The Impact of Sexual Violence in Women's Transition to College

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Abstract

Unwanted sexual experiences are a problem for college campus communities. The current study examined the incidence of victimization in a convenience sample of 817 college women in their first semester of college at one of two universities in New England. The aim of the study was to examine changes in social support and indicators of well-being over time that may be associated with experiencing sexual violence. We hypothesized that participants who reported victimization would overall report decreases in social support and psychological distress were assessed at two points, during the first month of their first semester and during the last few weeks of the first semester.

Introduction

• Unwanted sexual experiences are a prevalent problem on college campuses. They occur at alarmingly high rates, especially among women. In fact, it is consistently estimated that around 20% of college women report having experienced an instance of attempted or complete rape during their lifetime.1
• This form of violence is accompanied by negative social and psychological consequences.2
• College is often a difficult transition for many students with changes in environment, relationships, and workload, but most students are able to adjust positively while some are not.3
• Given the knowledge of negative consequences of victimization and the vulnerability of first-year college students, this study aimed to look at how victimization may affect this transition to college.
• The current study differs from past research on this topic in that it is cross-sectional and over time.

Methods

Participants:
• 563 college women from two universities in New England
• 92.8% of the participants were White, reflecting the demographics of the two campuses.
• Parental education levels were similar between participants' mothers and fathers.
  - For the mothers' education, most went to a 4-year college (26.2%) or graduated high school (24.2%).
  - The fathers' education was comparable with 28.4% having attended a 4-year college and 24.4% having graduated high school.
• 149 reported having an unwanted sexual experience (26.5%).
• Victims did not differ from non-victims at Time 1 in any of the variable of interest (stress, social support, depressive symptoms, identity or intimacy).

Procedure:
Participants were asked to complete a questionnaire at two separate times, one during the first few weeks of their freshman year, and another a couple weeks before the end of their first semester. The measures used in the questionnaire aimed to examine students' perceived social support and psychological well-being. SPSS was used to quantitatively analyze the data after collection.

Measures:

Measures used during Time 1:
- Eriksen Psychological Stage Inventory (EPSI) measured intimacy and identity
- Multi-Dimensional Support Scales (MDSS) measured social support
- Center for Epidemiologic Studies Depression Scale (CES-D) measured depressive symptoms

Measures used during Time 2:
- EPSI
- MDSS
- CES-D
- Adolescent Minor Stress Inventory (AMSI): measured stress
- Youth Orientation Scale: measured optimism
- Sexual Experiences Survey (SES): measured victimization

Results and Conclusions

To test for between-group differences in the Time 2 data, an independent t-test was conducted. These results showed there were statistically significant differences between victims and non-victims in their perceived stress and optimism at the end of their first semester. Participants who did not experience an instance of unwanted sexual violence reported significantly greater levels of optimism and lower levels of stress at Time 2 than those who were victimized. This finding suggests there is a relationship between victimization and negative psychological effects as hypothesized.

Victimized participants also reported a significant increase in depressive symptoms and a slight increase in the perceived adequacy of friend support. All other variables of interest generally remained static, suggesting these individuals do not experience the positive growth that is seen among their non-victimized peers. Since these differences between victims and non-victims only appeared in Time 2 and not Time 1, it suggests that victimization was driving the factor. This study tells us students encountering victimization are having a different experience when transitioning to college than non-victimized students.

References