Beliefs About Rape and Women's Social Roles: A Four-Nation Study
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Researchers dealing with feminist issues have proposed that sexual assaults on women are supported by social beliefs that encourage male domination and exploitation of women. One of the most influential sources for this position is Susan Brownmiller's (1975) social-historical analysis of rape, in which she argues that "rape myths" help support men's social and economical control of women. If this is true, beliefs in rape myths should be positively correlated with beliefs that restrict women's social roles and rights. This hypothesis was tested in four countries: United States, England, Israel, and West Germany. Two self-report scales were used, one measuring the acceptance of rape myths and the other measuring restrictive beliefs about women's social roles. Translations of the scales provided the instruments for the Israeli and West German subjects. Subjects for Phase 1, carried out in the United States, included female and male university undergraduates and women and men employed in a variety of occupations. Product-moment correlations between scores on the two scales were significant (p < .01) for all four groups, with r's ranging from .72 for employed women to .46 for employed men. Phase 2 was carried out in the United States, England, Israel, and West Germany. In addition to university graduates in all four countries, subjects included secondary school teachers from the United States and England, and women and men from a variety of other occupations in the United States. Acceptance of rape myths was significantly correlated (p < .01) with restrictive beliefs about women's social roles and rights in all but 1 of the 19 groups tested. The r's ranged from .87 for female teachers to .40 for male police in the United States. Social and educational implications of the confirmed hypothesis are discussed.

Beliefs About Rape and Women's Social Roles
A Four-Nation Study

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Various researchers dealing with feminist issues have argued that rape and other forms of sexual assault against women are supported, at least in part, by social beliefs that encourage male domination and

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exploitation of women. The most influential source of this argument is Susan Brownmiller’s (1975) social-historical analysis of rape, *Against Our Will*. A central theme in her analysis is that rape has an intimidating effect on all women, not only those who have actually been raped. Thus, according to Brownmiller, rape “is nothing more or less than a conscious process of intimidation by which all men keep all women in a state of fear” (p. 5). This intimidation is expected to reduce women’s self-esteem, decrease their motivation to achieve in the same social areas as men, and strengthen their adherence to traditional gender roles.

Although Brownmiller has been criticized for exaggerating the process of “male intimidation,” and for various polemical excesses, *Against Our Will* remains a landmark historical analysis of rape as a social phenomenon (Geis, 1977, pp. 15-18). Especially important is the departure from conventional views of rape. Rather than emphasizing that rape is a “deviant sexual act” and thus simply another form of psychosexual disorder, Brownmiller views it mainly as an aggressive and antisocial tool of control. Its central purpose is to humiliate and debase the victim; the sex act itself is not the primary motive. This view is consistent with an earlier study of forcible rape by Menachem Amir (1971), the Israeli sociologist, whose pioneering contribution to the sociocultural nature of rape is acknowledged by Brownmiller to have influenced her own writings on the subject. Amir points out that rapists are not a danger to the community because of their sexual behavior per se, but because they use sex as a vehicle for a violent and antisocial act.

Brownmiller ties her central theme of male domination and intimidation to the prevalence of “rape myths,” that is, beliefs about rape that place women at a disadvantage. Among such common myths are “All women want to be raped” and “She was asking for it” (p. 346). Brownmiller asserts that rape myths support a belief in the “supreme rightness of male power.” By making women appear to be willing
participants in the act, these myths obscure the "true nature of rape,"
aggression aimed at maintaining male supremacy (p. 346).

The results of several recent studies are consistent with Brown-
miller's theory of "rape myths" and "male power." In her field study
of tribal societies, Sanday (1981) found that, in contrast to women in
societies relatively free of rape, women in "rape-prone" societies did
not participate in decision making and had very limited power. She
concludes, like Brownmiller, that "rape is an expression of a social
ideology of male dominance" (p. 24).

A study by Burt (1980) involved interviews with some 600 adults in
Minnesota. These interviews were designed to elicit "myths" about
rape and various attitudes toward social relationships. Burt found
that, consistent with Brownmiller's thesis, acceptance of rape myths
went along with approval of interpersonal violence as a way of life.

More recently, Schwarz and Brand (1983) have provided experi-
mental evidence concerning the impact of vicarious exposure to rape
on beliefs about women's rights. In this study, American college
women were exposed to a pseudo-newspaper account of rape that
strongly implied that the female victim had been careless. Subse-
quently, they reported less liberal beliefs about women's social roles
and rights than did female students who had not read the story.
Consistent with Brownmiller's position, the finding suggests that the
threat of rape may well have an intimidating effect even on women
who have not necessarily experienced sexual assault.

Although suggestive, these studies do not represent a direct empir-
ical test of the central hypothesis inherent in Brownmiller's theory
of rape myths: Beliefs in myths about rape are positively correlated
with beliefs that women's social roles and rights should be more
restricted than those of men. However, as a minor part of a more
general study, Feild (1978) reported data that did offer more direct
evidence. The primary purpose of his investigation was to survey
attitudes toward rape held by police officers, rapists, crisis counsel-
ors, and general "citizens." In an analysis of the "citizen" sample, Feild
discovered that individuals who thought women should be restricted
to "traditional" social roles also tended to believe that rape was often
the woman's fault and that rape is motivated by a strong need for
sexual release. The significant correlations between these beliefs and
views of women's social roles were .30 or less.

Given the evidence revealed by these studies, and the powerful
influence that Brownmiller's historical analysis has had on feminist
views of rape, it is appropriate to test more broadly and directly the hypothesis that acceptance of rape myths is positively correlated with beliefs that restrict women’s social roles and rights. With this in mind, we tested the hypothesis in four different countries: United States, England, Israel, and West Germany. Although the subjects were not representative, they did provide a broad test of the hypothesis due to their variation in cultural and socioeconomic background. Furthermore, it was possible to test university undergraduates in all four countries, thus increasing the plausibility of replication. Thus the strategy of the analysis was to discover whether support of the hypothesis could be obtained in very different sociocultural settings. In addition, the principle of replication was applied to this related question: Within each country, are there sex differences (a) in support of the hypothesis and (b) in the acceptance of rape myths and restrictive beliefs about women’s social roles?

**PHASE 1**

The study was carried out in three phases. The first phase, which took place in the United States during 1981, has been described in detail elsewhere (Costin, 1985). However, since the method of gathering data was the same as that used in Phases 2 and 3, we shall review the earlier phase briefly before reporting our more recent findings.

**Subjects and Method**

The subjects were undergraduate students in a large midwestern university (432 women, 140 men) and women and men employed in the metropolitan area of Chicago (Ns = 114 and 76, respectively).

Two self-report scales were developed, each consisting of 20 items. The $R$ scale was derived mainly from a 32-item questionnaire developed by Feild (1978). A total of 7 of the items were taken directly from his instrument, 4 were modified versions, and 4 were newly constructed. All 20 items reflected the kinds of myths about rape often cited in the works of feminist writers and others who have dealt extensively with the subject (for example, Brownmiller, 1975; Malamuth, 1981). Illustrative items are as follows:

- Many women really want to be raped.
- A charge of rape two days after the act has occurred is probably not rape.
- Most rapists are oversexed.
The $W$ scale consisted of items dealing with women’s social roles and rights, and was adapted mainly from a more extensive inventory developed by Spence and Helmreich (1972). Items that were retained or modified were those that undergraduate women enrolled in courses on women’s studies believed to be especially crucial issues. Of these, 12 were the same as in the Spence and Helmreich inventory, 3 were modified versions from that instrument, and 5 were adapted from other statements often occurring in feminist writings. The following items illustrate the nature of the $W$ scale:

- Women should receive the same pay as men for doing the same work.
- Women should worry less about their rights and more about becoming good wives and mothers.
- Women should have as much sexual freedom as men.

Spearman-Brown reliability estimates for the $W$ scale ranged from 0.79 for the female undergraduates to 0.91 for the employed women. The coefficients for the $R$ scale ranged from 0.67 for the male college students to 0.80 for the employed women.

To facilitate administration and help reduce the possibility of oversensitizing respondents, the $R$ scale items were combined randomly with those of the $W$ scale to form a single instrument. All items were scored on a 6-point scale, from “strongly agree” (1) to “strongly disagree” (6). To control for acquiescence set, the phrasing of items varied as to whether agreement or disagreement produced a high score: The higher the score, the stronger the belief.¹

**Results**

The correlation between scores on the $R$ scale and $W$ scale were as follows: students, .55 for women ($N = 432$) and .54 for men ($N = 140$); employed women, .72 ($N = 114$); employed men, .46 ($N = 76$). All correlations were significant below the .01 level of probability. These results were consistent with the finding reported earlier for Feild’s survey. Tentatively, then, this first phase of our study supported the hypothesis that myths about rape are correlated with beliefs that women’s social roles and rights should be more restricted than those of men.
PHASE 2

Subjects and Method

The data in Phase 2 were gathered in the United States during 1982. Subjects represented a new and more extensive sample than in Phase 1. The undergraduates (411 women, 261 men) were from a large midwestern university, and were recruited from sororities, fraternities, residence halls, and independent houses. The employed women and men, totaling 385, included nurses, police officers, secondary school teachers, and other professional, managerial, and technical personnel; clerical workers; and workers in a variety of skilled and semiskilled trades (see Table 1). The scales used for gathering data were the same as in Phase 1.

Results

The upper part of Table 1 shows the mean scores and standard deviations for the $R$ and $W$ scales, as well as the product-moment correlations between the scales. As a whole, the magnitude of those relationships was substantial. Of the eleven correlations, all but one (.31) were significant at or below the .01 level of probability. They ranged from .87 for female students to .40 for police officers (all men), and exceeded .50 in all but two instances. Thus, as in Phase 1, the results supported the hypothesis that myths about rape—beliefs that place women at a disadvantage—are positively related to beliefs that women's social roles should be restricted.

Within four of the seven occupational groups, comparisons could be made between the correlations for men and women. In only one instance was there a significant difference: .87 for female students versus .55 for male students ($p < .01$). However, in each of these groups, women had lower mean scores than men on both the $R$ and the $W$ scales. This finding is consistent with sex differences in myths about rape reported in previous studies (Calhoun, Selby, & Warring, 1976; Feild, 1978; Feldmann-Sumner & Lindner, 1976; Selby, Calhoun, & Brock, 1977). From the perspective of Brownmiller's (1975) analysis these results are to be expected, since it is more in the interest of men to accept rape myths ($p .346$). Differences in the $W$ scale represent self-interest of another sort; one would expect that, on the average, women would uphold their social rights more strongly than would men.
<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Occupational Group</th>
<th>N</th>
<th>R Scale</th>
<th>W Scale</th>
<th>r: R versus W</th>
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<tr>
<td><strong>USA (1982)</strong></td>
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<td>12.7</td>
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<td>8.4</td>
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<td>Police (M)</td>
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<td>8.2</td>
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<td></td>
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<td>11.0</td>
<td>11.8</td>
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<td><strong>England (1983)</strong></td>
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<td>.56</td>
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<td></td>
<td>13.6</td>
<td>13.9</td>
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<td>.70</td>
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<td>42.5</td>
<td>.51</td>
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<td>10.2</td>
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<tr>
<td>Undergraduates (M)</td>
<td>35</td>
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<td>51.6</td>
<td>.72</td>
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<td><strong>West Germany (1983)</strong></td>
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<td>43.1</td>
<td>.68</td>
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TABLE 1 Continued

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<td>11.1</td>
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</table>

NOTE: PMT = professional, managerial, technical. Each scale contained 20 items; the higher the mean score on a scale, the stronger the beliefs. All correlations are significant at or below the .01 level of probability, except where marked NS (p > .05). Mean scores for each female-male pair within a given occupational group differ significantly at or below the .05 level of probability.

PHASE 3

Subjects and Method

The third phase of the study was carried out during 1983. Subjects included 194 university undergraduates and 91 secondary school teachers from various regions in England, 98 undergraduates in Israel, and 153 undergraduates in West Germany (see Table 1).

The scales used in England were the same as those administered in the United States. Translations of the scales into Hebrew and German provided the instruments for the Israeli and West German subjects. The adequacy of the translations was controlled through independent back-translations. Spearman-Brown reliabilities ranged from .68 to .77 for the R scale and from .64 to .72 for the W scale.

Results

The lower part of Table 1 shows the results obtained in England, Israel, and West Germany. All of the eight correlations between the R scale and the W scale were significant (p < .01), ranging from .51 for female students in Israel to .80 for male teachers in England. Thus the hypothesis was supported in all three countries.

As we pointed out in Phase 2, comparisons between the correlations for women and men within the occupational group in the United States yielded only one significant difference—in favor of female students. Similar comparisons were made for the four occupational groups in England, Israel, and West Germany. Consistent with the U.S. data, in only one instance was there a significant difference (p < .05). That occurred for the secondary school teachers in England:
.70 for women versus .80 for men. Thus there were no consistent sex differences in support of the hypothesis that myths about rape are positively correlated with restrictive beliefs concerning women’s social roles. Furthermore, as in the U. S. data, women in each country had significantly lower mean scores on each scale than did men (see Table 1).

DISCUSSION

Data from the United States, England, Israel, and West Germany all supported the hypothesis that myths about rape are positively correlated with beliefs that women’s social roles should be more restricted than men’s. Thus our findings converge with the historical analysis by Brownmiller (1975) and the anthropological data reported by Sanday (1981), both of whom conclude that rape reflects a social ideology of male domination over women. They are also consistent with the studies by Burt (1980), Schwarz and Brand (1983), and Feild (1978), whose findings we discussed earlier.

Without necessarily implying a direct cause-and-effect relationship, the results of our study also have potentially important practical applications. To begin with, the knowledge that rape myths are indeed related to restrictive beliefs about women’s social roles and rights could be helpful in counseling with women who have been victims of sexual assault. For example, such women may experience a great deal of unjustified self-blame and guilt, and in doing so reflect an acceptance of rape myths. Exploring such beliefs could then be incorporated into the counseling sessions. An important goal would be to help the victims understand how the acceptance of myths about rape helps maintain a social climate conducive to “keeping women in their place” and thus lending social support to sexual assault.

Knowledge concerning the relationship between acceptance of rape myths and restrictive beliefs about women’s social roles might also be profitably employed in various educational programs in which the topic of sexual assault is likely to occur. A particular example may be found in courses dealing with abnormal psychology, psychopathology, social work, women’s studies, human sexuality, and related subject matter. Rather than treating sexual assault mainly as a “pathological act” of a “mentally ill person,” as many traditional textbooks do, the focus could be on rape as a social crime rather than
simply as a "deviant sex act." In presenting this perspective, data concerning the relationship between rape myths and restrictive beliefs about women’s social roles could be used to bolster a social approach to understanding rape, emphasizing its criminal nature rather than treating it as an expression of sexual impulses per se. This perspective could be especially fruitful in examining the phenomenon of "acquaintance" or "date" rape, in which the perpetrator is not likely to conform to the traditional image of the rapist as a "sexual deviant" suffering from a "mental disorder."

Finally, the consistent demonstration that rape myths are correlated with restrictive beliefs about women’s social roles point the way toward further research: discovering whether the liberalizing of beliefs about women’s social roles could contribute to the reduction of rape myths, thus providing a social atmosphere that discourages sexual assault. These endeavors could be carried out not only as a part of formal educational programs, but also through the mass media. Furthermore, evidence that rape myths are directly connected to restrictive beliefs concerning women’s place in society could be used to help support public policies for strengthening the social and economic rights of women.

NOTE

1. A complete list of items for each scale is available from the first author.

REFERENCES


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