Attribution of Blame to Rape Victims among Therapists and Non-Therapists

Yael Idisis, Ph.D.,* Sarah Ben-David, Ph.D. and Efrat Ben-Nachum, M.A.

This paper examines the hypothesis of modular judgment in the context of attribution of blame to rape victims. Modular judgment was operationalized using blame schemata suited to judgment of everyday aggression. Subjects were 72 individuals, 36 therapists and 36 non-therapists; half were men and half women. Each subject was presented with written descriptions of four rapes, which included information regarding victim’s gender (male versus female) and victim’s prior acquaintance with the rapist (stranger or known). Dependent variables were attribution of blame and judgments regarding severity of the rape and of the punishment deserved by the rapist. Among both therapists and non-therapists there was a slight general tendency to blame the victim. As expected, women were blamed more than men. Also, men attributed less blame to male victims then did women, whereas women attributed less blame to female victims then did men. These results support the theories of modular judgment and of defensive attribution. As for judgment of severity of the rape, therapists judged the rapes as slightly more severe. Similar results were found regarding judgment of deserved punishment. We suggest further investigation of the connection between blame attribution and rape myths, which may facilitate blaming the victim. Copyright © 2007 John Wiley & Sons, Ltd.

INTRODUCTION

Rape, defined in the literature as sexual contact against the will of one of the participants, is one of the most common forms of assault. The legal definition of rape is limited to sexual penetration against the will of the victim (Langevin, 1983). In most cases, rapists are referred to as male, and victims of rape are referred to as female (Ellis, 1989).

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Despite the high frequency of rape, many incidents go unreported, in many cases due to the victim’s fear that she will be blamed for being victimized. One of the central explanations for the phenomenon of blaming the victim is the “just world” theory (Lerner, 1980; Lerner & Miller, 1978). According to this theory, people get what they deserve and deserve what they get. When people are perceived as good, it is expected that good things will happen to them; if they are perceived as bad, bad things will befall them as ‘just deserts’. People with a strong belief in a just world want to believe that the world is safe and protected even in the face of harsh reality. This belief extends to rape. In order to preserve their belief in a “just world”, believers will try either to detract from the victim’s suffering or to blame the victim for what happened (Lerner, 1980).

Walster (1966) suggests that people judge the severity of events as a function of harm caused. If the victim is not severely harmed, the event is seen as an accident. However, as the level of harm increases, the fear that “this could happen to me” also increases. Blaming the victim and convincing oneself that one would have acted differently in similar circumstances help restore faith in a safe, controllable environment. We see, therefore, that blaming the victim serves to provide the blamer with a sense of control, safety, and protection from traumatic events such as rape.

The tendency to blame the victim, or to see her as responsible for being victimized, has been demonstrated in several studies (e.g. Damrosch, 1985; Janoff-Bulman, Timko, & Carli, 1985; Jenkins and Dambrot, 1987; Sinclair & Bourne, 1998). The apparent trend of the literature is that blaming the victim is connected to acceptance of rape myths (Burt, 1980; Jenkins & Dambrot, 1987).

The accepted definition of the term “rape myth” is that of Lonsway and Fitzgerald (1994): rape myths are false but pervasive beliefs and attitudes aimed at justifying or denying aggression of males against females. Examples of such beliefs include “If the woman really had wanted to, she could have prevented the rape”, or “deep down she really wanted to be raped”. Rape myths also include portrayal of stereotyped personality traits of victims, for example “only bad girls get raped” (Burt, 1980; Costin & Schwarz, 1987; Ehrhart & Sandler, 1985; Lonsway & Fitzgerald, 1994).

Burt’s “Rape Myth Acceptance Scale” (1980) identifies false beliefs about rape, rapists, and rape victims—beliefs that produce a hostile attitude toward victims and facilitate blaming them for their victimization. Using this scale it was found that, as a result of widespread acceptance of rape myths, rape victims are held responsible for their victimization (Burt, 1980; Damrosch, 1985; Janoff-Bullman et al., 1985; Jenkins & Dambrot, 1987; Johnson, Kuck, & Schander, 1997; Lonsway & Fitzgerald, 1994; Muehlenhard, Friedman, & Thomas, 1985; Sinclair & Bourne, 1998).

Research has also indicated that specific traits of a victim influence the degree of blame attributed to her (Anderson, Cooper, & Okamura, 1997; Barbaree, Marshall, & Sundbery, 1991), for example provocative dress, sexual background, alcohol consumption, emotional reaction, and degree of physical resistance to the attack (Holloway & Jefferson, 1998). Belief that these traits can be indicators of blame facilitates the building and maintaining of rape myths.

The literature reviewed above illustrates the existence of the tendency to blame the rape victim and see her as responsible for her rape, and the role which endorsement of rape myths plays in facilitating this blame. However, not every victim is blamed to the same degree. In some cases a greater degree of blame is attributed, in others less. Changes in the degree of blame attributed as a function of differences in external circumstances is known as “modular judgment” (Wolf, 1989, 2001).
The theory of "defensive attribution" (Bell, Kuriloff, & Lottes, 1994) may explain the phenomenon of modular judgment. According to this theory, attribution of varying degrees of blame and responsibility are a function of the observer's degree of identification with the participants in the rape. People tend to reduce the amount of blame attributed to people with whom they identify, and increase the amount of blame attributed to those perceived as different from them. Thus, women who identify with other women tend to attribute less blame to rape victims. Accordingly, if such women blamed the victim to a greater degree, they would have to deal with their own responsibility for such situations.

The functional theory of cognition (Anderson, 1996) proposes a paradigm suitable for judging violent events in everyday life, and provides a method for operationalizing modular judgment. By operationalizing a system of attributing and avoiding blame, Anderson found attribution of blame to be a frequent social behavior, part of the "psychodynamics of everyday life". Anderson sees blame seeking as a behavior that will predictably occur when things do not go as expected. Avoidance of blame is also a predictable behavior, which occurs proximally to blame attribution. According to this theory, attribution and avoidance of blame are social skills, which are practiced and improve with time. Anderson sees blame attribution as a reflection in which information regarding events with unpleasant outcomes is stored. The "blame attribution schema" is expressed in the equation

\[
\text{blame} = \text{culpa} \oplus \text{consequences}
\]

In this equation, attribution of blame is a function of information from two sources. The first, culpa, represents the way in which the observer perceives the aggressor's attempts to avoid causing harm. The second, consequences, represents the perceived degree of harm caused. The symbol \(\oplus\) represents an unknown integration function. Wolf (1985, 1995) argues that the moral judgment of violent acts by those participating in them can provide information on cognitive and emotional components of aggression that cannot be measured by non-participant observers. Wolf has demonstrated that the perception and moral judgment of aggression change in accordance with situational factors, a phenomenon that demonstrates modular judgment (Wolf, 1989; Wolf, Ron, & Walters, 1996; Wolf, Battash, Addad, & Walters, 1992). The blame attribution scheme enables one to derive the relative weight of different factors in determining blame, such as the molecular component of culpa and consequence. This relative weight index is known as moral ratio (MR).

Anderson's paradigm can be used to understand the process of attributing blame to victims of rape. As explained above, the expression "culpa" represents the way in which an observer perceives the aggressor's attempts to avoid causing harm. By using Baron's (1977) definition of aggression, which incorporates the intention of the victim to avoid harm, "culpa" can be evaluated by focusing on the victim's rather than on the aggressor's behavior, and "culpa" is seen to represent the way in which an observer perceives the victim's attempts to avoid being harmed. Introducing victim-related variables into the equation affords the aggressor an opportunity to justify his or her actions and explain why he or she did not refrain from attacking the victim. Such justifications also afford the observer an opportunity to justify the aggressor's actions, or explain his or her not refraining from attacking the victim. This study will examine the effects of two victim-related variables: Victim gender.
(male or female) and level of acquaintance between victim and attacker (acquainted or strangers).

In the literature, rape is considered as a sexual offence against women, and relatively little attention is paid to cases in which the victim is male. Although in recent years there have been growing numbers of clinical reports on male rape (Coxell & King, 1996; Forman, 1983; Hickson et al., 1994; Mitchell, Hirschman, & Nagayama-Hall, 1999; Pino & Meier, 1999), still laypeople as well as professionals in the fields of medicine, law, and education continue to deny, dismiss, or diminish the significant number of men who are sexually assaulted (Scarce, 1997). For example, Donnelly & Kenyon (1996) found fewer than 12 studies of male rape victims, many of which were based on small sample groups. Most studies of the subject deal with prison rape or rape of male children. In some respects the situation facing male rape victims today is not so different from that which faced female victims about two centuries ago (Scarce, 1997).

However, as time progresses, there is more and more evidence that many men are victims of homosexual rape, and the increasing public awareness of this phenomenon justifies a study of attribution of blame to male rape victims. Moreover, the existence of male rape victims contradicts prevalent ideas about blame attribution, and the effect these male victims have on feminist and "just-world" theories needs to be examined.

Within the framework of rape myths, it is generally believed that rape is a sexual act incorporating violence and aggression as a means to an end, and manifest between two strangers. This is despite evidence that points to acquaintance rape being more common than stranger rape (Lonsway & Fitzgerald, 1994; Muir, Lonsway, & Payne, 1996), and that acquaintance rape does not necessarily involve the same level of violence as stranger rape. In many cases of acquaintance rape, psychological pressure or induction of guilt feelings in the victim is enough to coerce sex, and may lead to the victim's realizing that he or she was raped only after a significant period of time has elapsed (Holloway & Jefferson, 1998).

Simonson and Subich (1999) investigated judgments of severity made by men and women regarding stranger rape, acquaintance rape, first-date rape, and marital rape. They found that the closer the relationship between perpetrator and victim, the less severe the rape in the eyes of the raters. Moreover, in most cases, marital rape was not seen as rape at all. Attribution of blame to the victim increased in direct proportion to the closeness of the relationship between victim and perpetrator. This trend was especially strong among male raters, who also judged acquaintance rape as less severe, to be more forgiving of the rapist and blame the victim for seducing or enticing the rapist (Bell et al., 1994; Jenkins & Dambrot, 1987; Muir et al., 1996). The effect of closeness between victim and rapist on perceived severity of male–male rape has yet to be examined.

In addition to the variables described above, the present study will examine potential differences in judgment between men and women and between therapists and non-therapists. Both men and women support rape myths, albeit for different reasons: men in order to justify sexual violence, and women to facilitate denial of their potential victimization and responsibility for rape (Johnson et al., 1997). Most research has found that men support rape myths to a greater degree than do women, and are more forgiving of the rapist (e.g. Anderson et al., 1997; Barbaree et al., 1991; Burt, 1980; Calhoun, Selby, & Warring, 1976; Jenkins & Dambrot, 1987; Johnson
et al., 1997; Kooper, 1996; Muir et al., 1996). Research has also found that gender influences empathy towards victims. Men are less empathic towards rape victims and tend to see the victim as wanting sexual intercourse. Men view rape scenarios as less severe than do women, and to see as non-rape scenarios judged by women as rape. This is especially true among men with more traditional views of sex roles (Jenkins & Dambrot, 1987; Sinclair & Bourne, 1998).

Not all research supports these differences. Henrey and Meltzoff (1998) examined ways in which people interpret passive versus assertive reactions of victims of sexual harassment and sexual violence. They found that interpretations differed according to the victim’s reaction, but not according to observer’s gender. Similarly, Acock and Ireland (1983) and Baker, Terpstra, and Culter (1990) found no gender differences in judging victim’s behavior as a facilitator of rape, but they did find differences in judgment based on cultural and occupational differences between raters.

Literature on how attitudes change as one moves from student to professional (therapist) status emphasis the importance of education (Blumberg & Lester, 1991; Pass, 1988; Popma, 1996) and experience (Leahy, 1994; Mahoney & Crane, 1991). Since information reduces stereotypes and stereotyped thinking, and therapists should possess the knowledge necessary to refute rape myths, there may be differences in how therapists and non-therapists attribute blame.

**HYPOTHESES**

1. There will be gender and professional versus non-professional differences in the level of blaming the victim in accordance to the scene of the rape—women and professionals will attribute less blame to rape victims than will men and non-professionals. Women will attribute less blame to female victims than men will, while men will attribute less blame to male victims than women will.

2. There will be gender and professional versus non-professional differences in the level of severity as a function of victim gender and prior acquaintance between victim and rapist.

3. There will be gender and professional versus non-professional differences in the degree of punishment as a function of victim gender and prior acquaintance between victim and rapist.

4. There will be gender and professional versus non-professional differences in the relative weight of victim gender and prior acquaintance between victim and rapist.

**EXPERIMENT 1: BLAMING THE VICTIM**

**Method**

**Subjects**

72 subjects, 36 professional therapists and 36 non-therapists, half of whom were male and half of whom were female. All therapists were staff members of the Division
of Forensic Psychiatry in Magen Prison, Israel. The therapist group included psychiatrists, clinical criminologists, clinical psychologists, and social workers, all of whom specialize in diagnosis, risk assessment, or treatment of sexual offenders. The 36 non-therapists were undergraduate students at Tel Aviv University who had no prior knowledge of any forensic or mental health profession.

**Instruments and Procedure**

Subjects were individually presented with a series of rape scenarios, each containing information regarding the gender of the victim (male or female), and the relationship between victim and perpetrator (stranger or acquaintance). Each subject was asked to envision the following scenario:

A man/woman is standing at a hitchhiking station, trying to hitch a lift. A driver whom he/she recognizes/does not recognize pulls up and he/she gets into the car. At the same point, the driver suddenly pulls off the road and rapes the man/woman who was hitchhiking.

After being presented with this scenario, the subject was asked to rate the level of responsibility attributable to the victim on a scale ranging from zero (the least) to ten (the most). Each subject was presented with four scenarios. The scenarios were presented several times in changing order, in order to avoid bias due to order of presentation. The order was changed for every eight subjects.

**Results**

One-third of the professionals, seven men and five women, showed trends different from those of other raters. In the first repetitions of all scenarios, they attributed absolutely no blame to the victim, and so their judgments were eliminated from the final analysis. We will relate to this matter later. The other 24 therapists and 36 non-therapists attributed similar levels of responsibility to the victim, and so their judgments were evaluated as one group. The means and standard deviations of the judgments made by these 60 participants are summarized in Table 1 and in Figure 1.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>Women (n = 31)</th>
<th>Men (n = 29)</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Victim’s gender:</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Acquaintance—stranger</td>
<td>3.22 (2.43)</td>
<td>4.10 (2.69)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Acquaintance—acquainted</td>
<td>1.29 (1.67)</td>
<td>1.65 (1.75)</td>
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</table>

1It should be noted that hitchhiking is frequent in Israel. It is seen as normative behavior and an integral part of Israeli culture.
Table 1 and Figure 1 show a tendency to blame the victim for her rape. However, the degree of blame was relatively low across all experimental situations (mean rating among all subjects, females, and males, 2.14, 2.02, and 2.26 respectively). Victim’s gender and prior acquaintance with the rapist affected blame attribution (in Figure 1 expressed as the distance between the lines and their angle, respectively). There was a general tendency to blame female victims to a greater degree than male victims (mean level 2.56 and 1.73, respectively), and also to attribute more blame to the victim when the rapist was a stranger rather than an acquaintance (3.05 and 1.25 respectively). There was a greater variance among ratings in cases where the rapist and victim were strangers. Women attribute less blame to female victims than men do, whereas men attribute less blame to male victims than women do. The following interactions were also found: victim’s gender was more significant in cases of stranger rape than in cases of acquaintance rape, and the difference between levels of blame attributed to female victims is greater than the difference between levels attributed to males in such cases. There was also an interaction between subject’s and victim’s gender: there were greater differences in levels of blame attributed to male versus female victims among male subjects as compared to female subjects.

No differences were found in judgments as a function of age and of the order in which scenarios were presented. A four-way ANOVA of levels of blame as a function of victim gender, acquaintance with rapist, subject’s gender and occupation found no significant four-way interactions. However, interactions between three factors, victim gender and acquaintance with rapist and subject’s gender were significant: $F(4, 65) = 4.75$, $\eta^2 = 0.078$, $p < 0.05$. Two-way ANOVA found the coefficients of the interaction between victim gender and acquaintance and victim gender and subject gender were also significant: $F(4, 56)$, 21.25 and 8.74, $\eta^2 = 0.275$ and 0.135, respectively, $p < 0.01$. There was also a significant main effect between acquaintance and victim gender: $F(4, 56) = 47.53$ and 40.46, $\eta^2 = 0.495$ and 0.419, respectively, $p < 0.01$. 

Figure 1. Attribution of blame to the victim as a function of victim gender and prior acquaintance with rapist, for men and women.
Moral Ratio

A two-way analysis of variance was used to compute the independent significance of victim's gender and prior acquaintance with the rapist. An index that facilitates examination of this phenomenon is the moral ratio (MR). MR is an index derived from measures of blame attribution, and represents the relative weight of different factors in determining blame. The present study attached great importance to the victim's prior acquaintance with the rapist (Lonsway & Fitzgerald, 1994; Muir et al., 1996; Holloway & Jefferson, 1998), and therefore the relative weight of this variable was determined as a basis for checking differences between different experimental scenarios. The moral ratio of prior acquaintance (MRf) is computed using the formula

$$MRF = \frac{F}{F + S}$$  

(2)

$F$ represents the absolute weight attributed to prior acquaintance and $S$ represents the absolute weight attributed to victim’s gender. Absolute weights are determined using data from subject’s original response sets, by computing the differences in the marginal averages of the two variables. The value of MRf varies from zero to unity. Using the above equation as a base, the relative weight of victim gender (MRs) can be expressed as

$$MRs = 1 - MRF$$  

(3)

Moral ratio was computed using the ratings of the 60 subjects who differentially attributed blame to the victim. The moral ratio of the judgments of the 12 subjects who attributed no blame whatsoever to the victim in any of the scenarios were not relevant. As shown in Table 2, over half the subjects (35) assigned the most significant weight to the variable of prior acquaintance, whereas about one-third (19) assigned the most significant weight to victim gender. Six subjects attributed equal weight to both variables.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>N</th>
<th>MRf</th>
<th>MRs</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>35</td>
<td>0.88</td>
<td>0.12</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>19</td>
<td>0.19</td>
<td>0.81</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>6</td>
<td>0.50</td>
<td>0.50</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

EXPERIMENT 2: SEVERITY OF THE CRIME

The results of Experiment 1 indicate that subjects tend to blame the victim for being raped. However, levels of attributed blame were low. Experiment two examined the issue of the effects of blame attribution on judgments of severity of the rape. Experiment 2 was conducted together with Experiment 1 subjects. The methodology was the same, with the subjects asked to rate on a scale of 0–10 the degree of severity of each of the four scenarios presented. Before hearing the
scenarios, each subject was asked to describe a rape he or she would rate as most (10) and least (1) severe. These descriptions served as anchor stimuli for the present experiment.

Results

Table 3 and Figure 2 summarize the subjects’ judgments of severity. Judgments are presented for 60 of the original 72 subjects. The same 12 subjects eliminated from Experiment 1 were also eliminated here, because (in contrast to the other subjects) they rated each of the four scenarios presented as most severe (10).

Table 3 shows that the subjects rated the rape scenarios as very severe, regardless of the particulars of each scenario. Each of the four scenarios was rated on the top half of the scale (on average 8.14). As opposed to results of other researchers (e.g. Anderson et al., 1997; Barbaree et al., 1991; Johnson et al., 1997; Kooper, 1996;
Muir et al., 1996) there were no differences between male and female subjects’ ratings of severity.

However, there were implied differences between therapist and non-therapist subjects, as presented in Table 4. There was a consistent but non-significant trend among therapists to rate all four scenarios as more severe than non-therapists (mean 8.45 and 7.94 respectively).

Ratings were not affected by order of presentation. A four-way ANOVA found no significant interactions between the variables (victim gender × prior acquaintance × subject’s gender × occupation). There was a near-significant interaction between three variables: victim gender, prior acquaintance, and subject’s occupation ($F(4, 46) = 3.45, \eta^2 = 0.058, p = 0.06$). A two-way ANOVA found that only the interaction between victim gender and prior acquaintance neared significance ($F(4, 56) = 3.45, \eta^2 = 0.058, p = 0.06$).

As stated above, the mean blame attributions were relatively low (2.14), whereas the mean judgments of severity were relatively high (8.14). We found that the more blame subjects attributed to a victim, the less severe their judgment of severity. A significant, inverse Pearson correlation ($p < 0.05$) between these ratings was found in the following cases: among women, when the female victim and rapist were strangers ($-0.38$), among male therapists, when the male victim and rapist were strangers ($-0.45$), among women therapists, when the female victim and rapist were strangers ($-0.60$), and among women non-therapists when the male victim and rapist were acquainted ($-0.48$).

### EXPERIMENT 3: JUDGMENTS OF DESERVED PUNISHMENT

Judgments of deserved punishment are not an essential component of functional moral judgment. In most everyday situations, the conclusions of an observer’s moral judgments are manifest in thought only, and are seldom verbalized (Wolf, 2001). In such cases we can not know whether these conclusions are expressed in terms of judgment of blame, of severity, of deserved punishment, or of all three, whether there is any connection between these judgments, or what that connection might be. In most cases where functional moral judgment can be observed, attribution of blame is not accompanied by a suggested punishment. Of course, even a verbalized attribution of blame carries some facet of punishment, in that it should cause some
unpleasantness to the person being blamed. It follows that judgments of deserved punishment are an inherent part of moral judgment.

The results of Experiment 2 showed that rape scenarios are rated as severe, that there is a negative correlation between attribution of blame and judgment of severity. Experiment 3 examined the possible influence of attribution of blame and judgment of severity on judgment of deserved punishment. Subjects were asked to imagine a rape for which they would sentence the rapist to the maximum punishment allowable (10), and a rape for which they would sentence the rapist to the minimum punishment (0). These descriptions served as anchoring stimuli for the experiment. All subjects who participated in Experiments 1 and 2 participated in Experiment 3. The method was the same as in the prior experiments, with the difference that subjects were asked to estimate the degree of punishment deserved by the rapist in each of the four scenarios.

**Results**

Table 5 presents the means and standard deviations of judgments of deserved punishment made by all 60 subjects, as a function of subject’s gender and occupation, respectively. Results show that, like judgments of severity, judgments of deserved punishment were in the upper half of the scale (mean 7.81). There was also a consistent, implied tendency of therapists to envision harsher punishments than non-therapists (mean 8.13 and 7.59 respectively)—a trend similar to that found in Experiment 2.

Ratings were not affected by order of presentation. A four-way ANOVA found no significant interactions between the independent variables. A three-way ANOVA which excluded the variable of subject’s occupation found a near-significant effect for victim gender ($F(2, 58) = 3.58, \eta^2 = 0.059, p = 0.06$).

There was a negative Pearson correlation between attribution of guilt and judgments of deserved punishment, showing that the greater the degree of blame attributed to the victim, the lesser the degree of punishment deserving of the rapist. The correlation was significant ($p < 0.05$) only in the following cases: among woman subjects, when the victim was female, or when the victim was male and acquainted with the rapist ($r = -0.37$), among non-therapist, men subjects ($r = -0.46$), when the male victim was acquainted with the rapist ($r = -0.34$), among non-therapist women subjects when the male victim was acquainted with the rapist ($r = -0.53$), and when the female victim was acquainted with the rapist ($r = -0.47$).

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Subject’s gender:</th>
<th>Women ($n = 31$)</th>
<th>Men ($n = 29$)</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Victim’s gender:</td>
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<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Female</td>
<td>Male</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Acquaintance—stranger</td>
<td>8.00 (1.15)</td>
<td>8.00 (1.21)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Acquaintance—acquainted</td>
<td>8.22 (1.25)</td>
<td>8.25 (1.31)</td>
</tr>
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</table>

Table 5. Rating of degree of punishment as a function of victim gender and prior acquaintance between victim and rapist among men and women (mean and standard deviation)

The results also showed that there was a direct correlation between the judged severity of the rape and the degree of deserved punishment. Pearson correlations were significant across all groups of subjects and in all experimental situations: male victims acquainted or unacquainted with the rapist ($r = 0.73$ and $0.55$, $p < 0.05$ respectively), and when the female victim was acquainted or unacquainted with the rapist ($r = 0.73$ and $0.66$ respectively, $p < 0.05$).

**DISCUSSION**

**General Findings**

This paper has explored assessments of blame, severity of harm and punishment as functions of two dichotomous variables: victim’s gender, and prior acquaintance between victim and rapist. The first variable relates to the vulnerability of the victim, within the framework of the theory by Muir et al. (1996) that women are identified as potential rape victims and are therefore expected to take care to avoid being victimized. The second variable relates to the level of wariness expected from the victim, within the framework of research that has found that society is more forgiving of date rape and attributes a higher level of blame to date rape victims than to stranger rape victims (Bell et al., 1994; Jenkins & Dambrot, 1987; Muir et al., 1996). These factors may help rapists or even casual observers justify sex crimes or explain why the rapist did not refrain from attacking the victim.

**Assessments of Blame**

In general, the results show that subjects attribute blame to the rape victim. Attribution of blame helps to reinforce the casual observer’s belief that the world is a safe, protected place, and that occurrences such as rape can be controlled.

We found a clear and consistent tendency to attribute more blame to female victims than to male victims. Blame reflects the way in which people organize data regarding events and behaviors that have actual or potential adverse consequences (Anderson, 1996). It is possible that, given the perception that women are vulnerable, exposed, and more aware of their vulnerability, they are expected to act with extra caution to avoid rape, and are therefore judged more harshly when actually victimized.

The hypothesis that women would attribute less blame to other women than would men was only partially supported. We must emphasize that the literature regarding gender differences in blame attribution is not conclusive: some research has found that men attribute higher levels of blame to rape victims and are more forgiving of rapists and minimize the level of violence in rape scenarios more than do women (e.g. Anderson et al., 1997; Barbaree et al., 1991; Burt, 1980; Calhoun et al., 1976; Jenkins & Dambrot, 1987; Johnson et al., 1997; Kooper, 1996; Muir et al., 1996; Sinclair & Bourne, 1998). It is important to note that the above is especially true among men with more traditional views of sex roles. It is reasonable to assume that our subjects, university students and therapists, do not adhere to strictly
traditional views of sex roles, which would explain why no clear gender differences in blame attribution were found.

As hypothesized, and in accordance with the theory of defensive attribution (Bell et al., 1994), women, who identify with other women more than with men, tend to attribute less blame to female victims than to male victims, while men, who identify with other men, attribute less blame to male victims. This finding indicates that judgment is influenced by external circumstances, and supports the theory of modular judgment, which has found intra-personal changes in judgments of blame and severity of violent interactions (Idisis, 2002; Idisis & Wolf, 2002; Shimkin, 1998; Wolf, 1985, 1989, 1995, 2001; Wolf et al., 1992, 1996). The results can also be placed within the framework of the “role” theory by Sarbin and Allen (1968), which maintains that a person’s morality changes with social circumstances. In other words, people tend to judge others while watching out for their own interests.

Unlike Bell et al. (1994), Jenkins and Dambrot (1987), and Muir et al. (1996), who found that subjects attributed more blame to the victim in cases where there was a prior acquaintance between victim and rapist, we found that subjects blamed the victim more when the attacker was a stranger. Apparently, the decision to hitchhike is seen as irresponsible behavior with potentially disastrous consequences, regardless of the gender of the hitchhiker. The fact that the subject knew the final outcome of the scenario contributed to his or her attributing more blame to the hitchhiker-victims, reinforcing his or her conviction that he or she would never act that way.

The hypothesis that therapists would attribute lower levels of blame to victims then would non-therapists was not supported. As described above, subjects in this study did not attribute high levels of blame to victims. It is possible that this is due to their relatively high level of education, non-rigid opinions, and relatively low propensity to accept prejudices and stereotypes. Research has shown that acceptance of rape myths, and therefore blaming the victim and leniently judging the rapist, is more prevalent in populations from lower socio-economic backgrounds, older persons, and persons who endorse traditional sex roles (Anderson et al., 1997; Johnson et al., 1997; Kooper, 1996; Sinclair & Bourne, 1998). Prior knowledge of a social problem has been shown to reduce prejudice and stereotyping. It is plausible that our non-therapist subjects, university students, had prior knowledge of rape situations due to exposure to intense media campaigns in Israel over the past years. Campaigns heighten awareness of the subject of sexual assault. We would also expect the therapist subjects to eschew prejudice and stereotypes regarding sexual assault as a direct result of their professional work.

Moral Ratio

An additional index, which can be derived from blame attribution, is the moral ratio (MR). MR represents the relative weight of the source of crucial information from an empirical or theoretical standpoint—in the present context, the prior acquaintance between victim and rapist. An analysis of MR found that over half of the subjects attributed major importance to this variable when assessing blame. This supports results of other researchers, who have found a significant facet of rape myths to be that most rapists are strangers to their victims, and that date rape is something
between two people that the victim helped to precipitate (Holloway & Jefferson, 1998; Lonsway & Fitzgerald, 1994; Muir et al., 1996; Simonson & Subich, 1999).

Assessments of Severity

Assessments of severity as a function of the victim’s gender and prior acquaintance with the rapist were high. All subjects rated the rapes as severe, independent of the specifics of the scenario. However, there was an implied trend indicating the importance of prior acquaintance between victim and rapist. This trend is compatible with the finding that, in attributing blame, the relative weight of this variable was significant. It is also congruent with other research, which emphasizes the importance of the prior acquaintance between victim and rapist and the relevance of this variable to blaming or not blaming the victim, and reflects the salience of one of the more prevalent rape myths (Holloway & Jefferson, 1998; Lonsway & Fitzgerald, 1994; Muir et al., 1996; Simonson & Subich, 1999).

There was a consistent tendency among therapists to judge all scenarios more harshly than non-therapists. One explanation for this may be found in the theory of cognitive dissonance (Festinger, 1957). This theory holds that each person has a system of knowledge and beliefs relating to him- or herself, his or her surroundings, and his or her and others’ behavior. When all these factors are in harmony a person is ‘balanced’, and when they are not in harmony he or she enters a state of imbalance, or dissonance, from which he or she endeavors to escape. It is possible that when therapists who treat sex offenders are asked to rate the severity of rape scenarios, they feel dissonance between competing perspectives: that of the empathic therapist who endeavors to treat and rehabilitate the rapist, and that of the judgmental observer. Judgment and empathy do not go together, and the way out of the resultant state of dissonance is to take an overly judgmental stand, which is manifest as a harsh judgment of severity. It is possible that the therapist’s motive for giving harsher judgments of severity lies in an aim for social desirability, so as not to be seen as identifying with sex offenders.

Assessments of Deserved Punishment

Assessments of deserved punishment, like assessments of severity, were high among all subjects. Therapists showed a consistent tendency towards severity in all rape scenarios. The explanation suggested above may also explain the tendency of the therapists in this case. There was a slight trend regarding the salience of the victim’s gender, in contrast with the trends found regarding attributions of blame and judgments of severity, where the more salient variable was prior acquaintance.

In judgments of ordinary observers, as in those of professional judges, the severity of rape scenarios and accompanying judgment of deserved punishment are dependent, among other factors, on the degrees of blame attributed to the rapist and to his victim. The greater the degree to which the victim is seen as contributing to the rape, the lower the judgment of severity of the rape and the lesser the degree of punishment deserved by the rapist—and vice versa. When a high degree of blame and
responsibility is attributed to the rapist, the scenario is seen as more severe and there is a tendency to view the deserved punishment as more severe.

### Methodological Considerations

#### Internal Validity

In the pretest, involving five therapists and five non-therapists, there were problems of calibration: the subjects all rated the severity of the rape and the deserved punishment as 10, the highest possible degree, across all experimental situations. For this reason, the following anchor stimulus was added: before the presentation of the scenarios in Experiment 2 (judgment of severity), subjects were requested to imagine a rape scenario that they would rate as most severe (10), and one that they would rate as least severe (0). In Experiment 3, subjects were asked to imagine a rape for which they would sentence the rapist to the maximum punishment allowable (10), and a rape for which they would sentence the rapist to the minimum punishment (0). The addition of these anchor stimuli solved the calibration problem, and enabled use of modular judgment by the subjects.

Despite this addition, 12 subjects persisted in attributing no blame whatsoever to the victim, judging rapes as most severe and deserved punishment as most harsh in all scenarios, reflecting a defensive position and unwillingness to cooperate in an authentic manner. It is possible that prior acquaintance with the authors precluded them from truthfully revealing their positions. For these reasons, the judgments of these subjects were excluded from the final analyses.

### Practical Applications

Many cases of rape are not reported to the police because victims fear they will be blamed for their rape (Damrosch, 1985; Janoff-Bulman et al., 1985; Jenkins et al., 1997; Sinclair & Bourne, 1998). Blaming the victim is facilitated by endorsement of rape myths, which are salient not because they are true, but because they are pervasive and believed to be true (Anderson et al., 1997; Barbaree et al., 1991; Holloway & Jefferson, 1998; Janoff-Bullman et al., 1985; Lonsway & Fitzgerald, 1994; Muehlenhard et al., 1985; Simonson & Subich, 1999).

Despite growing public awareness of the problem of rape, this study shows that even among educated subjects, assumed to be free of prejudice, there is still a tendency to blame the victim. This trend is moderate, but it exists among all subjects regardless of gender or occupation.

Along with the observer’s personal need to blame the victim as a means of enforcing his or her sense of security and control over his or her life, blaming the victim serves another, social, function: it reduces the importance of the crime of rape. By deflecting blame from the rapist on to the victim, and putting responsibility firmly on the victim, society can avoid confronting the problem of rape (Lonsway & Fitzgerald, 1994). This also helps the rapist: if he knows that he belongs to a society that endorses rape myths, he can neutralize and devaluate the victim by projecting
onto her negative personality and behavioral traits. It also helps the potential rapist neutralize inhibitors before committing a rape.

Experiencing rape and realizing that due to something she or he did or failed to do will result in being blamed for being raped can lead to serious psychological and behavioral consequences for the victim: Feelings of helplessness, fear and anxiety, mood disturbances, somatic complaints, sexual problems, substance abuse or addiction (Schetky, 1990). Blame, if internalized and left untreated, can lead the victim to adopt a long-term perspective of a "perpetual victim," in which context the victim personifies as possessing "victim traits" such as passiveness, readiness to accept being mastered and controlled, repression or denial of anger and frustration, readiness to accept undeserved punishment, etc. Adoption of these traits lay the framework for future interactions that may be characterized by repeated actual victimization. Victims may come to identify with the rapist, leading to assimilation of aggressive behavioral traits and violent sexual behavior. If these perpetual victim traits are assimilated by a parent, the traits may be passed down to the children and internalized by them (Ferenczi, 1949; Schetky, 1990).

The above discussion points to the need for intensification of educational and informational programs that will facilitate changing preconceived ideas, shattering rape myths and refuting prejudices. This in turn could help reduce rape victims' fears regarding being blamed for their victimization, free them from feelings of guilt that accompany them, and encourage them to report their victimization to the authorities. This will increase the chance that rapists will be caught, incarcerated, and possibly treated, and that victims will receive the therapy and support that they need and deserve.

REFERENCES


