



Myths and legends: The reality of rape offences reported to a UK police force



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ABSTRACT

Rape myths affect many aspects of the investigative and criminal justice systems. One such myth, the 'real rape' myth, states that most rapes involve a stranger using a weapon attacking a woman violently at night in an isolated, outdoor area, and that women sustain serious injuries from these attacks. The present study examined how often actual offences reported to a central UK police force over a two year period matched the 'real rape' myth. Out of 400 cases of rape reported, not a single incident was found with all the characteristics of the 'real rape' myth. The few stranger rapes that occurred had a strong link to night-time economy activities, such as the victim and offender both having visited pubs, bars, and clubs. By contrast, the majority of reported rape offences (280 cases, 70.7%) were committed by people known to the victim (e.g., domestic and acquaintance rapes), occurred inside a residence, with most victims sustaining no physical injuries from the attack. The benefits of these naturalistic findings from the field for educating people about the inaccuracy of rape myths are discussed.

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Mitos y leyendas: la realidad de los delitos de violación denunciados a la policía británica

RESUMEN

Los mitos sobre la violación influyen en muchos aspectos de los sistemas judiciales de investigación y penales. Uno de esos mitos, el referido a la "violación real", sostiene que la mayoría de las violaciones implican la participación de un extraño armado que ataca a una mujer de forma violenta durante la noche, en un lugar aislado al aire libre y que las mujeres sufren heridas graves a consecuencia de los ataques. Este estudio analizó la frecuencia con la que coincidían los delitos reales denunciados a la policía en el centro del Reino Unido con el mito de la "violación real" durante un periodo de dos años. De los 400 casos de violación denunciados, no se encontró ninguno que tuviera las características del mito de la "violación real". Las escasas violaciones por extraños acaecidas estaban vinculadas a actividades laborales nocturnas, como que la víctima y el agresor hubieran estado en pubs, bares y clubs. Por el contrario, la mayoría de las violaciones denunciadas (280 casos, 70.7%) las cometieron personas conocidas de la víctima (por ejemplo, violaciones domésticas o por conocidos) y tenían lugar en el domicilio, sin que la mayoría de las víctimas sufrieran lesiones a consecuencia del ataque. Se comenta la utilidad de estos resultados con casos reales para instruir a la gente acerca de la inexactitud de los mitos de la violación.

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Rape myths have been defined as “descriptive or prescriptive beliefs about rape (i.e., about its causes, context, consequences, perpetrators, victims, and their interaction) that serve to deny, downplay, or justify sexual violence that men commit against women” (Bohner, Eyssel, Pina, Siebler, & Tendayi Viki, 2009, p. 19). Such myths attribute blame to the victim for their rape (e.g., that women who dress scantily provoke rape), suggest that many claims of rape are false (e.g., that women often make up rape accusations in revenge against the alleged perpetrator), remove blame from the perpetrator (e.g., implying men cannot control their sex drive), and suggest that rape only happens to particular kinds of women (e.g., only women who are promiscuous get raped; Bohner et al., 2009).

Rape myths are held by people of both sexes, all ages, and across races (Burt, 1980; Johnson, Kuck, & Schander, 1997; McGee, O’Higgins, Garavan, & Conroy, 2011; Suarez & Gadalla, 2010). For example, McGee et al. (2011) found over 40% of their sample believed that rape accusations are often fabricated. They also exist in those who deal with rape cases professionally, such as police officers (Goodman-Delahunty & Graham, 2011; Page, 2007; Sleath & Bull, 2012). Such myth acceptance has been not only found for victims (Peterson & Muehlenhard, 2004) but also perpetrators of sexual assault (Marshall & Hambley, 1996).

Acceptance of rape myths can have serious effects on people’s behaviour and attitudes towards rape offences. Victims of rape who hold rape myths may not acknowledge their experiences as rape. Rape is legally defined in England and Wales as the intentional penetration of another person’s vagina, anus, or mouth with the perpetrator’s penis without consent or reasonable belief of consent (Sexual Offences Act, 2003, s.1). Peterson and Muehlenhard (2004) found that, amongst women who had had an experience that would legally be defined as rape, acceptance of specific rape myths affected whether they perceived the experience as rape or not. For example, women who had not fought their attacker and accepted the rape myth that a victim had to fight back for the offence to be classified as rape were less likely to say they had been raped, despite the fact that, legally, they had been.

Acceptance of similar myths involving a codified stereotype of a crime also affects the attitudes of police officers. In a written mock trial in which a female defendant was charged with the murder of her husband and had pleaded not guilty on the grounds of legitimate self-defence due to intimate partner violence, police officers’ opinions were affected by how prototypical the defendant was described to have been (Herrera, Valor-Segura, & Expósito, 2012). When the defendant was described as a prototypical battered woman (e.g. a shy mother who dresses poorly), she was judged as having less control over the situation than when she was described as a non-prototypical battered woman (e.g., a confident, well-dressed, businesswoman), despite no difference in the evidence against her. The police officers’ levels of sexism, empathy, their perceptions of their own personal responsibility, and of the seriousness of the crime also seem to have an effect on whether officers felt they should file a crime report, lay charges, and make an arrest in an intimate partner violence situation despite the victim’s unwillingness to press charges or not (Gracia, García, & Lila, 2011; Lila, Gracia, & García, 2013). Therefore, some police officers may continue to have crime schema based on stereotypes (Goodman-Delahunty & Graham, 2011; Page, 2007; Sleath & Bull, 2012), and acceptance of these myths and the degree to which a victim, offender, and offence fits with the stereotype held may affect attitudes and behaviours towards the offence, victim, and investigation.

Rape myth acceptance has also been found to influence the reporting behaviour of victims (Du Mont, Miller, & Myhr, 2003). For instance, in the USA, Clay-Warner and McMahon-Howard (2009) found victims were twice as likely to report to the police rapes committed in public (as in the ‘real rape’ myth, discussed below)

or through unlawful entry into a home as those that occurred elsewhere. They also found rapes carried out by strangers more likely to be reported than those carried out by partners or ex-partners, and that increases in reporting were associated with both the victim sustaining severe injuries (corroborated by Du Mont, Miller, & Myhr, 2003) and the use of weapons. There are a number of reasons why offences that do not fit rape myths may be reported less often; for example, victims of domestic rape may face a higher risk or fear of repeat victimisation by their partners or ex-partners which may not be the case for stranger rapes, or victims may view offences involving severe physical violence as more serious than those which are less violent. However, other reasons relate to rape myth acceptance; if victims do not interpret their experiences as rape due to their partial belief in rape myths, they may not report the rape. Biased reporting may in itself lead to perpetuation of rape myths, as more of those that fit the stereotype will be made public than those that do not fit the stereotype (McGregor, Wiebe, Marion, & Livingstone, 2000). Additionally, some victims may not actually believe in rape myths themselves, but may believe that the criminal justice system will not take their report seriously if their case does not fit with rape myths. Injured victims may have felt that this physical proof of violence (part of the ‘real rape’ myth, discussed below) corroborated their stories, and implied that their case was a ‘real’ rape case, and so the criminal justice system might take their allegations more seriously (Du Mont et al., 2003).

Rape myth acceptance relates to the perpetrating of rape and to increased self-reported rape proclivity. A number of studies using male student samples from around the world have found that increased rape myth acceptance (as measured by self-report scales) correlates with a higher likelihood of reporting that they would commit rape in a written mock date-rape scenario (Bohner et al., 1998; Chiroro, Bohner, Tendayi Viki, & Jarvis, 2004). This finding can be criticised as a hypothetical outcome in a non-criminal population. However studies with incarcerated populations have found a relationship between rape myth acceptance and the committing of actual rape offences. DeGue, DiLillo, and Scalora (2010) found that both coercive and aggressive rapists accepted rape myths to a higher degree than incarcerated men who reported having only had consensual sex. However, it is not possible to determine whether these men endorsed rape myths so strongly before they committed rape or whether their acceptance of rape myths was increased by the perpetration of the offence itself in an attempt to alleviate their guilt. Bohner et al. (1998) addressed this question by presenting a rape myth acceptance scale either before or after a written, mock date-rape scenario. They found that increased rape myth acceptance was only related to increased rape proclivity when the participants thought about rape myths before making a decision on the written date-rape scenario, whereas rape myth acceptance and rape proclivity were not related if the rape myth acceptance scale was completed *after* the written scenario. Bohner et al. (1998) concluded that this suggests a causal relationship between rape myth acceptance and intention to rape. However, given how pervasive rape myths are and the inconsistency of the relationship between attitudes and behaviour, it is unlikely that the accepting of rape myths of itself would lead someone to commit the offence. Instead these myths may help maintain misunderstandings regarding rape, which could affect how seriously a person would contemplate carrying out a rape.

Mock juror studies show rape myth acceptance to be associated with jurors’ opinions of victims and their judgements of guilt in simulated rape cases (Stewart & Jacquin, 2010). In studies using rape myth acceptance scales, greater endorsement of these constructs correlated with more responsibility being attributed to the victim and less to the alleged perpetrator of rape (Hammond, Berry, & Rodriguez, 2011), and lower ratings of guilt for defendants (Stewart & Jacquin, 2010). However, in a sample of real English and

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