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The Impact of Past Sexual Experiences on Attributions of Responsibility for Rape

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Two factors potentially affect observers' attributions of responsibility to a rape survivor: how closely they identify with the survivor and how much they adhere to rape myths. To assess the impact of these factors, 157 female college students categorized by their sexual assault history and by their acceptance of rape myths, evaluated a sexual assault scenario. It was hypothesized that previously victimized participants would attribute less blame, and that those participants who self-identify as rape survivors would view the assault as rape more often than other participants. Neither hypothesis was supported. As expected, those who scored higher on the Rape Myths Acceptance Scale (RMAS) blamed the victim more and were less likely to believe rape had occurred. Only one subscale of the RMAS, Adversarial Sexual Beliefs, was consistently associated with participants' evaluation of the scenario, suggesting that this dimension may be especially important to understanding an observer's assessment of rape.

Keywords: *rape myths; attribution of blame; defensive attribution hypothesis; adversarial sexual beliefs*

Blaming a victim for her rape may adversely affect her psychological response to the assault (Davis, Brickman, & Baker, 1991; Ullman, 1996), her self-reported rate of recovery (Ullman, 1996), and whether she blames herself for the assault (Wyatt, 1992). Two factors that affect whether people blame a victim are how closely they identify with the rape victim (Fulero &

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DeLara, 1976; Gold, Landerman, & Bullock, 1977), and how much they adhere to rape myths (Check & Malamuth, 1985; Jenkins & Dambrot, 1987; Muehlenhard & MacNaughton, 1988). The current study examined the association between observers' sexual assault history, their ratings on the subscales of the Rape Myth Acceptance Scale (RMAS; Burt, 1980), and their attributions of blame to a rape victim.

According to the defensive attribution hypothesis (Shaver, 1970), people blame a victim of a negative event based on how similar they perceive themselves to be to the victim (personal relevance), and on situational relevance, that is, how likely they believe they could be in a similar situation. When situational relevance exists, blame is assigned based on how similar the observer feels to the victim: Greater similarity is associated with less blame.

Research suggests this hypothesis is applicable to sexual assault. Studies with female participants report that as levels of personal relevance to a victim of rape increase, attributions of blame to her significantly decrease (Bell, Kuriloff, & Lottes, 1994; Dexter, Penrod, Linz, & Saunders, 1997; Workman & Freeburg, 1999). These findings are also relevant for participants who have been victimized. Barnett, Tetreault, and Masbad (1987) compared feelings of similarity to a rape victim among research participants who had previously been raped and those who had not. Participants who had been raped perceived significantly greater similarity to the stimulus victim than did non-victimized participants. Although previously victimized participants attribute less blame to the victim than do participants who have never been victimized, this difference is not significant (Coller & Resick, 1987; Jenkins & Dambrot, 1987).

Another theory that helps to explain why and how observers make negative attributions to a survivor of rape is the sex-role stereotyping theory. This theory purports that men and women are socialized to assume set roles and behavior in male-female sexual interactions, for instance, that men should initiate sexual relations and that women should act as gatekeepers and control how much sexual activity occurs (Weis & Borges, 1973). Check and Malamuth (1983) suggested that sex-role stereotypes associated with dating likely contribute to the occurrence of date rape as sexual coercion by verbal or physical means is thought of as normal behavior in such settings. Observers are also likely to apply such stereotypes, and this may affect how they view date rape assaults. Bridges (1991) suggested that this socialization process is relevant to acquaintance rape more than to stranger rape as observers already have established schema for the behavior of men and women who are on a date or are in an intimate relationship (Check & Malamuth, 1983).

Acquaintance rape is therefore likely to be seen by persons with traditional sex-role expectations as the extreme result of traditional sex-role interactions (Bridges, 1991).

In her investigation of victims of rape who tell no one about their assault, Koss (1985) suggested that rape victims be categorized as either those who perceive themselves to have been a victim of rape or as those who do not. She labeled persons who experience a sexual assault that legally qualifies as rape but who do not believe their experience was rape *unacknowledged victims*, and those who do believe their assault was rape *acknowledged victims*. In examining the relevance of the defensive attribution hypothesis to sexual assault, the current study compared responses to a victim of rape by participants who are unacknowledged victims, by participants who are acknowledged victims, and by participants who have never been raped.

Previous comparisons between acknowledged and unacknowledged victims of rape suggest that they experience similar emotional responses to their assaults. For instance, both groups display similar levels of sexual dissatisfaction, anxiety, hostility, and self-blame (Frazier & Seales, 1997; Kahn & Mathie, 2000; Orlando & Koss, 1983). Differences emerge for prior intimacy between the victim and her assailant, and the perceived level of violence during the assault. Generally, unacknowledged victims report having a significantly more intimate relationship with their assailant (Kahn, Jackson, Kully, Badger, & Halvorsen, 2003; Koss, 1985; Levine-MacCombie & Koss, 1986) and experiencing less violence during their assault than do acknowledged victims (Bondurant, 2001; Kahn et al., 2003; Layman, Gidycz, & Lynn, 1996).

One comparative study examining cognitive elements found differences in the descriptions each group gives of what they believe happens during a typical assault (Kahn, Mathie, & Torgler, 1994). Scenes given by unacknowledged victims included a stranger rape occurring outdoors with physical violence and the threat or use of a weapon significantly more often than those given by acknowledged victims. For the current study, comparisons between these groups of sexual assault survivors will be based on information about their most severe assault.

Here we examine two hypotheses related to victimization status. According to the defensive attribution hypothesis, both categories of previously victimized participants (acknowledged and unacknowledged) should feel greater situational relevance and personal similarity to the stimulus victim than nonvictimized participants. Therefore, we expect that participants who have been previously victimized will attribute less responsibility to the vic-

tim than will nonvictimized participants. Our second hypothesis is that nonvictimized participants and unacknowledged participants will be less likely to label the incident as rape than acknowledged participants will.

The second factor that we examine is belief in rape myths. Rape myths are "prejudicial, stereotyped or false beliefs about rape, rape victims and rapists" (Burt, 1980, p. 217). A high acceptance of such myths is consistently associated with greater attributions of blame to a victim of rape (Check & Malamuth, 1985; Jenkins & Dambrot, 1987; Krahe, 1988). Female participants who score high in the acceptance of rape myths believe that the victim was desirous of sexual intercourse (Jenkins & Dambrot, 1987) and believe the assault could have been avoided (Kopper, 1996) significantly more than do women who score low in the acceptance of rape myths. Having been a victim of sexual assault does not predict less likelihood of accepting rape myths (Burt, 1980; Carmody & Washington, 2001; Lefley, Scott, Llabre, & Hicks, 1993; Muehlenhard & Linton, 1987; Mynatt & Allgeier, 1990; Reilly, Lott, Caldwell, & DeLuca, 1992).

Acceptance of interpersonal violence and beliefs that sexual relationships are inherently exploitative correlate highly with rape myth acceptance (Burt, 1980; Burt & Albin, 1981; Check & Malamuth, 1985; Mynatt & Allgeier, 1990; Reilly et al., 1992). Burt's RMAS (1980), an instrument often used in studies that examine rape myth beliefs, measures both these attitudes as well as rape myth acceptance.

Although several studies use the RMAS to examine attributions of responsibility, no study has examined how scores on its individual subscales (Rape Myth, Acceptance of Interpersonal Violence, and Adversarial Sexual Beliefs) relate to these attributions. Studies that have explored how the subscales relate to one another find that although there is a strong relationship among them, some differences exist (Briere, Malamuth, & Check, 1985; Lonsway & Fitzgerald, 1994). In their research, Lonsway and Fitzgerald (1994) found that scores for female students on the Acceptance of Interpersonal Violence and the Adversarial Sexual Belief scales accounted for 46% of the variance of the overall rape myth scale score. A factor analysis done by Briere et al. (1985) on the three subscales resulted in nine different factors. These findings suggest that the subscales tap into different elements of beliefs in rape myths.

We expect that participants who score higher on the overall RMAS will attribute greater responsibility to the victim and will be less likely to label the incident as rape. In addition, we explore how each subscale relates to perceptions of sexual assault.

METHOD

Participants

Participants were psychology students at a public university in northeastern Florida ($N = 157$) who received class credit for their involvement in the current study. The current study included only female students to increase the likelihood of having victims of rape participate in the study, as more than 90% of all rape victims are women (U.S. Bureau of Census, 2002). Ages ranged from 18 to 49 years with a mean age of 22.4. Most of the participants were White (78%). The rest were African American (10%), Asian American (4%), Hispanic American (3%), and Other (5%). One participant's packet was excluded because more than 50% of her responses were missing.

Procedure

Participants first read a scenario, developed by two of the authors, that described a date between two juniors, Brian and Lisa, who attend the same college. After going to dinner and a movie, they return to Lisa's apartment and begin to engage in some sexual activity; however, she does not want to have intercourse. Lisa twice tells Brian to stop; but, he ignores her protests on the second occasion and uses his body weight to prevent her from leaving, and they have intercourse.

Several steps were taken to maximize the validity of the scenario. For instance, it was decided to exclude loaded words such as *victim*, *perpetrator*, *force*, *rape*, and *sexual assault* so as not to bias the reader. In addition, naming the couple was intended to assist with readability. These tactics have been used in other research examining rape (e.g., Ewoldt, Monson, & Langhinrichsen-Rohling, 2000; Monson, Byrd, & Langhinrichsen-Rohling, 1996; Monson, Langhinrichsen-Rohling, & Binderup, 2000; Workman & Orr, 1996). It was clearly stated that they were at the same level in school to limit the perception of one person being younger and more naïve than the other. Keeping with suggestions from other researchers (Bourque, 1989; Cronkite, 1980), extraneous information was kept at a minimum so participants would respond to the important elements of the scenario, and not to unrelated material (e.g., the type of movie the couple saw).

After reading the scenario, participants completed a 10-item questionnaire about the scenario, the RMAS, the Sexual Experiences Survey, and the Sexual Experiences Inventory. Nine of the 10 questions about the scenario

were on a 6-point Likert-type rating scale with a range of 1 for *strongly disagree* to 6 for *strongly agree*. The 10th question asked participants to assign the percentage of responsibility so that the assignment of responsibility totaled 100%. The question read, "How responsible do you find the parties, that is, Lisa and Brian, for the incident that occurred?"

The questions of particular interest are the ones asking for assignment of responsibility, and the rating scale question that asked for participant's level of belief that the encounter was date rape. The other rating scale items asked for opinions on such things as the victim's desire to have sexual intercourse, the perpetrator's intent to have sexual intercourse, and the victim's control of the situation. The attitudinal measures were deliberately presented after the 10-item questionnaire so that the idea of sexual assault would be introduced as late as possible.

Measures

RMAS. The RMAS (Burt, 1980) measures how accepting a participant is of rape myths. The measure consists of 26 questions with ratings on a 7-point scale, and 8 questions with ratings on a 5-point Likert-type scale. The three subscales: Rape Myth, Adversarial Sex Beliefs, and Acceptance of Interpersonal Violence had Cronbach's alphas of .75, .71, and .38, respectively, and the Cronbach's alpha for the overall scale was .81. Higher scores for each subscale indicate greater acceptance of rape myths, sexual relationships as inherently exploitative, and interpersonal violence, respectively.

Sexual Experiences Survey and Inventory. The Sexual Experiences Survey (Koss & Oros, 1982), a 10-item measure identifies persons who have experienced sexual victimization. The internal reliability was acceptable with Cronbach's alpha equal to .80. Participants who indicated in this survey that they had been sexually victimized were asked to complete the Sexual Experiences Inventory (SEI), a scale based on the Sexual Experiences Interview used by Koss (1985). The SEI asks for information about the most severe sexual assault experienced by the participant and classifies her as either an acknowledged or unacknowledged victim. This classification is based on the response to the question, "Looking back on the experience, how would you describe the situation?" Using previously established methodology (Layman et al., 1996) a participant who responded that her situation was rape was classified as an acknowledged victim, those who gave any other response were classified as unacknowledged victims.

TABLE 1: Factors of the Dependent Measure

<i>Factor and Items</i>	<i>Rotated Eigenvalues</i>	<i>Percentage of Variance Explained</i>
Expectations of sexual contact: Brian should have expected to have sexual intercourse with Lisa. Brian should have stopped sexual contact completely the first time Lisa said no. Brian should have stopped sexual contact completely the second time Lisa said no. Lisa wanted to have sexual intercourse.	2.91	36.23
Criminality of incident: Brian should be held legally accountable for what he did. Lisa should report the events that took place to the proper authorities.	1.77	22.17
Female's control of situation: Lisa could have stopped Brian. Lisa should have been more insistent when she said no.	1.57	19.63

NOTE: The extraction method used was principal component analysis. The rotation method used was varimax with Kaiser normalization.

RESULTS

Responses to the SEI resulted in 11 participants classified as acknowledged victims, 21 as unacknowledged victims, and 124 as nonvictims.

A factor analysis of the first eight items from the questionnaire on the scenario was performed using the principal components method with varimax rotation. Based on the SCREE PLOT from the analysis, three factors were identified (see Table 1). These factors accounted for 78% of the variance in the data. The first factor consisting of four questions asked about expectations of sexual contact. The second factor consisting of two questions examined whether there was a criminal element to the incident. The third factor, also consisting of two questions, asked about the female's control of the situation. Reliability analyses for these factors produced Cronbach's alphas of .87, .87, and .69, respectively. Responses for the questions in each factor were averaged, after relevant items were reverse coded, to obtain one score for each factor.

Participant ratings for six of the items were heavily skewed reflecting attitudes that were not victim blaming. The two items that made up the factor Female's Control of Situation were the only ones that were fairly evenly distributed.

A MANOVA was run with participant category as the predictor variable, and the three factors identified in the factorial analysis, along with the two primary questions (responsibility attributed to the victim, and whether the incident was rape) as the dependent variables. Contrary to the hypothesis, unacknowledged victims attributed the highest responsibility to the victim ($M = 16.29\%$), followed by nonvictims ($M = 15.94\%$). Acknowledged victims attributed the least responsibility to the victim ($M = 14.55\%$). However, these differences were not statistically significant, $F(2, 151) = .11, p > .05$. Both classes of victimized participants (unacknowledged and acknowledged) were more likely to believe that rape occurred ($M = 5.29$ and 5.09 , respectively) than nonvictims were ($M = 4.89$). Again, these differences were not statistically significant, $F(2, 151) = .61, p > .05$. There were no significant results for any of the factors.

We examined differences between acknowledged and unacknowledged victims using t tests, with items from the SEI as dependent variables, and category of participant as the predictor variable. There were significant differences for age at time of assault, $t(30) = -2.59, p < .05$, and level of violence during assault, $t(30) = 2.80, p < .05$. Unacknowledged victims were older than acknowledged victims at the time of their assault ($M = 18.62$ and 15.00 , respectively) and rated the level of violence during their assault as less severe ($M = 2.71$ and 4.91 , respectively). There was no difference between the groups for either acquaintance level with assailant, $t(30) = .35, p > .05$, or preassault sexual activity with assailant, $t(30) = -1.48, p > .05$.

The total scores for the RMAS were ranked into quartiles, and a comparison among these groups was done using a MANOVA. The dependent variables were the two primary questions, along with the three factors identified in the factorial analysis (Expectations, Criminality, Female's Control). Only one of the hypotheses was supported. Responsibility attributed to the stimulus victim was significantly different among the groups, $F(3, 152) = 13.01, p < .05$. Post hoc analyses showed that participants in Quartile 4, that is, those most accepting of rape myths, were significantly different from all other groups and attributed the most responsibility to the victim. The groups did not differ in their belief in whether the incident was rape, $F(3, 152) = .15, p > .05$. Analyses for the three factors were also not significant.

The same analyses were run for each of the subscales: Rape Myth scale (RMS), Adversarial Sexual Beliefs (ASB), and Acceptance of Interpersonal Violence (AIV) using only the extreme quartiles (1 and 4). These are the participants who were least accepting (Group 1) and most accepting (Group 4) of each set of beliefs. For each subscale, participants with higher acceptance levels attributed significantly higher responsibility to the victim than did

TABLE 2: Mean Percentage of Responsibility Attributed to Victim by Rape Myths Acceptance Subscales

Subscale	Low Acceptance Group			High Acceptance Group		
	M	SD	n	M	SD	n
Rape myth scale	10.68 ^a	14.76	40	25.15 ^a	19.14	39
Adversarial sex beliefs	9.82 ^b	14.03	39	22.36 ^b	17.43	39
Interpersonal violence	9.97 ^c	13.06	30	21.91 ^c	18.89	43

NOTE: Higher percentages indicate a higher level of responsibility attributed to the victim.

a. $p < .05$ for pairs of numbers with the same superscript.

b. $p < .05$ for pairs of numbers with the same superscript.

c. $p < .05$ for pairs of numbers with the same superscript.

those with lower acceptance, RMS: $F(1, 75) = 16.07, p < .05$; ASB: $F(1, 74) = 12.47, p < .05$; and AIV: $F(1, 69) = 8.60, p < .05$.

Participants in Group 4 for the ASB and AIV scales were less likely to believe that a rape occurred. However, this difference was significant only for the ASB scale, $F(1, 74) = 5.00, p < .05$. For the RMS scale, participants in Group 4 were more likely to believe a rape had occurred; however, this difference was not significant. Tables 2 and 3 show the marginal means respectively for responsibility attributed to the victim and for belief that rape occurred.

Only the ASB scale had statistically significant results for the three identified factors. Participants with lower acceptance of these beliefs agreed significantly less that sexual contact should be expected by the persons in the scenario, $F(1, 74) = 4.56, p < .05$; agreed more strongly that legal authorities should be involved, $F(1, 74) = 9.78, p < .05$; and believed the female had less control of the situation, $F(1, 74) = 4.49, p < .05$, than did participants with higher acceptance of these beliefs.

DISCUSSION

The current study examined attribution differences among unacknowledged victims, acknowledged victims of rape, and nonvictimized women. The percentage of unacknowledged victims in the current study (13.5%) was higher than in other studies. However, within the sample of participants who were previously victimized the percentage of unacknowledged victims (66%) was consistent with other findings (Bondurant, 2001; Kahn et al., 1994; Koss, 1985; Koss, Dinero, & Seibel, 1988; Layman et al., 1996).

TABLE 3: Means for View of Incident as Rape by Rape Myths Acceptance Subscales

Subscale	Low Acceptance Group			High Acceptance Group		
	M	SD	n	M	SD	n
Rape myth scale	4.78	1.82	40	5.10	1.25	39
Adversarial sex beliefs	5.44 ^a	1.21	39	4.77 ^a	1.44	39
Interpersonal violence	5.30	1.44	30	4.91	1.41	43

NOTE: Higher values indicate more agreement that rape occurred.

a. $p < .05$ for pairs of numbers with the same superscript.

The hypotheses associated with the predictor variable (participants' victimization category) were not supported. Based on the defensive attribution hypothesis, it was expected that participants who were previously victimized would have greater feelings of situational relevance and personal similarity to the victim and would, therefore, attribute less responsibility to the rape victim in the scenario and would, therefore, attribute less responsibility to her than nonvictimized participants. Instead, unacknowledged victims attributed more responsibility to the victim than either acknowledged victims or nonvictimized participants. The differences among the three groups, however, were not significant.

It was also expected that acknowledged victims would be more likely to label the incident as *rape* than either nonvictimized participants or unacknowledged victims. Although the group means were in the predicted direction, none of the differences was significant.

An examination of victimized participants' self-described most severe sexual assault found some differences between acknowledged victims and unacknowledged victims. Consistent with previous research (e.g., Layman et al., 1996), acknowledged victims rated the level of violence in their assault as significantly higher than the rating given by unacknowledged victims. Unacknowledged victims may have a preconceived notion that rape must involve severe physical violence, and if their assault did not have a high level of violence, they may not call it rape. Acknowledged victims were also significantly younger at the time of their assault than unacknowledged victims. If, at the respective times of their assaults, acknowledged victims were less sexually experienced than unacknowledged victims, this might contribute to their believing that a sexual act that is in any way forced (such as their sexual assault) is rape.

The above results suggest that a woman's sexual assault history may not be the main factor in predicting how she views the sexual assault of others, as no statistical difference existed among unacknowledged victims, acknowl-

edged victims, and nonvictimized women in their cognitive perceptions of a victim of rape. However, acknowledged and unacknowledged victims differ in the perceptions of their own assaults.

The hypotheses for the attitudinal measure, rape myths acceptance, were partially supported. As in previous research (e.g., Coller & Resick, 1987; Kopper, 1996), participants who were more accepting of rape myths attributed more responsibility to the victim than did those less accepting of rape myths. However, participants, regardless of their level of acceptance of rape myths, did not differ significantly in their view on whether the incident was date rape.

An examination of the subscales of the RMAS showed that Adversarial Sex Beliefs scale had the greatest relationship to participants' evaluation of the scenario. This was the only subscale that had significant results for the three identified factors (expectations of sexual contact, criminality of incident, female's control of situation), for responsibility attributed to the victim, and for the belief that a rape had occurred. All results were in the predicted direction. Participants more accepting of Adversarial Sex Beliefs were more likely to expect sexual contact between the persons, believed less strongly that legal authorities should be involved, viewed the victim as having more control of the situation, attributed more responsibility to the victim, and were less likely to believe that rape occurred than did participants less accepting of these beliefs.

Neither of the other two subscales, Rape Myth and Acceptance of Interpersonal Violence, produced consistent results for the dependent variables. Therefore, although a high score on the RMAS may indicate likelihood to attribute a high level of responsibility to a victim of rape, and less likelihood to believe that rape occurred, it is one's level of adversarial sexual beliefs, in particular, that makes the most contribution to an overall evaluation of a sexual assault. It affects the level of responsibility attributed to a victim of rape, expectations of sexual contact, the view of the victims' control of the situation, and the view of the need to involve legal authorities.

Our finding about the effect of adversarial sexual beliefs may be particularly relevant to sexual assault educators. Many sexual assault education programs include segments that try to debunk rape myths as a way to decrease the likelihood that audience members will blame rape survivors for their assault (e.g., Breitenbecher, 2000; Gidycz et al., 2001; Lonsway, 1996). Focusing on rape myths also appears to have some effect on the level of people's adversarial sexual beliefs. In her review on college-based sexual assault prevention programs, Breitenbecher (2000) reported that of six programs that focused on debunking rape myths and also measured preadversarial and postadversarial sexual beliefs levels, four had favorable results and two had

nonsignificant findings. Based on those results and the finding from the current study, specifically addressing people's beliefs about what individuals want from sexual relationships may help change their attitudes toward rape and toward survivors of rape.

The current study had several limitations. The use of scenarios restricts how realistic the described assault may be for participants. There were also indications of a ceiling effect for the Likert-type rating statements. Frequencies for seven of the nine statements were heavily skewed with at least 50% of respondents rating them a 6, the highest possible score. Another limitation is the population used. Federal law requires that government-supported universities and colleges provide sexual assault education programs for incoming freshmen, so these participants may be exposed to the idea of not holding a victim of rape responsible for her assault. They may, therefore, differ from the general population in their perception of the scenario.

Despite these limitations, the current study suggests possible areas for future research. First, it supports the idea that the subscales of the RMAS tap different aspects of a person's attitude to sexual assault and so warrant attention separately. In keeping with the sex-role stereotyping theory and with results found here about the effect of adversarial sexual beliefs, researchers may want to explore how beliefs about male and female roles within sexual relationships are developed and maintained, and find ways to change beliefs that support the idea that sexual relationships are manipulative and adversarial. The current study also suggests that, for researchers examining rape survivors' perception of their assault, the perceived level of violence and the age of the victim at the time of the assault may be related to why some victims of sexual assault do not acknowledge their assault.

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