

Myths about Rape Myths? Let the Evidence Speak.

A Comment on Reece (2013)

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Abstract

In her article, Reece (2013) warned that we are in the process of creating myths about rape myths and that there is little evidence that rape myths are widespread. In this comment, it is argued that Reece's analysis of rape myth research refers to misleading comparisons to corroborate her claim that rape convictions are not different from convictions for other offences and disregards a large body of psychological evidence showing that many rape myths are, in fact, false beliefs that can be refuted on the basis of empirical research. Her attack on established and psychometrically sound measures of rape myth acceptance and on research linking these measures to perceptions of victim and perpetrator blame is made without an understanding of the basic principles of reliability and validity in psychological measurement. Therefore, her claim that there is little evidence that rape myths play a role in low conviction rates for rape must be rejected on the basis of the available evidence.

1. Background

In her recent article entitled "Rape myths: Is elite opinion right and popular opinion wrong?", followed up by a summary in the OUP blog in July 2013², Helen Reece has offered a provocative critique of a large body of research on rape myths and their role in decision making about sexual assault cases. Essentially, she argues that there is nothing special about

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² Reece, H. (2013). Rape myths: Is elite opinion right and popular opinion wrong? *Oxford Journal of Legal Studies*, Advance Access, March 25, 2013; <http://blog.oup.com/2013/07/myths-about-rape-myths/>

low conviction rates in rape cases, that some myths about rape are in fact valid beliefs, and that the endorsement of rape myths in the general population is overstated as a result of flaws in the measurement of rape myth acceptance.

Provocative analyses are always welcome as they may advance the field, and views from someone who has not done original research on the issues in question may be particularly helpful in offering a fresh perspective looking beyond the box. Unfortunately, the analysis offered by Reece does not make a constructive contribution to the academic discourse on rape myth acceptance and may misinform the public debate. Her discussion of research on rape myth acceptance in relation to attrition rates must be challenged on both conceptual and methodological grounds. As will be detailed below, she presents a distorted comparison of rape with other offences, misrepresents findings from research on rape myth acceptance, and displays a complete lack of understanding of the methodological requirements for valid measures of rape myth acceptance. In combination, these problems undermine the credibility and persuasiveness of her argument about recent rape myth research. This comment picks up some of the more blatant flaws in her reasoning, looking first at conceptual and then at methodological problems.

2. Conceptual Critique

Is rape a special case when it comes to convictions? The first “myth” identified by Reece is that there is a particularly stark justice gap in rape. Rightly, she argues that one needs a comparison to corroborate the claim that conviction rates for rape are lower than for other offences. However, looking only at conviction rates, as she does, is too simple, and choosing a property crime, namely burglary, for this comparison is equally problematic. Conviction rates obviously depend on whether a suspect is identified, so the critical comparison is the conviction rate relative to the rate of cases in which a suspect has been identified. In addition, as a violent offence, rape should be compared against other violent offences, such as assault

or robbery. One source of data that can be used to illustrate a more appropriate comparison, relating the number of convictions to the number of offenders for different offences, is provided by the European Sourcebook of Crime and Criminal Justice Statistics (2006).³ For England and Wales, the figures extracted for rape, compared to assault robbery, and burglary, for the period from 2000 to 2003 are presented in Table 1.

Table 1: Offender and Conviction Rates for Rape, Assault, Robbery, and Burglary, 2000-2003, for England and Wales (Source: European Sourcebook of Crime and Criminal Justice Statistics, 3rd ed. 2006).

	Rates per 100,000	2000	2001	2002	2003	% Change 2000-3
Rape	Offenders*	4.0	5.1	5.7	5.4	+ 34
	Convictions	1.1	1.1	1.2	1.3	+ 11
	% convictions of offenders**	27.5	21.6	21.1	24.1	
Assault	Offenders	324	329	344	372	+ 15
	Convictions	136	136	145	155	+ 14
	% convictions of offenders	41.9	41.3	41.2	41.7	
Robbery	Offenders	24	29	31	27	+ 10
	Convictions	11	13	15	14	+ 22
	% convictions of offenders	45.9	44.8	48.4	51.9	
Burglary	Offenders	94	92	94	89	- 6
	Convictions	50	47	51	49	- 3
	% convictions of offenders	53.2	51.1	54.3	55.1	

* Suspected offenders; ** Rate of convictions as percentage of the rate of offenders, calculated by the author.

³ <http://www3.unil.ch/wpmu/europeansourcebook/printed-editions-2/third-edition/>. Unfortunately, the subsequent 4th edition published in 2010 does not provide data for England and Wales for later years.

These figures make two important points: The first is that contrary to the claim made by Reece, the proportion of offenders to convictions is about twice as high for burglary as it is for rape, and more appropriate comparisons of rape with other violent crimes, such as assault and robbery, also yield substantially lower rates for rape. The second point is that in terms of changes over time, a 34% increase in offender rates for rape corresponds to an increase of conviction rates of only 11% during the same period. Again, this discrepancy is specific to rape and not matched by the other offences. Thus, these exemplary findings serve to disconfirm the claim that “attrition and conviction rates for rape are in line with some other serious crimes.”⁴

In addition to questioning that rape is a special case in terms of conviction rates, Reece claims that there is “very little reason to believe that people blame rape victims more than they blame other crime victims”.⁵ A recent study that compared ratings of victim and perpetrator blame for scenarios of rape and robbery provided evidence of such a double standard.⁶ Participants assigned more blame to the victim and less blame to the perpetrator in the rape cases compared to the robbery cases. In addition, they increased victim blame and decreased perpetrator blame the closer the relationship between the two (from stranger to acquaintance to former partner), whereas the relationship between victim and perpetrator had no impact on ratings of victim and perpetrator blame in the robbery cases.

Are some myths really myths? Several of the myths surrounding rape that Reece claims not to be myths have actually been identified as such by systematic research. This is true, for example, for the belief that stranger rape is more serious than acquaintance rape, for which the author asks “does this serve to be designated as a *myth*?”⁷ Yes, it does, based on a substantial research literature on rape traumatisation that showed that victimization by a

⁴ Reece, p. 5.

⁵ Reece, p. 27.

⁶ Bieneck, S., & Krahe, B. (2011). Blaming the victim and exonerating the perpetrator in cases of rape and robbery: Is there a double standard? *Journal of Interpersonal Violence*, 26, 1785-1797.

⁷ Reece, p. 13.

perpetrator known and trusted by the victim is more damaging than an assault by a stranger as in the “real rape” stereotype,⁸ or failed to find an impact of victim-offender relationship on rape traumatisation.⁹ It is obvious here that Reece does not have a sufficient grasp of the psychological literature on the effects of rape victimisation.

Are rape scenarios too ambiguous? The claim that participants often cannot help but draw on their own interpretations of the items in rape myth scales or in scenarios describing a rape allegation because of the ambiguity in the descriptions cannot be used to downplay the role of stereotypic beliefs in judgements about rape cases.¹⁰ All the scenarios used in the research by Temkin and Krahe, for example, contained an explicit verbal statement of non-consent from the woman that was disregarded by the man. Thus, there was no basis for participants in this research to assume that the alleged perpetrator had been “misreading the signs”.¹¹ Despite this expression of non-consent, assessments of victim blame differed significantly as a function of participants’ endorsement of rape myths and the information provided in the scenarios about the prior relationship between victim and perpetrator. The more participants believed in rape myths, the more they blamed the victim and the less they blamed the perpetrator, and the closer the relationship between the two, the stronger this effect.¹²

What is a benign belief? Reece claims that endorsing the statement that being drunk made a woman to some extent responsible for being raped is a “far more benign belief than victim-blaming”.¹³ By making this claim, she falls into the same trap that is at the heart of the whole problem of rape myths, namely mixing up the causal roles of victim and perpetrator and weighing one against the other. Empirical research has amply demonstrated a “psycho-

⁸ Culbertson, K. A., & Dehle, C. (2001). Impact of sexual assault as a function of perpetrator type. *Journal of Interpersonal Violence, 16*, 992-1007.

⁹ Ullman, S. E., Filipas, H. H., Townsend, S., & Starzynski, L. L. (2006). Psychosocial correlates of PTSD symptom severity in sexual assault survivors. *Journal of Traumatic Stress, 20*, 821-831.

¹⁰ Reece, p. 21.

¹¹ Reece, p. 20.

¹² See, for example, Krahe, B., Temkin, J., & Bieneck, S. (2007). Schema-driven information processing in judgements about rape. *Applied Cognitive Psychology, 21*, 601-619.

¹³ Reece, p. 25.

logic” underlying judgments of victim and perpetrator blame that implicitly adds up the total blame apportioned to the two parties to 100%. This means that any responsibility shifted to the victim automatically serves to reduce blame attributed to the perpetrator. While it is true to say that certain behaviours may increase the odds that a woman may be victimized, it is questionable to assume that this makes the perpetrators’ behaviour any less blameworthy. It is also inaccurate to say that a women’s drunkenness “caused” the rape. What caused it is the perpetrator’s actions, and the woman’s behaviour, unwise as it may have been in terms of looking after her own safety, only serves to facilitate the successful completion of his intended acts.

3. Methodological Critique

In Section 5.5 of her article, Reece attacks the methodological foundations of research on rape myths. Unfortunately, this section is written without even a basic understanding of the principles of quantitative methodology in general and attitude measurement in particular, which is evidenced in several places throughout her analysis and refers to key issues of reliability and validity in psychological measurement. Her criticism of the AMMSA scale and other measures of rape myth acceptance ignores the fact that there is an established, scientifically respected and respectable method for designing and validating measuring instruments. The rape myth scales have been developed in accordance with these methodological standards and passed rigorous peer review evaluations.

Issues of reliability. There is simultaneous criticism that measures of rape myth acceptance, such as the Acceptance of Modern Myths about Sexual Aggression Scale (AMMSA) leave too much or too little room for interpretation.¹⁴ Both aspects have to do with the reliability of these measures. In statistical terms, Reece’s criticism is equivalent to

¹⁴ Gerger, H., Kley, H., Bohner, G., & Siebler, F. (2007). The Acceptance of Modern Myths About Sexual Aggression (AMMSA) Scale: Development and validation in German and English. *Aggressive Behavior*, 33, 422-440.

claiming that there is either too much variance (participants assigning very different meanings to the statements) or too little variance (participants uniformly rejecting or accepting the statements) in the individual items and the scale as a whole. Both these claims can be proven to be invalid by the data generated in AMMSA-based research. If variance were too high, this would be reflected in low internal consistencies and low item-total correlations of the AMMSA scale, two standard indicators of how closely responses to one item are linked to responses to other items measuring the same construct. In fact, on both these indicators many studies have shown the AMMSA to be a reliable instrument for capturing individual differences in rape myth acceptance. If the variance were too low, this would have precluded the detection of significant links with other measures, such as victim blame. Again, the data disconfirm this criticism.

Reece further criticises that the AMMSA scale was designed to reflect a normal distribution (bell curve) of responses so that fewer participants are found with extreme scores of agreement and disagreement with the items than with scores around the middle of the agreement scale. This refers to another aspect of test reliability that has to do with item difficulty. Statements that are endorsed or rejected by almost everyone are useless in a measure designed to reflect individual differences in rape myth acceptance (or in any other individual difference measure, for that matter) as they are unable to discriminate between persons with differing levels of rape myth acceptance. This is the same as in a math test where problems that are solved by almost everyone or almost no-one cannot be used to detect differences in mathematical achievement. The statistical tests employed to establish the associations between rape myth acceptance and judgments about rape scenarios require the normal distribution of the responses.

Finally, finding fault with individual items of the AMMSA scale misses the point. The very reason why a scale consisting of several items is more reliable than a single-item measure is that it is possible to ascertain that agreement with one item is correlated with

agreement to the remaining items, all assumed to represent the same underlying construct.

The high internal consistency of the AMMSA scale that has been demonstrated in many studies indicates that all the items in the scale tap into the same underlying construct.

Individual items that are ambiguous and interpreted differently by different participants are eliminated from the scale on the basis of low item-total correlations in the scale construction process.

Issues of validity. Reece goes to great lengths offering semantic interpretations of the individual items of the AMMSA scale. This approach completely ignores the fact that significant associations were found between the extent to which research participants agreed with these items and the extent to which they were willing to blame the victim and exonerate the perpetrator. Here, we are moving to the issue of the validity of measures of rape myth acceptance. To establish the construct validity of a psychological measure, such as the AMMSA, it needs to be shown that the measure is related to other constructs in a theoretically meaningful way. For example, demonstrating that individuals who score high on a measure of rape myth acceptance assign more blame to a victim of rape and less blame to a perpetrator provides evidence of the construct validity of the rape myth acceptance measure. Indeed, as the research referenced by Reece and many other studies have shown, this link has been found consistently in the empirical literature, using different measures of rape myth acceptance in different groups of participants, including members of the criminal justice system and members of the public eligible for jury service.¹⁵ If there was that much room for interpretation, and hence so little validity in the measure of rape myth acceptance, these significant associations would be hard to explain. It is worth noting in this context that in the typical research design using rape vignettes, the case-related evidence, i.e., the description of the course of events leading to the rape, is identical for all participants. Yet those who are more accepting of rape myths arrive at different conclusions about victim and perpetrator

¹⁵ For a summary see Temkin, J., & Krahé, B. (2008). *Sexual assault and the justice gap: A question of attitude*. Oxford: Hart Publishing.

blame than those who are less accepting of these myths. This finding is a clear indication that people refer to their general beliefs about rape, as measured by scales like the AMMSA, to interpret information about an alleged rape case. This is exactly what the argument about the undue effects of rape myths on decisions about rape complaints is all about.

4. Summary and Conclusion

As shown in this article, Reece's analysis of rape myth research must be rejected on both conceptual and methodological grounds. She refers to misleading comparisons to corroborate her claim that rape convictions are not different from convictions for other offences and disregards a large body of psychological evidence showing that many rape myths are, in fact, false beliefs that can be refuted on the basis of empirical research. Her attacks on established and psychometrically sound measures of rape myth acceptance and on research linking these measures to perceptions of victim and perpetrator blame are made without an understanding of the basic principles of reliability and validity in psychological measurement. Reece is worried that we are in the process of "creating myths about myths".¹⁶ Unfortunately, her paper contributes to this process by misrepresenting the evidence that shows rape myths to play a critical role in explaining the low conviction rates for sexual assault.

¹⁶ Reece, p. 2.