

SHAPING THE FUTURE

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Excusing and Justifying Rape Cognitions in Judgements of Coercive Sexual Scenarios

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Rape-supportive cognitions, broadly defined as incorrect or maladaptive attitudes about women and/or sexual relationships, have been implicated as key drivers of coercive sexual behavior (Gannon, 2009; Ward & Beech, 2006). In recent times, however, there have been increasing levels of social discussion about the role of such attitudes in the general community, particularly in relation to claims that particular aspects of our society can be deemed “rape cultures.”

In non-offending populations, rape-supportive cognitions have been associated with future sexual aggression (Thompson, Koss, Kingree, Goree, & Rice, 2011). More relevant to the present study, rape-supportive cognitions have also been implicated in leniency being shown toward the perpetrators of sexual aggressions. The endorsement of rape myths (e.g., that victims are responsible if they have consumed alcohol or are provocatively-dressed) is associated with higher levels of victim blame and lesser perceptions of perpetrator responsibility (Gerger, Kley, Bohner, & Siebler, 2007; Suarez & Gadalla, 2010). Not only has this effect been observed in explicit (self-report) judgments, but the acceptance of such rape myths has also been found to lead to more severe judgments of cases that concur to the “real rape” stereotype at the implicit level (Süssenbach, Albrecht, & Bohner, 2017).

According to recent analyses, Bumby’s RAPE scale of rape-supportive cognitions about women and sexual assault comprises two factors (Hermann et al., 2012). Excusing rape serves to reduce abusers’ culpability for their offending, and ascribing blame to victims, while justifying rape is associated with a sense of sexual entitlement. The distinct effects of these factors on rape judgments have not yet been investigated. We examined whether these belief clusters differentially explained judgments of perpetrator innocence after priming cues related to each of them. As predicted, we found that excusing rape cognitions contributed to exaggerated innocence judgments when the victim paid the bill on a first date (potentially indicative of romantic or sexual interest). However, contrary to expectations, there was no evidence that participants justified rape when the perpetrator paid the bill.

This effect is consistent with Hermann et al.’s (2012) description of excusing rape cognitions. That is, this collection of thoughts is said to reflect a tendency to ascribe complicity in the rape onto the victim. As these cognitions are intricately related to the mitigation of rapists’ responsibility (and are thus directly related to levels of culpability and guilt), we might expect these opinions to explain judgments of others’ sexually coercive behavior. That is, excusing rape cognitions (or a lack of them) might lead people to attempt

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to explain the behaviors of others in criminal procedures. Justifying rape cognitions, in contrast, may be more related to personal actions than in the judgments of those behaviors of others. That is, we are responsible for justifying our own actions, but not those of other people. We discuss the potential implications for conceptualizing the various functions of rape-supportive cognitions.

Craig Harper is a Senior Lecturer in Psychology at Nottingham Trent University. His research interests lie in the psychological processes that underpin decision-making in relation to controversial social and political topics. Most of his research has been focused on how people form and express attitudes towards people with sexual convictions, with the aim being to promote progressive and evidence-based policies to prevent and reduce sexual victimisation. Away from forensically-based research, he is a member of the Heterodox Academy, which is an organization seeking to promote viewpoint diversity and reduce political polarization in higher education.