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Short Communication

Susceptibility to sexual victimization and women's mating strategies

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ABSTRACT

Women show stable individual differences in mating strategies ranging from short-term to long-term. Short-term mating strategies may put women at greater risk of sexual victimization through increased exposure to risky situations or to men most inclined to pursue a strategy of sexual coercion. To test these predictions, we studied female college students who had experienced a completed rape, an attempted sexual victimization, or no sexual victimization. Women's mating strategies were assessed through the Sociosexual Orientation Inventory. Victims further reported whether they engaged in consensual intimate behaviors with their victimizer before or after the victimization. Victims of completed rape scored highest on short-term mating strategy pursuit; non-victims scored lowest; women experiencing attempted victimization scored between these two groups. Victims of completed rape also more frequently reported consensual kissing and intercourse with their victimizer before and after the victimization than women who experienced attempted victimization. The findings of this study should not be interpreted as blaming the victim, but rather as identifying circumstances that put women at greater risk. Clearly, perpetrators are to blame for sexual victimization. Discussion focuses on future research directions and on practical implications for reducing rates of sexual victimization.

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1. Introduction

Given its prevalence and large costs to victims, it is not surprising that psychologists have sought to identify the predictors and consequences of rape (Goetz, Shackelford, & Camilleri, 2008; Lalumiere, Harris, Quinsey, & Rice, 2005). Most research has focused on immediate risk factors, such as alcohol use (Testa & Livingston, 2009), location (Abbey, BeShears, Clinton-Sherrod, & McAuslan, 2004), and precipitating factors such as infidelity (Camilleri & Quinsey, 2009). Trait-level predictors have been identified for perpetrators of sexual coercion (e.g., Malamuth, 1996), but rarely for victims (McKibbin, Shackelford, Miner, Bates, & Liddle, 2011). Exceptions include studies documenting demographic differences between victims and non-victims in education level, income, age, and marital status (e.g., Cloutier, Martin, & Poole, 2002; Elliott, Mok, & Briere, 2004).

An important proclivity that might put women at greater risk of rape is their dispositional mating strategy. Mating strategies span a continuum from short-term oriented to long-term oriented and individuals may pursue short-term and long-term mating simultaneously (Buss, 2006; Buss & Schmitt, 1993). Mating strategies,

although showing some degree of intra-individual variability, also show some degree of stability over time (Schaller & Murray, 2008; Simpson & Gangestad, 1991). An orientation toward short-term mating may lead women to engage in more frequent opposite-sex interactions, circumstances that have the potential to lead to sexual victimization. Furthermore, a short-term mating strategy may attract men, or lead to increased interactions with men, who themselves pursue a short-term mating strategy – a larger subset of short-term oriented men pursue sexually coercive strategies than of long-term oriented men (Malamuth, 1996). Men oriented more toward short-term mating themselves are also more likely to mistakenly interpret women as sexually interested when they are not (Jacques-Tiura, Abbey, Parkhill, & Zawacki, 2007; Lenton, Bryan, Hastie, & Fischer, 2007; Perilloux, Easton, & Buss, under review), potentially leading to even higher risks of sexual victimization. In sum, a short-term mating strategy could increase women's risk of sexual victimization through both increased exposure to sexually vulnerable situations and to men more inclined to commit acts of sexual coercion. Identifying risk factors for sexual coercion, including women's preferred sexual strategies, obviously should not be misconstrued as blaming victims for sexual crimes perpetrated against them.

The current study explored whether mating strategy was related to sexual victimization experience: completed rape, attempted sexual victimization of any kind, or no victimization experience. We predicted that women who had experienced a completed victimization would be most likely to be those pursuing a short-term mating strategy. Women experiencing no sexual

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victimization were predicted to be least likely to be pursuing a short-term strategy, with the attempted victimization group falling in between. Consensual intimate activity with the victimizer was further compared between victims of attempted and completed victimization. This comparison allowed us to assess actual mating behavior that could be relevant to sexual victimization susceptibility. For the purposes of the current study, sexual victimization was defined as follows:

Sexual victimization refers to being a nonconsensual (unwilling) participant in sexual activity with another person. Engaging in sexual activity with another person without your consent, against your wishes, or against your will may all be considered examples of sexual victimization. Another person attempting to get you to engage in sexual activity without your consent, against your wishes, or against your will may also be considered sexual victimization. It can be committed by a wide range of people, including strangers, acquaintances, current or ex-romantic partners, dates, fellow employees, neighbors, fellow students, and others. Sexual activity may include, but is not limited to, intercourse, anal sex, oral sex, or penetration.

2. Method

2.1. Participants

Participants were recruited through university organizations as volunteers or to partially satisfy a research requirement in psychology courses. For the purposes of the current study, the following categories of participants were used: women who reported a completed vaginal rape that occurred post-puberty, defined here as after age 13 ($n = 49$; age: $M = 20.31$, $SD = 2.56$), women who experienced an attempted sexual victimization post-puberty ($n = 91$; age: $M = 19.78$, $SD = 1.67$), and non-victim women who never experienced any sexual victimization ($n = 268$; age: $M = 19.74$, $SD = 2.49$). Self-reported family income during childhood was approximately “middle class” on our 7-point scale for the completed group ($M = 4.65$, $SD = 1.09$), the attempted group ($M = 4.52$, $SD = 0.94$), and the non-victims group ($M = 4.60$, $SD = 0.97$).

2.2. Materials

After obtaining informed consent, the instrument first provided a broad definition of sexual victimization (see above) and then participants completed either a victim instrument or a non-victim instrument, based on their self-reported victimization status. The victim instrument consisted of several webpages of questions concerning their most vividly recalled sexual victimization experience, in addition to instruments designed to measure individual differences also completed by non-victims. Mating strategy was assessed with the Sociosexual Orientation Inventory (SOI; Simpson & Gangestad, 1991) for which higher scores indicate greater interest in casual sex and short-term mating. While the SOI measures trait-level tendencies toward short-term mating, we also sought to assess degree of consensual sexual contact with the victimizer as an immediate factor that might predict specific victimization experience. We assessed consensual intimate behavior with the victimizer by asking: “Did you ever willingly kiss the victimizer on the mouth before the victimization? Did you ever willingly kiss the victimizer on the mouth after the victimization? Did you ever willingly have sexual intercourse with the victimizer before the victimization? Did you ever willingly have sexual intercourse with the victimizer after the victimization?” Participants responded to each question with “yes” or “no.”

2.3. Procedure

Participants received the web address of the study and were instructed to access it when they had enough time and privacy to complete the entire instrument. The current research represents part of a larger study of sexual victimization that lasted approximately 45 min. After providing informed consent, participants were directed to the instrument. If participants indicated that they had a completed or attempted sexual victimization experience consistent with our definition, provided above, they completed the victim instrument and if not, they completed a non-victim instrument. Due to time constraints during certain semesters, some participants completed shorter versions of the overall instrument from which the SOI portion was removed. In addition, participants had the option to skip any item on the instrument. As a result, there is variability in the number of participants in each group who completed each item of the SOI (17 in the completed group, 33–34 in the attempted group, 125–128 in the non-victims group), resulting in sample sizes of 175–179 for SOI items. Upon completion of the instrument, participants were debriefed.

3. Results

Total SOI scores significantly differed by group. According to Tukey HSD post hoc tests on the means provided in Table 1, the completed group scored significantly higher than the attempted group ($p = .002$) and female non-victims ($p < .001$), while the attempted group and the non-victims did not differ from one another ($p = .99$). Given the significant group differences in overall SOI, we explored the pattern of responses for each question separately, as outlined in Table 1. The completed group scored higher than the attempted group and the non-victims on number of one night stands and agreement with the statement “Sex without love is okay.” Number of sex partners in the past year and enjoyment of casual sex significantly differed between the completed group and the non-victim group, but the attempted group did not significantly differ from either. There were trends for the completed group to report more sex partners in the past 5 years and require less attachment before sex than the attempted group and the non-victims group. Extrapair fantasies did not differ between the groups.

Beyond global individual differences, significant patterns emerged in self-reported consensual intimate activity with the perpetrator (the sample size for these analyses is 112 because 12 women in the completed group and 16 in the attempted group did not respond to these questions). Across all of the victims surveyed, completed and attempted, 68% consensually kissed the

Table 1
Responses to Sociosexual Orientation Inventory (SOI) items by victim type.

	Completed	Attempted	Non-victims	F
Partners in the past year	2.41 _a	1.09 _{a,b}	0.97 _b	4.19*
Partners in past 5 years	2.76	2.03	1.55	2.87†
One night stands	1.59 _a	0.48 _b	0.41 _b	5.51**
Extrapair fantasies	2.41	2.00	1.91	0.52
Sex without love is okay	4.29 _a	2.45 _b	2.06 _b	9.75***
Enjoy casual sex	2.71 _a	2.06 _{a,b}	1.61 _b	3.62*
Attachment before sex ^A	2.88	2.48	1.97	2.31†
Total SOI ^B	81.82 _a	52.91 _b	44.24 _b	8.75***

Note: Different subscripts within a row indicate significantly different means based on Tukey HSD post hoc tests.

^A Reverse-scored.

^B For instructions on converting item scores into a total SOI score, see Simpson and Gangestad (1991).

† $p \leq .10$.

* $p \leq .05$.

** $p \leq .01$.

*** $p \leq .001$.

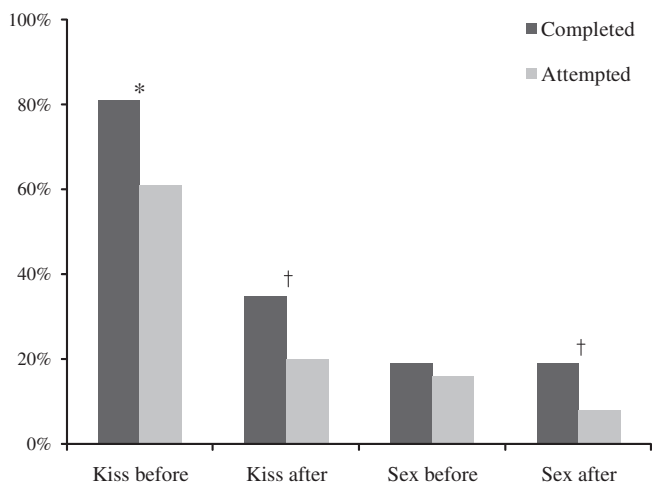


Fig. 1. Proportion of victims reporting consensual intimate contact with victimizer. Note: † $p \leq .10$; * $p \leq .05$.

perpetrator at some point before the victimization and 17% engaged in consensual sexual intercourse with the perpetrator at some point before the victimization. At some point after the victimization, 25% of victims consensually kissed the perpetrator and 12% engaged in consensual sexual intercourse with the perpetrator.

Comparisons of the groups showed that the completed group more frequently reported engaging in consensual kissing and sexual behavior with their victimizer than the attempted group (see Fig. 1). A significantly higher proportion of victims in the completed group (81%) indicated kissing the perpetrator before the victimization than in the attempted group (61%), $p = .05$, Fisher's exact test. There was no difference in reports of consensual sex with the perpetrator before victimization for the completed (19%) and attempted (16%) groups, $p = .80$, Fisher's exact test. After the victimization, there were trends for a higher proportion of victims in the completed group (35%) than in the attempted group (20%) to report consensual kissing, $p = .10$, Fisher's exact test, and consensual sexual intercourse with the perpetrator, $p = .12$ (completed: 19%; attempted: 8%).

4. Discussion

The results of our research indicate that women who pursue a short-term mating strategy are more likely to report having been sexually victimized. We predicted this finding based on the hypothesis that women who are oriented toward short-term mating would be more likely to find themselves in more vulnerable social situations, become exposed more frequently to sexually coercive men, and engage in sexual interactions that put them at higher risk of sexual victimization. Nonetheless, as a quasi-experimental study, causality cannot be clearly inferred. These results could indicate that after experiencing completed rape, women are more likely to shift to a short-term mating strategy; that women who are oriented toward short-term mating put themselves at greater risk of sexual coercion; or that some currently unknown third variable causes the association we discovered. Longitudinal studies of mating strategy and sexual victimization experiences are needed to disentangle these causal possibilities.

Since the SOI is known to assess stable individual differences in orientation toward casual sex, the current results, while not ruling out other causal paths, are consistent with a causal path from mating strategy to increased risk of sexual victimization. Circumstantial support for this direction of causality comes from the finding that victims of completed rape in the current study indicated that they had engaged in more pre-victimization

consensual sexual activity with their victimizer than did victims of attempted rape. The current results are also consistent with previous research documenting positive correlations between self-reported number of sex partners and sexual victimization, though such studies did not actually measure dispositional mating strategy (Campbell, Sefl, & Ahrens, 2004; Ellis, Widmayer, & Palmer, 2009). Because the current study was part of a larger investigation, the SOI was not completed by about half of our sample. Although we were able to test our hypotheses involving the SOI on 175 participants, future research that can obtain SOI information from larger samples of completed and attempted rape victims could validate our findings.

Other research provides evidence that short-term oriented women may possess specialized defenses in the context of romantic and sexual interactions because of the greater relative risks inherent in their mating strategy. For example, short-term oriented women, more than long-term oriented women, display a shift toward greater vigilance about risk of sexual coercion at ovulation (Fleischman, Perilloux, & Buss, under review). Thus, the current findings are especially important in that they suggest that, despite greater vigilance, short-term oriented women still suffer from sexual victimization at substantially higher rates than long-term oriented women.

The finding that women pursuing a short-term mating strategy are at higher risk of sexual victimization should in no way be interpreted as blaming the victim. Rape is a crime, and the proper locus of blame is entirely on the perpetrator. Nonetheless, our findings may have potential practical implications for rape prevention. Women could be made aware that their preferred mating strategy may put them at increased risk for sexual victimization through exposure to risky situations, risky social or sexual encounters, and men inclined to pursue a sexually coercive strategy. Whether such educational efforts are effective at reducing victimization rates remains a fruitful avenue for future research.

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