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Police Officers' Definitions of Rape: A Prototype Study

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ABSTRACT

The study investigates police officers' definitions of different rape situations. On the basis of the concept of 'cognitive prototypes' a methodology is developed which elicits consensual feature lists describing six rape situations: *the typical, i.e. most common rape, the credible, dubious, and false rape complaints* as well as *the rape experiences that are particularly hard vs. relatively easy for the victim to cope with*. Qualitative analysis of the data allows the identification of the characteristic features defining the prototype of each rape situation, as well as comparisons between the situations in terms of their common and distinctive features. It is shown that police officers, while sharing some of the widely held stereotypes about rape, generally perceive rape as a serious crime with long-term negative consequences for the victim. The quantitative analysis of prototype similarity between the six situations corroborates this conclusion by demonstrating a high similarity between the prototypes of the typical and the credible rape situation. In addition, subjects' general attitude towards rape victims is measured to compare the prototypes provided by respondents holding a positive vs. negative attitude towards rape victims. Findings for the two groups, however, reveal more similarities than differences in their descriptions of rape prototypes. The paper concludes with a discussion of the feasibility of the prototype approach presented in this study as a strategy for investigating implicit or common-sense theories of rape.

Key words: Rape, police, cognitive prototypes.

Rape is a traumatic experience for the victim. Numerous studies have demonstrated the long-term psychological consequences of rape on many aspects of psychological functioning, such as depressive symptoms, adjustment problems at work, sexual dysfunction and partnership problems (e.g. Norris and Feldman-Summers, 1981; Resick, Calhoun, Atkeson and Ellis, 1981; Lenox and Gannon, 1983; Burgess and Holmstrom, 1985; Kilpatrick, Veronen and Best, 1985; Cohen and Roth, 1987; Koss and Burkhardt, 1989; Roberts, 1989). Apart from having to come to terms with the attack itself, a raped woman is frequently faced with another, equally painful challenge: confronting the attitudes and preconceptions about the crime and its victims held by the general public, and more specifically, by her partner and friends, as well as the different groups of people with whom she may have to interact as a consequence

of the assault, such as police officers and medical as well as legal professionals. Public beliefs about rape have a serious, often highly negative impact on the victim, as Burgess (1987) points out: 'She suffers not only from the incident itself—the painful, violent penetration of her body—but also from the reactions of people, especially the negative subjective reactions based on the myths and stereotypes that surround the subject of rape' (p. 3).

Based on this line of reasoning, social psychologists have been concerned with the examination of social attitudes about rape and their impact on the evaluation of rape cases, most notably the attribution of responsibility to victims and assailants. Since the well-known (yet unrepeated) findings by Jones and Aronson (1973) on the role of victim respectability on attributions of responsibility, a large body of evidence has been accumulated demonstrating that judgements about rape are influenced by a number of critical variables on the side of the *victim* (e.g. provocativeness, Best and Demmin, 1982; physical attractiveness, Jacobson and Popovich, 1983; social status, Krahé, 1985), the *assailant* (Deitz and Byrnes, 1981; Jacobson, 1981) and the *observer* (e.g. sex, Krulowitz, 1981; sex-role attitudes, Thornton, Ryckman and Robbins, 1982; Acock and Ireland, 1983).

Like in most other areas of social psychology, the majority of this work has been conducted with student samples with only a few studies addressing conceptions of rape held by other groups, such as nurses (Alexander, 1980), jurors (LaFree, Reskin and Visher, 1985), judges (Feldman-Summers and Palmer, 1980), police officers (LeDoux and Hazelwood, 1985), and convicted rapists (Feild, 1978).

In view of the prominent role of the police in the legal processing of rape complaints, the paucity of empirical evidence on police officers' attitudes and definitions of rape is particularly unfortunate. After all, they are the first persons met by the victim once she has decided to report the rape, and the evidence they collect is crucial in determining the further legal treatment of the case. Moreover, the public image of the police in dealing with rape victims is a predominantly negative one, echoing victims' widespread complaints about unsympathetic treatment often perceived as a 'second assault'. The few studies that have examined police officers' attitudes towards rape and its victims largely corroborate this negative image. Feild (1978) compared police officers, rape counsellors, normal citizens and a small sample of rapists on a number of rape-related attitudes, concluding that the police officers showed greater similarity to the rapists than to the rape counsellors. Feldman-Summers and Palmer (1980) compared members of the criminal justice system (police officers, court judges and prosecuting attorneys) to staff at rape crisis centres in terms of their beliefs about (a) the causes of rape, (b) how to reduce the frequency of rape, and (c) the likelihood that any rape complaint is true or false. Their findings suggest that members of the criminal justice system assign women a significant causal role in rape, and estimate the number of false complaints to be much higher than the rape crisis personnel (cf. also Galton, 1975–76). Moreover, a number of factors are identified that contribute to the evaluation of a rape complaint as having been fabricated by the woman, such as a delay in reporting the rape, engaging in sexual relations with men to whom they are not married, and engaging in social contacts with the alleged attacker prior to the assault. However, a recent study by LeDoux and Hazelwood (1985) portrays a somewhat more favourable image of police attitudes towards rape. After administering a questionnaire measure of rape-relevant attitudes to a sample of 2170 police officers from all parts of the USA, they conclude:

Analysis of the data revealed that officers are not typically insensitive to the plight of rape victims. They are, however, suspicious of victims who meet certain criteria, such as previous and willing sex with the assailant, or who 'provoke' rape through their appearance and behavior (LeDoux and Hazelwood, 1985, p. 219).

Similarly, Holmstrom and Burgess (1978) summarized their findings on police officers' reactions to rape victims:

The stereotype of the police as anti rape victim does not gain much support from the data. Negative reactions by police were observed, but their occurrence was not as frequent as the stereotype would lead one to believe (p. 39).

The present study seeks to provide further evidence on police officers' conceptions about rape. In this attempt it differs from previous research in two major respects:

- (1) By studying a sample of West German police officers from a metropolitan city, West Berlin, where rape is a major problem for the police¹. In so doing, the present study adds a new facet to the existing evidence obtained almost exclusively in the USA, and contributes to a clearer understanding of the cross-cultural dynamics of societal conceptions about rape.
- (2) By focusing on subjective definitions of different types of rape situations rather than traditionally defined attitudinal measures. To address this task the study draws upon research on 'cognitive prototypes' to develop a methodological approach for investigating the meanings associated with different rape categories.

The majority of studies exploring social perceptions of, and reactions to, victims of rape have relied on two methodological strategies:

- (1) The use of rape vignettes describing a specific rape incident, whereby the variables of interest can be systematically manipulated by creating different versions of the vignette and subjects' differential responses to these versions can be examined as dependent variables (cf. Ferguson, Duthie and Graf, 1987; Mayerson and Taylor, 1987, and Carli and Leonard, 1989, for recent examples).
- (2) The administration of standard attitude scales to tap individuals' ideas about rape (e.g. Bunting and Reeves, 1983; Costin, 1985; Hall, Howard and Boezio, 1986; Quackenbush, 1989).

A large body of empirical evidence on the antecedents and consequences of social judgements about rape has been generated on the basis of these two methods, individually as well as in combination. However, both approaches share the drawback of response formats which constrain subjects' responses to a narrowly prescribed range of (usually numerically expressed) responses (cf. Burt and Albin, 1981 for a critical analysis).

In contrast, the present study uses a more open-ended methodology to explore the way in which subjects actively construct their definitions of different rape situations. It is proposed that, in everyday discourse, the term of rape is used to refer to a range of situations, each characterized by a set of distinctive features. Thus, unlike legal definitions of rape that are required to be clear-cut and unequivocal, common-sense understanding includes several categories of rape, varying, e.g., in

¹ The present study was conducted before the reunification of Germany, when Berlin was still a divided city.

terms of the exact nature and severity of the attack, or the credibility of the complaint. These common-sense beliefs about rape are referred to as 'subjective definitions' in order to distinguish them from formal definitions of rape codified in criminal law. Burt and Albin (1981) examined the breadth or restrictiveness of rape definitions held by people differing on a number of rape-relevant attitudes. Following the presentation of either of two rape vignettes manipulating the woman's reputation, her relationship with the assailant, and the amount of force used, subjects were asked to decide whether or not they felt the situation was a rape, and to name some of the reasons underlying their decision. From the findings, the authors concluded that the breadth or narrowness of rape definitions depended to a significant degree on the rape-supportive attitudes held by the general public (Burt and Albin, 1981, 226; cf. also Burt and Estep, 1981). Similarly, Williams (1984) identified a pervasive stereotype of the 'real rape' involving a street attack by a stranger, with an additional likelihood of weapons being used and injuries caused to the victim. She argues that public attitudes about rape frequently lead to a secondary victimization of rape victims, especially when the circumstances of the assault deviate from the 'real rape' stereotype.

To investigate the different meanings associated with the term of rape, the present study draws on the concept of 'cognitive prototypes' as a theoretical as well as methodological frame of reference (e.g. Rosch and Lloyd, 1978; Cantor and Mischel, 1979; Cantor, Mischel and Schwartz, 1982). According to this concept, classification in natural language typically involves categories with fuzzy rather than well-defined boundaries, with each category containing a combination of highly typical and less typical members. While typical members share many characteristic features with other members of the same category and few features with members of other categories, the opposite is true for less typical exemplars. The best, i.e. most typical, member of the category is called the category prototype and combines those characteristic features typically associated with the respective category. The most widely adopted strategy for operationalizing prototypes consists in asking respondents to list the characteristic features they associate with the category in question and then establishing a consensual feature list on the basis of the most frequently named responses (e.g. Cantor, 1981).

The prototype construct has been used in a number of empirical studies to explore the cognitive representation of different categories of persons and situations (e.g. Brewer, Dull and Lui, 1981; Cantor *et al.*, 1982; Cohen, 1983; Krahé, 1986). Apart from providing information about the contents and structure of cognitive categories, these studies have shown that the cognitive organization of social stimuli in terms of prototypes facilitates information-processing, such as faster and better recall for prototype-consistent as opposed to inconsistent information (e.g. Cohen, 1981).

At a methodological level the concept of prototypicality has been recognized as a coherent framework for designing empirical measures tapping people's understanding of various social categories (e.g. problem children, Horowitz, Lowenstein, Wright and Parad, 1981), personality dimensions (e.g. student motivation, de Jong, 1988) and trait categories (Buss and Craik, 1984).

In the present study the prototype concept is used as a basis for eliciting and comparing the characteristic features of different rape situations as defined by police officers. In line with the proposition that rape has multiple meanings, each associated with a different set of characteristics, a total of six different situations was examined. In the absence of an established typology, the following situations were selected

on the basis of the psychological and psycholegal literature on rape to cover a representative range of rape complaints:

- (1) The typical, i.e. most common, rape situation.
- (2) The credible rape complaint where there is no doubt about the truth of the victim's allegations.
- (3) The dubious rape complaint where there are serious doubts about the truth of the victim's allegations.
- (4) The rape experience that is particularly hard for the victim to cope with.
- (5) The rape experience that is comparatively easy for the victim to cope with.
- (6) The false rape complaint.

By eliciting subjects' perceptions of the defining features of each of these rape categories, it is possible to identify the prototype of each category and to compare the prototypes of different situations in terms of their similarities and differences. In this way the present approach provides information about both the contents of individual rape categories and the relationship between different categories. Thus, respondents in the present study are asked to actively construct a profile of their understanding of a particular rape situation.

As noted above, previous research has provided conclusive evidence that rape-related attitudes, most notably rape myth acceptance, determine individuals' responses to specific rape incidents (e.g. Burt, 1980; Howard, 1984; Krahe, 1988; Quackenbush, 1989). People who endorse rape myths (i.e. negative statements about rape victims that are either factually wrong or unsupported by empirical evidence) tend to attribute more blame to a victim of rape and less blame to the assailant than people rejecting such statements. As Burt and Albin (1981) showed, rape myth acceptance also affects a person's definition of rape, whereby high rape myth acceptance is associated with more restrictive rape definitions.

In order to examine the effect of rape-related attitudes on individuals' subjective definitions of different rape situations, the 'Attitude toward Rape Victims Scale' (ARVS) developed by Ward (1988) was used in the present study. It was expected that individuals holding positive vs. negative attitudes towards raped women would differ in terms of their perceptions of the prototypical features of the six rape situations, especially with respect to those situations that involve doubts about the credibility of the woman's complaint.

In sum, the aim of the present study is two-fold: (1) to provide evidence, at a descriptive level, about the contents of police officers' definitions of rape prototypes, including a comparison of respondents holding positive vs. negative attitudes towards rape victims and (2) to examine the similarities between different prototypes so as to illuminate the underlying pattern of social judgements about the victims, assailants, and circumstances of rape. Both aspects are immediately pertinent to the way in which police officers deal with rape complaints and interact with victims as part of their professional duties.

METHOD

Subjects

One hundred and fifty police officers from the West Berlin police force participated

in this study. Questionnaires were distributed via the internal mail network to respondents at a range of police stations in different parts of the city to ensure a representative coverage of inner-city and suburban areas. Subjects were allowed to complete the questionnaire while on duty. One hundred and eight completed questionnaires were returned, resulting in a response rate of 72 per cent. This final sample included 85 males and 23 females, whereby the proportion of females in the present study was slightly higher than the corresponding number of female officers in the force as a whole. The average age of respondents was 35.7 years, while the average number of years in the police was 17.1. Ninety-two (85.2 per cent) of the respondents reported that they had to deal with rape cases as part of their duties, with the average number of cases being estimated at 4.2 per year. This last figure, however, shows a wide variation across the sample with a median of 2 cases per year and a standard deviation of 9.50.

Materials

Development of the characteristic feature list. In line with the general conceptual approach of prototype research, the first step in examining prototypes of rape consists in eliciting a list of characteristic features describing different rape situations. In the present study a list of features potentially relevant to the description of rape situations was derived from data obtained in a previous study. In order to clarify the procedure, those aspects of that study relevant to the present research need to be described briefly.

As part of an unpublished study looking at the relationship between attitudes towards rape victims and attributional judgements of a specific rape incident, Krahé² presented 195 West German subjects (96 female and 99 male undergraduates) with a brief rape vignette of the kind that is typically used in research on attributions of responsibility. The vignette was introduced as being taken from an authentic newspaper report about a rape trial and contained a 60-word description of the woman's account of the events. The vignette referred exclusively to the course of events in the rape situation and did not contain any personal information about the victim and the alleged assailant. It also stated that the defendant denied the allegations.

Following the rape vignette, subjects were asked to indicate whether or not they felt they had sufficient information to form a judgement about the case. Those who answered 'yes' ($n = 78$) were then asked a number of attributional questions that are not directly relevant to the present study and will therefore not be further discussed. One hundred and seven respondents (54.9 per cent) answered 'no' to this question, an alarmingly high percentage in view of the prevalence of the vignette format in eliciting attributions and other judgements about rape victims. The methodological implications of this finding are discussed in more detail elsewhere (Krahé, 1991).

Those 107 subjects (57 females and 60 males) who felt the information in the vignette was insufficient to form an impression about the case were then given the following task. They were asked to list, in a free-response format, all the questions

² Krahé, B. (1988). Rape myth acceptance and judgments of specific rape incidents: A comparative study in West Germany and the UK (unpublished manuscript).

they would want to ask about the victim, the attacker and the circumstances of the alleged attack before feeling confident enough to make a judgement about the case. A total of 651 questions were obtained, of which 189 referred to the woman, 295 to the man, and 167 to the circumstances. These questions were then categorized independently by the author and another rater. There were few discrepancies between the two raters, which were resolved through discussion. Some questions had to be regrouped because respondents had listed questions that clearly referred to, e.g., the victim, under the assailant or circumstances rubrics. One particular question, namely whether or not the victim and assailant had known each other prior to the attack, appeared under all three headings and was consistently re-assigned to the 'circumstances' section. Table 1 presents a list of the resulting categories with at least five nominations, omitting a number of 'idiosyncratic' categories with low frequencies that also appeared in the data.

Table 1. Categories resulting from the free-response questions about the victim, the assailant, and the circumstances of the alleged rape

Victim	Assailant	Circumstances
Resistance (21)	Psychological state (26)	Victim/assailant acquaintance (44)
Injuries (15)	Use of weapons (25)	Time of day (24)
Age (13)	Criminal record (19)	Witnesses (17)
Dress (11)	Age (17)	Place of attack (14)
Alcohol (9)	Use of threats (9)	Identification of accused (6)
Escape attempt (8)	Physical build (9)	
Communication with assailant (6)	Alcohol (9)	
Psychological consequences (14)	Sexual experience (8)	
	Marital status (7)	

The frequency of listings is given in parentheses (categories with less than five nominations are not included).

The prototype measure. The categories resulting from the content analysis of questions pertaining to the victim, assailant and circumstances can be regarded as a comprehensive list of consensual features potentially applicable to the description of rape incidents. They reveal subjects' implicit understanding of what aspects are important in clarifying an ambiguous rape scenario so as to feel able to evaluate a charge of rape. Therefore, they were used as the basis for the prototype measure developed in the present study. All the features listed in Table 1 were included, along with three further categories considered to be relevant to the description of a wider range of rape situations: nationality of victim, nationality of assailant and number of attackers. In addition, marital status and sexual experience were included among the victim-related features, even though they had been named by fewer than five subjects. The rationale behind this was that both features had emerged as important with respect to the assailant and that it would be interesting to see if they played a similar role in describing the victim in different rape situations. This procedure resulted in a total of 27 characteristic features, 11 of which referred to the victim, 10 to the assailant, and 6 to the circumstances of the rape. For each category, appropriate response alternatives were construed as a next step.

In order to arrive at prototypes of rape, a questionnaire was designed asking

subjects to apply the feature list to the description of the six rape situations introduced above: (1) the typical, i.e. most common rape situation; (2) the credible rape complaint where there is no doubt about the truth of the victim's allegations; (3) the dubious rape complaint where there are serious doubts about the truth of the victim's allegations; (4) the rape experience that is particularly hard for the victim to cope with; (5) the rape experience that is comparatively easy for the victim to cope with; (6) the false rape complaint. The format of the prototype measure is illustrated in Figure 1.

Each subject was presented with a questionnaire containing a random combination of three out of the six situations. After a brief introduction to the purpose of the study, subjects received the following instruction (in German):

On the following pages you will find three broadly described types of rape. These descriptions are no more than 'general headings', covering a variety of specific aspects. Following each heading, you are provided with a list of features people might think are characteristic of that type of situation.

For each situation, please tick all those aspects on the list which you consider to be typically characteristic of it. To illustrate this task, consider the following example: Let us assume the situation in question to be 'A woman being raped while hitch-hiking', and the list of characteristic features to include the following two items:

Age of assailant: under 20; 20-40; 40-60; over 60

Age of victim: under 20; 20-40; 40-60; over 60

Now, if you think that men who rape a hitch-hiker are typically very young, i.e. under 20 years of age, then you tick the appropriate box. If, however, you think that the man's age is not relevant in that context, then make no tick at all in this line. In the same way, if you think that women of a particular age are most likely to get raped while hitch-hiking, tick the appropriate box. Again, make no tick if you think that hitch-hiking women of all age groups are equally at risk of being raped.

It is important to note that there are no right or wrong answers to this questionnaire. The study is concerned with your personal views on the subject of rape.

Thus, subjects were asked to select those features that in their view distinguished a particular rape situation. Across subjects, the most frequently named features make up the consensual feature list or 'prototype' of the respective rape category. Subjects were free to select more than one response alternative per feature (e.g. selecting both 'slightly drunk' and 'heavily drunk' as being typically characteristic of the victim in the 'typical' rape situation).

Attitude towards rape victims. Following the prototype measure, all subjects were asked to complete the 'Attitudes toward Rape Victims Scale' (ARVS) developed by Ward (1988). The ARVS consists of 25 statements tapping either favourable or unfavourable attitudes towards raped women. Subjects indicated their agreement with these items on a five-point scale ranging from 1 (completely disagree) to 5 (completely agree). In the present study, a German translation of the ARVS was used. This version had been constructed and pretested by Krahe in the previously mentioned study involving 195 undergraduate subjects, and shown to be sufficiently reliable (Cronbach's alpha = 0.82; average corrected item-total correlation $r = 0.37$).

RESULTS

Rape prototypes

To establish the prototypical 'profile' of each of the six rape situations, frequencies of the different response options within each feature category were computed. If no response option was ticked by the subject for a particular feature, then the response was coded as 'irrelevant'. Those options which had been named most frequently were included in the consensual feature list defining the prototype of the respective situation. For example, the distribution of frequencies for the 'victim age' feature in the 'typical rape' situation was as follows: Of the 51 respondents who looked at this situation, 11 (18.6 per cent) selected the 'under 20' age group, 38 (64.4 per cent) regarded the '20-40' age range as typically characterizing this situation, and 2 (3.4 per cent) selected the '40-60' age range. Finally, 8 respondents (13.6 per cent) did not tick any response option, and their responses were coded as reflecting the irrelevance of the feature of 'victim age' in describing the typical rape situation. On the basis of these data the feature of 'victim age between 20 and 40' was included into the consensual feature list, i.e. the prototype, for the typical rape situation. In the same way the characteristic features to be included in the prototype were determined for the remaining categories of victim, assailant and circumstance characteristics.

A look at the frequency distributions within each category suggested that some of the response alternatives had apparently been overly specific and should be combined in order to allow a more meaningful interpretation of the data. This was true for the features of 'victim age' and 'assailant age' where the '40-60' and 'over 60' age groups were combined into an 'over 40' category. In the same way, 'slight' and 'short-term' psychological consequences for the victim were combined into a 'slight consequences' category. For the 'scene of the crime' feature, 'man's place' and 'woman's place' were combined into a joint category. Finally, 'evening' and 'night' were combined into one category ('night') for the feature of 'time of attack'.

The prototypes obtained for each of the six situations from the total sample are displayed in Table 2. As noted earlier, each respondent received only three of the six situations. Since situations were randomly combined in the individual questionnaires, the fact that not all questionnaires were returned resulted in slightly different sample sizes for each of the situations.

The characteristics listed in Table 2 reflect the police officers' understanding of the features that distinguish a particular kind of rape situation. In terms of the prototype approach they represent a set of consensual features that define the prototypical example of a given category. These data lend themselves to both qualitative and quantitative interpretation. The former perspective leads to a comprehensive description of the exact nature of respondents' prototypes of each situation, while the latter will provide a numerical index of the similarity between prototypes. The frequency analyses showed that marital status and nationality of both victim and assailant had been regarded as irrelevant with respect to all six situations. Even though this is an interesting finding in its own right that will be further discussed later, these aspects fail to differentiate between the situations and were therefore dropped from any further analysis. In two further categories, namely the presence of witnesses ('none') and the woman's confidence in identifying the attacker ('yes'), the same options were named for all situations and thus also failed to discriminate

The typical, i.e. most common rape situation

Please imagine what you consider to be the typical rape situation, i.e. the kind of rape that occurs most frequently. Please indicate, in each section of the following list, those aspects which you think are characteristic of that kind of situation. If, in any section, none of the features appears to be particularly characteristic of that situation, do not make a tick there.

<i>The victim</i>			
Age	<input type="checkbox"/> under 20 yrs. <input type="checkbox"/> 20–40 yrs. <input type="checkbox"/> 40–60 yrs. <input type="checkbox"/> over 60 yrs.	Alcohol	<input type="checkbox"/> no alcohol before the attack <input type="checkbox"/> slightly drunk <input type="checkbox"/> heavily drunk
Marital status	<input type="checkbox"/> single <input type="checkbox"/> married <input type="checkbox"/> separated <input type="checkbox"/> divorced	Physical injuries	<input type="checkbox"/> none <input type="checkbox"/> slight <input type="checkbox"/> serious <input type="checkbox"/> critical
Apparel	<input type="checkbox"/> non-distinctive <input type="checkbox"/> distinctive/in which way: 	Escape	<input type="checkbox"/> no attempt to escape <input type="checkbox"/> attempt to escape
Sexual experiences	<input type="checkbox"/> no sexual experiences <input type="checkbox"/> occasional sexual contacts <input type="checkbox"/> regular sexual contacts	Communication with assailant	<input type="checkbox"/> talks to the assailant <input type="checkbox"/> does not talk to the assailant
Resistance	<input type="checkbox"/> no resistance <input type="checkbox"/> verbal resistance (screaming) <input type="checkbox"/> physical resistance	Nationality	<input type="checkbox"/> German <input type="checkbox"/> other/which:
Psychological consequences	<input type="checkbox"/> slight psychological distress <input type="checkbox"/> short-term psychological distress <input type="checkbox"/> lasting psychological distress <input type="checkbox"/> psychotherapy needed		
<i>The assailant</i>			
Age	<input type="checkbox"/> under 20 yrs. <input type="checkbox"/> 20–40 yrs. <input type="checkbox"/> 40–60 yrs. <input type="checkbox"/> over 60 yrs.	Alcohol	<input type="checkbox"/> no alcohol before the attack <input type="checkbox"/> slightly drunk <input type="checkbox"/> heavily drunk
Marital status	<input type="checkbox"/> single <input type="checkbox"/> married <input type="checkbox"/> separated <input type="checkbox"/> divorced	Threat of violence	<input type="checkbox"/> no threat of violence <input type="checkbox"/> threat of physical violence <input type="checkbox"/> death threat
Psychological disturbances	<input type="checkbox"/> psychologically disturbed <input type="checkbox"/> no known psychological disturbances	Use of weapons	<input type="checkbox"/> no threat with weapon <input type="checkbox"/> threat with weapon <input type="checkbox"/> use of weapon

Figure 1 continues opposite.

Figure 1 continued from previous page

Sexual experiences	<input type="checkbox"/> no sexual experiences <input type="checkbox"/> occasional sexual contacts <input type="checkbox"/> regular sexual contacts	Physical constitution	<input type="checkbox"/> weak <input type="checkbox"/> average <input type="checkbox"/> strong
Previous convictions	<input type="checkbox"/> no previous rape conviction <input type="checkbox"/> one previous conviction <input type="checkbox"/> several previous convictions	Nationality	<input type="checkbox"/> German <input type="checkbox"/> other/which
<i>The circumstances</i>			
Scene of the crime	<input type="checkbox"/> woman's place <input type="checkbox"/> man's place <input type="checkbox"/> outdoors <input type="checkbox"/> car <input type="checkbox"/> other/which	Time of day	<input type="checkbox"/> morning <input type="checkbox"/> afternoon <input type="checkbox"/> evening <input type="checkbox"/> night
Witnesses	<input type="checkbox"/> none <input type="checkbox"/> one <input type="checkbox"/> several	Number of attackers	<input type="checkbox"/> one <input type="checkbox"/> two <input type="checkbox"/> several
Victim-assailant acquaintance	<input type="checkbox"/> strangers <input type="checkbox"/> met briefly <input type="checkbox"/> friends <input type="checkbox"/> related <input type="checkbox"/> ex-partners	Identification of assailant	<input type="checkbox"/> woman thinks she would recognize the assailant <input type="checkbox"/> woman does not think she would recognize the assailant

Figure 1. Format of the prototype measure (English translation)

between them. However, they were retained in the analysis because, unlike the irrelevance judgements, they contribute positive information to the prototypes.

The findings in Table 2 can be interpreted in two complementary ways. Comparing the feature profiles for different situations shows how two or more situations differ in terms of the pattern of characteristics that are peculiar to them. At the same time, one can look at each feature individually to determine its significance across the total range of situations. The following discussion will highlight only a few important differences between the prototypes of the six situations, taking the typical rape situation as a point of reference.

In characterizing the *typical* rape situation, the police officers in the present sample confirm some of the stereotypical notions about rape as a crime involving an attack, out in the open, after dark, by a complete stranger, who is psychologically disturbed. At the same time, they perceive the psychological consequences for the victim to be severe, even though they think of the victim in a typical rape situation as being slightly drunk and suffering only minor physical injuries. It is interesting to note that the typical rape situation is described by very much the same features as the

Table 2. Prototypes of the six rape situations: Total sample

	Typical S1	Credible S2	Dubious S3	Hard S4	Easy S5	False S6
<i>Victim</i>						
Age	20-40	20-40	over 40	under 20	20-40	20-40
Dress		non-dis- tinctive	non-dis- tinctive			
Sexual experience	occasional			none	regular	occasional
Resistance	verbal	physical	none	physical	none	none
Psychological consequences	serious	serious	slight	serious	slight	slight
Alcohol	slight	none	heavy	none	none	slight
Injuries	minor	minor	none	serious	none	none
Escape attempt		yes	no	yes	no	no
Communication with assailant	yes	yes	yes			yes
<i>Assailant</i>						
Age	20-40	20-40	20-40		20-40	20-40
Sexual experience	occasional	occasional			occasional	occasional
Psychologically disturbed	disturbed	disturbed	not dis- turbed		not dis- turbed	not dis- turbed
Criminal record			none		none	
Alcohol	slight	slight	heavy		slight	slight
Threat	violence	violence	no threat	death threat	no threat	violence
Use of weapons	threat	threat	none	threat	none	none
Physical constitu- tion	average	average	weak		average	average
<i>Circumstances</i>						
Place	outdoors	outdoors	man's/ woman's		man's/ woman's	man's/ woman's
Witnesses	none	none	none	none	none	none
Acquaintance	unknown	unknown	friends	unknown	unknown	met briefly
Time	night	night	night		night	night
Number of attackers	one	one	one	several	one	one
Identification	yes	yes	yes	yes	yes	yes
<i>n</i>	51	50	54	57	54	54

credible rape situation except that in the latter situation the victim is perceived as having made an attempt to escape and not being intoxicated.

In contrast, the prototype of the *dubious* rape complaint is substantially different from the typical rape. Here, respondents think that the victim is generally older,

heavily drunk, does not show any resistance or attempt to escape. The assailant, at the same time, is also regarded as being heavily drunk, yet not psychologically disturbed. A dubious rape complaint is further characterized by the feature that the man and woman involved used to be friends, and by typically occurring at either the man's or the woman's place.

Compared to the first three situations, the rape that is *particularly hard for the victim to cope with* is characterized by a smaller number of features. Victim age is crucial, with victims under 20 years of age being regarded as most likely to find the rape experience particularly hard to cope with. Other distinctive features in this prototype are physical resistance shown by the victim, her lack of previous sexual experience and the suffering of serious injuries, while on the assailant side the severity of threat used in the situation is an essential feature associated with particularly hard coping.

Prototypes of the last two situations, i.e. the *false rape complaint* and the rape experience that is *comparatively easy for the victim to cope with*, show a high degree of feature overlap both amongst each other and with the dubious rape complaint. For the easy-to-cope-with situation, a victim's regular sex life is seen as a critical feature. As expected, psychological consequences for the victim in this type of situation are perceived as being only slightly negative. The false rape complaint differs from the previous situations in that, by definition, it refers to a victim's account of events that did not actually happen. So respondents had to think of characteristics that a woman pretending to have been raped would put forward to tell a convincing story. This may explain, at least in part, why a relatively high degree of overlap was found between the false complaint and the typical rape situation. However, it is interesting to note where the two prototypes differ. In the false rape complaint, the place of the alleged attack is typically seen as being either the man's or the woman's home, with both parties having met briefly in the past. While respondents think it most likely for the woman to report she had been threatened, she is deemed unlikely to claim that a weapon was involved.

The findings in Table 2 already give some indication of the similarities between the prototypes. However, a quantitative analysis of feature overlap was conducted to obtain more precise evidence of prototype similarity. In accordance with previous work on cognitive prototypes, the following formula was used to arrive at a quantitative index of pairwise similarity between rape situations (cf. Eckes, 1986):

$$S(A,B) = \frac{f(A \cap B)}{f(A \cap B) + f(A - B) + f(B - A)}$$

whereby $S(A,B)$ is the similarity between the prototypes of Situations A and B , $f(A \cap B)$ is the number of shared features in A and B , $f(A - B)$ is the number of features contained in A , but not in B , and $f(B - A)$ is the number of features contained in B , but not in A . $S(A,B)$ can range from 0 to 1, with a score of 0 reflecting complete dissimilarity (i.e. no shared features at all) and a score of 1 reflecting complete similarity (i.e. no distinctive features at all). The pattern of similarity between the six rape prototypes is presented in Table 3.

The findings show that by far the highest similarity exists between the prototypes of the typical and the credible rape situation. The greatest dissimilarities emerge between the rape situation that is particularly hard to cope with and the dubious

Table 3. Similarity between situation prototypes: total sample

Situations		S1	S2	S3	S4	S5
Typical	S1					
Credible	S2	0.78				
Dubious	S3	0.17	0.20			
Hard to cope	S4	0.18	0.25	0.06		
Easy to cope	S5	0.32	0.35	0.50	0.14	
False complaint	S6	0.46	0.35	0.45	0.06	0.62

and false complaints, respectively. Medium levels of similarity were found between the dubious rape complaint on the one hand and the easy-to-cope-with and false complaint situations on the other. It should be pointed out, however, that the meaning of these quantitative measures of prototype similarity can be fully understood only in conjunction with the qualitative findings reported in Table 2. So, for instance, the prototype of the most common rape situation is equally dissimilar to those of the dubious and the hard-to-cope-with situations, yet the nature of the dissimilarities differs greatly with regard to the two situations.

Attitudes towards rape victims

As a first step in the data analysis, responses to the ARVS were subjected to a reliability analysis. This analysis largely replicated the findings from the earlier study, yielding an alpha of 0.83 and an average corrected item-total correlation of $r = 0.39$. However, an inspection of the response distributions for the individual items revealed a considerable number of items that had been endorsed or rejected almost unanimously by the respondents. Eliminating all items with endorsement or rejection frequencies (i.e. ratings of 1 and 2 or 4 and 5) of over 80 per cent or under 20 per cent along with three items with corrected item-total correlation of less than $r = 0.20$ led to an abbreviated form of the ARVS consisting of 13 items. This version of the ARVS still showed high internal consistency (Cronbach's alpha = 0.78; average corrected item-total correlation $r = 0.41$) and was subsequently used to classify subjects as holding a favourable or unfavourable attitude towards rape victims on the basis of a median-split. The items and means of the abbreviated ARVS version are shown in Table 4.

In order to examine the impact of an individual's generalized attitude towards rape victims on his or her perception of the characteristics of different rape situations, subjects were classified, via median-split, as holding a positive vs. negative attitude towards rape victims based on their responses to the ARVS. The qualitative and quantitative analyses of rape prototypes described above were then repeated individually for the two groups.

Looking first at the findings for overall prototype similarity, Tables 5 and 6 reveal a very similar pattern to the one obtained for the total sample. What is noteworthy, however, is the substantially lower similarity between the typical and the credible rape situation for subjects holding negative attitudes towards rape victims. At the same time, these subjects seemed to accentuate the differences between the credible and the dubious rape complaints, reflected in a decrease in similarity from 0.20 for the total sample to 0.11 for the negative attitude group. For subjects holding a positive attitude towards rape victims, only one substantial difference emerged,

Table 4. Abbreviated version of the ARVS

	M	SD
1. A raped woman is a less desirable woman	1.740	0.998
2. The extent of the woman's resistance should be the major factor in determining if a rape has occurred	1.907	1.148
4. Women often claim rape to protect their reputations	2.685	1.056
8. Intoxicated women are usually willing to have sexual intercourse	3.269	1.029
*10. Even women who feel guilty about engaging in premarital sex are not likely to falsely claim rape	2.500	1.148
14. Many women invent rape stories if they learn they are pregnant	2.380	1.117
18. Accusations of rape by bar girls, dance hostesses and prostitutes should be viewed with suspicion	2.935	1.306
*19. A woman should not blame herself for rape	2.213	1.168
20. A healthy woman can successfully resist a rapist if she really tries	2.139	1.148
21. Many women who report rape are lying because they are angry or want revenge on the accused	2.324	1.021
*22. Woman who wear short skirts or tight blouses are not inviting rape	3.018	1.151
23. Women put themselves in situations in which they are likely to be sexually assaulted because they have an unconscious wish to be raped	2.057	1.118
24. Sexually experienced women are not really damaged by rape	1.806	1.072

Median: 2.308

Item numbers refer to the original 25-item scale. Higher scores indicate more negative attitudes towards rape victims.

*Indicates reverse coding.

Table 5. Similarity between situation prototypes: positive attitudes towards rape victims

Situations		S1	S2	S3	S4	S5
Typical	S1					
Credible	S2	0.75				
Dubious	S3	0.20	0.19			
Hard to cope	S4	0.23	0.32	0.11		
Easy to cope	S5	0.29	0.29	0.59	0.11	
False complaint	S6	0.45	0.38	0.44	0.07	0.48

Table 6. Similarity between situation prototypes: negative attitudes towards rape victims

Situations		S1	S2	S3	S4	S5
Typical	S1					
Credible	S2	0.62				
Dubious	S3	0.15	0.11			
Hard to cope	S4	0.21	0.32	0.06		
Easy to cope	S5	0.29	0.34	0.50	0.09	
False complaint	S6	0.52	0.19	0.43	0.09	0.71

relating to their perception of a lower similarity between the easy to cope with situation and the false complaint than the total sample and the negative attitude group.

To further clarify the way in which the two attitude groups differed from each other as well as from the total sample, the prototypes generated by the three groups were compared individually for each situation, using the above formula to compute feature overlap. The results from this analysis are presented in Table 7. As expected, the highest overall dissimilarity across the six situations was obtained between the negative and positive attitude groups ($M = 0.69$). Comparing the three groups, the highest similarity emerged in their descriptions of the typical rape situation ($M = 0.90$), while they differed most in their prototypes of the rape situation that is particularly hard to cope with ($M = 0.65$), yet even in this case the proportion of shared features is substantial.

Table 7. Group comparisons of prototype similarity

Situation		Comparison			<i>M</i>
		Total/positive attitude	Total/negative attitude	Positive/negative attitude	
Typical	S1	1.00	0.85	0.85	0.90
Credible	S2	0.76	0.86	0.62	0.75
Dubious	S3	0.90	0.74	0.65	0.76
Hard to cope	S4	0.87	0.56	0.53	0.65
Easy to cope	S5	0.78	0.74	0.73	0.75
False complaint	S6	0.95	0.77	0.77	0.83
<i>M</i>		0.89	0.75	0.69	

Again, one has to look more specifically at the contents of the different rape prototypes to fully understand the meaning of those similarities and differences. The consensual feature lists provided by the two subgroups of respondents holding a positive vs. negative attitude towards rape victims are presented in Tables 8 and 9. Substantiating the quantitative results, the tables portray a relatively similar picture of the prototypes generated by the two groups, while at the same time displaying some interesting discrepancies. The hard-to-cope-with rape is the situation on which the two groups differed most, and this reveals that subjects with negative attitudes include a greater number of characteristic features referring to the victim and the assailant and a smaller number of features pertaining to the circumstances than do subjects holding a positive attitude. Thus, a victim's physical resistance and attempt to escape from the situation, as well as the assailant's mental health and physical constitution, are perceived to be essential elements of this situation by the negative attitude groups, whereas they are not considered as distinctive features by the positive attitude group. Altogether, however, the similarities between the groups are more striking than the differences, suggesting that rape-related attitudes as measured by the ARVS failed to show a powerful effect on individuals' prototypical conceptions of different rape situations.

Table 8. Prototypes of the six rape situations: subjects with positive attitudes towards rape victims

	Typical S1	Credible S2	Dubious S3	Hard S4	Easy S5	False S6
<i>Victim</i>						
Age	20-40	20-40	over 40		20-40	20-40
Dress			non-dis- tinctive		non-dis- tinctive	
Sexual experience	occasional			none	regular	occasional
Resistance	verbal	physical	none		none	none
Psychological consequences	serious	serious	slight	serious	slight	
Alcohol		none	heavy	none		slight
Injuries	minor	minor	none	serious	none	none
Escape attempt		yes	no		no	no
Communication with assailant	yes	yes	yes		yes	yes
<i>Assailant</i>						
Age	20-40	20-40			20-40	20-40
Sexual experience	occasional	occasional			occasional	
Psychologically disturbed			not dis- turbed		not dis- turbed	not dis- turbed
Criminal record			none		none	none
Alcohol	slight	slight	none			slight
Threat	violence	violence	no threat	death threat	no threat	violence
Use of weapons	threat		no threat		none	
Physical constitu- tion	average	average	average			average
<i>Circumstances</i>						
Place		outdoors	man's/ woman's	outdoors	man's/ woman's	man's/ woman's
Witnesses	none	none	none	none	none	none
Acquaintance	unknown	unknown		unknown	unknown	met briefly
Time	night	night	night	night		
Number of attackers	one	one	one	several	one	one
Identification	yes	yes	yes	yes	yes	yes
<i>n</i>	23	27	18	33	26	18

DISCUSSION

The present study was designed to explore police officers' subjective definitions of different rape situations. It was argued that, in contrast to its legal definition, multiple

Table 9. Prototypes of the six rape situations: subjects with negative attitudes towards rape victims

	Typical S1	Credible S2	Dubious S3	Hard S4	Easy S5	False S6
<i>Victim</i>						
Age	20-40	20-40	over 40	under 20	20-40	20-40
Dress		non-dis- tinctive				
Sexual experience	occasional	regular		none	regular	occasional
Resistance	verbal	verbal	none	physical	none	none
Psychological consequences	serious	serious	slight	serious	slight	slight
Alcohol	slight	none	heavy	none	none	slight
Injuries	minor	serious	none	serious	none	none
Escape attempt		yes	no	yes	no	no
Communication with assailant	yes	no	yes		yes	yes
<i>Assailant</i>						
Age	20-40	20-40	20-40		20-40	20-40
Sexual experience	occasional	occasional			occasional	occasional
Psychologically disturbed	disturbed	disturbed	not dis- turbed	disturbed	not dis- turbed	not dis- turbed
Criminal record		1 convic- tion	none			
Alcohol	slight	slight	heavy		slight	slight
Threat	violence	violence	no threat	death threat	no threat	violence
Use of weapons	threat	threat	no threat	threat	none	none
Physical constitu- tion	average	average	weak	strong	average	average
<i>Circumstances</i>						
Place	outdoors	outdoors	man's/ woman's		man's/ woman's	man's/ woman's
Witnesses	none	none	none	none	none	none
Acquaintance	unknown	unknown	friends	unknown	met briefly	met briefly
Time	night	night				night
Number of attackers	one	one	one	several	one	one
Identification	yes	yes	yes	yes	yes	yes
<i>n</i>	28	23	36	24	28	36

meanings are attached to the term of rape in everyday understanding. Based on the concept of 'cognitive prototypes', a methodological strategy was developed for eliciting respondents' perceptions of the characteristic features associated with each

of six rape situations: the typical rape situation, the rape situation that is particularly hard or relatively easy for the victim to cope with, the credible and the dubious rape complaints and finally the false rape complaint. The resulting prototypes (i.e. consensual feature lists) of the six situations can be interpreted in two complementary ways. At a qualitative level they provide evidence about the central characteristics that define the meaning of a particular rape category. At a quantitative level a comparison of the situations in terms of their shared as well as distinctive features illuminates the underlying structural relationships in the cognitive representation of the six situations.

Altogether, the findings reveal that the police officers participating in this study perceive rape as a serious criminal offence with lasting consequences for the victim. This is reflected most clearly in the prototype of the typical rape situation that is characterized by the majority of respondents as involving long-term psychological problems for the victim as well as the use of threat by the assailant. The high degree of overlap between the prototypes of the typical and the credible rape situation also fails to support the predominantly negative public image of the police in dealing with rape victims. Thus, the present findings join research by Holmstrom and Burgess (1978) and LeDoux and Hazelwood (1985), quoted earlier, in demonstrating that police officers generally adopt a view of rape that acknowledges the severe effects of the assault on the victim. At the same time, however, they also corroborate the tendency found by these authors for police officers to become suspicious if a rape complaint contains certain critical features. As Tables 2, 8 and 9 reveal, previous encounters between the victim and the assailant are perceived as typical features of the dubious and false rape complaints. Similarly, a rape complaint is likely to be treated with suspicion if the alleged assailant does not have a history of psychological disturbance and the attack took place at either the man's or the woman's place. This evidence suggests that the credibility of a rape victim is likely to be called in question whenever her account includes features that are consensually perceived as characterizing the dubious or false rape complaint.

In this context it should be pointed out that respondents' general positive or negative attitudes towards rape victims failed to significantly affect their descriptions of rape prototypes. While no conclusive explanation of this finding can be derived from the data, one lead is provided by the relatively low means for the individual items shown in Table 4. Most means, as well as the overall median used as the basis for classifying subjects, are within the 'disagreement' range of the response scale, suggesting that even with the abbreviated version of the ARVS few people with a genuinely negative attitude were identified in the present sample.

Beyond this general discussion, one aspect of the present results deserves special mention. It refers to the features of victim and assailant nationality which were consistently rated as irrelevant across the six situations. In order to fully appreciate this finding, a brief comment is in order about the demographic and political situation in West Berlin at the time of the study (before the fall of the Berlin Wall). West Berlin has a large foreign community, and the number of foreigners is disproportionately high compared to the rest of the country. Turkish migrant workers represent by far the largest group, but the number of refugees from Asian countries seeking political asylum in West Berlin is also substantial. In the late eighties, a new right-wing political party ('Die Republikaner') emerged, calling for a drastic reduction in the number of foreigners and capitalizing on people's fears of and prejudicial attitudes

against members of ethnic minorities. The sweeping success of this party in the 1989 elections to the Berlin senate has been attributed mainly to its widespread support among members of the police force. In view of this political climate it is particularly noteworthy that the present data provide no evidence of the nationality of either victim or rapist playing any role in police officers' characterization of rape complaints.

In methodological terms the study presented a strategy for investigating the subjective understanding of rape that differs from previous research in at least two respects:

- (1) It relies on the concept of cognitive prototypes as a theoretical frame of reference from which specific propositions about the cognitive organization of social knowledge can be derived and applied to the study of rape.
- (2) It allows respondents greater freedom in portraying their ideas about rape than is true for the majority of work in this area relying heavily on the use of rating scales.

The findings from the present study attest to the feasibility of the prototype strategy for obtaining detailed and fine-grained evidence about subjective rape definitions. This evidence includes both descriptive information relating to the contents of rape prototypes as well as a quantitative appraisal of the patterns of similarity and differences between different prototypes.

While the present research has drawn upon the prototype approach primarily for methodological purposes, a logical extension of this approach would be to study the cognitive processing of rape-related information from a prototype perspective. Here, future work can rely on a body of evidence, mentioned earlier, demonstrating the facilitative function of cognitive prototypes on various aspects of information processing, such as more confident judgements as well as faster and more accurate recall of prototype-consistent information. In this vein, the issue of how the processing of information about rape varies as a function of its prototypicality could be addressed as part of the task of exploring the cognitive mediators involved in individuals' responses to rape (cf. also Wyer, Bodenhausen and Gorman, 1985).

In conclusion, the concept of cognitive prototypes is advocated here as a frame of reference facilitating the systematic analysis of subjective definitions of rape. More specifically, the present findings contribute towards uncovering the implicit bases underlying the handling of rape cases by police officers who are entangled, perhaps more than any other group, in the intricate relationship between subjective and legal definitions of rape.

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