

SEXUALITY AND RAPE-SUPPORTIVE BELIEFS

JOHN BRIERE, NEIL MALAMUTH
and **JAMES V.P. CHECK**

ABSTRACT

Rape myths and other rape-supportive beliefs have recently been posited as the social underpinnings of violence toward women. The present study is an investigation of the factorial or construct complexity of these attitudes and of their relationship to variables reflecting sexuality. Rape-supportive beliefs were found to be multidimensional, and several were significantly related to what appears to be sexual conflict or sexual inhibition.

INTRODUCTION

Rape myths, defined as false beliefs about rape which seek to deny or make light of its effects on the victim, or in fact, *blame* the rape on the victim, have been increasingly implicated in the literature as perpetuating or reinforcing violence towards women. In a recent important paper, Burt (1980) identified a series of these myths including, for example, the notions that "many women have an unconscious wish to be raped" and "any healthy woman can successfully resist a rapist if she really wants to." Using path analysis, Burt was able to predict scores on a "rape myth acceptance scale" on the basis of scales tapping "sex-role stereotyping", "adversarial sexual beliefs", and "acceptance of interpersonal violence." These data were presented by Burt in support of the feminist contention that rapist behaviour is socially determined and, in fact, "is the logical and psychological extension of a dominant-submissive, competitive, sex-role stereotyped culture" (Burt, 1980, p. 229).

The present study was concerned with two aspects of Burt's generally excellent analysis: 1) the delineation of rape myths and other rape-supportive beliefs, and 2) the potential for a relationship between these beliefs and other, thus far untested, sexuality variables.

A difficulty with Burt's development of rape-related scales was her use of item analysis to determine which of a pool of items was to be included in each scale. This procedure involves correlating a given item in a scale with the sum of all potential items in the scale excluding that item. If the correlation is high, the item is retained in the scale; if not, it is excluded. In this manner, Burt created a Rape Myth Acceptance scale, an Adversarial Sexual Beliefs scale, an Acceptance of Interpersonal Violence scale, a Sex-Role Stereotyping scale, a Sexual Conservatism scale, and a Sex-Role Satisfaction scale. Unfortunately, item analysis in no way assures that the scale being developed measures a single construct or phenomenon, since different items might relate to different sources of variance or dimensions within a scale yet still correlate moderately with the total (potentially multidimensional) scale score. The implication of this problem for Burt's study is that she might, for example, designate a scale called "Rape Myth Acceptance" and actually be measuring a variety of essentially unrelated constructs. Further analysis with these potentially complex variables could, in turn, easily lead to lessened specificity, if not erroneous conclusions.

The second issue addressed in the present study, that of a possible connection between self-reported sexuality and endorsement of rape-supportive attitudes, was in response to the limited attention Burt gave sexual variables in her analysis. Beyond the use of a single scale ("Romantic Self Image") developed in an earlier study to tap "satisfaction with oneself as a sexual actor" (Estep, Burt & Milligan, 1977), data concerning quality of sex life, interest in sex, sexual inhibitions, etc. were not obtained. The present authors believed this type of information to be of interest, since rape, although a crime of violence, occurs in at least the context or name of the rapist's sexuality.

Given these concerns, the present study sought to accomplish two goals: 1) through the use of factor-analytic techniques, to assess the construct or factorial complexity of rape-supportive beliefs as measured by Burt's Rape Myth Acceptance scale, Acceptance of Interpersonal Violence scale, and

Adversarial Sexual Beliefs scale; and 2) to determine the relationship between endorsement of these beliefs and ratings of sexual satisfaction and behaviour.

METHOD

Four hundred fifty-two male undergraduate students, participating in the present study for course credit, were presented with a 118-item questionnaire containing Burt's attitude and rape myth scales, as well as a variety of questions concerned with sexuality and sexual attitudes. After completion, Burt's Rape Myth Acceptance, Adversarial Sexual Belief, and Acceptance of Interpersonal Violence scales were extracted for further analysis, along with items tapping frequency of pornography use, knowledge of sex, importance of sex, pleasantness of sex, quality of sex life, liberality of sexual attitudes, extent of significant relationships with members of the other sex, experience with sex, and extent of sexual inhibitions.

DATA ANALYSIS

To assess the complexity of Burt's scales, each was factor analyzed using a Principal Factors approach, followed by Varimax rotations on all factors with eigenvalues exceeding unity. When multiple factors were discovered within a given scale, new subscales were created with those items whose loadings exceeded .35. Following creation of these new scales, each served as a criterion variable in subsequent stepwise multiple regression analyses, using the sexuality variables as predictors. Data analyses, in each case, were run on computer subprograms from the *Statistical Package for the Social Sciences* (Nie, Hull, Jenkins, Steinbrenner, & Bent, 1975).

RESULTS

Factor analysis of the Rape Myth Acceptance scale generated four independent factors, as indicated in Table 1. On the basis of their respective item loadings, these factors were named 1) "Disbelief of Rape Claims", 2) "Victim Responsible for Rape", 3) "Rape Reports as Manipulation", and 4) "Rape only happens to certain kinds of women." Analysis of the Adversarial Sexual Beliefs scale yielded two factors which were named 1) "Male Dominance is Justified" and 2) "Adversarial Sexual Beliefs (Purified)." Finally, factor analysis of the Acceptance of Interpersonal Violence scale produced three factors: 1) "Women Enjoy Sexual Violence"; 2) "Acceptance of Domestic Violence"; and 3) "Vengefulness", which loaded negatively on the "eye for an eye and a tooth for a tooth" item alone.

Of the nine new scales defined by factor analysis, five were significantly associated with sexuality variables by multiple regression analysis. The tendency to disbelieve victim rape reports was significantly predicted ($R^2 = .726$, $F[9,442] = 130.24$, $p < .001$) by an absence of serious relationships with members of the other sex ($F[1,450] = 9.6$, $p < .005$) and perceived importance of sex ($F[1,450] = 5.4$, $p < .025$). Significant regression equations occurred for the belief that victims are responsible for their own rapes ($R^2 = .202$, $F[9,442] = 2.10$, $p < .05$) and the belief that women enjoy sexual violence ($R^2 = .181$, $F[9,442] = 1.91$, $p < .05$), both of which were predicted by self-reported sexual inhibitions ($F[1,450] = 11.2$, $p < .001$ and $F[1,450] = 6.0$, $p < .025$, respectively). Endorsement of male dominance over women was significantly associated ($R^2 = .237$, $F[8,443] = 3.29$, $p < .001$) with sexual inhibitions ($F[1,450] = 10.1$, $p < .005$), increased importance of sex ($F[1,450] = 5.8$, $p < .025$), and conservative sexual attitudes ($F[1,450] = 4.3$, $p < .05$). Finally, acceptance of domestic violence was significantly related ($R^2 = .207$, $F[9,442] = 2.22$, $p < .025$) to experience with sex ($F[1,450] = 9.4$, $p < .025$), absence of significant relationships with members of the other sex ($F[1,450] = 6.5$, $p < .025$), and frequent use of pornography ($F[1,450] = 5.5$, $p < .025$).

TABLE 1

Principal Factors Analysis of Rape Myth Acceptance, Adversial Sexual Beliefs, and Acceptance of Interpersonal Violence Scales

1) Rape Myth Acceptance

Item	I	II	III	IV
a) A woman who goes to the home or the apartment of a man on their first date implies that she is willing to have sex.	.02	.43	.00	.03
b) Any female can get raped.*	-.01	.05	.13	.69
c) One reason that women falsely report a rape is that they frequently have a need to call attention to themselves.	.00	.27	.25	.07
d) Any healthy woman can successfully resist a rapist if she really wants to.	-.02	.45	.17	.18
e) When women go around braless or wearing short skirts and tight tops, they are just asking for trouble.	.00	.57	.10	-.03
f) In the majority of rapes, the victim is promiscuous or has a bad reputation.	-.03	.41	.16	.25
g) If a girl engages in necking or petting and she lets things get out of hand, it is her own fault if her partner forces sex on her.	-.08	.51	.15	.01
h) Women who get raped while hitchhiking get what they deserve.	-.02	.53	.06	-.13
i) A woman who is stuck-up and thinks she is too good to talk to guys on the street deserves to be taught a lesson.	-.02	.62	.07	.14
j) Many women have an unconscious wish to be raped, and may then unconsciously set up a situation in which they are likely to be attacked.	.01	.47	.25	-.01
k) If a woman gets drunk at a party and has intercourse with a man she's just met there, she should be considered "fair game" to other males at the party who want to have sex with her too, whether she wants to or not.	-.01	.50	.08	.01
l) What percentage of women who report a rape would you say are lying because they are angry and want to get back at the man they accuse?	-.06	.21	.66	.10
m) What percentage of reported rapes would you guess were merely invented by women who discovered they were pregnant and wanted to protect their own reputation.	-.02	.24	.78	.09
n) A person comes to you and claims they were raped. How likely would you be to believe their statement if the person were:				
your best friend?*	.90	.04	.03	.04
an Indian woman?*	.81	-.03	-.09	.03
a neighborhood woman?*	.94	.03	.02	-.01
a young boy?*	.63	-.14	-.01	-.12
a black woman?*	.95	-.06	-.03	.01
a white woman?*	.92	.05	-.05	.01
Percentage of total variance	25.3	19.2	7.3	5.6

*Item scored in opposite direction

TABLE 1 (continued)

2) Adversarial Sexual Beliefs			
Item	I	II	
a) Men are out for only one thing.	.10	.46	
b) In a dating relationship a woman is largely out to take advantage of a man.	.26	.73	
c) A lot of women seem to get pleasure in putting men down.	.23	.44	
d) Many women are so demanding sexually that a man just can't satisfy them.	.30	.22	
e) A man's got to show the woman who's boss from the start or else he'll end up henpecked.	.57	.24	
f) A lot of men talk big, but when it comes down to it, they can't perform well sexually.	.33	.04	
g) Most women are sly and manipulating when they are out to attract a man.	.57	.24	
h) Women are usually sweet until they've caught a man, but then they let their true selves show.	.51	.34	
i) A woman will only respect a man who will lay the law down to her.	.61	.20	
Percentage of total variance	32.7	12.0	
3) Acceptance of Interpersonal Violence			
Item	I	II	III
a) Being roughed up is sexually stimulating to many women.	.60	.11	.13
b) A wife should move out of the house if her husband hits her.*	.09	.45	-.03
c) Sometimes the only way a man can get a cold woman turned on is to use force.	.48	.11	.05
d) A man is never justified in hitting his wife.*	.13	.52	.15
e) People today should not use "an eye for an eye and a tooth for a tooth" as a rule for living.	.05	.05	.49
f) Many times a woman will pretend she doesn't want to have intercourse because she doesn't want to seem loose, but she's really hoping the man will force her.	.60	.11	.09
Percentage of total variance	30.3	18.3	16.8

Note: Factor structure coefficients considered meaningful when $c \geq .35$.

*Item scored in opposite direction.

DISCUSSION

The primary findings of the present study can be divided into two areas: the complexity of rape-supportive attitudes, and the “sexual profiles” of persons who endorse these attitudes. The data presented here provide fairly straightforward evidence that the attitudes hypothesized to support rape are complex and multidimensional. Probably through the use of item analysis to define internal consistency, Burt’s analysis appears to have markedly underestimated the variety of rapesupportive beliefs tapped by her scales. The Rape Myth Acceptance scale was found to contain four separate and statistically unrelated attitudes supporting violence against women. Similarly, the Adversarial Sexual Beliefs scale and the Acceptance of Interpersonal Violence scale involved, respectively, two and three independent attitudinal factors. There *did* appear to be a unidimensional Adversarial Sexual Beliefs scale, but this emerged only after factor analysis extracted a series of items involving justification for male dominance. Finally, the Acceptance of Interpersonal Violence scale actually appears to measure acceptance of two separate types of violence toward women, with a solitary, non-gender-related vengeance item serving as a third dimension.

A number of sexual variables appear to relate to certain rape-supportive attitudes. Interestingly, other rape-related attitudes did not correlate at all with sexual variables. Those relationships that did pertain seem to support Burt’s contention that rape-supportive attitudes are more frequently found among persons experiencing sexual dissatisfaction or conflict. For example, the tendency to disbelieve victim rape reports was associated with considering sex an important activity, using pornography, and rating one’s self as sexually knowledgeable, yet simultaneously reporting little overall sex experience and the relative absence of significant relationships with members of the other sex. An analogous situation occurred for persons who believed male dominance over women to be justified: they rated sex as an important activity yet defined themselves as sexually conservative and sexually inhibited. In all, sexual inhibition was predictive of three separate types of rape-supportive beliefs.

In several instances, however, sexuality and pro-rape attitudes did not relate to one another. Believing rape reports to be lies and manipulations, rape only to happen to certain types of women, and sexual relationships to be adversarial were all essentially unrelated to the sexuality variables tested in the present study. This is especially interesting in the case of adversarial sexual beliefs, which Burt reported as linked to poor sexual self-image. In this regard, one may note that the “Male Dominance is Justified” factor, which *did* correlate with sexual concerns, was a component of Burt’s original Adversarial Sexual Beliefs scale, and thus may represent the type of confounding possible when multiple factors occur in a single scale.

It is the authors’ contention that while “rape-supportive beliefs” and “rape myth acceptance” are viable research concepts, they appear to be composed of a larger variety of sub-constructs than has been indicated in the literature. These attitudes, in turn, are at least partially mediated by another complex set of variables which appear to reflect sexual conflict. The present data are insufficient to explain how sexual conflict might, in fact, support or reinforce certain rape-supportive attitudes. It should be recalled, however, that both Burt’s data and the results of the present factor analysis indicate these attitudes to be potentially conflict-resolving—suggesting, for example, that victims ask for and enjoy rape, or that rape does not exist at all. One might hypothesize that sexual conflict (perhaps concurrent with other types of dissonance) engenders resentment and anger toward the perceived object of the conflict, thereby motivating the endorsement of social attitudes which condone violent, quasi-sexual acts against women. Alternatively, society may simultaneously condition both sexual conflict and acceptance of rape-supportive beliefs in the same susceptible individuals.

It should be pointed out that a relationship between sexual variables and rape-supportive attitudes does not logically imply a connection between sexuality and actual rapist behaviour. Both rapists and sexually-conflicted individuals may tend to endorse rape-supportive beliefs without being equivalent in their willingness to assault women. It is conceivable, in fact, that men experiencing sexual inhibitions might be *less* likely to attempt rape, given its socially assumed sexual context.

Clearly, additional study in this area is strongly indicated, both to specify further the antecedents and correlates of rape-supportive attitudes and to determine the interactive effects of these variables on actual proclivity to rape.

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