**Forced-to-penetrate cases: Deconstructing myths and stereotypes**

# Introduction

Rape myths are ‘prejudicial, stereotyped, or false beliefs about rape, rape victims and rapists’ (Burt, 1980: p.217), which deny, justify or minimise sexual violence. They ‘help influence and reinforce what is and is not sexual violence, as well as who is a “credible victim”’ (Walfield 2018: p.4). A substantial body of academic research has developed which explores the scope, prevalence, and impacts of such myths, particularly in cases involving female rape victims (see, e.g. Ellison & Munro, 2009 and Temkin et al., 2018). Much of this research has been conducted with the aim of challenging and deconstructing these myths in an effort to reduce rape myth acceptance and improve societal and criminal justice responses for victims. Male rape myths have also been explored in the literature, although this body of work is smaller, and the focus has largely been on male-on-male rape (see, e.g. Struckman-Johnson & Struckman-Johnson 1992 and Walfield 2018). Engagement specifically with the myths that emerge in cases of female-on-male sexual violence has been more limited, particularly in relation to forced-to-penetrate (FTP) cases. These cases involve a man being forced to penetrate, with his penis and without his consent, a woman’s vagina, anus, or mouth (Weare 2018a: p.110). This form of sexual violence is not legally recognised as rape in any UK jurisdictions, instead being prosecuted under alternative and ‘less serious’ sexual offences, such as ‘causing a person to engage in sexual activity without consent’ (see, Sexual Offences Act 2003, section 4; and Sexual Offences (Northern Ireland) Order 2008, Article 8).

This chapter explores and deconstructs the myths and stereotypes that have emerged in FTP cases. To do so, it draws upon qualitative data gathered from the first research study in the UK to interview male FTP survivors. The data provides evidence that dispels the myths and allows the impacts of these stereotyped attitudes to be considered, both for male survivors and legal and criminal justice systems. The research project which gathered this qualitative data ran for 15 months from May 2018 to July 2019. The study was funded by the British Academy and involved Survivors Manchester (a male survivor support organisation based in North-West England) as project partners. Semi-structured interviews were conducted with 30 men who self-identified as having been FTP a woman. The interviews focused on the contexts within which compelled penetration took place; the impacts of being FTP a woman on participants’ mental, emotional, and physical wellbeing; the agencies and organisations (if any) men engaged with; and their perceptions of legal and criminal justice responses to this form of sexual violence. Participants were recruited through online, print, and social media, as well as third sector organisations who support male survivors. Participants were able to choose whether they wanted to be interviewed face-to-face at Survivors Manchester’s premises, or via telephone or Skype. All interviews were recorded and transcribed verbatim. The transcripts were then ‘manually’ thematically analysed, before computer aided analysis was undertaken using NVivo. Ethical approval for the study was gained from the Faculty of Arts and Social Sciences and Management School Ethics Committee at Lancaster University. Participants provided informed consent for their involvement and were signposted to support services before, during, and after their interviews (see Weare & Hulley, 2019 for more detail on the methodological and ethical processes followed in the study).

# Forced-to-penetrate myths and stereotypes

During their interviews many participants discussed what Oswald and Holmgreen (2013) describe as the ‘stereotypic representations of [sexual and domestic] violence [which] generally portray men as aggressors and women as victims’ (p.83). The dominance of this female-victim/male-perpetrator narrative can make it difficult to conceive of male victimization, particularly where the perpetrator is female. Therefore, it is perhaps unsurprising that the FTP myths that emerged most frequently in participants’ narratives reflected the disbelief and minimization of female-on-male sexual violence. Three of the key myths that emerged were: 1. An erection signals a man’s consent, and therefore a man cannot have sex with a woman without his consent; 2. Men are “bigger and stronger” than women and so can stop a woman from having sex with them should they want to; 3. Even if men can be FTP women, these experiences are not harmful for men. Each of these myths will be considered in turn, before moving on to reflect on the importance of deconstructing such myths and stereotypes in order to improve the legal and criminal justice responses to this form of sexual violence.

## Myth 1: An erection signals a man’s consent, and therefore a man cannot have sex with a woman without his consent

Underpinning this myth is the belief that a man can only obtain and sustain an erection if he is consenting to, or wants to engage in, sex. Consequently, there can be no such thing as a man being *forced* to penetrate a woman; all penetration is consensual because an erection signifies consent. If a man did not want to have sex with a woman, or was being threatened or attacked by her, it is believed that ‘it would be almost impossible for [him] to achieve or maintain an erection’ (Sarrel & Masters, 1982: p.118). Put simply, ‘it is impossible for a woman to have sexual relations with a man who does not desire her’ (Struckman-Johnson & Anderson, 1998: p.12). Taking this belief to its furthest point, it is also assumed that a man cannot *sustain* an erection if he is not enjoying the sexual activity. Therefore, if a man maintains his arousal then the experience must not only be consensual, but also enjoyable.

Several of the study participants were acutely aware of this myth and addressed it directly in their interviews. For some men, their sexual arousal despite their lack of consent resulted in difficulty processing their experience due to feelings of self-blame. For example, Participant 24 explained;

I’ve always had this ideology that’s been put into my mind by other people that if I get erect, doesn’t that mean I want sex? And how can I be raped? Because if I get hard, erect, and somebody is penetrated by me, that’s not me being raped… and it’s just this whole… whole topic is very difficult.

Other participants reported a sense of ‘body betrayal’, where their bodies responded sexually even though they did not want them to. As noted by Fuchs (2004); ‘stereotypes teach male victims that an erection during a sexual assault means that they enjoyed their attack, leaving them feeling betrayed by their own bodies’ (p.117). This was the experience of Participant 18;

I felt that my body let me down … and I’ve learned this before in therapy, which is that your body is born or programmed to respond in a certain way, but you might not want to be in that situation.

Participants also reported how this myth acted as a barrier, preventing them from disclosing their FTP experience(s) to friends or family. For those who did disclose, the pervasiveness of this myth meant that they were often met with disbelief or incredulity by those they told.

I told them about it and um as I say they kind of laughed it off and said “well surely you gave consent when you were… yeah, hard’’ – Participant 9.

He said “how can you possibly ... how can a bloke have sex if he doesn’t want to, you’re obviously making it up” – Participant 28.

It was clear from their interviews that participants were able to obtain and sustain erections, even when they were feeling a range of negative emotions and were not consenting to sex with the female perpetrator. For example, Participant 17 explained how he was ‘revulsed’ [*sic.*] but his ‘body would [still] physically respond’. These findings align with research on male sexual arousal, which has consistently demonstrated that men and boys can respond ‘sexually to female assault or abuse even though [their] emotional states … have been overwhelmingly negative - embarrassment, humiliation, anxiety, fear, anger, or even terror’ (Sarrel & Masters, 1982: p.118). Indeed, it is well established that ‘an erection can be induced by fear’ (Fisher and Pina, 2013: p.57) or a variety of emotions; it is an innate ‘physical response [that is] rooted in biology, not in implied consent’ (Widow, 1996: p.234). This is well illustrated using the example of adolescent males who ‘experience erections under a variety of circumstances: risk, peril, hazard, threat, accidents, anger, riding a bike fast … playing or watching exciting games … boxing, wrestling’ (Fuchs, 2004: p.102) etc. The physiological nature of male sexual arousal was noted by Participant 17; ‘men wake up with erections all the time, don’t they? … When boys are going through puberty they get erections all the time you know.’ The pervasiveness of this myth, which views ‘an erection as a signifier for consent to another’s sexual advances [both] perpetuates [and is perpetuated by] the stereotype that men always want to have sex’ (Fuchs, 2004: p.117). This stereotype of male sexual insatiability is discussed in more detail later in the chapter in relation to myth 3.

## Myth 2: Men are “bigger and stronger” than women and so can stop a woman from having sex with them if they want to

The second myth that frequently emerged in interviews with participants related to their physical stature. In particular, the belief that men’s physical strength and size relative to women’s means that they are incapable of being overpowered and forced into having sex. This myth feeds into two wider societal stereotypes around the impossibility of men’s victimization. First, that ‘they are physically strong enough to defend themselves from … attack’ (Fisher & Pina, 2013: p.58), and secondly, that men are sexually dominant and assertive, rather than submissive and passive (Fisher & Pina, 2013: p.58). When interviewed, participants’ concerns about this myth most frequently arose in relation to disclosing or reporting their FTP experiences. Men were worried that the difference in physical stature between themselves and the female perpetrator would mean they would not be believed, or that it would prevent a successful outcome for their case should they report to the police.

I mean I’m just under six foot and I’m about twelve and a half stone so I’m not a big bloke, but I’m a lot bigger than her, she’s five foot one, so again, you know? There’s that disparity as well – Participant 26.

This focus on men’s “size and strength” is incredibly problematic. First, it is well documented in both academic and practitioner literature that both male and female victims of sexual violence do not always physically resist, and instead may react passively with ‘frozen fear, helplessness, or submission’ (Walfield, 2018: p.19). Secondly, the focus on a man’s ability to physically resist as a reason why FTP cases cannot happen echoes the archaic, yet pervasive, female rape myth that “if a woman doesn’t … fight back, you can’t really say that it was rape” (Peterson & Muehlenhard, 2004: p131). However, there is no requirement within UK sexual offences legislation that force be used, either by the perpetrator during the offence, or by the victim in resistance.

Secondly, this myth also assumes that men are both willing and able to use their physical strength to prevent their own victimization. However, this overlooks the complexity of men’s FTP experiences and the different ways such sexual violence occurs. It also overlooks the variety of ‘aggressive strategies’ used by female perpetrators (see e.g. Struckman-Johnson et al., 2003; Weare, 2018b), many of which may not be effectively combatted through a man’s use of strength and force. Indeed, in this study, half (15) of the interviewees reported that they were FTP their female partners in the context of an abusive intimate relationship, with this form of sexual violence taking place alongside other forms of abuse, e.g. coercive control, physical violence, financial and economic abuse, and emotional and psychological abuse (Weare & Hulley, 2019: p.9). For these participants, being FTP their abusive partner was a form of control, psychological abuse, and dehumanization. This was the experience of Participant 16;

And you go “come on, you’re six foot two, you’re an ex-rower, you’re a big intelligent guy, how can you be scared of a woman who is a foot shorter than you?” and it’s like “because I’ve been programmed through threats, intimidation and violence to be scared of her and … to freeze because then hopefully she won’t hurt me”.

Similarly, several men reported being fearful of the “consequences” if they tried to stop the sexual violence or did not ‘perform on demand’. This was the experience of Participant 5: ‘I know if I don’t [have sex with her] I will be assaulted much more violently … I know what’s coming if I’m not ready to have sex with her – there’s gonna be violence.’ Other participants were unable to use physical force to prevent their victimization because they were asleep or unconscious, or because they had been physically restrained by the female perpetrator.

Several of the men also raised concerns around using physical force against the female perpetrator. They were worried that even if they used the minimum level of force to stop her, they could leave bruises or marks that could be used by the female perpetrator to allege that they were the aggressor, rather than the victim. Their fear was that if any criminal allegations were made then she would be believed over him, and he would be arrested. This was noted by Participant 8:

And I thought to myself “well I could use my strength to, to prevent her from doing what she’s about to do, but if I do that she’s going to make a commotion um, if I hurt her in any way and leave a mark or bruise then I could be arrested for that.”

Other participants noted that they did not want to use force against a woman because of ‘the norm that men are not supposed to hit women’ (Weiss, 2010: p.291).

She was only very thin and quite a lot smaller than me but I’ve got it ingrained in me not to hit women … I think I could probably have quite easily have pushed her off but, I just don’t put my hands on women, it’s the way I was brought up – Participant 30.

As can be seen from the narratives incorporated here, the reality of being FTP a woman was far more complex than men simply being “bigger and stronger” and thus able to stop it from happening.

## Myth 3 – Even if men can be FTP women, these experiences are not harmful for men

This myth reflects long-held stereotypes and sex scripts around men’s sexuality ‘that require men to be sexually potent, dominant and in control’ (Weiss, 2010: p277). It is believed that ‘men who are attracted to women should always take, rather than resist, any opportunity of sex with a willing woman’ (Davies, 2013: p.97) because men are ‘sexually insatiable [with the consequence that] virtually all sex is welcome’ (Stemple & Meyer, 2014: p.e20) all of the time. The consequence of these stereotypes is that even if it is recognized that men can be FTP women, this form of sexual violence is likely to be viewed as a ‘“sexual experience”, not a violation of will’ (Struckman-Johnson & Struckman-Johnson, 1994: p.113) because “achieving” sexual intercourse is an activity that is ‘“sex role congruent”’ (Struckman-Johnson & Struckman-Johnson, 1994: p.113). This mitigates any negative impacts that could arise, creating a perception that men cannot, and do not, experience trauma or distress from a sexual experience. Taken to its furthest point, the myth goes so far as to suggest that ‘men’s reputation and value may be enhanced [if they are] desired “so much” by a woman that she tries to coerce [them] into sex’ (O’Sullivan et al., 1998: p.180). Thus, the negative aspects and consequences of being “coerced”, or the sexual experience being non-consensual, are replaced with a narrative that reinforces men’s masculinity through their sexual desirability.

The perceived lack of harm in female-on-male sexual violence cases has been reaffirmed in rape myth research. For example, in his 2018 study on male rape myth acceptance, Walfield found that ‘several of the most adhered to myths downplayed the harm of rape, particularly when the offender was female’ (Walfield, 2018: p.18) and that ‘male sexual insatiability was another consistent theme among the adhered to [myths], with some individuals agreeing that victims can enjoy forced sex as well as enjoy rape committed by a woman’ (Walfield, 2018: p.18). Other studies have consistently found that female-on-male sexual violence is perceived as less serious and less likely to cause harm than male perpetrated sexual violence (Oswald & Holmgreen, 2013: p.86). The “no-harm” myth is also frequently seen in media reporting of male sexual victimization, particularly where it involves female teachers and adolescent male students. These cases are portrayed as ‘non-serious or even positive for the victim, even when the victim in these situations is below the legal age of consent’ (Davies, 2013: p.95). This example was used by Participant 23 in his interview to illustrate the perceived lack of harm associated with FTP cases:

Where it’s been reported in the press that a teenage boy has had sexual relations with, or an affair with, or a fling with, an older woman, you know a teacher maybe … and in that scenario … if it’s boys who are teenagers and women are the adults then “oh he’s having a fling” you know, whereas if it’s the other way round [i.e. a male teacher and female student] it’s “no they were sexually abused”.

Other participants also discussed this myth, and it was clear that perceptions around a lack of harm, or even enjoyment, of their FTP experiences was something that they were mindful of. For example, Participant 16 explained that:

Talking about the fact that your ex-partner used to get drunk and force herself on you, rape you essentially, it’s like most blokes’ fantasy isn’t it? Down the pub you know, she gets a bit drunk, she gets a bit frisky “yay! Oh, that would be fantastic! I would love a bit of that!” no you really wouldn’t, you bloody wouldn’t, it’s not the way that you think it is.

For several of the men, the myth “came to life” in the responses they received when attempting to disclose their experiences. For example, Participant 9 recalled trying to tell his male friends about being FTP a female friend and receiving the following response; ‘one of my mates was like “well what are you complaining at? You got your end away!” sort of thing.’ Participant 12 explained how masculine expectations of men’s sexuality acted as a barrier to him disclosing his FTP experience to anyone prior to his interview: ‘I’ve never told anyone this because it’s like…. If you’re a guy, you’d be like, you know what they’re gonna say, it’s like “what are you moaning about?”’

Despite the pervasiveness of the “no-harm” myth, it is clear that being FTP a woman can have serious emotional and psychological impacts on male victims (see, e.g. Struckman-Johnson & Struckman-Johnson, 1994; Weare 2018c). In this study, while not all of the participants reported harm as a result of their FTP experiences, the majority did. For 25 men their FTP experiences were overwhelmingly negative, with often substantial and long-lasting impacts. Over two-thirds of the men experienced detrimental impacts on their mental health, including anxiety, depression, flashbacks, panic attacks, post-traumatic stress disorder, suicidal ideation and suicide attempts. For example, Participant 15 explained; ‘I’ve been diagnosed with PTSD … [the] trauma and stuff, the impact has just been colossal, absolutely colossal.’ Men’s emotional wellbeing was also impacted, with many participants reporting feelings of guilt, self-blame, shame, poor self-worth, and anger. Participant 30 explained:

There wasn’t anybody … I could think about telling, because I used to, I mean I used to look in the mirror a lot and feel shame and disgust so I thought “I can’t look at anybody and tell them that.”

The impacts also extended to men’s personal lives, with some participants reporting difficulties in forming new intimate relationships, and others disclosing various types of sexual dysfunction or a reduced sex drive. Participant 7 explained: ‘when I started trying to have another relationship I found that I was having impotence problems.’ The breadth and depth of harms reported in this study clearly undermine the “no-harm” myth that has become so synonymous with female-on-male sexual violence.

# Importance of deconstructing myths and stereotypes

Conceptualisations of FTP cases in legal and criminal justice discourse which reflect these myths are detrimental to ensuring that both male victims and female perpetrators are treated appropriately. By deconstructing the myths that underpin some legal and criminal justice responses to FTP cases, it is possible to improve responses to this form of sexual violence. As noted in the discussions above, many of the participants interviewed were acutely aware of these myths. They acted as barriers to disclosure of their FTP experiences to others and impacted the responses they received when they did disclose. These myths were also relevant to men’s engagement with the criminal justice process. Only 5 men had reported their FTP experiences to the police, typically in the context of reporting wider domestic abuse they were suffering (Weare and Hulley, 2019: p.16). The experiences of these men with police were overwhelmingly negative, with some of their responses reflecting the FTP myths discussed above. For example, when Participant 26 reported his FTP experience, an officer told him that he must have enjoyed what happened:

She looked me in the eyes and said “it says here that she squeezed your testicles – well you must have enjoyed it or you’d have reported it sooner” ... and I was speechless, that was it. I couldn’t say anything after that. I was just gone.

The officer’s comments reflect sentiments that underpin the “no harm” myth, namely that men enjoy all sexual interactions with women.

The majority of participants did not report their FTP experiences to the police, often because they had overwhelmingly negative perceptions of both the police and criminal justice system. Some of these concerns directly related to fears they would not be believed, for example due to the ‘erection equals consent’ myth. Participant 29 explained: ‘Someone being forced it would be like well you have to be aroused, sexually aroused, so he had to be kind of into it to a certain extent, so there’s an extra layer.’ Moreover, men were concerned about the “bigger and stronger” myth and how this would impact the police believing them. For example, Participant 7 noted:

I was thinking about it. I thought, actually, “what are the chances of there being anything successful happening here?”… A man who is six foot two, not slightly built, you know, I play rugby … getting a successful conviction for that.

Deconstructing the myths and stereotypes discussed in this chapter are important to encouraging men’s disclosure to the police by improving their perceptions around police responses. They are also relevant to improving police responses to men who do report, by ensuring that officers do not invoke such myths and stereotypes when engaging with male survivors.

The deconstruction of these myths, particularly the “lack of harm” myth is also relevant to potential law reform in this area. As noted at the beginning of this chapter, FTP cases are not currently prosecuted as rape in the UK. Instead they are prosecuted under alternative offences, e.g. in England and Wales and in Northern Ireland it is dealt with under the wider offence of causing a person to engage in sexual activity without consent (Sexual Offences Act 2003, section 4; and Sexual Offences (Northern Ireland) Order 2008, Article 8). Part of the justification for the exclusion of FTP cases from the legal definition of rape in England and Wales reflected the “no-harm” rape myth discussed above. Indeed, in *Setting in the Boundaries* (Home Office, 2000)*,* the recommendation paper published prior to the enactment of the Sexual Offences Act 2003, the issue of harm was cited as a reason for the different treatment of FTP cases. In the paper it was made clear that FTP cases were not ‘the equivalent of rape’ (Home Office, 2000: p.15), but rather were ‘a serious assault on the man’s sexual autonomy’ (Home Office, 2000: p.31). Unfortunately, no evidence was cited to support these assertions, and thus it is difficult to believe that such an approach was not influenced by FTP myths. However, as discussed earlier in the chapter, the majority of participants in this study reported substantial and long-lasting harm to their mental and emotional well-being, as well as their personal relationships. All victims of sexual violence experience harms personally and thus differently. However, there are evidently ‘significant similarities, particularly in relation to the psychological and emotional traumas that [male FTP] victims have reported’ (Weare, 2018a: p.125) when compared to those that are well recognized in the experiences of rape victims. With harm being particularly relevant to the exclusion of FTP cases from the legal definition of rape, deconstructing the “no-harm” myth is relevant to pursuing potential law reform in this area.

Finally, underpinning any improvements in the legal and criminal justice responses to FTP cases involves improving societal understanding of this form of sexual violence. This is not least because of the role of lay people sitting on juries in sexual offences cases. Indeed, it has been well documented in research on rape cases that ‘jurors are influenced by the attitudes they bring with them into the jury room’ (Horvath & Brown, 2009: p.6). This will undoubtedly include myths and stereotypes around female-on-male sexual victimisation, not least because female-perpetrated aggression fails to meet the “real rape” script simply by violating the assumption of a male aggressor (Oswald and Holmgreen, 2013: p.85). So, for example, because ‘consent is an important legal element when jurors decide whether or not [sexual violence] occurred’ (Oswald and Holmgreen, 2013: p.87), if jurors believe the “erection equals consent” myth then they are likely to find a defendant not guilty. Similarly, if they believe that a man is able to defend himself if he is not consenting to a woman’s sexual advances, then this is likely to ‘translate into more difficulty successfully prosecuting women when they engage in sexually aggressive behaviors … against a male’ (Oswald and Holmgreen, 2013: p.87). Therefore, it is vital that public understanding of this form of sexual violence is improved through deconstructing these myths, ensuring they are less impactful on lay people who may sit as jurors in future cases.

# Conclusion

As noted by Walfield (2018) ‘understanding the attitudes and beliefs that support the acceptance of … myths is important given that both lay people, who may serve as jurists or potential bystanders, and professionals who interact with rape victims … are susceptible to them’ (p.7). This chapter has highlighted three of the most prevalent myths that emerged in interviews with male FTP survivors and considered their impacts. The chapter has also discussed how understanding and deconstructing these myths is important to improving the legal and criminal justice responses for male survivors of this form of sexual violence, specifically in relation to police responses, potential law reform, and jurors’ perceptions. As an area of research, exploring myths and stereotypes around FTP cases is ripe for future work. This could take multiple forms, for example interviews with criminal justice professionals to more fully understand the pervasiveness of these myths within organisations that male survivors are likely to access. It is only by recognizing, discussing, and gathering evidence to undermine these myths and stereotypes that real progress can be made in improving responses to male survivors.

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