

Theoretical Analyses

Rape Crimes Reviewed: The Role of Observer Variables in Female Victim Blaming

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Abstract

This article presents an overview of empirical research on the role of observer variables in rape victim blaming (female attacked by a male perpetrator). The focus is on literature from the last 15 years. The variables observer gender, ambivalent sexism, rape myth acceptance, and rape empathy are discussed in relation to victim blaming. Most research on rape is conducted using diverse methods and approaches that result in a great disparity regarding the role of these variables in predicting blame assignments. Despite the inconsistencies, most studies show that men hold the victim more responsible for her own victimization than women. Findings further indicate that higher scores on sexist ideologies and rape myth acceptance predict higher victim blame, and that higher rape empathy scores predict lower victim blame. Theoretical and practical implications are discussed.

Keywords: rape, victim blaming, observer gender, ambivalent sexism, rape myths, empathy

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Introduction

Rape is a prevalent phenomenon with no cultural boundaries and, contrasting with other victims, sexually victimized women are often stigmatized and perceived as responsible for their own fate (Angelone, Mitchell, & Lucente, 2012; Bieneck & Krahé, 2011; Grubb & Turner, 2012; Rebeiz & Harb, 2010). In many cases, they are disbelieved and held responsible not only by society but also by close social support structures (e.g., family, friends, medical services, police, and judicial system). This secondary victimization worsens the negative impact of rape by causing self-blame and shame (Kohsin Wang & Rowley, 2007).

Two main theories have been used to explain victim blaming: the just world theory (Lerner & Miller, 1978) and the defensive attribution hypothesis (Shaver, 1970). According to the just world theory (Lerner & Miller, 1978), people get what they deserve and deserve what they get: good people are rewarded, whereas bad people are punished. When facing random misfortune (as is the case of rape), people tend to re-conceptualize the situation, in order to restore the belief in a just world and their own sense of invulnerability. In the context of rape, people

with a high belief in a just world blame the victim for her own misfortune (so as to combat cognitive dissonance), somehow believing that she deserved her own fate because she did not behave as expected (Kleinke & Meyer, 1990). The belief in a just world was proven to be an important predictor of negative attitudes towards rape victims; this belief is stronger in conservative cultures and with a more organized hierarchy (e.g., Abrams, Viki, Masser, & Bohner, 2003; Sakalli-Uğurlu, Yalçın, & Glick, 2007; Valor-Segura, Expósito, & Moya, 2011).

Similarly, the defensive attribution hypothesis (Shaver, 1970) argues that the identification with the victim leads to less blame assignments (in the presence of a negative event): the degree of perceived similarity to the victim may indicate the possibility of a similar misfortune (avoidance of danger), motivating individuals to defend themselves from being blamed in the likelihood of future victimization (avoidance of blame). Since women may perceive themselves as more similar to the victim, they are more likely to use this defence mechanism, assigning less blame to the victim.

Additionally, as acquaintance rape (where the rapist is known or intimate to the victim) is thought not to be as serious as stranger rape, the victim is held more responsible and blamed because people mistakenly assume that she may have provoked the situation (Abrams et al., 2003). This proclivity to blame the victim in acquaintance rape was shown in countries such as the United States (e.g., Yamawaki, 2007), England (e.g., Abrams et al., 2003; Viki & Abrams, 2002), Australia (e.g., Newcombe, van den Eynde, Hafner, & Jolly, 2008), Spain (e.g., Frese, Moya, & Megías, 2004), Sweden (Pedersen & Strömwall, 2013), and Turkey (Gölge, Yavuz, Müderrisoglu, & Yavuz, 2003). The attribution of blame to the victim increases as the relationship victim-rapist becomes more intimate (Bennice & Resick, 2003), leading marital rape to be perceived as less serious or not considered as a crime, given that a married woman is supposed to have sexual duties to her husband (Ben-David & Schneider, 2005; Frese et al., 2004).

A large body of literature has examined a plethora of personal, psychological, and situational variables that may affect rape victim blaming. In addition to the victim's personal characteristics (e.g., physical attractiveness, sexual history, and substance misuse), the perceiver's personal characteristics (e.g., gender, sexist beliefs, and rape myth acceptance) have been one of the most studied aspects regarding rape perceptions. In fact, observers are exposed to biased perspectives based on their own beliefs and unique characteristics, and these seem to play a major role in the way the rape victim is perceived and blamed for the situation (Angelone et al., 2012; Gölge et al., 2003; Grubb & Harrower, 2008; Grubb & Turner, 2012). It therefore follows that in-depth understanding of the determinants of victim blaming (particularly those related to the social perceiver) is required so that rape perceptions can be changed.

In line with the aforementioned, the purpose of this theoretical study is to offer an overview of the major empirical findings from the last 15 years (2000-2015) regarding four of the most studied and best-documented observer characteristics related to the rape victim blaming (focusing only on rape perpetrated by a male on a female victim): gender, ambivalent sexism, rape myth acceptance, and rape empathy (see Table 1 to identify the main research reports included in this review). This theoretical overview might prove useful when considering the vast number of studies on the theme. Simultaneously, by summing up the correlates and consequences of rape, it might shed light on the problem and ways of addressing it, namely through intervention programs aimed at reducing the impact of this cross-cultural tradition of victim blaming.

Table 1

Research Reports Included in the Review Regarding Rape Victim Blaming.

Study	Year	n	Sample type	Culture	Scale
Gender – significant differences					
Cohn et al.	2009	250	Students	American	N.a.
Frese et al.	2004	182	Students	Spanish	N.a.
Mandela	2011	235	Students	African-American	N.a.
Newcombe et al.	2008	102	Students	Australian	N.a.
Rye et al.	2006	256	Students	American	N.a.
Strömwall et al.	2013	164	Community	Swedish	N.a.
Viki & Abrams	2002	57	Students	British	N.a.
Whatley	2005	160	Students	American	N.a.
Gender – no significant differences					
Anderson & Lyons	2005	121	Students	British	N.a.
Bendixen et al.	2014	475	Community	Norwegian	N.a.
Black & Gold	2008	160	Community	American	N.a.
Durán et al.	2010	206	Students	Spanish/British	N.a.
Ferrão et al.	in press	90	Community	Portuguese	N.a.
Gölge et al.	2003	800	Students	Turkish	N.a.
Grubb & Harrower	2009	156	Students	British	N.a.
Harrison et al.	2008	118	Students	American	N.a.
Mitchell et al.	2009	171	Students	American	N.a.
Paul et al.	2014	192	Students	American	N.a.
Schneider et al.	2009	764	Students	American	N.a.
Strömwall et al.	2014	161	Community	Swedish	N.a.
Yamawaki & Tschanz	2005	300	Students	American/Japanese	N.a.
AS – significant results for benevolent sexism					
Abrams et al.	2003	259 ^a	Students	British	ASI
Durán et al.	2010	206	Students	Spanish/British	ASI
Masser et al.	2010	120	Students	Australian	ASI
Pedersen & Strömwall	2013	158	Community	British/Swedish	ASI
Viki & Abrams	2002	57	Students	British	ASI
Yamawaki & Tschanz	2005	300	Students	American/Japanese	ASI
AS – significant results for hostile sexism					
Cohn et al.	2009	250	Students	American	ASI
Durán et al.	2010	206	Students	Spanish/British	ASI
AS – no significant results for hostile sexism					
Viki & Abrams	2002	57	Students	British	ASI
Pedersen & Strömwall	2013	158	Community	British/Swedish	ASI
RMA – significant results					
Basow & Minieri	2011	188	Students	American	IRMAS
Bendixen et al.	2014	475	Community	Norwegian	IRMAS
Cohn et al.	2009	250	Students	American	IRMAS
Earnshaw et al.	2010	179	Students	American	IRMAS
Frese et al.	2004	182	Students	Spanish	RMAS
Gerger et al.	2007	1,279	Community	German/British	AMMSA
Grubb & Tam	2012	73	Students	British	RMAS
Hammond et al.	2011	172	Students	American	RMAS

Study	Year	<i>n</i>	Sample type	Culture	Scale
Mason et al.	2004	157	Students	American	RMAS
Newcombe et al.	2008	102	Students	Australian	IRMAS
Paul et al.	2014	192	Students	American	RMAS
RE – significant results for rape empathy					
Gannon	2002	248	Students	Australian	RVE
Miller et al.	2011	69	Students	American	RVE
Smith & Frieze	2003	213	Students	American	REMV
RE – no significant results for rape empathy					
Grubb & Tarn	2012	73	Students	British	RVE

Notes. AS = Ambivalent Sexism; RMA = Rape Myth Acceptance; RE = Rape Empathy; N.a. = not applicable; St. = Studies; ASI = Ambivalent Sexism Inventory (Glick & Fiske, 1996); IRMAS = Illinois Rape Myth Acceptance Scale (Payne et al., 1999); RMAS = Rape Myth Acceptance Scale (Burt, 1980); AMMSA = Modern Myths about Sexual Aggression Scale (Gerger et al., 2007); RVE = Rape Victim Empathy Scale (Deitz et al., 1982); REMV (Rape-Victim Empathy Scale (Smith & Frieze, 2003).

^aFour studies (65 + 111 + 43 + 40 participants).

An Overview of Rape Victim Blaming

Observer Gender

Men and women have different socialization processes and learn different social roles, based on social gendered expectations and attitudes. These processes are perpetuated by different social structures (e.g., family and school) and are culturally dependent, whereas biological differences are universal (Larsen & Krumov, 2013). Sociocultural gender roles influence our behaviours and beliefs about ourselves and the world around (Grubb & Turner, 2012; Larsen & Krumov, 2013). Accordingly, men are expected to be socially oriented towards independence, dominance, assertiveness, egoism and leadership, whilst women are primarily oriented towards interpersonal support, reciprocity, forgiveness, warmth, and emotional expressiveness (Ridgeway, 1992).

The influence of observer gender on rape blame attribution has been extensively researched. Yet, there is mixed evidence as to whether female victim blaming is affected by gendered perceptions.

Different studies show that gender does not impact upon female victim blaming (e.g., Cohn, Dupuis, & Brown, 2009; Frese et al., 2004; Mandela, 2011; Newcombe et al., 2008; Rye, Greatix, & Enright, 2006; Strömwall, Alfredsson, & Landström, 2013; Viki & Abrams, 2002; Whatley, 2005). This propensity has been shown across different cultures, namely American (e.g., Rye et al., 2006), Swedish (Strömwall et al., 2013), Australian (e.g., Newcombe et al., 2008), and Spanish (e.g., Frese et al., 2004).

Rye and colleagues (2006), for instance, examined the effects of gender (perpetrator, victim, and observer) on attributions of blame and responsibility among a sample of American undergraduates. No significant main effects or interactions were found for observer gender. In addition, by conducting a stepwise multiple comparison analysis, using attitudes toward sexual minorities, erotophobia-erotophilia, belief in a just world, and observer gender, none of the variables were shown to predict female victim blame (with a male perpetrator). In a current study using a sample of Swedish community participants, Strömwall and colleagues (2013) further explored the effects of gender (victim and observer), victim's age (20 years or middle-aged), and belief in a just world on blame attributions towards a female rape victim. Belief in a just world was shown to increase victim blaming and young victims were attributed

more blame (mostly by participants scoring higher on belief in a just world), but no gender differences were found. As reasoned by the authors, these results may be influenced by the existence of more egalitarian sex roles among the Swedish society.

Nonetheless, a large number of studies suggests that men are more likely to engage in victim blaming (e.g., Anderson & Lyons, 2005; Bendixen, Henriksen, & Nøstdahl, 2014; Black & Gold, 2008; Durán, Moya, Megías, & Viki, 2010; Ferrão, Gonçalves, Giger, & Parreira, in press; Gölge et al., 2003; Grubb & Harrower, 2009; Harrison, Howerton, Secarea, & Nguyen, 2008; Mitchell, Angelone, Kohlberger, & Hirschman, 2009; Paul, Kehn, Gray, & Salapska-Gelleri, 2014; Schneider, Mori, Lambert, & Wong, 2009; Strömwall, Landström, & Alfredsson, 2014; Yamawaki & Tschanz, 2005).

Schneider and colleagues (2009), for example, examined the impact of gender and ethnicity upon female victim responsibility among a sample of American undergraduates (Caucasian, Hispanic, and Asian). A written vignette describing a stranger rape was used and a significant main effect for gender was found (but not for ethnicity), with male participants scoring higher on perceived victim responsibility than females. The same findings were reported by studies using English (e.g., Anderson & Lyons, 2005; Durán et al., 2010, Study 2; Grubb & Harrower, 2009; Mitchell et al., 2009), Spanish (Durán et al., 2010, Study 1a), Turkish (Gölge et al., 2003), and Japanese undergraduate students (Yamawaki & Tschanz, 2005).

Durán and colleagues (2010) explored the role of observer gender and sexist ideologies (benevolent and hostile sexism), perpetrator's beliefs (benevolent sexism in Study 1a and hostile sexism in Study 2), and type of relationship (boyfriend or husband) on victim blaming. In Study 1a (with Spanish high school students), a hierarchical regression analysis showed significant main effects for gender, perpetrator's benevolent sexism, and participants' hostile sexism. By using the same statistical test, Study 2 (with British undergraduates) showed the same significant main effects for gender and participants' hostile sexism (but not for perpetrator's hostile sexism).

Most of the research on rape perception identifies significant differences in how women and men evaluate situations involving sexually victimized women. Overall, men hold more stereotypical beliefs about sexual assault, perceiving rape as sexually motivated crime rather than an action stirred by desire for power and control (Anderson & Swainson, 2001). In light of this perspective, individuals perceive the crime as the result of an innate sexual desire, and the responsibility for controlling these desires depends on the woman. This sort of beliefs leads to the absolution of the perpetrator, given that he is believed not to have control over his actions (Coates & Wade, 2004). Similarly, men express a greater acceptance of rape myths, identify less with the victim and more with the rapist (Vrij & Firmin, 2001), subscribe to rape-supportive attitudes (McQuiller Williams, Porter, & Smith, 2015), and have more sexist beliefs than women (Aosved & Long, 2006).

These studies provide invaluable information on the influence of gender on victim blaming, but they have some methodological limitations, in that they are often based on convenience samples of undergraduate students, making it difficult to generalize the results to other populations; these should include not only the general population but also professionals working in the field (e.g., criminal justice professionals or health carers). Likewise, regardless of gender differences, mean scores for victim blame are usually low and most of the studies use diverse experimental designs and written rape vignettes to assess the perception of rape victims. These vignettes represent a number of different situational factors, such as marital or general acquaintance rape, and most of the scales used to measure victim blaming are not standardized tools (they are usually developed to the purposes of each study).

Furthermore, most research on rape is conducted in the United States: in 2011, 72% of the literature on this topic was carried out in the United States, followed by the United Kingdom and Australia (Burrowes, 2012). Additional research is needed in the general population and other countries, in order to assess the extent to which these results reflect the prevailing views in different cultures and populations. These different methods and approaches have resulted in a great variation regarding the role of observer gender in victim blaming, and have caused mixed results that make it difficult to establish comparisons or reach any consistent conclusions. Finally, methods with higher ecological validity and involving the interpretation of real-world scenarios (not only using written vignettes and imaginary victims) should be developed so as to expand on the reported findings. Research in this field could also benefit from the inclusion of rape descriptions in video format, following the example of Cohn and colleagues (2009).

Ambivalent Sexism

As aforesaid, men and women have different socialization processes that may lead to sexist beliefs about gender roles (Larsen & Krumov, 2013). A significant contribution to understand these gender-based stereotypes was carried out by Glick and Fiske (1996), based on the theory of ambivalent sexism. This theoretical concept is defined as a sort of prejudice that comprises positive and negative perspectives towards women; thus, sexism is conceptualized as a two-dimensional construct that encompasses two ideologies about women: benevolent sexism, based on positive stereotypes about women and a paternalistic ideology whereby individuals have attitudes of protection, idealization, and affection towards women who assume traditional gender roles (Glick & Fiske, 1996); and hostile sexism, defined as a generalized antipathy towards women, seen as inferior beings who seek to control men through sexuality or feminist ideologies (Glick & Fiske, 1996; Glick & Fiske, 2001).

Ambivalent sexism is measured through the Ambivalent Sexism Inventory (ASI), a 22-item scale developed by Glick and Fiske (1996) in order to assess sexist beliefs against women. Sample items include “Many women are actually seeking special favours, such as hiring policies, that favour them over men, under the guise of asking equality” (hostile sexism) and “Women should be cherished and protected by men” (benevolent sexism). As seen through these sample items, one of the reasons why ambivalent sexism occurs is related to the categorization of women in different subtypes, namely the “good” (e.g., housewives) and “bad” subtypes (e.g., feminists and with a career). The “good” (traditional) subtype is more likely to activate benevolent attitudes (deserving patriarchal protection), whereas the “bad” subtype (non-traditional) may trigger hostile reactions (being denied patriarchal protection) (Glick & Fiske, 1996).

As sexism may be simultaneously motivated by men’s fear of and need for women, they usually report more sexist beliefs than their female peers. However, women can also hold sexist beliefs towards individuals of the same gender (Glick & Fiske, 1996). Some researchers reported that women endorse benevolent sexism more strongly than men (and the opposite for hostile sexism) across different cultures (for a comparison among 19 countries, see Glick et al., 2000). This tendency was suggested to be a self-protective mechanism against men’s hostile and sexist beliefs (Glick & Fiske, 2001).

As far as rape is concerned, both forms of sexism were shown to predict less positive attitudes towards sexually victimized women, because people believe it is natural for men to dominate women (Sakalli-Uğurlu et al., 2007). In general, traditional women elicit benevolent feelings and non-traditional women are evaluated in a more hostile way (mainly by men), because they undermine the social hierarchy (Sibley & Wilson, 2004). Men usually score higher on sexism scales (Masser, Lee, & McKimmie, 2010), but women may also have sexist reactions towards

non-traditional victims, especially when they succeed in typically male professions (Parks-Stamm, Heilman, & Hearn, 2008). Based on two studies using German community samples, Becker (2010) tried to explain why women endorse in hostile and benevolent sexist attitudes. Hostile sexism was proven to be higher when women think about non-traditional female subtypes; in contrast, benevolent sexist attitudes were proven to be adopted when they think about traditional female subtypes. These results were further shown to be determined by women's identification with one of the subtypes.

Some studies state that benevolent sexism promotes gender inequality and, in some aspects, it may even be more insidious than hostile sexism (e.g., Abrams et al., 2003; Heilman, Wallen, Fuchs, & Tamkins, 2004; Viki & Abrams, 2002; Yamawaki, Darby, & Queiroz, 2007). Research on rape perception highlights the role of benevolent sexism as a predictor of victim's stigmatization, but only when the perpetrator is known and the woman violates the expectations of female traditionalism (e.g., Abrams et al., 2003; Viki & Abrams, 2002; Yamawaki et al., 2007). These findings suggest that there is a relationship between benevolent sexism and victim blaming, mediated by the perception of her inappropriate behaviour, reason by which she deserves no protection or deference (Abrams et al., 2003).

Indeed, benevolent sexism was consistently shown to predict victim blaming when she does not conform to traditional gender roles, both in British (e.g., Abrams et al., 2003; Viki & Abrams, 2002) and American cultures (e.g., Yamawaki, 2007). For example, using a rape acquaintance scenario where the victim was described either as a married mother caught in an act of infidelity or where no information was given about her marital status, Viki and Abrams (2002) showed that participants with high scores on benevolent sexism assigned more blame to the married mother than to the victim with an unknown marital status. These findings were complemented by Abrams and colleagues (2003), who found that benevolent sexists (both female and male students) assigned more blame to victims of acquaintance rape when they had an inappropriate conduct, in order to defend their just world beliefs (cf. Lerner & Miller, 1978). However, no differences were found for victim blaming and benevolent sexism in stranger rape.

A more recent study (Pedersen & Strömwall, 2013), conducted with community samples in both the United Kingdom and Sweden, confirmed that benevolent sexism predicts victim blame within the date rape condition but not in stranger rape. Hostile sexism was shown not to predict victim blaming in any condition. Furthermore, no significant nationality differences were found regarding victim blaming, but the British reported significantly higher levels of benevolent and hostile sexism.

Stating that in past British research (e.g., Abrams et al., 2003) acquaintance rape victims were attributed more blame by benevolent sexists due to the transgression of gender stereotypes, Masser and colleagues (2010) manipulated not only gender stereotypicality (a widowed mother who goes to party, leaving her children with a trusted babysitter vs. asleep in their beds) but also victim stereotypicality (a victim who resists the attack and co-operates with the police vs. a victim who neither resists nor co-operates). Participants (Australian undergraduates) higher in benevolent sexism tended to blame the counter-stereotypical victim significantly more than the stereotypical victim, but no significant differences were found according to gender stereotypicality for those lower in benevolent sexism. In addition, those presented with a counter-stereotypical victim blamed her more than those presented with a stereotypical victim or with low scores in benevolent sexism. By reporting that benevolent sexism predicts more victim blame when she transgresses gender and victim stereotypicality, this study underlined that victim

counter-stereotypicality plays an important role when considering the relationship between benevolent sexism and increased victim blaming.

Additionally, [Durán and colleagues \(2010\)](#) added to evidence that the perpetrator's benevolent sexist attitudes may play a role in victim blaming. Based on two studies using different samples (Spanish high school students and British undergraduates), they found that benevolent sexism predicts more victim blame when the rapist is a husband with benevolent sexist beliefs (but not when he is a boyfriend). Moreover, hostile sexists blamed the victim more when the rapist was described as a hostile sexist (Study 2). Hostile sexism was also proven to be positively related to victim blaming in both studies.

Regarding hostile sexism, [Cohn and colleagues \(2009\)](#) reported the same results in two studies with American undergraduates, in that hostile sexism was positively related to victim responsibility within an acquaintance rape scenario (using videotapes). Given that hostile sexists perceive women as attempting to control men, individuals are likely to believe that women try to control men through seductive behaviour ([Glick & Fiske, 2001](#)).

In sum, benevolent sexists perceive women as pure ([Glick & Fiske, 1996, 2001](#)) but also as wardens of sexuality ([Glick et al., 2000](#)); they are thereby responsible for their own sexuality and expected to behave properly ([Abrams et al., 2003](#); [Viki, Abrams, & Masser, 2004](#)). Thus, benevolent sexism seems to be rather insidious when the victim does not assume conventional gender roles, because benevolent sexists have a strict view regarding gender stereotypicality and may see the woman who violates their expectations as deserving her misfortune ([Glick et al., 2000](#); [Glick & Fiske, 2001](#); [Viki & Abrams, 2002](#)). Moreover, some studies using date rape depictions reported no relation between hostile sexism and female victim blame (e.g., [Pedersen & Strömwall, 2013](#); [Viki & Abrams, 2002](#)), suggesting that benevolent sexism is a stronger predictor of victim blame, whereas hostile sexism is a stronger predictor of rape proclivity ([Abrams et al., 2003](#)).

Yet, in spite of the findings reported in these studies, several issues still need to be addressed in future research. Little emphasis has been placed on community samples, specific settings (e.g., legal contexts or professions related to rape victims), or other cultures. As systematic cross-cultural comparisons are rare regarding the relationship between sexist beliefs and victim blame, future research should also pursue comparative studies in various countries, following the example of [Pedersen and Strömwall \(2013\)](#). Likewise, while benevolent sexism has received much attention, further research is required on hostile sexism. Finally, other ethnic groups and female stereotypes should be examined (e.g., feminist, sexy women, or athletic women), and other methodologies should be adopted (rather than written rape vignettes).

Rape Myth Acceptance

One of the earliest studies on rape myths was conducted by [Burt \(1980\)](#), who defined the concept as a set of “prejudicial, stereotyped, or false beliefs about rape, rape victims, and rapists” (p. 217). Rape myths were later described by [Lonsway and Fitzgerald \(1994\)](#) as “attitudes and beliefs that are generally false but are widely and persistently held, and that serve to deny and justify male sexual aggression against women” (p. 134). Basically, the concept refers to a number of beliefs that hold the woman responsible for her own victimization and justify the perpetrator's actions ([Ryan, 2011](#)).

Examples of rape myths include the following clusters of beliefs: rape is a sexually motivated crime, most rapists are strangers, only certain women (“bad girls”) get raped, victims often lie about rape, or the victim caused the crime ([Ben-David & Schneider, 2005](#); [Moor, 2010](#)). These views are in par with the just world belief ([Lerner &](#)

Miller, 1978): as people deserve what they get and get what they deserve, bad things (e.g., rape) happen to bad people.

As no single definition of the concept exists, rape myth acceptance is measured by a variety of psychometric tools, the most common of which are Burt's (1980) Rape Myth Acceptance Scale (RMAS) and the Illinois Rape Myth Acceptance Scale (IRMA), developed by Payne, Lonsway, and Fitzgerald (1999). McMahon and Farmer (2011) developed a modified version of the IRMA, which includes 4 of the original subscales and a fifth factor (alcohol), excusing the rapist when he is drunk. Other measures employed are the Perceived Causes of Rape Scale (PCRS) (Cowan & Quinton, 1997) and the Acceptance of Modern Myths about Sexual Aggression Scale (AMMSA) (Gerger, Kley, Bohner, & Siebler, 2007).

Some authors explored the relationship between ambivalent sexism and rape myth acceptance, reporting that benevolent and hostile sexism are positively related to rape myth acceptance (e.g., Abrams et al., 2003; Aosved & Long, 2006; Chapleau, Oswald, & Russell, 2007; Sakalli-Uğurlu et al., 2007; Viki & Abrams, 2002; Yamawaki, 2007). Masser and colleagues (2010) added that rape myth acceptance is a form of benevolent sexism, in that it is closely related to gender role ideologies, suggesting that only “bad girls” get raped. King and Roberts (2011) further demonstrated that traditional gender role acceptance was the strongest predictor of rape myth acceptance in a sample of American undergraduates.

Rape myth acceptance has been studied extensively by a variety of authors who showed that men are more likely to ascribe rape myths than women (e.g., Aosved & Long, 2006; Aronowitz, Lambert, & Davidoff, 2012; Chapleau & Oswald, 2014; Diehl, Glaser, & Bohner, 2014; Ewoldt, Monson, & Langhinrichsen-Rohling, 2000; Hammond, Berry, & Rodriguez, 2011; Hayes, Lorenz, & Bell, 2013; Hayes-Smith & Levett, 2010; Jimenez & Abreu, 2003; McMahon & Farmer, 2011; Paul et al., 2014; Suarez & Gadalla, 2010). These results may reflect Shaver's (1970) defensive attribution hypothesis, in that men feel more dissimilar to female rape victims than women. Even so, other studies failed to replicate such findings, reporting that both men and women endorse rape myths (e.g., Clark & Carroll, 2008; Frese et al., 2004; Süssenbach & Bohner, 2011; Süssenbach, Bohner, & Eyssele, 2012).

Higher rape myth endorsement was also shown to predict increased female victim blaming (e.g., Basow & Minieri, 2011; Bendixen et al., 2014; Cohn et al., 2009; Earnshaw, Pitpitan, & Chaudoir, 2011; Frese et al., 2004; Gerger et al., 2007; Grubb & Tarn, 2012; Hammond et al., 2011; Mason, Riger, & Foley, 2004; Newcombe et al., 2008; Paul et al., 2014). Men are thought to accept rape myths so as to justify sexual violence, whilst women endorse them to reject personal vulnerability to rape (Johnson, Kuck, & Schander, 1997).

Frese and colleagues (2004) demonstrated that higher rape myth acceptance predicts increased victim blame (in a sample of Spanish undergraduates). However, the authors highlight that this effect is moderated by a significant interaction between the type of rape (acquaintance, date, or marital) and rape myth acceptance, thus suggesting the importance of considering situational factors when explaining different blame assignments. Significant differences were found for acquaintance and date rapes, meaning that in the face of date rape participants with higher rape myth endorsement were more disposed to hold the victim responsible. Consistent with the previous authors, Newcombe and colleagues (2008) found that individuals (Australian undergraduates) with higher rape myth acceptance assigned more blame to the victim in a date rape (compared to stranger, acquaintance, and marital rape).

Similar findings were reported by American research with undergraduate students. For instance, a study exploring the influence of the cost of a date rape, gender, and rape myth acceptance on female victim blaming (Basow & Minieri, 2011) indicated that higher victim blame was assigned in an expensive date scenario; overall, rape myth acceptance was the best predictor of female victim blaming (rather than participant gender). Furthermore, Hammond and colleagues (2011) examined the influence of rape myth acceptance, belief in a just world, and sexual attitudes on attributions of responsibility in an ambiguous date rape scenario. They found that people more accepting of rape myths and belief in a just world, as well as those with more conservative sexual attitudes, assigned more blame to the victim than to the rapist. Moreover, gender was found to predict judgments of responsibility and this effect was mediated by the degree of rape myth acceptance.

In a more recent study using a sample of British female undergraduates, Grubb and Tarn (2012) explored the relationship between rape fantasies (general, aversive, or erotic), rape myth acceptance and attitudes towards rape victim, rape victim empathy, and rape blame attribution (stranger rape scenario). Overall, higher levels of rape myth acceptance were associated with higher levels of rape blame attribution. A multiple regression analysis was also performed to examine the contributions of all the study variables to predictions of victim blame, showing that victim blame was predicted by only rape myth acceptance. Additionally, high levels of rape myth acceptance were related to low levels of attitudes towards rape victims (assessing general rape victims) and high levels of blame assignments (assessing a specific victim), suggesting that individuals may differ regarding the attributions of blame either to specific or to general victims.

Despite the extensive attention that rape myth acceptance has received, there remains the need for a more thorough definition of the concept, which is seen as a one-dimensional construct in several studies, neglecting that rape myths fall into different categories. The absence of a generally accepted definition of the concept has also led to a lack of consistency when measuring rape myth acceptance. Quite often, rape myth acceptance is assessed through a number written vignettes and self-report-measures that evaluate conceptually different aspects of rape myths and neglect the potential effect of social desirability (which may limit internal validity).

Finally, as stated before, a large number of studies use samples of undergraduate students, hindering the generalization of the findings reported to other populations, and there is little evidence about the relationship between rape myth acceptance and victim blaming in non-Western countries. Henceforth, other methodologies and experimental research designs are warranted, as well as samples of specific professionals (e.g., law enforcement officers, educators, or health professionals).

Rape Empathy

Empathy is described as a sociocognitive attribute that involves the ability to understand distinct cognitive and affective states, thereby eliciting the development of positive attitudes towards others (Tarrant, Dazeley, & Cottom, 2009). There is compelling evidence that empathetic people have a perception and sensitiveness that allow them to engage in more prosocial behaviours than those lacking empathy (Paciello, Fida, Cerniglia, Tramontano, & Cole, 2013; Zelazo & Paus, 2010). Empathy is especially important in adverse situations such as rape, where it is conceptualized as the ability to grasp the underlying perspective, emotional responses and reactions of the victim and/or perpetrator (Smith & Frieze, 2003). This attribute has been studied in relation to rape perceptions, in that it is thought to affect attitudes towards rape and rape responsibility.

Most research on rape victim empathy uses the Rape Empathy Scale (RES), a one-dimensional scale designed by Deitz, Blackwell, Daley, and Bentley (1982) to measure empathy towards a victim or perpetrator by using paired statements (e.g., “A. In general, I feel that rape is an act that is provoked by the rape victim. B. In general, I feel that rape is an act that is not provoked by the rape victim”). This scale has been criticized for measuring rape myth acceptance rather than empathy and for assuming rape victim and perpetrator empathy are interdependent constructs (Smith & Frieze, 2003).

Considering these constraints, Smith and Frieze (2003) developed two gender-neutral scales that reflect affective and cognitive empathy: Rape-Victim Empathy Scale (REMV) and Rape-Perpetrator Empathy Scale (REMP). These authors underlined the importance of measuring both constructs separately, in that they are interdependent and may take place simultaneously. Using the same scale (combining victim and rapist gender), Osman (2011) and Ferrão, Gonçalves, Parreira, and Giger (2013) further supported the assertion that individuals may feel empathy towards both the victim and the perpetrator, in that the scales were reported to have no correlations in any condition. This suggests that rape victim and perpetrator empathy are not mutually exclusive and that Smith and Frieze’s (2003) scales are more valid measures to assess rape empathy than Deitz and colleagues’ (1982) scale.

The relationships between rape empathy and other variables was tested by a number of studies, which reported associations with gender, perceived similarity with the rape victim, personal victimization, or rape myth acceptance. One of the most pivotal findings to emerge was the existence of gender differences in expressing empathy, since women seem to express more empathy towards rape victims (Anastasio & Costa, 2004; Diehl et al., 2014; George & Martínez, 2002; Mellor, Fung, & Mammat, 2012; Miller, Amacker, & King, 2011; Osman, 2011, 2014; Paul et al., 2014; Sakallı-Uğurlu et al., 2007; Smith & Frieze, 2003) and men towards perpetrators (Ferrão et al., 2013; Mellor et al., 2012; Osman, 2011; Sakallı-Uğurlu et al., 2007; Smith & Frieze, 2003). Rape victim empathy has also been shown to be negatively related to rape myth acceptance (Forbes, Adams-Curtis, Pakalka, & White, 2006; Gerger et al., 2007; Jimenez & Abreu, 2003; Mason et al., 2004; Miller et al., 2011). Likewise, people with rape experience were proven to be more empathetic towards a victim than those without personal victimization (Osman, 2011, 2014; Smith & Frieze, 2003). Women with victimization experience were shown to be more empathetic towards a female victim (Osman, 2011, 2014; Paul et al., 2014), but no gendered empathic differences were found for victimized men (Osman, 2011). Osman (2014) further reported that victimized women are more empathetic in acquaintance rape (but not in stranger rape).

Jimenez and Abreu (2003) explored gender and race (European American couple, Latino couple, an interracial couple composed of a Latino and an European American woman, and an interracial couple composed of a Latina and an European American man) effects on perceptions of acquaintance rape (using a sample composed of Latino and European American undergraduates). The dependent variables were rape empathy, attitudes towards rape victim, and rape myth acceptance. A multivariate analysis of variance indicated that women were more empathetic, found the victim more credible and endorsed lower levels of rape myths. A two-way interaction was also found between participant gender and race, with European American females suggested to hold more positive attitudes towards rape victims and less likely to accept rape myths than Latinas.

More recently, Sakallı-Uğurlu and colleagues (2007) examined the potential predictors of attitudes towards rape victims (ambivalent sexism ideologies, belief in a just world, and rape empathy) in a sample of Turkish undergraduates, finding that women scored significantly higher on rape empathy. Attitudes towards rape victims were shown to be positively related to sexism ideologies and belief in a just world, and inversely related to rape empathy. Ad-

ditionally, both sexist ideologies were positively correlated for women and they were also demonstrated to have a positive relation with belief in a just world for both genders; empathy was unrelated to either ambivalent sexism ideologies or belief in a just world. Miller and colleagues (2011) further tested a causal model of rape victim blaming among American undergraduate females and reported that rape victim empathy is positively related to sexual assault experience and perceived similarity, and negatively related to rape myth acceptance. Nonetheless, in a study using a sample of British female undergraduates, Grubb and Tarn (2012) found no significant correlations between empathy and rape myth acceptance, rape fantasies (erotic and aversive), or rape blame attribution. These findings suggest that empathy is more related to personality traits than to ideological beliefs.

Similarly, empathy was reported to impact rape blaming judgments, with most of the studies showing that such dispositional characteristic decreases the levels of blame and responsibility attributed to the victim (e.g., Gannon, 2002; Miller et al., 2011; Smith & Frieze, 2003). Smith and Frieze (2003), using Rape-Victim Empathy and Rape-Perpetrator Empathy scales within a sample of American undergraduates, showed that the first scale was negatively correlated with perceived rape victim empathy (but only for women) and the second was negatively correlated with victim responsibility, for both men and women. It should be noted, though, that these scales are gender-neutral; however, the participants might have pictured a female victim and a male aggressor, as a result of the cultural and biological factors that cause women to be more vulnerable to male rape (Crawford & Popp, 2003; Osman, 2011). In view of that, based on social stereotypes and considering that there is a higher number of female victims, women are often thought to be the victim and men the perpetrator. Concurrently, women are expected to be more fearful of rape and they are not believed to be physically fit to hurt others (Rozee, 2008).

In a more recent study, Miller and colleagues (2011) hypothesized a model of female victim blaming among American college women, which comprised sexual assault history, perceived similarity to the victim, rape victim empathy, and rape myth acceptance. The study included a short written vignette where the participants were told that the victim had been raped during her high school junior year without telling anyone. As predicted by the authors, sexual assault history, perceived similarity, and rape victim empathy were negatively related to victim blaming, whereas rape myth acceptance was positively related. In addition, the latter variable was confirmed to mediate the relationship between the lack of victim empathy and victim blaming (i.e., participants with low victim empathy justified these feelings based on rape myths and, in turn, the victim has held more responsible for her own victimization).

However, a few authors (e.g., Grubb & Tarn, 2012) found that empathy was not associated with rape victim blaming, which may be due to the designs and intervening variables used in these studies. For example, as described before, Grubb and Tarn (2012) tested a model of rape blame attribution (stranger rape) in a British sample of female undergraduates, which included rape fantasies, rape myth acceptance, attitudes towards rape victim, and rape victim empathy, and found that victim blame was predicted by only rape myth acceptance. These findings suggest that rape beliefs and stereotypes are stronger predictors of female victim blaming than empathy. In addition, even though empathy was proven to be related to prosocial behaviour (Paciello et al., 2013; Zelazo & Paus, 2010), it may not be directly linked to less victim blame. Nevertheless, further research is required to clearly examine the relationship between empathy and victim blaming.

It is also important to note that these studies present limitations that may hinder the interpretation of the findings reported. In addition to the problems related to generalizability (in that the samples are mostly composed by American undergraduates, with few exceptions), there is a lack of consistency regarding the designs and method-

ologies adopted. For instance, the role of empathy in victim blaming is assessed through diverse statistical procedures (i.e., analysis of variance, regression and correlational analyses) and based on the inclusion of different variables, which may lead to a high degree of variability in the results. There is also the problem of the most frequently used scale to measure rape empathy, the Rape Empathy Scale (Deitz et al., 1982), which has been criticized in several ways. In fact, by containing items that measure rape myth acceptance rather than empathy and by assuming the interdependence between rape victim and perpetrator empathy, the relationship between empathy and attributions of blame may be overestimated in these studies.

Conclusion

This theoretical article has underlined a number of observer characteristics that may impact upon rape victim blaming. The role of gender, ambivalent sexism, rape myth acceptance, and rape empathy has received much academic attention and all these variables were shown to predict victim blaming. While considering gender differences, most studies showed that men are more likely to blame the victim (e.g., Anderson & Lyons, 2005; Black & Gold, 2008; Durán et al., 2010; Ferrão et al., in press; Gölge et al., 2003; Grubb & Harrower, 2009; Harrison et al., 2008; Schneider et al., 2009; Yamawaki & Tschanz, 2005), but others failed to replicate such findings (e.g., Cohn et al., 2009; Frese et al., 2004; Mandela, 2011; Newcombe et al., 2008; Rye et al., 2006; Strömwall et al., 2013).

Regarding ambivalent sexism (Glick & Fiske, 1996), both ideologies were shown to increase victim blame, but benevolent sexism seems to be more insidious when the victim is a non-traditional female, given that benevolent sexists expect women to conform to traditional gender roles (Abrams et al., 2003; Glick et al., 2000; Viki & Abrams, 2002; Viki et al., 2004). Furthermore, hostile sexism was found not to be related to victim blaming in some studies depicting date rape scenarios (e.g., Pedersen & Strömwall, 2013; Viki & Abrams, 2002). Higher myth acceptance (e.g., Basow & Minieri, 2011; Cohn et al., 2009; Frese et al., 2004; Grubb & Tarn, 2012; Hammond et al., 2011) and lower rape empathy scores (e.g., Miller et al., 2011; Smith & Frieze, 2003) were suggested to predict increased victim blame.

With reference to the relationship among the four variables under review and victim blaming, most of the literature suggests that gender may predict victim blaming and that this relation is mediated by the degree of rape myth acceptance (e.g., Hammond et al., 2011; Miller et al., 2011). The defensive attributions based on the perceived similarity to a target (Shaver, 1970) may also promote these gendered differences in rape victim blaming, since women may assume themselves as more similar to the victim, hence assigning less blame; this relationship between defensive attribution and victim blaming may be mediated by empathy, as suggested by Shaver (1970). Additionally, rape myth acceptance is shown to mediate the relationship between lack of victim empathy and victim blaming (e.g., Deitz et al., 1982; Gerger et al., 2007; Miller et al., 2011). Sexist beliefs are further suggested to mediate the relationship between rape myth acceptance and victim blaming, in that traditional role acceptance seems to be the strongest predictor of rape myth acceptance (King & Roberts, 2011) when the victim has an inappropriate behaviour (Abrams et al., 2003). Considering Masser and colleagues' (2010) statement that rape myth acceptance is a form of benevolent sexism, these sexist beliefs are believed to mediate the relationship between the belief in a just world (Lerner & Miller, 1978) and victim blaming, assuming that only "bad" girls get raped (because they deserve it) (Sakallı-Uğurlu et al., 2007). Nonetheless, thorough research is required, in that the literature is not clear-cut on these relationships and on the importance of situational factors such as type of

rape (e.g., acquaintance or stranger rape) and type of victim (e.g., transgression or conformity to traditional gender roles).

While enhancing the key role of these variables on rape perception, research has also created misperceptions and inconsistencies due to a number of methodological constraints. First, as described before, a large number of studies uses samples composed by undergraduate students, hindering the generalizability of the findings reported to other general and specific populations. Second, the use of written vignettes (sometimes with minimal information) is an issue that must be dealt with, especially because it was proven to be associated with more evidence of rape myth acceptance and victim blaming than video recording (Sleed, Durrheim, Kriel, Solomon, & Baxter, 2002). Third, these written vignettes depict several factors, such as the type of rape (stranger, acquaintance, marital, or date rape) or the victim's characteristics (e.g., ethnicity, age, or level of intoxication), making it difficult to analyse and compare the results reported. Fourth, there are few cross-cultural studies exploring the relationship between the examined variables and victim blaming, and most of the studies were conducted in Western countries. Fifth, most research on rape victim blaming and responsibility uses non-standardized tools developed only for the purpose of each study. Sixth, the literature surveyed includes a wide range of psychometric tools, designs and statistical procedures that hinder the explanation of the results. Henceforth, methodologies with greater ecological validity and realistic measures are warranted.

Finally, a thorough knowledge of the factors that contribute to the phenomenon of rape victim blaming provides a theoretical background for sexual assault prevention programs. However, research seems to neglect the applicability of these findings in designing rape prevention programs. Thus, the opinion of professionals in the field and the development of action research methodologies may well be contemplated in future research. Professionals would benefit from in-depth information on the subject, since being acquainted with perceptive biases may decrease rape victim blaming. It is important to develop more suitable prevention programs aimed at decreasing female victim blaming, and these programs were proven to decrease rape supportive attitudes (for a review, see Brecklin & Forde, 2001).

Foubert (2000) found that fraternity men who participated in a rape prevention program declined in rape myth acceptance and in likelihood to commit rape (even 7 months after the initial program). Subsequently, Foubert and Newberry (2006) found that a rape prevention program modified attitudes towards rape in a sample of fraternity male undergraduates. The participation in the program led participants to be more empathetic towards rape victims, less accepting of rape myths, and less likely to perpetrate a rape or sexual assault. These results are particularly relevant because helping behaviours are enhanced by empathy. Paciello and colleagues (2013) further demonstrated the role of empathy in helping behaviours, even in the face of prospective high costs.

Overall, the analysis of the literature showed that men are more likely to score higher on victim blaming, that higher scores on sexist ideologies and rape myth acceptance predict higher victim blaming, and that higher levels of empathy towards the victim predict lower victim blaming. As such, this theoretical article provides an overview of the current knowledge regarding the impact of these variables upon victim blaming biases. Additional empirical research is needed, however, in order to clarify how these factors affect such biased attributions. As a final point, similar theoretical articles may prove useful in summarizing the influence of other variables on blame attributions, namely those related to situational factors (e.g., type of relationship with the rapist) or the victim's characteristics (e.g., type of woman, sexual history, clothing, and substance misuse).

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