Correlates of College Women's Self-Reports of Heterosexual Aggression

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Traditional Western social and sexual scripts have discouraged women from expressing sexual interest or initiating sexual behaviors. For the present study, 212 women attending sexuality classes in the New York/New Jersey area volunteered anonymously to complete a questionnaire that measured demographics, sexual attitudes, and sexual behaviors. The instrument was designed to identify predictors of the respondents' sexually aggressive behaviors toward men. Sexual aggression, in this instance, is defined as initiating sexual contact (kissing, fondling, or intercourse) by using sexual coercion (e.g., threatening to end a relationship, verbal pressure, or lying), sexual abuse (e.g., sex with a minor by an adult at least 5 years older than the minor, by inducing intoxication, or by using a position of power or authority), or physically forced sex (i.e., by the threat of physical force, actual physical force, or the use of a weapon). Following tests for the reliability and validity of the questionnaire, phi coefficients, multiple regression, and chi-square analysis were completed and indicated that both the experience of past sexual abuse and the attitudinal subscale of adversarial beliefs about sexual relationships were independently related to women's heterosexual aggression. Social learning theory has been used to explain the development of aggressive attitudes and behaviors. The contributions of adversarial beliefs and past sexual abuse to heterosexual aggression among this sample of college women are discussed in relation to the social construction of gender and two specific aspects of social learning theory.

KEY WORDS: college women's heterosexual aggression; sexual coercion; societal norms; victims of sexual abuse; women's sexual aggression.

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INTRODUCTION

Until the pioneering work of Masters and Johnson (1966), Western culture attributed little or no sexual desire or capacity to women (Willy, Vander, & Fisher, 1950). At the same time many African and Asian social and religious practices were, and continue to be, carried out to suppress powerful sexual desires ascribed to women (Francoeur, 1991). These contrasts support the postmodern contention that many male-female differences are not universal or enduring (Hare-Mustin & Marecek, 1989) but are the result of socially constructed and assimilated norms.

Traditional Western social and sexual scripts have discouraged women from expressing sexual interest or initiating sexual behaviors (McCormick, 1987). As a result of these scripts, women may have relied on covert or subtle signals (e.g., body language) to encourage men to approach them (Perper & Weis, 1987). However, some recent researchers have concluded that male and female social and sexual scripts have been converging (Hendrick & Hendrick, 1987; King et al., 1988). Other researchers report that young women are overcoming the lack of directness our society expects of them in relationships (Midwinter, 1992) as well as overcoming a double standard, which allows a greater latitude of sexual expression for males than for females (Reiss, 1967).

Despite traditional gender scripts in Western culture that are assumed to keep women from engaging in sexually aggressive behaviors, recent articles report that some women are sexually aggressive (Craig, 1988; Laury, 1992; Sarrel & Masters, 1982; Struckman-Johnson & Struckman-Johnson, 1988, 1994). Sarrel and Masters (1982) reported the case histories of 11 men who were abused by women in a variety of settings, and Laury (1992) outlined the behavioral patterns of females who were abusive toward patients in a psychiatric hospital. These findings were corroborated by Craig (1988), who reported that 19% of the college women she surveyed acknowledged sexually coercing a male dating partner. Struckman-Johnson and Struckman-Johnson (1994) reported that 24% of the 204 college men they surveyed indicated that they had received coercive sexual contact from a woman. Struckman-Johnson & Struckman-Johnson (1988) found that college women and men reported similar rates (approximately 67%) of experiencing “unwanted” sexual intercourse through four of five strategies (e.g., verbal pressure, sexual stimulation, forced seduction, and intoxication). The exception was physical force, which was experienced more by women (9%) than men (1%).

Although previous research on female sexual aggression has not directly tested social learning theory, researchers have drawn conclusions from their work that are supportive of several of its elements. The emer-