

**The Impact of College Men's Sexual Coercion Perpetration on Proclivity toward
Sexual Assault and Their Cognitive and Emotional Reactions**

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Abstract

Sexual coercion is one of the most frequent manifestations of sexual aggression that occurs within intimate relationships. The current research examined the role of previous perpetration of sexual coercion toward an intimate partner on men's proclivity toward partner sexual assault and their cognitive and emotional reactions to a sexual assault scenario. Male college students with ($n = 45$) and without ($n = 52$) self-reported previous sexual coercion perpetration watched a video clip showing an unwanted sexual interaction that included verbal and physical tactics used by the perpetrator, and they indicated the point at which they would stop acting like the man (response latency), their degree of identification with the perpetrator, their attributions of responsibility to victim and perpetrator, and their emotional state. Results indicated that prior sexual coercion perpetrators scored higher on sexual assault proclivity and reported lower responsibility attributed to the perpetrator than did nonperpetrators. No differences were found in attributed victim's responsibility and emotional reactions. Furthermore, the increase in severity of the sexual aggression situation resulted in lower identification with the man, higher responsibility toward him, and more negative emotions in general. Findings could have implications for both the assessment of individual risk of future sexual assault and primary prevention efforts.

Keywords: domestic violence, sexual coercion, perpetration, attributions of responsibility, negative emotions.

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Sexual interactions are a frequent part of romantic relationships, but, unfortunately, sometimes these interactions are carried out against the other person's wishes (Brousseau et al., 2012). One of the most common forms of sexual aggression that occurs in couple relationships is sexual coercion (Smith et al., 2017), which is generally defined as making another person engage in unwanted sexual activity after being pressured in a nonphysical way, through the use of lies, continuous verbal pressure to have sex, threats to end the relationship, untrue promises, show of displeasure, or anger (Koss et al., 2007; Smith et al., 2017).

Men's sexual coercion against women is more common than might be widely recognized. For instance, research across 10 European countries showed that 13.3% of women report experiencing one or more incidents of *verbal sexual coercion* at some point in their life (Krahé et al., 2015). In Spain, prevalence rates of sexual coercion victimization ranged between 15.7% and 19.1% (Krahé et al., 2015; Santos-Iglesias & Sierra, 2012). Concerning men's perpetration rates, research shows a prevalence in Europe of verbal sexual coercion of 7.5%, having been committed against the former or current partner in 12% of cases (Krahé et al., 2015). In Spain, prevalence rates ranged between 6.5% and 15.3% (Fuertes-Martín et al., 2005; Krahé et al., 2015).

These prevalence rates, along with the multiple consequences for victims (e.g., Brown et al., 2009), have encouraged a large body of research on the identification of characteristics that increase the risk of future victimization for women (e.g., Garrido-Macías, Valor-Segura, Krahé et al., 2020; Garrido-Macías et al., in press; Haugen et al., 2019). However, the study of perpetrators' characteristics (perceptions, cognitions, emotions, etc.) could be the most effective way to reduce and prevent sexual coercion situations. In spite of the abundant research about the association between men's history of sexual aggression perpetration and their intent to perpetrate (e.g., Abbey & Wegner,

2015; Davis et al., 2014) not much is known about the relationship between men's previous *verbal sexual coercion* perpetration and their proclivity toward future sexual assault, especially in interactions with intimate partners. The current research attempted to address this gap, examining how young adult men perceive a scenario involving intimate partner sexual assault against a woman. Specifically, we analyzed whether men's previous verbal sexual coercion perpetration toward an intimate partner and the increasing severity of sexual aggression would be related to men's proclivity toward partner sexual assault, as well as their cognitive and emotional reactions to the incident.

Men's Previous Perpetration and Proclivity toward Sexual Assault

According to traditional sexual scripts theory (Simon & Gagnon, 1986), men are usually seen as sexual predators and women as resisters. Following this premise, men's use of coercive strategies with the main objective to obtain sex from their partner could be perceived as partially acceptable because these behaviors correspond to their role in the traditional script (Brousseau et al., 2012). Moreover, the degree of acceptability of this behavior would be higher for men with previous sexual assault perpetration.

According to this perspective, the social learning theory (Bandura, 1977) postulates that people might learn how to behave not only by observation of others' behaviors, but also through direct experiences. Thus, perpetrators of sexual aggression could learn that their manner of acting helps them to obtain sexual activities, thus justifying and normalizing such behaviors in future encounters, and increasing their probability to commit future sexual assault perpetration (e.g., Brousseau et al., 2012; White & Smith, 2004).

A large body of literature is congruent with traditional sexual scripts and social learning theories, suggesting that the history of sexually aggressive behavior could be a significant predictor of future perpetration (e.g., Brousseau et al., 2012; Gidycz et al., 2007; Zinzow & Thompson, 2015). For example, some studies indicated that college

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men with a history of sexual aggression perpetration were more than nine times more likely to perpetrate any act of sexual assault during the 3-month follow-up period than men without such a history (Loh et al., 2007; Loh & Gidycz, 2006). Several other studies suggested similar results regarding sexual coercion, showing that men with past self-reported sexual coercion were more likely to engage in future sexual coercion (Zinzow & Thompson, 2015) and intimate partner sexual coercion (Brousseau et al., 2012).

However, a lower number of studies have employed less direct self-report measures about the likelihood to perpetrate sexual assault, such as the acceptability of sexual aggression or the proclivity toward sexual aggression (e.g., Franz et al., 2018; Gracia et al., 2015; Thomas & Gorzalka, 2012). Regarding acceptability, research using samples of male offenders of intimate partner violence found that convicted batterers were more prone to show higher levels of acceptability of intimate partner violence against women than men from the general population (Gracia et al., 2015; Martín-Fernández et al., 2018). Similar findings were reported with undergraduate students in terms of sexual assault, indicating that men with a history of sexual aggression demonstrated a greater level of acceptance of obtaining sexual intercourse through coercion (Morry & Winkler, 2001; Warketin & Gidycz, 2007).

Research specifically focused on proclivity to perpetrate has evidenced that men with a history of sexual aggression or coercion (vs. men without it) saw their own behavior as more similar to the man in a sexual assault situation (Loh et al., 2007; Thomas & Gorzalka, 2012). More recently, Franz et al. (2018) conducted a study in which male students had to select one of two videos (one of them containing sexually explicit content) for a female to watch, showing a positive association between men's self-reported history of engaging in sexual aggression toward women and proclivity toward sexual assault (higher probability to choose the sexually explicit video).

Men's Previous Perpetration and Cognitive Reactions

Previous sexual assault perpetration has also been linked to perceptions about the victim's and perpetrator's responsibility, because these perceptions could be strong forecasters of actual behavior, becoming a potential way to predict perpetration (McDaniel & Rodríguez, 2017). According to Social Judgment Theory (Sherif & Hovland, 1961), one's prior attitude on a particular issue serves as the standard against which other information is judged. This concept has important implications because it could allow men with a history of sexual aggression (who have broken accepted social norms) to justify their behavior by identifying better with other perpetrators (Loh et al., 2007). As previous research suggests, this higher identification with other perpetrators would lead to these men perceiving behaviors of other perpetrators as inappropriate to a lesser extent, or to attribute less responsibility to them (e.g., Loh et al., 2007).

Moreover, perpetrators usually try to justify their behavior by making external attributions of blame (Hennin & Holdford, 2006). For example, studies about convicted of intimate partner violence have indicated that male offenders were more likely than non-offenders to attribute more responsibility to the victim (e.g., Lila et al., 2013; Martín-Fernández et al., 2018). Meanwhile, research with male university students has shown an association between perpetration of intimate partner aggression and partner attributions of responsibility (e.g., Makin-Byrd & Azar, 2011; Scott & Straus, 2007).

Usually, people also differ in their reactions to sexual assault depending on the severity of the action. In this sense, the increase in the severity of the use of coercive behavior could be seen as clarifying for the participants that a sexual assault is happening, thus modifying their perceptions about the victim and the perpetrator (Garrido-Macías, Valor-Segura, Krahé et al., 2020). Research has confirmed this assumption, suggesting that the extent of force used to coerce sex is negatively

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associated with the assigned victims' responsibility and positively associated with the assigned perpetrator's responsibility (e.g., Garrido-Macías, Valor-Segura, & Expósito, 2020; Katz et al., 2007). For example, research using hypothetical scenarios of sexual coercion has found a lower attribution of responsibility to the victim and a higher attribution of responsibility to the perpetrator when the victim was coerced with force than when she was coerced verbally (Garrido-Macías & Arriaga, 2020; Garrido-Macías, Valor-Segura, & Expósito, 2020; Katz et al., 2007). Similar results were reported by Garrido-Macías, Valor-Segura, Krahe et al. (2020), whose study demonstrated more responsibility attributed to the perpetrator but also to the victim after participants watched a full video showing a sexual assault situation (including physical force) than when they only visualized some forms of verbal sexual coercion.

Men's Previous Perpetration and Emotional Reactions

The experience of sexual perpetration could also impact emotional reactions to future sexually risky situations. Previous research has analyzed the relationship between sexual perpetration and emotional outcomes, showing that perpetrators of sexual aggression reported higher levels of negative affect, anxiety, anger, hostility, sadness, and depression than did nonperpetrators (e.g., Carvalho & Nobre, 2013; Peterson et al., 2018). For example, Thomas and Gorzalka (2012) demonstrated that university men with higher sexual coercion proclivity (vs. men with lower proclivity) experienced higher negative affect (anger and anxiety) after reading a vignette about a sexual coercive interaction.

Finally, the perceived increase in the severity of aggression not only influences the attribution process, but also impacts the emotions it evokes, associated with more negative emotional reactions (Garrido-Macías, Valor-Segura, Krahe et al., 2020; Ullman et al., 2007). For example, Garrido-Macías, Valor-Segura, Krahe et al. (2020)

demonstrated that more use of physical force by the perpetrator in the sexual assault simulated situation was associated with more negative emotional affect reported.

The Current Research

The current research is defined by specific characteristics that make it different from other research. First, the current study is focused on a population of young adults including college male offenders that have not been detected by the criminal justice system (rather than incarcerated or convicted sex offenders), with the aim to provide a better understanding of perpetrators' characteristics that are associated with the proclivity toward sexual assault (Warkentin & Gidycz, 2007). Second, this research is focused on nonphysical sexual coercion perpetration rather than acts of forcible rape, because verbal sexual coercion is more frequent within intimate relationships than is physical coercion (Brousseau, 2012; Van der Laan & Vasey, 2009), and there is a high correlation between the two forms of coercion (e.g., Gidycz et al., 2007). Lastly, this study employed a laboratory task with a simulated threat situation using a film clip to increase the realism of such a situation, and it complements self-report measures (including the response-latency paradigm) to obtain a more accurate measure of the proclivity toward partner sexual assault.

Based on the above, the current study analyzes the role of men's previous verbal sexual coercion perpetration toward an intimate partner (between-subjects) and the increasing severity of sexual aggression in a sexually risky scenario (within-subjects) concerning men's proclivity toward partner sexual assault and their responsibility attributions and emotional responses.

Concretely, we hypothesized that men who perpetrated verbal sexual coercion toward an intimate partner would have higher proclivity toward sexual assault than would nonperpetrators (*Hypothesis 1*). Specifically, we expected a main effect of

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perpetrator status, in that perpetrators of sexual coercion (vs. nonperpetrators) would have a longer latency for identifying the point at which they would stop acting the same way as the man in the situation (*Hypothesis 1a*), and a higher identification with the perpetrator (*Hypothesis 1b*). Regarding the main effect of severity, we predicted that participants would identify with the perpetrator to a lower extent when the situation of sexual aggression increased in severity (*Hypothesis 1c*). Finally, we predicted an interactive effect of perpetrator status by increase in severity, in that perpetrators (vs. nonperpetrators) would show a lower decrease in identification with the perpetrator of the sexual assault situation when such a situation increased in severity (*Hypothesis 1d*).

Regarding attributions, we predicted that perpetrators, compared to nonperpetrators, would attribute more responsibility to the victim and less responsibility to the perpetrator (*Hypothesis 2a*). Moreover, we expected to find that participants would attribute less responsibility to the victim and more responsibility to the perpetrator with increasing severity of aggression (*Hypothesis 2b*). Finally, we predicted that perpetrators (vs. nonperpetrators) would show a lower decrease of responsibility attributed to the victim and a lower increase in responsibility attributed to the aggressor when the situation of sexual aggression increased in severity (*Hypothesis 2c*).

Regarding negative emotions, we expected that perpetrators would experience more negative emotions than nonperpetrators (*Hypothesis 3a*). Moreover, we predicted that participants would experience more negative emotions when the situation of sexual aggression increased in severity (*Hypothesis 3b*). Finally, we predicted that perpetrators, compared to nonperpetrators, would show a higher increase in negative emotions when the situation of sexual aggression increased in severity (*Hypothesis 3c*).

Method

Participants and Design

Participants were 97 male college students from Spain who were enrolled in various university programs. They received a monetary compensation (5 euros) for their participation in the study. The sample size was determined *a priori* by a power analysis (using G*Power program) to detect a moderate effect size [$\eta^2_p = .06$], with $\alpha = .05$ and a power of 80% (Faul et al., 2007). The participants ranged in age from 18 to 38 ($M = 22.09$, $SD = 3.57$) and self-identified as heterosexual. At the time of the study, 45.4% were in a relationship (average duration: $M = 56.70$ months, $SD = 137.45$ months), but all participants were required to have had a previous intimate relationship. Based on their responses to the Sexual Coercion in Intimate Relationships Scale (SCIRS; Shackelford & Goetz, 2004), 52 men who did not report any verbal sexual coercion were classified as nonperpetrators (45.5% of them had a partner), and 45 men who endorsed at least one item of (nonphysical) sexual coercion were classified as perpetrators of intimate partner verbal sexual coercion (54.5% of them had a partner). None of the participants reported any form of physical sexual assault, so perpetrators and nonperpetrators of intimate partner verbal sexual coercion composed the sample.

The study was a 2 (previous sexual coercion: perpetrators vs. nonperpetrators; between-participant factor) by 3 (increase in severity: Baseline vs. Time 1 vs. Time 2; within-participant factor) design. Proclivity toward sexual assault (indicated by response latency to stop acting the same way as the man in the video and probability of behaving the same way as the man), attributions of responsibility to the victim and the perpetrator, and negative emotions were examined as dependent variables based on responses to the video.

Procedure

Volunteer participants (requested by a research assistant via email) completed the measures in the e-prime program in an individual lab room after providing consent. Participants responded to a baseline measure of negative emotions and then watched a video about a couple that ended with the woman having unwanted sex with her male partner. Participants were instructed to watch the film clip as if they were the male protagonist, and they were asked to stop the video when they would stop acting like the man in the scene. At that point (Time 1), they rated their emotional state, as well as the degree of responsibility they would attribute to the victim and the perpetrator, the perceived severity of the situation (manipulation check), and their degree of identification with the male perpetrator of the visualized situation. After that, participants watched the video again from the beginning to the end, meaning that they visualized more severe violent behavior by the man than at Time 1. After the video ended (Time 2), they completed the dependent variables and manipulation check one more time. Finally, all men reported their previous partner sexual coercion perpetration and provided demographic information (see *Figure 1* for further clarification). After the experiment (an approximate duration of 30 minutes), participants were debriefed and received a monetary reward for their participation. All measures and procedures were approved by the research ethics committee of the University of Granada.

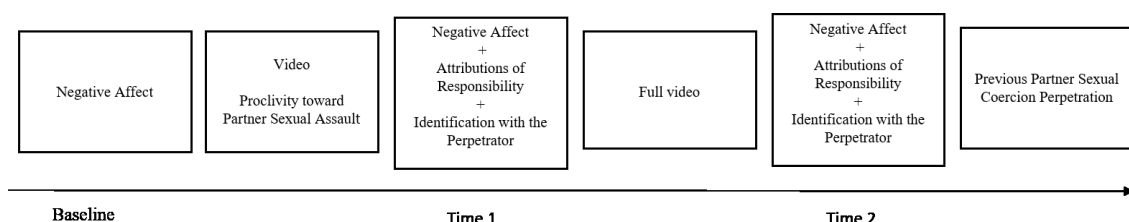


Figure 1: Visual representation of the used procedure.

Measures

Previous sexual coercion perpetration toward an intimate partner. Participants were classified as sexually coercive or noncoercive using the perpetrators' version of the SCIRS (Shackelford & Goetz, 2004). The scale is composed of 34 items clustered into three components: *resource manipulation/violence* (15 items; e.g., "I hinted that I would withhold benefits that my partner depends on if she did not have sex with me," of which 4 include threat or use of physical violence), *commitment manipulation* (10 items; e.g., "I told my partner that if she loved me she would have sex with me"), and *defection threat* (9 items; e.g. "I hinted that I would have sex with another woman if my partner did not have sex with me"). Responses were recorded using a dichotomous response format (0 = *has never occurred in my life*; 1 = *has occurred in my life*) through which participants indicated whether they had perpetrated each act at some point in their life (i.e., in a past or a current relationship, so it was a requirement that all participants have had at least one previous intimate relationship). Nonperpetrators were defined by a score of zero across all items of the SCIRS, and perpetrators were defined by a score above zero on the 30 nonphysical sexual coercion items and zero on the 4 physical sexual assault items. This procedure resulted in a binary independent variable with 52 nonperpetrators and 45 perpetrators of verbal sexual coercion toward an intimate partner.

Video. A clip of 165 seconds from the Spanish film "No estás sola, Sara" [You are not alone, Sara] (Villalba & Sedes, 2009) used in previous research (Garrido-Macías, Valor-Segura, Krahe et al., 2020; Garrido-Macías et al., in press) was employed to present a situation of sexual assault. This scene was about two young people (involved in a romantic relationship) who were in the woman's bedroom studying for a university exam. A few seconds after the start of the clip, the man attempts to persuade

his girlfriend to have sexual intercourse with him. Until second 105, the man engages in an increasingly severe sequence of verbally coercive behaviors (e.g., emotional blackmail, verbal pressure, and signs of disgust or anger). In the last 60 seconds, the man includes physical acts in addition to verbal coercion, ending with the use of extreme physical force (holding her arms and legs, throwing her to the floor, and blocking her body) to have sexual intercourse with her. Throughout the interaction, the woman responds with verbal refusals and resistance, clearly indicating that she does not want to have sex with her partner. In line with previous research, to assess the extent to which participants were immersed in the experimental task, they rated the realism of the portrayed interaction. Responses were recorded using a scale from 1 (*nothing*) to 7 (*a lot*).

Manipulation check. To evaluate whether the manipulation of the increase in sexual aggression had the intended effect of invoking perceptions of greater severity, two items were created (“How severe do you consider the situation shown in the video to be?,” and “to what extent do you consider the man is using sexual aggression to have sex with her partner?”). Participants responded to both items twice (Time 1 and Time 2) using a 7-point response scale from 1 (*not at all*) to 7 (*very much*). Higher ratings reflected greater perceived severity.

Proclivity toward partner sexual assault. Two measures were used to assess the proclivity toward partner sexual assault. The first was the response-latency measure developed by Marx and Gross (1995) and adapted by Anderson and Cahill (2014) to be used with victims. In the research by Anderson and Cahill (2014), Garrido-Macías, Valor-Segura, Krahé et al. (2020), and Garrido-Macías et al. (in press), participants were asked to indicate at what point they would leave the situation if they were the woman in the scene (imagining them as the victim of the situation). According to the

objectives of this research, and adapting this procedure to research about perpetration of sexual aggression, we asked participants to indicate at what point they would stop behaving in the same way as the man in the situation if they were the male protagonist. A longer response latency was conceptualized as indicating greater proclivity toward partner sexual assault. The second measure was one item (modified from Malamuth et al., 1980; and Loh et al., 2007) that evaluated participants' identification with the perpetrator ("To what extent do you feel your behavior would be like the man in the video if you were in a similar situation?"). Responses were made on a 7-point scale from 1 (*I would definitely not behave like the man*) to 7 (*I would definitely behave like the man*). Participants responded to this item after stopping the video (Time 1) and after having seen the full video (Time 2). As in previous measures, higher scores on identification with the perpetrator were conceptualized as indicating greater proclivity toward partner sexual assault.

Attributions of responsibility. As in previous research (e.g., Garrido-Macías, Valor-Segura, & Expósito, 2020; Garrido-Macías, Valor-Segura, Krahé et al., 2020), two items were used to assess the degree of responsibility attributed to the man and the woman in the video ("To what extent do you consider the man/woman to be responsible for what occurred?"). Participants responded to both items at Time 1 and Time 2, with higher ratings reflecting higher responsibility attributed to the victim and the perpetrator, respectively.

Negative emotions. The negative subscale of the Positive and Negative Affect Schedule Scale (PANAS; Watson et al., 1988) was used to measure 10 different negative emotions (e.g., irritable, upset, nervous). Participants evaluated to what extent they experienced each presented emotion, using a scale from 1 (*very slightly*) to 5 (*very*

much), answering this subscale at baseline ($\alpha = .86$), Time 1 ($\alpha = .87$), and Time 2 ($\alpha = .87$).

Demographic characteristics. Gender, age, sexual orientation, and relationship status (and duration, if in a relationship) were assessed.

Results

To account for the fact that the length of time before stopping the video (Time 1) varied between participants, preliminary analyses were run, including response latency as a covariate. However, because such analyses indicated results that did not vary depending on response time, hypothesis-testing analyses were run without this control variable to increase statistical power.

Manipulation Check and Correlations

Initial analyses examined whether the manipulation of increase of sexual aggression (Time 1 vs. Time 2) influenced perceptions of severity, by means of a within-subjects MANOVA. The results revealed a significant multivariate effect of time, *Wilks' $\lambda = .77$* , $F(2, 94) = 14.35$, $p < .001$, $\eta^2_p = .23$, with significant univariate effects of time on perceptions of severity, $F(1, 95) = 24.72$, $p < .001$, $\eta^2_p = .21$, and use of violence, $F(1, 95) = 5.82$, $p = .018$, $\eta^2_p = .06$. After having watched the full video (Time 2), participants perceived the situation to be more serious, $M = 6.86$, $SD = 0.66$, and a higher use of violence by the man, $M = 6.60$, $SD = 1.17$, than at the point at which they had first stopped it (Time 1), $M_{severity} = 5.77$, $SD = 1.26$, $M_{violence} = 4.96$, $SD = 1.87$.

Regarding the ecological validity of the video, a within-subjects ANOVA was conducted to examine the perceived realism of the portrayed interaction. The results indicated that participants thought the interaction between the man and the woman was quite realistic, perceiving the shown situation to be more realistic after having seen the full video (Time 2), $M = 5.55$, $SD = 1.58$, than at the point at which they had stopped it

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(Time 1), $M = 5.31$, $SD = 1.61$, $F(1, 95) = 4.16$, $p = .044$, $\eta^2_p = .04$. Perpetrators and nonperpetrators did not differ on this measure, $F(1, 95) = 0.52$, $p = .473$, $\eta^2_p = .01$.

Table 1 shows the means, standard deviations, and correlations for all dependent variables.

Proclivity toward Partner Sexual Assault

To examine the hypothesized relationship between previous sexual coercion perpetration and proclivity toward partner sexual assault (*Hypothesis 1*), we first conducted a between-subjects ANOVA, with previous sexual coercion perpetration (perpetrators vs. nonperpetrators) as the independent variable, and response latency to stop acting the same way as the man as the dependent variable. Consistent with *Hypothesis 1a*, the results showed a significant effect of previous sexual coercion perpetration on response latency, $F(1, 95) = 4.28$, $p = .041$, $\eta^2_p = .04$, in that perpetrators of sexual coercion ($M = 66.36$, $SD = 28.02$) took more time deciding to stop the video, indicating that they would stop acting the same way as the male protagonist in the shown situation, compared to nonperpetrators, $M = 55.25$, $SD = 24.89$.

Second, we conducted a mixed-model ANOVA to test whether perpetrator status (*Hypothesis 1b*), increase in severity (*Hypothesis 1c*), and the interaction between both (*Hypothesis 1d*) would differentially affect the degree of identification with the perpetrator of the sexual assault situation (dependent variable). Perpetrator status was included as a between-participants variable, and increase of severity of sexual aggression (Time 1 vs. Time 2) as a within-participants variable. Results indicated significant effects of perpetrator status, $F(1, 95) = 4.03$, $p = .048$, $\eta^2_p = .04$, and increase of severity, $F(1, 95) = 4.29$, $p = .041$, $\eta^2_p = .04$, on probability of behaving similarly to the man in the video. According to *Hypothesis 1b*, perpetrators reported a higher

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Table 1

Means, Standard Deviations, and Correlations between the Dependent Variables

| | Time 1 | | | | | | Time 2 | | | | |
|--|------------------|----|-------|-------|--------|-------|-----------------|----|----------|----------|---------|
| | M (SD) | 1 | 2 | 3 | 4 | 5 | M (SD) | 1 | 2 | 3 | 4 |
| 1. Negative Emotions | 20.91 (7.76) | -- | -.023 | -.023 | .132 | .216* | 27.35 (8.97) | -- | -.292*** | .178 | -.054 |
| 2. Victim Responsibility | 1.58 (1.05) | | -- | -.172 | .554** | .174 | 1.48 (1.07) | | -- | -.294*** | .152 |
| 3. Perpetrator Responsibility | 5.92 (1.53) | | | -- | -.103 | .005 | 6.71 (0.84) | | | -- | -.270** |
| 4. Identification with the perpetrator | 1.54 (0.84) | | | | -- | .253* | 1.27 (0.98) | | | | -- |
| 5. Response latency | 60.40 (26.84) | | | | | -- | | | | | |

Note. Score for Proclivity toward Sexual Assault is presented in seconds.

*** $p < .001$, ** $p < .01$, * $p < .05$.

identification with the perpetrator of the hypothetical situation than did nonperpetrators (see Table 2, between-participants column). Furthermore, and consistent with *Hypothesis 1c*, participants showed a lower identification with the perpetrator at Time 2 (after visualizing the full video) than at Time 1 (see Table 2, within-participants column). However, the predicted interaction effect (*Hypothesis 1d*) between perpetrator status and the increase of sexual aggression severity was nonsignificant, $F(1, 95) = 0.02, p = .881, \eta^2_p = .00$ (see Table 2, interaction column).

Attributions of Responsibility

Using two mixed-model ANOVAs, we examined whether perpetrator status (*Hypothesis 2a*), increase of severity of the sexual aggression (*Hypothesis 2b*), and the interaction between both (*Hypothesis 2c*) would affect perceptions about (1) victim's responsibility and (2) perpetrator's responsibility (dependent variables). Again, perpetrator status was included as the between-participants variable, and increase of severity (Time 1 vs. Time 2) as the within-participants variable.

Regarding perpetrator status, the results revealed significant effects on responsibility attributions to the perpetrator, $F(1, 95) = 4.51, p = .036, \eta^2_p = .05$, but not to the victim, $F(1, 95) = 0.04, p = .833, \eta^2_p = .00$, partially supporting *Hypothesis 2a*. Specifically, perpetrators attributed lower responsibility to the perpetrator of the shown situation than did nonperpetrators, but no differences were found in terms of responsibility attributed to the victim (see Table 2, between-participants column).

Furthermore, partially consistent with *Hypothesis 2b*, the effect of the increase in severity was significant only for perpetrator responsibility attributions, $F(1, 95) = 24.22, p < .001, \eta^2_p = .20$, whereas the effect on victim responsibility attributions was nonsignificant, $F(1, 95) = 0.60, p = .443, \eta^2_p = .01$. As shown in Table 2

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Table 2

Attributions and Emotions: Means, Standard Deviations, and Hypothesized Contrasts

| | Perpetrator Status <i>(between participants; H1b, H2a, H3a)</i> | | | Increase of Severity <i>(within participants; H1c, H2b, H3b)</i> | | | | Perpetrator Status x Increase of Severity <i>(interaction; H1d, H2c, H3c)</i> | | | | | | |
|-------------------------------------|--|-------------------------|-----------------|---|------------------------|-------------------------|----------|--|-------------------------|------------------------|-------------------------|-------------------------|-------------------------|----------|
| | Perpetrators | | Nonperpetrators | Baseline | Time 1 | | Time 2 | Perpetrators | | | Nonperpetrators | | | |
| | <i>M</i> <i>(SD)</i> | <i>M</i> <i>(SD)</i> | | | <i>F</i> | <i>M</i> <i>(SD)</i> | | <i>M</i> <i>(SD)</i> | <i>M</i> <i>(SD)</i> | <i>F</i> | <i>M</i> <i>(SD)</i> | <i>M</i> <i>(SD)</i> | <i>M</i> <i>(SD)</i> | <i>F</i> |
| Identification with the perpetrator | 1.55 <i>(1.09)</i> | 1.28 <i>(0.71)</i> | 4.03* | 1.54 <i>(0.84)</i> | 1.27 <i>(0.98)</i> | 4.29* | | 1.69 <i>(1.06)</i> | 1.40 <i>(1.12)</i> | | 1.40 <i>(0.57)</i> | 1.15 <i>(0.85)</i> | 0.22 | |
| Victim Responsibility | 1.51 <i>(0.99)</i> | 1.55 <i>(1.13)</i> | 0.04 | 1.58 <i>(1.05)</i> | 1.48 <i>(1.07)</i> | 0.60 | | 1.60 <i>(1.01)</i> | 1.42 <i>(0.97)</i> | | 1.56 <i>(1.09)</i> | 1.54 <i>(1.16)</i> | 0.39 | |
| Perpetrator Responsibility | 6.10 <i>(1.40)</i> | 6.50 <i>(0.87)</i> | 4.51* | 5.92 <i>(1.52)</i> | 6.71 <i>(0.84)</i> | 24.22*** | | 5.67 <i>(1.64)</i> | 6.53 <i>(1.16)</i> | | 6.13 <i>(1.40)</i> | 6.87 <i>(0.35)</i> | 0.18 | |
| Negative Emotions | 23.37 <i>(8.02)</i> | 21.41 <i>(7.86)</i> | 2.15 | 18.71 <i>(7.14)</i> | 20.91 <i>(7.76)</i> | 27.35 <i>(8.97)</i> | 62.05*** | 19.89 <i>(7.59)</i> | 22.38 <i>(7.92)</i> | 27.84 <i>(8.54)</i> | 17.69 <i>(6.63)</i> | 19.63 <i>(7.46)</i> | 26.92 <i>(9.38)</i> | 0.68 |

Note. *** $p < .001$, ** $p < .01$, * $p < .05$.

Values are presented to reflect hypothesized contrasts for between participants (first column) and within participants (second column), and to explore interactions (third column). *Hypotheses 1b, 2a, and 3a* contrasted perpetrators and nonperpetrators; *Hypotheses 1c, and 2b* contrasted Time 1 and Time 2, and *Hypothesis 3b* contrasted Baseline, Time 1 and Time 2 (for negative emotions). The scale ranged from 1 (low) to 7 (high) for victim/perpetrator attributed responsibility. For negative emotions, the scale ranged from 1 to 50 (summation procedure), where higher ratings reflected greater negative affect.

(within-participants column), participants attributed more responsibility to the perpetrator at Time 2 than at Time 1.

Finally, the predicted interaction effect between perpetrator status and the increase of severity of sexual aggression (*Hypothesis 2c*) was nonsignificant for both dependent variables: victim responsibility attributions, $F(1, 95) = 0.39, p = .436, \eta^2_p = .00$, and perpetrator responsibility attributions, $F(1, 95) = 0.18, p = .676, \eta^2_p = .00$ (see Table 2, interaction column).

Negative Emotions

To test whether previous sexual coercion perpetration (*Hypothesis 3a*), the increase of severity of sexual aggression (*Hypothesis 3b*), and the interaction between both (*Hypothesis 3c*) would differentially promote negative emotions (dependent variable), a mixed-model repeated-measures ANOVA was conducted. Perpetrator status was included as the between-participants variable, and increase of the severity of sexual aggression (Baseline vs. Time 1 vs. Time 2) as the within-participants variable.

Regarding perpetrator status, the results did not show a significant difference between perpetrators and nonperpetrators in terms of negative affect, $F(1, 95) = 2.15, p = .146, \eta^2_p = .02$, leading to no support for *Hypothesis 3a* (see Table 2, between-participants column). However, according to *Hypothesis 3b*, the increase of severity of sexual aggression had a significantly negative affect, $F(2, 190) = 62.05, p < .001, \eta^2_p = .40$, so that participants reported more negative affect at Time 2 than at Time 1 and at Baseline (see Table 2, within-participants column). Finally, contrary to *Hypothesis 3c*, no interaction effects were found between perpetrator status and the increase of sexual aggression on negative emotions, $F(2, 190) = 0.68, p = .507, \eta^2_p = .01$ (see Table 3, interaction column).

Discussion

The main objective of this study was to explore whether previous perpetration of partner sexual coercion was related to men's proclivity toward future intimate partner sexual assault. As predicted, perpetrators showed higher levels of proclivity toward sexual assault than did nonperpetrators, taking longer to stop the video to indicate the point at which they would stop acting in the same way as the male protagonist of the situation and identifying with him to a greater extent. These findings confirm previous research supporting the role of the history of sexually aggressive behavior as a predictor of subsequent sexual assault perpetration (Gidycz et al., 2007; Zinzow & Thompson, 2015), suggesting that men's coercive behavior tends to repeat itself throughout relationships (Brousseau et al., 2012). Furthermore, the results are consistent with specific research about proclivity toward sexual aggression, demonstrating that previous sexual perpetration increases the perceived similarity with the man's behavior and the probability of engaging in sexual assault (Franz et al., 2018; Thomas & Gorzalka, 2012). In short, findings from previous studies and the current one enhance support for the sexual scripts and social learning theories, confirming that sexual coercion experiences could strengthen men's sexual scripts, which encourage male sexual experiences and reinforce their sexual behaviors (Brousseau et al., 2012).

This study also extended past research to examine the association between previous sexual coercion and men's attributions of responsibility. The results support our predictions, showing that perpetrators attributed lower responsibility to the man in the hypothetical situation than did the nonperpetrators. A possible explanation for this finding could be generated from social judgment theory (Sherif & Hovland, 1961), which allow perpetrators to identify better with other aggressors as a mechanism to justify their behavior, thereby attributing less responsibility to the man in the sexual

assault situation (Loh et al., 2007). However, it is interesting to note that perpetrators did not attribute different levels of responsibility to the victim than the nonperpetrators. Although some past research has demonstrated a positive association between the history of aggression and the responsibility attributed to the victim (e.g., Lila et al., 2013; Makin-Byrd & Azar, 2011), other studies have not found this association (e.g., McDaniel & Rodríguez, 2017). It is possible that this absence of differences in victims' responsibility attributions could be due to the fact that the positive correlation between identification with the perpetrator and responsibility attributed to the victim at Time 1 (when participants decided to stop the video and therefore had only viewed a part of the video that exclusively included verbal coercive behaviors) ceased to exist at Time 2 (when participants had watched the full video, including the use of physical force). Furthermore, our sample was composed exclusively of perpetrators of verbal coercion (who had not committed physical aggression), which probably contributed to this absence of differences in responsibility attributions.

The relationship between emotional responses and perpetrator status was not supported. Perpetrators of sexual coercion did not report different levels of negative affect than did nonperpetrators. A plausible explanation why we did not find differences between perpetrators and nonperpetrators in emotions as in the study from Thomas & Gorzalka (2012) could be that they only measured anger and anxiety, whereas we also included other emotions (e.g., scared, ashamed, guilty, jittery, etc.); or that our visual scenario included a more severe situation of sexual aggression than their scenario of sexual coercion. Due to the vast majority of studies about the relationship between emotions and perpetration of sexual aggression focusing on analyzing how negative emotions predict perpetration (e.g., Carvalho & Nobre, 2013; Peterson et al., 2018) instead of how a situation of sexual aggression predicts emotional responses on

perpetrators, it is necessary for future researchers to further examine this inverse association to strengthen the results found here.

For its part, the hypothesized association between the increase in the severity of sexual aggression and the identification with the aggressor, attributions of responsibility, and emotional responses was partially supported. Regardless of perpetrator status, men showed lower identification with the perpetrator and higher responsibility attributed to him after they had watched the full video at Time 2 than when they stopped the video at the point they would stop acting like the man (Time 1). These findings confirm the results of previous studies (e.g., Garrido-Macías, Valor-Segura, Krahe et al., 2020; Garrido-Macías & Arriaga, 2020; Katz et al., 2007) and support that individuals modify their perceptions about a sexual aggression situation when this situation increases in severity, which makes more salient that sexual assault is happening and thereby makes the situation more difficult to justify.

However, and contrary to previous research (Garrido-Macías, Valor-Segura, & Expósito, 2020; Katz et al., 2007), there were no differences in victim responsibility attributions, which means that participants did not attribute less responsibility to the victim when they watched the use of physical sexual assault by the man in the hypothetical situation (Time 2) than when they watched only verbal coercion forms (Time 1). This result could be explained by the fact that at the end of the video, although the victim clearly showed she did not want to have sex and tried to resist all the time, she told the perpetrator not to make noise because her mother was downstairs, which might have given the impression to participants that the victim was somehow agreeing to have sex or ceasing her resistance. However, it is interesting to notice that the positive correlation between identification with the perpetrator and victim responsibility at Time 1 was dissolved at Time 2. This result could support the idea that,

when the severity of sexual aggression increases, identification with the perpetrator decreases, which could have implications for attributions of responsibility to the victim.

Finally, concerning emotions, men reported more negative affect experienced when the situation included physical force (Time 2) compared to the point where they decide to stop the video (Time 1) and at the beginning of the experiment (Baseline). This result agrees with the association found in past research between the perceived increase in severity of aggression through greater use of physical force and more negative emotional reactions (Garrido-Macías, Valor-Segura, Krahe et al., 2020; Ullman et al., 2007).

Of note, analyses failed to reveal any significant interactions between men's history of sexual coercion and the increase of severity of the sexual aggression situation on any of the dependent variables. These results are indicative that perpetrators modified their perceptions in the same proportion as nonperpetrators when the situation increased in severity. Future researchers should profoundly analyze whether this absence of differences might be due to the specific characteristics of these perpetrators (who only had committed nonphysical sexual coercion).

Limitations

Although the present findings provide an important contribution to understand how college men who have perpetrated sexual coercion toward an intimate partner react to a hypothetical sexual assault situation differently than nonperpetrators, some limitations of this study should be noted. First, a film clip was used to represent a situation of sexual assault; reactions men have to this fictitious situation could differ from their responses in real-life situations (Garrido-Macías, Valor-Segura, Krahe et al., 2020; Garrido-Macías et al., in press). However, because it is not possible to measure sexual assault involving non-consensual acts in the laboratory, we believe the visual

scenario favors the increase of experimental realism and similar responses to real-life situations (Franz et al., 2018). Another possible limitation is that the finalization of the video with the woman asking the perpetrator not to make noise because her mother was downstairs could have altered participants' perceptions of consent. Finally, generalization of the results regarding the proclivity toward partner sexual assault (measured through the response-latency paradigm and the identification with the perpetrator) should be cautious, because results might differ if an alternative operationalization of sexual aggression is used (Abbey & Wegner, 2015).

A second limitation is related to the measure of sexual coercion. First, the order in which previous sexual coercion was measured (after the visualization of the video) could have affected participants' responses. Second, the measure of sexual coercion examined sexual coercion in intimate relationships, so participants might not have reported all significant sexually coercive perpetration experiences with strangers or acquaintances. Along the same lines, we did not assess victimization experiences or other forms of perpetration (e.g., child abuse). However, our goal was not to identify all forms of sexual aggression perpetration or victimization that men had experienced. Instead, we focused on men's previous sexual coercion in intimate relationships, expecting positive associations with the proclivity toward intimate partner sexual assault, and the results confirmed our predictions. Future studies are necessary to analyze how different forms of sexual perpetration impact future sexual assault to come closer to determining causal effects. Furthermore, future studies should use higher sample sizes as well as participants from general population, with the aim to facilitate the generalization of the findings to a broader audience.

Research and Clinical Implications

Despite the noted limitations, our study suggests that previous sexual coercion perpetration in intimate relationships and the severity of the sexual assault might be related to men's proclivity toward future sexual assault and their attributions of responsibility and emotional responses to risky sexual situations. The current data underscore the importance of incorporate laboratory paradigms that go beyond self-report measures to facilitate that a given sexual aggression analog accurately identifies those who might be more likely to perpetrate sexual assault in real-world settings. Future research that incorporates these laboratory paradigms into experimental designs as measures of perpetrator's behavior to examine causal contributors to sexual aggression is needed. Furthermore, additional research is needed to identify risk factors for sexual aggression to address the significant and longstanding public health problem of sexual assault. In this sense, future directions for research should analyze the role of different masculinities in relation to sexual assault offense (McDermott et al., 2015). Moreover, it is essential to identify high-risk populations to direct more targeted interventions toward them. These groups include young adults who perpetrate nonphysical forms of sexual coercion toward their partners, because this type of violence is widespread within intimate relationships, tends to be normalized, and goes unnoticed.

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