

Predicting the use of Sexual Initiation Tactics in a Sample of College Women

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Abstract

Significant attention has been focused on women's initiation of sexual contact with men and the point at which this initiation becomes sexual aggression. The purpose of this study was to examine possible predictors of the use of three conceptually distinct sets of sexual initiation tactics: seduction, coercion, and force. Relationships between women's personal characteristics, future expectancies about sex and relationships, the 'rehearsal behavior' of telephone calling patterns in adolescence, sexual self-esteem, past abuse, and past sexual abuse were related to measures of women's sexual initiation and aggression. Survey respondents were 272, mostly white women students with a mean age of 26 years. A complex relationship emerged between predictor and outcome variables. Social learning theory is utilized to interpret the findings and recommend future research directions.

Introduction

Women's sexual initiation

Sexual initiation is defined as any acknowledged attempt on the part of the respondent to establish sexual

contact. For more than a decade significant attention has been focused on the phenomenon of women's initiation of sexual contact with men. Studies conducted in the 1980's focused on the incidence and prevalence of women's sexual initiation, the impact it had on the male receivers, and women's reasons for initiating sexual contact (Anderson, 1990; Calderwood*, 1987; Muehlenhard & Cook, 1988; Muehlenhard & Long, 1988; Sarrel & Masters, 1982; Struckman-Johnson, 1988). Findings from these studies indicated that women participate in a broad range of behaviors, including attempts at arousing a partner, threats to end a relationship, force, and taking advantage of someone who is too intoxicated to resist, to accomplish sexual contact with men. Also, women were reported to initiate sexual contact for a wide variety of reasons, including arousal, a need to have power and control, and as a reaction to past abuse. Finally, prior research supports the contention that nonaggressive and aggressive sexual initiation tactics differ in prevalence, motive, and impact. While research has established the prevalence of a variety of initiatory behavior, less is known regarding the predictors of such behavior. To further our understanding of female's sexual behavior; the purpose of this study was to test the ability of selected variables to predict college women's use of seduction and/or aggression tactics to obtain sexual contact with a man.

Seductive (i.e., nonaggressive) tactics include behaviors such as dancing seductively, wearing specific clothes or perfume, or giving massages. Aggressive tactics include coercive behaviors such as threats to end a relationship, lies, or psychological manipulation and physical force tactics such as hitting, holding someone down, or the threat or use of a weapon.

Researchers have attempted to broaden their understanding of women's use of initiation tactics and specifically the use of aggressive tactics by considering the role of cultural norms and expectations, and the psychological characteristics of individuals that promote differences in aggressive and nonaggressive initiation tactics (Anderson & Sorenson, 1999; Anderson & Aymami, 1993; O'Sullivan & Byers, 1993). The authors of these studies have reported that among college women in the US, women living in the South are less aggressive than women in the East and that women who believe in rape myths and/or hold adversarial beliefs about relationships are more likely to use aggressive tactics. Researchers have also made comparisons between the experiences of women and men as initiators and receivers (Bauserman & Rind, 1997; Greer & Buss, 1994; McConaghy & Zamir, 1995; Struckman-Johnson & Struckman-Johnson, 1994) concluding that women are more negatively affected by receiving sexual aggression. The experiences of men who were sexually 'assaulted' (King & Woollett, 1997), or sexually 'pressured and forced' (Struckman-Johnson & Struckman-Johnson, 1994) by women have been examined. These studies highlighted insights into men's limits of sexual readiness.

Many researchers have reported women's sexually aggressive tactics (e.g., Gwartney-Gibbs, Stockard, &

Bohmer, 1987; Poppen & Segal, 1988; Stets & Pirog-Good, 1989) using a measure that combined the use of physical force tactics with non-force tactics in a single reporting set. The value of this type of reporting is that it captures all aggressive acts in a single score and allows for larger cell sizes for statistical analysis. Since the use of physical force may indicate a qualitatively different strategy (Lottes & Weinberg, 1997) and a different experience for the receiver of this type of sexual aggression (Zweig, Barber, & Eccles, 1997), a drawback of this measuring system is that it cannot distinguish these differences. In addition, authors have reported that women are slightly less likely than men to report using psychologically coercive tactics, but considerably less likely than men to report using physical force tactics (Christopher, Madura, & Weaver, 1998). The differences between women who are willing to use physical force and those who are not may prove significant.

Variables related to women's sexual aggression

Demographics. Age, marital status (MS), socio-economic status (SES), and ethnicity have been assessed in several studies of women's sexual behaviors. Typically, these variables have been used as population descriptors or screening variables rather than independent variables (e.g., Anderson, 1990; Lotts & Weinberg, 1996; Struckman-Johnson, 1988). In some cases (e.g., O'Sullivan, Byers, & Finkelman, 1998), previously reported differences, based on marital status or other demographics, were not statistically verified. In other studies, relationship status was demonstrated to relate to women's sexual pressure tactics or aggression (Clements-Schreiber, Rempel, & Desmarais 1998; Lane & Gwartney-Gibbs, 1985; Stets & Priog-Good, 1989). In general, women in committed relationships were reported to be more likely to use or endorse the use of pressure tactics or aggression. In addition, age at first intercourse and numbers of lifetime sexual partners have been positively connected to a variety of problem behaviors for young women, including experiences as sexual aggressors (Leitenberg & Saltzman, 2000; Lotts & Weinberg, 1997). Therefore, the variables of greater number of lifetime sexual partners, early age at first intercourse, older current age, and being currently married or cohabiting were expected to predict the use of all tactics in this study.

Future Expectations about Sex and Relationships. Mental constructs, specifically future expectations, are likely to guide judgments and behaviors. Whitaker, Beach, Etherton, Wakefield, and Anderson (1999), argue that future expectations guide thoughts, feelings and behaviors between individuals in a relationship. In this study, future expectations about sex and relationships were expected to predict the use of seduction, but not aggression tactics.

Adolescent Calling Patterns. Anderson, Arceneaux, Carter, Miller, and King (1995) first documented the shift in telephone calling patterns of adolescent girls who attended a Southern urban university in the United States. The authors reported that women who were adolescents prior to 1964 were unlikely to call boys and perceived their parents as disapproving if they did. Those women who were adolescents between 1964 and 1981 (the transition period)

gave mixed responses about calling and parental approval. Those women who were adolescents after 1981 called boys and perceived their parents as approving. Changes in this behavior for women were attributed to major cultural events and shifts in cultural norms that would allow women and girls to be more assertive with boys and men (Anderson, et al., 1995).

For this study, early age at first call to a boy, calling more different boys, and making more total calls to boys during adolescence were expected to predict college women's use of seduction, but not aggression tactics. These behaviors are conceptualized by the authors as rehearsal behaviors that would increase situational self-efficacy (Bandura, 1977b) relative to initiating social and sexual contact with men. The authors of this study hypothesized that any increased self-efficacy due to rehearsal may lead to increased use of seduction tactics, but that there is no evidence to support the notion that it would lead to increased use of aggression tactics.

Sexual Self-esteem. Sexual self-esteem, "... the dispositional tendency to evaluate positively one's capacity to relate sexually to others" (Snell, Fisher, & Walters, 1993, p. 34) has been positively correlated with greater sexual awareness, an approach to relationships that involves mutual concern and caring, and a more varied history of sexual behavior (Snell, et. al.,). The findings regarding these attributes lead the authors to hypothesize that increased sexual self-esteem would lead to increased use of sexual seduction tactics, but not aggression tactics.

Past Abuse. The experience of any past abuse (verbal, emotional, or physical) has been connected with courtship violence among adolescent women (Tontodonato & Crew, 1992). Stets and Pirog-Good (1989), addressed past experiences with abuse, self-esteem, acceptance of violence, relationship involvement, and the need for interpersonal control as factors that contribute to sexual aggression within relationships. They concluded that, for women in relationships, experiencing past abuse, low self-esteem, high behavioral involvement, and a high need for interpersonal control all contribute to women inflicting sexual aggression on dating partners. The authors argued that much of relationship aggression is learned, reciprocal, and based, in part, on the degree of control that one person exerts on the other in a relationship. Therefore, we expected all forms of past abuse to predict the use of aggression tactics in this study.

Past Sexual Abuse. Personal experiences with sexual aggression are likely to produce aggression (Gwartney-Gibbs, et. al., 1987). The experiential factor of past sexual abuse has been reported as predictive of sexual aggression in several past studies of women (Anderson, 1990, 1996, 1998; Higgs, Canavan, & Meyer, 1992). Therefore, we expected past sexual abuse to predict the use of aggression tactics in this study.

Purpose

While research has established the prevalence of a variety of initiatory behavior less is known regarding the predictors of such behavior. To further our understanding of female's sexual behavior, the purpose of this study was to test the ability of selected variables to predict college women's use of seduction and/or aggression tactics to obtain sexual contact with a man. The hypotheses tested were:

1. The use of seduction tactics will be predicted by the demographic variables: having a greater number of lifetime sexual partners, early age at first intercourse, and older current age; and by: positive future expectations about sex and relationships, early age at first call to a boy, calling more different boys and making more total calls to boys during adolescence, and having high sexual self-esteem.
2. The use of coercion tactics will be predicted by the demographic variables: having a greater number of lifetime sexual partners, early age at first intercourse, and older current age; and by experiencing past sexual abuse.
3. The use of force tactics will be predicted by the demographic variables: having a greater number of lifetime sexual partners, early age at first intercourse, and older current age; and by experiencing past sexual abuse.

Methodology

Participants

Respondents were 272 women college students attending a public commuter university of approximately 16,000 students located in a major metropolitan city in the South. All respondents volunteered their participation without any incentive. The women were single (61.0%), with 20.1% married, 11.9% cohabiting, and 7.0% divorced or separated, White (71.5%), with 16.7% Black, 5.9% Hispanic, 4.8% Asian and 1.1% Other or missing, raised in households headed by executives or professionals (56.4%), and identified themselves as heterosexual (97%). Their mean age was 25.9 years ($SD = 7.49$), mean age at first intercourse was 16.7 years ($SD = 3.82$), and their mean number of lifetime sexual partners was 6.6 ($SD = 8.48$). Of the respondents, 80.3% reported experiencing some kind of past abuse (i.e., verbal, emotional, physical or sexual) and 45.7% reported experiencing past sexual abuse.

Procedures

Following approval by the university's human subjects committee, questionnaires were distributed to volunteers in a variety of undergraduate Health and Psychology classes. Students were asked to complete the questionnaires in privacy away from the classroom and return them at the following class meeting. Three hundred and seventy five questionnaires were distributed and 272 usable questionnaires were returned for a total response rate of 72.5%.

Instrument

Demographics. The first section, demographics, consisted of seven items (i.e., age, marital status, socio-economic background, sexual orientation, age at first intercourse, ethnic background, and number of lifetime sexual partners). Age, age at first intercourse, and number of lifetime sexual partners provided ratio data, the other variables were nominal variables. Marital status had five response categories; single, married, divorced (living alone), separated (living alone), and cohabiting. Primary sexual orientation included responses for heterosexual, lesbian, bisexual, and gay and socio-economic background included ten response categories of occupations for the primary wage earner in the respondent's family of origin (e.g., executive, laborer, clerical).

Future Expectations about Sex and Relationships. The second section, future expectations about sex and relationships, consisted of six items (e.g., do you expect to be monogamous, happily married, sexually satisfied), scored on a 7-point Likert-type scale with 1 being extremely unlikely and 7 being extremely likely. A scale mean was calculated to create an index of future expectations about sex and relationships. The calculated Cronbach's Alpha (Cronbach, 1972) coefficient of reliability (.88) indicated adequate internal consistency.

Calling patterns. The third section, adolescent telephone calling patterns, consisted of eight items and included three questions analyzed in this study (i.e., age at first call to a boy, the number of different boys called in a week between the ages of 8 - 18, and the total number of calls made per week between the ages of 8 - 18) (Anderson, et al., 1995). The scores were summed to provide a single score. The calculated Cronbach's Alpha coefficient of reliability (.73) indicated adequate internal consistency. This component assessed the extent to which young women rehearsed behaviors related to initiating contact with men.

Self-esteem. The fourth section, sexual self-esteem, consisted of five items (e.g., I am confident about myself as a sexual person, I am better at sex than most other people) that comprise the sexual self-esteem subscale of The Multidimensional Sexuality Questionnaire (MSQ; 61 items; Snell, et. al., 1993). Item responses were on a 5-point Likert-type scale with 1 being not at all characteristic of me and 5 being very characteristic of me. Respondents completed the entire MSQ, but only the self-esteem subscale was analyzed for this study. The five items were summed to create a scale score. In previous work, the MSQ was reported to possess good internal reliability (alpha levels ranging from .71 to .94, self-esteem subscale = .87), test-retest reliability (range .50 to .86, self-esteem subscale = .85), and concurrent validity using the Sexuality Scale (Snell & Papini, 1989) as a comparison (self-esteem subscale $r = .72, p < .001$) (Snell, et al., 1993). The calculated coefficient alpha for the self-esteem subscale for the present sample was an adequate .87.

Past abuse. The fifth section, a past abuse scale, consisted of five items that assessed past nonsexual (i.e.,

verbal, emotional, and physical abuse) and sexual abuse (with or without intercourse) (Anderson, 1996). Respondents wrote a number in response to questions posed in the format of “How many times have you experienced ... abuse?” Scores were summed to create global measures of sexual and non-sexual abuse. The calculated coefficient alpha for the present sample was an adequate .65.

Initiation and aggression. The sixth section used the Heterosexual Contact Scale (HSC) to assess women’s use of initiation tactics (i.e., seduction, coercion, and force). The 45-item scale used in this study was a new version of past questionnaires, “The Initiating Heterosexual Contact Scale” (Anderson, & Newton, 1997) and “The Sexually Assertive Behavior Scale” (Anderson, 1998). Respondents wrote a number in response to questions posed in the format of “How many times have you attempted to have sexual contact with a man ...?” The responses produced lifetime cumulative scores that ranged from 0 to 90. To produce percents, the scores were dichotomized with all scores of 1 or more considered as a positive answer to using this strategy. In the regression analysis, mean scores based on the raw data were used in all calculations. To create a model that best represents the 3 component characterization of sexual behaviors used in this study, the 45-item HSC was divided into 3 categories. The first category was comprised of five items that appraised the use of seduction tactics (e.g., by dancing or moving seductively, by giving him a massage) (Cronbach’s Alpha coefficient of reliability = .84). The second category was comprised of five items that appraised the use of coercive tactics to obtain sexual contact (e.g., by threatening to end your relationship, by pressuring him with verbal arguments) (Cronbach’s Alpha coefficient of reliability = .66). The third category was comprised of six items (Cronbach’s Alpha coefficient of reliability = .90) and appraised the threat or use of physical force tactics (e.g., by holding him down, by hitting him, by using physical force).

Results

Means, standard deviations, ranges and percent scores are reported in [Table 1](#). The results describe a population of women who are older than typical college women ($M = 25.89$ years), started calling boys (mean number of boys called = 9.63) when they were about 13 years old ($M = 12.95$ years), have been sexually active for almost ten years (mean age at 1st intercourse = 16.68 years) and have had an average of approximately 7 sexual partners ($M = 6.59$). These women have also experienced significant abuse in their lives, with 75.4% reporting either physical or emotional abuse, and 45.7% reporting past sexual abuse. Almost all (92.3%) used seduction tactics to initiate sex with a man, 25.5% used coercive tactics, and 10.3% reported the use of force tactics to obtain sexual contact with a man.

Due to the exploratory nature of the present study, a stepwise method multiple regression was performed to

predict the three dimensions of initiation. Stepwise regression bases the order of variable entry on statistical rather than theoretical criteria. All computations were completed using the desktop version of the Statistical Package for the Social Sciences (SPSS) version 9.0.

Hypothesis one, stating that use of seduction tactics would be predicted by early age at first call to a boy, making more calls to boys during adolescence, calling more different boys during adolescence, high sexual self-esteem, positive future expectations about sex and relationships, greater number of lifetime sexual partners, early age at first intercourse, and older current age was partially supported. In support of the hypothesis, older current age, higher sexual self-esteem, making more total calls per week during adolescence, and making more total calls to boys (see [Table 2](#)) predicted use of seduction tactics. A total of 25% of the response variation in the use of seduction tactics was accounted for by these variables. The predictive relationships hypothesized between early age at first call, having a greater number of lifetime sexual partners, early age at first intercourse and future expectations about sex and relationships were not supported.

Hypothesis two, that the use of coercion tactics would be predicted by the demographic variables: having a greater number of lifetime sexual partners, early age at first intercourse, and older current age; and by experiencing past abuse and experiencing past sexual abuse was partially supported. The largest predictor was having a greater number of lifetime sexual partners, which accounted for 13% of the response variance. Early age at first intercourse also contributed significantly to the prediction of the use of coercive tactics and accounted for an additional 3% of the response variance.

Hypothesis three, that the use of force tactics would be predicted by the demographic variables: having a greater number of lifetime sexual partners, early age at first intercourse, and older current age; and by experiencing past abuse and experiencing past sexual abuse was not supported. Only early age at first intercourse was related to the use of force tactics to establish sexual contact and explained only 2% of the response variance.

Discussion

The purpose of this study was to test the ability of selected variables to predict college women's use of seduction, coercion, and force tactics. Two of the three hypotheses were partially supported. Previously untested relationships between adolescent calling patterns and initiation tactics were found. Two variables that have been linked to women's antisocial behaviors (e.g., abuse of others, problems with the law), namely the number of lifetime sexual partners (Paul, McManus, & Hayes, 2000) and early age at first intercourse (Woody, Russel, D'Souza, & Woody, 2000), also demonstrated predictive ability related to the use of coercion and force tactics. Previous findings (Anderson, 1996) documenting the relationships between past abuse (whether sexual or not) and using aggressive

tactics were not supported for this sample of respondents.

Sexual Seduction

The MSQ sexual self-esteem sub-scale and two rehearsal behaviors related to telephone calling during adolescence were useful in predicting the use of seduction tactics among this sample of respondents. The social learning concept of self-efficacy may be an effective way to explain these relationships. Social learning theorists believe that humans learn behavior through social interaction, even in the absence of a reward (Hogben & Byrne, 1998). More specifically, Bandura (1977a) concluded that enhanced *self-efficacy* (i.e., the belief that you can perform a given behavior successfully) leads to increases in the frequency of a behavior. Thus rehearsing a behavior should produce enhanced situational self-efficacy and the likelihood to engage in that behavior, or a similar behavior, at a later time.

For this study, two measures related to self-efficacy were tested. Sexual self-esteem, "... the dispositional tendency to evaluate positively one's capacity to relate sexually to others" (p. 34) as measured by the Multidimensional Sexuality Questionnaire (Snell, et al., 1993) and three rehearsal behaviors related to calling boys during adolescence were tested as predictors of college women's use of the initiation strategy of seduction. Sexual self-esteem has been positively correlated to greater sexual awareness, an approach to relationships that involves mutual concern and caring, a more varied history of sexual behavior, and having a more committed and restrictive orientation to sexual relationships (Snell, et al., 1993). Other measures of self-efficacy and tests of additional behaviors that could be considered rehearsal behaviors may become important variables in our evolving understanding of women's heterosexual initiation.

Sexual Coercion

Earlier age at first intercourse and higher number of lifetime sexual partners were predictive of women's use of coercion tactics. Two components of social learning theory may be used to support these results. Social learning theorists suggest that life experiences influence learning (Mischel, Ebbesen, & Zeiss, 1973). Bandura classified behavior, in the social learning view, as a process of *reciprocal determinism* between personal and environmental factors that include expectancies, modeling, and reinforcement (Bandura, 1977b). Reflective thought and *acquired competencies* are also portions of the reciprocal process of learned behavior (Bandura, 1977a; Bandura, Ross, & Ross, 1961). In this study, age at first intercourse and number of lifetime sexual partners could be conceptualized as measures of sexual experiences that allow for acquired competencies. It is plausible that women with more sexual partners have had more opportunities to engage in coercive tactics as experimentation, as part of a particular relationship, as part of a generalized behavioral pattern with men, or that they have learned this specific aggressive

strategy to satisfy their sexual needs or curiosity and therefore, report using this strategy more. Previously reported relationships between past abuse and the use of coercive tactics were not substantiated in this study. These past studies have explained small amounts of the variance (4-7%) in their populations (Anderson, 1996, 1990) and the lack of substantiation here is not surprising.

Other researchers have concluded that women who were abused in the past and become abusers are those who shifted roles from the victim to the aggressor (Higgs, et al., 1992). Perhaps most women who are victims either remain victims or, with significant personal work and help, become well adjusted in their adult sexual relationships. Obviously the use of coercive tactics among women is not well understood. Acquired competencies offer limited explanation. Hopefully, other rehearsal behaviors, other components of reciprocal determination, or other theoretical approaches can offer more insight into this component of women's sexual behavior in the future.

Sexual Force

The use of physical force tactics was weakly predicted by age at first intercourse. This may also represent an acquired competency. The use of physical force tactics is an unusual behavior in women; only 12% of the respondents reported ever using any type of force strategy while 43% reported using a coercion strategy and 92% reported using a seduction strategy to initiate sex. The rarity of force resulted in a very small sample for the examination of this relationship. With a larger sample, the tenants of social learning theory may be more reliably examined. As with the use of coercive tactics, other theoretical concepts, lifestyle issues, demographics, attitudes, and experiences need to be added to the exploration of the use of force tactics.

Conclusions

Several previously untested relationships demonstrated statistical significance in this study. The practical meaning of the results must be interpreted with caution due to the limits of the study in the sampling methods, research tool(s) used, specificity of connections between the theoretical concepts tested and the measurements used to test them, statistical methodology, and the explanatory power of the questions that might have been asked and were not. The results of this study can, with caution, be used to generalize beyond this population to college women, but not to other groups. These results also reflect the complexity of women's sexual behaviors and motivations. Despite ten years of regular research in this area, we are just beginning to scratch the surface of understanding women's initiation of sexual contact with men.

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Table 1

Descriptive Statistics

Variable	N	Range	Mean	SD	%
Current age	271	17 - 60	25.89	9.14	N/A
Age at first intercourse	253	7 - 24	16.68	2.28	N/A
Number of sexual partners	258	0 - 98	6.59	10.31	N/A
Age at first call to a boy	254	5 - 21	12.95	2.48	N/A
Total boys called	216	0 - 101	9.63	11.11	N/A
Total calls per week	215	0 - 392	46.75	48.80	N/A
Experienced past abuse	257	N/A	N/A	N/A	75.4
Experienced past sexual abuse	256	N/A	N/A	N/A	45.7
Sexual contact by seduction	259	N/A	N/A	N/A	92.3
Sexual contact by coercion	262	N/A	N/A	N/A	25.5
Sexual contact by force	262	N/A	N/A	N/A	10.3

Table 2

Stepwise Multiple Regression of Seduction Coercion, and Force

Sig of <i>Seduction</i>	Cum R ²	R ² chg	Beta	beta
Sexual self-esteem	.18	.00	.40	<.001
Total calls per week	.21	.03	.16	<.001
Age	.23	.02	.19	<.001
Total calls to boys	.25	.02	.15	<.001
<i>Coercion</i>				
Number of sexual partners	.13	.00	.31	<.001
Age at first intercourse	.16	.03	-.18	<.001
<i>Force</i>				

Age at first intercourse

.02

.00

-.02

<.001