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ORIGINAL ARTICLE

Female sexual coercion examined from a developmental criminology perspective[☆]

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KEYWORDS

Sexual coercion;
Behaviour problems;
Women;
Developmental
criminology

Summary Based on the developmental criminology perspective, this study examines the association between the history of behaviour problems in childhood and adolescence and the use of sexually coercive behaviours by women. Sexual coercion refers to the use of strategies, which can be sometimes subtle, to have sexual contact without the consent of a partner (i.e., seduction, manipulation, intoxication and physical force). In addition, this study examines the association between the use of sexual coercion and physical aggression (e.g., hitting a partner with an object, pushing or shoving) and psychological aggression (e.g., yelling at a partner, keeping him from seeing friends) toward their actual partner (or their last partner) during a disagreement to document different coercive behaviours used by women. The data were

DOI of original article: <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.sexol.2018.02.011>.

[☆] La version en français de cet article, publiée dans l'édition imprimée de la revue, est également disponible en ligne : <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.sexol.2018.02.011>.

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<https://doi.org/10.1016/j.sexol.2018.02.012>

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Please cite this article in press as: Fontaine NMG, et al. Female sexual coercion examined from a developmental criminology perspective. Sexologies (2018), <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.sexol.2018.02.012>

collected from a sample of female heterosexual university students ($n=274$; mean age, 22.9 years). The participants completed the Multidimensional Inventory of Development, Sex and Aggression (MIDSA; Knight, 2007). The findings suggest that women who had behaviour problems in childhood *and* adolescence tend to use sexual coercion to a greater extent than women without a history of behaviour problems. Moreover, the findings suggest that women who use sexual coercion are also prone to resort to psychological aggression toward a partner during a disagreement. These findings highlight the importance of taking into account the history of behaviour problems across the life-course in the development of theoretical models of female sexual coercion.

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Introduction

Past research suggests that women are less likely than men to use violent behaviour, particularly physical aggression (Fontaine et al., 2009). Nevertheless, some women resort to violent behaviour, notably psychological and physical aggression in the context of romantic or intimate relationships (Archer, 2000).

Studies suggest that women can also be involved in sexual coercion, which is another form of violent behaviour toward a partner (Bouffard et al., 2016; Parent et al., in this issue; Schatzel-Murphy, 2011; Schatzel-Murphy et al., 2009). Sexual coercion refers to the use of strategies, which can be sometimes subtle, to have sexual contact without the consent of a partner (i.e., seduction, manipulation, intoxication and physical force). A number of factors have been found to be associated with the use of female sexual coercion, including sexual victimization, hostile attitudes toward men, sexual compulsion, depression symptoms, aggressiveness and antisocial or psychopathic traits (e.g., Bouffard et al., 2016; Krahe et al., 2003; Parent et al., in this issue; Schatzel-Murphy, 2011; Schatzel-Murphy et al., 2009).

The developmental criminology perspective as a theoretical framework

The developmental criminology perspective focuses on two important aspects:

- the emergence and the development of antisocial behaviour (e.g., violent behaviour);
- the risk and protective factors associated with antisocial behaviour over time (Farrington, 2005).

Several trajectories of antisocial behaviour have been identified (see Fig. 1). Common trajectories include: childhood-limited, adolescence-limited and life-course persistent (or early-onset and persistent) (Moffitt, 1993).

Behaviour problems in childhood *and* adolescence could be a risk factor associated with different aggressive and coercive behaviours in adulthood. Women with a history of early-onset and persistent behaviour problems could be

at a particular high risk of using aggressive and coercive behaviours toward a romantic or an intimate partner, such as physical and verbal aggression as well as sexual coercion (Bouffard et al., 2016; Fontaine et al., 2008; Straus et al., 1996).

History of behaviour problems in childhood and adolescence and its association with coercive behaviours in adulthood

Similar to men, women with behaviour problems (e.g., physical aggression, bullying) during childhood and adolescence are more likely to have adaptation problems in adulthood, including the use of physical and psychological aggression toward a partner (Fontaine et al., 2007, 2008; Odgers et al., 2008). Although research has traditionally highlighted the importance of taking into account behaviour problems in childhood and adolescence to explain non-sexually coercive behaviours in women, to our knowledge, there is no study on the association between history of behaviour problems and female sexual coercion.

Developmental models explaining sexual coercion

Schatzel-Murphy (2011) proposed a theoretical model of sexual coercion adapted to women. Two developmental pathways have been proposed. The first pathway is characterized by an impersonal and callous approach to sexuality (sociosexuality). The second pathway is characterized by emotion regulation problems as well as compulsion and sexual domination.

In contrast to theoretical models explaining male sexual coercion (e.g., Malamuth et al., 1996), Schatzel-Murphy's model (2011) does not include prior behaviour problems as a predictor of female sexual coercion. In addition to past victimization experiences, the explanatory factors for female sexual coercion proposed in this model are mainly proximal rather than distal. Given the theoretical and empirical work stemming from the developmental criminology perspective, it could be useful to take into account the history of behaviour problems in the explanation of female sexual coercion.

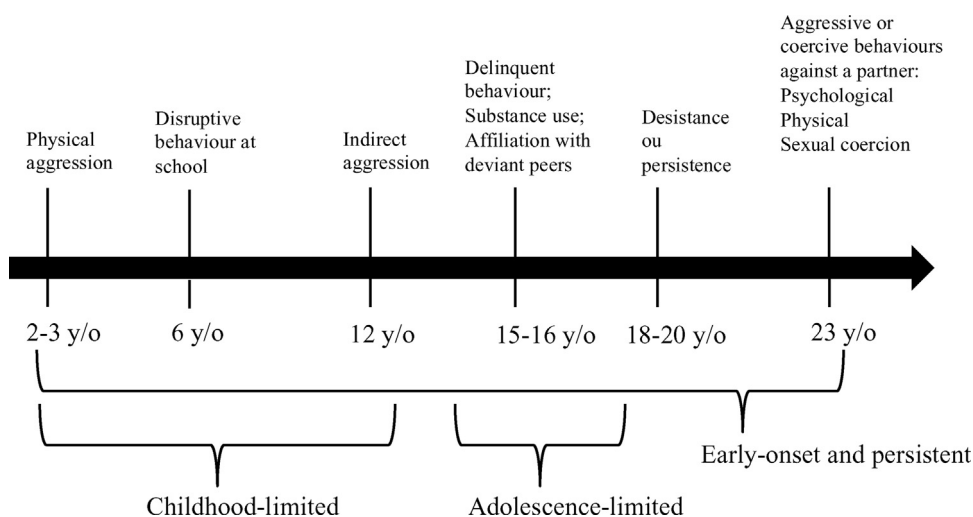


Figure 1 Example of different manifestations of antisocial behaviour from childhood to adulthood.

Study objectives

This study examines the association between the history of behaviour problems in childhood and adolescence and the use of sexually coercive behaviours by heterosexual women from the general population (university students). This study also examines the association between the use of sexual coercion and physical and psychological aggression toward a partner during a disagreement to document different coercive behaviours used by women.

Methodology

Participants

The participants were 274 female university students from the province of Quebec, heterosexual and French-speaking (see Parent et al., in this issue, for further details about the sample). Most of them reported to belong to Caucasian ethno cultural group (92.6%) and were aged 22.9 years on average ($SD = 5.2$). Among these participants, a sub-sample ($n = 97$) responded to additional questions on physical and psychological aggression toward a partner during a disagreement.

Measures

Sexual coercion

Sexual coercion was assessed using the French version of the Multidimensional Inventory of Development, Sex and Aggression (MIDSA; Knight, 2007). We focused on four strategies:

- seduction (e.g., flirting, massaging);
- manipulation (e.g., making false promises, threatening to end the relationship);
- intoxication (e.g., giving alcohol or drugs so then he could not object);
- physical force (e.g., grabbing, hitting).

Participants were asked to indicate how often, from “never” to “very often,” they used each of the tactics

during their lifetime in order to have sexual contact (i.e., sexual games, oral sex, attempted sex, sexual intercourse and anal sex) in the absence of consent from a partner.

A scale assessing the mean of the frequency of sexually coercive strategies was created. We applied a square root transformation to the scale of sexual coercion to correct for non-normally distributed data (for the correlations and the analysis of variance).

Behaviour problems in childhood and in adolescence

Two scales were created using the MIDSA:

- behaviour problems in childhood (before age 13 years);
- behaviour problems in adolescence (between ages 13 and 17 years).

These scales were each composed of 11 items (e.g., “I intimidated or harassed other children”). For each item, participants were asked to indicate how often, from “never” to “very often,” they engaged in these behaviours. Internal consistency (α) of the scale in childhood and the scale in adolescence was 0.83 and 0.86, respectively. We applied a logarithmic transformation to these two scales to correct for non-normally distributed data (for the correlations and the analysis of variance).

For each of the two scales, participants at or above the 60th percentile were considered to have behaviour problems. Based on these scores, four profiles of behaviour problems were created:

- no behaviour problems (107 women, 39.1%);
- behaviour problems in childhood only (47 women, 17.2%);
- behaviour problems in adolescence only (41 women, 15.0%);
- behaviour problems in childhood and adolescence (79 women, 28.8%).

Physical and psychological aggression toward a partner

We assessed physical and psychological aggression toward a partner during a disagreement using items based on

existing questionnaires (Dutton, 1992; Lavoie and Vézina, 2001; Straus et al., 1996). The participants reported their behaviours over the last five years with regard to their current partner or last partner if they did not have one at the time of assessment. Women were asked to rate the frequency of each behaviour from “never” to “11 times or more.” The physical aggression behaviour scale included 15 items (e.g., “pushed or punched”) and the internal consistency (α) was 0.68. The psychological aggression scale included 9 items (e.g., “yelled, screamed”) and the internal consistency (α) was 0.79. We applied a square root transformation to both scales to correct for non-normally distributed data (for the correlations and the analysis of variance).

Analytical strategy

First, we examined the associations between the study variables using Pearson correlations. Second, we performed an analysis of variance (ANOVA) to compare the mean levels of sexually coercive behaviours by the profiles of behaviour problems in childhood and adolescence.

The analyses were performed using Statistical Package for the Social Sciences software version 24 (IBM Corp, 2016).

Results

Descriptive statistics and correlations

Table 1 presents the descriptive statistics of the study variables. We can see that the mean of sexually coercive behaviours is relatively low. We also examined the mean of sexually coercive behaviours (based on the raw data) by the profiles of behaviour problems in childhood and adolescence:

- no behaviour problems ($M=0.07$, $SD=0.18$);
- behaviour problems in childhood only ($M=0.10$, $SD=0.20$);
- behaviour problems in adolescence only ($M=0.10$, $SD=0.16$);

Table 1 Descriptive statistics of the study variables.

	<i>n</i>	<i>M</i>	<i>SD</i>
<i>Aggressive and coercive behaviours toward a partner</i>			
Sexual coercion	274	0.11	0.24
Physical aggression	97	0.93	1.74
Psychological aggression	97	5.36	3.93
<i>History of behaviour problems</i>			
During childhood	274	3.80	5.31
During adolescence	274	5.92	6.39

The means and the standard deviations are based on the raw data.

- behaviour problems in childhood and adolescence ($M=0.17$, $SD=0.34$).

Table 2 presents the correlations between the study variables. Notably, we can see that sexual coercion is positively and significantly associated with psychological aggression toward a partner (but not physical aggression) as well as behaviour problems in childhood and adolescence.

Use of sexual coercion toward a partner based on the profiles of behaviour problems

We compared the mean of sexually coercive behaviours by the profiles of behaviour problems in childhood and adolescence using an analysis of variance ($F(3, 270) = 3.19$, $P = .02$). Only one comparison (based on post-hoc tests) was statistically significant: women with behaviour problems in childhood and adolescence also reported using sexual coercion to a greater extent than women without a history of behaviour problems (effect size: $d=0.44$; see Table 3).

Discussion

The current study highlights a number of important issues. First, in line with the assumptions of the developmental criminology perspective, our findings suggest that there is continuity between behaviour problems in childhood and adolescence and female aggressive/coercive behaviour toward a romantic or an intimate partner. Similar to the theoretical models of male sexual coercion, the history of behaviour problems in female should be taken into account as a potential distal factor associated with the development of sexually coercive behaviours in women. Future studies on the possible influences of the history of behaviour problems on sexual coercion (e.g., whether behaviour problems are directly associated with sexual coercion or whether mediation processes or interaction effects are at play) will be needed.

In addition to behaviour problems, other individual factors, some of which have been considered into theoretical models of male and female sexual coercion as proximal factors, should be taking into account as potential distal factors (e.g., impulsivity, anxiety, callous-unemotionality). Callous-unemotional traits could be an important proximal factor (Bouffard et al., 2016), as well as a distal factor. Indeed, callous-unemotional traits in youth (both girls and boys) have been associated with severe and persistent antisocial behaviour (Fontaine et al., 2011). Thus, theoretical models of female sexual coercion (Bouffard et al., 2016; Schatzel-Murphy, 2011) could be refined by the addition of distal risk factors.

We also found that female sexual coercion is associated with psychological aggression toward a partner during a disagreement, but not physical aggression. This finding was expected given that the women included in our sample mainly used coercive tactics associated with seduction and manipulation strategies: none of the women reported using physical force to have sexual contact (see Parent et al., in this issue). This is in line with findings from studies of antisocial behaviour suggesting that women are more likely to use relational or indirect aggression than physical

Table 2 Correlations between the study variables.

	1	2	3	4	5
1. Sexual coercion toward a partner	–				
2. Physical aggression toward a partner	0.10	–			
3. Psychological aggression toward a partner	0.21*	0.51***	–		
4. Behaviour problems—childhood	0.17**	0.23*	0.35***	–	
5. Behaviour problems—adolescence	0.18**	0.23*	0.27**	0.57***	–

n = 97, for correlations including variables on physical and psychological aggression toward a partner; *n* = 274, for all other correlations.

* *P* ≤ .05.

** *P* ≤ .01.

*** *P* ≤ .001.

Table 3 Effect size (Cohen's *d*) associated with the comparisons of means of sexually coercive behaviours by the profiles of behaviour problems in childhood and adolescence.

Comparisons			<i>d</i>
Childhood and adolescence	Versus	No problems	0.44
Childhood and adolescence	Versus	Childhood only	0.23
Childhood and adolescence	Versus	Adolescence only	0.21
Childhood only	Versus	No problems	0.22
Adolescence only	Versus	No problems	0.27

aggression (Fontaine et al., 2009). Still, several women in our sample reported using physical aggression toward a partner during a disagreement. Future studies will be needed to understand further the factors and mechanisms associated with different types of violent and coercive behaviours by women toward a romantic or an intimate partner. The use of sexual coercion could be one facet of a more general pattern of antisocial behaviour among women (Bouffard et al., 2016).

Strengths and limitations

This study has a number of strengths. First, behaviour problems and sexual coercion were assessed using the MIDSA, a comprehensive and validated assessment tool. In addition, this study highlighted the importance of taking into account distal factors (i.e., behaviour problems in childhood and adolescence) in the explanation of female sexual coercion. A certain number of limitations should be noted. First, the analyses were based on a relatively small sample of heterosexual women from the general population (university students). Further research will be needed to replicate our findings and verify whether or not they can be generalized to other populations (e.g., clinical or offending populations). Second, data on behaviour problems in childhood and adolescence were collected retrospectively. Further studies based on longitudinal data will be needed to understand further the potential risk factors associated with female sexual coercion. Third, the data analyses were based on self-reports. Although self-reports are associated with biases (i.e., social desirability), studies suggest that this type of data remains valid (Moffitt et al., 1997; Straus et al., 1996).

Clinical implications

A number of implications for clinical practice should be noted. First, our findings highlight the importance of identifying at-risk girls as well as girls with behaviour problems in childhood. They also emphasize the importance of intervening early in their development. A number of these girls are at risk for life-course persistent antisocial behaviour. They could be at risk for using aggressive and coercive behaviours toward a romantic or an intimate partner, including sexual coercion. These targeted interventions should not be designed to label or stigmatize individuals; they should be implemented with the aim to provide support to girls and help them develop various skills (e.g., social skills, problem-solving skills).

Moreover, because partner violence often begins during adolescence (Foshee, 1996), programs targeting youth (girls and boys, at risk or not) aimed at raising awareness of violence between partners (including sexual coercion) should be fostered. In addition, intervention strategies targeting aggressive and coercive behaviours that are more likely to be observed in girls and women (e.g., psychological aggression and sexually coercive strategies focusing on seduction and manipulation) could be particularly effective.

Sexuality education programs aimed at preventing sexual violence and risky sexual behaviour could be especially promising. To that effect, the Ministère de l'Éducation et de l'Enseignement supérieur du Québec (MEES) (Ministry of Education and Higher Education of Quebec) implemented a sexuality education pilot project in several schools across the province of Quebec in 2015. The program involves students across grade levels, from kindergarten to the end of secondary school (MEES, 2017). A rigorous assessment of such programs is necessary to verify their effectiveness.

Disclosure of interest

The authors declare that they have no competing interest.

Acknowledgements

We thank the women who participated in the study. Nathalie M.G. Fontaine is a Research Scholar-Junior 1, Fonds de recherche du Québec–Santé.

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