An exploratory analysis of the relationship between women's rape fantasies, rape myth acceptance, rape victim empathy and rape blame attribution

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This paper explores the existence of rape fantasies within a sample of female university students and investigates whether there is a relationship between rape fantasies and the way individuals make attributions about the victims of rape. Participants completed a questionnaire which included measures of erotic and aversive rape fantasies, rape myth acceptance, rape victim empathy and specific attributions about a victim of rape presented in a vignette. The findings indicate that rape fantasies are more common than previously thought, with 53.4 per cent of participants reporting having experienced some form of sexually coercive fantasy at least once a year. The findings also indicate that there is positive correlational relationship between general rape fantasies and the way individuals make attributions about individual rape victims, with people who experience rape fantasies allocating a greater amount of blame to the victim in a specific rape scenario. Potential reasons and implications for these findings are discussed.

O NE OF THE most widely recognised rape myths is the idea that *'all women secretly desire to be raped'*. Recent research has demonstrated that although this statement is far from accurate, some individuals do fantasise about coercive sex and/or rape (Critelli & Bivona, 2008; Bivona & Critelli, 2009). The relationship between rape myth acceptance (RMA) and rape fantasy (RF) is one which has yet to be empirically or academically explored. Research has consistently demonstrated a link between rape myth acceptance and individual's attributions about the victims of rape (Abbey, McAuslan & Ross, 1998; Lambert & Raichle, 2000; Mynatt & Allgier, 1990). In addition to this, rape victim empathy (RVE) has also been found to be negatively correlated with rape blame attributions (Deitz, 1984; Smith & Frieze, 2003). If attitudes towards rape victims in general influence the way responsibility and blame is attributed to individuals in rape scenarios, it is likely that rape fantasy also plays a role

within rape blame culpability attributions. This study explores the existence of both erotic and aversive sexual rape fantasies within a sample of female university students and examines the potential relationship between rape fantasies, rape myth acceptance (RMA), rape victim empathy (RVE) and rape blame attribution (RBA). The findings are discussed with reference to the implications for the legal and criminal justice system response to the victims of rape.

Aims
The aim of the current study was to identify whether rape fantasies exist within a sample of female undergraduate students. More specifically, the current study also aimed to determine whether there is a relationship between the existence of rape fantasies and rape myth acceptance/rape victim empathy and whether rape fantasy impacts upon the way individuals/observers form attitudes about rape victims.

Hypotheses

On the basis of pre-existing research focusing on rape blame attribution, the following hypotheses were generated:

1. There will be a relationship between rape fantasies and the way participants form attitudes about rape victims generally (including ARVS, RMA and RVE).

2. There will be a relationship between rape fantasies and the way participants attribute blame within a specific rape scenario.

3. Women who experience erotic rape fantasies will demonstrate less positive attitudes towards rape victims in general, higher levels of rape myth acceptance and lower levels of rape victim empathy.

4. Women who experience aversive rape fantasies will demonstrate more positive attitudes towards rape victims in general, lower levels of rape myth acceptance and higher levels of rape victim empathy.

5. Women who experience erotic rape fantasies will attribute higher levels of victim blame within a specific rape scenario.

6. Women who experience aversive rape fantasies will attribute lower levels of victim blame within a specific rape scenario.

Proposed Pathway Model

On the basis of the hypotheses above, an exploratory pathway model was developed to demonstrate the predicted relationships between the variables being investigated (see Figure 1).

Figure 1: Hypothesised Pathway Model Depicting Relationship between Variables.
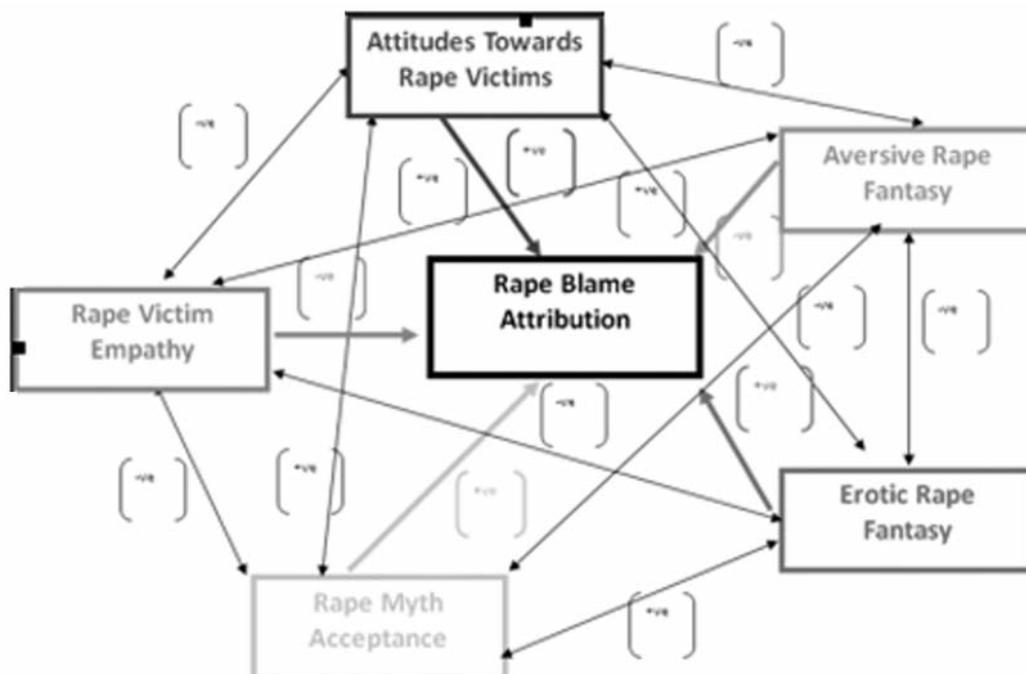
Methodology

Participants

The sample consisted of 73 female under-graduate students from Coventry University with a mean age of 20.5 years (*SD*=3.42) and an age range of 18 to 44. The majority of the participants were White British (43.4 per cent) and the remainder of the sample consisted of students from a variety of different ethnicities; including Other White (18.4 per cent), Black African (7.9 per cent), Indian (7.9 per cent), Bangladeshi (2.6 per cent), Other Black (2.6 per cent), and Pakistani (1.3 per cent).

Measures

Demographic Questionnaire: This questionnaire was devised by the researchers and consisted of six items including *age, gender, country of birth, ethnicity, religion* and *course of study.*

Rape Fantasy Questionnaire: This question-naire was devised by the researchers by util-ising, adapting and adding to some of the items used by Bivona and Critelli (2009) in their work. The scale consisted of 33 items which assessed the existence, frequency and content of *General Rape Fantasies* (GRF), *Aver-sive Rape Fantasies* (ARF), and *Erotic Rape Fantasies* (ERF). The scale was deemed to be internally consistent and reliable, demon-strating a Cronbach alpha of 0.85.

Victim Blame Questionnaire: This question-naire was originally devised by one of the authors for use in Grubb and Harrower (2009) and consisted of eight items used to measure the degree of victim blame allo-cated to a victim within a 300-word rape vignette which describes a stranger rape of a female. The scale was deemed to be inter-nally consistent and reliable after removal of a single item, demonstrating a Cronbach alpha of 0.63.

The Attitudes toward Rape Victims Scale (ARVS): The ARVS is a pre-validated 25-item scale devised by Ward (1988) to assess general attitudes towards rape victims.

The Rape Myth Acceptance Scale (RMA): The RMA is a pre-validated 14-item scale devised by Burt (1980) that assesses the degree to which individuals endorse rape myths.

The Rape Empathy Scale (RES): The RES is a pre-validated 19-item scale devised by Deitz et al. (1982) that assesses the degree to which individuals empathise with the victims of rape.

The Balanced Inventory of Desirable Responding (BIDR): The BIDR is a pre-validated 40-item scale devised by Paulhus (1988) which assesses levels of socially desirable responding within participants.

Procedure

Ethical approval for the study was obtained from the Coventry University Ethics Committee. Participants were recruited using the SONA system in line with the Psychology Research Participation scheme at Coventry University. Participants were required to complete an online question-naire which took approximately 30 to 45 minutes in total and were awarded course credits for taking part in the research.

Results

1. The existence and nature of rape fantasies

The findings confirmed the existence of rape fantasies in over half of the participants, with 53.4 per cent having experienced some form of rape fantasy at least once a year. Participants also reported a variety of both erotic and aversive experiences, with 14.4 per cent of participants having experienced rape fantasies that were *erotic* (pleasurable) and 7.8 per cent having experienced rape fantasies that were *aversive* (i.e. not enjoy-able). Participants were also asked to identify the nature of their rape fantasies by indi-cating who the aggressor was within their fantasies. The majority of the participants identified having fantasised about being raped by their *current partner* (26 per cent), an *acquaintance* (24.7 per cent), a *stranger*

(21.9 per cent) or a *faceless individual* (20.5 per cent), however, a number of participants also reported having experienced fantasies where the aggressor was an ex-partner (15.1 per cent), an *authority figure* (13.7 per cent) or a *relative* (5.5 per cent).

2. Correlational analyses

The relationships between the seven variables being investigated were analysed using Pearson product-moment correlation coefficient (please see Table 1 for the inter-correlation matrix).

- There was a strong positive correlation between ARF and ERF, $r=0.81$, $N=73$, $p<.0005$, with high levels of ARF being associated with high levels of ERF.
- There was a medium negative correlation between ARF and GRF, $r=-0.47$, $N=73$, $p<.005$, with high levels of GRF being associated with low levels of ARF.
- There was a medium positive correlation between GRF and ERF, $r=0.38$, $N=73$, $p<.0005$, with high levels of GRF being associated with high levels of ERF.

- There was a medium positive correlation between GRF and RBA, $r=0.32$, $N=73$, $p<.0005$, with high levels of GRF being associated with high levels of RBA.
- There was a strong positive correlation between GRF and RMA, $r=0.55$, $N=73$, $p<.0005$, with high levels of GRF being associated with high levels of RMA.
- There was a medium negative correlation between GRF and ATRV, $r=-0.32$, $N=73$, $p<.0005$, with high levels of GRF being associated with low levels of ATRV.
- There was a strong positive correlation between RMA and RBA, $r=0.66$, $N=73$, $p<.0005$, with high levels of RMA being associated with high levels of RBA.
- There was a small negative correlation between ATRV and RBA, $r=-0.24$, $N=73$, $p<.05$, with high levels of ATRV being associated with low levels of RBA.
- There was a medium negative correlation between ATRV and RMA, $r=-0.35$, $N=73$, $p<.0005$, with high levels of ATRV being associated with low levels of RMA.
- RVE did not correlate significantly with any of the other variables.

Table 1: Pearson Product–Moment Correlations between Variables.

	1. Aversive Rape Fantasy (ARF)	2. Erotic Rape Fantasy (ERF)	3. General Rape Fantasy (GRF)	4. Rape Blame Attribution (RBA)	5. Rape Victim Empathy (RVE)	6. Rape Myth Acceptance (RMA)	7. Attitudes Towards Rape Victims (ATRV)
1	–	0.81**	−0.47**	0.19	−0.05	0.17	−0.07
2		–	0.38**	0.06	0.11	0.12	−0.13
3			–	0.32**	0.15	0.55**	−0.32**
4				–	0.17	0.66**	−0.24*
5					–	0.03	−0.04
6						–	−0.35**
7							–

*$p<0.05$ (two-tailed). **$p< 0.01$ (two-tailed).

3. Confirmed Pathway Model
See Figure 2.

4. Multiple regression analysis
Standard multiple regression was used to assess the ability of the six variables (GRF, ARF, ERF, RMA, RVE and ATRV) to predict levels of RBA.

- The total variance explained by the model as a whole was 46.3 per cent, $F_{6,73}$=9.48, p<.0005.
- Only RMA was statistically significant as a predictor, with RMA recording the highest beta value (beta=0.65) and accounting for 27.7 per cent of the variance in the model.

Discussion
The findings indicate that rape fantasies exist and are more common within women than previously thought. Over half of the current sample (53.4 per cent) reported having experienced some form of rape fantasy at least once a year, which is in line with Bivona and Critelli's (2009) findings whereby 62 per cent of their sample had experienced such fantasies. Participants were more likely to experience fantasies involving their current partner (26.0 per

cent), an acquaintance (24.7 per cent) or a stranger (21.9 per cent) and only 5.5 per cent of individuals reported having fantasies that involved a relative. Erotic rape fantasies (14.4 per cent) were more common than aversive ones (7.8 per cent), indicating that participants find at least some of the fantasies they experience as pleasurable.

The findings indicate partial support for Hypothesis 1 whereby significant correlations have been identified between general rape fantasy (GRF) and attitudes towards rape victims (ATRV) and rape myth acceptance (RMA) respectively. Hypothesis 2 has also been fully supported by the identification of a significant correlation between general rape fantasy (GRF) and rape blame attribution (RBA) in a specific rape scenario. These findings indicate that the existence of general rape fantasies play a role in the way individuals make attributions about rape victims both generally and specifically.

Despite this support, the findings are somewhat contradictory regarding attributions made about general victims of rape and specific victims of rape. The positive relationship between general rape fantasy (GRF) and rape myth acceptance (RMA) indicates that those individuals who experience high

Figure 2: Confirmed Pathway Model depicting relationships between the variables.
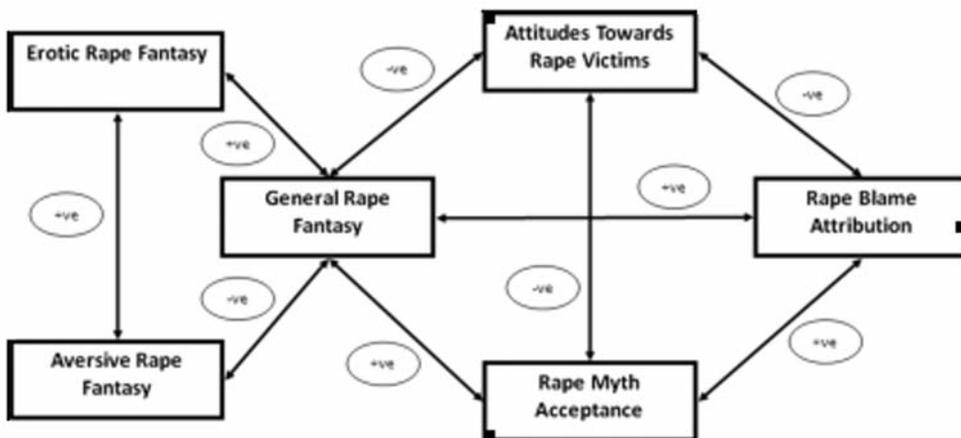
levels of general rape fantasy (GRF) are more likely to endorse rape myths to a greater extent whereas the negative relationship between general rape fantasy (GRF) and attitudes towards rape victims (ATRV) indicates that those who experience high levels of general rape fantasies are more likely to view general victims of rape more positively. In addition to this, the positive relationship between general rape fantasy (GRF) and rape blame attribution (RBA) indicates that those who experience general rape fantasies are more likely to blame specific victims of rape for their misfortune.

The reasons for these findings are unclear but suggest potentially that there is a difference in the way we make attributions about specific rape victims or more general attitudes about victims of rape. It may be that those individuals who experience general rape fantasies are less likely to identify with or feel similar to general rape victims as they have little information about the victim provided within general rape victim attitude measures (e.g. ARVS) and as such are less likely to utilise defensive attribution or just world thinking which often leads to higher levels of victim blame. Contrastingly, it may be that those who experience general rape fantasies are more likely to identify with a *specific* rape victim within a scenario because the information provided about the victim provides an increased level of similarity between the observer and the victim and ergo defensive attribution and just world thinking are more likely to be engaged, resulting in a higher level of rape blame culpability. The authors propose that this latter observed mechanism represents a form of 'defensive rape fantasy attribution' which operates in a similar way to the defensive attribution proposed by Shaver (1970) and observed within the rape blame attribution literature (see Grubb & Harrower, 2008).

Interestingly, a similar finding has been found regarding the relationship between rape myth acceptance (RMA) and formation of attributions about specific and general rape victims. In the current sample, high levels of rape myth acceptance (RMA) are associated with low levels of attitudes towards rape victims (ATRV) and high levels of rape blame attribution (RBA), indicating that those who endorse rape myths are more likely to blame specific victims for their plight but are more likely to view general rape victims more positively. This finding contradicts the pre-existing literature relating to rape myth acceptance and rape blame attributions, but again, suggests that the way we form attributions about specific individuals differs from the way we form attitudes more generally.

Specific findings relating to Erotic and Aversive Rape Fantasies indicated that these two factors do not appear to be related to the way individuals form general or specific attributions about rape victims. These two variables were not significantly correlated with any of the other variables and therefore all four of the specific hypotheses were rejected. These findings would suggest that it is the existence of rape fantasies that is important, as opposed to the type of the fantasy experienced.

The findings confirm that the relationship between women's rape fantasies and the way they form attributions about general and specific victims of rape is a complex one. Whilst it is clear that rape fantasies play some role in the way we make judgements about rape victims, the direction of influence is diverse and dependent on the type of attribution being formed. The findings must be interpreted with caution as they are based on a fairly small sample of female university students and as such may not be representative of the total population. It would therefore be prudent to conduct further research with a more representative sample of women, including a wider range in terms of age and ethnicity of participants.

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