

A Mixed Methods Study of Coerced First Sex in Young Adults from Cebu, Philippines

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Introduction

The first sexual experience is considered a landmark event and usually connected with other major transitions in an individual's life including marriage, childbearing, and parenthood. It is also an event where sexual coercion can take place. The 2008 Philippines National Demographic and Health Survey estimated among women aged 15-49, about 4 percent of first sexual intercourse was against their will or forced. The percentage is higher still among women who had first sex before age 15 (14.7%) and those who had first sex before first marriage or cohabitation (6.7%) (NSO & ICF Macro, 2009). The 2002 survey Young Adult Fertility Sexuality Survey also found that among Filipino youth aged 15-24 who had premarital sex, about two percent happened against their will (Natividad & Marquez, 2004). The percentage is higher among females (about 4 percent) compared to males (only about one percent). Clearly, nationally representative survey data among Filipinos showed that coerced first sex is more likely to happen to females compared to males.

This study focuses on young men and women from Metro Cebu, in the Central Visayas region of the Philippines. Cebu is the country's second largest metropolitan area with a population of more than 2 million people. Metro Cebu is the study site for the Cebu Longitudinal Health and Nutrition Survey (CLHNS), an ongoing longitudinal study of women and their children, which was started in 1983. A prior quantitative study using the CLHNS (Upadhyay, Hindin and Gultiano 2006) found that men and women differed in their timing and tempo of initiation into emotional relationships (crush, courtship, romantic relationship, dating) and physical expressions leading to first sex (holding hands, kissing, petting, sexual intercourse). Men usually experience earlier onset and quicker tempo of these emotional relationships and physical behavior (including sexual initiation) compared to females. A more recent study using both quantitative and qualitative data (Gipson et al. 2012) also found differing motivations and experiences between men and women regarding first sex. For instance, compared to men, women were more interested in maintaining virginity and postponing sex until after marriage. This might be due to more severe negative consequences of loss of virginity and premarital pregnancy for women. These gender differentials in first sex experiences may contribute to our understanding of the gender differential in the experience of first sex coercion.

The present study aims to explore the characteristics of sexual coercion, and to understand gender differences, based on narratives found in interviews of men and women from Metro Cebu.

Methods

This work is the second phase of a larger study conducted by Gipson et al. (2013). The Systematic Anomalous Case Analyses (SACA) identified four groups of “anomalous cases” from quantitative models predicting time to first sex and number of living children using data from the Cebu Longitudinal Health and Nutrition Survey, an intergenerational and longitudinal study conducted in the Philippines (Gipson et al., 2014; Adair and Popkin, 2001; Pearce, 2002). These groups were: 1) young adults whose sexual debut occurred earlier than the model predicted, 2) young adults whose sexual debut occurred later than the model predicted, 3) young adults who had less than predicted fertility, and 4) young adults who had more than the predicted fertility. Respondents with values approximately two or more standard deviations above mean zero were considered anomalous cases.

Eight respondents (four male and four female) were randomly selected from each group of anomalous cases for in-depth interviews. For each model, we also randomly sampled eight normative respondents (four male and four female) whose residual values were approximately zero. These normative respondents were interviewed in order to better understand cases in which the models were highly predictive of age at first sex and fertility. In total 48 in-depth interviews were conducted with 24 male and 24 female respondents from August 2013 to January 2014.

A field guide was developed to explore in greater detail components of young adults' lives that would:

1) complement previous quantitative survey questions including educational aspirations, perceptions regarding religion's influence, and sexual and contraceptive decision-making and 2) to explore aspects of young adult lives that were not explored previously in quantitative surveys (e.g., engagement in same-sex and opposite-sex behaviors, etc.).

Analysis

All interviews were audio recorded, transcribed, and translated from Cebuano to English. Transcripts were imported into QSR NVivo software (2010) for initial analysis and coding. A coding scheme was developed using an iterative method and based on review of interview transcripts. Initially, two researchers independently coded a set of the same transcripts to ensure coding consistency and to make any needed changes to the coding scheme. Each coder coded a set of transcripts independently, as well as a set of transcripts that were double-coded as a means of checking coding consistency. The transcripts are being analyzed using a constant comparative method in which dominant themes are identified across transcripts, coding sorts are constructed by compiling similar pieces of narrative according to these dominant themes, and memos are created to explore the range and exceptions to these themes (Glaser, 1965).

Out of the 48 in-depth interviews, we identified those interviews that reported sexual coercion during first sex. We then analyzed specific parts of the transcripts dealing with sexual coercion using the constant comparative method.

Results

Among the 48 in-depth interviews, five contained narratives of sexual coercion during first sexual intercourse. Three of these narratives were from female respondents and only one was from a male respondent. This was also indicative of the greater likelihood of coerced first sex to be reported among females than among males. Two of the featured narratives (Female Narratives 1 and 2) were from female respondents identified in the SACA sampling as anomalous in terms of sexual debut occurring earlier than the quantitative model predicted. The third female narrative was from a respondent identified as normative in terms of the predicted number of children, while the fourth female narrative was from a woman identified as having more children than predicted by the quantitative model. The only male narrative was from a respondent identified as normative in terms of the predicted age at first sex.

Observed Narratives

Female Narrative 1:

The respondent had sexual debut at around 23 years old with the man who became her first cohabiting partner. She was not sure about the exact time of her first sexual experience since her partner tried to have sex with her several times but his penis repeatedly failed to erect.

I: Then you agreed to it?

R: I was just forced.

I: Ah you agreed?

R: I didn't know that time. It was long ago.

I: How many years have passed?

R: 10 years ago.

I: How old are you now?

R: Around 2006... around seven years ago.

I: Yes seven years ago. So that was your first sex?

R: I cannot say that it was my first, I don't know.

I: Why?

R: Nothing... you know why? It malfunctioned.

I: What do you mean?

R: It did not erect

There was one time, however, when she was drunk and when he tried to have sex with her it was painful.

R: The last one was painful.

I: What?

R: Painful, but I didn't know if it went inside. It was just painful.

I: How did he tell you?

R: I was drunk, I was sleeping because I was drunk. I was drinking inside the boarding house, but he wasn't drinking. I didn't know.

I: No romancing?

R: Nothing, it was just painful. He was more into kissing. If we go more than that, it will not erect. I don't know what's wrong with him. We are just of the same age, I mean he is younger than me by one year. Maybe he was very nervous.

I: Hmmmm

R: We were both first timers. That's why.

I: So you didn't enjoy?

R: I don't want to marry him, because I do not enjoy doing it with him. (laughs) I never enjoyed what we did.

R: I had run away from home that time. I was drunk, then he arrived at the boarding house. That was it. It's not that we were sharing first our problems, like having a drama. Nothing, that was it. He took the chance. Not that (murmuring) I don't know, I forgot if it got inside me or not, because I know that he has a small penis.

Despite the fact that she did not want to marry him, they cohabited for two years after their first sexual intercourse. Her second relationship lasted for about a year. Her current cohabiting partner was her third boyfriend. She still remained childless.

Female Narrative 2:

The respondent had her first sex at around age 23, with her current partner. Before this she only had one boyfriend, when she was aged 19 or 20. The guy was 34 years old and they went on dates but never had sex. Her sexual debut was with her current partner who was described by her as an "old man" but a person that she liked.

R: It was just that I really liked him during that time. I was also just blinded by him at that time. (laughs)

The old man was a widower, in the forties at the time of her sexual debut, with one child. He was a seaman and described as relatively affluent, compared to her family, which was not well off. Her father was a trisikad (tricycle) driver and she described their family as poor. She only finished elementary schooling. This disparity in social status, experience and education was a significant feature of her first sexual experience.

I: What were the circumstances?

R: It was just that I really liked him during that time. I was also just blinded by him at that time. (laughs)

I: How did it happen, where did you do it?

*R: He has a car, and he invited me to go to the mall to buy some clothes. I also went with him because we were **uyab**. I was just puzzled that he did not bring me to the mall, and instead he brought me to a hotel.*

I: Where?

R: There at Queensland, near SM [a mall].

I: Ah, there at SM? That's far.

R: Yes, there only. And it would not be good for me to scream. He might think that I was very naïve. I have not experienced anything like that yet. I did not know anything, and then I would run, that would be very embarrassing.

I: And then he took you there? You did not know?

R: I really did not know, I just thought that he had some concern. I was not used to such elegant places. While he was very used to elegance, I did not know anything.

I: So what did you do?

R: I just cried.

I: There inside?

R: Yes. He told me to go on and shout, and it would be very embarrassing, and they would just laugh at me. I really had no knowledge about that, I just cried hard, I just cried.

I: And then?

R: I told him that I would tell my mother what he did to me (laughs). I kept telling him that. And so he told me why would I be afraid, when if ever I would get pregnant, he will marry me. Even if I would not get pregnant, he told me not to worry because he will really marry me. But it also did not mean that he would immediately marry me. He told me that we need to save up some money for that. He told me that he has already experienced being married, while I have not experienced that yet. He said that marriage is not an easy thing that you could just go into.

I: So when that happened that he brought you inside a hotel, what did you feel at that time?

*R: I was nervous at that time, I was very nervous. I thought that he would really **kuan** me. And I also accepted him because I loved him. That's why I did not resist.*

I: So while you were nervous, you still consented?

R: Yes. I also consented because I really loved him. I just cried. I could not do anything but cry.

I: So you really loved him? You really liked him a lot at that time?

R: Yes, I really liked him very much at that time.

I: How many months was your relationship when he brought you there?

R: Almost one year. Yes, he is a well-respected man, because he is educated. He is a graduate of Nautical Engineering. As for me, I had nothing. He is very different.

At the time of the interview, about seven years later, he was still her boyfriend and they had regular sexual intercourse, but there were no talks of marriage or having a child.

He also did not tell me that he already wanted to have a child with me. He also did not tell me that we should already live together. That's why I thought that if ever we would live together we would just rent a place. But he never really told me that. That's why I also thought of that.

I: That's why you had doubts?

R: That's why I had doubts, because he never told me. And besides, we only seldom see each other.

*I: But when you see each other, you will **kuan**?*

*R: Yes, we really **kuan** every time.*

She reported that she was not accepted by his family (parents and siblings) and even by his child, who all thought that she was only after his money, although in fact she was currently working at an export company and had her own money to spend for herself. She currently had plans of marriage but was still waiting for her boyfriend to decide.

R: I wanted to get married when I would be over twenty years old. If I am already more than 20 years old, I would get married hopefully to someone who would take me seriously. But it never happened. My current boyfriend doesn't have plans to marry me. I just keep on waiting.

Female Narrative 3:

She had sexual debut at around age 15, after graduating from high school and was already working. Before her first sexual experience she had only one previous boyfriend. Her sexual debut happened at Christmas time about 6 months into her relationship with her boyfriend. She went to his house to celebrate and began drinking with their circle of friends. She became very drunk. Her boyfriend told their friends that he would let her sleep there in his house that night because she was very drunk. The friends left and she was alone with him at his house, because his mother and his brothers were all outside having fun because it was Christmas. First sex happened. She said she did not remember exactly what occurred because she was very drunk and not conscious of what she was doing.

I: Do you remember what happened at that time?

R: When I woke up, I thought... Oh no... I told him, "You're a fool, I told you I did not like to get married yet and I don't want to have children yet." I told him, "You don't have a standpoint, you fool." I really quarreled with him because I really do not like to have children yet.

I: So, when you had sex with him, were you not conscious?

R: Something like that because I was very drunk. I was not conscious of what I was doing.

I: But you were not forced to have sex?

R: What? Maybe (laughs). I forgot. But maybe I also consented because I was already very drunk. I was too tired. If you are drunk, your body becomes tired. That's why we went all the way (laughs).

The respondent did not go home immediately after that because she was embarrassed and feared her mother would scold her, which did happen. She stayed with the boyfriend for about a week. When she came home she was scolded by her parents because she went with the guy didn't have a stable job. Her grandmother also scolded her because she had sex at a young age. Her grandmother accused the respondent of making the first move, citing that the boyfriend was the silent type who was not capable of flirting.. According to the respondent, he "pretended to be a good puppy." Her parents advised them to get married. Her mother told her boyfriend to marry her because she could get pregnant.

When by January she learned that she was pregnant, she thought of aborting the fetus because she was thinking she was too young and did not want to have a child at that age. Her boyfriend told her not to abort the fetus. He said that he purposely did it so they could live together. She consented not to abort the baby, especially that the baby had a father who was willing to take responsibility. They cohabitated for one year and she gave birth to the child. Then they separated for three months. Then they got reconciled for a second period of cohabitation and they had another child. The second period of cohabitation lasted for two years before they were legally married in a church wedding. Two years after the church wedding they separated. She was currently living with a second partner.

Female Narrative 4

She had her sexual debut at the age of 18, in the third month of her relationship with her tenth boyfriend, who became her current partner. Her first sexual experience happened when she and her boyfriend was in the house of her friend. They went there and the two of them were alone at the apartment. They kissed. She did not know if he planned it but he requested to have sex with her because his groins were painful.

R: He requested me. Because he said his groins were painful. After some time when we were together and kissing each other, that's when he requested it because his groins were painful.

I: Hmmmm

R: I would not have consented but he forced me.

I: Where was this?

R: In the house of my friend.

I: House of your friend?

R: Yes. In the apartment.

I: No one was around?

R: No.

I: Only the two of you?

R: Yes.
I: He planned to kayak you?
R: I also don't know if he planned that.
I: How old were you the first time you did kayak?
R: 18
I: What did you feel that time?
R: I was nervous, I didn't understand what I felt, but I was nervous.
I: Was it your desire?
R: Perhaps I was just forced.
I: What? You were forced?
R: Yes. Hehe
I: Why are you laughing?
R: I just remember.
I: Did you cry after?
R: I also did not. I was just nervous about what I did.
I: Did you use contraception?
R: No.
I: Did your partner use a condom?
R: No.
I: Why were you nervous that time?
R: I was scared of my parents. My mother might know, then I will get pregnant.
The scolding will be unbearable.

After first sex they lived together. Her husband was working as a motorized tricycle driver and she stayed at home taking care of their 9-year old child.

Male Narrative 1

The respondent had his sexual debut at the age of 16, when he was in third year high school and already wanting to experience sex. Her first sexual partner was a sexually experienced girl who said that he was gay if he did not have sex with him.

R: It was nothing. That girl was not clear also.
I: Why do you say it was not clear?
R: I just tried having sex with her but she was not my girlfriend. It was just sex.
I: What was your relationship? What do you call that type of relationship?
R: The girl was not clear....she had sex with different guys.
I: Who?
R: She kept on getting close to me, so I did it.
I: You did it?
R: Yes.
I: What happened?
R: She kept on tempting me and challenging me.
I: She challenged you?
R: She challenged me.

I: And then?
R: She said I was gay if I did not have sex with her.
I: And then?
R: So I brought her with me.
I: Where?
R: To my cousin's house.
I: And then?
R: I iyot her. (laughs)
I: You iyot her?
R: Yes.

It was that one time that they did it, although he found it pleasurable. He described it as a “one night stand.”

Themes that appeared in the five featured narratives

1) Coerced sex is more likely to happen to women than men.

Out of 48 interviews that we did in the larger study, only five described their first sex experience as being “forced” or being of a coercive nature. Out of the five narratives, four came from women respondents. The male narrative talked about being pressured by the girl to have sex or be called gay, but the victim in this case described himself as responding successfully to the challenge and of finding the experience pleasurable afterwards. He also described his anticipation of experiencing sex and being in control (i.e. *I brought her with me*, and *I did sex to her*). The male coercion narrative had less negative consequences compared to the four women narratives.

2) Uncertainty and ambivalence in narratives of coerced sex

A certain amount of uncertainty as to whether the sex was actually unwanted or coerced, or regarding specific details could be observed in the featured narratives, especially among females. The uncertainty may be due to the passage of time.

I: Then you agreed to it?
R: I was just forced.
I: Ah you agreed?
R: I didn't know that time. It was long ago.
(Woman Narrative 1)

Uncertainty may also be in establishing whether sexual intercourse had in fact happened.

Not that (murmuring) I don't know, I forgot if it got inside me or not, because I know that he has a small penis.
(Woman Narrative 1)

Sometimes this is because the victim was drunk when it happened.

I: But you were not forced to have sex?

R: What? Maybe (laughs). I forgot. But maybe I also consented because I was already very drunk.

(Woman Narrative 3)

Narratives of coerced sex can also be complicated by positive features of a coercive situation that can create ambivalent feelings and attitudes. In the second female narrative, for instance, where the woman described being trapped by her boyfriend in a situation where it was very difficult for her to say no to sex, it was mentioned that she “liked” her boyfriend and that she also “loved” him. It may be that in many cases, coercion is tolerated because there are positive or redeeming factors involved.

3) Alcohol consumption promotes opportunity for sexual coercion

Reported in two out of four women narratives (Women Narratives 1 and 3) was the experience of having first sex without giving clear consent because they happened to be drunk at that time. In the third narrative, both the woman and her partner was part of the group who drank together to celebrate Christmas, although she was more drunk than her partner. In the first narrative, only the woman was drunk and the man was not.

R: I was drunk, I was sleeping because I was drunk. I was drinking inside the boarding house, but he wasn't drinking. I didn't know.

(Woman Narrative 1)

4) Relationship inequality can result in sexual coercion.

A coercive situation can develop when an unequal balance of power exists between the partners involved, such as a situation in the second female narrative where an older, more experienced, more educated male of higher socioeconomic status was coupled with a younger, less educated, less experienced girl of lower socioeconomic status. When the older man brought the girl to a motel, she could only offer token resistance to her boyfriend, due to her lack of experience.

In the case of the male narrative, because of the recognized greater sexual experience of the girl, she was in a position to threaten her masculinity in front of his peers if he didn't accept her challenge to have sex with her.

5) Unplanned events could create opportunities for sexual coercion.

Events unplanned by the perpetrators of sexual coercion, like the drunkenness of the partner (in Female Narratives 1 and 3), or being in private surroundings (in Female Narrative 4) could create opportunities where coercion could happen.

6) Embarrassment as an element in sexual coercion.

A male who had coerced his female partner into first sex could use the threat of embarrassment to hinder the woman from telling other people, and to accept what had happened. This is further development of coercive behavior, from coercing the woman to have sex, to coercing the woman to keep silent about the coercion that happened. The second female narrator told of what happened when she and her older, more experienced boyfriend was already inside the hotel room.

R: I just cried.

I: There inside [the motel]?

R: Yes. He told me to go on and shout, and it would be very embarrassing, and they would just laugh at me. I really had no knowledge about that, I just cried hard, I just cried.

7) Fatalism as an element in sexual coercion

A certain amount of fatalism is exercised as a coping mechanism by women trapped in a coercive situation, such as this quote from the second female narrator.

*R: I just cried because I thought that this is it. I even prayed, "Lord, what will I do, this is really it, Lord...Forgive me Lord, because I did not intend to do this." He bought me clothes because I really had nothing. I prayed, "Lord, I just want that he would marry me just in case I get pregnant or what. But it's really up to him if he will not marry me, I will still accept his decision because I love him very much." I really swore to the Lord that I should really be in love with the one whom I would first have sex with so that I would not have any regrets. At least if we break up, I won't have any regrets. That's why I just accepted the fact, but I just cried. He told me not to cry anymore because I was acting like a child.
(laughs)*

8) Assurances as an element in sexual coercion.

Males who had enough experience and resources to handle possible marriage negotiations arising from sex with an unmarried woman appeared to be more confident in getting away with sexual coercion. Promises of marriage could be given to make the woman accept her new situation.

R: I told him that I would tell my mother what he did to me (laughs). I kept telling him that. And so he told me why would I be afraid, when if ever I would get pregnant, he will marry me. Even if I would not get pregnant, he told me not to worry because he will really marry me. But it also did not mean that he would immediately marry me. He told me that we need to save up some money for that. He told me that he has already experienced being married, while I have not experienced that yet. He said that marriage is not an easy thing that you could just go into.

(Female Narrative 2)

Conclusions

We found that sexual coercion is more of an issue for women compared to men. Certain situations are mentioned in relation to sexual coercion, such as alcohol intoxication and relationship inequality, although unplanned events can also become opportunities for sexual coercion to happen. Strategies were mentioned that could be used by perpetrators to successfully carry out a coercive action or to manage the consequences of coercion. We also recorded a certain amount of fatalism that can promote the victim's acceptance of the coercive situation. The narratives also revealed the difficulties involved in establishing whether a sexually coercive fact indeed happened. Memory of the event can be faulty and in many cases ambivalent feelings are also involved.

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