

Blame Attributions of Victims and Perpetrators: Effects of Victim Gender, Perpetrator Gender, and Relationship

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Abstract

Although research has been conducted on rape myth acceptance (RMA) and other factors associated with attribution formation, researchers have not yet determined how the combination of such factors simultaneously affects levels of victim blame and perpetrator blame. The current investigation recruited 221 students from an all-women's college to examine differences in blame attributions across RMA, victim gender, and perpetrator gender, and the relationship between the two parties (i.e., stranger vs. acquaintance). Results suggested that RMA, victim gender, and perpetrator gender account for a significant amount of variance in blame attributions for both victims and perpetrators. In sum, victim blame with female perpetrators was relatively consistent across levels of RMA, but increased substantially for male perpetrators as individuals endorsed higher levels of RMA. Perpetrator blame, however, was highest with male perpetrators when individuals endorsed low levels of RMA and lowest for male perpetrators when individuals endorsed relatively higher levels of RMA. Findings demonstrate the continued influence of RMA on blame attributions for both victims and perpetrators, and the stigma faced by male victims. More research is needed on the differing attributions of male and female victims and perpetrators, as well as differing

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attributions based on type of relationship. Such research will lead to a better and more thorough understanding of sexual assault and rape.

Keywords

sexual violence, rape myth acceptance, victims, perpetrators, gender

Recent research suggests women between the ages of 18 and 24 are most likely to become victims of rape and sexual assault in comparison to women of other ages (U.S. Department of Justice, 2014). Research also indicates that the likelihood of college-aged victims reporting such crimes to authorities is low, with estimates ranging from 11.5% to 33% (U.S. Department of Justice, 2014; Wolitzky-Taylor et al., 2011). Consequently, sexual assault is considered to be the most underreported violent crime in the United States. Researchers estimate that one in every five college women will experience an attempted or completed rape at some point throughout their college career (Karjane, Fisher, & Cullen, 2005). It is estimated that an additional three million men fall victim to sexual violence every year in the United States (Choudhary, Coben, & Bossarte, 2009). Despite the prevalence of sexual violence in our society, researchers in the social sciences have yet to thoroughly understand the complex nature of factors and attitudes associated with rape, rape myths, victim blame, and perpetrator blame.

One of the core constructs often associated with sexual violence is rape myths and the acceptance of rape myths in society. Unfortunately, many beliefs about rape and sexual violence are based on myths, which include stereotypical beliefs and/or ideas that promote sexual violence against women (Gerber, Cronin, & Steigman, 2004; Lonsway & Fitzgerald, 1995). Such myths include the assumptions that women are more responsible for an assault when drinking, that only men sexually assault women, that women are the only victims, and that most victims do not know their perpetrators. As Bohner, Weisbrod, Raymond, Barzvi, and Schwarz (1993) noted, rape myths are “prejudicial, stereotyped, or false beliefs about rape, rape victims, and rapists” (p. 217) that justify male sexual violence against women, promote victim blame, minimize perpetrator blame, and justify acquaintance rape (Johnson, Kuck, & Schander, 1997; Lonsway & Fitzgerald, 1995). The basic construct of rape myths often assumes that females are victims and males are perpetrators, perpetuating additional myths even further. These widely held beliefs about sexual violence ultimately determine the rape myth acceptance (RMA) of an individual, which is the degree to which a person endorses stereotypical presumptions about sexual violence (Burt, 1980).

More recently, however, with the addition of rape prevention education, society has seen a shift in the rate at which rape myths are overtly accepted (McMahon & Farmer, 2011). Decreasing levels of sexism and increasing levels of feminism in society have led to a decline in rape myths that blatantly blame females for rape. However, this statement is not to say women are no longer blamed for rape. Overall, there are still many underlying beliefs that females have done something to contribute to their assault, including dressing a certain way, drinking alcohol, or demonstrating flirting behaviors. Although victim blame in rape myths has decreased, there are still varying situations in which men are not considered entirely accountable for rape (McMahon & Farmer, 2011).

Rape myths are still pervasive in today's society; thus, it is important to understand the extent to which blame and other attributions of sexual assault relate to RMA. Not only do attributions and perceptions of sexual violence differ between individuals, research suggests they also change based on various factors (Grubb & Harrower, 2009). For example, survivors of sexual assault are more likely to be blamed for an incident if an individual accepts and believes in the rape myths that are present in society (Gerber et al., 2004; Sleath & Bull, 2010). Hammond, Berry, and Rodriguez (2011) concluded that RMA mediates the relationship between gender and judgments of responsibility of the accused and the accuser, suggesting that RMA plays a strong role in blame attribution formation.

Although research has been conducted on RMA and other factors associated with attribution formation, researchers have not yet determined how the combination of RMA and these factors simultaneously affects levels of victim blame and perpetrator blame. When researchers have conducted such studies, follow-up univariate tests have been used, subsequently inflating Type I error rates and missing multivariate effects (e.g., Davies, Pollard, & Archer, 2006). In addition, we sought to follow up on recent research that suggests that women may be as likely as men to blame the victim, despite holding feminist values or beliefs (Earnshaw, Pitpitan, & Chaudoir, 2011).

Furthermore, as college students become increasingly exposed to trainings on sexual violence, campus-wide alerts, and campus crime statistics reports (among other media outlets), it is important to understand how students interpret and form attributions surrounding sexual violence situations and scenarios. Ongoing changes at the state and federal levels continue to address issues of sexual violence and increase its visibility on college campuses. The federal Jeanne Clery Disclosure of Campus Security Policy and Campus Crime Statistics Act (Clery Center for Security on Campus, 2012b) requires colleges and universities (i.e., those participating in federal student aid programs) to disclose campus safety information and imposes basic requirements for

handling incidents of sexual violence. Since it was signed into law in 1990, two notable amendments have been established to improve awareness and safety on campuses nationwide.

As of 2013, the Campus Sexual Violence Elimination (SaVE) Act requires institutions to disclose incidents of domestic violence, dating violence, sexual assault, and stalking in annual campus crime statistic reports (Clery Center for Security on Campus, 2012a). Students and employees reporting victimization are also given several essential rights in reporting their assault. In addition, there are minimum standards for institutional disciplinary procedures covering incidents of victimization. The second amendment, the Violence Against Women Act (VAWA), expands the rights granted to survivors of sexual assault, domestic violence, and stalking on college campuses (Clery Center for Security on Campus, 2012b). Hence, The Clery Act now mandates colleges and universities to have sexual assault, domestic violence, dating violence, and stalking policy statements; offer prevention and awareness programs for students and employees; follow specific institutional and disciplinary procedures when an incident occurs; grant confidentiality of the victim; and report and disclose annual statistics.

Due to increased awareness and visibility surrounding sexual violence on college campuses, the purpose of this investigation was to assess the extent to which RMA and situational factors interact with one another to affect blame levels of victims and perpetrators in a sample of college-aged women. The current investigation recruited students from an all-women's college to examine differences in RMA and blame attributions across victim gender, perpetrator gender, and the relationship between the two parties (i.e., stranger vs. acquaintance). The literature, discussed as follows, provided well-informed hypotheses and the rationale for the current investigation.

Literature Review

When assessing public beliefs about sexual assault, researchers tend to find that attributions differ according to the situation and circumstances faced by the victim (e.g., Grubb & Harrower, 2009; Pollard, 1992). Such factors include the relationship between the victim and perpetrator, gender of the perpetrator, and gender of the victim.

Type of Relationship

Prior research has shown that victims are perceived differently depending on whether they are assaulted by an acquaintance or by a stranger (e.g., Perrott & Webber, 1996). Despite the popular myth that only strangers perpetrate

rapes, between 80% and 90% of victims know their perpetrator, which makes it less likely for the victim to label the assault *rape* (Karjane et al., 2005). Some researchers have found that both male and female victims receive less blame for cases of acquaintance rape when compared with stranger rape (Perrott & Webber, 1996; Stromwall, Alfredsson, & Landstrom, 2013a). This may be associated with the thought that individuals in society, particularly women, are expected to be knowledgeable about their risks of sexual violence. Thus, women may be more likely to avoid situations that involve risks of stranger rape. When raped by an acquaintance, however, women are seen as more vulnerable because they would not have expected a sexual assault to take place.

Furthermore, there are contradictory findings for victim blame with stranger or acquaintance rape. Although many studies postulate that victims of stranger rape are blamed more, other studies suggest that victim blame and responsibility are the highest in the case of acquaintance rape (Bell, Kuriloff, & Lottes, 1994; Hammock & Richardson, 1997; Sleath & Bull, 2010). This may be due to the rape myth that sexual assault takes place because victims say “no” in an ambiguous manner. Researchers have found that women are significantly more likely to receive blame when they are sexually assaulted by an acquaintance (Perrott & Webber, 1996). Grubb and Harrower (2009) found that observers attributed the most blame to victims of seduction rape (i.e., consensual flirtation and seduction leading to non-consensual sex), less blame to date rape (i.e., consensual date leading to non-consensual sex), and the least amount of blame to victims of stranger rape.

Aside from blame attributions of victims, attitudes pertaining to perpetrators also seem to shift with the context of the relationship in a sexual assault. Research suggests that perpetrators receive the most blame when the victim is a stranger (Hammock & Richardson, 1997). Such attributions may be linked to the rape myth that all perpetrators are strangers. Additional research regarding perpetrator blame and type of relationship is sparse, creating a lack of understanding between type of relationship and perpetrator blame attributions.

Regardless of the context of the relationship, most people seem to believe the perpetrator is at fault for the incident, and not the victim (Stromwall et al., 2013a). More specifically, Stromwall et al. (2013a) found that level of victim blame was low and the level of perpetrator blame was high across different scenarios (i.e., perpetrator as stranger, acquaintance, dating partner, or marriage partner). Such findings suggest that blame attributions are relatively low for victims and relatively high for perpetrators, but continue to fluctuate depending on the context of the relationship between the victim and perpetrator.

Gender of Victim

In addition to type of relationship, research suggests attributions differ depending on the gender of the victim involved in a sexual assault. It is believed that the act of sexual assault is more common for women than men. Therefore, many individuals may have the impression that women are always the victims of sexual violence, whereas men serve only as the perpetrators. It is also important to note that some people may simply assume that rape is less serious when the victims are male and/or when the perpetrators are female. Despite the fact that most victims are female, we must not exclude males from the discourse surrounding sexual violence, as 12% of sexual assaults include male victims (Ellison, 2003). Due to rape myths, there is a strong stigma surrounding men who are sexually assaulted. Men who disclose information about being sexually assaulted may be labeled *weak* or *homosexual* if sexually assaulted by a male, and if assaulted by a female, men are likely to receive criticism from peers for not wanting to give consent, not wanting to participate in sexual activities in the first place, or not being able to defend themselves. Due to these stigmas, chances of reporting the incident decrease significantly when the victim is male (Davies et al., 2006).

Although there is a lack of acknowledgment that males can also be victims of sexual assault, more research is attempting to explore RMA in relation to male victims (Maxwell & Scott, 2014). Currently, most studies that assess the perceptions of sexual violence have studied cases in which women were the victims (e.g., Davies et al., 2006; Gerber et al., 2004). More recent studies are beginning to include male victims, but often look at male victims in the context of sexual orientation, although gender and sexual orientation are separate constructs (e.g., Davies, Gilston, & Rogers, 2012; Davies et al., 2006; Davies, Rogers, & Whitelegg, 2009; Doherty & Anderson, 2004). This shows progress; however, it is important to acknowledge that a male does not need to be homosexual to be a victim of rape.

Research that has included males as victims has found that male victims generally receive less sympathy in the case of rape than do female victims (Davies et al., 2006). Furthermore, male victims are attributed more blame than female victims (Stromwall, Alfredsson, & Landstrom, 2013b). Women, in turn, generally receive less blame than men when they are sexually assaulted (Gerber et al., 2004). This may be due to an inherent assumption that men should be able to defend themselves physically, thereby preventing an assault from occurring (Perrott & Webber, 1996). Surprisingly, some research has shown that male victims do not receive as much blame for sexual assault when perpetrated by a female acquaintance (Perrott & Webber, 1996).

Gender of Perpetrator

Few studies have assessed how blame attributions differ based on the gender of the perpetrator. Perhaps, this is because it is often assumed that most perpetrators are male and most victims are female. The research has shown that both male and female perpetrators receive more blame when the victim is female (Gerber et al., 2004). Research also suggests that female perpetrators are perceived to be more likable than male perpetrators, regardless of the victim's gender (Gerber et al., 2004). Other studies suggest that male RMA and sex-role egalitarian beliefs are significant predictors of perpetrator blaming (Sleath & Bull, 2010). Such findings likely pertain to RMA and rape scripts (i.e., preconceived ideas about behaviors and events that occur during rape; Kahn, Mathie, & Torgler, 1994), which have an implicit connection between violence and male perpetrators in the case of rape. Such limited information suggests that more research is needed on how blame attributions differ based on the gender of perpetrators.

Rationale for Investigation

The manner in which males and females perceive rape and attribute victim and perpetrator blame differs (Tetreault & Barnett, 1987). Females tend to have higher levels of empathy toward rape victims, ascribe more credibility toward the rape victim, and are less accepting of rape myths (Jimenez & Abreu, 2003). In general, males blame the victim to a greater extent than females tend to (Grubb & Harrower, 2009). They also display higher RMA and more negative attitudes toward rape victims than their female counterparts (Hockett, Saucier, Hoffman, Smith, & Craig, 2009). In general, males are more accepting of rape myths than females (Sleath & Bull, 2010).

Perhaps, gender is not the only driving factor when understanding the manner in which females ascribe blame. More specifically, the majority of studies support feminist theory in stating that gender is critical in explaining rape myths and attitudes toward victims (Nagel, Matsuo, McIntyre, & Morrison, 2005; Sheldon & Parent, 2002). Bohner et al. (1993) found that there is support for the feminist hypothesis that the threat of rape serves to exert social control over women and maintain men's dominance. Women score higher than men on a scale of feminist attitudes, attributions of fault to society for the rape, feelings of anger and fear in the response to the rape, and lower than men on RMA attitudes (Earnshaw et al., 2011). However, despite the fact that women tend to have lower RMA and are more likely to hold feminist values and beliefs than males, they can be as quick to blame the victim as their male counterparts (Earnshaw et al., 2011). Although female

college students are more likely to have the intention of engaging in anti-rape collective action and help victims of rape, the processes of how attitudes, attributions of fault, and emotions relate to intended responses to rape are very similar to male college students (Earnshaw et al., 2011).

Most studies conducted thus far on sexual assault have focused on female victims (e.g., Bell et al., 1994; Grubb & Harrower, 2009; Peterson & Muehlenhard, 2004; Tetreault & Barnett, 1987), male victims (e.g., Choudhary et al., 2009; Davies et al., 2006; Doherty & Anderson, 2004), or sexual orientation of victims (e.g., Davies et al., 2006; Ford, Liwage-McLamb, & Foley, 1998) without assessing individual effects and interactions between constructs. Recognizing that the context of the relationship may often determine the blame attributions of an individual, it is important to understand the intersections between RMA, victim gender, perpetrator gender, and type of relationship. Furthermore, many studies assess blame attributions of co-ed undergraduate psychology students at large public universities (e.g., Bell et al., 1994; Black & McCloskey, 2013; Earnshaw et al., 2011; Grubb & Harrower, 2009; Hammond et al., 2011; Jimenez & Abreu, 2003; Sleath & Bull, 2010; Tetreault & Barnett, 1987). Aside from assessing the roles of gender, type of relationship, and RMA, we sought to further conceptualize blame attributions of female undergraduate students who are likely to hold feminist values and beliefs.

Based on the literature, we formed four hypotheses:

1. RMA and victim gender would interact with one another resulting in significantly different blame attributions of victims and perpetrators. More specifically, it was hypothesized that participants with lower RMA would endorse relatively similar blame attributions for male and female victims; however, participants with higher RMA would blame victims more and perpetrators less for male victims (as compared with female victims).
2. RMA and perpetrator gender would interact when forming blame attributions of victims and perpetrators. That is, it was hypothesized that participants with lower RMA would endorse relatively similar blame attributions for male and female perpetrators; however, participants with higher RMA would blame female perpetrators and victims less than male perpetrators and victims.
3. RMA and type of relationship (acquaintance vs. stranger) would form interactions to predict blame levels for victims and perpetrators in sexual assault vignettes. In sum, it was expected that participants with lower RMA would endorse relatively similar blame levels for acquaintance and stranger rape; furthermore, participants with higher RMA

would blame victims more and perpetrators less in an acquaintance rape scenario when compared with a stranger rape scenario.

4. Given the unique sample of the current investigation, we hypothesized that female psychology and women's studies majors at an all-women's liberal arts college would hold significantly lower levels of RMA in comparison with other samples.

Method

Design

We used a $1 \times 2 \times 2 \times 2$ between-subjects multivariate design with four independent variables and two dependent variables. Victim gender (male vs. female), perpetrator gender (male vs. female), and type of relationship (stranger vs. acquaintance) were manipulated in vignettes and assessed in conjunction with RMA. Victim blame and perpetrator blame levels were subsequently measured. Participants were randomly assigned to one of eight conditions, and scales and items were presented to participants in a consistent manner.

Participants

The target sample for this investigation included college women exposed to feminist discourse and beliefs. Two hundred twenty-one female participants were recruited from psychology and women's studies classes at a women's college in the Midwest. The selected institution promotes feminist values through its core curriculum, events and speakers on campus (e.g., Dr. Maya Angelou), small classroom discussions on gender issues, and the women's center on campus. Through the core curriculum, all matriculated students are exposed to seminal pieces of feminist theory, including work by Peggy McIntosh, bell hooks, Virginia Woolf, and others. It was reasoned that women from this institution were regularly exposed to discourse surrounding gender, multiculturalism, privilege, and social justice.

Participants ranged in age from 18 to 58 ($M = 21.38$, $SD = 5.49$). Participants included freshman (28.1%), sophomores (23.5%), juniors (21.7%), seniors (19%), and others (7.7%). Eighty-four percent of the participants were Caucasian, 6.3% were Asian, 3.2% were Latina, 1.8% were biracial, and 1.4% were Middle Eastern. In terms of sexual orientation, 86% identified as heterosexual, 6.8% identified as bisexual, and 4.1% identified as homosexual. The remaining participants were questioning or of other self-identified sexual orientations. This sample was generally representative of the college population, though it was somewhat less racially diverse and had a larger proportion of traditional age students (18-22 years old).

Materials

Each participant received four items for participation: a demographics questionnaire, a vignette, and two scales. The demographics questionnaire included background information, such as the age, gender, sexual orientation, and ethnicity for each participant.

The vignettes were designed to reflect the study's purpose by manipulating three independent variables. Each vignette was designed in conjunction with the study's gender and relationship variables to reinforce and/or challenge rape myth ideology, depending on the variables of interest. To appeal to students and to be representative of common social activities, the vignette depicted an undergraduate student who went out to dinner with a classmate, and joined the classmate at his or her apartment afterward. On arrival at the apartment, the classmate told the student that he or she was going to take a shower. In four of the scenarios, a stranger entered the room and sexually assaulted the student while the classmate was in the shower. In the other four scenarios, the classmate returned from the shower and sexually assaulted the student. The scenario was manipulated according to the gender of the perpetrator and the victim, as well as the nature of the rape (acquaintance rape vs. stranger rape). Thus, there were eight vignettes, each differing based on three independent variables, at two levels each. All other information remained consistent, including the events preceding the assault, the amount of force and coercion used, and the place at which the event took place.

The first scale was adapted from a 2006 study that assessed blame attributions pertaining to a sexual assault (Davies et al., 2006). Two items from the initial scale were deleted, as they pertained to victim blame due to alcohol use and were not relevant for the present investigation. Four items were adapted by removing the phrase "at the party," which did not pertain to the vignettes used in this research. Finally, male pronouns were changed to female pronouns as needed. Twelve remaining items addressed the attributions and perceptions pertaining to the sexual assault. Statements included items such as "Jack was responsible for what happened," "Jack cannot be blamed for what happened to him," and "Jack was just in the wrong place at the wrong time." Each statement included the victim's name and the perpetrator's name when relevant. Participants responded to statements on a 7-point Likert-type scale (1 = *strongly disagree*, 2 = *disagree*, 3 = *slightly disagree*, 4 = *neutral*, 5 = *slightly agree*, 6 = *agree*, 7 = *strongly agree*). High scores were associated with high levels of blame, and low scores were associated with low levels of blame. To assess the presence of subscales within each scale, a Confirmatory Factor Analysis was run using Maximum Likelihood Estimation. The first scale, titled *perpetrator blame*, comprised six items. Items pertained to the

responsibility of the perpetrator, sympathy toward the victim, and perceived consequences (i.e., trauma) of the assault. Scores ranged from 7 to 42. The second scale, titled *victim blame*, consisted of six items and scores also ranged from 7 to 42. Items included blame directed toward the victim (e.g., “Jack is responsible for what happened”). Internal reliability for perpetrator blame ($\alpha = .78$) and victim blame ($\alpha = .75$) was acceptable and did not differ drastically from that of the initial scale ($\alpha = .75$ and $\alpha = .88$, respectively; Davies et al., 2006).

The second scale, the Illinois Rape Myth Acceptance Scale–Short Form (IRMA-SF), was presented after the attribution scale, and was designed to assess the attitudes and perceptions surrounding the act of rape (Payne, Lonsway, & Fitzgerald, 1999). This scale included 20 items pertaining to rape and violence against women. Participants responded to items on a 7-point Likert-type scale (same as above), and scores were based on the attitudes of participants pertaining to rape myths that are currently prevalent in society. Three of the 20 items were “filler” items and were not analyzed for the purpose of this study. They included statements related to sexual violence, but were not actual rape myths themselves. Mean scores are used for question responses, so the scale ranged from 1 to 7. High scores were associated with high levels of RMA. Low scores were associated with participants who rejected rape myths. Psychometric support is sound for this scale and includes strong internal consistency reliability ($\alpha = .87$), well-established convergent validity with similar scales, and known-groups validity. Internal consistency reliability in the current sample was good ($\alpha = .85$).

Procedure

The primary investigator visited psychology and women’s studies classes at an all-women’s college to recruit participants. She told each class that she was assessing views surrounding sexual violence. Students were told that they would respond to a demographic questionnaire and read a scenario that included specific actions relating to sexual violence. They were then told that they would be asked to respond to two scales. Aside from this information, participants received no details about the purpose of the research so as not to bias the results. Interested students provided their e-mail addresses to the investigator and were randomly assigned to one of the eight conditions. The investigator then e-mailed them a link to the study, which included the demographic questionnaire, the scenario, the attribution scale, and the IRMA-SF.

Participants first viewed information regarding their consent to participate in the project, followed by a list of mental health and sexual assault resources in the area. Students then responded to the demographic information form

and read one of eight possible sexual assault vignettes (stranger rape vs. acquaintance rape \times gender of perpetrator \times gender of victim). Next, participants responded to the statements assessing perceptions and attributions surrounding the scenario. They then responded to statements addressed in the IRMA-SF. Finally, participants were debriefed by receiving myths and facts about sexual violence. They viewed the list of available mental health and sexual violence resources in the area a final time.

Results

Missing Data and Assumptions

Five participants left one item blank in the response sets. Little's Missing Completely at Random (MCAR) test suggested data were not missing at random ($\chi^2 = 133.823$, $df = 82$, $p < .001$); thus, imputation was not used for missing information. Analyses were conducted for the 221 participants with complete data sets. Assumptions underlying MANOVA were met, including multivariate normality. The Box's M statistic was significant, with a chi-square value of 91.55 ($p < .001$), suggesting a violation of the homogeneity of variance-covariance matrices assumption. For this reason, Pillai's Trace (V) was used to interpret multivariate tests, which has a robust nature and is less likely to be affected by violations in multivariate assumptions (Haase & Ellis, 1987; Maxwell & Delaney, 2004).

Descriptive Findings

In the overall sample, levels of victim blame were relatively low ($M = 12.76$, $SD = 6.12$, $Mdn = 11.00$), and levels of perpetrator blame were relatively high ($M = 37.18$, $SD = 5.95$, $Mdn = 39.00$) (See Table 1). Average level of RMA was also low ($M = 1.18$, $SD = 0.69$, $Mdn = 1.59$). Compared with the sample of undergraduate female students on which the scale was normed ($M = 2.10$), women in the current investigation endorsed significantly lower levels of RMA, $t(220) = -19.82$, $p < .001$, $\hat{\rho}^2 = .64$, 95% confidence interval (CI) = [.56, .69].

Major Analyses

To test the full multivariate model, a $1 \times 2 \times 2 \times 2$ between-subjects MANOVA was conducted (See Table 2). RMA, victim gender, perpetrator gender, and relationship type served as the independent variables in the analysis, and victim blame and perpetrator blame served as the dependent variables. Results from

Table 1. Means, Standard Deviations, and *ns* for Victim and Perpetrator Attribution Scores.

| | Victim Blame | | | | | | Perpetrator Blame | | | | | |
|-----------------------------------|--------------|----------|-----------|----------|----------|-----------|-------------------|----------|-----------|----------|----------|-----------|
| | Acquaintance | | | Stranger | | | Acquaintance | | | Stranger | | |
| | <i>n</i> | <i>M</i> | <i>SD</i> | <i>n</i> | <i>M</i> | <i>SD</i> | <i>n</i> | <i>M</i> | <i>SD</i> | <i>n</i> | <i>M</i> | <i>SD</i> |
| Male victim, male perpetrator | 26 | 13.89 | 7.46 | 27 | 13.82 | 7.39 | 26 | 37.54 | 5.60 | 27 | 36.33 | 8.41 |
| Male victim, female perpetrator | 28 | 14.43 | 6.39 | 24 | 11.92 | 3.93 | 28 | 33.04 | 5.53 | 24 | 36.83 | 4.67 |
| Female victim, male perpetrator | 29 | 13.97 | 8.34 | 28 | 11.57 | 5.06 | 29 | 37.10 | 8.46 | 28 | 39.18 | 3.24 |
| Female victim, female perpetrator | 28 | 11.71 | 4.34 | 28 | 10.46 | 3.26 | 28 | 38.50 | 3.22 | 28 | 38.71 | 4.22 |

Table 2. Significant and Non-Significant Multivariate Effects for the MANOVA (*N* = 221).

| Source of Variation | <i>V</i> | <i>F_{MV}</i> | η^2_{MV} | $\hat{\rho}^2_{mv}$ ^a | 95% CI | <i>p</i> |
|--------------------------|----------|-----------------------|---------------|----------------------------------|------------|----------|
| RMA | .003 | 0.36 | .003 | .000 | [.00, .00] | <.001 |
| Victim gender | .042 | 4.58* | .042 | .033 | [.00, .07] | .01 |
| Perpetrator gender | .033 | 3.60* | .033 | .024 | [.00, .06] | .03 |
| Relationship type | .003 | 0.36 | .003 | .000 | [.00, .00] | .70 |
| RMA × Victim gender | .042 | 4.59* | .042 | .033 | [.00, .07] | .01 |
| RMA × Perpetrator gender | .042 | 4.55* | .042 | .033 | [.00, .07] | .01 |
| RMA × Relationship type | .007 | 0.74 | .007 | .000 | [.00, .02] | .48 |

Note. CI = confidence interval; RMA = rape myth acceptance.

^a $\hat{\rho}^2_{mv}$ is the shrunken multivariate effect size (i.e., eta squared).

**p* < .05.

the overall MANOVA were not statistically significant according to Pillai’s Trace, *V* = 0.01, *F*(2, 209) = 0.76, *p* = .47, $\hat{\rho}^2_{mv}$ = .00, 95% CI = [.00, .02], where $\hat{\rho}^2_{mv}$ is equal to the shrunken multivariate effect size (Haase & Ellis, 1987). No multivariate interaction emerged between the four independent variables and two dependent variables.

To test the first hypothesis, the two-way interaction was assessed between RMA and victim gender for both victim blame and perpetrator blame, *V* = 0.04, *F*(2, 209) = 4.59, *p* = .01, $\hat{\rho}^2_{mv}$ = .03, 95% CI = [.00, .07]. These findings were significant, subsequently supporting the first hypothesis. Low levels of RMA were associated with relatively low levels of victim

blame for both male and female victims. As RMA increased, victim blame also increased—particularly for male victims. Perpetrator blame, however, decreased as RMA increased; the decrease was especially prominent for male victims, suggesting perpetrator blame is at its lowest when there were high levels of RMA and male victims.

The second hypothesis was tested by assessing victim and perpetrator blame levels for the interaction between RMA and perpetrator gender. A significant two-way interaction emerged, $V = 0.04$, $F(2, 209) = 4.55$, $p = .01$, $\hat{\rho}_{mv}^2 = .03$, 95% CI = [.00, .07], thus supporting the second hypothesis. That is, victim blame with female perpetrators stayed relatively lower across levels of RMA, but increased substantially for male perpetrators as individuals endorsed higher levels of RMA. Perpetrator blame, however, was highest with male perpetrators when individuals endorsed low levels of RMA and lowest for male perpetrators when individuals endorsed relatively higher levels of RMA.

The third hypothesis assessed the two-way interaction between RMA and Type of Relationship for victim and perpetrator blame, $V = .01$, $F(2, 209) = .74$, $p = .48$, $\hat{\rho}_{mv}^2 = .00$, 95% CI = [.00, .02]. According to the multivariate F test, the third hypothesis was not supported.

Main effects were not interpreted for variables with significant interactions, and no main effect was found for the final variable (i.e., type of relationship), $V = .00$, $F(2, 209) = .36$, $p = .70$, $\hat{\rho}_{mv}^2 = .00$, 95% CI = [.00, .02]. Non-significant findings suggest blame levels did not differ based on acquaintance versus stranger rape.

Finally, norm comparison tests were conducted to assess whether women in the sample endorsed significantly lower levels of RMA than that of previous studies. Very few studies using the IRMA-SF with samples of college women were found. Participants endorsed significantly lower RMA ($M = 1.79$, $SD = 0.69$) than Aronowitz, Lambert, and Davidoff's (2012) sample of 164 college women ($M = 1.94$), $t(220) = -3.21$, $p < .05$, $\hat{\rho}^2 = .04$, 95% CI = [.00, .08], as well as Foubert, Langhinrichsen-Rohling, Brasfield, and Hill's (2010) sample of 215 college women ($M = 2.15$), $t(220) = -7.80$, $p < .05$, $\hat{\rho}^2 = .21$, 95% CI = [.12, .28].

Discussion

The purpose of this research was to assess the combined effects of RMA, victim gender, perpetrator gender, and type of relationship on victim blame and perpetrator blame in a sample of college-aged women. Results suggest that RMA, victim gender, and perpetrator gender account for a significant amount of variance in blame attributions for both victims and perpetrators.

Before interpreting the findings in depth, one must first look to the strengths and limitations of the current investigation.

Strengths

Many strengths are worth mentioning in the current investigation, including the research design, statistical analysis, and target population and sample. This is one of the first studies to simultaneously investigate the multivariate effects of RMA and other factors of sexual assault on victim blame and perpetrator blame. Rather than assessing the effects of these variables individually, the investigators wanted to recognize that many of these constructs overlap with one another when individuals form attributions. Hence, it is helpful to evaluate the intersecting relationships between variables and how they ultimately contribute to blame attributions. Second, by using a multivariate design and avoiding unnecessary post hoc analyses, Type I error was minimized, subsequently increasing confidence in the study's findings. Steps were also taken to minimize error variance by assessing psychometric support of inventories and by evaluating data to make sure multivariate assumptions were met. Finally, the present study targeted a unique population of students from an all-women's university. Despite relatively limited generalizability, this research will provide a starting point for researchers who seek a stronger understanding of how women in feminist, liberal arts, and higher education settings form attributions pertaining to sexual violence.

Limitations

Unfortunately, it is difficult to measure rape myths in society without further perpetuating them. One must be cognizant of the fact that the structure and content of questions and statements can frame people's thinking. Although it would be ideal to assess rape myths while including a gender-neutral scale, it may also be difficult. Thus, the IRMA Scale (Payne et al., 1999) perpetuates rape myths itself due to the nature of the items in the scale. It is important for us to educate participants about rape myths after assessing them, so that we do not inadvertently reinforce the stereotypes that are presented in the rape myths.

An additional limitation pertains to the use of clinical vignettes. College students are exposed to campus-wide alerts and crime statistics reports on sexual violence due to improvements in federal mandates (Clery Center for Security on Campus, 2012b). Although vignettes are structured in a manner similar to these reports, it is still difficult to assess true responses with the use of vignettes due to the artificial nature of such situations. Little research has been conducted to specifically address the ecological validity of vignettes in

the area of sexual violence. However, prior research has suggested that responses obtained from vignettes hold ecological validity in the context of decision-making and forming judgments about mental health concerns (Braspenning & Sergeant, 1994). Medical researchers have also addressed the benefits of vignettes for topics that are sensitive in nature and have outlined the practical and ethical implications of using vignettes in social research (Hughes & Huby, 2002). Hence, vignettes cannot specifically capture reality, but are a more ethical practice when presenting potentially disturbing stimuli to participants, as in the study of rape.

Furthermore, it is also difficult to assess blame attributions. The selection of scales that can be used to assess blame attributions in sexual violence is limited, particularly with regard to psychometric support. In the future, it may be worth creating a measure that assesses blame attributions and has strong support for reliability and validity.

Finally, we cannot actually confirm that the women in the sample were feminist; despite having significantly lower RMA and enrollment at an institution that promotes feminist ideology, we did not include a measure of feminist beliefs. Due to this, one must be cautious when generalizing findings to feminist samples.

Major Findings

In sum, victim blame with female perpetrators stayed relatively consistent across levels of RMA, but increased substantially for male perpetrators as individuals endorsed higher levels of RMA. Perpetrator blame, however, was highest with male perpetrators when individuals endorsed low levels of RMA and lowest for male perpetrators when individuals endorsed relatively higher levels of RMA.

Gender of victim. The first hypothesis was supported, which assessed the interaction between RMA and victim gender for victim and perpetrator blame. Low endorsement of RMA was associated with lower levels of victim blame for both male and female victims (See Table 3). As suspected, victim blame increased as RMA increased—particularly for male victims. When an individual has higher levels of RMA, she or he is more likely to blame the victim (Hammond et al., 2011) and less likely to take male victims into consideration (Sleath & Bull, 2010). Furthermore, perpetrator blame decreased as RMA increased. Again, this pattern was stronger for male victims, reinforcing the notion that perpetrators are blamed the least when victims are male and an individual endorses RMA. These findings suggest that RMA still contributes to blame attributions for victims and perpetrators, especially for

Table 3. Bivariate Correlations of Study Variables.

| Variable | Victim Gender ^a | Perpetrator Gender ^a | Relationship Type ^b | RMA | Victim Blame |
|--------------------|----------------------------|---------------------------------|--------------------------------|--------|--------------|
| Victim gender | — | | | | |
| Perpetrator gender | -.004 | — | | | |
| Relationship type | -.005 | .023 | — | | |
| RMA | -.101 | .163* | .063 | — | |
| Victim blame | .136* | .078 | -.133* | .350** | — |
| Perpetrator blame | -.205** | .069 | .110 | -.133* | -.551** |

Note. RMA = rape myth acceptance.

^a0 = female, 1 = male.

^b0 = acquaintance, 1 = stranger.

p* < .05. *p* < .01.

male victims, who are not typically taken into account in stereotypical rape depictions.

Gender of perpetrator. The second hypothesis was also supported, which examined the effects of RMA and perpetrator gender on blame attributions. More specifically, the data suggest that victim blame among female perpetrators stayed relatively consistent across levels of RMA, but victim blame increased substantially for male perpetrators as RMA increased. In other words, higher levels of RMA were associated with higher levels of victim blame when perpetrators were male. With regard to perpetrator blame, RMA was associated with blame levels for males; male perpetrator blame was highest when individuals reported low levels of RMA, and blame was lowest for male perpetrators when individuals reported higher levels of RMA. These findings coincide with many of the theoretical assumptions underlying RMA, particularly that male victims receive more blame from individuals with high levels of RMA and less blame from individuals with low RMA (Sleath & Bull, 2010).

Type of relationship. The third hypothesis was not supported, which assessed the interaction between RMA and Type of Relationship for victim and perpetrator blame. Type of Relationship was not significantly associated with victim and perpetrator blame when assessing main effects. Hence, victim and perpetrator blame levels did not change regardless of whether the perpetrator was an acquaintance or stranger. This contradicts previous literature suggesting that blame levels differ between the types of relationship (Bell et al., 1994; Hammock & Richardson, 1997; Perrott & Webber, 1996; Sleath & Bull, 2010; Stromwall et al., 2013a).

Implications for Future Research

The sample in the current investigation consisted of female undergraduate students in psychology and women's studies classes at an all-women's liberal arts university. Results suggest that RMA is still an important factor to consider—even when assessing beliefs in a sample of women with significantly lower levels of RMA. Based on these findings, women attending a feminist college are still susceptible to RMA, and they may subsequently allow these false beliefs to inform blame attributions they make toward victims and perpetrators.

Future researchers should continue to assess the simultaneous effects of RMA and gender on blame attributions of victims and survivors. The current investigation is limited to a very specific sample of women. Hence, it will be helpful in the future to determine how RMA levels and gender affect blame attributions for both women and men in other populations.

Conclusion

This study suggests that the amount of blame that victims and perpetrators receive differs depending on the gender of the victim and the gender of the perpetrator. It also demonstrates the continued influence of RMA on blame attributions for both victims and perpetrators. Currently, the literature is conflicted as to whether victims and perpetrators of acquaintance rape or stranger rape are attributed the most blame; this study further speaks to the need to clarify this issue. The field of psychology must continue to conduct research on the differing attributions of male and female victims and perpetrators, as well as differing attributions based on type of relationship (i.e., stranger vs. acquaintance). Such research will lead the field to a better and more thorough understanding of sexual assault and rape. The field can use this research and the available literature to create educational workshops in communities throughout the nation. The literature can also be used to train professionals in the fields who work directly with sexual assault victims and survivors, and the populations that are most affected by sexual violence (e.g., college campuses and universities).

Furthermore, this study suggests that male victims of sexual assault continue to face stigmatization. As stated earlier, communities continue to experience consequences from the stigmas surrounding male victimization, leading to decreased likelihood of reporting and increased levels of distress. Although women are significantly more likely to be sexually assaulted and raped than men, men are not immune to such victimization. These men merit the same treatment and respect that female victims receive. In fact, a male's

recovery may be more demanding because he may face more stressors and feelings of shame and depression than his female counterpart.

Most importantly, we must continue to educate college communities about sexual violence. Many victims experience feelings of shame and guilt, regardless of how responsible they feel about the situation. The results in the current investigation reinforce this notion; many participants endorsed items stating they would blame themselves for what happened. By educating women and men about sexual violence, communities can create more supportive environments for victims and survivors. The field may also continue to challenge the rape myths and stereotypes present in society to strengthen the discourse surrounding sexual violence. Doing so will make sexual violence a more public issue and may help with prevention, intervention, and awareness—all of which are needed on a daily basis in society.

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