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Sexual Assault Perpetrators' Justifications for Their Actions: Relationships to Rape Supportive Attitudes, Incident Characteristics, and Future Perpetration

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Abstract

Perpetrators use rape supportive attitudes and sexual assault incident characteristics to justify forcing sex on their victims. Perpetrators who can justify their behaviors are at increased risk for future perpetration. This study examined the relationships between rape supportive attitudes, sexual assault incident characteristics, and the post-assault justifications of 183 men sampled from the community who self-reported committing at least one act of sexual aggression. Hierarchical multiple regression analyses indicated that rape supportive attitudes, expectations for having sex, misperceptions of sexual intent, victims' alcohol consumption, attempts to be alone with her, and the number of consensual sexual activities prior to the unwanted sex were significant predictors of perpetrators' post-assault use of justifications. Greater use of justifications was a significant predictor of sexual aggression over a 1-year follow-up interval. These findings demonstrate the need for further research exploring when and why perpetrators use post-assault justifications and whether they are amenable to change.

Keywords

sexual assault perpetration; justifications; rape myths; alcohol; misperceptions of sexual intent; repeat perpetration

Men's sexual aggression toward women is a pervasive problem in U.S. society. Between 25–57% of men report having perpetrated a sexually aggressive behavior against a woman since the age of 14 (Abbey, Jacques-Tiura, & LeBreton, 2011; Abbey, McAuslan, & Ross, 1998; Davis, Kiekel et al., 2012; Koss, Gidycz, & Wisniewski, 1987; White & Smith, 2004). These acts range from verbally coerced sexual contact to physically forced penetrative sex, with verbal coercion and the victim's incapacitation the most commonly reported tactics. This wide range in prevalence rates has been explained by differences in the scope of tactics and types of sex included in the survey as well as the procedures used to insure participants'

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privacy (Abbey, Parkhill, & Koss, 2005; Tyler, Hoyt, & Whitbeck, 1998). Many of these acts do not fit legal definitions of sex crimes, and researchers avoid using language in their surveys that label these acts as crimes. Nonetheless, most of the studies cited above use phrases such as “when you knew she was unwilling.” Thus, when participants provide an affirmative response, they recognize that they made a woman engage in sex against her wishes.

Individuals often develop post hoc excuses or justifications to explain morally reprehensible behaviors (Snyder & Higgins, 1988). Excuses allow the individual to shift the locus of causality from internal and stable individual factors to external and situational factors. Sexual assault perpetrators often use post-assault excuses or justifications to shift blame to the victim, using the victim’s behaviors or other environmental cues to justify their sexually aggressive behavior (Burt, 1980; Murnen, Wright, & Kaluzny, 2002; Polaschek & Ward, 2002). Excuses absolve perpetrators from the guilt, shame, embarrassment, and revulsion that would normally accompany a moral transgression (Bandura, Barbaranelli, Bachishin, & Mann, 1996; Snyder & Higgins, 1988; Ward, Hudson, & Marshall, 1995). Without negative self-contemplation and self-sanctions, perpetrators are more likely to feel comfortable engaging in similar behavior in the future.

Despite the large literature on rape supportive attitudes in the general population and among perpetrators (Anderson, Cooper, & Okamura, 1997; Burt, 1980; Lonsway & Fitzgerald, 1994; Murnen et al., 2002; Suarez & Gadalla, 2010), there is surprisingly little focus on the justifications that perpetrators provide *after* an incident, particularly in nonincarcerated samples. This article addresses this gap in the literature by examining the use of post-assault justifications in a community sample of self-reported sexually aggressive men. The cross-sectional predictors of post-assault justifications are explored, as well as the prospective role of post-assault justifications in predicting sexual aggression over a 1-year time interval. The following sections review the relevant literature and describe the study’s goals and hypotheses.

Justifications Used by Sexual Assault Perpetrators

Most of the research conducted with nonincarcerated adult perpetrators focuses on identifying who is most likely to commit sexual aggression by examining individual differences in personality, attitudes, and past experiences (Abbey et al., 2011; Abbey, et al., 1998; Abbey, Parkhill, BeShears, Clinton-Sherrod, & Zawacki, 2006; Malamuth, Linz, Heavey, Barnes, & Acker, 1995; Tharp et al., 2013; Ullman, Karabatsos, & Koss, 1999; Wheeler, George, & Dahl, 2002; White & Smith, 2004). To our knowledge, there are only two studies that have systematically examined sexual assault perpetrators’ post-assault excuses and justifications; both studies were conducted with incarcerated rapists (Beech, Ward, & Fisher, 2006; Scully & Marolla, 1984).

Convicted rapists in a maximum security prison in Virginia volunteered to be interviewed by Scully and Marolla (1984). These authors distilled the following themes used by rapists to justify their actions: *women are seductresses, women mean “yes” when they say “no,” most women eventually relax and enjoy it, nice girls don’t get raped, and it was only a minor*

wrongdoing. Some rapists implied that the victims brought the rape on themselves or wanted to be raped because they flirted with them; others convinced themselves that when she stopped resisting, it was because she enjoyed it (even if they had threatened her with a weapon). Others cited the victim's reputation for being sexually promiscuous, her revealing clothing or willingness to go somewhere alone with them as evidence that the victim was asking to be raped.

Beech and colleagues (2006) interviewed 41 incarcerated rapists in the United Kingdom. The transcribed interviews were coded for the five different rape supportive implicit theories identified by Polaschek and Ward (2002). Seventy-nine percent of these convicted rapists made comments consistent with the theme that it is a dangerous world and you have to treat others as they would treat you; 51% made comments describing women as sex objects, whose function is to be sexually available to men at all times; 44% expressed feelings of entitlement, assuming that as a man they could take what they wanted from the woman; 15% said that they were unable to control their sexual urges; and 9% indicated a generally hostile and distrustful view of women, which led them to behave toward women in a hostile way. Although somewhat different themes emerged from these two qualitative studies, both research teams found that incarcerated rapists frequently normalized their actions by blaming the woman or situation for what happened (Beech et al., 2006; Scully & Marolla, 1984).

Rape Supportive Attitudes

Perpetrators' post-assault justifications often mirror rape supportive attitudes. According to Burt (1980), rape myths are "prejudicial, stereotyped, or false beliefs about rape, rape victims, and rapists" (p. 217). Lonsway and Fitzgerald (1994) later extended this definition to include "attitudes and beliefs that are generally false but are widely and persistently held, and that serve to deny and justify male sexual aggression against women" (p. 134). Common rape supportive attitudes include the following: women say "no" when they mean "yes"; women who dress provocatively, drink alcohol, or go someplace alone with a man are asking to be raped; women can resist a rape if they try; women falsely accuse men of rape; and a husband cannot rape his wife (Basow & Minieri, 2011; Bumby, 1996; Burt, 1980; Lonsway & Fitzgerald, 1994; Payne, Lonsway, & Fitzgerald, 1999). A recent study of college students demonstrated that these beliefs are still common, with 63% of students agreeing that it is okay for a guy to push for sex with a woman who makes out with him and 41% agreeing that a woman shares responsibility if she is raped while drunk (Aronowitz, Lambert, & Davidoff, 2012). Research has consistently shown a positive relationship between rape supportive attitudes and sexual assault perpetration (Abbey et al., 1998; Abbey, McAuslan, Zawacki, Clinton, & Buck, 2001; Loh, Gidycz, Lobo, & Luthra, 2005; Murnen et al., 2002; Tyler et al., 1998).

According to Fazio and Williams (1986), "behavior in any situation [stems] from individuals' perception of the attitude object and the situation in which the attitude is encountered" (p. 505). Based on this definition, rape supportive attitudes should be activated in situations that align with individuals' pre-existing attitudes. Therefore, men who believe that when women say "no" they really mean "yes," may be more likely to perceive a

woman's refusal in a sexual situation as token resistance, and continue to push for sexual activity against the woman's wishes. Rape supportive attitudes can act as pre-existing expectancies that bias potential perpetrators' perceptions of victims' behavior (Snyder & Higgins, 1988). Thus, when potential perpetrators perceive situational cues, such as the woman's alcohol consumption, as consistent with their rape supportive attitudes, they are likely to feel justified in using force to obtain sex. The ubiquitousness of rape myths in American culture may also reassure potential perpetrators that others will find these justifications reasonable and, therefore, they will be more likely to try to use them to excuse their behavior.

Characteristics of Sexual Assault Incidents That Encourage Justifications

Most sexual assaults occur among people who know each other, typically in some type of actual or potential romantic or sexual relationship (Black et al., 2011). Hooking up is common among young adults (Glenn & Marquardt, 2001; Paul & Hayes, 2002), thus even casual relationships often have the potential for consensual sexual activity. Although everyone has the right to say no to sexual activity at any time, regardless of any past history of sexual relations or sexual activity earlier in the interaction (United Nations, 2008), many common rape supportive attitudes are likely to be activated in these situations.

The next sections briefly review the relevant literature regarding the importance of considering men's initial expectations for having sex with the woman, their acknowledged misperception of her sexual interest, the woman's alcohol consumption during the incident, the man's alcohol consumption during the incident, the man's attempts to get the woman to go somewhere they could be alone, and number of consensual sexual activities engaged in prior to the forced sex. These incident characteristics often parallel perpetrators' rape supportive attitudes.

Expectations for Having Sex

Men often enter cross-sex interactions with a higher expectation of sex than do women (Cohen & Shotland, 1996). In addition, expectations for sex increase in situations in which the man has paid for an expensive meal (Basow & Minieri, 2011; Muehlenhard & Linton, 1987) and there is a previous romantic or sexual history between the two individuals (Basile, 2002; Livingston, Buddie, Testa, & VanZile-Tamsen, 2004). Men's sense of entitlement to sex with a woman is significantly positively associated with date rape myth acceptance and past coercive sexual behaviors (Bouffard, 2010; Hill & Fisher, 2001). In Beech and colleagues' (2006) study, nearly half of the rapists mentioned feeling entitled to "take" sex from the victim.

Misperception of Sexual Intentions

Sexual expectations are often projected onto others, thus men who are interested in sex are likely to infer greater sexual interest from their partner (Lenton, Bryan, Hastie, & Fischer, 2007; Perilloux, 2011). Men who frequently misperceive women's level of sexual intent more strongly endorse rape supportive attitudes (Abbey et al., 1998; Jacques-Tiura, Abbey, Parkhill, & Zawacki, 2007). In addition, men who assume a woman is sexually interested in

them are more likely to feel “led on” (Muehlenhard & Linton, 1987; Willan & Pollard, 2003), and may feel especially justified in pushing for unwanted sexual activity when their sexual advances are rejected (Abbey et al., 2001; Goodchilds & Zellman, 1984). Consistent with this hypothesis, misperceptions of sexual intent are a direct proximal predictor of sexual assault perpetration (Abbey et al., 1998; Zawacki, Abbey, Buck, McAuslan, & Clinton-Sherrod, 2003).

Victims' Alcohol Consumption

Men often infer a greater level of sexual intent on the part of a woman when she is drinking compared with when she is sober (George, Cue, Lopez, Crowe, & Norris, 1995). The assumption that drinking women are interested in sexual intercourse is a common rape supportive attitude (Burt, 1980). For example, in a study of high school students, almost 40% of boys said it would be acceptable to force sex on an intoxicated woman (Goodchilds & Zellman, 1984). Participants in this study also describe intoxicated women as “asking for it” and “fair game.” In a more recent study, McAuslan, Abbey, and Zawacki (1998) found that 20% of college men thought it was acceptable to use verbal pressure to obtain unwanted sexual activity when either the man or the woman was drinking or they met at a bar. Men who more strongly endorse the belief that women’s drinking is a cue for their sexual interest are also more likely to endorse rape supportive attitudes, misperceive women’s sexual intent, and perpetrate an alcohol-involved sexual assault (Zawacki et al., 2003).

Perpetrators' Alcohol Consumption

Whereas victims’ use of alcohol increases the likelihood that they will be blamed for what happened, perpetrators’ intoxication is often used to absolve them of responsibility (Abbey et al., 2001; Grubb & Turner, 2012; Ryan, 2011; Scully & Marolla, 1984). Alcohol is known for its excuse-giving properties, allowing individuals to engage in disinhibited and socially inappropriate behaviors, and then “blame it on the alcohol” afterward (Abbey et al., 2001; Dermen & Cooper, 1994; Seto & Barbaree, 1995). Perpetrators’ alcohol consumption is also likely to bias their perceptions of the incident in ways that make them feel more justified in perpetrating the sexual assault. Experimental research has demonstrated that acute alcohol intoxication contributes to biased perceptions of the woman’s sexual arousal, sexual interest, and enjoyment of forced sex, as well as increasing men’s feelings of sexual entitlement (Abbey et al., 2005; Davis, 2010; Davis, Schraufnagel, Jacques-Tiura, et al., 2012; Norris, Davis, George, Martell, & Heiman, 2002).

Attempts to Get the Woman Alone

A common rape supportive attitude is that if a woman is willing to go somewhere alone with a man, then she is willing to have sex (Burt, 1980). Sexual assault perpetrators often use isolation techniques when they are with a woman in a social or public setting (Abbey et al., 2001; Livingston et al., 2004). When a woman finally agrees to go somewhere alone with them, potential perpetrators are likely to interpret this behavior as an implicit agreement to have sex. Incarcerated rapists have attested that the victim was asking to be raped because she got into a car with them or went somewhere private with them (Beech et al., 2006; Scully & Marolla, 1984).

Consensual Sexual Activity Prior to Unwanted Sex

Some potential perpetrators assume that a woman's agreement to any sexual activity constitutes her willingness to engage in whatever sexual activities they desire (Willan & Pollard, 2003). In a cross-sectional survey of male college students, Abbey and colleagues (2001) compared characteristics of sexual assault perpetrators' most severe incident with the characteristics of nonperpetrators' "worst date." Perpetrators reported engaging in significantly more consensual sexual activity with the woman, compared with nonperpetrators. Study participants were asked whether they wanted to provide any additional information about the incident. One perpetrator who forced his steady dating partner to have sex after she willingly touched his penis, said "I felt as if I had gotten something that I was entitled to. And I felt like I was repaying her for sexually arousing me" (Abbey et al., 2001, p. 801). This example highlights how some perpetrators use the rape supportive attitude that men's sex drive is uncontrollable to justify their unwanted sexual behaviors.

Study's Goals and Hypotheses

The current study has four goals that address gaps in the existing literature. First, this study examines the types of justifications used by a nonincarcerated community sample of sexual assault perpetrators. Understanding how sexually aggressive men explain their behavior is important for the development of treatment and prevention programs. Second, this study cross-sectionally predicts perpetrators' use of justifications based on characteristics of the sexual assault incident. We hypothesized that the greater perpetrators' initial expectation for having sex with the victim during the interaction, the longer they misperceived the victim's degree of sexual interest, the more alcohol the victim consumed, the more alcohol the perpetrator consumed, the more effort the perpetrator put into spending time alone with her, and the more consensual sexual activities that occurred prior to the forced sex, the greater the perpetrators' use of justifications. These incident characteristics were selected because they overlap with common rape supportive attitudes; however, they are not identical to attitudes. Thus, as the third goal, we hypothesized that characteristics of the incident would explain variance in justifications, even after taking into account rape supportive attitudes.

The final goal was to evaluate the hypothesis that perpetrators' use of justifications would prospectively predict their likelihood of committing a sexually aggressive act over a 1-year follow-up interval. Finding an excuse can initiate a feedback loop in which the justification serves to further strengthen rape supportive attitudes (Abbey, 2002; Beech et al., 2006; Scully & Marolla, 1984). Thus, perpetrators who were able to justify previous acts of sexual aggression are expected to feel more comfortable engaging in future acts of sexual aggression.

Method

Participants

Baseline interviews were conducted with 470 men between the ages of 18 and 35 years ($M = 23.67$ years, standard deviation [SD] = 4.95 years) in the Detroit Metropolitan area. Participants were recruited for a study on men's dating relationships and all participants

were required to be single (i.e., not currently married, engaged, or cohabitating) and to have dated a woman in the past 2 years. Ninety percent ($n = 425$) of the 470 men who completed the baseline interview also completed the 1-year follow-up interview. Two participants skipped large sections and had long strings of identical responses. Their data were deleted, leaving a sample size of 423 men who completed both interviews. (See Abbey et al., 2011, and Abbey, Wegner, Pierce, and Jacques-Tiura, 2012, for further information about the baseline and follow-up procedures and findings.)

The current study focuses on the 183 men who reported in the baseline interview that they had perpetrated some form of sexual aggression since the age of 14 and who also completed the follow-up interview. The percentage of perpetrators who completed both interviews (183 of 204 = 89.71%) is comparable with the percentage of nonperpetrators who completed both interviews (242 of 266 = 90.97%). Sixty-nine percent of the 183 participants self-identified as Caucasian, 19% as African American, 5% as mixed ethnicity, 4% as Middle Eastern, 2% as Hispanic, and 1% as Asian.

Procedures

Potential participants were recruited by telephone from the Metropolitan Detroit area using a commercial telephone list that had a high probability of including men between the ages of 18 and 35 years. More than four million people live in this region, which includes a wide range of suburban and semirural communities, as well as the city of Detroit. Sampling and interviewing were conducted under contract by the Survey Research Center at the University of Michigan. Both universities' institutional review boards approved the study's procedures. Professionally trained female and male interviewers conducted in-person interviews at a mutually agreeable location selected for quiet and privacy (e.g., the participant's home, library, or coffee shop).

After reviewing the consent form with participants, interviewers orally administered the first few sections of the survey, which contained the least sensitive questions. Participants then completed the audio computer-assisted self-interview independently. All responses were recorded on the laptop. Both interviews lasted 1 hr on average. Participants were paid US \$50 at baseline and US\$60 at follow-up to compensate for their time.

Measures

Sexual assault perpetration—A modified 16-item version of the Sexual Experiences Survey (SES) was used to assess sexual aggression at baseline (Abbey et al., 2006; Koss et al., 1987). This measure uses behaviorally specific language to assess a range of sexual activities (e.g., sexual touching; oral, vaginal, and anal intercourse) that happened since age 14 against the woman's wishes through the use of verbal pressure, physical force, or when the woman was too impaired to consent. Responses ranged from 0 (*never*) to 5 (*five or more times*). The original and modified versions of this instrument have demonstrated good internal, test-retest, and criterion validity (Abbey et al., 2006; Koss & Gidycz, 1985). Cronbach's alpha for this sample was .84.

The same version of the SES was completed at the 1-year follow-up interview, except participants were asked to report incidents that had occurred since the last interview. For the analyses described in this article, *repeat perpetration* was coded as 0 = *no acts of sexual aggression since the last interview* or 1 = *at least one act of sexual aggression since the last interview*.

Rape supportive attitudes—At baseline, a subset of Payne, Lonsway, and Fitzgerald's (1999) and Bumby's (1996) rape myth acceptance items were combined to form a nine-item measure, which we have labeled *rape supportive attitudes*.¹ Many of the original items developed by Burt (1980) and then revised by Payne et al. (1999) use outdated language and examples. Also, because many acts of sexual aggression do not meet the criminal definition of rape, items that use criminal labels (e.g., rape, sexual assault) are less relevant to the types of acts and language used in the SES. For these reasons, the most relevant items from Payne et al.'s (1999) and Bumby's (1996) rape myth acceptance measures were combined to form a nine-item measure. Example items include, "If a woman does not resist strongly to sexual advances, she is probably willing to have sex," and "If a woman gets drunk at a party, it is really her fault if someone takes advantage of her sexually." This measure was pilot tested with 171 undergraduates; the items loaded on a single factor and had good internal consistency reliability. Response options ranged from 1 (*strongly disagree*) to 7 (*strongly agree*). Cronbach's alpha for this sample was .85.

Characteristics of the incident—Participants who endorsed any of the sexual aggression items in the baseline interview were asked to describe one incident in detail (Abbey et al., 2001). If they endorsed more than one item, a computer algorithm prompted them to describe the most severe incident, which was operationalized by treating penetrative sex through force as most severe and sexual touching through verbal coercion as least severe.

Participants were asked to think back to the beginning of their interaction with the woman that day and to recall their *expectations for having sex with her during their interaction*. Responses were made on a 5-point scale with options ranging from 1 (*definitely didn't expect to have sex*) to 5 (*very likely that you would have sex*).

To assess *misperception of the woman's sexual intentions* during the interaction, participants were told that "Sometimes we misperceive a person's behavior and believe that they are more interested in us sexually than they really are." Then, they were asked how long they had misperceived the woman's interest in engaging in some level of sex (kissing, touching, intercourse). Responses were coded on a 6-point scale with options ranging from 0 (*didn't happen*) to 5 (*more than 3 hr*).

Participants provided an estimate of the number of alcoholic drinks the woman consumed during the incident and the number of alcoholic drinks they consumed during the incident. A

¹Previous publications with this data set have labeled this measure as *stereotypic attitudes about women that justify forced sex* (Abbey, Jacques-Tiura, & LeBreton, 2011; Abbey, Wegner, Pierce, & Jacques-Tiura, 2012). The label *rape supportive attitudes* was adopted for the current manuscript to be consistent with the discussion of relevant variables in the introduction and to reduce confusion associated with having the word *justify* in the label of both predictor and outcome variables.

drink was defined as 12 ounces of beer or wine cooler, 5 ounces of wine, or one shot of liquor. These items used an open-ended response format. Responses for the *victims' alcohol consumption* ranged from 0–12, and were positively skewed. Responses for the *perpetrators' alcohol consumption* ranged from 0 to 15, and were also positively skewed. Therefore, the data were winsorized by rescoring values higher than 3 *SDs* above the mean to the value 3 *SDs* above the mean (Tabachnick & Fidell, 2007). The new winsorized ranges for *victims' alcohol consumption* and *perpetrators' alcohol consumption* are both 0–7.

Participants were asked to indicate the extent to which they tried to get the woman to agree to go *someplace where they could be alone*. Response options ranged from 1 (*not at all true*) to 5 (*very true*).

A list of eight sexual activities was presented to participants who were asked which sexual activities occurred during the interaction that both they and the woman wanted to happen. The activities ranged from light kissing to anal intercourse. The *number of consensual sexual activities* that they engaged in with the woman was summed. Responses ranged from 0–8.

Post-assault justifications—Post-assault justifications were assessed at baseline with 10 items that were introduced with this statement, “Many men feel that they had a good reason for doing something sexual with a woman even if she said she had not wanted it. Please indicate how much each of the following led to the unwanted sex.” The items are included in Table 1. Responses were made on 5-point scales with response options ranging from 1 (*not at all*) to 5 (*very much*). The final question asked participants to rate how responsible the woman was for what happened using a 5-point scale with response options ranging from 1 (*not at all*) to 5 (*completely*). A sum of these 10 items was computed; responses ranged from 10–41. Cronbach’s alpha was .73.

Results

Preliminary Analyses and Descriptive Information

Twenty-four percent ($n = 44$) of perpetrators’ most severe act of sexual aggression at baseline involved unwanted sexual contact, 56% ($n = 102$) involved a verbally coerced sexual assault, 5% ($n = 9$) an attempted rape, and 15% ($n = 28$) a completed rape. At the 1-year follow-up interview, 41.5% ($n = 76$) of participants reported that they had committed at least one act of sexual aggression since the last interview.

To address the study’s first goal, Table 1 provides descriptive information about each of the post-assault justifications assessed at baseline. More than half of the perpetrators in this study felt quite a bit or very justified because she had gotten them sexually aroused. Forty percent or more agreed at least somewhat that the woman was responsible, that she led him on, or that they believed she would enjoy it once it started. Perpetrators were least likely to justify their actions by agreeing that she got what she deserved or that she owed them.

Bivariate Correlations

Table 2 provides the correlations, means, *SDs*, and ranges for study variables. Post-assault justifications were significantly positively correlated with rape supportive attitudes, the perpetrators' expectations for having sex, misperception of sexual intentions, victims' alcohol consumption, perpetrators' alcohol consumption, and attempts to get the woman alone. Number of consensual sexual activities during the incident was marginally correlated with justifications.

Hierarchical Regression Analysis With Cross-Sectional Predictors of Baseline Post-Assault Justifications

We hypothesized that rape supportive attitudes would be positively associated with perpetrators' use of justifications and that characteristics of the incident would explain additional variance in justifications, even after taking rape supportive attitudes into account. A two-step hierarchical multiple regression analysis was conducted to examine these hypotheses with rape supportive attitudes entered on the first step and incident characteristics entered on the second step of the model. When both victims' and perpetrators' number of alcoholic drinks were entered into the model, neither emerged as significant. This is not surprising given the strong positive correlation between the two variables, $r = .79$. The victims' intoxication is a common element of rape supportive attitudes, thus it was retained in the model.²

As can be seen in Table 3, rape supportive attitudes were significantly positively related to post-assault justifications, and accounted for 17.3% of the variance in post-assault justifications, $F(1, 181) = 37.85, p < .001$. Expectations for having sex, misperception of sexual intentions, victims' alcohol consumption, attempts to get the victim alone, and number of consensual sexual activities were all significantly positively related to post-assault justifications and accounted for an additional 22.1% of the variance in post-assault justifications, $F(6, 176) = 19.04, p < .001$. Overall, 39.4% of the variance in baseline post-assault justifications was accounted for by this set of predictors.

Do Baseline Justifications Prospectively Predict Perpetration at the 1-Year Follow-Up?

The greater perpetrators' use of post-assault justifications to explain their behavior at baseline, the more likely they were to commit an act of sexual aggression during the 1-year follow-up period (point biserial $r = .15, p < .05$; perpetration status: 0 = *nonperpetrator*, 1 = *perpetrator*). A one-way ANOVA was conducted comparing the average level of endorsement of post-assault justifications among participants who reported perpetrating a sexual assault during the 1-year follow-up and those who did not. Perpetrators who went on to perpetrate again 1 year later ($M = 21.79, SD = 5.94$) more strongly endorsed post-assault justifications when describing the sexual assault incident at baseline than did those who did not ($M = 19.90, SD = 6.39$), $F = 4.13, p < .05$.

²Including perpetrators' number of alcoholic drinks in the model instead of victims' drinks produced comparable results.

Discussion

These findings provide new insights into how nonincarcerated men justify having sex with a woman against her wishes. Most perpetrators endorsed several justifications, with the most strongly endorsed items being “She had gotten you sexually aroused,” “She led you on,” and “You thought she’d enjoy it once it started.” The frequency with which these items were endorsed suggests that feelings of sexual entitlement are incredibly common among perpetrators (Hamilton & Armstrong, 2009). These men have not learned that their partners’ wishes must be respected regardless of how sexually frustrated that might leave them. The pervasiveness of these beliefs suggests that creative and engaging primary prevention programs are needed that address double standards about sexuality from an early age.

As hypothesized, perpetrators’ rape supportive attitudes were significantly positively related to their post-assault justifications. Although common definitions of rape supportive attitudes describe them as a means for justifying sexually aggressive behavior (Lonsway & Fitzgerald, 1994), the relationship between rape supportive attitudes and post-assault justifications has gone largely unexplored. Sexual assault incident characteristics accounted for an additional 22% of the variance in post-assault justifications, above and beyond the 17% accounted for by rape supportive attitudes.

Among the incident characteristics, misperceiving the woman’s sexual intent was the strongest multivariate predictor of post-assault justifications, with the other incident characteristics all moderately associated with post-assault justifications. Misperception and alcohol often work together synergistically to bias perpetrators’ perceptions of the woman’s level of sexual intent and encourage feelings of sexual entitlement (Abbey, 2002). These findings highlight the importance of considering these and other situation-specific characteristics in future research on post-assault justifications.

At the bivariate level, greater expectations of having sex that day and engaging in more consensual sexual activities prior to the unwanted sex were unrelated to other incident characteristics, but significantly related to perpetrators’ post-assault justifications. Expectations for having sex and consensual sexual activities are more often associated with intimate partner sexual assaults; whereas, misperception of sexual intent, alcohol use by the victim and perpetrator, and isolating tactics are more often associated with casual partner sexual assaults (Wegner, Pierce, & Abbey, 2014). Future research should consider how the victim–perpetrator relationship determines the types of justifications used by perpetrators and the situations in which intimate versus casual partners feel more justified in pursuing sex that they know is unwanted.

Three quarters of the incidents that involved victims’ alcohol consumption also involved perpetrators’ alcohol consumption. The unique effects of perpetrators’ and victims’ alcohol consumption are difficult to ascertain because they typically co-occur in natural drinking situations. Experimental studies are one possible strategy for examining the separate effects of perpetrators’ and victims’ drinking on justifications. For example, participants could be recruited into an alcohol administration study based on their responses to a survey of past sexual aggression. Perpetrators and nonperpetrators could be randomly assigned to drink

conditions and asked to read sexual assault scenarios in which only the woman, only the man, or both are drinking. The type and level of justification provided by perpetrators will likely differ based on both their alcohol consumption and the story characters' alcohol consumption.

The results described thus far were cross-sectional. As hypothesized, the use of post-assault justifications at baseline was a significant predictor of committing an act of sexual aggression the following year. Only a few studies have examined prospective predictors of perpetration, and we are not aware of any that included this construct (Abbey & McAuslan, 2004; Hall, DeGarmo, Eap, Teten, & Sue, 2006; Loh et al., 2005; Malamuth et al., 1995; White & Smith, 2004). Thus, although the magnitude of this relationship is small, it provides important information about factors associated with repeat perpetration in a community sample.

Strengths and Limitations

One strength of the current study is its utilization of a community sample of sexual assault perpetrators. This study also utilized an audio computer-assisted self-interviewing procedure to increase participants' sense of privacy and confidentiality, thereby promoting honest reporting from participants. To make participants feel more comfortable endorsing the post-assault justifications, no language was used to imply that their behavior or their reasoning was inappropriate.

This study also has several limitations. As discussed in more detail in the next section, the justifications measure was developed by this research team; thus, these findings need to be replicated in future studies. Also, many of the perpetrators in this study committed more than one act of sexual aggression; however, justifications were only assessed for the most severe incident. Although we hypothesized that participants' rape supportive attitudes existed prior to their sexual assault, they were both measured in the baseline interview, so temporal precedence cannot be established. These findings are based on perpetrators' recollections of the incident, which may be biased.

Suggestions for Future Research

Scale development was not the primary goal of the current study and additional qualitative research is needed to identify the full range of justifications provided by sexual assault perpetrators. Research on this topic would be facilitated by the development of a content-validated justifications scale. Perpetrators who strongly endorse one post-assault justification may not strongly endorse any others. Some perpetrators may need only one explanation; thus, standard measures of internal consistency may not be appropriate for judging the adequacy of the measure.

Another direction for future research is to examine relationships between personality and justifications. In their general aggression model, Anderson and Bushman (2002) emphasized the role of personality in aggressive responses. Regarding sexual aggression, we posit that highly narcissistic perpetrators would be most certain that "no" really means "yes" because they are certain every woman finds them desirable. Highly impulsive perpetrators would be most likely to misperceive the woman's intentions, particularly when they are intoxicated.

Interpersonally manipulative perpetrators would be likely to target intoxicated women whom they can easily isolate and then use the justification that “nice girls don’t get raped.” Perpetrators who lack empathy for others may not use justifications because they feel their behavior is normal. These are just some examples of the many potential interactions between individual difference and situation characteristics that may influence post-assault justifications.

A positive feedback loop between rape supportive attitudes, perpetration, and justifications is likely such that rape supportive attitudes contribute to perpetrators’ justifications; and then their reliance on these attitudes to excuse their actions intensifies their endorsement of rape supportive attitudes. Due to time and space restrictions, as well as larger study goals, the current study did not assess rape supportive attitudes at the 1-year follow-up interview. Future research should consider rape supportive attitudes as a potential mediator of the relationship between post-assault justifications and future sexual assault perpetration, utilizing a longitudinal design.

In conclusion, there are many potential avenues for future research on perpetrators’ post-assault justifications. Exploring when, how, and which post-assault justifications contribute to future sexual assault perpetration could provide useful information for how to most effectively target these cognitive distortions in an intervention setting. Although many college sexual assault prevention programs address rape supportive attitudes, this is much too late to serve a primary prevention function. Instead, programs are needed in middle school that dispel common rape supportive attitudes, as well as double standards about sexuality and alcohol consumption that underlie many common rape supportive attitudes. No one should feel that any justification entitles them to have sex with another person against that person’s wishes.

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Antonia Abbey is a professor of psychology at Wayne State University. She received her PhD in social psychology from Northwestern University. She has a long-standing interest in

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Jennifer Pierce is a social health psychology doctoral student at Wayne State University. She is interested in the antecedents and consequences of sexual assault and dating violence. Her research interests related to the perpetration of sexual aggression and dating violence include understanding the cognitive, behavioral, and situational factors that contribute to the propensity to perpetrate aggression against women. In the domain of victimization, she is interested in understanding the factors that influence recovery as well as the mental and physical health effects of victimization.

Sheri E. Pegram is a social health psychology doctoral student at Wayne State University. Her research interests focus on etiological factors in sexual assault perpetration. Specifically, she is interested in understanding how alcohol interacts with individual and situational factors to predict sexual aggression. She is also interested in the effects of sexual assault victimization on women's mental and physical health.

Jacqueline Woerner is a social health doctoral student at Wayne State University. Her research interests focus on examining sexual assault perpetration and risky sexual behavior. She is specifically interested in the role of alcohol and normative influence in sexual aggression. She is also interested in the etiological factors of casual sex and risky sexual behavior, as well as the effects of HIV/AIDS on mental health.

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Table 1

Perpetrators' Endorsement of Post-Assault Justifications ($N = 183$).

Post-assault justification	Not at all % (n)	A little % (n)	Somewhat % (n)	Quite a bit % (n)	Very much % (n)	M	SD
1. She had gotten you sexually aroused.	11.5 (21)	15.8 (29)	17.5 (32)	29.5 (54)	25.7 (47)	3.42	1.33
2. She led you on.	32.8 (60)	19.7 (36)	21.9 (40)	16.9 (31)	8.7 (16)	2.49	1.33
3. The woman was responsible.	23.0 (42)	26.8 (49)	31.7 (58)	16.4 (30)	2.2 (4)	2.48	1.08
4. You thought she'd enjoy it once it started.	33.9 (62)	25.7 (47)	14.2 (26)	14.2 (26)	12.0 (22)	2.45	1.39
5. You thought she was just playing hard to get.	53.6 (98)	16.9 (31)	15.8 (29)	8.2 (15)	5.5 (10)	1.95	1.23
6. You learned that women can't be trusted.	54.1 (99)	19.1 (35)	13.1 (24)	8.2 (15)	5.5 (10)	1.92	1.22
7. You thought she wanted to have "rough sex" with you.	67.2 (123)	13.1 (24)	10.4 (19)	5.5 (10)	3.8 (7)	1.66	1.11
8. You feel like she treated you unfairly.	68.9 (126)	13.7 (25)	8.7 (16)	3.8 (7)	4.9 (9)	1.62	1.11
9. You feel like she got what she deserved.	83.0 (152)	6.6 (12)	5.5 (10)	2.7 (5)	2.2 (4)	1.35	0.87
10. You felt like she owed you.	77.0 (141)	14.8 (27)	4.9 (9)	3.3 (6)	0.0 (0)	1.34	0.72

Table 2Means, Standard Deviations, Ranges, and Correlations Among Study Predictors ($N = 183$).

Variable	1	2	3	4	5	6	7	8
1. Rape supportive attitudes	—							
2. Expectations for having sex	.12	—						
3. Misperception of sexual intentions	.17*	.06	—					
4. Victims' alcohol consumption	.09	-.11	.17*	—				
5. Perpetrators' alcohol consumption	.09	-.12	.13	.79**	—			
6. Attempts to get the victim alone	.29**	.08	.20**	.25**	.21**	—		
7. Consensual sexual activities	-.01	.09	-.14	.03	.06	.05	—	
8. Post-assault justifications	.42**	.23**	.37**	.27**	.27**	.39**	.014	—
<i>M</i>	2.59	2.73	1.24	0.97	0.96	2.13	4.66	20.68
<i>SD</i>	1.17	1.45	1.41	1.79	1.87	1.36	1.80	6.25
Range	1–6.44	1–5	0–5	0–7	0–7	1–5	0–8	10–41

* $p < .05$.** $p < .01$.Italics indicate marginal correlations, $p < .06$.

Table 3Hierarchical Multiple Regression Analysis Predicting Post-Assault Justifications ($N = 183$).

Variable	<i>B</i>	<i>SE B</i>	β	R^2
Step 1				.17**
Rape supportive attitudes	2.21	0.36	.42**	
Step 2				.22**
Expectations for having sex	0.74	0.26	.17**	
Misperception of sexual intentions	1.19	0.27	.27**	
Victims' alcohol consumption	0.56	0.22	.16*	
Attempts to get the victim alone	0.87	0.29	.19**	
Consensual sexual activities	0.52	0.21	.15*	
Total variance explained				39.4%

*
 $p < .05$.**
 $p < .01$.