

Barbara Krahe, University of Potsdam, Germany

Preventing Sexual Aggression among College Students: An Online Intervention Study

Project funded by the German Research Foundation (1 June 2018 – 31 May 2021).

Summary

Sexual aggression is a widespread problem among young people, with about one in five women and a lower, yet substantial proportion of men reporting experiences of sexual contact against their will. However, there is a lack of effective, evidence-based prevention programs.

The proposed project will develop and evaluate an intervention program to prevent sexual aggression perpetration and victimization among university students. Based on past research on prevalence and risk factors of sexual aggression, the program will include first-year students starting university in the academic year 2018/19 and follow them over two follow-up data waves at the end of their first year (+ 8 months) and second year (+ 20 months) of study.

The theory-based intervention centers on changing sexual scripts for consensual sex, as these cognitive representations have been shown to increase the risk of sexual aggression, defined as sexual contact against a person's will. Sexual scripts are considered risky to the extent that they contain established risk factors of sexual aggression, including alcohol use, ambiguous communication pattern and casual sexual contacts, which inform sexual behavior. In addition, the intervention will address sexuality-related cognitions and behaviors (sexual self-esteem, acceptance of sexual aggression, and sexual assertiveness) and address the use and perceived realism of pornography.

These elements will be addressed in six modules presented at weekly intervals in an online format, with a baseline assessment, a post-intervention assessment a week after the intervention and two follow-ups at the end of the first and second year of study. The intervention group will be compared to a non-treated control group at each wave. Reducing the odds of sexual aggression victimization and perpetration are the critical outcome variables.

The project adopts a gender-inclusive approach by considering males and females in both victim and perpetrator roles and tailoring the intervention to participants' sexual orientation. By combining an experimental evaluation with a longitudinal design, it is possible not only to assess the efficacy of the intervention but also to evaluate hypotheses about the causal impact of the risk factors targeted by the intervention on the probability of sexual aggression victimization and perpetration.