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Risk and protective factors for sexual aggression across the ecosystem: An overview

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Introduction

Prevention of sexual aggression (which ranges from perpetration of unwanted sexual contact to attempted/completed rape) is a complex public health and safety issue that requires attention to multiple levels of social ecology (Centers for Disease Control and Prevention, 2004). The social ecological model provides a framework for understanding how risk and protective factors for sexual aggression exist at multiple levels, with some factors being more proximal such as the individual attitudes, and other factors being more distal such as the broader culture (e.g., laws and policies) (Centers for Disease Control and Prevention, 2013). Indeed, research indicates a variety

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of risk factors (factors associated with increased risk for sexual aggression) and protective factors (factors associated with decreased risk for sexual aggression) that exist across the social ecology (Basile et al., 2016; Tharp et al., 2013). Understanding risk and protective factors across multiple levels of the ecology is key to preventing the complex behavior of sexual aggression. In the current chapter, we review risk and protective factors for sexual aggression among men and boys at multiple levels of the social ecology. Of note, although we earnestly reviewed the interdisciplinary research, this chapter is not meant to be a systematic review. Rather, the purpose of this chapter is to discuss various levels of the social ecology and provide examples of risk and protective factors for the perpetration of sexual assault within each of these levels. The foundational information provided in this chapter sets the stage for subsequent chapters in this edition that focuses on strategies for the primary prevention of sexual aggression.

The Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (2013) describes four levels of the social ecology (**Figure 1**). Societal factors include social and cultural norms that support violence. Community factors include the settings of daily life such as schools and workplaces. Relationship factors include close relationship such as family or romantic partners. Finally, individual factors include attitudes, beliefs, and personal history factors. In the current chapter we will review risk and protective factors at each of these levels. We will also review factors that are situational, such as alcohol use and lack of active bystanders. A key feature of the social ecological approach is that influential factors may interact to make sexual aggression more likely; we provide examples of these interactions throughout. Finally, although the social ecological approach is a useful organizational tool to discuss levels of risk and protective factors, many other theories are also relevant to sexual aggression. Theories beyond the social ecological model explain *how* and *why* factors interact to increase or reduce risk for sexual aggression. We will discuss several etiological theories throughout the chapter.

In 2013, Tharp and colleagues published a systematic review of risk and protective factors for sexual violence perpetration at various social ecological levels using research from 1989 to 2008 (Tharp et al., 2013). Thus, in the current chapter, we will summarize the findings

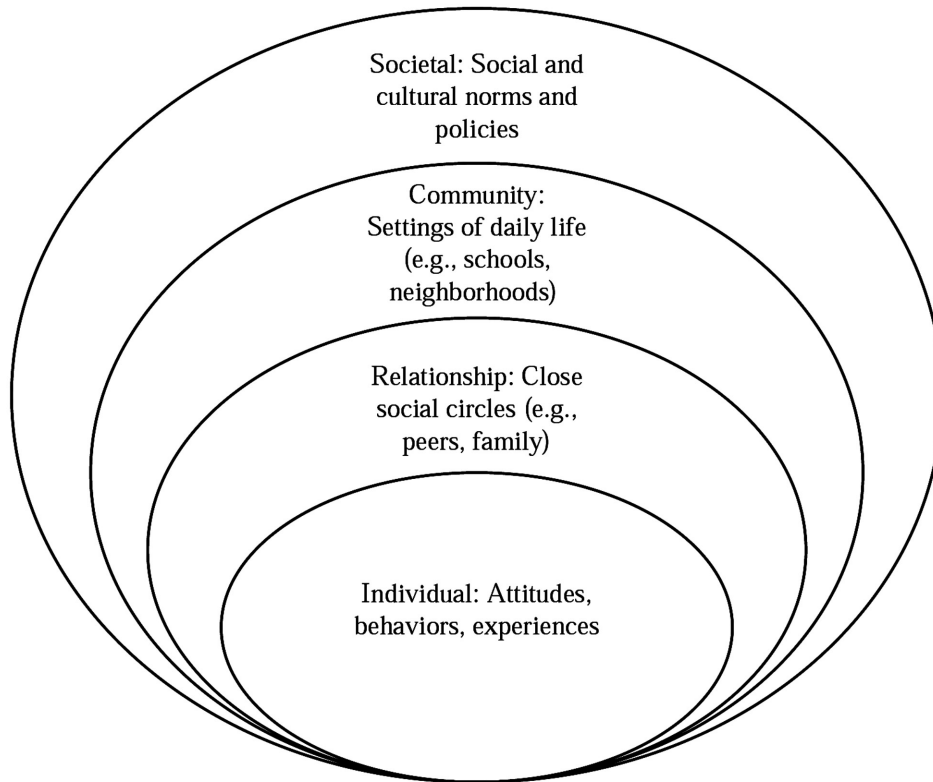


Figure 1 The social ecology of risk and protective factors. This figure is based on the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention. (2013). The social ecological model: A framework for prevention. Retrieved from <http://www.cdc.gov/violenceprevention/overview/social-ecologicalmodel.html> . Situational factors (not pictured), which include momentary risk factors such as alcohol use or lack of bystanders, may interact with factors at various levels to increase or decrease sexual aggression risk.

of Tharp and colleagues, then expand on these findings by focusing our review on research published from 2009 to 2019. Although our focus is on risk and protective factors for sexual aggression, we sometimes include literature on risk and protective factors for other forms of violence, such as intimate partner violence when literature on sexual aggression is scant. Finally, although girls and women can perpetrate sexual violence, the vast majority of perpetrators of sexual violence are boys and men (Black et al., 2011; Edwards, 2015a), which is the focus of this chapter.

Societal and community factors

Although researchers have emphasized the importance of risk and protective factors for the perpetration of sexual aggression at outer levels of the social ecological model (Banyard, Edwards, & Seibold, 2015; DeGue et al., 2012; Edwards & Sessarego, 2018), little research to date has focused on these more distal levels especially compared to more proximal levels. Indeed at the time of the Tharp et al. review (2013), only a handful of studies had been conducted on how societal and community factors relate to the perpetration of sexual aggression, and overall Tharp and colleagues found equivocal evidence to suggest societal and community factors predict the perpetration of sexual aggression. Since the publication of the Tharp et al. review there has been an increase in studies that focus on the role of the societal factors as predictors of the perpetration of sexual violence; in this and other sections, we highlight research that has emerged since 2009.

Ethnographic research suggests that higher rates of sexual aggression are found in cultures characterized by other forms of interpersonal violence, male dominance, and separation of the sexes (Sanday, 1981a, 1981b, 1996, 2003). Recent research expands on these findings. Higher rates of sexual aggression are found in communities with higher violence-accepting community norms, community norms supportive of male superiority and female subordination, weak laws addressing sexual aggression, and high community consumption of pornography (Edwards & Sessarego, 2018). Research also suggests that there is cross-cultural variation in hostility toward women, and that hostility toward women predicts higher rates of physical and psychological aggression toward dating partners, which is associated with the perpetration of sexual aggression (Ozaki & Otis, 2017).

In addition to violence-accepting community norms, variability in gender inequality across societies also predicts rates of sexual aggression. For example, countries with higher rates of male perpetration of sexual aggression have lower levels of gender equality in economic power and work domains (Krahe et al., 2015). When women's economic, educational, and occupational attainment is higher, rates of sexual aggression are lower (Martin, Vieraitis, & Britto, 2006). However, the researchers also found that in communities with greater

gender equality, rates of rape were higher, which seems counterintuitive (Martin, Vieraitis, & Britto, 2006). Moreover, researchers have documented that state-level gender inequality predicts higher rates of rape victimization among women (Kearns, D’Inverno, & Reidy, 2020).

The trend regarding societal-level risk factors such as violence-accepting norms is associated with various subcultures, including rape culture, hook-up culture, and military culture. These subcultures are characterized by male domination, female submission, and acceptance of sexual aggression, thus fostering environments in which the perpetration of sexual aggression is more likely (Edwards & Sessarego, 2018). For example, rape culture is defined as setting in which sexual violence is pervasive and normalized (Herman, 1984). Rape culture can lead to individual attitudes that are supportive of sexual aggression (reviewed subsequently). Thus research suggests that individuals who are higher in rape myths, a proxy measure of internalization of rape culture, are more likely to perpetrate sexual aggression than individuals lower in rape myths (Edwards, Turchik, Dardis, Reynolds, & Gidycz, 2011). Similarly, research suggests that positive attitudes toward hook-up culture are predictive of rape myth acceptance in a sample of college students (Reling, Barton, Becker, & Valasik, 2018). Despite this research, critics suggest that there is neither evidence of the existence of rape culture, nor are there clearly defined measures to assess its presence (O’Donohue & Schewe, 2019). More intensive reviews of rape culture and masculinity can be found in Chapters 5 and 6, respectively.

Laws and policies also play a role in increasing or decreasing risk for sexual aggression perpetration. There has been an increasing focus on the role of alcohol policies, which include things like alcohol pricing, outlet density, minimum legal drinking age, and sale time, and how they intersect with risk for the perpetration of sexual aggression (Lippy & DeGue, 2016). Although a relatively new line of research, initial studies suggest that alcohol policies are one promising approach to the prevention of sexual aggression perpetration (Cunradi, Mair, & Todd, 2014; Lippy & DeGue, 2016). Moreover, although not specific to the perpetration of sexual aggression, research suggests that rates of physical teen dating violence are lower in states where there are stronger policies toward teen dating violence and a democratic governor (Hoefler, Black, & Ricard, 2015). Research also

suggests that the 1994 Violence Against Women Act, which aimed to create tougher penalties for offenders as well as funds to implement and research prevention activities, reduced annual reports of rape to law enforcement (Boba & Lilley, 2009).

Finally, societal factors related to sexual aggression can be understood from a criminology perspective. Social disorganization theory suggests that crime is the result of weakened social integration which results from factors such as community-level poverty, weak social ties, and low collective efficacy (Sampson & Groves, 1989; Shaw & McKay, 1942). Communities characterized by these various forms of disorder do not possess adequate social control to control crime and violence (Shaw & McKay, 1942). Most research that has examined violence within the context of social disorganization theory has focused on intimate partner violence, not necessarily specific to the perpetration of sexual aggression. Nevertheless, this research suggests that whereas neighborhood disadvantage (i.e., poverty) and cultural norms accepting of violence are predictors of higher rates of intimate partner violence, collective efficacy and social ties are protective factors against intimate partner violence (Pinchevsky & Wright, 2012). However, in a study of youth, researchers found that community-level poverty is unrelated to the perpetration of sexual teen dating violence, and community-level poverty is related to the perpetration of physical dating violence (Edwards & Neal, 2017). Furthermore, some research suggests that perpetrators of intimate partner violence in rural locations, compared to urban locations, may perpetrate more chronic and severe intimate partner violence, which could be due to higher rates of substance abuse and poverty in rural locations (Edwards, 2015b).

Given the emerging research on community-level risk factors for sexual violence, the development and evaluation of community-level sexual violence prevention strategies is critical. While previous programs have focused on individual-level factors (e.g., attitudes), research examining the effectiveness of such programs is very limited (DeGue et al., 2014). Programs that target community-level change at the outer levels of the social ecology might include (1) targeting community-level risk factors such as violence-accepting community norms and community norms supportive of male superiority and female subordination, (2) bolstering community-level protective factors such as

collective efficacy and economic empowerment programs especially for girls and women, and (3) implementing policy changes that address comorbid health behaviors such as drug and alcohol use (Basile et al., 2016; DeGue, Hipp, & Herbst, 2016).

Relationship factors

Relationship factors include the closest relationships in an individual's life such as family, friends, and romantic partners. Thus, in this section, we discuss three groups of risk factors: early childhood adversity, peer factors, and romantic relationship factors.

Early childhood adversity

Although the vast majority of men and boys who experienced childhood maltreatment and family of origin violence as children do not subsequently perpetrate sexual aggression, research does indicate that men and boys with these experiences are at greater risk than boys and men without histories of childhood maltreatment (Tharp et al., 2013). The review by Tharp et al. (2013) drew specific attention to child maltreatment such as child abuse, as well as hostile family environment, such as hostility between parents. The Tharp et al. review noted that socioeconomic status and family structure (e.g., divorce, number of adults in the home) are not consistently related to the perpetration of sexual aggression.

Indeed, more recent research confirms these findings regarding early childhood adversity (Swartout, Swartout, Brennan, & White, 2015). Childhood physical abuse (Zurbriggen, Gobin, & Freyd, 2010), childhood emotional abuse (Zurbriggen et al., 2010), and childhood sexual abuse are associated with subsequent sexual aggression among adolescent boys (DeLisi, Kosloski, Vaughn, Caudill, & Trulson, 2014). Childhood sexual abuse also predicts men's sexual aggression in survey research (Parkhill & Pickett, 2016) and men's sexual aggression intentions in research where men are asked about their intentions to react to a scenario in a lab (Davis et al., 2012). Other forms of childhood adversity are also risk factors for sexual aggression among boys and men. Factors such as hostility between parents (Richardson, Simons,

& Futris, 2017; Sutton & Simons, 2015) and count measures of childhood adverse experiences (Zinzow & Thompson, 2015a, 2015b) also predict the perpetration of sexual aggression. This research generally assesses sexual assault forms of sexual aggression; however, it is notable that childhood sexual abuse and interparental conflict are also associated with other forms of sexual aggression, for example, technology-based sexual coercion (Thompson & Morrison, 2013).

Whereas numerous studies have demonstrated the association between early childhood adversity, specifically child abuse and hostile family environment, and sexual aggression, studies that examine how childhood adversity impact later risk are just emerging. Some potential mechanisms involved in this association include avoidant attachment style (Sutton & Simons, 2015) and impulsivity (Parkhill & Pickett, 2016). It also may be that early childhood adversity leads to maladaptive schemas or beliefs systems: maladaptive schemas such as high sense of mistrust/abuse, high sense of dependence/incompetence, and high negativity/pessimism are associated with sexual aggression (Sigre-Leiros, Carvalho, & Nobre, 2013). Sexual entitlement (beliefs that men's sexual needs should be met on demand) of may also play a role in this link, although the research is unclear. A lab-based study found that sexual entitlement to mediate the association between child sexual abuse and intentions to act aggressively (Davis et al., 2012). Another survey-based study found that whereas overparenting (i.e., parenting that is very high in control and assistance) is not directly associated with young adult men's sexual aggression, overparenting is strongly associated with sense of entitlement. Sense of entitlement is in turn associated with sexual aggression (Richardson et al., 2017). Finally, parental monitoring (i.e., supervision of adolescent activities) may be a protective factor for sexual aggression (Basile, Rostad, Leemis, Espelage, & Davis, 2018; Foshee et al., 2016).

The most-often used theories to describe the association between early childhood adversity and sexual aggression are social learning theory (Bandura, 1977) and family of origin models (Sutton & Simons, 2015). These theories posit that aggression, including sexual aggression, is a learned behavior that results from violence in one's family of origin (Carr & VanDeusen, 2002). This theory helps explain the association between experienced child sexual abuse and subsequent sexual

aggression. However, family of origin violence (Ybarra & Thompson, 2018), even if that violence is not sexual violence, may have an effect on sexual aggression via its effect on violence-supporting beliefs (Zinzow & Thompson, 2015b). Put another way, when individuals experience any form of violence in childhood it may increase their acceptability of those behaviors and translate into sexual assault perpetration later in life. As previously stated, most men who experience early childhood adversity do not subsequently perpetrate sexual aggression; as with other risk factors, it is likely that early childhood adversity interacts with other risk factors (e.g., peer factors, personality, etc.) to increase risk for perpetration. In conclusion, preventing early childhood adversity and addressing the negative effects of early childhood adversity are important prevention strategies for sexual aggression. Several prevention programs have been found to be effective in preventing child maltreatment (e.g., Chen & Chan, 2016; Mikton & Burchart, 2009), but programs do not typically assess impact on sexual aggression.

Peer factors

Tharp et al. (2013) identified three themes of peer influences on sexual aggression: peer attitudes and behaviors, hypermasculine/all-male peer groups, and peer delinquent behavior. Whereas peer attitudes and behaviors and hypermasculine/all-male peer groups both are strong predictors of the perpetration of sexual aggression, the evidence for peer delinquent behavior was mixed. However, more recent research on peer delinquent behavior and sexual aggression has expanded on this research. In this section we review more recent research on peer risk factors for sexual aggression and describe several relevant theories.

The association of peer attitudes and behaviors with sexual aggression can be understood using social norms theory. Social norms and, specifically, norms that are accepting of violence, are an important predictor of violence (Banyard, 2011; Berkowitz, 2005). Social norms are unwritten rules for behavior. Norms can be perceived (i.e., what individuals believe about their peers' behaviors and acceptance of behaviors) or real (i.e., actual behaviors and acceptance of behaviors among those same peers) (Berkowitz, 2004). Although actual peer

norms are an important risk factor, individuals' perceptions of those norms may be more important. Research shows that individuals often overestimate their peers' acceptance of violence and violent behavior (Berkowitz, 2010). According to the theory of social norms, an overestimation of problem behavior norms leads to individuals' enactment of those problem behaviors (Berkowitz, 2005, 2010).

Indeed, in prospective studies, perceived norms supportive of sexual aggression are associated with higher likelihood of multiple forms of subsequent sexual aggression (Thompson, Koss, Kingree, Goree, & Rice, 2011; Thompson & Morrison, 2013; Thompson, Swartout, & Koss, 2013; Zinzow & Thompson, 2015a, 2015b); perceived norms vary over time, which may lead to increased sexual aggression when perceived aggression-supportive norms are high (Thompson, Kingree, Zinzow, & Swartout, 2015). In experimental studies, presenting men with antiaggression norms leads to lower sexual aggression intentions compared to control (Bosson, Parrott, Swan, Kuchynka, & Schramm, 2015; Zounlome & Wong, 2019). Perceived norms are also important for bystander behavior, or prosocial behavior aimed to prevent another person's sexual aggression. In cross-sectional studies, researchers found that perceived norms supportive of sexual aggression are associated with willingness to intervene to stop sexual aggression (Orchowski, Berkowitz, Boggis, & Oesterle, 2016), in one study, even more so than personal attitudes toward sexual aggression (Brown & Messman-Moore, 2010). More about social norms can be found in Chapter 7 of this volume.

Another model to help explain the peer risk factors for sexual aggression is the male peer support model, which states that all-male groups tend to adopt hypermasculine values that support sexual aggression and compel men to be sexually aggressive to belong to the group (Godenzi, Schwartz, & DeKeseredy, 2001). This model is often used to explain why men and boys who belong to fraternities and sports teams are more prone to sexual aggression (Murnen & Kohlman, 2007). The association between athletics and sexual aggression, particularly among college students, is reviewed elsewhere (McCray, 2015); however, mechanisms involved in this association such as hypermasculinity adopted in all-male groups appear to be similar to the research on fraternity membership (McCray, 2015; Murnen & Kohlman, 2007; Young, Desmarais, Baldwin, & Chandler, 2017).

Emerging research has further explored the mechanisms involved in the association between fraternity membership and sexual aggression. Mediators of this association include high-risk drinking and other substance use (Franklin, Bouffard, & Pratt, 2012; Kingree & Thompson, 2013), pressure to uphold masculine norms, and objectification of women (Seabrook, Ward, & Giaccardi, 2018b). Peer pressure to have sex is also a mediator of the association of fraternity membership and sexual aggression (Franklin et al., 2012). In fact, peer pressure to have sex is a risk factor for sexual aggression among men and boys inside and outside fraternities (Thompson et al., 2011, 2015). Men who are at high risk for sexual aggression tend to select into the fraternity environment, further reinforcing these norms (Boyle, 2015; Waterman, Wesche, Leavitt, & Lefkowitz, 2019). Moreover, researchers documented that fraternity men are more likely than nonfraternity men to be higher in rape myths and to have more degrading images of women displayed in their rooms (Bleecker & Murnen, 2005). Finally, research has documented an association between gang affiliation and sexual violence perpetration in boys and men (Morris, Anderson, & Knox, 2002; Nydegger, DiFranceisco, Quinn, & Dickson-Gomez, 2017).

In contrast with involvement in these risky peer networks, involvement in prosocial groups may be a protective factor against sexual aggression, with factors such as church attendance being associated with less likelihood of sexual aggression (Kingree, Thompson, & Ruetz, 2017). Indeed, men with tightly knit peer networks that are low in hostility against women have low average hostility (Swartout, 2013). However, the research on prosocial peer groups is mixed. In one study, researchers found that involvement in student government among adolescents is positively associated with technology-based sexual coercion; the researchers stated this finding should be interpreted with caution because they were not able to account for number of social interactions (individuals in student government may have more overall interactions) (Thompson & Morrison, 2013). The authors also hypothesized that factors that are associated with sexual aggression such as narcissistic traits and motivation for authority and power may also be associated with involvement in student government (Thompson & Morrison, 2013).

Social norms marketing campaigns that seek to change perceptions of the peer norms in a community have been found to be effective in preventing sexual aggression (Berkowitz, 2010; Gidycz, Orchowski,

& Berkowitz, 2011). One way to enhance the effectiveness of social norms marketing campaigns would be to increase the engagement of community members in the creation and implementation of such efforts. This may be especially true for boys and men who are less likely than girls and women to engage in prevention efforts for sexual aggression (Rich, Utley, Janke, & Moldoveanu, 2010). Because of this issue, researchers have begun to document factors that predict men's engagement with prevention initiatives, and one of these factors is men's perceptions of their peers' willingness to engage (Carlson et al., 2015; Casey & Smith, 2010; Coulter, 2003), again underscoring the critical role that peer groups play in understanding and prevention of sexual aggression.

Relationship factors

Most research and theory reviewed in this chapter focus on sexual aggression generally or sexual aggression outside of romantic relationships. This focus is consistent with the literature, which tends to address sexual aggression perpetrated by acquaintances or strangers. Yet, sexual aggression also occurs inside of romantic relationships. The risk and protective factors associated with men's and boy's sexual aggression outside of relationships are also considered risk and protective factors for sexual aggression inside of relationships. However, some factors are specific to aggression inside romantic relationships. As noted by Tharp et al. (2013), relationship processes such as controlling behaviors, emotional withdrawal, and poor communication, casual relationship status (compared to more serious relationships), and partner conflict are all risk factors for sexual aggression.

Controlling behaviors, dominant tactics, and jealousy in relationship are all associated with sexual aggression (Goetz & Shackelford, 2009; Munoz-Rivas, Grana, O'Leary, & Gonzalez, 2009), as are factors that may elicit these behaviors such as infidelity on the part of the victim (Goetz & Shackelford, 2009). Recent research also confirms that sexual aggression is more likely to occur within shorter relationships with less commitment than longer relationships with more commitment (Rapoza & Drake, 2009). Similarly, insecure attachment style

in at least one partner is associated with sexual aggression (attachment style is reviewed later under individual factors; Wilson, Gardner, Brosi, Topham, & Busby, 2013). Although sexual aggression and intimate partner violence tend to co-occur (Thompson, 2014), there are also differences in risk factors for sexual aggressions and other forms of intimate partner violence such as physical intimate partner aggression. For example, one study found that men's controlling behavior is significantly associated with both physical intimate partner aggression and sexual coercion aggression, whereas jealousy is only associated with sexual coercion aggression (Snead & Babcock, 2019). Notably, most of this research focuses on heterosexual relationships; more research is needed on men's and boy's sexual aggression toward same-gender and transgender partners.

In general, the types of factors that are associated with perpetration of other forms of intimate partner violence (e.g., physical abuse, emotional abuse, financial abuse) are also associated with sexual aggression within romantic relationships. The I3 model of aggression in intimate partner is one broad theory to explain intimate partner violence (Finkel & Hall, 2018; Finkel & Slotter, 2009; Slotter & Finkel, 2011a, 2011b). According to this model, three processes influence the likelihood and intensity of aggressive behavior. One is instigation, or the immediate environmental trigger (e.g., an argument). The second is impellance, or situational or dispositional qualities that cause proclivity to violence (e.g., trait aggressiveness). The third is inhibition, which describes qualities that influence whether or not an aggressive impulse is outweighed (e.g., alcohol intoxication reduced inhibition). Violence in intimate partner relationships is most likely, and increased in intensity, when instigation and impellance are high and inhibition is low (Finkel & Hall, 2018; Finkel & Slotter, 2009; Slotter & Finkel, 2011a, 2011b). Specific risk factors for intimate partner violence are reviewed elsewhere (Capaldi, Knoble, Shortt, & Kim, 2012). Strategies that are effective for reducing sexual aggression outside of romantic and dating relationship are also likely to reduce sexual aggression inside these relationships, but most program evaluations do not assess sexual aggression inside and outside of relationships separately.

Individual factors

According to the social ecological model (Centers for Disease Control and Prevention, 2013), individual factors include factors such as history, attitudes and beliefs, and personality factors. In this section, we discuss history of sexual aggression, violence-supportive attitudes and beliefs, personality traits, interpersonal and intrapersonal skills, sexual behaviors and attitudes, and gender-related risk factors such as hostile gender role beliefs, hypermasculinity, and sexual objectification of women. The social Individual factors 79 ecological model depicts the individual is nested within the relationship, community, and societal levels. Thus many of the factors discussed in this section are reflected in the less proximal levels, for example, societal norms that are accepting of violence are a societal risk factor, and personal acceptance of violence is an individual risk factor (i.e., an individual's internalization of broader social norms).

Aggression history

As with any behavior, probably the most reliable predictor of future sexual aggression is previous sexual aggression. Indeed, in the articles reviewed by Tharp et al. (2013), all articles that explored this association found it to be significant. In adolescence particularly, other forms of violence perpetration, specifically bullying may predict subsequent sexual aggression (Espelage, Basile, & Hamburger, 2012). This link has been called the bully sexual violence pathway theory (Espelage, Basile, Leemis, Hipp, & Davis, 2018).

Violence-supportive beliefs

We defined violence-supportive beliefs and attitudes broadly to include constructs such as acceptance of violence, dominance, adherence to rape myths, and rape-supportive beliefs. Violence-supportive beliefs and attitudes are among the most widely studied risk factors for sexual aggression, and most studies find these constructs to be associated with violence. Indeed, Tharp et al. (2013) generally found an association between what they called violence-related cognitions and sexual aggression. Recent cross-sectional and longitudinal research

has found that rape-supportive attitudes are associated with both one-time and repeated sexual aggression (Thompson et al., 2011, 2015; Zinzow & Thompson, 2015a, 2015b), and with various forms of sexual aggression, including incapacitation and force (Zinzow & Thompson, 2015a), and coercion (Thompson & Morrison, 2013). Research also suggests that adherence to rape myths is a consistent predictor of perpetrating sexual aggression (Edwards et al., 2011). However, one study found that adherence to rape myths is associated with both alcohol-uninvolved sexual aggression and alcohol-involved sexual aggression, but when accounting for binge drinking frequency, adherence to rape myths is only associated with alcohol-involved sexual aggression, indicating the binge drinking frequency is particularly strong factor in alcohol-involved sexual aggression (Kingree & Thompson, 2015). It is important to note though, that particularly when accounting for other risk factors, researchers do not always detect associations of violence-supportive beliefs and attitudes with sexual aggression. For example, when examining shared risk factors for sexual harassment, physical dating violence, and bullying, one paper found that acceptance of violence is not a shared risk factor. This paper, unlike others, accounted for other risk factors such as lack of parental minoring and high anger reactivity; these risk factors may be stronger than acceptance of violence at least for adolescent boys (Foshee et al., 2016).

Personality traits

Tharp and colleagues (2013) concluded that there was little research on personality traits and sexual aggression, and that the extant literature was mostly mixed. However, since this review, significantly more research has emerged that examines how personality traits are associated with sexual aggression. One study found that men low in agreeableness (tendency to be high on trust, sympathy, and altruism) and conscientiousness (tendency toward achievement, organization, planning, and sense of control) are more likely to perpetrate sexual assault (Mouilso & Calhoun, 2012); another found that rape perpetrators report lower levels of agreeableness and conscientiousness compared to nonperpetrators, whereas nonperpetrators are similar to men who have perpetrated other forms of sexual assault (Voller & Long, 2010). Most of the research around personality traits focuses on

narcissism (tendency to have excessive interest in oneself). Men who report higher narcissistic traits generally, or traits indicating narcissistic personality disorder, are more likely to perpetrate sexual aggression (Mouilso & Calhoun, 2012, 2013, 2016). Examination of various facets of narcissism provides a clue as to which facets of narcissism may lead to sexual aggression—one study found that feelings of entitlement and a willingness to exploit others are positively associated with sexual aggression, whereas grandiosity is not (Zeigler-Hill, Enjaian, & Essa, 2013). A relatively new construct in the literature, sexual narcissism or narcissism exhibited in sexual situations, is associated with sexual aggression as well (Widman & McNulty, 2010).

Other research has focused on antisocial traits (tendency toward arrogance, deceitfulness, impulsivity, emotional detachment, and anger) and psychopathy. Antisocial traits are associated with multiple types of sexual aggression, including coercion, incapacitation, and forcible (Zinzow & Thompson, 2015a, 2015b). As mentioned earlier, antisocial traits are likely associated with antisocial peer groups, which are in turn associated with sexual aggression (Franklin et al., 2012). This example exemplifies interactions between levels. Researchers have also explored subclinical levels of psychopathy instead of diagnoses, which is a grouping of personality traits that includes some of the previously mentioned aspects such as narcissism and antisocial traits, and other traits such as lack of empathy. Subclinical levels of psychopathy are associated with sexual aggression (Abbey, Jacques-Tiura, & LeBreton, 2011; O'Connell & Marcus, 2016), although as noted by Tharp and colleagues, evidence is mixed (Tharp et al., 2013).

Interpersonal skills

Interpersonal skills that act as risk and protective factors for sexual aggression may include cue reading, comprehension of consent, and empathy. Overall, previous research has found that misinterpretation of consent cues is associated with sexual aggression (Tharp et al., 2013). Indeed, misinterpretation of women's sexual cues is associated with number of sexually aggressive acts (Abbey et al., 2011). Lack of comprehension of sexual consent, or an understanding of when and how individuals give consent, is associated with sexual aggression in at least one study (Warren, Swan, & Allen, 2015). It is difficult

to ascertain from self-report data whether misinterpretation of consent cues is real (e.g., genuine misinterpretation of cues) or purposeful (e.g., pretending to misinterpret with the intention to act aggressively). Men with other sexual aggression risk factors (e.g., risky behavior, rape-supportive beliefs, childhood adversity, peer norms accepting of violence) are less likely to endorse the need for active, verbal consent, and more likely to endorse passive consent (e.g., assuming “yes” until hearing “no”; Zinzow & Thompson, 2019). See Chapter 9 in this volume for additional discussion regarding sexual consent.

Empathy is another area explored by researchers. One recent study found that perpetrators have lower empathy scores than nonperpetrators (Basile et al., 2018). However, a meta-analysis by Vachon and colleagues found that there is a very weak association between empathy and multiple forms of aggression, with this association being the weakest for sexual aggression (Vachon, Lynam, & Johnson, 2013), calling the importance of empathy as a protective factor of sexual aggression into question. One more consistent factor for sexual aggression is attachment style; the findings of multiple studies indicate that individuals with insecure or avoidance attachment styles (focused on isolation and emotional distance) are more likely to perpetrate than those with more secure attachment styles (Nguyen & Parkhill, 2014; Sutton & Simons, 2015; Wilson et al., 2013).

Intrapersonal skills

Since the Tharp and colleagues review in 2009, a considerable amount of new research has emerged examining how intrapersonal skills such as self-control, emotional regulation, and impulsivity are associated with sexual aggression. In general, these terms refer to the ability to regulate one’s negative and positive emotions and to control one’s behavior using foresight instead of impulse. In recent years, researchers have found all these constructs have been found to be associated with sexual aggression. Difficulties in emotion regulation have been identified as a risk factor in a number of studies (Kirwin, Lanni, Warnke, Pickett, & Parkhill, 2019; Parkhill & Pickett, 2016). A related protective factor to consider is emotional intelligence, or the ability to perceive, understand, and manage emotions—although not specific to sexual assault, a review by Garcia-Sancho and colleagues found that

emotional intelligence is associated with multiple forms of aggressive behavior across the lifespan (Garcia-Sancho, Salguero, & Fernandez-Berrocal, 2014). Mindfulness (ability to stay present in a situation) is a protective factor against sexual aggression against a romantic partner (Gallagher, Hudepohl, & Parrott, 2010). In contrast, impulsivity in childhood is a risk factor for subsequent sexual aggression in young adulthood (Hentges, Shaw, & Wang, 2018), as is impulsivity in adulthood (Kingree & Thompson, 2015; Thompson et al., 2015). An experimental study regarding impulsivity and sexually aggressive responses to scenarios found similar results (Pickett, Parkhill, & Kirwan, 2016). Similarly, lack of self-control is associated with sexual aggression (Franklin et al., 2012). Anger and aggressiveness may also act as risk factors for sexual aggression. For example, anger reactivity is associated with multiple types of aggression, including sexual harassment perpetration (Foshee et al., 2016). Similarly, aggressive traits risk factor for both alcohol-involved and alcohol uninvolved (Davis, Danube, Stappenbeck, Norris, & George, 2015).

Pornography use

Tharp et al. (2013) found that the literature on pornography use and sexual aggression was mixed. Recent research suggests that exposure to pornography, especially violent pornography, predicts the perpetration of multiple forms of sexual aggression (Huntington, Pearlman, & Orchowski, 2020; O'Donohue & Schewe, 2019; Rodenhizer & Edwards, 2017; Wright, Tokunaga, & Kraus, 2016). It is likely that the type of pornography is important, as sexually aggressive pornography may predict sexual aggression whereas other forms do not (Tharp et al., 2013). It is also likely that there is a reciprocal relationship between pornography use and sexual aggression, with men at higher risk for sexually aggressive behavior being more likely to view aggressive pornography and more influenced by viewing it than other men (Malamuth & Pitpitan, 2007). Exposure to violent pornography may especially contribute to men's acceptance of sexual violence against women (Malamuth & Pitpitan, 2007), which is a risk factor for sexual aggression (Thompson et al., 2011, 2015; Zinzow & Thompson, 2015a, 2015b).

The confluence model

The confluence model is one of the models used most often to explain sexual aggression risk (Malamuth, Heavey, & Linz, 1996; Malamuth, Linz, Heavey, Barnes, & Acker, 1995; Malamuth, Sockloskie, Koss, & Tanaka, 1991). The confluence model proposes that sexual aggression is a result of convergence of two components. The first component is impersonal sexuality. Impersonal sexuality is a preference for casual and unemotional sex. This component is sometimes called sexual promiscuity or risky sexual behavior and is often exhibited by sex with many partners. The second component is hostile masculinity, or negative attitudes about women that support aggression. Similarly, this construct goes by several names, including hypermasculinity and toxic masculinity. In the next two sections, we review research related to these factors.

Sexual behaviors and attitudes

As stated, there has been much research on factors related to sexual behaviors and attitudes based on the confluence model. Tharp and colleagues identified, for example, 25 studies examining multiple sex partners as a risk factor, 13 examining impersonal sex, 7 examining early sexual initiation, and 5 studies examining sexual risk taking. The vast majority of these studies concluded that these constructs are risk factors for sexual aggression (Tharp et al., 2013). Indeed, in the years since, even more studies have examined the association of sexual behaviors and attitudes with sexual aggression. Impersonal sexuality has been found again to be associated with sexual aggression, even in the presence of other predictors (Abbey et al., 2011; Nguyen & Parkhill, 2014; Troche & Herzberg, 2017). Another study found that when examining risk factors for sexual coercion and physical sexual aggression, sexual promiscuity is a risk factor among men who have committed *both* of these types of aggression (DeGue, DiLillo, & Scalora, 2010). Peer pressure to have sex is a related construct that is associated with sexual aggression (Tharp et al., 2013; Thompson et al., 2015).

Gender-related risk factors

Arguably the most well-studied group of risk factors for sexual aggression are what we call here gender-related risk factors. Like sexual behaviors and attitudes, research on gender-related risk factors also arises from the confluence model. By gender-related risk factors, we mean a broad range of risk factors related to attitudes about masculinity and attitudes about women. In addition to the confluence model, feminist frameworks help explain gender-related risk factors. Broadly, according to these theories, the motivation for sexual aggression in patriarchal society is to maintain men's status as the dominant group and women's status as subordinate. According to these frameworks, men use sexual assault not to obtain sexual gratification, but to assert their social dominance over women. The sexual nature of sexual assault increases its power to degrade women. Feminist frameworks generally assert that sexually aggressive men have hostility toward women and a desire to protect their higher status in society (Brownmiller, 1975), that the culture only supports heterosexuality as the only appropriate and normative sexuality, and encourages men to feel entitlement to women's sexuality (MacKinnon, 1981). In addition, these frameworks highlight how men's cultural role as aggressive and sexually powerful to maintain masculinity. In this cultural context, sexual assault is a behavior that fills a masculine role (McPhail, 2015).

It is difficult to overstate the prominence of gender-related risk factors in the sexual aggression risk literature. Tharp and colleagues' (2009) review contains 42 articles examining hostility toward women, 21 articles examining traditional gender role adherence, and 18 examining hypermasculinity. These gender-related risk factors are associated with sexual aggression in most articles. The trend of including these risk factors in sexual aggression research has continued in recent years. Indeed, cross-sectional research finds hostility toward women (contempt toward women and girls) to be associated with sexual aggression (Kingree & Thompson, 2015), as well as hostile masculinity (insecure and hostile orientation toward women combined with a desire to control them) and hypermasculinity (exaggeration of stereotypically male attitudes and behaviors; Abbey et al., 2011; Salazar et al., 2018; Troche & Herzberg, 2017).

One study found hostility toward women to be the only risk factor that distinguished between nonaggressor, coercive sexual aggressors, and forcible aggressors (DeGue et al., 2010). Similar findings regarding intended sexual aggression are present in the experimental literature (Bosson et al., 2015). This association also extends to recent prospective studies (Thompson et al., 2013, 2015). These attitudes are no doubt influenced by peer networks, exemplifying interactions between different levels, in this case, the individual and relationship levels (Swartout, 2013).

A growing line of research examines the constructs of objectification of women and dehumanization of women as risk factors for sexual aggression. Indeed, the objectification of women (the reduction of a person to instruments of sexual gratification) is associated with various forms of sexual aggression (Seabrook et al., 2018b; Seabrook, Ward, & Giaccardi, 2018a; Tuliao et al., 2019). Similarly, dehumanization (the denial of human uniqueness) is associated with intended sexual aggression (Bevens & Loughnan, 2019). Finally, one potential risk factor in need of further study is sexual prejudice, or negative attitudes based on sexual orientation targeting sexual minority individuals. One experimental study found that sexual prejudice is associated with intended aggression toward a gay male aggression (Parrott & Lisco, 2015). Although this study did not study sexual aggression specifically, it does suggest an attitudinal risk factor that may be associated with sexual aggression against sexual minority individuals; again, further research is needed on this topic.

Minority stress

A burgeoning body of research suggests that sexual minorities may be at increased risk for both sexual assault victimization as well as the perpetration of sexual aggression (Decker, Littleton, & Edwards, 2018; Edwards, Sylaska, & Neal, 2015). Minority stress theory suggests that external stressors (e.g., experiences of discrimination) lead to internal stressors such as internalized homonegativity (i.e., feeling shame regarding one's sexual orientation; Meyer, 2003). These internalized stressors increase the risk for a number of factors that are predictors of the perpetration of sexual aggression, such as alcohol use and relationship dissatisfaction (Decker et al., 2018; Edwards et al., 2015).

Research suggests that higher levels of minority stress, especially internalized homonegativity, predict the perpetration of intimate partner violence, including sexual aggression (Decker et al., 2018; Edwards et al., 2015; Edwards & Sylaska, 2013).

Individual risk factors and prevention

In general, the field is further along in addressing individual risk factors compared to societal/community factors or relationship factors (DeGue et al., 2016). Several programs may impact these risk factors. However, the effectiveness of programs that focus on individual risk factors remains limited (DeGue et al., 2014) despite basis in the theories described before. Although limited effectiveness may be due to a number of factors such as not enough focus on skill building, the limited effectiveness of these individually focused prevention programs might be due, in part, to the lack of situating these programs within broader initiatives at the societal, community, and relationship levels (DeGue et al., 2014, 2016; Nation et al., 2003). Consistent with the social ecological model, the individual is nested within these broader systems (Centers for Disease Control and Prevention, 2013). Without addressing these risk factors at these outside levels of the social ecology, the effectiveness of individually focused program is likely diminished by broader influences. We describe ideas for multilevel initiatives in the conclusion.

Situational factors

Thus far, we have reviewed factors that are associated with sexual aggression more broadly. Situational factors, or factors related to the instance of possible sexual aggression, also play a role in instance of sexual aggression perpetration. One influential theory to explain situational factors is the routine activities theory. Routine activities theory is a criminology theory that explains incidence of crime. The theory states that incidence crime in a location is dependent on three factors: (1) presence of motivated perpetrators, (2) presence of potential victims, and (3) presence of effective guardians, or people to prevent crime. High presence of motivated perpetrators and suitable victims,

along with low presence of effective guardians, results in high crime incidence, a phenomenon known as criminogenic convergence. Criminogenic convergence creates “hot spots” for crimes in particular locations (Cohen & Felson, 1979). For instance, there is high criminogenic convergence for sexual assault on college campuses, although college campuses are in low criminogenic convergence for most other crimes (Schwartz & Pitts, 1995).

Much of the literature we review in earlier sections speaks to perpetrator motivation (e.g., hostility toward women). We have reviewed fewer studies speaking to presence of potential victims. In regard to sexual aggression in relationships, the I3 model helps explain situational factors. The I3 model stated that one piece of aggression is an instigation or the immediate environmental trigger (e.g., an argument; Finkel & Hall, 2018; Finkel & Slotter, 2009). The environmental trigger creates the second piece of criminogenic convergence, a potential victim. Regarding sexual aggression outside of relationships, much research has focused on the role of alcohol. Alcohol is overwhelmingly the most frequent drug involved in incapacitated sexual assault (Krebs, Lindquist, Warner, Fisher, & Martin, 2009). Alcohol may be purposefully administered by perpetrators or may be consumed by victims at their own volition (Testa & Livingston, 2009), creating the presence of a potential victim. Moreover, according to alcohol myopia theory, when intoxicated, individuals may pay more attention to salient environmental cues, limiting their ability to regulate impulses and consider the consequences of their actions (George & Stoner, 2000; Giancola, Duke, & Ritz, 2011; Steele & Josephs, 1990).

Much research has also focused on perpetrators’ own alcohol use (see Chapter 8 in this volume for an intensive review). The review by Tharp et al. (2013) states that alcohol may be a situational risk factor, but that the association between alcohol use and sexual aggression is complicated. Indeed, recent research also finds an association of binge drinking and other substance use with sexual aggression (Kingree & Thompson, 2015; Salazar et al., 2018; Zinzow & Thompson, 2015b). We refer readers to several reviews regarding this association (Abbey, 2011; Abbey, Wegner, Woerner, Pergram, & Pierce, 2014). In general, it is likely that alcohol interacts with existing risk factors (e.g., hostility toward women) and other aspects of the situation (e.g., the

victim is likely drinking as well; Abbey, 2011; Abbey et al., 2014). That said, some recent research does not find such interactions (Testa et al., 2015). Individuals who are higher on other risk factors may be more likely to perpetrate sexual aggression when they are under the influence of alcohol, but for individuals lower on other risk factors, alcohol use does not lead to sexual aggression (Abbey, 2011; Abbey et al., 2014). The drinking environment (e.g., barrooms, parties) may also facilitate sexual aggression because sexual aggression is normalized in these contexts (Becker & Tinkler, 2015; Sanchez, Santos, Sanudo, Carlini, & Martins, 2019).

Another important situational factor to consider in the perpetration of sexual aggression is the issue of effective guardians, or people to prevent crime, consistent with routine activities theory. The individuals who may be able to stop sexual aggression are usually called bystander (McMahon & Banyard, 2012). Research suggests that one-third of sexually violent events occur in the presence of a bystander (Lukacena, Reynolds-Tylus, & Quick, 2019; Planty, 2002). According to theories by bystander behavior, bystanders must (1) detect the event, (2) identify a situation as risky and in need of intervention, (3) take responsibility for intervention, (4) choose a course of action, and (5) intervene in the situation (Burn, 2009; Latane & Darley, 1970). Thus, to be effective guardians and thus reduce criminogenic convergence for sexual aggression, bystanders must not only recognize risky situations but also have the skills and willingness to intervene (Banyard et al., 2015). There is also theoretical speculation that in communities in which there are higher rates of overall bystander action to prevent sexual aggression, rates of sexual aggression may be lower (Banyard et al., 2015); this latter example highlights the ways in which various levels of the social ecology interact.

Conclusion

In this chapter, we reviewed risk and protective factors for sexual aggression across the social ecology, including individual, relationship, community, and societal factors. The application of this information for prevention programming is discussed in later chapters. Broadly, the social ecological model shows that multilevel prevention is key to

preventing sexual aggression. The most effective initiatives will be those that address reduce risk factors and bolster protective factors at multiple levels of the social ecology. In addition, considering prevention efforts, it is important to note that many of the factors listed in this review are also associated with bystander behavior, or whether or not an individual intervenes to stop sexual aggression (Banyard, 2011). As we note previously, bystander behavior is a key component for sexual aggression prevention (Basile et al., 2016). Preventionists can use this information to be strategic about programming initiatives that both prevent sexual aggression and increase bystander behavior by targeting shared risk and protective factors.

The current review of risk and protective factors across the social ecology demonstrates the importance of multilevel initiatives to prevent sexual aggression. These types of initiatives may take many forms. For example, while an individually focused prevention program is being implemented, social norms marketing interventions (e.g., social media campaigns, social norms marketing poster campaigns) could occur at the same time. In addition, community leaders implementing these programs could be involved in creating policies that are consistent with programming, such as addressing alcohol policies. These initiatives may also look different according to community. For example, at the school and college campuses, teachers, faculty, and administrators should be trained on bystander intervention, how to talk to youth about sexual aggression prevention, and should make consistent statements regarding their expectations for the community. These community leaders have norm-setting abilities. In schools and colleges, preventionists can harness the multiple environments of education (e.g., classroom, extracurricular activities, transportation, online environment) to transmit consistent prevention messaging (such as norms) and to build skills (such as social-emotional skills). We know little to date about which types of combinations of prevention approaches are most effective as well as the order in which they should be introduced within a community.

Although our shared understanding of risk and protective factors for sexual aggression is increasing, many areas for future research exist. Much of the research that we reviewed here is cross-sectional, thus failing to understand the temporal sequencing of risk and protective factors and sexual aggression. Certainly, a behavior such as

sexual aggression may influence other attitudes and behaviors (e.g., an individual who perpetrates sexual aggression may develop more accepting attitudes toward this behavior to reduce cognitive dissonance, especially if there are no consequences for the behavior). Determining the risk and protective factors preceding sexual aggression (or lack thereof) is important for prevention initiatives. Temporal sequencing requires rigorous longitudinal study design (e.g., multiple waves over time, daily diary studies) and advanced statistical methodology (e.g., multilevel and structural equation models). Other rigorous designs will also be beneficial to the study of nuanced study of sexual aggression. For example, social network analysis will help researchers understand how perpetration clusters within networks; person-centered designs will help researchers understand different types of perpetrators.

The study of types of perpetrators is increasingly important. Not all perpetrators are alike and risk and protective factors may be associated with some types of sexual aggression and not other types. More nuanced studies of sexual aggression, especially those using advanced statistical approaches such as latent class analysis, will elucidate these differences. Along these lines, it is important for prevention initiatives to determine if efforts work better for certain types of perpetrators more so than others. Other areas of research along these lines might include research on single-instance and multiple-instance perpetration, protective factors for sexual aggression desistance. Furthermore, more research is needed on sexual perpetration among diverse populations, such as sexual and gender minorities, and the ways in which forms of oppression increase risk for the perpetration of sexual aggression.

Additionally, future research might also ask questions about which risk and protective factors are more robust in predicting sexual aggression, and which are most amendable to change. Both these questions are key for prevention initiatives, which can then target these robust, amenable risk factors. In addition, prevention initiatives will benefit from an understanding of how sexual aggression intersects with other behaviors (e.g., other forms of violence and delinquency) as well as health issues (e.g., alcohol and drug use). Shared risk and protective factors can be targeted for comprehensive prevention programs, connecting sexual aggression research and prevention to other

fields. In addition, researchers might examine whether prevention initiatives for associated health issues such as alcohol and drug reduction programs also prevent sexual aggression.

Returning to the social ecology, more research is needed on outer levels of the social ecology, that is, community and society factors. This research is critical for multilevel prevention efforts. In addition, the field needs more research on interactions between the level of the ecology: a combination of societal, community, relationship, and individual factors causes sexual aggression, and understanding how these factors interact will help preventionists design multilevel initiatives. Through rigorous research on risk and protective factors and through evaluation of initiatives that address these factors as outlined in later chapters, sexual aggression is preventable.

In sum, the prevention of sexual aggression is a critical public health priority. Risk and protective factors for sexual aggression exist at multiple layers of the social ecological model, as reviewed herein. Although our understanding of risk and protective factors for sexual aggression has increased over the past few decades, there are still numerous unanswered questions. We hope this review will provoke interest and discussion in answering these questions, which ultimately could help to reduce if not eradicate sexual aggression from our society.

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