

## **Sexual Assault Perpetration and Possible Correlates: Examining the ASB and RMA Scales**

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### **Abstract**

Interpersonal violence perpetration, such as sexual assault, has serious and lasting consequences. Previous research has studied the link between sexual assault perpetration and various attitudes, including both rape myth acceptance (RMA), the endorsement of beliefs that exonerate the perpetrator and blame the victim, and adversarial sexual beliefs (ASB), the endorsement of beliefs that men and women have negative intentions regarding the other sex and are sexually demanding or inept. However, research assessing the relationship between RMA and ASB and ASB and perpetration is limited and dated. There is also a need for updated sexual assault perpetration prevalence among college students. Therefore, the objectives of this study were 1) to provide updated estimates of prevalence of perpetration and overall endorsement of RMA and ASB, and relative endorsement of each item; 2) to examine the relationships among individual RMA items and overall ASB agreement; and 3) to determine whether ASB predicts perpetration. Respondents (n=212), who were introductory psychology students, completed an online, IRB-approved questionnaire that included demographic items, the RMA survey (20 items), the ASB survey (9 items), and the Sexual Experiences Survey Short-Form Perpetration (7 items). Analyses revealed that, overall, participants were not likely to agree with adversarial attitudes about sex or adhere to rape myths, although there was variability among individual RMA and ASB items. Furthermore, a linear multiple regression analysis demonstrated that agreement with the RMA items significantly predicted overall ASB endorsement. Two items of the RMA survey, “rape accusations as revenge” and “ambiguous consent,” were significant predictors of responses on the ASB scale. However, a binary logistic regression yielded no significant relationship between ASB and perpetration. In nine t-tests for each ASB item, three items were significantly different between men and women, with men having more highly endorsed two items, “A man’s got to show the woman who’s boss right from the start or he’ll end up nagged” and “In a dating relationship, a woman is largely out to take advantage of a man”, and women having more highly endorsed one item, “Men are out for only one thing.” Limitations of the study and implications of these findings are discussed.

**Keywords: Attitudes, Sexual Assault Perpetration, Rape Myth Acceptance, Adversarial Sexual Beliefs**

### **1. Introduction**

Sexual assault perpetration is pervasive among the college population, with approximately one-third of men having committed some form of sexual assault perpetration<sup>1</sup>. Approximately three decades ago, researchers<sup>2</sup> found that 34 out of every 1,000 college men (29.41%) reported attempted or completed sexual assault perpetration. In a more recent study just over 26% of senior females reported nonconsensual sexual contact since starting college<sup>3</sup>. These results suggest that the prevalence of sexual assaults at colleges has been fairly stable over time, although there are variations among colleges<sup>3</sup>.

It should also be noted that there are long lasting effects of these behaviors on the victims of sexual assault, including mental effects such as anxiety, depression, and Post Traumatic Stress Disorder<sup>4, 5</sup>, as well as physical symptoms of

distress<sup>6</sup>. Additionally, physical trauma and health consequences of rape are common, with 25% to 45% of victims having suffered from nongenital trauma, 19% to 22% having suffered from genital trauma, and up to 40% contracting sexually transmitted diseases<sup>7</sup>. Factors such as self-stigma, the alienation of oneself as being different than others, makes these symptoms even more severe<sup>8</sup>. Therefore, it is critical to understand what factors contribute to perpetration behavior.

Previous research has shown that attitudes are related to behavior<sup>9,10,11</sup>, including sexual violence behavior<sup>12,13</sup>. Two supporting theories of the attitude-behavior connection are the Theory of Reasoned Action (TRA)<sup>14</sup> and the Theory of Planned Behavior (TPB)<sup>15</sup>. The TRA postulates two determinants of behavior. The first determinant is one's attitude toward the behavior, or whether they want to commit it, and the second is social norms, or whether others will approve of or disapprove of the behavior. The TPB, on the other hand, postulates the same two determinants of behavior and adds a third element of perceived behavioral control, which is the ease or difficulty with which the behavior can be performed. In one study where TPB was applied, it was found that when there was an intent to sexually abuse, social norms were no longer significant predictors of behavior. Rather, the first and third determinant were the most significant predictors, which were applied as the desire to commit sexual assault and the perceived ease or difficulty of performing it<sup>12</sup>.

These findings align with research regarding Rape Myth Acceptance (RMA), which is the endorsement of beliefs that blame the victim and exonerate the perpetrator. RMA has been shown to predict sexual assault perpetration<sup>16</sup> and rape proclivity<sup>17</sup>. In relation to the TPB, RMA is part of the first determinant (one's attitude towards the behavior). However, the TPB suggests that endorsement of rape myths alone may not predict sexual assault unless the perpetrator also believes they would get away with the assault.

Along with acceptance of rape myths, other attitudes are linked to sexual assault perpetration such as acceptance of interpersonal violence<sup>13</sup>, traditional attitudes toward female sexuality<sup>18</sup>, and hostile masculinity<sup>19</sup>. Among the less recently studied attitudes that predict sexual assault behavior is Adversarial Sexual Beliefs (ASB), which is the endorsement of beliefs that men and women have negative intentions regarding the other sex and are sexually demanding or inept. ASB has been found to have a positive correlation with RMA<sup>20,18</sup>, and like RMA, ASB and sexual coercion behaviors are correlated<sup>21</sup>. Due to the variable nature of attitudes across time<sup>22</sup>, an updated assessment of the relationship between ASB and RMA and ASB and perpetration is needed. Because RMA and ASB are correlated and have both been found to predict sexual assault perpetration, we predict the following hypotheses for our sample: 1) individual RMA items will predict ASB, and 2) ASB will predict sexual assault perpetration. An updated measure of perpetration prevalence will also be provided and discussed.

## 2. Method

### 2.1. Participants And Procedure

Participants ( $n = 210$ ) were undergraduate students from a large southeastern university. Data were cleaned by removing data from those who did not consent, from respondents who took the survey more than once, from participants who failed the manipulation checks, and from those who took less than five minutes to complete the survey. Students were recruited via the introductory psychology research participation system and received course credit or extra credit for their input. Access to the survey was granted to those who consented, and the survey took an average of 25 minutes to complete. Participants consisted of 152 females (72.4%), 56 males (26.7%), and one who identified as other (.5%), and ages ranged from 18 to 49 ( $M = 20.45$ ,  $SD = 4.73$ ). Students indicated their race, resulting in a sample of 54.8% Caucasian, 22.4% African American, 8.6% Hispanic, Latino, or Spanish, 5.7% Asian, 5.7% multi-racial, 1% Middle Eastern or Middle Eastern American, 1% Native Hawaiian or other Pacific Islander, and 2% "other." There were eight researcher-identified perpetrators (3.83%), with three male and five female perpetrators as defined by either attempted or completed sexual assault behaviors.

### 2.2. Measures

Because the survey was conducted as part of a larger study, data were only collected from responses to three of the measures given. Participants responded to a modified version of the Sexual Experiences Survey Short-Form Perpetration<sup>22</sup>, the Adversarial Sexual Beliefs scale<sup>20</sup>, and the original Illinois Rape Myth Acceptance Scale Short-Form<sup>23</sup>. Participants also responded to demographic questions regarding whether they had ever perpetrated sexual

assault and if they had been formally accused of sexual assault, as well as whether they had been sexually assaulted or raped in their lifetime or since the age of 17.

### *2.2.1. sexual experiences-short form perpetration scale*

The SES-SFP is a modified version of the Sexual Experiences Survey Short-Form Victimization (SES-SFV). The SES-SFV was devised to assess victimization of sexual assault. The SES-SFP includes items from the SES-SFV that were reworded to assess perpetration of sexual assault. The SES-SFP describes seven types of sexual assault, including completed and attempted behaviors. The scale measures five tactics of committing those behaviors, which include two types of verbal coercion, taking advantage of an incapacitated victim, the use of threatening force, and the use of force. An example of an item included in the survey is: "I had oral sex with someone or had someone perform oral sex on me without their consent by threatening to physically harm them or someone close to them." The original scale SES-SFV scale asked two questions for each tactic, those being "how many times in the past 12 months?" and "how many times since age 14?" However, we wanted to assess the perpetration experiences of college students and did not want to limit the assessment to a year, so we modified the scale to ask, "approximately how many times since age 17?" and "to how many people?" for each tactic. A binary variable was created based on the response to the "how many times since 17?" question for each of the five possible tactics under each scenario. Participants who indicated that they had engaged in at least one of the behaviors at least once since age 17 were labelled as a perpetrator.

### *2.2.2. adversarial sexual beliefs scale*

The ASB scale contains nine items. On a 5-point Likert-type scale ranging from 1 (*strongly disagree*) to 5 (*strongly agree*), participants indicated their level of agreement with each item. The scale contains statements that assume an untrustworthy relationship between genders by associating negative intentions toward the opposite gender as well as depicting men as sexually incompetent. An example item is, "Women are usually sweet until they've caught a man, but then they let their true self show." One item of this scale was modified to reflect the modern vernacular of the participants by changing the word "henpecked" to "nagged." For analysis, a sum score was obtained, with the highest possible score (and highest level of agreement) being 45, and the lowest possible score (and greatest amount of disagreement) being 9. The scale has good internal consistency, with a Cronbach's Alpha of .85.

### *2.2.3. rape myth acceptance scale*

The IRMA-SF contains 17 scored, and three filler items that were answered on a 5-point Likert scale. Rape myth acceptance (RMA) is the endorsement of attitudes about rape that exonerate the perpetrator, blame the victim, or undermine the severity or likelihood of the event. An example item included in the survey is: "Women tend to exaggerate how much rape affects them." A sum score was calculated from the 17 items, with the highest score possible (and highest level of agreement) being 85, and the lowest possible score (and the greatest amount of disagreement) being 17. The three filler items serve as manipulation checks. An example item is "All women should have access to self-defense classes." The scale has excellent internal consistency, with a Cronbach's Alpha of .898.

## **3. Results**

In general, most of the participants did not endorse ASB or RMA, with respondents having disagreed overall with items on both the ASB scale ( $M = 2.14$ ) and with items on the RMA scale ( $M = 1.61$ ). For the first hypothesis, which was that individual RMA items would predict ASB, a standard multiple linear regression was used to assess this relationship. When examining the preliminary analyses, none of the assumptions were violated. Agreement with the RMA items significantly predicted overall agreement with the ASB scale,  $F(17, 188) = 6.99$ ,  $p < .001$ , with 38.7% ( $R^2$ ) of the variance in ASB endorsement having been explained by RMA. Two items of the RMA scale significantly predicted ASB endorsement, with "When women are raped, it's often because the way they said 'no' was ambiguous" having made the largest contribution ( $\beta = .315$ ), and "Rape accusations are often used as a way of getting back at men" also having made a significant contribution ( $\beta = .222$ ).

Table 1 *Standard multiple linear regression results of RMA on ASB endorsement*

RMA items	$\beta$	P-values
“When women are raped, it’s often because the way they said ‘no’ was ambiguous”	.315	.000
“Rape accusations are often used as a way of getting back at men”	.222	.000

For the second hypothesis, which was that ASB would predict sexual assault perpetration, a binomial logistic regression was used to identify whether endorsement of ASB would predict researcher-identified sexual assault perpetration. The model was not significant. To determine how gender may have influenced ASB endorsement, further exploratory analyses were conducted through nine independent samples t-tests for each of the ASB items, with gender as the grouping variable and using a Bonferroni adjustment. Three items were significant as follows: “A man’s got to show the woman who’s boss right from the start or he’ll end up nagged”, “In a dating relationship, a woman is largely out to take advantage of a man”, and “Men are out for only one thing.” With each of these items, both men and women either disagreed or strongly disagreed. Expectedly, men showed a higher level of endorsement than women with questions regarding the negative intentions of women, and women showed a higher level of endorsement than men regarding men’s negative intentions.

One objective of this study was to provide an updated prevalence rate of perpetration. In total, there were eight perpetrators (3.83%), with three of those being male and five of those being female. Possible explanations and implications of these results will be discussed.

For the additional demographic questions, the results are as followed: For the perpetration questions, three participants (1.4%) responded that they had sexually assaulted someone, and two participants (1%) responded that they had been formally accused of sexual assaulting someone. For the victimization questions, 27.3% of participants indicated that they had been sexually assaulted within their lifetime, and 10% responded that they had been raped. Since the age of 17, 14.4% of participants responded that they had been sexually assaulted and 6.7% reported that they had been raped.

#### 4. Discussion

The first objectives of this study were to assess the current endorsement of RMA and ASB in college students, as well as the relationship between each attitude. Encouragingly, most people do not endorse ASB, and as other research supports, most people do not endorse RMA either<sup>17</sup>. However, these attitudes are still present among some college students and need to be addressed.

Given that the results show a connection between RMA and ASB, assessing both attitudes when constructing intervention programs is warranted. Due to the lower variance accounted for, it is possible that other attitudinal variables may also contribute to RMA. Past research has attempted to discover these attitudes<sup>20,23</sup>, but the attitudinal scales have been used differently across studies and some scales need to be paired with updated research. A replication of such studies with the adjustment of using the same scales along with other valid scales would provide an updated model of, and more concrete support for the salience of certain attitudes.

The other objectives of this study were to provide an updated assessment of perpetration in college students and assess whether ASB was connected to perpetration. Given that there were only eight perpetrators (3.83%), these results do not align with other studies<sup>1,2</sup> and may have limited our findings for ASB and perpetration. The lower perpetrator count may have occurred due to many of the participants skipping the SES-SFP questions or that the participants were not honest with their responses. To address these issues in future studies, it may be helpful to survey a larger pool of participants, create a greater incentive to complete the survey for those less inclined to do so, and include more reminders throughout the survey of the anonymity of responses.

It should also be noted that even though the sample in this study consisted of more female perpetrators than male perpetrators, these results should be taken with caution. There were a small number of perpetrators, limiting any generalizations about gender differences in sexual assault behaviors. The sample also consisted of mostly females, which may have resulted in more female perpetrators.

There are multiple reasons ASB and sexual assault perpetration may not have been correlated. First, there were not enough perpetrators in the sample to assess this effect. Second, the binomial logistic regression showed that men significantly endorsed more of the ASB items than did women. This could have affected the results because most of the perpetrators were women. These findings could point to other unknown salient attitudinal variables regarding sexual assault perpetration that apply to women, or perhaps to both genders more equally. To assess the likelihood of this possibility, future research should target a population that better captures perpetrators in both quantity and gender diversity. This study was made possible through the use of self-report measures, which were necessary when assessing attitudinally and behaviorally specific questions. However, some limitations may have been created from such measures, such as dishonesty or a lack of participant awareness about which attitudes they truly endorse.

To extend this study, broaden the literature on previously investigated attitudes, and strengthen the connection between attitudes and behavior, future research should also include analyses for how likely each scale predicts sexual assault perpetration. For subsequent behavioral intervention programs, it should be considered that there are different levels of attitudes that occur before the behavior, which may result in variation in effectiveness of the programs. As discussed, according to the Theory of Planned Behavior and the intent to sexually abuse, the attitudes are egregious in nature and the perpetrator rejects perceived social norms that may have prevented such behavior<sup>12</sup>. Therefore, such attitudinal intervention programs would likely be most helpful to an audience with misperceptions about women rather than ill intentions.

Overall, this study further supports the relationship between ASB and RMA and RMA and perpetration. It also lays the groundwork for further analysis into the relationship between ASB and perpetration. Such an investigation could bolster evidence that shows there is a web of attitudinal variables rather than one subset of beliefs that contributes to sexual assault perpetration, which may include beliefs that alienate the opposite sex. The more information known about the complex reasons perpetrators sexually assault, the more effective intervention programs can become.

## 5. Acknowledgements

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## Appendix A

### Illinois Rape Myth Acceptance Scale-Short Form (Lonsway, & Fitzgerald, 1999)

1. If a woman is raped while she is drunk, she is at least somewhat responsible for letting things get out of control.
2. Although most women wouldn't admit it, they generally find being physically forced into sex a real "turn-on."
3. If a woman is willing to "make out" with a guy, then it's no big deal if he goes a little further and has sex.
4. Many women secretly desire to be raped.
5. Most rapists are not caught by the police.
6. If a woman doesn't physically fight back, you can't really say that it was rape.
7. Men from nice middle-class homes almost never rape.
8. Rape accusations are often used as a way of getting back at men.
9. All women should have access to self-defense classes.
10. It is usually only women who dress suggestively that are raped.
11. If the rapist doesn't have a weapon, you really can't call it a rape.
12. Rape is unlikely to happen in the woman's own familiar neighborhood.
13. Women tend to exaggerate how much rape affects them.
14. A lot of women lead a man on and then cry rape.
15. It is preferable that a female police officer conduct the questioning when a woman reports a rape.
16. A woman who "teases" men deserves anything that might happen.
17. When women are raped, it's often because the way they said "no" was ambiguous.
18. Men don't usually intend to force sex on a woman, but sometimes they get too sexually carried away.
19. A woman who dresses in skimpy clothes should not be surprised if a man tries to force her to have sex.
20. Rape happens when a man's sex drive gets out of control.

## Appendix B

### Adversarial Sexual Beliefs Scale (Burt, 1980)

1. A woman will only respect a man who will lay down the law to her.
2. Many women are so demanding sexually that a man just can't satisfy them.
3. A man's got to show the woman who's boss right from the start or he'll end up nagged.
4. Women are usually sweet until they've caught a man, but then they let their true self show.
5. A lot of men talk big, but when it comes down to it, they can't perform well sexually.
6. In a dating relationship, a woman is largely out to take advantage of a man.
7. Men are out for only one thing.
8. Most women are sly and manipulating when they are out to attract a man.
9. A lot of women seem to get pleasure in putting men down.

## Appendix C

### The SES-SFP (Koss et al., 2007)

<b>I fondled, kissed, or rubbed up against the private areas of someone's body (lips, breast/chest, crotch or butt) or removed some of their clothes without their consent (<i>but did not attempt sexual penetration</i>) by:</b>	<b>Approx. how many times since age 17?</b>
a. Telling lies, threatening to end the relationship, threatening to spread rumors about them, making promises about the future I knew were untrue, or continually verbally pressuring them after they said they didn't want to.	<input type="checkbox"/>

b. Showing displeasure, criticizing their sexuality or attractiveness, getting angry but not using physical force after they said they didn't want to.	<input type="checkbox"/>
c. Taking advantage when they were too drunk or out of it to stop what was happening.	<input type="checkbox"/>
d. Threatening to physically harm them or someone close to them.	<input type="checkbox"/>
e. Using force, for example holding them down with my body weight, pinning their arms, or having a weapon.	<input type="checkbox"/>
<b>I had oral sex with someone or had someone perform oral sex on me without their consent by:</b>	<b>Approximately how many times since age 17?</b>
a. Telling lies, threatening to end the relationship, threatening to spread rumors about them, making promises about the future I knew were untrue, or continually verbally pressuring them after they said they didn't want to.	<input type="checkbox"/>
b. Showing displeasure, criticizing their sexuality or attractiveness, getting angry but not using physical force after they said they didn't want to.	<input type="checkbox"/>
c. Taking advantage when they were too drunk or out of it to stop what was happening.	<input type="checkbox"/>
d. Threatening to physically harm them or someone close to them.	<input type="checkbox"/>
e. Using force, for example holding them down with my body weight, pinning their arms, or having a weapon.	<input type="checkbox"/>
<b>Are you male? SKIP LOGIC (only males get this Q)</b>	<b>Approximately how many times since age 17?</b>
<b>I put my penis (men only) or I put my fingers or objects (all respondents) into a woman's vagina without her consent by:</b>	
a. Telling lies, threatening to end the relationship, threatening to spread rumors about them, making promises about the future I knew were untrue, or continually verbally pressuring them after they said they didn't want to.	<input type="checkbox"/>
b. Showing displeasure, criticizing their sexuality or attractiveness, getting angry but not using physical force after they said they didn't want to.	<input type="checkbox"/>
c. Taking advantage when they were too drunk or out of it to stop what was happening.	<input type="checkbox"/>
d. Threatening to physically harm them or someone close to them.	<input type="checkbox"/>
e. Using force, for example holding them down with my body weight, pinning their arms, or having a weapon.	<input type="checkbox"/>
<b>I put in my penis (men only) or I put my fingers or objects (all respondents) into someone's butt without their consent by:</b>	<b>Approximately how many times since age 17?</b>
a. Telling lies, threatening to end the relationship, threatening to spread rumors about them, making promises about the future I knew were untrue, or continually verbally pressuring them after they said they didn't want to.	<input type="checkbox"/>
b. Showing displeasure, criticizing their sexuality or attractiveness, getting angry but not using physical force after they said they didn't want to.	<input type="checkbox"/>



c. Taking advantage when they were too drunk or out of it to stop what was happening.	<input type="checkbox"/>
d. Threatening to physically harm them or someone close to them.	<input type="checkbox"/>
e. Using force, for example holding them down with my body weight, pinning their arms, or having a weapon.	<input type="checkbox"/>
<b>Even though it did not happen, I TRIED to have oral sex with someone or make them have oral sex with me without their consent by:</b>	<b>Approximately how many times since age 17?</b>
a. Telling lies, threatening to end the relationship, threatening to spread rumors about them, making promises about the future I knew were untrue, or continually verbally pressuring them after they said they didn't want to.	<input type="checkbox"/>
b. Showing displeasure, criticizing their sexuality or attractiveness, getting angry but not using physical force after they said they didn't want to.	<input type="checkbox"/>
c. Taking advantage when they were too drunk or out of it to stop what was happening.	<input type="checkbox"/>
d. Threatening to physically harm them or someone close to them.	<input type="checkbox"/>
e. Using force, for example holding them down with my body weight, pinning their arms, or having a weapon.	<input type="checkbox"/>
<b>Even though it did not happen, I TRIED to put in my penis (men only) or I tried to put my fingers or objects (all respondents) into a woman's vagina without their consent by:</b>	<b>Approximately how many times since age 17?</b>
a. Telling lies, threatening to end the relationship, threatening to spread rumors about them, making promises about the future I knew were untrue, or continually verbally pressuring them after they said they didn't want to.	<input type="checkbox"/>
b. Showing displeasure, criticizing their sexuality or attractiveness, getting angry but not using physical force after they said they didn't want to.	<input type="checkbox"/>
c. Taking advantage when they were too drunk or out of it to stop what was happening.	<input type="checkbox"/>
d. Threatening to physically harm them or someone close to them.	<input type="checkbox"/>
e. Using force, for example holding them down with my body weight, pinning their arms, or having a weapon.	<input type="checkbox"/>
<b>Even though it did not happen, I TRIED to put in my penis (men only) or I tried to put my fingers or objects (all respondents) into someone's butt without their consent by:</b>	<b>Approximately how many times since age 17?</b>
a. Telling lies, threatening to end the relationship, threatening to spread rumors about them, making promises about the future I knew were untrue, or continually verbally pressuring them after they said they didn't want to.	<input type="checkbox"/>
b. Showing displeasure, criticizing their sexuality or attractiveness, getting angry but not using physical force after they said they didn't want to.	<input type="checkbox"/>
c. Taking advantage when they were too drunk or out of it to stop what was happening.	<input type="checkbox"/>
d. Threatening to physically harm them or someone close to them.	<input type="checkbox"/>
e. Using force, for example holding them down with my body weight, pinning their arms, or having a weapon.	<input type="checkbox"/>

\*\*This scale was modified by the author to come from a perpetrator's standpoint. The original scale asks "how many times in the past 12 months?," and "How many times since age 14?"