

Women's Situational Coping with Acquaintance Sexual Assault: Applying an Appraisal-Based Model

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Overview

The study from which this presentation is drawn applied appraisal-based coping theory and structural modeling to examine the relationships between personal goal orientations, appraisals of acquaintance sexual assault, and behavioral responses among college women

Population

- Female college students a high-risk group in regards to sexual assault (Brener, McMahon, Warren, & Douglas, 1999; Bureau of Justice Statistics, 1994)
 - 1 in 4 experience attempted rape or rape
 - 80% experience some form of sexual aggression (Fisher, Cullen, & Turner, 2000; Harrington & Leitenberg, 1994; Koss, Gidycz, & Wisniewski, 1987; Randall & Haskell, 1995; Tiaden, & Thoennes, 1998)

Approach

- Situational coping analysis applied to college women's perceptions of risks and responses to sexual assault by male acquaintances
- Coping analysis takes situational coping processes and social context factors into account

Types of Responses to Sexual Assault Incident

- Direct or assertive
- Indirect, diplomatic, or verbal negotiation (Norris, Nurius, & Dimeff, 1996; Nurius, Norris, Young, Graham, & Gaylord, 2000)
- Immobilization (Galliano, Noble, Travis, & Puechl, 1993)

Considerations of Responses

- Types are not mutually exclusive
- Women usually “match” their level of responding to amount of force used by assailant (Ullman, 1997)
- Responses to sexual aggression can influence outcomes of sexual assault (Amick & Calhoun, 1987; Heath & Davidson, 1988; Thompson, 1991)

Goals of Study

- To learn more about the factors that facilitate or impede self-protective coping
- Use information gained to assist women in augmenting their self-protective measures

Focus on Self-Protection

Consistent with Research on Active Resistance

- Active Resistance

- does not increase risk of injury
- is associated with escaping rape
- is associated with experiencing less self-blame

(Furby, Fischhoff, & Morgan, 1990; Rozee & Koss, 2001; Ullman, 1997)

Theoretical Models

- Underlying premise that behavioral responses to sexual assault are shaped by contextual factors and mediated by cognitive and emotional processing of current circumstances (Lazarus & Folkman, 1984; Smith, Haynes, Lazarus, & Pope, 1993)

Theoretical Models cont.

- Work from conceptual model (Nurius, 2000; Nurius & Norris, 1996) that applies cognitive analysis to women's interpretation of and response to sexual assault threat
- Structural equation modeling used to link cognitive interpretation of events pre-assault to behavioral responding

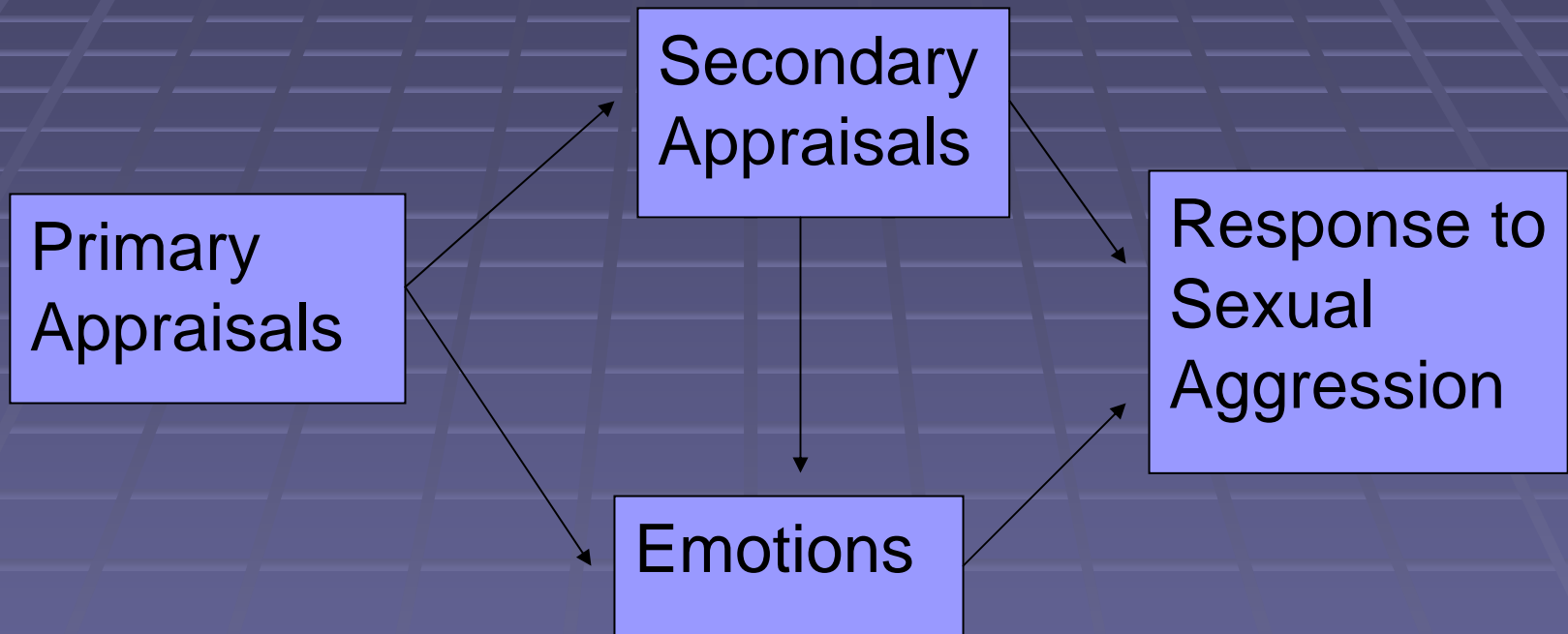
Levels of Appraisal

- Primary appraisal
 - concerns evaluating event as beneficial, harmful, or neutral
 - activates subsequent coping
 - 1st step to mounting a defense (Rozee et al., 1991)

Levels of Appraisal cont.

- Secondary appraisal
 - concerns evaluating nature of threat
 - includes such issues as:
 - Who is responsible for the circumstance
 - What are the possible outcomes
 - What potential is there to realize desired outcomes
 - Weighing benefits (e.g. avoid sexual assault) against negative aspects of resistance (e.g. change in relationship with acquaintance, rejection, being blamed for the situation, threats to social standing)

Theoretical Framework: Coping



Prior Research on Correlated Factors

- Embarrassment and concern over religion negatively correlated with self-reported likelihood to be verbally and physically resistant
- Anger and confidence in personal power positively correlated with this tendency (Norris, Nurius, & Dimeff, 1996; Nurius et al., 2000)

Prior Research on Developmental Goals

- Chief goals of young adulthood in the West are creating an independent identity and pursuing intimacy (Cantor & Fleeson, 1994; Cantor & Sanderson, 1998)
- These goals are developmental priorities for college students
- These goals predict coping in contexts of regulating risky sexual behavior (Sanderson & Cantor, 1995)

Prior Research on Alcohol

- Drinking habits in general and at time of assault linked to increased likelihood of completed rape (Abbey, Zawacki, Buck, Clinton, & McAuslan, in press; Testa & Parks, 1996)
- Correlational evidence links overall alcohol consumption with embarrassment when faced with a potential sexual assault situation (Norris, Nurius, & Graham, 1996)

Prior Research on Alcohol cont.

- Awareness of alcohol's incapacitation effect associated with lower verbal assertiveness and higher indirect communication patterns in potential sexual assault situations (Norris, Nurius, & Graham, 1996)
- Women who drink are less likely to see alcohol as a risk factor for sexual assault (Norris et al., 1999)

Study Hypotheses

- Goal of pursuing intimate relationships will impede self-protection
- Sense of independence will be positively associated with feeling capable of influencing the outcome of the situation

Study Hypotheses

- Alcohol consumption will result in
 - decreased ability to recognize risk cues
 - increased self-blame
 - decreased sense of ability to influence the situation
 - increased concern over opinion of acquaintance

Study Hypotheses

- Primary appraisal of assailant's behavior as invasive will be associated with secondary appraisals of feeling powerful and resentful of being wronged
- Social costs will explain diplomatic responding, safety costs will explain assertive responding, and powerlessness and self-blame will be associated with immobilization

Study Hypotheses

- Secondary appraisals related to social concerns will be more salient than safety concerns because of the incremental nature of acquaintance sexual assault

Participants

- 415 college women from two public colleges in the same Northwestern metropolitan area (one community college, one graduate/undergraduate university)
- At least 18 years of age at time of study, at least 16 years of age at time of assault with no more than 5 years between time of assault and study
- Mean age of 21.7
- Had to have experienced physical coercion from a man who was not a spouse or live-in partner

Questionnaire

- Completed by participant in isolation
- Measures presented in fixed order and self-administered
- Measures drawn from previous research on appraisals and responses to threatening situations or sexual assault
- Assessed on a 0 to 4 scale (higher scores indicating more of the construct)

Questionnaire cont.

- Questions probed three areas:
 - 1.) Participant's life circumstances before assault and immediately leading up to it (including primary appraisal)
 - 2.) The assault itself (including secondary appraisals, emotions, behaviors) and an accompanying narrative of it
 - 3.) Background information on the participant

Measures

- Personal goals-items taken from Social Goals Scale (Sanderson & Cantor, 1995)
 - Independence
 - Intimacy orientation
- Alcohol use-2 items and Drinking Habits Scale (Cahalan, Cisin, & Crossley, 1969)
 - Frequency
 - Amount
 - Degree of intoxication

Measures cont.

- Primary appraisals-items drawn from Christopher et al., 1993; Craig, 1990; Cue, et al., 1996; Malamuth, et al., 1991; Muehlenhard & Linton, 1987; Norris & Nurius, 1997; Rapaport & Burkhart, 1984
 - Extent of acquaintance's coercive behavior (invasive distinguished from manipulative)
 - Extent of participant's lack of comfort

Measures cont.

- Secondary appraisals-adapted from Carver & Scheier, 1994; Nurius et al., 2000; Smith et al., 1993
 - Self-blame
 - Concern for relationship outcome
 - Perceived personal power
 - Resentment

Measures cont.

- Behavioral responses-3 patterns adapted from resistance scales in a variety of prior research
 - Assertive
 - Diplomatic
 - Immobility

Findings

- Assumed primacy of social concerns supported by results
- Expectation that the effects of social context variables and primary appraisals would be mediated by secondary appraisals was met with two exceptions:
 - Alcohol use and
 - Appraisals of assailant manipulation had direct effects on diplomatic responding

Findings cont.

- Expectation that primary appraisals would be associated with each other and with social context variables was met with two exceptions:
 - Social context factors were not significantly associated with more explicit threat signs
 - Independence orientation was not associated with either threat appraisal **OR WHAT?**

Significant Paths

- Intimacy orientation explained:
 - Greater concern for acquaintance's judgment
 - More self-blame
 - Higher levels of resentment
- Independence orientation explained:
 - Less concern for acquaintance's judgment
 - Less self-blame
 - Greater tendency to see self as powerful

Significant Paths cont.

- Alcohol explained:
 - More self-blame
 - Less concern for acquaintance's judgment
- Primary appraisal of manipulative behavior explained:
 - Greater concern for acquaintance's judgment
 - More diplomatic responding
- Primary appraisal of invasive behavior explained higher levels of resentment

Significant Paths cont.

- Tension between social and safety issues evidenced by:
 - Greater concern for acquaintance's judgment negatively associated with resentment
 - Greater self-blame negatively associated with sense of self as powerful in the situation
- Tension between social and safety issues undermined by the finding that greater concern for acquaintance's judgment was positively associated with sense of self as powerful

Behavioral Responses

- Lower self-blame associated with more assertive responding, higher self-blame with immobility
- Concern for acquaintance's judgment associated with diplomatic responding (which research has found to be generally ineffective)
- Greater resentment had path to all three types, but strongest path to assertive responding
- Sense of self as powerful
 - associated with less immobility
 - had fairly positive path to diplomatic response
 - not significantly associated with assertive behavior

Implications of Results

- Women must cope with two types of concerns in relation to sexual assault
 - Safety
 - Relationships
- These sometimes conflicting concerns affect the type of resistance used
- Intervention methods should attempt to overcome these psychological barriers to resistance

Recommendations for Interventions

- Support a more independent identity orientation
- Incorporate skills training on identifying situational information that indicates a threat
- Use Assess, Acknowledge, Act (AAA) model (Rozee & Koss, 2001) to help women anticipate and prepare for self-protection
- Counteract self-blame
- Research and educate about the vulnerabilities resulting from alcohol consumption, as well as potential benefits (e.g. muting concern for acquaintance's judgment)

Applicability

Applicability is uncertain and more research should be done on:

- Non-college age women
- Women who successfully escaped a sexual assault incident
- Differences of race, class, disability, and citizenship status

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