



*ugr* | Universidad  
de Granada

**SEXUAL VIOLENCE CONFERENCE**  
*Middlesex University, London, 8<sup>th</sup> of September*  
*2011*

---

# Social perception of sexual assault: a qualitative study using focus group methodology

---

**Mónica Romero-Sánchez and Jesús L. Megías**  
*Faculty of Psychology, Granada*  
*Spain*  
E-mail: [monicaromero@ugr.es](mailto:monicaromero@ugr.es)  
[jlmegias@ugr.es](mailto:jlmegias@ugr.es)

# INDEX



- Introduction
  - Sexual assault in college students
  - Factors related with its occurrence
    - Alcohol
    - Misperception of sexual intent
- Our research
  - Two focus groups
- Results and Conclusions



# INTRODUCTION

# INTRODUCTION



- Sexual aggression against women, particularly in social or dating situations, is a widespread problem in university populations.
- Studies have revealed that sexual violence against women is four times greater in this age range than in the general population (Humprey & Kahn, 2000).
- Starting university has been described as moving into a “red zone” in which young women are at an increased risk of experiencing unwanted sexual contacts (Flack et al., 2008).

# INTRODUCTION



- Koss, Gidycz and Wisniewski (1987) in a sample of 6.159 american college students:
  - 54% some form of sexual abuse
  - 15% acts that met the legal definition of rape
  - 12% attempted rape
- Prevalence in Spain:
  - 36% female reported experiencing some kind of sexual assault (Romero-Sánchez & Megías, 2010).
  - 33.2% of female students reported experiencing sexual coercion (Sipsma, Carrobles, Montorio and Everaerd, 2000)
  - 12.6% acknowledged being victims of forced sexual relations with penetration by an ex or present partner (Hernández & González, 2009).

# INTRODUCTION



- Research on sexual assault in the university population has focused on exploring the factors that influence its occurrence.
- Several variables have been identified as relevant, such as **alcohol** and **misperception of sexual assault**
- Alcohol is involved in many cases of sexual assault, especially in casual relations and dating situation (Lovett & Horvath, 2009).  
1 in 20 female college students reported having been victim of rape since the beginning of the academic year; 72% of the victims were under the influence of alcohol (Moler-Kuo, Dowdall, Koss and Wechsler, 2004)

# INTRODUCTION: Alcohol

- Alcohol use not only affects women's probability of sexual victimization but also the way others perceive the assault.
- One of the most important points in this sense concern the role of the beliefs about traditional gender roles. A double standard has been observed for alcohol consumption in men and women:
  - Male perpetrators who have been drinking tend to be considered less guilty than sober perpetrators (Schuller & Wall, 1998)
  - Female victims who have been drinking are judged more harshly than sober victims, being attributed greater blame (Maurer & Robinson, 2008)

# INTRODUCTION: Misperception



- In some cases sexual assault perpetrated by men against women is the result of “miscommunication” between both.
- **Token resistance**: men perceive women rejection to their sexual advances as a covert way to say “yes”.

Men characterized by such beliefs on women s token resistance may think that women s refusal is part of flirting and they should insist and even act aggressively to convince them to have sexual contacts.



# OUR STUDY

# AIMS



- **Aim**: use the focus group methodology to explore the ideas of university students on the sexual assaults that occur in their peer group.

**Which are the main topics in the discourse of university students about the occurrence of sexual assault?**

**What attitudes and opinions do young people have on the phenomenon of sexual assault?**

**Which is the perceived incidence of this type of violence in this population?**

# METHOD



- **Participants**

14 undergraduate students from the University of Granada (Spain) (8 men and 6 women). Age ranged from 19 to 25 years.

- **Procedure**

- Participants were invited to participate in two separate single-gender discussion groups of college students to talk about issues related to sexual relations.
- Students interested in participating were contacted by telephone.
- Moderator and assistant received the participants, provided information about the procedure that was going to be followed and the main subject of the discussion.
- Guiding questions were used by the moderator during the focus group.

# METHOD: some examples about questions used



## **Introductory question**

We would like to know your perception and ideas about sexual relations among young people at present. Do you think they are different from sexual relations in the past or are they basically the same?

## **Transition question**

What do you think about communication of sexual intentions among young people at present? Do you think it is expressed openly? Is it still restricted? Do boys express themselves more openly than girls?

## **Key questions**

What role do you think alcohol plays in nonconsensual sexual relations in the university context or among young people?

# METHOD



## Procedure

- Recordings of the focus groups were transcribed, and the content of the resulting text was coded according to the guiding questions
- Resulting information was grouped into 10 general themes
  1. Generational differences in sexual relations
  2. Misperception of sexual intentions
  3. Token resistance
  4. Compliance or “resignation” to have sexual relations.
  5. Use of alcohol and drugs to have non-consensual sexual relations

# METHOD



## Procedure

- Resulting information was grouped into 10 general themes
  6. Perception of the behaviour of women consuming alcohol in a social/dating context
  7. Victim blame
  8. Aggressor responsibility and exoneration
  9. Relevance of the problem of nonconsensual sexual relations among university students
  10. Prevention programs for sexual assaults

# RESULTS



- In general, these were the same in the male and female group, although different perspectives and ideas were observed, especially regarding the role of the victim and the perpetrator.

## THEMES

1. Misperception of sexual intentions
2. Token resistance
3. Use of alcohol to have non-consensual sexual relations
4. Victim Blame
5. Explanatory causes of women's sexual assaults.

## RESULTS: THEME 1



### **Communicating sexual desires and intentions among young people. Misinterpreting communication**

- **BOYS AND GIRLS:** communication is more open today but few things are still taken for granted, which is the source of misinterpretation of sexual intentions.
- **GIRLS:** boys tend to interpret behaviors such as having a conversation, accepting a drink, dancing... as clear signs of sexual intent. Three stated that they sometimes flirt or make advances to feel pretty or increase their self-esteem.
- **BOYS:** girls use more subtle communication, messages that they cannot always interpret correctly.

## RESULTS: THEME 2



### Token resistance offered by girls

- **GIRLS:** One of them said that boys tend to interpret refusal to have sexual relations as acceptance. However, they admitted that sometimes girls show this pattern of token resistance

**Causes:** Social judgment other people might make of her  
Education women receive.

- **MEN:**

**Causes:** Negative social assessment made by others  
Lack of self-assurance and pride

They also argued that men sometimes refuse to have sexual relations with women, but did not mention why.

## RESULTS: THEME 3



### **Alcohol as a strategy to have sexual relations**

- **BOYS AND GIRLS:** consume alcohol to lower their inhibitions and do things that they wouldn't do if they were sober or in order to flirt with other people.
- **GIRLS:** - Boys use this strategy to obtain sexual relations (buy girls drinks to get them drunk and have sexual relations with them)
  - Girls invite boys to drink alcohol in order to start a conversation
- **MEN:** - Men and women use this strategy to obtain sexual relations

## RESULTS: THEME 4



### **Blaming the victim of sexual assault**

- **GIRLS:** - Woman's behavior may make her more likely to experience assault, but no circumstances can make the victim be blamed for the assault
- **MEN:** - Several characteristics of girls can make them more likely to experience sexual assault (dressing provocatively or making advances to men); but they don't mention behaviors or characteristics that could make them guilty.

# RESULTS: THEME 5



## Causes of sexual assault against women

- **GIRLS:** - Refer to sociocultural factors such as power, the feeling of possession and sexist attitudes.
  - Context of partying, boy s misinterpretation of girl s sexual intention.
- **MEN:** - Refer to factors related to the perpetrator, such as his personality, alcohol or drug use, the existence of a psychological disorder, biological characteristics or physiological needs

# CONCLUSION



- In general, the themes and ideas that emerged across the two groups replicated and extended the previous findings in the international literature regarding the sexual assault in college student.
- Men and women agreed in different topics or themes that emerged across the two discussion groups.
- But there were differences among them in several topics, especially in those related to the causes of sexual assault and communication of sexual intents.
- Specifically, men showed more ideas and opinion related to “rape myths” (for example, “Psychological disorder or biological needs factors related to the occurrence of sexual assault”)



**THANK YOU!!**