



Does Training Affect Rape and Domestic Violence Myth Endorsement Among Police Personnel? A Trend Analysis

The frequency with which sexual assault and domestic violence occurs is pervasive. Recent national estimates have demonstrated that, across the United States, more than 33% of women have experienced a wide range of sexually violating experiences perpetrated by a current or former intimate partner (Smith et al., 2018). These experiences have included physical violence, sexual violence, and other forms of emotionally and psychologically controlling behavior (Smith et al., 2018). Additionally, official data and self-report surveys have demonstrated that as many as 1 in 6 women and 1 in 33 men will experience attempted or completed rape in their lifetime (Black et al., 2011). These statistics demonstrate greater prevalence when focused on students enrolled in institutions of higher education (IHEs). Specifically, women in IHEs face increased risk of victimization, where between 20% to 25% will likely experience some form of sexually violating experience during their tenure in college (Fedina et al., 2018; Fisher, Cullen, & Turner, 2000). While these crimes have been labeled a public health crisis, formal response has had shortcomings.

Police Response to Sexual and Domestic Violence

Despite their occurrence, these crimes are among the most underreported to formal authorities. Specifically, data from 2016 indicates that 49% of domestic violence incidents and less than one-quarter of sexual assault incidents were formally reported to law enforcement. Low reporting among sexual assault and domestic violence survivors has been attributed to re-victimization or insensitivity from criminal justice practitioners. Indeed, when survivors present to report victimization and they are met with stigma, disbelief, skepticism and invalidation, their trauma is exacerbated and they experience secondary victimization. This often deters survivors from continuing participation in the formal criminal justice process in terms of cooperation with investigation, formal interviews, assistance with suspect identification/apprehension and later help-seeking behaviors. All of this has produced increased case attrition (Sleath & Bull, 2017).

While not systematic, police agencies have received heightened scrutiny for their response to sexual assault and domestic violence. Lack of effective and victim-centered formal criminal justice processing has drawn attention to the ways first responders interface with survivors who formally present to file a report to law enforcement. An instructive antecedent to case attrition may be, in part, myths surrounding sexual assault and domestic violence held by police officers that have an effect on discretionary decision-making in terms of how to process formally with cases involving gender violence. To be sure, cultural messages surrounding sexual assault and domestic violence proliferate among society and within the general public. Police personnel are not immune from these messages (O'Neal, 2017).

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Rape Myth Endorsement

Rape myths are culturally-accepted beliefs surrounding what constitutes a “real rape,” who are “real” survivors and who perpetrates sexual assault. These are widely held beliefs

that neutralize the seriousness of rape, blame the victim, and excuse the perpetrator (Edwards et al., 2011). The concept of rape myths dates back to Brownmiller's (1975) seminal work, but Burt's (1980) research solidified these ideologies as commonly held among samples of the general public. These myths fall into three broad categories and include, “victim masochism,” “victim precipitation,” and “victim fabrication.” When individuals falsely believe that “women cry rape” or “men get blamed when a woman has bad sex or regret sex,” individuals are endorsing myths of victim fabrication. Victim masochism includes myths such as “women enjoy rape” and “women like rough sex.” Finally, myths centering on deservedness, such as “women who wear tight skirts” or “hang out with dangerous men get what they deserve” are endorsing victim precipitation myths. Collectively, these beliefs undermine the significant trauma of rape, protect perpetrators from responsibility, and hold victims culpable. Understanding the manifestation of rape myth endorsement is critical as adherence creates an adversarial climate accepting of violence against women. Within the context of law enforcement, rape myth endorsement plays a primary role in producing secondary or re-victimization, has diminished perceptions of victim credibility, prejudiced report writing, and reduced the likelihood that an officer will involve an advocate in the investigation—all of which exacerbate case attrition.

Domestic Violence Myth Endorsement

Domestic violence myths are cultural beliefs and stereotypes that are widely and persistently held by both the general public and police personnel. These myths function similarly in that they neutralize violence, excuse the perpetrator, and blame the victim. Specifically, myths suggest that survivors are masochistic, seek out controlling men, could leave if they wanted to, and provoke the violence (Koss et al., 1994). Other myths include the idea that under or unemployed women, women of color, those with limited education, and women from underprivileged families-of-origin are the most likely victims. The durability of these myths have become institutionalized and have translated to shortcomings in police response to domestic violence calls for service (Twis et al., 2018).

Effectiveness of Police Training

Recent efforts have seen a focus on the implementation of specialized, victim-centered and trauma-informed training to enhance and augment police re-

sponse to sexual assault and domestic violence survivors. An exhaustive review of the literature on training yielded five studies examining the effect of training on police response to sexual assault and one study examined the effect of training on police response to domestic violence (Darwinkel et al., 2013; Lonsway et al., 2001; Oehme et al., 2016; Sleath & Bull, 2012; Smith, et al., 2016). Collectively, this research has demonstrated inconsistent results surrounding the effect of specialized training on police attitudes for sexual assault. One study assessing training on domestic violence produced promising findings. Inconsistencies in conclusions from the limited training literature may be explained by heterogeneity in police samples, different training protocol, therapeutic integrity, the duration or dosage of the program, timing of evaluation in terms of memory decay, agency size, and geographic location.

Lonsway, Welch, and Fitzgerald (2001) examined the effects of training in a methodologically robust design, using a pre- and post-evaluation and reported no significant differences in rape myth endorsement among program completers. More recent studies have produced positive outcomes among police samples following exposure to specialized sexual assault training, such as decreased rape myth endorsement (Smith, Wilkes, & Bouffard, 2018), though there is little evidence that these attitudes have translated to changes in behavior. The present study uses a trend analysis to assess the impact of a trauma-informed training on rape and domestic violence myth endorsement among a sample of police participants.

Methodology

Data for the study presented here came from a larger federally-funded grant project through the Office on Violence Against Women and a research partnership with a large, urban police department located in one of the five most populous and diverse U.S. cities.

Pre-Training Data. Initial, baseline data were collected from police personnel in August 2016 at all 14 police substations. A purposive sample of roll calls were selected to maximize participation while taking into consideration scheduled leave. Roll calls were held at 6-7am, 2-3pm, and 10-11pm. Prior to the scheduled survey date, reminder announcements were made by Police Lieutenants from the agency's Special Victims' Division to further facilitate participation. On the scheduled survey date, researchers administered pencil-and-paper surveys to commissioned officers who were present for roll call after reading a University Institutional Review Board approved description of the voluntary and anonymous nature of the study. Police personnel were invited to participate but were not offered incentive. Individuals did not receive anything of value in return for their participation. Surveys contained items presented in set order and administration took approximately 25 minutes. Baseline survey administration yielded 502 surveys for a 98% response rate.

Post-Training Data. Following the 2016-2017 training cycle that lasted from September 1, 2016 to August 31, 2017, data were collected from program completers using Qualtrics, an online survey platform. After participation in training, personnel were provided with post cards that identified the survey, highlighted its voluntary and anonymous nature, and provided the Qualtrics URL link with access instructions. Participants did not directly receive anything of value. To maximize participation in the online, post-training survey, reminder emails were sent at 2-weeks, 4-weeks, and 8-week intervals following training. Post-

training survey administration yielded 571 surveys—a 20% response rate and a 50% completion rate.

Measures

Rape myth endorsement was captured using the 20-item Illinois Rape Myth Acceptance Scale—Short Form (IRMA-SF; Payne, Lonsway & Fitzgerald, 1999). Items were measured on a 6-point, Likert-type scale from 0 (*strongly disagree*) to 5 (*strongly agree*). Twenty items were summed to create an index that ranged from 0 to 100, where higher numbers indicated stronger endorsement of rape mythology ($\alpha = .855$).

Domestic violence myth endorsement was captured using Peters' (2008) 18-item Domestic Violence Myth Acceptance Scale. Items were measured on a 6 point, Likert-type scale from 0 (*strongly disagree*) to 5 (*strongly agree*). Twenty items were summed to create an index that ranged from 0 to 90 where higher numbers indicated stronger endorsement of mythology ($\alpha = .869$).

Trauma-informed training was an agency-wide intervention that included a mandated four-hour training block for all 5300 police personnel during the 2016-2017 training cycle. Training addressed gender bias, neurobiology of trauma, best practices in responding to sexual and family violence, and available resources for survivors. Additional covariates included in the model as control variables included officer demographic and occupational characteristics. Officer sex, race, educational attainment, years of service, number of sexual assault calls for service in the last 12 months, and number of family violence calls for service in the last 12 months were accounted for.

Results

Table 1 presents the sample descriptive statistics with independent samples *t*-tests to identify if there were significant differences in demographic characteristics across the untrained and trained samples. Bivariate analyses revealed differences on participant sex and race.

Table 1. Independent Samples *t*-tests

Variables	Pre-Training Sample n = 502		Post-Training Sample n = 571		t
	n (M)	%	n (M)	%	
Officer Sex					-6.83*
Male	452	90.0	426	74.6	
Female	50	10.0	145	25.4	
Officer Race					
White	190	37.8	299	52.4	-4.82*
Black	122	24.3	95	16.6	3.10*
Latinx	135	26.9	125	21.9	1.90*
Other	52	11.0	52	9.1	
Education					
High School	37	7.4	23	4.0	-5.47
Some College	140	27.9	126	22.1	
Two Year Degree	61	12.2	54	9.5	
Four Year Degree	202	40.2	206	36.1	
Graduate School	62	12.4	162	28.4	
Years of Service	(11.63)		(15.23)		

Specifically, there were significantly more male police participants in the pre-training subsample compared to the post-training subsample. Second, There were significantly more White police partici-

pants in the post-training subsample compared to the pre-training subsample and significantly more Black, and Latinx police participants in the post-training subsample compared to the pre-training subsample. On average, officers in the pre-training subsample reported approximately 12 years of service compared to 15 years of service in the post-training subsample.

The study's main research question focused on whether the trained sample of police personnel reported decreased sexual assault and domestic violence myth endorsement. Two separate ordinary least squares regression models were estimated. Table 2 presents the findings for the OLS regression model predicting rape myth endorsement. Findings demonstrate that officer sex had a significant and negative effect on rape myth endorsement, indicating that women participants reported lower levels of rape myth endorsement compared to men. Additionally, the trauma-informed training variable was significant, which means that the post-training subsample of participants reported significantly lower endorsement of rape mythology when compared to the pre-training subsample.

Table 2. OLS Predicting Rape Myth Endorsement

Variables	b	SE	β
Officer Sex (0 = male, 1 = female)	-3.37	0.91	-0.12*
Black ^a	-1.42	0.89	-0.05
Latinx ^a	0.45	0.83	0.02
Highest level of education	0.18	0.28	0.02
Years as officer	-0.01	0.01	-0.05
Number of SA reports responded	0.15	0.37	0.01
Training (0 = pre, 1 = post)	-3.51	0.74	-0.16*
R ²	0.05		
F	8.22*		

Table 3 presents the results of the multivariate OLS regression model predicting domestic violence myth endorsement.

Table 3. OLS Predicting Domestic Violence Myth Endorsement

Variables	b	SE	β
Officer Sex (0 = male, 1 = female)	-4.30	1.03	-0.13*
Black ^a	-2.60	1.01	-0.08
Latinx ^a	-0.50	0.95	-0.02
Highest level of education	0.03	0.33	0.01
Years as officer	-0.01	0.01	-0.04
Number of DV reports responded	0.59	0.28	0.08*
Training (0 = pre, 1 = post)	-3.13	0.98	-0.12*
R ²	0.07		
F	10.84*		

Findings indicate that, similar to rape myth endorsement, participant sex had a significant and negative effect on myth endorsement, such that women participants reported lower levels of adherence to domestic violence mythology. The number of domestic violence reports a participant responded to in the previous 12 months was also a significant predictor of mythology. Specifically, as officers reported responding to more family violence calls for service, they reported increased myth endorsement. Finally, training emerged as significant, such that the post-training subsample of participants reported lower levels of mythology when compared to the pre-training subsample.

Discussion

To reiterate, this study reported abbreviated findings from a trend analysis assessing the effect of a mandatory, trauma-informed training on police participant endorsement of rape and domestic violence myths among a sample of survey-takers from a large, urban police department located in one of the fifth most populous and diverse US cities. Several findings are worthy of discussion. First, in both multivariate models, training was significant. This means that the post-training subsample reported decreased levels of mythology as compared to the pre-training subsample. Second, participant sex was a significant and substantively meaningful predictor of myth endorsement, such that women reported lower levels of both forms of adverse cultural stereotypes.

While findings are noteworthy, they are not without limitations. First, while the trend design employed here used independent pre- and post-training samples, responses from these two groups could not be linked due to human subjects' protections and the anonymity of surveys. As a result, individual change over time and a causal relation between training and mythology cannot be established. Results should be interpreted accordingly. Second, post-training survey data were collected through an online platform and yielded a response rate of 20% with a completion rate of 50%. This was after multiple contacts were made following Dillman et al.'s (2014) mail survey method to facilitate response. This response rate aligns with previous studies on law enforcement samples and those that have employed online administration methods (see Renzetti et al., 2015) without direct incentives (Couper, 2011). These findings are not necessarily related to non-response bias (Nix et al., 2017) though findings should be interpreted with caution.

Implications for Texas Police Agencies

In terms of implications for the state of Texas, it is important to note that the 86th Texas Legislative Session demonstrated unprecedented investment in response to Texas crime victims, specifically sexual assault survivors. Within the context of law enforcement officers across Texas, senate bill 586 Watson/Leave augmented the training that Texas peace officers are already required to receive. The senate bill included the implementation of trauma-informed training for *all* Texas peace officers in order to improve police response to victims of child abuse or neglect, family violence, and sexual assault effective September 1st, 2019.

Findings from the present translational report are the first to provided empirical support for the implementation of trauma-informed training on police response to sexual and domestic violence. Indeed, when police officers are presented with the most recent, evidence-based information regarding training, every stakeholder has the potential to benefit.

Additional implications from the findings presented here suggest it may be fruitful to focus on increasing female representation among police personnel. Women in policing have been beneficial in terms of fewer misconduct and use of force reports, increased diffusion of conflict, and increased citizen satisfaction. That police participant sex significantly predicted decreased rape and DV myth endorsement in both multivariate models while simultaneously considering the effect of training also suggests that increasing female representation would be advantageous for police processing outcomes, potentially decreasing case attrition and increasing and victim/survivor satisfaction and cooperation with sexual and family violence investigations.

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