

# Interpreting Survey Questions About Sexual Aggression in Cross-Cultural Research: A Qualitative Study with Young Adults from Nine European Countries

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**Abstract** Examining equivalence in the interpretation of survey items on sexual assault by participants from different cultures is an important step toward building a valid international knowledge base about the prevalence of sexual aggression among young adults. Referring to the theoretical framework of contextualism, this

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study presents qualitative data from semi-structured interviews with 128 young adults from nine EU countries on their understanding of survey items from the Sexual Aggression and Victimization Scale (SAV-S). The measure had previously been used to collect quantitative data on the prevalence of sexual aggression perpetration and victimization in the same countries that had yielded substantial differences in the rates of victimization and perpetration between countries. Based on the methodological approach of a mixed research design, the current study was conducted as a follow-up to the quantitative study with a new sample to explore whether systematic differences in the interpretation of the survey items in the different countries might explain part of the variation in prevalence rates. The interviews showed that participants from the nine countries interpreted the items of the SAV-S in a similar way and as intended by the authors of the scale. Systematic differences between men and women in interpreting the survey items were revealed. Implications of the findings for conducting survey research on sexual aggression across cultures are discussed.

**Keywords** Sexual aggression · Survey · Interview study · Cross-cultural · Gender

## Introduction

Experiencing sexual contacts against their will is a reality in the lives of many adolescents and young adults, as documented in a large body of evidence from the international research literature (Chan et al. 2008; Krahé et al. 2014). Establishing the scale of sexual aggression in terms of both victimization and perpetration is a key task to identify the need for prevention and to inform policy decisions designed to improve young people's sexual health and well-being. Cross-cultural analyses aimed at detecting similarities and differences in the extent of sexual aggression between countries may help to identify socio-structural correlates of sexual aggression that may provide a basis for the development of evidence-based interventions. However, the existing data base reveals substantial methodological differences between studies both within and across cultures that stand in the way of deciding to what extent variability in the prevalence of sexual aggression reflects actual differences in the degree to which young people are affected by sexual aggression. For example, a comparison of two surveys conducted in the United States using differently worded items to elicit experiences of sexual victimization revealed substantial differences in the resulting prevalence rates (Fisher 2009). As noted in recent systematic reviews, inconsistencies in conceptual definitions and methodology greatly impede progress in the study of sexual aggression (Bagwell-Gray et al. 2015; Krahé and Vanwesenbeeck 2015).

Even when the same design and items are used to assess the prevalence of sexual aggression in different countries, substantial variability remains. For example, an EU-wide survey on violence against women revealed that the percentage of women who reported having experienced physical or sexual victimization since the age of 15 ranged from 19 % (Poland) to 52 % (Denmark; European Union Agency for Fundamental Rights 2014, p. 28). More than 42,000 women aged between 18 and

74 years took part in the survey, and the sample was representative of the population in the respective countries in terms of socio-demographic variables, such as education, employment, household size, and citizenship.

Data collected by Chan et al. (2008) as part of the International Dating Victimization Survey included only college students. Administering the Conflict Tactics Scales (CTS2) to male and female college students in 22 countries, they found that female victimization rates ranged from 9 to 42 %, and male victimization rates ranged from 8 to 59 %. Even though identical survey questions were presented in each of the participating countries, this does not necessarily mean that they were understood in the same way, so that questions remain as to the explanation of the observed variations in prevalence rates. Furthermore, even within countries, the interpretation of survey items may vary between social groups, for example between men and women. A study investigating cultural differences in college students' social construction of sexual harassment found that Brazilian men not only reported higher rates of sexual harassment than did Brazilian women but also defined a broader range of behaviors as sexually harassing, whereas no such gender differences were found in Germany and Australia (Pryor et al. 1997). Thus, variability in the definition of sexual aggression as a function of culture and gender must be considered as a source of variance in reported rates of sexual aggression perpetration and victimization.

Such variance was also found in a recent study by Krahe et al. (2015), who collected data on the perpetration of, and victimization by, sexual aggression among young adults in 10 EU countries. The majority of participants were college students, and they all completed the same measures of sexual aggression perpetration and victimization, the Sexual Aggression and Victimization Scale (SAV-S). The measure was first developed in Germany by Krahe and Berger (2013), building on the Sexual Experiences Survey (SES) by Koss et al. (2007). Prevalence rates of sexual victimization ranged from 19 to 52 % among female and between 10 and 55 % among male participants; self-reported perpetration rates ranged between 5 and 48 % among men and 2 and 14 % among women. More detailed findings from this study are reported below.

To further investigate these variations, the present study followed up the findings from the quantitative survey by Krahe et al. (2015) in nine of the ten countries with a new sample of participants, who took part in semi-structured interviews designed to probe the interpretation of the items of the SAV-S. In addition, since the SAV-S is designed to elicit reports of both victimization and perpetration from men as well as women, possible differences in the understanding of the items by men and women were addressed in the study. The objective was to explore whether there was sufficient agreement in the interpretation of the items by participants from the nine countries, as well as by men and women, to employ the SAV-S as a valid instrument for assessing the prevalence of sexual aggression perpetration and victimization across gender groups in different cultures. Beyond this specific aim, the study sought to illustrate more generally the feasibility of combining quantitative and qualitative methods to examine the validity of findings from prevalence surveys about sexual aggression, advocated by Hamby (2015) and, as a more general methodological approach, by Frels and Onwuegbuzie (2013).

In cross-cultural research, the concept of *equivalence* plays a critical role for the generation of findings that can be compared across cultures (Berry et al. 2011;

Smith et al. 2013). Equivalence needs to be established at different levels: at the conceptual level by adopting a uniform definition of the construct under investigation, at the methodological level by ensuring functional equivalence. Functional equivalence is given if an instrument used to measure sexual aggression in one culture measures the same construct in another culture. Whether using the same items in each culture meets the criterion of functional equivalence is an empirical question that has to be addressed by qualitative research on the meaning assigned to the questions in each cultural group. Even within countries, the issue of functional equivalence needs to be addressed when comparing responses across different gender or ethnic groups (Hamby 2015; White et al. 2013).

In the quantitative survey conducted by Krahe et al. (2015), conceptual equivalence was observed by adopting a uniform conceptual definition of sexual aggression as “behavior carried out with the intent or result of making another person engage in sexual activity or sexual communication despite his or her unwillingness to do so” (p. 2). To address the issue of functional equivalence, the items on perpetration and victimization presented in the SAV-S used behaviorally specific descriptions of different coercive strategies and sexual acts (see below), recommended as the gold standard in sexual aggression research (Cook et al. 2011; Wilson and Miller 2015). The validity of such behaviorally specific items can be ascertained by following up responses to the anonymous survey by face-to-face interviews with the same participants to establish the extent to which incidents reported in the survey part are consistent with reports in the interviews (Koss and Gidycz 1985). Beyond examining the concordance of reports of victimization or perpetration in the survey and the interviews, a further way of validating survey questions is by prompting interpretations of the items in an open-ended format. Using this approach, Ross and Allgeier (1996) conducted interviews with 102 men who had previously completed the SES by Koss and Oros (1982) and were asked to give their interpretation of four items that referred to different forms of verbal pressure as a coercive strategy. They concluded that the items left considerable room for interpretation, casting doubts on their validity as measures of men’s self-reported sexual aggression perpetration.

An impressive number of methodological studies addressing the issue of validating survey instruments have been published in recent years, and the use of qualitative methods in the process of developing and evaluating survey items is advocated by many scholars in the field (e.g., Grych and Hamby 2014; Koss et al. 2007; White et al. 2013). Building on these recommendations, the current study was conducted to contextualize the findings from a quantitative survey in different EU countries by conducting interviews with a new sample of respondents similar in age and educational background from the same countries.

## **Sexual Aggression Perpetration and Victimization Across Ten EU Countries**

To test the feasibility of a harmonized methodology for studying sexual aggression among young people in Europe, Krahe et al. (2015) conducted a survey in ten EU countries as part of an international project on youth sexual aggression and

victimization (Y-SAV) funded by the European Agency for Health and Consumers (<http://www.rutgers.international/programmes/y-sav>). The Sexual Aggression and Victimization Scale (SAV-S; Krahé and Berger 2013) was used to assess both perpetration and victimization in 3,480 men and women, mostly college students, with a mean age of 21.5 years. The SAV-S records self-reports of perpetration and victimization broken down by three coercive strategies (use or threat of physical force, exploiting the other person's inability to resist, and use of verbal pressure), each presented for three different victim-perpetrator relationships (current or former partner, acquaintance, and stranger) and with respect to four different sexual acts (sexual touch, attempted sexual intercourse, completed sexual intercourse, and other sexual acts). For use in the Y-SAV study, a further category was added, namely misuse of a position of authority. Parallel items are presented from the victim and the perpetrator perspective. A demonstration version of the instrument is available online, <http://www.w-lab.de/sav-s.html>. The SAV-S can be used as an online tool, which facilitates assigning participants to custom-tailored versions based on their gender and sexual experience background (hetero- and/or same-sex experiences). In the study conducted as part of the Y-SAV project, only incidents involving heterosexual victim-perpetrator constellations were studied. The items were translated carefully from the English master version by members of the project team with a track record in sexual aggression research in each country, and the adequacy of the translation was checked using state of the art back translation methods.

The study provided detailed prevalence rates for different coercive strategies and victim-perpetrator relationships, as reported by Krahé et al. (2015). For the purposes of the present study, the focus is on the overall prevalence rates (i.e., the percentages of participants who responded 'yes' to at least one of the items). These are presented in Table 1, separately for victimization and perpetration and for male and female

**Table 1** Perpetration and victimization rates across countries and gender groups (based on Krahé et al. 2015)

Country (age of consent)	N		Victimization (%)		Perpetration (%)	
	Women	Men	Women	Men	Men	Women
Austria (14)	–	302	–	19.9	21.5	–
Belgium (16)	274	119	20.4	10.1	5.5	2.6
Cyprus (17)	240	51	31.7	49.0	11.8	3.3
Greece (15)	176	116	45.5	55.8	48.7	14.8
Lithuania (16)	193	105	19.7	33.3	15.2	4.1
Netherlands (16)	249	79	52.2	15.2	11.4	6.4
Poland (15)	256	96	30.1	35.4	7.3	6.3
Portugal (14)	182	63	24.2	28.6	9.5	3.3
Slovakia (15)	299	72	35.8	29.2	6.9	5.0
Spain (13)	439	169	30.8	21.9	9.5	3.0
Overall	2308	1172	32.2	27.1	16.3	5.0

participants. In each country, experiences were elicited from the age of consent to exclude incidents of sexual abuse in which consent is not an issue. The age of consent in each country is indicated in parentheses after the name of the country.

Two observations become immediately obvious when inspecting the figures in Table 1. The first is that within each gender group, both perpetration rates and victimization rates varied substantially between countries. Using the same items, prevalence rates for victimization ranged from 19.7 % (Lithuania) to 52.2 % (Netherlands) for women and from 10.1 % (Belgium) to 55.8 % (Greece) for men. Prevalence rates for perpetration ranged from 5.5 % (Belgium) to 48.7 % (Greece) for men and from 2.6 % (Belgium) to 14.8 % (Greece) for women. The second observation is that in some countries, male victimization rates were not only high in absolute terms but also relatively higher than female victimization rates. In two countries, Cyprus and Lithuania, male victimization rates were significantly higher than were female rates. Belgium and the Netherlands were the only countries in which female victimization rates were significantly higher than male rates. The findings need to be interpreted with caution, as they are based on convenience samples rather than randomly selected or representative samples of young adults in the different countries. However, similar results have been found in other studies. For example, victimization rates for Greece obtained by Chan et al. (2008), using the Sexual Coercion Subscale of the CTS2 were highly similar to the Krahé et al. (2015) findings with 59.5 % for men and 42 % for women. Perpetration rates were 62.2 % for men and 21.9 % for women, replicating the threefold higher rate for men found in the Krahé et al. study. Chan et al. also found the victimization rates for Belgium to be at the low end (11.8 % for women and 9.8 % for men).

These findings raise the question to what extent differences in the prevalence rates generated by an identical set of survey questions used in different countries may be due to differences in the actual rate at which young people experience sexual victimization and engage in sexual coercion or reflect differences in the interpretation of the questions by members of different cultures. Given that the ratios of male and female victimization and perpetration rates also differed across countries, a second question refers to gender differences in assigning meaning to the items. The current qualitative study was designed to address both of these questions.

## The Current Study

Whether respondents from different cultures and different gender groups interpret survey questions on sexual aggression perpetration and victimization in a similar fashion has not received much attention in past research. This is due at least in part to the fact that few studies have directly compared male and female victimization or perpetration reports within and across cultures (see, however, Buday and Peterson 2014; Hamby 2015, for recent comparisons within U.S. samples). The few exceptions from the cross-cultural literature, for instance Chan et al. (2008) and Hines (2007), were based on the assumption that the items would be interpreted in similar ways by men and women and across different cultural groups without putting this assumption to empirical test. In particular, the high rates of female-to-

male sexual victimization reported by men in some countries in the Krahé et al. (2015) study raise questions regarding the validity of the findings. The figures may reflect the actual scale of men's unwanted sexual interactions with women or they may be due, at least to some extent, to different interpretations of the types of interactions the items are designed to address.

Ontologically the current study is rooted in Stephen Pepper's contextualism, building on the pragmatist tradition of philosophy. Specifically, it refers to descriptive contextualism, which seeks to understand the complexity and richness of a whole event through the personal appreciation of its features by the participants (Hayes 1993). Descriptive contextualism is the umbrella paradigm for epistemologies of social constructivism, phenomenological hermeneutics, and narrative approaches. It is a triangulation of these approaches, utilizing the discursive approach as a general methodological tool that enables researchers to consider language expressions as valid and reliable predictors of conduct. From the two main streams of discourse analysis, one focusing on the power of a discourse (discursive resources analysis) and the other focusing on people's use of discourse (analysis of discursive practice; Stainton Rogers 2011), our analysis refers to the second one. In this perspective the research questions are formulated in terms of "what is the aim of the participant in a particular part of a conversation?" and "how does this person use the discursive resources that are available?" Discourse can be considered as practice (Gill 2008) in the sense of people using discourse to perform factual activity, e.g., attributing responsibility, making decisions, making excuses, presenting the self, and, notably, responding to questions posed to them in the context of quantitative empirical research.

The purpose of the present study was to examine whether there were similarities across countries and between male and female respondents regarding the interpretation of items of the SAV-S. It was investigated which mental scenarios respondents activate when presented with the descriptions of the different coercive strategies, victim-perpetrator constellations, and sexual acts. The key aim was to obtain as detailed information as possible about the kinds of situations envisaged by participants in response to the SAV-S items and to identify both overlap and divergence between participants from different countries as well as between men and women. The research question was whether young men and women in the nine European countries included in the study would interpret the SAV-S items about coercive strategies in similar ways.

In methodological terms, the current study provides a qualitative follow-up of a quantitative survey, representing a mixed research approach (Frels and Onwuegbuzie 2013). Because the purpose of the study was to clarify findings from a quantitative survey, it can be described as a "quantitative dominant crossover mixed analysis" in the classification proposed by Frels and Onwuegbuzie (2013). In this type of analysis, qualitative methods are used to better understand research questions investigated on the basis of a quantitative approach. Our study does not exactly represent this design as the sample yielding the qualitative data was different from the sample on which the quantitative data were based. However, the two samples were closely matched in age, gender, and educational background.

## Method

### Participants

Face-to-face interviews were conducted between April and September 2013 in nine of the ten countries that had participated in the Krahé et al. (2015) study: Belgium, Cyprus, Greece, Lithuania, the Netherlands, Poland, Portugal, Slovakia, and Spain. For Austria, where only male participants had been recruited for the quantitative study, no interviews could be conducted. In total, 128 participants took part in the study (71 women and 57 men). Because no funding was provided for the study, systematic or random sampling of larger groups was not possible, and respondents were recruited through snowball sampling. Specifically, participants in each country were asked at the end of the interview to pass on the invitation to participate in the study to other students in their social network.

Only age and gender were recorded as demographic information to maximize anonymity. Participants were aged between 18 and 25 years, with a mean of 22 years. We decided to set 18 years as a lower age limit to avoid having to obtain parental consent. The sample composition is detailed in Table 2. As the respondents were university students, the sample was homogeneous in terms of educational status and highly similar to the sample in the quantitative survey, which also consisted mainly of university students. The two samples were also similar in age.

Participants were informed that taking part in the study was voluntary and that they would be able to terminate the interviews at any time without giving reasons. All participants signed a consent form, which included consent for the interviews to be audio-recorded. They were also informed that their answers would be kept anonymous and only be used for research purposes. Furthermore, participants' identity was protected as they were not personally known to the interviewers. No compensation was offered for participation. At the end of the interviews, all participants were handed a list of local counseling agencies providing professional help to victims and/or perpetrators of sexual assault.

**Table 2** Sample size and age per country

Country	Total <i>N</i>	Women <i>N</i>	Men <i>N</i>	Total <i>M</i> Age
Belgium	7	4	3	23.9
Cyprus	20	10	10	21.4
Greece	20	10	10	20.6
Lithuania	14	7	7	23.0
Netherlands	19	11	8	22.6
Poland	9	5	4	20.5
Portugal	15	9	6	21.4
Slovakia	11	8	3	23.8
Spain	13	7	6	22.2
Overall	128	71	57	22.0



## Procedure and Interview Schedule

The interviews were conducted by researchers affiliated with the Y-SAV project, who had a track record in sexual violence research. In some countries, members of the collaborators' project team not previously affiliated with the Y-SAV project were recruited as additional interviewers.

After welcoming the participant, the interviewer explained the purpose of the interview in the following way:

Many studies that examine unwanted sexual experiences present their participants with questions about their experiences or behaviors and ask them to state whether or not they have ever made that experience or shown that behavior. These questions are necessarily worded in a fairly general and abstract way, as you will see in a moment. Researchers know little or nothing about the kinds of situations and scenarios that their participants have in mind when considering the question and deciding whether to answer them with 'yes' or 'no'. [... Therefore, we want] to find out whether men and women interpret the items in the same way, that is whether or not they have the same situations in mind when they think about the questions. [...] The interview is \*not\* about what you have experienced in the past. Instead, I would like to find out how you interpret, and make sense of, a number of questions that I have taken from a standard instrument used in quantitative research.

The purpose of the introduction was to clarify that we were not interested in finding out whether or not participants had ever experienced (victimization) or engaged in (perpetration) the forms of sexual aggression described in the items but that the interviews were designed to find out what mental scenarios they would call up in order to decide whether or not they should respond 'yes' or 'no' in case they were asked to respond to this question in a survey.

In the main part of the interview, respondents were presented with the questions addressing the four different coercive strategies covered by the SAV-S and were asked how they would interpret these questions. Specifically, they were asked to imagine/think about the kind of scenarios they would have in mind in order to make a decision on whether to respond 'yes' or 'no' to the presented item.

The following four SAV-S items were presented:

- (1) *Use or threat of physical force*: "Has a man ever made (or tried to make) you have sexual contact with him against your will by threatening to use force or by harming you?"<sup>1</sup>
- (2) *Exploitation of the victim's inability to resist*: "Has a man ever made (or tried to make) you have sexual contact with him against your will by exploiting the fact that you were unable to resist (e.g., after you had had too much alcohol or drugs)?"

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<sup>1</sup> Victimization: version for women; for men, the item read: "Has a woman ever made...". Perpetration: "Have you ever made (or tried to make) a man (a woman) to have sexual contact with you against his (her) will ...".

- (3) *Verbal pressure*: “Has a man ever made (or tried to make) you have sexual contact with him against your will by putting verbal pressure on you (e.g., by threatening to end your relationship, humiliating or blackmailing you)?”
- (4) *Exploiting a position of authority*: “Has a man ever made (or tried to make) you have sexual contact with him against your will by using his position of authority or power over you (e.g., as a teacher, sports coach, boss etc.)?”

Following each item, participants were asked:

When you hear this question: what specific situations come to your mind? What would have had to happen for you to answer ‘yes’ to this question? Can you describe to me one or more possible situations/scenarios? How did the situation arise, what kinds of behaviors did the man/the woman show (perpetration items: did you show)?

The format of the interview schedule is presented in the “[Appendix](#)”. Interviews lasted between 30 and 90 min and were audio-recorded. In addition, the interviewers took field notes. The English master copy of the interview schedule was translated into Dutch (Belgium and the Netherlands), Greek (Cyprus and Greece), Lithuanian, Polish, Portuguese, Slovakian, and Spanish by the co-authors from each country. Careful back translation procedures were used in each country, whereby the collaborators recruited a bilingual speaker for the back translation into English. Differences between the original and the back-translated versions were used to amend the translations where necessary. This procedure followed the recommendations of the World Health Organization for the process of translation and adaptation of instruments in cross-cultural research.<sup>2</sup>

### Transcription and Analysis

For reasons of budget and time, it was not possible to make verbatim transcripts of all 128 interviews and translate these into English. Instead, researchers made detailed summaries of each interview and systematically listed the information from the interviews for each of the four items. The summaries contained verbatim quotes from interviews representative of the answers to each of the questions. The quotes presented below were taken from these summaries.

The coding was conducted by a single coder, who started with a careful reading of the summaries from each country. Next, the summaries were imported into the MAXQDA07 software that facilitates an easy organization of texts into groups (Boeije 2010). The nine summaries were organized by country and gender to enable the coder to detect communalities and differences in relation to these two grouping variables. In the actual coding, the first step was to identify overarching themes in the interviews through a process of systematically searching for similarities and differences between the texts (Flick 2002). Passages from the interviews were then divided into segments that could be assigned to the overarching themes. The coding process was guided by the purpose of the study, which was to assess functional equivalence by looking for similarities and differences in interpreting the survey

<sup>2</sup> [http://www.who.int/substance\\_abuse/research\\_tools/translation/en/](http://www.who.int/substance_abuse/research_tools/translation/en/).

items between participants from the different countries and between men and women to better understand the differences in prevalence rates obtained in the quantitative survey. Therefore, we did not attempt to provide an exhaustive coding and counting of all statements generated by the participants but sought to detect country-specific and gender-specific interpretations of the items of the SAV-S. To make sure all relevant segments were coded and no information got lost (for example in translation), the collaborators from all countries came together in a face-to-face meeting to discuss the themes that had emerged from the analysis.

## Results

Based on the aim of the study to establish the meaning assigned to the items referring to different coercive strategies by men and women in the nine countries, we present a narrative summary of the main themes that emerged from the interviews. Quotations from the interviews were selected to illustrate the range of responses provided by the participants. A quantitative summary, for instance in the form of percentages of interviewees mentioning certain points, was not intended as it would have required a larger sample size to yield meaningful results.

All participants were prompted to reflect on the nature of the situation that they would consider in order to determine whether or not to register a 'yes' response. Some participants elaborated on this task in the 1st person, others chose to do so in the 3rd person. In both cases, they described the situation as they constructed its meaning in the respective question.

### Use or Threat of Physical Force

Regarding the first strategy, the majority of the respondents (from all countries, both male and female) described situations that involved the use of physical violence. For example:

'I think of a man who forces a woman to have sexual intercourse using violence.' (Man from Cyprus)

'That can be assault in the street perpetrated by an unknown man. He would try to have intercourse. The woman and the man would struggle, and the man would try to take the woman to an isolated place, where nobody could help her. He would try to cause physical harm.' (Woman from Spain)

Respondents, both male and female, found it hard to imagine women as perpetrators because women have less power and are weaker, according to several male and female respondents from Greece, Lithuania, the Netherlands, Spain, and Slovakia. The following quotes illustrate this view.

'It is hard to imagine a boy aroused and have intercourse when the girl threatens him. Boys are usually stronger than girls, and forcing a boy to have intercourse is very difficult.' (Woman from Spain)

'It is harder to imagine a woman forcing a man physically than the opposite scenario, because in general, girls have less strength.' (Man from Spain)

'If something like that happened, I imagine it would be in the form of verbal violence, since she will be unable to use physical violence. Maybe, she would have threatened me to disclose one of my secrets.' (Man from Greece).

The majority of the respondents (from all countries, both male and female) imagined a situation in which the victim is isolated and the perpetrator is in a position of power. The perpetrator could either be known or unknown to the victim. Other characteristics of the perpetrator that were mentioned in some countries were strength, being self-focused, and being disturbed (having psychological problems).

'It could be a man with financial problems who has psychological problems too and becomes very aggressive. This man can force a woman to have sexual intercourse against her will. This mostly happens within the home.' (Woman from Cyprus)

Many respondents from almost all countries thought that perpetrators use physical force because they have drunk alcohol. Some respondents believed the perpetrator does it because he feels entitled to have sex or because he is sexually aroused. It was also suggested that perpetrators could do it to take revenge, because they are angry. Men were believed to be more ready to use force when they feel protected by anonymity, for example when they are part of a bigger group and their responsibility is less clear. Group pressure to become sexually active was also mentioned by some as a contributing factor.

'Some boys are in a group. The boys try to convince one of them that he is the only one who hasn't had sexual intercourse with a girl. The boy takes it to heart so much that he thinks of nothing else anymore. One evening they can see a few girls walking past when they come from some party. The boy is encouraged by his friends and follows the girls. At the end, one of the girls is walking alone because her house is the farthest away. The boy is close behind her. He remembers that his friends told him that this girl had had sex with each of them so she would want to do it with him. He must only convince her. They also told him that the girl at first does not want but after he uses some force she would make him really happy. The whole situation makes him angry. His only aim is to have sex for the first time and now. Then he tries to rape the girl...' (Man from Poland)

With regard to the victim, some respondents indicated that sexual aggression through the use of physical force could happen to anyone, whereas other respondents pictured victims with specific characteristics, such as women who provoke or arouse men or women who flirt, women who cheat on their boyfriend, women with low self-esteem, with a lack of assertiveness, who do not set clear boundaries, women who are socially and sexually inexperienced and not supported by their families. The victim was mostly pictured to be a woman. Most respondents found it hard to imagine men as victims. They thought, for example, that men cannot be forced.

'It is difficult to have forced sexual contact with a man, because he will not have an erection if he does not want it.' (Woman from Spain)

Furthermore, some respondents believed that men are always ready to have sex.

'Boys would rather say yes to sex than no to sex.' (Woman from Spain)

'It is hard to imagine a man resisting sexual contact with a girl. Boys are usually ready to have sexual contacts with girls, except when they are not attracted to the girl or when they didn't enjoy previous contact with that girl.' (Man from the Netherlands)

'If a woman forces a man to have sexual interaction with her, the man will love it.' (Man from Cyprus)

So for some respondents, the perceived willingness of men to have sex was a reason for rejecting men as potential victims. However, one interviewee turned this belief around:

'It is possible that when the man (a guy) comes home after a busy day (because he studies and works at the same time) he is really tired, and his girlfriend has not had sex for a long time, and she wants to have sex. She makes advances to him, he refuses, and then she gets violent in order to get what she wants. It might seem like foreplay. She may think that she is getting him aroused or that he likes the way she is behaving, but in fact it is violence because he does not really want this. She may think that men always want sex, and that it is only a matter of making him want to do it.' (Man from Poland)

In addition to this example, other respondents also described situations with male victims. There were some men from Slovakia, Portugal, and Poland who could only imagine men as victims in very extreme and violent situations. A few respondents believed that men who are physically or mentally weak can get victimized. Another scenario with a male victim and a female perpetrator that was described was a situation in which a woman threatens a man with physical harm inflicted by others, for example, male family members. One interviewee said:

'I can also imagine that a girl threatens to use force but not her own force but someone else's. I mean her brother's or even her father's. If the girl wants the boy to have any kind of sexual activity with her and the boy does not want it, she can even threaten to tell her father that the boy wanted to touch her sexually or even tried to make her have sexual intercourse with him. The boy is afraid of her bodyguard's power and can be made to have sexual activity against his will.' (Man from Poland)

A few participants from Lithuania also described situations with male victims. One respondent said that it happens, but that it is a hidden topic, another referred to gender equity.

'Sexual aggression occurs in public transport and in the streets at nights. Not only females but also males are victimized. However, men do not report such acts, it is a hidden topic.' (Man from Lithuania)

'Nowadays in gender equality times, frequently men are not the strong gender and females are not the weak gender. There are many cases of sexual aggression against men.' (Man from Lithuania)

Finally, a few male and female respondents described situations in which the perpetrator did not use or threaten physical violence but used verbal aggression or exploited the fact that a person was unable to resist because he or she had consumed too much alcohol or drugs. This was especially, but not solely, the case with respondents from Poland.

'My female friend is at a party with a male friend. He sees that she is very drunk and wants to take advantage of this. He puts his hand on her lap and although she tells him to stop, he continues. Finally, he threatens her. He says that if she does not immediately come out with him and does not have oral sex with him, he will upload a movie on the Internet which shows her drunk and doing stupid things. However, if she went with him and did what he told her, he would delete the video.' (Woman from Poland)

In sum, in response to the item on the use or threat of physical force most respondents from all countries, both male and female, imagined a situation with sexual aggression that involved physical force with a female victim who is isolated and a male perpetrator who is in a position of power. Although most respondents described female victims, some situations with male victims were described too, involving extreme violence or threats by the perpetrator's male family members. Overall, there seemed to be consensus between men and women and between participants from the different countries.

### **Exploitation of the Victim's Inability to Resist**

For this scenario, the interviewees described similar events. Respondents typically pictured a situation in a disco or bar with many people around, but after a while the perpetrator manages to isolate the victim. The perpetrator (male) may either take advantage of a woman who is drunk or he may offer her alcohol or drug her in order to undermine her resistance. Respondents believed that the perpetrator could be sexually aroused. Also he could miss signals of resistance because he is drunk, too. It was suggested that the victim loses control because she is drunk or has drugs in her system. As a result, she cannot resist. Also she may be more willing to have sex due to alcohol. The victim could also feel obliged to do the man a favor because he bought all these drinks for her or because she fancies him and does not want to disappoint him. She could have been flirting with the perpetrator. Some examples of respondents' answers are:

'In the case of drug abuse, the perpetrator might be less capable of sensing the transgression, because he is under the influence. From the victim's point of view, it could be that she is too intoxicated (or elevated with feelings of joy) by the substance, that she can't resist.' (Man from the Netherlands)

'In a disco club, after drinking with friends, someone may try to take advantage and takes me to somewhere hidden and forces me to have intercourse.' (Woman from Portugal)

'It could happen at a party, pub or disco club when people go on their own and end up drinking too much and someone takes advantage of that and tries to have intercourse.' (Woman from Portugal)

'Of course I must admit that there are situations when men are led by the rule: 'drink, drink – you will be easier'. It is nothing but forcing a girl to sexual activity. Girls can be forced to have sex against their will or girls can be forced to do sexual things that they would not do if they were sober – for example anal sex.' (Man from Poland)

'The man could plan the situation inciting the woman to drink in order to undermine her resistance. In that case they are familiar, like friends, partners or acquaintances and she has rejected him before.' (Man from Spain)

Most interviewees pictured women as victims and men as perpetrators. However, men and women from Poland described some situations in which women take advantage of younger men who are drunk.

'The woman might make the young man drunk to the extent that he loses control over himself but is still able to have sex. I know some young women who share their experiences on how to make a guy willing and sexually fit.' (Man from Poland)

### **Use of Verbal Pressure**

Respondents described several strategies by which perpetrators can put verbal pressure on victims, such as blackmailing the victim (e.g., threatening to spread rumors, or to spread erotic pictures), using threats (e.g., threatening to end the relationship), degrading the victim (e.g., undermining her self-esteem or question her sexual capability), or using subtle ways of verbal pressure (e.g., stating that sex in a relationship is normal and that they also should have sex or expressing disappointment when a girl isn't yet ready for sexual interactions beyond kissing). These strategies were consistent with the conceptualization of verbal pressure in the scale construction of the SAV-S and the examples provided as part of the instructions at the beginning of the scale.

As with the previously described strategies, respondents often implicitly referred to a male perpetrator. Some respondents explicitly mentioned that perpetrators are usually men.

'Men demonstrate this form of aggression more often than women. We live in a conservative society and women have not changed the traditional model of communication.' (Man from Lithuania)

'Boys do this more often than girls. They try and push the girl into sexual acts. Girls just don't do this so often.' (Man from the Netherlands)

Also, respondents often implicitly referred to a female victim. More specifically, victims were often pictured as women with low self-esteem.

‘Many victims feel insecure, with a low level of assertiveness. The more assertive a girl is, the less successful a perpetrator might be in using verbal pressure.’ (Man from the Netherlands)

‘Victims mostly have low self-esteem and maybe even a distorted self-image as well. These traits make it possible for the boy to convince her of her own ‘unworthiness’ and the fact that she is lucky to at least have him.’ (Woman from the Netherlands)

Although women are usually pictured as victims and men as perpetrators, men and women from all countries described a specific situation in which men can be victimized by women. In this case, the woman uses verbal pressure by questioning the masculinity of the man. Some examples are provided below.

‘The woman would try to question the manliness of the man, in order to provoke him.’ (Woman from Spain)

‘I can imagine a situation in which a girl came back home and she felt like having sex with her partner. He was tired. She tried to touch his body but he got nervous and said no. She told him: ‘Why do I need you? I want a man not a boy. I will have to look for a real man’. The boy did not want her to leave him so he started to touch her.’ (Woman from Poland)

‘A young woman can blackmail her partner and call him a loser. He might even be afraid that she will tell her friends that they only do it once a night or even less often. His masculinity can suffer. Women very often know that men are proud of their masculinity and crazy about everything related to sexuality, such as sexual fitness and can use this knowledge to bring a man to engage in sexual contact against his will. Otherwise he might think that there is something wrong with him, because he does not want to have sex but actually he should.’ (Man from Poland)

‘A girl can blackmail a boy by threatening to tell her friends that he is gay.’ (Man from Portugal)

In addition to such forms of (presumed) devaluation, some respondents also described that women are becoming more and more assertive, due to their improving social position. This was especially the case in Greece, Cyprus and Lithuania. Some respondents from these countries expressed that this assertiveness might be perceived by men as a threat to their masculinity. These responses might reflect a shift in the male–female balance of power, which may generate feelings of powerlessness for men that may give rise to feelings of being victimized by women.<sup>3</sup>

In addition to the gender of the perpetrator, respondents described other perpetrator characteristics. Respondents typically pictured the perpetrator as

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<sup>3</sup> This was the theme that emerged from the group discussion of the researchers after the coding process as a possible explanation of the high male victimization rates particularly in Cyprus and Greece.



someone known to the victim. Many respondents could not image a stranger to use this strategy.

‘It could be a familiar boy, a friend or partner. This is easier to imagine, because girls don’t care what unknown men will say.’ (Woman from Spain)

Some respondents believed that perpetrators use verbal pressure because they are psychologically disturbed or very sexually aroused.

‘He would be psychologically disturbed to behave like this. He would have met me at a bar and would wish to have sex with me from the first night. I would probably refuse to have sex with him and he would become furious.’ (Woman from Greece)

‘It could happen if I started something with a girl and she asked me to stop while being sexually aroused. I would do that to persuade her to continue.’ (Man from Greece)

Perpetrators could also feel entitled to have sex with their partner.

‘He may slap my bottom. I would let him know to stop because I am not in a mood. He would then ridicule me that I am oversensitive and as I am his lover he is entitled to do such things from time to time, even though I do not like it.’ (Woman from Slovakia)

Some respondents thought this could happen due to misunderstandings.

‘Girls have to be careful with flirting, especially during the nightlife and set clear boundaries. If she can’t do that, flirting may be misinterpreted.’ (Man from the Netherlands)

In sum, respondents believed that perpetrators using verbal pressure are usually men and victims are typically women. This was found across countries and regardless of the gender of the participants. However, with regard to some specific situations, male and female respondents described alternatives to this stereotypical scenario. Respondents from all countries believed that women may use verbal pressure by questioning the masculinity of the man, which can result in sexual aggression. In addition, participants across countries pictured a perpetrator who is known to the victim, because the impact of verbal pressure was believed to be greater when the victim and the perpetrator are known to each other. Respondents provided us with several examples of this coercive strategy, such as blackmail, using threats, degrading the victim, and using subtle ways of verbal manipulation consistent with the examples provided in the SAV-S.

### **Exploitation of Authority Position**

Responses to this scenario also reflected a consensus across countries and genders. Respondents from all countries typically pictured a situation in which a teacher, sports coach, or boss uses threats, intimidation, or rewards to induce sexual

cooperation in women. Some respondents indicated that it happens in isolation and that it unfolds gradually.

‘A woman in business is treated differently than her colleagues. Her boss spends a lot of time with her and often apparently accidentally touches her. She feels uncomfortable at first, but as time passes by she begins to like it. But when they are alone the boss tries to lead up to intercourse, she protests but he complains to her that she wanted this herself. He says that he is the boss and that it depends on him whether she will work here or not. She gives in because she does not want to lose her job. She hides this fact, because she feels ashamed.’ (Woman from Poland)

Respondents often implicitly referred to a male perpetrator. Some respondents specifically stressed that perpetrators are usually men.

‘At work also, males are more aggressive than women. In our society pressure exerted by males is more acceptable than from the females’ side.’ (Man from Lithuania)

‘Most of the time perpetrators are men, it is very difficult for women to force men.’ (Man from Cyprus)

## Discussion

The present research was prompted by a quantitative study that tested the SAV-S as a common assessment tool for youth sexual aggression in samples in ten European countries (Krahé et al. 2015). The findings of that study revealed a wide variability between countries in the prevalence rates of perpetration and victimization in heterosexual encounters. It also revealed substantial variability in the extent to which rates differed between men and women in each country, especially with regard to sexual victimization. One potential explanation for this unexpected finding could be that men and women in the different countries interpreted the items of the SAV-S in different ways, so that variability in prevalence rates between gender and cultural groups would reflect—at least to a certain extent—a lack of functional equivalence rather than differences in actual experience.

The current study was designed to examine this possibility, employing a methodological design that used qualitative interviews to follow up research questions generated by a quantitative survey. This approach is advocated as a means of enhancing the interpretation of evidence from quantitative studies by complementing it with qualitative evidence in what Frels and Onwuegbuzie (2013) refer to as a “quantitative dominant crossover mixed analysis”.

The interview responses generated by participants in the nine countries did not reveal clear indications of systematic cultural and/or gender differences in interpreting the items of the SAV-S that might explain country-level differences in the reported rates of sexual victimization, particularly by male survey participants. Notably, participants from the countries with high male victimization rates did not stand out as a group in generating interpretations of the items that were

different from the remaining sample. Overall, there was a broad agreement across countries and among men and women regarding the interpretation of the coercive strategy items of the SAV-S, and interpretations were in line with the meaning intended by the authors of this measure.

However, there were some findings that might be relevant to understanding the high prevalence rates that were found in the quantitative survey. In Greece, Cyprus, and Lithuania, respondents referred to the fact that women in their country have been becoming more assertive, which might be perceived by men as a threat to their masculinity. Participants reasoned that men may feel victimized as a result of women's perceived willingness to take a more active role in initiating sexual contact. The statements to that effect by some interviewees from the countries in which high male victimization rates were found in the quantitative survey by Krahe et al. (2015) may be linked to analyses including country-level indicators of sexual assertiveness and gender equality. In the Krahe et al. (2015) study, victimization rates reported by men were the higher the less sexually assertive men were in relation to women in the respective country. However, the same study found a negative relationship between male victimization rates and gender equality in the domain of political power, assessed by the European Gender Equality Index, indicating that male victimization was lower in countries with greater gender equality. To complicate matters further, the multinational study of university students by Hines (2007) showed that reports of male victimization were positively correlated with women's status in a society. Thus, there is currently no consistent evidence linking male victimization rates to cultural differences reflected in macro-level indicators such as gender equality, highlighting the need for future research.

The interpretations of the majority of the respondents reflected traditional beliefs about sexuality and about male and female victimization. Many respondents, both men and women, believed that men are always ready to have sex and that perpetrators are usually men, while victims are typically women. This is consistent with previous research, which shows that men are usually not seen as victims. A recent survey study showed that situations were more often considered rape when the victim was female compared to male (Vandiver and Dupalo 2013). This may be due to the fact that traditional sexual scripts still embrace gender roles prescribing that men should initiate sexual interaction and women should be the sexual gatekeepers who are responsible for saying 'no' (Jozkowski and Peterson 2013).

Although prevalence figures vary, previous research has shown that male victimization is not uncommon (Fiebert and Osburn 2001; Peterson et al. 2011). In fact, recent studies from the United States have reported male victimization rates similar to those for women (Stemple and Meyer 2014; Turchik 2012). Respondents in the present study did not deny the possibility of male victimization. With regard to some specific situations, they described alternatives to the stereotypical scenario of female victimization and male perpetration. Many respondents believed that if women victimize a man, they do so by questioning his masculinity. According to many respondents, this is an effective strategy for obtaining sex from men.

## Strengths, Limitations, and Future Research Directions

The current qualitative study included convenience samples of young men and women from nine EU countries. In total, 128 interviews were conducted and analyzed, which provided us with a rich source of information about the social construction of the meaning of sexual aggression that may inform future research using quantitative survey instruments in cross-cultural studies. However, some limitations should be borne in mind when interpreting the results and implications of the present study. First, the sample size was small in comparison to the sample in the quantitative survey, with a range of 7–20 interviews per country. Therefore, the findings cannot be generalized to student samples or young adults more generally in the respective countries. However, it is worth noting that the purpose of our study was not to arrive at a full description of young adults' representations of sexual aggression. Our aim was a more modest one, namely to investigate whether there were any obvious cultural and gender differences missed by our quantitative survey that might have undermined the functional equivalence of our survey questions and help to explain variations due to culture. Nonetheless, the findings of our study need to be interpreted with caution bearing in mind the small sample size in each country. A second limitation is that interviewers were unable to make verbatim transcripts of the interviews. Rather, the answers of the respondents were summarized in detailed text, including verbatim quotes, and subsequently translated into English. Third, data were coded by only one coder. In this process, some details could have been lost. However, to minimize this possibility, interviewers came together to discuss the country-level findings in a face-to-face workshop. Finally, we used a highly educated student sample. It remains to be studied whether the results also apply to a more diverse group of young people.

The quantitative study by Krahé et al. (2015) using the SAV-S was a first attempt to harmonize data collection about youth sexual aggression in Europe, which may improve the integration and comparability of research in this field (Krahé and Vanwesenbeeck 2015). The SAV-S facilitates a detailed assessment of prevalence rates and may provide in-depth information about youth sexual aggression. It provides a comprehensive analysis of coercive strategies and sexual acts in different victim-perpetrator constellations and addresses both men and women in the victim and perpetrator roles. However, researchers should carefully consider whether a self-report survey is the appropriate tool to answer their research questions. For example, with regard to the assessment of intimate partner violence, it has been suggested that surveys have the potential to demonstrate the wide-spread nature of intimate partner violence, whereas the context, motivation, and impact can be more adequately addressed in semi-structured interviews (Woodin et al. 2013).

## Conclusion

The present study has shown that men and women from different European countries interpreted the items of the SAV-S in a similar manner. Although it is possible that greater differences would have been found if the study had been conducted with a more detailed or standardized interview schedule or a larger

sample, the data of the present study did not suggest that the SAV-S items were understood differently in the nine countries and from how they were conceptualized by the researchers. Moreover, the interview responses yielded agreement across genders and countries, which suggests that the differences in prevalence rates revealed in response to the SAV-S may reflect actual differences in the extent to which men and women in the different countries experience or engage in sexual aggression. Future research is needed to explore predictors of these differences and to provide a starting point for evidence-based interventions tailored to the scale and causes of the problem in different countries.

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## Appendix: Format of the Interview Schedule

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### Introduction

Hello,

First of all, thank you very much for agreeing to talk to me today. I want to assure you that everything we will talk about will remain strictly confidential and will be used only for research purposes. It will be impossible to draw any conclusions from what you say about your personality or about other people you mention.

Today, I would like to conduct an interview with you in which the focus is on how you interpret questions from a questionnaire. The questionnaire is about the topic of “sexual aggression”.

I would like to begin by telling you a little bit more about the background of my study. Many studies that examine unwanted sexual experiences present their participants with questions about their experiences or behaviors and ask them to state whether or not they have ever made that experience or shown that behavior. These questions are necessarily worded in a fairly general and abstract way, as you will see in a moment. Researchers know little or nothing about the kinds of situations and scenarios that their participants have in mind when considering the question and deciding whether to answer them with ‘yes’ or ‘no’.

In some recent studies, a particular finding has been obtained that highlights this problem, namely that men reported more frequently than women to have experienced unwanted sexual contacts. Before this finding is taken to reflect higher rates of sexual victimization among men than among women, it is important to find out whether men and women interpret the items in the same way, that is whether or not they have the same situations in mind when they think about the questions. This is exactly what I want to find out through these interviews. This means there are no right or wrong answers, and the interview is \*not\* about what you have experienced in the past. Instead, I would like to find out how you interpret, and make sense of, a number of questions that I have taken from a standard instrument used in quantitative research.

The interview is about a sensitive topic, and it cannot be ruled out that the questions I am going to ask you may elicit memories of negative situations and experiences. Therefore, I want to emphasize that you can terminate the interview at any time. At the end of the questionnaire, all participants will receive a list of counseling agencies that provide professional support.

Do you have any further questions about the interview? Are you still willing to participate? And do you feel you have been sufficiently informed about the interview? If that’s OK for you, I would like to record our conversation so that I can listen again to what you say after the interview. Do you agree with that?

<If so, present consent form for signing>

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**Victimization\***


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(Version for female interviewees, parallel items referring to female perpetrators for male interviewees)

**Items**

Item 1: Has a man ever made (or tried to make) you have sexual contact with him *against your will* by **threatening to use force or by harming** you?

Item 2: Has a man ever made (or tried to make) you have sexual contact with him *against your will* by **exploiting** the fact that you were **unable to resist** (e.g., after you had had too much alcohol or drugs)?

Item 3: Has a man ever made (or tried to make) you have sexual contact with him *against your will* by putting **verbal pressure** on you (e.g., by threatening to end the relationship or calling you a failure)?

Item 4: Has a man ever made (or tried to make) you have sexual contact with him *against your will* by using his **position of authority or power** over you (e.g., as a teacher, sports coach, boss etc.)?

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**Interview question for each item**

When you hear this question: what specific situations come to your mind? What would have had to happen for you to answer 'yes' to this question?

Can you describe to me one or more possible situations/scenarios? How did the situation arise, what kinds of behaviors did the man/the woman show?

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\* **Parallel questions to address perpetration, e.g.,**

Have you ever made (or tried to make) a man have sexual contact with you against *his will* by **threatening to use force or by harming** him?

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