Knowing is Half the Battle: Examining the Impact of Expert Testimony about Rape Myth Acceptance in Restoring a Blamed Victim’s Credibility in Court

Hillary Hogle, Amanda Chambers, Cassie Pinaire and Molly Ramsden
Faculty Mentor: Kathryn Sperry, Psychology

The overall goal of this research was to reduce jurors’ tendency to blame victims of sexual assault and restore a victim’s credibility in the face of perceived “blameworthiness.” Research has demonstrated that increasing self-awareness of cognitive biases reduces those biases and their impact on decision-making (Dijksterhuis, & Knippenberg, 2000; Troisi, Young, & Harris, 2013). Thus, we hypothesized that a courtroom expert discussing Rape Myth Acceptance (RMA) and Belief in a Just World (BJW) would restore a rape victim’s credibility and reduce victim blame by making jurors aware of these cognitive biases. We found that inclusion of such an expert decreased BJW and marginally increased victim credibility in the low blame condition, and marginally increased sympathy for the victim in the high blame condition. Our findings should be a source of optimism for victims of sexual assault, as it seems that a scientific expert may be able to bring to light jurors’ tendency to endorse rape myths and believe in a just world.