

“Boys Will Be Boys” and Other Gendered Accounts

An Exploration of Victims’ Excuses and Justifications for Unwanted Sexual Contact and Coercion

Karen G. Weiss
West Virginia University

An examination of 944 victim narratives from the National Crime Victimization Survey (NCVS) finds that one in five women who reveal an incident of sexual victimization to the NCVS excuse or justify their situations, largely by drawing on social vocabularies that suggest male sexual aggression is natural, normal within dating relationships, or the victim’s fault. The study’s findings substantiate the influence that rape myths and gender stereotypes have on victims’ perceptions of their own unwanted sexual situations and demonstrate the ways in which cultural language delimits victims’ recognition of sexual victimization as crime and inhibits reporting to the police.

Keywords: *excuses; gender stereotypes; justifications; rape myths; sexual victimization*

Few crimes in the United States today elicit as much skepticism and victim-blaming as do allegations of rape and sexual assault. Numerous studies published during the 1980s and 1990s (Bell, Kuriloff, & Lottes, 1994; Burt, 1980, 1991; Cook, 1995; Frazier & Seales, 1997; Jackson, 1995; Kahn, Mathie, & Torgler, 1994; Shotland & Goodstein, 1983; Yescavage, 1999) have demonstrated the extent to which social stereotypes and myths (e.g., women enjoy, fabricate, and are responsible for their own rapes) contribute to the public’s reluctance to acknowledge certain incidents of sexual victimization as serious crimes. Although there has been much written about public acceptance of rape myths, there have been surprisingly few empirical studies that examine how cultural stereotypes affect victims’ own perceptions of their sexually coercive experiences. This study seeks to fill this void by delineating the specific gender-based accounts victims¹ use to excuse partner behavior and minimize the seriousness of unwanted sexual contact and coercion.

Foremost, this study is interested in understanding how victims interpret what happened to them within a culture that often defines sexual aggression as natural,

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