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Current Perceptions of Marital Rape

Some Good and Not-So-Good News

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The current study extends previous research on marital rape and acceptance of general rape myths by comparing the perceptions of undergraduate college students ($n = 85$) to those of college alumni/ae ($n = 44$) who graduated from the same university three decades earlier. Participants read a hypothetical rape scenario that depicted the perpetrator as either the victim's husband or neighbor and completed three measures of different aspects of rape myth acceptance. Results indicated that although participants reported fairly low levels of support for different aspects of rape myths, certain rape myths were more strongly endorsed than were others. Furthermore, rape myth acceptance was stronger for marital rape than for acquaintance rape and for undergraduates than for college alumni/ae. Practical and theoretical implications of this study are discussed.

Keywords: *marital rape; acquaintance rape; rape myths; attitudes toward rape*

Rape is a rampant problem of social significance because it affects millions of people around the world. In the United States, recent surveys indicate that someone is sexually assaulted every two and one half minutes (Catalano, 2005). Although a person is not protected based on race, sex, age, class, or sexual orientation from rape and sexual abuse, females are disproportionately affected. Statistics about the prevalence of acquaintance and intimate partner rape are often inaccurate because rape, regardless of the victim-offender relationship, is one of the most underreported crimes in the United States. However, it is estimated that in the United States, a female is raped every 6 minutes (Tjaden & Thoennes, 2006). The lifetime probability for rape victimization is 50%, which means that one out of every two females will be sexually assaulted at least once in her lifetime (Sheffield, 1994). Eighty-four percent of reported rapes are committed by an acquaintance or intimate partner (Tjaden & Thoennes, 2006).

Attitudes toward rape changed with the success of the women's movement in the 1970s and the creation of rape awareness programs throughout the United States in the 1980s, particularly by framing rape as violent rather than sexual (McCaughey, 1997; Meyer, 2000). However, rape myths persist; as recently as 2002, Basile reported that rape myth acceptance is relatively high among U.S. citizens. Rape still tends to be viewed as less serious, and less physically and emotionally damaging, than are other violent crimes (Frese, Moya, & Megias, 2004; McCaughey, 1997; Russell, 1998). Although there are differences in attitudes toward rape based on respondents' characteristics and certain situational factors of the rape, overwhelmingly attitudes toward rape are reflective of gender stereotypes and patriarchal views of sex, which are based on controlling every aspect of the female body (Russell, 1998). Sexual violence and the threat of it serve to terrorize women and further reinforce the patriarchal definition of a woman's place in society (Sheffield, 1994).

The judicial system contributes to the silence of rape victims because rape has the lowest conviction rate of all violent crimes (Sheffield, 1994). However, the relationship between the victim and offender is a major factor as to whether a female reports a rape (Weingourt, 1985). Contrary to popular belief, rapists are not strangers lurking in dark alleys or hiding behind bushes looking for their next victims; rather, the majority of rapes involve a victim and an offender who had a prior relationship before the rape occurred (Kirkwood & Cecil, 2001).

Although more attention is being paid to acquaintance rape in the clinical and research arenas, the issue of marital rape is often overlooked. Recent statistics suggest that 10% to 14% of married women are raped by their husbands in the United States (Bergen, 2006). It was not until July 5, 1993, that marital rape became a crime in all 50 states. However, by May 2005, only 20 states had completely eliminated the marital rape exemptions from state laws; in the remaining 30 states, there were still some exemptions given to husbands from rape prosecution (Bergen, 2006). The signing of the Violence Against Women Act 2005 into law on January 5, 2006 led to changes in existing state rape laws, which treated spousal rape as lesser crime than rape occurring with other victims (The National Alliance to End Sexual Violence, 2007). Clearly, legal recognition of marital rape as a criminal act, without accompanying exemptions or qualifiers, is an important change which was long overdue; whether and how such legislation is acknowledged and handled by law enforcement and the legal system remains to be seen.

The use of relationship status to determine whether a crime has occurred reflects the ways in which our attitudes about rape vary depending on the victim-offender relationship. Monson, Langhinrichsen-Rohling, and Binderup

(2000) found that participants were less likely to support general rape myths when the perpetrator in a rape scenario was a stranger rather than the victim's husband. Marital rape is also less likely than stranger or acquaintance rape to be accurately labeled as rape (Kirkwood & Cecil, 2001) or to be perceived as a serious offense (Monson, Byrd, & Langhinrichsen-Rohling, 1996; Monson et al., 2000). In addition, victims of marital rape are more likely to be blamed for the rape (Monson et al., 1996; Monson et al., 2000). Furthermore, the status of the marriage can also affect level of support for rape myths; Ewoldt, Monson, and Langhinrichsen-Rohling (2000) reported that participants are less likely to support rape myths when the couple depicted in the rape scenario is not living together, is legally separated, or is divorced. Clearly, social and legal constructions of marriage in the United States include the belief that consent is an inherent component of the marital contract.

However, there is variability in the endorsement of rape myths, and demographic characteristics are related to differences in beliefs about marital rape. Exploring differences between males' and females' perceptions of rape, regardless of the victim-offender relationship, has been a major area of research. Previous research has revealed that males and females tend to have different perceptions of rape (Barnett, Quackenbush, Sinisi, Wegman, & Otney, 2001; Blumberg & Lester, 1991; Nagel, Matsuo, McIntyre, & Morrison, 2005), with males consistently demonstrating stronger endorsement of rape myths than females. An even greater disparity exists, however, between males' and females' perceptions of marital rape (Auster & Leone, 2001; Basile, 2002; Ewoldt et al., 2000; Jeffords & Dull, 1982; Monson et al., 1996). A survey from the Spring 1980 Texas Crime Poll, which was conducted before the marital rape exemption was removed from Texas state rape laws, revealed that 45% of female respondents were in favor of removing the exemption, whereas only 25% of males were (Jeffords & Dull, 1982). Auster and Leone (2001) found that females were more likely than males to believe that marital rape is no different than rape occurring in other victim-offender relationships. Similarly, other studies reported that males were more likely to attribute blame to the marital rape victim and show a higher level of support for false beliefs about rape than were females (Ewoldt et al., 2000; Monson et al., 1996).

The age of the respondent has also been found to be a predictor of people's perceptions of rape, with mixed results. Some research has suggested that younger participants are more likely to endorse various aspects of rape myths than are older participants (Blumberg & Lester, 1991). However, other data have indicated that younger participants are more sympathetic toward and less likely to blame rape victims than are older participants (Kalra, Wood, Demarais, Verberg, & Senn, 1998; Nagel et al., 2005).

Research on the relationship between age and beliefs about marital rape in particular has been similarly mixed. Aromaki, Haebich, and Lindman (2002) found that younger males were more likely to support marital rape myths and expressed more hostility toward females than did older men, who were generally married and more sexually experienced. On the other hand, Jeffords and Dull (1982) reported that younger participants were more in favor of removing the marital rape exemption from the rape laws than were older participants, and Basile (2002) found that older participants were less likely to believe in the occurrence of marital rape than were younger participants. However, not all of the research has supported the existence of age differences; Luddy and Thompson (1997) found that college males and their fathers did not differ in their evaluations of a marital rape scenario.

The current study extends our knowledge of the effect of the victim–offender relationship on endorsement of rape myths in several ways. Consistent with previous research (Auster & Leone, 2001; Basile, 2002; Ewoldt et al., 2000; Jeffords & Dull, 1982; Kirkwood & Cecil, 2001; Monson et al., 1996; Monson et al., 2000), in this study we explore whether and how participants' endorsement of rape myths differs as a function of who the perpetrator is (spouse or acquaintance). In addition, although previous research has explored the differences by sex and age regarding perceptions of rape, rarely has marital rape been included, and when it has, the findings have been inconsistent. Therefore, this study also examines whether and how participants' endorsements of rape myths vary by sex and age, comparing the views on marital and acquaintance rape of current male and female college students to those of male and female alumni/ae from the same college.

The current study utilizes a 2 (spouse vs. acquaintance perpetrator) \times 2 (sex of respondent) \times 2 (cohort of respondent) design. Three main effects were predicted. First, it was expected that there would be a main effect of victim–offender relationship, with greater endorsement of rape myths in response to scenarios depicting a marital rape than those depicting an acquaintance rape. Second, a main effect of sex was predicted, with male participants more strongly endorsing rape myths than female participants. Third, it was expected that there would be a main effect of cohort, with alumni/ae participants reporting higher levels of support for rape myths than undergraduate participants.

In addition, two interactions were predicted between the victim–offender relationship and the sex of the respondent and between the victim–offender relationship and the cohort of the respondent. It was expected that male participants would more strongly endorse rape myths in response to reading

marital rape scenarios than would female participants and that alumni/ae participants would more strongly endorse rape myths in response to reading marital rape scenarios than would undergraduate participants.

Method

Participants

In this study, 85 undergraduate students and 44 alumni/ae from a small liberal arts college served as respondents. Of the 85 undergraduate participants, 68% were female. Of the undergraduates, 77% described themselves as Caucasian, 8% as Asian, 5% as Hispanic, and 4% as African American. Of the 44 alumni/ae participants, all of whom graduated in the 1970s, 55% were female and all described themselves as Caucasian. Alumni/ae participants also reported the amount of additional education they received after graduating from the university; 20% reported that they completed some graduate work, 32% had completed a master's degree, 16% had completed a doctorate, and 11% had some other type of professional degree.

Procedure

The study was conducted via the Internet. Participants' responses were recorded in a special database that was accessible only by the experimenters. Participants were given a computer-generated, randomly assigned code number that they used throughout the study as a way to link their individual responses without compromising their anonymity. Undergraduate participants voluntarily signed up as an option for credit in an introductory psychology course. Alumni/ae were sent an initial e-mail from the director of alumni relations soliciting volunteers and directing them to the Web site. Participants were asked to complete an online informed consent form prior to beginning the study and were debriefed at its conclusion.

Materials

Vignettes. The vignettes used in the current study were similar to the ones used by Monson et al. (2000). Both vignettes depicted a rape scene and varied only in their description of the victim-offender relationship. The measures were administered via the Internet, and the design of the Web site ensured that each participant had an equal chance of receiving the marital rape depiction and the acquaintance rape depiction.

The vignette read as follows:

Julie was returning to her apartment from the laundry room. With her arms full of laundry and a box of detergent, she was attempting to get her keys to open her apartment door. Dan, *her husband/her neighbor*, was walking towards the door and offered to hold the laundry while she got the door open. She gave him the laundry and proceeded to open the door. As she went into their apartment, Dan followed her inside to the living room with the laundry. Julie thanked Dan for his assistance and *began to talk about how many things she had taken care of that day/started to walk him to the door. While she was talking/Before they reached the door*, Dan began to make sexual advances towards her. Julie resisted the advances persistently and asked him to stop. Dan continued with his sexual advances, and managed to get himself on top of her and have sexual intercourse with her.

In all, 32 female undergraduate students, 13 male undergraduate students, 11 female alumnae, and 9 male alumni were randomly assigned to read the version of the vignette that depicted a marital rape, and 26 female undergraduate students, 14 male undergraduate students, 13 female alumnae, and 11 male alumni were randomly assigned to read the version of the vignette that depicted an acquaintance rape.

Attitude scales. The Illinois Rape Myth Acceptance Scale assessed participants' acceptance of rape myths. The 22-item scale yields an overall assessment of rape myth acceptance and three subscales: "It Wasn't Really Rape," which assesses what conditions must be met for participants to refer to the situation as rape; "He Didn't Mean To," which assesses the level of blame that can be attributed to the offender; and "Rape Is a Deviant Event," which assesses participants' beliefs about the deviant nature of rape and rapists. Additional "filler items" were also selected from the original scale. Participants' answers were recorded for these questions using a 7-point Likert-type scale ranging from 1 (*not at all agree*) to 7 (*very much agree*). Previous use of the Illinois Rape Myth Acceptance Scale has indicated that these subscales are highly correlated to general rape myth acceptance (Payne, Lonsway, & Fitzgerald, 1999).

The Rape-Supportive Attributions Scale and the Sex-Role Stereotypical Victim Blame Attributions Scale assess participants' responses to the specific rape scenarios used in this study (Monson et al., 2000). The Rape-Supportive Attributions Scale consists of four questions that assess participants' false beliefs about rape, such as the amount of psychological damage the victim suffered or the level of certainty that the act would be labeled rape. These items were reversed scored and averaged, with higher scores indicative of greater

rape-supportive attributions. The Sex-Role Stereotypical Victim Blame Attributions Scale consists of six questions that assess the level of blame attributed to the victim. Items were averaged, with higher scores indicative of sex-role stereotypical victim blame attributions. Participants' answers were recorded for each of these scales using a 7-point Likert-type scale ranging from 1 (*minimal*) to 7 (*extremely*; Monson et al., 1996).

Results

Attitudes Toward Rape

Attitudes toward rape were assessed through the Rape-Supportive Attributions Scale, the Sex-Role Stereotypical Victim Blame Attributions Scale, and the three subscales ("It Wasn't Really Rape," "He Didn't Mean To," "Rape Is a Deviant Event") of the Illinois Rape Myth Acceptance Scale. Cronbach's alphas for the subscales ranged from .67 to .82. Overall, endorsement of rape myths on each of these measures was low ($M = 1.47$ to 2.90). However, a series of paired-samples t tests indicated that endorsement was not uniformly low. Comparison of the two attributions scales indicated that endorsement of rape-supportive attributions was significantly higher than sex-role stereotypical victim blame attributions, $t(126) = 9.18, p = .000$. Comparisons among the subscales from the Illinois Rape Myth Acceptance Scale indicated that beliefs that rape may be accidental on the part of the perpetrator were significantly higher than were beliefs that rape is a deviant event, $t(128) = 14.46, p = .000$, or that the event was not really a rape, $t(128) = 14.10, p = .000$; the belief of rape as deviant was also endorsed more strongly than was the belief that an event was not really a rape, $t(128) = 3.02, p = .003$. Means, standard deviations, and reliability coefficients for each of the scales are reported in Table 1.

The Effects of Victim–Offender Relationship, Participant Sex, and Participant Cohort on Rape Myth Endorsement

A series of univariate ANOVAs was used to assess differences on each of the rape myth scales based on the victim–offender relationship, participant sex, and participant cohort and on any interactions among these variables. Significant main effects are reported below; no significant interactions emerged (p values $> .05$). Means by victim–offender relationship, participant sex, and participant cohort are reported in Table 2.

Table 1
Means, Standard Deviations, and Reliability Coefficients
of Attitudes Toward Rape Scales

Scale	<i>M</i>	<i>SD</i>	Cronbach's α
Rape-Supportive Attributions Scale ^a	2.51	1.22	.82
Sex-Role Stereotypical Victim Blame Attributions Scale ^a	1.60	0.659	.67
Illinois Rape Myth Acceptance Scale			
"It Wasn't Really Rape" scale ^b	1.47	0.664	.77
"He Didn't Mean To" scale ^b	2.90	1.12	.75
"Rape Is a Deviant Event" scale ^b	1.64	0.546	.70

a. Means for the Rape-Supportive and Victim Blame Attributions Scales are significantly different at $p < .001$.

b. Means for the subscales of the Illinois Rape Myth Acceptance Scale are significantly different at $p < .003$.

Table 2
Means and Standard Deviations of Attitudes Toward Rape
Scales by Victim–Offender Relationship, Participant Sex,
and Participant Cohort

	Rape-Supportive		Victim Blame		"It Wasn't Really Rape"		"He Didn't Mean To"		"Rape Is a Deviant Event"	
	<i>M</i>	<i>SD</i>	<i>M</i>	<i>SD</i>	<i>M</i>	<i>SD</i>	<i>M</i>	<i>SD</i>	<i>M</i>	<i>SD</i>
Victim–offender relationship										
Marital	3.02 ^a	1.23	1.60	0.74	1.43	0.60	3.09	1.18	1.60	0.57
Acquaintance	2.00 ^a	0.97	1.60	0.57	1.51	0.73	2.71	1.04	1.68	0.52
Participant sex										
Female	2.59	1.18	1.64	0.64	1.40	0.63	2.81*	1.10	1.55*	0.50
Male	2.38	1.28	1.54	0.69	1.58	0.71	3.06*	1.17	1.79*	0.59
Participant cohort										
Undergraduate	2.56	1.17	1.67	0.69	1.45	0.56	3.22*	1.07	1.73*	0.54
Alumni/ae	2.42	1.32	1.46	0.58	1.50	0.83	2.30*	0.99	1.46*	0.52

a. Means are significantly different at $p < .03$.

Victim–offender relationship. There was a significant main effect of victim–offender relationship on the Rape-Supportive Attribution Scale, $F(1, 120) = 19.17, p = .000$. Participants who read the vignette depicting a marital

rape ($M = 3.02$) were significantly more likely to endorse false beliefs about rape than were participants who read the vignette depicting an acquaintance rape ($M = 2.00$). There were no other significant main effects or interactions (p values $> .05$) for the victim–offender relationship on any of the dependent measures of rape myth endorsement.

Participant sex. The analyses revealed that there were significant main effects of participant sex for the “Rape Is a Deviant Event” subscale, $F(1, 121) = 8.20, p = .005$, and the “He Didn’t Mean To” subscale, $F(1, 121) = 5.01, p = .027$. Male participants were significantly more likely than were female participants to construe rape as a deviant event (1.79 vs. 1.55) and to suggest that rape might be unintentional on the part of the perpetrator (3.06 vs. 2.81).

Participant cohort. There were significant main effects of participant cohort on the “Rape Is a Deviant Event” subscale, $F(1, 121) = 9.26, p = .003$, and the “He Didn’t Mean To” subscale, $F(1, 121) = 21.61, p = .000$. Undergraduate participants were significantly more likely than were alumni/ae participants to construe rape as a deviant event (1.73 vs. 1.46) and to suggest that rape might be unintentional on the part of the perpetrator (3.22 vs. 2.30).

Discussion

The results of the current study indicate that perceptions of rape are generally more realistic than were expected. The relatively low means show that, overall, participants are not very supportive of false beliefs about rape and are generally sympathetic toward victims of rape. Although these findings suggest that today’s current and former college students may be more educated about some issues concerning rape, people are still more likely to endorse certain types of rape myths than others. For example, although our findings indicate that people are acknowledging that forced sex is rape and that the victim is not to be blamed, they are less clear about the extent to which the offender should be held responsible for the rape and where, when, and to whom rape can occur. Furthermore, people are still willing to rationalize sexual assault as accidental or uncontrollable on the part of the male perpetrator. Clearly, some acts of rape are construed as more problematic than are others, and “accidental” rape—perhaps one way of framing marital rape—is somehow less serious or less criminal.

In addition, participants were still likely to believe, to a small degree, that rape is an act committed by violent, crazed strangers. However, these

beliefs are inconsistent with reality; according to Tjaden and Thoennes (2006), 64% of reported rapes are committed by an acquaintance or intimate partner. The belief that rape is committed by psychotic strangers in dark alleys is problematic for acquaintance rape in general and marital rape in particular, making it even less likely that marital rape will be labeled as rape and treated as a criminal act.

Victim–Offender Relationship

Consistent with the first predicted main effect, there was a significant effect of the victim–offender relationship on participants' level of support for false beliefs about rape, although not on the amount of blame that was attributed to the victim. Our results indicate that support for false beliefs is greater for participants who read about marital rape than for those who read about acquaintance rape. This finding supports previous research indicating that the relationship between the victim and offender affects people's endorsement of rape myths (Basile, 2002; Kirkwood & Cecil, 2001; Monson et al., 1996; Monson et al., 2000). Although overall there was a lower level of support for false beliefs about rape, beliefs still varied by the victim–offender relationship, suggesting that a higher level of intimacy is expected between married couples, thus making it harder for participants to believe that rape occurs in a married relationship.

This misconception may stem from a patriarchal view of marriage in which it is believed that a husband has full access to his wife's body with or without her consent (Russell, 1998). Even if participants correctly labeled the act as marital rape, they were reluctant to believe that the act was a violation of the wife's rights or that she will be psychologically damaged from the experience because the perpetrator is someone with whom she has had consensual sex in the past. Unless specifically stated, it is assumed that a sexual history does not exist between two neighbors, which then makes it easier to label the act as rape.

This study does not support prior research that the victim–offender relationship affects the amount of blame that is attributed to the rape victim (Monson et al., 1996; Monson et al., 2000). The amount of blame that was attributed to the rape victim, regardless of her relationship to the perpetrator, was relatively minimal. Monson et al. (2000) reported a decline in the amount of blame attributed to the victim from their original research; our findings show this same trend.

Sex of Participant

Consistent with the second predicted main effect, there were significant differences found between males' and females' general acceptance of rape myths, with male participants more likely to endorse rape myths and attribute less blame to offenders than were female participants. However, contrary to the researchers' predictions, there were no differences in participants' perceptions of marital rape based on their sex.

Males have been found to support rape myths and view rape differently than do females (Barnett et al., 2001; Blumberg & Lester, 1991; Nagel et al., 2005). Although these results do not suggest that male participants *strongly* endorse rape myths and victim blame, the sex differences were significant. Because rape disproportionately affects females and our society is a rape culture in which male sexual aggression against females is accepted, the fear of being sexually victimized is far greater for females than for males (McCaughy, 1997). This constant fear of rape, which changes the way in which females go about their everyday lives, perhaps made it more difficult for female participants to endorse rape myths, such as the belief that only women who frequent bars are raped. Because rape culture reinforces the male's invulnerability to rape (McCaughy, 1997), males are not experiencing this constant threat of rape, which in turn may contribute to their inaccurate perceptions of rape.

The finding that male participants are less likely to attribute blame to offenders than are female participants can also be seen as a direct result of rape culture. The fact that the mean on the "He Didn't Mean To" subscale was 3.02 on a 7-point Likert-type scale for male respondents (vs. 2.59 for female respondents) suggests that males are experiencing a sense of confusion about whether or not a female is willing to engage in sexual relations. According to McCaughy (1997), although males acknowledge that a woman wearing a skirt or frequenting a bar at night is not an invitation to rape, they do see it as an invitation for sex. Males are then reluctant to label the sex that was not consented to as rape because they believe the women acted in manner that caused her to appear sexually desirable (McCaughy, 1997). This finding also suggests that male participants are more likely than female participants to forgive the offender for "overlooking" whether or not the female wanted to engage in the sexual relations.

Although males' and females' levels of acceptance of general rape myths differed, surprisingly there were no differences found between their perceptions of marital rape. This finding contradicts previous research that has found that male participants are more likely to attribute blame to the marital rape victim and show a higher level of support for false beliefs about

rape (Ewoldt et al., 2000; Monson et al., 1996). Therefore, the current study's finding is promising in that there may have been a shift in men's understanding of marital rape as rape. However, the current study's finding that male and female participants regard marital rape and acquaintance rape differently suggests that marital rape is still not viewed as seriously as are other types of rape.

Cohort

The results of the study show that there were significant differences found between the acceptance of rape myths of undergraduate students and alumni/ae. However, contrary to the hypothesis that alumni/ae would have a higher level of support for rape myths, the study revealed the opposite finding—that undergraduate students were significantly more likely to endorse rape myths than were alumni/ae. There were no differences in the perceptions of rape by victim–offender relationship of undergraduate students and alumni/ae.

Previous research has revealed inconsistent findings about whether the age of the participant can predict his or her level of endorsement for rape myths (Aromaki et al., 2002; Basile, 2002; Blumberg & Lester, 1991; Jeffords & Dull, 1982; Kalra et al., 1998; Luddy & Thompson, 1997). The results of this study support the findings of Aromaki et al. (2002) in that undergraduate participants were more likely to support rape myths than were alumni/ae, although, again, overall endorsement of rape myths was relatively low. However, the cohort finding in our study is still disturbing because it is often assumed that today's college students are more aware of and educated about issues concerning rape than are individuals from previous generations. That the undergraduates are reporting higher levels of rape myths than are older samples suggests that sexual assault awareness programs in colleges may not be as effective as they need to be or that awareness and education do not necessarily affect general rape myths.

Although college alumni/ae participants had graduated before college rape awareness programs were implemented in the 1980s, they came of age during the second wave of feminism, when there was a greater focus on issues of gender and violence (Kolmar & Bartkowski, 2005; Meyer, 2000). Today, we find ourselves in the midst of a backlash against all forms of feminism and women's organizing (Kolmar & Bartkowski, 2005). Therefore, undergraduate participants may have been more likely to endorse rape myths than college alumni/ae may because of current trends to covertly or overtly reject feminism and endorse traditional or antifeminist perspectives on gender issues, including gender violence (e.g., Felson, 2006).

Inconsistent findings have likewise been found regarding age and perceptions of marital rape, separate from stranger or acquaintance rape (Basile, 2002; Jeffords & Dull, 1982; Luddy & Thompson, 1997). Contrary to our predictions, we did not find undergraduate participants endorsing myths about marital rape more strongly than were alumni/ae participants; there was no significant interaction between participant cohort and victim–offender relationship.

The participants attended or are currently attending the same college, which is located in one of the first states to abolish the marital rape exemption; (Russell, 1998). Even so, the perceptions of marital rape by the undergraduate students in this study, the majority of whom were not yet born when the state marital rape exemption was eliminated, were not statistically different from those of alumni/ae, who lived in a time when it was legal to rape one's wife. However, the main effect for victim–offender relationship still indicates that there is work to be done in increasing awareness about marital rape.

Limitations of the Current Research and Directions for Future Research

There are some potential limitations to the current study that should be addressed in future research. For example, whether or not the respondent was a current or prior victim of sexual abuse is important information to know and may affect participants' beliefs about rape. According to Basile (2002), current and previous victims of sexual abuse are two times more likely to believe that wife rape occurs than are nonvictims. Therefore, the way respondents answered particular questions may have been affected by their personal experiences with abuse; this information was not collected from participants.

In addition, because most undergraduate participants were 1st- and 2nd-year college students, it cannot be assumed that the perceptions of 1st- and 2nd-year students are similar to those of 3rd- or 4th-year students. Rather, perceptions of 1st- and 2nd-year college students may be more similar to those of high school students than those of 3rd- and 4th-year college students. Cross-sectional research involving more cohorts, or longitudinal research assessing whether and how beliefs about rape change, is required to better understand the developmental nature of such attitudes. Moreover, less work has been done on beliefs about rape in noncollege populations; it would be problematic to assume that beliefs about sexual violence in such selected samples adequately reflect beliefs about sexual violence more generally.

Another limitation of the current research is the measurements that were used to assess participants' perceptions of marital rape and acceptance of rape myths. The Rape-Supportive Attributions Scale and the Sex-Stereotypical Victim Blame Attributions Scale explicitly measure participants' perceptions toward marital and acquaintance rape. Similarly, the Illinois Rape Myth Acceptance Scale is an explicit measurement of rape myth acceptance. Although these scales are useful, participants' responses may be driven by their need to provide socially acceptable answers to the various questions to avoid the negative feelings that are usually experienced when one is aware of the fact that one's true beliefs deviate from the norm.

Furthermore, social psychological research has documented that there is often a discrepancy between attitudes and behavior. Therefore, low endorsement of rape myths on paper may be unrelated to actions about or toward perpetrators or victims of rape, and generally held beliefs may vary as a function of specific characteristics of people (e.g., race, sex, age) or (perceived) knowledge of situations or the individuals themselves. Methodologies and measurement instruments that decrease socially desirable responding (e.g., implicit measurement techniques), increase the level of realism for participants (e.g., jury simulations), and allow for the collection of data on the more dynamic and changing ways in which sexual assault is constructed in particular instances (e.g., qualitative methods) are useful in furthering our understanding of perceptions of rape in different populations.

Conclusion

Overall, participants' endorsement of rape myths was relatively low, suggesting that social attitudes about sexual assault may be moving in the right direction. However, the current study does confirm previous findings that the relationship between the victim and the offender and the demographic characteristics of the participants continue to be important factors that affect the judgments people make about rape, rapists, and victims. Furthermore, although attitudes may have shifted in a more positive direction for victims and survivors of rape, rates of sexual assault against women remain high, suggesting that there is a discrepancy, at least among some people, between attitudes and behavior. Research must continue to identify the factors related to the development and maintenance of rape myths and how those are supported and enacted in the ongoing struggle to end violence against women.

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