Sexually Aggressive Men's Perceptions of Women's Communications: Testing Three Explanations

Neil M. Malamuth and Lisa M. Brown

The authors tested three explanations of findings that sexually aggressive men perceive women's communications differently than less aggressive men. The first suggests that aggressors are incompetent in decoding women's negative emotions. The second posits that they fail to make subtle distinctions between women's friendliness and seductiveness and between assertiveness and hostility. The third explanation contends that sexual aggressors use a suspicious schema and therefore discount the veridicality of women's communications. These explanations were tested using videotaped scenarios in which a woman's responses to a man's advances were systematically varied. The data were most supportive of the suspicious schema explanation. These findings are integrated with other research on the characteristics of sexual aggressors and on the perceptions of aggressive children and of maritally violent men. Implications for interventions are also discussed.

The present study is part of research designed to identify the characteristics of men in the general population who sexually aggress against women. We have hypothesized and provided supportive data showing that several factors distinguish between more sexually aggressive men and their less aggressive counterparts. Examples of such factors include attitudes supporting aggression against women, hostile emotions, and relatively high sexual arousal to aggression (e.g., Malamuth, 1986). These factors may be described as part of an interrelated network (Berkowitz, 1993) of converging factors that lead some men to commit sexual aggression (e.g., Malamuth, Heavey, & Linz, 1993). In this study, we explored men's perceptions of women's communications. Perceptions are the first element in the interactive process and are likely to play a primary role in activating and shaping other aspects of such a network (Fiske & Taylor, 1993). We anticipated that such research will add to our understanding of the interrelated factors contributing to the development and the maintenance of sexually aggressive characteristics.

Previous Studies Linking Social Perceptions and Sexual Aggression

Although earlier work (Check & Malamuth, 1983, 1985; Malamuth & Check, 1980, 1985; Malamuth, Haber, & Feshbach, 1980) consistently found that sexually aggressive characteristics were associated with more positive perceptions of a rape victim's experience, more recent work examined whether perceptual differences also extend to stimuli depicting noncoercive interactions. On the basis of their clinical experience with rapists, Murphy, Coleman, and Haynes (1986) hypothesized that more sexually aggressive men may have "deficits in their ability to separate seductive from friendly behavior or hostile from assertive behavior" (p. 260). To test this hypothesis, they measured men's perceptions of a woman in videotaped interactions responding to a man's advances in one of four ways: with hostile rejection, assertive rejection, seduction, or friendliness. The investigators computed two accuracy indices: The seduction discrimination index was computed by subtracting ratings of the woman's seductiveness in scenarios in which she behaved seductively from those in which she behaved in a friendly manner. The hostility discrimination index was computed by subtracting ratings of the woman's hostility in scenarios in which she behaved in an assertively rejecting manner from those in which she behaved in a hostile rejecting manner. Poorer discrimination (i.e., smaller differences in perceptions) on both the hostility and seduction discrimination indices were associated with more rape-supportive attitudes. The hostility discrimination index, but not the seduction index, also correlated with sexually aggressive behavior. A regression equation designed to predict sexual aggression that included personality, sexual arousal, and attitudinal variables as well as the hostility discrimination index showed that additional variance was explained by the inclusion of this index. However, the total amount of vari-
ance explained by this equation was considerably less than that found in some other research (e.g., Malamuth, 1986), which leaves open the possibility that the added variance predicted by the perceptions index may not be replicated when a relatively large amount of the variance has been explained by other variables.

Although we designed the present study primarily in light of Murphy et al.'s (1986) study and we used their methodology, two other studies using different methods than that of Murphy et al. are directly relevant to the present research. Lipton, McDonel, and McFall (1987) administered in federal prison a measure of heterosocial cue reading to groups of rapists, violent nonrapists, and nonviolent nonrapists. Participants responded to a measure consisting of a series of videotaped vignettes, some depicting a couple on a first date and others depicting more intimate couples. Rapists were less accurate than the other two groups in reading women's cues in first date interactions. No differences were found, however, in the intimate situation. Although the differences for the first date interactions were reported as an overall effect, the authors also reported that stepwise multiple regression analysis indicated that the negative-cue items accounted for the greatest portion of unique variance (where rapists were more likely to perceive the negative responses as relatively positive reactions).

McDonel and McFall (1991) found similar results in a follow-up study using male college students. In this study, they included only the first date interactions from the perceptions instrument used by Lipton et al. (1987). They also used a second measure that consisted of three dating scenarios wherein participants were asked to indicate the extent to which the man was justified in continuing his advances in the face of the woman's negative responses. As the authors noted, this latter measure appears to be both a perception measure and a decision task that involves evaluative components (i.e., what a man should do). The investigators reported that on both measures college men who were less accurate in decoding women's negative cues were higher in rape-supportive attitudes and scored higher on a self-reported measure of likelihood of committing rape. Accuracy in decoding women's positive cues and men's cues in general, which were assessed only with the first instrument, was not related to these outcomes.

Explanations for Misperceptions

The three studies discussed above have made important contributions by showing that the associations between sexually aggressive characteristics and perceptions of women are not limited to coercive interactions and by developing methodologies to assess such perceptions. We designed the present study to advance this area of research further by systematically testing the predictions of different explanations of the findings and by better integrating this work with the larger body of research on the characteristics of sexually aggressive men.

In examining this perceptions research, we present three explanations (overperception, negativeness blindness, and suspicious schema) that can provide promising directions for the development of theoretical models. We explicate these explanations and test their competing predictions. These explanations may be differentiated on the basis of the conditions under which perception differences are expected to be associated with men's sexually aggressive characteristics.

Overperception of Hostility or Seductiveness

Nature of explanation. The first explanation is based on Murphy et al. (1986) findings that sexual aggressors appear to be less able to make subtle perceptual distinctions between friendliness and seductiveness and between assertiveness and hostility. Although Murphy et al. did not state so explicitly, they implied that this may be due to aggressive men's overperception of sexuality and of hostility. The overperception of sexual intent is an extension of research showing that men generally perceive more sexual intent than do women (e.g., Abbay, 1982). As applied here, it suggests that some men are more inclined than others to overperceive such intent. Similarly, Abbay and her associates (Harnish, Abbay, & DeBono, 1990) also suggested this hypothesis when they argued that "males may misperceive females' friendliness as seduction, an error which can create unpleasant interactions and sometimes lead to date rape" (p. 1341).

Conditions under which differences are predicted. With respect to the type of scenarios used in this line of research, the overperception explanation predicts differences between aggressive and nonaggressive men only in those scenarios in which the woman responds with relatively mild or benign friendliness or assertiveness. Therefore, when a woman responds in a friendly manner that is not sexual or seductive, aggressors are expected to overperceive sexual cues and thereby label her behavior as relatively seductive. Similarly, when she responds in a rejecting but relatively nonhostile (i.e., assertive) manner, aggressors are expected to overperceive hostility. However, when a woman responds in a highly hostile or highly seductive manner, there is no opportunity to read more into the behavior and therefore no differences are predicted between aggressive and nonaggressive men.

Negativeness Blindness

Nature of explanation. McDonel and McFall (1991) suggested that there is a specific cue-reading impairment in sexually aggressive men's ability to decode a woman's negative cues. This results in failing to recognize her negative reactions, which

1 Although Murphy et al. (1986) and the present research used ratings scales, the two studies by McFall and associates used a test of reading affective cues measure that required participants to "guess which of five affective cues—romantic, positive, neutral, negative or bad mood—was being conveyed by each party in each interaction" (Lipton et al., 1987, p. 18). It is therefore not feasible to make direct comparisons between the studies using the different methodologies.

2 Unfortunately, the use of difference scores by Murphy et al. (1986) clouds interpretation of the findings. These discrimination scores would have yielded the same correlations even if a psychological process operating in the opposite way had been operating. More sexually aggressive men may have perceived less, or underperceived, hostility in the hostile scenarios and underperceived seductiveness in the seductive scenarios rather than overperceiving in the assertive and the friendly scenarios. Difference scores do not permit us to distinguish between the two possibilities.
could result in persistence in making advances (e.g., sexual aggression). These investigators emphasized that this deficit is limited to accuracy in decoding negative cues and stated that “misinterpretation of positive cues as negative should not logically be a contributory factor leading to sexual assault” (p. 20).

Conditions under which differences are predicted. The negativity blindness explanation predicts differences associated with men’s aggressivity only when the woman communicates negative cues. Therefore, when the woman rejects the man by communicating responses such as hostility, nonaggressors are expected to read these cues clearly but aggressors are hypothesized to fail to appropriately detect and interpret these cues.

Suspicious Schema

Nature of explanation. A third explanation emphasizes the role of cognitive schemas (Neisser, 1976) as applied to sexually aggressive men’s perceptions (Malamuth, 1983; McFall, 1990). This approach suggests that perceptual differences are due to different decision rules or judgmental heuristics underlying social information processing.

Recent research on sexually aggressive men (e.g., Malamuth, Sockloskie, Koss, & Tanaka, 1991; Malamuth et al., 1993) has suggested that the schema likely to guide their perceptions of women is a suspicion schema: Women’s communications about romantic or sexual interest cannot be trusted as veridical (i.e., Women don’t tell the truth when it comes to sex). This schema is hypothesized to form expectancies that underlie perceptions of women generally (e.g., greater typicality of hostile behaviors) and to be applied to initial perceptions of individual women (e.g., suspecting the veridicality of her sexual communication).

In the terminology used by Jones (1990), these constitute category-based (women generally) and target-based (particular woman) expectancies.

Conditions under which differences are predicted. A woman’s attempt to communicate (in sexually related areas) by her overt behavior would be processed suspiciously by more aggressive men and as veridical by less aggressive men. Therefore, aggressors would perceive such communication as having the opposite meaning of that intended. There are some conditions that might be expected to increase differences between the perceptions of aggressive and nonaggressive men, such as when women communicate intense reactions. This prediction may be derived from the principle of distinctiveness (Kelley, 1971) whereby unique events are perceived as more informative. When the woman’s communications are intense (e.g., she is highly hostile or highly seductive), less aggressive men are apt to believe that it is easy to clearly read her communication and to accept it as honestly describing how she feels. More sexually aggressive men, in contrast, are prone in such circumstances to discount the veridicality of women’s communications and to question why her reactions are so strong (e.g., “She protests too much” or “Why is she being so nice?”).

The Present Study

Overview

In the present article we report on data collected from men who responded to four relevant situations: Two in which a woman rejects a man’s advances, in a high hostile fashion or a low hostile (i.e., assertive) manner, and two in which the woman reacts to the man’s advances favorably, either seductively or in a friendly manner (i.e., nonassertive). Because we used some of the stimuli developed by Murphy et al. (1986), we first attempted to replicate their findings using procedures and analyses similar to those they used. Such replication not only establishes the reliability of the phenomenon but provides a firmer basis for suggesting that any differing conclusions that we may reach using other types of analyses would apply to the data they had gathered. We then tested the ability of the overperception, negativity blindness, and suspicious schema explanations to account for participants’ interpretations of the four scenarios. We also attempted to directly test the explanation that sexually aggressive characteristics are associated with a hostile, suspicious schema affecting category-based and target-based expectancies by asking participants questions pertaining to their beliefs about typicality and honesty. Next, we attempted to extend Murphy et al.’s (1986) finding that the addition of information about social perceptions enables better prediction of sexual aggression (i.e., in a regression equation). Because we used a set of variables that has been shown to be particularly successful in such prediction, this is a rather stringent test of the potential utility of such perceptions.

Explanations’ Predictions for Four Situations

The differences in the predictions made for the four scenarios (used in the present research) by the overperception, negativity blindness, and suspicious schema explanations are shown in Table 1. Below, we summarize these predictions for each of these explanations. These predictions are made for a measure that assesses perceptions of how negative are the woman’s reactions to a man’s advances. Such an overall index of negativity was indeed computed in this study, as described later.

Overperception explanation. To reiterate the basis for making predictions for this explanation, it should be recalled that the overperception explanation predicts differences only in those scenarios in which sexual aggressors are likely to overperceive the woman’s benign friendly or assertive reactions as revealing more seductiveness or hostility than she intends. How-

---

3 Fiske and Taylor (1984) defined a schema as “a cognitive structure that contains knowledge about the attributes of a concept and the relationships among those attributes” (p. 8). Schemas “form a relatively cohesive and persistent body of knowledge capable of guiding subsequent perception and appraisals” (Segal, 1988, p. 147). Schemas have been shown to influence varied aspects of information processing including the encoding of new information (Markus & Zajone, 1985). They are often activated automatically (Barth, 1989) and frequent thought about a domain is likely to lead to automatized schemas (e.g., Andersen, Spielman, & Barth, 1992; Hayes-Roth, 1977).

4 This work indicates that most of the factors identified in earlier work as predictors of sexual aggression (e.g., Malamuth, 1986) are part of a constellation of variables that may be organized within a statistical path labeled hostile masculinity. Men high on such characteristics show a desire to be in control, to be dominating, particularly in relations with women, coupled with an insecure, defensive, and suspicious or adversarial orientation to them.
Table 1
Three Explanations’ Predictions of Correlations Between Men’s Sexually Aggressive Characteristics and Their Perceptions of Women’s Negativity Across the Four Scenarios

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Explanation</th>
<th>Hostile</th>
<th>Assertive</th>
<th>Seductive</th>
<th>Friendly</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Overperception</td>
<td>no correlation</td>
<td>positive correlation</td>
<td>no correlation</td>
<td>inverse correlation</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Negativeness blindness</td>
<td>inverse correlation</td>
<td>weak inverse correlation</td>
<td>no correlation</td>
<td>no correlation</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Suspicious schema</td>
<td>strong inverse correlation</td>
<td>weak inverse correlation</td>
<td>strong positive correlation</td>
<td>weak positive correlation</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

ever, when she communicates a high level of seductiveness or hostility, overperception is not likely to occur.

In Scenario 1 (see Table 1) the woman is communicating a high level of hostility. Therefore, overperception (of hostility or negativeness) would not have the opportunity to occur. Similarly, in Scenario 3, the woman is communicating a high level of seductiveness; overperception (of seductiveness or positivity) would not occur here either. Consequently, in these two scenarios no correlation is predicted by this explanation.

In contrast, in Scenario 2, when the woman reacts in a rejecting but low hostile manner (i.e., assertively), more sexually aggressive men are predicted to overperceive hostility (i.e., to perceive her reactions as more negative than they actually are). This should result in a positive correlation between men’s aggressive characteristics and perceptions of her negativeness. Similarly, in Scenario 4, in which the woman reacts in a friendly but nonseuctive manner, the overperception explanation suggests that more aggressive men will overperceive positive reactions, particularly seductiveness. Consequently, the prediction here is of an inverse correlation between aggressive characteristics and perceptions of the woman’s overall negativeness (i.e., they will perceive more positive reactions).

Negativeness blindness. The negativeness blindness explanation (which suggests that aggressive men fail to detect women’s negative cues) predicts that when the woman communicates high hostility (Scenario 1), the more aggressive men will fail to perceive her negative reactions accurately (i.e., they will perceive less negativity). Therefore this explanation predicts an inverse correlation between men’s aggressive characteristics and their perceptions of the woman’s negative or hostile reactions for this scenario. In Scenario 2, she is assertively rejecting the man. Here, too, it may be that some weak inverse correlation would be expected, although the opportunity to miss negative cues is far less. In neither of the other conditions is the woman communicating negative cues, and therefore this explanation would not predict any correlations between perceptions of her reactions and men’s aggressive characteristics.

Suspicious schema. This explanation predicts that more aggressive men will discount the veridicality of the messages communicated by the woman. Differences between relatively high- and low-aggressive men are particularly likely to emerge when the woman communicates intense, ostensibly clear messages. For the high hostility scenario (Scenario 1), therefore, a relatively strong inverse correlation is predicted between men’s aggressive characteristics and their perceptions that the woman is being truly negative or hostile (i.e., high-aggressive men will perceive less negativeness on the part of the woman). A similar but weaker relationship is predicted when the woman rejects the man in a manner relatively low in hostility (Scenario 2), because the discounting process is less likely to show as strong a difference between aggressors and nonaggressors when the woman reacts in a less distinct way (see earlier discussion of the principle of distinctiveness). Furthermore, when the woman communicates a high level of seductiveness, it is predicted that more aggressive men will again perceive her as less truthful. They will therefore perceive her as actually less responsive (or more negative) to the man’s advances. Consequently, a positive correlation is predicted here between men’s aggressive characteristics and their perceptions of the woman’s negativeness. A similar correlation is predicted when the woman reacts in a friendly, low-seductive manner (Scenario 4) but again the correlation is expected to be weaker in the context of this less distinct reaction.

Perceptions of man’s behavior. Finally, we examined perceptions of the man’s behavior, which was not systematically manipulated across the scenarios but was supposed to remain constant. The schema explanation, in the context of other research on the characteristics of sexually aggressive men, suggests predictions regarding how the man would be perceived. Research indicates that not only do schemas affect social perceptions but experiencing emotions that may be associated with such schemas may independently affect such perceptions (Kelner, Ellsworth, & Edwards, 1993). The hostile masculinity construct suggests that men with more sexually aggressive characteristics have emotions (e.g., anger toward women) and schemas (e.g., male–female relations are adversarial) that would lead them to perceive the man in the scenarios as hostile toward the woman. Neither of the other two explanations discussed in this article appear to predict any associations between sexual aggression and perceptions of the man, although the overperception one might predict higher perceptions of both hostility and seductiveness for the man as well as for the woman.

Method

Overview of Design

The research was conducted over a 2-year period. All of the measures used in the first year were also used in the second year, but an additional instrument—the self-report measure of sexual aggression—was added in the second year. Data are therefore available for this measure for participants from the second year only. When the same measures were used in both years, the data were combined. The present sample that included the measure of sexual aggression and social perceptions came from participants in a study reported in an earlier article (Malamuth, 1986). As described below, this provided the opportunity to analyze the
contribution of social perceptions to predicting sexual aggression in the context of other factors shown to relate quite strongly to such behavior.

We conducted the research in three phases. During the first session, all of the questionnaire measures (except for the social perceptions assessment) were administered. These included various paper and pencil measures assessing attitudes and sexual aggression (in the second year only) as well as the other questionnaire measures used for the regression analyses reported below. In the second phase (conducted several days or weeks later), we measured sexual arousal using self-reports and physiological measures (see Malamuth, 1986).

The third phase was composed of two assessments. First, we measured laboratory aggression as described by Malamuth (1988). Second, in the final stage of the research, we moved participants to another location and assessed social perceptions. This final assessment, which was presented to participants as an attempt to obtain perception ratings to be used in future independent research, is the primary focus of this article.

Participants

One hundred and seventy-four men participated in the study. Missing data on the attitudes or the perception ratings permitted analyses on 161 participants. For 90 men, data were also available from the self-report sexual aggression measure. As noted below, analyses using the penile tumescence index (of sexual arousal to rape vs. consenting sex) have somewhat reduced sample sizes because not all of the men chose to participate in that phase of the research. However, systematic comparisons of volunteers with nonvolunteers in similar research using the penile tumescence measure have revealed no differences in various measures pertaining to sexual aggression, although volunteers scored higher on a measure of general sensation seeking (Malamuth & Check, 1983).

We recruited participants from several sources, including university courses, a sign-up list displayed in the psychology department, a city summer employment center, and newspaper ads. Only applicants over the age of 18 participated in the study. They were paid $7 per hour for their participation.

Participants signed up for a general subject pool. Experimenters then selected participants from this general list and invited them to participate in specific experiments. When contacted by the individual experimenters conducting each of the three phases (presented to participants as independent experiments), potential participants received general descriptions of the procedures and measures used. The experimenters emphasized in each phase that participants could leave at any time and that there would be no penalty nor would any explanation be required. Participants were paid on arrival at each study and were told that they could keep the money regardless of whether they completed the experiment. As an additional safeguard, a law professor was hired to serve as ombudsman for the project. Participants received his name and phone number on signing up for the experiment. They were told that this person was completely independent of the staff conducting the research and that they could direct any complaints to him. None were made. At the end of the second and third phases, participants received relevant debriefings (Malamuth & Check, 1984).

Although participants’ names were not used for identification, background information (e.g., date of birth) enabled exact matching of questionnaires across the separate phases of the study. Questions asked at the end of the third phase verified that none of the participants recognized any association between this study and the earlier phases of the research.

Primary Materials and Procedure

Assessment of social perceptions. We obtained videotapes of four of the scenarios developed by Murphy et al. (1986). These portrayed 30-s scenes simulating interactions in a bar between a woman and a man in which the man attempts to initiate a social interaction with the woman. The woman responds to the man’s advances in one of four ways. These scenarios were viewed in the following order: friendly, assertively rejecting, seductive, and high hostile. To facilitate presentation, we first discuss the two scenarios in which the woman rejects the man (with hostility and assertively) and then the two scenarios in which she responds favorably (with high seductiveness and in a friendly manner).

After viewing each interaction, participants indicated their perceptions on several 9-point scales, ranging from 4 (strongly disagree) to 0 (strongly agree), with 0 (neither agree nor disagree) as the midpoint. (For some of the analyses reported below, the scales were transformed to range from 1 to 9.) Participants rated the woman and man separately, indicating the extent to which they agreed in each interaction that the person was friendly, assertive, rejecting, seductive, and hostile. These items were embedded within a larger questionnaire containing other adjectives designed to disguise the specific focus of the study’s scenarios. Participants also indicated the extent to which they thought that the woman’s behavior accurately reflected her feelings.

Attitudes supporting aggression. We used four scales developed by Burt (1980) to create a composite-attitudes score (see her article for information regarding reliability and validity). These were the Rape Myth Acceptance (19 items), the Acceptance of Interpersonal Violence (6 items), the Adversarial Sexual Beliefs (9 items), and the Sex Role Stereotyping (9 items) scales. Burt has theorized that the scales she developed measure certain attitudes that are widely accepted in Western culture but are particularly held by rapists and potential rapists. She has argued that such attitudes play an important role in contributing to sexual aggression. Each man’s score for each scale was converted to z scores before being added together.

Sexually aggressive behavior. Sexually aggressive behavior was measured by the self-report instrument developed by Koss and Oros (1982). It assesses a continuum of sexual aggression including psychological pressure, physical coercion, attempted rape, and rape. Participants respond by using a true–false format to 10 descriptions of different levels of sexual coercion. An example of an item is “I have had sexual intercourse with a woman when she didn’t want to because I used some degree of physical force (twisting her arm, holding her down, etc.).” Koss and Oros (1982) and Koss, Gidycz, and Wisniewski (1987) presented data regarding the reliability and validity of this scale.

Secondary Measures

We used five additional measures in the regression analyses. We describe these measures briefly below. A more detailed description is found in Malamuth (1986).

Dominance motive. This 8-item measure focused on power (i.e., dominance) as a motive in sexual relations (Nelson, 1979).

Hostility toward women. We used the Hostility Toward Women (HTW) scale (30 items; Check, 1984; Check, Malamuth, Elias, & Barton, 1985). Data concerning its reliability and validity were presented by Check (1984).

Psychoticism. We used the Psychoticism scale of the Eysenck Personality Questionnaire (Eysenck, 1978). It includes 20 items and is designed to assess a dimension associated with general antisocial personality characteristics.

Sexual experience. We used the Sexual Behavior Inventory (Benter, 1968) to assess sexual experience in conventional heterosexual acts. It includes 21 items that inquire whether the subject has engaged in various sexual behaviors including such acts as fondling breasts, intercourse, and oral sex.

Sexual arousal to rape. We computed an index of sexual arousal to rape (with arousal measured by a gauge directly assessing penile tumescence) for each participant by dividing maximum arousal to a rape de-
Table 2

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Scenario</th>
<th>Friendly</th>
<th>Assertive</th>
<th>Seductive</th>
<th>Hostile</th>
<th>Rejecting</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Hostile</td>
<td>-3.37a</td>
<td>1.80b</td>
<td>-3.35b</td>
<td>2.91d</td>
<td>2.59b</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Assertive</td>
<td>-2.75b</td>
<td>1.86b</td>
<td>-3.18b</td>
<td>1.37b</td>
<td>2.34b</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Seductive</td>
<td>3.15a</td>
<td>2.14b</td>
<td>2.89a</td>
<td>-3.40c</td>
<td>-2.98e</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Friendly</td>
<td>2.39a</td>
<td>-0.40a</td>
<td>-1.59a</td>
<td>-3.01a</td>
<td>-2.02a</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Note. Perceptions rated on scales ranging from -4 (strongly disagree) to +4 (strongly agree), with 0 (neither agree nor disagree) as the midpoint. For each characteristic within each column, means with common superscript do not differ from each other at the .05 level.

Pictorial representation by maximum arousal to a depiction portraying consenting sex (Abel, Barlow, Blanchard, & Guild 1977). As noted earlier, this was assessed in a separate session, with about two thirds of the participants choosing to participate in this assessment.

Results

Manipulation Check

Although Murphy et al. (1986) provided data for the validity of their scenarios by relying on expert raters, we also evaluated the specific scenarios we selected from those of Murphy et al. We assessed whether the intended behaviors were perceived as intended by the sample as a whole. We conducted analyses of variance on each of five ratings (friendly, assertive, seductive, hostile, and rejecting). The analyses reported here used the data obtained from all participants, although it might be contended that only participants who do not show aggressive characteristics accurately encode the woman’s communications. We judged it more appropriate to use the entire sample for several reasons. First, it would be difficult to decide what criterion to use for exclusion. If we excluded any participant who scored above the lowest point on the composite measure of attitudes supporting violence against women, then the vast majority of participants would be excluded (98%), because most scored above that lowest level. Using aggressive behavior only as the criterion for exclusion seems inappropriate because we also expected attitudes to be related to perceptions. Second, comparisons between scenarios (in terms of validating the intended manipulations) can be meaningfully made because even highly aggressive men are expected to recognize these differences. Finally, inclusion of all participants would be expected to reduce support for the intended manipulations. Consequently, we concluded that including all participants was the more conservative approach and that, if such comparisons showed support, considerable confidence could be placed in such assessment.

The expected effects were obtained on all of these variables (p < .001). Follow-up comparisons strongly supported the success of the intended variations in the woman’s behavior (see Table 2). The scenarios in which the woman rejects the man’s advances differed primarily on perceptions of hostility, although both were perceived as showing some degree of hostility (1.37 vs. 2.91). Correspondingly, in the high hostility scenario, the woman was perceived as somewhat less friendly than in the assertive scenario (−3.37 vs. −2.75). Interestingly, these two scenarios did not differ in perceptions of the woman’s assertiveness or rejection.

In the scenario in which the woman was instructed to respond in a friendly or pleasant manner, she was in fact rated as showing a high degree of friendliness and a low degree of seductiveness. She was also perceived as low on the negative reactions of hostility and rejection. The seductive scenario was also rated as intended: The clearest difference between the friendly and seductive scenarios was on perceptions of seductiveness (−1.59 vs. 2.89), but expected differences were also observed on perceptions of friendliness, assertiveness, hostility, and rejection. Overall, the scenarios we selected from Murphy et al. (1986) seem to have been very successful in yielding the intended manipulation differences.

Perceptions of Negativity Index

We computed a composite score that reflects the overall judgment of the woman’s responsibility. It combined the four ratings with a clear valence: hostility, rejection, seductiveness, and friendliness. The composite was created by adding these four variables together (after each was converted to a z score), with the friendliness and seductiveness ratings weighted negatively and the hostility and rejection ratings weighted positively. We did not include the assertiveness ratings in the composite score because they did not have a clear valence rating in terms of the degree of negativity of the woman’s reactions. We labeled this measure the perceptions of negativity index, reflecting how discouraging or negative rather than encouraging or positive the woman was perceived to have reacted to the man’s advances. Higher ratings on this index reflected more negative perceptions of the woman’s responsiveness (i.e., more rejection and hostility and less seductiveness and friendliness). The alpha coefficients for this index were .62 for the hostile scenario, .50 for the assertive scenario, .60 for the seductive scenario, and .42 for the friendly scenario. Except for the last of these, these coefficients are certainly satisfactory for a four-item assessment. Further examination of the friendly scenario revealed that all of the items except ratings of the woman’s seductiveness showed relatively high intercorrelations. Eliminating the seductiveness item for this scenario results in an alpha of .61, which is high for a three-item assessment. This might be because relatively few men are expected to rate the woman’s friendly behavior as seductive in this scenario. However, for the sake of consistency across sce-
narios, we computed the composite in the same way across all of the scenarios. The alpha coefficient for an analysis using all of the four perceptions of negativity indices was .66.

Replicating Murphy et al.'s Findings

As indicated earlier, we considered it critical to first replicate Murphy et al.'s (1986) findings so that we may be confident that we measured the same phenomenon as them before we test alternative explanations for these findings.

Perceptions of negativity index. We first attempted to replicate with the perceptions index the type of analyses conducted by Murphy et al. (1986). As noted earlier, they found that rape-supportive attitudes correlated significantly with both the hostility discrimination and seduction discrimination indices, whereas sexual aggression correlated only with the former measure. We calculated for each participant the hostility discrimination index by subtracting the scores on the composite perceptions of negativity index for the assertive scenario from the scores for this same index for the hostile scenario. We calculated the seduction discrimination index by subtracting the composite scores for the friendly scenario from the seductive scenario. We then correlated scores on these indices with attitudes supporting aggression.

Our results generally replicated Murphy et al.'s (1986). The hostility discrimination index was correlated with attitudes \( r(161) = -.26, p < .001 \). An effect approaching significance was found for the seduction discrimination index, \( r(161) = .15, p < .10 \). The analyses also replicated Murphy et al.'s findings for sexual aggression. The hostility discrimination index was significantly related to sexual aggression, \( r(90) = .30, p < .01 \). As in Murphy et al.'s findings, the seduction discrimination index was not related to sexual aggression, \( r(90) = -.13, n.s. \).

Individual ratings. To more precisely follow Murphy et al.'s (1986) analyses, we subtracted (a) the individual woman's hostility ratings (rather than using the composite of the four variables) for the assertive rejecting scenario from the woman's hostility ratings of the hostile rejecting scenario and (b) the woman's seductiveness ratings of the friendly scenario from woman's seductiveness ratings of the seductive scenario. We found that rape-supportive attitudes correlated as predicted with both the hostility discrimination index, \( r(161) = -.20, p < .02 \), and seduction discrimination index, \( r(161) = -.32, p < .001 \). However, neither index was correlated with sexual aggression, \( r(90) = -.09, n.s., r(90) = -.09, n.s. \), respectively.

Findings from the present study appear to mostly replicate Murphy et al.'s (1986) results. The overall perceptions of negativity index and the individual item ratings correlated with attitudes supportive of aggression against women. However, for sexual aggression, Murphy et al.'s results were replicated only when the overall index was used.

Examining Alternative Explanations for Perceptual Differences

The analyses reported immediately below focus on the four scenarios: Woman rejects man's advances in a hostile fashion; woman rejects man in an assertive manner; woman responds seductively; or woman responds in a pleasant or friendly manner. We tested the ability of the overperception, negativness blindness, and suspicious schema explanations to account for participants' responses to the four scenarios. As shown in Table 3, we report the findings for (a) the overall composite index assessing perceptions of the woman's negativity and (b) the individual woman's hostility and woman's seductiveness items. These two items were focused on by Murphy et al. (1986) and are the ones most pertinent to the three explanations described. For the purposes of presentation in Table 3, the ratings for the seductiveness item were reversed (i.e., higher ratings indicate lower seductiveness) so that they are in the same direction as the negativity composite and the hostility ratings. The analyses focus on both attitudes and sexual aggression because these are the two categories that showed relationships to social perceptions in the three studies described above.

High hostility scenario. As indicated in Table 3, the data for this scenario were consistent with the suspicious schema and negativness blindness explanations. Strong associations were found between characteristics associated with sexual aggression (attitudes and behavior) and more positive perceptions of the woman's responsiveness when she behaved in a highly hostile way. This pattern was found for the overall perceptions index and for the individual ratings of the woman's hostility and seductiveness. The results for seductiveness are more easily accounted for by the suspicious schema than by the negativness blindness explanations. The latter explanation predicts that participants will fail to detect the woman's negative cues but does not suggest that they will be more likely to perceive such responses as seductive.

Assertive scenario. Using the composite negativity index, the data showed weak, nonsignificant correlations in a direction supportive of the suspicious schema and negativness blindness explanations (see Table 3). Analyses using the individual items
showed no effects with perceptions of the woman's hostility, whereas both the men's attitudes and aggression revealed some correlation with perceptions of her seductiveness (i.e., more aggressive characteristics associated with higher perceptions of woman's seductiveness; see Table 3). Again, these data appear more consistent with the suspicious schema than the negativity-blindness explanation. To reiterate, the latter explanation suggests that it is the failure to detect negative responses that differentiates aggressors from nonaggressors. Therefore, differences should occur primarily on items directly assessing negativity (i.e., hostility), which were not found here. Although supporters of this explanation could argue that perceptions of positive responses could be indirectly affected by the failure to detect negative cues, it is less clear that such a failure would necessarily result in greater perceptions of cues such as seductiveness. On the other hand, the suspicious schema explanation would suggest that aggressors may be more likely to perceive women's "no" responses as seductive teasing. Consequently, it follows more clearly from this explanation that an assertive rejection might be interpreted as somewhat seductive by those with an adversarial orientation to women.

Seductive scenario. In the scenario in which the woman responds in a seductive way, the data were supportive only of the suspicion explanation—that is, men with more sexually aggressive characteristics perceived her in a relatively more negative, hostile way. Using the negativity composite index, the results reached statistical significance for attitudes and approached significance for aggression. For the individual hostility item, they were significant on both attitudes and aggression, but for seductiveness they were significant on attitudes only (see Table 3).

Friendly scenario. For the scenario in which the woman responds in a friendly manner, the data using the negativity composite index were again consistent with the suspicious schema explanation, reaching statistical significance with aggressive behavior and approaching significance with attitudes (see Table 3). Examining the individual items, we also found that on perceptions of the woman's hostility, rape-supportive attitudes and aggression were correlated in the direction predicted by the suspicious schema explanation, although the strength of the relationship here actually appears to exceed that predicted by this explanation. However, on ratings of seductiveness, more rape-supportive attitudes yielded a weak relationship in the direction predicted by the overperception explanation, although no correlation was found with aggressive behavior (see Table 3).

Perceptions of Man

We tested the prediction of the suspicion explanation that men with more sexually aggressive characteristics would also perceive the man in the scenarios as being more hostile. In keeping with the hostile masculinity construct, we predicted that there would be a general tendency for men with more sexually aggressive characteristics to project their own hostility to women in these types of interactions onto the man in the scenarios and thereby to perceive the man as being more hostile toward the woman.

We computed an overall hostility composite that combined all of the ratings in the four scenarios (after first converting each to a z score) of perceptions of the degree of the man's hostility. As predicted, both attitudes supporting sexual aggression, \( r(160) = .37, p < .001 \), and aggressive behavior, \( r(90) = .28, p < .008 \), were related to this composite.

Examination of the data for each scenario separately showed the same pattern. In all of the scenarios, attitudes significantly correlated with greater perceptions of the man's hostility, although they appeared somewhat higher in the friendly (\( r = .27, p < .002 \)) and seductive (\( r = .33, p < .001 \)) scenarios than in the assertive (\( r = .21, p < .01 \)) and hostile (\( r = .23, p < .005 \)) scenarios. Similarly, sexually aggressive behavior also correlated significantly in the friendly (\( r = .22, p < .05 \)) and seductive (\( r = .26, p < .03 \)) scenarios, but the correlations did not reach significance in the assertive and hostile scenarios (both correlations = .16, ns).

Directly Testing the Suspicious Schema Construct

In an attempt to directly test the explanation that sexually aggressive characteristics are associated with a hostile, suspicious schema affecting category-based and target-based expectations, we selected the scenario in which the woman responded in a hostile manner. This type of scenario has generally shown the strongest associations with men's sexually aggressive characteristics, both in the present and in previous research. We asked participants questions pertaining to their beliefs about typicality and honesty, with the same 9-point scales used to assess perceptions. For typicality, we asked participants to indicate for each scenario the degree to which the type of reaction exhibited by the woman was the way most women would behave; for honesty, we asked the degree to which the woman expressed her feelings honestly.

We reasoned that schema suspiciousness would be a function of (a) the belief that most women behave in such a highly hostile, rejecting way and (b) the extent to which the particular woman was perceived as being honest. A low-suspicion schema would include the belief that such hostile behavior was atypical and that the particular woman in the scenario was honest. The opposite pattern would reflect high suspicion: The more suspicious schematic male would believe that hostile behavior was typical and that this individual could not be trusted. We reasoned that a mixture of the particular and general belief would reflect intermediate degrees of schema suspicion. However, perceptions of typicality of women generally might take precedence over a belief in this specific woman's honesty.

To operationalize these notions of typicality and specificity we divided our sample at the median for the two items. Typicality and honesty ratings that were above the median of the distribution for all participants were judged to show high typicality or honesty, whereas those at or below the median were judged as being low on these dimensions. Therefore, the pattern rated as showing the least suspicious schema, which was evidenced by 30% of the participants, consisted of a below-the-median rating on the typicality of the woman's hostile rejection coupled with an above-the-median rating of the belief that she is being honest in communicating her feelings. The most suspicious pattern was the opposite on both dimensions, which was exhibited by 16% of the participants. In the second least suspicious pattern, exhibited by 40% of the participants, the participant did not believe that this hostility is typical of women in
Table 4

Frequency Analysis of Degree of Suspicious Schema as a Function of Men's Aggressive Characteristics

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Men's aggressive characteristics</th>
<th>Degree of schema suspicion</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Low</td>
<td>23</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>High</td>
<td>1</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Note. $X^2(3) = 10.1, p < .02$. 1 = low suspicion, 4 = high suspicion.

general, but did not judge this particular woman's hostility to be veridical. The opposite pattern (i.e., hostility is typical of women, but believed this woman) was exhibited by 15% of the participants and was rated as being the third level of suspicion.

Using this four-level classification, we found that both attitudes supporting sexual aggression, $r(161) = .23, p < .01$, and aggressive behavior, $r(90) = .29, p < .01$, correlated in the expected direction, with high suspicion associated with higher attitudes and aggression. Because of potential differences of opinion regarding the appropriateness of ranking the two intermediate levels in the manner described above, we also calculated these relationships using a 3-level classification with both the intermediate levels being designated as a 2 on this suspicion dimension. The results were virtually identical, with both attitudes, $r(161) = .24, p < .01$, and aggression, $r(90) = .28, p < .01$, correlating significantly.

To illustrate the basis for these correlations, we conducted an analysis that classified participants as having low- or high-aggressive characteristics using both attitudes and behavior. If a participant scored in the top 10% of the distribution on either attitudes or behavior, he was classified as having high-aggressive characteristics. We then conducted a frequency analysis using this twofold classification (low vs. high) crossed with the degree of schema suspicion classification described above. This analysis yielded a significant relationship (see Table 4), indicating that men with aggressive characteristics were more likely to use schemas with higher suspiciousness.

Predicting Sexual Aggression

As noted earlier, Murphy et al. (1986) found that in a regression equation (that included several variables), social perceptions showed a relatively strong unique contribution to the prediction of sexual aggression. As also indicated earlier, many of the participants in the present study came from a pool used in a study reported in an earlier article (Malamuth, 1986). In that study, a combination of several variables, not including social perceptions, had a relatively high success in cross-sectional prediction of sexual aggression. In the analysis reported below, we examined whether the addition of information about social perceptions might enable even better statistical prediction of sexual aggression or whether it would be redundant with some of the other measures already included in that equation.

Malamuth (1986) performed analyses on 155 participants using all of the variables except for the penile tumescence measure. Of these, 95 had also agreed to participate in the research phase in which the penile tumescence index (of sexual arousal to rape vs. consenting sex) was assessed.

In the social perceptions phase reported here, 90 men (out of 155 possible) participated. Of these, 58 participants had penile tumescence data. The analyses reported below focus on this sample.

We used two approaches in the analyses reported below. The first used a stepwise approach. It allowed to enter the equation (a) all of the variables found to be significant contributors in Malamuth's (1986) study and (b) social perceptions. The second approach, which was a more stringent test, first forced entered all of the variables found significant in Malamuth's article and only then entered the social perceptions variable.

To include social perceptions in the regression analyses, we created a single index across the four scenarios based on the discounting predictions of the suspicious schema explanation. The perception of woman's negativity indices for the four scenarios were summed together. For the two scenarios in which the schema explanation predicted that more aggressive men would perceive the woman's reactions as more positive (i.e., the hostile and assertive scenarios), the woman's negativity indices were weighted positively, whereas for the two scenarios in which the schema explanation predicted that more aggressive men would perceive her reactions as more negative (i.e., the seductive and friendly scenarios), they were weighted negatively. Also, to make the analyses most comparable with Malamuth's (1986), we used the Acceptance of Interpersonal Violence (AIV) against women attitude scale only, rather than the composite of seven attitude measures.

Regressions without penile tumescence. Using the full sample of 90 participants, four variables entered the equation in the stepwise analysis, yielding a multiple correlation of .71, which accounted for 50% of the variance. The enting variables (in the order entered and with the probability values after all variables entered) were sexual experience ($p < .0001$), AIV ($p < .0006$), HTW ($p < .002$), and perceptions ($p < .01$).

In the forced entry analysis, after entering sexual experience ($p < .0001$), AIV ($p < .0003$), HTW ($p < .02$), and sexual dominance ($p < .06$), the multiple correlation was .69. The amount of variance accounted for was 48%. The addition of perceptions yielded an $F$ change that was significant, $F(1, 84) = 6.66, p < .01, R^2 = .72$. The percentage of variance accounted for was 52%. The additional percentage of variance explained by including the perceptions measure was therefore 4%. With all variables entered, all of the variables (including perceptions) made significant unique contribution to the equation, except for sexual dominance, which showed a nearly significant contribution ($p < .07$).

Regressions with penile tumescence. With the 58 participants in the phase assessing penile tumescence, we found that four variables entered the equation in the stepwise analysis, yielding a multiple correlation of .70 and accounting for 48% of the variance. The variables entering (in the order entered and with the probability values after all variables entered) were the perceptions index ($p < .0002$), rape tumescence index ($p < .002$), sexual experience ($p < .002$), and HTW ($p < .01$).

In the forced entry analysis, after entering sexual experience ($p < .001$), the rape tumescence index ($p < .008$), AIV ($p < .02$), HTW ($p < .14$), and sexual dominance ($p < .19$), the multiple
correlation was .69. The percentage of variance accounted for was 48%. The addition of the perceptions index accounted for 9.8% change that was significant, \( F(1, 51) = 8.99, p < .005, R^2 = .75.\) The percentage of variance accounted for was 56%. Therefore, the increase in the percentage of variance explained with the addition of perceptions was 8%. With all variables entered, only perceptions (\( p < .002\)), sex experience (\( p < .002\)), and rape tumescence (\( p < .007\)) made a significant unique contribution to the equation, with HTW approaching significance (\( p < .08\)). In all of the analyses, then, the perceptions index consistently showed a significant contribution to predicting sexual aggression and appeared to exert as consistent an influence (and sometimes the strongest) as the most influential variables.\(^5\)

**Discussion**

The data across the four scenarios were clearly more consistent with the predictions of the suspicious schema explanation than the other two explanations. For the two scenarios in which the suspicious schema explanation predicted relatively strong associations (hostile and seductive), 10 of 12 correlations were significant and one approached statistical significance. In the other two scenarios, the data were also generally supportive of this explanation, but the findings were sometimes less clear.

The findings for the scenario depicting the woman communicating her rejection in a highly hostile manner were particularly revealing. The data were contrary to what might be intuitively expected and in contrast to the predictions of the overperception explanation. Men’s sexually aggressive characteristics (attitudes and behavior) were associated with perceiving the woman’s reactions as much less negative on the overall index of perceptions. The individual item ratings showed that more aggressive characteristics were associated with perceiving both less hostility and more seductiveness. These findings are consistent with the suspicious schema explanation, which argues that more sexually aggressive men discount the veridicality of women’s communications, particularly when the woman appears to be communicating a clear and strong message (e.g., “she protests too much”). The data on the composite measure of woman’s negativity are also supportive of the negativity blindness explanation. However, the findings with the individual items may be viewed as more consistent with the suspicious schema explanation. The negativity blindness explanation only predicts that aggressive men are less able to see the negative cues. It does not necessarily follow that such a failure to detect negative cues necessarily results in an increased perception of seductiveness (i.e., there can be a reduction in avoidance cues without a necessary increase in the perception of approach cues). It is true that the suspicious schema explanation does not make clear predictions in this regard either because it specifies only that more aggressive men would be more likely to question the veridicality of the messages communicated and to therefore perceive responses in the opposite direction of those overtly communicated. However, the suspicious schema explanation may integrate such findings by suggesting, for example, that more aggressive men believe that “game-playing,” deceptive women attempt to be seductive by using aggression to provoke men.

The weakest associations with men’s aggressive characteristics were for the scenario in which the woman rejected the man’s advances with little hostility (i.e., assertively). The direction of the pattern was consistent with the suspicious schema explanation whereby there was a tendency for aggressors to perceive the woman as more receptive, particularly in terms of perceptions of more seductiveness. The weakness of the associations actually supports the suspicious schema explanation. It predicts clearer differences when the woman communicates relatively strong reactions, which was not true in this rejecting, low hostility scenario. Although the data in this instance may also be viewed as consistent with the negativity blindness explanation, they are clearly inconsistent with the overperception explanation, which predicts that more aggressive men would overperceive hostility when there is little of it.

For the two scenarios in which the woman reacted favorably to the man’s advances, the clearest findings were that more aggressive men rated her as more hostile than their nonaggressive counterparts. These data are generally consistent with the suspicious schema explanation but are not predicted by either the overperception or the negativity blindness explanations. The suspicious schema explanation would predict clearer findings when the woman appeared to be strongly communicating a favorable response (i.e., seductiveness), but the strength of the associations were actually similar in both of these positive reaction scenarios.

Additional data provided greater confidence in the predictive ability of the suspicious schema explanation. Men’s higher aggressive characteristics were associated with perceiving the man as more hostile across all four scenarios, a finding predicted by the suspicious schema but not by the other two explanations. In addition, we obtained more direct support for the mediating role of a suspicious schema by asking participants about the extent to which the highly hostile behavior of the woman in one of the scenarios was typical of women and whether it was honest communication. More sexually aggressive men were less likely to think such female behavior was rare and honest (i.e., they were more likely to believe it was typical and dishonest).

In addition to systematically evaluating different explanations for the relationship between social perceptions and sexual aggression, the present findings also point to the potential usefulness of the perceptions assessment as an important added factor in the prediction of sexual aggression. In regression analyses, we found a perceptions index (reflecting the predictions of the suspicious schema explanation) consistently entered the

\(^5\) As an alternative strategy, we entered the separate perceptions of negativity indices for all four variables as a single block within the regression analyses. Both with and without the penile tumescence measure, these analyses showed a very substantial increase in the amount of variance accounted for by the addition of the perception indices. With the penile tumescence measure (\( n = 58\)), the additional amount of variance accounted for by the four perception indices was 14% (from 48% to 62%). Without the tumescence measure (\( n = 90\)) the additional amount of variance accounted for by the four perception indices was 8% (from 48% to 56%). In both analyses, significant unique contributions to the equation were made by the negativity indices of the hostile and friendly scenarios; analyses using these two indices only yielded very similar results to those using all four scenarios. Because of concerns regarding the ratio between the number of participants and number of variables entered in the equation, we chose to use the more conservative procedure of obtaining a single index across all four scenarios.
equation when we used a stepwise procedure. In fact, in the analyses using all of the measures including penile tumescence, perceptions was the first variable to enter. Moreover, we also found that this perceptions index enabled better prediction of sexually aggressive behavior even after several variables were force entered first. Those variables had been shown in previous work to be relatively strong predictors of such aggression. The consistency and strength of the relationships between sexual aggression and the perceptions index indicated, in keeping with Murphy et al.’s (1986) findings, that perceptions appear to be as important to predicting sexual aggression as any of the variables analyzed in this line of research. However, in keeping with the multivariate emphasis in our research program (e.g., Malamuth, 1986; Malamuth et al., 1993), it is noteworthy that no single predictor by itself, including social perceptions, accounts for a very substantial amount of the outcome variance.

Misinterpretation of Positive Cues

The suspicious schema explanation outlined in this article provides a basis for addressing the important issue posed by McDonel and McFall (1991) when they suggested that misinterpretation of positive cues as negative should not logically contribute to sexual aggression. We submit that such perception does contribute to sexual aggression because it maintains a hostile orientation to women generally and may be likely to perpetuate a cycle of conflict with a particular woman even when she attempts to be nice to the man. Such an effect of reinterpreting positive behavior is reminiscent of the perpetuation of conflict between hostile political adversaries (e.g., Vallone, Ross, & Lepper, 1985). Such suspicion may also lead sexually aggressive men to be less trusting that a woman’s initial positive reactions, such as on a first date, will necessarily continue and eventually lead to physical intimacy. These men may be relatively primed to seize the moment by using pressure and coercion when a woman appears to react favorably because they are less likely to trust that her positive overt reactions at this stage are predictive of continued favorable responses on later occasions.

Additional Explanations

Although the suspicious schema explanation fared best among the three explanations described in this article, there may be others that could also account for our findings. The pattern of the data suggests that although less sexually aggressive men perceived a clearly inverse relationship between perceptions of hostility and seductiveness, these were less clearly differentiated in the ratings of more aggressive men. Although the suspicious schema explanation explains these primarily by the discounting of veridicality process (i.e., the woman is not really feeling so hostile), these data might also be viewed as consistent with some other models, such as psychodynamic ones (e.g., Hammer, 1957; Johnson & Robinson, 1957). These models emphasize that sexual aggressors often link seductiveness with hostility because of early rearing experiences. Future research should focus on analyzing the precise points and associated mechanisms responsible for perceptual differences by examining individual components of the perception process. For example, in response to various scenarios participants might be asked to indicate their perceptions of (a) what the woman actually feels, (b) the emotions she is trying to convey, and (c) how the participant himself feels at various points. A suspicious schema explanation predicts that the differences between more and less aggressive men would be revealed in comparisons of perceptions of what the woman actually feels and the emotions she is attempting to convey (which aggressors would perceive to be less congruent). A confusion of seductiveness and hostility explanation, in contrast, would predict that the differences between more and less aggressive men would occur at the point of perceiving what the woman is actually feeling or in his own feelings (e.g., feeling both sexual and hostile toward her).

Perceptions of Nonsexual Aggressors

There exists research focusing on the social perceptions of nonsexual aggressors that pertains to the current study and earlier work with sexual aggressors. Several studies have shown that more aggressive children overperceive hostile cues and intents after an ambiguous provocation (Dodge, 1980; May, 1986). The development and triggering of children’s aggression seems to be partly caused by specific social information processing that stems from having experienced aggression repeatedly as a child (Dodge, 1986; Dodge, Bates, & Pettit, 1990).

The earlier theoretical explanation favored by Dodge and associates to explain their findings emphasized information-processing deficiencies. They suggested that aggressive children may not have developed skilled attentional and social-cue-detection capabilities that would enable accurate perceptions, interpretations, and responses to their social environment (e.g., Dodge, 1980, 1986). Later work, however, incorporated cognitive content such as beliefs, attitudes, or expectations that may guide information processing and thereby affect behaviors. This approach is similar to that advocated by Huesmann to explain the stability of aggression from childhood to adulthood (e.g., Huesmann, 1988; Huesmann & Eron, 1984). For instance, Dodge and Somberg (1987) and Dodge (1991) suggested that aggressive children increase their hostile attributions under conditions of high threat because of the priming of a cognitive schema or script.

In related work with adults, Holtzworth-Munroe and Hutchinson (1993) found that maritally violent men were more likely than nonviolent men to attribute negative intentions to wives’ behaviors in a variety of vignettes, particularly those involving rejection from the wife. These authors concluded that both their work and Dodge’s show that aggressive individuals are prone to interpret others’ actions as motivated by negative intent.

Are the present findings consistent with the conclusions reached with aggressive children and with maritally violent men? At first glance, those studies appear to yield rather different findings from the present work or from previous studies on the social perceptions of sexual aggressors. Our research does not show that more sexually aggressive individuals necessarily perceive others as more hostile. In fact, when the woman behaved in a highly hostile way in one of the scenarios, more sexually aggressive men perceived her as relatively less hostile than their less aggressive counterparts. However, as suggested by the suspicious schema explanation, this appears to be due to their perception that women are trying to deceive them, which may
be viewed as consistent with the negative intent perspective. We submit that the common element to all of these three lines of research (with aggressive children, violent husbands, and sexually aggressive men) is that the responses of aggressive individuals are guided by suspiciousness schemas, but the schema's specific content may differ somewhat when comparing sexually aggressive men to the other two groups (e.g., "Women can't be trusted when it comes to sexual communications" vs. "People are out to get me").

Implications for Interventions

The data supporting a suspicious schema explanation recommend different types of interventions (to alter the perceptions of sexually aggressive men) than those suggested by the overperception or negativensness blindness explanations. Both of those latter explanations emphasize skills deficits as responsible for the perceptions of sexual aggressors. Although the underlying mechanisms responsible for such deficits have not yet been described by the investigators proposing these two explanations, one possibility has been suggested by Ellis (1991, 1993). He argued that neuroendocrine (i.e., neurological and hormonal) factors are responsible for sexual aggressors' perceptual deficits in decoding women's negative emotional cues. Clearly, a deficit explanation based on such an explanation would suggest that only some form of direct physiological intervention, perhaps as early as at a neonatal stage, could have promising results.

The construct of social skills does not necessarily imply actual brain or other physiological processes (i.e., "hardware" deficits) but could refer to a "software" problem. As used in McFall's (1990) well-developed model, social skills are defined broadly, referring to "processes that enable an individual to perform a task in a manner that has been (or will be) judged to be competent" (p. 312). However, a skills explanation that does not postulate physiological mechanisms may also have different implications than a schema approach. The decision rule schema approach suggests that it may be more appropriate to use the term prejudice rather than deficit or incompetence to describe the differences in the perceptions of more sexually aggressive versus less aggressive men. All perceivers use decision rules that may be calibrated along a suspiciousness dimension. Sexually aggressive men's rules may be calibrated in a more suspicious direction so that they are consequently primed to interpret women's responses as nonveridical. When such men are interacting with women who are communicating honestly, the men's perceptions may be less in keeping with what the women are trying to communicate. However, when men interact with people who are not honestly communicating their emotions, the perceptions of sexually aggressive men may actually be primed to be more accurate in some instances than that of their nonaggressive counterparts. This certainly does not justify their aggressive behavior in any way, just as understanding the mechanisms underlying racial prejudice (and noting that there may be a "grain of truth" in some stereotypes) does not justify racial discrimination. Rather than attempting to make them more skillful, it may be necessary to create the motivation among sexual aggressors to change the priming of their schema. This may require convincing them that it is in their interests to be more prone to err in the direction of believing someone who is deceptive rather than erring in the direction of disbelieving someone who is honest (i.e., to recalibrate their suspiciousness).

The different implications for interventions suggested by an incompetence versus a prejudice model may be clarified further by considering how a behavioral intervention might differ in the two instances. In behavioral therapy focusing on incompetent skills, the therapist is likely to use such interventions as behavior rehearsal, modeling the behavior for the client and gradually shaping its proper execution by reinforcing successive approximations (e.g., see Twentyman & McFall's, 1975, treatment of shy men). In addressing a problem of prejudice, the therapist is much more likely to attempt cognitive restructuring, such as that exemplified by a "schema-focused cognitive therapy" described by Young (1990).

It should be noted, however, that the differences between an intervention based on a skills deficit and a prejudice conceptualization may not always be very clear. For example, an intervention using the schema approach would probably include changing interpretations of incoming stimuli and other byproducts of a suspicious schema, such as attributions (e.g., Dodge & Somerfield, 1987). Well-developed social skills interventions often include techniques designed to change interpretation of stimuli (e.g., McFall, 1982). Indeed, McFall's (1990) incorporation of the concept of a schema in his analysis of the social skills of sexual aggressors reveals the potential congruence of these concepts. However, in keeping with the negativensness blindness explanation, his discussion of such cognitive schema emphasized the problem whereby aggressors read "positive sexual connotations into women's neutral or negative messages" (McFall, 1990, p. 318). In providing more support for a different explanation, the present research points to a more general suspicious schema that may need to be changed in work with sexual aggressors.

Unfortunately, this may be a difficult task: Other interventions to change prejudices, such as attempting to reduce stereotypes by pointing out disconfirming information, have met with mixed success. Nevertheless, optimistic forecasts remain about the use of such interventions (Hewstone, 1989). Some encouragement may be derived from successful interventions designed to change attitudes supporting sexual aggression (e.g., Gilbert, Heesacker, & Gannon, 1991), although these have not yet targeted more broadly based schemas. The present work and other findings in our research program suggest that a comprehensive treatment approach, which may include a focus on relevant schemas and the perceptions they influence, is needed to target various elements of the converging factors leading to sexual aggression.

References


PERCEPTIONS OF WOMEN


Received February 9, 1994
Revision received April 25, 1994
Accepted May 3, 1994

---

**New Publication Manual for Preparation of Manuscripts**

APA has just published the fourth edition of the *Publication Manual of the American Psychological Association*. The new manual updates APA policies and procedures and incorporates changes in editorial style and practice since 1983. Main changes cover biased language, presentation of statistics, ethics of scientific publishing, and typing instructions. Sections on references, table preparation, and figure preparation have been refined. (See the June 1994 issue of the *APA Monitor* for more on the fourth edition.)

All manuscripts to be published in the 1995 volumes of APA's journals will be copyedited according to the fourth edition of the *Publication Manual*. This means that manuscripts now in preparation should follow the guidelines in the fourth edition.

The fourth edition of the *Publication Manual* is available in softcover for $19.95 or in hardcover for $23.95 (members) or $29.95 (nonmembers). Orders must be prepaid, and a charge of $3.50 (U.S.) or $5 (non-U.S.) is required for shipping and handling. To order the fourth edition, write to the APA Book Order Department, P.O. Box 2710, Hyattsville, MD 20784-0710, or call 1-800-374-2721.