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Male Rape Myths: Understanding and Explaining Social Attitudes Surrounding Male Rape

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Abstract

This paper provides a critical review of the literature surrounding male rape, aimed at exploring how male rape myths shape society's responses and attitudes to male victims of rape and integrates the literature from a theory driven perspective. In doing so, this theoretical paper reveals information relating to the barriers to recognition of male rape. These barriers are male rape myths that prevent male rape victims from coming forward and seeking the support that they merit. There has been a lack of research on male rape myths, although some research has documented such myths to be present in practice. These myths could be harmful because they may influence societies' opinions of male rape victims, so this could affect the treatment and responses toward such victims. To understand and explain such myths so some attempt can be made at eradicating them, this paper will explore common male rape myths that seem to be prevalent in Western society. This paper will examine male rape myths in the areas of media, incarcerated settings, and the wider community, focusing on England and Wales, UK. This is important to do to recognise which myths are harmful and are facilitating the under-reporting of male rape. This paper will help raise awareness of male rape myths and not only attempt to tackle them, but also encourage male rape victims to come forward to report and seek the help that they merit. It will also address the gaps in the literature and areas ripe for research, so further empirical research can be conducted on male rape, highlighting ideas for future research and providing guidance in areas most needed in research on male rape.

Keywords: male rape myths, male rape, gender, masculinity, sexuality



Mitos de la Violación Masculina: Entender y Explicar las Actitudes Sociales alrededor de la Violación Masculina

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Resumen

Este trabajo ofrece una revisión crítica de la literatura sobre la violación masculina, dirigido a explorar cómo las respuestas de la sociedad alrededor de los mitos de la violación masculina forman actitudes en los hombres que han sido víctimas. De este modo, este trabajo teórico revela datos sobre las existentes barreras al reconocimiento de la violación masculina. Estas barreras son mitos que impiden que las víctimas puedan buscar el apoyo que merecen. En este sentido, ha habido una falta de investigación sobre dichos mitos, aunque algunas investigaciones los han documentado en la práctica. Estos mitos pueden ser perjudiciales porque pueden influir en las opiniones de las víctimas de violaciones masculinas y en la sociedad, así que esto podría afectar el tratamiento y las respuestas a dar a estas víctimas. Para entender y explicar tales mitos que permita su erradicación, este trabajo explora los más frecuentes en la sociedad occidental. De modo que se examinarán mitos de violación masculina en los medios de comunicación y en la comunidad en general, centrandonos en Inglaterra y Gales (Reino Unido). Este análisis es importante para demostrar que los mitos son perjudiciales y están facilitando la infradeclaración de la violación masculina. Así, este artículo ayudará a aumentar la conciencia sobre dichos mitos y no sólo tratar de hacer frente a ellos, sino también alentar a las víctimas y buscar la ayuda que merecen. También se abordarán las lagunas en la literatura, por lo que una mayor investigación empírica puede desvelar ideas para futuras investigaciones y proporcionar orientación en este ámbito.

Palabras clave: mitos de violación masculina, violación masculina, género, masculinidad, sexualidad

While men are more likely to be the offenders of sexual violence and women the victims, writers are not encapsulating the full range of sexual violence by conceptualising men as respectively offenders and women as victims. This, it could be argued, only bolsters rape myths rather than attempting to eradicate them. It is important to eradicate both male and female rape myths because the victims will neither get the treatment nor help that they merit. Male rape myths may not only silence male victims of rape, but also could exacerbate their experience of victimhood, resulting in societies not understanding the full depth of sexual violence since the victims may be reluctant to report their crime. Therefore, it is important to explore male rape myths in this paper, so as to understand their development and current manifestations in Western society. By doing so, one can then outline possible means for tackling male rape myths. Approximately 3 to 8% of British men report having suffered an adulthood incident of sexual assault in their lifetime (Elliott, Mok & Briere, 2004). Weiss (2010) found that, whilst 30% of female rape victims reported their rape to the police, only 15% of male rape victims reported their rape to the police. These figures, however, are likely to be underestimates of the scale of the issue of male rape, considering that many male rape victims are frequently reluctant to report their crime (Javaid, 2014a, 2014b, 2014c). This warrants research on male rape, in order to not only understand and explain the phenomenon using social theory, but also to encourage male rape victims to come forward and report, whilst raising awareness of male rape. To do this, it is important to shed some light on what male rape and male rape myths are.

This paper focuses on male victims of rape and sexual violence in England and Wales, UK. The Sexual Offences Act 2003 (UK Government, 2003) in England and Wales strengthened and modernised the law on sexual offences, although there are some weakness of the Act (see Javaid, 2014d for a discussion of the weaknesses surrounding this Act). This Act extends the definition of rape to include the penetration by a penis of the vagina, anus, or mouth of another person. Moreover, sexual violence is any unwanted sexual act or activity. For example, male sexual assault is a form of sexual violence. Male sexual assault is an act of psychological, physical, and emotional violation in the form of a sexual act, which is inflicted on a man without his consent. It can include manipulating or forcing a man to

participate in any sexual act, such as the offender intentionally touching the victim in a sexual way, apart from penetration of the mouth or anus (however slight) with the penis since this would be rape. These definitions form the conceptual basis for this paper in order then to be able to critically explore male rape myths.

Male rape myths are stereotyped, prejudicial, and false beliefs about rape, offenders and victims of rape, keeping male rape hidden. Throughout this paper, I argue that the cause of the stereotypes and male rape myths is the gender role socialisation, and, as a result, the social construction of masculinity that socialises men into becoming sexually dominant, strong, violent, and invulnerable. This socialisation process, as such, produces what is known as the ‘myth of male invulnerability’ (Donnelly & Kenyon, 1996, p. 448) that precludes societies, incorporating men, from accepting the fact that men can experience all forms of sexual violence, including rape. Groth and Burgess (1980), McMullen (1990), and Isley and Gehrenbeck-Shim (1997) argue that the taboo and stigma of male rape keep it under-researched and hidden. It may be argued that this taboo and stigma are consequential of stereotypes and male rape myths ingrained within societies pertaining to the causes, impact, and nature of male rape. It must, therefore, be recognised that research on male rape is needed. This paper will draw attention to the many stereotypes and male rape myths, backed up by various research studies. This paper will consider the following common male rape myths/cultural myths and stereotypes identified in various work: (1) men cannot be raped; (2) only gay men are victims and/or offenders of male rape; (3) ‘real’ men can defend themselves against rape; (4) men are not affected by rape; (5) gay and bisexual men deserve to be raped since they are deviant and immoral; (6) male rape only occurs in prisons; and (7) if a victim physically responds to rape, he must have wanted it.

This paper will focus on adult male rape victims as opposed to male children who are victims of rape. Both are certainly worthy of research. Though research on male rape is vital, the conception of male rape has been largely “overlooked, dismissed, or ignored” (Ratner et al., 2003, p. 73) and is an understudied topic. The marginalisation and invisibility of male rape is largely due to male rape myths being perpetuated (Kassing, Beesley, & Frey, 2005). This paper aims to elucidate how male rape myths influence societies’ attitudes in respect of male victims of rape and sexual violence.

Through an investigation of the attitudes, this paper will present an important insight into how social and cultural perceptions shape the responses to male rape. Thus, this paper will provide an improved understanding of male rape and will supply knowledge to help support male rape victims all around the world, informing and encouraging them to engage with their respective criminal justice system. Moreover, it will help increase awareness that will help to eliminate negative perceptions of male rape that may be present in many countries, which may not just be limited to England and Wales, UK. This paper will attempt to tackle the gender expectations of men that are possibly ingrained in all societies; this, again, may encourage male rape victims to come forward to report, and possibly validate their experience of being raped. In short, this paper aims to critically review studies relating to male rape, and important results and omissions will be highlighted.

This paper extends the existing literature on male rape, as it specifically explores male rape myths in different settings, bringing studies on rape myths together from disparate disciplines is not only original, but also enlightening, permitting deeper insights into the ways in which male rape myths influence the reporting, recording and service delivery pertaining to male rape. This process helps to illuminate the significant attitudes that underpin the responses to male rape victims. Research that is available on male rape rests either on analysed quantitative data sets on male rape victims' experiences or on case outcomes, or interviews directly with male rape victims. Though a wealth of research highlights victims' experiences of being revictimised by the legal and criminal justice systems, by exploring male rape myths, I am able to discover how they impact not only male rape victims, but also the wider community. I chose not to directly interview male rape victims because getting access to them was extremely difficult, and the male rape literature implies that such victims rarely disclose their rape to researchers because they hold feelings of self-blame, trepidation, and shame. Therefore, this paper is a conceptual and theoretical analysis, using the theoretical frameworks of Butler and Connell and, to a lesser extent, feminist research, to help explain and understand the conception of male rape and male rape myths.

It is important to note that some empirical studies on male rape premise themselves on low sample sizes, which further limits the reliability of

anything we know about the topic of male rape. Therefore, caution is required when considering the different studies used in this paper. In order to encourage future research to adopt large sample sizes and to research areas relating to male rape that have been largely neglected, this paper will end by highlighting ideas for future research and it will provide guidance in areas most needed in research on male rape. It is also important to note that, in general, many studies on male rape are US-based, which urgently calls out for in-depth research to be conducted within the UK since there may be a dearth of information available for male rape victims who are situated in England and Wales, UK. Nonetheless, this paper will be structured around different contexts to elucidate which male rape myths are likely to occur in particular contexts.

Rape in Institutions and Secondary Victimisation

It is important to contextualise the issue of male rape to give an understanding of such a phenomenon. However, very little is known about the nature, incidence and prevalence of male rape in UK prisons. Therefore, this section will include the majority of studies emanating from the USA. Nonetheless, USA research pertaining to male rape in prisons can be utilised to give some indication of the nature of rape within prisons.

In the 1970s, male rape was first seen as a problem in incarcerated populations, and it was in prisons that male rape first gained recognition (Graham, 2006). Male rape was seen as something that neither required research nor public interest because it was considered as a minority issue (Abdullah-Khan, 2008). Therefore, it has been argued that male rape in prisons remained hidden until relatively recently. Throughout the world, the places with the largest number of male rape are prisons (Scarce, 1997). However, an absence of robust empirical evidence means that such conclusions remain anecdotal. It is difficult to gain empirical evidence in prisons because of the reluctance of men to report being raped (Rideau & Sinclair, 1982), and the difficulties of carrying out research on rape in prisons within conservative institutional establishments (King, 1992). Still, the widely held misconception in UK society that male rape happens only in prisons flourishes, but this misconception is problematic because it ignores male rape occurring in the community; non-institutionalised rape

has been traditionally seen as consensual homosexual activity (Javaid, 2015a). Therefore, state and voluntary agencies may neglect dealing with male rape happening outside of prisons. Similarly, this may also be the case in prisons as is suggested in the following quote:

[M]ale rape within prisons can be viewed as an extension of powers forcibly taken by the aggressors to dominate the victims both physically and sexually. The rape of inmates is not regarded sympathetically, due to the common belief that a ‘man’ cannot be forced to engage in anything against his will (Abdullah-Khan, 2008, p. 17).

This assertion suggests that prison officials may overlook the issue of male rape in prisons because it is possible that they consider that ‘men cannot be raped’. However, Abdullah-Khan does not consider alternative explanations. For instance, there could be a general indifference to the negative experiences of prisoners who are there to be punished as criminals; e.g., ‘they get what they deserve when raped in prisons’ because of the crimes they committed to be incarcerated, although this remains speculative but warrants further research. Moreover, it is found that prison officials also see that any sexual intimacy in prisons is purely of a homosexual nature (Lockwood, 1980). In addition, it has been argued that victim-blaming views are instilled in prison officials, in that they blame prisoners who have been raped for being ‘weak’ and, thereby, inviting the rape and this justifies exploitation in the eyes of prison officials (Scacco, 1982). Regardless of efforts by prison officials to conceal the issue of male rape (*ibid.*), male rape research continually refutes the claim that male rape is non-existent. This is illustrated in the early work of Lockwood (1980) and Scacco (1982), who both demonstrate the occurrence of male rape in US prisons and document that it is common. The increasing prevalence of male rape in prisons is further emphasised:

The opportunity to carry out rape within prisons has ... increased with the erosion of the nineteenth-century ideology of prisoners needing strict supervision to avoid corrupting one another. This lack of tight control due to the normalisation of prison life since the 1960s, combined with *financial cutbacks* (resulting in staff shortages) and

overcrowding within prisons, means that prisoners have more freedom of movement and, hence, are more able to engage in illegal activities (Abdullah-Khan, 2008, p. 17. Emphasis added).

The conception of financial cutbacks can also be applied to state and voluntary agencies because, currently, there are financial cutbacks in such agencies, resulting in staff shortages and a lack of resources in England and Wales. Therefore, this may reflect the treatment and responses that male rape victims get in the community. It is important to conduct empirical research on the prevalence of these issues. Such drawbacks have also resulted in research examining male rape in the UK to be based on small-scale samples due to the limited number of known cases and have mainly been clinically based. Thus, this may be due to the lack of resources and finance put in place for male rape victims in the community to come forward and disclose their crime. This is similar to the position of prisoners who have been raped, in that they are also reluctant to come forward to report sexual assault and rape, which means that the extent of these crimes are likely to be underestimated (Rideau & Sinclair, 1982).

There is evidence to suggest that male rape also happens in the army. Though military establishments may not be as restricting as prisons, the state of being confined may make male rape less easy to evade.

Recent research has found that male veterans who were in the military and suffered sexual assault were met with poor treatment when they sought help from state and voluntary agencies (Mulkey, 2004). The author found that the participants in their study suffered what was defined as ‘secondary victimisation’, which refers to the re-traumatisation of the sexual assault, abuse or rape victim. It is an indirect result of assault that happens via the responses of institutions and individuals to the victim. The types of secondary victimisation are victim blaming, inappropriate language or conduct by the police, medical professionals and by other organisations that have access to the victim after their experience of crime. This conception of secondary victimisation is also evident in cases of female rape; it was found that many female rape victims feel as if the experience of seeking help from mental, medical, and legal health systems only exacerbates the trauma (Campbell et al., 1999). This study explored the link between post-traumatic stress symptoms (PTSS) and secondary victimisation. Analyses concerning rape victims’ psychological well-being and social system

contact showed that the group most at risk for high PTSS levels post-rape were female victims of non-stranger rape, who had received minimal assistance from the medical or legal system and had suffered victim-blaming attitudes from system personnel.

It was found that instances of male rape are minimised in the military (Belkin, 2008). This was in fear that, if people discovered that male rape, particularly if it is seen as a gay issue, happens and that even military men who are trained can become victims, it could diminish the military's reputation as an establishment comprising of tough, masculine men (*ibid.*). Belkin (2008) argues that the military places blame on gay men for male rape occurring, suggesting that 'male rape is a gay issue', and it allows male rape to carry on without punishing the perpetrators. Therefore, homophobia within the army is problematical, which not only leads to uncertainty between the connection of male rape and homosexuality, but also dissuades reporting of same-sex rape, enabling perpetrators to avoid being punished, allowing them to carry on raping other men who are seen as 'inferior' (Scarce, 1997).

Earlier work found that sexual assault and rape were more dominant in the army than any other non-institutional setting. This is evidenced in the work of Goyer and Eddleman (1984), who researched a psychiatric outpatient clinic serving a population of Marine Corporal and Navy men within the USA. The authors conclude that these men experienced similar trauma to other victims of male rape (sexual difficulties, mood disturbances, and problems in relationships with peers) consequential of the attacks. In this research, it was also established that analogous themes to rape in prisons were present, such as humiliation, submission to sexual advances because of fear of actual physical violence, and gang rape.

Given the above-mentioned anecdotal work and research studies, it can be seen that male rape is apparent in prisons and military establishments. There is no research available on the prevalence and incidence of male rape in UK prisons and military establishments—this calls out for in-depth research to be conducted to explore male rape in such UK institutions. Of course, research can only take place in these institutions if/when the authorities in charge of these confess that male rape occurs in these settings and give permission for research to be executed. It is also important that the male rape myth that 'male rape happens only in prison' is eradicated

because male rape occurring in the community may be overlooked. That said, it is vital to critically examine other male rape myths occurring in the community because they will ultimately influence the way state and voluntary agencies, regardless of their own professionalism, respond to and handle male rape victims (Javaid, 2015b).

Common Male Rape Myths in the Wider Community

This section highlights common male rape myths/cultural myths and stereotypes identified in various work. These stereotypes of male rape and male rape myths proliferate in societies (Hodge & Canter, 1998), which are exacerbated by the visible tendency to hypothesise men's sexual 'experience' in comparison to women's, in that numerous male rape research compares male rape with female rape in terms of severity (Cohen, 2014). This can be seen in various male rape research (e.g., McMullen, 1990; Stermac et al., 1996; Scarce, 1997; Gregory & Lees, 1999). These research studies neither specifically develop nor apply theory while unchallenging the conventional frame of male rape—either within the sphere of feminism or sexual violence. It could be argued that this lack of theory in prior research leaves the stereotypes of male rape and male rape myths unchallenged. However, McMullen (1990) does begin to challenge male rape myths, but it is not empirically supported. For example, McMullen (1990, p. 132) suggests, "The sexual identity ... of the vast majority of male rapists is heterosexual," therefore, challenging the male rape myth that 'male rape is solely a gay issue' whereby the male rape offenders and victims are both gay. However, McMullen's argument is purely anecdotal, as he has no empirical data to support his theory; therefore, he can be accused of being biased when formulating his argument. McMullen draws his conclusions from clinical observations, not empirical work, and disregards case examples from his observations to support his arguments. Research by Hodge and Canter (1998, p. 231), which was empirically based, found the following in their research pertaining to male rape offenders:

[F]orty-five percent (30) of the offenders in the self-report sample were believed to be heterosexual, and most offenders in the police

sample were thought to be either bisexual (43%, 10) or homosexual (33%, 8) with only 22% (5) labelled as heterosexual.

The dissimilar findings from these two data sources (i.e., the self-report sample and police sample), pertaining to the sexual orientation of offenders, demonstrate the difficulties in generalising since they show different results. The dissimilarities may be because of the police being reticent to categorise offenders as heterosexual or because of the lack of data required to develop such categorisations. Other work has found that 10 male rape victims were gay; 8 were heterosexual; and 4 were bisexual (Mezey & King, 1989). In this study, however, the researchers placed advertisements in the gay press for victims to come forward, which may have biased their sample. Mezey and King (1989) do indicate that this may have biased their results. Nevertheless, the ‘sexual orientation’ variable is vital to understanding male rape, as it helps to challenge the male rape myth that ‘male rape is solely a gay problem’; for example, only gay men rape other gay men or that only gay men get raped. However, all men have the potential to rape or be raped, not just gay men (Lees, 1997). For example, Stermac et al. (1996) found that heterosexual male rape victims are more likely to experience ‘stranger rape,’ while gay male rape victims are more likely to experience ‘date rape.’ ‘Stranger rape’ typically refers to a stranger raping a victim, a victim who had no knowledge about the offender prior to the attack. ‘Date rape’ (also known as ‘acquaintance rape’) is a type of rape perpetrated by someone known to the victim. Arguably, focusing on heterosexual male rape victims relatively neglects gay male rape victims experiencing ‘date rape’ in the discourse of male rape, which reinforces a myopic conception of male rape analogous to female rape victims experiencing ‘stranger rape.’ Other research evidence also supports that heterosexual men can be raped:

The survey found, similar to existing reports on adult male rape, that most of the victims seeking therapeutic help were both heterosexual and white. Reports by victims further verify, as Groth and Burgess (1980) have suggested, that men are more likely to be assaulted by male, white, heterosexual offenders (Isley & Gehrenbeck-Shim, 1997, p. 162).

It is vital to challenge unhelpful and deleterious male rape myths in order to accurately understand male rape offenders and victims. The studies mentioned above, though, neglect acknowledging the theoretical issues that tie in with basic comprehensions regarding sexual orientation. Therefore, the contexts wherein the studies decide which male rape victims are what sexual orientation are frequently ambiguous. The studies also do not consider that sociologists claim that sexual orientation is fluid and open to change, so it is never fixed. However, this is a highly contentious area especially when studies on this issue are empirically flawed. The studies mentioned above (for example, [Hodge & Canter, 1998](#)) are inconsistent especially when the sexual orientation of offenders itself is guessed, as it is unknown within the studies or to the male rape victims. In addition, it is quite possible that an offender may identify himself as being a heterosexual man but will carry out the act of male rape in order to execute power and control, not for sexual purposes ([Groth & Burgess, 1980](#)). However, their sample was based on convicted sex perpetrators undertaking examination at a clinic for sexually dangerous people, so they will show considerably dissimilar characteristics that are ungeneralisable to perpetrators recognised via other means and environments.

Likewise, the above-mentioned studies used different data sources and obtained different results, so it is problematic to generalise the sexual orientation of both the offenders and victims of male rape, especially when the data is reliant upon the participants that come forward to report, are prosecuted, or are seeking treatment. The studies are all based on certain sample groups, most of which are small scale. Nonetheless, the studies do give a valid understanding of male rape while challenging the male rape myth that ‘male rape is solely a gay problem’.

It is argued that male rape myths are prevalent among the general public as well as counsellors, medical professionals, and law enforcement ([Anderson & Quinn, 2009](#)). [Chapeau et al. \(2008\)](#) found that participants equally endorsed male rape myths and female rape myths and that there was a strong, positive relationship between participants’ endorsement of these two types of myths. That is, people do not believe male rape myths more or less than female rape myths, and people who believe one type of myth are likely to believe the other. It is clear, then, that there is some overlap of rape myth acceptance regarding male and female rape. I argue that male and

female rape myths are prevalent due to gender expectations and stereotypes and social norms pertaining to sexual orientation and masculinity. These norms stipulate that men are expected to achieve the heterosexual masculine ideal (i.e., hegemonic masculinity, which refers to the dominant social position of men, and the subordinate social position of women and other subordinate masculinities, such as gay masculinity) and have certain traits, such as independence, toughness, power, aggressiveness, control and dominance (Connell, 2005).

However, traits such as emotionality, submissiveness, homosexuality, and compliance are not in agreement with social norms pertaining to masculinity (Javaid, 2015b). Socially constructed ideas of masculinity are not consistent with construction of the rape victim as weak, feminine, and defenseless (Javaid, 2014a). Therefore, based on socially constructed definitions of masculinity, ‘real men’ cannot be rape victims (Lees, 1997). This is consistent with research findings that male rape victims are blamed for their rape (Walker et al., 2005). In addition, sexual orientation is vital to the conception of male rape considering that constructions of masculinity are very closely linked to heterosexuality. Due to such close linkages, male rape victims are frequently thought of as gay and less deserving of help and sympathy (Graham, 2006). This concurs with research that argues that gay male rape victims are blamed more than heterosexual male rape victims (Stermac et al. 1996), and that homophobia is a significant predictor of male rape myth acceptance (Kassing et al., 2005). On balance, it can be argued that male rape myths are perpetuated by a substantial segment of the population and are linked to social norms regarding sexuality and masculinity. Future empirical research should explore male and female rape myth acceptance in different contexts, such as in state and voluntary agencies, prisons, colleges, schools, universities, and the media. This is important to do, otherwise, such myths may continue to minimise and conceal both male and female rape, which can have harmful ramifications for all rape victims, regardless of gender.

It is my argument that male rape stems from the same patriarchal structure as female rape and is related to different forms of oppression, such as heterosexism and sexism. Particularly, under a social system of patriarchy, masculine heterosexism and hegemony are valued ideals and these are inconsistent with men’s experiences of rape. In certain areas (for

example, sports and religion), there is little or no empirical research on male rape or the various male rape myths, such as ‘male rape victims will always fight back.’

However, some male rape victims will submit or freeze so as to reduce physical damage (Carpenter, 2009). Scarce (1997) postulates that a ‘real man’ is someone who is a physically powerful heterosexual male guardian, who is able to look after not just himself, but also violently protects his own safety and that of others. However, this definition is refuted within research; for example, Hodge and Canter (1998) found that in 119 incidents of male rape, freezing was the victims’ response in 60% of bisexual, heterosexual and gay men. Carpenter (2009) adds that the intense fear of death forces male rape victims to remain cooperative when being raped, promoting their inability to fight back. Analogously, Gregory and Lees (1999) found that, in their sample, 60% of male rape victims gave no resistance to their attackers; and that the threat of violence was usually sufficient to gain compliance from the victims. In another study, it was found that most of the male rape victims in the sample responded to their rape with either submission, frozen fear, or helplessness, though 27% stated they resisted at some point during the attack (Walker et al., 2005). The issue of focusing on the physical violence aspect of a male rape incident is that it disregards those victims who have a lack of, or none physical damage. It is evident that the extent to which a male rape victim is seen to have attempted to physically resist a rape situation influences the opinions made towards him (Lees, 1997). This leads one to argue that a scarcity of physical violence in male rape is explicitly or implicitly associated with consent (Graham, 2006), as the media tend to reinforce (Cohen, 2014).

Representations of Male Rape in the Media

Male rape [is] framed as a secretive topic that not even the media can contend with accurately ... when male rape is referenced in the media, it is not representative of the experiences that survivors [male rape victims] are challenged with. This can further reinforce an idea that rape is about female victims ... women are portrayed as sexual objects for men, whilst men are denied being sexual objects for other men (Pitfield, 2013, p. 81).

This part of the paper focuses on the depiction of male rape in the media. It is important to critically discuss because research, which will be examined in this section, has found male rape myths/cultural myths concerning male rape to be present in the media. In turn, this may influence policy makers, societies, state and voluntary agencies' responses and attitudes toward male rape victims. Cohen (2014) asserts that the media has credence, credibility, and authority; so it has the power to legitimise knowledge of the social world while inventing it or simplifying it. She goes on to argue that the media is the main source of learning, and, through the socialisation process, it consorts people to becoming accustomed to 'normal' rituals. Therefore, it may be safe to claim that the media has the power to influence societies' responses to, and attitudes toward male rape.

Although media depictions of male rape are important, it lacks research within the realm of social science. General texts on media depictions of sexual violence have a dearth of information on male rape, but disregarding male rape may be deleterious because male rape myths may stay unchallenged in the media. Research that includes media representations of male rape often reinforces male rape myths, such as 'male rape is a homosexual issue.' For instance, Wlodarz (2001) argues that it is always homosexual men who are blamed in male rape movie story lines. He scrutinised movies in the 1990s that convey male rape, and concluded that male rape is intrinsically 'deviant' and 'abnormal', arguing that the narratives in these story lines are desexualised and unerotic. It could be argued that, by conveying the character's sexual orientation, however, sexualises the nature of male rape.

Again, the male rape myth that 'male rape is a homosexual issue' is highlighted in more recent research. Demirkan-Martin (2009) perpetuates male rape as solely a homosexual issue and believes that male rape is either incited by sexual deviance, sexualised aggression, or sexual lust/desire, instead of male rape being totally desexualised. This suggests that male rape does not affect heterosexual men and is essentially a sexual act, whereby the offender is unable to control his aggressive and sexual impulses. Lees (1997) argues that male rape is usually committed by heterosexual men against other men and is not motivated by sexual gratification but, like female rape, by dominance, power and the enhancement of masculinity. It could be problematic if studies wrongly

inform state and voluntary agencies because they could possibly perpetuate and, perhaps, reinforce male rape myths.

Male rape myths, suggested by some authors, are very much commonly widespread throughout the media and the media continue to express such myths. For instance, McMullen (1990) argues that the media undoubtedly reinforce these myths, especially the press. He goes on to comment that there are many reports pertaining to male on male rape, in which the physicality of male rape victims is discussed in a way that suggests a shock that such a physical, masculine, capable individual ought to enable himself to be sexually abused and overpowered by another man. This may serve to reinforce gender expectations, and patriarchal and heterosexual norms, while emphasising the male rape myth that ‘men cannot be raped by other men.’ Jewkes (2015) argues that media texts can have double meanings, in that they are open to many interpretations. This is because, she argues, the audience has unique identities and characteristics that allow them to have different views on the subject matter at hand. This implies that not everyone will subscribe to male rape myths, but some will critically challenge them. The problem with Jewkes’ argument, though, is that it is too simplified because the effects of media do not have to be inevitable and causal, as there may be other contributing factors involved.

If we consider the work of Judith Butler (1993), it can help one to understand the above male rape myth that ‘men cannot be raped’. Butler theorises that heterosexuality creates sexual differences or it determines one’s gender, so gendered subjectivities and heterosexual affiliations are comprehended with regards to *penetrating*. That is, heterosexuality is rooted in an understanding of whether bodies penetrate or are penetrated. This links into her discussion on representations through generations, though more specifically, the place of generation and, as generation of form is linked intrinsically with the feminine (able to give birth and reproduce), the masculine is perceived as penetrating or ‘entering that place’. This notion flows through generations. Butler’s analysis summarises that the feminine is always the penetrated and the masculine is always *impenetrable*.

It seems this creates and is reconfirming the gender expectations through cycles of generations, while completely disregarding the idea that men can be raped, which supports and perpetuates the male rape myth that ‘men

cannot be raped’. In short, *by Butler’s definition*, the female body is the penetrated by receiving penetration; and the male body, again, by her definition, is the penetrator, not penetrated. From Butler’s viewpoint, it can be seen that, for societies wherein heterosexual orientation is the norm, a male body being penetrated would be more problematical to understand than penetrating the actual anus since it is an opening that both women and men inherently possess. It can also be concluded from Butler’s ideology that penetrating the male body is more ‘disgusting’ than penetrating the female body, as the conceptualisation of the male body directly challenges the act of male rape, because within generations, men are inevitably seen as ‘impenetrable’. The female body being penetrated is less ‘disgusting’, as societies see this as the norm. Therefore, classifying anal penetration of men as ‘unnatural’ and ‘abnormal’ may question the credibility of male rape victims. The autonomy or integrity of the male body might be classed as less deserving of attention or protection by state and voluntary agencies. Although unjustifiable, Butler’s ideology offers an understanding as to why societal psyches frown upon male rape and perpetuate the male rape myth that ‘men cannot be raped.’

Meanwhile, research shows that the media socially construct knowledge, so it may possibly distort the knowledge in ways that are misleading (Kern et al., 2003). For instance, Abdullah-Khan (2008) criticised articles for their stereotypical viewpoints, having conducted content analysis of UK newspaper coverage of male rape between 1989 and 2002, because approximately 50% of the 413 articles examined depicted male rape victims as liars, male rape as consensual sex, and male rape as solely a gay issue. As a result, she argues, the newspaper reports on male rape convey heterosexuality as culturally ‘normal’ while presenting homosexuality as ‘abnormal’ through the use of stereotypes, inviting condemnation. In addition, most media coverage on male rape cases is given to the concept of stranger rape, whereby the coverage demonstrates that the typical rapist is the serial or the sex crazy stranger rapist who lurks in dark alleys (Jamel, 2014). A serial rapist is a person who forces a series of victims into unwanted sexual activity. Similar to a serial killer, the rapist will have a ‘cooling-off period’ in-between crimes.

However, research evidence regarding male rape has shown that acquaintance rape and date rape, which are both types of rape that involve

people who are familiar with or know each other, are more common than stranger rape (Stermac et al., 1996; Isely & Gehrenbeck-Shim, 1997; Walker et al., 2005). It could be argued that such erroneous depictions may keep society misinformed, conveying an extremely distorted picture of the incidence, prevalence, and nature of male rape. This could be deleterious for how state and voluntary agencies handle male rape victims because such agencies may uncritically and simplistically believe the media when it is portraying stereotypes and male rape myths.

[I]t is often difficult to disentangle how news frames shape the social construction of reality from the “actual” reality of events. It is like being surrounded by an endless hall of mirrors (Kern et al., 2003: 282).

The conception of the media distorting knowledge pertaining to sexual violence is evidenced in Cohen (2014), in which she found articles on rape that are routinely and invariably gendered, and this is made both implicit and explicit. In Cohen’s research, the gendering of rape was found in images, content, and context in the articles examined, whereby women were viewed as victims; men, as offenders. In doing so, the male rape victim is conveyed as aberrant, relegated, and marginalised within specialist archive of news; and even voluntary agencies’ workers and the police cited in the media failed to provide due attention to male rape victims (*ibid.*). It can be argued that such portrayal supports the male rape myth that “male rape is not ‘real’ rape.” If state and voluntary agencies consider such misrepresentations, it could ultimately have an impact on their duties when dealing with male rape victims. In criticism, the writers’ media reports may be based on low statistical frequency of male rape in police statistics or on the lack of known cases of male rape, which in turn is gendering the media reports, in spite of neither justifying nor excusing the gendering of rape. To prevent the gendering of rape, the media should use gender-neutral terms without gendered pictures or pronouns. Such neutrality, therefore, will include both male and female rape in the media discussions, giving a chance for all rape victims to seek validation for their experience.

From the evidence presented herein, it seems that the media does not consider male rape victims to be real victims, promoting the male rape myth that ‘male rape is not a serious issue’, which may discourage

reporting from male rape victims. Whilst media coverage on male rape is increasing and is better than silencing the problem of it, it seems that such coverage is distorting this phenomenon. The media choosing not to dispel male rape myths is pernicious to the lives of male rape victims, and such myths may negatively influence policy makers, societies, state and voluntary agencies' responses and attitudes toward male rape victims.

Conclusion

This paper focused on male victims of rape and sexual violence in England and Wales, UK. This paper critically explored how institutions and societies perpetuate male rape myths, and how the institutional presence of these rape myths is related to individuals' rape-related attitudes alongside social norms regarding gender expectations. The aim of this paper was to critically explore the literature on male rape myths with regards to their prevalence, development, and where they stem from. I particularly focused on how male rape myths are perpetuated and present in the institutions of media, institutional settings, such as the military and prisons, and the wider community. This paper argues that both male and female rape myths are deeply rooted in stereotyped gender and social roles alongside different forms of oppression, such as heterosexism, sexism, and homophobia.

In addition, combining the above theoretical frameworks enables one to arrive at a better understanding of the rape of men and the subsequent responses to this phenomenon. This paper critically explored and applied the theoretical frameworks of masculinity and sexuality to the subject of male rape. I explored these theoretical frameworks in this paper to understand and explain male rape. The discussions in this paper attempted to understand gender as a social construction. This paper demonstrated that gender is used to express behavior learned through the socialisation process, not biologically determined, and negotiates through socio-structural settings. This is where male rape myths emanate from. It was argued in this paper that male rape may be disregarded due to the powerful gender expectations and stereotypes wherein women and men are socialised. For example, it was argued that traditionally men have been expected to be dominant, powerful and strong, so this expectation may disallow them to be male rape victims; arguably, male rape essentially

challenges and threatens men's manliness and sexuality. Hegemonic masculinity helps to understand and explain the attitudes surrounding male rape, as well as the under-reporting and causation of male rape. I focus the rest of the paper on suggestions for future empirical research in the area of male rape myths and potential ways for eradicating them.

Future Research

In the existing literature surrounding male rape, only a small bulk of empirical research has explored male rape myths. The bulk of research on male rape myths looks at rape attitudes utilising college samples and rape vignettes. These are vital but may underestimate the magnitude of male rape myths since at least one research has argued that male rape myths are more prevalent amongst older, less educated men (Kassing *et al.*, 2005). Future research is required amongst more diverse and larger samples, so as to estimate the frequency of male rape myths and consider dissimilarities amongst different types of groups, as this will allow researchers to discover male rape myth perpetuation across time if the same measures of assessment are used. Though a small number of self-report measures of male rape myths have been formulated, these measures were not utilised extensively across populations and may benefit from additional psychometric examination (Chapleau *et al.*, 2008).

The use of other methods, for example, qualitative examination of open-ended questions and quantitative examination of closed questions, and content analysis of legal papers relating to male rape, media documents, and historical materials, and so on, might be of particular use to help conceptualise, examine and comprehend male rape myths. By adopting different research methods across various contexts, researchers can explore the link between male rape myth acceptance and actual conduct. For example, studies should explore the influence of male rape myths on the treatment that is provided to male rape victims, and, when male rape victims disclose their crime, are they met with people who support male rape myths? It is vital to see whether male rape myths influence state agencies because they are the first port of call for when male rape is reported; similarly, whether male rape myths influence the treatment that voluntary agencies provide to male rape victims.

Because male rape myths are seen to link to other forms of oppressive belief systems, such as sexism, racism, homophobia, and ageism (Kassing et al., 2005), future examination of these links, alongside research on the underlying mechanisms and formulation of male rape myths, is also required. It is crucial that research attempts to critically explore the intricate relationship between male rape myth operation at the individual and societal levels. There is certainly a requirement for empirical research to examine the prevalence, effects, and manifestations of male rape myths in sport and religious settings because there is no published empirical research to date on these areas.

It is vital to tackle male rape myths within the context of treatment, screening, and rape prevention programmes. Because men could be reluctant to report their rape and search for treatment and report due to male rape myths, it is vital that medical practitioners are knowledgeable of male rape and its effects. Knowledge regarding male rape myths ought to also be talked about in counselling and medical treatment contexts when handling male rape victims. Because male rape myths might exacerbate male rape victims' experiences after their attack, medical and mental health practitioners must be well-equipped to talk about these myths and associated concerns; for example, homophobia, masculinity, sexuality, and gender role conflicts, handling these concerns could help victims to better handle the shame, stigma, and self-blaming attitudes (Kassing et al., 2005).

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