

# Sexual Coercion in a Sample of Puerto Rican Gay Males

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**ABSTRACT.** Sexual coercion as part of the cycle of domestic violence represents a serious threat for HIV infection among partners in general, and gay and bisexual men in particular. This study examined the experiences of Puerto Rican gay men with domestic violence and sexual coercion in the context of the HIV epidemic. A self-administered questionnaire was obtained from a sample of 302 Puerto Rican gay males, 49% of whom reported having a steady partner. Forty-eight percent (48%) reported experiences of emotional violence in their relationships, 26% reported physical violence, and 27% reported sexual violence. There was a positive correlation between being anally penetrated without a condom, the need to please the partner, and being HIV positive. Findings suggest that the manner in which violence is constructed and perceived in men may be related to vulnerability for violence and possibly HIV infection. *[Article copies available for a fee from The Haworth Document Delivery Service: 1-800-HAWORTH. E-mail address: <docdelivery@haworthpress.com> Website: <<http://www.HaworthPress.com>> © 2004 by The Haworth Press, Inc. All rights reserved.]*

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Domestic violence and sexual coercion among men have been poorly studied. Only recently we can find some studies that addressed issues of prevalence of domestic violence among male same-sex partners. Some researchers had stated that there are several reasons why domestic violence among same-sex partners had not been clearly addressed, even by the gay, lesbian, bisexual and transgender community: homophobia and sexism. Homophobia hinders the possibility of accepting that same-sex partners even exists; less will it allow addressing issues of intimate violence. Sexism has supported the idea that male are always the aggressors and females always the victims. There is no space under this paradigm to visualize same-sex battering between men.

Domestic violence is defined as a systematic pattern of abusive behavior, in an intimate relationship, over time, which can become frequent and severe. Domestic violence has the objective of controlling, dominating, and coercing another person (Farley, 1992; Schornstein, 1997). Some people include date rape as part of the spectrum of domestic violence, considering it an aggression in an intimate relation (Hickson, Davies, Hunt, Weatherburn, McManus, & Coxon, 1994; Scarce, 1997). Batterer is defined as repeated physical and/or sexual assault by an intimate partner within a context of coercive control (Farley, 1992; Schornstein, 1997).

Recent studies have demonstrated that there is a similar prevalence of domestic violence among same-sex partners as among their heterosexual counterparts (Cruz, 1996; Cruz, & Firestone, 1998; Farley, 1996; Jewkes, 2002; Merrill, & Wolfe, 2000; Nieves-Rosa, Carballo-Diequez, & Dolezal, 2000; Schafer, Caetano, & Clark, 1998; Toro-Alfonso, 1999a). Among the issues addressed in the context of intimate partner violence there had been an increasing *number* of studies done in relation to sexual coercion among gay men (Struckman-Johnson, & Struckman-Johnson, 1994; Waldner-Haugrud & Gratch, 1997).

Sexual coercion had been defined as a series of behaviors and tactics geared to obtain sexual satisfaction from an unwilling partner (Felson, 2002). Coercion tactics range from repeated verbal coercion to the use of restraint and physical force. The result of coercion may include a variety of behaviors from kissing to anal penetration (Walder-Haugrud & Gratch, 1997). The fact is that nonconsensual sex had been found to be common among gay and homosexual communities (Krahne, Schutze, Fritsche, & Waizenhofer, 2000). Waterman, Dawson, and Bologna

(1989) reported that among a sample of gay men, 12% were victims of at least one incident of forced sex by their current or most current intimate partner. Struckman-Johnson and Struckman-Johnson (1994) in a study among undergraduate students reporting nonconsensual sex found that 2% self-identified as homosexual. Among the self-identified homosexuals, 34% reported some sort of sexual coercion. The majority of the reported incidents included pressured contact, with verbal persuasion, intoxication, emotional manipulation, and bribery. Also, Duncan (1990) found that students who identified as lesbian and gays were significantly more likely than heterosexual students to report that they were forced to have sex against their will at some time in their life. From this sample, 12% of gay men reported being victims.

More recently, Waldner-Haugrud and Gratch (1997) reported that in a sample of 162 gay men, 3.6% reported having experienced forced penetration at some time in their lives. Tjaden, Thoennes, and Allison (1999, p. 419) indicated that in their sample, "in general, same-sex cohabiting men tended to be raped by strangers and acquaintances," suggesting that sexual coercion and forced sex is indeed part of the complex milieu of domestic violence among gay men. Cruz and Firestone (1998) reported prominent similarities between heterosexual domestic violence and the perception of abuse experienced by the respondents *in* their study.

*However*, there seems to be no relation between the experience of sexual coercion and ethnicity. Kuhn, Arellano, and Chavez (1998) reported that in a study of 1,385 Mexican American and White Non-Hispanic adolescents, the 54 males who reported being sexually assaulted were compared to the rest of the sample. The levels of stress and social isolation found in this sample showed no difference between ethnic groups. In other studies, Burke and Follingstad (1999) and Toro-Alfonso (1999a; 1999b) reported that between 7 and 13% of participants had been victims of physical violence. Nieves-Rosa, Carballo-Dieguez, and Dolezal (2000) found a higher percent (35%). The findings of the studies by Toro-Alfonso (1999a; 1999b) and by Nieves-Rosa, Carballo-Dieguez, and Dolezal (2000) found that similar numbers of participants (33-50%) reported having been victims of psychological violence by their partners. In addition, these researchers found that a fourth of participants had, under some form of sexual coercion, participated in unprotected anal sex.

The use of verbal pressure and constant nagging, the use of threats of self-violence, and other manipulation tactics have been found to be the basis for much sexual coercion. Gay men have reported having unwanted and undesired sexual relations because they have felt pressured by constant verbal arguments (Lane & Gwarthey-Gibbs, 1985) or by the

feeling of “taking care” of their partner. The use of verbal persuasion and seductive words in intimate relations is so common that generally people do not consider them to be coercion. However, lying and nagging in order to make a partner have sex is the tip of the iceberg for incidents of domestic violence and sexual aggression. Rape and sexual abuse are generally integral part of the cycle of domestic violence (Renzetti, 1992).

Despite contradictory evidence of the degree to which an abusive partner is influenced by violence in his/her own childhood household (West, 1998), we believe that the most important aspect of the transmission of intergenerational patterns of violence is the role models provided by parents (Arias, 1984; Hanson, Cadsky, Harris, & Lalonde, 1997; O’Leary, 1988). In other words, someone who experiences violence between their parents is very likely to subsequently create the same abusive dynamic with their partner. An additional factor related to role models is the learning of compulsive behaviors manifested in the form of addictions. In those families in which a variety of compulsive or addictive behaviors are observed, a stronger tendency towards violence in the home is also observed. We are referring here to uncontrolled behaviors in eating, the abuse of alcohol, and compulsive sexual behavior. Studies have shown that there is a direct relationship between these behaviors and domestic violence as well as unprotected sexual behaviors in heterosexual couples (Bailey, Montgomery, Sly, Soler, Lacroix, & Moore, 1999).

There is difficulty assessing the prevalence of sexual coercion among gay men primarily because the need to hide their relationships hinders the possibility of reporting these cases. Also, most of the studies reported in the literature are based on availability samples which make difficult the possibility to generalize the results. Yet there is evidence of the prevalence of this dynamic and its implications for HIV infection (Cunningham, Stiffman, Dore, & Earls, 1994; Zieler, Cunningham, Andersen et al., 2000).

The relevance of studying the prevalence and manifestations of sexual coercion among gay men is evidence by the possibilities of HIV infection generated from these experiences (El-Bassel, Gilbert, Rajah, Foleno, & Frye, 2000; Klein, Birkhead, & Wright, 2000). There is some evidence that sexual coercion and sexual abuse are generally development in an environment that inhibits the possibility of protection for sexually transmitted diseases (STD) and HIV, from the detrimental effect on self-esteem and on negotiation skills due to childhood sexual abuse (Doll & Carballo-Diequez, 1998; Relf, 2001; Nieves-Rosa, Carballo-Diequez, & Dolezal, 2000; Kalichman & Rompa, 1995) to the

effect of lowering the likelihood of engaging in risk-resistance behaviors in the future. Some researchers have recommended that HIV prevention interventions for gay and bisexual men should include intensive training in strategies to resist coercive sexual advances.

It is in this context that we examined the experiences of Puerto Rican gay men in relation to domestic violence and sexual coercion. This is part of a major research program addressing the prevalence of domestic violence among male same-sex partners. Because this is a program initiated in Puerto Rico by Puerto Rican researchers, we only included participants who were born or living in Puerto Rico. Even though the literature review clearly established no relation between ethnicity and sexual coercion, we found it pertinent to address this issue in this population because of the significant incidence of HIV infection in the island (Department of Health, 2003). Our main objectives were to identify the prevalence of domestic violence and sexual coercion among participants. We expected to find high levels of sexual coercion among participants who reported high levels of domestic violence in their relationships.

### ***METHOD***

For this descriptive study, we were interested in recruiting Puerto Rican gay men who were willing to participate and answer a self-administered questionnaire. We contacted community organizations that provided services to gay and bisexual men and friendship networks of Puerto Rican gay men. We also wrote letters to key informants identified by these networks and solicited their support in identifying participants.

All participants received an informed consent form that was mailed separately from the questionnaire. The consent form described the study and addressed issues of confidentiality and possible risks from participating in the study. Community mental health service providers were identified as possible referral sites in case any participant requested such a service.

These procedures resulted in a convenience sample that consisted of 199 Puerto Rican men living in Puerto Rico and 103 Puerto Rican men living in New York. All were of Puerto Rican nationality, older than 18 years old, had at least one steady same-sex partner in their lifetime, and participated voluntarily in the study.

Nieves-Rosa and Toro-Alfonso (1996) developed the questionnaire used which assessed (1) history of intergenerational abuse; (2) addictive behaviors; (3) domestic violence behaviors; and (4) conflict resolution skills. The last two variables were measured using scales. The

domestic violence scale included three dimensions: emotional violence (alpha = .89), physical violence (alpha = .95), and sexual violence and coercion (Kalichman & Rompa, 1995) (alpha = .93). The conflict resolution skill scale measured two dimensions: assertiveness and aggression, with reliability indexes of .83 and .89, respectively.

## RESULTS

The average age of participants was 31 years. Respondents reported high formal education levels; 77% of the participants reported some university level education. Most of them (81%) self-identified as gay, and 19% identified as bisexual. Almost half (49%) of the participants reported having a steady partner at the time of the study, and 77% reported three or fewer partners in their lives.

Forty-eight percent reported having experienced emotional violence in their relationships, and 26% reported physical violence. One-fourth of the participants (25%) reported at least one incident of sexual coercion or nonconsensual sex with their partners. Reports included unprotected anal penetration coerced by verbal persuasion and psychological manipulation. Table 1 shows reasons identified by participants for engaging in nonconsensual or unprotected sex with their partners.

Participants reported a significant amount of domestic violence and sexual coercion experienced in their families of origin. More than half (52%) of participants reported witnessing violence in their families, in-

TABLE 1. List of Sexual Coercion Behaviors Reported by Participants

Behavior	Participant		Partner	
	f	%	f	%
Being penetrated without a condom due to the need to please him	50	19	ND	ND
Use of physical force to penetrate your partner without a condom	41	16	57	22
Threatening your partner with use of physical force in order to penetrate him without a condom	39	15	43	16
Being penetrated due to his insistence	36	14	ND	ND
Lying to penetrate him without a condom	19	7	26	10
Threatening your partner with ending the relationship if he does not accept being penetrated without a condom	13	5	29	11

ND = No data available

cluding emotional, physical, and sexual abuse; specifically, 26% reported physical violence, 31% reported emotional abuse, and 5% reported sexual violence. This is similar to other studies that reported substance abuse and intimate partner violence in families of origin as high-risk factors for experiencing intimate violence (Coker, Smith, McBrown, & King, 2000). Participants reported being victims of abuse by their fathers (48%) and by their mothers (44%). Sibling violence and abuse was also reported by the participants—26% reporting physical violence, 31% reporting emotional violence, and 5% reporting sexual violence.

More than half of the participants (66%) indicated compulsive use of or addiction to at least one of the following: alcohol, drugs, food, and/or sex. The participants (64%) also identified these habits in their families of origin, including parents and siblings. The frequency of compulsive behaviors reported by participants seems to confirm the premise that there is a direct link between addictive tendencies and the necessity to aggressively control and dominate over one's partner.

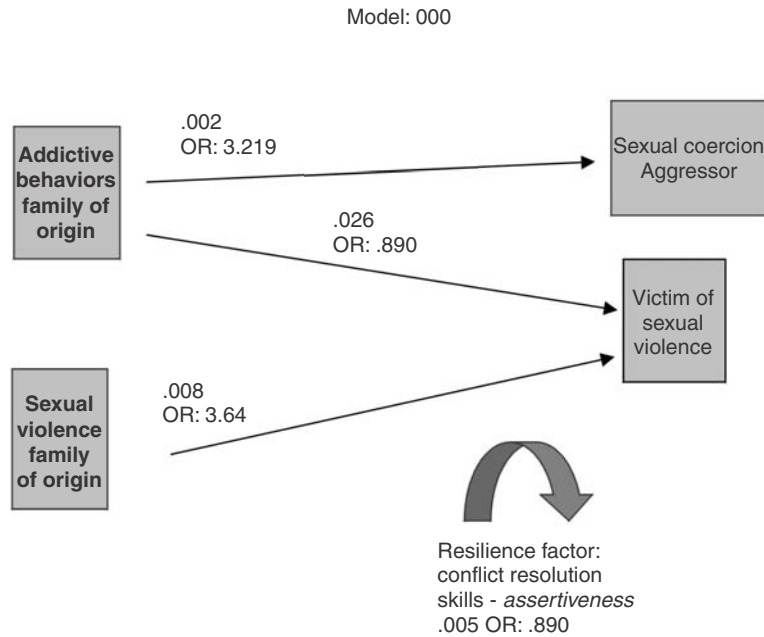
We observed that the majority of participants (75%) showed a violent approach to conflict resolution, while 27% indicated having skills of assertiveness. The combination of a low level of assertiveness and the presence of a degree of aggression in the solving of conflicts is evidently a dangerous combination.

In order to identify which of the variables predict better sexual coercion in current relationships, we performed logistic regression including the following variables: intergenerational violence (emotional, physical, and sexual), addictive behaviors, and conflict resolution skills. The regression model showed that previous exposition to sexual violence and addictive behaviors in their families of origin increases the probability of being sexually victimized by their partners and the probability of victimizing their partners. Having assertiveness skills reduces this probability (see Figure 1).

## ***DISCUSSION AND IMPLICATIONS***

The findings of this study, even when supported by previous research, should be viewed in the context of the population that participated. As this was a convenience sample, no generalization to the rest of the gay male Puerto Rican population can be made, neither to other Latino/Hispanic population. Findings apply only to this sample of participants.

FIGURE 1. Vulnerability Factors for Sexual Coercion



It is difficult to assess domestic violence specifically because self-reported measures might depend on memory, social desirability, and perception of the events. When addressing sexual coercion we must take in consideration that there is a social general acceptability of male aggressiveness and many participants might not consider many sexual advances as coercion. Puerto Rican males, including gay males, learn that as part of their male construction men should be aggressive and coercive, using as many means as possible to get someone to engage in sex (Marín, 2003). This perception might interfere with the possible identification of coercion tactics.

The social construction and perception of violence among gay males and its possible relation to their vulnerability for the HIV infection requires an examination of the prevalence of aggression and violence in their intimate relationships. There seems to be a significant level of vulnerability to HIV infection among gay partners involved in sexual coercion and domestic violence, as this study demonstrates. This is consistent

with other findings reported in the literature (Kalichman, & Rompa, 1995).

The level of violence and sexual coercion in families of origin is directly related to the experience of either being the aggressor or the victim of sexual coercion and domestic violence in intimate relationships among this sample of Puerto Rican gay and bisexual men. Vicarious experience of violent behaviors in their family of origin might be directly related to the experience of sexual coercion in intimate relationships.

These findings are similar to other studies that established the existence of similar trends in domestic and sexual abuse among intimate partners without major difference by sexual orientation. The relevance of these findings makes prominent the need to address HIV infection as result of sexual coercion specifically among a population that reported a high HIV incidence.

There is an urgent need to examine intergenerational history of violence and sexual coercion as a mean to develop interventions addressing the transmission of violence to next generation couples (Coker, Smith, McBrown, & King, 2000). Negotiation skills building, assertiveness, and conflict solution skills appear to be resilience factors that may mitigate the appearance of sexual coercion and violence.

Gay and bisexual men can be victims of acquaintance sexual coercion or abuse. Date rape has been reported in many instances among newly met gay men (Scarce, 1997). Men should learn to identify risk situation. The risk for HIV infection is present in all sexual relationships mediated by coercion and where there is no real consent for sex. Some providers have suggested that prevention programs should be developed to address sexual dating violence (Merrill, 1999).

All these issues must be addressed in order to halt the continuous threat of abuse in our communities. Interventions for domestic violence among gay men and men who have sex with men should include in their major core addressing issues of power, examining intergenerational violence and problem-solving skills. Interpersonal and structural obstacles for the development of healthy relationships should be carefully considered and include in all prevention interventions (Powell, 1991).

Policy makers should be made aware of the implications of violence among same-sex partners. Laws targeting domestic violence should be made inclusive of the dynamic of violence among same-sex partners. It is the responsibility of government to provide funding for these efforts.

The gay and lesbian community should address the need to develop shelters and safe environments for victims of domestic violence; these

programs should address the needs of victims and aggressors. Government and private funds should be identified to support these programs.

Our society must face the unequivocal responsibility to provide support and services to all victims of domestic violence. The home should not be tolerated as a place to privately receive the brutal violence of intimate partners. Our youth population must learn to solve interpersonal problems in a way that excludes the use of violence.

Sexual coercion is a manifestation of power beyond gender differences. "Men will always be men" should not be accepted as an excuse to promote behaviors that increase the vulnerability of an already stigmatized community. There should be no more silence around this issue in the gay and lesbian community. Escaping from the moral judgments of the society could mean leaving many people vulnerable to aggression and maybe murder, in the hands of his/her partner.

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