Gender, Age, and Rape-Supportive Rules

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Social rules regarding sexual behavior indicate when sex may be desired, expected, or obligatory. Some of these rules legitimate a man’s initiation of sex with a woman regardless of the woman’s desires or intentions; such situations could potentially lead to rape. Middle school, high school, and university students completed a Rules About Sex Questionnaire on which they indicated the situations in which a man could assume a woman wants to have sex. The results indicated that girls and women endorsed fewer rules than did boys and men. University students endorsed the fewest rules, and middle school students endorsed the most rules. Endorsement of rules was associated with boys’ and men’s self-reported sexually coercive behavior and with beliefs about who should initiate sex. The findings may be useful in the design of sexual assault prevention programs for adolescents.

KEY WORDS: rape; rape myths; rape-supportive rules; gender; adolescents.

Most studies of attitudes toward rape have focused on rape myth acceptance (Burt, 1980; Lonsway & Fitzgerald, 1994). Examples of rape myths include the belief that a woman deserved to be raped because she was dressed provocatively or because she had a reputation for being promiscuous (Burt, 1991). The research on rape myth acceptance has contributed to a better understanding of the explanations and justifications people may give for situations when a woman or girl is raped, as well as the phenomenon of “victim blaming.”

Rape is illegal, and it is never justified. Nevertheless, rape occurs in particular contexts (e.g., alcohol is often present when a woman is raped by an acquaintance). Women and girls do not behave in ways that justify rape; however, we postulate that men and boys sometimes learn rape-supportive rules that govern the contexts or situations in which they believe they can force sex on a woman or girl. These rules do not imply that the man or boy must force the girl or woman to have sex; however, if a girl or woman is perceived as having “broken” these rules, the boy or man may believe that it is okay to force her to have sex with him. For example, one rule may be that if the man pays for dinner and a movie, then the woman should pay him back with sex (i.e., the reciprocity rule, see Cialdini, 1993). If she refuses (i.e., “breaks” the rule), he may try to force her to have sex with him.

A rules perspective on social interactions is not new. For example, adolescents may perceive dating as a game with rules that indicate what should and should not happen (White & Humphrey, 1991). Furthermore, Card (1991) postulated that rape is “a form of social activity structured by rules that define roles and positions, powers and opportunities, thereby distributing responsibility for consequences” (pp. 297–298; see also Sheffield, 1989). These rules are largely unwritten, but they are used by people to “guide and evaluate [emphasis in the original] their behavior” (Card, 1991, p. 306). As with rape myths, rape supportive rules are most likely to exist in societies with pervasive gender inequalities. Furthermore, rape supportive rules and rape myths can exist simultaneously. People may
develop rape myths to help to explain certain behavior (e.g., married women cannot be raped by their husbands), and over time these myths become codified into rules, and even laws, that govern that very same behavior (e.g., married women may not be able to prosecute their husbands for rape). A rape myth may also dispose a man to adopt a rape supportive rule; however, rape myths do not mandate the acceptance of rape. Alternatively, rules may originate as a form of social control. Groups with social authority and power (e.g., men) then subvert these rules into erroneous beliefs and myths that benefit their group and maintain the inferiority and subordination of less powerful groups (e.g., women).

A majority of studies on rape and attitudes toward rape have employed samples of university students. Less is known about rape and younger adolescents; however, research on younger adolescents is important for a variety of reasons. First, a substantial proportion of girls (12–13%; Hall & Flannery, 1984; Humphrey & White, 2000; Krahe, 1998; Vicary, Klingaman, & Harkness, 1995; White, Donat, & Bondurant, 2001) and young women (14–25%; Abbey, Ross, McDuffie, & McAuslan, 1996; Humphrey & White, 2000; Koss, 1993; Laumann, Gagnon, R. J. Michael, & S. Michaels, 1994; White et al., 2001) report having been raped or sexually assaulted.

Second, many sex offenders are adolescents when they commit their first sexual assault (Aljazireh, 1996; Epps, Haworth, & Swaffer, 1993; Vinogradov, Dishotsky, Doty, & Tinklenberg, 1988). Third, sexual attraction may begin as early as 10 or 11 years of age (McClintock & Herdt, 1996), and dating behaviors and sexual activities often start in adolescence (Kinsman, Romer, Fürstenberg, & Schwarz, 1998; Ku et al., 1998; B. C. Miller et al., 1997). Information about age differences in perceptions of rape may have theoretical implications for the development of models of sexual behavior and programs that focus on the prevention of sexual assault.

Variables that seem to be consistently related to rape myth acceptance are being a man, adhering to traditional gender role stereotypes, and being a man who reports a greater likelihood of raping a woman (Lonswey & Fitzgerald, 1984). The relationships between age, attitudes toward rape, and rape myth acceptance are less clear. Surveys and studies of adolescents have indicated that a significant proportion of them believe that rape is justified in some situations, such as when a man spends money on a woman (Goodchilds & Zellman, 1984; “Kids Blame,” 1988; Rhode Island Crisis Center, 1988, as cited in White & Humphrey, 1991) or when a girl is dressed provocatively (Cassidy & Hurrell, 1995). Consistent with gender differences found in adult samples, several studies have shown that high school boys are more likely than high school girls to endorse rape-supportive beliefs (Cowen & Campbell, 1995; Haworth, 2000; Smith & Welchans, 2000).

Fewer studies have compared attitudes toward rape across different age groups. Hall, Howard, and Boezio (1986) found that university men were significantly more supportive of rape myths than were university women or girls and boys aged 14–17 years. In contrast, older adolescents and college students were less likely to support sexually coercive and unwanted behaviors (Feltey, Ainslie, & Geib, 1991; Hutchinson, Tess, Gleckman, Hagans, & Reese, 1994), and believe in rape myths (Blumberg & Lester, 1991) than were younger adolescents, particularly high school boys. These disparate findings suggest that cohort effects, sampling, and different measurement techniques, in addition to age, may influence people’s attitudes toward rape.

In this study we examined some of the rules that may govern sexually aggressive behavior such as rape. In that prior research has demonstrated a possible interaction between age and gender in the support of rape myths, we examined gender differences in the endorsement of rape supportive rules among middle school, high school, and university students. Because men tend to have authority over women, they are more likely to be the ones who make and enforce the rules (both written and unwritten) regarding sexual behavior (Card, 1991; Rozee, 1993). Consistent with the literature on rape myth acceptance (Lonswey & Fitzgerald, 1994), we hypothesized that overall boys and men would endorse more rape supportive rules than would girls and women. However, we also expected girls and women to endorse some of the rape supportive rules because of their socialization into a male-dominated culture.

The findings on the relationship between age and rape myth acceptance are somewhat inconclusive, and the relevant literature on rape supportive rules is not large; therefore, we offer two possible hypotheses on the interaction between age and gender. First, it is possible that regardless of gender, university students would endorse the fewest rules and middle school students would endorse the most rules. This hypothesis relies on the notion that more formal education and experience with cross-gender relationships would make people less accepting of sexually coercive