

Examining the Impact of Traditional Sexual Scripts on Professional Responses to Female Sexual Assault:

An Implicit Approach

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# RUNNING HEAD: EXAMINING THE IMPACT OF TRADITIONAL SEXUAL SCRIPTS ON PROFESSIONAL RESPONSES TO FEMALE SEXUAL ASSAULT: AN IMPLICIT APPROACH

## Examining the Impact of Traditional Sexual Scripts on Professional Responses to Female Sexual Assault:

### An Implicit Approach

Despite increasing evidence that female sexual assault (FSA) can be at least as harmful, malignant and sexually driven as male sexual assault (MSA; e.g., Clements et al., 2014; Cortoni et al., 2017; Peter, 2009; Pflugrat & Allen, 2012; Williams & Bierie, 2015), professionals likely to encounter FSA as first responders, treatment providers and representatives of the law, tend to minimize perpetrator guilt, dangerousness, need for sanctioning and victim consequences when confronted with FSA cases (Clements et al., 2014; Colson et al., 2013; Denov, 2001, 2003, 2004; Gakhal & Brown, 2011; Heatherton & Beardsall, 1998; Mellor & Deering, 2010). The principle theoretical explanation for this bias in response to FSA v. MSA is based on the assumption that the idea of a female engaging in sexually deviant behavior clashes with deeply ingrained traditional sexual scripts that characterize normative female behavior as nurturing, protective, non-aggressive, and most importantly non-sexual (Allen, 1991; Denov, 2003, 2004; Hetherton, 1999; Smith et al., 1997). In an attempt to address this seeming cognitive dissonance, professionals are thought to subconsciously reframe FSA cases in a way that is more coherent with their ingrained traditional beliefs, resulting in the minimization of the severity and consequences of the assault (Denov, 2003, 2004; Hetherton, 1999; Smith et al., 1997). Although this theoretical explanation appears to be widely accepted, no efforts have thus far been undertaken to empirically substantiate the relationship between traditional sexual scripts and professional responses to FSA.

### **Proposed Study**

The proposed study aims to systematically examine the impact of traditional sexual scripts on responses to adult and child FSA in a sample of clinical professionals likely to encounter victims and perpetrators of FSA in everyday practice. Different from other studies examining sexual bias in response to FSA, this study will utilize an implicit measure that is less suggestible to impression management.

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## **Hypotheses**

1. Professionals will respond more favorably to FSA v. MSA despite similar offense patterns.
2. Professionals presenting stronger traditional sexual scripts will endorse more lenient responses to FSA v. MSA, than those with less traditional or non-traditional sexual scripts.

## **Proposed Method**

### **Participants**

Professionals (i.e., psychology, psychiatry, social work) will be recruited through mailing lists distributed by professional organizations and national online directories.

### **Procedure & Measures**

Participants will complete an online survey provided through Qualtrics consisting of the following measures.

### ***Demographic Questionnaire***

Participants will answer questions relating to their age, ethnicity, sexual orientation, profession/specialization, years in practice, professional affiliations, experience and training in sexual assault cases.

### ***Case Vignettes and Response Questionnaire***

Similar to Hetherington & Beardsall (1998), participants will rate victim/perpetrator credibility, appropriateness of social service/law enforcement involvement, perpetrator dangerousness, severity of physical and psychological victim consequences and appropriate perpetrator sanctions on a five-point Likert scale based on presented case vignettes. The vignettes will vary on the following case details: Perpetrator and victim gender (male v. female), victim age (adult v. child), type of sexual activity (penetration v. non-penetration). Direct FSA vs. MSA comparisons will control for critical characteristics of the offense (i.e., victim age, gender, & relationship to offender; offense duration and severity; circumstance of the offense).

*Traditional Sexual Script Implicit Association Test (IAT; Greenwald et al., 1998)*

Computerized response latency paradigm measuring implicit associations of male and female attributes with traditional sexual script concepts as defined in the literature (e.g., Denov, 2003, 2004; Hetherington, 1999; Smith et al., 1997).

**Proposed Design & Analyses:**

Data will be analyzed using the software IBM SPSS 27. A multiple regression analysis will be conducted examining the effect of perpetrator gender on professional responses while controlling for victim gender, age and relationship; offense duration, type and severity; and circumstances of the offense. In addition, a multiple regression analysis will be conducted examining whether the association between perpetrator gender (IV) and professional response (DV) varies as a function of the strength of traditional sexual scripts (moderator) as measured by the IAT.

**Significance of the Study**

The proposed study hopes to contribute to the development of more egalitarian approaches to FSA by examining the insufficiently understood persisting marginalization of female sex offenders by a sample of professionals who play a pivotal role in the identification and handling of FSA. In particular, this study aims to analyze the theoretically proposed relationship between heteronormative “traditional” sexual scripts and the minimization or preconception of FSA risk when evaluated through a mind-set of traditional gender-based beliefs and attitudes. When viewed through such a lens, this heuristic can have a potentially significant impact on the disposition and management of FSA, who is considered a perpetrator or victim, and which behaviors are being identified, reported, investigated and charged as sexual assault. The under-recognition of FSA not only renders victims feeling silenced and deprived of the services they might otherwise receive to heal (Clements et al., 2014; Deering & Mellor, 2011; Denov, 2003; Oglivie & Daniluk, 1995; Peter, 2009), it also impedes the likelihood that the perpetrators will face appropriate legal

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sanctions and treatment to reduce their re-offense risk (Angelides, 2008; Clements et al., 2014; Deering & Mellor, 2009; Denov, 2003; Kaylor et al., 2015; Mellor & Deering, 2010). The empirical exploration of why professionals appear to have this hypothesized bias is inherently interesting, since it has led, among other things, to a paucity of research on FSA (cf. Cortoni, 2017). To date, only a handful of studies worldwide have attempted to examine professional attitudes and responses to FSA. Although these studies provide some empirical evidence of the disparities in professional responses to MSA v. FSA, the complexity underlying this phenomenon remains poorly understood. In fact, all of the extant studies relied on explicit qualitative or quantitative measures that are highly suggestible to impression management and provide little insight into potential sexual biases thought to operate on a “subconscious” level, such as traditional sexual scripts (Kite et al., 2008; Neely & Cronley, 2004; Rudman & Glick, 2001). To overcome these limitations, the proposed study is the first of its kind to utilize an implicit measure of sexual bias, grounded and validated in social psychology (Ebert et al., 2014; Nosek et al., 2007; Rudman et al., 2001; Smeding, 2012; White & White, 2006), to investigate the relationship between implicit traditional sexual stereotypes and the persisting sexual bias in FSA. It is hoped that the results of this study will open the gates for a new intersection of legal, psychological and social science research that will inform policy and practice across disciplines about necessary courses of action that need to be taken in order to promote a more holistic, non-gendered understanding of FSA, and that allows for all women’s voices to be heard, “whether in compassion, in protest, or in violence” (Denov, 2003, p. 312).

**Word count without references: 987**

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