

African-American College Students' Perceptions of Sexual Coercion

*LaTonya D. Mouzon, Alicia Battle, Kevin P. Clark, Stephanie Coleman,
and Roberta J. Ogletree*

Abstract

While the phenomenon of sexual coercion has been studied extensively, little is known about African-American college students' perceptions about verbal sexual coercion. Using a phenomenological approach, the researchers conducted five focus group interviews with 39 African-American students (20 females, 19 males) at a large Midwestern university to elicit perceptions of sexual coercion. Focus group discussions were based on four primary research questions: (1) What is sexual coercion? (2) How common is sexual coercion? (3) What causes it? (4) How can it be prevented? Content analysis was used to extract and report themes that emerged from the focus group interviews. Participants denounced physical coercion as rape and only addressed verbal forms of coercion in their discussions. Participants viewed verbal sexual coercion as a normative behavior often referred to it as "running the game." They acknowledged the reciprocal nature of coercion as well as the fact that women use it and experience it as much as men. Poor communication skills were identified as a potential cause of sexual coercion. Because of this, college health and university housing personnel, along with health educators, need to focus their efforts on helping students improve sexual communications skills.

"intoxication, blackmail, lies, false promises, guilt, and threats to end the relationship." (Walner-Haugrud & Magruder, 1995, p. 203).

In a seminal study undertaken nearly 20 years ago, Koss, Gidycz and Wisniewski (1987) reported results of a representative sample of over 6,000 college students. They revealed that a significant percentage of college women had experienced sexually coercive experiences that met the legal definition of attempted rape or rape. Since then numerous studies have confirmed that college women are a high-risk group for being coerced to engage in unwanted sexual behavior (Baier, Rosenweig & Whipple, 1991; Kalichman, Williams, Cherry, Belcher & Nachimson, 1998; Marx, Gross & Adams, 1999; O'Sullivan, Byers & Finkleman, 1998).

Research conducted in the past decade has examined women as perpetrators of sexual coercion (Busby & Compton, 1997; Fiebert & Tucci, 1998; O'Sullivan, et al., 1998; Russell & Oswald, 2001); involvement of alcohol in sexual coercion (Gross & Billingham, 1998; Marx, Gross & Adams, 1999); and gender differences in perceptions of sexual coercion (Haworth-Hoepfner, 1998). While a few studies have focused on African-Americans in the study of sexual coercion (Kalichman, et al., 1998; Kalof & Wade, 1995; Varelas & Foley, 1998), the authors found no qualitative studies of the perceptions of African-American college students in the literature.

The purpose of this descriptive study was to explore the phenomenon of sexual coercion as lived or perceived by African-American college students at a large Midwestern university. A phenomenological approach was taken to gain insights into participants' opinions about the meaning of sexual coercion.

Methods

Data Collection

After Institutional Review Board approval was granted, data were collected through focus group interviews. Focus groups, a qualitative technique used to gather data about feelings and opinions of small groups of participants, were selected because of their potential to provide opportunities for participants to discuss ideas. In addition, the interaction among participants in focus groups reveals multiple stories about and diverse experiences of the phenomenon under study (Brown, 1999).

Purposeful sampling, the method used most often when assembling focus groups (Morgan, 1997), was used for this study. African-American college students were recruited by

While a variety of behaviors have been identified as sexually coercive (Hogben & Waterman, 2000; Russell & Oswald 2001; Struckman-Johnson & Struckman-Johnson, 1998), several studies revealed verbal coercion to be the most common form of sexual coercion (Busby & Compton, 1997; Lottes & Weinberg, 1996; Struckman-Johnson, Struckman-Johnson, & Anderson, 2003). The key element common to various definitions of sexual coercion is that one is exposed to pressure and persuasion to engage in undesired sexual activity. Verbal sexual coercion tactics include

LaTonya D. Mouzon, PhD; Kate Bond Elementary School, 2127
Kate Bond Road, Memphis, TN 38133

Alicia Battle, MS; Director of Alcohol Education Initiatives,
Residence Life; Tulane University, 27 McAlister Drive, New
Orleans, LA 70118

Kevin P. Clark, MS; Community Development Specialist; 1653
Logan Drive #6, Carbondale, IL 62901

Stephanie Coleman, MS; 4915 S. Hermitage, Chicago, IL 60609

* Roberta J. Ogletree, HSD, CHES, FASHA; Professor of Health
Education; Southern Illinois University, Carbondale, IL 62901;
Telephone: 618-453-7727; Fax: 618-453-1829; E-mail:
bobbie@siu.edu; Chapter: Alpha Alpha

* Corresponding author

announcing, in a human sexuality course, the need for African-American participants for a study on sexual coercion, posting flyers on residence hall bulletin boards, announcing the study at a residence hall floor meeting, and encouraging volunteers to recruit additional participants. Names and telephone numbers were collected and volunteers were contacted and invited to attend one of the focus groups.

Five focus group interviews were conducted. Due to concern that mixed gender groups might inhibit participants, two groups were all male (n=10; n=6) and two groups were all female (n=6; n=7); a fifth group (n=8) was mixed male (n=3) and female (n=5). An African-American researcher with experience in focus group moderation served as moderator and another African-American researcher served as a recorder, taking field notes during each session for data triangulation to ensure trustworthiness of the data.

The researchers developed a semi-structured interview guide which included broad open-ended questions followed by probes (Brown, 1999; Morgan, 1997) to ensure consistency among the five groups. At the beginning of each focus group session, participants were greeted and asked to read and complete an informed consent and a participant profile sheet, giving their sex, age, year in school, residence, and sexual coercion experience.

The researchers audiotaped the interviews with participants' permission. The moderator focused the interviews by using four major questions: (1) What is sexual coercion? (2) How common is it? (3) What causes it? (4) What can be done to prevent it? When discussions no longer provided material contributing to the purpose of the study, the interviews were brought to a close and audiotapes turned off. Interviews lasted between 60 and 90 minutes. Participants were thanked and refreshments were served.

Analysis

The researchers used content analysis as described by Brown (1999) and Neundorf (2002) to analyze data from the focus group interviews. The findings included extensive quotations from the interviews (Morgan, 1997). After a paid assistant transcribed the focus group interview verbatim and researchers coded the data individually, researchers worked collaboratively to identify themes and draw conclusions. Researchers repeatedly read the transcripts, identifying and recording key ideas, words, phrases and verbatim quotes that captured the essence of the discussion. Next, the researchers used the ideas to create categories, and classified interview transcript data under the appropriate identified categories. They then clustered the categories into themes. Finally, quotes from the participants were used to illustrate and support those themes.

Each researcher coded the transcript of one focus group, yet read the other four transcripts. The five researchers met face-to-face for team analysis in order to validate the findings and to ensure credibility and trustworthiness (Brown, 1999). In addition, they examined the notetakers' observations for consistency in what was said and what was observed.

Meeting several times, the research team mapped out the various themes that emerged from each question/category. A high level of agreement resulted, demonstrating consistency in interpretation of the focus group interview data and providing credibility and trustworthiness (Brown, 1999). Working in this manner the researchers were able to discuss similarities and differences in the data. For a clear and concise presentation of data the researchers elected to organize results by the four questions used to focus the interviews.

Results

A total of 39 African-American college students participated in the interviews. Twenty-two participants (56%) were less than 21 years of age and 17 (44%) were 21 or older. Twenty females (51%) and 19 males (49%) participated. The majority (n=23; 59%) were underclassmen while 13 (33%) were upperclassmen and 3 (7%) were graduate students. Most students lived in either university housing (n=17; 44%) or off-campus housing (n=17; 44%); four students (10%) lived at home and one (2%) in a fraternity house.

Information provided on the participant profile revealed that six of the men (32%) and six of the women (30%) indicated they had engaged in sexual behavior when they did not want to because they felt pressured to do so. Seven men (37%) and six women (30%) indicated they had used verbal coercion to pressure someone into sexual activity. None of the participants indicated they had used or experienced physical sexual coercion or rape.

What is Sexual Coercion?

The first major question asked of the five groups was "what is sexual coercion?" Initially, participants experienced difficulty in defining sexual coercion and notetakers commented on participants' looks of confusion. This question required follow-up probes in order to elicit specific examples of situations considered to be sexually coercive (e.g. "Can you give some examples to explain what it is?"). Several themes emerged from the data.

Each focus group discussed the *unacceptability of physical coercion* and there was consensus that once physical force was used it became rape. It is important to note that once this spontaneous discussion and distinction occurred, all further discussion addressed verbal forms of sexual coercion. A distinction also was made between persuasion and threats of force. "I don't think too much about threatening. If you've got to do that, then there's something wrong with you anyway." One male offered this distinction between verbal coercion and rape:

If I persuade you, like I was playing a game, right? I'm going to talk to you, make you feel a little more comfortable, and then maybe you'll feel a little bit better about having sex with me. But if I just grab you, catch you from behind on the street and throw you down, rip off your clothes, and have sex with you, that's wrong.

Also consistent across the five groups was the theme of sexual coercion as *persuasion and/or pressure* with all groups clearly identified coercion as persuasion or some type of pressure. The variety of responses from the women in the focus groups suggested a range in the type of verbal pressure used in verbal sexual coercion from ultimatums to guilt. "Talking or threats" was identified as one example of pressure. One female participant described it as "basically an ultimatum [in which a guy says] 'if you don't give in to me, I won't be with you anymore.'" Another offered an example of a man saying "if you don't give it up, I'm going to cheat." Guilt was brought up as "they [men] make you feel guilty, saying, 'you don't like me,' saying stuff like that." One woman said "you feel like sometimes you're obligated to do it just because he's been good to you, you know – look what he did for me, and look how long we've been together, and he's a good person. You feel pressure." Another example brought up a different sort of pressure: "Some people, you know, they think, well, if I don't do it I'll probably not get anyone else, or he won't like me anymore, so, you know, there is a certain degree of pressure. Even though you might not want to do it, you do it to make that person happy. In that sense, you know, you're being pressured."

Male descriptions as to what constituted sexual coercion were more succinct and brief. They used terms and phrases such as "persuasion," "verbal persuasion," "persuading someone to have sex," and said things like "I'll break up with you if you aren't putting out after six months." Another male indicated a type of pressure called "selling dreams. Tell her what you're going to do for her."

"*Running or playing the game*" was a dominant theme in four of the five focus groups. One participant from an all-male group described the game as "a script." It became clear that men, and many of the women, viewed potential sexual interaction as a game with certain rules. One of those rules, from which there was strong support in the men's groups, was the unacceptability of physical force. It was clear, however, that pressure, manipulation, persuasion, and even lying was acceptable and part of the playing the game. "The term sexual coercion, more often than not, is typically our perception of being a player. You know, if you can manipulate your way into having sex."

In one of the all-male groups there was initial resistance to explaining the game ("The game is to be sold, not to be told"). Eventually, one man did explain that "running the game is using a different talking. Like you're saying the words, you tell the woman something that she needs to hear to get what you want." Others also described the game as "telling her what she needs to hear." A female revealed that "a lot of guys...feel like it's a running game, it's a pass, whatever... 'I have to spin a little game on her, tell her I love her, I like her, you know, I really like her, or whatever, you know, to be with her.'" This notion of telling a woman something she wants to hear in order to get something sexual in return reveals another theme identified as the *exchange nature of coercion* in a relationship (i.e. "You give her what

she wants to get what you want. I mean, it's an even exchange").

Sexual coercion normative behavior and a commonly played game emerged as another theme. Groups saw it as normal and even behavior to be expected. "Its just life" and "Who doesn't go through that?" Men and women agreed "She doesn't want you to give up too easily." A woman stated that "most women loved to be chased...it's a cat-and-mouse game." Another said it's "definitely a game. See how many you can get, you know, in terms of, from grammar school how many phone numbers you can get, to high school and how many you can actually have sex with."

How Common is Sexual Coercion?

The predominant theme during this portion of the focus group discussions was that *sexual coercion is common*. Numerous comments were made to the effect that sexual coercion was common in the college setting. "You know, it's a college campus. It happens all the time" and "on a college campus, it happens every day." One participant suggested that it also was "common in high schools, probably sometimes in marriages." One man stated that "dudes are always going to try to like girls and stuff, because it's like an everyday thing." In one all-female group it was acknowledged that sexual coercion happened often but not everyone revealed it:

Because, you know, the situations are embarrassing for them... They're not going to come down [to the lounge] saying, "Yeah, John forced me to have sex with him." They're not going to come out and say it...they might say, "Yeah, me and John did something last night" or whatever. They're not going to come out and say "He forced me, he threatened me" or whatever.

Another theme that emerged from all five discussions was that *both men and women used sexual coercion*. In fact, the first example of sexual coercion in one all-female focus group was an example of a woman coercing a man. A barrage of responses to the question "how often do you suppose women pressure men?" revealed that both male and female participants felt women used sexual coercion nearly as often as men.

When probed for examples of how women pressured men, the men tended to offer specific examples and scenarios in which persuasion and some manipulation were presented. For example: "Women will see a guy with a nice car or lots of flash or something, and they will pressure a man to get with him. They will try to give him sex just to get with him." Some of the men in the all-male groups admitted they had been verbally pressured into having sex. One man offered the following example of how he felt he had been pressured:

She came to me one night, she told me her name...asked me to take her to the mall...I'm looking at shirts while she's shopping. She sees me picking up this shirt, she grabs the shirt and buys it for me like that. Then she comes home and gives me money to order pizza and, just buying liquor for all my friends. Then I was letting

her pay for my rent...one night I said she could stay over...and she just, that girl, she was up on the bed, verbally pressuring me, because I did not want to touch her. She did things but I didn't want to do it, but she started kissing...she did stuff to me, and I still didn't want to do it...Pressure the whole time. I never wanted to touch her.

What Causes Sexual Coercion?

While the participants mentioned poor self-esteem as a possible cause of sexual coercion, it did not emerge as a theme common to most of the focus groups. When asked about causes of sexual coercion one man said "People are not sure of themselves" while one woman responded "it's low self-esteem." One man explained that "a man's sex drive is, you know, working a lot faster than a woman's, so we are going to constantly, you know, try to coerce." Yet another man indicated that "I think it's natural, it's nothing personal."

Poor communication emerged from the focus group interviews as a theme. One male group discussed lack of communication and miscommunication as situations in which sexual coercion might take place. One man pointed out that "sex is communication, if you ask me, no matter which way you look at it." The interpretation of "no" was discussed. "If I'm laying down with a girl and I'm trying to get her out of her clothes and she starts telling me 'no, no, no'...and I keep on going, and you know, just any moment in time I'm taking each piece of her clothes off, but at the same time she's saying 'no, no, no.' and then later on she just gives in."

One man shared that "I've had women tell be basically 'no,' because they feel like that's what they're supposed to say at first, just so he wouldn't get the indication that she was easy; you see what I'm saying? So it's on her to say 'no' a few times...I'm going to take 'no' two or three times." Women admitted that there is a way to say 'no' that is sending a different message. Multiple female focus group participants demonstrated this by saying 'no' in a playful manner suggesting that they don't really mean 'no' and they don't really expect the man to interpret it as a serious rejection. Men agreed that "she's going to know how to tell me 'no' so I understand 'no.'"

What Can be Done to Prevent Sexual Coercion?

When asked about sexual coercion prevention, the participants' initial discussion led to statements like "I don't really know if there is a way to stop it" and statements to the effect that sexual coercion cannot be prevented. One man's opinion was that it's "never going to stop because the guy is always going to try to get the girl." Another man stated "our parents did it, we're doing it, and it's going to keep on going." After continued probing, groups began to suggest ways to prevent coercion.

Avoid getting into that position and assertiveness were the only two themes to emerge. "The person should just keep themselves out of that environment or, you know, not

even get in that situation from the get go." Several women offered statements such as "don't put ourselves in that position." One woman felt "you can be blunt with the pressure. From the moment you meet, you just tell him what's on your mind exactly; let him know what you are about right then and there. So, if they choose not to be with you because of that, they can leave." "Being blunt from the beginning" was a sentiment expressed by several women and seemed to refer to being able to clearly communicate limits.

To summarize, after initial difficulty in defining sexual coercion, participants agreed that physical sexual coercion as rape and unacceptable, and thereafter, their discussions centered on verbal sexual coercion. They defined it as a type of persuasion or pressure to engage in sexual activity and they commented on it being a commonly played game. Participants believed that women engaged in such behavior as often as men. Poor communication was identified as the principle cause and prevention required being assertive about sexual limits.

Discussion

This study of African-American participants revealed that sexual coercion is perceived to be as common among women as men. Participants in this study admitted both using and having been recipients of sexually coercive techniques. This finding is supported by prior research revealing that men and women were both perpetrators and targets of sexual coercion (O'Sullivan, et al, 1998; Sprecher, Hatfield, Potapove & Leviskaya, 1994; Struckman-Johnson, et al, 2003).

While no gender differences existed in willingness to exert verbal pressure and behavioral manipulation, the intentions of men and women differed. These results are supported by Sprecher et al, (1994) who found that men used coercion to get sex while women used coercion to negotiate and/or control a relationship. Men viewed their sexual coercion behavior as a means to an end, while women used coercion to control emotional aspects of a relationship. Such differing perspectives may lead to sexual miscommunication between men and women.

Although participants never used the phrase "token resistance," they referred to this practice when women discussed saying "no" when they really wanted to say "yes" (O'Sullivan et al., 1998; Sprecher et al., 1994). This practice may well stem from societal expectations regarding female sexual behavior. Women are socialized to exude sexuality, yet sexually aggressive behavior is generally viewed as inappropriate (Sprecher et al., 1994; Metts, Cupach & Imahori, 1992). Men tend to be socialized to be sexual aggressors within relationships while women are expected to be the gatekeepers (O'Sullivan). Token resistance is employed to satisfy cultural expectations of the gatekeeper role, but this ultimately promotes sexual miscommunication among men and women (Motley & Reeder, 1995). Yet, it is important to note that research on traditional gender role socialization of women has not provided consistent support for the idea

that such socialization increases risk of sexual coercion (Mynatt & Allgeier, 1990).

The men involved in this study expressed strong disapproval of physical sexual coercion and they clearly identified such behavior as the equivalent of rape. Due to the fact that a female moderated the male groups, it is possible that they presented socially desirable responses. Women, as one might expect, revealed they knew that verbal sexual coercion had the potential to escalate to physical coercion. Yet, they were not as quick, or as clear as the men, to identify physical coercion as rape. In fact, in an all-female discussion of how common sexual coercion is, the scenario of "...John forced me to have sex with him" was never identified by the women as rape. This supports early research by Koss and colleagues (1987) who found that a number of college women had experiences meeting the legal definition of rape, yet those women did not label those experiences as rape.

Another issue deserving attention is that of the *game*. Both men and women acknowledge the existence of the *game*. Research on love style and sexual victimization in dating relationships revealed that men who endorsed a game-playing style of love were more likely to be sexually coercive (Russell & Oswald, 2002). This finding warrants further research given that the participants in this study emphasized the game-playing nature of sexual relationships.

According to Madhubuti (1990) the *game* serves to meet several needs in African-American dating relationships. While on the surface, these needs appear to be only sexual in nature, the game allows material, emotional, social, and intellectual needs too be met as well (Burgest & Goosby, 1985). For men who are characterized as sexual aggressors, the additional need to be in control is met. For women, social, material, and emotional needs are met. The *game* serves to perpetuate sexual miscommunication through use of verbal pressure and behavioral manipulation. According to some (Burgest & Goosby, 1985; Burgest, 1990), the use of games is counterproductive and prevents the development of genuine interpersonal relationships between African-American males and females. The need for continued effort toward personal and social skills building that focuses on interpersonal relationships is evident on college campuses.

College health education faculty, health service personnel, counselors, and residence hall staff are well aware of the existence of sexual coercion on campus. As they continue to study the phenomenon, they need to seek an understanding of the perceptions of different racial/ethnic groups, as well. Health educators should work cooperatively with residence hall staff to moderate discussions among residents using the same questions in this study with different racial/ethnic groups. Benefits exist for the participants of such focus groups, for as students begin to understand their perceptions and those of others, they may be more receptive to college health programming that takes their perceptions into account.

It is notable that the African-American students in this study perceive verbal sexual coercive behaviors to be normal and their suggestions for preventing it centered on not

getting into situations and being blunt about the behaviors in which they will not engage. Not getting in situations is difficult given the dating culture of the college environment, but communication skills training and self-esteem building may be key prevention tools.

There were limitations to the study that should be noted. The use of a female moderator for all groups may have influenced the openness of the all-male groups. In future research on sexual coercion, focus group interviews should be exclusively male or female and moderators and note-takers should be the same sex as the participants. While there was a lively discussion in the mixed male/female focus group, it was primarily a male versus female exchange among few of the group members. This study addressed only heterosexual relationships, and no discussion of perceptions of sexual coercion within homosexual relationships occurred. Due to the small number of participants and the purposive sampling, the results cannot be generalized to the entire African-American college student population. The findings, however, offer insight into sexual coercion that has not been previously described and that have implications for further research and educational programming.

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