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Objectification and System Justification Impact Rape Avoidance Behaviors

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Abstract There is little recent research on women's adoption of rape avoidance behaviors, and there has been no known investigation into how adoption of these behaviors relates to various system justification beliefs or experiences of sexual objectification. We surveyed 294 U.S. women aged 18 to 40 to assess experiences of objectification, belief in a just world, gender-specific system justification, benevolent sexism, rape myth acceptance, and engagement in rape avoidance behaviors. Belief in a just world, gender-specific system justification, and benevolent sexism were conceptualized and analyzed as a "system justification" latent factor due to similarities between constructs regarding how they influence worldview, particularly regarding fairness and relations between dominant and subordinate groups. Our hypothesized model had good fit to the data and illustrated that experiencing objectification was related to increased rape myth acceptance and system justification, which, in turn, were related to implementation of rape avoidance behaviors. Further, system justification was significantly positively related to rape myth acceptance. Results show the continued importance of understanding the role of objectification in the endorsement of rape myths and assessments of societal fairness, as well as how women's attitudes about society may ultimately affect their assessment of rape myths and their personal behavior. This research provides new information and groundwork for researchers developing rape education programming in addition to those interested in the complex relationship between women's experiences and behavioral outcomes.

Keywords Sexual objectification · System justification · Belief in a just world · Benevolent sexism · Rape myth acceptance

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Rape is defined as nonconsensual vaginal, anal, or oral penetration by a body part or object, and sexual assault is an umbrella term that may refer to rape, attempted rape, nonconsensual touching, and verbal threats (Federal Bureau of Investigations 2013; Planty et al. 2013). Approximately 95 % of sexual violence experienced by U.S. women is perpetrated by (primarily White) men, most of whom are known to the survivor (Fisher et al. 2000; Planty et al. 2013). During childhood, women often learn to be cautious around strangers (giving rise to the well-known colloquialism "stranger danger"; Scott 2003), a mentality that may bleed into women's worldview as they become aware of sexual violence (Scott 2003). Further, U.S. cultural beliefs surrounding sexual assault often denote the perpetrator as a violent, Black stranger (Fonow et al. 1992; Ullman 2010), and rape myths depict male sexual aggression as both natural and provoked by women (Burt 1980; Lonsway and Fitzgerald 1995).

From a conceptual perspective, many theorists have postulated that women, regardless of previous history of sexual assault, are indeed aware and fearful of potential victimization (Beneke 1982; Brownmiller 1975; Griffin 1979; O'Donovan et al. 2007). Public spaces seemingly belong to men, and as a result, women do not feel safe on the streets despite most assaults being perpetrated by someone known to the survivor (Paul 2011; Pollitt 1985). This viewpoint is in line with other theoretical suggestions that fear of rape forces women to change their behavior to avoid attack (Beneke 1982; Brownmiller 1975; Griffin 1979). In a

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review of crime fear literature, DuBow et al. (1979) discussed behavioral reactions to crime, which range from reducing exposure to a situation in which crime could occur to taking actions in the public sphere, such as possessing a weapon (Riger and Gordon 1981; Riger et al. 1982).

The fear of rape is believed to restrict women's, particularly younger women's, movements and prevent them from living their lives as freely as their male counterparts, which ultimately affects the quality of their lives (Brownmiller 1975; Valentine 1992; Websdale 1999). Because it has been documented that public space is considered male-dominated (particularly at night; Pollitt 1985; Valentine 1989), women may see the public space as intrinsically unsafe and either avoid it or employ behavioral tactics to make themselves feel less at risk (Warr 1985). However, it is important to consider the relationship between women's behavior and the ways in which their safety and what role they can and should play in their own safety are presented to them.

How women attempt to preserve their own safety may be related to the culturally enforced misconceptions they hold regarding rape and rape survivors, referred to as rape myths. Rape myths are able to play this role in women's perceived safety due to the pervasiveness of the underlying messages. These widely held beliefs reinforce men's sexual aggression against women and hostile attitudes toward survivors of assault, shifting the blame from assailant to survivor (Burt 1980; Eyssel and Bohner 2011; Lonsway and Fitzgerald 1995). Lonsway and Fitzgerald (1995) proposed that women who endorse rape myths do so to dismiss personal vulnerability, making them feel safer. Thus, if women embrace rape myths, they may refrain from engaging in rape avoidance tactics, such as not traveling alone. Because, in their minds, they are already behaving "correctly," they are, therefore, not potential targets for assault. Those who endorse rape myths may feel inviolable because they place blame on survivors of assault, and changing their own behavior to avoid assault would be an admission of risk.

Other self-protective mindsets may also make women feel safer and decrease their adoption of rape avoidance behaviors. System justification theory posits that oppressed groups not only associate with and possibly defend their subjugator but also see the system they exist within as fair, despite the fact that this approach is harmful to them (Jost and Banaji 1994; Jost et al. 2004; 2010). Current dominant institutions are supported when oppressed groups feel they have little control or that the system is inescapable, even during extreme conditions (Jost 2001; Kay and Friesen 2011). Although it seems counterintuitive to remain loyal to a system that is harmful, accepting the status quo can offer security when compared to an unfamiliar system (even though it may be more fair; Jost and Hunyady 2005). Indeed, one study provided quantitative support that situation-specific anxiety can lead to greater endorsement of system-justifying beliefs, suggesting that when one is anxious, justifying the system can help to relieve

that anxiety (Hennes et al. 2012). Thus, justifying beliefs may be especially apparent in anxiety-provoking situations and help to make women less anxious about situations they cannot control. If women themselves justify the system and believe there is no unfair disparity between men and women, they may see sexual assault as less of a threat because their worldview does not take into account the gender discrepancy in sexual violence. Sexual assault within a just world is, therefore, the fault of the subordinate group (women) and their inability to behave correctly around the dominant group (men). For the purpose of the present study, system justification can be understood as an overarching construct, which is operationalized in different yet interrelated ways.

The belief in a just world (BJW) is a system-justifying ideology that contends people often deserve what happens to them (Lerner 1980). The BJW can be measured globally (good things happen to good people) or personally (good things happen to me when I am good), suggesting that one can hold this bias for themselves but also extend it onto others' experiences. This belief structure serves a self-protective function because to believe otherwise is to consciously address that we are all susceptible to victimization (Lerner 1997) and, thus, acts as a type of system justifier by defending the status quo. Endorsement of BJW has been linked, in women, to negative attitudes toward rape survivors (Correia et al. 2007; De Judicibus and McCabe 2001; Sakallı-Uğurlu et al. 2007). Within the context of sexual assault, the theory of BJW can be understood to suggest that women endorse rape myths to protect themselves from attending to their own chance of assault. The connection between endorsement of rape myths and BJW has been suggested theoretically (Carmody and Washington 2001) and quantitatively established in prior research (Hayes et al. 2013; Strömwall et al. 2013).

BJW has also been linked to decreased feeling of discrimination among women who experience gender-based prejudice on an individual level (Hafer and Choma 2009), and gender may serve as a channel through which people categorize their justifying beliefs. In fact, Jost and Kay (2005) specifically identified gender-specific system justification as a construct which revolves around justification of continued gender inequality. Gender-specific system justification has been linked to endorsement of rape myths (Chapleau and Oswald 2014). This is not, however, the only gender-related system-justifying construct. Benevolent sexism can also be understood within the system justification framework. Benevolent sexism refers to the way women are viewed as objects to be adored and protected by men as long as they do not step outside their traditional gender roles (Glick et al. 1997; Glick and Fiske 1996, 2001). It acts as a system-justifying mindset by presenting the system as fair because men and women have their own roles (Connelly and Heesacker 2012; Jost and Kay 2005), and previous research has connected benevolent sexism to general and gender-

specific system justification (Becker and Wright 2011; Connelly and Heesacker 2012; Hammond and Sibley 2011). Endorsing benevolent sexism may serve a protective function: as long as women are "good," chivalry allows for better personal treatment, and women may interpret this as protection from crime (Glick et al. 2000).

In the context of gender, system justification involves women defending the current treatment of women as fair, even at their own detriment (Jost and Banaji 1994; Jost et al. 2004; Jost et al. 2010). Building upon this logic, it is likely that women who believe in a just world would endorse the notion that if a woman behaves "badly," bad things will happen to her (Lerner 1980); again, this willingness to blame the survivor reflects contentment within a sexist system so long as they themselves are "good." Further, endorsing benevolent sexism may be a way of accepting the system (Connelly and Heesacker 2012) because it may be misguidedly viewed as beneficial to women (Glick et al. 2000). Due to the overlap of these constructs (gender-specific system justification, belief in a just world, and benevolent sexism) and their similarities in how they affect women's worldview, they can be conceptually understood as subcomponents of the overarching construct of system justification.

Women's attitudes may also be impacted by the unique contradiction that they are expected to embrace, that is, of appearing sexy but not behaving sexually, in a society of sexual objectification. Fredrickson and Roberts (1997) put forth objectification theory, which states that women are often detached from their bodies because they are frequently perceived as objects to be looked at and judged. Whereas children, in general, are raised to fear strangers, young girls receive additional cues to accept, expect, and even enjoy sexualization (American Psychological Association [APA], 2007), even from strangers. Fredrickson and Roberts (1997) noted that victim-blaming culture uses women's bodies to excuse rapists, and others assert that rapists interpret women as threatening if they appear attractive (Beneke 1982).

A critical part of objectification theory has remained underdeveloped: because women are expected to submissively serve as sexual objects, this attention may make them feel like targets. Fredrickson and Roberts (1997) suggested that this targeting might provoke anxiety. Unfortunately, when women are then assaulted, according to cultural rape-related beliefs, they "asked for it" with their clothing or actions (Burt 1980; Lonsway and Fitzgerald 1995). Living within a culture of objectification, women may feel required to appear attractive but must not be sexually assaulted, lest it occur when they are doing something unacceptable (yet expected) like wearing revealing clothing, partying, or talking to men.

Thus, sexual objectification may influence women's embrace of rape myths and other system-justifying beliefs. When women are sexually objectified, it is possible that their first response is to feel exposed or defenseless. To combat this negative and troubling concept, they may subconsciously contemplate societal myths regarding rape and determine whether they are "obvious" targets of victimization. To ease their anxiety and make them feel safe, they may then use these myths to assure themselves that they do not fit the role of victim, possibly by identifying a feature that does not fit victim-blaming rhetoric (e.g., not drinking). Women may also need to assure themselves that there is harmony in the system, and that if they are "good," and the system is just, they are not in danger.

Although research exists on women's fear of sexual assault and use of rape avoidance tactics, much of it is outdated. There is also no known research focused on examining the relationships among objectification, system justification, and rape avoidance behavior. Having a greater understanding of sexual objectification and how it relates to beliefs and behaviors can inform the creation of rape prevention policy and programs, as well as offer some insight into many women's lived experiences. As common as everyday sexual objectification is (Capodilupo et al. 2010; Fredrickson and Roberts 1997; Nadal 2010), it is critical that we examine and develop theories regarding possible outcomes of these microaggressions. Given that, we have undertaken an exploration of these constructs through structural equation modeling. With this work, we hope to find support for past empirical and theoretical work as well as provide evidence for new relationships between constructs and behaviors.

Guided by previous theoretical and quantitative work, we hypothesized that (a) due to thematic commonalities and prior research relating some concepts (Connelly and Heesacker 2012; Hennes et al. 2012; Jost and Kay 2005), gender-specific system justification, belief in a just world, and benevolent sexism could be established quantitatively as a "justifying beliefs" latent variable (Hypothesis 1). Rape myths also may function similarly to beliefs in a just world in that both argue that when women are "bad" (e.g., they drink too much, flirt too much, or wear too little), bad things will happen to them. However, because rape myths focus so specifically on the context of sexual assault (unlike global just world beliefs), rape myths fall outside the norm of our justifying beliefs latent factor. As such, we have chosen to consider rape myths as a distinct construct separate from the system-justifying constructs of gender-specific system justification, beliefs in a just world, and benevolent sexism that are not specifically connected to sexual assault. Thus all subsequent hypotheses involve this latent system justification variable rather than the individual components that contribute to it.

In addressing our proposed model, we hypothesized that (b) experiences of objectification would be positively related to rape myth acceptance as a way for women to assure themselves that, despite experiencing frequent objectification, they are behaving "correctly" and are thus unlikely to be assaulted (Hypothesis 2). We also hypothesized that (c) we would find a positive relationship between objectification and our system

justification latent variable because these system-justifying beliefs can act as an anxiety-reducing tactic (Hypothesis 3; Hennes et al. 2012). Due to prior work linking system justification with rape myth acceptance and negative attitudes toward survivors of rape (Abrams et al. 2003; Correia et al. 2007; De Judicibus and McCabe 2001; Hayes et al. 2013; Sakallı-Uğurlu et al. 2007; Strömwall et al. 2013), we hypothesized that (d) our system justification latent variable would be positively related to rape myth acceptance (Hypothesis 4). We hypothesized that (e) rape myth acceptance (Hypothesis 5a) and (f) the system justification latent variable (Hypothesis 5b), as ways of mentally protecting women from believing they could be assaulted, would be negatively related to rape avoidance behavior.

Method

Participants

We recruited 294 female participants between the ages of 18 and 40 who were either United States citizens or living in the United States at the time they completed our online survey. On average, participants were 28 years old (SD = 5.24). The majority of participants self-identified as White/Caucasian (190, 64.6 %), followed by Asian/Pacific Islander (36, 12.2 %), American Indian (30, 10.2 %), African American/Black (18, 6.1 %), Latina (10, 3.4 %), "other" (5, 1.7 %), and multiracial (3, 1 %), while 0.7 % did not disclose their ethnicity. Most women also self-identified as heterosexual/straight (234, 79.6 %), followed by bisexual (39, 13.3 %), homosexual/gay/lesbian (15, 5.1 %), and "other" (5, 1.7 %); 0.3 % of participants declined to respond. Furthermore, a majority of participants self-identified as middle class (137, 46.6 %). The remainder of participants identified as working class (105, 35.7 %), upper-middle class (33, 11.2 %), living in poverty (13, 4.4 %), or wealthy (4, 1.4 %), while 0.7 % chose not to disclose their socioeconomic status. The most common educational status reported was having received a college education (93, 32 %). Participants also reported having some college or an Associate's degree (91, 31 %), a Master's level degree (46, 16 %), some graduate school (29, 10 %), or a high school degree (30, 10 %). The remaining 1 % of participants reported having either a doctoral degree, some high school education, or declined to answer this question.

Procedure and Measures

Participants were recruited using Amazon Mechanical Turk (MTurk). MTurk is a website that offers a paid participant pool that is more economically and ethnically diverse than average samples (Casler et al. 2013). Researchers have argued that scale reliability and results from MTurk samples are comparable to data obtained from traditional online recruitment methods (Buhrmester et al. 2011; Casler et al. 2013; Goodman et al. 2013). On MTurk, our study was advertised as an investigation of women's feelings about their safety. The posted survey link, hosted through Surveygizmo.com, first directed participants to an online informed consent. After they indicated consent, they completed the anonymous survey. The debriefing statement at the end of the survey included a code, which participants entered on MTurk in order to receive $.25 as compensation for their participation. The study was reviewed and approved by a university IRB.

The order of measures was as follows: gender-specific system justification, belief in a just world, rape myth attitudes, experiences of sexual objectification, benevolent sexism, and rape avoidance behaviors. A latent variable encompassing four system-justifying beliefs (benevolent sexism, gender-specific system justification, and two belief in a just world subscales) was part of our hypothesized model. Pilot data for the study indicated the questionnaire took approximately 15 min to complete. We removed participants who did not complete the questionnaire or who completed it in less than 10 min. The average time spent on the survey was 20.46 min (SD = 9.61).

Experiences of Objectification

Participants' experiences of sexual objectification were evaluated using the Interpersonal Sexual Objectification Scale (Kozee et al. 2007). Participants indicated their agreement with the statements on a 5-point scale ranging from 1 (*never*) to 5 (*almost always*; e.g., "How often have you felt that someone was staring at your body?"). The Cronbach's alpha for the total score was .92 in the original study and .94 in the current study.

Benevolent Sexism

The six-item benevolent sexism subscale of the short form of the Ambivalent Sexism Inventory was used to assess participants' endorsement of benevolent sexism toward women (Glick and Whitehead 2010). The items were scored on a 6-point scale ranging from 0 (*disagree strongly*) to 5 (*agree strongly;* e.g., "Women should be cherished and protected by men"). Higher scores on this measure indicated greater endorsement of benevolent sexism. The internal consistency reliability for the benevolent sexism subscale was .77 in the original investigation. In the current study, Cronbach's alpha was .88.

Gender-Specific System Justification

The Gender-Specific System Justification Scale evaluates participants' rationalization of the sexism that exists in society (Jost and Kay 2005). The 8-item measure was scored on a 9-

point scale ranging from 1 (*strongly disagree*) to 9 (*strongly agree*; e.g., "In general, relations between men and women are fair"). Higher scores for this scale indicated greater endorsement of gender-related system justification in current society. Cronbach's alpha for this scale was .65 in the original study and .81 in the present study.

Belief in a Just World

Dalbert's (1999) Belief in a Just World Scale was used to assess this belief structure because it measures the extent to which participants believe they live in a just world. Participants indicated their agreement with items on a 6-point scale ranging from 1 (*strongly disagree*) to 6 (*strongly agree*). The measure consists of two subscales that assess participants' belief about whether justice exists both personally (7 items; e.g., "I believe that I usually get what I deserve") and generally (6 items; e.g., "I am confident that justice always prevails over injustice"). Higher scores indicated stronger belief in a fair world. Internal consistency reliabilities for personal belief in a just world and general belief in a just world were .82 and .68, respectively, in the original investigation. For the present study, they were .88 and .87, respectively.

Rape Myth Acceptance

The 19-item short form of the Illinois Rape Myth Acceptance Scale (IRMA) was used to evaluate participants' endorsement of rape myths (Payne et al. 1999). Items were scored on a 7-point scale ranging from 1 (*not at all agree*) to 7 (*very much agree*; e.g., "If a woman doesn't physically fight back, you can't really say that it was rape."). Higher scores indicated greater endorsement of rape myths. Cronbach's alpha in the original study was .87, and it was .96 in the present study.

Rape Avoidance Behaviors

The Rape Avoidance Inventory was used to gauge participants' behavioral habits as they relate to assault evasion (McKibbin et al. 2009). The 69 items were measured on a 7-point scale ranging from 0 (*never*) to 6 (*always*; e.g., "Avoid drunk men," "Avoid staying out too late"). Higher summed scores indicate more avoidant behaviors. The authors (McKibbin et al. 2009) provided correlational analyses between the RAI and the sociosexual orientation inventory (Simpson and Gangestad 1991). The negative relationship between participants' behavior and attitudes regarding short-term sex and their engagement in rape avoidance behavior was provided as evidence of the validity of the RAI. The Cronbach's alpha in the original investigation was .94, and it was .97 for the current study.

Results

Descriptive statistics and correlations for the studies variables are reported in Table 1. In support of Hypothesis 1, the four constructs conceptualized as justifying beliefs (gender-specific system justification, personal and general belief in a just world, and benevolent sexism) were significantly positively correlated with moderate to large effect sizes. This pattern supports the previously suggested relationship among these four variables, and it justified the use of the variables as a latent factor in our tested model. In support of Hypothesis 2, experiences of sexual objectification were significantly positively correlated with rape myth acceptance. Our third hypothesis, regarding the significant positive relationship between objectification and the system justification constructs, was not reflected in our results at the bivariate correlational level. Our correlational data did support our fourth hypothesis that the system justification constructs would be significantly positively related to women's rape myth acceptance. Hypotheses 5a and 5b were largely not supported at the level of our bivariate correlational results. Women's endorsement of rape avoidance tactics was not significantly related to rape myth acceptance, gender-specific system justification, or personal belief in a just world. There were, however, positive correlations with benevolent sexism and general belief in a just world.

Although the bivariate relationships gave limited support for our proposed model of relationships among these constructs, we used path analysis with maximum likelihood estimation and bootstrapped standard errors using M-plus version 6.12 (Muthén and Muthén 1998-2010) to test our hypothesized model in full. The model had good fit to the data, $\chi^2(8) = 14.97$, $p = .06$, RMSEA = .06, CFI = .99, SRMR = .03 (see Fig. 1 for standardized path loadings). This model allowed us to explain 18.6 % of the variance in rape avoidant behavior. All modeled pathways were significant and positive, with the exception of the relationship between rape myth acceptance and rape avoidance tactics, which was significant and negative. This supports Hypotheses 1 through 5a. Hypothesis 5b was not supported, however; we had hypothesized a negative relationship between the system justification latent variable and rape avoidance behaviors whereas it was found to be significant and positive.

Discussion

The primary purpose of the present research was to provide further understanding of women's use of rape avoidance tactics. We wanted to explore the impact of women's experiences and beliefs on rape avoidance behaviors given the detrimental impact that women's engagement in these tactics may have on their quality of life and/or opportunities. Specifically, we

Table 1 Descriptive statistics and correlations among study variables

Variables	M (SD)	Actual range	Possible range	1	2	3	4	5	6
1. Sexual objectification	2.62 (.75)	1–4.73	1–5	–					
2. Benevolent sexism	2.64 (1.16)	0–5	0–5	.10	–				
3. Gender-specific system justification	5.29 (1.39)	1–9	1–9	−.04	.49***	–			
4. Personal belief in a just world	4.22 (.83)	1–6	1–6	.01	.38***	.57***	–		
5. General belief in a just world	3.82 (.99)	1–6	1–6	.07	.54***	.62***	.70***	–	
6. Rape myth acceptance	2.77 (1.42)	1–7	1–7	.39***	.48***	.32***	.27***	.45***	–
7. Rape avoidance behaviors	288.11 (65.24)	45–414	0–414	−.03	.22***	.04	.11	.12*	−.05

n = 160. Higher scores indicate higher endorsement of the construct measured

*p < .05. ** p < .01. *** p < .001

examined how experiences of sexual objectification, system-justifying beliefs, and rape myth acceptance related to engagement in rape avoidance behaviors.

Our hypothesis that experiences of sexual objectification would be positively related to rape myth acceptance (Hypothesis 2) was supported by our data. Because women learn that the sexualization of their bodies is normal in current U.S. society (APA, 2007), they may employ specific cognitive defenses when faced with experiences of objectification. The positive relationship between objectification and rape myth acceptance suggests a potential mechanism for feeling safer. Women who experience more frequent sexual objectification may endorse rape myths at higher rates because it allows them to feel less vulnerable (Lonsway and Fitzgerald 1994, 1995). Facing sexual objectification may increase women's fear of sexual assault by the person objectifying her, while the breadth of rape myths allows the blame of assault to be placed on women for a variety of reasons. As a result, a woman looking to deflect her fear could easily find a "victim characteristic" she does not represent (e.g., unlike the "victim", she was not flirting, she was not drinking, or she was not dressed provocatively). The more threatening a negative outcome, the more likely someone will be to maintain the belief the outcome can be controlled, and the more severe an outcome, the

more likely others are to blame the survivor to assure themselves "it won't happen to me" (Walster 1966). Rape myths are not, by any means, logically sound; even if women believe they are following an unwritten code of conduct that allows them to bypass sexual assault, sexual violence is not predictable. In the face of objectification, women who endorse rape myths may think that they can control the outcome and, therefore, feel less afraid, but this mindset ultimately "others," blames survivors of assault, and may prevent useful discourse regarding the source of fear.

Consistent with Hypothesis 3, experiences of objectification were also positively related to endorsement of system-justifying beliefs. Similar to the relationship between objectification and rape myth endorsement, women's system-justifying beliefs may be driven by the culture of objectification in which they live. System justification allows a person to believe that although circumstances may be negative for some, there are also benefits to their position in society. When objectification occurs, women may initially feel vulnerable but comfort themselves by turning the objectification into something positive to alleviate anxiety (Fatima and Suhail 2010; Otto et al. 2006). As previously discussed, rape myths may make many women feel safer when confronted with objectification, potentially due to underlying themes of system

Fig. 1 Final path model of the relationships among the variables of interest. Fit was good, $\chi^2(8) = 14.97$, $p = .06$, RMSEA = .06, CFI = .99, SRMR = .03. Standardized path coefficients are reported. *p < .05. **p < .01. ***p < .001
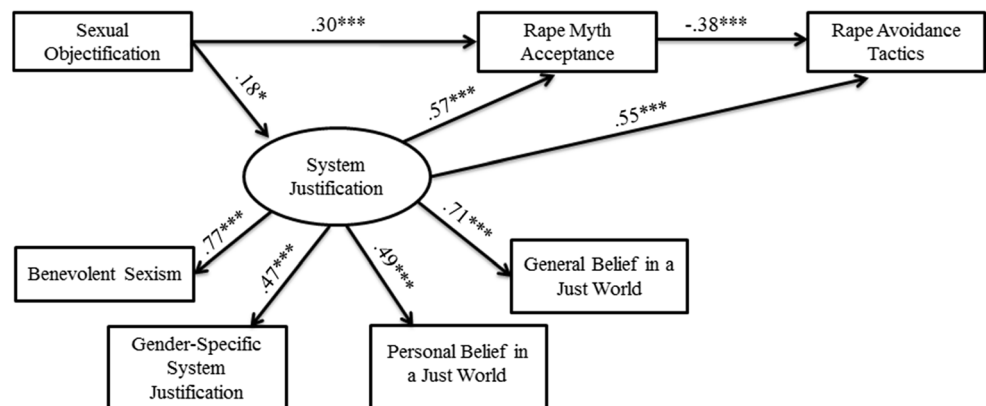
justification found in rape myths. The belief in a just world is effectively maintained if survivors are believed to be responsible for their suffering (Lerner and Simmons 1966), and relying on these ideas when objectified may mitigate fear. Although framing objectification positively in this context may initially seem like a useful tactic, the potential negative effects of normalizing unwanted sexual attention outweigh the possible benefits of self-preservation. When unwanted sexual attention is characterized as an ordinary experience, women who are made to feel uncomfortable or unsafe may not be taken seriously when reporting these experiences. A lack of societal repercussions for sexual assault may result in more, and more extreme, unwanted sexual advances. Further, our data supported the relationship between experiencing objectification and endorsing rape myths, meaning that sexual objectification may have more insidious effects beyond merely accepting unwanted sexual attention.

Our hypothesis about system-justifying beliefs being positively related to rape myth acceptance (Hypothesis 4) was also supported, lending further support to previous research framing rape myths as a method of system justification (Abrams et al. 2003; Correia et al. 2007; De Judicibus and McCabe 2001; Hayes et al. 2013; Sakallı-Uğurlu et al. 2007; Strömwall et al. 2013). Stereotypes play a large role in system justification, such that stereotypes are created and propagated to explain and support the current status quo (Jost and Banaji 1994). Because rape myths are more stereotype than actual fact, and because they serve a role in preserving women's subjugated place in society, the connection between system-justifying beliefs and the endorsement of rape myths is understandable. By justifying the status quo in favor of equity, women may feel that they, individually, do not face a disproportionate amount of discrimination (Hafer and Choma 2009). Therefore, it may be easier to believe that other women provoke their own assaults.

Benevolent sexism may play an important two-step role in the context of this relationship between system justification and rape myth acceptance. First, it may increase feelings of safety. Women who endorse system justification may embrace the "benefits" of womanhood, notably women's status as a protected group. Then, victim-blaming may arise from the belief that the survivor was not performing her role as a woman and thus was not receiving her deserved protection from men, instead exposing herself to uncontrollable sexual violence. These women's endorsement of benevolent sexism may make them feel safer; however, the outcome of endorsing this construct is clearly negative because it is also linked to higher rates of self-objectification, self-surveillance, and body shame (Calogero and Jost 2011; Shepherd et al. 2011).

The ultimate aim of our study was to understand factors related to women's rape-avoidant behavior through examination of a model that included constructs linked in prior research (i.e., rape myths, system justification, belief in a just world, and benevolent sexism) with new constructs that have not been examined within this context (i.e., objectification and rape avoidance behaviors). Our outcome hypotheses were partially supported. In support of Hypothesis 5a, our model illustrated a negative relationship between rape myth acceptance and the endorsement of rape avoidance tactics. Because rape myth acceptance may be related to the potential for fear (either due to being objectified or feeling as though women cannot protect themselves), the construct's relationship with rape avoidance behavior is explained by its role as a fear-reducing mindset. Women are placed in situations that make them feel vulnerable, and countering that vulnerability by endorsing rape myths has a significant effect on behavior. The IRMA not only asks about women's "assault-provoking" behavior, but also assesses beliefs that women lie about or want to be sexually assaulted. If women embrace a mindset that suggests not only that women deserve their assaults, but also that they are possibly lying about or desiring them, this thinking may greatly reduce these women's perceived need to protect themselves.

Contrary to Hypothesis 5b, however, the latent system justification variable was positively, rather than negatively, related to rape avoidance behaviors such that greater endorsement of system justification was related to stronger endorsement of rape avoidance behaviors. We are unsure why this relationship differs from the relationship between endorsement of rape myths and avoidant behavior; we encourage future researchers interested in this topic to explore why rape-specific system justification shows a different relationship with rape avoidance behaviors than general system-justifying beliefs.

One potential explanation for the different relationships lies with the measures used. Specifically, as previously discussed, some items of the IRMA contend that not only are women responsible for sexual assault, but also that sometimes there is no crime at all (e.g., she lied or wanted to be assaulted). Sexual assault, in the context of system justification, is a crime; however, because the system is just, it is a crime that was in some way the fault of the survivor. If women believe there is fairness in gender relations, they may also believe that assault survivors must have provoked their own attacks. Thus, a woman who endorses rape myths may feel sexual assault is not a realistic threat, whereas a woman with a system-justifying mindset may feel that she can prevent her sexual assault by taking protective measures. Similarly, women who see gender relations as just may support the gender stereotype of "acting like a lady" (e.g., a "lady" does not stay out late drinking with strange men). Because the RAI reflects women's self-report of "acting like a lady," this may explain the positive relationship between system justification and rape avoidance.

Akin to the relationship between system justification and rape myth acceptance, benevolent sexism, which was significantly positively correlated with rape avoidance behaviors,

may play a role here. Believing women need protection could be positive if women have partners to fulfill that role; however, not having a male protector may lead to women experiencing anxiety and thus changing their behavior to negate those feelings. In a fair society, women would not face unjust and disturbing rates of sexual assault were it not for some action on their part, and therefore, women need to be careful and protect themselves.

Ullman (2014, p. 346) proposed that in the context of an attempted sexual assault, when women resist, they are "good victims." This mindset may also explain why women who believe the world is just report greater endorsement of rape avoidance behaviors. However, this rationale should also apply to women who endorse rape myths. Despite part of rape myths being that women deserve or desire, or lie about, assault, rape avoidance behaviors in the RAI address ways to counteract the "deserving" actions alluded to by rape myths. Thus, endorsing rape myths and other system-justifying beliefs should have similar relationships to this measure.

System justification and rape myths, because they rely on women ignoring, not believing, or not understanding the reality of gender and power inequality, may contribute to women's distortion of risk assessment. Women's understanding of their safety is based on the way they view the world, and if they have a distorted understanding of violence against women (or even "kindness" toward women in the form of benevolent sexism or "compliments" in the form of unwanted sexual attention) and gender relations, they may not be able to adequately predict which situations are more harmful than others. While this may help us to understand the positive relationship between system justification and rape avoidance behavior in our model, it should also be reflected in the relationship between rape myths and avoidance behaviors. Interesting still, rape myth acceptance and endorsement of rape avoidance behaviors were not correlated, whereas rape myth acceptance was positively and significantly correlated with every other construct. More research will be necessary to tease apart these contradictions and make better sense of this complex and seemingly antithetical pattern of relationships.

Limitations and Future Research Directions

The results of our study should be understood with an acknowledgment of the limits of this research. Data were collected through Amazon Mechanical Turk, which requires participants to be computer savvy and willing to share personal information online. Future researchers may wish to more specifically attend to socio-demographic factors that may play a role in endorsement of rape avoidance behaviors because women who experience gender roles or relations differently may use varying avoidance tactics based on these factors. Although there was diversity in terms of race/ethnicity, social class, and sexual orientation, the majority of the sample still identified as middle-class and heterosexual. The priming effect of various constructs on one another should also be considered in understanding our results. Future work exploring this avenue of research may benefit from presenting belief in a just world first because the construct itself is unrelated to gender. For this study, belief in a just world was the second measure to which participants responded. It appeared after gender-specific system justification, which may have resulted in a priming effect leading participants to consider gender when responding to questions about their belief in a just world. Lastly, the Rape Avoidance Inventory (McKibbin et al. 2009) is a lengthy questionnaire that primarily assesses women's avoidance of stranger rape. It would be advantageous to utilize a scale that not only has fewer items as to avoid fatigue and rushing, but also gauges women's self-protection with regard to the threat of sexual assault by acquaintances because most sexual assaults are perpetrated by someone the survivor knows (Fisher et al. 2000; Planty et al. 2013).

Despite these limitations, the relationship between objectification and rape myth acceptance is troubling and should be explored further. Future researchers may also wish to consider experimental studies focusing on specific relationships in our model, addressing questions such as (a) Does exposing women to sexual objectification increase the likelihood that they will endorse rape myths or other system-justifying beliefs? and if, in turn, (b) Does this relate to the way participants interact with a male confederate? Understanding of these constructs may be aided with further information regarding women's beliefs about how frequently sexual assault occurs, by whom, and where. Evidence may show that women who hold accurate information about sexual assault may score differently on the RAI than do women who hold inaccurate information. Further, we theorized that the negative relationship between RMA and RAI is due to rape myths acting as a protectant against fear. Our hope is that future research develops this idea, perhaps by testing various levels of women's rape myth acceptance and, in turn, how calm or protected they feel and their subsequent engagement in rape avoidance behaviors. For example, women's changing ideas about rape myths and how they impact fear over time may be assessed before and after a sexual assault prevention seminar or training course that takes place over the course of weeks or months.

Practice Implications

Our work may aid therapists and counselors in discussions with clients regarding their experiences of objectification and how that has shaped their everyday behavior. In particular, we wonder if women's endorsement of rape avoidance behaviors relates to fear of strangers because much of rape avoidance tactics and rape myths involve women being in strange places with strange men. Additionally, understanding women's behaviors and the

ways they interact with the world around them, particularly when motivated by maintaining their own safety, is paramount in order to create the most effective anti-assault public policies and education. Lonsway (1996), in a review of rape education programming, noted that programs may be more effective in changing rape-related attitudes in both women and men if they involve discussion about gender inequality in society—a suggestion which carries the potential to address not only rape myths and sexual objectification, but also system-justifying beliefs because they have been shown to be an important factor in rape avoidance behaviors (understood in our study to be based on outdated stereotypes surrounding assault).

Many researchers and feminists believe that although women should not be held responsible for sexual assaults committed against them, they should be educated about gender role inequality, sexual violence, and risky behavior (Ullman 2007). Although the responsibility does not fall to women when assaulted, if it does happen, educational programming may decrease feelings of guilt or blame and increase the likelihood of reporting their assaults because they have a better understanding of the social and cultural context of sexual assault (Ullman 2010). As feminists continue to direct their attention toward addressing and fighting rape culture (Fraser 2015; Herman 1989; Makin and Morczek 2015; Miller and Biele 1993), it may benefit us to better understand why these rape-lenient ideas continue to be pervasive by focusing on how objectification and women's held stereotypes or beliefs about their own gender and society may be affecting their attitudes toward rape myths and rape avoidance behaviors.

Conclusion

The present research adds to the existing literature in a number of ways. First, no known published research to date has explored women's experiences of objectification and how this may relate to their endorsement of rape myths. Because objectification is a frequent occurrence for women in our society (Capodilupo et al. 2010; Fredrickson and Roberts 1997; Nadal 2010), it is critical to understand how it may influence women's assessment of sexual assault survivors. By understanding that objectification is a regular occurrence for women and that it may induce a state of fear that urges women to endorse harmful worldviews, it gives more weight to the argument that objectification should be taken seriously. Although rape myths do seem to decrease women's feelings of vulnerability, illustrated by a reduction in safety-enforcing behaviors, overall, rape myths are harmful and contradict the reality of assault. Further, we have provided evidence for a relationship between objectification and system justification, which builds upon a prior study that illustrated a link between self-objectification and gender-specific system justification (Calogero 2013). Our research has established a positive

relationship between justifying beliefs and rape avoidance tactics, which broadens the literature as well as poses questions for future researchers regarding the inherent contradiction of this relationship.

Whereas our study focused on understanding women's motivation for implementing rape avoidance tactics, our findings do not imply that the use of such tactics is necessarily beneficial or effective. Because most assaults occur within a familiar place by someone known to the survivor (Planty et al. 2013), rape avoidance tactics may not be a valid way to prevent rape, particularly because they assume a stranger-rape script that is not consistent with the most common acquaintance-rape assault experience. Women should not feel responsible for limiting their own opportunities out of fear, nor should they have the onus of preventing their own sexual assaults put upon them.

Furthermore, benevolent sexism and objectification may not be taken seriously because they can be framed as positive (as compliments and chivalry, respectively), but they have an alarming relationship with rape myth endorsement. When women are rewarded for seeking feminine protections (i.e., benevolent sexism) and attention (i.e., objectification), they may believe they are experiencing positive reactions when, in reality, both are two-sided coins. Specifically, the converse impact of being reinforced for "gender-appropriate" behavior is that women may face negative reactions when they behave inconsistently with their gender roles. This motivation could be related to women's reluctance to reach out for support or even attempt to prevent future victimization after experiencing assault; they are embodying the stereotype of the passive or appearance-focused woman or are internalizing victim-blaming. Further, the harmful beliefs that accompany endorsement of rape myths are disconcerting. Statistical data regarding assault completely counter rape myths, yet our participants scored, on average, at the midpoint for this scale, evidencing that activists cannot yet write off rape myths as outdated.

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CORRECTION

CrossMark

Correction to: Objectification and System Justification Impact Rape Avoidance Behaviors

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The correlation table (Table 1) erroneously listed the N as 160; n for correlations (using pairwise deletion) ranged between 279 and 293 and is now included in the table. Two rounding errors and one typographical error were made in recording the correlations between sexual objectification and benevolent sexism ($r(291) = .09$, ns), general belief in a just world and rape myth acceptance ($r(284) = .46$, $p < .001$), and general belief in a just world and rape avoidance behaviors ($r(293) = .14$, $p < .05$). These errors do not impact the direction, effect size, or statistical significance of the correlations, nor do they change the overarching results or conclusions of the study.

The authors regret these errors.

Table 1 Descriptive statistics and correlations among study variables

Variables	M (SD)	Actual range	Possible range	1	2	3	4	5	6
1. Sexual objectification	2.62 (.75)	1–4.73	1–5	–					
2. Benevolent sexism	2.64 (1.16)	0–5	0–5	.09 $n = 291$	–				
3. Gender-specific system justification	5.29 (1.39)	1–9	1–9	−.04 $n = 284$	.49*** $n = 286$	–			
4. Personal belief in a just world	4.22 (.83)	1–6	1–6	.01 $n = 287$	.38*** $n = 289$	.57*** $n = 283$	–		
5. General belief in a just world	3.82 (.99)	1–6	1–6	.07 $n = 290$	.54*** $n = 292$	.62*** $n = 286$	.70*** $n = 289$	–	
6. Rape myth acceptance	2.77 (1.42)	1–7	1–7	.39*** $n = 282$	.48*** $n = 284$	.32*** $n = 279$	.27*** $n = 282$	.46*** $n = 284$	–
7. Rape avoidance behaviors	288.11 (65.24)	45–414	0–414	−.03 $n = 291$	.22*** $n = 293$	.04 $n = 287$	.11 $n = 290$	.14* $n = 293$	−.05 $n = 285$

Note. Pairwise deletion used. Higher scores indicate greater endorsement of the construct measured

*$p < .05$. ** $p < .01$. *** $p < .001$

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