

## **Women's Reactions to Hypothetical Male Sexual Touch as a Function of Initiator Attractiveness and Level of Coercion**

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*This study investigated women's reactions to hypothetical male sexual advances and how these reactions are influenced by the physical attractiveness of the initiator. The 144 mostly Caucasian female participants were given vignettes asking them to imagine themselves as the recipients of an uninvited sexually coercive advance from a casual male acquaintance. The acquaintance was described as either attractive or unattractive, and the level of sexual coercion was low, medium, or high. Participants evaluated the situation in terms of how negatively or positively it would affect them, how socially acceptable it would be, and how much it would flatter them. The results indicate that for women, as has previously been shown for men, the attractiveness level of the opposite gender perpetrator redefines how the sexual advances are perceived. In addition, the results support earlier findings that women view sexual advances which use low levels of sexual coercion less negatively than those employing higher levels.*

The use of sexual coercion as a means to obtain the fulfillment of sexual needs continues to be a problem in North American society. Statistics show that approximately half of all college-age women have been victims of some coercive sexual contact (Kanin & Parcell, 1977; Ogletree, 1993). The initiation of sexual contact through the use of sexually coercive behavior has been the focus of much research in the recent past.

Sexually coercive strategies range on a continuum from the use of persistent verbal pressure to sexual stimulation to the use of physical force

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(Struckman-Johnson & Struckman-Johnson, 1991). Men and women can be either the perpetrators or the targets of such strategies in both casual and long-term relationships. Nonetheless, despite a growing tendency towards male and female sexual equality, it is still women who are more often the victims of these tactics (Baier, Rosenzweig, & Whipple, 1991). Although traditional sexual scripts, in which men are the initiators of sexual activity and women play the restrictor role, still frequently characterize heterosexual relationships, most women will at times deviate from their traditional restrictor role by reacting positively to sexual initiations (O'Sullivan & Byers, 1992).

A study on men and women's reactions to coercive sexual contact indicated that the genders differ in their responses to varying levels of coercion used in the sexual advances (Struckman-Johnson & Struckman-Johnson, 1993). Whereas men expected to experience almost no negative effects in response to receiving a gentle or a forceful coercive sexual touch from a casual female acquaintance, women anticipated strong negative effects as the result of either type of touch from a casual male acquaintance.

Further research into male reactions to sexual coercion revealed that males are influenced by the perceived physical attractiveness of a female initiator (Struckman-Johnson & Struckman-Johnson, 1994). At low levels of coercion, men anticipated being pleased by the sexual advances of an attractive woman and displeased by those of an unattractive one. Even in reaction to more coercive sexual advances, although expecting in general to be displeased, men predicted experiencing less displeasure the more attractive the female initiator. This held true even when the woman wielded a weapon and threatened the man with it.

Physical attractiveness is well documented as a determinant of how one is perceived and treated. This influence extends beyond the obvious aesthetic appeal of physical beauty. People who are seen as beautiful are typically also credited with having many positive personal characteristics (Dion, Berscheid, & Walster, 1972). This halo effect extends even to those people with whom the physically attractive associate (Sigall & Landy, 1973). In addition, good-looking people receive more social reinforcement (Barocas & Karoly, 1972), are viewed as being more persuasive (Chaiken, 1979), and are less likely to be perceived as psychopathological (Jones, Hansson, & Phillips, 1978).

The issue of whether physical attractiveness can influence women's reactions to sexual advances has yet to be investigated. However, since physical attractiveness has been found to influence likability for both sexes (Walster, Aronson, Abrahams, & Rottman, 1966), one would expect to find a beauty bias to be in effect for women, just as it has been demonstrated

for men. A male's beauty would likely "soften" the negative reaction of a female to his sexual advances.

This study endeavored to build on and extend previous research. Its specific purpose was twofold. First, it attempted to duplicate previous findings concerning women's reactions to varying levels of sexual coercion from a male casual acquaintance. In particular, it has been shown that women tend to react less negatively to lower levels of coercion (Struckman-Johnson & Struckman-Johnson, 1993). At such levels, women were therefore expected to view the advances as socially acceptable, to react more positively to them, and to feel flattered by the attentions paid them. Second, this study examined the potential for any mediating effects of physical attractiveness. At any level of coercion, it was hypothesized that women's reactions to an attractive initiator would be less negative than their reactions to an unattractive one.

## METHOD

### *Subjects*

The sample of 144 female volunteers ( $M$  age = 22.39,  $SD$  = 3.41) was recruited from a variety of undergraduate psychology courses (introductory, social, abnormal, statistics, and memory and cognition) at two urban American universities, one in the midwest and one in the east. Some subjects received extra credit points for their participation. The sample was restricted to include only heterosexual unmarried women, 35 years of age or younger. Subjects were predominantly middle class with an ethnic representation of 79% Caucasian, 14% African American, 4% Asian American, and 3% from other ethnic groups.

### *Measures*

Vignettes portraying a nonromantic situation in which a casual male acquaintance attempts to initiate a sexual act were adapted from a Struckman-Johnson and Struckman-Johnson (1993) study. Their study showed that women anticipated reacting quite negatively to both their low and high coercion situations, indicating a potential ceiling effect for coercion. To avoid such an effect, we conducted a pilot ranking of various situations in order to identify acts that would be regarded as lower in terms of coerciveness. On a 9-point scale, anchored at (1) *Not coercive* and (9) *Very coercive*, participants ranked the coerciveness of five vignettes that differed

in terms of the sexual area touched and/or the physical force accompanying the touch. The three vignettes that participants perceived as differing most widely from one another were then selected. As a result, the low coercion level was represented by a gentle kiss, the medium level by a gentle breast touch, and the high level by a forceful genital touch.

The attractiveness level in each vignette was manipulated by describing the initiator as either "very attractive" or "unattractive." The strengthener "very" was not applied to the unattractive condition as the dimension of attractiveness is not symmetrical. Therefore, the inclusion of "very" would have appeared unusually strong, possibly serving as a demand characteristic. In addition, attractiveness was described, as opposed to presented using photographs, so that the women would make use of their own personal beauty schemata.

The actual low coercion vignette, with the attractiveness manipulation in brackets, appeared as follows:

You are studying for an exam in your room when a male acquaintance you find [*unattractive/very attractive*], who lives nearby, knocks on the door and asks if he can study with you. You have talked to him a few times in your class, but you don't really know him well. You agree to study together. After an hour or so you take a break. As you sit relaxing and talking about class, he moves from his chair to the couch beside you. Gently, he puts an arm around you and kisses you and leans softly against you on the couch.

The ending of the medium coercion vignette read, "*Gently, he puts an arm around you and touches your breasts and leans softly against you on the couch.*" The ending of the high coercion vignette read, "*Suddenly, he puts an arm around you and touches your genital area and forcefully pushes you down on the couch.*"

After reading the vignette, participants rated their reactions to it by responding to twelve questions, among which were distributed the three questions representing dependent measures. The first dependent measure, the overall effect of the event, was assessed by the question "How negatively or positively would this event affect you?" Responses were rated on a scale ranging from (1) *Very negatively* to (7) *Very positively*. The other two dependent measures, social acceptability and flattery, were measured, respectively, through the questions "How socially acceptable is the behavior of this person?" and "How flattered would you feel?" Both questions were answered on a scale ranging from (1) *Not at all* to (7) *Very*.

The remaining questions were included in order to better define the nature of coercion. On a scale anchored at (1) *Not at all* and (7) *Very*, subjects were asked to rate how romantic, helpless, responsible, and sexually aroused they would expect to feel in the situation depicted in the vignette. The exact wording of each question was as follows: "How romantic

would you feel?" "How helpless would you feel?" "How responsible would you feel?" "How sexually aroused would you feel?" Additionally, the subject's likelihood of participating in further sexual activity with the initiator, of developing a future relationship with him, and of reporting the incident were assessed through the following questions, using a scale that ranged from (1) *Not likely* to (7) *Very likely*: "How likely would you be to participate in further sexual activity?" "How likely would you be to develop a future relationship with this person?" "How likely would you be to report this incident?"

Two items, constituting manipulation checks, were included to determine the perceived physical attractiveness of the initiator and the perceived level of coercion used in each of the six scenarios. In particular, on a 7-point scale ranging from (1) *Not at all* to (7) *Very*, participants responded to the questions "How physically attractive is this person?" and "How violated would you feel?" The subject's perception of violation was deemed to be a measure of the perceived level of coercion based on the assumption that a sexual advance is coercive in that the recipient neither chooses nor desires it. This lack of choice and desire is embodied in how violated the recipient feels.

Written responses were required to the statement, "In your own words, explain how you would feel and react to this situation if it actually happened to you." Demographic information including age, marital status, sexual orientation, ethnic background, and income level was collected from each participant.

### *Procedure*

One of the investigators provided potential subjects with a brief verbal description of the study including the fact that the study would be an examination of people's reactions to interpersonal events that might be viewed as intimate or sexual in nature. They were then invited to participate by taking one packet to complete at home. Each packet contained a more detailed written description of the research as part of an informed consent form and one survey consisting of exactly one of the six possible versions of the vignette together with a questionnaire. To obtain even and random distribution among the participants, the surveys were arranged such that each successive set of six surveys included a random ordering of all six vignette versions. During the subsequent class period, the signed consent forms and surveys were collected in separate envelopes to ensure participant anonymity. After the surveys had been collected from all the classes

involved, participants were provided with a written explanation of the research.

## RESULTS

### *Manipulation Checks*

A  $2 \times 3$  (Initiator Attractiveness  $\times$  Level of Coercion) analysis of variance was conducted on the ratings of perceived violation associated with each scenario. Significant main effects were found for coercion,  $F(2,138) = 34.42$ ,  $p < .001$ , and for attractiveness,  $F(1,138) = 12.03$ ,  $p < .01$ . The interaction was not significant.

Simple main effects analysis revealed that the mean ratings of perceived violation for each of the three coercion conditions differed significantly thus showing the coercion manipulation to be successful. With the midrange score of 4 dividing the 7-point scale into low and high ratings, it was found that in the low coercion scenario, subjects' ratings of perceived violation fell in the moderately low range of the scale ( $M = 3.19$ ); in the medium coercion condition, the ratings were in the moderately high range ( $M = 5.26$ ); and for the high coercion scenario, the ratings fell in the high range ( $M = 6.07$ ).

The attractiveness of the initiator affected the ratings of perceived violation. In particular, across coercion conditions the subjects rated the behavior of an attractive initiator as less violating ( $M = 4.26$ ) than that of an unattractive one ( $M = 5.34$ ).

A  $2 \times 3$  (Initiator Attractiveness  $\times$  Level of Coercion) analysis of variance was also conducted on the perceived physical attractiveness ratings of the initiator. Significant main effects were found for attractiveness,  $F(1,134) = 80.09$ ,  $p < .001$ , and for coercion,  $F(2,134) = 13.33$ ,  $p < .001$ . A significant interaction effect,  $F(2,134) = 3.96$ ,  $p < .05$ , was also observed.

Post hoc comparisons, conducted to interpret the interaction, indicated that the initiator who was described as unattractive was perceived by participants as being highly unattractive regardless of the amount of coercion that accompanied the sexual advance. The ratings of perceived attractiveness in the medium ( $M = 1.43$ ) and high ( $M = 1.38$ ) coercion conditions did not differ, but the low coercion condition rating was significantly higher than the other two ( $M = 2.00$ ). For the initiator who was described as very attractive, the ratings of perceived attractiveness for each of the three levels of coercion differed significantly. In particular, the initiator in the low coercion scenario was seen as moderately attractive ( $M = 5.14$ ), in the medium scenario as more or less neutral in appearance ( $M = 3.81$ ), and in

the high coercion scenario as unattractive ( $M = 2.75$ ). The most coercive initiator, in this case, was regarded as being physically unattractive.

Similarly, simple main effects analysis showed that the ratings of physical attractiveness were affected by the level of coercion depicted in the scenario. The perceived attractiveness ratings of the initiator described as very attractive were, across all scenarios, significantly higher than the corresponding ratings of the initiator described as unattractive. At the low level of coercion, the very attractive initiator was viewed as being moderately attractive ( $M = 5.14$ ) while the unattractive initiator was regarded as very unattractive ( $M = 2.00$ ). In the medium coercion scenario, the very attractive initiator was seen as being neutral in appearance ( $M = 3.81$ ) and the unattractive one as very unattractive ( $M = 1.43$ ). In the high coercion condition, however, the attractiveness ratings of the very attractive ( $M = 2.75$ ) and the unattractive initiator ( $M = 1.38$ ) both fell in the unattractive range of the scale.

#### *Ratings of Overall Effect, Social Acceptability, and Flattery*

The ratings of overall effect, social acceptability, and flattery associated with the vignette were initially analyzed in a  $2 \times 3$  (Initiator Attractiveness  $\times$  Level of Coercion) multivariate analysis of variance. The results yielded significant main effects for both independent variables, coercion,  $F(2,134) = 17.10$ ,  $p < .001$ , and attractiveness,  $F(1,134) = 38.88$ ,  $p < .001$ . In addition, the interaction was statistically significant,  $F(2,134) = 4.66$ ,  $p < .01$ . Univariate analyses of variance were then performed on each of the three dependent variables.

*Overall Effect.* A  $2 \times 3$  (Initiator Attractiveness  $\times$  Level of Coercion) analysis of variance conducted on the ratings of the overall effect of the sexual advance showed significant main effects on both the attractiveness,  $F(1,138) = 24.23$ ,  $p < .001$ , and coercion,  $F(2,138) = 28.21$ ,  $p < .001$ , dimensions. The interaction was not significant. The means of the ratings of overall effect are reported in Table I.

Post hoc comparisons revealed that the mean ratings of the effect of the medium ( $M = 2.19$ ) and high ( $M = 1.89$ ) coercion conditions did not differ from each other. With the midrange score of 4 on the 7-point scale dividing the negative from the positive ratings, it was found that the medium and high scenarios were both viewed as having a very negative effect. The ratings of the effect of the low coercion condition ( $M = 3.62$ ) were significantly higher than those of the medium and high levels and indicate that the gentle kiss scenario was perceived as being only moderately negative in its overall effect.

**Table I.** Mean Ratings of Overall Effect, Social Acceptability, and Flattery by Levels of Coercion and Attractiveness

Dependent Variables at Levels of Attractiveness	Levels of Coercion			
	Low	Medium	High	Across Levels
Overall effect				
Attractive	4.10	2.88	2.08	3.09
Unattractive	3.00	1.48	1.67	2.06
Across attractiveness	3.62	2.19	1.89	
Social acceptability				
Attractive	4.03	2.79	1.92	2.99
Unattractive	2.91	1.43	1.76	2.04
Across attractiveness	3.54	2.13	1.84	
Flattered				
Attractive	4.59	3.04	1.50	3.14
Unattractive	3.52	1.65	1.52	2.25
Across attractiveness	4.12	2.36	1.51	

Although the sexually coercive advances of attractive and unattractive initiators were both seen as having a negative effect, the advances of an attractive initiator ( $M = 3.09$ ) were rated as being significantly less negative than those of an unattractive one ( $M = 2.06$ ).

*Social Acceptability.* Significant main effects for coercion,  $F(2,138) = 18.30$ ,  $p < .001$ , and attractiveness,  $F(1,138) = 13.39$ ,  $p < .001$ , were also found for the ratings of the social acceptability of the sexually coercive advance, as revealed by a  $2 \times 3$  (Initiator Attractiveness  $\times$  Level of Coercion) analysis of variance. The interaction was not significant. The means of the ratings of social acceptability are reported in Table I.

According to simple main effects tests, the mean ratings of the social acceptability of the medium ( $M = 2.13$ ) and high ( $M = 1.84$ ) coercion conditions did not differ. The mean scores were in the low range of the 7-point scale, indicating that both conditions were viewed as representing socially unacceptable situations. The social acceptability ratings of the low coercion scenario ( $M = 3.54$ ) fell in the moderately unacceptable range and were significantly higher than those of the other conditions.

Although the coercive advances of attractive and unattractive initiators were regarded as being socially unacceptable, the behavior of an attractive initiator ( $M = 2.99$ ) was rated as being significantly less unacceptable than that of an unattractive one ( $M = 2.04$ ).

*Flattered.* A  $2 \times 3$  (Initiator Attractiveness  $\times$  Level of Coercion) analysis of variance was conducted on the ratings of flattery associated with the coercive sexual advance, subsequently referred to as the flattered ratings. Results indicated significant main effects on both the attractiveness,



$F(1,138) = 11.90, p < .01$ , and coercion,  $F(2, 138) = 40.84, p < .001$ , dimensions. In addition, a significant interaction,  $F(2,138) = 3.02, p = .05$ , was obtained. The means of the flattered ratings are reported in Table I.

Simple main effects analysis was conducted to interpret the interaction. Subjects in both the low and medium coercion conditions rated the attentions of an attractive initiator as more flattering than those of an unattractive one. In particular, the advances of an attractive initiator in the low coercion scenario were rated as moderately flattering ( $M = 4.59$ ) and those of an unattractive one were moderately unflattering ( $M = 3.52$ ). In the medium coercion condition, the attractive initiator's advances were perceived as being only moderately unflattering ( $M = 3.04$ ) while those of the unattractive one were strongly unflattering ( $M = 1.65$ ). Only in the high coercion condition were the advances viewed as being equally strongly unflattering regardless of the attractiveness level of the initiator ( $M = 1.50$  for attractive,  $M = 1.52$  for unattractive).

Similarly, simple main effects tests revealed that the flattered ratings were affected by the level of coercion associated with each of the three conditions. In particular, for the initiator described as very attractive, subjects' flattered ratings fell in the moderately high range of the scale in the low coercion scenario ( $M = 4.59$ ), in the moderately low range in the medium coercion scenario ( $M = 3.04$ ), and in the very low range in the high coercion condition ( $M = 1.50$ ). For the initiator described as unattractive, however, low coercion was associated with moderately low flattered ratings ( $M = 3.52$ ), while the ratings for medium and high coercion were very low and did not differ significantly ( $M = 1.65$  for medium,  $M = 1.52$  for high).

### *Sexual Outcome*

When asked if they would engage in further sexual activity with the initiator, with the midpoint score of 4 dividing the 7-point scale between the lower half consisting of those "not likely" to and the upper half consisting of those more "likely" to, 68% of participants in the attractive condition reported scores below the midpoint while 15% reported scores above it. In the unattractive condition, 89% reported scores below the midpoint and 6% above it. A  $\chi^2$  test performed on the corresponding frequency data indicated that the frequencies differed significantly,  $\chi^2(1, N = 127) = 4.43, p < .05$ .

### *Regression Analysis*

In order to see which of the measures collected best predicted the effect of the coercive sexual advance, a regression analysis was performed.

As we had no a priori expectation as to which of the variables was most important, a forward stepwise procedure was used. In addition, although the high values of the correlation coefficients for all the measures (see Table II) indicated multicollinearity, we chose not to eliminate variables from the analysis based on this intercorrelation since our regression analysis was exploratory, not hypothesis testing. Thus, the variables that entered in the analysis were social acceptability, flattered, helpless, romantic, responsible, aroused, violated, perceived attractiveness of the initiator, the likelihood of a future relationship, the likelihood of further sexual activity, and the likelihood of reporting the incident.

The resulting regression equation included the variables flattered, social acceptability, violated, and the likelihood of a future relationship. The specific results of the analysis are given in Table III. It can be seen that how flattered a woman anticipated feeling by the attentions of her casual male acquaintance best predicted the effect of the coercive sexual advance on her ( $R^2 = .61$ ). The more flattered she expected to feel, the more positive the effect of the advance. The next best predictor was the perceived social acceptability of the sexually coercive act; the more socially acceptable, the more positively it was viewed. How sexually coercive the act was deemed to be, as measured by the feeling of being violated, was the next predictor. In particular, the more coercive the advance was perceived to be, the more negative its effect. The final predictor of the advance's effect on the woman was her expectation of developing a future relationship with her male acquaintance. When she anticipated that a future relationship was

Table II. Intercorrelations Among All Dependent Variables

Dependent Variable	2	3	4	5	6	7	8	9	10
1. Overall effect	.76 <sup>b</sup>	.76 <sup>b</sup>	-.18 <sup>a</sup>	.71 <sup>b</sup>	.34 <sup>b</sup>	.74 <sup>b</sup>	.73 <sup>b</sup>	.42 <sup>b</sup>	-.32 <sup>b</sup>
2. Social acceptability	—	.72 <sup>b</sup>	-.22 <sup>b</sup>	.64 <sup>b</sup>	.29 <sup>b</sup>	.66 <sup>b</sup>	.65 <sup>b</sup>	.39 <sup>b</sup>	-.29 <sup>b</sup>
3. Flattered		—	-.09	.69 <sup>b</sup>	.37 <sup>b</sup>	.74 <sup>b</sup>	.72 <sup>b</sup>	.35 <sup>b</sup>	-.36 <sup>b</sup>
4. Helplessness			—	-.16 <sup>a</sup>	.30 <sup>b</sup>	-.09	-.15	-.01	.14
5. Romantic				—	.38 <sup>b</sup>	.85 <sup>b</sup>	.77 <sup>b</sup>	.45 <sup>b</sup>	-.18 <sup>a</sup>
6. Responsible					—	.39 <sup>b</sup>	.41 <sup>b</sup>	.15	.00
7. Aroused						—	.77 <sup>b</sup>	.51 <sup>b</sup>	-.23 <sup>b</sup>
8. Likelihood of future relationship							—	.51 <sup>b</sup>	-.26 <sup>b</sup>
9. Likelihood of further sexual activity								—	-.14
10. Likelihood of reporting incident									—

<sup>a</sup> $p < .05$ .

<sup>b</sup> $p < .01$ .

**Table III.** Summary of Hierarchical Regression Analysis for Variables Predicting the Overall Effect of a Coercive Sexual Advance ( $N = 134$ )

Dependent Variable	Predictor Variable	$R$	$R^2$	$\beta$
Overall effect	Flattered	.78	.61	.29 <sup>b</sup>
	Social acceptability	.84	.71	.31 <sup>b</sup>
	Violated (perceived coerciveness)	.86	.74	-.22 <sup>b</sup>
	Likelihood of future relationship	.87	.75	.17 <sup>a</sup>

<sup>a</sup> $p < .05$ .<sup>b</sup> $p < .01$ .

a possibility, she was more positively affected by his sexual advances. Overall, the four variables accounted for 75% of the variance.

## DISCUSSION

The use of sexually coercive behavior to attain sexual goals has long been a societal problem. Both genders use it and both are victims of it. The results of this study have confirmed that the reactions of women who are victims of such behavior are influenced by the level of coercion used in a given situation and by the physical attractiveness of the male initiator. As was expected, based on Struckman-Johnson and Struckman-Johnson's (1993) results, women anticipated responding more positively to the sexual advances of a casual male acquaintance using low levels of coercion than to those of one using higher levels. Their reactions were also, as predicted, more positive in response to an attractive initiator than to an unattractive one.

Women indicated that being the target of a coercive act would, overall, affect them negatively. How negatively, however, depended on the level of coercion used. They expected, for example, to be very negatively affected when either their breasts or genitals were touched. Their feelings, however, were more neutral when they anticipated being gently touched and kissed by their casual male acquaintance. This last result is contrary to the finding that women react very negatively to almost all forms of sexual coercion, from kissing to fondling (Christopher, 1988; Struckman-Johnson & Struckman-Johnson, 1993). At all coercion levels, fear was a frequently expressed reaction, with some participants indicating that they would bite, kick, and scream in order to escape from their perceived attacker.

While all of the sexually coercive acts represented in the vignettes were regarded as being socially unacceptable, the gentle touch and kiss was seen as only moderately so, while the gentle breast touch and more forceful

genital touch were viewed as highly unacceptable. Despite this, on average women anticipated feeling mildly flattered by the sexual advances that employed lower levels of coercion. The majority of respondents indicated nonetheless that they would choose not to engage in any further sexual activity. Most wrote that they would simply ask the male acquaintance to leave. In such situations, women may see themselves as the objects of a seduction rather than as victims.

The results of this study add to the beauty bias literature yet another situation in which physically attractive people are judged less harshly when they err. In particular, it was found that at lower levels of coercion, initiator attractiveness redefined the sexually coercive encounter. This was seen clearly in the women's ratings of how flattered they would be by the sexual advances of the initiator. In reaction to low and medium levels of coercion, women anticipated feeling more flattered by the advances of an attractive initiator than by those of an unattractive one. In addition, regardless of the amount of coercion used, women regarded the sexually coercive actions of an attractive initiator as having a less negative effect and as being more socially acceptable than those of an unattractive one. These results extend to women Struckman-Johnson and Struckman-Johnson's (1994) finding that initiator physical attractiveness influences men's reactions to sexual advances.

The causes of this beauty bias are unclear, but the results of the regression analysis point to the importance of flattery when a woman experiences a sexual advance. We can speculate that the attentions of an attractive male who employs low levels of coercion are for some women flattering, leading them to interpret the event in a less negative light. Untangling the social cognitive processes involved is a task left to future research.

The use of high levels of coercion affects the perceptions of the other attributes of an initiator. The results of this study show that the use of sexual coercion can change a female recipient's perspective of attractiveness. In particular, at high levels of coercion, the distinction between attractive and unattractive was blurred, as women viewed both physically attractive and physically unattractive males as unattractive. Perhaps women are unable to consider a man who carries out a highly coercive act as physically attractive, or maybe they are simply expressing their disapproval of him by giving him a low physical attractiveness rating. Future research should be aware that manipulations of coercion can change the way in which the initiator is perceived. There is, unfortunately, no way to completely control for this effect. However, to allow the investigator to better define the processes involved in these judgments, perceptions of the initia-

tor could be measured on a greater variety of dimensions. Other terms for "attractive," such as "handsome," could also be used.

Interestingly, women's anticipated resistance strategies to the coercive situations depicted in the vignettes varied a great deal. Although most felt physical resistance was necessary only at the highest level of coercion, some anticipated reacting violently to the low level kiss scenario. The beliefs, attitudes, and personality characteristics of women who are willing to resort to physical resistance in response to sexually coercive strategies may be a fruitful area of future research. How their responses are changed by their relationship with the initiator also warrants investigation. Such information may prove helpful in uncovering ways to avoid escalation of the use of violence in situations in which sexual coercion is employed.

The use of vignettes is a limitation of this research. The scenarios are clearly not equivalent to real life. Although some respondents indicated having been in situations similar to those in the vignettes, the majority were forced to deal with the situation as being purely hypothetical. Future research could incorporate the use of video to improve the realism of the scenarios.

A further limitation of this research revolves around its focus on sexual matters. Such matters are often considered private, and thus any research that requires subjects to honestly provide details concerning their sexual feelings and behaviors raises questions about the representativeness of the data.

In conclusion, this research aids in our understanding of gender similarities and differences by extending to women the finding that the attractiveness of an opposite gender perpetrator alters how that person's sexually coercive advances are perceived. It also helps us better comprehend the role played by gender and coercion in people's interpretations of events involving heterosexual interpersonal violence. It is hoped that such knowledge about coercion and the variables that influence it will affect what goes on in our daily lives, our courtrooms, our classrooms and our therapeutic settings.

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