

Male Definitions of Sexual Assault: The Role of the Perpetrator's Gender

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ABSTRACT - The objective of this study was to examine men's perceptions of sexual assault acts according to the perpetrator's gender. One hundred male university students were administered a self-report questionnaire consisting of 28 items (14 pairs in relation to each perpetrator's gender); each item was a description of either a sexual assault act or a culturally acceptable normative behavior. Participants were asked to rate the extent to which they perceive and define each act as a sexual assault. Results indicated that the gender of the perpetrator was a significant factor in whether the act was considered a sexual assault or not. Paired sample *t* tests revealed that when the perpetrator of an act was male, the act was significantly more likely to be considered an assault than when the perpetrator was female. However, in relation to culturally acceptable normative behaviors, no differences were found according to gender. Findings were discussed in the context of men's masculinity and sexual identity.

Sexual assault and rape include any unwanted sexual acts. The assailant can be a stranger, an acquaintance, a family member, or someone the victim knows well and trusts. Rape and sexual assault are crimes of violence and are used to exert power and control over another person (Koss, Gidycz, & Wisniewski, 1987). Usually a sexual assault occurs when someone touches any part of another person's body in a sexual way, even through their clothes, without that person's consent. Rape of males is any kind of sexual assault that involves all types of forced penetration. Research indicates that males who were sexually assaulted experience psychological symptoms of distress such as depression, anger, guilt, self-blame, sexual dysfunctions, posttraumatic stress disorder, and suicidal tendencies (Ratner et al., 2003). Other problems facing males include an increased sense of vulnerability, damaged self-image, emotional distancing, and confusion regarding their manhood (Paul, Catania, Pollack & Stall, 2001).

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According to child and male sexual assault statistics, one in six boys is sexually assaulted before age 18 (Finkelhor, 1994). At the peak victimization age of 4, a male's risk for sexual assault victimization is just half that of females (one in four girls) of the same age; 83% of sexually abused boys are under the age of 12, and 26% are under age of 6 (Snyder, 2000). Although society is becoming increasingly aware of male sexual assault, clinicians estimate that the rates of under-reporting sexual assault crimes among men is higher than of women—only about one in fifty rapes is reported (Brochman, 1990). It was suggested that the lack of tracking and reporting of male sexual abused victims is an indication of the attitude held by society at large that it is not an acceptable topic for discussion (Doeleal & Carballo-Diequez, 2002). Perhaps one of the reasons that male victims do not come forward and report having been sexually assaulted, is the fear of being perceived as homosexual (Donaldson, 1990). Yet, to the best of our knowledge the individual's own perception of whether his experiences constitute sexual assault, has not yet been studied (Doeleal & Carballo-Diequez, 2002), nor as far as we know, men's perceptions in general of what sexual assault involves.

Based on the above, this paper aimed to explore the perception of adult males' perception of what should be regarded as male sexual assault. We hypothesized that the perpetrator's gender may have an impact on the male's perception of the sexual act because of the fear of being perceived as homosexual (homophobia).

The following hypotheses were proposed:

Hypothesis 1 (H1): We anticipated that when acts were carried out by males, those acts would be more highly perceived as sexual assaults than when the same acts were carried out by females.

Hypothesis 2 (H2): When the actions are socially accepted as normative behaviors (e.g., when a hug is offered by a male family member, friend or father or even when someone watches a pornographic film with male friend), no differences are expected between the perpetrator's genders.

Method

Participants

A convenience sample consisting of one hundred male university students, all born in Israel and served in the IDF (i.e., Israeli Defense Forces), average age 26.02 (*SD* = 3.26), were recruited as volunteers.

Procedure and Measures

Participants were informed that the study aimed to investigate, "What males think about sexual harassment." After giving their consent to participate, a 28-item self-report questionnaire consisting of 16 (8 paired according to gender) statements describing male sexual assault were administered. Pairs were randomly mixed along the questionnaire. Participants were asked to rate whether the statement is a description of male sexual assault from *very much so* (4) to *not at all* (1). The statements were chosen according to a focus group of 6 male

students who were asked to present all possible variations of male sexual assault acts (see Table 1). In addition, the questionnaire also included 12 (6 pairs) of statements describing culturally acceptable normative activities (e.g., hugs and kisses among family members and friends) to provide contrast. This 28-item measure yielded an internal consistency Cronbach's α of .88 in the current sample (with Cronbach's $\alpha = .81$ and Cronbach's $\alpha = .84$ for the 16 items with acts defined as sexual harassment and for the 12 items defined as culturally acceptable normative acts, respectively).

Table 1
Male Definitions of Actions as Sexual Assault: M, SD, Prevalence, Associations and Differences Related to the Perpetrator Gender

Action Definition	M	SD	%	r	p<	t(99)	p<
A male doctor asks me to undress for a physical examination.	1.34	.63	22.0	.65	.0001	2.03	.05
A female doctor asks me to undress for a physical examination.	1.22	.76	15.0				
A woman visually scrutinizes my body.	1.69	.84	51.0	.46	.0001	3.80	.0001
A man visually scrutinizes my body.	2.06	.98	64.0				
My boss is a woman.	1.27	.59	20.0	.79	.0001	.27	Ns.
My boss is a man.	1.26	.67	15.0				
Watching porno movies/website with another man.	1.53	.77	37.0	.63	.0001	.29	Ns.
Watching porno movies/website with a woman.	1.55	.84	37.0				
Masturbating in the presence of a man.	2.00	1.11	50.0	.59	.0001	2.35	.02
Masturbating in front of a woman.	1.77	1.03	41.0				
Taking a shower in the presence of males.	1.68	.69	42.0	.51	.0001	2.72	.0008
Taking a shower in the presence of females.	1.45	.92	34.0				
Being hugged by a male family member.	1.17	.54	11.0	.63	.0001	.001	Ns.
Being hugged by a female family member.	1.17	.50	15.0				
Being hugged unexpectedly by a male friend.	1.22	.63	14.0	.74	.0001	.000	Ns.
Being hugged unexpectedly by a female friend.	1.22	.62	14.0				
Being hugged unexpectedly by a male stranger.	1.51	.75	37.0	.33	.001	1.60	Ns.
Being hugged unexpectedly by a female stranger.	1.37	.67	27.0				
Being showered by my mother when I was a child.	1.18	.58	11.0	.89	.0001	.38	Ns.
Being showered by my father when I was a child.	1.19	.60	11.0				
Being massaged by a man.	2.48	1.06	74.0	.35	.001	4.86	.0001
Being massaged by a woman.	1.89	.98	53.0				
Being intimately touched by a woman in a deliberate manner.	2.52	1.20	70.0	.51	.0001	5.00	.0001
Being intimately touched by a man in a deliberate manner.	3.08	1.08	84.0				
Being forcefully kissed by a man.	3.55	.82	91.0	.27	.008	6.09	.0001
Being forcefully kissed by a woman.	2.80	1.12	81.0				
Being forced to perform oral/anus/genital sex by a man.	3.71	.78	91.0	.43	.0001	4.88	.0001
Being forced to perform oral/anus/genital sex by a woman.	3.18	1.13	84.0				

Note: $N = 100$, t and $r =$ Paired Samples Statistics, $p =$ Sig. (2-tailed)

Results

Table 1 presents the Means, Standard Deviations and percentages of high scores for the statements describing acts reflecting male sexual assault and culturally acceptable normative acts. Significant positive correlations were found between scores of sexual assault definitions committed by males and the same acts committed by females (r 's range from .27, $p < .008$ to .89, $p < .0001$). Yet, paired sample t tests (see Table 1) indicate significant differences related to the perpetrator's gender; males tend to define acts as significantly more sexual

assaulting when committed by a male compared to the ratings when the same act is committed by a female. As expected, results of paired sample t tests indicated no significant differences related to the perpetrator's gender when the situation involved a cultural accepted normative act.

Discussion

The study aimed to examine men's perceptions of what should be considered as a sexual assault perpetrated against men. The findings revealed that although sexual assaults acts perpetrated by male or female persons were positively correlated, men tended to define the act as a sexual assault significantly more frequently when the perpetrator was a male. Yet, acceptable normative acts such as being hugged by a parent or physically examined by a doctor were not considered to be sexual assaults whether conducted by male or female. Perhaps, a sexual overture by a woman is perceived as a compliment to masculinity in the eyes of the man, whereas, the same action when perpetrated by another male is perceived to be a threat to one's masculinity and sexual identity. Another possible explanation is that men, like women, are naturally more threatened by other males' physical power; women are socially perceived to be weaker physically and less aggressive (Bem, 1993). Nevertheless, further research is required to examine the reasons for gender differences in defining sexual assault acts; such a study should include direct assessments of homophobia, gender-identity, masculinity, and self-esteem. It seems that male gender socialization plays a role in the attitude towards sexual assault; men who have not dealt with the symptoms of their sexual assault may experience uncertainty over their sexuality and role as men (their gender role). This uncertainty occurs for numerous reasons. For example: the traditional gender role for men in our society expects males to be strong, self-reliant, and in control. Our society often does not recognize that men and boys can also be victims. Boys and men may be taught that being victimized implies that they are weak and "unmanly" which might increase their homophobic fears and anxiety. In addition, one of the possible interpretations of our study's result might be that when other male assaults a male, resultant feeling of shame, stigmatization, and negative reactions from others may also stem from social taboos. Parents often know very little about male sexual assault and may unwittingly cause even more damage to their male children who are sexually abused, by downplaying or denying the experience. On the other hand, when the perpetrator of a sexual assault is a woman, some people do not take the assault seriously and men may feel as though they are unheard and unrecognized victims; they may even interpret the woman's actions as "ego-flattering." Cultural attitudes towards sexual assault perpetrated against men might shed light on possible mechanisms that underlie the greater tendency of men to define acts as sexual assault when the perpetrator is a male.

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