

Sexual Coercion Victimization and Perpetration in Heterosexual Couples: A Dyadic Investigation

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Abstract Sexual coercion (SC), or making another person engage in sexual activity despite his or her unwillingness to do so, has been shown to have negative consequences for victims, namely depression, anxiety, low self-esteem, and a negative view of one's sexual self. The goals of the present study were to investigate the rate of SC victimization and perpetration, inter-partner agreement concerning its occurrence, in addition to its degree of reciprocity within a sample of 222 heterosexual couples. SC within previous romantic relationships was also examined. Results showed that less than 30% of couples agreed on the occurrence of sexual coercion within their ongoing relationship. Moreover, dyadic responses rather than individual responses provided a more accurate estimation of the frequency of SC. Over one in two couples reported experiencing some SC. More specifically, 45% of couples reported female victimization, 30% reported male victimization, and 20% reported reciprocal SC. Conversely, both men and women reported more SC victimization within previous relationships than in their current one. Findings suggest that SC is a common, pervasive problem within couples and that it is underreported by both victims and perpetrators, regardless of gender. Consequently, more systematic research, prevention and intervention efforts are warranted.

Keywords Sexual coercion · Couples · Inter-partner agreement · Reciprocity

Introduction

Whether for emotional or reproductive purposes, sexual interactions have always constituted an integral part of the lives of couples. The type and quality of these interactions and the negotiation that surrounds them have been shown to influence relationship adjustment and satisfaction (Impett, Peplau, & Gable, 2005; Lawrance & Byers, 1995; Williams & Frieze, 2005). More specifically, sexual coercion (SC), or making another person engage in sexual activity despite his or her unwillingness to do so (e.g., by using verbal pressure or physical force) (Hartwick, Desmarais & Hennig, 2007; Spitzberg, 1998), has been shown to have negative consequences for victims. Indeed, research has documented that victims experience reactions ranging from moderately upsetting to extremely distressing. Adjustment difficulties such as depression, anxiety, low self-esteem, and negative sexual self-perceptions (De Visser, Rissel, Richters, & Smith, 2007; Offman & Matheson, 2004) often prevent victims from functioning adequately in their day-to-day lives and engaging in healthy interpersonal relationships. These significant repercussions underscore the need to broaden our understanding of the actual frequency of SC and its impact. Despite the fact that coercive sexuality most often occurs in couples as opposed to between strangers (Koss, Dinero, Siebel, & Cox, 1988; Koss, Gidycz, & Wisniewski, 1987; Struckman-Johnson, Struckman-Johnson, & Anderson, 2003), research to date has focused almost exclusively on one member of the dyad rather than involving both.

Generally speaking, men tend to be more sexually aggressive than women—a statement that is supported by numerous studies

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(e.g., Christopher, Madura, & Weaver, 1998; Hamby, 2005). Sexually coercive men tend to use both consensual and coercive tactics to obtain access to sex (Harney & Muehlenhard, 1991). Correspondingly, sexual precedence plays a role in verbal coercive strategies; men tend to use threats to leave when sexual access has already been established, whereas they tend to use positive pressure, such as professing affection or complimenting regardless of their true emotions, when a sexual relation has not yet been established (Livingston, Buddie, Testa, & VanZile-Tamsen, 2004).

In a national survey conducted in the United States in 1997, a random sample of 602 adult women was questioned about unwanted sexual experiences. Of this sample, 34% of females had been victims of sexual coercion by their partners (Basile, 2002). O'Sullivan, Byers, and Finkelmann (1998) examined the prevalence of SC by sending anonymous questionnaires to a random sample of university students. Their final sample size comprised 346 never-married students (216 women and 130 men). Results showed that 42.5% of the women had experienced some form of SC, and 20% of the men reported using sexually coercive tactics. Women reported that verbal pressure and arguments were the tactics most often used by their male partners to obtain sex play and intercourse. Moreover, 18.5% of the male participants reported having experienced unwanted sexual intercourse with a woman. Similarly, Larimer, Lydum, Anderson, and Turner (1999) reported an overall 20.7% victimization rate for males. In both studies, verbal pressure and attempted sexual intercourse following the use of drugs or alcohol were the coercive tactics most often reported to be used by women. In a recent study, Krahe, Scheinberger-Olwig, and Bieneck (2003) examined the prevalence of non-consensual sexual interactions and their impact on male victims within a sample of community males in Germany. The researchers found that 25.1–30.1% of the 400 heterosexual male participants reported experiencing non-consensual sexual activity with a woman at least once in their lifetime. The men also reported a similar prevalence rate (23.5–23.9%) for attempts at making them unwillingly engage in sexual activities. Also worth noting is that 13% of men reported being victims of non-consensual sex by a female friend or acquaintance, 11% by a current or ex-partner, but only 6% reported SC from a stranger. In a similar study in Germany, Krahe, Waizenhöfer, and Möller (2003) investigated women's reports of sexual coercion perpetration against men. Within their community sample of 248 women, they found that 9.3% of the women reported using some SC against men. When compared to the males' victimization rate, it is clear that females' reported perpetration rates were much lower. This variation in rates may be due to the fact that the women and men were not in relationships together, or that perpetrators in general report less use of coercion. Consequently, further research on both partners' perceptions is needed to examine and compare the severity of experienced coercion in men and women.

A study by Meyer, Vivian, and O'Leary (1998) examined men's sexually aggressive behavior in 252 heterosexual couples seeking marital therapy and 53 community control couples, by collecting data from both partners on the use of sexual coercion by the husband towards the wife (male perpetrators and female victims). Results showed that clinical wives and husbands reported similar rates of husbands' SC (36% vs. 35%) in the previous year; however, correlations between both partner's reports were low. In comparison, the wives in the control couples reported a rate of 13.5% of SC by the husband, and the husbands reported a rate of 23%. Thus, it may be that more severe SC is harder to deny or ignore for either partner in aggressive couples, whereas milder SC can be overlooked in non-violent couples (Perry & Fromuth, 2005). Although this study was helpful in examining reported rates of sexual violence, it neglected to measure the level of sexual coercion used by the woman, as well as her partner's perception of it.

In one of the rare studies investigating both partners within married couples with children, O'Leary and Williams (2006) found that up to 42.8% of the couples reported female SC victimization and up to 21.4% reported male SC victimization. These rates were based on the maximum dyadic report, such that at least one partner had to report its occurrence. O'Leary and Williams (2006) also ascertained that there was very low inter-partner agreement on the occurrence of sexual coercion (κ , .11–.24). A similar study by Ramisetty-Mikler, Caetano, and McGrath (2007) examining both partners within White, Black, and Hispanic married couples found that 11–23% of couples reported female SC victimization, and 5.5–13.5% reported male SC victimization. The SC rates were also based on the reports of at least one partner, and varied according to the ethnic backgrounds of the couples, with Whites reporting its occurrence the least and Blacks reporting the most. However, inter-partner agreement was not investigated. In addition, none of the aforementioned studies examined whether there was reciprocal SC within the couples. Lastly, the victimization and perpetration of SC was only investigated in the current relationship of participants.

Very little is known about the reciprocity of sexual coercion within couples. More often than not, studies have examined it within the larger context of intimate partner violence (IPV), which includes physical and psychological violence within relationships. A study by Próspero (2008) examining individual university students ($N=609$) found that 87% of participants reported some perpetration of IPV in their relationship. Moreover, 86.3% of the participants reported being in a reciprocally violent relationship. Within the sample, participants reported experiencing varying degrees of psychological violence (86%), physical aggression (47%), and sexual coercion (30%). Unfortunately, the study did not specifically examine whether SC was reciprocal in couples or whether victims retaliated with another form of IPV. Furthermore, responses were obtained from only one member of the couple.

While research conducted in the past 20 years has provided some understanding of sexual coercion, it is characterized by several limitations. First, the majority of studies have investigated SC experiences from the perspective of only one partner. When inter-partner comparisons have been made, it has often involved unidirectional sexual violence only (female victim with male perpetrator) (e.g., Meyer et al., 1998). Moreover, of the few studies that have examined SC within couples, all of them have used the Revised Conflict Tactics Scale (CTS2) SC subscale (O’Leary & Williams, 2006; Ramisetty-Mikler et al., 2007), which has fewer items and has demonstrated less reliability than the Sexual Experience Survey (SES; Koss & Gidycz, 1985; Koss et al., 1987)—a measure designed specifically for the assessment of SC. Furthermore, prior studies on dyadic SC have solely investigated married or cohabitating couples (Caetano, Schafer, Field, & Nelson, 2002; Meyer et al., 1998; O’Leary & Williams, 2006; Ramisetty-Mikler et al., 2007). Thus, there is a need to investigate young adult couples instead of older married/cohabitating couples before violent behaviors become entrenched in their interactions. Another limitation of previous research is that rates of sexual coercion often vary depending on who is asked. Regardless of gender, victims generally report more coercion than the perpetrators (Anderson & Sorensen, 1999; Johnson & Sigler, 2000; Kolivas & Gross, 2007; Struckman-Johnson et al., 2003). In addition, female victimization rates are generally greater than male victimization rates. Some researchers may interpret this result as meaning that few men coerce a greater number of women or that men underreport the perpetration of coercion (Kolivas & Gross, 2007; Spitzberg, 1999). Another possible explanation is that women and men interpret behaviorally worded SC questionnaire items differently (Kolivas & Gross, 2007) or they label the actual behaviors differently according to their own sexual scripts (Hartwick et al., 2007). Theoretically, it is also possible that cognitive dissonance (Festinger, 1957) would prevent people from identifying SC as such within their relationships. Thus, reports of SC may vary according to whether couples are still together or separated. These assumptions need to be verified in order to assess more accurately the extent of the frequency and reciprocity of SC, and its implications for couples.

The purpose of the present research was to address the above limitations by examining and comparing the reported rates of victimization and perpetration of sexual coercion, and its degree of reciprocity from the perspective of both partners in current romantic relationships. In addition, the rates were also compared with the participants’ reports of SC with previous partners.

It was hypothesized that there would be a divergence between partners of a given couple in their reports of sexually coercive behaviors. Based on previous studies of SC victimization focusing on individuals, we predicted that women and men would report experiencing more SC than their partners would report perpetrating, independent of gender. It was also expected that the majority of coercive couples would include both members as

perpetrators and victims, highlighting the potentially reciprocal nature of SC, similar to results found in studies of intimate partner violence (O’Leary, Slep, Avery-Leaf, & Cascardi, 2008; Próspero, 2008). Moreover, it was predicted that participants would report more coercion within previous relationships as opposed to within their current one. This hypothesis was based on the cognitive dissonance theory (Festinger, 1957) which postulates that men and women would minimize the occurrence of a bad experience if it does not coincide with their image of a loving relationship. Consequently, individuals in current relationships that are coercive may report less coercion than in their previous coercive relationships.

Method

Participants

Student participants were recruited from undergraduate and graduate courses in a public metropolitan Canadian university at the beginning of the summer and fall semesters of 2005. Student participants who were currently in a relationship were asked to invite their partners to participate in the study. Eighty-seven professors from various departments such as mathematics, marketing, political science, and psychology were solicited. Recruitment took place in 46 courses, representing a 52.9% acceptance rate from the professors. Overall, we succeeded in recruiting 1,214 participants out of a possible 1,522 (based on the course enrollment numbers), which represents a 79.8% response rate from individual students. Follow-up visits were made one month later to encourage participants to recruit their partners. Seventy percent of the total sample of participants reported being in a relationship ($n = 850$), and our couple response rate was 27.9%. This reduced response rate may be due to the fact that we had to rely on student participants to recruit their partners for this study; thus some may have chosen not to solicit them or partners may have chosen not to participate. The initial sample for the present study consisted of 237 couples. Because analyses were conducted within couples based on gender (males vs. females), we had to exclude same-sex couples ($n = 15$) for this study. Our final sample size was 222 heterosexual couples.

Within the couple sample, 97.7% ($n = 217$) of the females and 99.5% ($n = 220$) of the men were heterosexual; the rest identified themselves as bisexual. The mean age for women was 23.73 years ($SD = 6.04$; range, 18–54), whereas the mean age for men was 25.80 years ($SD = 6.85$; range, 18–59). Almost all couples (98%) identified themselves as being in exclusive relationships; of those, 36% were cohabiting and 5% were married. The mean length of relationship was 32 months (range, 3–300 months) and the average frequency of sexual activity was once a week (76.0–77.1%). The majority of men and women reported 4–10 lifetime sexual partners. Participant characteristics are shown in Table 1.

Table 1 Participant characteristics ($N = 222$ couples)

Characteristics	Women		Men	
	<i>n</i>	%	<i>n</i>	%
Age				
18–20	66	29.9	33	14.9
21–30	135	61.1	154	69.7
31–40	12	5.4	22	9.9
41–60	8	3.6	12	5.4
Student status				
1st year undergraduate	91	41.0	26	11.8
2nd–3rd year undergraduate	79	35.6	44	19.9
4th year undergraduate-M.A.	26	11.7	15	6.8
Non-student	26	11.7	136	61.5
Frequency of sex				
Once a day	21	9.5	23	10.4
Once a week	168	76.4	172	77.5
Once a month	26	11.8	20	9.0
Less than once a month	5	2.3	7	3.1
Desired frequency of sex				
Much more	14	6.4	40	18.1
A bit more	105	47.7	104	47.1
Same	96	43.6	77	34.8
Less	5	2.3	0	0.0
Age of first sexual intercourse				
11–15	77	34.8	44	19.9
16–17	80	36.2	84	38.0
18–19	36	20.9	62	28.0
20–24	16	7.2	28	12.7
25 and over	2	0.9	3	1.4
Number of sexual partners				
One	47	21.3	41	18.5
2–3	55	24.9	51	23.0
4–10	75	33.9	84	37.8
11–20	31	14.0	26	11.7
More than 20	13	5.9	20	9.0

Procedure

The first author provided an overview of the study to students in their classrooms and explained that its purpose was to examine sexual negotiation within relationships. They were advised that they were free to choose to participate and that there were no penalties if they decided not to take part in the study. Participating students were asked to read and sign a consent form and to return it separately from the completed questionnaire. Lastly, students were advised that as a compensation for their participation, they could fill out a ballot for a draw to win one of three prizes of \$500, \$200, or \$100. Each individual participant also received a list of community resources and counselling centers that deal with sexual violence in the event that the testing caused

them some distress. Finally, they were informed that the first author was also available for a debriefing session upon request.

Students were explained that their questionnaire package contained an identical questionnaire for their partner. They were asked to give the questionnaire package to their partner if they thought he/she would be interested in participating and were instructed to refrain from discussing their answers with each other. Partners were asked to mail back their signed consent form and their draw ballot separately from their completed questionnaires in the pre-addressed postage-paid envelopes provided. Each pair of couple questionnaire packages was numbered identically (e.g., 101 and 101B) prior to distribution so as to facilitate the comparison of answers within couples. This study was approved by our university's Institutional Review Board.

Measures

Each questionnaire booklet included measures of sociodemographic information, as well as sexual coercion victimization and perpetration.

Sociodemographic Information

This section included general questions concerning gender of the respondent, sexual orientation, age, culture, relationship status, length of current relationship, age at first sexual intercourse, current and desired frequency of sexual activities, and number of sexual partners.

Sexual Coercion Victimization and Perpetration

The experience of SC victimization and perpetration was measured using the Sexual Experience Survey (SES; Koss & Gidycz, 1985; Koss et al., 1987). This questionnaire was originally created by Koss and Oros (1982), but has since been modified (Koss & Gidycz, 1985; Koss et al., 1987). The SES is a widely used self-report questionnaire focusing on sexually coercive experiences. It contains behaviorally worded questions to enable researchers to measure SC without labelling it as sexual violence. Answers were provided in a yes–no format. The SES has demonstrated good validity, internal consistency and test–retest reliability (Koss & Gidycz, 1985; Koss et al., 1987; Testa, VanZile-Tamsen, Livingston, & Koss, 2004). The 15-item French translation of the SES, as used by Poitras and Lavoie (1995), was chosen because of its language and its modification which includes women and men as both possible victims and perpetrators of SC. In this format, the 15 items were administered twice, once to measure victimization and once to measure perpetration. Furthermore, the item which measured the use of threat or force to obtain oral or anal intercourse was modified so that oral and anal sexual violence were measured as separate items, thus creating a 16-item scale. A similar separation of the

two items was used in a recent study involving the SES (Abbey, Parkhill, & Koss, 2005).

In order to measure sexual coercion within participants' current relationship and in other possible relationships since the age of 14 years old, the SES items were presented in a table format. For each item, participants were asked to respond to two questions: (1) Has the behavior occurred with their current partner? and (2) Has the behavior occurred with other partners since the age of 14?

Data Analytic Strategy

For both males and females, the SES victimization and perpetration data were computed in three ways. Aside from the score for each item, we calculated dichotomous subscale scores and a dichotomous total scale score to reflect whether the respondent had reported the occurrence of any of the coercive behaviors with their current partner and within previous relationships. Furthermore, couple coerciveness was computed using the reports from at least one partner. The categories were: no coercion reported by either partner, only female victimization reported, only male victimization reported, and reciprocal SC.

Frequency analyses were conducted to examine prevalence rates of SC within couples and since the age of 14. Chi-squares and *t*-tests were used to identify any group differences. Moreover, chi-squares were performed to investigate inter-partner agreement for within-couple data. Kappas and the percentage of agreement are reported because the kappa is a measure that can be biased when investigating situations of low rates of report (Feinstein & Cicchetti, 1990).

Results

Descriptive Statistics

Paired *t*-tests were performed to evaluate gender differences on sexual and demographic variables. Results indicated no significant gender differences in reported frequency of sexual relations with the partner. However, gender differences were noted in the participants' age (for women, $M = 23.71$, $SD = 6.05$; for men, $M = 25.80$, $SD = 6.87$, $t(219) = -7.75$, $p < .001$), and the *desired* frequency of sexual relations (for women, $M = 2.42$, $SD = .66$; for men, $M = 2.17$, $SD = .71$, $t(218) = 4.37$, $p < .001$; a greater score indicates less desire). Moreover, women reported having their first sexual intercourse at a younger age than the men (for women, $M = 16.64$, $SD = 2.66$; for men, $M = 17.26$, $SD = 2.43$, $t(219) = -2.89$, $p < .01$).

Rate of Sexual Coercion within Couples

The reported frequency rates for sexual coercion victimization within the heterosexual couples were similar for both genders.

The rate of overall female victimization was 30.6% according to the reports of the women, and 27.0% according to the men. When asked about overall male victimization, men reported a rate of 20.3%, whereas women reported a rate of 17.1%. Inspection of subscale scores suggests that unwanted sexual contact and verbal SC were the two most common types of SC reported by both male and female victims and perpetrators, as opposed to the rape and attempted rape subscales. Moreover, examination of item endorsement revealed that: (1) unwanted kissing and touching because of verbal pressure and arguments, and (2) unwanted sexual intercourse because perpetrator was too excited to stop were the most reported events for both men and women (see Table 2).

Reciprocity of Sexual Coercion within Couples

Results showed that almost one in four couples (24.8%) reported only female victimization by the male partner, and 9.5% reported only male victimization by the female partner. Reciprocal SC, that is victimization and perpetration by both the male and female partner, was reported by 20.3% of the couples. In total, 54.5% ($n = 121$) of the 222 couples reported experiencing some sexual coercion.

Inter-Partner Agreement on Sexual Coercion within their Relationship

While the rates of sexual coercion were similarly reported by both male and female participants, we needed to verify whether partners actually agreed on the occurrence of sexual coercion within their couple. As a baseline, we examined the extent to which couples agreed whether consensual sexual activities had ever occurred within their relationship. There was very good agreement from both partners on consensual sexual activity and sexual intercourse (94.5 and 98.2%, respectively). However, when examining each SC item individually, partner agreement was much lower. Six of the men's items and two of the women's items could not be analyzed because they were not endorsed often enough. Consequently, significant couple agreement was found for only one of the possible 16 SES items for each gender: (1) male victim of unwanted sexual contact by means of verbal pressure (6/38 = 15.8%, kappa = .20, $p = .003$), and (2) female victim of unwanted intercourse because partner was too excited to stop (12/58 = 20.7%, kappa = .22, $p = .001$).

Since specific events or occurrences can be recalled differently by partners within a couple (Moffitt et al., 1997), an analysis of agreement was performed using the SES subscale scores as well as the dichotomized total score. Results of these analyses are presented in Tables 3 and 4. For the overall occurrence of any sexually coercive behavior, there was a moderate but significant level of agreement between partners within a same couple (28.0% for female victimization, 25.8% for male victimization). Moreover, when examining rates of SC reported from

Table 2 Prevalence of sexual coercion within current couples per item

Sexual Experience Survey items	Female victim	Female perpetrator	Male victim	Male perpetrator
Unwanted sexual contact subscale				
Unwanted sexual activity due to arguments	42 (18.9%)	18 (8.1%)	26 (11.7%)	27 (12.2%)
Unwanted sexual activity due to threats of leaving	1 (0.5%)	2 (0.9%)	2 (0.9%)	1 (0.5%)
Unwanted sexual contact due to lies or false statements	7 (3.2%)	11 (5.0%)	13 (5.9%)	14 (6.3%)
Unwanted sexual contact using authority	2 (0.9%)	2 (0.9%)	2 (0.9%)	1 (0.5%)
Unwanted sexual contact using physical force	1 (0.5%)	0 (0.0%)	2 (0.9%)	1 (0.5%)
Attempted rape subscale				
Attempted penetration using physical force	1 (0.5%)	1 (0.5%)	1 (0.5%)	1 (0.5%)
Attempted penetration using alcohol or drugs	4 (1.8%)	4 (1.8%)	1 (0.5%)	6 (2.7%)
Verbal sexual coercion subscale				
Unwanted sexual intercourse because initiator was too excited	35 (15.8%)	14 (6.3%)	18 (8.1%)	35 (15.8%)
Unwanted sexual intercourse because initiator threatened to leave	0 (0.0%)	1 (0.5%)	0 (0.0%)	2 (0.9%)
Unwanted sexual intercourse because initiator used lies or false statements	8 (3.6%)	9 (4.1%)	4 (1.8%)	13 (5.9%)
Unwanted sexual intercourse because initiator used arguments	23 (10.4%)	6 (2.7%)	7 (3.2%)	13 (5.9%)
Unwanted sexual intercourse because initiator used his/her authority	2 (0.9%)	1 (0.5%)	0 (0.0%)	2 (0.9%)
Rape subscale				
Unwanted sexual intercourse because initiator used alcohol or drugs	3 (1.4%)	0 (0.0%)	0 (0.0%)	3 (1.4%)
Unwanted sexual intercourse using force	0 (0.0%)	0 (0.0%)	0 (0.0%)	1 (0.5%)
Unwanted anal sex using force	1 (0.5%)	0 (0.0%)	0 (0.0%)	1 (0.5%)
Unwanted oral sex using force	1 (0.5%)	0 (0.0%)	0 (0.0%)	1 (0.5%)

Note: Subscale scores are presented in the first two columns of Tables 3 and 4

Table 3 Agreement concerning female victimization within couples by subscale and total score on SES

Type of coercion	Female report of victimization	Male report of perpetration	Reported by either partner for female victimization	Agreement on occurrence of female victimization	Kappa
Unwanted sexual contact	45 (20.3%)	35 (15.8%)	68 (30.7%)	12/68 = 17.6%	.15*
Attempted rape	5 (2.3%)	7 (3.2%)	11 (5.0%)	1/11 = 9.1%	NV
Verbal sexual coercion	53 (23.9)	47 (21.2%)	80 (36.4%)	20/80 = 25%	.23***
Rape	5 (2.3%)	4 (1.8%)	8 (3.7%)	1/8 = 12.5%	NV
Total report of at least one incident of sexual coercion	68 (30.6%)	60 (27.0%)	100 (45.0%)	28/100 = 28.0%	.21**

SES Sexual Experience Survey, NV not valid because some cells had a count less than 5

* $p < .05$; ** $p < .01$; *** $p < .001$

either partner (column 4 in Tables 3 and 4), the female victimization rate increased from 30.6 to 45.0%, and male victimization rate increased from 20.3 to 29.8%.

Underreporting of Sexual Coercion

Compared to the overall rates reported by the couples, both victims and perpetrators underreported SC. When comparing the dyadic rates with the individual reports of both partners, we used the correction factor proposed by Szinovacz and Egley (1995). To calculate the extent of the underreporting, we divided the overall couple SC incidence rate by the individual (victim and/or perpetrator) rates. Correction factors above 1.00 indicate a greater level of underreporting. Thus, the female and male

victimization correction factors would both be 1.47 (45.0/30.6 and 29.8/20.3, respectively). Likewise, perpetration correction factors would be 1.74 for women and 1.67 for men.

Incidence of Sexual Coercion in Previous Relationships

Frequency analyses were conducted to obtain the men and women's rates of sexual coercion victimization and perpetration in previous relationships since the age of 14 (see Table 5). The overall female victimization rate was almost double that of the men's victimization rate. Conversely, men's overall perpetration rate was almost double of that reported by women. Chi-square analyses were performed to investigate differences between rates of SC reported in previous relationships

Table 4 Agreement concerning male victimization within couples by subscale and total score on SES

Type of coercion	Male report of victimization	Female report of perpetration	Reported by either partner for male victimization	Agreement on occurrence of male victimization	Kappa
Unwanted sexual contact	33 (14.9%)	28 (12.6%)	50 (22.6%)	11/50 = 22.0%	.26***
Attempted rape	1 (0.5%)	5 (2.3%)	6 (2.8%)	0 (0.0%)	NV
Verbal sexual coercion	25 (11.3%)	23 (10.4%)	41 (18.5%)	7/41 = 17.1%	.21**
Rape	0 (0.0%)	0 (0.0%)	0 (0.0%)	0 (0.0%)	–
Total report of at least one incident of sexual coercion	45 (20.3%)	38 (17.1%)	66 (29.8%)	17/66 = 25.8%	.28***

SES Sexual Experience Survey, NV not valid because some cells had a count less than 5

** $p < .01$; *** $p < .001$

Table 5 Prevalence of sexual coercion within previous relationships

Type of coercion	Female report of victimization	Female report of perpetration	Male report of victimization	Male report of perpetration
Unwanted sexual contact	123 (56.4%)	36 (16.4%)	56 (25.6%)	78 (35.8%)
Attempted rape	44 (20.2%)	7 (3.2%)	7 (3.2%)	14 (6.4%)
Verbal sexual coercion	108 (49.5%)	28 (12.8%)	50 (22.8%)	68 (31.2%)
Rape	33 (15.1%)	8 (3.7%)	4 (1.8%)	5 (2.3%)
Total (any sexual coercion)	137 (62.8%)	45 (20.5%)	77 (35.2%)	88 (40.4%)

as opposed to current relationships. Results demonstrated that SC victimization rates for both genders were significantly greater in previous relationships, $\chi^2(1) = 43.15$, $p < .001$, for females and $\chi^2(1) = 11.57$, $p < .001$ for males. However, perpetration rates were only significantly greater in previous relationships for men, $\chi^2(1) = 7.95$, $p < .001$.

Frequencies analyses to examine reciprocal SC in previous relationships showed that, within the female sample, 43.4% (95) reported being victims only, 1.4% (3) reported being perpetrators only, and 19.2% (42) reported being both. Within the male sample, the rates were 10.1% (22), 15.6% (34), and 24.8% (54), respectively.

Discussion

The present study sought to examine the rate of sexual coercion in ongoing heterosexual relationships based on both partners' reports, as well as its occurrence in previous relationships. The level of agreement between partners was also investigated, as was the reciprocity of coercion. Findings suggest that over 50% of couples experienced some type of SC within their current relationship. Although female victimization was the most common form of coercion within couples, 20% of the couples reported reciprocal SC. Despite the high rate of SC, less than 30% of couples agreed on its occurrence and it was generally underreported by both victims and perpetrators. Conversely, when investigating sexual coercion experiences in previous relationships, both women and men reported a significantly greater

rate of victimization and perpetration as compared to the rates they reported for their ongoing romantic relationship. Moreover, women reported more victimization and men reported more perpetration or reciprocal SC.

Sexual Coercion within Couples

When examining prevalence rates within ongoing relationships, close to a third of women and one out of five men reported being victims of SC from their partners, whereas one out of five women and one out of four men reported perpetrating SC. There was some divergence between partners' reports of sexual coercion within their couple, but the difference was not significant. Therefore, the findings did not support the hypothesis that victims disclose more coercion than the perpetrators divulge within couples. Moreover, when combining reports from both partners within a given couple, the rates of SC victimization increased to 45.0% for the females and 29.7% for the males. This suggests that even in early adulthood, an important number of couples are experiencing SC. These dyadic results were similar to those of O'Leary and Williams' (2006) for the female victimization rate (42.8%), but not for the male victimization rate (21.4%). This difference regarding male victimization results may be due to the fact that our sample was for the most part drawn from a university population whereas theirs was a community sample, or related to the different measures used to assess SC. Nevertheless, the dyadic results of the present study suggest that individual measures of sexual coercion may be biased towards underestimating the extent of its occurrence. Consequently,

obtaining the perspective of both partners may be important when evaluating inter-partner coercion within experimental and clinical settings. The participants' awareness that their partner is also answering the same questionnaires may encourage or influence individuals to be more honest.

Although individual sexual coercion rates were similar between victims and perpetrators in this study, agreement analysis revealed that less than a third of couples who experienced SC agreed on its occurrence in their romantic relationship. This low agreement rate may be due to the fact that the couples in our sample tended to report milder coercive behaviors such as unwanted sexual contact or verbal coercion as opposed to more serious offences like rape or attempted rape. Less severe coercion may be susceptible to more ambiguous interpretation by both partners in that one may perceive it as coercive whereas the other may perceive it and label it as sexual negotiation. Consequently, each partner may interpret the ambiguous sexual events according to their own sexual scripts, its impact on them, and the context of the situation. Participants may also remember events that were disturbing to them more than their partners who may not feel an event was necessarily coercive or upsetting. Indeed, Meyer et al. (1998) found that couples who were more physically and sexually violent had a higher rate of inter-partner agreement than less violent couples, suggesting that more extreme violence may be harder to misinterpret than less severe coercion.

The investigation of reciprocal sexual coercion revealed that over half of the couples in our sample reported some SC in their relationship, but only one in five reported mutual SC. Within our sample, unilateral female victimization was more prevalent, affecting one out of four couples. The hypothesis of reciprocity within most sexually coercive couples was, therefore, not supported. This suggests that SC is still a greater concern for women than men, and sexually coercive couples are not as prone to reciprocity as physically or psychologically violent couples (O'Leary et al., 2008; Próspero, 2008). It is plausible that a victim of SC, especially female, would not necessarily react or defend herself by being sexually coercive, but rather by using psychological or physical aggression. Another possible interpretation is that sexual scripts still encourage male initiation of sex, which may make them vulnerable to being perceived as a perpetrator in ambiguous situations of mild SC.

Despite discrepancies in agreement, findings also suggest that sexual coercion is underreported by individuals. Overall, victims and, to a larger extent, perpetrators, underreported coercive incidents. Indeed, the dyadic victimization rates were, on average, 1.5 times greater and the dyadic perpetration rates were 1.7 times greater than individual reported rates. Therefore, the perpetrators underreported SC to a greater extent than victims. Using the same calculation method, O'Leary and Williams (2006) found a similar correction factor for male perpetration rates (1.51) with their sample of community couples. However, unlike our study, they found that female perpetration rates should be corrected by a factor of 2.43. Their large correction factor for

female perpetrators may be due to the fact that the community couples had children; thus, there may be a stronger desire to minimize and underreport coercion by these mothers than within our sample of women. Nevertheless, these findings suggest that both victims and perpetrators may be reluctant to label themselves as coercive or victimized. Cognitive dissonance may prevent participants from objectively identifying their relationship with their partner as coercive. In light of these findings, it may be prudent to consider that rates of SC obtained from previous studies investigating individuals may be underestimations of the actual prevalence. Correspondingly, in the absence of data from both partners, the individual respondent rates could be multiplied by the above correction factors to obtain more accurate prevalence rates in future studies.

Sexual Coercion in Previous Relationships

Sexual coercion victimization rates in previous relationships were significantly greater for both genders, as were perpetration rates for men, than the rates reported within their current relationship. These findings support our hypothesis that participants would report more coercion within previous relationships than within their current romantic relationship. One possibility is that participants who have experienced SC within previous relationships may choose to avoid coercive partners in their current relationship. Another possibility is that participants may reinterpret SC within their current relationship as less serious as a means to justify why they were still engaged in a relationship with their partner (Arriaga, 2002). Conversely, they may be more willing to acknowledge and report sexually coercive incidents when a relationship is terminated. In such situations, participants may feel less obligated to minimize incidents of SC and they may experience less cognitive dissonance associated with it. Thus, participants may be more capable and/or willing to label coercive behaviors as such only once the relationship is over. Lastly, it is possible that rates of sexual coercion increase near the end or during the breakdown of a relationship. In this case, partners may become less emotionally attached and use less healthy communication and sexual negotiation skills during conflicts. Considering that our sample involved intact couples, this is also a possible explanation for lower rates of coercion within current couples.

Interestingly, although we found that both victims and perpetrators, regardless of gender, reported similar rates of sexual coercion within their ongoing relationship, this finding was not replicated for measures of SC since adolescence. Indeed, females reported being victims of SC (62.8%) more than perpetrators (20.5%), whereas males reported more perpetrating (40.4%) than victimization (35.2%). These results were similar to those of previous studies measuring individuals' past experiences with SC. The gender differences in prevalence rates may be due to the participants' greater objectivity associated with their distancing of the events, as mentioned previously. It may also reflect the

participants' sexual scripts. It is possible that women may be more apt to remember unwanted sexual activities they were unable to prevent, whereas men may remember more sexual "conquests." Future studies should examine couple and past SC within the context of sexual scripts (Simon & Gagnon, 1986) to explore this possibility.

One finding that did remain fairly consistent with regard to sexual coercion in current and past relationships was its reciprocal nature. Similarly to the ongoing couples' data, about one in four women and men reported being both victims and perpetrators of SC (19.2 and 24.8%). However, these results need to be interpreted with caution because they do not necessarily reflect mutual SC within specific previous relationships. Consequently, it is possible that the participants were victims in some relationships and perpetrators in others. Ideally, future studies would examine whether mutually coercive partners persistently enter into reciprocally coercive relationships.

Limitations and Implications

The present research was not without limitations. Because the administration of the partner questionnaires was not done simultaneously, it is not possible to ascertain whether confounding factors might have influenced their responses. Indeed, partners may have discussed their answers together. Another limitation is that past sexual coercion rates may be greater due to the number of previous relationships considered and the length of time involved. Ideally, future studies should examine SC within each one of the participants' relationships to get a clearer picture of their experiences. Lastly, the use of a university sample as opposed to a clinical or community sample may limit the extent of our understanding of more severe forms of SC.

Despite these limitations, the findings of the current study have important theoretical implications. Firstly, the finding that participants reported less frequent and severe sexual coercion within their current relationships than in terminated relationships lends support to the cognitive dissonance theory (Festinger, 1957). Minimization or reinterpretation of SC as coaxing or seductive behaviors may help victims cope with otherwise negative situations. However, this may also prevent them from leaving their partner or getting help (Arriaga, 2002). Moreover, participants may be more tolerant of milder SC and interpret it as "normal" and reportable, whereas cognitive dissonance and social desirability may prevent them from reporting severe SC. Likewise, the low rates of agreement on the occurrence of SC suggest that neither member of a couple can truly objectively report or recall SC in their relationship, but rather presents their interpretation of it according to their beliefs, sexual scripts, and need for low cognitive dissonance. Furthermore, results indicated that the majority of couples were not reciprocally sexually coercive. The implication of this finding is that SC may be better understood within the more global intimate partner violence or common couple violence context (Johnson, 1995, 2001).

Indeed, women are still at greater risk of being victims of SC in their relationships and they may retaliate or attempt to defend themselves using psychological or physical aggression rather than reciprocate sexual coercion.

Further studies need to continue to involve both partners within couples to better understand the extent of SC. Moreover, a longitudinal study examining coercive tactics during the courting, the committed, and the dissolution stages of relationships would allow for a better understanding of whether SC is consistent within some relationships or whether situational factors increase its occurrence. Observational studies could also shed light on these issues. Finally, future studies should examine the factors associated with mutually sexually coercive couples versus unidirectional coercive couples.

Clinically, findings show that sexual coercion was underreported by both victims and perpetrators, thereby underscoring the need for clinicians to assess and intervene with both members of the couple experiencing SC. More specifically, sexual negotiation tactics of couples need to be addressed systematically in therapy so as to identify underreported sexual coercion.

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