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Police Decisions in a Rape Scenario: The Effect of Trauma Response, Forensic Evidence, Stranger–Perpetrators, and Rape Mythology

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Abstract

This study examined the direct effect of "classic rape" characteristics, and how they were moderated by rape myth endorsement, on the likelihood of arrest, perceived district attorney charge acceptance, and perceived suspect conviction using a formal rape disclosure among a sample of 468 police participants from a sizeable municipal law enforcement agency in one of the fifth largest and most diverse U.S. cities. A randomly assigned, between-subjects factorial vignette design was employed. Manipulations included stereotypical trauma response, forensic medical exam, and perpetrator type. Path modeling revealed statistically significant relations between stereotypical trauma response, forensic medical exam, perpetrator type, and the three outcome variables. Rape myth endorsement moderated the effect of manipulations on the dependent variables. Implications for research and policy are discussed.

Keywords

sexual assault, forensic medical exam, stranger–perpetrator, trauma response, police case processing

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Introduction

Research on sexual assault has identified police as "gatekeepers" in the criminal justice system (Kerstetter, 1990) because they exercise significant discretion to investigate, present a case to the district attorney (DA), or unfound a case. Scholars have argued that police and prosecutorial decision-making in sexual assault cases cannot be fully disentangled, and therefore, should not be empirically assessed in isolation from the downstream orientation of justice context (Spohn & Tellis, 2019). The impetus for a focus on police decision-making in sexual assault cases has been multifaceted. The last several decades have seen policy shifts related to sexual assault case processing (Spohn & Horney, 1992) and U.S. cities have been scrutinized for untested forensic medical exam backlogs (Campbell et al., 2014; Campbell & Fehler-Cabral, 2018). Multidisciplinary, coordinated-community responses have encouraged a trauma-informed and victim-centered response to sexual assault (Martin, 2005), and researchers have emphasized the ways police have magnified case attrition, proposed largely due to misinformation surrounding the manifestation of trauma (Campbell et al., 2019; Franklin et al., 2020; Maddox et al., 2012). Despite important reforms, shortcomings have continued. Sexual assault happens with frequency but has remained considerably underreported. Nearly 20% of women and one in 14 men have experienced attempted or completed rape in their lifetime (Smith et al., 2018), yet only 33% of sexual assault offenses will be reported (Morgan & Truman, 2020). Among those victims who formally report to police, the "second rape" is not an uncommon experience (Campbell et al., 2001). This negative interaction with police—being met with skepticism, disbelief, and insensitivity during the police response, has hindered victim cooperation (Campbell & Raja, 1999; Patterson, 2011) and accelerated case attrition.

Research has suggested that only 18%–33% of sexual assaults reported to police will be disposed by arrest (Alderden & Ullman, 2012; Morabito et al., 2019). The process of screening cases for investigation and prosecution by police has centered on social constructions of "real victims" and the "classic rape" (Du Mont et al., 2003; Stewart et al., 1996). These historically entrenched stereotypes have informed police perceptions of appropriate victim behavior during and after a sexual assault and have influenced police attributions of responsibility for victim provocation (Amir, 1967) or allegations of false reporting (see Belknap, 2010). Despite archaic narratives rooted in rape mythology, recent advances in psychology and neurobiology have identified considerations for police, including commonly held stereotypes surrounding the way a victim presents behaviorally during a formal disclosure (Ask, 2010). Police perceptions of victims and their interpretation of the circumstances, including case and victim characteristics, have significant implications for case progression that warrant attention. Indeed, when police misperceive trauma presentation and question the authenticity of a formal sexual assault disclosure, victims experience secondary victimization (through disbelief and stigma) and are disincentivized to continue participating in the formal criminal justice process. Crime severity (Spohn & Tellis, 2012), assault location (Bouffard, 2000), victim–offender relationship (Ylang

& Hotlfreter, 2020), weapon use (Alderden & Long, 2016), injury (McLean & Goodman-Delahunty, 2008), victim cooperation (Meeker et al., 2019), and forensic medical evidence (Tasca et al., 2013) have been integral in the response to sexual assault. Research has also explored the effect of rape myths on police decision-making (Garza & Franklin, 2021; O'Neal, 2019; Page, 2008, 2010; Sleath & Bull, 2017) and has highlighted deleterious outcomes when police have endorsed rape mythology. Limited research has acknowledged the importance of trauma presentation when a victim reports a sexual assault (see Klippenstine & Schuller, 2012; Maddox et al., 2011, 2012), though recent efforts have reported a significant empirical relation between rape myth adherence and trauma presentation stereotypes (Franklin et al., 2020). Instead, police have held a series of relatively durable beliefs surrounding how a crime victim *should* act that are analogous to rape mythology but at odds with the neurobiological brain/body response (Ask, 2010). The theoretical disconnect between the effect of trauma on behavior and the way police expect a crime victim to behave has propelled scholars to speculate negative consequences for case progression, though to date, this has not been examined empirically. The present study used a between-subjects, factorial design to empirically examine the role of trauma presentation on police perceptions of case outcomes, while considering participant rape myth endorsement, forensic medical exam, and perpetrator type as covariates, using a randomly assigned vignette among a sample of police at a large, urban agency located in one of the five most populous and diverse U.S. cities.

Police Decision-Making and the "Classic Rape"

Termed the most "important processing agents in sexual assault cases" (LaFree, 1981, p. 582), police exercise significant discretion in screening, investigation, and disposition of cases. Suspect, victim, and incident characteristics have shaped police perceptions of the credibility and convictability of a case. The paradigm of a "classic rape" has produced the framework from which individuals have interpreted these characteristics. The "classic rape" paradigm has stemmed from cultural rape myths that have justified sexual violence (Burt, 1980; Koss et al., 1994) through the social construction of how women "ought to" behave in intimacy interactions (Franklin, 2013). The "classic rape" has suggested that cases involving assault by a stranger–perpetrator, wielding a weapon, and producing gratuitous injury are among the most genuine (Lisak & Miller, 2002). Du Mont et al. (2003, p. 469) argued the classic rape is, "…an act of violent, forceful penetration committed by a stranger during a blitz attack in a public, deserted place. The victim is portrayed as a morally upright, White woman who is physically injured while resisting." When these characteristics are present during an offense, research has demonstrated that victims have been increasingly more likely to report the assault (Alderden & Long, 2016) and police perceptions of assault seriousness have increased (Spohn & Tellis, 2012) relative to when an incident has not been characterized by these circumstances. Similarly, when an incident reflects the "classic rape," police have expected prosecutors to accept charges and prosecutors have expected juries to return a guilty verdict (Spohn & Tellis, 2019) more so than

when an incident does not reflect the "classic rape." To be sure, each criminal justice actor makes decisions with at least some attention to how cases may be perceived and acted on by subsequent personnel—termed the downstream orientation of justice (Frohmann, 1997).

Alternatively, cases not conforming to the "classic rape" have been met with callous system response. Research on the neurobiology of trauma has noted how the human body is flooded with hormones following a traumatic event, producing a series of chaotic outcomes on an individual's behavioral display. Victims may present with flat affect, make delayed reports, or lack expressive behavioral signs of pain (Barrett & Hamilton-Giachritsis, 2013). These behavioral indicators have conjured notions of deceit. Additional factors related to the victim and her identity politics/social position have decreased the severity and seriousness with which police view this crime and have reported increased culpability toward victims including race/ethnicity, lower educational attainment, receiving social welfare assistance, and risk-taking behaviors (O'Neal, 2019; O'Neal et al., 2019). Officers have expected, for example, that "reliable" victims dress conservatively (Sleath & Bull, 2012), have a reputable job (Page, 2008), and present a consistent narrative of events (Alderden & Ullman, 2012; Maddox et al., 2012)—all expectations derived from the "classic rape" legacy. When these expectations of timely, consistent, and sequential reporting are not met, victims' motives and "truth-telling" have been questioned. Officers have suspected false allegations (Venema, 2016), alleged "attention-seeking" behavior (Barrett & Hamilton-Giachritsis, 2013, p. 208), and reported diminished credibility (Maddox et al., 2012). To that end, scholars have argued that officer expectations for how sexual assault victims *should* behave have impacted case processing decisions, though police perceptions of trauma manifestation and their effect on formal case processing decisions have not been empirically examined.

Rape Mythology

Rape mythology, defined as the "attitudes and beliefs that are generally false but are widely and persistently held" (Lonsway & Fitzgerald, 1994, p. 134), has neutralized the severity of sexual assault, justified perpetrator behavior, and blamed the victim. These myths have facilitated general hostility toward women (Brownmiller, 1975; Page, 2008); police have not been unaffected (Belknap, 2010; Garza & Franklin, 2021; Venema, 2018). Rape myths have provided the scaffolding for what has defined a "real victim" or a "classic rape" (Brownmiller, 1975), and have influenced police attributions of victim credibility (Page, 2008) and sexual assault case processing decisions, more generally (Garza & Franklin, 2021; Venema, 2018). Research on rape myth endorsement has demonstrated men report higher levels of rape myths than women (Grubb & Turner, 2012; Suarez & Gadalla, 2010). Race effects have also been reported, with increased endorsement among People of Color compared to White counterparts (Jimenez & Abreu, 2003; Suarez & Gadalla, 2010). Rape myth endorsers have attributed increased victim blame and decreased perpetrator culpability when presented with sexual assault incidents (Goodman-Delahunty & Graham, 2011).

Additionally, police endorsement of rape myths has negatively influenced system response to sexual assault (Garza & Franklin, 2021; Sleath & Bull, 2017). Belknap (2010, p. 1336) asserted, for example, that the:

> …significant adherence to rape myths by…the criminal legal system makes it practically impossible to unravel the highly layered "truth" about false rape allegations, and poses real, negative impacts for victims, who are all too often assumed to be making false reports.

To that end, rape myth endorsement may deter investigative progress, including whether the DA will accept charges and suspect conviction.

Forensic Medical Exam

The advent of forensic medical evidence has transformed policing in terms of evidence preservation and the certainty with which evidence may implicate a particular suspect (Campbell et al., 2017). This, coupled with the collection of a sexual assault kit (SAK; also termed "rape kit"), has enhanced outcomes for sexual assault case processing. Physical biological evidence can authenticate an assertion of rape, improving case convictability. Recent work has reiterated the importance of a forensic medical exam in capturing biological or forensic evidence used in suspect identification through deoxyribonucleic acid (DNA) testing (Campbell et al., 2018; Peterson & Sommers, 2010); and for known suspects, DNA testing can reveal serial offending (Campbell et al., 2018).

Research has also demonstrated the presence of a SAK has improved police perceptions of victim reliability through a "trial by fire" imposed to remedy the historic police suspicion of false rape allegations. Corrigan (2013, p. 924) argued the forensic medical exam and SAK collection "…imposes demands on rape victims unlike those required for any other type of criminal complainant." Here, police have perceived the voluntary submission of a highly invasive and time-consuming exam as an indicator for victim credibility. Indeed, forensic evidence has increased the arrest and prosecution of sexual assault cases. Peterson and Sommers (2010) reported that forensic evidence in sexual assault cases increased arrest, prosecutorial referral, charging decisions, and conviction. Similarly, Holleran et al. (2010) and Tasca et al. (2013) reported that physical and biological evidence captured through forensic medical evidence increased suspect identification, arrest, and prosecution.

Stranger–Perpetrators

One of the most resilient rape myths has involved the victim/offender relationship, where stranger–perpetrators have been perceived as more serious and worthy of intervention compared to intimate partner– and acquaintance–perpetrators (Alderden & Ullman, 2012; O'Neal & Spohn, 2017). Stranger–perpetrators have been historically viewed as more threatening because a woman's chastity has been violated. Instead,

the "stranger-danger" stereotype psychopathologizes rape as an individual-level problem among perpetrators (Lisak & Miller, 2002) who prey upon undeserving women (Franklin, 2013).

This myth has had negative consequences for victims of intimate partner– and acquaintance–perpetrated rape (Franklin & Garza, 2021; Grubb & Harrower, 2008; Sleath & Bull, 2012) as police have viewed stranger–perpetrators with heightened concern (Du Mont et al., 2003; Spohn & Holleran, 2001; Spohn & Tellis, 2012). Prevalence research has suggested, however, that only 20% of sexual assaults among women aged 18–24 years old involved stranger–perpetrators, compared to intimate partner– or acquaintance–perpetrators (Sinozich & Langton, 2014). Prior intimacy between the perpetrator and victim has delegitimized harm, limited victim credibility, and increased victim blame (O'Neal & Spohn, 2017). Police who endorse the "stranger-danger" stereotype may view victims of intimate partner– and acquaintance–perpetrated assaults with more scrutiny (O'Neal & Spohn, 2017) and be less likely to proceed formally with a case.

Stereotypical Trauma Response

The initial contact between a sexual assault victim and an officer can have significant consequences for subsequent formal processing decisions. Victims can exhibit conduct and demeanor inconsistent with the emotionality and behavioral expressiveness traditionally expected by police (Ask, 2010; Wrede & Ask, 2015). Victims have approached police with restricted affect, emotional numbing, avoidance of eye contact, and a disjointed recollection of events (Kilpatrick et al., 1992; Rothbaum et al., 1992)—all diagnosable criteria for posttraumatic stress disorder (American Psychiatric Association [APA], 2013). These are also characteristics associated with deceit, equivocating, and fabrication by police who have been trained to interrogate *suspects* (Ask, 2010; Venema, 2016).

When victims do not exhibit the despair and hysteria that police typically expect (Franklin et al., 2020; Maddox et al., 2011), research has reported that a victim's behavior has been misconstrued as deceptive and they have been disbelieved (Akehurst et al., 1996; Ask, 2010). Victims with visible indicators of expressive emotionality have been viewed as more credible complainants (Bollingmo et al., 2008), in part from rape myths entangled with notions of appropriate femininity (Johnson, 1997). The relation between stereotypical trauma presentation on police decisions, however, has not been empirically examined. It may be that when the responding officer does not understand this behavior as trauma and interprets it as deception, they may discontinue the investigation because they view the victim as unreliable. If, instead, police identify this as trauma-related behavior, but believe the DA or later, a jury, may view the victim with skepticism and disbelief, police may not proceed formally, or may not believe the DA will accept charges because a case would not be sufficiently convictable.

Purpose of the Present Study

While recent research has devoted considerable effort toward understanding police response to sexual assault, significant gaps remain. Most notably, existing literature has not examined the effect of victim stereotypical trauma presentation on police case processing decisions. To address this, the present study used the "classic rape" paradigm to understand police intentions in a rape scenario using an experimental vignette design with attention to stereotypical trauma presentation. This study employed a randomly assigned, 2 (stereotypical trauma presentation/flat affect and nonlinear recollection of events) × 2 (forensic medical exam/no exam) × 2 (stranger–perpetrator/acquaintance–perpetrator) between-subjects, factorial design to assess the role of vignette manipulations on case processing decisions among police participants from a large, municipal agency in one of the five most populous and diverse U.S. cities. The present study addressed the following research questions and subsequent directional hypotheses:

RQ1: How does stereotypical trauma response, compared to flat affect and nonlinear recollection of events, affect police decisions, controlling for rape myth endorsement?
Hypotheses 1: There will be a positive empirical relation between stereotypical trauma response and police decisions regarding arrest, DA charge acceptance, and suspect conviction.
RQ2: How does forensic medical exam evidence, compared to no forensic evidence, affect police decisions, controlling for rape myth endorsement?
Hypothesis 2: There will be a positive empirical relation between forensic medical exam evidence and police decisions regarding arrest, DA charge acceptance, and suspect conviction.
RQ3: How does a stranger–perpetrator, compared to an acquaintance–perpetrator, affect police decisions, controlling for rape myth endorsement?
Hypothesis 3: There will be a positive statistical relation between stranger–perpetrator and police decisions regarding arrest, DA charge acceptance, and suspect conviction.
RQ4: Does rape myth endorsement moderate the effect of experimental vignette manipulations on police decisions in a rape scenario?

Method

Procedure

Data were part of a larger study funded by the Office on Violence Against Women, U.S. Department of Justice. The partner agency employed 5,300 commissioned personnel[1] and 1,200 civilians[2] with one central station and 14 agency substations during data collection. Voluntary and anonymous surveys were administered using Qualtrics, an online survey platform, after police personnel participation in an

agency-wide, mandated four-hour training block on gender violence during the 2016–2017 training cycle.[3] All 5,300 commissioned personnel completed the training. Following each weekly training session, trainees were invited to participate in an anonymous, online survey. A postcard with survey instructions and a URL link was distributed. Individual participants did not directly receive anything of value.[4] All participants in this study completed the mandatory training. Once online, participants were provided with an Institutional Review Board-approved informed consent statement. The survey captured demographic information and police experiences, attitudes concerning victims, perceptions of sexual and family violence,[5] and responses to a randomly assigned, manipulated vignette. Survey completion took approximately 25 min. Reminder emails were sent at 2-, 4-, and 8-week intervals following training (Dillman et al., 2014). Questions were presented in a set order.

Participants

Survey administration produced 1,221 surveys that were opened and partially or fully completed. Of those, 933 surveys included a response that had been selected for at least one item—a response rate of 17.60%.[6] In total, 468 surveys contained completed data, yielding a completion rate of 50.02%. The mean age of participants was 45.16 years ($SD = 8.73$; range = 25–64). The majority of the sample were men ($n = 394$, 74.8%) compared to women ($n = 133$, 25.2%). Over half of participants reported race/ethnicity as "White" ($n = 277$, 52.6%), followed by "Latino/a" ($n = 114$, 21.6%), "African American" ($n = 87$, 16.5%), "Asian/Pacific Islander" ($n = 31$, 5.9%), "Native American/Alaska Native" ($n = 3$, 0.6%), and "Other" ($n = 15$, 2.8%). More than a third of participants reported a 4-year college degree ($n = 194$, 36.8%), and 28.7% ($n = 151$) reported a graduate degree. Participants averaged 18.15 years of experience (SD = 9.35; range = 1–42), and 62.3% identified their rank as a "police officer" ($n = 325$, 61.7%), compared to "sergeant" ($n = 145$, 27.5%), "lieutenant" ($n = 47$, 8.9%), "captain" ($n = 9$, 1.7%), or "assistant chief/higher" ($n = 1$, 0.2%). More than one-third of participants were assigned to "patrol" ($n = 188$, 35.7%) or "investigation" ($n = 205$, 38.9%), while 25.4% ($n = 134$) were "administrative personnel."[7]

Study Design

This study used a 2 (stereotypical trauma response vs. flat affect and nonlinear recollection) × 2 (forensic medical exam vs. none) × 2 (stranger–perpetrator vs. acquaintance–perpetrator) between-subjects, factorial design. Vignette manipulations were informed by cultural norms that have defined a "real victim" and the "classic rape." Participants were randomly assigned to one of eight manipulated vignettes that depicted the formal disclosure of a rape. Content was developed in collaboration with the agency's Special Victims' Division supervisory staff to ensure a realistic scenario. Each vignette described a rape disclosure following, "the morning after going out to a nightclub." The victim filed a formal report with the police and noted no struggle or visible bruising but said the previous night's encounter ended in unwanted

vaginal penetration. In the scenario, police interviewed the suspect, who admitted to sexual intercourse with the victim but maintained that sex was consensual.

Forensic Medical Exam. Four vignettes depicted a rape disclosure with a forensic medical exam: "First thing that morning, [victim] went to a nearby hospital to have a Sexual Assault Nurse Examiner [SANE] collect forensic medical evidence." The remaining four vignettes stated, "[victim] arrived at the police station to report a rape." All vignettes noted, "[victim] told police she had not struggled and there was no evidence of bruising." A binary variable captured the forensic medical exam, no = 0 ($n = 299$, 49.3%); yes = 1 ($n = 307$, 50.7%).

Stranger–Perpetrator. Four vignettes depicted an acquaintance–perpetrated rape: "[victim] believed she had been raped by a man she knew, named [suspect]." The remaining four vignettes depicted a stranger–perpetrator: "[victim] believed she was raped by a man she did not know." A binary variable captured stranger–perpetrator, no = 0 ($n = 307$, 50.7%); yes = 1 ($n = 299$, 49.3%).

Stereotypical Trauma Response. Four vignettes described a victim with expressive emotionality, behavioral displays of upset, and a linear recollection of events (Ask, 2010; Maddox et al., 2011, 2012). Stereotypical trauma response was described: "[victim] was hysterical. She was crying as she told her story, recalling all of the details and describing the events that led up to the rape. In her statement, she described arriving at the club with a group of friends and midway through the evening, connected with [suspect]. At the end of the evening, [suspect] offered to walk her home to the house she shared with two roommates. When they got back to her place, she invited [suspect] up for coffee. After coffee, they started kissing on the couch and [suspect] started undoing her blouse. She stated that she did not want to have sex. [suspect] said that was OK, and they continued to fool around. Then he undressed himself and, against her continued objections, penetrated her vaginally." The remaining four vignettes portrayed a victim who reports to police with flat affect and fragmented memory: "In her statement, [victim] was unemotional. Her story was disjointed, and she wasn't able to recall all of the details of the rape. She could not give police a clear description of the events that took place leading up to the rape but maintained that she had been penetrated vaginally after having said 'no' to her assailant." A binary variable captured stereotypical trauma response, no = 0 ($n = 311$, 51.3%); yes = 1 ($n = 295$, 48.7%).

Dependent Variables

Likelihood of arrest with victim cooperation. One item was presented to participants, "How likely is it that you would arrest [perpetrator] in this situation if [victim] was willing to cooperate?" from Franklin et al. (2019). Victim cooperation was explicitly stated as research has noted the importance of victim cooperation in case processing

(Kaiser et al., 2017). Responses were captured in a 6-point, Likert-type format: 1(*extremely unlikely*) to 6 (*extremely likely*); $M = 3.65$, $SD = 1.82$.

Perceived DA charge acceptance. One item was presented to participants, "How likely do you think it is that the prosecutor would file charges in this case?" to capture the perceived likelihood that the DA would move forward with a case or accept the charges, once the case had been submitted by police. Responses were captured in a 6-point, Likert-type format: 1 (*extremely unlikely*) to 6 (*extremely likely*); $M = 3.45$, $SD = 1.53$.

Likelihood of suspect conviction. One item was presented to participants, "How likely to you think it is that [perpetrator] would be convicted in court?" Responses were captured in a 6-point, Likert-type format: 1 (*extremely unlikely*) to 6 (*extremely likely*); $M = 3.01$, $SD = 1.50$.

Covariates

Rape myth endorsement. An initial pool of 20 items was generated from Payne et al.'s (1999) Illinois Rape Myth Acceptance-Short Form (IRMA-SF). Items were captured on a 6-point, Likert-type scale from 1 (*strongly disagree*) to 6 (*strongly agree*). The 20 items were subjected to exploratory factor analysis with maximum likelihood estimation, which produced a single, 17-item factor with an eigenvalue over 1 that accounted for 35.97% of the variance. Factor loadings ranged from .361 to .867 and were summed to create an index from 17 to 102, where higher values represented increased rape myth endorsement. Mean values for the 17 items that comprised the rape myth endorsement index ranged from 1.17 to 2.41 and standard deviations ranged from 0.627 to 1.348, indicating adequate variability ($M = 25.86$, $SD = 10.98$). Internal consistency reliability was excellent ($\alpha = .913$). Next, rape myth endorsement was divided into three categories to represent low, medium, and high levels of endorsement. The sample was split into roughly thirds with attention to natural breaks in the distribution of responses on the rape myth endorsement index. The "low" endorsers included scores of less than 20 on the scale ($n = 194$; 34.2%), the "medium" endorsers included scores between 20 and 26 ($n = 203$; 35.7%), and the "high" endorsers included scores of 27 or higher ($n = 171$; 30.1%). It is important to note that these categories do not represent "low," "medium," or "high" absolute levels of rape myth endorsement. Rather, they capture the lowest and highest groups, along with those in between, *within the sample of officers in this study*.

Analytic Strategy

Analysis proceeded in three stages. First, manipulation checks, in the form of independent samples *t* tests and analysis of variance (ANOVA), were conducted to determine if participant sex and race had a significant effect on rape myth endorsement and the three dependent variables. Next, bivariate analyses were estimated to identify significant

relations between rape myth endorsement, experimental manipulations, and the three dependent variables. Finally, path modeling in AMOS 22.0 was used to assess whether rape myth endorsement moderated the relation between three experimental manipulations on the dependent variables. A path model was estimated with the full sample. Next, three additional path models were estimated using low, medium, and high rape myth endorsement. The magnitude and direction of significant path coefficients were interpreted in light of model fit indices.[8]

Results

Manipulation Check

Participant Sex. Existing research has supported a sex effect on rape myth endorsement (Grubb & Turner, 2012) and culpability attributions toward victims (Grubb & Harrower, 2008). Four independent samples *t* tests were estimated to test the effect of participant sex on: (a) rape myth endorsement and (b) official judgments related to the rape scenario. Results demonstrated only the relation between participant sex and rape myth endorsement differed significantly, $t(612) = 4.72$, $p > .000$. Men reported increased rape myth endorsement ($M = 26.87$, $SD = 11.61$) compared to women ($M = 22.86$, $SD = 8.26$). There were no sex differences on the dependent variables.

Participant Race. Research has also supported a race effect on rape myth endorsement (Suarez & Gadalla, 2010). Four ANOVA models were estimated to test the effect of participant race on (a) rape myth endorsement and (b) official judgments related to the rape scenario. Rape myth endorsement differed significantly across race groups, $F(1, 5) = 6.64$, $p > .000$, partial $\eta^2 = .052$. Asian Americans reported significantly increased rape myth endorsement ($M = 35.51$) compared to Native American ($M = 26.33$), White ($M = 25.43$), African American ($M = 23.90$), or Latinx participants ($M = 25.80$). There were no race differences on the dependent variables.

Bivariate Results

Table 1 presents bivariate results for each of the experimental manipulations, rape myth endorsement, and the three dependent variables. Significant differences emerged across two of the experimental manipulations. Participants reported increased likelihood of arrest, perceptions of DA charge acceptance, and perceptions of suspect conviction when the scenario involved a stereotypical trauma response compared to scenarios that described a victim with flat affect and a nonlinear recollection of events. Arrest likelihood did not differ by forensic medical exam, but evidence from a forensic medical exam significantly increased perceived DA charge acceptance and suspect conviction. There were no significant differences by perpetrator type.

Table 1. Bivariate Analyses Assessing the Effect of Experimental Conditions on Criminal Justice Outcomes Overall and by Level of Rape Myth Endorsement.

	Endogenous variables		
Exogenous variables	Arrest	Charges	Conviction
Full sample			
Stereotypical trauma response			
Yes	3.94 (1.86)	3.69 (1.54)	3.20 (2.81)
No	3.36 (1.75)	3.21 (1.46)	2.81 (1.41)
	T = −3.80**	T = −3.87**	T = −3.10**
	Cohen's d = 0.32	Cohen's d = 0.32	Cohen's d = 0.18
Forensic medical exam			
Yes	3.73 (1.81)	3.61 (1.53)	3.19 (1.50)
No	3.56 (1.83)	3.27 (1.49)	2.81 (1.47)
	T = −1.10	T = −2.71**	T = −3.10**
	Cohen's d = 0.09	Cohen's d = 0.23	Cohen's d = 0.26
Stranger–perpetrator			
Yes	3.52 (1.83)	3.37 (1.56)	2.88 (1.46)
No	3.77 (1.81)	3.52 (1.48)	3.12 (1.53)
	T = 1.66	T = 1.20	T = 1.91
	Cohen's d = 0.14	Cohen's d = 0.10	Cohen's d = 0.16
Rape myth endorsement (scale)	−.143**	−.109**	−.108*
	$r^2 = 0.02$	$r^2 = 0.01$	$r^2 = 0.01$
Grouped rape myth endorsement			
Low	3.84 (1.99)	3.66 (1.61)	3.25 (1.59)
Middle	3.74 (1.86)	3.50 (1.50)	3.01 (1.46)
High	3.30[a] (1.51)	3.12[a] (1.39)	2.71[a] (1.39)
	F = 4.46*	F = 6.14**	F = 5.88**
	$Eta^2 = 0.02$	$Eta^2 = 0.02$	$Eta^2 = 0.02$

[a]Post hoc tests identified the higher rape myth endorsement group as significantly different from the other two groups.
*$p < .05$. **$p < .01$.

Rape myth endorsement was significant and negatively correlated with the three dependent variables. Increased rape myth endorsement predicted significantly lower arrest likelihood and decreased perceived DA charge acceptance and suspect conviction. When rape myth endorsement was categorized into three groups, high-rape myth endorsers reported significantly decreased arrest, decreased perceptions of DA charge acceptance, and decreased perceptions of suspect conviction likelihood.

Path Models

Full Sample. Path modeling was used to assess whether rape myth endorsement moderated the empirical relation between experimental manipulations on the three dependent variables: (a) likelihood of arrest with victim cooperation, (b) perceptions of DA

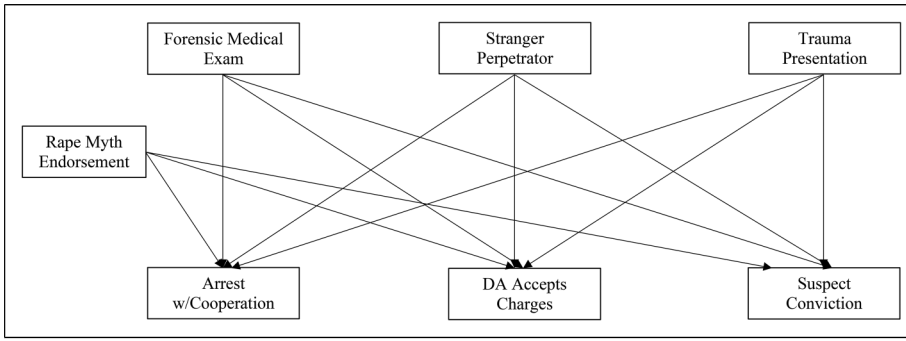

Figure 1. Hypothesized Path Model Assessing the Moderating Effect of Rape Myth Endorsement on Police Decisions.

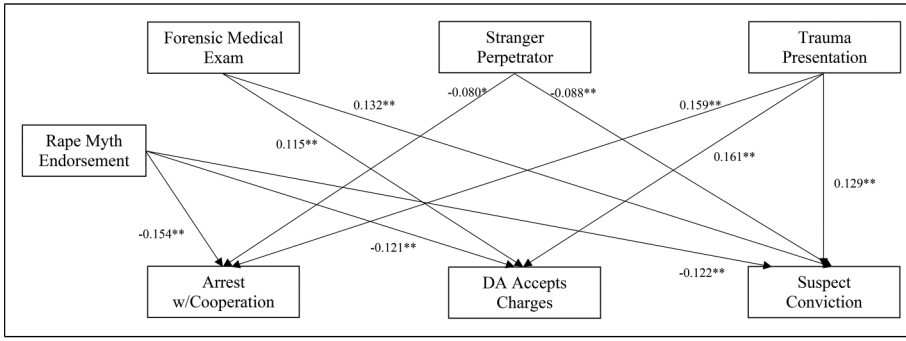

Figure 2. The Moderating Effect of Rape Myth Endorsement on Police Decisions.
Note. Standardized regression coefficients are presented. $\chi^2(3) = 4.351$, $p = .629$, CFI = 1.000, TLI = 1.011, RMSEA = .000, AGFI = .990, Hoelter .05 = 806. CFI = comparative fit index; TLI = Tucker–Lewis index, RMSEA = root mean square error of approximation; AGFI = adjusted goodness of fit index. *$p < .05$, **$p < .001$.

charge acceptance likelihood, and (c) perceptions of suspect conviction likelihood. Figure 1 presents the overall hypothesized path model. Path modeling calculates regression coefficients for each specified path while considering previous path coefficients in a single analysis and produces model fit indices that provide confidence when interpreting findings (Gau, 2010; Hu & Bentler, 1999; Kline, 2005). The path model presented in Figure 1 was tested using AMOS 22.0. The path model was recursive and properly identified. Model testing produced a good fit to the data $\chi^2(6) = 4.351$, $p = .629$, and fit statistics demonstrated strong model fit when compared to the independence model (comparative fit index [CFI] = 1.000), Tucker–Lewis Index [TLI] = 1.011, root mean squared error of approximation [RMSEA] = .000, and adjusted goodness-of-fit index [AGFI] = .990).[9]

Table 2. Path Models Assessing the Effect of Experimental Conditions on Criminal Justice Outcomes Overall and By Level of Rape Myth Endorsement.

	Endogenous variables		
Exogenous variables	Arrest	Charges	Conviction
Full sample			
Rape myth endorsement	−0.154**	−0.121**	−0.122**
Stereotypical trauma response	0.159**	0.161**	0.129**
Forensic medical exam	0.049	0.115**	0.132**
Stranger–perpetrator	−0.080*	−0.058	−0.088*
χ^2 (6) = 4.351, p = .629; CFI = 1.000, TLI = 1.011, AGFI = .990; RMSEA = .000; Hoelter .05 = 1641			
Low-rape myth endorsement			
Stereotypical trauma response	0.173*	0.214**	0.154*
Forensic medical exam	−0.082	0.004	0.076
Stranger–perpetrator	−0.064	−0.060	−0.017
χ^2 (3) = 1.873, p = .599; CFI = 1.000, TLI = 1.033, AGFI = .977; RMSEA = .000; Hoelter .05 = 806			
Mid-rape myth endorsement			
Stereotypical trauma response	0.178**	0.150*	0.064
Forensic medical exam	0.125	0.159*	0.192**
Stranger–perpetrator	−0.085	−0.166*	−0.225**
χ^2 (3) = 2.053, p = .561; CFI = 1.000, TLI = 1.027, AGFI = .976, RMSEA = .000; Hoelter .05 = 769			
High-rape myth endorsement			
Stereotypical trauma response	0.111	0.096	0.161*
Forensic medical exam	0.146	0.252**	0.161*
Stranger–perpetrator	−0.055	0.109	−0.001
χ^2(3) = 2.978, p = .395; CFI = 1.000, TLI = 1.001, AGFI = .959; RMSEA = .000; Hoelter .05 = 447			

Note. Standardized regression coefficients are presented.

Standardized regression coefficients for the full sample in the path model are presented in Figure 2 with only significant path coefficients presented for parsimony (see also Table 2). Rape myth endorsement had significant, negative effects on all three dependent variables; increased endorsement significantly decreased arrest likelihood and perceived DA charge acceptance and suspect conviction. Experimental manipulations exerted a significant effect on the three dependent variables. The presence of a forensic medical exam (no = 0, yes = 1) had a positive and significant effect on perceived DA charge acceptance and perceived suspect conviction, but not on likelihood of arrest. Additionally, a stranger–perpetrator (no = 0, yes = 1) significantly decreased participant likelihood of arrest and perceived suspect conviction but had no effect on perceived DA charge acceptance. Finally, stereotypical trauma response (no = 0, yes = 1) had a positive and significant effect on likelihood of arrest, perceived DA charge acceptance, and perceived suspect conviction.

Moderating Effect of Rape Myth Endorsement. Table 2 presents path coefficients for the models that were estimated separately for the three rape myth endorsement groups

(high, medium, and low). Experimental manipulations seem to have moderated participants' criminal justice judgments differently across levels of rape myth endorsement. At the mid-level of endorsement, all three vignette manipulations were significantly related to at least one outcome. Stereotypical trauma response significantly increased arrest likelihood and perceived DA charge acceptance, compared to the vignette scenarios that described flat affect and a nonlinear recollection of events. The presence of forensic medical exam evidence significantly increased perceptions of DA charge acceptance and perceived suspect conviction, compared to scenarios that described having no forensic medical exam evidence. Scenarios describing a stranger–perpetrator, compared to acquaintance–perpetrators, significantly decreased perceived DA charge acceptance and perceived suspect conviction. For low-rape myth endorsers, only stereotypical trauma response was a significant moderator on the dependent variables; trauma presentation, compared with flat affect and a nonlinear recollection of events, increased arrest likelihood, perceived DA charge acceptance, and perceived suspect conviction. Among low-rape myth endorsers, a forensic medical exam and perpetrator type were not significantly related to the dependent variables. Finally, among high-rape myth endorsers, the presence of a forensic medical exam significantly increased perceived DA charge acceptance and perceived suspect conviction compared when the vignette did not describe forensic medical exam evidence. Finally, stereotypical trauma response significantly increased perceived suspect conviction among high-rape myth endorsers when compared to victims who were described with more accurate trauma presentation. Experimental manipulations were not significant predictors of arrest likelihood among high-rape myth endorsers.

Discussion

The present study examined criminal justice case processing outcomes related to a hypothetical rape scenario from among 468 police participants commissioned at a municipal agency located in one of the fifth largest and most diverse U.S. cities. This study contributed to the research on case processing by using an experimental design with randomly assigned, manipulated vignettes to assess the effect of case characteristics on police perceptions of three formal outcomes, while considering the moderating effect of individual rape myth endorsement. Despite an increase in literature on sexual assault case processing, research on stereotypical trauma response is limited, particularly as it relates to behavioral displays of emotionality. Moreover, to the best of our knowledge, this is the *first* empirical study to directly assesses how stereotypical victim trauma response influences police decisions, and how this influence may be moderated by police rape myth endorsement. Several findings are worthy of discussion.

First, research questions 1 through 3 (and their related hypotheses) addressed the effect of experimental vignette manipulations on the dependent variables to demonstrate the importance of each factor—stereotypical trauma response, forensic medical exam, and stranger–perpetrator—on case outcomes. Significant path coefficients in Figure 2 illustrate the effect of these case characteristics while considering

participant rape myth endorsement on arrest, perceived DA charge acceptance, and perceived suspect conviction.

Stereotypical trauma response had significant, direct effects on all three dependent variables in the full sample path model, providing support for Hypothesis 1. To the best of our knowledge, this study is the first of its kind to experimentally manipulate trauma response in a scenario provided to a police sample to assess rape case processing decisions. Despite mandatory training to educate and normalize the unexpected behaviors often manifested by victims who present to police, including blunted affect, limited eye contact, and nonlinear recollection of events (Franklin et al., 2020), participants in this sample continued to interpret behavioral hysteria, expressive emotionality, and sequential recall as indicators of truth-telling. These factors influenced participant decisions related to arrest, perceptions of DA charge acceptance, and perceptions of suspect conviction. In this way, victim behavior representing the "classic rape" paradigm directly influenced decision-making. Prior research has demonstrated that stereotypical trauma response, specifically, the victim's emotional presentation, has had a considerable influence on police perceptions of victim credibility (Bollingmo et al., 2008). The current findings reiterate the importance of considering emotional affect, but *also* underscore the need to account for linear recollection, as indicators of trauma manifestation that may be significant for police who are directed with making case processing judgments about the vignette they had been presented with (Akehurst et al., 1996; Ask, 2010; Venema, 2016). It is important to note that trauma response significantly predicted the arrest decision for which these participants were responsible, *and* official judgments made by the prosecutor and jury. The latter decisions take place during subsequent, formal stages. Police in this study made decisions with attention to the downstream orientation of justice. Future research should continue to explore the role of trauma presentation on the formal criminal justice process, particularly as it is related to gendered offenses and "real victim" narratives.

Next, path model coefficients in the full sample revealed that a forensic medical exam increased perceived DA charge acceptance and perceived suspect conviction, providing partial support for Hypothesis 2, which predicted a significant, positive relation between the presence of forensic medical exam evidence and police decision outcomes. This finding reiterates existing research on the use of forensic medical exams, the significance of DNA, and the importance of forensic evidence, more broadly, in terms of strengthening the authenticity and defensibility of a case (Campbell et al., 2014; Henry & Jurek, 2020). Indeed, rape cases with forensic evidence provide both corroborating evidence and potentially identify the suspect in stranger–perpetrated incidents (Campbell et al., 2018; Peterson & Sommers, 2010). Police perceptions surrounding the utility of forensic medical exams in this study varied by perpetrator type. It may be that for acquaintance–perpetrated incidents, police value forensic medical exams, but not for evidentiary purposes because these are "consent cases," where suspect identity is not in question. Instead, research has noted that police interpret forensic evidence as a credibility marker, because "real" victims would willingly undergo an intrusive forensic medical exam (Yu et al., 2022) and this is indicative of cooperation (Bouffard, 2000)—both of which stem from normative judgments informed by the "classic rape" narrative.

In terms of stranger–perpetrators, path model coefficients demonstrate a statistically significant and direct effect on arrest likelihood and perceived suspect conviction while considering rape myth endorsement. Here, arrest and suspect conviction decreased when the suspect was a stranger, refuting the predictions outlined in Hypothesis 3. This finding does not reflect the "classic rape" paradigm; instead, these findings may be capturing the logistical challenges faced by police surrounding the timely identification and apprehension of suspects when the perpetrator is not known. In other words, police may engage more readily with acquaintance–perpetrators because less resource expenditure is necessary (O'Neal & Spohn, 2017). When the suspect is a stranger, police must rely on witnesses, DNA evidence, and other mechanisms that require additional time and effort to apprehend a suspect.

Research question 4 was concerned with whether rape myth endorsement moderated the effect of experimental manipulations on case processing outcomes. Important conclusions emerged from comparisons between respondents with low-, medium-, and high-rape myth endorsement. Low-rape myth endorsers reported the highest likelihood of arrest, perceived DA charge acceptance, and perceived suspect conviction in bivariate analyses. In the multivariate context, the hypothetical decision-making of these participants was not significantly impacted by a forensic medical exam or a stranger–perpetrator. Stereotypical trauma response significantly increased the likelihood of arrest, charge acceptance, and suspect conviction. Even among low-rape myth endorsers, all of whom had recently participated in a training on a trauma-informed response to sexual assault, stereotypical expectations of victim trauma presentation still influenced their hypothetical decision-making. This was the *only* experimental factor to affect those decisions.

In contrast, among high-rape myth endorsers, little else impacted criminal justice judgments. This supports the endurance of the "classic rape" narrative and the harmful consequences it has produced in criminal justice case processing. A forensic medical exam significantly increased perceived DA charge acceptance and perceived suspect conviction; and stereotypical trauma response significantly increased perceived suspect conviction. The experimental manipulations did not influence arrest, which is the single case processing decision included in this study under the police respondents' direct control. Recall that high-rape myth endorsers also reported the lowest likelihood of arrest. Perhaps nonarrest is their default, and these three case characteristics do little to sway that decision?

Decision-making among the mid-level rape myth endorsement group appears more malleable when considering the three experimental manipulations. Stereotypical trauma response, for example, increased arrest likelihood and perceived DA charge acceptance, and a forensic medical exam increased perceived DA charge acceptance and perceived suspect conviction. This was also the only group of participants for which suspect type was significant. Medium-rape myth endorsers reported a significantly lower likelihood that the DA would accept charges, or the suspect would be convicted in cases involving a stranger–perpetrator. Given that the DA charge acceptance and suspect conviction decisions occur in subsequent criminal justice stages, by individuals other than those who participated in this study, these findings suggest that

participants interpreted these outcomes through the lens of evidence that would most likely convince later decision-makers. This interpretation included the level of importance for forensic evidence that participants may have projected on prosecutors and jurors. This finding supports the downstream orientation of justice where police make decisions contingent on their perceptions of what a prosecutor or juror may think (Spohn & Tellis, 2019) and these perceptions are also influenced by narratives about "real victims" and "classic rape."

Findings presented here are instructive, though not without limitations. Data were collected through a web-based platform with a response rate of 17.60% and a completion rate of 50.02%. Strategies were employed to increase participation (Dillman et al., 2014) and the percent of usable data in this study was comparable to other analyses that have used online surveys with police participants (Renzetti et al., 2015). Nix et al. (2017) have suggested that lower response rates among police participants do not indicate nonresponse bias, particularly when sensitive information is collected. Results should be interpreted accordingly. Moreover, these findings reflect police personnel commissioned at a municipal agency in a large, urban U.S. city. Future research should consider the way police perceive case processing decisions from other geographic locations, including small and mid-sized agencies operating in rural and suburban communities with more homogenous populations.

The results from this study were derived using vignettes to identify participant perceptions of a formally disclosed rape scenario. Schwartz (2000) highlighted the utility of employing vignettes to understand victimization, but police participant behavior was not measured here. Existing research has supported the correlation between intentions to act and actual behavior (Kim & Hunter, 1993). It would be important for future research to assess police case processing decisions using other methodologies such as quantitative case file data analysis and qualitative interviews. Finally, the experimental manipulation representing stereotypical trauma response in this study described multiple components of trauma presentation—emotional affect *and* linear recall. It is important to note that trauma produces a multifaceted psychological and physiological response that is manifested in myriad ways and may differ by person. The scenario presented in this study did not disentangle which of these many presentations (e.g., affect *or* linear recall) might have a more substantive influence on police decisions in rape case processing. It may be that linear recollection is more important than emotional affect for police perceptions of victim credibility because a sequential narrative may counter myths about false rape allegations. Future research can build upon this contribution by employing vignettes with multiple, independent trauma manipulations to better understand how each single expression of trauma affects police decision-making in sexual assault cases.

Despite limitations, these findings have important implications. Police play an important role in case processing. This research has affirmed that rape mythology remains an area for intervention despite targeted training on the neurobiology of trauma. Curriculum would benefit from a continued focus on dismantling rape myths and understanding and normalizing trauma response. To that end, recent police programming has produced positive change among participants based on substantive content and dosage. Evaluation

research has reported that exposure to material presented during a 40-h training block significantly improved police attitudes about gender violence (Campbell et al., 2019; Darwinkel et al., 2013; also, Franklin et al., 2020) Research has also supported training protocols that promote cultural change and institutional transformation over time (Campbell et al., 2019; Sleath & Bull, 2012). While in-service and other training modalities may not motivate immediate change among police, scholars have argued that continued programming has the potential to generate behavioral change, long-term. In other words, training that incorporates content on neurobiology of trauma and the characteristics of sexual assault may take generations for police cohorts to evolve in ways that reflect departmental norms, where behavior resembles best practices.

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Notes

1. Commissioned personnel in the study jurisdiction refers to those personnel who have been licensed as a public safety officer through the State. These are individuals who have met work and training eligibility requirements, have successfully completed academy training, passed the state licensing examination, and have been appointed by a law enforcement agency withing 2 years from the date they passed the examination. Examples of

commissioned personnel include patrol officers, Lieutenant, Sargent, Captain, Commander, and administrators like Assistant Chief and Police Chief.
2. Civilian police personal are agency employees whose responsibilities do not require academy training and public safety licensure. Examples include legal counsel, members of a department's office of planning, the crime analyst, information technology personnel, and victim assistance professionals.
3. Instructors addressed gender bias, neurobiology of trauma, available resources and best practices in responding to sexual and family violence. Training began September 1, 2016 and was finalized on August 31, 2017.
4. Individual participants did not receive any incentive. Legal counsel determined that incentive through direct benefit (e.g., a drawing for something of value) was a conflict of interest.
5. The partner agency operates under a statute that classifies all domestic and intimate partner violence as "Family Violence," therefore, similar language was used in the survey description.
6. Franklin et al.'s (Franklin et al., 2012) peer-reviewed article reporting findings from an uncompensated web-based survey with a response rate of 5.24%—much lower than typical rates for mail-based surveys but not uncommon in online-facilitated questionnaires when participants do not receive direct incentive (see e.g., Couper, 2011).
7. A comparison of the sample to the agency population revealed similarities across data reported by the police partner for 2017. Men represented the majority of commissioned police personnel (83.77%). While the agency population was diverse, a direct comparison to the sample revealed some differences. White officers represented just under half of police (44.06%), followed by Latinx (27.77%), Black (21.09%), Asian (6.91%), and Native American individuals (0.17%). Personnel averaged 18.89 years of service with a mean age of 47. Personnel at the rank of "police officer" averaged 5.74 years of service and were, 34.84 years old (personal communication, Senior Staff Analyst, June 22, 2018).
8. Path analysis is a common analytic strategy with experimental designs and multiple correlated dependent variables and involves less restrictive assumptions than a traditional MANOVA, make it an appropriate analytic technique for this study (Bagozzi & Yi, 1989).
9. A good fitting model will typically yield a CFI of .95 or higher, a TLI of .95 or higher, an RMSEA of .06 or less, and an AGFI of .90 or higher (Hu & Bentler, 1999; Kline, 2005).

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