Information Acquisition in Sexual Aggression

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Objective: This study is the first to examine how the manner of searching for information in the social environment is associated with college male students’ self-reports of sexual aggression and attitudes supportive of sexual aggression. Method: A modified MouselabWEB task, a Web-based program for tracing information acquisition processes, was utilized in this study. Asked to imagine themselves in a social situation, participants (N = 167) were tasked to reveal and gather information about 5 women by clicking on and opening “boxes” in a 5 (Number of Women) × 6 (Number of Female Attributes) matrix grid. Female attributes include attractiveness, sharing similar interests, dressing sexy, having an “easy” reputation, being intoxicated, and being alone most of the time. Results: The data suggest that those who engaged in prior sexually aggressive acts and those with attitudes supportive of sexual aggression were more likely to search for information related to a woman’s vulnerability. The manner of searching for sexual aggression-related information also partially mediated the relationship between hostile attitudes toward women and self-reported sexual aggressive behavior. Conclusions: At-risk men actively search for information consistent with their attitudes supportive of sexual violence against women. This study also informs prevention efforts, indicating the viability of intervening at the level of judgment and decision processes.

Keywords: sexual aggression, decision-making, information acquisition, information processing, college males

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Various theoretical models have been put forth to explain sexual aggression (SA; Ward, Polaschek, & Beech, 2006), and a myriad of risk factors have also been outlined in the literature. Beliefs and attitudes such as misogynistic attitudes, rape myth acceptance, acceptance of interpersonal violence, hostility toward women, hypermasculinity, and hostile masculinity were associated with self-reports of prior SA and likelihood toward SA (Abbey, Zawacki, Buck, Clinton, & McAuslan, 2001; Malamuth, Linz, Heavey, Barnes, & Acker, 1995; Murmen, Wright, & Kaluzny, 2002). In studies involving priming paradigms and implicit association tests, the strength of the power–sexuality and women–sex, −hostility, −animal, −object associations predicted higher rape-supportive attitudes and increased likelihood toward SA (Barth, Raymond, Pryor, & Strack, 1995; Leibold & McConnell, 2004; Rudman & Mescher, 2012; Zurbriggen, 2000). In studies utilizing information processing theories (Anderson & Huesmann, 2003; Crick & Dodge, 1994), research using performance measures and/or cognitive tasks suggest that men with high rape-supportive beliefs were less accurate in decoding women’s affect and were more likely to misinterpret a woman’s friendliness as sexual intent (Farris, Viken, Treat, & McFall, 2006; McDonel & McFall, 1991; Treat, McFall, Viken, & Kruschke, 2001). In turn, the frequency of misperceiving a woman’s sexual intent was associated with hostile attitudes toward women and prior SA (Abbey, Jacques-Tiura, & LeBreton, 2011; Bondurant & Donat, 1999). Great strides have been made to understand the social–cognitive processes underlying SA. Unfortunately, information acquisition as it relates to SA has yet to be investigated. In response, the overarching goal for this article is to explore how men gather information in a heterosocial context, and how the manner of information acquisition is associated with self-reports of SA and other variables that place them at a high risk of SA.

Social Cognition, Information Processing, and Sexual Aggression

Information processing theories (Anderson & Huesmann, 2003; Crick & Dodge, 1994) of SA focus on the mechanisms that determine what information is attended to, how it is perceived, and what interpretations and attributions are made (Langton, 2007). Four aggression-related macroprocesses have been identified: (a) attention, encoding, and interpretation of social cues; (b) generation and selection of goals, behaviors, or scripts to guide behavior;
Potential Predictors of Information Acquisition Strategies

Apart from the information processing theory, this study relies on the confluence model of SA (Malamuth, Heavey, & Linz, 1996; Malamuth et al., 1995; Malamuth, Sockloskie, Koss, & Tanaka, 1991) to examine predictors of SA-related information acquisition. The confluence model posits that sexually aggressive behavior is a function of two general constellations of risk factors: hostile masculinity and impersonal sex. The hostile masculinity pathway includes adversarial and hostile beliefs and attitudes about women and about heterosexual relationships, which subsequently justifies the use of force in attaining sexual goals. The impersonal sex pathway is a constellation of beliefs, attitudes, and behaviors suggesting a game-playing and a noncommittal orientation to sexual relations.

We posit that hostile masculinity and impersonal sex attitudes predict an information acquisition strategy that prioritizes SA-relevant information, particularly information associated with the victim’s vulnerability. In selecting which data are relevant, social decision-makers can resort to preexisting knowledge and expectations, schema, scripts, memory, and implicit theories (Fiske & Taylor, 2013; Ward, 2000). Given that attention and cognitive resources are limited, preference is given to schema-consistent information (Gannon, Ward, Beech, & Fisher, 2009). A considerable body of knowledge also indicated that information that confirms prior expectancies is more readily processed (Hamilton & Sherman, 1996). In studies on the misperception of social cues and its relationship with SA, men who hold rape-supportive and misogynistic attitudes are more likely to misperceive a woman’s affect and behavior (Abbey et al., 2011; Farris, Treat, Viken, & McFall, 2008).

As previously mentioned, the confluence model suggests that hostile masculinity and impersonal sex attitudes predict SA (hostile masculinity → SA; impersonal sex → SA). In this study, we hypothesize that hostile masculinity and impersonal sex are associated with SA-related information acquisition (hostile masculinity → SA-related information acquisition; impersonal sex → SA-related information acquisition). In studies utilizing information processing theories, misinterpretation of heterosocial cues is associated with misperception of a woman’s sexual intent and SA (Abbey et al., 2011; Bondurant & Donat, 1999; Farris et al., 2006; McDonel & McFall, 1991; Treat et al., 2001). As such, we hypothesize that SA-related information acquisition is associated with SA (SA-related information acquisition → SA). Combining these patterns of association suggests a mediation model (see Figure 1), which we aim to examine in this article.

The Present Study

The current study represents an initial foray into information acquisition associated with SA. First, utilizing an information board method (i.e., an adapted version of the MouselabWEB; Willemsen & Johnson, 2011, 2012), we aim to describe the normative procedure in gathering information in decision-making in a heterosocial context. Second, we will compare information acquisition strategies between those with and without prior self-reported sexual coercive behaviors, and between those who have high and low scores in measures of attitudes endorsing SA. In this regard, we expect those who previously engaged in sexually coercive behavior, those with more hostile attitudes toward women, and those with more positive attitudes toward sexual dating violence would gather SA-related information more frequently and at the onset of the information acquisition process. Finally, using the
Participants

In total, 174 male research participants from a large Plains State public university volunteered in exchange for course credits in introductory psychology and other psychology courses. Given our emphasis on male-to-female SA, only self-reported heterosexual (n = 162, 97%) and bisexual (n = 5, 3%) male subjects were retained for the subsequent analyses (N = 167, M_age = 20.26, SD = 2.85). Majority self-identified as European American (n = 141, 84%), followed by Asian American (n = 9, 5%), Hispanic (n = 5, 3%), African American (n = 3, 2%), and Native American (n = 1, 1%). Most of the participants were first-year (n = 63, 38%) and second-year (n = 39, 23%) students, followed by seniors (n = 34, 20%) and juniors (n = 30, 18%). The University of Nebraska—Lincoln Institutional Review Board reviewed and approved the research protocol prior to participant recruitment.

Information Board Stimuli and Procedure

The MouselabWEB (Willemsen & Johnson, 2011, 2012; original MouselabWEB HTML and CSS scripts available in http://mouselabweb.org/; HTML and CSS syntax utilized in this study available from the first author’s website, http://www.myweb.ttu.edu/atuliao), an updated version of the original Mouselab (Payne, Bettman, & Johnson, 1988), was used to track the type of information accessed by the participants. Intended to be an analog for recording eye fixation, MouselabWEB measures the order and frequency with which participants search for information. In the instructions (see Supplemental Material I), participants were asked to imagine themselves in a social situation wherein alcohol is freely available. The task requires participants to pick one woman out of five who they want to get to know and pursue romantically/sexually. Information about the five women were presented using a grid matrix, with women as columns and their characteristics as rows (see Figure 2 for the computer interface in which some cells are open and others are closed), with rows and columns randomly counterbalanced. Two of the attributes, which we will label as innocuous, include attractiveness and sharing similar interests. The choice for these two attributes was based on informal conversations with male college students regarding what characteristics they look for when asking someone out on a date. Four attributes, which we will label as SA-related, include dressing sexy, having an “easy” reputation, being intoxicated, and being alone most of the time. Dressing sexy, having an easy reputation, and being intoxicated were lifted from items of the Burt Rape Myth Acceptance Scale (Burt, 1980) that can be converted to an attribute. For example, the item “any female can get raped” is difficult to convert to a characteristic, but the item “in majority of rapes, the victim is promiscuous or has a bad reputation” was converted to “having an ‘easy’ reputation.” All four SA-related attributes were also reported as characteristics that serial sex offenders use to select victims (Beauregard, Rossmo, & Proulx, 2007).

For this study, three revisions were made from the original MouselabWEB. First, the participant must click the box instead of hovering over it to reveal the information. Second, to avoid memory overload, the boxes were left open instead of covering them up after revealing the information. However, one tradeoff of leaving information open is that it may not necessarily mimic cognitive constraints. As a result, the third revision we made was to limit the number of choices to 15 out of 30 possible boxes that can be opened. Owing to the revisions made, we deviated from the conventional analyses suggested by Willemsen and Johnson (2011), which we will discuss in the results. Additional evidence regarding the validity of this task is available in the Supplementary Material II.

Measurements

Hostility toward women. A 10-item Hostility Toward Women Scale (HTW; Lonsway & Fitzgerald, 1995) was used to measure the hostility toward women construct. Typical items include “generally, it is safer not to trust women” and “women are responsible for most of my troubles,” and participants report their agreement to each item using a Likert scale (1 = strongly disagree, 5 = strongly agree). Scores range from 10 to 50, with higher scores indicating higher hostility toward women. Reported internal consistency reliability was .83 (Lonsway & Fitzgerald, 1995), similar to the estimates for this study (α = .84). The HTW was found to be positively associated with various measures of hostile attitudes toward women, rape myth beliefs, adversarial heterosexual beliefs, and acceptance of interpersonal violence (Lonsway & Fitzgerald, 1995).

Attitudes toward male sexual dating violence. A 12-item Attitudes Toward Male Sexual Dating Violence Scale (ATSDV; Price et al., 1999) assesses perceived permissibility of using pressure and force to have sexual intercourse. Sample items include “it is no big deal to pressure a girl into having sex” and “it is alright to pressure a girl to have sex if she has had sex in the past.” Participants report their agreement to each item using a Likert
scale (1 = strongly disagree, 5 = strongly agree). Scores range from 12 to 60, with higher scores indicating more permissive attitudes regarding coercing a date to have sex. Reported internal consistency reliability was .87 (Price et al., 1999) and .89 for this study. Higher ATSDV score was reported to be associated with more traditional gender roles and self-reports of sexually abusive behaviors (Price et al., 1999).

Impersonal sex. Endorsement of and favorable attitudes toward impersonal sex was measured by aggregating the 10-item Brief Sexual Attitudes Scale–Permissiveness subscale (BSAS-P; Hendrick, Hendrick, & Reich, 2006) and three items (“I enjoy casual sex,” “I enjoy casual sex with multiple partners,” and “sex without love is OK”) adapted from other studies (Parkhill & Abbey, 2008; Zawacki, Abbey, Buck, McAuslan, & Clinton-Sherrod, 2003). Sample items for the BSAS-P include “the best sex is with no strings attached” and “it is okay for sex to be just good physical release.” For both scales, participants rate their agreement for each item using a 5-point Likert scale (1 = strongly disagree, 5 = strongly agree). Reported internal consistency reliability for the BSAS-P was .93 (Hendrick et al., 2006), and .76 for the additional three items (Parkhill & Abbey, 2008; Zawacki et al., 2003). For the aggregated scale used in this study, internal consistency reliability was .96. Test–retest correlation for the BSAS-P was .92. Scores range from 13 to 65, with higher scores indicating more permissive attitudes toward impersonal sex. The BSAS-P was found to be negatively correlated with relational satisfaction, partner commitment and self-disclosure, and respect toward partner (Hendrick et al., 2006).

Sexual aggression perpetration. A revised 11-item version of the Sexual Experiences Survey–Males (SES-M; Abbey, McAuslan, Zawacki, Clinton, & Buck, 2001; Koss, Gidycz, & Winstead, 1987; Koss & Oros, 1982) was used in this study to operationalize sexual assault perpetration. The original SES-M (Koss et al., 1987; Koss & Oros, 1982) has 10 items that outline various forms of SA, ranging from unwanted kissing to sexual intercourse without consent, and the means in which victimization was achieved, such as using false promises, threats and intimidation, and physical force (see Table 1 for the items). One item (sexual intercourse where the woman was too intoxicated to resist unwanted sex) was added to the original SES-M in other studies (Abbey et al., 2011, 2001). For each item, participants are asked to divulge committing such acts (0 = no, 1 = yes). Scores range from 0 to 11, with higher scores indicating a higher number of sexually aggressive acts perpetrated. Internal consistency reliability for the original SES-M was reported to be .89 for male college students, and 1-week test–retest reliability had a mean item agreement of 93% (Koss & Gidycz, 1985). Internal consistency reliability for the revised SES-M was .83 (Abbey et al., 2001). For this study, Cronbach’s alpha based on standardized items is .70.

Figure 2. Screenshot of the choice matrix provided in MouselabWEB with some of the cells opened. All cells are initially closed, unless a participant opens it using a mouse, and remains open throughout the task. Rows and columns are randomly counterbalanced. See the online article for the color version of this figure.
Informacja o zdrowiu

A brief description of the study was made available in SONA, an online subject pool management software where undergraduate students in psychology courses can sign up and participate in research. After signing up, a Web link to an online informed consent page was made available. In addition to the usual contents of the informed consent (inclusion/exclusion criteria, risks and benefits, confidentiality statements, etc.), participants were informed that the study is about “how college students make decisions...and how it relates to sexual attitudes and behaviors, and alcohol and substance use.” To help the participants get acquainted with the MouselabWEB task (Willemsen & Johnson, 2011, 2012), participants were asked to complete two practice decision-making tasks involving buying a notebook and buying a computer. Participants were then asked to accomplish the main decision-making tasks involving buying a notebook and buying a computer. Partic-

Data Analysis

To evaluate the hypothesized mediation model (see Figure 1), path analysis using Mplus Version 6.12 (Muthén & Muthén, 2010) was carried out. Owing to the extremely positively skewed distribution and the count nature of SA measure, all paths leading to SES-M were estimated using a Poisson regression (Coxe, West, & Aiken, 2009), and unstandardized path coefficients are interpreted in terms of the log rate. The analog of the standardized path coefficients in Poisson regression is the incidence rate ratio, which is the multiplicative increase in the expected count of sexually aggressive acts per 1-unit increase of a predictor variable. To further account for violations in multivariate normality and missing data, full-information maximum likelihood with robust standard error was used (Enders, 2010; Muthén & Muthén, 2010).

Tests for indirect effects and bootstrap estimates in Mplus are unavailable when using Poisson regression. Instead, a Monte Carlo simulation method was utilized to test indirect effects (Tofighi & MacKinnon, 2011; http://www.amp.gatech.edu/RMediation). The Monte Carlo method produces similar results to bootstrapping, and can be used when conventional bootstrapping procedures are unavailable (Tofighi & MacKinnon, 2011). To interpret, an indirect effect is supposed to exist at $p < .05$ when zero is not included in the 95% confidence interval (CI).

Results

Examining Information Acquisition Patterns

The first aim for this article was to provide a general description of how male college students gather information about women in a social context. To review, the MouselabWEB task asked participants to open 15 boxes out of 30 possible options to reveal female characteristics. Two of the attributes are innocuous (i.e., attractiveness and sharing similar interests) and four are SA-related (i.e., drunk, alone most of the time, dressed sexy, and has an “easy” reputation). Sixty-five percent ($n = 108$) of the participants opened all 15 boxes, whereas $35\%$ ($n = 59$) made a decision with less than 15 units of information. In terms of search patterns, only one participant (1%) utilized a purely person-focused strategy (i.e., opening all characteristics for one person, then moving on and opening all the characteristics of the next person). Nineteen (11%) utilized a purely characteristic-focused strategy (i.e., opening one type of characteristic across five women, then moving on to another characteristic across five women, then on to another characteristic). Twelve of the 19 who used a purely characteristic-focused search strategy opened all boxes related to attractiveness first, followed by all boxes related to sharing similar interests, or
vice versa. Because all boxes related to innocuous characteristic have been exhausted, these participants were “forced” to choose SA-related information for their 11th to 15th choice.

Those who did not use either a purely person-focused strategy or purely characteristic-focused strategy utilized a mixed search strategy \( (n = 147, 88\%) \). Among those who used a mixed strategy, the general trend was to first open all five boxes related to either attractiveness or sharing similar interests, then proceed to opening boxes from other SA-related characteristics \( (n = 89, 53\%) \).

Figure 3A presents the proportion of the participants who chose SA-related attributes across the 15 opportunities to open the box. Results suggest that, for the first five boxes opened, only 17% to 19% of the sample chose SA-related attributes. After the sixth choice, the proportion of the sample who chose SA-related attributes gradually increased, with more than 50% of the sample choosing SA-related attributes at the ninth choice onward. It is important to emphasize here that the maximum number of information items that could be acquired addressing innocuous attributes was 10 (5 women × 2 innocuous attributes). Hence, data suggest that the majority of the participants would first examine all information related to attractiveness and sharing similar interests, and then were subsequently “forced” to gather SA-related attributes after all, or almost all, innocuous information had been exhausted. Furthermore, assuming that information first acquired represents its relative importance in decision-making, the data also suggest information related to attractiveness and sharing similar interests are more important compared with SA-related information.

Information Acquisition, Self-Reports of SA, and Attitudes Supportive of SA

The second aim for this article was to compare information acquisition between those who self-reported committing any SA and those who did not. Of the total 167 participants, 25 (15%) of them reported having committed at least one act of SA as measured by the SES-M (Koss et al., 1987; Koss & Oros, 1982). Table 1 presents the frequency of endorsement of each SES-M item. As Figure 3B suggests, the pattern of information acquisition was similar across groups (i.e., majority of the participants gather information related to attractiveness and sharing similar interests first, followed by SA-related attributes). Using a two-sample \( z \) test for proportions, results suggest that a higher proportion in the SA group chose SA-related attribute \( (p < .10) \) as the first information to gather. Of particular interest too is that a significantly higher proportion of the SA group \( (p < .05) \) switched to choosing SA-related information as early as the sixth and seventh opportunity. This result could suggest that the SA group did not thoroughly exhaust all the innocuous information available first before looking for SA-related information. Alternatively, they may have processed the innocuous information more quickly before attending to information perceived to be more salient.

This article also aimed to compare information acquisition between those who endorsed high and low attitudes permissive of SA. For this study, we compared information acquisition between individuals with low (defined as one standard deviation below the mean) and high (one standard deviation above the mean) scores in the HTW and ATSDV.

Figure 3. Information acquisition patterns of sexual aggression-related information among (A) males \( (n = 167) \), (B) those with \( (n = 25) \) and without \( (n = 142) \) a history of sexual aggression, (C) those with high \( (n = 28) \) and low \( (n = 28) \) hostile attitudes toward women score (HTW), and (D) those with high \( (n = 33) \) and low \( (n = 41) \) positive attitudes toward male sexual dating violence score (ATMSDV). \(^1 p < .10. \ ^{**} p < .05. \ ^{***} p < .01 \) (one-tailed).
Results suggest that a higher proportion of participants with high HTW scores \((n = 28)\) chose more SA-related information in the first nine choices compared with those who scored low \((n = 28)\) on the construct (see Figure 3C). In other words, those with low HTW scores tend to emphasize and gather more innocuous information, and tend to only gather SA-related information after all or most of the innocuous attribute choices (maximum of 10) had been exhausted. This explains the increase in the proportion of low-risk men who sought SA-related attributes at the 11th choice onward. On the other hand, a higher proportion of individuals with high HTW scores tend to prioritize and include the acquisition of SA-related attributes early on in their decision-making process.

Similar patterns were observed when comparing those with low \((n = 41)\) and high \((n = 33)\) scores in the ATSDV (see Figure 3D). Specifically, a significantly higher proportion of participants with high ATSDV scores tend to choose SA-related attributes early in their information acquisition stage. Among those with low scores, information acquisition tends to emphasize gathering innocuous information first, and then gathering SA-related information only after the available innocuous information (maximum of 10) had been exhausted.

Information Acquisition as a Mediating Variable

Using the confluence model as an explanatory framework, the final aim for this article is to examine how the predilection to gathering SA-related information mediates the hostility toward women–SA and impersonal sex–SA relationships. Owing to the modifications made in the MouselabWEB platform, we deviated from the analytical procedures suggested by Willemse and Johnson (2011). As such, we developed our own scoring procedure that reflects frequency of choosing an attribute (number of times an innocuous attribute was chosen vs. the number of times a SA-related attribute was chosen) and the saliency of the information (i.e., the type of attribute chosen first is presumed to be more important to decision-making compared with an attribute chosen much later in the decision-making process). Specifically, the category of attribute chosen first (innocuous or SA-related attribute) will receive a score of 9; the second type of attribute chosen will receive a score of 8; the third and fourth will receive a score of 7; the fifth and sixth receives a score of 6; the seventh, eighth, and ninth receive a score of 5; the 10th and 11th receive a 4; the 12th and 13th receive a 3; the 14th receives a 2; and the 15th receives a 1.

Figure 1 presents the standardized coefficients and the incidence rate ratio. As for the direct effect (path c’), results suggest that only hostility toward women was significantly and positively associated with SA (see Table 2 for descriptive statistics and bivariate correlations). Hostility toward women and impersonal sex (path a) was significantly and positively associated with the scores measuring the tendency to gather SA-related information. The predilection to gathering SA-related information was in turn significantly and positively associated with higher self-reports of SA (path b). Indirect effects from hostility toward women to SA \((b = .016, SE = .008, 95\% \text{ CI } [.002, .037])\) indicate SA-related information acquisition scores partially mediated the relationship, but not for the impersonal sex–SA relationship \((b = .005, SE = .003, 95\% \text{ CI } [0, .013]).\)

Discussion

This study represents the first to examine heterosocial information acquisition patterns among male college students, and how it is associated with prior sexually coercive behavior, hostile attitudes toward women, and attitudes supportive of sexual violence. In classic decision-making strategies such as expected utility or the weighted additive strategies, all available information about the alternatives is acquired and used to make a choice (Baron, 2004; Payne & Bettman, 2004). However, environmental and/or cognitive constraints limit the number or amount of information that can be processed, which necessitates the use of heuristics in the decision-making process (Payne & Bettman, 2004). Given the constraints on the amount of information that can be acquired in the task (i.e., opening only 15 out of 30 boxes), participants seem to have resorted to a lexicographic (Payne & Bettman, 2004) or take-the-best (Gigerenzer & Goldstein, 1999) heuristic strategy. In lexicographic and take-the-best strategies, the attribute or the information that is most important and most relevant to the decision is first acquired and processed. For the first aim for this study, results indicated that, normatively, male participants tend to gather information related to non-SA-related information first, suggesting the relative importance of these attributes. Only after most or all of the information that pertains to attractiveness or sharing similar interests had been exhausted, did participants seek information related to women’s vulnerability.

For the second aim of this article, interesting patterns emerged when examining those with prior SA, those with more hostile attitudes toward women, and those with more positive attitudes toward sexual violence. Similar to the normative patterns, the majority of those who reported prior sexually coercive behaviors first sought innocuous information such as attractiveness and sharing similar interests. However, a bifurcation occurred at the sixth and seventh choices, wherein a significant majority of those who previously perpetrated shifted toward searching for SA-related information. Among those with more hostile attitudes toward women and more positive attitudes toward sexual violence, the preference toward SA-related information occurs much earlier in the information search process. Assuming that these individuals utilize lexicographic or take-the-best strategies, these results suggest that, among at-risk men, SA-related information is given more importance.

Information processing models posit that sexually aggressive behavior stems in part from biases in perception, encoding, and interpretation of social cues (Crick & Dodge, 1994), which has been examined in previous studies (Harnish, Abbey, & DeBono, 1990). Beyond the misperception and misinterpretation of social cues, results of this study further suggest that the type of information sought and the manner for searching which social and environmental information to process are likely faulty as well. Information processing models also indicate that social knowledge and schema guide encoding, perception, and interpretation of social cues. The results of this study also suggest a similar influence on information search. In general, misogynistic attitudes and attitudes supportive of sexual violence were associated with an information acquisition pattern preferential toward aggression-related information. In other words, in addition to passively misrepresenting social cues, at-risk men seek information that is consistent with their worldview that espouses violence against women.
For the final aim for this article, using the confluence model (Malamuth et al., 1991) as a theoretical backdrop, we also hypothesized that information acquisition that is biased toward SA-related information mediates the relationship between the hostile masculinity–SA and the impersonal sex–SA relationship. Only partial mediation was observed for hostile masculinity. The partial mediation result is understandable, as information acquisition, encoding, and interpretation process is only one process in a continuum that also includes goal clarification, evaluation of the appropriateness of the selected behavioral script, and behavioral enactment (Anderson & Huesmann, 2003; Crick & Dodge, 1994). Hence, other factors or processes in addition to information acquisition can also intervene in the hostile masculinity and sexually coercive behavior pathway.

In summary, the results of this study suggest that men who are at risk of SA perpetration and who reported prior sexual coercive behaviors tend to have an information acquisition pattern that is biased toward searching for SA-relevant information in the social environment. Although this study represents an initial foray into information acquisition associated with SA, prevention efforts can benefit from the debiasing literature that aims to correct biases in information acquisition associated with SA, prevention efforts can be expanded to include the consideration of other factors in addition to information acquisition that can change the decision-making process (Larrick, 2004). For instance, the consider-the-opposite intervention asks individuals to attend to and consider the opposite arguments or reasons my initial judgment might be wrong?) and has been used to correct biases and improve decision quality (Hertzog & Hertwig, 2009; Mussweiler, Strack, & Pfeifer, 2000).

Findings from this study though should be tempered by several limitations. First, participants in this study were male college students, and the extent of SA in this sample is limited to verbal coercion and pressure. Information acquisition should be examined in a forensic population and those with more severe reported sexually coercive behaviors. Furthermore, other demographic variables such as race/ethnicity and socioeconomic status and cultural/ cross-cultural values should also be considered in future work. Second, the Web-based nature of the study and the use of self-report measures of SA and related variables can be influenced by social desirability factors and issues inherent in a Web-based methodology; future research should account for these problems.

Third, given the revision we made in the MouselabWEB, there were areas of inquiry that we were unable to pursue. For instance, future research can examine whether at high risk of committing sexually coercive behaviors engage in compensatory (i.e., consider all available information and account for the trade-offs among the values) or noncompensatory (i.e., a more limited, heuristically driven information search and avoidance of trade-offs; Payne & Bettman, 2004) strategies. In addition to exploring whether an exhaustive search was undertaken, an examination of the amount of time used in acquiring information can aid in determining whether participants engaged in a more exhaustive, computationally intensive information search. We were also unable to assess how the participants’ choices or manner of information acquisition predicts the woman that they “chose.”

Last, we were unable to account for other factors that prior research works have documented to influence judgment and decision-making. These include, but are not limited to, emotions (Loewenstein & Lerner, 2003), cognitive load and the number of attributes being accounted for (Payne, Bettman, & Johnson, 1993), and alcohol intoxication (Parkhill & Abbey, 2008).

References


