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Prevalence and Effects of Rape Myths in Print Journalism

The Kobe Bryant Case

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Two studies examine the prevalence and effects of rape myths in the print media covering a real-life case of alleged sexual assault. Study 1 was an archival study of 156 sources from around the country. Articles about the Kobe Bryant case were coded for instances of rape myths, among other variables. Of the articles, 65 mentioned at least one rape myth (with “she’s lying” being the single most common myth perpetuated). Study 2 assessed participants’ ($N = 62$) prior knowledge of the Bryant case and exposed them to a myth-endorsing or myth-challenging article about the case. Those exposed to the myth-endorsing article were more likely to believe that Bryant was not guilty and the alleged victim was lying. The implications for victim reporting and reducing sexual assault in general are discussed.

Keywords: *news media; rape myths; sexual assault*

Helping the media shape the perception of a case is the single most important thing a lawyer can do.

Alan Dershowitz (quoted in Chancer, 2005, p. 133)

On July 1, 2003, a woman went to authorities in Eagle County, Colorado, and reported that Los Angeles Lakers basketball player Kobe Bryant sexually assaulted her the night before. Kobe Bryant acknowledged having sexual intercourse with this woman but said that the sex was consensual. Two weeks later, Mark Hurlbert, Eagle County district attorney, decided there was enough evidence to proceed to trial, and Kobe Bryant was formally charged with one count of felony sexual assault. In the 14 months that preceded the trial, hundreds of articles were published in newspapers around the country and on the Internet about this case. More than 70 articles were

Authors’ Note: We are grateful for help with data collection from Sara Johnson and Jesse Riegert.

written for the *Denver Post* alone before the trial was set to begin. On September 1, 2004, the Eagle County DA dropped the charges filed against Kobe Bryant mainly because of the alleged victim's decision not to testify. Leading up to the trial, several errors on the part of the court led to confidential material about the trial being leaked to the press. The alleged victim believed that she could not get a fair trial because of how the case had been discussed in the media in the year preceding the trial.

For most people, sexual assault is conceptualized as a brutal crime that occurs between strangers and deserves swift and harsh punishment for the offender. However, in actuality, most sexual assaults are committed by acquaintances of the victim, go unreported, and, when reported, typically go unpunished (U.S. Department of Justice, 2003). To explain this disconnect between people's images of sexual assault and the reality of sexual assault, Martha Burt (1980) outlined several "rape myths" that highlight the distinction between sexual assaults that actually occur and ones that we (prefer to) believe occur. Research supports that people are more likely to label a situation as sexual assault when it fits the prototype—for example, when a "no" is explicit, when it is not a dating couple (Check & Malamuth, 1983; Goodchilds, Zellman, Johnson, & Giarrusso, 1988; Sawyer, Pinciaro, & Jessell, 1998). When sexual assault does not fit this image of what Estrich (1987) labels "real rape," people are likely to employ one or more rape myths to explain away the assault. In the present research, we explored the prevalence of rape myths in print journalism and the effects of exposure to rape myths on people's beliefs about sexual assault. The recent charges brought against Kobe Bryant presented a unique opportunity to study rape myths in the media coverage of a high-profile case (Study 1). Furthermore, this case allowed for a real-world test of media exposure to rape myths on people's attitudes and beliefs about the case (Study 2). In reality, only Kobe Bryant and his alleged victim can know exactly what happened that night in June 2003. It is the goal of this article not to suggest otherwise but rather to show the extent to which stereotypes and misconceptions are still used when discussing sexual assault and the impact that these myths can have on beliefs about sexual assault cases. Because of the uniquely high profile of Kobe Bryant and the subsequent media saturation of the case, this story had great potential to shape public opinion about sexual assault in general.

Rape Myths

Rape myths are generalized and widely held beliefs about sexual assault that serve to trivialize the sexual assault or suggest that a sexual assault did not actually occur. Brownmiller (1975) was one of the first to discuss the long history of myths and misconceptions about sexual assault. A few years later, Burt (1980; Burt & Albin, 1981) developed a measure of several rape myths that reflect common responses to sexual assaults that do not fit the prototype described above. Burt (1980) described myths about the victim, the perpetrator, and the nature of sexual assault. Myths about the victim suggest that she is lying and has ulterior motives,¹ was "asking for it" (e.g., by

going to the perpetrator's apartment for a drink), is not the type of woman who gets raped (i.e., it only happens to promiscuous women), or changed her story after the fact (i.e., she wanted it at the time). Myths about the perpetrator excuse his behavior (i.e., he didn't mean to) or paint a narrow picture of those who commit sexual assault (i.e., sex-crazed psychopaths).² People also hold the false belief that rape is trivial (i.e., she wasn't really hurt) or natural (i.e., men have a biological predisposition to get sex through force). Although it is possible that for any specific case the above beliefs may not actually be myths (i.e., the "she is lying" allegation is accurate if a woman has made a false report), these are "myths" in the sense that data do not generally support these popular beliefs about sexual assault (for a review, see Lonsway & Fitzgerald, 1994).³

Although endorsing rape myths may seem malicious and cruel, this is usually not the explicit motivation of those maintaining these beliefs. First, Brinson (1992) noted that sexual assault contradicts our culture's values of personal integrity and justice. As a culture, we pride ourselves on respecting one's personal integrity and in punishing those who violate such integrity. Sexual assault is a serious violation of the victim's personal integrity, and consistency demands that we severely punish those who violate this cultural norm. However, the majority of sexual assaults go unreported (Koss, 1992), and the majority of those reported go unpunished (Bureau of Justice Statistics, 1998; U.S. Department of Justice, 2003). The employment of rape myths may explain why judges and juries are not harshly punishing this crime that they would otherwise view as very serious (Brinson, 1992; Burt, 1991). By using rape myths to explain away the majority of sexual assaults that occur, a culture maintains that sexual assault is a serious violation that should be punished harshly (in the rare instances) when it does occur.

A related explanation for the widespread employment of rape myths is the pervasive motivation to believe the world is just. Lerner (1980) argued that the belief in a just world allows people to give order to and make sense out of troubling events. A belief in a just world encourages the attribution that good things happen to good people and bad things happen to bad people. Therefore, when a negative event such as sexual assault occurs, people search for a way to make sense of it. It is threatening to accept that a sexual assault could have happened under less prototypical (and, therefore, less predictable) circumstances, so people have a tendency to use just-world explanations for the event (Cowan & Curtis, 1994; McCaul, Veltum, Boyechko, & Crawford, 1990; Wyer, Bodenhausen, & Gorman, 1985). The thinking goes, "If this woman who is not promiscuous, who was not dressed provocatively, who clearly did say 'no' and was with her boyfriend was sexually assaulted, what's to prevent *me* from getting sexually assaulted too?" People have a powerful incentive to maintain rape myths as a way of bringing predictability and control to otherwise random events. Furthermore, internalizing rape myths may protect us from disturbing thoughts that we have been victims of or have committed sexual assault (Lonsway & Fitzgerald, 1995).

Several studies have shown that rape myths are endorsed by a significant portion of the population and that men are almost always more accepting of rape myths than are women (for a review, see Lonsway & Fitzgerald, 1994). Rape myths, no matter how strongly endorsed by an individual, have serious consequences for sexual assault victims. People who endorse rape myths are less likely to label a scenario as sexual assault, even when it meets the legal criteria (Muehlenhard & MacNaughton, 1988; Norris & Cubbins, 1992). Endorsement of rape myths leads people to be less likely to blame the man for an assault (Check & Malamuth, 1985; Linz, Donnerstein, & Adams, 1989; Muehlenhard & MacNaughton, 1988). Muehlenhard and MacNaughton (1988) showed that women who endorsed rape myths were 3 times more likely to be victims of coerced sex than were those who did not strongly endorse rape myths (though Koss and Dinero, 1989, did not find this distinction). Priming men's rape myth acceptance increased their self-reported likelihood of sexually assaulting a woman (Bohner et al., 1998; Bohner, Jarvis, Eyssele, & Siebler, 2005). Furthermore, research has shown associations between the endorsement of rape myths and hostility toward women, endorsement of stereotypical attitudes and sex roles for women, and negative evaluations of rape survivors (for a review, see Lonsway & Fitzgerald, 1994). Finally, rape myth acceptance has been shown to lead to greater victim blame, lower conviction rates for accused rapists, and shorter sentences for convicted rapists by juries in mock trials (Finch & Munro, 2005; also see Lonsway & Fitzgerald, 1994). It follows that rape myths may lead others to advise a sexual assault victim away from pressing charges, may lead law enforcement to doubt the legitimacy of a woman's claim, and may lead lawmakers away from enacting appropriate legislation.

As suggested above, rape myths serve to indirectly perpetuate sexual violence through creating beliefs and attitudes about sexual assault that distort the definition of sexual assault and shift the blame to the victim. Rape myths may also directly contribute to sexual violence by leading to a greater likelihood to commit sexual assault. Several studies have shown correlations between endorsement of rape myths and sexual aggression (e.g., Koss, Leonard, Beezley, & Oros, 1985), whereas other studies have shown causal associations between endorsement of rape myths and aggressive behavior against women (but not men) in the laboratory (e.g., Donnerstein & Malamuth, 1997). Finally, Lanier (2001), in a longitudinal study of 851 young men, found that rape myth supportive attitudes predicted sexually aggressive behavior, but sexual aggression did not predict rape myth attitudes. Despite these findings, it is admittedly difficult to go beyond correlational data or measures of aggression in a controlled setting to empirically establish a causal association between rape myth endorsement and actual sexual aggression.

Media Exposure and Views of Sexual Assault

Rape myths are part of transmitted culture. They get passed from person to person through many channels. Popular media are one such channel. Although we usually view movies and television shows as fictional accounts of events and news media as

factual, the similarities between the two in promulgating stereotypical views of sexual assault are striking. The media's treatment of sexual assault not only serves to prime and reinforce rape myths in those who already hold them but also may construct these thoughts for those who do not already have them.

Evaluating sexual assault's treatment in the media, researchers have primarily focused on television shows and print journalism. Cuklanz (2000), evaluating prime-time television shows depicting sexual assaults from 1976 to 1990, found that acquaintance rapes became more prevalent in the late 1980s and that cases of false accusations were overrepresented on TV. Brinson (1992), reviewing 26 episodes involving sexual assault from various television shows in the 1980s, found that each episode averaged just more than five uses of rape myths, with the most commonly endorsed myths being "she asked for it" (46% of the episodes) and "she wanted it" (42% of the episodes). However, Cuklanz (1996, 2000) found fictional depictions on TV to be more sympathetic to sexual assault victims and issues than mass media depictions of actual sexual assault cases during the same period. This is consistent with findings that reality "crime-solving" police programs tend to engage in victim blame by focusing on victims instead of perpetrators to sensationalize crimes for the purpose of garnering viewers (Dobash, Schlesinger, Dobash, & Weaver, 1998). Cuklanz (1996) suggested that the "fragmented nature of news" (p. 50) perpetuates traditional, stereotypical views of sexual assault by discussing many elements out of context. First, victim-blame themes are common in newspaper accounts of sexual assault cases (Korn & Efrat, 2004; Los & Chamard, 1997; Smart & Smart, 1978). Los and Chamard (1997) reviewed several hundred cases of sexual assault covered in Canadian newspapers in the early 1980s. They found that although stranger rapes were reported more frequently during the 5-year period, acquaintance rape cases received more attention (i.e., more articles on the one case), and the reputation of the victim was usually the focus. Second, news media accounts of sexual assault cases seem to focus on the stereotypical stranger rape, unusual cases, and rare cases in which the accusation had been falsified (Caringella-MacDonald, 1998; Gavey & Gow, 2001; Los & Chamard, 1997; Soothill & Walby, 1991; Surette, 1992). Labeling a sexual assault claim as "false" may have more to do with law enforcement adhering to rape myths than with the actual dishonesty of the alleged victim, but Gavey and Gow (2001) found that allegedly false claims are taken as indisputable fact.

Although the vast majority of sexual assaults never get any publicity (Meyers, 1997), the ones that do get publicity serve an important role in shaping and maintaining our perceptions of sexual assault. The above research discusses rape myths on TV and in the print media, but quantitative research in this area remains scant, particularly with regard to the American press. The first goal of this research is to add to the existing literature by assessing the prevalence of rape myths in print journalism surrounding a highly publicized case of acquaintance rape. Although previous researchers have offered speculation about the effects of exposure to such media on attitudes about sexual assault, they have not empirically tested these effects. Therefore, the second goal

of the present research is to assess the impact of the depiction of sexual assault in print journalism on people's opinions about a sexual assault case.

Overview

The two studies presented here address two related issues: (a) How do the media present information about sexual assault cases? and (b) How does this presentation affect its audience? The recent case involving Kobe Bryant allowed us to investigate the print news media's treatment of a high-profile sexual assault case. This research adds to the literature by empirically assessing the endorsement of rape myths in the American print media and then assessing the effects of exposure to these rape myths. Study 1 is a content analysis of more than 150 news articles for their endorsement of rape myths and other information that may have influenced readers about the case. In Study 2, we designed an experiment to assess the causal impact of exposure to rape myths in news articles on people's attitudes and beliefs about the case.

Study 1

Method

Sample. A total of 156 unique articles was gathered from 76 different online sources (major newspapers and news sources, such as CNN, ESPN). Based on U.S. Census Bureau groupings, 18 (11.5%) articles were from Northeastern newspapers, 16 (10.2%) from Midwestern newspapers, 20 (12.8%) from Southern newspapers, 44 (28.2%) from Western newspapers, and 58 (37.2%) from national papers or Web sites. Nine of the 10 most highly circulated newspapers (with the exception of *The Wall Street Journal*) were included in the sample, along with 30 other newspapers among the top 150 most widely circulated (Audit Bureau of Circulation, 2004). Given the large number of articles written about this trial, a sample of articles that was geographically diverse was analyzed for this article. Although only one article was chosen from most newspapers, some sources composed a greater percentage of the sample. The most articles from single sources came from *The Denver Post* (13 articles) and espn.com (12 articles).

Procedure. Collection of articles started when the media first broke the story on July 6, 2003, and stopped when the charges were dropped on September 1, 2004. The focus of this study was pretrial media. The articles were chosen using search engines (e.g., Google) and the keywords *Kobe Bryant sexual assault*.

Two raters coded the articles for endorsement of seven rape myths: (a) she's lying, (b) she asked for it, (c) she wanted it, (d) rape is trivial, (e) he didn't mean to, (f) he's not the kind of guy who would do this, and (g) it only happens to "certain" women (Burt, 1980). The articles were also coded for endorsement of any myths

suggesting Kobe Bryant was guilty (e.g., because he is the type to cheat on his wife, he is probably also guilty of sexual assault), positive statements about Kobe Bryant, positive statements about the alleged victim, negative statements about Kobe Bryant, and mention of race (of the alleged victim or the alleged perpetrator). Myths were coded as present in an article only if the article endorsed those myths.⁴ If an article mentioned rape myths by countering them, the myths were not counted in the present analysis. Only 13 of the 156 articles included statements countering rape myths. The two coders were trained together about the seven myths and common examples of each. They were each given a sample article to rate before being given the remainder of the articles. The two coders independently reached consensus on the myths present in this sample article. Each rater coded approximately half of the articles and coded 15 redundant articles to check for interrater reliability. The intraclass correlation to assess interrater reliability for this sample was high at $r_1 = .88$ (for an explanation of using intraclass correlations, see Shrout & Fleiss, 1979).

Results

Rape myths in articles. On average, there were 1.66 myth-endorsing statements per article, with 65.4% of the articles ($n = 102$) having at least one myth-endorsing statement. The number of myth-endorsing statements per article ranged from 0 statements (in 34.6% of the articles; $n = 54$) to 15 statements (in 0.6% of the articles; $n = 1$), as some myths were occasionally represented more than once in the same article. Also, on average, there was one distinct myth mentioned per article. As seen in Table 1, the most frequently endorsed myths were that the victim was lying (mentioned in 42.3% of all articles) and that she wanted it (mentioned in 31.4% of all articles). A contrast of proportions indicated that the articles were significantly more likely to endorse Rape Myth 1 (she's lying) than all other rape myths combined ($z = 7.90, p < .001$). Articles were significantly more likely to endorse Rape Myth 3 (she wanted it) than all other rape myths, excluding Rape Myth 1 ($z = 6.61, p < .001$). Articles were significantly more likely to endorse Rape Myth 6 (he's not the type) than all other rape myths, excluding Rape Myths 1 and 3 ($z = 4.67, p < .001$). Articles were more likely to endorse Rape Myth 2 (she asked for it) than all other rape myths, excluding Rape Myths 1, 3, and 6 ($z = 4.86, p < .001$). Endorsement of Rape Myths 4 (rape is trivial), 5 (he didn't mean to), and 7 (it only happens to certain women) did not significantly differ in this sample.

Other coded variables in articles. In addition to rape myths, we also coded the articles for other statements that may have influenced readers' opinions about the sexual assault case (Table 2). We found that 24.4% of the articles had at least one positive comment about Kobe Bryant as an athlete (e.g., "he is one of the best in the league" and "one of the greatest superstars ever to step foot on the court"—Kilson-Anderson, 2003), and 21.2% of the articles had at least one positive comment about Bryant as a

Table 1
Percentage of Articles Endorsing Each Rape Myth

Rape Myth	Articles Endorsing (%)	Articles (<i>n</i>)
1. She's lying	42.3	66
2. She asked for it	8.3	13
3. She wanted it	31.4	49
4. Rape is trivial	1.3	2
5. He didn't mean to	1.3	2
6. He's not the type	17.9	28
7. It only happens to "certain" women	1.9	3

Note: *N* = 156 articles.

Table 2
Percentage of Articles Including Other Potentially Influential Statements

Statement Type	Articles Including (%)	Articles (<i>n</i>)
Positive comments about Bryant as an athlete	24.4	38
Positive comments about Bryant as a person	21.2	33
Positive comments about victim as a person	5.1	8
Negative comments about Bryant as an athlete	2.6	4
Negative comments about Bryant as a person	14.1	22
Statements suggesting Bryant's dishonesty	7.7	12
Statements suggesting victim's dishonesty	42.3	66

Note: *N* = 156 articles.

person (e.g., "the boy next door"—Dilbeck, 2003; "a squeaky-clean image, a devoted husband and father"—Wilson, 2003). Admittedly, 67.0% (*n* = 22) of the articles with positive comments about Bryant as a person also had positive comments about Bryant as an athlete. In all, 41 (26.3%) unique articles had positive comments about Bryant as an athlete and/or person. In contrast, only 5.1% of the articles (*n* = 8) had positive comments about the victim as a person ($z = 5.47$, $p < .001$; e.g., "A good kid, reporters were told"—Eagan, 2003). It is important to note that the above analyses did not include other articles that discussed Bryant's performance during the 2003-2004 NBA season. Because the analysis was focused on articles about the sexual assault case, this research does not address the additional press Bryant was receiving outside of the case.

Although most of the information presented in the articles was likely to bias the audience in favor of Bryant's position (i.e., that a sexual assault did not occur), we also coded the articles for information that might bias the audience against Bryant's position. Only 2.6% of the articles included negative comments about Bryant as an

athlete, and 14.1% of the articles included negative comments about Bryant as a person. Furthermore, 7.7% of the articles included statements that we coded as “myths about Kobe” because they drew unsubstantiated correlations between events to suggest Bryant’s guilt (e.g., “People will say Kobe bought the verdict . . . call it O.J.’s legacy”—Reynolds, 2003). Therefore, myths questioning the alleged victim’s honesty (found in 42.3% of articles) were much more common than were myths questioning Bryant’s ($z = 7.62, p < .001$). Finally, in 23.5% of the articles ($n = 37$), Bryant and/or the alleged victim’s race was mentioned (Bryant is Black and the alleged victim is White). Although Black men are not convicted at a higher rate than are White men in sexual assault cases, Black men convicted of sexual assault against a White woman get the longest prison sentences of all defendants (Wortman, 1985). This may stem from a long-standing myth about the commonality of Black men’s sexually assaulting White women (Brownmiller, 1975; Epstein & Langenbaum, 1994) and general stereotypes of Black men as violent (Peffley & Hurwitz, 1998). In addition, Knight, Giuliano, and Sanchez-Ross (2001) found that people were more likely to give harsher punishments to Black celebrities than Black noncelebrities in a hypothetical sexual assault case. Therefore, it is reasonable to think that the mention of race in these articles might have worked against Bryant’s position.

Finally, given Kobe Bryant’s celebrity status, it is likely that more information in general was written about Kobe Bryant than the alleged victim (who was not publicly known prior to this case). Therefore, a significant difference between the amount of information (positive and negative) written about Kobe Bryant and that written about the alleged victim is expected. A better test of a bias in the presentation of information about Bryant and the alleged victim is a within-person comparison of the amount of positive and negative information written about each. Of the articles, 24.0% had positive statements about Bryant as an athlete, and 2.6% of the articles contained negative statements about Bryant as an athlete. Articles were significantly more likely to include positive information about Bryant’s athletic performance ($z = 5.91, p < .001$). Although one can present relatively objective data to determine whether or not Bryant deserved this positive assessment of his athletic skills, this information may still function to support Rape Myth 6. However, comparing statements about Bryant’s character also shows that journalists were more likely to write positive than negative statements about Bryant as a person ($z = 1.65, p < .05$). In contrast, articles were much more likely to contain negative statements (i.e., she’s lying, she wanted it, or she asked for it) than positive statements about the alleged victim’s character ($z = 21.7, p < .001$).

Discussion

Analyzing articles from around the country spanning the 14 months from the point charges were filed until charges were dropped against Kobe Bryant, we found that a high percentage of articles include rape myth–endorsing statements. Rape myths negate the experience of the assault victim and perpetuate our misperceptions

about sexual assault. The articles in Study 1 were most likely to endorse the myths that the alleged victim was lying and that a sexual assault therefore did not occur, that the alleged victim's actions indicated that she actually wanted the sex (that she is claiming was an assault), implying that the accused cannot be held responsible for interpreting her actions as such, and that the accused is not the type of man who would commit such a heinous act. The alarming frequency with which these myths are perpetuated in the media is highlighted in this content analysis, and the potential impact of these myths in this particular sexual assault case is the focus of Study 2.

Study 2

Study 1 demonstrated the prevalence of rape myths surrounding the Kobe Bryant case in articles from widely circulated newspapers. The purpose of Study 2 is to assess the causal impact of exposure to these myths on people's beliefs about this particular case by giving participants bogus articles about the case. In addition, Study 2 allows for a test of the impact of exposure to media breaking rape myths. It was expected that participants would be more likely to believe that Kobe Bryant was not guilty after reading an article endorsing rape myths than they did before they read the article. Participants should be more likely to believe that Kobe Bryant is guilty after reading an article challenging rape myths. Finally, participants should be more likely to hold beliefs in favor of Bryant's position after reading an article endorsing rape myths than after reading an article challenging rape myths.

Method

Participants. Participants were 62 undergraduate students (18 male, 44 female) at a Midwestern university. Their ages ranged from 18 to 49 years, with a mean age of 23.9 years ($SD = 5.3$) and a median age of 21.5 years. Of the sample, 87% were White, 3% Native American, 3% Asian, 2% Latino, and 5% Other or Missing.

Procedure. This study was conducted in the summer of 2004, approximately 1 year after news about the Kobe Bryant case broke. All data were collected before the charges were dropped on September 1, 2004. Participants were first asked five questions about their existing knowledge of the Kobe Bryant case: (a) if they knew who Kobe Bryant was, (b) if they knew that Kobe Bryant had been charged with sexual assault, (c) to rate how informed they believed they were on a 1 (*not at all informed*) to 7 (*extremely well informed*) scale about "the case in general," (d) to rate how well informed they believed they were about "physical evidence that may be used in court against Kobe Bryant," and (e) to rate how informed they believed they were about "the alleged victim's history." In addition, participants were asked to rate the extent to which they believed Kobe Bryant was guilty of the charges brought

against him on a 1 (*definitely not guilty*) to 7 (*definitely guilty*) scale. Participants were then randomly assigned to read one of two fictitious articles about the case. One article was rape myth endorsing (RME) and the other was rape myth challenging (RMC).⁵ The two articles were of approximately the same length (around 1,000 words), with the RME article including 11 statements endorsing rape myths and the RMC article including 9 statements countering rape myths. The RME article was fashioned after many of the actual articles that had been printed in the media (mainly focusing on Rape Myths 1, 3, and 6) but was a more extreme version of these articles in the sense that it included more RME statements than most of the articles from Study 1. The RME article included statements such as “We also know that the woman had planned to see Kobe that evening, expected him to make a move on her, was flirtatious with him, and admitted to willingly kissing him.” The RMC article took a position cautioning readers against employing rape myths and gave reasons to “explain away” the myths that the media had been presenting (again focusing on Myths 1, 3, and 6). The RMC article included statements to counter rape myths such as

Reports have stated that the accuser knew she would be seeing Bryant that night and that she expected him to make a move on her. These statements, though, do not imply that she indeed wanted *sex* or that she didn't change her mind once alone with Bryant.

After reading the article, participants were asked two questions about their opinions about the Kobe Bryant case. As they were before the manipulation, participants were asked to rate the extent to which they believed that Kobe Bryant was guilty of the charges brought against him, and participants were asked to rate the extent to which they believed that the alleged victim was lying on a 1 (*definitely not lying*) to 7 (*definitely lying*) scale. Participants were asked about the victim's honesty postmanipulation only to minimize bias and suspicion prior to reading the stimulus article. Also, following the manipulation, participants were again asked Questions 3 to 5 above regarding how informed they felt they were about the case. Participants then filled out a short demographics form including questions about gender, year in school, age, ethnicity, religiosity, and relationship status. Participants were thanked, debriefed, and given a list of community and campus resources for sexual assault support.

Results

Preexisting knowledge of the case. All but 2 participants said that they knew who Kobe Bryant was, and all but 1 of the remaining participants said that they knew that Kobe Bryant had been charged with sexual assault. The participants who knew about the sexual assault case rated their knowledge slightly below the midpoint on the 7-point scale ($M = 3.57$, $SD = 1.56$). Therefore, it follows that participants felt even less informed about the alleged victim's history ($M = 3.02$, $SD = 1.74$) and the physical evidence in the case ($M = 2.63$, $SD = 1.64$). That participants believed they

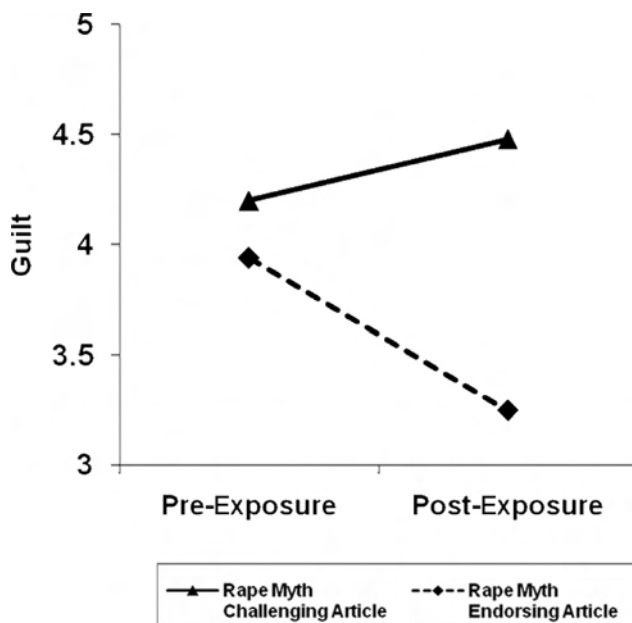
knew more about the alleged victim's history than the physical evidence against Bryant is practically and statistically significant, $t(58) = -2.65, p < .01$. This is consistent with findings from Study 1 on the prevalence of rape myths in the media surrounding this case. There were no preexisting differences between experimental conditions on any of these variables, t values < 1.34 . After reading the articles about the case, all participants felt more informed about the case in general, more informed about the victim's sexual history, and more informed about the physical evidence in the case (t values $> -2.84, p$ values $< .01$) than they did prior to reading the article. Furthermore, there were no preexisting differences between experimental conditions on participants' ratings of Bryant's guilt, $t(57) = -0.75, ns$.

Beliefs about the case. Reading the articles shifted participants' beliefs about Bryant in the predicted directions. Figure 1 shows participants' mean ratings of Bryant's guilt pre- and postarticle exposure in the RME and RMC conditions. A 2×2 mixed-model ANOVA showed that the interaction between article condition and pre- and postmanipulation ratings of Bryant's guilt was significant, $F(1, 54) = 21.85, p < .001$. As expected, there was no main effect for pre- and postmanipulation ratings, $F(1, 54) = 2.68, ns$. There was a significant main effect for article condition, driven by the significant difference in the postmanipulation ratings, $F(1, 54) = 6.77, p < .05$. In other words, before reading the RMC or RME article, participants' ratings of Bryant's guilt fell very close to the midpoint of the scale ($M = 4.09, SD = 1.1$). Participants in the RME ($M = 3.94, SD = 1.34$) and RMC ($M = 4.20, SD = 0.89$) conditions did not differ in premanipulation guilt ratings, $t(57) = -0.75, ns$. However, postmanipulation, participants exposed to the RME article were less likely to believe that Bryant was guilty ($M = 3.25, SD = 1.49$) than those exposed to the RMC article ($M = 4.48, SD = 0.91$), $t(57) = -3.93, p < .001$ (see Figure 1). Most important, within-participant ratings of Bryant's guilt significantly changed in the predicted directions after reading the stimulus article compared to premanipulation ratings. After reading the RME article, participants were more likely to believe that Bryant was not guilty, $t(25) = 3.49, p < .01$. After reading the RMC article, participants were less likely to believe that Bryant was not guilty, $t(29) = -3.10, p < .01$. In addition, participants who read the RME article ($M = 4.48, SD = 1.34$) were significantly more likely to believe that the alleged victim was lying than were those who read the RMC article ($M = 3.79, SD = 1.0$), $t(57) = 2.25, p < .05$.

Discussion

Study 2 highlights the causal effects of exposure to articles endorsing and challenging rape myths. This study demonstrated how exposure to articles endorsing rape myths leads participants to be more likely to side with the defendant in a sexual assault case than prior to exposure. Furthermore, exposure to articles challenging rape myths leads participants to be more likely to believe an alleged victim's

Figure 1
Participants' Ratings of Kobe Bryant's Guilt Before
and After Article Exposure



claim of sexual assault than prior to exposure. Given the widespread endorsement of rape myths in the media (as supported by Study 1), Study 2 suggests the effects that such media exposure could have had on the Kobe Bryant sexual assault case and on sexual assault cases in general.

General Discussion

Taken together, findings from the current studies show the media's role in perpetuating rape myths and reinforcing beliefs about men and women who support sexual assault in American culture. Study 1 demonstrated the extent to which rape myths are endorsed in print journalism. More than 65% of articles discussing the Kobe Bryant sexual assault case included at least one statement endorsing popular rape myths. Finding that "she's lying" and "she wanted it" were the most commonly perpetuated myths was consistent with past research on rape myth endorsement in the media

(Caringella-MacDonald, 1998; Los & Chamard, 1997). Study 2 allowed for a test of the effects of these myths in this particular case. Participants were much more likely to think that the defendant was not guilty after reading an RME article compared to pre-exposure beliefs, and participants were much more likely to think the defendant was guilty after reading an RMC article. Finally, participants were more likely to think that the victim was lying after reading an RME article than after reading an RMC article. Study 2 is an important demonstration of the potential devastating effects of the saturation of media coverage of sexual assault cases with rape myths.

In Study 1, not only did a high percentage of articles contain RME statements, but the articles also often contained other irrelevant information about Kobe Bryant and the alleged victim that might have swayed readers' opinions of the case. For example, numerous articles mentioned Bryant's (good) performance as an athlete during past and present NBA seasons. In addition, many articles discussed general sentiment by the public and other NBA players about Bryant's (good) character. The alleged victim in the case did not receive such additional positive editorial comments in articles about the case. And although it is important to acknowledge that there was irrelevant information presented in the articles that may have biased readers *against* Bryant (e.g., his race), this information was much less likely to be presented than information that led readers to believe a sexual assault did not occur.

The findings from Study 2 are consistent with findings from other studies investigating the effects of rape myths in the media. Exposure to rape myths reinforces people's prototypical representations of sexual assault, making them more likely to dismiss or explain away claims of sexual assault that do not fit their narrow definitions (for a review, see Lonsway & Fitzgerald, 1994). Franiuk, Seefelt, and Vandello (in press) found that men were less sympathetic to sexual assault victims after reading newspaper headlines endorsing rape myths. Furthermore, exposure to rape myths may either lead victims of sexual assault to dismiss their own experiences or scare them away from reporting sexual assault (Peterson & Muehlenhard, 2004; Pitts & Schwartz, 1997). According to survey evidence, only 10% to 40% of sexual assaults (and possibly far fewer) are reported to police (Kilpatrick, Edmunds, & Seymour, 1992; Koss, 1992; U.S. Department of Justice, 2003). Finally, exposure to rape myths can lead men to excuse or dismiss their own sexually assaulting behavior (Lonsway & Fitzgerald, 1995; Sinclair & Bourne, 1998).

Rape Myths and the Media

The Kobe Bryant case is unusual in that it deals with an acquaintance rape, unlike most sexual assault stories in the news (Los & Chamard, 1997). Therefore, the prevalence of rape myths used in this case is not surprising given that this case does not meet the criteria for the prototypical "stranger" rape. In other words, because this case does not meet the stereotypical criteria for a sexual assault, people may be particularly inclined to dismiss it as a sexual assault. Researchers have suggested that

coverage of acquaintance rape cases often perpetuates rape myths by focusing on the misinterpretations and misunderstandings between the victim and the accused (Los & Chamard, 1997; Smart & Smart, 1978). Results from the present research support this assertion given the prevalence of rape myths found in Study 1.

Rape myths serve to not only perpetuate misinformation about sexual assault but also prevent communication of accurate information about sexual assault. Some of the information used against the alleged victim in this case (e.g., emotional instability, promiscuity) could have been used to discuss her *heightened* vulnerability to sexual assault (Gold, Sinclair, & Balge, 1999). Suggesting that a woman's promiscuity makes it more likely that she "wanted" the sexual assault is mutually exclusive of suggestions that sexual promiscuity may put a woman in more sexual situations, thereby increasing her chances of being assaulted (Koss, 1985; Koss & Dinero, 1989). Furthermore, Rape Myth 3 (suggesting she is promiscuous) and Rape Myth 7 (suggesting it only happens to promiscuous women) contradict one another. Suggesting that a woman is promiscuous implies that she is the type to want sex (and, therefore, cannot be assaulted), which runs contrary to the myth that sexual assault happens *only* to promiscuous women. That people endorse these contradictory myths suggests that people employ not all rape myths at once, just the ones that assist in dismissing the current sexual assault. Although endorsement of rape myths is to be expected from a defendant's attorney, it seems that the court of public opinion, fueled by media reports, often tries a case before it actually makes it to the courtroom (Chancer, 2005). By her own admission, the alleged victim in this case was no longer willing to testify in the criminal trial after a year of being vilified by the press ("Experts Were to Testify," 2004). Results from Study 2 (and past research on rape myths) support her fears that she would not have been able to receive a fair trial from an unbiased judge and jury (for a review, see Lonsway & Fitzgerald, 1994).

Given what we know about people's perceptions of sexual assault, it is no surprise that we continue to see the media flooded with rape myths when charges of sexual assault make the headlines. However, given the prevalence of sexual assaults that do not fit the prototype, it may seem surprising that people have not changed their views of sexual assault. As social cognitive research on motivated reasoning and perseverance biases has repeatedly demonstrated, though, people will often maintain erroneous beliefs in the face of contradictory evidence (e.g., Anderson, Lepper, & Ross, 1980; Kunda, 1990). It takes mental effort to change existing beliefs, especially when this change may be threatening and cause personal distress. Although it is difficult to acknowledge truths about sexual assault, it is ironically more harmful to ourselves and others not to do so.

When confronted with data from studies demonstrating the negative influence of the media, many people defensively say that they are able to separate "truth" from fiction in television shows and movies. Although the effects of the media are well documented (e.g., Bryant & Zillman, 1994; Emmers-Sommer & Allen, 1999), there are likely certain audiences that give less credibility to the messages they receive

from television and movies than do other audiences. Messages received through television and print journalism, however, may not be filtered with the same skepticism as other media. Although some viewers may dismiss rape myths in movies and television shows as distortions of reality, these same viewers may look at television and print news as unbiased presentations of fact (Gaziano, 1988; Robinson & Kohut, 1988; Surette, 1992). Any form of media that transmits rape myths is clearly problematic, but news media may have a greater impact on audiences' (false) beliefs about sexual assault given our almost blind faith that their reports are impartial. Rape myths in the news may contribute to the development of rape myths, and, more likely, they may prime rape myths already held by the audience and make people more likely to use them in the future (Malamuth & Check, 1985).

Of interest, sexual assault cases seem to present a counterexample to the common finding that pretrial publicity (PTP) usually biases potential jurors *against* defendants (for a review, see Devine, Clayton, Dunford, Seying, & Pryce, 2001); however, much PTP related to sexual assaults is antiprotection and/or prodefendant.⁶ Past researchers have found that men, in particular, are less likely to display an antidefendant bias after exposure to PTP for sexual assault cases (Hoiberg & Stires, 1973; Mullin, Imrich, & Linz, 1996). The current studies suggest a possible reason for PTP biases favoring defendants in sexual assault cases—namely, journalists' employment of rape myths.

It is important to note that journalists' motives behind endorsing rape myths in coverage of sexual assault cases are not elucidated by the present research. First, according to Websdale and Alvarez (1998), journalists' use of "forensic journalism" causes them to give many details of a crime without discussing these details within the context of the greater social issues related to that crime. This journalistic strategy also involves getting information quickly, regardless of the source, and is readily capitalized on by defense attorneys in sexual assault cases (Chancer, 2005; Websdale & Alvarez, 1998). Second, it is possible that journalists consciously employ rape myths in their writing to sensationalize a story and increase newspaper sales. It is also possible that the use of rape myths in print journalism is less a reflection of malicious intent by an author and more a reflection of that author's internalization of our culture's beliefs about sexual assault. Journalists may believe that they are merely presenting reasonable alternatives to a sexual assault claim. Although it would be interesting to assess journalists' personal endorsement of rape myths, bringing the current research to the attention of journalists is important for reducing rape myths in the print media regardless of journalists' motives.

In Study 1, we found that nearly 35% of articles did not mention rape myths at all. Clearly, bias-free journalism is possible, if not probable. The media have great potential for positive effects, too, as past research has shown the positive impact of prosocial messages on television (Fisch, Truglio, & Cole, 1999; McAlister, 2000; Mussen & Eisenberg-Berg, 1977). In addition to showing the negative impact of media coverage of sexual assault cases, Study 2 suggests the potentially powerful effects of *countering* rape myths when discussing sexual assault cases. RMC messages in the

media can break myths (at least temporarily). It is important to note that in Study 2 it is impossible to determine whether reading an RMC article leads people to espouse an antidefendant stance unfairly or helps people evaluate the case on the evidence and accurate information about sexual assault. Future research to delineate the short- and long-term effects of both RME messages and RMC messages is imperative.

On September 1, 2004, the district attorney's office in Eagle, Colorado, dropped the charges against Kobe Bryant primarily because of the alleged victim's decision not to testify. Many have speculated about this turn of events, but the alleged victim has said little publicly about her decision. Her attorneys said that she believed she could not get a fair trial after all of the leaks and errors in this case ("Experts Were to Testify," 2004). Furthermore, her attorneys cited the alleged victim's fear of how she was going to be the one put on trial through cross-examination (which would undoubtedly employ rape myths; "Experts Were to Testify," 2004). We will never know what specific role the media's saturation with rape myths played in the alleged victim's decision, but given the research presented here, we can fairly confidently cite negative repercussions. And more important, we will never know the full impact that this case will have on future sexual assault victims and perpetrators. Research has shown that men are more likely to accept rape myths after a not-guilty verdict in a sexual assault case (Sinclair & Bourne, 1998). At least for men, not-guilty verdicts strengthen their beliefs that excuse men as perpetrators of sexual assault. The rape myths surrounding the Bryant case likely played a large role in preventing the alleged victim from believing she could receive a fair trial; and, consequently, her decision to not testify in the criminal trial resulted in an effectively "not-guilty" verdict for Bryant that further validates rape myths.

Limitations

These studies are not without their limitations. First, a small sample size prevented gender and racial comparisons in Study 2. Generally, research on rape myths has shown that men are more accepting of rape myths than are women, but most studies also show that women hold and are affected by perceptual biases about sexual assault (for reviews, see Linz, 1989; Lonsway & Fitzgerald, 1994). Research on rape myths is also consistent in showing that non-White men and women are more likely to endorse rape myths than are White men and women (e.g., Fischer, 1987; Foley, Evancic, Karnik, King, & Parks, 1995; Jimenez & Abreu, 2003; Varelas & Foley, 1998). Future research should investigate gender and racial differences in attitudes post-rape myth exposure in the media.

Second, questions of generalizability arise from this high-profile case. The Kobe Bryant case presented an opportunity to examine rape myths associated with one case because of the relatively large amount of media coverage, but there could have been features unique to this case that led to the results presented here. Certainly, Kobe Bryant's celebrity is one feature that would not be present in most sexual assault

cases. One could argue that his status and athletic success put journalists in a unique position to use Rape Myth 6 (“he’s not the type”). Furthermore, as claimed by the defendant’s attorneys, his fame and wealth make it easy to believe that he might be particularly vulnerable to false accusations (Rape Myth 1). Finally, the desire to sensationalize this story through the use of rape myths may be greater for this case than for others because of Bryant’s notoriety and the increased likelihood to sell newspapers. The results presented in this study are consistent with prevalence rates of rape myths in other mediums, but it would be advantageous to do a broader review of sexual assault cases in print journalism.

Regardless of the uniqueness or commonality of the coverage of this case, highly publicized sexual assault trials play a very important role in perpetuating rape myths. Even if the number of rape myths in these articles is greater compared to articles about other cases of sexual assault, the enormous celebrity and media saturation suggest the potential for this case to have a great influence on public opinion, much as the O.J. Simpson case brought public opinions about race and crime into sharper relief a decade earlier (Brown, Duane, & Fraser, 1997; Chancer, 2005; Mixon, Foley, & Orme, 1995). Most articles about sexual assault are about stranger rape (also fulfilling rape myths) and/or get ignored because they get very little press. The attention given to this case and the use of rape myths make this case particularly damaging, regardless of how representative it is of the way the print media typically treat sexual assault. Freeman (1993) and Chancer (2005) address this point in their writings about the highly publicized William Kennedy Smith and Mike Tyson sexual assault trials.

Finally, the manipulation in Study 2 is admittedly strong. The information presented in each fabricated article was more than was mentioned on average in actual articles written about the case. A few editorials presented almost as much information about the case (as presented in Study 2), but most articles printed less. Nevertheless, people likely were exposed to hundreds of articles and television and radio news stories about this case. And given that articles on crime are the most likely to be read of all newspaper articles (Surette, 1992), it is reasonable to believe that most people would have been exposed to most or all of the information that was presented in the articles in this study.⁷ Therefore, the amount of information participants received in Study 2 represents a culmination of the information people had read or heard about the case during the 14 months between the original allegation and case dismissal. Nevertheless, future research should investigate the effects of varying exposure to rape myths in newspaper articles.

Summary

One of the biggest barriers that remains for reducing sexual assault is people’s inability or refusal to recognize it when it occurs. When a sexual assault does not meet the criteria for a prototypical sexual assault (and it often does not), we are likely to use rape myths. Unfortunately, the employment of rape myths creates a vicious cycle

that makes it increasingly harder for sexual assault victims to report the crime. In the unlikely event that a sexual assault victim actually reports the crime, rape myths are self-reinforcing when they influence the way the victim is treated along the entire chain of the criminal justice process (e.g., intake by hospital personnel, questioning and investigation by law enforcement, jury verdicts, judge's sentencing). For example, the myth that women lie about sexual assault may contribute to law enforcement personnel's not accepting a woman's sexual assault claim and deeming it a false report or "unfounded" (Estrich, 1987). This boosts the belief that women often make false claims of sexual assault and leads law enforcement to be more skeptical the next time a woman claims assault, thereby fueling the "she's lying" myth. Unfortunately, though, sexual assaults that *do* conform to the prototype reinforce rape myths as well. Although these women are more likely to be believed and these cases more likely to be prosecuted, giving legitimacy to the prototypical assault and dismissing the atypical assault reinforces the prototype and the rape myths that support it. In the present research, we discuss one way that rape myths are reinforced in our culture. The more rape myths are used in the media, the more accessible they are to those responding to sexual assault victims and the harder it is to eliminate sexual assault.

Notes

1. It is difficult to get true estimates on false accusation rates in sexual assault cases. Lonsway and Fitzgerald (1994), in a review of the literature on rape myths, found numbers ranging from 2% to 9% in data estimating falsely reported cases. With any crime, a certain level of subjectivity and uncertainty may be involved in labeling a report a "false report" when allegations are not backed up by sufficient evidence. However, sexual assault cases may be particularly susceptible to being labeled false reports given the tendencies for law enforcement to employ rape myths and to reduce sexual assault cases to "he said—she said" situations. In the present analysis, because no one besides Bryant and his alleged victim can know who is lying in this case, statements questioning Bryant's and the alleged victim's honesty should be equally presented in newspaper articles.

2. It should be noted that recent research has identified some groups that are at a high risk to commit rape, namely, fraternity members (Boswell & Spade, 1996; Humphrey & Kahn, 2000) and athletes (for a review, see Benedict, 1998). Therefore, it is possible that a popular athlete such as Kobe Bryant fits people's prototypical notions of someone who would be likely to commit sexual assault. However, results from Study 1 indicate otherwise.

3. For this article, feminine gender pronouns will be used to refer to the victim and masculine gender pronouns to refer to the perpetrator. Although men are victims of sexual assault (in approximately 10% of reported cases) and women are perpetrators of sexual assault (in approximately 2% of reported cases), the overwhelming majority of sexual assaults are committed by men on women (Bureau of Justice Statistics, 1999; U.S. Department of Justice, 2003).

4. The authors of this article consider "endorsement" and "presence" of a rape myth to be equivalent. In the absence of any qualifying statements to admonish the particular rape myth, "use" of a rape myth in these articles (e.g., suggesting that a woman "asked for it" by her actions) is implicit endorsement. We are not suggesting that any one author's purpose is explicit endorsement of rape myths; it is our assumption that most journalists believe that they are reporting unbiased "facts."

5. Both articles are available from the first author on request.

6. In addition, Brown, Duane, and Fraser (1997) have suggested that pretrial publicity may generate public sympathy for celebrity defendants they are motivated to like. They found that media exposure was correlated with greater beliefs in O.J. Simpson's innocence, regardless of race and gender of the respondent.

7. Less than 5% of participants answered a 1 (*not at all informed*) when asked to rate their self-knowledge about the case. Of participants, 24% felt they were "not at all informed" about the alleged victim's history, and 30% of participants felt that they were "not at all informed" about the physical evidence against Bryant. That participants felt least informed about the alleged evidence against Kobe Bryant is consistent with the data presented in Study 1.

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