

Social Perception of Rape

How Rape Myth Acceptance Modulates the Influence of Situational Factors

BETTINA FRESE

MIGUEL MOYA

JESÚS L. MEGÍAS

University of Granada, Spain

This study assessed the role of rape myth acceptance (RMA) and situational factors in the perception of three different rape scenarios (date rape, marital rape, and stranger rape). One hundred and eighty-two psychology undergraduates were asked to emit four judgements about each rape situation: victim responsibility, perpetrator responsibility, intensity of trauma, and likelihood to report the crime to the police. It was hypothesized that neither RMA nor situational factors alone can explain how rape is perceived; it is the interaction between these two factors that best account for social reactions to sexual aggression. The results generally supported the authors' hypothesis: Victim blame, estimation of trauma, and the likelihood of reporting the crime to the police were best explained by the interaction between observer characteristics, such as RMA, and situational clues. That is, the less stereotypic the rape situation was, the greater was the influence of attitudes toward rape on attributions.

Keywords: attitudes; rape myths; victim blame

Attitudes toward rape are important to understand how people react or behave toward victims and perpetrators of rape. These attitudes are often characterized by blaming the victim, minimizing the psychological impact and justifying the perpetrator and can be sustained by the perpetrators as well as the victims. Attitudes toward rape seem to be linked to traditional gender-role stereotypes, in particular those related to sexual behavior (Acock & Ireland, 1983; Anderson, Cooper, & Okamura, 1997; Burt, 1980; Check & Malamuth, 1983; Lonsway & Fitzgerald, 1995; Willis, 1992): Women are not supposed to show their sexual interest, so that their refusal is interpreted

Authors' Note: This research was funded by Ministerio de Ciencia y Tecnología (Spain) Grant BSO2001-3158. The authors would like to express their appreciation to Bruce Milliken for his help with the manuscript preparation and Estrella Ryan for her assistance with English translation.

JOURNAL OF INTERPERSONAL VIOLENCE, Vol. 19 No. 2, February 2004 143-161
DOI: 10.1177/0886260503260245
© 2004 Sage Publications

as token, whereas men learn to act out their sexual interest and they are told that in certain circumstances, it is not necessary to control their sexual urge, such as dating situations or marriage. Women in these situations are viewed as sexual objects whose function is to satisfy men's needs so that in some situations, sexual coercion is seen as normal and acceptable in-role behavior (Brownmiller, 1975; Check & Malamuth, 1983). This tolerance toward rape has several extremely negative consequences for the victim, as she is more likely to blame herself for the assault, which then has an important impact on her recovery. Trauma-related guilt has been highly positively correlated with posttraumatic stress disorder, depression, negative self-esteem, shame, social anxiety, and suicidal thoughts (Kubany et al., 1995). Furthermore, this social perception of rape makes its eradication more difficult as it reduces the likelihood of reporting the crime and elevates judges' and police officers' proneness to not investigate further such assaults. Prevalence studies have repeatedly shown that rape victims, more so than victims of other crimes of comparably severity, keep their victimization hidden (Koss, 1992). Therefore, assailants perceive that the law will not punish their actions, which then makes victims feel even more helpless and unsafe. What is it that makes it still so difficult to identify rape as a crime and perceive sexually assaulted women as innocent and traumatized victims?

A huge amount of empirical research has tried to determine the factors that make rape victim blame more likely (see Pollard, 1992, for a review). On one hand, factors related to the assault, such as the absence or presence of victim resistance (McCaul, Veltum, Boyechko, & Crawford, 1990; Ong & Ward, 1999) or the relationship between the perpetrator and his victim (Bell, Kuriloff, & Lottes, 1994; Check & Malamuth, 1983; Monson, Byrd, & Langhinrichsen-Rohling, 1996) have been shown to influence attitudes toward rape victims and perpetrators. The probability that a victim is held responsible for her victimization is higher when she was acquainted with the rapist (Bell et al., 1994; Bridges & McGrail, 1989). Comparing marital rape to stranger rape, Monson et al. (1996) found that people perceived less violation of victims' rights in marital rape than in stranger rape. Other "behavioral" indexes support these attitudinal data. For instance, McCormick, Maric, Seto, and Barbaree (1998) revealed that stranger rapists received longer sentences than assailants who knew their victims. This study deserves special interest because the fact that it uses behavioral intention as the dependent variable allows for more ecologically valid conclusions about the relationship between situational factors and the legal prosecution of rape.

On the other hand, several characteristics of the observer have also been studied in relation to social perception of rape. One of the most studied demographic characteristics is the observer's sex. As would be expected, men gen-

erally hold more accepting attitudes toward rape than do women (see Anderson et al., 1997 for a review). More interesting, investigators have dedicated a lot of effort to analyze how attitudinal factors, such as gender attitude (Burt, 1980; Check & Malamuth, 1983; Ong & Ward, 1999; Ryckman, Kaczor, & Thornton, 1992) or rape myth acceptance (RMA) (Jenkins and Dambrot, 1987; Krahe, 1988; Stormo, Lang, & Stritzke, 1997), relate to reactions to rape. RMA is conceptualized as the amount of stereotypic ideas people have about rape, such as that women falsely accuse men of rape, rape is not harmful, women want or enjoy rape, or women cause or deserve rape by inappropriate or risky behavior (Burt, 1980). Generally, these studies confirm that the more stereotypic ideas an individual has about gender roles or rape, the less likely he or she is to interpret forced sexual intercourse as rape and the more likely it is they blame the victim and justify the assailant's behavior.

Nevertheless, most of the studies conducted so far present an important limitation: Most of them study the impact of assault characteristics and cognitive factors of the observer separately. Most researchers in this field either manipulate situational factors to assess their influence on rape attributions or they assess correlations between observer characteristics and attitudes toward rape. These strategies make it impossible to analyze the interaction between cognitive variables of the observer and situational factors. Yet there is abundant evidence in social cognition research that it is the interaction between these two factors that gives a better picture about social perception. Attitudes, as is the case for any kind of knowledge or beliefs that people have in their mind, are not activated and used in a uniform or automatic way independently of the situation or of the social stimulus. Research in social cognition has shown that there are two basic variables that influence the likelihood that some stored knowledge will be activated: the accessibility of the stored knowledge prior to stimulus presentation (e.g., rape myths) and the "fit" between the stored knowledge and the presented stimulus (Higgins, 1996). That is, although some beliefs may be accessible to social perceivers, these beliefs would not be used if the perceiver thinks that they are not applicable to the stimulus or situation. There is substantial evidence that perceivers' assessment of the relevance or appropriateness of particular information for their response can determine their use of this information for subsequent judgements (Higgins & Bargh, 1987). Moreover, as the studies about new forms of prejudice and racism show (Gaertner & Dovidio, 1986), "old-fashioned" beliefs (i.e., those concerning rape myths) are probably used when situations are less stereotypic and people's behavior and opinions cannot be labeled as prejudiced, sexist, or old-fashioned. That is, even though people hold old-fashioned rape myths that favor victim blame, they will apply these stereotypic ideas differently depending on the characteristics of

the assault. Supporting this view, Johnson and Russ (1989) stated that there is some evidence that cognitive biases have their greatest effect on perception of information concerning rape with a certain degree of perceived ambiguity. They propose that factors associated with acquaintance rape, such as previous physical contact or the victim voluntarily being with the assailant or situational characteristics like drinking, lack of resistance, or provocative dressing, may increase the level of perceived ambiguity associated with victim consent. For the same reason, marital rape might also be perceived as more ambiguous due to the previous intimate contact between the perpetrator and his victim and to the traditional ideas about "marital duties" (Monson et al., 1996).

In fact, there is some empirical evidence that supports this view about the interaction between perceived ambiguity and attitudinal factors on social perception of rape. In relation to gender attitudes, Check and Malamuth (1983) found that gender-role stereotyping affected the amount of sexual arousal to an acquaintance rape scenario but not to a stranger rape scenario (both were compared to a scenario of consenting sex). Assessing victim truthfulness, Willis (1992) found an interaction effect between gender-role stereotyping and acquaintance versus stranger rape. Ryckman et al. (1992) studied the differences in responsibility attributions to resistive versus nonresistive victims in women with high versus low gender-role stereotyping. They obtained an interaction effect, in which more traditional women attributed more responsibility to the resistive victim, whereas the nontraditional women blamed the nonresistive victim. These results suggest that gender-role stereotyping plays a more dominant role when rape scenarios contain information about gender-role relevant behavior, such as the degree of intimacy tolerated by the woman or her resistance to victimization. Another study conducted by Johnson and Russ (1989) provides additional evidence about the importance of the interaction between gender-role stereotypes and situational factors in the perception of rape. They manipulated the salience of information about women's discrimination and showed that people who previously heard about the different social status of men and women (salient condition) did not make different responsibility attributions for acquaintance versus stranger rape. However, participants in the nonsalient condition attributed more blame to the acquaintance rape victim than to the stranger rape victim.

The second main attitudinal factor studied in relation to social perception of rape is RMA. To our knowledge, there is only one study that assesses how RMA affects the perception of different rape scenarios. Krahe (1988) investigated the importance of RMA in responsibility attributions when different victims' pre-rape behaviors were described. Her study shows that people

with high RMA evaluated victim and perpetrator's responsibility differently depending on victim's pre-rape behavior, whereas individuals with low RMA did not. Stormo et al. (1997) addressed this issue but only by treating RMA as a covariate into the analysis of blame and responsibility attributions throughout different rape scenarios.

The aim of our study was to investigate the interaction between RMA and characteristics of the rape situation on rape perception. Therefore, we created three different rape scenarios: acquaintance rape, marital rape, and stranger rape. Following Johnson and Russ's (1989) proposal that ambiguity might play a role in the social perception of rape, we manipulated the descriptions of the situations so that acquaintance rape and marital rape might be understood as more ambiguous than stranger rape, although perhaps for different reasons. Acquaintance rape (see below for our description of the situations) was ambiguous because the victim was portrayed as drunk, dressed in a short skirt, attending a party, and freely accepting to leave with the perpetrator. Thus, observers could interpret that the woman was, in some way, responsible for the outcome or that she actually wanted to have sexual intercourse. In the marital rape situation, ambiguity can be provoked because according to traditional gender-role stereotypes, it is the duty of a wife to have sexual relationships with her husband. We also described the perpetrator as drunk, which has been shown to reduce responsibility attributions for the assailant (Stormo et al., 1997). In addition, this fact could lead to minimize the psychological impact of the rape because stereotypical ideas about gender roles maintain that a wife should understand and tolerate her husband's behavior.

Some authors have also found differences between men and women in their perceptions of different rape scenarios (Monson et al., 1996; Stormo et al., 1997), but others have found that gender was not a relevant variable (Johnson & Russ, 1989; Krahe, 1988; L'Armand & Pepitone, 1982). Due to these contradictory results, we also included gender as an independent variable in our study.

To assess the perception of these three rape scenarios, four different questions were included for each of them. First, participants rated victim responsibility. Second, they rated how much responsibility they attributed to the perpetrator. Third, the amount of psychological impact each rape would have on the victim was assessed. Finally, a behavioral index was introduced to measure how likely it was that the observer would recommend that the victim report the assault to the police. This question gave us the opportunity to evaluate whether acquaintance and marital rape are highly underreported crimes (e.g., Hanneke & Shields, 1985; Sorenson & White, 1992) is related to the amount of stereotypical ideas about rape.

Our hypotheses were as follows:

Hypothesis 1: Individuals with high RMA, compared to people with low RMA, generally would attribute more responsibility to the rape victim and less responsibility to the assailant, they would perceive rape as less traumatic, and they would be less prone to report the rape.

Hypothesis 2: We also expected a main effect of situational cues. That is, individuals would attribute less responsibility to the victim in the stranger rape scenario than in the other two rape situations. Furthermore, they would blame the perpetrator more when he is a stranger than when he is acquainted or married to the victim. Stranger rape would be perceived as more traumatic than the other two scenarios, and stranger rape would be more likely to be reported.

Hypothesis 3: Finally, we expected a significant interaction effect between levels of RMA and situational factors. That is, individuals with high and low RMA were not expected to differ in their judgements of the stranger rape scenario, but they were expected to make different judgements in the date rape and the marital rape situation.

Because previous studies have yielded inconsistent findings regarding gender differences, we had no specific hypothesis about the effect of this variable.

METHOD

Participants

Respondents were 182 psychology undergraduates (91 men and 91 women) from the University of Granada, Spain, who participated in our study for extra credits. Women ranged in age from 18 to 28 (mean age = 19.2; $SD = 1.84$). Men ranged in age from 18 to 43 (mean age = 21.9; $SD = 4.42$). This difference in age between males and females was significant, $t(180) = 5.47, p < .01$.

Materials

Participants were given a booklet that included instructions, questions about their sex and age, and a questionnaire to assess attitudes toward rape and the different rape settings.

Rape attitudes. The Rape Myth Acceptance Scale (RMAS) (Burt, 1980), translated to Spanish specifically for this research, was used to assess attitudes toward rape. This scale consists of statements that involve prevalent myths about rape and includes 19 items. This instrument used a 7-point, Likert-type rating scale with response options ranging from 1 (*strongly agree*) to 7 (*strongly disagree*). Ratings were added to obtain an RMA score.

Because it was the first time that this measure was used with a Spanish population, no previous statistical information was available. In this study, we obtained a Cronbach's alpha of 0.73, similar to that obtained with the English version (Cronbach's alpha = 0.875).

Rape scenarios. We used three short vignettes developed for this study. Participants read the following descriptions in Spanish¹: (a) Imagine that a young woman who is drunk and dressed in a short skirt leaves a party accompanied by a man who she doesn't know very much and this man forces her to have sexual intercourse with him; (b) Imagine that a young woman who doesn't want to have sexual intercourse with her husband, who comes home drunk, is forced by him; and (c) Imagine that a young woman is threatened by a knife and forced to have sexual intercourse with an unknown man in the doorway of her house when she comes home at night.

We labeled the first situation as "acquaintance rape," the second as "marital rape," and the last as "stranger rape." Each participant read all the descriptions. We chose these situations to depict possible rape scenarios in a naturalistic way. In the acquaintance rape description, "provocative" victim's clothing and her drunkenness were included to create an ambiguous scenario; in the marital rape scene, drunkenness of the assailant was included with the same aim. In the stranger rape condition, the presence of a weapon was supposed to decrease ambiguity. In neither of the three descriptions was the expression "rape" used so that participants would be less likely to answer questions based on their individual preconceptions about the meaning of the word.

The three scenarios were followed by the same four questions in Spanish²: (a) Evaluate how much responsibility can be assigned to the woman for what has happened, (b) Evaluate how much responsibility can be assigned to the man for what has happened, (c) How traumatic must this experience have been for the woman? and (d) If you were a friend of this woman, would you recommend that she report the incident to the police? Each question was answered on a 5-point, Likert-type scale. The first three questions had responses ranging from 1 (*nothing at all*) to 5 (*a lot*), and the last question had responses ranging from 1 (*definitely no*) to 5 (*definitely yes*).

Procedure

Participants answered the questionnaire in their classrooms. They were seated separately to guarantee privacy. When they finished, they inserted the questionnaire in an envelope to guarantee the privacy of their answers. To eliminate possible order effects, half of the male and half of the female partic-

ipants answered first the RMAS and then the questions about the rape settings and the other half answered in the opposite order. Because type of rape was manipulated within subject, the order of the three rape vignettes was counterbalanced, so that each scenario was preceded by each of the other two the same number of times. Order of the four questions about each rape vignette was incompletely counterbalanced using the following sequences: abdc, bcad, cdba, and dacb.

Overall Design

In this study, there were three independent variables: RMAS (median split), gender, and type of rape, the first two factors being manipulated between participants, the last factor being manipulated within participant. Dependent variables were participants' judgments about victim responsibility, perpetrator responsibility, victim traumatization, and reporting of rape to police.

RESULTS

We classified participants as high or low on RMA using a median split procedure (Krahe, 1988) with their scores on RMAS (higher scores in RMAS indicated lower acceptance of rape myths and vice versa). We also checked for possible order effects, but neither the order of questionnaire presentation, nor the order of rape scenarios, nor the order of the four questions about the perception of the rape situation yielded significant differences (all $F_s < 1$).

We then conducted a one-way ANOVA on total RMA scores with subject gender as the independent variable. This analysis showed no significant differences between men (mean = 100.86, $SD = 10.1$) and women (mean = 99.51, $SD = 8$) in attitudes toward rape, $F(1, 180) = .92, p > .30$.

Separate $2 \times 2 \times 3$ ANOVAs were performed for each of the four questions following the rape vignettes (victim responsibility, assailant responsibility, victim trauma, and probability of report). The independent variables were RMA, gender, and type of rape, the first two factors being manipulated between participants and the last factor being manipulated within participant.

Victim Responsibility Attributions

This analysis yielded significant main effects for RMA $F(1, 177) = 11.89, p < .01$, for type of rape, $F(2, 354) = 239.75, p < .01$, but not for gender. High

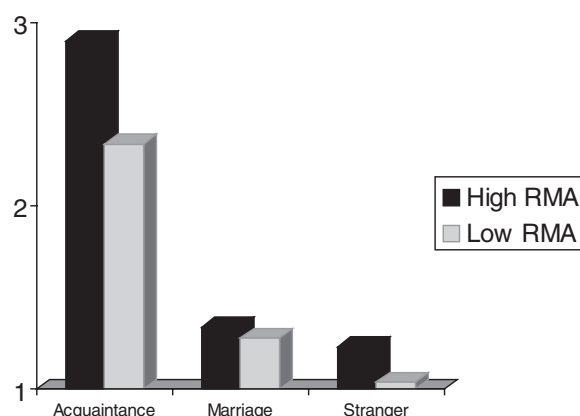


Figure 1: Ratings of Victim Responsibility by Participants With High Rape Myth Acceptance (RMA) and Low RMA in the Three Rape Situations

NOTE: Low scores express lower responsibility attributions.

RMA participants attributed more responsibility to the victim ($M = 1.9$) than low RMA participants ($M = 1.5$). Post hoc least significant difference (LSD) tests of differences revealed that the victim responsibility ratings were significantly higher for the acquaintance rape situation ($M = 2.6$), than for the marital rape ($M = 1.3$) and for the stranger rape situation ($M = 1.1$) (both $ps < .05$). The difference between these two latter scenarios was marginally significant ($p < .06$).

However, these main effects were modulated by a significant interaction between type of rape and RMA, $F(2, 354) = 6.22, p < .01$. Data illustrating this interaction are presented in Figure 1. To know how RMA influenced responsibility attributed to the victim in each rape situation, we conducted three one-way ANOVAs with RMA as the independent variable. These analyses yielded significant differences for the acquaintance rape, $F(1, 180) = 11.3, p < .01$, and the stranger rape $F(1, 179) = 9.4, p < .01$ situation. No differences in responsibility attributions for marital rape were found ($F < 1$). As shown in Figure 1, in the acquaintance and stranger rape situation, participants with high RMA saw victims more responsible than participants with low RMA.

Perpetrator Responsibility Attributions

Figure 2 shows ratings of assailant responsibility by participants with high and low RMA in the three rape situations. The global ANOVA with RMA, gender, and type of rape as independent variables showed only a significant

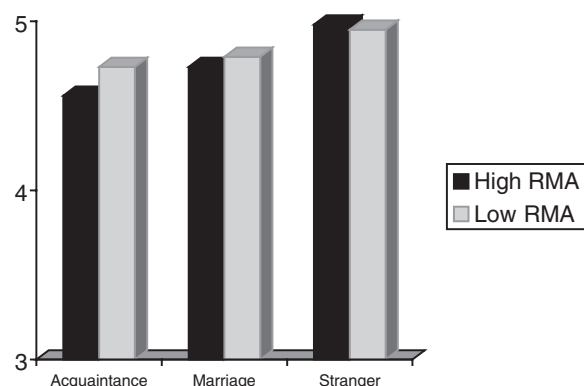


Figure 2: Ratings of Assailant Responsibility by Participants With High Rape Myth Acceptance (RMA) and Low RMA in the Three Rape Situations

NOTE: Low scores express lower responsibility attributions.

main effect for type of rape, $F(2, 352) = 25.36, p < .01$. Post hoc LSD tests revealed that people judged the assailant significantly more responsible in the stranger rape situation ($M = 5.0$) than in the acquaintance rape ($M = 4.6$) and the marital rape setting ($M = 4.8$). The difference between the ratings in the last two settings also reached significance. Neither the main effect of RMA nor the main effect of gender was significant. The only interaction to approach significance was that between RMA and type of rape ($p < .09$).

Estimation of Trauma

Figure 3 shows estimations of victim trauma by participants with high and low RMA in the three rape situations. Analysis of this dependent variable yielded a significant main effect for RMA, $F(1, 177) = 12.3, p < .01$, indicating that people with high RMA ($M = 4.6$) judged the trauma of rape as less severe than people with low RMA ($M = 4.8$). We also obtained a significant main effect for type of rape, $F(2, 354) = 42.7, p < 0.01$. Post hoc LSD tests revealed that participants judged the stranger rape as significantly more traumatic ($M = 5.0$) than the acquaintance rape ($M = 4.5$) and the marital rape ($M = 4.5$). The main effect for gender was marginally significant ($p < 0.07$), as was the interaction of gender and RMA ($p < 0.06$). Most important, the interaction between RMA and type of rape was significant, $F(2, 354) = 3.7, p > 0.05$.

To understand the interaction between RMA and type of rape, we performed three one-way ANOVAs, one for each rape scenario, to see how RMA influenced trauma estimation in each of the three rape situations. Peo-

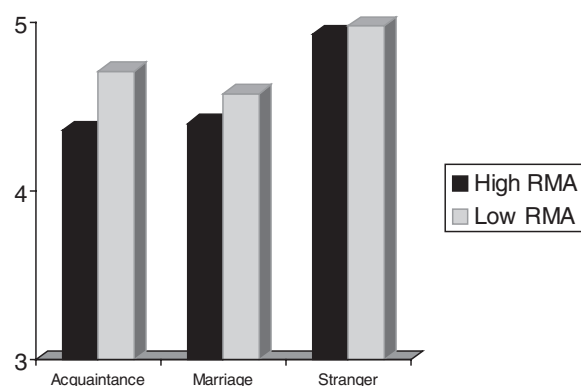


Figure 3: Estimations of Victim Trauma by Participants With High Rape Myth Acceptance (RMA) and Low RMA in the Three Rape Situations

NOTE: Low scores express lower trauma estimations.

ple with low RMA judged victim's trauma as more severe ($M = 4.7$) than people with high RMA ($M = 4.4$) in the acquaintance rape setting, $F(1, 179) = 12.8, p < .01$. No differences were found for the other two situations.

Reporting of Rape to Police

Ratings of the probability that participants with high and low RMA would recommend the victim to report the incident to the police in the three rape situations are displayed in Figure 4. Analysis of the probability that participants would recommend the woman to report the incident to the police resulted in a significant main effect for RMA, $F(1, 178) = 16.61, p < .01$, indicating that people with high RMA were less likely to recommend the report to police ($M = 4.3$) than people with low RMA ($M = 4.6$). The main effect for type of rape was also significant, $F(2, 356) = 71.15, p < .01$. Post hoc LSD tests revealed that people were less likely to recommend report to police for the marital rape scenario ($M = 4.2$) than for the acquaintance rape scenario ($M = 4.4$). The stranger rape scenario was the most likely to be reported ($M = 4.9$). The main effect of gender was not significant, and gender did not enter into any significant interactions with other variables.

However, there was a significant interaction between type of rape and RMA, $F(2, 356) = 4.22, p < .05$. Again, this interaction was examined further by conducting three one-way ANOVAs, one for each rape scenario, that treated RMA as the lone factor. A significant difference between high and low RMA participants was found for both scenarios in which the victim knew her assailant; acquaintance rape, $F(1, 180) = 12.5, p < .01$, and marital rape

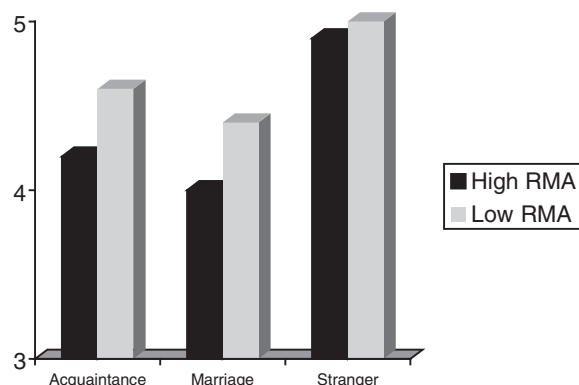


Figure 4: Ratings of the Probability That Participants Would Recommend the Victim to Report the Incident to the Police, With High Rape Myth Acceptance (RMA) and Low RMA, in the Three Rape Situations.

NOTE: Higher scores express higher probability to recommend a report.

$F(1, 180) = 8.5, p < .01$. In both cases, people with high RMA ($M = 4.2$ for acquaintance rape and $M = 4.0$ for marital rape) were less likely to recommend a report than individuals with low RMA ($M = 4.6$ for acquaintance rape and $M = 4.4$ for marital rape). No differences for stranger rape were found.

DISCUSSION

The main aim of the present study was to examine the importance of RMA and situational factors in rape attributions. We first assessed the role of RMA and differences in rape settings separately and then examined the interaction between these two factors on perception of rape. Our results strongly support the importance of RMA and situational factors in accounting for differences in rape attributions. Furthermore, they support our hypothesis that it is the interaction between these two factors that best describes how individuals judge victim responsibility and the intensity of trauma. The results also suggest that an interaction between RMA and situational factors affects the likelihood of reporting the rape to the police, whereas assailant responsibility attributions seem to depend mostly on situational factors.

There was support for our first hypothesis because our results revealed that people with high RMA attribute more responsibility to the victim, estimate victim trauma as less severe, and would be less likely to recommend the victim to report the rape to the police than people with low RMA. Therefore,

our results demonstrate once more that RMA is an important predictor of people's attributions about victim blame (Krahe, 1988; Stormo et al., 1997).

Only attributions of assailant responsibility did not seem to depend on the amount of stereotypic ideas about rape. Krahe (1988) reported a similar finding. She obtained a significant main effect for RMA on victim blame but not on assailant blame. In our study, we suspect that this null effect may be due to a ceiling effect. Another possibility relates to a potential shortcoming of the RMA, which measures attitudes toward rape by using mainly items that describe victim behavior, including statements that describe false beliefs about the perpetrators of sexual aggressions, such as "men can't control their sexual urges once they feel sexually aroused" or "men have the right to force a woman to have sex once they are in an intimate relationship." Taking into account the role of the assailant might lead to more sensitive measures of attitudes toward rape.

Our second hypothesis was also supported by the data. Characteristics of the context in which rape takes place influence the social perception of this type of violence. The results showed that the three scenarios were perceived differently, but the directions of these differences varied according to the dependent variable considered.

Victim blame was highest in the acquaintance rape situation, whereas in marital and stranger rape, the responsibility of the woman was perceived similarly. As expected, responsibility attributions for the perpetrator were highest for the stranger rape and lowest for the acquaintance rape. These results may reveal the underlying belief that an assailant who knows the victim may not understand her refusal, which then gives him the right to rape her. Furthermore, participants clearly estimated a more important trauma for the victim of stranger rape than for the other two. This pattern of results expresses the common assumption that being assaulted by a known man is less traumatic than becoming a victim of an unknown rapist. This belief is false because several studies have demonstrated that victims of known offenders are as prone to develop trauma symptoms as victims of stranger rape (Koss, 1993; Shapiro & Schwarz, 1997). The same pattern of results was found for the likelihood to recommend a police report: Participants clearly recommend report of the stranger rape but are less likely to recommend report of the acquaintance and the marital rape. There is evidence that sexual assaults committed by an offender who was known to the victim are less likely to be reported than sexual assaults committed by a stranger (Koss, 1993). It has been proposed that this is due to the victim's fear of becoming stigmatized and that this could be especially true for acquaintance rape situations (Stormo et al., 1997). Our results suggest that this fear is justified.

Nevertheless, the more important results of our study are those concerning the interaction between attitudes toward rape and the type of rape (Hypothesis 3). We predicted that stereotypic ideas about rape would be most influential when the rape situation was perceived as more "ambiguous." This prediction was correct for three of the four measures of rape perception. Participants with high and low RMA showed the largest differences when they estimated victim responsibility, intensity of trauma, and likelihood of report in the acquaintance rape situation. Surprisingly though, in the case of victim blame, individuals with high RMA differed from those with low RMA not only in the acquaintance rape situation but also in the stranger rape situation. These results indicate that RMA modulates the importance of rape characteristics in social reactions to sexual violence. Nevertheless, our hypothesis that individuals with fewer stereotypic ideas about rape would not be affected by situational factors in making attributions about sexual aggression was not supported. This unexpected pattern of results reveals that the absence of stereotypic ideas about rape does not make a person invulnerable to the influence of situational factors. Even people with low RMA expressed more doubts about the victim's responsibility in the acquaintance rape in which the victim was drunk and dressed in a "provocative" way. Furthermore, these people also hold the erroneous belief that this kind of rape is less traumatic than a stranger rape, and they were less likely to recommend a report to the police.

These findings have important implications for the design of programs for rape prevention. In contrast to other authors' conclusions (Stormo et al., 1997), the fact that rape acceptance is a major factor influencing attributions about rape does not necessarily mean that educational and prevention efforts are best aimed at eliminating general beliefs that support aggression against women. Instead, an additional effort has to be directed at eradicating specific misconceptions about situations that are perceived as "ambiguous" in sexual aggressions. This specific information seems to be necessary to make clear that "there are, in fact, no circumstances under which a woman gives up her right to say no to sexual intercourse" (Unger & Crawford, 1992; see Monson et al., 1996). Future investigation will have to look for other attitudinal variables, which could explain people's proneness to blame the rape victim as a function of the amount of ambiguous clues present. We think that gender-role attitudes, especially taking into account evidence of new forms of sexism (Glick & Fiske, 1996), could be one of these attitudinal antecedents of rape attributions.

Because scarce empirical research about the perception of marital rape is available, we will comment on our results about this rape situation separately. Perception of this type of rape differed substantially depending on the mea-

sure we used. In the case of victim blame, attributions were similar to those of stranger rape, whereas for assailant responsibility, intensity of trauma, and the likelihood to report the crime to the police ratings were similar to those of acquaintance rape. In general, these results indicate that people do not blame married women for being raped by their husbands as they tend to do for victims in an acquaintance rape setting. This would mean that the idea of a woman having "marital duties" is no longer valid. But still, people in general hold a husband less responsible for raping his wife than the stranger rapist, and they consider marital rape less traumatic. Further research of this issue is necessary because in our manipulation the husband was described as drunk and this might have introduced a significant difference between marital and stranger rape scenarios. Furthermore, RMA did not influence victim blame but was important for the estimation of trauma and the likelihood to report. These results can be seen as evidence that high RMA individuals, although they justify the married sexual assailant more than the stranger rapist, do not blame marital rape victims more than stranger rape victims. Instead, they hold other erroneous beliefs about this type of rape, such as that marital rape is less traumatic than stranger rape. Finally, marital rape was seen as the most difficult to denunciate, especially for those with high RMA. This might indicate that individuals do not interpret marital rape to be as serious a crime as stranger rape, in particular when they hold stereotypic ideas about rape. This conclusion is consistent with Monson et al.'s (1996) data. They found that, for marital rape, participants perceived a lower level of victim rights violation, a lower level of violence, and less psychological damage than for stranger rape. In addition, they judged marital rape as less obviously an act of rape.

We did not find any effect of participant's gender on rape attributions. Our results confirm those obtained by other authors (Check & Malamuth, 1983; Johnson & Russ, 1989; Krahe, 1988) who haven't found significant gender effects on rape perception when situational factors were manipulated. Our results also contradict the general finding that men hold more rape myths than women do (Anderson et al., 1997). Our data indicate that it is not the observer's gender that determines rape attributions but his or her preconceptions about rape. Thus, the influence of gender on rape attributions might be mediated by RMA, which then might explain why some studies reveal a significant gender effect (Monson et al., 1996; Stormo et al., 1997). Our failure to find gender differences in RMA might be due to our sample as men who study psychology might show less stereotypic ideas about rape than men from other populations. Even though sample choice is a limitation of our study, Krahe (1988) found similar results with a nonstudent sample.

Several other limitations of our study should be mentioned. As we already outlined before, we used a student sample, and some of the results might not

generalize to the rest of the population. Nevertheless, the aim of our study was mainly to show the importance of the interaction between situational factors and RMA for specific rape attributions. Even if we assume student population as holding less rape myths than the general population, our study still proves that this interaction is important to understand the social perception of rape. We might also be critical about the rape depictions we used. They were aimed to be representative for common rape situations, but at the same time they are abstract and contain only a restricted amount of relevant detail. In real rape perception, observers have much more information that can be used to make their judgements. As such, we cannot rule out the possibility that our results are due to the artificial manipulation of situational factors. Further investigations using more ecologically valid scenarios are needed. The same is true for our dependent variables. In this study, only cognitive measures were used, whereas there is some empirical evidence for the importance of other measures of rape perception, such as sexual arousal to rape depictions (Check & Malamuth, 1983) and measures of behavioral intentions (Bohner et al., 1998; Check & Malamuth, 1983). Future studies should relate these variables to RMA across different rape settings. Finally, because several authors have proposed that RMA is related to other forms of sexism, such as sex-role stereotyping (Anderson et al., 1996), hostility toward women (Lonsway & Fitzgerald, 1995), or ambivalent sexism (Glick & Fiske, 1996), these variables should be taken into account for future analysis of social perception of rape.

NOTES

1. Imagínese usted que una mujer joven borracha vestida con minifalda se va de una fiesta con un hombre al que no conoce muy bien y éste le fuerza a mantener relaciones sexuales. Imagínese usted que una mujer joven que no quiere mantener relaciones sexuales con su marido que ha llegado borracho a casa es forzada por él. Imagínese que una mujer joven vuelve a casa de noche y es amenazada con un cuchillo y forzada por un desconocido a mantener relaciones sexuales con él en el portal de su casa.

2. Valore cuánta responsabilidad tiene *la mujer* en lo que ha ocurrido. Valore cuánta responsabilidad tiene *el hombre* en lo que ha ocurrido. ¿Cómo de traumática puede haber sido la experiencia para la mujer? Si fuese amigo/a de la mujer, ¿le aconsejaría que denunciara lo ocurrido?

REFERENCES

- Acock, A. C., & Ireland, N. K. (1983). Attribution of blame in rape cases: The impact of norm violation, gender, and sex-role attitudes. *Sex Roles, 9*, 179-193.
- Anderson, K. B., Cooper, H., & Okamura, L. (1997). Individual differences and attitudes toward rape: A meta-analytic review. *Personality and Social Psychology Bulletin, 23*, 295-315.
- Bell, S. T., Kuriloff, P. J., & Lottes, I. (1994). Understanding attributions of blame in stranger rape and date rape situations: An examination of gender, race, identification, and students' social perceptions of rape victims. *Journal of Applied Social Psychology, 14*, 1719-1734.
- Bohner, G., Reinhard, M. A., Rutz, S., Sturm, S., Kerschbaum, B., & Effler, D. (1998). Rape myths as neutralizing cognitions: Evidence for causal impact of anti-victim attitudes on men's self-reported likelihood of raping. *European Journal of Social Psychology, 28*, 257-268.
- Bridges, J. S., & McGrail, C. A. (1989). Attributions of responsibility for date and stranger rape. *Sex Roles, 21*, 273-287.
- Brownmiller, S. (1975). *Against our will*. New York: Bantam.
- Burt, M. R. (1980). Cultural myths and supports for rape. *Journal of Personality and Social Psychology, 38*, 217-230.
- Check, J., & Malamuth, N. M. (1983). Sex role stereotyping and reactions to depictions of stranger versus acquaintance rape. *Journal of Personality and Social Psychology, 45*, 344-356.
- Gaertner, S. L., & Dovidio, J. F. (1986). The aversive form of racism. In J. F. Dovidio & S. L. Gaertner (Eds.), *Prejudice, discrimination, and racism* (pp. 61-89). San Diego, CA: Academic Press.
- Glick, P., & Fiske, S. T. (1996). The Ambivalent Sexism Inventory: Differentiating hostile and benevolent sexism. *Journal of Personality and Social Psychology, 70*, 491-512.
- Hanneke, C. R., & Shields, N. A. (1985). Marital rape: Implications for the helping professions. *Social Casework: The Journal of Contemporary Social Work, 66*, 451-458.
- Higgins, E. T. (1996). The "self digest": Self-knowledge serving self-regulatory functions. *Journal of Personality and Social Psychology, 71*, 1062-1083.
- Higgins, E. T., & Bargh, J. A. (1987). Social cognition and social perception. *Annual Review of Psychology, 38*, 369-425.
- Jenkins, M. J., & Dambrot, F. H. (1987). The attribution of date rape: Observer's attitudes and sexual experiences and the dating situation. *Journal of Applied Social Psychology, 17*, 875-895.
- Johnson, J. D., & Russ, I. (1989). Effects of salience of consciousness-raising information on perception of acquaintance versus stranger rape. *Journal of Applied Social Psychology, 19*, 1182-1197.
- Koss, M. P. (1992). The underdetection of rape: Methodological choices influence incidence estimates. *Journal of Social Issues, 48*, 61-75.
- Koss, M. P. (1993). Rape. Scope, impact, interventions, and public policy response. *American Psychologist, 48*, 1062-1069.
- Krahe, B. (1988). Victim and observer characteristics as determinants of responsibility attributions to victims of rape. *Journal of Applied Social Psychology, 18*, 50-58.
- Kubany, E. S., Abueg, F. R., Owens, J. A., Brennan, J. M., Kaplan, A. S., & Watson, S. B. (1995). Initial examination of a multidimensional model of trauma-related guilt: Applications to combat veterans and battered women. *Journal of Psychopathology and Behavioral Assessment, 17*, 353-376.

- L'Armand, K., & Pepitone, A. (1982). Judgments of rape: A study of victim-rapist relationship and victim's sexual history. *Personality and Social Psychology Bulletin*, 8, 134-139.
- Lonsway, K. A., & Fitzgerald, L. F. (1995). Attitudinal antecedents of rape myth acceptance: A theoretical and empirical reexamination. *Journal of Personality and Social Psychology*, 68, 704-711.
- McCaul, K., Veltum, L. G., Boyechko, V., & Crawford, J. J. (1990). Understanding attributions of victim blame for rape: Sex, violence and foreseeability. *Journal of Applied Social Psychology*, 20, 1-26.
- McCormick, J. S., Maric, A., Seto, M. C., & Barbaree, H. E. (1998). Relationship to victim predicts sentence length in sexual assault cases. *Journal of Interpersonal Violence*, 13, 413-420.
- Monson, C. M., Byrd, G. R., & Langhinrichsen-Rohling, J. (1996). To have and to hold. Perceptions of marital rape. *Journal of Interpersonal Violence*, 11, 410-424.
- Ong, A. S. J., & Ward, C. A. (1999). The effects of sex and power schemas, attitudes toward women, and victim resistance on rape attributions. *Journal of Applied Social Psychology*, 29, 362-376.
- Pollard, P. (1992). Judgements about victims and attackers in depicted rapes: A review. *British Journal of Social Psychology*, 31, 307-326.
- Ryckman, R. M., Kaczor, L. M., & Thornton, B. (1992). Traditional and nontraditional women's attributions of responsibility to physically resistive and nonresistive rape victims. *Journal of Applied Social Psychology*, 22, 1453-1463.
- Shapiro, B. L., & Schwarz, J. C. (1997). Date rape. Its relationship to trauma symptoms and sexual self-esteem. *Journal of Interpersonal Violence*, 12, 407-419.
- Sorenson, S. B., & White, J. (1992). Adult sexual assault: Overview of research. *Journal of Social Issues*, 48, 1-8.
- Stormo, K. J., Lang, A. R., & Stritzke, W. G. K. (1997). Attributions about acquaintance rape: The role of alcohol and individual differences. *Journal of Applied Social Psychology*, 27, 279-305.
- Unger, R., & Crawford, M. (1992). *Women and gender: A feminist psychology*. Philadelphia: Temple University Press.
- Willis, C. E. (1992). The effect of sex role stereotype, victim and defendant race, and prior relationship on rape culpability attributions. *Sex Roles*, 26, 213-227.

Bettina Frese is a Ph.D. student at the University of Granada in Spain. She received her doctoral training in experimental psychology. Her research interests concern social perception of women who suffer male violence and its impact on psychological adjustment after victimization. She also works as a clinical psychologist treating victims of rape and sexual abuse.

Miguel Moya is a professor in social psychology at the School of Psychology of the University of Granada. His main research interests are gender and prejudice. Some of his papers have been published in the following journals: European Journal of Social Psychology, Sex Roles, and Journal of Personality and Social Psychology. He has been a postdoctoral research fellow at the University of Kent at Canterbury (U.K.) and at the University of California, Los Angeles (U.S.).

Jesús L. Megías is a senior lecturer in experimental psychology at the School of Psychology of the University of Granada. He received his Ph.D. in learning; now his main research interests concern psychological adjustment of women who suffer male violence and posttraumatic stress disorder in several populations. He coordinates a Psychological Assistance Service for women victims of male violence in Granada in Spain.