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Attitudes Toward Prostitution and Acceptance of Rape Myths¹

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Violent behaviors against women are associated with culturally supported attitudes that encourage men to feel entitled to sexual access to women, to feel superior to women, or to feel that they have license as sexual aggressors. Rape myths and prostitution myths are components of these culturally supported attitudes that normalize violence against women. Prostitution myths justify the existence of prostitution, promote misinformation about prostitution, and contribute to a social climate that exploits and harms not only prostituted women, but all women. This study investigated the relationship between prostitution myth acceptance and rape myth acceptance in a sample of university undergraduates. Rape myth acceptance was positively correlated with prostitution myth acceptance among 783 university undergraduates from California, Iowa, Oregon, and Texas. College men were significantly more accepting of prostitution myths than were college women. Results suggest that acceptance of prostitution myths might be a component of attitudes that justify violence against women.^A

A

Violent behaviors against women are associated with culturally supported attitudes that encourage men to feel entitled to sexual access to women, to feel superior to women, or to feel that they have license as sexual aggressors (Koss, 1988; Malamuth, Sockloskie, Koss, & Tanaka, 1991; Marolla & Scully, 1986). Rape myths are a specific component of culturally supported attitudes that normalize rape (Lonsway & Fitzgerald, 1994). Prostitution myths are beliefs that justify the existence of prostitution, that promote misinformation about prostitution, and that contribute to a social climate that exploits and harms not only prostituted women, but all women. Like rape myths, prostitution myths are hypothesized to

¹The authors wish to acknowledge the valuable contributions of Thomas Becker, Louise Fitzgerald, and Robert Jensen.

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be a component of attitudes toward women, gender roles, sexual interactions, and sexuality.

B Rape myths have been linked theoretically and empirically to other attitudes regarding gender roles and interpersonal interactions (Burt, 1980; Field^B, 1978; Malamuth et al., 1991). Rape myths and prostitution myths might be similarly associated. For example, three of Payne's (1993) rape myth items might also be viewed as statements about women as prostitutes: "If a man buys a woman things like expensive clothes and jewelry, he is entitled to sex from her," "If a husband pays all the bills, he has the right to sex with his wife whenever he wants," and "If a woman lets a man pay for an expensive date, realistically she is agreeing to sleep with him." These statements imply that women in general are prostitutes and, as a corollary, the belief that women's sexuality is a commodity. In addition to the rape myth that all women are prostitutes, there are unique rape myths relevant to prostitutes themselves.

Miller and Schwartz (1995) interviewed prostituted women regarding the prevalence of rape myths among johns, police, and others whom they encountered on the street. Common themes reported by their interviewees were the prejudicial beliefs that (a) prostitutes are unrapable; (b) no harm is done to prostitutes when they are assaulted or harassed; (c) prostitutes deserve to be raped; and (d) all prostitutes are the same. These rape myths about prostituted women have been upheld in judicial decisions in which women in prostitution were raped (Farley & Kelly, 2000).

C There has been little study of attitudes toward prostitution in the general population. Two studies investigated attitudes toward prostitution among college students. Basow and Campanile (1990) found that pro-feminist and anti-prostitution attitudes were positively correlated. A second study reported that 33% of a sample of college students believed that prostitutes "love sex, enjoy their work, are proud of their work, have high self-esteem, and like being on display" (Polk & Cowan, 1996, C) The current study investigates the relationship between prostitution myths and rape myth acceptance in a large sample of university undergraduates.

Method

D We used six items that reflect myths about prostitution from the attitudes subset of the Prostitution Behavior Questionnaire (PBQ-A; Sawyer, Lewis, & Brucker, 1998). The six items are: "There is nothing wrong with prostitution"; "Prostitutes are victims of pimps"; "Most prostitutes make a lot of money"; "Women are prostitutes because they want to be; it's their choice"; "Prostitutes enjoy their work"; and "Prostitutes genuinely like men." Students responded to each statement on a ^Dscale ranging from *strongly disagree* to *strongly agree*. Agreement with each statement indicated endorsement of the myth, with the

exception of the statement “Prostitutes are victims of pimps,” in which case disagreement indicated prostitution myth endorsement.

Rape myth acceptance was measured by the short form of the Illinois Rape Myth Acceptance scale (IRMA-SF; Payne, 1993). A Cronbach’s alpha of .87 suggests strong internal reliability of the IRMA-SF (Payne, 1993). The rape myth scale contains seven subscales: Victim precipitation (VP); It wasn’t really rape (NR); He didn’t mean to/couldn’t help it (MT); She really wanted it/enjoyed it (WI); She lied (LI); Rape is no big deal (BD); and Rape is a deviant event (DE).

Written measures were collected anonymously from undergraduates enrolled in introductory level courses at four universities (one university each in California, Iowa, Oregon, and Texas). Two of the universities were small private institutions, and two were large public institutions. Respondents were instructed not to put their names on the surveys.

Results

E Participants were 783 (507 females, 65%; 276 males, 35%) university
 F undergraduates. The participants ranging in age from 17 years to 46 years, with a mean of 19.5 years ($SD = 2.4$). The ethnic composition of the sample was approximately 67% White European American, 11% Asian or Pacific Islander, 8.7% Latino, 5% Multicultural, 2.5% African American, 1% Native American, and 4.5% Other. Of the participants, 95% identified themselves as heterosexual, 2% as homosexual, and 3% as bisexual. Of the sample, 27% reported having had no sexual partners, 56% reported fewer than 5 sexual partners, 12% reported fewer than 10 sexual partners, 3% reported 11 to 15 sexual partners, and 3% reported more than 16 sexual partners.

Of the college men, 6% ($n = 17$) responded “Yes” to the question “Have you ever had sex of any kind (e.g., hand job, blow job, intercourse) with a professional sex worker (e.g., call girl, paid escort, massage parlor worker, prostitute)?” These students were not included in the subsequent analyses. Responses to the prostitution myth items by this group of male students—johns, or customers of prostitutes—were compared to the rest of the sample in an exploratory manner.

The IRMA-SF (rape myth scale; Payne, 1993) consists of seven subscales with two or four items loading on each subscale. Cronbach’s alphas for the seven subscales were as follows: VP = .68, NR = .47, MT = .55, WI = .64, LI = .70, BD = .51, and DE = .44. Cronbach’s alpha for the 19-item scale was .80.

Rates of endorsement of the six prostitution myths varied from 16% to 59%. More than half (59%) disagreed or strongly disagreed that “Prostitutes are victims of pimps”; 45% agreed or strongly agreed that “Women are prostitutes because they want to be; it’s their choice”; 39% agreed or strongly that “Prostitutes genuinely like men”; and 16% of the students agreed or strongly agreed that “There is nothing wrong with prostitution” and that “Prostitutes enjoy their work.”

Table 1

Percentage of Women and Men Who Agreed or Strongly Agreed With Prostitution Myths (PBQ-A)

Item	Women	Men
1. There is nothing wrong with prostitution.	10.0	26.7
2. Prostitutes are victims of pimps. ^a	42.4	39.2
3. Most prostitutes make a lot of money.	41.2	37.8
4. Women are prostitutes because they want to be; it's their choice.	41.8	49.8
5. Prostitutes enjoy their work.	14.0	19.1
6. Prostitutes genuinely like men.	34.7	44.7

Note. Percentages reflect total endorsements for *agree* and *strongly agree* response options.

^aDisagreement with this item is the prostitution myth.

There were gender differences in prostitution and rape myth acceptance in this sample. More college men than college women endorsed prostitution and rape myths. The overall MANOVA by gender was significant for both prostitution myths, $F(6, 665) = 7.14, p < .001$; and for rape myths, $F(7, 706) = 21.98, p < .001$. Gender differences were found on the following prostitution myth items: "There is nothing wrong with prostitution," $F(1^G) = 34.5^H, p < .001$; "Prostitutes enjoy their work," $F(1^I) = 5.3, p = .04$; and "Prostitutes genuinely like men," $F(1^J) = 6.7^K, p = .01$. Table 1 shows endorsement rate of prostitution myths by gender.

We found a positive correlation between acceptance of prostitution myths and acceptance of rape myths. Overall prostitution myth endorsement was significantly correlated with overall rape myth endorsement ($r = .27, p < .0001$).

Finally, we looked at the endorsement rates of prostitution myth items among the johns ($n = 17$). The results were as follows: 29% of the johns (as compared to 27% of the rest of the men in the sample) agreed with the myth "There is nothing wrong with prostitution"; 41% of the johns (compared to 39% of the rest of the men) agreed with the statement "Prostitutes are victims of pimps"; 29% of the johns (compared to 38% of the rest of the men) agreed with the myth "Prostitutes make a lot of money"; 35% of the johns (compared to 50% of the rest of the men) agreed with the myth "Women are prostitutes because they want to be"; 6% of the johns (compared to 19% of the rest of the men) agreed with the myth "Prostitutes enjoy their work"; and 29% of the johns (compared to 45% of the rest of the men) agreed with the myth "Prostitutes genuinely like men."

Discussion

Prostitution myth acceptance was positively correlated with rape myth acceptance among the college undergraduates. Just as rape myths justify rape, prostitution myths rationalize sexual exploitation and violence in prostitution. College men were significantly more accepting of prostitution myths than were college women. This finding is consistent with previous research on gender differences in sexual attitudes and rape myth acceptance (Hendrick, Hendrick, & Slapion-Foote, 1985; Lonsway & Fitzgerald, 1994). More men than women might support prostitution because men are more likely to believe that male sexual urges are an imperative, and that prostitution should exist as an institution to meet men's sexual needs. On the other hand, fewer women might support prostitution because they identify with the situation of prostituted women and view prostitution as exploitation. Nonprostituted college women might understand that contemptuous and misogynistic attitudes toward prostituted women are only a thin line away from misogynistic attitudes toward all women.

Of the 276 college men, 17 reported being johns. Although the small size of this group prevented statistical analysis, it was noteworthy that they endorsed prostitution myths at a lower rate than men who were not johns on four of the six prostitution myth items (*make a lot of money, it's their choice, enjoy their work, and genuinely like men*). Lower endorsement rates of prostitution myths among johns might be understood in terms of their direct experience with prostituted women, and their fact-based perspective from which to evaluate the myths. Future research might investigate the hypothesis that, over time, as men age and continue to purchase women in prostitution, their denial increases and prostitution myth acceptance increases. Monto and Hotaling (1998) reported that arrested johns who purchased prostitutes at least once a week strongly endorsed rape myths. Sawyer et al.^M (1998) found varying degrees of acceptance of prostitution myths among arrested johns. A positive correlation between having used a prostituted woman and finding rape generally appealing was reported by Sullivan and Simon (1998).

There is a growing literature that documents the human-rights abuses intrinsic to prostitution, which include sexual harassment, economic servitude, educational deprivation, job discrimination, domestic violence, racism, classism, vulnerability to frequent physical and sexual assault, and being subjected to body invasions that are equivalent to torture (Farley & Kelly, 2000). Interviews with 475 people in prostitution indicated that 92% wished to escape, but felt they had no other options (Farley, Baral, Kiremire, & Sezgin, 1998). Housing, medical/psychological care, treatment for drug/alcohol addiction, and job training are necessary in order to provide genuine options for those who wish to escape prostitution.

Public education regarding the nature of the harms of prostitution is crucial in preventing violence against women. Frank dialogue regarding noncoercive sexuality is urgently needed.

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