



Police Attitudes Toward Teenage Sexual Assault Complainants

Introduction

Scholars, advocates, and victims have focused on the ways in which police practitioners have treated adolescent sexual assault complainants. When law enforcement respond to victims with apathetic attitudes and hostile behavior, this has likely been the result of socialization into a culture and organization that engages in culpability attributions toward victims (Spohn, et al., 2015). Research has demonstrated the ways police personnel have been unsympathetic toward victims' experiences. Complainants who engage the criminal justice system have been met with skepticism and suspicion (Alderden & Ullman, 2012).

Attributions among law enforcement officers toward sexual assault victims may have resulted from a combination of the job role (Alderden & Ullman, 2012), the hypermasculine environment of police organizations (Franklin, 2007), and societal beliefs about rape (Jordan, 2004; Page, 2008). Regarding job role, police are tasked with examining the "facts" and identifying the "truth" (Alderden & Ullman, 2012, p. 6). As a result, officers have often drawn on past experiences, training, and informal organizational socialization when navigating these responsibilities. Regarding the hypermasculine environment, inflated displays of aggression and physicality have been promoted through recruitment techniques, academy training, and day-to-day job duties and peer interactions (Richardson, 2014). Van Maanen and Schein (1978) asserted that workplace behavior and socialization do not exist in a vacuum or without any external transmission of cultural and social values. Therefore, it is important to situate the law enforcement response to sexual assault victims within broader beliefs surrounding this crime. Overall, the problematic treatment of sexual assault victims by police is arguably the result of searching for "truth" within a hypermasculine occupational social climate—widely referred to as rape culture—that has sometimes justified sexual assault based on certain complainant and incident characteristics.

The current report presents findings from a study focusing on law enforcement attitudes toward teenage complainants. Relative to research on adult sexual assault cases, adolescent cases have received less attention. This study used framing theory to identify the ways police officers interpreted and reconstructed adolescent complainant behavior based on day-to-day experiences and societal encounters (Volkmer, 2009). This approach has facilitated the development of knowledge on police officer attitudes through the lens of framing theory while informing victim management-related policies and practices. This action-oriented report presents abbreviated findings from a study recently published in *Violence Against Women*.

Rape Culture

The ubiquitous linking of sexuality to violence has resulted in a "rape culture" where societal beliefs have normalized sexual violence and fostered an environment conducive to rape (Herman, 1988). These deeply ingrained negative social attitudes regarding victims and misguided beliefs about sexual assault are called "rape myths," defined as widely held views about the causes, consequences, perpetrators, and victims of sexual assault (Gerger et al., 2007). Research has indicated that law enforcement officers are sometimes suspicious of claims

Eryn Nicole O'Neal, Ph.D.

Brittany E. Hayes, Ph.D.

made by rape victims and have accepted some of the more common rape myths (e.g., the belief that "real rape" only involves strangers; Garza & Franklin, 2020; Jordan, 2004; Page 2008). Responses from criminal justice professionals are harmful to victims because this treatment has made victims question the utility and effectiveness of service providers (Ahrens, 2006). This is particularly salient regarding law enforcement, as they are often the first point of contact victims have with the criminal justice system.

Police Subculture

Rape myth acceptance and problematic views of sexual assault victims do not develop in a vacuum. Beliefs and ideals are often the product of interactions with social subsystems. The police are not immune to this type of socialization. Therefore, to completely understand law enforcement officers' framing of and attitudes toward sexual assault victims, it is necessary to discuss not only the societal dynamics that contribute to the development, growth, and maintenance of these views, but the smaller organizational structure with which the police interact.

The existence of the police subculture has been well-documented (Crank, 2010; Paoline et al., 2000). It is defined as the widely held set of attitudes, beliefs, and norms shared among officers (Paoline et al., 2000); although, police scholars are increasingly questioning the extent to which the police subculture is monolithic (Paoline, 2004; Crank, 2010). The police subculture communicates to its members various expectations about their career, interactions with fellow officers, as well as general attitudes (Adcox, 2000). Recruits are taught the formal rules and laws associated with police work as well as the informal beliefs, norms, and expectations officers learn from seasoned coworkers.

Rape Myths

Prior research has revealed that some police officers hold problematic views of sexual assault victims, but they are often at low levels (Sleath & Bull, 2017). Misconceptions of SA that are fueled by rape myth acceptance can prevent law officers from providing full protection to certain victims (O'Neal, 2017). First, increased levels of rape myth acceptance are associated with increased victim blaming and minimized perpetrator blaming (Sleath & Bull, 2012). Second, those with higher rape myth acceptance are less likely to believe victims who report experiences that do not mirror "real rape" (Page, 2008). Third, when compared to students, officers were found to have a higher acceptance of myths associated with denial that a rape occurred (Sleath & Bull, 2015). These examples may indicate that officer perceptions and the level of belief assigned to complainants are established based on individual officer adherence to rape myths (see Edward & MacLeod, 1999).

Adolescent Complainants

Scholarship investigating law enforcement perceptions of sexual assault and complainant age has produced inconsistent results. Regarding research examining both adult and juvenile cases, some scholarship suggests that there is no relationship between victim age and officer perceptions of victim credi-

bility (Beichner & Spohn, 2012; Spohn et al., 2014). Conversely, other research examining both adult and juvenile cases suggests that older victims are more likely to be perceived as credible by criminal justice professionals (Spears & Spohn, 1997). Research focusing solely on perceptions of juveniles has also produced mixed findings. Hicks and Tite (1998) found that law enforcement officers considered younger adolescents to be more credible (compared to older adolescents); but, McCauley and Parker (2002) found no difference in officer perceptions regarding the age of adolescents. Given mixed findings, work specifically focusing on officer perceptions of minor complainants is needed.

Officer Attitudes and Framing Theory

Goffman’s (1974) theoretical work on frame analysis argues that situations and interactions are defined by how individuals and groups make sense of, organize, and communicate about reality. Because situations and interactions are often complicated and require an individual to draw from a variety of perspectives, frames offer individuals a shortcut by focusing attention on factors that the individual reasons to be the most important to the situation. Additionally, organization-based frames dictate “rules and regulations” for members of the organization to follow (March & Olson 1989). These frames are often so deeply embedded in the organizational context that even those who disagree with the frame will often comply because conformity in the workplace is expected (Scott & Lyman, 1968). These factors can potentially result in the widespread acceptance of various beliefs within the police department. Using data from 130 Florida organizations, Martin and Powell (1995), explored the organizational and community conditions that influence legal responses to rape victims. The main conclusion from this research is that numerous factors position legal organizational staff to treat rape victims unresponsively. Frames specific to police are described here (Martin & Powell, 1995). First, rape victims are seen as a source of evidence rather than as victims of crime. Second, police anticipate the reactions of prosecutors, judges, defense attorneys, and jurors. Third, affective neutrality is desired and empathy is prohibited. Fourth, time and energy constraints cause expeditious processing practices—police are trained to handle various types of cases; therefore general knowledge and practices are valued, preventing a specialized response to rape. Fifth, police protocols require that the police ensure the validity of evidence they collect. Overall, these factors cause the police to treat victims in an unresponsive way. Martin (1997) examined official accounts of rape processing work and focused on gendered organization theory’s proposition that organizations are gendered. This claim is in contrast with the bureaucratic model which states that organizations are gender-free (Acker, 1990). Overall, findings suggested support for gendered organization theory and Martin (1997) concluded that gender and work are inextricably linked and mutually reproduce each other. Some organizations explicitly included gender in their policies and practices. Most organizations assigned processing work with a gendered division of labor. Moreover, gender organization was produced informally when protocol and guidelines say it is irrelevant (Martin, 1997).

Methods

Data

Understanding officer attitudes toward teenage complainants may help understand why the factors associated with sexual assault case processing can vary depending on whether the incident involves adult or juvenile complainants (see Campbell et al., 2015; Spohn & Tellis, 2014). We rely on data from in-depth semi-structured interviews with 52 LAPD sex crimes detectives collected in 2010. Semi-structured interviews deviate from the structured format in that they allow new concepts or topics to emerge during the interview based on participant dialog (Wengraf, 2001). This methodology combines

the flexibility of an open-ended format with the directionality of a survey (Schensul et al., 1999). In an effort to increase the likelihood of forthright self-disclosure, sociodemographic characteristics about participants including gender, race, age, and Bureau or Division assignment were not recorded

Analytic Strategy

We carefully read each transcript in full and performed a line-by-line text analysis of the interviews to systematically assign codes to phenomena and to identify themes that repeatedly emerged. Constant comparison involves determining whether codes/themes generated in one case apply across cases (Charmaz, 2014). This step is imperative to the process as it assists in theory development during each step of analysis (Charmaz, 2014)—a feature of qualitative research that enhances reliability and validity (Morse et al., 2015).

Results

Interviewees overwhelmingly framed teenagers as the “typical” or “common” false reporter, even going as far as saying, “If we profiled those who make a false report they would be young females” because “most [false reports] involve teens.” Out of 52 interviewees, 38 detectives mentioned that teenagers lie about SA, with the majority (92%, n = 35) describing teenagers as means-serving false reporters (see Table 1). The remaining small minority of detectives stated that although teenagers lie about occurrences of SA, they do so for good reasons (8%, n = 3). Fourteen detectives did not discuss teenagers in their interviews.

Teens Lie About Sexual Assault For Self-Serving Reasons

Most (n = 35) detectives in this sample framed teenagers as self-serving false reporters. Within this group of detectives, interviewees asserted that teenagers lie about SA for five primary reasons. These motivations include (1) excusing age-inappropriate behavior; (2) efforts to gain attention from parents; (3) seeking revenge; (4) their general runaway status; and (5) help-seeking. One (<1%) detective in this group made general statements about teenagers lying about sexual assault without providing explanations of motivations.

Table 1. Attitudes toward Teenage Complainants (N = 52)^a

	N	%
Teens Lie About Sexual Assault	38	100%
Teens lie about sexual assault for self serving reasons	35	92%
<i>Teens lie:</i>		
To excuse age-inappropriate behavior.	(30)	(79%)
To gain attention from their parents.	(3)	(8%)
As a mechanism for revenge.	(2)	(<1%)
Because they are runaways.	(4)	(11%)
Because they are seeking help.	(1)	(<1%)
Detective did not mention teenagers^b	14	
^a Values in parentheses are not always mutually exclusive		
^b Not relevant for the current study objective		

Excusing Age-Inappropriate Behavior

Overall, these teenagers were said to “lie to get out of trouble.” Thirty detectives discussed that the typical false allegation of SA included teenagers who were afraid of getting in trouble for ditching school, attending parties where they engaged in alcohol or drug consumption, engaging in consensual sex, or not making curfew. When asked about false allegations generally, detectives often provided teen-specific examples, “the one that we get most is young teenagers who don’t make curfew or have done something that they know their parents would not approve of [like] ditching school and using drugs and had consensual sex;” or “she said she was kidnapped and raped—turned out that she ditched school, went to a party and was drinking or smoking weed, and

made it up to explain her absence.” These examples demonstrate that detectives made problematic and accusatorial assertions about teenagers and false reporting based on prior experiences, often drawing on previous case assignments.

Attention-Seekers

In this sample, three (8%) detectives described scenarios where teenage complainants lied about sexual victimization as a means of gaining attention from parents. For example—when asked about motivations behind false reporting—these detectives said, “To gain attention, especially with younger victims;” and “One example, she alleged she was kidnapped and raped and said the reason she fabricated was because her parents are divorcing and no longer speak and she wanted them to speak and she said it worked because now they are speaking.”

Revenge

The third type of lying teenager described by detectives included revenge-based false reporting motivations (5%). One detective simply said, “revenge.” The other said, “Older daughters and stepdads where the girls don’t like their stepfathers and want them out of the home. Revenge and anger are motivating factors.”

Runaways

Four (11%) detectives mentioned runaway teens and false reporting. Two detectives did not elaborate further, refraining from providing an example or explanation. As an example,

I had one with a chronic runaway who reported that she was picked up on the street, at knifepoint, taken to an alley, and raped. The suspect walked her to his place, kept her there overnight, raped her repeatedly, threatened her, and the next morning let her go [...] I could arrest him for rape because I have the crime report, but am I? Nothing corroborated her story, said she was hit, choked, etcetera; nothing supported this in the SART (sexual assault response team exam).

Selfish Help-Seeking

Lastly, one (>1%) detective discussed help-seeking as a motivation behind teenage false reporting. This detective said, “One of the common problems I have with juveniles, they are out beyond curfew and have to justify if they have sex with a boyfriend and want medical treatment because they fear they are pregnant.”

Teens Lie About Sexual Assault For Good Reasons

Three (8%) detectives acknowledged that teenagers lie, but for good reasons. These accounts focused on the complexity of motivations for false allegations, highlighting situations where teenagers lied about SA incidents to evade physical abuse, due to unstable mental health statuses, or to cover-up an incident inflicted by a family member. Regarding the first example, one detective referenced a case where a complainant “came up with a story of a stranger to protect her boyfriend (who had been physically abusing her).” This detective also acknowledged that false reports are rare, stating, [it is] “very rare to have a false report.” Regarding a potential false report involving a complainant described as mentally “unstable,” one detective described how it is “difficult to determine whether someone is telling the truth [...] and] if it turns out she didn’t tell the truth I know I investigated it on my part.” Lastly, one detective discussed a case where a complainant lied about a stranger SA at the request of her mother. The complainant in this case was raped at knifepoint by her brother.

Discussion and Implications

In this sample (N = 52), 38 detectives described teenagers as lying complainants, with 35 detectives portraying teens as means-serving false reporters and three detectives asserting that teens lie for good reasons. In these cases involving teenagers, complainants are perceived to be control-seeking through the use of false reporting—whether the report is actually false or not (see Glick & Fisk, 2001). As

previously mentioned, the inherent suspicious attitudes of law enforcement officers toward teenage rape victims may be a result of the officer role, which requires close examination of “facts” and the identification of the “truth” (Alderden & Ullman, 2012, p. 6). This idea is in line with contemporary frame analysis, which defines organizational frames as interpretive schemas that actors use to deal with various situations (Goffman, 1974). Because situations and interactions are often complicated and require an individual to draw from a variety of perspectives, frames offer individuals a shortcut by focusing attention on factors that the individual reasons to be the most important to the situation. In this case, the teenager status of the victim may be viewed as the most salient factor.

O’Neal et al. (2014) investigated the motivations for false allegations of SA. Salient to the current discussion regarding teenagers, O’Neal and colleagues (2014) found that one false allegation motivation, labeled “avoiding trouble/alibi,” involved either (1) young girls who fabricated a SA to avoid the consequences of missing curfew, drinking or using drugs, or engaging in consensual sex, or (2) older teens and adult women who made up a SA to cover up consensual sexual activity with someone other than a current partner. It must be noted, however, that these cases were often far more complex. Complainants described dysfunctional relationships with their parents as well as abusive intimate relationships. It is possible that LAPD police view most teenagers as false reporters because they have experience with such cases, despite estimates that the rate of false reports among rapes reported to the LAPD in 2008 are somewhere between 4-5% (Spohn et al., 2014). It is possible that these teenager-related attitudes are so deeply embedded in the organizational context that even those who initially disagree with the organizational viewpoint eventually internalize such beliefs because conformity in the workplace is expected (Scott & Lyman, 1968).

Second, this study partially supports prior research that suggests that police responses to SA victims are shaped by widespread societal victim-blaming views (Jordan, 2004). Even though false reports of sexual victimization are uncommon, beliefs that women lie about sexual victimization are widespread. One belief that influences law enforcement interactions with SA complainants is misconceptions surrounding the high prevalence of false rape allegations (Jordan, 2004). It appears that rape myths, particularly regarding false reporting, facilitate the formation of beliefs regarding teenage complainants.

Third, this study has implications for law enforcement practice. O’Neal (2017), in her study of law enforcement victim credibility assessments, argued that officers need to prioritize dismantling rape myths or they will continue engaging in policing techniques that deny full protection to certain types of victims. O’Neal (2017) was referring to victims who were perceived to have character flaws (e.g., mental health issues) and whose cases did not fit pervasive societal views about what constitutes a “genuine victim” and “real rape.” The current study suggests that the same may apply to teenage complainants, where officers need to actively work against myths surrounding false reporting. In addition to denying protection, rape myth acceptance contributes to underreporting and case attrition (Edward & McLeod, 1999). Developing appropriate SA responses is particularly important for law enforcement officers, as they are often the first interaction victims have with the CJS. Working toward dismantling rape myths may increase reporting and decrease case attrition (O’Neal, 2017).

It should also be noted that approximately a quarter (27%, n=14) of the detectives in this study did not discuss teenagers in their interviews. We cannot know for sure why these detectives remained silent about teens in their interviews. But, possible explanations include not working with teenage complainants, not viewing teenage complainants as distinctly different from adult complainants, or viewing teenagers as inherently more credible. Indeed, research in this area is needed, prior research has produced inconsistent findings (Beichner & Spohn, 2012;

Hicks and Tite, 1998; McCauley & Parker, 2001; Spears & Spohn, 1997).

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