
An Overlooked Factor in Sexual Abuse: Psychological and Physical Force Examined

SCOTT A. JOHNSON

Minnesota Department of Corrections

ABSTRACT Most perpetrators of sexual assault utilize psychological rather than physical force. To optimize the effectiveness of re-offense prevention, it is imperative that the specific types of psychological force used in the commission of sexual assault be identified and understood. Two studies (involving respectively sex offenders who were serving prison sentences [residential treatment] and sex offenders placed on probation [community-based or outpatient treatment]) are discussed which lend support to the proposition that psychological force is most commonly used in sexual assault. *[Article copies available for a fee from The Haworth Document Delivery Service: 1-800-342-9678. E-mail address: getinfo@haworthpressinc.com]*

KEYWORDS Psychological force, force, sexual abuse

This paper examines the types of force that incarcerated sex offenders utilized in the commission of their offenses. A comparison is made between incarcerated and non-incarcerated sex offenders. It was expected that the incarcerated sex offenders would have utilized more force than the community-based sex offenders. That hypothesis was supported with the exception that the incarcerated sex offenders utilized less physical force than their

community-based counterparts. Several studies have identified the types of force sex offenders used in the commission of their crimes (Briere & Malamuth, 1983; Goodchilds & Zellman, 1984; Johnson, 1995; Koss, 1987; Koss & Leonard, 1984; Mahoney, Shively, and Traw, 1985; Makepeace, 1981; Makepeace, 1986; Malamuth, 1981; Miller, 1988; Miller & Marshall, 1987; Muehlenhard, 1988; and Thompson, 1986).

Sexual abuse inherently involves physical and psychological abuse (Johnson, 1993). Although the touches that occur during sexual abuse are primarily sexual in nature, the very fact that physical touch is occurring constitutes physical abuse; it is unwanted touch that can or does harm the person psychologically, physically, and sexually. Sexual abuse also involves psychological abuse because of the entire violation, the total violation of the victim by the perpetrator. Therefore, sexual abuse involves all other forms of abuse.

In a previous study (Johnson, 1995), the present writer discussed the types of force which occur during sexual abuse: Physical and psychological. Physical force is often less complicated to demonstrate, by means of bruises, scratches, or other types of physical evidence. Physical force involves not only physically abusing the victim but also the mere fact of touching without consent. Physical force is often easier to prove in a court of law and often receives more media attention. There are some common types of physical force which occur in most sexual assaults which are often overlooked. One example includes restraining a victim. This may occur by physically holding the victim down, or by binding the victim's hands or feet, either with a rope or with the perpetrator's hands.

Restraint may also occur simply with the body weight of the perpetrator, when the perpetrator has a part of his body that is used to pin the victim down. This may be the perpetrator's leg being placed over the victim's leg or rolling over onto the victim; any part of the body that is used to hold the victim down constitutes physical force. In this writer's opinion, when working with perpetrators who have used physical force to restrain their victim, it often appears that the impact of the physical restraint method is minimized and overlooked. It is as though, somehow, the victim should have continued to fight back even to the death despite the perpetrator's strength and/or physical advantage. Further, many perpetrators misinterpret the victim's lack of or actual resistance as consent.

Physical force is used when the perpetrator begins to touch the victim against the victim's will. The victim now has to deal with the fact that the perpetrator is not likely to listen to his/her "no's," in that any type of resistance may result in further physical harm, in addition to being sexually assaulted. Another type of physical force that is often overlooked is when a perpetrator kisses the victim and the victim is not able to verbally refuse or to scream for help because of the strength or duration of the kiss. The perpetra-

tor's mouth becomes no different than a hand or gag that prevents the victim from sounding his or her plea for help. All of these forms of overlooked physical force are significant because they begin to indicate that the perpetrator was aware of the fact that he was forcing the victim to be sexual and he was willing to go to the extent of preventing the victim from verbally communicating her wishes and pleas for help.

TYPES OF PSYCHOLOGICAL FORCE

But the most frequently overlooked force in sexual abuse is psychological. Psychological force is often difficult to prove because there may not be physical evidence of having been forced into sexual activity. In addition, it often comes down to the victim's word against the perpetrator's word and the end result is, whoever has the better attorney or the more accepted reputation is more likely to win the case. There are seven forms of psychological force, and it is imperative for anyone who works with perpetrators or victims of any type of sexual abuse to be aware of and closely assess the type of psychological force which occurred during the offense.

- The first type of psychological force is *emotional blackmail*. This involves using emotions to pressure and trick the victim into being sexual. Common examples include, "If you love me, prove it"; "We have been dating so long and I spent so much money on you, now you owe me sex"; and "Show me how much you care for me." Emotional blackmail plays on the emotions of care, love, respect, and obligation.
- The second type is *game-playing*. Game-playing involves manipulating situations, so as to place the perpetrator at a distinct advantage. Common examples include beginning to literally play a game, such as strip poker, tickling or wrestling and, when the timing is right, the perpetrator takes advantage and begins to take sexual touch or pressure the victim into being sexual. Game-playing and manipulation can include misusing a hug or back-rub, lying next to someone, or sitting next to someone, taking advantage of the closeness to make sexual advances. This may occur repeatedly over the course of an evening until sexual contact has occurred.
- *Pressuring* is the third type of psychological force. Pressuring involves repeated demands or requests for sexual contact for which the victims have already refused. As children, we were all experts at begging and pressuring. It was not uncommon to repeat requests such as, "Oh, please, please can't I stay up late," or "Can I have just one more cookie, just one." Pressuring used in this situation was innocent and hurt no one. However, when pressure and begging are used to get sexual contact from

one's partner, it becomes abusive and dangerous. Oftentimes, the message heard by the victim is that the perpetrator is going to continue to make requests until they give in and the perpetrator may do whatever he can to isolate the victim, so as to decrease the likelihood of escaping the situation without being sexual.

- The fourth type of psychological force is *boundary violation*. This basically involves crossing into someone else's space, making unwanted physical advances, and/or taking advantage of situations to observe someone's body without their knowledge or consent. Common examples would include watching someone dress/undress through a window or open doorway, looking down someone's shirt or up their shorts or skirt, and also may include making repeated requests or gestures of a sexual nature that are unwanted. Boundary violations are typical of sexual harassment. Continuing to ask someone out on a date or for sex when they have already refused constitutes a boundary violation and/or sexual harassment. In addition, it may include being in the victim's bedroom or other personal space and not allowing the victim privacy.
- The fifth type of psychological abuse is *lying*. This basically involves not keeping one's word and it is often used in a date rape situation. Common examples would include agreeing to fondle and then the perpetrator attempts to go further by attempting intercourse. Other forms of lying may include promising to make a commitment for the relationship, or that they will become engaged and eventually marry after sexual contact. When these promises are not kept, lying occurred and that should be viewed no differently than a case of fraud which is a crime.

The present writer has referred to these five types of psychological force as psychological strategies in a continuum of force (Johnson, 1993). These are often the most subtle forms of force and their powerful effects are easily overlooked and underestimated. Perpetrators use these five methods of psychological force because they are aware that it is difficult to prove that psychological force was being used, as there may be no physical evidence. In addition, the perpetrator is aware that the victim will experience confusion, may begin to doubt whether they are giving enough, or putting enough, or committing enough into the relationship with the perpetrator. There is fear of physical and sexual safety, and a sense of craziness as the victim attempts to sort through the inappropriate and forceful requests being made of them. It is as though the victim counts for little more, at this point, other than having a vagina, breasts or penis.

The last two types of psychological force are oftentimes more believable and, yet, are still minimized when it comes to prosecuting perpetrators:

- The sixth type of psychological force is *intimidation*. Intimidation is causing the victim to experience fear; fear not only for their physical and sexual safety, but also fear for their life. Examples of intimidation include making statements such as: “What is wrong with you”; “why don’t you want to do this”; “everyone else is doing it”; “everyone else is doing it, why can’t you.” Intimidation can be behavioral, such as a clenching of fists; beginning to remove the victim’s clothing; or gestures and/or comments that indicate that it will not be acceptable for the victim to refuse the perpetrator in any way. If the victim has seen the perpetrator become abusive in the past, or is aware of a physically abusive or assaultive past, the intimidation may encourage the victim to submit once the perpetrator has shown signs of escalation.
- The last type of psychological force involves the use of *threats*. Threats are direct statements of impending harm. Common examples would include: “If you don’t give in, I will take it from you”; “If you don’t do this for me, then I will do even more to you later or to your friend.” Threats take intimidation one step further by actually giving the either/or ultimatum. Both threats and intimidation are indicative of more severe violence and perpetrators who use intimidation and threats should be considered far more dangerous and more pathological than those who do not. These perpetrators tend to be more comfortable causing physical and sexual pain and are more likely to become physically assaultive during the sexual assault, as well, especially if any lessor demands are not met.

The seven types of psychological force should be understood and the specific types used in an offense identified. It is imperative that we not minimize force that we cannot see, that we hold perpetrators accountable for any type of force whether it be physical or psychological. The majority of the perpetrators this author has worked with have denied using psychological force when initially questioned about their offense behaviors. However, through the treatment process, they were able to identify specific types of psychological force they used in the commission of their offenses.

On the continuum of force, psychological strategies begin the perpetrator’s abuse history. From the first six psychological strategies, the perpetrator gains power and control over his victim. However, when the psychological strategies no longer allow the perpetrator to feel empowered and satisfied, he will gradually move into the seventh strategy which is threats. When a perpetrator has progressed to threats, it is a very short step to using physical force. It does not matter whether the type of threat was simply to spread rumors or to end the relationship if sex was not granted, or whether physical harm was threatened. A threat is a threat, no matter how you twist it and turn it, no matter where it places on the continuum of threats, it is dangerous. Perpetrators who use threats are almost always going to progress to using physical

force. When threats no longer give the perpetrator the sense of control, empowerment, and satisfaction he needs, physical force is right around the corner. This may be physically abusing the victim by hitting, slapping, or restraining, etc., or physically forcing sexual contact.

However, the sex offender has an agenda, that is to establish a trusting relationship in which the victim will offer the least resistance possible and, one in which, if someone were to notice this, the sexual behavior could be easily explained as an accident. For example if a dad is wrestling with his daughter and decides to slip his hand down her pants and fondle her vagina, he will have a ready excuse to justify his actions. For him, it may be, in his mind, easy to explain that during the wrestling, he went to push her off and his hand slipped down her pants. He did not mean to do it and says it won't happen again. This type of situation happens often and it is imperative that professionals are aware of the different types of psychological strategies that are involved in the grooming process. We see them so often and need to be able to label what the behavior was: a conscious, preplanned decision to sexually abuse another person. It is never an accident.

METHODOLOGY FOR A STUDY

In order to determine the conceptual validity of the schematic just reviewed, a study was undertaken with adult male offenders currently incarcerated in one of four Minnesota Correctional Facilities. Inmates were asked to participate in the study on a volunteer basis and did not receive any compensation for their participation. All were involved in a sex offender treatment program. The questionnaire was completed in a group setting and each inmate completed his own questionnaire. The researcher or therapist read the questions aloud in order to account for the issue of illiteracy. The questionnaires were sent to an independent researcher for tabulation (Lisa Lynn, M.A., L.P., of Lynn & Associates, Minnetonka, Minnesota). To avoid bias or contamination in data, the present writer was not involved in the tabulation of the questionnaire responses.

The earlier study (Johnson, 1995) examined the types of force used by sex offenders in the commission of their offenses. Subjects in that study had been placed on probation, with the stipulation that they become involved in the community-based sex offender treatment program. The current study found that sex offenders who were serving prison sentences for their offenses utilized more force than offenders who were not sentenced to prison, doubtless a factor in the determination of their sentences. One interesting exception, however, was that the incarcerated sex offenders utilized less physical force in the commission of their sex offenses than the community-based offenders. However, they were more likely to use two types of physical force more than

the community-based sample, and that involved: holding their victim down, using restraint; and using any weapon or object. The other four types of physical force were used more by the community-based sample.

In the present study, a total of 92 incarcerated offenders who were involved in sex offender treatment programs in Minnesota completed this survey, and they identified a total of 823 victims. Of the 823 victims, 773 were female and 50 were male. Because 8 offenders had over 10 victims each and also because they scored high on a measure of voyeurism, their responses were segregated for purposes of the following victim data. The remaining 84 offenders identified 219 female victims and 35 male victims. Of the 219 female victims, 64 were under the age of 10, 71 were between the ages of 11-15, 45 were between the ages of 16-20, 31 were between the ages of 21-30, 6 were between the ages of 31-40, and 2 were 41 years and older. Of the 35 male victims, 22 were under the age of 10, 11 were between the ages of 11-15, 2 were between the ages of 16-20, and there were no male victims identified in the other age categories.

The 8 offenders who scored high on voyeurism had 554 female victims and 15 male victims, for a total of 569 victims. Of the 554 female victims, 192 were under the age of 10, 70 were between the ages of 11-15, 138 were between the ages of 16-20, 119 were between the ages of 21-30, 32 were between the ages of 31-40, and 3 were 41 years and older. Of the 15 male victims, all but one were under the age of 10, while the remaining victim was between 11 and 15.

Subjects were asked to identify the type of force used in their offenses.

Approximately 53% engaged in begging/pressuring, 53% engaged in boundary violations, 34% in lying, 36% in game playing/manipulation, 35% engaged in intimidation, 29% in emotional blackmail, 17% in physical force, and approximately 15% engaged in threats.

The most frequently used forms of psychological force were begging/pressuring and boundary violations. The most common examples of begging/pressuring involved verbally pressuring to get their own way and verbally pressuring for sex. The most common example of boundary violations involved stealing or sneaking a kiss; the misuse of a position of power and control; behaving seductively with children or adolescents; behaving seductively or sexually with an inappropriate person; and expecting children or adolescents to meet their sexual needs.

The third most used type of psychological force was game playing/manipulation. The most common examples involved taking advantage of the victim's emotional state; wrestling, tickling or other playful activities before or during sexual contact; playing on their feelings to get what they want; giving the victim a back rub or massage and then moving their hands to genitals; and

paying for affection or sex with money, drugs, alcohol, food, gifts, or other privileges.

The fourth and fifth most used types of psychological force were intimidation and lying. The most common examples of intimidation involved placing the victim's hands on their genitals; raising their voice; and demanding that the victim does what they want. The most common examples of lying included statements such as "It (the abusive behavior) will never happen again," but it does; "I'm doing this because I love you"; telling children or adults that it is all right to engage in sexual behavior that would be inappropriate; and agreeing to certain sexual behavior and then going farther than agreed.

The sixth most used type of psychological force was emotional blackmail. The most common examples included statements such as: "don't you love me"; "this means I love you"; giving a sob story to gain sympathy and then asking for sex to feel better; "if you love me, prove it"; "this is the way I love you"; and "I am lonely and you should want to take care of me/make me feel good by having sex."

The seventh most common type of psychological force was threats. The most common example of threats included: statements such as, "if you tell, I'll go to jail"; threatening to physically harm them; and "if you tell, they won't believe you."

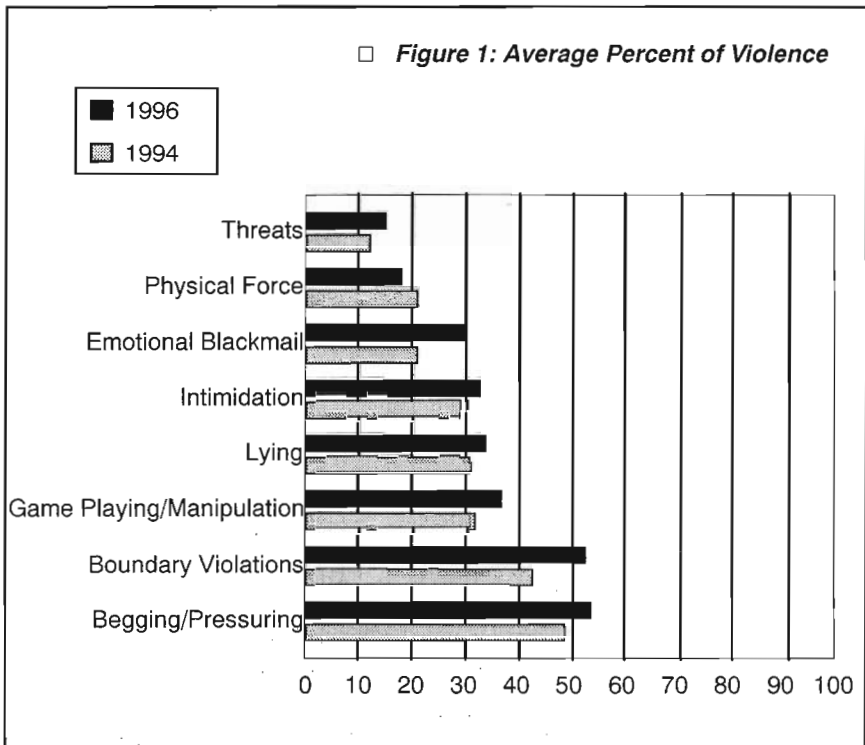
Physical force was used far more often than threats. The most common examples of physical force involved: Holding down, using restraint; and hitting, slapping, or punching.

The most significant difference between the community-based sample (Johnson, 1996) and the incarcerated sex offenders was in the area of boundary violations. The incarcerated sex offenders admitted to engaging in far more boundary violations than the other group. The incarcerated group also used more force in all of the other areas with one exception: the incarcerated group admitted to using less physical force than what was expected.

Interestingly, the men who participated in this study would appear not to utilize physical force to the same extent as the community-based group. The results of this study support that most sex offenders utilize psychological force rather than physical force in the commission of their crimes. Clinical data, data from collateral sources such as criminal complaints and police reports, and research data (Johnson, 1995) appear to support the current findings (see Figure 1).

DISCUSSION

These results support the premise that sex offenders utilize psychological force far more than they use physical force. As the data show, the majority of sex offenders in this study did not admit to using physical force. Of course



sex offenders have been known to be dishonest. Court materials including victim statements offer support that in most sex abuse offenses, community-based sex offenders tended not to use psychological force rather than physical force during the offenses. Incarcerated sex offenders admitted to using psychological force much more than physical force. However, collateral data suggests that a high percentage of incarcerated sex offenders used physical force, but they deny or minimize using physical force. In addition, many of the incarcerated sex offenders molested children or adolescents, and they did not need to utilize physical force to complete their sex offense. On one hand, incarcerated sex offenders may in fact utilize less physical force than community-based sex offenders, yet on the other hand, they may simply be lying about the physical force they utilized.

The primary motive for this study was to identify the specific types of psychological and physical force sex offenders used in the commission of their offenses. This study was not without flaws. However, the data appear reliable given other study data and again, from collateral information such as working directly with the offenders, as well as information from court and

victim reports. The questionnaire may undergo revision and be part of a larger study in the future.

Identifying the types of psychological force utilized in the perpetrator's offense is crucial. It would be nearly impossible to construct an offense cycle or re-offense prevention plan without an understanding of the types of force used. Psychological force occurs throughout sex offenses, and may occur in many forms. For example, the language used, verbal tonations, certain phrases, gestures and eye movements may have played a role in the grooming process or during the actual offense. Most offenders are not even aware of how they groomed their victim until a thorough examination of their precursor and offense behavior occurs. It is therefore crucial to examine the grooming process in depth, as well as the actual behaviors that occurred as part of the offense in order to identify the type of psychological force used.

REFERENCES

- Briere, J. and Malamuth, N.A. (1983) Predicting self-reported likelihood of sexually abusive behavior: Attitudinal versus sexual explanations. *Journal of Interpersonal Violence*, 5 (2), 247-258.
- Goodchilds, J.D. and Zellman, G.L. (1984). Sexual signaling and sexual aggression in adolescent relationships. In N. Malamuth and E. Donnerstein (Eds.), *Pornography and Sexual Aggression*. Orlando, FL: Academic Press.
- Johnson, S. A. (1992). *Man-To-Man: When Your Partner Says No*. Brandon, VT: The Safer Society Press.
- Johnson, S. A. (1993). *When "I Love You" Turns Violent: Emotional and Physical Abuse in Dating Relationships*. Far Hills, NJ: New Horizon Press.
- Johnson, S. A. (1995). The overlooked force in sexual assault: Implications for recovery. *Acta Sexologica*, 1, 3-4, 268-302.
- Johnson, S.A. (1997). Psychological force in sexual abuse: Implications for recovery. In B.K. Schwartz, & H.R. Cellini (Eds.), *The sex offender: New insights, treatment innovations and legal developments* (Chapter 17, pp. 17-1-17-11). New Jersey: Civic Research Institute.
- Koss, M.P. (1987). Outrageous acts and everyday seductions: Sexual aggression and victimization among college students. In B. Levy (Ed.), *Dating violence: Young women in danger*. Seattle, WA: Seal Press.
- Koss, M.P. and Leonard, K.E. (1984). Sexually aggressive men. In N.A. Malamuth and E. Donnerstein (Eds.), *Pornography and Sexual Aggression*. Orlando, FL: Academic Press
- Mahoney, E.R., Shively, M. and Traw, M. (1985). Sexual coercion and assault: Male macho and female chance. *Sexual Coercion and Assault*, 1(1), 2-7.
- Makepeace, J.M. (1981). Courtship violence among college students. *Family Relations*, 30, 97-102.
- Makepeace, J.M. (1986). Gender differences in courtship violence victimization. *Family Relations*, 35, 383-388.

- Malamuth, N.M. (1981). Rape proclivity among males. *Journal of Social Issues*, 37 (4), 138-157.
- Miller, B. (1988). Date rape: Time for a new look at prevention. *Journal of College Student Development*, 29, 553-555.
- Miller, B. and Marshall, J. (1987). Coercive sex on the university campus. *Journal of College Student Personnel*, 28 (1), 38-47.
- Muehlenhard, C.L. (1988). Misinterpreted dating behaviors and the risk of date rape. *Journal of Social and Clinical Psychology*, 6 (1), 20-37.
- Thompson, W.E. (1986). Courtship violence. Toward a conceptual understanding. *Youth and Society*, 18 (2), 162-176.

AUTHOR'S NOTES

Scott A. Johnson, MA, LP, is a counseling and forensic psychologist who has worked with physical and sexual abusers for many years. He is currently employed with the Minnesota Department of Corrections as a Sex Offender Assessor and Civil Commitment Review Coordinator. He was the first clinician in Minnesota or in a correctional setting to utilize the Abel Assessment protocol. He has worked with sex offenders at Alpha Services Industries in Minneapolis, Minnesota, and at Project Pathfinder in St. Paul. He has authored *When "I Love You" Turns Violent* (1993) and *Man to Man: When Your Partner Says No* (1992) and the soon to be published *Handbook for Mental Health and Law Enforcement Personnel Working with Sex Offenders*. He is on the editorial board for the journal *Acta Sexologica*.

Address correspondence to Scott A. Johnson, Minnesota Department of Corrections, 1450 Energy Park Drive, Suite 200, St. Paul, MN 55108.