Rape-Supportive Cognition and Sexual Aggression against Adults

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Cognitions supportive of sexual offending against adults (rape) are thought to play an important role in sexual violence against adults. This notion is reflected in current theory, research, assessment, and treatment practices. Although there is theoretical and empirical support for this notion, more work is needed to fully understand the nature of this relationship. This symposium consists of four papers examining rape-supportive cognition and its relationship with social information processing, as well as single and multiple perpetrator sexual aggression. The first paper examines the relationship between rape-supportive cognition and memory recall. The second paper longitudinally examines the relationship between attitudes towards rape (evaluations) and subsequent sexually aggressive behaviour. The third paper investigates the relationship between rape-supportive cognition and proclivity for multiple perpetrator rape. The fourth and final paper examines a new measure of rape-supportive cognition that has been designed to assess distinct types of rape-supportive cognition (attitudes, excuses, and justifications). Together these papers (a) examine the relationship between rape-supportive cognition, social information processing, and sexual aggression, (b) highlight the need for more research on the role of rape-supportive cognition in single and multiple perpetrator sexual aggression, and (c) highlight implications for research, theory, and practice.

The Influence of Rape-Supportive Cognitions on Memory Recall

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According to Polaschek and Ward (2002), rape-supportive attitudes are the product of underlying distorted schemas about women (e.g., Women Are Sex Objects; Women are Dangerous). As Ward (2000) argues, these schemas can lead social information to be interpreted in an offence-supportive manner. However, there is a lack of research examining the effects of rape-supportive cognition on an individual’s processing of social
information. To address this, a false memory paradigm was adopted to investigate whether rape-supportive cognition biases information in a manner consistent with the Women are Dangerous schema (i.e., that women are inherently deceptive). A community sample of heterosexual males (n = 41) were given a heterosexual dating scenario to read that included a number of ambiguous statements. After a 15 min interval, the participants were given a surprise recall task that involved recounting the previously read vignette. All participants then filled out a rape myth acceptance, hostility towards women, and rape proclivity questionnaire.

Relative to those with a low endorsement, males with high rape myth endorsement reported a greater rape proclivity and a greater hostility towards women. Moreover, they demonstrated a greater proportion of schema-consistent false memories. That is, the ambiguous statements in the dating scenario tended to be misremembered in a manner consistent with the belief that women are deceitful (or ‘dangerous’). These results provide some support for the idea that rape-supportive cognition biases the processing of social information related to women. The implications and limitations of this study are discussed.

Goals of the Paper:
1. Highlight the importance of adapting robust psychological paradigms to experimentally investigate the effects of offence-supportive cognition;
2. Through the results of the study, demonstrate that a false memory paradigm could be a novel way to examine the biasing effects of rape-supportive cognitions;
3. Highlight the issues associated with this particular paradigm; issues that can addressed by future researchers who wish to adopt a similar paradigm in their research.

Positive Evaluations of Rape Predict Sexually Aggressive Behavior

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Attitudes towards rape are considered important in theory, research, assessment, and treatment of sexual aggression because of their potential causal influence on sexually aggressive behavior. Clearly understanding the role of attitudes towards rape in sexual aggression is important — but what are ‘attitudes’? There is general agreement in the social psychological literature that the key feature of attitudes is evaluation (e.g., Ajzen, 2001). More specifically, attitudes are defined as evaluations (e.g., positive vs. negative) of psychological objects, such as people, things, or behaviors (e.g., Ajzen, 2001). Attitudes can
be further divided into implicit attitudes — immediately activated evaluations of a psychological object — and explicit attitudes — deliberative evaluations of a psychological object (e.g., Gawronski & Bodenhausen, 2006). Theory and research in other domains suggest both implicit and explicit attitudes predict subsequent behaviour (e.g., Cameron et al., 2012; Glasman & Albarracín, 2006; Greenwald et al., 2009; Kraus, 1995).

In research on sexual aggression, several studies have found explicit attitudes towards rape are associated with sexually aggressive behaviour (e.g., Hermann et al., 2014; Maimone et al., 2014; Nunes et al., 2013). The results for implicit attitudes, however, have been more mixed with some studies finding implicit attitudes towards rape are associated with sexually aggressive behaviour (e.g., Nunes et al., 2013; Widman & Olson, 2012) and other studies finding no relationship (e.g., Hermann et al., 2014; Maimone et al., 2014). Thus, the role of implicit attitudes towards rape in sexually aggressive behaviour needs to be further explored in research. Furthermore, the available studies are limited in that they have used cross-sectional research designs, which cannot test whether attitudes towards rape predict sexually aggressive behaviour. Thus, it is important to extend and replicate past research by longitudinally examining the relationship between attitudes towards rape and sexually aggressive behavior. The purpose of the current study was to longitudinally examine the relationship between implicit and explicit attitudes towards rape and sexually aggressive behavior against adults in large representative samples of adult men. Participants were 250 adult males from the community recruited online. Participants were asked to complete measures of implicit and explicit attitudes towards rape, and self-reported sexually aggressive behaviour at two time points approximately four months apart. Cross-lagged panel analyses were conducted using path analysis models to examine the relationship between attitudes at Time 1 and self-reported sexually aggressive behaviour at Time 2. Implicit and explicit attitudes towards rape at Time 1 significantly predicted self-reported sexually aggressive behavior at Time 2, while controlling for self-reported sexually aggressive behavior at Time 1. To the best of our knowledge, this is the first study to test whether implicit and explicit evaluation of rape predicts subsequent sexually aggressive behavior. Our findings suggest that both implicit and explicit evaluation of rape may be relevant for sexually aggressive behavior. If these findings are replicated, evaluation of rape should be studied with more rigorous methodology (e.g., experimental design) and correctional/forensic populations, and possibly addressed in risk assessment and interventions.

Goals of the Paper:
1. Learn about the relationship between implicit and explicit attitudes towards rape and self-reported sexually aggressive behaviour in community men;
2. Learn about longitudinal research conducted online with a sample of community men;
3. Discuss the role of attitudes towards rape in the sexual offence process.
The Relationship between Rape Supportive Cognitions and a Proclivity Towards Multiple Perpetrator Sex Offending

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A number of individual, sociocultural, and situational factors are proposed to play a role in explaining multiple perpetrator rape. This study aims to examine several components of a proposed multi-factorial framework (Harkins & Dixon, 2010; 2013), which outlines factors hypothesized to influence and heighten the likelihood of an individual participating in multiple perpetrator sex offending. Given that we know a substantial proportion of sexual offenders are not apprehended (Smith et al., 2011; Walby & Allen, 2004), this has led researchers to introduce self-report methods to test propensity to engage in sexual offending among the general public (e.g., Blake & Gannon, 2010; Bohner et al., 1998). These sexual offender proclivity measures assess self-reported sexual interest in rape by lone perpetrators (e.g., Bohner et al., 1998) as well as multiple perpetrator rape proclivity (Alleyne, Gannon, O’Ciardha, & Wood, 2013). This form of measurement enables research to be conducted on these types of sexual interests in community males who may show some proclivity to sexually offend (e.g., Blake & Gannon, 2010). For example, in a sample of university males in the UK, 66% did not emphatically reject an interest in MPR (i.e., they did not endorse a complete lack of interest in engaging in this type of offending). This study uses anonymous online data collection to assess whether rape supportive cognitions and group process factors (components of the proposed multifactorial model of multiple perpetrator sex offending; Harkins & Dixon, 2010; 2013) predict a propensity towards multiple perpetrator rape in a student population. A measure of a proclivity towards rape in general is also included to determine whether the factors examined uniquely predict an interest in multiple perpetrator rape or are related to an interest in rape in general. The implications of the results are discussed in terms of prevention and treatment of sexual violence, and in particular, in relation to multiple perpetrator rape.

Goals of the Paper:
1. To determine whether rape supportive cognitions play a role in predicting a propensity for multiple perpetrator rape;
2. To examine whether the same factors predict lone and multiple perpetrator rape;
3. To consider the implications of the results for multiple perpetrator rape.
Sexual assault victimization can have many negative psychological and physical consequences for victims (Choudhary, Smith, & Bossarte, 2012; Hanson, 1990; Lalumière, Harris, Quinsey, & Rice, 2005; Resick, 1993). In order to reduce rates of sexual assault, research has focused on understanding the risk factors associated with sexually aggressive behavior. Cognitions supportive of rape are considered important factors in the initiation and maintenance of such behavior (Bumby, 1996; Helmus, Hanson, Babchishin, & Mann, 2013; Malamuth, 2003; Marshall & Barbaree, 1990; O Ciardha & Ward, 2013; Thornton, 2002; Ward, Gannon, & Keown, 2006). However, cognitions supportive of rape often appear to encompass several constructs such as attitudes, excuses, and justifications. Although these constructs are often viewed as interchangeable and many measures of rape-supportive cognition do not make distinctions between them, researchers have suggested that these constructs may be distinct from one another (Hermann, Babchishin, Nunes, Leth-Steensen, & Cortoni, 2012; Nunes, Hermann & Ratcliffe, 2013; White, Hermann, Nunes, & Pettersen, 2014). Thus, measures of cognitions supportive of rape that reflect these distinctions may be useful when attempting to understand sexually aggressive behavior. To that end, Hermann and colleagues developed the Sexual Aggression: Attitudes, Justifications, and Excuses (SAAJE; Hermann, Nunes, & Maimone, 2015) measure to assess distinct types of cognition towards rape. The SAAJE was designed to assess excuses, justifications, positive attitudes, and negative attitudes regarding rape.

The purpose of the current study is to assess the reliability and validity of the SAAJE and to explore the distinctiveness of rape-supportive attitudes, excuses, and justifications as measured by the SAAJE. We conducted online surveys with four samples of participants: two samples of male students (N = 65, N = 80) and two samples of community men (N = 170, N = 277). All participants were asked to complete the SAAJE as well as additional measures of attitudes towards rape, cognitive distortions supportive of rape, self-reported past sexually aggressive behavior, and self-reported proclivity to rape. Reliability of the subscales will be explored by examining the internal consistency of each subscale. Validity will be explored by examining the relationship between each subscale and other measures of attitudes towards rape and rape-supportive cognition. The distinctiveness of the subscales will be explored using exploratory factor analysis. Furthermore, if the subscales are distinct, each subscale’s relationship with indicators of sexually aggressive behavior
(i.e., self-reported past sexually aggressive behavior and self-reported proclivity to rape) will be explored. It is hypothesized that the SAAJE will be a reliable and valid measure of attitudes, excuses, and justifications supportive of rape. In addition, it is hypothesized that each subscale will measure a distinct cognitive construct and have a unique relationship with self-reported past sexually aggressive behavior and self-reported proclivity to rape. The implications of these findings will be discussed in terms of their impact on future research on rape-supportive cognition, and the role rape-supportive cognition may play in sexually aggressive behavior.

Goals of the Paper:
In this presentation, we will
1. Examine the reliability and validity of the SAAJE subscales;
2. Examine the distinctiveness of each SAAJE subscale and whether they are related to self-reported past sexually aggressive behavior and/or self-reported proclivity to rape; and
3. Discuss the implications of these findings for theory, research, and assessment aimed at understanding sexually aggressive behavior.