



# A review of the literature relating to rape victim blaming: An analysis of the impact of observer and victim characteristics on attribution of blame in rape cases



Madeleine van der Bruggen <sup>a,c,\*</sup>, Amy Grubb <sup>b</sup>

<sup>a</sup> Central Criminal Investigations Unit, Dutch Child Exploitation Team, Zoetermeer, The Netherlands

<sup>b</sup> Department of Psychology and Behavioural Sciences, Coventry University, Coventry, UK

<sup>c</sup> Faculty of Health and Life Sciences, Coventry University, Priory Street, Coventry CV1 5FB, UK

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## ABSTRACT

Historically, many studies have examined rape victim blaming among various observers, using a vignette methodology in which victim characteristics were manipulated. However, a gap in the research concerns a clear distinction between victim and observer characteristics and its separate influence on rape victim blaming. The current paper explores this distinction by examining the victim characteristics of gender, sexuality, degree of resistance exhibited, and victim–perpetrator relationship, as well as the observer characteristics of gender, professional status, gender role attitudes, and rape myth acceptance in relation to rape victim blame. Findings indicate that these variables have significant effects on rape blame attribution. A number of theoretical standpoints including the Just World Theory, Defensive Attribution Hypothesis, and notion of Homophobia are discussed in relation to the findings with the aim of enabling interpretation of the results. The limitations associated with the vignette methodology are also identified and discussed, along with reference to the development of newer methodologies and their contribution to the field.

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\* Corresponding author at: Priory Street, Coventry CV1 5FB, UK. Tel.: +44 24 7688 8957; fax: +44 02476 795950.  
E-mail address: vanderbm@uni.coventry.ac.uk (M. van der Bruggen).

## 1. Introduction

Sexual assault and rape are serious problems in today's society; for example, statistics demonstrate that one in five women will become the victim of rape or attempted rape in their lives (United Nations Development Fund for Women, 2008). Moreover, reporting rates to the police are exceptionally low and few perpetrators are successfully prosecuted (Bohner, Eyssele, Pina, Siebler, & Viki, 2009). Early feminist researchers suggested that rape is an inevitable phenomenon in patriarchal societies where males are the leading figures and hold authority over women (Burt, 1980). 'Rape myths', commonly held beliefs about what a typical rape situation looks like which influence the decision-making process and guilt assessment of lay people as well as jurors have also been identified (Bohner et al., 2009; Temkin & Krahé, 2008; Ward, 1995). It is generally believed that these myths determine the degree to which a victim is blamed and the perpetrator is exonerated for the rape (Gerger, Kley, Bohner, & Siebler, 2007; Ward, 1995). According to Janoff-Bulman (1979), blame can be twofold; in the form of characterological blame, where blame is attributed to a stable factor such as personality, and behavioral blame, where blame is attributed to a changeable factor such as the way the victim acts and reacts (Davies, Rogers, & Whitelegg, 2009).

Early research on this topic predominantly focused on characterological and behavioral victim characteristics that make observers more likely to blame victims for their own misfortune. Significant results were found for victims' degree of intoxication (Richardson & Campbell, 1982), dress (Furnham & Boston, 1996), attractiveness (Calhoun, Selby, Cann, & Keller, 1978), respectability (Jones & Aronson, 1973), and professional status (Smith, Keating, Hester, & Mitchell, 1976), with these variables leading to negative rape blame attributions (Grubb & Turner, 2012). However, much of this traditional research can be characterized as naïve and unrealistic; for example, in one study the victim was either a stripper, a social worker, or a nun (Smith et al., 1976), thereby failing to represent a realistic picture of rape or rape victims. Recent work utilizes more realistic, relevant, and common professions within rape attribution research, and tends to investigate perpetrator–victim relationship rather than respectability (which was previously operationalized as being single, married, or divorced, and which indicates a negative and prejudicial connotation of the concept).

Nevertheless, these traditional studies set the agenda for the methodology commonly used in the field. The majority of rape blame attribution studies have typically utilized an experimental vignette methodology, whereby groups of observers read a hypothetical scenario in which characteristics of the victim and situation are controlled and manipulated, and are thereafter asked to make judgments about the rape scenario using quantitative rating scales (Alexander & Becker, 1978; Ward, 1995). The vignette procedure is thought to be more reliable, valid and realistic than simple questions usually used in surveys (Alexander & Becker, 1978) and it enables "a detailed and comprehensive analysis of the quantity and quality of factors that affect judgements of rape and perceptions of rape victims" (Ward, 1995, p. 70). Nevertheless, a point worth noting is that many studies find significant differences in victim blaming when manipulating various victim characteristics; yet, generally victim blaming does not occur to an extreme extent. Typically low levels of culpability are assigned to victims compared to blame assigned to perpetrators; an annotation that has to be considered when evaluating results.

In addition to the manipulation of victim characteristics, studies often investigate observer characteristics. Influences of observer gender and professional status, as well as the constructs of gender role attitudes and rape myth acceptance on rape victim blaming, are frequently assessed (Davies & Hudson, 2011; Kelly, 2009). Currently, knowledge about the influence of observer characteristics on rape victim blaming is fairly limited compared to knowledge about victim characteristics, due to practical, ethical, and sampling issues. Often, only university

or college students are tested, which remains a restricted and unrepresentative observer group. Also, in the majority of studies that investigate observer groups from specific professions or backgrounds, no control groups from the general population are used, which sets limits to the generalizability of results.

Furthermore, studies often fail to clearly distinguish between victim and observer characteristics, meaning that both are manipulated and investigated simultaneously, and the results are discussed as a collective. This makes it somewhat difficult to clearly differentiate the independent impact of observer or victim characteristics on rape blame attributions. This literature review will clarify this issue, and discuss what is currently known about victim and observer characteristics, and their separate effects on rape victim blaming. First, to enable interpretation of results, relevant theories on which the literature is based will be briefly discussed. The two main sections of this paper contain research findings from studies with a vignette methodology related to victim and observer characteristics, respectively. Thereafter, the review seeks to outline and describe some of the more current and promising methodologies, along with identification of the contribution of such experimental designs to the rape blame literature.

## 2. Methodology

In order to find an answer to the research question concerning what is currently known about victim and observer characteristics and their independent effects on rape victim blaming, a systematic search through the empirical literature was conducted. To develop a general overview and theoretical underpinning of the topic, firstly the University library catalogue was searched for books with relevance to the topic. Subsequently, the databases PsycInfo and Science Direct were systematically searched for peer reviewed articles only, using Boolean Logic, and using the key words "rape AND blame [in title] AND attribu\*" (78 results), "rape AND responsibility [in title] AND attribu\*" (39 results), and "rape AND percept\* [in title] AND blame\*" (24 results). Google Scholar was searched for complementary relevant recent literature (2007 onwards), using the key words "rape blame" (in title only), to make sure that all relevant materials were accessed. Finally, the databases were searched for specific papers on the relevant theories (Just World Theory, Defensive Attribution Hypothesis and Homophobia) to be discussed initially. All hits were screened for relevant methodology (vignette studies and newer methodologies), information on victim and observer characteristics, and relevance to a UK context. In the analysis, a distinction was made between traditional studies (from the 70s and 80s) and more recent papers (1990 onwards).

## 3. Findings

### 3.1. Theories

#### 3.1.1. Just World Theory

Early studies predominantly aimed to find support for the Just World Theory (Lerner & Matthews, 1967), which states that people perceive the world to be a fair place where individuals deserve what they get and get what they deserve (Lambert & Raichle, 2000). By blaming rape victims, it is assumed that they deserve their misfortune, which gives people a sense of control, order, and justice (Grubb & Harrower, 2008). Just world beliefs are frequently manipulated as an individual difference variable, which is hypothesized to have a causal effect on victim blaming (Lambert & Raichle, 2000). Support for this theory is found in many studies investigating rape victim blaming (Furnham, 2003; Whatley & Riggio, 1993; Yamawaki, 2009); yet, other studies have not found support for this theory (Hammond, Berry, & Rodriguez, 2011) or have even found support for the opposite (Lambert & Raichle, 2000). For example, Kleinke and Meyer (1990) found that women with high just world beliefs tend to view rape victims more favorably and blame them to a lesser extent than those with lower beliefs in a

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