Types of Victimization Experienced by Men and Women That Influence Rape Empathy

In the current study, we predicted that four types of victimization experience (sexual contact; attempted rape; sexual coercion; rape) would increase rape empathy for a victim compared with no such experience. We also predicted that women would report greater empathy than men. Participants were 80 men and 70 women undergraduates. Hypotheses were not fully supported. Results showed that only participants who reported having experienced rape were more empathetic than those who reported no victimization, \( p = .009 \), but that women did report more empathy than men, \( p < .0001 \). Rape experience may allow one to fully identify with and understand the perspective of a rape victim. Other ways to conceptualize victimization are offered.

In the United States, 17.7 million women and 2.78 million men have reported being victims of attempted or completed rape (Rape, Abuse and Incest National Network [RAINN], 2008). Reported sexual victimization experience has been associated with higher levels of rape empathy for a victim (Ching & Burke, 1999; Deitz, Blackwell, Daley, & Bentley, 1982; Smith & Frieze, 2003). Deitz et al. (1982) defined rape empathy as the capacity to understand the psychological perspective of a rape victim and found it to be associated with jurors’ and students’ rape trial-related decisions. It is thought that those with victimization experiences have higher rape empathy because they can more easily identify with and understand the perceptions and emotions of rape victims. The present study will contribute to the literature by examining various types of victimization experiences and their influence on rape empathy as reported by men and women.

The literature associating rape empathy with victimization has largely examined victimization as experience with rape. For example, Deitz et al. (1982) created their victimization group by lumping together those who reported they were either raped or had escaped a situation in which they believed rape would have occurred. Ching and Burke (1999) examined rape empathy based on whether participants reported that they had been raped themselves or knew a rape survivor. In both of these studies, the researchers used the word rape when they questioned their participants about their experiences. However, many rape victims do not define or acknowledge their own rape experience as rape (Kahn, Mathie, & Torgler, 1994; Layman, Gidycz, & Lynn, 1996). Thus, some participants who were categorized as having no victimization experience in past studies may actually have been victimized. Koss and Oros (1982) developed the Sexual Experiences Survey (SES), which does not use the term rape, to help capture different types of victimization and those who may not label themselves as victims. Smith and Frieze (2003) used this scale but only categorized victimization as those experiences that met the legal definition of rape. Therefore, previous research is ambiguous regarding (a) whether some potential victims of sexual victimization may have been excluded, and (b) whether other types of sexual victimization experience, in addition to rape, may lead to increased rape empathy for a victim.

The literature has also largely focused on empathy reported by female victims (Deitz et al., 1982; Gidycz et al., 2001; Smith & Frieze, 2003). Although female victims are more prevalent and women report greater levels of victim empathy than men do, men are sexually victimized as well (Dietz et al., 1982; Fiebert & Tucci, 1998; RAINN, 2008; Okun & Osman, 2006; Smith & Frieze, 2003; Struckman-Johnson, 1988). Furthermore, victimized men have reported similar experiences and consequences to victimized women (Larimar, Lyndum, Anderson, & Turner, 1999; Stermac, Del Bove, & Addison, 2004). However, men have typically been excluded from victimization samples in studies examining rape empathy. Although 32% of Ching and Burke’s (1999) sample were men, it is not clear what percentage, if any, of their victimization experience group were comprised of men. Thus, victimization...
data from men is lacking in the rape empathy literature (Struckman-Johnson, 1988). We made an effort in the present study to include at least as many men as women in the sample.

The primary purpose of the present study is to examine the influence of four levels of reported sexual victimization experience on rape empathy. Any type of victimization experience may help individuals to identify with and understand the perspective of a rape victim. Thus, we predicted that rape empathy would be greater for individuals who have reported any type of victimization experience relative to those with no such experience.

Given that men and women were included in the current sample, we made a secondary prediction for replication purposes. Past studies have revealed that women are more empathic toward rape victims than men (Ching & Burke, 1999; Dietz et al., 1982; Okun & Osman, 2006; Smith & Frieze, 2003). Consistent with these findings, we also predicted that women would report greater levels of empathy than men.

### Method

#### Participants

Participants were 80 men and 70 women undergraduate students taking general psychology at a public university. The large majority of participants (99%) were between the ages of 18 and 22, and 100% were single. Most participants (79%) identified themselves as Caucasian, European, or European American; 12% African or African American; 2% Hispanic or Hispanic American; 3.3% Asian or Asian American; 4% listed themselves as other. Religion was reported as follows: 33% Catholic; 8% Protestant; 4% Jewish; 15% Methodist; 8% Baptist; 3% Lutheran; 21% no religion; 7% other. All participants were randomly selected from a volunteer pool, which was created as an option for fulfilling a requirement for an introductory level psychology course. Those selected were contacted and all respondents agreed to participate. This research adhered to APA ethical standards and was approved by an Institutional Review Board.

#### Materials

As part of a larger study, Smith and Frieze’s (2003) gender-neutral Rape-Victim Empathy Scale (REMV) was modified to measure empathy levels toward women raped by men. This is consistent with the way rape empathy has been measured in the existing literature (Ching & Burke, 1999; Dietz et al., 1982; Gidycz et al., 2001; Okun & Osman, 2006; Schewe & O’Donohue, 1993). The REMV is an 18-item, Likert-type scale, ranging from 1 (strongly disagree) to 5 (strongly agree). A sample item from this scale is “I know if I talked to a woman who was raped, I’d become upset.” Smith and Frieze (2003) reported that the Cronbach alpha for this scale was .92 and provided validity information for this scale by demonstrating that it positively correlated with the Questionnaire Measure of Emotional Empathy (QMEE), a well-known general empathy measure. The Cronbach alpha for this scale in the present study was .87. Each participant’s scores on the REMV were summed and divided by 18, so that final scores could range from 1 to 5 with higher scores indicating more empathy.

Following the REMV and filler items, participants also filled out the Sexual Experiences Survey (SES) to measure level of victimization (Koss & Gidycz, 1985; Koss, Gidycz, & Wisniewski, 1987; Koss & Oras, 1982). We slightly modified the items to allow for both men and women to respond. Participants responded yes or no to 10 victimization questions that Koss and her colleagues (1987) created to reflect one of the following four levels of experience (sexual contact; attempted rape; sexual coercion; rape). If they responded no to all 10 questions, they were categorized as having no reported sexual victimization experience (no-victimization). A sample of one of the three items measuring sexual contact from this scale was, “Have you given in to sex play (fondling, kissing, or petting but not intercourse) when you didn’t want to because you were overwhelmed by someone’s continual arguments and pressure?” A sample of one of the two items measuring attempted rape was, “Have you had someone attempt sexual intercourse when you didn’t want to by giving you alcohol or drugs, but intercourse did not occur?” A sample of one of the two items measuring sexual coercion was, “Have you given in to sexual intercourse when you didn’t want to because you were overwhelmed by someone’s continual arguments and pressure?” Last, a sample of one of the three items measuring rape was, “Have you had sexual intercourse when you didn’t want to because someone threatened or used some degree of physical force (twisting your arm, holding you down, etc.) to make you?” Although experience with one item does not necessarily lead to or stem from experience with other items, the Cronbach alpha for the SES in the current study was .74. Koss and Gidycz (1985) reported the same Cronbach alpha for women. Participants were categorized into one of the five groups based on their highest reported level of victimization. The number of participants in each of these five groups, and the victimization rates of men and women, are presented in Table 1.

#### Procedure

Participants completed surveys in a group classroom setting with approximately 20 to 50 students in the room.
Each participant completed the survey with at least one empty seat on each side. Prior to asking participants to sign consent forms guaranteeing anonymity and confidentiality and to complete the surveys, the researchers informed them verbally and in the consent form that the study was investigating sex-related attitudes and behaviors. After they completed their packets, students placed the questionnaires in an anonymous drop box. As they left the room, an experimenter handed a list of references for counseling options to each participant.

Results

One woman who reported rape was dropped from the following analyses because she was missing data on the REMV. To test the main hypothesis, a one-way ANOVA was performed on the rape empathy scores, followed by the necessary a priori pairwise comparisons conducted between each of the four victimization groups and the no-victimization group. The ANOVA revealed a main effect for type of victimization, $F(4, 144) = 2.71, p = .03$, partial $\eta^2 = .07$. The a priori pairwise comparisons revealed a significant difference between the no-victimization group and the rape group, $p = .009$. The no-victimization group did not differ from any other group, although it approached being significantly different from the sexual coercion group, $p = .07$. See Table 1 for a summary of means and standard deviations for rape empathy scores.

A $t$ test was performed to test the secondary hypothesis comparing men and women on their rape empathy scores. As expected, women scored significantly higher than men, $t(147) = 5.85, p < .0001$, (one-tailed), $d = .97$. Therefore, women ($M = 3.98, SD = .53$) reported being more empathic toward rape victims than men ($M = 3.47, SD = .53$).

To explore the data in an alternate way, a Pearson product-moment correlation was performed between the number of items to which participants responded yes on the SES and their REMV scores. A significant positive correlation was found between these two variables, $r = .317, p < .0001$ (two-tailed). Higher scores on the RES were related to greater numbers of victimization items answered yes, and higher scores on the REMV indicated greater empathy for rape victims.

Discussion

The main purpose of the current study was to examine the influence of various levels of victimization on rape empathy. We expected that individuals who reported experiencing either sexual contact, attempted rape, sexual coercion, or rape would report greater levels of empathy than those who reported no sexual victimization experience. Unexpectedly, but consistent with the way previous researchers have defined victimization (Smith & Frieze, 2003), reported rape was the only type of victimization that significantly increased rape empathy.

Perhaps one must have the rape experience to fully identify with and understand the perspective of a rape victim. However, it is important to note that the SES categories were based on the highest level of victimization reported, and that the large majority of participants who were categorized into the rape group (highest level) did report at least one other lower-level experience as well. Thus, it may be that a compilation of experiences that include rape rather than rape only, increases empathy. Furthermore, participants did not report how many times each of these experiences had occurred. They simply answered yes or no to “Have you had…” Thus, another way to conceptualize victimization experience that may influence empathy would be to look at the number of times each of these types of experiences occurred. For instance, someone who reports 20 sexual contact or 10 sexual coercion experiences may have equivalent levels of rape empa-

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>TABLE 1</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Means and Standard Deviations for Rape Empathy Scores</td>
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<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Experience</th>
<th>Women (n = 69)</th>
<th>Men (n = 80)</th>
<th>Overall (n = 149)</th>
</tr>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>$M$</td>
<td>$SD$</td>
<td>$n$</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>No Victimization</td>
<td>3.81</td>
<td>.60</td>
<td>24</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Sexual Contact</td>
<td>4.01</td>
<td>.39</td>
<td>11</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Attempted Rape</td>
<td>3.88</td>
<td>.62</td>
<td>7</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Sexual Coercion</td>
<td>4.08</td>
<td>.40</td>
<td>14</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Rape</td>
<td>4.19</td>
<td>.51</td>
<td>13</td>
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Note. There was a significant difference between the no-victimization group and the rape group ($p = .009$).

Higher scores indicate greater empathy.
thy as someone who reports only one rape experience. Although this particular question could not be addressed by the current study, the exploratory analysis suggests that greater levels of empathy may be associated with the number of times a participant answered yes to the 10 victimization questions on the SES. These are considerations for future research.

Results also revealed a tendency for those who reported being sexually coerced to report greater levels of rape empathy than those who reported no-victimization experience. Given this tendency and the fact that sexual coercion and rape were the only victimization types measured that involved penetration, another way for researchers to operationally define victimization is to categorize based on whether or not penetration was reported.

Future researchers may also want to consider investigating empathy with different types of victims. The dependent measure used in the current study only measured empathy for rape victims. It is possible that those with victimization experience may report the greatest empathy with others who experience the same type of victimization.

As a secondary focus of this study replicating earlier research, we predicted that women would report greater levels of empathy than men. As expected, this hypothesis was supported. This finding could reflect higher female victim prevalence rates, which may lead women to be better able to identify with the perspective of victims than men. Given this general gender difference, it is worth noting here that there were more men than women in the no-victimization group (43 vs. 24), while there were more women than men in the rape group (13 vs. 8). Thus, it is possible that this gender imbalance could partially explain the difference in empathy levels found between the rape and no-victimization groups. Last, it is also possible that women empathized more than men because the rape empathy measure used in the current study was targeted toward a female victim rather than a male victim. Researchers should consider these possibilities in future studies including men and women.

Conclusions based on the results of the current study are limited by the sample’s relatively low reported rates for each type of victimization. Thus, gathering data from more participants who report victimization experience in future studies may help better our understanding of the relationship between victimization and rape empathy. Although the present results are not conclusive, they nonetheless suggest that future researchers consider the importance of investigating and understanding different types of victimization. For example, reported rape experience was associated with an increase in empathy, but attempted rape was not. Thus, combining these two experiences into one category may not provide a complete picture of how victimization can influence rape empathy and other rape-related constructs. Furthering our knowledge of empathy and its associated factors is important as they may impact rape-related medical, judicial, or counseling decisions (Deitz et al., 1982).

References