# Police Interviews of
# Sexual Assault Reporters:
# Do Attitudes Matter?

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Sexual assault is underreported in the United States. Survivors are often reluctant to make police reports for various reasons; one is fear of revictimization by criminal justice professionals. Conversely, police officers often lack skills for interviewing crime victims. Posttraumatic stress reactions among victims can exacerbate the problem. Although some victims prefer female interviewers, it is not known whether they are more skilled. A sample of 429 police officers completed a written survey testing their rape myth acceptance and knowledge of how to interview rape reporters. A significant relationship between rape myth acceptance and interviewing skill was discovered. Although officer gender was related to interviewing skill, the effect was mediated by rape myth acceptance. Specific officer behaviors related to high rape myth acceptance were identified. Implications for selection of police to conduct victim interviews were discussed.

**Keywords:** rape victims; social support; secondary victimization; rape trauma syndrome

Rape victims are expected to make prompt police reports, and delays are often viewed with skepticism (Lonsway, Archambault, & Lisak, 2009). However, in the United States, only 16%–39% of cases are reported, making rape the most under-reported violent crime in the nation (Tjaden & Thoennes, 2006). Reluctant victims fear they will be shamed, disbelieved, coerced, retraumatized, or dismissed (Ahrens, Campbell, Ternice-Thames, Wasco, & Sefl, 2007; Patterson, Greeson, & Campbell, 2009) if they make a report. Studies of both victims (Campbell, 2006; Ullman, 2010) and their advocates (Maier, 2008; Shaina, 2006; Ullman & Townsend, 2007) suggest a need to improve the police response to rape reporters.

Victims most likely to report rapes are those whose suffering is most intense (Starzynski, Ullman, Filipas, & Townsend, 2005), although participation in prosecution may increase their depression and anxiety (Koss, 2000). Some police officers underestimate the distress victims experience during interviews (Campbell, 2005) and, particularly in the absence of victim advocates, engage in behaviors that demoralize and discourage them (Campbell, 2006; Jordan, 2001). Although victims may prefer interacting with female officers (Martin, 1997), it has not been established that women are superior interviewers (Jordan, 2002). Studies conducted in the United States and the United Kingdom show that victims most

likely to report positive treatment by police are women who conform closely to traditional ideals for female behavior and were physically injured by a stranger with a weapon (Ask, 2010; Gregory & Lees, 1999; Page, 2007); however, these factors are not characteristic of typical real-world rapes (Lonsway et al., 2009) and suggest a reliance on inaccurate stereotypes, or rape myths to determine the accuracy of reports.

Police officer skill in taking rape complaints is important because it may affect (a) the willingness of victims to cooperate with criminal justice authorities, (b) the quality of crime reports that result, and (c) the degree of secondary trauma experienced by victims. However, research on how police officers interact with rape reporters is scant, partly because of a lack of standardized protocols and measurement tools. In addition, there are differing views about the influence of officers' attitudes on their ability to effectively intervene with victims, and of the influence of attitudes on behaviors in general. This study will address gaps in the literature by (a) assessing police officers' skill in taking rape complaints and (b) relating these to attitudes about rape and (c) examining these dynamics in terms of officer gender.

## SOCIAL AND INSTITUTIONAL SUPPORT

Although social support is pivotal to their recovery (Mason, Ullman, Long, Long, & Starzynski, 2009; Ullman & Filipas, 2001), rape victims tend to elicit more negative reactions than the victims of other crimes; in addition, they react more strongly to negative responses (Campbell, Wasco, Ahrens, Sefl, & Barnes, 2001; Filipas & Ullman, 2001); as a result, even mixed reactions may effectively silence them (Ahrens, 2006; Campbell, 2006). Harmful reactions (many of which police may exhibit) include emotional withdrawal, disbelief, blaming, distraction, attempts to control, questioning the victim's motives, denying the significance of the rape, premature attempts to reestablish intimacy, or ending the relationship (Patterson et al., 2009; Ullman, 2010).

## RAPE MYTH ACCEPTANCE

Burt (1980) introduced the concept of rape myths, negative but commonly endorsed stereotypes about the crime and its victims. Rape myths exist cross-culturally, although the construct was developed and most extensively researched in the United States. Common rape myths include, but are not restricted to the following: rape is rare, women secretly want to be raped, some women are asking to be raped, rape is harmless, rape is a result of uncontrollable passion, all rapists are mentally ill/retarded, only certain kinds of women are raped, and a heterosexual man cannot be raped (Lonsway & Fitzgerald, 1994; Suarez & Gadalla, 2010). Rape myths shape perpetrators' views of victims (Temkin & Krahe, 2008); victims' views of themselves (Ahrens & Campbell, 2000); and the way third parties, including juries (Tetreault, 1989), police officers (Page, 2007), and prosecutors (Lonsway et al., 2009) attribute responsibility for rape.

According to research in both the United States (Suarez & Gadalla, 2010) and the United Kingdom (Temkin & Krahe, 2008), females generally endorse fewer rape myths than males. However, this may not be the case within settings where one gender is overrepresented. Organizational culture, socialization, and peer pressure may influence personal attitudes. In addition, attraction to a particular field (such as police work) may reflect preexisting attitudes more characteristic of the work group than of one's gender (Jordan, 2002).

## POLICE OFFICERS' RAPE MYTH ACCEPTANCE

In early studies, police officers were more likely to endorse rape myths than members of other professions and the general public (Lonsway & Fitzgerald, 1994; Suarez & Gadalla, 2010). Although more recent studies show fewer rape myths endorsed overall (Page, 2007), wide variability exists among police officers taking rape complaints (Campbell, 2005); thus reporters are still at risk for revictimization. As a result, some have asserted the police response to rape is not substantially different from 30 years ago either in the United States (Hodgson & Kelley, 2002) or in the United Kingdom (Jordan, 2001; Temkin & Krahe, 2008). Education and professional experience with victims have been associated with lower rape myth acceptance (Campbell & Johnson, 1997; Page, 2007) as has sexual assault–related training (Ask, 2010; Campbell, 2005), which may account for differences among officers. Less is known about the impact of an officer's *personal* experience with rape victims or victimization.

In the United States, police officers may exercise discretion on how to proceed with rape cases (Lord & Rassel, 2002); in at least one study, officers described having no specific guidelines on which cases to pursue (Page, 2008). If reflected in behavior such as unfounding cases, failing to investigate them promptly, or encouraging victims to rescind complaints, rape myths among police officers may have harmful consequences for public safety (Archambault & Lindsay, 2001; Temkin & Krahe, 2008). Officers tend to overestimate the percentage of false rape reports (Ask, 2010; Lonsway et al., 2009; Page, 2008), reflecting the myth that rape is rare. Research on case unfounding (dismissal) in relation to negative beliefs about victims (Frazier & Haney, 1996; LaFree, 1989; Schwartz, 2010) have identified relationships between the two.

## TRAUMA AND VICTIM BEHAVIORS

At least one in three raped women will develop PTSD, rape trauma syndrome, or another anxiety problem (Tjaden & Thoennes, 2006; U.S. Department of Justice, 2002). Situations that dynamically resemble the rape incident (e.g., a female victim alone in a room with an authoritative male) may trigger anxiety-related responses such as changing the subject, avoiding eye contact, exhibiting inappropriate affect, emotional hypersensitivity, initial omission of details, or concentration/memory problems (Kaysen, Morris, Rizvi, & Resick, 2005; Norris & Thompson, 1993). To an officer unfamiliar with PTSD, these behaviors may suggest fabrication, substance abuse, or mental illness (Lonsway et al., 2009). Police officers are trained to look for indicators of dubious credibility and possible intoxication (Roberg, Crank, & Kuykendall, 2004) and may receive no training on interaction with crime victims (Milne & Bull, 2007). Thus, a negative behavioral feedback loop can arise between a rape reporter and a police interviewer (Jordan, 2001).

## POLICE CULTURE AND RAPE VICTIM INTERVIEWING

Some generalizations about police culture that may be relevant to sexual assault victim interviewing include (a) law enforcement organizations are hierarchically organized and tend to be male dominated, thus the skills for developing rapport with females and subordinates are not central to the officer role (Dodge, Valcore, & Klinger, 2010; Gregory & Lees, 1999); (b) apprehension of criminals is perceived as the primary task of police work

and taking crime reports is viewed as more subsidiary, thus most training is focused on the former (Milne & Bull, 2007); (c) emotional detachment is prized and empathizing with victims can be viewed as a deviation from objectivity (Jordan, 2001; Norris & Thompson, 1993); and (d) police work is often stressful, so some officers employ a rapid-fire questioning style that leaves little time for victims to elaborate (Epstein & Langenbahn, 1994). Police officers may subject rape reporters to intense questioning regarding inconsistencies in their statements, insist they take lie detector tests, restrict their access to support persons during interviews, fail to refer them to victim advocates, compromise their confidentiality, use intimidating postures and tones, subject them to multiple interviews, or demonstrate a lack of flexibility (Archambault & Lindsay, 2001; Frazier & Haney, 1996; Jordan, 2001). Interruptions, staccato speech, close-ended questions, negative wording, and inattention to material that does not conform to an officer's biases are common problems when relating to complainants (Milne & Bull).

In most jurisdictions across the United States, the protocol is for trained detectives to conduct full investigative interviews (Hazelwood & Burgess, 2008). However, in smaller municipalities, detectives are not always available and patrol officers may collect more detailed information than falls within their purview (Schwartz, 2010), or behave with skepticism that discourages victims from lodging complaints (Jordan, 2001). Because the first officer on the scene may have a profound impact on the victim, his behavior, *and* that of the assigned detective are important to the investigation (Hazelwood & Burgess; U.S. Department of Justice, 2000).

## POLICE OFFICER GENDER AND RAPE VICTIM INTERVIEWING

In both the United States and the United Kingdom, assignments to conduct rape victim interviews are often based on officer's (female) gender or rank, rather than skill in relating to victims (Gregory & Lees, 1999; Hodgson & Kelley, 2002). Rape victims may prefer to be interviewed by women (Martin, 1997; Temkin & Krahe, 2008), although it is not known whether female officers are more skilled. Contradictory findings exist regarding officer gender and rape myth acceptance, despite evidence that women generally accept fewer rape myths than men (Ward, 1995). Nor can it be assumed that female officers wish to conduct these interviews, especially if they view this work as having lower status within their organizations (Gregory & Lees, 1999; Hazelwood & Burgess, 2008). In fact, a recent study (Jordan, 2002) found that rape myth acceptance among female police officers was as pervasive as that of their male colleagues.

## VICTIM INTERVIEWING SKILLS FOR POLICE OFFICERS

Skill sets and general principles for interviewing sex crime victims appear in several police training curricula (Archambault & Lindsay, 2001; Epstein & Langenbahn, 1994; Hazelwood & Burgess, 2008; Littel, Malefyt, & Walker, 1998; Lonsway, Welch, & Fitzgerald, 2001; U.S. Department of Justice, 2002). However, these are not uniformly distributed in police officer training (Campbell, 1995). In addition, required levels of instruction vary across jurisdictions and by agency type (city, state, or town) and may not include victim interview training (Milne & Bull, 2007; Schwartz, 2010).

Principles of effective victim interviewing include (a) maintaining a respectful demeanor, (b) attending to privacy issues, (c) granting control over the interview process, (d) avoiding retraumatizing behaviors, (e) documenting emotional responses, and (f) making referrals in a timely fashion. These actions tend to maximize a victim's recall, increase her willingness to prosecute, and potentially result in more convictions (Archambault & Lindsay, 2001; Epstein & Langenbahn, 1994; Hazelwood & Burgess, 2008; Littel et al., 1998; U.S. Department of Justice, 2002).

## RESEARCH HYPOTHESES AND QUESTIONS

Based on the preceding discussion, the following hypotheses/questions were advanced: (a) Rape myth acceptance will be a significant predictor of interviewing skill when gender, age, years of police experience, number of recent cases, rank, education, specialized training, and number of victims known personally are controlled; (b) Female police officers will have lower levels of rape myth acceptance than male officers; (c) Female officers will be better victim interviewers than male officers; and (d) What specific interviewing behaviors are strongly associated with rape myth acceptance?

## METHODS

### Sample

The respondents are 429 regularly sworn police officers. Subjects were recruited at voluntary professional trainings on topics relevant to police work, as well as through local police departments in the northeastern United States. All potential subjects were informed that participation was voluntary and confidential. Surveys were filled out privately by respondents and placed in a collection box in a convenient, nonpublic location. No financial incentives were provided; however, officers were informed that results may be used to improve training on sexual assault intervention.[1]

### Measures

***Knowledge of Interview Techniques (KIT).*** The KIT scale was designed to assess an officers' knowledge of how to conduct an effective, nonstigmatizing, full or initial interview with an alleged victim of a sex crime. KIT was measured using a 35-item author-constructed KIT scale designed in collaboration with senior investigators specializing in forensic sexual abuse investigations. Each question asked the respondent about how to proceed during police interviews with sexual assault victims. Formats included 5-point Likert scale, as well as vignette items that illustrate sexual assault reporting situations requiring the use of skill and judgment. Multiple choice response menus were provided for each vignette. For vignettes, the correct reply was scored 5 points; all other incorrect responses were scored 1 point. Examples from the KIT scale include items that ask if the officer believes that he/she should not focus on the emotions of the victim, proceed with the interview as if the victim is partially to blame for the rape, and whether or not it is important for the officer to "take control" of the interview process. Responses to Likert and vignette items were added to achieve a total score for the scale. Cronbach's alpha reliability coefficient for this scale is .73.[2]

*Rape Myth Acceptance.* Rape myth acceptance (RMA) scores were obtained using an author-adapted 21-item rape myth acceptance scale composed of items from preexisting rape myth acceptance scales. In accordance with critiques of previous rape myth scales (see Lonsway & Fitzgerald, 1994), several items were modified for greater clarity, uniformity, and construct validity. Initially, an attempt was made to make all items gender-neutral, but this was abandoned when it became apparent that widespread negative assumptions regarding sexual assault victims are largely about women, making gender-neutral terminology sound forced, unfamiliar, and unlikely to be endorsed. As a compromise, gender-neutral terms were used wherever reasonable in the judgment of the researcher. High scores on the scale indicated higher rape myth acceptance and more negative attitudes toward victims. Each item was presented on a 5-point Likert-type scale and coded 1–5 points (with the best answer receiving 5 points). Examples from the RMA scale include items that ask the officer if they believe rape is rare, if women secretly want to be raped, and whether or not victims of sexual assault lie about being raped. The rape myth scale is the sum of these items. Cronbach's alpha reliability coefficient for this scale is .83.

*Sexual Assault Education.* A single survey question with five possible responses, asked the respondent to identify the amount of sexual assault education they had received to date. The range on a 5-point ordinal scale was from no training to multiple trainings (30 hours or more).

*Number of Sexual Assault Cases.* Respondents were asked to state the number of sexual assault cases they had been involved within the past year that required them to conduct an interview of a sex crime victim. Such an interview included either taking an initial report or doing a full investigative interview.

*Victims Known Personally.* A single item asked respondents to state how many people they had known (whether friend, family member, coworker, or self) who have been the victim of a sex crime.

*Years as a Police Officer and Rank.* Respondents were asked to report the number of years they had served as a police officer and to identify their occupational title. Responses were categorized using the following codes: (a) trooper/patrolman/deputy/sheriff, (b) sergeant, (c) investigator/detective, and (d) lieutenant/captain/chief. These were later recoded into two categories: high-ranking and low-ranking officers, after several high-ranking respondents listed themselves as members of two categories (e.g., sergeant/detective).

*General Education.* General education was measured with a 5-point scale ranging from high school graduate to postmaster's study or PhD.

*Agency Type.* Respondents were asked to identify the type of police agency in which they were involved at the time of the survey. Agency types are stratified by personnel size, rural setting vs. urban setting, and jurisdiction: (a) town/village, (b) county, (c) city, (d) state/federal, and (e) other agency type. State and federal police were originally recorded as separate agency types; however, because of the small number of federal police in the sample ($n = 13$), the state and federal categories were combined. City police reported the largest number of personnel in their departments and were the most experienced regarding the number of sexual assault cases processes by each officer. In the regression analysis, city police are used as the comparison category for all other agency types.

## Analytic Strategy

Analysis of the data includes descriptive statistics for the 429 officers and ordinary least-squares regression equations that examine the associations among rape-related attitudes

and experiences, officer interviewing ability (KIT), and officer gender. Officer's rank, years of professional experience, and agency type are potentially associated with certain rape-related variables under investigation, such as the number of recent sexual assault cases processed and the number of sexual assault education training sessions attended, and are thus included in the regression equations primarily as control variables. First, we examine associations between officer gender and rape-related attitudes and experiences to evaluate the nature and extent to which male and female officers are similar or different in these domains. Second, we examine the influence of rape-related attitudes and experiences on officers' ability to conduct interviews with victims of rape (KIT). Third, we examine the extent to which rape-related attitudes and experiences mediate or explain average differences between male and female officer interviewing ability. For a more thorough evaluation of potential mediation effects, we conduct tests for coefficient change which are

*t* tests that take the form $t = \dfrac{d_k}{\hat{\sigma}_{dk}}$, where $\hat{\sigma}_{dk}$ is the estimated standard error for the difference in the unstandardized beta coefficients for gender $d_k$ after including additional covariates in the model (see Clogg, Petkova, & Haritou, 1995 for a complete description).

## RESULTS

Table 1 shows descriptive statistics for the 429 male and female police officers. Most of the sample is male, with 313 male officers and 116 female officers, reflecting a somewhat larger percentage of female officers than is typical in the general population of police personnel. The average age of officers in the sample indicates that most are younger than 50 years of age. Means and standard deviations are shown for rape-related attitudes and experiences. Measurement of general training and education variables indicate that the officers in the sample vary considerably in years of police experience and police rank, with nearly half of all officers reporting a rank higher than patrolman. The mean level of general education among officers in the sample indicates that most have earned a 4-year college degree. Although most officers (32.6%) in the sample reported working within a city police department, about 13% hail from smaller, more rural agencies that have jurisdiction over towns and villages.

In Table 2, we evaluate the degree to which officers' gender is associated with rape-related attitudes and experiences, net of controls for age, general education, training, and agency type. Compared to male officers, female officers report statistically higher average KIT scores, lower average rape myth acceptance, and higher levels of participation in sexual assault education. No significant gender difference is detected however regarding the number of recent sexual assault cases handled by each officer. Compared to male officers, female officers do, however, report personally knowing significantly more victims of rape and sexual assault. These results are net of controls for police experience, rank, and agency type, which suggest that the gender of a police officer is an independent influence on matters closely related to working with victims of rape and sexual assault. The models suggest that officers of higher rank with many years of police experience are relatively better interviewers of rape victims, endorse lower levels of rape myth acceptance than less experienced officers and are more likely to have attended sexual assault education training sessions. Interestingly, police agency type is not significantly associated with variations in interviewing ability (KIT). Furthermore, results suggest that, regardless of rank, years on the job, or agency type, all of which have some influence on rape-related attitudes and

**TABLE 1.   Descriptive Statistics of Police Officer Variables**

| | Mean/Percent | Standard Deviation | Range |
|---|---|---|---|
| Demographics | | | |
| Female | 27% (*n* = 116) | | |
| Male | 73% (*n* = 313) | | |
| Age[a] | 2.40 | 0.91 | 1 (20–29 years)– 5 (60 years+) |
| Rape-related attitudes and experiences | | | |
| Knowledge of victim | 137.06 | 12.13 | 87.00–167.00 |
| Interview | | | |
| Rape myth acceptance | 3.32 | 0.45 | 2.45–5.00 |
| Sexual assault education | 3.37 | 1.45 | 1 (no training)– 5 (multiple trainings) |
| Number of recent S.A. | 16.08 | 45.10 | 0–600 |
| Cases | | | |
| Victims known personally | 2.09 | 2.99 | 0–30 |
| General training & education | | | |
| Years of police experience | 12.89 | 8.46 | 0–45 |
| Rank low (e.g., patrol) | 51.9% | | |
| Rank high (e.g., captain) | 48.1% | | |
| Education | 2.42 | 0.84 | 0 (high school)– 5 (PhD) |
| Agency type | | | |
| Town or village | 13.3% (*n* = 57) | | |
| County | 29.4% (*n* = 126) | | |
| City | 32.6% (*n* = 140) | | |
| State or federal | 14.5% (*n* = 62) | | |
| Other agency | 10.0% (*n* = 43) | | |
| *N* = 429 | | | |

[a]Age was measured on an ordinal scale with 10-year age intervals for the first 4 levels of the variable.

**TABLE 2.  OLS Regression of Rape-Related Attitudes and Experiences**

| | Knowledge of Victim Interview | | Rape Myth Acceptance | | Sexual Assault Education | | Number of Recent S.A. Cases | | Victims Known Personally | |
|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|
| | B | SE | B | SE | B | SE | B | SE | B | SE |
| Demographics | | | | | | | | | | |
| Female (Male) | 0.165*** | 1.320 | −0.186*** | 0.049 | 0.185*** | 0.141 | −0.024 | 4.865 | 0.139** | 0.337 |
| Age | −0.026 | 0.866 | 0.033 | 0.032 | 0.007 | 0.093 | −0.036 | 3.210 | 0.004 | 0.223 |
| General Training & Education | | | | | | | | | | |
| Years of Police Experience | 0.210** | 0.098 | −0.137* | 0.004 | 0.238*** | 0.011 | 0.174* | 0.365 | 0.134 | 0.025 |
| Rank (Patrol) | 0.155** | 1.223 | −0.108* | 0.045 | 0.297*** | 0.133 | 0.060 | 4.573 | −0.010 | 0.317 |
| Education | −0.063 | 0.726 | −0.033 | 0.027 | 0.099* | 0.078 | 0.078 | 2.693 | −0.055 | 0.187 |
| Agency Type | | | | | | | | | | |
| Town or Village (City) | 0.033 | 1.873 | 0.149** | 0.069 | −0.104* | 0.201 | −0.208*** | 6.946 | −0.037 | 0.482 |
| County | −0.015 | 1.480 | 0.067 | 0.055 | −0.075 | 0.159 | −0.196*** | 5.486 | 0.079 | 0.380 |
| State or Federal | 0.067 | 1.778 | 0.075 | 0.066 | −0.039 | 0.191 | −0.129* | 6.592 | 0.011 | 0.457 |
| Other Agency | −0.006 | 2.072 | 0.136** | 0.076 | 0.018 | 0.223 | −0.162** | 7.682 | 0.011 | 0.533 |
| $R^2$ | 0.103 | | 0.107 | | 0.261 | | 0.104 | | 0.045 | |
| N = 429 | | | | | | | | | | |

*Note.* Beta estimates are standardized. Reference categories are in parentheses. Intercepts are estimated but not shown.
*$p < .05$. **$p < .01$. ***$p < .001$.

experiences, female officers may be better adapt than male officers at interviewing victims of rape and sexual assault because, on average, they are less likely to endorse rape myths, more likely to attend sexual assault education training sessions, and report knowing more victims of rape on a personal level than male officers.

## Testing for Gender Mediation

Analysis in Table 2 indicated that female officers are no more likely than male officers to be assigned to sexual assault cases, thus this variable is not considered as a mediating factor in the following analysis, but is included as a control variable. Likewise, although agency type is related to rape myths, sexual assault training, and number of sexual assault cases, agency type was not found to be independently correlated with KIT and was therefore excluded from the regression analysis in Table 3. Table 3 examines variations in KIT as predicted by gender, rape-related attitudes and experiences, and general training and education. Furthermore, we aim to evaluate the extent to which rape myths, sexual assault education, and knowing victims personally mediates the gender gap in officers' ability to interview victims of rape and sexual assault.

Model 1 in Table 3 shows zero-order relationships between KIT and other rape-related attitudes and experiences. Results indicate that rape myth acceptance is significant and negatively associated with KIT, although sexual assault education and knowing victims personally is significant and positively associated with interviewing techniques. The number of recent sexual assault cases in which officers were involved is not significantly associated with KIT. Models 2 through 4 add general training and education variables and test for gender mediation by including rape-related variables in the equation. Model 2 indicates that adding rape myth acceptance to the model reduces the effect of gender to a nonsignificant level. A test for coefficient change (see Clogg et al., 1995) between models with and without rape myth acceptance further indicates that this change in the effect of gender on KIT is indeed statistically significant ($t = 14.793$, $p < .001$). Model 3 indicates that sexual assault education is a positive and significant influence on KIT. Including this variable in the equation partially mediates the KIT gender gap, albeit to a lesser degree than rape myth acceptance; however, the effect size of gender after adding sexual assault education to model produces a significant reduction in the gender coefficient ($t = 5.785$, $p < .001$). Likewise, model 4 shows that although knowing victims personally has a positive and significant influence on KIT, the effect of gender is reduced by statistically significant margin ($t = 4.174$, $p < .001$). Model 5 includes all variables in the equation. Results show that rape myth acceptance has the strongest influence on KIT, followed by sexual assault education and years as a police officer. Knowing victims personally is no longer significant in the final model. These results are in line with the hypothesis that female officers perform better than their male counterparts when it comes to interviewing victims of rape and sexual assault because of lower average endorsement of rape myths and higher levels of participation in sexual assault education.

To further highlight the nature and extent to which rape myths are associated with lower average KIT performance, the sample was divided into rape myth quartiles. Those officers in the top rape myth quartile ($n = 111$) were examined in terms of which KIT items were most frequently answered "incorrectly." Table 4 shows that more than 60% of officers in the top rape myth quartile provided an "incorrect" answer to questions in the KIT scale that referred to the emotional state of the victim, victim's supposed motives for getting raped or assaulted, and general protocol for victim interviewing (i.e., taking control of the

**TABLE 3. OLS Regression of Police Knowledge of Victim Interview Techniques (KIT): Testing for Gender Mediation**

| | [1] | | [2] | | [3] | | [4] | | [5] | |
|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|
| | B | S.E. | B | S.E. | B | S.E. | B | S.E. | B | S.E. |
| Demographics | | | | | | | | | | |
| Female (Male) | | | 0.034 | 1.048 | 0.102* | 1.273 | 0.132** | 1.281 | 0.007 | 1.056 |
| Age | | | −0.021 | 0.671 | −0.040 | 0.816 | −0.041 | 0.833 | −0.028 | 0.664 |
| Rape-Related Attitudes and Experiences | | | | | | | | | | |
| Rape Myth Acceptance | −0.637*** | 1.012 | −0.607*** | 1.043 | | | | | −0.571*** | 1.086 |
| Sexual Assault Education | 0.364*** | 0.381 | | | 0.299*** | 0.441 | | | 0.132** | 0.374 |
| Number of Recent S.A. Cases | 0.070 | 0.013 | | | | | | | −0.076* | 0.010 |
| Victims Known Personally | 0.231*** | 0.189 | | | | | 0.190*** | 0.187 | 0.051 | 0.153 |
| General Training and Education | | | | | | | | | | |
| Years of Police Experience | | | 0.136** | 0.078 | 0.143* | 0.096 | 0.189** | 0.097 | 0.117* | 0.078 |
| Rank (Patrol) | | | 0.067 | 0.961 | 0.065 | 1.214 | 0.157*** | 1.183 | 0.042 | 0.991 |
| Education | | | −0.077 | 0.563 | −0.091 | 0.685 | −0.045 | 0.697 | −0.079* | 0.562 |
| R-Square | | | 0.434 | | 0.163 | | 0.131 | | 0.452 | |
| N = 429 | | | | | | | | | | |

*Notes*: Beta estimates are standardized. Reference categories are in parentheses. Intercepts are estimated but not shown. [1] = zero-order model; [2,3,4] = includes controls; [5] = full model.
*p < .05, **p < .01, ***p < .001.

**TABLE 4.  Sample of Commonly Missed KIT Items Among Officers with the Highest Rape Myth Acceptance**

| Question Content | % Who Answered "Incorrectly" |
|---|---|
| Direct attention away from emotions | 62.2% |
| Suggest that victim behavior resulted in rape | 58.6% |
| Take complete control of the interview process | 84.7% |
| Cover as much detail as possible, regardless of how uncomfortable it makes the person | 73% |
| N = 111 | |

*Note.* Responses to 25 Likert items coded on a 5-point scale, ranging strongly agree to strongly disagree, were recoded as "incorrect" if the respondent did not endorse the "correct" answer by disagreeing or strongly disagreeing. Responses to 10 vignette items were coded as "incorrect" if the respondent did not identify the "best" answer out of four possible answers.

situation). Although more than five KIT items were missed by at least 60% of the officers in the top rape myth quartile, it is clear from this subset that personal attitudes on rape and sexual assault are likely to affect the job performance of officers when interviewing victims of rape.

## SUMMARY AND CONCLUSIONS

Victim interviewing skill among 429 police officers was assessed in relation to rape myth acceptance. Several covariates, including gender, were evaluated. The hypothesis that rape myth acceptance is a significant predictor of interviewing skill was supported. This is in contrast to the notion that police officers (and perhaps other professionals) "check their personal attitudes at the door" when coming to work. A similar study of psychotherapists who interact with rape victims (Dye & Roth, 1990) found similar results. These findings support the value of an attitudinal component in officer training on sexual assault.

The number of studies comparing rape myth acceptance among male police officers versus female police officers has been scant. Women in this sample had lower average levels of rape myth acceptance than men. Similar results were found in two previous quantitative studies (Brown & King, 1998; Page, 2007) and one qualitative study (Schwartz, 2010). These findings are consistent with general research on rape myth acceptance and gender. However, they are not unanimous; Jordan (2002) found negative attitudes among female criminal justice personnel to be at least as pervasive as that of their male colleagues. Discrepant findings may result from varying methods of investigation, historical periods, or sampling.

Female officers in this sample had higher levels of interviewing skill; however, this was a result of their lower levels of rape myth acceptance. Although sexual assault training (higher among women) was also significant, it was of lesser importance than attitudes. Rape myth acceptance mediated, and sexual assault training partially mediated, the relationship between gender and interviewing skill. However, these results do not indicate that rape victim interviews should be routinely assigned to female officers. Instead, they

should be assigned to those with low rape myth acceptance and superior skills. Although many such officers are female, this does not preclude male officers from competency in this area.

Sexual assault victims (especially recent ones) may feel more comfortable recounting the crime with someone of a different gender than their perpetrator (Jordan, 2001; Martin, 1997). However, it is possible that a female officer with poor skills could make a rape reporter feel comfortable initially, but engage in discouraging behaviors and fail to collect good information. Conversely, a male officer with good interviewing skills and low rape myth acceptance might overcome a victim's initial discomfort (Jordan, 2002), especially with a female victim advocate present.

Individual attitudes are affected by occupational and local culture (Dodge et al., 2010; Roberg et al., 2004). Officers from larger agencies had lower rape myth acceptance than those from smaller and more rural precincts. This may be because of larger departments in big cities employing urban residents who may be less conservative about gender roles than those who work in rural areas. In addition, larger departments in big cities may employ more female officers, have formal protocols for addressing sexual harassment, and have more resources for training. Each of these factors may contribute to lower rape myth acceptance.

Sexual assault training, rather than general education level, was a significant contributor to interviewing skill. Although general education levels have previously been associated with low rape myth acceptance among police officers (Page, 2007; Roberg et al., 2004), specific training may be more useful in predicting positive behaviors. Because an officer of any rank and location may interact with a rape reporter, ideally, all officers would have some training in this area (Jordan, 2001). However, only a small proportion of training for new recruits is devoted to victim interviewing (Milne & Bull, 2007) and there is considerable variability across jurisdictions (Lonsway et al., 2001). Officers likely to take elective courses in this area are those with preexisting knowledge about rape and lower rape myth acceptance. This selection bias makes it difficult to measure whether existing sexual assault education programs are effective.

When specific police training is provided, most formats include material on rape myths because previous research (Dye & Roth, 1990; Ward, 1995) has suggested that attitudes and knowledge about rape are related. However, there are contradictory findings about whether attitudinal change is *necessary* to improve victim interviewing skills. Some have proposed that behavioral changes often *precede* attitudinal changes (Jaccard & Blanton, 2005). For example, Lonsway et al. (2001) reported success in changing officer behaviors without affecting attitudes. More studies are needed to illuminate the process by which victim interviewing skills are acquired and retained.

Specific officer behaviors related to rape myth acceptance were identified in this study, primarily for illustrative purposes. Although it would be useful to focus training on these behaviors, it is possible that others would become more salient in the absence of an attitudinal component.

## Limitations

There are several limitations which limit the generalizability of these findings. One is that the impact of social desirability is likely to be high among police officers, thus skewing their responses to the questions. Both rape myth acceptance and appropriate interventions are areas where officers are likely to want to appear "good." Indeed, some

researchers found that negative beliefs among police officers were more effectively tapped by asking about percentage of false reports (Schwartz, 2010) or requesting a description of a "credible" or "real" rape victim (Campbell, 1995; Page, 2007) than by use of a formal rape myth scale. Despite this problem, there was a wide range in responses to the RMA items.

A related limitation was the lack of direct observation of interview behaviors among this sample. Self-report was the only means used to assess the officers' skills. In the real world, decisions must be made quickly and habit often dictates behaviors; on paper, one has time to ponder multiple options and come to the most favorable conclusion. As a result, the findings may overestimate police officers' effectiveness in cases involving sexual assault.

A third issue concerns the sample, which was neither random nor representative. More than 50% of the data were collected at police trainings, where officers interested in (a) self-development and promotion and (b) sexual and other violence were overrepresented. Because women are more likely to participate in elective training, there was a higher proportion of female officers in our sample than occurs in the general population of police officers (29% as opposed to 11%). Male and female officers were similarly distributed across ranks, which is not the case in the larger universe of police officers. Thus these findings should be interpreted with caution.


## FUTURE DIRECTIONS

Future research might continue the efforts of Lonsway et al. (2001) and others to develop protocols for improving the police response to rape victims. Avenues for inquiry would include: (a) comparing methods and components for relative effectiveness, (b) establishing a quantity necessary for basic proficiency, and (c) comparing results of mandatory versus required training to overcome selection bias.

Because this study used a self-report survey, there was no direct observation of police behavior during an interview. Videotaping mock rape reports would be another way to measure skills. Selection and social desirability issues would still remain, but it would give a clearer picture of whether officers know how to intervene effectively with a rape reporter.

Another area for future study is officers' perceptions of the process of taking rape complaints, including the most difficult aspects and populations. This would complement existing literature on victims' perspectives. Some efforts in this regard have already begun. For example, Schwartz's (2010) sample of detectives expressed skepticism about the motives of adolescent and prostitute reporters, as well as those married to the accused. As a result, actions on some of these cases were not taken swiftly. Additional (qualitative) research on officers' perspectives would help educators develop more effective training protocols and assist in supervision.

Rape victim advocates, focused on victims' emotional and practical needs, often attend police interviews. Campbell (2006) found that rape reporters received better (though not always adequate) treatment by police when an advocate was present. Other researchers (Campbell, 2005; Maier, 2008; Shaina, 2006) describe tension and role confusion among victim advocates and police officers. Although advocates' perceptions of police officers have been explored, it would be useful to investigate officers perceptions of advocates and how these influence the conduct of victim interviews.

## NOTES

1. The data set contains information for 440 officers; however, 11 cases were missing on gender and are not included in the analytic sample.

2. The KIT scale included 27 principles, excerpted from police training curricula prepared by Archambault & Lindsay, 2001; Hazelwood & Burgess, 2008; Epstein & Langenbahn, 1994; Littel et al., 1998; Lonsway, Archambault, & Lisak, 2009; Lonsway, Archambault, Berger et al., 2000; the U.S. Department of Justice, 2000; as well as the Federal Crime Victims' Bill of Rights. For a complete listing of survey items used in the KIT and RMA scales please contact lead author.

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