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Bryana H. French  
*University of St. Thomas, Minnesota*

Helen A. Neville  
*University of Illinois at Urbana-Champaign*

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What Is Nonconsensual Sex?
Young Women Identify Sources of Coerced Sex

Bryana H. French¹ and Helen A. Neville²

Abstract
Extending the American Psychological Association (APA) report on the Sexualization of Girls, this study investigated how young women identified sources of coerced sex. Findings from three focus groups with 25 Black and White adolescent women uncovered a perceived overarching force that “pushed” them to have sex before they felt ready. Participants identified four domains of coerced sex: (a) Sociocultural Context, (b) Internalized Sexual Scripts, (c) Partner Manipulation of Sexual Scripts, and (d) Developmental Status. Coerced sex was a complex system consisting of cultural, peer, and internal messages that create pressures to engage in sexual activities. Future implications for research and practice are presented.

Keywords
sexual coercion, sexual scripts, girls, women

Young women are routinely targeted for sexual coercion and exploitation. Nearly one in five women experience sexual assault in her lifetime (Black et al., 2011) and more than 50% of sexual assault survivors are below the age of 20 (Catalano, 2005). The sexual objectification and exploitation of girls and women is also pervasive; they are grossly overrepresented in sexually objectifying or sexualized images across multiple forms of media (American Psychological Association [APA], Task Force on the Sexualization of Girls [TFSG], 2010). According to the APA TFSG (2010), girls are sexualized in three contextual spheres: (a) societal and cultural norms, expectations,

¹University of St. Thomas, Minneapolis, MN, USA
²University of Illinois, Champaign, IL, USA

Corresponding Author:
Bryana H. French, Graduate School of Professional Psychology, University of St. Thomas, 1000 LaSalle Ave., MOH 217, Minneapolis, MN 55403, USA.
Email: Bryana.French@StThomas.edu
and values; (b) interpersonal peer and group encouragement; and (c) self-sexualization, where girls internalize messages to be sexual.

The present study builds on the research introduced in the TFSG by exploring young women’s identification of sources of coerced sex. We were interested in comparing the TFSG report and potential connections between sexualization (i.e., the representation of girls and women as sexual objects for the gaze of heterosexual males) and coerced sex (i.e., nonconsensual sexual interactions). As indicated in the TFSG report, girls and women are sexualized at an early age through larger social systems such as the media and more immediate systems such as family and peers. We argue that the social environment in which girls are sexualized—for example, posing little girls in sexual ways in magazines—is part of a larger culture in which girls and women are viewed as sexual objects. The sexualization of girls manifests in sexual scripts or roles that males and females play to conform to gender expectations. The objectification of girls and women in society is the context in which individuals and groups compel girls, and later women, to engage in unwanted sexual acts. We were interested in understanding how young women conceptualize coerced sex or forced sexual activity in the absence of consent.

Research currently lacks a discussion of how girls identify sources of coerced sex, expanding beyond traditional definitions of rape. To address the gaps in the literature, we adopted an ecological framework to explore young women’s conceptualization of coerced sex. To help contextualize this study, we briefly outline the ecological framework guiding the study, and discuss unique contexts of adolescent sexual development and the potential impact on sources of coerced sex.

An Ecological Framework of Coerced Sex

In this study, we were particularly interested in the potential influence of sexual scripts and social context on young women’s understanding of coerced sex. We ground our work in an ecological or contextual framework because it allowed us to place coerced sex within a larger social context. By doing so, we believe this helps us better understand the complexity of coerced sex, as opposed to situating the phenomena solely within an individual or interpersonal level. Building on ecological models in the sexual assault recovery literature (Campbell, Dworkin, & Cabral, 2009; Neville & Heppner, 1999), we assert that sexual coercion is embedded within larger macro and exosystems that sexualize girls and objectify women through the media and other social processes (see APA, 2010). These distal processes create cultural norms about gendered expectations that girls and women should seek out (sexual) attention from males. The pervasive sexualization and gender socialization influence all aspects of society, including family interactions, peer relations, and girls’ and women’s beliefs about themselves, and they manifest themselves in multiple microsystems such as nightclubs, schools, and community. Sexual scripts reflect the broader cultural norms about sexual relations in society—and the specific contexts such as the media, family, neighborhood, and school, deliver and reinforce these messages (Simon & Gagnon, 1969, 1984). We were particularly interested in understanding whether specific
Competing Coerced Sex: Defining Essential Terms

In this section, we provide a discussion of the debates in the scholarly literature about what constitutes coerced sex and nonconsensual sex. The lack of agreement underscores the complexities and ambiguity surrounding these terms among experts and lay people alike. Although we situate the review in the sexual coercion literature, we use the broader term coerced sex because it provides for inclusion of both nonconsensual and compliant sexual activities, which are outlined below. Definitions of sexual coercion in the psychology literature are inconsistent. Sexual coercion is often defined as sexual intercourse due to continual arguments, pressure, or abused authority (Koss, Gidycz, & Wisniewski, 1987), but has also been defined as an overarching term to refer to any nonconsensual sexual experience (e.g., Adams-Curtis & Forbes, 2004). Though varied, all definitions of sexual coercion entail a person or persons engaging in some level of force or coercion to have nonconsensual sex with another person.

The term nonconsensual also is less clearly defined. Whether “nonconsent” refers to stated refusal or merely an omission of verbal consent is not clear or agreed upon, and thus contention arises when identifying sufficient expression of consent (see Lim & Roloff, 1999, for a thorough review). Muehlenhard, Powch, Phelps, and Giusti (1992) outlined criteria of sexual coercion (specifically, rape) used by various scholars to establish nonconsent. According to their review, some authors relied on the victims’ state of mind (e.g., against her will), whereas others specified behavioral responses (e.g., fights, cries, or pleas), and others did not operationalize consent at all. Later, Muehlenhard and Rogers (1998) discussed the complexities associated with “consent”; these complexities involve issues of desire and intention and depend on the context in which the action occurs as well as the degree to which the individuals involved adhere to traditional sexual scripts, such that men are sexual aggressors and women passive recipients. For example, a partner may want sex but not the consequences of sex (e.g., sexually transmitted disease or tainted reputation) and thus resists sex even though desire is present. As these scholars suggest, establishing rape by determining whether the act was “nonconsensual” is particularly troublesome, given the lack of clarity around what constitutes consent and the presumption that rape occurs only when nonconsent is verbalized.

Although sexual consent implies a desire to engage in sexual activity, many women express consent when sex is unwanted, also known as sexual acquiescence or compliance (O’Sullivan, 2005). Sexual compliance occurs when individuals willingly comply with sexual activity, even though they lack desire to do so (O’Sullivan & Allgeier, 1998). Studies have found that approximately 40% of racially diverse high school girls (Blythe, Fortenberry, Temkit, Tu, & Orr, 2006) and college women (Vannier & O’Sullivan, 2009) report sexual compliance with unwanted sex. In Vannier and O’Sullivan’s (2009) diary and in-depth interview study, men were more likely than
women to be initiators of compliant sexual activity, and sexual compliance was less enjoyable for the noninitiating partner compared with the partner who initiated the sexual activity. Moreover, sexual compliance often occurred after a history of pressure within a heterosexual romantic relationship, suggesting the implicit connection between past sexual coercion and future sexual acquiescence. For example, Katz and Tirone (2010) found that undergraduate women who were coerced by a partner were more likely to sexually comply with that partner’s unwanted sexual advances a month later than noncoerced counterparts.

The issue of sexual compliance or acquiescence adds a layer of complexity to researchers’ interpretations of sexual coercion. A few researchers view sexual compliance as a component—albeit a lesser one—of sexual coercion (Gavey, 2005; Muehlenhard & Schrag, 1991), whereas many researchers view it as a separate but related issue from sexual coercion (see Katz & Tirone, 2010). The term coerced sex is flexible enough to include both sexual coercion as traditionally defined and sexual compliance. At this point, there are only a few studies that investigate the perception of coerced sex (i.e., sexual coercion and/or sexual compliance) from the perspective of young women. Initial scholarship in this area of investigation provides descriptions of conditions in which unwanted sex occurs. On the basis of interviews with heterosexual women, Gavey (2005) argued that dominant heterosexual discourse creates conditions where women might have unwanted sex with men because it seems like a nonnegotiable act or she does not feel empowered to question his advances. Focusing specifically on college women, Bay-Cheng and Eliseo-Arras (2008) found that participants reported consenting to unwanted sex to please their partner and often blamed themselves for unwanted sex by believing they sent mixed signals. Comparatively, few women in the study placed blame on the men for the unwanted sexual experiences; instead, participants normalized and excused men’s sexually aggressive behavior. Thus, coerced sex occurred in intimate relationships in which college women viewed these experiences as normative.

Coerced Sex, Sexual Scripts, and Social Contexts

Sexual Scripts and the Relation to Coerced Sex

Traditional sexual scripts play an important role in understanding young women’s experiences with coerced sex. Sexual scripts are social roles that are influenced by gendered and developmental norms to engage in relationships and sexual behavior (Simon & Gagnon, 1969, 1984); essentially, scripts serve as loose social guidelines informing what is considered “normal” for sexual encounters. Gender role expectations are enacted in dominant sexual scripts. The dominant adolescent sexual scripts are heteronormative in which girls and young women are encouraged to yearn for love and commitment from males and are discouraged from being sexual, whereas boys are encouraged to be sexually assertive and have successful heterosexual experiences with girls and women (Simon & Gagnon, 1969). As an example of this interrelated dynamic, a common assumption is that women play “hard to get” with men and secretly want
sex. As a result, women say “no” when they mean “yes.” In contrast, there is the view that it is socially “acceptable” for males to try harder for sexual activity to occur. At the same time, expectations of femininity encourage girls and women to be sexy for male desire, to meet males’ needs at the expense of their own desire (Gavey, 2005; Holland, Ramazanoglu, Sharpe, & Thomson, 2004). Some scholars have poignantly connected sexual scripting to various forms of coerced sex. Gavey (2005) made the compelling argument that women often do not feel they have sexual agency due to dominant scripts about sex. She discussed a blurred line between sexual choice and coercion and stated:

I am concerned about times when women don’t feel that they have a choice; when the sense of obligation and pressure is too strong and/or the costs are too high. . . . All raise questions about how we understand sexual choice, freedom, and consent; and how subtle forms of sexual pressure and sexual coercion may be fostered through the invisible networks of power that operate in heterosexual sex. (Gavey, 2005, p. 10)

As Gavey suggests, the underlying discourse in heterosexual sex scripts is often one of pervasive power where women feel obligated to appease men’s sexual drive.

Over the past 20 years, sexual attitudes about girls and women have included both messages about restricting one’s sexual desires/activities and a performance of hypersex(uality), not for their own desire but for male pleasure and arousal (Tolman, 2005). The concept of self-objectification is sometimes used in the literature to capture the latter process (see Szymanski, Moffitt, & Carr, 2011, for a thorough review and discussion). The sexualization of girls in mass media is closely related in many ways to the sexual performance for male desire, as opposed to the expression of sexual desire from the vantage point of young women. Moreover, an impossible duality is created, as girls are encouraged to be sexually provocative and desired, but not sexually loose and thus unwanted.

**Context of Coerced Sex and Adolescence**

Given the pervasive nature of sexual victimization among adolescent women, understanding the context of adolescence and emerging adulthood as it relates to coerced sex is particularly important. There are several factors influencing sexual decision making among adolescents, including a desire for intimacy, perceived relationship safety, problem solving skills, family and peer influences, concern about pregnancy and sexually transmitted diseases, and cognitive ability (see Fantasia, 2008, for a review). Adolescent sexual experiences can be marked with uncertainty, primarily because of changes that come with puberty and gendered sexual socialization; thus, unwanted sexual experiences, and sexual coercion in particular, become more likely. In Martin’s (1996) interviews with 55 14- to 19-year-olds, the girls in the study consistently reported that boys pressured them to have sexual activity. These coercive tactics included getting mad at them for refusing to have sex, goading them to have sex, and threatening to end the relationship. The boy participants also discussed ways they used
various tactics to coerce sex or to gain sexual compliance, including false professions of love and pressuring consent.

College environments also provide unique context for sexual scripting. One example of this is the relational versus recreational scripts found in “hook-up” culture, or brief sexual encounters that are outside of intimate relationships. In Berntson, Hoffman, and Luff’s (2014) study of more than 600 college students, women were less likely than men to engage in recreational hookups, but there were no gender differences in relational hookups. The authors discussed the gendered context of hooking up for women who more often engaged in them to pursue relationships, yet also felt a loss of respect and psychological distress as the hookup script offers fewer advantages for women than it does for men. For example, the hookup script has been found to relate to sexual victimization in college women as Flack and colleagues (2007) found that 78% of unwanted sexual experiences occurred while hooking up. Other studies found that risk behaviors in high school increased risk behaviors in the first semester of college, including hooking up, sexual partners, and heavy drinking, which were strongly predictive of sexual victimization in the first year of college (Testa, Hoffman, & Livingston, 2010). Given particular sexual developmental processes, exploring diverse adolescent contexts, such as those occurring in high school and college, can aid in a fuller understanding of coerced sex and its relation to sexual scripting for young women.

Rationale and Purpose

Despite inconsistency in concrete definitions, sexual coercion typically refers to verbal and/or physical tactics in some form to have sex with a nonconsenting partner. Sexual coercion and coerced sex, more broadly, may encompass much more than direct tactics for young women. Understanding how adolescent young women identify sources of coerced sex and the relation to sexual scripts and compliance can offer a nuanced notion of sexual victimization and exploitation. This line of inquiry complicates the boundaries of coerced sex to uncover the mechanisms that influence unwanted sexual experiences among adolescent girls. Our study aimed to advance the psychological violence literature by moving beyond investigator-defined constructs and incorporating young women-centered understandings of coerced sex. We expand the literature in this study by including participants in mid-to-late adolescence to explore adolescent contexts surrounding young women’s conceptualization of coerced sex, while using a social constructivist approach to uncover subjective realities. Consistent both with the TFSG and an ecological perspective, another purpose of the project was to place the young women’s definitions within the context of messages received from larger societal mechanisms such as the media, as well as the influence of their immediate environments such as home and school. This study sought to answer the following research questions:

**Research Question 1:** What are the range and boundaries of adolescent young women’s understanding of the sources of coerced sex?
Research Question 2: Does social context, including sexual scripts (or sexualization messages), and adolescent/emerging adult school context (i.e., high school and college) inform how adolescent young women identify coerced sex?

Method

Research Design

Social constructivism assumes that realities are multiple constructions based on social experiences, and thus no “true” reality exists in an absolute sense. Following Muehlenhard and Kimes’s (1999) call for social constructionist perspectives in sexual violence research, this study centers on young women’s voices by using a focus group methodology to explore multiple subjective understandings of coerced sex. By adopting this method, we aimed to have participants express their perspectives of coerced sex while limiting investigator-imposed definitions. However, participant perspectives influence focus group discussions. Thus, this methodology also allowed us to consider ways in which the social context, including school settings, friendship circles, and the media, may have informed participants’ viewpoints. We purposely selected focus group methodology to understand individual as well as group perspectives on coerced sex. Focus groups are also consistent with feminist research that uses natural social contexts and shifts the balance of power by reducing the researcher’s influence (Madriz, 2000). Finally, focus groups offer particular advantages in sex-related research, including access to language of respondents in talking about sexual behaviors, providing conditions for a comfortable environment to enhance the discussion of sex including shared experiences, agreement to elaborate on, and disagreements to lead to further defending views (Frith, 2000). This method has been particularly fruitful in sensitive discussions with young women (Overlien, Aronsson, & Hyden, 2005). Though focus groups offer benefits for adolescent research and reducing power dynamics, they also have limitations; participants may not have been forthcoming with their responses due to fear of judgment or desire to confirm to the group. In addition, given the focus on coerced sex, participants who were survivors of sexual violence may have chosen not to participate in the discussion.

Participants

A total of 25 students participated in one of three focus groups from three schools in a Midwestern state. Four participants were sophomores (two Black biracial and two White) at a high school located in a small town with an enrollment of less than 800; the majority of students at the school were White (56% White, 27% Black). Fifteen participants (all Black) were juniors and seniors at a magnet school located in a large urban area; the school was large, with more than 2,000 students, and racially diverse (30% White, 26% Black). Six participants (three Black and three White) were traditionally aged undergraduate college students at a large, predominantly White (62% White, 6% Black) university with more than 41,000 students. Additional demographic
data were not collected to achieve consent for focus groups on coerced sex and to protect anonymity.

Diverse ranges of public and private high schools were invited to participate in the study. However, given the sensitive nature of the topic, only two schools consented to data collection at their sites, and recruitment was limited to a selected group of students. An assistant principal and guidance counselor identified participants in the small town high school, namely, those who fit criteria (i.e., female, spoke fluent English), were available at the time of data collection, assented and provided parental consent. We only recruited from one class at the urban high school; working with a teacher at the high school, we were able to recruit girls in her African American psychology class. University participants were recruited through a request for participants in psychology and African American studies classes.

**Interview Protocol**

The interview protocol was grounded in extant literature on adolescent sexual experiences and consisted of seven broad questions to guide the discussion. The questions were carefully constructed to assess participants’ understandings and perceptions of sexual coercion. Sample questions included the following: “What do you think of when you hear the term sexual coercion?” “Are there different tactics or methods that boys and girls use to pressure someone to have sex or engage in sex acts?” and “Do you think sexual coercion is a problem at your school?” We did not ask specifically about heterosexual experiences but instead allowed participants to guide the discussion with regard to gender and sexual orientation. Although the questions included the term *sexual coercion*, participants’ responses reflected a broad understanding of sexual coercion and included all forms of unwanted or coerced sex.

**Trustworthiness**

The authors are two Black biracial and Black American women who have experience conducting research examining coerced sex among racially diverse adolescents and adults. At the time of data collection, the first author was a doctoral student and the second author a professor in counseling psychology and African American Studies. We have been actively involved in coerced sex awareness raising and prevention, particularly among women and men of color, and have worked closely with university and community organizations. The first author served as the primary facilitator for each of the three focus groups. The second author cofacilitated the small town focus group, and a White advanced psychology undergraduate student cofacilitated the university focus group. Both authors consider themselves Black feminists and thus believe that social identities such as race, class, and gender influence girls’ and women’s lived experiences. Consistent with feminist approaches, we made efforts to provide a safe space for the girls and young women to discuss their impressions of the sensitive material.
Various forms of trustworthiness in qualitative methods were sought (see Morrow, 2005). Member checking occurred during the focus groups; facilitators asked participants to elaborate on their statements, summarized their statements verbally, and asked for feedback to establish mutual understandings. At the conclusion of the focus groups, informants were given the opportunity to reflect on the topics discussed and provide additional information they considered important that had not been previously discussed. Peer debriefing sessions occurred with researchers who have expertise in sexual assault and/or feminist qualitative research. This forum served to hold the researchers accountable by clarifying that the themes identified from the focus groups are an accurate representation of the data. The first author engaged in reflexivity throughout the research process by journaling her feelings of frustration, curiosity, and excitement and consulted with the second author and other colleagues. Often times, the second author challenged potential biases and blind spots of the first author, which offered richness and complexity to the study. The first and second authors worked together in defining themes and making sense of participant statements for a collaborative analysis, while also thinking critically about how the findings connect with the extant literature.

**Procedures**

Institutional Review Board Human Subjects approval was received prior to data collection. Focus group procedures and protocol followed recommendations by Krueger (1994). We aimed to have focus groups between four and eight individuals; however, given the difficulty in scheduling a focus group discussion on a sensitive subject such as sexual attitudes and pressure, we had to conduct one large focus group of 15. Focus groups lasted approximately 90 min; all focus groups were conducted in classroom settings and were audiotaped for transcription purposes. Focus group members were asked to identify a pseudonym to use prior to speaking initially so that their voice could be identified on the transcription. Light refreshments were provided to create an informal and comfortable atmosphere. Participants below 18 years of age were required to provide parental consent for participation and also youth assent at the time of the focus group discussion. Focus group participants received a US$10 gift certificate as a token of appreciation for their participation.

**Data Analysis**

Data were transcribed and checked for accuracy by undergraduate female research assistants, following transcription quality guidelines by Polland (2002). A total of 219 pages of text was generated from the focus group transcriptions. Focus group data were analyzed primarily using thematic analysis (Ely, Anzul, Friedman, Garner, & McCormack-Steinmetz, 1991), while incorporating analytical techniques from dimensional analysis that provides a systematic approach to qualitative data analysis (Strauss & Corbin, 1990). Dimensional analysis is an analytic tool used by researchers who want to explore how participants define and make meaning out of complex social
phenomena; the analysis requires the researchers to stay close to the data, compare and contrast responses across interviews, and search for patterns that capture the interrelations between and among dimensions or components of the data (Bryant & Charmaz, 2012).

To analyze the data, we first familiarized ourselves with it by rereading transcripts and repeatedly listening to audio recordings while taking note of initial ideas, assumptions, and reactions. In the second step, we conducted open coding, where data were examined word-for-word and line-by-line to create initial summaries of text and identify significant statements. The third step consisted of axial coding, where initial themes were identified by creating categories and subcategories that explored various dimensions, contexts, and consequences of a given concept (e.g., “having sex to keep a boyfriend”). From there, we created categories and discrete parts consisting of words, phrases, sentences, or paragraphs that described participant perspectives. Categories and subcategories were grouped by including perspectives that seemed similar to one another and were given initial labels for coerced sex definitions and perspectives. We reviewed categories using visual thematic maps to turn back to the data for identification of new or revised themes using a constant comparative approach. Categories were placed near each other on the thematic map as they seemed to relate to each other and were given size based on their relative salience to the discussion (i.e., importance or emphasis given by the participant, frequency of discussion, implications for coerced sex definitions). Themes were initially created independently for each focus group with unique thematic maps. Then these data were reviewed to identify broad themes for comparison and contrast across focus groups. Throughout this process, codes and categories were reviewed and revised until no new codes or categories emerged for a final set of parsimonious themes that best represented participant perspectives. Data were analyzed to explore themes related to coerced sex conceptualizations and the potential influence of social contexts in shaping these beliefs. Ongoing consultations with members of the peer debriefing team were had as a way to hold us accountable to the data and confirm accurate representation within the themes.

**Results**

We uncovered a meta-theme that captured the adolescent young women’s understanding of coerced sex—*It’s a Push*. This meta-theme explains how participants saw coerced sex as an overarching force that “pushed” them to have sex before they felt ready or interested. Within this meta-theme, young women felt *pushed* from multiple sources to have sex. *It’s a Push* is best described in the following quote:

> I think it’s more of a forced thing because I don’t think anybody really wants to until somebody pushes them to say “Oh come on, it’s not that bad” and stuff. And then they do it [have sex] but then . . . I don’t really think . . . they wanna do it so they tell somebody that they want to do it. I think it’s more of a push. (Lucky Charms, White, Small Town High School)
In this quote, Lucky Charms underscored ways that young women feel pressured to have sex, without developing, or perhaps being allowed to develop, their own sense of desire or agency. The participants throughout this study described this push of coerced sex coming from several facets in the larger society, among their peer groups, within relationships, and within themselves. Participants identified four primary ways they felt pushed to have sex across an ecological spectrum. We identified themes based on participant perspectives, while also integrating theoretical foundations, resulting in four themes defined and described in the following: (a) Sociocultural Context Shapes Coerced Sex; (b) Internalized Sexual Scripts as a Form of Coerced Sex, (c) Partner Manipulation of Sexual Scripts, and (d) Developmental Status as Sexually Coercive.

**Sociocultural Context Shapes Coerced Sex**

Broader social factors influenced a large part of the “push” that girls felt to have sex without a genuine desire to do so. This theme was defined as the broader environment that served as a source of coerced sex; girls and women described sex as being both normalized and overexposed. The following exchange highlights this:

*Sasha:* It’s around you a lot so it will draw you in cuz your environment is constant, it’s always there and you start thinking about it and you might find yourself doin all types of stuff . . . Or you could like find yourself turn into something that you’re interested in all of a sudden because [sex] is always in.

*Alexis:* I get what she’s tryin’ to say that it’s around you so much that it feels like it’s normal ALL of a sudden.

As this quote highlights, Sasha found herself interested in things she did not expect to interest her because of exposure to sex. Alexis felt like this normalized certain behaviors. Within this theme, environmental and cultural expectations for sex permeated young women’s sexual interactions. For high school women, sociocultural pressure was most salient from the media, whereas for college women, the unique cultural context of parties and nightclubs created this atmosphere.

**Sexual overexposure in mass media encourages unwanted sex.** The influence of mass media on unwanted or coerced sex was a core subtheme for the all-Black Urban Central High group. This subtheme is defined by the overexposure to sex young women in this focus group felt, and ways it influenced their sexual attitudes and behavior. From their perspective, this exposure to sex in the media and in popular culture seemed, at times, more salient than pressure by an individual to have sex. Exposure to sex through television shows, movies, and the radio seemed pervasive, yet also intrigued participants, as the conversation at Urban Central High describes:

*Sasha:* I think it comes from . . . What you see on T.V., what you hear on the radio, movies that come out. Everything that’s around you, and now,
a LOT of young people are really interested. . . . And you see it all the time and you find yourself doin’ what everybody else is doin’.

**Shay:** I just think we’ve become so desensitized to certain things? Where, like, everyone else was saying it’s acceptable. Things that, you know, you might have been taught was wrong, you personally may believe are wrong. Because you’re constantly exposed to it—whether it be through the media or through your friends—it becomes ok . . . “It” meaning sex, drugs, whatever.

As highlighted in this exchange, young women reflected on ways their attitudes toward sex changed as a result of the perceived overexposure to sex. Sasha’s statement that she finds people doing what everyone else is doing and Shay’s comment about the normalization of engaging in sex or taking drugs imply a social expectation for sexual engagement as opposed to a conscious personal decision. This theme related closely to the sexualization of girls in the media from TFSG and how this served as its own source of coerced sex. Participants discussed ways that girls internalized these broader sociocultural messages and, in a sense, complied with the expectation to be sexual. Absent from the discussion were explicit statements about any potential positive effects of these messages on the way the participants viewed sex, whether consensual or nonconsensual.

**Bars and nightclubs are spaces for unwanted sex.** Comparatively, women in college identified the atmosphere of parties as particularly predatory and unsafe for women. This subtheme of *bars and nightclubs are spaces for unwanted sex* identifies social environments that created a sexually coercive atmosphere and influenced sexual compliance, particularly when coupled with alcohol use and parties. Moving from the general values espoused about having sex in popular culture, this subtheme identifies the norms and behaviors within specific environmental spaces that allow men to sexualize women. Within bars and nightclubs, women discussed ways that men take advantage of the dark environment, close contact, and alcohol use, for their own sexual arousal and use it as an opportunity to engage in physical sexual contact, often unwanted. Mary began this part of the discussion by stating, “They have some bars down here where they actually like feel you up while you’re in the bar.” Jane followed-up with her observations of this dynamic:

Let’s say you’re just dancing with your friends and then it’s like some really scrayny gross guy comes up and starts grinding from behind you . . . it’s just weird. It’s not like they come up in front of you and start dancing . . . that’s more human. Like from behind it’s just like Chester the molester.

To many of the women in this group, women’s bodies were deemed sexually available to men in this social context, and the norm within a club culture was to relate in sexually provocative ways, despite the lack of consent to do so. It was couched in the expectation of dancing and flirting and thus a normalized part of the social and cultural context in nightclubs.
Internalized Sexual Scripts as a Form of Coerced Sex

Many participants internalized the “romantic love” sexual script, which in turn became its own source of coerced sex and the overarching push. In each of the focus groups, participants indicated that young women feel pressure to be in a relationship with a male and thus acquiesce to sexual advances to please a male partner. Heterosexual scripts and gendered expectations intersected with the pressure young women faced from boys/men as well as other girls and women. Participants expressed the belief that to keep a boy or man interested, girls and women have to be sexual regardless of their own desire, complying with his specific sexual advances or her own expectation of what boys/men desire.

Participants discussed gender role expectations in the negotiation of engaging in sexual activities, whether wanted or unwanted. The following exchange from Rural Township High School highlights the heterosexual feminine script of male desire and ways girls felt compelled to meet boys’ perceived sexual needs.

**Riku:** Like if you were going out with him and, you told him that you wouldn’t have sex with him so he like broke up with you. And then you’ll probably start wearing sluttier things and like short skirts and you’ll come to school and then make him think that now you’ll want to have sex with him to get him back.

**Lucky Charms:** Yeah people think that if . . . that’s the only thing that they want and you really like that person then they think that that’s what they have to do to keep that person. Like if he says I want you to have sex with me and she says no and he breaks up with her then she’s gonna think that that’s the only way I can be with him and I really like him so that’s what I’m gonna do.

Girls in this discussion felt an obligation to comply with perceived boys’ interests by presenting in more sexual ways and engaging in sexual behavior, without an intrinsic desire to do so.

The traditional dichotomous script that boys want sex and girls want love was expressed by younger participants. From the perspective of some of the young women, boys and men were interested in sex and they felt, for girls and women to receive emotional closeness, they must provide sexual intimacy. This gender dichotomous sexual script was an active force in the ways participants defined coerced sex. Cassie’s comment, from Urban Central High, illustrated this dichotomy:

**Girls have that emotional attachment. And guys get more attached, generally, from the physical attachment . . . so you feel like in order for your relationship to grow that’s where pressure comes in making you feel like you need to go farther just, since they’re satisfying you emotionally and you satisfy him physically.**

Sexual scripts and the struggle to obtain heterosexual love or emotional intimacy had implications for relationships between young women, especially in the high
schools. Participants talked about a perceived competition among young women to vie for the affections of boys. As Rainbow, from Small Town High, described,

A lot of people in the school like, if they like your boyfriend, you have to compete with them to KEEP your boyfriend. Because they, they’ll go up to your boyfriend and touch him and rub him and, hug him, and flirt with him.

Being fully cognizant of this potential sexual currency, Rainbow saw ways that girls used their sexuality to try to entice boys who were already involved in relationships.

At the same time, part of this internalization led young women in the college focus group to believe that women did not have the power to say no to sex, but men did. There was more discussion of sexual desire and less of the binary gender roles for college participants. Jennifer, a White woman at the University of the Midwest, described this dynamic:

Society’s convention is that men always want sex and they have a high sex drive. . . . From what I’ve, kind of experienced, women will never turn down like their partner’s sex. I’ve kind of had a lot of frustration and kind of annoyance where the women want sex but then the guy has no problem saying like “no” or being like “no I’m not in the mood.”

In this quote, Jennifer also discusses her own sexual agency and ways that women’s sexual desires are potentially squelched as men are perceived to have more power in refusing sex than women do. This woman expressed frustration that women often feel compelled to comply or acquiesce to sexual requests from their partners despite their lack of desire to do so. For her, boys and men seemed to lack the same sense of obligation that girls and women felt to comply with the sexual needs of their partner.

**Partner Manipulation of Sexual Scripts**

Not only did participants identify ways that girls and women internalize sexual scripts, they also discussed ways that partners manipulated these scripts as well. This partner manipulation served as an additional source of coerced sex. In the high school groups, participants perceived manipulation as a part of verbal coercion that was the most pervasive tactic used to coerce sex; this was particularly salient for high school participants. Young women discussed a system of manipulation in which boys were fully cognizant of sexual scripts of romantic love and the desire to have a heterosexual relationship. Thus, participants believed males used this knowledge to manipulate sex from their partner, as this exchange from Rural Township High School demonstrates:

Rainbow: Or they’re just telling you they are in love with you so you’ll have sex with them because you know, they know that you think it’s right, it’s ok for you to have sex with him.
Riku: And then if they don’t like it or whatever, they’re just using it for that 
time being. They’ll probably leave you in the next couple days.

The fear that a young man would leave his partner for another person if a young 
woman did not engage in sexual intercourse was a particularly salient manipulation 
tactic described. As Tracy, a Black student from Urban Central High stated, “He said 
that he talk(ed) to this girl, because . . . she would do [sexual] things for him that I 
wouldn’t do.” Participants also placed sexual coercion within the context of abusive 
relationships, which is consistent with Gavey’s (2005) and Holland et al.’s (2004) 
conceptualizations of heterosexual scripting, compliance, and the culture of rape. As 
Jennifer from the University of the Midwest stated:

Not realizing that you’re in an unhealthy relationship it kind of plays on the whole 
manipulation factor . . . because the reason they don’t realize they’re in an unhealthy 
relationship is because that partner has like manipulated them . . . and their emotions and 
their mind into not realizing that the truth, and they’re kind of completely like shut out 
from reality. And, therefore they feel trapped and that there’s no real way out and they 
don’t actually realize the extent of their abuse. Whether it’s mental, sexual, or physical… 
They’re kind of trapped in this very manipulative kind of cycle.

Jennifer discussed the lack of sexual agency women can experience due to manipula-
tive dynamics over the course of the relationship. The threat of losing a male partner 
seemed to create a fear that led girls to comply with unwanted sexual behaviors to 
keep their relationship.

Sexual precedence was used as another sexually coercive tactic. Partners were 
described as manipulating and intimidating sexual activity by using previous sexual 
experiences within a relationship. Rainbow described this dynamic in the following 
quote:

She’s feeling guilty because she let him touch her. And then like, if it happens again she 
doesn’t want him to touch her and she’s like pushing away and stuff like that, he can get 
really mad or something. And most guys they turn abusive sometimes.

In this example, a sense of entitlement to girls’ and women’s bodies was expressed, 
where males felt entitled to have sex with young women who were believed or known 
to be sexually active with them or someone else. As Bobbi Jo, a White student from 
Small Town High, stated,

You don’t really have to have sex for people to spread rumors like that. Like there’s 
other—like giving head. If you give one guy that, then they’re going to tell all their 
friends and then everybody else is going to try to do that with you.

As this quote suggests, boys were perceived to manipulate knowledge of girls’ previ-
ous sexual experiences to pressure and coerce sex, in part by engaging in rumor 
spreading (i.e., sharing sexual information about girls to peers in school, regardless of
its factual accuracy). This also seemed to manipulate sexual double standards for girls and women. Men threatened to spread rumors about girls’ sexual behaviors, with the presumed knowledge that it would be damaging to their reputations. However, the threat to reputations of male participants in these behaviors seemed to be of little concern. This contributed to the sexual push participants described by compounding past sexual experiences with expectations from new partners and peers to engage in similar behavior.

Comparatively, alcohol-facilitated coerced sex was the most pervasive tactic described by college participants. Women at the University of the Midwest spent considerable time discussing the role that alcohol and parties played in their understandings of coerced sex. Men were considered sexually predatory at parties or bars as participants observed men getting women purposefully intoxicated to then take sexual advantage of them. Mary, a Black woman, described, “They seek [a woman] out fast like, ‘You’re drunk? Ok well I’m about to be around her cuz I know she acts like this, she’s gonna open up more so let’s bring alcohol in here.’” This quote demonstrates a perceived sexual passivity that participants observed men expect from women. Many participants viewed alcohol as a coercive tactic because alcohol consumption may influence a person’s judgment and ability to say “no” or their willingness to acquiesce to sex. The use of alcohol as a coercive strategy was also conceptualized as an excuse to relieve the perpetrator of responsibility. As Nicole, a Black woman, stated:

I think like there’s two ways that guys can like use alcohol to . . . get sex or whatever? I think it’s like either they can get the girl drunk or they can get themselves drunk as well because . . . they can use that as an excuse like, “Oh I was just drunk so I wouldn’t have normally done that.”

Within this subtheme, the college atmosphere that normalized drinking and conflated sex and alcohol use served as a particularly pervasive coerced sex tactic among university participants, though some women in this discussion grappled with the notion that an individual who is intoxicated cannot consent.

There was considerable debate between participants about whether alcohol was regarded as a sexual coercion tool. Some women believed that the act of having sex while intoxicated was sexually coercive given the inability to fully consent when drunk. Other participants believed that women were aware of their behavior when intoxicated and used this as an excuse to engage in sexual behaviors they did not feel comfortable doing when sober. The following conversation illustrates these conflicting perspectives:

**Claire:** I don’t feel that if you’re drunk that you can consent. . . . I just don’t think that you can. I mean. Science has proven that your inhibitions are down. You can’t make important decisions . . .

**Nicole:** I disagree kind of ’cause I think that just because you’re drunk, you’re still a little aware of what’s going on. And you, like I’m not
saying that it’s ok to get raped, but you did put yourself in that position and if you know that you give in easily then you should obviously like surround yourself with other friends and stuff. And also, I don’t think . . . you’re not aware of what you’re doing . . . Alcohol just brings out something that you already wanted to do but you never like had the nerve to do it . . .

Jennifer: I agree with Nicole because, um, people use alcohol I think as like an excuse? Like I said about the guys . . . basically there’s a lot of people that drink alcohol to get more confidence because it does lower your inhibitions.

Claire believed that women may not realize what they are doing when they are drunk and cannot make clear decisions while inebriated. Comparatively, Nicole and Jennifer believed that women were responsible for preventing coerced sex when drinking and from Jennifer’s perspective women may use alcohol purposefully to lower their sexual inhibitions.

**Developmental Status, School Context, and Coerced Sex**

Unique developmental issues and school context were discussed and indirectly related to sexual scripting of romantic relationships. Each of the groups shared the connections they saw between coerced sex and adolescent development with different perspectives. Younger girls discussed the perceptions of older boys’ unique power to be sexually coercive, whereas older girls shared expectations to have sex because they were seniors in high school. The identities of the freshmen girls in Rural Township High School were very much in formation, and thus they appeared more susceptible to peer pressure in their decision to become sexually involved. From their perspective, they saw older boys as having power over them to engage in sex and their perceived competition with other girls for boys’ attention pushed girls into engaging in sexual activity before they were ready. Reflecting on her own observations, a participant in the University of Midwest group further illuminated this process:

With teenagers or young adults like in grade school, I’ve seen it happen a lot . . . it’s just the feeling of you have to do it because of what’s going on right now. So it’s not considered sexual coercion, but it really is because these guys are playing on these girls’ self-esteem.

The urban high school students were seniors and did not report boys having a unique power over them. Instead, these participants described a dichotomy between “good girls” (who do not engage in sex) and “ho’s” (who engage in sexual activities), and said that girls have the choice to decide their own identities. Young college women adopted a more nuanced view of consensual sex and coerced sex; the pressure to be sexual was discussed within the context of relationships.
Participants also discussed a process of male socialization that contributed to the coerced sexual experiences of girls; this socialization was linked to heterosexual gender expectations about transitioning from a boy to a man. Participants speculated that as boys progressed through high school, they seemed to gain social clout from juniors and seniors by learning acceptable expressions of masculinity and tools for sexual conquest. Girls in Rural Township High tried to make sense of coercive dating and reflected on their observations of male socialization throughout high school. Lucky Charms stated,

I remember the first year of high school for me like all the freshman guys were really nice and then now that I’m a sophomore? Most of those guys turned into total jerks because they see what they have. Like they have power and what they can get and what they want.

Comparatively, for older adolescents developmental sources of coercion manifested differently. Being a virgin was considered childish after a certain age. Because they were seniors in high school, many girls in the Urban Central High discussion described the peer pressure from friends to “lose” their virginity. As a result, girls expressed feeling rushed to be sexually active. As Shay asserted,

Most of my pressure . . . or coercion as far as like sex has been mostly from my friends. . . . They’re just makin’ comments like “you can’t go to college a virgin” . . . they were thinkin’ like, “you’re 18 . . . like why are you waiting?”

The social messages these girls reported receiving about “losing” one’s virginity are similar to the messages that boys typically receive about losing one’s virginity—that is, that engaging in sex is desirable and expected by a certain age. The messages counter dominant gender scripts for some girls about the honor and value of “saving oneself.” The perceived pressure to “lose” one’s virginity appears in contrast to other messages the participants received about girls who make a decision to engage in sexual activities (i.e., “good girls” don’t have sex and “ho’s” like and engage in sexual activity).

**Discussion**

Young women in this study identified the multiple ways in which adolescent women feel pressured or pushed to engage in sex from cultural, societal, peer, and internalized sources. The meta-theme uncovered in this study, *It’s a Push*, supports our larger assertion about the perceived influence of social forces on young women’s beliefs about coerced sex. Participants’ conceptualizations of sexual coercion extended beyond traditional notions of sexual coercion such as nonconsensual sex and included issues related to other forms of pressure such as sexual acquiescence. In each of the three focus groups, participants discussed the bartering agreement between the sexes where emotional intimacy was received through sexual currency, which manifests when young women acquiesce to sexual activity, even unwanted sex. Moreover, the pressure
girls experienced from sociocultural encouragement for sex also influenced their attitudes and behaviors in ways that felt coercive to participants. In this sense, young women felt obligated at times to comply with this cultural expectation for sex, though not fully wanted or desired.

Findings support and extend existing definitions of coerced sex in the field. Similar to the literature, young women recognized interpersonal coerced sex tactics such as manipulation and alcohol use to have unwanted sex. Extending the research on “expert” definitions and consistent with the ecological framework adopted in this study, young women also considered societal sexualization, peer norms, and internalized sexual schema as unique sources of coerced sex that were rooted in gender socialization. Social context specifically shaped young women’s understanding of coerced sex across school context and racial groups. These latter findings were the most consistent themes from this study, which connect and extend the interrelated spheres of influence at the intrapersonal, interpersonal, and societal levels, as outlined by the TFSG Report.

**Individual and Peer Tactics as Dimensions of Coerced Sex**

Consistent with “expert” definitions of coerced sex, young women discussed direct tactics of coerced sex from male partners. The most salient for young women were manipulation tactics and substance use. This theme directly connected such tactics to the **interpersonal** sphere of sexualization identified in the report on the sexualization of girls. Young men were perceived as manipulating the sexual scripted desire for love that young women experience to coerce sexual activity, particularly among the high school participants. Similar to other studies about adolescent perceptions of sexual scripts and coercion (e.g., Hird & Jackson, 2001), participants in this study believed boys feigned emotional investment in girls for the sole purpose of engaging in sexual activities.

Many college participants identified substance-facilitated coercion as the most salient tactic for them, including intentional alcohol-facilitated rape, seeking out intoxicated women, and becoming intoxicated to relieve responsibility. These findings are consistent with existing literature on alcohol use and sexual coercion in college settings (Ullman, Karabatsos, & Koss, 1999). Specifically, the perception that men purposefully seek out intoxicated women has been supported in studies, which have found that men have higher sexual expectations (Palmer, McMahon, Rounsaville, & Ball, 2009) and misinterpret women’s behavior as sexual interest (Abbey, Zawacki, Buck, Clinton, & McAslan, 2004) when intoxicated. There were disagreements, however, in participants’ beliefs about the role of alcohol in coerced sex. Some women believed that it was possible to provide consent while under the influence, and stated their beliefs that some women use alcohol as a way to remove some of the stigma of sexual desire. Other studies with college students found similar attitudes about drinking and sexual behavior, namely, that it is considered a tool to lose inhibitions, considered positive, in that it helped men and women enjoy themselves and feel more free, and negative, where participants felt regret for what they said or did (Lindgren,
Pantalone, Lewis, & George, 2009; Vander Ven & Beck, 2009). In Lindgren and colleagues’ study, women perceived alcohol as a way to be sexually assertive and also as a justification to reduce the shame and stigma associated with being perceived as “slutty” for having casual sex. As findings from Lindgren et al.’s (2009) and our study suggest, alcohol was used as a method to counter the sexual script that places rigid dichotomies on women’s sexuality.

Peer and group pressure was a common theme this sample identified in their conceptualization of coerced sex. Freshmen high school girls observed significant pressure and manipulation to have sex from senior boys who used their maturity, status as more advanced students, and dating experience to manipulate girls into having sex before they were ready. Coerced sex was perceived differently among the older students. The senior high school girls talked about perceived pressure from friends and romantic partners to be sexually active and lose their virginity before college. Research and theory in sexuality suggests that men see virginity loss as a rite of passage and an achievement of manhood. Studies have found that college women are more likely to report being proud and happy to be virgins, whereas college men are more likely to feel embarrassed and guilty (Sprecher & Regan, 1996). However, in our study, some of the young women expressed pressure to lose virginity as a rite of passage from peers as well. Results from Carpenter’s (2002) qualitative study with men and women, found that about one fifth of the participants saw virginity as a stigma, something that was embarrassing to have, whereas nearly six out of 10 saw it as a gift. The interpretation of virginity as a stigma was more pronounced for younger women, suggesting potential generational differences. However, unlike the men in this study, virginity was seen as much less shameful for these women. In other works, Carpenter (2005) interviewed several women who define virginity loss as a process to becoming a woman and transitioning to a new stage in life. Middle-class girls were more likely to have this perspective at the time of virginity loss compared with working class girls. Similar to our findings, Carpenter’s study suggests fewer gender dichotomies in virginity loss specifically.

It is not surprising then that the beliefs of participants in the present study reflected the larger sexualization of girls and women that occurs in the media, and thus the barrage of implicit and explicit messages that “girls should be sexual” was interpreted as “girls should have sex,” yet also contradict other messages that restrict girls’ sexuality. These messages are also connected to the larger messages about what it means to be a woman in U.S. society; to be a woman from this framework means to be considered sexually attractive to heterosexual men and to engage in sexual activities to satisfy the male gaze. Participants resisted these dominant beliefs and their manifestations among peers; they identified this aspect of interpersonal sexualization as a form of coercion.

**Societal and Cultural Contexts of Coerced Sex**

Individual and peer coerced sex tactics occurred within a larger social context in which cultural norms created a societal expectation to be sexual, which young women in this study readily identified. The TFSG Report considers these forces as part of the contribution by society sphere, which states that society communicates a sexualization of
girls and women through cultural norms, values, and expectations. The media is over-saturated with messages that girls and women should look and behave in sexually suggestive ways (APA, 2010). Findings from the present study complement this body of research by describing ways that girls are responding to this sexual saturation, and how it informs their sense of obligation to be sexy and sexual with men. Extending objectification theory (Fredrickson & Roberts, 1997) in which girls and women internalize cultural messages and evaluate themselves accordingly, participants in this study believed that girls were coerced to engage in sexual activities, complying with the surrounding culture—thus serving as its own form of coerced sex.

Media images were a substantial source of participants’ understandings of coerced sex. For example, Black high school girls felt pressured to have sex and behave in sexually enticing ways like women in hip-hop music videos and commented on the sexual attention they received as a result. Ward, Hansbrough, and Walker (2005) found associations between music video exposure, sexual stereotypes, and the importance of physical appearance and sexiness among African American adolescents. Similar to her findings, participants in the present study felt particularly influenced by representations of sex and intimacy on television and in music. This influence created a cultural expectation for girls to behave in sexually provocative ways to receive male attention.

For university participants, alcohol use and the insidious culture of drinking and partying that the college women experienced were central to their conceptualization of coerced sex. Nightclubs were also seen as a cultural space where coerced or nonconsensual sexual contact was normalized. Women reflected on how they felt violated as men rubbed on their bodies while attempting to dance. This experience is similar to the “post-refusal sexual persistence” tactic of sexual arousal found by Struckman-Johnson, Struckman-Johnson, and Anderson (2003, p. 79). However, few studies have explored nightclubs as a unique culture of sexualization or context of coerced sex. Both Hutchinson (1999) and Muñoz-Laboy, Weinstein, and Parker (2007) conducted ethnographic studies on gender, dancing, and hip-hop clubs. Dancing in such clubs was often equated with sex. In these clubs, sexual scripts were enacted in which men of color felt pressured to perform masculinity and dance in sexually provocative ways with women. Women, on the other hand, were objectified and expected to compete with other women for the sexual attention of men. Findings in the current investigation differ from these ethnographic works in that the clubs described by participants were not hip-hop clubs and the majority of partygoers were White as opposed to persons of color. Research is needed about the ways in which sexual scripts manifest themselves in nonurban nightclubs. In what ways do women in these settings perceive social pressure to self-sexualize and provide an anonymous space for men to inappropriately touch and violate women?

**Internalized Sexual Scripts as Coerced Sex**

Young women internalized sexual scripts and placed internal pressure to engage in unwanted sex. This theme connects with the *self-sexualization* sphere outlined in the TFSG Report. The sexual socialization of girls and women seemed so pervasive that participants perceived an internal obligation to be sexually active with boys and men.
Common across focus groups were gender socialization messages that led girls to believe that having a boyfriend was a necessary part of their happiness, which contributed to a gendered and cultured coercion that they seemed to internalize. This often meant engaging in and complying with sexual behavior or striving to be sexually enticing to spark male interest and acquiesce to their partners’ sexual desires, regardless of their own interest in having sex. Such findings were also found in Bay-Cheng and Eliseo-Arras’ (2008) study where gender norms served as a foundation that informed their heterosexual experiences, and were directly present in sexual acts. College women in the present study perceived that when a desire to be sexual was expressed, it was accompanied with a fear of rejection and frustration. Unlike women, however, men seemed privileged with the ability to refuse sex. These findings connect with Peterson and Muehlenhard’s (2007) model of complex intersections between desire and consent. Women in the present study described consenting to unwanted sex to keep the peace and promote intimacy in a relationship. Thus, sexual scripts were ever present in these young women’s sexual experiences and played a role in their conceptualizations of coerced sex.

Limitations

Despite the strengths of our study, it also has noteworthy limitations. Interesting developmental and ethnocultural findings emerged in the focus groups; however, comparative analyses across focus groups should be interpreted with caution. Due to logistical challenges in conducting sensitive research with vulnerable populations, the focus groups were each conducted with different age groups (though lack of data on participant ages is a limitation), geographic locations, and types of schools. Thus, differences across focus groups could be due to a number of reasons not related to the racial or developmental uniqueness of each group. Moreover, two of the focus groups were racially mixed, and it is difficult to determine what influence the composition may have had on responses and an ability to discuss potential racial dynamics authentically. Finally, the Urban Central High focus group was significantly larger than the other two focus groups given the number of interested participants and one-time classroom access for focus group discussion. With 15 participants in 90-min discussion, it was challenging to have everyone’s voice heard. Some of the girls in the group were silent and the perspectives that were most vocal may not have been representative of everyone in that group. Specifically, although participants were not asked questions specific to heterosexual experiences, none of the participants discussed coerced sex by girls or women. Participants may have felt uncomfortable discussing same-sex examples given the heteronormative nature of the discussion. Thus, our findings do not comprehensively reflect the experiences of all girls and women, given that heterosexual experiences were primarily discussed. Unfortunately, we did not collect data on participant demographics, including sexual orientation, age, or socioeconomic status.

Future Research and Practice Implications

Findings from this exploratory investigation point to future areas of inquiry, especially with respect to expanding our current understanding of coerced sex, identifying the
influence of context in these conceptualizations, and including the perspectives of multiple voices that have traditionally been silenced in the academic discourse. Participants’ conceptualization of sexual coercion underscore the importance of understanding how girls and young women differentiate between wanted and unwanted sex. In this study, we did not explore consensual sexual activity or intimacy. However, on the basis of participants’ perspectives, it seems an explicit discussion of desire and coercion on continua may better illuminate the complexities of sexual agency versus sexual pressure. Having a more in-depth examination of what constitutes desire and placing that understanding in conversation with the various levels of consent and coercion could inform future interventions with young women. This more nuanced understanding could help tailor discussions with young women to better identify their agency at least with respect to resisting sexual compliance.

Explicit and more in-depth explorations of context in future research is needed to better describe the process of peer and societal pressure for girls and the ways this remains stable and changes from high school to college. For example, younger high school participants in particular talked about feeling pressured by older male classmates to engage in sexual activity. When and under what conditions do these perceived pressures change? Does type of school context matter? Are there unique pressures that urban schools experience compared with schools located in less populated cities? Understanding these contextual dynamics can help better inform targeted interventions.

This study found initial support for sociocultural contextual differences in definitions of coerced sex. Future research would benefit from continued exploration to unpack ways that racial identity, adolescent development, and social class influence how girls and young women perceive wanted and unwanted sex. It is also critical to gain a broader range of voices from American Indians, Asian Americans, and Latinas as well as the perspective of girls and young women who identify as transgender, queer, lesbian, bisexual, and/or two-spirit. This will offer perspectives from youth often excluded in social science research. Studies exploring within- and between-group differences of various racial and ethnic groups, sexual minorities, social class lines, and ability statuses will begin to provide complex and integrative analyses. This integrative analysis will also help us to better expand our identification of the sexual scripts youth receive.

The present findings also have practical implications for educators and health advocates/workers. Our findings suggest that adolescent girls and young women perceive pressures to engage in sexual activity for a range of reasons. The most relevant for work with youth is around the issue of agency and sexual compliance or acquiescence. Given that the focus of our study was on girls’ and young women’s perspective and that interventions with these youth will not decrease incidents of sexual assault, the insights from these findings center on ways to help girls and young women strengthen their sense of (sexual) agency. It seems important to provide high school girls, in particular, with education designed to increase media literacy. Education programming is needed to assist girls to identify and analyze the sexual scripts enacted in multiple media platforms (e.g., movies, blogs, Internet). As part of the media literacy efforts,
girls should be provided with tools to analyze who benefits from these messages, the influence of these messages on their sense of self, and specific ways to counter the messages in their lives. The latter focuses on girls’ sense of agency. Consistent with this recommendation, school counselors and/or community workers could provide spaces for girls and young women to define the ways in which they feel pushed to prematurely engage in sexual activity. These spaces could take the form of educational workshops, rap groups, discussion meetings and should include an explicit discussion of sexual desire and how desire is natural and different from sexual acquiescence.

In conclusion, findings from this qualitative investigation are consistent with the TFSG and suggest that adolescent young women feel “pushed” into having sex before they are ready due to a range of perceived pressures from society and peers as well as the internalization of sexualized images of girls and women in society. Restructuring our understanding of sexual coercion to include societal and cultural expectations broadens the scope of the problem and exposes issues of unwanted sex as it relates to gender socialization and macro-level influences, which may otherwise be ignored.

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**Author Biographies**

**Bryana H. French** is an assistant professor in the Graduate School of Professional Psychology at the University of St. Thomas and completed her PhD at the University of Illinois’ Counseling Psychology Program. Her research focuses on sexual coercion and associated psychosocial outcomes among racially diverse young men and women, which has been published in *Journal of Interpersonal Violence* and *The Counseling Psychologist* among others. She has been recognized for her scholarly contributions through the APA Society for the Psychology of Women, and holds leadership positions in APA Divisions 17 and 51.

**Helen A. Neville** is a professor of educational psychology and African American Studies at the University of Illinois with affiliate status in Women and Gender Studies. Her research on issues of race, racism, and racial identity has appeared in a wide range of journals, and she has written book chapters related to the psychological well-being of African Americans. She has been recognized for her many accomplishments, including gaining fellow status in the American Psychological Association and receiving the APA Kenneth and Mamie Clark Award and the Janet E. Helms Award for Mentoring.