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From "real rape" to real justice: A systematic review of police officers' rape myth beliefs☆

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ABSTRACT

This systematic review examined 18 documents that contained information about rape myths/cognitions of police officers with the goal of identifying the factors that influence police officers' beliefs of rape. Past research on sexual offence processing decisions has rarely considered the characteristics of police officers as active participants in the legal decision making process (Alderden & Ullman, 2012); meaning that the factors that directly influence police officers' rape myths and the implications these may have on rape victims' experiences when reporting to the police remain unclear. The current review systematically examines the literature on police officers' rape myth beliefs, and evaluates the current available research regarding, decision-making, victim credibility, police training and experiences, and police gender. It concludes by providing recommendations for policy makers in terms of best practice, continual police training and development and improving rape victims' reporting experiences.

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1. Introduction

1.1. Victims' experiences and attrition rates

The United Kingdom has the lowest conviction rates for rape cases in Europe (Hohl & Stanko, 2015); with rape being considered as one of the most under-reported crimes (Fisher, Daigle, & Cullen, 2008; Hohl & Stanko, 2015). Attrition is also at its highest at the beginning of the police investigation, with victim withdrawal explaining a large proportion (Hester, 2013; Stern, 2010). Victim withdrawal may be attributable to secondary victimization, as rape victims are at an increased risk, through negative beliefs surrounding their credibility (Hackett, Day, & Mohr, 2008). Attrition can also be explained by rape myth conceptions, which can include, but are not limited to the idea that a "real" rape victim will report to the police as soon as the offence has occurred, and will also have bruising and distinguishing marks on their person (Hohl & Stanko, 2015). Attempts to address the issue of attrition in rape cases include the introduction of Sexual Assault Referral Centres (SARCs), also known as Havens, some of which are based in London, that serve to address the medical and physical needs of rape victims (Hohl & Stanko, 2015). SARCs are also available in many areas to facilitate support to sexual assault victims, providing multi-agency, forensically secure, one-stop services for victims (ACPO Rape Working Group, 2008). Despite such implementations, victims report dissatisfaction when reporting to the police, finding that officers are too lenient on the perpetrator, and lack sensitivity especially when the victim and perpetrator are acquaintances, not complete strangers (Felson & Pare, 2008).

1.2. Rape myths

Rape myths were first recognized in the 1970s as cultural beliefs supporting male sexual violence against women (Brownmiller, 1975; Schwendinger & Schwendinger, 1974), thereby trivializing rape (Brownmiller, 1975). Research sought to examine the cultural mythology of sexual aggression perpetrated by men against women (Lonsway & Fitzgerald, 1994), which was theorized to be serving a similar function to that of just world beliefs (Lerner, 1980), thus blaming the victim for their own victimization (Ryan, 1976). Rape myths were then defined in 1980 by Burt, combining social psychological and feminist theories, as "prejudicial, stereotyped, or false beliefs about rape, rape victims, and rapists" (p.27). Rape myths have also been conceptualized as "attitudes and beliefs that are generally false, but are widely and persistently held, and that serve to justify male sexual aggression again women" (Lonsway & Fitzgerald, 1994, p.134). By conceptualizing males as perpetrators and females as victims, these myths could be seen as denying the possibility of males also being victims of rape (Newburn & Stanko, 1994). In the same time period, male rape research was undertaken (Zeringer, 1972), however it is still considered to be approximately twenty years behind that of female rape (Rogers, 1998; Sleath & Bull, 2012). Rape myths serve many purposes, including blaming the victim whilst exonerating the perpetrator from responsibility (Anderson, 1999), implying that the victim is lying about the offence (Cuklanz, 2000; Grubb & Turner, 2012) or is to blame (Scully, 1990), and providing justifications for acquaintance rape (Johnson, Kuck, & Schander, 1997).Therefore, such beliefs have been suggested by Grubb and Turner (2012) to have a significant impact on: 1) how victims of rape are perceived, 2) how victims of rape are treated, and 3) the dissemination of a cultural acceptance of rape and a rape-supportive society.

2. Goals of the current review

2.1. Rape myths within the police service

The goal of this review is to describe the literature that investigates rape myths within the police service, including negative cognitions/schemas of victims/perpetrators which may influence decision making in sexual assault cases. Over the past three decades (Page, 2008a) there has been limited research into police officers' rape myths (Sleath & Bull, 2015). With attrition rates being greatest at the investigative stage of a sexual assault case (Brown, Hamilton, & O'Neill, 2007), it

Table 1
Scoring system for quality of police belief papers.

		Validity score			Validity score
Publication	Peer reviewed	3	Method of gathering beliefs	Self-report survey	2
	PhD dissertation	2		Focus group	1
	MSc dissertation	1		Semi-structured interview	1
	Unknown	0		Mixed methodology	3
Sample Size	0–50	0	Validity and reliability of rape myths measure	No information on reliability/validity provided.	0
	51–100	1		Citation to the original study provided but no reliability/validity.	1
	101–200	2		Author constructed, but data provided on reliability/validity scores for the present study.	2
	201–400	3		Citation to the original study (established method/scale) and provided reliability/validity for current study.	3
	401+	4			

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