

EXPLORING ATTITUDINAL VARIABLES PREDICTIVE OF HOW MEN PERCEIVE RAPE

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Abstract

86 male university students completed an assessment battery regarding their attitudes towards women and beliefs about sexual violence, as well as their own intentions to be sexually violent. They read five vignettes depicting different situations in which women were raped, and answered questions about what they thought happened in the vignettes, i.e. whether the actions depicted were rape. Results showed only one of the constructs, acceptance of sexual violence, predicted men's ability to recognize rape scenarios, whereas hostility towards women, adversarial sexual beliefs, rape myth acceptance and sex role stereotyping were not significant after acceptance of sexual violence was accounted for. Furthermore, men's acceptance of sexual violence mediated the relationship of their perceptions of rape vignettes and their self-reported intentions to be sexually violent. Implications for further research in sexual violence and interventions to prevent acts of aggression towards women are discussed.

Key words: *rape, sexual aggression, violence against women.*

Introduction

Violence against women remains a problem in most post-secondary educational settings given the high prevalence (e.g. Testa & Livingstone, 2010) and great costs, both tangible and intangible, associated with victimization. Most of the research attempting to predict sexual aggression and identify those at risk of perpetrating it has focused on offenders' personality traits and dispositions like authoritarianism (Walker, Rowe & Quinsey, 1993), poor anger management (Groth, 1979), lack of empathy (Marshall, Jones, Hudson, & McDonald, 1993), inadequate abilities to form meaningful relationships (Marshall, 1989; Ward, Hudson, Marshall, & Siegert, 1995), general aggressiveness, impulsivity and cognitive patterns, e.g. having stereotypes about sex-roles (Burt, 1980). Holding false beliefs about the severity of sexual assault as well as false attribution of responsibility (i.e. blaming the victim instead of the offender) can also be expected to increase the likelihood of engaging in sexually aggressive behavior towards women (Jones, Russell & Bryant, 1998).

Gudjonsson, Petursson, & Skulason (1989) found that perpetrators of sexual violence scored higher on over-controlled hostility than non-sexual violent, criminal offenders. Fiqia, Lang, Plutchik, and Holden (1987) found greater indirect hostility among sexual offenders. However, research investigating the relationship of hostility and sexual offending is not conclusive. While several studies found sexual offenders to exhibit greater hostility and anger (e.g. Hudson & Ward, 1997; Lee, Pat-

tison, Jackson, & Ward 2001; Rada, Laws, Kellner, Stivastava, & Peake, 1983), others did not find this relationship (Overholser & Beck, 1986; Seidman, Marshall, Hudson, & Robertson, 1994).

Some researchers have also proposed sexual offenders have a social skill deficit (Overholser & Beck, 1986) and are sexually incompetent (Dwyer & Amberson, 1989). Marshall and Barbaree (1990) argue that as a result of poor socialization, offenders fail to learn how to control their behavior. Therefore they lack inhibition and respond impulsively to sexual and aggressive cues. Marshall and Barbaree suggest that sexuality and aggression are connected in offenders' minds, resulting in aggression becoming part of their repertoire in sexual situations.

While most research that looked at perpetrators' personality traits used incarcerated offenders, several studies have shown that these findings are also valid for non-incarcerated offenders (e.g. university students who self-report raping women). Lisak and Roth (1990) found differences in hostility, feelings of betrayal, wish to sexually dominate women, and hypermasculine traits in a sample of college males who admitted to rape compared to a non-sexually violent control group. These differences are comparable to the differences found between incarcerated rapists and controls.

Rapaport and Burkhardt (1984) concluded that males who endorse sexual coercion possess attitudes that make the use of aggression acceptable. Other authors (e.g. Ageton, 1983) have suggested rape is just a subset of delinquent behaviors, and can be predicted by the same factors (i.e. peer support for delinquent behaviors) that anticipate other antisocial, criminal behavior. Undoubtedly however, sexual crimes differ in some aspects from other, violent crimes.

Problem of Research

Malamuth (1988) conducted two studies to assess if several individual difference measures of males predict laboratory aggression in form of noise blasts toward female and male confederates. The individual difference measures (acceptance of interpersonal violence, sex role stereotyping, being motivated to be sexually dominant, antisocial tendencies, tumescence measured in response to arousal to rape scenes) did not predict aggression toward a male target, but accounted for over 36% of variance in aggression displayed toward a female target. The motivation to dominate a woman sexually and level of antisocial tendencies were the strongest predictors (β s ~ 0.40), only sex role stereotyping was not a significant predictor.

Briere and Malamuth (1983) surveyed 352 college males for their sexual attitudes using Burt's (1980) rape myth acceptance scale, acceptance of interpersonal violence measure and the adversarial sexual beliefs scale. Self-reported likelihood to force a woman to do something sexual she didn't want to do and self-reported likelihood to rape a woman were the dependent variables. They found that 60% of the sample reported some likelihood to engage in either rape or use force to obtain sexual compliance. Variables that assess attitudes and beliefs about women and sexuality that are deemed to be rape encouraging predicted the intentions to commit sexual assault rather than sexual variables such as sexual experience and number of sexual encounters during a specified period. This provides evidence that rape and forceful sexual acts seem to be indeed motivated by social factors such as rape supportive attitudes rather than a lack of sexual outlets, as it was hypothesized by numerous researchers before (e.g. Gebhardt, Gagnon, Pomeroy, & Christianson, 1965; Groth & Burgess, 1977).

Clearly a variety of beliefs and attitudes men might hold to varying degrees have been linked to a greater propensity to engage in sexual coercion or violence. Prevention and intervention programs designed to reduce risk of sexual offending often attempt to address these. However, being able to accurately recognize situations in which sexual coercion is occurring also appears to be very important. An inability to recognize such situations on part of the male would annihilate any possibility of the man altering or ceasing his unwanted sexual advances. Hence, the present study is interested in whether beliefs and attitudes regarding women, sexuality and sexual coercion are predictive of men's abilities to accurately perceive situations in which sexual violence is occurring.

Research Focus

The primary aim of the present study was to explore the relative importance of dispositional variables related to sexual assault perpetration on men's perceptions of sexual interactions depicting

rape, and men's self reported intentions to commit sexual assault. By using a battery of scales assessing a range of different variables thought to be associated with the commitment of sexual assault, we examined the interrelation of several concepts: the role of general hostility toward women, beliefs and attitudes related to the role and expectations of women in society, sexual motives, and endorsement of hyper-masculine beliefs. The outcome measure of interest was participants' perceptions of situations depicting rape, and participants own intentions to be sexually aggressive.

We expected men who hold rape supportive attitudes, endorse violence in general as well as sexual violence against women and have stereotyped gender perceptions to perceive fewer of the rape scenarios as depicting rape, and report higher intentions to use force to obtain intercourse and rape a woman themselves. Furthermore, we hypothesized perceptions of rape would mediate the relationship of dispositional variables and intentions to commit sexual violence.

Methodology of Research

Sample of Research

Eighty-six male students from a public university in the north-central United States participated in the study. The literature suggests this to be a large enough sample to conduct the planned analyses with adequate power (Tabachnick and Fidell, 2006). Men received extra credit for their participation, and were recruited using sign-up sheets that were hung in the psychology department. Subjects had to be at least 18 years old, and were initially not told the full purpose of the study.

Instrument and Procedures

When participants arrived to the lab, they were seated privately by a male experimenter who then obtained informed consent who reminded them the study was anonymous and they could leave anytime. No participants withdrew from the study. Participants were then given the study materials, and the experimenter left to allow for complete privacy until participants indicated they had completed the study.

Measures

The study began with demographic measures, and the 13-item short version of the Marlowe - Crowne social desirability scale (Crowne & Marlowe, 1960), version MC form C (Reynolds, 1982) to control for the potential of participants' responses being influenced by not wanting to be seen in a negative light. The questions in this part of the survey consisted of 8 different scales, which were all answered on 7 point scales from 1- strongly disagree to 7 strongly agree.

The hostility toward women scale (Check, 1985) was used to assess hostile, negative and resentful feelings subjects might hold against women. This scale consists of 22 items, which specifically address male hostility against females. A sample item reads as following: "It is safer not to trust women".

To assess sex and rape related beliefs and attitudes, subjects completed the Sex Role Stereotyping Scale (SRS; Burt, 1980), Adversarial Sexual Beliefs Scale (ASB; Burt, 1980), Rape Myth Acceptance Scale (RMA; Burt, 1980). The SRS assesses the degree to which subjects think people should adhere to the traditional gender roles and what their attitudes are about violating those. It assesses the degree to which participants hold beliefs that sexual intimate relationships are negative, violent and exploitive in nature. The RMA measures the adherence to faulty beliefs about the circumstances and justifiability of rape. We also used three items adapted from the Acceptance of Interpersonal Violence Scale (AIV; Burt, 1980) to fit sexual, rather than physical, violence.

Following these dispositional measures, participants read five vignettes of sexual assaults occurring in various situations, inside and outside of established relationships. One scenario depicted rape in a marriage, one rape in a dating relationship, one rape while the victim is intoxicated; another situation depicted a girl hitchhiking; and the last scenario described a promiscuous, intoxicated woman at a party. Participants were asked to judge whether a particular scenario constitutes rape, or simply a wrongdoing on the man's part that should be forgiven on a three point scale. The composite score

of these judgments served as an index of how participants perceive situations and what they would label as rape, and is referred to as rape perceptions in this study.

Participants then indicated how likely they were to “force a woman to do something sexual she doesn’t want to” as a percentage in increments of 10. The questionnaire concluded with the Sexual Experience survey (Koss & Oros, 1982). This instrument asks participants whether they have ever been in a variety of sexual situations. It assesses a wide range of sexual experiences from heterosexual intercourse to sexual coercion, and attempted and completed rape. The 11 questions were answered in a yes/no fashion.

After participants had finished the questionnaire, they underwent an elaborate debriefing aimed at educating participants about rape and dispel any rape myths, as well as probe what participants thought was the purpose of the study. No participants reported negative effects or were able to discern the purpose of the study.

Results of Research

Analyses of their demographics revealed participants’ age was $M = 21$, $SD = 3.6$ years. Most participants identified as Caucasian (86%), and stated they have had intercourse before (73%). Responses to the questions taken from the Sexual Experience Survey (Koss & Oros, 1982) indicated that 51.8% of the sample had used verbal coercion to obtain sexual intercourse, 18.1% have used physical coercion or done unwanted sexual acts to a woman. One participant (1.2%) has indicated he attempted rape, and 4.9% of the sample indicates they have committed an act that meets the legal definition of rape. This is not significantly lower (Fisher’s exact probability $p > 0.41$, $df = 66$) than the percentage of rapists in a college sample found by Koss and Dinero’s survey of US men (1988).

Social desirability was unrelated to all variables of interest. All dispositional variables had significant positive correlations with perceptions of rape vignettes. Table 1 depicts the correlations of the dispositional variable and the social desirability as well as obtained Cronbach’s alpha coefficients for this sample.

Table 1. Correlations of measures of beliefs and attitudes about women and rape.

	ASB	Host	MC	RMA	SRS	SV	RP
ASB	0.78	0.78**	-0.19	0.61**	0.53**	0.38**	0.34**
HOST		0.88	-0.2	0.60**	0.52**	0.41**	0.30*
MC			0.54	-0.14	-0.25*	0.02	0.06
RMA				0.81	0.42**	0.45**	0.35**
SRS					0.56	0.21	0.25*
SV						0.54	0.37**

ASB = Adversarial Sexual Beliefs; HOST = Hostility towards women; RMA = Rape Myth Acceptance scale; SRS = Sex Role Stereotyping scale; SV = Sexual Violence scale; MC = Marlow – Crowne Social Desirability scale, short version. Alpha coefficients are printed in bold on the diagonal

To see which dispositional variables would predict perceptions of the rape vignettes, perceptions of rape vignettes was regressed on the five variables that had significant Pearson correlations with perceptions of the vignettes. Only acceptance of sexual violence ($\beta = .29^*$) contributed uniquely to the prediction, $F(5, 77) = 4.04$, $p < 0.01$, $R^2 = 0.21$. Hostility towards women, adversarial sexual beliefs, rape myth acceptance and sex role stereotyping were not significant.

According to Baron and Kenny (1986), a mediation is present if, after including the mediator, the relationship between the predictor and criterion (here: rape perceptions and intentions to use force) is no longer be significant, but the mediator significantly predicts the criterion. Hence, to test whether acceptance of sexual violence mediated the relationship of rape perceptions and intentions

to use force to obtain intercourse, a two step regression analysis was conducted. Perceptions of the five rape vignettes significantly predicted intentions to use force to obtain intercourse, $\beta = 0.30$, $t = 2.76$, $p < 0.01$. When acceptance of sexual violence was added in the second step, it was significant, $\beta = 0.26$, $t = 2.32$, $p < 0.05$. Perceptions of rape were no longer significant, $\beta = 0.20$, $p > 0.08$, thereby meeting criteria for mediation.

Discussion

As expected, all the dispositional variables had significant Pearson's correlations with men's perceptions of what constitutes rape in response to reading a variety of vignettes depicting different situations in which sexual aggression occurs. Interestingly, only acceptance of sexual violence was a unique predictor with perceptions of rape as indicated by the results of the multiple regression analysis. Men who accepted violence as normal part of sexuality, labelled fewer of the five rape vignettes as actual rapes. This suggests that men who accept sexual violence might have a mistaken view of what constitutes rape, and have difficulties accurately identifying a rape scenario. Furthermore, acceptance of sexual violence mediated the relationship of rape perception and intentions to rape. Maybe men who have a proclivity to engage in sexual coercion can accept violent actions as a normal in sexual relations because they can convince themselves their violent sexual actions do not really constitute rape, as evidenced by their failure to recognize sexual coercion when it was presented to them. This would make it easier for them to overcome inhibitions to use force and coercion in sexual situations. If this is the case, prevention programs should also incorporate educational components designed to improve men's recognition of what constitutes sexual coercion.

In addition to these finding having interesting implication for programs aimed at reducing risk of sexual offending, the results might also have importance in terms of bystander intervention. Many sexual assaults occur in environments where eyewitnesses could mitigate the risk of sexual assault to occur (Burn, 2009). However, this is unlikely to happen when the bystanders, who often belong to the assailant's peer group, are unable to accurately identify a sexually coercive situation themselves. Therefore, bystander intervention programs might need to focus initially most on teaching participants to accurately identify situations that constitute sexual assault, and dispel any mistaken beliefs men might hold that "true" rape mostly occurs as a random crime of opportunity between complete strangers.

Given the exploratory nature of the present study, future research should attempt to replicate these findings with a larger and more diverse sample of men. The men in the current study were all recruited from an area that has traditionally lower than average crime rates (US Department of Justice, 2007). This may have impacted how men in the study judged the scenarios, or their endorsements of rape myths, sex role stereotypes or acceptance of sexual violence. In addition, future research could present participants with a greater variety of sexual assault scenarios to gain a more in depths understanding of which variables in a sexual assault (e.g. location, relationship to the perpetrator, and characteristics of the victim) relate to attitudinal measures and in what way.

In summary, our study demonstrated the importance of attending to what situations men perceive as rape, since results suggest men are not accurately identifying situations that constitute sexual assault as such, and their ability to do so is strongly influenced by men's acceptance of sexual aggression in general.

Conclusions

Although many beliefs and attitudes have been shown to be associated with sexual coercion, our study showed acceptance of sexual violence to be particularly influential when judging the nature of a situation potentially involving sexual aggression. Failure to adequately identify sexual coercion across various situations was associated with holding adversarial sexual beliefs, and these beliefs mediated the relationship of men's ability to accurately recognize scenarios depicting rape and their self-reported intentions to be sexually coercive. This provides further evidence to the need for sexual violence prevention programs aimed at men and incorporating components that heighten men's accuracy when judging what is and is not coercive sexual behavior.

Acknowledgements

The authors wish to thank Jared Ladburry for his assistance in collecting the data.

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Received: September 12, 2013

Accepted: December 02, 2013

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