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ORIGINAL ARTICLE

Sexual coercion perpetrated by women: Testing an etiological model[☆]

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Women;
Sexual abuse;
Sociosexuality;
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Structural equation modeling

Summary

Introduction. – Although an increasing body of literature focuses on sexual coercion committed by women in the general population, very few explanatory models have been put forward to explain the use of coercive strategies by women.

Objective. – The main objective of this study is to test, using a wider and more culturally diverse sample, the first explanatory model suggested by Schatzel-Murphy (2011) and tested on American women.

Method. – To this end, 274 Canadian, heterosexual and French-speaking university students completed the French version of the Multidimensional Inventory of Development, Sex and Aggression (MIDSA).

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Results. – The results show that a greater proportion of Quebecers (41%) than Americans (26%) use sexual coercion to force their partner to have sexual contacts. In general, the Schatzel-Murphy etiological model successfully explains Quebecers' use of sexual coercion, albeit not quite as well as for Americans, as can be seen by an explained variance which is three times smaller (12% as opposed to 34%). The lack of link between sexual abuse and sexual coercion, together with the different roles played by sociosexuality and hyperfemininity in the use of sexual coercion by Quebecers, is discussed in light of the cultural differences between women from the two countries.

Discussion. – Some thought is also given to the two major paths leading to sexual coercion and suggestions are made for related clinical implications.

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Introduction

Most studies documenting the circumstances and paths leading women to commit sexual assault used adjudicated populations, implying that scant attention was paid to events not reported or dealt with by the courts (e.g., Gannon et al., 2010). In seeking to obtain a better understanding of the phenomenon, an examination of the concept of sexual coercion as a means of studying sexual violence in non-adjudicated populations proves to be particularly relevant (see the Benbouriche and Parent, 2018 article, in this issue, for some thoughts on the notion of sexual coercion).

An explanation of sexual coercion

To date, few studies have enabled the identification of factors associated with sexual coercion in women, such as a history of sexual abuse, antisocial or psychopathic traits, hostile attitudes towards men, adhering to a rigid and stereotypical gender role and a sizeable investment in sexuality (Bouffard et al., 2016; Krahe et al., 2003; Porter and Bent, 2014; Russell and Oswald, 2001). To our knowledge, the first explanatory model was suggested by Schatzel-Murphy et al. (2009) and documented the paths leading to the use of sexual coercion in a sample of 93 women. This model was based on the works of Malamuth (1996, 1998) and Knight and Sims-Knight (2003) and on the few studies examining the factors associated with sexual coercion in women. This model was then improved and tested on a second sample of 177 American university students (Schatzel-Murphy, 2011).

This improved model (Fig. 1) suggests that sexual abuse (including sexual abuse during childhood and sexual harassment in adulthood) and rape myth acceptance might favour the development of a false perception of the capacity of men and women to resist (or to consent to) sexual relations. This perception might in turn allow the development of hyperfemininity (i.e., considering female sexuality to be a form of "merchandise" and expecting men to behave in a dominant way). This hyperfemininity, central to the Schatzel-Murphy model, might entail the development of rigid feelings and behaviors based on a stereotype of femininity and might encourage the adoption of a traditional sexual script (i.e., a mental representation of how sexual encounters between a man and a woman might be expected to unfold). According

to the script, men cannot refuse sexual relations, as they are expected to be perpetually seeking out such relations. Faced with a refusal, a woman might turn to coercive strategies to ensure that there is sexual contact in accordance with her sexual script.

According to Schatzel-Murphy (2011), two paths would allow the use of coercion. The first path is characterized by an impersonal and emotionless approach to sexuality, measured by sociosexuality. This path shares similarities with the externalized and antisocial path observed in models put forward for men, but without the display of general antisocial behaviors. The second path is characterized by problems of emotional control following a refusal by a man (theory put forward, but not measured, by Schatzel-Murphy) and sexuality characterized by compulsion (difficulty in controlling sexual urges) and sexual domination (which serves to justify the right to sexuality).

This etiological model of sexual coercion for non-adjudicated women seems to converge with two of the three major paths suggested by Gannon et al. (2010) for adjudicated female sex offenders (the third path related to women forced by a man to sexually assault another person) and the two major paths identified in men (Knight and Sims-Knight, 2003; Malamuth, 1996, 1998): the first characterized by emotional detachment and antisocial behaviors and the second by problems of emotional control, overinvestment in sexuality and a lack of self-control.

Objective of the study

Several authors have underlined the fact that, in general, Americans and Canadians share moderate values, with the exception of Americans from the south of the United States, who generally present more conservative values, and French-speaking Quebecers, who present more liberal values (Adams, 2003; Grabb and Curtis, 2010), but also in terms of romantic relationships and sexuality (Grabb and Curtis, 2010; Léger et al., 2016; Wu and Baer, 1996). Taking into consideration these cultural differences, the objective of this study is to test, on French-speaking Quebecers women (hereinafter, Quebecers), the explanatory model put forward by Schatzel-Murphy and validated solely on American women (hereinafter, Americans).

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