

Factors Influencing the Credibility and Believability of Victims of Sexual Assault

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Abstract

The purpose of this research is to answer the question of which factors that influence the believability of a woman who comes forward to disclose a sexual assault are the most impactful. My methodology consisted of conducting interviews with attorneys who have participated in both the defense and prosecution of criminal sexual conduct cases to evaluate whether the trends revealed in the literature on a macro scale apply to the micro-scale in northern Minnesota. Findings showed that the majority of patterns revealed in the literature did in fact influence the credibility of victims of sexual assault in Beltrami County, Minnesota including chemicals, facts, false reporting, and post-assault contact. Also suggested in the findings were added reasons influential to a victim delaying their reporting and the discussion of how common of a trend not believing a victim of sexual assault is in Beltrami County, Minnesota.

INTRODUCTION

Sexual assault is a politically and socially charged topic in modern-day society. The issue at hand is that many women who come forward to share their experiences of sexual assault are not believed due to socially constructed reasons. The goal of this research was to determine what socially constructed factors in rape culture are the most influential in guiding a person to discredit a victim of sexual assault. Much of the existing literature touches on more than one reason women are scrutinized when reporting sexual assaults. I thematically address the major trends that emerged during research. I address the most common and tested factors of believability to answer the question: What social factors have the most influence on victims of sexual assault, specifically women, not being believed when they report their assaults?

LITERATURE REVIEW

Rape Myths

Rape myths are generally false beliefs about rape that are commonly accepted as true and which are used to justify men's violence against women (Lonsway and Fitzgerald, p. 133). Rape myths were first defined in 1980. Since then, research has refined the definition to what we understand it as today. Rape myth has been studied and shown to be subconsciously ingrained in some people's views of the world to a point that leads to people being less likely to believe victims of sexual assault. For example; O'Neal (2019) found that police officers with high rates of rape myth acceptance will often deny victims full protections they deserve and negatively impact their legal decision making, especially when it comes to investigating allegations of sexual assault. The knowledge that victims of sexual assault have of the prevalence of rape myths can become a barrier to disclosure of an assault and can sometimes go even further to where victims defend the actions of the perpetrator when questioned by police (Whiting, 2021).

There are four main types of rape myths that manifest themselves in different ways; myths that blame the victims, myths that lead to disbelief in claims of rape, myths that work to exonerate the perpetrator, and myths that claim only certain types of women are raped (Eyssel and Bohner, 2011). It is not insignificant that rape myths have been found to influence both the general public's perception of sexual assault victims and the circumstances of their assault, but also how police officers and others working within the medical and legal systems treat victims. Rape myth acceptance has also been found to be more common among men than women and is often associated with low amounts of rape empathy (Nason et al., 2019). This acceptance and lack of rape empathy are determining factors that influence how people will respond to someone who discloses their sexual assault, often facilitating negative reactions. Understanding what rape myths are and how rape myth acceptance is the most commonly discussed reason for victims of sexual assault to not be believed is critical to appreciate the more specific reasons for decreased believability.

“Real Rape”

The idea of “real rape” explains that most people have an image in their head as to what a victim, perpetrator, and assault scenario will look like, and when a reported story does not have what a person believes to constitute a “real rape”, they are less likely to believe the victim and their story. Stranger rape of a female victim who has not been drinking is a scenario of “real rape” that is most likely to be believed by police officers and the general public (Parratt and Pina, 2017). Even though we know that acquaintance rape of both sexes is more common, and intoxication does not mean a victim deserved to be sexually assaulted, such preconceived notions of “real rape” lead to many quick judgements of a victim's assault experience and their credibility. Another commonly accepted idea of “real rape” dictates that there be an appropriate

response from the victim that would indicate the assault was unwanted and they tried to stop it. The victim reporting that they did not fight back, scream, struggle, or explicitly tell the perpetrator to stop are all reasons some people will use to justify that the victim was somehow complicit in their own attack. These people operate under the assumption that in all instances of sexual assault the victim does everything they can to get away from their attacker, which has been proven to not be the case for any number of reasons including the presence of a weapon during the attack (O’Neal, 2019). Oftentimes the idea people have of what the defining characteristics of a “real rape” and “real rape victim” are, do not align with crime definitions and could therefore be described as myths about rape (Venema, 2014).

Prior Relationships and Post-Assault Contact

If a victim discloses a prior relationship with their accuser at the time of a report of sexual assault, their assault will likely not be taken seriously. Evidence of prior relationships has typically resulted in police officers determining a sexual assault case as ambiguous, or in other words difficult, if not too difficult, to determine who is telling the truth when a previous relationship is involved (Venema, 2014). Aligned with the idea that rape myths work to justify the actions men take against women, a prior relationship between perpetrator and victim will lead some to argue that the victim has already consented to sex based on previous behaviors she has exhibited towards her attacker (Lonsway, 2010). Since we know that the majority of sexual assault occurs between two people who knew each other prior to the assault, it is then logical to assume that in many situations a victim might still have contact with their assaulter after the assault takes place. The degree to which post-assault contact influences people’s perceptions of victims and perpetrators had not been officially studied as its own variable until 2018. It had previously been established that post-assault contact is a common trauma response for victims

(Breen and Boyce, 2018). Working relationships, romantic partnerships, familial ties can all influence a victim's likelihood to sever contact with their assaulter and report an attack.

Oftentimes when a victim stays in contact with their assaulter after the attack more of the blame is placed on the victim and how they contributed to themselves being targeted and becoming a victim of sexual assault. If a "real rape" victim does not know their attacker, as previous research and discussion has shown, then a victim who knows and chooses to keep in contact with their aggressor post-assault is not likely to be seen as a real victim who is telling the truth about their assault in the eyes of those with higher rates of rape myth acceptance (Breen and Boyce, 2018). Therefore, even though post-assault contact has been documented as a normal and common behavior among survivors of sexual assault, the tendency for this fact to invalidate a survivor's experience decreases the likelihood that women will be believed when they disclose an assault and the perpetrator is someone they know.

The Media and Public Perceptions

The media frames the way the general public thinks about a sexual assault based on the language they use to describe the attack. Media coverage of sexual assault has been studied a multitude of times in a variety of contexts, including reporting of assaults on college campuses, and it has been found that media sources engage in framing which "refers to the process of organizing news stories to place emphasis on certain issues and attaching meaning to those issues" (Siefkes-Andrew and Alexopoulos, 2018, p. 745). Essentially the media gets to pick and choose which pieces of information they deliver to the general public. If a media outlet decides to tell a story of sexual assault and they focus on what the victim was wearing and whether or not they were drinking instead of telling how the attacker got her alone or how he used physical violence to force her into submission, the media is covertly telling the public that the victim is

responsible for their assault. Attribution allows people to assign blame to either internal or external factors that help them to understand and process difficult information in their minds and give themselves a semblance of control over their own lives. It is easier to believe that a victim is responsible for her own assault than it is to believe that you yourself could be a victim of sexual assault even if you engage in none of the risky behaviors the victim in the news was doing (Siefkes-Andrew and Alexopoulos, 2018). Sexual assault coverage will also often focus on describing details of either the victim's or the perpetrator's lives, and by doing so journalists create a personable figure the public can relate to, and when that personable individual is the perpetrator the likelihood of their conviction in the public's eye becomes less likely (Siefkes-Andrew and Alexopoulos, 2018).

The reality is that the media does not need to report on the perpetrator's or the victim's life, they only need to report on what acts of violence were committed against the victim by the perpetrator. Any other additional information that is provided through news sources work to make one party look better or worse, greatly influencing public perception of the people and circumstances involved in a sexual assault. There is some research, however, that argues victim anonymity can lead to increased attention on the perpetrator and the depersonalization of the victim. Thus anonymity and allowing the public to distance themselves from information about the assault could constitute a social loss that might turn into a legal loss (Oldfield and McDonald, 2021). There is a difference between victim anonymity and silencing a victim. It is a fine line that is difficult to walk in the media, but the real transition in media reporting would come when the victim's benefit is considered first and foremost in any type of coverage (Oldfield and McDonald, p. 2021). Both objective facts and subjective factors influence public opinions on sexual assault cases, which is important to acknowledge since public perceptions about rape

shape political, legal, and social reactions to reports and accusations of sexual assault (Schwarz et al., 2020). Research that measures ordinary people's opinions about perpetrators and victims in hypothetical sexual assault cases has shown that leaving out legally irrelevant information has a big influence on how the public views both the perpetrator and the victim. Rape myths constitute the ideology behind a lot of unconscious responses people have to hearing about sexual assaults and understanding the ramifications the media has on public opinion and how public opinion has the power to perpetuate rape myths was a significant trend in the research. Negative reactions towards victims who disclose their sexual assaults is one of the biggest reasons women choose not to disclose their assaults. At the minimum, acknowledgement of the assault takes precedence over any other reaction to a victim telling you about their assault, but this automatic reaction of believing a victim is not something that is supported by the media or by the general public's opinion towards victims of rape and sexual assault (Relyea and Ullman, 2013).

False and Delayed Reporting

There are a multitude of variables that go into someone reporting a sexual assault and many reasons to not report at all including: fear of reprisal, not wanting their family to know, not wanting others to know, not enough proof, fear of the justice system, and not knowing how to report (Wolitzky-Taylor et al., 2011). One or more of these reasons can contribute to victims of sexual assault not reporting immediately after an assault takes place, not for 5 years, or not ever. Recent research has shown that contrary to popular belief there has not been a significant increase in the amounts of reports of sexual assault compared to studies from the 1990s, and it is likely that fewer than one in six rapes are ever reported to law enforcement (Wolitzky-Taylor et al., p. 821). Those who choose to report their sexual assault immediately or soon after it occurs

are individuals whose assaults are similar to the stereotypes the public has of rape because they are likely to be more confident they will be believed based on the circumstances of their assault (Wolitzky-Taylor et al., 2011). Any reason a victim has for choosing to delay reporting their sexual assault is valid and should be acknowledged, but a proven consequence of delayed reporting is decreased believability and credibility of the victim when they do choose to come forward (Fraser et al., 2021). Rapes are more difficult to investigate and there is often less evidence to go off of when delayed reporting is involved, and many believe that if an assault truly occurred the victim would have reported immediately after. The effects of delayed reporting on legal outcomes does not have much research behind it, but what we do know from the research currently available is that shorter delays are typically associated with more guilty verdicts along with delays of more than 25 years, while delays averaging around 15 years are less likely to result in a guilty verdict. The cause of these trends has been determined to be time affecting the jurors' beliefs of the victim's credibility and information available on post-assault contact. Believability is a difficult variable to measure, but research has shown patterns detailing during what time frames of delayed reporting are victims most likely to be believed (Fraser et al., 2021).

Research on the prevalence of false reports has found the likelihood of a sexual assault report being completely falsified is very low. If someone were to file a false rape report, they would likely frame the circumstances of their alleged assault around common rape myths such as being attacked by a stranger with a gun and describe themselves as having fought back and said no throughout the duration of the attack. We know from previous discussion that these myths do not represent real facts about the circumstances of sexual assault, so a false report would likely look like what we would stereotypically assume a sexual would look like, but it would probably

look nothing like the real reports of rape and sexual assault law enforcement works with regularly (Lonsway, 2010). It is also important to note that while from a legal standpoint, discrepancies in a victim's story might lead to questions about their credibility, in reality inconsistencies are to be expected as people recount and relive their trauma over and over again (Lonsway, 2010). The perception that false reports are common, and that delayed reporting means a victim is lying are two more hurtful perpetuations of rape myths that lead to women not being believed when they choose to disclose their sexual assaults.

Assessing the Literature

From literature reviewed it can logically be concluded that rape myths permeate the public consciousness and significantly influence the ways in which women are treated and not believed when they disclose sexual assault, especially to law enforcement. Drawing attention to the reasoning behind and the consequences of women not being believed can lead to necessary changes in the reporting system that allows victims to be validated and make them feel safe to report their assault. Public safety is put at risk when an unknown number of sexual predators are allowed to roam free because rape myths have allowed their actions to be justified and dismissed. Further conversation can lead in the direction of policy changes and resources for victims that will ensure more thorough investigation of sexual assaults, regardless of the circumstances, in the aftermath of an assault that is never their fault. More research is necessary into the more difficult to measure variables such as believability and credibility of victims in cases of delayed reporting and how acceptance of rape myths influences juror decisions in both hypothetical and real scenarios of sexual assault. Continued research into rates of false reporting and investigation into reasons why victims choose not to report can add to this conversation and change the public

belief that sexual assault is not common and does not deserve continued attention for victims old and new.

ARGUMENT

The decision of whether or not to believe a woman who comes forward with claims of sexual assault has ramifications through the criminal justice system. No one is immune to the reactions we have been socialized to have toward scenarios of sexual assault, something the literature has demonstrated through studies into the prevalence of rape myths and the misconceptions associated with “real rape”. This lack of immunity extends into crucial players in the criminal justice system such as prosecutors and defense attorneys and how they work with victims of sexual assault, the accused perpetrators, and the resulting case. In the state of Minnesota, “rape” is not a legal term used to describe a crime, but rather the official term used is *criminal sexual conduct*. This term encompasses a wide variety of offenses ranging from flashing to forcible rape on a scale of fifth to first degree criminal sexual conduct, the former being the least severe offenses on the scale. An aspect of the credibility of victims of criminal sexual conduct and the way their cases and credibility influence the development of a criminal case was not something I had found in the existing literature on this topic. My interest, then, was related to exploring the more influential contributing factors to a victim’s increased credibility during the preparation for a criminal trial. I wanted to see how on a smaller scale factors such as delayed reporting and prior and post-assault relationships, which were heavily mentioned in the literature, create barriers and opportunities for justice for victims. I conducted two interviews to gain insight on the complexities of criminal sexual conduct cases, with both a prosecuting attorney and public defender who currently work in Beltrami County, Minnesota where I attend school. I felt as though these trends that showed up in the literature about rape myths and “real rape” seem

prevalent on a macro scale, but I wanted to see if those trends held up on a much smaller scale in the context of less high-profile cases. I first spoke with Kristine Kolar, who is the Chief Public Defender of the 9th judicial district of Minnesota and I then interviewed David Hanson, Beltrami County Attorney. These interviews both confirmed patterns I uncovered in my research and presented conflicting information that broadened my understanding of the complexity of victim's credibility and criminal sexual conduct cases.

Chemicals

Rape myths would have us believe that if alcohol is involved in a sexual assault, the victim is more responsible for the attack and the perpetrator is less responsible, based on which of the involved parties had been consuming alcohol. The presence of chemicals, for our understanding drugs and alcohol, in a situation of alleged criminal sexual conduct infinitely complicates the investigation and prosecution of those involved. Kristine Kolar spoke to this complexity when she said, "when two people are together under the influence then the issue of consent and the understanding of consent becomes incredibly murky". Chemicals can affect a person's memory and their recollection of past events making it very tough to prove how impaired a victim or perpetrator was at the time of the event. When chemicals are involved the story of the assault can be understood in more than one way when it is presented to the jury where "not only are there people...who think 'oh she was drunk she deserved it' there are also people who think 'oh just because he was drunk doesn't mean he deserves to get away with that behavior'". It therefore could be the case that a jury puts blame on and removes blame from both the victim and the perpetrator, respectively, because direct consent and events are hard to make clear when any of the parties involved were under the influence of chemicals during the alleged assault. After speaking with David Hanson, it came to my attention that not all the facts of a

criminal sexual conduct case may make it in front of a jury. The information the prosecution is allowed to present to the jury depends on its relevance to the specific case that is being prosecuted, meaning prior offenses of the perpetrator may not be allowed to be spoken about during a trial. Hanson said, “But things like alcohol and drug use of the victim is almost certainly going to be in front of a jury” which from his experience shows that chemical usage during an assault is undoubtedly going to influence a jury’s perception of the victim and situation. Hanson continued his discussion of presence of alcohol being brought up in court by saying “If the victim was intoxicated at the time, the jury will probably...be judging her or him because of that. Undoubtedly they will whether it’s conscious or not conscious.” This discussion goes to show that there are times where the truth and facts of a criminal sexual conduct case can hurt the credibility of the victim. Regardless of how chemical usage by the victim or perpetrator is portrayed, it is likely that the jury will form biased opinions which will influence their ruling of guilty or not guilty. Prior research that I found spoke to the same trends Hanson and Kolar mentioned where the use of alcohol and drugs drastically changes the way victims and perpetrators are perceived and the amount of credibility a victim is given.

Facts and Storytelling

The literature related to credibility in cases of sexual assault noted that discrepancies in a victim’s story about their assault can be one way they become discredited early on in the investigation and prosecution process. Kolar placed a great significance on facts in cases of sexual assault by saying “I think in a good investigation the more facts there are the more credible a victim is, the harder it is for someone to discredit that person”. As a public defender it is her job, in any type of case, to use the facts of the case to create a story that will hopefully sway the jury to a not-guilty verdict based on available evidence. When the facts of a case are

clear-cut and the victim relays the same facts over and over again, it is less likely that victim will be discredited in the eyes of the jury, because consistency breeds confidence in a story. The reality that it is the job of a defense attorney to look for discrepancies in a victim's story was also brought up by Hanson when he explained that if a victim is found to have been telling many versions of their story to different parties the defense council is going to become aware of this and "they're going to put this victim on the stand and they're going to poke holes in her story or his story and they're going to bring him to tears in front of a jury, they're going to make him look like a liar". Hanson clarified that one glaring red flag in conversation with a victim is this inability to keep their story straight. Previous research has found that trauma responses can lead to a victim recounting events with slight variations, but when there are obvious differences during each retelling, the victim's credibility is inevitably going to come into question. During conversation, Hanson mentioned that the prosecution will also pay attention to the consistency of the statements of the accused. Warrants for the involved party's phone records can be granted through which the prosecution could gain access to evidence such as text messages that corroborate a victim's story but goes against official statements the accused has made. This issue of credibility can even go as far as becoming the determining factor in he said, she said situations where "a lot of [those] cases come down to the credibility of the victim versus the credibility of the accused" as explained by Hanson. Facts oftentimes need to be prompted from the victim by law enforcement because it can be difficult for a victim to know exactly which details of their assault will be most important to the investigation and prosecution. Kolar spoke to the importance of minute facts by giving the following example: "She can say I was locked in a closet and in the closet, I counted 58 jackets while I was in there and 23 pairs of shoes...that's a lot more credible than 'I was locked in a closet'". However, it is important to note that in the

aftermath of a traumatic assault, the victim might not think to tell law enforcement that they counted x number of jackets and shoes while they were hiding in the closet, but if law enforcement can guide the victim through the events of an assault to pull out those minute details that are initially left out of the retelling, the victim's story is going to have more credibility from the start. Kolar made it a point to inform that while facts are extremely important to a criminal sexual conduct case, opinions should be left out of the official narrative. Opinions are not something that can be proved, and therefore do not necessarily add to a victim's credibility. Information provided by both Hanson and Kolar aligned with the literature in emphasizing the consistency of a victim's (and perpetrator's) story in establishing and maintaining their credibility.

Prevalence of False Reporting

The literature revealed a prevalent belief in our society that false reports of sexual assault are common, even though the reality is the quite the opposite. Research has concluded that while false reports of sexual assault do happen, they are few and far between for a variety of reasons. While I mentioned quite a few of these reasons in my review of the literature, including reasons such as fear of the justice system and not wanting others to find out, Kolar suggested another reason that she believed was more important than the ones I had highlighted: guilt and remorse on the part of the victim. She explained that in assault situations, particularly where chemicals might be involved, victims can feel guilty and ashamed for being in a situation where it was possible for an assault to take place and thus feel personally responsible for what has happened to them. Even though it is not the victim's personal responsibility to stop a sexual assault from taking place, the shame that is associated with being a victim can stop a person from reporting, and also presents a reason why false reports are less likely to be placed. My research had

revealed that oftentimes when false reports are made, the story will align with common rape myths, often involving stranger rape by force. Kolar disagreed with this assertion I had made, and instead presented a contradictory trend she has noticed throughout her career: “I see a lot of potentially false reports of people accusing people that they know...yes, there are stranger rape false accusations...to falsely accuse someone of sexual assault is the worst possible thing you could do because the ramifications of that type of accusation are enormous and the ability to defend yourself against those accusations is very hard. And some people know that.” Kolar’s observations were interesting to hear because while she does confirm part of my thesis, that false reports are not as common as the general public believes, the alleged circumstances of false reports, in her experience, happen between individuals who know one another. One of the main reasons why a large number of people believe false reporting of sexual assault is a real issue, is because of the influx of sexual assault reports in recent years. My research revealed that the increased number of sexual assaults being reported is due to the stigma associated with sexual assault changing and a culture of support being established in society where women feel safe to disclose their assaults. Kolar confirmed this trend, that while reporting is on the rise, false reporting is not. Kolar has been working as a public defender since 1991, and throughout her career she confirmed that she personally has seen an increase in reports of sexual assault. She commented that she “believe[s] that society is much more accepting of the fact that this [sexual assault] is happening a lot more frequently than we ever thought” and that acceptance creates a safe space for reporting to take place. Two decades into the twenty-first century we have resources for victims of criminal sexual conduct such as sexual assault centers and advocates that did not exist when Kolar began her career. I broached this subject with Hanson as well who said rather than seeing an increase in reporting within his jurisdiction he has “observed it on the

macro-social level with the #metoo movement”. Having discussions about the prevalence of false reporting with people who have the potential to work directly with those reports and who can speak to the trends my research revealed on a much smaller scale gave insights that both confirmed and contradicted my knowledge of the subject.

Post-Assault Contact

Even though sexual assault is most likely to happen between individuals who know one another, a victim’s credibility can still be diminished if they have contact with their assaulter at any point before or after an assault. Both Hanson and Kolar spoke to different types of pre- and post-assault contact and what that can mean for a victim’s credibility. Hanson first addressed this topic when he mentioned that his office will often get a warrant for a person’s phone to go through and see if there is any record of communication between the victim and accused. There are times he has seen where phone records reveal apologies coming from the victim to the perpetrator. When a crime takes place and the people involved know one another, emotions can become incredibly complicated when “victims of a crime...where they do know each other, they’re conflicted. They don’t want to get the person in trouble...this is someone I cared for, now they hurt me” as Hanson explained. People deal with trauma and grief differently, and it can be difficult to process those types of pain when you know and trusted the person who assaulted you, which can tie in with Kolar’s explanation of how guilt and shame are major driving factors for delayed reporting. Another type of post-incident communication that Hanson has seen in his career goes from the accused to the victim. Occasionally these messages will include apologies from the accused, trying to mitigate their actions, there are also times where the accused will show remorse, and a chance messages could be uncovered between the accused and friends corroborating the events the victim described. However, post-assault contact does not have to

only come in the form of physical messages between the victim and the accused, in-person contact can also occur. One example of post-assault contact Hanson offered was in reference to college campuses. If a victim and perpetrator were in the same class at the time of the assault, the jury could question why she even continued going to class or why she did not drop out, which is questioning not just the victim's credibility, but also the severity of the assault when the reality is that trauma responses are different for everyone. Context is very important when providing a justification to the jury as to why post-assault contact took place, and why that contact does not diminish the assault that took place, but Hanson explained that the reality is context does not always get in front of a jury. There are rules and limitations to what an attorney is able to address during a trial in order to make sure the evidence being presented is not more prejudicial than it is probative. From the perspective of a defense attorney, post-incident contact has the opportunity to work in the favor of the defendant. Kolar illustrated an example situation and said, "If they go back, if they stay you know I'm going to allege that to show there wasn't any fear, [they] weren't hurt". It is important to acknowledge both sides of the presence of post-assault contact and how evidence of that contact can be used in favor of or against the victim. It is the defense's job to show that post-assault contact decreases the severity of the alleged assault, but it is up to the prosecution to refute that assertion and instead prove that post-assault contact does not diminish the severity of the crime. Both Kolar and Hanson confirmed what my research and the literature had suggested that post-assault contact more often reduces how credible a jury will determine a victim to be, as this type of contact can undermine a victim's claim of fear or distress.

Challenges to the Existing Literature

Interviews conducted with Kristine Kolar and David Hanson confirmed much of what the existing literature says about trends related to a victim's credibility, but both provided me with

information that contradicted information the literature provided. As mentioned previously, Kolar added guilt, remorse, and shame as influential factors related to delayed reporting of sexual assaults. She also argued from the experiences in her career that false reporting is more common between individuals that know each other, rather than claims of stranger rape being most prevalent. This statement directly contradicts with information the literature presented about claims of false rape adhering to rape myths and therefore involving more stories of stranger rape than acquaintance rape. Hanson began our interviewing by objecting to the premise of my research, a statement he made based on his involvement in criminal sexual conduct cases. Within his office Hanson commented, “I don’t know how often women are not believed. I mean there’s a definite question of what we [can] prove beyond a reasonable doubt in a court of law to a jury...but very rarely do we say we’re not going to believe somebody.” While his experiences of defaulting to believing the victim until the evidence proves otherwise does differ from studies conducted in current literature, it differs in a productive way. The majority of studies I collected for this research were conducted within larger cities or on a national scale, so hearing from Kolar and Hanson about trends in criminal sexual conduct cases on a county level in northern Minnesota differ from national trends in those same types of cases is important insight into progress being made in treatment of victims of sexual assault.

Discussion

The biggest limitation of the interviews I conducted was the small scale on which the information from which Hanson and Kolar can be applied. Observing how patterns revealed in the literature were confirmed or contradicted within Beltrami County in northern Minnesota puts the information researched in the context of real people and real situations. However, contradictions to the literature cannot be explored without conducting further interviews.

Worthwhile future research on this topic would continue to interview players within the criminal justice system. From law enforcement officers who conduct criminal sexual conduct investigations, to the attorneys who prosecute and defend, to the judge and jury who make the decisions in a case, interviews from all these individuals would contribute to an overall understanding of how treatment of victims of sexual assault is changing or remaining stagnant on a micro level. Another limitation of this research speaks to the unavailability of literature speaking to skepticism toward rape culture. Both Kolar and Hanson provided information which showed that at the micro level they work, rape culture is not as pervasive as it is nationally, but I was not able to find literature speaking to this move away from acceptance of rape culture.

Conclusion

Sexual assault has long been a taboo topic in North American society, and elsewhere around the world. Too often women who come forward to disclose they have been sexually assaulted are met with judgement and mistreatment that decreases their credibility and leaves them with a lesser chance of getting justice for crimes committed against them. Society is continually evolving, and more women are feeling there is a space to come forward to tell their stories of assault, but even still there is a social culture which exists to discredit victims and protect perpetrators. The purpose of this research was to highlight the more prevalent reasons why women who come forward with allegations of sexual assault are not believed. Reasons such as chemical usage, post-assault contact, delayed reporting, and rape myths, among others, were mostly confirmed as continually prevalent by interviews conducted with both a public defender and prosecuting attorney from Beltrami County, Minnesota who related concepts from the literature to the micro-scale they work on. Sexual assault against women continues to be a threat

faced daily by women and exploring the reasons why victims do not feel safe and supported to come forward provides the opportunity for understanding and change moving forward.

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