

Study finds 'sexism' in sexual assault research, but this time men are the target

July 10 2017



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Sexism is alive and well in sexual assault research, but this time men are the target. A new study conducted by researchers at Florida Atlantic University and Sam Houston State University debunks a long-standing theory that sexual assault isn't as emotionally traumatizing for men as it is for women and that it doesn't result in similar emotional impacts, especially when it comes to depression.

Sexual assault is unwanted sexual contact - including rape - and is a traumatizing event linked to numerous mental health consequences associated with negative outcomes such as depression, [posttraumatic stress disorder](#), fear, anxiety, alcohol dependence, use of illicit substances, suicidal ideation, and attempted suicide. While there is extensive research on the collateral consequences experienced by females, almost no research exists on how sexual violence affects adult, non-incarcerated males or how it affects them as compared to females.

Using a sample size of 11,860 adults in the United States (5,922 men and 5,938 [women](#)) obtained from the National Violence Against Women Survey's database, the researchers sought to challenge a sociological theory that explains that men are more likely to respond to sexual assault with anger and by engaging in criminal activity, while women are more likely to respond with depression and sadness.

The General Strain Theory, used by criminologists and sociologists, explains delinquency and deviant behavior in terms of behavioral, emotional, and cognitive adaptations to negative life events (i.e., strain). Results of the study are published in the journal *Women & Criminal Justice*.

The aim of the study, led by Lisa M. Dario, Ph.D., assistant professor in the School of Criminology and Criminal Justice within FAU's College for Design and Social Inquiry, was to prove how depression and sexual assault are both underreported as well as understudied in adult men. Research examining male sexual victimization has predominantly focused on childhood trauma. Findings from this study will help to tackle the many gaps that exist, identify appropriate support programs for men, and ultimately remove the stigma and barriers that prevent them from disclosing as well as discussing their experience.

"When we began this study, we thought for sure that we would find that females who were sexually assaulted would exhibit higher depression scores than males who were sexually assaulted," said Dario. "I think this is probably because of antiquated ideas that men and women experience emotions differently. What we actually discovered, much to our surprise, is that sexual assault is traumatic regardless of gender."

The researchers suspect that it is possible that men may even experience depression more than women because they don't have the social outlets and support systems available to women and therefore may wind up internalizing their feelings and emotions.

What didn't surprise Dario and her collaborator Eryn Nicole O'Neal, Ph.D., an assistant professor of [criminal justice](#) and criminology at Sam Houston State University, was that all victims of sexual assault have higher depression scores than individuals who have not been sexually assaulted in their lifetime.

In 1980, men made up between 1 to 10 percent of rape reports received in crisis centers, hospitals and emergency rooms; in 1997, they represented between 5 and 10 percent of all reported rapes. More recently, National Crime Victimization Survey results show that men make up about 38 percent of sexual assault and rape incidents reported, and those in the military are particularly vulnerable and more unlikely to report an assault.

"There is no room for 'sexism' in sexual assault research [by ignoring male victims] and we must bring attention to an issue that impacts men equally, especially if we know that their negative emotional responses are treatable," said Dario. "If left untreated, [sexual assault](#) victims may look for other outlets to process their emotions; untreated [depression](#) may lead to negative coping mechanisms, like drug use. We do know that people who experience strains, like sex assault, are more likely to use illicit drugs, and we certainly need to be mindful of halting an already nationwide epidemic of opioid and other drug misuse."

Provided by Florida Atlantic University

Citation: Study finds 'sexism' in sexual assault research, but this time men are the target (2017, July 10) retrieved 16 August 2024 from <https://phys.org/news/2017-07-sexism-sexual-assault-men.html>

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