A Religious Paradox: Can Priming Ideas of God Reduce Rape Victim Blame?

Emma G. Heath and Kathryn Sperry

Utah State University

Abstract

Rape victim blame contributes to unreported incidents of sexual assault and failure to support victims (Ahrens, 2006). The present study investigated the relationship between religiosity, religious priming, and rape victim blame. Using an online Qualtrics panel, 247 U.S. participants were randomly assigned to either a neutral prime or a religious prime. They then read a short vignette of an acquaintance rape scenario and answered questions regarding perceptions of victim blame, victim credibility, benevolent and hostile sexism, religiosity, religious fundamentalism, and Rape Myth Acceptance (RMA). Results revealed that the religious prime reduced victim blame for highly religious participants but not among participants scoring lower in religiosity. The results confirmed that religiosity was positively correlated with both victim blame and RMA. The data also confirmed previous findings that men scored higher on blame than women and that higher religiosity correlated with higher victim blame. Additionally, RMA mediated the relationship between religiosity and rape victim blame. The results of this study could prove valuable in settings where sexual assault demands action from specifically religious individuals or institutions (e.g., jurors on a rape case in a highly-religious region or religious universities trying to confront the high prevalence of sexual assault on campus).

Keywords: victim blame, religiosity, religious fundamentalism, priming, rape myth acceptance, ambivalent sexism, sexual assault

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According to the National Crime Victimization Survey, approximately one in six American women will be sexually assaulted in their lifetime (Rape, Abuse & Incset National Network [RAINN], 2018). Of these victims, only 31% report the incident, and of alleged rapists, less than 1% will face a prison sentence. These statistics are most likely an underestimation of the true prevalence due to the silence commonly seen among sexual assault survivors (Ahrens, 2006). Recent national movements such as #MeToo and #TimesUp have revealed the widespread impact of this epidemic. It has confirmed research that sexual assault remains a large and misunderstood problem in U.S. society.

Sexual assault is a pervasive issue that is commonly accompanied by patterns of victim blame. When asked to address the abuse of power exhibited by sexual assailants, Congresswoman Eddie Bernice Johnson responded: "We also need to start talking about the power that women have to control the situation" (Zoga, 2017, para. 5). Representative Johnson goes on to say that it is the responsibility of the woman to avoid any behaviors that could be interpreted as an invitation. The behaviors to which she is referring are acts such as drinking, promiscuity, and dressing provocatively. This example is just the beginning of the victim blame language (i.e., statements that shift the accountability from the assailant to the victim) that is endorsed today.

One reason why victims of sexual assault often do not report the incident is fear that they will be blamed for what happened to them (Ahrens, 2006). Some research suggests that behaviors the victim engages in before, during, or after the incident result in a higher degree of victim blame. If a victim is intoxicated leading up to the incident, she is seen as more deserving than if she had been sober (Littleton, Grills-Taquechel, & Axsom, 2009). Inversely, perpetrators

are viewed as less accountable if they are under the influence of drugs or alcohol (Angelone, Mitchell, & Pilafova, 2007; Qi, Starfelt, & White, 2016; Wenger & Bornstein, 2006). That is, drugs and alcohol seem to make victims more culpable but assailants less culpable. The assailant's actions are also excused when a victim is dressed provocatively or their demeanor could be interpreted as seductive (Loughnan, Pina, Vasquez, & Puvia, 2013; Workman & Freeburg, 1999). If there is a longer delay in reporting to the police, victims are seen as less believable than those who report immediately (Hockett, Smith, Klausing, & Saucier, 2016). Victims who have had a previous or current relationship with their perpetrator are viewed more negatively than victims of stranger rapes (Monson, Byrd, & Langhinrichsen-Rohling, 1996; Simonson & Subich, 1999, Wenger & Bornstein, 2006). This is especially problematic given that an estimated 70–90% of rapes are committed by an acquaintance (Fisher, Daigle, & Cullen, 2010; RAINN, 2018).

There are specific systems of thought that can contribute to a propensity to blame a rape victim. Belief in a Just World (BJW) is a defensive attribution whereby people believe that good people get good outcomes and bad people get bad outcomes (Lerner, 1980). When applied to rape victim blame, this belief pattern leads people to believe that if a woman or man is raped, they must have done something to deserve it. Scoring high in BJW has repeatedly exhibited positive correlations with rape victim blame (Landström, Strömwall, & Alfredsson, 2016; Sakalli-Uğurlu, Sila Yalçin, & Glick, 2007; Strömwall, Alfredsson, & Landström, 2013). A theory that parallels BJW is known as system justification efforts (i.e., the notion that a threat to the status quo increases one's own personal vulnerability), which has resulted in a propensity for women to blame victims of rape when gender stereotypes are primed (Ståhl, Eek, & Kazemi, 2010).

Another prominent predictor of rape victim blame is known as Rape Myth Acceptance (RMA; McMahon & Farmer, 2011; Suarez & Gadalla, 2010). A *rape myth* is a commonly held misconception about the causes and definitions of sexual assault (Burt, 1980). For example, "If a woman is raped while she is drunk, she is at least somewhat responsible for letting things get out of control" (Payne, Lonsway, & Fitzgerald, 1999, p. 49). A meta-analysis revealed that men endorse rape myths at a higher rate than women (Suarez & Gadalla, 2010). Evidence also suggested an association between RMA and discriminatory ideologies such as racism and sexism (Suarez & Gadalla, 2010).

Religion and Victim Blame

In the present study we aim to examine the use of religious priming to reduce victim blame. However, the relationship between religion and victim blame is complicated. There are established connections between religion and some of the previously stated contributors to rape victim blame. On a large scale, religion has supported a pattern of patriarchy (Lidzy, 2005) and traditional gender roles (Bryant, 2006). When compared to egalitarian views, individuals with more traditional gender role expectations were more likely to see rape as innocuous and to assign responsibility to the victim (Simonson & Subich, 1999). Additionally, participants who hold more traditional views about marriage are more likely to blame a victim of marital rape (Whatley, 2005). A meta-analysis concluded that conservative political views and religious beliefs about sexuality can lead to Rape Myth Acceptance (Anderson, Cooper, & Okamura, 1997). Further, religious affiliation has also been found to be associated with just world beliefs, particularly among White Protestants and Latinx Catholics (Hunt, 2000). A recent meta-analysis revealed similar themes, emphasizing the endorsement of patriarchy and prejudice against women as predictors of victim blame (Suarez & Gadalla, 2010).

There is a strong association between sexist attitudes and higher degrees of victim blame (Davies, Gilston, & Rogers, 2012). Gender scholars now distinguish between two types of sexism: hostile and benevolent; together they are referred to as ambivalent sexism (Glick & Fiske, 2012). Hostile sexism is the belief that men are naturally superior to women and also that women are complaining too much and trying to manipulate men (Glick & Fiske, 2012). Benevolent sexism views women as gentle, fragile creatures that men must cherish and protect. Although there is an illusion that benevolent sexism is contrary to hostile sexism, they are positively correlated (Glick & Fiske, 2012).

Importantly, research has established a connection between religious priming and increased levels of benevolent sexism (Haggard, Kaelen, Saroglou, Klein, & Rowatt, 2018). Moreover, benevolent sexism has been shown to increase negative attitudes toward rape victims, despite its apparent objective to protect women (Abrams, Viki, Masser, & Bohner, 2003). This could be due to a violation of traditional gender roles because the perception may be that if a woman puts herself in a situation to be raped, she was not staying in alignment with her inherent purity and high moral standard, which is a central tenent of benevolent sexism (Viki & Abrams, 2002; Yamawaki & Tschanz, 2005). That said, the literature has also asserted that subtypes of benevolent sexism could differentially impact attitudes toward victims. While the Gender Differentiation subscale (e.g. "Women, compared to men, tend to have a superior moral sensibility") is positively correlated with RMA, Protective Paternalism (e.g. "Women should be cherished and protected by men") was found to be negatively correlated with RMA (Chapleau, Oswald, & Russell, 2007). Modern sexism was also investigated in relation to victim perceptions. This more subtle form of sexism has also been associated with high levels of victim blame assigned by men, even when controlling for blatant hostility toward women (Ståhl et al.,

2010). This research supports the evolving influence of sexism on perceptions of rape victims.

Religious Priming

Despite research connecting religion to victim blame (albeit indirectly), religious priming has also been found to increase a number of prosocial behaviors. Given the research we presented, it remains unknown whether the religious priming literature would extend to prosocial attitudes toward victims of rape. Priming is the contribution of recent experiences on the retrieval of a certain schema (Aronson, Wilson, Akert, & Sommers, 2016). Individuals organize sets of information that help guide expectations of people, places, and social situations. Which schema is utilized could depend on how easily it can be brought to mind (Aronson et al., 2016). One way in which schemas can be made accessible is through priming. In a classic study on priming, researchers found that participants interrupted an experimenter more abruptly and more often when they were primed with words related to rudeness (Bargh, Chen, & Burrows, 1996). Bargh et al. (1996) also found that when primed with ideas of old age, participants subsequently walked at a slower pace compared to those who received a neutral prime.

Religious priming, then, occurs when researchers expose a participant to a religious concept. This has been shown to increase prosocial behaviors in several domains. When researchers primed religion by having participants read Christian religious scripture, individuals were more likely to help a stranger who was a member of an out-group, such as a woman wearing a hijab (Johnson, Memon, Alladin, Cohen, & Okun, 2015). Another study primed religion by having participants complete a sentence descrambling task (a task that included either religious or non-religious words) and found that exposure to religious words increased participants' selfless behaviors in an anonymous dictator game (Shariff & Norenzayan, 2007). Religion has even been primed simply by asking participants to indicate their religious affiliation

(with no such question in the control condition); participants who were asked to indicate their religion were less likely to act in a hostile manner after a threat (Schumann, McGregor, Nash, & Ross, 2014).

Research has not yet examined whether religious priming reduces rape victim blame. However, a recent study does lend credence to the idea of religious priming reducing general blame toward another person. Tong and Teo (2018) primed religion by flashing a religious cross on a screen during a computer task, whereas the control condition did not see a cross flashed on the screen. Participants believed they were playing a game with a partner, although there was not actually a partner. They were then told that their own performance was good but their fictitious partner did not perform well, resulting in a loss of compensation for both of them. Those who were religiously primed felt less anger and blame toward the partner after he or she allegedly failed the task and cost them their compensation (Tong & Teo, 2018).

The Present Study

We predicted that the religious prime condition would moderate the relationship between religiosity and victim blame (Hypothesis 1a) and that the religious prime condition would moderate the relationship between religiosity and victim credibility (Hypothesis 1b). This expectation is consistent with research showing that religious priming has greater impact among highly religious participants (Shariff, Willard, Andersen, & Norenzayan, 2016; Van Tongeren, Newbound, & Johnson, 2016). We further predicted that high scores on both benevolent sexism and hostile sexism would predict victim blame and credibility, above and beyond what is accounted for by gender and religiosity (Hypothesis 2). We also conducted two exploratory analyses examining whether (a) RMA and benevolent sexism mediate the relationship between religiosity with victim blame and credibility and (b) these variables acted as moderators and

interacted with religiosity on victim blame and credibility.

Method

Participants and Design

Data were collected using a Qualtrics Panel and participants were compensated according to their agreement with Qualtrics (compensation did not exceed $5.00). The original sample consisted of 260 adult participants. After the debriefing section, there was a question that asked participants if we may use their data; 13 participants indicated they did not want their data included (seven in the neutral prime and six in the religious prime condition). This left a final sample size of 247 participants (123 women, 122 men, and two gender non-conforming individuals). One transgender man was coded as a man. We could not confidently categorize those identifying as gender non-conforming without potentially misrepresenting their gender identity.

We used quota sampling in our study. The sample reflected the 2010 U.S. Census data concerning the distribution of age and region of the United States. The age distribution of the sample was: 11.7% ($n = 29$) were 18 – 24 years-old; 17.8% ($n = 44$) were 25–34; 17.4% ($n = 43$) were 35–44; 18.6% ($n = 46$) were 45–54; 17.0% ($n = 42$) were 55–64; and 17.4% ($n = 43$) were 65 years and older. Participants were sampled from various regions of the United States with 15.4% ($n = 38$) from the Northeast, 21.1% ($n = 52$) from the Midwest, 36.8% ($n = 91$) from the South, and 23.5% ($n = 58$) from the West. The number of men and women from each region was roughly the same; however the West had slightly more women than men and the Northeast had slightly more men than women. The religious affiliation breakdown was: 57% ($n = 141$) identified as Christian; 23.1% ($n = 57$) were unaffiliated, agnostic, or atheist; 4.5% ($n = 11$) were Jewish; 1.6% ($n = 4$) were Muslim; 1.2% ($n = 3$) were Buddhist; and 12.6% ($n = 31$) indicated

either "other" or "prefer not to answer."

Our study was a between-subjects design in which participants were randomly assigned to read a neutral prime or religious prime, and they were subsequently measured on various aspects of rape victim perceptions and religiosity. Victim blame and victim credibility were the main dependent variables. Level of religiosity was examined as a moderator and gender was included as a covariate. RMA was explored as both a potential mediator and moderator on the relationship between religiosity and victim blame/credibility measures. Benevolent sexism and hostile sexism were also explored as mediators on the relationship between religiosity and victim blame and credibility.

Procedure and Measures

Prior to collecting data, approval was granted through the Institutional Review Board to ensure compliance with ethical guidelines determined by the American Psychological Association. Participants responded to an electronic questionnaire via Qualtrics, an online survey platform. Participants were randomly assigned to one of two prime conditions where they read either a religious prime ($n = 124$) or a neutral prime ($n = 123$). The religious prime was the first passage of Genesis (World English Bible) that starts with: "In the beginning God created the sky and the earth" and ends after Genesis 2:20. The neutral prime was a passage from a fiction novel (Exile and the Kingdom – Growing Stone short story) that described a scene of a man and his chauffer driving at night. These primes were each approximately 1,200 words and have been used previously in religious priming literature (Van Tongeren, McIntosh, Raad, & Pae, 2013; Van Tongeren et al., 2016).

After reading the prime, participants were asked to briefly summarize the passage. They were required to write at least 150 characters. This was intended to serve as a manipulation

check. It was important to confirm that individuals in the religious prime condition did effectively receive the prime (i.e. they thought about God or religion). When reviewing the data for the effectiveness of the manipulation, only three participants did not respond with any religious language. The data were analyzed both with and without these three participants, and the results were consistent. For this reason, we report on the full dataset.

Following the prime, participants read a 100-word vignette of a sexual assault scenario. The scenario was adapted from a study conducted by Abrams et al. (2003). The woman's name in the vignette was changed from its original because it was similar to the Principal Investigator's name, which appeared on the letter of information. The vignette read:

> Jason and Sarah met and got acquainted at a party thrown by a mutual friend. Since they had a lot in common, they spent the night laughing, dancing, drinking, talking, and flirting with each other. Sarah was pretty intoxicated by the end of the party, so Jason walked her to her apartment where they talked some more and had some coffee. When they got to her room, Sarah started kissing and caressing Jason. Jason then grabbed Sarah and tried to take her clothes off in order to have sex with her. At this point Sarah said no, but Jason kept going and eventually penetrated her (Abrams et al., 2003, p. 114).

After reading the vignette, participants were asked questions on the following measures and in order listed.

Victim credibility. On a 7-point scale from 1 (*not at all*) to 7 (*extremely*), participants were asked to rate the extent to which they thought the victim was honest, trustworthy, likeable, and believable (Sperry & Siegel, 2013). The scale was modified from its original version. Initially, Sperry and Siegel (2013) gave the measure to participants who read an entire testimony

from a rape victim. Due to the ambiguity of the rape scenario in our study, we believed it was impractical to ask participants to rate the victim's confidence or consistency, for instance. For this reason, we used only four of the nine original items. In addition, we included an option to select "not sure" because the participants may not have felt they had enough information to offer such character assessments. Responses of "not sure" were counted as missing data and thus were not included in the composite measure. Internal consistency was high in both the original nine-item version of the scale ($\alpha = .91$) and the present study's four-item version ($\alpha = .90$). Scores were averaged across the four items and higher scores indicated higher perceived credibility.

Victim blame. Six items were used to assess victim blame. On a Likert scale from 1 (*strongly disagree*) to 7 (*strongly agree*), participants were prompted to indicate the level to which they agreed with statements such as "Sarah could have prevented this situation" and "Sarah should had known better." This scale was used previously by Sperry and Siegel (2013) and found to be internally consistent ($\alpha = .90$); similarly, in the present study, alpha equalled .92. Scores were averaged across items so that higher scores indicated stronger victim blame.

Ambivalent sexism. Using the Ambivalent Sexism Inventory (ASI) created by Glick and Fiske (1996), participants were measured on their attitudes surrounding ambivalent sexism (22 items). Ambivalent sexism is composed of two 11-item factors (hostile sexism and benevolent sexism), and it uses a 6-point rating scale from 1 (*disagree strongly*) to 6 (*agree strongly*). Hostile sexism endorses the notion that men are the superior sex and views women as weak, overly-emotional, and incompetent. An example of an item measuring hostile sexism is: "Most women fail to appreciate fully all that men do for them"; in the present study these items displayed an alpha of .87. Benevolent sexism presents women as highly moral beings who should be protected and cherished. An item measuring benevolent sexism is: "Many women have

a quality of purity that few men possess;" the present alpha is .79. When created by Glick and Fiske, the complete ASI produced alphas between .83 and .92 across six different studies. The ASI has demonstrated convergent validity (relating appropriately to the Modern Sexism scale and the Old-Fashioned Sexism scale) along with divergent validity (differing from the Modern Racism scale; Glick & Fiske, 1996). Scores were averaged across items within each subscale such that higher scores indicated higher levels of sexism.

Illinois Rape Myth Acceptance Scale (IRMA). The modified version of the IRMA consists of 22 items designed to measure the extent to which individuals endorse commonly held rape myths (McMahon, & Farmer, 2011; Payne et al., 1999). Participants were asked to rate the extent to which they agreed with statements such as: "A lot of times, girls who say they were raped often led the guy on and then have regrets" and "If a girl doesn't physically fight back, you can't really say it was rape." Participants indicated their agreement using a Likert scale from 1 (*strongly disagree)* to 7 (*strongly agree)*. McMahon and Farmer (2011) found an alpha of .87 when administering the scale to 951 undergraduate students. In the present research, alpha was .96, supporting the internal consistency of the scale. We averaged scores across items so that higher scores indicated stronger endorsement of rape myths. Payne et al. (1999) concluded strong construct validity through a number of studies investigating the association between original IRMA items and other fundamentals of rape acceptance. Predictive validity was also established through accurate presumptions of male sexual aggression and rape proclivity (Payne et al., 1999).

Religiosity. The religiosity scale in the present study was based on the Duke University Religion Index (DUREL; Koenig & Büssing, 2010). For the present study, items were modified and one was added. This measure was intended to gain insight on how integral religion was in

participants' everyday lives. The scale used in the present study contained six items: "I attend a place of worship," "I attend religious services," "I experience situations in which I feel that God or something divine intervenes in my life," "I make decisions based on my religious beliefs," "I think about religious issues," and "I participate in a religious community." Responses were made on a scale from 1 to 5 (1 = *never*, 2 = *rarely*, 3 = *sometimes*, 4 = *often*, 5 = *always*). Exploratory factor analysis was conducted via principle components extraction. The scree plot illustrated that only one component had an eigenvalue greater than 1, and that single component accounted for 77.3% of the total variance. Of note, all item loadings were between .80 and .90, attesting to homogeneity between items. Additionally, the scale produced an alpha of .94.

Religious fundamentalism. The revised 12-item Religious Fundamentalism Scale (RFS; Altemeyer & Hunsberger, 2004) was created to assess a person's convictions about there being one true and unwavering religion. Items include: "God has given humanity a complete, unfailing guide to happiness and salvation, which must be totally followed" and "To lead the best, most meaningful life, one must belong to one, fundamentally true religion." Some items were reverse-coded. The measure was scored using a 9-point scale from 1 (*very strongly disagree*) to 9 (*very strongly agree*). Altemeyer and Hunsberger (2004) determined the revised 12-item scale to be just as internally consistent as the original 20-item scale ($\alpha = .91$). The RFS has demonstrated convergent validity with scales measuring dogmatism and religious ethnocentrism and divergent validity with scales such as racial prejudice (Altemeyer & Hunsberger, 2004). The present study also exhibited an alpha of .91 when using the revised 12-item RFS. Scores were averaged across times so that higher scores reflected stronger endorsement of religious fundatmentalism.

In addition to the main dependent measures we detailed, the survey included demographic questions, including age, gender identity, religious affiliation, and ethnicity.

Participants were fully debriefed and offered resources for any psychological needs that may have surfaced from participating in the survey. They were then given the option to exclude their data from the study.

Analytic Strategy

We used PROCESS macro version 3.4 by Hayes (2013) to test whether the prime condition moderated the relationship bewteen participants' religiosity and rape victim blame (Hypothesis 1a) and credibility (Hypothesis 1b), including gender and age as covariates. Hierarchical linear regression in SPSS was used to test whether benevolent and hostile sexism predicted victim blame (Hypothesis 2). PROCESS was used to examine whether benevolent sexism, hostile sexism, and RMA mediated or moderated the relationship between religiosity and victim blame.

Results

Descriptive Data

Table 1 displays the average scores for men and women on each dependent measure. Men scored higher than women on blame, $t(243) = 2.49$, $p = .01$, $d = 0.32$, benevolent sexism, $t(243) = 1.95$, $p = .05$, $d = 0.25$, and hostile sexism, $t(243) = 2.23$, $p = .03$, $d = 0.28$. Table 1 also displays the correlations between all measures, both bivariate and partial correlations that controlled for age and gender. Victim blame positively correlated with all variables in the study (i.e., religious fundamentalism, religiosity, benevolent and hostile sexism, and RMA), except for credibility which correlated negatively with blame. Religiosity and RFS also positively correlated with all variables except victim credibility for which the correlation was not significant. Counter to previous research (Glick & Fiske, 1996, 2012), there was not a significant correlation between hostile sexism and benevolent sexism ($r(247) = .07$, $p = .25$).

Testing Hypothesis 1

Using the PROCESS macro in SPSS, we tested a model in which participants' religoisity was the predictor variable (x variable) and victim blame was the criterion variable (y variable). The religious prime was included as a moderator and gender and age were included as covariates. This model was statistically significant, $F(5, 236) = 4.55$, $p < .001$. Together this model accounted for 8.79% of the variance in perceptions of victim blame. Consistent with Hypothesis 1a, the prime was found to significantly moderate the relationship between participants' religiosity and victim blame when controlling for gender and age. The two-way interaction between the prime condition and religiosity was statistically significant, $t(240) = -2.15$, $p = .03$, 95% CI [-0.7740, -0.0328] . The relationship between religiosity and victim blame depended on which prime participants received. For participants in the neutral-prime condition, their higher religiosity was associated with great victim blame whereas for participants who received the religious prime, there was no association between their religiosity and victim blame. In the neutral-prime condition, a 1-point higher religiosity score was associated with about a half point increase in victim blame ($b = .478$, $SE = .13$), $t(236) = 3.65$, $p < .001$, 95% CI [0.2200, 0.7355]. In the religious-prime condition, religiosity was not significantly associated with victim blame ($b = .074$, $SE = .14$), $t(236) = .55$, $p = .59$, 95% CI [-0.1931, 0.3417] (see Figure 1).

This model was also run with the Religious Fundamentalism Scale (RFS) as the predictor variable (variable x) and victim blame as the criterion variable (variable y), again including the prime as a moderator and gender and age as covariates. This model was statistically significant, $F(5, 236) = 5.50$, $p < .001$. However, the interaction between RFS and the religious prime was not significant, $t = 0.97$, $p = .33$, 95% CI [-0.3498, 0.1188]. There were significant main effects of both gender and RFS on victim blame. Men scored significantly higher than women on victim

blame, $t = 3.02$, $p = .003$, 95% CI [-1.1291, -0.2382]. Higher RFS also significantly predicted

victim blame, $t = 2.16$, $p = .03$, 95% CI [0.0379, 0.8170]. Age did not significantly predict victim

blame, $t = 0.25$, $p = .81$, 95% CI [-0.0117, 0.0150]. Together this model accounted for 10.43% of

the variance in blame.

We also ran the model with credibility as the criterion variable (and religiosity as the

predictor), but it did not yield significant results, $F(5, 190) = 1.28$, $p = .28$. Thus, Hypothesis 1b

was not supported. Every model in which blame was included as the criterion variable was also

run with credibility as the criterion. In all cases in which credibility was the criterion, the models

were not significant. For this reason, credibility is not further reported in the results. Reasons

why credibility may not have yielded significant findings are explored in the discussion section.

Testing Hypothesis 2

We conducted hierarchical multiple regression to examine whether hostile and

benevolent sexism predicted victim blame beyond gender and religiosity. Gender and religiosity

were entered into Block 1, benevolent sexism was added in Block 2, and hostile sexism was

added into Block 3 of the model. Together, gender and religiosity explained 6.4% of the variance

in victim blame. Benevolent sexism did not significantly add to the percent of variance explained

($\beta = .23$, $p = .10$, $\Delta R^2 = .01$). Hostile sexism added an additional 30% of the variance explained,

beyond the variables already in the model ($\beta = .96$, $p < .001$, $\Delta R^2 = .30$). In sum, although

stronger ensorsement of benevolent and hostile sexism each was associated with greater victim

blame, only hostile sexism was related to victim blame above and beyond what was accounted

for by gender and religiosity, lending partial support for Hypothesis 2.

Exploratory Analyses

PROCESS macro in SPSS was used to examine possible mediation effects. A simple

mediation analysis was run using ordinary least squares path analysis to examine whether RMA mediated the effect of religiosity on victim blame (see Figure 2). Religiosity significantly predicted RMA, and higher scores on RMA were associated with higher scores on victim blame. A bootstrap confidence interval based on 5,000 bootstrap samples for the indirect effect did not include zero, indicating a significant indirect effect. The direct effect of religiosity on blame was not significant. These analyses show that RMA mediated the relationship between religiosity and victim blame.

Benevolent sexism was also explored as mediator on the relationship between religiosity and victim blame. Religiosity significantly predicted benevolent sexism, $a = .25$, $p < .001$, 95% CI [0.1664, 0.3380] and benevolent sexism predicted victim blame, $b = .27$, $p = .05$, 95% CI [-0.0003, 0.5466]. However, the direct effect of religiosity on victim blame was still significant, c' = .23, $p = .03$, 95% CI [0.0292, 0.4268]. In addition, the indirect effect of religiosity on victim blame was not significant, $ab = .07$, 95% CI [-0.0031, 0.1487], indicating that benevolent sexism did not mediate the relationship between religiosity and victim blame.

We also conducted a mediation analysis to examine whether hostile sexism mediated the relationship between religiosity and victim blame (see Figure 3). Religiosity significantly predicted hostile sexism and hostile sexism predicted victim blame. Although there was a significant indirect effect of religiosity on victim blame, there was also a significant direct effect of religiosity on victim blame. This pattern suggests that hostile sexism mediates the relationship between religiosity and victim blame, but the direct effect is also significant.

Benevolent sexism, hostile sexism, and RMA were also explored as moderators on the relationship between religiosity and victim blame. None of those models was statistically significant.

Discussion

The literature poses a complicated relationship among religiosity, religious priming, and rape victim blame. Despite religion exhibiting a trend of blaming sexual assault victims (Bryant, 2006; Lidzy, 2005; Suarez & Gadalla, 2010), religious priming has elicited prosocial behaviors in numerous settings (Johnson et al., 2015; Shariff & Norenzayan, 2007). In light of this paradox, we wondered what impact religious priming would have on perceptions and attributions of rape victims.

The present study exhibited positive correlations between religiosity with both victim blame and RMA. These relationships were consistent with previous research suggesting religiosity to be a substantial predictor of RMA (Bryant, 2006; Lidzy, 2005; Navarro & Tewksbury, 2017). Our findings also demonstrated the potential for religious priming to moderate that relationship between religiosity and rape victim blame. Although there was a significant positive association between religiosity and victim blame in the neutral-prime condition, there was no such association between religiosity and victim blame in the religious-prime condition. The religious prime literature has demonstrated that religious priming increases various prosocial behaviors (Johnson et al., 2015; Shariff & Norenzayan, 2007; Tong and Teo, 2018). The results of our study suggest these benefits could extend to rape victim perceptions. A potential reason behind this process could be that reminding an individual of their personal values could increase empathy toward a rape victim. Religion or the religious prime could also produce an increase in positive affect, leading them to more favorable judgments of a victim.

We also hypothesized that benevolent and hostile sexism would predict victim blame. Significant correlations were found between both benevolent and hostile sexism with victim blame. However, in the hierarchical linear regression, benevolent sexism did not add to the

variance explained beyond gender and religiosity. Hostile sexism added an additional 30% of the variance explained in victim blame, above and beyond gender, religiosity, and benevolent sexism.

Exploratory analyses revealed that RMA mediated the relationship between religiosity and victim blame. Hostile sexism also appeared to mediate the relationship between religiosity and victim blame (although there remained a significant direct relationship between religiosity and victim blame). Benevolent sexism did not mediate the relationship between religiosity and victim blame. RMA, benevolent sexism, and hostile sexism did not act as moderators on the relationship between religiosity and victim blame.

Limitations and Future Directions

The present models were run with victim credibility as the dependent variable but they consistently lacked statistical significance. This could be due to low power because we lost 48 participants in our credibility measure by categorzing responses of "not sure" as missing data (leaving a sample of 199 participants on analyses with credibility). In hindsight, it may have been unreasonable to ask participants to offer character judgments based on such little information as a 100-word vignette. However, if participants had been quick to make assumptions about the victim, this scale could detect such patterns.

The religiosity scale we used was based on the DUREL (Koenig & Büssing, 2010) and had high internal consistency and certainly high face validity. However, this specific scale has not been assessed for other forms of validity and reliability on a separate sample. It would be important to conduct a psychometric evaluation of this measure before using it for future studies.

In hindsight, the use of the manipulation check could have been executed more precisely. After reading the passages that served as a neutral or religious prime, we wanted to ensure that

the religious prime effectively elicited ideas of God or religion and that the neutral prime did not. When going through the data, it became clear that the criterion for being excluded would be difficult to solidify. It was not until after we received the data that we discussed whether we wanted participants to fully comprehend the biblical passage or simply register that it was about God. For example, some participants included God in their open-ended response but did not accurately describe the passage (e.g., "This was a boring passage from the Bible about God"). Some participants copied and pasted one sentence about God so that they could move on in the survey (because the survey required them to write at least 150 characters). These responses are clearly careless, but technically they did mention God or the Bible and thus were considered substantial enough.

There are also recognized drawbacks of quota sampling. Because it was important to hit certain demographic marks, Qualtrics was able to attain a diverse sample without collecting a surplus of participants. Unfortunately, this compelled Qualtrics, for example, to reject potential male participants once we had already met the quota for men in the study. It is possible that this technique could pollute the randomization of the sample. Limitations aside, the results of our study provide support for the utility of religious priming in reducing rape victim blame. Ours is the first known investigation to examine the impact of religious priming on perceptions of rape victims.

The results of our study leave room for further investigation. It would be interesting to explore the nature of the religious prime and test its impact on schema retrieval. For the present study, we chose a religious prime that had been used in previous priming literature, and it served as a general biblical reference. Experimenters could use different scripture excerpts as a manipulation (e.g., passages speaking to nonjudgment, charity, or sexual purity) and test if this

has a contrasting impact on victim-blame levels. This has been explored by priming a forgiving, rather than a punishing, God and assessing subsequent judgments (DeBono, Sharif, Poole, & Muraven, 2017). It was further investigated using primes related to justice versus forgiveness in religious contexts (Van Tongeren, Welch, Davis, Green, & Worthington, 2012). It would also be important to examine if religiosity increases victim blame only among certain groups because Navarro and Tewksbury (2019) found religion to be associated with RMA, but only among non-athletes. Another distinction could be made between the motivations behind an individual's sense of religiosity. Because religiosity could encompass both intrinsic and extrinsic motivations, it could be of value to see if these two forces interact differently with victim blame. This line of research could lay out a framework for a more precise pathway of religion's multi-faceted influence on judgments and perceptions of victims as well as perpetrators.

Priming other schemas could also be used to understand victim perceptions. Our method could be replicated to test different personal values, such as political stance. It may be that identifying as conservative or liberal differentially predicts rape victim blame. If so, priming could be manipulated to examine its effects on this relationship. Additionally, it would be important to understand the threshold of what would prompt the retrieval of one's religion schema. There is a possibility that the process of taking an oath over the Bible could be enough to activate this process, but further investigation would be necessary to say for sure. Research on schemas and stereotypes suggests that individuals depend on schemas when faced with ambiguity. In our study, the rape scenario was intentionally vague for this reason. We were curious to know when participants are presented with more information on the case if religious priming would still be effective.

Practice Implications

Religious priming could be an asset to lawyers supporting rape victims in court if they found a way to prompt a juror's religion schema. This strategy would be particularly salient in U.S. states with high rates of religiosity. Given that female college freshmen are the demographic most at risk for sexual assault (Carey, Durney, Shepardson, & Carey, 2015), it would be particularly relevant for rape victims within religious institutions, such as Christian colleges or Catholic high schools. The present study and previous literature supports the link between religiosity and rape victim blame (Sheldon & Parent, 2002; Simonson & Subich, 1999). However, according to our results, bringing up religious constructs could reduce victim blame, particularly among highly religious participants. Therein lies the true paradox: The more religious someone is, the more likely they are to have negative perceptions of victims unless they are reminded of that personal value beforehand.

Conclusion

Victims of sexual assault are frequently blamed for behaviors in which they engaged before, during, and after a sexual assault (e.g., alcohol and drug use, the way they are dressed, flirting, not reporting the incident immediately or at all). Victims are often afraid to report due to fears that they will be blamed (Ahrens, 2006). Victim blame and self-blame lead to higher levels of depression, anxiety, and suicide ideation (Orchowski & Gidycz, 2015; Ullman & Peter-Hagene, 2014). There is a large and important body of literature elucidating factors that lead individuals to blame victims of sexual assault, but there is a dearth of research focusing on ways to reduce victim blame. To our knowledge, our study is the first to report on a potential mechanism for reducing negative perceptions of victims of sexual assault. There is much more to learn about when and how religious priming exerts its influence in the context of rape victim blame, but our study is an important first step in this line of inquiry.

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Table 1

Descriptive Statistics and Bivariate and Partial Correlations for Study Variables

Variable	Men M (SD)	Women M (SD)	Correlations						
			1	2	3	4	5	6	7
1. Victim blame	4.10 (1.75)	3.54 (1.79)	--	-.22**	.25***	.26**	.20**	.57***	.76*:
2. Credibility	5.22 (1.35)	5.04 (1.50)	-.20**	--	-.05	.15*	.24***	-.16*	-.09
3. Religious fundamentalism	4.75 (1.95)	4.99 (1.79)	.25***	-.07	--	.58***	.30***	.23***	.21*:
4. Religiosity	2.83 (1.26)	2.88 (1.09)	.20**	.14	.58***	--	.38***	.18*	.32*:
5. Benevolent sexism	3.58 (0.89)	3.37 (0.81)	.18**	.25***	.28***	.35***	--	.08	.22*
6. Hostile sexism	3.53 (1.02)	3.24 (1.04)	.59***	-.15*	.27***	.14*	.07	--	.73*:
7. Rape myth acceptance	3.39 (1.46)	3.14 (1.40)	.75***	-.09	.22***	.24***	.24***	.72***	--

Note. Values below the diagonal of the correlation matrix indicate bivariate correlations; values above the diagonal indicate partial correlations, controlling for age and gender (female = 0, male = 1). Ratings for Blame, Credibility, and Rape Myth Acceptance were made on a 7-point Likert scale (1 = *strongly disagree*, 7 = *strongly agree*). Ratings for the RFS were made on a 9-point Likert scale (1 = *very strongly disagree*, 9 = *very strongly agree*). Judgments for the Benevolent Sexism Scale and Hostile Sexism Scale were made on a 6-point Likert scale (1 = *disagree strongly*, 6 = *agree strongly*).
*p < .05. ** p < .01, ***p <.001.

Table 2

Hierarchical Multiple Regression Examining Gender, Religiosity, and Sexism

Variable	Block 1			Block 2			Block 3		
	B	*SE B*	*ß*	*B*	*SE B*	*ß*	*B*	*SE B*	*ß*
Gender	.58	.22	.16*	.53	.22	.15*	.24	.19	.07
Religiosity	.30	.09	.20**	.24	.10	.16*	.13	.08	.08
Benevolent sexism				.23	.14	.11	.22	.12	.12
Hostile sexism							.96	.09	.56***
ΔR^2		.06			.01			.30	
F for ΔR^2		8.23**			2.77			112.99**	

Note. Gender (female = 0, male = 1).
*p < .05. **p < .01. ***p < .001.
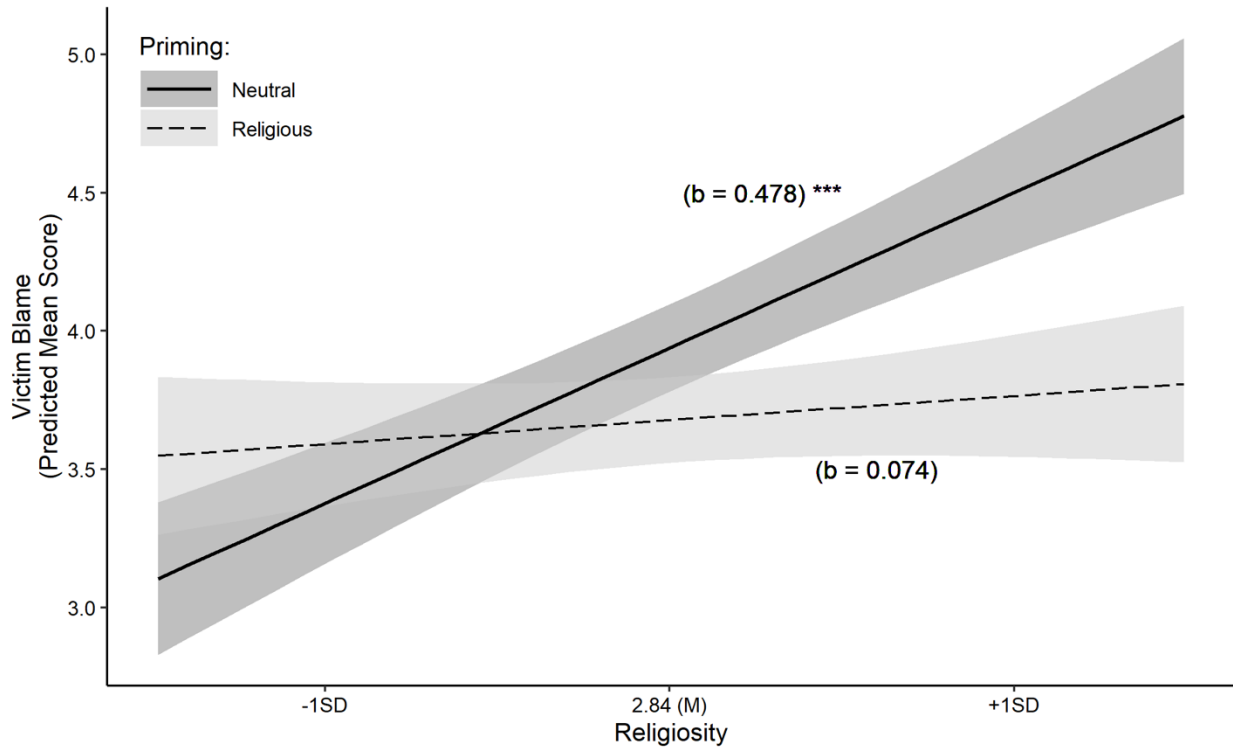
Figure 1. Regression model predicting victim blame based on priming and religiosity. In the

neutral-prime condition, one point higher on religiosity was associated with a .478 increase in

victim blame. In the religious-prime condition, religiosity was not significantly associated with
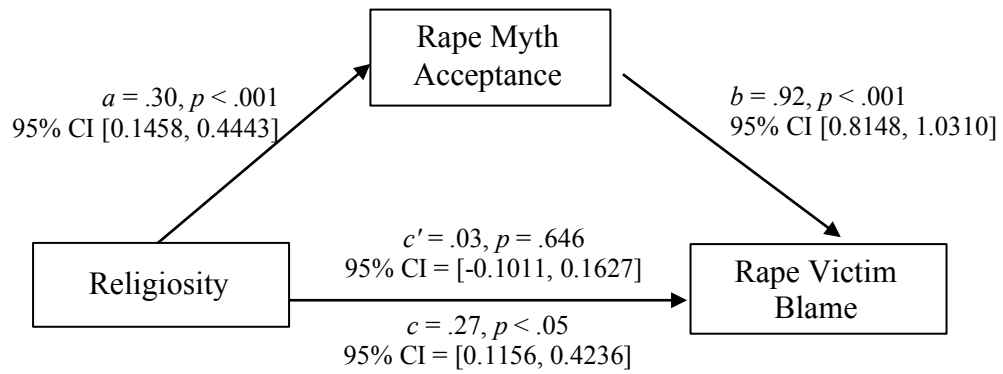
victim blame.

Figure 2. Rape Myth Acceptance (RMA) mediated the relationship between religiosity and victim blame. The indirect path (ab) was statistically significant (*p* < .05).
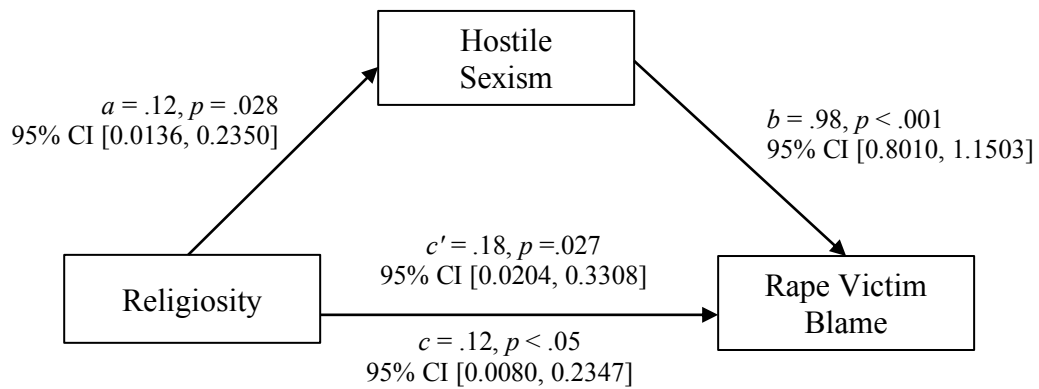
Figure 3. In this model, the indirect effect (ab) was significant; the direct effect (c') was also

significant (*p* = .027). Whereas Hostile Sexism mediates the relationship between Religiosity and

Rape Victim Blame, there remains a significant direct effect between Religiosity and Rape

Victim Blame.

Neutral Prime Passage

The automobile swung clumsily around the curve in the red sandstone trail, now a mass of mud. The headlights suddenly picked out in the night – first on one side of the road, then on the other – two wooden huts with sheet-metal roofs. On the right near the second one, a tower of coarse beams could be made out in the light fog. From the top of the tower a metal cable, invisible at its starting-point, shone as it sloped down into the light from the car before disappearing behind the embankment that blocked the road. The car slowed down and stopped a few yards from the huts. The man who emerged from the seat to the right of the driver labored to extricate himself from the car. As he stood up, his huge, broad frame lurched a little. In the shadow beside the car, solidly planted on the ground and weighed down by fatigue, he seemed to be listening to the idling motor. Then he walked in the direction of the embankment and entered the cone of light from the headlights. He stopped at the top of the slope, his broad back outlined against the darkness. After a moment he turned around. In the light from the dashboard he could see the chauffeur's black face, smiling. The man signaled and the chauffeur turned off the motor. At once a vast cool silence fell over the trail and the forest. Then the sound of the water could be heard. The man looked at the river below him, visible solely as a broad dark motion, flecked with occasional shimmers. A denser motionless darkness, far beyond, must be the other bank. By looking fixedly, however, one could see on that still bank a yellowish light like an oil lamp in the distance. The big man turned back toward the car and nodded. The chauffeur switched off the lights, turned them on again, then blinked them regularly. On the embankment the man appeared and disappeared, tall and more massive each time he came back to life. Suddenly, on the other bank of the river, a lantern held up by an invisible arm swung back and forth several times. At a final signal from the lookout, the chauffeur turned off his lights once and for all. The car and the man disappeared into the night. With the lights out, the river was almost visible – or at least a few of its long liquid muscles shining intermittently. On each side of the road, the dark masses of forest foliage stood out against the sky and seemed very near. The fine rain that had soaked the trail an hour earlier was still hovering in the warm air, intensifying the silence and immobility of this broad clearing in the virgin forest. In the black sky misty stars flickered.

Material: Religious Prime Passage

In the beginning, God created the heavens and the earth. The earth was formless and empty. Darkness was on the surface of the deep and God's Spirit was hovering over the surface of the waters.

God said, "Let there be light," and there was light. God saw the light, and saw that it was good. God divided the light from the darkness. God called the light "day", and the darkness he called "night". There was evening and there was morning, the first day.

God said, "Let there be an expanse in the middle of the waters, and let it divide the waters from the waters." God made the expanse, and divided the waters which were under the expanse from the waters which were above the expanse; and it was so. God called the expanse "sky". There was evening and there was morning, a second day.

God said, "Let the waters under the sky be gathered together to one place, and let the dry land appear;" and it was so. God called the dry land "earth", and the gathering together of the waters he called "seas". God saw that it was good. God said, "Let the earth yield grass, herbs yielding seeds, and fruit trees bearing fruit after their kind, with their seeds in it, on the earth;" and it was so. The earth yielded grass, herbs yielding seed after their kind, and trees bearing fruit, with their seeds in it, after their kind; and God saw that it was good. There was evening and there was morning, a third day.

God said, "Let there be lights in the expanse of the sky to divide the day from the night; and let them be for signs to mark seasons, days, and years; and let them be for lights in the expanse of the sky to give light on the earth;" and it was so. God made the two great lights: the greater light to rule the day, and the lesser light to rule the night. He also made the stars. God set them in the expanse of the sky to give light to the earth, and to rule over the day and over the night, and to divide the light from the darkness. God saw that it was good. There was evening and there was morning, a fourth day.

God said, "Let the waters abound with living creatures, and let birds fly above the earth in the open expanse of the sky." God created the large sea creatures and every living creature that moves, with which the waters swarmed, after their kind, and every winged bird after its kind. God saw that it was good. God blessed them, saying, "Be fruitful, and multiply, and fill the waters in the seas, and let birds multiply on the earth." There was evening and there was morning, a fifth day.

Victim Credibility Measure

Using the scale below from 1 (not at all) to 7 (extremely), please rate the extent to which you believe that Sarah exhibited the following traits. Please choose the corresponding number.

	(Strongly Disagree) 1	2	3	4	5	6	(Strongly Agree) 7	(Not Sure) 8
Honest								
Trustworthy								
Likeable								
Believable								