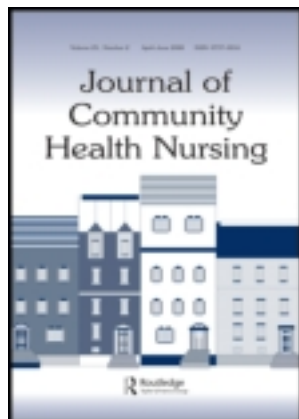


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Journal of Community Health Nursing

Publication details, including instructions for authors and subscription information:

<http://www.tandfonline.com/loi/hchn20>

The Role of Rape Myth Acceptance in the Social Norms Regarding Sexual Behavior Among College Students

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Published online: 02 Aug 2012.

To cite this article: Teri Aronowitz PhD APRN FNP-C, Cheryl Ann Lambert & Sara Davidoff (2012) The Role of Rape Myth Acceptance in the Social Norms Regarding Sexual Behavior Among College Students, Journal of Community Health Nursing, 29:3, 173-182, DOI: [10.1080/07370016.2012.697852](https://doi.org/10.1080/07370016.2012.697852)

To link to this article: <http://dx.doi.org/10.1080/07370016.2012.697852>

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The Role of Rape Myth Acceptance in the Social Norms Regarding Sexual Behavior Among College Students

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This study examined the antecedents for the acceptance of rape myths. The information motivation behavioral skills model was the basis for this study. In this cross-sectional study at a northeastern university, 237 students consented to participate in an online survey examining knowledge, social norms regarding sexual behavior, future time perspective, and rape myth acceptance (RMA). The majority of the sample was female. Forty-one percent believed that a woman who was raped while drunk was responsible. Men had higher RMA and the less sexual knowledge they had, the more they accepted the rape myths. Direction is provided regarding primary prevention of sexual assault.

Sexual assault is defined as any vaginal, oral, or anal penetration that is forced upon another, regardless of sex and sexual orientation, using any object or body part (Rape Abuse and Incest National Network, 2011). Although any individual could be raped, women are more likely to be victims, and men are more likely to be perpetrators (Tjaden & Thoennes, 2000). There is increasing evidence that sexual assault is a common and reoccurring problem among college women (B. S. Fisher, Cullen, & Turner, 2004). Researchers have reported that between one-fifth to one-quarter of college women are raped during the course of their college careers (B. S. Fisher et al., 2004; Mohler-Kuo, Dowdall, Koss, & Weschsler, 2004). In fact the sexual victimization rates among college women are about 3 times greater than victimization among women in the general population (White & Smith, 2004). In addition, American women aged 16–24 are considered to be at the greatest risk of sexual assault (Lombardi & Jones, 2009), suggesting that the risk of rape is greatest among women who recently entered college.

The psychological and physical effects resulting from a sexual assault are often disabling and chronic, with many survivors experiencing posttraumatic stress disorder or depression, and most

people experiencing cognitive, affective, and/or behavioral disequilibrium following a sexual assault (Söchting, Fairbrother, & Koch, 2004). The aftermath of a sexual assault frequently leads to withdrawal from college (Lombardi & Jones, 2009). Due to the prevalence of sexual assault and data indicating that sexual assault can have a long-term impact on survivor's psychological functioning and development, the prevention of sexual assault needs to be a priority on college campuses. The purpose of this pilot study was to examine the informational and motivational antecedents for the acceptance of rape myths among 1st- and 2nd-year college students to develop strategies for a campuswide, theoretically based intervention.

THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK

The information, motivation, and behavioral skills model (IMB; Fisher & Fisher, 1992) is a leading behavioral change theory that proposes that social-cognitive antecedents such as knowledge, attitudes, and social norms predict willingness to learn behavioral skills and future behavior. Applying this model to the phenomenon of sexual assault on college campuses may enhance the ability to influence attitudes in a prosocial manner, thereby decreasing rape myth acceptance and increasing positive bystander behavior (see Figure 1).

Information

Young people are not being taught, or are being taught ineffectively, basic information on sex and sexuality. A study found a shocking lack of information or misinformation: Only 25% of the youth surveyed knew that urination and menstruation occurred through different openings in the vulva, 33% knew that withdrawal was an ineffective birth control method, and 37% knew that people could satisfy their sexual needs in activities other than intercourse. The average score on a sexual knowledge survey was 44% correct among college students (Carrera, Williams, & Philiber, 2000).

Motivation

Beyond information, motivation is an important construct to investigate in regard to college-aged individuals' willingness to participate in sexual activity. Motivation is what influences whether or not a person will actually act on his or her knowledge (Fisher & Fisher, 1992) regarding sexual

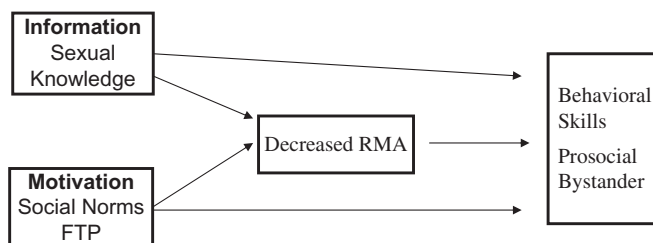


FIGURE 1 Information, Motivation, Behavioral Skills Model with Measures Utilized in this Pilot Study.

behaviors including risky and predatory sexual behavior. It includes attitudes toward rape myths, as well as consideration of *social norms* surrounding sexual behaviors, which in this study incorporated influences from peers. Attitudes toward sexual activity involve attitudes toward sexual debut and alcohol use with sexual activity.

In considering the pros and cons of sexual behavior and risky sexual behavior, statements revealing facilitation of a *future time perspective* (FTP) were classified as provention. The presence of a FTP has been identified in other studies as a motivational factor for decreasing risk behaviors in late adolescents (Aronowitz & Morrison-Beedy, 2004; Zimbardo & Boyd, 1999). The presence of a FTP may have a significant effect on whether or not a young adult participates in risky behavior. FTP is influenced by the strength of relationships present, with a positive correlation between strong supportive bonds and an extended FTP (Aronowitz & Morrison-Beedy, 2004). Those with stronger FTPs tend to report a later onset of sexual activity as well as fewer sexual partners (Zimbardo & Boyd, 1999).

The concept of *rape myth acceptance* (RMA) is predicted to be correlated to the antecedents discussed. Historically, feminists and sociologists described a complex set of cultural beliefs thought to support and perpetuate male sexual violence against women (Brownmiller, 1975; Schwenlinger & Schwenlinger, 1974) first introducing the concept of rape myths in the 1970s. Rape myth attitudes have been defined as “attitudes and beliefs that are generally false but are widely and persistently held, and that serve to deny and justify male sexual aggression against women” (Brownmiller, 1975, p. 12). It is postulated that rape myths contribute to the prevalence of rape and that rape myths may be used in such a way as to cognitively justify rape and to ignore social prohibitions against hurting others. The acceptance of traditional gender roles for men and women and the acceptance of negative, stereotypical views of women are related to rape myths acceptance attitudes (Burt, 1980; Combs-Lane & Smith, 2002). It is postulated that students with lower knowledge and higher acceptance of social norms that accept risky behavior are more likely to hold rape-myths attitudes. It is believed that rape myth acceptance attitudes are related to eventual completed rapes; therefore, investigating the level of acceptance of rape myth in college students would help in developing a prevention intervention. Four research questions guided the study.

1. What is the baseline sexual knowledge level of 1st- and 2nd-year college students?
2. What are the social norms regarding sexual behavior on the campus?
3. What are the rape myth acceptance attitudes among college students in a large urban university?
4. Does FTP influence a student's rape myth acceptance?

METHODS

This was an exploratory quantitative study conducted by recruiting students to participate in a Web-based survey assessing sexual knowledge, social norms about sexual behavior, and rape myths acceptance attitudes.

Participants

Following Institutional Review Board approval, 1st- and 2nd-year male and female students were randomly selected from the registrar's database program and a *secure message* e-mail (a specific

form of e-mail that is more secure than regular e-mail) was sent asking for volunteers to participate in the survey. The 1st- and 2nd-year undergraduate student body formed the pool of individuals from which a stratified random sample was selected with equal number of male and female students. Students who were 18 years of age or older were contacted through e-mail, requesting their participation in a survey regarding sexual health issues. A list of student identification numbers was separated by gender so as to select an equal number of female and male students, with every 5th number selected to request participation. All participants were entered into a raffle for a \$100 i-Tunes card. Students completed the survey from the privacy of their own computers and submitted their responses through a secure messaging system anonymously. Data was obtained regarding the participant's age, year of education, Greek affiliation, and major.

Measures

Means, standard deviation, range, and Cronbach's alphas of all the measures are listed in Table 1.

Information

Sexual health knowledge was measured by a 34-item multiple choice test. It included questions about: adolescent physical development, adolescent relationships, adolescent sexual activity and sexually transmitted diseases. One point was given for each correct answer, with the higher scores indicating greater knowledge. This instrument has been piloted and used to evaluate sexual education programs with adolescents. Cronbach alpha of .89 was obtained (Carrera et al., 2000).

Motivation

Social norms. An 8-item scale measured the college students' peers' attitudes toward sexual intercourse and use of condoms during sex. These items were rated on a scale ranging from 1 = *strongly disagree* to 5 = *strongly agree*, with total scores for each scale ranging from 8 to 40. Examples of these items include: "Your friends think it is OK for teenagers to have sex if they

TABLE 1
Measures and Variables

<i>Content</i>	<i>No. Items</i>	<i>Mean</i>	<i>SD</i>	<i>Potential Range</i>	<i>Actual Range</i>	<i>Reliability</i>
Information						
Sexuality knowledge	34	F = 26.5 M = 25.8	2.09 3.14	0–34	F = 20–31 M = 7–30	.89
Motivation						
Social norms about sexual behavior	8	F = 16.3 M = 17.7	5.2 5.4	8–45	F = 9–38 M = 8–36	.80
Future time perspective	13	F = 45.8 M = 46.3	6.8 8.1	13–65	F = 30–64 M = 29–65	.80
Rape myth acceptance scale (IRMA-SF)	20	F = 32.9 M = 37.0	11.4 13.7	20–140	F = 17–73 M = 17–79	.94

protect themselves by using condoms” or “Your friends think having sex is a normal part of growing up for teenagers.” Cronbach’s alpha for this scale in previous work with late adolescents was .80 and construct validity was established (DiIorio et al., 2000).

FTP. The FTP scale, a subscale of the Zimbardo Time Perspective Inventory (Zimbardo & Boyd, 1999), measures a general future orientation dominated by striving for future goals and rewards. FTP has been identified as correlated to reducing risk behaviors (Aronowitz & Morrison-Beedy, 2004). This 13-item Likert scale used answer choices ranging from 1 = *not at all like me* to 5 = *very much like me* to assess whether the person sees positive outcomes for the future, with higher scores indicating higher future expectations. Typical items include: “When I want to achieve something, I set goals and consider specific ways for reaching those goals” and “Before making a decision, I weigh the costs against the benefits.” This scale has been shown to be internally consistent with test–retest reliability of .80; convergent and discriminant validity was also demonstrated (Zimbardo & Boyd, 1999).

Rape myth acceptance. The Illinois Rape Myth Acceptance-Short Form (IRMA-SF) is a 20-item instrument based on the original 45-item version. Participants responded to the 20-item measure by rating their level of agreement on a 7-point Likert scale (1 = *strongly disagree*, 7 = *strongly agree*); three of the items are filler items and are not scored (e.g., “All women should have access to self defense classes;” filler items were used in the original development of the measure to discourage response sets). Typical items include: “Women routinely lie about rape.” Factor analysis of IRMA-SF (Briere, Malamuth & Check, 1985) revealed four interrelated but independent dimensions underlying the construct of rape myths: (a) disbelief of rape claims, (b) victim responsible for rape, (c) rape reports as manipulation, and (d) rape only happens to certain kinds of women. A total score was calculated by summing the scored items, and thus the theoretical range of the instrument is 17 to 119. Higher scores indicate more endorsement of rape myths. The IRMA subscales are based on exploratory and confirmatory multivariate analyses of rape myths and addition to six studies demonstrating good psychometric properties both reliability (i.e., $\alpha = .94$) and construct validity (Payne, Lonsway, & Fitzgerald, 1999).

Analysis plan. Careful preliminary analyses were conducted to determine the distributional characteristics of the data by initially analyzing using univariate and bivariate analyses at a significance level of .05. To further examine significant correlations exploratory analyses were performed using *t*-tests.

RESULTS

Participants

Data was collected during the spring semester of 2010. Two hundred and thirty-seven students participated in the online survey, which was approximately one-fourth of the potential population of students. Female students (69.3%) were more likely to participate, compared to the male students (30.7%). This corresponds to the female-to-male ratio across campus. Fifty percent of the students were 18 years old, with 50.3% of them being freshmen. A minority of students had

become involved in Greek life (8%). Very few students had decided on their major at the time of the survey (8.5%).

Theoretical Constructs

Summaries of the findings are listed in Table 2. In regard to the motivational antecedent FTP, the sample was found to be future oriented and there was no difference between males and females.

Information

The overall mean for both men and women for total sexual knowledge was high. The majority of students (91%) agreed that if one is sexually active, latex condoms are the safest method to prevent a sexually transmitted infection. There were, however, some misconceptions about sexual knowledge. Forty-four percent of the sample believed that gonorrhea and syphilis were incurable. Increased sexual knowledge was negatively correlated to acceptance of social norms that are permissive regarding sexual behavior ($r = -.19, p = .002^{***}$). The greater sexual knowledge one had the less likely the individual was to accept rape myth attitudes ($r = -.28, p = .000^{***}$).

Motivation

Social norms. Only 5.9% of the sample thought that being sexually active at their age was a mistake. In fact, 14.7% of the sample thought that those who were not having sex were wasting their youth, and did not believe in waiting until marriage (44.5%). The majority of the sample believed it is okay to have sex with a condom (85.7%). There was a positive correlation between permissive social norms regarding sexual behavior and RMA ($r = .118, p = .035^*$). There was no significant difference on any of the constructs of interest by year of education.

TABLE 2
Summary of Findings

Bivariate Analyses

- ↑ Sexual knowledge negatively correlated to acceptance of social norms about sexual behavior ($r = -.192, p = .002$)
- ↑ Sexual knowledge is negatively related to RMA ($r = -.282, p = .000$)
- ↑ Social norms is positively correlated to RMA ($r = .118, p = .035$)
- Trend noted toward a positive correlation between FTP and sexual knowledge ($r = .096, p = .072$)

Exploratory Analyses

- Males have significantly higher RMA compared to females ($t = -2.24, p = .02$)
- There is a trend toward significance for males to accept social norms regarding sexual behaviors as compared to females ($t = -1.81, p = .07$)
- There is a trend toward significance for females to have higher sexual knowledge levels as compared to males ($t = .47, p = .08$)
- There was no significant difference between male and female FTP ($t = -.47, p = .64$)

Rape myth acceptance. Men had a significantly higher RMA, compared to women ($t = -2.24, p = .02^*$). Additionally, the less knowledge men had the more likely they were to accept rape myths ($r = -2.07, p = .001^{***}$). Forty-one percent of the sample believed that if a woman is raped while she is drunk, then she is partly responsible. Many individuals believed that forced sex is a turn on (23%). Sixty-three percent of the sample agreed that if a woman makes out with a guy, it is okay for him to push for sex.

Testing research questions. Both men and women had high levels of sexual knowledge, with no significant difference ($t = 1.75, p = .08$); however, women did have overall higher scores. Peer social norms regarding sexual behavior was higher among men, but there was not a significant difference ($t = -1.81, p = .07$). Men were significantly more accepting of rape myths, as compared to the women in this sample.

DISCUSSION

Information

The findings from this sample show that the more sexual knowledge the student had, the less likely he or she would be to accept the negative social norms of peers, and the less likely the student would be to accept rape myths. Although it has been shown that information alone is not enough to create behavioral change (J. D. Fisher & Fisher, 1992), these findings suggest that sexual knowledge is an important component leading to prosocial attitudes.

Motivation

Men's significantly higher RMA may be based on the sexual double standard that evaluates sexual behavior depending on whether a man or woman engages in it (Marks & Fraley, 2006). For example, it is often suggested that what a woman chooses to wear makes her at risk for sexual assault; however, the same belief is not held for men. Additionally, social norms of male sexual dominance and female sexual submission add to the trivialization and/or justification of male sexual coercion toward women (Krape, Scheinberger-Olwig, & Kolpin, 2000). Certainly, the objectification of women is evident in the media, particularly in car and alcohol commercials.

Another explanation is the claim that North American culture is a "rape-supporting culture" (Scully, 1990, p. 98). In a rape-supporting culture there are messages throughout society that allow the majority of sexually aggressive men to claim that they are not rapists. An event that does not qualify as violent stranger rape may not be perceived as a crime at all. College campuses have, in the past, prescribed to the rape-supporting culture by having very little consequences for the men when a rape is reported. This then leads to women's feelings of powerlessness and a perceived lack of confidentiality in reporting (Paul & Gray, 2011).

A college campus is an environment that has few persons with criminal records, and is an environment that the public would not consider threatening. This makes the high sexual assault victimization rates on college campuses an interesting phenomenon. One explanation that has been discussed is the male peer support theory that argues that men who abuse women do so because they have other men's encouragement and support. These groups perpetuate

and legitimize sexual exploitation of women, especially when they are intoxicated (Schwartz, DeKeseredy, Tait, & Alvi, 2001). Specific groups, such as fraternities and athletes, are particularly vulnerable to the male peer support for sexual exploitation. These groups have been targeted for interventions in the past, which has led to the men feeling that they are all being blamed (Choates, 2003). In this sample, no analysis was performed regarding involvement in Greek life, for only 8% had become involved due to the majority of the sample were freshmen.

Currently, many universities offer support services for victims, but few provide extensive training related to sexual assault prevention (McMahon, Postmus, & Koenick, 2011). The focus of these school strategies often reinforces gendered social norms restricting women's behavior to what is thought to be appropriate for nice girls or be responsible for the consequences of sexual harassment and assault. For example, many programs during orientation discuss always walking with someone and having a buddy plan. To the extent that services promote individual and victim-centered strategies, universities support patriarchal social norms that restrict women's independent use of public space. These interventions inadvertently support the myths that most rapes are stranger rapes and that women's behaviors increases their risk. Strategies need to be implemented that focus on the type of rape most common on college campuses (90% of rapes on campus are acquaintance rape; Sampson, 2002).

LIMITATIONS

This pilot study explored the sexual knowledge and attitudes about sexual behavior and rape myth acceptance. Because of the higher prevalence of female victimization by men and the heterosexual focus of this pilot study, the findings cannot be generalized to a lesbian-gay-bisexual-transgender community. The information obtained is helpful in beginning to plan for a prosocial bystander intervention. It is hoped that instilling prosocial bystander behaviors would in the end decrease violence targeted at all individuals. The results are specific to a northeastern urban university's 1st- and 2nd-year students and cannot be generalized to other populations. Although random selection was employed, the sample was a self-selected group. Although FTP has been shown to be significant in reducing risk (Aronowitz & Morrison-Beedy, 2004) it did not affect decision-making in this population. This is probably because the participants are already future oriented, being that they are college students planning for their future.

CONCLUSION

First- and 2nd-year female students on college campuses are a vulnerable population in respect to their risk of sexual assault. Researchers have attempted to assess the effectiveness of various sexual assault prevention programs. Sexual assault prevention programs have focused on components such as providing information on the prevalence of sexual assault, challenging rape myth attitudes, discussions of sex-role stereotypical behaviors that contribute to sexual assault and practical suggestions for safe dating behaviors (Sochting et al., 2004). Some have focused on changing men's attitudes and behavior (Choates, 2003), whereas others have focused on direct prevention efforts for women (Banyard, Plante, Cohn, Morrhead, Ward, & Walsh, 2005). Ultimately men and women can both benefit from increased knowledge and awareness of the important topic and

from an understanding of the challenges and struggles that the opposite sex faces with regard to sexual assault related issues (Banyard, Moynihan, & Crossman, 2009).

Results of this study will provide preliminary data crucial to planning and piloting a culturally relevant, theoretically based randomized controlled clinical trial aimed at decreasing rape myth acceptance and increasing prosocial bystander action on campus. Taking a primary prevention approach, such as orientation programs for incoming students that focus of challenging rape myths, would offer all students the chance to take part in sexual assault prevention, which is consistent with primary prevention and a community health framework (Centers for Disease Control, 2008).

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