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Using a Cognitive Bias Modification Task to Reduce Rape-Supportive Cognition in Men

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Introduction

Rape-Supportive Cognition (RSC)

- RSC = cognitive distortion; beliefs that justify or excuse sexually aggressive behaviour (Gerger et al., 2007; Hermann et al., 2012)

- RSC is highly prevalent in the general population, with men > women (Canto et al., 2014)

- RSC negatively impacts jury decision-making (Wilmott et al., 2017) and is linked with reduced conviction rates of rape (Temkin, 2010)

- One model of cognitive distortions is the sequential information processing model (Haaga, 1997; Gannon, 2009; Ward et al., 1997):

| Cognitive Structure | Implicit; indirect measurement |
| Cognitive Processing | Interpretation; ambiguous stimuli |
| Cognitive Product | Accessible beliefs; self-report |

Cognitive Bias Modification (CBM) Task

- Aim: to implicitly associate a benign response with a target stimulus, instead of a negative (or rape-supportive) one at cognitive processing level (Hallion & Ruscio, 2011)

- Useful with anxiety and depression (Hallion & Ruscio, 2011) but not used in a forensic context so far!!

Aim: To examine the extent to which a CBM task can reduce RSC in a general population of men
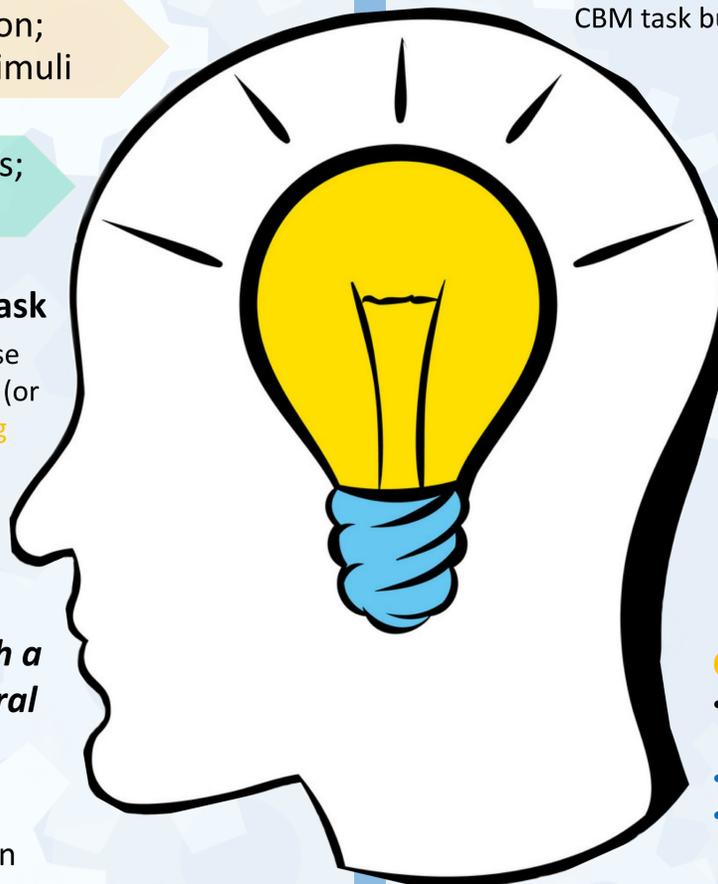
Method

- 40 heterosexual men
- Mean age = 27.62; range = 19-56
- IV: Task
- DV: RSC (via MT, vignette, RAPE scale)

| Pre-task measures (randomised) | → | Task | → | Post-task measures (randomised) |

Pre-task measures (randomised)	Task	Post-task measures (randomised)
• Mousetracking task (structure) • Amb. vignette (processing) • Bumby RAPE scale (product)	• CBM task OR • Control task	• Mousetracking task (structure) • Amb. vignette (processing) • Bumby RAPE scale (product)

- Stimuli = 121 sentences with word-fragments that could be interpreted only in a benign or rape-supportive manner
- Participants completed the word-fragments
- If rape-supportive = Negative feedback
- If benign = Positive feedback
- Control task = no feedback

Results

Cognitive Structure – Mouse-tracking task
- Reaction Time (RT)
- No sig. main/interaction effects

Cognitive Processing – Ambiguous vignette
- 'Female to blame for rape' scores
- No sig. main/interaction effects

Cognitive Product – Bumby RAPE scale
- Data = Excusing and Justifying subscale scores
- 2-way mixed ANOVA for each subscale;
- Task (between; CBM vs control)
- Time (within; pre- vs post-task)

Analyses conducted separately for each cognitive level

Justifying subscale:
- Interaction effect approaching sig. (p = .053)
- Comparing pre- and post-task scores, sig. reduction for the CBM task but not control task

Excusing subscale:
- No sig. main effect of Task
- Sig. main effect of Time Interaction effect
- For both tasks, sig. decrease in scores post-task

Discussion

Cognitive Structure
- Since the implicit level precedes processing, it was expected to be non-significant, supporting the use of the CBM task for RSC.

Cognitive Processing
- Expected to see a reduction at post-task on this measure, but this was *not* the case
- Due to the measure itself?
- BUT measure correlated strongly with the Bumby RAPE scale

Cognitive Product
- As expected, the CBM task reduced RSC
- Implications for use with jurors & offenders, as it can alter their cognitively accessible beliefs.

Alternative Explanation
- The findings of this study can be better explained by a dual-processing theory of cognition.

- One example is the Multi-Mechanism Theory of Cognitive Distortions, which focuses on men who have sexually offended (Szumski et al., 2018)

Conclusions
- Findings support a dual-processing model of cognition rather than a sequential processing model

- CBM task may be useful for reducing explicit RSC

- This might have implications for use with jurors and possibly individuals with high RSC e.g., individuals who have committed rape