

---

## 5. The promotion and resistance of rape myths in an internet discussion forum

Dr Nicole Westmarland,

School of Applied Social Sciences,

Durham University,

Laura Graham,

Nottingham University,

[nicole.westmarland@durham.ac.uk](mailto:nicole.westmarland@durham.ac.uk)

[llxlg4@nottingham.ac.uk](mailto:llxlg4@nottingham.ac.uk)

### **Abstract**

There is now widespread recognition in the UK that the problems faced in rape prosecutions cannot be dealt with solely through legal reform (HM Government, 2007; Rape Crisis Scotland, 2008; Temkin and Krahe, 2008) and that a societal shift in attitudes is needed throughout society. This recognition has led to a renewed interest in 'rape myths', defined by Burt (1980: 217) as '... prejudicial, stereotyped, or false beliefs about rape, rape victims, and rapists'. This research uses qualitative data downloaded from an internet discussion forum linked to a television series shown in England and Wales called '*The Verdict*' (where celebrities acted as jurors in a fictional rape trial). The data were used to investigate the ways in which rape myths were promoted, challenged and resisted. The findings were both pessimistic and optimistic - rape myths remained prevalent, but rarely if ever went unchallenged. Disturbingly misogynistic statements co-existed alongside feminist ones; the latter once would have been challenged as radical, but appeared to be generally accepted as mainstream views. By showing how rape myths are resisted, we suggest some emergence of 'green shoots' of change amidst an otherwise grey landscape.

---

**Keywords**

Celebrity, rape policy, reality TV, sexual violence.

**Introduction**

There has been an increased recognition from the 1970s onwards of the widespread nature of violence against women. Violence against women causes more death and disability worldwide than war, cancer, malaria and traffic accidents amongst women aged 15-44 (World Bank, 1993). In most countries, it is now acknowledged as being a significant and serious social problem and is legislated against within criminal codes. However, there is no evidence of any significant reduction in violence against women - described by UN Secretary General Ban Ki-moon as a problem of 'pandemic' proportions (UN General Assembly, 2006).

In England and Wales, rape began to be taken more seriously within a public policy agenda from the turn of the century. Prior to this, sexual violence was said to have been 'left behind', with policy makers placing most focus and resources on non sexual domestic violence (Kelly and Regan, 2001). Rape was named the 'forgotten issue' that no one wanted to talk about (Kelly and Regan, 2001). There has since been a raft of policy and legislation introduced, focused on what have become known as the 'three P's' - prevention, provision and protection (e.g. HM Government, 2009). However, it remains the case that rape prevalence is unacceptably high (problems with prevention), there are significant problems with the way rape victim survivors are treated (problems with service provision) and the vast majority of men who rape still go unpunished (problems with protection). Rape myths play a role in all of these problems, and these are the focus of this paper.

After providing a brief overview of 'rape myth' research, this paper describes '*The Verdict*' - a television series about a fictional rape trial which controversially used a 'celebrity jury' in a 'reality TV' format. Using qualitative data downloaded from its linked internet discussion forum, *The Verdict* is then

---

used as a case study to investigate rape myths currently in existence and the ways in which they are challenged and resisted. This article adds to the long-standing discussion about rape myths in that it contextualises how they are used and resisted in a 'natural' (non-research) environment in contemporary society. In turn, it is hoped that this can help focus policy developments and add to theoretical understandings of rape myths today. By including rape myth resistance we show the positive changes that are happening in relation to rape myths in society and demonstrate the emergence of 'green shoots' of change.

### **Rape myths**

One of the earliest academic studies on rape myths was carried out by Burt in 1980. Defining rape myths as '... prejudicial, stereotyped, or false beliefs about rape, rape victims, and rapists' (Burt, 1980: 217), she found that there was a link between rape proclivity and rape myth acceptance. Following at least three decades of research and discussion about rape myths the topic is, unfortunately, still very much relevant today (Kelly, Lovett and Regan, 2002; Rape Crisis Scotland, 2008; Temkin and Krahe, 2008). In 2005, Amnesty International commissioned a telephone poll about attitudes to rape with a random sample of 1,095 adults in England and Wales (Amnesty International/ICM, 2005). As well as showing that there is general ignorance about rape incidence and conviction rates, the poll measured levels of agreement on a range of attitudes towards rape victims. The results of the poll included that 34% of respondents believed that the victim was 'partially' or 'totally' responsible if she behaved in a flirtatious manner and 22% believed that the victim was 'partially' or 'totally' responsible for rape if she had had many sexual partners. The positive interpretation of these results is that most people *do not* consider that a woman's behaviour makes her responsible for being raped. However, the poll received a high level of media coverage and stimulated widespread discussions based on its 'shock' finding that these attitudes still existed in contemporary society. Subsequent surveys have

---

found similar findings (Opinion Matters/The Havens, 2010; Home Office, 2009; Scottish Executive, 2007).

Faced with some of the lowest rape conviction rates in Europe, of just 6% in England and Wales and even lower in Scotland (Lovett and Kelly (2009), the UK Government is beginning to acknowledge that there needs to be a shift in public attitudes before any significant changes can be noticed. The Cross Government Action Plan on Sexual Violence and Abuse, for example, states:

We are aware that we need to do more to address the myths and stereotypes associated with sexual violence and childhood sexual abuse that are prevalent in society. We will look at what more can be done with our statutory and voluntary sector partners to raise awareness in this area. (HM Government 2007: 40)

This acknowledgement can also be seen in recent proposals to educate juries about rape myths (Office for Criminal Justice Reform, 2006) and radio and poster campaigns attempting to educate young men about consent (HM Government, 2007). In Scotland, Government funding was made available for a nationwide campaign launched in 2008 by Rape Crisis Scotland entitled 'This is Not an Invitation to Rape Me', aimed at tackling rape myths by using striking imagery to stimulate debate ([www.thisisnotaninvitationtorapeme.co.uk](http://www.thisisnotaninvitationtorapeme.co.uk)). Campaigners for change point to road safety campaigns (e.g. seatbelt wearing, drink driving) as evidence that shifts in public attitudes and behaviour are possible (see for example Tay, 2005; World Health Organisation and World Bank, 2004). Attitudinal and behavioural change has also been documented internationally following health campaigns, such as tobacco smoking (e.g. McVey and Stapleton, 2000) and excessive alcohol consumption (e.g. Stewart and Casswell, 1993).

The tackling of rape myths is important for three key reasons (in addition to the psychological effect they may have on victim survivors and the people

---

close to them). Firstly, research has demonstrated a correlation between rape myth acceptance and self-reported likelihood to rape (Greendlinger and Byrne, 1987; Bohner et al., 1998). Secondly, there are a range of studies that have shown people who hold negative attitudes towards rape victims and believe in rape myths attribute blame to victims rather than defendants, which has obvious ramifications in terms of jury decision making (Gray, 2006; Ellison and Munro, 2009a). Temkin and Krahé (2008) conducted three studies using student and non-student samples in England and Germany to investigate the impact of rape myths on judgements in rape cases. They consistently found that the participants who believed that women precipitate rape (e.g. through behaviour or appearance) were the most likely to blame the complainant and least likely to hold the defendant liable. The third key reason why rape myths are problematic is their impact on the way rape victim survivors are treated by professionals. This may have an impact on the way investigations and prosecutions are handled and also on their help seeking behaviour. For example, both US and UK studies have shown that police officers believe a high proportion of rape allegations are false (Kelly et al., 2005; Page, 2008).

### ***The Verdict* television series**

In February 2007, BBC 2 broadcast a short television series called *The Verdict* that consisted of a fictional rape case, a four day trial and a celebrity jury. According to an interview in *The Guardian* newspaper, a television producer was considering a programme about a jury when he met comedian Jo Brand, who had just completed jury duty, at a *Radio Times* party. The article cites the producer as saying:

It encouraged me to think, 'wouldn't it be fascinating to see famous people making judgments and weighing up the evidence in a criminal case?' We thought first of all about a sexual harassment case, and then a murder case, but then went with rape because it's so clearly two interpretations of reality [sic]. It's a hotly debated crime in the legal world. (Jeffries, 2007: np)

In the fictional case, 'Damien Scott', a famous football player and his friend, 'James Greer', were arrested and prosecuted for the vaginal and anal rape of 'Anna Crane' in a hotel room. Both defendants pleaded not guilty. As a complicating factor, 'Anna' did not initially report the rape to the police. Instead, she told her best friend who covertly recorded the conversation and sold it to a newspaper. The alleged rapists (Damien and James) and two of the witnesses (Anna and her friend) were actors, but the expert witnesses and the legal teams were in their usual professional roles. The televised trial was held in a real courtroom (Kingston magistrates' court) and used a recently retired judge. The trial was held over four days, before the jury deliberated and eventually delivered a verdict of not guilty.

*The Verdict* is particularly interesting for a number of reasons. First, the reality TV format, it is argued by Jenkins, is part of a 'convergence culture' between old and new media, allowing audiences to participate in the creation and circulation of central cultural myths (Jenkins, 2006). Unlike some more traditional reality TV formats, such as those employed by Big Brother and The X Factor, the audience of *The Verdict* had no control over the outcome of the show, the jury's verdict. Therefore, in order to actively participate in the debates, particularly where the programme had inspired strong reactions, some viewers made use of the discussion board. As such, the format of *The Verdict* allowed for a more thorough engagement with the debates and a more open discussion about the issues than would have occurred if the viewers had simply voted on the verdict.

Secondly, there is a history of reality TV being used to educate the public about rape prosecution. Over two decades ago, it was a very early reality TV format that first revealed to the general public the way rape victims were treated by the police – in the form of Roger Graef's 'fly on the wall' groundbreaking documentary 'Police' in 1982. The audience's reaction to the harrowing way the police sought to undermine the victim's credibility and bully

---

her into a retraction created a public outcry that contributed to major changes to policing rape not only within Thames Valley but also nationally. The Verdict, then, showing the way victims and defendants are treated by the legal system and jury members, had the potential to create a similar public outcry that could result in similarly widespread change. It was also aired within a fortnight of the Channel 4 programme '*Consent*', which also televised a mock rape trial and recorded the jury deliberations. But *Consent* used members of the public who were not celebrities as jurors, a rape case that did not involve a celebrity as the victim or perpetrator, and was heralded within anti-rape groups as a realistic, if depressing, programme which provided a unique insight into how juries make decisions in rape cases.

### **Method**

*The Verdict* website linked to a discussion board where viewers were encouraged to 'post' their 'point of view' on the programme and discuss it with other viewers. This paper analyses the messages (these are known as 'posts' and the people who write messages are 'posters') in discussion board threads (a thread is where a new discussion is started). The discussion board received a large amount of traffic, totalling a substantial 1,588 threads. The length of the threads varied, with some very short (the shortest had just 44 words) and others very long (the longest had 89,642 words). The text from all discussions with at least one reply was downloaded and imported the data into QSR NVivo for analysis. The codes were developed deductively to allow for the possible discovery of 'new' rape myths, although the codes that emerged were those that had already been identified in previous research. It was found that these rape myths were talked about in different ways - promotion and resistance – and therefore developed sub-codes for each of these categories.

Using this method, it was not possible to know who the viewers were, or whether those who used the discussion board were representative of *The Verdict* audience as a whole. The only clues available were when posters

---

prefaced their opinion with a statement about their identity – this was usually (but not always) done in order to provide ‘weight’ to the importance of their post and to substantiate their ‘expert’ opinion. A total of 52 different ‘as a ...’ statements were used, included being ‘as a woman’, ‘as a rape survivor’, ‘as a feminist’, ‘as a barrister’, ‘as a psychologist’, ‘as a magistrate’, and ‘as a genuine rape victim’ (sic). Three of the jurors (Sara Payne, Jacqueline Gold and Stan Collymore) also apparently turned up on the message boards, although it was of course impossible to verify their true identity. However, the posters appeared to take the celebrity posters as genuine (we did not see any challenges to their identity and saw no reason to doubt them) and some of these threads were the most popular. The addition of the celebrity jurors is not significant to our findings beyond the creation of additional data (since it probably encouraged additional participation in the forum).

There are particular ethical issues to be taken into consideration when doing research of this nature. On the one hand, the discussion boards are public spaces and anyone can view them – even people who are not board members and who do not intend to post their views. On the other hand, however, despite the foresight of one poster that ‘the contributions should keep sociologists amused for a long time’ it is unlikely that the views posted were intended for prying academic eyes. Following Moreira (2008), who used a similar method of data collection to investigate the use of health technologies, we consider this research to be documentary analysis rather than internet ethnography/virtual ethnography (since we did not participate in or even observe, overtly or covertly, the discussion boards at the time of the programme) and have treated the data in the way we would other written material in the public domain. Although we appreciate the line between internet ethnography and documentary analysis using data collected on the internet may be a blurry one, it is our opinion that to call this ethnography would be an insult to the time and skills needed to conduct ‘truer’ internet ethnography/virtual ethnography (for example that done by Boellstorff, 2008).

---

Although we had no control over our research population and could not be sure whether people were who they said they were (whether their online identity matched their 'real life' identity). This does of course raise questions about the validity of the data, which is an issue that the academics must increasingly consider when interpreting their findings, as the internet becomes a more popular site for research. We found this research design to be particularly useful to research the prevalence of rape myths. The data collection phase of the research was quick and inexpensive, and was as 'naturalistic' as possible. We had no researcher effects to take into consideration, for example participants feeling 'judged' by academics for holding certain opinions, and it is possible that the data was both 'thicker' and more valid for this reason. For those who posted about their own experiences of rape, it is possible that it was easier to do so through their online identity than it would in 'real world' environments. While questions of validity do remain, data was gained that would be difficult to collect by other means.

It should further be noted that all quoted posts remain as they were originally posted, and therefore often include misspellings or grammatical mistakes. This has been done to provide an accurate representation of what was written on the boards.

## **Findings**

The most prevalent myths were: 1) that women are 'asking for it' if they do not keep themselves safe; 2) that if women behave provocatively then they cannot expect a jury to believe she did not consent to sex; 3) that a woman will always fight back when faced with rape; 4) that a woman will always report a rape immediately and display distress; and 5) that women frequently lie about rape.

We found that for every rape myth stated in the posts, there was a whole host of replies challenging it (what we have called 'rape myth resistance'). This

---

demonstrates that although rape myths do still exist, they do not go unchallenged. Resistance to rape myths is of course well established through the women's movement, led by Rape Crisis and other anti-rape campaign groups. Plummer (1995) refers to this as 'a new feminist-inspired culture of rape survival' which has allowed women who are raped to 'come out'. Many rape survivors posted about their own personal experiences, for example explaining the reasons why women do not always react in the ways others may think they would. In the sections that follow, each of these rape myths is described with examples given from the discussion boards, followed in turn by how they were 'resisted'.

**1) *'Throwing yourself into a lion's den' - women should keep themselves safe***

A common theme amongst the posts was that if a woman relies on society to keep her safe, then her naivety is partly to blame for the attack under which she may find herself. The attitude that women should be responsible for keeping themselves safe has a long history. In an infamous case in 1982, a woman who was raped while hitchhiking was described as being 'contributory negligent' (Radford and Jeffreys, 1984). Today, there exists a wide range of (often profit-making) devices that are marketed towards women 'keeping themselves safe', including rape alarms, whistles, torches, devices which spray semi-permanent paint at attackers, mini CS gas canisters and mobile phone text services (where the number plate of a taxi is recorded before the customer gets in). In the Amnesty International/ICM (2005) poll, 22% of respondents believed that the victim was 'partially' or 'totally' responsible for rape if she was alone in a dangerous/deserted area. Many of the posters mentioned alcohol, which ties in with a recent trend of alcohol becoming the 'new short skirt' (Bindel, 2007). Similarly, in the Amnesty International/ICM (2005) poll, 30% of respondents believed that the victim was 'partially' or 'totally' responsible if she was drunk.

---

Many posters argued that Anna (the victim witness) was foolish in going back to James' hotel (defendant 1), as she was putting herself in a position where 'intercourse could happen'. Posters suggested that women should take more care of themselves, avoid dangerous situations, and not leave each other alone with men they do not know well. This is particularly the case, it was argued, where the woman has consumed alcohol or other drugs and therefore was not in 'full control'. One post suggested that if a woman is going to drink alcohol, she should keep a personal alarm on her in case things begin to 'get nasty'. The following posts also suggested that the first defence to rape is avoiding situations where rape is a risk, for example:

The first defence against rape should not be the court, it should be women themselves avoiding situations which might lead to rape and then defending themselves if it does happen.

What frightens me is the way some women seem to want to play Russian roulette with their most prized possession 'themselves'.

The fact remains that she willingly went up to the room and placed herself at risk. Should it not be taken that women do have a responsibility to protect themselves by not placing themselves at risk in the first place.

It has also done well to show how stupid some young girls are if they don't realise the outcome of going to a hotel room with a man you have only just met.

Nobody needs any education on rape – its part of life - it happens - most women who claim rape, have only been asking for what they can't understand. 9/10 they can run away. If they can't do that they shouldn't put themselves in a position where intercourse can happen. Far too

---

much fuss made out of the whole thing IMO. Going up to a hotel room with a guy you only just met is like throwing yourself into a lion's den!

In response to these posts, there were many replies stating that women should not have to choose between having fun and staying safe. Putting the burden of safety on young women was rejected by many as a far-from-ideal way to tackle the problems of abusive or predatory males. Moreover, the emphasis on women 'keeping safe' and carrying 'rape alarms' was indicative of an emphasis on stranger rape. It perpetuated a belief that rapes are always outside by the stereotypical 'stranger in a dark alley', whereas research consistently shows that stranger rape only accounts for a very small proportion of cases (Myhill and Allen, 2002; Feist et al., 2007; Hoare and Jansson, 2008). Most rapes, it was pointed out, were perpetrated by a person known to the victim, quite often colleagues, friends, family, boyfriends, and husbands. It would, therefore, be virtually impossible for a woman to 'keep herself safe' when it is more likely that the assault would occur in places she frequents everyday than a place she considered 'dangerous'.

## **2) 'Well, if she was wearing those' - provocative behaviour**

In a related theme, many viewers stated that by acting in a provocative or flirtatious manner, Anna was somehow leading James to believe she would consent to sex, and that this made it difficult for jurors to believe that she wouldn't have consented. The Amnesty International/ICM (2005) poll found that 26% of respondents believed that the victim was 'partially' or 'totally' responsible for rape if she was wearing sexy/revealing clothing.

In the jury discussion Stan Collymore was heard to ask 'how can she have been raped when she was kissing up on him?' This belief was supported in posts that stated that Anna would not have gone to James' room and kissed him while they were alone if she didn't intend to have sex. One witness for the defence reported that she had seen Anna draped over James acting

---

flirtatiously. This statement, for some, was evidence that she was a 'sexually aggressive female' (as one poster put it) who would not have refused consent to sex when she so clearly was aiming to seduce him. One line of enquiry in the trial was about how she arrived on the bed, when she and James had previously been on the sofa. Some posts argued that she certainly wouldn't have got into bed with him if she had not wanted to have sex. This line of commentary suggests that if a woman goes so far with a man she has no right to refuse consent to anything he wishes to do or that if he forces her into sex, that she is partly to blame for leading him on. One poster responded to a woman who posted her own experience as a survivor:

OK so you were raped years ago. I am sorry that you were obviously. Just out of curiosity though, why did you get into the bed in the first place with the bloke? Beds are generally speaking used for two things aren't they, one of which is sleeping. This echoes previous research by Temkin (2000) where barristers admitted to agreeing with juries who used complainants' behaviour as an indicator of consent.

During the jury's deliberation, the shoes that Anna had worn on the night in question, a pair of high heels, were produced. A poster reported that 'Megaman' looked at the shoes and shook his head as though saying 'well if she was wearing those....' While this was simply conjecture on behalf of that poster, other posts suggested that if a woman dresses in a certain way or acts flirtatiously, she must be aware she is being provocative, and should watch what she is doing in order to ensure that she is not giving the 'wrong impression'. The fact that Anna took her shoes off in the hotel room was classed by some as relevant, with one asking 'Why did she take her shoes off?' and another stating '... she got very comfortable in a strangers room by taking off her shoes, she had already made the 1st move. None of her flimsy clothes displayed signs of being forcibly removed.'

---

The idea that if women act provocatively they could be partially to blame for being raped was heatedly challenged in the posts. One poster stated, 'it is not against the law to wear a short skirt or drink alcohol; but it is to rape someone.' This was only one of a large number of posts that embodied the assertion that women and girls should not have to modify their dress sense, or the way they act because of a 'misogynist' society, where some men are 'on a power trip which involves subjugating women.'

On a similar note, posters argued that wearing short skirts, drinking and flirting may be 'folly' (in the words of one poster) but they didn't mean that she would want sex. A woman should be able to flirt, kiss or even perform some sexual acts, and still have the right to say no to sex. The idea that a woman simply taking her shoes off constitutes a 'first move' was particularly strongly resisted. One poster responded angrily:

What the hell is wrong with people? Does taking one's shoes off in a hotel suite really indicate that you might be up for sex (or that you can be gang raped)? Of course it bloody doesn't. It's entirely irrelevant.

### **3) 'Why was she not bruised at all?' - fighting back**

Research shows that rather than there being a single response to rape, women respond in a range of different ways. An excellent example of this can be seen in Jordan's (2008) book 'Serial Survivors', which is based on 15 in-depth interviews with women who were sexually assaulted by the same serial rapist in Auckland, New Zealand. Jordan describes the range of survival techniques the women used while the attacks were ongoing (physical resistance; talking to the offender; trying to alert others; doing the unexpected; and mental/inner resistance), showing that no two women responded in exactly the same way when faced with the same rapist. The assumption that a woman, faced with rape, would automatically 'fight back' is a common myth, with people often assuming that that is how they personally would react to the threat of rape. In an analysis of 274 police reports and court testimonies for rape and attempted rape, Ullman and Knight (1992) found that only 22 per

---

cent of victims resisted rape through fighting and screaming. The response used most often (by 56 per cent of victims) was to beg and plead with the offender. In many cases women describe being 'frozen with fright' and feeling not only unable to fight back, but in some cases even to move or make any noise at all (Galliano et al., 1993). Subsequent research has found this 'immobility' response to be particularly common in women with a history of sexual victimisation (Gidycz, Van Wynsberghe and Edwards, 2008).

Some of the jurors and many of the posters argued that because there was no bruising to Anna's body, her story was not credible. They argued that if she had been raped, she would have fought back enough to have sustained some physical injury, or scratched the rapist, or ripped some of her clothes. Jennifer Ellison, during the jury's deliberation, stated that if she was raped that she would fight back. Some posts suggested that if the women do not fight back then they are 'passively accepting' sex:

Surely, if women actually resisted rather than passively accepted sex, there would be proof of rape and physical evidence. If women don't treat rape as a serious assault needing to be fended off with every possible method, then it clearly isn't possible for the jury to convict!

Another post suggested that the women did not fight back because, unlike other types of assault, rape was a crime from which both parties could gain pleasure: 'The difference in rape to another form of assault is that there is a possible pleasure in the act of sex for both parties whereas that is not the case if say punched or stabbed, say.'

Others argued that it was a woman's 'civic duty' to 'have the presence of mind' to fight back and hopefully gain enough of an injury to have hard evidence to present to a jury and ensure that the rapist is locked away. One poster even suggested that women don't fight back because they'd rather be raped than have a few bruises. Indeed, the absence of physical injuries (with

---

the exception of an anal tear) was the fact that many posters had the most issues with:

Why was she not bruised at all, even if she froze when she was raped after three alleged quick sexual liaisons where she was held down, she would have some bruising.

The evidence (kissing, cuddling, no damaged clothing, no bruising) suggests consent was given.

These posters were therefore ignorant of the range of responses to rape (as detailed above).

However, many survivors and other posters challenged this with either knowledge or experience. Common reactions to rape described in survivors' posts were fear and shock, which had caused them to freeze, and had made them unable to fight back or try to run. Some posts also argued that when a man weighs more than a woman and has a lot more physical strength, then she may fear that if she fights back he would just get angrier and cause more injuries, perhaps even killing her. Ultimately, the resistance to this rape myth demonstrated that people act in a range of different ways when they are raped: 'No-one knows how they would react if they have been raped. You can say you would fight, you would kick and scream, but the truth is you have no idea what you would do.'

#### ***4) 'Common sense says she would have run out into corridor screaming' – reactions to rape***

Linked to the previous section about 'fighting back', another rape myth related to how women would react immediately following the rape. In particular, questions were raised about the fact Anna did not report the rape to the police immediately and her relatively calm demeanour immediately afterwards. Home Office research found that only 46% of all rapes which were recorded as a crime were reported on the same day as the offence, while 14% had more than 6 months between the offence and reporting (Feist et al., 2007).

---

A number of posts suggested that Anna (the victim-witness) would have first told the police rather than her friend if she had been raped. There were posts suggesting that if a woman did not report the rape straight away it was because it didn't happen, or she was unsure about whether she consented or not: 'Her failure to report to the police indicates her own uncertainty as to what happened, and probably self-doubt as to the degree of her own complicity in some of the sex acts which took place.'

Posters also suggested that other aspects of Anna's reaction were incongruous with being raped. These were from both people using what they saw as 'common sense' understandings as well as survivors who had reacted differently to Anna:

Common sense says she would have run out into corridor screaming, kicking, biting raising the alarm and been very stressed. I think the main flaw is that she was simply "distressed" after that ordeal. You would be more than distressed. I was beside myself. It took me over half an hour to be calm enough to even stand up. She made it sound like she just 'went home.'

As with the previous theme, these posters assumed a sole 'correct' reaction onto the victims of rape (that women would run screaming and crying to the police) and ignored the reality born out in research (Ullman and Knight, 1992; Galliano et al., 1993; Jordan, 2008). However, posters were again vocal in challenging this belief:

You also get it wrong M8y about the girl not reporting the rape to the Police. I had 27yrs in the Police and believe me Male or Female who have been raped feel so degraded that they don't even want to tell anyone. Some feel so dirty they go home and bath after bath to help themselves feel clean. They also wash their probably soiled clothes.

---

You have commented that you cannot see a woman who is raped NOT going to the police. Everyday crimes take place that aren't reported. That doesn't mean they didn't happen. People don't report because they don't realise something is a crime, because they are too busy, too embarrassed, or too frightened. They can't be bothered, they doubt they'll be believed, they want to pretend it didn't happen, they tell someone and they react badly, or they can't find the words. Take your pick.

Some posters therefore had a very good understanding, from their professional life or otherwise, about the variety of reactions to rape. Challenging these presumptions was particularly pertinent when done by police officers, as in the above post, as this demonstrates a definite evolution (at least from this particular officer) from the attitudes shown in 'Police' (discussed above), where police officers were shown to be sceptical of complainants' stories. Furthermore, the position of the police as the institution to which rapes may or may not be reported lends *gravitas* to the resistance to this myth.

**5) *'Ultimately, an accusation of rape is one that is very easy to make' – women frequently lie about rape***

Finally, the myth that women frequently lie about rape ran throughout the discussion board. Although there is no universally accepted figure regarding how many rapes reported to the police are false allegations (in part due to problems defining and recording false allegations), the posters seemed sure that false allegations are increasing. One poster stated, 'In this day and age there are so many women who are crying rape now just to get back at the man they sleep with.' Another agreed, 'I think the problem with today's society is that it is so easy for a female to "cry" rape.'

The common misconception that a finding of not guilty equates to the victim-witness lying about rape was also perpetuated, for example posters asked whether Anna and her friend should be charged with 'conspiracy', 'conspiracy

---

to defraud' and 'perjury'. In addition, the age-old myth that accusations are 'easy to make' was also found within the posts:

Ultimately, an accusation of rape is one that is very easy to make whether it actually happened or not and the reality is that usually only the two people involved know the truth about what really happened. Before everyone gets on their high horse and tells me that all accusations of rape are true this is clearly not the case - there are plenty of girls who do have consensual sex and later regret it and make false allegations of rape.

In a peculiar series of posts, the very fact that the programme was made was used as evidence that women lie about rape. The rationale for this was that Anna was an actress in the programme, ergo someone like Anna could act the part in real life, for example, '[w]hat really happened is she WASN'T raped she acted the whole thing. It was a whole scripted show for the BBC just shows how in real life many get falsely accused by false tears.' And a further poster stated:

We know for a fact that she was not gang raped as she is an actress and this is a TV programme. What the BBC have done is prove that it is completely possible for someone to present a made up story within court and get people to believe it.

Resistance to the myth that women frequently lie about rape was robustly challenged in the posts. There was a wide range of different people using the discussion boards, and these included staff and volunteers at Rape Crisis Centres. The latter were particularly vocal in their resistance to this myth.

False accusations of rape!!!! What about the 400 women a year we get to see who haven't even managed to get their case to court? No woman or girl attending a Rape Crisis Centre is lying. Why would she

---

bother coming to see us.....the vast majority of women don't even tell anyone and even less go to the police. It is very rare cases that make it to court and even fewer that achieve convictions and after this programme, maybe the public can see why. There is rarely justice for any survivor of rape.

## **Conclusions**

This paper has confirmed that there is a high public interest in rape cases, evidenced by the level of traffic on the discussion boards from a very wide range of contributors. Despite criticisms of the programme itself, the discussion boards were found to be an ideal environment in which to research the existence of rape myths but also to research the ways in which they are resisted. The findings were both pessimistic and optimistic: while the age-old myths undoubtedly remained prevalent, they rarely if ever went unchallenged.

Dangerous and misogynistic attitudes towards women, sex and consent were posted on the discussion boards. This demonstrates that there continues to be an urgent need for a public education campaign, particularly because of the documented links between both rape myths and rape proclivity and rape myths and reluctance to convict in rape trials. There continues to be disagreement about whose responsibility it is to prevent rape – men's or women's - and this was evident in the first two myths described (women should keep themselves safe and should not act 'provocatively'). These myths are also pejorative to men – the idea that they are unable to control themselves simply because of a way a woman behaves. They also suggest that even when women stop doing certain forms of behaviour (for example, hitchhiking is rare these days), the myth will simply 'evolve' into new forms of behaviours that they should not engage in to be free from rape (such as drinking alcohol). Hence, rape myths can be seen as dynamic social constructs which evolve in relation to shifting expectations about women and sexual behaviour within the wider framework of gender inequality. There was a similar 'no win' situation for women in terms of acting 'provocatively' with

---

some posters able to interpret almost anything as consent, including the simple act of Anna taking her shoes off. This echoes mock jury research which has shown a wide range of behaviours are interpreted by some as indirectly communicating consent, including paying/receiving compliments, offering/accepting a lift, and inviting someone in for coffee (Ellison and Munro, 2009b).

Myths three and four (that women would fight back when faced with rape and then react in a particular way afterwards) were also strongly held by some. Only hyper-physical reactions (shouting, screaming and fighting) were seen as corroboration for rape while other reactions were taken as evidence that no rape could have taken place. There may be a role here for script writers to play in showing a wider range of reactions to rape in television dramas and in films. This might mean increasing the level of input that academics and practitioners have liaising with writers and producers. Considering the reactions were interpreted as corroborative evidence that rape had/had not occurred, these myths would also be important to tackle in any forthcoming jury education procedures that are introduced.

The myth that women frequently lie about rape continued, with posters even stating that it was increasing. The belief that false allegations are increasing could be an effect of the increase in reported rapes compared to the number of convictions for rape. It is a myth that can be particularly difficult to rebut, because of the way some criminal justice data are recorded and interpreted (where offences that are 'undetected' or 'no-crimes' are sometimes equated with being 'false'), the problems associated with proving a report was false, and disagreement between academics about what proportion of rape reports are 'false'.

Many posters challenged the rape myths which were posted on the message boards. While the identities of the posters cannot be confirmed, it is clear that a wide range of posters (rather than just members of an organised resistance

movement) were posting to resist the myths. Furthermore, there were instances of rape survivors speaking out from their own experiences in order to rebut the myths put forward in some of the posts, an action which may have been made easier by the anonymous medium of the discussion board. It is both interesting and inspiring to be able to argue that we may have reached or be close to reaching a tipping point, where more people do not believe rape myths than do. This was shown quantitatively in the Amnesty International and similar surveys and this study has provided qualitative evidence to explain how these myths are resisted.

*\*The authors would like to thank Professor Clare McGlynn for providing helpful guidance on an earlier draft.*

## References

Amnesty International/ICM (2005) *Sexual Assault Research Summary Report*. London: Amnesty International/ICM.

BBC (2006) *The Verdict: Major Cross-platform Event Commissioned for BBC*. BBC Press release 07.09.06.

Bindel, J. (2007) Why is Rape so Easy to Get Away With? *The Guardian*, 1 February 2007.

Boellstorff, T. (2008) *Coming of Age in Second Life: An Anthropologist Explores the Virtually Human*. Princeton: Princeton University Press.

Bohner, G., Reinhard, M.A., Rutz, S., Sturm, S., Kerschbaum, B. and Effler, D. (1998) Rape myths as neutralising cognitions: evidence for a causal impact of anti-victim attitudes on men's self-reported likelihood of raping, *European Journal of Social Psychology*, 28 (2), 257-268.

Burt, M.R. (1980) 'Cultural Myths and Support for Rape', *Journal of Personality and Social Psychology*, 8: 217-30.

**Coy, M., Kelly, L. and Foord, J. (2007) *Map of Gaps: The Postcode Lottery of Violence against Women Services*. London: End Violence Against Women Coalition.**

Ellison, L. and Munro, V. (2009a) 'Reacting to Rape: Exploring Mock Jurors' Assessments of Complainant Credibility', *British Journal of Criminology*, 49: 202-19.

Ellison, L. and Munro, V. (2009b) 'Of 'Normal Sex' and 'Real Rape': Exploring the Use of Socio-Sexual Scripts in (Mock) Jury Deliberation', *Social & Legal Studies*, 18, 291-312.

---

Fawcett Society (12 February 2007) *Press Release: The Verdict - A Missed Opportunity for the BBC*, available at: <http://www.fawcettsociety.org.uk/index.asp?PageID=389> (last accessed 8 January 2009)

Fawcett Society (2008) *Regional Rape Conviction Rates in England and Wales 2004-2006*. London: Fawcett Society.

Feist, A., Ashe, J., Lawrence, J., McPhee, D., and Wilson, R. (2007) *Investigating and Detecting Recorded Offences of Rape*. London: Home Office.

Galliano, G., Noble, L.M., Travis, L.A. and Puech, C. (1993) 'Victim Reactions during Rape/Sexual Assault: A Preliminary Study of the Immobility Response and its Correlates', in P. Eastal (ed) *Without Consent: Confronting Adult Sexual Violence: Proceedings of a Conference held 27-29 October 1992*. Canberra: Australian Institute of Criminology.

Gidycz, C.A., Van Wynsberghe, A. and Edwards, K.M. (2008) 'Prediction of Women's Utilization of Resistance Strategies in a Sexual Assault Situation: A Prospective Study', *Journal of Interpersonal Violence*, 23 (5): 571-88.

Gray, J. M. (2006) 'Rape Myth Beliefs and Prejudiced Instructions: Effects on Decisions of Guilt in a case of Date Rape', *Legal and Criminological Psychology*, 11: 75-80.

Greendlinger, V. and Byrne, D. (1987) Coercive sexual fantasies of college men as predictors of self-reported likelihood to rape and overt sexual aggression, *The Journal of Sex Research*, 23, 1-11.

Hoare, J. and Jansson, K. (2008) 'Extent of Intimate Violence, Nature of Partner Abuse and Serious Sexual Assault, 2004/05, 2005/06 and 2006/07 British Crime Survey', in D. Povey (ed) *Homicides, Firearm Offences and Intimate Violence 2006/07* (3<sup>rd</sup> edn), London: Home Office.

HM Government (2007) *Cross Government Action Plan on Sexual Violence and Abuse*. London: HMSO.

Home Office (2009) *Results from the Ipsos Mori poll of telephone interviews with people in England and Wales regarding their opinions on violence against women*. London: Home Office.

Jeffries, S. (2007) *Twelve Angry Celebs*, guardian.co.uk, 13.01.2007

Jenkins, H. (2006) *Converging Culture: Where Old and New Media Collide*. New York: New York University Press.

Jordan, J. (2008) *Serial Survivors. Women's Narratives of Surviving Rape*. Sydney: The Federation Press.

Kelly, L., Lovett, J. and Regan, L. (2005) *A Gap or a Chasm? Attrition in Reported Rape Cases*. London: Home Office.

- 
- Lovett, J. and Kelly, L. (2009). *Different systems, similar outcomes? Tracking attrition in reported rape cases in eleven European countries*. London: CWASU.
- McVey, D. and Stapleton, J. (2000) Can anti-smoking television advertising affect smoking behaviour? Controlled trial of the Health Education Authority for England's anti-smoking TV campaign, *Tobacco Control*, 9, 273-282.
- Moreira, T. (2008) 'Continuous Positive Airway Pressure Machines and the work of Coordinating Technologies at Home'. *Chronic Illness* 4 (2): 102-9.
- Myhill, A. and Allen, J. (2002) *Rape and Sexual Assault of Women: Findings from the British Crime Survey*. London: Home Office.
- Office for Criminal Justice Reform (2006) *Convicting Rapists and Protecting Victims – Justice for Victims of Rape - A Consultation Paper*. London: OCJR.
- Opinion Matters/The Havens (2010) *Wake Up to Rape – Research Summary Report*, London: Opinion Matters/The Havens.
- Page, D.A. (2008). Gateway to Reform? Policy Implications of Police Officers' Attitudes Toward Rape. *American Journal of Criminal Justice*, 33 (1), 44-58.
- Plummer, K. (1995) *Telling Sexual Stories – Power, Change and Social Worlds*, London: Routledge.
- Radford, J. and Jeffreys, S. (1984) 'Contributory Negligence: Being a woman', in P. Scraton and P. Gordon (eds) *Causes for Concern*. Harmandsworth: Penguin.
- Rape Crisis Scotland (2008) 'October news: [This Is Not An Invitation To Rape Me](http://www.rapecrisisscotland.org.uk/news.htm). Rape Crisis Scotland launches national campaign to tackle woman-blaming attitudes to rape', available at <http://www.rapecrisisscotland.org.uk/news.htm> (last accessed 8 January 2009).
- Kelly, L. and Regan, L. (2001) *Rape: The Forgotten Issue? A European research and networking project*, London: Child and Woman Abuse Studies Unit, University of North London.
- Scottish Executive/TNS System 3 (2007). *Findings from the Wave 10 post-campaign evaluation of the Domestic Abuse Campaign 2006/07*. Edinburgh: Scottish Executive.
- Stewart, L. and Casswell, S. (1993) Media advocacy for alcohol policy support: results from the New Zealand Community Action Project, *Health Promotion International*, 8 (3), 167-175.
- Tay, R. (2005) Drink driving enforcement and publicity campaigns: are the police recommendations sensitive to model specification? *Accident Analysis and Prevention*, 37 (2), 259-266.
- Temkin, J. (2000) 'Prosecuting and Defending Rape: Perspectives From the Bar', *Journal of Law and Society*, 27: 219-48.

---

Temkin, J. and Krahe, B. (2008) *Sexual Assault and the Justice Gap: A Question of Attitude*, Oxford: Hart Publishing.

The Verdict, BBC2 TV.

Ullman, S.E. and Knight, R.A. (1992) 'Fighting Back. Women's Resistance to Rape', *Journal of Interpersonal Violence*, 7 (1): 31-43.

UN General Assembly (2006) *In-depth study on all forms of violence against women : report of the Secretary-General*, available at:  
<http://www.unhcr.org/refworld/docid/484e58702.html> [accessed 4 March 2010]

Westmarland, N. (2007) *An Unhelpful Verdict*, guardian.co.uk, 15.02.2007, available at <http://www.guardian.co.uk/commentisfree/2007/feb/15/bbcstheverdictisguiltyof> (last accessed 17 March 2009).

World Bank (1993) *World Bank Study World Development Report: Investing in Health*. New York: Oxford University Press.

World Health Organisation and World Bank (2004) *World Report on Road Traffic Injury Prevention*. Geneva: World Health Organisation.

Women's Resource Centre/Rape Crisis (2008) *The Crisis in Rape Crisis*. London: Women's Resource Centre.