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Effects of a Sexual Assault Peer Education Program on Men's Belief in Rape Myths

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An all-male sexual assault peer education program focusing on how to help a survivor led to a decrease in rape myth belief among predominantly Caucasian participants immediately after and two months following a one hour program. Program participants believed fewer rape myths than the initial testing of a control group. In addition, a clear majority of participants reported a decreased likelihood of being sexually coercive as a result of attending the program. A new method of decreasing men's rape myth acceptance by learning how to help a survivor is supported.

The United States Department of Justice (Maguire & Pastore, 1995) reports that in one six month period, 432,700 women were victims of rape, attempted rape, or sexual assault nationwide—a figure that computes to 99 women every hour. Research has shown that 15% percent of college women have had an experience since their 14th birthday that met the legal definition of rape. An additional 12% have experienced attempted rape without penetration (Koss, 1992). Similarly, in a study on date rape, Sandberg, Jackson, and Petric-Jackson (1987) found that 21% of women have been forced to submit to intercourse on a date. In two studies, researchers have found that nearly one out of four college men report becoming so sexually aroused that they could not stop themselves from having sex, even though the woman did not consent (Koss & Oros, 1982;

Peterson & Franzese, 1987). Collectively, these results demonstrate that rape is a pervasive social problem in need of attention, particularly on the college campus.

Recent research focusing on rape prevention has used a man's agreement with rape myths as a measure of his potential for raping a woman (Schaffer & Nelson, 1993; Symanski, Devlin, Chrsiler, & Vyse, 1993). Burt (1980) defined the term "rape myth" as "prejudicial, stereotyped, or false beliefs about rape, rape victims, and rapists" (p. 217). Endorsement of rape myths (e.g., women falsely report rape to call attention to themselves) is related to men's reported intent to rape (Breire & Malamuth, 1983; Hamilton & Yee, 1990; Malamuth, 1981) and is higher among men who admit to rape (Malamuth, 1981).

APPROACHES TO SEXUAL ASSAULT PREVENTION

Several efforts have been made on college campuses to educate men about sexual assault, with mixed results. In a comprehensive review of acquaintance rape programs published during the last 20 years, Lonsway (1996) concluded that few programs have been subjected to rigorous empirical evaluation. Furthermore, while several programs note immediate effects, few have been shown to produce long-term change. For example, research has shown that despite a significant drop in rape myth acceptance after an intervention, men have experienced a rebound in scores to pretest levels after two months (Heppner, Good, Hillenbrand-Gunn, Hawkins, Hacquard, Nichols, DeBord, & Brock, 1995). This rebound effect was suggested to be due to the failure of the program to convince men of the personal relevance necessary for lasting attitude change.

The recommendation that sexual assault programs for men be restricted to all-male audiences is widely supported in the literature (Berkowitz, 1992, 1994; Hamilton & Yee, 1990; Lonsway, 1996; Schewe & O'Donohue, 1993). Approaches such as discussions of rape myths followed by the graphic description of a male as the rape victim (Lee, 1987) and exploring the context of masculinity and its dynamics (Ring & Kilmartin, 1992) have had some modest success, though lasting effects were not shown. When comparing several formats varying the administrator/student status of the presenter and all-male vs. coeducational nature of the audience, Earle (1996) found that an all-male peer education program was the only condition in which men's attitudes toward women and rape improved.

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AN INNOVATIVE APPROACH FOR A PREVENTION PROGRAM

The program evaluated in the present study used the intervention described in Foubert and Marriott (1996). Trained male undergraduate peer educators spoke to all male audiences as they defined rape, showed a video in which a man being raped was graphically described, discussed connections between the male victim's experience and women's common rape experiences, suggested how to help a sexual assault survivor, encouraged men to improve their communication during sexual encounters, and urged participants to confront rape jokes, sexism, and the abuse of women. The major differences between this program and others reported in the literature are in its title, tone, and advertising. "How to Help a Sexual Assault Survivor" is the title for the program and remains the theme throughout. Participants are told that each portion of the program is designed so that they can better help a survivor. A complete manual on how to train peer educators to present this program is available at no cost from the first author.

By advertising the program as a training workshop on how to help a survivor, presenters note that men enter with an open, helpful attitude. In the process, the same issues dealt with in other rape awareness workshops are covered in a less threatening manner. By presenting the material in the form of a helping workshop, we believed participants would be more likely to accept the information as personally relevant, thus increasing the likelihood of lasting attitude change (Heppner, Good, et al., 1995).

Hamilton and Yee (1990) found that men's reported likelihood of raping is negatively correlated with both their knowledge of rape trauma and with the degree to which they view rape as aversive. Therefore, our program included a component where women's common reactions to rape were compared to an aversive male-as-victim scenario.

We hypothesized that the program would lead to decreased rape myth acceptance, that this decrement would remain stable two months after the program, and that it would be significantly lower than a control group. In addition, it was hypothesized that a majority of men would report that they were less likely to use force against a woman in a sexual encounter as a result of having seen the program.

METHOD

Participants

Six fraternity pledge classes were solicited for participation through their pledge educator. Five pledge classes agreed to sponsor and advertise

the program for the volunteer participation of pledge class members. Three pledge classes ($n = 76$) were assigned to the experimental condition where the peer education program was presented. Of those 76 men eligible to attend the program 71 (93%) did so (mean age = 18.8), all those who attended the program agreed to participate in the present study. Of those who attended, 45 (63%) completed the follow-up posttest. Two pledge classes were assigned to the control condition ($n = 38$) where no program was presented (mean age = 18.7). Of the members of the control group pledge classes, 34 men (89%) completed a pretest. Follow-up posttests were completed by 32 participants, 94% of those pretested. One experimental group participant was of Native American descent, the remaining experimental group participants were Caucasian. One Latino student and two Asian students were in the control group, all others were Caucasian. All participants were treated in accordance with the "Ethical Principles of Psychologists and Code of Conduct" (American Psychological Association, 1992).

Materials

Belief in rape myths was assessed using the Burt Rape Myth Acceptance Scale (Burt, 1980). This 19-item scale measures the extent to which respondents endorse belief in items rated on a 7-point Likert scale, such as "A woman who goes to the home or apartment of a man on their first date implies that she is willing to have sex." The possible range of scores on this scale is 19 (*strong disagreement with all rape myths*) to 133 (*strong agreement with all rape myths measured*). Burt (1980) reported that internal consistency of her scale as shown by Cronbach's alpha is .875. A similar alpha emerged in the present study (.855). The Burt Rape Myth Acceptance Scales' validity is supported by research showing that it correlates with sexual conservatism, adversarial sexual beliefs, and acceptance of interpersonal violence (Burt, 1980), and that men who report a higher likelihood of raping endorse more rape myths (Hamilton & Yee, 1990). Participants were also asked to respond to several demographic items and experimental participants were asked whether seeing the program changed their likelihood of being sexually coercive.

Design and Procedure

All participants signed a consent form prior to completing the measures used in this study. Experimental group participants completed the Burt Rape Myth Acceptance Scale (1980) prior to (pretest), immediately follow-

ing (postprogram test), and approximately two months after (follow-up posttest) attending the sexual assault peer education program. The control group completed the questionnaire twice, one month apart. Due to scheduling difficulties, the time elapsed between testing occasions for the experimental and control groups differed. All administrations occurred during the Spring 1995 semester. Rape myth acceptance was analyzed through a repeated measures analysis of variance. Chi-square analysis and reporting of response percentages were used to explore the extent to which men reported decreased likelihood of being sexually coercive after experiencing the program.

RESULTS

Prior to the program, participants in the experimental group reported that on average they disagreed somewhat with rape myths ($M = 40.8$; $SD = 12.2$) as measured by Burt's Rape Myth Acceptance Scale (1980). After having seen the program, belief in rape myths declined sharply ($M = 28.7$; $SD = 10.4$), as shown in Fig. 1. A within subjects analysis of variance showed that this decrease in rape myth belief was statistically significant [$F(1, 44) = 50.36, p < .001$]. Approximately two months later, rape myth acceptance rose moderately [$M = 33.7$; $SD = 13.0$; $F(1, 44) = 5.88, p < .05$]. While rape myth acceptance was significantly higher at the follow-up posttest than at the postprogram test, it is important to note that the follow-up posttest mean remained significantly lower than the pretest [$F(1, 44) = 14.66, p < .001$].

The control group also reported that on the pretest, they disagreed somewhat with rape myths ($M = 41.4$; $SD = 10.6$). As there was no program for the control group to assess, no postprogram data was collected for this group. Rape myth belief in the control group unexpectedly declined on the follow-up posttest [$M = 37.3, SD = 11.8$; $F(1, 31) = 4.31, p < .05$]. As expected, the pretest means of the experimental and control group did not significantly differ. Rape myth belief at the follow-up posttest among men who saw the program ($M = 33.7$; $SD = 13.0$) was significantly lower [$F(1, 77) = 8.29, p < .01$] than rape myth belief in the control group's pretest ($M = 41.4$; $SD = 10.6$). In addition, rape myth belief among program participants was significantly lower at the postprogram test ($M = 28.7$; $SD = 10.4$) than in both the control group pretest [$M = 41.4$; $SD = 10.6$; $F(1, 101) = 36.12, p < .0001$], and the control group follow-up posttest [$M = 37.3, SD = 11.8$; $F(1, 99) = 14.77, p < .001$]. While program participants ($M = 33.7$; $SD = 12.8$) believed fewer rape myths than the control

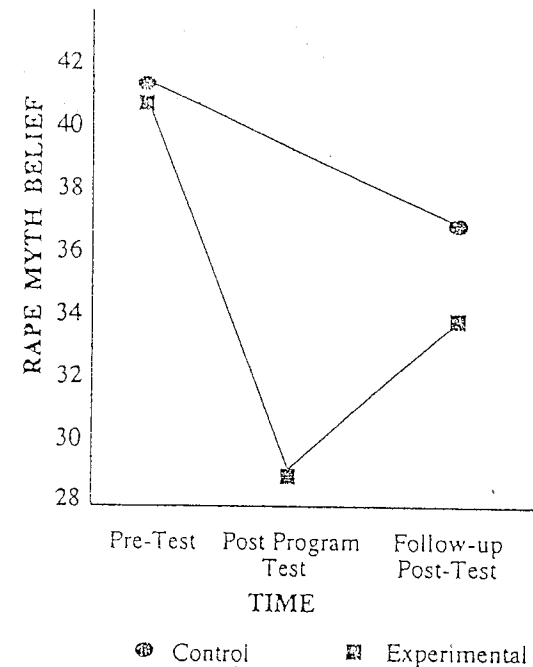


Fig. 1. Mean belief in rape myths as a function of whether participants saw a program and when belief was measured.

group ($M = 37.3, SD = 11.8$) at the follow-up posttest, this difference did not reach statistical significance.

After having seen the program, 59% of participants reported that they were less likely to do something sexual with a woman that she did not want to have happen. An additional 25% did not answer this question, 13% reported that they were neither more nor less likely to be sexually coercive, and 3% reported increased likelihood of being sexually coercive as a result of the program. The percentage of participants responding "less likely" to be sexually coercive was significantly greater than the expected frequency for that cell assuming random distribution as determined by a chi-square analysis [$\chi^2(2) = 51.66, p < .001$].

DISCUSSION

The main goal for the program, to decrease rape myth acceptance among participants, was achieved. As predicted, men who attended the

peer education program in the present study reported significantly less belief in rape myths after seeing the program. Two months later, belief in rape myths among program participants rose significantly, yet their belief remained significantly lower than it had been prior to seeing the program. Unexpectedly, the control group follow-up posttest did not significantly differ from the follow-up posttest of the experimental group, although the difference was in the predicted direction of a stronger decrement in rape myth belief among program participants. As there was also a significant decline in rape myth belief among control group subjects over time, we postulate that administering the Burt Rape Myth Acceptance Scale (Burt, 1980) raised awareness among participants, enough to lead to a modest yet significant decline in rape myth belief. Indeed, there may be a benefit in simply administering this scale to individuals as a consciousness-raising measure. Other researchers who have used the Burt Rape Myth Acceptance Scale (Burt, 1980) as a pre- and posttest have found that pretested subjects in both treatment and control groups believe fewer rape myths than those who are not pretested (Fonow, Richardson, & Wemmerus, 1992). This decrement in the control group could also have been due to either social desirability or may have resulted from conversations the fraternity members had in between testing occasions. Given this decrement, future research should include a control group with participants who are pretested and some who are not. That rape myth acceptance among those who saw the program was significantly lower than their pretest two months earlier lends credence to the suggestions of researchers who advocate all-male sexual assault programming (Berkowitz, 1992, 1994; Hamilton & Yee, 1990; Lonsway, 1996; Schewe & O'Donohue, 1993). While other researchers have questioned the potential of a single program to producing lasting attitude change on rape myths particularly given cultural supports for rape on many college campuses (Heppner, Humphrey, Hillenbrand-Gunn, & DeBord, 1995), the present study suggests that lasting attitude change among program participants may be possible.

In addition to decreased rape myth acceptance, the program used in the present study led 59% of the men to report less likelihood of being sexually coercive on the postprogram test. When subjects who did not answer this question were eliminated from the analysis, 79% of those responding indicated decreased likelihood of being sexually coercive.

Several limitations to the present study should be acknowledged. Perhaps most importantly, it should be noted that the sample used in the present study was overwhelmingly Caucasian. As this study was conducted on a predominantly Caucasian campus among traditionally Caucasian organizations, the homogeneity of the sample was not surprising, but is unfortunate. The lack of inclusion of members of diverse ethnic groups limits the

generalizability of the present findings. That this study was done on fraternity pledge classes, not a randomly selected group of men, also limits the findings. Fraternity men have been shown to be different in that they are more likely to be involved in gang rapes (O'Sullivan, 1991) and often reinforce attitudes among themselves that help perpetuate sexual coercion against women (Martin & Hummer, 1989). They have also been shown to have more traditional attitudes toward women and to believe more strongly in rape myths than men who live in coeducational housing (Schaeffer & Nelson, 1993). Others have shown that men who are in fraternities are more sexually coercive than other men (Gartett-Gooding & Senter, 1987). They suggest that a combination of more traditional sex roles and the socialization process of fraternities contributes to this higher level of rape myth belief. Thus participants in this study may have been more prone to believe rape myths and be sexually coercive than if a sample of all male students were used. While the present results should not be generalized to men outside fraternities, studying fraternity men seems particularly important given their likelihood of being sexually coercive.

Another limitation of the present study is the different time between pretests and follow-up posttests. Had another month elapsed for the control group, the pretest effects of taking the Burt Rape Myth Acceptance Scale (Burt, 1980) might have subsided; however, this cannot be confirmed in the absence of further research. In addition, although the 63% response rate for the control group is an improvement over recent research (Lenihan & Rawlins, 1994), attrition may have impacted the present results.

Furthermore, it must be stressed that even though attitudinal change was significant among program participants, the relationship between attitudes and behavior is a tenuous one. Though the relationship between rape myth acceptance and likelihood of raping has been established (Malamuth, 1981), we do not know whether decreasing men's belief in rape myths will lead to a concurrent decrease in likelihood of raping. Belief system theory as postulated by Rokeach (1968) and later elaborated upon by Grube, Mayton, and Ball-Rokeach (1994) suggests that lasting attitudinal and behavioral change is difficult to achieve. They also suggest that the most promising efforts to do so are those that allow participants to continue to conceptualize themselves in a positive manner. If this is true, the approach to sexual assault prevention used in the present study, one that emphasizes men's opportunities to help survivors, offers particular promise because men can learn about rape in the context of a helping workshop instead of in a format that treats them as potential rapists.

The new method of rape education through learning to help a survivor in an all-male peer education format has been shown to offer promise for future programming and research efforts. Educators who work with college

students looking for a new and empirically supported method for changing men's attitudes toward rape should give serious consideration to modifying current programs to focus on how men can help sexual assault survivors—the unique contribution of the programming method in this study. In the process, we may not only be training a new group of men to react in a more helpful fashion when they encounter sexual assault survivors, but we may also be decreasing the likelihood that those men will be perpetrators themselves.

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