The Role of Sexual Scripts and Pornography Use in Male and Female Sexual Aggression Among University Students in Poland

Key Terms Defined

**Sexual aggression perpetration** – Behavior carried out with the intent or result of making others engage in sexual contact against their will, for example, through verbal pressure, the use or threat of physical force, or the exploitation of the other person’s incapacitated state (research definition on which this study is based; see Basile, Smith, Breiding, Black, & Mahendra (in press) for more details on definition).

**Risk factors** – Any factors that increase the likelihood of making others engage in sexual contact against their will. Examples of such factors include drinking alcohol in the context of a sexual encounter, the ambiguous communication of sexual intentions, or engaging in sex with casual partners.

**Sexual scripts** – Mental scenarios of the typical and acceptable features of sexual interactions that guide sexual behavior.

Background

Previous research has shown that the way in which individuals interact sexually is partly regulated by their sexual scripts. Sexual scripts are mental scenarios of the typical and acceptable features of sexual interactions, which guide sexual behavior. The theory of sexual scripts states that these mental representations consist of the typical elements of sexual interactions as well as the normative approval of these elements (Krahé, Bieneck, & Scheinberger-Olwig, 2007). For example, drinking alcohol when having sex may be seen as belonging to the script for sexual interactions and considered an acceptable form of behavior in this type of situation. Because people act in accordance with their scripts, it is likely that the risky scripts are translated into risky behavior, which then increases the likelihood of sexual aggression perpetration. For example, a person who drinks alcohol in the context of sexual interactions may not be able to respond adequately to another person’s reactions, making it difficult to recognize how far she/he wants to go sexually. Alcohol impairs information processing and makes it harder to recognize other persons’ communications of nonconsent.

Sexual scripts are developed in the course of socialization. Media exposure and, in particular, pornography may shape youths’ views on sexuality and may influence their sexual scripts. Therefore, we examined the links between pornography use, risky sexual scripts, and risky sexual behavior, and related these factors to the likelihood of sexual aggression perpetration.

Study

Our study examined sexually aggressive acts committed by participants since the age of 15 as well as potential risk factors, particularly risky scripts and behavior, defined here as behavior that may increase the probability of sexual aggression. Five hundred seventy-five first- and second-year university students aged 18 to 27 from Zielona Góra (Poland) took part in a paper-and-pencil survey. For a subsample (n = 318), information about the risk factors for sexual aggression (pornography use, sexual scripts, and sexual behavior at Time 1) was available from a previous data wave. To capture risk elements in participants’ sexual scripts, a short scenario was presented: “You spend the evening with a man/woman. In the course of the evening, you sleep with him/her for the first time. You are NOT asked to describe one particular situation you have experienced in the past. Rather, we would like to know what you think a situation like this would normally look like for you.” Participants were then asked to answer a number of
questions referring to this scenario, representing their sexual scripts (e.g., "How likely is it that alcohol is consumed; by you/by the man/woman?") and to indicate to what extent they found that behavior acceptable (e.g., “Drinking alcohol when having sex is part of the game”). In the next step, they were asked to indicate how frequently they had engaged in these behaviors in the past (e.g., drinking alcohol when having sex). Finally, participants were asked questions about their own sexually aggressive behavior with questions such as: "Have you ever made (or tried to make) a woman/a man have sexual contact with you against her/his will by threatening to use force or by harming her/him?" The survey questions were approved by an institutional review board, and participants were informed that participation was voluntary and could be ended at any time. All received a list of local counseling centers offering support to perpetrators and victims of sexual aggression.

**Results**

In the total sample of 575 participants, 11.7% of male and 6.5% of female university students reported having committed at least one sexually aggressive act since the age of 15, with the rate for men being significantly higher than the rate for women. For the reduced sample that took part in two data waves, Figure 1 shows that sexual scripts were associated with risky sexual behavior, suggesting that young people act in accordance with their mental scenarios about sexual interactions. The riskier their scripts were, the riskier the behavior reported by both male and female students. As presented in Figure 1, risky sexual behavior at Time 1 predicted sexual risk behavior one year later. More importantly, risky sexual behavior was a predictor of sexual aggression perpetration. Male and female university students whose scripts contained risk features of sexual aggression and who acted accordingly (i.e., consumed alcohol to a greater extent, communicated their sexual intentions less clearly, had more sexual partners, and started being sexually active at a younger age), were more likely to report sexually aggressive acts than those who showed these behaviors to a lesser degree.

As we expected, pornography use was linked to the content of participants’ sexual scripts. The more often participants viewed pornography, the riskier their sexual scripts as well as their sexual behavior. Moreover, pornography use was indirectly linked to the perpetration of sexual aggression through its associations with sexual scripts and sexual behavior, as indicated by the broken red line in Figure 1. Our findings do not lead to the conclusion that every young man or woman who is exposed to pornographic media has risky sexual scripts and engages in risky sexual behavior, or will act aggressively towards his/her sexual partner. Rather, this research suggests that pornography may serve as a source of information that influences individuals’ sexual scripts and promotes risky sexual behaviors that increase the likelihood of engaging in sexual aggression.

**Figure 1. Pathways from pornography use to sexual aggression**
Implications for Violence Prevention

Our research could be of value to practitioners working with youth, as it identified possible contributory factors to sexual aggression. Concrete actions aimed at reducing sexual risk behavior could be implemented at different levels, including the following measures:

- Challenging the normative approval of the risk elements in scripts for consensual sex to reduce risky sexual behavior and, indirectly, reduce the probability of sexual aggression.
- Sensitizing young people to the potentially negative influence of pornography on scripts for consensual sex and promoting their ability to critically analyze the way sexual encounters are presented in pornographic media.
- Raising awareness about the potential risks associated with alcohol use in sexual encounters, in particular the risk of misperceiving the partner's cues of nonconsent.

Further information on this topic


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