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# Social Norms and the Likelihood of Raping: Perceived Rape Myth Acceptance of Others Affects Men's Rape Proclivity

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*Research showing that rape myth acceptance (RMA) causally affects rape proclivity (RP) was extended by examining the impact of RMA-related norms on RP. Male students (total N = 264) received feedback about the alleged responses of other students to RMA items either before (Experiment 1) or after (Experiment 2) they reported their own RMA, and then their RP was assessed using acquaintance-rape scenarios. The level of RMA feedback was varied. Results showed that higher norms led to higher RP. In Experiment 1, this effect was mediated via self-reported RMA. Experiment 2 yielded main effects of both RMA feedback and self-reported RMA and an interaction effect showing that RMA feedback was particularly influential at higher levels of own RMA. Theoretical and practical implications of these findings are discussed.*

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**Keywords:** rape myths; rape proclivity; sexual violence; social norms

**M**ale sexual violence against women has multiple causes (for reviews, see Buss & Malamuth, 1996; Malamuth, 1998). In this article, we focus on one determinant of men's rape proclivity, the endorsement of rape myths. The concept of rape myths, which was introduced in the 1970s (Brownmiller, 1975; Schwendinger & Schwendinger, 1974), refers to beliefs that are thought to sustain male sexual violence against women within society. Rape myths have been defined as beliefs about rape that serve to deny, trivialize, or justify sexual aggression of men against women (for reviews, see Bohner, 1998; Lonsway & Fitzgerald, 1994). Although the content of rape myths may vary widely, common myths tend to blame the victim (e.g., "Women often provoke rape through their appearance or behavior"), exonerate the

perpetrator (e.g., "Men often can't control their sexual urges"), and deny or belittle the violence inherent in rape (e.g., "Women often make up rape accusations as a way of getting back at men"; "A woman who is raped might as well relax and enjoy it").

## *Correlational Evidence for a Link Between Rape Myth Acceptance and Rape Proclivity*

Researchers in personality and social psychology have proposed that rape myth acceptance may facilitate sexual aggression at the individual level. For example, Burt (1980) suggested that rape myths may act as "psychological neutralizers" that allow men to turn off social prohibitions against hurting others when they want to use force in sexual interactions (also see Bohner et al., 1998). In line with this assumption, some quasi-experimental studies have shown that convicted or self-confessed rapists reported higher levels of rape myth acceptance (RMA) than did nonrapists (e.g., Feild, 1978; Koralewski & Conger, 1992), although some studies using this approach have failed to show a significant difference (cf. Epps,

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Haworth, & Swaffer, 1993; Overholser & Beck, 1986). A clearer picture comes from correlational studies in which self-reports of both rape proclivity and rape myth acceptance were obtained from nonconvicted men. These studies generally revealed a significant relationship between the two variables (e.g., Malamuth, 1981, 1989a, 1989b; Malamuth & Check, 1985; Quackenbush, 1989; for reviews, see Bohner, 1998; Murnen, Wright, & Kaluzny, 2002). For example, Malamuth (1981) asked men to report, along a 5-point scale, the likelihood "that they personally would rape if they could be assured of not being caught and punished" (p. 140) and assessed these men's rape myth acceptance using a scale developed by Burt (1980). Results showed that the correlation between the likelihood of raping and rape myth acceptance was as high as  $r = .60$  (Malamuth, 1981, p. 144). In a recent meta-analysis, the mean correlation between Burt's RMA measure and Malamuth's likelihood of raping (LR) measure across 11 studies was found to be .256 (Murnen et al., 2002, p. 369).

These correlational results are compatible with the idea that rape myths may affect the likelihood of raping at the individual level. What remains unclear, however, is whether these results reflect any direct, causal impact of RMA on rape proclivity (RP). Viable alternative explanations would be that (a) men justify preexisting tendencies to exert violence by adopting rape myths, which would reflect a reverse causal impact of rape proclivity on RMA, or that (b) there is no direct causal link between RMA and rape proclivity, but the two concepts are related indirectly via some third variable such as general hostility toward women (see Bohner et al., 1998).

#### *Evidence for a Causal Impact of Rape Myth Acceptance on Rape Proclivity*

To go beyond a correlational design and test the causal pathway more directly, Bohner et al. (1998) took an experimental approach. For obvious reasons, neither of the variables of interest can be easily manipulated experimentally. However, Schwarz and Strack (1981) discussed an alternative approach "for identifying causal effects when it is impossible to manipulate the independent variable of interest" (p. 554). They propose to vary the cognitive accessibility of the hypothetical causal variable by making some respondents think about this variable before assessing the dependent variable that is assumed to be influenced. This approach has been applied successfully to a number of research questions, for example, to studying the causal influence of the political climate on the willingness to freely express one's opinion (Strack, Schwarz, Weidner, Hippler, & Schwarz, 1983).

Applying the approach to our current problem, Bohner et al. (1998) manipulated the relative cognitive

accessibility of RMA and RP by varying the order in which respondents completed questionnaires assessing these constructs. They reasoned that if variations in RMA cause variations in RP, a stronger link between these two variables would be observed if respondents had recently thought about their rape myth beliefs when reporting their rape proclivity. If the opposite causal hypothesis was true, conversely, a higher correlation would be found if respondents had first thought about their behavioral inclinations and only later reported their belief in rape myths. Finally, if there was no direct causal link between these variables, they reasoned, then the size of the correlation would not be affected by the order variation. The results of two studies with German students clearly supported the assumption of a causal impact of RMA on RP. In each study, the RMA-RP correlation was significantly higher if RMA had been assessed before RP than vice versa. This pattern was recently replicated with a British sample of students and employees (Bohner, Jarvis, Eyssel, & Siebler, in press).

#### *Rape Myth Acceptance as a Social Norm*

In the present research, we examine if men's rape proclivity may be influenced not only by their own individual endorsement of rape myths but also by the perceived rape myth acceptance of others. One way in which such an influence might operate is by others' perceived RMA acting as a social norm. This assumption is plausible because male sexual violence against women can be perpetuated by rape myths prevailing in a society (Brownmiller, 1975) only to the extent that these myths are communicated and that potential perpetrators perceive these myths to be endorsed by others. In a similar vein, Burt (1980) argued that rape myth beliefs held by a rapist's family and friends might indirectly contribute to sexual violence by creating excuses for the rapist's actions. However, the causal role of other people's rape myths in promoting rape proclivity has not been studied systematically to date. To do so was the aim of the present studies.

Social norms may be defined as "rules and standards that are understood by members of a group and that guide and/or constrain behavior" (Cialdini & Trost, 1998, p. 152). Norms feature prominently as predictors of behavior in several theoretical approaches (e.g., Ajzen, 1991; Pepitone, 1976; for a review, see Cialdini & Trost, 1998). Researchers have distinguished between injunctive norms, which prescribe certain behaviors (and prohibit others), and descriptive norms, which inform individuals about how others judge or act in a given situation (Cialdini, Kallgren, & Reno, 1991; Schaffer, 1983). Our present research will focus on rape myths functioning as descriptive norms, that is, norms that represent information about relevant others' RMA.

However, a strict distinction between injunctive and descriptive norms may be misleading in this case because rape myths do contain prescriptive elements (e.g., prescribing how women should and should not behave, specifying conditions under which sexual aggression is justifiable, etc.).

Different accounts of normative influence each emphasize specific facilitating conditions for norm effects to occur. These include norm salience (focus theory of normative conduct; Cialdini et al., 1991) and ingroup status of the reference group that the norm emanates from (self-categorization model of social influence; Terry & Hogg, 1996). In our present research, we combined the insights from these two approaches by always presenting highly salient ingroup norms to maximize the likelihood of demonstrating normative influences on rape proclivity. In the General Discussion, we will address more distinctive predictions of focus theory and the self-categorization model and consider their consequences for future research.

To sum up, we conducted two experiments in which we examined the impact of rape myth acceptance as a social norm on individuals' rape proclivity by informing student participants about other students' alleged responses to a rape myth questionnaire. Thus, we made normative beliefs of an ingroup temporarily salient to test if this would affect self-reports of the likelihood to engage in sexually aggressive behavior.

#### EXPERIMENT 1

In Experiment 1, male students received information about other students' alleged responses to an RMA scale before they reported their own RMA as well as their rape proclivity. By varying the information about others' RMA, we could thus study its causal impact on participants' own RMA and ultimately on rape proclivity. In line with previous research on own RMA as a predictor of RP, as well as theories of normative influence, we tested the following hypotheses: (1) self-reported RMA is highest when feedback about others' RMA is high and lowest when feedback about others' RMA is low, with self-reported RMA in a no-feedback condition falling in between; (2) self-reported RP is highest when RMA feedback is high and lowest when RMA feedback is low, with the no-feedback condition falling in between; (3) self-reported RP is positively correlated with self-reported RMA; and (4) the effect of RMA feedback on self-reported RP is mediated via self-reported RMA.

#### Method

##### PARTICIPANTS AND DESIGN

Ninety male students at the University of Mannheim, Germany, volunteered to participate in a "study on the

effects of survey results." They received a small gift (e.g., a chocolate bar) for their participation. Participants' ages ranged from 18 to 33 years ( $M = 24.0$ ). With the restriction of equal cell sizes, participants were randomly assigned to the three conditions of a single-factor, between-subjects design comprising the conditions of low RMA feedback, no RMA feedback, and high RMA feedback.

##### PROCEDURE

All participants were greeted by a male experimenter and received a booklet containing the following materials: (a) a 20-item scale assessing rape myth acceptance, (b) a measure of rape proclivity, and (c) a page assessing participants' age, major, sexual orientation, and thoughts about the purpose of the study. Participants were informed that the session consisted of two independent studies, each being part of a larger project on "the validity of surveys," and that one purpose of that study was to examine any influence that the publication of survey results might have on attitude formation. To do so, several different conditions would be run regarding various content areas. Participants learned that in either or both of the following two studies, they might receive information about the modal responses of a large sample of students who had answered the same survey in the previous year. In the low and high RMA feedback conditions, the RMA scale was used to manipulate the feedback about other students' alleged responses (see below for detail). Participants were asked to answer all questions honestly and were reassured of the strict confidentiality and anonymity of responses. To enhance confidentiality, each participant received a neutral envelope in which to place his completed questionnaire; envelopes could be dropped in a large box. After returning his questionnaire, each participant was thoroughly debriefed with particular emphasis on explaining the fictitious nature of the RMA feedback (see below for detail).

##### MATERIALS

*RMA scale and feedback manipulation.* Participants' own rape myth acceptance was assessed using a German adaptation of Costin's (1985) R scale (Bohner, 1998). The R scale contains 20 items reflecting common myths about rape, for example, "Women often provoke rape through their appearance or behavior." The German R scale has been shown to produce satisfactory levels of internal consistency (Cronbach's  $\alpha = .70$  to  $.80$ ), test-retest reliability ( $r_{tt}$  in the range of  $.81$  to  $.85$  across a 3-week interval), and construct validity (see Bohner, 1998). In the current study, internal consistency of the R scale was good ( $\alpha = .88$ ). The mean across all 20 items (after reverse-scoring where appropriate) was defined as a participant's RMA score.

The R scale was presented under the heading “Study 1.” Each item was accompanied by a 7-point scale with endpoints 1 (*do not agree at all*) and 7 (*completely agree*). Participants were instructed to read each statement carefully and then tick the number that best represented their personal opinion. The R scale also served to manipulate feedback about other students’ RMA. For participants in the high RMA feedback and low RMA feedback conditions, one of the response options for each item was underlined and participants were informed that the underlined value represented the response given by most male students in the previous year’s survey. In the low RMA feedback condition, each of these values was about 1 standard deviation below the responses of male students from the same population (based on item-wise descriptive statistics from a pilot study as well as Bohner et al., 1998), yielding an overall mean of 1.4. In the high RMA feedback condition, these values were about 1 standard deviation above said responses of male students, yielding an overall mean of 4.4. In the no RMA feedback condition, none of the response options were underlined and nothing was mentioned about previous respondents.

*Rape proclivity measure.* After the R scale, a measure of rape proclivity was introduced under the heading “Study 2.” This measure consisted of five acquaintance-rape scenarios that were taken from Bohner et al. (1998)—see the appendix for an English translation. Participants were instructed to read each scenario carefully and to imagine that they were in the same situation before answering three questions that followed each scenario. An initial filler question asked how sexually aroused they would be in this situation (scale from 1 = *not at all aroused* to 5 = *highly aroused*). Then followed two questions designed to assess rape proclivity, which asked whether they would have behaved like this (scale from 1 = *certainly no* to 5 = *certainly yes*) and how much they would have enjoyed “getting their way” in this situation (scale from 1 = *not at all* to 5 = *very much*). We later combined the latter two questions across the five scenarios to yield a 10-item index of rape proclivity. This measure had shown good internal consistency in previous research (Cronbach’s  $\alpha > .80$ ) and did so in the current study ( $\alpha = .88$ ). Previous studies had further shown that the measure was unaffected by a response tendency toward social desirability,  $r(111) = .05, p > .61$ , and correlated positively with men’s self-reports of past sexual aggression,  $r(112) = .38, p < .001$ . Finally, previous studies also indicated that our measures of rape myth acceptance versus rape proclivity assess constructs that are empirically distinct, with intercorrelations below .5 overall (Bohner et al., 1998; Bohner et al., in press).

*Additional measures.* On the final page of the booklet, participants were asked to indicate their age and major as well as their sexual orientation. Then they were asked to write down on five printed lines what they thought the purpose of the study was.

*Debriefing.* It was important to make sure that participants would not leave the experiment with false information about their peers’ rape-related beliefs, especially in the high RMA feedback condition. Therefore, upon returning his questionnaire, each participant was thoroughly debriefed both orally and in writing. To educate participants about rape myths, a written debriefing sheet explained the concept of rape myths and their detrimental effects, including their functions of blaming the victims and exonerating the perpetrators of sexual violence. Some examples of rape myths were contrasted with empirical findings (e.g., the myth that young women who dress in a “provocative” way are at a particularly high risk of being raped was contrasted with research findings showing that about 25% of all women, whether young or old, attractive or unattractive, are raped during their lifetime). Our hypotheses were explained and it was strongly emphasized that the numbers marked in participants’ rape myth questionnaires did not represent the true responses of previous participants but were deliberately altered. This aspect was always reiterated and explained once more by the experimenter in the oral debriefing and any questions on the part of participants were answered. Finally, all participants were given a telephone number that they could call with any further questions.

## Results

### PRELIMINARY ANALYSES AND EXCLUSION OF CASES

Neither in response to the open-ended suspicion probe nor during debriefing did any participant indicate that he had doubted the veracity of the feedback. Because we felt that our rape scenarios may not provide meaningful behavioral templates for homosexual individuals, we excluded the data of 7 participants (7.8%), 5 of whom reported to be homosexual and 2 of whom did not indicate their sexual orientation. The final sample thus consisted of 83 participants with heterosexual (81) or bisexual (2) orientation.

### MAIN ANALYSES

*Rape myth acceptance.* The means of RMA in the low RMA feedback, no RMA feedback, and high RMA feedback conditions were 2.21, 2.61, and 3.18, respectively. To test Hypothesis 1, we computed a linear contrast within a one-way analysis of variance with RMA as the dependent variable (contrast coefficients were  $-1$  for low RMA feedback,  $0$  for no RMA feedback, and  $+1$  for high RMA feedback) as well as pairwise comparisons of

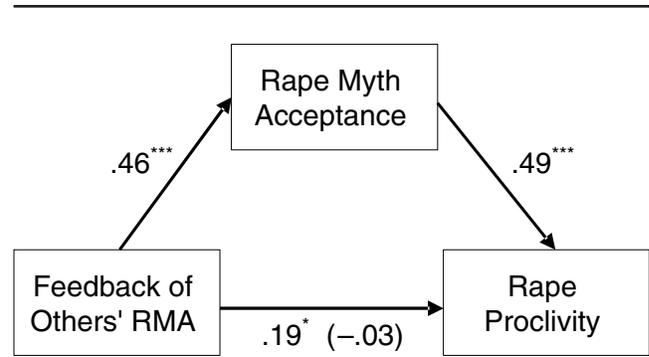
the high and low RMA feedback conditions, respectively, with the no-feedback control condition. The linear trend was highly significant,  $t(80) = 4.61, p < .001$  ( $MSE = 0.612, r_{\text{effect size}} = .46$ ),<sup>1</sup> implying that high RMA feedback led to higher self-reported RMA than did low RMA feedback. Furthermore, compared to the no-feedback control condition, high RMA feedback produced higher self-reported RMA,  $t(80) = 2.66, p = .01$  ( $r_{\text{effect size}} = .26$ ), whereas low RMA feedback produced marginally lower self-reported RMA,  $t(80) = 1.91, p = .06$  ( $r_{\text{effect size}} = .19$ ).

**Rape proclivity.** The means of RP in the low RMA feedback, no RMA feedback, and high RMA feedback conditions were 1.60, 1.70, and 1.93, respectively. To test Hypothesis 2, we computed a linear contrast within a one-way analysis of variance with RP as the dependent variable as well as pairwise comparisons of the high and low RMA feedback conditions, respectively, with the no-feedback control condition. The linear trend was marginally significant,  $t(80) = 1.77, p = .08$  ( $MSE = 0.477, r_{\text{effect size}} = .19$ ), whereas the pairwise comparisons were not significant,  $t(80) = 0.54$  and  $1.20$ , respectively, both  $ps > .23$ , although the pattern of means was as predicted. There was thus only weak support for Hypothesis 2.

Hypothesis 3 was clearly supported. The correlation between self-reported RMA and self-reported RP was  $r(81) = .48, p < .001$ .<sup>2</sup>

Despite the weak support for an effect of RMA feedback on RP, we conducted a hierarchical regression analysis with RP as the dependent variable to test Hypothesis 4. In the first block, we entered a contrast-coded variable representing the linear trend of RMA feedback ( $-1 =$  low RMA feedback,  $0 =$  no RMA feedback,  $+1 =$  high RMA feedback) and in the second block we entered the continuous RMA measure.<sup>3</sup> The results of this mediation analysis are summarized in Figure 1. Obviously, the results of the first regression block are identical to the contrast results reported above, showing again (Hypothesis 2) that RMA feedback marginally affected rape proclivity, with higher feedback leading to higher RP ( $\beta = .19$ ),  $t(81) = 1.77, p = .08$ . In line with Hypothesis 3, results of the second regression block showed that self-reported RMA was a significant predictor of RP even when considered jointly with RMA feedback ( $\beta = .49$ ),  $t(80) = 4.48, p < .001, r_{\text{sp}} = .44$ .

To test whether the marginal effect of RMA feedback on rape proclivity was mediated via its effect on RMA (Hypothesis 4), we examined the effect of RMA feedback on RP in the second regression block, where RMA was included as a concurrent predictor. In line with Hypothesis 4, the effect of RMA feedback was nonsignificant and close to zero in this block ( $\beta = -.03$ ),  $t(80) = -0.30, p = .76, r_{\text{sp}} = -.03$ , suggesting full mediation (see Baron & Kenny, 1986). This was further confirmed by the significant result of a Sobel test ( $z = 3.19, p = .001$ ).



**Figure 1** Mediation model showing rape proclivity as a function of rape myth acceptance (RMA) feedback and rape myth acceptance.

NOTE: Numbers shown are beta coefficients. The coefficient in parentheses reflects the path from normative feedback to rape proclivity when rape myth acceptance is included in the regression model.

\* $p < .10$ . \*\*\* $p < .001$ .

Following Preacher and Leonardelli (2001), we used the conservative Aroian version of the Sobel test.

#### Discussion

The results of Experiment 1 provide initial evidence that men's proclivity to exert sexual violence is causally affected by the perceived rape myth acceptance of others. Specifically, feedback about a high level of rape myth acceptance in their peer group led students to report somewhat higher rape proclivity compared to feedback about a low level of rape myth acceptance. This effect, although only marginally significant in a two-tailed test, was mediated through an impact of the RMA feedback on self-reported rape myth acceptance. These findings suggest that perceived social norms may act as a causal factor in their own right in the etiology of sexual violence.

A potential problem of the current study is that RMA was assessed using a questionnaire in which "normative responses" were initially marked for participants in both the low and high RMA feedback conditions. Thus, one might argue that this study did not allow for the simultaneous and independent assessment of the effects of (a) own RMA and (b) the normative implications of others' perceived RMA because the assessment of own RMA was "contaminated" by the normative information in the high and low feedback conditions. Furthermore, the question arises if normative information about peers' rape myth acceptance would produce similar effects on rape proclivity if it were introduced after participants had already expressed their own rape myth acceptance in a standard questionnaire. These issues were addressed in Experiment 2.

## EXPERIMENT 2

Our previous results showed that variations in information about peer group norms tended to cause variations in self-reported rape proclivity, which were mediated via changes in own rape myth acceptance. However, because participants' RMA was assessed after the norm information had been presented, potentially independent contributions of normative information and own RMA to predicting rape proclivity could not be assessed. In Experiment 2, we therefore first assessed participants' rape myth acceptance, then experimentally manipulated information about their peers' alleged RMA, and finally assessed participants' rape proclivity.

We also extended our design by including an additional, "very high" level of feedback about others' RMA. This was done to enhance the power of our design by studying a wider range of feedback conditions in light of the fact that the effect of RMA feedback on rape proclivity had been relatively weak in Experiment 1. In terms of the symmetry of our design, it would have been desirable to study a "very low" feedback condition as well; this was not feasible, however, because participants' RMA responses were generally in the lower half of the scale and thus the low RMA feedback was already close to the bottom of the scale.

We tested the following hypotheses: (1) The higher the alleged RMA of their peers, the higher is participants' self-reported rape proclivity; thus, RP in the very high RMA feedback condition is highest, RP in the high RMA feedback condition is second highest, RP in the no RMA feedback condition is third highest, and RP in the low RMA feedback condition is lowest. (2) Participants' self-reported rape proclivity is positively correlated with their self-reported RMA.

Finally, we explored the possibility that own RMA and RMA feedback may show an interactive effect on RP. Although both factors may influence RP independently, yielding two separate and additive main effects, it is conceivable that feedback about others' allegedly high RMA might exert a particularly strong effect on individuals who already endorse rape myths to some extent. This would result in a multiplicative effect of RMA feedback and own RMA and, hence, a significant interaction.

*Method**SAMPLE AND DESIGN*

One hundred seventy-four male students at the University of Mannheim volunteered to participate in a study on "relationships between men and women," which would be conducted on personal computers. They were paid a small amount (approx. 4 Euros) for their participation. Participants' ages ranged from 19 to 39 years ( $M = 22.6$ ). Participants were randomly assigned

to the four conditions of a single factor experiment: low RMA feedback, no RMA feedback, high RMA feedback, and very high RMA feedback. This was done with the restriction that twice as many participants be assigned to the no RMA feedback condition than to each of the remaining conditions.

*PROCEDURE*

*General instructions.* Participants were informed that the computer program would present questions pertaining to the relationship between men and women but also some questions related to other topics. They also learned that they would receive information on previous participants' responses for some of the questions presented. This would be done because we knew "that participants are often interested in seeing the results of studies in which they participate." The selection of questions and information to be presented was said to be done by the computer program on a random basis. To reinforce the impression of random selection by the computer program, a frame containing the words *module change* was displayed for several seconds between the parts of the computerized questionnaire.

*Materials.* The following modules were presented: (a) the 20-item R scale (Cronbach's  $\alpha = .73$ ), (b) a module containing the alleged responses of previous participants to five questions regarding campus issues (e.g., satisfaction with campus parking—this was done to familiarize participants with the format used to inform them about others' alleged responses and to uphold the cover story), (c) a module containing the alleged responses of previous participants to the R scale items (this module was omitted in the no RMA feedback condition), (d) the scenario-based rape proclivity index (Cronbach's  $\alpha = .78$ ), and (e) questions on age, major, sexual orientation, and an open-ended suspicion probe.

*Debriefing.* After completing the study, participants were thoroughly debriefed. In the debriefing, we followed the same procedure as in Experiment 1, again educating participants about the concept of rape myths and its link to sexual violence and placing particular emphasis on explaining the fictitious nature of the RMA feedback.

*MANIPULATION OF RMA FEEDBACK*

Participants in the low, high, and very high RMA feedback conditions received information about the alleged responses of "a large sample of male students" to the R scale items, along with a reminder of their own responses to these items. Specifically, each item was presented in the center of the screen and below it the following text appeared: "The average answer of male Mannheim students was: [value 1]. Your own answer was: [value 2]." "Value 2" was the participant's own answer given just a

few minutes earlier and “value 1,” depending on condition, was 1 standard deviation lower (low RMA feedback), 1 standard deviation higher (high RMA feedback), or 2 standard deviations higher (very high RMA feedback) than the participant’s answer, rounded to one decimal place. Standard deviations were taken from item distributions in a pilot study. If the resulting value would have been less than 1 or greater than 7, the values 1.0 and 7.0, respectively, were displayed instead. The means of feedback values across the 20 R scale items were 2.2, 4.0, and 4.8 for low, high, and very high feedback conditions, respectively.

### Results

#### PRELIMINARY ANALYSES AND EXCLUSION OF CASES

The data of 16 participants (9.2%) were excluded from analyses. Of these, 4 participants had indicated a homosexual orientation and 1 participant had not answered the sexual orientation question. Eleven participants had either suspected the purpose of the study or doubted the authenticity of the RMA feedback; these participants were distributed roughly equally across the four conditions (low RMA feedback: 2; no RMA feedback: 2; high RMA feedback: 3; very high RMA feedback: 4),  $\chi^2(3; N = 174) = 2.28, p = .52$ . The final sample thus consisted of 158 participants who reported either a heterosexual (154) or a bisexual orientation (4).

A preliminary one-way analysis of variance with RMA as the dependent variable confirmed that there were no a priori differences in RMA between the experimental conditions,  $F(3, 154) = 0.93, p = .43$ . Thus, random assignment with respect to level of RMA was effective.

#### MAIN ANALYSES

The means of the rape proclivity measure were 1.57 for low feedback, 1.63 for no RMA feedback, 1.66 for high feedback, and 1.92 for very high feedback. To test Hypothesis 1, we computed a linear contrast within a one-way analysis of variance with RP as the dependent variable (contrast coefficients were  $-3, -1, +1, +3$  for the low RMA feedback, no RMA feedback, high feedback, and very high feedback, respectively) as well as pairwise comparisons among the four condition means. In line with Hypothesis 1, the linear contrast was significant,  $t(154) = 2.73, p = .01$  ( $MSE = 0.258, r_{\text{effect size}} = .21$ ). The pairwise comparisons showed that the mean of RP in the very high RMA feedback condition differed from each of the remaining three condition means, all  $t_s(154) > 2.11$ , all  $p_s < .04$ , whereas the low RMA feedback, no RMA feedback, and high RMA feedback conditions did not differ significantly from each other, all  $t_s(154) < 1$ , although the pattern of means was as predicted.

To test Hypothesis 2, we computed the correlation between self-reported RMA and RP. This analysis yielded

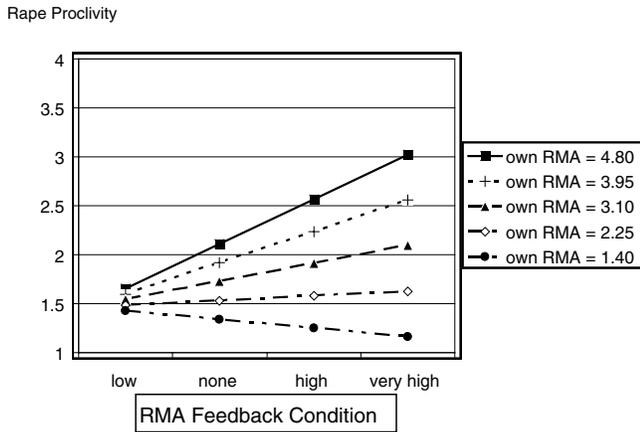
a highly significant result,  $r(156) = .37, p < .001$ , supporting our hypothesis that higher RMA would be associated with higher rape proclivity.

To explore whether the joint effects of RMA feedback and own RMA on self-reported rape proclivity are additive or interactive, we conducted a hierarchical regression analysis with RP as the dependent variable. In the first step, the RMA feedback (coded as a linear trend:  $-3, -1, +1, +3$ ) and the continuous RMA score were entered simultaneously as predictors. The results from this step are consistent with the above results from separate one-way and correlation analyses; both the main effect of RMA feedback,  $\beta = .23, t(155) = 3.13, p = .002, r_{\text{sp}} = .23$ , and the main effect of own RMA,  $\beta = .37, t(155) = 5.13, p < .001, r_{\text{sp}} = .37$ , were significant. In a second step, the product of the two predictors from Step 1 was entered to test their interaction. The result from Step 2 was a significant and positive beta coefficient,  $\beta = .99, t(154) = 2.67, p = .01, r_{\text{sp}} = .19$ , suggesting that the effect of the RMA feedback on RP increases in size with increasing levels of self-reported RMA.<sup>4</sup> To illustrate this interaction effect, we computed simple slopes and intercepts for the prediction of RP from the RMA feedback at five different levels of RMA, representing, at equal intervals, the empirical range of RMA scores that we observed in the present study (from 1.40 to 4.80). The resulting set of regression lines is shown in Figure 2.<sup>5</sup>

We thus found evidence that participants’ own RMA and perceived social norms regarding RMA (a) each independently predicted self-reported rape proclivity and (b) interacted in such a way that higher levels of RMA feedback produced particularly high self-reported rape proclivity if self-reported RMA was high rather than low.

### Discussion

In this study, where RMA feedback was presented after participants had reported their own RMA, we found a significant effect of this feedback on subsequent judgments of rape proclivity. The effect size of the effect of RMA feedback in Experiment 2 ( $r = .21$ ) was comparable to that in Experiment 1 ( $r = .19$ ), where the RMA feedback had been presented as part of the RMA questionnaire. We thus found a small but replicable effect of perceived others’ RMA on RP in two independent experiments. The two studies varied in their operationalization of feedback, in their presentation mode (paper-and-pencil vs. PC), and in their cover story. Whereas the first study may be seen as higher in possible demand characteristics because an expected influence of survey results on participants’ responses was mentioned in the instructions, this concern should be lower for Experiment 2, where it was only mentioned that “participants might be interested to see previous results.” If anything,



**Figure 2** Simple-effect regression lines predicting self-reported rape proclivity from rape myth acceptance (RMA) feedback at different levels of own RMA.

this more subtle introduction of the RMA feedback, which was further supported by the notion of a computer program randomly presenting different modules, produced a slightly stronger effect than did the somewhat heavy-handed cover story of Experiment 1.

Although the linear trend for RMA feedback conditions was significant as predicted, additional pairwise comparisons showed that the effects of RMA feedback were mainly due to the very high feedback condition in the present experiment (see also Note 5). In Experiment 1, a similar asymmetry of the feedback effect was present in the pattern of RP means. If we compare the numerical values of the RMA feedback, we find that the mean feedback across RMA items in the high feedback condition of Experiment 1 was 4.4 and thus close to the very high feedback condition of Experiment 2 (4.8). Our present data thus suggest that it may be necessary to use feedback values above the RMA scale mean of 4 to produce a significant increase in self-reported RP, whereas a decrease in RP compared to no-feedback controls was not observed. This asymmetry may be due to the fact that the endorsement of rape myths in our samples of university students was quite low overall (the grand mean of RMA was 2.71 and 2.66 in Experiments 1 and 2, respectively). Things may be different in populations where the endorsement of rape myths is higher, as may well be the case in applied settings.

The predicted positive correlation of rape myth acceptance and rape proclivity was obtained as a highly significant effect and also replicated across studies. Effect sizes were comparable (Experiment 1:  $r = .48$ ; Experiment 2:  $r = .37$ ). Obtaining a somewhat lower coefficient in the current experiment is consistent with the fact that RMA responses in Experiment 1 already reflected an influence of the RMA feedback, whereas in

Experiment 2 these responses were always assessed before the RMA feedback was given. However, the difference between the two correlation coefficients was not significant ( $z = 0.98, p = .32$ ). In line with our previous research (Bohner et al., 1998; Bohner et al., in press), the relationship between RMA and our scenario-based measure of RP thus seems to be robust, representing a medium to large effect size (Cohen, 1988).

The independent initial assessment of participants' own RMA enabled us to explore the interactive effect of RMA feedback and own RMA on rape proclivity. The results point to the interesting possibility that the effect of RMA feedback is amplified by a high level of self-reported RMA. This finding makes sense if one assumes that social norms are particularly effective if they reinforce preexisting attitudes. Conversely, however, this result pattern also suggests that the perception of high RMA in others may have little effect on a man's rape proclivity if he clearly rejects rape myths to begin with. Educational interventions that successfully reduce the belief in rape myths may thus immunize individuals against future adverse effects of proviolent group norms. Before pursuing these ideas any further, however, it seems necessary to replicate the observed interaction effect in independent studies.

#### GENERAL DISCUSSION

The current research further corroborates the role of rape myths as a factor facilitating sexual aggression. Taken together, our findings suggest that salient ingroup norms may be important determinants of the professed willingness to engage in sexually aggressive behavior. Our studies go beyond quasi-experimental and correlational work that had shown a close relationship between RMA and rape proclivity as well as our own previous experimental studies, which have shown individuals' RMA to causally affect RP. They demonstrate that salient information about others' RMA may cause differences in men's self-reported proclivity to exert sexual violence. Experiment 1 provides additional evidence on how this influence is mediated: It shows that the perceived RMA of others may increase or lower men's rape proclivity by temporarily increasing or lowering their own RMA. In Experiment 2, where own RMA was assessed before participants were exposed to RMA feedback, both independent and interactive effects of the two variables on self-reported rape proclivity were observed. Thus, our studies confirm that RMA may indeed function as a social norm as originally conceived by Burt (1980).

#### *Potential Limitations*

An important question is whether the results we found on self-reports in response to hypothetical scenarios

reflect behavioral tendencies in the real world. Although scenario studies have their limitations, this approach is about as close to real-life behavior as we can currently get within ethical limits. The method also has its strengths. If people judge aspects of a situation based on their chronic beliefs (such as rape myth acceptance) and salient external information (such as communicated group norms), then a method that requires people vividly to imagine a realistic situation possesses high content validity. We are confident that this provides a closer approximation to people's reactions in real-life situations than do some alternative methods that are further removed from real life (e.g., Malamuth's highly abstract "likelihood of rape" measure, see Bohner et al., 1998). Furthermore, earlier research has shown that our scenario-based measure of rape proclivity was uncorrelated with a tendency toward socially desirable responding (Bohner et al., 1998). Of course, any single method is never free from potential sources of systematic error so the insights gained from our current approach should be combined with those of studies using other methodologies, including correlational studies of real-world behavior.

Our main dependent variable clearly focused on rape proclivity in an acquaintance rape situation. We thus cannot say what relevance our findings may have to stranger rape. We suspect, however, that we would have been less likely to observe parallel effects had we used stranger rape scenarios as well. This is because the victim's behavior is usually seen as much less ambiguous in stranger rape situations, such that it becomes more difficult to reinterpret these situations, on the basis of rape myths, as consensual sex (see Abrams, Viki, Masser, & Bohner, 2003; Bechhofer & Parrot, 1991; Bohner, 1998; but cf. Note 4). Even if our findings did apply to stranger rape, participants might not be willing to admit any tendency toward sexual violence that is unambiguously identifiable as such.

#### *Preview of Future Research*

##### *COMPARING THEORETICAL EXPLANATIONS*

Our results are equally compatible with two theories of normative influences on behavior that we mentioned in the introduction. Cialdini and his colleagues' (1991) focus theory of normative conduct posits that social norms affect behavior especially if these norms are salient at the time a behavioral decision is made. According to focus theory, an individual should thus report higher or lower rape proclivity to the extent that social norms of high versus low rape myth acceptance are salient in the situation. Terry and Hogg (1996) proposed a self-categorization model of normative influence that emphasizes the ingroup versus outgroup status of reference groups as a crucial variable. These authors conceptualize social norms as ingroup norms. Accordingly,

group norms should affect behavior mainly if they emanate from a group that is a relevant source of social identity for the perceiver (see also Turner, 1991).

Each of these approaches has received empirical support (e.g., Kallgren, Reno, & Cialdini, 2000; Terry & Hogg, 1996; Terry, Hogg, & White, 1999). The predictions of the two models may indeed be seen as compatible with each other because both norm salience and ingroup status of the reference group may jointly affect the extent of normative influences. In the present research, we deliberately held both norm salience and type of reference group constant, always providing highly salient norm information that pertained to an ingroup to maximize the likelihood of observing an influence of RMA norms on rape proclivity. We are planning to study the relative contribution of each of these variables in future research.

The self-categorization model may be tested by varying the ingroup versus outgroup status of the reference group whose RMA responses are presented. If the ingroup status of the reference group is crucial, then the effects of normative influence we observed should be attenuated in outgroup conditions. Of interest, an alternative prediction is suggested by expectancy-violation theory, an approach that was originally formulated to explain how expectancies based on a target's social category membership affect perceivers' evaluations of this target (Bettencourt, Dill, Greathouse, Charlton, & Mulholland, 1997). More extreme target evaluations result if the target's behavior is discrepant from stereotypic expectancies. For example, skillful behavior was shown to elicit more positive evaluations if shown by a Black (vs. White) target, whereas unskillful behavior elicited more negative evaluations if shown by a White (vs. Black) target (Bettencourt et al., 1997). It should be possible to apply this approach to explaining normative influences on behavior if we assume that people often hold stereotypic expectancies regarding the normative beliefs within a given group. This should apply, in principle, to outgroups as well as ingroups. One could therefore predict that feedback about others' RMA may affect an individual's RP to the extent that this feedback diverges from this individual's stereotypic expectancies regarding the RMA beliefs held by the reference group. For example, if a perceiver initially expected that a particular outgroup strongly endorses rape myths but were later to learn that this outgroup actually rejects rape myths, this experience might reduce the perceiver's self-reported rape proclivity even to a greater extent than similar normative information emanating from an ingroup. The opposite prediction would derive from the self-categorization model.

The role of norm salience could be tested independently by presenting feedback about others' RMA either

as focal information (as was done in the present studies) or in a more peripheral way as part of a larger stimulus array. It also would be interesting to test the joint influences of norm salience, ingroup versus outgroup status of the reference group, and prior expectancies by crossing these factors in a factorial design. In studies pinpointing those theories against each other, the relevant mediating processes, such as degree of identification with the reference group, surprise at learning about the reference group's beliefs, or the ease with which relevant norms come to mind, also should be assessed.

*EXPANDING THE SCOPE OF NORMATIVE PREDICTORS  
OF SEXUAL VIOLENCE*

The current paradigm may be expanded beyond the concept of rape myths to the study of additional predictors of sexual aggression. In a recent meta-analysis of the research relating aspects of masculine ideology to reports of past sexual aggression and the likelihood of raping (Murnen et al., 2002), the important role of rape myth acceptance as a predictor of sexual aggression was confirmed. However, other measures, such as "hostile masculinity" (a measure that includes RMA items but also items on "adversarial sexual beliefs" and "acceptance of interpersonal violence"; Malamuth, 1989a, 1989b) and "hypermasculinity" (Mosher & Sirkin, 1984), tended to correlate even more highly with the criterion variables. This purely correlational research should be complemented by experimental studies using the normative feedback paradigm presented here. We have recently started applying the paradigm to hostile and "benevolent" sexist attitudes as predictors of rape proclivity and victim blame (Michaelis & Bohner, 2005), following up on related correlational research (Abrams et al., 2003). Our initial results are promising; for example, they show that feedback about others' hostile sexist attitudes clearly influence rape proclivity.

*Potential Applications*

The insights from our research might eventually inform interventions designed to reduce rape myth acceptance and, ultimately, the likelihood of acquaintance rape. Our studies showed that men who had learned that people in their peer group generally reject rape myths (low RMA feedback conditions) reported a very low level of RMA (Experiment 1) and RP (Experiments 1 and 2, although the low-feedback means of RP did not significantly differ from the control means, see above). The rejection of rape myths and low levels of RP might thus be brought about by using individual members of a relevant ingroup as sources of persuasive communications. If someone who is clearly identifiable as a peer-group member strongly argues against rape myths, the effect of this communication on recipients' attitudes

may be as large as feedback about the attitude of the group as a whole. This approach would have the added advantage that it should always be possible to find individual peer-group members who are willing to endorse a position opposing rape myths, whereas in an intervention setting there are ethical constraints against telling recipients that the ingroup as a whole strongly rejects rape myths unless this is in fact true.

A potential problem with this approach is that the source might end up being perceived as an outgroup member for expressing views that potentially diverge from those of the listeners, which might attenuate the expected effect. However, if our conjectures about the potential effectiveness of outgroup norms in terms of expectancy violation are correct, then outgroup sources may be useful in interventions aimed at reducing rape myths as well. Specifically, if a member of an outgroup that is stereotypically associated with high RMA turns out to argue strongly against rape myths, then the overall effect of this communication on recipients' attitudes may even be stronger than that of an ingroup source. Clearly, these assumptions need to be tested in future research.

**APPENDIX**

**English Text of the Five Acquaintance-Rape Scenarios  
Used to Assess Rape Proclivity**

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*Situation 1*

You have gone out a few times with a woman you met recently. One weekend you go to a film together and then back to your place. You have a few beers, listen to music, and do a bit of petting. At a certain point your friend realizes she has had too much to drink to be able to drive home. You say she can stay over with you, no problem. You are keen to grab this opportunity and sleep with her. She objects, saying you are rushing her and anyway she is too drunk. You don't let that put you off, you lie down on her and just do it.

*Situation 2*

A while back, you met an attractive woman in a disco and you would like to take things a bit further with her. Friends of yours have a holiday home so you invite her to share a weekend there. You have a great time together. On the last evening you are ready to sleep with her, but she says no. You try to persuade her, insisting it's all part of a nice weekend. You invited her, after all, and she did accept. At that she repeats that she doesn't want to have sex but then puts up hardly any resistance when you simply undress her and have sex with her.

*Situation 3*

Imagine you are a firm's personnel manager. You get on especially well with a new female member of staff. At the end of a busy week, you invite her out to dinner and take her home afterward. As you want to spend some more time in her company,

you suggest she might ask you in for a coffee. Next to her on the sofa, you start fondling her and kissing her. She tries to move out of reach but you tell her that her career prospects stand to be enhanced by her being on good terms with her boss. In due course, she seems to have accepted this, and she doesn't resist when you have sex with her.

#### Situation 4

You are at a party and meet a good-looking and interesting woman. You chat, dance together, and flirt. After the party, you give her a lift home in your car and she invites you in. You both sit down on the floor, then your new friend kisses you and starts to fondle you. That's absolutely fine with you and now you want more. When you start to undress her in order to sleep with her, she suddenly pushes you off and says she wants to stop now. Her resistance only turns you on more and, using some force, you press her down to the floor and then penetrate her.

#### Situation 5

You helped a young woman recently when her car broke down. She invites you to dinner in her flat as a way of saying thank you. It's a very pleasant evening and you have the impression she likes you. When your hostess indicates she is beginning to feel rather tired, you are not at all ready to leave. You would rather you finished the evening in bed together and you try to kiss her. At that the woman gets mad and tells you to clear out. Instead, you grab her arms and drag her into the bedroom. You throw the woman onto the bed and force her to have sex with you.

#### NOTES

1. Following Rosenthal and Rosnow (1985), we use the error term and degrees of freedom from the full sample in all a priori contrast analyses. The reported effect size coefficients ( $r$ ) represent the correlation between individual scores and the contrast weights associated with each condition (see Furr, 2004).

2. To explore potential differences in the sensitivity of our rape scenarios to influences of own rape myth acceptance (RMA) and perceived others' RMA, we ran additional analyses. For each scenario, we formed a separate two-item index from the items pertaining to the likelihood of behaving like the protagonist and enjoyment of getting one's way; Cronbach's  $\alpha$  ranged from .69 (scenario 1) to .85 (scenario 4). These indices were subjected to one-way analyses of variance and correlation analyses. The sign of the linear trend of the RMA feedback was in the predicted direction for all five scenarios, with effect sizes ranging from  $r = .12$  (scenario 1) to  $r = .29$  (scenario 5), although the effect was significant only for scenario 5,  $t(80) = 2.70$ ,  $p = .01$ , all other  $p$ 's  $> .17$ . The correlations of the individual scenario indices with self-reported RMA ranged from  $r = .35$  (scenario 2) to  $r = .40$  (scenario 4), all  $p$ 's  $< .01$ .

3. In coding the RMA feedback variable for the regression analysis, we focused on the a priori contrast that represents the linear trend effect specified in our hypotheses. One might argue, however, that the full between-condition variance of the feedback variable should be represented in the regression analysis. This requires the inclusion of a second, orthogonal contrast, which happens to be a quadratic trend (coded +1, -2, +1). We also conducted this analysis and found that the quadratic trend effect was negligible ( $p = .83$ ). Its inclusion left the coefficients reported in Figure 1 unchanged to the second decimal place.

4. Again, we explored potential differences among the rape scenarios, analyzing separate scenario-wise two-item indices. Cronbach's  $\alpha$

ranged from .52 (scenario 5) to .82 (scenario 3). The sign of the linear trend of the RMA feedback was in the predicted direction for all five scenarios, with effect sizes ranging from  $r = .03$  (scenario 2) to  $r = .29$  (scenario 4), and three of the five scenarios showing significant effects: scenario 1,  $t(154) = 2.23$ ,  $p = .03$ ; scenario 4,  $t(154) = 3.77$ ,  $p < .001$ ; and scenario 5,  $t(154) = 2.09$ ,  $p = .04$ . The correlations of the individual scenario indices with self-reported RMA ranged from  $r = .16$  (scenario 4) to  $r = .36$  (scenario 1), all  $p$ 's  $< .05$ . Finally, separate regression analyses revealed that the interaction effect of self-reported RMA and RMA feedback was significant for scenario 4,  $r_{sp} = .16$ ,  $p = .03$ , and scenario 5,  $r_{sp} = .20$ ,  $p = .01$ , and marginal for scenario 1,  $r_{sp} = .14$ ,  $p = .06$ . Together with the scenario-wise analyses in Experiment 1, these results suggest, of interest, that responses to the less ambiguous scenarios may be more prone to normative influences than the more ambiguous ones (see the appendix).

5. As in Experiment 1, we ran additional analyses in which the full between-condition variation of the RMA feedback variable was represented, this time coding three orthogonal contrasts: linear (-3, -1, +1, +3), quadratic (+1, -1, -1, +1), and cubic (-1, +3, -3, +1). Again, the main results reported for the linear trend, self-reported RMA, and their interaction remained unchanged. However, the quadratic trend was marginal ( $\beta = .14$ ),  $t(153) = 1.92$ ,  $p = .06$ ,  $r_{sp} = .14$ , reflecting that moving from low feedback to high feedback, there was little difference in RP among the levels of RMA feedback, whereas there was a significant increase in RP as one moves from high to very high feedback. All other nonlinear effects of RMA feedback, either as main effects or in interaction with self-reported RP, were negligible, all  $p$ 's  $> .18$ .

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