



The impact of victim-perpetrator relationship, reputation and initial point of resistance on officers' responsibility and authenticity ratings towards hypothetical rape cases



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ABSTRACT

Purpose: Previous studies suggest that judgments of responsibility and authenticity made towards hypothetical rape cases differ when specific case factors are varied. However, few studies have examined whether police officers exhibit similar variations in judgment.

Methods: Sixteen vignettes depicting a hypothetical rape scenario were created. Vignettes varied on *victim-perpetrator relationship*, *victim reputation*, and *initial point of resistance*. Police officers from a large police force in the United Kingdom ($n = 808$) provided judgments of victim and perpetrator responsibility, as well as rape authenticity.

Results: Officers rated perpetrators as less responsible and gave lower rape authenticity ratings when a partner was the perpetrator, and in 'late' resistance scenarios. Officers rated victims as more responsible in 'bad' reputation conditions and in 'late' resistance conditions. Additional effects of officer sex and receipt of specialist training were also found (i.e., male officers rated the victim as more responsible than female officers), as were several interactions between factors.

Conclusions: Results suggest that police officers in the UK may judge victims of rape differentially based on extralegal case factors. The potential impact on the investigation of rape cases is discussed, and a recommendation for thorough and prompt review of specialist and non-specialist training is made.

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1. Introduction

Rape myths are 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, 1998, p.14). Examples of rape myths include specific beliefs regarding victims (e.g., if a woman wears revealing clothing she is partly responsible for her victimization), and perpetrators (e.g., once men reach a certain level of sexual arousal, they are unable to control their actions), as well as broad ideas about rape as a crime, such as the 'real rape stereotype' (i.e., the belief that legitimate rape cases occur suddenly, at night, by an aggressive stranger, with a weapon, and typically involve visible victim resistance and emotional trauma for the victim; Horvath & Brown, 2009). Rape myths can therefore be characterized as a general cognitive schema that enables negative attributions to be made about the crime of rape and those involved (Grubb & Turner, 2012). Rape myth acceptance - the extent to which a person adheres to such beliefs - is substantial in

members of the general public (between 19% and 57%; Sussenbach & Bohner, 2011). Furthermore, whilst it is true that a number of rape myths also exist regarding male victims (Coxell & King, 2010; Davies & Rogers, 2006), this paper focuses on male-on-female rape, and rape myth beliefs regarding female victims and male perpetrators.

In recent years, several studies have demonstrated that rape myths influence those within the criminal justice system in their assessment of both real and hypothetical rape cases. For example, studies utilising 'mock juror' paradigms have revealed that general levels of rape myth acceptance, as well as specific case manipulations, correspond with variations in judgments of victim and perpetrator responsibility, as well as verdict outcome and severity of sentencing (Dinos, Burrowes, Hammond, & Cunliffe, 2015; Ellison & Munro, 2009, 2013; Gray, 2006; Lynch, Wasarhaley, Golding, & Simic, 2013; McKimmie, Masser, & Bongiorno, 2014). Those responsible for presenting cases in court (e.g., lawyers and barristers) are also susceptible to the endorsement of rape myths, as well as playing on the attitudes held by jurors to build or dismantle cases (Temkin, 2000; Temkin & Krahé, 2008). Furthermore, it has been highlighted that judges demonstrate some level of rape myth acceptance through their comments regarding the increased responsibility of victims in certain cases of rape, both in academic studies (Temkin & Krahé, 2008) and in the popular media (e.g., comments

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that victims are 'foolish' for drinking too much prior to their assault; Evans, 2015).

Despite their relative importance in the criminal justice system, the attitudes and beliefs of police officers are rarely examined, particularly concerning rape. This is an important line of enquiry, as police officers: act as gatekeepers to the criminal justice system (Sleath & Bull, 2015); play a crucial role in victims' interactions within said system (Du Mont, Miller, & Mhyr, 2003); have a key impact on the progression of cases (Spohn & Tellis, 2012); and are largely responsible for the type and level of care that victims experience throughout the process of evidence gathering, case-building, and prosecution (Lonsway, Welch, & Fitzgerald, 2001). As such, their perceptions of victims, perpetrators, and the rape claim itself, are highly influential in dictating victim experience and case outcome. Some studies have provided limited insight into officers' general acceptance of rape myths, as well as their judgements of victim and/or perpetrator responsibility (e.g., level of victim intoxication, Goodman-Delahunty & Graham, 2011; Schuller & Stewart, 2000), and a thorough review of such literature follows. However, at present further examination is needed of the judgments officers make regarding victim and perpetrator responsibility, as well as the perceived 'authenticity' of the claim, in scenarios that vary on specific factors associated with rape myths, the 'real rape' stereotype, and case attrition. This is crucial in understanding which specific case characteristics influence officers' perceptions of rape claims, and will help to provide an evidence-base upon which to design appropriate training and intervention. Additionally, examining the influence of certain officer characteristics (such as officer sex and officer training) on responsibility judgments will undoubtedly provide a greater understanding of the importance of individual factors in case evaluation and investigation, again providing important insight into the current efficacy of officer training in the UK and potential future avenues of development. To that end, this study examined variations in police officers' judgements of victim and perpetrator responsibility, as well as perceived case authenticity, towards hypothetical rape scenarios varying on key extra-legal factors related to prominent rape myths; *victim-perpetrator responsibility*, *victim reputation*, and *initial point of resistance* (i.e., the point in the encounter when the victims first resists).

1.1. Negative attitudes towards rape in police officers

Over 40 years ago, Galton (1975) noted that police officers often 'hold rape complainants to a higher standard of conduct than the law requires' (p.17), due to their pre-conceived beliefs regarding rape as a crime. Since then, a number of studies have investigated the negative attitudes towards rape held by police officers in both the United States and the UK. LeDoux and Hazelwood (1985) conducted the largest review of officer attitudes towards rape, examining the views of 2170 U.S. law enforcement officers, finding low levels of endorsement for rape myths. This is supported by studies conducted more recently with U.S. officers (Mennicke, Anderson, Oehme, & Kennedy, 2014), although slightly greater endorsement has been found for some myths compared to others (Page, 2007, 2008a, 2008b, 2010). For example, whilst 94% of officers agreed with the broad statement that any woman could be raped, 20% also agreed with more specific statements, such as 'women who dress provocatively are inviting sex' and that 'women report rape to call attention to themselves' (Page, 2010). Fewer studies on attitudes towards rape cases have been conducted in the UK; however, those that have find similar results. Sleath and Bull (2015) showed that police officers hold similar levels of rape myth acceptance to student populations, endorsing 'she lied' myths to a slightly greater extent, and 'she asked for it' and 'he didn't mean to' myths to a slightly lesser extent. These studies all conclude that whilst levels of rape myth acceptance are generally low, a significant minority of officers agree with negative statements about the crime of rape.

Many researchers have commented on how police culture may help to perpetuate such attitudes. Holdaway (1983) describes police culture

as an informal structure of norms and values that operate within the rigid hierarchy of the police organization. Some have highlighted that a key part of this culture is the expectation placed on officers to conform to 'hegemonic masculinity' (Fielding, 1994; Page, 2007), an idealized form of masculinity venerating dominance, aggression, heterosexuality and a lack of emotion (Connell, 2002). Importantly, Martin (1989) noted that negative sexist attitudes are often tied to this hyper-masculine occupational identity. This is coupled with a strong culture of scepticism that exists within police culture (Kelly, 2010), where disbelief of rape victims specifically is commonplace (Jordan, 2004; Kersetter, 1990; LaFree, 1989). Importantly, previous research has highlighted how officers' negative beliefs inform their understanding and classification of rape as a crime. For example, Campbell and Johnson (1997) found that 50% of U.S. officers in their sample gave 'mixed' definitions of rape, containing both legal and extra-legal elements. This is supported by more recent research highlighting the incomplete definitions of rape still provided by many U.S. officers (Mennicke et al., 2014). Hazelwood and Burgess (1995) lend further support for this phenomenon, and suggest that police officers evaluate reports of rape against their preconceived notions of what cases should look like, utilising both knowledge of the law and other factors (such as rape myths). In addition, research by Venema (2016b) confirms that officers identify and use a wide variety of case factors in establishing the legitimacy of rape claims, with many of these factors directly related to rape myths, such as whether the victim was intoxicated at the time of the assault. These observations are important considering the tremendous amount of discretion they have in rape cases (Page, 2008a).

Officers' negative attitudes also inform the level of belief they place in victims, as well as their associated judgments regarding responsibility. Considering the attributions of blame and responsibility extant in wider society (Buddie & Miller, 2001) it is no surprise that such attributions would also exist in professionals who interact with rape victims, such as police officers (Jackson, Witte, & Petretic-Jackson, 2001). For example, Page (2008a) found that officers with higher rape myth acceptance were less likely to believe a victim who did not match 'genuine' victim characteristics (as measured by the Non-Genuine Victim Scale, NGVS; Spohn & Horney, 1996). This is similar to findings from research conducted in South Korea assessing officers' evaluations of victims who did not match the 'real rape' stereotype (Lee, Lee, & Lee, 2012). Further support is provided from UK studies. Sleath and Bull (2012) examined how officers' acceptance of rape myths impacted upon judgments made about the crime and those involved. Results showed that officers' overall rape myth acceptance significantly influenced judgments of both victim and perpetrator responsibility (i.e., higher rape myth acceptance corresponded to higher victim responsibility). Studies such as these demonstrate that, whilst further investigation is clearly required, police officers' negative attitudes regarding rape significantly influence how they perceive the victims and perpetrators of rape, as well as the crime itself.

1.2. Victim-perpetrator relationship

A common misconception regarding rape, and a central tenant of the 'real rape' stereotype, is that the attacker is unknown to the victim (Horvath & Brown, 2009). This is despite significant evidence from both academia (Koss, 1990; Koss, Dinero, Seibel, & Cox, 1988; Koss et al., 1994) and crime statistics from both the UK and U.S. (Office for National Statistics, 2013a; Tjaden & Thoennes, 2000) demonstrating that the majority of rape and serious sexual assault is perpetrated by someone known to the victim, such as an acquaintance or partner. It has therefore been suggested that different 'types' of rape exist in the public perception, and that these elicit different reactions based on their degree of congruency with the idea of a 'legitimate' or 'proper' rape (Tetreault & Barnett, 1987). For example, several studies using undergraduate populations have demonstrated that victims are allocated higher levels of responsibility in acquaintance versus marital or stranger

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