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Rape Myth Acceptance and Rape Proclivity

Expected Dominance Versus Expected Arousal as Mediators in Acquaintance-Rape Situations

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Individuals who are high in rape myth acceptance (RMA) have been found to report a high proclivity to rape. In a series of three studies, the authors examined whether the relationship between RMA and self-reported rape proclivity was mediated by anticipated sexual arousal or anticipated enjoyment of sexually dominating the rape victim. Results of all three studies suggest that the anticipated enjoyment of sexual dominance mediates the relationship between RMA and rape proclivity, whereas anticipated sexual arousal does not. These findings are consistent with the feminist argument that rape and sexual violence may be motivated by men's desire to exert power over women. Theoretical and practical implications of our findings are discussed.

Keywords: *motives for sexual violence; rape myths; rape proclivity; sexual arousal; sexual dominance*

A large proportion of the male population seems to show some proclivity toward exerting sexual violence (for reviews, see Lonsway & Fitzgerald,

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1994; Malamuth, 1981). This finding has emerged in a number of studies that employed self-report measures of rape proclivity (RP), asking men to indicate the likelihood that they would rape if they could be assured of not being caught (Malamuth, 1981; Malamuth & Check, 1985; Quackenbush, 1989). For example, Malamuth (1981) observed that 35% of the respondents in college samples indicated some likelihood of perpetrating sexual assault.

However, direct self-reports of RP may be criticized for several reasons. Often, the items assessing RP have been embedded in a large pool of questions pertaining to "sexual activities" (e.g., Malamuth, 1989a, 1989b). This context may have suggested to participants that the items regarding rape and using force could be interpreted as acceptable variants of sexual behavior (see Bohner et al., 1998). Furthermore, the use of direct self-report items raises the concern that participants may respond in a socially desirable manner. To address both issues, Bohner et al. (1998) developed a new measure of RP based on five realistic scenarios in which an acquaintance rape is described, but the word "rape" is never used. Respondents are simply asked to indicate whether they would have behaved like the person described in each scenario. This scenario measure of RP was shown to be unrelated to social desirability, whereas the direct RP measure taken from Malamuth (1989a, 1989b) showed a small but significant correlation with a measure of social desirability. Furthermore, the proportion of respondents indicating some likelihood of raping was higher for the scenario measure than for Malamuth's items (Bohner et al., 1998).

Among the predictors of RP, rape-related beliefs play a prominent role. For example, researchers have found that individuals who are high in rape myth acceptance (RMA) report a higher likelihood of raping in comparison to individuals who are low in RMA (Bohner et al., 1998; Malamuth, 1981; Malamuth & Check, 1985; Tieger, 1981). Rape myths may be defined as "stereotypic beliefs about rape that blame the victim and exonerate the rapist" (Bohner et al., 1998, p. 258). These beliefs are often assessed via participants' endorsement of statements like "Women who are raped ask for it" or "Most rapists are oversexed" (for reviews, see Bohner, 1998; Lonsway & Fitzgerald, 1994).

Bohner and his colleagues (1998) further tested the notion that RMA may causally affect men's tendency to engage in sexual violence. They reasoned that if RMA had a causal effect on RP, then the relationship between RMA and RP should be particularly strong when a man's own endorsement of rape myths was salient to him at the time he completed a RP measure. To test this prediction, they asked male participants to report their RP either before or after completing a 20-item RMA scale (for a comprehensive discussion of this method, see Schwarz & Strack, 1981). In two studies, Bohner et al. found

that the relationship between RMA and RP was indeed significantly stronger when participants had completed the RMA scale first (versus last), suggesting that RMA may play a causal role in RP. This finding was interpreted in line with a suggestion by Burt (1978), who argued that rape myths may be used as “psychological releasers or neutralizers, allowing potential rapists to turn off social prohibitions against injuring or using others when they want to commit an assault” (p. 282).

In the present article, we further examine the motivations that may underlie and mediate the link between RMA and RP. There are mainly two motivations for rape that are discussed in the literature (and represented in laypersons’ subjective perceptions of rape) (Anderson & Swainson, 2001): the motivation to obtain sex and the motivation to exert power. The sexual motivation view emphasizes either an evolutionary perspective (for a review, see Archer & Vaughan, 2001), proposing that rape may be used by men as an adaptive mating strategy to compensate for a lack of opportunity to obtain consensual sex (e.g., Thornhill & Palmer, 2000; Thornhill & Thornhill, 1992) or a more general cost-benefit approach, whereby a rapist applies a method of obtaining sexual gratification that entails relatively low costs (see Medea & Thompson, 1974). In either case, however, the ultimate motivation is sexual in nature. By contrast, the feminist view of rape as exertion of power maintains that rape is used as one means (among others) by which men maintain and enforce a status hierarchy that is to their own advantage and to the disadvantage of women. Brownmiller (1975), for example, described rape as “a conscious process of intimidation by which *all men* keep *all women* in a state of fear” (p. 15; emphasis in original; see also Russell, 1982). From this perspective, the sexual aspect of rape is not motivationally relevant. Accordingly, rape has been characterized as a “pseudosexual act” and as “sexual behavior in the primary service of non-sexual needs” (Groth, 1979, p. 13).

Research into rapists’ motivation has produced somewhat mixed evidence regarding men’s predominant motives for exerting sexual violence (for a review, see Ellis, 1989). In a study conducted by Scully and Marolla (1985), convicted rapists mentioned the desire for excitement and risk taking as often as the desire for sex or domination. Based on interviews with convicted sex offenders, Prah and Ayerakwa (2001) concluded that these rapists underestimated the severity of their actions and were mainly concerned about satisfying their sexual urges, rationalizing their behavior by the myth that men cannot control their sexuality. In a study by Yegidis (1986), college students who admitted to have used violence in sexual encounters rarely mentioned a desire for power but did mention getting sexually aroused during their actions. Finally, studies have also found that date rapists try indirect tactics, such as getting their date drunk or falsely pledging love in order to have sex

with their victims (Rapaport & Burkhart, 1984). It is only when these tactics fail that date rapists then resort to the use of more direct forms of violence (Ellis, 1989; Koss & Leonard, 1984; Mosher & Anderson, 1986).

Although varied, the results of the above studies suggest that the main motivation for rape may not be the desire to dominate women but rather the desire for sexual gratification. However, these studies relied mostly on convicted or self-confessed rapists' explanations for their own behavior. This procedure may be problematic for two reasons. First, it is possible that rapists themselves may not be aware of what motivates them to rape (Ellis, 1989). Second, even if rapists were aware of their real motivations, it seems highly unlikely that they would admit that they only rape to dominate women. Common myths about rape suggest that men cannot control their sexual urges (Burt, 1980; Lonsway & Fitzgerald, 1995). As such, it is possible that rapists rely on these more socially acceptable explanations to rationalize, excuse, or justify their behavior (Bohner et al., 1998; Prah & Ayerakwa, 2001; Scully & Marolla, 1984).

At least one study on potential motivations for rape took a different approach. Hamilton and Yee (1990) argued that if rape is used as a means of obtaining sex, then more accurate knowledge of the traumatic effects that rape can have on the victim should deter men from raping; if, however, rape is used as a means of exerting power, then more accurate knowledge of its aversive effects should either be unrelated to RP or may even enhance it. To test this hypothesis, they assessed undergraduates' rape-related attitudes, RP, and knowledge about the effects of rape on its victims. Their results were consistent with the view of rape as a means of obtaining sex: Men who had greater knowledge about the traumatic effects of rape reported both fewer pro-rape attitudes and lower RP.

Although Hamilton and Yee's (1990) study nicely goes beyond mere self-reports of motives, it remains somewhat inconclusive regarding the motivational mediators of the link between RMA and RP. The finding that men with more pro-rape attitudes (i.e. higher RMA) also perceive rape to be less harmful may constitute one pathway by which RMA causally affects RP. Other contents of rape myths, however, maintain that women who behave "inappropriately" deserve to be "punished" (Burt, 1991). Thus, the effects of RMA on RP may be mediated by both sexual and power-related motives simultaneously.¹ Finally, the findings of both Bohner et al. (1998) and Hamilton and Yee (1990) would be compatible with the notion that rape myths mainly serve as justifications or rationalizations for rape although the "real" motivation is the desire to dominate women sexually. To address these questions more directly than has been done in previous research, we conducted a series of mediational studies.

Overview of Studies and Hypotheses

Although studies have shown that stereotypic beliefs about rape influence participants' likelihood of raping, we are not aware of any studies that have investigated whether anticipated sexual arousal or anticipated enjoyment of sexual domination mediates this relationship. Because both anticipated arousal and enjoyment of sexual domination had been assessed by Bohner et al. (1998, Experiment 2), we started with a reanalysis of their data that would allow us to test the effects of both potential mediators simultaneously. In addition, we conducted two independent studies that used the same design and analytic strategy. Our studies focus on self-reported RP in the context of acquaintance rape. This approach has several advantages. On one hand, there is a possibility that in the general population there are a number of date rapists that have not yet been detected (cf. Gross, Weed, & Lawson, 1998). On the other hand, participants with some proclivity to commit date rape are different from convicted date rapists in that their motivation to excuse or justify crimes that have already been committed and detected may be low or even absent. As such, the role of expected sexual arousal and expected enjoyment of sexual dominance in the proclivity to rape can be assessed in an unbiased fashion.

In all three studies, male participants reported their RMA and read five date rape scenarios. For each scenario, participants were asked (a) to indicate the likelihood that they would behave like the perpetrator (*rape proclivity*), (b) to indicate how sexually aroused they would feel in the situation (*sexual arousal*), and (c) to indicate how much they would have enjoyed getting their way (*dominance*). Our starting point was the significant positive relationship between RMA and RP that was observed by Bohner et al. (1998). We expected to replicate this relationship in both of the follow-up studies. Furthermore, we explored the role of both anticipated sexual arousal and anticipated enjoyment of domination as concurrent mediators in a multiple regression model (see Baron & Kenny, 1986).

The current studies also provided an opportunity to compare the relationship between RMA and RP cross-culturally. Study 1 (the reanalysis of data from Bohner et al., 1998) used a sample of German university students, Study 2 was conducted with university students in the United Kingdom, and Study 3 was conducted with college students in Zimbabwe. We are not aware of any studies that have investigated RMA, RP, or the relationship between the two constructs using an African sample. Thus, the current Study 3 enabled us to establish the reliability of both Costin's Rape Myth Acceptance Scale (Costin's R) (Costin, 1985) and the scenario-based measure of RP (Bohner et al., 1998) in a different cultural context. Because the methods and

analyses were similar across studies, all three studies are described in one Method section and one Results section.

METHOD

Participants and Procedure

Study 1. This study constitutes a reanalysis of the data from Experiment 2 by Bohner et al. (1998). Participants were 113 male students from different faculties at the University of Mannheim, Germany, who had been recruited on campus for a study on “different aspects of sexual relationships between men and women.” All participants in this study were of European origin. Their mean age was 23.9 years. All materials were completed in a laboratory setting but could be returned anonymously to a collection box. Participants received 7 German Marks (roughly equivalent to US\$3.50) for their participation.

Study 2. Participants were 114 male volunteers living in the southeast of England. They were recruited on the campus of the University of Kent at Canterbury (UKC) and in other places through personal contact by one of the authors. Sixty participants were UKC undergraduates (mean age = 21.5 years), and 54 were nonstudents from a variety of occupational backgrounds (e.g., security personnel, firefighters, engineers; mean age = 35.7 years). Although ethnic origin was not assessed in this study, it can be assumed that the majority of participants were of European origin. Completed questionnaires could be returned anonymously to the experimenters; no course credits or other rewards could be earned.

Study 3. Eighty-three male students from five colleges of higher education in Zimbabwe volunteered to participate in the study. Participants' mean age was 25.9 years, and all were of African origin (92.4% Zimbabwean; 7.6% “other”). Participants were recruited through the head of their college and completed the questionnaires individually in a classroom setting. They did not earn any college credits or other rewards for participation.

Materials

All materials in Study 1 were administered in German, whereas materials in Studies 2 and 3 were administered in English. Although English was the

second language for most of the Zimbabwean participants in Study 3, all participants were fluent English speakers. (English is the language of instruction in all colleges in Zimbabwe.)

Rape myth acceptance. To measure RMA, participants in all three studies were asked to complete a slightly modified version of Costin's (1985) R-Scale that contained 20 items (e.g., "Many women really want to be raped," "In general, rape victims exhibit more provocative behavior than victims of other kinds of violent crime"). Numerous studies conducted in Europe and North America attest to this scale's reliability and construct validity: Estimates of internal consistency and retest reliability were generally in the range of .70 to .85, and the scale showed meaningful relations to constructs such as attitudes toward women's rights, interpersonal trust, blaming of rape victims, and RP (Bohner, 1998, 2001; Bohner et al., 1998; Costin, 1985; Costin & Schwarz, 1987). Participants indicated their level of agreement with each RMA item along a scale from 1 (*completely disagree*) to 7 (*completely agree*).

Rape proclivity and potential mediators. Participants also received five written date rape scenarios.² The English scenarios used in Studies 2 and 3 were direct translations of the German scenarios used in Study 1 (Bohner et al., 1998). A sample scenario read as follows:

You have gone out a few times with a woman you met recently. One weekend you go to a film together and then back to your place. You have a few beers, listen to music, and do a bit of petting. At a certain point your friend realizes she has had too much to drink to be able to drive home. You say she can stay over with you, no problem. You are keen to grab this opportunity and sleep with her. She objects, saying you are rushing her and anyway she is too drunk. You don't let that put you off, you lie down on her and just do it.

Participants were asked to imagine that they were in the same position as the man in the scenario and to answer three questions for each scenario. Expectations of sexual arousal were assessed by asking participants, "How sexually aroused would you have felt in this situation?" (1 = *not sexually aroused*, 2 = *rather not sexually aroused*, 3 = *don't know*, 4 = *somewhat sexually aroused*, 5 = *very much sexually aroused*). Participants' RP was assessed by asking participants, "Would you have behaved like this in this situation?" (1 = *not at all*, 2 = *rather not*, 3 = *don't know*, 4 = *rather yes*, 5 = *very much*). Expectations of enjoying sexual dominance were assessed by asking participants, "How much would you have enjoyed getting your way in this situation?" (1 = *not at all*, 2 = *rather not*, 3 = *don't know*, 4 = *rather yes*, 5 = *very much*).³

Analysis

In all three studies, we first assessed the internal consistencies of all scales. Then we tested a series of regression models. RMA was used as the primary predictor⁴ of RP, and both expected arousal and expected enjoyment of domination were used as concurrent mediators. Following suggestions by Baron and Kenny (1986), we estimated the bivariate effects of RMA on RP and on each mediator, respectively, the correlation between the two mediators, and the corrected effects of RMA on RP as well as of each mediator on RP once all variables were included in the model. Mediation is indicated if the beta coefficient predicting RP from RMA is significantly reduced once the other mediators are included in the model. Furthermore, an effective mediator itself remains significantly related to the criterion variable once all variables are in the model. To test the significance of indirect (i.e., mediated) paths, a *z* test based on Sobel (1982) was used (see also Baron & Kenny, 1986).

RESULTS

Preliminary Analyses

Cronbach's alpha for each scale in each study is displayed in Table 1. As the internal consistencies of all measures were at least satisfactory, composite mean scores for all scales were calculated for each participant by combining the relevant items (after reverse-scoring negatively cued items where appropriate), yielding an RMA score, an RP index, an enjoyment of domination index, and a sexual arousal index. Means and standard deviations for all variables are presented in Table 2, along with an indication of significant differences across samples. The results indicate that the Zimbabwean sample (Study 3) had higher mean scores than both the English and the German sample on all four indices (all $p < .01$), whereas the English and German samples did not differ from each other (all $p > .05$). The results also confirm that the measures of RMA and RP are reliable within the Zimbabwean context.

Test of Hypotheses

For each data set, mediation analyses (Baron & Kenny, 1986) were performed as described above. The results are summarized in Figures 1 to 3. As the Figures indicate, the beta coefficient for predicting RP from RMA was clearly reduced once the potential mediators were included. This was true in

TABLE 1: Cronbach's Alpha of All Scales Used

Scale	Study		
	1	2	3
Rape myth acceptance	.80	.80	.71
Rape proclivity index	.78	.78	.69
Enjoyment of domination index	.74	.85	.71
Sexual arousal index	.76	.83	.67

TABLE 2: Means and Standard Deviations for All Scales

Variable	Study		
	1	2	3
Rape myth acceptance	2.70 _a (0.73)	2.62 _a (0.80)	4.27 _b (0.82)
Rape proclivity index	1.72 _a (0.65)	1.59 _a (0.62)	2.72 _b (0.92)
Enjoyment of domination index	1.99 _a (0.73)	1.98 _a (0.85)	2.87 _b (0.98)
Sexual arousal index	2.64 _a (0.83)	2.49 _a (0.91)	3.40 _b (0.88)

NOTE: Within each line, means not sharing a common subscript differ significantly at $p < .01$ (based on pairwise t tests with Bonferroni correction for multiple testing).

all three studies. Furthermore, although the two potential mediators were highly correlated, after controlling for their common variance only anticipated enjoyment of dominance, but not anticipated arousal, proved to be significantly related to RP in Studies 1 and 2. In Study 3, the relationship between RMA and anticipated sexual arousal failed to reach significance, which rules out sexual arousal as a potential mediator. Moreover, the relationship between anticipated arousal and RP was much smaller than the relationship between anticipated enjoyment of dominance and RP in Study 3. Thus, the combined results of our studies suggest that the relationship between RMA and RP is mediated by expected enjoyment of dominance, whereas expected sexual arousal does not contribute to mediation. The z tests for significance of the indirect paths supported these conclusions: For the indirect path via arousal, we found $z = 1.50, 1.89,$ and $.51$ in Studies 1, 2, and 3, respectively (all $p > .05$), whereas for the indirect path via expected enjoyment of sexual dominance, the respective z scores were $2.86, 4.55,$ and 2.31 (all $p < .02$).

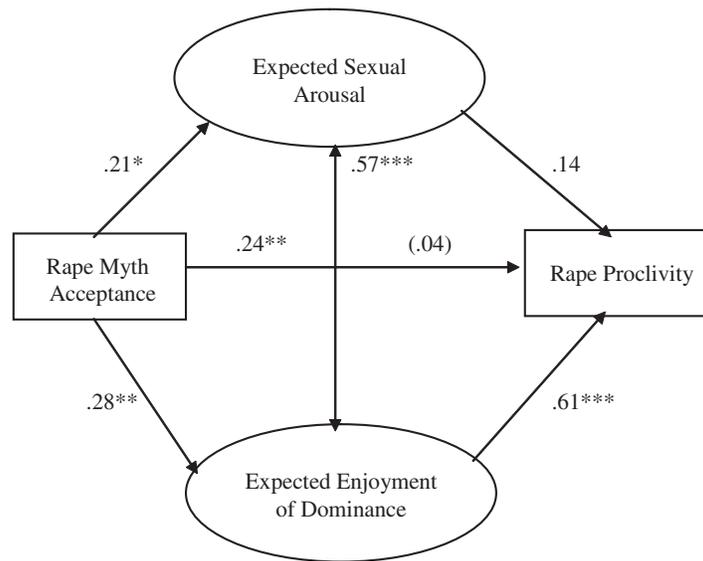


Figure 1: Mediation of Effects of Rape Myth Acceptance on Rape Proclivity by Expected Enjoyment of Sexual Dominance and Expected Arousal (Study 1)

NOTE: Figures shown are beta coefficients. The figure in parentheses indicates the beta coefficient for rape myth acceptance when the mediators are included in the regression model as concurrent predictors.

* $p < .05$. ** $p < .01$. *** $p < .001$.

DISCUSSION

Previous studies have shown that RMA is positively related to self-reported RP (e.g., Malamuth, 1981) and that RMA may even causally affect RP (Bohner et al., 1998). In the current series of studies, we investigated potential motivational mediators of this relationship, using a cross-cultural approach. The results from three studies conducted in different countries suggest that anticipated enjoyment of sexual dominance mediates the relationship between RMA and RP, whereas anticipated sexual arousal does not. The higher proclivity to rape exhibited by individuals who endorse stereotypical views about sexual violence may thus be motivated by a desire to sexually dominate women. These findings support the feminist argument that rape functions as an expression of male dominance over women in broader

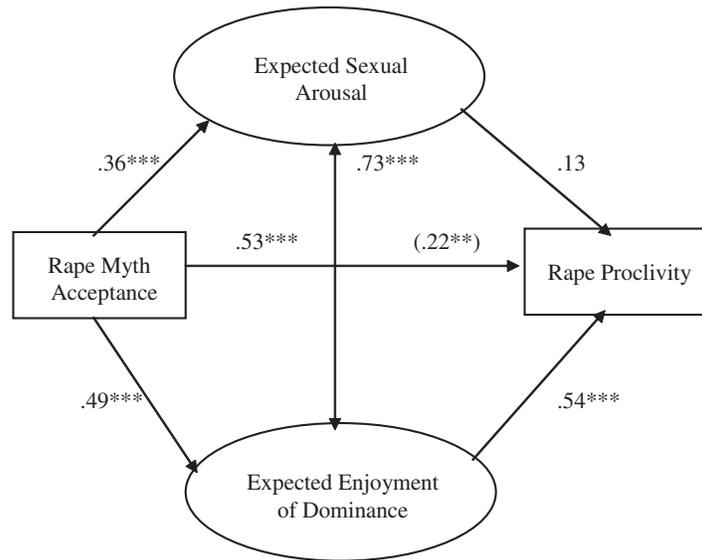


Figure 2: Mediation of Effects of Rape Myth Acceptance on Rape Proclivity by Expected Sexual Arousal and Expected Enjoyment of Sexual Dominance and Expected Arousal (Study 2)

NOTE: Figures shown are beta coefficients. The figure in parentheses indicates the beta coefficient for rape myth acceptance when the mediators are included in the regression model as concurrent predictors.

** $p < .01$. *** $p < .001$.

society (e.g., Brownmiller, 1975), but they provide little backing for evolutionary and other theories that highlight sexual motives for rape (e.g., Thornhill & Palmer, 2000).

Nonetheless, a significant relationship between anticipated sexual arousal and anticipated enjoyment of sexual dominance was obtained across all three samples. This finding suggests that, for men, the motives of domination and sexual stimulation may be strongly associated. Consistent with this argument, priming studies have revealed an automatic association in memory between sex and power, which was particularly strong for men who reported a high likelihood to sexually harass (Bargh, Raymond, Pryor, & Strack, 1995; see also Wesselmann, Pryor, & Palmieri, 2002). The correlation of sexual arousal with RP reported in previous studies, especially those based on interviews with convicted rapists, may thus be due to sexual arousal being

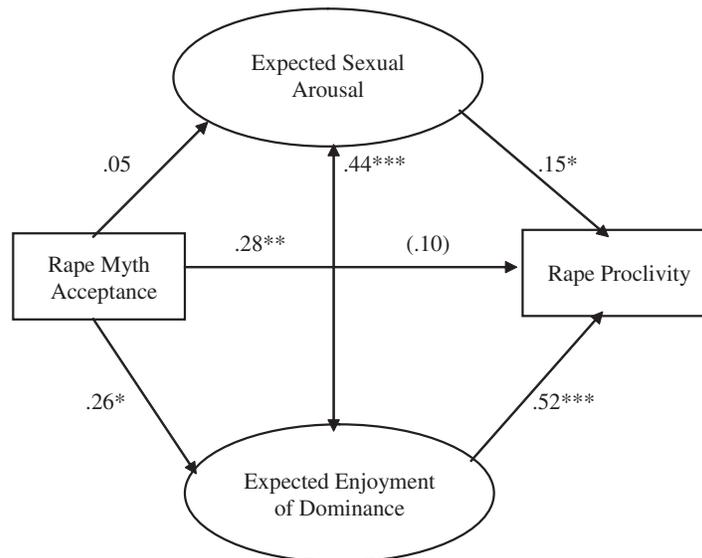


Figure 3: Mediation of Effects of Rape Myth Acceptance on Rape Proclivity by Expected Enjoyment of Sexual Dominance and Expected Arousal (Study 3)

NOTE: Figures shown are beta coefficients. The figure in parentheses indicates the beta coefficient for rape myth acceptance when the mediators are included in the regression model as concurrent predictors.

* $p < .05$. ** $p < .01$. *** $p < .001$.

naturally confounded with the motivation for sexual dominance. If both motives are thus intertwined, rapists may tend to report that sex rather than domination was their main motive, because they may perceive this as socially more desirable and more in line with prevailing myths (see Bohner et al., 1998). Importantly, our results suggest that once the relationship between anticipated sexual arousal and anticipated enjoyment of sexual dominance is accounted for, anticipated sexual arousal is only weakly related to RP, whereas sexual dominance remains a significant and strong mediator of RP.

Another important result is that RMA, as measured by Costin's (1985) R-Scale, proved to be a reliable construct within the Zimbabwean context. The scale was found to have an acceptable internal consistency coefficient. The positive relationship between RMA and RP, which had been well established in Europe and North America, was also replicated within the Zimbabwean

sample. We can thus conclude that RMA may be a cross-culturally reliable and valid construct. Interestingly, the Zimbabwean sample had the highest mean scores for RMA, RP, anticipated sexual arousal, and enjoyment of sexual dominance. These results may be due to cultural differences in norms governing the expression of negative attitudes toward women. It is also possible that Zimbabweans generally hold more traditional views concerning male-female relationships than their European counterparts (Chiroro, Muhwava, & Mashu, 2002). In a similar vein, Costin and Kaptanoğlu (1993) reported that undergraduates in Turkey, a country with values relatively high in power distance (Hofstede, 1980), showed both more restrictive beliefs about women's rights and higher RMA than undergraduates from Western Europe, Israel, and the United States.

The present results have important implications for the understanding of male sexual violence against women. Although the question assessing participants' expected enjoyment of sexual dominance did not explicitly ask whether participants desired to dominate the victim, the notion that one would enjoy "getting their way" in a rape situation strongly suggests a desire to have sexual dominance over the victim. As such, it seems that when social desirability concerns are low (e.g., because the questions are indirect), participants high in RMA are more likely to indicate some desire to dominate the woman.

A potential limitation of the current study is the fact that we assessed only *anticipated* motivational states in relation to *anticipated* sexual aggression. In real rape situations, the relative contributions of sexual arousal and sexual dominance motives in determining the man's behavior may differ. However, given the ethical constraints limiting the direct investigation of this hypothesis, our scenario-based measure probably constitutes the closest possible approximation to real behavior. It is probable that males who report a high tendency to commit a sexual assault are more likely to rape a woman once they get an opportunity to do so (for discussion, see Bohner et al., 1998). As such, the finding that the desire to sexually dominate women is strongly related to the proclivity for committing sexual violence is important. It suggests that the incidence and prevalence of rape and sexual violence could be decreased by educational interventions that minimize men's tendency to associate sex with power.

NOTES

1. Furthermore, the concepts of sex and power may be closely linked in many men's cognitive system (Bargh, Raymond, Pryor, & Strack, 1995; Wesselmann, Pryor, & Palmieri, 2002).

2. In both Studies 1 and 2, the order in which rape myth acceptance (RMA) and rape proclivity were assessed was varied. In Study 3, RMA was always measured first because this was the condition in which the correlations among study variables had been stronger in Studies 1 and 2. Apart from this general difference, the mediational patterns were comparable across conditions; therefore, we will not discuss the order variation any further.

3. The wording of items differed slightly in Study 2.

4. We use the term "predictor" in a statistical sense, as is common in regression analysis, without implying that RMA preceded or caused RP.

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