Acquaintance Rape on Trial: A Social Psychology Analysis of Jury Selection in Acquaintance Rape Trials**[[1]](#footnote-1)**

**The Problems with Acquaintance Rape**

Every two minutes, an American is sexually assaulted.[[2]](#footnote-2) Although crime rates have fallen dramatically over the past several decades, rape and sexual assault remain serious problems in the United States today. The prototypical rape is stranger rape, often pictured in the following manner: a woman is walking alone late at night when a stranger emerges from the bushes and forces himself on her. While such examples are certainly terrifying, they do not accurately represent the majority of rape cases. In fact, acquaintance rape, rape committed by someone the victim knows, constitutes approximately two-thirds of rape incidents.[[3]](#footnote-3) Despite the statistics, “[t]he discourses of rape that surround the criminal justice system’s treatment of rape… construct stranger rape as ‘real rape’ and render the vast majority of rapes invisible.”[[4]](#footnote-4) Because of this, most rape victims never report being raped and many prosecutors do not feel confident enough to take acquaintance rape cases to trial. Famous 17th century English jurist Matthew Hale wrote “Rape is an accusation easily to be made and hard to be proved.”[[5]](#footnote-5) Modern-day Charlottesville, VA domestic violence attorney Jon R. Zug echoes Hale’s sentiments, noting “I’ve never won an acquaintance rape jury trial.”[[6]](#footnote-6)

Historically, advocates blamed poorly defined, unfair rape laws for the high rates of acquittal in acquaintance rape trials. These advocates thus fought for legal reform, which has resulted in changes such as the universal acceptance of rape shield laws and removing the requirement of corroboration of the victim’s testimony.[[7]](#footnote-7) Although these improvements were certainly welcome and necessary, most rape prosecutions today still end in dismissal or acquittal, and rape continues to be one of the most underreported crimes in the United States.[[8]](#footnote-8)

Despite changes to the law, there has not been much change in trial outcomes. Assistant Commonwealth’s Attorney Zug blames skeptical jurors, and many scholars would agree with him.[[9]](#footnote-9) Acquaintance rape cases often come down to “he said, she said” testimony, so trial outcomes frequently depend on the personal opinions of the jury. Victoria University professor Colleen A. Ward writes “that on many occasions the evidence presented at a rape case does not reliably predict a verdict as trial outcome is based more on jurors’ attitudes about rape.”[[10]](#footnote-10) According to a study by Yale professor Dan Kahan, cultural predispositions have such a powerful influence on perceptions of who’s to blame in a rape case that no change in the legal definition of rape will likely affect this.[[11]](#footnote-11) For prosecutors, in particular, this makes pursuing rape convictions remarkably difficult, because juries tend to ally with the defendant and are extremely reluctant to convict.[[12]](#footnote-12)

Based on these findings, many attorneys consider jury selection as the decisive stage of the case.[[13]](#footnote-13) Before jurors are chosen, attorneys have the opportunity to question each juror about his or her background during voir dire, a process that allows attorneys on both sides to determine jurors’ potential biases and challenge their selection based on that information. If the attorney challenges a particular juror for “cause”, he must justify the removal to a judge by pointing out a specific bias. If he utilizes his “peremptory” challenges, however, he can remove the juror without having to provide a reason. This latter type of challenge can prove particularly helpful to attorneys trying rape cases.

For many lawyers, experience teaches them how to select a jury. Experienced advocates analyze their prior results and adjust accordingly. That being said, in addition to intuition, all attorneys should have a firm understanding of juror social psychology. This knowledge and its application, aside from separating the strong attorneys from the weak, are often the difference between conviction and acquittal in rape trials. Over the past fifty years, social scientists have conducted numerous studies examining individuals’ attitudes towards rape based on various factors. By looking at rape trial jury selection within the framework of these social psychology studies, attorneys can understand how different juror characteristics like gender, education, and cultural cognition might affect trial outcomes in potentially unexpected ways. Attorneys will then be able to develop supplemental juror questionnaires for voir dire designed to determine favorable jurors and to choose or challenge jurors in a manner that best serves the interests of their clients.

The purpose of this essay is to apply these psychology findings to acquaintance rape trials so that attorneys can rely on methodical procedures when selecting jurors. I focus on acquaintance rape trials, because juror psychology tends to have the greatest impact on these types of cases. From here on, “rape” will always refer to acquaintance rape. First, I will introduce commonly held views of acquaintance rape, or “rape myths.” These myths affect the decisions of an overwhelming majority of jurors, so they need to be properly identified and understood before their effects can be analyzed. Then, I will discuss various correlations that psychology has found between characteristics such as education, cultural dispositions, etc. and that individual’s view of acquaintance rape. Lastly, I will utilize these studies to evaluate jury selection so that attorneys can more accurately assess jurors’ beliefs and how they will vote during the trial. Within this section, I will also recommend certain questions and statements that attorneys can include during voir dire. Taken together, this should provide a framework for attorneys trying rape cases.

**Acquaintance Rape Myths: Recipes for Acquittal**

For the purposes of this paper, I will present common rape myths as stated in Stout and McPhail’s *Challenging Sexism & Violence Against Women*.[[14]](#footnote-14) Since research has indicated that jurors in acquaintance rape trials often decide based on their personal opinions rather than on the facts of the case, I have selected myths that focus more on characteristics of the jurors rather than on characteristics of the case.[[15]](#footnote-15) These myths blame women for their own victimization, so those who agree with them tend to reach verdicts of acquittal.

1. Women routinely lie about rape for their purposes.
2. Only bad women are raped.
3. You can’t rape an unwilling woman.
4. Women who are raped must have provoked the rape by leading men on or dressing provocatively.
5. Most women secretly desire rape and enjoy rape.

These common myths all revolve around negative perceptions of the female rape victim. Since many of these myths are unfounded, ideally, most jurors would reject them. However, a large number of individuals still believe them, and they have a substantial effect on a jury’s final decision, especially when many jurisdictions require unanimous juries for conviction. Since judges usually do not harbor these beliefs, one might argue that the problem could be avoided by letting judges, instead of juries, decide. While this would likely lead to more convictions, constitutionally, all accused criminals have a right to a trial by jury. Our conception and system of justice demands that ordinary people decide the fate of our accused criminals, because they bring in life experiences and common sense that reflect the opinions of the general public and protect against government oppression. Unfortunately, in many acquaintance rape cases, as Peter Tiersma writes, “one person’s common sense is another person’s patriarchal narrative.”[[16]](#footnote-16) In “Reflections on a Rape Trial,” psychology professor Judy Shepherd[[17]](#footnote-17) confirms this prevalence of patriarchal rape myths among juries. Shepherd illustrates how rape myth acceptance impacted jury deliberations and the ultimate verdict of acquittal.[[18]](#footnote-18) Because these myths still color our current perceptions of rape, attorneys need to be able to determine what kinds of individuals hold these views.

**Who believes what? Social Psychology and Rape: How Different Characteristics Influence an Individual’s View of Acquaintance Rape**

Extensive research has been done to determine what characteristics correlate with rape myth acceptance. In the following section, I will examine and summarize the existing literature.

Gender

Offhand, most people would probably believe that a juror’s gender affects his or her decision in a rape trial. Since most rape defendants are male and most victims are female, it seems to follow that more men would lean towards acquittal, while more women would lean towards conviction. Many early studies supported this belief, claiming “men are more tolerant of rape and have less empathy towards victims.”[[19]](#footnote-19) However, more recent psychological studies have contradicted this assertion. Cohn, Dupuis, and Brown reject the hypothesis that men hold the victim more responsible than women.[[20]](#footnote-20) Kahan finds that gender matters only in conjunction with culture, concluding that gender alone does not significantly influence a juror’s decision.[[21]](#footnote-21) In practice, current attorneys have supported the claims of the newer studies. Through his experiences trying rape cases, Assistant Commonwealth’s Attorney Zug has found that *women* 35 and older tend to be the toughest on victims.[[22]](#footnote-22)

Education

Many psychology studies have noted a connection between an individual’s level of educational attainment and his or her acceptance of rape myths. A study of 600 adults in Minnesota conducted by Martha Burt discovered that rape myth acceptance varies inversely with the person’s education level.[[23]](#footnote-23) Research by Williams that found “education to be the most powerful predictor of attitudes toward rape” supports Burt’s claim.[[24]](#footnote-24) Intuitively, these results make sense, since many schools emphasize not only the seriousness of rape, but also how rape is rape, regardless of the circumstances. Educated individuals have probably also learned more about the historically unfair treatment of women, information that helps individuals view the victim in a more favorable light.[[25]](#footnote-25)

Sexism

Broadly speaking, I will define sexism as “behavior, conditions, or attitudes that foster stereotypes of social roles based on sex.”[[26]](#footnote-26) For the purposes of this paper, I concentrate on sexism that stereotypes women. Before making claims about how sexism affects a juror’s perception of rape victims, I would like to break sexism into two, more narrow, types: benevolent and hostile sexism.

Benevolent sexism positively views females as people that men should protect and adore. These sexists stereotype women as warmer, more nurturing, and purer than males.[[27]](#footnote-27) Those who score high on the benevolent sexism scale created by Glick and Fiske tend to attribute more responsibility to the victim.[[28]](#footnote-28) Since they characterize women as the purer antithesis to men, they particularly dislike women who appear to break from the traditional ideal of a chaste woman. If the victim engages in “unwomanly activities,” such as heavy drinking or dressing provocatively, benevolent sexists blame the victim.

Hostile sexists, on the other hand, believe that all women are attempting to control men.[[29]](#footnote-29) Individuals who score high on Glick and Fiske’s hostile sexism scale also tend to fault the rape victim, because they are more likely to view rape victims as temptresses who lie about rape in order to control men.[[30]](#footnote-30) While benevolent sexists agree more with rape myths two and four, hostile sexists would agree more strongly with myths one, two, and five. Although the two types of sexism have different reasons for doing so, both reinforce common rape myths.

Cultural Cognition

Cultural cognition contends that people’s beliefs reflect and reinforce their cultural worldviews.[[31]](#footnote-31) Kahan splits people into two camps: hierarchal and egalitarian. Hierarchical individuals prescribe highly differentiated and stratified gender roles to society.[[32]](#footnote-32) Similar to benevolent sexists, they believe that although men can be sexually promiscuous, women should be chaste and faithful. Consequently, those who deviate from this norm should be viewed with contempt, in spite of the facts of the case. Juries made up of hierarchical men and women both favor acquittal, because they “reason that a reputation of ‘loose moral character’ probably has a basis in fact and that a girl with such a character is more likely than not to consent to intercourse…”[[33]](#footnote-33) Perhaps surprisingly, hierarchical women favor acquittal even more than men, which offers further support for the irrelevance of gender as a significant factor on its own. These women stigmatize rape complainants whose actions seem to conflict with hierarchical gender norms. Kahan’s results suggest that older hierarchical women are the most likely to vote for an acquittal.[[34]](#footnote-34)

In contrast, egalitarian individuals judge women and men similarly, so they view “female sexuality as a legitimate expression of individual autonomy.”[[35]](#footnote-35) As a result, they tend to form the most anti-defendant fact perceptions and outcome judgments in acquaintance rape trials.[[36]](#footnote-36) Kahan further found that younger egalitarians were least likely to blame the victim.[[37]](#footnote-37)

**Winning the Jury 101: Applying the Psychology to Jury Selection in Rape Trials**

In the previous section, I presented various psychology findings that demonstrate how certain characteristics affect an individual’s acceptance or rejection of rape myths. With an understanding of what influences rape myth acceptance, attorneys can capitalize on voir dire by dispelling rape myths and asking questions to identify ideal jurors. Asking questions such as “How would you vote in this case?” or “Are you sexist?” would likely be unhelpful and suffer from response bias, so attorneys could instead devise more indirect questions meant to elicit responses that would help them understand how the potential juror would vote. Normally, during voir dire, attorneys ask the jury pool questions in an open group setting. However, due to the sensitive nature of rape trials and to ensure that jurors are comfortable enough to answer the questions honestly, I recommend that attorneys create supplemental juror questionnaires that they can distribute to each potential juror. On these questionnaires, jurors can respond to short easy questions or statements in private. The substance of these questionnaires should be modeled on the questions that participants in the psychology studies examined above had to answer. That way, juror responses could quickly and easily be compared to results of the studies.

I will go through each factor I described earlier and, using the research, decide what types of individuals prosecutors and defense attorneys should favor. Then, I will offer suggestions for possible questions or statements that attorneys can utilize during voir dire to assess the prevalence of these favorable qualities in a juror.

Gender

The results of the studies suggest that attorneys should not be too concerned about a juror’s gender. In fact, though somewhat counter-intuitive, both sides should learn to not base their selections on gender alone. In practice, most attorneys have enough experience to come to this conclusion. For example, Assistant Commonwealth’s Attorney Zug notes “I went a long time trying to pack cases with women [jurors] – until I started talking to them.”[[38]](#footnote-38) However, statements such as this attest to the counter-intuitive nature of social psychology’s findings. Therefore, the point must still be emphasized, especially for newer attorneys. Although the questionnaire ought to ask for the juror’s gender, the lawyer should not use gender by itself to draw extensive conclusions about how that juror will vote.

Education

The studies clearly indicate that prosecuting attorneys should strive to have as many well-educated people on the jury as possible while defense attorneys should try to eliminate as many well-educated jurors as possible. For the most part, many lawyers already understand this. For instance, in the trial analyzed by Shepherd, the defense dismissed eight individuals with jobs requiring college degrees.[[39]](#footnote-39) Even individuals without legal training understand the importance of educational attainment. One trial observer remarked, “They sure don’t want any smart women on that jury, do they?”[[40]](#footnote-40) To ascertain a juror’s level of educational attainment during voir dire will not be very difficult. Each questionnaire could have a section, similar to job applications, in which the juror lists any schooling he or she has received. The juror should also be asked to list his or her occupation, because this would provide even more insight into how much education the juror has received. Moreover, attorneys should discuss the historical mistreatment of women with jurors to prime them to be more receptive to the victim’s testimony.

Sexism

Since sexism, both benevolent and hostile, correlates positively with rape myth acceptance, prosecutors should choose jurors that score lower on the ambivalent sexism inventory (ASI) developed by Glick and Fiske. The inventory these two research psychologists created consists of 140 statements that participants respond to on a 0 (strongly disagree) to 5 (strongly agree) scale.[[41]](#footnote-41) Asking jurors to respond to 140 statements in addition to the rest of the questionnaire would be impractical, but the questionnaire should include statements used and analyzed in the Glick and Fiske study.

To determine whether a juror holds hostile sexist attitudes, jurors could be asked to rate the following statements on a 0 to 5 scale.

1. Women exaggerate problems at work.
2. Women are too easily offended.
3. Most women interpret innocent remarks as sexist.
4. Feminists are not seeking more power than men.
5. Few women tease men sexually.
6. Feminists are making reasonable demands.

To determine whether a juror holds benevolent sexist attitudes, jurors could be asked to rate the following statements on a 0 to 5 scale.

1. A good woman should be set on a pedestal.
2. Women should be cherished and protected by men.
3. Men should sacrifice to provide for women.
4. In a disaster, women need not be rescued first. [[42]](#footnote-42)

By pulling statements directly from Glick and Fiske’s ASI, attorneys can draw conclusions consistent with and easy to compare to those drawn by research psychologists. I chose a small sample of statements, but looking at the ones I selected, we can see how attorneys could use responses to pick jurors. Jurors who more strongly agree with statements one through three and seven through nine will likely attribute more blame to the victim, while those who more strongly agree with statements four, five, six, and ten will likely side with the victim.

Cultural Cognition

Cultural cognition research suggests that prosecutors find egalitarian jurors and defense attorneys find hierarchical jurors. Categorizing individuals into hierarchical and egalitarian depends on many underlying factors. For instance, hierarchical participants tended to be political conservatives that lived in the south. They often agreed that “no” does not necessarily mean “no,” that “unwomanly” behavior communicates sexual interest, that women lead men on, and that real rape victims would work as hard as possible to fight off their attacker.[[43]](#footnote-43) Unfortunately, the exact statements that Kahan’s study participants responded to cannot be written verbatim into the supplemental juror questionnaire.[[44]](#footnote-44) However, attorneys can include statements adapted from the study. Jurors could be asked to respond again on a 0 (strongly disagree) to 5 (strongly agree) scale or asked a series of yes or no questions.

1. If a woman dresses provocatively, that’s a sign that she is open to have intercourse.
2. If a woman says “yes” to intercourse with her body language but says “no” verbally, a man should listen to her body language.
3. Do you think it is unwomanly for a woman to dress provocatively?
4. Do you think it is unwomanly for a woman to have more than a few drinks?
5. Do you believe that a real rape victim fights off her attacker with all her strength?

Jurors who strongly agree with the first two statements or answer yes to the last three can be considered more hierarchical, and prosecutors should consider using their challenges on these jurors.

Summary

These are just a few examples of statements and questions that attorneys can include to assess a juror’s cognitive biases, and attorneys can certainly deviate and add to them, as necessary. After analyzing responses across these different characteristics, prosecutors can more easily challenge jurors who support traditional rape myths, and defense attorneys can challenge those who reject these myths.

**Conclusion: Bringing Science and the Courts Together**

While certainly not foolproof, I believe that this knowledge base will give all attorneys – prosecution or defense, experienced or fresh – an advantage in rape trials. Since the outcomes of these trials depend so heavily on perceptions of jurors, winning jury selection could easily mean winning the trial. Voir dire offers a very special period to apply social psychology research, because attorneys have time to interact with and analyze the mindset of the jurors. A supplemental juror questionnaire, while simple, can greatly impact the outcome of rape trials, since attorneys can identify who agrees with the common rape myths that often lead to votes of acquittal. Historically, the jury has always been a friend of the defendant in rape cases, so I hope that prosecuting attorneys, especially, will benefit from these studies. A better understanding of social psychology and successful jury selections could increase conviction rates in acquaintance rape trials. This, in turn, may encourage larger numbers of acquaintance rape victims to report their cases. Although society does not want more innocent men going to jail, women certainly have a right to feel comfortable enough to report any and all cases of sexual assault. Hopefully, this research will lose its importance over time as our culture changes and more and more individuals reject existing rape myths. Until then, however, an attorney’s understanding and application of juror social psychology findings will remain a critical component of acquaintance rape trials.

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*of Virginia School of Law*, February 2001. http://www.law.virginia.edu/html/news/.

*This paper represents my own work in accordance with University regulations.*

/s/Lawrence Liu

1. For the purposes of this paper, rape will be defined in terms of a man’s actions towards a woman, because this situation occurs most frequently. I acknowledge that the definition of rape can and should extend to include more scenarios, and I hope my analysis of this specific situation here can be modified and applied more generally to broader studies in the future. [↑](#footnote-ref-1)
2. Rape, Abuse, and Incest National Network, RAINN, http://www.rainn.org/statistics. [↑](#footnote-ref-2)
3. Ibid. [↑](#footnote-ref-3)
4. Susan Ehrlich, “Normative Discourses and Representations of Coerced Sex.” In *The Langauge of Sexual Crime*, ed. Janet Cotteril (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2007), 128. [↑](#footnote-ref-4)
5. Susan Brownmiller, *Against Our Will: Men, Women and Rape* (New York: Simon and Schuster, 1975), 369. [↑](#footnote-ref-5)
6. Mary M. Wood, “City Attorney Shares Reality of Prosecuting Sexual Assault Cases, *University of Virginia School of Law,* February 2001. http://www.law.virginia.edu/html/news/. [↑](#footnote-ref-6)
7. According to Encyclopedia Britannica, rape shield laws limit the ability of defense attorneys to introduce the victim’s sexual history as evidence during a rape trial. [↑](#footnote-ref-7)
8. Judy Shepherd, “Reflections on a Rape Trial: The Role of Rape Myths and Jury Selection in the Outcome of a Trial,” *Affilia* 17, (2002): 70. [↑](#footnote-ref-8)
9. Wood, “City Attorney,” *University of Virginia School of Law.* [↑](#footnote-ref-9)
10. Colleen Ward, *Attitudes toward rape: Feminist and social psychological perspectives* (Thousand Oaks: Sage, 1995), quoted in Shepherd, Reflections, 91. [↑](#footnote-ref-10)
11. Dan M. Kahan, “Culture, Cognition, and Consent: Who Perceives What, and Why, in ‘Acquaintance Rape’ Cases” *University of Pennsylvania Law Review* 158, no. 729 (2010): 69. [↑](#footnote-ref-11)
12. Brownmiller, *Against Our Will,* 379. [↑](#footnote-ref-12)
13. Kahan, Culture, Cognition, and Consent, 61. [↑](#footnote-ref-13)
14. Karen D. Stout and Beverly McPhail, *Confronting Sexism and Violence Against Women: A Challenge for Social Work* (Boston: Addison Wesley Longman, Inc, 1998), 261-262. [↑](#footnote-ref-14)
15. See Footnotes 10 and 11. [↑](#footnote-ref-15)
16. Peter M. Tiersma, “The Language of Consent in Rape Law,” in *The Language of Sexual Consent,* ed. Janet Cotterill (New York: Palgrave Macmillan), 100. [↑](#footnote-ref-16)
17. In 1999, Judy Shepherd sat on a rape trial jury. Being a research psychologist, she reported her findings and analyzed how the jury deliberations conformed to common rape myths. [↑](#footnote-ref-17)
18. Shepherd, Reflections, 70. [↑](#footnote-ref-18)
19. Shepherd, Reflections, 71. [↑](#footnote-ref-19)
20. Ellen S. Cohn, Erin C. Dupuis, and Tiffany M. Brown, “In the Eye of the Beholder: Do Behavior and Character Affect Victim and Perpetrator Responsibility for Acquaintance Rape?,” *Journal of Applied Social Psychology* 39, no. 7 (2009): 1523. [↑](#footnote-ref-20)
21. Kahan, Culture, Cognition, and Cognition, 5. [↑](#footnote-ref-21)
22. Wood, “City Attorney,” *University of Virginia School of Law.* [↑](#footnote-ref-22)
23. Ward, Attitudes, quoted in Shepherd, Reflections, 72. [↑](#footnote-ref-23)
24. Shepherd, Reflections, 72. [↑](#footnote-ref-24)
25. J.D. Johnson and I. Russ, “Effects of salience of consciousness-raising information in perceptions of acquaintance versus stranger rape,” *Journal of Applied Social Psychology,* 19 (1989), 1182-1997. [↑](#footnote-ref-25)
26. This is the definition of sexism found in the Merriam-Webster Dictionary. [↑](#footnote-ref-26)
27. Peter Glick and Susan T. Fiske, “The Ambivalent Sexism Inventory: Differentiating Hostile and Benevolent Sexism,” *Journal of Personality and Social Psychology* 70, no. 3 (1996): 491. [↑](#footnote-ref-27)
28. Cohn, In the Eye of the Beholder, 1517. [↑](#footnote-ref-28)
29. Ibid. [↑](#footnote-ref-29)
30. Ibid. [↑](#footnote-ref-30)
31. Kahan, Culture, Cognition, and Consent, 25. [↑](#footnote-ref-31)
32. Ibid., 26. [↑](#footnote-ref-32)
33. Bronwmiller, *Against Our Will,* 371. [↑](#footnote-ref-33)
34. Kahan, Culture, Cognition, and Consent, 43. [↑](#footnote-ref-34)
35. Ibid., 26. [↑](#footnote-ref-35)
36. Ibid., 31. [↑](#footnote-ref-36)
37. Ibid., 43. [↑](#footnote-ref-37)
38. Wood, “City Attorney,” *University of Virginia of School of Law*. [↑](#footnote-ref-38)
39. Shepherd, Reflections, 88. [↑](#footnote-ref-39)
40. Ibid., 89. [↑](#footnote-ref-40)
41. Glick, Ambivalent Sexism Inventory, 496. [↑](#footnote-ref-41)
42. Glick, Ambivalent Sexism Inventory, 500. These statements were taken verbatim from Glick and Fiske. [↑](#footnote-ref-42)
43. Kahan, Culture, Cognition, and Consent, 28, 32. [↑](#footnote-ref-43)
44. Ibid., 74. The statements participants responded to in Kahan’s article are all very specific, since they were all based on a vignette constructed by Kahan. Thus, they cannot be used word for word in questionnaires. [↑](#footnote-ref-44)