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**Understanding 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 study examined a variety of factors that may influence attributions of rape victims. 156 participants completed a questionnaire, which included a measure of attitudes towards rape victims and a vignette depicting one of three rape scenarios (a stranger rape, date rape and seduction rape). Participants rated the extent to which they blamed the rape victim as well as the degree to which they identified with the victim and perpetrator. Results indicated that male participants blamed the victim to a greater extent than did female participants; with participants consistently attributing most blame to the victim in the seduction rape scenario, then the date rape scenario, and finally the stranger rape scenario. Perceptions of similarity to the rape victim and perpetrator were negatively correlated with attributions of blame. These findings have important implications for juror selection, jury decision making, and attempts to improve the conviction rate in rape cases.

**Keywords:** Rape; blame; defensive attribution; rape prevention

## **Introduction**

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 victimisation (Amir, 1971; Curtis, 1974; Goldner, 1972; Schultz, 1968; Wood, 1973). A recent example of this was the decision of the Criminal Injuries Compensation Authority to reduce compensation to rape victims if they had consumed alcohol (2008), echoing the findings of the 2005 Amnesty International Report on Sexual Assault which reported that 30% of respondents said a woman is partially or totally responsible for being raped if she was drunk. 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; Sinclair & Bourne, 1998). Investigations of rape from this attribution perspective have typically involved laboratory-based experiments on undergraduates at North-American universities. The experimental participants are normally asked to make a series of judgements 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.

This propensity to blame the victims of rape translates worryingly into a tolerance of the crime itself. This tolerance toward rape has several extremely negative consequences for the victim, as she is more likely to blame herself for the assault, which then has an important impact on her recovery (Frazier & Schauben, 1994). Trauma-related guilt has been positively correlated with post-traumatic stress disorder, depression, negative self-esteem, shame, social anxiety and suicidal thoughts (Kubany et al., 1995).

Furthermore, this social perception of rape makes its eradication more difficult as it reduces the likelihood of reporting the crime as a result of the perceived negative connotations associated with the crime. Prevalence studies have repeatedly shown that rape victims, more so than victims of other crimes of comparable severity, keep their victimisation hidden (Koss, 1992). Research indicates that victims do not report their assaults to authorities because they feel they will be blamed or disbelieved (Hodge & Cantor, 1998; Walker, Archer & Davies, 2005). Attitudes towards victims have a direct influence on whether or not a victim reports the assault to the police or medical services (Pollard, 1992). This means that most perpetrators of such an assault go unpunished, and many victims do not seek the help that they need to recover from the assault (Davies, 2002). In addition to the impact of victim blaming on recovery, research has shown that sexual assault victims are also at increased risk of sexual re-victimisation (SRV). Tjaden and Thoennes (2000), found that women who were raped during a 1 year period were victimised an average of 2.9 times. Similarly, Gidycz, Coble, Latham and Layman (1993) conclude that victimised college women are up to 2 times more likely than non-victims to be re-victimised during a single academic quarter. These findings have been replicated more recently by Miller, Markman and Handley (2007) who found that among a sample of female undergraduate students who had experienced sexual assault, those endorsing greater self-blame were at increased risk of sexual re-victimisation during a 4.2 month follow-up period. As such, these findings, along with a more in depth understanding of the phenomenon of victim blaming, have immense implications for the treatment and recovery of rape victims worldwide.

In a robust attempt to understand and challenge such rape victim denigration, a significant amount of empirical research has tried to determine the factors that make victim blame more likely (see Pollard, 1992, for a review). The tendency to blame female rape victims has been investigated from many directions using various methodologies. Two such approaches have dominated the 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 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* (Deitz, Litman & Bentley, 1984; Tieger, 1981), *provocativeness* (Scroggs, 1976), *previous sexual activity* (Cann, Calhoun & Selby, 1979; L’Armand & Pepitone, 1982), *victim resistance* (VanWie & Gross, 1995; Wyer, Bodenhausen & Gorman, 1985; Yescavage, 1999), *degree of victim intoxication* (Richardson & Campbell, 1982; Stormo & Lang, 1997; Stormo, Lang & Stritzke (2006)) 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 the influence of observer/participant characteristics. The second approach has therefore focused on investigating the influence of different observer characteristics on the attribution of blame. Such studies have examined the influence of *participants’ attitudes towards rape* (Feild, 1978b), *attitudes towards feminism* (Krulowitz & Payne, 1978), *belief in a just world* (Kerr & Kurtz, 1977), *status as students or non-students* (Feild & 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;). Proponents of this second approach have drawn upon theories of victim blaming, such as the Defensive Attribution Theory (Shaver, 1970) and the Just World Hypothesis (Lerner & Matthews, 1967),

which are based upon motivational and ego defensive processes, to explain the negative attributions often directed at rape victims.

According to the Defensive Attribution Theory, people increase or reduce blame depending on their perceived similarity with the victim and the perceived likelihood of similar future victimisation befalling them. Defensive attributions predict negative victim perception to decrease as the similarity of the observer to the victim increases, this being a defence mechanism to protect the observer from being blamed themselves if a similar fate should befall them in the future. Research has consistently supported Shaver's Defensive Attribution Formulation, with females repeatedly displaying 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). Similarly, the Just World Theory accounts for negative rape victim perception as the result of over-compensation 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 behavioural 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, according to the Just World Theory, to perceive the victim as deserving of their misfortune helps to restore a comfortable view of the world as being ordered, fair and just.

### *Gender*

As research has consistently demonstrated, the perception of a rape victim and attribution of responsibility is subject to the influence of observer characteristics. One of the most studied demographic characteristics is the observer's gender, which has

been found to influence rape victim judgements, 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;; Deitz, Littman & Bentley, 1984; Edmonds & Cahoon, 1986; Gerdes, Dammann & Heilig, 1988; Gilmartin-Zena, 1983; Johnson & Jackson, 1988; Johnson, Jackson & Smith, 1989; 1980; Kanekar & Nazareth, 1988; Kleinke & Meyer, 1990). Social psychologists have broadly accounted for such gender differences by drawing upon the solid tradition of inter-group research. Studies on social identity and social comparison have revealed that individuals tend to hold favourable attitudes towards members of their own group and unfavourable attitudes towards members of out-groups. Consequently, men should be more likely to identify with the perpetrators of sexual offences whereas women should be more likely to empathise with rape victims.

Other studies have failed to replicate such findings, however, reporting no sex differences (Acock & Ireland, 1983; Calhoun, Cann, Selby & Magee, 1981; Check & Malamuth, 1984; Feldman-Summers & Lindner, 1976; Frese, Moya & Megias, 2004; 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, Krulewitz & Payne, 1978; Luginbuhl & Mullin, 1981; Nagel, Matsuo. McIntyre & Morrison, 2005). Results regarding gender differences are therefore not clear cut, revealing inconsistent and contradictory effects on victim judgements. The apparent inconclusiveness of this evidence on gender effects may be due, in part, to the fact that many of the studies demonstrating a greater tendency of males to attribute responsibility to rape victims did not include measures of rape-related attitudes. Thus, it may be argued that gender effects only materialise when specific information regarding participants' attitudes towards rape is excluded.

### *Type of rape*



Early research on reactions to rape and rape victims focused almost exclusively on what Collier & 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 (Fisher, Cullen and Turner, 2000; Williams, 1984) and occurs more frequently than stranger rape (Koss, 1990; Koss, Dinero, Seibel & Cox, 1989; 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 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, 1996) 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 victimisation being higher when she is acquainted with her rapist (Bridges & McGrail, 1989). As with gender, the research findings regarding acquaintance with attacker are also inconsistent. Reasons for this inconsistency could be linked to the recent shift in public attitudes since the recognition of marital rape as a crime. *Ergo* more recent studies may be reflecting society’s acknowledgement of the traumatising effect of acquaintance or intimate partner rape.

#### *Perceived similarity to the victim*

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 this 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 (Barnett, Tetreault, Esper & Bristow, 1984; Fulero & Delara, 1976; Kahn et al., 1977; Thornton, 1984). 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. 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.

While these studies suggest that similarity between observer and victim may play a role in determining attributions of blame, more extensive work is needed to understand this relationship. To begin with, whilst actual personal and experiential similarity between the observer and victim seem to be important mediators of attributions, it is not clear how perceptions of these similarities affect participants. In addition to this, the degree of similarity felt by the participant towards the rape perpetrator may also influence attributions of responsibility. Finally, it is important to differentiate the role of

identification with a specific rape victim from the role of more dispositional differences in participants' ability or propensity to empathise with others. The present study aims to establish which variables are related to identification with the victim and with the perpetrator and how these resulting perceptions are related to attributions of rape blame.

To this end, the present study investigates three variables which have previously produced contradictory results; *gender*, *type of rape* and *perceived victim/perpetrator similarity*. It attempts to understand how observers make attributions about rape victims in different rape scenarios. A sample of undergraduate university students was used to ascertain how demographic differences (*gender of the participant*) as well as differences in the type of rape situation (*stranger rape*, *date rape* and *seduction rape* settings) affect participants' perceptions of rape victims, in particular their attributions of blame and responsibility allocated to the victim and/or perpetrator. The role of contextual perceptions of similarity in determining the degree to which a rape victim is blamed was also explored. Participants' perceptions of similarity to the victim and perpetrator in the differing rape scenarios were measured, allowing an examination of the relationship of this factor to participants' attributions of responsibility in the scenario to be carried out.

### *Hypotheses*

The following hypotheses were generated:

*Hypothesis 1:* Male participants will score significantly higher on the Attitudes towards Rape Victims Scale than females and will exhibit significantly higher levels of victim blame than female participants.

*Hypothesis 2:* Attributions of blame will differ significantly between the three rape scenarios, with more blame being attributed to the

victim in the following order: Seduction rape > Date rape > Stranger rape.

*Hypothesis 3:* Individuals who perceive themselves as similar to the victim<sup>1</sup> will engage less in victim blaming, attributing significantly lower levels of victim blame than those individuals who perceive themselves as less similar to the victim of the rape.

*Hypothesis 4:* Individuals who perceive themselves as similar to the victim on a number of different specific personal aspects<sup>2</sup> will engage less in victim blaming, attributing significantly lower levels of victim blame than those individuals who perceive themselves as less personally similar to the victim of the rape.

## Method

### *Design*

In this study there were two independent variables: gender and type of rape. Dependent variables were: a) participants' Attitudes towards Rape Victims Scale (ARVS) (Ward, 1988) scores, b) participants' judgements about victim/perpetrator responsibility, c) victim blame and d) participants' perceptions of similarity to the rape victim/perpetrator.

### *Participants.*

Participants consisted of 160 undergraduate students (105 women and 55 men) from a UK University. The data from 4 participants was

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<sup>1</sup> General similarity will be assessed by two generic questions: "*How similar do you feel to the woman in this scenario?*" and "*How much could you see yourself being in the same situation as the woman in this scenario?*"

<sup>2</sup> Participants perceived personal similarity on nine different aspects will be assessed: *age, build, background, people you interact with, places you go, things you do, physical fitness, ability to fight off attacker and attractive target to perpetrator.*

excluded due to non-completion of the questionnaire; resulting in a total sample of 156 participants. . Women ranged in age from 19 to 35 (mean age = 23.74; SD = 4.71). Men ranged in age from 18 to 35 (mean age = 24.90; SD = 4.64). The three versions of the questionnaire were randomly ordered to ensure random distribution of the three questionnaire versions.

#### *Procedure.*

Each of the students in the study completed a 53-item questionnaire. The questionnaire consisted of 3 sub-sections. Participants were initially asked to complete The Attitudes towards Rape Victims Scale (Ward, 1988). They were then asked to read one of three scenarios in which a woman is raped by a man. After reading the vignette, respondents were asked a series of questions concerning the responsibility of the man and woman for what happened and how similar they felt to them. A final set of questions assessed participants' perceived similarity to the victim and perpetrator in more detail. Participants were informed of the sensitive nature of the research prior to consent being obtained, and details of a local rape crisis centre were made available to participants.

#### *Measures*

The Attitudes towards Rape Victims Scale (ARVS) (Ward, 1988) was used to assess participant's attitudes towards rape. This scale consists of 25 statements (8 positive and 17 negative) designed to assess favourable and unfavourable attitudes towards rape victims. The instrument uses a 5-point, Likert-type rating scale with response options ranging from 0 (*disagree strongly*) to 4 (*agree strongly*). Individual item scores were then added to obtain an ARVS score out of 100, with higher scores denoting more unfavourable attitudes toward victims. Ward (1988) reported good internal

reliability for this scale ( $\alpha = 0.83$ ) and moderately high test-retest reliability (Pearson product-moment correlation = +0.8).

Three short vignettes were developed for this study. The first vignette depicted a “*stranger rape*”, the second depicted a “*date rape*” and the third depicted a “*seduction rape*”<sup>3</sup>. The vignettes consisted of approximately 350 words and were chosen to depict possible rape scenarios in a naturalistic way. The expression “rape” was not used in any of the three descriptions, so that participants would be less likely to answer questions on their individual preconceptions about the meaning of the word. Participants in this study each read one of these three vignettes contained in three randomly distributed versions of the questionnaire.

After reading the vignette, respondents were asked a series of 10 questions<sup>3</sup> devised for the purpose of this study to assess 1) a general perception of similarity to victim/perpetrator and 2) the degree of blame/responsibility assigned to the victim/perpetrator in the vignette. The 10 questions were each rated on a 5-point, Likert-type scale, ranging from *not at all* (1) to *completely agree?* (5).

Victim blame was measured by collapsing several of the questions that dealt with responsibility of the woman in the rape into a single scale. Principle Component Factor Analyses indicated that six of the items<sup>4</sup> assessed a single victim blame variable. This measure of victim blame was found to be very reliable ( $\alpha = 0.90$ ).

A third and final set of questions was developed in order to assess participants’ perceived similarity with specific reference to personal characteristics. Participants were asked to answer 9 questions assessing their perceived personal similarity to the victim on 9 different aspects (*age, build, background, people you interact with, places you go, things you do, physical fitness, ability to fight off attacker and attractive target to perpetrator*), and 9 questions assessing participants’ perceived personal similarity to the

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<sup>3</sup> Please refer to Appendix 1 for copies of the rape vignettes.

<sup>3</sup> Please refer to Appendix 2 for a copy of the questions

<sup>4</sup> Questions marked with a \* were collapsed to form a single scale to measure Victim Blame.

perpetrator on 9 different aspects (*age, build, background, people you interact with, places you go, things you do, physical fitness, ability to overpower victim and respect for women*). These questions could be answered as *not at all, somewhat, or completely* and were scored as 0, 1 or 2, respectively. Participants' responses were then totalled to provide two similarity scores out of 18, with higher scores denoting higher perceived similarity.

## **Results**

### *1. Male vs. Female ARVS Scores*

A one-way between-groups ANOVA was conducted to explore the impact of gender on attitudes towards rape victims, as measured by the Attitudes towards Rape Victims Scale (ARVS). There was a statistically significant difference at the  $p < 0.001$  level in ARVS scores for males and females,  $F(1, 154) = 21.22$ ,  $p < 0.001$ , with male participants scoring significantly higher ( $M = 26.73$ ;  $SD = 9.94$ ) than female participants ( $M = 19.60$ ;  $SD = 8.61$ ). These results indicate that males exhibit significantly less favourable attitudes towards the victims of rape than females. It is worth noting that although males scored significantly higher than females, both scores were relatively low; indicating an overall favourable attitude towards victims of rape in this student population.

### *2. Factors influencing perceptions of similarity to the victim*

A two-way between-groups ANOVA was conducted to explore the impact of gender and type of rape scenario on perceptions of similarity to the rape victim. There was a statistically significant main effect for gender,  $F(1, 150) = 16.44$ ,  $p < 0.001$ , with female participants feeling more similar to the victim ( $M = 4.70$ ) than male participants ( $M = 3.22$ ). A significant main effect for type of rape was

not obtained, however, there was a significant interaction between gender and type of rape,  $F(2, 150) = 5.53$ ,  $p < 0.05$ , showing that there was a larger difference between the similarity scores obtained from females in the three rape scenarios (see Table 1).

### 3. *Factors influencing perceptions of similarity to the perpetrator*

A two-way between-groups ANOVA was conducted to explore the impact of gender and type of rape scenario on perceptions of similarity to the rape perpetrator. There was a statistically significant main effect for gender,  $F(1, 150) = 27.50$ ,  $p < 0.001$ , with male participants feeling more similar to the perpetrator ( $M = 2.98$ ) than female participants ( $M = 2.08$ ). A significant main effect for type of rape was also obtained,  $F(2, 150) = 4.47$ ,  $p < 0.05$ , with participants feeling more similar to the seduction rape perpetrator ( $M = 2.63$ ), than the date rape perpetrator ( $M = 2.32$ ) and the stranger rape perpetrator ( $M = 2.18$ ; Table 1). A significant interaction was also obtained between gender and type of rape,  $F(2, 150) = 4.05$ ,  $p < 0.05$  showing a more dramatic difference between how similar male participants felt to the perpetrators in the three kinds of rape scenarios (see Table 1).

### 4. *Factors influencing attributions of victim blame*

Univariate analysis was also conducted on the Victim Blame Scale in order to determine how gender of participants and type of rape scenario influenced decisions about the extent to which the female victim was held responsible. The results are summarised in Table 1. A two-way between-subjects ANOVA revealed a significant main effect for gender,  $F(1, 150) = 10.38$ ,  $p < 0.05$ , with male participants blaming the victim to a greater extent ( $M = 13.02$ ), than female participants ( $M = 10.96$ ). In addition, participants consistently attributed more blame to the victim in the seduction rape situation ( $M = 16.51$ ), than the date rape situation ( $M = 10.51$ ) and the stranger



rape situation ( $M = 8.14$ ; Table 1),  $F(2, 150) = 64.91$ ,  $p < 0.001$ , with no interaction between gender and type of rape.

### 5. Correlational analyses

Pearson correlations were calculated to determine the relationship between participants' attitudes towards rape victims, their perceptions of similarity to the characters in the rape scenarios and the attributions they made to victims in the rape scenarios. Results are shown in Table 2. Pearson correlations revealed that the extent to which respondents identified with the woman in the scenarios was negatively correlated with victim blame ( $r = -0.24$ ,  $p < 0.001$ ) with participants scoring high on victim similarity scoring low on victim blame. Conversely, a positive correlation was found between perpetrator similarity and victim blame ( $r = 0.24$ ,  $p < 0.001$ ) - the more respondents identified with the man who raped in the scenario, the more they blamed the rape victim. The Attitudes towards Rape Victim Score was also positively correlated with victim blame, with those respondents scoring highly on the AVRS exhibiting high victim blame scores ( $r = 0.38$ ,  $p < 0.001$ ).

Correlation coefficients were also computed separately for the more detailed personal victim and perpetrator similarity measures. Pearson correlations revealed a negative correlation between victim blame and perceived personal victim similarity ( $r = -0.29$ ,  $p < 0.01$ ), indicating that those respondents who viewed themselves to be personally similar to the victim on a number of different levels (i.e. scored higher on the perceived personal similarity measure), engaged less in victim blaming. However, no significant correlation was found between victim blame and perceived personal perpetrator similarity, suggesting that personal identification with the victim has a greater influence on rape blame attribution than personal identification with the perpetrator.

### Stepwise Regression Analysis

A stepwise regression analysis indicated that together, the two measures of victim and perpetrator similarity accounted for 13% of the variation in attributions of blame<sup>6</sup>,  $F = 11.40$ ,  $p < 0.001$ .

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<sup>6</sup> Adjusted R square value reported due to small sample size.

## Discussion

The objective of the present study was to investigate the effect of *gender*, *type of rape* and *perceived similarity with the victim/perpetrator* on victim blame.

### *Gender*

The present findings revealed two consistent gender differences, with males scoring significantly higher on the Attitudes towards Rape Victims Scale and victim blame. This sex difference is reflected in the higher mean ratings by male respondents, demonstrating significantly more unfavourable attitudes towards rape victims than females. These findings provide support for Hypothesis 1. The observed ARVS scores follow in line with previous gender differences observed in respondents' attitudes towards rape and rape victims. Research has consistently found that men seem to make harsher judgements about rape victims than do women (Kanekar, Pinto & Mazumdar, 1985; Krulewitz, 1982; Thornton & Ryckman, 1983). This finding has been demonstrated using several standard survey instruments across a variety of different attitudinal variables. Research shows men are more accepting of rape myths (Margolin, Miller & Moran 1989); men are more tolerant of rape (Hall, Howard & Boezio, 1986); men have less empathy towards victims (Brady, Chrisler, Hosdale, Osowiecki & Veal, 1991; Deitz, Blackwell, Daley & Bentley, 1982); men are less intensely concerned about rape (Young & Thiessen, 1992, as cited in Ward, 1995); and men are more blaming and denigrating of sexual assault victims (Feild, 1978a).

Social psychologists have broadly accounted for such gender differences by drawing upon the solid tradition of inter-group research. Studies on social identity and social comparison have revealed that individuals tend to hold favourable attitudes towards members of their own group and unfavourable attitudes towards

members of out-groups. Consequently, men should be more likely to identify with the perpetrators of sexual offences whereas women should be more likely to empathise with rape victims. These factors, along with differences in male and female socialisation may account for the significant differences observed in male and female attitudes towards rape victims in the present study.

The gender differences observed in victim blame scores are also in line with the predictions of hypothesis 1. These findings are predicted by attribution theory, and are consistent with the notion of “judgemental leniency” introduced by Shaver (1970) 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 (1970) suggests that blame would not be in the observers’ best interest if the victim was similar to themselves in some way. One could speculate that when respondents in the present study felt that they could just as likely have 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 similar to and hence identifying with other women, may have been less likely to blame the female rape victim, since to do so would be facing her own culpability. It might be easy for a female respondent to see how she could just as easily be the victim of the rape, which would lead to a self-protective denial of the victim’s responsibility. It could be speculated, therefore, that in attributing the victim less blame, females in this study are operating a 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).

The concept of “just world” theorising can also be drawn upon to account for the sex differences observed in this study. Female

participants in this study are more likely than men to identify with the rape victim and are therefore less apt to blame her character. Women who can 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.

Whilst 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 concepts of “defensive attribution” and “belief in a just world” are sufficient to deal exclusively with these substantial male-female differences in experience and socialisation.

Worryingly, the present findings provide supporting evidence for the existence of the popular conception that males will tend to be harsher than females in their judgements about the role of the victim in the rape episode.

### *Type of rape*

Similarly, the findings that observers attributed blame in the order of seduction rape > date rape > stranger rape, supports the prediction of hypothesis 2. Although the research findings concerning acquaintance to the attacker are somewhat contradictory, recent research has tended to indicate that those victims who know their attacker in some capacity prior to the rape are attributed more blame than those who have no prior connection with their attacker (Bell, Kuriloff & Lottes, 1994; Bridges & McGrail, 1989; Frese, Moya & Megias, 2004; Johnson & Russ, 1989; L'Armand & Pepitone, 1982; Quackenbush, 1989; Whatley, 1986). The present study helps to clarify the differential reactions to victims of stranger versus

acquaintance rapes. Findings suggest that when a rapist and victim know each other in some capacity, university students are more likely to blame the female victim to a greater extent for what happened to her. One might speculate that this is due to issues of shared responsibility. Perhaps when there was some prior contact between those involved in the rape, respondents made a shift in how they delegated blame because they understood that relationships often involve miscommunications and that different interpretation of events are likely to occur. Respondents might have felt that blame needed to be more shared in this type of situation. It is also possible that prior involvement of the man and woman raised difficult issues regarding consent. When confronted with the situation of a woman going into a man's room or house, respondents, particularly male respondents, may have fallen back on ideas about implied consent that a woman's actions, behaviour and appearance could implicitly be saying "yes" to sex even if her words do not. While these notions of implied consent seem to be changing, these traditional attitudes tend to endure.

Participants' perceptions that they could more easily be a victim of a stranger than victimised by someone with whom they were acquainted, reflected by the similarity scores obtained across the three rape conditions, might have helped to moderate their blaming of stranger-rape victims. Media coverage of the dangers of urban life and the ubiquitous nature of violence today might contribute to feelings of similarity to the *stranger rape* victim, while feelings of personal competency and loyalty to one's social network might help to convince one that he or she was different from the *date rape* and *seduction rape* victims who "chose a partner poorly". These differential perceptions of one's own vulnerability may have affected the degree to which victims of the three kinds of rape scenarios were blamed.

The findings from this study suggest that stranger rape and acquaintance rape need to be treated as distinct phenomena, with attributional work in the area of rape focusing on both of these

conditions. The results 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.

#### *Perceived similarity with the victim/perpetrator*

Beneficially, the present study helps to clarify the role of identification in attribution of blame. The degree to which observers feel similar to those that are involved in a specific rape case does seem to be quite related to how those in the rape scenario are evaluated, with participants blaming female victims to a greater extent when they felt dissimilar to these women and more similar to the men who perpetrated the rape. This is consistent with the notion of “judgemental leniency” introduced by Shaver in his Defensive Attribution Theory (1970). Shaver’s assertion puts forward two important motivating factors that influence people when they evaluate victims of misfortune. Individuals have a need to defend against the possibility that random misfortune may happen to themselves (*harm avoidance*), and correspondingly, persons are motivated to defend against the possibility that they will be held responsible if they were to end in a similar fate (*blame avoidance*). According to Burger (1981), if the observers see themselves as potential victims, the perceivers will seek harm avoidance of a potential future accident. Thus, persons seeing themselves as personally similar to the victim should be less likely to attribute blame to the victim in the scenario.

The findings of the present study support the idea of defensive attribution and how it serves to modify rape blame attribution. The results are therefore consistent with the predictions of hypothesis 3. Previous literature examining the effect of perceived similarity has placed most emphasis on similarity being determined by obvious variables such as gender and occupation. The results of the present study have served to expand the knowledge and understanding of

how perceived similarity influences our attributions allocated to rape victims. It appears that perceived personal similarity on a number of different levels with a victim/perpetrator can influence rape blame attributions. Whereas it has often been assumed that a female respondent perceives herself as similar to a rape victim as a result of her gender, this study assesses perceived similarity with the victim and perpetrator in terms of personal similarity on a number of different levels. The results indicate that males viewing themselves to be highly personally similar to the rape victim attribute less blame to the victim, as do females viewing themselves to be highly personally similar to the victim. These findings suggest that it is not gender alone which governs identification with a victim, but instead, a number of different variables which define personal similarity.

The findings provide support for hypothesis 4, by demonstrating that high perceived personal victim similarity (respondents identifying numerous factors as being similar to themselves) is negatively correlated with victim blame. Interestingly, identification with the perpetrator was not found to be positively correlated with victim blame, as would be expected by the formulations of the Defensive Attribution Theory. Possible explanations for this finding could be linked to the concepts of social desirability and the bias often obtained when using self-report measures. It could be speculated that respondents, in particular male respondents, were reluctant to admit similarity with the rapist (even if they actually felt similar), for fear of being viewed as a 'possible rapist' or a 'person who associates with rapists'. This is likely to have produced a skew in the perpetrator similarity scores and perhaps resulted in the insignificant correlation obtained.

Unfortunately, the correlational nature of this study limits assessments of causality. As such, it is impossible to determine whether participants' perceptions of similarity to the victim affect attributions in a manner described by Shaver's "judgemental leniency", or if perceptions of similarity to the victim are affected by attributions of blame. For example, it is conceivable that participants



may be motivated to dissociate themselves from a victim whom they blame for the rape, and may allow themselves to feel more similar to those rape victims whom they feel are not responsible. This is a classic dilemma of “cause or effect”, encountered in many social psychological 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.

Similarly, artificiality, created by the use of written vignettes and a homogenous sample group, combined with the high demand characteristics introduced by experimental conditions, limits the generalisability of these findings in terms of application to real life rape perception required during legal rape cases. Nevertheless, studies such as this one do 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.

Overall, this research provides useful information about who blames rape victims and factors ameliorating and exacerbating this blame. From a social policy perspective, there is also clear potential here for influencing awareness-raising in rape-prevention strategies in schools and colleges. Specifically, the finding that men tend to blame female rape victims to a greater extent than do female observers, and the indications that rape involves miscommunications between men and women, suggest the need for co-educational rape prevention models, rather than the previously used early rape prevention initiatives focused solely on women. In addition to implications for rape prevention policy, there are also therapeutic implications, in that victim-blaming is likely to increase the likelihood of trauma-related guilt and make recovery more difficult. These findings highlight the need for a more adept understanding of the

phenomenon of victim-blaming and the effect it has on victim recovery. Whilst the results of this study have a direct bearing on legal processes surrounding rape victims, particularly the influence of both observer and victim characteristics on jury decision making and juror selection, jury behaviour 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 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 mitigating and aggravating factors, concerning both the victim and the observer, which may influence the way rape victims are perceived. The present study makes a contribution towards understanding the psychological underpinnings of victim blaming, shedding some light on the phenomenon and why it is that rape may be wrongly, but tacitly, condoned in many situations.

## **Conclusion**

In summary, the results of the present exploratory study yield several conclusions. First, female observers differ from male observers in the way in which rape victim blame is attributed, with males typically exhibiting more unfavourable attitudes towards rape victims and attributing blame to the victim to a greater extent than females. Participants consistently attributed most blame to the victims of the seduction rape, then the date rape and finally the stranger rape, following in line with previous research findings showing that rape victims who are acquainted with their attacker are held more responsible for their victimisation. Perceived similarity with the victim was also found to significantly influence participants' attributions of blame, with participants who scored highly on measures of victim similarity allocating significantly less blame to the

rape victim. These findings are in line with the notion of “judgemental leniency” proposed by Shaver in his Defensive Attribution Theory (1970) and would seem to demonstrate the effects of both “harm avoidance” and “blame avoidance” (Shaw & McCartin, 1973) as self-protective defence mechanisms.

**Appendix 1***Rape vignettes***1. "Stranger Rape"**

Linda, a 21 year old, is a student at a local university. She is average height and build for her age and enjoys sports and socialising. About six months ago, she was assaulted whilst out jogging. Linda had started jogging after her lectures on a Wednesday, in a nearby park. At the time of her assault she was wearing shorts and a loose-fitting T-shirt, and was running along one of the pathways in the park. She slowed down to catch her breath and as she walked along, an unknown man came up beside her. He was average height and build, with dark hair and Linda presumed him to be only slightly older than her. The man began to talk to Linda, but she thought nothing of it, as she was used to meeting new people when jogging. Linda chatted to him for a while about her jogging and after a few minutes of walking along with him, she thought she had rested enough and told him that she had to get moving again. She started moving faster when the man grabbed her arm. His expression changed as he told Linda that he had a knife. By this time it had become quite dark and Linda began to feel scared. She asked him what he wanted, only to be told to "shut the fuck up". She thought that maybe she could outrun him, but the man must have guessed what she was considering and punched her hard in the ribs with his fist. She was knocked to the ground and then kicked when she started to get up again. He then dragged Linda up off the ground and pushed her onto a nearby picnic table. He yanked down her shorts and underwear and proceeded to have sex with her, despite her constant protests for him to stop. When he was finished, the attacker stood up quickly, looked around and then ran off.

**2. "Date Rape"**

Linda, a 21 year old, is a student at a local university. She is average height and build for her age and enjoys sports and socialising. Linda was at a friend's party the week before, when she met Mike. They were both a similar age and had hit it off when they discovered they both had an interest in sport and Linda told Mike about her regular jogging. They had chatted throughout the party and Linda had commented to her friend that she thought Mike was "really nice". Mike was average height and build and had dark hair. At the end of the party, Linda and Mike exchanged phone numbers and then both went home separately. Linda did not hear from Mike for a few days, but then on the Friday she received a phone call from Mike asking her out on a date the next evening. Linda eagerly accepted and Mike arranged to pick Linda up at 7pm on the Saturday night. The next day, Mike arrived to pick Linda up and they drove to the cinema where they watched a film they had both wanted to see. After the film, Mike suggested that they go for a drink in a nearby pub and that he would drop her home afterwards. They sat and chatted in the pub for about an hour and when it was closing time, Mike suggested that they went back to his house for a coffee and promised that he would drive Linda home afterwards. Linda agreed and Mike drove them to his house. When they got there, Mike and Linda sat on the sofa watching the telly. Mike then began kissing Linda and touching her breasts. To begin with Linda kissed back, until Mike started kissing her harder and groping her breasts so that they hurt. At this point, Linda told Mike to stop and that she wanted to leave, but Mike became angry and slapped her across the face. He then pinned her arms down and got on top of her. Linda constantly begged Mike to stop, but he yanked down her trousers and underwear and proceeded to have sex with her. When he had finished, Mike stood up and went into the kitchen and Linda ran out of the house.

**3. "Seduction rape"**

Linda, a 21 year old, is a student at a local university. She is average height and build for her age and enjoys sports and socialising. Linda, had been on a night out with the girls when she spotted a man staring at her from across the bar. To begin with, she thought nothing of it and simply carried on chatting and dancing with her friends. A bit later on in the night, the man, who was about average height and build, with dark hair, approached her, introduced himself as Mike and offered to buy her a drink. Linda was embarrassed to begin with, but noticed his gentle demeanour and found him very attractive, and accepted the offer of a drink. Linda and Mike spent the rest of the evening chatting and drinking until the bar closed. Linda chatted to Mike about her interests which included sport, in particular, regular jogging. Linda's friends checked that she was ok and then went home. Mike assured them that he would make sure Linda got home ok. Linda lived a long way from the bar, so Mike invited Linda to stay at his house, assuring her that he would drive her home in the morning. Linda eventually agreed and they got a taxi back to Mike's house. When they got there, Mike showed Linda round his house and then proceeded to pour two large glasses of red wine and put on some romantic music. It wasn't long before they were kissing passionately on the sofa. Linda had told herself that she was not going to sleep with Mike, as she hardly knew him and wasn't in the habit of sleeping with people she had just met. Before she knew it, Mike was unbuttoning her shirt and softly stroking her breasts. They had gone through a bottle of wine and Linda felt very drunk. Both Linda and Mike were becoming very aroused and Mike stood up and led Linda into the bedroom, where he proceeded to undress her. At this point Linda told Mike to stop, but Mike ignored her. Before she knew what was happening, Mike penetrated her and proceeded to have sex with her. When Linda woke up, she felt an immense feeling of unease at what had happened and got up and left.

**Appendix 2**

*c. Questions Following Rape Scenarios*

1. How similar do you feel to the woman in this scenario?
2. How similar do you feel to the man in this scenario?
3. How much could you see yourself being in the same situation as the woman in this scenario?
4. How much could you see yourself being in the same situation as the man in this scenario?
5. To what extent did the woman act carelessly? \*
6. To what extent did the woman lead the man on? \*
7. To what extent was the woman's behaviour responsible for her sexual encounter with the man? \*
8. Even though you don't know much about the woman in this scenario, to what extent do you feel her character was responsible for the sexual encounter with the man? \*
9. Taking into account both the woman's behaviour and character, how responsible was she for the sexual encounter with the man? \*
10. Overall to what extent was the man responsible for what happened with the woman? \*

\* These items were used to compute the degree to which the female victim was held responsible (with number 10 being reverse scored).

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**Table 1.** *Participants' Perceptions of Similarity to Rape Victim and Attributions of Blame: Means by Gender and Type of Rape Scenario*

	Type of rape scenario								
	Stranger Rape			Date Rape			Seduction Rape		
	M	F	All	M	F	All	M	F	All
Perceptions of similarity to rape victim <sup>a</sup>	2.94	5.70	4.76	3.18	4.95	4.42	3.53	3.38	3.43
Perceptions of similarity to rapist <sup>a</sup>	2.35	2.09	2.18	3.00	2.03	2.32	3.59	2.13	2.63
Attributions of blame to rape victim <sup>b</sup>	9.76	7.30	8.14	11.71	10.00	10.51	17.59	15.94	16.51

<sup>a</sup>Items were scored on a 5-point Likert-type scale ranging from *not at all* (1) to *completely* (5). <sup>b</sup>Scores represent summation of six items on the questionnaire following the rape scenario. Scores ranged from 6 to 28.

**Table 2.** Intercorrelation Matrix: Pearson Correlations Between Attitudes towards Rape Victim Scores, Perceptions of Similarity and Attributions of Blame to Rape Victims

Variables	1	2	3	4
1. Attitudes towards Rape Victims Score	1	-0.17*	0.24**	0.38**
2. Perceptions of similarity to female rape victim		1	0.11	-0.24**
3. Perceptions of similarity to male rapist			1	0.24**
4. Attributions of blame to rape victim				1

\*  $p < 0.05$ . \*\*  $p < 0.001$ .