Rape Myths in Numbers: The Relationship Between Stereotypical Case Characteristics & Arrest Outcomes

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Introduction

What are rape myths?
- False beliefs and stereotypes about rape victims, offenders, and the crime (Brownmiller, 1975; Burt, 1980; Lonsway & Fitzgerald, 1994).
  - Ex: Men can't be raped; a woman can fight off a rape if she really tries; rapists are Black.

What are the implications of rape myths?
- Contribute to an overarching rape narrative.
- Become the criteria to determine a rape's legitimacy.
- Cases that embody myths are labeled as "real."
- Underreporting by victims.

Purpose of this project
- Use case characteristics to quantify rape myths to understand their (anticipated) effects on case outcomes.

Literature Review

Rape myth acceptance (RMA) affects multiple areas of the CJ system, including police and the courts.
- McDonald (2020): These "erroneous assumptions or stereotypical attitudes… illegitimately influence the way decision-makers approach cases of sexual assault" (p. 43).

Police:
- Police officers' level of victim-blaming → influences effort/motivation to pursue a case (Klement et al., 2018; Murphy & Hine, 2019; Spohn & Tellis, 2012).
  - *More RMA → more victim-blaming → less likely to believe victims*

Effect:
- Persistent "spiral" of silence, where victims don't report because they don't think the police will believe them or do anything (Coker et al., 2015).

Methods

Research Questions:
1. *Of rapes that are known to law enforcement, to what extent do they align with traditional rape myths?*
2. *To what extent are rapes that fit traditional rape myths more likely to result in arrest than those that do not?*

Data Source: National Incident-Based Reporting (NIBRS) data from 2020

Independent Variables (Myths) (5):
- Most rapists are strangers (ARVS).
- A person can't rape their spouse (AMMSA; Bumby).
- If the vic. doesn't have physical injuries, it probably wasn't rape (IRMA; IRMAS).
- Most rapists use weapons (IRMA; IRMAS).
- Most rapists are under the influence of alcohol or drugs (IRMA; IRMAS).

Dependent Variable (1): Arrest
Control Variables (6): Victim age, race, and sex; offender age, race, and sex
Data Analysis Method: Logistic regression (0-1 coding scheme)
- 1 = yes, matches myth
- 0 = no, does not match myth

Case Inclusionary Criteria:
- Rapes; 1 female victim and 1 male offender; both above 18yo → *N = 20,214*

Results

Supportive of myth:
- 48% MORE likely to be arrested when the victim DID have physical injury.
- 56% MORE likely to be arrested when the offender DID use a weapon during the commission of rape.
- 5% MORE likely to be arrested when the offender WAS suspected of being under the influence.

Contrary to myth:
- 59% MORE likely to be arrested when the offender WAS the spouse of the victim.

Not significant: Stranger relationship between victim and offender

Variable	Sig.	Exp(B)
Was the offender a stranger to the victim?	.576	1.052
Was the offender the spouse of the victim?	.000	.594
Did the victim present with apparent physical injuries?	.000	.479
Did the offender use a weapon?	.000	.560
Was the offender suspected of using drugs/ alcohol?	.048	.884

Conclusion

Discussion:
- Partial support (more than not) → when cases align with rape myths, they are more likely to result in arrest (element of justice).
- Implications:
  - Victims more likely to receive justice when cases align with rape myths. → *For victims whose cases do not, they may not.*
  - More training for police needed to combat RMA.

Limitations:
- Doesn't include cases with multiple offenders (e.g., gang rape) or cases where victims are male and offenders are female.
- Only accounts for *reported* rapes.

Future Research:
- Remove/adjust control variables and compare results.
  - Ex: *Are cases where the offender is a POC and the victim is White more likely to align with myths? And are they more likely to end in arrest?*
- Longitudinal data analysis, looking at multiple years of data.
- Consider additional data sets (e.g., NCVS).
  - Would enable comparison of cases that are and are not reported and their alignment with myths.
- Account for different sexes of victims and offenders, as well as cases involving multiple offenders.