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Right-Wing Authoritarianism and Rape Myth Acceptance in Female College Students

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Abstract

The significance of high or low right-wing authoritarianism on rape myth acceptance in female college students was investigated. One hundred and fifty-eight college undergraduates answered an anonymous questionnaire containing a modified version of Altemeyer's (1996) Right-Wing Authoritarian Scale (RWA) and Burt's (1980) Rape Myth Acceptance Scale (RMA) and related subscales: acceptance of interpersonal violence (AIV), sex role stereotyping (SRS) and adversarial sexual beliefs (ASB). Consistent with Burt's findings, males exhibited higher rape myth acceptance than females. Females with high right-wing authoritarianism had greater rape myth acceptance than females with low right-wing authoritarianism. These findings supplement existing research on right-wing authoritarianism and male college students (Begany and Milburn, 2002) and suggest that right-wing authoritarianism is an important factor in understanding why people accept rape myths.

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A plethora of research has been devoted to understanding why violence against women occurs and why it is accepted by so many in our society (e.g., Begany & Milburn, 2002; Buddie & Miller, 2001; Burt, 1980; St. Lawrence & Joyner, 1991; Walker, Rowe, & Quinsey, 1993). Rape is just one of many facets of injustice women face today. In the United States, 1 out of 6 women will become a victim of rape (RAINN, 2002). Yet, less than a third of rapes are reported to law enforcement officers (U.S. Department of Justice, 2001). The majority of these cases go unreported because many women do not consider themselves victims of rape (Koss, 1985). It has been suggested by some researchers that the United States is a *rape culture*, in which particular cultural attributes guide the acceptance of sexual violence (Burt, 1980; Koss et al., 1985; Lonsway & Fitzgerald, 1995). Buddie and Miller (2001) postulated that societal stereotypes surrounding sexual violence (e.g., a woman who dresses provocatively is 'asking for it') might account for why so many women do not report being raped or acknowledge that they have been victimized. Burt (1980) refers to these stereotypes as *rape myths*. Rape myths are defined by Burt (1980) as "prejudicial, stereotyped, or false beliefs about rape, rape victims, and rapists" (p. 217). Lonsway and Fitzgerald (1994) also define rape myths as "attitudes and beliefs that are generally false but widely and persistently held, and that serve to deny and justify sexual aggression against women" (p. 134).

In recent decades, rape myths have been the focus of several studies (e.g., Begany & Milburn, 2002; Burt, 1980; Burt & Albin, 1981; Malamuth, 1983; Walker et al., 1993). Burt (1980) demonstrated that rape myth acceptance is predominately fueled by a cluster of three attitudinal variables: (a) sex role stereotyping, (b) adversarial sexual beliefs, and

(c) acceptance of interpersonal violence. In addition to these variables, Burt found that gender, age, and race were also correlated with the acceptance of rape myths. Researchers have consistently reproduced Burt's findings (e.g., Burt & Albin, 1981; Fonow, Richardson, & Wemmerus, 1992; Lambert & Raichle, 2000; Mynatt & Allgeier, 1990). Based on her findings, Burt created the Rape Myth Acceptance (RMA), Adversarial Sexual Beliefs (ASB), Sex Role Stereotyping (SRS) and Acceptance of Interpersonal Violence (AIV) scales. Burt's scales have been widely used in the field. Furthermore, research has suggested that there may be an association with the belief in rape myths, acceptance of violence towards women, and males' self-reported potentiality of raping (Koss et al., 1985; Malamuth, 1983; Walker et al., 1993).

Past research has studied numerous variables that could be associated with the acceptance of rape myths. One such variable, known as *right-wing authoritarianism* (Altemeyer, 1981; Altemeyer, 1988), has recently been gaining attention. Right-wing authoritarians are known to be cognitively rigid, aggressive, and intolerant (McHoskey, 1996). Altemeyer (1981) conceptualized right-wing authoritarianism (RWA) as a combination of three characteristics: (a) authoritarian submission, (b) authoritarian aggression, and (c) conventionalism. Authoritarian submission occurs when someone is highly submissive to authority. Authoritarian aggression is characterized by general aggressiveness directed against those who are condemned by authority figures. Conventionalism is a characteristic of people who obey social conventions, which are perceived as being supported by society in general as well as established authorities.

One consistent finding in the literature is that males tend to accept rape myths more often than females (Burt, 1980, Giacopassi & Dull, 1986). Therefore, researchers have primarily concentrated on how acceptance of rape myths may contribute to the beliefs and behaviors of men. Recently, some researchers are beginning to focus on rape myth acceptance in women.

For example, Carmody & Washington (2001) surveyed 623 undergraduate college women and studied their attitudes about race, past sexual victimization and the impact these factors have on rape myth acceptance. Their results suggest that African-American and Caucasian women do not differ significantly in their acceptance of rape myths. Furthermore, they found that prior victimization experiences did not affect woman's attitudes regarding rape myths. Lonsway and Fitzgerald (1995) studied the attitudinal difference men ($N = 199$) and women ($N = 230$) have regarding the acceptance of rape myth. They adapted the Burt RMA scale and found that among men hostility toward women was the best predictor of rape myth acceptance, accounting for 40% of the variance in men. However, among women, hostility towards women only accounted for 21% of the variance.

Contrary to early research that suggested that rape myth acceptance was mostly related to the prevalence of these myths in society, Lonsway and Fitzgerald (1995) have recently argued that the acceptance of rape myths is related to their function to the believer. Their research findings indicate that males believe rape myths because it allows them to perpetuate violence without feeling blame. Furthermore, they suggest that females may perpetuate rape myths because of their desire to feel that rape victims cause their own victimization. This allows them to believe that they have the power to avoid victimization.

Examining rape myth acceptance in women has important implications for understanding why rape victims remain silent and rapists go unpunished. The reason some women remain silent after victimization may be due to the belief that the attack was justified (e.g., they dressed too provocatively). Moreover, women may be afraid that if they report the crime, others will also believe this myth. Therefore, the blame may be placed on the victim rather than the attacker during the trial. Women participate in all aspects of the justice system: they serve as law

enforcement agents, jurors, attorneys, judges and policy makers. Therefore, rape myths in women may be a threat to the prosecution and punishment of rapists.

The main goal of the present study is to determine if a college sample of men and women would yield findings similar to Begany and Milburn (2002). Begany and Milburn (2002) examined the interaction between sexual harassment, right-wing authoritarianism and rape myth acceptance in male college students. Their findings suggest that highly authoritarian men show in greater support for rape myths. Past researcher conducted on right-wing authoritarianism has neglected to study a female sample when analyzing the possible impact this variable has on rape myth acceptance. We expect to find that women will support rape myths considerably less than men will. Furthermore, we expect to replicate Burt's (1980) findings that the level of education will significantly influence the acceptance of rape myths in women or men. In addition, we predict that women who are highly right-wing authoritarian will exhibit higher acceptance of rape myths as well as greater acceptance of interpersonal violence, sex role stereotyping and adversarial sexual beliefs than their low authoritarian counterparts will.

Method

Participants

The participants were 158 undergraduate college students attending a small university in the Midwestern United States. The majority of the participants were female ($N=111$). Participants ranged in age from 18 to 34 ($M=20.27$, $SD=3.00$) and included students from all educational class levels (freshmen to senior).

Materials

Right-Wing Authoritarianism Scale. A modified version of Altemeyer's (1988, 1990, 1996) Right-Wing Authoritarianism Scale (RWA) was used. The scale consisted of 28 questions

and measured right-wing authoritarian submission, authoritarian aggression and conventionalism. The scale contained statements such as “Our country will be great if we honor the ways of our forefathers, do what the authorities tell us to do, and get rid of the ‘rotten apples’ who are ruining everything.” Consistent with Altemeyer’s (1996) findings, responses were scored on a 9-point Likert scale ranging from -4 (*very strongly disagree*) to +4 (*very strongly agree*) with 0 representing *neutral*. Chronbach’s alpha for the RWA in the present study was .92.

Rape Myth Acceptance Scale. The Rape Myth Acceptance Scale measures false beliefs about rape that are prevalent in Western culture (Burt, 1980). The Rape Myth Acceptance Scale consists of 11 items and is scored on a 7-point Likert scale ranging from 1 (*strongly agree*) to 7 (*strongly disagree*). Chronbach’s alpha for the RMA in the present study was .92. Burt (1980) investigated the relationship of rape myth acceptance to a variety of attitudinal and demographic variables. Burt (1980) found three attitudinal constructs to be significantly correlated with rape myth acceptance. These constructs are represented by three rape myth subscales: acceptance of interpersonal violence (AIV), sex role stereotyping (SRS), and adversarial sexual beliefs (ASB). All three subscales use the same Likert response scale as the RMA. Lower scores on the RMA, AIV, SRS, and ASB indicate higher rape myth acceptance. Some research has suggested that the RMA and related subscales could be considered to measure hostility toward women as opposed to strictly measuring rape myth acceptance (see Lonsway & Fitzgerald, 1994 and 1995). To provide a more complete means of assessing our results, respondent’s scores on the RMA, AIV, SRS and ASB were compiled to create a GRMA (global rape myth acceptance) score. It can be viewed as assessing respondents’ hostility toward women.

Procedure

Researchers visited freshmen and sophomore classes in multiple academic departments in a private Midwestern university. Researchers told students that they were conducting a psychological research project regarding “Interpersonal Conflict Acceptance.” The exact nature of the study was disguised to control for social desirability effects.

Researchers explained to students that their participation in the study was not required and that they would not be penalized for not participating. Participants were also cautioned that the questionnaire contained questions regarding sexuality and violence. Participants were encouraged to decline or discontinue participation at any time if they felt uncomfortable answering the questions. To participate in the study, students were told to answer the questions and return the questionnaire in the sealed manila envelope at the next meeting of their class. In a few cases, instructors allowed students to fill-out the questionnaires during the class period. In some classes, students were offered course credit to participate in the study. Following the completion of the study, participants were provided with contact information in the event that they had any questions.

Results

Male ($M=60.67$, $SD=10.78$) participants had significantly higher mean Rape Myth Acceptance scores than female ($M=65.43$, $SD=8.98$) participants, $t(156) = 2.54$, $p<.05$. Figure 1 shows the relationship between the male and female participants’ mean RMA scores. Male ($M=183.54$, $SD=29.46$) and female ($M=196.37$, $SD=28.75$) participants also had statistically significant differences on the global rape myth acceptance total (GRMA), $t(156) = 2.55$, $p<.05$.

To determine which participants were low right-wing authoritarian, and which participants were high right-wing authoritarian, scores from the RWA were used to divide

participants into the top 33% (high) and the bottom 33% (low). This was done for all participants, then for all female and all male participants. The mean score for low right-wing authoritarian females was 74.38 ($SD=13.02$) and the mean score for high right-wing authoritarian females was 152.68 ($SD=15.80$). Low right-wing authoritarian males had a mean RWA score of 66.20 ($SD=15.56$). High right-wing authoritarian males had a mean score of 152.18 ($SD=25.32$).

We hypothesized that females with low right-wing authoritarianism would exhibit significantly higher rape-myth acceptance scores than females with higher right-wing authoritarianism. An independent t-test conducted between low and high authoritarian women and RMA showed significance, $t(70) = 4.52, p < .01$. The mean RMA score for women in the low authoritarian group was 74.38 ($SD=13.02$) and the mean score in the high right-wing authoritarian group was 152.68 ($SD=15.80$). Figure 2 shows the difference between the low right-wing authoritarian and high right-wing authoritarian RMA mean scores for females. High right-wing authoritarian females also had lower scores on the AIV, $t(70) = 3.75, p < .01$; SRS, $t(70) = 8.43, p < .01$; ASB $t(70) = 3.64, p < .01$; and the GRMA, $t(70) = 6.05, p < .01$, indicating greater rape supportive attitudes than low right-wing authoritarian females. Table 1 shows the means and statistically deviation for low and high right-wing authoritarian women on each of these scales.

Past research has consistently found correlations between males with high right wing authoritarianism and rape myth acceptance. The results of this study replicate those findings. High right-wing authoritarian men showed greater support for rape supportive attitudes by having ($M=152.18, SD=15.56$) lower scores than low right-wing authoritarian men ($M=66.20, SD=25.32$) for rape myth acceptance, $t(28) = 3.08, p < .01$, and on all of the related subscales: AIV, $t(28) = 2.22, p < .05$; SRS, $t(28) = 5.29, p < .01$; ASB, $t(28) = 3.45, p < .01$ and the GRMA,

$t(28) = 4.55, p < .01$. Table 2 shows the means and statistically deviation for low and high right-wing authoritarian men on each of these scales.

The relationship between low ($M=72.28, SD=6.63$) and high ($M=152.37, SD=14.11$) right-wing authoritarianism for all participants and the RMA was also significant, $t(102) = 5.03, p < .01$ as were scores for the AIV, $t(102) = 4.27, p < .01$; SRS, $t(102) = 8.84, p < .01$; ASB, $t(102) = 3.50, p < .01$ and the GRMA, $t(102) = 6.54, p < .01$. Table 3 shows the means and statistically deviation for all low and high right-wing authoritarian participants on each of these scales.

A one-way ANOVA was used to determine the effect of year on the RMA, $F(3, 154) = 3.36, p < .05$. A one-way ANOVA was also conducted on the effect of year on the GRMA, $F(3, 154) = 3.35, p < .05$. Table 4 shows the mean values for all educational class levels on the RMA and GRMA. Post hoc tests on the effect of class year on the RMA and GRMA indicate that the significant difference occurs between the scores of freshmen and seniors.

Discussion

The goal of the present study was to examine whether or not women who are highly right-wing authoritarian will exhibit higher acceptance of rape myths as well as greater acceptance of interpersonal violence, sex role stereotyping and adversarial sexual beliefs than their low authoritarian counterparts. As hypothesized the relationship between high right-wing authoritarianism and rape myth acceptance was found to be statistically significant in females. High scores on right-wing authoritarianism also related to high scores on the AIV, SRS, and ASB. The male sample yielded similar findings, replicating the results of previous research on right-wing authoritarianism and rape myth acceptance (Begany & Milburn, 2002). These findings suggest that right-wing authoritarian is an important factor in understanding why people accept rape myths.

Our findings also lend credence to Lonsway and Fitzgerald's (1995) theory that females may perpetuate rape myths because of their desire to feel that rape victims caused their own victimization. Right-wing authoritarian females are more likely to believe that if they follow the dictates of authorities they will be unharmed and will benefit from their protection. This may result in a greater willingness to accept culturally sanctioned stereotypes that rape victims caused their attacks by disobeying sanctioned norms for female behavior.

The finding that women accept rape myths significantly less than men confirms the results of previous research (Burt, 1980; Giacopassi & Dull, 1986), indicating that gender is still a significant factor in the prediction of rape myth acceptance. In addition, this study yielded findings similar to Burt (1980) regarding the importance of higher education on the acceptance of rape myths. Participants with four or more years of college accepted rape myths significantly less than participants with one year or less. This difference indicates that higher education can correct erroneous beliefs about rape.

However, it is important to consider that our sample came from a predominantly Caucasian, middle-class, liberal Midwestern college. Future research should include a more diverse sample and should include participants from different age groups (e.g., high school students and older adults). Furthermore, studying the effects of high right-wing authoritarianism on rape myth acceptance in participants from different cultures could provide additional information about the generalizability of these results.

Finally, studies regarding the effectiveness of educational programs on rape myths acceptance in highly right-wing authoritarian populations should be conducted. For example, past research has found high right-wing authoritarianism among law enforcement officers (e.g., Carlson & Sutton, 1975; Hageman, 1979; Henkel & Sheehan, 1997). The relationship between

right-wing authoritarianism and rape myth acceptance among law enforcement officers may have important implications for understanding why so many rapes goes unreported. Changing the negative cultural climate that rape victims encounter, will reduce the likelihood that rape victims remain silent and will result in greater safety and justice for all.

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Table 1

Means and Standard Deviation For High And Low Right-Wing Authoritarian Females on AIV, SRS, ASB, And GRMA.

Scale	Means	Standard Deviation
Low Right-Wing Authoritarian Females (N=36)		
AIV	36.61	4.51
SRS	54.61	5.38
ASB	52.19	7.62
GRMA	214.09	16.62
High Right-Wing Authoritarian Females (N=36)		
AIV	31.83	6.20
SRS	40.47	8.51
ASB	44.49	10.16
GRMA	176.07	33.87

Table 2

Means and Standard Deviation For High And Low Right-Wing Authoritarian Males on AIV, SRS, ASB, And GRMA.

Scale	Means	Standard Deviation
Low Right-Wing Authoritarian Males (<i>N</i> =15)		
AIV	35.40	4.78
SRS	52.73	9.88
ASB	48.00	6.69
GRMA	201.80	23.66
High Right-Wing Authoritarian Males (<i>N</i> =15)		
AIV	31.47	4.94
SRS	35.75	7.56
ASB	38.67	8.09
GRMA	159.72	28.86

Table 3

Means and Standard Deviation For All High And Low Right-Wing Authoritarian Participants on AIV, SRS, ASB, And GRMA.

Scale	Means	Standard Deviation
Low Right-Wing Authoritarian (male and female) Participants ($N=52$)		
AIV	37.37	4.60
SRS	54.00	6.95
ASB	50.48	44.28
GRMA	210.05	19.38
High Right-Wing Authoritarian (male and female) Participants ($N=52$)		
AIV	31.94	5.90
SRS	40.01	9.05
ASB	44.28	10.18
GRMA	174.54	34.01

Table 4

Mean scores for all educational class levels (freshmen through senior) on the RMA and GRMA.

Educational Class Level	Means	Standard Deviation
	RMA Scores	
Freshmen	52.89	12.04
Sophomore	64.08	9.61
Junior	58.60	11.19
Senior	65.86	7.40
	GRMA Scores	
Freshmen	164.07	31.87
Sophomore	187.19	26.34
Junior	171.80	29.92
Senior	191.14	21.36

Figure Caption

Figure 1. Mean RMA scores for females and males. Low scores on the RMA indicate rape myth acceptance.

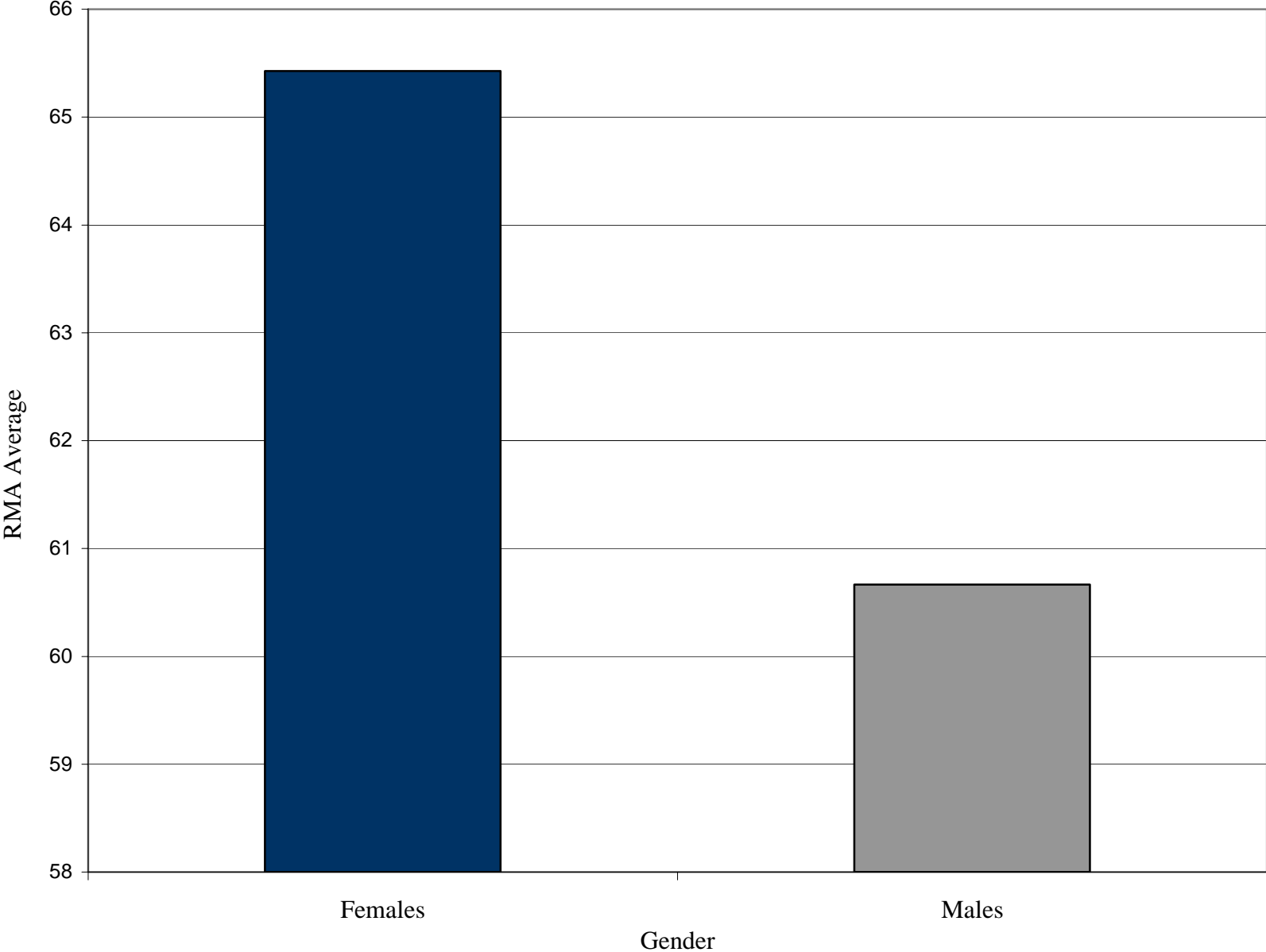


Figure Caption

Figure 2. Mean RMA scores for high right-wing authoritarian females and low right-wing authoritarian females. Low scores on the RMA indicate rape myth acceptance..

