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A Study of Women's Experiences with Verbal Sexual Coercion

Anne Rudzinski

University of Windsor, rudzins@uwindsor.ca

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Women's Experiences of Verbal Sexual Coercion



University
of Windsor

Anne Rudzinski, Dusty Johnstone - University of Windsor

Abstract

This research aims to understand how women label or acknowledge unwanted sexual experiences that occurred due to verbal coercion or pressure, and the role of their relationship with the man whom they had this experience with. Past research on acknowledgement shows that between 15 and 85% of women do not label unwanted sexual experiences that meet the legal definition of sexual assault as an assault or as rape. The woman's relationship to the perpetrator has been found to be influential in the labelling process, however, the current literature is lacking in-depth examinations of the role of the relationship. In addition, research has shown that verbal forms of coercion are less commonly acknowledged as rape or sexual assault. Due to this effect on the labelling process, and the commonality of coercion in heterosexual scripts, questions regarding how women understand or acknowledge experiences of verbal coercion in different types of relationships need to be addressed. Participants will be approximately 30 undergraduate women, who indicated in a screening questionnaire that they had experienced an act of verbal coercion by a man, and that they had not ever been raped or sexually assaulted. Data will be collected across the Winter 2016 semester using qualitative methods, through an online survey of open-ended questions about the woman's relationship (or lack thereof) to the perpetrator, a narrative about the verbally coerced experience, and questions about their labelling and understanding of the event. This ongoing research forms the author's undergraduate thesis. Results will be reported in April 2016.

Introduction

- Research questions:
How do women understand, acknowledge and/or label experiences of heavy verbal coercion in the context of an ongoing romantic or sexual relationship?
What is the role of the type of relationship in terms of acknowledgement of verbally coercive acts as forms of sexual assault or victimization?
- Verbal coercion is not commonly acknowledged (Fisher et al., 2003)
- Coercion is common in relationships (Brousseau, et al., 2012)
- When the perpetrator is someone the woman has a relationship with, they do not commonly acknowledge (Clements & Ogle, 2009 for example)
- Normative heterosexuality, or the norms and expectations we as a society hold for heterosexual encounters, is very influential on rape acknowledgement (Gavey, 2005)
- This research fills a methodological gap: qualitative study of acknowledgement

Participants

- Participants are approximately 30 women in their undergraduate degrees at the University of Windsor
- Selected from the Participant Pool screening questionnaire using the Sexual Experiences Survey (Koss & Oros, 1982) which uses behaviourally based questions

Quotes

Normative Heterosexuality:

"Some people would say I was raped. I don't know what to call it since we were dating." (Participant 16)

"He made me feel like it was something we needed in the relationship..." (Participant 06)

"He would try to guilt me by saying things like he loved me and wanted to show me..." (Participant 15)

"I felt I should because he was my boyfriend and I had already done it with him..." (Participant 15)

Force VS Pressure:

"I wasn't forced, but pressured." (Participant 11)

Self Blame:

"... I became increasingly annoyed with how naïve I used to be. So I just roll my eyes and think of what I've learned." (Participant 13)

Shared Blame:

"Both parties were involved... Both parties are to blame." (Participant 11)

Unwillingness to Disclose:

"I have never told anyone about it and I don't want them to know." (Participant 12)

Continuous Acknowledgement:

"While I was with him, I thought he was right, so I would do what he asked even though I didn't want to. Now that we are not together, I realized it was pressure from him..." (Participant 18)

Methods

- A qualitative online survey
- Participants retake the SES to determine if acknowledgement has changed since the time of the screening questionnaire
- The remainder of the study uses qualitative survey methods, using open ended questions about relationship to perpetrator and acknowledgement, as well as a narrative of the coercive event
- The study finishes with a mood neutralizer to end on a positive note

Results

- Data collection for this study is currently ongoing
- However, preliminary results from thematic analysis have found the following themes:
- Normative heterosexuality, including:
 - Sex as expected in relationships
 - Sex as a necessary expression of love/affection
 - Sex as expected when it has previously occurred
- A semantic difference between "force" and "pressure" relating to how that experience is labelled
- Self blame
- Shared blame
- Unwillingness to disclose to others
- Framing it as a "learning experience"
- Support for a continuous frame for acknowledgement (as reported by Johnstone, 2013)
 - Specifically, coming to a new understanding of the event after the relationship ends

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