Who Are The Sexual Harassers?

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By Stephanie Pappas, Live Science
10/31/2017 02:09pm ET

In the wake of the allegations that movie producer Harvey Weinstein harassed and assaulted multiple women over several decades, the hashtag #metoo began trending. Survivors of harassment and assault posted about their experiences to demonstrate the scope of the problem. A smaller social media campaign, #howiwillchange, had men pledging to stand up against harassing behavior. But neither campaign really addressed the elephant in the room: Who are the harassers?

Psychologists have an answer to that question: About 20 to 25 percent of men report sexually coercive behavior, ranging from forced sex to verbal manipulation like guilt-tripping a woman into having sex. And these men do tend to share certain traits, including a tendency to bully others and to believe myths like “a short skirt means a woman is asking for it.” [Understanding the 10 Most Destructive Human Behaviors]

“The personality profile of that kind of guy is somebody who believes in traditional gender roles,” said Tiffany Russell, a doctoral student at the University of North Dakota who studies how childhood experiences and personality traits beget bad behavior in adulthood. “So, they’re the macho strong men, or they believe they are, and they’re very rejecting of the idea they may be girly or feminine.”

Dangerous misconceptions

Among the strongest indications that a man might sexually harass or even sexually assault someone, Russell said, is that man’s belief in rape myths. These include false beliefs like that if a woman goes home with a man after a date, she’s automatically willing to have sex with him, or that wearing certain clothes means “asking for trouble.”

In a 2016 study published in the journal Personality and Individual Differences, Russell and her doctoral adviser Alan King found that acceptance of rape myths — such as the idea that a woman in a miniskirt wants sex — was directly linked to the probability of a man committing sexual assault.

Other studies back up this linkage. A 2016 paper by researchers at Wayne State University published in the journal Violence Against Women asked 183 men who self-reported sexually coercive behavior why they did what they did. More than half said they were justified in coercing or even raping a woman because she had gotten them aroused; 40 percent said the victim was partially responsible because she’d led them on.
Justifications of sexually coercive behavior were linked to belief in rape myths, the researchers reported.

“They feel entitled to sexual access,” Russell said of sexually coercive men. “Especially combined with those gender role [beliefs], women are basically there for them to get what they need. And if a woman dares to, say, reject them, they tend to get pretty angry and that is when a lot of aggressive stuff will happen.” Perhaps unsurprisingly, Russell has found that a tendency toward everyday sadism is also linked with sexual aggression. Everyday sadism is basically bullying, she said — these are the same people who pick on weaker kids on the playground or steal their lunch money. Vicarious sadism, meaning enjoying seeing other people getting hurt, was also linked to hostility toward women. [5 Ways to Foster Self-Compassion in Your Child]

“They’ll seek out videos of violence,” Russell said. One of the questions used to measure vicarious sadism is asking whether someone likes to watch NASCAR races just to see car crashes, she said.

“All that disinhibits the person to aggress against anybody, honestly, but especially in a sexual way it makes them want to dominate women,” she said. Women can also be perpetrators, with some surveys pegging the number of sexually violent females at around 10 percent nationally. In a study published this year in the journal Personality and Individual Differences, Russell found similar dynamics at play. Sadism and rape myth acceptance predicted coercive behavior in women, just as in men. Common rape myths include beliefs like, “If a woman goes to the home of a man on their first date, she is willing to have sex” and “Women often lie about rape to get revenge against a man.”

“The profile from this model is that of a hostile, eccentric and grandiose woman prone to abnormal beliefs,” Russell and her colleagues wrote of the female perpetrators in their sample.

Roots of the behavior

Why are a significant minority of men (and some women) sexually coercive when the rest are not? It probably comes down to a combination of innate vulnerabilities and societal learning, Russell said. There likely are some genetic factors that play into these personality types, particularly the narcissism required to put aside a victim’s pain or fear in the pursuit of sexual satisfaction. But these victimizers also learn from adults and friends to disrespect women, Russell said. [6 Ways Sexual Harassment Damages Women’s Health]

A 2015 study published in the American Journal of Public Health found that men who reported making a woman engage in sex when they knew she was unwilling or unable to consent in the past year were more likely to say their friends urged them to have sex by any means necessary, compared with men who didn’t force women into sex. They were also more likely to say their friends used objectifying language when talking about women.
Childhood experiences may also play a role, Russell found in her 2016 study. Men who were perpetrators were more likely to report what is called “anxious attachment” to their mothers. Attachment theory is a line of thinking in psychology that holds that forming a secure, warm attachment to a parent or caregiver early in life is key to healthy psychological development. An anxious attachment is one in which a child may cling to the caregiver but react ambivalently if the caregiver returns after an absence, or in which the child may avoid the caregiver altogether. This usually happens in emotionally neglectful situations in which a child’s attempts at affection are repeatedly rebuffed.

“It’s not a warm, nurturing parental relationship, so this kind of teaches early that women are untrustworthy,” Russell said. Fortunately, Russell said, there are ways to prevent attitudes like this and to reverse them if they take hold.

“The way that you raise boys to not be like that is to teach them respect for powerful women,” she said. “Show them women in science, show them women accomplishing things, like board members. Talk to them pretty early about rape myths and how women don’t ask to be abused. Try to instill some empathy into them.” College intervention programs often follow a similar approach for those who may not have been raised this way, Russell said, debunking rape myths and encouraging men to consider situations from a woman’s point of view.

“We can teach our young men not to treat women this way,” she said. “And even if they go down the path, we can still reverse it. We can still show them the right way to be.”

Original article on Live Science.