

MASOC PRACTICE UPDATE: Prevention and Progress



MAY 2021 MASOC NEWSLETTER By Joan Tabachnick and David Prescott

Factors Predictive of Sexual Violence: Testing the Four Pillars of the Confluence Model

BOTTOM LINE

The successful identification of risk factors for sexual violence can be used to develop more accurate assessments and more effective interventions for both large groups as well as individually tailored interventions.

RESEARCH

This study examined the four pillars of the Confluence Model in a sample of 1,148 traditional aged and diverse college and university males. Using a modified version of the Sexual Experiences Scale Short Form Perpetration the authors were able to include students who perpetrated a variety of noncontact and contact sexually coercive and sexually aggressive acts which were not reported or convicted of any crime.

The Confluence Model, developed and championed by Neil Malamuth, was the first model to present an empirical framework that integrates multiple factors for men likely to commit some form of sexual aggression. Beyond simply being a list of risk factors for sexual violence, the Confluence Model was among the first to explain how these risk factors interact. Knowledge of these interactions can aid our understanding and efforts to prevent and respond to sexual violence perpetration.

- The first pillar, the core of the model, emphasizes the synergistic properties of certain core risk factors (e.g., more significant risk when they both are working together) between Impersonal Sex (IS) and Hostile Masculinity (HM). IS can evolve out of growing up in an abusive or violent home environment, a pattern of delinquent behavior, or a peer group that supports a detached attitude towards sexual relations. HM includes a personality profile that combines two inter-related components of 1) a narcissistic, insecure, and hostile-distrustful orientation combined with 2) sexual gratification through controlling or dominating the women they are with.
- The second pillar emphasizes that general risk factors such as psychopathy will affect various types of anti-social behaviors will also affect sexual aggression.
- The third pillar is a framework of male dominance and hostility. It is based on feminist theories that similar risk factors may predict various hostile forms of dealing with conflict with women.

- The fourth pillar includes secondary risk factors that can influence the core factors of HM and IS such as participation in alcohol parties, extreme pornography use, and perceived peer support for sexual aggression. Empathy was also included as a factor that may inhibit aggression.

The results showed empirical support for all four of the Confluence Model pillars. They found that the interaction of IS and HIM predicted self-reported sexual violence. They also found general support for the second pillar and suggested that the antisocial component of the model may be more relevant to relative extreme acts of sexual violence. They found support for the third pillar, reflecting that a general hostile orientation for how some men interact with women, especially during sexual conflict. And the data supported an expanded version of the model in the fourth pillar, which included factors with two-way effects between empathy, peer approval and alcohol parties, especially when interacting with HM. These factors plus extreme pornography use were found to have a contribution to the predictive model.

In summary, the elaborated Confluence Model was able to account for 49% of the variance and 37% of the variance using the “core” components. This compares to using three components of another model (the Dark Triad, which looks at psychopathy, Machiavellianism and Narcissism) which accounted for only 14% of the variance. The use of empirical findings such as these is critical to the development of better assessment and more effective interventions.

IMPLICATIONS FOR PROFESSIONALS

Understandably, professionals who enter the field of assessing, and treating sexually abusive behaviors seek out and employ the best available risk assessment measures. As this article demonstrates, it is not enough to simply measure the number of risk factors present in the life of a late adolescent or young adult; it is vitally important to understand how these risk factors interact with each other and within different situations. This paper goes a long way to explaining how professionals can conceptualize their cases.

For those grappling with sexual assault on college and university campuses, this paper demonstrates the complexities involved. Just as it can be easy to assume dangerousness among those who are not actually at high risk to abuse, it can also be easy to overlook some areas of a person’s functioning, that will increase an individual’s risk substantially. Ultimately, the work of Malamuth and his colleagues, which spans several decades, reminds us of the need to approach assessments and decision-making carefully and impartially, with an awareness that the factors contributing to sexually abusive behaviors are more than a simple checklist.

IMPLICATIONS FOR THE FIELD

Understanding the Confluence Model does take some time and effort. It is built on and confirmed by a large body of scientific study spanning decades. At the same time, its complexity highlights the need for further research that which can help professionals apply this knowledge more accurately, reliably, and systematically. The nuanced interaction of risk factors (for example, hostility towards women combining with being willing to act on that hostility within certain situations) is one reason why professionals need empirically based tools when making decisions about an individual’s risk and ability to live safely in a community.

CITATION:

Malamuth, N.M., Lamade, R.V., Koss, M.P., Lopez, E., Seaman, C., & Prentky, R. (2021). Factors predictive of sexual violence: Testing the four pillars of the Confluence Model in a large diverse sample of college men. *Aggressive Behavior*. 2021: 1-16. DOI: 10:1002/ab.21960.

ABSTRACT

This article focuses on the characteristics of sexually violent men who have not been convicted of a crime. The objective of this study was to test the four key interrelated pillars of the Confluence Model. The first key pillar posits the interaction of Hostile Masculinity and Impersonal Sex as core risk predictors. The second pillar entails a “mediated structure” wherein the impact of more general risk factors is mediated via those specific to aggression against women. The third pillar comprises a single latent factor underlying various types of sexual violence. The fourth pillar expands the core model by including the secondary risk factors of lower empathy, peer support, extreme pornography use, and participation in alcohol parties. An ethnically diverse sample of 1,148 male students from 13 U.S. colleges and universities completed a comprehensive survey that assessed the hypothesized risk factors and self-reported sexual violence, which included noncontact sexual offenses, contact sexual coercion, and contact sexual aggression. A series of multiple regression analyses were conducted before testing structural equation models. The results supported the integration of the four pillars within a single expanded empirical model that accounted for 49% of the variance of sexual violence. This study yielded data supporting all four key pillars. These findings provide information about nonredundant risk factors that can be used to develop screening tools, group-based and individually tailored psychoeducational and treatment interventions, and mental health programs that are responsive to the needs of this community.