

An Empirical Test of the Bodyguard Hypothesis

Margo Wilson and Sarah L. Mesnick

In a comparative review of mateship alliances, Mesnick (this volume) argues that one benefit to females of forming a heterosexual pair-bond is reduction in risk of sexual aggression from other males. Several subsidiary hypotheses follow from this “bodyguard hypothesis,” including (1) that females may be especially attracted to large and/or dominant males where high risk of sexual aggression prevails, and (2) that the cross-species distribution of pair-bonding by females may be accounted for, in part, by variable risks of sexual aggression. Mesnick’s review of field studies of a diverse array of species lends much support to these and related hypotheses.

In the case of *Homo sapiens*, Mesnick reviews several empirical studies that suggest that being married is associated with significant reductions in risk of sexual assault and in the risk of sexual harassment. The bodyguard hypothesis predicts that women coresiding with a male partner will incur less risk of sexual aggression from men other than the marital partner than the risk incurred by “unmarried” women. Mesnick furthermore reviews evidence of the relevance of a woman’s youth to the risk of sexual assault and sexual harassment. In none of the published reports that Mesnick reviews, however, had the authors assessed the rates of sexual victimization in relation to age or mated marital status while controlling for the other variable. And, of course, age and marital status are highly correlated. As Mesnick pointed out, a stronger test of her bodyguard hypothesis with respect to reduced risk of sexual victimization in humans would be to assess rates according to mated marital status while controlling for the woman’s age.

Here, we present rates of sexual assault homicides and rates of women reporting nonlethal sexual aggression in relation to mated marital status, while controlling for the victim’s age. Sexual assault homicides are a particularly useful assay of sexual aggression, because a complete sample of homicide cases does not suf-

fer from various possible biases in the reporting of nonlethal sexual victimizations. The reader should also be reminded that we are not claiming that the risk of being killed in the context of sexual aggression is the adaptive context for the bodyguard hypothesis. Factors that exacerbate or mitigate the risk of sexual assault homicides can also be expected to raise or lower the likelihood of nonlethal sexual aggression; fatal outcomes are much rarer events (Wilson, Daly, and Scheib, this volume). It is an implicit assumption of many who study and deal with violence against women that lethal and nonlethal outcomes of an assault share commonalities of motive and causal dynamics, and of the circumstances and other factors that may exacerbate or mitigate risk. In a comparison of the demographic patterns of risk of lethal and nonlethal violence against wives by marital partners in Canada (Wilson, Johnson, and Daly, 1995), type of marital union, age of the wife, and evidence of the relevance of male sexual proprietariness were found to have parallel patterns of risk in both lethal and nonlethal incidents. The same data archives as used in this study of violence against wives, namely a national archive of all known homicides in Canada from 1974 to 1992, and a national survey of 12,252 Canadian women in 1993, are used to test the implications of the bodyguard hypothesis with respect to risk of sexual aggression by men other than marital partners.

Methods

For the purpose of testing the bodyguard hypothesis, we categorized women as married or not married. Married women included coresiding women in both registered and *de facto* (common-law) marital unions. Not-married women included women who were single, married but separated, divorced, and widowed.

Nonlethal Assaults

In a five-month period of 1993, a national sample of Canadian women, aged eighteen years and older, were interviewed by telephone (1% of this population lives in households without telephones) about their experiences of threats of violence, sexual and other physical violence, perceptions of safety, forms of sexual harassment, and other related topics, as well as demographic background information (Johnson and Sacco, 1995). The 12,252 interviewees from the ten Canadian provinces included 8,413 married women (both registered and *de facto* marriages) and 3,839 women who were not presently married (including separated, divorced, and single women). The survey methodology used random-digit dialing of households such that the random selection procedure would result in a statistically representative sample of the population-at-large in that province. Once the interviewer had spoken with women eighteen years of age or older, 91% agreed to be interviewed. The survey methodology incorporated a number of in-