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## Perpetrator characteristics and blame attributions in a stranger rape situation

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### ABSTRACT

Both real-life events and research show that rape victims are sometimes blamed for their victimization. The effect of perpetrator characteristics on victim blaming has rarely been studied. In an experiment using a community sample ( $N = 161$ ), we investigated the effect of the perpetrator's previous conviction and age, as well as participants' gender and belief in a just world (BJW) on blame attributions using a vignette methodology. It was predicted that less victim blame and more perpetrator blame would be attributed when the perpetrator had a previous conviction. Results showed that level of BJW was associated with victim blame (positively) and perpetrator blame (negatively). Men blamed the victim more and women blamed the victim less when the perpetrator had a previous conviction. Women blamed the perpetrator more and men less when the perpetrator had a previous conviction. Hence, gender is an important factor in explaining variation in blame attributions.

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### Características de los autores y atribución de culpa en una situación de violación por extraños

#### RESUMEN

Tanto los hechos de la vida real como la investigación muestran que a las víctimas de violación a veces se las acusa de victimización. Apenas se ha estudiado el efecto de las características del autor en la culpabilización de las víctimas. En un experimento con una muestra comunitaria ( $N = 161$ ) utilizando una metodología de viñetas investigamos el efecto de las condenas anteriores y de la edad del autor, así como el género y su creencia en un mundo justo, en la atribución de culpa. Se predijo que se atribuiría menos culpa a la víctima y más al autor cuando éste había sido condenado anteriormente. Los resultados indican que la creencia en un mundo justo se asociaba (positivamente) a la culpabilización de la víctima y (negativamente) a la del autor. Los hombres culpabilizaban más a la víctima y las mujeres la culpabilizaban menos cuando el autor había sido condenado anteriormente. En consecuencia, el género constituye un factor importante en la explicación de la variación en la atribución de culpa.

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#### Palabras clave:

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Creencia en un mundo justo

Rape has serious consequences for the victim. Apart from the trauma of the rape itself (i.e., the primary victimization), rape victims are sometimes (more or less) blamed for the rape, which leads to secondary victimization (e.g., Campbell, Ahrens, Sefl, Wasco & Barnes, 2001). Blame reactions from family, friends, and the media can enhance feelings of self-blame, commonly experienced by rape victims (Ullman, Filipas, Townsend & Starzynski, 2007). Self-blame negatively affects the victim's chances of recovery (Ullman et al., 2007) and make victims less prone to report the incident to the

police (Wolitzky-Taylor et al., 2010). Research has provided several insights into the attribution processes involved in victim blaming, but some potentially important aspects have been given less attention (see Grubb & Harrower, 2008 for a qualitative review and Whatley, 1996 for a meta-analysis). Victim blame research often involves experimental studies using hypothetical rape case scenarios and has established several factors which increase the levels of victim blame attributions (e.g., Buddie & Miller, 2001) and levels of perpetrator blame (e.g., Sleath & Bull, 2010). Factors related to the victim, the described rape situation, and characteristics of the individuals making the attributions have all been studied. Much less is known regarding perpetrator characteristics. Perceptions of both the perpetrator and victim have been found to be important in blame attributions (Gerdes, Dammann, & Heilig, 1988). The present study,

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therefore, investigated perpetrator characteristics and their relation to both victim and perpetrator blame attributions.

In one of the few studies examining the effects of perpetrator characteristics, Mitchell, Angelone, Kohlberger, and Hirschman (2008) investigated perpetrator motivation and found that when the perpetrator was violently motivated the victim was blamed less compared to when the perpetrator was sexually motivated. Information about the perpetrator may, then, make people less prone to blame the victim. Arguably, taking part of information about the previous criminal record of the perpetrator might lower the participants' tendency to attribute blame to the victim, and might also affect the tendency to blame the perpetrator. In this study, we manipulated the perpetrator's previous sexual crime history.

Previous research has often investigated factors that may increase blame attributions; much less attention has been devoted to factors that might *decrease* levels of such attributions. Some research indicates a negative correlation between assigned victim and perpetrator blame (Brown & Testa, 2008; Krahe, Temkin, & Bieneck, 2007), such as high levels of perpetrator blame are linked with low levels of victim blame. However, other studies report high levels of both victim blame and perpetrator blame for the same scenarios (e.g., Frese, Moya, & Megías, 2004). Thus, the victim/perpetrator blame relation merits further investigation.

Victim blame research has seldom considered the age of either the victim or perpetrator. There are a few studies with children (e.g., Back & Lips, 1998) and adolescents as victims (e.g., Davies, Rogers, & Whitelegg, 2009), and few comparing young and middle-aged adult victims (e.g., Foley & Pigott, 2000; Strömwall, Alfredsson, & Landström, 2013a). In the latter study, participants attributed more blame to the younger victim, and the authors theorized that the younger adult victim was expected to be able to fight off or run away from the assailant to a higher extent than the middle-aged victim. However, reasonably, participants' perceptions and attributions may also be coloured by the *age of the perpetrator*. A younger perpetrator may lead to lower levels of blame attributed to the victim since that perpetrator might be perceived as more difficult to, for example, run away from compared to a middle-aged man. Another reason why a young perpetrator may lead to lower levels of victim blame is that a young perpetrator is seen as less responsible and acts out of "youthful stupidity" compared to a middle-aged man who should be much more mature and able to both appreciate the integrity of the female victim and to control himself. Previous research has not shed light on the age of perpetrator issue; therefore, the effect of perpetrator age was examined in the current study.

In addition to how victim, perpetrator, and situational factors affect victim blame attribution, characteristics of the research participants have also been explored and a common finding is that male participants attribute more blame to the victim compared to female participants (see e.g., Grubb & Harrower, 2008; Krahe et al., 2007). However, other studies show that some women attribute more blame to rape victims (Strömwall et al., 2013a; Strömwall, Alfredsson, & Landström, 2013b) and a few studies find no gender differences (e.g., Frese et al., 2004; Newcomb, Eynde, Hafner & Jolly, 2008).

Arguably, the most often cited theory aimed at explaining victim blaming is the belief in a just world (BJW; Lerner, 1980). The basic premise is that if an event is perceived as unjust it threatens the observer's belief of the world as fair and predictable (Dalbert, 2009). Justice can be restored if the observer finds an explanation of the cause of the event (Haynes & Olson, 2006), which in rape cases is manifested by blaming the victim. Doing so, the observer distance him/herself from the victim and secures a sense of own safety (e.g., Hafer & Bègue, 2005; Lerner & Miller, 1978). The theory has been supported by research showing that participants high on BJW blame rape victims more than participants reporting low on BJW (Whatley & Riggio, 1993; Strömwall et al., 2013b), although there are studies

reporting no effect of BJW on blame attributions (e.g., Sleath & Bull, 2010). Furthermore, research has found that BJW interacts with gender of participant (e.g., Foley & Pigott, 2000), albeit the results are not clear-cut. Men (Drout & Gaertner, 1994) as well as women (Strömwall et al., 2013a) high on BJW have been found to attribute higher levels of victim blame. Arguably, the BJW and gender might interact differently in the various settings used in the vignettes. The relationship needs further investigation (Hayes, Lorenz, & Bell, 2013).

## The Present Study

With just a few exceptions, studies in victim blame research have used undergraduate students (Grubb & Harrower, 2008; see also Foley & Pigott, 2000, for a warning against using college students in rape research). To avoid this sample bias the current study used a community sample (cf. Pedersen & Strömwall, 2013). Based on previous research we proposed a number of hypotheses. We predicted that participants with high BJW scores would attribute more blame to the victim (than participants with lower BJW scores) and lesser blame to the perpetrator (than participants with lower BJW scores). Regarding perpetrator characteristics, we expected that participants exposed to information about the perpetrator having a previous conviction would attribute lower levels of victim blame and higher levels of perpetrator blame compared to participants not given that information. We also made the non-directional prediction that perpetrator age would affect blame attributions. Finally, we expected the gender of the participant to be important, either as a main effect or included in interaction terms.

## Method

### Participants

The study used a community sample of 161 volunteering individuals (86 women, 75 men). Age ranged from 15 to 75 years ( $M = 29.8$ ,  $SD = 14.3$ ). All participants were compensated with a lottery ticket (value of approx. £ 2.50). The participants were randomly allocated to the experimental conditions. The participants were approached in different places, such as companies, shopping malls, and resource centres. The participants were asked to participate in a short study (approx. 10 min) and were informed of the somewhat sensitive nature of the research content. Consent was obtained. The participants were randomly assigned to one of four booklets, each containing a different scenario. Debriefing details were included at the end of the questionnaire.

### Design

The experiment had a 2 (perpetrator previous conviction: yes vs. no)  $\times$  2 (perpetrator age: young vs. middle aged)  $\times$  2 (gender of participant: women vs. men) between-subjects design. Level of BJW was used as a covariate. The main dependent variables were measures of victim blame and perpetrator blame.

### Materials

Participants were handed a booklet consisting of a stranger rape vignette in the form of a newspaper article (approx. 500 words) followed by items measuring victim and perpetrator blame and participants' level of belief in a just world. Demographic data (gender, age) was filled in at the end of the questionnaire. In total, four vignettes were used. In the vignette, a woman ("Anna") had been followed by an unknown man on her way home from work, but not phoned or asked for help, or tried to run away. When reaching the entryway to her house, Anna opened the door and the man pushed her into the house and forced himself sexually on her. The content of

the scenario was held constant, apart from our manipulation of the age of the perpetrator (19 or 47 years old) and information about the perpetrator having a previous conviction for a similar offence either present or absent. The wording "rape" was excluded to avoid a possible bias in the subsequent ratings (Davies & Rogers, 2006). All scenarios and questionnaires were prepared for this study and subjected to a smaller pilot test ( $N = 22$ ) and smaller adjustments to the rating scales were accordingly made prior to the main study.

Four items measuring victim blame were rated on a 10 cm long line (endpoints 0% to 100%) and concerned the extent to which Anna could be blamed for the incident. The four items described the extent to which the victim was blameworthy, responsible, at fault, and had acted inappropriately. The four items were summed into one victim blame scale (Cronbach's  $\alpha = .80$ ). Four items measuring perpetrator blame were rated in the same fashion as the victim blame items, exchanging the name Anna with "the aggressor". The four items were summed into one perpetrator blame scale (Cronbach's  $\alpha = .76$ ). The last item asked the participants to rate the extent to which they characterized the event described as a rape, using the 0-100 scale.

BJW has been measured in several contexts and with different instruments (see Furnham, 2003 for a review). The current study employed a translated Swedish version of the General Beliefs in a Just World scale (GBJW, originally developed by Dalbert, Montada & Schmitt, 1987, translated by Strömwall et al., 2013a). The original GBJW-scale has been shown to have satisfactory psychometric properties (Dalbert, 2000; Furnham, 2003). The BJW is a 6-item measure; responses are given on a 6-point scale ranging from 1 (*strongly agree*) to 6 (*strongly disagree*). The items showed high internal consistency (Cronbach's  $\alpha = .75$ ) and were summed into one score.

## Results

In general, participants attributed low levels of victim blame ( $M = 2.16$ ,  $SD = 4.13$ ) and high levels of perpetrator blame ( $M = 38.25$ ,  $SD = 4.68$ ); the difference was significant: paired-samples,  $t(157) = -58.14$ ,  $p < .001$ ,  $d = 4.63$ . The association between levels of attributed victim blame and levels of attributed perpetrator blame was significant and negative ( $r = -.57$ ,  $p < .01$ ). As expected, BJW correlated positively with level of victim blame,  $r(157) = .23$ ,  $p = .004$ , and negatively with level of perpetrator blame,  $r(158) = -.19$ ,  $p = .016$ .

In order to investigate differences in level of *victim blame* attributions, a 2 (perpetrator previous conviction: yes vs. no)  $\times$  2 (perpetrator age: young vs. middle aged)  $\times$  2 (gender of participant: female vs. male) between-subjects ANCOVA was performed using the victim blame scale as dependent variable and the level of BJW as a covariate (see Table 1 for descriptive statistics and Table 2 for full descriptions of results). The covariate, BJW, was significantly related to victim blame,  $F(1, 150) = 6.26$ ,  $p = .01$ ,  $\eta_p^2 = .04$ . One of the tested effects was significant at  $\alpha = .05$ , namely the two-way interaction between perpetrator previous conviction and participant gender,  $F(1, 150) = 8.15$ ,  $p < .01$ ,  $\eta_p^2 = .05$ . To analyse the interaction further, simple effects tests were conducted comparing participant gender at each level of perpetrator previous conviction. When the perpetrator was described as having a previous conviction the victim was blamed significantly more by male participants ( $M = 3.67$ ,  $SE = 0.65$ ) than by female participants ( $M = 0.86$ ,  $SE = 0.61$ ),  $F(1, 150) = 9.86$ ,  $p < .01$ ,  $\eta_p^2 = .06$ . When the perpetrator had no previous conviction the female participants ( $M = 2.49$ ,  $SE = 0.60$ ) and the male participants ( $M = 1.71$ ,  $SE = 0.66$ ) did not differ,  $F(1, 150) = 0.77$ ,  $p = .38$ ,  $\eta_p^2 = .005$ .

In order to investigate differences in levels of *perpetrator blame* attributions, a 2 (perpetrator previous conviction: yes vs. no)  $\times$  2 (perpetrator age: young vs. middle aged)  $\times$  2 (gender of participant: female vs. male) between-subjects ANCOVA was performed using the perpetrator blame scale as dependent variable, again with the level of BJW as a covariate (see Table 3 for descriptive statistics and

**Table 1**

Means and standard deviations of victim blame attributions across perpetrator age, perpetrator previous conviction, and participant gender

Perpetrator age	Previous conviction	Female participants			Male participants		
		<i>M</i>	<i>SD</i>	<i>M</i> <sub>adj</sub>	<i>M</i>	<i>SD</i>	<i>M</i> <sub>adj</sub>
Young	Yes	0.98	2.08	1.02	3.32	5.75	3.12
	No	3.73	5.29	3.24	1.83	3.04	1.66
Middle aged	Yes	0.47	1.34	0.71	4.23	5.27	4.24
	No	1.55	4.07	1.73	1.71	3.02	1.76

Note. *M* and *SD* refer to the uncorrected values; *M*<sub>adj</sub> is the cell value after the covariate (BJW) has been accounted for.

**Table 2**

Results of analysis of covariance for the victim blame scale

Effect	<i>F</i> (1, 159)	<i>p</i>	$\eta_p^2$
Participant gender	2.59	.11	.02
Perpetrator age	0.06	.81	.00
Perpetrator previous conviction	0.08	.78	.00
Participant gender $\times$ perpetrator age	1.47	.23	.01
Participant gender $\times$ perpetrator previous conviction	8.15	.01	.05
Perpetrator age $\times$ perpetrator previous conviction	0.78	.38	.01
Participant gender $\times$ perpetrator age $\times$ perpetrator previous conviction	0.01	.94	.00

Table 4 for inferential statistics). The covariate, BJW was significantly related to level of attributed perpetrator blame,  $F(1, 151) = 4.67$ ,  $p = .03$ ,  $\eta_p^2 = .03$ . A significant two-way interaction between perpetrator previous conviction and participant gender was found,  $F(1, 151) = 4.05$ ,  $p = .04$ ,  $\eta_p^2 = .03$ . The interaction was further analysed with simple effects tests. When the perpetrator had a previous conviction, the perpetrator was blamed to a significantly lesser degree by male participants ( $M = 36.98$ ,  $SE = 0.76$ ) than by female participants ( $M =$

**Table 3**

Means and standard deviations of perpetrator blame attributions across perpetrator age, perpetrator previous conviction, and participant gender

Perpetrator age	Previous conviction	Female participants			Male participants		
		<i>M</i>	<i>SD</i>	<i>M</i> <sub>adj</sub>	<i>M</i>	<i>SD</i>	<i>M</i> <sub>adj</sub>
Young	Yes	39.66	0.84	39.65	36.21	9.26	36.77
	No	37.66	4.77	37.81	38.56	2.17	38.77
Middle aged	Yes	38.90	2.75	38.68	37.51	4.64	37.58
	No	38.22	5.09	38.07	38.92	2.33	38.70

Note. *M* and *SD* refer to the uncorrected values; *M*<sub>adj</sub> is the cell value after the covariate (BJW) has been accounted for.

**Table 4**

Results of analysis of covariance for the perpetrator blame scale

Effect	<i>F</i> (1, 159)	<i>p</i>	$\eta_p^2$
Participant gender	0.90	.34	.01
Perpetrator age	0.18	.89	.00
Perpetrator previous conviction	0.13	.72	.00
Participant gender $\times$ perpetrator age	0.40	.53	.00
Participant gender $\times$ perpetrator previous conviction	4.05	.04	.03
Perpetrator age $\times$ Perpetrator previous conviction	0.00	.98	.00
Participant gender $\times$ perpetrator age $\times$ perpetrator previous conviction	0.71	.40	.01

39.17,  $SE = 0.72$ ),  $F(1, 151) = 4.38$ ,  $p = .04$ ,  $\eta_p^2 = .03$ . When the perpetrator did not have a previous conviction there was no difference between the female participants ( $M = 37.94$ ,  $SE = 0.70$ ) and the male participants ( $M = 38.74$ ,  $SE = 0.77$ ),  $F(1, 151) = 0.57$ ,  $p = .45$ ,  $\eta_p^2 = .004$ .

Concerning the ratings of the extent to which the event was considered a rape, women ( $M = 9.86$ ,  $SD = 0.60$ ) rated the event as a rape to a higher extent than did men ( $M = 9.38$ ,  $SD = 1.89$ ), Welch's  $t(85.8) = 2.06$ ,  $p = .04$ ,  $d = 0.33$ . Finally, BJW score was positively related to the ratings of the event such that the higher the level of BJW, the lesser participant indicated the event was a rape,  $r(158) = -.29$ ,  $p < .001$ .

## Discussion

Consistent with recent findings (Mitchell et al, 2009; Strömwall et al., 2013a, b) this study showed much higher blame attributions to the perpetrator than to the victim. Thus, the current research suggests that when hearing about rape cases one may not think about reasons why the victim has herself to blame. The negative correlation between victim and perpetrator blame found in this study suggests that when attributing blame to one of the parties in a rape case, less blame will be attributed to the other party. This finding stresses the importance of including both victim and perpetrator blame measurements in future research.

The main finding in the present study was, however, the interactions between participant gender and perpetrator conviction. Our manipulation of a perpetrator with or without a previous history of sexual crimes affected women and men differently. Women attributed less blame to the victim and more blame to the perpetrator when the perpetrator was described as having previous criminal conviction. The male participants showed the opposite pattern. It is plausible that male participants reasoned that the offender could not be blamed as much when committing a second (or third,...) crime of the same type, whereas the female participants reasoned the other way around. Speculatively, the difference may stem from different beliefs about causes of criminality and offending (cf. Hurwitz & Smithey, 1998). Women, traditionally more lenient than men in terms of, for example, crime punishment, may have reacted negatively when the representation of a repeat offender was evoked. Further research could compare different crimes (e.g., rape, robbery and economic crime) to find out if women consistently have less forbearance with repeated offenders or if this is unique to sexual crimes against women. We hypothesize the latter. The finding both highlights an important factor for future research to consider when investigating blame attributions and shows a shortcoming in previous research, which has neglected to ask participants about views on crime and punishment in general in addition to specific questions regarding the vignette presented. Thus, we encourage future research to address this matter. Previous research (Mitchell et al., 2009) found that participants were more punitive to the offender when he was motivated by violence than by sexual needs. Furthermore, male participants assigned less blame to the victim if the perpetrator was motivated by sexual needs. A tentative conclusion is, then, that men and women differ in terms of victim blaming as a consequence of information about the perpetrator. Clearly, more research is needed and the results need to be replicated before substantial conclusions can be drawn.

Although research supporting gender differences regarding beliefs about causes of criminality and offending is largely lacking, gender differences in views on crime and punishment have been documented (e.g., Hurwitz & Smithey, 1998; see also Petersen & Hyde, 2011 for gender differences in sexual attitudes). In this study, one unambiguous gender difference was found: women rated, in line with Mitchell et al. (2009), the depicted event as a rape to a higher degree than did men. The reason may be that women are more afraid of crime and more supportive of prevention efforts (Hurwitz &

Smithey, 1998). Thus, rape and other crimes specifically targeting women may cause women to respond differently than men.

We expected the belief in a just world measure to predict levels of victim and perpetrator blame in line with previous research (e.g., Whatley & Riggio, 1993; Strömwall et al, 2013b), and BJW was indeed associated with both dependent variables. Level of BJW correlated positively with level of victim blame and negatively with level of perpetrator blame. Level of BJW did, furthermore, generate findings in the perception of the depicted crime as a rape: participants high on BJW were less willing to label the assault a rape. This finding indicates that just-world beliefs play a part in how individuals perceive the blameworthiness of rape victims and rape perpetrators, as well as influence the perception of the rape itself. The current research adds to the body of research showing that Lerner's just-world theory (e.g., Lerner, 1980) can explain differences in attributed victim blame. This study adds to the extant research in that just-world theory has been shown to predict differences in levels of attributed blame to the perpetrator as well.

Perpetrator age was included as an independent variable but without a specific prediction due to lack of previous research. The variable turned out to have no main or interaction effects at all for either victim or perpetrator blame. One reason may be the information about the perpetrator's age is simply not related to level of attributed blame, and the current study is the first to show that. Another reason may be that operationalization of the age variable was not optimal, that is, our inclusion of a 19 year-old and a 47-year-old perpetrator was not a true representation of ages for which differences occur. In the latter case, further research may shed light on the issue.

One possible limitation of the current study is our use of a Swedish community sample. Previous researchers have pointed out that Swedish people hold more egalitarian sex-role beliefs in comparison to most countries (Sevilla-Sanz, 2010), which may question the generalizability of this study's results. However, the current study is part of a larger research program that has consistently shown that Swedish community members are, in general, more reluctant to blame the victim (Strömwall et al., 2013a, b). In their review, Grubb and Harrower (2008) called for more victim blame research from countries other than USA and the UK. We therefore urge researchers from all over the world to contribute to the understanding of victim blame.

One implication of this research is that if the reports about a rape, for example in the media, contain information about the perpetrator, less focus may be on the victim. Thereby, the probability that the victim and her behavior, clothing, sexual history, and so on will come under scrutiny will be lower. In turn, the chances of the rape victim being secondary victimized may be smaller. Arguably, when information about the *victim* is the only information given, people will look for explanations of the rape in the victim's behavior or person. When reports about rape include other facts, such as information about the perpetrator, we may see less victim blaming. A shift in focus from victim to perpetrator can in addition lead to more rape victims daring to report to the police.

In the end, the study adds to the victim blame literature by showing, once again, that gender is an important factor in explaining variation in blame attributions. However, the relationship between gender and victim blame appears to be quite complicated, as gender may interact with several other factors, such as just world beliefs and information about the perpetrator's past such as his criminal history. An improved understanding of the psychological processes involved in – and the factors that influence – blame attributions is paramount to fully understand the concept of victim blame. Considering that secondary victimization and victim blaming have serious consequences for rape victims we argue that future research must address not only why people blame the victim but also ways to remedy the effect.



## Conflict of Interest

The authors of this article declare no conflict of interest.

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