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Male rape myth - The role of gender role conformity in men's perceptions of male rape

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Abstract

Prior studies have examined connections between homophobia and rape myth acceptance. While homophobia has not been found to be a significant mediator, conformity to rigid male gender roles is theorized to correlate with rape myth acceptance, or victim blaming. The current study surveyed 60 men regarding rape myth acceptance and adherence to traditional male gender roles. Participants were also presented a scenario of man-on-man sexual assault. Data was analyzed to determine relationships between gender role conformity, victim/perpetrator sexual orientation, and victim blaming. Three hypotheses regarding association between rates of gender role conformity, the sexual orientations of perpetrator/victim and levels of victim blame are examined. Analysis revealed partial support and demonstrated a novel effect of perpetrator orientation on victim blaming.

Male Rape Myth Acceptance

Sexual assault and rape are common in the United States. The Bureau of Justice Statistics reports that every 92 seconds, an American is sexually assaulted (Truman & Langton, 2015). Rape is often thought of as a women's issue, as one in six women will be a victim of rape or attempted rape in her lifetime. However, it is not solely a concern for women (Sorrel & Masters, 1982). According to the Bureau of Justice Statistics, three percent of American men will experience rape or attempted rape in his lifetime, and one in ten rapes in this country happen to men (Truman & Langton, 2015). This number is even higher for transgender men, at 21%. More than 86,000 men in prison settings are assaulted each year, approximately 4% of prison inmates and 3.2% of jail inmates. Additionally, 78,000 men in the United States military are raped or assaulted each year, though less than 13,000 of victims report the attack to their commanders (Truman & Langton, 2015).

Rape myths, the prejudicial, stereotyped, and false beliefs about victims of sexual assault, are thought to be rooted in negative views about women in general (Davis et al., 2001). Common rape myths, also known as victim blaming, may include statements like, "she was asking for it by wearing that outfit", or "it wasn't really rape because they are dating" (McMahon & Farmer, 2011). Many victims of assault struggle to report their attacks due to fears of disbelief and secondary victimization (Mezey & King, 1989; Williams, 1981). This secondary victimization takes place when the person to which the victim outcries then blame the victim for their own attack due to how he or she was dressed, how much he or she may have had to drink, or as a natural consequence for the lifestyle he or she lives.

A victim's sexual orientation has been associated with a higher likelihood of secondary victimization (Mezey & Kind, 1989). This is especially true for transgender and gay men (Kite & Whitely, 1996), who are assumed to be promiscuous and therefore not able to be raped. Prior

studies have suggested that men's negative perceptions about gay men lead men to also have negative reactions to the rape of men (Davies et al., 2001).

For example, in a study of 161 undergraduate students, it was predicted that gay rape victims would be more likely to face blame than heterosexual victims (Davies et al., 2006). This study included both hetero- and homosexual participants, and it was noted that the men who participated were more likely to place blame on the victim if the victim's gender was one to which the participant was sexually attracted. In addition, heterosexual victims of either sex were given more sympathy by participating men than homosexual victims, and homosexual victims were supposed to have enjoyed his or her attack more often than heterosexual victims. Participating women did not express any significant differences in beliefs, regardless of the victim's sexual orientation. Researchers suggested that this difference may be accounted for by the rigidity of traditional male gender role socialization, rather than degrees of homophobia expressed.

A 2007 study of undergraduate students exploring judgements of gay and lesbian victims found similar results (Sheridan, 2007). Women were found to be equally sensitive to rape victims, regardless of gender or sexual orientation. Men judged gay victims to be more compliant to their attackers, and to have experienced less trauma due to their assault. Heterosexual victims, however, were found to be less responsible for their own attack, to have experienced more trauma, and the participating men suggested harsher punishments for the perpetrators of assaults on heterosexual men. Once again, homophobia was not found to a significant mediator in the differences between men's and women's responses.

Researchers have suggested that men's judgements about sexual assault occur within a framework of traditionally accepted sexual attraction (cis-men and cis-women) and social motivation (Davies et al., 2006; Sheridan, 2007). This framework is a function gender role conformity, or acceptance of the culturally accepted gender-based norms and roles that men

and women are supposed to operate within in their daily lives (Davies et al., 2001; Hammer et al., 2018; Kassing, 2003). Studies about gender role conformity have proposed that it is the inflexible roles expected of men that drive the disparities in belief about rape and assault between men and women. While women may be able to take on more traditionally masculine traits or roles, i.e., the idea of the “tomboy”, men are more likely to be held to strict standards of masculine behavior – for example, less emotional expression and more aggressive behaviors. Feminist researchers have theorized that rape myth acceptance is linked to cultural expectations of men and women (Davies et al., 2001).

Davies et al. (2012) surveyed 323 undergraduate students to explore these differences. The results indicated that men were significantly more likely to ascribe to rape myths when presented with scenarios of assault. Researchers also found significant correlations between belief in female rape myths and male rape myth acceptance. Participants who were likely to assign blame to a woman victim for her sexual assault were also more likely to blame a man for his attack. Additionally, higher rates of traditional gender role conformity in men were significantly associated with increased rape myth acceptance in general. Men who believed that men should be tough, unemotional, responsible for providing the bulk of income for their homes and pursue science or business-based careers, were more likely to assign blame to the victim of a sexual assault, regardless of the victim’s sex or orientation.

Kassing (2003) examined the perceptions of 201 adult men in the Midwest United States regarding male rape. Participants were surveyed for their personal adherence to traditional male gender roles and given a same-sex rape scenario to read. Researchers found that higher adherence to restrictive male gender roles was strongly associated with higher levels of rape myth acceptance, as well as a higher degree of negative associations about gay men. Older participants were found to be more likely to express belief in rape myths, while more educated men are less likely to victim blame. Kassing (2003) suggested that in large part, rape myth

acceptance is linked to the socialization of men, and that more education in gender role flexibility and equality may reduce rape myth acceptance among men.

Purpose of the Present Study

Although rape myth acceptance as it applies to women is widely studied, male rape myth acceptance remains less understood. The existing literature has widely focused on possible connections between homophobia and male rape myth acceptance. More recent studies have implied a possible connection between traditional gender role conformity in men and levels of rape myth acceptance. The current study desired to take a closer look at the suggestions of Kassing (2003) and explored possible connections between gender role conformity in men and their perceptions of the men who are victims of sexual assault. For this study, I hypothesized that 1) men expressing a higher level of gender role conformity would also have significantly higher levels of victim blaming across all scenarios, 2) that scenarios which involved a homosexual victim would result in higher levels of victim blame than those with a heterosexual victim, and 3) the scenario involving a homosexual perpetrator assaulting a heterosexual victim would result in lower levels of victim blaming than each of the other scenarios.

Method

Participants

Participants were recruited from a combination of the undergraduate psychology pool of a mid-size regional public university in the Midwestern United States, and online surveying using the Survey Monkey service, distributed via snowballing methods through social media (Facebook and Twitter). The participant pool was restricted to people who identify as men and were at least 18 years of age. There were no restrictions on race or sexual orientation. All participants were provided with informed consent prior to beginning the surveys, debriefed as required by APA ethical guidelines, and offered the opportunity to participate in a drawing for a gift card as compensation for their time. Each participant completed a short demographic

survey, the Illinois Rape-Myth Acceptance Short Form Scale (IRMA-SF, McMahon & Farmer, 2011), the Gender Role Conflict Scale-Short Form (GRCF-FS, Hammer et al., 2018) and the Male Rape Myth Scale (MRM, Melanson, 1999) in random order. All participants were then randomly assigned one of four short fictional man-on-man rape scenarios to read, which was adapted for the purposes of this study. All surveys were completed and submitted online using the SurveyMonkey web service.

A total of 90 men responded to the survey, 60 of which sufficiently completed the scales for inclusion in the final data analysis. The sample self-reported as predominantly Caucasian/White (53, 88.3%) but also included African American/Black (5, 8.3%), Latinx (1, 1.7%) and Other (1, 1.7%). Forty-eight (80%) identified as heterosexual, eight (13.3%) as homosexual, two (3.3%) as bisexual and two (3.3%) as other sexual orientation. The survey also asked about age (16 (26.7%) ages 18-24; 15 (25%) ages 25-35; 14 (23.3%) ages 36-45; 10 (16.7%) ages 46-55; 5 (8.3%) ages 55 and up) and estimated annual income in family of origin (7 (11.7%) \$0-24,999; 16 (26.7%) \$25,000-49,999; 18 (30%) \$50,000-74,999; 7 (11.7%) \$75,000-99,999; 7 (11.7%) \$100,000-149,999; 5 (8.3%) \$150,000 and up).

Materials

Illinois Rape-Myth Acceptance Short Form Scale (IRMA-SF, McMahon & Farmer, 2011)

The IRMA-SF was developed to measure internalized beliefs about the rape of women. The short form scale explores four dimensions of common rape stereotypes: 1. "she asked for it", 2. "He didn't mean to do it", 3. "It wasn't really rape" and 4. "she lied". This tool uses a five-point scale ranging from 1 (*strongly disagree*) to 5 (*strongly agree*). Scoring is cumulative, with higher scores indicating greater rape myth acceptance. The reported internal consistency is

excellent across all 22 items as a total score ($\alpha = 0.92$), and acceptable within each of the four categories ($\alpha = .69 - .89$) (Bendixen & Kennair, 2017)

Male Rape Myths scale (Melanson, 1999)

The Male Rape Myth scale was created to better understand perceptions and beliefs about adult male victims of sexual assault (Melanson, 1999). This scale is a 22-item scale using a six-point Likert scale ranging from 1 (*strongly disagree*) to 6 (*strongly agree*). It is scored cumulatively, with higher scores indicating greater male rape myth acceptance. This scale has demonstrated excellent reliability ($\alpha = .90$) and a test-retest reliability of $r(291) = .89, p < .0001$ in prior studies.

Gender Role Conflict Scale – Short Form (GRCS-FS, Hammer et al., 2018)

The GRCS-SF is a shortened scale adapted from the Gender Role Conflict Scale that was originally used to measure men's levels of distress regarding the perceived rigidity of cultural standards of masculinity. Like the Gender Role Conflict scale, the GRCS-SF is divided into four sub-scales: success, power, and competition (SPC); restrictive emotionality (RE); restrictive affectionate behavior between men (RABBM); conflicts between work and family relations (CBWFR). All items are scored on a six-point Likert scale, ranging from 1 (*strongly disagree*) to 6 (*strongly agree*). Higher subscale scores indicate stronger adherence to typical male gender roles in the participant. The GRCS-SF has shown acceptable levels of internal consistency in prior testing ($.77 < \alpha < .80$) (Levant et al., 2015).

Male Rape Scenario and Victim Blaming Response Survey

All participants were assigned one of four short fictional male rape scenarios to read, which had been adapted by the researchers to explore the participants' personal opinions of who is at fault in the presented scenario: Scenario 1: A homosexual man is assaulted by a homosexual man: Scenario 2: A heterosexual man is assaulted by a heterosexual man: Scenario 3: A homosexual man is assaulted by a heterosexual man: Scenario 4: A heterosexual

man is assaulted by a homosexual man. The Victim Blaming (VB) response survey was adapted from the IRMA-SF (McMahon and Farmer 2011) and Male Rape Myth Scale (Melanson 1999). The scenario response survey was scored on a five-point Likert scale, ranging from 1 (*strongly disagree*) to 5 (*strongly agree*). Scoring for the response survey is cumulative, with higher scores indicating greater rape myth acceptance as it regards to the specific scenario presented.

Data Analysis

Ninety respondents participated in the data collection process. However, 30 of the participants had significant amounts of missing response data, and so their responses were removed from the final data analysis. Additionally, there were five missing data points found in the results from the remaining 60 participants, which were replaced with the mean score for the affected survey question. All survey tools were then scored accordingly.

Collected data was initially analyzed to check for potential covariation of scores on the IRMA-SF, MRM, and GRCF-SF with the VB survey, and to address hypotheses one. For hypotheses two and three, an ANOVA was performed to better understand the impacts of victim sexual orientation (IV) and perpetrator sexual orientation (IV) may exert on levels of victim blaming (DV) as measured by the VB response survey. All data analysis was conducted using SPSS (Version 24.0; IBM Corp, 2016).

Results

Preliminary correlational analysis was performed on the IRMA-SF, MRM, GRCF-SF and VB survey. Descriptive results for all surveys are available in Table 1. Correlations were found between the IRMA-SF and MRM ($r(60) = .561, p < .001$) (see Table 2) and the GRCF-SF and MRM ($r(60) = .248, p = .031$). An ANOVA performed for between-subjects testing (see Table 4) found no connection between Victim Orientation and VB, $F(1,56) = 1.587, p = .213$.

However, the ANOVA did show a connection between Perpetrator Orientation and VB, $F(1,56) = 4.336, p = .042$.

Discussion

This study sought to examine the potential influences of traditional male gender roles more closely, and the sexual orientations of victim and perpetrator, on men's perceptions of men who have been sexually assaulted. Prior studies have shown that men presented with a scenario of man-on-man sexual assault are more likely to exhibit victim blaming beliefs when the victim is homosexual (Davies et al, 2001; Davies et al., 2006; Sheridan, 2007), although homophobia has not been shown to be a significant factor (Sheridan, 2007). Revisiting Kassing's research on adherence to traditional male gender roles and general rape myth acceptance (2003), the current study hypothesized that 1. higher rates of adherence to traditional gender roles would significantly associate with higher levels of rape myth acceptance across all scenarios, 2. that scenarios which involve a homosexual victim would result in higher levels of rape myth acceptance than those with a heterosexual victim, and 3. the scenario involving a homosexual perpetrator assaulting a heterosexual victim would result in lower levels of rape myth acceptance than each of the other scenarios.

Hypothesis One

The first hypothesis proposed that data analysis would show a significant correlation between traditional male gender role conformity as measured by the GRCF-SF and scenario-specific rape myth acceptance or victim blaming as measured by the VB survey. Consistent with the existing literature (Davies et al.; 2012; Kassing, 2003), the data did show a small correlation between the GCRF-SF and MRM (see Table 2), indicating an association between gender role conformity and male rape myth in general. However, the analysis of GRCF-SF and VB (see

Table 2) showed no correlation between gender role conformity and victim blaming for the scenarios presented, therefore this hypothesis was rejected.

Hypothesis Two

For the second hypothesis, it was suggested that participants presented with a scenario involving a homosexual victim would score more highly on VB than those with heterosexual victims. In contrast with prior research (Davies et al., 2001; Davies, et al, 2006; Sheridan, 2007), the analysis here led the author to also reject this hypothesis, as it did not show a significant difference in VB scores based upon victim's sexual orientation (see Tables 3 & 4). It is possible that there has been an attitude shift towards more egalitarian gender roles and acceptance of the LGBTQ community in the past 20 years, which may account for some of the difference in results between the current study and those done by Davies et al. (2001) and Sheridan (2007).

Hypothesis Three

The last hypothesis examined proposed that those participants reading scenarios portraying a homosexual perpetrator and heterosexual victim would report lower levels of VB. This hypothesis was found to be partially supported. Data analysis did show a main effect of perpetrator orientation; scenarios involving homosexual perpetrators were associated with lower levels of VB, however this effect was found regardless of victim orientation (see Tables 3 & 4). The sexual orientation of a victim appears to have no significant effect on VB scores. Instead, the data demonstrated that the most significant effect of perpetrator orientation on degree of victim blaming (VB) was exhibited in scenarios involving a heterosexual perpetrator (see Table 3). This novel finding may be the most interesting finding of the study, as the current body of literature has not examined in depth the sexual orientation of the perpetrator as a key factor when studying man-on-man sexual assault.

Limitations and Future Directions

There are several limitations to consider with the current study. Thirty respondents failed to complete all the survey tools, which reduced the sample size significantly. This reduction in sample size limited the ability to examine potential covariance of race, sexual orientation, or family income. This certainly minimized the overall generalizability of the study to a larger population. In addition, after completing data analysis, there were concerns regarding the validity of the VB survey adapted for this study (see Appendix). The short length of the survey tool made it difficult for there to be any real significant scoring variance beyond the random outliers, which reduced the ability to properly assess the main effects of Victim and Perpetrator Orientation. Another limitation regarding the adapted sexual assault scenarios is the issue of use of restraints within the context of each short story. Including the use of restraints in the assault scenario (see Appendix) may have had a significant effect on the VB scores, across all scenarios. Removal of the restraint wording may change the VB scores, and thus alter the overall analysis of the study. Overall, the VB scenarios and survey should be revisited before attempting to replicate the current study.

This study may have raised more questions than it answered. As mentioned in the discussion of the second hypothesis, there have been some significant cultural shifts in America regarding gender roles and acceptance of the LGBT community in the past two decades. Additionally, there is widespread national conversation around consent and sexual activity, particularly on American college campuses. Either or both of those factors could explain some of the differences between the results of this study and the predecessors (Davies et al., 2001; Davies, et al, 2006; Davies et al., 2012; Sheridan, 2007). Future researchers may want to reexamine the GRCF-SF as it is currently written and investigate whether the gender roles within are still valid when discussing American men.

More importantly, the question remains – why does a perpetrator’s sexual orientation have a significant effect on the degree of victim blaming in cases of same-sex sexual assault?

Specifically, why do men assign more blame to the man who is a victim of same-sex sexual assault when the perpetrator is a heterosexual? It could be reasonably inferred that a heterosexual man is not predisposed to partake in same-sex sexual activities, and so a man-on-man sexual assault should fall outside the norms of expectable behavior. If social science is to better understand sexual violence to work towards prevention and treatment, a greater understanding of both perpetrators and public perceptions is a very necessary step in the right direction.

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Tables/Figures

Table 1*Descriptive analysis*

Instrument	<i>M</i>	<i>SD</i>	<i>N</i>
IRMA-SF	41.28	13.06	60
MRM	41.97	14.83	60
GRCF-SF	51.97	11.22	60
VB	13.68	1.64	60

Table 2*Model Correlations*

		IRMA total	MRM total	GRCF total	VB total
IRMA total	<i>r</i>	1	.561**	.186	.236
	<i>p</i>		.000	.155	.070
	N	60	60	60	60
MRM total	<i>r</i>		1	.278*	-.029
	<i>p</i>			.031	.825
	N		60	60	60
GRCF total	<i>r</i>			1	-.080
	<i>p</i>				.542
	N			60	60
VB total	<i>r</i>				1
	<i>p</i>				
	N				60

Table 3*Dependent Variable Descriptive Analysis*

Victim Orientation	Perpetrator Orientation	<i>M</i>	<i>SD</i>	<i>N</i>
Heterosexual	Heterosexual	13.64	1.39	14
	Homosexual	13.36	.745	14
	Total	13.50	1.10	28
Homosexual	Heterosexual	14.75	1.77	12
	Homosexual	13.30	1.98	20
	Total	13.84	2.00	32
Total	Heterosexual	14.15	1.64	26
	Homosexual	13.32	1.57	34
	Total	13.68	1.64	60

Table 4*Test of Between-Subjects Effects*

Source	SS	df	MS	F	p	η_p^2
Victim Orientation	3.992	1	3.992	1.587	.213	.028
Perpetrator Orientation	10.908	1	10.908	4.336	.042	.072
Victim Orientation* Perpetrator Orientation	4.908	1	4.908	1.951	.168	.034

Appendix

Sample Text of Scenarios

The following text is the scenario for the condition of a gay victim and a gay perpetrator

Jacob is a 21-year-old senior in college. He currently shares a home with a roommate, but he does not currently have a boyfriend(girlfriend). He is very active in the campus Pride (Campus Senate) organization, plays on the university tennis team, and enjoys an active social life on the weekends. Several days a week he works as a bartender at a local bar.

David is also 21, and a student at the same university as Jacob, though not in the same major. He is currently single, though he does occasionally enjoy dates with other men (with women). David is active in several sports clubs on campus. He works as a fitness instructor during the week and enjoys going out to bars and clubs on the weekends.

Jacob and his roommate arranged to host a party to celebrate the end of Finals week for the first semester. At the party, Jacob started talking to David, though they had not met before that night. During the conversation, David confessed that he found Jacob to be attractive, and suggested they go somewhere quieter. Jacob politely declined, as he did not find David to be attractive. David left off talking to Jacob and rejoined his friends at the party. The party continued into the early hours of the morning, and by 1:00am, Jacob had consumed a large amount of alcohol. He began to feel ill, and proceeded upstairs to his bedroom, where he laid on his bed and fell asleep.

David, on his way to the restroom, saw Jacob asleep on his bed. After watching Jacob sleep, he glanced around the bedroom and spotted a ball of string on the shelf. David entered the bedroom, took the string off the shelf, and approached Jacob asleep in the bed. David rolled Jacob over to his back and tied his hands and feet together. Jacob stirred but did not awaken. David then unzipped Jacob's jeans, and pushed Jacob's pants and boxers down to his knees. Jacob, disturbed by the movement of his clothing, awoke, and began to try to free his hands. Jacob asked David what he was doing. David told Jacob to be quiet and enjoy himself. Jacob was angry and repeatedly told David to stop and leave him alone, while fighting to undo the knots of string. David told Jacob to relax, that he knew that Jacob found him attractive, that he should enjoy it while David sucked his penis, and then Jacob could do the same to him. Jacob was very afraid and tried to escape David's grasp while loudly protesting. David continued to perform oral sex on him while holding Jacob down. David was then disturbed by a loud banging on the front door of the house. The police were at the door, responding to a noise complaint about loud music. The music was turned off, and David heard footsteps in the hallway outside the bedroom door. David got up off the bed, and, not wanting to explain why Jacob was tied up, he quickly loosened the string around Jacob's hand and feet and left the room. Jacob freed himself and got dressed. He did not want anyone to know what had happened.

Jacob did not rejoin the party. He did not want anyone to know what happened. He has not seen David since that night, and David has made no attempts at further contact with Jacob.

Victim Blaming Response Survey

Please answer the following statements as honestly as possible. Be assured that your responses are completely anonymous. Please circle your responses according to the following scale:

1 - Strongly Disagree

2 - Moderately Disagree

3 - Neither Agree nor Disagree

4 - Moderately Agree

5 - Strongly Agree

1. Jacob was drunk and therefore is at least partially responsible for things getting out of hand.
2. David didn't mean to force Jacob, David just got carried away because he was sexually excited.
3. David was drunk, so it can't be rape because he didn't know what he was doing.
4. Jacob could have successfully resisted David if he really wanted to.
5. I would have a hard time believing Jacob if he told me that he was raped