Rape myths and victim blaming: A study of attitudes of university students in Namibia

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Abstract

Rape myths serve to blame the victim, justify the perpetrator's actions, and discount the violence of rape. For perpetrators, these rape myths are thought to reduce the expected negative consequences of committing rape. It is believed that endorsement of rape myths might precede sexual aggression and rape. The primary purpose of this study was to examine the extent of endorsement for rape myths by a sample of university students and to establish whether there was any gender difference in this endorsement. A quantitative, descriptive and cross-sectional research framework was adopted. A non-probability stratified convenience sample of 152 students was employed. The 20-item short-form of the Illinois Rape Myth Acceptance Scale (IRMA-SF) was administered to assess how strongly the participants agreed with rape myths overall. A rape vignette (acquaintance rape scenario) and an accompanying questionnaire were used to assess victim and perpetrator-blaming. The results suggested that at least some students tend towards endorsing some of the rape myths. Male participants endorsed rape myths slightly more than female participants. There were no statistically significant differences in the pattern of responses of male and female respondents regarding the rape vignette. Gender seemed to make no difference with regard to the degree of victim blaming on the acquaintance rape scenario. However, rape myth endorsement on the IRMA-SF scale was significantly associated with victim blaming. In light of the results indicating a presence of rape myth, suggestions are made for possible interventions to reduce rape myths. The overall findings suggest a need to provide more accurate information that will undo myths and by doing so reduce attitudes towards rape and other forms of sexual violence.

Introduction

Rape is not a contemporary phenomenon. On the contrary, it is believed to be as old as the human race (Smith, 1974). However, for much of recorded history, rape was not always perceived as a criminal act and in many societies it was kept silent, denied, minimised or even condoned (Gavey, 2005). Worldwide and within the Namibian context, rape and other forms of sexual violence are considered social problems.

Reports by the Legal Assistance Centre (LAC, 2006) suggest that the prevalence of rape and attempted rape between the years 2003 and 2005 amounted to approximately 60 reported cases per 100 000 people in the Namibian population. This is considered to be relatively high, particularly for the population of the country and relative to other countries (LAC, 2006). It is however cautioned that high levels of reporting should not be interpreted as necessarily indicating high incidence of rape. On the contrary, these statistics may perhaps be attributed to factors such as higher official sensitivity to rape, good crime recording practices, increased awareness of the crime on the part of both police and members of the public, and general empowerment of women (LAC, 2006).

Factors that perpetuate rape and other forms of sexual violence are numerous. They include traditional and cultural beliefs, the media, perceptions and attitudes towards rape, and myths about rape (Anderson, 2007; Edwards, 2005; Kopper, 1996; Krieg, 2007; Sutherland, 2009). Rape myths are defined as false sociocultural beliefs that serve the purpose of shifting blame from the perpetrator of rape to victim of rape (Burt, 1980; Suarez & Gadalla, 2010). Although no cause-effect relationship has been found between endorsement of rape myths and the actual acts of rape, acceptance or endorsement of rape myths is viewed as a possible factor underlying rape and other forms of sexual violence (Domalewski, 2008).

Psychological effects of rape and rape myths

Most victims of rape experience both short-term and long-term psychological effects (Briere & Jordan, 2004). Immediate symptoms of psychological distress may include shock, fear, anxiety, confusion, numbness, self-blame, guilt and shame (Yuan, Koss & Stone, 2006). Post-traumatic stress disorder (PTSD) is often reported (Frazier & Borgida, 1992). In this regard Barlow and Durand (2005) noted that trauma-related guilt has been linked to post-traumatic stress disorder, depression, negative self-esteem, shame, social anxiety, and suicidal ideation. Rauch and Foa (2004) report that victims of rape tend to experience potentially higher rates of chronic health problems throughout their lives, including chronic headaches, menstrual irregularities, and pain in general.

The experience of rape is associated with mental health disturbance and social problems in a significant proportion of victims (Mezey, 1997). Early victimisation through rape may have particular psychological consequences that can last through life, including suicide attempts, low self-esteem, depression, personality disorders and schizophrenia (Chen, Murad, Paras et al., 2010; Spataro et al., 2004). Several studies have linked rape to sexual dysfunctions (Faravelli et al., 2004), physical problem (Rauch & Foa, 2004), and promiscuity.

When victims of rape are exposed to victim-blaming behaviours or attitudes, the experience may feel like a "second rape". This phenomenon is known as "secondary victimization" (Schulz, 1999). In many instances, these behaviours manifest when society explicitly holds victims responsible for the assault, doubt the authenticity of victims' stories, or minimise the seriousness of the crime. Secondary victimisation occurs when rape victims are denied any needed or desired services (Schultz, 1999). Rape victims often translate negative reactions toward their case into self-blame and sexual re-victimization (Miller, Markman & Handley, 2007). Although rape myths do not directly cause rape, acceptance of rape myths has been described as a possible factor underlying rape and other forms of sexual violence (Domalewski, 2008. It is thus suggested that rape prevention programs address not only rape myths but also how such myths can shape societal perceptions of rape victims (Suarez & Gadalla, 2010).

Problem statement and motivation for the study

Rape is a growing problem in today's society. International studies on rape myths suggest that generally male students seem to be more likely to endorse rape myths and to blame the victim compared to female students (Mori, Bernat, Glen, Selle & Zarate, 1995; Kopper, 1996; Lev-Wiesel, 2004). The LAC study indicated that about one quarter of rape crimes were committed by young men below the age of 21 years (Hubbard, 2006). One can speculate that these young men could, at least partly, be influenced by their endorsement of rape myths.

Although people who hold on to stereotypes about rape do not necessarily become rapists, there is research evidence that suggests a positive relationship between acceptance of rape myths and rape proclivity. These studies appear to propose that the acceptance of rape myths may even causally affect men's tendency to commit rape (Viki, Chiroro & Abrams, 2006). A further problem with the existence of rape myths is that rape victims themselves may hold misconceptions about rape. This may lead to victims blaming themselves for the assault.

The presence of distorted perceptions about rape might also result in additional negative consequences. According to Anderson (2007), rape myths are dangerous as they have the potential to have destructive consequences, not only for the rape victims, but also for their families and the communities. Anderson (2007) explains that rape myths promote silence, shame and pain which lead to the blame being transferred from the perpetrator to the victim. Furthermore, acceptance of rape myths leads to the belief that sexual violence is part of normal

behaviour, which gives perpetrators the opportunity to avoid being held accountable for their actions.

A further and very prominent problem with victim-blaming is that the fear of being raped threatens women's freedom of movement, behaviour and dressing code, ultimately negatively impacting on their quality of life (Vogelman, 1990).

A number of studies have documented the extent of rape myths among university students internationally (Kopper, 1996; Lev-Wiesel, 2004; Mori et al., 1995; Gölge et al., 2003). Several African studies have investigated rape myths, namely in Kenya (Tavrow et al., 2013), South Africa (Kalichman et al., 2005) and Zimbabwe (Viki et al., 2006). However, no such study has been conducted in Namibia. The present study, therefore, aims to fill this gap and conduct an investigation into the attitudes of university students in Namibia with regard to rape and rape victims, thus investigating levels of endorsement of rape myths. Since rape is a social problem that should be addressed by broad social policy, the perspectives of young and educated Namibians concerning the growing incidence of rape need to be known first and then an attempt at understanding them can be made, such as their background and psychological role.

Several studies have reported gender differences in the extent of the endorsement of rape myths (Suarez & Gadalla, 2010). On the contrary, a few studies have reported no gender differences in the endorsement of rape myths (Peltzer, Cherian & Cherian**,** 1998; Frese, Moya & Megias, 2004). Because of this lack of consensus in the literature, the role of gender in perceptions of rape remains unclear, which might impact on the specific intervention strategies needed to combat rape **(**Iconis, 2008).

Cowan and Campbell (1995) maintain that gender differences in attitudes towards rape suggest a need for gender-specific rape-education programmes targeting the specific rape myths that each gender group most strongly holds. It is thus important to establish gender similarities and/or differences in the endorsement of rape myths in order to determine suitable intervention strategies. As such, this study also investigates the extent to which university educated male students in Namibia may have different perceptions concerning rape compared to their female counterparts.

Aim of the study

The aim of the study is two-fold. Firstly, the study aims to determine the extent to which university students endorse rape myths by assessing their attitudes towards rape. Secondly, the study aims to determine levels of support towards

the victim and perpetrator of rape, by describing the respondents' responses to an acquaintance rape vignette.

Method

Research Design

A non-experimental, cross-sectional descriptive design was employed in this study. A survey method of data gathering was selected as an appropriate method for this type of descriptive study. Questionnaires are especially appropriate for collecting information that may be of a sensitive nature, such as attitude towards rape.

Participants and Procedure

Probability stratified convenience sampling was employed to select participants (n=152). Participants were approached by the researcher while sitting at various leisure places on campus or while queuing for registration. Participants were informed about the voluntary nature of the study. Informed consent was obtained from each research participant. Participants were given the research instruments to complete at their own pace. Keeping in mind that the research is of a sensitive nature, the researcher attempted to increase the participants' chance of being as honest as possible by keeping a distance while the participants were completing the questionnaire.

Research Instruments

A socio-demographic questionnaire, the 20-item Illinois Rape Myth Acceptance Scale (IRMA-SF; Payne, Lonsway & Fitzgerald, 1999) and Rape Scenario (Kalosky, 2005) were used.

The IRMA-SF is a shorter version of the 45-item Illinois Rape Myth Acceptance Scale (IRMA) developed by Payne and colleagues (1999) to assess the extent to which a person endorses rape myths. It includes statements related to rape myths**,** such as "If a woman doesn't physically fight back, you can't really say that it was rape". Items are scored on a 7-point Likert-type scale, ranging from 1 (strongly disagree) to 7 (strongly agree). A participant's rape myth acceptance score was the added sum of their responses to various items to obtain a total IRMA-SF score, yielding scores ranging from 20 to 140. A high score indicated strong endorsement of rape myths while a low score indicates low degree endorsement of rape myths (Foubert & Marriott, 1997). The reliability coefficient for the IRMA-SF in the study of Payne et al. (1999) was 0.87. An additional item

(item 21) was added at the end of the IRMA-SF to assess the extent to which participants thought that society should devote more time to preventing rape.

Victim-blaming was measured using an acquaintance rape vignette scenario adapted from a study conducted at the University of New Hampshire (Kalosky, 2005). In the current study, the rape vignette was accompanied by a 10-item questionnaire that assessed participants' views towards the rape victim and perpetrator. After reading the brief rape vignette, participants were asked to rate the extent to which they agreed with statements [i.e. on a Likert-type rating scales ranging from 1 (strongly disagree) to 7 (strongly agree)]. The questionnaire aimed to assess participants' views regarding the incident, particularly highlighting their views of whom is to be blamed in the incident. Five items concerned victim blaming (e.g., "Jennifer is responsible for what happened") and the remaining 5 items concerned perpetrator blaming (e.g., "John is responsible for what happened". The highest score on both the victim-blaming and the perpetrator-blaming scale is 35 and the lowest is 5.

Data Analysis

All quantitative data gathered for this study were analysed using the SPSS statistical package. Cronbach's alpha coefficient for the IRMA-SF was analysed. Descriptive analyses were employed to summarise and describe the information gathered. Independent samples t-test analysis was carried out on the total rape myth score to evaluate the differences between male and female participants. Pearson product-moment correlation coefficients were performed to determine correlations between various variables (i.e. IRMA-SF and victim blaming).

Results

The sample consisted of 83 (54%) female and 69 (46%) male students registered in six faculties. The majority of participants (60%) were in the 17-22 years age category.

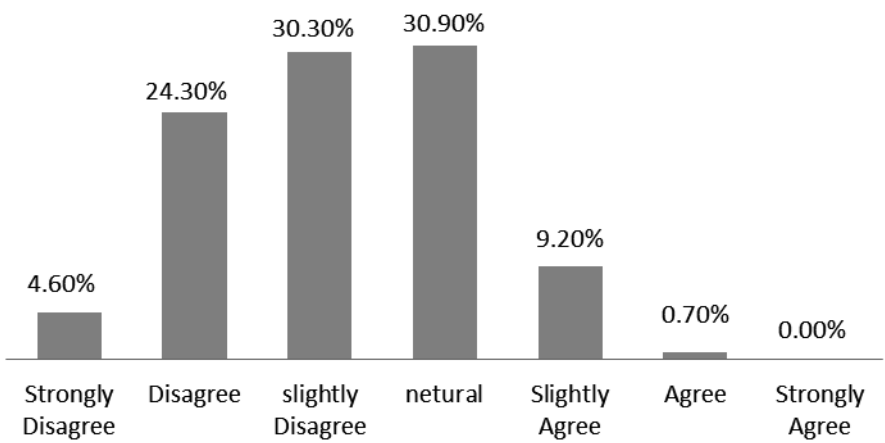
The Cronbach's alpha coefficient for the entire IRMAS-SF in the current study was 0.85. Inter-item correlation coefficients ranged from 0.24 to 0.60. The lowest and highest total rape myth scores were 21 and 111 respectively. The mean for the IRMA-SF was 63 (SD = 21.13).

With regard to the extent to which participants thought that society should devote more time to prevent rape**,** results indicated that most of the participants (77%) agreed with the statement. However, approximately 22% of the respondents seem to think that society should not invest more in attempts to curb

rape. As far as strong endorsement of this statement (i.e., strongly agree), more female participants (43%) agreed with the statement that rape in society should be prevented compared to the male respondents (23%).

Total response on individual categories on the IRMAS as viewed in Figure 1 indicates that 30.9% of the participants were neutral in their acceptance of rape myths. With regard to participants who have expressed some certainty in their response, 30.3% slightly disagreed while 24.3% of the participants disagreed with the rape myths. Only 4.6% of participants strongly disagreed with the rape myths. On the acceptance categories it is noted that 9.2% of the participants slightly endorse rape myths while 0.7% agree with the rape myths. None of the participants strongly agreed with the rape myths. These results indicate that the majority of participants (59.2%) disagreed to some extent with rape myths, and approximately 9.9% agreed with rape myths. This suggests that approximately 10% (i.e. 9.9%) of the participants endorsed rape myths.

Figure 1: Percentage of Rape Myth Endorsement



The result of the independent samples t-test indicate a significant difference in the IRMA-SF total scores for males (M = 68.15, SD=20.78) and female (M = 59.53, SD = 20.73; (t (150) = 2.55; p = .012).

Regarding the specific myths, item 10 “Rapists are usually sexually frustrated individuals” yielded the highest mean of 4.43 (SD = 2.19) and it was endorsed by more than half of the participants (52%). Cross-gender analysis revealed that

both male (59.3%) and female (49.4%) students were equally supportive of this rape myth.

High scores were also obtained on the following rape myths: item 2 (M = 3.86, SD=3.86; ["Although most women wouldn't admit it, they generally find being physically forced into sex a "turn-on")], item 3 (M = 3.71, SD = 2.25; "If a woman is willing to make out with a guy, then it's no big deal if he goes a little further and has sex"), item 1 (M = 3.67, SD = 2.28; "If a woman is raped while she is drunk, she is at least somewhat responsible for letting things get out of control") and item 18 (M = 3.61, SD = 1.20; "Men don't usually intend to force sex on a woman but sometimes they get too sexually carried away") (see Table 1).

Table 1: Mean and Standard Deviation of Individual Rape Myths

No.	**Item**	**Mean**	**SD**
10	Rapists are usually sexually frustrated individuals.	4.43	2.19
2	Although most women wouldn't admit it, they generally find being physically forced into sex a "turn-on".	3.86	2.25
3	If a woman is willing to "make out" with a guy, then it's no big deal if he goes a little further and has sex.	3.71	2.23
1	If a woman is raped while she is drunk, she is at least somewhat responsible for letting things get out of control.	3.67	2.28
18	Men don't usually intend to force sex on a woman, but sometimes they get too sexually carried away.	3.61	1.20
15	A lot of women lead a man on and then they cry rape.	3.39	1.87
20	In reality, women are almost never raped by their boyfriends.	3.36	2.20
6	Most rapists are not caught by the police.	3.28	2.01
9	Rape accusations are often used as a way of getting back at men.	3.26	2.06
11	When women goes around wearing low-cut tops or short skirts, they're just asking for trouble.	3.20	2.24
14	Women tend to exaggerate how much rape affects them.	3.19	2.04
7	If a woman doesn't physically fight back, you can't really say that it was rape.	3.14	2,27
5	Many so called rape victims are actually women who had sex and "changed their minds afterwards".	3.13	2.13

13	Rape almost never happens in a woman's own home.	3.06	2.15
8	Men from nice middle-class homes almost never rape.	2.98	2.19
16	If a woman goes to the home or apartment of a man on the first date she is implying that she wants to have sex.	2.68	2.09
17	When women are raped, it's often because the way they said "no" was unclear.	2.67	2.02
4	Many women secretly desire to be raped.	2.23	1.91
19	If a woman claims to have been raped but has no bruises or scrapes, she shouldn't be taken seriously.	2.01	1.97
20	If the rapist doesn't have a weapon, you really can't call it rape.	2.00	1.79

From the rape vignette, mean score for the victim-blaming sub-scale was 3.07 (SD = 1.42). The highest score obtain was 33 and the lowest was 5. Results of the total victim-blaming scores indicate that 21.7% (n = 33) of the participants were neutral. In other words, this group seems uncertain of whether the victim should be held accountable for what happened to her. On the disapproval side (i.e. not blaming the victim) 21.7% (n = 33) slightly disagree, 23.7% (n = 36) disagree and 15.8% (n = 24) strongly disagree with the victim-blaming statements. On the approval side (i.e. blaming the victim), 12.5% (n = 19) slightly agree, 4.6% (n = 7) agree and none of the participants strongly agree with the victim-blaming statements. Viewing the descriptive analyses on the total mean on the victim-blaming sub-scale, results generally indicate that most students take a stand that the female victim (Jennifer) is not responsible for what happened.

From the rape vignette, the mean score for the perpetrator-blaming sub-scale was 4.90 (SD 1.23). The participant with the highest perpetrator score was 35 and the participant with the lowest score was 11. The majority of the participants blamed the male perpetrator (John) and held the belief that the victim's rights were clearly violated.

Pearson product-moment correlations indicated a significant and strong positive correlation between the IRMA-SF score and victim-blaming ($r = 0.526$, $n = 152$, $p<.001$, 2-tailed). These results suggest that participants who endorse rape myths also tend to blame the victim.

A statistically significant negative correlation was found between IRMA-SF score and perpetrator blaming ($r = -0.331$, $n=152$, $p<0.001$, 2-tailed), suggesting that

participants who endorse rape myths do not only blame the victim but they tend to support the perpetrator (see Table 2).

Table 2: Pearson Correlation: IRMAS and Victim Blaming

		Total IRMAS	Victim-Blaming	Perpetrator-Blaming
IRMAS	Pearson Correlation	1	.526**	-.331**
	Sig. (2-tailed)		.000	.000
	N	152	152	152

****. Correlation is significant at the 0.001 level (2-tailed).**

Discussion

The Cronbach's alpha coefficient of .85 for the IRMA-SF for the current study, although slightly lower than the 0.87 reported for the original instrument (Curtiss, 2007; Payne et al., 1999), appears to be comparable. Other studies that have employed the IRMAS-SF yielded reliability coefficients ranging from 0.73 to 0.85 (Frese et al., 2004; Chapleau et al., 2008; Boakye, 2009; Rebeiz & Herb, 2010; Viki et al., 2006). Thus the reliability coefficient obtained for the current study suggests that the IRMAS-SF is a reliable measure within the Namibian context.

Regarding the item that assessed the extent to which participants thought that rape should be prevented in society, seventy-five percent (75%) of the participants reflected that society should devote more time to combating rape. This finding is potentially promising and encouraging and suggests that rape is considered as an important social problem and challenge, which needs to be addressed. However, it also means that a sizeable proportion of participants (approximately 24%) seem to suggest that rape is not a serious social concern.

The first goal of the study was to investigate the extent to which university students endorse rape myths. Endorsement of rape myths is regarded in the psychological literature as one indicator of more traditional, stereotyped views of men and women and as a possible contributing factor in the perpetuation of rape in modern societies (Burt, 1980). A key finding of the study is that the students who were sampled did not strongly endorse rape myths. More specifically, approximately 60% did not endorse rape myths, 10% endorsed rape myths and 30% were neutral. This could be seen as encouraging that the majority of participants did not endorse rape myths, but this deserves some further elaboration. It was derived from the findings that most respondents straddled the mid-

point of the rating scales used to assess views regarding rape. In other words, there were few extreme responses provided that might suggest unequivocal or complete acceptance of particular rape myths (i.e. strongly agree responses). At the same time, however, the opposite is also true in that there were few extreme responses which suggested unequivocal or complete rejection of particular rape myths. The question could be posed as to whether any degree of endorsement of rape myths is acceptable at all. This is difficult to answer without a comparative framework. The current study obtained a mean value of 63 on the IRMA (SD = 21.13). We can compare this mean score with that obtained in a study reported by Kalosky (2005), where a mean value of 40.94 (SD= 13.63) was obtained with university students in the United States of America. On the other hand, a Spanish study by Frese et al., 2004, reported a higher mean value of 100.86 (SD=10.1).

Given that most students did not endorse rape myths to any significant degree, it was interesting to observe that the rape myth that "Rapists are usually sexually frustrated individuals" was endorsed quite strongly. This would suggest that despite decades of research evidence suggesting that rape is a crime of power and control (Ben-David & Schneider, 2005), students in this study seem to regard rape as motivated by sexual desire. If lack of awareness is at the root of the greater endorsement of rape myths in Namibia, intervention strategies to reduce such myths should include factual information with regard to aspects such as motives and methods of men who rape.

With regard to sex differences in perception of rape myths, consistent with previous research, (Gölge *et al*., 2003; Chapleau *et al*., 2008; Hockett *et al*., 2009; Suarez & Gadalla, 2010), gender was found to be a salient factor, with males endorsing rape myths to a considerably larger degree than females. It is important to understand underlying perceptions of rape in order to establish a basis for macro-level attitudes, such as views regarding the seriousness of rape. The existence of rape myths among some university students may be reflective of various factors. One possibility is that perhaps some Namibian university students endorse rape myths because they adhere (to some greater degree) to traditional stereotypes concerning gender role behaviour (Tavrow et al., 2013; Yamawaki, Niwako, Tschanz & Brian, 2005). It has been found consistently that in societies that adhere to conservative sexual attitudes, rape myths are more likely to be prominent than in non-traditional cultures (Alexis & Boris, 2002; Schaefer & Richard 1999). Robertson (1998) pointed out that the acceptance of rape myths is strongly related to adversarial sexual beliefs and tolerance of interpersonal violence. She further asserts that sexually aggressive men are more likely to believe myths about rape and to accept the use of interpersonal vio-

lence as an effective strategy for resolving conflict. Furthermore, the tolerance of rape myths functions differently for males and females. Lonsway and Fitzgerald (1994) explain that men tend to use rape myths as a way of justifying or denying the occurrence of a rape incident, while females endorse myths about rape to deny personal vulnerability and responsibility.

With regard to the rape vignette, the results generally suggest that the majority of the research participant was sympathetic to the rape victim. These findings support the results of the study by Curtiss (2007). However, it contradicts studies done by Yamawaki & Tschanz, 2005) and Szymanski et al. (1993), where participants in the studies blamed the victim. The result of this study is also in contrast to research findings in Kenya, which suggest that the majority of research participants blamed the victims unconditionally (Tavrow et al., 2013). When examining the role of gender in victim-blaming, overall results indicate that the sex of the respondent was not significant in determining the degree of victim-blaming in the rape scenario. This finding suggests that university students in this study do not differ in victim-blaming and that both sexes tend not to blame the victim in the scenario, although this support for the victim is never always clear-cut nor unconditional. This finding contradicts studies conducted by others (Hockett *et al*., 2009) that suggest that males tend to blame the victim more.

The results suggested that participants who endorsed rape myths did not only tend to blame the victim but they also tended to excuse the perpetrator ($r = -.331$, $p<0.001$). These results find support in extensive literature which suggests that individuals who adhere to rape myths are also more likely to blame the victim (Bell, Kuriloff & Lottes, 1994; Gölge et al., 2003; Frese et al., 2004; Iconis, 2008; Trangsrud, 2010). A high correlation between victim-blaming and adherence to myths rapes was expected since most rape myths tend to blame the victim. A victim is also blamed more when she is perceived to show behaviour that is 'blameworthy'. Since the victim in the rape vignette accompanied the perpetrator home, perhaps her behaviour was viewed as inappropriate. However, literature generally suggests that victims of acquaintance rape are blamed more than victims of stranger rape (Sleath & Bull, 2010).

The findings of this study could have significant policy implications as they suggest a need for rape awareness programmes that aim at reducing the endorsement of rape myths among university students. There is limited exposure on Namibian university campuses to education or awareness campaigns about the incidence, circumstances and definitions of rape. This is common practice in some developed countries (e.g. North America) where rape prevention programmes are routinely disseminated across university campuses to sensitise young students about the dangers of 'date rape' and where slogans such as 'No

Means No' have become part of the culture. With discussion and exposure to factual information, beliefs can be challenged and the endorsement of rape myths can perhaps be significantly decreased. Without factual information, even with regard to something as simple as what kind of behaviour actually constitutes rape, personal biases and misinformation serve to reinforce endorsement of myths.

Although these rape myths were not necessarily endorsed strongly by many people, many students seem ambivalent about their support towards rape myths. All of these rape myths were found to be 'victim blaming' rape myths. One could speculate that certain other key values (such as the status of women in society, religious beliefs etc.) may be influencing this split in student views. Further research to explore these possible factors is needed.

This study explored levels of endorsement of rape myths by university students. Owing to the small sample size, the data cannot be generalized to all university students in Namibia. Further research, with larger representative sample, is recommend. Similarly, research with other youth groups such as high school students, is recommended.

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