

Rape stereotyping and public delusion

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As the Government seeks to discover why prosecutions for rape are so low, four academics argue that much of the blame is the media's

The percentage of rape cases in the UK that are successfully prosecuted has hit a record low in recent years, according to Home Office figures. Considerable rape-case attrition begins at the reporting stage, with only 10-25 per cent of all victims reporting the crime to authorities. Further attrition occurs at the police and prosecution stage. About 6 per cent of rapes reported to the police result in a conviction. This figure, however, may overestimate the conviction rate. The BBC recently reported that 45 per cent of rape complaints were not recorded in official statistics by some police authorities (BBC, 2009). These figures taken together indicate that the crime of rape most often goes unpunished.

A new government review has been commissioned to examine why rape prosecution rates are exceedingly low. The review, headed by the crossbench peer Baroness Stern, and due to be released early next year, will review how effectively the police, health workers and the Crown Prosecution Service respond to rape complaints. A previous Home Office report concluded that case attrition is largely due to a “culture of scepticism”, whereby rape victims are expected to prove that they are, in fact, real crime victims. The scepticism with which some criminal justice officials treat rape complaints, however, may be symptomatic of a much wider problem.

The public tends to scrutinise the victim to determine whether she or he is lying or responsible for the rape. People are less likely to hold the perpetrator accountable if the victim had behaved flirtatiously before the

attack; if the victim is sexually experienced; and if the victim and perpetrator had engaged in consensual sexual intercourse in the past. Other research has shown that victims of rape are also less likely to report under these circumstances.

These beliefs originate from a variety of sources, including the media. With a large percentage of the population solely dependent on the media for facts, media reports can influence public opinion and possibly affect the results of criminal cases. In particular, media representations of rape can affect rape prosecution on multiple levels: they can potentially influence whether a victim reports rape to the police and whether legal officials, from the police to jurors, find the victim believable and the perpetrator culpable. Therefore, it is imperative that the media report objectively about rape.

Research suggests that there is a relationship between media reports of rape and rape case prosecution, with media reports quite probably shaping public perceptions of rape and affecting prosecution results. The British Psychological Society (BPS) Division of Forensic Psychology recently issued a press release of research by two of the authors of this article (Shaw and Flowe) which examined the role that situational and personality factors play in sexual coercion. The study tested whether some men were more likely to engage in sexual coercion if a woman was dressed provocatively, intoxicated with alcohol, behaved flirtatiously, and/or was known to be sexually promiscuous. The woman was portrayed under these varying circumstances in a hypothetical intimate encounter.

Men and their sexual advances

Male research participants indicated whether they would continue to make sexual advances if the woman portrayed stopped consenting to sexual activity. The study found that some men were more likely to engage in sexual coercion if the woman was provocatively dressed. The other variables (intoxication, flirtation, promiscuity) were not associated with coercion. Men were also more likely to report that they would use sexually coercive tactics with the hypothetical woman if they themselves were sexually promiscuous. These findings were clearly articulated in the BPS press release.

The Daily Telegraph received the press release and carried an article about the study both online and in print. However, the report came from an altogether different angle from that of both the BPS press release and the

original study – the *Telegraph* headline stated: “Scientists say women who drink alcohol, wear short skirts and are outgoing are more likely to be raped”. Both the headline and the article were contrary to the study’s findings. Additionally, the focus of the media story was on the behaviour of the hypothetical woman, rather than on the behaviour of the male participants who actually took part in the study. The *Telegraph* eventually retracted the article at the request of the BPS and the study’s authors.

While it is recognised that emotive headlines capture the public’s attention and thereby increase the circulation of newspapers, there needs to be some accountability regarding the possible damage this type of haphazard reporting may inadvertently cause with respect to public reactions toward rape victims. Members of the public rely on the print media to fill the gaps in their experiential knowledge. Newspaper articles that frame rape victims’ behaviour in a stereotypical manner may fuel public misconceptions of sex crimes and thereby create negative consequences for victims, rape-case prosecution and public safety.

Rape myths, or rape stereotypes, are widely held but are mostly untrue. Rape stereotypes serve to downplay the severity of the offence and can even suggest that no crime occurred. Examples of rape stereotypes include: rape is perpetrated only by strangers using violence; women who wear short skirts are asking to be raped; no woman can be raped against her will; women frequently lie about being raped. Rape stereotypes seem to stem from a belief in a “just world” – a view that people get what they deserve and if something bad happens to a person, that individual must have deserved it in some way. This thinking provides a safety net of sorts: “Good” women can feel safe, and “good” men can rest assured that they would never commit such an act. Maintaining such stereotypes maintains society’s sense of invulnerability.

Along these lines, a victim of a “real rape” is stereotypically described as woman who, despite resisting to her utmost, is physically beaten into submission and raped by a stranger in a deserted public place. However, 72 per cent of rapes in the UK are committed by an acquaintance or intimate of the victim, 74 per cent take place indoors, such as the victim or attacker’s home, and nearly half involve no additional physical injury beyond the rape itself. Unfortunately, even with evidence to the contrary, stereotypes of the situations and behaviours that constitute “real rape” continue to affect victims and case prosecution. If media stories tend mainly to reflect this stereotyped view of “real rape”, the public’s understanding of rape may continue to remain overly narrow.

Media portrayals of rape that are not representative in the aggregate of the circumstances in which rape typically occurs may do little more than reinforce stereotypical notions of what constitutes “real rape”. Systematic analyses of rape cases in the media have found that the media in many parts of the world most often report stories that conform to the stereotype of “real rape”. Thus, the circumstances in which rape actually does occur tend to be under-represented in the media. To illustrate this, the Lilith Project, a London-based organisation that carries out research into violence against women, instigated a content analysis of reports published in the mainstream British press in 2006. They found that cases most reported by the media did not reflect the typical circumstances in which rape takes place. Only 2 per cent of the articles portrayed stories about rapes committed by current or former partner (in actuality, 56 per cent of rapes are committed by a current or former partner), more than 50 per cent of press reports covered stories about rape in public places (in actuality, only 13 per cent of rapes take place in public), and reports most often were about sensational cases that involved extreme violence, multiple assailants, and kidnapping. If the media are the primary source of information regarding the characteristics of sex crime, then the public will tend to have a distorted view of what most rape cases are like.

Headlines contained rape stereotypes

Media stories can also be presented to suggest the victim precipitated the attack or is making a false allegation. The infamous Kobe Bryant sexual assault case in the United States illustrates this. In 2003, a young woman filed a sexual assault complaint against Bryant, who is a National Basketball Association player for the Los Angeles Lakers. Because of Bryant’s popularity, the media widely covered the case, which ended when the charges against Bryant were dropped after the victim refused to testify.

Illinois academic Renae Franiuk’s study of the Bryant case examined newspaper headlines of major U.S. news companies and discovered that 10 per cent of the headlines contained one or more rape stereotypes, implying the victim was lying or that “she asked for it”. Headlines were more likely to use the term “accuser” in lieu of “alleged victim”, a term which refocused attention from the defendant’s behaviour to the victim’s behaviour, effectively reversing their roles. Moreover, 65 per cent of the articles contained at least one rape stereotype. The stereotype most often portrayed

was that the victim was lying. The articles were also more likely to call into question the veracity of the victim's statements rather than Bryant's. Similar results have been obtained in studies of rape coverage on prime-time television. The media portrayal of rape can affect judgments about other rape cases. Exposure to rape stereotypes has been associated with a decreased likelihood that rape victims identify their experience as rape, and an increased likelihood that victims blame themselves for the attack. Exposure to rape stereotypes can also lead other people to be dismissive of rape allegations. Research has further found that exposure to rape myths in news articles tends to increase the bias against the victim, suggesting that such media exposure may reduce the likelihood that jurors find a defendant guilty in actual rape cases. In other research embracing the Bryant case, male participants who read news stories or headlines that contained rape stereotypes were less likely to think Bryant was guilty compared with those who were exposed to neutral news stories.

On the other hand, the media have the power to influence positively public opinion in a manner that can encourage victims to report rape. Chris Greer, of London's City University, has noted that between 1985 and 1997 there was a substantial reduction in the use of "stranger-danger" terminology in rape articles in the daily newspapers. Coinciding with this reduction in stereotypical portrayals of rape by the media, female rape victims, in recent years, have been reporting acquaintance rape to the police at an increasing rate. It is imperative that the media continue striving to portray rape in a representative light, because so doing may encourage victims to come forward.

With so much of the population dependent on the media for the news of the day and factual knowledge, researchers and journalists must take extreme care to report findings accurately. If the media are to report on rape research, they have a responsibility to report findings accurately. Beyond this, journalists must be aware of the media's impact on public opinion and take that knowledge into account when addressing topics such as rape and sexual assault, which have been misunderstood and stereotyped for too long.

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