

## Real Rape Stereotype: Between Knowledge and Beliefs

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**Abstract:** The paper presents the results of a research related to the existence of stereotypes in connection with sexual violence among the general population of Serbia, as well as among the students of the University of Criminal Investigation and Police Studies in Belgrade (UCIPS). Bearing in mind that comparative studies testify to a high level the presence of stereotypes related to sexual violence, the researchers have attempted to establish whether there are any differences in understanding this issue among the above-mentioned categories of respondents, as some of them are prospective police officers, who will likely be in contact with the victims of sexual violence given the nature of their job. The focus was also on the differences in the manner of obtaining information about this phenomenon. The study encompassed a total of 310 respondents, out of whom 62 were the students of the UCIPS and 61 the students of other universities, whereas all others were above the student age. The data were collected by filling in a questionnaire and analysing responses by the use of descriptive statistics and correlation. The results suggest that the information from the Internet is a principal source of obtaining information about sexual violence except among the UCIPS students, who primarily learn about such phenomena from professional literature. The initial thesis on the absence of significant differences related to rape stereotypes among the UCIPS students and the students of other universities, irrespective of their previous professional education, has been confirmed, which indicates the need for narrowly targeted expert education of prospective police officers in respect of issues of sexual violence.

**Keywords:** stereotype, rape, police, UCIPS students.

### Graphical abstract



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## INTRODUCTION

Satisfying one's sex drive has not been instinctive for centuries now but rather based on the patterns of learning and accepting established and socially acceptable models (Marinković & Lajić, 2016). Sexual delinquency is a complex phenomenon which within a sexual relationship transcends the frames of what is natural and the consent of a partner, and whose essence derives from a specific conduct of the perpetrators of sex crimes and their relation towards the victim (Bošković, 2007). Although its share in the overall number of criminal offences is comparatively small, sexual violence has always drawn special attention of the public. Namely, according to the data of the Statistical Office, the number of adults reported for the criminal offence of rape in the Republic of Serbia has been stable for a decade at 0.1% out of the total number of reported offenders in one year. The use of aggression and violence related to violation of sexual intimacy give rise to a lot of attention both in the ranks of general and expert public (Feješ & Lajić, 2014).

Despite the nominally small number of criminal offences in this area, sexual violence is widespread, and sexual violence among acquaintances is prevalent as compared to the so-called 'rape by a stranger'. Rape among familiar persons (partners, household members, partners in a relationship or lovers) constitutes 66-76% out of the total number of sex offences, which leads to a conclusion that the closer relationship between the victim and the perpetrator, the more rarely crime gets reported (Marinković, 2012), and the literature offers data which suggest an even smaller percentage of rape by a complete stranger, at the level of only 9-11% (Anderson, 2007), or 14% (Temkin et al., 2018). Sexual violence in the family is a frequent phenomenon, but also a difficult topic for discussion (Đundek, 2011).

The data from a study dating from late 20<sup>th</sup> century about sexual experiences of student population testify to a high incidence of unwarranted sexual contact among acquaintances, whereby 34% of girls reported some kind of unsolicited sexual contact, 20% an attempted sexual intercourse and 10% an unwanted sexual intercourse (Ward et al., 1991). According to other studies, sexual violence is also frequent in the general population, where as many as 20% of adult women from six European states reported having experienced some form of sexual violence at some point in life, with a low level of reported cases (Olszewski, 2009). The data on the high incidence of sexual violence also applies to Serbia, given that in the *National Study on the General Features of Sex Behaviour among Adolescents* 5% of respondents reported having been raped or coerced into a sexual intercourse with a steady partner (Stanković et al., 2009).

Sexual violence is accompanied by myths that are based on stereotypes. The scientific community became more interested in the stereotypes related to sexual violence in the 1980's and the American author Martha Burt can be regarded to be the pioneer in popularizing this topic. A stereotype is considered to be a simplified and hard-to-change attitude towards someone or something, based on a misconceived or unjustifiably widespread generalization. There is no doubt that the myths on rape are widely spread, based on misconceptions, the nature of rape itself, as well as circumstances that accompany it (Burt, 1980; Temkin et al., 2018).



Among the most frequent stereotypes related to rape are such that it always takes place at night, out in the open, dark space, that it is perpetrated by a stranger, with the use of physical force, whereas the other myth is related to the alleged frequency of false rape reports (Martinjak, 2003; Anderson, 2007; McGee et al., 2011, Temkin et al., 2018). In addition to these, there are other frequent myths, such as the one that a woman can always physically resist a rapist, that elderly men cannot perpetrate rape due to less intense libido (Cusack & Timmer, 2011), that real rape victims immediately report to the police (Temkin et al., 2018) etc. Cook and Cusack (2010) list a large number of stereotypes related to sexual violence, while McGee and associates (2011) produce a list of 20 stereotypes whose incidence they tested on a sample of 3,120 respondents.

The perception of rape is significantly shaped by stereotypes about the traditional sex roles of a man and a woman, which leads to blaming the victim rather than the offender and playing down the significance of the crime (Willis, 1992), thus leading to justifying sexual violence (Spencer, 2016). The conducted research clearly indicates that the stereotypes about rape are deeply rooted and that a larger portion of the population believes in numerous myths about rape, which are at that significantly related to lack of confidence in the opposite sex and acceptance of interpersonal violence (Burt, 1980).

In this respect, the judiciary, police and prosecution are no exception although they are in charge of conducting preliminary inquiry and investigation. As a part of society, they are not immune to the influence of the environment and they may also be susceptible to the above-mentioned stereotypes. From the perspective of the police and prosecution, in cases of reported rape, there are two most prominent problems that can be identified as arising from the rape-related myths: their existence may lead to justification of violence and they may result in the lack of confidence in the victim's statement that does not fit in the expected version of the event. Temkin and associates (2018) quoted the study of Angiolini from 2015 as stating that prosecutors constantly failed to recognize the myths related to rape and concluded that managing investigation of rape remained questionable.

Anderson also points out to widespread stereotypes among investigative authorities, judiciary and medical professionals, along with frequent division into 'strong' and 'weak' cases, where it is desirable for the former, as the cases with the highest probability of convicting the suspect, to include as many stereotypes as possible (Anderson, 2007). Following the same lead, Fávero and associates (2020), researching the same phenomenon among police members, indicated that police officers who showed the highest levels of tolerance or acceptance of violence in their attitudes were at the same time the ones who thought there was no need for special training for work with the victims of sexual violence, which illustrates what difficulties anyone who tries to change the established customs and informal concepts that shape or characterize police actions will be faced with.

## METHODS

### *Experimental Approach to the Problem*

While conducting this research, the authors – motivated by the data from the aforementioned studies – sought to establish in which way the respondents acquired information about the issue of sexual violence, as well as to find out whether any of the real rape stereotypes



were present among the UCIPS students, as prospective police officers who would encounter the victims of sexual violence in the course of their work in Serbia, or to compare and find out whether their attitudes in this respect differ from the attitudes of the students from other universities or the attitudes of the general population. In this way the researchers wanted to check their initial hypothesis, according to which there was no significant difference in the attitudes of the UCIPS students on the one hand - despite acquired skills and knowledge related to criminal law, criminal investigation and practical police procedures - and the general public, on the other hand, as well as that sensitivity to delicate issues of sexual violence and the exclusion of stereotypes in professional practice can be achieved only by narrowly targeted professional training. In doing so, the authors were aware of the limitations arising from the snow ball sampling technique, as well as the fact that respondents may strive to give the expected answers.

### *Participants*

The sample comprised a total of 310 respondents from the territory of the Republic of Serbia. The core of the sample consisted of 62 third-year UCIPS students of vocational studies of criminalistics. The rest of the sample was provided by the snowball method, with each of the students providing four more respondents from their place of residence, thus ensuring better territorial coverage. The sample was semi-structured, with each student surveying one student from another university, one respondent up to the age of 30, and two respondents aged over 30. The last two categories made “general population” part of the sample. In this way, in addition to the territorial balance, a balance was established in respect of the respondents’ age. The research was conducted in early 2020.

### *Measurements and Procedures*

A survey questionnaire covering a total of 19 questions was used during the survey. The first five questions were of socio-demographic nature and related to gender, age, level of education, occupation, place of residence and its type (village, city, suburbs). The respondents then answered the questions concerning the dominant way of obtaining information about the phenomenon of rape, possible personal acquaintance with a person who was a rape victim and gave their opinion on the frequency of the commission of the act by a complete stranger. The respondents chose among the offered answers, with the possibility of writing an answer that was not offered on the list. The rest of the questionnaire consisted mainly of a set of statements reflecting the aforementioned stereotypes related to rape, to which the respondents expressed a degree of (dis)agreement via the Likert scale. The survey was conducted anonymously.

### *Statistical analyses*

The statistical analyses were conducted using Social Package for Social Sciences (IBM, SPSS statistics, version 18). The descriptive statistics for each age category were calculated including mean, standard deviation (SD), minimum (Min) and maximum (Max). The significance level was set to  $p < 0.05$ .



## RESULTS

For easier analysis and comparison, the sample in the research was divided into three groups. The first group consisted of the sample of the UCIPS students, including a total of 62 respondents, 36 men (58.1%) and 26 women (41.9%), average age of 22.55 (SD 1.888, Min 20, Max 32). Most students were from Belgrade, 13 (20.8%), followed by Gornji Milanovac 5 (8.1%), Zemun 4 (6.5%) and Vlasotince 3 (4.8%), whereas other places were represented with less than 5%. The second group was made up of the students from other universities and colleges from the territory of Serbia, a total of 61, out of whom 25 were men (41%) and 36 women (59%), average age 22.69 (SD 2.054, Min 19, Max 32). The most respondents from this group were the students from Belgrade, 16 (26.2%), Gornji Milanovac and Kraljevo with 4 respondents each (6.6%), while other cities were represented with less than 5%. The third group (general population) consisted of other respondents, a total of 187, of whom 105 (56.1%) were men and 82 women (43.9%), average age 36.79 (SD 11.117, Min 18, Max 71). The most respondents in this group were from Belgrade, 41 (21.9%), then Gornji Milanovac 13 (7%), while the respondents from other cities accounted for less than 5%.

**Table 1.** *Sample Structure*

|                      | UCIPS students | Students of other universities | General population |
|----------------------|----------------|--------------------------------|--------------------|
| Number               | 62             | 61                             | 187                |
| Share in the sample  | 20%            | 19.7%                          | 60.3%              |
| Male to female ratio | 58.1%:41.9%    | 41%:59%                        | 56.1%:43.9%        |

The first question related to the dominant source of knowledge related to rape generally, its manifestations and frequency with which specific criminal offences were committed. The respondents could circle one (prevalent) of the offered answers or opt for writing an answer that was not on the list.

**Table 2.** *The Respondents' Sources of Information About Rape*

|  | UCIPS students | Students of other universities | General population |
|--|----------------|--------------------------------|--------------------|
| Newspapers and other printed media                 | 5 (8.1%)       | 3 (4.9%)                       | 42 (22.5%)         |
| Internet (electronic news, Internet portals, etc.) | 22 (35.5%)     | 42 (68.9%)                     | 96 (51.3%)         |
| Radio and television                               | 9 (14.5%)      | 8 (13.1%)                      | 39 (20.9%)         |
| Expert literature                                  | 15 (24.2%)     | 1 (1.6%)                       | 6 (3.2%)           |
| Previous education                                 | 10 (16.1%)     | 2 (3.3%)                       | 2 (1.1%)           |
| Friends/acquaintances                              | 0              | 2 (3.3%)                       | 1 (0.5%)           |
| Other  | 1 (1.6%)       | 3 (4.9%)                       | 1 (0.5%)           |
| Total  | 62 (100%)      | 61 (100%)                      | 187 (100%)         |





Following this, the respondents declared whether they personally knew anyone who had had non-consensual sexual intercourse at least once in their life, and the answers received from the three groups were presented in the table below.

**Table 3.** *Personal Acquaintance with Someone Who Had Unconsented Sexual Intercourse*

|       | UCIPS students | Students of other universities | General population |
|-------|----------------|--------------------------------|--------------------|
| No    | 53 (85.5%)     | 52 (85.2%)                     | 155 (82.9%)        |
| Yes   | 9 (14.5%)      | 9 (14.8%)                      | 32 (17.1%)         |
| Total | 62 (100%)      | 61 (100%)                      | 187 (100%)         |

This was followed by a set of questions about attitudes regarding the aforementioned stereotypes about rape – the stereotype of a complete stranger, the commission of the act in the open and remote place, and the mandatory use of force in the course of committing the crime, i.e. about the inevitable physical harm to the rape victim. Regarding the views on previous acquaintance between the perpetrator and the victim, the respondents were offered to choose among answers that implied: a) that the victim and the perpetrator had known each other before, at least superficially (familiar); b) that they did not know each other at all (unfamiliar); or c) that there was no significant difference in the incidence of the two options. The final response was offered to allow the respondents to remain undecided.

**Table 4.** *The Respondents' Attitudes Regarding the Acquaintance Between the Perpetrator of Rape and the Victim*

|                            | UCIPS students | Students of other universities | General population |
|----------------------------|----------------|--------------------------------|--------------------|
| Familiar                   | 29 (46.8%)     | 19 (31.1%)                     | 51 (27.3%)         |
| Unfamiliar                 | 11 (17.8%)     | 9 (14.8%)                      | 30 (16.1%)         |
| No significant differences | 19 (30.6%)     | 25 (41%)                       | 79 (42.2%)         |
| I do not know              | 3 (4.8%)       | 8 (13.1%)                      | 27 (14.4%)         |
| Total                      | 62 (100%)      | 61 (100%)                      | 187 (100%)         |

The next question concerned the victim's clothing and the respondents were asked if a female person who dresses more liberally and moves in the locations and at the time when there are no other people around thereby contributes significantly to becoming a victim of rape.



**Table 5.** *The Respondents' Attitudes Regarding the Relation Between the Victims' Clothing and Their Victimization*

|                   | UCIPS students | Students of other universities | General population |
|-------------------|----------------|--------------------------------|--------------------|
| Strongly disagree | 9 (14.5%)      | 14 (23%)                       | 21 (11.2%)         |
| Disagree          | 8 (12.9%)      | 8 (13.1%)                      | 38 (20.3%)         |
| Undecided         | 5 (8.1%)       | 8 (13.1%)                      | 26 (13.9%)         |
| Agree             | 33 (53.2%)     | 21 (34.4%)                     | 60 (32.1%)         |
| Strongly agree    | 7 (11.3%)      | 10 (16.4%)                     | 42 (22.5%)         |
| Total             | 62 (100%)      | 61 (100%)                      | 187 (100%)         |

T-Test for independent samples was applied to test the assumption of age differences (older and younger age group of participants) in the context of accepting the mentioned stereotypes. The result showed that there was not statistical significant difference between two groups ( $t(121) = 1.13, p > .05$ ). The same kind of the result, from the same statistical analysis, was obtained in the context of type of faculty (UCIPS or non-UCIPS students) for accepting the mentioned stereotypes ( $t(186) = 1.64, p > .05$ ).

Also, there was no statistically significant difference between the UCIPS students and the second group of participants, which consisted of the students from other faculties and the general population ( $t(308) = 1.44, p > .05$ ).

The question that followed concerned physical violence against the victim as an indispensable part of the act of rape. The question was formulated as a claim according to which rape is always and inevitably accompanied by physical harm to the victim, with which the respondents expressed a degree of (dis)agreement on the Likert scale.

**Table 6.** *The Respondents' Attitudes Regarding Indispensable Physical Harm to the Rape Victims*

|                   | UCIPS students | Students of other universities | General population |
|-------------------|----------------|--------------------------------|--------------------|
| Strongly disagree | 0 (0%)         | 3 (4.9%)                       | 3 (1.6%)           |
| Disagree          | 5 (8.1%)       | 1 (1.6%)                       | 7 (3.7%)           |
| Undecided         | 2 (3.2%)       | 2 (3.3%)                       | 17 (9.1%)          |
| Agree             | 31 (50%)       | 29 (47.6%)                     | 105 (56.2%)        |
| Strongly agree    | 24 (38.7%)     | 26 (42.6%)                     | 55 (29.4%)         |
| Total             | 62 (100%)      | 61 (100%)                      | 187 (100%)         |



## DISCUSSION

When discussing the general knowledge about rape, its manifestations and frequency of occurrence of specific criminal offences, it is evident that, in accordance with the time we live in, the Internet is the dominant form of obtaining information among all categories of respondents. Still, there are noticeable differences stemming from the difference in age and age-related habits, as well as education, so that students are informed in the aforementioned manner in over two thirds (68.9%) of cases, and the rest in just over a half of the cases (51.3%). Newspapers and other printed media, together with radio and television, account for only 18% among the students whose average age was 23, whereas in the general population sample (average age around 37) they made up 43.4%. Quite expectedly, the UCIPS students significantly differed from the other two categories of respondents as the Internet as a source of information in this category was half the level of the students from other universities (35.5%), while expert literature and previous education together accounted for more than 40%, whereas for the other two categories this value was below 5%.

The question about personal acquaintance with a victim of sexual violence was aimed at establishing whether there were significant differences regarding the perception of the prevalence of this phenomenon in the society, regardless of official statistics, which indicates a relatively small share of sexual violence in the overall number of perpetrated criminal offences. The respondents' answers suggest a relative uniformity of experience across all three categories, where the number of those who knew the victims of sexual violence ranged between 14.5% and 17.1%, which is a value that significantly exceeds official statistics on the incidence of sexual violence and calls for additional research. Again, as expected, this number is the highest in the group of respondents who do not belong to the student population, given their more advanced age and hence their richer life experience and a wider circle of persons they got to know in various aspects of life. Yet, as previously mentioned, a difference of only 1.6% suggests that these differences are insignificant.

The views regarding the stereotype of rape by a complete stranger show that police education does yield results in terms of better knowledge of the facts from criminal investigation practice and better awareness of stereotypes, although their knowledge of the facts was nevertheless of limited range, which is illustrated by the example that follows and also by some other examples yet to be discussed. Namely, just under a half (46.8%) of the UCIPS students thought that in most cases there was previous acquaintanceship between the perpetrator and the victim, which is the case in practice (Anderson, 2007; Marinković, 2012; Temkin et al., 2018), but 17.7% respondents from this group still think the opposite, along with almost a third who thought that there were no significant differences between these two forms. By comparison, a national study on rape-related stereotypes conducted in Ireland found that this percentage was over 80% (McGee et al., 2011) and in this context the value obtained in our research can be regarded as rather low. Burt (1980) also found that more than half of respondents agreed with the stereotypes about sexual violence.

In this relation it should be noted that the respondents were the third-year UCIPS students who had previously obtained the information about this criminal offence through four academic courses. These included criminal law, criminology, criminalistic psychology, and criminalistic methodology. Reasons for the poor state of information could be in part attributed to the fact that in the course of the reform of higher education at the





beginning of the 21<sup>st</sup> century, known as the Bologna process, all of the mentioned subjects were reduced to one-term courses with a very limited number of lessons (2-3 lectures and – on average – 2 practical lessons per week), which is a rather modest scope that may have easily resulted in a complete failure to adopt vital information related to this aspect of sexual violence. Hence the situation in which familiarity of the students with such details depends exclusively on the lecturers' sensibility and sense of what is important, and does not derive from the systemic approach to sexual violence as something that should be in the focus of practical police activities.

The number of respondents in the remaining two categories who found that both forms were equally present exceeded 40%, where 31.1% of younger respondents (students) believed that there was previous acquaintanceship between the perpetrator and the victim and among the older ones the percentage was 27.3%. The last thing mentioned testifies to the known thesis that younger and better educated respondents are less likely to accept stereotypes related to rape (Burt, 1980) and that, conversely, older ones are more likely to accept them (McGee et al., 2011).

The stereotype about the victim's liberal dressing and presence in locations and at times with lower frequency of people as a typical pattern for rape was present among over 50% of respondents in all categories. It is interesting that this stereotype was most prevalent among the prospective police officers – the UCIPS students (64.5%), while it was significantly lower among the two remaining categories of respondents – 50.8% among students and 54.6% among the older population. By comparison, this stereotype was present among approximately 30% of respondents in Ireland (McGee et al., 2011). Although a lot of the UCIPS students know that rape most often occurs among familiar persons, and therefore in locations where they usually live and work, it appears that the stereotype about rape in dark distant spots is exceptionally appealing and seems so convincing that the respondents simply forgot the previously acquired knowledge.

The data speak in favour of the two previously mentioned assumptions – fragmentation of the educational process of police officers-to-be regarding the facts related to sexual violence, as well as a lower tendency towards stereotypes among the younger and better educated. This should be seen in the context of data showed by Ljubin (2004), who researched the attitudes of students of Police College in Zagreb (Croatia) and found that there were no statistically significant differences between men and women in their belief in the testimonies of rape victims. In relation to the attitudes of the UCIPS students, there is a need for more detailed research on the psychological profile of future police officers and possible links between machismo and conservatism as prominent features of law enforcement profession (Milosavljević, 1997) and the attitudes regarding the subject under survey.

The stereotype on physical harm to the rape victim as a constituent part of the act of rape belongs to the group of the most prevalent stereotypes, with an extremely high incidence among all groups of respondents. Namely, the percentage of respondents agreeing with the claim that rape is always and inevitably accompanied by inflicting physical injury to the victim ranged between 85.5% and 90.1%. Interestingly, the older respondents showed a slightly weaker belief in this stereotype (85.5%) as compared to students (90.1%) or the UCIPS students (88.7%), which was the only situation that departed from the thesis about the younger population being better informed. The result can in part be explained by a



slightly larger number of undecideds in this category (9.1% as compared to 3.3% among students or 3.2% among the UCIPS students), probably as a result of a more pronounced critical attitude deriving from life experience. However, it is still an extremely high level of acceptance for this misconception about rape, especially if one bears in mind that the reality is diametrically opposed. This is best illustrated by the example given by Anderson (2007), who quoted research by other authors as saying that in 84% of analysed rape cases minimal aggression was applied, the use of weapons was absent, and the injury to the victims of sexual violence was minimal.

## CONCLUSIONS

The results obtained in the research speak in favour of the dominant impact of information adopted through the Internet on the formation of awareness of rape as a form of crime, as well as the wide acceptance of stereotypes related to rape as a manifestation of crime, both in the general population and among the UCIPS students. It is also evident that there are no significant differences in the level of adopting stereotypes related to rape among the UCIPS students and the students of other universities.

However, when we move beyond that, the students' answers to other questions that correlate with the mentioned one, for instance the question regarding the inevitable occurrence of physical injuries, rape in dark and distant places, etc., a fragmentation is evident in the adopted knowledge because the initial information loses its significance, and the students approach the mainstream in terms of their views and opinions, noticeably moving towards accepting what they think is right – the stereotype of real rape. It can be said that the initial hypothesis has been confirmed as there is no significant difference between the attitudes of the UCIPS students and the rest of the population, despite the skills and knowledge they acquired in the course of education.

We can therefore conclude that sensitivity to delicate issues of sexual violence and exclusion of stereotypes in professional practice can be achieved only through narrowly targeted professional training.

The studies referred to in the opening section of the paper indicate that stereotypes about rape are present among other professionals, not only police officers, but also doctors, prosecutors and judges. It appears that at the professional level there is frequently harsh realism, which does not respect actual needs of the victims, the violation of their integrity and dignity, nor the interests of criminal justice that should be achieved through criminal proceedings and the cases are seen through the prism of the expected outcome of the ensuing court proceedings. The broad acceptance of rape stereotypes and the relevant acts of professionals result in repercussions on a personal level to the victims of sexual violence, such as secondary victimization of the victims, withdrawal, non-reporting and waiving further criminal prosecution of the perpetrator, and – seen in a wider social context – all of the above gives an unintentional incentive to sexual violence and its persistence in the given community. The intangible damage inflicted in this way is immeasurable and it seems that the



least one can do is to initiate the implementation of specialist training among all relevant subjects that come into contact with victims of sexual violence.

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