

Major Articles

Rape Myth Beliefs and Bystander Attitudes Among Incoming College Students

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Abstract. Objective: The bystander approach to rape prevention is gaining popularity on college campuses, although research is limited. This study explored bystander attitudes and their relationship with rape myths in a sample of college students. **Participants:** Surveys from 2,338 incoming undergraduate students at a large, northeastern university were analyzed. **Methods:** Participants completed revised versions of the Illinois Rape Myth Acceptance Scale and the Bystander Attitude Scale. **Results:** A higher acceptance of rape myths was reported by males, those pledging a fraternity/sorority, athletes, those without previous rape education, and those who did not know someone sexually assaulted. A greater willingness to intervene as a bystander was reported by females, those who had previous rape education, and those who knew someone sexually assaulted. Acceptance of rape myths was negatively related to willingness to intervene. **Conclusions:** Bystander intervention programs should include content on rape myths as well as focus on the role of gender.

Keywords: bystander intervention, rape myths, rape prevention

It is widely demonstrated that rape is a major public health problem on college campuses, with research suggesting that that 3% of college women are raped during a 9-month period and one fifth to one fourth of all women experience a completed or attempted rape during their 4- to 5-year college careers.¹ The devastating impact of rape on victims has been well documented, including negative outcomes on physical health, mental health, academic performance, and interpersonal relationships.²⁻⁵ In response, many colleges now provide various services to respond to survivors, such as crisis intervention and counseling. Additionally, the federal government mandated that all higher education institutions receiving federal funds must provide rape prevention programs.⁶

One increasingly popular and promising approach for rape prevention is a focus on bystander intervention. The idea re-

flects the current shift in the field of rape prevention from a focus on victims and perpetrators to the role of community members, and suggests that individuals in a community can intervene when faced with situations involving sexual violence.^{7,8} This is reinforced by a recent call from the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention⁹ to shift efforts within the field of sexual violence to focus on primary prevention and the responsibility of the larger community. The call for this shift has impacted colleges and universities as well. For example, the American College Health Association recently issued a position statement calling for college health professionals to recognize the importance of the primary prevention of sexual violence, and to develop strategies to engage the campus community.¹⁰

The bystander approach holds particular promise for addressing rape on college campuses, which may be considered "at risk" environments.¹¹ On college campuses, most assaults are committed by someone known to the victim,¹² often involve alcohol intoxication^{13,14} and occur in social settings with others present, such as residence halls or fraternities.¹² Burn¹⁵ suggests that in these settings, bystanders are often present during the "preassault phase" where risk markers appear, and if equipped with the correct skills, can intervene to interrupt these situations. Hence, bystander intervention may be a potentially powerful prevention tool to ultimately reduce the occurrence of rape.^{15,16} In addition to primary prevention, bystanders can also respond after an assault occurs, providing support and resources to victims.⁷ Part of the appeal of this approach is that it offers all students an opportunity to take part in rape prevention, not just those identified as high-risk, which is consistent with the public health framework.⁹

However, for rape prevention programs to effectively prepare individuals to act as bystanders, we must further our understanding of what factors facilitate and prevent action, and thus what content to include in educational programming for students.^{15,16} One of the factors that may influence whether bystanders intervene in situations involving sexual

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assault relates to their beliefs about rape and rape victims. Previous yet limited research suggests that an individual's willingness to intervene may be impacted by their perception of rape victims' "worthiness," responsibility for their own assault, and beliefs in other rape myths.¹⁵ The present study further explores the relationship between acceptance of rape myths and willingness to engage in a range of bystander behaviors in a sample of university students.

Bystander Intervention and Rape Prevention

The idea of bystander intervention originated after the landmark case involving the murder of a woman named Kitty Genovese in New York in 1964. The assault occurred in public and there were numerous witnesses who did not intervene, and thus began the often-cited work of researchers Latane and Darley who studied how bystanders react to emergency situations and why they do not intervene.¹⁷ The idea of bystander behavior is well established in the field of social psychology and is utilized internationally, largely to explore individual's reactions to witnessing crimes and emergencies.^{7,18,19}

In recent years, the role of bystander intervention has been extended by researchers as a possible technique for rape prevention, especially on college campuses. This strategy departs from previous program efforts that were focused on audience members as potential perpetrators or victims, and instead emphasizes the potential role of all community members in reducing rape.⁷ According to the bystander approach, individuals play an important role in "interrupting situations that could lead to assault before it happens or during an incident, speaking out against social norms that support rape, and having skills to be an effective and supportive ally to survivors."^{20(p464)}

The literature on sexual violence and bystander intervention is limited but promising.²¹ Foubert has reported positive findings from *The Men's Program*, which focuses on approaching men as "potential helpers." Multiple evaluations of the program have demonstrated long-term changes in men's attitudes and behavior, including decreases in rape myth acceptance and likelihood of raping, increases in empathy towards rape victims, increased willingness to curtail sexist comments, and a greater likeliness to offer support to rape victims.²¹⁻²⁵ The Mentors in Violence Prevention (MVP) program is a nationally recognized education program for student-athletes and leaders to encourage leadership on issues of violence against women.²⁶ Internal evaluation of the MVP program indicates that among other findings, students feel more able to intervene, such as telling a friend to stop calling his girlfriend names.²⁷ "Bringing in the Bystander" was developed by Vicki Banyard and her colleagues and demonstrates the most empirically and theoretically supported bystander intervention (BI) model to date.¹¹ Their model has been developed rigorously over time and found to increase positive bystander attitudes and behaviors with both the general student population²⁰ and "high-risk" students such as athletes and members of sororities and fraternities,²⁸ and student leaders.¹¹

Research on the factors that facilitate or hinder a bystander's decision to intervene in situations involving sexual assault is in its infancy. Greater acceptance of rape myths has been identified by Burn¹⁵ and Banyard¹⁶ and as a potential barrier to the ability of bystanders to intervene in sexual assault situations. Although these studies identified acceptance of rape myths as barriers to bystander intervention, the specifics of the relationship have not been explored. Rape myths are a broad construct, including several related yet distinct types of myths, and the research has not yet explored how these are related to bystander intervention.

Rape Myths

Rape myths were originally defined by Burt^{29(p217)} as "prejudicial, stereotyped, or false beliefs about rape, rape victims, and rapists" and later described by Lonsway and Fitzgerald^{30(p134)} as "attitudes and beliefs that are generally false yet widely and persistently held and that serve to deny and justify male sexual aggression against women." Common rape myths cited over time include the belief that the way a woman dresses or acts indicates that "she asked for it," or that rape occurs because men cannot control their sexual impulses. Researchers have demonstrated that the acceptance of rape myths not only indicates problematic attitudes, but is also an explanatory predictor in the actual perpetration of sexual violence.^{31,32}

Measurement of rape myths often views it as a unidimensional construct, but research indicates that there may be various, related constructs—with some that focus on beliefs about the act of rape itself, with others about the victim or perpetrator. For example, The Illinois Rape Myth Acceptance Scale (IRMA) is arguably the most reliable and psychometrically demonstrated rape myth scale to date.³³ The scale consists of a general rape myth construct as well as 7 subscale constructs, including *She asked for it*; *It wasn't really rape*; *He didn't mean to*; *She wanted it*; *She lied*; *Rape is a trivial event*; and *Rape is a deviant event*. The IRMA authors conducted a series of studies to demonstrate the scale's construct validity through the relationship of the IRMA to empirically and theoretically related rape acceptance variables.³³ In their study with 951 undergraduates, McMahon and Farmer³⁴ revised the IRMA to provide updated language and to focus specifically on victim blaming. They used 4 of the IRMA's subscales (*She asked for it*, *It wasn't really rape*, *He didn't mean to*, *She lied*) and found evidence of a fifth factor (*Alcohol*) that specifically excused the perpetrator for the rape because he was drunk.

The complexity of rape myths is especially apparent among college students, who likely received some exposure to rape prevention education in some shape or form by the time they graduate high school and therefore may have greater awareness that certain traditional rape myths are not socially acceptable.^{35,36} For example, Hinck and Thomas³⁷ found that college students with previous rape education had less adherence to rape myth beliefs. However, these myths may exist in various, more subtle and

covert forms, especially regarding expressions about victim-blaming.³⁴ Although those rape myths that blatantly blame girls and women for rape have become less acceptable, many of the underlying beliefs that the girls and women did something to contribute to the assault and that it is not completely the perpetrator's fault still exist but in more covert expressions. For example, in a study conducted with college student-athletes, McMahon³⁸ found that respondents would not directly blame the victim for her assault, but expressed the belief that women put themselves in bad situations by dressing a certain way, drinking alcohol, or demonstrating other behaviors such as flirting. Additionally, some respondents indicated a belief that rape could happen accidentally or unintentionally, and that there are certain situations where men should not be held entirely accountable for sexual assault. Similarly, in a recent study, Ferro et al³⁹ found that college students knew that forced sex was rape and that the victim should not be blamed, but they were less clear about how accountable the perpetrator should be.

If individuals accept rape myths, especially those that blame the victim or excuse the perpetrator, the question remains as to whether they would be less likely to intervene as bystanders. If so, information is lacking about whether certain types of rape myths (ie, using alcohol to excuse the perpetrator or believing that victims asked for it) are more strongly prohibitive of positive bystander attitudes. Other than the work of Banyard and Burn, however, the relationship between rape myth acceptance and bystander attitudes and behavior has yet to be substantiated or explored. This has important implications for bystander rape prevention programs. With limited time to present programming to students, administrators must be parsimonious about what educational information to include. Some program administrators may wonder if they need to choose to focus either on rape myths or bystander intervention, or both. The purpose of this study is to further our understanding of the relationship between rape myths and students' willingness to intervene as bystanders. The research questions used to guide this study include the following: (1) In a sample of university students, what types of rape myths were most accepted? (2) Was acceptance of rape myths related to a willingness to intervene as a bystander? (3) Were certain types of rape myths more related to bystander attitudes?

METHODS

Sample

This exploratory study was conducted with a convenience sample of approximately 2,500 undergraduate students attending new student orientation at a large, northeastern public university. All students who participated in the survey were first-year students residing on campus. A total of 2,446 students returned surveys for a response rate of 98%. Of those surveys, a total of 108 surveys were discarded during data cleaning, for a total of 2,338, representing 93.5% response rate.

TABLE 1. Characteristics of Respondents

Characteristics	<i>n</i>	%
Gender		
Male	1,130	47.3
Female	1,242	52.0
Missing	13	< 1
Ethnicity		
White	1,275	53.4
Asian/S. Asian	580	24.3
Latina/Latino	174	24.3
Black/African American	151	6.3
Multiethnic	78	3.3
Middle Eastern	31	1.3
Other	96	4.1
Missing	3	< 1
Fraternity/sorority		
Pledging	551	23.1
Not pledging	1,673	70.0
Missing	164	6.9
College athletes		
Yes	585	24.5
No	1,633	68.4
Missing	170	7.1
Rape education		
With	869	36.4
Without	1,502	62.9
Missing	17	< 1
Someone sexually assaulted		
Know	687	28.8
Don't know	1,686	70.6
Missing	15	< 1

Note. *N* = 2,388. Number of missing cases reported because they were included in the analyses by obtaining maximum likelihood estimates.

Within the sample, 52% of respondents were female, with the remaining male (48%). Additionally, the majority were White (53%) followed by Asian/South Asian (24%); 23% planned on pledging to a sorority or fraternity, and 24% identified themselves as on an athletic team. Finally, 36% of respondents had attended a rape prevention program before; 29% reported that they knew someone who had been raped (Table 1).

Procedure

All incoming students at the university explored in this study were required to attend a rape prevention program at orientation. Before the program began, the researchers explained and distributed paper surveys, informed consent forms), and pencils, which were collected after completion which lasted approximately 15 minutes. This study was approved by the Institutional Review Board.

Measures

Rape Myth Acceptance

To measure rape myth acceptance, the revised version of the IRMA was selected because the scale includes updated

language for college students as well as having a specific focus on accountability for rape and victim blaming.³⁴ The scale includes a total of 19 items scored on a 5-point Likert scale (1 = strongly disagree with rape myths to 5 = strongly agree). The alpha coefficient in a previous study with 951 undergraduates was .87³⁴ and .86 in the present study. The scale includes 5 subscales.

The first subscale, *She asked for it*, reflects the belief that the victim's behaviors invited sexual assault. A sample statement is, "When girls go to parties wearing slutty clothes, they're asking for trouble." Five items are included on this subscale ($\alpha = .72$). The second subscale, *It wasn't really rape*, consists of 3 items ($\alpha = .74$) that deny that an assault occurred due to either blaming the victim or excusing the perpetrator; for example, "If the rapist doesn't have a weapon, you can't really call it a rape." *She lied*, the third subscale, consists of items that indicate the belief that the victim fabricated the rape, such as, "Girls who say they were raped often led the guy on and then had regrets." Five items are included ($\alpha = .83$). The fourth subscale, *He didn't mean to*, reflects the belief that the perpetrator did not intend to rape, with items such as, "When guys rape, it is because of their strong desire for sex." Four items are included ($\alpha = .69$). *He didn't mean to—Alcohol*, the fifth and final subscale, is a related construct to *He didn't mean to*, with a focus on intoxication of the perpetrator, such as "If both people are drunk, it can't be rape." This subscale shares one item that cross-loads with *He didn't mean to*, "If a guy is drunk, he might rape someone unintentionally." This scale includes three items ($\alpha = .60$).

Bystander Attitudes

To measure bystander attitudes, the Bystander Attitude Scale, Revised (BAS-R) was administered, which is a modified version of Banyard's Bystander Scale.^{40,41} The scale contains 16 statements about behaviors in which students can engage to intervene before, during, or after a sexual assault. The scale includes statements about intervening in overt acts of violence such as "Report a friend that committed a rape" as well as more covert acts, such as "Say something to my friend who is taking a drunk person back to his/her room at a party." Additionally, it contains statements about intervening as a bystander to impact a culture that supports sexual violence, such as "Challenge a friend who uses 'ho,' 'bitch,' or 'slut' to describe girls." For each of the 16 statements, participants indicate how likely they are to engage in the behavior on a Likert scale from 1 to 5, "Not likely" to "Extremely likely." The BAS-R was selected because its language was updated for college students to reflect relevant discourse and settings.⁴¹

Demographic Items

A variety of demographic items were collected to determine whether attitudes and behaviors about acting as an engaged bystander were consistent between groups, including gender, status as a college athlete, intention to pledge a fraternity or sorority, knowing someone sexually assaulted, and

receiving previous rape education. Additionally, in order to increase reliability, a question was added in the middle of the rape myth questionnaire that stated, "If you are still reading this survey, please circle 2."

Data Analyses

All data were carefully cleaned and triple-spot checked for accuracy. Cases that failed the reliability check item were removed, leaving a total of 2,388 cases. Missing data were reviewed using SPSS Missing Value Analysis. Due to low levels of missing data, maximum likelihood estimates were obtained using Expectation Maximization (EM) algorithm and imputed for all missing data.⁴² A mean score was created for the Rape Myth Scale and each of the 5 subscales, as well as the BAS-R. All demographic items were dummy coded. Descriptive statistics were run as well as correlations among the variables. *t* tests were conducted to review whether significant differences existed among groups for rape myth acceptance and bystander attitudes. To determine the impact of rape myth beliefs on bystander attitudes and behaviors, a series of linear regression analyses were conducted.

RESULTS

The overall mean for the rape myth scale was 2.51 ($SD = .56$) and the subscales were as follows, from highest to lowest: *He didn't mean to* ($M = 2.81, SD = .82$), *She lied* ($M = 2.79, SD = .73$), *She asked for it* ($M = 2.76, SD = .77$), *Alcohol* ($M = 2.13, SD = .76$), and *It wasn't really rape* ($M = 1.68, SD = .73$). The mean score for each rape myth item ranged from 1.34 to 3.39, indicating that the results were skewed towards a lower acceptance of rape myths (Table 2). For bystander attitudes, the mean score was 3.64 ($SD = .58$). The mean score for each item ranged from 2.96 to 4.45, suggesting an overall willingness to intervene in most situations (Table 3).

All of the demographic items revealed significant results in the *t* tests for rape myths, although ethnicity was not included due to the small representation of most groups, which prevented meaningful analysis. Those students who indicated a significantly greater acceptance of rape myths than their counterparts, included males, those pledging a fraternity/sorority, athletes, those without previous rape education, and those who did not know someone sexually assaulted (Table 4). For bystander attitudes, only 3 of the demographic variables were significant including males, those who did not receive previous rape education, and those who did not know anyone sexually assaulted (Table 5).

Further, within at-risk groups (ie, athletes and those pledging a fraternity/sorority), there was a significant difference by gender for both rape myth acceptance and bystander attitudes. Male athletes ($M = 2.70, SD = .53$) reported significantly higher rape myth acceptance than female athletes ($M = 2.38, SD = .55$), $t(593) = -7.074, p < .001$. Male athletes also reported significantly less positive bystander attitudes ($M = 3.47, SD = .53$) than female athletes ($M = 3.89, SD = .54$), $t(584) = 9.399, p < .001$. Similarly, males

TABLE 2. Mean Scores of Rape Myths Items

Item	Mean	SD
If a girl is raped while she is drunk, she is at least somewhat responsible for what happened. (SA)	2.53	1.22
When girls go to parties wearing slutty clothes, they are asking for trouble. (SA)	2.90	1.12
If a girl goes to a room alone with a guy at a party, it is her own fault if she is raped. (SA)	2.19	1.06
If a girl acts like a slut, eventually she is going to get into trouble. (SA)	3.39	1.07
When guys rape, it is usually because of their strong desire for sex. (MT)	2.94	1.20
Guys don't usually intend to force sex on a girl, but sometimes they get too sexually carried away. (MT)	2.95	1.05
Rape happens when a guy's sex drive gets out of control. (MT)	2.69	1.14
If a guy is drunk, he might rape someone unintentionally. (MT, SA)*	2.65	1.12
If both people are drunk, it can't be rape. (A)	2.02	1.04
It shouldn't be considered rape if a guy is drunk and didn't realize what he was doing. (A)	1.70	0.84
If a girl doesn't physically resist sex—even if protesting verbally—it really can't be considered rape. (NR)	1.92	1.02
If a girl doesn't physically fight back, you can't really say it was rape. (NR)	1.74	0.93
A lot of times, girls who say they were raped agreed to have sex and then regret it. (LI)	2.94	0.93
Rape accusations are often used as a way of getting back at guys. (LI)	2.89	0.95
Girls who say they were raped often led the guy on and then had regrets. (LI)	2.84	0.90
A lot of times, girls who claim they were raped just have emotional problems. (LI)	2.38	0.96
If the accused "rapist" doesn't have a weapon, you really can't call it a rape. (NR)	1.34	0.68
Girls who are caught cheating on their boyfriends sometimes claim that it was rape. (LI)	2.89	0.93
If a girl doesn't say "no," she can't claim rape. (NR)	2.78	1.22

Note. Rating of these items were made on a 5-point scale (1 = strongly disagree, 5 = strongly agree).

The abbreviations represent the subscales of the Rape Myths: SA = *She asked for it*; NR = *It wasn't really rape*; MT = *He didn't mean to*; A = *Alcohol*; LI = *She lied*.

*Item cross-loaded.

intending to pledge a fraternity reported significantly higher rape myth acceptance ($M = 2.74$, $SD = .53$) than females pledging sororities ($M = 2.43$, $SD = .52$), $t(561) = -7.063$, $p < .001$. Additionally, males pledging fraternities reported significantly less positive bystander attitudes ($M = 3.40$, $SD = .51$) than females pledging sororities ($M = 3.89$, $SD = .53$), $t(550) = 10.899$, $p < .001$.

Correlations among the Rape Myth subscales revealed small to moderate relationships, ranging from .30 to .54, $p < .001$. The correlation between the overall Rape Myth scores and the Bystander Attitude scores was small but significant, $r = .28$, $p < .001$ (Table 6).

For all regression analyses, the demographic variables gender, athlete status, fraternity/sorority status, knowing

TABLE 3. Mean Scores of Bystander Attitude Items

Item	Mean	SD
Ask for verbal consent when I am intimate with my partner, even if we are in a long-term relationship.	3.67	1.23
Stop sexual activity when asked to, even if I am already sexually aroused.	4.35	0.90
Check in with my friend who looks drunk when s/he goes to a room with someone else at a party.	4.05	1.10
Say something to my friend who is taking a drunk person back to his/her room at a party.	3.88	1.07
Challenge a friend who made a sexist joke.	2.96	1.30
Express my concern if a family member makes a sexist joke.	3.04	1.34
Use the word "ho," "bitch," or "slut" to describe girls.	3.04	1.37
Challenge a friend who uses "ho," "bitch," or "slut" to describe girls.	2.68	1.25
Confront a friend who plans to give someone alcohol to get sex.	3.95	1.08
Refuse to participate in activities where girls' appearances are ranked/rated.	3.09	1.23
Listen to music that includes "ho," "bitch," or "slut."	3.70	1.25
Confront a friend who is hooking up with someone who was passed out.	4.09	1.05
Confront a friend if I hear rumors that s/he forced sex on someone.	3.86	1.01
Report a friend that committed a rape.	3.71	1.05
Stop having sex with a partner if s/he says to stop, even if it started consensually.	4.45	0.84
Decide not to have sex with a partner if s/he is drunk.	3.93	1.08

Note. Rating of these items were made on a 5-point scale (1 = not likely, 5 = extremely likely).

TABLE 4. Overall Rape Myths by Demographic Characteristics

Characteristics	Mean	SD	<i>t</i>	<i>df</i>	<i>p</i>
Gender			-14.63	2425	< .001
Male	2.68	.55			
Female	2.36	.52			
Fraternity/Sorority			-2.58	2277	.010
Pledging	2.56	.55			
Not pledging	2.49	.57			
Athlete			-2.83	2268	.005
Yes	2.57	.56			
No	2.49	.56			
Rape education			2.76	2428	.006
With	2.47	.57			
Without	2.54	.56			
Someone sexually assaulted			3.31	1203.97	.001
Know	2.45	.60			
Don't know	2.54	.54			

TABLE 5. Overall Bystander Attitudes by Demographic Characteristics

Characteristics	Mean	<i>SD</i>	<i>t</i>	<i>df</i>	<i>p</i>
Gender			19.89	2388	< .001
Male	3.41	.55			
Female	3.85	.52			
Fraternity/Sorority			-1.82	2241	.069
Pledging	3.68	.57			
Not pledging	3.63	.57			
Athlete			-0.13	2234	.896
Yes	3.65	.58			
No	3.64	.58			
Rape education			-3.77	2391	< .001
With	3.70	.60			
Without	3.60	.57			
Someone sexually assaulted			-5.69	1315.90	< .001
Know	3.74	.57			
Don't know	3.60	.58			

TABLE 6. Pearson's Correlations for Overall Bystander Attitudes (BA) With Overall Rape Myths (RM) and the Subscales of Rape Myths and Among the RM Scales

	Subscales of the RM					
	Overall RM	<i>She asked for it (SA)</i>	<i>Not rape (NR)</i>	<i>He didn't mean it (MT)</i>	<i>Alcohol (A)</i>	<i>She lied (SL)</i>
BA	-.28	-.18	-.28	-.15	-.22	-.21
Subscales of the RM						
SA	.78					
NR	.67	.42				
MT	.69	.37	.30			
A	.68	.39	.50	.54		
SL	.76	.46	.37	.39	.37	

Note. All *p* values were lower than .001.

someone sexually assaulted, and having previous rape education were entered as predictor variables. For the first of the series, the mean rape myth scale score was entered along with the demographic variables as independent variables, with the Bystander Attitude scale as the dependent variable. Overall, the regression analysis indicated that the model significantly predicted bystander attitudes. The 19% of the variance (adjusted $R^2 = .19$) in bystander attitudes was explained by the model, $F(6, 2071) = 81.67, p < .001$. The results indicate that gender (female), knowing someone sexually assaulted, and athlete status (nonathletes) were all significant predictors, along with overall rape myth acceptance. For each additional score increase in rape myth acceptance, a .20 point decrease in bystander attitudes ($p < .001$) was predicted, controlling other variables in the model. Gender also predicted the bystander attitudes, its score decreased by .32 points for males, compared to females ($p < .001$).

To determine whether certain types of rape myths were related to bystander attitudes, a second series of regression analyses were conducted. Due to the moderate correlations among the subscales and the possibility of multicollinearity, a series of separate linear regressions were conducted for each subscale. Along with each of the 5 subscales, the demographic variables were entered as independent variables to determine the impact on Bystander Attitudes. In each of these analyses, the subscales were significant, along with gender. The strongest model was produced with the subscale *It wasn't really rape* as the predictor, explaining 20% of variability in bystander attitudes, adjusted $R^2 = .20, F(6, 2071) = 86.95, p < .001$. The other subscales also produced significant results, with *She asked for it* (adjusted $R^2 = .17, F[6, 2071] = 72.40, p < .001$); *She lied* (adjusted $R^2 = .17, F[6, 2069] = 72.240, p < .001$); *He didn't mean to* (adjusted $R^2 = .16, F[6, 2071] = 66.82, p < .001$); and *Alcohol* (adjusted $R^2 = .17, F[6, 2071] = 72.25, p < .001$).

COMMENT

The purpose of this exploratory study was to determine college students' level of rape myths and bystander attitudes and to determine if they are related as well as impacted by various demographic factors. The results indicate that college students in this sample moderately supported rape myths, with certain myths receiving more endorsement than others. The rape myth subscales *He didn't mean to* and *She lied* had the highest mean scores, although they were still skewed towards lower rape myth acceptance. The responses items on these scales suggest that despite a new generation of college students who likely received some education on sexual violence and who have an awareness of political correctness, victim-blaming beliefs still persist as well as excusing the perpetrator. Those items with the highest means demonstrate the presence of victim blaming myths in this sample; for example, over 53% of students strongly agreed or agreed that "If a girl acts like a slut, she is eventually going to get into trouble." As administrators on college campuses debate what content should be included in rape prevention programming, the results of this study suggest that further work is needed

to address victim blaming and excusing perpetrator behavior as innocent or accidental.

Students in this sample also reported a moderate overall willingness to intervene as a bystander in situations involving sexual violence. Those bystander items to which students responded most positively were related to their own sexual behavior. Although this may suggest that students are aware of the importance of obtaining consent in intimate situations, it may also suggest the influence of social desirability commonly associated with self-reported behavior. The other bystander items receiving more positive responses were related to more overt forms of sexual violence, such as confronting a friend who was taking advantage of someone passed out. Students reported less likeliness to challenge others around issues of sexist language and jokes. This replicates previous findings by McMahon et al⁴¹ and suggests that students are more willing to intervene in those situations with more blatant demonstrations of sexual violence and perhaps do not see the relevance of behaviors on the other end of the continuum such as sexist language.

The results of this study suggest that beliefs in rape myths are negatively related to students' intentions to intervene as bystanders. The moderate relationship suggests that those students who endorse more rape myths are less likely to intervene as bystanders. This is an important finding because it supports the need for education about rape myths to accompany bystander intervention. As college administrators consider the incorporation of bystander intervention into their prevention education programs, the preliminary results from this study underscore the need to include content on rape myths as well.

Although the *It's not really rape* subscale had the lowest mean score, it also produced the strongest model for predicting bystander attitudes. This is important because it suggests that although there may be fewer students who support these particular myths, those that do endorse these beliefs are less likely to intervene as bystanders. Because bystander intervention is based on the premise of engaging communities, it is essential to pinpoint which members of the community are least likely to intervene and address their needs. Although further research is needed, the findings suggest that those students who do not believe that perpetrators have committed sexual assault are especially less likely to engage as bystanders. Education is clearly warranted to provide accurate information about what constitutes rape as well as addressing issues of perpetrator accountability.

In this study, gender was a salient factor for both rape myths and bystander behaviors, with males more accepting of rape myths and less positive about bystander intervention. This is consistent with previous research.^{16,41} Additionally, gender was the strongest variable in predicting bystander attitudes in the regression model, including with the overall rape myth score as well as the various subscales. The fact that gender continues to emerge as significant in studies related to attitudes about sexual violence must be recognized by those designing rape prevention and education programs. The findings strongly support the case for separate programming

for men and women, with an opportunity to address the role of gender in rape myth acceptance and willingness to intervene as a bystander.

The results of this study indicate that student athletes and those intending to pledge a fraternity or sorority hold significantly greater rape myth acceptance, although no difference related to bystander attitudes. Greater rape myth acceptance by these groups is consistent with previous research and emphasizes the need to develop community-specific prevention programs that address aspects of these cultures that may be unique.³⁸ The finding about bystander attitudes contradicts the previous yet limited research showing that athletes and those intending to pledge the Greek system held less positive bystander attitudes.⁴¹ Analysis revealed that within these “high-risk” groups, gender was again salient, with male athletes and men intending to pledge fraternities with higher rape myth acceptance and less positive bystander attitudes than their female counterparts. This preliminary finding suggests that in addition to community-specific programming for these groups, the role of gender within the context of these communities must be addressed. Further research should investigate the intersection of gender and athlete/fraternity status and its relationship to bystander behavior. It is also important to note that those students who reported knowing someone who had been sexually assaulted and those who had previous rape education also held less rape myths and more positive bystander attitudes. This is consistent with previous literature and these mediating variables should be considered in future studies. Future research could also further examine the impact of previous rape education to determine if the content, length, or timing results impacts rape myth acceptance and bystander attitudes.

Limitations

This study has a number of limitations that should be considered when interpreting the results. Measurement related to sexual violence may be influenced by social desirability bias due to its sensitive nature. Student’s self-reports about their willingness to assist a victim of sexual violence are certainly subject to the pressure of social desirability. Future studies may wish to include measures to counteract social desirability bias.

Additionally, this study did not address some of the situational factors that may influence bystander attitudes. For example, future research can distinguish whether the willingness to intervene is influenced by how well the bystander knows the victim/perpetrator (ie, stranger versus friend). A related concern is that our sample was low in its representation of ethnic diversity, which prevented meaningful analysis by this demographic but which needs further exploration. In particular, questions remain about whether the race/ethnicity of the victim/perpetrator may influence the bystander’s intentions to intervene.

This study was also limited to studying the relationship between rape myths and bystander attitudes and did not examine the impact on actual bystander behaviors. Future work should establish the predictive validity of the measure utilized

in the study. A next step in research can be further examining the relationships among bystander attitudes, behaviors, rape myths, and other mediating variables.

Lastly, although the sample was large, it represented only one campus in the Northeast. The sample was rather homogeneous for age (all first-year students) and race. Replication of studies on bystander attitudes and rape myths are needed on other campuses with varying demographic profiles.

Conclusions

Bystander intervention presents an appealing and promising approach to rape prevention efforts on college campuses. However, research on the bystander approach applied to sexual violence prevention is in its infancy and many questions remain. This exploratory study provided insight as to the prevalence of rape myths and bystander attitudes among a sample of incoming college students. The results indicate that gender was the most salient predictor of both rape myths and bystander attitudes, which deserves serious consideration when developing and implementing rape prevention programs. Additionally, the results indicate a negative relationship between rape myth acceptance and willingness to intervene as a bystander, which suggests that rape prevention programs must include content on both. In particular, students who scored higher on the *It’s not really rape* myth subscale indicated less willingness to intervene, which warrants further investigation and the development of strategies to engage and educate this group of students.

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NOTE

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