



Rape myth acceptance and rape acknowledgment: The mediating role of sexual refusal assertiveness

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ABSTRACT

Unacknowledged rape, defined as when an individual experiences an event that meets a legal or empirical definition of rape but the individual does not label it as such, is prevalent. Research examining predictors of rape acknowledgment is needed. Sexual assertiveness may be an important variable to consider, as an individual's typical behavior during sexual situations may influence rape acknowledgment. To assess the indirect effect of rape myth acceptance on rape acknowledgment through sexual refusal assertiveness, an online survey of 181 female rape survivors was conducted. The indirect effects of two types of rape myths (*He didn't mean to* and *Rape is a deviant event*) were significant and positive. Specifically, acceptance of these two rape myths was negatively related to sexual refusal assertiveness, which was negatively associated with likelihood of rape acknowledgment. The results of this study indicate that sexual refusal assertiveness is associated with lower likelihood of rape acknowledgment among rape survivors. As a result, it appears that, under certain circumstances, women high in rape myth acceptance may be more likely to acknowledge rape when it results in decreased sexual refusal assertiveness.

1. Introduction

Despite being a central issue in the sexual violence literature, rape acknowledgment is still largely not understood (Wilson and Miller, 2016). Rape acknowledgment relates to how a survivor labels a victimization incident (Wilson and Miller, 2016). Specifically, unacknowledged rape is when an individual has an experience that satisfies either a legal or empirical definition of rape, but they do not label the incident as “rape” (Koss, 1989). Instead, the survivor may use non-victimizing terms, such as “bad sex” or “miscommunication” (Littleton et al., 2006, 2008). A recent meta-analysis found that the majority of female rape survivors do not label their experiences as “rape,” with approximately 60% meeting the criteria of unacknowledged rape (Wilson and Miller, 2016). Given the prevalence of unacknowledged rape and the potential impact rape acknowledgment can have on survivor outcomes, it is important that the field better understand this phenomenon.

The extant literature on rape acknowledgement has yielded a mixed understanding of the impact of acknowledged rape versus unacknowledged rape on survivor functioning. For example, unacknowledged survivors are more likely to experience sexual

revictimization (Littleton et al., 2009) and less likely to report the incident to the police, seek medical care, and utilize mental health services than acknowledged survivors (Wilson and Miller, 2016). Furthermore, some studies have found that unacknowledged rape survivors are at greater risk for distress and psychopathology compared to acknowledged survivors (e.g., Clements and Ogle, 2009). Conversely, several studies have found that acknowledged rape is associated with greater posttraumatic stress disorder (PTSD) symptoms compared to unacknowledged rape (e.g., Littleton et al., 2006; Wilson and Scarpa, 2017). More recent research has suggested that these inconsistent results are a function of researchers failing to consider more complex models that examine the impact of rape acknowledgment on psychopathology in the context of survivor beliefs (e.g., Wilson et al., 2017a; Wilson et al., 2017b). Despite these inconsistent findings, it is clear that rape acknowledgment is of clinical importance in understanding survivor functioning following sexual victimization and should be taken into account when planning treatment. Therefore, research examining predictors of rape acknowledgment is needed. False beliefs about rape (i.e., rape myths) and sexual refusal assertiveness are two variables that may affect survivors' likelihood of acknowledging an incident as rape.

Research examining factors that impact how survivors label their

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experiences has primarily focused on two lines of investigation (Peterson and Muehlenhard, 2011): characteristics of the event (e.g., level of force by the perpetrator, level of resistance by the survivor; Littleton et al., 2008) and characteristics of the survivor (e.g., acceptance of rape myths, rape scripts; Kahn et al., 1994; Peterson and Muehlenhard, 2004). Peterson and Muehlenhard, however, found evidence that the characteristics of the event mattered in the context of the survivor's characteristics, specifically their acceptance of rape myths. For example, if a survivor displayed low levels of resistance toward the perpetrator, then this was associated with unacknowledged rape if she held the belief that "it is not really rape if a woman does not fight back." Thus, the impact of rape myth acceptance on how survivors conceptualize their experiences appears to be a promising, albeit under-researched, line of inquiry.

1.1. Rape myths

In 1980, Burt defined rape myths as "prejudicial, stereotyped, or false beliefs about rape, rape victims, and rapists" (p. 217). In the present study, we used the Illinois Rape Myth Acceptance Scale (IRMAS; Payne et al., 1999), which has been touted as the most psychometrically sound measure of this construct (McMahon and Farmer, 2011). This measure assesses rape myths across seven domains, including (1) She asked for it (e.g., "If a woman goes home with a man she doesn't know, it is her own fault if she is raped"), (2) It wasn't really rape (e.g., "A rape probably didn't happen if the woman has no bruises or marks"), (3) He didn't mean to (e.g., "Rape happens when a man's sex drive gets out of control"), (4) She wanted it (e.g., "Many women actually enjoy sex after the guy uses a little force"), (5) She lied (e.g., "A lot of women lead a man on and then they cry rape"), (6) Rape is a trivial event (e.g., "Women tend to exaggerate how much rape affects them"), and (7) Rape is a deviant event (e.g., "Rape mainly occurs on the 'bad' side of town"). These widely held beliefs lead individuals to justify or deny sexual violence, ultimately restricting what incidents are considered rape by survivors, as well as perpetrators and the general population (McMahon and Farmer, 2011).

1.2. Rape myths and rape acknowledgment

Although several studies have found evidence that rape myths impact perceptions of hypothetical rape vignettes (e.g., Cowan, 2000; Hammond et al., 2011), fewer studies have examined how these beliefs affect survivors' conceptualizations of their own sexual victimization. Within the extant literature, LeMaire et al. (2016) found that greater endorsement of rape myths was associated with unacknowledged rape. Similarly, Peterson and Muehlenhard (2004) found that greater acceptance of two rape myths (i.e., sexually teasing, not physically fighting back) was associated with unacknowledged rape if the characteristics of the incident were consistent with the myth. Conversely, Koss (1985) found no difference between acknowledged and unacknowledged survivors on rape myth acceptance. Although there are some inconsistencies among the existing studies, at least two prior studies (i.e., LeMaire et al., 2016; Peterson and Muehlenhard, 2004) have demonstrated that greater acceptance of rape myths was associated with unacknowledged rape. It is important to remember though that Peterson and Muehlenhard (2004) found a relationship between rape myth acceptance and rape acknowledgment specifically when the characteristics of the incident were consistent with the myth. No prior research has examined potential mechanisms that explain (or partially explain) the relationship between rape myth acceptance and rape acknowledgment.

To extend the existing literature, we elected to examine a potential explanation for *why* rape myths may impact survivors' conceptualizations of their own experiences rather than simply comparing acknowledged and unacknowledged rape survivors in their acceptance of rape myths. One possible mechanism is the survivor's typical behavior

during sexual activity. Prior research suggests that gender norms dictate that women should be passive during sexual activity and men should initiate sexual activity (Morokoff et al., 1997). These traditional gender roles impact how individuals behave during sexual activity, contribute to rape myths, and place women at greater risk of experiencing unwanted sexual intercourse (Burt, 1980; Morokoff et al., 1997). Furthermore, endorsement of rape myths may lead some women to believe that they do not need to engage in sexually assertive behavior to protect themselves. For example, if women believe that rape only happens in "bad parts of town" or to women who put themselves at risk (e.g., wear certain clothing, drink too much), they may perceive themselves as not being at risk for experiencing a rape and therefore not needing to be sexually assertive. Furthermore, if women believe that men cannot control their sexual urges, they may believe that attempting to be sexually assertive will be futile and therefore not engage in those behaviors. Thus, we hypothesized that women's beliefs about rape would impact how they behave during sexual activity, which in turn, would impact how they conceptualize unwanted sexual activity. Rape myth acceptance was expected to be part of a broader set of beliefs about gender norms and societal norms; therefore, these beliefs were expected to impact behavior, including assertiveness, during sexual activity.

Sexual assertiveness, as defined by Morokoff et al. (1997), involves strategies individuals use to establish sexual autonomy, including initiation of wanted sexual activity and refusal of unwanted sexual activity. Hahn et al. (2016) found that lower rape myth acceptance was associated with greater sexual assertiveness among college women. Furthermore, Rusinko et al. (2010) found that female participants' levels of both general and sexual assertiveness predicted the amount of blame they assigned to a female survivor in a hypothetical rape scenario. This finding is important because higher levels of self-blame following a sexual assault is associated with unacknowledged rape (Fisher et al., 2000). Given that sexual assertiveness has been found to be related to attributions of survivor-blame in hypothetical rape scenarios, it was also expected to affect how they conceptualize their own sexual experiences, including victimization events, by influencing how they assign responsibility for the incident.

We hypothesized that greater rape myth acceptance would be negatively related to sexual assertiveness, which would be positively associated with likelihood of rape acknowledgment. Overall, we predicted a negative indirect effect, indicating that greater acceptance of rape myths would be associated with a decreased likelihood of acknowledged rape. This study focused on sexual refusal assertiveness, as opposed to general sexual assertiveness, because lower levels of assertive refusal has been associated with increased likelihood of completed rape (e.g., Söchting et al., 2004) and assignment of more blame to rape survivors in some scenarios (e.g., Rusinko et al., 2010).

2. Method

2.1. Participants

As part of a larger study, undergraduate women at a public university in the Mid-Atlantic United States were recruited via the Psychology Department's online study management site and flyers posted on campus to complete a series of online questionnaires. Of the 1187 women who began the online survey, 1095 (92.2%) completed the full survey. One hundred thirty-one women were excluded from the analyses because they responded incorrectly to at least one reading validity item (e.g., "Please select 4 for this question."). Since the purpose of this study was to examine predictors of rape acknowledgment, only participants who indicated they had experienced a rape (defined as incapacitated or forced vaginal, oral, or anal sexual intercourse that was unwanted and nonconsensual) since the age of 14 on the Sexual Experiences Survey – Short Form Victimization (SES-SFV; Koss et al., 2007) were included in the present analyses ($n = 181$). Demographic

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