Lessons Learned and Unanswered Questions About Sexual Assault Perpetration
Antonia Abbey
J Interpers Violence 2005; 20: 39
DOI: 10.1177/0886260504268117

The online version of this article can be found at:
http://jiv.sagepub.com/cgi/content/abstract/20/1/39
Lessons Learned and Unanswered Questions About Sexual Assault Perpetration

ANTONIA ABBEY
Wayne State University

The most important lesson learned about interpersonal violence in the past 20 years is the astonishingly high prevalence of sexual assault in American society. The extensiveness of unreported sexual assault has been repeatedly documented through the use of self-report data from well-constructed surveys of victims and perpetrators. In contrast, little has been learned about how to effectively reduce rates of sexual assault perpetration. Theoretically derived universal prevention programs targeted at adolescents are sorely needed.

Keywords: sexual assault; perpetration; etiology; prevention

WHAT HAVE WE LEARNED?

The most important lesson learned about interpersonal violence in the past 20 years is how frequently it is perpetrated by apparently normal individuals. This lesson applies to a variety of different types of violence, although my expertise is in the area of sexual assault. Early research provided a distorted view of rates of sexual assault as well as characteristics of perpetrators and victims by focusing on reported rapes that met the restricted Uniform Crime Reports definition. Early studies often pathologized victims and overestimated the prevalence of stranger rapes and rapes that involved serious physical injuries because these are the types most likely to be reported (Amir, 1971).

Kanin, in a series of studies in the 1950s and 1960s, began to uncover unreported sexual assaults among college students. In one study, 28% of the...
college women sampled had experienced attempts of “offensive” intercourse on a date in the previous year (Kirkpatrick & Kanin, 1957). In another study, one quarter of the college men sampled had forcefully tried to make a woman have sex with them since being in college (Kanin, 1967). This groundbreaking research did not receive much attention until the 1980s, when Koss, Gidycz, and Wisniewski (1987) surveyed a large representative sample of college students and found that 54% of the women had been victims of sexual assault and 27% of the men had committed sexual assault, with most incidents occurring among acquaintances and very few of these incidents being reported to authorities. Since that time, there have been hundreds of studies that have demonstrated the alarmingly high prevalence of sexual assault among general population samples through the use of behaviorally specific questions that describe acts of sexual assault without using that label (see Tjaden & Thoennes, 1998, for a recent example). In contrast to early research, little evidence has been found that links specific victim characteristics to the likelihood of being sexually assaulted, supporting the feminist perspective that sexual assault is not caused by its victims. One apparent exception to this conclusion is the relationship between early sexual victimization and revictimization (Wyatt, Guthrie, & Notgrass, 1992). Although this finding has been frequently replicated, it is still poorly understood.

A number of personality characteristics and attitudes have been linked to sexual assault perpetration; however, it is still the case that most perpetrators blend into society and cannot be easily pigeon holed. Malamuth’s (1989) startling finding that approximately one third of college men reported that they could consider committing sexual assault if they would experience no negative consequences provided strong support for the argument that societal norms about gender roles and violence against women made sexual assault acceptable to a sizable proportion of men. Research that suggests that at least a quarter of men have verbally or physically forced a woman to have some type of sex demonstrates that this problem is not going to be solved by vigorous law enforcement efforts that capture a small number of pathological rapists. Instead, this is a larger societal problem that needs to be addressed through universal programs that change messages about the acceptability of violence against women.

WHAT DO WE STILL NEED TO LEARN?

Despite the great strides made in the past 20 years in documenting the prevalence of sexual assault, we have learned very little about how to prevent sexual assault. Far too many prevention programs have focused on the vic-
tims of sexual assault rather than the perpetrators. Victims can benefit from risk reduction programs, however, primary prevention must focus on potential perpetrators. This presents a large challenge both because sexual assault is so widespread and because there is no single set of characteristics that identify perpetrators (although many typologies have been explored). Numerous studies have found that men who have committed sexual assault are more likely than other men to feel hostile toward women, endorse rape myths and adversarial beliefs about relationships between women and men, have peers who accept violence toward women, be low in empathy, drink heavily, have casual attitudes about sex, engage in frequent casual sexual relationships, and have been a victim of abuse as a child (see Abbey, Zawacki, Buck, Clinton, & McAuslan, 2004, for a review). As noted above, none of these factors necessarily identify someone as a perpetrator, and they tend to work in combination, so that men who have many of these characteristics are more likely to commit sexual assault than are men who have just a few. Translating this knowledge into effective universal and targeted prevention programs remains a challenge. In a free society where popular rap music and video games denigrate women, how do we teach young men that sex is not a way of demonstrating their power or manhood and instead promote positive, equalitarian relationships between young men and women? In a society that still has double standards about sexual behavior, how do we encourage young men to communicate clearly about sex with potential partners to avoid exerting pressure or force? In a society where rape victims are still often blamed and ridiculed and perpetrators are rarely prosecuted (particularly if they knew the woman or if she had been drinking), what types of sanctions are likely to deter perpetrators?

WHAT IS THE MOST PROMISING METHODOLOGICAL INNOVATION?

A promising methodological innovation is the use of computer-assisted interviews (CASI). Numerous studies have demonstrated that people are more likely to report embarrassing and illegal activities on a computer than through either interviews or written questionnaires (Newman et al., 2002). Although large-scale nationally representative community surveys of sexual assault victimization have been conducted (Tjaden & Thoennes, 1998), there are no parallel surveys that assess the incidence and prevalence of sexual assault perpetration, presumably because of concerns that perpetrators would be unwilling to acknowledge their acts. Our own preliminary research demonstrates that community samples of men report high rates of sexual
assault perpetration using CASI methodology (Abbey, Parkhill, BeShears, Clinton-Sherrord, & Zawacki, 2004). For some segments of the population, Web-based surveys also increase response rates and disclosure of sensitive information. Violence and trauma researchers need to integrate state-of-the-art survey research methodology into their studies to ensure that interventions are based on the highest quality data available.

REFERENCES


Antonia Abbey, Ph.D., is a professor of community medicine and psychology at Wayne State University. Her research focuses on the etiology of sexual assault perpetration, alcohol’s role in sexual assault, and developing better assessment tools and methodologies to measure the prevalence of sexual assault perpetration and victimization.