

People who embrace traditional masculinity beliefs less likely to report rape

September 5 2018

Even in cases where a rape has clearly taken place, traditional beliefs and assumptions about masculinity can cause both witnesses and victims to be uncertain about reporting it, according to new research conducted at Binghamton University, State University at New York.

In a study exploring possible reasons for the underreporting of rape, researchers at Binghamton University and SUNY Broome Community College had both male and female college students read a series of vignettes describing a clear incident of rape. In the different vignettes, which were randomly assigned, the rape was perpetrated by either a man against a woman, a man against a man, or a woman against a man. Afterwards, participants were asked to indicate how much blame they felt was attributable to the perpetrator or the victim; and then to consider, if they were the victim, how likely they would be to (1) tell people they know that the rape happened, or (2) to report it to authorities.

Even in situations that were clearly rape, individuals often appeared on the fence about whether or not they would disclose the rape to others.

"In general, participants were ambivalent about disclosing that they had been sexually assaulted, even though they identified the attack as a definite rape," said Binghamton University Associate Professor of Psychology Richard Mattson, corresponding author for the study. "The participants' [gender](#) role beliefs and [sexual orientation](#), together with the sex of the perpetrator, seems to affect their attributions of blame, which

could influence this tenuous decisional balance in ways that map onto patterns of underreporting in actual rapes."

The researchers found that male and heterosexual participants were more likely to blame victims and less likely to blame perpetrators, and were also less likely to disclose the rape if they were the victim. Endorsement of traditional beliefs and assumptions about men and masculinity seemed to be driving these associations.

"Regardless of gender (and sexual orientation), those who believed men should act more stereotypically masculine were less likely to either report a rape or disclose having been assaulted," said Mattson. "In part, this was because those endorsing such ideologies blamed victims more and minimized the responsibility of the perpetrators. However, the overall pattern of effects suggest a more complex picture in which different aspects of the masculine gender role might relate to underreporting for different reasons."

One surprising finding was that decisions to report a rape to authorities were more strongly tied to judgements about the perpetrator's actions than those of the victim.

"Regardless of how much blame a person placed on the victim for being raped, it was how they viewed the [perpetrator](#), how much blame they assigned to them, that affected their likelihood to report the incident to authorities," said Mattson.

The study highlights the importance of continuing to explore and critically reflect on our enduring traditional beliefs about gender and how these beliefs shape our understanding of both sexual behaviors and sexual assault, said Mattson.

"Our findings suggest that challenging belief systems and cultural

narratives about rape that exonerate perpetrators—particularly those related to gender and sexual orientation—may help to increase the reporting of rapes, which has implications for both public safety and the support and resources available to, and accessed by, victims of [rape](#)," said Mattson. "We hope these findings will serve to prevent the inadvertent and unjust blaming of victims while giving guilty perpetrators a pass."

More information: Susan M. Seibold-Simpson et al, Person- and Incident-Level Predictors of Blame, Disclosure, and Reporting to Authorities in Rape Scenarios, *Journal of Interpersonal Violence* (2018). [DOI: 10.1177/0886260518795171](https://doi.org/10.1177/0886260518795171)

Provided by Binghamton University

Citation: People who embrace traditional masculinity beliefs less likely to report rape (2018, September 5) retrieved 3 May 2024 from <https://medicalxpress.com/news/2018-09-people-embrace-traditional-masculinity-beliefs.html>

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