

Sexual coercion associated with rape myths and sexual attitudes in college students

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Original article

ABSTRACT

Sexual violence occurs when an individual obtains sexual interaction through coercion, intimidation, blackmail, injury, or threats of physical harm. It ranges from slight approaches to rape, and involves some kind of persuasion to obtaining unwanted sexual interaction; it happens more often in dating relationships. The aim of this paper is to measure the association of sexual attitudes and the acceptance of rape myths with sexual coercion in a sample of college students, and compare these variables by sex and age. The sample was non-probabilistic and included 630 students (51% had experiences of sexual coercion); 71% of men reported practicing sexual coercion. Women who practiced sexual coercion had a less traditional sexual attitude than men ($F=21.413$, $p<.001$), and women who faced sexual coercion had a more permissive attitude in sexual interactions ($F=37.432$, $p<.001$). Men who faced sexual coercion blamed rape victims more than women ($F=10.603$, $p=.001$). Younger men also blamed rape victims more than older ones ($F=9.841$, $p=.002$). When women use sexual coercion it seems to have a paradoxical implication regarding their gender role. It also appears to be a problem for negotiating safe sexual encounters; women who reported more sexual permissiveness seem to participate more frequently in unplanned sexual interactions and they may be more vulnerable to coercion. It is necessary to modify beliefs about abusive sexual behaviors being normal in dating relationships.

Key words: Sexual violence, sexual coercion, rape myths, sexual attitudes, young people.

RESUMEN

La violencia sexual es el logro de actos sexuales mediante coerción, intimidación, chantaje, lesiones o amenazas de daño físico y varía desde acercamientos hasta la violación. Involucra algún tipo de persuasión para que se den intercambios sexuales no consensuados y acontece con mayor frecuencia en relaciones de cortejo, noviazgo o románticas. El objetivo de este trabajo es medir la asociación entre las actitudes sexuales y la aceptación de los mitos de violación con la coerción sexual en una muestra de jóvenes universitarios y hacer una comparación por sexo y grupos de edad. La muestra del estudio fue no aleatoria e incluyó a 630 estudiantes universitarios. El 51% de la muestra reportó experiencias de coerción sexual; los hombres la ejercieron casi tres veces más (71.1%) que las mujeres (28.9%). Las mujeres que ejercieron coerción reportaron una actitud sexual menos tradicional que los hombres ($F=21.413$, $p<.001$) y las que la sufrieron aceptaron más la permisividad ($F=37.432$, $p<.001$). Los hombres que sufrieron coerción culpabilizaron más a las víctimas de violación que las mujeres ($F=10.603$, $p=.001$); esto mismo se observó en el grupo de 17-20 años de edad ($F=9.841$, $p=.002$). El ejercicio de coerción por parte de las mujeres tiene un carácter paradójico en cuanto al rol de género. En los sujetos existe una dificultad para negociar un encuentro sexual seguro o consensuado; las mujeres que reportaron mayor permisibilidad sexual mostraron una mayor propensión a involucrarse en relaciones sexuales no planificadas y ser más vulnerables a la coerción. Es importante hacer esfuerzos para erradicar las creencias que sostienen que los comportamientos sexuales abusivos en las relaciones erótico-afectivas son normales o naturales.

Palabras clave: Violencia sexual, coerción sexual, mitos de violación, actitudes sexuales, jóvenes.

BACKGROUND

Violence is a serious human rights and public health problems that affects all sectors of the population.¹ It has different manifestations,^{2,3} but sexual violence is one of the most concerning and widely-discussed.^{1,3} It consists of obtaining sexual acts through coercion, intimidation, blackmail, inju-

ry, or threats of physical harm. The acts vary from unwanted approaches to rape; they form part of a continuum of behaviors that can affect the mental health of the victim.^{1,3}

Some studies have found that individuals associate sexual violence with rape.^{4,6} However, it can be subtle and involve some kind of persuasion for non-consensual sexual exchanges to take place, and it happens with greater fre-

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quency in the context of romantic relationships, dating, or engagements.⁴ This is known as sexual coercion on dates and it refers to any type of physical or emotional imposition that a person uses to obtain sexual encounters.⁷ The frequency with which this occurs ranges between 14% for men and 60% for women and is usually carried out by the former,⁸ although men are also susceptible to being victims,⁹ especially in the adolescent and young adult population. Some studies have estimated that up to 50% of young women and 39% of young men have experienced different types of coercion¹⁰ and that between 25% and 60% of adolescents have experienced it within relationships.^{11,12}

Sexual coercion in relationships or on dates has not been widely investigated in Latin America, perhaps because it includes the use of practices that have become normalized, such as tests of love or the threat of ending the relationship if the sexual encounter does not occur.^{4,13} This can force the start of being sexually active and raise the risk of unwanted pregnancies, sexually-transmitted infections or HIV in young people.^{13,14}

The study of ways in which young people negotiate their sexual encounters would allow a better understanding of the nature and meaning of coercion and the factors associated with it,¹⁵ such as rape myths and sexual attitudes.

Rape myths are prejudices, stereotypes, or false beliefs about rape, rape victims, or rapists.¹⁶ They are used to deny or justify the sexual aggression of men towards women,^{17,18} they reflect positions, values, or feelings towards the event and ensure the reproduction of stereotyped gender roles, as well as constructions about women and femininity.¹⁹ They contribute to the women's fear of suffering a sexual attack, as well as the way in which they define, resist, face, and survive the events when they occur. They can even convince the victims that they are responsible for the event¹⁶ and influence the responses offered by various institutions.^{3,20}

Attitudes involve preferences towards a certain sexual behavior and they are conditioned by personal values. They are constructed with opinions or beliefs, feelings, and behaviors which originate in prior sexual experience.²¹⁻²³ They are classified as conservative (a static and moralistic view of sexuality) and liberal (a view based on pleasure and possibilities other than procreation).^{21,23} They are usually associated with gender roles, given that a behavior is valued differently depending on whether it is carried out by a man or a woman.²³ In young people, it has been observed that the most permissive sexual attitudes are associated with more extensive and more positive sexual experiences, and a less emotional nature.²⁴

The problem of coercion can have a serious impact on the mental health of young people, as well as encouraging learning of types of relationships where violence exists.^{25,26} Acceptance of rape myths and sexual attitudes has not been studied in depth in Mexico. The aim of this paper is to measure the association between these variables and sexual coercion in a

sample of young college students who have experienced or carried out sexual coercion in their partner relationships, as well as to make a comparison by sex and age group.

METHOD

Participants

The sample was non-probabilistic and included 630 university students; a subsample was formed of those who reported having carried out or experienced sexual coercion (n=321) and they were divided into two age groups (17-20 and 21-29 years). The median age for both groups was 22 (SD= 2.8 and SD= 2.9). The inclusion criterion was having had a girlfriend/boyfriend or other partner relationship at some time in their lives.

Instruments

*Sexual Experiences Survey (SES).*²⁷ The SES was used to measure sexual coercion in those who had carried it out (SES-P) and those who had experienced it (SES-V); it is a translated version adapted for the student population.^{6,28} The scale integrates questions with four response options (never=0, through to more than four times=3) which similarly inquire into perpetration (seven items) and/or experience (seven items) of behaviors such as forcing any kind of touching, attempted sexual relations, and consummated sexual relations. The research documents rates of reliability which fluctuate between .73 and .85 for the SES-P and .75 and .90 for the SES-V.^{6,29}

Escala de Aceptación de Mitos de Violación [Rape Myths Acceptance Scale] (AMV). This scale was designed to assess adherence to rape myths. It is formed of 12 adapted questions^{30,31} which are presented in a *Likert*-type format with three response options. It explores the level of conformity towards myths (1=agree, 2=indifferent, 3=disagree). Two dimensions were generated from the scale: victim-blaming and the invulnerability of the man to rape. In Mexico, the AMV has been applied to students and young people in the open population, with coefficients of reliability that fluctuate between .80 and .84.³²

*Escala de Actitudes Sexuales [Sexual Attitudes Scale] (EAS).*³³ This was used to assess the individuals' position towards sexual behaviors. It consists of 14 *Likert*-type questions which explore conservative vs liberal views, with three response options (1=agree, 2=indifferent, 3=disagree). Two dimensions were generated from the scale: sexual permissiveness and sex by mutual agreement. For the EAS, the investigation has reported reliability rates which range between .76 and .82.³³

Procedure. The data was collected in university facilities in the morning and afternoon sessions. Authorization

Table 1. Percentage of students who have carried out sexual coercion (SES-P)

Sexual behavior	Men (n=123)			Women (n=50)		
	%	χ	SD	%	χ	SD
1. Have you had, or have you tried to have foreplay with someone, when they did not want to, wearing them down with continuous pressure or blackmail?	83.0	1.28	0.84	84.0	1.26	0.87
2. Has anyone ever had sexual foreplay with you when they didn't want to because you threatened them or used any kind of physical force to make them do it (twisting their arm, pulling them)?	24.4	0.34	0.68	12.0	0.14	0.40
3. Have you ever tried to have sexual relations with anyone when they didn't want to, giving them alcohol or drugs?	27.6	0.37	0.68	10.0	0.18	0.59
4. Have you had sexual relations with someone, when they did not want to, wearing them down with continuous pressure or blackmail?	39.0	0.60	0.88	30.0	0.46	0.59
5. Have you had sexual relations with someone when they did not want to, because you gave them alcohol or drugs?	17.9	0.27	0.64	18.0	0.24	0.55
6. Have you ever had sexual relations with anyone when they didn't want to because you threatened them or used any kind of physical force to make them do it (twisting their arm, pulling them)?	15.4	0.21	0.54	8.0	0.14	0.53
7. Have you tried to have sexual relations with someone when they didn't want to though using threats or any kind of physical force (twisting their arm, pulling them)?	17.1	0.24	0.60	8.0	0.10	0.36

was obtained from the authorities and the students were informed about the study. After explaining the objective and guaranteeing anonymity of participation, they were asked to respond to the questionnaire. The application was done in groups with an approximate duration of 45 minutes.

Statistical Analysis

Variance analyses were performed to understand the effects of sex and age group, as well as the interaction of both, on those who carried out and those who experienced sexual coercion.

RESULTS

Of the students interviewed (N=630), a little over half (51%) had experienced a situation of sexual coercion; 27.5% (n=173) admitted having carried it out on their partner, while 23.5% (n=148) indicated having suffered it at some time in their lives.

In the group who carried out coercion, there were significant differences by sex ($t=37.29$, $gl=172$, $p<.001$); men reported having carried out it almost three times as much (71.1%) as women (28.9%) (Table 1). In the group of those who had suffered coercion at some time in their lives, there

Table 2. Percentage of students who have experienced sexual coercion (SES-V)

Sexual behavior	Men (n=123)			Women (n=50)		
	%	χ	SD	%	χ	SD
1. Have you had, or have you tried to have foreplay with someone, when they did not want to, wearing them down with continuous pressure or blackmail?	84.0	0.97	0.88	65.7	1.28	0.76
2. Has anyone ever had sexual foreplay with you when they didn't want to because you threatened them or used any kind of physical force to make them do it (twisting their arm, pulling them)?	19.8	0.27	0.66	17.9	0.26	0.58
3. Have you ever tried to have sexual relations with anyone when they didn't want to, giving them alcohol or drugs?	23.5	0.25	0.72	13.4	0.31	0.62
4. Have you had sexual relations with someone, when they did not want to, wearing them down with continuous pressure or blackmail?	44.4	0.70	0.95	43.3	0.70	0.88
5. Have you had sexual relations with someone when they did not want to, because you gave them alcohol or drugs?	17.3	0.46	0.82	28.4	0.22	0.52
6. Have you ever had sexual relations with someone when they didn't want to because you threatened them or used any kind of physical force to make them do it (twisting their arm, pulling them)?	9.9	0.24	0.67	13.4	0.15	0.50
7. Have you tried to have sexual relations with someone when they didn't want to though using threats or any kind of physical force (twisting their arm, pulling them)?	16.0	0.24	0.63	14.9	0.22	0.54

Table 3. Variance analysis of the dimensions obtained by sex and age group in students who have carried out sexual coercion

Scales and dimensions	A	B	A*B
	Sex n=173	Age n=173	n=173
Rape myths (AMV)			
• Victim-blaming	(F=3.110, p=.079)	(F=0.195, p=.659)	(F=3.000, p=.085)
• Invulnerability of the man	(F=0.423, p=.516)	(F=0.459, p=.499)	(F=0.252, p=.617)
Sexual attitudes (EAS)			
• Sexual permissiveness	(F=21.413, p<.001)	(F=0.027, p=.871)	(F=0.118, p=.732)
• Sex by mutual consent	(F=5.635, p=.019)	(F=0.152, p=.697)	(F=0.377, p=.540)

were also significant differences by sex ($t=37.68$, $gI=147$, $p<.001$); women (54.7%) reported it more than men (45.3%) (Table 2). Comparison by age did not show significant differences in either of the groups.

Group 1. Subjects who carried out coercion

In the Sexual Attitudes Scale (EAS), sex showed to have a significant effect on sexual permissiveness and sex by mutual consent. Women ($\bar{x}=2.66$) reported a significantly less traditional sexual attitude than men ($\bar{x}=2.16$) ($F=21.413$, $p<.001$). Furthermore, women ($\bar{x}=1.87$) accepted the practice of sex by mutual consent significantly more than men ($\bar{x}=1.58$) ($F=5.635$, $p=.019$).

Group 2. Subjects who experienced coercion

In the Rape Myths Acceptance Scale (AMV), sex showed a significant effect on the culpability of victims; men ($\bar{x}=18.56$) accepted victim-blaming significantly more than women ($\bar{x}=16.34$) ($F=10.603$, $p=.001$). Furthermore, in the Sexual Attitudes Scale (EAS), the significant effect was obtained on sexual permissiveness; women ($\bar{x}=2.72$) accepted permissiveness significantly more ($F=37.432$, $p<.001$) than men ($\bar{x}=2.14$).

Age had a significant effect on the Rape Myths Acceptance Scale (AMV) around victim-blaming; subjects in the 17-20 age group ($\bar{x}=18.53$) accepted victim-blaming significantly more than those in the 21-29 age group ($\bar{x}=16.40$) ($F=9.841$, $p=.002$).

DISCUSSION

The findings of this study generated information on the effect of sexual attitudes and rape myths on the experience of applying or receiving pressure to have a sexual encounter in the context of dating. Consistent with that reported in other works,^{8-12,32} the results showed that men carried out more coercion (71%) for non-consensual sexual activities than women (55%). Significant associations were observed in the group who had carried out coercion in the EAS; women were more sexually permissive and had a more open attitude to mutually-consented sexual encounters.

Coercion carried out by women, at least in this study, seems to have a paradoxical character in terms of acting out clearly feminine gender roles, given that some seem to vary between domination (coercion) and considering the needs of the other person (sexual activity by mutual consent); in other words, perhaps in this group of women there exists a tendency to present a style which allows them to combine gender roles; certain characteristics that are by turns masculine (aggression, seeking dominance, virility, and sexual power) and feminine (submission, emotions, tolerance, care for others, self-denial).³⁴

In terms of the effect of sexual permissiveness, developing a clear explanation of this attitude is complex given that it is present in women who have carried out or suffered from sexual coercion. However, it is possible to propose the existence of differences in the difficulty to negotiate a safe or consensual sexual encounter in both cases.³⁵ The research suggests that more permissive sexual attitudes are associat-

Table 4. Variance analysis of the dimensions obtained by sex and age group in students who have experienced sexual coercion

Scales and dimensions	A	B	A*B
	Sex n=148	Age n=148	n=148
Rape myths (AMV)			
• Victim-blaming	(F=10.603, p=.001)	(F=9.841, p=.002)	(F=1.804, p=.181)
• Invulnerability of the man	(F=0.134, p=.715)	(F=0.184, p=.669)	(F=0.288, p=.593)
Sexual attitudes (EAS)			
• Sexual permissiveness	(F=37.432, p<.001)	(F=0.123, p=.726)	(F=0.035, p=.853)
• Sex by mutual consent	(F=0.855, p=.357)	(F=0.079, p=.779)	(F=0.030, p=.862)

ed with greater sexual experience;²⁴ this supposes a certain capacity to reject situations that are unwanted or not mutually agreed upon, and as such, the use of self-protection behaviors. On the contrary, when a sexual relation is imposed (or happens for the first time), risky sexual behaviors increase (including activity with multiple partners not using protection).^{35,36} Therefore it is possible that some women who accepted sexual permissiveness could have a greater propensity to be involved in unplanned sexual relations and be more vulnerable to coercion due to not having acquired the skill to negotiate a sexual encounter or demonstrate a clear rejection of a sexual event.

Furthermore, an important percentage of men admitted having experienced coercion (43%), which coincides with other works in the sense that the phenomenon affects people of both sexes.⁹ However, it is notable that this group, especially those in the lower age bracket (17-20), obtained the highest scores on the AMV scale in the aspect of victim-blaming. The results suggest that they are inclined to justify this using expressions such as "women are raped because they don't look after themselves, they put themselves at risk, or they cause men to get turned on". In any case, the message is that women get the punishment they deserve because of their behavior.³⁷ As such, the beliefs and practices of many men is possibly adjusted to the stereotype of the dominant macho man which defines masculine sexuality as intrinsically violent, demanding privilege and power over women.³⁸ Rigid gender or macho sexual attributes tend to translate into the seduction and imposition of women,³⁹ however, for the youngest men in this study, it is possible that this has become problematic.

Macho attributes can obey various factors, for example, the fact that the conservative characteristics of the masculine sexual role make it more difficult to accept being actively approached by a woman to have a sexual relationship.³⁷ Consideration should also be given to the level of intrinsic conflict around accepting unwanted sexual activities precisely because of the stereotype of the macho man and in order not to be called gay. The data shows the need for further research into the way younger men understand and experience sexual coercion in the contexts of flings and relationships.

Research in Mexico has shown that men and women do not identify coercive behavior while they are dating and that they cover it with talk of love or social norms.⁶ Therefore, it is important to make efforts to eradicate the sustained belief that abusive sexual behaviors in the context of erotic and/or emotional relationships are normal or natural; the undercover nature of partner violence is due to it previously having been considered something private.¹ The absence of education of the causes and consequences of sexual coercion, as well as the acts of violence that characterize it, has left a wide margin for subjective interpretation, which is often associated with rape alone.⁴⁻⁶

Prevention strategies need to be centered on sex education that includes perspectives of gender, communication, and the development of skills to negotiate sexual encounters, as well as emphasizing the notion of people's rights regardless of age and gender, as well as the creation of integrated programs between schools, society, and communities. It seems that the concept of sexual coercion is still not understood, nor are behaviors taken into account which include adolescent and young adult populations, and further study is needed to see an end to it in the Latin American population.

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Conflict of Interest

No author of this paper has a conflict of interest, including specific financial interests, relationships, and/or affiliations relevant to the subject matter included in this manuscript.

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