FACT SHEET: RAPE MYTHS
Berenike Waubert de Puiseau, PhD Student

What are rape myths?

Rape is characterized as one of the most serious type of all sexual offences. At present, the documented rate of rape victimization is assumed to be underestimated, as a large number of rape cases presumably go unreported (Horvarth, 2010). One possible explanation for the refusal of victims to press charges against their rapist stems from a passive denial of rape. Many victims believe that the characteristics of their rape experience do not match the defining characteristics of what they believe is a true rape offence. This passive denial results from the acceptance of rape myths. Rape myths are defined as, “attitudes and beliefs that are generally false but are widely and persistently held, and that serve to deny and justify male sexual aggression against women” (Lonsway & Fitzgerald, 1994, p. 134).

In other words, rape myths describe stereotypes held by the general public towards the act of rape and the involved parties (Horvarth, 2010). The two most common stereotypic beliefs about rape are that (Lonsway & Fitzgerald, 1994):

“Women routinely lie about rape”, and “Only certain women are raped”.

Such beliefs imply that only allegedly “bad girls”, for example, those who dress provocatively, are at risk of being raped. It has been argued that rape is implicitly (without awareness) endorsed through the acceptance of rape myths. Such implicit beliefs create a hostile environment for rape victims by leading individuals to minimize some rape experiences or worse, place blame on the victim for the rape (Burt, 1980). As a direct consequence, some women will not report their rape to the police either because they themselves do not believe that their experience constitutes a rape, or because they fear that the police will not believe they were raped. Researchers have found that individuals who maintain higher levels of rape myth acceptance are less likely to label situations as constituting a rape (e.g., in a written description of a situation) compared to those who hold lower levels of acceptance (Lonsway & Fitzgerald, 1994).

Consequently, women endorsing rape myths may fail to appreciate the gravity of a rape offence. Similarly, biases are more likely to enter legal decision-making among those individuals in the criminal justice system who endorse rape myths. Fortunately, there is evidence that expert testimony may counterbalance the effects of rape myth acceptance in the process of legal decision making, by broadening the current definition of rape, and thus increasing conviction rates of various rape offences (Lonsway & Fitzgerald, 1994).

Who accepts rape myths?

The acceptance of rape myths is considerably prevalent in Western societies, where it has been studied most extensively. Generally, men maintain higher levels of rape myth acceptance (Lonsway & Fitzgerald, 1994). Additionally, endorsing conservative sex roles is positively related to the acceptance of rape myths. There is also a relationship between ethnicity and rape myth acceptance with African-Americans being more likely to endorse such myths over Caucasians; once more, this difference is more pronounced for men than for women (Johnson, Kuck, & Schander, 1997). Further, some aspects of sexism are related to increased blaming of the
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Victim (Abrams, Viki, Masser, & Bohner, 2003). Overall, attitudes and beliefs that are less critical towards (or even in favor of) rape have been found to be related to a higher acceptance of rape myths (Lonsway, & Fitzgerald, 1994). For more information on the factors associated with rape myth acceptance, refer to Johnson et al. (1997) for a comprehensive review of the literature.

Assessing rape myths

Several definitions of rape myth acceptance exist and have lead to variations among the measures used to assess the endorsement of rape myth acceptance (Lonsway & Fitzgerald, 1994). However, the two most regarded measures of rape myth acceptance are: the Rape Myth Acceptance Scale (RMAS; Burt, 1980), and Illinois Rape Myth Acceptance Scale (IRMAS; Payne, Lonsway & Fitzgerald, 1999). Recently, a new scale has been developed assessing a broader definition of rape myth acceptance, the Acceptance of Modern Myths about Sexual Aggression (AMMSA) scale (Gerger, Kley, Bohner, & Siebler, 2007).

Reducing rape myths

The reduction of rape myths is a key element in preventing rape and ensuring due legal processing of individuals who are involved in acts of rape. One way to alleviate rape myths is by participating in rape education programs. These programs are known to successfully decrease rape-supportive attitudes by providing information on why and how rape actually occurs (Brecklin & Forde, 2001). Empathy training is also often part of rape education programs, to help individuals relate to sexual abuse victims and decrease endorsement of distortions justifying sexualized violence. Participants in these types of educational programs report significant increases in empathy toward rape survivors and significant declines in rape myth acceptance, likelihood of raping, and likelihood of committing sexual assault (Foubert & Newberry, 2006).

Final comments

Despite the increasing attention paid to the acceptance of rape myths, there remains a lack of agreement among researchers regarding a comprehensive definition of rape myth acceptance. The last review of rape myth acceptance as a field of research (i.e., the definition, its measurement, etc.) was published in 1994. To date, few efforts have been exercised at the international front (with little information known about rape myth acceptance in non-Western countries) in validating a universally accepted conception of rape myths.

Quick summary:

- Rape myths are attitudes/beliefs that are widely held and serve to justify male sexual aggression against women.
- These attitudes can lead to the minimization of rape experiences or placing blame on the victim.
- Many types of individuals endorse rape myths.
- Rape education programs can reduce rape myth acceptance.

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