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Attribution of blame in cases of rape: an analysis of participant gender, type of rape and perceived similarity to the victim.

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Abstract

This paper reviews studies exploring the effects of a variety of factors on participants' judgments of hypothetical depictions of rape within an experimental setting. The focus is on attribution of responsibility or fault to the victim or attacker and related judgments. Three aspects have been reviewed: the effect of *participant gender*, the *type of rape* depicted (stranger rape, date rape or acquaintance rape) and *perceived similarity with the victim/perpetrator* in line with the defensive attribution theory. There are limits to generalization due to populations studied and methods used, and the observed effects of several factors are either minimal or inconsistent. However, some factors have consistent effects on judgments. Findings indicate that men engage in victim blaming more readily than women; victims who are acquainted with their attacker tend to be assigned more responsibility for a rape; and participants who view themselves as similar to the victim attribute more blame to the perpetrator of the rape, demonstrating the effects of "harm avoidance" and "blame avoidance."

Keywords:

Rape, Blame, Defensive Attribution, Acquaintance Rape, Gender Differences, Victim Similarity.

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1. Introduction

1.1. Attribution of responsibility

Attribution of responsibility for observed events entails a determination of causative factors. At the personal level, the extent to which actors are believed responsible for outcomes may be an important determinant of observers' perceptions and evaluations of actors and of their subsequent behavior toward them. However, the causal attributions made by observers may not always accurately reflect the action sequence observed. Such attributions may be subject to various cognitive and motivational biases which may render a less than factual interpretation of events (e.g., Jones & Davis, 1965; Jones & Nisbett, 1971; Kelley, 1967; Wegner & Vallacher, 1977). While these biases characterize the behavior of observers generally, it is also apparent that observers differ in their basic personality dispositions, and as a consequence, tend to view and interpret the same outcomes from uniquely biased perspectives. It therefore follows that, the way people assign responsibility for events consists of a complex amalgamation of personal, psychological, and situational factors.

1.2. Victim Blaming

Social psychologists have applied the concept of attributional theory to victims of crime, attempting to explain how observers account for and attribute responsibility for victimization. A particular focus of this research has been on victims of sexual assault, primarily rape victims. In recent years, the crime of rape has emerged as a

major area of professional and public concern. One aspect of rape that has been of particular focus in social psychological research is the negative social attitudes people often hold about rape victims. It is generally accepted that individuals have a tendency to perceive victims, as well as or even instead of perpetrators of rape, in negative terms, and much social psychological research has been devoted to an examination of factors influencing these perceptions. This general phenomenon has been observed with college students in the laboratory (Acock & Ireland, 1983; Karuza & Carey, 1984; Krahe, 1988) and with persons from the helping professions (Damrosch, 1985a; King, Rotter, Calhoun, & Selby, 1978; Resick & Jackson, 1981). It is true of both men and women (Acock & Ireland, 1983); it is obtained across different cultures (Kanekar, Pinto, & Mazumdar, 1985); and it even can occur when victims explain their own behavior (Damrosch, 1985b; Janoff-Bulman, 1979).

Rape victims occupy a unique position in that, although they are targets of assault, they may not be sympathetically perceived and in some cases, may even be assigned the responsibility by observers for having precipitated their own victimization (Amir, 1971; Curtis, 1974; Goldner, 1972; Schultz, 1968; Wood, 1973). Numerous studies have pointed to the tendency of observers to denigrate the rape victim, holding them responsible for the assault (Calhoun, Selby, & Warring, 1976, Cann, Calhoun, & Selby, 1979; Donnerstein & Berkowitz, 1981; Janoff-Bulman, Timko & Carli, 1985; Muehlenhard, 1988; Muehlenhard & Rodgers, 1993). Investigations of rape from this attribution perspective have typically involved laboratory-based experiments on undergraduates at North American universities. Experimental participants are normally asked to make a series of judgments about a rape vignette, including how they define the crime, the extent to which victim and perpetrator are to blame, and the extent to which the perpetrator should be punished.

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The tendency to blame female rape victims has been investigated from many disparate directions and by various methodologies. Two such approaches have dominated study of blame attributions in sexual violence. The first approach examines the effect of victim, perpetrator, and situational characteristics on negative attributions in rape, and it is often referred to in social psychology as the “rape perception framework” (Pollard, 1992; Krahe, 1991). Factors such as the *victim’s respectability* (Luginbuhl & Mullin, 1981), *physical attractiveness* (Tieger, 1981; Deitz, Litman & Bentley, 1984), *provocativeness* (Scroggs, 1976), *previous sexual activity* (L’Armand & Pepitone, 1982; Cann, Calhoun, & Selby, 1979), *victim resistance* (VanWie & Gross, 1995; Wyer, Bodenhausen, & Gorman, 1985; Yescavage, 1999), *degree of victim intoxication* (Richardson & Campbell, 1982; Stormo & Lang, 1997) and *what the victim was wearing at the time of the attack* (Edmonds & Cahoon, 1986; Workman & Freeburg, 1999) have all been found to influence negative attributions in rape. It should be noted that in the majority of cases, participants tend to attribute more responsibility to the rapist, usually very much more, and that attributions of fault to the victim are usually low (Pollard, 1992). Experimental manipulations are thus typically aimed at investigating whether in some circumstances victim blame will be increased, rather than decreased.

In addition to attributes of the victim, the perception of a rape victim and attribution of responsibility is subject to influence of observer/participant characteristics. The second approach has therefore focused on investigating the influence of different observer characteristics on the attribution of rape blame. Such studies have examined the influence of *participants’ attitudes towards rape* (Field, 1978b), *attitudes towards feminism* (Krulowitz & Payne, 1978), *belief in a just world* (Kerr & Kurtz, 1977), *status as students or non-students* (Field & Barnett, 1978),

likelihood of identifying with the victim or defendant (Kaplan & Miller, 1978) and *gender* (Calhoun, Selby, & Warring, 1976; Fulero & DeLara, 1976; Kerr & Kurtz, 1977; Rumsey & Rumsey, 1977; Selby, Calhoun, & Brock, 1977; Seligman, Brickman, & Koulack, 1977). Proponents of this second approach have drawn upon theories of victim blaming, based upon motivational and ego defensive processes to explain the negative attributions directed at the rape victim which are often observed.

Several theories have been proposed to explain the phenomenon of victim blaming. The most commonly cited theory is known as the Just World Theory (Lerner & Matthews, 1967; Kleinke & Meyer, 1990). This theory states that negative rape victim perception occurs as a result of overcompensation for a seemingly undeserved act. According to this perspective, one has a motivational need to believe that the world is a fair place and that behavioral outcomes are deserved (“people get what they deserve and deserve what they get”), thus maintaining a sense of control and efficacy over the environment. To believe that unfortunate things happen to people without any apparent reason would prove chaotic and would subsequently threaten one’s sense of control. Thus, to perceive the victim as deserving of the misfortune helps to restore the comfortable view of the world as being ordered, fair, and just.

The second theory central to this framework is known as the Defensive Attribution Hypothesis (Shaver, 1970; Cann, Calhoun, & Selby, 1979; Kanekar & Vaz, 1988; Thornton, Ryckman, & Robbins, 1982; Muller, Caldwell, & Hunter, 1994). According to this hypothesis, people increase or reduce blame depending on their perceived similarity with the victim and the perceived likelihood of similar future victimization befalling them. Defensive attributions predict negative victim perception to decrease as the similarity of the observer to the victim increases, this being a

defense mechanism to protect the observer from being blamed themselves if a similar fate should befall him or her in the future.

This paper explores the effect of *participant gender*, *type of rape*, and *perceived similarity with the victim* on rape blame attribution and examines how the above theories are employed to account for the research findings obtained.

2. A Review of the Literature

2.1. Gender Differences

As research has consistently demonstrated, perception of a rape victim and attribution of responsibility is subject to the influence of observer characteristics. Sex of the perceiver has been found to influence rape victim judgments, with regards to victim and perpetrator responsibility. Several studies have reported that females attribute less responsibility to a rape victim than do males (Brekke & Borgida, 1988; Calhoun, Selby, & Warring, 1976; Deitz, Littman, & Bentley, 1984; Edmonds & Cahoon, 1986; Gerdes, Dammann, & Heilig, 1988; Gilmartin-Zena, 1983; Johnson & Jackson, 1988; Johnson, Jackson, & Smith, 1989; Kanekar & Kolsawalla, 1977, 1980; Kanekar & Nazareth, 1988; Kleinke & Meyer, 1990; Luginbuhl & Mullin, 1981; Selby, Calhoun, & Brock, 1977), although others have reported no sex differences (Acock & Ireland, 1983; Calhoun, Cann, Selby, & Magee, 1981; Check & Malamuth, 1984; Feldman-Summers & Lindner, 1976; Jones & Aronson, 1973; Krahe, 1988; L'Armand & Pepitone, 1982; Paulsen, 1979; Yarmey, 1985a). Some studies have even revealed that women attribute more responsibility to victims, at least under certain circumstances (for example, Kruelewitz & Payne, 1978; Luginbuhl & Mullin,

1981). Results regarding gender differences are therefore not clear cut, revealing inconsistent and contradictory effects on victim judgments. In depth examination of several of these studies divulges possible explanations for this discrepancy.

Calhoun, Selby and Warring (1976) conducted a study exploring the social perception of the victim's causal role in rape. Participants were required to respond to a standardized videotape of an interview with a presumed victim and then rate the victim on four scales, which were used to calculate the overall degree of responsibility attributed to the victim. Calhoun et al's findings produced two consistent results: males viewed the victim as contributing to the rape to a greater degree than females, and specifically, males tended to indicate that the rape was due to the victim's traits to a greater extent than females. These findings are in line with the predictions of attribution theory; females are more likely to be able to identify and empathize with the victims of rape and as such are more likely to attribute more blame to the perpetrator of the rape. More specifically however, findings from this study highlight males' tendency to attribute rape to the personal characteristics (i.e., dispositional factors) of the victim, suggesting that females may assume the perspective of the victim-actor to a greater extent than males (Jones & Nisbett, 1971). These findings suggest that female observers differ from male observers in the way in which the causal role of a rape victim is perceived, with males viewing the victim as contributing to the rape to a greater degree than females.

Similar results were obtained by Luginbuhl and Mullin (1981). Participants were required to make attributions after reading a brief description of a rape. In line with Calhoun et al.'s study, Luginbuhl and Mullin found that in general, females blamed the victim less than males. They also tended to discriminate among the causal attributions to a greater extent than did males, blaming the victim's *character*

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very little, her *behavior* somewhat, and *chance* a great deal. Luginbuhl and Mullin purport that their results show operation of defensive attribution (Shaver, 1970), with female participants attributing less blame to the victim of rape, in order to avoid blame should a similar situation befall them. They conclude, worryingly, that the victim seems to generally fare worse when judged by males than by females. While acknowledging that some of the attributional differences observed in males and females may result from defensive motivation on the part of females, it is also necessary to highlight the fact that women are more familiar with the issue of rape, are more likely to know rape victims personally, and are apt to have thought about rape in connection with their daily activities. It is therefore questionable whether the concept of defensive attribution is sufficient to deal exclusively with these substantial male-female differences in experience and socialisation.

Subsequent research by Kleinke and Meyer (1990) was consistent with both Calhoun et al. & Luginbuhl & Mullin's findings, with male participants holding the victim more responsible for the rape than female participants. Their study involved a similar experimental set-up to previous literature assessing rape attribution, and consisted of undergraduate students viewing a videotaped interview with a rape victim and then evaluation of the woman and the man who raped her. Participants were also assessed on the Just World Scale (Rubin & Peplau, 1975) prior to viewing the videotaped interview. Kleinke and Meyer's results show a straightforward sex bias contrast with studies in which women assign more responsibility than men to a rape victim, usually in interaction with other variables such as *victim resistance* (Kruelwitz, 1981; Kruelwitz & Nash, 1979), *acquaintance with rapist* (Tetreault & Barnett, 1987), and *rape victim's dress* (Yarmey, 1985a). The authors draw upon the Just World Theory to account for their findings. They purport that the female

participants in their study are more likely than men to identify with a rape victim and therefore less apt to blame her character (Lerner & Miller, 1978; Miller, Smith, Ferree, & Taylor, 1976). Women who identify with a rape victim and who believe in a just world face a particular conflict in reconciling the rape with their belief that “people get what they deserve” (Lerner & Miller, 1978, p. 1030). It follows, that these women are especially reluctant to derogate a rape victim for a negative experience that could also happen to them.

In addition to sex differences, Kleinke and Meyer’s study also highlights the importance of the “Just World” belief system in attributing responsibility for a crime such as rape. Men with a high belief in a just world viewed the crime as more serious (their just world belief was threatened; Lerner & Miller, 1978), and they evaluated the rape victim more negatively than men with a low belief in a just world. These findings have immense implications for the courtroom. If we can be sure that judgments made by university students generalize to those made by jurors, judges in rape cases may wish to instruct jurors about the “just-world” phenomenon and the implications it has for blaming victims. Kleinke and Meyer’s study has therefore served as a step forward in bridging the gap between the social psychological study of rape attribution and its application to real-life rape cases tried in the courtroom.

On the other hand, several studies have revealed a lack of gender differences in rape attributions. Acock and Ireland (1983), for example, find little support for the findings of the above-mentioned studies. Instead, Acock and Ireland found that men rated the crime of rape just as seriously as women, perceived no more norm violation on the part of the victim, did not blame the victim more and blamed the rapist just as much as women. While this lack of gender differences is a “positive result,” the use of a university sample may limit its generalizability. However, in a barrage of

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literature indicating that males view rape victims more negatively than females, the finding that gender has little effect on attitudinal responses or dispositional judgments regarding rape is a promising and advantageous one, with positive implications for the influence of gender bias on jury decision making.

Acock and Ireland also explored behavioral intentions towards the victim and rapist, alongside attributions of blame and responsibility. This aspect of their study produced a perplexing finding in that although males were just as likely as females to view the victim positively, they still expressed more positive behavioral intentions toward the rapist and somewhat less positive behavioral intentions toward the victim than did females. It could be speculated that these results involve same-sex identification in some complex way, but they do not appear to fit a simple linear model. Perhaps in-group bias serves to skew behavioral intentions positively towards the member of the same sex. This research strongly supports the need to consider both the characteristics of the actors and the characteristics of the observers in the attribution process. While much work on attribution has focused on actor-victim characteristics, this study shows that observer characteristics may be just as important, and in some cases, more important.

A later study by Krahe (1988) also found a lack of gender differences in terms of responsibility attributions to victims of rape. Krahe incorporated the concepts of rape myth acceptance and victim's pre-rape behavior into her study, finding that both these factors influenced the degree of responsibility attributed to victims and assailants, whereas gender of participant did not. Participants in her study were asked to complete a questionnaire that contained the 19-item Rape Myth Acceptance Scale (RMAS) by Burt (1980) and a brief rape vignette. Following the rape vignette, respondents were asked whether the victim had any responsibility for the rape.

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Those participants who perceived some form of victim responsibility were then asked to indicate the amount of responsibility on a 0-100% rating scale. Unlike the majority of studies within this field, Krahe's study benefits from the use of a non-student sample. Use of the general public as participants may have served to remove some of the biases which are encountered when using undergraduate students.

Krahe concluded that gender itself did not appear to be a psychologically relevant variable in the rape responsibility attribution process. Although her findings are at odds with previous studies demonstrating a significant relationship between gender and attributions of victim responsibility, it corroborates results from her German sample (Krahe, 1985) and also ties in with Burt's (1980) findings concerning antecedents of rape myth acceptance where highly similar patterns of relationships were obtained for male and female participants. Krahe also goes on to propose that the apparent inconclusiveness of the evidence on gender effects may be due, in part, to the fact that the studies demonstrating a greater tendency of males to attribute responsibility to rape victims did not include measures of rape-related attitudes. Therefore, it may be argued that gender effects materialize only so long as more specific information concerning participants' attitudes about rape is not taken into account. Krahe's findings speak against a simple correspondence between gender and restrictive vs. sympathetic judgments of rape victims. Instead, the results suggest that it is not male attitudes, but stereotypic rape myths held across the genders that have to be changed in the social perception of victims of rape.

Although results of these studies into gender differences in rape attributions have acted to extend knowledge on the social perception of rape victims, they are subject to a number of methodological limitations. A problematic aspect from a European perspective is that apart from the Krahe (1988) study, which was run in the

UK, and Kanekar's work in India, the majority of the studies were run in North America. Although many studies have observed low amounts of victim blame, some have reported quite high scale means. In the UK study, victim blame was low. Krahe asked an initial question about whether the victim had any responsibility for the rape, participants only being asked to rate this if they answered 'yes.' Nearly 80 per cent of participants said 'no.' Although the verbal question may have reduced the likelihood of a positive answer in an interview (conducted on the street), there is thus a possibility that the amount of victim blame observed would be less in the UK, and possibly that other factors would affect it less. There is therefore a need for further cross-cultural comparison, using standardized scales and manipulation of the same dependent variables.

Other problems of generalizability arise from the methods used. Most studies show a clear sample bias, using undergraduate university students, although a few (e.g., Krahe, 1988) have used general public samples. Given that most studies are based on participants individually making scale judgments about a written rape depiction (usually of about 100-1000 words) in an experimental situation, another query would be to ask whether this would generalize to other conditions, i.e., that of a courtroom. Although studies of actual trials may identify similar effects to those found in the experimental literature (e.g., Lafree, Reskin, & Visher, 1985), it is obviously not the case that all experimental findings would necessarily generalize to a trial situation. Data on sentencing, for instance, has little direct application, as juries do not recommend sentences. The studies do, however, shed light on some of the attitudes with which a juror will enter the court and inform us more generally about people's attitudes towards rape.

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Other methodological limitations include the varied type of stimulus used. The most popular but least satisfactory approach in social psychological investigations of sexual violence has entailed the use of *written vignettes* (Gilmartin-Zena, 1983; Hoffman & Dodd, 1975; Jones & Aronson, 1973; L'Armand, Pepitone, & Shanmugam, 1982; Muelenhard, Friedman, & Thomas, 1985; Pallak & Davies, 1982; Richardson & Campbell, 1982; Shotland & Goodstein, 1983; Williams, 1979), *mock trials* (Borgida & White, 1978; Field, 1979; Nagao & Davis, 1980; Pugh, 1983; Villemur & Hyde, 1983), *videotaped scenarios* (Calhoun, Cann, Selby, & Magee, 1981, Kleinke & Meyer, 1990), *still photography* (Terry & Doerge, 1979) and *newspaper reports* (Cann, Calhoun, & Selby, 1979) as bases for inferring attitudes toward rape and rape victims. These different approaches have indirectly created some confusion and inconsistencies, and the research results are somewhat hindered by the lack of any formal objective direction. In addition to this, the disparity of methods employed makes direct comparison between studies extremely difficult and points to the need to standardize a procedure to examine victim attribution. Most studies have implemented the vignette approach, asking participants to evaluate imaginary rape victims from written case depictions, however this method has been criticized for its artificiality. Several studies, such as the one by Kleinke and Meyer (1990) have attempted to counter this criticism by using videotaped interviews with "rape victims." This approach has received less criticism in terms of artificiality, however, whether this method can be generalized to wider, "real life" settings is still questionable.

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2.2. Type of Rape

Early research on reactions to rape and rape victims focused almost exclusively on what Coller and Resick (1987) have called the “classic rape” situation, wherein the victim is sexually assaulted by a stranger. However, the evidence that acquaintance rape is vastly under-reported by victims (Williams, 1984) and occurs more frequently than stranger rape (Koss, 1990; Koss, Dinero, Seibel, & Cox; Russell, 1984) has tended to shift the focus of research in recent years.

Literature suggests that acquaintance and stranger rape may be quite different “types” of rape, which elicit different reactions from their victims as well as from their observers (Tetreault & Barnett, 1987). Research seems to indicate that there are significant differences between observers’ responses to victims of acquaintance versus stranger rape. Some studies (Calhoun, Selby, & Warring, 1976; Check & Malamuth, 1983; Smith, Keating, Hesler, & Mitchell, 1976; Tetreault & Barnett, 1987) have shown that observers attribute greater responsibility to victims of stranger rape than to victims who were better acquainted with their attacker. Conversely, other studies (Bell, Kuriloff, & Lottes, 1994; Frese, Moya, & Megias, 2004; Johnson & Russ, 1989; L’Armand & Pepitone, 1982; Quackenbush, 1989; Whatley, 1986) have shown that more responsibility and blame is attributed to victims of acquaintance rape, with the probability that a victim is held responsible for her victimization being higher when she is acquainted with her rapist (Bridges & McGrail, 1989).

In line with other early studies, Calhoun, Selby, and Warring’s (1976) study found that observers typically attributed greater responsibility to victims of stranger rape than to those of acquaintance rape. Participants responded to a standardized videotape of an interview with a presumed victim and then answered questions

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ascertaining the degree to which the victim was responsible for the rape. Acquaintance with the attacker was varied in different conditions, by altering whether the victim had, or had not been in class with the rapist the previous semester. The predicted effect of acquaintance on causal attribution to characteristics of the victim was not obtained, however, as when the victim was described as unacquainted with the rapist, her behavior was seen as contributing more to the rape than when she was described as acquainted with the rapist. These results would seem to indicate that acquaintance between two people involved in a rape episode reliably influences the causal inferences of an outside observer; however several subsequent studies have reported findings in the opposite direction.

Frese, Moya, and Megias (2004) investigated the social perception of rape in three differing rape scenarios (*date rape, marital rape, and stranger rape*). Psychology undergraduates were asked to produce victim and perpetrator responsibility judgments for each vignette. Contradictory to Calhoun et al.'s findings, the authors found that victim responsibility ratings were significantly higher for the acquaintance rape situation than for the marital rape and stranger rape situations. Frese et al. propose that these results may reflect the underlying belief that an assailant who knows the victim may not understand her refusal, which then supposedly gives him the right to rape her. Inclusion of marital rape in this study is beneficial because empirical research into the perception of marital rape is scarce and has not received much attention since the legislation concerning rape within marriage was brought in, in 1991. Perception of this type of rape differed substantially depending on the measure used. In the case of victim blame, attributions were similar to those of stranger rape, whereas for assailant responsibility, ratings were similar to those of acquaintance rape. Encouragingly, in

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general, these results indicate that people do not blame married women for being raped by their husbands as they tend to do for victims in acquaintance rape settings. This implies that the idea of a woman having “marital duties” is no longer valid. However, worryingly, people still hold a husband less responsible for raping his wife than the stranger rapist, and they consider marital rape less traumatic. Marital rape is therefore an area which requires further theoretical attention with regards to attribution theory.

Analogous findings have been found by Bell, Kuriloff, and Lottes (1994), who compared attributions of blame within stranger rape and date rape situations. A similar methodology was employed, using vignettes depicting either a date rape or stranger rape scenario. Participants’ level of victim blame was assessed, with the authors finding that students consistently attributed more blame to the victim in date rape situations than they did in stranger rape situations. These findings suggest that when a rapist and victim know each other, university students are more likely to blame the female victim for what happened. Bell et al. speculate that this phenomenon results from issues of shared responsibility. Perhaps when there is some prior contact between those involved in the rape, respondents make a shift in how they delegate blame because they understand that relationships often involve miscommunication and that different interpretations are likely to occur. Respondents may therefore have felt that blame needed to be more shared in this type of situation. In addition to this, Bell et al. call upon the notion of saying “no” but meaning “yes,” implying that a man can perceive a woman’s actions, behavior, and appearance as implicitly saying “yes” to sex even if her words do not. While these notions of implied consent seem to be changing with the evolution of societal roles, these traditional attitudes are obstinate and may persist even in young adults today.

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The most important findings from Bell et al.'s study suggest that date rape and stranger rape need to be treated as distinct phenomena, with attributional work in the area of rape focusing on both of these conditions. The findings imply that responsibility and culpability become more muddled once the rapist and rape victim have had some previous contact, but more qualitative work is needed to understand the thinking and reasoning behind attributions made in these two kinds of rape situations.

A meta-analytic study carried out by Whatley in 1996 provides a comprehensive review of the literature covering the effect of victim characteristics on attributions of responsibility allocated to rape victims. Whatley looks at a number of different factors thought to adversely impact on rape victim blame, including the victim's *clothing revealingness, character, physical attractiveness, and acquaintance with her attacker*. With respect to acquaintance to attacker, Whatley acknowledges the disparity in findings across different studies, with some showing the unacquainted victim as more responsible (Bolt & Caswell, 1981; Smith, Keating, Hester, & Mitchell, 1976), others showing the acquainted victim as more responsible (Alexander, 1977; D'Cruz & Kanekar, 1992; Gerdes, Dammann, & Heilig, 1988; Johnson, 1994; Kanekar & Seksaria, 1993; L'Armand & Pepitone, 1982; Plane, 1987; Quackenbush, 1989; Root, 1993; Weiner & Vodanovich, 1987; Wooten, 1980) and yet others showing no significant differences (Tetreault & Barnett, 1987). Whatley collapses results from these 14 studies, revealing a significant trend for the victim acquainted with her attacker to be assigned more responsibility by third party observers. However, performance of the Sign test indicates that this direction of findings does not occur more often than chance would suggest and the results should therefore be interpreted with caution.

Whatley proposes that a possible explanation for this lack of continuity in research findings stems from the disparity of the scenarios used by the researchers. For example, Smith et al. (1976) and Bolt and Caswell (1981) used a scenario where the rape occurred late at night in a wooded park; Tetreault and Barnett (1987) used a scenario where the victim was raped in her basement apartment; and Wiener and Vodanovich (1987) used a scenario where the victim was raped in a deserted stairwell. Each of these studies employed scenarios that were unique, and this discrepancy amongst scenarios used across studies could account for the inconsistency which is observed in the literature. This is an aspect of social psychological research which needs to be rectified, in order to make direct comparison across studies feasible.

2.3 Perceived similarity to the victim/perpetrator

Finally, the degree to which observers identify with individuals involved in a rape has also been considered as a possible variable that may explain differential attributions of responsibility and blame. Similarity between the target person and the participant has typically been shown to increase identification and empathy (Krebs, 1975). There are many ways that such similarity phenomenon might apply to the rape situation. Studies have shown that similarity between participant and defendant or victim on the basis of *gender, race, social status, and experience* affect identification and in turn, attributional decisions. Unfortunately, the few studies in this area have revealed contradictory results. When subjects were asked to rate the degree to which they identified with rape victims, Kahn et al. (1977) failed to find a relationship between identification and attributions of blame. However, positive

results have been found in studies that defined identification in terms of personal similarity between participants and victims. An experimental study by Thornton (1984), manipulated personal similarity, by assessing participants' attitudes on 12 topic areas (e.g., sports, money, war etc.) and presenting victim profiles that were consistent or inconsistent with these views. A significant negative relationship between identification and attributed fault was found, with greater attributions of responsibility occurring in participants' responses to a personally dissimilar victim and less attributions to rape victims who hold similar world views.

The most frequently reported study within this area is that of Fulero and Delara (1976). The authors set out to test Shaver's defensive attribution theory and distinguish whether participants who are similar to the victim attribute less blame to her as a function of both "harm-avoidance" and "blame avoidance" (Shaw & McCartin, 1973). Undergraduate psychology students were asked to read a vignette depicting a rape scenario and answer questions assessing the attribution of responsibility to the victim. Three different vignettes were used to manipulate the level of similarity between the participants and the victim; the victim was described as a 20 year old student (high similarity), a 50 year old housewife (low similarity) or name only with no additional information. Fulero and Delara (1976) found that women who rated themselves as similar to the victim assigned the least blame, women who rated themselves as dissimilar assigned the most blame, and male participants fell in the middle. Their findings strongly support the defensive attribution formulation indicating that female perceivers in a rape incident are subject to self-protective distortion, in order to minimise the perceived possibility that such an incident could happen to them - "harm avoidance" (Shaw & McCartin, 1973) and to

avoid the possibility of being blamed should they encounter the same situation – “blame avoidance” (Shaw & McCartin, 1973).

Although direct extrapolation of these results into the courtroom is not simple, due to methodological issues surrounding the applicability of laboratory simulation research to actual legal processes, the implications of these social psychological findings are immense. For example, in the USA, the process of *voir dire* is likely to have been affected by these findings, with prosecutors in rape trials attempting to select female jurors who are very similar on personal dimensions to the rape victim, and defense attorneys attempting to select female jurors who are dissimilar to the victim. Results suggest that the extent to which the juror feels that the incident is relevant to his or her situation may be a crucial factor involved in jury decision making. Thus, rape is certainly an “involving” or relevant incident for women, and both Fulero & Delara’s (1976) results and research on actual rape cases (Kalven & Ziesel, 1966) indicate that the characteristics of the victim do influence case outcomes. The “involving” variable may influence both what evidence is attended to and how the information is interpreted. When the juror is “involved,” motives extraneous to the task of judging guilt or innocence (e.g., “harm-avoidance” and “blame avoidance”) may influence verdicts. This suggests, worryingly, that cases in which the alleged crime is relevant to jurors may be more prone to the influence of extralegal attributes and biases. However, the possibility of implementing a screening system to try to avoid such biases is both problematic and unrealistic.

In a more recent study, Bell, Kuriloff and Lottes (1994) replicated the findings demonstrated by Fulero and Delara (1976). They incorporated the concept of perceived similarity between observer and the victim/perpetrator into their vignette study, finding that participants blamed the female victim of the rape to a greater

extent when they felt dissimilar to these women and more similar to the men who perpetrated the rape. These findings are again, consistent with the notion of “judgmental leniency” introduced by Shaver in his defensive attribution theory. According to Shaver’s view, one would expect individuals to decrease their attribution of blame to those with whom they identify. While individuals might blame a victim in the interest of shielding themselves from the possibility of random misfortune and maintaining their sense of control, Shaver suggests that blame would not be in the observers’ best interest if the victim was similar to themselves in some way. Bell et al. speculate that when the respondents in their study felt that they could just have likely been the victim, they were hesitant to assign responsibility since doing so might be comparable to stigmatising themselves in the process. For example, a female participant, feeling identification with other women, may have been less likely to blame the female rape victim, since to do so would be facing her own culpability. This results in a self-protective denial of the victim’s responsibility.

Unfortunately, as a result of the correlational nature of the Bell et al. study, there is no way to determine whether participants’ perceptions of similarity to the victim affected attributions in a manner described by Shaver’s judgmental leniency or if perceptions of similarity to the victim were affected by attributions of blame. A study by Krahe (1983) illustrates that perceived similarity is often adjusted after the observation scenario depending on the consequences that befall a stimulus person. Therefore, it is conceivable that in this study, participants might have been motivated to dissociate themselves from a victim whom they blamed for the rape and might have allowed themselves to feel more similar to those rape victims whom they felt were not responsible. This is a classic dilemma of ‘cause or effect,’ encountered by many correlational studies and more experimental work is required to resolve this

issue. Studies need to assess participants' perceptions of similarity to the female victim prior to any exposure to the rape situation. After reading about the rape, experiments need to assess not only the attribution made about the rape victim, but also any changes in perceptions of similarity to the victim. In this way, the temporal relationship between similarity and attributions of blame can be accurately determined.

Not all studies have revealed the same trend in terms of similarity to victim and attributed blame. A study conducted by Muller, Caldwell and Hunter (1994) reported results in the opposite direction to Bell et al.'s findings. In their study, Muller et al. found that participants who viewed themselves as having greater personal similarity to victims were more likely to demonstrate victim blame. Muller et al. state that their findings can be accounted for by defensive attribution, but in a different way to that asserted by Fulero and Delara (1976) and Bell et al. (1994). They propose that participants who identify with the victims in the scenario respond by viewing the victims as responsible for their misfortune. It may be that the participants who consider themselves to be similar to the victim are individuals who have incorporated into their own identities the concept of 'victim.' Such persons would therefore have much to feel unsafe about and harm avoidance motives would be particularly salient in their lives. Thus, blaming victims would be a natural response for these participants. These findings are worrying; as they implicate that the experience of rape may not lead to a greater sympathy for others in a similar predicament. Instead, the experience may actually bring about a more negative attitude toward other victims.

All of the above cited studies are subject to a number of methodological limitations, and as such the research findings may be somewhat limited in terms of

generalizability across persons. The sample sizes, although fairly large in the majority of cases, consist almost exclusively of undergraduate university students. It may be that this group exhibits somewhat unique characteristics such as higher levels of intelligence, more education and a greater need for achievement. In addition to this, as a by product of the high-fee-paying American university system, samples are likely to be biased, with students of higher socio-economic status being over-represented. Some studies have accounted for this factor, employing psychometrics to measure socio-economic status (e.g., The Duncan SEI is used by Muller et al., 1994), whereas others have not, making the issue of generalisability to other populations more difficult. It may also be the case that these studies make use of a group of participants that are somewhat homogenous in terms of intelligence and are likely to be brighter than the average person. A patent implication of these methodological limitations is a direction for further research, which would clearly benefit from extending current findings to samples other than university students.

It is also worth acknowledging the over-representation of rape attribution studies carried out in the 1970s and 80s within this paper, which can be accounted for by the observable decline in published social psychological research in this area over the past fifteen years.

3. Conclusion

This paper has identified some of the information which, when presented in the form of brief vignettes or videotaped interviews, affects attribution of responsibility or blame to a 'rape victim.' Generally, females make more pro-victim judgments than do males; the victims of stranger rape are viewed more positively than those of

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acquaintance rape; and participants attribute less blame to those victims who they perceive to be similar to themselves in some way. Findings are not, however, conclusive with respect to several of these factors. Literature looking at gender differences implicates the role of sex-role attitudes as mitigating the effects of blame attribution, as opposed to *gender* exclusively governing how responsibility is allocated. This is an area which is now being explored in a separate context from gender influences on rape attitudes. The research exploring different types of rape has produced contradictory results. A distinction is often made between stranger and acquaintance rape, however research has implicated the need to differentiate between a subcategory of the latter, 'rape of dates or after prior sexual activity,' as opposed to 'non-sexual acquaintances.' Studies looking into acquaintance rape have produced few reliable effects and many inconsistencies, whereas the position is much clearer with respect to rape on dates, in that victims tend to be attributed more responsibility for the rape. With regard to the literature concerning defensive attribution and perceived similarity to the victim, the findings are again inconsistent. The trend of data seems to imply that the more similar a participant views themselves to be with the victim of a rape, the less blame they are likely to attribute to that person, however some findings have not followed this trend, and methodological flaws have raised concerns about whether similarity ratings are altered in accordance with the type of experimental situation observed.

While the results of these studies have a direct bearing on legal processes surrounding rape victims, particularly the influence of such information on jury decision making, jury behavior is not the only interest. Identification of the societal attitudes endemic to the population in which rape flourishes is perhaps a more important goal. Despite the inconsistencies and methodological problems discussed

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above, work in the attribution of responsibility paradigm has contributed to this goal. It has identified the possibility of biases which all human beings are subject to and has highlighted some of the possible aggravating and mitigating factors, concerning both the victim and the observer, which may influence the way rape victims are perceived. Finally, research has provided an explanation for the phenomenon of victim blaming and why it is that rape may be wrongly, but tacitly condoned in many situations.

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