International Journal of Women's Studies, 1985, 8, 414-423.

AN EMPIRICAL ASSESSMENT OF SOME FEMINIST HYPOTHESES ABOUT RAPE

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ABSTRACT

This paper is an examination of a number of feminist contentions about rape which, stated as hypotheses, have only recently been empirically addressed by researchers. Studies are reviewed in regard to assessing the validity of the feminist position about (a) the "normality" of rape, (b) the pervasiveness of rape and forced sexuality, (c) rape myths and their influence, and (d) the effects of mass media portrayals of women. This evidence was found to support the hypotheses that rape and forced sexuality are widespread and, to a surprising extent, acceptable in North American society; that rape is not exclusively the product of a few bent and twisted minds; that beliefs in rape myths are linked to acts of aggression against women; and that sexual violence in the mass media plays a significant role in the fostering of rape myths and in the acceptance of rape and other forms of violence against women.

INTRODUCTION

Despite a growing number of theorists stating the feminist position on rape (e.g., Brownmiller, 1975; Clark & Lewis, 1977; Gager & Schurr, 1976; Griffin, 1971; Lederer, 1980; Russell, 1975), relatively few studies have been designed to assess empirically the validity of this position. The purpose of this paper is to present selected aspects of the feminist viewpoint as empirically testable hypotheses about rape and to review the research—much of which is only now beginning to emerge—relating to each hypothesis. Specifically, we will examine the research evidence relating to (a) the normality of rape, (b) the pervasiveness of rape and sexual coercion, (c) rape myths and their influence, and (d) the effects of sexual violence against women in the mass media.

THE NORMALITY OF RAPE

Perhaps the most central theme underlying feminist theory about rape stems from its disagreement with the traditional psychiatric view of rape as a mental aberration. According to this psychiatric model, the rapist is a sexaul deviate, and research in this tradition is directed toward diagnosing the rapist so that he may be treated and made more like "normal" men (e.g., Groth & Burgess 1977; Rada, 1978). In contrast to this traditional psychiatric view, feminist writers say that rape is a symptom of an ill society rather than the product of a few bent and twisted minds. One feminist view is that rapists and "normal" men are essentially similar, their behaviour differing only in degree of coercion and not in kind (e.g., Clark & Lewis, 1977). Feminists contend that rape is only to be expected, given the sexual socialization processes in our society (Clark & Lewis, 1977). Our traditional sexual scripts (Gagnon & Simon, 1973) dictate that women are not supposed to indicate sexual interest openly or to engage freely in sexuality, whereas men are taught not to take "no" for an answer—at least not the first time (Wilson & Byers, 1981). Consequently, from the male point of view, women ". . . are seen as hoarders and miserly dispensers of a much desired commodity, and men must constantly wheedle, bargain, and pay a price for what they want" (Clark & Lewis, 1977, p. 128). As a result, it is not surprising that the use of force has become acceptable in many sexual interactions in which a woman does not consent to intercourse (Giarrusso, Johnson, Goodchilds, & Zellman, 1979). Rape, therefore, is regarded by feminists as an overextension of, and the price of, our society's coercive sexuality (Clark & Lewis, 1977).

Past research relating to the psychiatric view of rape has generally involved subjecting convicted rapists to psychological tests and other, similar evaluation techniques. Researchers in this tradition have employed a wide variety of measures including the Rorschach Inkblot Test (e.g., Perdue & Lester, 1972),

the Minnesota Multiphasic Personality Inventory (MMPI) (e.g., Karacin, Williams, Guerrero, Salis, Thornby, & Hursch, 1974), the Edwards Personal Preference Schedule (Fisher & Rivlin, 1971), the Buss-Durkee Hostility Inventory (Buss & Durkee, 1957; Rada, Laws, & Kellner, 1976), intelligence scales (Rada, 1978), physical measurements (Rada, 1978), and investigations of rapists' childhoods (Rada, 1978), their dreams (Karacin et al., 1974), and even their genetic makeup (Money, 1975). Despite these numerous efforts to identify ways in which rapists are abnormal, the results have generally indicated very few differences between rapists and nonrapists which would justify any conclusion that rapists are grossly abnormal. Furthermore, as Abel, Becker, and Skinner (1980) have concluded, fewer than 5% of rapists are psychotic at the time of the rape.

Brownmiller (1975) has argued that studies of psychopathy in convicted rapists have little generalizability, since psychopathy may be more indicative of a tendency to get caught and convicted than of a predisposition to rape. (Note, for example, that the items on the Psychopathic Deviate scale of the MMPI were chosen on the basis of their ability to differentiate a group of psychopathic individuals who also had a history of criminal convictions from a group of nondeviant, noncriminal individuals). The suggestion that rapists who do not get caught are different from those who do is supported by Smithyman's (1978) finding that self-admitted rapists who have not come to the attention of the law are very different from convicted rapists (e.g., 50% of his self-admitted rapists were college-educated).

Of greater generalizability than studies of convicted rapists are studies testing the "normality of rape" hypothesis using males in the general population. One such study by Koss, Leonard, and Beezley (1985) demonstrated that sexual aggressivity was unrelated to the Psychopathic Deviate scale of the MMPI but, in contrast, was strongly related to socially acquired attitudes about rape, women, and sexual relations. Furthermore, recent data obtained on college males (Malamuth & Check, 1981a) indicate that self-reported likelihood of raping is only weakly related to psychoticism as measured by Eysenck's (1976) Psychoticism Scale (rs - .06 to .15) but is more strongly related to acceptance of rape myths, acceptance of violence against women, and sex-role stereotyping (rs = .30 to .40). Both of these studies therefore support the hypothesis that sexual aggression is more closely linked to socially-acquired beliefs, roles, and attitudes about rape than to gross psychological abnormality.

Support for the "normality-of-rape" hypothesis was also found in a recent study conducted in an effort to examine the influence of sex-role stereotyping attitudes on reactions to pornographic rape depictions (Check & Malamuth, 1983). College students classified as either high or low in their sex-role stereotyping attitudes were exposed to one of two rape depictions (stranger rape vs. acquaintance rape) or to a depiction of mutually consenting sexual intercourse. As expected, students' sex-role stereotyping classification was unrelated to reactions to the consenting intercourse depiction. In contrast, sex-role stereotyping had a major impact on reactions to rape. High sex-role stereotyping respondents, relative to low sex-role stereotyping respondents, were found to the rape victims' experience was more positive, and (c) (for males) report a greater likelihood that they would commit the rapes. Moreover, these effects were most apparent for the acquaintance-rape depiction, in which the man raped the woman when she refused to have sex with him in his apartment where they had gone after a date. This study thus provides direct support for the suggestion that many rape-related attitudes, as well as much rape-related behaviour, are the products of our sex-role socialization.

THE PERVASIVENESS OF RAPE AND FORCED SEXUALITY

An important implication of the feminist theory that rape is an overextension of our coercive sexuality is that rape and sexual coercion are pervasive phenomena in our society. One source of empirical information about the prevalence of sexual aggression against women is police reports about rape. Unfortunately, however, police reports do not accurately reflect the true incidence of sexual aggression, since even such extreme acts as rape are seriously underreported. Estimates of the proportion of actual rapes that are reported range from a high of 50% (Amir, 1971), to as low as 5% (Brownmiller 1975). Moreover, recent researchers asking women about their experiences of rape and sexual assault have found that only about 5-10% of the rape and sexual assault victims who were surveyed ever reported the

incident to the police (Brickman, Briere, Lungden, Shepherd & Lofchick, 1980; Byers & Eastman, 1981). Given the problem of underreporting, it would seem that a more accurate assessment of the incidence of rape may be derived from studies of the general population. One such survey of 250,000 people in thirteen major U.S. cities was conducted in 1972 by the United States Law Enforcement Assistance Administration (LEAA), and the results were reported by Hindelang and Davis (1977). In this study, all members over 11 years of age of selected households were surveyed and asked about their experiences of crime victimization during the preceding year. Based on the data for attempted and completed rapes from this survey, Johnson (1980) has calculated that a woman living out her life in a large U.S. city has a 16% chance of being a victim of a completed or attempted rape. it should be noted that this probability estimate is based on the assumption that the completed/attempted rapes reported in the LEAA survey constituted 100% of all rapes that actually occurred. Therefore, Johnson's 16% estimate is likely to be an *under*estimate of the actual lifetime probability of being sexually assaulted.

Studies of both females and males in the general college population also suggest that forced sexuality is widespread in North America. Kirkpatrick and Kanin (1957) found that more than half of a sample of 291 women students at Ohio State University had been offended by some form of sexual aggression during the preceding academic year. Twenty-one percent had been offended by forceful attempts at intercourse. A similar study conducted 15 years later at the same university revealed virtually identical percentages (Kanin & Parcell, 1977). More recently, Byers and Eastman (1981) found that 38% of the women at West Virginia University who returned questionnaires had been victims of forced sexual activity. A door-to-door survey of 551 Winnipeg women residents conducted by Brickman et al. (1980) revealed that 27% of those interviewed had been the victims of rape and/or sexual assault (excluding forced kissing).

In terms of coercive sexuality by males, a number of recent researchers have asked college men how likely they would be to rape if they could be assured of not being caught and punished (Check & Malamuth, 1983; Malamuth & Check, 1980b, in press; Malamuth, Haber, & Feshbach, 1980; Malamuth, Reisin, & Spinner, 1979; Tieger, 1981). Although there was some variability across studies, it was consistently found that a sizeable percentage of men indicated some likelihood that they would rape. On a 5-point scale where 1 = "not at all likely" and 5 = "very likely", about 35% of all the males indicated some likelihood of raping (i.e., a 2 or above), and about 20% of all the males indicated an even higher likelihood (i.e., at or above the midpoint of 3). (For a more detailed review of this literature see Malamuth, 1981). More directly, Koss and Oros (1982) found that 23% of a random sample of 1,846 college men responded "yes" to the question "Have you ever been in a situation where you became so sexually aroused that you could not stop yourself even though the woman didn't want to?"

Finally, a recent study of Los Angeles high school students yielded some particularly revealing data about the acceptability of the use of force in sexual interactions (Giarrusso et al., 1979). Teenagers were asked how acceptable it was for a male to hold a female down and force her to have intercourse under various conditions. It was found that up to 40% of both females and males indicated some acceptability for forcing a woman to have intercourse if she gets the man sexually excited, is stoned or drunk, or has had intercourse with other men. These results, as well as the results of the previously mentioned surveys, provide support for the notion that the use of force in sexual interactions is indeed quite widespread and acceptable in our society.

RAPE MYTHS, ATTITUDES, AND BEHAVIOUR

Burt (1980) defines rape myths as prejudicial, stereotyped, or false beliefs about rape, rape victims, and rapists (e.g., "women ask for it"). Rape myths are accepted to some extent by laypeople as well as by professionals who interact with rape victims and by assailants (Barber, 1974; Burt, 1978, 1980; Field, 1978; Kalven & Ziesel, 1966). Burt (1980), for example, found that more than half of her sample of 598 Minnesota residents agreed with such statements as "In the majority of rapes, the victim was promiscuous or had a bad reputation." A similar percentage believed that most reports of

rape are made only because the woman was trying to get back at a man with whom she was angry or because she was trying to cover up an illegitimate pregnancy.

An important implication of feminist theory about rape is that rape myths form an integral part of, and contribute to the presence of, coercive sexuality and acceptance of violence against women. In an important theoretical contribution to our understanding of rape myths, Burt (1980) found that rape myths held by both women and men formed part of a larger interrelated attitude structure that includes acceptance of interpersonal violence (primarily against women), the belief that sex relations are primarily adversarial in nature, sex-role stereotyping attitudes, and sexual conservatism. In order to examine the replicability of these findings, we administered Burt's scales to a sample of 283 male and female introductory psychology students. It was found that individual differences in rape-myth acceptance were strongly related (all $ps < .001$) to acceptance of interpersonal violence against women ($r = .57$), adversarial sex beliefs ($r = .59$), sex-role stereotyping attitudes ($r = .53$), and sexual conservatism ($r = .49$). In addition, a multiple regression analysis combining all four of these variables to predict rape-myth acceptance yielded a multiple correlation of $R\ (4,278) = .69$, $p < .001$, accounting for 48% of the variance in acceptance of rape myths. The standardized regression weights were 0.28 for acceptance of violence against women, 0.28 for adversarial sex beliefs, 0.15 for sex role stereotyping, and 0.15 for sexual conservatism (all $ps < .05$). Note that a previous study by Malamuth and Check (1980a), using an independent sample, revealed correlations virtually identical to these, as did Malamuth, Check, and Briere (1983). Thus, there is considerable empirical support for Burt's (1980) conclusions regarding the attitudinal structure of rape-myth acceptance.

Rape myths in various forms affect a variety of rape-related behaviour and attitudes, including the breadth or narrowness of one's definition of rape (Burt & Albin, 1981), mock-jurors' verdicts in a rape trial (Borgida & White, 1979), denial or reduction of perceived injury, and blaming rape victims for their victimization (Calhoun, Selby, & Warring, 1976; Jones & Aronson, 1973; Lerner, Miller, & Holmes, 1976; Smith, Keating, Hester, & Mitchell, 1976). Unfortunately, many researchers investigating the influence of rape myths conduct their studies under artificial laboratory conditions and often fail to consider the important question of whether attitudes and beliefs in rape myths predict reactions to real-life rape and actual behaviour predictions regarding rape (Fishbein & Ajzen, 1975) in addition to reactions to hypothetical or fictionalized rape situations. In order to address this problem more directly, we conducted a study to determine whether scales measuring rape myths and related attitudes would predict (a) reactions to fictional rape, (b) reactions to a report of a real rape, and (c) males' actual predictions about their own likelihood of raping.

The study was conducted in three phases. In Phase 1, Burt's (1980) scales measuring rape-myth acceptance, acceptance of violence against women, and adversarial sex beliefs were given to 71 female and 57 male college students who had signed up for an attitude study. In Phase 2 (three weeks later), these students were given pornographic rape portrayals to read and were asked to indicate their perceptions of the victim's experience in terms of her willingness, her sexual pleasure and her pain. Males were also asked to indicate how likely they would be to rape. Finally, in Phase 3 (a few days later), 56 of the females and 41 of the males (those who were in class on the day of the Phase 3 survey) were asked to respond to a newspaper report of an actual alleged rape and to indicate their perceptions of the causes of rape in the real world. Various procedural disguises (e.g., the use of different experimenters, different rooms, different cover stories, different experiment names) and the use of a postexperimental questionnaire ensured that the students were unaware of the connections among the three phases of the research.

For the purposes of data analysis, the perceptions of the Phase 2 fictional rape depiction (woman's willingness, pleasure, and pain) were combined to form a single, factor-analytically derived scale reflecting the degree to which the rape victim's experience was a positive one (high scores) or a negative one (low scores). Correlations were then computed between the Burt (1980) scales and (a) perceptions of the Phase 2 fantasized rape, (b) the Phase 3 responses to the real rape reported in the newspaper article, and (c) males' self-reported likelihood of raping. These correlations are presented in Table 1.

TABLE 1

Rape Myth Acceptance (RMA), Acceptance of Violence Against Women (AIV), and Adversarial Sex Beliefs (ASB) as Predictors of Reactions to Fictional and Real-World Rape

Variable	RMA	AIV	ASB
	r	r	r
Reactions to Fictional Rape (n = 128)			
Perceptions of Rape Victim's Experience	.30**	.26**	.31**
Responses to Real Rape (n = 97)			
Agreement to Lay Charges	-.04	-.20**	-.21**
Recommended Sentence (Yrs.)	-.05	.02	-.07
Victim's Responsibility	.27**	.00	.11
Perceived Causes of Rape (n = 97)			
Women Desire Victimization	.40**	.29**	.22**
Victim Behavior in General	.38**	.18*	.24**
Natural Masculine Tendencies	.25**	.31**	.30**
Self-Reported Likelihood of Raping (n = 57)	.45**	.32**	.25**

* $p < .05$, one-tailed test
** $p < .05$, two-tailed test

As can be seen from the first row of Table 1, perceptions that the fictional rape victim's experience was a positive one were associated with rape-myth acceptance (RMA), acceptance of interpersonal violence against women (AIV), and adversarial sex beliefs (ASB). In terms of reactions to real rape, individuals with high AIV and ASB were less inclined to agree with the police's decision to lay charges in the newspaper account of the alleged rape (Table 1, row 2). In addition, RMA was associated with beliefs that the rape victim was responsible for her own rape (Table 1, row 4). In terms of the items asking for beliefs about the causes of rape, people with higher RMA, AIV, and ASB were more likely to believe that women's secret desire to be victimized, victim behaviour in general, and natural masculine tendencies were important in causing rapes. Finally, RMA, AIV, and ASB were all predictive of males' self-reported likelihood of raping (Table 1, row, 8).

In summary, these data suggest that scales measuring rape-myth acceptance and related attitudes do in fact predict responses to both fictional and real rape descriptions. These findings also provide evidence that there is cross-situational generalizability with respect to the interrelationships of rape-related perceptions, behaviour, and attitudes.

The finding that acceptance of rape myths is predictive of males' self-reported likelihood of raping (Table 1) replicates and is consistent with other research showing that rape-myth acceptance is associated with aggressive behaviour. A previous study by Malamuth and Ceniti (1983) also showed Burt's RMA and AIV scales to be related to self-reported likelihood of raping. In addition, analysis of independent data collected at the same time as the data referred to in Table 1 (Malamuth et al., in preparation) revealed that RMA, AIV, and ASB were all related to males' self-reported likelihood of raping and forcing women into unwanted sex acts. Also consistent with these data is a study by Koss et al. (1985), showing that higher rape-myth acceptance by men is associated with higher levels of self-reported sexual aggression in male-female interactions. Finally, RMA and AIV have been recently shown

to predict aggression against women under laboratory conditions (delivery of an ostensibly aversive noise) using a modified Buss (1961) aggression machine (Malamuth, 1983a; Malamuth & Check, 1982).

In summary, the research on rape myths reviewed above supports the notion that the acceptance of both rape myths and violence against women is widespread in our society and is related to a number of antisocial beliefs and forms of behaviour toward women. The next section of this paper is a review of recent evidence showing that mass media portrayals of women can contribute to the acceptance of rape myths and to coercive sexuality.

THE EFFECTS OF MASS MEDIA PORTRAYALS OF WOMEN

Feminists have long contended that rape myths are to some extent a product of the way women are portrayed in the mass media, especially in pornography (e.g., Brownmiller, 1975; Clark & Lewis, 1977; Gager & Schurr, 1976). Much of the research on the effects of pornography, however, has concerned the general effects of erotica on sexual attitudes and behaviour (e.g., Commission on Obscenity and Pornography, 1970). The only reliable finding from this research has been that exposure to pornography generally results in more favourable attitudes toward pornography. Feminists, however, contend that it is not just exposure to erotica *per se* but rather that it is the degradation of women and the violence against women in pornography which contribute to rape myths and acceptance of violence against women in our society.

A number of recent studies have examined the effects on attitudes and perceptions of portraying violence against women in a favourable light in the mass media." In three laboratory experiments (Malamuth et al., 1980; Malamuth & Check, 1980b, in press) college students were exposed either to pornography in which sexual violence was portrayed as having favourable consequences (the woman was perceived as sexually aroused by the assault) or to control materials. All participants were then presented a second portrayal (a rape) and asked to indicate their perceptions. In the Malamuth et al. (1980) and Malamuth and Check (1980b) experiments, respondents who were earlier exposed to "sexual violence with favourable consequences" subsequently perceived less trauma to the victim in the second (rape) portrayal than did those who were earlier exposed to the control materials. Similarly, Malamuth and Check (in press) found that exposure to "rape with favourable consequences" resulted in increased belief in the victim's pleasure in a second rape portrayal as well as increased beliefs that women in general enjoy rape and forced sexual acts. These data are consistent with the results of Tieger and Aronstam (1981), who found that exposure to sexually violent fashion advertisements and album covers tended to increase beliefs that rape is motivated by rapists' sexual gratification. Moreover, recent data show that exposure to mass media portrayals of violence against women not only affects perceptions and attitudes but also results in higher levels of behavioural aggression (electric shocks) against women under laboratory conditions (Donnerstein, 1980; Donnerstein & Berkowitz, 1981; Malamuth, 1978). Finally, Check and Malamuth (1982) found that exposure to a pornographic rape depiction in which the victim put herself at risk by going to the man's apartment with him after a date increased women's acceptance of the myth that rape victims are in general responsible for their own rape.

Unfortunately, laboratory studies of the effects of exposure to violence against women are very much subject to problems of bias in choosing participants, artificiality, and "demand characteristics" (Adair, 1973). In order to avoid these problems, Malamuth and Check (1981b) conducted a field experiment which provides perhaps the clearest evidence to date that stimuli which portray sexual violence against women as having favourable consequences can contribute to acceptance of rape myths and violence against women. Female and male college students signed up to view two movies on separate evenings in on-campus theatres, ostensibly to evaluate them critically as movie critics would do. One group of students was randomly assigned to view two "experimental" films (*Swept Away* and *The Getaway*), and a second group viewed two control films. In both "experimental" films, after being dominated, physically abused, and raped, a woman later willingly becomes involved with her assailant; in *Swept Away,* she even falls in love with him. A few days after viewing the movies the students filled out Burt's (1980) rape-myth acceptance (RMA) scale and acceptance of interpersonal violence (AIV) scale in

class. Data from a postexperimental questionnaire confirmed that the various precautionary procedures were effective in preventing the students from seeing any connection between the viewing of the movies and the administration of the Burt scales.

The results indicated that exposure to the experimental films depicting sexual violence against women in a favourable light increased males' acceptance of interpersonal violence against women and also tended to increase their acceptance of rape myths. It should be noted that these effects were observed several days after exposure to the films, indicating that the experimental films resulted in relatively longterm changes in the students' attitudes.

The results of these studies of the effects of the mass media, as well as studies by Malamuth and Spinner (1980) and Smith (1976) showing that media portrayals of sexual violence against women are on the increase, provide empirical support for the feminist contention that the mass media may play a significant role in the fostering of rape myths and the acceptance of rape and other forms of violence against women. There is also evidence, however, that researchers can actually *reduce* people's acceptance of rape myths by providing research participants an appropriate debriefing following exposure to sexually violent materials. Malamuth and Check (in press), for example, found that participants who read a pornographic rape depiction and were then debriefed in a manner designed to dispel rape myths subsequently became less accepting of certain rape myths (e.g., rape is caused by women wanting it) than did respondents who read control materials. Donnerstein and Berkowitz (1981), using pornographic rape films, found a similar effect. Furthermore, Check (1982) and Check and Malamuth (1984) have shown that a properly constructed debriefing can affect research participants' attitudes toward rape both by itself and in combination with prior exposure to an actual pornographic rape depiction. Clearly, the possibility that pornography researchers can change their research participants' attitudes toward rape in a favourable direction is worthy of further investigation.

CONCLUDING REMARKS

Feminist writings have provided a much-needed theoretical framework for research on rape. The empirical evidence reviewed here supports a number of central tenets of feminist theory. Many of the issues raised by feminists, however, have not yet been directly addressed by researchers. One such issue stems from the feminist contention that rape is a hostile, aggressive act *as opposed to* a sexual act. It may be that this question needs restating, however, since this type of "either-or" conceptualization precludes the possibility that rape can have both aggressive *and* sexual components. A related question concerns the degree to which the feminist conceptualization of rape as a hostile, aggressive act generalizes to both stranger- and acquaintance-rape. The findings to date suggest that reactions to acquaintance-rape are more strongly related to sexual variables then are reactions to stranger-rape. Check and Malamuth (1982, 1983), for example, found in two separate investigations that males' sexual arousal to an acquaintance-rape depiction correlated with self-reported likelihood of committing the acquaintance rape described in the depiction. In contrast, sexual arousal to a stranger-rape depiction was unrelated to likelihood of committing the stranger rape described in the depiction. Although these data are not conclusive, they do suggest the possibility that many men regard acquaintance rape as a more sexual act than stranger rape, a possibility which merits further investigation.

There is also a need for more research on women's attitudes toward rape. The lack of sex differences with respect to the effectiveness of procedures designed to change rape attitudes (Check & Malamuth, 1984; Malamuth & Check, 1984) suggests that both sexes can benefit from efforts to educate the public about rape. The fact that women as well as men seem to need such attitude change is clearly evidenced by the fact that the relationships displayed in Table 1 apply to both sexes.

It seems clear, then, that although our knowledge of rape has progressed rapidly in recent years, a great deal of research still needs to be done. It is hoped that in the 1980s an increasing number of social scientists will attempt to address empirically the many as-yet unanswered questions.

Acknowledgements. The authors are indebted to Erma Chapman and Barry Spinner for their comments on earlier drafts of this paper and to David Branton, Jeff Grevstad, Greg Rubin, Jackie Shinfield, and Doug Speirs for their assistance in collecting data. Portions of this paper were presented at the Canadian Pscyhological Association Section on Women And Psychology Pre-Convention Institute, Toronto, June, 1981.

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