

Narcissism linked to sexual assault perpetration in college, study finds

March 29 2016, by Leigh Beeson

Almost 20 percent of college men have committed some kind of sexual assault, and 4 percent have committed rape, according to a study published by University of Georgia researchers who were examining the link between different kinds of narcissism and the perpetration of sexual assaults.

The study found a strong connection between pathological narcissism and sexual assault perpetration through a survey of 234 male university students, mostly in their first and second years of college. Its findings related to perpetration rates were mostly consistent with previous studies, said the study's lead author Emily Mouilso, a clinical assistant professor in the Franklin College of Arts and Sciences' psychology department.

People who demonstrate characteristics of pathological narcissism have difficulties when it comes to relating to others, Mouilso explained.

Non-pathological narcissism, on the other hand, can be somewhat beneficial because it manifests in high self-esteem and makes it easier for people to shake off failures, study co-author Karen Calhoun said, explaining that it's what some researchers call the "healthy" form of narcissism.

"As we predicted, the aspects of narcissism that we thought would be related were (related)—the lack of empathy, the entitlement aspects of narcissism," Mouilso said.

What surprised them was the link between vulnerable narcissism and rape perpetration.

Vulnerable narcissists express high levels of self-esteem but are actually very insecure, Mouilso said.

The study found that men with vulnerable narcissistic traits were more likely to use alcohol or other date-rape drugs to incapacitate their victims, a finding that is especially concerning on a college campus, Mouilso said.

"I think people don't realize how prevalent drinking is" in colleges, said Calhoun, a professor emerita in the psychology department. "It's not so much how much they drink total for women that makes them vulnerable; it's how much they drink at a time, the binge drinking, the getting drunk and just not being alert and aware of their surroundings or the risks involved. That really puts women at risk."

Mouilso and Calhoun explained their results in the context of the theory that there are two general pathways that frequently lead to perpetration.

"If the end product is perpetration, there's more than one kind of profile that would make you more likely to perpetrate a sexual assault," Mouilso said. "One of those streams is promiscuity—so people who have higher levels of sexual interest and more frequent sexual partners, they're more OK with impersonal sex. That's one stream of risk factors.

"The second path is the hostile masculinity path. That has more to do with how you look at women, so having a hostile and angry orientation toward women in general and thinking that relationships are adversarial ... it's more about, what can I get out of this person that I want? I don't really care all that much about what they want."

She explained that people can be high or low on factors in both of those tracks, but if a person has both of them together, it makes that person much more likely to perpetrate a sexual assault, according to current theory.

Narcissists feel a sense of entitlement to anything they want, something that makes it easier for them to rationalize their aggressive and sometimes illegal behaviors, Mouilso said.

Many previous studies have used incarcerated sex offenders as their sample pool, which makes it more difficult to generalize results to other populations. Mouilso and Calhoun's sample of college men is fairly representative of large Southeastern university male populations.

Often the view of college men tends to be an old-fashioned, "boys will be boys" attitude when it comes to acts of sexual aggression, Mouilso said.

"I just don't think that that's accurate," Mouilso said, "so this research helps to shed light on some of the commonalities in the personality profile between men who end up in prison and men who are walking around because they haven't been caught."

The idea that most sexual assault perpetrators are strangers who grab women in dark alleyways isn't accurate, Mouilso said.

"It's less likely to be a stranger who jumps out of the bush," she said. "It's more likely to be someone you know like the guy sitting next to you in your intro psych class."

The societal belief in "stranger danger" puts people at risk because they are looking for the deranged person on the corner rather than at the individuals in their lives who have much greater access and opportunity

to perpetrate, the researchers said.

Studies of non-incarcerated perpetrators are useful in developing prevention programs that could give women a more accurate idea of what to look out for.

Although the percentage of college men who committed [sexual assaults](#) is unsettling, the findings suggest that it's a "small percentage of men who are doing most of" the assaults, something that gives the researchers hope, Calhoun said.

"If we could identify them and intervene in some way, that would give you some better hope of preventing it," she said.

The study, "Personality and Perpetration: Narcissism Among College Sexual Assault Perpetrators," is published in the journal *Violence Against Women*.

More information: E. R. Mouilso et al. Personality and Perpetration: Narcissism Among College Sexual Assault Perpetrators, *Violence Against Women* (2015). [DOI: 10.1177/1077801215622575](https://doi.org/10.1177/1077801215622575)

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