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Abstract

This paper provides a review of literature and research on verbal sexual coercion on college campuses by focusing on heterosexual dynamics. The studies involved explore the factors that influence sexually coercive behavior, including parenting styles, heteronormative beliefs, and risk-taking behaviors. Furthermore, this paper reviews current informal and formal responses to campus sexual coercion by focusing on the overlooked power dynamics that influence sexual consent. This paper concludes that restorative justice serves as an alternative to traditional justice for campus-based sexual coercion because of its flexibility and applicability to nuanced sexual assault cases.

Keywords

sexual assault, adolescents, gender roles, campus response, heterosexual relationships

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Introduction

Significant media attention and prevention research addresses campus sexual assault prevention, yet verbal sexual coercion, a serious form of sexual violence, is frequently left out of the conversation. Overtly violent behaviors often eclipse the seriousness of verbal coercion. As such, verbal coercion is under-researched and poorly understood by victims, perpetrators, and student conduct professionals alike (Garner et al., 2017). Verbal coercion can manifest as negotiating sexual acts, persistently asking after receiving a "no," misleading the victim, using guilt tactics, or a combination of all four (Eaton & Matamala, 2014).

The Sexual Experiences Survey (2007) describes strategies to "impel sex against consent" and delineates several examples of sexual coercion:

> Negative coercion: Telling lies, threatening to end the relationship, threatening to spread rumors about me, making promises I knew were untrue, or continually verbally pressuring me after I said I didn't want to.
>
> Escalated coercion: Showing displeasure, criticizing my sexuality or attractiveness, getting angry but not using physical force, after I said I didn't want to. (Koss et al., 2014, p. 244)

Sexually coercive acts may blur the lines between sexual harassment and sexual violence, indicating confusion around these behaviors' gravity. College-aged women who experience this form of incursion may identify unwanted sex resulting from verbal sexual coercion as "problem sex" rather than rape or sexual assault (Pugh & Becker, 2018). Legally, verbal sexual coercion is more challenging to establish as criminal than sexual assaults involving force and physical resistance (Pugh & Becker, 2018). However, the Dear Colleague Letter of 2011, which addresses the

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role of higher education in preventing sexual violence, categorizes sexual coercion behaviors as a form of sexual violence (Koss et al., 2014).

Unwanted sex resulting from verbal sexual coercion is distinct from other forms of sex that may be undesired but chosen with free consent. In healthy relationship dynamics, individuals may choose to have sex that they do not desire for the sake of their partner's enjoyment or the benefit of the relationship (Pugh & Becker, 2018). These common scenarios differ from sex attained by verbal sexual coercion in core ways. By nature, verbal sexual coercion tactics are only present in circumstances where a partner declines consent; therefore, unlike those freely choosing to consent to undesired sex, the victims of verbal coercion have relented unwillingly after persistent pressure (Pugh & Becker, 2018). Current conceptualizations of consent assume that sexual partners may give or revoke consent without consequences, an assumption that fails to account for power dynamics within coercive scenarios (Pugh & Becker, 2018). During verbal sexual coercion, some may feel as if they cannot actualize their right to say no for many reasons. Studies show that women who acquiesce to unwanted sex frequently voice their non-consent but give in after their lack of consent is persistently disregarded (Pugh & Becker, 2018). This dynamic is reinforced by previous experiences of coercion or violence, justified fear of further violence, and feelings of powerlessness (Pugh & Becker, 2018). Furthermore, studies show that men are aware of their partners' verbal and non-verbal consent cues. While many choose to stop the sexual interaction at the time of refusal, some men choose to persist through coercion and other tactics (Pugh & Becker, 2018).

Verbally coercive behaviors are common in college-aged relationships and, like all forms of sexual violence, can cause

significant harm. According to a 2017 study, approximately half of all male college students report utilizing coercive tactics to obtain sex, and approximately 30-50% of college women report being coerced by a partner (Richardson et al., 2017). College students engage in verbal coercion at a higher rate than any other age group. Other studies suggest that up to 70% of women in college experience verbal coercion from their male partners (Eaton & Matamala, 2014). Some theorize that this strikingly high prevalence may be due to poorly developed relational and sexual skills (Eaton & Matamala, 2014).

Coercion as a form of sexual misconduct has a significant impact on student health despite frequent minimization of the harm caused. Women who experience sexual coercion are at higher risk for psychiatric symptoms than women who do not have a history of coercive victimization (Jouriles et al., 2009). Sexual coercion is associated with emotional disturbances, including depression, social anxiety, and substance abuse (Eaton & Matamala, 2014). Academics, relational functioning, and sexual health may suffer as a result of sexual coercion (Eaton & Matamala, 2014). This form of assault is also associated with inconsistent condom use and increased HIV and STI risk (Fair & Vanyur, 2011). Furthermore, women who report having unwanted sex due to verbal sexual coercion experience post-traumatic stress symptoms similar to women who report rape (Pugh & Becker, 2018). Feelings of fear, powerlessness, guilt, and self-blame appear to be shared regardless of the style of assault (Pugh & Becker, 2018).

This paper provides a brief overview of the complex problem of college sexual coercion by focusing primarily on male perpetrators and female victims and proposing alternative campus responses to these incidents. It is essential to acknowledge that

persons of all genders and sexual orientations are capable of perpetrating sexual coercion and being victimized. However, this paper focuses on heterosexual relationship dynamics due to their prevalence of incidents and availability of research. Accordingly, there exists a need for further research on the incidence of verbal sexual coercion in, and its impacts on, the LGBTQ+ community. College sexual assault response programs often fail to address the severe harms caused by verbal sexual coercion due to the conceptual challenges inherent in understanding coerced consent. However, the restorative justice model presents a valuable opportunity for universities to address verbal sexual coercion, support victims of verbal sexual coercion, and bring about behavioral change in persons who cause harm.

Factors and Theories of Prevalence

Family of Origin

Studies have examined the factors that influence the perpetration of verbal sexual coercion, which includes family of origin issues such as overparenting and parental inconsistency. Parental inconsistency, described as irregular rules and boundaries with unreliable consequences, can lead to children and adolescents' coercive behaviors (Richardson et al., 2017). In the absence of clearly defined behavioral boundaries and consistent enforcement, children may develop coercive strategies to manipulate their parents. Adults raised with inconsistent parenting as children may develop the belief that other people are vulnerable to manipulation and that it is acceptable to disregard another's "no." Similarly, men who choose to continue with sex after a refusal may believe that it is acceptable to persist until a "yes" or absence of "no" is achieved (Pugh & Becker, 2018).

Overparenting is a related developmental factor that is associated with sexual coercion. Overparenting refers to

inappropriately controlling and coddling parental behaviors and is correlated with the development of manipulative behaviors (Richardson et al., 2017). A shared outcome of both overparenting and inconsistent parenting is the development of problematic entitlement. Problematic entitlement may influence individuals to believe that their sexual desires are paramount to their partner's consent. If thwarted in their ability to satisfy those desires, entitled individuals may be willing to deceive, belittle, or harm another person in order to gratify themselves (Richardson et al., 2017).

Heteronormativity

Heteronormative beliefs are associated with the perpetration of sexual coercion, acceptance of sexually coercive behaviors, and victimization. Heteronormativity refers to a set of cultural beliefs about men and women in which they are considered complementary opposites in their needs and roles in society (Eaton & Matamala, 2014). Heteronormativity also functions to affirm and maintain the privilege that heterosexual relationships, and the men in them, carry in society. These beliefs set cultural standards for what constitutes a normal relationship between a man and a woman while emphasizing gender hierarchy and portraying men as active and aggressive and women as passive and receptive. Heteronormative roles support men's status in a patriarchal society (Eaton & Matamala, 2014). In this paradigm, women are considered sexual gatekeepers, and sexual coercion by men is considered natural and condoned (Pugh & Becker, 2018). Therefore, consent is less definitive when the accepted paradigm asserts that men must coerce to engage in sexual activity (Pugh & Becker, 2018). Beliefs in male sexual dominance, male readiness for sex, and the acceptability of male sexual desire are associated with male perpetration and female victimization, whereas beliefs about an adversarial relationship between sexes are associated

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with female perpetration and male victimization (Eaton & Matamala, 2014). Hostile sexism, which is characterized by an implicit belief that women seek to control men and that men and women are adversaries, plays a role in heteronormativity and is strongly associated with coercion in relationships (Eaton & Matamala, 2014).

Risk Taking, Sensation Seeking, and Alcohol

Verbal sexual coercion can be a risk-taking behavior due to its potential for social, financial, and legal consequences. Garner et al. (2017) found that increased risk-taking behavior was associated with an increased rate of sexually coercive behavior, and sexual risk-taking was associated with sexual aggression. Sexual coercion was also related to impulsivity, sensation seeking, and the expectation of a gratifying outcome. Furthermore, the benefits of sexual coercion often outweigh the risks for college men, given a general attitude of accepting coercive behaviors in the college setting. Research suggests that 86% of college-aged men who have engaged in sexual coercion have done so more than once, indicating low barriers to repeat offenses (Garner et al., 2017).

Sensation seeking is a factor in risk-taking behavior and may play a role in verbal sexual coercion. Research suggests an association between sensation seeking and a preference for nonverbal (and therefore arguably ambiguous) consent cues; furthermore, sensation seeking negatively correlates with proactive consent attitudes (Garner et al., 2017). The prevalence of alcohol may compound this relationship as a factor in sexual coercion incidents. A 2010 study of 59 male participants found that intoxicated men showed reduced ability to differentiate between friendliness and sexual interest cues in comparison to prior sober trials (Farris et al., 2010). Incorrectly interpreted cues

may lead intoxicated men to pursue uninterested partners which, in combination with alcohol-related disinhibition, may contribute sexual coercion among campus communities (Farris et al., 2010).

Informal and Social Responses to Campus Sexual Coercion

Interpersonal responses play a significant role in redress and recovery from sexual misconduct. Empathic and affirming responses aid recovery, whereas victim-blaming and other negative responses increase the likelihood that a victim will develop post-traumatic stress disorder (Banyard et al., 2010). College students who are victims of sexual assault are likely to disclose their assault to their friends; approximately one third of female students and one fifth of male students will be disclosed to by a friend (Banyard et al., 2010). In trials assessing student reactions to sexual assault disclosure, men experienced discomfort with disclosure, reported feeling burdened, and experienced uncertainty about their capacity to effectively support victims (Banyard et al., 2010). Women reported greater comfort with being disclosed to and had confidence in their supportive efficacy, but the disclosure negatively impacted their sense of safety (Banyard et al., 2010). Therefore, campus prevention programs might utilize this opportunity to coach male students in effective allyship and work to decrease stress and fear for female students (Banyard et al., 2010). Informal responses to verbal sexual coercion and other forms of sexual violence may improve by utilizing interpersonal response-training programs to increase student ability to support survivors of sexual violence and address problematic college-student beliefs around verbal sexual coercion.

College student beliefs about rape and verbal coercion reflect a lack of understanding of these behaviors' gravity. One 2015 study suggests that only 27% of female college students who

https://scholarworks.sjsu.edu/themis/vol8/iss1/5
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report sexual assault view their assault as meeting criteria for legal action (DeMatteo et al., 2015). Sexual coercion is rarely seen as a serious issue among college students, further decreasing the likelihood that women will feel empowered to report (Garner et al., 2017). Garner et al. (2017) indicated that 41% of students felt a woman was partially to blame if sexually assaulted while intoxicated and 63% felt that engaging in kissing was grounds for a man to push for sex. Plying with alcohol and negotiating for increased sexual contact are common forms of sexual coercion, indicating that students tend to believe that sexual coercion is somewhat justifiable.

Justice System & Institutional Responses to Campus Sexual Coercion

University Response

Sexual violence is pervasive on college campuses, yet administrative leadership often minimizes the significance of the issue. Data indicates that only 32% of the 647 college presidents surveyed believe that campus sexual violence is prevalent in general, and only 6% agree that it is a problem for their specific campus (Carlson et al., 2018). While several government task forces focus specifically on campus sexual violence prevention, this focus has not provided clarity around campus response organizations' roles nor successfully standardized best practices for prevention and response (Carlson et al., 2018). Less than 1% of sexual assault perpetrators see any form of discipline from the university, and only 6% experience repercussions by the criminal justice system (DeMatteo et al., 2015). DeMatteo and colleagues (2015) also found that 30% of schools do not train campus adjudicators on common rape myths, and some campuses allow athletic departments to oversee sexual assault cases involving athletes. These inappropriate sexual misconduct responses have

implications for victim's well-being. Sexual assault survivors are at risk for retraumatization by helping professionals, risking further trauma symptomatology and impaired recovery (Banyard et al., 2010).

Criminal Justice System Response

Considerable debate regarding the management of campus sexual misconduct cases exists, including multiple viewpoints on whether responsibility for justice lies within the academic institution or the criminal justice system (DeMatteo et al., 2015). There are several potential pitfalls in relying on the criminal justice system alone. Interactions with law enforcement and medical staff may be negative due to victim-blaming attitudes and invasive investigations (Koss et al., 2014). Sexual assault convictions are uncommon, and victims may not be satisfied with the results of a criminal investigation or experience extenuated trauma due to recounting their assault (Koss et al., 2014). Furthermore, many state criminal codes poorly define consent (DeMatteo et al., 2015). Only seven states have legal definitions for consent (DeMatteo et al., 2015). This review found no mention of legally defined coerced consent in the literature discussed. A clarified understanding of consent is mandatory for a legal response to sexual assault to be successful. However, issues of coercion are nuanced and not easily understood in black and white terms (DeMatteo et al., 2015). Conceptual nuances within verbal coercion and juror biases towards blatant physical violence are likely to preclude justice for victims in cases involving verbal sexual coercion (Leahy, 2014). Existing legislation is likely not applicable to most college sexual coercion and assault cases (DeMatteo et al., 2015).

Leahy (2014) argues that coercion via emotional threats—threatening to end a relationship, guilting, continuous pressure—

https://scholarworks.sjsu.edu/themis/vol8/iss1/5
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is not sufficient to impair a person's ability to consent. However, such attitudes dismiss lower-grade relational violence and neglect to account for psychological harm caused by repeated exposure to verbal sexual coercion. The legal system is arguably unsuitable for most victims of sexual misconduct. Some scholars may interpret this lack of responsiveness as confirmation that some harmful behaviors are not damaging enough to warrant a community response; however, this line of thought ignores findings that suggest verbal sexual coercion is a common first step in escalating relational violence (Eaton & Matamala, 2014). When assailants use verbal sexual coercion strategies are used to compel unwanted sex, further violence by the perpetrator is typically unnecessary (Pugh & Becker, 2018). However, some men will resort to threats and physical force if verbal sexual coercion does not lead to their partner's acquiescence (Pugh & Becker, 2018). The fear and sense of powerlessness created by ignoring non-consent, and both overt and covert threats of rape or physical assault, are the driving forces behind verbal sexual coercion (Pugh & Becker, 2018). Furthermore, college women frequently cite previous experiences of verbal sexual coercion with a current or previous partner as a reason for conceding to coerced sex, indicating that verbal sexual coercion is a recurring problem with the capacity to escalate dramatically (Pugh & Becker, 2018). Thus, an important opportunity for early intervention is missed when coerced sex is regarded as fully consensual sex, as opposed to conceptualizing verbal coercion as a sexual assault tactic (Pugh & Becker, 2018).

In some cases, sex obtained by verbal sexual coercion tactics may be considered non-criminal. Responses to sexual assault cases featuring verbal sexual coercion vary greatly, and in some circumstances, exclude victims of this type of sexual assault

perpetration from justice. In these scenarios, campus restorative justice programs may provide a nuanced understanding of coerced consent and the procedural flexibility required to successfully address this form of victimization.

Restorative Justice Responses

Restorative justice is a philosophy and praxis of criminal justice that emphasizes repairing harm and reducing the risk of future harm through responsibility and community transformation ("Lesson 1: What Is Restorative Justice?", 2020). In the context of sexual violence, restorative justice has the potential to be more victim sensitive than traditional responses. It may provide a greater opportunity for perpetrators to accept accountability and gain support in changing their behavior (Koss et al., 2014). Sexual assault victims have a variety of needs that traditional campus or legal responses may not meet. Restorative justice provides an opportunity to meet victim needs through an array of techniques. Creating a plan of action will allow the person who was harmed to be heard, validated, and prepared to witness perpetrator remorse. Simultaneously, the restorative justice sentencing circle will engage in planning consequences and rehabilitation steps for those responsible. These sentencing circles comprise victims, families, friends, and community-support professionals, among other configurations. This process may or may not involve law enforcement. This type of response has the potential to create a greater sense of resolution for some victims. Furthermore, restorative justice provides a valuable model for cases in that cannot conclusively determine responsibility or when the harm in question did not officially violate the university code of conduct. This process creates an environment in which the person causing harm may take responsibility for repairing said harm without formal punishment (Koss et al., 2014).

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A potential challenge to the restorative justice model is that perpetrators must either be willing to accept responsibility and participate in restorative justice or must be found responsible through investigation (Koss et al., 2014). Additionally, many restorative justice programs support honesty by creating confidentiality agreements among participants. Some survivors may not accept this, and thus restorative justice must always be optional and offered with fully informed consent (Koss et al., 2014). Restorative justice conferences must never be imposed on survivors; forced participation would only perpetuate their harm.

Furthermore, critics of restorative justice raise concerns about victim safety, retraumatization, and the suitability of restorative justice techniques for sexual assault and coercion (Koss et al., 2014). However, these same concerns can apply to traditional responses to sexual violence on campus. As explored in prior sections, the traditional justice system and campus response systems are lacking and infrequently lead to sanction or repair of harm. Survivors are at risk of being retraumatized within the traditional response system and may not achieve resolution through the sentencing process (Koss et al., 2014). Therefore, the landscape of current responses to sexual coercion must consider restorative justice for its potential to meet survivors' needs and prevent further harm. Survivors' needs in this context include validation, observation of remorse from the responsible person, the ability to tell their story, and choice in potential resolutions for their experience (Koss et al., 2014).

Furthermore, restorative justice may meet the needs of the perpetrator as well. Research suggests that restorative justice techniques such as support circles can reduce recidivism among persons incarcerated for sex crimes and decrease the risk of further harmful behavior (Koss et al., 2014). Plans for offender

rehabilitation include case management, appropriate psychological treatment, community service, and consistent check-ins to monitor progress on redress goals (Koss et al., 2014). Restorative justice involves the survivor in the creation of these goals. Survivor input is essential in determining community service placement, rehabilitation activities, payment for victim services, and reparations (Koss et al., 2014).

Restorative justice programs have historically been a safe option for survivors of sexual coercion and assault. A program evaluation study of restorative justice for sexual assault cases, measured safety by incidents of physical threat and changes to post-traumatic stress disorder symptoms throughout the program (Koss et al., 2014). This study found no incidents of threat, and participating survivors showed a decrease in PTSD symptoms from the program's initiation to its completion (Koss et al., 2014). Furthermore, victims may opt-out of face-to-face resolution meetings and may instead work with a surrogate, increasing their emotional safety (Koss et al., 2014). Additionally, restorative justice programs must work alongside justice system proceedings when required or desired (Koss et al., 2014).

Restorative justice may be of particular value to verbal sexual coercion cases. Responsibility is difficult to prove, and the law or universities may view it as sub-threshold misconduct in the law or university's eyes. In these circumstances, harm may still need addressing. If both parties are willing to meet in the context of restorative justice, a dialogue may facilitate repairs to harms and curtail further coercive. Koss et al. (2014) state:

This approach recognizes that individuals accused of sexual misconduct may be willing to accept responsibility for repairing harm they created even if their behavior did not amount to a policy

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violation and that they may be willing to repair that harm in a manner that would be useful to the victim. (p. 253)

Restorative justice proceedings, both when responsibility is established and when responsibility cannot be conclusively proven, can significantly reduce the risk of escalating sexual violence behavior through support circles and student education. Student accountability and ethical citizenship goals may be supported through restorative justice work in sexual coercion cases where traditional adjudication may not be applicable (Koss et al., 2014). Multiple resolution and redress pathways are needed to address an issue as broad as campus sexual coercion, and restorative justice provides a flexible, adaptable approach to this complex problem.

Conclusion

Verbal sexual coercion is common in college student relationships and causes significant harm to victims in many functioning domains. Though sexual coercion is a serious problem and a risk factor for escalating relational violence, it is underestimated in importance by students and university professionals alike. In heterosexual relational paradigms, family of origin dynamic, heteronormative beliefs, risk-taking behavior, and alcohol consumption may influence sexual coercion. Contemporary responses to sexual coercion on college campuses often lack the necessary nuance required to address these cases. As such, verbal sexual coercion could be considered an invisible epidemic of harm.

Restorative justice responses may be appropriate in verbal sexual coercion cases in which responsibility is challenging to prove. Restorative justice programs allow addressal of harm to and increased student accountability to in verbal coercion cases that may not meet the university threshold for misconduct due to

an underdeveloped understanding of coerced consent. These proceedings provide an opportunity to alter the responsible person's trajectory of violence and increase sexual harm education for the greater campus community. To effectively address sexual coercion, there must be a perspective shift in what society, law enforcement, and universities consider harmful, actionable sexual behavior. Verbal sexual coercion is a sexual assault perpetration tactic. Repairing harm caused by these tactics requires understanding the power dynamics influencing coerced consent within heterosexual relating. While responses to verbal sexual coercion are currently lacking, the university system is in a unique position to lead the way in early gender-based violence intervention. Should universities choose to address campus sexual coercion and establish restorative resolution programs, campus sexual assault response programs may become powerful allies in the greater movement to end sexual violence.

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