

Using the Theory of Planned Behavior to Examine Beliefs About Verbal Sexual Coercion Among Urban Black Adolescents

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Abstract

This study used the theory of planned behavior to identify urban Black adolescents' beliefs about male-to-female verbal sexual coercion. Interviews were conducted with 91 urban, Black adolescents (53 boys and 38 girls) to identify their behavioral, normative, and control beliefs about verbal sexual coercion perpetration (for males) and resistance (for females). Boys reported that perpetrating verbal sexual coercion could result in negative relationship outcomes, and the main benefit of using this tactic was to obtain sex. Unsupportive peers and some male family members were seen as encouraging boys to use verbal sexual coercion, whereas parents were seen as opposed to the use of coercion. Being in a private context with a girl and having persuasive skill were seen as facilitating the use of coercion, whereas being with an experienced or skilled girl was a barrier. For girls, positive relationship outcomes and sexual health risks were the benefits and pitfalls of resisting verbal sexual coercion. "Real" friends and family were described as supporting girls' resistance to coercion, while "fake" friends, promiscuous girls, and male peers were seen as not supporting resistance. Girls believed being in a safe, public context would make it easier to resist coercion,

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while being in a stable relationship with an attractive and persistent partner would make it more difficult to resist. Knowing urban, Black adolescents' beliefs about verbal sexual coercion is the first step toward predicting and intervening on their perpetration and resistance behaviors.

Keywords

dating violence, adolescent victims, cultural context

Sexual coercion, or the use of coercive tactics to obtain sex from an unwilling partner, is a significant public health concern (Chamberlain & Levenson, 2012; Fair & Vanyur, 2011). The most prevalent form of sexual coercion in the United States is verbal sexual coercion (Gilmore et al., 2014), which involves using verbal tactics to get one's partner to engage in more sexual activity than he or she wants (Hines, 2007). Verbal sexual coercion tactics may include the use of lies, guilt, begging, manipulation, continual arguments, threats, or ignoring verbal requests by the victim to stop (without using force; DeGue & DiLillo, 2004).

Verbal sexual coercion is common in heterosexual relationships, with approximately one in 10 adolescent females reporting verbal sexual coercion in their current relationship (Rickert, Wiemann, Vaughan, & White, 2004; Zweig, Dank, Lachman, & Yahner, 2013), about one in five college women reporting verbal sexual coercion in their current relationship (Katz & Myhr, 2008), and between 35% and 75% of college women having experienced verbal sexual coercion at some point in their lives (Temple, Bucossi, & Stewart, 2008). Because it is considered a less obvious form of intimate partner violence (IPV), verbal sexual coercion and verbal aggression are often overlooked or normalized in intimate relationships dynamics (Dutton & Goodman, 2005; Katz, Carino, & Hilton, 2002). Nonetheless, verbal aggression has been identified as the first stage on the continuum of aggressive behaviors in abusive relationships (Hines, 2007; Katz & Myhr, 2008), which ultimately escalates to physical aggression (O'Leary, 1993).

A key critique of current verbal sexual coercion research is that it has typically been studied in samples of primarily White young adults (e.g., Gilmore et al., 2014; Katz, Moore, & Tkachuk, 2007; Katz & Myhr, 2008; Tamborra, Dutton, & Terry, 2014). Research on White young adults is important given that verbal sexual coercion is positively related to physical aggression (Katz et al., 2002), negatively related to relationship satisfaction and sexual functioning (Katz & Myhr, 2008), and positively related to depression (Zweig, Crockett, Sayer, & Vicary, 1999) in this population. However, it is important

to examine the phenomenon of verbal sexual coercion across varying populations, particularly in terms of age and race/ethnicity, for a number of reasons.

First, verbal sexual coercion in adolescence, generally defined as ages 10 to 18 (American Psychological Association, 2002), appears to be a risk factor for coercion and other forms of IPV later in life. Most adult female victims of coercion were initially coerced before reaching 25 years of age (Black et al., 2011; de Visser, Rissel, Richters, & Smith, 2007). In addition, recent research suggests a destructive feedback loop between sexual coercion in adolescence and sexual coercion risk factors. Specifically, Young and Furman (2008) found that adolescents' risk for sexual coercion after an initial incident of coercion increases more than sevenfold, likely because the first experience of coercion leads to an intensification of factors that put adolescents at risk to begin with, including externalizing symptoms, sexual intercourse, and substance use (Young, Furman, & Jones, 2012). Women who were coerced more than once during adolescence are also at a higher risk for psychosocial distress in adulthood (de Visser et al., 2007). Taken together, the early onset of verbal sexual coercion and its positive relationship to IPV risk factors and psychological dysfunction reinforce the importance of investigating and intervening on sexual coercion predictors in adolescence.

In addition to the importance of examining beliefs about coercion in adolescent populations, researchers have recommended that investigations of sexual scripts and beliefs pay close attention to participant race and ethnicity (Bowleg et al., 2015; Carpenter, 2015; Eaton, Rose, Interligi, Fernandez, & McHugh, 2015; Frith & Kitzinger, 2001). Although all adolescents undergo sexual socialization, the specific norms, beliefs, attitudes, and behaviors they internalize and express are affected by their social locations, with race/ethnicity and culture playing a major role (e.g., Dunlap, Benoit, & Graves, 2013; Hussen, Bowleg, Sangaramoorthy, & Malebranche, 2012).

With regard to African American adolescents, French (2013) found that Black high school girls discussed their beliefs about sexual scripts and coercion in both racialized and gendered ways. In focus groups, these girls emphasized personal responsibility and moral obligation in avoiding sexual coercion victimization, consistent with the Sister Savior stereotype of Black women (Stephens & Phillips, 2003). Research has also found that Black adolescent girls' sexual self-representations reflect sexual scripts portrayed in hip-hop culture (Stokes, 2007). Black popular culture and media also appear to play a role in the sexual scripts of Black heterosexual men (Bowleg et al., 2015) and African American preadolescents (Stephens & Few, 2007). Finally, qualitative work shows that young Black men and women in college perceive verbal sexual coercion as normative, referring to it as "running the game" (Mouzon, Battle, Clark, Coleman, & Ogletree, 2005). Despite this, few studies have

directly assessed the nature of any youth sub-culture beliefs about verbal sexual coercion, although scholars have called for more research on socially constructed beliefs on relationship violence (Peterson & Muehlenhard, 2007).

This study will, in addition, focus on male-to-female verbal sexual coercion. Although it is not uncommon for boys and men to be the victims of coercive sex by women (French, Tilghman, & Malebranche, 2015; VanderLaan & Vasey, 2009), recent findings from a large national survey show that female teens report higher rates of victimization than males for almost all forms of IPV. This included verbal sexual coercion, with 16.4% of adolescent girls reporting having been sexually coerced in a current/recent relationship compared with 8.8% of boys (Zweig et al., 2013). Thus, male-to-female sexual coercion is twice as likely among adolescents as female-to-male sexual coercion. In addition, the reasons females and males perpetrate IPV—and their subjective experiences as victims—differ greatly (e.g., Stephens & Eaton, 2014; VanderLaan & Vasey, 2009). For these reasons, examinations of male-to-female and female-to-male sexual coercion are best addressed by separate studies, or by studies that specifically examine the role of gender role socialization in adolescent IPV.

Finally, our investigation into the antecedents of verbal sexual coercion among urban Black youth will draw from established theory in psychological science. Basic theories provide useful guidance for developing and interpreting data from emerging investigations. Theoretically justified examinations in the early stages of work also provide a solid basis for researchers to build on and adapt as the research area grows. Theory helps researchers to see coherent structures in uncharted domains, and it builds bridges between the known and the unknown (Van Lange, Kruglanski, & Higgins, 2012). Because so little is known about Black adolescents' likelihood of engaging in verbal sexual coercion, and because this study lays the groundwork for future investigations, we structured our investigation into the antecedents of perpetrating and resisting verbal sexual coercion using the theory of planned behavior (TPB; Ajzen, 1985, 1991, 2012).

TPB

The TPB makes clear predictions about the antecedents of engaging in controllable behaviors (Ajzen, 2016b). According to the TPB, controllable behavior is influenced by three major factors: behavioral beliefs, normative beliefs, and control beliefs (Ajzen, 2012). Behavioral beliefs produce an attitude toward the behavior, normative beliefs result in subjective norms to perform or not perform the behavior, and control beliefs create perceptions of behavioral control (or self-efficacy). Together, attitudes, subjective norms, and perceptions of control predict intentions to perform the target behavior and actual behavior (see Figure 1, based on Ajzen, 2016c).

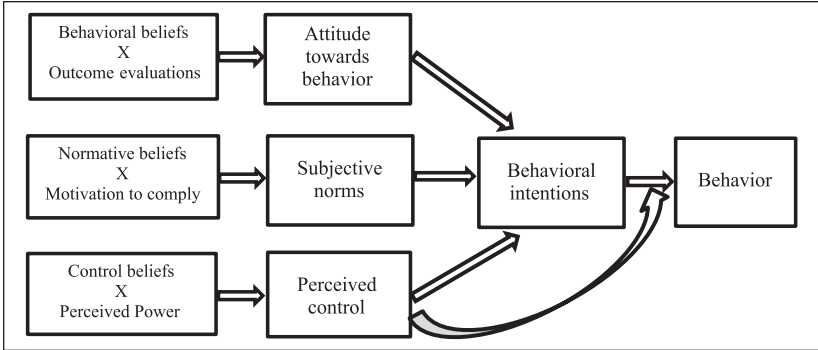


Figure 1. The theory of planned behavior.

The TPB has been repeatedly shown to successfully predict positive and negative health behaviors, from engaging in physical exercise to drug and alcohol use and abuse (Cooke, Dahdah, Norman, & French, 2016; Godin & Kok, 1996). It has also been used to predict positive and negative sexual health behaviors in diverse populations of adolescents (e.g., Flisher, Myer, Merais, Lombard, & Reddy, 2007; Li, Frieze, & Tang, 2010). Finally, it has been used to create and evaluate interventions designed to modify sexual health behaviors (e.g., Hardeman et al., 2002).

Before behavioral, normative, and control beliefs can be used to predict or modify attitudes, subjective norms, and perceptions of control, and ultimately behaviors, they must first be elicited in a free-response format and content analyzed. Thus, qualitative research on behavioral, normative, and control beliefs about verbal sexual coercion is the first step in being able to predict engagement in this form of IPV.

To identify modal salient beliefs about verbal sexual coercion in our target population, we performed individual interviews with urban Black male and female adolescents using Ajzen’s (2016b) instructions for eliciting salient beliefs in interviews. Because we were interested in male-to-female verbal sexual coercion, we assessed boys’ beliefs about the perpetration of verbal sexual coercion, and girls’ beliefs about resistance to verbal sexual coercion.

Method

Data collection involved the use of in-depth interviews structured by the TPB to elicit participants’ salient beliefs about male-to-female verbal sexual coercion, specifically looking at boys’ beliefs about perpetration and girls’ beliefs

about resistance. As a methodology that centers and describes individual and group constructions of meaning, qualitative methods were employed to identify the socially constructed meanings of verbal sexual coercion (Firestone, 1987). As we are studying a unique population, we employed individual interviews; prior research has noted that the use of interviews with marginalized groups provides rich descriptions and details that are not easily quantified, or that are not captured using quantitative tools designed for using White, college, middle-class populations (Braun & Clarke, 2013; Few, Stephens, & Rouse-Arnett, 2003; Graham, 2009).

A total of 91 adolescents (53 boys and 38 girls), ages 14 to 18, self-identifying as Black and heterosexual, participated. Participants' mean age was 16.12 ($SD = 1.21$), with girls being 16.16 on average ($SD = 1.33$), and boys being 16.09 on average ($SD = 1.13$). Participants were recruited from four afterschool programs in a southeastern United States urban center.

Data Collection

The project was reviewed by the institutional review board (IRB) at the authors' university and was approved as compliant with all institutional, state, and federal regulations pertaining to research involving human participants. Adolescent participants took part in this study at their afterschool programs. The director of each afterschool program was first consulted about the nature of the study and then gave approval for the researchers to recruit from their programs. Next, parental consent from potential adolescent participants was sought. After parental consent was received, adolescent assent to participate in the one-on-one interviews was sought.

All interviews were led by the principal investigators (PI) or one of five female undergraduate research assistants (RA) who were trained in interview methodologies specifically for this study. Prior to the start of data collection, all attended a 2-day training on qualitative methods, interviewing techniques, cultural competency in human participants research, and addressing sensitive issues with adolescent populations. This included training on protocols related to the reporting of evidence of child abuse or a subject's threatened violence to self or other, as mandated by state and federal guidelines. Interview questions and accompanying prompts were developed to assess participants' subjective beliefs about and experiences with verbal coercion. Although data comparisons were not done across interviewers, all interviewers followed the same questioning route with all participants to ensure uniformity in interview structure.

Interviews involved the qualitative elicitation of readily accessible (aka salient) behavioral, normative, and control beliefs about verbal sexual coercion

using a semi-structured questioning route (Ajzen, 2016b). Readily accessible beliefs are beliefs that are easy to call up from memory. After participating in the interview, participants were asked to complete a 20-min online survey on sexual health, which was conducted for a separate study. The survey was administered after the interview to reduce the likelihood that the survey content influenced participants' interview responses. Participants were given a \$10 gift card as a participation incentive. All study participants were also provided with a brochure that included contact information for local and national sexual health support services.

Verbal sexual coercion belief interviews. The in-depth, semi-structured interviews protocols were developed using Ajzen's (2016b) instructions for eliciting salient beliefs. For example, in Ajzen's sample protocol (2016b), positive behavioral beliefs about an exercise behavior are elicited by asking: "What do you see as the advantages of your exercising for at least 20 minutes, three times per week for the next three months?" In our protocol, boys' positive behavioral beliefs about using verbal sexual coercion were elicited by asking "What positive things might come out of using words to get a girl to do more sexually than she wants to?" (see Table 2). All questions were developed in conjunction with Dr. Ajzen (I. Ajzen, personal communications, September 12, 2012-March 1, 2013) and pilot tested on a sample of Black adolescents ($N = 10$; 5 girls and 5 boys).

Behavioral beliefs about verbal sexual coercion were elicited by having interviewees generate the advantages and disadvantages of using verbal sexual coercion (for boys) or resisting verbal sexual coercion (for girls). Normative beliefs were elicited by asking participants to list the individuals or groups who support or oppose the relevant behavior (perpetration for males, and resistance for females), and individuals or groups who do and do not participate in the behavior. Finally, control beliefs were gathered by asking participants to generate a list of factors that could make it easier or more difficult for them to perform the relevant behavior (again, perpetration for males and resistance for females). Interviews lasted from 27 to 43 min.

Data Analysis

Four RAs transcribed the interviews; five additional RAs verified the completeness of the transcripts, accuracy of the discussion content, and a high quality of transcription. RAs reviewing the transcripts did not check the interviews they personally conducted or files they transcribed. Data collection and analysis proceeded simultaneously, using the constant comparative method (Patton, 2002). Specifically, themes are classified and compared across categories to create the analysis of initial observations. As such, the identification

of themes undergoes constant refinement throughout the collection and analysis progressions, continuously feeding back into the process of category coding (Patton, 2002).

The first stage of analysis involved reviewing each transcript line-by-line using a coding scheme developed by study Co-PI. She constructed a preliminary coding framework after an in-depth reading of the transcripts. Sections of text were coded by issue or theme, and additional codes were added as new themes emerged. After reading all the transcripts, the second author coded and organized the data to identify themes related to perpetration and victimization. During the second stage of analysis, initial codes were reviewed and organized into three specific TPB themes: behavioral, normative, and control (see Tables 1 and 2 for girls' and boys' modal salient beliefs).

To ensure validity, key themes were summarized, reviewed, and discussed with one PI and two RAs throughout the data collection and analysis processes. Credibility was enhanced by the PI having volunteered with the organizations for several years in the capacity of a community speaker; she was trusted by the organization directors and introduced to parents and adolescents as a longtime supporter of the groups. Finally, immediate insights and thoughts regarding the interview sessions were captured and integrated into the process from interviewers' field notes. These tools help ensure credibility of the data collection, and highlight dissimilarities/similarities in the data and variations in interpretation (Hollstein, 2014).

Results

Beliefs About Verbal Sexual Coercion

Behavioral beliefs

Girls' behavioral beliefs about resisting verbal sexual coercion. Responses to the question "What *positive* things might come out of resisting a guy when he uses words to get you to do more sexually than you want to?" fell into three broad categories: sexual health risk ($n = 27$), relationship outcomes ($n = 23$), and self-respect ($n = 11$).

Positive things that could come out of resisting is less risk of getting STDs [sexually transmitted diseases], less risk of pregnancies umm and emotionally like you could be um some people become depressed. Yeah I mean it's kind of negative and positive 'cause like you might risk not getting pregnant which is also a good thing for some people I guess it's just depending on what's the circumstances. (16-year-old female)

Table 1. Females' Modal Salient Beliefs About Resisting Verbal Sexual Coercion.

Behavioral Beliefs	Normative Beliefs	Control Beliefs
What positive things might come out of you resisting a guy when he uses words to get you to do more sexually than you want to?	Who do you know that might think you should resist a guy when he uses words to get you to do more sexually than you want to?	What kinds of things or situations would make it easier to resist a guy when he uses words to get you to do more sexually than you want to?
Avoiding pregnancy Avoiding sexually transmitted infections Retaining his respect for you Maintaining your own values and beliefs Avoiding a relationship with bad partner	Friends with positive intentions Family members—parents Family members—siblings	Strong sense of self Strong social network (family & friends) High self-esteem Having skills to negotiate/avoid his advances Avoid being alone with him
What negative things might come out of you resisting a guy when he uses words to get you to do more sexually than you want to?	Who do you know that might think you should not resist a guy when he uses words to get you to do more sexually than you want to?	What kinds of things or situations would make it harder to resist a guy when he uses words to get you to do more sexually than you want to?
Becoming pregnant Acquiring sexually transmitted infections Losing his respect for you Rejecting your own values and beliefs He ends/leaves relationship	Female peers with negative intentions ("fake" friends) Male peers Female peers with negative reputations	Strong feelings of attraction/loving him Being alone with him He is very persistent

Table 2. Males' Modal Salient Beliefs About Perpetrating Verbal Sexual Coercion.

Behavioral Beliefs	Normative Beliefs	Control Beliefs
<p>What positive things might come out of using words to get a girl to do more sexually than she wants to?</p> <p>Having sex</p> <p>Approval from other males</p>	<p>Who do you know that might think you should use words to get a girl to do more sexually than she wants to?</p> <p>Male peers</p>	<p>What kinds of things or situations would make it easier to get a girl to do more sexually than she wants to using words?</p> <p>Getting her sexually "excited" by touching</p> <p>Having peers present</p> <p>Being alone with her</p> <p>Having verbal skills to coax/induce guilt</p> <p>Having done more sexually prior to this</p>
<p>What negative things might come out of using words to get a girl to do more sexually than she wants to?</p> <p>Accusations of sexual assault perpetration</p> <p>Losing her respect for you</p> <p>Rejecting your own values and beliefs</p> <p>She ends/leaves relationship</p> <p>She stops all physical contact at that moment</p>	<p>Who do you know that might think you should not use words to get a girl to do more sexually than she wants to?</p> <p>Parents</p> <p>Male siblings</p> <p>Male mentor (coach, counselor)</p> <p>Male relative (uncle, cousin)</p>	<p>What kinds of things or situations would make it harder to get a girl to do more sexually than she wants to using words?</p> <p>Having too many people around</p> <p>Not really wanting to do it</p> <p>Having respect for her</p> <p>Her being shy, having prior experience with coercion, or her being firm and certain</p>

He, I think he respects you more. 'Cause you, like, you have a strong mind . . . He might not agree with it at first, but in the end he's going to see like, you're not, you're not okay with it. And you're voicing your opinion to him. (16-year-old female)

That would be a long lasting relationship. Because if he understands that you are not ready, then it'll be a good relationship. (16-year-old female)

Based on the TPB questioning route (Ajzen, 2016b), the follow-up question on behavioral beliefs was, "What are some *negative* things that might come of resisting a guy when he uses words to try to get you to do more sexually than you want?" Again, the broad themes that emerged from the data focused on negative relationship outcomes ($n = 26$), sexual health risk ($n = 18$), and self-respect ($n = 17$). Comments centered primarily on feelings toward their partner and fears about the potential loss of the relationship.

Well, he'll threaten her by saying, "I will go look for another girl." Um, "If you don't do this, we're breaking up." Um, let's say, um. "Okay, we're over." (14-year-old female)

Because she loves the guy and, and she's afraid he's going to leave her if she doesn't. And . . . after that we end up regretting it. (16-year-old female)

In contrast, sexual health risk related responses were broader in their focus. Fears ranged from disease acquisition to one's own physical safety. Physical assault ($n = 22$) emerged as a primary concern, followed by fears of becoming pregnant ($n = 15$) or STD acquisition ($n = 5$).

Rape. Rape, they might not accept the no and just go ahead and rape you they can um drug you or they can just accept the fact that they said no and sometimes they can actually bully you for it and tell people that certain things happened that didn't happen and that just backfires for both them. (16-year-old female)

He might like keep on, he might like be very persistent. And like maybe he can lead to like umm some people abuse like physically or something. It might lead to that. It's hard to think about it like that because you don't expect yourself to be in that situation but it might actually happen. If the person is asking you all this time like he might end up forcing you at some point. (15-year-old female)

Um, I think not getting your heart broken because it might be the wrong person. And you don't end up being pregnant. (14-year-old female)

Interestingly, girls' comments about self-respect focused less on their feelings about themselves and more on fears that the male would be dishonest about her resistance to his pressure for sex. Girls noted that a boy could create false rumors or tell lies about them engaging in sexual activities despite their resistance if they were to turn him down. There was a fear that these lies would be believed and lead peers, friends, or family members to view them negatively.

He'll start talking bad about her. He'll be like "Man she a hoe. Yeah, even though she resisted, she a hoe. I had her in the car." Talking lies, "in the school closet, on the third floor"—things like that. (17-year-old female)

Then when you break up with the boy, the boy exposes you about it. "Oh yea, I made her do this. I made her suck my mmm and all that stuff." (14-year-old female)

Or they might start putting you down. Like talking about you, making rumors stuff like that. Saying little nasty things about you that aren't true. (18-year-old female)

Table 1 shows the modal salient behavioral, normative, and control beliefs for females in this sample.

Boys' behavioral beliefs about perpetrating verbal sexual coercion. Less than half of the boys gave responses to the question "What *positive* things might come out of using words to get a girl to do more sexually than she wants to?" ($n = 24$). They clearly had difficulty finding answers that supported using verbally coercive tactics. Overall, the responses they did give centered on achieving control of the situation and the goal of having sex. More specifically, boys felt that being able to get what they wanted from girls would be a reason for engaging in this tactic. Of those boys who provided answers to this question, 11 qualified their response by noting that they did not necessarily agree with the potential outcome.

The more words you say, the more exciting she feels maybe . . . maybe she's going to get into the sex. (14-year-old male)

It's just that once, like, [men] get in that mood or whatever, we just like start saying stuff. And then, like, if the girl be, like, "oh I don't know," "I don't want to do it," and then we keep trying to comfort [her] . . . she's like "Okay, I'll try and whatever." Then I guess the way it benefits us is, like, I guess we get them to give in. (16-year-old male)

I mean obvious, physically, if you do persuade her to do more than what she wants, then you benefit physically, because you are getting what you want. (16-year-old male)

In response to the follow-up question, “What *negative* things might come out of using words to get a girl to do more sexually than she wants to?” negative relationship outcomes, such as turning a girl off or losing the relationship ($n = 42$), emerged as possible concerns.

She might stop in the process or just you know stop talking to you. (14-year-old male)

You’ll probably get rejected on the spot. (14-year-old male)

Come off [desperate], I guess. Like, doing that, you are trying to rush things. (15-year-old male)

Like, at my school, if it actually happens and, I mean, it becomes very awkward between the two people. (18-year-old male)

Table 2 shows the modal salient behavioral, normative, and control beliefs for males in this sample.

Normative beliefs

Girls’ normative beliefs about resisting verbal sexual coercion. Girls’ positive normative beliefs about resisting verbal sexual coercion were identified through the question “Who do you know that might think you *should* resist a guy when he uses words to get you to do more sexually than you want to?” Beliefs about who would encourage girls’ resistance were linked to their supportive social networks. The majority of girls stated that “real” friends ($n = 27$) and close family members ($n = 24$) would support them resisting a coercive guy.

Plenty, most of my friends would say like, “You need to drop him. Like no. That’s, that’s no. Just no.” (16-year-old female)

My sister . . . ’Cause she’s like, ’cause she knows what goes on and she would want me to wait until I actually know what’s gonna happen when I do it. (15-year-old female)

The biggest resistor I’ve seen is my mom. She’s always resisting. She’s like nope. (16-year-old female)

In response to the questions “Who do you know that might think you *should not* resist a guy when he uses words to get you to do more sexually than you want to?” girls suggested other girls described as “fake” friends ($n = 29$) and sexually permissive female peers ($n = 14$).

This girl convinced my sister to do it . . . to go the girl’s house. Then they would go to their boyfriend’s house. And . . . and, so like, they go to one room while the other. And the girl told my sister, “Oh I already went, so it’s your turn to go next. C’mon, c’mon, I already did it. Have fun. It’s just having fun.” “No ’cause I’m not like you.” (14-year-old female)

I think only one (female) friend at school. Something happen with some boy I liked, really liked. And it kind of hurt when he asked me [to have sex]. I was like wow that’s a shocker. And she was like, “Oh why not?” (18-year-old female)

There’s some friends who say, you know, you shouldn’t resist a guy because he’s cute and he has this and has that. He has a car. He has everything. (16-year-old female)

Male peers were also seen ($n = 8$) as supporting acquiescing to a verbally coercive guy because “this is what guys do” (according to a 15-year-old female).

I think like, you know how you have a relationship and you’re close to the friends—your boyfriend’s friends—I think they would tell you “Oh, you should do it.” (14-year-old female)

Boys’ normative beliefs about perpetrating verbal sexual coercion. Similar to girls’ responses, when asked “Who do you know that might think you *should* use words to get a girl to do more sexually than she wants to?” the boys in the study reported that unsupportive peers ($n = 33$) would be the ones most in favor of them using verbal sexual coercion on a girl.

The [male classmates] that like, they don’t really care about like, they don’t care about other people feelings. Or they just like using people. (14-year-old male)

Yeah, like probably people at school. Like . . . kinda’ like bad at influence I guess. (14-year-old male)

However, several of the boys in the study noted that close male friends and family members would be supportive of them verbally coercing girls into having sex.

My friend [names friend]. 'Cause [names friend] . . . [sigh] [names friend] is that type of guy . . . that guy that would probably be like "Oh I'm having a one night stand with her" and he'll never call her again. (14-year-old male)

Probably like my friends. They talk about [how to get away with using girls for sex] all the time. (14-year-old male)

Well, probably my stepfather. He says to use the words to caress her, like, use the words to be seductive in a certain type of way. (15-year-old male)

Boys were more easily able to provide information when asked "Who do you know that might think you *should not* use words to get a girl to do more sexually than she wants to?" Parents or parental figures ($n = 38$) were often viewed as not supporting the use of coercion.

I would say, my Auntie. Because she says, well, she . . . she's like my mom. But she hasn't personally said, but the way she talks, she says that a female shouldn't listen to that, but I feel like she said that, coming from past experience, or something that happened in her family or something like that. (15-year-old male)

That'd be my dad . . . and probably my mom. We don't really talk about it. But I know they would not like it if I did [use verbal sexual coercion tactics]. (17-year-old male)

Female friends were the third most mentioned group when asked about who would discourage them from engaging in verbal coercion. A total of 13 boys noted that girls in their peer group circles were likely to express these feelings.

My female best friends. She would tell me to quit that if she heard I tried to do it to someone. (15-year-old male)

Most of the time it's the girls [at school] who say that [women should not be verbally coerced]. (18-year-old male)

Control beliefs

Girls' control beliefs about resisting verbal sexual coercion. Control beliefs tied to girls' verbal coercion resistance were identified through the question "What kinds of things or situations would make it *easier* to resist a guy when he uses words to get you to do more sexually than you want to?" Responses centered on the ability to be in a safe context ($n = 16$) and in the presence of other individuals ($n = 13$). Being physically apart (e.g., living in different

neighborhoods, primarily interacting over phone) made it easier to resist verbal sexual coercion. Also, having the ability to change one's location was expected to be helpful.

Distance—how far we are away. (16-year-old female)

If you're always around someone . . . like he can't find the time to ever try to get you to do anything alone. (16-year-old female)

Like, if you see a group of boys, like in a certain area. Just walk the other way. (14-year-old female)

When asking "What kinds of things or situations would make it *harder* to resist a guy when he uses words to get you to do more sexually than you want to?" perceptions of the male partner emerged as an important theme. For example, girls' perceptions of the relationship as stable, or their attitudes about their partner's personality or appearance, were seen as influencing their ability to resist verbal sexual coercion ($n = 7$).

Umm if I have feelings for that person. If I haven't been going out with that person for a long time, I don't have feelings for the person as they do for me, so yeah. (16-year-old female)

If he is ugly like if he like if he got a turn-a-round I'm not gonna even pay you no mind. If he's attractive if he saying all the right things the devil could fool you. (17-year-old female)

High pressure persistence was cited by nine girls in this study as a factor that decreased their ability to resist verbal sexual coercive tactics. Male partners' continued requests for sex, including over text messaging and in face-to-face interactions, were seen by girls as a "wearing down" approach that could lead girls to give in over time.

If we're face-to-face? When he keeps asking over and over. (16-year-old female)

Him being aggressive. Just keep asking and going. (14-year-old female)

Overall, however, being in sexually charged contexts or situations was seen by girls as decreasing their control over the situation ($n = 22$). Being alone in a bedroom or house, having already acquiesced to some intimate actions, or not stopping his suggestive comments earlier were viewed as increasing their inability to resist verbally coercive tactics.

Like if maybe we're in my [bed]room it'll probably be way more likely to happen. (16-year-old female)

We're in a different like the wrong type of environment . . . probably be someone's house . . . where no one is, you know. (16-year-old female)

When you let it get too far. Like, if he keep doing like keep saying sexual stuff and all of that stuff and you ain't like stopping it right there and it get too far. You, you in trouble. (14-year-old female)

Boys' control beliefs about perpetrating verbal sexual coercion. When asked, "What kinds of things or situations would make it *easier* to get a girl to do more sexually than she wants to using words?" the majority of boys pointed to contextual opportunities such as being alone with a girl in her house or bedroom ($n = 19$).

Probably if we're in my room by ourselves. And we're probably just hug, and things like, and I tell her, you know, "Keep going" or something like that. (14-year-old male)

It would probably make it easier if she were in the comfort of her own home, she feels like, she's free there, and like if she knows the person, if she's been with a person for a while. (15-year-old male)

Following contextual affordances, the man's own ability to use words emerged as the second most powerful tool for helping them get a girl to do more than she wanted to. A total of 12 boys described skills that a man must have if he wanted to use verbally coercive tactics.

You got to be a good persuader if you want a girl to have sex and that if you're a good persuader, and I'm saying a like good, good one then you know what she know how to get for seduction word and grow like real slick and you could just do it like that [*snaps fingers*] quick. Like ASAP. (16-year-old male)

When asked, "What kinds of things or situations would make it *harder* to get a girl to do more sexually than she wants to using words?" boys again primarily mentioned context. Not being alone or in a space that was public was viewed as a barrier by 26 of the boys. A girl's personality and experience were the next two most common responses, mentioned by 23 boys.

If she had experience, like other people did it to her before. (15-year-old male)

Oh, when she's very uncomfortable, probably freaked out, or she's shy. (14-year-old male)

Discussion

In this study, we captured the most common beliefs about male-to-female verbal sexual coercion held by urban, Black adolescents. These modal salient beliefs shed light on the factors that make urban, Black adolescents both vulnerable and resistant to this form of IPV.

Behavioral Beliefs

Girls' behavioral beliefs. When asked what positive and negative things might come from resisting verbal sexual coercion, girls' most common responses were related to potential relationship outcomes and sexual health risks. In terms of relationship outcomes, adolescence is a life stage of heightened concern about intimate relationships, and one in which status and dating are interrelated (Sullivan et al., 2012). Girls who have boyfriends, or are viewed as desirable to males, are often seen as the most popular (Helms, Sullivan, Corona, & Taylor, 2013). There is also evidence that urban girls can regard sex as a mechanism for establishing or maintaining a relationship (Stanton, Black, Kaljee, & Ricardo, 1993), and that sexual compliance can be the result of relationship maintenance motives (Impett & Peplau, 2003). Thus, the motivation to develop and preserve a dating relationship can put urban Black girls at risk for verbal sexual coercion. Girls also noted that negative sexual health outcomes (e.g., unwanted pregnancy, sexually transmitted infections) could result from not resisting verbally sexually coercive tactics.

Boys' behavioral beliefs. The boys in this study had difficulty describing what benefits they might reap from using coercion. Their answers focused primarily on obtaining sexual gratification and engagement, reflecting the fact that verbal tactics are seen as capable of producing sexual compliance in females. The idea that girls and women can be convinced to have sex after an initial rejection is consistent with the cultural stereotype that women offer token resistance to sex, and may refuse sex when they actually intend to engage in it (Muehlenhard & Rodgers, 1998). A concern that arises from this societal pressure is the lack of mutual consent, as this belief assumes that men are always interested in having sex, and it is up to the woman to resist (French et al., 2015; Katz et al., 2007; Tamborra et al., 2014).

When asked what negative things might result from using verbal sexual coercion, many boys noted the loss of opportunity to "get with" the girl or losing the relationship. These findings indicate that boys care about maintaining a relationship with their female partner. Many negative outcomes noted were also tied to boys' self-esteem, such as fears of coming off desperate, being

made fun of later, or feeling awkward. Among other things, these concerns may be related to gender role norms that require men to be sexually confident and invulnerable (e.g., Stephens & Eaton, 2014). Engendered societal pressures dictate that men “prove” their masculinity through their sexuality and power in relationships with women (French et al., 2015; Stephens & Eaton, 2014). This pressure is important to consider given that pressures for gender role conformity are particularly powerful during adolescence (Santor, Messervey, & Kusumakar, 2000).

Normative Beliefs

Girls’ normative beliefs. Girls’ assertion that “real” friends would support them in resisting verbal sexual coercion supports research examining the influence of girl’s friendships on IPV outcomes. Close family members—specifically, sisters and mothers—also served as key sources of support for resisting verbal sexually coercive tactics. This is not surprising given that older siblings are often considered a source of relationship advice for their younger siblings (Killoren & Roach, 2014) and that mothers typically lead discussions about sexuality with daughters in Black families (O’Sullivan, Meyer-Bahlburg, & Watkins, 2001). In contrast, most of the girls in this study suggested girls who are “fake” friends and sexually permissive female peers would support them acquiescing to a man using verbal sexually coercive tactics. This also emerged in research by O’Sullivan and Meyer-Bahlburg (2003) in which urban African American and Latina adolescents’ experienced considerable pressure from other girls to engage in sexual activity with boys.

Boys’ normative beliefs. Boys in this study noted that unsupportive peers would be most likely to encourage the use of verbal sexual coercion. This is consistent with work showing that peers play an important role in the development of intimate relationships and the perpetration of dating violence during adolescence (Foshee et al., 2013). Similarly, the finding that close male friends and family members would be supportive of boys verbally coercing girls is consistent with prior research. Jacques-Tiura et al. (2015) found that sexual coercion perpetrators perceived more pressure from their male friends to have sex by any means than non-perpetrators.

Importantly, male participants more easily identified people who would discourage them from using verbal sexual coercion than people who would encourage them to use coercion. Parental figures—primarily mothers and fathers—were the most commonly listed individuals who would discourage the use of coercion, supporting prior research on the importance of Black parental-child conversations about sexual health (Harris, Sutherland, & Hutchinson, 2013).

Control Beliefs

Girls' control beliefs. The prevailing factor influencing whether girls felt they could control a verbally coercive situation was being in a safe context with other individuals. This is consistent with research showing that unsupervised adolescents are more likely to engage in risky sexual behaviors when alone (Borawski, Ievers-Landis, Lovegreen, & Trapl, 2003), and highlights the importance of afterschool programs in urban contexts. First, these programs provide education about intimate relationships, including sexual health knowledge and relationship skills. Second, afterschool programs can decrease opportunities for perpetrators to be alone with girls. In fact, the adult supervision offered through afterschool programs has been linked to decreased sexual activity (Cohen, Farley, Taylor, Martin, & Schuster, 2002).

Perceptions of their partners' appearance and shared emotional bonds were another set of factors influencing girls' perceived ability to resist coercion. This is not surprising given that the more an adolescent feels connected to a potential sexual partner, the more likely they are to accept engaging in risky behaviors with him or her (Renya & Farley, 2006). O'Sullivan, Udell, and Patel (2006) found that urban adolescents engaged in sexually risky behaviors with partners they viewed as familiar or "safe," despite having high rates of HIV knowledge. A study on urban Black adolescents found this occurs, in part, because it serves to increase the relationship connection and improves adolescents' self-image (Helms et al., 2013).

Boys' control beliefs. Control barriers that boys stated would decrease their ability to verbally coerce a girl were similar to those noted by the female participants. In particular, the presence of others or not being in a private space was the most common issue boys reported. However, a guy's ability to use words to get what he wants, and the girl's personality or experience were the next two most common barriers to achieving this, as noted by boys. Boys in the study specifically talked about their ability to be "a good persuader" or be "indirect" in their verbal approaches to get a woman to do more than she wanted.

The next most common barrier to controlling perpetration was the skill and experience of the female partner. A large body of research has focused on the ways in which women can be more empowered and better negotiate their experiences with coercion (e.g., Fair & Vanyur, 2011). However, there is a need to shift from focusing solely on girls' abilities and responsibilities, as it may minimize boys' responsibility for perpetrating IPV.

Future Research

Having uncovered the modal salient beliefs about male-to-female verbal sexual coercion among urban, Black adolescents, researchers can now (a) quantify the extent to which each of these beliefs contributes to verbal sexual coercion behaviors in this population, and (b) develop culturally competent interventions for high school or community settings to change the most impactful and maladaptive beliefs in this population.

Quantifying the Influence of Beliefs

Determining the modal salient beliefs underlying a specific controllable behavior in a population is the first step toward quantifying the impact of these beliefs on actual behavior using a TPB questionnaire (for instructions, see Ajzen, 2016b). The TPB questionnaire assesses features of modal behavioral beliefs, features of modal normative beliefs, and features of modal control beliefs (see the leftmost boxes in Figure 1). The questionnaire also includes direct measures of attitudes, subjective norms, perceived behavioral control, behavioral intentions, and actual behavior. Analyses of a full TPB questionnaire, which is based on modal salient beliefs such as those collected in this article, will reveal the nature and strength of the relationships between these beliefs and attitudes, norms, and perceived behavioral control, as well as the direct and indirect relationships between beliefs and behavioral intentions and behaviors.

For example, a TPB questionnaire developed based on the present study may show that girls' attitudes toward resistance to coercion significantly predict their resistance behaviors in relationships. In addition, the data may show that the strongest predictors of girls' attitudes toward resistance are relationship maintenance beliefs, such as retaining a male partner's respect and the possibility of him ending the relationship (Table 1). This contributes to basic knowledge on Black girls' sexual health because it reveals the factors influencing girl's sexual coercion resistance behaviors, along with suggesting a role for gender, race/ethnicity, and other cultural and interpersonal variables. In addition, knowing the relative contributions of each belief to actual coercion behavior in a population allows researchers to develop interventions to target the most impactful antecedents of behavior for that population (Ajzen, 2011, 2016a).

Developing Culturally Competent Interventions

Again, assuming that relationship maintenance beliefs significantly influence urban, Black girls' verbal sexual coercion resistance, a clear pathway

for increasing healthy resistance among these girls would be to address their relationship maintenance beliefs (Ajzen, 2011, 2016a). For example, sex education efforts in high schools with large populations of urban, Black adolescents could work to undermine the belief that male partners will always end relationships with females who resist. They could also aim to reduce the importance of relationship termination in girls' minds. Finally, high school or community educators could attempt to add new beliefs to adolescents' psychological inventories. For example, educators might help urban, Black girls to see relationship termination in the context of resistance to coercion as a positive outcome. Importantly, by using both participant-derived data and established theory to inform intervention efforts, effort is not wasted attempting to address beliefs that do not exist in the population or that are not meaningful contributors to behavioral outcomes in the population.

Intervention practices modeled around a population's own beliefs are culturally competent in two ways. First, rather than conjecturing about the antecedents of participants' behavior using comparison groups or previous findings, using participants' modal salient beliefs centers the intervention around their subjective and contemporary realities. The risk of practitioners and researchers incorrectly stereotyping participants or otherwise misrepresenting their perceptions is vastly reduced by developing methods and materials based on the modal salient beliefs from that population.

The second way in which interventions such as these are culturally competent is that they attend only to those specific beliefs that are significant predictors of behavior in a population. The relative power of various beliefs in predicting attitudes, norms, perceptions of control, intentions, and behaviors likely varies across groups even if the basic content of these beliefs is highly universal. For example, while both Black and White adolescent girls may hold relationship maintenance beliefs behind their attitudes toward resisting coercion, the impact of these beliefs on attitudes may be significantly stronger for one group than for the other. Attending to those beliefs that are especially impactful for a particular population is a culturally sensitive practice.

It should be noted that some beliefs uncovered through this process may be unique to the population being studied, while others may be similar to those held by participants from different backgrounds. In the present research, for example, our urban, Black male participants reported that their male peers were encouraging of them using verbal sexual coercion (see Table 2). The existence and influence of peer pressure to engage in risky sexual behavior and sexual violence have already been established in many samples of adolescent males (e.g., Potard, Courtois, & Rusch, 2008; Reeves & Orpinas, 2012). However, this apparent commonality could only have been uncovered

using empirical methods. In addition, the exact extent of overlap in verbal sexual coercion beliefs between urban, Black adolescents and other groups, and the relative contributions of each belief to behavior among group members, has yet to be directly tested and is a direction for future research. Given that this is the first study to use TBP methods for examining verbal sexual coercion among Black adolescents, our findings also serve as a foundation for identifying intervention points for potentially similar groups.

It should also be noted that a number of the modal salient beliefs our adolescent participants articulated about verbal sexual coercion were already supportive of low levels of perpetration and high levels of healthy resistance. For example, many girls and boys described their friends and family members as believing that verbal sexual coercion should not be perpetrated and should be resisted. Many of our participants were also already familiar with some negative consequences of sexual coercion, such as acquiring STDs and unwanted pregnancies. Finally, almost half of the boys stated, without prompting, that they did not support the use of verbal sexual coercion. Depending on the relative contribution of each of these beliefs to actual coercion behaviors, all that may be required from educators to reduce coercion in this population is to strengthen and reinforce the healthy beliefs these adolescents already hold.

Limitations

While this study provides foundational information about verbal sexual coercion perpetration and victimization in an understudied group, there are methodological limitations that must be considered. First, it is important to note that this study required participants to report knowledge and beliefs related to sexual health and IPV. When sitting in front of adult interviewers, social desirability bias may have led participants to limit the truthfulness of their responses, omit relevant information, or provide what they viewed as appropriate responses (Spector, 2004). Furthermore, all the interviewers were female, and all self-identified as either Black or Hispanic. Although research suggests interviewers' and interviewees' differing identities can enhance the interview process and increase openness (Few et al., 2003), participant and interviewer gender and racial/ethnic differences could have influenced participants' responses. This would be particularly true when considering the ways in which cross-gender matches could have informed men's willingness to fully share their sexual health beliefs (Waldner-Haugrud & Magruder, 1995). However, other research suggests that male participants—particularly those with high masculinity conformity beliefs—might be less willing to disclose beliefs that conform to masculinity expectations (Randle & Graham, 2011).

Demographic limitations of this sample include the fact that this small sample of adolescents came from a specific community within the southeastern United States. Furthermore, all participants were drawn from community-based afterschool programs; this means that these participants' beliefs and experiences with IPV may be informed by their very participation in the program. Specifically, research has shown that afterschool programs can buffer adolescents from risky behaviors, and provide valuable social skills, particularly when they feature programming specifically addressing community and culture-specific needs (Bulanda & McCrea, 2013; Bulanda, Tellis, & McCrea, 2015). Furthermore, afterschool programs targeting adolescent populations commonly integrate healthy skills training, including skills to address relationship violence (Bulanda et al., 2015; Woodland, 2014). As such, it would be important to tease out in further research how their differing reasons for participating in these groups makes them different or similar to other Black adolescents in the region. Furthermore, although appropriate for qualitative methods (Patton, 2002), this sample size does limit our ability to make broader generalizations to Black adolescents in other regions, communities, and so on.

This study also specifically focused male-to-female verbal sexual coercion. However, some work finds that girls engage in verbal coercion and other verbally aggressive behaviors in intimate relationships at almost the same rate as men (Fair & Vanyur, 2011; Katz et al., 2007; Katz & Myhr, 2008). Exploring the ways in which Black urban boys' victimization and Black urban girls' perpetration is perceived would provide us with more comprehensive knowledge, including this populations' ability and willingness to address this phenomenon in their daily lives. Finally, it would be useful to gather data from urban adolescents who identify as members of other racial/ethnic groups, or from rural Black adolescents. The present data do not speak to the extent to which urban, Black adolescents' beliefs about verbal sexual coercion differ from those of other samples.

Conclusion

This study contributes to our ability to develop theory-driven interventions by identifying culturally relevant behavioral antecedents in a target population. Few studies have empirically examined the influence of community, or youth sub-culture norms and values, on perceptions of, engagement in, and responses to verbal sexual coercion (French & Neville, 2008; Mouzon et al., 2005). As a result, research continues to reinforce broad racial/ethnic group stereotypes by failing to uncover these populations' unique cultural processes, drawing comparisons to middle-class, White college student populations, and focusing primarily on behavioral outcomes.

Furthermore, the present study addresses this gap by using methodologies and drawing upon the literature that validates and centers the experiences of a traditionally marginalized group. Our findings contribute to the diversification of psychological knowledge by uncovering and intervening on the unique attitudes, social norms, and perceptions of Black, urban, heterosexual adolescents that can influence one's willingness to perpetrate verbal sexual coercion (among males) and/or impair one's resistance to verbal sexual coercion (among females). Consequently, results from this study contribute to the field's ability to recognize and address diverse populations' unique experiences with IPV.

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Dionne P. Stephens received her PhD in human development and is currently an associate professor in psychology at Florida International University. Her research agenda involves the study of racial/ethnic minority women's sexual messaging processes in media, familial, and community contexts. This work has been used to explore such health disparity outcomes as Human Papillomavirus (HPV) transmission, intimate partner violence (IPV), and sexual risk taking processes. A mixed methodologist, her publishing record is interdisciplinary as her work is found in journals serving the fields of psychology, public health, and gender studies, including the *Journal of Interpersonal Violence*, *The Journal of Black Psychology*, the *Hispanic Journal of Behavioral Sciences*, *Psychology of Men & Masculinity*, *Women's Reproductive Health*, *Sexuality & Culture*, and others.