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# Does Familiarity With A Rape Victim Influence Rape Myth Acceptance?

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**Does Familiarity with a Rape Victim Influence Rape Myth Acceptance?**

BY

**Christopher Bottger**

**THESIS**

SUBMITTED IN PARTIAL FULFILLMENT OF THE REQUIREMENTS  
FOR THE DEGREE OF

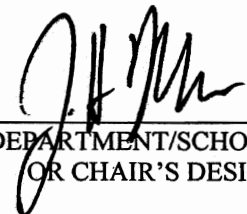
**Master of Arts in Clinical Psychology**

IN THE GRADUATE SCHOOL, EASTERN ILLINOIS UNIVERSITY  
CHARLESTON, ILLINOIS

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**DOES FAMILIARITY WITH A RAPE VICTIM  
INFLUENCE RAPE MYTH ACCEPTANCE?**

**CLINICAL PSYCHOLOGY MASTER'S THESIS 2010**

**CHRISTOPHER BOTTGER**

**EASTERN ILLINOIS UNIVERSITY**

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Abstract

The topic of rape myth acceptance has been extensively studied; however, research investigating how rape myth acceptance may be related to a person's familiarity with a rape victim is minimal. To assess this relationship, 160 male and female undergraduate students indicated their degree of acceptance of rape myths on one of two versions of the Illinois Rape Myth Acceptance Scale (IRMAS). One version presented the traditional IRMAS' items that referred to a hypothetical woman. The other version developed for the present study included personalized items that referred to a friend of the participant. The present study was the first to alter the actual rape myth acceptance statements rated by participants so the statements promoted familiarity with the potential victim. It was hypothesized that participants who were told to envision the items as involving a friend of theirs would endorse fewer rape myths than would the participants responding to statements about a hypothetical woman. Based on previous research findings, men were expected to score significantly higher on rape myth endorsements than women. Contrary to expectations, the attempt to personalize rape myths did not result in lower rape myth acceptance scores. Reasons for this lack of significance are discussed. As expected, male university students scored higher on rape myth endorsements than did female students. Limitations of the present study, as well as suggestions for future research, are presented. Future research is needed in order to determine the influence of familiarity with a potential victim of sexual assault and endorsements of rape myths.

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Does Familiarity with a Rape Victim Influence Rape Myth Acceptance?

Introduction

Rape is difficult to define. Legal definitions of rape vary from state to state and across countries. Although definitions of rape vary, they share the essential element that rape is sexual intercourse without consent (Koss, Heise, & Russo, 1994). Based on current statistics, rape is a crime that affects a significant number of women in the United States. According to the latest figures from the FBI (2006), there were an estimated 93,934 instances of rape reported to law enforcement in 2005. Many researchers over the years, however, have suggested that the actual number of rape cases is much higher than those reported to law enforcement (e.g., Koss, et al., 1994; Weidner, 1983). Many women may not report rape because of feelings of embarrassment or guilt, fear of retribution by perpetrators, or doubt others will believe them (Koss, 1985). Common false beliefs or myths, such as women contribute to their own victimization when rape occurs, may also influence some women's decision not to report rape.

This paper will begin by reviewing various theories of rape, as well as definitions of rape myths, before describing common rape myths, who endorses rape myths, and how rape myths are measured. Finally, results from a research study that investigated how acceptance of rape myths is influenced by familiarity with the victim are presented. Although both women and men may be targets of sexual aggression, this paper focuses on women as potential victims of rape.

## Literature Review

*Theories of Rape*

What causes rape? Numerous theories related to who rapes and why have been suggested over the years. Three of the most recent and prominent theories relate to deviance, feminism, and social learning and are described next.

*Sexual Deviance.* Early theories focused on characteristics of the perpetrator and considered rape a form of sexually deviant behavior. From the late 1950's through the early 1970s rape was viewed as a by-product of a general criminal mind, and rapists were considered psychologically disturbed, even psychopathic, individuals who could not control their sexual urges. The rapist was considered mentally ill and sexually perverted and, therefore, was easily recognizable as deviant and clearly different from other men. These early theories lost some support, however, when studies comparing incarcerated perpetrators to males in the general population failed to show the anticipated difference between these groups (Larsen & Long, 1988). Researchers have also reported that rapists, as a group, are not distinguishable from other men on standardized tests of psychological adjustment, emotional well-being, involvement in heterosexual relationships, and frequency of sexual activity (e.g., Koss & Dinero, 1989). The only clear difference between men who rape and men who do not is that rapists have what has been referred to as "hypermasculine" or "hostile masculine" self-concepts (Koss & Dinero, 1989). Hypermasculine men are likely to hold stereotypical attitudes about gender roles, feel hostility toward women, believe that men should dominate women and have a right to sex, and show physical aggression in other situations. Sexually aggressive

men, therefore, tend to have attitudes that support the occurrence of rape (Malamuth, Sockloskie, Koss, & Tanaka, 1991).

*Feminist Theory.* The feminist theory of rape, largely supported after the women's movement in the mid-1970s, suggested that rape was perpetuated by our cultural belief system which functions to degrade women as second-class citizens (Lonsway & Fitzgerald, 1994). Feminist theory directly challenged the early theories of rape that implied only mentally ill or perverted men raped and instead pointed out that the insinuation that only "certain types" of highly recognizable men commit rape downplayed the true threat of rape to women. Rape was reconceptualized as an act of violence, rather than an act of sex, that was designed to humiliate and dominate another person (Chiroro, Bohner, Viki, & Jarvis, 2004). Feminist theory suggested that men are socialized to be aggressive, to be dominant over women, and to view women as sexual conquests. In Sanday's (1981) early study of variables related to the ideology of male dominance across cultures, female power and authority were found to be lower and there was greater sexual separation in more rape-prone societies than in less rape-prone ones.

*Social Learning Theory.* More recently, social learning theory has suggested that sexual violence was learned from family, peers, media cues and upbringing (Harbridge & Furnham, 1991). Individuals raised in families where sexual violence was taking place or overlooked, where they were exposed to highly sexualized media, such as pornography, and where they were treated cruelly are considered at risk for becoming perpetrators of sexual violence. According to social learning theorists, individuals exposed to these environmental situations, would likely view rape behaviors as more acceptable and be more likely to perpetrate these crimes. Although every child who experiences abuse or

witnesses violence does not become a rapist, there is some research evidence to support the notion that sexually aggressive men are more likely than sexually nonaggressive men to have witnessed or experienced family violence (Malamuth et al., 1991). Social learning theory further holds that sexual aggressiveness can be reinforced by the widespread acceptance of rape myths, which blame the victim and excuse the perpetrator, and by traditional gender roles that encourage men to be aggressive in sexual situations (e.g., Lonsway & Fitzgerald, 1994).

*Conclusions.* Theories that suggest that sexual assault is the result of perversion or mental illness on the part of the perpetrator are no longer supported. Both feminist and social learning theories explain rape as an act of violence that is related to learned social roles. Previous research has indicated that physical aggressiveness, hostility toward women, gender-stereotypical attitudes, history of family violence, and endorsement of rape myths may differentiate sexually aggressive men from other men. The following section of this paper describes one of the factors previous researchers have suggested as being associated with sexual aggression, namely rape myths.

#### *Definitions of Rape Myths*

Sociologists (e.g., Schwendinger & Schwendinger, 1974) and feminists (e.g., Brownmiller, 1975) first introduced the idea of rape myths in the 1970's. Generally, rape myths were described as a "complex set of cultural beliefs thought to support and perpetuate male sexual violence against women" (Schwendiger & Schwendiger, 1974, p. 23). The first rape myths revolved around ideas about who is to blame when a rape occurs, and included the misconceptions that women are somehow responsible for or ask to be raped and that rape results from men's uncontrollable sexual urges. Other early-

identified rape myths attempted to discredit the notion of rape itself by pointing out incidences of false charges, by depicting women as vengeful, and even claiming that women have to consent on some level for any sexual activity to take place.

Fundamentally, early researchers discussed how rape myths sanctioned male sexual aggression against women by justifying or downplaying the aggression taking place, pardoning the perpetrator, and blaming the victim all at the same time.

Several years later in 1980, Martha Burt provided what is considered by many to be the first widely accepted definition of rape myths. Burt defined rape myths as “prejudicial, stereotyped or false beliefs about rape, rape victims, and rapists” (p. 226). This definition served to incorporate many of the earlier ideas of rape myths that included blaming the victims and making sexual victimization appear acceptable. Although this definition was largely well received, many were still unhappy with it because they felt it left many unanswered questions (Briere, Malamuth, & Check, 1985). Some questioned, for example, how these beliefs are prejudicial and to whom. This led to significant discussions by researchers about variations in the meaning of rape myths.

The late 1980’s discussion by researchers brought about the conceptualization that rape myths were essentially stereotypes that are typically supported by examples that are rare in occurrence, but are widely publicized, and that information and examples that contradict rape myths are usually overlooked (Larsen & Long, 1988; Lonsway & Fitzgerald, 1994). Lonsway and Fitzgerald (1994) subsequently offered a more encompassing definition: “Rape myths are attitudes and beliefs that are generally false but are widely and persistently held, and that serve to deny and justify male sexual aggression against women” (p. 134). While this definition included the original notion

that rape myths perpetuate male sexual violence against women, it also incorporated ideas about the scope and falsehoods associated with rape myths.

### *Common Rape Myths*

Lonsway and Fitzgerald (1994) suggested that rape myths function to explain why rape victims deserve their fate and instill a false sense of security that the majority of women are somehow immune to rape. Ultimately, however, the myths help perpetuate the crime of rape and continue to oppress and socially control women (Chiroro, et al., 2004). Still today, there are numerous examples of rape myths, which continue to be perpetuated. For example, the notion that women routinely lie about rape is one commonly believed rape myth (Dull & Giacopassi, 1987). This rape myth is widely used to discredit rape allegations to this day despite several sources pointing out that rape may well be the most underreported crime in this country (Koss, 1985).

Other myths blame the victim and minimize the perpetrator's responsibility. Beliefs that if a woman engages in sexually provocative behavior, goes home with a man she does not know well, or gets drunk suggest that she is "asking for it" and responsible if a rape occurs. For example, an early study by Hotchkiss (1978) found that 71% of men believed that women possessed a subconscious desire to be raped and that 48% of the men felt that dressing provocatively (a woman wearing no bra and a short skirt) was an invitation to rape. More recently, Boeringer (1999) reported that male college students endorsed statements such as "Women pretend not to want sex but want to be forced" and "Women secretly want to be raped." Boeringer also reported that men who were athletes and men who were in fraternities were more likely to endorse these statements.

Another example of a widely believed rape myth is that only certain types of women with “bad” reputations are raped, including women from socially marginal or minority groups (Gilmartin-Zena, 1987). However, given the estimated frequency of sexual victimization, it is not reasonable to suggest that any particular kind of woman is excluded from the threat of rape. Additionally, research has identified only three discriminating personal characteristics of rape survivors: youth, level of sexual experience, and previous sexual experience, none of which are related to social or racial background (Koss & Deniro, 1989; Mason, Riger, & Foley, 2004). Younger women are likely at a higher risk for rape, specifically in college populations, due to an atmosphere of increased experimentation, cultural pressure to couple, and the frequent involvement of alcohol. Also, women who have engaged in more extensive sexual activity with a variety of men are believed to have more opportunity to have been raped. Ultimately, however, the belief that only certain types of women are raped serves to obscure and deny personal vulnerabilities of all women by suggesting that only “other” women are raped (Lonsway & Fitzgerald, 1994).

While individual rape myths vary greatly, their functions are typically unified toward one goal. They function to deny and trivialize rape so that this crime can continue to affect a substantial portion of the female population (Schwendiger & Schwendiger, 1974). One way rape myths accomplish this is by transferring blame for the crime from the rapist to the victim (Burt, 1980). For example, the common myth that the victim was wearing provocative clothing and therefore was “asking for it” suggests that it was the woman’s fault because of the way she was dressed and assumes she contributed to her own victimization.

*Measuring Rape Myths*

In addition to being credited with the first definition of rape myths, Burt (1980) developed the first tool for measuring acceptance of rape myths. This measure, the Rape Myth Acceptance Scale (RMAS), remains the most extensively used instrument for measuring rape myth endorsement. The scale consists of 19 items which describe various rape myths focusing almost solely on the characteristics and role of the victim, such as “One reason that women falsely report rape is that they frequently have a need to call attention to themselves” or “In the majority of rapes, the victim is promiscuous or has a bad reputation.” Items are presented to respondents and they are asked to rate their agreement on a standard 7-point Likert scale (completely disagree to completely agree). The RMAS is supported by numerous studies which attest to its forefront in the measurement of rape myth endorsement (Ashton, 1982; Feild, 1978; Giacomassi & Dull, 1986; Gilmartin-Zena, 1897).

Because of criticisms and changes offered to Burt’s original conceptualization of rape myths over the years, Payne, Lonsway, and Fitzgerald (1999) decided to revise the RMAS. For instance, the original RMAS focused mostly on the roles and characteristics of victims and Payne, et al., (1999) sought to create a more encompassing and expanded scale by including other rape myth elements, as well as more overall items. Further, they felt there was a need to clarify and rephrase many of the existing rape myth items because of colloquial phrases and confusing wording. For example, “If a woman gets drunk at a party and has intercourse with a man she’s just met there, she should be considered ‘fair game’ to other males at the party who want to have sex with her, whether she wants to or not” was considered awkward because there are too many separate ideas contained in this



one item that a respondent may or may not endorse. Additionally, Payne, et al., saw the need to eliminate items about rape that did not measure rape myths specifically, or items they referred to as negatively worded items. An example of one of these negatively worded items is “Any female can get raped.” Because a strong endorsement of this item does not reflect an endorsement of a rape myth, Payne, et al., thought it, and similar items, should be eliminated from the scale.

For their revision to the RMA, Payne, et al., (1999) devised a 95-item scale that included some reworded items and some entirely new items. In addition to the 95 items which measured rape myth beliefs, another 9 items were included which were considered “filler” items. These “filler” items do not directly address any particular rape myth and are not included in calculating a total scale score. For example, the item, “All women should have access to self-defense classes” does not specifically involve rape or a rape myth. Items such as this might elicit an endorsement from those individuals who have been answering negatively to the previous rape myth items. The “filler” items’ purpose, therefore, is to prevent response sets, and responses to them are not included in final scoring. Payne, et al., administered the 104 total items to 780 undergraduate students, in a 7-point Likert format, over the course of six successive studies. These studies refined the scale sequentially so that it only included the most pertinent items to the concept of rape myths. Throughout these six studies, those items which were not regularly endorsed together were eliminated; this eventually resulted in 36 items that correlated the best with one another for the endorsement of rape myths. These 36 items were combined with the nine filler items to create the 45-item Illinois Rape Myth Acceptance Scale (IRMA).

*Endorsement of Rape Myths*

Numerous studies have been conducted to find trends in the acceptance of rape myths. The most significant findings reported are related to sex differences. Overwhelmingly, men have been shown to be more accepting of rape myths than are women (Dull & Giacopassi, 1987; Feild, 1978; Gilmartin-Zena, 1987; Larsen & Long, 1988). In fact, no study to date has reported that women are more accepting of rape myths than are men (Frese, Moya, & Migías, 2004). Explanations for this difference between the sexes in rape myth acceptance revolve around the idea that there exists a fundamental difference in the ways that the sexes perceive the crime of rape. Giacopassi and Dull (1986) found that participants with more negative attitudes toward the female role made decisions that were more accepting of negative rape stereotypes. The researchers suggested that people who endorse rape myths are more likely to blame the victim and are less likely to blame the perpetrator. These researchers further posited that individuals are more likely to attribute more responsibility for an unfortunate occurrence to the person potentially responsible who is perceived as different from them, and attribute less responsibility to the person with whom they identify. More recently, Idisis, Ben-David, & Ben-Nachum (2007) explained this tendency for observers of rape to attribute varying degrees of blame and responsibility “as a function of the observer’s degree of identification with the participants in the rape” (p. 105). Researchers use the term “defensive attribution” to describe this tendency. Previous researchers have found, therefore, that women are more likely to indicate that men are responsible for a rape, and men are more likely to indicate that women are responsible (Buddie & Miller, 2002).

Gilmartin-Zena (1987) also suggested that women perceive rape quite differently from men and are more likely to be supportive of rape victims.

While it was originally thought that there would be major differences in the acceptance or endorsement of rape myths based on race or ethnicity, only minor differences have been shown (Aosved & Long, 2006; Dull & Giacomassi, 1987; Kalof, 1993; Lee, Pomeroy, Yoo, & Rheinboldt, 2005; Mori, Bernat, Glenn, Selle, & Zarate, 1995; Muir, Lonsway, & Payne, 1996; Sapp, Farrell, Johnson, & Hitchcock, 1999;). Some researchers have reported that, regardless of gender, African Americans, Latino Americans, and Asian Americans were less likely than whites to define situations as rape, were more likely to blame the victim, and were less willing to prosecute the rapist (Lee, et al., 2005; Lonsway & Fitzgerald, 1994). These findings are believed to be due to cultural trends for male dominance and female submission experienced in these ethnic groups (Lee, et al., 2005). Of the many groups studied, Caucasian women demonstrated the highest level of homogeneity. Specifically, this group was more likely than any other racial or gender group to support the idea that “men who rape are somehow different from other men” (Gilmartin-Zena, 1987). The overwhelming support of this rape myth by Caucasian women was theorized to exist due to this myth’s purpose of lulling women into a false sense of security about their likelihood of being raped. If the male culture perpetuates an idea that only certain “deranged” men rape and that most women have no contact with these “deranged” men, then most women are safe from rape.

Of the studies that attempt to find individual differences in rape myth acceptance, few have investigated whether or not knowing a rape survivor influences acceptance of rape myths (Lonsway & Fitzgerald, 1994; Payne, et al., 1999). The few existing studies

on this topic have yielded conflicting results about the relationship between acceptance of rape myths and knowing a rape survivor. Gilmartin-Zena (1987) conducted a study in which 198 male and female students at a medium-sized Midwestern University completed a questionnaire about their acceptance of various rape myths, their knowledge regarding rape, and three social constructs (self-esteem, sense of coherence, and sense of a just world). Acceptance of rape myths was gathered using statements that participants rated on a 5-point Likert-type scale. Respondents who indicated knowing someone who had been raped (32% of the participants) or who reported being sexually victimized themselves (6%) showed significantly lower rape myth endorsement compared to other respondents. These results seemed to indicate that knowing someone who has been raped (other or self) reduces one's acceptance of rape myths.

Other research has, however, found no significant difference between knowing or not knowing someone who has been raped and an individual's acceptance of rape myths (Burt, 1980; Lonsway & Kothari, 2000; Mason, et al., 2004; O'Donohue, Yeater, & Fanetti, 2003). In Mason, et al., (2004), 157 female college students read a scenario describing a sexual assault and completed a 10-item questionnaire about the scenario. They also completed the Rape Myth Acceptance Scale (RMAS; Burt, 1980) and answered questions about their previous sexual experiences. The college women responded to nine of the ten items on the questionnaire using a 6-point Likert-type scale. These questions assessed subjects' feelings about several aspects of the scenario, particularly subjects' level of belief that the encounter was date rape, the victim's versus the perpetrator's desire to have sexual intercourse, and the victim's control of the situation. The tenth question asked participants to assign the percentage of responsibility

for the sexual assault to the man and woman in the scenario to total 100%. The question was phrased, "How responsible do you find the parties, that is, Brian and Lisa, for the incident that occurred?" The participants' responses to the RMA were not related to whether or not they reported experiencing a previous sexual assault. The two hypotheses, that those participants who reported previous sexual victimization on the surveys would blame the female less and that those participants who identified themselves as rape survivors would view the assault as rape more often than would other participants, were not supported. The authors believed that this failure to confirm the hypotheses might be due to subjects' failure to define certain acts as rape, especially date rape. Many of the participants' answers on the questions about their own sexual experiences seemed to indicate preconceived notions about rape. For instance, participants did not appear to consider their own unwanted sexual experiences as rape if severe physical violence was not involved in their experiences. In addition, participants appeared to feel that they in some way encouraged intercourse if they did not put up a fight. The study found that respondents did blame the victim more and were less likely to believe rape had occurred if they scored higher on the RMA. Mason, et al., (2004) concluded that this finding supports the notion that rape myths play a particularly strong role in what individuals consider to be rape.

The Gilmartin-Zena (1987) and Mason, et al.(2004) research studies reported conflicting results related to how rape myth endorsement was related to knowing someone who had been raped. These two studies were different from one another in many aspects, including the original purpose of the research, the research procedures and how rape history was measured. For instance, Gilmartin-Zena (1987) did not set out

specifically to determine what influence, if any, knowledge about someone who had been raped would have on acceptance of rape myths. This study simply set out to gather information about participants who endorsed rape myths and those who did not in order to identify differences between the two groups. Mason, et al., (2004) specifically set out to see if a history of sexual victimization would affect endorsement of rape myths. The sex of participants in the two studies differed: Gilmartin-Zena (1987) had both male and female subjects and Mason, et al., (2004) assessed only women. This is a critical difference considering that other researchers have consistently reported that men, in general, are more likely to endorse rape myths (e.g., Frese, et al., 2004). How information was gathered in the two studies also differed. Gilmartin-Zena (1987) had participants rate their endorsement of various rape myths on a 6-point Likert-type scale and then answer questions about their knowledge about rape in general. Mason, et al., (2004) presented participants with a scenario involving sexual assault and asked them questions about this one specific scenario, which each participant may have interpreted differently. Participants were later given the RMAS and a questionnaire about their previous sexual experiences. Because of the use of the scenario, there may have been more opportunities for participants to involve rape myth acceptance in their responses in the Mason et al., study. How rape history was measured also differed in these two research studies. Participants only indicated whether or not they themselves had been raped or if they knew someone who had been raped in the Gilmartin-Zena (1987) research. Mason, et al., (2004) included several categories for participants to respond to, including those who had a history of an unwanted sexual experience, but did not consider this to be rape, and participants who indicated that they had been raped but did not report

the crime to authorities. How any of these reasons or other possible differences between the Gilmartin-Zena (1987) and Mason, et al., (2004) studies may have influenced the conflicting research findings is unknown. While the two studies measured participants' general acceptance of rape myths and assessed participants' knowledge of someone who had been raped, there seems to be little similarity between the two studies. One commonality between these two studies, however, is that both measured rape myth acceptance and familiarity with a victim of rape.

### *Conclusions and Present Study*

Rape myths can be viewed as stereotypes that people have about behaviors, attitudes, and feelings surrounding rape (Lonsway & Fitzgerald, 1994). Some common myths include the notions that only certain kinds of women are raped, most women have an unconscious desire to be raped, women routinely lie about rape, women cannot be raped against their will, and a woman who is raped was asking for it. Since rape myths were first named by Burt in 1980, there have been many published studies investigating rape myths and their acceptance. For many years, Burt's (1980) Rape Myth Acceptance Scale (RMAS) was used by researchers to assess endorsements of rape myths. Because of criticism of this scale, Payne, et al., (1999) revised the RMAS and renamed it the Illinois Rape Myth Acceptance Scale (IRMAS). The single most consistent finding reported by researchers over the years is that men are more likely than women to accept rape myths as true (Frese, et al., 2004). Few studies, however, have investigated how familiarity with a victim of rape relates to endorsement of rape myths. Those that have investigated familiarity with a victim have reported conflicting results (e.g., Gilmartin-

Zena, 1987; Mason, et al., 2004) which may be related to differences in research methods.

*Present Study.* The purpose of the current study was to further investigate whether or not familiarity with a potential victim of rape influences endorsements of rape myths. Previous researchers investigated rape myth acceptance by grouping participants based on whether or not they knew someone who was a survivor of sexual assault or violence. It is not clear, however, if or how often the participants considered this familiarity when responding to a formal rape myth assessment scale. Unlike previous research reports, the present study made familiarity more evident in the actual rape myth acceptance items rated by the participants.

*Hypotheses:*

In order to investigate how familiarity with a victim or potential victim relates to rape myth acceptance, participants in the present study completed the IRMAS. Unlike previous research, however, familiarity and rape myth acceptance were not measured separately. Instead, familiarity was incorporated into the rape myths the participants rated. Half of the participants received the traditional IRMAS' statements that described a hypothetical woman, and the other half responded to the same items that mentioned a woman who was a friend of theirs in order to make familiarity more obvious.

Based on previous research, the following hypotheses are offered:

1. Because personalizing the rape myths makes it more likely that participants will identify with the victim and thus be less likely to engage in defensive attribution (Buddie & Miller, 2002; Idisis et al., 2007), those who are told to envision the items as



involving a friend of theirs were expected to endorse fewer rape myths than were those responding to statements about a hypothetical woman.

2. Based on previous research findings, men were expected to score significantly higher on rape myth endorsements than were women (e.g., Frese, et al., 2004).

## Method

### *Participants*

The participants were 128 female and 32 male undergraduate students at a Midwestern university. Students participated in the study in partial fulfillment of the requirements for an introductory course in psychology. Of the 160 participants in the study, the mean age was 19.5 years old, with the range of ages being 17 to 30 years old.

All participants were undergraduates and included 92 freshmen, 33 sophomores, 22 juniors, and 12 seniors, with one additional individual not responding to this item. Participants had varied relationship statuses, with 90 single individuals, 67 individuals in committed relationships, one married participant, one participant who had been separated or divorced, and one individual in an open relationship. The ethnic background of participants included: 121 Caucasian/white, 28 African American, two Asian or Pacific Islander, six Latino American, two individuals described themselves as mixed race, and one individual who answered that they would prefer not to answer.

Over half of the participants indicated some previous familiarity with sexual assault. Eighty-five participants reported that they had known someone who had been raped, with some participants indicating that they were familiar with more than one individual who had experienced rape. Of participants who reported knowing a victim of

rape, 52 reported that a friend was the victim, 28 reported an acquaintance, 2 reported a neighbor, 12 reported a relative, and 2 reported having known a date who was raped. An additional 28 individuals reported having been sexually victimized themselves. Most participants reported some familiarity with the subject of sexual assault. One hundred twenty participants reported having read a book or article on the subject of rape and 152 reported having seen a movie or heard a lecture on the subject of rape. Additionally, 10 participants reported learning about rape in an academic or self-defense course.

### *Materials*

A demographics questionnaire was developed for this study based on Gilmartin-Zena (1987) that asked participants to indicate their age, sex, race, year in school, relationship status, and knowledge regarding rape. A copy of the demographics questionnaire is included in Appendix A.

Participants completed the 45-item *Illinois Rape Myth Acceptance Scale* (IRMAS) (Payne, et al., 1999). Participants responded to the 45 items on the IRMAS using a 7-point Likert scale, where 1 corresponded to “completely disagree” and 7 corresponded to “completely agree.” Higher scores on the IRMAS indicated more endorsement of rape myth ideas. The dependent variable for this study was total score on the IRMAS, which represented each subject’s acceptance of rape myths. The higher this total score, the higher the subject’s overall acceptance of rape myths.

Seventy-seven of the participants (21 male and 56 female students) were given the original IRMAS that was worded to refer to women in general (see Appendix B). For instance, subjects of the rape myth statements were broadly worded as “women” or “rape victims.” Eighty-three of the participants (11 male and 72 female students) were given a

revised version of the IRMAS that includes 16 reworded items that made reference to an acquaintance of the research participant (see Appendix C). This rewording was accomplished by changing relevant words such as “woman” and “rape victims” to “a friend of yours.” For example, item #1 was reworded from “If *a woman* is raped while she is drunk, she is at least somewhat responsible for letting things get out of control” to “If *a friend of yours* is raped while she is drunk, she is at least somewhat responsible for letting things get out of control.”

### *Procedure*

Each participant individually completed the demographics questionnaire and IRMAS online. This was accomplished by setting up the study on the university’s online study page. Participants were randomly assigned through the online study page to either the group which completed the traditional IRMAS or to the group which completed the reworded version of the IRMAS.

### Results

A total of 77 participants were randomly assigned to take the original form of the IRMAS, which included statements about a hypothetical woman, and 83 participants were assigned to the altered form of the IRMAS that instructed participants to imagine some of the statements as relating to a friend of theirs. Due to random assignment of the participants, this resulted in an unequal distribution of male and female participants in the two groups (i.e., 21 men and 56 women completed the original version of the IRMAS versus 11 men and 72 women completing the modified version).

The two hypotheses for this study were (1) participants who were told to envision the items as involving a friend of theirs would endorse fewer rape myths than would the participants responding to statements about a hypothetical woman, and (2) men would score significantly higher on rape myth endorsements than would women. To test these two hypotheses, a two-way analysis of variance (sex of participant x version of IRMAS) was conducted on total IRMAS' scores.

Mean scores by male and female participants on both versions of the IRMA are presented below in Table 1.

Mean IRMAS' Scores			
	Original IRMAS	Reworded IRMAS	Overall
Males (n = 32)	155.52 (n = 21)	146.27 (n = 11)	152.34 (n = 32)
Females (n = 128)	118.16 (n = 56)	126.97 (n = 72)	123.12 (n = 128)
Overall	127.45 (n = 77)	129.53 (n = 83)	128.52 (n = 160)

At an alpha level of 0.05, results of analysis of variance showed there was no significant interaction for form of IRMAS participants responded to and gender of participants,  $F(1,156) = 1.76, p = 0.19, \eta_p^2 = 0.01$ . Contrary to expectation, personalizing the rape myths did not result in significantly lower rape myth endorsements as there was also no significant main effect for form of the IRMAS,  $F(1,156) = 0.00, p = 0.97, \eta_p^2 = 0.00$ . As predicted, however, men ( $M = 152.34$ ) scored significantly higher on rape myth endorsements than did women ( $M = 123.12$ ) as indicated by a significant main effect for gender of participant,  $F(2,156) = 11.11, p = 0.00, \eta_p^2 = 0.13$ .

## Discussion

The first goal of the present study was to determine whether or not personalizing rape myths so they described an acquaintance or friend would influence rape myth endorsements. Contrary to expectations, there was no significant difference between the overall rape myth endorsements of undergraduate students who responded to typical items on the IRMAS and those who responded to personalized statements. The exact cause for this insignificant result is not clear. Of course, one possible explanation is that endorsement is not influenced by personalization of rape myths. That is, rape myth stereotypes might not be influenced by personal experiences. Mason, et al. (2004) reported similar findings using the original RMAS, which was the basis for the IRMAS. They found that their two hypotheses, that female undergraduate participants who reported previous sexual victimization would blame a hypothetical female victim of sexual assault less and would also view the assault as rape more often than would other participants, were not supported. Unlike the present study, Mason, et al. measured familiarity with sexual assault and rape myth acceptance separately. Familiarity in their research was based on participants' personal experience with sexual victimization and not on a hypothetical friend as in the present study. Future research is needed to further validate findings that different types of personalization do not significantly influence rape myth endorsements.

Another possible reason for the lack of significant findings in the present research, as well as in Mason, et al. (2004), is that the personalization of the myths may not have been obvious enough to participants. For instance, only 16 of the 45 items on the IRMAS were reworded in the present study to reflect familiarity with a rape victim.

These 16 items were selected because it was easy to substitute the word “woman” or “rape victim” with the term “friend of yours.” Because less than half of the items were personalized, this may not have been enough to encourage a familiarity-with-the-victim mindset in the participants. Further research that makes personalization of the rape myths more obvious is needed to investigate this possibility.

Another possibility is that participants responding to both versions of the IRMAS were personalizing the rape myths. In the present study, over half of the respondents indicated that they had known someone who had been sexually assaulted and there were roughly equal numbers of respondents who indicated that they knew someone who had been sexually assaulted in both conditions of the IRMAS. Additionally, participants were questioned about their familiarity with a rape victim prior to completing the IRMAS, which may have created a familiarity with victim mindset. Thus, it is possible that many of the respondents were already personalizing statements on the IRMAS regardless of which version of the IRMAS they completed. Because previous researchers have suggested that those who identify with the victim may be less likely to engage in defensive attributions (e.g., Buddie & Miller, 2002; Idisis et al., 2007), it may be that approximately half of the participants were already personalizing the statements regardless of the version of the IRMAS they completed, thus nullifying the independent variable.

The second hypothesis, that gender of participants would have an overall effect on rape myth endorsements score on the IRMAS was confirmed in the present study. This finding matches up with findings from previous research that have overwhelmingly supported the idea that men support rape myths significantly more than do women (e.g.,

Dull & Giacopassi, 1987; Feild, 1978; Gilmartin-Zena, 1987; Larsen & Long, 1988).

Previous researchers have also reported that women are more likely to indicate that men are responsible for a rape and men are more likely to indicate that women are responsible (Buddie & Miller, 2002). As Giacopassi and Dull (1986) and Idisis, Ben-David, and Ben-Nachum (2007) suggested, males may attribute less responsibility for rape to males (often the perpetrators) and more responsibility to females (often the victims) because they identify more with the males in rape myth statements. This idea of “defensive attribution” may explain why Gilmartin-Zena (1987) found females more likely to be supportive of rape victims than males. Though rape is by no means restricted to women, rape is most commonly reported as being perpetrated on females (Aosved & Long, 2006). On the IRMAS, women are consistently portrayed as at risk for rape and men as potential perpetrators. Therefore, it seems likely that the female participants may have identified more with the victims of the rape scenarios and endorsed the rape myths less than did the male participants.

### *Limitations*

Several limitations should be considered when interpreting the results of the present study. One limitation to this study was the unequal number of men and women in each condition. This research study was designed to randomly assign students to one of the two groups (unaltered IRMAS scale and reworded IRMAS scale). Unfortunately, there was no attempt to assign an even number of male and female participants to each condition. As a result, a disproportionate number of female participants volunteered for this study, and there was an unequal distribution of women and men in the two research conditions. The views of male participants in both conditions were substantially

underrepresented and we have no way of knowing if the men who did respond were representative of the population of male university students in general.

Additionally, the number of participants in this study was relatively small when compared with some of the rape myth studies mentioned previously. For instance Payne, Lonsway, and Fitzgerald (1999) collected data from 604 subjects, Burt (1980) from 598 subjects, and Feild (1978) from 1448 subjects. The limited sample size of the present study certainly limits the ability to generalize the results.

As mentioned previously, only 16 of the 45 IRMAS' items were altered in the familiarity condition in the present study. Whether or not participants noted this attempt at personalization is unknown. Additionally, over half the participants in both conditions indicated some sort of familiarity with a survivor of sexual assault and how this type of familiarity influenced rape myth endorsements was not controlled for in the present study.

#### *Future Research*

Based on the results from the present study, several future areas of study are suggested. For example, investigations that use larger and more diverse samples of respondents making rape myths endorsements are needed in order to understand how the results might generalize to the population at large.

Another possible change for future research investigating how familiarity with a potential victim influences rape myth endorsement would be to personalize more items on the IRMAS and to otherwise make personalization, such as in the instructions for completing the questionnaire, more obvious to respondents. This would help ensure that



participants were consistently reminded that they were responding to a statement about a potential “friend of theirs.”

Because future research is needed to investigate specifically if, when and under what conditions participants consider personalization when responding to rape myths, future research should also control for factors that might influence personalization. For instance, real-life familiarity with rape victims and amount of course-work, reading, and other relevant back-ground characteristics associated with knowledge about rape could be statistically controlled for or considered when assigning participants to different research conditions.

### Conclusions

The present study was the first to alter the actual rape myth acceptance statements rated by participants so the statements promoted familiarity with the potential victim. Contrary to expectations, this attempt to personalize rape myths did not result in lower rape myth acceptance scores. Consistent with previous research, however, male university students scored higher on rape myth endorsements than did female students. Future research is needed in order to confirm if, and under what conditions, familiarity with a potential victim of sexual assault influences endorsements of rape myths.

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Appendix A  
Demographic Questionnaire

Please provide the following background information by providing a response that best completes each question asked below. This survey is completely anonymous, so please do not include your name on any of the forms.

1. Age: \_\_\_\_\_

2. Gender: Male \_\_\_\_\_ Female \_\_\_\_\_

3. Race/Ethnicity:

\_\_\_\_\_ White Caucasian

\_\_\_\_\_ African American

\_\_\_\_\_ Asian or Pacific Islander

\_\_\_\_\_ Latino

\_\_\_\_\_ Native American

\_\_\_\_\_ Other: Specify \_\_\_\_\_

4. Level of Education:

\_\_\_\_\_ Freshman

\_\_\_\_\_ Sophomore

\_\_\_\_\_ Junior

\_\_\_\_\_ Senior

Major: \_\_\_\_\_

5. Relationship Status:

\_\_\_\_\_ Single

\_\_\_\_\_ Committed Relationship

\_\_\_\_\_ Married

\_\_\_\_\_ Separated/Divorced

\_\_\_\_\_ Other (please specify): \_\_\_\_\_

6. Level of Knowledge Regarding Rape (**Remember, this is completely confidential**):

\_\_\_\_\_ I Have Known Someone Who Has Been Raped

If so, was it: a friend \_\_\_\_\_

an acquaintance \_\_\_\_\_

a neighbor \_\_\_\_\_

a relative \_\_\_\_\_

a date \_\_\_\_\_

\_\_\_\_\_ I Have Been Sexually Victimized

\_\_\_\_\_ I Have Read a Book or Article on the Subject of Rape

\_\_\_\_\_ I Have Seen a Movie or Have Heard a Lecture on the Subject of Rape

\_\_\_\_\_ Other (please specify): \_\_\_\_\_

Appendix B  
Illinois Rape Myth Acceptance Scale

This is a questionnaire about your feelings about several statements involving the topic of rape. For each item you are to ask yourself: "To what level do I agree with this statement?" Your task is simply to rate the level to which you agree with each item. Use the rating scale below for each response:

MY LEVEL OF AGREEMENT WITH THIS ITEM IS:

Completely Disagree	Disagree	Slightly Disagree	Neutral	Slightly Agree	Agree	Completely Agree
1	2	3	4	5	6	7

The higher the number (1, 2, 3, 4, 5, 6, 7), the more YOU agree with the statement.

1 – means that you completely disagree with the statement.

3 – means that you are at neutral agreement with the statement.

7 – means that you completely agree with the statement.

There is no right or wrong, good or bad for these questions. Don't worry about how your responses would compare to those of others or whether they are consistent among the questions. Just indicate how you truly feel about each item on its own merit. Please complete each item on the scale.

1. \_\_\_\_\_ If a woman is raped while she is drunk, she is at least somewhat responsible for letting things get out of control.
2. \_\_\_\_\_ Although most women wouldn't admit it, they generally find being physically forced into sex as a real "turn-on."
3. \_\_\_\_\_ When men rape, it is because of their strong desire for sex.
4. \_\_\_\_\_ If a woman is willing to "make out" with a guy, then it's no big deal if he goes a little further and has sex.
5. \_\_\_\_\_ Women who are caught having an illicit affair sometimes claim that it was rape.
6. \_\_\_\_\_ Newspapers should not release the name of a rape victim to the public.
7. \_\_\_\_\_ Many so-called rape victims are actually women who had sex and "changed their minds" afterwards.
8. \_\_\_\_\_ Many women secretly desire to be raped.



9. \_\_\_\_ Rape mainly occurs on the “bad” side of town.
10. \_\_\_\_ Usually, it is only women who do things like hang out in bars and sleep around that are raped.
11. \_\_\_\_ Most rapists are not caught by the police.
12. \_\_\_\_ If a woman doesn't physically fight back, you can't really say that it was rape.
13. \_\_\_\_ Men from nice middle-class homes never rape.
14. \_\_\_\_ Rape isn't as big a problem as some feminists would like people to think.
15. \_\_\_\_ When women go around wearing low-cut tops or short skirts, they're just asking for trouble.
16. \_\_\_\_ Rape accusations are often used as a way of getting back at men.
17. \_\_\_\_ A rape probably didn't happen if the woman has no bruises or marks.
18. \_\_\_\_ Many women find being forced to have sex very arousing.
19. \_\_\_\_ If a woman goes home with a man she doesn't know, it is her own fault if she is raped.
20. \_\_\_\_ Rapists are usually sexually frustrated individuals.
21. \_\_\_\_ All women should have access to self-defense classes.
22. \_\_\_\_ It is usually only women who dress suggestively that are raped.
23. \_\_\_\_ Some women prefer to have sex forced on them so they don't have to feel guilty about it.
24. \_\_\_\_ If the rapist doesn't have a weapon, you really can't call it rape.
25. \_\_\_\_ When a woman is a sexual tease, eventually she is going to get into trouble.
26. \_\_\_\_ Being raped isn't as bad as being mugged or beaten.
27. \_\_\_\_ Rape is unlikely to happen in the woman's own familiar neighborhood.
28. \_\_\_\_ In reality, women are almost never raped by their boyfriends.
29. \_\_\_\_ Women tend to exaggerate how much rape affects them.

30. \_\_\_\_\_ When a man is very sexually aroused, he may not even realize that the woman is resisting.
31. \_\_\_\_\_ A lot of women lead a man on and then cry rape.
32. \_\_\_\_\_ It is preferable that a female police officer conduct the questioning when a woman reports a rape.
33. \_\_\_\_\_ A lot of times, women who claim they were raped just have emotional problems.
34. \_\_\_\_\_ If a woman doesn't physically resist sex – even when protesting verbally – it really can't be considered rape.
35. \_\_\_\_\_ Rape almost never happens in the woman's own home.
36. \_\_\_\_\_ A woman who "teases" men deserves anything that might happen.
37. \_\_\_\_\_ When women are raped, it's often because the way they said "no" was ambiguous.
38. \_\_\_\_\_ If a woman isn't a virgin, then it shouldn't be a big deal if her date forces her to have sex.
39. \_\_\_\_\_ Men don't usually intend to force sex on a woman, but sometimes they get too sexually carried away.
40. \_\_\_\_\_ This society should devote more effort to preventing rape.
41. \_\_\_\_\_ A woman who dresses in skimpy clothes should not be surprised if a man tries to force her to have sex.
42. \_\_\_\_\_ Rape happens when a man's sex drive gets out of control.
43. \_\_\_\_\_ A woman who goes to the home or apartment of a man on the first date is implying that she wants to have sex.
44. \_\_\_\_\_ Many women actually enjoy sex after the guy uses a little force.
45. \_\_\_\_\_ If a woman claims to have been raped but has no bruises or scrapes, she probably shouldn't be taken too seriously.

## Appendix C

Illinois Rape Myth Acceptance Scale (Reworded for Acquaintance)

This is a questionnaire about your feelings about several statements involving the topic of rape. For each item you are to ask yourself: "To what level do I agree with this statement?" Your task is simply to rate the level to which you agree with each item. Use the rating scale below for each response:

## MY LEVEL OF AGREEMENT WITH THIS ITEM IS:

Completely Disagree	Disagree	Slightly Disagree	Neutral	Slightly Agree	Agree	Completely Agree
1	2	3	4	5	6	7

The higher the number (1, 2, 3, 4, 5, 6, 7), the more YOU agree with the statement.

1 – means that you completely disagree with the statement.

3 – means that you are at neutral agreement with the statement.

7 – means that you completely agree with the statement.

There is no right or wrong, good or bad for these questions. Don't worry about how your responses would compare to those of others or whether they are consistent among the questions. Just indicate how you truly feel about each item on its own merit. Please complete each item on the scale.

1. \_\_\_\_\_ If a female friend of yours is raped while she is drunk, she is at least somewhat responsible for letting things get out of control.
2. \_\_\_\_\_ Although most of your female friends wouldn't admit it, they generally find being physically forced into sex as a real "turn-on."
3. \_\_\_\_\_ When men rape, it is because of their strong desire for sex.
4. \_\_\_\_\_ If a female friend of yours is willing to "make out" with a guy, then it's no big deal if he goes a little further and has sex.
5. \_\_\_\_\_ Women who are caught having an illicit affair sometimes claim that it was rape.
6. \_\_\_\_\_ Newspapers should not release the name of a rape victim to the public.
7. \_\_\_\_\_ Many so-called rape victims are actually women who had sex and "changed their minds" afterwards.
8. \_\_\_\_\_ Many of your female friends secretly desire to be raped.

9. \_\_\_\_ Rape mainly occurs on the “bad” side of town.
10. \_\_\_\_ Usually, it is only women who do things like hang out in bars and sleep around that are raped.
11. \_\_\_\_ Most rapists are not caught by the police.
12. \_\_\_\_ If a female friend of yours doesn't physically fight back, you can't really say that it was rape.
13. \_\_\_\_ Men from nice middle-class homes never rape.
14. \_\_\_\_ Rape isn't as big a problem as some feminists would like people to think.
15. \_\_\_\_ When female friends of yours go around wearing low-cut tops or short skirts, they're just asking for trouble.
16. \_\_\_\_ Rape accusations are often used as a way of getting back at men.
17. \_\_\_\_ A rape probably didn't happen if the woman has no bruises or marks.
18. \_\_\_\_ Many females friends of yours find being forced to have sex very arousing.
19. \_\_\_\_ If a female friend of yours goes home with a man she doesn't know, it is her own fault if she is raped.
20. \_\_\_\_ Rapists are usually sexually frustrated individuals.
21. \_\_\_\_ All women should have access to self-defense classes.
22. \_\_\_\_ It is usually only women who dress suggestively that are raped.
23. \_\_\_\_ Some female friends of yours prefer to have sex forced on them so they don't have to feel guilty about it.
24. \_\_\_\_ If the rapist doesn't have a weapon, you really can't call it rape.
25. \_\_\_\_ When a female friend of yours is a sexual tease, eventually she is going to get into trouble.
26. \_\_\_\_ Being raped isn't as bad as being mugged or beaten.
27. \_\_\_\_ Rape is unlikely to happen in the woman's own familiar neighborhood.
28. \_\_\_\_ In reality, women are almost never raped by their boyfriends.

29. \_\_\_\_ Women tend to exaggerate how much rape affects them.
30. \_\_\_\_ When a man is very sexually aroused, he may not even realize that the woman is resisting.
31. \_\_\_\_ A lot of women lead a man on and then cry rape.
32. \_\_\_\_ It is preferable that a female police officer conduct the questioning when a woman reports a rape.
33. \_\_\_\_ A lot of times, women who claim they were raped just have emotional problems.
34. \_\_\_\_ If a female friend of yours doesn't physically resist sex – even when protesting verbally – it really can't be considered rape.
35. \_\_\_\_ Rape almost never happens in the woman's own home.
36. \_\_\_\_ A female friend of yours who "teases" men deserves anything that might happen.
37. \_\_\_\_ When women are raped, it's often because the way they said "no" was ambiguous.
38. \_\_\_\_ If a female friend of yours isn't a virgin, then it shouldn't be a big deal if her date forces her to have sex.
39. \_\_\_\_ Men don't usually intend to force sex on a woman, but sometimes they get too sexually carried away.
40. \_\_\_\_ This society should devote more effort to preventing rape.
41. \_\_\_\_ A female friend of yours who dresses in skimpy clothes should not be surprised if a man tries to force her to have sex.
42. \_\_\_\_ Rape happens when a man's sex drive gets out of control.
43. \_\_\_\_ A female friend of yours who goes to the home or apartment of a man on the first date is implying that she wants to have sex.
44. \_\_\_\_ Many women actually enjoy sex after the guy uses a little force.
45. \_\_\_\_ If a female friend of yours claims to have been raped but has no bruises or scrapes, she probably shouldn't be taken too seriously.

Appendix D  
Informed Consent

The following is a consent form for participation in a research project from the psychology department at Eastern Illinois University. The research study is being conducted by Chris Bottger, a Master's level student of Clinical Psychology at Eastern Illinois University, under the supervision of Dr. Linda Leal. The purpose of the study is to investigate college students' acceptance of statements involving the topic of rape. Although the topic is a serious one, participation in the current study entails no anticipated risks and you benefit by receiving course credit for participation.

I, \_\_\_\_\_ (PRINT NAME), agree to participate in this research study. I understand that I will be asked to complete 2 questionnaires, which will take approximately 25-30 minutes to complete.

I understand that my participation in this study and all information I provide will remain anonymous and confidential, and will only be used for research purposes. I also understand that any information that might serve to identify me will be deleted from all files upon completion of this research project. I have been informed that my participation is voluntary and that I may withdraw my participation from this research project at any time without penalty.

Your signature below indicates that you have read and agreed to the above stated terms, are 18 years or older and are willingly participating in the study.

Participant Signature: \_\_\_\_\_

Date: \_\_\_\_\_