



## Chapter 2

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# Rape myth acceptance: cognitive, affective and behavioural effects of beliefs that blame the victim and exonerate the perpetrator

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### Introduction

The reality of sexual violence and its harmful effects on the individual and on society are indisputable. Recent statistics indicate a serious worldwide problem, with one in three women having experienced some form of sexual violence, such as being battered, coerced into sex or otherwise abused (United Nations Development Fund for Women 2008; World Bank 1993). The health consequences of rape and sexual violence are both detrimental and long lasting (Holmes *et al.* 1998); for women aged between 15 and 44, rape and domestic violence are higher risk factors for death and disability than are cancer, war and motor vehicle accidents (United Nations Development Fund for Women 2008; World Bank 1993). In sum, 'sexual violence is the most pervasive human rights violation that we know today, it devastates lives, fractures communities and stalls development' (United Nations Development Fund for Women 2008: 1). Feminist writers have argued that the prevalence of sexual violence contributes to gender inequality and supports the status quo of male dominance by keeping all women, including those women who are not directly victimised, in a state of constant fear (Brownmiller 1975). Empirical research confirms that the fear of rape is a daily reality for many women, limiting their freedom of movement and reducing their quality of life (Dobash and Dobash 1992; Gordon *et al.* 1980; Mirrlees-Black and Allen 1998).

At the same time, the attrition rates for successful prosecution of rapes through the criminal justice system are high. The proportion of rapes reported to the police is notoriously low, and within those

relatively few cases that are reported, conviction rates have been declining (Kelly *et al.* 2005; Temkin and Krahe 2008; United Nations 2000). Researchers have recognised that a major cause of this widening 'justice gap' are pervasive beliefs about rape, or *rape myths* (Brownmiller 1975; Burt 1980). These myths affect subjective definitions of what constitutes a 'typical rape', contain problematic assumptions about the likely behaviour of perpetrators and victims, and paint a distorted picture of the antecedents and consequences of rape. They are widely held by the general public (e.g. Gerger *et al.* 2007) and by those in the criminal justice system (e.g. Brown and King 1998; Feild 1978). Rape myths are propagated by the media (e.g. Franiuk *et al.* 2008), affecting the offending behaviour of perpetrators, the reporting behaviour of victims, the decision-making behaviour of investigators and prosecutors and the assessment of guilt or innocence by jurors (Temkin and Krahe 2008; Wilson and Scholes 2008).

In this chapter, we introduce and discuss the concept of rape myths and examine some of the research instruments that have been used to measure these beliefs. We then review a series of interlinked studies from our laboratory, as well as related research by others, on both general and gender-specific functions of rape myth acceptance (RMA). In doing so, we present a theoretical framework according to which RMA influences information processing, affect and behaviour by serving as a cognitive schema. We conclude with discussing applied implications of RMA research for interventions aimed at reducing RMA and improving legal procedures.

### **Introduction to the concept of rape myths**

In the 1970s the concept of rape myths became a topic of interest and closer inspection for various researchers (e.g. Brownmiller 1975; Feild 1978; Schwendinger and Schwendinger 1974). Within social psychology, Martha Burt (1980) was the first to propose a definition of rape myths as 'prejudicial, stereotyped and false beliefs about rape, rape victims and rapists' (p. 217). Although this definition has been widely used, Lonsway and Fitzgerald (1994), in their excellent review and critique of prominent definitions of rape myths, point out that Burt's definition is not 'sufficiently articulated', nor are all the terms used explained sufficiently clearly for it to serve as a formal definition (p. 134).

Despite definitional concerns that will be outlined in more detail below, there seems to be a consensus as to what rape myths usually

entail (for a full review on structural issues see Payne *et al.* 1999). We may identify four general types of rape myth: beliefs that

- *blame the victim for their rape* (e.g. 'women have an unconscious desire to be raped', 'women often provoke rape through their appearance or behaviour');
- express a *disbelief in claims of rape* (e.g. 'most charges of rape are unfounded', 'women tend to exaggerate how much rape affects them');
- *exonerate the perpetrator* (e.g. 'most rapists are over-sexed', 'rape happens when a man's sex drive gets out of control'); and
- allude that *only certain types of women are raped* (e.g. 'a woman who dresses in skimpy clothes should not be surprised if a man tries to force her to have sex', 'usually it is women who do things like hang out in bars and sleep around that are raped').

(Bohner, Reinhard *et al.* 1998; Briere *et al.* 1985; Burt 1980, 1991; Costin 1985; Gerger *et al.* 2007; Lonsway and Fitzgerald 1994, 1995; Payne *et al.* 1999).

Lonsway and Fitzgerald (1994) emphasise the characteristics of the term 'myth', highlighting the specific cultural functions that myths usually serve. Their more recent definition of rape myths as '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' (Lonsway and Fitzgerald 1994: 134) integrates such functional aspects. Taking this functional view a step further, Bohner (1998: 12–14) as well as Gerger *et al.* (2007) pointed out that aspects such as whether rape myths are 'false' or 'widely held' should not be included in a formal definition. On the one hand, it is often impossible to decide whether a myth is false, for example if the myth expresses a normative belief or is stated in a way that is difficult to falsify (e.g. 'many women *secretly* desire to be raped'). Questions of prevalence, on the other hand, should be addressed empirically, otherwise a belief that was once widely held but is not widely held any more would by definition cease to be a rape myth. The most recent definition we rely on for the purposes of this chapter thus describes rape myths as 'descriptive or prescriptive beliefs about rape (i.e. about its causes, context, consequences, perpetrators, victims and their interaction) that serve to deny, downplay or justify sexual violence that men commit against women' (Bohner 1998: 14).

## Current measures of rape myth acceptance and methodological issues

The scientific progress reflected in the evolution of conceptualisations about rape-related beliefs also becomes evident at the level of instruments to measure rape myths. We critically discuss some of the most commonly used classic measures of rape myths as well as a recently developed scale designed to measure modern myths about sexual aggression. The distinction between classic and contemporary versions of rape myths predominantly rests on the degree of subtlety of the item wordings, with classic measures being marked by rather blatant item formulations, whereas our modern measure is characterised by its more subtle item content.

Among the most widely used classic scales are the *Rape Myth Acceptance Scale* (RMAS: Burt 1980) and the *Attitudes Toward Rape Scale* (ATR: Feild 1978). To illustrate, Buhi (2005) reviews 57 studies using the 19-item RMAS scale, thus attesting to its wide usage. Most of these studies attest to the good psychometric properties of this instrument (e.g. Kopper 1996; Krahe 1988; Margolin *et al.* 1989). Other researchers developed RMA scales that were modified versions of Burt's original scale (e.g. Donnerstein *et al.* 1986; Ellis *et al.* 1992; Fonow *et al.* 1992).

Another widely used measure of RMA is Feild's (1978) ATR. The ATR is a 32-item scale that predates the RMAS (for a report on the reliability of the ATR, see Lonsway and Fitzgerald 1994). In a factor analysis, Feild identified eight interpretable subscales (e.g. *woman's responsibility in rape prevention, sex as motivation for rape, victim precipitation of rape*). Subsequent research on the differential validity of these subscales, however, is lacking. As with the RMAS, the ATR too has been subjected to modifications, including Costin's popular 20-item *R scale* (Costin 1985), which was translated into several languages (Costin and Schwarz 1987) and widely used with German samples by Bohner (1998).

Despite their wide use, these two scales have been criticised for various reasons (e.g. Payne *et al.* 1999). For example, several of Burt's (1980) RMAS items are too long and complex and often include several concepts within one item, which makes them difficult to understand and answer unambiguously. This results in further methodological problems, as it threatens the scale's reliability and validity (Hinck and Thomas 1999; Payne *et al.* 1999). Furthermore, the classic scales often feature items whose wording is marked by a heavy usage of colloquialisms and slang terminology (e.g. 'put out', 'necking', 'fair

game'). Payne *et al.* (1999) argued that the use of colloquialisms can severely affect the cross-cultural applicability of the scales, since particular culture-specific wordings might not be grasped by persons from a different cultural background.

A more recent RMA measure that avoids many of the pitfalls of item wording discussed above is the *Illinois Rape Myth Acceptance Scale* (IRMA: Payne *et al.* 1999). The IRMA comes in two versions, a 45-item long version and a 20-item short form (IRMA-SF). In factor analyses, Payne and colleagues identified seven factors, but again, research on the differential validity of these seven factors is lacking and the scale is usually treated as measuring a one-dimensional construct. The scale's reliability and construct validity is good, and during the last decade the IRMA has been used in both basic and applied research (e.g. Bohner and Lampridis 2004; Loh *et al.* 2005; Lonsway *et al.* 2001).

More recently, however, Gerger and her colleagues (2007) have noted a problem with the classic RMA scales. Especially in research with college students, these scales often produce floor effects, i.e. highly skewed distributions and means near the low endpoint of the scale. Skewed distributions have disadvantages because statistical tests of correlational or experimental hypotheses usually require a normal distribution of scores or error terms. Also, in applied studies aimed at reducing RMA through appropriate interventions, any beneficial effects of the intervention may be difficult to determine if the means of the target variable are already near the bottom of the scale. Gerger *et al.* point out that the observed low means of self-reported RMA may have two possible causes: (1) that respondents nowadays are more aware of and so comply with socially accepted answers to explicit and blatant RMA items; and (2) that the content of common myths about sexual aggression may have changed. They drew an analogy with similar historical developments that took place in the areas of sexism and racism over the last decades. For example, Swim *et al.* (1995) proposed that sexist beliefs have become more subtle and covert, and distinguish between 'old fashioned' and 'modern' sexism, where the former includes the endorsement of traditional gender roles, discriminatory treatment of women and stereotypes about female competence, whereas the latter includes the denial of present discrimination, antagonistic attitudes toward women and a lack of support for women's needs.

Based on these guiding ideas, Gerger *et al.* (2007) developed a new RMA scale, the 30-item *Acceptance of Modern Myths about Sexual Aggression Scale* (AMMSA). Its items were generated to reflect the content categories as shown in Table 2.1.

**Table 2.1** Content categories and exemplar items of the acceptance of Modern Myths about Sexual Aggression (AMMSA) Scale (Gerger *et al.* 2007)

Content	Example
(a) <i>Denial of the scope of the problem</i>	'Many women tend to misinterpret a well-meant gesture as a "sexual assault".'
(b) <i>Antagonism toward victims' demands</i>	'Although the victims of armed robbery have to fear for their lives, they receive far less psychological support than do rape victims.'
(c) <i>Lack of support for policies designed to help alleviate the effects of sexual violence</i>	'Nowadays, the victims of sexual violence receive sufficient help in the form of women's shelters, therapy offers and support groups.'
(d) <i>Beliefs that male coercion forms a natural part of sexual relationships</i>	'When a woman starts a relationship with a man, she must be aware that the man will assert his right to have sex.'
(e) <i>Beliefs that exonerate male perpetrators by blaming the victim or the circumstances</i>	'Alcohol is often the culprit when a man rapes a woman.'

Note: An English and a German version of the scale are available online at <http://www.uni-bielefeld.de/psychologie/ae/AE05/AMMSA/index.html>.

Empirical studies showed that mean scores on the AMMSA, as intended by its authors, were generally higher than the mean scores on classic scales (for direct comparisons with the IRMA-SF, see Gerger *et al.* 2007). Also, AMMSA scores were symmetrically distributed, approximating a normal distribution. Furthermore, the scale's excellent reliability and construct validity was demonstrated in various studies. The scale is available in English and German, and two parallel short versions are currently being developed (Eyssel and Bohner 2009). For a review of the concept of modern rape myths and research using the AMMSA scale, see Eyssel and Bohner (2008a). Additional studies using the AMMSA with UK samples are currently being undertaken (e.g. Calogero *et al.* 2009; Pina and Hallmark 2009).

## Functions of rape myths: cognitive, affective, behavioural

Why do people endorse rape myths? It has long been posited that rape myths may serve various psychological functions (e.g. Bohner 1998; Brownmiller 1975; Burt 1980, 1991; Lonsway and Fitzgerald 1994). They may help people to understand and explain events in their social world, to maintain cognitive consistency, to fend off negative affect and threats to self-esteem, and to rationalise problematic behaviour. Here we review research on these cognitive, affective and behavioural functions of RMA, addressing both *general* functions and *gender-related* functions which are typically relevant only to women or only to men.<sup>1</sup>

### *Rape myth acceptance as a general cognitive schema*

Early research focused on external perceivers' responsibility attributions in relation to rape scenarios (e.g. Jones and Aronson 1973; for reviews, see Krahé 1991; Pollard 1992). A central finding was that perceivers with higher RMA attributed greater responsibility to the victim and lesser responsibility to the perpetrator. Furthermore, it was shown that perceivers with high (vs. low) RMA perceived the trauma of the victim to be less severe and were less likely to recommend that the victim report the incident to the police (e.g. Frese *et al.* 2004; Krahé 1988). Attributions of responsibility may also be expressed in subtle linguistic choices: Bohner (2001) showed that students high (vs. low) in RMA who described a rape they had observed in a film scene were more likely to use language that put the perpetrator in the background and the victim in the focus of discourse (e.g. agentless passive: 'she was raped'; nominal phrases: 'then the rape occurred').

RMA may thus be conceived as a general *schema* which guides and organises an individual's interpretation of specific information about rape cases. Generally speaking, cognitive schemas are broad knowledge structures that people use to assist the processing of incoming information (e.g. Neisser 1976). Processing of information becomes selective, with attention being focused on a potential match between incoming information and the schema-related information stored in memory (e.g. Bem 1981). Importantly, schemas allow perceivers to 'go beyond the information given' (Bruner 1957), that is to infer things that were not actually present in the stimulus material.

Applied to rape myths, this means that perceivers high in RMA may readily use a particular piece of information contained in a rape case (e.g. that the complainant had been drinking alcohol), or infer



information that was never presented (e.g. that the complainant may have consented because she knew the defendant), with the result of exonerating the defendant. Recent research by Krahé *et al.* (2008) shows that even prospective lawyers fall prey to these schematic influences. In their studies, undergraduate and postgraduate law students rated rape scenarios varying with respect to the defendant–complainant relationship. Those law students who were high in RMA held the defendant less liable and blamed the complainant more, especially when the two had known each other (for related research on rape myths within the criminal justice system, see Andrias 1992; Burt and Albin 1981; Spohn and Horney 1993).

Although the findings we review here pertain to external perceivers, we should note that rape victims often interpret their own experiences in terms of rape myths. This may prevent them from labelling these experiences as rape; it may also cause them to find fault with their own behaviour and, hence, to fail to report an incident to the police (Peterson and Muehlenhard 2004; Warshaw 1988). Some research points to the conclusion, however, that becoming a victim may attenuate the effect that a rape myth schema has on people's processing (for discussion see Bohner 1998: 62–3).

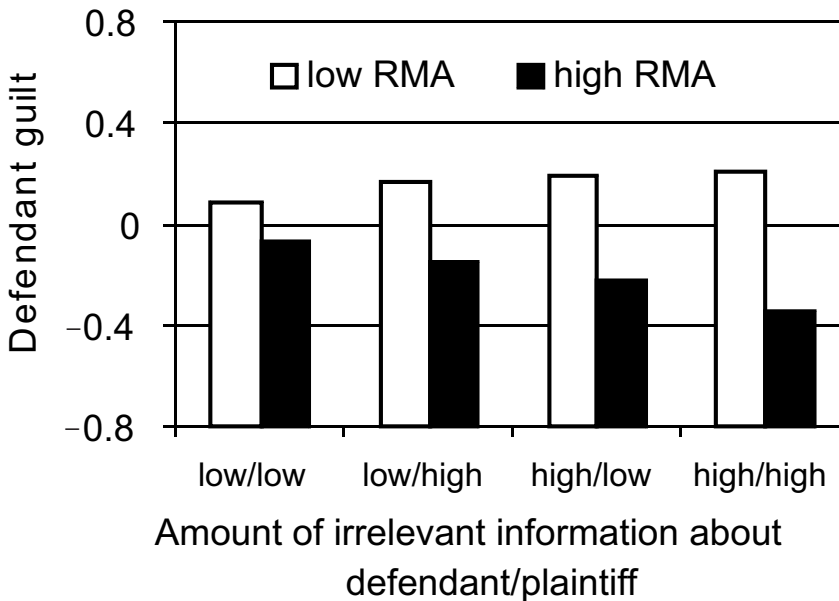
Schematic influences tend to be strong when external facts are uninformative or ambiguous (e.g. Dunning and Sherman 1997; Kunda and Sherman-Williams 1993). In an ongoing research programme, we tested the hypothesis that the influence of RMA on judgments about rape cases would increase when the available information was mixed or uninformative. In one experiment, students received pieces of case-related information in a sequence of five steps: (1) contradicting statements of complainant and defendant; (2) summary of expert witness A's statement; (3) summary of expert witness B's statement; (4) extended version of A's statement, and (5) extended version of B's statement. The expert witnesses' statements were prepared in such a way that one pointed to the defendant's guilt whereas the other suggested his innocence. After reading each piece of information, participants were repeatedly asked to rate the likelihood that the defendant was guilty of rape. In line with our hypothesis, these ratings were not influenced by RMA whenever the weight of the evidence clearly implied either guilt or innocence (i.e. after steps 2 and 4), but were influenced by RMA whenever the evidence was completely balanced (i.e. after steps 1, 3 and 5; Eyssel and Bohner 2008b: Study 1).

In another experiment, participants received either a low amount or a high amount of case-*irrelevant* information about the defendant



versus the complainant (e.g. what subject the person studied or where he/she lived). We hypothesised that the effect of participants' RMA on judgments about the defendant's guilt would increase with increasing amounts of case-irrelevant information. As Figure 2.1 shows, the data clearly supported this prediction: high-RMA participants generally perceived lower levels of guilt than did low-RMA participants; more importantly, this effect was particularly pronounced when a lot of irrelevant information had been provided (Eyssel and Bohner 2008b: Study 2).

A third experiment in this series showed that people's reliance on their RMA for making guilt judgments may increase even if people merely believe that they possess case-related evidence when in fact they do not. In their 'social judgeability' approach to stereotyping, Leyens *et al.* (1992) had shown that people often avoid using stereotypes in person judgments unless they feel 'entitled to judge' because they believe that relevant individuating information was presented to them subliminally. Building on this approach, we set out to create an illusion of being informed in some of our participants. All participants first received minimal case information, consisting only of very brief,

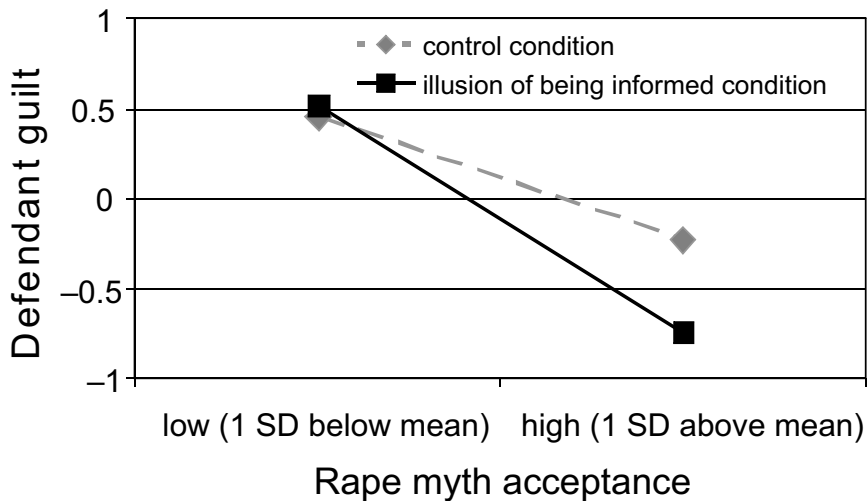


**Figure 2.1** Effects of RMA on judgments of defendant guilt increase with the amount of irrelevant information presented (Eyssel and Bohner 2008)

divergent statements from defendant and complainant. Then they performed a vigilance task, where they had to respond quickly to stimuli appearing on a computer screen. Embedded in the vigilance task was the repeated subliminal presentation of masked strings of non-words that resembled text sentences. We later told half of the participants that these strings (which participants had not been able to recognise) had actually been sentences containing relevant case information; we further told them that ‘psychological studies have shown that people are capable of processing information, even if it was not recognised consciously.’ The other half of the participants were simply told that the vigilance task had served as a distractor task (control condition). When participants later judged the defendant’s guilt, high-RMA participants gave lower guilt ratings than did low-RMA participants. More importantly, as shown in Figure 2.2, the effect of RMA on guilt judgments was stronger, as predicted, for those participants who were under the illusion of having received additional case information (Eyssel and Bohner 2008b: Study 3).

*Self-perpetuating aspects of the rape myth schema*

That people draw specific conclusions about rape cases which blame the victim and exonerate the perpetrator may be conceived as part



**Figure 2.2** Effects of RMA on judgments of defendant guilt increase with the illusion of being informed (simple slopes analysis – Eyssel and Bohner 2008)

of a more encompassing cognitive motive, the 'belief in a just world'. This construct describes a tendency to perceive the world as a fair place, where people generally get what they deserve and where bad things happen only to bad people (Lerner 1980). Just-world beliefs thus offer reassurance that if all necessary precautions are taken, and if people are good, nothing bad will happen to them. If these beliefs are challenged, for example by encountering information that an innocent person has suffered violence, one way of restoring cognitive consistency is by blaming the victim. In the case of sexual violence, rape myths offer the necessary 'explanations' as to why rape victims 'got what they deserved' (e.g. they did not protect themselves sufficiently or they even provoked their own victimisation). Research has shown that individual differences in the belief in a just world correlate positively with RMA (Bohner 1998; Lonsway and Fitzgerald 1994). By interpreting information in a way that is consistent with rape myths (and thus also with more general just-world beliefs), individuals thus generate 'evidence' that seemingly supports their own myths.

A similar self-perpetuating principle may operate at the societal level when rape myths and jury verdicts influence each other. Sinclair and Bourne (1998) have proposed a 'cycle of blame' framework, suggesting that the same rape myths that limit convictions may in turn be strengthened by not-guilty verdicts. On the one hand, rape myth endorsement by jury members may lead to more restrictive rape definitions and fewer convictions (see Andrias 1992; Burt and Albin 1981; Rhode 1989). On the other hand, not-guilty verdicts may reinforce those very myths that have contributed to the verdicts in the first place. Sinclair and Bourne tested this idea by presenting identical case summaries but telling participants either that the jury's verdict was 'guilty' or that it was 'not guilty'. Later, participants' RMA was assessed as a dependent variable. For male participants, the 'cycle of blame' hypothesis was supported, in that their RMA scores were higher after a not-guilty verdict and lower after a guilty verdict. For women, interestingly, the opposite effect was found, in that a not-guilty verdict lowered RMA and a guilty verdict increased RMA. The authors' explanation for the women's discrepant results invokes the just-world hypothesis: because women generally fear rape victimisation more than men do (see Bohner *et al* 1993), they may endorse rape myths in order to feel safer ('If it *was* rape, the woman must have contributed to it happening'). Below we will have more to say about the idea that rape myths may fulfil a self-protective function for women.

In sum, there is compelling evidence that RMA serves as a cognitive schema for interpreting information in rape cases. These schematic influences affect both laypersons and legal experts. The effects of RMA are particularly pronounced if the available evidence is mixed or irrelevant, or if people are merely under the false impression of being informed. Cognitive and motivational principles operating at the individual and the societal level contribute to the perpetuation of rape myths.

*Gender-related functions for women: affect management and self-esteem protection*

Our research suggests that RMA has divergent functions for the two genders. For women specifically, an important aspect of the rape myth schema is that it pertains to their self-categorisation. Their level of RMA determines whether they include the threat of rape in their self-concept or exclude this threat from their self-concept. Specifically, women who reject rape myths would agree that any woman can be raped and, thus, perceive rape as a potential threat to *all women*, including themselves; women who endorse rape myths, by contrast, believe that rape only happens to a *certain type of woman* (e.g. who behaves carelessly or improperly), whom they perceive as dissimilar from themselves (Bohner 1998; Bohner *et al.* 1993).

Based on this proposed relationship between RMA and the cognitive representation of self and rape victims, we tested the hypothesis that women low (vs. high) in RMA would be more likely to use gender spontaneously as a general category when thinking about themselves or others and when solving cognitive tasks. In other words, we predicted that the concept of gender would chronically be more accessible to women low (vs. high) in RMA (Bohner, Siebler *et al.* 1998). This hypothesis was supported in a series of three studies. In Study 1, women were asked to complete ten statements starting with the phrase 'I am ...'. As predicted, low-RMA (compared to high-RMA) women provided self-descriptions in terms of gender (e.g. 'a woman', 'female') or gender-related roles (e.g. 'a daughter', 'a sister') both earlier and more frequently. In Study 2, low-RMA women were more likely to use gender as a discriminating feature when judging the similarity of pairs of target persons, although gender was never mentioned in the task instructions. Finally, in Study 3, women were asked to complete word fragments as quickly as possible with the first solution that came to mind; in critical trials, where both gender-related and neutral solutions existed, low-RMA participants were

more likely to generate gender-related solutions, and did so more quickly, than high-RMA participants.

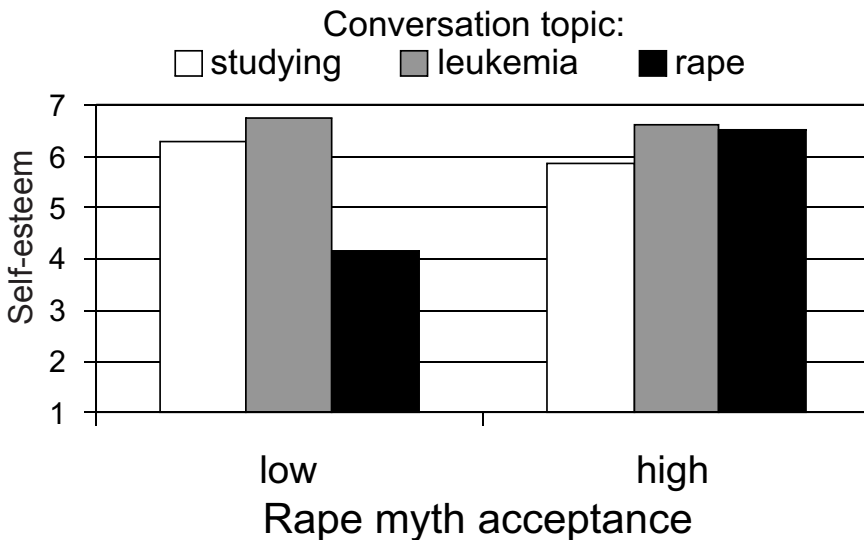
The proposed RMA-linked differences in the accessibility of gender and in self-categorisation have implications for affect management and self-esteem maintenance in situations where rape is salient. A first experimental test of the effect of fear of rape on women's self-related judgments indicated that women who were presented with reminders of rape (in the form of rape scenarios) showed severely impaired self-perceptions, with a particularly negative effect on their self-esteem and trust in others. Furthermore, women faced with reminders of rape also showed an increased acceptance of traditional gender norms (Schwarz and Brand 1983). In follow-up studies, Bohner and his colleagues examined the hypothesis that level of RMA would moderate the effects of rape salience on self-esteem and affect, in line with the assumed RMA-related differences in self-categorisation (Bohner 1998; Bohner and Lampridis 2004; Bohner *et al.* 1993, 1999). The general result of these studies was that the negative effects of rape salience on women's self-esteem that Schwarz and Brand had observed were limited to women who reject rape myths. Women who endorse rape myths, on the other hand, showed no decrease in self-esteem or affect after exposure to a rape scenario, or even reported somewhat heightened self-esteem (Bohner *et al.* 1993; Bohner and Lampridis 2004).

To illustrate this line of research, we review in some detail the most recent empirical test of the effect of RMA on women's self-esteem (Bohner and Lampridis 2004). Female students who were either high or low in RMA participated in what they thought was a study about 'getting acquainted'. They expected having a first conversation with another woman about a topic that the other woman had suggested. Participants were randomly assigned to one of three topic conditions which were designed to vary experimentally the salience of rape. In a rape-salient condition, the other woman had apparently been raped and wanted to talk about this experience; in a neutral control condition, the other woman wanted to talk about studying at their university; and in a further control condition, the other woman had apparently been diagnosed with leukemia and wanted to talk about her illness. This latter condition was included to rule out the possibility that any differential reactions of high-RMA and low-RMA participants to the rape-salient versus neutral control conditions might be caused by general differences in emotional reactivity. After participants had read about the alleged conversation topic, they

completed scales measuring different facets of self-esteem as well as their affective reactions in anticipation of the upcoming conversation. (After completing these scales, the participants were debriefed, and no conversation took place.) Results indicated that the prospect of meeting a rape victim had a strong impact on women’s self-esteem and affect (stronger than the effects of reading information about rape that we had found in previous studies). Again, this negative effect of rape salience was clearly more negative for low-RMA women than for high-RMA women, replicating previous results (e.g. Bohner *et al.* 1993, 1999).

As illustrated in Figure 2.3 for the dependent variable gender-related self-esteem (i.e. self-reported importance and evaluation of being a woman: Bohner and Sturm 1997), the differential effects on low-RMA versus high-RMA women were limited to the rape-salient condition and did not generalise to the leukemia-salient condition. This supports the idea that RMA acts as a specific anxiety buffer related to sexual violence (for an extended discussion, see Bohner and Lampridis 2004).

In sum, RMA was shown to serve as an anxiety buffer that allows women to feel less vulnerable to sexual assault and to protect their self-esteem. The more they endorse rape myths the less threatened and vulnerable they feel about their own possibility of victimisation



**Figure 2.3** RMA moderates effects of rape salience on women’s gender-related self-esteem (data from Bohner and Lampridis 2004)

(see also Bohner 1998). However, women who reject rape myths may experience negative effects on their self-esteem because they do not believe that only certain women are at risk of being raped, but rather construe rape as a potential threat to all women, including themselves (Bohner and Schwarz 1996). The beliefs of women low in RMA thus seem to be more realistic, but this greater realism comes at a cost, as the rejection of rape myths makes low-RMA women prone to negative affective reactions when confronted with the topic of sexual violence. Nonetheless, high-RMA women's illusion of invulnerability may be even more problematic, as it seems to prevent these women from learning self-defence strategies and from engaging in protective behaviours that have been shown to be effective in the case of an attack (e.g. shouting, talking to the attacker: Bohner 1998: 66–9). As noted above, women high in RMA who become rape victims may also be less likely to report the incident to the police because they are less likely to label their own experiences as rape (Peterson and Muehlenhard 2004; Warshaw 1988).

#### *Gender-related functions for men: rationalisation of aggressive tendencies*

Research conducted with male participants has focused on behavioural functions of RMA. Given the high prevalence of sexual violence, it is plausible to assume that many men harbour aggressive sexual tendencies. The endorsement of rape myths may serve both to rationalise these tendencies and to turn them into actions. From the beginning, feminist writers have noted this rationalising function of rape myths (Brownmiller 1975; Burt 1980). In our own research, we (Bohner, Reinhard *et al.* 1998) have drawn parallels between the content and functions of rape myths and the 'techniques of neutralisation' which have been proposed to explain juvenile delinquency (Sykes and Matza 1957) and other socially deviant behaviours (e.g. Schahn *et al.* 1995). Among the neutralising beliefs that Sykes and Matza described are *denial of injury* ('no harm was done'), *denial of responsibility* ('it was not my fault', 'I was provoked'), and *denial of victim* ('they had it coming'). By endorsing these beliefs, an offender may avoid perceiving his own criminal acts as norm violations.

Accordingly, we concluded that the prevalence of rape can be linked to the use of rape myths as mechanisms that neutralise or trivialise rape and sexual violence. In line with this reasoning, several studies have shown RMA to be highly correlated with measures of self-reported rape proclivity (e.g. Abrams *et al.* 2003; Malamuth 1981; Malamuth and Check 1985; Quackenbush 1989). Going beyond these



correlational findings, we conducted an extensive research programme to examine the causal role of men's own RMA and of the perceived RMA of others in predicting rape proclivity.

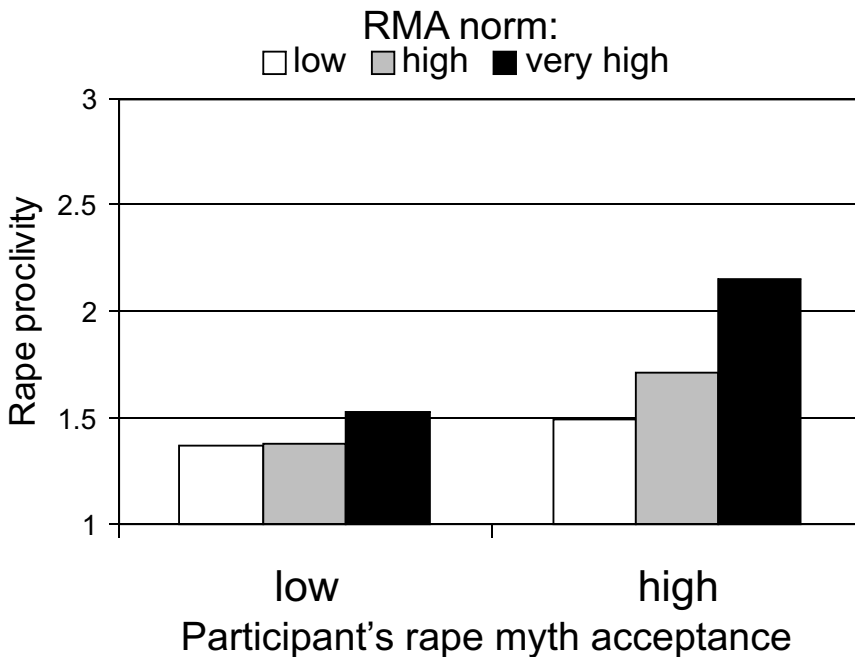
To assess rape proclivity, we developed an instrument that contains several scenarios in which an acquaintance rape is described (but the word 'rape' is never used). Participants indicate for each scenario whether they would have behaved like the perpetrator and how much they would have enjoyed getting their way in this situation. Averaging participants' responses across scenarios yields a valid measure of rape proclivity that is less affected than earlier measures by tendencies to answer in a socially desirable way (see Bohner, Reinhard *et al.* 1998; for a recent adaptation addressing more general tendencies toward sexual aggression, see Eyssel *et al.* 2009; for a laboratory measure of milder forms of sexual aggression, see Siebler *et al.* 2008). In our initial studies, we manipulated the temporal order in which we assessed men's RMA and rape proclivity to vary their relative salience. Our reasoning was that a causal impact of RMA on rape proclivity should be indicated by higher correlations between the two measures if RMA had been assessed first. If, however, RMA was a result of pre-existing rape proclivity, then the reverse order should yield higher correlations. The results of three studies, two conducted in Germany and one in the UK, were clearly in line with the first alternative: making participants' own RMA accessible to them (by presenting the RMA scale before the rape proclivity measure) consistently yielded a higher correlation than did the reverse order (Bohner, Reinhard *et al.* 1998; Bohner *et al.* 2005).

Furthermore, Bohner *et al.* (2005) found evidence for a chronically high accessibility of RMA in men who had been sexually coercive before. These men generally showed a high correlation between RMA and rape proclivity, and were faster in responding to RMA items than were men who had not been sexually coercive. This indicates that sexually coercive men may use rape myths to justify their actions (Bohner 1998; Burt 1980), and that therefore these myths may become more cognitively accessible to them in future situations, including future sexual encounters. Thus RMA as a cognitive schema in men may indeed facilitate sexual aggression (Bohner *et al.* 2005).

Another line of our research looked at normative effects of others' perceived RMA on men's rape proclivity (Bohner *et al.* 2006; Eyssel *et al.* 2006). Bohner *et al.* (2006: Study 2) asked male students to complete an RMA scale. Then they provided participants with manipulated feedback about the alleged level of RMA in their peer group. Depending on experimental conditions, participants learned

that their fellow students had either low, high or very high RMA scores. Later, participants completed our scenario measure of rape proclivity. As shown in Figure 2.4, both participants' own RMA and the level of perceived RMA in their peer group influenced their self-reported rape proclivity. Importantly, the two variables had an interactive effect: higher perceived RMA in participants' peer group increased rape proclivity especially in those students whose RMA was high to begin with.

Additional research confirmed that the effect of others' RMA on men's rape proclivity was quite robust. Eyssel *et al.* (2006) found that the effect was independent of whether the level of peers' RMA was presented to participants as a social norm (as in Bohner *et al.* 2006) or whether participants merely considered that level of RMA as a judgmental anchor ('Do you think the mean response of students at your university is higher or lower than X?'). In two further studies, Bohner *et al.* (2009) showed that the perceived RMA of an outgroup (foreign students or pensioners) can be just as effective in influencing rape proclivity as can the perceived RMA of one's ingroup (native



**Figure 2.4** Participant's own RMA and perceived RMA norm jointly affect men's rape proclivity (data from Bohner *et al.* 2006)

students). Interestingly, when participants expected the outgroup's level of RMA to be high and then learned that the outgroup's level of RMA was actually low, the effect on reducing rape proclivity was greater than that of learning about the ingroup's low level of RMA (Bohner *et al.* 2009: Study 2). In sum, for men, RMA serves as a means to rationalise and justify their own tendencies to engage in sexual aggression. Furthermore, the perceived RMA of others may provide a social norm for men's sexually aggressive behaviour (Bohner *et al.* 2006; Eyssel *et al.* 2006). These results corroborate Berkowitz's (2002) proposal that men who believe that their peers are using coercive methods to obtain sexual relations are more likely to engage in similar behaviours themselves. They may be seen as the laboratory equivalent of applied work conducted by Berkowitz and his colleagues (Berkowitz 2002; Fabiano *et al.* 2003). Longitudinal research by Loh *et al.* (2005) also, tentatively, indicates that level of RMA in fraternity memberships (in the US) has some influence on actual rape perpetration.

## Applications

We have discussed the detrimental effects of rape myths which may nurture false beliefs about a just world, provide women with illusory feelings of safety and offer men ways of rationalising tendencies toward committing sexual violence. Our theoretical analysis and empirical results thus show that RMA is one of the main factors that need to be addressed in order to prevent sexual violence and ameliorate negative attitudes toward victims. Indeed, existing programmes of sex-offender treatment have aimed at correcting distorted beliefs about sexual violence (e.g. Marshall 1999; Seto and Barbaree 1999). In this final section we will focus on the primary prevention of sexual offending, mainly addressing general rape prevention programmes directed toward individuals that have not offended.

A plethora of educational programmes, especially in the US, address sexual violence on college campuses (e.g. Fonow *et al.* 1992; Foubert 2000; Foubert and Marriott 1997; Foubert and McEwen 1998; Gidycz *et al.* 2001; Hanson and Gidycz 1993, Lonsway *et al.* 1998; Lonsway and Kothari 2000; Malamuth and Check 1984; O'Donohue *et al.* 2003). Most of these programmes use various methodologies, including video presentations, seminars on victim empathy or training for involvement in rape victim support, to change false beliefs surrounding rape in order to reduce sexual violence, usually

relying on the self-reported likelihood to sexually aggress or on self-reported behaviour as criterion measures.

Although many of these intervention programmes lack a clear theoretical basis, some (e.g. Foubert 2000; Foubert and Marriott 1997; Foubert and McEwen 1998; Gilbert *et al.* 1991; Heppner *et al.* 1995) rely on Petty and Cacioppo's (1986) elaboration likelihood model (ELM), a theory of persuasion that specifies the conditions for lasting attitude change. In numerous studies, Petty and Cacioppo have demonstrated that information perceived to be personally relevant leads to high-effort processing, which in turn may produce attitude change that is resistant to subsequent challenges if the information is of high argument quality. Interventions designed to successfully change attitudes should therefore use well-argued messages and establish high personal relevance of these messages to their target group (Foubert and McEwen 1998).

Other programmes (O'Donohue *et al.* 2003; Schewe and O'Donohue 1993; Yeater and O'Donohue 1999) rely on theoretical models that are widely used in the aetiology of child sexual abuse or adult sexual assault, as well as several cognitive and information processing models, for example Finkelhor's four-factor model (1986) and Bandura's social learning model of aggression (1973). According to these models, rape myths are cognitions that make liable conduct ethically acceptable, minimise the consequences of that behaviour and devalue the victim (O'Donohue *et al.* 2003; see our earlier discussion of rape myths as neutralising cognitions: Bohner, Reinhard *et al.* 1998). Most of these programmes appear to be successful in reducing RMA in college males as well as reducing the likelihood of these males to engage in sexually coercive behaviour (Fonow *et al.* 1992; Foubert 2000; Foubert and Marriott 1997; Foubert and McEwen 1998; Gilbert *et al.* 1991; Hanson and Gidycz 1993, Lonsway *et al.* 1998; Lonsway and Kothari 2000; Malamuth and Check 1984; O'Donohue *et al.* 2003).

Nevertheless, existing programmes have their limitations. The reported effects are often relatively short-term (e.g. Foubert and McEwen 1998), and we lack information on the long-term effectiveness of interventions (e.g. O'Donohue *et al.* 2003). Furthermore, most of the existing programmes are aimed at college males (in particular fraternity members), whereas there is very limited current research addressing the reduction of RMA in females. Moreover, a systematic evaluation of the above programmes has not yet been undertaken, thus making the assessment of the success of such programmes very difficult (for a review, see Lonsway and Kothari 2000).

The research we have reviewed in this chapter may provide additional insights that can be used in interventions aimed at reducing RMA in both males and females. Evidence for a causal influence of RMA on rape proclivity (Bohner, Reinhard *et al.* 1998; Bohner *et al.* 2005) is in keeping with most of the aforementioned programmes on rape prevention that show a reduction of RMA followed by a reduction in rape proclivity (e.g. Foubert and McEwen 1998; Gilbert *et al.* 1991; O'Donohue *et al.* 2003). In addition, our work on RMA as a social norm may form the basis for new types of intervention. We have shown that presenting normative information about others' denouncement of rape myths may effectively lower both RMA and rape proclivity in male participants (Bohner *et al.* 2006 2009). Such normative information about low RMA is effective when it pertains to reference groups that the recipient belongs to (peer group norms), but may even be more effective when it pertains to an outgroup that the recipient expects to be higher in RMA (Bohner *et al.* 2009). Turning these experimental findings into interventions may require some changes of procedure. In an intervention setting, there are ethical constraints against telling recipients that their peer group (or a given outgroup) strongly rejects rape myths unless this is in fact true (although perceptions of peer group norms are often distorted toward seeing norms as more pro-violent than is warranted: Berkowitz 2002). But if a single communicator who is clearly identifiable as a group member strongly argues against rape myths, then the effect of this communication on recipients' attitudes may be as large as feedback about the attitude of the group as a whole. Compared to the feedback of group norms, this approach would provide the advantage that it should always be possible to find individual group members who are willing to endorse an anti-rape myth position and to collaborate in an intervention programme. These assumptions will of course need to be tested and evaluated in future research.

So far, we have focused on the possibility of *changing* RMA as a means of changing problematic behaviour. Might it be possible, alternatively, to keep people from *using* their rape myths, without necessarily changing RMA? Research by Krahe and her associates has examined this possibility with respect to rape-case related judgments. In a study conducted in Germany (Krahe *et al.* 2008: Study 2), prospective lawyers judged various rape scenarios in terms of defendant liability and complainant blame. To examine if information about the legal code might reduce participants' reliance on rape myths, the researchers provided half of the sample with the legal definition of rape from the German Criminal Code prior

to reading the case scenarios. These participants were explicitly instructed to 'base [their] assessment of the cases that follow on the definition provided by the law' (p. 472). The other half of the sample was not given the legal definition. Disappointingly, this experimental intervention had no effect whatsoever: participants' judgments of defendant liability and complainant blame as well as their sentencing recommendations were strongly affected by their RMA no matter if they had been reminded of the legal code beforehand or not (see also Schewe 2002). A different type of intervention, however, promises to be more successful: in an earlier study with psychology students (Krahé *et al.* 2007), the researchers tried to foster greater accuracy by making participants accountable for their judgments. They did so by informing half of the sample at the outset that they might be asked to explain and justify their judgments about a rape case in subsequent mock jury sessions. This experimental intervention significantly reduced the impact of stereotypic beliefs about rape on participants' judgments about an ex-partner rape case.

Further research is again needed to corroborate these findings and determine their long-term effects. Interventions similar to those employed by Krahé *et al.* (2007, 2008) might also be tested as a means for improving the judgments and behaviour of people involved in victim support (e.g. social workers), of police officers who interact with rape victims and of judges and juries involved in rape cases.

## Conclusion

In sum, the research presented in this chapter highlights the wide impact rape myths have on men and women who endorse them (in terms of liable behavioural inclinations and/or self esteem), on attitudes toward victims and perpetrators of sexual violence and on judgments about rape cases. It also emphasises how crucial it is to recognise the implications of RMA as a social norm, and to challenge their apparent normativity by the use of broadly targeted educational campaigns. Such interventions may destroy comfortable illusions but will ultimately help to reduce sexual violence.

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## Note

- 1 Many of the studies reviewed in this section used an experimental approach, often including the temporary deception of participants. Such methodology is sometimes necessary in order to test causal hypotheses and to avoid motivated response distortions. It always requires the careful consideration of ethical issues, especially when materials contain sensitive information such as descriptions of sexual violence. In all of our studies we followed applicable ethical guidelines as laid down by the American Psychological Association, the British Psychological Society and the German Society for Psychology (Deutsche Gesellschaft für Psychologie). Participants always gave informed consent to participate, and they were informed that they could terminate participation at any time without giving a reason. When a study involved deception, participants were thoroughly debriefed immediately after the experimental session. The debriefing always included educational information about rape myths and their detrimental consequences. In studies with female participants we employed screening procedures to avoid assigning participants who may have experienced sexual violence themselves to conditions in which they would be exposed to information about rape.

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## Rape myth acceptance

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