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Men's Sexual Coerciveness, Perceptions of Women's Attachment, and Dating Preferences

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Abstract

This study examined whether sexually coercive men are uniquely drawn to certain attachment styles in women. Specifically, it employed an experimental design to investigate what sorts of inferences men draw about women based on women's attachment styles and whether a woman's attachment style may serve as an indicator of vulnerability, rendering sexually coercive men more attracted to some women than to others. One-hundred thirty-six college men completed a measure of sexual coerciveness and answered questions about personal ads experimentally manipulated for portrayed attachment style. Findings suggest that sexually coercive men may be more attracted to women with characteristics associated with sexual vulnerability. Additionally, men perceive women differently based on their attachment styles, and sexually coercive men may perceive women differently than do other men.

Sexual coercion refers to the use of verbally coercive tactics (as opposed to the use of physically aggressive tactics; **Thomas & Gorzalka, 2013**) to obtain sexual intercourse (e.g., **Strang, Peterson, Hill, & Heiman, 2013**). It includes behaviors such as threatening to end a relationship, being dishonest, and applying continual verbal pressure (e.g., **Koss & Oros, 1982**). Direct comparisons of sexual coercion rates between community and college samples are extremely difficult due to both a dearth of community prevalence data and to sampling, definitional, and other methodological discrepancies leading to wide-ranging prevalence estimates for both groups. For example, community rates of self-reported sexual coercion perpetration since age 14 years range from 8.7% to 52% (**Senn, Desmarais, Verberg, & Wood, 2000**; **Strang et al., 2013**), whereas college rates range from 9.6% since age 14 to 34% during a 1-year period (**Abbey & McAuslan, 2004**; **Kingree, Thompson, & Ruetz, 2017**). It is clear, however, that sexual coercion represents the most frequently used sexually aggressive tactic by community members, convicted sex offenders, and college men (**Mouilso, Calhoun, & Rosenbloom, 2013**; **Strang et al., 2013**; **Widman, Olson, & Bolen, 2013**). Finally, sexual coercion victimization is associated with serious health risk behaviors, sexual dysfunction, lower mood, and lower self-esteem (**Katz & Wigderson, 2012**; **Turchik & Hassija, 2014**; **Zweig, Barber, & Eccles, 1997**). Furthermore, this form of sexual assault may be particularly insidious because survivors tend to perceive themselves as more culpable and the perpetrator as less culpable than do survivors of physically forced sexual assault (**Abbey, BeShears, Clinton-Sherrod, & McAuslan, 2004**). Therefore, it is critically important to better understand this most common form of campus sexual assault.

Although feminist perspectives importantly situate sexual aggression within the context of rape-supportive attitudes and the attempted dominance of women by men, **Mustaine and Tewksbury (2002)** note that such perspectives do not account for the reasons some women are at significantly greater risk for sexual assault than are other women (e.g., those with histories of child sexual abuse, those who drink more alcohol; **Fisher, Cullen, & Turner, 2000**; **Gidycz, Hanson, & Layman, 1995**). They further note that by adding emphases on the roles of crime victims' exposure to potential offenders, attractiveness as vulnerable targets, and level of guardianship (e.g., self-protective behaviors, actions of bystanders), routine activities theory (**Cohen & Felson, 1979**) can greatly enrich our understanding of differential risk profiles for sexual assault. Relatedly, **Cornish's (1993)** rational choice theory proposes that even violent criminals tend to act with a fair amount of rationality, weighing risks and benefits of various courses of actions. As such, victim vulnerability is an important variable in targeting. Consistent with this theory, **Beauregard, Rossmo, and Proulx (2007)**, in their study of serial sex offenders, found that "most rapists (69%) mentioned vulnerability as the strongest reason to attack a female" (p. 455). Twenty-two percent of the rapists studied by Beauregard and colleagues mentioned personality characteristics, including the perceived characteristic of being "easy," as influencing their victim choice. These findings highlight the importance of understanding predators' perceptions of potential victims. This point has been raised (e.g., **Finkelhor & Asdigian, 1996**) and echoed (**Livingston, Hequembourg, Testa, & VanZile-Tamsen, 2007**) by various researchers who have found that opportunity alone does not account for victimization experiences. Rather, a comprehensive understanding of any form of aggression requires that other factors, including vulnerability of targets, be considered as well.

POTENTIAL INDICATORS OF VULNERABILITY

Victims are never responsible for being sexually assaulted. However, it is possible (and extremely important) for research to elucidate factors that may heighten women's risk for sexual assault without implying blame. To this end, researchers have discovered that, for example, higher numbers of consensual sexual partners (**Koss & Dinero, 1989**) and various aspects of alcohol consumption (e.g., **Fisher et al., 2000**) are associated with a greater risk of sexual assault. An important body of work on sexual revictimization has robustly established the role of child sexual abuse victimization as a risk factor for adolescent and adult sexual assault (e.g., **Barnes, Noll, Putnam, & Trickett, 2009**; **Filipas & Ullman, 2006**; **Gidycz et al., 1995**; **Lutz-Zois, Phelps, & Reichle, 2011**).

Furthermore, among women with such an abuse history, greater self-blame, posttraumatic symptomology (**Arata, 2000**), alexithymia (difficulty identifying and/or expressing emotions), and lower sociability (**Cloitre, Scarvalone, & Difede, 1997**) also serve as sexual assault risk factors. It is possible that, in addition to direct mechanisms (e.g., heavy alcohol use decreasing the ability to detect or respond to risk), some of these characteristics may increase sexual assault risk indirectly through their attractiveness to sexually coercive men.

Another such characteristic may be adult attachment. Attachment theory posits that early caregiving experiences influence adult romantic relationships (**Hazan & Shaver, 1987**). **Bartholomew (1990)** conceptualizes attachment as consisting of two dimensions, described by **Brennan, Clark, and Shaver (1998)** as "avoidance (discomfort with closeness and dependency) and . . . anxiety (about abandonment)" (p. 48). Individuals with low avoidance and anxiety are said to possess a *secure* attachment style; those with high avoidance but low anxiety are *dismissing*; those with low avoidance but high anxiety are *preoccupied*; finally, those with high avoidance and anxiety are *fearful* (**Brennan et al., 1998**). Adult attachment is related to the sexual behavioral system (**Birnbaum, Mikulincer, Szepsenwol, Shaver, & Mizrahi, 2014**; **Davis, Shaver, & Vernon, 2004**) and is hypothesized to contribute to perpetration of sexual coercion in several ways (**Davis, 2006**). It may also serve as an indicator of sexual vulnerability. Anxiously attached individuals, for example, tend to worry about abandonment and partners' not returning their love. As a result, they may be more willing to engage in sexual acts they do not actually desire in order to fulfill relationship maintenance goals. In fact, this has been shown to be the case (e.g., **Impett & Peplau, 2002**). We propose that sexually coercive men may therefore perceive attachment anxiety as an eagerness to please or a sign of sexual exploitability.

Avoidant attachment, too, may contribute to sexual vulnerability. First, it is associated with having more casual sex (e.g., **Garneau, Olmstead, Pasley, & Fincham, 2013**; **Gentzler & Kerns, 2004**; **Paul, McManus, & Hayes, 2000**), which could increase opportunity for victimization. Second, like anxious attachment, it is associated with consensual but unwanted sex (i.e., sex that one partner does not want but to which they ultimately agree; e.g., **Gentzler & Kerns, 2004**), which we propose may be perceived or inferred by potential sexual partners, consistent with routine activities and rational choice theories (**Cohen & Felson, 1979**; **Cornish, 1993**). Finally, avoidant attachment is associated with denial of negative affect (e.g., **Roberts & Noller, 1998**), which may render women more likely to ignore internal cues of discomfort, fear, or anger. Attachment insecurity (both anxious and avoidant) is, in fact, associated with various victimization experiences, including childhood sexual abuse (**Aspelmeier, Elliott, & Smith, 2007**), childhood relationship aggression (**Troy & Sroufe, 1987**), intimate partner aggression (e.g., **Karakurt, Keiley, & Posada, 2013**), battering (**Shechory, 2013**), and criminal victimization such as robbery. Alternately, insecure attachment may serve as a more general cue for vulnerability to interpersonal victimization. For example, avoidantly attached individuals may be more socially isolated, rendering them more vulnerable to victimization experiences.

Attachment is also related to the dimension of sociosexuality (SOI). Specifically, **Brennan and Shaver (1995)** found avoidant attachment to be correlated with unrestricted SOI (being positively disposed to short-term mating strategies—i.e., sex in the absence of a committed relationship or emotional intimacy) in a sample of college students. Furthermore, researchers have demonstrated that college women's SOI can be accurately perceived by strangers through observation of behaviors such as patterns of eye contact, which would be important for mating strategies (**Stillman & Maner, 2009**). Importantly, college men appear to estimate women's sexual exploitability based on observable cues associated with sexual availability (**Goetz, Easton, Lewis, & Buss, 2012**). Although men may or may not consciously associate any of these cues—such as appearing "easy" or "promiscuous"—with attachment dimensions, they do find women they perceive as more sexually exploitable as the most attractive short-term mates (i.e., casual sex partners; **Goetz et al., 2012**). The authors conclude that "men are sensitive to cues in a variety of domains when assessing the sexual exploitability of women" (**Goetz et al., 2012, p. 424**).

There are several gaps in the sexual coercion literature, including whether any of the risk factors for sexual assault and sexual revictimization may exert their influence through their attractiveness to sexually coercive men. It is unknown, in particular, whether sexually coercive men may be more attracted to women with insecure (avoidant or anxious) attachment styles. Equally unclear is whether or not sexually coercive men (or indeed men in general) may use attachment cues to infer other aspects of sexual exploitability or vulnerability in women. Understanding these attraction and inferential processes is crucial to developing a better understanding of how sexually coercive men may target vulnerable women—consciously or otherwise. It could also improve our understanding of why sexual assault risk profiles differ across different groups of women. In particular, it may shed light on whether characteristics associated with sexual vulnerability (including those associated with a history of child sexual abuse) affect potential aggressors' perceptions of target suitability, thus contributing to our understanding of the risk profiles of sexually revictimized women.

STUDY OVERVIEW

This study used a mixed between- and within-subjects experimental design to examine what types of inferences sexually coercive men draw about women with varying attachment styles to determine whether attachment may serve to alert sexually coercive men to characteristics that may render some women more vulnerable to sexual assault. First, it was hypothesized that sexually coercive men would show a dating preference for insecurely attached women (either anxious or avoidant) over securely attached women. Second, it was thought that these men would tend to perceive the women whom they would want to date as possessing characteristics (such as greater alcohol consumption, higher levels of posttraumatic symptomology, etc.) which may serve as cues of sexual vulnerability. Third, we hypothesized that men in general (but especially sexually coercive men) would perceive women with insecure (avoidant or anxious) attachment to possess more characteristics associated with sexual vulnerability.

METHOD

Sample

One-hundred sixty-seven male college students were recruited from a medium-sized private Catholic Midwestern university to participate in a study on "how people respond to personal dating ads and how people act in their relationships." Participants either received partial course credit through a psychology subject pool or were part of the general student body and were entered into a drawing for a gift certificate. Five were excluded from analyses because they indicated that they were "completely homosexual." Eighteen participants were excluded because they did not finish the overall survey, two because they did not complete the entire Sexual Experiences Survey (SES) measure (**Koss & Oros, 1982**), and eight because they came extremely close to guessing the primary purpose and/or hypotheses of the study. Because the focus of the study was on sexual coercion, four participants were excluded because they reported a history of physical acts of sexual aggression (sexual assault or rape) on the SES (**Koss & Oros, 1982**). The final sample for all analyses therefore consisted of 130 male college students.

Participants were, on average 19.17 years of age (*SD* = 1.23). Most participants, 77% (*n* = 100) identified as White, whereas 5% (*n* = 7) identified as Asian American, 5% (*n* = 7) were biracial, 5% (*n* = 6) were Mexican American/Chicano, 4% (*n* = 5) were African American, 2% (*n* = 2) were citizens from another country, 1% (*n* = 1) was Puerto Rican, and 2% (*n* = 2) identified as "other." Eighty-six percent (*n* = 112) of the final sample identified as "completely heterosexual," with the remaining participants (14%; *n* = 18) identifying as somewhere between 2 and 9 on a continuum of sexual orientation (1 = *Completely heterosexual*, 10 = *Completely homosexual*).

Procedure

Participants completed the study on personal computers in a laboratory and were provided with a cover story (used successfully by **Baldwin, Keelan, Fehr, Enns, & Koh-Rangarajoo, 1996**), which indicated that researchers were interested in what kind of personal information is most helpful in dating ads. Participants were also told that the women who wrote the personal ads were asked to include statements about how they typically think and feel in their romantic relationships; this additional instruction served to plausibly explain the presence of statements about attachment within the personal ads.

Personal Ads

Sixteen personal ad templates written by college women and collected by **Zayas and Shoda (2007)** were used in this study. Using the technique developed by Zayas and Shoda, each ad template was experimentally manipulated to portray one of the four different attachment styles by adding statements from Fraley and colleagues' measure of adult attachment (**Fraley, Waller, & Brennan, 2000**) to each ad template. Each participant viewed 16 ads (4 secure, 4 dismissing, 4 fearful, and 4 preoccupied). For example, the preoccupied attachment style was portrayed in four different ads for each participant, but the specific statements connoting low avoidance (e.g., "I usually discuss my problems and concerns with my [boyfriends]"; **Fraley et al., 2000, p. 361**) and high anxiety (e.g., "Sometimes [boyfriends] seem to change their feelings about me for no apparent reason"; p. 361) differed across each of the four "preoccupied" ads. One completed ad, then, including ad template and experimentally added attachment statements, appeared as follows; the attachment statements have been underlined here for clarity:

> I am the type of person that would like to sit by the fire and just relax, but also willing to go out with a group of friends on certain night. I am a self-motivated person. I think <u>sometimes boyfriends seem to change their feelings about me for no apparent reason</u>, but <u>I usually discuss my problems and concerns with my boyfriends</u>. I would like someone who cares about keeping in shape and me keeping up equally. I have many different interests and hobbies. I am open for new and exciting things, although "roughing it" would not be included in the above. If this ad at all interests you please call me and we will see what is meant to be. :)

To safeguard against the effect of any given ad template being perceived as more desirable than any other template, the attachment statements were paired with different ad templates across four conditions, to which participants were randomly assigned. Participants, then, were randomly assigned to one of four conditions, across which ad templates and attachment statements were counterbalanced in different combinations and were presented with a computer program designed to simulate an Internet dating site. The mentioned ad template, for example, appeared with different attachment statements to participants in different conditions, thereby varying the attachment style portrayed by each ad across conditions. The men read the sixteen personal ads (randomly ordered across participants) and were instructed to think about which of the women they would be "interested in dating." For each ad, they indicated the likelihood that they would "go on a date" with the author (1 = *Not at all likely*, 7 = *Very likely*).

Next, participants were asked to choose their most preferred dating partner (the ad author they would "most like to date"). Each participant was then asked a series of questions, described below, about his perceptions of the author of his chosen ad. Participants were then presented with four ads they had already seen (one representing each attachment style). The participants answered a series of questions, described in the following text, about their perceptions of each of the ads' authors. They therefore provided their perceptions of five ads in total. The characteristics assessed are associated with heightened risk of sexual revictimization and were hypothesized to be more attractive to sexually coercive men.

Measures

Perceptions of Personal ad Authors

Perceptions of the targets' alcohol consumption were measured with three questions: "How many alcoholic drinks do you think this woman typically consumes in a week?" "How many days per week do you think that this woman typically drinks alcohol?" "How many days in a week do you think this woman typically drinks enough alcohol to get drunk?" These items were examined individually in all analyses.

Perceptions of targets' self-blame was also assessed. Specifically, participants were asked, "To what extent do you think this woman blames herself for bad things that happen to her?" (1 = *Not at all*, 7 = *Very much*).

Representative items from the Impact of Event Scale (IES; **Horowitz, Wilner, & Alvarez, 1979**) were modified slightly and used to measure participants' perceptions about targets' posttraumatic symptomology (1 = *Not at all*, 7 = *Often*). Participants answered the questions, "To what extent do you think that pictures of bad things that have happened to her pop into this woman's mind? To what extent do you think that after something bad happens to this woman, she is aware that she has a lot of feelings about it but doesn't deal with them," and "To what extent do you think this woman tries not to talk about it when bad things happen to her?" Mean scores were calculated for these three items for the most preferred dating partner (with a Cronbach's alpha coefficient of .69) as well as for the highlighted ads (with Cronbach's alpha coefficients of .60 for preoccupied, .71 for secure, .73 for fearful, and .70 for dismissing). Cronbach's alphas are likely somewhat lower for this measure as it is extremely brief (three items) to reduce participant burden. Additionally, the items represent disparate symptom clusters (reexperiencing and avoidance) of posttraumatic symptomology and may not have been widely perceived by participants to "hang together." Participants were then asked how many consensual sexual partners they think each of the five targets had had.

To assess perceptions of targets' alexithymia, participants were asked, "To what extent do you think this woman is able to recognize how she feels?" and "To what extent do you think this woman is able to label how she feels?" (1 = *Not at all*, 7 = *Very much*). Responses were reverse-coded such that higher scores indicated higher levels of alexithymia and averaged, yielding one total score of perceived alexithymia for the most preferred dating partner (with a Cronbach's alpha coefficient of .76) and for each highlighted ad (with Cronbach's alpha coefficients of .85 for preoccupied, .79 for secure, .83 for fearful, and .81 for dismissing).

Participants were asked modified versions of items from the sociability subscale of **Cheek and Buss's (1981)** Shyness and Sociability Scale. Items included, "To what extent do you think this woman likes to be with people?" and "To what extent do you think this woman welcomes the opportunity to mix socially with people?" (1 = *Not at all*, 7 = *Very much*). Mean scores of these questions were calculated for the most preferred dating partner (with a Cronbach's alpha coefficient of .73) and for each highlighted ad (with Cronbach's alpha coefficients of .82 for preoccupied, .76 for secure, .87 for fearful, and .85 for dismissing).

Participants were also asked to speculate on the likelihood that each of the four highlighted ads' authors experienced sexual abuse as a child and how vulnerable they are currently to sexual assault (1 = *Not at all likely/vulnerable*, 7 = *Very likely/vulnerable*). These items were presented just before the believability check and demographics items to prevent the overt nature of the questions from contaminating any speculation as to the study hypotheses.

Sexual Experiences Survey

Participants completed the SES (**Koss & Oros, 1982**), an instrument designed to measure lifetime occurrence of engagement in sexually coercive behaviors. The SES (male version) consists of 12 items worded in specific behavioral and sexually straightforward language (e.g., "Have you ever had sexual intercourse with a woman when she didn't want to because you used some degree of physical force (twisting her arm, holding her down,

etc.)?" (p. 456). A range of severity is represented by the measure, from coercing a woman to have sex by threatening to end the relationship to acts meeting legal definitions of rape. Of interest to this study were sexually coercive men, defined as those endorsing any of Items 3–6 on the measure, which refer to being unable to stop oneself, threatening to end the relationship, continually arguing, or saying things "you didn't really mean" to obtain intercourse (**Koss & Oros, 1982, p. 456**).

Believability Check and Demographics

Finally, participants completed a demographics questionnaire including age, sexual orientation, and race/ethnicity. They were also asked to describe in writing any speculation they may have had regarding the purpose of the study. This information was used to exclude several participants (see above) who correctly guessed the study's purpose. Participants were then debriefed as to the nature of the study and thanked for their participation.

RESULTS

Preliminary Analyses

Data were examined to ensure that they met assumptions for analyses, and corrections were used and noted where appropriate when assumptions were violated. Extreme values for quantitative, open-ended questions (defined as those values falling >3 times the interquartile range from the inner two quartiles) were trimmed to a value one unit more extreme than the next unchanged value, as recommended by **Tabachnick and Fidell (2006)**. For example, data were changed for two participants who responded that their most preferred dating partner had likely had 100 and 145 consensual sexual partners; these data points were reduced to 13 because the next highest value was 12. Ten open-ended variables were subjected to this trimming procedure; of these, 2.1% of the values were trimmed.

Sexual Aggression and Attachment Style of Most Preferred Dating Partner

Twenty percent (*N* = 26) of the men studied were classified as sexually coercive because they endorsed a history of at least one sexually coercive behavior (but not physical sexual aggression); 80% (*N* = 104) of the sample were classified as noncoercive.

We evaluated our first hypothesis, that sexually coercive men would show a dating preference for insecurely attached women (either anxious or avoidant), using a chi-square test for independence (see **Table 1** for overall participant likelihood of dating women with each attachment style). There was no significant association between participants' history of sexual aggression and the attachment style of their preferred dating partners, Yates' continuity correction for $\chi^2(1, N = 130) = 1.14$, $p = .29$. Of the sexually coercive men, 77% (*n* = 20) chose an insecure (anxious or avoidant) woman, and 23% (*n* = 6) chose a secure woman. Of the noncoercive men, 64% (*n* = 66) chose an insecure woman (anxious or avoidant), and 37% (*n* = 38) chose a secure woman.

TABLE 1. Means, Standard Deviations, and Ranges of Likelihood of Dating Women With Different Attachment Styles

Variable	*M*	*SD*	Range
Likelihood of dating secure[a]	4.50	0.95	1.75–6.50
Likelihood of dating dismissing	3.91	0.95	1.25–6.00
Likelihood of dating fearful	4.08	0.91	1.00–5.75
Likelihood of dating preoccupied	4.39	1.08	1.25–6.50

Note. Statistics are based on *N* = 130.

[i] [a]Likelihood of dating scores were rated on 7-point scales (1 = *Not at all likely*, 7 = *Very likely*).

Our second hypothesis was that sexually coercive men would perceive the women they most wanted to date as having characteristics associated with sexual revictimization. To evaluate this, a series of independent *t* tests compared sexually coercive and noncoercive men on their perceptions of the woman they chose as their most preferred dating partner (**Table 2**). Results indicated that sexually coercive men perceived their most preferred dating partners as consuming more alcoholic drinks per week, getting drunk more days per week, having higher levels of alexithymia, and having had more consensual sex partners than did other men. Additionally, sexually coercive men perceived their most preferred dating partner as having marginally higher levels of posttraumatic symptomology and marginally higher levels of sociability than did other men. However, there was no difference for perceptions of the number of days per week the target drinks alcohol or for her levels of self-blame.

TABLE 2. Perceptions of Most Preferred Dating Partner by Sexually Coercive and Noncoercive Men

	Noncoercive		**Sexually Coercive**					
Perceptions of Top Pick	***M***	***SD***	***M***	***SD***	***t***	***df***	***p***	***d***[a]
Drinks per week*	4.51	3.28	7.00	5.26	−2.26	28.63	.03	0.67
Days per week target drinks	1.80	1.05	1.96	1.25	−0.69	128	.50	0.15
Days per week target gets drunk*	0.70	0.79	1.38	1.30	−2.58	29.83	.02	0.75
Self-blame	4.22	1.37	4.19	1.65	0.09	128	.93	0.02
Sociability	5.91	0.89	6.23	0.83	−1.64	128	.10	0.36
Alexithymia*	2.61	0.92	3.27	1.46	−2.19	30.12	.04	0.63
Posttraumatic symptoms	3.73	1.00	4.13	0.89	−1.84	128	.07	0.41
Consensual sexual partners*	3.25	2.26	4.32	2.78	−2.03	127	.05	0.45

[i] [a]Cohen's *d* measure of effect size.
*$p \leq .05$.

Finally, we investigated our third hypothesis, that men in general (but especially sexually coercive men) would perceive insecurely (anxiously or avoidantly) attached women as possessing characteristics associated with sexual vulnerability. To this end, a series of mixed analyses of variance (ANOVAs) was performed with dichotomous sexual coerciveness as the between-subjects variable and the four target attachment styles as the within-subjects variable (see **Table 3** for a summary of the ANOVA statistical results).

TABLE 3. Effects of Sexual Coerciveness and Target Attachment on Perceptions of Ad Authors

	df	***F***	***p***	η^2
Alcoholic Drinks Per Week Target Is Perceived to Consume				
Sexual coerciveness	1, 125	0.57	.45	.01
Target attachment	3, 375	0.02	1.00	<.01
Sexual Coerciveness × Target Attachment	3, 375	0.25	.86	<.01
Days Per Week Target Is Perceived to Drink Alcohol				
Sexual coerciveness	1, 128	0.62	.43	.01
Target attachment	3, 384	0.02	1.00	<.01
Sexual Coerciveness × Target Attachment	3, 384	0.66	.58	.01
Days Per Week Target Is Perceived to Get Drunk				
Sexual coerciveness	1, 128	0.15	.70	<.01
Target attachment	3, 384	0.56	.64	<.01
Sexual Coerciveness × Target Attachment	3, 384	0.33	.81	<.01
Perceived Self-Blame				
Sexual coerciveness	1, 128	0.55	.46	<.01

Target attachment*	3, 384	3.86	.01	.03
Sexual Coerciveness × Target Attachment	3, 384	0.37	.78	<.01
Perceived Sociability				
Sexual coerciveness	1, 128	2.71	.10	.02
Target attachment	3, 384	1.26	.29	.01
Sexual Coerciveness × Target Attachment	3, 384	1.35	.26	.01
Perceived Alexithymia				
Sexual coerciveness	1, 128	2.03	.16	.02
Target attachment	3, 384	0.48	.70	<.01
Sexual Coerciveness × Target Attachment	3, 384	0.89	.45	.01
Perceived Posttraumatic Symptomology				
Sexual coerciveness	1, 128	0.17	.68	.01
Target attachment[a]	2.83, 361.61	2.52	.06	.02
Sexual Coerciveness × Target Attachment[a]	2,83, 361.61	0.36	.77	<.01
Perceived Number of Consensual Sexual Partners				
Sexual coerciveness	1, 120	0.58	.45	.01
Target attachment	2.91, 348.99	0.08	.97	<.01
Sexual Coerciveness × Target Attachment	2.91, 348.99	0.49	.69	<.01
Perceived Likelihood of Child Sexual Abuse History				
Sexual coerciveness[a]	1, 127	0.25	.62	<.01
Target attachment*	3, 381	10.60	< .01	.08
Sexual Coerciveness × Target Attachment[a]	3, 381	1.18	.32	.01
Perceived Risk of Sexual Assault				
Sexual coerciveness	1, 128	0.00	.97	<.01
Target attachment	3, 384	1.12	.34	.01
Sexual Coerciveness × Target Attachment	3, 384	0.49	.69	<.01

[i] [a]Huynh-Feldt correction used for violation of sphericity.
*$p \leq .05$.

Men, in general, perceived fearful women (M = 4.53, SE = .17) to be more self-blaming than secure women (M = 3.78, SE = .17) and, marginally, than preoccupied women (M = 4.00, SE = .17), $F(3, 384) = 3.86$, $p = .01$, $\eta^2 = .03$. They also perceived fearful women (M = 4.29, SE = .12) as having more posttraumatic symptomology than did preoccupied women (M = 3.93, SE = .11), Huynh-Feldt correction $F(2.83, 361.61) = 2.52$, $p = .06$, $\eta^2 = .02$. Finally, they perceived fearful women (M = 3.24, SE = .18) to have a higher likelihood of child sexual abuse history than either preoccupied (M = 2.64, SE = .16) or secure women (M = 2.22, SE = .15) and for dismissing women (M = 3.02, SE = .16) to have a higher likelihood of child sexual abuse history than did secure women, $F(3, 381) = 10.60$, $p < .01$, $\eta^2 = .08$. Additionally, sexually coercive men (M = 5.20, SE = .12) perceived women in general to be (marginally) less sociable than did other men (M = 5.42, SE = .06), $F(1, 128) = 2.71$, $p = .10$, $\eta^2 = .02$.

DISCUSSION

These results are consistent with previous studies demonstrating high rates of self-reported sexual coercion in college men (**Kingree et al., 2017**). In particular, 20% of this sample reported that they had coerced a woman into having sex. Also consistent with the literature, sexually aggressive men in this sample most frequently reported the use of verbal tactics; only four men were excluded because of a self-reported history of physical sexual aggression. Although sexually coercive men did not appear to be more attracted than were other men to

insecurely attached women (fearful, preoccupied, or dismissing), they did clearly exhibit preferences for women with other characteristics of vulnerability.

Sexually coercive men perceived their most preferred dating partner as having more characteristics associated with sexual vulnerability than did other men. In particular, with medium effect sizes, they perceived their most preferred dating partners as using more alcohol and as being more alexithymic. Sexually coercive men may be more attracted to alexithymic women in particular because such women may be less able to identify or express their own feelings of discomfort or anger with unwanted sexual advances. Alternately, such men may be attracted to the women most likely to have casual sex; this interpretation is consistent with the recent findings of **Lando-King and colleagues (2015)** that adolescent girls low in intrapersonal skills (i.e., high in alexithymia) are more likely to report a greater number of male sexual partners. These authors point out that girls with more skill in this area are likely "more thoughtful about their own desires to engage in (or abstain from) sexual intercourse," (p. 4), a tendency which would likely be unattractive to sexually coercive men.

The aforementioned interpretation is consistent with our own finding that sexually coercive men also perceived their most preferred dating partner as having had sex with more partners. Additionally, they (marginally) perceived their preferred dating partner as suffering from more posttraumatic symptomology than did noncoercive men. Although these effect sizes were small, we feel they are still potentially significant. Taken together, these findings suggest that sexually coercive men are more attracted to sexually vulnerable women than are other men. Such findings are largely consistent with reports by sex offenders that they tend to select vulnerable women (**Beauregard et al., 2007**) and, in some cases, women they perceive as "easy" (**Beauregard et al., 2007**; **Kanin, 1985**). Perhaps men who sexually coerce partners, friends, or acquaintances find themselves more attracted to women with these characteristics, which stranger rapists identify as increasing their likelihood of targeting a woman (**Beauregard et al., 2007**; **Kanin, 1985**). This is important as it suggests that some risk factors for sexual victimization may increase vulnerability not only in direct ways (e.g., by inhibiting defensive capabilities or increasing opportunity) but also through another pathway: by being attractive to, or perhaps actively sought by, sexually coercive men. This is especially consistent with routine activities theory, which posits that victimization is influenced by several parameters, including target attractiveness (**Cohen & Felson, 1979**).

The current data may also have implications for the study of sexual revictimization risk profiles. Specifically, sexually coercive men in this sample were more attracted to women who seem less in touch with or able to express their emotions, seem to avoid thinking about traumatic events, engage in sex with more individuals, and drink more heavily. Each of these characteristics has been implicated in the relationship between child sexual abuse and later sexual revictimization (e.g., **Arata, 2000**; **Cloitre et al., 1997**; **Fargo, 2009**). The current data suggest a possible causal mechanism for this linkage whereby such characteristics may indirectly increase risk of assault in women with sexual abuse histories by serving as cues of vulnerability or attractiveness to potentially aggressive men.

We did not expect the finding that self-blame would not be associated with sexually coercive men's dating preferences. It could be that self-blame was somehow less evident in the personal ad format. However, it seems unlikely that participants were more able to make judgments about a target's ability to identify her emotions than about, for example, her tendency to blame herself for bad things that have happened to her. Alternatively, self-blame may not be perceived as indicative of vulnerability or may not influence attraction.

We were surprised by the finding that sexually coercive men viewed their most preferred dating partner as being *more* sociable (small effect size) than did other men. Previous research has demonstrated that college men perceive women as more sexually exploitable if they display certain traits, many of which are consistent with the current finding. For example, men perceive sexual exploitability in (and are more attracted to, at least in the short term) cues of attention-seeking, flirtation, partying, and promiscuousness (**Goetz et al., 2012**). It is

therefore perhaps not surprising that sexually coercive men in this sample were more attracted to women they perceived as being more sociable. However, we also found that sexually coercive men may perceive women in general as being less sociable than do other men. This may be consistent with evidence that sexual aggressors tend to score higher in hostility toward women (**Abbey, McAuslan, Zawacki, Clinton, & Buck, 2001**) and see women as trying to take advantage of them sexually (**Malamuth, Linz, Heavey, Barnes, & Acker, 1995**). One explanation for our pattern of results, then, is that sexually coercive men (who tend to carry a perception of women as "out to get them") may perceive women in general as having less *genuine* interest in spending time with others—that is, as being less sociable. At the same time, however, such men may be more attracted to women whom they perceive as more sociable as this may serve as a cue for sexual exploitability or vulnerability.

The study demonstrated that men in general perceived women somewhat differently based on attachment-related statements in women's personal ads. For example, men perceived fearful women to have significantly higher levels of self-blame than secure or (marginally) preoccupied women. Additionally, men perceived securely attached women as being less likely to have a history of child sexual abuse than fearful or dismissing women (a perception that is consistent with the literature on child sexual abuse and attachment; e.g., **Alexander, 1993**; **Alexander et al., 1998**; **Aspelmeier et al., 2007**; **Limke, Showers, & Zeigler-Hill, 2010**; **Roche, Runtz, & Hunter, 1999**). These findings suggest that attachment, like the related dimension of sociosexuality (**Brennan & Shaver, 1995**; **Stillman & Maner, 2009**) may be perceivable to others and may provide somewhat accurate cues about sexual history, attitudes, and vulnerability. That is, men may have some awareness of the kinds of marked effects experiences such as child sexual abuse can have on how women relate to others as adults. Importantly, they also support the idea that the experimental manipulation of portrayed attachment influenced participants' perceptions in meaningful ways.

Interestingly, most significant differences in perceptions of attachment styles involved the dimension of attachment avoidance. That is, differences tended to involve secure and preoccupied (low avoidance) styles versus dismissing and fearful (high avoidance) styles. Attachment anxiety did not seem to be a factor particularly noticed or interesting to the men in the study. It is unclear whether the men are less attuned to statements about relationship anxiety, feel less strongly about the dimension than they do about avoidance, or possibly are ambivalent about it (e.g., finding a woman's worry about her partner's feelings toward her to be a reassuring sign of her fidelity). Whatever the cause, it is evident that men were more likely to make judgments about women based on their attachment avoidance level than their anxiety level.

This study has several important limitations. First, it is unclear whether or not the study's use of the terms *dating* and *date* precludes inferences about attraction. Relatedly, it is unclear in what way participants may have interpreted this language in the current context of college "hook-up" culture (sexual behavior without expectation of commitment; e.g., **Sutton & Simons, 2015**). Second, it is possible that the experimental manipulation of attachment style or the ads themselves may not have realistically simulated dating choices in real settings. Third, the study examined the preferences only of college men at a private, Catholic Midwestern university, who may not be representative of either college or noncollege men. Thus, it is important that future studies use community samples of men. The cross-sectional nature of the data, too, precludes conclusions of a causal nature; for this reason, longitudinal research on sexual aggression is still needed, especially as it relates to offenders' attraction to and perceptions of victims. Such information would be vital in the design of sexual assault prevention and treatment efforts.

The study only addressed one form of sexual aggression—that of sexual coercion. It should be noted, however, that although this study focuses only on the least aggressive tactic (verbal coercion), the end result of the tactic in this study is sexual intercourse (as opposed to potentially less intimate acts such as fondling). Therefore, the seriousness of the acts should not be underestimated simply because no physical tactics were reported.

Additionally, sexual coercion is the most common form of sexual assault, both on campus and off (**Mouilso et al., 2013**; **Strang et al., 2013**; **Widman et al., 2013**), making it an important area of study.

The current findings do not preclude the possibility that sexually coercive men perceived their most preferred dating partners in ways that were designed to (consciously or not) justify or rationalize past or future sexually coercive behavior—that is, in rape myth-consistent ways. However, we believe there are reasons to doubt this interpretation. First, although the sexually coercive men in this study did tend to perceive their most preferred dating partner as having two characteristics which may be rape myth-consistent (having had more consensual sex partners and drinking more heavily), they also demonstrated preferences that have no basis in rape myth of which we are aware. Specifically, they perceived their most preferred partners to be higher in alexithymia and, marginally, in symptoms of PTSD. It is not clear that a woman's alexithymia or PTSD might serve any of the functions of a rape myth—namely, to shift blame from the perpetrator to the victim or to minimize the impact of the crime (**Burt, 1980**). Second, the sexually coercive men in this sample did not ascribe rape myth-consistent traits to women in general, which would be consistent with correlates of sexual aggression (e.g., adversarial sexual beliefs, negative attitudes toward women, etc.; **Malamuth et al., 1995**). Rather, they ascribed these traits only to the women they would most like to date, suggesting that they were differentially attracted to these women.

Finally, it is impossible to determine with this methodology whether significant findings represent attraction or victim targeting. Because of the importance of masking the true hypotheses of the study and because of the nonoffender nature of the sample, it was unfeasible to ask direct questions about victim selection in the context of personal ads. However, the fact that personal ads were used (as opposed to, e.g., third-person narrative descriptions of women) does allow for some level of speculation that men's dating preferences were more indicative of their behaviors in situations potentially resulting in sexual encounters. Given the evidence that college men report having consciously intended to seduce, not rape, a woman initially (**Kanin, 1984**), and that they tend to assault women they know or are dating (e.g., **Abbey & McAuslan, 2004**; **Gidycz, Warkentin, & Orchowski, 2007**), the responses of the participants in this study seem substantially relevant to the question of perceptual factors involved in sexual victimization.

CONCLUSIONS

This study highlights the need for further investigation into the roles of attachment and perceptions of women in the study of sexual aggression and sexual revictimization. It is clear that women's attachment affects men's perceptions of them and that sexually coercive men perceive women as being generally less sociable than do other men. The effects of women's attachment on men's perceptions seem especially likely to center on the avoidant dimension, suggesting that men are either more observant of these characteristics, care more about their implications for potential relationships, or perhaps feel ambivalently about attachment anxiety in a romantic partner. Results lend support to the idea that sexually coercive men are more sexually attracted to vulnerable women. Future research should continue to investigate this question.

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