WCSAP

Volume 9 | 3
May 2007

Research & Advocacy Digest

Linking Advocates & Researchers

Rape Myths

Letter From The Editor

Janet Anderson, Advocacy Education Director, WCSAP

On any given day one can turn on a media story; read a newspaper; walk through the halls of justice; walk through a college or university campus; sit in a bar, playground, or just about anywhere else; and most likely hear disparaging statements like, "victims of rape lie or exaggerate," "she really wanted it, even if she said no," "how could he be assaulted," "she can't be raped, she's married to the guy," or any other similar sentiment. While most individuals in our society believe these to be true, and some might even say these are harmless beliefs or opinions, those of us working in the anti-rape field understand clearly that these are rape myths. And you know these myths all too well because you are out there fighting against them every single day.

Rape myths were first defined by M. Burt in 1980 as "prejudicial, stereotyped or false beliefs about rape, rape victims, and rapists." Others further defined rape myths as "attitudes and beliefs that are generally false, yet widely held, and that serve to justify male sexual violence against women."[1] However, a broader definition would include understanding that rape myths are central to the fundamental exercise of power and control, patriarchy, rape culture and ensuring the institutionalization of oppression of disenfranchised groups.

We live in a culture that supports, excuses and encourages sexual violence and male sexual aggression. And what better way to preserve this system of power and control than to construct an entire mythology,

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[1] Lonsway, K.A., & Fitzgerald, L.F. (1984) Rape Myths in Review *Psychology of Women Quarterly, 18, pgs. 133-164.*

or set of lies and stereotypes, that not only enables perpetrators to excuse or deny their sexual violence, but that also shifts the blame away from the perpetrator and places it squarely on the shoulders of the victim. When you think about it, this political and social arrangement that most people have bought into is actually quite brilliant. Growing up, we are taught that we can only be responsible for our own behavior, our own choices and our own actions. Yet, when it comes to sexual violence and rape myths, the victims are blamed and held responsible for the perpetrator's behaviors, choices and actions. This is completely counter-intuitive to everything we've been taught about being a capable adult, yet somehow it "makes sense" when it comes to rape.

When you hear people blaming victims, questioning their credibility, implying they deserved to be raped, say they enjoyed it, or when they trivialize someone's rape experience, do you ever wonder if they really understand what they are saying? Yet, because we live in a rape culture, it's nearly impossible not to have internalized these myths; indeed, we have been indoctrinated to believe them since the time we are born. They have become so integral to our way of thinking that most people don't understand the impact of what they are saying. For example, I recently overheard someone say that the woman central to the Duke Lacrosse case deserved to be raped even if the players weren't guilty because she was a stripper and a "ho." When I challenged that statement, the response I received was, "Well, that's my opinion and what I think is harmless. How can what I think hurt her?"

Rape myths are not just a set of harmless beliefs. They are destructive forces. They do not fall on deaf ears, nor are they said in a vacuum. Rape myths have profound impacts. They hurt.

Rape myths are not just a set of harmless beliefs. Rape and rape myths are destructive forces. They do not fall on deaf ears, nor are they said in a vacuum. Although some people may think they are just "saying words" or holding on to innocuous beliefs, rape myths have profound impacts. They hurt. They hurt individuals, they hurt survivors, they hurt families and they hurt communities. They encourage silence, shame and pain. They shift blame away from the perpetrator, and, ultimately, keep us believing that sexual violence is natural and normal. And, most assuredly, perpetrators count on us believing them in order to continue perpetrating sexual violence.

Much is at stake when most of our society supports and accepts these myths as truth: It allows perpetrators to deny and excuse their violence, it grants permission to not be held accountable, it allows for a system of social and economic control, it fosters opportunities to dehumanize whole groups of people, and it ultimately produces an environment where witnesses and bystanders get to remain neutral and disengaged.

Dismantling rape myths is critical to the work of ending rape. While we won't find many individuals who would stand up and claim that it is O.K. to rape, when people imply that victims deserve it, question a victim's credibility, or hold up rape myths and rape-supportive attitudes and beliefs as truth, that is exactly what they are saying.

It's up to us to listen to survivors and be there to support them. It's up to us to help them understand that the sexual assault had nothing to do with their clothing; it had nothing to do with how late they stayed out or how much they drank.

Because rape myths are so prevalent and institutionalized throughout all aspects of our society, we see them played out through pop culture, through the media, within our institutions and, unfortunately, within ourselves. They are evidenced every time a police officer approaches a victim with suspicion and doubt; when a prosecutor fails to take a case because he/she believes the victim isn't a "genuine victim" because the victim is a sex worker or a person with a developmental disability; and when family, friends and peers fail to support a survivor. They are evidenced when a survivor won't tell someone for fear of being judged, denigrated or told they deserved it; and they are evidenced by the tremendous amount of guilt, shame and isolation survivors feel.

So, it's up to us to set the record straight. It's up to us to listen to survivors and be there to support them. It's up to us to help them understand that the sexual assault had nothing to do with their clothing; it had nothing to do with how late they stayed out or how much they drank. And, hopefully, one day when they understand this they'll be able to let go of the guilt and shame they carry.

And it's up to us to continue educating our communities about the realities of rape myths — that rape myths are not just a set of harmless beliefs, but are part of a larger destructive force that justifies violence in our culture. And when they really get that rape myths are painful, when they get that these myths are being applied to a child, a mother, a father, a teenaged boy, a human being, hopefully then they will pause the next time they are about to say something disparaging about a rape survivor. That would truly be a good day.

As always, I applaud you for the work you do and hope that you find this *Digest* useful. When producing this publication, I typically interview someone who has done research around the topic being explored. However, for this issue, I wanted to provide as complete a picture about rape myths as possible; and to do that, I felt it was important to examine rape myths through the lens of someone living within a marginalized community. I am excited to share the interview I had with Theryn Kigvamasud'Vashti from CARA (Communities Against Rape and Abuse) in Seattle, beginning on the next page. I found my conversation with her to be stirring and powerful, and hope that you will find that as well. ■

Interview with Theryn Kigvamasud'Vashti

Co-Director, Communities Against Rape and Abuse (CARA), Seattle

Interviewed by Janet Anderson, Advocacy Education Director, WCSAP

WCSAP: How would you define rape myths?

TKV: If I gave a short definition, I would say that rape myths are a set of beliefs about sexual assault that are predicated on untruths. However, one needs to look at a broader definition and understand the more complex role that rape myths serve.

That was my next question. What role do rape myths play within the context of our culture? And why are they so prevalent?

TKV: A broader definition is one that understands that rape myths serve to ensure systems of oppression. If I asked a survivor, or perhaps someone else, whom they thought they would most likely be assaulted by, they would tell me a stranger from someone outside their race. However, those in the field know that most people are likely to be assaulted by someone they know and are more often assaulted by someone within their race, with the exception of Native American women (due to colonialism). Non-Native men disproportionately rape Native women. That is to say, Native women are more often raped by white men [than by Native men]. The reasons for this have to do with the ongoing consequences of colonialism and conquest. As Andrea Smith points out in her book "Conquest: Sexual Violence and American Indian Genocide," rape was the most effective tool of colonization.

To understand rape myths fully, we have to look at where those ideas come, who benefits from perpetuating rape myths and how they are transmitted. The "who" are the purveyors of dominant culture, those who hold power and who benefit from the exploitation of marginalized people. The "how" is media: Film and television images depict and glorify violence against women in general, women of color, queer people, and people with disabilities. The reason rape myths are so prevalent in our society is because they serve to advance the agenda of a power structure that relies on exploitation as a tool to maintain power and control within institutions, policies and culture. This is something that can be seen throughout different parts in history when it was imperative for dominant culture to assert superiority over marginalized groups of people.

WCSAP: Can you give me an example of this?

TKV: One prevalent myth about rape in American popular culture is that historically black men rape white women. This myth has its roots in American slavery and later when Jim Crow legislation

was used as a justification for the lynching of nearly 5000 black people from approximately 1882 to the turn of the last century. Lynching was a tool of population control designed to terrorize Africans in America, post-American-slavery, and to halt Black prosperity. The rape of white women was often the reason law enforcement, politicians, business men and citizens gave to control the movement and success of Black people when, in reality, it was women of African decent who were truly terrorized by sexual assault by white men, which was often done as a means of providing and ensuring a labor force. During the lynching period, many Black women were raped and tortured along with their children before they themselves were hanged. So, we have rape myths that not only distort the reality of how rape has played out historically but are also designed to target the very people who are the subject of the oppression. The myth that all black men are rapists is just one example of how rape myths serve those in power. And we know that there are many other rape myths that can be deconstructed in the same manner.

WCSAP: When you spoke about how rape myths serve as justifications for violence toward targeted groups, I thought about how hard it is for people to understand the role that rape myths really play. Why do you think that is so?

TKV: I think you are right on-point and I believe that the reason it is so hard for people to accept is because it is so ingrained in American culture and transmitted so easily and quickly through our pop culture. For example, rape-myth stereotypes have also been used to criminalize marginalized people. Take the Susan Smith case [in 1994] and Charles Stuart case [in 1989]. Both relied on the mythology surrounding black men to serve each of their agendas in their attempt to escape the detection of murder and to gain national support, all of which later proved to be false. Smith, a South Carolina resident, blamed a black carjacker for her children being missing, but it was later discovered that she sank her car in a lake with her little boys still strapped into their car seats. In Boston, Stuart claimed that he and his wife, too, were attacked by a viscous black carjacker, who shot his wife to death. Like Smith, it was later discovered that he played a role in her death. In each case, black neighborhoods were terrorized when local law enforcement officers dragged black men from their living rooms at gunpoint and others were arrested in front of their families and community, all based on the words of individuals who used a well-established rape-myth stereotype to cover up their own crimes and criminalize men of color. Because popular culture is a means by which information about who we are is transmitted via broadcasting, print, through story telling, in books, songs, and through entertainment, it is easy to see the role pop culture plays in perpetuating the value of dominant culture.

WCSAP: How do rape myths play out within various institutions, such as the media?

TKV: We live in a rape culture, which means that the relationships we have with each other and as members of a society are all relationships that are predicated on a power-and-control model. And those values are embedded in the kinds of institutions we have created that serve the interest of the public good. As an example, in one of the articles that we wrote for our newsletter, we examined a commercial that ran for Nike during the Super Bowl that was known as the "Nike Chainsaw Commercial." It showed a woman who was getting ready for bed and she felt like she was being watched, and then a killer with a chainsaw busted through her home. She takes off running in her

Nike shoes through the forest, and because of her Nike shoes she was able to outrun the chainsaw killer. This was an example of society perceiving violence against women as sexy, and sexuality as violence. That commercial, along with many others, condones physical and emotional terrorism against women as the norm, which is part of the definition of "rape culture." That said, culture not only informs the way we think about sexuality and gender, it also impacts our values around commerce and politics. In terms of the experience of sexual assault, survivors report experiencing their bodies being reduced to objects, their sense of self being erased, their sense of power being subjugated, and their ability to connect with others as being disrupted. In essence, the ordeals that survivors describe are objectification, feeling diminished, and feeling isolated. These are all fundamental elements of rape culture that are perpetuated through rape myths. So not only do rape myths prevail, they actually predict the outcomes of what most rape survivors are going to experience.

WCSAP: Many survivors give some kind of meaning to their assault and, most often, the meaning they give is based on rape myths. How do you see this?

TKV: They base their meaning on what society says about rape and on the idea that individuals are responsible for what happens to them in the context of a rape culture, where violence is perpetuated as a tool of oppression. So you have a situation where many survivors say, "I could have done something about that, it was my fault," or something like, "I shouldn't have opened the door to a relative." And I wonder, when would that be a problem? In any other time, when would opening a door to a relative be a problem? Never. Yet we have a society that profits off the degradation of women, whether it's through the Nike ad or through other mediums such as some forms of hip hop, particularly the specific genre of hip hop that is served en mass to white suburban culture, which prioritizes the dehumanization of women of color. Another place where this plays out is in the courtroom. For example, I work with women who have used sex as a tool to survive. When these women are sexually assaulted, they are not only blamed for the choices they've made, but their sexual assault is expected. And if the case does go to trial or up for prosecution, most survivors don't realize that the prosecutor is working on behalf of the State and not on behalf of them personally. So it's no wonder that the women in these circumstances don't find justice through the criminal justice system because they often have a history with the criminal justice system, are not seen as "genuine victims," and have little-to-no cultural credibility. Because of these dynamics, marginalized survivors, and survivors in general, internalize messages that they are the ones who are inherently bad, they are the ones who did something wrong, and consequently carry a great deal of shame and guilt.

WCSAP: That reminds me of a study I read that examined the "real rape"–"real victim" stereotype and how only those who fit this scenario are deemed as "genuine" victims by the criminal justice system, which ultimately impacted the outcomes of the cases.

TKV: There has been a long historical understanding in marginalized communities that our bodies are perceived as rapeable. By "rapeable bodies" I mean bodies that have less cultural value and when violated there is very little (or no) public acknowledgement or outcry, because the exploitation of the victim has become normalized by the dominant culture. For example, we had a serial killer in the Northwest who preyed upon sex workers because he perceived that they would not be missed.

In other words, these women were rendered rapeable and susceptible to murder because their humanity is invisible and their bodies disposable. We see this with different groups of marginalized people according to the place they hold within the dominant culture. We know there is an under-reporting of sex crimes against queer people, there is an under-reporting of sex crimes against people with disabilities, and there is an under-reporting of sex crimes against people of African descent — not only African Americans, but African immigrants as well as other people of color. There is a gross under-reporting against immigrants from the global south because of the war on terror, homeland security, INS [Immigration and Naturalization Service] border patrols, etc. Not only this, but another reason for under-reporting is that survivors who are members of groups that are marginalized by the dominant culture often fear that they will not be served respectfully, and, because of institutional oppression (particularly within the criminal-justice system and the medical industrial complex, to name just two), survivors fear that institutions located in the dominant culture may recapitulate the objectification, de-humanization, disempowerment and isolation they felt during their interpersonal assault.

WCSAP: Rape myths definitely impact survivors. How can advocates help deconstruct these myths? I ask because I believe that helping a survivor uncover them may help them let go of the guilt and shame they carry.

TKV: I first want to say that I offer my response with a lot of humility and that I live it daily. When I hear stories from marginalized survivors, they often associate racism, sexism, homophobia and able-bodied supremacy to their story. "I was raped by this kind of man, this group of men, and their kind are dirty. Now, I hate those men and I hate their people. Also, I hate myself for trusting." So, there is a lot that is going on. There is the person who is really pissed off, hurt and trying to find something that is rational to explain what they have been through. It is challenging to make something rational when it isn't. Violence is not rational. But a survivor can feel safe if they hold on to a rape myth and say, "as long as I avoid this group of men, I will be safe." There is also a self-deprecating part of a survivors' story that is painful to hear, like, "I should have never trusted, I never should have walked home alone," "I never should have let my uncle in," "I never should have, never should have, never should have." So sometimes it is hard for survivors to hear a critique about myths when they are in the throes of anguish.

One organizational value we hold at CARA when supporting survivors of interpersonal violence is to always be mindful of the greater context of oppression, and, consequently, this informs our strategies to help increase the survivors' safety. We do this by accessing the survivors' community members who all share in wanting to build a safer community. When we support someone in the middle of disclosing the terrible things they have experienced, we make sure that we hold on to the layered critique of their experience. And we try to validate the places that are healthy and try to support them in moving beyond places where they are less so. Because most of our survivors at CARA are from marginalized communities, we try to talk about the sexual assault in the context of the group they represent. Many of our survivors represent intersections of several marginalized groups. For example, we may see a survivor who is a single-parent, "out" queer survivor living with bi-polar disorder. We continually try to support them within the context in which they have experienced the sexual assault. We help them understand that there are many places where they are visible or where their bodies are deemed prioritized, but we also help them understand that

the negative messages about them are informed by society and not about their choices. It's not about their choice to open the door, it's not about their choice to go to the store, and it's not about their choice to trust someone, but about who they are *perceived* to be when the door is opened, when they walk to the store, when they are trusting relationships that will not harm them. Sometimes people are not able to move through the layers of trauma from an assault, so the best form of support is to just continue to listen until the rape myths they've internalized are disclosed.

WCSAP: Since rape myths are internalized by all of us to some extent, I believe it's important for those in the field to take an inventory of our own beliefs and attitudes about rape myths on a regular basis. What do you think about that?

TKV: We definitely have an obligation to continually take stock, particularly because we are public servants. We cannot bring people the best product, which is support in the various ways that our organizations do, if we are not constantly challenging ourselves. And there are many ways in which we can do this.

For example, sometimes this support may take the form of working with day laborers who are being accused of sexual harassment. There is an issue occurring in a community that we are working with. Assumptions were made that some Latino day laborers were sexually harassing women, resulting in some community resistance to a new day labor organization relocating to a particular neighborhood. However, it turns out that another group of men were actually doing the harassing and were not connected to the day-labor organization that is relocating their offices. As an anti-rape, anti-racism organization, when people came to us to help prevent the day-laborer group from moving to their neighborhood, it was incumbent upon us to educate them about the differences between arming oneself with information about sexual harassment, in general, to increase a community's safety, and the racism that was occurring because the group of men they were targeting and making assumptions about are men of color. CARA helped by educating fearful community members about sexual harassment in general and by stressing that it is not an issue specific to only men of color. Often it is the work we do within the political arena or within the community where we can set examples of what self-reflection can be. Reflecting on our own internalization can take many forms. It can be taking stock of one's self, it be done when working one-on-one with a survivor, it can be reflected within our organizational values and strategies, and it can be done when we work with a community that relies on our services.

WCSAP: Is there anything else you would like to add before we close?

TKV: I want to say that it is really critical to honor all survivors equally. I understand that our society places value on one group over another or some groups of people over others. I certainly have more privilege over a sex worker who uses drugs and alcohol and who has been arrested multiple times, and, as a woman of African decent, there are many places in our culture where I hold little to no privilege at all. At times, because of education or class privilege, or my position at work, I hold more institutional power than a poor uneducated woman who is white. However, my people do not have the power to implement any kind of prejudices that we may have on an institutional level. That is the big difference. So, we have to honor all survivors where they are and truly believe that they are as worthy of our services and advocacy, and are also truly worthy of safety, as anyone else. And our organizations and community partners must be making this message clear. Sometimes our partners are prosecutors and law enforcement; sometimes they are pastors and merchants.

Wherever we are, it is our responsibility to increase the safety of survivors by advocating for them on an institutional level, along with our community partners who also have institutional power, and at the grassroots level where many marginalized survivors get support. It is one thing for me to tell a survivor that she is not responsible for her assault; but that message can be erased when she goes to church on Sunday and hears the pastor speak about the lasciviousness of women. That is hard to battle. So in order to support the individual, we also have to work with their community to help educate everyone so that we are all saying the same message. What can be challenging is that, at times, funders struggle to understand the role community can play and how to measure the success of organizing communities to address sexual violence. We've been asked things like, "What do you mean? How is a community meeting going to reduce sexual assault? Can you measure it?" Our answer is, "I may not be able to measure it the way you want in terms of seeing numbers of people served, but I can certainly measure it when I hear a survivor tell me she finally believes me when I tell her that the rape was not her fault." I can measure it when she has built a network of supporters to increase her safety, and when she recognizes that being a survivor of sexual assault from a marginalized community means being creative and strategic about safety. I can also measure whether she is getting the same message from institutions that don't prioritize her humanity and have impeded her access to safety. To me, these things make all the difference in the world.

WCSAP: Theryn, thank you so much for taking the time to have this conversation with me, and I hope our readers find your analysis of rape myths and rape culture helpful in their efforts to end sexual violence in all communities.

Theryn Kigvamasud'Vashti is the Co-Director of Communities Against Rape and Abuse (CARA) in Seattle. Theryn has been organizing for social change around sexual assault, economic injustice and the death penalty for nearly 16 years. She has trained at the Center for Third World Organizing and has served on the steering committees of the Seattle-Washington Coalition to Abolish the Death Penalty and the African American Task Force Against Domestic and Sexual Violence. Previously, she served as a board member with People of Color Against AIDS Network. Currently, she serves on the steering committee of The Committee On Women, Population and the Environment. Theryn can be reached at 206-322-4856 or theryn@cara-seattle.org. ■

Effects of Clothing and Behavior on Perceptions Concerning an Alleged Date Rape

Johnson, Kim, K.; & Lee, MiYoung
Family and Consumer Sciences Research Journal, Vol. 28, 2000, pgs. 332-357

A predominantly strong myth surrounding sexual assault is the assumption that "provocative" clothing is directly linked to a higher risk of rape, and, consequently, leads to higher levels of victim blaming. This perception is particularly strong within a stranger-rape scenario. However, less is known about what impact clothing has within the context of a dating scenario. Past research examining myths regarding how clothing affects rape was often done in isolation of the victim's behavior; therefore, this study sought to explore the relationship between a rape victim's clothing, her behavior and the participants' gender on perceptions surrounding an alleged date rape.

Three hundred and sixty-eight (368) college students participated, 160 males and 208 females. Students read vignettes that described both parties' versions of the date. However, Amy's (the victim's vignettes included manipulated accounts of herself. For example, in one account she described her clothing and behavior as "provocative" (as wearing tight clothes, low-cut sweater, pulled him closer, rubbing and kissing) while in the other account she described her clothing and behavior as "non-provocative" (wore ankle-length pleated skirt, sweater, told him she wasn't interested in sex, wanted to leave after awhile). After reading the vignettes, participants were asked to rank how believable each party was in their description of the date, whether Amy behaved in a way that indicated she was interested in sex, whether Mike thought sexual advances of any kind would be welcomed, whether Mike was justified in his behavior, whether a rape occurred at all, whether Amy should report, etc. Additionally, male students were asked if they ever forced or tried to force a date for sex, and female students were asked if they've ever been forced or almost forced to have sex on a date.

Contrary to other findings, the results indicated that victim behavior significantly influenced participants' perceptions or attributions of blame much more than the clothing worn, and impacted whether they considered the event a rape. In fact, the effects of clothing had little to almost no significance. The authors theorize that including the descriptions of Amy's behavior in the vignettes potentially diminished the impact of clothing as a point of focus. They point out however, that when asked to explain their answers, a few brought up the victim's clothing because it signaled to them that Amy was interested in sexual intercourse that night because of what she was wearing.

The notion of non-provocative behavior was significantly linked to higher levels of believability and lower attributes of blame by both males and females. Non-provocative behavior was also tied significantly by both males and females to the participants calling the event a rape more often, in believing she should report the rape to the police, that Mike was not justified in his actions, etc. Conversely, when Amy described her behavior as provocative, she was considered less believable, participants believed she wanted to have sexual intercourse to a greater extent, didn't view the incident as a rape, didn't believe she should contact law enforcement, and that Mike was justified in his actions.

When comparing the males to females, the males, (particularly if the behavior was provocative), were less likely to call the event rape, believed more often that Amy wanted to have sex, and that Mike was justified in his behavior. Males also ranked Mike's believability higher than the females. While the study did find these

differences, they were not statistically significant. They also found that both males and females used similar rationales for their perceptions, "suggesting that sex differences in perceptions reflect differences in degree rather than absolute differences in perceptions and how claims of date rape should be handled." (pg. 353)

Of the 106 males who participated, three reported they had forced a date for sex and 7 reported that they tried to force a date in the past. Twenty-three (23) women reported being forced and 71 reported almost being forced. Interestingly, the women who had been forced or almost forced were less certain that a rape occurred, believed that Mike thought sexual advances of any kind would be welcomed, and were less certain that Mike would be found guilty.

While the findings in this study were contrary to what was expected (that clothing would have an impact on participant perceptions), it was important in showing just how much of a role a rape victim's behavior plays in influencing perceptions, attributions of blame, whether she will be believed, and whether one will even label the event a rape. Consequences for these deeply embedded rape myths have a direct impact on victim's lives. It impacts the ways criminal cases do and don't get prosecuted, it has an impact on jury decisions, in societal and media responses to rape, and ultimately to how a victim can heal. ■

Beyond Belief? Police, Rape and Women's Credibility

Jordan, Jan *Criminology and Criminal Justice*, Vol. 4, 2004, pgs. 29-59

Victims of sexual assault have long struggled with the perception that in the eyes of law enforcement, the majority of rape cases are false and lack credibility. Using both qualitative and quantitative data drawn from police sexual assault files, this research analyzes factors that most significantly influenced police officers' views of sexual assault complaints.

A review was conducted of 164 police files that not only never proceeded to trial but didn't proceed far in the police investigation process. The author first outlines the historical context which has given rise to the high rates of attrition and belief that sexual assault cases are false throughout history and within different countries. Additionally, she also outlines that such myths as the "real rape" and "real victim" stereotype in which individuals want victims to conform to certain sets of behaviors such as crying and being hysterical influence police decision regarding credibility and indicate that other factors such as moral judgments impact decision making and investigative processes.

Of the 164 cases reviewed, three-fourths included rape allegations, with the remainder indicating other sexual-violence offenses. Eleven involved multiple offenders, and/or victims, resulting in a sample size of 181 offenders and 166 victims. 60% were aged 25 and under, and 84% showed that the victim and perpetrator were acquainted.

The files were divided into categories:

1. Genuine – (n=34 or 21%) – police indicating clear legitimacy.
2. Possibly True or False – (n=62 or 38%). Police were unsure or it was impossible to determine.
3. False – (n=55 (33%) – police indicating the victim is telling a lie and halted investigation.
4. Victim said case was false (n=13 or 8%).

Factors that were identified as influencing decisions regarding credibility included: drugs/alcohol, delayed reporting, previous consensual sex, previous rape or abuse, psychiatric disturbance, perceived immorality, intellectual

impairment, previous false rape allegations and concealment during interview.

The results indicated that a victim under the influence of drugs and alcohol accounted for the highest rate of believing that the case was not credible. This occurred for ½ of all files and only 1/5th perceived as genuine while 72% were perceived that the victim contributed to their own rape. Delayed reporting and previous consensual sex was also linked to credibility issues with 86% being viewed as suspicious. If the police felt the victim was concealing any information, the results indicated that 0 cases were viewed as genuine, 40% were identified as possible and 60% being viewed as absolutely false. 1/3 of the cases involved victims who had psychiatric issues or some form of intellectual impairment. Out of this group, only 13% were regarded as genuine. When it came to subjective assessment of perceived morality, 74% of the police files indicated that they were unsure of the credibility or believed the victim to be false.

The researcher also reviewed the cases to determine what other items the police wrote in the files that informed their decision about credibility. If the victim had a physical injury and appeared to be hysterical and crying, they were deemed to be genuine.

The study of these police files clearly demonstrates that police rely on stereotypes that involve subjective evaluations and interpretation and reveals a dominant mindset of suspicion which ultimately underlined police response. The results of this study show that overall, pervasive attitudes of mistrust continue to be evident in police processing of sexual assault cases. Unfortunately, we know that this suspicion originates within our social environment that is characterized by a history of sexism and distrust of women. Those working in the anti-rape movement need to recognize and understand these factors which influence law enforcement's decision-making and investigative processes so as to develop stronger working relationships and educational programs aimed at reducing these myths so that sexual assault survivors who wish to seek justice from the criminal justice system can do so without fear of reprisal, judgment and disbelief. ■

Rape-Accepting Attitudes: Precursors To, or Consequences Of, Forced Sex

Lanier, Cynthia, A. *Violence Against Women*, Vol. 7, 2001, pgs. 876-885

Research has documented that sexual violence is a significant problem among adolescents. For example, one study found that 20% of male and female high-school students indicated being victims of forced sex, and more girls (26%) than boys (11%) reported being victimized. To reduce this high incidence, it is believed that changing rape-supportive attitudes is an important strategy for prevention programs because rape-myth acceptance has been shown to be associated with coercive sexual behaviors. When examining rape-supportive attitudes, researchers also theorized that rapists use them after the act to deny and excuse their behavior ,indicating a potential multi-dimensional function of rape-myth attitudes: 1) predicting initiation of forced sex, and 2) rape-accepting attitudes resulting from perpetration. No prior studies were identified that measured the relationship of forced sex and rape-supportive attitudes in males. This was the first study of its kind to examine both dimensions.

This study was conducted as part of an evaluation of an adolescent dating violence prevention program and included 14 middle and high schools in rural North Carolina. Adolescent males were assigned into either a treatment condition (exposed to both school and community dating-violence prevention

programs that focused on changing rape-myth attitudes), or a controlled condition (exposed to community-only activities). 1,965 or 96% participated in the baseline survey and one-month follow-up, and 851 who completed the one-year follow-up survey were used for final data analysis. The age range was 11 to 17years and the majority (73.6%) were white.

The authors hypothesized that: 1) acceptance of rape myths would predict forced sex by adolescent males, and 2) acceptance of rape myths results from perpetration of forced sex. The "forced sex" measures were determined by asking how many times they had forced a date to have sex or forced a date to do something sexual they did not want to. Rape-acceptance attitudes were assessed by asking "how strongly" they agreed with nine items — 0 (zero) for strongly disagree, and 3 for strongly agree. A composite variable was created by summing and averaging the nine items, with 0 (zero) representing the minimum possible score and 27 representing the maximum. The lower the score, the less indicative of rape-supportive attitudes.

Of the dating male adolescents, 31.4% reported forcing a dating partner to do something sexual they did not want to do, and 2.9% (n=25) forced a partner to have sex. Those who perpetrated forced sex scored a mean average of 6.10 on rape- myth acceptance attitudes, while those who did not perpetrate scored a mean of 5.06. Significant differences were also found when the mean attitude baseline score was compared between those who reported perpetration and those who did not. Those who had 5 more points in rape-supportive attitudes were 1.9 times more likely to commit forced sex in the future. Thus, hypothesis 1 was supported. However, males who perpetrated at baseline did not have significantly higher rape-supportive attitude scores at follow up than those who did not perpetrate forced sex. Thus, hypothesis 2 was not supported — acceptance of rape myths did not result from perpetration of forced sex, but did predict it.

While citing some limitations such as reluctance to report due to fear, and unclear definitions, the study shows that prevention programs that aim to diminish rape-supportive attitudes in males can be effective in reducing forced sex and, therefore, can be considered promising. To determine reliability and sustainability, more longitudinal studies are needed. ■

Women's Hostility Toward Women and Rape and Sexual Harassment Myths

Cowan, Gloria *Violence Against Women*, Vol. 6., 2000, pgs. 238-246

While most sexual assault perpetrators are men and more research indicates that males strongly hold to rape myths such as "she asked for it," "her clothing caused the rape," etc., women also contribute to sexual violence by supporting victim-blaming and other myths in rape and sexual-harassment cases. The purpose of this study was to examine the association of women's hostility toward women and their support of rape and sexual-harassment myths. The following three beliefs were examined: 1) victim precipitation — female victims provoke rape, 2) male sexuality — men cannot control their sex drive, and 3) male pathology — rape is caused by mentally ill men. In addition, the belief that sexual harassment victims are responsible for their harassment was also examined. The authors expected to find that women's hostility toward women would be related to beliefs of all four rape and sexual harassment myths.

One-hundred-fifty-five (155) college women participated in the study and were given questionnaires to complete at their own convenience. The measures included a modified version of a Hostility Toward

Women Scale, Perceived Causes of Rape Scale, Sexual Harassment Myth Scale, and an Anger Inventory.

The results indicated that women's hostility toward women was positively associated with their beliefs in all areas, with the belief in male pathology as being the strongest myth, followed by the myth of male sexuality, and, lastly, the rape myth of female precipitation. Sexual harassment victim-blame also yielded a significant correlation. Results also demonstrated that age was significantly related to levels of hostility and beliefs in the rape myths of female precipitation and male sexuality, but not to male pathology and sexual harassment victim-blame — older college women were less likely to believe that female victims precipitate rape or that rape is caused by the male sex drive.

The findings of this study demonstrate that women who hold negative stereotypes about women are hostile toward women and are more likely to believe that victims of rape and sexual harassment precipitate their own rape and harassment. They are also more likely to believe that rape is caused by male's sexual drive, and that rapists are mentally ill.
Overall, the findings indicated that the women who had the tendency to blame victims had a predisposition to dislike and distrust women in general; had lower self-esteem, less happiness and satisfaction with their own lives; and were more emotionally dependent on men. It is important to understand why some women participate in blaming female victims of sexual assault and harassment. This understanding is necessary in order to develop educational and mental-health program strategies that increase levels of self-worth and personal empowerment in an effort to decrease victim blaming and help prevent women's devaluation of other women. ■

The Impact of Past Sexual Experiences on Attributions of Responsibility for Rape

Lichtenstein, Bronwen
Social Science and Medicine, Vol. 60, 2005, pg. 701-714

The authors laid out the argument that individuals tend to assign blame for rape based on two factors: identification with the victim (if previously victimized, they would assign less blame), and how clearly they adhere to rape myths. To test this theory, the study compared the responses to a victim of rape by participants who fell into three categories: 1) unacknowledged victims — those who were clearly rape victims but who didn't perceive their experience as rape, 2) acknowledged victims — those who believe they were raped, and 3) those who were never raped. They hypothesized that those who were previously victimized would assign less blame to a rape victim, and that those who identified as a rape survivor would view the assault more often as rape.

One-hundred-fifty-seven (157) female students aged 18-49 were given a sexual assault scenario that was carefully constructed to ensure that participants would relate to and believe the scenario. Additional scales included a ten-item questionnaire about the scenario, a Rape Myth Acceptance Scale with a higher score indicating a higher degree of rape-myth acceptance, and a Sexual Experience Survey designed to assess prior victimization.

Of the 157, 21 fell into the acknowledged victim category, 21 into the unacknowledged category, and 115 into the non-victim category. Two factors emerged in assigning blame: 1) expectation of sexual content (for example, "Brian should have stopped," "Brian should expect sex," "Brian should have stopped the first time," "Lisa wanted sex") and criminality of event ("Brian should be held accountable," "Lisa could have stopped Brian," "Lisa should have been more insistent saying no").

Although the authors predicted that previously victimized participants would assign less blame and those who self-identify as a survivor would view the assault as rape more often than other participants, neither hypothesis was supported. Unacknowledged victims attributed the highest levels of responsibility toward the rape victim, followed by the non-victims. Acknowledged victims attributed the least responsibility but the levels were not statistically significant. Additionally, while both categories of victims were more likely to believe the assault was rape, again, figures were not statistically significant to demonstrate support for the hypothesis. Only the subscale of Adversarial Sex Beliefs seemed to be a factor in determining attributions of blame. Based on the results of this study, a woman's sexual history may not be a factor in predicting how she views sexual assault by others. What did emerge as a significant factor was that those who were more accepting of adversarial sex beliefs believed less strongly that legal routes should be explored, viewed the victim as having more control over the situation, attributed more responsibility to the victim and were less likely to believe a rape occurred.

Sexual assault educators need to focus their efforts on debunking rape myths along with discussing adversarial sex beliefs. As the authors noted, other programs that focused on this combination were particularly successful in decreasing rates of victim blame rather than just focusing on debunking rape myths alone. ■

Attitude Toward Rape Victims: Effects of Gender and Professional Status

White, Bradley, H. & Kurpius, Sharon E. Robinson *Journal of Interpersonal Violence*, Vol. 14, 1999, pgs. 989-995

Researchers have demonstrated that gender differences impact how people views rape and whom they hold responsible for it. Less research has been conducted examining the relationship between rape-myth acceptance and professional status. The purpose of this research is to explore the relationship of attitudes toward rape victims along both gender and professional-status lines. Participants were recruited from a large Health Maintenance Organization and college classes and divided into three distinct groups:

1. PROFESSIONAL — mental health professionals (22 males and 23 females) ranging in age from 30 to 65, with a median level of 16 years' experience.
2. COUNSELOR TRAINEES — (18 males, 60 females) enrolled in a 60-semester- hour Masters of Counseling course.
3. UPPER-CLASS GRADUATES — (120 males, 54 females) recruited from general studies classes.

Participants were given questionnaires that asked about demographics along with the Attitude Toward Rape Victim Scale (ARVS), which is a 25-item questionnaire designed to assess attitudes about blame, resistance, credibility, denigration, responsibility, triviality and deservingness. A higher score on the scale indicates more negative attitudes toward rape victims.

The results indicated that, overall, male professionals held more negative attitudes about rape than female professionals, male undergraduates from the general studies population also held more negative attitudes than undergraduate females from the general studies population. There were no differences found between male and female counselor trainees and there were no differences based on age.

Regarding the scores on the ARVS, men more

strongly endorsed myths that women can resist rape if they try hard enough, believed they were more responsible because of their dress and actions (such as going out alone and where they choose to work). Additionally, more men believed that if a woman did get raped, she should blame herself.

Regarding profession, undergraduates held more negative attitudes than graduate counselor trainees, who, in turn, held more negative attitudes than mental-health professionals. The most negative attitudes were held by male undergraduates, and female mental-health professionals held the least negative attitudes. Gender differences between male and female undergraduates were not found among graduate counselor trainees. While the differences between the male and female mental-health professionals were not significant, they did find that males who had worked well with rape victims in the past still held more negative beliefs and attitudes about rape victims than female mental-health professionals.

This study clearly demonstrated that significant differences exist when examining attitudes and rape-myth acceptance through the lenses of gender and professional status. While males clearly demonstrated more negative attitudes in all categories and across all professions, — particularly as they relate to blame, resistance, clothing, behavior and the belief that a victim should blame herself — one needs to view these results cautiously because rape myths are an institutionalized phenomenon that is widespread and believed by individuals from all walks of life, contributing to the rape culture in which we live. ■

Clergy's Attitudes and Attributions of Blame Toward Female Rape Victims

Sheldon, Jane, P., & Parent, Sandra, L. *Violence Against Women*, Vol. 8, 2002, pgs. 233-256

Victims of sexual assault report that clergy are the least likely people they would tell if assaulted, and that they believe clergy would be the least helpful due to their potentially negative attitudes. Prior to this research, the authors indicate that no research had been conducted examining attitudes of clergy members toward rape victims. The current study investigated clergy's religious fundamentalism and levels of sexism, with the expectation of finding high levels of victim blame and negative attitudes toward rape victims.

Two-hundred-fourteen (214) clergy were recruited to complete a questionnaire. 93% were male and 63% were aged 40–50 years old. The clergy were typically married, white, and held a college degree. 75% reported prior counseling of rape victims. Measurements included the Attitude Toward Rape Victims Scale, which is a 25-item scale designed to measure such things as credibility, victim responsibility and deservingness. Other measures included scales to determine levels of fundamentalism and sexist attitudes that identified overt and more subtle forms of sexism, such as lack of empathy toward women's issues and denial of discrimination.

The clergy were presented with three rape scenarios that depicted rape within the context of marriage, dating and acquaintanceship. Each scenario described a situation that would meet the legal definition of sexual assault. Certain details in the scenario were purposely left ambiguous, such as amount of force, clothes worn, behavior, types of resistance, etc. Clergy were asked to identify whether a rape occurred or not.

Results indicated that those having more fundamental belief systems and stronger sexist attitudes assigned more negative views toward rape victims and demonstrated unfavorable attitudes. Regarding the three types of rape (marital, date, acquaintance), the highest level of blame was assigned to acquaintance rape, then date rape, then marital rape victims, which was not an expected outcome. The authors predicted clergy would view a sexual assault occurring within the context of marriage as the least likely scenario to be considered rape.

The clergy were also asked to outline their reasons for not considering a particular scenario to be a rape or not. While citing various reasons within the context of marital rape, the most cited answer had to do with that the fact that the victim was forced to do something she/he didn't want to do (of the 67 who called it rape, 53 gave this reason). ■

Rape Myth Acceptance and Rape Proclivity: Expected Dominance Versus Expected Arousal as Mediators in Acquaintance Rape Situations

Chiroro, Patrick; Bohner, Gerd; Tendaly, Viki; & Jarvis, Christopher
Journal of Interpersonal Violence, Vol. 19, 2004, pgs. 427-442

Research has shown that rape-myth acceptance is positively correlated to self-reports of rape proclivity. Furthermore, studies have been conducted in an effort to identify other motivations for sexual violence. This study investigated the relationship between rape-myth acceptance, rape proclivity and whether the anticipated sexual arousal or the anticipated sexual dominance served as the primary motivations.

Using a cross-cultural analysis, the authors collected data from three different studies. Study 1 included 113 male students from Germany, Study 2 included 114 males from England, and Study 3 included 83 males from Zimbabwe.

Participants were given questionnaires that measured rape-myth acceptance and rape proclivity, and measures to identify other potential motivations for sexual assault. To measure rape-myth acceptance, participants were given a scale consisting of 20 questions (such as, "many women want to be raped").
To measure rape proclivity and other motivations, participants were given five scenarios depicting a date rape and were asked to imagine themselves in the same position as the male. Questions regarding expectations of arousal included, "how sexually aroused would you have felt." Questions regarding rape proclivity included, "how likely were you to have behaved differently." Questions regarding expectations of sexual dominance included, "how much have you enjoyed getting your way in this situation."
In all three studies, results demonstrated that only the anticipated enjoyment of sexual dominance — and *not* anticipation of expected sexual arousal — proved to be significantly correlated to rape proclivity and strong beliefs in rape-myth acceptance. In other words, those exhibiting a higher proclivity to rape were more likely to endorse stronger stereotypical views of sexual violence, along with possessing a desire to sexually dominate women. These findings support feminist theory that argues that rape serves as an expression of male dominance over women within our broader culture, rather than being fueled by sexual desire.

Citing some limitations, such as the fact that only "anticipated expectations" were measured, the study does have implications in understanding male sexual violence. The authors suggest that educational interventions aimed at minimizing men's tendency to associate sex with power may be a worthwhile strategy. ■

The Role of "Real Rape" and "Real Victim" Stereotypes in the Police Reporting Practices of Sexually Assaulted Women

Du Mont, Janice; Miller, Kren-Lee; & Myhr, Terri *Violence Against Women*, Vol. 9, 2003, pgs. 466-486

Although initiatives have been aimed at improving the legal treatment of sexual assault victims, research indicates that sexual assault is still one of the most under-reported crimes with an estimate of only 6% reporting to law enforcement. Victims have a variety of reasons for not reporting their assaults, including the secondary victimization experienced by being blamed, discredited, denigrated or not being deemed a "real rape" survivor by the criminal justice system. Rape myths deeply embedded in our culture have codified the belief that a "real rape" is a "*violent, forceful penetration committed by a stranger during a blitz attack in a public place with the victim portrayed as a morally upright white woman who is physically injured while resisting." (pg. 469).*

The purpose of this study was to examine the police reporting practices of sexually assaulted women who presented to a hospital-based sexual assault center. The aim was to assess to what extent the reported cases were imbued with the "real rape, real victim" myth and to determine whether women who were not deemed "genuine victims" were less likely to report their assaults to the police.

Data was collected from 187 victims of sexual assault. Information collected included demographics, health and abuse history, presentation information, assailant characteristics, assault characteristics, and physical and forensic findings. The research team then was able to review corresponding police reports to determine police and court outcomes. The data collected from the police files included police reporting levels, police action, prosecution action and court outcomes. The variables that were selected for examination included those that pertain to the "real rape, real victim" scenario described above to determine whether this stereotype impacted survivors' decisions to report.

The results indicated that the women ranged in age from 16–61; 31% were women of color; 71% were unemployed; and 70% reported previous sexual-assault victimization as an adult. In addition, 40.4% reported some mental-health difficulty and almost half (49.7%) reported drinking prior to the assault. Of the 187 cases, 50% reported to the police.

While the researchers expected that those who fit the "real rape, real victim" profile would have a higher rate of reporting, the results did not support that hypothesis. Statistically significant variables that were correlated to police reporting included age at presentation, multiple assaults, relationship to the assailant, the presence of a weapon, the use of physical force and the presence of observable injuries.

Women who did not resemble the mythology of a "real rape" victim were as likely to report, thus rejecting the classic stereotype, which was considered a positive finding. Women of color, those previously assaulted, those reporting mental-health problems and those drinking prior to the assault were equally represented among reported and unreported cases. The authors suggest that more women who have been traditionally viewed as not being genuine victims are rejecting that stereotype and seeking more criminal justice redress.

However, the data also demonstrated that those with severe physical injuries and those who were coerced or forced (as evidenced by torn clothing, cuts, etc.) were more likely to report because they believed they were more likely to be believed, as

force has been shown to facilitate prosecution and conviction. These two conditions hold fast to the "real rape" scenario.

In sum, this study showed that having experienced sexual assault in any form, regardless of the victim's personal characteristics, proved to be a more significant factor in reporting than being the perfect, mythic victim. The authors suggest that perhaps the internalized moral worthiness ascribed to the general victim becomes less important in the presence of overt violence. Although the study did find only limited correlations between reporting and the "real rape, real victim" stereotype, further research is still needed to clarify the relationship between reporting, rape myths and assault characteristics. ■

Investigation of Attitude Change in a Rape-Prevention Program

Johansson-Love Jill & Geer, James, H. *Journal of Interpersonal Violence*, Vol. 18, 2003, pgs. 84-99

The purpose of this study was to examine whether a rape-prevention program that utilized a specific videotape would reduce rape-myth acceptance levels of college males, and to determine whether participants who held strong negative attitudes would be able to remember the information learned at several different intervals. The study sought to examine these attitudes among college males due to the high rates of sexual violence on college campuses. The authors expected that 1) there would be greater attitude change for those receiving the intervention, and 2) that participants with high agreement on rape-myth acceptance and low accessibility (which determines how strongly one holds a belief) were going to have the greatest change.

Participants were 151 males aged 18–39 who were divided into two groups: the experimental group vs. the control group. The experimental group was given a pamphlet containing rape information and the experimental video that discussed rape myths, the effects of rape on the victim, etc. The control group received a so-called sex-talk pamphlet, which contained information about safer sex, and a video on STDs. All participants were also given a questionnaire that examined levels of rape-myth acceptance and an attitude accessibility scale, which measured how strongly they held their beliefs.

The results indicated that those in the experimental group, who had the sexual-assault pamphlet and video, experienced a *significantly greater effect on reducing previously held rape myths* both at the immediate and two-week interval check-in, which demonstrated an ability to recall the information, thus supporting hypothesis #1. However, hypothesis #2 was not supported in that those who held the strongest levels of rape- myth acceptance and low accessibility levels (how strong the beliefs were), did *not* make the greatest change in their rape-myth acceptance levels.

Overall, using the video and rape information pamphlets as part of a rape prevention program for college males to reduce rape-myth acceptance was shown to be an effective strategy. ■

WCSAP Library Resources

TRANSFORMING A RAPE CULTURE, Edited by Emilee Buckwald, Pamela R. Fletcher, Martha Roth
Milkweed Editions, 1998 [revised in 2005]
#130.buc.trans
A groundbreaking work that seeks nothing less than fundamental cultural changes: the transformation of basic attitudes about power, gender, race and sexuality. 37 extraordinary writers unite to create a sourcebook of visions for a future without rape, strategies to get us there and programs for action to end sexual violence.

RAPE IS ...
Cambridge Documentary Films, 2002
#130.cam.repei
This half-hour documentary video explores the meaning and consequences of rape. It looks at rape from a global and historical perspective, focusing on domestic cultural conditions that contribute to a rape culture.

RAPE: MYTHS AND REALITY
Signature Productions, 1991
#130.sig.rapem
This video explores the mythologies and the facts surrounding rape.

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