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## A Social Learning Perspective on Sexual Coercion

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UNIVERSITY OF NEW HAVEN  
HONORS PROGRAM

**2021-2022 Honors Thesis**

A Social Learning Perspective on Sexual Coercion

Mallory Ferrick

A thesis presented in partial fulfillment of the requirements of the Undergraduate Honors Program at the University of New Haven.

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**A Social Learning Perspective on Sexual Coercion**

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Honors Thesis

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May 4, 2022

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### **Abstract**

Akers' (2009) social learning theory proposes that individuals learn deviant behavior through the same learning processes by which they learn conventional behavior. Social learning theory has been applied as an explanation for an array of deviant behaviors; however, no known published research has explored the theory's ability to explain the perpetration of sexual coercion. This project investigated the extent to which Akers' social learning theory can be applied to sexual coercion. This project utilized a sample of undergraduate students enrolled in various courses at a private four-year institution in the northeast. Descriptive statistics revealed a lack of variability among responses to the sexual coercion inventory. Therefore, the project explored the relationship between differential association and modeling, and definitions. Chi square analyses revealed that individuals who are exposed to prosocial influences regarding sexual assault, such as media relating to the #MeToo movement and family who support the movement, are more likely to hold beliefs which emphasize the necessity of freely given consent and trust media depictions of the prevalence of sexual assault. Findings from the project suggest that social influences can impact the beliefs they develop regarding healthy sexual behavior.

*Keywords:* sexual coercion, Akers' social learning theory, differential association, differential reinforcement, modeling/imitation, definitions

## **A Social Learning Perspective on Sexual Coercion**

Sexual coercion involves acts whereby consent may be given for sexual activity, but the consent is obtained through some form of manipulation on the part of the perpetrator (French et al., 2017). Though not overtly illegal in many states, sexually coerced acts can have damaging psychological effects on victims (Brown et al., 2009; Byers & Glenn, 2011). Davis et al. (2014) found that 78% of their female sample reported experiencing sexual victimization; 58% of which reported victimization through coercion. Similarly, 58% of their male sample reported perpetrating sexual violence, with 80% using coercion to do so (Davis et al., 2014). The apparent prevalence of sexual coercion necessitates further research into factors influencing its perpetration.

One potential explanation for the use of sexual coercion can be found in Akers' (2009) social learning theory. The theory proposes that all behavior, conventional and deviant, is learned through the same mechanisms and social influences. Research has supported the theory, including research that has measured the influence of the theoretical components on sex offenses (Boeringer et al., 1991). However, more research on sex offenses, in particular coerced sex, is warranted given the aforementioned data on use of and experience with coerced sex. The current study aims to contribute to this literature by examining the relationship between the components of Akers' (2009) social learning theory and individuals' self-reported perpetration of sexual coercion.

## Literature Review

### Social Learning Theory

Akers' (2009) social learning theory proposes that people learn deviant behavior through the same process of learning by which they learn conventional behavior. The process centers on four main factors: differential association, differential reinforcement, imitation, and definitions, which are explained by Akers (2009). He explains that differential association can be defined as, simply, interaction with others. Factors such as frequency and duration of interaction affect the reinforcement of both conventional and deviant behavior. Differential reinforcement is described as the process by which attitudes and behaviors are rewarded or punished by the peers with whom one differentially associates. Imitation can be defined as the process by which one observes the behaviors of others being rewarded or punished and models their own behaviors accordingly. Finally, Akers notes that definitions are the learned attitudes one has about a particular behavior. The theory proposes that these components interact to teach a particular behavior (Akers, 2009). The final version of Akers' theory reflects social changes that have taken place since its inception and has been heavily influenced by various theorists.

Akers' social learning theory was primarily developed as an extension of Sutherland's differential association theory (Akers, 2009). Sutherland proposed that criminal behavior is learned through communication with others who engage in said behavior, and individuals become delinquent when they endorse more definitions against the law than in support of the law. This inspired the components of differential association and definitions in Akers' (2009) theory. Akers further expanded the theory by

integrating the ideas of operant conditioning, first presented by Skinner, which became the social learning factor differential reinforcement. The final factor, modeling and imitation, was based on the work of Bandura in his social learning theory in the field of psychology (Akers, 2009). Akers integrated these concepts from their various fields of origin into his final product: criminology's social learning theory.

Social learning theory is a general theory of crime and has therefore been applied as an explanation of an array of deviant behavior. The theory has been used to explain lower-level forms of deviance, such as smoking, alcohol use, and distracted driving (Akers & Lee, 1996; Akers et al., 1989; Capece & Lanza-Kaduce, 2013; Krohn et al., 1985; Tontodonato & Drinkard, 2020). The theory has also been subjected to testing on more serious crimes, such as stalking, intimate partner violence, and sexual assault (Boeringer et al., 1991; Cochran et al., 2011; Fox et al., 2011; Sellers et al., 2005). Although tests of the theory have generally supported it, results suggest that certain components of the theory serve as stronger explanations for crime and deviance than others. As such, each component of the theory will be reviewed separately.

### ***Differential Association***

Social learning theory states that individuals who interact with peers who engage in a particular behavior are more likely to engage in that behavior themselves (Akers, 2009). This component is generally measured through the number of intimate contacts an individual has who have engaged in the deviant behavior being investigated, or deviant behavior in general (Akers et al., 1989; Akers & Lee, 1996; Boeringer et al., 1991;



Cochran et al., 2011; Cochran et al., 2017). Research has found that differential association in the form of both parental and peer influence is related to deviant behavior.

Studies of lower-level deviance have consistently found both peer and parental influence to be related to deviant behavior. Key findings in several studies indicate that individuals with peers who engage in deviant behavior are more likely to engage in deviant behavior themselves (Akers et al., 1989; Akers & Lee, 1996; Miller & Morris, 2016; Morris & Higgins, 2010; Pratt et al., 2010). Some of those studies also indicate that individuals with parents or other family members who engage in deviant behavior are more likely to engage in deviant behavior themselves (Akers et al., 1989; Pratt et al., 2010).

Though fewer studies have applied social learning theory to crimes of interpersonal violence, those that have produced similar findings regarding the impact of peer and parental influence. Key findings in many studies indicate that individuals with peers who report the use of interpersonal violence are more likely to commit similar crimes themselves (Boeringer et al., 1991; Cochran et al., 2011; Fox et al., 2011; Sellers et al., 2005). Among studies that apply social learning theory to more serious deviance, few measure parental influence; however, at least two studies have found that individuals with parents who engage in interpersonal violence are more likely to engage in such behaviors themselves (Cochran et al., 2011; Sellers et al., 2005).

### ***Differential Reinforcement***

The extent to which individuals engage in deviant behavior depends on consequences, in the form of either rewards or punishments, that they expect to

experience after the behavior. Differential reinforcement refers to the balance of positive and negative consequences of a given behavior. These consequences can be formal or informal, ranging from the physical effects of drug use to the reactions of family and friends, to arrest and imprisonment (Akers, 2009). Formal reinforcement refers to legally sanctioned responses to a behavior, whereas informal reinforcement is more generally the response of family and peers, or in some situations, one's own physical response to the behavior (e.g., side effects of drug use).

In studies of social learning theory's application to lower-levels of deviance, research suggests that reinforcement supportive of a given deviant behavior from both formal and informal sources is related to an individual's engagement in that behavior. Studies consistently find that individuals who anticipate informal reinforcement favoring deviant behavior are more likely to engage in that behavior (Akers et al., 1989; Akers & Lee, 1996; Capece & Lanza-Kaduce, 2013; Krohn et al., 1985). Similarly, studies measuring differential reinforcement through the anticipation of formal sanctions also find the variable to be related to deviant behavior (Shadmanfaat et al., 2020; Skinner & Fream, 1997).

Studies of social learning theory in relation to crimes of interpersonal violence have similar findings to those of general deviance in terms of differential reinforcement. Individuals who anticipate more positive responses from family and friends in response to their criminal behavior are more likely to engage in that behavior (Boeringer et al., 1991; Cochran et al., 2011; Sellers et al., 2005). Few social learning studies of crimes of interpersonal violence measure differential reinforcement through formal sanctions, but those that do generally find the variable to be related to deviance (Cochran et al., 2017).

### ***Modeling and Imitation***

The basis of the social learning component modeling and imitation is that by observing others' engagement in a particular behavior with few-to-no negative consequences, one becomes more likely to engage in that behavior (Akers, 2009). Many studies of social learning theory combine the components of differential association and imitation and thus cannot independently evaluate the relationship between imitation and deviance. Those that do measure imitation typically do so by asking about exposure to socially modeled behaviors or to media relating to the behavior, or both.

Research that examines the concept of modeling and imitation on lower-level deviance consistently finds support that the influences, such as social models and media, are related to deviant behavior. Studies measuring the component through both socially modeled behaviors and media sources have found exposure to both types of models to be related to deviant behavior (Shadmanfaat et al., 2020; Skinner & Fream, 1997). These findings indicate that deviant behavior can be influenced by primary models, such as family members and teachers, as well as secondary models, like television shows and films.

Just as with lower levels of deviance, studies measuring the effect of social learning on interpersonal violence have found that social modeling and media modeling are consistently related to deviance. Individuals exposed to socially modeled interpersonal violence are more likely to engage in interpersonal violence (Felson & Lane, 2009). Exposure to media models of sexual violence is related to commission of nonphysical sexual abuse as well (Boeringer et al., 1991).

### *Definitions*

The final factor of Akers' (2009) social learning theory is definitions. Individuals are more likely to engage in a particular behavior if they have learned to endorse definitions which favor the behavior (Akers, 2009). It is important to note that this concept does not center on an individual's knowledge or understanding of laws, but rather their personal values and agreement with or respect for the law. Measurements of definitions take different forms depending on the specific behavior being measured.

Studies applying social learning theory to lower-level forms of deviance measure the concept with a variety of items. In studies of smoking (Akers & Lee, 1996), alcohol consumption (Akers et al., 1989), distracted driving (Tontodonato & Drinkard, 2020), and computer crimes (Morris & Higgins, 2010), researchers asked participants about how acceptable they believe the behavior is. Affirmative responses in all of the aforementioned studies were found to be related to participants' own engagement in the behavior.

Researchers applying social learning theory to more serious crimes such as intimate partner violence and sexual assault oftentimes measure definitions through individuals' level of agreement with typical heteronormative beliefs or rape myths. People who report higher levels of agreement with heteronormative beliefs and common rape myths engage in more crimes of interpersonal violence (Boeringer et al., 1991; Eaton & Matamala, 2014; Thompson & Morrison, 2013).

### ***Social Learning and Sexual Assault***

Although the previous discussion presented measures and important findings of social learning theory research by component, one study needs to be discussed in more detail given its relevance to the current study. Boeringer et al. (1991) applied social learning theory as an explanation for sexual aggression among college men. They measured sexual aggression through both self-reported sexually aggressive behavior and self-perceived likelihood of perpetrating sexual aggression. The study put particular emphasis on comparing the responses of fraternity men to non-fraternity men. Results indicated that all components of social learning theory (differential association, differential reinforcement, modeling and imitation, definitions) are related to either self-perceived likelihood of perpetrating sexual aggression or actual sexual aggression. In addition, fraternity members were more likely to experience differential association and differential reinforcement favoring sexual aggression than non-fraternity members (Boeringer et al., 1991).

### **Sexual Coercion**

#### ***Definitions***

Definitions of sexual coercion vary among scholars. French et al. (2017) define sexual coercion as “the use of verbal pressure or manipulation to have sexual intercourse with a reluctant or non-consenting partner” (p. 963), whereas DeGue et al. (2010) define it as “the use of nonphysical tactics to obtain unwanted sex” (p. 403). For the purposes of the proposed study, sexual coercion will be defined as sex obtained through non-consent or under duress (Raghavan et al., 2014). Sexual coercion encompasses a larger range of behaviors than sexual assault and while it is considered to be a form of sexual

victimization (French et al., 2017), many behaviors under the umbrella of sexual coercion do not legally constitute a crime (Tamborra et al., 2014).

Pugh and Becker (2018) dedicated significant attention to analyzing various definitions of verbal sexual coercion and explained that the operationalization of the term sexual coercion is more complex than for sexual assault because the concept of coercion is more ambiguous. It should be noted that technological advancements have created further gray areas in the operationalization of sexual coercion, due to new opportunities to engage in or experience sexually coercive behavior. For instance, Choi et al. (2016) found in their study of adolescent females that sexting serves as an extension of offline sexually coercive behavior.

Although sexual coercion is generally considered to be closely related to sexual assault, sexually coercive tactics have been found to be used in conjunction with intimate partner violence (Mitchell & Raghavan, 2019). Mitchell and Raghavan (2019) found that among a sample of men who have been arrested for domestic violence, use of coercive control was often related to use of sexual coercion tactics, suggesting that sexual coercion is just as closely related to intimate partner violence as it is to sexual assault, if not more so.

### ***Measures and Rates***

Differing definitions of sexual coercion have led to the creation of different scales with which to measure it. The Revised Conflict Tactics Scale contains a 7-item sexual coercion scale intended to measure sexual coercion between dating partners (Straus et al., 1996). The Sexual Experience Survey is more extensive, with items measuring a range of

coercive tactics, including verbal and physical strategies (Koss et al., 2007). The Sexual Coercion Inventory also includes multiple forms of coercion: verbal coercion, substance coercion, and physical coercion (Waldner et al., 1999). The Multidimensional Sexual Coercion Questionnaire (MSCQ) further expands to include seven subscales of various forms coercion can take (Raghavan et al., 2014), therefore this scale was utilized in this study.

The MSCQ was specifically designed to measure sexual coercion experienced by college students, and therefore takes into consideration more nuanced forms of coercion. The questionnaire consists of seven factors measuring different tactics of coercion: threats, exploitation, humiliation, pressure, manipulation, hopelessness, and helplessness. Participants are asked to note how many times they experienced each form of coercion in the past year (Raghavan et al., 2014). The present study rephrased the questions to measure perpetration rather than victimization and isolated the factors to focus on threats, exploitation, pressure, and manipulation.

Sexual coercion has been found to occur at rates similar to or greater than forcible sexual assault (Brown et al., 2009; Davis et al., 2014). Victims of sexual coercion do not experience post-traumatic stress symptoms as severely as victims of forcible rape, but they do report negative emotional reactions and self-blame (Brown et al., 2009). Byers and Glenn (2011) found that most victims of sexual coercion report at least mild levels of guilt, shame, and self-blame, though they generally attribute more blame to the coercer than to themselves. The emotional responses are similar for both male and female victims (Byers & Glenn, 2011)

### ***Gender/Sex and Sexual Coercion***

Historically, literature relating to sexual assault and sexual coercion has focused on male perpetrators and female victims. However, as noted by many scholars, males can be victims and females can be perpetrators. Gamez-Guadix et al. (2011) found that both males and females perpetrate sexual coercion, although males perpetrate at a higher rate. Byers and Glenn (2011) found that males and females have similar responses to sexual coercion victimization, suggesting that men do not, as commonly assumed, find more pleasure in their victimization experiences than women. French et al. (2014) found in their study of high school and college males that 43% had experienced sexual coercion, with 95% of the perpetrators being female.

### **Conclusion**

There is a significant body of research that examines Akers' (2009) social learning theory in connection to a variety of deviant behaviors. Though none of the reviewed studies directly measure its application to sexual coercion, supportive findings for similar crimes such as sexual aggression and sexual assault (Boeringer et al., 1991) and intimate partner violence (Cochran et al., 2011; Cochran et al., 2017; Sellers et al., 2005), indicate that the social learning perspective may be applied as an explanation for the perpetration of sexual coercion. The present study seeks to fill this gap in the literature and apply social learning theory as an explanation for the perpetration of sexual coercion.



## Method

### Participants

The current study utilizes a sample of undergraduate students from a private Northeastern university. All participants were required to be 18 years of age or older. Participants were recruited through three primary methods. The study was posted to an online platform and made available to students enrolled in introductory psychology courses in exchange for course credit; the researcher also went to selected core required criminal justice courses to administer the survey in person; and the survey link was provided to professors of core required criminal justice courses for professors to forward to students.

Data were obtained from a total of 142 participants. After the removal of cases that had excessive missing data, a final sample of 137 participants remained. The sample consisted of primarily White (79.7%,  $n = 98$ ) and female (69.9%,  $n = 93$ ) individuals. Black individuals made up 9.8% ( $n = 12$ ) of the sample, and 4.9% ( $n = 6$ ) identified as being from multiple races. Individuals of Hispanic, Latino, or Spanish origin made up 24.1% ( $n = 32$ ) of the sample. The age of participants ranged from 18 to 29 years ( $M = 19.49$ ,  $SD = 1.465$ ).

### Measures

The survey instruments were designed to measure the social learning theory variables: differential association, differential reinforcement, modeling and imitation, definitions. The independent variables were measured using items based on those used by Boeringer et al. (1991), with adjustments to modernize the items. This modernization includes removing gendered language, rewording phrases which are no longer commonly

used (such as “known tease”), as well as taking into consideration advancements such as more widespread technology and social movements such as #MeToo.

### ***Differential Association***

The items measuring differential association ask participants about friends and family who engage in behaviors in support of, and in opposition to, sexual coercion. There are eight items measuring differential association, some of which were taken from Boeringer et al. (1991). Each item asks participants how many of their family or friends have engaged in certain sexually abusive behaviors (e.g., how many of your friends have forced or tried to force sex on someone?) or support certain efforts in opposition to sexual abuse (e.g., how many of your friends think perpetrators of sexual assault should be punished by the criminal justice system?) on a 5-point scale, ranging from *0* (1) to *More than 5* (5). This section of the questionnaire can be found in Appendix A. The items marked with an asterisk were taken from Boeringer et al. (1991) and modified slightly.

### ***Differential Reinforcement***

The items measuring differential reinforcement evaluate whether participants’ friends and family encourage or discourage them to engage in sexually coercive behavior. There are six items measuring differential reinforcement, some of which were taken from Boeringer et al. (1991). Each item asks participants how approving they believe their family members and friends would be of them in certain sexual situations on a 4-point scale ranging from *Very Disapproving* (1) to *Very Approving* (4), with a separate option for *I Don’t Know*. This section of the questionnaire can be found in Appendix B. The items marked with an asterisk were taken from Boeringer et al. (1991) and modified slightly.

### ***Modeling and Imitation***

The items measuring modeling and imitation ask participants about exposure to media content promoting and condemning sexual assault. There are eight items measuring modeling and imitation, some of which were taken from Boeringer et al. (1991). Each item asks participants about the number of times they were exposed to certain forms of media relating to sexual abuse (e.g., how many times have you seen television shows, films, and other forms of media which make it clear that sexual assault is unacceptable?) on a 4-point scale ranging from *0 times* (1) to *More than 5 times* (4). This section of the questionnaire can be found in Appendix C. The items marked with an asterisk were taken from Boeringer et al. (1991) and modified slightly.

### ***Definitions***

The items measuring definitions ask participants to rate how much they agree with certain statements regarding rape. There are seven items measuring definitions. Each item asks participants to what degree they agree with certain rape myths (e.g., it is impossible to be sexually assaulted by a significant other; by consenting to a relationship, they are consenting to sex) as well as truthful statements about rape (e.g., anyone can be a perpetrator of rape, regardless of their gender identity or sexual orientation) on a 4-point scale ranging from *Strongly Disagree* (1) to *Strongly Agree* (4). This section of the questionnaire can be found in Appendix D.

### ***Perpetration of Sexual Coercion***

The outcome variable, engagement in sexually coercive behavior, was also assessed. Questions were based on Raghavan et al.'s (2014) Multidimensional Sexual Coercion Questionnaire (MSCQ). Analysis of the instrument revealed seven factors of

coercion techniques: threats, exploitation, humiliation, pressure, manipulation, hopelessness, and helplessness (Raghavan et al., 2014). The original instrument contains 37 items, but the present study utilized 22 of the items: those measuring threats, exploitation, manipulation, and pressure. Because the original instrument measures experiences of sexual coercion victimization, modifications were necessary to fit the current study's goal of examining perpetration behaviors. Questions were rephrased to ask how many times participants used sexually coercive tactics against someone else, rather than how many times the tactics have been used against them. Each item asked participants how many times they perpetrated a certain behavior in the last twelve months (e.g., I pressured my partner to not use a condom) on a 5-point scale ranging from *Never* (1) to *More than 5 times* (5). This section of the questionnaire can be found in Appendix E.

## **Procedure**

### ***Pilot Testing***

The current study was approved by the Institutional Review Board at the University of New Haven. To obtain informed consent, the study began with a brief description of the research and an option to consent or exit the survey (see Appendix F). Participants were given the option to exit the survey at any time if they became uncomfortable or wished to discontinue for any reason.

After receiving IRB approval, the researcher pilot-tested the survey in an undergraduate criminal justice research methods course. The pilot sample consisted of 19 students. Students were instructed to take a paper version of the survey and flip it over when they finished. After around 10 minutes, all students had completed the survey. The

researcher instructed the students to mark any questions they found confusing with a '1,' and mark any questions that made them uncomfortable with a '2.' Only one individual noted that questions resulted in feelings of discomfort; therefore, the questions were not adjusted.

Several individuals were confused by questions referring to the “#MeToo movement;” these questions in the differential association items were rephrased to state “current social movements which seek to expose perpetrators of sexual assault (e.g., #MeToo),” and the item in the modeling and imitation section was rephrased to state “social movements which address sexual assault (#MeToo).” In addition, several people were confused by the meaning of “violent pornography,” in the section designed to measure modeling and imitation; the clarification “(e.g., pornography which depicts rape, sexual assault, or other forms of unwanted sexual contact)” was added. In the definitions section, the question “there are no circumstances under which sexual assault is acceptable” was changed to “sexual assault is not acceptable under any circumstances.” The questions “anyone can rape” and “anyone can be raped” were modified to “anyone can be a perpetrator of rape” and “anyone can be a victim of rape.” Only one person marked the dependent variable question “my partner had sex with me to stop me from swearing” confusing; therefore, the question was not changed.

The researcher also performed an informal test of the online survey platform by instructing five individuals to take the survey on different devices and internet browsers and report any technical difficulties that ensued. There were no difficulties reported, therefore it was assumed that the online platform functioned as intended.

### ***Survey Administration***

The survey was created online using Google Forms. The link was made available to introductory psychology students through the university's online research study participation system. To expand the sample, professors from select criminal justice courses were contacted to request that the survey be distributed to students. The link was made available to students; they were given the choice to either take the survey in the classroom or wait to take it in a more private setting. The survey took approximately 10 minutes to complete. Upon completion of the survey, participants were debriefed with contact information for a local rape crisis program in case the survey brought up painful memories and emotions.

### **Results**

Descriptive statistics uncovered a lack of variability among responses to many of the survey items; however, some items yielded substantial variability. Analysis revealed that 15.8% ( $n = 22$ ) of participants reported having one or more friends who have forced or attempted to force sex on someone, whereas 13% ( $n = 18$ ) have one or more friends who have gotten someone drunk or high in order to have sex with them. In contrast, 66.9% ( $n = 93$ ) of participants reported having three or more friends who support social movements seeking to expose perpetrators of sexual assault. Regarding familial influence, 9.4% ( $n = 13$ ) of participants reported having one or more family members who have forced or attempted to force sex on someone. Only 3.4% ( $n = 5$ ) reported having one or more family members who have gotten someone drunk or high in order to have sex with them. In contrast, 54% ( $n = 75$ ) of participants reported having three or

more family members who support social movements seeking to expose perpetrators of sexual assault.

Regarding more indirect influences, 72.5% ( $n = 100$ ) of participants reported viewing media relating to social movements addressing sexual assault three or more times. A smaller percentage of participants (7.2%,  $n = 10$ ) reported watching violent pornography at least once. Roughly one fifth (19.7%,  $n = 27$ ) of participants believed that the media makes sexual assault seem more common than it really is. A majority of the participants (83.8%,  $n = 114$ ) believed that individuals under the influence of drugs or alcohol cannot consent to sex, even if the drugs and alcohol were consumed voluntarily. In addition, 10.9% ( $n = 15$ ) of participants believed that it is impossible to sexually assault a significant other and that by consenting to a relationship, one is consenting to sex.

Descriptive statistics on the dependent variable revealed a lack of variability among responses to the sexual coercion inventory. None of the items in the inventory received more than eight affirmative responses; on most items, zero to three respondents per item reported perpetration of the various forms of sexual coercion. These data lacked variation to analyze the relationship between perpetration of sexual coercion and the social learning variables. Therefore, the relationship between differential association and modeling, and definitions was explored. Akers (2009) explains that as part of the social learning mechanisms, an individual's definitions are developed and shaped through differential association, differential reinforcement, and imitation. Therefore, analysis examined the relationship between differential association and definitions and between imitation and definitions. Variables measuring differential reinforcement were excluded

from analysis due to a lack of variability in responses; only one to two respondents per item reported that their friends or family would be approving of them perpetrating sexual assault in various situations.

Chi-square tests of independence were performed to examine the relationships between the variables encompassing the concepts of differential association and modeling, and selected measures of definitions (see Table). Only the definitions variables that produced sufficient variability among respondents were chosen for analysis to ensure accuracy of results. The selected definitions variables measure the extent to which individuals believe that individuals under the influence of drugs or alcohol can consent to sex if the drugs and alcohol were consumed voluntarily, the media makes sexual assault seem more common than it really is, and it is impossible to sexually assault a significant other because consenting to a relationship means consenting to sex. Analyses revealed five significant relationships.

A chi-square test of independence was performed to examine the relationship between having friends who support social movements seeking to expose perpetrators of sexual assault and believing that individuals under the influence of drugs or alcohol can consent to sex if the drugs and alcohol were consumed voluntarily (see Table). Results revealed that the relationship between the variables was significant,  $X^2(1, N = 137) = 5.458, p < .05$ . Individuals with more friends who support social movements seeking to expose perpetrators of sexual assault were less likely to believe that individuals under the influence of drugs or alcohol can consent to sex if the drugs and alcohol were consumed voluntarily. Participants with three or more friends who support such social movements



and believed voluntarily intoxicated individuals cannot consent to sex constituted 59.6% ( $n = 81$ ) of the sample.

A chi-square test of independence was performed to examine the relationship between having friends who support social movements seeking to expose perpetrators of sexual assault and believing that the media makes sexual assault seem more common than it really is (see Table). Analyses revealed a significant relationship,  $X^2(1, N = 137) = 7.862, p < .05$ . Individuals with more friends who support social movements seeking to expose perpetrators of sexual assault were less likely to believe that the media makes sexual assault seem more common than it really is. Participants with three or more friends who support such movements and did not believe the media makes sexual assault seem more common than it really is constituted 58.4% ( $n = 80$ ) of the sample.

A chi-square test of independence was performed to examine the relationship between having family members who support social movements seeking to expose perpetrators of sexual assault and believing that the media makes sexual assault seem more common than it really is (see Table). Analyses revealed a significant relationship,  $X^2(1, N = 137) = 5.790, p < .05$ . Individuals with more family members who support social movements seeking to expose perpetrators of sexual assault were less likely to believe that the media makes sexual assault seem more common than it really is. Participants with three or more family members who support such social movements and did not believe the media makes sexual assault seem more common than it really is constituted 47.4% ( $n = 65$ ) of the sample.

A chi-square test of independence was performed to examine the relationship between viewing media relating to social movements that address sexual assault and believing that the media makes sexual assault seem more common than it really is (see Table). Results revealed that the relationship between these variables was significant,  $X^2(1, N = 137) = 5.055, p < .05$ . Individuals who viewed more media relating to social movements which address sexual assault were less likely to believe that the media makes sexual assault seem more common than it really is. Participants who viewed media relating to social movements that address sexual assault more than three times and did not believe the media makes sexual assault seem more common than it really is constituted 61.8% ( $n = 84$ ) of the sample.

A chi-square test of independence was performed to examine the relationship between viewing violent pornography and believing that it is impossible to sexually assault a significant other (see Table). Analyses revealed a significant relationship,  $X^2(1, N = 137) = 9.338, p < .05$ . Individuals who viewed more violent pornography were more likely to believe that it is impossible to sexually assault a significant other. Participants who viewed violent pornography at least once and agreed that it is impossible to sexually assault a significant other constituted 4.4% ( $n = 6$ ) of the sample.

Chi-square tests of independence were also performed to examine the relationship between demographic variables and measurements of definitions, differential association, and modeling. Men were more likely than women to believe that the media makes sexual assault seem more common than it really is,  $X^2(1, N = 133) = 3.973, p < .05$ . Men also viewed fewer social media posts and news articles relating to social movements addressing sexual assault, such as #MeToo,  $X^2(1, N = 132) = 4.076, p < .05$ . Men were

more likely than women to have friends who have forced or tried to force sex on someone,  $X^2(1, N = 133) = 4.444, p < .05$ .

### Discussion

Results from the study indicate that there is a relationship between a person's social influences and their beliefs regarding healthy sexual behavior. In regard to the influence of differential association, individuals with more friends who support social movements seeking to expose perpetrators of sexual assault were less likely to believe that individuals under the influence of drugs or alcohol can consent to sex if the drugs and alcohol were consumed voluntarily. This suggests that peer influence has an impact on the beliefs an individual develops. This relationship is particularly interesting because the definitions item regarding consent through voluntary intoxication demonstrates a strict view of consent, which reaches beyond the law. The Model Penal Code does not consider voluntary intoxication to be a factor inhibiting one's ability to give consent (Cole, 2017). Descriptive statistics revealed that 83.8% of participants disagree with this and believe that voluntarily intoxicated individuals cannot consent to sex. The direct relationship between this belief and the number of friends one has who support social movements against sexual assault suggests that the #MeToo era may have led people to adopt stricter rules regarding consent that are unrelated to the law.

Regarding familial influence, which is also associated with differential association, individuals with more family members who support social movements seeking to expose perpetrators of sexual assault were less likely to believe that the media makes sexual assault seem more common than it really is, suggesting that familial influence impacts the development of an individual's beliefs. The relationship between

familial influence and deviant behavior is well supported in social learning research (Akers et al., 1989; Pratt et al., 2010; Cochran et al., 2011; Sellers et al., 2005).

Of the modeling and imitation items, two significant relationships were found. Individuals who viewed more media relating to social movements that address sexual assault were less likely to believe that the media makes sexual assault more common than it really is. This finding indicates that as with direct interpersonal influences, exposure to indirect media influences can impact an individual's beliefs.

Analyses also revealed that individuals who viewed more violent pornography were more likely to believe that it is impossible to sexually assault a significant other. This finding is particularly interesting because it is the only statistically significant relationship in the current study that considers the impact of antisocial influences. This suggests that indirect influences impact one's beliefs and demonstrates that just as prosocial influences promote the development of prosocial beliefs, antisocial influences promote the development of antisocial beliefs. These results provide further support for other research that has produced similar findings regarding the impact of antisocial influences (Akers & Lee, 1996; Boeringer et al., 1991; Cochran et al., 2017; Fox et al., 2011; Sellers et al., 2005).

Overall, the results of the study support Akers' (2009) assertion that a person's definitions are shaped through the same social influences that shape their behavior. An individual with more prosocial influences is more likely to develop prosocial beliefs; these beliefs, in conjunction with the continuation of prosocial influences, increase the likelihood that the individual will engage in prosocial behavior. The same can be said for

those who have more antisocial influences and, accordingly, develop antisocial beliefs which make them more likely to engage in antisocial behavior.

### **Limitations**

There are several limitations to the current study. First, the study utilized a convenience sample, and the findings are therefore less generalizable than if a random sample had been used. In addition, the sample used in this study was primarily female (69.9%). This may have influenced the lack of variability of responses, particularly on the sexual coercion inventory; males tend to perpetrate sexual coercion more than females (Gamez-Guadix et al., 2011). The lack of response variability on the sexual coercion inventory could also be due to non-sexually active participants skewing the data; the survey did not ask respondents whether they were sexually active. It is important to consider that the COVID-19 pandemic may have influenced the extent to which college students are engaging in sexual relationships, and therefore their opportunities to perpetrate sexual coercion. Further research is needed to ascertain if the pandemic has impacted the sexual activity of college students.

Social desirability may have influenced participants' responses to the survey items. Some participants completed the survey in classrooms, surrounded by their peers. Although the participants were informed that their responses were entirely confidential, taking the survey with others nearby may cause people to respond in socially desirable ways. Social desirability bias refers to when study participants form their responses in what they deem to be favorable to others (Nederhof, 1985). This bias is of particular concern to criminologists, who commonly request that respondents self-report behavior that is illegal or otherwise deviant. In the current study, it is possible that participants did

not want to admit to perpetrating sexual coercion, despite assurances that their responses could not be traced back to them. In addition, social desirability biases in studies of sexual violence perpetration may have been exacerbated by the #MeToo movement, which brought the issue of sexual assault to the forefront of public attention. Further research is needed to determine whether the #MeToo movement has influenced social desirability responses in research measuring perpetration of sexual violence.

### **Policy Implications**

The findings of the study suggest that social influences impact the beliefs one develops regarding deviant behavior. Individuals with more influences promoting deviant behavior are more likely to develop beliefs which promote engagement in deviant behavior. By introducing sexual assault awareness programming in schools and community groups, individuals can be provided with more prosocial influences regarding sexual assault, and therefore made more likely to develop prosocial beliefs. As suggested by other social learning research (Boeringer et al., 1991), these prosocial beliefs and influences then make individuals less likely to perpetrate sexual assault.

### **Directions for Future Research**

If the survey items had produced sufficient variability to allow for analysis to progress as originally intended, the researcher would have run a factor analysis on the sexual coercion inventory items. In addition, the items measuring differential association, differential reinforcement, modeling and imitation, and definitions would have been collapsed into separate composite scores to accurately analyze the items as concepts, rather than individual variables. The differential association and differential reinforcement items would have each become two composite scales, differentiating

between familial and peer influences. The items were not collapsed due to limitations on the number of items which produced enough variability to be considered for analysis.

The current study yielded results; therefore, future research should replicate the current study with adjustments to address the above limitations. Research inspired by this study should utilize a more diverse, randomized sample. This would ensure a greater level of generalizability than is possible with the current study. In addition, researchers should ensure the sample includes more male participants; this would likely produce greater response variability on the sexual coercion inventory. Replication of this study should also utilize a screening question to ensure that the sample consists only of individuals who are sexually active or have recently been sexually active; this would provide a more accurate picture of the prevalence of sexual coercion among college students without the data being skewed by responses from students who are not in sexual relationships.

Additional research should also examine alternative explanations for the lack of sexual coercion reported which may be unrelated to the sample limitations of the current study. For example, has the #MeToo movement and other media attention dedicated to the issue of sexual assault increased social desirability bias in surveys measuring sexual coercion and similar crimes? Have the movements decreased perpetration of sexual coercion altogether? Future research should also examine the impact of the COVID-19 pandemic on sexual activity among college students; decreased sexual activity overall could be a possible explanation for decreased sexual coercion.

## **Conclusion**

The study sought to apply Akers' (2009) social learning theory as an explanation for the perpetration of sexual coercion. After descriptive statistics revealed a lack of response variability on the sexual coercion inventory, the research question was reframed to examine the relationship between differential association and imitation, and definitions. Findings support Akers' assertion that social influences, in the form of differential association and imitation, influence individual's development of definitions. Future research should examine sexual coercion among a more diverse sample of sexually active college students and investigate the impact that the #MeToo movement and the COVID-19 pandemic have had on sexual activity and sexual coercion.



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**Table***Chi-Square Results*

		CSVI <sup>e</sup>			MSAMC <sup>f</sup>			ISASO <sup>g</sup>		
		Disagree n (%)	Agree n (%)	<i>p</i>	Disagree n (%)	Agree n (%)	<i>p</i>	Disagree n (%)	Agree n (%)	<i>p</i>
FRSM <sup>a</sup>	0-2	33 (24.3)	12 (8.8)	0.019	30 (21.9)	15 (10.9)	0.005	39 (28.5)	6 (4.4)	<i>ns</i>
	3+	81 (59.6)	10 (7.4)		80 (58.4)	12 (8.8)		83 (60.6)	9 (6.6)	
FASM <sup>b</sup>	0-2	50 (36.8)	13 (9.6)	<i>ns</i>	45 (32.8)	18 (13.1)	0.016	56 (40.9)	7 (5.1)	<i>ns</i>
	3+	64 (47.1)	9 (6.6)		65 (47.4)	9 (6.6)		66 (48.2)	8 (5.8)	
MRSM <sup>c</sup>	0-2 times	28 (20.7)	9 (6.7)	<i>ns</i>	25 (18.4)	12 (8.8)	0.025	30 (22.1)	7 (5.1)	<i>ns</i>
	3+ times	85 (63.0)	13 (9.6)		84 (61.8)	15 (11.0)		91 (66.9)	8 (5.9)	
VP <sup>d</sup>	0	105 (77.2)	21 (15.4)	<i>ns</i>	104 (75.9)	23 (16.8)	<i>ns</i>	116 (84.7)	11 (8.0)	0.002
	1+	9 (6.6)	1 (0.7)		6 (4.4)	4 (2.9)		6 (4.4)	4 (2.9)	

<sup>a</sup> Number of friends who support social movements seeking to expose perpetrators of sexual assault.

<sup>b</sup> Number of family members who support social movements seeking to expose perpetrators of sexual assault.

<sup>c</sup> Number of times participant has viewed media relating to social movements addressing sexual assault.

<sup>d</sup> Number of times participant has viewed violent pornography.

<sup>e</sup> Agreement with statement: Someone under the influence of drugs or alcohol can consent to sex if the drugs and/or alcohol were consumed voluntarily.

<sup>f</sup> Agreement with statement: The media makes sexual assault seem more common than it really is.

<sup>g</sup> Agreement with statement: It is impossible to be sexually assaulted by a significant other; by consenting to a relationship, they are consenting to sex.

## Appendix A

### Differential Association

Asterisks are used to indicate items which were taken from Boeringer et al. (1991).

This survey will ask you about influences in your life and your sex life. All responses are anonymous and cannot be traced back to you. You can opt-out at any time.

Please answer the following questions by selecting one of the options on the given scale.

*How many of your friends support current social movements that seek to expose perpetrators of sexual assault (e.g., #MeToo)?*

0                    1-2                    3-5                    More than 5

*How many of your family members support current social movements that seek to expose perpetrators of sexual assault (e.g., #MeToo)?*

0                    1-2                    3-5                    More than 5

*How many of your friends think perpetrators of sexual assault should be punished by the criminal justice system?*

0                    1-2                    3-5                    More than 5

*How many of your family members think perpetrators of sexual assault should be punished by the criminal justice system?*

0                    1-2                    3-5                    More than 5

*\* How many of your friends have gotten a person drunk or high in order to have sex with them?*

0                    1-2                    3-5                    More than 5

*\* How many of your family members have gotten a person drunk or high in order to have sex with them?*

0                    1-2                    3-5                    More than 5

*\* How many of your friends have forced or tried to force sex on someone?*

0                    1-2                    3-5                    More than 5

*\* How many of your family members have forced or tried to force sex on someone?*

0                    1-2                    3-5                    More than 5



## Appendix B

### Differential Reinforcement

Asterisks are used to indicate items which were taken from Boeringer et al. (1991).

Please answer the following questions by selecting one of the options on the given scale.

*How approving do you think your family would be of you in the following circumstances:*

- *\* If you had sexual intercourse with many people during the academic year*

Very disapproving    Disapproving    Approving    Very approving    I don't know

- *\* If you got someone drunk or high in order to have sex with them*

Very disapproving    Disapproving    Approving    Very approving    I don't know

- *If you forced someone to have sex with you*

Very disapproving    Disapproving    Approving    Very approving    I don't know

- *\* If you forced someone to have sex with you, after they had teased you (led you on) and then refused to have sex*

Very disapproving    Disapproving    Approving    Very approving    I don't know

*How approving do you think your friends would be of you in the following circumstances:*

- *\* If you had sexual intercourse with many people during the academic year*

Very disapproving    Disapproving    Approving    Very approving    I don't know

- *\* If you got someone drunk or high in order to have sex with them*

Very disapproving    Disapproving    Approving    Very approving    I don't know

- *If you forced someone to have sex with you*

Very disapproving    Disapproving    Approving    Very approving    I don't know

- *\* If you forced someone to have sex with you, after they had teased you and then refused to have sex*

Very disapproving    Disapproving    Approving    Very approving    I don't know

## Appendix C

### Modeling and Imitation

Asterisks are used to indicate items which were taken from Boeringer et al. (1991).

Please answer the following questions by selecting one of the options on the given scale.

*How many times have you viewed social media posts and news articles relating to social movements that address sexual assault (e.g., #MeToo)?*

0 times      1-2 times      3-5 times      More than 5 times

*How many times have you viewed social media posts which condemn sexual assault (make it clear that sexual assault is wrong)?*

0 times      1-2 times      3-5 times      More than 5 times

*How many times have you seen television shows, films, and other forms of media which make it clear that sexual assault is unacceptable?*

0 times      1-2 times      3-5 times      More than 5 times

*\* How many times have you viewed violent pornography (e.g., pornography which depicts rape, sexual assault, or other forms of unwanted sexual contact)?*

0 times      1-2 times      3-5 times      More than 5 times

*How many times have you viewed social media posts which promote sexual assault?*

0 times      1-2 times      3-5 times      More than 5 times

*How many times have you seen television shows, films, and other forms of media which downplay the seriousness of sexual assault?*

0 times      1-2 times      3-5 times      More than 5 times

## Appendix D

### Definitions

The researcher is also interested in learning about your attitudes about sex.

Please answer the following questions by selecting one of the options on the given scale.

*Rate your level of agreement with the following statements*

- *Sexual assault is not acceptable under any circumstances.*

Strongly disagree      Disagree      Agree      Strongly Agree

- *Freely given consent from all parties is necessary every time one participates in sexual activities.*

Strongly disagree      Disagree      Agree      Strongly Agree

- *Anyone can be a perpetrator of rape, regardless of their gender identity or sexual orientation.*

Strongly disagree      Disagree      Agree      Strongly Agree

- *Anyone can be a victim of rape, regardless of their gender identity or sexual orientation.*

Strongly disagree      Disagree      Agree      Strongly Agree

- *The media makes sexual assault seem more common than it really is.*

Strongly disagree      Disagree      Agree      Strongly Agree

- *Someone under the influence of drugs or alcohol can consent to sex if the drugs and/or alcohol were consumed voluntarily.*

Strongly disagree      Disagree      Agree      Strongly Agree

- *It is impossible to be sexually assaulted by a significant other; by consenting to a relationship, they are consenting to sex.*

Strongly disagree      Disagree      Agree      Strongly Agree

## Appendix E

### Sexual Coercion Inventory

*Relationships are often complicated and challenging. Sometimes disagreements between partners are about sex. The following questions ask about how you and your partner have negotiated your intimate and sexual life in the past 12 months. Please rate the number of times you have done each of the following things to your partner in the past 12 months by selecting one of the options on the following scale: never; once; twice; 3-5 times; more than 5 times.*

- *I pressured my partner to not use a condom.*

Never	Once	Twice	3-5 times	More than 5 times
-------	------	-------	-----------	-------------------

- *I pressured my partner to engage in sex fantasies.*

Never	Once	Twice	3-5 times	More than 5 times
-------	------	-------	-----------	-------------------

- *My partner had sex with me to stop me from swearing.*

Never	Once	Twice	3-5 times	More than 5 times
-------	------	-------	-----------	-------------------

- *I constantly pressured my partner for sex.*

Never	Once	Twice	3-5 times	More than 5 times
-------	------	-------	-----------	-------------------

- *I made false promises to my partner so that I could have sex with them.*

Never	Once	Twice	3-5 times	More than 5 times
-------	------	-------	-----------	-------------------

- *I left when my partner said no to sex.*

Never	Once	Twice	3-5 times	More than 5 times
-------	------	-------	-----------	-------------------

- *My partner saying no to me caused a fight.*

Never	Once	Twice	3-5 times	More than 5 times
-------	------	-------	-----------	-------------------

- *I overwhelmed my partner by arguing in order to have sex.*

Never	Once	Twice	3-5 times	More than 5 times
-------	------	-------	-----------	-------------------

- *I overwhelmed my partner with my persistence to have sex.*

Never	Once	Twice	3-5 times	More than 5 times
-------	------	-------	-----------	-------------------

- *I pressured my partner to have sex with others.*

Never	Once	Twice	3-5 times	More than 5 times
-------	------	-------	-----------	-------------------

- *I demanded my partner have sex to prove their love.*

Never          Once          Twice          3-5 times          More than 5 times

- *I insisted that sex is part of commitment.*

Never          Once          Twice          3-5 times          More than 5 times

- *I accused my partner of being a bad lover in order to get sex from my partner.*

Never          Once          Twice          3-5 times          More than 5 times

- *I had sex with my partner when they were too drunk to resist me.*

Never          Once          Twice          3-5 times          More than 5 times

- *I gave my partner alcohol or drugs so that I could have sex with them.*

Never          Once          Twice          3-5 times          More than 5 times

- *I made my partner afraid I would find someone else if they didn't have sex with me.*

Never          Once          Twice          3-5 times          More than 5 times

- *I threatened to have sex with others in order to get sex from my partner.*

Never          Once          Twice          3-5 times          More than 5 times

- *I threatened to end our relationship in order to get sex from my partner.*

Never          Once          Twice          3-5 times          More than 5 times

- *I threatened to use force against my partner if they didn't have sex with me.*

Never          Once          Twice          3-5 times          More than 5 times

- *I used force to obtain oral sex from my partner.*

Never          Once          Twice          3-5 times          More than 5 times

- *I used force to obtain anal sex from my partner.*

Never          Once          Twice          3-5 times          More than 5 times

- *I used force to obtain sex from my partner.*

Never          Once          Twice          3-5 times          More than 5 times

## **Appendix F**

### **Informed Consent**

Hello, I am a researcher who is interested in how influences in your life may affect how you and a sexual partner negotiate sexual contact.

Your responses will be kept anonymous. The questions in this study are only meant to help me learn more about your experiences. Therefore, please feel free to answer honestly and without fear that anything you report will get back to a school or program official, or to your parents/guardians.

This survey will take you anywhere from 10 - 15 minutes to complete.

If you have been a victim of a sex crime, some of the questions may bring up painful memories. Whether or not you have been the victim of a crime, please feel free to stop taking the survey if you become overwhelmed by the questions. You can quit this survey at any time.

If you choose to participate in the study you have the right to learn more about the goals and procedures used in this study. You may contact the Professor Alex Guzman, Chair of the University of New Haven Institutional Review Board at 203-479-4562, or Professor Tracy Tamborra at 203 479-4591, or by email at ttamborra@newhaven.edu.

Are you 18 years old or older and you agree to participate in this study:

Yes

No

Have you ever taken this survey before?

Yes

No