



Blame attribution in sexual victimization

Carin Perilloux*, Joshua D. Duntley¹, David M. Buss

University of Texas at Austin, Austin, TX 78712, United States



ARTICLE INFO

Article history:

Received 13 October 2013
 Received in revised form 24 January 2014
 Accepted 25 January 2014
 Available online 20 February 2014

Keywords:

Rape
 Blame
 Perpetrator
 Victim
 Sexual violence

ABSTRACT

The current study explored how victims and third-parties attribute blame and perpetrator motivation for actual sexual victimization experiences. Although we do not assert that victims are responsible for perpetrators' behavior, we found that some victims do not allocate all blame to their perpetrator. We sought to examine how victims and third-parties allocate blame in instances of actual completed and attempted sexual victimization and how they perceived perpetrator motivations. Victims of completed rape ($n = 49$) and attempted sexual assault ($n = 91$), and third-parties who knew a victim of sexual assault ($n = 152$) allocated blame across multiple targets: perpetrator, self/victim, friends, family, and the situation. Participants also described their perceptions of perpetrator's motivation for the sexual assault. Victims tended to assign more blame to themselves than third-parties assigned to victims. Furthermore, victims perceived perpetrators as being more sexually-motivated than third-parties did, who viewed perpetrators as more power-motivated. Results suggest that perceptions of rape and sexual assault significantly differ between victims and third-party individuals who have never directly experienced such a trauma.

© 2014 Elsevier Ltd. All rights reserved.

1. Introduction

Research devoted to understanding the allocation of blame and responsibility for sexual victimization (for a review, see Pollard, 1992) indicates that both personal and contextual variables influence the degree to which perpetrators and victims are blamed. Traits such as rape myth acceptance and hostile masculinity are positively correlated with tendencies to blame rape victims (Abrams, Viki, Masser, & Bohner, 2003; Cohn, Dupuis, & Brown, 2009; Mason, Riger, & Foley, 2004). Victim-blaming is also associated with victim behaviors such as prior willingness to have consensual romantic contact with the victimizer, wearing revealing clothing, or accompanying one's date to his home (Bell, Kuriloff, & Lottes, 1994; Maurer & Robinson, 2008; Pollard, 1992). These studies' methods range from investigations of victim self-blame among female sexual victims to manipulations of vignettes rated by general samples of participants (i.e., participants not selected by victimization status) to identify variables that influence blame and responsibility attributions. The current study examined how female victims and women in whom victims have confided allocate blame for an actual sexual victimization experience.

Although early studies of victim-blaming reflected previously pervasive negative stereotypes about rape and rape victims (for a review, see Suarez & Gadalla, 2010), subsequent research shows that friends of rape victims do not blame their friends and most felt their relationship grew closer after the disclosure (Ahrens & Campbell, 2000). Even though individuals assign most of the blame to the perpetrator, they still indicate that the victim is not completely blameless (e.g., "she should not have drunk so much; she should not have put herself in that situation"). This trend is present in both third-party ratings and ratings made by the victims themselves (Testa & Livingston, 1999; Ullman & Najdowski, 2010).

Not only do contextual variables (e.g., victim drinking) influence blame ratings, perceptions – right or wrong – of the perpetrator's underlying motivation behind the act might influence how blame is attributed. It has become the standard view in social science that the motivation for rape is more about power than about sex (e.g., Brownmiller, 1975). This view has been challenged by researchers arguing that there need not be a singular motivation for sexual assault; different rapists have different motivations, and some might be motivated by power, some by sex, and some by combinations of power and sex (Buss & Malamuth, 1996; Jones, 1999; McKibbin, Shackelford, Goetz, & Starratt, 2008; Thornhill & Palmer, 2000).

Self-blame appears to influence many aspects of victim psychology. Victims who blame themselves feel more guilt, shame, and self-loathing and are more likely to experience post-traumatic stress disorder (Arata & Burkhart, 1996), but the tendency to blame

* Corresponding author. Present address: Psychology Department, Union College, 807 Union Street, Schenectady, NY 12308, United States.

E-mail address: perilloc@union.edu (C. Perilloux).

¹ Member of the Criminal Justice and Psychology Programs, The Richard Stockton College of New Jersey, United States.

oneself after sexual victimization is also associated with certain coping mechanisms. For example, feeling self-blame implies that one has some control over the outcome and this control can lead to greater confidence to avoid similar future victimizations (Heath & Davidson, 1988). The key appears to be the type of self-blame. Individuals who engage in self-blame based on a perceived *characterological defect* are more likely to experience post-traumatic stress disorder and to feel helpless and guilty. In contrast, individuals who engage in self-blame based on a perceived *behavioral mistake* are more likely to perceive control over the situation and feel more confident in their ability to take precautions to avoid similar victimization in the future (Arata & Burkhart, 1996; Breitenbecher, 2006; Heath & Davidson, 1988). Other than perpetrators, victims usually have the most direct, first-hand information about behaviors and decisions leading up to the event and thus might have insights into which tactics were actually effective and which were not. Conversely, the more victims blame their perpetrator or “society” for their victimization, the more likely they are to experience anger and feelings of injustice, and likewise more fear since they perceive victimization as less personally controllable (Brockway & Heath, 1998). Perpetrator blame varies with personal and situational factors; for example, perpetrators who have a “good reputation” are blamed less (Cohn et al., 2009) and perpetrators whose victims start resisting earlier rather than later are blamed more (Kopper, 1996).

Victims are also aware of the potential social costs of public knowledge of the victimization (Perilloux, Duntley, & Buss, 2012; Ullman, 1996). Rape victims often keep their victimization secret due to the fear that others will blame them or judge them negatively (Suarez & Gadalla, 2010; Ullman, 1996). These consequences prevent many rape victims from coming forward to disclose to friends and family, and prevents police investigations most rapes (Maddox, Lee, & Barker, 2012; Wolitzky-Taylor et al., 2011). Indeed, victims experience varying levels of psychological pain themselves: particularly women who are of reproductive age and mated (Thornhill & Thornhill, 1990). Concerns about others’ attributions could cause victims to perceive detrimental effects to their reputation, their value as a romantic partner, and even their own self-esteem (Perilloux et al., 2012).

The current study assesses whether victims and third-parties differ in their perceptions of blame and causality on the part of perpetrators and victims of actual instances of sexual victimization. We collected data from women who self-reported about a completed rape, women who self-reported about an attempted sexual victimization, and women who knew someone well who was sexually victimized. By comparing how these groups of women attributed motivations and assigned blame, we could identify whether first-hand experience of sexual victimization results in different perceptions of responsibility.

2. Method

2.1. Participants

The current study represents a subset of a larger online survey of victimization experiences approved by our university’s institutional review board. Participants were recruited as volunteers from university organizations or to partially satisfy a research requirement in psychology courses at a large Southern university. For the current study, we included participants from the original study who fit one of three categories: women who reported a completed rape that occurred after puberty, defined here as age 13, ($n = 49$; current age: $M = 20.31$, $SD = 2.56$), women who experienced an attempted sexual victimization after puberty ($n = 91$; current age: $M = 19.78$, $SD = 1.67$), or women who indicated that they knew a

woman who had experienced any sexual victimization after puberty, attempted or completed, ($n = 152$; current age: $M = 20.28$, $SD = 3.00$). Because we cannot know the perpetrator’s true intended outcome in an attempted victimization, women reporting any form of attempted victimization (e.g., attempted molestation, attempted rape) comprised the attempted group.

2.2. Materials

This survey defined sexual victimization as follows:

“Sexual victimization refers to being a nonconsensual (unwilling) participant in sexual activity with another person. Engaging in sexual activity with another person without your consent, against your wishes, or against your will may all be considered examples of sexual victimization. Another person attempting to get you to engage in sexual activity without your consent, against your wishes, or against your will may also be considered sexual victimization. It can be committed by a wide range of people, including strangers, acquaintances, current or ex-romantic partners, dates, fellow employees, neighbors, fellow students, and others. Sexual activity may include, but is not limited to, intercourse, anal sex, oral sex, or penetration.”

Participants indicated whether they had experienced an attempted or completed victimization based on this definition by responding to the question “Was this experience an attempted or a completed victimization?” Participants who indicated that they had been victimized completed the victim version of the instrument concerning the sexual victimization experience they identified as the most vivid in their memory. Participants who indicated they had never been victimized were asked if they knew anyone who had been. Those who answered affirmatively completed the third-party version of the instrument. Those who did not completed an unrelated task. The full instruments consisted of about 200 questions regarding their most vividly recalled first-hand sexual victimization experience or third-party knowledge of an attempted or completed victimization. The questions ranged from factual details, such as time and location, to more subjective details, such as perceptions of blame and attributions of perpetrator motivation (full instrument available from the first author).

Participants divided up the blame for the victimization between the perpetrator, the victim, family members, friends, the situation, and other. Participants assigned percentages to each category (between 0% and 100%), provided the categories summed to 100% total. We further examined why victims might blame themselves using their open-ended responses to “Please explain why you assigned the blame in this way.” Three research assistants, unacquainted with the research goals, read through the responses and identified the most common items mentioned: the five most frequent reasons for self-blame were: victim was intoxicated, victim put herself into a bad situation, victim did not resist enough, victim sent mixed messages, and victim was too trusting. The research assistants then coded each response into these categories.² We also examined how participants attributed the perpetrator’s motivation with an open-ended question asking “Please explain what you think the person hoped to gain by sexually victimizing you [the victim]. In other words, WHY did this person sexually victimize you [the victim]?” The same research assistants determined the most frequency categories and coded the responses as: sex, power, preserve or start a relationship, opportunity arose, perpetrator had a mental problem, or perpetrator was intoxicated. In the case of multiple categories

² The three research assistants ranged in agreement from 85% to 100% before discussion across the variables they coded. 100% agreement was reached by discussion.

Download English Version:

<https://daneshyari.com/en/article/7252372>

Download Persian Version:

<https://daneshyari.com/article/7252372>

[Daneshyari.com](https://daneshyari.com)