The difficulties of psychological adjustment for female rape victims: a literature review

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The Difficulties of Psychological Adjustment for Female Rape Victims

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Abstract

In this literature review we explore the various factors that can affect how well college-aged female rape victims adjust psychologically following a rape incident. Such factors include the following: how a victim cognitively labels the incident (i.e., as rape or something else); society’s reaction to the victim’s story, and subsequent identification of the victim as stigmatized or not; the prevalence of rape myths that impact stigmatization; and the presence of a support system in the form of friends who are willing to listen receptively to the victim. These factors together affect how well a victim is able to adjust psychologically following the rape. Given the literature’s reliance on small samples of rape victims, scholars in their future research should broaden the age, gender, and cultural diversity of subjects in research on rape victims. Clinical implications of the findings are discussed as well.

Keywords: Victims, Female, Rape Myths, Rape, Adjustment

A Literature Review

Victims of rape have undergone a very trying ordeal. Rape can be defined as, “sex obtained by force, threat, or the assault of a victim incapable of consenting” (Littleton, Axsom, & Grills-Taquechel, 2009, p. 34). For those who find themselves the victim of such an act, the distress associated with the incident continues on long past the incident itself. Victims are presented with the challenge of reconciling this incident with the happenings of the rest of their lives, and resuming a normal life once again can be difficult. Research (e.g., Littleton, 2007) has found that there are several factors that can affect a victim’s ability to adjust psychologically following a rape. These factors include how the victim cognitively labels the incident, the presence of rape myths and how these affect the level of stigmatization of the victim from society, and the level of support offered by those close to the victim. Together, these various factors can either help or hinder victims as they adjust to this traumatic event. Following a discussion of the limitations in generalizability of some of the research mentioned, we provide some suggestions for directions of future research. Finally, several practical ways that victims, friends, and society can use this research to help victims in their psychological adjustment following rape are delineated. It should be noted, however, that because research on rape victims has tended to focus solely on female victims, mostly between the ages of 18 and 22, the findings discussed here pertain to this female subsample of the population of rape victims.

Factors Affecting Rape Victim’s Adjustment Cognitions

The first factor that affects victims’ ability to re-adjust to society is the victims’ cognitions concerning the rape. When individuals undergo a traumatic experience such as a rape, how they label the experience and incorporate it into their previous knowledge structure is very important. In general, people tend to believe that violence will not happen to them and that the world is a generally safe place (Littleton, 2007). Given that this new incident contradicts any previously-held illusion of safety that victims might have had, victims now need to reconcile this new act with their beliefs about the prevalence of interpersonal violence. There are a few ways that the victims can approach this task.

Littleton (2007) investigated these various methods of victims’ reconciliation of rape through a study conducted on college women, who mostly ranged in age from 18 to 22. One approach victims can take is that of assimilation, which involves incorporating new knowledge into an already existing framework without adjusting the framework. In the situation of rape victims, assimilating the experience involves not labeling it as rape (Littleton, 2007). By doing this, victims do not have to change their beliefs that the world is a place where they can remain safe from violence. By assimilating in this manner, victims are not acknowledging the severity of what happened to them, but are instead denying that they are raped (Littleton, 2007).

A different approach that victims can take is that of accommodation, which involves adjusting their existing framework of knowledge so that it can take new information into account appropriately (Littleton, 2007). In the situation of rape victims, accommodating the experience involves admitting to themselves that a rape did occur. However, since this
incident contradicts the notion that the world is a safe place, this belief has to be adjusted to accommodate this new experience (Littleton, 2007). As a result, victims acknowledge that the world might not always be as safe as once thought, and that violence is possible, so caution must be taken.

A final approach that a victim can take is that of overaccommodation (Littleton, 2007). Victims who overaccommodate also acknowledge the incident as rape and adjust their knowledge frameworks to concede that the world is not as safe as once thought, but they do so in a maladaptive way (Littleton, 2007). These victims adjust their knowledge frameworks about the safety of the world to a new exaggerated extreme, convincing themselves that the world is a very dangerous and bad place.

Which of these cognitive labeling approaches victims take can affect their psychological adjustment. Victims who do not label their experience as rape (take the approach of assimilation) may initially exhibit lower levels of distress in the short term (Littleton, 2007). Because they have not acknowledged that a rape has happened, they do not have to address the pain and discomfort initially that this incident most likely brings with it. However, these unacknowledged victims seem to experience other side effects. First, unacknowledged victims are more likely to report engaging in higher levels of drinking alcohol within the first year after the incident (Littleton et al., 2009; McMullin & White, 2006). Instead of addressing the rape, victims seem to be suppressing the stress caused by this event and instead engage in self-destructive behaviors. Furthermore, those victims who do not label their experience as rape are at a greater risk for sexual revictimization (Littleton et al., 2009). A possible reason for this finding is that because victims have not acknowledged that they were violated, they are less likely to change whatever behaviors they might previously have been engaging in that put them at risk in the first place for the initial rape. Therefore, unlike those who acknowledge that they have been raped, and as a result, take extra precautions to avoid that situation again, victims who have not acknowledged their rape will take no such precautions, leaving them just as at risk as before.

On the other hand, victims who do acknowledge the incident as rape in the short term are likely to exhibit more symptoms of general distress (McMullin & White, 2006) and PTSD (Littleton & Henderson, 2009). Therefore, compared to victims who do not acknowledge the incident as rape, these acknowledged victims are more likely to have difficulties adjusting psychologically in the beginning. This makes sense because they have to adjust their knowledge frameworks about the prevalence of interpersonal violence, which is a large adaptation. In addition, this initial high level of general distress could be due in part to victims’ awareness of the possible social stigma associated with rape victims (McMullin & White, 2006). Victims, knowing that they have experienced something that will designate them as a sort of outcast, may worry about how others will react to the incident, and this worry will pile on top of the stress that is already present due to the victims having to process the incident themselves.

Rape Myths

A second major factor in determining how well victims psychologically adjust following a rape incident has to do with society’s reactions to the rape victims. Society’s reaction to victims is, to a large extent, shaped by the prevalence of rape myths. Rape myths are “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). The myths that exist can lead to the following ideas: women lie about rape, women wish to be raped, and only bad women are raped (Shechory & Idisis, 2006).

If these rape myths are generally false, then why do they exist in the first place? Stahl, Eek, and Kazemi (2010) propose that the System Justification Theory plays a large role in why these myths exist. The System Justification Theory claims that people rationalize the way things are so that existing conditions seem acceptable. As acknowledged by Littleton (2007), people want to believe that the world is a safe and non-violent place. However, the presence of incidents such as rape blatantly contradicts this belief. Therefore, people must find a way of rationalizing why these rapes might be occurring, and one way that this is done is by formulating rape myths that tend to attribute blame for the incident to the victims. From this point of view, rape is not prevalent due to an unsafe world, but instead to the fact that the victims are either asking for it or are lying about the whole incident in general.

While these rape myths might protect the psychological well-being of the general public, the myths can affect victims in a few less positive ways. First, knowledge of rape myths can affect the credibility of victims when they are reporting about the incident. One commonly held belief in society about rape victims concerns their reactions to the incident. People believe that undergoing an incident
so stressful should result in a very emotional reaction, so when victims seem composed as opposed to emotional when reporting to the police about the incident, they are less likely to be believed. Ask and Landström (2010) refer to this occurrence as the 'emotional victim effect,' where victims who do not conform to the emotional victim stereotype are found to be less likely to be believed by the police than are victims who fit the stereotype when reporting the rape incident to the police. In reality, people react to stress in different ways, so not all victims will be emotionally distraught when reporting an incident to the police. However, because this myth that rape victims must be emotionally distraught exists, some victims are robbed of their credibility merely because their reactions do not conform to a stereotype.

Another way that rape myths can affect victims is by affecting society’s attribution of blame for the incident. Believers of rape myths are more likely to blame victims for the occurrence of the rape (Ståhl et al., 2010). This misattribution of blame occurs because the rape myths suggest ideas such as women who are raped were asking for it, either by their manner of dress or their actions, and it is therefore their own fault that the rape occurred.

Furthermore, the prevalence of rape myths can affect society’s level of empathy with victims, such that those who believe rape myths are more likely to exhibit less empathy towards rape victims. Studies have found that men are more likely to believe in rape myths (Suarez & Gadalla, 2010), possibly because, by their nature, rape myths exist in part to deny and justify male aggression against women. By extension, men are reported to have lower levels of empathy and sensitivity towards rape victims (Mitchell, Angelone, Kohlberger, & Hirschman, 2009; Osman, 2011). It is possible that by believing these rape myths, men attribute more blame to the victims for these rapes, and therefore, are less likely to believe that victims are worthy of empathy. A final way that rape myths can affect victims is that these myths, which cast victims in a poor light, create a negative stigma towards victims, leaving others less willing to want to be intimately involved with the victims (Ståhl et al., 2010). Therefore, victims might find it more difficult to develop new intimate relationships with others who believe rape myths.

Rape myths affect victims' ability to adjust in several ways, including reducing their credibility, making them feel blamed for the incident, reducing the amount of empathy that they receive from others, and making it more difficult for them to develop new intimate relationships. Given all of these challenges, victims can have a difficult time adjusting after a rape. However, social support serves as an important buffer to these adjustment difficulties.

**Support Systems**

The third major factor determining how well a victim adjusts psychologically after a rape is the reactions and roles that friends play in victims' lives. Friends, by listening to victims and maintaining their loyalty to them, have the potential to act as victims' support system during this period of readjustment after the incident (Ahrens & Campbell, 2000). Additionally, friends' reaction to victims' dilemma can be crucial in providing social support.

Ahrens and Campbell (2000) conducted a study on the friends of rape victims, collecting these friends' opinions on their role as a support system for the victims. Because experiencing a rape is a horrible ordeal, victims are sometimes reluctant to reveal this incident to their friends. In fact, Ahrens and Campbell (2000) found that college-aged victims tended to wait an average of 7 months before telling a friend about the rape. Fortunately, unlike the many members of society who have bought into the rape myths, friends tended to not blame the victims for the incident, and, in fact, friends tended to report being rather optimistic about victims' futures (Ahrens & Campbell, 2000). A possible reason for this discrepancy in the common reaction of the public towards rape victims and that of friends is due to relationship history. Because friends know the victim and already have a high level of liking for the victim, the friend would be unlikely to think that the victim was at fault for the rape. Stereotypes tend to be a type of heuristic thinking that people invoke when there is otherwise little information about a situation. Since the friend, however, knows the victim, even if he or she has been made aware of these rape myths, the friend is less likely to hold a belief in accordance with these stereotypes than would a stranger, due merely to the fact that the friend has history with the victim.

Furthermore, friends reported thinking that their assistance was helpful to victims and they felt as though they were capable of offering the needed support to victims (Ahrens & Campbell, 2000). Even though this opinion was not compared to that of the victims, there is probably a certain level of validity to the claim because friends would most likely be aware if they were not being at all helpful. In addition, it is beneficial that friends feel they are being helpful because if they feel successful in doing so, they are more likely to continue offering support than they would be if they felt as though the help they were offering was making no impact.
Most friends also reported that the friendship between friends and victims had not changed in any negative way as a result of the rape (Ahrens & Campbell, 2000). Therefore, the friendship itself also was reported to stay intact. That friends of the victims felt they were being helpful and reported no negative changes in the friendship shows that friends try to offer a relatively solid support system. They also lack the judgment and blame that victims have directed towards them from society, so friends seem to be not only willing to help, but also are a good, supportive presence to be around.

Since friends are willing to offer their support and seem to feel confident in doing so, the question that remains is, how do reactions of friends affect victims? In their interviews of 18 year-old victims, Campbell, Ahrens, Sefl, Wasco, and Barnes (2001), found that having the support of friends was related to lower levels of general distress after the rape. More specifically, victims who were allowed to talk about the rape and whose stories were believed (as opposed to doubted) were found to have lower levels of distress and emotional and physical symptoms. Having a person who is willing to take the time to listen to what the victim has to say without judgment can allow the victim to still feel accepted and to realize that what has happened does not change the relationship between the victim and the friend. To a person who has to readjust her framework of knowledge about the safety of the world, having a sense of constancy from a friend who is willingly to stay supportive can be reassuring and offer its own sense of safety.

Friends also must realize that while they clearly have the potential to help victims, if they are not supportive, they also have the potential to cause harm to the victims. In general, negative reactions from others to the incident had a stronger impact than did positive reactions from others (Campbell et al., 2001). Such negative reactions include when the person with whom the victim shared her story reacts by being patronizing, telling the victim to get on with her life, or telling the victim that she was irresponsible. These negative reactions were found to be predictors of later maladjustment for victims, regardless of the number of positive reactions that victims encountered.

Not only does it appear that negative reactions outweigh positive reactions in terms of the strength of their impact, but it also seems that negative reactions have more of an impact than does a lack of positive interactions. Campbell et al. (2001) found that negative reaction to the incident were so harmful that it was found that a lack of support was less harmful to victims that was a blatantly negative interaction. Therefore, if a person is unsure about how to react to victims' confession of rape and cannot act in a positive and supportive way, it is more important that the person avoids reacting in a negative manner than it is to worry about not being blatantly supportive.

Friends, it seems, have the potential to play an important role in victims' psychological adjustment following a rape. Merely offering an ear to listen and believing victims can be a type of support that has been linked to less qualities of maladjustment for victims. In this supportive role, friends offer victims a relief from the stigma they often experience coming from society, and this acceptance can help make victims' psychological adjustment easier.

**Discussion**

**Limitations and Future Directions**

While research has documented the challenges faced by rape victims in their adjustment, there are some limitations in this research that should be made known. A main limitation of the research is its focus on female rape victims. While women are raped at greater rates than are men (U.S. Department of Justice, 1997), it is important to not assume that men experience similar adjustment patterns. It is quite possible that male rape victims may be likely to manifest their psychological distress through externalizing behaviors (e.g., aggression) or substance use (Leadbeater, Blatt, & Quinlan, 1995). Given differences in gender socialization (Bussey & Bandura, 2004), the rape myths that so greatly affect the adjustment potential for female victims are most likely different for male victims. For example, some rape myths directed towards men include that rape against men only occurs in prison or that male victims should have shown more resistance to the attack than they did (Schechory & Idisis, 2006). In the future, scholars should investigate male victims and how the challenges they face adjusting psychologically after a rape differ from those of female victims.

Because these rape myths that so affect a victim are beliefs held by a society, the cultural climate of the research discussed should be noted. Apart from two studies that occurred in Sweden (Ask & Landström, 2010; Ståhl et al., 2010), all research cited in this literature review was conducted in the United States. Many of the reactions that rape victims encounter from the general public may vary depending on the culture of the country in which the victim is residing. For example, in Cambodia, a
country where the virginity of women is highly valued, rape victims have little support and are very highly stigmatized, much more so than in the United States (Amnesty International, 2010). It is alternatively entirely plausible that rape myths are not as prevalent in other societies, so in the future scholars should investigate the reactions of the public and the beliefs held by people in countries beyond the United States.

In addition, the age range of the participants in existing research involves women who are young adults (18 to 22 years of age) at the time of survey, so there is not any substantial research on adolescents, or those in middle or late adulthood. However, it is important to note that most of the studies surveyed participants of around the same age at the time of the survey and then had them report when they were raped. Therefore, while the age at the time of the survey was relatively uniform, the age at the time of the rape tended not to be uniform. This presents a problem when looking at victims' adjustment, since this is likely to change over time. Future studies would benefit from collecting a sample of participants who were uniform not only in age at the time of the survey, but also in time since the rape occurred. Performing a study in such a manner could help clarify the timing and typical patterns seen in the adjustment process of rape victims. With a clearer idea about what happens when in this readjustment process, it would be possible to determine exactly what sorts of support would be most helpful at various points in this adjustment process.

Additionally, much of the data that is collected for these studies is retrospective. Although participants are asked about their current levels of adjustment, the studies also often inquire as to levels of distress and behaviors that occurred closer in time to the actual rape. Since participants have to rely on recall to report these behaviors and feelings, it is possible that the reports are not entirely accurate. These reports might not be completely accurate because the behaviors or feelings in question occurred so long ago that the memory of them is difficult to recall, or the psychological state of the victim at present might influence how she remembers that time period, construing it as either more or less severe than it actually was at the time. As a result, research on rape victims would greatly benefit from longitudinal studies, a type of study that research in this area is currently lacking. If longitudinal studies were to follow victims' behaviors and adjustment starting shortly after the incident and continuing on for many years, research may be able to offer a better idea of the trajectory that rape victims usually take in their adjustment process. Since the data collected would not be retrospective, it would likely be more accurate than similar data that were collected in retrospect. However, it should be acknowledged that finding participants for such longitudinal studies shortly after they have been raped might be a difficult process, seeing as many victims do not report the incident immediately.

An additional limitation of the existing literature is that there is not a large amount of research addressing coping behaviors and strategies. The focus of this paper was on factors that explain the psychological adjustment of rape victims, but there are two constructs that contribute to this psychological adjustment: cognitions and coping behaviors (Meyer & Taylor, 1986). While scholars have documented how cognitions (labeling the experience as rape versus not labeling the incident as rape) can affect victims' psychological adjustment (Littleton, 2007; Littleton et al., 2009; Littleton & Henderson, 2009; McMullin & White, 2006), they did not focus as much on coping behaviors (Meyer & Taylor, 1986). These coping behaviors are physical acts that victims do that help them to adjust to their situation, and just as attributions about the incident play a part in determining people's ability to adjust psychologically, so do these coping behaviors. As a result, in the future scholars should study the types of coping behaviors in which victims are engaged, and how each type can contribute to psychological adjustment.

Implications

In light of the information about what factors affect victims' psychological adjustment following a rape, several findings have emerged that can be of use to friends, victims, and society in general. The first involves victims' cognitive labeling of the situation. Even though victims who acknowledge that they were raped reportedly experience higher levels of initial distress (McMullin & White, 2006), victims should be encouraged to acknowledge the rape as such instead of denying that it happened. Such denial of the experience seems to place victims at risk of being revictimized (Littleton et al., 2009) since they do not take care to change the behaviors that might have put them at risk in the first place. Also, those who deny that the rape occurred seem to be trying to repress the same distress that those who acknowledge the rape reportedly felt, but instead they channel this distress into self-destructive behaviors such as excessive drinking. By acknowledging that the rape occurred, victims can, therefore, learn to deal with their distress in a healthier manner, and can be sure to take precautions to keep themselves from being revictimized.
Therefore, victims of such an incident should be encouraged to acknowledge the experience for what it is so that they can deal with the psychological distress in a healthy manner as opposed to repressing it.

Friends of rape victims also can benefit from the findings of this research. The support of a friend is very important to a rape victim because the friend offers a channel through which the victim can ideally tell her story and have it received without judgment (Ahrens & Campbell, 2000). Friends should know that being there and being willing to listen are small ways to offer a form of support that can be very crucial in a victim's process of adjusting psychologically. However, friends should be made aware that they should at all costs try to avoid any negative reactions to the victim's story, because one negative reaction has the potential to outweigh the good done by many positive reactions.

The general public also can benefit from the research discussed in this literature review. A key lesson that the public can take away from this research is that of the impact of rape myths on victims. Clearly these myths present challenges to victims as they try to, so one productive step that should be taken from this point is to try to reduce the prevalence of these myths. A possible way to do this is by educating the public (e.g. through schools and universities) about the realities of rape and the difficulties victims go through after the incident. One of the best ways to eliminate rape myths would be to address them directly, presenting in these talks what myths actually exist and then countering these false claims with the facts. In order to reach out to the general public, commercials, billboards, and websites can be used to let the public know about rape myths. The aim in dispelling these rape myths would be to create a more accepting environment for rape victims. If rape victims felt as though they could share their stories and not be stigmatized, it could lead them to be less likely to repress their experiences as well as more likely to share their story with friends sooner and to therefore seek out the benefits that a support system can provide. Communities can respond to this research by creating and advertising support groups for victims. Since it was found that victims who had the chance to tell their story showed lower levels of distress (Campbell et al., 2001), victims could greatly benefit from having a place in which to talk with others who have undergone the same experience.

Conclusion

The literature on female rape victims has demonstrated that many factors can influence how successfully rape victims can adjust psychologically after the incident. Part of what determines how well they adjust involves the victims' cognitions about the event and how they mentally classify the incident. Those who do not acknowledge the incident as rape are more likely to be at risk for sexual revictimization and to engage in self-destructive behaviors, whereas those who label the incident as rape are more likely to experience greater levels of initial distress. Also affecting victims' ability to adjust psychologically is the presence in society of rape myths, which portray rape victims in a false light and are associated with people either blaming victims or not believing victims at all. A third factor that can seemingly help rape victims' psychological adjustment is that of the presence of a support system in the form of receptive friends. All of these factors provide an idea of why rape victims may have a difficult time adjusting psychologically after a rape. Hopefully, awareness of these factors can help to minimize the presence of factors, such as rape myths, that make this process more difficult for victims, and to increase the presence of factors, such as support systems, that can help to make this process of adjustment easier for victims.

References


