Understanding Community-Specific Rape Myths

Exploring Student Athlete Culture

Sarah McMahon
Rutgers, State University of New Jersey, New Brunswick

Using multiple measurement methods offers an opportunity to gain culturally specific information about rape myths. This study focuses on the subculture of student athletes and uses a survey, focus groups, and individual interviews to explore the meaning and role of rape myths. Although the survey indicates a low acceptance of rape myths, this finding is contradicted by the results of the focus groups and individual interviews. Subtle, yet pervasive, rape myths are discovered, as are myths that are unique to the student athlete community. This method provides a framework for social workers to explore rape myths in other communities and to subsequently develop appropriate educational and intervention programs to address and ultimately prevent rape.

Keywords: *mixed research methods; rape; student athletes*

Rape is a major social problem. About 1.5 million women have been reported to experience a completed or attempted rape each year in the United States alone (Tjaden & Thoennes, 1998). Yet given that rape represents one of the most underreported crimes, the actual prevalence is likely much higher (Koss & Harvey, 1991). Feminist researchers have argued that we are living in a "rape culture," in which our fundamental attitudes and values are supportive of gender stereotypes and violence against women (Buchwald, Fletcher, & Roth, 1993). One characteristic of living in a rape culture is support for rape myths, which Burt (1980) defined as "prejudicial, stereotyped, or false beliefs about rape, rape victims, and rapists" (p. 217) and Lonsway and Fitzgerald (1994) later described as "attitudes and beliefs that are generally false yet widely and persistently held and that serve to deny and justify male sexual aggression against women" (p. 134). Common rape myths include the belief that the way a woman dresses or acts indicates that "she wanted it" and that rape occurs because men cannot control their sexual impulses. Researchers have demonstrated that the acceptance of rape myths not only indicates problematic attitudes but also is an explanatory predictor of the actual perpetration of sexual violence (Berkowitz, 1992; Garrett-Gooding & Senter, 1987; Hinck & Thomas, 1999; Osland, Fitch, & Willis, 1996; Yescavage, 1999).

In addition to describing our general culture as supportive of rape, some researchers have identified certain "subcultures" or groups whose specific cultural norms legitimate violence against women. For example, feminist scholars have conducted extensive research on fraternities on college campuses and have found some of them to be "rape-prone cultures" whose group activities, language, rituals, and practices contribute to the creation of an atmosphere that tolerates or even promotes violence against women (see Martin & Hummer, 1989; Sanday, 1990). Other rape-prone subcultures include male athletic teams and the military (O'Toole, 1994). Research has suggested that there is a higher acceptance of rape myths and problematic attitudes toward women among these groups (Boeringer, 1999; Schwartz & Nogrady, 1996).

Typically, researchers have used quantitative scales to measure the acceptance of rape myths, frequently including Burt's (1980) Rape Myth Acceptance Scale (RMAS), Feild's (1978) Attitudes Toward Rape Scale, and other variations. Reviews of these scales have indicated several problems (see Anderson, Cooper, & Okamura, 1997; Lonsway & Fitzgerald, 1994). In addition to reliability and validity concerns, which are discussed later, this approach to measuring rape myths is problematic because it is not culturally specific (Lonsway & Fitzgerald, 1994; Ward, 1988). In trying to understand how rape-prone cultures function, it seems essential to explore the particular attitudes or beliefs of specific communities that contribute to a rape-supportive atmosphere. It has yet to be explored whether rape myths manifest and function differently among various communities, such as within fraternities, military groups, or teams of student athletes.

For social workers who work in counseling centers on college campuses, it is almost inevitable that the issue of rape will emerge. Research has suggested that 25% of women in college have been the victims of rape or attempted rape since age 14, and 20% to 25% of all women have experienced a completed or attempted rape during their 4- to 5-year college careers (Fisher, Cullen, & Turner, 2000; Koss, Gidycz, & Wisniewski, 1987). In addition to providing effective services to victims, social workers on college campuses are often charged with providing rape-prevention programs. Understanding the function of rape myths in various communities on campus is central to creating effective educational programs.

Social workers will likely encounter the issue of sexual violence, both on and off college campuses, because it is interconnected with other social welfare concerns that are central to the profession. Finding an appropriate method for understanding community-specific rape myths is critical for developing effective interventions. Using multiple data-collection methods is an important approach to gaining a deeper understanding of the presence, definition, and meanings of rape myths. Qualitative measures, such as focus groups and individual interviews, provide an essential opportunity to capture the essence of rape myths that may not materialize through the use of quantitative surveys. In addition to the benefits of triangulation, these methods support feminist principles of giving voice to participants and accounting for context (Reinharz, 1992).

The purpose of the study reported here is to use a multiple-method approach to understand the definition, function, and salience of rape myths within the student athlete community at one university. I hypothesized that the acceptance of rape myths, as indicated on the quantitative scale, would be minimal but that when the issue was further explored in focus groups and individual interviews, the presence of more subtle rape myths would emerge. This article briefly reviews traditional measures of rape myths, provides background information on student athletes and sexual violence, describes the method for the study, and discusses the results and implications for social workers.

Measuring Rape Myths

Measuring the acceptance of rape myths has been a popular method of assessing groups that have been identified as being at a high risk of perpetuating sexual violence, yet there are some major gaps in how it has been measured. First, it is difficult to find a reliable, updated measure. Many of the studies that have examined rape myths have relied on RMAS (Burt, 1980), a significant tool that was developed in 1980 to address the issue of "stranger rape" but whose language and scenarios are outdated (Lonsway & Fitzgerald, 1994). In his review of studies that have used RMAS, Buhi (2005) found serious problems with reliability,

including the fact that less than half of the articles reported reliability coefficients for the data used in the studies.

Second, studies that have used instruments other than RMAS have often defined the construct of rape myths differently and have used various scales to define and measure these attitudes. In their review of 24 separate measures of rape myths, Lonsway and Fitzgerald (1994) discovered a lack of theoretical consistency in defining and operationalizing rape myths and inadequately constructed psychometric properties. There are no standards for instruments that are used to measure these constructs, so although different authors have reported various prevalence rates of rape myths or that interventions have changed attitudes, it is difficult to interpret the significance of their findings.

Third, the issue of social desirability is rarely addressed in studies of rape myths. Because many high schools and colleges have implemented some form of education on issues of sexual violence during the past decade, many students have a greater awareness that certain traditional rape myths are not socially acceptable (Frazier, Valtinson, & Candell, 1994; Humphrey, 2001). However, these myths may exist in various, more subtle, and covert forms that have not been accurately assessed by current measures because of social desirability bias.

Student Athletes and Sexual Violence

With regard to the subculture of the student athlete community that I explored in my study, a small segment of largely theoretical work has been produced on the relationship among athletes, masculinity, and violence (e.g., Connell, 1990; Messner, 1994). Many of these authors have suggested that the athletic culture may foster violence against other men and women through narrowly defined ideas of masculinity that include dominance, aggression, and competitiveness (Bryson, 1987; Kidd, 1990). They have also argued that the institution of sport provides an arena for positively sanctioned violence (Bryson, 1987; Messner, 1994).

The debate still exists as to whether athletes are more likely to commit acts of sexual violence or whether they are simply more likely to be reported and publicized because of their celebrity status. A few studies have indicated that there is no significant difference between athletes' and nonathletes' proclivity to commit violence (Brown, Sumner, & Nocera, 2002; Crosset, 1990; Schwartz & Nogrady, 1996). During the past decade, however, a few studies have concluded that male student athletes are overrepresented among perpetrators of rape on college campuses (Crosset, Benedict, & McDonald, 1995; Crosset, Ptacek, McDonald, & Benedict, 1996; Frintner & Rubinson, 1993; Koss & Gaines, 1993). There is also some indication that male athletes have a higher acceptance of rape myths. For example, in his study of undergraduate men's attitudes toward rape, Boeringer (1999) found that male athletes responded more positively to 56% of the rape-supportive statements, whereas men in the control group responded to only 8% of them. The purpose of my study is not to determine if student athletes commit a higher percentage of rapes than do other students but, rather, to understand how rape myths function and exist within the student athlete community.

Method

This research was part of a larger study in which information about sexual violence and student athlete culture was collected from male and female sophomore and junior Division I student athletes at a large public university in the Northeast during the 2001-2002

academic year. Both quantitative and qualitative data were collected to explore the factors of the student athlete culture that may contribute to the occurrence of violence against women. A three-stage research design was implemented that included surveys that were administered to 205 sophomore and junior student athletes to measure rape myths, followed by a series of nine focus groups that were conducted with various teams that further explored attitudes toward violence against women and in-depth interviews that were held with a cross-section of 22 athletes that followed up on the responses that were given in the focus groups.

Minimal demographic information was collected from the participants to protect their confidentiality and increase the likelihood of participation. The only demographic information that was collected was gender and team, and for the purposes of protecting the participants' confidentiality, only the participants' gender is reported in the findings.

Survey

The survey contained two inventories: the Scale for the Identification of Acquaintance Rape Attitudes (SIARA; Humphrey & Hillenbrand-Gunn, 1996) and the Form A short-form version of the Marlowe-Crowne Social Desirability Scale (Crowne & Marlowe, 1964; Reynolds, 1982). The SIARA was developed to address some of the problems that have been identified in other measures of rape attitudes, particularly those in Burt's (1980) RMAS (Humphrey & Hillenbrand-Gunn, 1996). It represents a departure from the instruments that are typically used to measure students' attitudes toward sexual assault because it was specifically designed to address issues of acquaintance rape on a college campus. The scale contains 12 items that are measured by a 6-point Likert-type scale, from 0 (*strongly disagree*) to 5 (*strongly agree*). The scale coefficient alpha for the SIARA is .88 for women and .91 for men.

The Form A short-form version of the Marlowe-Crowne Social Desirability Scale (Reynolds, 1982) was included to provide some indication of the impact of response bias that may be present and thereby strengthen the internal validity. Although the Marlowe-Crowne Social Desirability Scale has been widely used, researchers have also found it too lengthy (33 items) to include with a battery of other tests, and therefore several short forms have been developed. Reynolds's (1982) Form A is recognized as one of the best of the short forms in terms of its factor structure and internal-consistency reliability (Loo & Thorpe, 2000). Form A contains 11 items and uses a true–false format. The reliability found by Reynolds (1982) in his study of 608 undergraduate students was .74.

Reliability tests were also separately run by gender for each instrument. The reliability for the SIARA was .91, although it was lower for women (.76) than men (.90). The reliability for the Social Desirability Scale was .62.

Focus Groups

A purposive sampling strategy was used to select teams for the focus groups. A variety of types of teams were desired, including men's and women's sports; high-profile sports, such as football, and less recognized sports, such as women's crew; and teams that had both male and female counterparts, such as soccer and track. Ten teams were invited and nine accepted the invitation to participate in the study, including football, wrestling, men's lacrosse, men's track, men's soccer, women's soccer, gymnastics, women's volleyball, and women's crew. All the participants received monetary compensation.

The focus groups were conducted as semistructured interviews and were facilitated by a male interviewer for the men's groups and a female interviewer for the women's groups.

Table 1
Participants in the Focus Groups and Individual Interviews, by Sports Team

Team	Number of Focus-Group Participants	Number of Individual Interview Participants
Football	8	3
Crew (women)	6	4
Gymnastics	6	1
Lacrosse (men)	6	1
Soccer (men)	5	0
Soccer (women)	6	5
Volleyball	5	2
Track (men)	3	3
Wrestling	3	3
Total	48	22

A total of 48 student athletes participated in the groups, including 25 men and 23 women. The size of the groups ranged from 3 to 8 participants (see Table 1).

I chose the questions in conjunction with a group of student athletes from the campus peer education program and staff from the university's department that serves victims of sexual violence. The final instrument included three main sections: team community, violence against women, and assuming leadership for social change. In the section on violence against women, the participants were asked a variety of questions that addressed rape myths, such as their definitions of rape and beliefs about victims and perpetrators. All the focus-group sessions were audiotaped and lasted about 1.5 hours each. The interviewers also completed an observation sheet for each team that noted the group dynamics.

I transcribed the tapes from the focus groups and reviewed the transcripts, along with the facilitators' notes and observation sheets. The cross-case analysis was based on the questions from the focus-group interview guide (Patton, 1990). The research questions were used as sensitizing concepts, and content analysis was used to search for emerging themes. The data were coded to note both the sensitizing concepts and other themes that emerged.

Individual Interviews

In-depth individual interviews with the focus-group participants were conducted to follow up on the themes that emerged in the focus groups and to determine whether there was a different response in a one-on-one situation versus a group interview. The final sample included 22 student athletes, 12 women and 10 men, who represented eight teams (see Table 1; men's soccer could not participate because of scheduling conflicts). All the participants received monetary compensation.

I created the interview guide after reviewing the results of the focus groups to determine which areas needed more in-depth exploration and which areas would provide a way to contrast the group versus one-on-one responses. The final guide contained the same three main areas as the focus-group guide, but certain questions were changed to elicit more in-depth information and to clarify information that was gleaned from the focus groups. The individual interviews lasted approximately 1 hour and were audiotaped.

The data-analysis techniques for the individual interviews were similar to those for the focus groups. Cross-case analysis was used to group answers from different participants on common issues (Patton, 1990). Using an inductive approach to analysis, I reviewed the

Table 2
Mean Composite Scores for the SIARA

Variable	n	M	SD	Range	t Value	p
Overall	202	15.42	11.01	0-60		
Gender						
Male	107	20.67	11.86	0-60	8.34	.000**
Female	95	9.49	5.80	0-36		
Know someone who was sexually assaulted						
Yes	98	12.62	10.20	0-46	−3.54	.001**
No	102	17.99	11.23	0-60		

**p < .01.

results of the interviews for emerging themes and coded the notes for themes. I reviewed the observation sheets completed by the interviewers while listening to the tapes to capture a sense of the tone and comfort level of each interview and compared the results from the individual interviews to those from the focus groups to note whether differences existed.

Results

I compiled the findings for each of the three stages of data collection—the survey, focus groups, and individual interviews—and assessed the acceptance of rape myths for each stage. The survey found a generally low acceptance of rape myths, but this finding was contradicted by the findings of the focus groups and individual interviews, which indicated the presence of subtle rape myths.

Survey

The possible range of total scores for the SIARA is 0 to 72, with higher scores indicating a higher acceptance of violence and rape myths. The responses were clearly skewed toward the lower end of the scale. The mean score for the sample ($N = 202$) was only 15.42, and when the scores were broken down by gender, the mean score for the men ($n = 107$) was 20.67 and the mean score for the women ($n = 95$) was a mere 9.49, indicating an extremely low agreement with rape myths. Although the scores were low, a comparison of the means revealed a higher acceptance of violence, as measured by the SIARA, for men and those who do not know someone who was sexually assaulted. Independent samples t tests were run to determine whether the difference in means was significant on the basis of these variables. As Table 2 shows, both gender and "whether you know someone who was sexually assaulted" proved to be significant.

Given the findings that gender and knowing someone who was sexually assaulted were two strong variables in explaining variability with the SIARA, I ran correlations to determine whether there was an association between the two variables and social desirability but found no significant correlations. I conducted additional tests to determine whether there would be a change in the results if individuals with high social desirability scores were removed. Therefore, the cases of those with a score of 7 or higher (with 11 being the highest possible indication of social desirability) were removed to explore a possible change in outcomes.

However, there was no change in any analysis with these cases removed. Therefore, on the basis of the results of the bivariate correlation, social desirability does not have a significant impact on the outcome variables.

Focus Group and Individual Interviews

The results of the focus groups and the individual interviews differed from the findings of low acceptance of rape myths on the SIARA. Certain subtle yet pervasive rape myths were expressed in both the focus groups and the individual interviews. The major themes related to rape myths were the misunderstanding of consent, the belief in "accidental" and fabricated rape, the contention that some women provoke rape, and the invulnerability of female athletes.

Defining rape, consent, and alcohol. The focus groups revealed that, in general, the male student athletes understood that forcing a woman to have sex is considered rape. All the men's teams defined rape by saying some version of "when the woman says no." However, some male athletes believed that when a woman says no, her response is not always clear-cut. As one male athlete commented, "Then you got some girls, too, who are playful, and their no, it really means yes, and sometimes it means no. Sometimes it's hard to tell." However, other members of his team directly challenged this statement by declaring that "no is no," regardless of the situation.

The participants' understanding of some of the more subtle issues, such as consent, was unclear. To gain a better understanding of the student athletes' definitions of rape, the individual interviews included direct questions to both the men and the women about the circumstances in which they considered an act to be rape. In the individual interviews, the participants were asked whether an act should be considered rape if the victim was drunk. Of the 22 participants, 11 clearly stated that it should still be considered rape, 7 provided more ambiguous statements, with qualifications for when it should be considered rape, and 4 did not answer this question. Three men and 1 woman said that if the girl is "silly" drunk, "incoherent," or "passed out," it is wrong, but that otherwise she is capable of saying no, and it should be considered rape only if she does not say no. During the individual interviews, 4 men talked about giving women alcohol to have sex and believing that it did not impair their ability to give consent. One man explained, "As long as they're [women] conscious, it doesn't matter how drunk they are. . . . Unless they're drugged and unconscious, they're capable of saying no. And if they don't, it's a mistake." It was interesting that this participant also said that alcohol is often used to get women drunk to have sex.

"Accidental" and fabricated rape. The male participants expressed the idea that rape is sometimes accidental and is sometimes fabricated by women. Both themes emerged in the focus groups and were confirmed in the individual interviews. During the focus groups, three of the men's teams acknowledged that there are some situations in which sexual violence can be unintentional or accidental. Examples included when both the victim and perpetrator are drunk or when there are so-called slipups or accidents that happen to male athletes. During the focus groups, one team had a particularly lengthy conversation about the issue. Some team members agreed that rape could be unintentional, but others voiced their disagreement. For example, one man explained, "Rape can happen as an accident— two people can be totally obliterated; . . . they can be in the heat of the moment and not even know." Another teammate stated, "Rape is rape, definitely," but another teammate

chimed in "unless it's accidental," to which a few other teammates agreed. Another member of the same team referred to the possibility of situations in which there are "slipups" and rape may occur, and some teammates agreed, whereas others did not.

The belief expressed by some participants in accidental rape was confirmed in the individual interviews. One man said that some men "could just snap at any time and be another person and not even realize [it] and . . . commit a rape and then calm down and be like, 'Oh man. I don't realize what I did.' But you did it already."

During the focus groups, three of the men's teams expressed the belief that women fabricate rape as a means of revenge. This issue was not brought up by any of the women's teams and was not included as a question by the interviewer. Members of these men's teams expressed the belief that certain types of women are either vengeful or simply regret having sex the next day and call it rape. One man explained,

> I know there are girls out there who accuse guys of it who haven't, first of all, who haven't touched them, second of all, who maybe did so but they were quite willing at the time, and it's like then the next morning, like, I just did that because I didn't like you and now I'm going to accuse you of raping me.

His teammates agreed, and another teammate explained that he has a friend who tapes every sexual encounter with women to have proof that it was consensual "because today women are quick to call rape."

Some teams expressed the belief that some women, particularly those who are drunk, simply regret having had sex and call it rape. One man said, "Some girls wake up the next morning and they're like, 'Oh, I shouldn't have done that, like I wouldn't have done that if I was sober,' but she remembers everything. I don't think that should be considered rape." Another player agreed and explained that, in addition, part of the issue is that women regret having sex but men do not.

This theme was confirmed in the individual interviews. Members of the men's teams explained that it is "known" that there are certain women who may falsely accuse them. One man said, "There are certain girls you should stay away from . . . because they get really drunk, and who knows what's gonna happen then. Better not to risk it."

Women provoking rape. A consistent theme that emerged during the focus groups and individual interviews was the belief that sometimes victims of sexual assault are culpable in their attack. This belief was expressed by both the men's and the women's teams during the focus groups, but the women's teams were more direct in expressing the idea that women who are raped sometimes put themselves in those situations. The members of all four women's teams made at least one comment that women put themselves in situations in which rape occurs. When asked to define rape, one woman commented,

> When we go out to parties, and I see girls and the way they dress and the way they act, and then how close the guys come up to them, and just the way they are, under the influence, . . . I honestly always think it's their fault.

In response, other team members agreed, saying, "They're asking for it," "yea," and "they're not really asking for it, but the way they dress. . . ." Another teammate commented, "You should never put yourself in that situation."

To probe for more details, the interviewers asked the participants during the individual interviews if they or their teammates believed there is a "type" of woman who is a victim of sexual assault. A few consistent themes emerged, including women who are sluts, women who are not athletes, and those who put themselves at risk through things such as drinking or dressing provocatively. These statements were tied in with direct and indirect statements that the woman is "asking for it" or somehow provokes the rape. Some of the participants became quite animated while talking about this issue. However, it is important to note that along with those who indicated that a woman is sometimes responsible for her rape, both the men and women expressed the belief that anyone can be a victim.

During the individual interviews, 20 participants talked about the type of woman who may be a rape victim. Of the 20, 8 stated that women who are "sluts" are more likely to be raped. For example, one man said, "I mean, if a girl was walking around showing everything she could possibly show, you know what I'm saying. She, I think, is more likely to get raped."

A female participant said, "I know this sounds horrible, but she threw herself at the guy, let's say. So, she in a way asked for it." When specifically asked about what type of woman may be raped, she said that it would be a girl who dresses in "revealing clothing" and who "drinks too much."

The responses of 12 participants were more ambiguous, and these participants believed that although there is no real "type" of woman who is a rape victim, there are women who put themselves at risk. Indirectly, these participants held women responsible on some level for being raped because of the way they dressed or behaved. For example, one woman said,

> So if she puts herself in a situation where she goes home with a guy and they're hooking up pretty seriously and she wasn't ever planning to have sex with him and they were both drinking, I mean, technically no means no, but she got herself there, still. Like you can blame the guy for whatever happens after that, but she still is to blame for putting herself in a dangerous situation like that.

Invulnerability of women athletes. A theme that emerged that is seemingly unique to the student athlete community is that women athletes believe they are less likely to be the victims of rape. When asked whether female athletes are more likely or less likely to be victims, the members of all four women's teams unanimously responded "less likely." All the female teams acknowledged that rape can and does happen to female athletes but that there are certain factors that make it less likely, including physical strength. One woman explained,

> I think it would be a shock to a female athlete because we feel that we're so tough. Like I always am kidding around that, like, I could sit on a guy and knock the wind out of him, and the idea of a guy taking advantage of me seems, like, well, that could never happen and if it did, how is that possible? I work out all the time, I'm so strong, you know. I'm not some little girl. I'm tough.

Her teammates agreed with this statement, and another teammate commented, "We were always taught to fight back. Probably a much better chance that a female athlete would fight back—wouldn't just let it happen."

In addition to physical strength, the female athletes believed that they were less likely to be victims of rape because of their mental strength, self-esteem, and confidence. For example, a one woman explained,

> Maybe someone with more confidence, maybe athletes, I don't know, aren't afraid to say no. I could care less if he goes and tells his friends, "Oh she's a bitch, she wouldn't go home with me, blah blah." . . . I could care less, I mean, give me a break.

Her teammates nodded in agreement.

Some female athletes noted that the expectation that women athletes are less at risk of becoming victims creates a greater barrier for these women to receive assistance if an assault does occur. One female athlete commented,

> People just don't look at athletes as victims. When you hear about it happening to a woman athlete, it's like, she's supposed to be a superwoman. I think a lot of times female athletes put the blame on themselves if something happens because they themselves think they should be able to take care of it.

These findings from the focus groups were confirmed in the individual interviews. Both the male and female participants believed that female athletes are less likely to be victims of rape because of their physical strength, ability to resist, and confidence and self-esteem.

Discussion

Three methods of data collection—a survey, focus groups, and individual interviews—were used to provide a rich, comprehensive look at student athlete culture and to dig deeper into the issue of rape myths. Each of the three data-gathering methods produced key findings, although the examination and integration of the findings from all three sources provide the richest and most telling analysis.

The most striking finding was the difference in the responses provided in each of these three settings. The skewed results of the survey indicate that most of the participants believed that sexual violence is wrong, and they largely disagreed with many of the victim-blaming statements. However, once the same types of questions were posed in a group setting where the student athletes interacted with their teammates, a different set of responses were provided that included more rape-supportive attitudes and victim-blaming beliefs. It appears that when in the group setting, many of the participants "let go" and shared information that contradicted the findings of the survey. Finally, the individual interviews provided an opportunity to clarify the responses offered in the survey and focus groups. Many of the attitudes expressed in the focus groups were confirmed in the individual interviews.

On a basic level, the student athletes in the study were able to recognize that forcing a woman to have sex is considered rape and that it is wrong to do so. This recognition was reflected in the responses to the survey and the initial responses that many participants provided in the focus groups and individual interviews. However, further exploration revealed myriad subtle, yet powerful, beliefs that there are certain situations in which violence is acceptable, unintentional, or the fault of the victim. The simple statement that "no means no" disguises a range of more subtle rape-supportive beliefs. If taken in isolation, the results of the survey would suggest that student athletes do not believe that the way a woman dresses or acts means that she wants to have sex. However, this belief was contradicted in the focus groups and individual interviews.

Across the board, men and women from all the teams consistently expressed some victim-blaming beliefs during the focus groups and individual interviews. Sometimes the statements

provided were directly victim blaming, such as "I always think it's their [girls'] fault" and "they're asking for it." Other times, however, the statements were more subtle and were disguised by hesitation or clauses such as "they're not really asking for it, but the way they dress. . . ." A commonly expressed belief was that women put themselves in bad situations by dressing a certain way, drinking alcohol, or engaging in other behaviors, such as flirting. On one hand, these statements demonstrate that the participants were aware that sexual violence occurs and that women are at risk. However, their comments also indicate their inability to assign accountability for sexual violence to perpetrators. Rape education programs could capitalize on this view by acknowledging students' awareness that sexual violence occurs and that vulnerability is increased by alcohol but that, ultimately, prevention efforts need to focus on the perpetrators.

The male participants also raised the issue of false accusations and, often with an animated demeanor, expressed the belief that there are certain types of women who are either vengeful or simply regret having sex the next day and call it rape. What is implicit in these statements, whether they are direct or subtle, is that women are somehow at fault for their victimization.

A related and important finding was the belief that rape sometimes happens accidentally or unintentionally. This view reinforced the finding that the participants were able to avoid assigning blame to the perpetrators. It also revealed a clear lack of understanding of consent because, most of the time, by accidental rape they were referring to occasions when alcohol was involved. Alcohol played an interesting role in the explanations given for sexual assault. Some of the men believed that it was not fair to label an act as rape if the two parties were intoxicated, and this is how they believed accidental rape occurs. Yet at the same time, many of the men also admitted to using alcohol to get women drunk at parties to loosen them up and get them to have sex. Again, a lack of consistency and responsibility emerged.

An important aspect of this finding is that the victim blaming expressed by the female participants was often connected with statements indicating their belief that women athletes are less at risk of rape than are women who are not athletes. This finding suggests that perhaps the victim blaming serves as a sort of self-protection for women athletes; if they believe that sexual assault happens to weaker, nonathletic women who put themselves in bad situations, then they can believe that it will not happen to them. The danger of supporting this myth is not only the false sense of security that it fosters but also the suggestion that it may be more difficult for women athletes to seek assistance if they are raped because of increased self-blame and stigma. This is an important barrier that must be further explored. Traditional rape myth measures would not have captured this important belief that is particular to student athlete culture; it is only through qualitative methods that it was detected.

Limitations and Implications

Although the findings of the study are not generalizable beyond this sample, the results suggest that rape myths may still be pervasive within the student athlete culture. The limitations of the study include small samples for some of the focus groups and self-selection for the focus groups and individual interviews. In addition, the lack of a comparison group raises questions regarding what myths may be particular to student athletes and whether the myths are also maintained by other students. Further studies would be helpful to confirm the presence of similar myths in other samples of student athletes.

The development of instruments is also clearly needed to measure both rape myths and social desirability. Scales that are designed to measure the acceptance of rape myths on college campuses should address the more subtle myths that exist and, if possible, the ones that are particular to various communities. Although the tests on the Social Desirability Scale revealed no bias, the difference in responses that emerged during the focus groups and individual interviews warrants further investigation. The social desirability measure itself may need to be reviewed and updated to be appropriate for a college student's experience.

The implications of the findings for feminist social work research include the need to gain a deeper understanding of violence against women and the attitudes that support it. Using multiple methods provides a means for "digging deeper" into issues such as rape myths. The focus groups and individual interviews produced rich, descriptive data that could not have been discovered from the survey. Using research methods that account for context is essential because rape myths vary by community. Employing multiple methods is a promising approach to gaining a better understanding of rape myths, particularly how rape myths are culturally specific.

The findings offer implications for social work practice with college athletes. Currently, many educational programs on sexual assault are generic for college populations, but the results of the study suggest that interventions could be designed as context specific to address the unique aspects of student athlete culture. The findings suggest that it may be beneficial to have separate programs for male and female athletes to address particularly problematic issues. For example, with male athletes, it seems necessary to address the pressure to be aggressive and dominant within the context of sports and then to turn it off—that is, how to manage the privilege and sense of entitlement that often accompany the male athlete status. For female athletes, programs should examine their sense of invulnerability to rape and how to access services when they are needed. Further research can investigate whether these implications can extend to other college samples and high school students. This framework could be useful for social workers who work not only with the student athlete culture but with various other subcultures on campuses and groups in the greater community. By understanding culturally specific rape myths, this information can be appropriately incorporated into effective programs.

References

Anderson, K. B., Cooper, H., & Okamura, L. (1997). Individual differences and attitudes toward rape: A meta-analytic review. *Personality and Social Psychology Bulletin*, *23*, 295-315.

Berkowitz, A. (1992). College men as perpetrators of acquaintance rape and sexual assault: A review of recent research. *Journal of American College Health*, *40*, 175-181.

Boeringer, S. (1999). Associations of rape-supportive attitudes with fraternal and athletic participation. *Violence Against Women*, *5*, 81-90.

Brown, T. J., Sumner, K. E., & Nocera, R. (2002). Understanding sexual aggression against women: An examination of the role of men's athletic participation and related variables. *Journal of Interpersonal Violence*, *17*, 937-952.

Bryson, L. (1987). Sport and the maintenance of masculine hegemony. *Women's Studies International Forum*, *10*, 349-360.

Buchwald, E., Fletcher, P., & Roth, M. (1993). Introduction. In E. Buchwald, P. Fletcher, & M. Roth (Eds.), *Transforming a rape culture* (pp. 1-3). Minneapolis, MN: Milkweed.

Buhi, E. R. (2005). Reliability reporting practices in rape myth research. *Journal of School Health*, *75*(2), 63-66.

Burt, M. (1980). Cultural myths and supports for rape. *Journal of Personality and Social Psychology*, *38*, 217-230.

Connell, R. W. (1990). An iron man: The body and some contradictions of hegemonic masculinity. In M. Messner & D. F. Sabo (Eds.), *Sport, men and the gender order: Critical feminist perspectives* (pp. 83-95). Champaign, IL: Human Kinetics.

Crosset, T. (1990). Masculinity, sexuality, and the development of early modern sport. In M. Messner & D. F. Sabo (Eds.), *Sport, men and the gender order: Critical feminist perspectives* (pp. 45-54). Champaign, IL: Human Kinetics.

Crosset, T., Benedict, J., & McDonald, M. (1995). Male student-athletes reported for rape: A survey of campus police departments and judicial affairs offices. *Journal of Sport and Social Issues*, *19*, 125-144.

Crosset, T., Ptacek, J., McDonald, M., & Benedict, J. (1996). Male student-athletes and violence against women. *Violence Against Women*, *2*, 163-179.

Crowne, D. P., & Marlowe, D. (1964). *The approval motive*. New York: John Wiley.

Feild, H. S. (1978). Attitudes toward rape: A comparative analysis of police, rapists, crisis counselors and citizens. *Journal of Personality and Social Psychology*, *36*, 156-179.

Fisher, B. S., Cullen, F. T., & Turner, M. G. (2000). *The sexual victimization of college women* (Research Rep. 182369). Washington, DC: National Institute of Justice.

Frazier, P., Valtinson, G., & Candell, S. (1994). An evaluation of a rape prevention program. *Journal of Counseling and Development*, *73*, 153-158.

Frintner, M. P., & Rubinson, L. (1993). Acquaintance rape: The influence of alcohol, fraternity membership and sports team membership. *Journal of Sex Education and Therapy*, *19*, 272-284.

Garrett-Gooding, J., & Senter, R. (1987). Attitudes and acts of sexual aggression on a university campus. *Sociological Inquiry*, *57*, 348-371.

Hinck, S. S., & Thomas, R. W. (1999). Rape myth acceptance in college students: How far have we come? *Sex Roles*, *40*(9-10), 815-832.

Humphrey, C. F. (2001). Acquaintance rape: Exploring the relationship between cognitions and behavioral intentions through the development of contemporary measures of attitude (Doctoral dissertation, University of Missouri-Columbia, 2001). *Dissertation Abstracts International*, *62*, 12.

Humphrey, C. F., & Hillenbrand-Gunn, T. L. (1996, August). *Acquaintance rape: Developing a contemporary measure of attitudes*. Paper presented at the 104th annual convention of the American Psychological Association, Toronto, Ontario, Canada.

Kidd, B. (1990). The men's cultural center: Sports and the dynamic of women's oppression/men's repression. In M. Messner & D. F. Sabo (Eds.), *Sport, men and the gender order: Critical feminist perspectives* (pp. 31-43). Champaign, IL: Human Kinetics.

Koss, M. P., & Gaines, J. A. (1993). The prediction of sexual aggression by alcohol use, athletic participation, and fraternity affiliation. *Journal of Interpersonal Violence*, *8*, 94-108.

Koss, M. P., Gidycz, C. A., & Wisniewski, N. (1987). The scope of rape: Incidence and prevalence of sexual aggression and victimization in a national sample of higher education students. *Journal of Consulting and Clinical Psychology*, *55*, 162-170.

Koss, M. P., & Harvey, M. R. (1991). *The rape victim: Clinical and community interventions*. Newbury Park, CA: Sage.

Lonsway, K. A., & Fitzgerald, L. F. (1994). Rape myths: In review. *Psychology of Women Quarterly*, *18*, 133-164.

Loo, R., & Thorpe, K. (2000). Confirmatory factor analyses of the full and short versions of the Marlowe-Crowne Social Desirability Scale. *Journal of Social Psychology*, *140*, 628-635.

Martin, P. Y., & Hummer, R. A. (1989). Fraternities and rape on campus. *Gender and Society*, *3*, 457-473.

Messner, M. (1994). When bodies are weapons. In M. Messner & D. F. Sabo (Eds.), *Sports, violence, and power: Rethinking masculinity* (pp. 89-98). Freedom, CA: Crossing Press.

Osland, J. A., Fitch, M., & Willis, E. E. (1996). Likelihood to rape in college males. *Sex Roles*, *35*(3-4), 171-183.

O'Toole, L. (1994). Subculture of rape revisited. In L. O'Toole & J. Schiffman (Eds.), *Gender violence: Interdisciplinary perspectives* (pp. 214-221). New York: New York University Press.

Patton, M. Q. (1990). *Qualitative evaluation and research methods* (2nd ed.). Newbury Park, CA: Sage.

Reinharz, S. (1992). *Feminist methods in social research*. New York: Oxford University Press.

Reynolds, W. M. (1982). Development of reliable and valid short forms of the Marlowe-Crowne Social Desirability Scale. *Journal of Clinical Psychology*, *38*, 119-125.

Sanday, P. R. (1990). *Fraternity gang rape*. New York: New York University Press.

Schwartz, M., & Nogrady, C. (1996). Fraternity membership, rape myths, and sexual aggression. *Violence Against Women*, *2*, 148-162.

Tjaden, P., & Thoennes, N. (1998). *Prevalence, incidence, and consequences of violence against women: Findings from the National Violence Against Women Survey*. Washington, DC: U.S. Department of Justice, National Institute of Justice Centers for Disease Control and Prevention.

Ward, C. (1988). The Attitudes Toward Rape Victims Scale. *Psychology of Women Quarterly*, *12*, 127-146.

Yescavage, K. (1999). Teaching women a lesson: Sexually aggressive and sexually nonaggressive men's perceptions of acquaintance and date rape. *Violence Against Women*, *5*, 796-812.

Sarah McMahon, PhD, is the coordinator for research and evaluation in the Department of Sexual Assault Services and Crime Victim Assistance, Rutgers, The State University of New Jersey, 3 Bartlett St., New Brunswick, NJ 08901; e-mail: smcmahon@rci.rutgers.edu.