What influences victim blaming in rape?

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1. Introduction

Ever since the 1980s, the phenomenon of sexual assault, which includes rape, is a notion that has been thoroughly discussed (Girard & Senn, 2008). Due to its broad occurrence and impact on victims, a large amount of academic attention has been provided to explore this universal phenomenon known as rape (Grub & Turner, 2012; Barn & Kumari, 2015). Statistics reveal that one in five women become a victim of rape or attempted at some point in their lives, and every year, approximately 85,000 women are reported as a victim of rape (Ministry of Justice, 2013). However, these figures are known to only partially represent the true nature of prevalence, as it is regarded as one of the most underreported crimes in the UK. This is due to the social construction of stigma that is assigned to the rape victims (Grubb & Turner, 2012). It has been postulated that there are various reasons why victims abstain from reporting this crime, including the fear of degradation (Gunn & Linden, 1997) and by a belief that perpetrators will not be prosecuted due to its complexity (Chapleau, Oswald, & Russel, 2008; Bohner, Eyssel, Pina, Siebler, & Viki, 2009).

Victim blaming has been recognised as a construction around females due to the stereotypical view of a victim amongst society (Whatley, 1996; Eigenberg & Garland, 2008), where many have found that these victims are often blamed for their own calamity (Grubb & Turner, 2012). Rape is feared by women, and from a young age they are socialised to modify their behaviours in order to decrease their risk of rape; learning that society is prone to victim-blaming. These ideologies stem from rape myths; beliefs and attitudes that are usually incorrect but are extensively held; aiming to condone male sexual aggression towards women (Burt, 1980; Lonsway & Fitzgerald, 1994).

There are various factors that influence the level of victim-blaming occurs, including victim characteristics, observers’ beliefs and situational factors (Horgan & Reeder, 1986). However, not all factors have been highly researched as rape cases are subject to various changing factors that can influence every rape situation in an unpredictable and distinct fashion (Grubb & Turner, 2012). Therefore, on the basis of strong empirical evidence the main focus will lie on the influence of rape myth acceptance, with reference to relevant theories (Lerner & Mathews, 1976; Shaver, 1970) and gender (Suarez & Gadalla, 2010) to observe the impact they have on victim-blaming. However, a wealth of research has focused on female victims that has neglected the research area regarding male victims, suggesting it is 20 years behind
(Rodgers, 1998) and only fairly recently the factor of victim gender has been manipulated in rape victim blame studies (van der Bruggen & Grubb, 2014). As well as that, the impact of perpetrator characteristics (Strömwall et al., 2014) and new methodology employed by researchers in this field will be explored in order to examine the current stance of what influences victim-blaming in rape cases.

2. Rape myth acceptance

The notion of rape mythology arose in the 1970s, (Brownmiller, 1975) with rape myths being characterised as “prejudicial, stereotyped or false beliefs about rape, rape victims and rapists” that forms a hostile milieu towards victims (Burt, 1980) and is considered to predict rape victim-blaming in society (Mason, Riger & Foley, 2004; Yamawaki, 2009). Rape myths are believed to vary across cultures and societies, but constantly follow a trend by which the victim is blamed and includes claims where a disbelief of rape is expressed; perpetrator is exonerated and posit that particular women are raped (Lonsway & Fitzgerald, 1994; Bohner & Siebler, 2007). These claims were further subcategorised into seven female rape myth domains, which include: “He didn’t mean to”; “Rape is trivial”; “She asked for it”; “Rape is a deviant event”; “It wasn’t really rape”; “She liked it”; and finally “She wanted it” (Payne, Lonsway & Fitzgerald, 1999). Holding such inaccurate beliefs explains the dissemination of sexual violence within society to date (Grubb & Turner, 2012). These victim-blaming ideologies have a huge impact on decisions made by the police or prosecutors when attributing a level of blame towards either the victim or perpetrator, as Frohman (1991) found that they were less inclined to take on a rape case if the victim had admittedly flirted with the perpetrator beforehand or was intoxicated, which are described by rape myth ideologies that are associated with victim blaming due to the victim’s behaviour.

The attribution of victim-blame is influenced by a general cognitive schema known as rape myth acceptance (RMA) (e.g. Jones & Aronson, 1973; Krahé, 1991; Pollard, 1992; as cited in Grubb & Turner, 2012), as a key finding revealed that those scoring high on RMA are likely to allocate greater accountability for the rape to the victim, as well as judging the trauma as less severe (Frese, Moyea & Megías., 2004). However, there are limitations in using rape myths as a single explanation of rape and a factor influencing victim-blaming (Buddie & Miller, 2001) because there is evidence for the lack of robust academic support for the construct of this phenomenon (Lonsway & Fitzgerald, 1994). In a comprehensive review by
Lonsway & Fitzgerald (1994), inconsistencies in the methodology and definitions were detected, as an analysis of Burt’s (1980) scales revealed that they were gender-biased since they only referred to the concept of violence towards women, which is concerning, as the majority of research in the field has utilised these scales, further questioning the strength of the findings in this field (Suarez & Gadalla, 2010). This led to the proposal of a variety of other scales, such as the Illinois Rape Myth Acceptance Scale (Payne et al., 1999), which suggests that there is no consensus on one measure of rape myths, which may query the overall strength of the findings in the field.

2.1. Rape myth acceptance & Just World beliefs

RMA may also assist in self-perpetuating a much broader motive, known as a “belief in a just world” (Bohner et al., 2009). The Just World theory (Kleinke & Meyer, 1990; Lerner & Mathews, 1967) is a social and cultural concept, which states that individuals perceive the world to be a rational place (Lambert & Raichle, 2000; Fetchenhauer et al., 2005), where events are “deserved, so the world cannot be unjust” (Faccenda & Pantaleon, 2011). Rooted within Protestant Ethic ideology, which states that good actions and hard-work are praised with good affluence, with this responsibility lying with the individual (Lerner, 1980; Montada & Lerner, 1998), Just World beliefs (JWBs) permit individuals to maintain a feeling of security and to ensure the control over their own behaviour and future outcomes, making the world around them a safer, manageable and predictable place (Lodewijx, Wildschut, Nijstadm Savenije, & Smit, 2001). A sense of control would be threatened if one believed that unfortunate events occur without a valid reason (Lerner & Mathews, 1967), postulating that adherence to this schema would suggest that victims are to blame, which is in line with the already held belief that people are deserving of what they get. The idea that a victim is innocent goes against the Just World theory (Grubb & Turner, 2012). A rape case that entails an innocent victim acts as a threat to JWBs, as it postulates that not everyone experience events they deserve (Hafer, 2000), which leads to the assertion of victim-blaming (Strömwall, Alfredsson& Landstrom, 2013) that gives people a sense of control and order (Grubb & Harrower, 2008). In addition, JWBs are viewed as an individual difference that acts as a factor in itself which can have a causal influence on victim blaming (Lambert & Raichle, 2000).
Recently, Hayes et al. (2013) found a link between RMA and JWBs, but postulated that the Just World hypothesis should be divided into two domains: Just World belief for oneself (JWB-self); and Just World belief for others (JWB-other). Findings yielded a negative relationship between a JWB-self and RMA, which implies that these individuals are stable within their lifestyle (Lerner, 1980), thus resulting in a decrease in rape myth acceptance as victim-blaming is reduced. However, a positive relationship between JWB-other and RMA was obtained, resulting in higher victim-blaming, which suggests that there is a difference in blame when just world beliefs are attributed for oneself or others. This is consistent with the actor-observer bias where one’s own behaviour is attributed externally, and other people’s behaviour is attributed internally (Jones & Nisbett, 1971), signifying that other people’s lives are coordinated with the Just world theory, which influences RMA and therefore prompting the way in which individuals assign the notion of blame towards the victim.

However, due to the homogenous sample of Caucasian, undergraduate students from a Midwestern University, it can be argued that the sample is not representative, as it fails to take into consideration other ethnicity groups and cultures (Hayes et al., 2013). But, due to the over-representation of sexual victimisation among this population (Fisher et al., 2000), it can be argued that it acts as a basis to support the use of such a sample when investigating rape myth attitudes (Hayes et al., 2013).

However, evidence regarding the just world theory is varied, as some have found support (Furnham, 2003; Yamawaki, 2009, and others have not (Hammond, Berry & Rodriguez, 2011), with some researchers even finding the opposite, as Kleinke & Meyer (1990) found women that were holding strong JWBs tended to blame the victim less compared to those with lower JWBs. Therefore, it can be argued that the relationship between JWB and victim blame is inconsistent in deciding whether the theory is adequate for explaining victim-blaming (Sleath & Bull, 2010). JWBs alone cannot entirely explain the notion of rape victim blaming, but may act as a mediating factor that influences certain observers when attributing blame in rape case, suggesting there is considerable room for further research (Sleath & Bull, 2010; van der Bruggen & Grubb, 2014).
2.2. Rape myth acceptance and gender

A relationship between RMA and gender has been detected, as a study hiring non-students and students have confirmed that men are more likely to hold views that accept rape myths compared to females (Jenkins & Dambrot, 1987; Ward, 1988), thus suggesting that gender may act as a factor that influences victim-blaming. It has also been indicated that men contain attitudes that are less supportive of rape victims (Ward, 1988) and are additionally tolerant of rape (Hall, Howard & Boezio, 1986). This gender difference is considered to reflect a self-serving bias that is in line with the defensive attribution hypothesis (Shaver, 1980); another theory central to the victim-blaming. It suggests that the level of blame is dependent on the perpetrator’s characteristics and the alleged similarity and identification with the victim. Individuals relate to and share a common ground with people of their in-group, holding less favourable attitudes towards out-group members, explaining why males are more likely to support the perpetrator in a typical rape case, and females are more prone to sympathise with the victim, which can be mapped onto higher or lower levels of RMA. Therefore, in a rape case, the victim and observer (in the case of a male) would be marked dissimilar, leading to higher levels of victim blame (Grubb & Harrower, 2008).

Suarez & Gadalla (2010) conducted a meta-analysis and reviewed what associated with rape myth acceptance (RMA) in a total of thirty-seven studies consisting of 11487 individuals which showed males to demonstrate a higher endorsement of RMA in comparison to females; consistent with earlier studies in the field, influencing the notion of victim-blaming (Whatley, 1996). This meta-analysis only included peer-reviewed journals, which is an advantage as it gives the opportunity to critically evaluate, as well as statistically combine results across the literature to gain a deeper insight into the relationship between RMA and gender (Fagard, Staessen & Thijs, 1996), but it is susceptible to publication bias. Journals that did not meet the threshold of inclusion were not be included even if they were adequate, as studies conducted in the United States and Canada were only included (Suarez & Gadalla, 2010). RMA is a universal phenomenon that appears across many cultures and societies (Lonsway & Fitzgerald, 1995) and therefore it is important to assess whether this relationship between RMA and gender is universal. In addition, two studies in the meta-analysis did not yield a significant difference between gender and RMA, one of which consisting of experienced therapists (McKay, 2001); proposing a relationship between gender and occupation, and the
other of non-Asian and Asian university students in Canada (Kennedy & Gorzalka, 2002), proposing a relationship between gender and ethnicity (Suarez & Gadalla, 2010).

Even though research has typically confirmed that females are less inclined to adhere to rape myths and less inclined to victim-blame (Burt, 1983), earlier research has reported no differences between gender on RMA and victim-blaming (Burt, 1980; Wiener, Wiener & Grisso, 1989). These outcomes can be explained with regards to the attribution theory, as women are naturally inclined to feel a sense of similarity towards the victim, thus employing a defensive attribution that protects them from a similar fate. Female observers that distance themselves from a victim, can decrease the cognitive dissonance produced by the likelihood of becoming a rape victim, whereby the defensive attribution uses the endorsement of a rape myth to reassure the observer that they are nothing like the victim; modulating victim-blaming (Grubb & Turner, 2012). This has been further supported by research that found a positive relationship between RMA and victim blame (Pollard, 1992), and may explain the lack of consistent findings between gender and RMA, with evidence of some women blaming the victim as much as men (Burt, 1980; Krahé, 1988; Hayes, Smith & Levett, 2010). Therefore, despite being a potent factor in the influence of victim-blaming, gender cannot solely explain this attribution of blame and RMA.

2.3. Rape myth acceptance and male victims

Traditionally, male rape has been neglected in comparison to the wealth of research on female victims (Davies, 2002; van der Bruggen & Grubb, 2014). Early work was inspired by feminists who assumed that only females could be raped by male perpetrators (van der Bruggen & Grubb, 2014), but recently, there has been a great deal of interest in male rape and the impact it has on an individual’s perception of the crime (Davies & Rogers, 2006). With regards to rape myths this appears to be limited, with attribution of blame usually directed towards the male victim, and even more so when they fail to fight back or escape (Davies, Pollard, & Archer, 2001; Rogers & Bates, 2008). The male rape myth scale (MRMS) (Melanson, 1999) is believed to lag behind the research regarding female RMA, which has been shown as successful by researchers in the field (Kassing et al., 2005), but a deeper understanding of male rape myths is needed, which is only possible with continued development of research (Sleath & Bull, 2010).
A study by Sleath and Bull (2010) manipulated experimental vignettes: the degree of the rape myth (low or high) and the form of rape (acquaintance or stranger) and found male RMA to be a robust predictor of victim-blaming, signifying that male victim-blaming highly occurs when stereotypical ideas are accepted. This supports other researchers that have stated the wide prevalence and acceptance of these myths in today’s society (Kassing et al., 2005; Lonsway & Fitzgerald, 1995).

This research is also in line with female rape myths as the victim’s level of resistance is a potent determinant that influences the level of victim blame assigned, but there are substantial differences as male rape myths presume that male victims and male rapists must be homosexual. This study only examined a general measure of victim-blaming and future research should aim to develop an understanding of the diverse forms of blaming that influences the attribution of male-victim-blaming (Sleath & Bull, 2010). Furthermore, rape victims’ sexuality was not stated in the vignettes, which could have led participants to make their own assumptions regarding the victims’ sexuality, as prior research has confirmed that rape blame may be assigned to “the typical sexual partner for a man” (Wakelin & Long, 2003), which may have influenced the level of male rape victim-blame (Sleath & Bull, 2010).

The harmful nature of male RMA has led these victims to be treated with suspicion and it has been postulated that such myths will not be eradicated from society by educating the population, but rather through changing the way individualised are socialised from an early age (Kassing et al., 2005).

3. Perpetrator characteristics

Factors associated with the rape case, the victim and the qualities of the observer when making the attribution of blame have all been examined extensively due to the experimental style that uses hypothetical rape scenarios, which are easily controlled (Buddie & Miller, 2001; Strömwall et al., 2014; van der Bruggen, 2014). However, victim-blaming does not always occur and much less is known about the influence of perpetrator characteristics and the level of influence on victim-blaming (Strömwall et al., 2014).

Strömwall et al (2014) used vignette methodology to examine the effect of perpetrators previous conviction and age, the participants’ “belief in a just world” and gender on the attribution of blame. The main findings revealed that females attributed less blame to the victim when the perpetrator was illustrated as having prior criminal convictions, whereas
males demonstrated the opposite pattern. This is plausibly linked to male participants reasoning that the perpetrator could not be continuously accused when committing a subsequent offense of the same type. On the contrary, this discrepancy may derive from differing beliefs about the causes of offending and criminal behaviour. Women are conventionally more tolerant than men with regards to punishment of crime but may have reacted contrarily when an offender repeating a crime was evoked (Hurwitz & Smithey, 1998; Strömwall et al., 2014). Future research could aim to compare different forms of crime to investigate whether women’s lack of tolerance towards repeated offenders is unique to sexual violence towards women, as this highlights the shortcoming in previous research, where participants have not been asked about their opinion on punishment and criminal activity in general. In addition to the vignettes presented in the studies; encouraging future research to address this (Strömwall et al., 2014) would help gain an insight on the true influences of victim-blaming.

However, prior research (Mitchell et al., 2009) has demonstrated when the perpetrator was driven by violence compared to sexual needs; participants were more likely to assign perpetrator blame. In particular, male participants demonstrated a reduction in victim-blaming if the perpetrator was motivated by sexual needs. It can be concluded that, men and women vary in terms of victim-blaming due to the information provided about the perpetrator, but evidence for more replicable findings is needed before robust conclusions can be made (Strömwall et al., 2014).

4. New methodologies

Early research in this field concentrated on characterological and behavioural aspects of the victim that led observers to blame victims for their fate, such as the victim’s level of intoxication (Richardson & Campbell, 1982) and types of dress (Furnham & Boston, 1996). These traditional studies have set a foundation for the vignette methodology, where observers typically read a hypothetical scenario whereby the characteristics of the victim and situation are controlled and changed, and are then asked to make a judgement using quantitative rating scales (Ward, 1995). This process is believed to be reliable and valid compared to simple questions used in surveys (Alexander & Becker, 1978), allowing a detailed analysis of the factors that influence judgement of blame and the stance of rape victims in this act (Ward, 1995).
However, the traditional research in this field has been considered as unrealistic as some studies have not obtained a realistic sample of victims that reflect rape, as one study contained victims that were strippers, social workers, or nuns (Smith et al., 1976), which would yield an inaccurate rape victim blaming. Recent research has utilised more representative and realistic professions, and explores perpetrator-victim relationship to yield accurate judgements of rape blame, rather than factors such as “type of dress” and the status of a woman (married, single or divorced) in earlier studies (van der Bruggen & Grubb, 2014).

In addition, researchers have been on the hunt for new inventive methodologies as vignette methodology is considered as artificial by some as it is unclear how individuals may react in a real-life situation, questioning the external validity (Davies et al., 2001; van der Bruggen & Grubb, 2014). Cohn, Dupuis & Brown (2009) implemented a “video tape approach” that intended to provide a more realistic situation with more contextual information, to assist observers when attributing blame in a rape case. The findings from this study confirmed the findings from vignette methodology as victim blaming was more likely when victims had a poor reputation, as well as yielding RMA as a strong predictor of victim blame (Cohn et al., 2009). New methodologies such as this “video tape approach” are important in this field as it is vital for observers and jurors to gain as much insight into the crime before making an accurate verdict in order to bridge the gap that vignette methodology has formed (van der Bruggen & Grubb, 2014), which could ultimately impact the level of victim-blame.

5. Conclusion

In summary, victim-blaming is largely influenced by rape myths (Mason et al., 2004; Yamawaki, 2009) as high levels of RMA positively correlating with higher levels of victim blaming, with males endorsing higher rape myths towards women in comparison to females (Suarez & Gadalla, 2010). This emphasises the need to alter societal attitudes about rape victims to ensure that they are given the support they require (van der Bruggen & Grubb, 2014). But, in relation to JWBs, the empirical evidence is mixed, suggesting it may act as a mediating factor, rather than a single explanation of victim-blaming. Therefore, it can be concluded that the relationship between JWB, RMA and gender is highly complex due to various factors that influence one’s judgement when assigning blame, as observers may be influenced by pre-existing ideologies that overlook the true nature of events that led up to the rape, thus falsely blaming victims (Hayes et al., 2013).
Traditionally, however, the notion of male rape has not received as much attention and is known to lag behind female rape research (Rodgers, 1998). Recent findings demonstrate that victim-blame is highly assigned to male victims due to the acceptance of stereotypical ideologies such as “male rape victims are homosexual” (Sleath & Bull, 2010), suggesting traditional gender stereotypes may also come into play when assigning rape victim blame (Davies & Rogers, 2006). Furthermore, victim-blaming does not always occur and it has been stated that victim-blaming can vary due to the information provided regarding the perpetrator, and future research should focus on formulating replicable findings in order to yield robust conclusions on what truly influences victim blaming (Strömwall et al., 2014). As well as that, the various paradigms used to measure the attribution of rape blame make it harder to make robust comparisons and conclusions, but new methodology regarding approaches that include video tapes could change the research in the field as it provides observers with contextual cues which could aid their process of attributing blame, thus influencing whether victims are blamed or not (van der Bruggen & Grubb, 2014).

In conclusion, due to the unique and complicated nature of rape, it can be difficult to effusively understand all the factors that influence rape victim-blaming as they intertwine with one another due to the multifaceted nature of each individual rape case (Hayes et al., 2013). Future research must aim to improve the understanding of these factors and the psychological processes involved in attributing blame in a rape case, and due to the secondary victimisation experienced by rape victims, it is paramount to address why they are blamed and develop interventions to relief the effect (Strömwall et al., 2014).

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References


