THE EFFECT OF SEXIST HUMOR AND TYPE OF RAPE ON MEN'S SELF-REPORTED RAPE PROCLIVITY AND VICTIM BLAME

G. Tendayi Viki
Manuela Thomae
Amy Cullen
Hannah Fernandez
University of Kent

ABSTRACT

In the current research, we investigated the effects of exposure to sexist humor on male self-reported rape proclivity and perceptions of rape. We also considered the role of type of rape. Male students were exposed to either sexist or non-sexist jokes and either a stranger rape or an acquaintance rape scenario. We found the highest levels of self-reported rape proclivity and victim blame in the sexist joke-acquaintance rape condition compared to the other conditions. We also found the lowest levels of perceived seriousness of rape and recommended sentence in the sexist joke-acquaintance rape condition compared to the other conditions

INTRODUCTION

Sexual violence has been shown to have negative effects on women's psychological and social lives (Day, 1995). Surprisingly, research has also shown that a number of men report some proclivity towards committing rape (Malamuth, 1981). These findings have been obtained in studies that have used self-report measures of rape proclivity (e.g. Bohner Reinhard, Rutz, Sturm, Kerschenbaum, & Effler, 1998; Malamuth, 1981). For example, a recent self-report measure of rape proclivity developed by Bohner et al. (1998) is based on five realistic scenarios in which a rape is described but the word "rape" is not used. Men then indicate the likelihood that they would have behaved like the person described in each scenario (Abrams, Viki, Masser & Bohner, 2003; Bohner et al., 1998; Chiroro, Bohner, Viki & Jarvis, 2004).

Using such methods, several factors that are related to men's self-reported rape proclivity have been identified. Among these is the combination of hostility towards women, attitudes accepting of violence against women and sexual arousal in response to aggression (Malamuth, 1986). The acceptance of rape myths has also been found to play a prominent role in self-reported rape proclivity. Rape myths are "stereotypic beliefs about rape that blame the victim and exonerate the rapist" (Bohner et al, 1998, pg. 258). Men who score high in rape myth acceptance (RMA) have been found to self-report higher levels of rape proclivity compared to men who are low in RMA (Bohner et al., 1998; Malamuth, 1981; Malamuth & Check, 1985; Tieger, 1981). Indeed, RMA has been found to have a causal impact on men's self-reported rape proclivity (Bohner et al., 1998). Research has also shown that the relationship between RMA and self-reported rape proclivity is mediated by the anticipated enjoyment of sexual dominance, but not by anticipated sexual arousal (Chiroro et al. 2004). This finding is consistent with the feminist argument that rape functions as an instrument of social dominance of women by men in broader society (c.f. Brownmiller, 1975).

Research has also shown that victims of rape are often blamed for their fate (Pollard, 1992). This is often the case in situations where women can be viewed as having violated traditional gender roles. For example, Viki, Abrams and Masser (2002) found that a woman who was assaulted while cheating on her husband received more blame than a non-married victim. Researchers have also found that victims of rape are more likely to receive blame if they have consumed alcohol or if they have had many previous sexual partners (Pollard, 1992). The type of clothing that women were wearing during the rape also influences whether they are blamed (Pollard, 1992). Another consistent finding is that women are blamed for rape if they are acquainted with the perpetrator. A large number of studies have found that victims of acquaintance rape are more likely to be blamed for the rape in comparison to stranger rape victims (see Pollard, 1992 for a review). Abrams et al. (2003) found that acquaintance rape victims are blamed because they are seen as having violated traditional gender roles.

In this paper, we report one study that further examines the conditions under which men are likely to self-report high levels of rape proclivity and victim blame. We also measured the perceived seriousness of the rape and recommended sentence length for the perpetrator. Our study focuses on the effects of sexist humor on our dependent measures. In our research, we explore the combined effects of sexist humor and type of rape. It is argued that sexist humor provides a local norm that is tolerant to prejudice and discrimination. This in turn leads to men, especially those in

acquaintance rape situations, to report higher levels of rape proclivity and victim blame; lower levels of perceived seriousness of the rape and recommend shorter sentence lengths.

Prejudiced Norm Theory

Prejudiced Norm Theory (Ford & Ferguson, 2004) argues that prejudiced jokes activate a conversational rule of levity, resulting in a non-serious mindset on the part of the receiver, which prevents the message from being interpreted critically. By switching to a non-serious mindset, the recipient of the joke essentially accepts the local norm implied by the joke. As such, when exposed to prejudiced jokes people may begin to accept the norm of prejudice implied by the joke. This may result in greater personal tolerance of discrimination. A study by Ford, Ferguson, and Kalair (2002) confirmed that the regulation of personal responses to discrimination is guided by the normative standard implied by disparaging humor.

For example, research has found that men do adopt a non-critical mindset when interpreting sexist jokes and thereby perceive a norm tolerant of sexism in the actual social context. For example, Ford and colleagues have found that men are more tolerant of a sexist event (e.g. sexual harassment) after they have been exposed to sexist humor (e.g. Ford, Wentzel, and Lorion, 2001). This effect was found to be particularly strong among men who scored high in hostile sexism (Ford et al., 2001). Other researchers have examined the role of sexist humor in rape-related attitudes and beliefs. For example, Ryan and Kanjorski (1998) found that enjoyment of sexist humor was related to negative rape-related attitudes and the self-reported likelihood of forcing sex. Similarly, recent research by Viki and colleagues has focused on the effects of sexist humor on men's self-reported rape proclivity. Viki, Thomae and Hamid (2006) exposed men to either sexist or non-sexist jokes. Afterwards, they measured their levels of self-reported rape proclivity. They found that men exposed to sexist (vs. non-sexist) jokes reported higher levels of rape proclivity (Studies 1 & 2). Viki and colleagues also found that this effect was particularly strong among men who scored high in hostile sexism. All the above findings suggest that individuals that are high in hostile sexism are much more likely to adopt a non-critical mindset when presented with sexist jokes. This is turn leads them to adopt the norms implied by the jokes and manifest hostile sexist behavior.

The Present Research

The current research was conducted to replicate and extend the work by Ryan and Kanjorski (1998) and Viki et al. (2006) by considering type of rape (acquaintance vs. stranger) as an additional independent variable and victim blame, perceived seriousness and recommended sentence as additional dependent variables. Male participants were exposed to either sexist or non-sexist jokes. After this, participants were exposed to either an acquaintance or stranger rape scenario and their levels of self-reported rape proclivity, victim blame, perceived seriousness of the rape and recommended sentence length were assessed. We focused on male participants because the rape proclivity self-report measure only made sense for this sample group. This research allowed us to examine the combined effects of both sexist jokes and type of rape. This has not been done by previous researchers (e.g. Ryan & Kanjorski, 1998; Viki et al., 2006). Given that both sexist jokes and exposure to acquaintance rape scenarios have been found to influence men's self-reported rape proclivity, we predicted that participants would

report the highest levels of rape proclivity after exposure to sexist jokes (vs. non-sexist jokes) in the acquaintance rape (vs. stranger rape) condition; followed by participants in the acquaintance rape condition who were exposed to non-sexist jokes. We did not expect any differences among participants in the two stranger rape conditions. Similar patterns of results were expected for victim blame, perceived seriousness and sentence length. Of-course, for perceived seriousness and sentence length, we expected the lowest levels for participants exposed to sexist jokes (vs. non-sexist jokes) in the acquaintance rape (vs. stranger rape) condition.

METHOD

Participants and Design

One hundred and twenty male students (*mean age* = 22.95 *SD* = 6.26) volunteered to participate in this study. The age of the participants ranged from 18 – 50 years, with 85.8% of participants being twenty-six years old or younger. This study utilized a 2(type of joke: sexist vs. non-sexist jokes) X 2 (type of rape: stranger vs. acquaintance) between-participants design. The dependent variables were the participants' levels of self-reported rape proclivity, victim blame, perceived seriousness and sentence length.

Materials

Participants in our study were presented with four jokes to rate in terms of their funniness. In the sexist joke condition three of the jokes were sexist and one was non-sexist. In the non-sexist joke condition it was the reverse. These jokes were selected on the basis of pilot research conducted by Viki et al. (2006). In this pilot study, twenty-four men were asked to rate 57 jokes in terms of their funniness and sexism. We selected eight jokes out of the pool of the 57 rated jokes (see Appendix). These jokes were similar in terms of funniness ratings, but distinct in terms of sexism ratings. The four selected sexist jokes were rated as equally funny (*M* = 4.17, *SD* = 2.26) to the four non-sexist jokes (*M* = 4.13, *SD* = 1.52), $F(1, 23) = 0.513$, *ns*. However, the sexist jokes were rated as being significantly more sexist (*M* = 7.40, *SD* = 1.77) than the non-sexist jokes (*M* = 1.29, *SD* = .61), $F(1, 23) = 93.93$, *p*<.001.

After rating the jokes, participants were presented with either an acquaintance rape or a stranger rape vignette. The acquaintance rape scenario described a story of a woman (Kathy) who went to a party where she met and got acquainted to a man named Jason. Later that night she invited him to her apartment where he subsequently raped her. In contrast, the stranger rape vignette described a story of a woman (Kathy) who was approached and attacked by a man (Jason) while she was walking home from a restaurant (see Abrams et al., 2003 for the scenarios).

Five items measured the extent to which participants held the rape victim responsible for the event. These were: "How much do you think Kathy should blame herself for what happened?"; "How much control do you think Kathy had over the situation?"; "How much control do you think Jason had over the situation?"; "How much do you agree Kathy should not have invited Jason over (or walked with Jason) if she did not want to have sex with him?"; "Whose fault do you think it is, that things turned out the way they did?"; "How much

sympathy do you feel for Kathy?". A 7-point scale accompanied all questions measuring the dependent variable (1 = *not at all* to 7 = *completely or totally*, or 1 = *Jason* to 7 = *Kathy*). Participants also responded to a single item asking them how serious they perceived the rape to be on a scale of 1 = *not very serious* to 11 = *very serious*.

Participants also responded to a 5-item self-report measure assessing the likelihood that they would behave like the assailant in the vignette (rape proclivity). This scale consisted of the following items: "How likely is it that you would have behaved like Jason in this situation?"; "How sexually aroused would you have felt in the situation?"; "How much would you enjoy getting your way in this situation?"; "Do you agree that in sexual encounters women like to be taken?"; "How likely is it that Kathy eventually enjoyed being taken in this situation?". Finally, participants were asked to indicate how long the sentence should be if the perpetrator is found guilty of rape. Participants could recommend sentences ranging from 0 to 21 years. All these items were adapted from Abrams et al. (2003) and Viki, Abrams and Masser (2004).

Procedure

Participants were approached at various sitting places on campus and asked whether they would participate in a study investigating relationships between men and women and sexual violence. Those participants who volunteered to participate were randomly assigned to the experimental conditions. After completing their demographic details, participants were presented with the jokes and asked to read and rate the jokes in terms of their levels of funniness. After rating the jokes, participants were presented with either the stranger rape or acquaintance rape scenario and asked to complete the measures of self-reported rape proclivity, victim blame, perceived seriousness and sentence length. After participants had completed the questionnaire the experimenter collected it, thanked the participants for their participation and debriefed them.

RESULTS

We computed average scores for each participant on all our dependent measures. The internal consistencies of all the indices were acceptably high (self-reported rape proclivity index: alpha = .80; victim blame index: alpha = .81, jokes ratings: alpha = .68). Additionally, analysis of variance indicated that both sexist and non-sexist jokes were perceived as being equally funny ($M = 4.44$, $SD = 1.78$ and $M = 4.90$, $SD = 1.67$; respectively; $F (1, 119) = 2.08$, *ns*. Furthermore, no significant main or interaction effects involving type of rape were obtained for joke ratings (all *p's*>.15).

Self-Reported Rape Proclivity

Because we had apriori hypotheses concerning our dependent measures, we analyzed our data using the contrast codes technique. This consisted of three single degree of freedom contrasts. Doing this analysis is similar to checking main effects involving our four conditions. This analysis also allowed us to make more direct tests of our hypotheses (see Judd, 2000). Specifically, we tested the contrast that the highest levels of rape proclivity would be found in the sexist joke-acquaintance rape condition but the other three conditions would not be

significantly different from each other. This contrast was represented in this way; 3, -1, -1, -1. We also tested a contrast that examined whether the nonsexist joke-acquaintance rape condition was significantly different from the two stranger rape conditions. This contrast was represented as; 0, 2, -1, -1. Finally, we ran a contrast to examine whether the two stranger rape conditions were significantly different from each other. This contrast was represented as; 0, 0, 1, -1.

Our analysis indicated that the first contrast was statistically significant; t (116) = 3.89, $p<.001$. This finding indicates that the highest levels of self-reported rape proclivity were in the sexist joke-acquaintance rape condition (M = 2.45, SD = 1.24), followed by the other conditions (i.e. nonsexist joke-acquaintance rape condition; M = 1.96, SD = 1.20; nonsexist joke-stranger rape condition; M = 1.54, SD = 0.7; and the sexist joke-stranger rape condition; M = 1.42, SD = 0.61). We also found that the second contrast was significant, t (116) = 2.19, $p<.04$. This result indicates that self-reported rape proclivity in the nonsexist joke-acquaintance rape condition was significantly higher than in the two stranger rape conditions. The final contrast was found to be non-significant, t (116) =0 .49, $p>.61$ and this shows that there were no significant differences in self-reported rape proclivity between the two stranger rape conditions.

Victim Blame

We ran a similar set of contrasts for victim blame. In line with our predictions, we found significant effects for the first contrast (i.e. 3, -1, -1, -1; t (116) = 2.93, $p<.01$). As expected, we found the highest levels of victim blame in the sexist joke-acquaintance rape condition (M = 4.01, SD = 0.79) followed by the other three conditions (i.e. nonsexist joke-acquaintance rape condition; M = 3.67, SD = 0.91; nonsexist joke-stranger rape condition; M = 3.62, SD = 0.55; and the sexist joke-stranger rape condition; M = 3.47, SD = 0.33). The other two contrasts did not produce significant effects; t (116) = 0.84, $p>.40$; t (116) = 0.83, $p>.39$ respectively.

Perceived Seriousness of Rape

As expected, we again found significant effects for the first contrast (i.e. 3, -1, -1, -1; t (116) = 2.03, $p<.05$. We found the lowest levels of perceived seriousness in the sexist joke-acquaintance rape condition (M = 9.77, SD = 2.06) followed by the other three conditions (i.e. nonsexist joke-acquaintance rape condition; M = 10.36, SD = 0.99; nonsexist joke-stranger rape condition; M = 10.23, SD = 1.65; and the sexist joke-stranger rape condition; M = 10.63, SD = 1.03). The other two contrasts did not produce significant effects; t (116) = 0.19, $p>.84$; t (116) = 1.03, $p>.29$ respectively.

Recommended Sentence Length

The results indicated that the first contrast was significant (i.e. 3, -1, -1, -1; t (116) = 2.61, $p<.02$). This finding indicates that the shortest number of years were recommended in the sexist joke-acquaintance rape condition (M = 5.93, SD = 6.61), followed by the other conditions (i.e. nonsexist joke-acquaintance rape condition; M = 6.21, SD = 6.61; nonsexist joke-stranger rape condition; M = 13.13, SD = 7.59; and the sexist joke-stranger rape condition; M = 10.83, SD = 8.09). We also found that the second contrast was significant (i.e. 0, 2, -1, -1; t (116) = 3.45, $p<.01$). This result indicates that the sentence length in the

nonsexist joke-acquaintance rape condition was significantly lower than in the two stranger rape conditions. The final contrast was found to be non-significant, t (116) =1.22, p>.22. This shows that there were no significant differences in recommended sentence length between the two stranger rape conditions.

DISCUSSION

The current study was conducted to examine whether exposure to sexist versus non-sexist humor would influence the levels of male self-reported rape proclivity, victim blame, perceived seriousness of rape and recommended sentence length. In doing this research, we also considered the role of type of rape. Previous research has shown people report higher levels of victim blame and rape proclivity in response to acquaintance rape versus stranger rape scenarios (Abrams et al., 2003). Furthermore, research has shown that males report high levels of rape proclivity after they have been exposed to sexist versus non-sexist jokes (Viki et al., 2006). As such, we predicted that the combined effect of exposing participants to both sexist jokes and an acquaintance rape scenario would result in the highest levels of victim blame and self-reported rape proclivity. We also expected that the combined effect of exposing participants to both sexist jokes and an acquaintance rape scenario would result in the lowest levels of perceived seriousness of rape and recommended sentence length. Overall, the results of our study were in line with all our predictions.

The current research findings extend previous research based on prejudiced norm theory (e.g. Ford, 2000; Ford et al., 2001). Our findings indicate that sexist jokes cannot only encourage the tolerance and expression of subtle discrimination in men, but may also lead to a greater self-reported propensity to commit sexual violence against women and also a greater propensity to blame rape victims for their victimization. This appears to be especially the case within acquaintance rape situations. Our research also extends previous research on the effects of type of rape. The research by Abrams et al. (2003) and others (e.g. Pollard. 1992) took situational factors into account by distinguishing between stranger and acquaintance rape. The current study adds to this research by showing that the impact of acquaintance rape situations on self-reported rape proclivity and victim blame amongst men can be amplified by exposing them to sexist jokes. In line with Ford and Fergusson (2004), we propose that this happens because sexist jokes provide a situational norm which suggests that discriminating or even violent behavior towards women is acceptable. This is further exacerbated by the fact that acquaintance rape is already perceived as being the victim's fault (see Abrams et al., 2003).

Although this is not a problem for our other measures, in the current research we focused on the self-reported propensity to commit rape. As such, our research does not provide conclusive evidence that exposure to sexist jokes results in an increase in the occurrence of actual rapes. It is relatively impossible to conduct ethical research studies that explore such a question more directly. Therefore, we can only argue that individuals who indicate a high likelihood of committing rape may be more likely to commit acts of sexual violence in comparison to individuals who do not report such a propensity. In this regard, our findings suggest that exposure to sexist humor can only encourage such individuals, especially in acquaintance rape situations.

A further limitation of the current research is the utilization of a male student sample. There is evidence that the appreciation of sexist jokes changes in relation to age. For example, LaFrance and Woodzicka (1998) found that among older (vs. younger) participants sexist jokes were not perceived as being very funny. In addition, Sev'er and Ungar (1997) found a higher acceptance of sexist humor among male students than male faculty members. In this regard, attempts should be made to replicate the current findings using an older, non-student sample. Researchers may also want to conduct research involving female participants. This is possible in terms of the victim blame, perceived serious and recommended sentence measures. Previous researchers have found that women are less accepting of rape myths than men are (Pollard, 1992). As such, it would be interesting to find out if sexist jokes have a similar impact on women that they have on men.

Future researchers may also want to explore the role of hostile sexism when examining the combined effects of exposure to sexist jokes and type of rape. Hostile sexism is an important piece of prejudiced norm theory and researchers have found that the effects of sexist jokes on tolerance to discrimination are stronger among individuals who are high (vs. low) in hostile sexism (Ford & Fergusson, 2004). As such, an important next step in the current programme of research would be to examine the role of hostile sexism. Given previous findings, it seems plausible to predict that the combined effects of sexist jokes and type of rape obtained in this study will be stronger among men who are high in hostile sexism.

Despite the above limitations, the results from the current research provide evidence that sexist jokes can lead to an increase in male self-reported rape proclivity and victim blame. These affects appear to be strongest within acquaintance rape situations. Our results provide a note of caution concerning the negative impact sexist jokes might have within sexual violence contexts. Such jokes may lead to increases in negative outcomes for sexual violence victims (e.g. victim blame and low perceived seriousness of rape).

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APPENDIX: CORRELATION MATRIX (PEARSON CORRELATIONS)

	Joke Ratings	Victim Blame	Rape Proclivity	Perceived Seriousness
Joke Ratings	-			
Victim Blame	.16	-		
Rape Proclivity	.20*	.46**	-	
Perceived Seriousness	-.08	-.27**	-.63**	-
Sentence Length	.11	-.10	-.29**	.26**

*significant at *p*<.05 (two-tailed); **significant at *p*<.01

APPENDIX: THE JOKES

Non-Sexist Jokes
Psychiatrist: What's your problem?
Patient: I think I'm a chicken.
Psychiatrist: How long has this been going on?
Patient: Ever since I was an egg!

How do you know when elephants have had sex in your house? The trash can liners are missing!

What's the difference between a golfer and a skydiver? A golfer goes whack… "Damn!" A skydiver goes "Damn!" … whack.

Why was the leper stopped for speeding? He couldn't take his foot off the accelerator!

Sexist Jokes
Why are women like carpets? If you lay them properly the first time, you can walk all over them for years.

Why do women have small feet? So they can get closer to the sink!

How many men does it take to change a light bulb? None let her do the dishes in the dark.

What is the best thing about a blowjob? Ten minutes silence.

AUTHOR BIOGRAPHIES

G. Tendayi Viki is a lecturer at the University of Kent, Canterbury, UK. His research deals with the consequences of prejudiced attitudes and intergroup bias on social relationships. His email address is: g.t.viki@kent.ac.uk

Manuela Thomae is a PhD student at the University of Kent, Canterbury, UK. Her research deals with when and how sexist attitudes can be reduced. Her email address is: mt96@kent.ac.uk

Amy Cullen and Hannah Fernandez were both undergraduate students at the University of Kent, Canterbury, UK during the time of this project. They recently graduated and are now working in industry. Their email addresses are: ac82@kent.ac.uk and hcf3@kent.ac.uk respectively.