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Students' Sexual Attitudes and Reactions to Hypothetical Conversations with Friends: Summary of Results

Charlotte McLean & Dr. Nicole K. Jeffrey

In Canada and most areas of the world, many young adults experience unwanted sexual behaviour. Any type of sex without consent is sexual assault under Canadian law. While anyone can experience and perpetrate sexual assault, most victims are women and most perpetrators are men who are acquaintances, including friends and romantic or sexual partners. Sexual assault can lead to a range of negative mental and physical health consequences.

Common **but false** stereotypes and beliefs about rape and other forms of sexual violence, called rape myths, suggest that sexual violence is caused by the victim's clothing or behaviour (e.g., not saying "no" clearly enough) or the perpetrator's inability to control their sexual desires. These are harmful myths that contribute to a culture that condones, supports, and normalizes sexual harm against women and people of other genders. Sexual assault is always the fault of the perpetrator. Research finds that most men understand when women do not want to have sex, and women can be sexually assaulted regardless of what they are wearing or how they are behaving.

The purpose of this study was to understand students' responses to hypothetical conversations in which a friend uses a rape myth. Participants in this study (81 students) were randomly assigned to read one of two hypothetical conversations in an online survey: one portraying a rape myth that blamed the victim ("She probably just didn't say 'no' clearly enough. Girls are so confusing."), and the other portraying a rape myth that excused the perpetrator ("The guy probably just got carried away. Guys can't help it."). After reading the conversation, participants were asked how they would respond and why.

Almost all participants (98%) reported at least one way they would challenge the rape myth, with very few (7%) reporting at least one way that they would not challenge it (e.g., walking away, changing the topic, or openly agreeing with the statement). Some participants described ways that they would both challenge and not challenge the rape myth. The main ways that they reported they would challenge the rape myth included:

- (a) Reprimanding the speaker by yelling, cursing, slandering the speaker, pointing to social consequences for the speaker (such as losing the participant's friendship), or pointing to the unacceptability of the statement.
- (b) Referring to personal experience or victims' experiences, often by pointing out that victims are sometimes scared to speak up because of victim-blaming.
- (c) Defining and nuancing consent and sexual violence, such as describing the different ways people can consent and communicate.

- (d) Directly contradicting the speaker's statement which often included pointing out that most can tell when someone is not interested in sex, that guys can control themselves, or that the victim in the scenario did say "no" clearly enough.
- (e) Pointing out that the speaker does not have all the information about the sexual assault and should not make assumptions.
- (f) Encouraging the speaker to reflect on their own life or put themselves in the victim's shoes.
- (g) Pointing to the perpetrator's fault in the rape (e.g., his responsibility for ensuring consent or controlling himself) or explaining that there is no excuse for rape.
- (h) Pointing to the consequences for victims as a result of sexual assault or reporting/disclosing sexual assault.

For the hypothetical **victim blaming** rape myth conversation:

- (a) Women were about 6 times more likely than men to say they would challenge the myth by defining and nuancing consent or sexual violence.
- (b) Men were about 11 times more likely than women to say they would challenge the myth by referring to missing information.

For the hypothetical **perpetrator excusing** rape myth conversation:

- (a) Women were about 3 times more likely than men to say they would challenge the myth by reprimanding the speaker.
- (b) Men were about 3 times more likely than women to say they would challenge the myth by encouraging the speaker to reflect on their own experiences.

The results of this study are promising in that almost all participants (both women and men) said they would respond in ways that would challenge the rape myths. Many even reported strong ways of challenging such as reprimanding the speaker. Students have the potential to use these strategies in the real world to help combat a culture that condones, supports, and normalizes sexual harm.