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Validating the French RAPE Scale in Incarcerated Sex Offenders and Men and Women from the Community

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ABSTRACT

The RAPE Scale is a widely used self-report questionnaire for assessing cognitive distortions related to sexual violence against women. While the French-translated version is used in research and clinical settings, it has never undergone formal validation. This article aims to validate the French version of the RAPE Scale. **Study 1** focuses on 142 French-speaking incarcerated male offenders. **Study 2** includes 203 participants from a community sample. Results demonstrate good internal consistency and convergent, divergent, and discriminant validity, suggesting the French-translated RAPE Scale is a reliable and valid tool for assessing cognitive distortions among incarcerated offenders and individuals from the community.

Sexual violence refers to "any sexual act, attempt to obtain a sexual act, unwanted sexual comments or advances [...] against a person's sexuality using coercion" (World Health Organization, 2012). A recent systematic review based on an aggregated sample of more than 25 500 college men concluded that approximately 1 in 3 men report engaging in behaviors defined as sexual violence (Anderson et al., 2021). Sexual violence is recognized as a public health issue (Center for disease control and prevention, 2022), and achieving a better understanding of the risk factors contributing to its perpetration is central to implementing relevant and effective prevention and management strategies (Ward et al., 2006).

Both clinically and criminologically, perpetrators of sexual violence constitute a heterogeneous group (Hanson & Morton-Bourgon, 2005). However, whether they have been convicted of sexual offending or never been reported to authorities, perpetrators share some commonalities concerning the thought processes surrounding their coercive behaviors, such as complete or partial denial of the coercive nature of their actions as well as erroneous beliefs regarding sexual violence (Trottier et al., 2019; Watson et al., 2016). Thus,

one of the factors commonly associated with sexual violence perpetration is the presence of cognitive distortions (Helmus et al., 2013).

Cognitive distortions can be defined as maladaptive beliefs and attitudes or problematic thinking that function to minimize, justify, and rationalize coercive behaviors (Ward & Casey, 2010). Cognitive distortions thus serve to lessen personal responsibility for behavior and help alleviate the guilt, anxiety, or shame that typically accompany actions that contradict social norms (Bumby, 1996). Available empirical knowledge on sex offenders indicates that cognitive distortions are associated with sexual recidivism (Hanson & Morton-Bourgon, 2005) and constitute a central target of sexual offender treatments.

Studies also suggest that people from the general population, including university students, may endorse several of the same cognitive distortions (Dadgardoust et al., 2022; Nunes et al., 2016; Widman et al., 2013). In this regard, a recent study highlights statistically equivalent endorsement of cognitive distortions between university students and a group of high-risk sex offenders (Dadgardoust et al., 2022). Such results would be due to the conceptual and operational proximity between cognitive distortions and rape myth acceptance (Murnen et al., 2002) but also to the relatively high proportion of perpetrators in the general population that have never been reported to authorities (Abbey et al., 2012; Malamuth et al., 1991).

The RAPE Scale,[1] developed in 1996 (Bumby, 1996), is one of the most widely used self-report questionnaires to assess cognitive distortions about sexual violence against women (Hermann et al., 2012; Nunes et al., 2014). Given its clinical relevancy, the original English scale has been translated into French over the years and is widely used in research and clinical settings with French-speaking individuals. However, no French version of the RAPE Scale has ever been subjected to formal validation.

Objectives

Through two original studies, this manuscript aims to validate the French RAPE Scale in French-speaking sex offenders (Study 1) and men and women from the community and without criminal records (Study 2).

Methodology

Instruments used in the context of this validation were the same in Studies 1 and 2 and consistent with those used for the original English validation.

Instruments

The French RAPE Scale
The French-translated version of the RAPE Scale used for this validation (Vanderstukken et al., 2005) is currently in circulation in clinical and research settings. Like the original English version of the RAPE Scale ,[2] the French-translated RAPE Scale is a 36 items self-reported questionnaire assessing the presence and intensity of cognitions distortions about sexual violence against adult women (e.g., "When a woman gets drunk at a party, it's really her fault if someone sexually abuses her" [Lorsqu'une femme se soûle lors d'une soirée, c'est vraiment sa faute si quelqu'un abuse d'elle

sexuellement.], "Often when women say 'no' they are just playing a game and actually mean 'yes'" [Souvent, lorsque les femmes disent « non », elles jouent simplement un jeu et veulent en fait dire « oui ».]). Participants respond on a four-point Likert scale for each statement, from 1 (Strongly disagree) to 4 (Strongly agree). The total score ranges from 36 to 144, with a higher score indicating greater endorsement of cognitive distortions.

MOLEST Scale

The MOLEST Scale (Bumby, 1996) is a self-report scale that assesses the presence and intensity of cognitive distortions related to child sexual abuse. It comprises 38 items. Items are rated on a four-point Likert scale to be answered from 1 (Strongly disagree) to 4 (Strongly agree). The total scores range from 38 to 152, and a higher score indicates more cognitive distortions related to child sexual abuse. Internal consistency for the MOLEST Scale was excellent for both studies 1 ($\alpha = .94$) and 2 ($\alpha = .90$).

Social desirability

Social desirability tendencies were measured using the Marlowe-Crowne Social Desirability Scale (Crowne & Marlowe, 1960), which is composed of 33 "true" or "false" statements. Responses are rated 1 or 0, with a higher score reflecting a greater tendency toward social desirability. In the first study, the Marlowe-Crowne Social Desirability Scale presented an acceptable internal consistency of $\alpha = .70$, while the acceptability threshold was not reached in the second study $\alpha = .62$. For this reason, social desirability was only used for analysis in study 1.

Study 1: validating the French RAPE Scale with a sample of incarcerated offenders

Procedure

The data was gathered in two prisons in France as part of a larger project assessing recidivism risk factors. The research project was presented to all psychiatrists and psychologists working in these institutions to encourage and optimize eligible participant referrals for the study. Participants with a medical history of severe mental illness or lower scores on the Wechsler Adult Intelligence Scale (<70) were not offered to participate in the research. The research protocol was conducted in compliance with the ethical principles of the Helsinki Declaration (World Medical Association, 2013). All participants provided written consent before taking part. They were informed that their participation offered no direct personal benefit and that their anonymity would be maintained. The study was carried out in individual interviews with research assistants lasting around an hour and a half. The use of secondary data for validation purposes received approval from the ethics committee at the first author's institution.

Participants

A total of 142 incarcerated male offenders, aged 19- to 68-year-old ($M = 38.09$, $SD = 10.87$) participated in the study. Specifically, 40 were sex offenders against adult women, 61 were

child sex offenders, and 41 offenders had no history of sexual offenses and served as a control group.

Results

Reliability

Internal consistency. Internal consistency was established using Cronbach's alpha coefficient (α), alpha coefficient after item suppression as well as corrected item-to-total correlations. The French RAPE Scale total score showed excellent internal consistency ($\alpha = .92$), which was not improved by the suppression of any of the 36 items. All adjusted item-total correlations were positive and ranged between $r = .28$ and $r = .74$. These results suggest good reliability for the French RAPE Scale (for complete results, see Table 1) and are consistent with those published in the original validation (Bumby, 1996).

Criterion validity

Criterion validity refers to the ability of an instrument to distinguish individuals based on an external but conceptually related criterion. In the case of this study, the criterion used was sexual offending history. Results indicate that sex offenders with female adult victims recorded the highest total scores on the French RAPE Scale ($M = 74.88$, $SD = 19.47$), followed by child sex offenders ($M = 72.26$, $SD = 15.29$) and control offenders ($M = 63.17$, $SD = 12.54$). Variance analyses revealed a significant effect of group on the recorded total score (F (2;140) = 6.247, $p < .01$). Post-hoc analyses revealed that sex offenders, regardless of whether the victim was an adult or a child, had significantly higher total scores compared to control offenders. These results suggest good criterion validity for the French RAPE Scale and replicate those published in the original validation (Bumby, 1996).

Convergent and divergent validity

Regarding convergent validity, the total score recorded on the French RAPE Scale was strongly and positively correlated ($r = .56$; $p < .001$) with the total score recorded on the MOLEST Scale (Bumby, 1996). Divergent validity was assessed by correlating the French RAPE Scale to the Marlowe-Crowne social desirability scale. Results reveal the absence of correlation between the two instruments ($r = -.114$; $p = .181$). The

Table 1. Psychometric properties for the original RAPE Scale and the FR-RAPE (studies 1 and 2).

	RAPE Scale (Bumby, 1996) N = 89	FR-RAPE Scale (Study 1) N = 142	FR-RAPE Scale (Study 2) N = 203
Reliability			
Internal consistency (*a*)	.96	.92	.92
Corrected item-to-total correlations	[.31–.81]	[.28–.74]	[.22–.61]
Validity			
Convergent	.61*	.56*	.66*
Divergent	- .016 (*p* = .46)	- .114 (*p* = .18)	–

*$p < 0,001$.

results for both convergent and divergent validity suggest good construct validity for the French RAPE Scale (for complete results, see Table 1) and replicate those of the original validation (Bumby, 1996).

Study 2: validating the French RAPE Scale with a community sample of men and women

Procedure

This research took place in an auditorium at a University in France and was conducted in compliance with the ethical principles of the Helsinki Declaration (World Medical Association, 2013). The participants were all registered students in an undergraduate kinesiology program. After a research assistant presented the research to the classroom, interested participants completed a consent form, after which all questionnaires were answered in a paper-pencil format. The protocol lasted approximately 30 minutes. No compensation was offered to participants. The ethics committee of the first author's institution approved the use of secondary data from this project for the current validation process.

Participants

A total of 203 persons (150 men and 53 women) from the community and without a criminal record participated in the study. Their age varied between 17 and 30 years ($M = 19.32$, $SD = 1.71$).

Results

Reliability

Internal consistency
Internal consistency was established using Cronbach's alpha (α), alpha after item suppression and corrected item-to-total correlations. The total score of the French RAPE Scale recorded excellent internal consistency ($\alpha = .92$). Item suppression did not lead to significant improvement of the alpha. All adjusted item-total correlations were positive and ranged between $r = .22$ and $r = .61$. These results suggest good reliability (for complete results, see Table 1).

Criterion validity

For this study, the criterion used was the respondent's gender, as it is well documented that men endorse more tolerant beliefs about sexual violence than women (McMahon & Farmer, 2011). Gender comparisons for the French RAPE Scale total score revealed that men ($M = 68.94$, $SD = 12.95$) recorded significantly higher total scores ($t (1.202) = 3.637$, $p < .001$) than women ($M = 61.96$, $SD = 8.75$) on the French RAPE Scale. These results suggest good criterion validity.

Convergent validity

Total scores recorded on the French RAPE Scale were strongly and positively correlated ($r = .66$; $p < .001$) with the total scores obtained on the MOLEST Scale (Bumby, 1996). This result demonstrates good construct validity (for complete results, see Table 1).

Discussion

Through two separate studies, this research aimed to validate the French version of the RAPE Scale. The primary objective of the first study was to evaluate the psychometric properties of the French RAPE Scale among sex offenders while also replicating findings from the original validation of the instrument (Bumby, 1996). Results indicate excellent consistency as well as good convergence, divergence and discriminant validity for the French RAPE Scale when used with incarcerated offenders.

It is interesting to note that analogous to the original RAPE Scale (Bumby, 1996), results from the French RAPE Scale discriminated sex offenders from offenders without sexual offenses. The scale's capacity to distinguish between offenders with and without a history of sexual offending indicates that the French version of the scale performs comparably to the original. These results also reaffirm the role of cognitive distortions as a risk factor for sexual violence perpetration.

It is noteworthy that perpetrators of sexual assaults, regardless of their victim's age (child or adult), exhibited statistically similar scores on the French RAPE Scale. One possible explanation is that cognitive distortions surrounding sexual violence are not influenced by the victim's age, behavior, or characteristics but rather reflect an integrated thought process that minimizes the perpetrator's responsibility, and shifts blame onto victims in various situations and contexts. This would be consistent with the «problematic thinking» notion described by Ward and Casey (2010). The strong positive correlation recorded between the RAPE Scale and the MOLEST Scale also weighs in favor of this explanation.

The second study highlighted the reliability and validity of the French RAPE Scale with a community sample of men and women with no criminal history. Psychometric properties include excellent internal consistency, as well as good convergent and discriminant validity. These results support the use of the French RAPE Scale in the context of research.

While referring to Table 1, it is essential to highlight the consistency of the psychometric properties between both the RAPE Scale (Bumby, 1996) and the French RAPE Scale (studies 1 and 2). Despite notable differences between the three studies in terms of sample size, languages (English vs. French), cultures (American vs French), eras (1990s vs 2020s) and status (offenders vs. men and women from the community without criminal records), internal consistency, item-total score correlations and convergent and divergent validity are homogeneous, testifying to the stability of the psychometric qualities of the instrument. From a metrological perspective, these results suggest that the French RAPE Scale is a reliable and valid measure to assess cognitive distortions about sexual violence against women with incarcerated offenders as well as for research purposes with men and women from the community.

Overall, the validated French version of the RAPE Scale should allow a greater number of clinicians and researchers to access a reliable and valid tool for measuring cognitive distortions about sexual violence against women. Clinically, cognitive

distortions are empirically linked to sexual reoffending (Hanson & Morton-Bourgon, 2005) and access to validated measures in the primary language of both the individual being assessed and the clinician is essential to optimize the quality and accuracy of cognitive distortion assessment, as well as the treatment and supervision recommendations that follow. In research, this could allow for a broader understanding of similarities and differences in cognitive distortions about sexual violence against women across new and more diverse populations.

In terms of extending the use of the validated French RAPE Scale to other French-speaking populations, we posit that France and other francophone communities worldwide share cultural similarities, particularly socialization into patriarchal values, which have been empirically demonstrated to shape attitudes and beliefs about sexual violence and its victims (Burt, 1980; Jordan, 2022). In alignment with previous research (Dadgardoust et al., 2022; Nunes et al., 2016; Widman et al., 2013), the substantial deviation of scores from the instrument's minimum among groups without a history of sexual offending suggests that cognitive distortions related to sexual violence are not limited to individuals who have committed sexual offenses. Instead, they reflect cognitive biases and beliefs that are prevalent throughout the population and endorsed to varying degrees based on individual factors, which include sexual history and past coercive behaviors.

These shared cognitive biases and beliefs among all respondents, including men and women from the community, suggest that a portion of the explanation lies within socio-cultural factors, which lend support to the generalizability of the instrument across patriarchal cultures. The alignment of results between the French samples from this study and the American samples from the original validation (as illustrated in Table 1), both of which are situated within patriarchal social structures, further supports this argument.

It is, however, important to keep in mind that each culture is unique and may approach sexuality and sexual violence with distinct language and expressions that could affect how French-speaking participants from countries other than France may interpret and respond to the items of the current scale. Validation studies with French populations outside of France would be extremely relevant to ensure the cross-cultural stability and reliability of the instrument.

This research has certain limitations. First, items of the FR-RAPE Scale are transparent and explore a sensitive topic which makes it vulnerable to social desirability bias. It is strongly suggested that the FR-RAPE be used in conjunction with other instruments that assess social desirability responding tendencies. In addition, it should be considered that Study 1 was carried out in the form of individual interviews, which may have influenced the participants' responses. Third, measures were chosen to replicate the original validating procedure (Bumby, 1996) while other more recent measures were available. Finally, some psychometric properties remain to be tested (e.g., test-retest reliability, and predictive validity).

Conclusion

Cognitive distortions about sexual violence are risk factors for sexual coercion perpetration. The RAPE Scale is one of the most widely used self-report scale to measure cognitive distortions for both clinical and research purposes. Through the presentation of two independent studies, this research validated the French version of the RAPE Scale.

Notes

1. We acknowledge that Kurt Bumby, the author of the original RAPE Scale (1996), was convicted of sexual crimes in 2023. All authors of this manuscript strongly condemn his actions. We have decided to remove the author's name from the title of the psychometric measure as well as refrain from mentioning the author's name in the manuscript except in the references. As the measure remains in use, we deem it essential to proceed with its French validation.
2. To respect copyright, the original 36 items are not provided in this manuscript. Readers wishing to consult them are encouraged to refer to the original article (Bumby, 1996).

Disclosure statement

No potential conflict of interest was reported by the author(s).

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