Antecedents to Women's Fear of Rape

Analise O'Donovan
Griffith University, Australia

Grant J. Devilly
Swinburne University, Australia

Ronald M. Rapee
Macquarie University, Australia

This study assessed the relative merits of sociodemographic variables and psychological variables in understanding women's fear of rape. A comprehensive understanding of the factors involved in women's fear of rape may allow for more effective interventions with women. Four hundred and eleven women, aged 18 years or older participated in the study, which surveyed their fear of rape and experience of rape. In agreement with previous findings, sociodemographic variables contributed significantly but relatively little (13%) to the variance in women's fear of rape. In contrast, psychological factors (perceived likelihood of being raped and perceived severity of consequences) predicted an additional 29% of the variance to this fear. Greater perceived likelihood of being raped functioned as a partial mediating variable between sociodemographic factors of age and relationship status and women's fear of rape. These results are encouraging as psychological models provide more avenues for restructuring such fear and modifying concordant, dysfunctional behaviours. Consequently, these results provide direction to intervention and education programs aimed at reducing women's fear of rape.

Fear of crime has traditionally been investigated by attempts to link this construct with sociodemographic variables (Parker & Ray, 1990). Sociodemographic factors have included gender, race, relationship status, age, socioeconomic status, education, and in the case of fear of rape, whether or not a women has a history of rape (e.g., Lewis & Salem, 1986; Liska, Sanchirico, & Reed, 1988; Parker & Ray, 1990; Senn & Dzinas, 1996; Warr, 1984). Although previous studies have established a relationship between various sociodemographic factors and fear of crime, this association leaves little room to proactively reduce this fear, with most individual demographic factors being immutable. The present study seeks to determine whether psychological factors mediate the relationship between sociodemographic factors and fear of crime, as the identification of psychological factors that mediate fear of crime can provide targets that are amenable to modification (Vernon & Best, 1983). In this study the focus was specifically on women's fear of rape. Fear of rape produces a marked impact on the lives of many women, and effective education and intervention programs that target this fear may be of great social benefit.

When comparing women's fear of different types of crime, fear of rape dominates fear of other crimes (Softas-Nall, Bardos, & Fakinos, 1995; Warr, 1985). Even if

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women have never been raped, they experience a greater fear of rape than for any other crime (Riger & Gordon, 1981). Warr (1984) describes fear of rape as a 'core' fear for women, with the obvious question being what influences this fear (Ferraro, 1996). There have been a number of proposed mediators of women's fear of rape, including the actual incidence of rape, high estimation of risks of victimisation, the seriousness of consequences, perceived low levels of physical competency to prevent rape, previous sexual harassment, age, knowing someone who has been raped, and media influences (Junger, 1987). Of these factors, three major psychological factors emerge as central in the debate: perceived degree of risk (e.g., Riger & Gordon, 1981; Softas-Nall, et al. 1995); perceived seriousness of consequences (e.g., Warr, 1984; Softas-Nall et al., 1995), and perceived ability to avoid being raped (e.g., Gordon & Riger, 1989; Heath & Davidson, 1988; Scheppele & Bart, 1983). Although all three of these factors have been investigated in a variety of studies, there does not appear to be a coherent model to explain and integrate these three aspects, limiting our ability to comprehensively examine the psychological factors influencing fear of rape. While fear of rape may well serve as an adaptive strategy — increasing vigilance and rape-preventative behaviours — it appears that cognitive avoidance (a strategy frequently utilised by anxious individuals) is negatively correlated with rape-avoidance strategies (Krahé, 2005). As such, a greater understanding of the context and predictors of rape fear may contribute to a greater understanding of how to most effectively influence such fears where they are either excessively strong or unrealistically low.

Theories on the nature of general fears and anxiety have also focused on these three factors. Several theorists have argued that the perception of threat, which includes estimates of both the probability and consequences of the threat, is the primary cognitive determinant related to levels of chronic anxiety (Butler & Mathews, 1983; Foa & McNally, 1996). On the other hand, some authors have pointed to the importance of perceived levels of control in mediating anxiety (e.g., Barlow, 1988). Rapee (1990) has suggested that both factors are likely to be important. That is, the final degree of fear in a situation may be a result of the degree to which the stimulus is considered to be dangerous (probability and consequences of threat) and the degree to which the individual believes that s/he, personally, has the ability to control that danger. In a recent empirical test of this suggestion (Rapee, 1997), participants were provided a series of hypothetical situations that covered both social events (e.g., being interviewed on TV) and physical events (e.g., going scuba diving). They were also asked to indicate the perceived likelihood and consequences of danger during these events, the degree to which they felt they could personally control any threat and their degree of fear of the event. Results indicated an interesting differentiation between physical and social events. Social events were best predicted by a combination of the probability of threat and the individual's perceived ability to control the threat, while physical events were best predicted purely by the perceived probability of threat.

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The purpose of the current research was to examine women's fear of rape from the perspective of the preceding model of fear and anxiety, and to investigate the influence of psychological factors (the probability of being raped, the consequences of being raped and the individual's perceived ability to avoid or control the rape), in addition to sociodemographic factors (such as age, type of relationship, religion, and previous victimisation).

The first research question centres on whether the inclusion of psychological variables can account for significantly more of women's fear of rape than sociodemographic variables alone. If this is the case, it will be possible for researchers and therapists to investigate the possibility of addressing more mutable factors (such as psychological variables), rather than seeing the fear of rape as an intransigent reaction due to static sociodemographic factors. Based on the model of Rapee (1990), we expect that psychological variables will predict significantly more of the variance in women's fear of rape than sociodemographic variables alone. Specifically, we intend to determine whether psychological variables mediate the relationship between sociodemographic variables and women's fear of rape.

Method

Participants

Four hundred and eleven women, aged 18 years or older, participated in the study. Age ranged from 18 to 67 years, with 59% aged 30 years or younger. As past research samples have typically been comprised of women from university populations, *or* women attending rape crises centres *or* via random phone samples, the current study recruited from a heterogeneous sample of university women (n = 156), friends of students (n = 115), telephone counsellors from a crisis helpline (n = 38), women who attended a rally for International Women's Day or worked for women's organisations such as the Women's Health Centre (n = 47), and 79 participants sampled for convenience in a variety of other contexts.

Measures

Sociodemographic Information

Age, level of education, income, current relationship status, history of having been raped, or knowing someone who had been raped were included as the most relevant sociodemographic indicators found to be related with a fear of rape in previous literature. To enhance anonymity, participants were asked to indicate their current age in one of ten 5-year age groups (e.g., 20–24; 15–29). Level of education was indicated on a scale of none to postgraduate degree. Personal income was indicated on a 7-point scale from $5000 or less to $40,000 or more. Current relationship status was assessed as being single or in a current relationship. Participants were also requested to provide information regarding their rape experiences and asked if (a) they had been raped themselves, and (b) knew someone who had been raped. Rape was defined at the beginning of the questionnaire as 'vaginal, anal, and/or oral sexual contact involving force or threat of injury'.

Psychological Factors

Perceived likelihood of being raped, negative consequences of being raped, and ability to avoid being raped were assessed as key psychological variables indicated in the psychological model of fear of rape. Specifically, likelihood/risk of being raped was measured on a 0–9-point Likert-type scale across 20 situations of different ages (e.g., 0–14, 15–20), possible locations (i.e., public place, your home, offender's home, car & work), and types of perpetrator (i.e., stranger, family member, friend, acquaintance, current partner, ex-partner and multiple attackers).

Likewise, seriousness of consequences of being raped and ability to avoid being raped were each measured on 0–9-point Likert-type scales over the situation

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TABLE 1

Bivariate Correlations Between Sociodemographic Factors, Psychological Factors and Fear of Rape

Measure	Mdn (%)	1	2	3	4	5	6	7	8	9	10
Sociodemographic factors											
1. Age	25–29	—									
2. Education	Some tertiary	.18***	—								
3. Income	$5000–$10,000	.53***	.29***	—							
4. Rape history	(17.9%)	.00	.04	-.01	—						
5. Know someone who was raped	(50.2%)	-.01	.19***	.01	.12	—					
6. Relationship status (single)	(58.4%)	.57***	.05	.26***	-.05	-.01	—				
Psychological factors	M (SD)										
7. Could avoid being raped	3.61 (1.33)	.10	.02	.05	.02	-.03	.02	.89			
8. Likelihood of being raped	2.66 (1.36)	-.35***	.02	-.19***	.03	.10	-.24***	-.37***	.92		
9. Negative consequences of rape	7.49 (.82)	.05	.03	.02	-.02	.06	-.01	-.14**	.05	.94	
Outcome factor	M (SD)										
10. Fear of rape	3.21 (1.72)	-.32***	-.03	-.19***	.03	.04	-.25***	-.22***	.62***	.13**	.95

Note: Mdn = median; % = percentage of participants who endorsed the median response; M = mean; SD = standard deviation; nonparametric spearman rho correlations reported for ordinal level sociodemographic variables; Pearson's r reported for continuous level psychological and outcome variables, alpha coefficients for psychological variables are in italics; **p < .01, ***p < .001.

described above. For example, in the section on location, participants were required to indicated on a 9-point scale (a) what they thought their chances were of being raped in the various locations, (b) how well they thought they could avoid being raped if someone tried in each of the locations, and (c) how bad the consequences would be for them if raped in any of these situations. Scores for each of the 3 psychological variables were an average across the 20 situations.

Participants were also asked to indicate how fearful they would be of being raped in the above situations. Again, an average score of fear of rape was calculated. Internal consistency for each of these measures was high (alpha ranging from .89 to .95; see Table 1). Participants were also asked at both the beginning and end of the questionnaire to rate their general fear of being raped.

Procedure

Measures were distributed and completed in a number of different ways: students completed the questionnaire at set times at the university; for other participants such as women at work settings, measures were either personally distributed or left in areas for collection by interested participants. All questionnaires were completed anonymously and were returned primarily by reply paid envelope or left in secure boxes in specified locations. Participants were provided with the contact number of the first author if they had further questions.

Results

Preliminary Analysis and Data Screening

Thirty-five participants were missing data on at least one sociodemographic variable and were deleted from any analysis which required the missing data. Data were screened for outliers and skewness, and the only variable that did not meet acceptable criteria (Tabachnic & Fidell, 2001) was the question relating to 'how bad' subjects thought being raped would be. Understandably, there was little variation in the responses and a negative skew was evident. Transformations were unable to correct for this skew and raw data for all variables was used in the analyses. Table 1 shows descriptive statistics, internal reliability and bivariate correlations for the sample. Due to the large number of correlations and the relatively large sample size, an alpha level of .01 is used to denote significant correlations. Further, due to the ordinal nature of the demographic variables, Spearman correlations are reported for demographic variables, while Pearson correlations are reported for the continuously distributed psychological variables. Eighteen per cent of the sample reported a history of rape. There was no significant difference between those who reported having been raped (M = 3.25, SD = 1.66) and those who had not been raped (M = 3.19, SD = 1.74) on overall global ratings of fear of rape (t (405) = −.23, ns). Over half the sample knew someone who had been raped. Again, there was no significant difference between those who knew someone (M = 3.24, SD = 1.64) and those who did not know someone who had been raped (M = 3.14, SD = 1.81) in their fear of rape (t (383) = −.49, ns). Given this lack of difference the whole sample was included in subsequent analyses.

Predictors

Hierarchical regressions were employed to determine whether the addition of the three psychological variables (perceived likelihood, severity, and avoidability of

TABLE 2

Summary of Hierarchical Multiple Regression Analysis for Sociodemographic and Psychological Variables Predicting Fear of Rape (n = 377)

Variable	B	Bse	β	sr²	R² change
Step 1					
Age	−.13***	.04	−.20	.02	
Education	.06	.06	.05	.00	
Income	−.08	.05	−.09	.01	
Rape history	−.02	.21	.00	.00	
Know someone	.16	.17	.05	.00	
Relationship status	−.53***	.20	−.16	.02	.12***
Step 2					
Age	−.02	.04	−.04	.00	
Education	.01	.05	.01	.00	
Income	−.04	.04	−.05	.00	
Rape history	−.02	.17	.00	.00	
Know someone	−.04	.14	.01	.00	
Relationship status	−.35*	.16	−.10	.01	
Could avoid rape	.01	.06	.01	.00	
Likelihood of rape	.72***	.06	.59	.25	
Serious consequences	.17*	.08	.07	.01	.29***

Note: Relationship status is coded 0 = single, 1 = cohabitating. *$p < .05$, ***$p < .001$.

rape) improved prediction of the fear of rape beyond that afforded by sociodemographic variables (age, education, relationship status, income, history of rape, whether knew a rape victim). Although, regression analyses assume at least interval level variables, Jaccard and Wan (1996) argue that ordinal level variables that represent a continuously distributed latent construct may be used as predictors in regression analyses. Dichotomous variables (i.e., rape history, know someone who's been raped, relationship status) were dummy-coded for entry as predictors.

Table 2 displays the unstandardised regression coefficients (B) and the standard error of the unstandardised regression coefficients (B$_{se}$), as well as the standardised regression coefficients (*Beta*), semipartial correlations (sr^2) and the increase in variance accounted for (R^2 change) after entry of the predictors. Sociodemographic variables were entered in the first step. Psychological variables were entered in the second step to assess whether psychological factors would account for additional variance in fear of rape beyond sociodemographic factors.

After step 1, with sociodemographic variables in the equation, the model reached significance, $R = .36$, $F(6, 370) = 9.16$, $p < .001$. After step 2, with psychological variables entered, $R = .65$, $F(9, 367) = 29.77$, $p < .001$. F change indicated a significant improvement in prediction of fear of rape by psychological variables over sociodemographic variables, R^2 change $= .29$, $F(3, 367) = 61.94$, $p < .001$. Altogether, 42% of the variability in fear of rape was accounted for by sociodemographic and psychological variables, with sociodemographic variables initially accounting for 13% of the variance and psychological variables accounting for an

additional 29%. Examination of the β values suggest that age and relationship status were the better sociodemographic predictors of rape fear, while likelihood of rape and serious consequences of rape were the more important psychological predictors of rape fear. Specifically, younger women, single women, and those who believed in a greater likelihood of rape and perceived rape to have more serious consequences reported greater fear of rape.

Psychological Factors as Mediators of Sociodemographic Factors on Fear of Rape

Tests for mediation were based on the definitions and procedures outlined by Baron and Kenny (1986). Mediation is demonstrated when a significant correlation between two variables becomes nonsignificant when a third variable, which also correlates with the first two variables, is partialled from the relationship. Partial mediation is demonstrated when the correlation between the IV and DV is reduced but remains significant. Full and partial mediating paths were verified using the Sobel test. Significant Sobel tests indicate that the indirect effect from the IV to the DV, via the mediating variable (MV), is significantly different from zero.

Only variables that had significant correlations with each other were included in the analysis. Thus, as age and relationship status were the only sociodemographic factors to significantly correlate with fear of rape in the first step of the above regression equation, these two variables were entered as IVs. Similarly, likelihood of being raped was the only psychological factor to correlate with these sociodemographic variables and thus entered as a potential mediator. As shown in Figure 1(a) age was significantly associated with fear of rape ($\beta = -.30$, $p < .001$). With likelihood of being rape entered into the equation the slope between age and fear of rape was reduced markedly in magnitude ($\beta = -.09$, $p < .05$). A Sobel test indicated a significant indirect effect ($t = -6.87$, $p < .001$). Thus, likelihood of being of rape functioned as a partially mediating variable between age and fear of rape. Similarly, as shown in Figure 1(b), relationship status was significantly associated with fear of rape ($\beta = -.18$, $p < .001$). With likelihood of being rape entered into the equation the slope between relationship status and fear of rape was reduced ($\beta = -.10$, $p < .05$). A Sobel test also indicated a significant indirect effect ($t = -4.75$, $p < .001$). Thus, likelihood of being of rape functioned as a partially mediating variable between relationship status and fear of rape.

Subsidiary Analysis

There was no significant difference on overall global ratings of fear of rape between those who reported having been raped and those who had not been raped in the past, $F(1, 401) = 1.72$, ns, with no effect for time (between the start of the questionnaire and the end of the questionnaire, $F(1, 401) = .32$, ns. However, there was a significant effect for the interaction of rape history and time, $F(1, 401) = 3.92$, $p < .05$, suggesting that completing the questionnaire was associated with a relative increase in fear of being raped by those with a history of having been raped.

Discussion

Results indicated that in combination, sociodemographic and psychological factors accounted for 42% of the variance in fear of rape. Psychological factors contribute considerably more to the variance (29%) as compared to sociodemographic factors
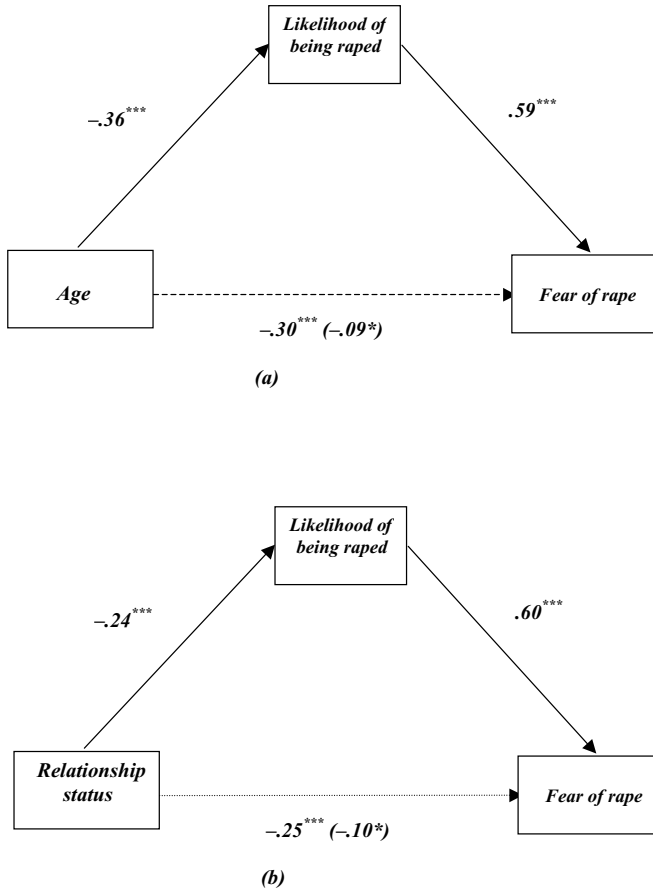
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FIGURE 1

Tests of mediating paths between socio-demographic variables (age, relationship status) and fear of rape via likelihood of being raped

Note: Standardised coefficients (beta weights) are reported, coefficients in parentheses are beta weights after controlling for MV; *$p < .05$, **$p < .01$, ***$p < .001$.

(13%); indicating that an understanding of women's fear of rape is greatly enhanced when considering psychological factors. The sociodemographic factors which significantly predict women's fear of rape are age (younger participants were more fearful of being raped than older participants) and, less strong but still significant, relationship status (single women are more afraid than women in relationships). Of the psychological factors, perceived likelihood of being raped was the strongest predictor of women's fear of rape; with the perceived seriousness of consequences if raped a much weaker, but still significant, predictor of rape fear.

We also found that psychological variables partially mediate the relationship between sociodemographic variables and women's fear of rape. When the likelihood of being raped is introduced as a mediator to the effect age has on fear of rape, the effect of age is markedly reduced. Similarly, the effect of relationship status is

markedly reduced with likelihood of rape as a mediator of fear of rape. This result further supports the importance of including psychological factors, particularly the perceived likelihood of being raped, in the understanding of women's fear of rape.

Women are afraid of rape because they know that many women do get raped (likelihood), and that the consequences tend to be serious. In the current sample of women, 18% of the participants had been raped, a finding which compares closely to other findings both in Australia and overseas (e.g., Easteal, 1993; Koss, 1993). The importance of psychological factors in predicting fear of rape is consistent with the literature on psychological aspects of fear. The diagnosis, theoretical conceptualisations and related treatments of anxiety and fear are some of the most common and well-researched areas in the science of psychology. The present study indicates that increasing the attention that psychological factors receive in the search to understand fear of crime is likely to be fruitful. In particular, the likelihood of being raped, and also the consequences of being raped, were demonstrated as impacting on women's fear of rape. Although degree of control is arguably important in general psychological models of fear (Rapee, 1990), this study did not find that a woman's belief in her ability to control or avoid being raped was a significant predictor of fear of rape. This finding may be an indication of women's belief that they do not have control over the circumstances leading to rape, and can thus not prevent it from happening.

It would be interesting to investigate whether degree of control has more importance in regard to fear of other types of crime. The current finding fits well with Rapee (1997), who reported that perceived control was an important factor for social threats, but not for physical threats. The reasons for this are as yet uncertain but are likely to involve social threats (e.g., embarrassment) actually being more controllable than physical threats (e.g., rape).

Despite the limited degree of predictability of sociodemographic factors, findings from the present study indicated significance for two predictors: age and type of relationship. That younger women were more afraid of being raped is supported by previous literature (e.g., Parker & Ray, 1990; Warr, 1985), and that being in a romantic relationship tends to reduce fear has also been found in previous studies (e.g., Parker & Ray, 1990). Gender has been demonstrated in previous studies to be a significant predictor of fear, but as this study only targeted female participants, this could not be assessed. In addition, although race has also been demonstrated as significant in other studies regarding general fear of crime (e.g., Ortega & Myles, 1987; Parker, 1988), 98% of the present sample identified most strongly with being Anglo-Saxon, thus disallowing for appropriate variance to investigate this predictor more closely.

Previous research findings have been mixed regarding the relative differences in levels of fear between women who have or have not been raped. McCann, Sakheim, & Abrahamson (1988) reported that all studies up to that point, comparing victims and nonvictims of rape on the Modified Fear Survey Schedule, found that victims reported significantly higher levels of anxiety and fear than nonvictims. More recently, Senn and Dzinas (1996) reported that, those participants who had within the last year experienced rape had significantly higher levels of fear than women who had not been raped, as measured on the Fear of Rape Scale. On the other hand, Kilpatrick, Veronen, and Resick (1979) and Veronen and Kilpatrick (1980) found that women who had not experienced rape reported the same level of fear of rape than women who had been raped. It is possible that these differing

research results may be due to when fear is measured. Although the current study found that in terms of level of fear, there was no significant difference between those who had been raped and those who reported to have not been raped (thus supporting studies such as Veronen & Kilpatrick, 1980), completing the questionnaire appeared to be associated with a relative increase in fear of being raped by those with a history of having been raped. This result may aid in understanding the earlier contradictory findings by factoring in when the measures of fear were taken. Not surprisingly, completing a questionnaire that contains material reminding victims of their rape experience is likely to increase their anxiety. Although exposure to previously experienced events is a central technique in the psychological treatment of fear and trauma responses (Foa & Kozac, 1986), this exposure provides corrective information through habituation to the feared stimuli and extinction of the fear response and, therefore, needs to be structured and prolonged to be effective. Completing a questionnaire would not meet these criteria. Instead, it is likely that completing the questionnaire was stimulus enough to activate the fear network associated with the past rape experience.

The present findings suggest that, at least in terms of women's fear of rape, future research would be well advised to put less emphasis on sociodemographic factors, which appear to have a relatively limited influence on fear, but rather focus efforts on further exploration of psychological factors. However, as this study was limited to women's fear of rape, the model of psychological factors would also have to be compared with sociodemographic factors in investigating other aspects of the wider fear of crime to enable a more generalised interpretation of these findings. We would also like to see future research incorporate personality measures, as these would likely add to the variance accounted for by the psychological variables. This is important because understanding the psychological basis for fear of rape provides a basis for assisting those individuals' whose lives are restricted by this fear.

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