Officers' attitudes and judgements towards hypothetical rape scenarios: A 5-year comparison short report

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Prof. Benjamin Hine, Professor of Applied Psychology, University of West London

Dr Anthony Murphy, Associate Professor, University of Birmingham Dubai

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Brief Introduction

In 2015, data was collected from over 800 officers to assess their attitudes and judgements towards hypothetical sexual violence. The results were published in three subsequent papers.

The first investigated attitudes predictive of rape myth acceptance (RMA) in officers. Results provided strong evidence for a predictive model of attitudes, where broader beliefs such as general hostility towards women, the relationship between power and sex, ambivalent sexism (i.e., prejudicial attitudes towards women), and years of service are strongly predictive of RMA scores (Murphy & Hine, 2019).

The second investigated officers' judgements of victim blame, perpetrator blame, and rape legitimacy when assessing hypothetical scenarios of rape varying on three key factors associated with common rape myths, namely victim-perpetrator relationship, victim reputation, and initial point of resistance. Results showed significant variations in judgements of responsibility of both victim and perpetrator, as well as perceived rape authenticity, suggesting a possible influence of subjective beliefs on officer's evaluations of rape cases containing information extraneous to the transgression of law. Importantly, this study also demonstrated that officer sex and whether they had received specialist training also predicted judgements, with male officers and those *with* specialist training providing more negative judgements than female officers and those without training (Hine & Murphy, 2017).

The third identified the relationship between officers' attitudes and judgements, revealing that officers high in RMA made more negative judgements than those who scored low in RMA (Hine & Murphy, 2019). Results from this study therefore had significant implications for police policy, specifically in the development and delivery of rape myth training for officers.

As a result of these studies, and broader institutional dialogue on rape case investigation (See Hine et al., in press for review), several changes in training provided for first responders and specialist officers have occurred since 2015 (when that data was gathered). Not only this, societal discourse on the policing of rape has been centred by several pertinent events relating to rape case policing, not least chronically poor attrition rates in rape cases and high-profile rape case operations,

such as Operation Yewtree (see Murphy et al., 2022 for review). As such, it became necessary to establish whether the findings produced by the above projects in 2015 where still relevant to MPS five years later, and in response to the changes described above.

The Present Study

The aim of the present study therefore was to examine any differences in the attitudes and judgements of officers between 2015 and 2020. It was hypothesised that, in response to institutional and training-based changes within the Metropolitan Police Service, that both attitudes and judgements would have improved over time.

Methods

This study involved replicating elements of a study conducted with MPS officers in 2015, detailing in three subsequent publications (Hine & Murphy, 2017, 2019; Murphy & Hine, 2019). The methods are briefly outlined below, as specific details can be found in those publications.

Design

This study utilised a quasi-experimental design. A 4 x 2 x 2 between-subjects design was used, where vignettes were constructed based on victim-perpetrator relationship (with four levels: Stranger, Acquaintance, Partner, Ex-Partner), reputation (with two levels: 'Good' and 'Bad'), and initial point of resistance (with two levels: 'Early' and 'Late'). The measures within this element were officers' judgements of victim and perpetrator responsibility, as well as ratings of rape claim authenticity. Levels of rape myth acceptance were also collected for simple time-point comparisons.

Participants

A total of 143 officers took part in this study. 7% were 18-35yrs, 37.1% were 36-35, 32.2% were 36-45, 21.7% were 46-55, and 2.1% were 56-65 (none were 65+). 5.3% had less than a year of service, 20.4% had 2-4yrs, 18.4% had 5-7yrs, 7.9% had 8-9yrs, and 40.1% had 10+yrs (7.9% provided no answer). 72% were recruits, with the next largest category Constable (14.8%), with the remaining ranks ranging from PCSO to Acting Inspector. 34% were SOIT trained, 66% were not. There were more male (n = 84, 58.7%) than female officers (n = 59, 41.3%).

Materials

As detailed in Hine and Murphy (2017), a series of written scenarios were utilised which included variations of three of the factors outlined above – victim-perpetrator relationship, victim reputation, and the initial point of resistance. There

were 16 vignettes in total, all constructed to be representative of typical initial statements given to police officers following a serious sexual assault in terms of length, structure and level of detail (although from 3rd rather than 1st person). As previously, all scenarios met the legal definition of rape as outlined in the Sexual Offences Act (2003) and were around 230 words in length. The 'Stranger Perpetrator, 'Bad' Reputation, 'Late' Initial Point of Resistance' scenario is given below as an example:

> 'Maggie was at a Christmas celebration in her place of work, among those attending were colleagues, friends, and people from other departments she had never met. After some brief introductions Maggie decided she had to go back to her own office, at the other side of the building to take care of some final emails before returning to the par- ty. A man from the party had been 'checking her out' during the course of the evening, and had been told by some of Maggie's col- leagues that she was an "up for it" kind of girl. He followed her to her office where Maggie was working on her emails. She said, "Can I help you?" and he replied "Yes you can, it's Christmas, and I have some mistletoe here". Maggie laughed calling the stranger a 'cheeky one' and she stopped her work and kissed the man under the mistle- toe. Maggie continued to kiss the man and things became increasingly physical with him placing his hands on her breasts. After several minutes of kissing and physical petting she removed her blouse and pulled him in close. Maggie then said "I am at work, I am meant to be at a party... I have to stop sorry!" At this point the man became more forceful, pushing her hand onto his crotch. He then pushed her to her desk, forcibly held her and went on to have sex with Maggie.'

After the scenario participants were presented with five questions. The first three questions came from a similar vignette study (Grubb & Harrower, 2009) and assessed victim responsibility, asking participants 'To what extent did the woman act carelessly?', 'To what extent did the woman lead the man on?' and 'To what extent was the woman's behaviour responsible for her sexual encounter with the man?'. Internal consistency for these three questions was high (α = 0.89), and participants' mean scores across these questions was utilized. The fourth question (from the same study; Grubb & Harrower, 2009) assessed perpetrator responsibility by asking 'Overall, to what extent was the man responsible for what happened to the victim?'. Participants answered these questions using a sliding scale, ranging from 'Not at All' to 'Completely', with no numerical values assigned. Finally, a fifth question was developed to measure officers' overall evaluation of the scenario as a rape. Participants were asked 'On a scale of 0 (Not at all) to 100 (Absolutely) do you

consider the scenario to constitute rape?' and answered using a sliding scale. The starting position of the sliders was in the middle of the scale for all questions. This study was approved by the School of Human and Social Sciences ethics committee at the University of West London.

Procedure

Participants were invited to take part in the study via an online link, with vignettes and questions presented using the survey software Qualtrics. The link to the questionnaire was emailed to select groups of newly recruited frontline officers, as well as specialist rape investigation officers (both of these groups were chosen by the MPS gatekeeper). Officers could only complete the questionnaire whilst on an MPS computer, ensuring participation occurred in a semi-controlled work environment.

Upon opening the link, participants were first presented with an information and consent form. Participation was voluntary, and was stressed as such in their initial email. Considering the sensitive nature of the study, it was also strongly emphasized that participating in this study would not affect their career in any way, that results were completely anonymous and confidential, and that they had the right to withdraw at any time. It was also stressed that nobody in the police force, including senior officers, had access to the data. Following this, participants were presented with a series of attitudinal measures, before then being presented with an information screen describing the format of the rape vignette and accompanying question. Officers were then presented at random with one of the sixteen vignettes, asked to read this carefully, and then asked to provide answers to the five questions below the scenario. Finally, a debriefing screen was provided, including the contact details of the researchers.

Results

First, four t-tests were conducted to examine the degree of change in any of the attitudes measured: hostility towards women (HTWS), explicit power-sex beliefs (EPSM), ambivalent sexism (ASI), and rape myth acceptance (RMA). Results were non-significant for all tests, suggesting that officers' objective level of attitude subscription had not changed. This is a positive finding, as mean values suggest that officers in both 2015 and 2020 were low on agreeing with these attitudes and that this has not changed.

	2015	2020
HTWS	2.52	2.55
EPSM	1.38	1.38
ASI	2.84	2.87
AMMSA	2.74	2.76

Table 1. Differences in ratings on all attitude measures between officers in the 2015 and 2020 cohorts.

Next, a 2 x 2 x 4 MANOVA was conducted to examine the influence of the three independent variables (Relationship, Reputation, and Initial Point of Resistance) on officers' judgements in 2020. Interestingly far fewer main effects were found for officers in the 2020 cohort (three in total) as compared to those that were originally found in the 2015 cohort (nineteen in total), and these were less significant. Specifically, officers in the 2020 cohort demonstrated a main effect of relationship on male responsibility, $F_{(3, 85)} = 4.16$, $p < 0.05$, with partners rated as less responsible than any other group. Moreover, there was a main effect for reputation on female blame $F_{(1, 85)} = 6.33$, $p < 0.05$, and of initial point of resistance on female blame, $F_{(1, 85)} = 415.89$, $p < 0.001$. Assessing these differences in an additional analysis, the cohort (2015 versus 2020) was included in a MANOVA model alongside the other independent variables. There was no effect of cohort on ratings of male blame or rape authenticity, however, there was a main

effect on female blame, F (1, 877) = 7.62, *p* < 0.01. This suggests that, regardless of the other factors involved, officers from 2020 generally rated the females in the scenarios as less to blame (M = 14.09, SD = 22.05) than officers in 2015 (M = 21.02, SD = 24.54).

Discussion & Conclusions

This study sought to examine whether officers' attitudes and judgements towards sexual violence had improved over a five-year time frame. Results demonstrated that, as well as officers' level of attitude acceptance remaining low, judgements towards hypothetical scenarios had also improved. Moreover, across all scenarios, officers' ratings of female responsibility had also lowered, suggesting that officers held women less accountability than they did five years previously. This would preliminarily suggest that, between 2015 and 2020, changes made to training for officers and greater awareness of rape myths and attitudes had improved officers' responses in this task.

However, it is important to note that even the most recent data collected in 2022 is now almost two years out of date, and that several incidences involving the Metropolitan Police Service and their approaches to rape case investigation have highlighted that this is an ongoing issue. Specifically, rape case attrition rates remain chronically high, and several high-profile cases of officer misconduct suggest that problematic attitudes may still remain (though these results suggest this may be limited to a small number of officers). Clearly further research is needed to a) establish and monitor the ongoing level and influence of problematic attitudes and b) establish whether, if at all, such attitudes have a relationship to real time case decision making and progression.

It is critical that the assessment of officers' attitudes toward sexual violence is an ongoing endeavour, and that steps are continually taken to ensure that officers are approaching cases objectively and fairly. An important next step would be real time monitoring of case decision making with specialist officers, to examine their decision-making processes and the influence of myths therein. However, at present, these results suggest some improvement over recent years.

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