Effects of relationship, Belief in a Just World and levels of violence on victim blaming

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ABSTRACT

In recent years rape has emerged as an area of public concern with particular focus being on the negative attitudes that rape victims encounter. Rape victims are often blamed for their misfortune which is partly responsible for such low reporting rates. The effect of levels of violence on victim blaming has received little research attention. Ninety four participants (23 male and 71 female) read a hypothetical scenario in which a female victim was attacked in her house by either a stranger or acquaintance. The levels of violence involved were also manipulated between subjects to make the attack either violent or non-violent. Participants then completed an online two part questionnaire to assess their levels of Belief in a Just World (BJW) and to what extent they blamed the victim.

Results showed that level of BJW was positively associated with victim blame and participants with high BJW attributed significantly more blame. It was also found that victims were blamed more when the perpetrator was an acquaintance than when they were a stranger. Levels of violence were not found to significantly impact blame. Overall the present study highlights the factors that exacerbate victim blaming.

KEY WORDS:	BELIEF IN A JUST WORLD	VICTIM BLAMING	RAPE MYTH ACCEPTANCE	RAPE	VIOLENCE

Introduction

In recent years there has been considerable interest in rape and the negative social attitudes towards the victims. One direction of research in this area has been to examine the characteristics of the rape and also of the victim in a bid to see what increases blame. Perceptions of sexual assault can have profound influences on social reactions and attitudes towards the victim. The most well-known consequence of these influences is victim-blaming (Maurer and Robinson, 2007). Victim blaming can cause secondary victimisation which can be particularly damaging for the recovery and well-being of victims after the attack. For example, women with a history of sexual assault experience diminished physical health, mental health and increased negative sexual outcomes when compared to matched samples of women that have not been assaulted (Jozkowski, Henry and Sturm, 2015). For these reasons it is important to understand the factors that exacerbate victim blaming.

In January 2013, the Ministry of Justice, Office for National Statistics and Home Office released its first joint Official Statistics bulletin on sexual violence, entitled An Overview of Sexual Offending in England and Wales (Ministry of Justice, Home Office & the Office for National Statistics, 2013). From this report, UK based organisation Rape Crisis reported that on average there are approximately 85,000 women raped each year in England and over 400,000 women are sexually assaulted (Rape Crisis England and Wales, n.d.). In Manchester alone there were 30 reported student rapes between August and November, double the amount reported for the same period the previous year (Greater Manchester Police, 2014). Ministry of Justice, Home Office & the Office for National Statistics (2013) also reported that 1 in 5 women aged between 16 and 59 had experienced some form of sexual violence since they were 16 and that 28% of women who are victims of the most serious sexual offences never tell anyone about it. Rape Crisis has also reported that through their involvement within the movement they have found that only around 5% of those who have experienced such violence will go on to report it to the police (Rape Crisis England and Wales, n.d.). Rape statistics may therefore underestimate the prevalence of rape because a large number of incidents do not get reported (Suarez and Gadalla, 2010). Research has identified a number of reasons why victims of rape choose not to tell anyone or involve authorities.

The seemingly hostile social attitudes towards rape victims is partly responsible for there being such low levels of victims reporting sexually violent crimes (Anderson, 2010). This leads victims to fear how they will be perceived by others (Gotovac and Towson, 2015). Negative attitudes towards victims means they are often afraid of not being believed, or even being blamed for what has happened to them as well as experiencing feelings of guilt, shame and stigmatization from others (Sakallı-Uğurlu, Yalçın and Glick, 2007). Recent research has shown that it has become generally accepted that individuals have a tendency to perceive victims of sexual assault in negative terms, and a wealth of psychological research has been devoted to examining the factors that contribute to and influence these perceptions (Grubb and Harrower, 2008).

An important factor that discourages rape victims from reporting what has happened to them is the non-supportive reactions that they often encounter after disclosing the assault. Instead of receiving sympathy and getting help, many victims are regarded

with suspicion and mistrust and their integrity and credibility is often cast in to doubt. Victim blaming can seriously hamper the victim's recovery process and leads to a secondary victimisation (Winkel and Kopplaar, 1991). However, the impact of rape on a woman is not limited to the act itself. Instead, so-called secondary victimization may result from negative experiences within their social surroundings, or with the authorities they subsequently deal with who may harbour negative attitudes toward victims of rape (Campbell and Raja, 1999). It has been suggested that when seeking help, victims are often met with questions about their prior sexual histories, how they were dressed at the time (Campbell and Raja, 2005), whether they had been drinking and other false beliefs inspired by various rape myths.

The endorsement of rape myths features heavily in literature relating to victim blame and plays a significant role in how much blame is attributed. Rape Myth Acceptance is often sighted as being one of the key predictors of increased victim blame and decreased perpetrator blame (Mckimmie et al 2014). Burt (1980) defines rape myths as a series of false beliefs and prejudicial stereotypes about rape and rape victims that create a hostile climate for the victims and mainly serve the purpose of shifting the blame from perpetrators to victims (Franiuk, Seefelt and Vandello, 2008). In addition, the understanding of the impact of rape myths on rape victims and the society at large has been recognized as crucial for the well-being and recovery of these victims (Suarez and Gadalla, 2010). Rape myths often imply that a 'real' rape victim is a woman injured whilst resisting and that 'real' rapes occur outside of the home and are committed by a stranger, in the dark, in a random attack (McKimmie et al, 2014). These rigid schemas of what constitutes 'real rape' - ideas about location, the circumstances in which they occur, victim behaviour at the time of the incident and perceived stereotypes of what a 'real' victim is - are often far from the truth. For example, Bachman (1998) found that only 10% of the rape victims who were surveyed had physical injures that were not related to a sexual assault and Davies, Gilston and Rogers (2012) found that in real life victim's stranger situations were no more violent than acquaintance situations, but victims felt they were less able to fight back. These beliefs and attempted justifications of rape in certain circumstances could be formed in part by Belief in a Just World (BJW) (Lerner, 1971) in order to maintain people's confidence that the world is a just and fair place (Correia et al., 2015).

A victim's relationship to their attacker is also an important influencer when it comes to how others view them and their credibility as a victim. Ben-David and Schneider (2005) suggested that previous research tends to take the view that the closer the relationship between the victim and the perpetrator the more likely people are to minimise the severity of rape. Research have found that people who have not been raped tend to view stranger rape as more of a 'real' crime and more distressing than acquaintance rape, with more blame attributed to victims that know their attacker (Strömwall, Alfredsson and Landström, 2013). However, these findings have not been consistent across all research.

Calhoun (1976) found that when the victim was described as being unacquainted with their rapist, their behaviour was held more to account for what happened than when they were unacquainted. Fisher et al. (2003) found that 42% of victims that knew their attacker didn't report the incident to authorities because they weren't sure whether a crime had been committed or whether harm was intended.

There are however discrepancies amongst researchers when looking at the interactions between relationship and blame, with some instances in which victims of

stranger rape received greater levels of blame (Stromwall et al, 2013). Nevertheless, this does seem to be a more unusual finding with the majority of recent research finding that acquaintance rape victims were generally blamed more. For example, van der Bruggen and Grubb's (2014) literature review found that recent research indicated that victims are 'consistently blamed more when it concerns date and acquaintance scenarios, compared to stranger scenarios'.

Whilst these findings support some previous ideas that in order to be a credible victim they should be a certain type of 'victim' and the victim of a certain type of attack (Calhoun et al 1976), it would seem that there are still some opposing findings and it can be difficult to assess whether or not, despite the circumstances, people still look to blame rape victims because of the nature of the attacks. Despite extensive research in this area there still remains some inconsistencies which demonstrate the complex relationship between relationship levels and blame attributions.

Victim resistance is also of interest when looking at victim blame. Research has found that more responsibility is usually attributed to victims if they do not resist against their attacker. There are however, inconsistent findings regarding the extent to which they are viewed as responsible if they attempt to physically fight back. Black and McCloskey's (2013) study has shown that when victims physically resist, this is more in line with what people's definitions of rape is and therefore it is associated with lower levels of victim blame as well as recommendations for more severe perpetrator punishment. Again this is often quite different from the truth as often victims are paralysed by fear. Some research has found that increased levels of victim resistance actually have negative consequences for the victim and increased levels of violence and resistance involved often increase the use of a weapon (Woodhams and Cooke, 2013). Yet again this demonstrates how rape myths are often far from the truth yet still influence society's attitudes towards victims of sexual assault.

Lerner (1971) originally proposed the BJW Theory where the main assumption is that people blame victims in order for their world to feel 'just' and safe. BJW suggests that people adopt the view point that bad things don't happen to good people and people usually get what they deserve and deserve what they get (Fetchenhauer, Jacobs and Belschak, 2005). Blaming the victim also psychologically protects others from thinking that similar misfortunes could happen to them (Lerner and Miller, 1978). People like to think they have a sense of control over what happens to them in their everyday lives and so they search for a reason as to why the victim was victimised such as telling themselves that they would behave differently in a similar situation, or that they are not the kind of person that behaves in a way where bad things could happen. When people hear of violent attacks such as rape they comfort themselves by attributing the blame to the victim and making attributions such as 'She shouldn't have walked home alone in the dark' (Whatley, 1996) and this allows people to comfort themselves with the belief criminality can be controlled (Cramer et al., 2014).

As past research has demonstrated, there are inconsistencies in to how people attribute blame in rape victim situations (e.g. Calhoun, 1976, van der Bruggen and Grubb, 2014). Whilst research has looked at the levels of blame attributed when a victim resists, little has looked at how blame is attributed when the perpetrator is violent and how this affects blame attribution. This research aims to look at blame attribution, rape myth acceptance and the differences in blame levels when the levels of violence (violent vs non-violent) and relationship to the perpetrator (stranger vs acquaintance) are manipulated and whether we are more likely to blame a victim when they don't

show signs of physical hurt and whether or not the victim's relationship to the perpetrator affects this. Past research and Rape Myth acceptance suggests blame would most likely be attributed in this way, and this research hopes to further add to the relationship to perpetrator research as at present there seems to be no definitive answer. Unlike a lot of past research this study is hoping to give participants as little information about the victim as possible. Past research has often manipulated victim's dress, behaviour at the time and whether they had drank any alcohol. Strömwall, Landström and Alfredsson (2014) suggested that when more information is available about the victim people will look for explanations for the rape in the victim's behaviour or person. With less focus on the victim it is expected that they will come under less scrutiny and less victim blaming will occur. Grubb and Harrower 's (2008) review found that despite extensive research in the area there are still inconsistencies as to how much blame is attributed to victims of acquaintance rape. The present study hopes to be able to contribute to this area.

Hypotheses

1. Participants with high BJW scores will attribute higher levels of blame
2. Participants will attribute higher levels of blame to the victim when the perpetrator is an acquaintance
3. Participants will attribute higher levels of blame to the victim when the attack is non violent
4. Null Hypothesis - There will be no significant difference in victim blame when levels of violence and relationship are manipulated.

Methodology

Design

An online survey based design was distributed, combining a previous well established questionnaire and one of four vignettes (appendix 1) relating to a fictitious rape scenario with questions (appendix 2) relating to the information contained. In the first questionnaire, The Global Belief in a Just World (GBJW) scale aimed to assess levels of BJW (High vs Low). The vignette questions aimed to assess levels of victim blaming when the victim's relationship to the perpetrator (stranger vs acquaintance) and levels of violence (violent vs non-violent) were manipulated. Participants all completed the GBJW scale then were randomly assigned to one of the 4 vignettes using a randomiser built in to the software used for hosting the questionnaire. The experiment used a 2 (Relationship to perpetrator: Stranger vs. Acquaintance) x 2(Levels of violence: Non-Violent vs. Violent) x 2 (Levels of BJW: High vs. Low) between subjects design.

The participants were randomly assigned to one of four vignettes, each containing one of the scenarios in which relationship level and levels of violence were manipulated. The main dependent variable was level of victim blame. The independent variables were levels of violence, BJW and relationship to perpetrator.

Participants

Participants were undergraduate students from a University in Manchester, North West England, and a community sample (N=106). Due to incomplete data 6 responses were removed with another 6 being removed from those who answered questions regarding variable manipulation incorrectly. This was to ensure that there was no miscommunication regarding which condition they had participated in. This left 94 complete responses. There were 23 male participants and 71 female participants.

Participants were recruited through the University's Participant Pool, where they received a '10 point' reward for their participation and also through dedicated social media sites ran by the University's Psychology department via a hyperlink to the study and a hyperlink shared on social media site 'Facebook'. Participants were required to be 18 years of age at the time of participation due to the potentially sensitive nature of some of the information contained within the questionnaire material. Participants remained anonymous at all times to keep social desirability bias to a minimum.

Materials

The two part questionnaire was administered online after being built in Qualtrics in which participants were required to answer several questions relating to BJW and relating to a vignette depicting a sexual assault. A participant information sheet and a De-Brief sheet were also included. In addition to the questionnaire, participants were asked to indicate their gender and their age from a choice of age groupings.

Global Belief in a Just World Scale

Participants were required to answer questions from the pre-existing GBJW scale in a Just World Scale (appendix 3), a 7 item well-established questionnaire, where

answers are indicated on a 6 point Likert scale ranging from Strongly Agree to Strongly Disagree. Participant's scores were assigned a number between 1 and 6 with 6 corresponding with Strongly Agree and 1 with Strongly Disagree. Possible scores could range from 7 to 49 with higher scores indicating greater endorsement of people usually getting what they deserve (O'Connor, Morrison and Morrison, 1996).

The GBJW scale has been shown to have good psychometric properties, even when used across gender and different cultures (Reich and Wang, 2015), with an estimated internal reliability ranging from 0.7 to 0.8 depending on the sample used (Schmitt 1998). It has also been shown to have convergent validity and discriminant validity (Parikh, 2008).

An analysis across 89 articles reported Cronbach's alphas were analysed. It was found that studies using the GBJW scale had higher average reliability with a smaller standard deviation compared to studies using the Just World Scale (Rubin and Peplau, 1973) and the Just World Scale Revised measures (Rubin and Peplau, 1975). The GBJW Scale (Lipkus, 1991) produced the highest average reliability score ($\alpha = .81$) (Hellman, Muilenburg-Trevino and Worley, 2008) compared to the Just World Scale (Rubin & Peplau, 1973; $\alpha = .64$) and the Just World Scale Revised (Rubin & Peplau, 1975; $\alpha = .68$). It has also been argued that as past research has often used the Just World scale which can be psychometrically problematic, links between BJW and victim blaming may not always be accurate (Sleath and Bull, 2009).

Vignettes

Participants were randomly assigned to one of four vignettes (appendix 1). Each vignette detailed one of four differing scenarios in which a 27 year old woman was sexually assaulted in her own home by a male perpetrator. The vignettes were designed using The Newspaper Clipping Generator website which generated images that looked like newspaper clippings in order to increase levels of authenticity and make the scenarios more real and conceivable to participants (Renolds, 2012).

The vignettes will be centred in the victim's home in order to reflect that this is where the majority of rapes occur. The characteristics of a 'typical' rape are different from the myths that rapes take place somewhere outside of the home and are committed by a stranger. Strömwall, Alfredsson and Landström (2013) suggested that future research needs to address relationship level and time and place of rape. Sleath and Bull (2012) concluded that the variables acquaintance vs. stranger, violent vs. nonviolent needed investigating further.

The relationship of the perpetrator and the female victim varied as did the levels of violence involved in the assault. This gave four conditions: Violent Stranger, Non-Violent Stranger, Violent Acquaintance, and Non- Violent Acquaintance. In two of the vignettes the perpetrator was described as 'known to the victim' (Acquaintance) and in the other two vignettes he was described as 'described as a white male of average build, wearing dark jeans and a green t-shirt' (Stranger). In the Non- Violent Scenarios it explains that the victim has been assaulted but 'she did not need medical attention' and in the violent scenario the perpetrator 'left her with extensive bruising and cuts to her face that required medical attention'. In the acquaintance scenario the perpetrator is invited in to the house and in the stranger scenario he forces entry. As little

information as possible about the victim was included and in all cases the description of her remains the same.

After reading the vignettes the participants were required to answer seven questions which remained the same for all four vignettes. The participants indicated which option they felt applied most to them. The options ranged from Strongly Agree to Strongly Disagree. Participants were given a score of between 1 and 6, with 6 being Strongly Agree and 1 being Strongly Disagree for their answers to questions 1, 2,3,5,6 and 7. Question 4 was scored in reverse and so an answer of Strongly Agree would receive a score of 1. There were also two additional questions; 'Did the victim sustain any injuries?' and 'Did the victim know her attacker?' to assess whether the participant understood the condition they were taking part in and to ensure the variables were being tested. Higher overall scores indicated higher levels of victim blaming and lower overall scores indicated lower levels of victim blaming.

Kulas et al. (2008) suggest that mid points of Likert scales can often be used as 'dumping grounds' for respondents to answer questions whether they are unsure, unwilling to commit to a definitive response or have a genuinely neutral outlook. This study has decided to opt for a 6 point scale to discard having a mid-point and to maintain consistency with the scale size used in the GBJW questionnaire. The consistency will hopefully minimise any confusion and should make completion of both questionnaires simpler.

Procedure

All ethical approval forms (appendix 4) and procedures were approved by the Psychology Department at Manchester Metropolitan University.

Before beginning, participants were required to read through a Participant Information sheet (appendix 5), information about giving consent (appendix 6) and finally some standardised instructions (appendix 5). The word 'blame' was intentionally left out of any information given prior to the start of the study in the hope of keeping social desirability bias to a minimum. All participants were required to answer the GBJW scale and answer 7 questions. They were then shown one of four vignettes and answered a further 9 questions.

Treatment of Data

Participants were required to create a unique anonymous code (appendix 7) in case they wished to withdraw their data at a later stage. They were informed that the study was interested in looking at levels of blame attributed to rape victims and it was explained that this information had been left out until then as the topic is potentially socially sensitive and keeping the true nature of the study from the participants was important in gaining the most honest responses possible. There were a few ethical issues involved in the study. Firstly the inclusion of rape scenarios could be potentially distressing for participants, however they were informed of the content beforehand and participation was optional. Participants were fully debriefed after the study and provided with several contact details should they feel they had been affected. Secondly, participants were also deceived about the nature of the study and that it was specifically looking at Levels of Blame, however this is a relatively small issue and the true nature of the study was explained to participants in the De-Brief process (appendix 7) and they were reminded of their right to withdraw at any point.

 Once data collection was complete all data was transferred in to SPSS (see appendix 8 for output). As the survey was hosted via Qualtrics, which retains participants IP addressed, these were removed as soon as data analysis began.

Results
Levels of victim blame were analysed using a 2 (Relationship Level; Stranger vs. Acquaintance) x 2 (Levels of Violence; Violent vs. Non Violent) independent factors ANOVA. The means and SDs can be seen in Table 1 below.

Descriptive Statistics

Table 1 - Means (M) and Standard Deviations (SD) for Participants Total Blame Scores and Total BJW scores.

N=94	Total Blame		Total BJW	
	M	*SD*	*M*	*SD*
	18.30	6.30	23.90	6.30

Defining a Total Blame score

Participants gave their answers on a 6 point Likert scale ranging from 'strongly agree' to 'strongly disagree'. These answers were then assigned a value of between 1 and 6 with 1 being assigned to 'strongly disagree' and 6 being assigned to 'strongly agree'. A score of 1 indicated a low blame score and 6 indicating a high blame score for each question. Question 4, 'Do you think the victim deserves sympathy' had its scores reversed as a 'strongly disagree' answer in this instance reflected higher levels of victim blaming than a 'strongly agree' answer. The totals for all 7 questions were added up for each participant, giving them a score out of 42 and this formed a Total Blame score.

Defining High or Low Levels of BJW

The process of defining high or low levels of BJW was similar to that of defining the total blame score. Participants answered on a 6 point Likert scale ranging from 'strongly agree' to 'strongly disagree'. These answers were then assigned a value of between 1 and 6 with 1 being 'strongly disagree' and 6 being 'strongly agree'. A score of 1 indicated a Low BJW score and 6 indicated a High BJW score for each question. The total scores for all 7 questions were added up for each participant giving them a score out of 42. A total mean for the scores was calculated (M=23.90, SD= 6.28). It was decided that every score that was 24 or above would be assigned a High BJW score and every score below 24 would be assigned a Low BJW score.

Parametric Testing

Parametric tests were conducted in order to assess the most suitable methods of testing. Due to parametric tests requiring certain conditions to be met in order for their use to be appropriate, tests for normality were conducted. Graphical representations in the form of Histograms (see appendix 9) revealed a normal distribution for Total Blame but not for Total BJW scores. This made it necessary to test for normality using skewness, kurtosis and Shapiro-Wilk.

The Skewness and Kurtosis values were calculated by hand by dividing the skewness statistic with the standard error to produce a skewness value. The method was repeated in order to calculate the Kurtosis value. Total Blame had a skewness score of 1.49, a Kurtosis value of -0.86 and a Shapiro-Wilk value of .037. Total BJW had a skewness score of 2.24, a Kurtosis value of .85 and a Shapiro-Wilk value of .009.

Kim (2013) suggested that with a medium-sized sample ($50 < n < 300$) a skewness level of up to 3.29 is within an acceptable level or normality. According to Field (2004) it is worth noting that nonparametric tests generally have less statistical power than their parametric counterparts, so for this reason parametric tests were used.

Internal consistency

When looking at internal consistency, A Cronbach alpha of .82 was obtained for the questions relating to victim blame and .88 for the GBJW scale which is consistent with previous research findings (Hellman, Muilenburg-Trevino and Worley, 2008). According to Coolican (2009), .75 is an acceptable level of internal consistency and this indicates the appropriate use of these measures for this study and it was deemed unnecessary to remove any items to increase internal consistency.

2x2 ANOVA

A 2(Level of Violence) x2(Relationship level) Analysis of Variance (ANOVA) using victim blame as the dependant variable showed a significant main effect for Relationship Level (F (1, 90) = 7.08, p = .009, partial η^2 = .073) whereas there was no significant main effect for Levels of Violence and (F (1, 90) =.06, p= .813, partial η^2 = .001). Additionally, the interaction between levels of violence and relationship level was non-significant (F (1, 90) = .20, p= .657, partial η^2 = .002).

The relationship interaction was further investigated using t-tests. Levene's test was non-significant, p>.05, therefore equal variance was assumed for all t-tests. The original SPSS output figures have been converted from 2-tailed to 1-tailed as this is appropriate for use with directional hypotheses. This was done by dividing the output by 2 (Howitt, 2013).

 Participants reported higher levels of blame when they had answered questions relating to an acquaintance vignette (M=20.04, SD= 5.94) than they did when they had answered questions relating to a stranger vignette (M=16.61, SD=6.22). This provides a mean decrease (M=3.79, SD= -.28) between levels of blame attributed to victims of an acquaintance attack and those attributed to a victim of a stranger attack. This mean decrease was significant t (92) = -2.71, p= .004 (one tailed). The mean difference (M=3.79, 95% CI: -5.93, -.94) was moderate to large (Cohen's d= .53), therefore this supports the hypothesis that participants will attribute higher levels of blame to victims of acquaintance rape than to victims of stranger rape.

T-tests

The mean Total Blame scores for Participants High on BJW were higher (M=19.55, SD = 6.63) than the mean Total mean Blame scores for Participants with Low BJW scores (M=16.96, SD= 5.71) resulting in a mean increase (M=2.59, SD= .92) for levels of blame attributed by participants with High BJW scores. This was statistically significant t (92) = -2.03, p<.05 (one-tailed). The mean difference (Mean difference =2.59, 95%CI:-5.13, to .06.) was moderate (Cohen's d = .42) and this supports hypothesis 1, as it was hypothesised that participants High on BJW would attribute higher blame scores than those with Low BJW scores.

Discussion

Overall, as expected there were relatively low levels of victim blaming across each of the four conditions. This would lead us to conclude that the British public do not attribute much blame to rape victims. This is in line with other recent research findings of Western populations (e.g. van der Bruggen and Grubb, 2014). The present study helped to clarify some of the differences between levels of blame for stranger rapes and acquaintance rape. Relationship to perpetrator proved to be a key factor in levels of blame attributed, with this study finding that the closer the relationship to the perpetrator the higher the levels of blame, supporting previous findings (e.g., Krahé et al., 2008). Just World theory was supported, with participants with high levels of BJW attributing significantly more blame to victims than those with low BJW scores. Again these findings are in line with recent research (e.g. Stromwall et al, 2013). Unexpectedly levels of violence involved had little effect on the levels of blame attributed, suggesting that blame levels were not influenced by whether the rape was violent or not.

According to The Home Office and the Ministry of Justice (2013) most rapes take place in the home and 90% of victims of the most serious sexual assaults knew the perpetrator. This is in contrast to ideas presented in rape myths, where often the victim is attacked by a stranger in the night. The results found in this study support the idea that people are more willing to blame a victim of an acquaintance rape than they are a stranger rape. This could be explained by participant's belief of certain rape myths and the misconception that rapes are committed by someone unknown to the victim. Research has found that contemporary rape myths are still often accepted (Sussenbach and Bohner, 2011). The acceptance of these myths has been argued to contribute toward rape crimes having a very low reporting rate, high levels of attrition throughout the criminal justice process, and low conviction rates with many victims unwilling to report the crime for fear of being blamed (Sleath and Bull, 2015). It could also be argued that participants assumed that there must have been some prior contact between the victim of the acquaintance attack and the perpetrator and they might have thought that sometimes there are miscommunications and that the victim had not made herself clear and that influenced their blame scores.

It would seem that blaming the victim seems to be an all too prevalent reaction to acquaintance rape (Curtis, 1997) and the trauma often extends far beyond the crime (Stel, van den Bos and Bal, 2012). This propensity to blame the victims of rape translates worryingly into a tolerance of the crime itself (Grubb and Harrower, 2009) and blame reactions from friends, family and the media enhance self-blame levels which in turn significantly impacts on the recovery process (Ullman et al., 2007).

The overall low levels of victim blaming could be explained by the lack of information about the victim. The participants could have identified with the victim as the attack was in her own home and she had not, to the knowledge of the participants, engaged in any risky behaviour beforehand. Research has shown that the more participants feel they can identify with a victim the more likely they are to be able to image how it would feel to be in their place (Krebs, 1975) and the fear of a random misfortune that might lead them to be in a similar situation limits their levels of blaming (Grubb and Harrower, 2009).

The idea of an 'innocent' victim as opposed to a 'non-innocent' victim has also been shown to affect how blame is attributed. In this instance, because of the lack of information about the victim prior to the attack, this could have portrayed the victim as not deserving what happened to her, as she had not displayed any risk taking behaviour (Correia and Vala, 2003).

As predicted, participants with high BJW scores attributed significantly more blame to the victim than those with low scores. This supports past research that BJW impacts victim blaming (Sakallı-Uğurlu, Yalçın and Glick, 2007, van den Bos and Maas, 2009, Strömwall, Alfredsson and Landström, 2013), and provides evidence that people's levels of BJW affects their social perceptions of others actions and misfortunes, with observer characteristics playing an important part in victim blaming.

Surprisingly the levels of violence involved did not affect the blame attributed to the victim. It was hypothesised that a victim of a violent attack would be blamed less than the victim of a non-violent assault as this would be in line with various rape myths and preconceived ideas which suggest a 'real' rape victim would fight back. As a result they would sustain injuries as the attack was a 'real non-consensual assault versus a regrettable sexual experience (Hayes, Lorenz and Bell, 2013), so it is thought that there would be a level of violence present in a real rape to overpower the victim. However, in this instance this was not the case. The lack of interaction could be explained by the description of the victim's injuries. The description was fairly ambiguous and undetailed and it could be that they were not described with sufficient detail for participants to be aware that the attack was any more violent, or non-violent than what they would already expect from a rape. In an attempt to ensure that the independent variables were being tested and to control for participants not distinguishing between the violence condition at the end of each vignette, participants were asked to indicate whether the victim sustained injuries, where for example, the response to a violent stranger vignette would be 'yes' and the response to a non-violent stranger response would be 'no'. All participants who did not respond with the expected answer were excluded from analysis. However, it could be that participants already view rape as a violent crime and more detail regarding the victim's injuries and the behaviour of the perpetrator, for example did they have a weapon or did they strangle the victim, could be included to gain more of a response and differentiate between the two conditions.

Whilst levels of violence did not significantly affect levels of blame attributed, when looking at participants answers to individual questions blame scores were significantly higher on questions relating to the victims behaviour, for example, 'Should the victim have resisted?'. This could imply a certain level of covert victim blaming, brought about by social desirability bias associated with self-report measures. This would however need examining further.

Limitations of research

Whilst efforts were made to recruit the most representative sample possible, the sample was largely made up of participants in the 18-24 age group with 75 out of 94

participants falling in to that bracket. The majority of research in this area uses undergraduate and college samples, or specific groups such as police officers or people from emergency services etc. that would deal with rape victims. University aged women (those, typically in the 18-24 bracket) are particularly at risk of sexual assault so this in part justifies the use of this sample (Daigle, Fisher and Cullen, 2008). It would however be interesting to see if results are replicated when solely a community sample is used instead.

Although the study was open to participants of any gender the sample turned out to be very gender biased with only 23 male participants taking part compared to 71 female participants. With known differences between gender and attribution of blame it would be interesting to see how a more evenly split sample would affect results. There are also some issues with the use of self-report measures as this can elicit social desirability bias with participants conforming to social norms instead of answering honestly, especially when a topic is sensitive or controversial. There can also be some misunderstanding of questions (Schroder, Carey and Vanable, 2003). Participants remained anonymous in the present study in the hope of limiting desirability bias.

There could also have been issues with the use of a vignette styled like a newspaper article. Whilst the use of vignettes is common in a study of this style it has been argued that they are hypothetical and therefore lack ecological validity (Davies, Austen and Rogers, 2011). In an attempt to make the vignettes more realistic they were styled as a newspaper clipping of an article published shortly after the incident. This meant that there were potential issues with getting enough information in to the article. With it being styled as a newspaper report, a newspaper would not report certain aspects and certain details of a case as they might not have been released by police.

Future research could expand on using levels of violence as a variable, however it could include a more detailed description in order to elicit more of a response. It would be interesting to see another method used as opposed to vignettes. Whilst vignettes are widely used in this type of research they are difficult to standardise and vary in length and detail from study to study. When considering how secondary victimisation can have such negative impacts on victims after the attack and the recovery process, further research could look at understanding ways in which secondary victimisation could be stopped, for example through educational programs or campaigns and their efficacy.

Conclusion

Overall the present study has provided useful information on who blames rape victims and the circumstances that exacerbate victim blaming. In addition, Just World Theory was yet again found to explain the differences found in participants high or low scores and provided an insight in to people's rational for blaming victims. Identification of the societal attitudes that provide a place in which rape flourishes is an important goal. Despite some of the methodological limitations discussed, the present study has demonstrated that social judgement of rape victims seems to be affected by several factors acting together. It is hoped that this will aid in helping to address the issues with victim blaming amongst university aged participants and hopefully encourage an increased awareness of the different types of sexual assault so this can lead to the abolition of rape myths.

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