

**Sexual Aggression Victimization and Perpetration  
Among Female and Male University Students in Poland<sup>1</sup>**

Paulina Tomaszewska and Barbara Krahe

University of Potsdam, Germany

**Abstract**

This study examined the prevalence of victimization and perpetration of sexual aggression since age 15 in a convenience sample of 565 Polish university students (356 female). The prevalence of sexual aggression was investigated for both males and females from the perspectives of both victims and perpetrators in relation to three coercive strategies, three different victim-perpetrator relationships, and four types of sexual acts. We also examined the extent to which alcohol was consumed in the context of sexually aggressive incidents. The overall self-reported victimization rate was 34.3% for females and 28.4% for males. The overall perpetration rate was 11.7% for males and 6.5% for females. The gender difference was significant only for perpetration. Prevalence rates of both victimization and perpetration were higher for people known to each other than for strangers. In the majority of victimization and perpetration incidents, alcohol was consumed by one or both parties involved. The findings are discussed in relation to the international evidence and the need for tailored risk prevention and reduction programs.

*Key words:* sexual aggression, victimization, perpetration, alcohol, Poland

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<sup>1</sup> Correspondence address: Paulina Tomaszewska, University of Potsdam, Department of Psychology, Karl-Liebknecht-Str. 24-25, D-14476 Potsdam, Germany. E-mail: [ptomasze@uni-potsdam.de](mailto:ptomasze@uni-potsdam.de). The authors gratefully acknowledge the support of Zbigniew Izdebski.

## **Sexual Aggression Victimization and Perpetration Among Female and Male University Students in Poland**

Experiencing and committing sexually aggressive acts affects multiple spheres of human functioning at the individual and the societal level. Researchers have pointed out the negative impact of sexual aggression victimization and perpetration on psychological and physical well-being as well as high-risk sexual behavior for women (Martin, Macy, & Young, 2011) and for men (Peterson, Voller, Polusny, & Murdoch, 2011). Early adulthood is a particular risky period in terms of unwanted sexual experiences (Sinozich & Langton, 2014). For example, it has been shown cross-culturally that young women aged between 18 and 24 were at higher risk of sexual victimization compared with women aged 34 (Jaquier, Fisher, & Johnson, 2011). Most studies on sexual aggression among young adults have been conducted in the United States, focusing on women as victims and men as perpetrators. In a pioneering study by Koss, Gidycz, and Wisniewski (1987) that used behaviorally specific items of the Sexual Experiences Survey (SES) in a nationally representative sample of more than 6,000 college students, 12.1% of females reported having experienced an unwanted sexual contact meeting the definition of attempted rape, and 15.4% reported experiences meeting the definition of completed rape (substance-related or through the use or threat of physical force). Later studies documented similar prevalence rates for completed rape victimization, such as 17.2% (Testa, VanZile-Tamsen, Livingston, & Koss, 2004), or 18.8% (Gross, Winslett, Roberts, & Gohm, 2006). More recent studies have distinguished between substance-related and forcible sexual victimization. For example, in a recent Campus Sexual Assault Study (CSA) with a random sample of almost 5,500 undergraduate women aged between 18 and 25, 8.5% reported having experienced substance-related rape and 3.4% forcible rape since entering college (Krebs, Lindquist, Warner, Fisher, & Martin, 2009). Based on a convenience sample of 496 female college students, Eshelman,

Messman-Moore, and Sheffer (2015) have found that 16.1% of their participants reported substance-related and 4.4% reported forcible sexual victimization, defined as attempted or completed oral, anal, or vaginal penetration since the age of 14 through the exploitation of their incapacitated state or the use or threat of physical force.

Rates of self-reported sexual aggression perpetration among college men are consistently much lower than self-reported victimization rates by women (Kolivas & Gross, 2007; Spitzberg, 1999). In the study by Koss et al. (1987), prevalence rates for men's sexual aggression perpetration were 3.3% for attempted and 4.4% for completed rape. More recent research based on the SES provided similar perpetration rates for completed rape, such as 5% (Abbey, McAuslan, Zawacki, Clinton, & Buck, 2001), or 6.5% (Peterson, Janssen, & Heiman, 2010) since the age of 14. Rates were lower in studies of attempted and completed rape in a shorter period of time, such as the past semester (e.g., 1.3% and 1.6%, respectively in the study by Testa, Hoffman, Lucke, & Pagnan, 2015).

As noted above, the majority of studies examining sexual victimization have focused on women, despite the fact that men can also suffer sexual victimization, both by women and by other men (see Fisher & Pina, 2013, and Rothman, Exner, & Baughman, 2011, for reviews). A more limited number of studies have addressed both females and males as victims of sexual aggression (Banyard et al., 2007; Williams et al., 2014), only male victims (French, Tilghman, & Malebranche, 2015; Weiss, 2010), or females as perpetrators (see Williams, Ghandour, & Kub, 2008, for a review). Acknowledging both females and males as victims has been more common in research conducted in Europe. In a comprehensive review of 113 prevalence studies from 27 countries of the European Union published since 2000, 104 presented data on female sexual victimization and 71 presented data on male victimization (Krahé, Tomaszewska, Kuyper, & Vanwesenbeeck, 2014). Rates of lifetime sexual victimization ranged from 9% to 83% for females and from 2% to 66% for males. Despite this great variability both within and between

the countries and the fact that victimization rates were mostly lower for men than for women, the findings confirm that sexual victimization is also a problem affecting men.

Compared to the extensive body of research in the United States and Western Europe, research on sexual aggression among young people in Poland is rather new, and the evidence so far is limited (Izdebski, 2012; Krahé et al., 2014). Addressing this shortcoming, we sought to examine the prevalence of victimization and perpetration of sexual aggression in heterosexual interactions as reported by Polish university students since the age of 15 (the legal age of consent). Unlike most previous studies from Poland, we concurrently obtained perpetration and victimization reports from both men and women, broken down by victim-perpetrator relationship and sexual acts. We also assessed the extent to which alcohol was involved in the incidents of committed and experienced sexually aggressive acts. Sexual aggression was defined in the current study as any type of behavior that aims at making another person engage in sexual activity against her or his will (Krahé, 2013).

### **Prevalence Studies from Poland on Young People's Sexual Aggression Victimization and Perpetration**

Altogether, we identified 11 studies that presented prevalence data on sexual aggression victimization and/or perpetration among young people in Poland. All of the studies yielded data on sexual victimization - nine for both male and female victims (Dębski, 2011; Doroszewicz & Forbes, 2008; Dünkler, Gebauer, Grzywa, & Kestermann, 2006; Gutkowska, 2011; Institute of Health Psychology, [Instytut Psychologii Zdrowia], 2011; Izdebski, 2012; Krahé et al., 2015; Łukaszek, 2013; Public Opinion Research Center, [Centrum Badania Opinii Społecznej], 2007), two only for women (Czapska, Kloza, Lesińska, & Okrasa, 2012; Gruszczyńska, 2007), no study addressed only men as victims. No more than four studies investigated the perpetration of sexual aggression, all including both gender groups (Doroszewicz & Forbes, 2008; Izdebski, 2012; Krahé et al., 2015; Łukaszek, 2013).

The findings from these studies reveal a wide range of the prevalence and forms of sexual aggression assessed from the victims' and the perpetrators' perspectives. Prevalence rates of victimization ranged from 0.8% (Czapska et al., 2012) to 57% (Doroszewicz & Forbes, 2008) for women and from 3.4% (Düinkel et al., 2006) to 38.6% (Doroszewicz & Forbes, 2008) for men. Perpetration rates ranged from 0% (Krahé et al., 2015) to 41.6% (Doroszewicz & Forbes, 2008) for men and from 0.4% (Krahé, et al., 2015) to 39% (Doroszewicz & Forbes, 2008) for women. The variability is due at least in part to differences in age (high school students vs. university students), type of sample (representative vs. convenience samples), the definition and measurement of sexual aggression, and the time span for which victimization and perpetration are reported.

This heterogeneity underlines the difficulty of arriving at clear conclusions about the extent of sexual victimization among young people and limits the comparability of studies both within and across countries, noted also by Krahé et al. (2014). Moreover, there is a shortage of studies addressing perpetration and the specific nature of sexual aggression, such as the type of coercive strategy used by the perpetrator or the relationship between victim and perpetrator. Furthermore, some studies reported lifetime prevalence rates without specifying a lower age limit, such as the legal age of consent (which is 15 in Poland). This is problematic because it is not clear to what extent the rates reported include incidents of child sexual abuse.

### **Victim-Perpetrator Relationship and the Co-Occurrence of Alcohol and Sexual Aggression**

Although a comparison of prevalence rates from different studies is limited by methodological and sampling differences, clear conclusions can be drawn regarding the most common constellation of victim-perpetrator relationship. As Fisher, Cullen, and Daigle (2005) stated, an important finding from the past two decades of research on violence against women has been that most of the incidents reported were committed not by a stranger, but by a person

known to the victim, such a former or current intimate partner, friend, or colleague (broadly called “acquaintance rape”). This finding is consistent regardless of the definitions and type of samples across both the United States (e.g., Black et al., 2011; Kilpatrick, Resnick, Ruggiero, Conoscenti, & McCauley, 2007) and Europe (e.g., Myhill & Allen, 2002; Santos-Iglesias & Sierra, 2012). Since the available studies from Poland did not collect this information systematically and evidence on the most common victim-perpetrator relationship for different forms of sexual aggression would help to develop tailored prevention approaches, the present study addressed sexual aggression perpetration and victimization in different victim-perpetrator constellations.

A consistent picture is also presented by the international evidence regarding the role of alcohol in the context of sexual interactions in increasing the risk of sexual aggression (Abbey, 2011; Abbey, Zawacki, Buck, Clinton, & McAuslan, 2004). Studies have shown for both the victim and perpetrator perspectives that in about half of the cases of either committed or experienced sexual aggression, both sides had been drinking alcohol (e.g., Abbey et al., 2001; Abbey, Parkhill, Clinton-Sherrod, & Zawacki, 2007). For instance, in a study by Gidycz, Warketin, and Orchowski (2007) with a convenience sample of 425 undergraduate men, 52% of the reported incidents of sexual aggression perpetration involved alcohol use by the perpetrator and 47.3% by the victim. The respective percentage for victimization reports in a study with 500 randomly selected female sorority members was 79% for the victims themselves and 71% for the perpetrator (Copenhaver & Grauerholz, 1991). In a recent German study, 58% of female and 75.6% of male victims reported that both themselves and the perpetrator had been drinking alcohol at the time of the assault. The respective rates of both parties drinking in the context of perpetration were 59.6% for men and 51.4% for women (Krahé & Berger, 2013). A multinational study including both situational alcohol use (drinking in situations when having sex) and general drinking habits found that only situational alcohol use but not general drinking

habits predicted the odds of sexual aggression victimization and perpetration (Krahé et al., 2015). Therefore, the current study specifically asked about alcohol consumption in the context of sexual aggression victimization and perpetration incidents. As has been shown in previous studies, alcohol may impair higher-order cognitive processes and reduce the ability to recognize risk cues, which may explain the link with victimization (Davis, Stoner, Norris, George, & Masters, 2009). On the part of the perpetrator, alcohol consumption may contribute to misinterpreting and misperceiving a partner's signals of consent or nonconsent (see Abbey, Wegner, Woerner, Pegram, & Pierce, 2014, for a review).

### **The Current Study**

In our study, we aimed to assess the prevalence of victimization and perpetration in heterosexual interactions as reported by Polish male and female university students since the age of 15, the legal age of consent. We aimed to extend the existing body of national and international evidence by providing victimization and perpetration data for both genders and to examine the extent of alcohol use in the context of experienced and committed acts of sexual aggression. Addressing the limitations of the available evidence from Poland, such as the lack of systematic information about victim-perpetrator relationship or type of coercive strategy, detailed behavior-specific questions were used to elicit reports of both victimization and perpetration, including three coercive strategies (use or threat of physical force, exploitation of the victim's incapacitated state, and verbal pressure) in different victim-perpetrator constellations (former or current partner, friend or acquaintance, stranger) as well as different sexual acts (sexual touch, attempted and completed sexual intercourse, other sexual activities). In addition, we also assessed whether and by whom alcohol was consumed in the reported sexual aggression and victimization incidents.

Based on the evidence reviewed above, we expected that the rates for sexual victimization would be higher for women than for men and that the rates of perpetration would

be higher for men than for women. Given that past research found that most acts of sexual aggression happen between people who know each other, we expected that more incidents of sexual aggression would be committed and experienced by (ex-)partners, friends, or acquaintances than by strangers. Finally, because of the substantial co-occurrence of alcohol use and sexual assault demonstrated in previous research, we expected that in the majority of incidents alcohol would have been consumed by one or both parties involved.

## Methods

### Participants

The initial sample consisted of 597 second-year university students from two universities in Zielona Góra and Warsaw, Poland. Since the focus of the study was on sexual aggression in heterosexual encounters, two participants who clearly self-identified as homosexual by giving a rating of 7 on the scale ranging from 1 (*heterosexual*) to 7 (*homosexual*) were excluded from the analysis. Twenty participants were excluded because they failed to complete sections of the questionnaire. Ten further participants were excluded because they reported neither consensual nor nonconsensual sexual experience (see also Macdowall et al., 2013). This resulted in a final sample of  $N = 565$  (209 males and 356 females). Demographic characteristics and data regarding sexual experience of the participants are summarized in Table 1.

### Measures

**Sexual aggression victimization and perpetration.** To measure sexual aggression perpetration and victimization, we used the Sexual Aggression and Victimization Scale (SAV-S; Krahe & Berger, 2013) that was inspired by Sexual Experiences Survey (Koss et al., 2007) and successfully employed in a multi-national study that included Poland (Krahe et al., 2015). The SAV-S examines three coercive strategies: (a) the use or threat of physical force (“Has a man/a woman ever made (or tried to make) you have sexual contact with him/ her against your will by threatening to use force or by harming you, e.g. by holding you down?”), (b) the exploitation of

the victim's incapacitated state (e.g., after alcohol use; "Has a man/a woman ever made or tried to make you have sexual contact with him/her against your will by exploiting the fact that you were unable to resist, e.g., after you had had too much alcohol or drugs"?), and (c) the use of verbal pressure ("Has a man/a woman ever made or tried to make you have sexual contact with him/her against your will by putting verbal pressure on you, e.g. by threatening to end the relationship or calling you a failure?"). Each strategy is broken down into three victim-perpetration relationships: (a) former or current partner, (b) friend or acquaintance, and (c) stranger. For each combination of coercive strategy and victim-perpetrator relationship, four types of sexual activity are presented: (a) sexual touch, (b) attempted sexual intercourse, (c) completed sexual intercourse, and (d) other sexual activities, (e.g., oral sex). Parallel items address perpetration (e.g., "Have you ever made (or tried to make) a man/a woman have sexual contact with you against his/her will by threatening to use force or by harming him/her?"), and participants are presented with the gender-appropriate versions (women: male perpetrators and victims; men: female perpetrators and victims). The cross-classification of coercive strategy, victim-perpetrator relationship, and sexual act yields a total of 36 items for the victimization and 36 items for the perpetration part.

Participants were asked to report victimization experiences and perpetration behavior for two time windows: (a) since the age of 15 (the legal age of consent in Poland) up to 12 months ago and (b) within the last 12 months. The two time windows match the reference periods recommended by Koss et al. (2007) and were merged for the calculation of prevalence rates.

Participants indicated for each item whether they had experienced/committed the respective acts *once* (1x) or *more than once* (>1). Participants who endorsed at least one of the response options within at least one of the time windows, were categorized as victims/perpetrators of sexual aggression. Additionally, the option *never* (0) ("I did not experience/engage in any of these actions") was provided. A fixed order was imposed in which the victimization items were

presented before the perpetration items to enable victims of sexual assault to register their victimization experiences first before being asked about potential perpetration behavior. The decision for using a fixed order was based on the ethical consideration that victims should be provided with the opportunity of reporting their victimization experiences before being asked about perpetration behavior.

The Polish version of the SAV-S was developed through careful translation and back translation procedures as described in Krahe et al. (2015). The validity of the SAV-S was addressed through a qualitative interview study with young adults from nine European countries (including Poland) to demonstrate equivalence in the interpretation of the items across countries and gender groups (Krahe et al, in press).

**Situational alcohol consumption.** For each coercive strategy, alcohol consumption in the reported incidents was assessed by placing a general question (“Was alcohol consumed in at least one of the incidents?”) at the end of each item block referring to one of the three victim-perpetrator relationships. Four response options were provided: (a) yes, by me, (b) yes, by the other person, (c) yes, by both of us, (d) no, not at all.

**Sexual experience background.** Several questions referring to participants’ sexual and relationship experiences were asked, namely whether they had ever been in a steady relationship, whether they had sexual experience with and without sexual intercourse, if so, what their age had been at first sexual intercourse, and how many sexual partners they had had in steady and casual relationships. Also, participants were asked to indicate their sexual orientation on a scale ranging from 1 (*heterosexual*) to 7 (*homosexual*).

## **Procedure**

The study was approved by the Research Ethics Commission of the authors’ university and the Bioethics Commission of the University of Zielona Góra. The data was collected between November 2011 and January 2012. The questionnaire was handed out in a pencil-and-

paper version to university students from different faculties during their lectures. The contents of the study were carefully explained to the participants. They were informed that participation was voluntary and that they could terminate the survey at any time without giving reasons. A raffle with 150 book store vouchers was offered as an incentive to participate. A list of professional counselling centers was handed out to all participants at the end of the data collection sessions.

### Results

Overall prevalence rates were established by assigning participants to one of two groups on the basis of their responses to the victimization and perpetration items, respectively: 0 ("no" responses to all victimization/perpetration items for both time windows) or 1 (at least one incident of victimization/perpetration since the age of 15). In addition, specific prevalence rates were calculated for each coercive strategy and victim-perpetrator relationship. The findings for victimization are presented in Table 2, the findings for perpetration in Table 3. The overall *victimization rate* was 34.3% for female and 28.4% for male participants. The gender difference was nonsignificant ( $\chi^2(1, N = 554) = 2.03, p = .16$ ), disconfirming our expectation. The total *perpetration rate* was 11.7% for men and 6.5% for women. In this case, the gender difference was significant,  $\chi^2(1, N = 559) = 4.45, p = .04$ , in line with our prediction. For both men and women, the rates of sexual victimization were significantly higher than the rates of perpetration (men: 28.2% vs. 11.4%; women: 34.3% vs. 6.6%;  $ps < .001$ ). By presenting all participants with both the victimization and the perpetration items of the SAV-S, we were able to analyze whether and to what extent the victimization and perpetration reports co-occurred. The results showed that 7.9% ( $n = 16$ ) of men and 6.3% ( $n = 22$ ) of women reported both victimization and perpetration incidents, 20.3% ( $n = 41$ ) of the male and 28.0% ( $n = 98$ ) of the female sample reported only victimization experiences, and 3.5% ( $n = 7$ ) of the male and 0.3% ( $n = 1$ ) of the female participants reported only perpetration.

### **Prevalence by Coercive Strategy**

Among both women and men, the highest victimization rates were found for the use or threat of physical force (women: 23.1% and men: 20.5%), followed by the exploitation of their incapacitated state (17.6% and 11.7%). The victimization rate was lowest for the use of verbal pressure (11.6% and 5.4%). Because multiple responses were possible across the three coercive strategies, we were unable to test differences between the coercive strategies for significance. Gender differences for each of the three coercive strategies were tested adopting a corrected alpha level  $p < .05/3$ . The gender difference was significant for the verbal pressure category, (11.6% in females and 5.4% in males;  $\chi^2(1, N = 556) = 5.96, p = .02$ ), but nonsignificant for the use or threat of physical force ( $\chi^2(1, N = 556) = 0.50, p = .48$ ) and for the exploitation of the victim's incapacitated state ( $\chi^2(1, N = 558) = 3.55, p = .06$ ).

Perpetration rates reported by men were 5.8% for the use or threat of physical force, 6.3% for the exploitation of the woman's inability to resist, and 3.4% for the use of verbal pressure. The corresponding rates for self-reported perpetration by women were 3.4%, 3.1%, and 1.4%. The gender differences within each strategy were nonsignificant ( $\chi^2(1, N = 560) = 1.88, p = .17$ ;  $\chi^2(1, N = 558) = 3.20, p = .07$ ;  $\chi^2(1, N = 560) = 2.56, p = .13$ , for the use or threat of physical force, exploitation of the victim's incapacitated state, and the use of verbal pressure, respectively).

### **Victim-Perpetrator Relationship Constellations**

As presented in Table 2, a large proportion of victimization incidents reported by both female and male participants involved perpetrators known to the victim, as a former or current partner, friend, or acquaintance. Consistent with our prediction, 25% of women and 21.2% of men reported having experienced at least one sexually aggressive act by a former or current partner, and 17.5% of females and 23.2% of males indicated such experiences with a friend or acquaintance. The corresponding rates for sexual victimization by a stranger were 14.9% for

women and 14.5% for men. Summarizing the categories “(ex-)partner” and “friend or acquaintance”, 31.8% of women and 27.4% of men indicated having been victimized by someone they knew. The differences in frequencies between the three victim-perpetrator relationship constellations could not be tested for the significance because of multiple responses. To test for gender differences within each victim-perpetrator relationship constellation, a corrected alpha level of  $p < .05/3$  tests was applied. Across the different sexual acts, no significant differences between women and men were found in any victim-perpetrator constellation, indicating that the extent to which unwanted sexual experiences within different victim-perpetrator constellations were reported did not differ between men and women ( $\chi^2(1, N = 551) = 1.04, p = .31$ ;  $\chi^2(1, N = 551) = 2.57, p = .11$  for partner or friend/acquaintance, and  $\chi^2(1, N = 549) = 0.02, p = .90$ , for stranger).

Similar patterns were found for the perpetration of sexual aggression (see Table 3). For both men and women, higher frequencies of perpetration were found in relationships with victims known to them than with strangers (former or current partner: 8.7% of men, 5.1% of women; friend, or acquaintance: 6.8% of men, 2.8% of women; stranger: 4.4% of men, 1.4% of women). Altogether, 10.3% of men and 6.3% of women reported having committed at least one sexually aggressive act toward someone they knew. As for victimization, there were no significant gender differences within each relationship category, based on a corrected alpha level of  $p < .05/3$  tests ( $\chi^2(1, N = 559) = 2.86, p = .09$ ),  $\chi^2(1, N = 558) = 5.03, p = .03$ );  $\chi^2(1, N = 557) = 4.67, p = .03$ , for current/former partner, friend/acquaintance, and stranger, respectively). In sum, the findings for both victimization and perpetration support the prediction that sexual aggression is more likely to occur between people known to each other than between strangers.

### **Gender Differences at the Item Level**

Only few significant differences between women and men emerged at the level of single items or for specific sexual acts. Because multiple tests (four specific sexual acts and the overall

category summarizing across these acts) were conducted to test for gender differences at the item level, we adopted a corrected alpha level of  $p < .05/5$ . Significantly more men (8.3%) than women (2.9%) reported experience of unwanted sexual acts other than touching, attempted or completed intercourse from a friend or acquaintance through the threat or use of physical force ( $\chi^2 (1, N = 555) = 8.25, p < .01$ ). As for the sexual victimization by a stranger, more men (6.4%) than women (1.1%) experienced forced sexual intercourse ( $\chi^2 (1, N = 554) = 11.98, p < .01$ ) as well as other sexual activities (6.9% of men and 1.4% of women;  $\chi^2 (1, N = 554) = 11.63, p < .01$ ). Finally, across all coercive strategies, men reported higher victimization rates than women for both completed sexual intercourse and other sexual activities by a friend or acquaintance and a stranger, all  $\chi^2$ s  $p < .001$ . No gender differences emerged at the level of the single items in the perpetration reports.

### **The Role of Alcohol Use**

Table 4 breaks down the reported incidents of victimization and perpetration by alcohol use on behalf of the victim, perpetrator, or both. In 64% of the victimization incidents reported by men, the victim, the perpetrator, or both had been drinking alcohol, the corresponding figure for female victims was 56%. The gender difference was nonsignificant,  $\chi^2 (1, N = 157) = 0.88, p = .35$ . However, victimized men (71.1%) indicated more often than did victimized women (50%) that alcohol had been drunk by them, the perpetrator, or both during incidents involving the use or threat of force ( $\chi^2 (1, N = 114) = 4.58, p < .05$ ). Alcohol consumption by one or both parties was also involved in 70% of the perpetration incidents reported by men and 33% of the incidents reported by women, with the gender differences being nonsignificant, ( $\chi^2 (1, N = 25) = 3.23, p = .07$ ). However, the percentage for women should be interpreted with caution due to the small number of participants in this category ( $n = 5$ ). No further gender differences regarding alcohol use for the respective coercive strategies were found. In both gender groups, it is worth noting that for the perpetration incidents, the number of cases where

only one of the persons involved had been drinking was zero. Overall, the data confirm earlier research showing that alcohol is involved in a large proportion of sexual victimization and perpetration incidents.

### **Discussion**

This study examined the prevalence of sexual aggression perpetration and victimization since the age of 15, the legal age of consent, in a sample of Polish university students, including the role of alcohol consumption in situations in which sexual aggression was experienced and shown. Female and male participants provided self-reports of both victimization and perpetration and indicated whether or not they, the other person, or both had consumed alcohol in the context of the reported incidents. Overall, more than 34% of the female and more than 28% of the male participants reported having experienced an unwanted sexual contact at least once since the age of 15. About 12% of men and 7% of women reported committing a sexually aggressive act at least once since the age of 15. For both genders, the rates of sexual aggression perpetration were lower than the rates of sexual victimization, which is consistent with previous findings (Kolivas & Gross, 2007; Koss, 1993; Krahe & Berger, 2013; Krahe et al., 2015). Other Polish studies obtained similar overall rates of sexual victimization, such as 36.4% for men and 31.3% for women (Izdebski, 2012), 32% for men and 35.4% for women (Łukaszek, 2013) as well as of sexual aggression perpetration, such as 7.3% for men and 6.3% for women (Krahe et al., 2015).

In this study, no difference was found in the overall victimization rates of females and males. This finding is contrary to a large body of evidence that documents higher victimization rates in women than in men (Black et al., 2011; Myhill & Allen, 2002; Weiss, 2010; Williams et al., 2014) and the general assumption that men are less willing to disclose their victimization experiences (Fisher & Pina, 2013). However, several recent studies have found either small or no differences between women's and men's victimization reports (e.g., in Brazil, D'Abreu, Krahe, & Bazon, 2013; in Slovakia, Krahe et al., 2015; in Netherlands, Kuyper et al., 2013); or even

found higher victimization rates in males in some countries (e.g., in Portugal, Germany, and Sweden, Chan, Straus, Brownridge, Tiwari, & Leung, 2008; in Poland, Izdebski, 2012; in Cyprus and Greece, Krahé et al., 2015). Consistent with previous research, men reported higher perpetration rates than did women (Banyard et al., 2007; Krahé & Berger, 2013; Łukaszek, 2013; Williams et al., 2014), however no further gender differences emerged at the level of single items probably because of the small number of participants in the single categories. The present study also revealed that a substantial proportion of participants who reported perpetration behavior also reported victimization experiences, consistent with previous research (Brousseau, Hébert, & Bergeron, 2012; Muñoz-Rivas, Graña, O'Leary, & González, 2009; Williams et al., 2014).

The pattern of reports obtained in the present study regarding coercive strategies indicates that a substantial percentage of participants experienced and committed sexually aggressive acts through the threat or use of physical violence, followed by the exploitation of the other person's incapacitated state (e.g., through alcohol) and the use of verbal pressure. As earlier studies with Polish young adults did not investigate the use of coercive strategies systematically, we cannot relate our results to this body of research. Yet, a study in ten European countries that included Poland (Krahé et al., 2015), which used the same methodology as the present study, showed a similar pattern of responses.

With regard to the victim-perpetrator relationship constellations in both sexual victimization and perpetration, the findings obtained in the present study are highly consistent with the international (e.g., Fisher et al., 2005; Kilpatrick et al., 2007) and national literature (e.g., Dębski, 2011; Czapska et al., 2012). More acts were experienced by, and committed against, a person known to the victim or to the perpetrator in both gender groups. Especially the lack of gender differences in committing sexually aggressive acts toward a former or current partner is in line with a recent study by Doroszewicz and Forbes (2008), who showed that male

and female university students from Poland did not significantly differ in sexual aggression perpetration toward an intimate partner. Moreover, the percentage of women reporting severe sexual coercion toward an intimate partner was high compared to other countries involved in the same multi-national study. In another multi-country comparison based on the same measure as used in the present study, Polish men and women reported similar levels of perpetration, with the highest rate of sexual aggression shown toward a former or current partner, followed by a friend or acquaintance, and a stranger (Krahé et al., 2015). For victimization, some significant gender differences in the detailed comparison of victim-perpetrator relationships revealed that more men than women were made to engage in unwanted sexual intercourse or other sexual activity (e.g., oral sex) by an acquaintance/friend or stranger who threatened or used some form of physical coercion toward them. Altogether, the results regarding the different victim-perpetrator constellations underscore the need for sexual educational or primary prevention programs that raise young people's awareness for respecting sexual boundaries among (new) acquaintances, friends, and intimate partners (Group of Sex Educators Ponton [Grupa Edukatorów Seksualnych Ponton], 2013).

The present study confirms widely established results that many incidents of sexual aggression happen under influence of alcohol (Abbey et al., 2004) and that both the victim and the perpetrator were drinking together more frequently than either the victim or the perpetrator alone (Krahé & Berger, 2013). We found that more men than women indicated that they, their partner, or both had consumed alcohol in the context of physical sexual coercion. Furthermore, men in our sample reported more casual sexual partners than did women. Since the observed gender differences in victimization rates were found for assaults by an acquaintance or stranger (e.g., a person met at party), it might be that men are more likely to engage in sexual contacts arising out of settings in which alcohol is involved. This issue is worth studying in the future in

order to better understand gender differences in Polish young adults' vulnerability for victimization through the use or threat of physical force.

### **Implications for Prevention**

The findings have implications for the societal discourse about young people's sexual health in Poland by highlighting the problem of sexual aggression among university students. They serve to raise awareness that a considerable proportion of young adults report having experienced unwanted sexual contacts or having made another person engage in sexual acts without their consent. In a country where open debate about sexuality, in particular extra-marital sexual activity, is still limited and sexual education does not fulfill the standards of reliable, evidence-based, and non-biased teaching about human sexuality (Waszyńska, Groth, & Kowalczyk., 2013), our findings may help to underline the need for systematic action to promote young people's chances to develop satisfying sexual relationships based on respect for every person's right to sexual self-determination.

Given the prevalence rates of sexual aggression victimization and perpetration reported by male and female university students in our sample, prevention programs to reduce the rates of committing sexually aggressive acts on the part of the perpetrator, but also risk reduction programs that may increase potential victims' awareness of risky situations, are needed (see Krahe, 2013, for a review of research on sexual assault prevention). Programs that address perpetrators could aim to change attitudes, beliefs and social norms condoning sexual aggression. Risk reduction programs could increase individuals' sensitivity to potentially risky situations and promote their interpretation of cues indicating impending risk. Such interventions could for example address the risk of misperceiving an individual's friendly cues as sexual interest (Abbey, McAuslan, & Ross, 1998) or ignoring cues that indicate non-consent (Abbey, 2002). Since alcohol use is a common feature of young people's lifestyle (Chodkiewicz, 2006;

National Institute on Alcohol Abuse and Alcoholism, 2013) and was found to be associated with increased sexual activity, particularly with risky sexual behavior such as having multiple sex partners (see Cooper, 2002, for a review), sexual aggression prevention programs should also address potential risk and vulnerability situations associated with alcohol use in sexual encounters. On the part of the victim, being intoxicated poses a risk of insufficient rejection of unwanted sexual advances (not saying no clearly) and/or a risk of being physically unable to resist effectively (Abbey, 2002).

### **Limitations and Future Directions**

This study has both strengths and limitations. The strengths are that data were collected on the prevalence of sexual aggression among university students in Poland, contributing to the international knowledge base from a country where previous research has been limited. Men and women were asked detailed questions about both victimization and perpetration, enabling us to identify specific constellations of coercive strategies and victim-perpetrator relationships in which sexual aggression is prominent. By asking about the role of alcohol in the reported incidents of sexual victimization and perpetration, we were able to corroborate findings from a large body of evidence from other countries that alcohol plays a critical role in sexual aggression.

At the same time, several limitations of our study have to be noted. First, our findings are based on a convenience sample, and they are not generalizable to Polish university students as a whole. No study with a representative sample of male and female university students in Poland is available with which to compare our results. Thus, there is clearly a need for further data, based on representative samples from the young adult population. Second, close-ended questions were used without giving participants the opportunity to describe an additional experience, or to add more detailed information about the incidents they reported. As some authors have argued that the quantitative approach does not fully represent the meaning and impact of the incident

(O'Sullivan, Byers, & Finkelman, 1998), follow-up studies using qualitative methods would give important insights into the nature of the reported incidents. Third, future studies employing larger samples might want to analyze prevalence rates separately for the two time windows to be able to investigate the issue of potential revictimization and re-perpetration. With a large representative sample, it would also be possible to detect potential differences in the use of specific coercive strategies by male and female perpetrators. A final limitation refers to the focus on heterosexual experiences. Given that individuals reporting both same-sex and opposite-sex sexual contacts have been shown to be particularly vulnerable to sexual aggression (Krahé & Berger, 2013; Rothman et al., 2011), further research is needed to extend the study of sexual aggression among young adults in Poland to include perpetration and victimization among persons of the same sex.

Despite these limitations, this Polish study expands the literature on sexual aggression by providing data from university students on experienced and perpetrated sexual coercion since the age of 15. Our findings were largely consistent with previous national and international evidence. They show that prevention and intervention initiatives are needed to promote young adults' ability to respect their mutual needs and limits and to sensitize them to the potential negative influence of alcohol use in the context of sexual activity.

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Table 1

*Demographic and Sexuality-Related Characteristics of the Sample*

Variable	Men ( <i>n</i> = 209)	Women ( <i>n</i> = 356)	<i>p</i> Difference
Age <i>M</i> ( <i>SD</i> ) <sup>a</sup>	20.8 (0.96)	20.6 (1.10)	<i>p</i> < .05
Range	18-25	19-27	
Steady relationship ever (%) <sup>b</sup>	82.0	91.8	<i>p</i> < .01
Age coital experience, <i>M</i> ( <i>SD</i> ) <sup>a</sup>	17.4 (1.62)	17.7 (1.51)	<i>p</i> < .05
Range	12-21	13-23	
Coital experience ever (%) <sup>b</sup>	84.1	83.5	<i>p</i> = .85
Number of steady sexual partners, <i>M</i> ( <i>SD</i> ) <sup>a</sup>	2.2 (2.02)	1.6 (0.89)	<i>p</i> < .001
Range	0-11	0-5	
Median	2	1	
Number of casual sexual partners, <i>M</i> ( <i>SD</i> ) <sup>a</sup>	2.6 (3.15)	1.1 (1.62)	<i>p</i> < .001
Range	0-15	0-10	
Median	2	1	

<sup>a</sup>Tested via t tests; <sup>b</sup>Tested via chi-square tests.

## SEXUAL VICTIMIZATION AND PERPETRATION IN POLAND 31

Table 2 Lifetime Sexual Victimization Broken Down by Gender, Coercive Strategy, Victim – Perpetrator Relationship and Type of Sexual Activity

%		Coercive Strategy						Overall (at least one ≥1 per row)	
		Use/Threat of Physical Force		Exploitation		Verbal Pressure			
Victim – Perpetrator Relationship	Sexual activity	Women	Men	Women	Men	Women	Men	Women	Men
(Ex-)Partner	Sexual touch	14.5	15.7	7.4	6.8	6.5	3.9	19.3	20.7
	Attempted sex. inter.	11.9	13.2	6.0	3.9	6.3	2.9	16.4	16.0
	Completed sex. inter.	6.8	10.8	3.7	4.9	2.6	2.5	9.2	14.9
	Other (e.g. oral sex)	6.5	10.3	2.0	4.4	2.8	2.0	7.8	13.9
Total (Ex-)Partner		17.3	16.2	9.1	7.3	9.1	4.4	25.0	21.2
Friend/Acquaintance	Sexual touch	9.7	15.6	8.2	7.8	3.1	2.0	14.7	20.7
	Attempted sex. inter.	6.3	11.7	5.4	4.9	2.8	2.0	9.8	15.4
	Completed sex. inter.	4.3	9.8	3.1	6.8	1.1	2.0	6.1***	16.8***
	Other (e.g. oral sex)	2.9**	8.3**	1.7	4.4	1.1	2.0	3.7***	13.4***
Total Friend/Acquaintance		11.7	16.6	10.5	9.2	4.0	3.4	17.5	23.2
Stranger	Sexual touch	8.8	10.8	6.5	4.4	2.0	1.5	12.9	14.0
	Attempted sex. inter.	3.7	6.9	3.4	3.4	1.7	1.5	6.6	9.5
	Completed sex. inter.	1.1**	6.4**	1.4	2.4	1.1	1.5	2.9***	9.0***
	Other (e.g. oral sex)	1.4**	6.9**	1.1	2.9	0.9	1.0	2.3***	9.0***
Total Stranger		9.4	11.3	7.7	4.9	2.8	2.0	14.9	14.5
Total Coercive Strategy		23.1	20.5	17.6	11.7	11.6*	5.4*	34.3	28.4

Note. Gender difference: \* $p < .05$  \*\*  $p < .01$  \*\*\*  $p < .001$ ;  $N = 565$   $N_W = 356$   $N_M = 209$ . The percentages based on at least one Yes since the age of 15. Multiple responses possible Sex. Inter. = sexual intercourse.

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Table 3 Lifetime Sexual Perpetration Broken Down by Gender, Coercive Strategy, Victim – Perpetrator Relationship and Type of Sexual Activity.

%		Coercive Strategy						Overall (at least one ≥1 per row)	
		Use/Threat of Physical Force		Exploitation		Verbal Pressure			
Victim – Perpetrator Relationship	Sexual activity	Men	Women	Men	Women	Men	Women	Men	Women
(Ex-)Partner	Sexual touch	4.9	2.5	3.4	1.7	1.4	0.9	6.8	4.0
	Attempted sex. inter.	3.4	1.1	2.9	1.4	1.9	0.9	5.4	2.8
	Completed sex. inter.	2.4	1.4	2.9	0.9	1.4	0.3	4.9	2.0
	Other (e.g. oral sex)	1.9	0.6	1.5	0.9	1.4	0.3	2.9	1.1
Total (Ex-)Partner		5.3	3.1	4.4	1.7	2.9	1.4	8.7	5.1
Friend/Acquaintance	Sexual touch	3.9	1.1	2.9	1.7	1.0	0.3	5.9	2.6
	Attempted sex. inter.	2.4	0.3	1.9	0.6	1.4	0.3	2.9	0.6
	Completed sex. inter.	1.5	0.6	1.5	0.6	0.5	0.3	2.0	0.8
	Other (e.g. oral sex)	1.5	0.3	1.5	0.6	0.5	0.3	2.0	0.6
Total Friend/Acquaintance		4.4	1.1	3.9	1.7	1.4	0.3	6.8	2.8
Stranger	Sexual touch	1.9	0.8	2.4	0.9	1.0	0.3	3.9	1.4
	Attempted sex. inter.	1.0	0.3	1.5	0.6	1.4	0.3	2.4	0.6
	Completed sex. inter.	1.5	0.3	0.5	0.6	1.0	0.3	2.0	0.6
	Other (e.g. oral sex)	1.0	0.3	0.5	0.6	1.0	0.3	1.5	0.6
Total Stranger		2.4	0.8	2.9	0.9	1.4	0.3	4.4	1.4
Total Coercive Strategy		5.8	3.4	6.3	3.1	3.4	1.4	11.7*	6.5*

Note. Gender difference: \* $p < .05$ ;  $N = 565$   $N_W = 356$   $N_M = 209$ . The percentages are based on at least one Yes response since the age of 15. Multiple responses possible Sex. Inter. = sexual intercourse.

Table 4

*Alcohol Consumption by Victims and Perpetrators in the Context of Sexual Aggression*

%	Alcohol use	Physical force incidents		Exploitation incidents		Verbal pressure incidents		Total	
		Men	Women	Men	Women	Men	Women	Men	Women
		Victims	<i>None</i>	28.9	50.0	27.8	15.7	33.3	48.5
	<i>Only self</i>	2.6	1.3	11.1	0.0	0.0	6.1	2.0	0.9
	<i>Only partner</i>	7.9	3.9	0.0	3.9	11.1	12.1	6.0	6.5
	<i>Both</i>	60.5	44.7	61.1	80.4	55.6	33.3	56.0	48.6
Perpetrators	<i>None</i>	12.5	60.0	33.3	50.0	50.0	40.0	30.0	66.7
	<i>Only self</i>	0.0	0.0	0.0	0.0	0.0	0.0	0.0	0.0
	<i>Only partner</i>	0.0	0.0	0.0	0.0	0.0	0.0	0.0	0.0
	<i>Both</i>	87.5	40.0	66.7	50.0	50.0	60.0	70.0	33.3

*Note.* Men  $n = 50$ ; Women  $n = 107$