

Sexual Assault Among Diverse Populations of Women
MEZCOPH Summary
June 24, 2010

Abbey, A., Jacques-Tiura, A., & Parkhill, M.R. (2010). Sexual assault among diverse populations of women: Common ground, distinctive features, and unanswered questions. H. Landrine & N. Russo (Eds.) Handbook of diversity in feminist psychology (pp.391-425). NY: Springer Publishing Co.

Chapter Overview

Sexual assault affects all women regardless of ethnicity, class, health status, or sexual orientation. Assumptions should not be made based on aspects of women's identity such as sexual orientation or ethnicity because women may respond differently to sexual assault victimization based on their own histories and resources. Women's culture and life experiences may influence the meaning of sexual assault victimization and how they recover.

This chapter examined unique challenges, characteristics, and consequences of sexual assault victimization that women from diverse backgrounds face. The chapter is divided into the following sections: African American women, American Indian and Alaskan Native women, Latinas, Asian American and Pacific Islanders, women living in poverty, women with disabilities, and lesbian and bisexual women. Each section includes a review of empirical research, unique challenges, treatment implications, and a table that summarizes studies that included prevalence rates among each population. Research studies chosen for the literature review are those that contributed the greatest amount of current knowledge about sexual assault victimization among women from diverse backgrounds. Limitations included difficulty in forming conclusions based on limited literature and conceptualizations of sexual assault victimization and measures vary across studies. Conclusions and recommendations for future research are discussed.

The following paragraphs briefly describe the unique challenges and review of literature for women from each population.

African American Women

Unique Challenges

- Researchers should consider American's history of slavery and racism to better understand responses to sexual assault victimization
- Stereotypes may endorse and depreciate African American victims

Literature Review

- More likely than White women to be victims of sexual assault
- More likely than White women to wait to tell anyone about assault for several years
- More likely than White women to attribute assault responsibility to their riskiness of living environment
- Less likely to report that a friend or family member's responses to their assault were supportive
- Common long term effects included: fear, anxiety, depression, and avoidance of sex

American Indians (AI) & Alaskan Natives (AN)

Unique Challenges

- Great diversity in cultural traditions among different groups of American Indians/Alaskan Natives
- Have a history of marginalization
- High rate of interracial rape experienced among AI/AN women compared to women of other ethnicities
- Traditional beliefs may reduce sexual assault disclosure
- Mistrust of criminal justice system
- Frequently seek services from traditional health care and spiritual providers

Literature Review

- Rates of rape across tribes may vary
- Predictors of rape may include being separated, divorced or cohabitating, childhood emotional abuse, physical neglect, sexual abuse, and alcohol dependence
- Women who spent more of their life off the reservation were more likely to be raped

Latinas

Unique Challenges

- 38% of Hispanics living in the United States are born in another country
- Cultural norms may discourage Latina sexual assault victims from disclosing an assault
- Cultural norms may also serve as protective factors (e.g. being discouraged to date until late adolescence)

Literature Review

- 10% of Hispanic women aged 18 to 39 have been sexually assaulted
- Common responses to sexual assault were anger, depression, anxiety, fear, guilt, and dishonor
- Just as likely to report being assaulted to the police as White women
- More likely to discuss an assault with a therapist than non-Hispanic women
- 29% of U. S. born women had been sexually assaulted by an intimate partner compared to 20% of migrant workers and 12% immigrant women
- Sexual victimization was higher among women who were divorced, separated, or never married
- Low rates of partner sexual assault victimization reported by immigrant women may reflect fear due to legal consequences of reporting

Asian American & Pacific Islanders

Unique Challenges

- Great diversity among ethnic groups of Asian Americans & Pacific Islanders
- Most ethnicities have unique cultural traditions, but collectivist orientation
- Women's modesty and restrained sexually are valued and social norms restrict sex to marriage
- Women may not disclose assault victimization because their culture discourages discussions of sex and emphasizes chastity before marriage

Literature Review

- 60% of women had been forced to have sex with husbands against their will
- Often first forced to have sex on wedding night

- Responses to assault were emptiness, loneliness, and objectification
- Husbands in South Asian culture dictate control over women's reproduction

Women Living in Poverty

Unique Challenges

- 15% of women in the U.S. live in poverty
- Women with disabilities are 2 times as likely to live in poverty
- 40% of the homeless are women
- Americans have negative attitudes about those living in poverty and homelessness
- More likely to live in neighborhoods and have jobs that increase risk for victimization

Literature Review

- Many studies sample women living in subsidized housing and/or shelters
- 58% of women had been raped since age 14
- 77% had experienced some type of sexual assault including rape
- 45% living in low-income housing had been raped since age 14
- Sexual assault victimization was correlated with frequency of criminal victimization and sexual harassment
- 9% reported they had been sexually assaulted in the past 30 days
- Risk factors include: sleeping outdoors, dependency on drugs, obtain income from selling drugs or sex, schizophrenia, and physical limitations

Women with Disabilities

Unique Challenges

- 15% of women in the United States have a disability
- Often perceived as asexual, unfeminine, passive, dependent, and oblivious to pain
- Women who disclose victimization are often not believed
- Those who live in institutional setting are at high risk of repeated sexual abuse from staff
- Unwilling to disclose victimization by caregivers because of concerns of finding alternative care
- Those with cognitive impairments often unable to recognize perpetrator manipulative strategies

Literature Review

- More likely to be sexually assaulted by a caregiver or service provider
- More likely to be assaulted in their home
- Less likely to tell a family member or friend about victimization
- 40% have been sexually abuse during their lifetime
- 11% reported being touched sexually in an unwanted way by a caregiver
- Sexual abuse went on for a longer period of time compared to abuse experienced by women without disabilities

Lesbian and Bisexual Women

Unique Challenges

- Targets of sexual assault victimization because of their sexual orientation
- May be more willing to disclose past sexual abuse than heterosexual women

- Stereotypes about women being nonviolent may cause researchers to ignore abuse within lesbian relationships
- Measures of sexual assault victimization developed to document women's experiences with male partners

Literature Review

- 22% of lesbian and bisexual women reported being assaulted by a stranger compared to 5% of heterosexual women
- Rape victimization 2 times as high compared to heterosexual women
- Report higher rates of sexual violence and most violence was perpetrated by men
- Survivors of sexual assault may not want to disclose sexual orientation to service providers

Implications for Practice

- Service providers should be educated & understand client cultural norms & traditions.
- Service providers should partner with providers from other cultures to better meet survivors' needs.
- Provider standard procedures should be modified to increase utilization of services by women from diverse backgrounds.
- Shelters should provide culturally appropriate foods & grooming supplies.
- Service providers should be aware that Western presumptions about individualism, self-determination, open communications, and how women display emotions may conflict with other cultures.

Recommendation for Future Research

- Assess characteristics and consequence of sexual assault victimization among diverse groups of women
- Use qualitative and quantitative methods
- Develop and use new survey research methodologies
- Conduct longitudinal studies
- Establish collaborations between researchers with different areas of expertise
- Consider multiple aspects of diversity
- Advocate to end sexual violence