

The Influence of Victim Intoxication and Victim Attire on Police Responses to Sexual Assault[†]

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Abstract

Limited research exists on the impact of contextual factors such as victim intoxication and victim attire on police processing of a case of sexual assault. The effects of these variables were examined in a simulated sexual assault case. Participants were 125 detectives from the New South Wales Police Department. Officers read controverted witness statements and viewed photographs pertaining to an investigation of a report of date rape. Contrary to findings in earlier studies, complainant intoxication, 'provocative' dress, and gender of the officer had no influence on the likelihood of charging the alleged offender. Factors predictive of pressing charges were the perceived credibility of the complainant and culpability of the alleged offender. Credibility and guilt judgements were themselves influenced by the level of rape myth acceptance endorsed by the officers. Rape myth acceptance also exerted a number of other effects on case evaluations. Implications for future studies and education and training programmes for police on sexual assault were discussed. Copyright © 2010 John Wiley & Sons, Ltd.

Key words: sexual assault; victim credibility; investigative bias

Sexual assault remains one of the most under-reported of all crimes, with estimates that only 10 to 30 percent of all incidents are reported to police (Australian Bureau of Statistics, 2006; Borzycki, 2007; Mouzos & Makkai, 2004). Frequencies of reported incidents indicate that these crimes are highly prevalent: 18,800 sexual assaults were recorded in Australia in 2009 (Australian Bureau of Statistics, 2009). Using the most conservative under-reporting ratio, the total number of sexual assault incidents for 2009 can be calcu-

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Since the research was conducted, New South Wales Police Force training and procedures for investigating sexual assault have changed substantially.

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lated at around 56,400, but this number is likely to be much higher, as in a 2005 survey 143,900 individuals reported experiencing sexual assault in the previous year (Australian Bureau of Statistics, 2006). Common reasons for failure to report by victims of sexual assault include fear of lack of support or disbelief by police (Easteal, 1992). When the assault is reported to the police, investigators have extensive discretionary power regarding whether to take the case forward (Brown & King, 1998; Rose & Randall, 1982). In many instances, the case is dropped or the charges reduced because of a perceived lack of evidence (Russo, 2000). Approximately 15% of the reported sexual assault cases in Australia result in charges laid by the police (ACT Victims of Crime Coordinator, 2009). When the alleged offender was charged, conviction rates in 2005–2006 for sexual assault were approximately 20% lower than those for other crimes (Australian Bureau of Statistics, 2007; Borzycki, 2007). Conviction does not necessarily result in a custodial sentence. In 2009, for example, 25% of convicted sexual offenders were imprisoned by the New South Wales Higher courts (New South Wales Bureau of Crime Statistics and Research, 2009).

Sexual assault in which there is some level of familiarity between the victim and offender is termed date or acquaintance rape (Russo, 2000). The reluctance in society to accept that sexual consent can be denied within relationships and the normalisation of sexual coercion in intimate relationships (Russo, 2000), together with the range of contextual factors taken into consideration by police when processing a claim of sexual assault (Galvin & Polk, 1983; Rose & Randall, 1982; Schuller & Stewart, 2000), may be enough to deter a victim of date rape from reporting to the police, particularly when corroborating physical evidence is lacking (e.g. torn clothing, bruising, evidence of a struggle). Examples of contextual factors found to influence police decision-making include the level of intoxication of the parties, some pre-existing victim–offender relationship, victim characteristics (e.g. appearance, demeanour), and so called questionable behaviours in which victims may engage (e.g. walking alone at night, going to bars by themselves; Galvin & Polk, 1983; Rose & Randall, 1982; Schuller & Stewart, 2000). Such factors exert their effects by lowering the credibility of the complainant and/or by placing the presence of consent into question (Rose & Randall, 1982).

Reporting to the police is the first, and potentially, most important step in the legal processing of a sexual assault case. Thus, it is important to study the various factors that influence police decision-making whether or not to proceed to investigate and prosecute a case of sexual assault. Two factors that may influence police judgements of credibility and consent issues and hence, ultimately influence their decision to proceed with a case of sexual assault in date rape cases are victim intoxication and victim dress. First, research that has examined how intoxication and victim attire influence perceptions of victims of sexual assault and police decision-making is reviewed. Next, a study that extends previous research on police decision-making in cases of acquaintance rape is described.

THE INFLUENCE OF VICTIM INTOXICATION AND ATTIRE ON DECISIONS IN SEXUAL ASSAULT CASES

Some indications as to why victim intoxication at the time of a sexual assault may influence police decision-making in sexual assault cases derives from research documenting a double standard regarding normative drinking practices (Schuller & Wall, 1998; Wall & Schuller, 2000). In particular, drinking and alcohol intoxication is an accepted part of the

traditional male, but not female, gender stereotype (Landrine, Bardwell, & Dean, 1988). In addition, less tolerance exists towards women who are intoxicated as opposed to intoxicated men (Leigh, 1995). This double standard is closely related to gender-specific expectations held by individuals regarding the effects of alcohol consumption, which is frequently associated with inferences about availability or interest (Schuller & Wall, 1998). In one study, for example, in a vignette depicting a heterosexual dating couple, the woman's alcohol consumption was varied, but the man was always portrayed as drinking (George, Gournic, & McAfee, 1998, study 2). Compared with her sober counterpart, the drinking woman was rated as more sexually available and more likely to engage in foreplay and intercourse. She was also rated as more aggressive, impaired, and less attractive. Similarly, in another study, participants believed that sexual activity was more likely to be initiated when the characters portrayed in the vignette consumed alcohol rather than soft drinks (Corcoran & Thomas, 1991). The introduction of alcohol as a situational cue influenced third-party judgements of the individuals and the perceived likelihood of sexual intercourse (Schuller & Wall, 1998).

The presence of alcohol in research vignettes that portray coercive sexual encounters similarly influences a third party's perceptions of the event and the character attributions they ascribe to the individuals. For example, in one study, the victim of rape was assigned greater responsibility for the rape and was attributed more negative character ratings when she was intoxicated than when she was sober (Richardson & Campbell, 1982). In another study, compared with when the victim only or assailant only was portrayed as drinking, the report of drinking by both parties diminished the view that rape had occurred and that the victim resisted (Norris & Cubbins, 1992). One implication of the latter finding is that third parties that learn that a woman and a man were drinking together expect sexual activity to follow. One recent study investigated the extent to which alcohol intoxication on the part of the defendant and/or the complainant influenced assessments of guilt in a sexual assault trial (Schuller & Wall, 1998). Findings indicated that when the complainant was intoxicated, she was rated as less credible and the defendant as less guilty. In sum, the consumption of alcohol prior to sexual assault influenced observers' interpretations of the event and judgements of the individuals implicated in the event. Research has consistently found that victim intoxication is associated with greater victim responsibility for the assault and less favourable views of the victim. Findings are more discrepant for offender intoxication. In some studies, alcohol had an exculpatory effect and excused the offender's actions, whereas in others, it was associated with increased perceptions of culpability.

Little research has been conducted on the impact of victim intoxication on police officers' judgements and perceptions of a sexual assault complaint. If police hold similar beliefs and attitudes as the foregoing research illustrates prevail in the general lay population, this could have serious implications for the processing of a sexual assault complaint. Where corroborating factors are present, such as bruising or evidence of a struggle, these assist police to decide whether or not to pursue a case of sexual assault. In their absence, credibility issues have a more substantial impact (Kerstetter, 1990; LaFree, 1981; McLean & Goodman-Delahunty, 2008; Rose & Randall, 1982). Further investigation is warranted of factors bearing on credibility judgements by police officers of victims of sexual assault that may influence police decisions regarding whether to proceed with a case.

The impact of victim and perpetrator alcohol consumption on police officers' evaluations of an alleged sexual assault and their reported likelihood of charging the perpetrator

were assessed by Schuller and Stewart (2000). A written summary of an acquaintance rape in which the beverage consumption of both the victim and offender was systematically varied (beer, cola) was presented to officers. Perceptions of the alleged perpetrator's intoxication had virtually no impact on officers' judgements or decision-making. By comparison, the more intoxicated the victim was perceived to be, the more negatively she was viewed. Specifically, victim intoxication was associated with lower perceived credibility, greater interest in sexual intercourse, greater likelihood that she would have communicated interest in sexual activity, and increased responsibility for the assault. The more intoxicated the victim, the less accountable the perpetrator was perceived to be. Interestingly, whilst the complainant's intoxication influenced the officers' attributions of blame and evaluations of the strength of the case, it had no direct impact on their reported likelihood of charging the offender. The only judgements that were related to the likelihood of charging the offender in that study were the perceptions of the complainant's credibility and the likelihood that the assailant would be found guilty in a court of law. Thus, victim intoxication did not exert a direct effect on the decision to charge the alleged offender but did affect credibility assessments of the victim, which, in turn, had an impact on the likelihood of charging the offender. In sum, police officers' evaluations of sexual assault cases involving alcohol were indistinguishable from those held by the lay public.

Similar to alcohol, variations in how a female dresses may influence judgements and character attributions ascribed to her by members of the general population. A study of college students' perceptions of sexuality based on revealing attire showed that females were rated as more flirtatious, sexy, promiscuous, and seductive when wearing revealing compared with non-revealing clothing (Abbey, Cozzarelli, McLaughlin, & Harnish, 1987). Students rated the likelihood that members of male-female dyads were romantically involved and sexually attracted to each other higher when the female wore revealing as opposed to non-revealing clothes. Males rated female targets significantly higher on sexualised behaviour in both conditions. The researchers argued that some men may misinterpret or overestimate the sexual intent of women whom they encounter. These overestimations, together with other misperceptions formulated on the basis of certain contextual cues, may result in date rape (e.g. 'She's dressed up. That must mean she's sexually attracted to me'; 'She's willing to go to a bar. That must mean she's sexually attracted to me'; 'She's willing to have a nightcap in my apartment. That must mean she's really sexually attracted to me' Abbey *et al.*, 1987).

Relevant to character attributions based on dress in the processing of a sexual assault case by law enforcement personnel is the view that if a woman is perceived as more sexually attractive and sexually available, she may be assigned more attributions of responsibility and lower ratings of credibility following a report of date rape. A number of studies document this phenomenon. For example, the effects of victims' clothing on students' judgements of date rape were examined by Cassidy and Hurrell (1995). Compared with those who viewed a photograph of the victim dressed conservatively or who viewed no photograph, participants who viewed a photograph of the victim in 'provocative' clothing were more likely to indicate that the victim was responsible for her assailant's behaviour, more likely to view the assailant's behaviour as more justified, and less likely to acknowledge that a rape had occurred. In a more recent study of date rape, participants who viewed photographs of the victim in a short, moderate length, or long skirt attributed more responsibility for the rape to the victim in the short skirt (Workman & Freeburg, 1999). Another study of college students who were shown one of two slides of a model wearing either sexy or non-sexy clothing revealed that the model wearing sexier clothes was rated as

more likely to be robbed or raped, more likely to provoke such an attack, and more likely to be responsible for the attack (Edmonds & Cahoon, 1986). Furthermore, the model's assailant was held less accountable if the model was assaulted whilst wearing more 'provocative' as opposed to conservative clothing. These studies demonstrated that in cases of sexual assault, modifications in victim attire, similar to alcohol intake, influenced interpretations of the event as well as character attributions about the victim and perpetrator. However, participants in the foregoing studies were college students. Additional research is needed to examine whether law enforcement personnel are similarly vulnerable to the biasing effect of victim attire.

THE ROLE OF RAPE MYTH BELIEFS WHEN VICTIM INTOXICATION IS AN ISSUE

Rape myths have been defined as 'attitudes and beliefs that are generally false but are widely and persistently held, and that serve to deny and justify male sexual aggression against women' (Lonsway & Fitzgerald, 1994, p. 134). The endorsement of rape myth beliefs has implications for the processing of a case of sexual assault. Some feminist analyses of rape suggest that rape myths affect how broad or restrictive a person's definition of rape will be by influencing the number of concrete instances included in a definition of rape (Burt & Albin, 1981). The rejection of rape myths by police officers will increase the likelihood of investigating a case of sexual assault where evidentiary and credibility factors might otherwise appear questionable.

The impact of rape myth endorsement on the adjudication of sexual assault cases has been investigated in a number of studies. In general, more males than females endorse rape-tolerant attitudes (Dull & Giacopassi, 1987; Holcomb, Holcomb, Sondag, & Williams, 1991). For example, participant rape myths were negatively related to the defendant's degree of guilt, the complainant's credibility, and perceptions of the event as sexual assault and were positively related to the defendant's credibility, complainant responsibility, and the likelihood of reporting that the beverage consumed by the complainant reduced her credibility (Schuller & Wall, 1998). In this study, participants' rape myth acceptance mediated the relation between gender of participant and perceived guilt. Overall, women rendered more than twice as many guilty verdicts (68%) than men (32%). However, the inclusion of rape myth acceptance in the model eliminated the impact of gender on verdicts. Participants who rendered not guilty verdicts were more likely to endorse rape myths than participants who rendered guilty verdicts. Men who rendered not guilty verdicts were more likely to endorse rape myths than women who rendered not guilty verdicts (Schuller & Wall, 1998). This finding is consistent with past research showing that males are more likely than females to endorse rape-tolerant attitudes (Dull & Giacopassi, 1987; Holcomb *et al.*, 1991). Male participants provided lower ratings of the defendant's guilt, were less likely to find the complainant's claim credible, were less likely to draw inferences that were consistent with sexual assault, and were more likely to hold the complainant responsible than were female participants. No significant differences between genders on case judgements were found once rape myth acceptance was included in the model, confirming the mediational role of this construct.

Police attitudes towards rape victims and cases are often a key factor in determining the quality of police responses to sexual assault (Lonsway, Welch, & Fitzgerald, 2001). One study revealed that female police officers, compared with their male counterparts,

were more likely to believe the complainant's allegation, to attribute less blame to the complainant, and to attribute more blame to the perpetrator, were more likely to report that the perpetrator was guilty, and would charge him (Schuller & Stewart, 2000). Additional research that explores the possibility that rape-related beliefs mediate these gender differences was recommended (Schuller & Stewart, 2000). Confirmation of such findings will affirm the importance of involving women police officers in the initial receiving and handling of sexual assault complaints/reports. Thus, additional implications exist regarding the content of educational and training programmes on sexual assault.

With regard to victim attire, a study of perceptions of rape by different groups (police, citizens, rapists, and counsellors) showed that males believed to a greater extent that it was a woman's responsibility to prevent rape, and that victims precipitated rape through their appearance or behaviour (Field, 1978). A comprehensive study that focused specifically on the effects of victim attire, gender of participant, and rape myth acceptance regarding an incident of date rape confirmed that these variables had both independent and combined effects on attributions about third parties (Workman & Orr, 1982). Consistent with findings outlined earlier regarding gender differences in the interpretation of rape claims and character traits ascribed to the victim and perpetrator, Workman and Orr found that males attributed more responsibility to the victim and less to the offender. They also rated her as wanting sex more, leading the perpetrator on more, behaving more suggestively, and as less likely to mean 'no' when indicating lack of consent. This pattern of responses was more prevalent among individuals who scored higher on measures of rape myth acceptance. The victim was perceived as more responsible for the incident, behaving more suggestively, leading the offender on more, and wanting sex more when wearing a short skirt versus a moderate length or long skirt. Significant interactions emerged between a victim's style of dress and degree of rape myth acceptance. Participants who scored high on rape myth acceptance were more likely to perceive that the victim led the perpetrator on, wanted sex, was less likely to mean 'no', and behaved more suggestively when she was wearing a short skirt versus a moderate length or long skirt.

The present study

The objective of the current study was to extend a series of findings on the impact of victim intoxication and victim dress on judgements and decision-making in cases of sexual assault in a contemporary Australian police sample and examine the influence of police training on sexual assault on their decisions. In New South Wales (NSW), little attention was focused specifically on rape myths in sexual assault training for police cadets (P. Hull, personal communication, September 20, 2002). Ideally, investigation of a sexual assault complaint should be undertaken by criminal investigators who have completed a course offered by the NSW Police on 'Investigation and Management of Adult Sexual Assault'. This programme was introduced for investigators on a voluntary basis (NSW Police College, 1999). The course duration is approximately 4 months and identifies the following key units of competence: participation in the legal process, interagency consultation, victim care, crime scene management, use of investigation and intelligence processes, and investigative interviewing. In this programme, training regarding attitudes towards victims is limited. Approximately 3 hours are devoted to addressing victim issues (K. Webb, personal communication, March 25, 2003). Whether this training is effective is unknown. In this study, police decision-making by officers with and without such training was compared to explore the impact of this component of NSW police training.

Hypotheses

The expected findings in this study were as follows:

- Consistent with findings from both police and non-police samples, victim intoxication and 'provocative' attire will adversely affect perceptions of the rape and the character traits assigned to the victim (Cassidy & Hurrell, 1995; Edmonds & Cahoon, 1986; Richardson & Campbell, 1982; Schuller & Stewart, 2000; Schuller & Wall, 1998; Workman & Orr, 1982). Specifically, intoxication and 'provocative' dress will reduce victim credibility, increase victim responsibility, reduce the likelihood that the event will be viewed as sexual assault, and will reduce perceptions of the assailant's guilt.
- Victim intoxication and 'provocative' attire will reduce the likelihood that a police officer will recommend charging the assailant. Intoxication and dress will exert their influence indirectly by lowering victim credibility and/or (in the case of victim dress) increasing victim responsibility. In previous studies (Schuller & Stewart, 2000), victim intoxication influenced credibility assessments, which, together with the estimate that the assailant would not be found guilty in a court of law, impacted the likelihood of charging the assailant.
- Consistent with findings by other researchers (Schuller & Wall, 1998; Workman & Orr, 1982), participant rape myth beliefs will be negatively related to ratings of the perpetrator's guilt, the victim's credibility, and perceptions of the situation as one of sexual assault. Conversely, rape myth beliefs will be positively correlated with ratings of the victim's responsibility and the perpetrator's credibility.
- As shown in numerous studies of sexual assault (e.g. Schuller & Stewart, 2000; Schuller & Wall, 1998; Workman & Orr, 1982), males will find victims of sexual assault less credible, more responsible, will render fewer guilty verdicts, and will report that they are less likely to charge the assailant. In addition, gender differences in police officers' evaluations and judgements will be mediated by rape myth beliefs, consistent with the findings by Schuller and Wall (1998). Individuals assigning ratings less favourable to the complainant will endorse rape myths more than those assigning more favourable ratings to the complainant. Additionally, in line with Schuller and Wall's (1998) findings with regard to guilty verdicts, an interaction between rape myth acceptance and gender is expected such that males rendering less favourable ratings of the complainant will be more likely to endorse rape myths than females rendering less favourable ratings of the complainant. Such differences are also expected to be more pronounced when the victim is dressed 'provocatively' or intoxicated than in those conditions where she is not.

METHOD

Participants and procedure

The participants were 125 police officers from the NSW Police who completed their detective training course in the period 2001–2003. Study materials were mailed to 672 officers (72% males and 28% females) of whom half ($n = 334$) had completed a course on 'Investigation and Management of Adult Sexual Assault' and half ($n = 338$) had completed a Senior Detective Training Course that did not include sexual assault training. Participation in the study was entirely voluntary.

A total of 125 questionnaires were returned, yielding a response rate of 19%. The majority of the participants (71.3%) were male, 35 (28.7%) were female, and three failed to

record their gender. Three-fifths (59.2%) had completed the training course on 'Investigation and Management of Adult Sexual Assault Course' and two-fifths (40.8%) had not. Most of the participants (40%) were employed in the Inner Metropolitan Area of Sydney, 24% were from the Greater Metropolitan Area, and 14.4%, 9.6%, and 7.2% were from the northern, southern, and western regions of NSW, respectively. The participants ranged in age from 20–51 years ($M = 34$ years, standard deviation [SD] = 5.92). Experience working as a detective performing an investigative role ranged from 1–25 years ($M = 6.7$ years, $SD = 4.66$). Of these officers, 2.4% were detective inspectors, 1.6% were senior sergeants, 16.8% were sergeants, 6.4% were leading sergeant constables, 69.6% were senior constables, and 2.4% were constables.

Materials

The participants read one of two versions of a written statement by the complainant and the alleged offender claiming and refuting an alleged sexual assault, respectively. The complainant's statement contained the following information. In the early hours of the morning following a post-exam celebration at a university bar, Lisa Frazier and her flatmate went to the police station to press a charge of sexual assault against Matthew Boyd. Lisa stated that she and her flatmate had met friends at the bar, and during the evening, she was introduced to Matthew. At the end of the evening, Matthew offered to walk Lisa home to her flat, which Lisa accepted. When they arrived at the flat, Lisa invited Matthew in for a coffee. Matthew and Lisa began to kiss to which she did not object. Matthew proceeded to undress Lisa at which point she voiced her objections. He continued undressing her. When Lisa yelled that he should stop, Matthew pinned her arms on the lounge and removed her underwear. Lisa feared for her safety and allowed him to have sexual intercourse with her. The alleged perpetrator admitted in his statement to sexual intercourse but claimed that it was consensual. A semen sample from Lisa confirmed that Matthew was the source. There was no medical evidence indicative of violence or other abnormalities (i.e. bruising, tearing, etc.). The beverage consumption reported by the complainant was varied: Lisa consumed six or seven beers/soft drinks only during the course of the evening. Beverage consumption by the alleged perpetrator was not specified.

To investigate the influence of the complainant's attire on participants' responses, witness statements were accompanied by a photograph of the complainant wearing conservative clothing (shirt, jacket, long pants), 'provocative' clothing (midriff singlet top, short skirt) or no photograph. Additional photographs of neutral items mentioned by the witnesses (i.e. lounge room, pictures on the wall) were included in the first two conditions to reduce the salience of the photographs of the victim's attire.

Design

A $2 \times 3 \times 2$ factorial between-subjects design was used in which the first independent variable was beverage consumption (alcohol, soft drink). The second independent variable was victim attire (conservative, 'provocative', no information), and the third independent variable was specialised sexual assault training (present/absent). To orthogonally vary the victim's beverage consumption (alcohol, soft drink) and attire (conservative, 'provocative', no photograph), six versions of the experimental materials were compiled.

Manipulation check

To assess whether the independent variables had their intended effect, on seven-point bipolar scales, the participants indicated the extent to which they perceived the complainant to be intoxicated (endpoints 'completely sober' and 'very intoxicated') and sexually 'provocative' (endpoints 'not at all provocative' and 'very provocative').

Dependent measures

A series of questions to assess perceptions of the alleged rape and views of the complaint were included.

Credibility assessments

On seven-point bipolar scales, the officers rated the credibility of the complainant's claim of sexual assault and the alleged perpetrator's denial. Endpoints for this scale were 'not at all credible' and 'completely credible'.

Evaluations of responsibility

On seven-point bipolar scales, the officers rated the perceived responsibility of the parties for the incident. Endpoints for this scale were 'not at all responsible' and 'very responsible'.

Case evaluations

Two seven-point bipolar scales assessed officers' evaluations of the claim. First, the participants indicated the extent to which they believed that the victim communicated lack of consent to the alleged perpetrator. Second, they indicated the extent to which the alleged offender was aware that the complainant did not consent to the intercourse. Endpoints for these scales were 'no' and 'most definitely'.

Perceptions of guilt

On a seven point scale with endpoints 'very unlikely' and 'very likely', the participants rated the extent to which the alleged perpetrator would be convicted in a court of law. They also stated whether or not they personally believed that the alleged offender was guilty of the crime of sexual assault.

Decision to charge

On seven point scales anchored with the endpoints 'very unlikely' and 'very likely', the participants rated the likelihood that they would recommend that the alleged offender be charged with sexual assault.

Perceptions of other influencing factors

On a scale of 1–6, the officers rated the extent to which they perceived the following factors to influence their approach to an investigation of sexual assault: professional training, personal life experience, number of cases previously investigated, experience with sexual assault victims, prior experience with the Department of Public Prosecution,

and prior experience with sexual assault court proceedings. Room was provided for officers to elaborate on how these or any factor influenced their investigation.

Rape myth acceptance

The extent of the participants' rape myth beliefs was assessed using the 20-item Illinois Rape Myth Acceptance Scale, Short Form (IRMA-SF; Payne, Lonsway, & Fitzgerald, 1999). The 45-item IRMA from which it is derived demonstrates adequate construct validity, internal consistency, and reliability on both total and sub-scale scores (Payne *et al.*, 1999). The uncorrected correlation between the IRMA and IRMA-SF scale is $r(602) = 0.97$, $p < 0.001$, indicating that the latter is more than a sufficient substitute for the IRMA when assessing general rape myth acceptance (Payne *et al.*, 1999). The validity of the IRMA or IRMA-SF has not been tested in Australia but colloquial language in the US and in Australia is similar. The items were framed using traditional terms as well as euphemisms and colloquialisms (Payne *et al.*, 1999).

Three items in the IRMA-SF are fillers designed to inhibit response sets. The participants' responses to the remaining 17 items were added, constituting an overall measure of rape myth acceptance on which higher scores indicated higher acceptance. The lowest score attainable on the IRMA-SF is 17, the highest, 119. In this study, the lowest score recorded was 17 and the highest, 72 ($M = 26.48$; $SD = 9.00$).

Demographic information

The officers provided demographic information, including gender, age, rank, length of time as a detective performing an investigative role, approximate number of sexual assault cases investigated, local area of command in which they were employed, and whether or not they had completed the course 'Investigation and Management of Adult Sexual Assault'.

RESULTS

Preliminary analyses and overview

To investigate whether the manipulations were effective, and to explore possible interaction between complainant intoxication and attire, univariate analyses of variance (ANOVAs) were conducted. As intended, the complainant was perceived as significantly more intoxicated when she consumed alcohol ($M = 3.59$; $SD = 0.82$) as opposed to when she consumed soft drink ($M = 0.30$; $SD = 0.75$), $F[1118] = 526.83$, $p < 0.001$, partial $\eta^2 = 0.82$). The main effect of victim attire and the interaction between attire and beverage consumption was non-significant. Overall, the participants viewed the complainant as moderately intoxicated when she consumed alcohol (0 = completely sober, 6 = very intoxicated).

Analyses of the influence of the complainant's attire indicated that the participants in the three conditions (conservative, 'provocative', and no photo) differed significantly in their perceptions of how sexually provocative the complainant was on the night of the alleged assault, ($F[2, 118] = 6.81$, $p < 0.01$, partial $\eta^2 = 0.10$). Post hoc comparisons using Tukey's honestly significant difference (HSD) indicated that the participants in the 'provocative' attire condition ($M = 2.22$, $SD = 1.50$) perceived the complainant as significantly more sexually provocative than the participants in the conservative attire ($M = 1.33$, $SD = 1.12$; $p < 0.01$) and the no photo ($M = 1.24$, $SD = 1.24$; $p < 0.01$) conditions (the latter

two groups did not differ significantly from one another). Nonetheless, the participants did not perceive the complainant as very provocative when dressed in the midriff singlet top and short skirt. The main effect of beverage consumption and the interaction between attire and beverage consumption was non-significant.

Overall means and standard deviations for the dependent measures are displayed in Table 1. Mean responses can be compared with the midpoint of the seven-point scales (rated 0–6). Generally, the officers found the complainant credible and held the alleged perpetrator, and not the complainant, responsible for the alleged assault. The officers perceived that the complainant communicated that she did not consent to the intercourse, that the alleged perpetrator was guilty of the crime of sexual assault, and that they would recommend that he be charged. Overall, 91% of the officers indicated that they personally believed that the alleged perpetrator was guilty.

A series of univariate and multivariate ANOVAs were conducted to investigate the relationship between complainant attire and beverage consumption on credibility assessments, evaluations of responsibility, case evaluations, and perceptions of offender guilt. The results of these analyses revealed no significant main effects, although there was one significant interaction between complainant attire and beverage consumption. The interaction is displayed in Figure 1. Analysis of the simple slopes revealed that the participants in the no photo condition were significantly more likely to perceive the offender as credible when the complainant consumed alcohol ($M = 3.79$, $SD = 1.77$) compared with soft drink ($M = 2.89$, $SD = 1.37$; $F[1119] = 4.13$, $p < 0.05$, partial $\eta^2 = 0.034$). The opposite was true for the participants in the 'provocative' condition; that is, the participants who saw a photo of the complainant dressed more 'provocatively' were less likely to perceive the offender as credible when the complainant consumed alcohol ($M = 3.10$, $SD = 1.17$) compared with soft drink ($M = 3.97$, $SD = 1.39$; however this relationship was marginally significant $F[1119] = 3.37$, $p = 0.07$, partial $\eta^2 = 0.028$). The participants in the conservative condition were equally likely to perceive the offender as credible, regardless of the complainant's beverage consumption ($F[1119] = 0.22$, $p > 0.05$).

Contrary to expectations, there were no significant main effects of complainant attire or beverage consumption. Therefore, following Schuller and Stewart (2000), further analy-

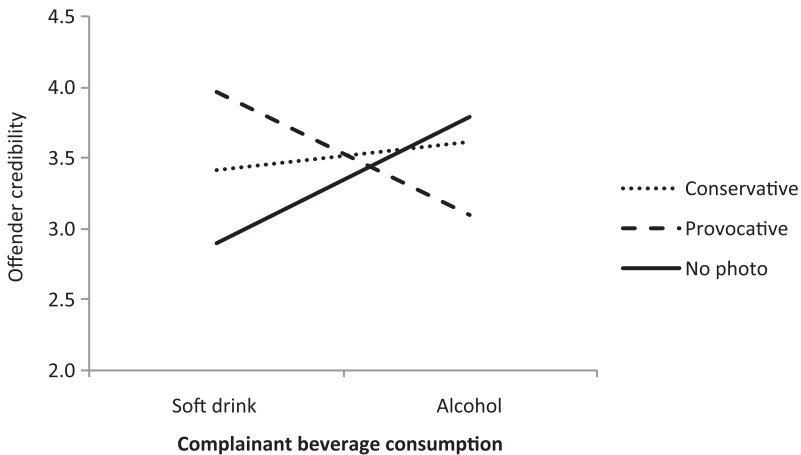


Figure 1. Mean ratings of offender credibility by complainant attire and beverage consumption.

ses were conducted using the perceived level of complainant intoxication and provocativeness. They argued that these continuous measures were more sensitive and captured the participants' subjective interpretations of the complainant's level of intoxication and its impact on her behaviour. Of central interest in this study is the impact that gender, perceived complainant intoxication, perceived complainant attire, and levels of rape myth acceptance endorsed by officers had on credibility assessments, evaluations of responsibility, case evaluations, perceptions of guilt, and the decision to charge. This was investigated by hierarchical regression analyses in which the variables were entered in the following order: gender (step 1), perceived intoxication of the complainant and perceived provocativeness of the complainant (step 2), and levels of rape myth acceptance (step 3). For these analyses, the categorical variable of participant gender was dummy coded (women = 0, men = 1).

Table 1 summarises the main effects that resulted. No significant relationships were found between gender or perceived intoxication of the complainant and any of the dependent variables. Two significant relationships emerged for perceived provocativeness of the complainant. This occurred at step 3 for the dependent variable, evaluation of responsibility of the complainant ($\beta = 0.417, F_{\text{change}}[2117] = 12.60, p < 0.001$). The addition of rape myth acceptance in the fourth step provided an additional significant increase in prediction ($\beta = 0.380, F_{\text{change}}[1116] = 22.071, p < 0.001$). The complainant was attributed more responsibility for the alleged sexual assault when she was perceived to be more sexually provocative and when the officers endorsed higher levels of rape myth beliefs.

Table 1. Main effects of participant gender, perceived intoxication and provocativeness of complainant, and Rape Myth Acceptance (RMA) on dependent measures

Dependent measures	Mean (SD)	Step 1: gender R ²	Step 2: perceived intoxication and provocativeness R ²	Step 3: RMA R ²
Credibility assessments				
Complainant	4.85 (0.96)	-0.003	0.014	0.093**
Perpetrator	3.47 (1.45)	-0.008	-0.020	-0.023
Evaluations of responsibility				
Complainant	0.70 (1.11)	-0.004	0.160**	0.288**
Perpetrator	4.60 (1.44)	0.004	0.034	0.040
Case evaluations				
Complainant communicated that she did not consent to intercourse	4.88 (1.38)	-0.007	0.038*	0.100**
Alleged perpetrator aware that complainant did not consent to intercourse	4.40 (1.52)	-0.008	-0.011	0.014
Perceptions of guilt				
Likelihood recommend perpetrator be charged	4.52 (1.40)	-0.003	-0.011	0.052**
Likelihood alleged perpetrator will be found guilty in court of law	1.96 (1.43)	-0.002	-0.018	-0.023

* $p < 0.05$; ** $p < 0.01$.

The more provocative the participants perceived the complainant to be, the more responsibility she was attributed for the assault ($\beta = 0.417$, $F_{\text{change}[2117]} = 12.60$, $p < 0.001$) and the less likely the participants believed that she communicated non-consent to the intercourse ($\beta = -0.254$, $F_{\text{change}[1116]} = 3.83$, $p < 0.05$). A similar pattern of results was observed for perceptions of the likelihood that the complainant communicated that she did not consent to the intercourse. The complainant was seen as less likely to have communicated non-consent when she was perceived to be more sexually provocative ($\beta = -0.254$, $F_{\text{change}[2117]} = 3.83$, $p < 0.05$) and when the officers endorsed higher levels of rape myth acceptance ($\beta = -0.273$, $F_{\text{change}[1116]} = 8.99$, $p < 0.01$).

A number of other significant relationships emerged between rape myth acceptance and the dependent variables on the fourth step. Significant relationships were found between rape myth acceptance and assessments of complainant credibility, $\beta = -0.305$, $F_{\text{change}[1116]} = 11.12$, $p < 0.01$, and the likelihood of charging the offender, $\beta = -0.276$, $F_{\text{change}[1116]} = 8.76$, $p < 0.01$. As shown in Table 1, the officers who endorsed higher levels of rape myth acceptance perceived the complainant to be less credible in her claim of sexual assault and were less likely to recommend that the alleged perpetrator be charged with sexual assault.

The categorical culpability ratings (0 = not guilty, 1 = guilty) were analysed via logistic regression in which gender (step 1), perceived intoxication of the complainant and perceived provocativeness of the complainant (step 2), and rape myth acceptance formed the independent variables (step 3). The results of this analysis revealed that gender was significantly related to perceptions of guilt ($\chi^2 = 6.55$, $df = 1$, $p < 0.05$); all of the female officers ($n = 30$) personally believed that the alleged perpetrator was guilty, whereas 12% ($n = 10$) of the male officers believed that the alleged perpetrator was not guilty. Results of this analysis revealed no significant relationship between the perceived intoxication or provocativeness of the complainant and beliefs about the guilt of the perpetrator after controlling for participant gender. There was a significant relationship, however, for rape myth acceptance ($\chi^2 = 7.43$, $df = 1$, $p < 0.01$, $\text{Exp}(\beta) = 0.896$). The participants who rendered not guilty judgements were more likely to endorse rape myths than the participants who found the alleged perpetrator guilty of sexual assault after controlling for gender and perceptions of complainant intoxication and provocativeness.

Likelihood of charging the perpetrator

As in Schuller and Stewart's (2000) study, one objective of the current analysis was to gain an understanding of variables that might influence police charging decisions. Therefore, the relationship between police officers' assessments and interpretations of the scenario and the likelihood of their recommendation that the alleged perpetrator be charged was investigated via a hierarchical regression analysis. The dependent variable in this analysis was the officers' ratings of the likelihood that they would recommend that the alleged offender be charged with sexual assault. Given that the analyses reported earlier indicate that rape myth acceptance is related to the likelihood of recommending that the alleged perpetrator be charged, this variable was entered into the analysis first. Credibility assessments, evaluations of responsibility, perceptions of whether the complainant communicated non-consent, and perceptions of guilt were entered on the second step. Perceptions of whether the offender was aware that the complainant was not consenting were not included in the analysis as this was highly correlated with perceptions of whether the complainant communicated non-consent ($r = 0.59$, $p < 0.001$). The results of this analysis

Table 2. Results of hierarchical regression analysis predicting recommendation to charge

Predictor variables	R ²	R ² Δ	β
Step I: Rape Myth Acceptance (RMA)	0.069	0.077*	-0.278**
Step II:	0.405	0.370**	
RMA			-0.058
Credibility assessments			
Complainant			0.265*
Perpetrator			-0.058
Evaluations of responsibility			
Complainant			-0.010
Perpetrator			0.148
Case evaluations			
Complainant communicated that she did not consent to intercourse			0.021
Perceptions of guilt			
Personal belief in guilt (guilty vs. not guilty)			0.331**
Likelihood alleged perpetrator will be found guilty in court of law			0.165*

* $p < 0.01$; ** $p < 0.001$.

are displayed in Table 2. A significant relationship was found between rape myth acceptance and the likelihood of the officer recommending that the alleged perpetrator be charged ($r = 0.29$, $F[1110] = 9.20$, $p < 0.01$). Moreover, the addition of the variables on step two afforded a significant increase in prediction ($r = 0.70$, $F[8103] = 10.43$, $p < 0.001$, for the full model, $R^2_{\text{change}} = 0.37$, $F_{\text{change}} = 9.86$, $p < 0.001$). The three variables that contributed to this significant finding were the officer's assessments of the credibility of the complainant, the officer's personal belief of whether the alleged perpetrator was guilty of sexual assault, and the officer's perception of whether the alleged perpetrator would be found guilty in a court of law. The more credible they found the complainant, the more they believed that the perpetrator was guilty of sexual assault. The more successful they thought the case would be in court, the more likely they were to recommend that the perpetrator be charged. From the standardised coefficients, it can be seen that once both independent variables were entered into the equation, rape myth acceptance was no longer a significant predictor.

Demographic analyses

To assess whether any demographic differences between the officers influenced their decision making about the sexual assault, a series of regression analyses were performed whereby age, years of experience, number of sexual assault cases investigated, rank, and region were entered simultaneously as independent variables, and perceptions of credibility and responsibility of the complainant and alleged perpetrator, case evaluations, perceptions of guilt, and decision to charge were the dependent variables. Only one significant main effect was found between age and the belief that the alleged perpetrator was guilty of sexual assault (Wald statistic = 7.48, $p < 0.01$). Overall, the participants were less likely to find the alleged perpetrator guilty of sexual assault with increasing age. For the remaining measures, the officers' perceptions and responses to the case did not significantly vary across differences in age, experience, rank, or region.

Furthermore, to assess officers' perceptions of the extent to which they believed training, personal life experience, number of cases previously investigated, experience with sexual assault victims, prior experience with the DPP, and prior experience with sexual assault court proceedings influences their decision-making in investigations of sexual assault, a series of regression analyses were performed in which these variables were entered as the independent variables. In all cases, none of these variables reached statistical significance.

Effects of training

To investigate whether responses of officers who had completed the relevant training ('Investigation and Management of Adult Sexual Assault') differed from those who had not, *t*-tests were conducted on perceptions of credibility, responsibility, the likelihood of conviction, case evaluations, the decision to charge, rape myth acceptance, and a chi-squared test on the dichotomous measure of guilt. Results of these tests revealed no significant differences between the trained and untrained groups.

DISCUSSION

The primary aim of the present study was to examine the impact of victim intoxication and victim attire on police investigators' responses to a sexual assault claim. Contrary to previous findings obtained from police and lay samples, in this study, the investigators' perceptions of the intoxication of the victim had no impact on their evaluations of and responses to the sexual assault claim. For example, Schuller and Stewart (2000) found that more intoxicated victims were seen as less credible, more responsible for the alleged assault, more interested in sexual intercourse, and less likely to communicate lack of interest in intercourse, whilst the perpetrator was viewed as less accountable for the assault. Those results suggested an indirect influence of victim intoxication on the likelihood of charging via reduced victim credibility were not replicated in the present study.

In the present study, when the complainant was perceived to be more sexually provocative, she was attributed significantly more responsibility for the alleged sexual assault, just as college students in previous studies regarded a more 'provocative' victim as more responsible for the sexual encounter (Cassidy & Hurrell, 1995; Edmonds & Cahoon, 1986; Workman & Freeburg, 1999). Contrary to previous findings and the hypotheses in this study, 'provocative' attire was not associated with diminished responsibility of the perpetrator, nor reductions in the determination that sexual assault occurred, the credibility of the complainant, or the likelihood of charging the alleged perpetrator.

Further aims of the present study were to assess the impact of gender and rape myth acceptance on officers' judgements and evaluations of the sexual assault scenario, expecting male officers to find victims of sexual assault less credible, to be more responsible, and to be less likely to charge the assailant or rate him as guilty of sexual assault (Schuller & Wall, 1998; Schuller & Stewart, 2000; Workman & Orr, 1982). However, no differences emerged between the male and the female officers on any measures of their responses to the sexual assault claim. The hypothesis that gender differences in police officers' evaluations and judgements would be mediated by rape myth beliefs was not supported.

Nonetheless, some significant direct effects of rape myth acceptance on officers' responses to the sexual assault claim emerged. Officers who endorsed more rape myths perceived the complainant as less credible, attributed her greater responsibility for the incident, were less likely to believe that she communicated non-consent, were less likely to regard the alleged perpetrator as guilty of sexual assault, and were less likely to recommend that he be charged. These findings are consistent with those documented in previous research (Schuller & Wall, 1998; Workman & Orr, 1982).

In the present study, victim intoxication and attire had no impact on the likelihood of charging the perpetrator with sexual assault. Results did indicate, however, two judgements that related to likelihood of charging, namely the officers' assessments of the credibility of the complainant and their perceptions as to whether the alleged perpetrator was guilty of the crime of sexual assault. As noted earlier, these assessments were themselves influenced by the extent to which rape myths were endorsed by the officers.

The failure of victim intoxication and attire to exert any impact on charge decisions may indicate that investigators rely more on other factors in their decision making. In contrast to findings obtained by Schuller and Stewart (2000) and Schuller and Wall (1998), in this study, victim intoxication did not influence perceptions of either party or officers' overall judgements of the claim. Whilst victim attire influenced the perceived responsibility of the victim, the level of responsibility attributed to the victim did not in turn influence a decision to charge. The presence of 'provocative' clothing impacted the perceived responsibility of the victim, but did not influence the perceived responsibility of the alleged perpetrator. Researchers have speculated that male misinterpretation or overestimation of female sexual intent from contextual cues may result in date rape (e.g. 'She's dressed up. That must mean she's sexually attracted to me'; 'She's willing to go to a bar. That must mean she's sexually attracted to me'; 'She's willing to have a nightcap in my apartment. That must mean she's really sexually attracted to me' Abbey *et al.*, 1987). If these views are held by law enforcement personnel, they may serve to excuse the perpetrator and heighten the perceived responsibility of the victim.

The present research has a number of limitations. Most importantly, given the number of variables assessed, a larger sample is required to confidently detect possible effects. In this study, the participants' rape-related attitudes were assessed after the case evaluations were provided. Ideally, rape myth beliefs should be gathered in advance of the presentation of the study materials to reduce the salience of those questions in regard to the acquaintance rape claim and to discourage socially desirable response sets. The relatively low-moderate mean levels of rape myth acceptance reported by officers may be a consequence of this timing of the administration of these materials, although there was substantial variability in the individual responses. Nonetheless, the impact of rape myth acceptance on officers' responses to the sexual assault claim was statistically significant. Rape myth beliefs influenced judgements of the victim, the perpetrator, and the overall assessment of sexual assault. Additionally, since the issue of consent is central to rape cases, it is possible that officers were trying to make judgements about this in their evaluation of the material. However, this was not assessed in this study and needs to be addressed in future research.

The stimulus materials were presented in a written format, and compared with the scope of evidence taken by officers in some actual cases, were relatively brief. Although responses by police officers in sexual assault cases might differ when dealing with the parties in person, written witness statements and the recorded perceptions of the frontline officer are reviewed to make charge decisions so the experimental procedures applied in this study,

were ecologically valid. Nonetheless, replication using materials presented by video or audiotape is recommended as the presence of voice recordings and animated visual images are richer than transcriptions of witness statements and still photographs and more closely resemble live interviews with witnesses, thus are likely to influence the credibility assessments of the parties.

A number of methodological differences between the present and previous studies may account for both the disparities observed in the research outcomes and the significance of these outcomes. Primarily, the stimulus materials in this study were more comprehensive and ecologically valid than those employed in earlier studies. These features increased the realism of the study and the reliability and generalisability of the outcomes. First, independent, controverted witness statements were utilised whereas other research relied on uncontroverted case summaries. Thus, the task of the police officers more closely resembled their task in an actual case investigation in which disparities between witness accounts must be resolved. Second, photographic exhibits, including a portrayal of the victim, were provided to participants, enhancing the basis for their credibility determinations. Third, the materials were administered to a police sample whereas most previous studies were conducted using college students or other convenience samples. The main predictors of the decision to charge the offender were the perceived credibility of the complainant and the alleged guilt of the perpetrator. Rape myth beliefs exerted some influence on these determinations. Victim intoxication and victim attire per se did not influence charging practices. The victim in this study was perceived as moderately intoxicated and moderately provocative. Whether comparable results would be obtained if the victim is perceived as very intoxicated and very provocative remain to be tested. Whilst victim intoxication did not adversely impact evaluations of sexual assault, 'provocative' attire increased the perceived responsibility of the victim. The findings suggested no influence of the gender of the investigator on evaluations or charging practices.

These findings have implications for education and training programmes on sexual assault. The pervasive effects of rape myth beliefs in this study indicate that additional training resources may be useful to counteract misconceptions and distorted attitudes about sexual assault. The absence of any difference in levels of rape myth endorsement by officers trained and untrained in investigation and management of adult sexual assault cases indicates that more attention to this topic may be warranted to counteract these myths. Training of this nature may increase the reporting of sexual assault and reduce the rate of attrition in sexual assault cases at the charge stage.

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