

Exploring Rape Myth Research within Social Science Literature

For this paper, I will explore the major conceptualizations of gender as well as the methodologies used to assess rape myth acceptance and its associated factors. Due to the vast amount of literature on the subject, I will look specifically at U.S.-based research on rape culture as it appears in 2010 issues of the *Journal of Interpersonal Violence*. From the results I generated through a search of the journal's archive on the Sage Journal database, I eliminated those articles which do not deal largely with either rape myths or the culture surrounding rape. I also eliminated those which deal with domestic or intimate partner violence, as these often involve separate issues. This paper will highlight in detail the aims, methodologies, and major findings of four articles.

A rape culture is considered to be any culture that supports, excuses, and encourages sexual violence and male sexual aggression. This culture is believed to be maintained by a series of false beliefs known as rape myths about the motivations, victims, and the perpetrators of rape. Rape myths are very powerful in that they create an environment that supports the degradation of women and justifies the violation of their bodies. Thus, research that both acknowledges and seeks to understand the existence of rape culture and rape myths is useful to the field of gender scholarship. While researchers tend to disagree on the most effective ways of assessing and dispelling rape myths, most acknowledge their presence and the harm they pose to the victims of sexual assault as well as the general society.

In an article on rape-related beliefs among college students, authors Shannon Baugher, Jon Elhai, Matt Gray, and James Monroe (2010) were interested in exploring the relationship between attitudes towards women, gender role identity, sexual trauma history, and posttraumatic stress disorder. The authors sought to explicate these relationships by assessing the extent to

which their subjects held rape-related beliefs as well as by identifying predictors of rape myth acceptance. They conducted a study of 258 male and female college students using the *Illinois Rape Myth Acceptance Scale (IRMA)*. The authors were driven to conduct this research through their recognition that a greater knowledge of the ways in which rape myths are created and maintained could help clinicians become better equipped to provide effective treatment to the survivor (Baugher et al., 2010, p. 2037).

The authors believe rape myths to be inextricably linked to the feelings of guilt and self-blame that victims of sexual assault often feel. This is based on research which links one's acceptance of rape myths to a higher likelihood that they will blame the victim of a sexual assault. They believe that accurate information can be empowering for the survivor when dealing with sexual trauma, as such information may have the capacity to dispel rape myths and alleviate self-blame (Baugher et al., 2010, p.2037).

The authors discuss previous research on rape myth acceptance and cite their use of nonstandard methodologies as insufficient for generating results that can be compared across studies. The authors also introduce sexual trauma history and posttraumatic stress disorder as potential predictors of rape myth acceptance, both of which had barely been studied in the research. Baugher et al. (2010) define sexual trauma history as "the emotional distress resulting from experiencing a sexual assault" (p. 2039). While it has only been studied in two previous studies, the authors believe that it is useful in that it can serve as a strong predictor of the extent to which one accepts common rape myths. Posttraumatic stress disorder had been studied even less within this literature. The authors imagined that posttraumatic stress disorder resulting from a sexual assault would make that victim less tolerant of victim-blaming rape myths and thus less likely to adhere to them, which is particularly harmful (Baugher et al., 2010, p. 2039).

The researchers generated three hypotheses for their study. First, they hypothesized that, "More traditional levels of attitudes towards women and GRI would predict higher levels of RMA" (Baugher, et al., 2010, p. 2039). Next, they hypothesized that, "Sexual trauma history would weaken the prediction of RMA by attitudes toward women and gender role identity" (Baugher et al., 2010, p. 2039). Lastly, they predicted that, "Higher levels of PTSD symptom severity would weaken the prediction of RMA by attitudes toward women and gender role identity" (Baugher et al., 2010, p. 2039). In their research, the authors employed the *Attitude toward Women Scale—Short Form (AWS)*, *Femininity Trait Index (FTI)*, *Masculinity Trait Index (MTI)*, *Stressful Life Events Screening Questionnaire (SLESQ)*, *PTSD Checklist-Stressor (PCL-S)*, and the *Illinois Rape Myth Acceptance Scale (IRMA)*. They conducted their research by administering all of the surveys to the respondents except for the *PTSD Checklist-Stressor* survey. This was only administered if the subject scored affirmatively on the *Stressful Life Events Screening Questionnaire*.

The results of this study demonstrated that the respondents' attitudes towards women and their sexual trauma history were significantly associated with rape myth acceptance (Baugher et al., 2010, p. 2046). On the other hand, the gender role identity and posttraumatic stress disorder results were not shown to be associated with rape myth acceptance (Baugher et al., 2010, p. 2046). In assessing their original hypotheses, the research somewhat supported their first hypothesis in that attitudes towards women did prove to be a significant predictor of rape myth acceptance, while gender role identity was not. The second hypothesis was supported as well, as the relationship between sexual trauma history was significantly associated with rape myth acceptance. The third hypothesis, however, did not hold up in the research, as "PTSD symptom

severity was not found to moderate RMA's relationship with AWS and GRI (Baugher et al., 2010, p. 2048).

The results of this research have significant implications for informing and improving efforts to reduce the acceptance of rape myths. By discovering a statistically significant association between traditional attitudes towards women and rape myth acceptance, efforts to change these attitudes could prove to be very successful in reducing rape-supportive beliefs. The authors suggest that education-based prevention programs would be particularly helpful in attempting to achieve this type of change. They also suggest strategies such as "increasing the topic's personal relevance" so as to evoke feelings of empathy as well as role-playing scenarios to encourage the internalization of the victim's circumstances (Baugher et al., 2010, p. 2048).

In another article on the predictors and associated factors of rape myth acceptance, authors Tahany Gadalla and Eliana Suarez (2010) examine the correlates of rape myth acceptance in thirty-seven published studies. The authors were interested in studying rape myths because they perceive them to be an important factor in the underreporting of sexual assaults. They suggest that rape myths are part of a larger culture that blames the victims of sexual assault and discourage survivors from reporting the assault. Much like Baugher et al. (2010), Gadalla and Suarez (2010) acknowledge the potential for trauma particularly after encountering such unsupportive responses (p. 2011). The authors also acknowledge the need for more research-based strategies within rape-prevention programs, as these programs have often been inadequate and produced short-lived results. They also wish to expand on the limited and unclear knowledge on rape myth acceptance, as "very little is known about the demographic, sociocultural, and behavioral determinants of RMA" (Gadalla & Suarez, 2010, pp. 2011-12).

Gadalla and Suarez (2010) selected the writings that they reviewed by using popular electronic databases. They ended up with thirty-seven articles and dissertations published within a ten-year period that employed at least one measurement tool to assess rape myth acceptance as well as a discussion of some predictive factors of RMA. The content of each article was then coded and analyzed using meta-analysis software. Gadalla and Suarez (2010) found that the majority (78 percent) of the studies used *Burt's Rape Myth Acceptance Scale* while 16 percent used the *Illinois Rape Myth Acceptance Scale* (p. 2018). They also compiled the results of each study to draw their own conclusions about the associations between rape myth acceptance and particular attitudes and behaviors. What they found was that such links existed, mostly between larger cultural and structural factors such as racist, sexist, and homophobic attitudes (Gadalla and Suarez, 2010, p. 2024).

In their reflection of their results, the authors recognize the inadequacy and oftentimes the inaccurate curriculum of many rape-prevention programs. They hope that these programs could be improved based upon their findings which suggested that the content of rape-education programs must be broadened to incorporate strategies to also address other oppressive beliefs concurrent with the acceptance of rape myths and sexism, such as racism, classism, and so on (Gadalla and Suarez, 2010, p. 2027). They acknowledge that it would be valuable to explore cases where more than one oppressive structure is at play, but they recognize that this is beyond the scope of this particular research project. The authors end on a positive note by arguing that change can occur when guided in large part by the empirical evidence and results of studies about rape myth acceptance, to develop a world without (or with very little incidence of) rape.

The next two articles focus particularly on rape myths as they relate to male perpetrators of sexual assault. Research conducted by Patricia Long and Emily Voller (2010) looked

specifically at five personality traits as possibly associated with rape perpetration. Much like the previous researchers, they present statistics to demonstrate the horrifying and growing problem of the sexual victimization of women by men. Long and Voller were interested in better understanding the causes of the sexual assault. They discuss the *Hierarchical-Mediational Confluence (HMC) Model*, which “suggests that a person’s likelihood to sexually aggress against women may be explained by various individual characteristics and experiences,” (Long & Voller, 2010) as having the potential to provide clarity on the presence of sexual violence (p. 458). Much like those which the previous researchers have considered, some of these traits include hostility towards women, attitudes accepting violence towards women, early abuse, and narcissistic personality traits (Long & Voller, 2010, p. 458).

Similar to the previous researchers’ interests, Long and Voller were interested in identifying associations and potential predictors of sexually violent men. They used the *Revised NEO Personality Inventory* as well as a more developed form of the *Sexual Experiences Survey* to create an accurate picture of the extent to which variation in the Big Five personality traits could provide “insight into the nature of sexual assault and rape perpetrators” (Long & Voller, 2010, p. 457). The Big Five personality traits, also known as the five-factor model (FFM), are openness, conscientiousness, extraversion, agreeableness, and neuroticism (Long & Voller, 2010). While this model is widely used in research, it is rarely employed for research involving sexual assault and measuring rape myths. Long and Voller were interested in studying perpetrators across these traits to discover their similarities to and differences from non-perpetrators, a measure which would take “account of an individual’s enduring experiential, attitudinal, interpersonal, emotional, and motivational style” (Long & Voller, 2010, p. 459).

In fact, their research was approached with the assumption that perpetrators and non-perpetrators would score differently on the big five personality traits. Likewise, their study was primarily concerned with comparing the personality profiles of rape perpetrators, sexual-assault perpetrators, and non-perpetrators (Long & Voller, 2010, p. 461). Long and Voller (2010) expected to find that perpetrators of both rape and sexual assault (they believe these forms of sexual aggression are distinct) would experience negative affect of each particular personality trait more than non-perpetrators (pp. 459 & 462). Long and Voller (2010) make a distinction between rape and sexual assault that is particularly problematic (p. 461). This distinction can be viewed as harmful in that it places a value judgment on the two actions, arguing that rape is worse than sexual assault because it typically involves force rather than coercion. This is a potentially dangerous and unnecessary distinction that functions to lessen the magnitude of sexual assault over rape, when in fact it can be (and often is) equally as traumatic.

The researchers conducted their study using a sample of 521 college men which they assembled in cooperation with the university's psychology department. In addition to the aforementioned measurement scales, their research also administered the *Expanded Sexual Experiences Survey-Perpetration Version (SES-P)* to assess the extent to which the subject had ever imposed non-consensual sexual contact on someone. This measure was particularly important to this study because it was the researchers' way of distinguishing perpetrators from non-perpetrators. The results of their study revealed that approximately seven percent of the men were classified as being perpetrators of rape, six percent that were perpetrators of sexual assault but not rape, and eighty-seven which had not perpetrated any form of sexual aggression (Long & Voller, 2010, p. 466). Their original hypothesis that these men would differ across the big five personality traits did not hold true in the research, as they found that sexual-assault

perpetrators and non-perpetrators did not differ significantly on any of the five domains (Long & Voller, 2010, p. 467).

Contrary to the researchers' beliefs, the perpetrators and non-perpetrators of rape and sexual assault in their study did not differ significantly in personality traits. Interestingly, they found that their distinction between rape and sexual assault was valuable in that they noticed a difference in the personality profiles of those who perpetrated rape versus those who perpetrated sexual assault (Long & Voller, 2010, p. 471). In fact, their results suggested that sexual-assault perpetrators were more similar to non-perpetrators than to rape perpetrators (Long & Voller, 2010, p. 471). This distinction could be seen across two personality traits—agreeableness and conscientiousness, both of which rape perpetrators reported to be lower than sexual assault perpetrators and non-perpetrators. Also, perpetrators of rape reported far lower levels of extroversion than non-perpetrators (Long & Voller, 2010, p. 471).

The authors draw on previous literature to explain their results. They believe in a strong link between perpetration and hypermasculinity, and recognize the intense pressure for men to live up to cultural and social ideals about what it means to be a man. They suggest that men's sexually aggressive behavior may emerge when they are not able to live up to the demands that society sets for them (Long & Voller, 2010, p. 472). In fact, "It has been theorized that these men respond with aggression and violence to regain a sense of male power and control and, in essence, prove their manhood" (Long & Voller, 2010, p. 472). Interestingly, the research appears to suggest that men who are "willing to perpetrate sexual assault, but not rape, may not experience the same level of vulnerability" (Long & Voller, 2010, p. 472).

These are important findings and certainly valuable to contribute to the existing literature on rape perpetration. The authors argue that their research, in particular, provides evidence for

some connection between personality profiles and rape perpetration. They also see the results of this study as valuable to enhancing clinicians' understanding of the perpetrators they work with as well as improving their clients' feelings of being understood. Also, they highlight their findings of similar personality profiles of perpetrators and non-perpetrators as having the potential to reduce the self-blame of victims by reassuring them of the striking similarities between the two and the inability to have predicted their victimization based on their attacker's personality (Long & Voller, 2010, p. 476). Another way that the results of this research could be useful is to identify potential perpetrators by the traits that were found to be associated with rape perpetration. By identifying men at risk and addressing these concerns early, it may be possible to reduce the perpetration of rape. Also, the results of this research provide a great case for the effectiveness of the five-factor model, or the big five personality traits measurement scale.

The final article, written by John Foubert, Eric Godin, and Jerry Tatum (2010), is a study of long-term behavioral and attitudinal change in a group of males who completed a sexual assault peer education program (The Men's Program) two years prior. They were interested in determining the extent to which the program had been effective and identifying the factors that were involved in the outcome. The authors discuss the belief system theory as it was the framework for the prevention program they are studying. Belief system theory understands effective lasting change as intertwined with the development and maintenance of positive and non-violent self-conceptions. Foubert et al. (2010) explain self-conceptions as "the roles people try to live up to and the people they strive to be" (p. 2239). The most effective way to approach this with men is not to address their ability to perpetrate, as men rarely see themselves as potential rapists, but rather by appealing to their potential to support survivors of sexual assault and intervene in situations which may lead to sexual assault (Foubert et al., 2010, p. 2239).

The Menø Program is unique in that it is the first of its kind to demonstrate lasting attitudinal and behavioral change. Foubert et al. (2010) are interested in exploring this finding and identifying the areas of the program that have been most successful in effecting lasting change on those who partake in the program. While their research interests generated an extensive list of questions that could be pursued, this particular study focuses on two questions. First, they are interested in learning about the ways in which "The Menø Program influence[d] first-year menø attitudes toward alcohol related sexual assault 2 academic years after [their] program participation" (Foubert et al., 2010, p. 2241). Also, they wanted to discover if and how involvement in the program motivates men "to behave differently, particularly in alcohol-related intimate situations two academic years after program participation" (Foubert et al., 2010, p. 2241).

Foubert et al. (2010) conducted their research using 184 men who had participated in The Menø Program during their first year in college. These men were approached two years later to complete follow-up surveys, one of which was a series of four open-ended questions about their perceived transformation through their participation in the program. The results of this particular survey demonstrated significant (seventy-nine percent of participants) reporting of long-term change (Foubert et al., 2010, p. 2243). This was further broken down into reporting of both attitude and behavior changes (forty percent), attitude changes only (thirty-two percent), behavior changes only (six percent), and no changes (twenty-one percent) (Foubert et al., 2010, 2243). Attitude changes were measured by the subjects' responses to prompts such as *Alcohol can be dangerous, Rape is very serious, I now understand the trauma of rape better, Communication is critical to consent* (Foubert et al., 2010, pp. 2244-45). On the other hand, change in behavior was determined by responses to prompts such as *I intervene to keep my*

friends safe, No sex without alcohol, Acting on a deeper understanding of communication and consent, and Stop joking about rape (Foubert et al., 2010, pp. 2247-49).

While The Menø Program is a widely studied prevention initiative, this study sought to research an updated version (which included bystander training) of the program which was believed to be improved. While the researchers found that the program had been successful in creating lasting change for participants two years following their exposure to the program, they were surprised to find that the effects at two years were more substantial than the results of another study which questioned students seven months after the program (Foubert et al., 2010, p. 2250). Perhaps the most important finding was the link between The Menø Program and lower incidence of rape as a result of these menø changed attitudes. Also, the success of the revised program suggests that bystander intervention training is vital in creating long-lasting and effective change.

While Baugher et al. (2010) acknowledged that *Burt's Rape Myth Acceptance Scale* was more popular within the research on rape myths, they chose to employ the *Illinois Rape Myth Acceptance Scale* for its more sophisticated òpsychometric properties [and the fact that it] may be capable of detecting differences other scales have been unable to detectö (p. 2047). However, Gadalla and Suarez (2010) point out that both *Burt's Rape Myth Acceptance Scale* and the *Illinois Rape Myth Acceptance Scale* are limited in that they have been shown to merely assess hostility towards women (p. 2047). While they recognize the limitations of traditional measures of rape myth acceptance, they see the value in understanding past research methodology for guidance in future research. They also discover a great deal of knowledge about the social and cultural structures that complicate a full understanding of rape myth acceptance and contribute towards creating a more comprehensive picture of the patterns of these attitudes and behaviors.

Foubert et al. (2010) discovered through their research on the effectiveness of The Men's Program that qualitative methods were more suited for and far more successful at extracting information than quantitative ones (p. 2251). In previous studies, the *Illinois Rape Myth Acceptance Scale* had been used to assess the program's success. In this case, the IRMA was not adequate in that it could not sufficiently grasp the most important factors and lessons of the program. For example, the IRMA contains only one item about alcohol, which is unacceptable in trying to evaluate a crime that involves alcohol somewhere between seventy-two and eighty-one percent of the time (Foubert et al., 2010, p. 2251). In this way, Foubert et al.'s research (2010) represents a valuable addition to the existing literature in that it extracted its data in a way that was more authentic and less limiting.

Gadalla and Suarez (2010) provide a conceptual framework within their research article, crediting M. R. Burt and Susan Brownmiller with developing the concept in the 1970s (p. 2012). They also recognize the limitations of the construct as not having a strong foundation in theory as well as its failure to function as a sufficient explanation of rape. The theoretical background knowledge that they provide of gender studies and sociology is quite sophisticated. Despite this sophistication and familiarity with deeply feminist constructs, Gadalla and Suarez (2010) only recognize two, mutually-exclusive genders.

The contributions of Baugher et al. (2010) to the study of gender are considerable. Their research is well-designed and aimed at researching the role of predictive factors as a way to engage in informed and therefore more effective prevention efforts. The authors also recognize the tendency of research on rape myth acceptance to use the category of sex. They believe that gender role identity is more effective at understanding a subject's acceptance of rape myths, as it concerns attitudes and behaviors rather than biological traits. The authors argue that the

predominance of masculine or feminine traits is most indicative of attitudes about rape, regardless of the subject's biological sex (Baugher et al., 2010, p. 2038).

Baugher et al. employed a relatively sophisticated conceptualization of gender through their use of gender role identity rather than the strict sex binary. The concept of gender role identity is more inclusive of queer identities in that it relies on attitudes and behaviors. In measuring gender role identity, a subject is judged on the degree to which they align themselves with a set of masculine and feminine traits such as dominance, ambition, compassion, and warmth (Baugher et al., 2010, p. 2038). This allows for a more fluid conceptualization of gender in that one is more likely to be represented as they perceive themselves rather than that which their biological sex might indicate, which in turn produces more accurate results. However, the fact that these traits must still be organized into masculine and feminine categories reinforces the dichotomy. Clearly, there is much progress still to be made within the field of gender research. Nevertheless, the contributions of the existing research in the field should not be discounted, as they represent a valuable step forward in the production of knowledge.

References

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