The effects of acquaintance versus stranger rape and gender on rape myth acceptance and attitudes toward rape in college students

Shellie Patscheck  
Fort Lewis College

Sharon Shears  
Fort Lewis College

Follow this and additional works at: https://scholar.utc.edu/mps

Part of the Psychology Commons

Recommended Citation
Available at: https://scholar.utc.edu/mps/vol14/iss1/7
The Effects of Acquaintance versus Stranger Rape and Gender on Rape Myth Acceptance and Attitudes Toward Rape in College Students

This original empirical experiment assessed effects of acquaintance versus stranger rape and gender on rape myth acceptance and attitudes toward rape in college students. Participants read hypothetical scenarios depicting acquaintance or stranger rape, and then completed modified versions of Burt's Rape Myth Acceptance Scale and Feild's Attitudes Toward Rape Scale. Based on previous research, we predicted that males would demonstrate more negative attitudes and would be more supportive of rape myth acceptance than females. In addition, given the relative lack of previous literature on this topic, we predicted that the two conditions for type of rape would be different, but we did not make specific directional hypotheses. Consistent with hypotheses, males were significantly more likely than females to support rape myths. However, no differences emerged for type of rape. Implications of these findings and suggestions for future research are discussed.

Keywords: acquaintance rape, stranger rape, rape myth acceptance, attitudes toward rape, college students, gender differences

Rape and sexual assault are among the most pervasive of all violent crimes. Approximately 1 in 6 women and 1 in 33 men in the United States may experience an attempted or completed rape in their lifetimes, and these rates double for college students. An estimated half of all rapes are never reported to authorities, making these statistics underestimates (Centers for Disease Control [CDC], 2006; US Department of Justice [USDOJ], 2006).

One commonly held myth is that most rapes occur in dark alleys by strangers. However, the majority of rapes are committed by acquaintances. In fact, the US Department of Justice reported that in 2005, approximately 7 in 10 rape or sexual assault victims stated that the offender was a boyfriend, girlfriend, other relative, a friend, or an acquaintance (USDOJ, 2006). Despite the prevalence of acquaintance rape, relatively few studies, if any, have examined the effect of acquaintance versus stranger rape on rape myth acceptance and attitudes toward rape. Lonsway and Fitzgerald (1994) defined rape myths as “attitudes and beliefs that are generally false but that are widely and persistently held, and that serve to deny and justify male sexual aggression towards women.” In more recent research, the definition has extended to include perpetrators and victims of both genders. Researchers have developed a number of scales to
measure attitudes toward rape and rape myth acceptance. One popular instrument is Feild’s Attitudes Toward Rape Scale (1978) which measures attitudes and stereotypes about rape. Another popular measure is Burt’s Rape Myth Acceptance Scale (1980) which was designed to assess stereotyped, prejudicial, and false beliefs about rape, rape victims, and rapists. Subsequent researchers have expanded, shortened, and otherwise modified these scales to meet individual research requirements.

Since the conception of these scales, researchers have studied the effects of demographic, experiential, and situational variables on attitudes toward rape and rape myth acceptance. Of the numerous demographic variables studied, gender has been the most commonly researched, and the only variable that has thus far shown a consistent relationship with rape myth acceptance. Burt (1980) first showed that men tended to be more accepting of rape myths than women. Numerous empirical studies have supported this finding (Jimenez & Abreu, 2003; Davies, Pollard & Archer, 2006; Davies & McCartney, 2003; Ashton, 1982; Blumberg & Lester 1991).

Recently, more studies on rape myth acceptance have included sexual orientation as a demographic variable. Davis and McCartney (2003) found that heterosexual men endorsed more rape myths and blamed the victim more than heterosexual women or gay men. In addition, they found that gay men made the most pro-victim judgments overall. Researchers have also studied what happens when they switch stereotypical sex roles. For instance, when the victim is male or when the perpetrator is female. Davies, Pollard, and Archer (2006) found that male participants blamed the victim more when the perpetrator was of the gender he was attracted to. In addition, they found that male participants deemed female perpetrators more favorably than male perpetrators regardless of the victim’s sexual orientation.

Another frequently researched demographic variable is ethnicity. However, the results have not been as consistent as with gender. In a study of college students, Giacopassi and Dull (1986) found that African American students tended to be more accepting of rape myths than their Caucasian peers. In addition, Jimenez and Abreu (2003) found that Caucasians were less likely to accept rape myths than Latinos. The researchers proposed that cultural expectations of sex and masculinity varied among these two ethnic groups. The results from these studies are helpful in identifying cultural factors that may support rape myths. However, many ethnic groups have not been included and many suggest that these results are not conclusive and can in no way be generalized (Lonsway & Fitzgerald, 1994).

Experiential factors such as knowing a rape survivor and awareness of rape both seem to predict a decrease in rape myth acceptance. However, the studies using these factors are limited and difficult to generalize (Lonsway & Fitzgerald, 1994). Situational factors such as alcohol, victim dress and reputation, prior sexual relationship between victim and perpetrator, length of time before a report, degree of resistance, and rape within marriage all seem to increase victim blame and acceptance of other rape myths (Feild, 1978).

To date, few studies have examined the effects of acquaintance versus stranger rape on attitudes toward rape and rape myth acceptance. Given the widespread myths that rapes occur between strangers, juxtaposed with the reality that rapes occur between acquaintances, studying this factor is an important contribution to the existing research literature and practical reality in understanding and preventing rape.

The aim of the present study was to examine the effects of acquaintance versus stranger rape on attitudes toward rape and rape myth acceptance. Given the relative lack of previous literature on this topic, we predicted that the two conditions would be different, but we did not make specific directional hypotheses. We also replicated previous research examining the effects of gender. Based on previous research we predicted that males would demonstrate more negative attitudes and would be more supportive of rape myth acceptance than females.
Method

Participants
Participants were 36 students (21 female, 13 male, 2 gender unknown) ages 17 to 35 ($M = 19.61$, $SD = 2.92$) recruited from a lower division undergraduate psychology course at a small public Liberal Arts college. Approximately 72.3% of participants self-identified as Caucasian, 11.1% as Hispanic, 5.6% as Native American, 5.6% as Multiracial, and 5.6% did not respond.

Materials and Measures

Demographic information. Participants completed a short questionnaire to gather demographic information such as gender, age, and ethnicity.

Acquaintance versus stranger rape scenarios. Participants were randomly assigned to read one of two hypothetical scenarios describing either an acquaintance rape or stranger rape situation (Appendix A). The two written scenarios were approximately the same length, and were similar to those developed by Foley et al. (1995), except that they were neutral regarding age and ethnicity. The scenarios did not include any of the situational factors such as alcohol, victim dress/reputation, or prior sexual relationship which previous research has found to impact attitudes toward rape and rape myth acceptance.

Attitudes toward rape and rape myth acceptance. As described in Appendix B, participants completed modified versions of Feilds’ 32-item Attitudes Toward Rape Scale (ATRS; 1978) and Burt’s 11-item Rape Myth Acceptance Scale (RMAS; 1980). We modified the scales to correspond to the names of the perpetrator and victim in each of the hypothetical rape scenarios (e.g., original: “Rapists are normal men;” adaptation: “John is a normal man”). Jimenez and Abreu (2003) found that modifying the measures in this way produced coefficient alphas similar to the original norm. Internal consistency reliabilities for these scales in our sample were acceptable (Cronbach’s alpha for ATRS = .70, RMAS = .72).

Procedure
The study received approval from the college’s IRB. The study was introduced as “investigating college students’ perceptions about rape.” After providing informed consent, participants completed questionnaires regarding demographic information. They then read one of the two randomly assigned hypothetical scenarios describing either an acquaintance rape or stranger rape situation. Finally, they completed the adapted versions of the Rape Myth Acceptance Scale and the Attitudes Toward Rape Scale. Participants were not compensated.

Results

In order to evaluate whether type of rape and gender influenced attitudes toward rape (ATRS) and rape myth acceptance (RMAS), we analyzed data with 2 x 2 ANOVAs (type of rape: stranger, acquaintance) x (gender: male, female) using SPSS for Windows. The two participants who did not indicate their gender were excluded from primary analyses. Levene’s tests for equality of variances were met despite unequal sample sizes for the remaining males and females. We included partial $\eta^2$ as indicators of effect size to reflect the proportion of variance that the predictor variable (i.e., type of rape or gender) accounted for in the dependent variable (i.e., ATRS or RMAS). We used values of .010, .059, and .138 as indicators of small, medium, and large effect sizes (these are approximately equivalent to Cohen’s $d$’s of 0.2, 0.5, and 0.8, respectively).

Table 1 shows descriptive statistics and Table 2 shows ANOVA results. Graphs of means by type of rape and gender for the ARTS and RMAS appear in Figures 1 and 2, respectively. As predicted, males ($M = 2.96$, $SD = 0.66$) had significantly higher scores on the RMAS than did females ($M = 2.21$; $SD = 0.56$), suggesting greater support for rape myths ($F(1, 30) = 4.34$, $p = .002$). As indicated by the partial $\eta^2$, effect size for this difference was large. Similarly, a trend emerged for males to have higher scores on the ARTS than did females, suggesting more negative attitudes. Although this difference was not statistically significant at the $p < .05$ level, the effect size based on the partial $\eta^2$ was medium. Despite these gender differences, it is worth noting that the anchors for the means for both males and females tended toward the “disagree” end.
of the scales, suggesting that both genders had relatively low acceptance of rape myths.

Regarding main effects of type of rape, our hypotheses were not supported that there would be a difference between stranger versus acquaintance rape. Regarding interaction effects, the plot of means in Figure 1 seems to suggest that the acquaintance rape situation magnified the differences between males and females such that males’ negative attitudes were even higher and females’ negative attitudes were even lower than in the stranger situation. However, these differences were not statistically significant.

Discussion

This original empirical study builds upon existing literature in examining the possible effects of acquaintance versus stranger rape as well as gender on rape myth acceptance and attitudes toward rape. For the effects of gender, results were consistent with hypotheses and previous literature (Jimenez & Abreu, 2003; Davies, Pollard & Archer, 2006; Davies & McCartney, 2003; Ashton, 1982; Blumberg & Lester 1991) that males tended to have more negative attitudes about gender roles and women that may perpetuate rape, and were more likely to accept rape myths than were females. Although the persistence of these gender differences may appear discouraging, it is worth noting that on average both males and females in this sample tended to disagree with rape myths. Results did not support our initial predictions for type of rape in that no overall differences emerged between the stranger and acquaintance rape conditions. Although the acquaintance situation appeared to magnify the observed gender differences, this interaction effect was not statistically significant.

The present study has a number of strengths including the experimental design with random assignment to conditions. In addition, given the prevalence of acquaintance rape in college populations, the sample was relevant to the primary research question. Nonetheless, several limitations warrant discussion. First, an obvious limitation is the small sample size. Second, we examined only male and female gender as a predictor variable and did not ask about sexual orientation. Third, our hypothetical scenario for acquaintance rape focused on a dating situation. Whether acquaintance rapes in other situations (e.g., among coworkers, friends, family members) would show similar results is an important empirical question. A final limitation of this study may be the outcome measures used. Although both scales utilized in this study have been validated through empirical research, the Rape Myth Acceptance Scale and the Attitudes Toward Rape Scale were developed in 1980 and 1978, respectively. Thus, one criticism of these scales may be that they are somewhat outdated.

With these caveats in mind, our study has important practical and theoretical implications, and suggests future research. Attitudes toward rape and rape myths have practical importance for preventing and reacting to rape in relationship, educational, political, judicial, and medical systems. Future research should examine possible effects of acquaintance versus stranger rape on police reports in criminal investigations, jury-decision making, medical responses, and psychological outcomes in victims and perpetrators. Given the high prevalence of acquaintance rape, future research is warranted as to whether differences would emerge in other studies with other outcome measures. Finally, continued research is needed to learn more about how rape myths evolve, particularly for males versus females. Identification of how these attitudes develop may inform strategies for the prevention and treatment of rape.
References


Table 1
Descriptive Statistics for Effects of Gender and Type of Rape on Attitudes Toward Rape and Rape Myth Acceptance

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Dependent Variable</th>
<th>Type of Rape</th>
<th>n</th>
<th>Female M (SD)</th>
<th>Male M (SD)</th>
<th>Total M (SD)</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>Female</td>
<td>Male</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>M (SD)</td>
<td>M (SD)</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Attitudes Toward Rape</td>
<td>Stranger</td>
<td>17</td>
<td>2.96 (0.27)</td>
<td>3.10 (0.39)</td>
<td>3.02 (0.32)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Acquaintance</td>
<td>17</td>
<td>2.82 (0.48)</td>
<td>3.19 (0.45)</td>
<td>2.95 (0.49)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Total</td>
<td>34</td>
<td>2.89 (0.39)</td>
<td>3.14 (0.40)</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Rape Myth Acceptance</td>
<td>Stranger</td>
<td>17</td>
<td>2.37 (0.49)</td>
<td>3.03 (0.73)</td>
<td>2.64 (0.67)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Acquaintance</td>
<td>17</td>
<td>2.06 (0.61)</td>
<td>2.88 (0.63)</td>
<td>2.35 (0.72)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Total</td>
<td>34</td>
<td>2.21 (0.56)</td>
<td>2.96 (0.66)</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Table 2
2 x 2 ANOVAs for Effects of Gender and Type of Rape on Attitudes Toward Rape and Rape Myth Acceptance

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Dependent Variable</th>
<th>df</th>
<th>F</th>
<th>p</th>
<th>partial η²</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Attitudes Toward Rape</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Gender</td>
<td>1, 30</td>
<td>3.11</td>
<td>.088†</td>
<td>.094</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Type of Rape</td>
<td>1, 30</td>
<td>0.04</td>
<td>.849</td>
<td>.001</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Gender * Type of Rape</td>
<td>2, 30</td>
<td>0.63</td>
<td>.432</td>
<td>.021</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Rape Myth Acceptance</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Gender</td>
<td>1, 30</td>
<td>4.34</td>
<td>.002**</td>
<td>.283</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Type of Rape</td>
<td>1, 30</td>
<td>1.16</td>
<td>.290</td>
<td>.037</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Gender * Type of Rape</td>
<td>2, 30</td>
<td>0.15</td>
<td>.698</td>
<td>.005</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Note. ** p < .01, † p < .10.
Figure 1. Effects of Type of Rape and Gender on Attitudes Toward Rape

Estimated Marginal Means of ATRSavg

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>IndVar</th>
<th>Stranger Rape Scenario</th>
<th>Acquaintance Rape Scenario</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Female</td>
<td>2.80</td>
<td>3.20</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Male</td>
<td>3.10</td>
<td>3.00</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

GENDER
- - Female
- - Male
Figure 2. Effects of Type of Rape and Gender on Rape Myth Acceptance

Estimated Marginal Means of RMASavg

GENDER
- • Female
- □ Male

IndVar

Stranger Rape Scenario

Acquaintance Rape Scenario
Appendix A

Acquaintance Rape Scenario

John and Julie have been dating for a while. Although in their time together there has been no sexual activity, the relationship has been long-term and comfortable. This past Friday night, Jon and Julie went out on a date. They went for a pizza and later rented a movie. While watching the movie, they began kissing. John became aroused and began to pet heavily. Julie asked him to stop, gently at first, then emphatically. She began crying and fighting, but John continued, eventually forcing Julie to have sex with him.

Stranger Rape Scenario

This past Friday night, Julie went out for pizza with a few of her friends. When she left the diner to start walking home she was approached by a stranger who introduced himself as John. He asked her name and said that he wanted to walk her home. Julie declined the offer and walked away. The man then grabbed her and tried to take her clothes off. Julie asked him to stop and began crying and fighting, but he continued, eventually forcing Julie to have sex with him.

Appendix B

In relation to the hypothetical scenario you just read, please answer the following questions on a scale of 1 to 7, where:

1 2 3 4 5 6 7
Strongly Disagree Neutral Strongly Agree

1. Julie was raped against her will.
   1 2 3 4 5 6 7

2. The reason John committed rape was for the thrill of physical violence.
   1 2 3 4 5 6 7

3. John is a “normal” man.
   1 2 3 4 5 6 7

4. Julie did not cause the crime of forcible rape.
   1 2 3 4 5 6 7

5. John is mentally sick.
   1 2 3 4 5 6 7

6. A charge of rape two days after the act has occurred is probably not rape.
   1 2 3 4 5 6 7

7. Julie should have been responsible for preventing her own rape.
   1 2 3 4 5 6 7

8. John should be given at least 30 years in prison.
   1 2 3 4 5 6 7

9. As a woman, Julie was trained by society to be a rape victim.
   1 2 3 4 5 6 7

10. As raped woman, Julie is a less desirable woman.
    1 2 3 4 5 6 7

11. Since Julie was going to be raped anyway, she might as well have relaxed and enjoyed it.
    1 2 3 4 5 6 7

12. Rape provided the opportunity for John to show his manhood.
    1 2 3 4 5 6 7
1. Like most women, Julie secretly desired to be raped.
2. It might do Julie some good to get raped.
3. Julie provoked the rape through her appearance or behavior.
4. “Nice” women do not get raped.
5. Most charges of rape are unfounded.
6. In order to protect males, such as John, it should be difficult to prove that a rape has occurred.
7. Rape was the expression of John’s uncontrollable desire for sex.
8. Rape is the worst crime that can be committed.
9. Rape is a sex crime.
10. All rape is a male exercise in power over women.
11. During the rape, a Julie should have done everything she could do to resist.
12. John is a sexually frustrated individual.
13. Julie was asking for it.
14. The reason John committed rape is for sex.
15. Rape of a woman by a man she knows can be defined as a “woman who changed her mind afterward.”
16. If convicted of rape, John should be castrated.
17. Julie should feel guilty following the rape.
18. The degree of a Julie’s resistance should be the major factor in determining if a rape has occurred.
19. Julie is a responsible victim, not an innocent one.
20. Rape serves as a way to put or keep women in their place.
21. A woman who goes to the home or apartment of a man on a date implies that she is willing to have sex.
22. Any female can get raped.
1. One reason that women falsely report rape is that they frequently have a need to call attention to themselves.

2. Any healthy woman can successfully resist a rapist if she really wants to.

3. When women dress provocatively, they are just asking for trouble.

4. In the majority of rapes, the victim is promiscuous or has a bad reputation.

5. If a girl engages in necking or petting and she lets things get out of hand, it is her own fault if her partner forces sex on her.

6. Women who get raped while hitchhiking get what they deserve.

7. A woman who is stuck-up and thinks she is too good to talk to guys on the street deserves to be taught a lesson.

8. Many women have an unconscious wish to be raped, and may then unconsciously set up a situation in which they are likely to be attacked.

9. If a woman gets drunk at a party and has intercourse with a man she’s just met there, she should be considered “fair game” to other males at the party who want to have sex with her too, whether she wants to or not.

*Note.* The first 32 questions are modified from Feild’s Attitudes Toward Rape Scale (1978), and the last 11 questions are modified from Burt’s Rape Myth Acceptance Scale (1980).