Rape Myths

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Brownmiller (1975) and Burt (1980) defined a rape myth as a set of persistent and widespread beliefs and attitudes held about rape, despite them being false, that contribute to the hostility towards victims and ultimately, victim blaming.

Rape myths include beliefs about the victim's character, appearance and behaviour, the motivations and behaviour of the offender and the situational factors surrounding the offence such as the time of day, area, method and impact on the victim (Burt, 1980; Brownmiller, 1975; Sleath, 2011).

In early work, Burt (1980) presented that over half of respondents agreed with the item 'In the majority of rapes, the victim was promiscuous or had a bad reputation'. The same proportion of respondents agreed that '50% or more of rapes are only reported as rape because the woman is trying to get back at the man, she was angry with or was trying to cover up an illegitimate pregnancy'.

As the measurement of rape myth acceptance (RMA) developed, Payne, Lonsway, & Fitzgerald (1999) presented the Illinois Rape Myth Acceptance Scale (IRMAS) which further categorized rape myths into seven main types of female rape myth:

1. She asked for it
2. It wasn't really rape
3. He didn't mean to
4. She wanted it
5. She liked it
6. Rape is a trivial event
7. Rape is a deviant event

In 2011, McMahon & Farmer updated the IRMAS to present four types of rape myths about women:

1. She asked for it
2. He didn't mean to
3. It wasn't really rape
4. She lied

How Rape Myths Work

When a number of rape myths come together (such as the victim should have injuries, the victim was attacked by a stranger, the victim did not do anything to cause the assault, the victim was not drunk and was dressed modestly, the victim immediately reported the incident) they form a false stereotypical rape against which the general public, authorities and victims themselves, compare their experiences (Kahn, Mathie, & Torgler, 1994; Ryan, 1988; Sleath, 2011).

When a rape or sexual assault experience falls outside of this stereotypical rape, it can lead to the victim being blamed or not believed at all. In fact, the greater the stereotypical belief of the observer, the more responsibility attributed to the victim and less responsibility to the perpetrator (Koppelaar, Lange, & van de Velde, 1997). This effect is also seen in women who have been subjected to rape, who use the same set of rape stereotypes to compare their own experience against to make a decision about whether to report (Campbell et al., 2011; Mont et al., 2003).

Evidence suggests that rape myths operate in different ways for different people. Men tend to use rape myths to excuse or minimise sexual violence, but women tend to use rape myths to deny their personal vulnerability (Heath et al., 2011; Sleath, 2011). Whilst many rape myths include direct victim blaming about the appearance, behaviour or character of the victim, others are focused on broader attitudes to sexual violence, attitudes towards women as a class of people or attitudes and beliefs that excuse or sympathise with the perpetrator (Payne et al., 1999; Sleath, 2011). Therefore, not all rape myths are related to blaming women for rape.

Who Accepts Rape Myths?

Studies have found that a third of the UK general public sample believed a woman was to blame if she was raped whilst drunk, believed that a woman behaving in a flirtatious way was responsible for being raped and believed that a woman was responsible for being raped if she failed to say 'no' clearly enough (Amnesty International, 2005). A drop from a half to a third could be presented as a significant decrease in acceptance from the eighties and Vonderhaar & Carmody (2015) have suggested that such a drop is due to an increase in education and an increase in awareness of rape and sexual assault.

However, in a study in which undergraduate students gave feedback on the IRMAS items and suggested changes to update the items and make them more realistic, McMahon and Farmer (2011) found that 53% of the students agreed that the actions of the woman led to her being raped. In the UK, The Fawcett Society (2017) found that 34% of women and 38% of men agreed that women are at least partially to blame for rape.

Societal and Individual Impacts of Rape Myths and Rape Myth Acceptance

The acceptance of societal myths surrounding rape has been shown to increase blaming of the victim for their experiences, by positioning women as the cause of rape (Frese et al., 2004; Golge et al., 2003; Sleath, 2011). Johnson (1997) found that a significantly higher proportion of men than women endorsed rape myths that stated that most rapes could be prevented if women didn't provoke them and if women didn't secretly want to be raped (Sleath, 2011).

Studies have shown that when women absorb and accept rape myths and stereotypes, they are more likely to victim blame and more likely to self-blame, often citing common rape myths and stereotypes as their reasons for blaming themselves or not reporting their experience to the police (Woodhams and Sleath, 2012).

However, Payne (1999) has also argued that the acceptance of rape myths by women who may not have been subjected to rape or sexual assault actually serves to reduce feelings of vulnerability to future sexual violence by reinforcing stereotypical messages of how, why and who rape happens to so women can make decisions or take action to attempt to 'avoid' rape and sexual assault by not behaving or acting in the way of previous stereotypical and largely mythical victims.

For example, the large amount of mass media stories of women being attacked in dark places alone could have led to the common and frequent message given to women about never walking home alone – a message that is less likely to be given to men. There is also evidence that rape myths affect the disclosure and reporting decisions of the individual. When women are subjected to rapes that conform to the widely accepted rape stereotype that includes injuries and physical violence, they are much more likely to identify as a victim of rape and are seven times more likely to report their experience to the police (Du Mont, Miller & Myhr, 2003; Clay-Warner & Burt, 2005).

Along the same lines, when women are raped by a stranger, they are much more likely to identify that event as rape and report it to the police (Campbell et al., 2001). This can be taken as evidence that the acceptance of rape myths appears to affect the identification of the event as a sexual offence. Whether the woman identifies as having been raped or not appears to be closely related to how high their levels of rape myth acceptance are, meaning that the higher their acceptance of rape myths and rape stereotypes, the less likely they are to identify the event as a rape (Peterson & Muehlenhard, 2004). They are also more likely to blame themselves for the assault whilst taking away the responsibility from the perpetrator and refocusing on their own actions, behaviours and personal qualities (Harned, 2005).

This could be presented as a lifelong process of being exposed to rape myths, rape stereotypes and victim blaming messages that, in the first instance, give women erroneous beliefs and actions to take in order to convince themselves that they can stay safe if only they do not act, dress, speak or live in particular ways. In addition, they have learned throughout this same lifelong process of exposure to only very specific types of stereotypical rapes, that there are a number of criteria that must be fulfilled for their experience to be a 'real rape', and only when they are certain that they have been fulfilled, will they identify as having been raped and then report that rape to the police.

The increase in self-blame when levels of rape myth acceptance are high is likely to be related to the confusion that would be caused when a woman is subjected to abuse or rape but not all of those criteria are fulfilled or when a woman is subjected to what she thinks might have been rape but perceives that her character or behaviours led to her own assault based on the rape stereotypes she has learned her whole life. That argument is based on rape myths being fairly subtle and women transforming rape myths into victim blaming of their own volition but actually, there is no need for them to have done this themselves. As it has been shown in the section on mass media, women have been presented with overt victim blaming statements and explanations for rape and sexual assault from many different outlets during her life.

The relationship between rapes that do not conform to the 'perfect victim/violent rape' template and the blaming of the female victim is well documented and can commonly follow most reports of a rape or sexual assault of a woman in the mass media. Therefore, it is sensible to argue that women have been taught to criticise and dissect the behaviour, actions, character, history and intentions of the woman, even when that woman is themselves. This leads to thoughts of self-blame and moves the focus away from the perpetrator and back to the woman who has been subjected to the rape or sexual assault.

Even women who have been subjected to rape or sexual assault themselves can still retain high levels of rape myth acceptance and can still go on to victim blame other women despite having real lived experience. The fact that the real experience of being raped does not affect their own levels of rape myth acceptance or victim blaming is a testament to how influential these societal messages really are.

Rape Myths and Stereotypes About Men and Boys

The South African Male Survivors of Sexual Abuse team (SAMSOSA) have put together the most important and prevalent myths surrounding the common misconceptions of male sexual abuse:

- Myth 1: Boys and men can't fall victim to sexual abuse
- Myth 2: Males who are sexually abused will go on to become abusers themselves
- Myth 3: All perpetrators of sexual abuse are male
- Myth 4: Males sexually abused by males are or will become bisexual or gay
- Myth 5: If you get an erection and/or ejaculate during the sexual abuse, you must have enjoyed it
- Myth 6: Only adult men in prison are sexually abused
- Myth 7: Only men who are gay or bisexual can be sexually assaulted
- Myth 8: If you never said no to the abuse, then it must be your fault
- Myth 9: Men should be capable of protecting themselves against sexual abuse
- Myth 10: If you didn't clearly remember the sexual abuse, it didn't really happen

Believing in these above myths keeps those male survivors isolated and alone, making it very difficult for them to reach out and find the support they need without being stereotyped and labelled. Individuals have to accept the harsh reality that male sexual violence and abuse does exist in our society and the victims must be provided with the same support and understanding available to women and children. The journey towards healing can only be taken within the context in which we live, within the society of which we are a part, with the support of those who matter in our lives.

A study by Walfield (2018) found that those who hold or support female rape myths are also likely to hold or support male rape myths. However, another set of studies in 1992 by Struckman Johnson and Struckman Johnson and replicated in 2008 by Chapleau et al., found that male rape myths are more likely to be disagreed with by most people. When items were agreed with, it was usually by other men holding beliefs about male rape. Men were twice as likely to hold rape myth beliefs about male victims than the women in the studies were.

For more information about rape myths or victim blaming, please visit www.victimfocus.org.uk or contact Jessica on jessica@victimfocus.org.uk