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Testing Adapted Sexual Assault Risk Detection and Resistance Measures

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Assessing Behaviours in Hypothetical Friendship and Dating Scenarios – Part 1: Summary of Results for Participants

In Canada, as is true in most areas of the world, many adolescents and young adults experience unwanted sexual behaviour. Any type of sex without consent is sexual assault under Canadian law. While sexual assault can occur to and be perpetrated by individuals of any gender, the majority of victims of sexual assault are women and the perpetrators are most commonly men who are acquaintances of the women, including friends and romantic or sexual partners.

By contrast, stereotypes about sexual assault are usually based on stranger situations where the violence is thought to occur suddenly and without warning. These stereotypes are harmful for several reasons, one of which is that women underestimate the risk of assault coming from known men. Further, researchers have discovered some verbal and situational strategies that male acquaintances and romantic partners commonly use before they perpetrate sexual assault against girls and women. This means that researchers can now study whether providing education about these strategies will increase the likelihood that women will detect danger earlier (faster risk detection) and get to safety *before* a situation escalates.

To measure women's risk perception, investigators have created hypothetical scenarios describing situations where a man gradually becomes coercive. Because sexual assault in romantic and sexual relationships is common, most of these scenarios measure women's perceptions of unwanted sexual behaviour in a dating context. These measures work well for many, but not all, girls and women. We are interested in developing measures that are appropriate and relevant for girls/women who do not date boys/men. For this group of young women, unwanted sexual behaviour is most likely to be perpetrated by male friends and other men who are (non-dating) acquaintances.

Therefore, our purpose in this study was to evaluate whether new versions of hypothetical risk detection scenarios in non-dating contexts work as well as the original ones that are in dating contexts. If so, these scenarios can be used in future research without assuming that participants are heterosexual or interested in dating men (currently or ever).

Participants in this study saw two scenarios, one that unfolded line-by-line and another in which they were asked to assess the situation at three different time points. In each case, they were randomly assigned to read about a developing situation of unwanted sexual behaviour, either in a dating or friendship situation. They were asked to provide their evaluation of the scenarios and report how they might feel and act in response.

Results suggested that the new hypothetical scenarios we created are relevant to women across sexual identities and dating experiences. The majority of participants—most of whom identified as heterosexual and had past dating experiences with men—reported that they could relate to the general scenarios depicted (e.g., waiting at a bus stop or taking public transportation, going to a carnival with friends, going on a date with

a man). Even those without relevant experiences (e.g., some lesbian and asexual women; some heterosexual women without dating experience) typically reported that they could imagine the scenarios.

In assessing whether our new scenarios performed similarly to the originals, we found that, for the scenarios that unfolded in three parts (the second scenario that participants viewed), the new scenarios generally worked as well as the originals in measuring women's ability to detect risk. For the scenarios that unfolded line-by-line (the first scenario that participants viewed), we detected some differences across scenarios for the point in the story where participants became uncomfortable and indicated that they would leave the situation. For example, participants indicated that they would leave earlier in the original acquaintance scenario (in which the young woman meets an acquaintance at a party) than they did in our new acquaintance scenario (in which the young woman meets an acquaintance at a carnival). Participants also felt uncomfortable and left earlier in our new stranger scenario (in which the young woman meets a man at a bus stop) than in the original scenario (in which the young woman meets a man at an airport). To address these inconsistencies, we have made minor changes to some of our scenarios and plan to test these further revised scenarios once again in the Fall 2021 term.