

See discussions, stats, and author profiles for this publication at: <https://www.researchgate.net/publication/15746834>

Sexual arousal to rape and consenting depictions: The importance of the woman's arousal

Article in *Journal of Abnormal Psychology* · December 1980

DOI: 10.1037/0021-843X.89.6.763 · Source: PubMed

CITATIONS

130

READS

949

2 authors, including:



[Neil M Malamuth](#)

University of California, Los Angeles

139 PUBLICATIONS 13,914 CITATIONS

SEE PROFILE

Sexual Arousal to Rape and Consenting Depictions: The Importance of the Woman's Arousal

Neil M. Malamuth and James V. P. Check
University of Manitoba, Winnipeg, Canada

In order to pinpoint the elements in rape portrayals that inhibit the arousal of nondeviants, 143 male and female undergraduate students were randomly assigned to read one of eight versions of an erotic passage. The independent variables manipulated in the stories were consent (nonconsent vs. consent), outcome (woman's arousal vs. disgust) and pain (woman's pain vs. no pain). Sex of subject was the fourth independent variable in a fully crossed $2 \times 2 \times 2 \times 2$ factorial design. The data indicated that both in terms of experimentally manipulated variables and individual within-cell perceptual differences, the outcome dimension was the only variable that significantly affected subjects' sexual arousal, $F(1, 127) = 9.35, p < .004$. Portrayals that depicted the woman as experiencing sexual arousal, irrespective of whether they portrayed rape or consenting interactions, were reported by subjects to be more sexually stimulating than those depicting the woman's disgust.

Abel, Barlow, Blanchard, and Guild (1977) found that rapists evidenced about equal levels of penile tumescence to audiotaped portrayals of both rape and consenting sexual acts, whereas nonrapists showed higher arousal (both in self-report and tumescence measures) to the consenting depictions. These investigators suggest that sexual responsivity to rape relative to consenting themes may be a measure of a "proclivity to rape" that can be used in the diagnosis and treatment of rapists. Some support for the possibility that such a measure may also assess aggressive tendencies in nondeviants comes from research showing that sexual arousal to certain types of rape as contrasted with arousal to consenting portrayals is positively correlated for male college students with self-reported possibility of raping (Malamuth & Check, in press; Malamuth, Haber, & Feshbach, 1980) and with levels of aversive noise that subjects choose to deliver to a female (Malamuth, Note 1).

Examination of the differences between the sexual arousal of rapists and nonrapists points to elements within rape portrayals that inhibit the arousal of nonrapists but not that of rapists (Barbaree, Marshall, & Lanthier, 1979). There are at least three dimensions that differentiate between the rape and consenting portrayals that may account for the inhibitory effect: (a) The nonrape portrayals describe the woman as consenting, whereas the rape vignettes indicate that she does not consent to the sexual acts (i.e., the consent dimension); (b) in the nonrape depictions the woman is portrayed as becoming sexually aroused and deriving pleasure, whereas in the rape depictions she abhors and is disgusted by the experience (i.e., the outcome dimension); (c) in the nonrape portrayals the woman does not experience pain, whereas in the rape portrayals she does (i.e., the pain dimension).

Two previous studies examined the effects of the dimensions outlined above (Malamuth & Check, in press; Malamuth, Heim, & Feshbach, 1980). These studies, using self-reported and penile tumescence measures of sexual arousal, implicated the outcome dimension as responsible for differences in nondeviants' arousal to rape versus consenting portrayals. However, these experiments did not fully analyze the potential main and interactive effects of these dimensions, because they only manipulated a subset of the

This study was supported by Grant 410-78-0607-R1 from the Social Sciences and Humanities Research Council of Canada to the first author. The authors would like to thank David Bronstein and Kathy McClintock for their help in conducting this experiment.

Requests for reprints should be addressed to Neil M. Malamuth, Department of Psychology, University of Manitoba, Winnipeg, Manitoba, R3T 2N2 Canada.

dimensions described. The present study employed a fully crossed factorial design that included systematic manipulations of each of the relevant dimensions.

Method

Subjects

The subjects were 77 male and 66 female students at the University of Manitoba. Students from an introductory psychology class signed up for the experiment, and those from a social psychology class participated within a course lecture. Preliminary analyses of the sexual arousal data with class as a variable indicated negligible differences, thus justifying collapsing across this variable. Within each sex, approximately equal numbers of subjects were randomly assigned to each experimental condition (story).

Materials

Stories. Eight versions of an erotic story of about 1,000 words were constructed. The independent variables manipulated in the content of the stories¹ were consent (nonconsent vs. consent), pain (pain vs. no pain), and outcome (woman's arousal vs. woman's disgust).

Questionnaire. Sexual arousal was measured on an 11-point scale ranging from 0% to 100%. For nondeviant populations, self-reported sexual arousal has been generally found to correlate quite highly with genital measures (e.g., Abel et al., 1977). The magnitude of correlations typically has ranged from .40 to .70, although there seems to be less correspondence for women than for men (Hatch, 1979). It is now recognized that physiological measures, as well as, of course, self-reports, may be voluntarily altered by subjects sufficiently motivated to do so (e.g., Laws & Holmen, 1978).

Since the present study focused on the sexual responses of nondeviants, it was important to obtain a relatively representative sample. To this end, only self-reported measures of sexual arousal were used in light of research indicating important differences in sexual attitudes, personality indices, and sexual behavior between volunteers and nonvolunteers for research using genital measures (e.g., Farkas, Sine, & Evans, 1978). In contrast, research has generally not shown such differences between volunteers and nonvolunteers for sex research using questionnaires (Barker & Perlman, 1975). The use of self-reported sexual arousal allowed the present study to be carried out within an intact class in which virtually all subjects participated as well as with volunteers who signed up for the study.

Items on the questionnaire assessed perceptions of the woman's willingness on a 10-point scale and the woman's pleasure and pain on 9-point scales. These were used as manipulation checks and to examine relationships between perceptions of the stories and sexual arousal.

Procedure

Subjects were run in groups of from 15 to 55 subjects. At the session's beginning, it was stated that the stories contained pornography that some might find offensive, that responses were completely anonymous, and that anyone was free to leave at any time without any penalty. No subject left the room. Subjects were also told that they were under no obligation to fill out the materials. Each subject was then given one version of the story with a questionnaire to complete after reading the story. Also attached was an envelope with a written debriefing, which subjects read after completing the questionnaire. The debriefing of subjects who read rape depictions stressed the true horror of rape and presented several points intended to dispel a number of rape myths.

Results

Manipulation Checks

Perceptions of the woman's willingness, pleasure, and pain were analyzed with a 2 (consent) \times 2 (pain) \times 2 (outcome) \times 2 (sex of subject) multivariate analysis of variance (MANOVA). This analysis yielded an effect of all three story variables on the total item set, $F(3, 125) > 33$, $p < .0001$, for each variable. The results are summarized in Table 1. Univariate analyses indicated that the consent variable had effects on all three perception items, the pain variable affected only perceptions of pain, and the outcome variable yielded effects on both perceptions of pleasure and willingness (Table 1). Standardized discriminant function coefficients, however, which assess each dependent variable's unique relationship to a given effect, revealed that each manipulation had its unique effect on its corresponding manipulation check (rows 3, 7, and 11 of Table 1).

These data indicate that the consent, pain, and outcome dimensions were effectively manipulated. However, it also appears that in people's perceptions there exists some association between certain variables such that the manipulation of one of these may also be perceived as affecting another (e.g., rape depictions may be

¹ Copies of the stories are available upon request from the first author.

perceived as involving more pain than consenting portrayals even if the same amount of pain is actually described).

Sexual Arousal

Ratings of sexual arousal were affected only by outcome, $F(1, 127) = 9.35, p < .004$, with higher levels to the arousal outcome ($M = 41.9\%$) than to the disgust outcome ($M = 29.3\%$) depictions. Examination of the cell means shows that this difference was consistent for each gender for both rape and consenting depictions. There was also a sex of subject effect, $F(1, 127) = 10.25, p < .003$, with males ($M = 41.7\%$) reporting more sexual arousal than females ($M = 28.6\%$).

To determine the extent to which the data herein correspond to those of Abel et al. (1977), a planned comparison was made between the two conditions comparable to those used in their research—the consenting, arousal outcome, no-pain condition versus the nonconsenting, disgust outcome, pain condition. As expected, sexual arousal in the former condition ($M = 46.5\%$) was greater than in the latter condition ($M = 29.3\%$), $F(1, 127) = 4.70, p < .05$.

Within-Cell Relationships

An analysis was carried out to determine to what extent subjects' individual differences in perceptions of each of the stories related to sexual arousal. The average within-cell correlations were calculated between sexual arousal to the stories and perceptions of these stories (i.e., woman's willingness, pain, and pleasure). Consistent with the between-cells results, sexual arousal correlated only with perceptions of the woman's pleasure, $r(141) = .35, p < .001$.

Discussion

Both in terms of experimentally manipulated variables and individual within-cell perceptual differences, the data clearly indicate that the woman's sexual arousal was the only variable that significantly affected subjects' sexual arousal. Depictions of the woman as experiencing sexual arousal were more sexually stimulating than those depicting the woman's disgust. Similarly, average within-cell correlations indicated that only perceptions of the woman's pleasure correlated with subjects' sexual arousal.

The importance of the outcome dimension might be related to sex role socialization within the context of sexual gaming (Clark & Lewis, 1977). The traditional sexual scripts (Gagnon & Simon, 1973) that people are frequently brought up with dictate that women are not supposed to

Table 1
Effects of the Consent, Pain, and Outcome Variables on Perception of the Woman's Experience

Story variable	Perception of the woman's experience		
	Willingness	Pain	Pleasure
Consent			
Nonconsent <i>M</i>	3.48	5.92	3.37
Consent <i>M</i>	7.46	4.46	5.33
DFC	.72	-.27	.43
<i>F</i> (1, 127)	77.26**	35.57**	23.86**
Pain			
Pain <i>M</i>	5.22	6.64	4.27
No pain <i>M</i>	5.77	3.62	4.45
DFC	.11	1.02	.03
<i>F</i> (1, 127)	1.33	101.12**	.25
Outcome			
Disgust <i>M</i>	4.59	5.39	2.58
Arousal <i>M</i>	6.36	4.97	6.11
DFC	.12	-.01	.95
<i>F</i> (1, 127)	15.97*	2.75	115.97**

Note. DFC = discriminant function coefficient. For a discussion of discriminant function analysis, see Tatsuoka (1971).

* $p < .001$. ** $p < .0001$.

openly indicate their sexual interest (Clark & Lewis, 1977). Thus, people may learn to focus on the woman's perceived sexual responses as the true index of her desires while ignoring other sources of information. Consequently, if a woman is perceived as disgusted by sexual acts, subjects' sexual arousal may be inhibited irrespective of other indications she may give of her consent. Indications that the woman is sexually aroused, in contrast, may create a context wherein other potential inhibitors (e.g., lack of consent, pain, violence, presence of a knife, etc.) have no effect.

Reference Note

1. Malamuth, N. *Predicting male aggression against females*. Unpublished manuscript, University of Manitoba, 1980.

References

- Abel, G. G., Barlow, D. H., Blanchard, E., & Guild, D. The components of rapists' sexual arousal. *Archives of General Psychiatry*, 1977, 34, 895-903.
- Barbaree, H., Marshall, W., & Lanthier, R. Deviant sexual arousal in rapists. *Behaviour Research and Therapy*, 1979, 17, 215-222.

- Barker, W. J., & Perlman, D. Volunteer bias and personality traits in sexual standards research. *Archives of Sexual Behavior*, 1975, 4, 161-171.
- Clark, L., & Lewis, D. *Rape: The price of coercive sexuality*. Toronto, Canada: The Women's Press, 1977.
- Farkas, G. M., Sine, L. F., & Evans, I. M. Personality, sexuality, and demographic differences between volunteers and nonvolunteers for a laboratory study of male sexual behavior. *Archives of Sexual Behavior*, 1978, 7, 513-520.
- Gagnon, J., & Simon, W. *Sexual conduct: The social sources of human sexuality*. Chicago: Aldine, 1973.
- Hatch, J. Vaginal photoplethysmography: Methodological considerations. *Archives of Sexual Behavior*, 1979, 8, 357-374.
- Laws, D. R., & Holmen, M. L. Sexual response faking by pedophiles. *Criminal Justice and Behavior*, 1978, 5, 343-356.
- Malamuth, N., & Check, J. Penile tumescence and perceptual responses to rape as a function of victim's perceived responses. *Journal of Applied Social Psychology*, in press.
- Malamuth, N., Haber, S., & Feshbach, S. Testing hypotheses regarding rape: Exposure of sexual violence, sex differences, and the "normality" of rape. *Journal of Research in Personality*, 1980, 14, 121-137.
- Malamuth, N., Heim, M., & Feshbach, S. Sexual responsiveness of college students to rape depictions: Inhibitory and disinhibitory effects. *Journal of Personality and Social Psychology*, 1980, 38, 399-408.
- Tatsuoka, M. *Multivariate analysis: Techniques for educational and psychological research*. New York: Wiley, 1971.

Received March 31, 1980

Revision received August 18, 1980 ■