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# Debriefing Effectiveness Following Exposure to Pornographic Rape Depictions

NEIL M. MALAMUTH AND JAMES V. P. CHECK

## Abstract

Data are presented concerning the ethics of exposing undergraduate students to pornographic<sup>1</sup> rape portrayals followed by a debriefing designed to dispel a number of rape myths. One hundred fifty males and females were randomly assigned to read pornographic stories. Some of these depicted a rape, whereas others depicted mutually consenting intercourse. Afterwards, those exposed to the rape version were given a debriefing which included statements concerning the true horror of rape and the existence of rape myths. About 10 days later, a "Public Survey" ostensibly conducted by a local committee of citizens was given to subjects in their classes. A postexperimental questionnaire confirmed that participants were not aware that this survey was related to the earlier phase of the research. As part of the survey, subjects were presented with actual newspaper articles about which their opinions were solicited. One of these articles, the dependent measure of the study, concerned rape. Subjects indicated their reactions to this article and their opinions about the general causes of rape. The results indicated that those exposed to the rape depictions followed by a "rape debriefing" were less accepting of certain rape myths than subjects exposed to mutually consenting intercourse depictions. Implications of the data for future research in this area are discussed both in terms of work focusing on the

<sup>1</sup>The term pornography is used herein to refer to sexually explicit stimuli without any pejorative meaning necessarily intended. The phrase "pornographic rape portrayals" is used rather than "rape portrayals" to distinguish between materials that include various elements that appear to be intended to sexually arouse the reader (e.g., descriptions of breasts, genitalia, etc.) from depictions of rape that only describe the events without inclusion of sexually explicit elements.

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potential antisocial impact of violent pornography and of research specifically designed to identify the conditions most likely to change acceptance of rape myths.

Sherif (1980), in a discussion of the ethical issues raised by research on the sexual responsiveness of college students to rape depictions (Malamuth, Heim, & Feshbach, 1980), argued that it is necessary to assess the effectiveness of the type of debriefing used by these investigators. This debriefing was designed to counteract any undesirable effects produced by exposing subjects to pornographic portrayals that conveyed rape myths. Sherif suggested that, despite debriefing procedures, exposure to certain types of pornographic rape depictions may have negative effects on subjects that extend beyond the research setting. For researchers on pornography, such a possibility could be a serious inhibitor to conducting research in an area that has recently aroused much social concern as well as calls for scientific studies (e.g., Barry, 1979; Bart & Jozsa, 1980; Clark, 1980; Johnson & Goodchilds, 1973; Russell, 1980; Steinem, 1978).

Malamuth, Feshbach, and Heim (1980), in a reply to Sherif, acknowledged the need to assess the impact of participation in research of this type. They suggested, however, that the combination of exposure to a rape portrayal followed by a communication emphasizing that reality sharply contradicts the events depicted in the story may provide an important corrective experience and result in reduced acceptance of rape myths.

The present study was designed to assess, empirically, whether exposure to rape portrayals followed by a debriefing has adverse, corrective, or no effects on attitudes and perceptions of rape, with particular focus on beliefs in rape myths. These myths refer to prejudicial, stereotyped, or false beliefs about rape, rape victims, and rapists (Burt, 1980). The present experiment addressed only the *ethical* concern that participation in research on the effects of aggressive pornography (e.g., Donnerstein, 1980; Donnerstein & Berkowitz, 1981; Malamuth & Check, 1980a, 1980b, 1983; Malamuth, Haber, & Feshbach, 1980; Malamuth, Heim, & Feshbach, 1980) may have adverse effects on subjects. We therefore assessed the impact of the overall experience of exposure to pornographic rape depictions combined with a debriefing designed to dispel rape myths. Whether any effects that may be found are due to the debriefing alone, to the rape depictions alone, or to the combination of the two is an important issue but one

that is not an ethical matter and consequently is beyond the scope of this paper.

The present assessment was conducted in the course of research designed to obtain raters' judgments so as to validate stories to be used in a replication and extension of the Malamuth, Heim, and Feshbach (1980) findings. The types of stories utilized in this validation research were similar to the ones used by those investigators. The variables manipulated herein (i.e., consent, pain, and outcome) were conceptually equivalent to those of the earlier research. These stories were, however, of considerably greater length than those employed by Malamuth, Heim, and Feshbach (1980), thus increasing the potential of any undesirable or corrective impact of exposure. In fact, in later research with these same stories, it was found that exposure to some of the rape depictions increased acceptance of rape myths measured prior to a debriefing (Malamuth & Check, 1981a). More specifically, it was found that rape depictions suggesting that the victim became sexually aroused by the assault (the typical rape depiction in pornography, e.g., Smith, 1976) increased male subjects' belief that women in general may derive pleasure from being forced into sexual acts or from being raped.

## Method

### Subjects

Seventy-seven male and 73 female undergraduate psychology students from the Universities of Manitoba and Winnipeg participated in the experiment. The mean age of the subjects was 21.2 years. Sixty-nine percent of the participants indicated that they were living with their parents. The median family income was \$23,500. Religious affiliation consisted of 49% Protestant, 25% Catholic, 8% Jewish, and 18% unaffiliated. Except for introductory psychology students at the University of Manitoba who signed up for the experiment to fulfill course requirements, students participated in their classes. The study was described to subjects as an evaluation of pornography involving exposure to sexually explicit materials.

### Overview of Design

The design was a 2 x 2 x 2 x 2 fully crossed factorial. The independent variables manipulated in the stories were Consent (consenting vs. rape or nonconsenting), Pain (pain vs. no pain) and Outcome (woman's

arousal vs. woman's disgust). Subjects were randomly assigned to these conditions. Sex of subject was the fourth independent variable. Subjects in the consenting-intercourse conditions received the nonrape debriefing, whereas subjects in the nonconsenting conditions received the rape debriefing. The dependent variables (measured about 10 days following exposure) were responses to a newspaper article about an alleged rape and a number of items asking subjects' general perceptions of the causes of rape.

### Materials

**Stories.** Each of the eight stories was virtually identical in length (about 1,000 words). These stories depicted sexual acts resulting in intercourse between a female owner of a boutique shop and a man who entered the shop shortly before closing. Except for the following manipulations, all of the versions were identical in the content of the story:

In the *rape* condition, the man forcibly raped the woman (e.g., "Suddenly the man leaped forward and pulled out a knife from within his jacket pocket. He grabbed Marie roughly, pinning her arms back so that she was unable to move. He forced her close and kissed her"), whereas in the *consenting* conditions the woman was a willing participant (e.g., "replied Marie, 'I remembered you being in the store earlier. I'm very happy you did come back.' They gazed at each other momentarily. Then, she stepped up to the man and gave him a deep kiss"). In the *pain* condition, the woman was described as experiencing pain at various points throughout the story (e.g., "causing Marie to cry out in pain"), whereas no pain was described in the counterpart condition. In the *arousal-outcome* condition, the man perceived the woman as becoming sexually aroused by the encounter (e.g., "He knew that she was getting really excited . . . He felt her coming now as he heard her moan louder and louder"). In the *disgust-outcome* condition, the woman found the experience unstimulating and reacted with nausea (e.g., "she lay unmoving beneath him, feeling only revulsion now").<sup>2</sup>

Manipulation checks performed on these content variations are discussed in detail elsewhere (Malamuth & Check, 1980b). To summarize these procedures briefly, 77 male and 66 female students rated their perceptions of the woman's willingness, pleasure, and pain for the 8 versions of the depiction. The data clearly indicated that the consent, pain, and outcome dimensions were effectively manipulated. These

<sup>2</sup>Copies of the stories are available upon request from the authors.

data also suggested that in people's perceptions there exists some association between certain variables such that the manipulation of one variable may also be perceived as affecting another (e.g., rape depictions may be perceived as involving more pain than consenting portrayals even if the same amount of pain is actually described).

**Debriefings.** The debriefings were typewritten and distributed in sealed envelopes. Each debriefing thanked the subject for participating and asked that he/she not discuss the study with any potential subjects. The rape debriefing also included the following communication:

While the following is probably obvious to all subjects, we would like to emphasize that the stories you read were *COMPLETE FANTASY*. Some of you read a story which depicted a rape. These stories were constructed specifically for this experiment. In reality, as you hopefully are aware, rape is a terrible crime, and in Canada is punishable by many years in prison. As well, rape victims suffer severe psychological damage as well as the more obvious physical effects of the assault. Unfortunately, many people still believe a number of falsehoods or myths about rape. For example, one totally unfounded myth is that if a woman does not immediately report a rape, or hesitates to report it, then the act is somehow not considered a real rape. A second falsehood is that if a woman does anything which puts her at greater risk or makes her more vulnerable to being victimized (e.g., going to a man's apartment, wearing enticing clothing, etc.) she somehow brings the rape upon herself. These are in fact just myths and are totally unfounded. Hopefully, you will leave this experiment with a more realistic and accurate view of rape.

The nonrape debriefing contained filler material of approximately equal length about the value of research about human sexuality. Both debriefings were followed by a section that encouraged participants to write any comments or suggestions concerning the research.

**Newspaper Article.** The article used to assess debriefing effectiveness (taken from a local newspaper) was about a man who had been charged with two sexual assaults (the second a rape) on the same woman. On both occasions the woman had accepted the man's invitation to visit him at his home. She reported the rape to the police 2 weeks following the attack. This particular newspaper account was selected because it contained the type of information relevant to the myths discussed in the debriefing (i.e., not reporting the rape immediately and putting herself at greater risk by going to the man's apartment).

On four items that followed the newspaper article, subjects were asked to indicate (a) the extent of their agreement with the police's decision to lay charges (on a scale from 1 = *very strongly agree* to 7 = *very strongly disagree*); (b) to what extent, if at all, they thought

the woman shared responsibility for being raped (on a scale from 1 = *not at all* to 5 = *very much*); (c) the recommended sentence for the man if convicted (in years); and (d) the percentage of men in general they thought might rape if assured that they would not be caught and punished. Subjects were also asked to indicate to what extent, if at all, they believed that various factors contribute to rape. The importance of each cause of rape was rated on a 7-point scale ranging from 0 = *no importance whatsoever* to 6 = *very important*. As in Malamuth, Reisin, and Spinner (1979), these items were grouped a priori into three sets. These were victim causes (victim behavior, women secretly wanting to be raped, and victims' nonreporting to the police), rapist causes (mental illness, natural masculine tendencies, and fear of homosexuality) and societal causes (the legal system, pornography, and societal attitudes).

*Demographic Information.* Subjects completed demographic forms concerning their date of birth, gender, number of siblings, marital status, occupation, place of residence, family income, religion, and citizenship, in both phases of the research. In addition to providing descriptive information on the sample, these questions were used (as described below) to match subjects' responses from the two phases of the research.

#### *Procedure*

*Exposure Phase.* In the first phase of the research, subjects participated in large groups ranging in size from about 15 to 55 subjects. At the beginning of the session, it was indicated that the stories contained pornography which some might find offensive, and that responses would be completely anonymous. Further, it was repeatedly emphasized that anyone was free to leave at any time without any penalty whatsoever. Where possible, the experiment was announced just before a midclass break, thus allowing students to return late from the break if they did not wish to participate.<sup>3</sup> It was also emphasized to subjects that they should feel under no obligation to either examine or fill out the materials. Each subject was given a story to read with an attached questionnaire, containing items designed to validate the varied manipulations in the stories. A demographic form was also included. The debriefing was in a sealed envelope, and sub-

<sup>3</sup>Although records were not kept on the actual number of subjects who chose not to participate in the research, it appeared that very few subjects decided not to participate.

jects were asked to read the debriefing after reading the stories and filling out the questionnaire. Subjects then returned all materials (including the debriefing) to the experimenter.

*Assessment Phase.* About 10 days later, debriefing effectiveness was assessed with a measure disguised as a "Public Survey Regarding Legal Decisions." This survey was administered in all subjects' classes by an experimenter whom subjects had not previously seen. Varied precautions were taken to ensure that subjects were not aware that this survey was in any way connected with the first phase of the research in which some of the students in the classes had participated. These precautions included embedding the rape articles in a series of other articles, disguising the whole survey as a "Public Survey Regarding Legal Decisions," using different experimenters for the two phases, not telling subjects that the two experiments were actually connected, and waiting 10 days before conducting the second phase.

The survey was ostensibly conducted by the Committee on the Attitudes of Citizenry and contained actual newspaper articles about legal and political issues, including the story about the alleged rape. The other articles were about Canada accepting Vietnamese refugees, a U.S. Supreme Court decision to allow natives one half of Washington State's annual fish catch, and the metrification of Canada. Each article was followed by a number of questions (similar to those used with the rape article) asking subjects' opinions. This procedure was designed to disguise the true purpose of the rape article, thus preventing the possible biasing effects of demand characteristics. Subjects were asked to fill out a demographic form, but no names were required. A postexperimental questionnaire was included at the end of the survey, asking subjects what they felt could be learned from a survey of this kind, and whether they participated in a similar survey or another phase of the experiment. In keeping with several other studies employing similar multiphase procedures, (e.g., Malamuth & Check, 1981a, 1981b; Malamuth et al., 1979), no subject indicated any awareness of the connection between the two phases of the research.

On the basis of the demographic data collected in both phases, data from the newspaper article were matched with information about which story and debriefing the subject had read in the exposure phase. Of the 262 subjects who had participated in the exposure phase of the research, 150 were in class when the assessment phase was conducted and were successfully matched with their exposure phase data. Since subjects had no knowledge whatsoever of the connection between the

two phases of the research or when the second phase of the research would be conducted, subject attrition (which was about evenly distributed across conditions) is in all likelihood attributable to fluctuations in course attendance throughout the semester.

## Results

### Responses to Newspaper Article

The four items asking responses to the newspaper article were analyzed using a 2 (Consent) x 2 (Pain) x 2 (Outcome) x 2 (Sex of Subject) Multivariate Analysis of Variance (MANOVA). These analyses yielded no significant multivariate or univariate effects.

### Perceived Causes of Rape

Each of the three perceived causes of rape item sets (victim causes, rapist causes, and societal causes) was analyzed using a 2 (Consent) x 2 (Pain) x 2 (Outcome) x 2 (Sex of Subject) MANOVA. The results of these analyses are presented in Table 1. There were no other multivariate effects found besides those indicated below.

**Victim Causes.** The analysis of the victim-causes set of items yielded an effect of Consent, multivariate  $F(3, 132) = 2.60, p < .06$ .<sup>4</sup> Follow-up analyses revealed a univariate effect on the item "women secretly wanting to be raped," and an effect which approached significance on the item "victim behavior" (see row 3 of Table 1). Subjects who had read a rape depiction followed by the rape debriefing were less inclined to see women wanting to be raped and victim behavior as causes of rape than subjects who had read a nonrape depiction (see rows 1 and 2 of Table 1).

**Rapist Causes.** The analysis of the rapist-causes item set also yielded a multivariate effect of Consent,  $F(3, 132) = 2.66, p < .06$ , with univariates on natural masculine tendencies and fear of homosexuality (see row 6 of Table 1). Subjects who read a rape depiction and the rape debriefing subsequently saw natural masculine tendencies and fear of homosexuality as less important causes of rape than those who read a depiction (see rows 4 and 5 of Table 1).

<sup>4</sup>As Hummel and Sligo (1971) have demonstrated, multivariate analysis of variance is generally more conservative than its univariate counterpart, even when significant multivariate  $F$ 's are followed-up by univariate  $F$ -tests. Therefore, in the present study any multivariate effect significant at  $p < .10$  was considered reliable.

Table 1

*Effects of Exposure to Consenting vs. Nonconsenting Depictions on Perceived Causes of Rape*

Item Set	Individual Variables		
<b>Victim Causes</b> (Multivariate $p < .06$ )	Women Wanting to be Raped	Victim Behavior	Victim Nonreporting
Nonconsent <sup>a</sup> $M =$	1.52	3.10	4.53
Consent <sup>b</sup> $M =$	2.31	3.54	4.80
Univariate $F(1, 134)$	6.83***	2.83*	1.41
<b>Rapist Causes</b> (Multivariate $p < .06$ )	Natural Masculine Tendencies	Fear of Homosexuality	Mental Illness
Nonconsent <sup>a</sup> $M =$	1.64	1.67	4.18
Consent <sup>b</sup> $M =$	2.25	2.23	4.36
Univariate $F(1, 134)$	4.83**	5.69**	<1.0
<b>Societal Causes</b> (Multivariate $p < .10$ )	Pornography	Societal Attitudes	The Legal System
Nonconsent <sup>a</sup> $M =$	2.66	2.99	3.36
Consent <sup>b</sup> $M =$	3.26	3.27	3.79
Univariate $F(1, 134)$	4.31**	1.08	2.11

\* $p < .10$ . \*\* $p < .05$ . \*\*\* $p < .01$ .

<sup>a</sup>Seventy-three subjects were in the nonconsenting condition.

<sup>b</sup>Seventy-seven subjects were in the consenting condition.

The only other multivariate effect on the rapist-causes item set was a Pain x Sex of Subject interaction, multivariate  $F(3, 132) = 2.26, p < .09$ , with a univariate effect on the item natural masculine tendencies,  $F(1, 134) = 5.27, p < .03$ . Because of the main effect of consent on this item (noted above), and the fact that there was also a univariate Consent x Pain interaction on this item,  $F(1, 134) = 3.94, p < .05$ , simple effects analyses were conducted. Since the concern of this study was with the effects of exposure to sexual violence followed by debriefing, subjects who had read a rape depiction and a rape debriefing and subjects who had read a nonrape depiction and the nonrape debriefing were compared within each of the four Pain x Sex of Subject conditions. These comparisons revealed that the differences in perceptions of natural masculine tendencies as a cause of rape were significant for males in the pain condition (rape  $M = 1.20, n = 20$ , nonrape  $M = 2.52, n = 21$ ),  $F(1, 134) = 6.37, p < .02$ , were nonsignificant for females in the pain condition (rape  $M = 2.60, n = 17$ , nonrape  $M = 1.71, n = 20$ ),  $F(1, 134) = 2.61, p < .12$ , and were negligible for both males in the no pain condition (rape  $M = 2.29, n = 17$ , nonrape  $M = 2.42, n = 19$ ),  $F(1,$

134)  $< 1, p > .10$  and females in the no pain condition (rape  $M = 1.47$ ,  $n = 19$ , nonrape  $M = 1.29$ ,  $n = 17$ ),  $F(1, 134) < 1, p > .10$ .

*Societal Causes.* There was also a multivariate effect of Consent on the societal-causes item set, multivariate  $F(3, 132) = 2.18, p < .10$ , but a univariate effect only on the pornography item (see row 9 of Table 1). Subjects who had read a rape depiction followed by the rape debriefing subsequently rated pornography as less of a cause of rape than subjects who had read the nonrape stimuli (see rows 7 and 8 of Table 1).

In summary, multivariate analyses on all three sets of items (i.e., victim causes, rapist causes, and societal causes) revealed effects of the rape versus nonrape exposure. Univariate analyses indicated that in comparison to those exposed to the mutually consenting intercourse depiction and associated debriefing, subjects who in the first phase of the study had been exposed to rape depictions followed by a rape debriefing were less inclined in the second phase to indicate that women's secret desire to be raped, the victim's behavior, natural masculine tendencies (primarily in the rape and pain exposures), fear of homosexuality, and pornography are causes of rape.

### Discussion

The general pattern of the data suggests that exposure to pornographic rape portrayals followed by a debriefing does not have relatively long-term undesirable effects on attitudes toward rape and may even have a beneficial impact on subjects' attitudes. Specifically, in comparison to subjects exposed to mutually-consenting-intercourse depictions, those presented with rape stories and the rape debriefing were less likely to believe certain rape myths (Burt, 1980), i.e., that women's secret desire to be raped, the victim's behavior, and natural masculine tendencies were causes of rape. Moreover, these effects were not attenuated by the manipulation of other variables in the content of the depictions (i.e., Outcome and Pain). These data are supported by the recent findings of Donnerstein and Berkowitz (1981) who, working independently, also found that subjects presented with violent pornography followed by a debriefing accepted rape myths to a lesser degree than control subjects.

In addition to differences on the items reflecting rape myths, the present data revealed differences on two other items, pornography and fear of homosexuality. Differences in perceptions of pornography as a cause of rape are consistent with previous findings (Commission on

Obscenity and Pornography, 1970; Malamuth et al., 1979) showing that exposure to pornography in an experimental setting causes reduced perceptions of it as a cause of criminal behavior. Such a change may be caused by subjects' beliefs that since they personally were not adversely affected by exposure to such pornography, the effects in general are not as negative as they may have previously assumed (Commission on Obscenity and Pornography, 1970). Similarly, changes in perception of pornography as a cause of rape may be due to subjects' assumption that if these materials were presented to them by the experimenters (who, as evidenced by the content of the debriefing, are clearly concerned about rape), then the effects of the violent pornography cannot be very negative. Otherwise, the experimenters would not have presented them with such materials or, at least, would have explicitly cautioned about the potential adverse effects of such pornography within the debriefing. Given that there is increasing evidence to suggest that mass media stimuli (including pornography) that fuse sexuality and violence may have undesirable effects (Donnerstein, 1980; Donnerstein & Berkowitz, 1981; Malamuth, 1978; Malamuth, 1981; Malamuth & Check, 1980a, 1981a, 1981b; Malamuth & Donnerstein, 1982; Malamuth, Haber, & Feshbach, 1980), it may be desirable in future debriefings to specifically address the potential adverse effects of violent pornography so as not to affect subjects' opinions in a direction inconsistent with current evidence.

The findings concerning fear of homosexuality as a cause of rape are not easily accounted for, and at this point can only be speculated about. It may be that the emphasis in the debriefing that rape is a "terrible crime" which is "punishable by many years in prison" made subjects less likely to view rape as caused by hidden psychological forces such as fear of homosexuality.

The possibility that exposure to violent pornography followed by a debriefing may have changed attitudes in a favorable direction has important implications for researchers focusing on the possible detrimental effects of violence in pornography and suggests a related line of future research of considerable social significance. As noted earlier, for researchers in the pornography area, the possibility of adversely affecting research participants could be a serious inhibitor to work in this area. Knowledge that a debriefing designed to counteract some of the hypothesized antisocial effects may effectively counteract such effects and even result in the total experience having a beneficial impact is likely to encourage future work in the area. This study, however,

should be seen as only a start, and not as a definitive set of conclusions to be used *carte blanche* to justify any or all pornography-exposure-debriefing procedures. It is important that pornography researchers design debriefing procedures which are appropriate for their specific materials and assess the effectiveness of those procedures whenever possible (Sherif, 1980).

From the present data we can conclude that the *combination* of exposure to a rape depiction and exposure to the rape debriefing was effective in reducing acceptance of rape myths. Explaining why these effects occurred is an important issue to be addressed in future research. Some of the questions that should be addressed in such research include the following: Is the rape debriefing by itself sufficient for such a change or is it necessary to first expose subjects to violent pornography? What is the relationship, if any, between initial levels of responsiveness to violent pornography and/or initial levels of rape-myth acceptance and the impact of debriefings? Given data showing wide acceptance of rape myths, even among college students (Barnett & Feild, 1977; Malamuth, Haber, & Feshbach, 1980), and the important links between such attitudes and socially significant behavior (Burt, 1980; Feild, 1978; Malamuth, 1983), it would be of considerable social value to determine the most effective means of reducing beliefs in rape myths.

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