Rapist Development: An Investigation of Rapists’ Attitudes Toward Women and Parental Style
Courtney A. Meyer and Tara L. Mitchell
Lock Haven University

**ABSTRACT.** More researchers are investigating factors that lead people to rape, including factors involving perceptions of women or childhood experiences (e.g., Scott & Tetreault, 1987). Despite the fact that childhood experiences influence perceptions of women, there is no research on their relation. We hypothesized that rapists would report more negative parental interactions than other types of criminals. In a between subjects, quasi-experiment, convicted rapists and robbers completed the Attitudes Toward Women Scale (Spence, Helmreich, & Stapp, 1973), Measurement of Parental Style (Parker et al., 1997), and the Balanced Inventory of Desirable Responding (Paulhus, 1991). Rapists reported higher levels of abuse, indifference, and overcontrol than robbers, but there was no difference in attitudes toward women. Our results also revealed rapists had fewer sisters than robbers. Future research should focus on rapists’ family constellation as a whole.

Rape is a forced and nonconsensual act (Lyon, 2004) that involves the penetration of the anus or vagina by a penis, finger, or object, or the penetration of the mouth by a penis (McCabe & Wauchope, 2005). The purpose of this study was to understand if male rapists vary from other criminals in their perceptions of women and/or how their caregivers treated them. By investigating these perceptions and treatment, researchers can begin to understand what may occur during a rapist’s development. There is no research investigating both rapists’ rearing and perceptions of women; however, there is research concerning each individually. Exploring these two variables together can increase understanding of the influence experiences with caregivers may have on perceptions of women, laying the foundation for further understanding of rapists’ development.

**Theoretical Rationale**
There are three well-known theoretical models of sexual violence. The first, developed by Malamuth (2003), is the hierarchical meditational confluence model (HMC). The HMC model proposes that sexual aggression develops from an abusive home environment or predisposition to hostility. Experiencing abuse or parental violence can lead the child to develop antisocial behavior or engage in premature sexual experiences. Being prone to hostility can lead the child to develop narcissism, hostility toward women, sexual violence, and a general acceptance of violence against women.

The second model, created by Knight and Sims-Knight (2003), proposed that sexual aggression develops from sexual drive/preoccupation, antisocial behavior, and callousness/unemotionality. Knight and Sims-Knight’s model improved on the HMC model because of its clarification of early childhood experiences. In the model, physical or verbal abuse leads to antisocial behavior and callousness/unemotional responses, both of which lead to sexual coercion.
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The last model, developed by Ward and Beech (2008), is the Integrated Theory of Sexual Offending (ITSO). Ward and Beech argued the model is an improvement on the previous two models because it outlines a network of causal factors comprised of biological, ecological, and neuropsychological systems. The biological factors include genetics and evolutionary mechanisms. The ecological factors include social learning influences from cultural and personal experiences and the physical environment. The neuropsychological factors include motivation and emotion, behavioral controls, action selection, and perception and memory. In sum, the interaction of biological, ecological, and neuropsychological systems can lead to sexual offending.

The HMC (Malamuth, 2003), Knight and Sims-Knight (2003), and ITSO (Ward & Beech, 2008) models suggest that it is not just a single factor that influences a person to commit a sexual offense, such as rape, but several factors interacting. All of the models, however, include family experiences as potentially important factors in a person committing sexual offenses.

In addition to noting the importance of family experiences in committing sexual offenses, researchers have also theorized that perceptions of the environment are important factors in the decision to commit a sexual offense (e.g., Ward & Beech, 2008). Polaschek and Ward (2002) suggested five implicit theories to understand rape-supportive beliefs held by rapists. The implicit theories of Polaschek and Ward evolved from an analysis of scales and research involving attitudinal statements supported by rapists. All five theories are based on rapists’ early family environment, experiences with abuse and/or neglect as a child, social learning, and the attitudes and beliefs of prominent family members. The five implicit theories proposed by Polaschek and Ward are women are unknowable, women are sex objects, male sex drive is uncontrollable, entitlement, and dangerous world. Overall, Polaschek and Ward highlighted that rapists do not hold all of the theories but that the theories they do hold interact to direct information processing. For example, when a man perceives women as sex objects and believes the male sex drive is uncontrollable, he perceives the woman as responsible for the rape.

Polaschek and Gannon (2004) investigated how the five implicit theories developed by Polaschek and Ward (2002) fit with rapists’ accounts of their offenses. Polaschek and Gannon interviewed 37 men serving prison sentences for sexually violating or attempting to sexually violate a person over 16 years of age. The interview focused on the offenders’ background pre-offense, details leading to the offense, the offense itself, and the offenders’ reactions after the offense. Polaschek and Gannon’s results confirmed all five implicit theories, serving as support for and an extension of Polaschek and Ward. Three of the theories were seen in the majority of rapists’ accounts: women are unknowable (65%), women are sex objects (70%), and entitlement (68%). However, the most prevalent finding was how the offenders described women as both malevolent and unpredictable. As a result, Polaschek and Gannon changed the name women are unknowable to women are dangerous to reflect those two elements. Polaschek and Gannon also supported the importance of perceptions of women in rapists’ decision-making.

Based on theories regarding family history (e.g., Ward & Beech, 2008) and rapists’ perceptions (e.g., Polaschek & Ward, 2002; Ward & Beech, 2008), it seems likely that both family history and perceptions of women would influence a rapist’s behavior. There is little research on this possibility, however, with most research focusing on one of the two issues instead of both. Therefore, in the current study, we investigated perceptions of women and parental rearing to test the possibility of a relation between the two.

Family Background
Researchers have investigated the family as a variable in criminals’ development to understand the role of family dynamics in criminal behavior. Bard et al. (1987) collected descriptive statistics from 184 men classified as sexually dangerous and incarcerated in a correctional/mental health facility specializing in the treatment of sexual offenders. The researchers collected data regarding family history, child/juvenile behavioral problems, adult incompetence (psychological or criminal problems in adulthood), frequency of criminal offenses, and clinical symptom variables. They were specifically interested in comparing the frequency of certain characteristics among men convicted of rape and men convicted of child molestation. They found that more child molesters than rapists came from families in which the parents were married throughout the participant’s childhood. However, over half of the child molesters were victims of sexual assault compared to a quarter of the rapists. In the overall sample, the majority of sex offenders
of perceptions of parental relationships with a sample of undergraduate men, half of whom were unincarcerated, but self-reported rapists and half of whom were a control group of nonsexually aggressive men. They gave both groups a series of standardized tests to investigate potential differences. When asked about parental relationships, rapists expressed negative feelings about their fathers and ambivalent feelings about their mothers. However, rapists also had higher scores on the Underlying Anger-Hurt Scale (Lisak & Roth, 1988), suggesting that they believed they had been wronged by women in some way in their lives. Finally, Lisak and Roth (1990) found that rapists’ perceptions of their mothers generalized to all women. Specifically, rapists felt entrapped by their mothers because their fathers were not present to help them develop a stable male identity. Because of this entrapment, Lisak and Roth (1990) suggested rapists may develop the attitude that all women are potential enemies, which is consistent with the implicit theory that women are dangerous (Polaschek & Gannon, 2004).

Giotakos et al. (2004) revealed the importance of gathering more information on parental relationships. Previous research has shown that childhood family dynamics can lead to adult behavior patterns. For example, when a child is reared in a home where the mother has psychological problems and the father has a criminal history, the child is more likely to be sexually abused; end up institutionalized as a juvenile; and develop expressive aggression, unsocialized aggression, and sadism in adulthood (Knight, 1999). However, the Giotakos et al. study investigated only sexually offending criminals compared to noncriminal controls. It is important to gather more information on parental relationships within different types of crime in order to determine if the differences found by Giotakos et al. exist only between criminals and noncriminals or if they also exist between sexual offenders specifically and other types of criminals.

Attitudes Toward Women

In addition to studying perceptions of parental relationships, some researchers have investigated attitudes toward women. Scott and Tetreault (1987) investigated rapists’ attitudes toward women by studying the attitudes of 60 people—20 convicted of rape, 20 convicted of violent nonsex crimes, and a control group of 20 never convicted of a crime. They hypothesized that the rapist group would...
have more conservative views of women, especially regarding sexual behavior, than the other groups. Scott and Tetreault measured the participants’ beliefs about the rights and roles of women in contemporary society with the 25-item Attitudes Toward Women Scale (AWS) created by Spence, Helmreich, and Stapp (1973). Scott and Tetreault found that there was a significant difference in attitudes toward women’s vocational, educational, and intellectual roles; freedom and independence; dating, courtship, and etiquette; drinking, swearing, and dirty jokes; and sexual behavior. The rapists believed women should stay in the home, allow men to take the initiative in relationships and sexual activity, and refrain from drinking and swearing. Scott and Tetreault’s study suggested that rapists perceive women conservatively, which we explored in the current study. These findings relate to Polaschek and Ward’s research (2002), particularly the implicit theory of entitlement, which proposes that rapists feel the need to control the behavior of women.

Harmon, Owens, and Dewey (1995), however, found that rapists were no more conservative than noncriminal controls. They conducted a study of 20 rapists, 21 nonrapist criminals (mostly murderers), and 30 noncriminal controls using a shortened, Anglicized version of AWS (Spence et al., 1973). Overall, the nonrapist criminals had the most conservative attitudes toward women, with no significant difference between the rapists and the noncriminal controls. Harmon et al. suggested that their findings may have contradicted the findings of Scott and Tetreault (1987) due to either differences in the ethnic background of the samples or differences in the nonrapist criminals. The majority of Harmon et al.’s nonrapist criminals were men who had murdered women, whereas Scott and Tetreault’s nonrapist criminals were violent criminals, but had not committed crimes against women.

We combined these areas of research to investigate whether rapists differed from other criminals in their family history (parental rearing), perceptions of women, and family constellation. Based on previous research (e.g., Leonard, 1993), we chose robbers as a comparison group. Robbers were the control group in order to increase the comparison between this study and others because the majority of previous literature has used robbers as the control group for rapists. Participants completed the Attitudes Toward Women Scale (AWS; Spence et al., 1973), Measurement of Parental Style (MOPS; Parker et al., 1997), and Balanced Inventory of Desirable Responding (BIDR; Paulhus, 1991), as well as a demographic questionnaire. These measures provided perceptions of women (AWS), parental rearing (MOPS), socially desirable responding (BIDR) and family constellation (demographics), the dependent variables of interest.

Based on Leonard (1993) and Bard et al. (1987), our first hypothesis was that the rapist group would have higher Mother Abuse and Father Abuse scores on the MOPS than robbers, indicating a greater perception of parental abuse. Based on Lisak and Roth (1990), our second hypothesis was that the rapist group would have higher Mother Overcontrolling scores on the MOPS than robbers, suggesting a greater perception of their mothers as overcontrolling.

Due to the conflicting literature on attitudes toward women, we did not make specific predictions regarding the results of the AWS. Based on Polaschek and Gannon (2004) and Scott and Tetreault (1987), we expected rapists in the current study to show more conservative attitudes toward women compared to robbers; based on Harmon et al. (1995), however, we expected robbers to show more conservative attitudes toward women than rapists. For that reason, we examined the possibility that rapists and robbers would differ in their attitudes toward women. We also explored the possibility that parental styles and attitudes would be related to attitudes toward women, given that childhood experiences should lead to adult behavior (e.g., Ward & Beech, 2008). Although previous research has not examined parental styles and attitudes toward women together, we expected to see that parental styles and attitudes toward women were related.

Based on Bard et al. (1987), we also decided to explore the potential differences in the number of participants’ brothers and sisters. Because Bard et al. made comparisons only among different types of sexual offenders, we made no specific predictions regarding differences between our two groups.

Method

Participants
The educational director at a State Correctional Institute (SCI) located in Pennsylvania recruited convicted prisoners (N = 63) to participate. No incentives were provided for participation. The participants included 19 men convicted of rape and 44 men convicted of robbery. Of the 19 men...
convicted of rape, 63% \((n = 12)\) were White, 26% \((n = 5)\) were Black, and 11% \((n = 2)\) were Hispanic. They ranged in age from 27 to 79 \((M = 40.84, SD = 12.67)\). Of the 44 men convicted of robbery, 73% \((n = 32)\) were Black, 23% \((n = 10)\) were White, and 4% \((n = 2)\) were (self-reported) other. They ranged in age from 24 to 63 \((M = 41.61, SD = 10.12)\).

Although we had hoped to match the members of each group, the small sample size made matching impossible. However, there was no significant difference in the average age of the participants, \(t(61) = 0.26, p = .80\), in the rape and robbery groups.

**Materials**

We used four surveys in the study: the AWS (Spence et al., 1973), MOPS (Parker et al., 1997), BIDR (Paulhus, 1991), and a demographics questionnaire. The BIDR was labeled “Opinion Survey” to protect against participant bias.

The short version of the AWS, a 25-item questionnaire, consists of statements concerning the rights and roles of women regarding education, freedom, romantic relationships, drinking, sexuality, and marriage in contemporary society (Spence et al., 1973). The AWS was revised in the current study to accommodate the average reading level of inmates. A second grade teacher at an elementary school in a large, urban area gave the AWS to a focus group of 5 high-level readers (approximately third-grade level) during a regular reading exercise to determine appropriate word choices for each question. For example we changed, “swearing and obscenity are more repulsive in the speech of a woman than of a man” to “it is more disgusting for a woman to swear and curse than a man.”

The MOPS contains 30 statements about the participants’ parental rearing experiences for their first 16 years of life (Parker et al., 1997). Participants rate both the mother and father on the same 15 characteristics. An example statement is, “Overprotective of me.” The MOPS measures Indifference, Abuse, and Overcontrol categories. Parker et al. tested the psychometric properties of the MOPS to assess dimensions of care and protection; experiences with parents causing insecurity, guilt, and failure; and parental abuse and separation experiences. Parker et al. found that participants who detailed abuse in an interview had significantly higher scores on the MOPS abuse scale. Overall, they also found that all six subscales showed acceptable internal consistency ranging from .76 (paternal over-control) to .93 (maternal and paternal indifference).

Participants also completed the Opinion Survey (BIDR), which consisted of 40 statements measuring self-deceptive positivity and impression management (Paulhus, 1991). A person who honestly believes his or her positive claims shows self-deceptive positivity, whereas a person who over-exaggerates how often he or she executes desirable behaviors displays impression management. One statement, for example, is, “I have never damaged a library book or store merchandise without reporting it.” Paulhus (1991) reported the BIDR shows acceptable reliability \((\alpha = .83)\) and concurrent validity with the Marlowe-Crowne (alpha = .71); it also shows concurrent validity with the Multidimensional Social Desirability Inventory \((\alpha = .80)\; Jacobson, Kellogg, Cauce, & Slavin, 1977)\). Kroner and Weekes (1996) further found that the BIDR was appropriate for use with offender samples.

Participants also completed a demographic scale, including their race, age, childhood home (indicated as urban or rural), and how many siblings they had (if any). They also provided details about their criminal history, including the crime(s) for which they were convicted; the sex, age, and race of the crime victim (if there was one); and their relationship to the victim.

**Procedure**

**Institutional Review Board approval.** IRB approval was sought from the University IRB. After a full board review, we received approval to complete the project with the Department of Corrections. In addition to obtaining IRB approval, researchers working with the Pennsylvania Department of Corrections must obtain approval from the Pennsylvania Department of Corrections prior to conducting their research. Due to Pennsylvania Department of Corrections protocols, we did not administer the study to participants. Instead, the educational director and teachers employed by the SCI where we gathered our sample administered the study. We established the following procedure in order to follow the research protocols of the Pennsylvania Department of Corrections.

**Participant procedure.** The educational director and/or teachers asked prisoners meeting the study requirements (convicted rapists and robbers) to participate. The administrator informed participants that this study was investigating their perception of women and parental rearing experiences and that they would be given a packet of surveys to complete. Prisoners who agreed to participate...
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completed the surveys individually.

The administrator provided participants with a consent form, which the administrator collected before any surveys were provided. Participants took an average of 15 to 30 min to complete the surveys. After completing the last survey, participants read the debriefing statement included in the packet. Participants’ individual packets were folded, inserted, and sealed in individual white letter envelopes in order to maintain anonymity. The administrator thanked and dismissed the participants.

Results

Because this study was based on self-report, we first examined if there were differences between our groups in levels of desirable responding. The results of the study would be confounded if one group was more likely to show desirable responding than the other group. Therefore, we examined differences in both self-deceptive positivity and impression management between rapists and robbers. To determine the appropriateness of an ANOVA or a MANOVA, we correlated the two BIDR scales, self-deceptive positivity and impression management. Because the two subscales were significantly correlated, \( r(63) = .58, p < .001 \), we conducted a MANOVA to investigate differences between rapists and robbers on self-deceptive positivity and impression management. There was no significant difference between rapists and robbers at the multivariate level, \( F(2, 60) = 0.18, p = .84, \eta^2 = .006 \), in desirable responding.

Preliminary Analyses

Each of our measures consisted of subscales. To determine the appropriateness of a MANOVA or a series of ANOVAs on those subscales, we conducted correlational analyses for each measure. The MOPS subscales (indifference, overcontrolling, and abuse for both mother and father) were correlated to determine if they were interrelated; these subscales were also correlated, some positively and some negatively (see Table 2).

MANCOVAs

MOPS. To test the hypotheses that rapists would have higher Mother Abuse and Father Abuse scores, indicating a greater perception of parental abuse, and higher Mother Overcontrolling scores, suggesting a greater perception of their mothers as overcontrolling, we conducted an analysis with crime type as the independent variable and the MOPS subscales as the dependent variables. Because self-deceptive positivity was correlated with some of the MOPS subscales, we conducted a MANCOVA to determine if crime type was related to parental style, using self-deceptive positivity scores as a covariate. Self-deceptive positivity was not a significant covariate, \( F(6, 55) = 1.47, p = .21, \eta^2 = .14 \). Crime type was significant at the multivariate level, \( F(6, 55) = 5.47, p = .006, \eta^2 = .28 \). To understand the multivariate effect of crime type on parental style, we conducted univariate tests for each subscale of the MOPS. The univariate tests showed that crime type was significant for the expressed parental styles of mother indifference, \( F(1, 56) = 8.03, p = .006, \eta^2 = .12 \); mother abuse, \( F(1, 56) = 8.22, p = .006, \eta^2 = .12 \); mother overcontrolling, \( F(1, 60) = 7.00, p = .01, \eta^2 = .10 \); father indifference, \( F(1, 60) = 5.27, p = .02, \eta^2 = .08 \); father abuse, \( F(1, 60) = 11.62, p = .001, \eta^2 = .16 \); and father overcontrolling, \( F(1, 60) = 13.77, p = .001, \eta^2 = .19 \). These tests showed that rapists were more likely than robbers to portray their mothers as more indifferent (\( M = 4.37, SD = 5.05 \) and \( M = 1.41, SD = 3.00 \), respectively), abusive (\( M = 3.26, SD = 4.59 \) and \( M = 0.91, SD = 1.80 \)), and overcontrolling (\( M = 4.26, SD = 2.66 \) and \( M = 2.45, SD = 2.34 \)) toward them. Rapists were also more likely than robbers to portray their fathers as more indifferent (\( M = 5.26, SD = 4.36 \) and \( M = 2.25, SD = 4.70 \)), abusive (\( M = 3.73, SD = 5.05 \) and \( M = 0.82, SD = 1.60 \)), and overcontrolling (\( M = 3.90, SD = 3.31 \) and \( M = 1.48, SD = 1.74 \)) toward them.

AWS. To explore differences between rapists and robbers in attitudes toward women, we conducted an analysis with crime type as the independent variable and the six subscales of the AWS as the dependent variables. Because self-deceptive positivity was correlated with some of the subscales of the AWS, we conducted a MANCOVA, using self-deceptive positivity scores as a covariate. There was no significant influence of crime type at the multivariate level, \( F(7, 54) = 0.65, p = .71, \eta^2 = .08 \). There was, however, a significant influence of self-deceptive positivity on perceptions of women, \( F(7, 54) = 2.76, p = .02, \eta^2 = .26 \). To understand the multivariate effect of self-deceptive positivity on attitudes toward women, univariate tests were conducted for each subscale of the AWS. They showed that self-deceptive positivity influenced the AWS total score, \( F(1, 63) = 5.91, p = .02, \eta^2 = .09 \).
and the Drinking/Swearing/Dirty Jokes Subscale, \( F(1, 63) = 3.99, p = .05, \eta^2 = .06 \). Based on the correlation between self-deceptive positivity and the AWS total score, \( r(63) = -.30, p = .01, \) and Drinking, Swearing, and Dirty Jokes (Subscale 4), \( r(63) = -.25, p = .05, \) as self-deceptive positivity increased, reported attitudes toward women became more liberal, particularly with regard to their rights to drink, swear, and tell dirty jokes.

**MOPS and AWS**

To explore the possibility that parental styles were related to attitudes toward women, we conducted a correlational analysis of the subscales for the MOPS and AWS. Mother overcontrol was significantly correlated with Women’s Marital Obligations (Subscale 6), \( r(63) = .29, p = .03 \). There were no other significant correlations.

**Family Background**

We conducted additional analyses to determine if rapists and robbers differed on certain family background variables. A chi-square analysis showed that a greater percentage of robbers (82%) were reared in an urban environment than rapists (58%), \( \chi^2(1) = 4.01, p = .05 \). A t test, \( t(61) = 2.79, p = .002 \), further revealed that rapists were reared with fewer sisters than robbers \( (M = 1.00, SD = 1.29, M = 2.39, SD = 2.05, \) respectively), although there was no significant difference in the number of brothers, \( t(61) = 0.19, p = .85 \). Despite the smaller number of sisters for rapists, there was also no significant difference, \( t(61) = 1.69, p = .10, \) in the overall number of siblings for rapists \( (M = 2.84) \) and robbers \( (M = 4.34) \).

**Discussion**

Based on previous research, we had two hypotheses based on perceptions of experiences with caregivers. The first hypothesis was that rapists would be more inclined than robbers to report higher levels of abuse from their mothers or fathers. The second hypothesis was that rapists would be more inclined than robbers to report higher levels of overcontrolling from their mothers. The results confirmed both of these hypotheses. Rapists rated their mothers as significantly more overcontrolling and both parents as more abusive than did robbers.

We also examined the issue of differences in attitudes toward women. We found no differences in perceptions of women between rapists and robbers. We also examined the potential relation between parental styles and attitudes toward women. Interestingly, we found only one relation; reported levels of mother overcontrol were related to more liberal views of women’s marital obligations. Additionally, we found that rapists had fewer sisters than robbers.

Our research is consistent with previous findings on rapists’ perceptions of parental rearing. The results are consistent with Lisak and Roth’s research (1990), which showed that rapists viewed their fathers negatively and held ambivalent feel-
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ings toward their mothers. Rapists in our study not only perceived their fathers negatively, but also perceived their mothers negatively. Some ambivalence, however, may be seen in the fact the effect sizes for the father overcontrol and father abuse scale analyses were larger than the effect sizes for the mother overcontrol, abuse, and indifference scale analyses. Larger effect sizes for father overcontrol suggest that, at least, reported differences in parental styles were greater when considering the fathers. Lastly, the findings are consistent with both Leonard (1993) and Bard et al. (1987) because both found that rapists reported being abused more than their control groups.

Interestingly, rapists rated each parent higher on all three parental styles than robbers, which suggests two possibilities. First, the higher ratings could suggest that rapists truly experience a greater deal of abuse, indifference, and overcontrol from parents. However, the higher ratings could also suggest that rapists, due to being prone to hostility as proposed in the HMC model (Malamuth, 2003), perceive greater persecution from others. As explained in the HMC model, a proneness to hostility can lead to narcissism. The rapists’ perception of greater persecution could be a factor in the decision to rape, as could tendencies toward narcissism. Future research should explore the possibility that rapists feel persecuted by others, have higher levels of narcissism, and/or are both physically and emotionally abused. This research, however, also showed that rapists may differ in the quality of their interactions with their fathers, suggesting that future research should continue to investigate perceptions of both the mother and the father.

Although our results regarding parental style are consistent with previous literature, the literature is less clear for the results on attitudes toward women. Our results contradict the findings of Scott and Tetreault (1987), who found that rapists were more conservative in their attitudes toward women, especially on sexual behavior, than other violent, but not sex-related, offenders. Rapists’ attitudes toward women may also be inconsistent with Polaschek and Gannon (2004), who found that rapists held general implicit theories that they were entitled to treat women however they pleased (a conservative view). However, the results are consistent with the Harmon et al. (1995) findings that showed no differences between rapists and noncriminal controls, but that murderers were more conservative than both of those groups.

Harmon et al. suggested that their results may have contradicted Scott and Tetreault’s due to differences in ethnicity (Harmon et al.’s sample was all White) or differences in the victim genders (Harmon et al.’s non-rape but criminal sample had largely murdered women) between the samples. Our results suggest that the contradiction is not due to differences in ethnicity. Although our robber group was comparable to Scott and Tetreault’s groups in overall ethnicity, we failed to replicate their findings based on race, suggesting that it is not race alone that led to their rapists showing such conservative attitudes. We do not know the gender of the victims in the Scott and Tetreault study, but, comparing participants who chose female victims to participants who chose male victims in our sample, we also failed to find any significant differences. Our finding is also consistent with other research, such as Epps, Haworth, and Swaffer (1993), who found that there were no differences between adolescent sexual offenders and adolescent nonsexual offenders on the AWS.

The inconsistency in the literature may suggest that rapists are not influenced by attitudes toward women in general as much as victim-specific attitudes. Future research should continue pursuing the issue of victim specific versus general attitudes.

Interestingly, we found only one significant relation between parental styles and attitudes toward women—as the reported level of mother overcontrolling increased, so did the liberalness of attitudes toward women’s marital obligations. Increased liberalness suggests that, as the level of a mother’s (over)control increases, so do perceptions of what women can do within a marriage. The lack of significant correlations, however, raises the question of the role of general attitudes in rapists’ decision-making, as do our findings that rapists and robbers do not differ in general attitudes toward women.

We also found that rapists had significantly fewer sisters than robbers, but no difference in the number of brothers. Although rapists having fewer sisters than robbers may appear inconsistent with Bard et al.’s (1987) findings, it is worth noting that Bard et al. did not provide a comparison group outside of sexual offenders (child molesters and rapists were the groups).

Our findings also suggest an interesting possibility in family dynamics. Perhaps, due to having fewer female influences in the family, rapists fail to learn appropriate methods of interacting with other women. Less interaction with females would
appear consistent with Leonard’s (1993) argument that family interaction deficits contribute to rape. Further, if rapists truly experience abuse from both parents, it is possible that they witness the abuse of the few females in their lives as well, which could further contribute to family interaction deficits. Therefore, researchers should not only concentrate on parents, but also on siblings as well in understanding the family dynamics that occur during rapists’ childhoods.

There were a few limitations in this study. One limitation is that we had to rely exclusively on self-report in measuring attitudes toward women and perceptions of parental rearing. To address concerns about the honesty of participants, we included the BIDR (Paulhus, 1991), which is reliable for use in forensic populations (Kroner & Weekes, 1996). There were no significant differences between our groups in the level of desirable responding, which provided some indication that socially desirable responding—if it occurred—was at least equivalent between the groups.

Secondly, we were unable to directly administer the study due to research protocols set by the SCI at which we collected the data. Many of the surveys had to be discarded due to incomplete data; the loss of data may have occurred because the administrators of the study themselves were unfamiliar with the questionnaires. Related to data collection, the number of participants was low, ostensibly because of participant apprehension over how the information was going to be used. Participant apprehension raises two concerns. First, there may be generalizability issues, as participants who completed the study fully may have been more educated or had less evaluation apprehension than participants who did not complete the study. Second, the low sample size also reduces the power of our statistical analyses, particularly given the need for a multivariate analysis.

Finally, we were unable to match participants in each group on the variable of race. Given that the Scott and Tetreault (1987) and Harmon et al. (1995) samples differed based on race and had conflicting results, we would have liked to be able to examine this inconsistency in more detail. However, analyses based simply on race showed that the conflicting literature is likely not due strictly to racial differences.

Despite these limitations, this study has the possibility of influencing sex offender treatment programs in prisons, parenting programs, and future research on rapists’ perception of women and parental rearing. This study has shown that the rapist’s family constellation is important and that research should not focus solely on the mother. It has also shown that the focus on context-specific characteristics, such as perceptions of the victim, versus general characteristics, such as attitudes toward women, may be important.

Our findings may be helpful in improving current offender treatment programs. At the Pennsylvania SCI where this study was administered, for example, there is an evidence-based cognitive-behavioral model of treatment, which uses a group-only format, as well as a points system (Commonwealth of Pennsylvania, n.d.). Participants must accumulate a percentage of the total possible points to successfully graduate from the program. The participants obtain points by attending group meetings, participating during group, and completing homework assignments. One part of the group includes addressing the client’s history of abuse. In this part of the treatment, efforts could be made to include not only consideration of abuse experienced from one parent, but from both parents, as well as dynamics with any female siblings.

The current study may also influence parenting programs. Our results showed that parenting styles differed between rapists and robbers. Assuming these differences are based on actual experiences and not narcissism, one avenue to reduce sexual offenses may be to work with parenting programs, perhaps by combining some element of existing sexual violence prevention programs. College campuses or prisons hold most of the common sexual violence prevention programs (Holcomb, 2010). Our research has shown the potential importance of parenting styles in the development of a rapist; it is possible that sexual violence prevention training could be integrated into parenting programs. These programs could help parents reduce overcontrol, abuse, and indifference, as well as educate parents about sexual violence. The outcome of this type of program could be a reduction in sexual violence.

Our research has some practical applications, although the findings are in need of replication. In addition to suggesting avenues for future research on general versus context specific differences in rapists, the accuracy of perceptions of parental rearing, and family constellation, focusing on parental rearing and family constellation may help to improve sexual offender treatment programs. The improvement of sexual offender treatment programs is crucial in decreasing the rate of recidi-
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vism among rapists, which will increase societal safety and the odds of successful reintegration of sexual offenders upon release. If research on parenting programs to address parental styles and rape could be developed, it has the potential to reduce the amount of sexual violence by reducing the number of first-time offenders as well.

References


Author Notes. Courtney A. Meyer, Department of Psychology, Lock Haven University; Tara L. Mitchell, Department of Psychology, Lock Haven University.

This study relies on a revised version of the AWS (Spence, 1973), written at the third grade level. For a copy of the revised version of the AWS, please contact the second author at mitchel@lhup.edu.

Correspondence concerning this article should be addressed to Tara L. Mitchell, Department of Psychology, Lock Haven University, Lock Haven, PA 17745. Email: tmitchel@lhup.edu