

## A preliminary study of eighth grade students' attitudes toward rape myths and women's roles.

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### **Abstract:**

This preliminary study examined the relationship between sex-role stereotypes of women and beliefs in rape myths among adolescents. A 35-item survey was completed by 211 female and males in eighth grade health classes. Findings indicate both females and males accept some rape myths and sex-role stereotyping of women. The data also indicated an association between belief in rape myths and sex-role stereotyping of women. Few racial and age differences emerged. The most profound differences involved gender. Most adolescents rejected rape myths, but 10% of girls and 30% of boys tended to accept rape myths. Most females (98.2%) and males (83.3%) rejected sex-role stereotypes of women. According to feminist perspective, sex-role stereotyping of women's role in society is associated with tolerance of sexual violence toward women.

### **Article:**

Law enforcement agents reported 102,555 forcible rapes during 1990, generating 80 rapes per 100,000 American females.[1] An aggregate of data proposes that rape incidence may be 6-10 times greater than that measured by the National Crime Statistics (NCS).[2] The NCS place acquaintance rape at 25% to 30% of all rapes. Koss[3] believes acquaintance rape accounts for 60% to 80% of all rape.

Adolescents often are neglected when it comes to investigating acquaintance rape. Adolescents typically start dating in middle and high school and may be in danger of sexual coercion and rape.[4] Although adolescents make up less than 10% of the population, an estimated 20% to 50% of all rapes occur against them, and six of 10 forcible rapes occur before the rape survivor reaches age 18.[5-7] Ageton[8] reported 67% of raped adolescent and college-age women involved an acquaintance. Ageton's[8] findings showed that between 7% and 9% of the adolescent female population has been raped, and 1 million teen-age females are raped each year. This study calculated that 1.5 million rapes occurred in each of the five years of the National Youth Survey. Only 5% of these rapes were ever brought to the attention of law enforcement agencies. Supporting Ageton's findings, data from the 1987 National Survey of Children reports 7% of all adolescents interviewed said they were forced to have sex against their will.[9] Thus, this preliminary study focused on this neglected population, and specifically middle school adolescents.

Sex-role stereotyping may explain why acquaintance rape is seen as less severe and more attributed to the behavior of the survivor than stranger rape. Sheffield[10] attributes this response to "sexual terrorism," because sex-role stereotyping is preserved by instructing men to be "terrorists" as part of their masculine role and women, "victims" as their feminine role. Many people believe in rape myths and their rape perspectives are strongly entwined with sex-role stereotyping.[11]

If adults who are more accepting of sex-role stereotyping support rape myths, it is likely that the same relationship would be found in adolescent populations. Goodchilds and Zellman[12] surveyed 432 adolescent females and males ages 14-18, and 79% of respondents believed it was acceptable for males to use coercive measures to obtain sexual intercourse under particular circumstances. The data suggested male adolescents considered sexual coercion toward women as ubiquitous and even acceptable in sexual relationships.[12] Ageton[8] found adolescent males often were supported in their coercive behavior by their male

contemporaries. Companions of coercive adolescent males, contends Ageton, usually overwhelmingly sanctioned the aggressive behavior. Data from the National Youth Survey, a five-year study of adolescents ages 13-19, indicated males perceived the capabilities and character of the genders in a more stereotyped perspective when compared to females. Both genders, however, endorsed comparable conventional roles for women and men when it came to matters of childbearing and economic providing in the family.[13] Adolescents are not excluded from violence and sexual coercion in dating. One risk factor in particular for adolescent date rape is males' acceptance of rape myths.[7]

This preliminary study determined if a relationship exists between stereotyped attitudes toward women and beliefs in rape myths among a sample of eighth grade adolescents attending middle school.

## **METHODS**

Data for this study were collected from a middle school in central North Carolina. The surrounding county has a population of 10,000 and the town site has 2,600 people. Major industries of this rural area include textiles and tobacco farming. The county has one elementary, one middle, and one high school. This school was selected because of administration and faculty cooperation, and a full-time health education program is provided for all three grades and has been in existence for the past four years.

Six health classes were selected, and each classroom consisted of approximately 35 (N = 211) students. Permission to administer the questionnaires was received from the principal, and passive parental consent was obtained prior to the study. Students were surveyed in January 1993, over a two-day period to accommodate the health schedule of alternate days for health instruction.

The survey instrument was a 35-item, anonymous, self-report questionnaire which combined two questionnaires: the Attitude Toward Women Scale for Adolescents developed by Galambos et al[14] and the Rape Myth Acceptance Scale developed by Burt.[11] Personal communication with the latter author determined some minor modifications of wording to ensure the scale was appropriate for adolescent subjects.

The Rape Myth Acceptance Scale consisted of 19 items aimed at prevalent accepted rape myths. Students answered 11 statements on a seven-point Likert-type scale where 1 indicates "Strongly Agree" to 7 which indicates "Strongly Disagree." Two statements required responses on a five-point scale from "almost all" to "almost none." Six statements required "always," "frequently," "sometimes," "rarely," and "never" as a response. One item was reverse scored. To compare the four-point, five-point, and seven-point response scales, the responses were recalibrated from -3 to +3 for equivalence.

Each item on the Attitudes Toward Women Scale for Adolescents represented an attitude to which the student responds on a four-point Likert-type scale ranging from 1 = "Agree Strongly" to 4 = "Disagree Strongly." Items numbered 18, 20, 22, 24, and 27 were reverse scored. These statements were worded so a response of 1, "Agree Strongly" would indicate rejecting a stereotyped view of women. The higher the score the more liberal the view of women and their roles.

An overall measure of rape myths was created using the mean scores of the rape myth statements on the Rape Myth Acceptance Scale. Another overall measure, the mean of the attitude items, was computed for the Attitudes Toward Women Scale for Adolescents. These two overall measures then were used as summary measures of the dependent values. The scores were divided into Accept and Does not Accept measures on the scales. On the Rape Myth Acceptance Scale, scores ranged from -3 to +3, a score of less than 0 on each individual statement would indicate an acceptance of rape myths. On the Attitude Toward Women Scale a score of +2 or less would indicate a stereotyped view of women. Comparisons of race, age, and gender groups were made using these indices and the Chi Square statistic. The anticipated response would indicate an association between stereotyped views of women and acceptance of rape myths. Significant differences were determined at the p [less than] 0.05 level.

## RESULTS

A total of 109 female and 102 male adolescents attending the eighth grade participated in this study. Of 219 parents receiving the passive consent form, three declined to grant permission for their adolescents to participate in the study. All three decliners were for male students. Five students were absent during the periods the questionnaire was being presented. Respondents were between ages 11-18, and almost half were boys. Thirty-five percent of respondents were age 13 and younger and 65% were age 14 and older. Most respondents were White-not Hispanic (76.8%).

### *Rape Myth Acceptance*

The Rape Myth Acceptance profile of respondents by gender indicates that most females and males (89.9% and 69.6%) did not accept statements of rape myth. Males (30.4%) were three times more likely to accept rape myth statements than females (10.1%), a significant difference at  $p$  [less than] 0.01.

Significant differences between females and males were seen in a number of specific rape myth statements (Table 1). Adolescent males were twice as likely as adolescent females (56.8% and 27.5%) to believe "A woman who goes to the home or apartment of a man on their first date implies that she is willing to have sex" (Item 1, Table 1). Males were twice as likely as females (45.1% and 22.9%) to accept the rape myth "A woman who is stuck-up and thinks she is too good to talk to guys on the street deserves to be taught a lesson" (Item 9, Table 1). Males were more likely than females to agree with the statements, "If a girl is making out and she lets things get out of hand, it is her own fault if her partner forces sex on her" and "In the majority of rapes, the victim is loose or has a bad reputation" (Items 6 and 7, Table 1). Female respondents were more likely than males to believe that a rape had occurred when it was reported by their best friend, a neighborhood woman, or a Black woman (Items 14, 16, and 18, Table 1). In summary, males were more likely than females to believe that females deserved to be raped in certain circumstances.

No significant differences occurred by race or age in relation to the means of rape-myth beliefs. However, significant differences did exist for specific rape-myth beliefs by race. Non-White respondents were less likely than Whites (87.7% and 95.6%) to believe the statement, "Any female can get raped." Whites were more likely than Non-Whites (59.2% and 42.8%) to believe a rape reported by a neighborhood woman.

Although no significant differences occurred by age in relation to the means of rape-myth beliefs, significant differences existed for specific rape-myth beliefs by age. Those respondents age 14 and older (40.8%) were twice as [TABULAR DATA FOR TABLE 1 OMITTED] likely as younger (20.2%) to believe the rape myth, "A woman who is stuck-up and thinks she is too good to talk to guys on the street deserves to be taught a lesson." Adolescents age 14 and older were more likely than the younger adolescents to accept the statements "A woman who goes to the home or apartment of a man on their first date implies that she is willing to have sex," "Any healthy woman can successfully resist a rapist if she really wants," "If a girl is making out and she lets things get out of hand, it is her own fault if her partner forces sex on her," "Half to almost all women who report a rape are lying because they are angry and want to get back at the man they accuse," and "Half to almost all reported rapes are merely invented by women who discover they were pregnant and wanted to protect their own reputation." Younger respondents were more likely than the older adolescents to believe a reported rape by their best friend, a neighborhood woman, a young boy and a Black woman.

### *Attitudes Toward Women*

Significant differences occurred between females and males in the means of Attitudes Towards Women Scale for Adolescents. Male respondents (16.7%) were eight times more likely than female respondents (1.8%) to believe stereotyped statements about women and girls. Females and males significantly differed on all but two of the Attitudes Toward Women statements (Table 2). Male respondents (62.7%) were six times more likely than females (10.1%) to believe that "Boys are better leaders than girls" (Item 1, Table 2). Male respondents were twice as likely (35.4%) than the females (17.4%) to agree with the statement, "More encouragement in a family should be given to sons than daughters to go to college" (Item 4, Table 2). Twice as many males as females believed "Girls should be more concerned with becoming good wives and mothers than desiring a

profession or business career" (Item 11, Table 2). More male respondents believed in the statements "In general the father should have greater authority than the mother in making family decisions," and "It is all right for girls to ask a boy on a date" (Items 6 and 7, Table 2).

Female respondents were more likely than males to agree with the statements, "On a date, the boy should be expected to pay all expenses," "On the average girls are as smart as boys," "It is all right for a girl to want to play rough sports like football," "If both husband and wife have jobs, the husband should do a share of the housework such as washing the dishes and doing the laundry," and "Girls should have the same freedom as boys" (Items 2, 3, 5, 9, and 12, Table 2). Generally, males agreed with their being superior to girls in a variety of settings, while females were more likely to consider themselves as at least equal to males. This pattern reflects the boys as holding more traditional attitudes toward women than did the girls.

No significant differences occurred by race or age on the means of Attitudes Toward Women Scale for Adolescents. However, significant differences occurred on individual variables with regard to race. More Whites than Non-Whites believed the statements, "On a date, the boy should be expected to pay all expenses" and "Girls should have the same freedom as boys." Non-Whites were twice as likely as Whites to agree that "More encouragement in a family should be given to sons than daughters to go to college," and were more likely to accede to the statements, "If both husband and wife have jobs, the husband should do a share of the housework such as washing the dishes and doing the laundry" and "Girls should be more concerned with becoming good wives and mothers than desiring a profession or business career."

Respondents age 14 and older were almost twice as likely as younger students to accept the statement "In general, the father should have greater authority than the mother in making family decisions." They also were more apt than the younger students to believe, "It is all right for girls to ask a boy out on a date."

An association between rape myths and students who sex-role stereotyped women (95.3%) was greater than would be expected to occur by chance (Table 3). Those students who believed rape myths were more likely to hold [TABULAR DATA FOR TABLE 2 OMITTED] stereotyped views toward women. Table 3 also indicated a significant association between male respondents acceptance of rape myths and their sex-role stereotyping of women (32.3%). No association was found for the female respondents.

**Table 3**  
*Rape Myth Acceptance Scale by Attitudes Toward Women Scale*

(N = 211) (\*)

	Attitudes Toward Women			
	Stereotyped		Liberal	
	n	%	n	%
Accepts	11	26.2	31	73.8
Rape Myth Acceptance Scale		57.9		16.1
Does Not Accept	8	4.7	161	95.3
		42.1		83.9
For males (n = 102) (*)				
Accepts	10	32.3	21	67.7
Rape Myth Acceptance Scale		58.8		24.7
Does Not Accept	7	9.9	64	90.1
		1.2		75.3

\* Significant difference, chi-square, p [less than or equal to] 0.01

## DISCUSSION

The findings showed significant and consistent differences across gender on adolescents' views of rape myths. Females were less willing to accept statements that put them at a social and physical disadvantage. Data indicated an association between rape myth beliefs and sex-role stereotyping of women. This finding does not imply a cause-and-effect relationship, but does suggest that rape myths and sex-role stereotyping need to be addressed together. Most adolescents in this study rejected rape myths but nearly one-third of the males tended

to accept rape myths. Malamuth[15] and Malamuth and Cheek[16] found in several university studies that 35% of "normal" men indicated some likelihood of raping. And these same males were the most likely to accept rape myths. Goodchilds and Zellman[12] found that adolescent males may internalize the belief that it is normal for men to be sexually aggressive.

One rape myth in particular, "When women go around braless or wearing short skirts and tight tops, they are just asking for trouble" was accepted by about 60% of respondents across race, age, and gender. Goodchilds and Zellman[12] found adolescent males can dress without a thought of accountability or suggestion of sexual availability. However, the same could not be said for female adolescents. The Goodchilds and Zellman data concluded that male youth believed adolescent females sent strong indications of sexual accessibility but females argued they were only following fashion trends. Both the female and male adolescents from this study supported this double standard.

Most respondents rejected stereotyped attitudes toward women. Males, however, were more likely to accept stereotypes of women. Check and Malamuth[17] reported that sex-role stereotyping was associated significantly with acquaintance rape among college males. Goodchilds et al[15] concluded dating and sexual attitudes are firmly etched into the adolescents social consciousness by age 14, and would argue for an education program on sexism and rape before ninth grade.

The sample, although confined to the convenience of one rural middle school, demonstrates a need to further explore the relationship between stereotypic beliefs about women and rape myths. Results indicate more can be learned by extending this research to other populations. The data, albeit preliminary, are useful in suggesting additional research needs to include conflict resolution and violence prevention programs.

The data were consistent with the Goodchilds et al[5] findings, as more male than female adolescents tended to believe that certain behaviors, such as going to a "guy's" home alone, was an indication of the female wanting to have sex. The feminist approach and explanation of rape, that males are socialized to rape, was supported by the findings that males were more than twice as likely than females in this study to agree with the rape myth "A woman who is stuck-up and thinks she is too good to talk to guys on the street deserves to be taught a lesson." Feminist theory argues that our rape-supporting culture teaches young males it is acceptable to be sexually aggressive and to take, if they can, what is not given.[11] Patriarchy accepts male supremacy over females and the right of males to control female sexuality.[10]

This acceptable dominance was further evident in that males in this study were significantly more likely than females to accept the statements, "If a girl is making out and she lets things get out of hand, it is her own fault if her partner forces sex on her" and "Women who get raped while hitchhiking get what they deserve." This finding was substantiated by Goodchilds et al[5] who found that adolescent males were more likely than females to legitimize forced sex.

Seventy percent of both females and males accepted the rape myth "When women go around braless or wearing short skirts and tight tops, they are just asking for trouble." Both females and males in this study consider forced sex to be acceptable under some circumstances as was seen in other investigations.[18-20] It appeared to these adolescents that females were not exempt from some part of the burden of male rape behavior.

Differences between females and males on the Attitude Toward Women Scale for Adolescents were consistent with Canton and Ageton[13] in the National Youth Survey of adolescents ages 13-19 that "males, as compared to females, view the nature and abilities of the sexes in significantly more stereotypic ways."

Males more readily accepted the statements addressing men as the family authority, leadership as a male prerogative, and the importance of education for males, indicating a supported belief of inherent male superiority. This response was consistent with the pattern of male dominance indicated by their beliefs in rape myths associated with legitimizing forced sex in some circumstances.

Findings on several variables concerning Non-Whites and Whites tended to support those of Canton and Ageton,[13] that Non-Whites had more stereotypic attitudes toward women than Whites. The small numbers of different groups in the sample, Non-White included Blacks, Hispanics, Asians, Native Americans, and Alaskan Natives, possibly masked some differences among these groups.

## CONCLUSION

A first step toward preventing rape involves developing anti-sexist perspectives among adolescents.[21] Attitudes about women, violence, and sex are conveyed to adolescents through the media, parents, peers, the classroom, and through other social support systems. Provisions for sexuality education about rape and sexism in middle schools and secondary schools is a meaningful tactic for attitude change. Educational materials oriented for the specific needs and perceptions of adolescents from various ethnic and racial backgrounds are needed. Provisions should be made for ongoing teacher training and educational support for teachers and staff on sexism and rape.

White and Humphrey[22] recommend that violence and sexism not be accepted in public institutions; that commitment through policy and awareness programs for faculty, staff, and students be implemented. One such program, "Model Secondary School Sexual Awareness and Prevention Program," for schools came from the Rape Treatment Center at the Santa Monica (Calif.) Hospital Medical Center.[23] This program focused on definitions, legalities, and incidence of rape, especially as it pertains to adolescents. It paid particular attention to the impact of rape on the survivor and tried to impart empathy for rape survivors through films and role-play. Class discussion was used to disseminate information on peer pressure, sex-role stereotyping, communication, and alcohol as they relate to rape and acquaintance rape.

Programs specifically designed to target male adolescents include the Rape Prevention Education Project, with preliminary research that suggested such programs can be effective in reducing rape tolerant attitudes.[24] This program targeted voluntary males from middle schools, high schools, universities, and prisons. The two-hour program covers myths and facts about rape, details of actual rapes and role-playing where participants were encouraged to empathize with rape survivor's pain. Group leaders also encouraged participants not to tell jokes about women and violence, and to start escort services or volunteer at a rape crisis center.

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