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ORIGINAL ARTICLE

Sexual coercion: Thinking and understanding sexual violence beyond sexual offenders[☆]

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KEYWORDS

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Prevention

Summary

Aims. – Sexual violence is a major social problem for which the incidence and prevalence are largely underestimated. In addition, available studies suggest that the vast majority of sexual violence is committed by individuals from the general population who are not (and probably never will be) identified by the authorities. By proposing to study a broader spectrum of behaviors than sexual offences alone, the concept of sexual coercion allows for a more accurate assessment of sexual violence as a whole.

Method. – Following a proposed definition of sexual coercion, a selection of available key data is presented to illustrate the magnitude of the phenomenon. The conceptual and practical implications of favoring the notion of sexual coercion over sexual offences are discussed.

Conclusion. – This article ends with a presentation of the articles that are included in the thematic issue.

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Introduction

Although there is a particular and legitimate focus on the study of sexual aggression among offenders in the legal system, available studies suggest that the vast majority of sexual violence is committed by individuals from the general population who are not (and probably never will be) identified by the authorities. To illustrate, data from the 2004 General Social Survey in Canada suggested that only one in 10 sexual assaults had been reported to the police (Brennan and Taylor-Butts, 2008). In France, and solely on the phenomenon of rape, the latest report published in the *Haut Conseil à l'égalité entre les hommes et les femmes* indicates that "of the 84,000 adult women who report rape or attempted rape each year, fewer than 10 percent file complaints and only 1 out of 10 complaints will lead to a conviction" (Bousquet et al., 2016, p. 10, own translation). Consequently, and without minimizing the human and social consequences of sexual offences, this data does not seem to account for all sexual violence. The concept of sexual coercion, rather than sexual aggression or sexual offence, highlights that sexual violence is not only the act of individuals identified by the authorities or the courts, but also that sexual violence may not always involve an offence (Benbouriche, 2016).

Sexual coercion: definition

Sexual coercion describes the use of any tactic or strategy to engage another person in sexual behaviors despite the absence of free and informed consent, or the clear expression of a refusal (Abbey et al., 2014; Farris et al., 2008). These so-called coercive strategies may comprise the use of manipulation (through promises or inducing guilt for example), persistent touching (caresses or kisses), intoxication of the partner (due to drugs or alcohol) or the use of verbal pressure or physical force. Sexual coercion therefore includes behaviors legally defined as sexual aggression and rape, but also refers to acts of sexual violence that do not meet the legal definition of sexual aggression or rape (Tedeschi and Felson, 1994).

Sexual coercion: available data

Since the late 1950s, sexual coercion on university campuses has been the subject of special attention (Kirkpatrick and Kanin, 1957). Of course, sexual coercion is not restricted to the academic community and is not limited to men and women in their twenties (Abbey et al., 2006). However, the opportunities for greater social interaction, in particular with regard to a general way of life that favors encounters (for example, through student parties), as well as age¹ have been suggested as risk factors that could explain a higher

incidence of sexual coercion on university campuses than in the general population.

Men who commit sexual coercion

Following the work of Koss (Koss and Gidycz, 1985; Koss et al., 1987), special attention was paid to developing questionnaires to describe coercive behaviors while avoiding labeling them as a sexual offence. Studies based on the use of self-reported questionnaires then multiplied and made it possible to quantify – at least partially – the phenomenon (Abbey and McAuslan, 2004; Finley and Corty, 1993; Bergeron et al., 2016; Frazier et al., 2009; Koss and Gidycz, 1985; Koss et al., 1987; Miller and Marshall, 1987; Thompson et al., 2013). Despite differences, mainly due to questionnaires used or sampling considerations, all of these studies highlighted the extent of sexual coercion, with almost a third of female students reporting having been victims. To illustrate, Koss et al. (1987) indicate that 27.9% of the 3187 female university students interviewed reported being subjected to behaviors that approximate the legal definition of rape or attempted rape since the age of 14 and 26.5% more reported experiencing other forms of victimization of a sexual nature. The study by Finley and Corty (1993) as well as that by Miller and Marshall (1987) suggest that approximately 30% of female students reported having been the victims of non-consensual sex specifically during their university years. With regard to perpetrators of sexual coercion, between 10 and 15% of students reported having committed acts that met the legal definition of rape or attempted rape (Abbey et al., 2004; Struckman-Johnson et al., 2003). Furthermore, Abbey et al. (2014) mention the study by White and Smith (2004) indicating that 34.5% of their sample of 184 students reported having committed at least one act of sexual coercion during their first semester at university.

These studies also revealed that in the vast majority of cases, the coercive strategies used did not involve physical force, but rather the use of psychological pressure or the use of alcohol (Finley and Corty, 1993; Struckman-Johnson et al., 2003). Moreover, like the observations already made by Kanin (Kanin, 1969; Kirkpatrick and Kanin, 1957), sexual coercion is generally characterized by a familiarity, or even closeness, between the victim and the perpetrator. The notion of date-rape is thus used to define situations of sexual coercion, including rape, occurring after a social outing or date, or even as a result of initially consensual sexual activities (Abbey et al., 2014; Farris et al., 2008).

Although sexual coercion in a university environment has been relatively well documented, fewer studies have focused on men from the general population. However, there is little or no evidence to suggest that the data observed in a university environment could not be extrapolated to the general population. Indeed, available studies suggest that sexual coercion is at least as common in the general population as it is on a university campus (Benbouriche, 2016; Bouffard and Miller, 2014; Farris et al., 2008; Spokes et al., 2014; Tedeschi and Felson, 1994; Widman et al., 2013). For example, the study by Widman et al. (2013) indicates that 59% of the participants of the general population report having committed at least one act similar to sexual coercion. Again, this percentage covers relatively different

¹ In criminology, it is commonly accepted that the effect of age, and its curvilinear relationship with the frequency of offenses and deviant behaviors, can be explained essentially by a general process of maturation (Gottfredson and Hirschi, 1990, Ulmer and Steffensmeier, 2014).

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