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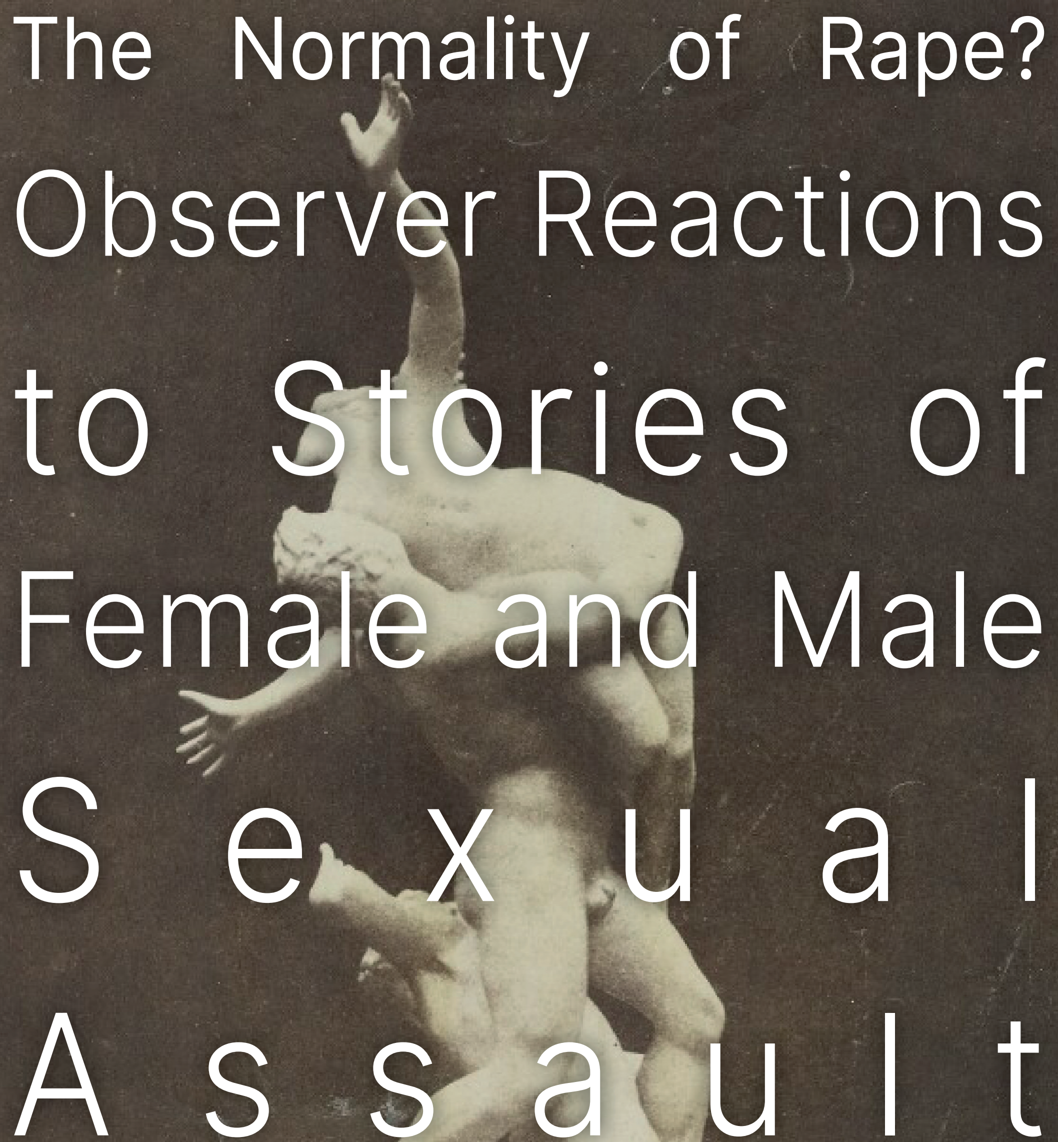
The Normality of Rape? Observer Reactions to Stories of Female and Male Sexual Assault



Eva Mulder

The Normality of Rape?

Observer Reactions to Stories of Female and Male Sexual Assault

Eva Mulder

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Image on the front cover: Statuette of “The Rape of the Sabines” after Giambologna, on a round tabletop, Matilda Talbot 1934, Schaaf no. 1865, Image provided by National Science and Media Museum.

The Normality of Rape?

Observer Reactions to Stories of Female and Male Sexual Assault

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“People have one night stands every day, stop calling it rape” (co-worker)
“You deserved it, you flirted with him and led them on” (ex-boyfriend)
“Well… how much did you have to drink?” (friend)
“Boys will be boys, there’s nothing we can do” (former school)

“Men can’t get raped” (acquaintance)
“Man up” (ex-fiancé)
“You liked it though right?” (ex-boyfriend)
“That doesn’t make sense (…)!” (parents)

Introduction

In 2011, Grace Brown created the photography project 'Project Unbreakable', which featured portraits of women and men who had experienced sexual violence holding up signs with handwritten text (Project Unbreakable, 2017). In accordance with the aim of the project, the words on the signs were mainly quotes from the direct perpetrators of the violence. Yet many participants also chose to include other people's (negative) reactions to their disclosure of sexual assault, presumably because they had made a lasting impression. The previous page displays several of these reactions from social surroundings, shared by female (first four quotes) and male (last four quotes) participants. Since I started working on my dissertation, the topic of social reactions to (alleged) victims[1] of sexual assault has seen a spurt in social and academic attention, most notably following the rise of the #MeToo movement in 2017.[2] However, both the realization that people at times seem inclined to respond negatively to the suffering of others, and the question why this might be so, have occupied academic research for much longer (Heider, 1958; Lerner & Simmons, 1966). With many questions still left unanswered, this dissertation aims to contribute to the investigation of the why and how of negative social reactions (henceforth also: observer reactions or third-party reactions) to victims of sexual violence.

Negative reactions by the social surroundings of a victim are by no means an exception (Ullman, 2010). Indeed, "there is a curious ambivalence in our reactions to victims. While pity and concern are the *normatively prescribed* responses to victims in our society, we may also derogate victims, holding them at least partly responsible for having been victimized" (Howard, 1984a, p. 270, emphasis added). Negative social reactions include, but are not limited to, blaming, derogating, or distancing from the victim, as well as denying or trivializing the victimization experience (Hafer & Bègue, 2005; Lerner, 1980).

Related to the means through which a victim shares their experience, the social surroundings that can interact with or react to the victim encompass a large group of people. Research has been conducted, for instance, on reactions to victims by criminal justice authorities, (mental) health personnel, and victim support organizations (e.g., R. Campbell, 1998; 2006; Koss, 2000; Ullman, 2010), and by close others such as family, friends, and colleagues (e.g., R. Campbell, Ahrens et al., 2001; Filipas & Ullman, 2001; Ullman, 2010). In recent years, sharing one's victimization experience on an online platform has become more common, prompting an increase of research into reactions by a wider (mostly online) public of unacquainted others (Bogen et al., 2019; Mulder & Bosma, 2018; Worthington, 2020).[3] The focus in this dissertation is on sense-

[1] In this dissertation, I use the word 'victim', rather than for instance 'survivor', to refer to a person who has experienced interpersonal victimization. At times, the word is meant to serve as a 'neutral' descriptor, but it is also employed because part of this thesis' interest lies precisely in the investigation of 'victim' as a category or stereotype (Loseke, 1999).

[2] "MeToo" was originally coined by activist Tarana Burke in 2006 to emphasize the scope of sexual violence and express solidarity with women and girls who had suffered sexual abuse, assault, and harassment (Me too., n.d.). The phrase was popularized as a hashtag by actor Alyssa Milano (Milano, 2017).

[3] For this reason, Victim Support Netherlands launched the campaign #socialvictim *(#socialslachtoffer)* in February 2019 to raise awareness of the increasingly frequent phenomenon of non-acquainted third parties responding to the victimization of others via social media (Slachtofferhulp Nederland, 2019).

making practices and reactions to stories of sexual victimization by the broad and 'non-professional' public.

It is a well-established finding that third-party reactions to a victim's story can aid the victim's process of recovery, but can also lead to experiences of secondary victimization (R. Campbell, 2008; R. Campbell & Raja, 1999; Orchowski et al., 2013; Sylaska & K. Edwards, 2014). Secondary victimization describes the phenomenon in which observer reactions such as victim blame, derogation, and distancing result in the aggravation of a victim's suffering in the aftermath of victimization (Orth, 2002). This phenomenon is found to be so prominent in cases of sexual assault that the term 'second rape' has been coined to refer to the treatment of alleged rape victims, particularly by the legal and medical system (R. Campbell, Wasco et al., 2001; Madigan & Gamble, 1991). However, social reactions by non-professional others may have as much, if not more, of an impact on victims as the reactions of professionals do (Filipas & Ullman, 2001). For instance, Ullman (1996) found that positive responses and emotional support from friends were associated with better recovery compared to similar reactions from other support sources. Additionally, whereas relatively few victims of sexual violence report to the police or seek professional help, significantly more share their experience with a close other such as a family member or friend (B. Fisher et al., 2003; Ullman, 1999; 2010).[4] As such, these social reactions may form the only source of feedback for victims who do not report or seek professional help. It seems with good reason then that philosopher Linda Martín Alcoff (2018) suggests that "the social response to rape needs to be measured not just in relation to what occurs in the courts but also in relation to general public attitudes" (p. 9).

Besides influencing the process of recovery and the risk of secondary victimization of the directly affected victim, observer reactions also contribute to understandings and portrayals of victimization in general. Reactions to stories that were shared during #MeToo provide particularly clear examples of this. An interesting aspect of the #MeToo movement is that it largely plays out in an accessible (online) public realm, meaning that a diverse group of participants can contribute to the discourse of sexual violence and victimization (Cohen, 2014).[5] Observer reactions in this way *produce* knowledge (Foucault, 1976) about what counts as (real) victimization and who should be considered a (legitimate) victim (Best, 1999; 2016; Dunn, 2008; Ryan, 2011). At the same time, these discourses form the pool of 'common knowledge' that people – including victims –

[4] It has been estimated that (in Western countries) approximately 15 percent of sexual assaults are reported to the police (Krahé, 2016). The large discrepancy between the number of cases reported and the number of cases for which an accused is subsequently convicted has been termed the 'justice gap' (Temkin & Krahé, 2008).

[5] 'Discourse' has been described by philosopher Michel Foucault as "a group of statements which provide a language of talking about – a way of representing knowledge about – a particular topic at a particular historical moment (…) Discourse is about the production of knowledge through language" (Hall, 2001, p.72).

(strategically) draw upon to make sense of sexual victimization.[6] In other words, these discourses form part of what Loseke (1999) calls "the *social resources* for sense-making" (p. 131).[7]

In sum, observer reactions not only influence whether victims feel supported (or not) in the aftermath of victimization, but also how victims may come to interpret the event itself. Both are likely to affect how victims cope with the (consequences of) the victimization, and how they integrate the experience into their life story (Pemberton et al., 2019). Furthermore, observer reactions conceivably reflect and contribute to our general understanding of sexual victimization and victimhood. For these reasons, I consider the further study of (negative) observer reactions, including what produces or enables them, to be a worthwhile endeavor.

When seeking to explain *why* observers may react negatively to victims, most victimological and social psychological (experimental) research has drawn upon the theoretical frameworks of the Just World Theory (JWT; Lerner, 1980; Lerner & Simmons, 1966), and, to a lesser extent, the Defensive Attribution Theory (DAT; Shaver, 1970; 1985; Walster, 1966). The JWT posits that negative observer reactions may result from observers' threatened belief that people get what they deserve. The DAT suggests that observers attribute responsibility in ways that serve to avoid being blamed for harm themselves, either now or in the future. Both theories thus locate the source of negative observer reactions in needs or motives internal to the individual observer, i.e., the justice motive and the tendency toward self-protection, respectively. Multiple studies have demonstrated that observers' inherent needs and motives indeed play a role in shaping their reactions toward victims (overviews in Grubb & Harrower, 2008; van der Bruggen & Grubb, 2014).

However, empirical studies that employ theoretical frameworks like the JWT and DAT generally fail to acknowledge the social context in which the observer is embedded, and in which discourses around victimization, including (in)appropriate responses to it, are shaped (Anderson & Doherty, 2008; Lea, 2007). The essence of this realization, namely that concepts such as victimization and justice are socially constructed and made meaningful, is deeply ingrained in disciplines like cultural and gender studies. For many scholars working in these fields, "language and discourse are held to be 'constitutive' of meaning – culturally shared linguistic resources constrain and enable particular ways of seeing and experiencing the world" (Gavey, 2005, p. 173). The fact that the construction of meaning is a social and discursive practice necessarily implies that our understanding of a given concept is hardly ever unchanging or unchangeable (Hacking, 1999). For instance, perceptions of what is (un)just – as integrated in the law and the individual and social mind – co-varies with place and time (Lerner, 1980). Many experiences that are perceived as victimizing here and now, including (many forms of) sexual assault, were not in the past or are not

[6] Although sense-making of people who have themselves experienced or perpetrated sexual violence has not been the focus of this dissertation, victims and perpetrators clearly draw upon mostly the same discourses as observers do to describe and explain sexual violence and victimhood (e.g., Ehrlich, 2001; Lea & Auburn, 2001; Leisenring, 2011).

[7] Loseke (1999) further describes that *social* implies that the resources "are more or less widely shared, rather than something available to only one person", and that they are *resources* because they "aren't things we *must* use, only things that are socially available" (p. 131).

elsewhere (Alcoff, 2018; Best, 2016; Freedman, 2013). This must necessarily also lead to the assertion that "a victim status is not fixed, but socially constructed, mobilized and malleable" (Daly, 2014, p. 378).

How one experiences or witnesses victimization thus depends on how one categorizes an event, which is in turn contingent on the "culturally available models and metaphors" (Alcoff, 2014; Brison, 2002, p. 31; Lakoff & Johnson, 1980). The culturally available models and metaphors that are likely to shape social reactions to victims of sexual violence are those relating to victimhood, sexual violence, and gender. Relevant to this dissertation are hence the cultural ideas about who counts as a legitimate victim (Christie, 1986; Lamb, 1999; Mardorossian, 2014), and how those victimized by crime (should) subsequently behave, express their emotions, and narrate their stories (e.g., Dunn, 2010; Polletta, 2009). Additionally relevant are cultural notions of what is 'just' sex (Cahill, 2016; Gavey, 2005; MacKinnon, 1989), what typifies 'real' rape (Estrich, 1987), and what are normal ways of being and acting like a man or woman (Prentice & Carranza, 2002; Rudman & Glick, 2001; West & Zimmerman, 1987).

What such models, metaphors, and discourses of victimhood, sexual violence, and gender predominantly do is to construct 'the norm' in a given society. The norm – as the representation of what is 'normal' or 'normative' – has great influence on how we experience the world, identify ourselves, and engage with others (Alcoff, 2018; Canguilhem, 1966; Foucault, 1976). Its power derives in part from the peculiarity that the concept is imbued with at least two concurrent meanings. First, it functions as a descriptive term to indicate what is usual, typical, or standard: imitative of the (statistical) average. Second, it functions as a prescriptive term that subtly merges with what is considered good and desirable: depicting 'the way it should be' (Bear & Knobe, 2016; Davis, 1997). Additionally, what is 'normal' is presumably easily explainable but, unlike the 'abnormal', does not *need* explanation (Presser, 2013). As will be elaborated upon in the following section, normative ideas related to victimhood, sexual violence, and gender are hence expected to form a substantial part of the breeding ground for (negative) observer reactions.

Research Aims

Whereas research has convincingly demonstrated the existence of negative observer reactions and their potential negative impact on victims,[8] less is known about *how* these observer reactions come about and/or what enables their expression. This seems in part to result from a neglect of the socio-cultural context in which observers make sense of victimization and form their

[8] In the remainder of this dissertation, I use 'negative observer reactions' in the context of sexual violence in a broad manner to describe observer reactions that, amongst others, normalize sexual violence, exonerate perpetrators, and construct victims as accountable or in some way 'other' (also resembling definitions or rape myths by e.g., Gerger et al., 2007; Lonsway & Fitzgerald, 1994). I would argue that an observer reaction can be labeled 'negative' without necessarily requiring a victim who feels negatively impacted by the reaction.

judgments of victims. The current thesis seeks to address these issues in accordance with three specific aims.

Aim I: To explore the role of normativity in observer reactions to victims of sexual assault

As stated above, the theory most commonly used to explain negative reactions to victims is the JWT, which locates the source of negative reactions in observers' violated justice beliefs (Lerner, 1980). However, isolating the causal or enabling mechanisms of negative reactions within the individual observer may overlook the role of the broader socio-cultural context in the construal of what counts as (real) victimization and who as (legitimate) victim (Anderson & Doherty, 2008). Additionally, (negative) reactions to victims are likely to be affected by more than solely a perceived violation of justice (Bosma, 2019; van Dijk, 2009; 2020), particularly in the case of sexual victimization (Milesi et al., 2020; Niemi & Young, 2016; Temkin & Krahé, 2008).[9]

A review of the relevant literature (e.g., Ellison & Munro, 2009a; Hackett et al., 2008; Howard, 1984a; Krahé, 2016; McKimmie et al., 2014) suggests that reactions to (victims of) sexual violence are extensively influenced by our ideas of what is normal. I generally refer to these ideas as 'normative expectations', by which I mean widely endorsed expectations of how things are, and more implicitly, how things should (and should not) be in the world. In this dissertation, the focus of these normative expectations is on the stereotypical conceptions around sex and sexual violence, victimhood, and gender.

Normativity may play a role in social reactions to victims in a number of ways. First, when the type of victimization is in line with normative expectations, it might be justified, trivialized, or normalized to such an extent that little to no moral outrage and subsequent action is provoked (Rozée, 1993). Various authors have pointed out that the 'normality' or commonness of a crime may cause it to be seen as less severe (e.g., Deming et al., 2013; MacKinnon, 1989). Erez and Rogers (1999), for instance, note that "the frequently encountered harm, even if initially acknowledged to be inherently serious, loses some of its aura of seriousness over time, as other similar cases are encountered" (p. 223). Deming et al. (2013) similarly found that when participants perceived a depicted scenario of forced sex as more common, they were less likely to label it sexual assault or rape. Additionally, Doherty and Anderson (2004) found that participants expected victims to suffer less when rape was assumed to resemble normative sexual practices of the targeted victim.

Second, research has demonstrated that victims and victimization experiences that are considered non-stereotypical or abnormal may provoke negative responses from social surroundings (Krahé, 2016). Many studies have manipulated variables that relate to stereotypical notions of what real rape and legitimate victimhood look like, linked for instance to rape scripts

[9] Alternatively, if one wishes to attribute the cause of negative reactions to (violated) ideas of justice, then it should at least be acknowledged that 'justice' is not an static and objective concept, but is instead socially construed and hence influenced by the socio-cultural context in which it is employed (Lerner, 1980).

and myths, and gender and/or victim stereotypes (e.g., Capezza & Arriaga, 2008; McKimmie et al., 2014; Schuller et al., 2010). Specific examples include studies that have manipulated variables relating to the victim's alcohol consumption, appearance, sexual history, and resistance (overviews in Gravelin et al., 2019; Whatley, 1996), the victim's gender and sexual orientation (overview in van der Bruggen & Grubb, 2014), and the type of rape (mostly stranger vs. acquaintance rape: overview in Grubb & Harrower, 2008). Related to the manipulation of these variables are studies that explore the predictive impact of traditional gender role attitudes, homophobia, and rape myth acceptance (e.g., Davies et al., 2012; Hammond et al., 2011; White & Yamawaki, 2009). Such studies generally indicate that participants who endorse more traditional or stereotypical beliefs about sexual violence, gender, and sexuality are more inclined to react negatively to victims (Grubb & Turner, 2012), especially in less stereotypical cases of sexual victimization (Temkin & Krahé, 2008). Explanations for findings in these studies, however, are not often related explicitly to broader aspects of normativity. For instance, studies that focus on the significance of rape myths generally do so through the inclusion of rape myth acceptance scales (Burt, 1980; Lonsway & Fitzgerald, 1994; Suarez & Gadalla, 2010). These studies thus employ the construct as an *individual* attitude – any person can accept rape myths to a greater or lesser extent – rather than emphasizing rape myths as *cultural* myths that condone rape (Lea, 2007). As summarized by Anderson and Doherty (2008):

> Consistent with the tradition of liberal theorizing in mainstream academic psychology, (…) most of the theory development in rape-perception work is concerned with explaining any observed extraneous factor effects in terms of *individual differences between observers*, assumed to emerge from differences in attitudes of other dispositional features as opposed to situating explanations for rape in cultural or societal conditions and processes. (p. 34)

Again, such tendencies of observer internalization may obscure the complexity and dynamics of the ways in which observer reactions are shaped by, for instance, socio-cultural prescriptions of the normal.

A particularly strong argument for the role of normativity seems to be the fact that victims are not simply judged by the 'concrete' injustice or victimization they experienced, but also by how they conduct themselves in the *aftermath* (Dunn, 2010; van Dijk, 2009; 2020). Victims are expected, for instance, to immediately report their victimization, and to fully cooperate with the police (Masser et al., 2010). Several experimental studies have conducted research specifically on the effect of *expectancy violations* on reactions to victims. These studies have manipulated the emotional demeanor of victims in the aftermath of victimization, and found that observers reacted more negatively to victims when victims' emotional expressions did not match observer expectations (Ask & Landström, 2010; Hackett et al., 2008; Lens et al., 2014). In their research, Erez and Rogers (1999) likewise concluded that:

> [criminal justice authorities] develop a repertoire of knowledge about the features of victim harm, the way particular crimes affect victims, and 'normal' victims' emotional and psychological reactions to violations of property and person. Victim reactions that are not perceived as typical are often viewed as exaggerated, illogical, and unbelievable. (p. 226)

Research has thus demonstrated the potentially detrimental effect for victims when they violate normative expectations, as well as the possible negative consequences of adhering to the normal or typical. Together, these findings suggest the importance of considering observer perceptions of what is 'just' within a framework in which justice is acknowledged as a social construct that is intimately entwined with (or a subset of) normativity. This dissertation aims to investigate more explicitly the ways in which constructions of the normal, embedded in socio-cultural discourse, may affect third-party responses to victims of sexual violence. It does so by testing the effects of (non-)normativity in descriptions of victims and victimization (e.g., victim gender; victim emotional expression; description of sexual violence), measuring the influence of observers' normative concerns, and including answering options in methodological designs that allow for a more comprehensive measurement of normalizing responses.

Aim II: To include male victims in the examination of observer reactions to sexual assault

The role of normativity in observer reactions to sexual victimization is expected to manifest itself particularly clearly in reactions to male victims.[10] Indeed, where female victims are the 'normal' targets of sexual victimization (MacKinnon, 1989), male sexual victimization can be described as inherently 'non-normative' in its deviance from gender stereotypes, victim ideals, and sexual scripts (Cohen, 2014; Doherty & Anderson, 2004; Hlavka, 2017). As pondered by Dunn (2010): "In a society in which victimization violates cultural values placed on agency, self-determination, and independence, how much worse might it be when it violates perceptions of masculinity as well?" (p. 177).

With (legal) definitions of sexual assault broadening in many countries to include men as potential rape victims (Rumney & Morgan-Taylor, 1997; Zhu & van der Aa, 2017), and prevalence studies demonstrating that male rape victimization is by no means rare (Davies, 2002; Lowe & Rogers, 2017),[11] increased academic attention has been devoted to the meaning of male rape (e.g.,

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[10] I use the term 'male rape' or 'male sexual victimization' when I seek to specify men as victims of sexual violence. In this thesis, my focus is on sexual violence perpetrated against adult men (and women) by *male* perpetrators, unless specified otherwise. Although beyond the scope of this dissertation, some research has been conducted on (male) sexual victimization perpetrated by women (overview in N. Fisher & Pina, 2013). Several studies have additionally demonstrated that perpetrator gender is likely to influence observer reactions, with male victims of female perpetrated rape generally receiving more negative reactions than male and female victims of male perpetrated rape (e.g., Davies et al., 2006; Huitema & Vanwesenbeeck, 2016; brief overview in Davies & Rogers, 2006).

[11] The U.S. National Intimate Partner and Sexual Violence Survey, for instance, has reported that 2.6% of men in the United States has experienced (attempted) rape (compared to 21.3% of women), and 7.1% of men has been made to (or there was an attempt to make them) penetrate someone else (Smith et al., 2018).

Cohen, 2014). Current experimental research that examines observer reactions to male and female victims of sexual victimization generally employs vignettes of stereotypical (stranger) rape and focuses primarily on quantitatively evaluated reactions of blame (Anderson & Doherty, 2008; Temkin & Krahé, 2008). These studies have provided somewhat inconsistent findings regarding differential reactions to male and female rape victims, although the majority has demonstrated higher blame attributions to male compared to female victims (overview in van der Bruggen & Grubb, 2014). Unfortunately, the specific focus on stranger rape and victim blame provides a rather limited picture of the ways in which reactions to male and female victims might differ, and what processes underlie these potential differences. It might be possible, for instance, that observers tend to use different sense-making practices in response to male versus female victimization by relying on different rape myths (e.g., Reitz-Krueger et al., 2017). Hence, the question whether there are indeed quantitative and/or qualitative differences between reactions to male and female victims of sexual assault remains largely unanswered.

As noted by Mardorossian (2014), in existing research, the discussion of male victims of rape "often takes place separately from the case of women victims, even warranting distinct works of scholarship altogether" (p. 16). In fact, male rape victims are presented in such a way that "the subtle message is that they are marginal to the real issue of female victimhood and that they are in some way an anomaly" (Cohen, 2014, p. 137). However, as argued by Cohen (2014), it is in the inclusion of *both* male and female victims that we may learn more about the phenomenon. The inclusion of male sexual victimization alongside (rather than separate from, or a derivative of) female victimization aids in better understanding the implications of norms surrounding sex and gender in social reactions to victims of sexual violence.

Aim III: To improve the measurement of observer reactions to victims of sexual assault

As partly indicated in the previous sections, many of the current experimental rape perception studies[12] have employed vignette studies in combination with quantitative response measurements (overviews in Davies & Rogers, 2006; Pollard, 1992; van der Bruggen & Grubb, 2014). The experimental studies reported in this dissertation have used these designs as a starting point, but have attempted to improve on them in the following three ways, in order to allow for the measurement of more diverse, subtle, and representative observer reactions to victims of sexual assault.

First, the vignettes employed in these experimental studies were written to be more representative of the type of narrative people may hear or read about in real life. The vignettes

[12] Following Anderson and Doherty (2008), I at times employ the descriptor 'rape perception research' to refer to research on observer perceptions of sexual violence and observer reactions to victims of sexual violence. '*Rape* perception' is mostly an apt description considering that most (experimental) studies focus on this type of sexual violence. However, at times these (and my) studies focus on types of sexual violence that do not (clearly) include penetration.

reflect more modern-day and common stories of sexual violence and negative sexual experiences, acknowledging that the scope of sexual violence reaches beyond prototypical stranger rape. The vignettes describe instances of acquaintance rape without the use of weapons or extreme physical force, and include different forms of sexual assault (e.g., touching, oral sex, unspecified sexual assault). Related to the previous, the vignettes include elements – e.g., alcohol consumption and lack of physical resistance – that make the portrayed transgression more 'ambiguous' and allow for more diverse observer responses. Frequently, the vignettes represent an 'alleged rape' – presented in a victim impact statement, claim, or story –, which permits respondents to scrutinize and dispute the veracity of the event from the outset (Anderson & Doherty, 2008).

Second, this dissertation examines different types of (negative) observer reactions. Thus far, (overview) studies examining observer reactions to victims have primarily focused on quantitative measures of blame (e.g., Gravelin et al., 2019; Grubb & Turner, 2012; van der Bruggen & Grubb, 2014). Although researchers may conceptualize this response in different ways, the utilized questions usually relate directly to observer perceptions of blame, responsibility and fault (Gravelin et al., 2019). Only occasionally have observer reactions such as victim derogation and distancing been the focus of study (e.g., Correia et al., 2012; Kay et al., 2005; Lerner & Simmons, 1966). In the different studies included in this dissertation, I distinguish between behavioral and characterological blame, and include quantitative measures of for instance derogation, distancing, and feminization. I also explore more subtle reactions to sexual assault claims, such as those that normalize or trivialize the alleged victim's experience.

Finally, and closely connected to the previous point, observer reactions examined in this dissertation have been measured in various ways. As noted, many rape perception studies have employed closed-ended questions and quantitative response scales to measure the dependent variables of interest. Such measures have been criticized for not adequately capturing the spontaneity, complexity, and subtlety of observer reactions (Anderson, 1999; Anderson & Doherty, 2008; Ellison & Munro, 2010; Mulder, 2018). In this dissertation, several (novel) indirect measures were employed to tap into spontaneous observer reactions. Additionally, qualitative data were collected in order to obtain more insight into *how* potential negative observer reactions come about. Such measures are expected to provide a better understanding of the ways in which certain norms or types of knowledge function to enable the expression of negative reactions toward victims.

Central Research Question

As indicated above, a key starting point of this dissertation is the idea that an awareness of conceptualizations of what is (ab)normal – embedded in the socio-cultural context – is essential to further an understanding of how third parties make sense of sexual victimization and react to victims. Using both traditional and novel measures, I therefore investigate the extent and the ways in which aspects of (non-)normativity feature in observers' reactions to claims of sexual assault and to male and female (alleged) victims. In doing so, I build on findings of relevant social

psychological (experimental) research, but also integrate theorizing about the normative from predominantly the disciplines of critical victimology and gender studies. The overarching research question of this dissertation can hence be formulated as:

How does 'the normal' feature in observer perceptions of sexual assault and observer reactions to male and female (alleged) victims?

My general expectation is that normativity plays a significant role in observers' sense-making of (claims of) sexual assault and in their reactions to (alleged) victims. Since we employ different standards of normality for men and women, and male rape victimization is presumably a more 'non-normative' occurrence, normativity is expected to feature differently and more prominently in observer reactions to male victims compared to female victims of sexual assault.

The Structure of the Dissertation

The dissertation consists of a theoretical chapter (Chapter 1), followed by five empirical chapters (Chapters 2 to 6), and concludes with a discussion of the overall findings (Chapter 7).

Chapter 1 presents a broad theoretical framework that draws from empirical rape perception research as well as theoretical insights from social psychology, critical victimology, philosophy, and gender studies. I argue that traditional rape perception research is typically characterized by a narrow focus on the individual observer, thereby overlooking the broader socio-cultural context in which the observer makes sense of injustices like victimization. The relevant context is elaborated upon, focusing on the concepts of sexual violence, victimhood, and gender. I subsequently explore the question of what it means for (experimental) rape perception research to take seriously the proposition that observers are "socially situated" (Fricker, 2007, p. 3), and that concepts such as sexual victimization and gender are socially constructed.

Chapter 2 focuses on observer expectations of (male and female) victim demeanor, and the consequences of expectancy violations. Previous research has indicated that normative expectations of victims include an 'appropriate' degree of emotionality, and that victims are judged more negatively if they do not meet this requirement (e.g., Ask & Landström, 2010; Hackett et al., 2008). In this chapter, emotionality is specified to entail the expression of either anger or sadness in a victim impact statement. Relevant here is that injustice has often been associated with the emotion of anger (Nussbaum, 2016), but sadness and fear are stereotypically a better fit to the image of the credible victim (Lamb, 1999). The influence of expressed (and anticipated) emotion, victim gender, and type of victimization is examined on the dependent variables of character evaluation, victim credibility, and perceived crime severity.

Chapter 3 explores the relationship between victimization and gender normativity. It takes as its premise that gender is malleable, and that sexual assault may hence influence observers' perceptions of a victim's gendered identity. This chapter is explicitly concerned with the

intertwinement of gender and victim stereotypes (Masser et al., 2010), and empirically tests the theoretical notion that rape is a gendering crime with the potential to 'feminize' male and female victims (Cahill, 2009). This chapter also explores the question whether victim feminization might be considered an attempt to 'normalize' (male) sexual victimization.

Chapter 4 reports a more direct investigation of the influence of normativity concerns on diverse observer reactions to victims of sexual assault. The reactions examined in this chapter include, amongst others, explicit and more indirect measures of victim derogation and distancing. The impact of both normativity and harm concerns (operationalized as individualizing and binding values of the Moral Foundations Questionnaire; Graham et al., 2009) on observer reactions is demonstrated, alongside the influence of gender role attitudes and homophobia. The chapter additionally investigates whether normative concerns more strongly influence reactions to male victims than to female victims.

Chapters 5 and 6 both focus on the question how observers *create* 'plausible' stories of sexual assault compared to normative sex in reaction to a relatively ambiguous story of sexual victimization. Here, 'ambiguous' means that the occurrence of sexual assault was not a priori and undeniably established as fact by the researcher. Chapter 5 explores how observers describe the event leading up to a male or female sexual assault claim based on a claimant's account that lacks detail and is contradicted by the accused. The chapter illustrates the extent to which participants initially accept the alleged victim's claim as truth, and how they subsequently construct the event.

Chapter 6 also focuses on how observers describe and explain an ambiguous sexual encounter, and how they distribute responsibility among the involved actors. In this vignette study, the described sexual encounter includes clear indications of non-consent, but lacks several elements that mark stereotypical rape, such as physical force and resistance. By employing discourse analysis on the verbal responses of participants, this chapter sheds more light on observers' sense-making of nonconsensual sex.

Chapter 7 consists of a general discussion of the main findings and implications. In this chapter, I combine my empirical findings with theoretical insights to claim that a thorough understanding of social reactions to victims requires (to a greater extent) laying bare the meanings observers assign to categories of people and events. I conclude this chapter with noting several overarching limitations of my research, and deliberating on possibilities for future research.

Chapter 1

Interdisciplinary Theorizing and Methodological Implications

The purpose of this chapter is to describe the theoretical framework relevant to my dissertation, which builds upon knowledge from social psychology, critical victimology, philosophy, and gender studies. This chapter explicates the assumption intrinsic to the dissertation that the concepts of sexual violence, victimhood, and gender are socially constructed, and that the meanings assigned to these concepts influence individual observer reactions to victims in various ways. As such, I employ a fundamentally interdisciplinary approach to critically examine the theories and (experimental) methods commonly used to explain and measure negative third-party reactions to victims. Although some of the concepts delineated in this chapter do not explicitly feature in the subsequent empirical chapters, they form the background against which the hypotheses have been formulated, the experimental designs developed, and the findings interpreted.

Observer Reactions: Internal Needs and Motives

It has been said that "the hallmark of human morality is third-party concern: person A can get angry at person B for what she did to person C" (Haidt & Joseph, 2004, p. 58). The connection between injustice and anger at the perpetrator finds it mirror image in the connection between suffering and compassion for the victim. However, as clarified in the introduction, compassionate and empathic reactions are by no means a given in response to the suffering of others (Sontag, 2003). This has been repeatedly confirmed in the personal testimonies of those who suffered sexual violence (e.g., Brison, 2002), and in the empirical study of third-party reactions to victims of sexual violence (e.g., R. Campbell & Raja, 1999; Ullman, 2010).

A number of social-psychological theories have been developed and applied to explain *why* third parties might react negatively to those who are suffering or in disadvantaged positions. These include the Just World Theory (JWT; Lerner, 1980; Lerner & Simmons, 1966), the Defensive Attribution Theory (DAT; Shaver, 1970; 1985; Walster, 1966), and the System Justification Theory (SJT; Jost & Banaji, 1994). Most relevant and prominent in victimological research is the JWT (Grubb & Harrower, 2008). To introduce the JWT, social psychologist Melvin Lerner (1980) begins his book by sharing some of the degrading comments his colleague-psychologists made about their patients, and the dismissive shrugs of his students when he lectured about the poverty of immigrants in their region. With all these people – whom he regarded as bright and kind-hearted – displaying such derogatory responses to the suffering of others, he concludes "there was simply no way I could attribute this 'sick' reaction to an obvious form of pathology. (…) Any explanation, then, had to fall within the range of normal processes. But how could this reaction be normal?" (p. 5).

Lerner (1980) subsequently posits that negative observer reactions are rooted in the justice motive. Every person has a persistent inherent need to believe in a 'just world', even if they consciously dismiss such a belief as irrational. Lerner notes that a just world is different from, and more than, a world that is merely predictable and controllable. He maintains that the belief in a just

world includes a sense of appropriateness, making injustice "the violation of that which is judged to be 'appropriate'" (p. 10). Lerner primarily defines justice – as a judgment of appropriateness – as deservingness: in a just world, people usually get what they deserve, and deserve what they get. The JWT postulates that the suffering of innocent victims provides stark counterevidence to our need to believe that the world is just, hence provoking in the observer a feeling of (empathic) distress. In an effort to reduce this distress and reaffirm the justice belief, observers may employ a number of tactics. These include 'rational' strategies such as prevention of suffering, and help and compensation to those who suffer, but also a number of victim-oriented strategies that can be detrimental to the victim. Amongst the psychological defenses that third parties might employ in reaction to the suffering of innocent others, Lerner includes denial or withdrawal from the injustice and/or the victim, and reinterpretation of the event itself. The latter reaction may entail reinterpreting the outcome of the event, its causes, or reinterpreting the character of the victim. Subsequent empirical research has focused on a number of observer reactions that can be located within this framework, including victim blame, victim derogation, judgments of victim credibility, physical and psychological distancing from the victim, and trivializing the severity of the crime through benefit finding or diminishing the resulted harm (Hafer & Bègue, 2005).

Where justice as deservingness initially seems a rather objective and universally applicable term, Lerner (1980) is quick to elaborate on its definition. According to him, deserving a certain outcome means that a person meets the "appropriate preconditions" for obtaining that outcome. He immediately adds to this that "determination of appropriate preconditions is, for the most part, *socially determined"* (p. 11, emphasis added), suggesting that "judgments of what is deserved in the 'Just World' reflect the norms of the culture" (p. 15). Lerner hence clearly seemed to indicate that the justice motive of individuals cannot be viewed separately from the socio-cultural context in which justice is given its meaning.

Subsequent studies conducted under the banner of JWT, however, have rarely acknowledged the socio-cultural embeddedness of the justice motive. One strand of JWT research typically manipulates the two key components that have been theorized to increase the threat to the justice motive: victim suffering and victim innocence (overview in Hafer & Bègue, 2005). A few studies have indeed found victim innocence and, more convincingly, victim suffering to be associated with an increase in victim blame and victim derogation (Correia et al., 2001; Correia & Vala, 2003; Lerner & Simmons, 1966).[13] However, the question whether negative observer reactions result specifically from a motive for *justice* remains largely unanswered in these studies (Bosma, 2019; Proulx et al., 2012). Some support has been found for this qualitative interpretation

[13] In the mentioned studies, victim innocence was operationalized as a person who became infected by HIV either because no condom was used during intercourse ('non-innocent victim') or because the condom broke ('innocent victim'), where suffering was manipulated by informing participants there was a good chance ('less persistent suffering') or no chance ('more persistent suffering') of survival (Correia et al., 2001; Correia & Vala, 2003). In Lerner and Simmons' (1966) study, anticipated persistence of suffering was manipulated by informing participants that 'the victim' (a confederate) would or would not continue to receive painful shocks. The authors also included a 'martyr' ('innocent victim') condition in which the confederate agreed to suffer for the sake of other students.

in innovative studies conducted by Hafer (2000) and Correia et al. (2007). They demonstrated that during a modified Stroop task, conditions of presumed high threat to the justice motive (i.e., no retribution to the victim's assailants) provoked higher interference in the time taken to identify the colors of specifically justice-related words, reflecting observers' preoccupation with this concept. As such, the authors concluded that confrontation with the innocent suffering of others indeed threatens observers' concerns for justice, potentially leading to negative reactions to victims.

A second strand of research encapsulates the JWT in self-report scales that measure individual beliefs in a just world (e.g., Dalbert, 1999; Furnham & Procter, 1989; Lipkus, 1991; Rubin & Peplau, 1975; overview in Hafer & Sutton, 2016). Examples of items included in just world belief scales are "I basically feel that the world is a fair place", "I feel that a person's efforts are noticed and rewarded", and "I feel that people get what they are entitled to have" (Lipkus, 1991, p. 1173). Employing these and similar scales, a considerable evidence base has demonstrated that stronger endorsement of the belief in a just world relates to negative observer reactions such as victim blame, derogation, and distancing (e.g., Correia et al., 2012; Kleinke & Meyer, 1990; Landström et al., 2016; overview in Hafer & Bègue, 2005). Within this type of research, the JWT is firmly located within the individual's psyche, as a personal need or motive. Indeed, in this strand, "psychometric measures tend to turn the BJW [belief in a just world] into an individual difference variable that ends up being treated as a stable trait or belief system" (Furnham, 2003, p. 800).[14]

Similar to the explanatory framework of the JWT, explanations for negative observer reactions offered by the DAT and SJT are also framed predominantly in terms of individual needs and motives, such as the tendency toward self-protection (DAT; Shaver, 1970; 1985) and the motive to defend the status quo (SJT; Jost & Banaji, 1994; Jost et al., 2004). As such, it seems that the most-commonly employed theories in victimological research about observer reactions "focus on the psychological motivations of the attributor" (Anderson & Doherty, 2008; Howard, 1984b, p. 495; Lea, 2007). In fact, Proulx et al. (2012) group a number of these theories together and suggest that their commonality lies in that they "represent different manifestations of the same *psychological phenomenon*" (p. 286, emphasis added). The authors conclude that all these theories describe expectancy violations that produce "a basic, biologically based pattern of arousal" in the observer (p. 185), which the observer consequently aims to reduce via several compensation strategies. The wellspring of negative reactions to victims is thus isolated in the observer's experience of distress, whether caused by violations of justice beliefs or other individual needs and motives.

The Observer in Context

Studies that examine observer reactions to victims, however, regularly bypass key words within the names of the explanatory theories themselves: the (role of the) 'world' or 'system' we

[14] However, several studies have suggested that the endorsement of just world beliefs can be influenced by external factors, particularly by the experience of traumatic life events (Corey et al., 2015; Forest, 1995).

live in. Thus, these studies largely seem to neglect that (reactions of) observers – as individuals trying to make sense of the world – are always embedded in a particular social and cultural context, or "socially situated" (Fricker, 2007, p. 3; Markus & Kitayama, 1991; Singer, 2004). This socio-cultural context is bound to influence sense-makers both explicitly and implicitly, as it explicitly prescribes what types of narratives are (not) permissible, but also more broadly forms the structures of our understanding. As philosopher Miranda Fricker (2007) describes using different terminology: "The collective social imagination inevitably contains all manner of stereotypes, and that is the social atmosphere in which hearers must confront their interlocutors" (p. 38). The relevant socio-cultural context to consider in reactions to (victims of) sexual violence is unambiguously described by the term 'rape culture' (Brownmiller, 1975; Buchwald et al., 1993). Rape culture describes the norms and practices, e.g., relating to gender, sexuality and violence, that effectively normalize and facilitate rape and other forms of sexual violence (Rentschler, 2014). Alcoff (2018) globally describes the ways in which rape culture affects public perception by noting that:

> Rape cultures produce a discursive formation in which the intelligibility of claims is organized not by logical argument or evidence, but by frames that set out who can be victimized, who can be accused, which are plausible narratives, and in what contexts rape may be spoken about, even in private spaces. (p. 3)

Several scholars who have conducted (experimental) rape perception studies have also argued the importance of considering the socio-cultural context in the analysis of observer reactions (e.g., Howard, 1984b; Temkin & Krahé, 2008; Ullman, 2010). Indeed, Gravelin et al. (2019) very recently affirmed in their review of blame reactions in acquaintance rape that "in order to fully understand victim blame we must take into account broader institutional and societal factors that may dictate how perceivers view any given sexual assault scenario" (p. 13). Amongst the sociocultural factors they listed were gender dynamics, changing definitions of rape, and cultural norms and expectations.

Explanatory frameworks that fail to incorporate such factors also seem inadequate at fully accounting for observer reactions to different *types* of victims (Howard, 1984b). An example of this – of particular interest to this dissertation – is the potentially different reaction to male and female victims of sexual violence. Although findings have proved somewhat inconsistent, most studies have found male rape victims to receive more blame than female victims (overview in van der Bruggen & Grubb, 2014). An attempt to explain any difference in blame attribution to male and female victims within the JWT framework requires interpreting this finding in terms of perceived innocence and suffering of the victim (Lerner & Simmons, 1966). This undertaking certainly seems feasible, but necessitates filling in the abstract concepts of innocence and suffering, and thereby making use of available cultural knowledge of gender and socio-sexual interaction. For instance, potentially a man is – somewhat ironically – a more 'innocent' victim of sexual

assault because prevalent 'truths' about rape do not require him to feel at risk in sexual situations, let alone to take the obligatory precautions of a 'pre-victim' (Cahill, 2000; Gavey, 2005). Or, in contrast, a man is perceived a more culpable victim of sexual assault because gender and rape stereotypes prescribe that a 'real' man is strong and capable of fighting off attackers, and so can only (let himself) be overpowered if he actually 'wanted it' (Turchik & K. Edwards, 2012). Any interpretation within the JWT framework thus requires an incorporation of the socio-cultural context: in this case, of norms that govern the performance of masculinity and femininity (Bartky, 1990; Javaid, 2015) and understandings of (the risk of) sexual assault (Anderson & Doherty, 2008; Cahill, 2000; Marcus, 1992). As Lerner (1980) implied, such norms are very likely part of the individual observer's 'justice consideration', but they remain largely invisible in current dominant theorizing and (experimental) methods. What might be problematic in mainstream rape perception research then is "the fact that 'individual' and 'society' remain fundamentally 'separate', and no account is possible of how the individual becomes essentially social" (Anderson & Doherty, 2008; Gavey, 2005; Lea, 2007, p. 496).

The acknowledgment the the individual (observer) and society are not "fundamentally 'separate'" (Lea, 2007, p. 496) seems necessary if empirical research is to provide better understandings of the why and how of negative observer reactions to (different) victims. This entails a greater consideration of the societal norms that influence what type of phenomena the individual observer considers normal and expected, and that enable certain observer reactions to victims while disallowing others. Additionally, it calls for an awareness that the individual observer is part of the social body that forms particular understandings of, for instance, sexual violence and victimhood. This requires a greater emphasis on the social construction and malleability of concepts used within rape perception research, particularly the concepts of sexual violence, victimhood, and gender.

Social Construction

"What a lot of things are said to be socially constructed!" philosopher of science Ian Hacking (1999) notes on the very first page of his book *The social construction of what?* (p. 1). In this chapter, I limit myself to 'merely' three of those things: sexual violence, victimhood, and gender. Social constructionism describes the epistemological stance that the meaning of many (perhaps *all*) objects and events is not an inherent attribute (Crotty, 1998). Unlike objectivism, it generally does not assume an objective reality or truth – 'out there' in the world – that is separate from people as interpreters (Berger & Luckmann, 1966). Rather, social constructionism postulates that (meanings of) "objects are made and not found, and that they are made by the interpretative strategies we set in motion" (Fish, 1990, p. 274). It is important to note that an endorsement of the social constructionist stance is not the same as claiming that 'everything is subjective', or that the meaning of a concept can be readily changed at individual will. Indeed, the inclusion of the word *social* in social constructionism emphasizes that "the means by which they [objects] are made are

social and conventional. That is, the 'you' who does the interpretative work (…) is a communal you and not an isolated individual" (Fish, 1990, p. 274). Hence,

> the mental operations we can perform are limited by the institutions in which we are already embedded. These institutions precede us, and it is only by inhabiting them, or being inhabited by them, that we have access to the public and conventional senses they make. (Butler, 1988; Fish, 1990, p. 274; Foucault, 1976)

Sexual Violence

Defining Sexual Violence

Discussions erupted on social media platforms in 2017 and 2018 after publication of the fictional story "Cat Person" (Roupenian, 2017), and an interview with a woman named Grace about her date with celebrity Aziz Ansari (Way, 2018). Both these stories described a 'grey area' sexual encounter that the narrator experienced as highly uncomfortable, even violating. The question that occupied many readers (e.g., North, 2018; NPR, 2018; Weiss, 2018): did these stories describe sexual assault, 'bad sex', or possibly still something else? It is not my intention to provide an answer to that question. However, the fact that the question can be raised serves well to demonstrate the malleability of (the definition of) sexual assault: clearly, it is something debatable.

In the past decades, both social understandings and legal definitions of sexual violence have broadened significantly (Best, 2016; Caringella, 2008; Rozée & Koss, 2001). Although there may arguably be something 'essential' to the experience and immorality of rape (e.g., Bergoffen, 2009; Cahill, 2009), the meaning of sexual violence is thus largely socially constructed (Freedman, 2013; LaFree, 1989):[15]

> at its core, *rape* is a legal term that encompasses a malleable and culturally determined perception of an act. Different societies define which nonconsensual acts to criminalize, which to condone, and how forcefully to prosecute the former. Indeed, the history of rape consists in large part in tracking the changing narratives that define which women may charge which men with the crime of forceful, unwanted sex, and whose accounts will be believed. The meaning of rape is thus fluid, rather than transhistorical or static. (Freedman, 2013, p. 3)

For instance, where originally rape was legally defined as a property crime enacted against the male possessor (i.e., the father or husband of a raped woman), it is now conceptualized as an offense

[15] Clearly, the social constructionism argument is not particular to sexual violence, but equally applies to other acts categorized as immoral and victimizing (Best, 2016).

that targets and has a severe impact on the direct victim.[16] Rape has, only fairly recently, become a crime that can be committed against prostitutes and against one's own wife, indicating changing evaluations of a victim's (occupational and marital) status and of the relation between the victim and perpetrator (Alcoff, 2018). Additionally, many countries – though not nearly all – have expanded their legal definitions of sexual assault to enable the recognition of both men and women as victims and perpetrators (Gidycz & Kelley, 2016).

Gavey (2005) describes two main developments in the understanding of sexual violence that occurred during the 1980s. These developments largely resulted from empirical research conducted by Koss and colleagues, which – employing questionnaires that inquired about a range of sexually transgressive behaviors, rather than directly and exclusively asking about the experience of 'rape' – illustrated the wide prevalence of sexual violence (e.g., Koss et al., 1987; Koss & Oros, 1982). First, where sexual victimization was traditionally understood as violent rape committed by a stranger, the majority of the female survey respondents indicated that they had known their perpetrator. Hence, the focus started to shift to sexual violence committed by intimates and acquaintances (i.e., marital rape, acquaintance rape, date rape; Gavey, 2005). Second, and related to the previous development,

> a 'dimensional' view replaced a 'typological' view of understanding rape. That is, within social science research rape came to be measured and talked about in ways that suggested it was related to other, less extreme forms of sexual assault and even more subtle forms of sexual coercion. (Gavey, 2005, p. 6)

Hence, sexual violence came to be understood as a continuum of events that extended far beyond prototypical stranger rape, in which "the basic common character underlying the many different events is that men use a variety of forms of abuse, coercion and force in order to control women" (Kelly, 1987, p. 48). Together, these developments encouraged a perception of sexual violence as common (i.e., immersed within normative heterosexual relationships) and widespread, rather than extraordinary and negligible (Koss, 1985). Nowadays, sexual violence is generally understood to include a wide range of (attempts at) coerced sexual acts, encompassing rape as well as unwanted sexual comments or advances (Gidycz & Kelley, 2016; Krug et al., 2002).[17] Indeed, the feminist

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[16] Although the acknowledgment of sexual violence as a type of victimization with severe impact is something to be applauded, several authors (e.g., Lamb, 1999; Mardorossian, 2014) have also warned against some of the potentially undesirable side effects. First, this emphasis may hinder (self-)identification of victims who are not traumatized, but have experienced sexual violence nonetheless. Second, an exclusive focus on the psychological impact on the victim can distract from the social and political aspect of sexual violence and the inherent wrongfulness of the act itself.

[17] The World Health Organization defines sexual violence as "any sexual act, attempt to obtain a sexual act, unwanted sexual comments or advances, or acts to traffic, or otherwise directed, against a person's sexuality using coercion, by any person regardless of their relationship to the victim, in any setting, including but not limited to home and work." Where "coercion can cover a whole spectrum of degrees of force. Apart from physical force, it may involve psychological intimidation, blackmail or other threats – for instance, the threat of physical harm, of being dismissed from a job or of not obtaining a job that is sought. It may also occur when the person aggressed is

movement has done much to argue for the interpretation of rape and sexual violence "as a social problem within the broader structure of society" (Griffin, 1971; Weis & Borges, 1973, p. 108) rather than as a private and singular experience.

As illustrated, legal definitions and social understandings of sexual violence change as a result of research findings, active (feminist) lobbying, and many other cultural developments (Best, 2016).[18] Although both legal definitions and social understandings of sexual violence are likely to undergo transformations as a function of broader societal developments, they may additionally exert an asynchronous influence on each other. Legal reform may influence the broader public's perceptions of morality, while – as is perhaps more common – changed social understandings can push judicial systems to adjust their formal definitions. As an example of the latter, new laws have recently been proposed in the Netherlands to 'modernize' legislation on sexually transgressive behavior, including the criminalization of 'sex against the will' – a 'new' offense that requires less proof of coercion than the crime of rape (Rijksoverheid, 2020).[19]

The social and/or legal agreement that something is or is not (or *should* or *should not* be labelled) sexual violence has important implications (Loseke, 1999). For instance, categorizing an event as sexual violence is more likely to designate someone as having a legitimate claim to the victim status, which entails certain rights and benefits (Burt & Estep, 1981). As aptly summarized by feminist philosopher Ann Cahill (2016):

> The very act of categorization needs to be recognized as a social and world-constituting act, one that ought not to be understood as an objective practice that either succeeds (by correctly aligning an experience with a definition) or fails (by mismatching an experience with a definition). To identify a particular experience as an instantiation of sexual violence (or not) doesn't just reflect the world as it is (or reflect it inaccurately); it creates new possibilities, and forecloses others. (p. 752)

Sexual Violence as Context

Numerous aspects of the social construction of sexual violence may influence observer reactions to victims. As suggested in the previous section, one of these aspects is the changing (legal) definitions of sexual violence. It is reasonable to expect that observer judgments of victims, as well as the manner in which these judgments are expressed, change in accordance with these definitions. For instance, with an increase in sexual events criminalized and (hence) perceived as

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unable to give consent – for instance, while drunk, drugged, asleep or mentally incapable of understanding the situation" (Krug et al., 2002, p. 149).

[18] Related to this point, formal definitions and social understandings clearly also depend on and change as a result of *who* has the power to define things and influence people (e.g., Finley, 1989), or who has been granted the status of epistemic subject (Fricker, 2007).

[19] Currently, Dutch criminal law defines rape as "Any person who by an act of violence or any other act or by threat of violence or threat of any other act compels a person to submit to acts comprising or including sexual penetration of the body shall be guilty of rape and shall be liable to a term of imprisonment not exceeding twelve years or a fine of the fifth category" (Criminal Code, Art. 242; cited in Amnesty International, 2019, p. 21).

unjust and victimizing over the past decades, a broader spectrum of events may be expected to trigger observer sympathy for the victim. Furthermore, feminist efforts to emphasize sexual violence as an act of *violence* motivated by power and domination, rather than primarily an act of *sex* (Brownmiller, 1975; Griffin, 1971), are likely to have had a significant impact on observer judgments of the crime severity.[20] Additional aspects of sexual violence that may influence observer reactions include associations of the sexual domain with non-normativity, and prevalent discourses about rape and 'normal' (hetero)sexual relations.

Sex and Non-normativity

While much has been done to change the perceptions of the injustice of rape, sexual crimes are not only embedded in the realm of suffering and injustice; they also remain firmly implanted in the sexual sphere (Haidt & Hersh, 2001). The sexual sphere has traditionally been, and is arguably still, a domain riddled with taboos and notions of deviance (Foucault, 1976; Nussbaum, 2004). Both sex and sexual violence have been described as immoral and non-normative for reasons that include uncleanliness and defilement, animalism, and madness (Nussbaum, 2004). They are phenomena that have been excessively regulated (Foucault, 1976) and purposefully obfuscated in common discourse (Higgins, 1991; Stevenson, 2010).[21] Whereas injustice has been connected to concerns over harm and the emotional response of anger (Nussbaum, 2016), (non-normative) sex has been found to (additionally) trigger purity concerns and responses of disgust (Giner-Sorolla & Russell, 2009). Haidt and Hersh (2001), for instance, found in their research that perceptions of harmfulness were rarely the strongest predictor of observers' moral judgments of non-normative sexual acts.[22] More recently, Niemi and Young (2016; also Milesi et al., 2020) found that moral concerns relating to loyalty, obedience to authority, and purity (i.e., 'binding values', or moral foundations not related to the prevention and redressing of harm; Graham et al., 2009) predicted victim blame and observer judgments of the rape victim as contaminated. Third-party confrontations with sexual assault are thus likely to trigger a number of concerns besides those over harm and justice. Notably, research has demonstrated that concerns relating to (non-)normativity and the associated emotion of disgust are particularly prominent in prejudice toward gay men (Kiss et al., 2020; Olatunji & Sawchuk, 2005). In combination with findings that demonstrate the significant influence of homophobia on negative reactions toward male victims of rape (Davies & Rogers, 2006), we might hence expect concerns over (non-)normativity to play a bigger role in response to male compared to female rape victims. In both cases, however, concerns over justice are not the only motivating factor in observer reactions to victims of sexual violence.

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[20] Although Alcoff (2018) has also noted how the use of the word *violence* in 'sexual violence' can be confusing or misleading. She promotes use of "the larger rubric of *sexual violation* to make clear that our concern is broader than what used to be called 'forcible rape,' or an action that is physically coerced" (p. 12).
[21] The latter for instance through the use of euphemistic and sanitized language (Stevenson, 2010).
[22] Scenarios of non-normative sexual acts included descriptions of homosexuality, 'unusual' masturbation, and consensual sexual relations between (half-)siblings (Haidt & Hersh, 2001).

Rape Stereotypes

Above, I noted that more sexually transgressive acts have come to be legally defined and socially understood as victimizing and unjust. However, a multitude of stereotypes continues to designate a limited and particular kind of event as '*real'* sexual violence (Krahé, 2016). Besides being descriptively incorrect, Temkin and Krahé (2008) have pointed out that what is especially problematic about these stereotypes is that "they tend to operate as *prescriptive* norms by defining the characteristics that are thought to be necessary in order to qualify as a credible rape allegation" (p. 2). Indeed, studies have demonstrated that third parties' credibility assessments frequently included considerations that were *not* part of the legal definition of rape, such as the relationship between victim and offender, alcohol consumption, or the presence of physical violence and resistance (Ellison & Munro, 2009a; 2009b; 2015).[23]

Rape Scripts. Events that are most readily acknowledged as *real* sexual violence adhere to what has been coined the 'real rape' script or stereotype (Estrich, 1987; Ryan, 2011; Temkin & Krahé, 2008). This script describes a violent stranger rape of an innocent (i.e., chaste) victim who tries her utmost to resist, usually marking her with serious and easily recognizable injuries (Ryan, 2011). Although stranger rape has been shown to be a (much) less frequent occurrence than rapes by acquaintances[24] and rapes without extreme physical force (Gidycz & Kelley, 2016; Koss, 1985), third parties typically continue to portray it as the main or only 'real' form of sexual violence (Anderson, 2007; Bohner et al., 2009; K. Edwards et al., 2011; Krahé, 2016; Ryan, 1988; 2011).

Research has demonstrated that victim blame is especially prominent in cases that deviate from the real rape stereotype (Bieneck & Krahé, 2011; Temkin & Krahé, 2008). A number of studies have found that victims are blamed more when no apparent force was used or when they did not physically resist, for instance because they 'froze' or were incapacitated (Black & McCloskey, 2013; Bongiorno et al., 2016; Davies et al., 2008; Schuller et al., 2010; Temkin & Krahé, 2008). Additionally, third parties have been found more likely to blame victims who initially participated in a sexual encounter, and refused at a later moment rather than immediately (Yescavage, 1999). Furthermore, studies have consistently demonstrated that victims of acquaintance rape are blamed more than victims of stranger rape (e.g., Krahé et al., 2008; Viki et al., 2004; overviews in Grubb & Harrower, 2008; Whatley, 1996). In fact, McKimmie et al. (2014) have suggested that 'crime prototypicality' is the strongest predictor of third-party evaluations of sexual assault victims. In their study, they demonstrated a hierarchy in impression formation in which victim and gender stereotypes influenced observer perceptions of 'counter-stereotypical' acquaintance rape, but did not influence observer perceptions of 'prototypical' stranger rape.

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[23] Of course, in plenty of jurisdictions, these elements *are* indeed of concern in determining whether something is legally rape. The current legal definition of rape in the Netherlands, for instance, is still based on coercion (Amnesty International, 2019).

[24] Gidycz and Kelley (2016) estimate that between 66% to 80% of sexual assaults are committed by someone known to the victim.

Hence, stereotypical victimization seemed to preclude the need to consider other factors related to the victim's behavior in order for the observer to form a judgment.

Rape Myths. The real rape stereotype is supported by "culturally rooted mythologies about the nature of sexual crime, and expectations of the appropriate behavior demanded of rape victims" (Stevenson, 2010, p. 364). These 'rape myths' (Brownmiller, 1975; Schwendinger & Schwendinger, 1974) reflect socio-cultural norms (Lea, 2007) that severely limit the number of cases that might unapologetically be called true and unjust sexual victimization. Rape myths have been defined as "descriptive or prescriptive beliefs about rape (i.e., about its causes, context, consequences, perpetrators, victims, and their interaction) that serve to deny, downplay, or justify sexual violence that men commit against women" (Bohner, 1998 cited in Gerger et al., 2007, p. 423; similar definitions: Burt, 1980; Lonsway & Fitzgerald, 1994). They do so by, for instance, holding the victim responsible (i.e., 'asking for it'), exonerating the perpetrator ('he didn't really mean to'), rejecting the possibility of rape (e.g., 'women lie about rape'; 'men cannot be raped'), or trivializing the severity of it (e.g., 'women enjoy rape'; 'men always want sex, even when forced upon them'). Rape myths form part of the 'common sense' discourse around sexual violence (Anderson, 1999). Designated as 'common sense', they form part of the "highly ideological (…) regime of the 'taken for granted'" (Hall, 1985, p. 105). In other words, they do not require external arguments to support their validity, and hence escape critical inspection. As explicated in its formal definition, rape myths were initially coined to describe the cultural beliefs about sexual violence perpetrated specifically by men against women (Brownmiller, 1975). Although numerous myths about male rape prevail in common discourse as well (e.g., Javaid, 2015a; Struckman-Johnson & Struckman-Johnson, 1992; Turchik & K. Edwards, 2012), stereotypical 'knowledge' about female sexual victimization is arguably still more widespread and readily accessible (Anderson, 1999).

As has been noted of the justice motive, rape myths have frequently been incorporated into experimental designs as an individual's personal endorsement of such beliefs (Gavey, 2005). A large number of instruments has been designed to measure people's rape myth acceptance (RMA; Lonsway & Fitzgerald, 1994), of which two of the most well-known are the Rape Myth Acceptance scale (Burt, 1980) and the Illinois Rape Myth Acceptance scale (IRMA; Payne et al, 1999; as described in K. Edwards et al., 2011). The endorsement of rape myths has been found to reliably predict negative observer reactions such as victim blame, perpetrator exoneration, and rape minimization (Davies et al., 2012; Hammond et al., 2011; Sleath & Bull, 2010; overviews in Gravelin et al., 2019; Grubb & Turner, 2012), and even self-reported rape proclivity (Bohner et al., 2005).

However, researchers have noted the need to adjust existing rape myth scales in order to retain them as valid instruments that accurately reflect rape-related beliefs in changing societies (Gerger et al., 2007; McMahon & Farmer, 2011; overview in Ryan, 2019). For this reason, McMahon and Farmer (2011) updated the IRMA scale to reflect the (at that time) modern-day language used to describe scenarios of sex and assault, and to better account for the increased

subtlety in rape beliefs. Their revised IRMA scale is explicitly geared toward US college students, necessarily implying that its terminology might not work well with different target audiences. Aimed at more general and global audiences, Gerger et al. (2007) developed the Acceptance of Modern Myths about Sexual Aggression (AMMSA) scale, and Bohner and colleagues are currently in the process of updating the scale to accord for relevant developments that have occurred since its initial publication (G. Bohner, personal communication, August 24, 2020).

Additionally, although correlational research treats the acceptance of rape myths as a relatively stable individual trait, several studies have demonstrated that RMA can be influenced by external factors such as rape education courses and the social norms of one's peer group (Bohner et al., 2006; 2010; Currier & Carlson, 2009), as well as personal experience of sexual assault (Vonderhaar & Carmody, 2015). Chapleau and Oswald (2013) have been among the few to employ participants' RMA as a dependent measure rather than predictor variable, and found that it was influenced by an interaction of the perpetrator's relative status and the likelihood of his arrest. As such, they suggested that RMA is to an extent "malleable and strategically motivated" (p. 18). Chapleau and Oswald's (2013) conclusion implies that rape myths can partly be understood as cultural explanations that are utilized by individual observers at their convenience, rather than simply as (mistaken) beliefs that are held out of ignorance (similar suggestions with respect to stereotypes and ideologies: Garcia-Marques et al., 2006; Knowles et al., 2009).

In line with the social constructionist perspective, it is hence important to keep in mind that rape scripts and myths are not solely or necessarily (accurate) reflections of the internal attitudes and beliefs of individuals (D. Edwards & Potter, 1992; Frith & Kitzinger, 2001). They are also powerful instruments that construct realities, which can be employed by observers in specific situations to define a victim's innocence or culpability, and to justify a particular response toward that victim. Alongside inclusion of (updated) RMA scales to measure individual attitudes in rape perception research, it hence seems fruitful to acknowledge rape myths more broadly as a representation of the cultural beliefs permeating our society, which can be employed as sense-making tools by *every* observer, not only those who score as 'high endorsers'. The inclusion of RMA scales alone provides us with little insight into *how* observers employ these culturally available myths in order to make sense of or frame sexual victimization (Ellison & Munro, 2010). Additionally, by focusing exclusively on individual endorsement of rape myths – treating RMA as a cognitive schema or psychological process – we forget to "consider the historical and social environment in which rape attitudes and myths were allowed to develop and endure" (Lea, 2007; Stevenson, 2010, p. 348). Still, empirical evidence of the widespread endorsement of rape myths and their direct influence on third-party reactions indicates the key role of societal discourse in our understandings of and reactions to sexual victimization.

Normal Sex

Burt and Estep (1981) have pointed out the ease with which claims of sexual assault are (re)interpreted as something else, and posited that "clearly, individuals use their cultural beliefs to

interpret the legitimacy of a [victim] role claim" (p. 18). These cultural beliefs do not only include beliefs about ('real') rape, but also descriptive and prescriptive beliefs about *'normal'* sexual encounters. A complex interaction between discourses of normal sex and of sexual violence may have as a consequence that anything that does not resemble 'real rape' may be reframed with relative ease as occurrences of normative sex (seduction, romance, etc.), or at least as not *truly* victimizing (Burt & Estep, 1981; Gilmore, 2017; Philadelphoff-Puren, 2005; Serisier, 2019). Put differently, sexual violence can be "discursively transformed into another kind of story" (Higgins, 1991, p. 307).

Numerous (feminist) scholars have emphasized how normative socio-sexual relations between men and women resemble and facilitate acts of sexual violence (Bridges, 1991; Cahill, 2001; Dworkin, 1976; Gavey, 2005; Koss, 1985; MacKinnon, 1989; Mardorossian, 2014). In fact, they frequently employ the term 'continuum' to refer to the enmeshment between sexual violence and 'normal' sexual practices, identifying rape as an extreme manifestation of the dynamics already present in heteronormative sexual practices. These authors note that rape and sexual violence (against women) is an ordinary rather than an extraordinary event, one that "rests squarely in the middle of what culture defines as 'normal' interaction between men and women" (Johnson, 1980, p. 146). Indeed, the traditional sexual script – the prototype of normative (hetero)sex – describes socio-sexual interaction between men and women as involving a man who actively and potentially aggressively pursues sex, while the woman functions as gatekeeper (Byers, 1996; Simon & Gagnon, 1986; Wiederman, 2005). This script reflects the socialization of men and women to act according to stereotyped gender roles, whereby "males are socialized to be the sexual aggressors and females the passive targets, whose societally prescribed role is to control the extent of sexual activity" (Bridges, 1991, p.292).[25]

Empirical support for the overlap between scripts of normal sex and elements of sexual violence comes from a range of studies. Some of these have requested participants to describe what they thought were typical examples of hookups or seduction, or in contrast typical instances of rape (e.g., Littleton & Axsom, 2003; Littleton et al., 2009; Ryan 1988). Results demonstrated that while participants depicted rape as stereotypical stranger rape, descriptions of hookups and seductions – understood as normative socio-sexual interactions – regularly included indicators of forced sex such as persuasion and manipulation. Complementing these findings, other research has demonstrated that people tend to view rape as predominantly motivated by sex, rather than (also) by power, domination, and aggression (Anderson & Swainson, 2001; McMullen, 1990). Evaluating scenarios of sexual violence through the lens of normative sex may have substantial consequences for observer reactions to victims. Indicative are findings that have demonstrated that heterosexual

[25] In contrast to the endorsed theorizing in this dissertation, some have rejected social or 'ideological' explanations in favor of biological and evolutionary reasons for sexual violence. The best-known example is Thornhill and Palmer's (2000) *A natural history of rape: Biological bases of sexual coercion*. Here, the authors (controversially) claim that a 'scientific' explanation for rape is that it "arises from men's evolved machinery for obtaining a high number of mates in an environment where female choose mates" (p. 190), adding that women's horror of rape has likely evolved from the fact that it disallows them to select a suitable mate to father their offspring.

women and homosexual men are blamed more than heterosexual men when sexually victimized (Davies et al., 2011; Wakelin & Long, 2003) and judged to experience more pleasure during the rape (Mitchell et al., 1999). These studies all included male perpetrators of rape. Hence, people possibly judge rape as less severe when it 'resembles' normative sexual practices of the parties involved (Davies et al., 2006; Doherty & Anderson, 2004). In line with this suggestion, Gravelin et al. (2019) suggest a likely pattern in which a higher romantic involvement of the victim and perpetrator (i.e., from stranger, to acquaintance, to marital rape) leads to more blame attribution. Together, these findings seem to support that discourses of normative sex and romance might be drawn upon to obfuscate the seriousness of sexual violence and attribute responsibility to the victim (Gilmore, 2017; Jeffrey & Barata, 2020; Philadelphoff-Puren, 2005).

Victimhood

The previous section illustrated various aspects of the construct sexual violence that are likely to influence observer reactions to victims. These included its changing (legal) definitions, its embeddedness in the sexual domain, and discourses of 'real rape' versus 'normal sex'. The current section elaborates on the ways in which the social construction of victimhood additionally has an impact on rape perception and reactions to victims.

Clearly, the construction of the (legitimate) victim encompasses much more than the factually established experience of a (legally recognized) crime (Holstein & Miller, 1990; Loseke, 1999). In fact, it might well be true that "no other crime has attracted so many myths and stereotypical images as those associated with the 'genuine rape victim'" (Stevenson, 2010, p. 344). In the JWT, Lerner (1980; Lerner & Simmons, 1966) mapped victimhood on the two axes of innocence and suffering. Other scholars have also emphasized innocence or blamelessness as a key characteristic of legitimate victimhood (Christie, 1986; van Dijk, 2009). That this trait comes accompanied by a host of other attributes has been supported by a number of recent empirical studies that have explored people's associations with the word 'victim'. The word has been shown to be associated with innocence, but also with attributes such as vulnerability, emotionality, fear, passivity, weakness, and shame (Boyle & Clay-Wagner, 2018; Buddie & Miller, 2001; Fohring, 2018; Hockett et al., 2014; Papendick & Bohner, 2017; Setia et al., 2020). Labeling someone a victim hence influences perceptions of (the character of) the one labeled, as well as the type of post-victimization outcomes anticipated and focused on (Hockett & Saucier, 2015).

With a steady rise in the use of the word 'victim' over the last decades (Best, 1997), it also appears as if its meaning has become more controversial and less 'neutral' (Lamb, 1999; Mardorossian, 2014). The term has increasingly been rejected in favor of the term 'survivor' by (advocates of) those who have experienced sexual and domestic violence (Dunn, 2005; Lamb, 1999; Leisenring, 2006). Meanwhile, the term has been employed in accusation of (developments in) entire social movements and cultures (e.g., 'victim feminism': Roiphe, 1993; Wolf, 2013; insightful commentary in Stringer, 2014; and 'culture of victimhood': B. Campbell & Manning,

2018; Lukianoff & Haidt, 2019). These developments suggest that victimization has gradually come to be perceived as an identity or "a characterological or psychological trait rather than the result of experience" (Lamb, 1999; Mardorossian, 2014, p. 32). Indeed, Lamb (1999) goes even further to state that the discourse we employ about victimhood is one in which "being victimized has become equivalent to having a chronic mental illness" (pp. 108-109; also Alcoff, 2018).

Although there may be good reasons to wish to reject the victim label for its negative connotations, once victimized the accordance of the legitimate victim status also provides the recipient with certain benefits, including legal rights, possible compensation, and other types of formal and informal support (Burt & Estep, 1981). As suggested before, being assigned the status of legitimate victim requires more than the experience of a crime alone, and, "because victim assignments are always open-ended, they may be sites of contestation and negotiation" (Leisenring, 2006, p. 313). Critical criminologist Nils Christie (1986) formulated a set of attributes that determine what person is most readily given the status of the legitimate or *ideal* victim. These attributes include that the victim is weak, blameless, and carrying out a respectable project at the time of victimization. The victim is furthermore placed in opposition to a big and bad offender, who has had no previous relation to the victim. The oppositional relationship between victim and perpetrator not only implies that the ideal victim is good and innocent and the (ideal) perpetrator bad and blameworthy, but also that the perpetrator is framed in terms of the (reprehensible) actions they committed, and the victim in terms of the consequences they suffer (Gray & Wegner, 2009). In part then, the legitimacy of the victim depends on the legitimacy of the perpetrator, and vice versa (Christie, 1986; Ehrlich, 2001). Although Christie did not formulate these criteria specifically for the context of sexual assault, they neatly map on to the previously discussed stranger rape as 'real rape' script.

As my colleagues and I have contended elsewhere (Bosma, Mulder & Pemberton, 2018), Christie's (1986) predetermined criteria are neither always necessary nor sufficient to be accorded the legitimate victim status. As stressed by Christie himself, the factors that make a victim 'ideal' depend on the place and time. For instance, features of the ideal victim differ according to justice context, with an international criminal context (van Wijk, 2013) and a restorative justice context (Pemberton et al., 2007) each requiring their own nuances of Christie's criteria.

An important pointer of the social construction of victimhood is that victim identities are not solely established during the fact of victimization. Rather, the affirmation of victimhood is a continuous process that prolongs into the aftermath of victimization (Easteal & Judd, 2008; Ellison & Munro, 2009b; Temkin & Krahé, 2008). Recognition of legitimacy requires victims to (immediately) report their victimization to and cooperate with the police (Masser et al., 2010; McKimmie et al., 2014). Victims also need to present themselves and their victimization stories in certain ways in order to qualify for the status of legitimate victim (Dunn, 2010; van Dijk, 2009). As such, accounts of victimization and a victim's involvement may be (re)constructed "to preserve normal or repair deviant identities" (Dunn, 2010, p. 161). Ensured recognition as a legitimate victim requires a fine balance between assertiveness and passivity: a victim must be strong enough

to (dare to) express their claim, but not so forceful as to obstruct the interests of others or society at large (van Dijk, 2009). In Christie's (1986) words:

> A minimum of strength is a precondition to being listened to, but sufficient strength to threaten others would not be a good base for creating the type of general and public sympathy that is associated with the status of being a victim. (p. 21)

Research has shown that credibility judgments of the victim in part depend on whether a victim's demeanor communicates emotional distress in the aftermath of victimization (overviews in Nitschke et al., 2019; van Doorn & Koster, 2019). This display of emotional distress ought to be of a degree that is thought to befit the intensity of the crime, meaning that a calm and controlled demeanor may elicit suspicion (Ellison & Munro, 2009b; Lens et al., 2014; Rose et al., 2006; Schuller et al., 2010). Moreover, a victim's emotionality ought to relate to a specific subset of emotions, namely that of sadness and fear. Expressions of anger may cause the victim to be perceived as less credible and likable (Bohner & Schapansky, 2018; van Doorn & Koster, 2019; Wrede et al., 2015). Hence, while victims are condemned for fearfulness and passivity *during* victimization (Diekman et al., 2013), they are condemned for (emotional) displays of power and agency in the subsequent retelling of their experience in the courtroom. Although absolute adherence to the varying context-dependent victim stereotypes hardly seems feasible, counter-stereotypical behaviors or expressions may result in a violation of the observer's expectations, which can in turn lead to social penalization in the form of character derogation and blame (e.g., Ask & Landström, 2010; Hackett et al., 2008; Lens et al., 2014).

The category of 'victim', then, is rather paradoxical (Loseke, 1999). On the one hand, a victim identity carries negative connotations of passivity and weakness, and as an 'identity' may be (increasingly) difficult to shake off (Lamb, 1999). On the other hand, the assignment of the legitimate or 'ideal' victim label is precarious and requires particular behaviors and demeanors before, during, and after victimization in order to be deserved and preserved (Christie, 1986; Dunn, 2008).

Gender

The previous sections have signaled the thorough intertwinement of the constructs sexual violence and victimhood with the construct gender (Gavey, 2005; Lamb, 1999). Indeed, it is primarily for the practical reasons of structure and readability that I have attempted to 'dissever' gender from the other constructs to provide it with its own section. In this section, I will limit myself to a discussion of gender as related to (observer reactions to) sexual violence and

victimhood. Although contested by some,[26] in many Western societies it is now widely accepted that gender is best understood as a social construct (Butler, 1988; de Beauvoir, 1949; West & Zimmerman, 1987). As such, 'gender' is commonly distinguished from 'sex', where 'sex' refers to biological differences between the male and female body, and gender to the socio-cultural significance ascribed to those differences, i.e., what it means to be a man or a woman (Bonthuys, 2008; Butler, 1986).[27]

The Victim as Female

The recognition that sexual violence and gender are closely intertwined is maybe best expressed in the description of rape as a 'gendered' crime (e.g., Cahill, 2001; 2009; Marcus, 1992; Mardorossian, 2014). Describing rape as a gendered crime in part entails the realization that "the vast majority of sexual violence is perpetrated by men, and the vast majority of the victims are women", and that "to ignore this disproportionality (…) is to misunderstand the phenomenon at the outset" (Cahill, 2009, p.16; Mardorossian, 2014). Clearly, this descriptive reality has implications for observer expectations of what sexual assault looks like. Almost too obvious a statement to put in writing: we generally expect a victim of sexual violence to be female (e.g., Buddie & Miller, 2001).[28] Although the opposite has also been argued, the presumption that women are the 'normal' and 'legitimate' targets of sexual victimization (MacKinnon, 1989; Weis & Borges, 1973) may increase the likelihood that they are acknowledged as credible and legitimate victims (Cohen, 2014). Indeed, the female victim has been described as "a cultural script that evokes sympathy without challenging the hierarchical structure" (Burbank, 1994; quoted in Renzetti, 1999, p. 50). In contrast, the male victim (of sexual violence) does not adhere to this cultural script, and might therefore receive less sympathy from his social surroundings. Indeed, the majority of studies has found that male victims are blamed more than female victims (e.g., Davies et al., 2009; Starosta & Schuller, 2020; Strömwall et al., 2013; White & Kurpius, 2002; overview in van der Bruggen & Grubb, 2014). A sizable minority, however, has demonstrated the opposite (Anderson, 1999; Schneider et al., 1994; Wakelin & Long, 2003), suggesting that people might also find reason to blame those who they *expect* to be at the receiving end of sexual pursuit or aggression (Davies & Boden, 2012; Wakelin & Long, 2003).[29] Another set of relevant studies has distinguished between behavioral and characterological blame (Janoff-Bulman, 1979), and found

[26] See for instance recent developments in Hungary (Kent & Tapfumaneyi, 2018) and Romania (Tidey, 2020) where new laws have been passed or proposed to ban gender studies and forbid teaching the idea that sex and gender are not identical.
[27] Although this is generally taken to mean that, unlike gender, sex is fixed and naturally dichotomous, this idea has proven to be overly simplistic (e.g., Ainsworth, 2015; Butler, 1986).
[28] Indeed, the association between victimhood and femaleness does not exclusively pertain to victimization by sexual violence. Although not part of Christie's (1986) formal set of criteria, he for instance consistently referred to the ideal victim as 'she', and to the perpetrator as 'he'. Additionally, Reynolds et al. (2020) have recently demonstrated in several experimental studies that harmed targets and 'victims' were assumed to be women, and that women were assumed to be harmed more by moral violations than men.
[29] Such findings might be explained by what Wakelin and Long (2003) have called the sexual attraction hypothesis, and what Davies et al. (2006) have coined the sexual preference effect.

that respondents comparatively blamed the *character* of the female victim more and the *behavior* of the male victim (Howard, 1984b; Sleath & Bull, 2010). It seems then that observers can find reasons, albeit different ones, to blame both male and female victims of sexual violence.

The Victim as Feminine

The description of rape as a gendered crime entails more than the awareness that rape is mostly perpetrated by men against women (Cahill, 2009).[30] It also implies that rape cannot be understood without thorough knowledge of the allotted significance to gender. Rape attains its meaning against the backdrop of hierarchical gender relations: perpetrated by the dominant, active, powerful masculine against the submissive, passive, powerless feminine (MacKinnon, 1989; Marcus, 1992).[31] As many scholars have noted, the position of the victimized, especially in the context of sexual violence, is hence one of femininity (MacKinnon, 1989; Marcus, 1992; Mardorossian, 2014). As aptly described by Mardorossian (2014):

> Masculinity and femininity are structural positions rather than biologically derived ones. The position of dominant masculinity can be occupied by either men or women, while structural femininity is a position that may define and subordinate men, minorities, and other marginalized groups just as effectively as it does the category women. (p.3)

Victimhood and femininity are hence complementary concepts according to their assigned meanings in many societies (Lamb, 1999). Specifically, “victimhood is irretrievably coded as feminine, no doubt because of its reframing as a sign of weakness and passivity, traits that have traditionally been ascribed to femininity in Western culture” (Mardorossian, 2014, p. 31-32). As mentioned previously, several experimental studies have shown that people tend to associate victimhood with innocence, but also with vulnerability, emotionality, and passivity (Fohring, 2018; Papendick & Bohner, 2017). These traits show significant overlap with traits of traditional femininity (Bem, 1974; Prentice & Carranza, 2002). In contradistinction, “cultural expectations dictate that ‘macho’ men exhibit strength, autonomy, and sexual aggression. So that, by definition, ‘macho’ men cannot also be victims” (Doherty & Anderson, 2004, p. 13; Javaid, 2015b). Hence, conceptions of stereotypical masculinity and (legitimate) victimhood are inherently oppositional (Anderson & Doherty, 2008). This might lead male victims to be regarded as “undeserving” and thus innocent victims of sexual violence (Doherty & Anderson, 2004; Mardorossian, 2014, p. 91), but also as anomalous or “aberrations from the masculine norm” (Cohen, 2014, p. 93).

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[30] In fact, using this limited operationalization leaves it vulnerable to the claim that sexual violence is in fact not gendered because men also become victims of rape and women have been known to perpetrate rape (Cohen, 2014; Graham, 2006). Or, relatedly, the claim that male victims are blamed more than female victims and that feminist theorizing hence serves poorly to explain rape victimization (Davies & Rogers, 2006; N. Fisher & Pina, 2013).

[31] This notion seems to be supported by the flourishing of rape in institutions that are marked by significant disparities in status and power, including religious institutions, prisons, professional sports, the army, the film industry, and academia.

Because the male rape victim to a certain extent occupies the position of the feminine, it has also been argued that rape can have a 'gendering' function of *feminizing* the victim (Bergoffen, 2009; Bonthuys, 2008; Cahill, 2000; 2009; MacKinnon, 1989; Marcus, 1992). Victim feminization may result either because the act of rape makes a male victim a 'social woman' (Bonthuys, 2008), or because observers presume that the male victim was feminine (or homosexual) to begin with, 'explaining' why he could be raped (Cohen, 2014). To the best of my knowledge, social psychologist Judith Howard (1984a) is the only researcher who conducted an experimental study that explicitly investigated whether observers tend to feminize victims of sexual violence. In a vignette study, she included male and female victims of rape and robbery, and measured, amongst other variables, observer ratings of masculinity/femininity. Her results revealed that participants indeed rated victims of rape as more feminine than victims of robbery.

Traditional Femininity and Victim Innocence

The influence of conceptualizations of gender on perceptions of sexual violence and victimhood is also demonstrated in studies that include self-report scales of attitudes toward gender roles and sexuality. Indeed, when Burt (1980) proposed a scale to measure RMA, she emphasized the strong connection between RMA and traditional gender role attitudes.[32] People with traditional gender role attitudes generally react more negatively to victims of sexual violence, and are more inclined to minimize rape (Ben-David & Schneider, 2005; White & Yamawaki, 2009; Yamawaki, 2007; brief overviews in Gravelin et al., 2019; van der Bruggen & Grubb, 2014). In a similar vein, sexist attitudes (Glick & Fiske, 1996) have been found to negatively influence observer reactions to victims of sexual violence (Abrams et al., 2003; Yamawaki, 2007; overview in Gravelin et al., 2019).[33]

Related to the correlational findings between traditional gender role attitudes and negative observer reactions, studies have demonstrated that victims of sexual assault are blamed for behaviors that simultaneously violate victim and gender stereotypes. For instance, Capezza and Arriaga (2008) found that 'nontraditional' women (i.e., career women) compared to 'traditional' women (i.e., housewives), and women who reacted actively rather than passively to their husband's psychological abuse were derogated and blamed more for their victimization. Masser et al. (2010; also Viki & Abrams, 2002) have also noted the overlap between victim and gender stereotypes, and in their study attempted to disentangle the two. They manipulated victim stereotypes (resistance during the assault and cooperation with the police vs. non-resistance and uncooperative behavior) separately from feminine gender norms (leaving the children with a babysitter vs. leaving

[32] Traditional gender role attitudes are conservative descriptive and prescriptive beliefs about (essential) differences between men and women, and the roles they should (and are best suited to) enact (Glick & Fiske, 1996).

[33] The best-known concept and scale employed to measure sexism is that of 'ambivalent sexism', as coined by Glick and Fiske (1996). Ambivalent sexism consists of a more blatant 'hostile sexism', as well as a covert and seemingly well-intended 'benevolent sexism'. Both have been found to predict victim blame (Yamawaki, 2007), although the influence of benevolent sexism is predominantly found in acquaintance rape and in response to non-stereotypical victims (Abrams et al., 2003; Masser et al., 2010; Viki & Abrams, 2002; Yamawaki, 2007).

the children home alone). The researchers found that a victim's deviance from the gender norm negatively influenced observer reactions, although only when the victim also failed to meet the victim stereotype.

Perhaps the overlap between stereotypes of the 'blameless victim' and the 'good woman' is most clearly exemplified in studies that have manipulated variables relating to 'victim respectability'. Manipulated variables include a female victim's occupational status (e.g., topless dancer vs. nun; Luginbuhl & Mullin, 1981), her dress and/or appearance (somber vs. seductive: Whatley, 2005; sexualized vs. non-sexualized: Loughnan et al., 2013), and her sexual history or reputation (e.g., Pugh, 1983; Schuller & Hastings, 2002). As may be expected, these studies found 'less respectable' victims to be blamed more than 'more respectable' victims (overview in Whatley, 1996). Additionally, research has shown that victims who were intoxicated by drugs or alcohol are ascribed more blame than victims who were sober at the time of the assault (e.g., Bieneck & Krahé, 2011; E. Finch & Munro, 2005; Qi et al., 2016; Wenger & Bornstein, 2006). All these factors can be understood as integral to stereotypes of both legitimate victimhood and traditional femininity. Notably, whereas factors related to victim respectability (i.e., alcohol consumption and acquaintance with the offender) predict victim blame and perpetrator exoneration in cases of sexual assault, the same has not been found in reaction to non-sexual victimization (i.e., robbery: Bieneck & Krahé, 2011).[34]

Gendered Explanations of Sexual Victimization

The importance of gender stereotypes in understanding observer reactions to victims of sexual violence is finally demonstrated in the type of descriptions and explanations people give of sexual violence. As stated by Anderson and Doherty (2008): "hegemonic understandings of gender and heterosexuality underpin causal reasoning about rape in a variety of contexts, providing the building blocks for the social construction of risk in relation to sexual violence" (p. 22). For instance, a 'boys will be boys' response to suggestions of sexual aggression (e.g., Hlavka, 2014) – trivializing the transgression and exonerating the accused – attains its explanatory power precisely from the fact that we are talking about *boys.* The phrase 'girls will be girls' does nothing to 'explain' female sexual perpetration against a man. Similarly, rape myths that allude to 'asking for it' (Fraser, 2015) only 'make sense' in reference to the female victim, and perhaps the homosexual male victim, but not generally as an explanation for the sexual victimization of heterosexual men. The

[34] The finding that female victims of sexual violence are blamed more when they do not adhere to traditional gender norms is particularly disheartening in light of the suggestion that some of these norms may in fact increase chances of (sexual) victimization. For instance, it has been argued that the traditional 'good' woman does not possess (or utilize) bodily strength or mobility (Bartky, 1990; Madriz, 1997), ought to be polite and not refuse her male partner, and has learned to be so fearful of rape that a situation identified as such probably makes it more likely that she will freeze in response rather than assert herself (Marcus, 1992; Weis & Borges, 1973). As noted by Sharon Marcus (1992) "it is by now a feminist truism – but nonetheless still an important feminist truth – that the criteria of feminine beauty and worthy feminine behavior, if enacted without any modification, create a trammeled, passive person" (p. 393). This passivity in turn "makes a feminine woman the perfect victim of sexual aggression" (Griffin, 1971, p. 33).

gendered aspect of rape can thus be found in the types of explanations that sound ‘reasonable’ or amount to ‘common sense’ when accounting for sexual violence, as provided by sexual scripts and rape myths (Frith & Kitzinger, 2001; Kitzinger & Frith, 1999).

Methodological Implications

Thus far, I have argued that a thorough understanding of observer reactions to victims of sexual assault requires an incorporation of the socio-cultural context in which the observer is embedded. The relevant context at a minimum includes (the interplay between) understandings of sexual violence, victimhood, and gender. Socio-cultural norms that involve these concepts can explicitly prescribe what types of reactions to victims are (dis)allowed, but also tacitly shape the particular narratives that are rendered ‘plausible’ accounts of sexual victimization. Importantly, these concepts should be understood as socially constructed, and hence as fluid rather than fixed in meaning. This final section elaborates on what I believe are some of the practical consequences of this view for (experimental) rape perception research. Specifically, this section delineates some of the limitations inherent to the traditional approach of measuring (determinants of) negative social reactions, and illustrates how I have addressed them in my own research.

Traditional Methodological Approach

When referring to the ‘traditional approach’, I mean the majority of rape perception studies that consists of predominantly written vignettes (i.e., short scenarios providing information about the victim, accused, and/or circumstances of the victimization), followed by mostly closed-ended questions and quantitative response scales (Anderson & Doherty, 2008; Temkin & Krahé, 2008). The traditional approach is primarily an experimental approach, focused on testing specific hypotheses.

Vignettes form a useful tool for the controlled manipulation of specific variables that are expected to influence observer reactions. Although particularly written vignettes have been criticized for insufficiently engaging the reader, thus presumably leading to low external validity regarding real-life encounters with victims (Collett & Childs, 2011), they seem largely successful at eliciting differential observer reactions. An interesting aspect of written vignettes is precisely that they “allow for participants to ‘fill in the details’, applying their own stereotypes to aspects of the characters and their behaviours that aren’t specifically given in the description” (J. Finch, 1987; Sleed et al., 2002, p. 25). Hence, it has been suggested that “if the aim of the research is to establish the normative stereotypes around the issue of rape, written vignettes may be an appropriate methodology to use” (p. 26). Additionally, these vignettes can be particularly representative of confrontations with stories of sexual assault that are currently quite common: namely, those

communicated via newspaper articles, social media messages, and social sharing (or gossip) about others we do not, or vaguely, know.[35]

Following the vignette, closed-ended questions in combination with quantitative response scales form an explicit measure of a limited number of pre-determined (independent and dependent) variables. Respondents generally have time to introspectively deliberate their answers, and then indicate on a (Likert) scale the answer of their preference. Independent variables mostly relate to either of two broad categories of determinants: those related to the observer, such as their just world beliefs or rape myth endorsement, and those associated with the (manipulated) stimulus, i.e., variables related to the victim, the offender, or the victimization (Gravelin et al., 2019; Grubb & Harrower, 2008; Temkin & Krahé, 2008). Although this predominant approach in rape perception research has proved valuable, for instance in identifying specific factors that influence observer reactions, it is also bound by certain limitations.

Addressing Current Methodological Limitations

A first limitation is that through the inclusion of a set of predetermined questions and response possibilities, the researcher provides a specific framework in which respondents have limited room to express themselves (Anderson & Doherty, 2008).[36] The specific framework is informed by the particular hypotheses a researcher wishes to test, and is hence frequently and deliberately reductionist compared to the theorizing from which the hypotheses were derived. Additionally, researchers cannot include every single question relating to possible (negative) reactions toward victims for practical reasons. Hence, researchers specify *a priori* what specific reactions they are interested in and how these are to be included in the study. Consequently, the researcher not only excludes other possible reactions to the victim, but also any reactions the participant may have toward, for instance, the perpetrator. At the same time, participants are forced to actively consider all included reactions. As such, even if participants would have never considered a particular type of reaction when unprompted, or would have been much more likely to resort to one response over the other, the forced directedness of the researcher's questions may obscure these inclinations.

With regard to the dependent variables, the framework provided by the researcher mostly revolves around one particular observer reaction. Indeed, a glance at the titles of recent overview studies on the topic reveals that most experimental studies have focused on (rape) victim blaming

[35] It should be noted, however, that many studies (still) employ vignettes that describe stranger or 'real' rape to measure observer reactions (Anderson & Beattie, 2001). Gravelin et al. (2019) have warned of the ease with which findings from such studies are generalized to form our understanding of reactions to acquaintance rape, even though it is conceivable that these events trigger significantly different types of biases and responses (e.g., McKimmie et al., 2014).

[36] Contributing to this set framework may be formulations within the vignettes themselves, which often give a one-sided or 'factual' account of the events that happened, leaving participants unable to express doubts or contest the given version of events. It has been noted that such an approach also fails to reflect the reality that claims of sexual assault are often allegations, which are particularly susceptible to scrutiny and reinterpretations (Anderson & Doherty, 2008; Serisier, 2019).

(e.g., Gravelin et al., 2019; Grubb & Harrower, 2008; Grubb & Turner, 2012; van der Bruggen & Grubb, 2014). Victim blame scales include questions that focus on different aspects of the victim's behavior (e.g., alcohol use, flirting, or non-resistance), and at times the victim's character (Howard, 1984a; Luginbuhl & Mullin, 1981; Wakelin & Long, 2003).[37] Scales that measure other victim-oriented reactions such as derogation and distancing are much less frequently employed (for exceptions, see e.g., Bal & van den Bos, 2010; Bohner, 2001; Correia et al., 2012; Kay et al., 2005). As such, the potential diversity in observer reactions remains hidden in many of the currently applied methodologies. In my empirical chapters, I seek to address this by examining a range of self-reported observer reactions. When victim blame is included, a distinction is made between behavioral and characterological blame (Chapter 4). Furthermore, reactions of victim derogation (Chapters 2 & 4), victim distancing (Chapter 4), victim credibility (Chapter 2), perceived crime severity (Chapter 2), victim feminization (Chapter 3), and emotional observer responses (Chapter 4) are included. Additionally, this dissertation includes two qualitative studies (Chapters 5 & 6) where participants were not limited by a chosen direction of the questions or narrow range of response options.

A second limitation that relates to the first point is that the traditional methodological approach may be unsuited to capture spontaneous and subtle reactions of the participant (Anderson, 1999; Mulder, 2018). Participants can choose to give socially desirable answers, and/or deliberately mask their 'true' feelings (Krumpal, 2011; Nederhof, 1985), but may also be subject to *implicit* biases and hence not fully aware of endorsing certain attitudes (Gawronski & de Houwer, 2014).[38] Both may lead to reported answers that are less informative than they possibly could be. Therefore, I have complemented traditional self-report measures with a number of relatively indirect measures. Chapter 4 includes a Single Target Implicit Association Test (ST-IAT; Karpinski & Steinman, 2006) as an implicit measure of derogation (similar approach used in Süssenbach, Albrecht & Bohner, 2017), as well as a pictorial measure (van Bakel et al., 2013) as a more indirect measure of victim distancing.[39] In Chapter 3, victim feminization is not only measured through explicit questioning, but also by use of an innovative measure in which participants choose between feminized and masculinized pictures of the target victim. Indirect measures generally leave

[37] Questions included in these scales are frequently phrased explicitly in terms of blame ("How much is the victim to blame for …"), or alternatively in terms of responsibility. Although one might doubt whether participants distinguish between the concepts, and researchers also frequently use the terms interchangeably (e.g., Grubb & Harrower, 2008), others have argued that the attribution of responsibility relates to perceptions of causality whereas blame signifies a moral judgment (e.g., Anderson & Doherty, 2008; brief overview in Gravelin et al. 2019).

[38] Multiple authors have pointed out that the lack of explicit (reported) endorsement of an attitude does not necessarily imply that someone does not endorse the belief implicitly or at least a certain extent (with respect to the justice motive: Lerner, 1980; with respect to RMA: Edwards et al., 2011). Hence, even when one fails to introspectively detect a particular attitude in oneself, such an attitude can still surface in interactions with others, and influence consequential judgments and decision-making (e.g., Jost et al., 2009; Kang et al., 2012; Süssenbach, Albrecht & Bohner, 2017).

[39] Rape perception studies that have innovatively employed other subtle or implicit measurements include studies that used eye-tracking to demonstrate that RMA influences attentional focus and information processing in rape cases (Süssenbach et al., 2012; Süssenbach, Eyssel, et al., 2017).

participants less opportunity to actively consider and/or control their responses, either because they are not entirely aware of what is being measured (such as in the feminization measure), or because time constraints require them to respond in near-automatic fashion (such as in the ST-IAT). As such, these measures may be more suitable when observer responses are prone to social desirability concerns (R. Fisher, 1993; King & Bruner, 2000), or otherwise resist the format of explicit articulation (Mulder, 2018).

Finally, with a number of notable exceptions (e.g., Anderson & Doherty, 2008; Doherty & Anderson, 2004; Ellison & Munro, 2009a; 2009b; 2010; 2015; McKimmie et al., 2014), many (experimental) rape perception studies provide little insight into the meaning a participant attaches to a concept, or the "sense-making practices" that underlie observer reactions (Anderson and Doherty, 2008, p. 30). Additionally, although "many of the variables involved in rape attribution formation are intertwined" (Ellison & Munro, 2015; van der Bruggen & Grubb, 2014, p. 529), the traditional methodological approach has a hard time illustrating this interplay between variables. The aforementioned concerns also apply to the measurement of (nuanced) differences between experimental conditions, such as those that include male and female victims. Regardless, for instance, of whether participants attribute similar or different quantities of blame, derogation, etc. to both victims, these reactions may not necessarily result from the same underlying instincts, concerns, or sense-making practices.

In one illustrative study that has extended on the traditional approach, McKimmie et al. (2014) combined a quantitative and qualitative analysis to investigate differences in observer reactions to stranger versus acquaintance rape. While the quantitative analysis demonstrated that victim stereotypes influenced reactions in the acquaintance-rape but not the stranger-rape scenario, the qualitative analysis revealed that participants focused on different aspects of the scenario in their verdicts of acquaintance compared to stranger rape. Specifically, stranger-rape scenarios directed their attention to the behavior of the accused, while reasoning about acquaintance rape was more likely to revolve around the issue of consent. This study highlighted that different points of focus can underlie judgments of sexual assault. Another example can be found in the study of Doherty and Anderson (2004), which demonstrated that participants emphasized the severity of rape for heterosexual women, heterosexual men, and homosexual men alike, but also suggested that heterosexual men are likely to suffer more because their victimization goes against norms of masculinity. This study demonstrated that participants gave meaning to the concept of 'suffering' by reference to particular gender norms.

To understand observer reactions, then, it seems necessary to explore the ways in which observers focus on particular elements of a sexual assault story (Sleed et al., 2002), as well as the meanings they assign to those elements. Social constructionism points to the significance of language in the construction of meaning, and previous research has indicated the value of closely examining language to better understand how observers make sense of and react to (victims of)

sexual violence (e.g., Bohner, 2001; Coates, 1997; Ehrlich, 2001).[40] Hence, Chapter 5 employs a frame analysis that combines a quantitative and qualitative approach to examine how participants construct events that have led up to a claim of sexual assault. Chapter 6 focuses on how participants describe and explain an 'ambiguous' sexual encounter, and what reasoning they employ to distribute accountability among the actors. Using the Articulated Thoughts during Simulated Situations method (ATSS; Davison et al., 1983), participants reacted spontaneously and aloud to a story of nonconsensual sex during intermittent 1-minute breaks in the vignette. In both chapters, qualitative analyses expose *how* participants speak about concepts like victimhood and sexual assault, and how these concepts attain different meanings as a function of the constructed narrative.

In sum, a fuller incorporation of the socio-cultural context in rape perception research might have several practical implications. Acknowledging the influence of socio-cultural norms on observers' explanatory accounts and reactions to victims likely requires that researchers include ways to measure more subtle and diverse responses to stories of sexual victimization. Furthermore, understanding relevant concepts such as victimhood and sexual violence as largely socially constructed seems to call for an approach in which those concepts are indeed treated as fluid and malleable. As such, much might be learned from closely examining the meanings that participants attach to those concepts in varying contexts.

[40] For instance, Bohner (2001) found that in response to particular rape scenarios, respondents' use of passive formulations to describe the rape were associated with increased responsibility attribution to the victim and decreased responsibility attribution to the perpetrator (also Niemi & Young, 2016).

Chapter 2

Emotional Victims and Expectancy Violations

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Abstract

Negative observer reactions toward victims may be related to people's expectations of the characteristics and demeanor of an ideal victim. We examined how expressed emotion, victim sex, and type of victimization influence observers' perceptions of victim credibility, victim character, and harm. Our hypothesis was that angry victims, male victims, and victims of sexual violence are perceived less positively than sad victims, female victims, and victims of physical violence. Additionally, we anticipated that expectancy violations following expressed agentic/high status, or passive/low-status emotions of the victim would lead to negative reactions. Participants ($N = 335$) read a written victim impact statement by a male or female victim of a sexual or physical assault in which anger or sadness was expressed. The results showed that observers generally respond more negatively to male victims than to female victims, and to victims expressing anger rather than sadness. However, a two-way interaction between expressed emotion and type of crime revealed that expressed emotion only significantly influenced character derogation and victim credibility in cases of physical violence. Finally, emotion expectancy violations based on ex-ante expectations led to derogation and diminished credibility. The discussion focuses on how emotion expectancy violations seem intimately tied to stereotype-ridden features of victimization.

Victimization can have a significant impact on the well-being of the victim, not in the least because of reactions of third parties after primary victimization has occurred. Negative reactions to the victim following his or her victimization may exacerbate the victim's suffering, which is referred to as 'secondary victimization' (Montada, 1994; Orth, 2002). In this article, we examine negative reactions in relation to the adherence to or breaking with, stereotypes about the type of victimization, gender, and emotion.

Ever since victims have been granted a more prominent role in criminal justice, discussions about the appropriateness and consequences of the expressions of certain emotions have flared up. Some argue that the victim's participation, such as through a Victim Impact Statement (VIS), in a trial may influence the sentencing of the offender (for an overview of the debate, see Pemberton & Reynaers, 2011). For example, concerns have been raised regarding the possibility that vengeful attitudes of the victim or unwarranted sympathy with an emotional victim may distort perceptions of what punishment should be imposed on the offender (Bandes & Salerno, 2014; Nuñez et al., 2017). However, leaving aside the implications for the justice procedure, self-expression is also expected to have major consequences for how the victim him- or herself is perceived and acknowledged. In the current study, we focus on expressions of anger and sadness by male and female victims of sexual and physical violence and examine how these factors influence observers' perceptions of victims in terms of their character, credibility, and suffering. Of particular interest is the question whether (violations of) normative expectations of observers regarding emotional display for certain types of victims promote secondary victimization of the victim.

The Ideal Victim

Most people have an implicit idea of what victims (should) look like and how they should behave. Christie (1986) argued that the image that most readily comes to mind is the "person or a category of individuals who – when hit by crime – most readily are given the complete and legitimate status of being a victim" (p. 18). In Christie's conception, the *ideal* victim is weak, respectable, and blameless. With regard to sex, though not one of Christie's formal criteria, the ideal victim is usually a female figure. Christie does not, however, address the issue of what emotions ought to be displayed by the ideal victim. In fact, whereas Christie's analysis does not extend so far as to include the appropriate behaviors and demeanor of a victim *post-victimization* (for example, in the courtroom), ad hoc narratives (such as a victim impact statements) might be used to reassert one's position as (ideal) victim (as suggested by Balfour et al., 2017; Polletta, 2009). Communication of the 'right' emotions is expected to be an essential ingredient in successfully coming across as a blameless victim.

The (Ideal) Emotional Victim

Research on the emotional victim effect (EVE; Ask & Landström, 2010) suggests that observers generally expect victims to express emotions of negative valence in an intensity that is in line with the perceived severity of the victimization (also: Golding et al., 2003). Although any

emotion that brings about unpleasant associations, such as sadness, fear, or anger, may be classified under 'emotions of negative valence', the types of emotions that seem to befit the stereotypical victim are those that correspond with the ideal victim portrayal of someone who is vulnerable, powerless, and passive (Dunn, 2008; Lamb, 1999). In other words, regardless of what emotions victims *experience* in reality in reaction to injustice (Smith & Lazarus, 1993), observers are likely to expect them to *express* emotions that signal passivity and low status (e.g., Regan & Baker, 1998). The stereotypical victim is generally not associated with a display of emotions that signal high status or agency. In the current study, passive/low status emotions include those emotions that are, in psychological studies, generally interpreted to signal submission, conformity, and lack of power. Examples include emotions such as fear, sadness, guilt, and shame (Tiedens, 2001; Timmers et al., 1998). Agentic/ high status emotions, in contrast, include those emotions that are generally interpreted to signal initiative, discipline, and an exertion of (self-)control and power over one's social environment. Examples include emotions such as pride, anger, and contempt (Brody & Hall, 1993). In the current design, we chose sadness to represent the first class of emotions and anger to represent the second class of emotions in a written vignette.

Support from real-life settings for the idea that victims are generally expected (and hence 'prescribed') to express the first class of emotions rather than the second can be found in a series of interviews with US district court judges, conducted by Schuster and Propen (2010). These authors found that judges believe that expressions of grief (especially when related to loss of life, and not expressed in an excessive manner) are more appropriate in the setting of the courtroom than expressions of anger. The expression of compassion by the victim is generally admired, but not in the context of domestic violence. In that case, the expression of compassion elicits suspicion by the judges. The pattern described by Schuster and Propen perfectly fits the profile of the ideal victim. Sadness and compassion are a much better fit with the passive and low-status position of the victim, but these emotions should not be expressed too intensely or in the wrong context (e.g., a domestic violence victim voicing compassion might undesirably signal complicity). Counterexamples are given by van Dijk (2009) when he analyses the stories of multiple non-passive victims. For example, Sabine Dardenne, one of the victims of the infamous Belgian kidnapper and child abuser Dutroux, displayed anger in her court testimony and refused to forgive him (van Dijk, 2009). The expression of these agentic emotions caused her status as victim to become a matter of dispute, not only in the media but also in the courtroom.

Victim Sex

In the description of the ideal victim, notions of victimhood show significant overlap with notions of (stereotypical) femininity. Both descriptions of stereotypical feminine women and stereotypical victims include associations that refer to weakness, innocence, vulnerability, defenselessness, and naivety (Carpenter, 2003; Cermele et al., 2001). Important for the current study is that both femininity and victimhood are frequently associated with the expression of low status and passive emotions (Brody & Hall, 1993; Plant et al., 2000), as well as with general

(intense) emotionality (Fischer, 1993; Hutson-Comeaux & Kelly, 2002). Previous studies found female victims to be perceived as less credible when they shared their experiences in an emotionally inexpressive way rather than with sadness (Ask & Landström, 2010), but did not find this effect for male victims (Landström et al., 2015). This seems related to the default implicit assumption to equate men with higher status relative to women (Nussbaum, 2016; Tiedens, 2001), making the acknowledgment of the male (emotional) victim to some extent an inherent contradiction (Doherty & Anderson, 2004). In cases of sexual violence, many authors found male victims to be blamed or ridiculed more than female victims, particularly by male observers and significantly more so when the victim was described as homosexual or as having been assaulted by a female perpetrator (for an overview of the literature, see Davies & Rogers, 2006). On the other hand, Wrede et al. (2015) demonstrated that victims who express sadness are generally perceived as warmer, but that only for male victims this results in a greater perceived need of support. The difference between these results may be due in part to the type of victimization described in the vignette, namely sexual violence in the first case as opposed to robbery in the latter. In the current study, we hope to shed more light on the (seeming) contradictions in observer reactions to male (emotional) victims by including both male and female victims of sexual and non-sexual forms of violence.

Type of Victimization

In relation to the above, observers may have specific sets of stereotypes of victims that depend on the type of victimization they have experienced. There is ample reason to suspect that sexual victimization, in particular, is likely to elicit different reactions than other forms of victimization. First, sexual victimization is generally perceived to be among the most severe crimes (Frieze et al., 1987; Miller et al., 1993; Waters et al., 2005). The assumed severity of the crime may subsequently lead to the expectation that its victims experience and express very intense emotions (Rose et al., 2006). Second, in addition to the perceived severity and assumed violence of the crime, rape is frequently called a gendered crime (Rumney & Morgan-Taylor, 1997). The vast majority of identified rape victims is female. Finally, rape is considered a gendering crime; i.e., the act itself may lead the victim to become perceived as more feminine than before (Bonthuys, 2008). This fact is likely to create the expectation in the general public that victims of sexual violence are particularly likely to express feminine, hence passive and low status, emotions. The sexual dimension of the victimization is therefore hypothesized to shape particular expectations of how the victim should express him- or herself.

Notably, studies comparing observer reactions to sexual victimization and to other types of severe victimization are still lacking in the current literature. Many studies that examine reactions toward victims have employed vignettes that describe a sexual assault, or different forms of sexual victimization (Grubb & Harrower, 2009; Pedersen & Strömwall, 2013; van der Bruggen & Grubb, 2014). Most research focused solely on one type of victimization (e.g., Bal & van den Bos, 2012; Hafer, 2000), removing the opportunity to test whether and how the sexual nature of a crime

influences reactions to victims in comparison to non-sexual crimes. One study did find differences in attributions of blame to victims (and perpetrators) of rape and robbery, with more blame attributed to victims of rape (Bieneck & Krahé, 2011). These two types of victimization admittedly seem to differ on many dimensions, including the perceived severity of the crime and the goal of the violence (e.g., whereas rape may be perceived as aggression in itself directed at the victim's body and being, robbery might make use of instrumental violence if the victim is 'in the way' in order to retrieve an item of material value). To facilitate reliable comparison as much as possible, the current study compares sexual violence (a rape) with physical violence (an attack). Both are interpersonal contact crimes that directly target the body of the victim, are perceived as serious enough to justify a VIS in a legal setting, and may be assumed to cause severe physical and psychological harm (Sadler et al., 2000). However, we have refrained from describing the victimization in more detail in the vignette to make respondents rely on their (implicit/ stereotypical) first associations when reading about such as crime. We expect the sexual versus non-sexual dimension of the crime to influence a broad range of assumptions in the observers.

Summarizing the above findings regarding observer expectations, our first set of hypotheses entails that:

H1a: Respondents more often expect passive and low-status, rather than agentic and high status, emotions from victims in general.
H1b: Respondents expect more passive and low-status emotions from female victims compared to male victims – irrespective of the type of victimization.
H1c: Respondents expect more passive and low-status emotions from victims of sexual violence compared to victims of physical violence – irrespective of the sex of the victim.
H1d: Respondents expect more intense emotions from female victims compared to male victims – irrespective of the type of victimization.
H1e: Respondents expect more intense emotions from sexual violence victims compared to physical violence victims – irrespective of the sex of the victim.

Reactions to (Non-)Stereotypical Victims

Social psychological theories have consistently posed that people go out of their way to retain their (implicit) beliefs and worldviews, and may initially greet counterevidence with denial and negativity to avoid the experience of justice related distress (e.g., Festinger, 1962; Jost et al., 2004; Lerner, 1980; Rudman & Glick, 2001). Studies specifically about victims of sexual violence have shown that both particularly stereotypical victims (Howard, 1984b) and non-stereotypical victims (Doherty & Anderson, 2004) run the risk of being met with more negative reactions from their social surroundings than victims who are less easily classified in one of the two categories. In the current study, we aim to test whether victims who do not adhere to the stereotypes about victimization (i.e., male victims; angry victims) in general are met with more negative reactions than ideal victims (i.e., female victims; sad victims). We expect that the former group will be

perceived as less credible, their character will be evaluated less positively, and their physical and psychological harm will be acknowledged to a lesser extent. The aforementioned leads us to the following hypothesis:

> **H2a:** Respondents generally perceive victims as less credible, evaluate their character more negatively, and judge the harm of the victimization to be less severe when the victims are male rather than female and when the victims express agentic/ high-status emotions (i.e., anger) rather than passive/ low-status emotions (i.e., sadness).

With few previous studies to deduce specific hypotheses regarding the comparison between sexual violence and non-sexual violence from, we abide by existing theory, as well as Bieneck and Krahé's study (2011) in the formulation of the following hypotheses:

> **H2b:** Respondents generally perceive victims of sexual violence as less credible, and evaluate their character more negatively, than victims of physical violence.
> **H2c:** Respondents judge the harm of sexual victimization to be more severe than the harm of physical violence.

The evaluation of a victim is likely to be the result of the different factors we have manipulated, which together form an image either of a normative/stereotypical victim, or a victim that diverges from this image in one or more ways. We, therefore, expect sex of the victim, type of crime, and emotional expression to interact with each other in eliciting negative observer reactions. However, neither theory nor empirical studies conducted thus far have provided a strong foundation on which we can hypothesize the direction of the interactions. We will thus examine interaction effects in an exploratory manner.

Expectancy Violations and Emotional Display

Nuancing the previous hypotheses, negative reactions toward victims may not always be associated with specific attributes of a victim and/or their performance, but rather be caused by a *violation* of the observer's prior expectations of the victim's performance or attributes (e.g., Ellison & Munro, 2009b; Hackett et al., 2008; Lens et al., 2014). For example, Wrede (2015) demonstrated that a greater overlap between the observer's expectation and the victim's displayed emotion is associated with higher perceived victim credibility. Similarly, Lens et al. (2014) found that in order for a victim to receive sympathetic reactions, the intensity of an emotional response should match the perceived severity of the crime. More precisely, an intense emotional response (a combination of anger, sadness, fear, anxiety, and disgust) of a victim in a low crime severity condition did not reflect observers' expectations about the victims' demeanor, which was associated with character derogation of the victim.

Previous research has consistently measured expectancy violations *after* the manipulation (Ask & Landström, 2010; Lens et al., 2014) and after dependent variables (Hackett et al., 2008). In these instances, the participants' expectations could easily have been influenced by the manipulated information, or even by their own answers regarding the (other) victim ratings. In this case, respondents may (re)adjust their expectations after they have been confronted with a story of victimization in order to, for example, relieve injustice-related distress caused by the story (Lerner, 1980) in the same way as respondents may blame or derogate the victim. In the current study, we operationalize an expectancy violation as the inconsistency between respondents' *ex-ante* expectation of a victim's emotional reaction and the emotional expression of the victim. We hypothesize that expectancy violations lead to negative reactions by the observer toward the victim:

> **H3:** Respondents who experience an expectancy violation perceive victims as less credible, evaluate their character more negatively, and judge the harm of the crime to be less severe compared to respondents who do not experience an expectancy violation.

Summary

In sum, we aim to study more closely how victims' expressed emotion in relation to the victim's sex and the type of victimization influence observer reactions. We hereby build on the literature on gender-related victim stereotypes about emotions (Ask & Landström, 2010; Landström et al., 2015). The current study additionally explores the effect of specific emotions (rather than general negatively valenced emotionality) for male victims and female victims. Complementing the study by Wrede et al. (2015), we focus on the negative reactions toward male versus female and sad versus angry victims rather than positive perceptions such as need for support. Moreover, we attempt to gain a deeper understanding of the effect of the sexual dimension of a crime through the comparison of victims of sexual violence and victims of another severe non-sexual crime. Finally, we evaluate the effect of an emotion expectancy violation based on ex-ante expectations on negative observer reactions related to character evaluation, victim credibility, and the perceived extent of experienced harm. In the current design, respondents are explicitly asked what emotion they expect of the victim after the sex of the victim and type of victimization have been announced, but *before* the manipulation of expressed emotion.

Method

Sample and Participant Selection

We determined our sample size to detect a small to medium effect between conditions using G*Power (Faul et al., 2007), which yielded a sample size of 325. Initially, 358 participants took part in the study, but 23 had to be excluded because they failed to answer the manipulation check correctly. More precisely, they did not acknowledge the type of violence that was presented in the vignette appropriately.[1] The analysis report concerns the final sample, which consisted of 335

Participants (66% female, age range 17–71, M_{age} = 35.5, SD_{age}= 11.3). They were recruited online from Prolific Academic, a UK-based platform similar to Amazon MTurk, specifically created for research purposes. Participants were eligible if they had not previously participated in relevant studies by the authors on the same website, currently resided in the UK,[2] and had an approval rate of 95% or higher on the website.

The application of these criteria resulted in an eligible participant pool of 7503. Participants completed the study online, which took approximately 5 min. Participants were paid £ 0.65 for their participation.

Procedure and Design

Participants were randomly assigned to one of eight cells in a 2 (victim sex: male vs. female) × 2 (type of victimization: sexual vs. physical violence) × 2 (expressed emotion: sadness vs. anger) between participants design. First, participants were informed that the study examined emotions after particular life events. They were then shown a (neutral) profile picture of a person unknown to them, either a man or a woman. In the next window, the person was identified as either Tom (*n* = 174) or Lisa (*n* = 161), aged 25, who became a victim of either sexual (*n* = 181) or physical (*n* = 154) violence less than six months ago. Participants were informed that within two weeks' time, Tom/Lisa would give a VIS (according to UK terminology: victim personal statement) at a court hearing, during which the victim would focus on the emotional impact of the victimization. Participants were then asked which emotion, and how intensely, they thought the victim would *primarily* express (even though the victim would likely express multiple emotions in the statement). Participants were requested to pick the one emotion that corresponded to their strongest expectations, rather than picking several emotions that they expected to a smaller degree. Subsequently, participants read an excerpt of the written statement,[3] which was said to be selected by the researchers as the most representative of the whole statement, and which communicated either sadness, representing a passive/low status emotion (*n* = 166) or anger, representing an agentic/high status emotion (*n* = 169; see Appendix A for the entire vignette). The emotion was expressed through text, in accordance with the textual format of the VIS. The vignette was designed in such a way that it covered common dimensions that are used to describe and differentiate emotions: feelings, appraisals, actions, and action tendencies. The descriptions of anger and sadness were derived from Roseman et al. (1994), and Deffenbacher et al. (1996). Finally, participants judged the severity of the crime, evaluated the victim's credibility and character, filled out short demographic questions, and were debriefed. In the last part of the questionnaire, other variables, not of interest for the current study, were measured.[4]

Assessments and Measures

Independent Variables

The independent variables of this study consisted of the type of crime that the victim experienced (sexual violence/physical violence), the sex of the victim (male/female), and the

emotion that the victim expressed (sadness/anger, which represented passive/low status or agentic/high status emotions; see Appendix A). An additional independent variable included in this study was expectancy violation. Participants were asked what emotion they expected from the victim before reading the vignette. Comparing the *ex-ante* expectation to the actually expressed emotion, we were able to code a variable that reflected whether there was an expectancy violation. When a participant expected an agentic/high-status emotion but was confronted with a sad victim, this was coded as an expectancy violation. Similarly, when a participant expected a passive/low-status emotion as the predominantly expressed emotion, while (s)he was confronted with an angry victim, this was coded as an expectancy violation. When the participant expected an emotion not related to status (happiness, disgust), the confrontation with both the angry and the sad victim was coded as an expectancy violation. No expectancy violation was marked when the participant expected a passive emotion and was presented with the sad VIS or when the participant anticipated an agentic emotion and was presented with the angry VIS. This measure differs from previous explicit measures of expectancy violations such as those applied by Ask and Landström (2010) and Lens et al. (2014), who measured the expectancy violation *ex-post*. The reason for this methodological choice was to prevent the given scenario from influencing the expectations of the respondents.

Dependent Variables

Several questions measured expectations and judgments about the victim, with answer ratings from 1 (not at all) to 5 (extremely). In two questions, i.e., 'expected emotion' and 'sex of the observer', participants had to select one answer. The order of the response alternatives was randomized.

Expected Emotion. Participants had to rate on a 1–5 scale which single emotion they primarily expected the victim to express. They could choose between anger, contempt, disgust, fear, happiness, and sadness. The response alternatives 'anger' and 'contempt' were combined to represent agentic/ high-status emotions, while the response alternatives 'sadness' and 'fear' were combined to represent passive/ low-status emotions. Disgust and happiness were combined to form the category 'other.'

Expected Intensity of Emotion. Participants rated how intense they expected the primary expected emotion to be on a 1–5 scale.

Victim Credibility. Participants were first asked how credible (1–5 Likert scale) they thought Tom/Lisa was in their role as a victim through the rating of the following items: honest, trustworthy, unreliable (reversed), insincere (reversed), and dependable. Cronbach's alpha was .84 so that items were collapsed into one measure of victim credibility.

Character Evaluation. Participants rated to what extent they thought other people would find Tom or Lisa *as a person* to be: assertive, bright, incompetent (reversed), cold (reversed), friendly, and likable (1–5 Likert scale; Cronbach's alpha = .77). These items map on to the dimensions of competence and warmth, respectively: two universal dimensions of character evaluation that have been identified in the previous literature (Fiske et al., 2007). However, Fiske et al. (2007) also confirm that the perceptions of competence and warmth are likely to highly correlate in response to individuals. Due to the high Cronbach's alpha in the current study, the items were combined as an overall measure of character derogation, i.e., to test whether victimization may cause the target person to be evaluated less positively in general.

Perceived Harm. Perceived harm was measured by two separate statements that evaluated the perceived harm of the offense. Physical harm of the offense was measured by asking: 'To what extent do you think Lisa/Tom was *physically* harmed?', the perceived psychological harm of the offense was evaluated with the question: 'To what extent do you think Lisa was *psychologically* harmed?'. Both questions required participants' ratings on a 1–5 Likert scale. The correlation between the two questions was low enough to consider them to measure different constructs (r = .31, p < .001), and were hence kept as separate variables.

Control Variable

Sex of the Observer. Sex of the observer (male/female/not indicated) was added as a control variable. Although not our main variable of interest, it was included because previous research has consistently demonstrated that the sex of the observer influences empathic reactions as well as those that resort to victim blaming or derogation, with male observers responding more negatively to victims than female observers (e.g., Davies et al., 2009; Whatley & Riggio, 1993).

Date Analysis Plan

Data analyses were conducted in three phases. The first step concerned the expectations of participants. Descriptive analyses were performed to identify participants' expectations. Chi-square tests of independence compared whether passive/ low-status emotions were expected more than agentic/ high-status emotions of victims in general, of female compared to male victims, and of victims of sexual compared to physical violence. *T*-tests were used to compare the expected intensity of emotions between male and female victims and between victims of sexual versus physical violence.

In the second step, observer reactions toward the emotional victim were analyzed using a three-way MANCOVA that included the type of victimization, sex of the victim, and expressed emotion as independent variables, observer sex as control variable, and victim credibility, character evaluation, and perceived psychological and physical harm as dependent variables.

Finally, in the third step, we conducted a MANCOVA to evaluate the effects of expectancy violations. Hence, expectancy violation was entered as the independent variable, while character

evaluation, victim credibility, and the two measures of perceived harm were entered as dependent variables, again controlling for sex of the observer.

Results

Observer Expectations

In total, 22.4% of the respondents expected the victim to express an agentic/ high-status emotion (contempt or anger), whereas passive/low-status emotions (sadness and fear) were anticipated by 68.7% of the respondents. Finally, 9% of the respondents expected an emotion that related to neither of the two described categories.[5] No differences in emotion expectations were found between male and female respondents. Respondents more frequently experienced an expectancy violation when victims expressed anger rather than sadness, χ^2 (1) = 74.18, $p < .001$. Based on the odds ratio, the odds of respondents experiencing an expectancy violation were 7.88 times higher if the victim expressed anger than if the victim expressed sadness, supporting H1a.

Contrary to H1b, participants expected male victims to display agentic/high status and passive/low status emotions as often as female victims, χ^2 (2) = 4.167, $p = .125$. Contrary to H1c, participants expected similar emotions for sexual violence and physical violence victims, χ^2 (2) = 3.503, $p = .174$. This means that no differences were found in frequencies of expectancy violation between victims of sexual violence compared to victims of physical violence (χ^2 (1) = .018, p = .893), or between female victims and male victims (χ^2 (1) = .276, $p = .599$).

As predicted by H1d, independent samples t-tests showed that respondents expect female victims to experience their emotions more intensely (M = 4.56, SD = 0.70) than male victims (M = 4.36, SD = 0.66), $t(333) = 2.729$, $p = .007$, Cohen's d = 0.294. In support of H1e, respondents further anticipated victims of sexual violence to experience their emotions more intensely (M = 4.59, SD = 0.57) than victims of physical violence (M = 4.29, SD = 0.76), $t(275.372) = 3.970$, $p <$ .001, Cohen's d = 0.442.

Observer Reactions

To evaluate general observer reactions (H2), a three-way MANCOVA was conducted that included type of victimization, sex of the victim, and expressed emotion as independent variables, observer sex as control variable, and victim credibility, character evaluation, and perceived psychological and physical harm as dependent variables. The correlations and descriptive statistics are presented in Tables 1 and 2. Hypothesis 2 received partial support, as explained in more detail below.

Table 1

Correlations for Victim Credibility, Character Evaluation, Perceived Physical Harm, and Perceived Psychological Harm (N = 335)

Variables	1	2	3	4
1. Victim credibility	-			
2. Character evaluation	.61**	-		
3. Perceived phys. harm	.13*	.08	-	
4. Perceived psych. harm	.25**	.24**	.31**	-

Note. * p <.05. ** p <.01.

The MANCOVA showed a main effect for sex of the victim, Hotelling's $F(4, 323) = 4.168$, $p = .003$, $\eta_p^2 = .049$; type of victimization, Hotelling's $F(4, 323) = 8.888$, $p < .001$, $\eta_p^2 = .099$; and emotion expressed, Hotelling's $F(4, 323) = 2.758$, $p = .028$, $\eta_p^2 = .033$. Sex of the observer also had a main effect, Hotelling's $F(4, 323) = 4.168$, $p < .001$, $\eta_p^2 = .076$.

Table 2

Means and Standard Deviations of Victim Credibility, Character Evaluation, Perceived Physical Harm, and Perceived Psychological Harm (N = 335)

	Sex of the victim				Expressed emotion				Type of victimization			
	Male		Female		Sadness		Anger		Sex. viol.		Phys. viol.	
Reaction	*M*	*SD*	*M*	*SD*	*M*	*SD*	*M*	*SD*	*M*	*SD*	*M*	*SD*
Credibility	3.95	.65	4.08	.62	4.05	.61	3.98	.65	4.08	.63	3.93	.64
Evaluation	3.62	.68	3.88	.62	3.84	.63	3.65	.68	3.76	.66	3.72	.66
Phys. harm	3.59	.81	3.73	.95	3.60	.91	3.70	.85	3.81	.94	3.47	.77
Psych. harm	4.74	.53	4.77	.64	4.80	.59	4.70	.57	4.90	.33	4.58	.75

Sex of the Victim

Male victims were hypothesized to be evaluated more negatively, perceived as less credible, and thought to suffer less from the victimization compared to female victims. The MANCOVA confirmed a significant main effect for sex of the victim on victim credibility, $F(1, 326) = 4.757$, $p = .030$, $\eta_p^2 = .014$, and character evaluation, $F(1, 326) = 13.943$, $p < .001$, $\eta_p^2 = .041$. As anticipated, respondents generally evaluated male victims' characters less positively ($M = 3.62$, $SD = 0.68$) than female victims' characters ($M = 3.88$, $SD = 0.62$, Cohen's $d = 0.399$). They also perceived male victims as less credible ($M = 3.95$, $SD = 0.65$) than female victims ($M = 4.08$, $SD = 0.62$, Cohen's $d = 0.205$). No significant effects were found for sex of the victim on perceived physical harm, $p = .114$, or psychological harm, $p = .677$.

Expressed Emotion

Angry victims were expected to be evaluated more negatively, perceived as less credible, and thought to physically and psychologically suffer less from the victimization than sad victims. However, as a main effect, expressed emotion was only found to be associated with character evaluation, $F(1, 326) = 8.243$, $p = .004$, $\eta_p^2 = .025$. Victims who expressed the agentic/high status emotion of anger were evaluated less positively ($M = 3.65$, $SD = 0.68$) than victims who expressed the passive/low status emotion of sadness ($M = 3.84$, $SD = 0.63$, Cohen's $d = 0.290$). No main effects for expressed emotion were found on victim credibility, $p = .202$, perceived physical harm, $p = .307$, or perceived psychological harm, $p = .154$.

Type of Victimization

The MANCOVA showed a significant main effect for type of victimization on victim credibility, $F(1, 326) = 5.029$, $p = .026$, $\eta_p^2 = .015$; perceived physical harm, $F(1, 326) = 15.023$, $p < .001$, $\eta_p^2 = .044$; and perceived psychological harm, $F(1, 326) = 24.985$, $p < .001$, $\eta_p^2 = .071$. No effect was found on character evaluation, $p = .684$.

In contrast to H2b, victims of sexual violence were perceived as more credible ($M = 4.08$, $SD = 0.63$) than victims of physical violence ($M = 3.93$, $SD = 0.64$, Cohen's $d = 0.236$). In line with H2c, respondents expected victims of sexual violence to have suffered more physical harm ($M = 3.81$, $SD = 0.94$) and psychological harm ($M = 4.90$, $SD = 0.33$) than victims of physical violence ($M = 3.47$, $SD = 0.77$, Cohen's $d = 0.396$ and $M = 4.58$, $SD = 0.75$, Cohen's $d = 0.552$).

Sex of the Observer

Sex of the observer was found to have an effect on victim credibility, $F(1, 326) = 12.658$, $p < .001$, $\eta_p^2 = .037$; character evaluation, $F(1, 326) = 4.669$, $p = .031$, $\eta_p^2 = .014$; and perceived physical harm, $F(1, 326) = 15.488$, $p < .001$, $\eta_p^2 = .045$. Female respondents generally evaluated victims more positively ($M = 3.78$, $SD = 0.67$) and rated them as more credible ($M = 4.10$, $SD = 0.64$) than did male respondents ($M = 3.66$, $SD = 0.62$, Cohen's $d = 0.186$ and $M = 3.85$, $SD = 0.62$, Cohen's $d = 0.397$). Female respondents also perceived the physical harm of victimization to be higher ($M = 3.79$, $SD = 0.85$) than male respondents did ($M = 3.40$, $SD = 0.91$, Cohen's $d = 0.443$).

Interaction Effects

Interaction effects were found of type of victimization * emotion expressed on victim credibility, $F(1, 326) = 5.091$, $p = .025$, $\eta_p^2 = .015$ and on character evaluation, $F(1, 326) = 5.593$, $p = .019$, $\eta_p^2 = .017$. All other interaction effects were non-significant. As shown in Figures 1 and 2, univariate tests with Bonferroni correction revealed that victims of physical violence were seen as less credible ($M = 3.82$, $SD = 0.70$) when they expressed anger than when they expressed sadness ($M = 4.06$, $SD = 0.72$), $p = .017$, Cohen's $d = 0.337$. Victims of physical violence were also evaluated less positively ($M = 3.55$, $SD = 0.72$) when they expressed anger than when they

expressed sadness ($M = 3.92$, $SD = 0.74$), $p < .001$, Cohen's $d = 0.507$. We did not find a similar effect for victims of sexual violence.

Figure 1

Interaction Effect Expressed Emotion and Type of Crime on Victim Credibility

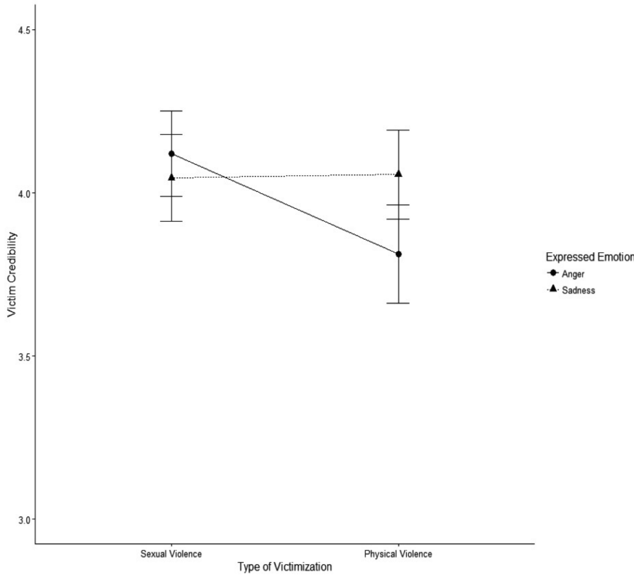
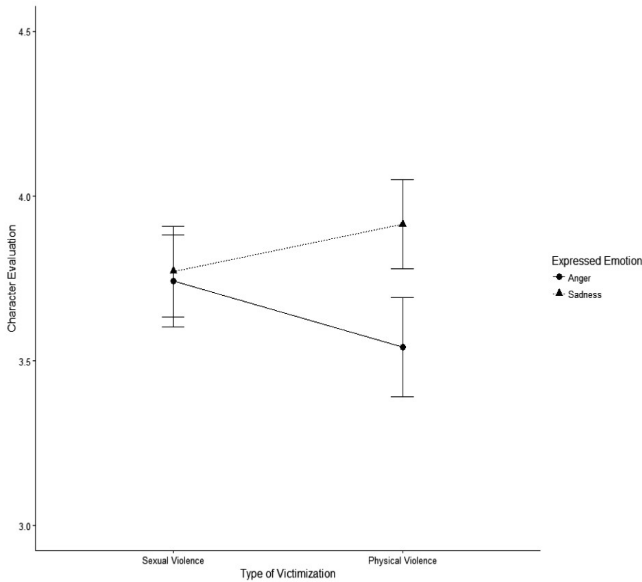


Figure 2

Interaction Effect Expressed Emotion and Type of Crime on Character Evaluation



Observer Reactions after Expectancy Violations

To test hypothesis 3, we conducted a MANCOVA with expectancy violation as the independent variable, and character evaluation, victim credibility, and the two measures of perceived harm as dependent variables, while controlling for sex of the observer.

As expected, the MANCOVA showed a main effect of expectancy violation, Hotelling's $F(4, 329) = 3.254$, $p = .01$, $\eta_p^2 = .038$. Participants who experienced an expectancy violation perceived the victim as less credible ($M = 3.92$, $SD = 0.66$) than participants who were confronted with a victim who expressed the emotion they expected ($M = 4.13$, $SD = 0.60$, Cohen's $d = 0.332$), $F(1, 332) = 7.589$, $p = .006$, $\eta_p^2 = .022$. Furthermore, the victim's character was rated as less favorable ($M = 3.62$, $SD = 0.67$) when their expectation was violated compared to when it was not ($M = 3.88$, $SD = 0.63$, Cohen's $d = 0.399$), $F(1, 332) = 11.610$, $p = .001$, $\eta_p^2 = .034$. There were no significant differences between the two groups of participants regarding the degree of physical harm ($p = .848$) and psychological harm ($p = .106$) they believed the victim experienced.

Sex of the observer was associated with the reaction toward the victim, Hotelling's $F(4, 329) = 5.076$, $p = .001$, $\eta_p^2 = .058$. Female participants rated the victim as more credible ($M = 4.10$, $SD = 0.64$) than male participants ($M = 3.85$, $SD = 0.62$, Cohen's $d = 0.396$), $F(1, 332) = 8.9$, $p = .003$, $\eta_p^2 = .026$. Female participants also thought that the victim experienced more physical harm ($M = 3.8$, $SD = 0.85$) than male participants did ($M = 3.4$, $SD = 0.91$, Cohen's $d = 0.454$), $F(1, 332) = 12.022$, $p = .001$, $\eta_p^2 = .035$.

Discussion

The present study was designed to evaluate whether the emotional display of a male or female victim of physical or sexual violence affects how the victim is evaluated in terms of character, credibility, and suffered harm. Respondents more often expected victims to express passive/low status rather than agentic/ high-status emotions. In support of H1d and H1e, observers anticipated female victims and victims of sexual violence to express more intense emotions than male victims or victims of physical violence. On the other hand, contrary to H1b and H1c, victim sex and type of victimization were not associated with the type of emotion observers expected.

Partial support was found for H2a, which predicted that observers would evaluate victims more negatively, and perceive the crime to be less severe when victims are male, and when victims express anger. Specifically, male victims suffered more character derogation and were perceived as less credible. Additionally, high status/agentic emotional expressions were met with less positive character evaluations. Contrary to H2b, victims of sexual violence were perceived as more credible than victims of physical violence. In line with H2c, victims of sexual violence were thought to suffer more physical and psychological harm. An interaction effect was found between type of crime and expressed emotion, implying that respondents reacted more negatively to victims of physical violence when they communicated anger rather than sadness.

Finally, we found support for H3. When emotion expectancy violations occurred, victims were perceived as less credible, and their character was evaluated less positively.

Thus, results partially corroborate findings of several previous studies that examined observer reactions to victims of crime. In accordance with those findings (e.g., Davies & Rogers, 2006), the current research shows that male victims are generally perceived less positively than female victims. This effect was not significantly influenced by either the type of crime or the emotion expressed during the aftermath. It thus seems that the strategies (e.g., emphasizing the type of harm that has occurred or expressing certain emotions most strongly) male victims can employ to receive acknowledgment and sympathy as a victim are very limited.

Also in line with previous findings (e.g., Ask & Landström, 2010; Hutson-Comeaux & Kelly, 2002; Landström et al., 2015), we found that observers who experience an expectancy violation generally judge the victim as less credible and their character as less positive. The current study once more shows that respondents more often expect passive/ low-status emotions from victims rather than active/ high-status emotions. This is not to say that anger does not play an essential role in the experience of injustice. Indeed, authors have found that anger is the emotion most frequently *experienced* after perceived injustice (Mikula, 1986; see for the expectations about experienced emotions also Wrede & Ask, 2015), but people generally do not *express* this anger in public situations (van Kleef, 2016). Plant et al. (2000) moreover suggest that people may suppress the expression of emotions that are inconsistent with their gender role. Following their line of reasoning, we speculate that people expect victims to suppress agentic/ high-status emotions once they take up (or find themselves in) the victim role, which is essentially a stereotypically passive role.

We are not the first to propose that the social acceptance and acknowledgment of a victim, and how we respond behaviorally to them, largely depends on the perceived appropriateness of their (emotional) demeanor or the extent to which the victim matches the criteria of the ideal victim (van Kleef, 2016). However, studies based on the theory of cognitive dissonance have continuously shown that an incongruence between experience and expectation may lead people to adjust their attitudes or verbal opinions in order to realign the two (e.g., Festinger, 1962; Proulx et al., 2012). Studies that ask participants about their expectations after the experience cannot determine what possible effects the inclination to reduce cognitive dissonance may have had on the variable of expectancy violation. Hence, this way of measuring may obfuscate the confounding effects of cognitive dissonance reduction. The present study accounts (at least to a certain extent) for these effects by measuring respondents' expectations before any emotion was expressed in the VIS, and hence before the possibility of cognitive dissonance.

Additionally, our results indicate that the effects of emotional expression on victim credibility and victim derogation depend on the context, in this case on the type of victimization experienced. Specifically, manipulations of expressed emotion created variance in reactions to victims of physical violence, but had no such effect in cases of sexual violence. Possibly, victimization by sexual violence is perceived as so significant and overwhelming that it becomes

the main source of information on which observers base their judgments, drowning out any more nuanced individual differences such as how the victim expressed him- or herself afterward. In contrast, a victim's expression of anger after involvement in physical violence may implicate the victim as an active agent both in the aftermath and during the assault. In other words, respondents may interpret the victim's expression as an indication of their behavior during victimization. This consideration may be precluded in the sexual violence condition due to the perceived nature of sexual violence as something that "anticipates and seeks its target's subjection as a subject of fear, defencelessness, and acquiescence to injury", to be distinguished from "subject-subject violence" (Marcus, 1992, p. 396).

An alternative explanation is that the expectation of a certain emotion from a victim of sexual violence versus a victim of physical violence carries very different connotations. This potential connotational difference has been established in several studies comparing the perception of emotional expression by women versus men. For example, Barrett and Bliss-Moreau (2009) found that respondents generally attribute the display of intense emotions by a woman to her (emotional) character, whereas the same emotional display by a man is attributed to situational factors. Furthermore, Shields and Crowley (1996) conducted a vignette study in which respondents read about a man versus a woman who responds 'emotionally' to discovering that his or her car was stolen. The authors found that whereas emotionality in female target persons was associated with excessive crying and general hysteria, the emotionality of a male target person was associated with a much less intense description of 'being upset' and thereafter rationalized. Likewise, in the current study, observers may generally have had very different associations with the assembled construct of 'agentic/passive victim of sexual violence' than with 'agentic/passive victim of physical violence.' Both may be described as angry, but the actual meaning of the term anger depends on the type of victimization it is coupled with. This line of reasoning may simultaneously explain why no interaction effect was found between victim sex and expressed emotion: the anger/sadness of a female victim may have been interpreted very differently from the anger/sadness of the male victim. The findings thus imply that the extent to which a dimension can be isolated from the context in which it occurs is limited, and hence it partially fails as a predictor of reactions to victims.

To summarize, we suggest that the effects of a victim's emotional expression on the (negative) reactions of observers depend on two important factors: (1) the individual observers' concrete expectations, and (2) contextual factors such as the circumstances of the victimization.

Limitations

We believe the current study to suffer from three main limitations, which concern the expectancy violation variable, the written form of the vignette, and the comparison between sexual and physical violence.

First, the expectancy violation variable was included in the analysis as an independent variable. However, the expectancy violation was, in fact, the result of the (in)consistency between

respondents' preexisting expectations and the manipulated emotional expression of the victim, and hence was not itself manipulated. This limits the extent to which causal inferences can be drawn from the findings. Furthermore, although respondents were given multiple answering options regarding the emotion they expected the victim to express, the VIS was limited to the phrasing of anger versus sadness, representing agentic/high status and passive/ low-status emotions. However, it is possible that respondents who expected, for example, fear and were faced with an expression of sadness experienced more of an expectancy violation than those who expected sadness in the first place. Our choice of measurement in the current study did not allow for the examination of 'degrees' of expectancy violation but instead defined it as a dichotomous (yes/no) variable. In reality, expectancy violations are likely to be much more nuanced. Respondents were also allowed to indicate only one emotion that they expected from the victim. Yet, in reality, they may have anticipated different emotions to a similar extent, diminishing the amount of cases in which a true expectancy violation occurred.

Second, previous researchers have criticized written vignettes for their "sterile environment" (Smith et al., 1983, p. 103) and lack of external validity because of the way participants get acquainted with the scenario (Collett & Childs, 2011). Particularly when one is interested in reactions that are brought about by strong emotions, a written vignette may not be the most reliable elicitor. We do believe that asking the respondents what emotion they expected of the victim after hearing about the victimization, but *before* the VIS was given, increased their cognitive involvement. Additionally, the experimental VIS were created to resemble ones that were written by real victims.

Third, although we remain convinced of the importance of comparing the effects of different forms of victimization on observer reactions, particularly to disentangle the effects of the sexual dimension of a crime in an empirical setting, we acknowledge that adequate comparisons are particularly difficult. Sexual violence may often be experienced as more traumatic than physical violence (Bennice et al., 2003), and was, as expected, perceived as more harmful in the current study.

Future Research

In light of the above, some might argue that the best form of prevention of secondary victimization is to instruct particular victims not to express anger in public settings such as the courtroom. We do not believe this to be the appropriate course of action, partly because other factors relating to negative observer reactions (i.e., maleness) are less easily manipulated in real life, and partly because requesting victims to adjust in this way seems ethically undesirable. On the basis of our findings that negative reactions toward victims are related to expectancy violations relying on stereotypes, we suggest that future research could focus on strengthening awareness of these stereotypes as a fruitful approach to reduce negative responses to victims. Part of this may entail studying what stereotypes are most accessible under certain conditions. For example, the current results indicate that expressed emotion influences observers' judgments in cases of physical

violence, but that this effect does not hold in cases of sexual violence. To gain a greater understanding of the underlying mechanisms, follow-up studies would benefit from more open-ended questions that tap into the respondents' interpretations of the different forms of violence they are confronted with, as well as the different expressions of emotion by the victims. Future studies may take up the challenge to shed more light on the interaction between various factors that create a multitude or even hierarchy of ideal victims.

Besides studying how to raise awareness of stereotypes, future studies should also focus on how stereotypes may be countered through different methods. Possibly, providing more detailed information may be helpful to counter the presumably stereotypical thinking that mediates negative reactions to the victim. Future studies could experiment with the quantity and quality of information about the victim that they provide to respondents. Sharing a more personal narrative might increase the likelihood that the victim is seen as a person rather than as someone who needs to be assessed through the ideal victim criteria.

Notes

1. The manipulation check, which took the form of a simple 'right or wrong' question tested whether participants understood the experimental condition they were in. Participants were asked whether they had read about a victim of sexual or physical violence. In the sexual violence condition, only one participant reported she had read about a victim of physical violence. In the other condition, however, 22 people answered the manipulation check incorrectly, 16 of which had read the story about a female victim. Participant sex was equally divided in this group. Although not a part of the current study, we speculate that people are quicker to infer sexual acts from a physical violence script when the victim is female rather than male.
2. This criterion was added because of our vignette (see Appendix A), that was written in such a way that it resembles the UK practice with regard to victims' voice in court.
3. Take note that participants were not instructed to imagine themselves to attend the court hearing or to behave as mock jurors. Instead, they took on the role of third parties who read an excerpt of the statement.
4. These additional variables were related to feminization of the victim. This part will be reported in a separate paper.
5. Not surprisingly, happiness was never chosen. The 9% thus entirely refers to the expectation of disgust.

Chapter 3

The Feminizing Effect of Sexual Violence

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Abstract

Various scholars have noted that the label 'victim' frequently elicits connotations of stereotypical, passive femininity—especially when the crime entails rape or other forms of sexual violence. In three online experimental studies, British respondents were recruited to test whether written information about a sexual assault led observers to perceive the victim as more feminine in terms of character traits and facial appearance. Study 1 ($N = 139$) compared observers' perceptions of a male victim to a man accused of sexual assault and a control condition. Study 2 ($N = 165$) was a conceptual replication, replacing the male with a female target. Study 3 ($N = 278$) extended Study 1 by adding a condition with a male victim of physical assault and another with a man who had engaged in consensual homosexual sex in order to assess whether feminizing effects were unique to victimization by sexual assault. Results revealed partial support for the feminization hypothesis. Male and female victims were consistently attributed fewer proscriptive masculine traits than target persons in other conditions, as well as more prescriptive feminine traits than target persons in the accused condition. Results for the feminization of facial features were inconsistent. We discuss potential implications of the results for sexual violence awareness-raising campaigns and understanding victims' potential identity struggles.

The term 'victim' frequently elicits connotations of stereotypical, passive femininity—especially when the crime entails rape or other forms of sexual violence (Lamb, 1999; Mardorossian, 2014). Although male-male rape is gradually receiving more academic and societal attention, presentations of male rape are frequently limited to those occurring in a very specific context, such as against gay or prison populations (Cohen, 2014; Javaid, 2015a). Yet prevalence studies indicate that male sexual assault should not be dismissed as an extraordinary occurrence, or one merely confined to specific population groups. For instance, according to results from the National Intimate Partner and Sexual Violence Survey conducted by the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention in 2011 (Breiding, 2014), 1.7% of men in the United States indicate they have been raped (compared to 19.3% of women), whereas 23.4% of men indicate they have experienced other forms of sexual assault (compared to 43.9% of women). Despite these figures (a presumably significant dark number), male victimization often remains depicted as exceptional or negligible.

The association of victimhood and sexual violence with (passive) femininity has been hypothesized to obstruct recognition of male victims of sexual assault and to potentially complicate the reaffirmation of victims' own sense of (masculine) identity (Javaid, 2016; Stemple & Meyer, 2014). It is not without reason that several anti-rape campaigns have attempted to tackle the persistent myth that "*real* men can't get raped" (e.g., the anti-rape advertising by SurvivorsUK "Real men get raped" in 2012; SurvivorsUK, 2018, and the photography project "Project Unbreakable" set up by Grace Brown in 2011; Project Unbreakable, 2017). This myth is likely to be so tenacious because rape victimization is a doubly feminine phenomenon: (a) because it entails (interpersonal) victimization, triggering associations of weakness and vulnerability traditionally associated with femininity and (b) because it forces the victim into a particular role within sexual relations that is typically allocated to the feminine party. Rape hence has been described as a *gendering* crime, that is, one that has the potential to feminize its victims (Marcus, 1992; Mardorossian, 2014).

The primary focus of the current paper is whether and how conceptions of gender roles that are subsumed within people's ideas of sexual violence influence their perceptions of (male) victims. At this moment, a small number of experimental studies have investigated the influence of gender stereotypes on perceptions and evaluations of victims (Howard, 1984a; Masser et al., 2010). However, very few experimental studies have been conducted that examine whether and how (sexual) victimization *changes* people's gendered perceptions of a victim (but see, Howard, 1984a). The studies presented in the current paper employed experimental designs to investigate whether information about sexual victimization causes observers to feminize the victim. We tested whether respondents ascribe more stereotypically feminine—and fewer stereotypically masculine—traits and facial features to a man (Studies 1 and 3) or woman (Study 2) when they learn that this person was a victim of a sexual assault. To assess whether this potential feminizing effect is specific to victimization through sexual violence, we also examined reactions to the separate components of victimization/interpersonal violence and homosexuality (Study 3).

Gender and Gendering

To be able to give meaning to the conception of rape as a potentially gendering crime, it is necessary to make a clear (yet simplified: see Ainsworth, 2015) distinction between sex and gender. We reserve the term sex for the categories 'male' and 'female', and we follow previous researchers in broadly defining gender as the cultural significance assigned to the distinction between these categories (Bonthuys, 2008; Helgeson, 1994; Howard, 1984b). The present article focuses on the perceptions of people, and to do so employs a framework wherein particular traits or features are dichotomously categorized as stereotypically feminine or stereotypically masculine (Abele, 2003; Abele & Wojciszke, 2014; Prentice & Carranza, 2002; see Wood & Eagly, 2015). Although the individual experience of gender is likely to be much more dynamic, we suggest that the dichotomous approach is a way of stereotyped or heuristic thinking inadvertently endorsed by most people in their perceptions and evaluations of others (see Ridgeway, 2009 on framing).

Widely applied measurement instruments such as the Bem Sex Role Inventory (BSRI; Bem, 1974) and the Personal Attributes Questionnaire (PAQ; Spence & Helmreich, 1978) have traditionally grouped traits perceived as either (stereotypically) masculine or (stereotypically) feminine to measure individuals' (self-)perceptions in terms of gender. Although the BSRI and PAQ may not accurately capture current-day Western men's and women's self-perceptions (Donnelly & Twenge, 2017), the adjectives included in the questionnaires remain descriptive of masculine versus feminine gender stereotypes (for a brief overview of validation studies of the BSRI in this regard, see Prentice & Carranza, 2002). Thus, stereotypical femininity is associated with vulnerability, emotionality, and passivity (Gilbert, 2002) and stereotypical masculinity with notions of toughness, rationality, and action (Connell & Messerschmidt, 2005). Broadly speaking, femininity and masculinity dichotomously map onto the domain of warmth, communion, or expressiveness, and onto the domain of competence, agency, or instrumentality, respectively (Abele & Wojciszke, 2007).

Despite the persistent presence of gender stereotypes through time, studies have also shown that cultural values and circumstantial factors influence perceptions of gender (Cuddy et al., 2015). For instance, Koenig and Eagly (2014) demonstrated that the observed or expected (occupational) role of a social group influences the character traits people attribute to that group (also Eagly & Steffen, 1984). Additionally, studies by Fiske et al. (2002) have shown that whereas housewives as a group are generally rated high in warmth but low in competence in accordance with traditional notions of women, feminists are rated as higher in competence but low in warmth. Hence, associations with particular occupations, studies, roles, etc. may make a person seem more feminine or masculine in the eyes of the perceiver, regardless of their assigned sex. These studies confirm that contextual factors can have a gendering function. Gendering "shows gender as an active ongoing process, rather than something that is ready-made and fixed" (Pilcherm & Whelehan, 2004, p. 59; see also Butler, 1988). We call a phenomenon gendering when there is something inherent to our understanding of it that (re)produces distinctions between (passive) femininity and (active) masculinity (Mardorossian, 2014). In the present article, we seek to provide

more substance to the impression that victimization, particularly through sexualized violence, feminizes the victim. This idea has been broadly voiced in feminist scholarship, but has received relatively little consideration in social psychological (experimental) research.

Although the attention paid to the interplay between sexual violence and gendering processes in gender studies has thus far found little resonance in social scientific studies, the presumed function of feminization – normalization of a transgression – fits well within several major theories related to observers' reactions to victims. First, Lerner (1980) coined the Just World Theory to explain why innocent sufferers are at times met with a (severe) lack of empathy. This author listed a number of coping strategies observers may (unconsciously) employ to protect their inherent need to believe that people get what they deserve. Although he framed his theory in terms of justice (also Hafer, 2000), it has more recently been posed that people's ideas of deservingness may have more to do with what they normatively expect rather than what they think is ethically correct (Proulx et al., 2012). Following this interpretation of justice, feminization, alongside strategies of blaming the victim, may function to reaffirm one's need to believe in a 'normal' world. Second, this interpretation is congruent with system justification theory (Jost & Banaji, 1994), which posits that people have a strong need to justify their societal system even when it disadvantages them. Both theories concur that negative observer reactions to victims can be read as an effort to re-establish predictability, be it in the form of justice or the status quo (see also Proulx et al., 2012). In the case of sexual violence, the reaffirmation of normality – hence the diminishment of threat caused by transgression – may well be entangled with the reaffirmation and production of gendered stereotypes (Cohen, 2014; Gavey, 2005).

Feminization through Sexual Violence

Various authors have illuminated the gendering dimension of rape. The gendering effect of rape refers to the process of reinforcing and/or scripting gendered stereotypes: masculinizing the perpetrator and feminizing the victim (MacKinnon, 1989; Sivakumaran, 2005). Marcus (1992) keenly summarized the implication of power in the social construction of gender and rape: "masculine power and feminine powerlessness neither simply precede nor cause rape; rather, rape is one of culture's many modes of feminizing women" (p. 391). Although Marcus here emphasized the female victim as subject, the feminizing effects of rape may be all the more apparent when the victim is a man. As stated by Bonthuys (2008), "a man who is raped loses his masculine status and becomes, in terms of his sexual role, a woman—while the sexually subordinate status of a woman who is raped is thereby confirmed" (p. 255).

A paper by Mulkey (2004) examining clinical group therapy with men who were victims of sexual violence illustrates the way in which participants experienced a loss of their masculinity and a subsequent need to build a new form of masculine identity. In fact, Mardorossian (2014) suggests approaching femininity and masculinity as structural positions of power, completely dissociated from biological sex. This approach facilitates the acknowledgment that sexual violence concerns constructed vulnerabilities and subordination rather than the female body per se (also

Cahill, 2000). The gendering effect of sexual violence is perhaps most blatantly illustrated in the context of male prisons, where victims may be forced to wear make-up and dress femininely (Gear & Ngubeni, 2002), or in rape as a weapon of war (Bergoffen, 2009; Skjelsbaek, 2001). However, exclusively focusing on such contexts risks denying or normalizing occurrences of rape that are less 'spectacular' and happen closer to home, such as those between intimates or acquaintances (Code, 2009).

The sources we mentioned mostly originate from domains in, or intersecting with, gender studies. In social psychological research on perceptions of victims, Howard (1984a) is, to the best of our knowledge, the only researcher who has measured the feminizing effect of rape in an experimental study. Employing a vignette study, Howard found that respondents rated both male and female victims of rape as more feminine than they rated victims of robbery. She furthermore demonstrated that perceptions of femininity were associated with attributions of (characterological) blame. Howard's study focused on the stereotypical 'real' (stranger) rape, and hence she suggested that future studies should examine whether similar effects occur in response to acquaintance-rape scenarios.

More recently, Papendick and Bohner (2017) demonstrated that even the use of the word 'victim' led respondents to perceive a woman who had been raped as weaker, more passive, and more innocent compared to a female 'survivor' of rape. Other experimental studies that touch on the gendered aspects of (sexual) victimization include studies that have demonstrated that respondents find feminine-looking victims less blameworthy than masculine-looking victims (Little & Terrance, 2010) and victims who express stereotypically feminine emotions (i.e., fear and sadness) more credible than victims who express stereotypically masculine emotions such as anger (Bosma, Mulder, Pemberton & Vingerhoets, 2018). Additionally, Masser et al. (2010) found that female victims who defy gender stereotypes in addition to victim stereotypes, are judged more negatively than female victims who adhere to a prescriptive feminine role. These studies tap into gendered dimensions of (sexual) victimization, but they have not directly measured whether and how victimization influences third-party perceptions of the (gendered) identity of the target person.

The Current Study

A likely cause of the lack of experimental research on the gendering effects of rape is the tendency in social psychological experiments to conflate social gender with sex. As noted by Butler (1994) regarding the relation of the concepts sex and gender: "that there are competing feminist views on how that tension ought to be formulated is clear, but few, if any, feminist texts proceed with a simple parenthetical conflation of the two" (pp. 5-6). Nevertheless, this is precisely what many social scientists do (most recently, Felson & Palmore, 2018). Certainly, the more encompassing definitions of gender are difficult to capture as a factor in a simple experimental design. Yet understanding sex and gender as synonyms prevents researchers from getting a better

grasp of the specific effects of gender stereotypes and of processes that can *gender* (for several exceptions, see Little & Terrance, 2010; Masser et al., 2010; Wasarhaley et al., 2017).

In the current set of experiments, we aimed to investigate these gendering processes by testing whether sexual victimization, partially in comparison to non-sexual victimization and consensual sex, influences respondents' perceptions of the character traits and facial features of the victim. We were primarily interested in whether (sexual) victimization itself changes third-party perceptions of a target person. This entailed distinguishing between the constructs of gender and sex, whereby gender was operationally defined through stereotypical masculine and feminine character traits, as well as average male and female facial features. Using the BSRI (Bem, 1974), Prentice and Carranza (2002) demonstrate a distinction between groups of traits that are perceived as either proscriptive or prescriptive, as well as masculine or feminine. Prescriptive masculine traits, for example, are those traits that are considered generally desirable, but more expected in men than in women. Examples include competence and rationality. Masculine proscriptive traits, on the other hand, are traits that are considered generally undesirable, yet more normatively accepted in men than in women, such as domination or arrogance. We expected that attempts by observers to normalize rape victimization led them to ascribe more feminine traits and less masculine traits to the victim. Additionally, we expected that the feminization of victims also occurred in a more implicit manner, meaning that the process of feminization may occur, at least in part, without full awareness or full control of the observer. To test this point, we included a measure that was intended to indirectly measure whether respondents feminize the appearance of the victim. We hypothesized that feminization is a particular function of sexual victimization, rather than of either (homo)sexuality or interpersonal victimization independently.

In Study 1, the extent of feminization of a male student (including picture) described as (a) a victim of sexual assault was compared with (b) a male student accused of sexual assault or (c) a male student who not described any further. In Study 2, the same conditions were applied but with a female target person. In Study 3, a male target person was depicted once more, and two comparison conditions were added: (d) a victim of physical assault and (e) a male student who engaged in consensual sex with another male student. In all studies, feminization was measured in several ways. First, through prescriptive and proscriptive masculine and feminine traits; second, by an explicit question regarding how feminine or masculine the target person seemed; and third, by an implicit measure that involved selecting one of two morphed pictures. Through morphing the original picture of the target person, masculinized and feminized versions of the original photo were available (DeBruine & Jones, 2017). Respondents were asked which of these two versions, in their opinion, most resembled the original picture of the target person. The gender of respondents was included as a predictor in Studies 2 and 3 because previous studies have indicated that men and women respond differently to victims of sexual violence (Grubb & Harrower, 2008). Study 3 also included questions about respondents' sexual orientation and experience with (sexual) victimization.

Participants in all studies rated the emotional expression in the picture of the target person. Respondents in Studies 2 and 3 additionally replied to an open-ended question regarding their expectations of what had occurred between the target person and the other student, and Study 3 included a final question about how close or distant respondents felt to the target person. These questions are not directly related to the formulated feminization hypothesis, and their results will be reported separately. Participants in each study were recruited via the online UK-based platform Prolific Academic. For every study, respondents' eligibility criteria included a minimum age of 18 years, UK nationality, and non-participation in relevant previous studies conducted by the authors on the same platform. All studies were reviewed and approved by the relevant ethical review board before data collection. (The complete vignettes are available in Appendix B.)

Study 1

Method

Participants

Using the calculation software G*Power (Faul et al., 2007), we determined the required sample size to be able to detect a medium effect among three conditions with a power of .70 at alpha level .05. This yielded a total required sample size of 129 respondents. Our initial sample size was 151, of which 12 were excluded because they had been allocated to one of the two experimental conditions but failed to answer the manipulation check correctly. The sample that remained consisted of 139 respondents of British nationality (105 women; $M_{\text{age}} = 35.8$, $SD_{\text{age}} = 10.5$, range = 18–65). Participants took approximately 5 min to complete the survey and were awarded £.50 for their participation.

Procedure and Materials

Participants were informed that in our study they would be asked to make an estimation of the personality of a target person based on a picture of that person. They were additionally warned that the study might include sexual and/or potentially upsetting information. Participants consented to participate in the study by entering their prolific ID number following information about the study and before being able to continue to the experiment. Participants were randomly assigned to one of three conditions. All three conditions (one control; two experimental) included a picture of a young White man. In the control condition, participants were shown the picture without any further descriptions besides his name. In the experimental conditions, participants were additionally informed either that the depicted individual had been accused of or had become a victim of sexual assault during a party at his college.

Participants were asked to take a careful look at the photo and rate the man in the picture on 28 (randomized) traits. Additionally, participants were asked to what extent they thought the man in the picture expressed the following emotions: anger, sadness, disgust, fear, contempt, happiness, guilt, and shame. Afterwards, participants were asked to select one of two pictures

(feminized vs. masculinized) that they thought more closely resembled the first picture they had seen. The placement of these pictures on the screen (left – right) was randomized: each featured on the left and the right half of the time. At the end of the questionnaire, respondents were asked to provide demographic information. Finally, respondents were asked what was indicated in the description attached to the picture they saw of Michael (accused of sexual assault; victim of sexual assault; nothing). This question served as a manipulation check.

Vignettes. The vignettes included limited information about a student named Michael. In the victim condition:

> Michael has become a victim of sexual assault during a fraternity party at his college. He has reported the incident to the University Board. Although the alleged perpetrator claims otherwise, Michael states that the sexual activity between them was not consensual. Michael explains that they had both had a lot to drink. He states that he told the alleged perpetrator "no" several times, but was too confused and scared to physically resist or start shouting.

In both victim and accused conditions, the gender of the other party (accused or victim respectively) remained unspecified. (For all vignettes used in the three studies, see Appendix B.)

Feminization versus Masculinization. The gendering effect of sexual assault was measured through the attribution of personality traits to the target person. A selection of six prescriptive masculine (i.e., decisive, self-reliant, high self-esteem, competent, disciplined, and rational; $\alpha = .83$) and six proscriptive masculine traits (i.e., controlling, cynical, self-righteous, arrogant, domineering, and insensitive; $\alpha = .90$), as well as six prescriptive feminine (i.e., warm, kind, sensitive to the needs of others, friendly, patient, and helpful; $\alpha = .91$) and six proscriptive feminine traits (i.e., child-like, naïve, overly emotional, weak, melodramatic, and gullible; $\alpha = .80$), was taken from Prentice and Carranza (2002). Each was rated on a 7-point scale ranging from 1 (*not at all*) to 7 (*very*). Responses across each set of six items were averaged so that higher scores indicated stronger endorsement of a trait dimension. Two additional explicit items were included that required respondents to rate how "feminine" and how "masculine" they perceived Michael to be.

Morphed Pictures. As an implicit measure of feminization, participants were asked at the end of the survey to select the one of two pictures they thought more closely resembled the first picture they had seen of Michael. In fact, neither of the two pictures was the original picture to which participants had been exposed. Rather both pictures were 50% morphed versions that rendered the face either more masculine or more feminine. All pictures were taken from an open access image base (DeBruine & Jones, 2017; credited to faceresearch.org; see Appendix C), and

were tested in a pilot study ($n = 69$) on several features, including perceived age, attractiveness, and general impression. All but one of these respondents could identify which picture had been feminized.

Results

Character Traits

A one-way Multivariate Analysis of Covariance (MANCOVA) was conducted that included the dependent variables: prescriptive masculine traits, prescriptive feminine traits, proscriptive masculine traits, proscriptive feminine traits, and the two one-item ratings of how explicitly masculine and feminine the target person seemed. Because there was a vastly uneven distribution of male ($n = 33$) and female ($n = 105$) respondents, respondent gender was included as a control variable, but not as an independent variable in the MANCOVA. Cell sizes ranged from 42 to 51 participants. We used Dunnett's (1985) tests with victim condition as the reference group to probe significant effects. Correlations and descriptive statistics are presented in Table 1, and group comparisons are displayed in Figures 1 and 2.

Table 1

Descriptive Statistics and Correlations of the Feminization Outcome Variables, Study 1

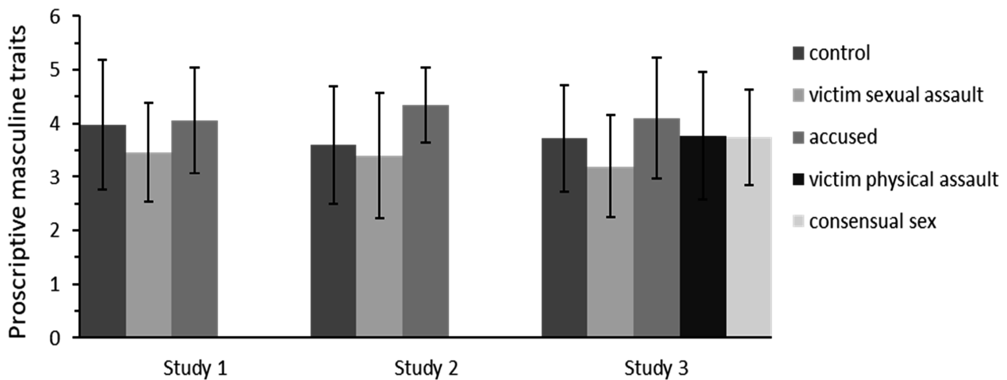
	Control	Victim	Accused	Correlations					
Variables	*M* (*SD*)	*M* (*SD*)	*M* (*SD*)	1	2	3	4	5	6
1. Prescriptive masculinity	4.30 (0.94)$_a$	4.30 (0.79)$_a$	4.13 (0.88)$_a$	--					
2. Proscriptive masculinity	3.97 (1.21)$_a$	3.46 (0.92)$_b$	4.06 (0.99)$_a$	.24**	--				
3. Prescriptive femininity	3.75 (1.14)$_a$	4.21 (0.81)$_b$	3.61 (0.89)$_a$	.50**	-.38**	--			
4. Proscriptive femininity	3.09 (1.04)$_a$	3.30 (0.90)$_a$	3.06 (0.82)$_a$	.01	.24**	.23**	--		
5. Explicit femininity	2.22 (1.21)$_a$	2.74 (1.27)$_b$	2.12 (0.92)$_a$	.07	-.07	.34**	.52**	--	
6. Explicit masculinity	5.10 (1.15)$_a$	4.57 (1.21)$_a$	4.64 (1.48)$_a$	.40**	.22*	.06	-.09	-.28**	--
7. Implicit femininity	1.37 (0.49)$_a$	1.65 (0.48)$_b$	1.45 (0.50)$_{a,b}$	.08	-.02	.05	-.00	.11	-.06

Note. $n = 139$. Means with different subscripts in a row differed significantly ($p < .05$).

* $p < .05$. ** $p < .01$.

Figure 1

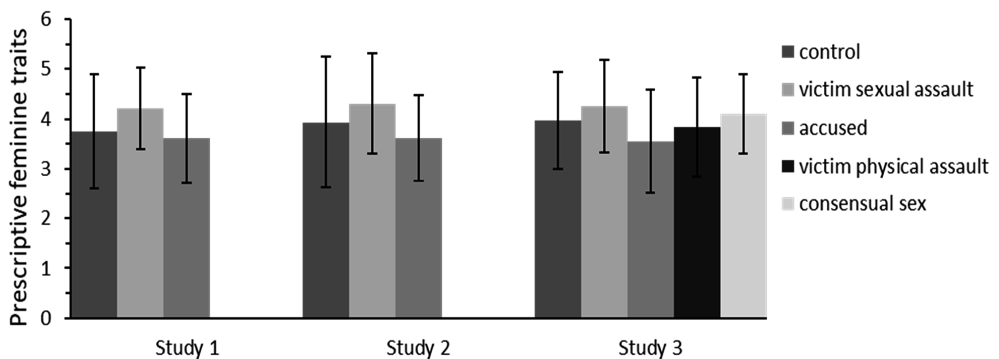
Attribution of Proscriptive Masculine Traits in Experimental Conditions in Studies 1-3



Note. Error bars denote ± 1 *SD* around the mean.

Figure 2

Attribution of Prescriptive Feminine Traits in Experimental Conditions in Studies 1–3



Note. Error bars denote ± 1 *SD* around the mean.

There was a statistically significant overall multivariate main effect across the dependent variables for the experimental condition, $F(12, 260) = 1.81$, $p = .046$, Wilks' $\Lambda = .85$, $\eta_p^2 = .08$, but not for gender of respondents, $F(6, 130) = 2.02$, $p = .068$, Wilks' $\Lambda = .92$, $\eta_p^2 = .09$. Looking at the univariate effects, a significant main effect was found across experimental conditions on proscriptive masculine traits, $F(2, 135) = 4.01$, $p = .020$, $\eta_p^2 = .06$, such that the male target in the victim condition was regarded as less proscriptively masculine than both the control ($p = .034$, 95%

CI [−.92, −.09]) and accused ($p = .016$, 95% CI [−1.00, −.12]) men. The main effect for prescriptive feminine traits was also significant, $F(2, 135) = 4.65$, $p = .011$, $\eta_p^2 = .06$, such that the victimized man was rated as significantly more prescriptively feminine than both the control ($p = .038$, 95% CI [.07, .85]) and accused ($p = .008$, 95% CI [.19, 1.01]) men. Furthermore, a significant effect of type of description was found on the explicit femininity rating, $F(2, 135) = 3.86$, $p = .023$, $\eta_p^2 = .05$, wherein the male victim was perceived to be more explicitly feminine than both the control ($p = .050$, 95% CI [.06, .99]) and accused ($p = .024$, CI [.14, 1.12]) men. Thus our hypothesis was supported in that the victimized man was perceived, by both women and men, as less proscriptively masculine, more prescriptively feminine, and more explicitly feminine than the control or accused men.

No significant main effects were found on the dimensions of prescriptive masculine traits, $F(2, 135) = .60$, $p = .550$, $\eta_p^2 = .01$, and proscriptive feminine traits, $F(2, 135) = 1.16$, $p = .316$, $\eta_p^2 = .02$. Also, no significant effect was found for explicit masculinity ratings of the target person, $F(2, 135) = 2.52$, $p = .084$, $\eta_p^2 = .04$. Thus support for our hypotheses did not extend to perceptions of prescriptive masculinity, proscriptive femininity, or explicit ratings of masculinity.

Re-running the three significant analyses with the accused condition as reference group demonstrated there were no significant differences between the accused and the control condition (proscriptive masculinity: $p = .886$; prescriptive femininity: $p = .712$; and explicit femininity: $p = .886$). Although not related to our hypotheses, it is interesting that the accused male perpetrator was regarded no differently from the neutral control target across all six of our measures of masculinity and femininity.

Manipulate Pictures

The Chi-square test of homogeneity indicated that the proportion of selected feminized pictures was not equal across conditions, $\chi^2(2) = 7.89$, $p = .019$, $\phi_C = .24$. Respondents more frequently selected the feminized picture in the victim condition compared to the control condition, $\chi^2(1) = 6.49$, $p = .011$, $\phi_C = .28$. In the control condition, 37.3% ($n = 19$) of respondents chose the feminized picture as the one more closely resembling the original picture, whereas in the victim condition, 65.2% ($n = 30$) of respondents chose the feminized picture. The comparison between the victim condition and the accused conditioned (45.2%, $n = 19$) followed a similar pattern but was not significant ($p = .095$).

Study 2

In the first study, extensive support was found for the hypothesis of victim feminization. Male victims were perceived as more feminine than target persons in other conditions on two of the four character trait dimensions. Their facial appearance was also reevaluated as more feminine compared to the control condition. A second study was conducted to assess whether similar feminization patterns could be found in response to female target persons. We suspected that

processes of feminization would be more difficult to detect because respondents are likely to rate women as feminine regardless of victim status.

Method

Participants

Participants were recruited in the same way as in Study 1 by using the same selection criteria. Using G*Power, we determined our sample size to detect a small-to-medium effect ($f^2 = .05$) between three conditions with a power of .70 at alpha level .05. This yielded a total required sample size of 159 respondents. The collected respondent sample consisted of 183 respondents, of which 18 people were excluded because they had been allocated to one of the two experimental conditions but failed the manipulation check. The sample that remained consisted of 165 respondents of British nationality (86 women; $M_{age} = 36.2$, $SD = 12.6$, range = 18–80). Participants needed approximately 5 to 6 min to complete the survey and received £.70 for their participation.

Procedure and Materials

Study 2 was almost an exact duplication of Study 1, except that the current study used a picture of a White female target person named Melanie instead of a male target person. Additionally, one open question was added after the manipulation check in the two experimental conditions. Respondents were asked to describe what they imagined had happened during the sexual assault of which the target person was the accused or the (alleged) victim. Personality traits were again grouped under proscriptive masculine traits (Cronbach's alpha in the present study = .86), prescriptive masculine traits ($\alpha = .78$), proscriptive feminine traits ($\alpha = .79$), or prescriptive feminine traits ($\alpha = .93$).

Results

Character Traits

A two-way Multivariate Analysis of Variance (MANOVA) was conducted that included the dependent variables: prescriptive masculine traits, prescriptive feminine traits, proscriptive masculine traits, proscriptive feminine traits, and the two explicit one-item ratings femininity and masculinity. Type of description (condition) and respondent gender were included as independent variables, resulting in a 3 × 2 between-subjects design, with cell sizes ranging from 18 to 31. Dunnett's (1985) tests with victim condition as the reference group were used to probe significant effects. Correlations and descriptive statistics are presented in Table 2, and group comparisons are displayed in Figures 1 and 2.

Table 2

Descriptive Statistics and Correlations of the Feminization Outcome Variables, Study 2

	Control	Victim	Accused	Correlations					
Variables	*M* (*SD*)	*M* (*SD*)	*M* (*SD*)	1	2	3	4	5	6
1. Prescriptive masculinity	4.62 $(0.96)_a$	4.53 $(0.82)_a$	4.28 $(0.62)_a$	--					
2. Proscriptive masculinity	3.86 $(1.10)_a$	3.40 $(1.18)_b$	4.34 $(0.70)_c$	.04	--				
3. Prescriptive femininity	3.93 $(1.31)_{a,b}$	4.31 $(1.00)_a$	3.62 $(0.86)_b$	.44**	-.54**	--			
4. Proscriptive femininity	3.04 $(1.03)_a$	2.99 $(0.73)_a$	3.40 $(0.85)_a$	-.23**	.27**	.08	--		
5. Explicit femininity	4.45 $(1.43)_a$	4.71 $(1.43)_a$	4.20 $(1.20)_a$	.18*	-.53**	.60**	.00	--	
6. Explicit masculinity	3.30 $(1.56)_a$	2.92 $(1.38)_a$	3.46 $(1.33)_a$	-.06	.52**	-49**	.015	-.68**	--
7. Implicit femininity	1.52 $(0.50)_a$	1.58 $(0.50)_a$	1.50 $(0.50)_a$	.05	-.18*	.19*	-.08	.17*	-.13

Note. $n = 165$. Means with different subscripts in a row differed significantly ($p < .05$).
* $p < .05$. ** $p < .01$.

There was a statistically significant overall multivariate effect across the dependent variables for the experimental condition, $F(12, 306) = 2.36, p = .006$, Wilks' $\Lambda = .84$, $\eta_p^2 = .09$, and for respondent gender, $F(6, 153) = 2.24, p = .043$, Wilks' $\Lambda = .92$, $\eta_p^2 = .08$. The interaction effect between respondent gender and experimental condition was not statistically significant, $F(12, 306) = .66, p = .786$, Wilks' $\Lambda = .95$, $\eta_p^2 = .03$.

Experimental Conditions. Looking at the univariate effects across experimental conditions, a significant main effect was found on proscriptive masculine traits, $F(2, 158) = 9.87, p < .001$, $\eta_p^2 = .11$, such that the female target in the victim condition was regarded as less proscriptively masculine than both the control ($p = .038$, 95% CI [−.88, −.02]) and the accused ($p < .001$, 95% CI [−1.37, −.50]) women. The main effect for prescriptive feminine traits was also significant, $F(2, 158) = 4.53, p = .012$, $\eta_p^2 = .05$, such that the victimized woman was rated as significantly more prescriptively feminine than the accused woman ($p = .003$, 95% CI [.22, 1.16]), although not significantly more than the female target in the control condition ($p = .12$). Thus our hypothesis was partly supported in that male and female respondents perceived the victimized woman as less proscriptively masculine than both the control and accused women, as well as more prescriptively feminine compared to the female target in the accused condition.

No significant main effects were found on the dimensions of prescriptive masculine traits, $F(2, 158) = 2.81, p = .063$, $\eta_p^2 = .03$, and proscriptive feminine traits, $F(2, 158) = 3.03, p = .051$, $\eta_p^2 = .04$. Also, no significant main effects were found for ratings of explicit femininity, $F(2, 158) = 1.91, p = .151$, $\eta_p^2 = .02$, and ratings of explicit masculinity, $F(2, 158) = 1.60, p = .205$, $\eta_p^2 = .02$. Thus support for our hypotheses did not extend to perceptions of prescriptive masculinity, proscriptive femininity, or explicit ratings of femininity or masculinity.

Re-running the analysis with the accused condition as reference group demonstrated that a woman accused of sexual assault was also attributed more proscriptive masculine traits than the control condition ($p = .019$, 95% CI [.07, .90]). No differences between the accused condition and control condition were found on the dimension of prescriptive femininity ($p = .226$). Results hence indicate that a woman accused of sexual assault is viewed as more proscriptively masculine than the other female targets.

Gender Differences. Looking at the univariate effects for gender of the respondent, a significant effect was found on proscriptive feminine traits, $F(1, 158) = 4.87, p = .029$, $\eta_p^2 = .03$, wherein male respondents generally attributed more proscriptive feminine traits ($M = 3.32, SD = .87$) to target persons than female respondents did ($M = 2.99, SD = .91$, Cohen's $d = .37$). No significant main effects were found on the dimensions of proscriptive masculine traits ($p = .055$), prescriptive masculine traits ($p = .275$), prescriptive feminine traits ($p = .978$), or explicit femininity ($p = .242$) and masculinity ($p = .647$). Male respondents thus perceived female targets as more proscriptively feminine than female respondents did.

Manipulated Pictures

The Chi-square test of homogeneity indicated that respondents did not feminize the facial features of a victim compared to persons in the accused or control condition. The feminized picture was selected 51.7% ($n = 31$) in the control condition, 50.0% ($n = 28$) in the accused condition, and 59.2% ($n = 29$) in the victim condition ($p = .609$).

Study 3

In Studies 1 and 2, similar patterns of feminization were found between the victim and the control and accused condition on the trait dimensions of proscriptive masculinity and prescriptive femininity, although absolute feminization (i.e., significant differences between the victim and control condition) was more prominent in the study with male targets. The third study examined reactions toward a male target person (Michael) once more with the aim of investigating whether the feminization effects we had found were unique to sexual victimization. The purpose of this third study was thus to disentangle two components of sexual violence that potentially have a feminizing effect: becoming a victim of (an interpersonal) crime and being involved in a homosexual act. Hence, the current study included the three conditions of the previous studies, as well as a condition where Michael states he has become a victim of physical assault and a condition in which Michael reportedly engaged in a one-night stand with another male student.

Method

Participants

Participants were recruited in the same way as in Studies 1 and 2 by using the same selection criteria. Using G*Power, the required sample size was calculated for detection of a small to medium effect ($f^2 = .05$) between five conditions with a power of .70 at alpha level .0021 (.05 divided by 24 total planned comparisons with the victim of sexual assault condition). This yielded a total required sample size of 262 respondents. The respondent sample initially consisted of 319 respondents, of which 28 people were excluded because of missing data and another 13 were excluded because they had been allocated to one of the four experimental conditions but failed the manipulation check. The sample that remained consisted of 278 respondents of British nationality (137 women; $M_{age} = 36.6$, $SD = 12.2$, range = 18–72). Of these respondents, 18 identified as gay, lesbian, or bisexual; 255 as heterosexual; and five preferred not to answer; 28.1% ($n = 78$) of the total sample confirmed that they or someone close to them had been a victim of (sexual or physical) violence. Participants needed approximately 8 to 10 min to complete the survey and received £1.00 for their participation.

Procedure and Materials

Study 3 was similar in design to Studies 1 and 2. This time, five conditions with a male protagonist were included: a control condition where hardly any information was given and four

conditions where the protagonist Michael was described as either accused of sexual assault, a victim of sexual assault, a victim of physical assault, or having had a one-night stand with another man. In contrast to the previous studies, every experimental condition emphasized that the other party featured in the scenario was also a male student. In addition to the feminization-related questions, respondents were asked to describe what they imagined had happened during the sexual/physical assault of which the target person was the accused or the (alleged) victim. Two questions were included to collect data on sexual orientation and experiences of victimization. Personality traits were again grouped under proscriptive masculine traits (Cronbach's alpha in the present study = .88), prescriptive masculine traits (α = .77), proscriptive feminine traits (α = .86), or prescriptive feminine traits (α = .91).

Results

Character Traits

A two-way Multivariate Analysis of Variance (MANOVA) was conducted that included the dependent variables: prescriptive masculine traits, prescriptive feminine traits, proscriptive masculine traits, proscriptive feminine traits, and two one-item measures of explicit femininity and masculinity. Type of description (experimental condition) and respondent gender were included as independent variables, resulting in a 5 × 2 between-subjects design, with cell sizes ranging from 20 to 36. Neither victim experience nor sexual orientation had an independent effect, so no covariates were included in the final analysis. We again used Dunnett's (1985) tests with victim condition as the reference group to probe significant effects. Correlations and descriptive statistics are presented in Table 3, and group comparisons are displayed in Figures 1 and 2.

There was a statistically significant overall multivariate effect across the dependent variables for both the experimental condition, $F(24, 915) = 1.82$, $p = .010$, Wilks' $\Lambda = .85$, $\eta_p^2 = .04$, and gender of respondents, $F(6, 262) = 3.68$, $p = .002$, Wilks' $\Lambda = .92$, $\eta_p^2 = .08$. The interaction effect between respondent gender and experimental condition was not statistically significant, $F(24, 915) = 1.17$, $p = .258$, Wilks' $\Lambda = .90$, $\eta_p^2 = .03$.

Table 3

Descriptive Statistics and Correlations of the Feminization Outcome Variables, Study 3

	Control	Victim sexual assault	Accused	Victim physical assault	Consensual sex	Correlations					
Variables	*M* (*SD*)	*M* (*SD*)	*M* (*SD*)	*M* (*SD*)	*M* (*SD*)	1	2	3	4	5	6
1. Prescriptive mas.	4.30 (0.78)$_a$	4.29 (0.83)$_a$	4.29 (0.81)$_a$	4.21 (0.83)$_a$	4.18 (0.63)$_a$	--					
2. Proscriptive mas.	3.72 (1.00)$_a$	3.20 (0.96)$_b$	4.09 (1.13)$_a$	3.77 (1.19)$_a$	3.74 (0.89)$_a$	.03	--				
3. Prescriptive fem.	3.96 (0.97)$_{a,b}$	4.26 (0.93)$_a$	3.55 (1.04)$_b$	3.84 (0.99)$_{a,b}$	4.10 (0.79)$_a$	.36**	-.57**	--			
4. Proscriptive fem.	3.03 (1.06)$_{a,b}$	3.20 (1.12)$_{a,b}$	3.02 (0.87)$_a$	3.34 (1.15)$_{a,b}$	3.54 (0.80)$_b$	-.41**	.24**	.03	--		
5. Explicit fem.	2.21 (0.93)$_a$	2.44 (1.15)$_a$	2.38 (1.03)$_a$	2.63 (1.46)$_a$	2.69 (1.20)$_a$	-.43**	-.01	-.03	.55**	--	
6. Explicit mas.	5.11 (1.33)$_a$	4.65 (1.10)$_a$	4.67 (1.23)$_a$	4.71 (1.29)$_a$	4.74 (1.18)$_a$	.45**	.06	.09	-.42**	-.57**	--
7. Implicit fem.	1.28 (0.45)$_a$	1.31 (0.47)$_a$	1.51 (0.51)$_a$	1.51 (0.50)$_a$	1.40 (0.49)$_a$	-.16**	-.13*	.01	.12	.24**	-.26**

Note. n = 278. Means with different subscripts in a row differed significantly ($p < .05$).
* $p < .05$. ** $p < .01$.

Experimental Condition. Looking at the univariate effects, a significant main effect was found for the experimental condition on proscriptive masculine traits, $F(4, 267) = 4.98$, $p = .001$, $\eta_p^2 = .07$. Results showed that the male victim of sexual assault was regarded as less proscriptively masculine than the male victim of physical assault ($p = .014$, 95% CI [−1.05, −.09]) as well as the male targets in the consensual sex ($p = .021$, 95% CI [−1.04, −.06]), the control ($p = .035$, 95% CI [−1.02, −.03]) and the accused ($p < .001$, 95% CI [−1.38, −.40]) conditions. The main effect for prescriptive feminine traits was also significant, $F(4, 267) = 3.76$, $p = .005$, $\eta_p^2 = .05$, indicating that respondents rated victims of sexual assault as more prescriptively feminine than they did accused persons ($p = .001$, 95% CI [.26, 1.16]). No significant differences on the dimension of prescriptive femininity were found between perceptions of victims of sexual assault and victims of physical assault ($p = .073$), men engaged in consensual sex ($p = .778$), and the control condition ($p = .289$). Furthermore, a significant effect of type of description was found on proscriptive feminine traits, $F(4, 267) = 2.45$, $p = .046$, $\eta_p^2 = .04$. However, no significant differences were found between the victim condition and other groups (accused: $p = .760$; victim physical assault: $p = .854$; consensual sex: $p = .180$; control: $p = .780$). Hence, partial support for the hypothesis was found in that male victims of sexual assault were perceived as less proscriptively masculine than male targets in all other conditions, as well as more prescriptively feminine than accused men.

No significant main effects were found for prescriptive masculinity ($p = .948$), explicit femininity ($p = .392$), or explicit masculinity ($p = .480$). Thus, support for our hypotheses did not extend to perceptions of prescriptive masculinity, proscriptive femininity, or explicit ratings of femininity and masculinity.

Re-running the three significant analyses with the accused condition as reference group demonstrated that the male target in this condition was also perceived as less prescriptively feminine ($p = .009$, 95% CI [−.98, −.11]) and less proscriptively feminine ($p = .045$, 95% CI [.07, .96]) than a man who had engaged in consensual sex with another man. No other significant differences were found between the accused condition and other groups on these two trait dimensions (prescriptive femininity: victim physical assault: $p = .288$; control: $p = .090$; proscriptive femininity: victim sexual assault: $p = .765$; victim physical assault: $p = .249$; control: $p = 1.00$). Also, no significant differences were found between the accused man and other conditions on proscriptive masculinity (victim physical assault: $p = .291$; consensual sex: $p = .236$; control: $p = .202$). As in Study 1, it is once more interesting to note that the alleged perpetrator of sexual assault against a male victim was not regarded differently from the other conditions (excluding the victim of sexual assault) on proscriptive masculine traits, although he was clearly perceived as less prescriptively and proscriptively feminine than a man who had engaged in consensual homosexual sex.

Gender Differences. Looking at the univariate effects for gender of the respondent, a significant effect was found on proscriptive feminine traits, $F(1, 267) = 19.08$, $p < .001$, $\eta_p^2 = .07$, such that male respondents generally attributed more proscriptive feminine traits

($M = 3.47$, $SD = .96$) to target persons than female respondents did ($M = 2.99$, $SD = 1.02$, Cohen's $d = .48$). Additionally, a significant effect was found on proscriptive masculine traits, $F(1, 267) = 5.22$, $p = .023$, $\eta_p^2 = .02$, wherein male respondents generally attributed more proscriptive masculine traits ($M = 3.84$, $SD = 1.08$) to the target person than female respondents did ($M = 3.58$, $SD = 1.06$, Cohen's $d = .24$). Finally, a significant effect was found on explicit masculinity, $F(1, 267) = 3.96$, $p = .048$, $\eta_p^2 = .02$, indicating that male respondents rated the target person as less masculine ($M = 4.62$, $SD = 1.22$) than female respondents did ($M = 4.94$, $SD = 1.23$, Cohen's $d = .26$). Hence, across conditions, male respondents generally viewed the male target somewhat more negatively than female respondents did.

Manipulated Pictures

The Chi-square test of homogeneity indicated that the proportion of selected feminized pictures was not equal across conditions, $\chi^2(4) = 10.80$, $p = .029$. Respondents selected the feminized picture 50.9% ($n = 28$) in the accused condition, 50.8% ($n = 30$) in the victim of physical assault condition, 27.8% ($n = 15$) in the control condition, 30.8% ($n = 16$) in the victim of sexual assault condition, and 39.7% ($n = 23$) in the consensual sex condition. However, separate follow-up 2 × 2 Chi-square tests with Yates Continuity Correction indicated there were no significant differences between the picture selection of the victim of sexual assault compared to the other conditions (consensual sex: $p = .440$; physical assault: $p = .051$; control: $p = .901$; accused: $p = .055$).

General Discussion

The three studies we presented in the present paper examined whether the theoretically familiar reference to rape as a gendering crime finds empirical support when testing observers' perceptions of male and female victims of sexual violence. Specifically, we tested whether victims of sexual assault were attributed more stereotypically feminine and less stereotypically masculine traits compared to a control or accused condition and whether they were expected to possess more feminine facial features. To disentangle the potential independent effects of perceived homosexuality and victimization, Study 3 additionally included conditions featuring a victim of physical assault and a male student who engaged in consensual sex with another man.

Partial support for our main hypothesis was found because both male and female victims of sexual assault were feminized on two of four character trait dimensions. Male and female victims were consistently attributed less proscriptive masculine traits than target persons in other conditions and more prescriptive feminine traits than target persons in the accused condition. The same pattern of feminization was not found in reaction to victims of physical assault, although respondents did rate a man who had engaged in consensual homosexual sex higher on proscriptive and prescriptive femininity compared to the accused male target. The specification of the other party's gender in the third study – contradicting the likely assumption that the male student was

accused of sexually assaulting a woman – remarkably did not eliminate differences in feminization between the victim and accused condition, providing evidence that assumptions of homosexuality are not sufficient to explain feminization. This finding resonates with the suspicion that reactions of feminization are additionally intertwined with perceptions of (passive) victimhood. The results then lend some support to the hypothesis that sexual assault has a uniquely gendering effect (Quinn, 2002), which cannot be ascribed to either interpersonal victimization or perceptions of homosexuality alone. On the other hand, no compelling evidence was found for theorizing that the perpetration of sexual violence simultaneously causes the (dominating) agent to be perceived as more masculine (Gilbert, 2002; Mackinnon, 1989).

It is notable that feminizing responses to the victim of sexual assault always occurred on the same two trait dimensions of proscriptive masculinity and prescriptive femininity, whereas no significant differences were found on the trait dimensions of prescriptive masculinity and proscriptive femininity. A plausible explanation for these findings is that feminization on the first two trait dimensions arguably entails a positive re-evaluation of the target person (e.g., assigning *more* warmth and *less* cynicism), whereas feminization on the latter trait dimensions entails a negative pattern of trait assignment (e.g., assigning *more* naivety and *less* competence to the target person). We speculate that respondents were unwilling to feminize a victim when they associated this with socially undesirable responses to victims. Alternatively, a possible methodological explanation for these findings is that the same character traits were employed across the three studies, risking the possibility that a different selection may have resulted in a different pattern of findings. Yet we find this explanation less plausible because we used a selection of traits not just representative of the BSRI (Bem, 1974), but also of the competence-warmth (Fiske et al., 2002) and agency-communion (Abele & Wojciszke, 2007) dichotomies.

In the second study, we found some support for victim feminization, as well as support for character derogation of the accused. Though not all main effects were significant, the alleged female perpetrator was ascribed more proscriptive masculine and feminine traits, as well as less prescriptive masculine and feminine traits, than the victim and/or control condition. On the other hand, in the studies with a male target, the feminization effect of victimization was more prominent than the derogation of someone accused of perpetrating violence. Indeed, in the first study—where respondents in all likelihood assumed the male student was accused of assaulting a woman—no differences were found between the accused student and the control condition at all. A comparison between these studies indicates that gender norms are likely to interact with expectations of a perpetrator as they do with victim stereotypes.

Using a more indirect measure of feminization that tapped into observers' expectations of target persons' facial appearance, the results of Study 1 were in accordance with our hypothesis that respondents are more likely to select the feminized picture when the target person was described as a victim. Post-hoc comparisons of Studies 2 and 3, on the other hand, were not significant. Finally, in the second and third study we found that male respondents are likely to evaluate target persons more negatively than female respondents do.

Theoretical Implications

Although the present findings seem to support the feminization-normalization hypothesis as a way of making sense of male rape (Doherty & Anderson, 2004; Graham, 2006), it is important to consider how this account relates to, and potentially improves upon, other explanations. First, it is conceivable that the current reactions by observers can be encompassed under a broader reaction of 'othering' the victim. Placing a victim outside the realm of our own (moral) world can be one strategy to reduce the threat the victim poses to our sense of justice or control (Cohen, 2014; Lerner, 1980). Hence, it is possible that feminizing the male victim of sexual assault, and feminizing the male student who willingly engaged in sexual relations with another man, were strategies that labeled the target person as gay, and hence as potential 'Other'—violating heteronormativity (Javaid, 2015b). However, this reasoning does not explain the results that were found in relation to the female victim, who was feminized on the same dimensions as the male victim. Instead, the present results seem to suggest that reactions follow stereotypes of victimhood and femininity, and they may thus be interpreted more specifically as an attempt of *normalizing* rather than othering. That is, by means of feminizing a (male or female) victim of sexual assault, the event is (re)interpreted in alignment with prescribed gender roles, normalizing the perceived victimization.

Kay et al. (2005) provide a second alternative explanation to the feminization hypothesis that suggests that respondents enhance victims on traits that are unrelated to their victimization, while derogating them on traits perceived as relevant to their victimization in order to justify the status quo. Our results are to a certain extent consistent with this view. We indeed found that the victim was enhanced in the eyes of the perceiver through the ascription of more positive feminine traits (e.g., warmth) and less negative masculine traits (e.g., arrogance). However, our results diverged from the victim enhancement-derogation hypothesis in two ways. First, victims were only enhanced in the specific direction of the feminine stereotype. So, although an alternative explanation might be that victims are evaluated more positively as a consequence of their victimization, this positive evaluation only pertained to the feminine domain (e.g., victims were not judged as more competent than others). Second, the complementary victim enhancement-derogation hypothesis suggests that victims in the current study would be derogated on dimensions that observers can associate with the victimization (Kay et al., 2005). This can entail a decrease in the attribution of prescriptive masculine traits, such as competence, or an increase in proscriptive feminine traits, such as naivety. However, although victims were not enhanced on these dimensions, they were also not derogated. Although our results do not entirely comply with the victim enhancement-derogation hypothesis, the strategy of feminization/normalization does fit relatively well within the system justification framework (Jost & Kay, 2005).

The feminization hypothesis is thus not incompatible with strategies of othering and system justification (or just world) motives, but seems a specifically apt framework through which to consider social reactions to victims of sexual violence. It suggests that observers may wield gender stereotypes in order to normalize their perceptions of sexual violence.

Implicit Feminization

Whereas the feminization of sexual assault victims in character traits was a consistent finding across our studies, results of the implicit feminization measure pose a greater interpretative challenge. Study 1 largely led to results in accordance with our hypothesis, where male victims were more frequently implicitly feminized compared to control target persons. Although our results followed a similar pattern in Study 2, the differences were not significant. The reason for this may be that respondents are already quite likely to pick the feminized picture of a woman, leaving less room to differentiate between experimental conditions. Differences between conditions were also not statistically significant in Study 3, but these results seemed to follow a different pattern from the first two studies because the selection frequencies of the feminized picture were higher in the physical assault victim and accused person condition. More research is necessary for accurate interpretation of the different findings between studies and to refine implicit measurements of observer reactions.

Observer Effects

Finally, results of Studies 2 and 3 indicated that male respondents generally evaluated the target person less positively than female respondents did. A fair number of studies have likewise indicated that men are generally less empathic toward victims than women, but not many of those studies included control conditions of non-victimized target persons (for an overview, see Grubb & Harrower, 2008). In the current study, no significant multivariate effect for the interaction between experimental condition and gender of the respondent was found, indicating that some of the more unsympathetic reactions of male respondents toward victims may result from a less positive perception of others in general compared to female respondents (Felson & Palmore, 2018). This is not to say that this bias is without indication of gender stereotyping because male respondents in the third study also rated male others as less masculine than female respondents did. Furthermore, Study 3 focused on a specific type of reaction, acknowledging the possibility that other types of (negative) reactions do interact with respondent gender. It is, for instance, conceivable that male respondents experience a greater distance between themselves and sexual assault victims and may hence feel less empathic toward them.

Practice Implications

In an age that is increasingly characterized by emphasis on victim inclusion, political correctness, and microaggressions (B. Campbell & Manning, 2014), our findings provide insight into the more subtle ways in which third parties may react to a victim of sexual violence. Whereas Javaid (2015b, p. 275) concluded that “feminizing or gendering victimization is mostly seen within labels that are derogatory …, pussies, sissies … and so on,” respondents in the current study feminized the victim in ways that resulted in the attribution of more positive traits and less negative traits. This is not to say that such feminization is harmless because even ‘benevolent’ feminization may effectively work to police gender borders and create skewed power relations (Quinn, 2002).

It is presumably precisely in (sub)cultures where sexual violence against men is more prevalent that qualities deemed desirable in women are depreciated or even abhorred in men, making rape a particularly powerful tool of domination. To evaluate a man as warm in such a context may not be an act of benevolence at all, but indeed a (sugarcoated) devaluation of his character. Our results may facilitate the recognition of such feminizing reactions of third parties in daily life, although future research is needed to explore the relationships between (subtle/benevolent) feminization and more blatantly negative observer reactions such as victim blame and avoidance (Herbert & Dunkel-Schetter, 1992).

The current findings do suggest that certain widespread misbeliefs about (male) sexual victimization cannot be confronted without also targeting gender stereotypes more broadly. Indeed, policymakers and anti-rape campaigners may wish to broaden the message that "real men *can* be raped" to include a deeper exploration and critique of our common expectations of what it means to be a 'real man.' This seems particularly important in light of the fact that concerns over 'real' masculinity play a role in male victims' reluctance to seek support (Javaid, 2016).

The present study finally highlights one of the complexities that can be experienced by male victims of sexual assault in particular (Mulkey, 2004). Male victims who themselves struggle with an experienced loss of their identity may have an especially hard time regaining or reinventing a sense of their masculinity if their social surroundings are inclined to reactions of feminization (Clark, 2014). Educators or counselors could use vignette studies with similar designs as described here to help confront others with their gendered expectations of victims.

Limitations and Future Research

The current study employed several fruitful ways to measure the feminizing effects of (sexual) victimization on observers' perceptions. However, the current design also suffers from several limitations. First, the narrative we provided to our respondents contained both specific and limited information. In all vignettes, we spoke of a "sexual assault" or "physical assault" with only a few hints at what may have happened (e.g., the offender undressed the victim or beat the victim). Particularly in the case of a sexual assault of a woman versus the sexual assault of a man, interpretations of the respondents may have varied greatly. Indeed, answers to open questions show that whereas respondents usually expect penetrative sex in the case of a female victim, they more frequently mentioned "inappropriate touching" and similar misbehaviors when the victim was a man. A future vignette could strongly emphasize that someone was either uncontestably a rape victim or a perpetrator. There is also much research to be done concerning the specific circumstances in which observers are inclined to react in one way, such as by feminizing, versus another in response to a victim. We are currently complementing quantitative data with qualitative data to shed more light on how respondents employ stereotypes to fill in the gaps of different victimization stories.

Second, the use of morphed pictures in social psychological experimental designs, such as those we employed in our series of studies, requires further testing and development. This

instrument is increasingly popular in (evolutionary) studies regarding mate preferences (e.g., Jones et al., 2018) and, more exceptionally, sexuality and sexism (e.g., Zheng & Zheng, 2015). However, it is most frequently used to measure a preference of the respondent rather than as an indicator of the perception or evaluation of a target person. More pilot testing is needed with different faces to get a firmer grip of the extent to which gendered facial manipulation in itself influences perceptions (Sutherland et al., 2015). Additionally, it remains important to investigate the relations between this implicit measure and explicit observer evaluations of victims.

In future research it would finally be interesting to use vignettes in which both the victim and the perpetrator play a role, after which respondents make judgments about both parties. This taps into the relational aspect of victimization, where the moral transgression establishes both a moral agent and a moral patient (Gray & Wegner, 2009). It may also give a clearer indication of the suggestion that sexual violence serves to simultaneously feminize or emasculate the victim and masculinize the perpetrator (Gilbert, 2002).

Conclusion

According to Quinn (2002), forms of sexual violence can be “mechanisms through which gendered boundaries are patrolled and *evoked* and by which deeply held identities are established” (p. 399; emphasis added). The current findings lend empirical support to the notion that sexual violence has the potential to create feminized perceptions of victims, and they affirm the accuracy of the description of sexual violence/rape as a ‘gendering crime.’ Whereas in gender studies scholars mostly refer to feminization as a mode or function of rape, from a social psychological perspective, we may best understand feminization as one potential effect of rape that results from (automatic) coping efforts to normalize a threat (Cohen, 2014). Hence, we suggest that a comprehensive understanding of social reactions to rape victims requires acknowledging their intertwinement with gender stereotypes.

Chapter 4

Harm and Normativity Concerns

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Abstract

Male and female victims of sexual violence frequently experience secondary victimization in the form of victim blame and other negative reactions by their social surroundings. However, it remains unclear whether these negative reactions differ from each other, and what mechanisms underlie negative reactions toward victims. In one laboratory study ($N = 132$) and one online study ($N = 421$), the authors assessed participants' reactions to male and female victims, and whether different (moral) concerns underlay these reactions. The reactions addressed included positive and negative emotions, behavioral and characterological blame, explicit and implicit derogation, and two measures of distancing. It was hypothesized that male victimization would evoke different types of (negative) reactions compared with female victimization, and that normative concerns would predict a greater proportion of the variance of reactions to male victims than female victims. Multivariate analyses of variance (MANOVAs) were conducted to test whether reactions to male and female (non-)victims differed. Multiple regression analyses were conducted to test the influence of gender traditionality, homonegativity, as well as binding and individualizing moral values on participants' reactions. Results revealed that participants consistently reacted more negatively to victims than to non-victims, and more so to male than to female targets. Binding values were a regular predictor of negative reactions to victims, whereas they predicted positive reactions to non-victims. The hypothesis that different mechanisms underlie reactions to male versus female victims was not supported. The discussion addresses implications of this research for interventions targeting secondary victimization and for future research investigating social reactions to victims of sexual violence. It also addresses limitations of the current research and considerations of diversity.

Victims of crime are often met with sympathy and receive help and compensation (Gray & Wegner, 2011). However, supportive reactions by a victim's social environment are not guaranteed. Instead, victims also frequently experience secondary victimization (Williams, 1984), which includes victim blaming, derogation, distancing, and disbelief (Lerner, 1980). The archetypal crime in which such reactions occur is that of sexual violence.

The current article focuses on observer reactions to male and female victims of rape. Despite inconsistent findings, scholars have suggested that such reactions are gendered (Reitz-Krueger et al., 2017). We investigate whether male and female victims of rape prompt different negative reactions from observers. We also illuminate potentially different underlying mechanisms of reactions to male and female victims by considering related moral concerns. Although academic attention to male rape has increased along with concerns about diversity, scholars press for more research on "the nature and triggers" of negative reactions to male victims (Lowe & Rogers, 2017, p. 41). We speculate that moral concerns about loyalty, obedience to authority, and maintaining purity (which have been termed "binding values"; Graham et al., 2009) underlie negative reactions to rape victims, especially male victims. In two experiments, we use both explicit survey questions and more indirect measures to investigate the relationship between (non-)normative victimization and observers' reactions.

Observer Reactions to Male and Female Victims of Rape

Experimental studies on victim blaming have sometimes shown that female victims of rape are blamed and dismissed more than (heterosexual) male victims (e.g., Schneider et al., 1994). Other studies, in contrast, have reported more blame and less sympathy assigned to male than female rape victims (e.g., Ayala et al., 2018). Finally, a few studies found that participants assigned more characterological blame to female victims and more behavioral blame to male victims (e.g., B. H. White & Kurpius, 2002).

These mixed findings indicate the importance of targeting two consistent oversights when comparing social reactions to male and female victims of sexual violence. First, it is important to examine reactions beyond blatant victim blame. Indeed, some of the findings suggest that certain (negative) reactions may generally be more common in response to male victims and others more common in response to female victims. In the current research, we hence include a variety of observer reactions, encompassing explicit and implicit character derogation, distancing, and emotional responses.

Accordingly, Reitz-Krueger and colleagues (2017) speak of "gendered nuances" in the framing of male and female rape myths (p. 315). Whereas female rape myths emphasize the notion of "asking for it," many male rape myths maintain that "real" men cannot be raped (Javaid, 2015a). The former set implies attributions of deservingness and blame, whereas the latter conveys denial and derogation. Hence, a second common oversight is the lack of (empirical) attention paid to the possibility that reactions to male and female victims of rape are characterized by qualitatively

different underlying mechanisms. The mechanisms we investigate in the current study are moral concerns underlying reactions to (non-)normative victimization.

(Non-)Normative Victimization

People are generally concerned with (in)justice and preventing or redressing harm done to victims (Lerner, 1980). However, people are also concerned with maintaining a sense of control, of a "normal" world order where things happen as expected (Proulx et al., 2012). Hence, victims of serious crimes may trigger conflicting feelings and motivations in an observer: On one hand, an observer wishes to help the sufferer; on the other hand, the observer is tempted to pretend the injustice never happened. This is the type of conflict an observer might experience when confronted with a woman who reports she has been raped. However, when an observer is confronted with a *man* who claims to have been raped, additional concerns may come into play. Male rape is not only evidence of an injustice, but it also constitutes an upsetting of familiar societal structures (Cohen, 2014; Sivakumaran, 2005). Social reactions may in this case also demonstrate an observer's need to reestablish familiar gender and victim stereotypes (Mulder et al., 2020).

Rape as a crime is, of course, inherently non-normative. First, it is against the law. Second, it occurs in the sexual realm, riddled with taboos and stigmatization (Nussbaum, 2004). However, male sexual victimization may generally be described as more non-normative than female sexual victimization (Kiss et al., 2020). Thus, female sexual victimization by an acquaintance is a *more* "normative" injustice because, while being unjust, it is also recognized as something unfortunately in line with the expected. This notion appears to be confirmed by statistics, considering that the prevalence rate of (attempted) rape of women in the United States (21.3%) is about 8 times higher than that of men (2.6%; Smith et al., 2018), but it also relates to societal (gender) norms. As stated by MacKinnon (1991), "women occupy a disadvantaged status as the *appropriate* victims and targets of sexual aggression" (p. 1302, emphasis added). Male sexual victimization is unjust *and* defies additional normative expectations of what the world should be like. First, male sexual victimization taps into prevalent homophobic attitudes that fear and derogate male–male intimate relationships (Kiss et al., 2020). Second, it defies heterosexual norms that portray the male body as physically impenetrable (Graham, 2006). Third, it defies the stereotypical cultural portrayal of a (real) man as someone who cannot be a victim (Cohen, 2014).

Importantly, although many male victims of sexual assault identify as heterosexual, male sexual victimization is quickly framed as related to homosexuality (Sivakumaran, 2005). Whereas both perpetrator and victim are involved in male-on-male rape, only the victim transgresses the ideal of a man as active rather than passive. Hence, although observers with homophobic attitudes tend to engage in more male victim blaming (S. White & Yamawaki, 2009), reactions to male victims may additionally be explained by broader moral or normative concerns uncaptured in current scales measuring homonegativity.

Moral Foundations and Reactions to Rape Victims

Different moral concerns thought to underlie people's engagements with others and the world have been formulated in Moral Foundations Theory (MFT; Graham et al., 2009). As Milesi et al. (2020) describe, MFT may be considered "a *descriptive* framework of the different standards people may rely upon intuitively when they consider whether something is morally right or wrong" (p. 121). The MFT features five moral foundations: care, fairness, loyalty, authority, and purity. The first two foundations have been summarized as "individualizing values" and the latter three as "binding values" (Graham et al., 2009). While individualizing values are concerned with (preventing or redressing) harm and suffering, binding values "focus on prohibiting behavior that *destabilizes groups and relational ties*: disloyalty, disobedience to authority, and behavior reflecting spiritual and sexual impurity" (Niemi & Young, 2016, p. 13, emphasis added). Individualizing values, then, seem positively associated with empathic concerns for victims of violence. Binding values, on the contrary, tap into people's need for the world to consist of structured, predictable events and relations, and thus resemble normative concerns. Binding values are positively associated with rape myth acceptance (RMA), whereas individualizing values are negatively associated with RMA (Barnett & Hilz, 2018; Milesi et al., 2020). Recent studies have also indicated that binding values predict victim blame and negative judgments of victims (Milesi et al., 2020; Niemi & Young, 2016). According to Milesi and colleagues (2020), "this raises the possibility that rape cases are judged with reference to a range of intuitive criteria of moral approval or disapproval that go beyond those of care and justice" (p. 113).

Because male sexual victimization is more non-normative than female sexual victimization, we expect binding values to explain a greater proportion of variance in reactions to male victims. Negative reactions to male victimization may result from group loyalty and hierarchy concerns because male victimization upsets the traditional gender hierarchy. Previous research has demonstrated, for instance, that endorsement of traditional gender role attitudes correlates with RMA and rape minimization in acquaintance rape (e.g., S. White & Yamawaki, 2009). Male victimization may also more strongly trigger purity concerns because this type of victimization involves the sexual taboo of homosexual contact, even if it is nonconsensual (Sivakumaran, 2005).

The Current Study

Our research addresses a wider array of possible reactions toward victims of sexual violence, including blaming, derogation, distancing, and emotional responses to the target person. We mostly expect the perceived non-normativity of male sexual victimization to evoke more negative observer reactions, although the normative framework available for female victimization may in contrast facilitate reactions of blame toward female targets. In studies examining the sensitive topic of social reactions to victims, it is especially important to include measures that are less susceptible to socially desirable responses. In Study 1, we used a Single Target Implicit Association Test (ST-IAT; Bluemke & Friese, 2008) to measure implicit victim derogation, and in

Study 2, we used a pictorial measure (van Bakel et al., 2013) to assess psychological distancing from the victim. The current research also builds on recent studies that have demonstrated causal relations between moral concerns and (negative) reactions toward victims (Milesi et al., 2020; Niemi & Young, 2016) by exploring whether moral concerns differentially influence reactions toward male versus female victims of sexual violence. We hypothesized that

> **Hypothesis 1 (H1):** Participants (a) experience more negative emotions toward victims than non-victims, (b) derogate victims more than non-victims, and (c) distance themselves more from victims than from non-victims.
> **Hypothesis 2 (H2):** Participants (a) experience more negative emotions toward male victims than female victims, (b) derogate male victims more than female victims, (c) distance themselves more from male victims than from female victims, and (d) blame male victims *less* than female victims.
> **Hypothesis 3 (H3):** The more participants endorse binding values, the more they (a) experience negative emotions toward victims, (b) derogate victims, (c) distance themselves from victims, and (d) blame victims.
> **Hypothesis 4 (H4):** The correlations predicted in H3 are more pronounced for male than female victims.

Study 1

Method

Participants and Design

An a priori power analysis (using G*Power; Faul et al., 2007) for a repeated-measures multivariate analysis of variance (MANOVA) with four levels in the between-subjects factor and two within-subjects levels yielded a required sample size of $N = 126$ to detect a medium-sized effect ($f = 0.30$) with a power of .80 at an alpha level of .05. Participants were recruited in the main hall of a German university and had various educational backgrounds. They received a chocolate bar for their participation and had a chance to win a voucher of 20 euros. After excluding data from 10 participants who either failed to answer the manipulation check correctly (five cases) or had problems understanding the material (five cases), the final sample consisted of 132 participants (50 male, 82 female) with a mean age of 22.55 years ($SD = 7.01$; range = 18–69). A total of 12.0% indicated they had been a victim of sexual violence at some point in their life, and 30.1% said they knew someone close to them who had been a victim of sexual violence. Male and female participants were randomly assigned to either a female-target condition ($n = 66$) or a male-target condition ($n = 66$), with number of participants per cell ranging from 20 to 46. An additional, within-subjects factor was created by having participants complete the dependent measures twice, once before (T1) and once after (T2) learning about the target's victimization.

Procedure and Materials

The experiment took approximately 30 min and was run by the software Inquisit 5 (https://www.millisecond.com/). Participants were seated in front of a computer, where they completed several questionnaires and then read a short description of a student (the target) who was either female or male. The description was accompanied by a picture of the target and contained information about the target's major and hobbies. The target had a girlfriend or boyfriend, respectively, which was included to imply that she or he identified as heterosexual. After reading the description, participants completed an ST-IAT measuring implicit positive versus negative associations of the target. Participants then rated the target on a variety of traits and indicated what emotions they felt toward her (him). The study continued by presenting a vignette in which the target was raped by a man whom she or he had met at a party. Following the vignette, participants completed the ST-IAT a second time, rated the target once more on the same traits, indicated again what emotions they felt toward the target, and answered items pertaining to victim blame. Participants also indicated what type of violence they had read about, which served as a manipulation check. Last, they answered several demographic questions. The materials used in this study were either originally generated by the authors in German (vignettes, ST-IAT, and most dependent variables) or taken from available German-language instruments (SABA-G and TAGRAS) or translated versions (MFQ; see below for details).

Dependent Variables[1]

The explicit reactions assessed related to expressed emotion, blame, and derogation. Two emotion items (disgust and contempt) were combined to form an index of negative emotions (Pearson's r at T1 = .73), and two items (solidarity and empathy) were combined into positive emotions (Pearson's r at T1 = .60). The response scale for the emotion items went from 0 (*not at all*) to 100 (*completely*). Six items were combined to form a scale of behavioral blame (Cronbach's α = .77), and six items were combined to form a scale of characterological blame (α = .87). Behavioral blame focused on the behavior of the victim, such as "Lukas/Lena could have avoided the situation if (s)he had drunk less alcohol," whereas characterological blame was more generally related to the character of the victim, for instance, "A person less naïve than Lukas/Lena would have been more in control over the situation." The response scale for the blame items went from 1 (*do not agree at all*) to 7 (*completely agree*). Explicit derogation was measured by the ascription of nine traits largely based on the research of Prentice and Carranza (2002). Items were translated by one bilingual person and double-checked by another. Examples of these traits were incompetent, gullible, weak, and untrustworthy (α T1 = .79; response scale from 1 (*not at all*) to 7 (*completely*).

As a measure of implicit derogation, participants completed two ST-IATs during which they were requested to quickly and accurately press the correct key in response to a number of evaluative phrases and words referring to the target ("Lena" or "Lukas"). Examples of positive evaluative phrases were "admire," "attractive," and "pure." Examples of negative evaluative phrases were "nasty," "avoid," and "weird." Words referring to the target included "Lena [Lukas],"

"Student," and "Ms. S. [Mr. S.]." The ST-IAT consisted of five blocks. After a practice block that involved allocating only evaluative phrases, all ST-IATs continued with an inconsistent block that required responding to negative phrases and target person stimuli by pressing the same (right-hand) key of the keyboard and responding to positive phrases by pressing another (left-hand) key. The inconsistent block was followed by a consistent block in which participants responded to positive phrases and target person stimuli by pressing the same key (and to negative phrases by pressing the other key). This was followed by one more inconsistent block and one more consistent block. Participants were required to correct any mistakes they made during the ST-IAT. Final *d* scores were calculated by Inquisit, following the algorithm suggested by Greenwald et al. (2003), with higher scores representing more positive implicit associations of the target. The *d* scores have a theoretical range from −2 (*most negative*) to +2 (*most positive*).

Continuous Predictor Variables

Moral Concerns. A German version of the Moral Foundations Questionnaire (MFQ; Bowman, 2010; Graham et al., 2009) was used to measure participants' scores on the domains of care, authority, and sanctity. Items of the MFQ include "compassion for those who are suffering is the most crucial virtue" (care), "respect for authority is something all children must learn" (authority), and "I would call some acts wrong on the grounds that they are unnatural" (sanctity). The response scale ranged from 1 to 7, indicating *not at all relevant* to *extremely relevant*, or *strongly disagree* to *strongly agree*, respectively. A principal component analysis indicated support for a two-component scale. All items that mapped at least .5 onto one of the two components were retained, meaning that four items were dropped. This resulted in a six-item scale of care items, congruent with that originally formulated in the MFQ30 (α = .67), and an eight-item scale representing binding values (α = .76).

Attitudes toward Homosexuality. Participants' attitudes toward male homosexuality were measured with the SABA-G scale (Preuss et al., 2020). This scale consists of five scenarios that ask the participant to imagine, for instance, seeing a homosexual couple kissing in public. For each scenario, participants indicated how comfortable they would feel in the situation (1, *very uncomfortable*, to 7, *very comfortable*), and how likely they would be to avoid that situation (1, *very unlikely*, to 7, *very likely*). All items were combined into one scale (α = .91) and coded so that higher scores indicate more negative attitudes toward gay men.

Gender Role Attitudes. The Traditional-Antitraditional Gender Role Attitudes Scale (TAGRAS; Klocke & Lamberty, 2015) was used to measure participants' attitudes toward gender roles. Participants indicated what they thought of a range of behaviors, such as playing soccer or becoming a hairdresser, when performed by a man versus a woman; response scale from −2, *very bad*, to +2, *very good*. Difference scores were calculated as suggested by Klocke and Lamberty (2015), yielding a variable that ranged from −1.27 to 2.73. Negative scores indicated antitraditional

attitudes, positive scores indicated traditional attitudes, and (near) zero scores indicated egalitarian attitudes (α = .91).

Results and Discussion

Reactions to Victims and Non-victims

To test H1 and H2, a repeated-measures MANOVA was conducted with target gender and participant gender as between-subjects variables and victim status as the within-subjects variable. Positive emotions, negative emotions, explicit derogation, and implicit derogation were included as dependent variables. A second MANOVA included target gender and participant gender as independent variables and behavioral and characterological blame as dependent variables. Because participants' age and their own or close others' experience of sexual victimization were unrelated to the combined dependent variables, they were not included as covariates. Correlations and descriptive statistics are presented in Table 1. There were no missing data points.

The first MANOVA indicated significant overall multivariate effects across the dependent variables for victim status, $F(4, 125) = 27.75, p < .001$, Wilks's $\Lambda = .53$, $\eta_p^2 = .47$, target gender; $F(4, 125) = 4.12, p = .004$, Wilks's $\Lambda = .88$, $\eta_p^2 = .12$; and participant gender, $F(4, 125) = 2.73, p = .032$, Wilks's $\Lambda = .92$, $\eta_p^2 = .08$. In addition, a significant interaction effect was found between victim status and participant gender, $F(4, 125) = 2.95, p = .023$, Wilks's $\Lambda = .91$, $\eta_p^2 = .09$. All other interaction effects were not significant, $p > .061$. The MANOVA on blame indicated a significant main effect of participant gender, $F(2, 127) = 7.38, p = .001$, Wilks's $\Lambda = .90$, $\eta_p^2 = .10$, though not of target gender, $p = .134$, as well as an interaction between target gender and participant gender, $F(2, 127) = 3.16, p = .046$, Wilks's $\Lambda = .95$, $\eta_p^2 = .05$.

Emotions. Follow-up univariate analyses of variance (ANOVAs) showed that victim status had a significant effect on both positive emotions, $F(1, 128) = 28.40, p < .001, \eta_p^2 = .18$, and negative emotions, $F(1, 128) = 9.14, p = .003, \eta_p^2 = .07$, indicating that participants expressed more positive and more negative emotions toward targets post-victimization compared with pre-victimization (see Table 1). Target gender also had a significant effect on positive, $F(1, 128) = 4.72, p = .032, \eta_p^2 = .04$, and negative emotions, $F(1, 128) = 4.65, p = .033, \eta_p^2 = .04$. Participants expressed less positive and more negative emotions toward male than female targets (see Table 1). Participant gender had a significant effect on the expression of positive, $F(1, 128) = 4.31, p = .040, \eta_p^2 = .03$, and negative emotions, $F(1, 128) = 5.52, p = .020, \eta_p^2 = .04$. Male participants generally expressed less positive emotions ($M = 58.43$, $SD = 23.73$) and more negative emotions ($M = 9.78$, $SD = 18.77$) toward targets compared with female participants ($M = 64.30$, $SD = 22.19$ and $M = 5.36$, $SD = 11.34$). Results additionally showed an interaction between victim status and participant gender on negative emotions, $F(1, 128) = 9.63, p = .002, \eta_p^2 = .07$, indicating that male participants, but not female participants ($p = .948$), expressed more negative emotions toward the target post-victimization ($M = 12.91$, $SD = 23.62$) than pre-victimization ($M = 6.64$, $SD = 12.11$, $p < .001$).

Table 1

Descriptive Statistics and Correlations of Outcome Variables, Study 1

Variables	Male target T1 M (SD)	Female target T1 M (SD)	Male target T2 M (SD)	Female target T2 M (SD)	Correlations[a] 1	2	3	4	5
1. Positive emotions[b]	54.61 (23.16)	56.73 (24.12)	63.39 (24.46)	73.59 (18.39)	--				
2. Negative emotions[b]	6.84 (12.84)	4.95 (10.96)	10.05 (21.01)	6.29 (12.04)	-.30**	--			
3. Explicit derogation[c]	2.58 (0.58)	2.49 (0.62)	2.86 (0.69)	2.67 (0.72)	-.37**	.47**	--		
4. Implicit derogation[d]	0.28 (0.28)	0.41 (0.27)	0.10 (0.27)	0.25 (0.25)	.06	-.02	-.06	--	
5. Behavioral blame[c]			2.71 (1.23)	2.56 (1.10)	-.26**	.43**	.39**	-.14	--
6. Character blame[c]			2.19 (1.32)	2.02 (1.03)	-.26**	.52**	.45**	.02	.66**

Note. $N = 132$. [a]Correlations between variables at T2. * $p < .05$. ** $p < .01$. [b]scale from 0 to 100; higher numbers mean more emotion; [c]scales from 1 to 7; higher numbers mean more derogation and blame; [d]D scores ranging from -2, most negative, to +2, most positive.

Table 2

Hierarchical Regression of (Difference Scores in) Observer Reactions on Moral Concerns and Control Variables, Study 1

	Positive emotions	Negative emotions	Explicit derogation	Behavioral blame	Character blame
Step 1					
Target gender[a]	-.08	.01	.04	-.05	-.01
Participant gender[a]	-.01	.29**	.14	.03	.18*
Gender traditionality[b]	.01	-.10	.05	-.07	.10
Homonegativity[c]	-.05	.07	.00	-.13	.04
Step 2					
Individualizing values	.00	.13	.09	-.18*	-.10
Binding values	-.38**	.45***	.29**	.51***	.46***

Note: Standardized regression coefficients (β) are displayed. †$p < .10$, *$p < .05$, **$p < .01$, ***$p < .001$. [a] female =0, male = 1; [b] higher scores mean more traditional gender attitudes; [c]higher scores mean more homonegativity.

Derogation. Univariate ANOVAs also showed that victim status had a significant effect on both explicit derogation, $F(1, 128) = 26.47, p < .001, \eta_p^2 = .17$, and implicit derogation, $F(1, 128) = 35.41, p < .001, \eta_p^2 = .22$. Participants attributed more negative traits to targets post-victimization than pre-victimization and showed a greater negative implicit bias toward them (see Table 1). In addition, target gender had a significant effect on both explicit derogation, $F(1, 128) = 3.93, p = .050, \eta_p^2 = .03$, and implicit derogation, $F(1, 128) = 9.76, p = .002, \eta_p^2 = .07$. Participants attributed more negative traits to, and showed a greater negative implicit bias toward, male targets compared with female targets (see Table 1). No effect was found of participant gender on explicit or implicit derogation, both $p > .318$. However, results showed a two-way interaction between victim status and participant gender on explicit derogation, $F(1, 128) = 4.10, p = .045, \eta_p^2 = .03$. Pairwise comparisons indicated that all participants attributed more negative traits to targets post-victimization than pre-victimization, but this effect was greater for male participants ($M^{Difference} = 0.370, p < .001$, 95% confidence interval [CI] = [0.21, 0.53]) than for female participants ($M^{Difference} = 0.161, p = .012$, 95% CI = [0.04, 0.29]).

Blame. Participant gender had an effect on attributions of behavioral blame, $F(1, 128) = 4.91, p = .028, \eta_p^2 = .04$, and characterological blame, $F(1, 128) = 14.78, p < .001, \eta_p^2 = .10$. Male participants blamed the victim's behavior ($M = 2.89, SD = 1.10$) and character ($M = 2.54, SD = 1.41$) more than did female participants ($M = 2.48, SD = 1.19$; $M = 1.84, SD = 0.95$). In addition, an interaction effect was found between target gender and participant gender on characterological blame, $F(1, 128) = 5.88, p = .017, \eta_p^2 = .04$, indicating that male participants, but not female participants ($p = .745$), attributed significantly more characterological blame to male victims ($M = 3.08, SD = 1.67$) compared with female victims ($M = 2.18, SD = 1.08, p = .006$).

To summarize, support was found for H1. Although participants understandably expressed more sympathy for victims, they also reported more negative emotions and were more likely to derogate victims. No substantial support was found for H2, as no interactions were found between victim status and target gender. Thus, although male targets were generally met with more negative reactions than female targets, this was not something particular to victimization. The only difference between male and female victims was found in the attribution of characterological blame. Contrary to our hypothesis, the character of male victims was blamed more than that of female victims, though only by male participants.

The Influence of Moral Concerns, Homonegativity, and Gender Role Attitudes

Hierarchical multiple regression analyses were used to test H3 and H4, assessing how binding values and individualizing values influenced reactions to victims. The influence of traditional gender role attitudes, homonegativity (both centered around the mean), target gender, and participant gender were entered at Step 1 as control variables. Binding values and care values (each centered around the mean) were entered at Step 2 (see Table 2). To protect against capitalizing on chance (analogously to the MANOVAs above), we first tested the effect of these

variables on a single dependent variable in which all the standardized dependent variables were aggregated. Both the model at Step 1, $R^2 = .19$, $F = 8.47$, $p < .001$, and the model at Step 2, $R^2 = .41$, F change (2, 125) = 6.27, $p = .003$, explained considerable proportions of variance. We then proceeded with univariate multiple regression analyses per dependent variable. For variables measured twice, difference scores that subtracted measurement at T1 from measurement at T2 served as dependent variables.[2]

Positive Emotions. Whereas the model at Step 1 did not explain a significant proportion of variance in expressed positive emotions toward the victim, $F = 1.91$, $p = .113$, the model at Step 2 did, F change (2, 125) = 6.27, $p = .003$. Binding values served as the only significant predictor ($\beta = -.38$, $p = .001$), with higher endorsement of binding values predicting less positive emotions toward victims.

Negative Emotions. The model at Step 1 explained 4.8% of the variance in negative emotions toward the victim, $F = 2.67$, $p = .035$. The model at Step 2 explained 14.7% more variance, F change (2, 125) = 11.86, $p < .001$. In the final model, male participant gender ($\beta = .29$, $p = .002$) and endorsement of binding values ($\beta = .45$, $p < .001$) significantly predicted more negative emotions toward the victim.

Behavioral Blame. The model at Step 1 explained 14.1% of the variance in behavioral blame, $F = 6.28$, $p < .001$, whereas the model at Step 2 explained 29.8%, F change (2, 125) = 15.16, $p < .001$. In the final model, care values negatively predicted ($\beta = -.18$, $p = .036$) and binding values positively predicted ($\beta = .51$, $p < .001$) behavioral blame of victims.

Characterological Blame. The model at Step 1 explained 18.3% of the variance in characterological blame, $F = 8.31$, $p < .001$, whereas the model at Step 2 explained 30.4%, F change (2, 125) = 12.07, $p < .001$. In this model, male participant gender ($\beta = .18$, $p = .039$) and binding values ($\beta = .46$, $p < .001$) significantly predicted characterological blame.

Explicit Derogation. The model at Step 1 explained 4.2% of the variance in the attribution of negative traits to victims, $F = 2.45$, $p = .050$. The variance explained at Step 2 was 9.2%, F change (2, 125) = 4.45, $p = .014$. Binding values were the only significant predictor of negative traits assigned to victims ($\beta = .29$, $p = .009$). Although the model at Step 3 did not explain a significantly larger proportion of the variance ($p = .10$), it is notable that in this model the only significant predictor was the interaction between binding values and target gender ($\beta = .26$, $p = .033$). The endorsement of binding values was hence likely a stronger predictor of the derogation of male victims than the derogation of female victims.

Implicit Derogation. None of the models significantly predicted the differences in ST-IAT scores toward targets pre- and post-victimization, all $p > .114$.

Hence, support was found for H3. Binding values were frequently the strongest predictor of reactions toward victims, whereas gender traditionality and homonegativity explained little variance in the dependent variables. However, no substantial support was found for H4, which stated that binding values would be a stronger predictor of reactions toward male victims than toward female victims.

Study 2

In Study 2, we again tested whether male and female rape victims received qualitatively different reactions from participants and the extent to which concerns for normativity (differentially) influenced those reactions. This time, data were collected from a larger and more varied sample of British participants. In addition, all moral foundations were included in the prediction of reactions to targets.

Method

Participants and Design

A power analysis for a MANOVA with four levels and nine dependent variables was conducted using G*Power (Faul et al., 2007). This yielded a required sample size of $N = 356$ to detect a small to medium-sized effect ($f = 0.15$) with a power of .80 at an alpha level of .05. Data were collected on the UK-based online platform Prolific Academic, which is geared toward (academic) research and includes elaborate data quality checks (https://www.prolific.co/). This platform provides a relatively naïve and diverse sample of participants (see Peer et al., 2017). After excluding data from six participants because they answered the manipulation check incorrectly (three) or because the questionnaire ended prematurely due to malfunctioning (three), the final sample consisted of 421 participants (206 male, 212 female, three nonbinary) with a mean age of 36.90 years ($SD = 13.04$; range = 18–81). Of the sample, 18.9% indicated they had been a victim of sexual violence at some point in their life (6.6% preferred not to answer), and 33.5% said someone close to them had been victimized by sexual violence (3.2% preferred not to answer). Participants took approximately 12 to 14 min to complete the study and received £1.50 for their participation.

Procedure and Materials

Study 2 resembled Study 1, but victim status was now varied between participants. In addition, after preliminary tests, participant age and participants' experience of sexual victimization (either own experience or that of close other) were included as (control) variables. This yielded a 2 (target victim status: victimization vs. no victimization) × 2 (target gender: male vs. female) × 2 (participant gender: male vs. female) × 2 (experience of victimization: yes vs. no)

between-subjects design. The number of participants per cell ranged from 14 to 35. All participants read the target description, but only participants in the victimization conditions read the rape scenario. (For an example of the vignettes, see Appendix D.) Verbal and pictorial distancing items replaced the explicit and implicit victim derogation items. Different questionnaires were used to measure homonegativity and traditional gender role attitudes, and the complete 30-item MFQ was included.

Dependent Variables

The explicit reactions assessed included expressed emotion, blame, and distancing. Sympathy and pity were combined as positive emotions toward the target (Pearson's $r = .73$), whereas contempt and disgust were combined as negative emotions (Pearson's $r = .44$). The response scale for the emotion items went from 0 (*not at all*) to 100 (*completely*). Attributions of blame were measured only in the victim conditions, with five items each assessing behavioral blame ($\alpha = .80$) and characterological blame ($\alpha = .90$). The response scale for the blame items went from 1 (*completely disagree*) to 7 (*completely agree*). Distancing was measured verbally by seven items ($\alpha = .93$); five items were taken from Martin et al. (2000), and two were added that referred to the description participants had read about the target, for example, "How willing would you be to employ Lucas [Lisa] as your babysitter." The response scale ranged from 1 (*definitely unwilling*) to 7 (*definitely willing*). Distancing was also measured by an adaptation of the Pictorial Representation of Illness and Self Measure (van Bakel et al., 2013): Participants indicated how close they felt to the target by dragging a disk resembling Lisa/Lucas closer to or further away from disks representing the participant himself or herself and their life. Closeness was measured by the relative distance between the centers of the disks resembling the participant and the target.

Continuous Predictor Variables

Moral Concerns. The MFQ30 (Graham et al., 2009) was used to measure participants' scores on care, fairness, loyalty, authority, and sanctity. Care and fairness items were grouped as individualizing values ($\alpha = .79$) and all loyalty, authority, and sanctity items were combined as binding values ($\alpha = .90$). The response scale ranged from 1 to 7, indicating *not at all relevant* to *extremely relevant* and *strongly disagree* to *strongly agree*, respectively.

Attitudes toward Homosexuality. To measure attitudes toward male homosexuality, the Modern Homonegativity Scale–Gay men (MHS-G; Morrison & Morrison, 2002) was used. The scale consisted of 12 items ($\alpha = .93$); response scale from 1 (*strongly disagree*) to 7 (*strongly agree*). Item examples are "Gay men should stop shoving their lifestyle down other people's throats" and "Gay men still need to protest for equal rights" (reversed). Higher scores indicated more negative attitudes toward gay men.

Gender Role Attitudes. The Social Roles Questionnaire (SRQ; Baber & Tucker, 2006) was used to measure participants' gender role attitudes. The scale consisted of 13 items ($\alpha = .86$); response scale from 1 (*strongly disagree*) to 7 (*strongly agree*). Examples are "Men are more sexual than women" and "Tasks around the house should not be assigned by sex" (reversed). Higher scores indicated more traditional gender role attitudes.

Results and Discussion

Treatment of Missing Values

Nineteen participants chose not to indicate whether they had any experience of victimization; these cases were thus not included in analyses that featured victimization experiences as an independent variable (see below).[3] Replies to both disgust and contempt were missing for two participants; hence, these cases were excluded from data analyses including negative emotions. One participant did not reply to one of the positive emotion items, so the other item response served as the positive emotion score.

Reactions to Victims and Non-victims

To test H1 and H2, a four-way multivariate analysis of covariance (MANCOVA) was conducted that included victim status, target gender, and participant gender, and experience of victimization as independent variables, and positive emotion, negative emotion, verbal distancing, and pictorial distancing as dependent variables. A three-way MANCOVA was also conducted including target gender, participant gender, and experience of victimization as independent variables, and behavioral and characterological blame as dependent variables. Participant age was included in both analyses as covariate; hence, in the remainder of this section, covariate-adjusted means and standard errors will be reported. Correlations and descriptive statistics by condition are presented in Table 3.

Table 3

Descriptive Statistics and Correlations of Outcome Variables, Study 2

Variables	Male non-victim *M* (*SE*)	Female non-victim *M* (*SE*)	Male victim *M* (*SE*)	Female victim *M* (*SE*)	Correlations 1	2	3	4	5
1. Positive emotions[a]	13.96 (1.92)	14.09 (1.93)	77.03 (1.95)	75.64 (1.98)	--				
2. Negative emotions[a]	5.85 (1.80)	4.63 (1.81)	10.54 (1.83)	14.37 (1.86)	.20**	--			
3. Verbal distancing[b]	2.62 (0.12)	2.35 (0.12)	2.26 (0.13)	2.23 (0.13)	-.21**	.16**	--		
4. Pictorial distancing[c]	19.05 (0.84)	16.80 (0.84)	19.57 (0.85)	18.89 (0.86)	.01	-.10*	.26**	--	
5. Behavioral blame[b]			3.33 (0.13)	2.91 (0.13)	-.20**	.28**	.43**	.26**	--
6. Character blame[b]			2.74 (0.15)	2.74 (0.15)	-.15*	.33**	.45**	.16*	.65**

Note. $N = 418$. * $p < .05$. ** $p < .01$. [a]scale from 0 to 100; higher numbers mean more emotion; [b]scales from 1 to 7; higher numbers mean greater distance and greater blame, respectively; [c]distance of target to self in percentage.

The four-way MANCOVA indicated significant overall multivariate effects across the dependent variables for victim status, $F(4, 378) = 266.61$, $p < .001$, Wilks's $\Lambda = .26$, $\eta_p^2 = .74$, and experience of victimization, $F(4, 378) = 3.33$, $p = .011$, Wilks's $\Lambda = .97$, $\eta_p^2 = .03$. In addition, a significant interaction effect was found between victim status and experience of victimization, $F(4, 378) = 3.08$, $p = .016$, Wilks's $\Lambda = .97$, $\eta_p^2 = .03$. All other multivariate effects were not significant, $p > .065$. The three-way MANCOVA on blame indicated a significant main effect of target gender, $F(2, 189) = 4.26$, $p = .015$, Wilks's $\Lambda = .96$, $\eta_p^2 = .04$; participant gender, $F(2, 189) = 8.86$, $p < .001$, Wilks's $\Lambda = .91$, $\eta_p^2 = .09$; and experience of victimization, $F(2, 189) = 3.29$, $p = .039$, Wilks's $\Lambda = .97$, $\eta_p^2 = .03$. Participant age also had a significant effect on the combined dependent variables, $F(2, 189) = 4.35$, $p = .014$, Wilks's $\Lambda = .96$, $\eta_p^2 = .04$. No significant interaction effects were found, $p = .154$.

Emotions. Follow-up univariate ANOVAs yielded significant main effects of victim status on positive emotions, $F(1, 381) = 1{,}026.18$, $p < .001$, $\eta_p^2 = .73$, and negative emotions, $F(1, 381) = 15.65$, $p < .001$, $\eta_p^2 = .04$. Participants expressed more positive emotions toward victims ($M = 76.33$, $SE = 1.39$) than non-victims ($M = 14.03$, $SE = 1.36$), but they also expressed more negative emotions toward victims ($M = 12.46$, $SE = 1.31$) than non-victims ($M = 5.24$, $SE = 1.28$). Experience of victimization had no effect on the expression of positive emotions toward targets, $p = .724$, but did have an effect on negative emotions expressed toward targets, $F(1, 381) = 11.17$, $p = .001$, $\eta_p^2 = .03$. Those who had no experience of sexual victimization, either of self or close other, generally expressed more negative emotions to targets ($M = 11.95$, $SE = 1.18$ compared with $M = 5.75$, $SE = 1.41$). Interactions between victim status and experience of victimization were not significant, both $p > .300$.

Distancing. No significant univariate effects were found for victim status on verbal distancing, $p = .052$, or pictorial distancing, $p = .124$, nor were significant effects found for experience of victimization on verbal distancing, $p = .061$, or pictorial distancing, $p = .853$. However, a significant interaction between victim status and experience of victimization on pictorial distancing, $F(1, 381) = 11.17$, $p = .001$, $\eta_p^2 = .03$, indicated that participants who had no experience of victimization distanced themselves more from victims ($M = 20.66$, $SE = 0.78$) than from non-victims ($M = 16.67$, $SE = 0.76$). No such interaction was found for verbal distancing, $p = .325$.

Blame. Target gender had a significant univariate effect on behavioral blame, $F(1, 190) = 5.12$, $p < .001$, $\eta_p^2 = .03$, but not on characterological blame, $p = 1.000$. The behavior of male victims was blamed more ($M = 3.33$, $SE = 0.13$) than the behavior of female victims ($M = 2.91$, $SE = 0.13$). In addition, participant gender had a significant effect on both behavioral blame, $F(1, 190) = 14.94$, $p < .001$, $\eta_p^2 = .07$, and characterological blame, $F(1, 190) = 14.15$, $p < .001$, $\eta_p^2 = .07$. Male participants were more likely to blame victims ($M = 3.47$, $SE = 0.13$ and $M =$

3.15, *SE* = 0.16) than female participants were (*M* = 2.76, *SE* = 0.13; *M* = 2.34, *SE* = 0.15). Finally, experience of victimization had a significant effect on behavioral blame, $F(1, 190) = 5.73$, $p = .018$, $\eta_p^2 = .03$, but not on characterological blame, $p = .433$. Those who had no experience of victimization were more inclined to blame the behavior of victims (*M* = 3.34, *SE* = 0.12) than those who had experience of victimization (*M* = 2.90, *SE* = 0.14).

Hence, partial support was found for H1. While participants expressed more positive emotions, they also expressed more negative emotions toward victims. Participants with no victimization experiences also distanced themselves more from victims, though not verbally. However, H2 was not supported. First, target gender did not have a significant influence on emotional and distancing reactions. Second, where blame was expected to be a more prominent reaction to female victims, the opposite pattern was found with participants blaming the behavior of male victims more. An interesting and unexpected finding was the influence of experience of victimization, with participants who had had such experiences generally displaying more positive reactions to targets than those who did not.

The Influence of Moral Concerns, Homonegativity, and Gender Role Attitudes

To test H3 and H4, regression analyses were used as in Study 1 (see Table 4). To test the overall effect of the independent variables on the combined dependent variables, we again aggregated all dependent variables into one variable. Victim status, target gender, participant gender, participant age, experience of victimization, gender traditionality, and homonegativity were entered in the model at Step 1 as control variables. Binding values and individualizing values were included in Step 2, and the interactions between victim status and binding values, as well as between victim status and individualizing values, were included in Step 3. Both the model at Step 1, $R^2 = .33$, $F\ (1, 390) = 28.87$, $p < .001$, and the model at Step 3, $R^2 = .38$, F change $(2, 386) = 16.25$, $p < .001$, explained a significant proportion of variance. In a second analysis, data were split by victim status, and interactions between moral concerns and target gender were entered at Step 3. The interactions between moral concerns and target gender were not significant for either group, $p > .534$, and will not be further discussed.

Table 4

Hierarchical Regression of Observer Reactions on Moral Concerns and Control Variables, Study 2

	Positive emotions	Negative emotions	Verbal distancing	Pictorial distancing	Behavioral blame	Character blame
Step 1						
Victim status[a]	.86***	.21***	-.09*	.10*		
Target gender[b]	.02	-.04	.05	.05	.16**	-.02
Participant gender[b]	.01	.03	.08	-.02	.22**	.22**
Gender traditionality[c]	.06	.08	.11†	-.06	.02	.20*
Homonegativity[d]	-.09*	.05	.25***	.21**	.32***	.33***
Age	.03	-.16**	-.22***	-.13**	.05	
Experience victimization	.02	.11*	.05	.07	.07	
Step 2						
Individualizing values	.00	.05	-.02	.09	-.06	
Binding values	.04	.04	-.25**	-.41***	.22**	
Step 3						
Indiv. values*Victim status	.07†	-.06	-.03	-.03		
Binding values*Victim status	-.09*	.22**	.34***	.24**		

Note: Standardized regression coefficients (β) are displayed. †$p < .10$, *$p < .05$, **$p < .01$, ***$p < .001$. [a]non-victim = 0, victim = 1; [b] female = 0, male = 1; [c] higher scores mean more traditional gender attitudes; [d]higher scores mean more homonegativity.

Positive Emotions. Repeating the regression model for individual dependent variables, we found that the model at Step 1 explained 73.5% of the variance in positive emotions toward targets, $F = 158.84$, $p < .001$. The model at Step 2 did not explain additional variance, $p = .243$, but the model at Step 3 did, F change (2, 388) = 3.74, $p = .025$. In the final model, victim status positively predicted and homonegativity negatively predicted positive emotions (see Table 4). A significant interaction between binding values and victim status ($\beta = -.09$, $p = .020$) indicated that the influence of binding values on positive emotions was significantly more negative in response to victims compared with non-victims ($\beta = .04$, $p = .339$). Although the interaction between individualizing values and victim status was not significant ($\beta = .07$, $p = .082$), it pointed to an opposite trend.

Negative Emotions. The model at Step 1 explained 10.4% of the variance in negative emotions toward targets, $F = 7.61$, $p < .001$. The models at Step 2 and at Step 3 explained significantly more variance, F change (2, 388) = 5.43, $p = .005$ and F change (2, 386) = 5.32, $p = .005$. In the final model, younger participants and those who had not experienced victimization reported more negative emotions toward targets (see Table 4). In addition, victim status ($\beta = .21$, $p < .001$) and the interaction between binding values and victim status ($\beta = .22$, $p = .001$) significantly predicted negative emotions toward targets. Binding values more strongly predicted the expression of negative emotions toward victims than toward non-victims ($\beta = .04$, $p = .598$).

Behavioral Blame. The model at Step 1 explained 34.2% of the variance in behavioral blame, $F = 18.14$, $p < .001$, whereas the total variance explained by the model at Step 2 was 38.6%, F change (2, 190) = 3.72, $p = .026$. In the final model, male participant gender ($\beta = .22$, $p = .001$), male target gender ($\beta = .16$, $p = .006$), homonegativity ($\beta = .32$, $p < .001$), and binding values ($\beta = .22$, $p = .007$) positively predicted behavioral blame of victims.

Characterological Blame. Whereas the model at Step 1 explained a significant proportion of variance (28.4%) in characterological blame, F (6, 192) = 14.07, $p < .001$, the model at Step 2 was no better at predicting variance in characterological blame, $p = .262$. In the final model, male participant gender ($\beta = .22$, $p = .001$), gender traditionality ($\beta = .20$, $p = .017$), and homonegativity ($\beta = .33$, $p < .001$) positively predicted characterological blame.

Verbal Distancing. The model at Step 1 explained 15.1% of the variance in verbal distancing, $F = 11.18$, $p < .001$. Whereas the model at Step 2 did not explain more variance, $p = .539$, the model at Step 3 did, F change (2, 388) = 13.35, $p < .001$. In this model, victim status ($\beta = -.09$, $p = .043$), participant age ($\beta = -.22$, $p < .001$), and binding values ($\beta = -.25$, $p = .001$) negatively predicted verbal distancing, whereas homonegativity ($\beta = .25$, $p < .001$) positively predicted distancing. An interaction between binding values and victim status ($\beta = .34$, $p < .001$)

indicated that whereas binding values predicted closeness to non-victims, they predicted distancing from victims.

Pictorial Distancing. The model at Step 1 explained 2.7% of the variance in negative emotions toward targets, $F = 2.60, p = .013$. The models at Steps 2 and 3 explained significantly more variance, F change $(2, 390) = 7.10, p = .001$ and F change $(2, 388) = 5.76, p = .003$. In the final model, victim status ($\beta = .10, p = .050$) and homonegativity ($\beta = .21, p = .002$) positively predicted, and participant age ($\beta = -.13, p = .009$) and binding values negatively predicted distancing ($\beta = -.41, p < .001$). An interaction between binding values and victim status ($\beta = .24, p = .001$) again indicated that whereas binding values predicted closeness to non-victims, they in contrast predicted distancing from victims.

Hence, in support of H3, binding values predicted distancing from and negative emotions toward victims compared with non-victims, as well as predicting behavioral blame. However, failing to support H4, binding values did not serve as a stronger predictor of reactions toward male victims than toward female victims.

General Discussion

Summary of Findings

In both studies, results largely indicated that people reacted more negatively to victims than to non-victims. These negative reactions extended beyond blaming, to include derogation, distancing, and the expression of negative emotions. In contrast to our hypotheses, hardly any differentiation was found in negative responses to male compared with female victims. In fact, target gender was much less influential in reactions to victims than participant gender (Study 1) or participants' own experience of sexual victimization (Study 2).

With respect to moral concerns, results demonstrated that binding values regularly influenced reactions toward targets, whereas individualizing values rarely did. Binding values had differential effects on reactions toward victims compared with non-victims. Whereas binding values generally had a positive (or no) influence on participants' reactions to non-victims, they mostly had a negative influence on participants' reactions to victims. For instance, binding values predicted closeness to non-victims, but predicted distance from victims. However, moral concerns did not have a differential effect on the reactions toward male versus female victims. Notably, neither homonegativity nor gender traditionality explained variance in the outcome variables of Study 1, whereas homonegativity frequently served as significant predictor in Study 2 (in accordance with S. White & Yamawaki, 2009). Possibly, the more diverse sample in Study 2 included more participants with negative attitudes toward persons who do not conform to gender stereotypes. Students generally report low levels of homonegativity and gender traditionality, and hence these variables may explain less variance in a student sample. Moral concerns may thus at

times be preferred over more direct predictors such as homophobia and rape myths to explain reactions to victims.

Implications

Reactions to Victims

Previous research has made few attempts to examine whether reactions such as blame, derogation, and distancing reflect different types of underlying meaning-making processes, and/or are elicited by different stimuli (for a review regarding the latter, see Hafer & Rubel, 2015). Based on research relating to (gendered) rape myths (Javaid, 2015a; Reitz-Krueger et al., 2017), we hypothesized that non-normative instances of victimization, in this case the rape of a male victim, would elicit different reactions from more stereotypical cases of victimization. Assuming that people are most likely to engage in “strategies that are less effortful or more available” (Hafer & Rubel, 2015, p. 76), we expected that a more elaborate sense-making framework for female victimization would promote reactions of blame, whereas the absence of such a framework would foster reactions of avoidance and derogation. However, we found neither clear differentiation between negative reactions nor in response to victim gender. One tentative explanation is that reactions to male compared with female victims may not differ substantially. This is in contrast to a number of previous studies (e.g., Schneider et al., 1994; contrastingly, Ayala et al., 2018), although in line with the accumulative inconsistencies of these previous findings. Perhaps different reactions found toward male and female victims sometimes indicate different reactions to male and female targets in general. What is more, perceived gender differences may largely be subordinate to an overarching conception of victimhood. In line with this argument, Mulder et al. (2020) found that sexual victimization led observers to perceive victims as more feminine. In the current study, target gender and respondent gender only became significant predictors when victim status was excluded from the analysis. McKimmie et al. (2014) have made a similar suggestion. In their study, observers evaluated allegations of sexual assault according to a hierarchy of prototypicality, where gender stereotypes only played a significant role in judgment forming when the crime and the victim’s behavior did not correspond to respondents’ normative expectations.

Alternatively, our findings may suggest there are no significant qualitative differences between the various (negative) observer reactions to victims, but that they are all expressions of one particular sentiment (e.g., Lerner, 1980). Yet we need to entertain the methodological concern that the current design failed to properly allow for distinctions in response strategies. In other words, whereas our hypothesis was based on the idea that no ready-made framework is available to participants when trying to make sense of male rape, the subsequent questions we posed them may have created such a framework for them. In a design where participants receive open questions or give spontaneous responses, we might discover greater differentiation or subtleties in (negative) reactions. To illustrate, using interview methods, Anderson and Doherty (2008) did find that participants employed different metaphors to describe female versus male victimization.

Moral Concerns

Milesi and colleagues (2020) concluded that moral concerns other than that for justice influence people's reactions to victims. The current studies extend this claim by showing that binding values consistently predicted negative reactions to victims of sexual violence more strongly than individualizing values did. In fact, concerns for harm only once served as a significant predictor. The predictive value of moral concerns elucidates the way in which people react and connect to others who have suffered severe misfortunes. Potentially, people do not need to score particularly high on fairness and care concerns to understand rape as an unjust experience. However, people's concerns about *what binds them* in society may complicate reactions to victims (Niemi & Young, 2016). Taking this into account, sexual violence awareness campaigns that target secondary victimization may wish not (only) to highlight the suffering and unjustness caused to victims, but also emphasize how these people are valued members of society.

Limitations

Studies 1 and 2 differed in several important aspects. Alongside several advantages, the differences in design may also have impeded generalizability because at times it was unclear to what element inconsistencies should be attributed. Notably, the studies included very different samples. In addition, different questionnaires were used to measure attitudes toward homosexuality and gender roles. It is possible that these did not entirely measure the same constructs. In the second study, for instance, homonegativity predicted much of the variance of reactions toward targets, not just in response to *male* victims. It is possible that this questionnaire to a certain extent measured negative reactions toward 'attention-seeking' minority groups, not limited to gay men. Furthermore, Study 1 partly included a within-subjects variation, whereas Study 2 used a fully between-subjects design. We can only speculate about the possibility of such designs having different effects on observer reactions. In Study 1, for instance, participants may have felt that they already knew the target fairly well, before discovering that this person had been victimized. This change of image may have produced different effects than when a person is immediately introduced as a victim.

Considerations of Diversity

Although it was not the focus of our research, our findings and the body of knowledge we draw upon have implications for issues of diversity. This applies quite explicitly to the diversity of targets; thus, a person's gender may determine not only his or her risk of being sexually assaulted, but also the risk of being subjected to (different types of) secondary victimization. Furthermore, (perceived) sexual orientation, another facet of diversity, strongly comes into play in cases of male-on-male sexual aggression. Finally, we found that especially binding moral foundations, which are shaped by a person's social identity, affect the perception of victims. This suggests that future research on observers' socioeconomic status, ethnic or national background (cf. Milesi et al., 2020),

religion, and culture may enrich our understanding of victim perceptions and their applied implications.

Conclusion

The current research demonstrates that concerns over normativity may at times have a stronger impact on reactions to victims than may concerns over harm and justice. Indeed, whereas normativity concerns may bind us to others in many instances, this clearly depends on who that other is, or what she or he has suffered. Other types of (experimental) designs may be necessary to further explore whether and how normativity concerns differentially affect reactions to male and female victims of sexual victimization.

Notes

1. Both studies included several additional variables that are not discussed in the current article, either because they are not relevant to the aim of this article or because they yielded no interesting results. In both studies, measures of explicit femininity ratings and implicit feminization, as well as ratings of crime severity, were excluded. In the first study, the Questionnaire for the Assessment of Disgust Sensitivity (Schienle et al., 2002) was used to measure disgust sensitivity of participants, but this had no influence on the dependent variables.
2. In a third step of the regression analysis, interactions between the moral concerns and target gender were entered. However, these never significantly contributed to the prediction of dependent variables, all $p > .10$, and will thus not be further discussed.
3. Originally, two variables measured whether the participant had ever been a victim of sexual violence himself or herself, and whether the participant knew anyone who had been a victim of sexual violence. Answering options for both questions were “Yes,” “No/ I don’t know,” and “Prefer not to answer.” Participants were only excluded from analyses if they responded “Prefer not to answer” to both questions or responded “No/I don’t know” to one of the questions, and “Prefer not to answer” to the other.

Chapter 5

Framing Claims of Sexual Assault

Mulder, E., & Bosma, A.K. (under review). Filling in the (gendered) gaps: How observers frame claims of sexual assault.

Abstract

Claims of sexual assault are especially prone to scrutiny and (re)interpretation as something else. We investigated how people judged the veracity of sexual assault claims and how they subsequently framed their interpretations of these claims using 'common knowledge' in the form of sexual scripts, rape myths, and gender stereotypes. Participants (N = 161) read about a sexual assault allegation by a male or female claimant and were asked to describe in more detail what they thought had happened. Data were analyzed using a combination of quantitative and qualitative frame analysis. Although participants mostly accepted the facts of the claim, they did not always share the claimant's interpretation of sexual assault and (legitimate) victimhood. The analysis revealed that participants drew upon distinct frames in order to interpret the claim, which included a sexual assault frame, but also regretted consensual sex and grey area scenarios such as miscommunication. Frames were differentially employed in response to male and female claims of sexual assault. We discuss how our research design and findings can contribute to an increased understanding of the underlying mechanisms of both male and female victim acknowledgment.

Was it rape *or* was it a bad date? This question circulated in the (social) media following the online publication of an interview with a young woman named 'Grace' about her date with comedian and actor Aziz Ansari (Way, 2018). Where Grace claimed she had felt violated as a consequence of Ansari's actions throughout the evening, Ansari maintained that he believed their sexual activity had been consensual. This is but one recent and popular example of a sexual assault claim that has been severely scrutinized by third parties, and frequently subsumed under other headers than sexual assault (Serisier, 2019; Worthington, 2020).

Claims of sexual assault in particular are prone to scrutiny and (re)interpretations as something other (D. Jackson, 2018) so that a claimant can be far from certain of being granted the status of legitimate victim. This may in part follow from the idea that in the (frequent) absence of victim injury or witnesses, such claims boil down to a 'he said, she said' type of allegation (Gilmore, 2017). Related to this, rape myths such as the belief that alleged victims frequently lie about rape (Boux & Daum, 2015; K. Edwards et al., 2011; Rumney, 2006) can function to prompt skepticism about sexual assault claims from the outset. Finally, an intertwinement between discourses of normative (erotic, romantic, consensual) sex and of sexual violence may enable reinterpretation (Gavey, 2005). Specifically, an understanding of sexual assault as motivated by sex rather than (also) by power and domination may facilitate alternative narratives of miscommunication or regretted drunken sex (Lea, 2007).

Although the above describes several potential reasons why third parties may question sexual assault claims, only a few studies have expanded their focus to include the question *how* third parties employ 'common knowledge' in the shape of sexual scripts, rape myths, and gender stereotypes to assign credibility to the alleged victim's statements, and construct 'plausible' versions of what happened (e.g., Alcoff, 2018; Anderson & Doherty, 2008; Ellison & Munro, 2009a). The current research seeks to further address this question by investigating how people judge the facticity of a sexual assault claim by a female or male student, and what types of frames they subsequently resort to in order to fill in the gaps of the reported events.

Scrutinizing and (Re)Interpreting Claims of Sexual Assault

According to Anderson and Doherty (2008): "from the moment that a rape survivor makes a public declaration that s/he was raped, the truth status of that claim is likely to be treated as provisional, as an 'allegation' and will be scrutinised and debated" (p. 51). Where a first step in the public response to claims of victimization is likely to involve this veracity judgment, even when observers *factually* accept claims, they may subsequently contest the alleged victim's *interpretation* of the event (Gilmore, 2017; Serisier, 2019).

It is a well-established finding that alleged victims and their claims of sexual assault are frequently met with disbelief and other negative reactions (R. Campbell, 2008). As noted by Burt and Estep (1981) nearly four decades ago: "the combination of sexual activity and coercion does not automatically qualify the coerced individual for the victim label" (p. 15). In other words, the assignment of legitimate victimhood status does not solely depend on the presence of specific

'facts' of the event, but also on the observers' willingness to interpret them in a certain way (Temkin & Krahé, 2008). Burt and Estep (1981) delineated several potential alternative interpretations that compete with the acknowledgment of sexual violence and legitimate victimhood. These include suggestions that the victim has fabricated a claim out of thin air, that the event entailed consensual sex, that coerced sex occurred but consequential damage was minimal, and that sexual assault occurred but that the victim was largely responsible. Such (re)interpretations typically amount to disbelieving or blaming the (alleged) victim, and to trivializing (the severity of) the transgression.

What facilitates competing interpretations of sexual assault and victim role claims? A growing body of research has highlighted the ways in which sexual violence can be justified, normalized or obscured (e.g., Ehrlich, 2001; Lea, 2007; Lea & Auburn, 2001). Many authors point to the discursive overlap between normal sex and sexual assault, making certain elements of sexual encounters – most notably a woman's resistance and a man's persistence – interpretable through either frame of reference (Jeffrey & Barata, 2020; Philadelphoff-Puren, 2005; Ryan, 2011). This discursive overlap also creates the possibility to (re)interpret a claim of sexual assault as a type of event that was not mentioned in the work of Burt and Estep (1981): a misunderstanding. As Gilmore (2017) aptly describes: "The narrative of sexual harassment as an artifact of love and longing gone wrong circulates the false notion that harassment arises from innocent, unknowing, and therefore nonresponsible stirrings, awkward, perhaps, but hardly actionable" (p. 11-12). This interpretation – where any feelings of violation are perceived as non-intended and instead more likely result from miscommunication between equally agentic parties – has been found to be a popular explanation of negative sexual experiences and acquaintance rape (Crawford, 1995; Frith & Kitzinger, 1997; Hindes & Fileborn, 2019).

Sources of (Re)Interpretation

The fact that Burt and Estep (1981) did not discuss miscommunication as an alternative suggestion to sexual assault is not surprising. At the time of their publication, attention had only just started to shift from stranger to acquaintance rape (Gavey, 2005; Koss, 1988), and an escalated hookup was perhaps not yet a 'logical' explanation for rape claims. This only serves to illustrate that people select information from discourses that are available, relevant, and credible to them in order to make sense of an event. Thus, in their interpretation of claims of sexual assault and victimhood, third parties draw from prevalent cultural beliefs or 'common knowledge' on the subject matter (Burt & Estep, 1981). Part of the reason why we include male claimants in our study is precisely because fewer sources of 'common knowledge' seem available in trying to make sense of male claims of sexual victimization (Anderson, 1999; Cohen, 2014).

As briefly discussed in the previous section, amongst cultural beliefs about sex and assault are descriptions – known as *scripts* – of what sexual situations are (or ought to be) like. People employ sexual scripts to determine what can be normatively expected in a situation (Simon & Gagnon, 1986), but also to frame events as one thing or another (D. Edwards, 1994; Frith &

Kitzinger, 2001). Sexual scripts portray sexual encounters as following a predictable sequence of actions, in which different roles are assigned to men and women (Frith, 2009). The traditional sexual script relies heavily on the stereotypical gender roles of a male initiative-taker and a female gatekeeper (Wiederman, 2005). The script most employed to portray sexual violence – the 'real rape' (or stranger rape) script – describes the stereotypical violent rape of a vulnerable woman by an aggressive male attacker unknown to her (Estrich, 1987; Ryan, 2011). Both sexual scripts and gender stereotypes allocate the passive (victim) role to women and the active or aggressive role to men. Male sexual victimization defies these scripts and stereotypes, potentially leading to the perception of men as 'abnormal' or non-legitimate victims (Javaid, 2017).

Related to the real rape script are rape myths that serve to dismiss anything that does not adhere to the prototypical stranger rape – including the rape of men – as *not* 'real rape'. Rape myths are persistent stereotypical beliefs that justify and trivialize sexual violence, and assign responsibility for rape to the victim (Burt, 1980; Gerger et al., 2007). Rape myths tend to point toward many factors other than the perpetrator's behavior as determinants of sexual assault, including alcohol consumption, appearance, and promiscuity of the victim (Gravelin et al., 2019), and miscommunication between parties (Dardis et al., 2017).

Framing Sexual Assault

Sexual scripts, rape myths, and gender stereotypes are all integral to the framing of (claims of) sexual assault and legitimate victimhood. They are the building blocks of what relevant frames depict as 'general knowledge' or 'common sense'. Framing is "the process of culling a few elements of perceived reality and assembling a narrative that highlights the connections among them to promote a particular interpretation" (Entman, 2007, p. 164; Goffman, 1974). In framing, actors and events are tactically placed in (causal) relations to each other, resulting in particular distributions of (moral) responsibility (Hertog & McLeod, 2001). Studies on framing have mostly investigated how the media portray social phenomena, including victimization (e.g., Bouchard et al., 2020; Kotanen & Kronstedt, 2019), to show how these phenomena are (intentionally) structured and consequently steer public opinion. In this study, we use frame analysis to investigate which frames are readily available to participants in their construction of sexual victimization.

Previous research has illustrated the key role of language in the framing of (claims of) sexual assault (Ehrlich, 2001). Studies have for instance demonstrated that the use of active and passive verbs can serve to emphasize or obscure agency and responsibility of the involved actors (e.g., Bohner, 2001; Ehrlich, 2001; Frazer & Miller, 2009; Niemi & Young, 2014). The placement of different elements as either actor or contextual factor in a frame can similarly function to construe (internal or external) causations of an event. The same elements, such as alcohol use, may thus be given the status of internal or external cause depending on "their discursive deployment in action sequences such as blaming or mitigating, excusing or accusing" (Coates, 1997; D. Edwards & Potter, 1992, p. 99). Furthermore, the choice of (morally or emotionally charged) words may function to embed a particular experience within a framework of normative sex, or instead within

a framework of (sexual) violence (e.g., Bavelas & Coates, 2001; Coates et al., 1994; Hindes & Fileborn, 2019; Lea, 2007; Lea & Auburn, 2001; Siefkes-Andrew & Alexopoulus, 2019).

The Current Study

Identification and acknowledgment of sexual victimization is an "interpretive process" (Alcoff, 2014, p.448). However, most (experimental) research on observer reactions to (claims of) sexual assault gives little insight into this interpretative process. Indeed, such research is generally marked by the manipulation of a limited number of concrete variables alongside closed-ended answer possibilities. Consequently, they provide us with little insight into *how* observers form judgments of sexual assault, i.e., what pieces of information they focus on, and how they combine these elements to construct an account of what happened (Anderson & Doherty, 2008). While this insight is lacking in research on claims of female sexual victimization, it is virtually absent with regard to claims of male sexual victimization (Cohen, 2014; but see Anderson & Doherty, 2008; Doherty & Anderson, 2004). The current study hence employed a mixed method design to investigate how observers interpreted a claim of sexual assault by a male or female student. First, we examined participants' veracity judgments of a sexual assault claim. Second, we explored through which framing strategies participants conveyed their portrayal of the event. Framing strategies that were investigated related to the selective repetition of the original vignette, the inclusion of and emphasis on specific acts, and the positioning of the actors (in relation to the acts). It was expected that participants draw upon different frames when making sense of sexual assault claims by a female or male student. We anticipated it more likely that interpretations of female claims of sexual assault were based on stereotypical sexual scripts.

Method

Participants

Participants who were at least 18 years old and of British nationality were recruited via the online UK-based research platform Prolific Academic. The collected sample consisted of 162 participants, of which one participant was excluded because of substantial missing data. The remaining 161 participants (82 men, 78 women, and one person who identified as non-binary; ages ranged from 18 to 76, $M = 35.17$, $SD = 11.81$) were allocated to the female ($n = 81$) or male ($n = 80$) claimant condition. Participants were awarded £0.90 for participation.

Procedure and materials

Participants read a vignette about either a male or a female student who had reported a sexual assault to the University Board. According to the claimant, the sexual assault had been committed by a fellow (male) student during an on-campus party. The vignette was purposefully designed to include limited and ambiguous information. For instance, the claimant stated that (s)he

and the accused had been drinking, but the amount of alcohol was left unspecified. Furthermore, the claimant was said to resist verbally, but not physically, and the details of the sexual assault were left open. Participants were requested to write down in detail what they expected had happened between the claimant and the accused.[1] The complete vignette and instructions have been included in Appendix E.

Analysis

We used a mixed method frame analysis that combined qualitative analysis with frequency counts. Several authors have noted the value of frame analysis as mixed method approach (e.g., Reese 2007; van Gorp, 2007), where a qualitative analysis serves to capture the subtleties inherent in sense-making (Anderson & Doherty, 2008), and frequency counts can be used as indications of, for instance, the emphasis placed on particular concepts within a frame (Hertog & McLeod, 2001). Both authors individually coded the participants' claim endorsements, actions and actors that featured in the response, and any type of moral judgment expressed by the participants. Codes were discussed, compared, and where necessary adjusted in the course of frequent meetings.

We first determined to what extent participants endorsed the claimant's story as (factually) veracious. Responses were categorized as accepting, questioning, or rejecting the claim, or refusing to evaluate it altogether (interrater agreement 95%). Subsequently, we coded all actions (e.g., drinking, saying no, forcing, etc.) mentioned by the respondent (included in Table 4), as well as the agents connected to those actions (claimant, accused, both, or unspecified). Any (evaluative) labels assigned to actors and actions or normative statements expressed by the participants were coded as moral judgments. After a first round of coding, we discussed patterns in the action sequences in responses, as well as the implications of specific formulations by participants. From this, frames were deducted that clearly depicted sexual assault, or in contrast depicted regretted consensual sex, and were coded as such. The remaining responses were initially coded as grey area, either because they diminished the severity of the claim, emphasized the responsibility of the victim, or downplayed the intentionality and responsibility of the accused. After careful reexamination, these responses were coded as trivialization, victim focus, and miscommunication frames.

Results

The majority of participants initially accepted the claim as truthful (Table 1). The most commonly provided reason for accepting the claim was that victims would not lie about such a serious allegation and/or had nothing to gain from it. Alternatively, participants expressed that one should start from a position of believing the claimant's word. People who did not accept the claim declared it unreliable because of the claimant's alcohol consumption and/or mentioned the need for more evidence (e.g., hearing witnesses, the other side of the story). People who refused to evaluate the claim stated they were not prepared to make assumptions.

Table 2 displays five frames participants seemed to draw upon in their responses. The contents and implications of these frames are described in detail in the qualitative analysis in the following sections. These frames correlated but did not completely overlap with participants' initial endorsements of the claim. Multiple frames could be offered in one response: a participant could for instance question the claim by entertaining the possibilities that the claim resulted from a real assault, from a mishap in communication, or from regretted sex.

Table 1

Initial Endorsements of Claim

Vignette	Accept	Question	Reject	Refuse
Female claimant	54 (67%)	21 (26%)	4 (5%)	2 (3%)
Male claimant	45 (56%)	25 (31%)	8 (10%)	2 (3%)

Note. Percentages refer to the percentage of claims within a row.

Table 2

Application of Frames in Relation to Initial Claim Endorsements

Frame	Vignette	Accept	Question	Reject	Total
Sexual assault	Female claimant	41	8	0	49
	Male claimant	36	3	0	39
Miscommunication	Female claimant	17	14	0	31
	Male claimant	9	9	0	18
Trivialization	Female claimant	4	2	0	6
	Male claimant	4	7	1	12
Victim focus	Female claimant	3	0	1	4
	Male claimant	0	5	0	5
Consensual sex	Female claimant	0	4	4	8
	Male claimant	1	6	7	14

Note. Participants could use multiple frames in their response. Responses that refused to evaluate the claim were not included.

Table 3

Extensiveness of Responses (Average Number of Words and Actions)

Vignette	Sexual assault	Miscomm.	Trivial.	Victim focus	Consensual	Total
Female						
n words						118.80
n actions	4.90	4.97	2.17	2.75	2.50	3.46
Male						
n words						94.50
n actions	3.59	4.06	3.00	4.20	3.07	3.58

Table 4

Building Blocks of Various Frames

Frame	Claimant	Building blocks (chronological) →					
Sex. assault	Female	(b/c) drink (b) flirt / participate	(a) initiate	(c) say no (c) non-consent	(a) persist	(c) cannot resist	(a) assault (a) misunderstand
	Male	(**b**/c) drink	(a) initiate	(c) say no (c) non-consent	(a) persist	(a) assault (c) cannot resist	
Miscomm.	Female	(**b**/u) drink* (b/c/u) flirt*	(a) initiate (c/u) participate	(c) say no*	(a) persist	(c) cannot / does not resist*	(**a**/b) misunderstand** (a) assault
	Male	(**b**/c/n) drink* (b/c/u) flirt*	(c) say no*	(**a**/b) misunderstand **		(c) cannot / does not resist* (a) persist / assault	
Trivial.	Female	(b) drink (a) initiate (c) cannot resist	(c) misunderstand	(c) say no	(a) persist (u) escalate		
	Male	(**b**/u) drink	(**a**/u) initiate (**b**/u) participate	(c) say no	(c) cannot resist (a) persist (u) escalate (b) misremember (a) assault		

V. focus	Female	(b/c/u) drink	(c) say no (c) flirt	(a) initiate		(c) cannot / does not resist
	Male	(**b**/c) drink		(a) initiate	(c) say no	(c) cannot / does not resist (c) regret / lie
Consensual	Female	(c/**u**) drink (c) flirt / initiate (c) does not resist	(**c**/b/u) participate / consent			(c) regret / lie
	Male	(**b**/c) drink (v) does not resist	(c) flirt / initiate	(**c**/b/u) participate / consent		(c) regret / lie

Note. c = claimant, a = accused, b = both, u = unspecified actor. **/* refers to repetition or flexibility of a position in the action sequence respectively. Bold font represents the actor most frequently assigned to an action. Font size represents the relative frequency within a frame and condition:

10-29%: small font size
30-49%: small-medium font size
50-69%: medium-large font size
>70%: large font size

On average, participants used more words to describe the event leading up to the female claim compared to the male claim of sexual assault (Table 3). This seems to support our expectation that participants have an easier task describing and explaining female sexual assault claims, considering the cultural knowledge available to both endorse and refute such claims. Table 3 further shows that participants included more actions when they portrayed the event as sexual assault or miscommunication in response to the female claim. In contrast, they mentioned more actions when they portrayed the event as trivial, victim focused, or as consensual sex in response to the male claim.[2] These findings complement the differences in conditions described in Table 2. The specific (chronological order of) actions per frame are displayed in Table 4, and qualitatively analyzed below.

Sexual assault

Participants most frequently employed a sexual assault frame in their responses, particularly when they accepted the veracity of the claim. This frame was the most elaborate (Table 3) and contained concrete actions of both the claimant and the accused (Table 4). Participants who employed the sexual assault frame shared the claimant's interpretation of the event, and hence labeled the claimant a legitimate victim. This did not automatically imply, however, that the accused was also held accountable.

In employing the sexual assault frame, participants gradually progressed from a discourse of romantic interaction to one of violence and control. Described actions shifted from accused to claimant and back, whereby the accused pushed for something that the claimant tried to resist: the accused initiated sex, the claimant said no and/or did not consent, the accused persisted, the claimant could not resist anymore, and then the assault happened. The going back-and-forth between perspectives placed the actors progressively in opposition to each other.

Where participants described the accused's advances in rather non-specific terms in the male claimant condition ("the other male has made advances"), more explicit references to sex were found in the female claimant condition. Examples like "when he started to put himself on her" and "at some point he makes a move, kisses or touches her" show that participants initially drew upon a discourse of normative sex. Participants then described the claimant's attempts at resistance by (repeatedly) saying no: "she **said** no several times", "she **told** him to stop". Some participants ($n = 9$) assigned the claimant the vulnerable position of being at mercy of the accused, having to *ask* to stop: "Michael **requested** that the other person stop", "he ignored **her pleas to stop**". When the accused subsequently persists, participants clearly marked the presence of conflict in highlighting the accused's non-response to the victim's verbal resistance: he "didn't stop", "didn't listen" or "ignored" the claimant. This portrayal of conflict was supported by participants' use of conjunctions that indicated sharp contrasts between the parties: "**Despite** her refusal to continue, the male decided that he wanted to carry on **regardless**", "He said no **but** was ignored", "Michael said no **but** the guy persisted."

The accused's persistence was often portrayed as intentional: "the male has completely and deliberately ignored Melanie and clearly carried out a horrible act". This assigned deliberativeness marked the accused's actions as aggressive and particularly threatening to the claimant, and excluded a discourse of 'love gone wrong'. The accused's alcohol consumption did not function to diminish the accused's agency or alleviate his responsibility: "the incident cannot be entirely blamed on alcohol however as the student cannot be excused from not having the self-judgement to drink so much as to lose inhibitions." The accused could have acted otherwise, and participants stressed that "**he should** not have proceeded with his advances". The descriptions of persistence thus carried a strong negative moral judgment toward the accused.

The claimant was portrayed as passive and weak, thus as a stereotypically legitimate victim (Christie, 1986), through an inability to resist the persisting accused. Whereas resistance referred to verbal refusal in first instance, after the accused's persistence, participants described the claimant as lacking the required physical power to "fight him off" or "physically restrain him". In both conditions, this lack of power was mostly attributed to shock or fear, though fear was attributed more often to the female claimant (n = 14 vs. n = 6). This might relate to the finding that fear is considered a stereotypically feminine emotion (Hess et al., 2009). Participants also more often mentioned the claimant's intoxication as an explanation for non-resistance in the female compared to the male claimant condition (n = 4 vs. n = 0).

The last identifiable action in the sexual assault frame was the assault itself, which was frequently described in terms that indicated severe violence, such as "sexual assault" and "rape". If the frame included assault as an action, it was often much shorter than the elaborate frame described above: in 18 cases, the frame consisted solely of the action 'assaulting', or 'assaulting' and any *one* other action. The following examples were full-length responses of participants. Many examples feature passive sentences: "I believe that the student sexually assaulted Michael without his consent", "I believe that Michael was assaulted by the perpetrator and should be believed by the university as sexual assault accusations should always be taken seriously as they can seriously affect the person who was assaulted", "She was sexually assaulted without consent by the male student", and "He was raped. He did not consent so was raped." The fact that short frames were more frequent in the male claimant condition (n = 13 vs. n = 5) suggests that participants less easily constructed an elaborate narrative of male victimization (Table 3).

Participants did not always employ assault as an action (i.e., as a verb), but at times concluded that a particular combination of actions – particularly saying no/non-consenting and persistence – should be defined as assault. Examples included: "However if she did say no and he did proceed **this is rape**", "Melanie told him to stop several times to which he did not comply. **This is then when the alleged assault took place**", "Anything that happened after which Melanie said no **counts as a sexual assault**", "Melanie attempted to rebuff the student but was intimidated into submission when the student refused to listen to her. **She was therefore raped**". In these cases, assault could be seen as the (moral) label attached to the actions.

It was striking that the moral judgment of sexual assault did not necessarily entail an explicit condemnation of the accused. In fact, the agency of the accused was obscured in several ways. One way of doing so was by removing the actor from the sentence structure and nominalizing the assault, e.g., “more serious sexual assault took place”. Moreover, the assault was often described in passive language – Michael/Melanie was assaulted (by the accused) – placing the accused in the periphery of the frame. In sum, the sexual assault frame often portrayed a legitimate victim and acknowledged the seriousness of the situation without clearly attributing blame to the responsible agent.

Consensual sex

When participants initially rejected the claim, the dominant explanation for rejection was that participants expected the claimant to have consented to sex, and afterwards regretted this decision. When participants initially questioned the claim, they used the consensual sex frame as an alternative to the other frames, most often the sexual assault frame (n = 6). Employing the consensual sex frame positioned the claimant as an active agent in a discourse of sexual desire, meaning that (s)he could be held accountable for what happened. We found that participants used three discursive ‘tactics’ to suggest claimant responsibility: they focused on the acts of the claimant rather than the accused, they described these acts in an active way both semantically and grammatically, and they focused on reasons why a claimant would choose to lie.

As illustrated in Table 4, the actions of the claimant were leading in this frame, whereas hardly any actions were identified that were performed by the accused alone. As such, the claimant was portrayed as an active agent who deliberately engaged in a sexual encounter. This could start with active initiation: “Melanie gave the other student the come on to play with his feelings or to make the other student buy her drinks”, “I believe he might have given signals to show he was interested”. At a minimum, participants emphasized that the claimant did not resist the advances of the accused (thereby “tacitly consenting”). This non-resistance was described as an active choice, rather than a matter of circumstances outside the control of the victim: “she decided to go with it”, “he didn’t stop the guy from physically advancing”. The possibility that the victim *could not* resist was not mentioned.

Notably, the action ‘drinking’ was less prevalent than in other frames, which suggested that the consumption of alcohol was assigned a less influential role in the unfolding of events. Implicitly, this left room for the claimant to be held responsible: the claimant could not reduce their accountability on the basis of not thinking clearly. This resonates with the active verbs that were used to describe the actions of the claimant. Similar to the phrasing of non-resistance, subsequent actions construed the claimant as an active agent. For instance, the claimant actively participated in the sexual encounter, often by giving active consent: “the female consented to the sexual activity”, “he agrees to a liaison”. In case alcohol consumption influenced the claimant’s actions, alcohol was portrayed as the fuel to make active decisions, not as an impairment to do so: “maybe

she got too drunk and said yes", "I think that the Michael got drunk and had sex with the guy by giving consent".

Finally, participants described that at a (much) later point in time – often the next day – the victim looks back, regrets the encounter and lies about it, thereby changing the narrative from consensual sex to violent assault: "These two may have had **consensual interaction** here and Melanie may have regretted it the next day and **cried rape**." Participants suggested potential reasons for lying could have been status-protection or embarrassment. Female claimants could have worried about their perceived promiscuity: "People may have been calling her a slag so she said she had been sexually assaulted", while male claimants might have wanted to avoid being seen as gay: "Michael then regretted the incident afterwards and felt ashamed and chose to call it a sexual assault rather than admit to having had a homosexual encounter". These explanations utilized traditional (hetero)sexual scripts and stereotypical gender roles, where men are supposed to be initiative takers and women have to be protective about 'giving up' sex.

Grey area

Whereas the frames described above generally followed clear action patterns, many responses were more complex and/or less clear-cut. These responses indicated that participants assumed some sort of (sexually) transgressive behavior had occurred, but they did not convincingly construct the event as sexual assault. We named these 'grey area' responses because they tended to remain ambiguous about the presence or absence of victim consent and perpetrator intent. Within these responses, we identified three separate frames: miscommunication, trivialization and the victim focus frame.

Miscommunication

Participants who drew upon a miscommunication frame typically depicted the event as a misunderstanding between parties that led to an (unintentional) escalation. This frame was dynamic, but relatively clear-cut and frequently employed compared to the other grey area frames. The miscommunication frame frequently featured in the same response as the sexual assault frame ($n = 21$), especially in the female claimant condition ($n = 15$), meaning that miscommunication was regularly used as an alternative to or explanation for sexual assault. Indeed, the actions in the miscommunication frame resembled those of the sexual assault frame, but included repeated interjections of the action 'misunderstanding'. Especially in responses coded as both sexual assault and miscommunication, participants at times explicitly argued that even though the event was rooted in a misunderstanding, there was no *excuse* (e.g., being drunk) for the accused's behavior, and that he should have stopped when told to. Regardless, depicting the event as a misunderstanding tended to distribute responsibility more evenly among the involved parties, while simultaneously refraining from explicitly blaming either one. This balancing act was accomplished in a number of ways.

First, participants emphasized that the development of events required the involvement of two (i.e., both) parties: “As they had **both** been drinking, **both** of their decision making would have been affected greatly”, “If they had **both** been drinking there could be confusion with the memories and not everything **either party** has said could have been true”, “If they had **both** been drinking then maybe more miscommunication happened”. Grouping the actors under the label ‘both’ accomplished a sense of shared (non-)agency and shared responsibility (Coates et al., 1994). As seen in the examples above, alcohol was instrumentalized as a significant contributor to the confusion of the events. Participants portrayed drinking as hindering communication, recollection, and decision-making, without distinguishing between affected parties.

Furthermore, the repetition with which misunderstandings occurred (Table 4) seemed to create a narrative where both actors experienced and reasoned from their own experiential worlds. Such an interpretation did not require the participant to dispute the ‘facts’ that had been reported by the claimant. Instead, the participants focused on how those (f)acts were experienced. For instance: “I suspect that the events Melanie relayed are correct but that each of them see the situation differently given that both were under the influence of alcohol”, “Although the alleged victim may have indeed been saying stop, it may not have seemed that way to the alleged attacker”, “The other student may not have been aware that Michael was seriously refusing him, especially as Michael did not physically resist or attempt to shout and make a scene”. These interpretations suggested the possibility that actions perceived as transgressive by the alleged victim were not intended as such by the accused. Indeed, what stood out in the miscommunication frame was that participants attempted to imagine how the accused might have perceived the situation: “the male likely thought”, “he being too drunk took her fear as consent”, “the perpetrator probably didn’t know that Michael didn’t want to do it”. Relatedly, the claimant’s non-resistance was framed almost as frequently in terms of *did not* resist as in terms of *could not* resist (Table 4). When participants took the accused’s perspective, they did not elaborate on *why* the claimant did not or may not have felt able to resist: “When he went to undo her belt she did not resist or remonstrate so he continued”. As a result, the non-resistance seemed to contribute to the claimant’s culpability.

Although it is almost exclusively the accused who was said to misunderstand, participants frequently externalized the reasons for the accused’s misunderstanding. Specifically, and reiterating that a misunderstanding involves two parties, reasons were often found with the (ineffective) communicator – i.e., the claimant – who sent signals or performed actions liable to, or directly *causing,* misunderstanding: “Melanie was being playful in the way she acted while saying to stop, which **led** to the male student to misinterpret the situation”, “Melanie went into a state of shock and as the sexual advancements happened she found herself not able to talk or move, **which led** the other student to think that his actions weren’t wrong”, “Michaels silence **could be led to** be believed as participation”. Other reasons for the perpetrator’s misunderstanding were found in alcohol consumption: “the other male has made advances that he probably would not make if sober”, “due to the intoxication, the other student may have carried on thinking that this is what Michael wanted”. In these examples it should be noted that the drinking itself was not pointed out

as a conscious (and perhaps bad) decision by the accused. Grammatically, it was not even phrased as an action of the accused. Depicting the actions of the accused as non-intentional, because they were based on a misunderstanding, functioned to diminish his responsibility. What is more, depicting the actions of the claimant as contributing to, even causing, the misunderstanding emphasized the claimant's own responsibility.

The miscommunication frame featured both more frequently (Table 2) and more elaborately (Table 3 and 4) in the female claimant compared to the male claimant condition. Indeed, participants often entertained the possibility that the female claimant's actions were interpreted as "playful", "sexual teasing", "pretend" or "shy". These findings demonstrate how traditional gender roles and sexual scripts facilitate miscommunication as a 'reasonable' explanation for sexual assault (Frith & Kitzinger, 1997).

Victim Focus

Relatively few responses were coded as victim focused. These responses solely reflected on the actions and experiences of the victim rather than incorporating the accused in the narrative as well. In the absence of actions by the accused such as 'persist' and 'assault', the event was presented as less serious, and the victim as at least in part responsible.

For instance, in all cases, participants mentioned that the event involved the consumption of alcohol. However, whenever a distinction between claimant and accused was made, the consumption of alcohol by the claimant was emphasized: "Melanie had too much to drink", "I think both parties had been drinking and as we don't know the length of time the advances took place over, we don't know how many drinks Michael had over that time".

Although several participants included that the claimant said no or tried to say no, they emphasized that the claimant *did not* or *could not* resist. Reasons for non-resistance were located within the claimant, rather than in coercive circumstances. Participants mentioned the possibility that the claimant *did not* resist because the claimant was not actually opposed to the sexual interaction: "In this situation myself I feel I would have kicked off not froze when it got serious if I didn't want it to happen". Alternatively, they stated the victim *could not* resist because (s)he had drunk too much alcohol and (hence) felt out of control: "Or they could have both been very drunk, Michael could have asked the other person to stop but then been too drunk to actually act on it". As such, the claimant was construed as someone who acted irresponsibly and did not exert serious effort to stop the accused.

Trivialization

The trivialization frame was probably the least structured frame we identified. Visual evidence for this can be found in Table 4, with many actions featuring relatively infrequently, and forming no clear chronological pattern. Typically, a limited number of actions were included in the descriptions. In fact, in 11 of the 18 frames, we coded no more than two actions in total. Relatedly, whereas in other frames participants frequently concluded with the action that reflected the name

of the frame (e.g., misunderstand, regret/lie, and assault), there was no clear endpoint to this frame. As shown in Table 2, the trivialization frame emerged twice as often in response to male claimants compared to female claimants.

Responses were labeled as trivializing because even when they accepted the claim, they described the event in ways that presented it as non-serious. Participants accomplished this in several ways. First, the part of the original vignette that suggested a form of perceptible conflict disappeared in participants' responses. Responses that included both resistance and persistence featured infrequently (n = 3) in this frame. Typically, actions of one party were not followed by *actions* of the other party at all: "A boy made sexual advances on Melanie throughout the night, before undoing her belt. Melanie was uncomfortable throughout the night, as a result of the boy's behaviour", "It is maybe that the male was more interested and pushed for this to happen, which then resulted in her feeling the way she does", "Due to intoxication the perpetrator started acting rash towards Michael. Michael was probably a bit more sober so he understood the scenario he was in, and due to the shock of the actions, he was unable to speak".

A key aspect of conflict also disappeared when it was not located in the dynamics between parties, but instead phrased as an agentless development in events, i.e., an escalation: "Melanie and the perpetrator were drinking, things got out of hand and Melanie did not wish to go further", "Drunken flirting went too far and Michael felt uncomfortable". The inclusion of alcohol in descriptions seemed to facilitate the depiction of the event as an escalation rather than an actor-instigated set of actions. Indeed, as illustrated in the examples, alcohol was discursively placed in direct connection with the alleged assault, masking (the potential responsibility of) the actor who drank the alcohol: "X was wrong to do this as no consent had been given for sexual activity, **but** if both students were drunk then it is easy to see how things went wrong".

A second notable aspect, found in almost all of the previous examples of trivialization, was that victimization was phrased as an experience or a feeling. Such terminology suggested that the outcome of the evening was directly related to the claimant's personal state of mind rather than a result of the accused's actions per se. Thus, even though the actions of the accused 'resulted' in the claimant's experience, they were assigned only limited significance. Participants' framing of the event in terms of feelings individualized the experience, and hence allowed for the possibility that another person would experience the same event entirely differently. Such relativity seemed to counter the position that the event consisted of something 'objectively' severe. Trivialization was further achieved by describing the subjective experience in terms of discomfort rather than, for instance, trauma or fear. For the uninformed reader or listener, this language likely obstructs accurate deduction of the type of accusation that was made. The issue was thus located in the claimant's "subjective interpretation of the encounter", rather than in the actions performed by the accused (Hindes & Fileborn, 2019, p. 647).

Finally, what happened between the accused and claimant was generally described either in language fitting a discourse of normative sex, or in vague non-sexual terms. Examples included: "initiating sexual activity by beginning to undress Melanie despite her lack of consent", "a potential

sexual encounter due to the effects of alcohol", "a drunken fumble"; "they did something sexual together". Non-sexual descriptions included: "acting rash", "what happened", "the behavior", "improper conduct", "unwanted/unwelcome advances". The latter examples were all found in the male claimant condition, where responses that lacked any sexual connotations were particularly frequent.

General Discussion

Disbelief and other negative observer reactions are a pressing social problem (R. Campbell, 2008). Such reactions may lead (alleged) victims to feel unheard, and may as such hinder their ability to cope with their experience and their ability to construct their own life stories (Pemberton et al., 2019). Unfortunately, previous research has indicated that these reactions are particularly likely in reaction to claims of sexual assault (D. Jackson, 2018; Temkin & Krahé, 2008). In this study, we hence investigated what types of 'common knowledge' participants employ when asked to make sense of an (ambiguous) allegation of sexual assault.

One of the most important findings of this study was the apparent difference between an acceptance of facts of the claim and an acknowledgment of 'real' sexual assault and legitimate victimhood. Most participants initially accepted the claim and very few participants explicitly accused the claimant of lying. However, even when accepting the facts of the claim, not all participants subsequently interpreted the situation as actual sexual assault, but employed frames that marginalized the crime or held the claimant (partly) responsible. This shows that the identification of a legitimate victim depends not only on accepting the facts of the claim, but also on observers' willingness to share the claimant's interpretation of those facts (Temkin & Krahé, 2008). Potentially, observer responses that counter the claimant's interpretation of the events may amount to what Fricker (2007) has termed testimonial injustice, which "occurs when prejudice causes a hearer to give a deflated level of credibility to a speaker's word" (p. 1). Framing the event as a miscommunication implies that the claimant has misunderstood and therefore mislabeled the acts and intent of the accused. Furthermore, through trivialization, the claimant's interpretation is reduced to a mere subjective experience of limited significance, thereby rejecting the claimant as a worthy source of knowledge. Finally, by framing the event as consensual sex, rape myths are employed to deflate the speaker's credibility, and accuse the claimant of intentionally providing an altered interpretation, i.e., 'crying rape'. These results clearly show the importance of investigating *all* responses to claims of sexual assault, including those that do not dispute the facts of the case, in order to better understand the underlying mechanisms of victim acknowledgment.

Responses to Sexual Assault Claims by Men versus Women

Of particular interest was whether participants would (more easily) draw upon different types of scripts, myths and stereotypes to explain female versus male claims of sexual assault. Our analysis revealed that participants were more likely to draw upon (more elaborate) frames of sexual

assault and miscommunication in their response to female claimants, and to draw upon (more elaborate) frames of consensual sex and trivialization in their response to male claimants. This seems to support our expectation that participants had more ‘common knowledge’ available to explain a claim of female compared to male sexual assault.

Female claims of sexual assault are thus potentially more likely to be accepted because they are familiar to third parties, i.e., everyone is aware that women are the frequent and ‘normal’ targets of unwanted sexual advances and sexual violence (Cohen, 2014). However, accessible normative sexual scripts also provide material to reframe sexual violence against women as ‘just sex’ or ‘love gone wrong’ (Gavey, 2005; Gilmore, 2017). Particularly striking was the frequency, and hence presumed ease, with which participants used miscommunication as (legitimate) explanation of what a woman reports as sexual assault. Reflecting previous research, these findings suggest that the severity and responsibility of sexual assault (claims) can be diminished and reapportioned by recourse to discourses of ‘normal’ (hetero)sexual interaction (Frith & Kitzinger, 1997; Hindes & Fileborn, 2019; Jeffrey & Barata, 2020). Our findings also suggest a presumption that people, perhaps women in particular, are quick to report sexual assault when *actually* it was not quite as serious as that. This taps into the rape myth of false accusations, and conflicts with findings that sexual violence is in fact one of the most underreported crimes we know of (K. Edwards et al., 2011).

Participants seemed to have more difficulty making sense of male claims of sexual assault. Even when participants acknowledged sexual assault, they frequently reiterated that ‘an assault’ had taken place without specifying what this entailed. Furthermore, participants were twice as likely to employ a trivializing frame in response to male compared to female claimants. This frame in particular could alternatively be considered the *absence* of a frame, and thus the absence of ‘clear-cut explanations’ for a claim of sexual assault. The lack of available knowledge about sexual violence against men may be related to the absence of discourse on ‘normal’ sexual relations between men. For instance, we found that participants made fewer references to sex in their description of what led up to Michael’s claim. As has been suggested by others, negative reactions or a lack of response to male sexual victimization may be related to the perception of male rape as “a homosexual issue”, and a continuing unease with homosexual relations (Javaid, 2017, p. 119; Sivakumaran, 2005). Supporting this suggestion further, participants were more likely to reframe claims of male students as consensual sex compared to those of female students, and ‘backed up’ those interpretations with suggestions that hint at (‘experimenting with’) homosexuality as something shameful.

The Value of (Qualitative) Frame Analysis

Whereas quantitative studies have (separately) identified a range of factors that influence observer reactions to (alleged) victims of sexual assault, the current study has given more insight into the interaction between such factors, and the meaning observers assign to them. We identified five different frames that each had their own recognizable structure in terms of how participants

placed actors and actions in a chronological sequence. We found that participants could assign very different meanings to these elements, presumably based on their motives and/or relevant knowledge. One clear example is the consumption of alcohol. Previous research has generally found that a victim's intoxication may serve to increase responsibility attribution, whereas, somewhat ironically, a perpetrator's intoxication may serve to *diminish* his perceived responsibility (E. Finch & Munro, 2007; Norris & Cubbins, 1992). Our results generally support these previous findings, but also illustrate that alcohol consumption attains a different meaning depending on the overall frame a participant draws from. Consumption of alcohol can be portrayed as a stupid decision of the victim, as a catalyst for overall confusion and misunderstanding between parties, or as an obstacle to the possibility of giving consent and thus lending credibility to a story of sexual assault.

Another example of context-dependent meaning was found in the element of non-resistance. Previous research has indicated that victims who do not resist are generally blamed more and perceived as less credible (Angelone et al., 2015; Davies et al., 2008). Our findings shed more light on how respondents construe non-resistance. They may attribute a failure to resist to circumstantial factors that lead to shock and fear in the victim, which are presumably 'good' reasons for freezing or stopping to resist (after saying no multiple times). In this case, non-resistance taps into the passivity required of an ideal, and hence legitimate, victim (Christie, 1986). Participants may also attribute non-resistance to a victim's own mindset or perceive it as a consequence of their own behavior. In that case, non-resistance becomes a factor that increases culpability.

Limitations and Future Research

Perhaps the most important limitation to note is that because responses were clearly elicited in an (online) experimental setting, participants received little incentive for the quality or elaborateness of their responses. As a consequence, some of the frames we extracted from the data, i.e., the trivialization and victim focus frame, may have been marked by brevity and vagueness (in part) due to reasons unrelated to participants' perception of the claim. Although one may wonder if trivialization and victim focus thus really amount to 'frames', they do resemble previously identified definitions as established by Burt and Estep (1981) that portray the victim as responsible, or the harm done as negligible.

Eliciting responses in an experimental context also meant that participants likely knew the claim to be fictional. They could thus describe what happened in the abstract, rather than having to justify their version of events to others, such as the claimant. If they had to *account to* others (Dunn, 2008), we might expect different types of responses and framing strategies from observers (Anderson & Doherty, 2008; Mulder & Bosma, 2019). Future research may hence elicit more elaborate answers from participants, as well as vary the context in which such responses are elicited, for instance through interview methods or more naturalistic conversations between participants (e.g., Doherty & Anderson, 2004; Ellison & Munro, 2009b). Future research might

also vary vignettes to include different (interplays between) elements in order to investigate (participants' spontaneous reproduction of) more scripts and myths that 'explain' sexual violence claims. In this case, an experimental condition with a female accused might be added. Finally, to strengthen frame analysis' potential to bridge the gap between qualitative and quantitative approaches (van Gorp, 2007), future research might benefit from the inclusion of additional quantitative measures (e.g., RMA scales: Bohner, 2001).

Conclusion

Our findings support Burt and Estep's (1981) conclusion that there are many ways in which a claim of sexual assault can be interpreted as something else. We demonstrated that even when third parties accept the facts as recounted by an alleged victim, they may offer alternative interpretations that effectively nullify his or her claim to the status of legitimate or 'ideal' victim. These interpretations can depend on many different factors, which are informed by ever-changing cultural knowledge in the shape of prevalent sexual scripts, rape myths, and gender stereotypes. In frequently employed quantitative research designs, the assigned meaning and interplay between these factors remains largely obscured. In contrast, by using a mixed method frame analysis we believe to have contributed to a more encompassing approach to "the telling and hearing of narratives of sexual assault" (Andersson et al., 2019, p. 1). In this case, our study has specifically shed more light on the gap *between* the telling and the hearing, or uptake, of such sexual assault narratives. An understanding, and potentially enhancement, of male and female victim acknowledgment is likely to require a continuing critical examination of this gap.

Notes

1. For the purpose of a different study, participants were also asked to suggest a remedy for the situation.
2. Due to the low *n,* interpretations of differences between male and female claimant conditions in the trivialization, victim focus, and consensual sex frame should be interpreted with caution.

Chapter 6

Making Sense of (Grey Area) Nonconsensual Sex

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Abstract

Research on third-party reactions to (transgressive) sexual encounters has frequently bypassed the question how observers categorize such encounters as normal sexual experience, sexual violence, or potentially as something else. In the present study, we investigated the ways in which participants made sense of a nonconsensual sexual encounter between a male or female student and a man. We specifically focused on how participants utilized sexual scripts and gender stereotypes to describe what happened, and as a means of attributing responsibility to the actors. Using the Articulated Thoughts in Simulated Situations (ATSS) technique, 52 Dutch participants (26 men and 26 women) responded aloud to a vignette. Data were analyzed using discourse analysis as employed in Discursive Psychology. The findings demonstrated that participants constructed the event described in the vignette as normal, while depicting the student as abnormal and accountable. Participants strategically employed sexual scripts and gender stereotypes to describe the event as predictable and not serious, and the initiative taker's actions as in little need of explanation. The student was positioned as detached from this 'objective reality', and held accountable for neither following nor sufficiently breaking with the script. In consequence, the event was rendered non-threatening. Our results illustrated the ways in which predominant discourses influence interpretations of encounters as transgressive or 'just' sex. This may have important implications for those who seek to share their experiences of sexual violation.

In this day and age, the identification of and adequate responses to claims of (severe) sexual assault have become ever more a priority. Recent movements such as Time's up, #Yesallwomen, and #MeToo have emphasized the scope of sexual violence; not just in terms of the vast number of victims affected, but also as a description of the many possible shapes and forms of sexual violence. Additionally, several stories have featured in the news and media that largely defy unambiguous labeling as either normal sex or sexual transgression. The fictional short story "Cat Person", in 2017 one of the most read pieces in *The New Yorker*, is an exemplary narration of a deeply uncomfortable sexual encounter that is generally not designated a story of rape (Roupenian, 2017). A non-fictional account of a similar experience has been given by a young woman with the pseudonym Grace. In an interview in January 2018, she related her experiences during a date with actor and comedian Aziz Ansari, concluding that his behavior had made her feel violated and that she had come to see the event as sexual assault (Way, 2018). These stories have received a large and widely varied response in the media (Silman, 2018; Walsh & Murphy, 2019; Worthington, 2020).

To describe 'ambiguous' sexual encounters such as those described above, several authors have used the term 'grey area' (Cahill, 2016; Gavey, 2005; Sessions Step, 2007). This grey area encompasses varying experiences that seem to fall somewhere between desired or consensual sex and encounters that are commonly acknowledged as clearly sexual assault or rape. These encounters generally do not include (threats of) physical violence, but may include more subtle forms of coercion such as manipulation or 'nagging' to such an extent that the other party is 'worn down'. This other party may be reluctant or unwilling to have sex, but feel that it is impossible or disadvantageous to refuse (Cahill, 2016; Gavey, 2005; Kahn et al., 2003). Although something may feel 'off', such ambiguous encounters generally hinder the sure identification of, and distinction between, a victim and a perpetrator. As such, these grey area sexual encounters are likely to signify a (moral) situation that is not 'clear-cut', and are therefore particularly demanding of observers' sense-making practices and judgment formation.

To date, most research on observer reactions to (victims of) sexual violence has employed relatively brief vignettes that provide a 'factual account' of rape, followed by closed-ended response scales that aim to determine the extent to which participants blame the victim (Anderson & Doherty, 2008). However, little is known about *how* observers make sense of such scenarios, and what types of resources they draw upon to construe more ambiguous nonconsensual sexual encounters as 'normal' sexual experience, sexual violence, or potentially as something else. One important sense-making resource is likely to be found in scripts: descriptions of how a given (sexual) situation will 'typically' develop (Frith & Kitzinger, 2001; Simon & Gagnon, 1986). Scripts can be utilized by observers to identify and explain both normative (e.g., the traditional sexual script) and transgressive (e.g., the 'real rape' script) sexual encounters between men and women. In those scripts, stereotypical gender roles form a key element (Wiederman, 2005).

Whereas academic research on the construction of nonconsensual sexual encounters between men and women is scarce, even less attention has been paid to sense-making of

nonconsensual sexual encounters between men. We might expect that fewer sexual scripts are available for observers who attempt to make sense of these encounters compared to sexual encounters between men and women, particularly when they include ambiguous elements. Observers may have difficulty to construct such scenarios as consensual sex because information about intimate (sexual) relations between men is less available in common discourse. The same scenarios may also challenge constructions as sexual violence since male (sexual) victimization is considered inherently non-normative, and far-removed from the expected and prescribed roles of men in sexual encounters (Doherty & Anderson, 2004; Mulder & Bohner, 2020).

In this study, we investigated how observers made sense of and navigated their moral judgments in response to a particular grey area nonconsensual sexual encounter. We additionally investigated potential differences in how observers made sense of this encounter between a man and woman, or between two men. We use the term 'grey area' to refer to the vignette in this study, not as a pre-categorization of the event, but to indicate our expectation that the described encounter resists easy categorization in current day discourses about sex and violence (Gunnarsson, 2018; Hindes & Fileborn, 2019). The current research takes social constructionism as its epistemological starting position, treating language not as a reflection of an objective reality, but as an instrument that shapes our (inter)subjective realities (Crotty 1998). However, because we contend that our vignette describes a situation of *nonconsensual* sex, our approach resembles one of contextual, rather than strict, constructionism where we "acknowledge making some assumptions about social conditions" (Best, 1989, as cited in Loseke, 1999, p. 206).

Sexual Scripts

Scripting has proved a useful conceptual tool in investigating how people make sense of sexual interactions. Scripts are "a metaphor for conceptualizing the production of behavior within social life" (Simon & Gagnon, 1986, p. 98). They can help us to interpret, (re)frame, and create meaningful situations. In line with the social constructionist approach, we agree that:

> Rather than understanding the 'scripted' description as indicative of underlying mental representation, we can see it […] as a contextually occasioned production, a way of discursively *constructing* events that attend to their attributional significance within a sequence involving responsibility and blame. (Edwards & Potter, 1992, p. 148; also Frith & Kitzinger, 2001)

Scripts function on different levels: socially in terms of "prescribing what is considered normative within a culture, and as intrapsychic maps, providing directions for how to feel, think, and behave in particular situations" (Wiederman, 2005, p. 496). Simon and Gagnon (1973) originally applied the concept of scripting to examine the development and experience of sexual behavior. Since then, sexual scripts have been viewed as ways of framing and making sense of a wide range of sexual scenarios, including transgressive ones (e.g., Marcus, 1992).

Sexual scripts include those that describe ‘normal’ sexual encounters, but also scripts that narrate sexual violence. Normative sexual scripts are based on the traditional sexual script, which revolves around a man who actively and/or aggressively pursues sex, and a woman who functions as gatekeeper and must not ‘give in’ to the man’s desires too easily (Byers, 1996). Notions like ‘playing hard to get’ and ‘token resistance’ derive from endorsement of this gendered script (Jackson, 1978; Wiederman, 2005). The script’s differential gender role attribution also facilitates the likelihood that ethically ambiguous sexual encounters are explained in terms of miscommunication or misunderstanding between parties (Frith & Kitzinger, 1997; Muehlenhard, 1988). Originating from the traditional sexual script are various normative sexual scripts that describe casual sexual encounters between men and women, i.e., hookups. Hookup scripts describe sexual encounters between men and women who are usually not well acquainted, or at least not involved in a romantic relationship with each other. Such scripts often include a meet-up at a bar or party, alcohol consumption and intoxication, going home together, and engaging in sexual activities (Holman & Sillars, 2012).

‘Real Rape’

Sexual violence or rape is generally scripted as a concrete experience clearly distinguished from normative sexual practice (Gash & Harding, 2018; Gunnarsson, 2018; Hindes & Fileborn, 2019; Jackson, 1978). This has been demonstrated, for instance, in experimental studies where participants were asked to describe what they believed to be typical seduction/hookup and rape scenarios (Anderson 2007; Krahé et al., 2007; Littleton & Axsom, 2003; Littleton et al., 2009; Ryan, 1988). Participants in these studies frequently depicted a stranger rape when asked to describe a typical rape or sexual assault. To denote the type of event that is most readily identified as unambiguous sexual assault, authors have employed the term ‘real rape script’ (Ryan 2011) or ‘real rape stereotype’ (Temkin & Krahé, 2008). This generally includes a stranger rape that takes place outside at night, during which the perpetrator attacks suddenly and uses a weapon or excessive physical force. While fearing for her life, the victim in this script is described as struggling fiercely to fight off her attacker (Ryan, 2011). Although such a stereotypical case of rape is far less common than cases of sexual violence between acquainted parties and with little or no physical force, it remains the prototype by which claims of sexual victimization are evaluated (Ryan, 2011; Temkin & Krahé, 2008).

Making sense of an experience or social interaction often involves a moral evaluation of the experience (Entman, 1993). In the perception of (sexual) victimization, this involves the identification of a moral agent – the perpetrator – who harms a moral patient: the victim (Gray & Wegner, 2009). The roles of victim and perpetrator are in direct and unambiguous opposition to each other (Christie, 1986; Dunn & Powell, 2007). Supporting this theorization is the finding that even in instances of mutual domestic violence, third parties such as care service providers and criminal justice authorities are inclined to approach the matter through the identification of a (female) victim and (male) perpetrator (Bates, 2016). In the case of sexual transgression, both

legally and socially, a broader range of sexual experiences has been recognized as unethical and victimizing in recent years, with factors such as physical force, resistance, and reporting to the police disappearing as necessary defining features (Caringella, 2008). Still, even in cases that meet the legal definition for rape, difficulties seem to arise when people are tasked to make sense of "subjective experiences [that] do not fit neatly into the contextual framework of the cultural 'rape script'" (Deming et al., 2013, p. 466).

Grey Area Sex

While the above describes an inclination to draw firm borders between what should be categorized as consensual or 'normal' sex and what as assault, both in experience and in discourse, distinctions between ethical sex and sexual transgression can be muddled and confused. Sexual encounters such as described in the interview with Grace or in the short story "Cat Person", for instance, are not easily scripted as one thing or another. In the academic arena, several (feminist) philosophers have pondered the ethically ambiguous space between 'normal' sexual encounters and those experienced or presented as rape or sexual assault. These scholars have referred to 'unwanted sex', 'unjust sex', or the 'grey area' of sexual interaction to denote a wide range of undesired and ethically questionable sexual experiences (Cahill, 2016; Gavey, 2005). Kahn and colleagues (2003), for instance, use the term "unwanted sex" to describe experiences of their female participants where they

> did not want to have sexual intercourse with the man at that time, and they made that very clear to the man, often resisting for some time. The man did not use physical force or the threat of it; rather, he begged, pleaded, pouted, and argued until the women stopped resisting and gave in to the man's pressure. (p.240)

According to Cahill (2016), grey area sex is generally "marked by hesitation, reluctance, or an ambivalent kind of unwillingness" (p. 753).

Grey area sexual interactions often consist of experiences that *feel* wrong, but cannot be adequately described (by the experiencer or third parties) in the available (legal) terminology of what is permissible and what is not (Alcoff, 2018; Gash & Harding, 2018). Several feminist scholars have noted that the existence of an experiential grey area of sexual interaction is characteristic of the intimate relationship between sexual violence and heteronormative sex. These scholars place 'normal' (hetero)sexual practices and violent ones on one continuum (Gavey, 2005; MacKinnon, 1989). As Gunnarsson (2018) notes, this implies "both the sense that ['normal'] sex and violence are often difficult to distinguish *in experience* and the sense that the *discursive* scripting of hetero-sex and sexual violence overlap" (p. 7). Clearly, what is grey is up for negotiation, leaving observers with a lot of interpretative leeway to construct their chosen version of events.

The discursive overlap between normative sexual scripts and sexual violence has been demonstrated in qualitative studies (Jeffrey & Barata, 2019; Lea & Auburn, 2001), as well as many of the same experimental studies that highlighted participants' employment of 'real rape' scripts (Littleton & Axsom, 2003; Littleton et al., 2009; Ryan, 1988). These studies showed that the seduction and hookup scripts written by participants shared notable features with what can be considered forced sex. For instance, both tended to include alcohol consumption, manipulative tactics by the man in order to obtain sex, and feelings of discomfort, shame, or remorse of the woman.

Making Sense of Gender

The sexual scripts described above take as their heteronormative starting point a passive woman and an active man. Indeed, stereotypical expectations of gender performances are essential to the logic of sexual scripts. As Burt and Estep (1981) noted almost four decades ago, "a culture's patterns of belief about appropriate gender and sexual roles determine which interactions involving sexual behavior between individuals should be called victimization" (p. 18; also Alcoff, 2014). To date, vignette studies that have conducted comparative investigations of target gender have mostly focused on male versus female victims of unambiguous stranger rape with a primary – almost exclusionary – focus on reactions of blame (overviews in Davies & Rogers, 2006; van der Bruggen & Grubb, 2014). However, as has been pointed out by other researchers, traditional vignette studies that include quantitative and directed dependent measures may not adequately and comprehensively capture social reasoning about sexual violence (Anderson & Doherty, 2008). Hence, such studies tell us little about the (gendered) sense-making practices that may lead to attributions of responsibility and blame.

To determine what counts as (male and female) victimization, to explain (away) sexual transgression, and to hold actors accountable, observers draw from interpretative repertoires (Wetherell & Potter, 1988). Interpretative repertoires are the "cultural themes, arguments and assumptions" that form "the 'common sense' basis for shared understanding" (Anderson & Doherty, 2008, p. 65-66), and include sexual scripts, rape myths, and gender stereotypes (Lea & Auburn, 2001). Potentially, observers selectively draw from interpretative repertoires and use different types of reasoning to make sense of (transgressive) sexual encounters between male-female or male-male dyads. Jeffrey and Barata (2019), for instance, argue that dominant social constructions of heterosexuality can function to justify and obfuscate sexual violence against women. Their findings revealed how male participants employed gender stereotypes such as men's uncontrollable sex drive and women's ineffective communication strategies to frame sexual violence as normal. The same constructions of heterosexuality and gender are presumably less effective in normalizing sexual violence against men. Furthermore, Reitz-Krueger et al. (2017) speak of "gendered nuances" in the framing of male and female rape myths (p. 315). Whereas female rape myths largely revolve around the notion of 'asking for it', most male rape myths boil down to the key notion that ('real') men cannot be raped (Javaid, 2015). The first set of myths

employs a language of deservingness and blame, while the latter constructs responses around denial and derogation. Similarly, Anderson and Doherty (2008) found in their studies that different metaphors were employed when participants discussed the rape of a male student or a female student. Whereas female rape was frequently explained by scientific language that referred to the possibility of calculated risks and safety management, male rape was framed as "supernatural", where its occurrence could be neither foreseen nor reasonably protected against (p. 111).

Such findings seem to tap into the (non-)normativity of male and female sexual victimization. Whereas female rape victimization is mostly acknowledged as deeply unjust, it simultaneously describes a relatively common phenomenon: one that may be accepted as a part of the 'normal world'. Male rape victimization, on the other hand, is likely to carry stronger connotations of non-normativity (Cohen, 2014). Such non-normativity potentially demands different and/or more effortful sense-making strategies.

The Current Study

As described above, until now many studies that have examined social reasoning about (transgressive) sexual encounters (e.g., overview in van der Bruggen & Grubb, 2014) have used vignettes in combination with close-ended questionnaires (Anderson & Doherty, 2008). However, designs that employ short, non-interactive vignettes may limit the understanding of the workings of observer sense-making practices, as they prevent participants "from critically scrutinizing and discovering flaws in disagreeable information, interpreting the meaning of ambiguous information to be favorable in their viewpoint, [and] selectively searching through memory" (Rothgerber et al., 2020, p. 11). Such designs also tend to direct participants' attention toward the victim, and toward specific reactions a priori selected by the researcher (Anderson & Doherty, 2008). In appreciation of these concerns, several authors have employed qualitative response methods that are better able to capture subtleties in sense-making practices (e.g., Anderson & Doherty, 2008; Deming et al., 2013). Anderson and Doherty (2008), for instance, collected conversational data about male and female rape, which they analyzed using discourse analysis. However, their vignette still presented a 'clear-cut' violent stranger rape, leaving questions of people's reactions to more ambiguous sexual encounters unanswered.

In light of this, we sought to investigate the ways in which people make sense of (i.e., describe and explain) a nonconsensual sexual encounter between a male or female student and another man. In order to do so, we conducted a qualitative study to examine how participants construed the event (i.e., *what happened?*), and in what ways they managed questions of accountability (i.e., *why did it happen in this way?*). We specifically focused on how participants utilized sexual scripts and gender stereotypes to describe what happened and as a means of attributing responsibility to the actors. In order to answer these questions, we presented participants with an interactive vignette (based on a true account) that described a nonconsensual sexual encounter and left one of the parties feeling uncertain and ashamed.

Method

Participants

A total of 52 Dutch participants (26 men and 26 women) completed the study, of which 25 participants were randomly assigned to the female target condition (12 male and 13 female participants) and 27 (14 male and 13 female) participants to the male target condition. Their ages ranged between 18 and 28 years ($M = 21.62$, $SD = 2.22$). With the exception of one participant, all were university students enrolled in varying bachelor or master programs.

Procedure

Prior to data collection, this study was approved by the relevant ethics review board. Potential participants were recruited on university campus via flyers, which were spread throughout various buildings. In addition, announcements were posted on the websites of several faculties and on social media. During this recruitment process, participants were informed that the study involved questions about sexually inappropriate behavior and thus contained potentially sensitive information. Those who chose to participate could then contact the researchers to make an appointment for participation. Requirements for participation included fluency in Dutch and a minimum age of 18. Participants received a voucher of 10 euros, or, in the case of four psychology students, 1 research credit for their participation.

Upon arrival, participants were welcomed and seated in front of a computer. They subsequently read an information form about the study before signing an informed consent and reading the instructions for the ATSS procedure (see below for more detail). By means of the information form, participants were informed that the focus of the study was on “how people think about social interactions that include inappropriate (sexual) behavior”, and that they would read a vignette that was based on interviews and newspaper articles published in recent years. Prior to starting the study, participants also read detailed instructions about every step of the ATSS procedure as outlined below. They were assured that there were no wrong answers and encouraged to voice *every* thought that came to mind, including thoughts that were not directly related to the vignette. Moreover, participants were informed that they could stop the procedure and/or ask questions at any time during the experiment. After giving participants sufficient time to read the forms, the researcher ensured the participants had no further questions about the procedure, turned on the voice recorder, and seated herself right outside the room. The entire experiment lasted approximately 30 to 35 min, and the participants were thoroughly debriefed by the researcher after its completion. All written material used in the study was in Dutch. Audio responses were transcribed verbatim, and analyzed in Dutch.

Vignette

As part of the experiment, participants read a vignette divided into five fragments. The vignette described a story narrated from the perspective of a male or female student – Lisa or Lucas

– who meets a male, relatively well-known DJ – Thomas – at a party. After drinking and talking throughout the evening, Lisa/Lucas (L) goes home with Thomas, and ends up feeling pressured to perform oral sex on him. Shortly after, L leaves. (S)he does not report the incident to the police, and describes feeling ashamed and guilty for not leaving sooner.

Numerous elements were included in the vignette in order to create a story that described an 'ambiguous' nonconsensual sexual encounter. In the vignette, both L and Thomas were drinking alcohol at the party, paid for by Thomas ("he kept on ordering rounds of beer and gin tonic"; "L says they were both very tipsy at that moment"). L went home with Thomas after he "proposed to L to have one more drink at his place". At Thomas' apartment, L told Thomas (s)he "did not want sex with him", but agreed to stay and watch TV after Thomas' first advances. In the vignette, L expressed that (s)he was bisexual, while Thomas' sexual orientation is left unmentioned. There was no mention of physical force, but Thomas continuously persisted in his advances (e.g., "it does not take long before Thomas moves closer again"). In response to some of these advances, "L does not react and keeps staring straight ahead" or "sat practically frozen on the couch". L also expressed non-consent in various ways, both verbal (e.g., "when Thomas wants to take off L's jeans, L states again that (s)he does not want that"), and non-verbal (e.g., "that really startled me, I detached myself and stood up"; "I pushed his hand away a couple of times"). L also "admits" in the vignette that: "He remarked that I was wet [stiff] down there". Finally, when Thomas "asks for a blowjob", "L obeys a single minute, but then detaches herself". L reflected in the vignette that (s)he felt ashamed and wondered "if I couldn't have left sooner".

The vignette was inspired by Grace's interview with the magazine *Babe* about her date with Aziz Ansari (Way, 2018). The English translation of the complete vignette can be found in Appendix F. We based the vignette on this interview because we were interested in how people would react to stories about 'grey area' sexual encounters as they have been portrayed online in recent years. In addition, Grace's interview was very lively and complex, and therefore gave participants ample room to 'interact' with information in the vignette and script their own versions of reality.

Articulated Thoughts in Simulated Situations (ATSS)

Participant reactions were elicited using the ATSS method (Davison et al., 1983; Zanov & Davison, 2010). In ATSS, participants are required to respond spontaneously and aloud to a particular (audio, video or written) vignette during designated speaking breaks. With this method, participants could articulate their immediate and complex thoughts relatively unimpeded as they were not obliged to answer specific questions, nor restricted by predetermined answering options (Anderson & Doherty, 2008). Furthermore, this method does not necessitate the presence of another person, meaning that participant responses were influenced by information in the vignette, their own experiences, and the social discourse available to them, but not by direct interaction with an interviewer or other conversation partner. We expected this approach to facilitate a setting in which participants could speak more freely about sensitive topics (Rayburn & Davison, 2002).

The vignette in the current study was presented in fragments using the software program *Qualtrics*. The presentation of the fragments of the vignette was timed so that each one was displayed for a minimum of 20 or 30 seconds, depending on the length of the fragment. After this time interval, an arrow appeared that allowed participants to proceed to the next fragment whenever they were ready. After each fragment, a one-minute break followed, during which the screen was blank except for the word “Break”. In this time interval, participants provided their immediate reactions to the story by voicing their thoughts aloud. After one minute, the next fragment appeared automatically. The intermittent breaks within the vignette were expected to provide more insight into the elements participants focused on to construct a version of events as the story developed. The timing of the ATSS break was based on previous research (Zanov & Davison, 2010). A pilot study indicated that the time intervals were sufficiently long to allow participants to read each fragment of the vignette and to articulate responses. Information about the exact placing of the breaks can be found in Appendix F.

Questionnaire

After the entire vignette, participants completed a questionnaire consisting of ten items. Questions pertained to victim credibility, victim blame, victim derogation, distancing of the victim, crime severity, and punishment of the perpetrator. Participants answered these questions both in a quantitative and qualitative manner. That is, they indicated their answers on a 7- point Likert scale, but also provided a spoken justification for why they selected a specific answer. Finally, participants answered several questions pertaining to demographic information. In light of the scope and aim of this article, the responses to the questionnaire and the demographic data were not included in the analysis.

Data Analysis

Data were analyzed using discourse analysis as generally employed in discursive psychology (Anderson & Doherty, 2008; Edwards & Potter, 1992; Goodman, 2017). Discourse analysis “is intended to do justice to the subtlety and complexity of lay explanations as they are deployed in natural contexts” (Wetherell & Potter, 1988, p. 183). In line with our goal, discursive psychology focuses on discourse’s action orientation and its (intended or unintended) consequences, rather than treating discourse as a reflection of individual cognition or motivation (Edwards & Potter, 1993; Wetherell & Potter, 1988). Its key aim is to examine “what is accomplished in talk”, and how this is accomplished (Goodman, 2017, p. 144).

In the course of careful repeated readings, we focused our analysis on what actions were accomplished in participants’ accounts, and through which discursive strategies they were accomplished. We specifically sought to identify information regarding how participants’ described and evaluated the events, and what interpretative repertoires (Wetherell & Potter, 1988) they tapped into in their construction of events, including sexual scripts and related gender stereotypes. The discursive action model (DAM; Edwards & Potter, 1993) guided our analytical

approach. The DAM consists of three principles that aid in investigating attributional reasoning in everyday discourse. The first principle stresses that attributions in discourse should be studied as *actions* that accomplish something (e.g., manage questions of blame). The second principle underscores speakers as interested parties who "manage 'interest' by performing attributions indirectly or implicitly" (p. 24), primarily by employing strategies to present their accounts as factual. The last principle highlights the role of agency and accountability, not only in the speaker's description and explanation of the events, but also as a key concern of the speaker him- or herself.

Our analysis focused exclusively on participants' ATSS data (i.e., their spontaneous reactions to the vignette). In initial readings, the first author broadly coded sections of the ATSS data in the software program MAXQDA (https://www.maxqda.com/). All descriptions of the event were coded, as well as descriptions of the actors and their behaviors, and explanations offered for these behaviors. Noting a tendency of participants to refer to what they found (ab)normal, or (un)expected, a subsequent reading included coding descriptions and explanations as such. We conducted several lexical searches and quantitative comparisons, but since this was not the main focus or basis of our analysis, the broadly coded sections were then selected for detailed readings and critical analysis.

Discourse analysis, and qualitative data analysis more generally, is interpretatively demanding. To enhance the quality of our analysis and validity of our findings, we continuously moved back and forth between the data and our developing argument. Whereas the first author conducted the main part of the analysis, she discussed findings and interpretations with the second author in regular meetings. The first author additionally consulted an academic researcher who possessed expertise in psychological discourse analysis and social reasoning about sexual victimization. In the realization that our interpretations are not the only ones possible, we also included numerous verbatim extracts to enable readers to evaluate our arguments. All extracts have been labeled by number (#), participant gender (female: F, and male: M) and target condition (female target: FT, and male target: MT).

Results

We found that participants generally portrayed the scenario presented in the vignette as non-threatening. To do so, they strategically employed various discursive strategies to construct the situation as normal, L's response to the situation as abnormal, and (hence) L as responsible. A summary of these results can be found in Table 1. It is important to emphasize that although we uphold a certain structure in the reporting of our results, discursive strategies relating to the construction of the events and to the accountability of the actors were interlinked.

In the following sections, we first discuss how participants constructed the event, including Thomas' actions, as normal in different senses of the word: it was framed as predictable, non-severe, and in little need of explanation. Participants drew upon the hookup script to emphasize the predictable sequence of the events, and more implicitly employed the sexual assault script as

contrasting discourse to diminish the severity of the event. Within this framework, Thomas' behavior was dismissed as in little need of explanation. Although participants generally contended that his actions were not what they ought to have been, many did not mark his behavior as particularly strange or unforeseeable, but portrayed it as largely in accordance with hookup behavior and gender stereotypes.

Subsequently, we focus on the ways in which participants constructed L as both abnormal and accountable. Participants implied that L's response to the situation was different from what might be expected, and strategically portrayed L's behavior as incomprehensible through self-comparisons. Participants emphasized L's reaction as requiring justification, and sought explanations within L's state of mind and personality, rather than in the potentially coercive circumstances. As such, they positioned L's 'subjective' experience as detached from a reality that was 'in fact' relatively non-threatening. In part through the construction of L's response as different from what is normal, L was also attributed responsibility for the events. By emphasizing the event as scripted, participants could hold L accountable for not 'appropriately' reading, and acting in accordance with what the situation required. They furthermore emphasized L's agency to suggest the ease with which (s)he could have resisted or left the situation, and hence to construct the sexual encounter as consensual.

In the final section, we elaborate upon the differences we noted between the male and female target conditions. These differences were not as pronounced as might have been expected, as similar scripts were employed in response to both conditions. However, participants seemed to draw more easily upon the hookup script, gender stereotypes and miscommunication discourse to explain the encounter between Thomas and Lisa compared to the encounter between Thomas and Lucas. Consequently, participants more explicitly constructed Lisa as responsible for failing to recognize the situation as a hookup, and its associated risks for her.

Table 1

Summary of Results: Discursive Accomplishments and Strategies in Participants' ATSS Responses

Discursive Accomplishment Discursive strategies	Description (including sub-strategies)
Event as Normal	The event resembles a normal sexual encounter, and is hence not particularly threatening.
1) Scripting as hookup	Reference to a predictable sequence of events, which is likely to include sexual interaction (e.g., F29 FT); use of generalizing language; reference to 'common knowledge' to indicate particular phrases and actions as signaling sexual intent (e.g., M40 MT, M36 FT).
2) Distancing from sexual assault	Obscuring of coercive elements in vignette such as non-consent and oral sex (e.g., F6 FT); implicit contrasting of situation to 'what could have happened' to diminish severity of event (e.g., F22 FT, F17 MT).
3) Portraying Thomas' behavior as self-explanatory	Alignment of Thomas' behavior with hookup script (e.g., M41 FT); reference to gender stereotypes to depict Thomas' behavior as unsurprising (e.g., M16 FT, F32 FT); employment of miscommunication discourse to diminish Thomas' intentionality and hence blameworthiness (e.g., M9 FT, F11 FT).
L as Abnormal	L's reaction to the situation is different from what can generally be expected, and L is 'detached' from a non-threatening reality.
1) Framing L's reaction as incomprehensible	Use of language such as 'strange' and 'naïve', and self-comparisons to emphasize L's abnormality. Suggestions that L's behavior requires explanation and justification (e.g., M9 FT, F1 MT).
2) Seeking explanations within L	Reference to factors such as alcohol, fear and panic that locate the cause for L's behavior in L's (altered) state of mind rather than in external circumstances (e.g., F33 MT, M46 MT, M52 MT).
L as Responsible	L should have been aware of how the event was likely to unfold, and should have displayed more forceful attempts to resist sex and leave.

1) Emphasizing event as scripted	Reference to common knowledge and predictable sequence of events to emphasize L's responsibility to 'accurately' read events and limit L's appropriate actions to counter progression of events, thereby holding L accountable (e.g., F2 FT, M31 MT).
2) Appealing to L's agency	Emphasis on ease with which L could have acted differently; formulations that express L's intentionality and agency (e.g., M47 FT, M30 MT, F13 FT).
Comparison male and female target condition	The situation in the female target condition was constructed as following a more fixed sequence of events; Lisa was hence depicted as more responsible for knowing and breaking with the script in an 'appropriate' manner.

Event as Normal

Participants generally framed the event as an unfortunate situation in which Thomas went 'too far', but not as something that carried the connotations of sexual violence. To construct the event as 'in fact' relatively normal and (hence) non-threatening, participants used three main discursive strategies, as well as various sub-strategies (see also Table 1 for an overview). Broadly, participants strategically constructed the encounter as (1) in line with a hookup, (2) different from a "real" sexual assault, and (3) the actions of Thomas as predictable.

Scripting the Event as a Hookup

Participants placed the behavior of going home with someone after a night out in a framework in which it is 'reasonable' to expect sexual interaction. To do so, they drew upon a particular sexual script that describes encounters of casual sex, or hookups. As described in the theoretical framework, a hookup script describes a meetup between two people who are not well-acquainted at a bar or party, and includes actions such as drinking alcohol, going home together, and initiating sexual activity (Holman & Sillars, 2012). All these elements were present in the vignette. Participants provided support for the reasonableness of anticipating a sexual encounter by referring to what 'generally' happens in these cases: "In the majority of these type of situations it indeed ends between the sheets" (M41 FT), and "Usually it is the case after having been out for an evening, and someone asks you to go home with them to have another drink … then a drink does symbolize something else" (F29 FT). Utilizing the hookup script, participants could also pinpoint particular actions that "symbolize" or "signal" particular intentions. Participants treated these implicit meanings as part of the common knowledge regarding the 'rules' of how casual sexual interactions evolve. Presumably everyone knows, for instance, that "People don't ask 'will you go home with me to drink another beer?' for no reason" (M40 MT). Although "something like

that does not necessarily have to lead to sex … you do then often think 'oh something more than just a nice conversation will happen here'" (M36 FT). By drawing upon the hookup script, the sequence of the events in the vignette was thus constructed as common and predictable.

Distancing the Event from a "Real" Sexual Assault

In their reactions, participants tended to indirectly distance the scenario from a situation of 'real' sexual assault, which would – based on the 'real rape' script – presumably have included clear markers of coercion and violence. To do so, participants strategically obscured elements that suggested conflict and non-consent. For instance, although most participants (42 out of 52) initially declared that L had clearly indicated (s)he was not interested in sex, they subsequently focused on the ways in which L failed to express refusal convincingly, suggesting for instance that if L "*really* didn't want it (...) then he could have gone home" (F1 MT; additional examples are displayed in the section *L as responsible*).

Additionally, whereas the occurrence of oral sex could have been interpreted as that which most closely resembles sexual violence, participants only fleetingly focused on this particular event in their response, and often omitted it completely. Instead, participants tended to focus their response to the last fragment on L's leaving, by saying things like "I am glad she got out in time" (F22 FT), "it could have been much worse" (F17 MT), and "he did just leave and nothing happened" (M34 MT). References to "getting out in time" and "could have been much worse" reflect participants' comparisons with the alternative of "real" sexual assault. Compared to what *could* have happened, the current events were easily framed as not particularly severe: it was "good that Thomas also left it at that because he could, of course, also have pushed on" (F29 FT). Indeed, participants rarely described the event as coercive or unsafe. As one participant suggested, "it is something that you can simply talk about with your girlfriends. And eventually maybe even laugh about it, that it was all so awkward" (F20 FT). Only one participant explicitly validated an explanation related to coercion:

> And I think that seeing the context of the first stories, it is quite clear here that also the part where she, like, blows him voluntarily, there is some form of intimidation or coercion in it. Ehm, so that that is against her will. I think that you could say that considering the context. (M43 FT)

Notably, whereas words such as 'coercive' and 'unsafe' signify interactions in the realm of sexual violence, words like "awkward" (F20 FT) or "super uncomfortable" (F17 MT) may be discursively employed to describe scenarios that amount to bad hookups, but still 'just' sex (Gavey, 2005; Hindes & Fileborn, 2019; Lea & Auburn, 2001).

The occurrence of oral sex was furthermore framed as non-coercive by depicting it as either a 'question' of Thomas, or an 'initiative' by L. In the first case, participants reiterated Thomas' question without including L's immediate response of briefly performing oral sex. Participant 6,

for instance, skipped from Thomas asking for a blowjob to L leaving the apartment: “Yes, subsequently he goes another step further and asks if she wants to blow him. I think that that is kind of the point where she thinks like: ‘Okay, I really need to go now’” (F6 FT). In this way, any conflict between the request and response of the actors disappeared from the narrative, masking the potential transgression of the event. The event no longer clearly included a moral agent who acts, and a moral patient who is affected by that act (Gray & Wegner, 2009). By exclusively focusing on Thomas’ request without including the reaction, participants also effectively freed themselves of the task of explaining *why* L ‘gave in’.

Portraying Thomas’ Behavior as Self-Explanatory

Participants generally agreed that Thomas was “going too far”, and being “inappropriate” (e.g., F1 MT; F2 FT; M4 FT; F5 MT; M16 FT; F33 MT) when he persisted in his sexual advances after L had indicated that (s)he was not interested. As one participant concluded: “it is absolutely clear that Thomas goes way too far here. That ... few people will disagree with that” (F33 MT). However, by aligning his behavior with normative sexual scripts and gender stereotypes, participants also portrayed Thomas’ behavior as predictable and hence not particularly shocking: “I do find the assumption of the guy in question understandable. By which I am not saying that it is right, but it is understandable” (M41 FT). In this way, participants seemed to deemphasize Thomas’ intentionality and diminish his blameworthiness. As stated by one participant, for instance:

> I don’t think it is necessarily wrong that Thomas tries something because, eh, yes, you know she goes home with him and of course that is no, eh, green light to do everything and assume that sex will also immediately follow and all those things. But I do think that, eh, that there is a certain signal maybe, that Thomas has understood a certain signal coming from her. (M9 FT)

Here, the participant tentatively suggested that although Thomas *should* not have assumed sex as a given, it was not particularly strange that he did. As has been found in previous research, participants borrowed from a discourse of miscommunication to explain, and at times justify, Thomas’ sexual advances and persistence (Frith & Kitzinger, 1997; Hindes & Fileborn, 2019; Jeffrey & Barata, 2019). In the extract above, this was illustrated by framing as plausible “that Thomas has understood a certain signal coming from her”. Participants additionally endorsed the possibility that L was “playing hard to get” (M9 FT; F11 FT; M16 FT; M48 MT; M50 FT) or “shy” or “insecure” (F1 MT; M16 FT; M48 MT), and in need of a little more encouragement. For instance:

> And well, [Thomas] actually noticed that Lisa did nothing against it. Or well, she did take her, ehm, his hand away, but he could have perhaps seen that as, well, playful, or he did not realize because he was very drunk. Yes, you don't know. (F11 FT)

Here, the participant initially described Lisa's non-verbal refusal as 'doing nothing', and while correcting herself, still suggested that Lisa's behavior could be easily misinterpreted. Hence, participants suggested the possibility that Thomas was not fully aware of his actions, and portrayed the misinterpretation of signals as a plausible explanation for his persistence. Framing the event as essentially a matter of miscommunication downgraded its severity, and constructed Thomas' actions as lacking intent, thereby diminishing his responsibility.

In order to normalize Thomas' behavior, participants not only drew upon 'common knowledge' based on scripts and miscommunication discourse, but also on intermingled gender stereotypes. Specifically, participants explained the event by framing Thomas as a particular type of man: presumably, a man who wanted sex, and was drunk on top of that. As such, both the event and Thomas' actions required little elaboration: "Sounds like quite a standard story of how that type of youth will behave themselves after they invite someone to their own apartment" (M16 FT). Another participant described Thomas as a "kind of a puberty boy: 'Oh I'm taking a girl home, something is going to happen', those kinds of things" (F18 FT). Portraying Thomas' actions as "typically boy-like" (F32 FT), thus as simply an instance of 'boys being boys' (Hlavka, 2014), precluded the necessity to exert more explanatory effort to account for his behavior. Indeed, in general, even though most participants did not approve of Thomas' behavior, they generally spent few words on explaining or excusing it. The reason for this might be that "the more socially entrenched the understandings, the less these understandings seem to require articulation" (Presser, 2013, p.85). Utilizing "group membership categories" (Edwards & Potter, 1992, p. 160) such as a "type of youth" or "puberty boy" also resulted in a reduction of Thomas' individual responsibility. At times, the 'explanation' sufficed that Thomas "remains a man and she the woman" (…) I find it logical that he then tries it again" (F23 FT).

Thus, although Thomas' behavior was denounced as inappropriate, the ease with which it was placed within a familiar script of a normative sexual encounter and aligned with miscommunication discourse and traditional gender roles seemed to make it more excusable, or at the very least, less shocking.

Lisa/Lucas as Abnormal

The previous section elaborated upon the ways in which participants constructed the event, including Thomas' actions, as 'normal', i.e., predictable, not severe, and self-explanatory. The construction of the event as normal both required and resulted in a portrayal of L as *abnormal.* In order to maintain an account of the event as non-threatening, participants framed L's reaction as (1) strange and foolish, and (2) as something that could be explained by L's personality or mental state rather than by external (coercive) circumstances. In this way, participants could also

acknowledge that L might 'feel violated' by the encounter, and express sympathy for L's experience without treating it as indicative of what 'actually happened'. Hindes and Fileborn's (2019) analysis of media reports on Grace's encounter with Aziz Ansari uncovered similar sense-making strategies that located the 'problem' of the encounter in Grace's "*subjective* interpretation of the encounter" (p. 9, emphasis added).

Framing L's Reaction as Incomprehensible

Although participants were quick to denounce Thomas' actions as inappropriate, it was notable how little participants elaborated upon this. Instead, participants predominantly focused on L's reaction to the situation, and strategically framed this as abnormal. They did so in various ways, including by direct references to L as "strange", "naïve", and "incomprehensible", by contrasting L's behavior to how participants themselves would act, and by emphasizing the need to explain L's behavior. Participants seemed to suggest that the behavior most in need of explanation was L's decision to stay, her/his limited physical resistance, and her/his engagement in oral sex. These elements might also be considered those that contradict prescriptive behaviors of a "legitimate victim" in a situation of sexual assault (Temkin & Krahé, 2008). In the following two extracts, for instance, participants quickly established that Thomas "is going too far", which is not "as it should be", but subsequently indicated that "the question is" why L reacted the way (s)he did. As such, participants seemed to hint that it was in fact L's behavior that required explanation and justification:

> And then I think like, that guy has gone too far, that is stupid. He should have actually stopped and. But the question is, well, is that girl then so scared that she feels forced or, or whatever, to do this, because she does feel free enough after to say: 'I don't feel like it and I'm going to stop'. But she is, though, she is, she does consent to it. That, that I then again find strange. Or well, strange. For me, incomprehensible so to say. Because maybe I just cannot place myself in that girl very well, but I would say 'Girl, get up, go home'. (M9 FT)

> Look, I get that Thomas thinks that Lucas is up for something seeing as he goes home with Thomas. But once on the couch, when Lucas says no and yet sits back down again, and Thomas tries it again … is actually of Thomas … is not really how it should be. But that Lucas freezes is to me always a very strange … because I think like if someone touches you while you would not want that, well I would never permit it. (F1 MT)

Both these participant responses included self-comparisons and evaluative labels that suggested L's abnormality. Participants contrasted L's behavior to how they themselves would act and explicitly labeled L as 'different'. Through this comparison, L was designated as incomprehensible, and foolish, while participants themselves were presented as sensible and thus unlikely to find themselves in a similar situation.

Seeking Explanations within L

As mentioned before, participants rarely raised the suggestion that L did not feel able to leave due to external circumstances such as a coercive atmosphere and pressure from Thomas. Instead, explanations were generally sought in L's own (altered) mental state. L's sense of reality was presented as diminished and confused by portraying it as under the influence of alcohol, shock, and fear: "because well, under the influence you are just not completely yourself" (F33 MT), and you might be "a little overwhelmed by the situation, and perhaps somewhat fearful" (M46 MT; also F8 MT; M30 MT). For instance, participant 52 focused on Lucas' anxiousness as a reason for staying: "And from Lucas, well, yes I do get him on the one hand, that just because of the nerves he does not know how easily he can actually leave" (M52 MT). Other participants focused on the potential influence of alcohol:

> And eventually he does something that she says that she does not like. Well, that's not proper. But, well. There is probably booze involved, there is booze involved. And so I get that she cannot push away from her, and that she just goes home and just says 'Later, I'm going home'. (F20 FT)

Although the participants offered different explanations for L's behavior, they simultaneously subtly portrayed it as something unreasonable. For instance, participant 52 mentioned an "on the one hand" without mentioning what he would place "on the other hand", but the contents of the counter-position are implied by stating that Lucas did not realize that *actually* he could have easily left. Additionally, participant 20 labeled Thomas' behavior as inappropriate before moving on to alcohol as a potential explanation. As it turned out, however, this explanation was offered to 'justify' Lisa's reaction, whereas Thomas' behavior was not elaborated upon.

Explanations based on L's (altered) mental state had several practical consequences. They placed L in the realm of the abnormal that was detached from a non-threatening 'objective reality', and thereby somewhat diminished L's agency and culpability (F8 MT: "it also isn't his own fault because he obviously for a moment didn't know what to do"), without transferring complete responsibility to Thomas. Potentially, this also allowed participants to express sympathy for L's 'subjective' experience, without rendering that experience an accurate reflection of the 'actual' events. Whereas Participant 23 sought an explanation for the event in Lisa's alcohol consumption and ineffective communication for instance, this participant also expressed that "it is very sad for Lisa because, well, you would not want anyone to experience something like this, that you feel sexually used" (F23 FT).

Lisa/Lucas as Responsible

The previous section demonstrated that although participants provided some justification for L's reaction, they thereby also implied that L's behavior was not as would be expected from a 'normal' or 'reasonable' person. The suggestion that L failed to be aware of what is generally

presumed common knowledge, and did not act as other people would, did not only function to depict L as abnormal, but also as accountable. Participants strategically positioned L as responsible by (1) emphasizing the event as clearly scripted, and (2) appealing to L's agency to suggest (s)he could have acted differently. Thus, participants suggested that L should have recognized the situation as a hookup, and, if (s)he did not want to perform in accordance with that script, (s)he should have undertaken one of a very few justified actions in order for the event to be recognized as sexual assault.

Emphasizing the Event as Scripted

As demonstrated in the first section, participants treated the story described in the vignette as one that is easily identifiable as a hookup script, in which certain actions (e.g., going home together; drinking together) point toward the likelihood of certain outcomes (e.g., sexual activity). By scripting the situation as a typical hookup, participants insinuated both that actions within such a situation follow a fixed sequence, and that people are generally aware of how the event is likely to unfold. As such, L was depicted as accountable for not taking sufficient note of the possible implications of entering the given situation, and for not performing the appropriate actions in order to escape from that situation. Participants implied, for instance, that L should have recognized the situation as a hookup, including the anticipation of sex as a key script component:

> Yes he has just really used her, but I also find that it has really been her own, eh, responsibility. She has been very naïve and she knew, *you know*, beforehand of course already that when a guy asks you if you'll go home with him, what can happen then. Well, that is thus exactly what happened. (F32 FT)

As illustrated in this extract, participants referred to 'common knowledge' – the things that *of course* people *know* – to construct L both as abnormal and responsible. By labelling Lisa as naïve, participants suggested that Lisa was in some way abnormal because she did not sufficiently realize, or act upon, what people generally understand as 'reality'. Participants additionally expressed that even if Thomas acted inappropriately, L should have foreseen the development of these events, and was thus assigned responsibility for deciding to go home with Thomas.

By emphasizing a fixed and thus predictable sequence of events, participants also implied that only a limited range of actions were available to L if (s)he wished to counter the development of events, and specifically, refuse sex. Participants implied that a 'clear' rejection of sex should be articulated explicitly, repeated several times, and accompanied by specific actions. In contrast, participants framed L's actions – particularly going home with Thomas and staying after his first advances – as liable to misinterpretation. To portray L's refusal to sex as unclear and unconvincing, participants again drew upon the hookup script and miscommunication discourse (also Frith & Kitzinger, 1997; Jeffrey & Barata, 2019). Although L articulated that (s)he had no interest in sex and pushed Thomas' hand away, these actions were attributed only a temporary effectiveness and

validity (also Ehrlich, 2001). For instance, where Participant 2 initially stated that Lisa "clearly indicated that she did not want sex", the participant subsequently noted within the same break that when Thomas persisted "he in that sense does go too far … [but] well, she should have actually also indicated that it is not okay" (F2 FT).

As such, participants suggested that L's behavior made it reasonable, or at least not particularly shocking, that Thomas continued his sexual advances. Another participant mentioned that Lucas "agrees to stay and continue with the movie", and he was "not surprised that at this moment eh… Thomas now goes through with it" (M31 MT). Although the participant did not explicitly state *why* he was not surprised that Thomas persisted, the temporal ordering of the events indicated a connection to the fact that Lucas did not leave. Most participants agreed that the most "appropriate" action to undertake when one is not interested in sex was to leave: "I would have left I think. I also do not understand why he does not do that. If you feel uncomfortable with it, then you should just go (M46 MT). In this extract, the participant discursively transitioned from using "I" to "he" to the general "you" to imply a universal rule that ought to be followed in a situation like this when one is not interested in sex. Yet another participant noted "How super stupid that Lisa still stays, while it was quite clear what the intentions of Thomas were. Namely, to go to bed with her", and concluded "Not that it's really entirely her fault, but it is also not Thomas' fault because she had not communicated well" (F23 FT). Clearly, this participant suggested that articulating refusal to sex while staying at the apartment amounted to ineffective communication.

In these responses, it appeared that the more defined and fixed a script was portrayed to be, the fewer actions were framed as permissible for L. In other words, the more clearly the intention of sex was emphasized, the more pressing the demand that L express non-consent by leaving the situation or alternatively by hitting and shouting. A course of action that included stating one's position, potentially followed by an agreement to watch a movie, were not accorded the status of valid alternative responses. Hence, L was held accountable for not breaking with the anticipated script and refusing sex in a sufficient manner.

Appealing to L's Agency

The previous section demonstrated how participants constructed only a few actions as 'correct responses' to the given situation, effectively limiting L's agency. Yet L could only be held accountable for not performing these actions precisely through the suggestion that (s)he could have easily acted differently if (s)he had wanted to. Indeed, participants portrayed L as having 'in fact' sufficient agency to be able to express and enact their refusal freely. As explicitly stated by one participant, for example, "At any moment she can still say 'I want to go', but she doesn't do that", leading the participant to conclude that "it is not good what he [Thomas] does, but she could have easily prevented this" (M47 FT).

Participants not only emphasized L's agency when suggesting that L might have easily acted in a way that would have resolved the situation, but also framed L's staying and engagement in oral sex as intentional. Whereas the vignette's description of L "obeying" when Thomas asked

for a blowjob might have been interpreted as a response to an authoritative and coercive demand, for instance, participants generally employed reformulations such as "agreeing" (e.g., M9 FT; M46 MT) to point to initiative-taking and egalitarianism between parties. Participants noted that "he [Lucas] lets himself be persuaded" (F1 MT), "that he [Lucas] has stopped it, and subsequently blows him" (M30 MT), and "she has blown him for a while, and only after that stopped" (F13 FT). In these responses, "the appeal to agency actually helps to mystify the power dynamics that are in play" (Cahill, 2016, p.756-757), thus depicting the oral sex as L's own initiative, and hence part of a normal sexual encounter. Indeed, by framing L's behavior as agentic, participants tentatively precluded the possibility of sexual assault:

> Now of course, the question is, or well, I am just saying something right, the question is, is this now for instance, has he, has he now raped her? Because he asked it, she agrees, in the first instance. And she, and she, and she blows him. So ehm, and she then stops, and then she leaves. (M9 FT)

Comparison Male and Female Target Condition

The previous sections have illustrated how participants construed the event described in the vignette as 'normal' and non-threatening, while they depicted L as abnormal and responsible. Although this tendency was found in both the male and female target conditions, several differences were noted in the overall participant responses.

Construction of the Event

First, as also reflected in the extracts mentioned in previous sections (e.g., *Event as Normal*: F29 FT; M36 FT; F32 FT), references to the hookup script and Thomas' predictable behavior were more prominent as explanatory tools in the female target condition compared to the male target condition. Especially in reaction to the first fragments, participants described the encounter at the party between Thomas and Lisa as a "standard story, not very much out of the ordinary" (F27 FT), or a "normal interaction between man and woman" (M4 FT) in a setting where "it often happens that men pursue the women" (M10 FT). Subsequently, participants constructed the act of drinking and going home together as a normal precursor to sexual engagements: "the general expectation within the student world is that you then go to bed with someone" (F23 FT). Even at later moments in the story, when Lisa had indicated that she was not interested in sex, participants normalized the encounter. Specifically, by employing sexual scripts and gender stereotypes, participants proposed that the encounter between Thomas and Lisa might have been a "classic miscommunication" (M41 FT; also M4 FT; F23 FT; F29 FT; M36 FT), where Thomas "just really didn't realize the signals that she gave" (F11 FT). As described more elaborately by the following participant:

> Yes this is something that really, what I gather from other stories in my surroundings, or well, that it happens more often that a boy is with a girl and that she resists, and eh. But how I

> understand it from other guys is that they interpret it more like she is playing hard to get. So that she does want it, only does not want to admit it (…) And so she should be very clear about that I think. If you're not clear about that then it becomes difficult. Then the guy does not know exactly what is going on. (M50 FT)

In this extract, the participant drew upon 'common knowledge' about sexual interactions between men and women that he gleaned from stories of friends and acquaintances as a means to support his argument. Presumably, the encounter between Thomas and Lisa was more easily framed as a 'typical' hookup because normative sexual scripts mostly revolve around a heterosexual dyad (Wiederman, 2005). As such, 'common knowledge' derived from sexual scripts and gender stereotypes provided participants with more tools to construct a nonconsensual sexual encounter between Thomas and Lisa as normal.

Instead, a less coherent framework seemed available for making sense of the encounter between Thomas and Lucas, presumably because "normally you just don't hear these types of stories" (M34 MT). As explicitly stated by one participant:

> That is intense to read. There is a turning point in the story, I had not expected that. Especially because they are two men you could, you would more quickly expect it of a man and a woman if the woman goes home with the man. (F37 MT)

Whereas Thomas' behavior was in general easily dismissed as typical and unsurprising, participants thus also tended to describe it as unusual or strange in the male target condition. As suggested by participants, if one had not been aware of the topic of the study, "it is of course a weird turn of events" (F26 MT; also M31 MT). Participants indicated that Thomas was "weird and really enormously inappropriate" (F7 MT), "just weird" (F17 MT), and that it was "strange that Thomas continued while Lucas clearly used his hand to signal 'stop, I don't want this'" (F8 MT). Participants even expressed they already found it strange that Thomas invited Lucas to his apartment (M34 MT; M42 MT).

Although participants generally seemed less prone to construct the encounter between Thomas and Lucas as 'normal', for instance by framing it as a 'typical' case of miscommunication or misunderstanding, they also drew upon normative sexual scripts to make sense of the encounter. Indeed, it should be noted that even if descriptors that signaled abnormality seemed more prominent in the male target condition, most participants expressed no surprise regarding the gender of the actors, and the first fragments of the vignette were generally described as "quite a normal story" (F5 MT; M52 MT). Presumably, participants knew to expect a sexual encounter – as they had been informed of prior to the study – and so were quick to place the (initial) interaction between Thomas and Lucas within a hookup scenario. As such, "Lucas could have expected that something like that was going to happen" (F8 MT). Although not many participants explicitly

mentioned the actors' presumed sexual orientation, two participants employed Lucas' bisexual orientation to normalize the outcome of the event:

> In that situation I can imagine that Lucas maybe lets himself be seduced to doing too much that he actually does not want to do. Compared to if he were a guy who is just self-confidently homosexual and eh… is also open about that. He indeed also says that he is bisexual, so maybe he is still experimenting a bit. (F1 MT)

Here, Lucas was constructed as an "insecure boy who didn't really know what he wanted" and "because of that ambiguity Thomas thought things that were not correct" (M48 MT). These responses also demonstrated once more how the normalization of the event corresponded with responsibility assignment.

Assignment of Responsibility

The fact that participants portrayed the situation as more clearly scripted for Lisa seemed to result in a greater assignment of responsibility to her compared to Lucas. Lisa in particular was expected to be able to read a hookup script into the scenario, *as well as* the possible risk this entailed for her. Participant 2, for instance, stated that:

> It is a risk which she takes, and she can't properly lock her bike, which means that she was really not clear-headed anymore. But well, on the other hand it should just be possible that she goes with him (...) but yes, ehm, it is somewhat naïve to immediately go home with him. (F2 FT)

In this extract, the participant implied that even if ideally "it *should* just be possible" to go home together, in 'reality' this type of action amounted to risky and naïve behavior. This relation between scripts and responsibility assignment has also been found in Anderson and Doherty's (2008) study, where female rape was construed as a predictable risk that could be anticipated and thus managed by the (pre-)victim. The following extract aptly illustrates how participants portrayed the situation for Lisa as particularly scripted and thus risky:

> So it is a situation that you maybe actually want to prevent, maybe that is indeed almost the painful conclusion. If you are both under the influence, you are a boy and a girl in such a situation but you are not interested, just don't even go home with each other at that point in time. Because then you prevent that sort of situation. Not to place blame somewhere, but purely as, yes, conclusion. (M41 FT)

This extract demonstrates how participants' utilization of scripts and gender stereotypes left particularly little room for Lisa to act 'appropriately'. In this case, the participant presented a

particularly deterministic viewpoint in which he tentatively suggested that the only "solution" for Lisa would have been not to go home together at all.

Strikingly, many participants (14 out of 25) at least once explicitly described Lisa or her behavior as "naïve", "foolish" or "not clever". In contrast, only a few participants (4 out of 27) evaluated Lucas and his decisions similarly, and none of them used the words "naïve" or "foolish". Instead, they employed milder expressions such as "not so very smart" (F5 MT), "not very sensible" (F25 MT; M44 MT), and "it would have been more sensible if" (M28 MT). Potentially, while Lucas may have also been expected to be familiar with the hookup script, for him this did not necessarily entail a situation of risk: "Lucas and Thomas seem to me like normal friends, not much can go wrong I think" (M21 MT). As articulated by another participant:

> Yes, maybe this sounds stupid but as a guy it is ehm, that is perhaps easier because you are not warned for it as much. Ehm, so I get what Lucas does and until now the situation is also not particularly strange. (M33 MT)

Hence, Lucas' actions were initially constructed as more excusable, whereas for Lisa they were identified as 'precipitating victim behavior'. As such, Lisa was judged more severely than Lucas was for behavior such as going home with Thomas, and staying at his place after her initial rejection of sex.

General Discussion

The present study investigated how observers made sense of a sexual encounter that included expressions of non-consent, but did not adhere to scripts of sexual violence as employed in common discourse. We were particularly interested in what interpretative repertoires participants drew from in order to describe the event, and determine whom to hold accountable.

Our analysis demonstrated that participants strategically constructed the situation as normal, and L's actions as abnormal. The situation was portrayed as normal predominantly by reference to what has been labeled the hookup script (Holman & Sillars, 2012; Littleton et al., 2009). This script was made salient by participants through discursive strategies of describing predictable stages of the event, speaking of common knowledge, and using hypothetical examples and general descriptions in their responses (Frith & Kitzinger, 2001). Similar to the findings by Jeffrey and Barata (2019), invoking the hookup script and related miscommunication discourse enabled participants to frame the sequence of events as predictable and not particularly severe, and Thomas' behavior as unsurprising. Elements that could have been scripted as indicative of sexual assault – specifically, the various expressions of non-consent and the oral sex – were instead largely obscured or viewed as indicators of L's incomprehensible behavior.

Contrary to the depiction of the event as common and understandable, L was construed as abnormal. This was done explicitly by using words such as 'strange' and 'incomprehensible', but

also achieved through self-comparisons. Furthermore, the search for explanations of L's behavior functioned to indicate that this behavior was not as one would expect. Explanations were mostly sought in L's (temporary) mental state, which was described as panicky and inebriated, or in L's naivety. These explanations also positioned L as at least in part accountable for what had happened. L was specifically held responsible for not being sufficiently aware of, and inadequately breaking with, the invoked script. Participants rarely entertained the possible explanation that L did not feel able to leave due to external (coercive) circumstances. Their sense-making practices hence echoed those previously found in rape perception research, where complainants were evaluated "against the standard of the 'normal' subject of legal discourse – the rational, autonomous, freely-choosing individual of classic liberal theory" (Ehrlich, 2001, p. 92).

In our comparison of observers' sense-making strategies in female versus male target conditions, both similarities and differences were found. In both conditions, participants tended to (initially) frame events in line with the hookup script, and made little explicit reference to gender stereotypes. Still, some support was found for the suggestion that "Our understandings of the normative cultural scripts (or stereotypes) for male and female (hetero)sexuality are likely to be lenses through which we read all manner of relevant detail for assessing safety and risk" (Gavey, 2005, p. 209). Results pointed to the likelihood that, compared to the male target condition, participants scripted the expected sequence of events for Lisa as more definite and fixed. In this condition, the narrative of miscommunication was particularly prominent, and only a very few actions were deemed appropriate for her. Similar to the findings by Anderson and Doherty (2008), participants seemed to hold Lisa more responsible for knowing the applicable script *and* the risk this entailed for her. They were more inclined to describe Lisa and her behavior as foolish and naïve compared to milder evaluative descriptions of Lucas and his behavior.

Our results demonstrate that besides evaluating events and actors in terms of 'bad' versus 'good', an equally powerful evaluative framework seems to consist of judgments of what is 'normal' (expected, familiar) versus 'abnormal' (weird, unrelatable). Previous research has similarly suggested that dominant discourses of sex and gender can function to normalize situations of sexual coercion and violence (e.g., Hlavka, 2014; Jeffrey & Barata, 2019). As a consequence of detaching the subjective and 'abnormal' experience of L from a predictable and non-severe 'objective' normality, the event was rendered largely non-threatening.

Practice Implications

In a time where definitions of sexual assault are increasingly broadening, and people are more likely to use a variety of (online) platforms to share negative sexual experiences, our study may provide important insights regarding third-party reaction to such stories. Whereas reactions on social media are typically limited to overt acknowledgments or rejections of the situation as sexual assault and the actor as victim, this study has shed more light on the sense-making practices that underlie such judgments. Scholars have stated that "a defining characteristic of an institutionally-*dominant* ideological frame is its capacity to be naturalized – to be accepted as

commonsensical" (Ehrlich, 2001, p. 65) and that "what gets stated in an explanation is crucially dependent on what is already shared knowledge" (Draper, 1988, p.29). Hence, explanations that participants provided in this experimental context can give insight into what ideas are presumed common knowledge in their own social environments. Hookup scripts were for instance firmly embedded in participants' understandings of student life. Although scripts can be useful tools to make sense of one's experiences, it seems recommendable to challenge not just constructions of 'real rape', but also scripts of normative sexual encounters. Refusal to portray (sexual) encounters as involving fixed progressives stages and prescribed roles and actions may leave actors with more leeway to pursue the type of connection they hope to establish with someone. While we are aware of the ideologically wistful note in this suggestion, we do believe media, education systems, art projects, etc. (can) all contribute to offering alternative possibilities of social interaction and loosening traditional scripts. Initiatives such as the Swedish #talkaboutit campaign, which encouraged sharing stories of 'grey area' sexual interactions (Karlsson, 2019), may broaden the available discourse for people when talking of experiences of sexual violation (Alcoff, 2018). People who have suffered from negative sexual experiences or sexual assault may also feel freer to open up about such experiences and seek support in their environment when they are not forced to frame their experience within limiting, predominantly legal, discourse (Gash & Harding, 2018). Finally, acknowledging that experience is largely shaped *through* discourse (Gunnarsson, 2018; Hindes & Fileborn, 2019), a greater variety in available scripts and discourses may aid individual sense-making.

Limitations and Future Research

The current study innovatively employed the ATSS method in combination with discourse analysis to investigate participants' sense-making practices in reaction to a (transgressive) sexual encounter. However, the chosen method may also have inadvertently influenced participants' responses in several ways. First, in accordance with ethical considerations and informed consent, participants were informed beforehand that the vignette contained details about sexual inappropriate behavior. This may have directed participants' sense-making strategies, prompting them to speak in terms of what they considered normal or expected from the first fragment onward. It additionally likely affected participants' expectations of the sexual orientations of the actors in the vignette. Because participants were informed prior to the study that the vignette involved a sexual encounter, the participants who read about Thomas and Lucas were likely to expect them to interact in a sexual manner and to thus view them as homosexual or bisexual. These expectations may have in turn activated different expectations based on the scripts and stereotypes that people hold in relation to men with these sexual orientations. In this context, another limitation is that we did not ask participants about their own sexual orientation, although this could have affected how they made sense of the vignette.

Second, participants' responses in the current design were researcher-prompted by the presentation of specific vignette fragments, and were constrained to one minute following each

fragment. Although in a sense participants 'interacted' with the vignette, and were aware that the researchers would eventually listen to their responses, participants' responses were not part of a typical social interaction. Hence, it is important to be aware that speakers may present their narratives differently, for instance by focusing more on speaker accountability, in a different and more social context. Furthermore, participants may have been influenced by the fact that the vignette was presented from the narrative viewpoint of L. Potentially, for example, participants reacted more empathetic to L than they would have done if the story had been presented from a different viewpoint (e.g., that of Thomas, or a third-person perspective). This would be an interesting topic for future research.

Finally, responses have been collected from a specific subgroup of Dutch university students who were willing to express their opinions about a topic related to sexual (inappropriate) behavior. This is not a representative sample, and patterns in the data may not generalize to other (sub)groups of observers. Future research could expand on the type of setting, participant pool, and contents and form of the vignette to gain a broader understanding of the elements people employ in constructing a sexual encounter as normal or transgressive, and its actors as blameless or accountable. It would additionally be interesting to investigate reactions to sexual encounters that include a woman who persistently pursues sex, and to examine potentially different sense-making practices of male versus female participants.

Conclusion

The current study lends support to the notion that dominant discourses of sex, violence, and gender can be strategically employed to render nonconsensual sexual encounters normal and (hence) non-threatening. Rather than arguing that observers should *instead* categorically label such an encounter as rape or sexual assault, we suggest there is value to acknowledging that sexual violence and negative sexual experiences can indeed be ambiguous (Alcoff, 2018; Cahill, 2016; Gavey, 2005). Maintaining a discursive 'grey area' might not only allow for a deeper exploration of the relationship between normative sex, sexual assault, and gender, it may also provide people with more room to share experiences of violation that they do not (wish to) define as clearly one thing or another. Even for people who do clearly define their own experiences as sexual assault, sharing these experiences might be easier if they are not forced to fit them within 'clear-cut' definitions of sexual violence.

Chapter 7

General Discussion

This dissertation has investigated observer reactions to male and female victims of sexual violence. In this endeavor, I have sought to incorporate more fully the socio-cultural context in which observers form their reactions. Multiple authors within the field of rape perception research have explicitly noted the importance of doing so (e.g., Anderson & Doherty, 2008; Temkin & Krahé, 2008; Ullman, 2010). However, the (experimental) research methods traditionally employed have tended to locate the source of negative observer reactions within the observers themselves (e.g., studies conducted within the framework of JWT; overview in Russell & Hand, 2017), or have manipulated factors with little investigation into their socio-cultural meanings. In Chapter 1, I explored what taking the socio-cultural context seriously might imply for theorizing and research methods into observer reactions to victims of sexual assault. In that chapter, I noted the importance of considering the influence of socio-cultural norms on observer reactions, as well as the importance of a greater awareness of the social construction of concepts integral to rape perception research, such as victimhood, sexual violence, and gender. In (experimental) research, I suggested this implies a focus on more diverse and subtle observer reactions, as well as their underlying processes. Additionally, I suggested it entails approaching more variables in research designs as fluid and malleable, implying that a researcher cannot simply assume to know the meaning participants assign to these concepts. The present chapter discusses the main findings of this dissertation and their potential implications. Subsequently, it highlights several limitations and suggests possibilities for future research.

Main Findings

Normative Expectations and Reactions to (Expectancy) Violations

It has previously been suggested that the label 'victim' comes accompanied with a range of connotations as well as requirements other than the 'factual' experience of victimization (Mardorossian, 2014). In fact, multiple scholars have lamented the fact that victimhood seems increasingly to become an identity: "a characterological or psychological trait rather than the result of experience" (Gavey, 2005; Lamb, 1999; Mardorossian, 2014, p. 32). The current findings showed that observers indeed have particular (normative) expectations of victims that stretch beyond expecting particular displays of behaviors and emotions, but also pertain to the type of person the victim is.

As illustrated in Chapter 5 and to some extent in Chapter 6, participants required particular behaviors of a legitimate victim.[41] For instance, they seemed to find it important that a victim expressly and frequently said 'no' to the accused's advances. Both chapters also indicated that

[41] In this chapter, I generally use the terms 'victim' and 'alleged victim' to refer to all target persons in the empirical chapters who shared stories of sexual violation. It should be noted, however, that the target persons were not actually referred to as such in (the studies of) Chapters 5 and 6.

when a victim did not perform the desired behaviors, such as physically resisting or withdrawing from the situation, only a limited number of reasons were portrayed as valid and 'victim-like'. For instance, fear could be offered as a legitimate reason for non-resistance, while alcohol consumption could be employed as a legitimate reason when connected to vulnerability and the incapacity to give consent. These types of explanations seemed to reinforce stereotypical notions of the victim as vulnerable, passive, and fearful (Lamb, 1999; Mardorossian, 2014).

In Chapter 2, it became clear that participants also expected victims to present themselves a certain way *after* the fact of victimization, suggesting that victim identities can be threatened or affirmed in post-hoc narration (Dunn, 2008). Specifically, participants expected victims to express sadness and fear in the aftermath of victimization, rather than anger at the injustice or contempt for the perpetrator. Nearly 69% of the participants anticipated that a victim would primarily express passive/low status emotions in a victim impact statement, compared to approximately 22% who expected active/high status emotions. Victims were thus expected to be 'emotional', but this emotionality entailed a passive and non-threatening subset of emotions.

Chapter 3 furthermore illustrated that participants expected particular character traits of a victim of sexual violence. Specifically, victims of sexual violence were attributed more prescriptive feminine traits, such as warmth, kindness and patience, than the accused and control target, and less proscriptive masculine traits, such as cynicism, arrogance, and insensitivity, than the accused. Notably, no differences were found in the attribution of proscriptive feminine traits such as naivety, emotionality, and weakness.

Additionally, several findings of this dissertation showed that participants were inclined to react negatively when victims did not meet normative expectations, supporting previous literature on expectancy violations and backlash against counter-stereotypical behavior (Hackett et al., 2008; Masser et al., 2010; Mulder & Bosma, 2018; Rudman & Glick, 2001). When comparing victims to non-victims, it was found that the fact of victimization alone already triggered normative concerns and subsequent negative reactions (also Milesi et al., 2020). Specifically, Chapter 4 demonstrated that participants who valued moral norms of sanctity, respect, and loyalty that tie "individuals into roles and duties" (Graham et al., 2009, p. 1030) frequently responded more positively to a target person, but not when that person had been sexually victimized. This was especially striking compared to the finding that concerns over harm and injustice, encompassed in individualizing values, had little to no effect on observer reactions to victims.

In Chapter 2, it was found that victims who did not adhere to the victim stereotype, by expressing anger rather than sadness, received more negative reactions from participants. Angry victims suffered more character derogation and were perceived as less credible than sad victims, although only in the case of physical (rather than sexual) violence. The results indicated that these negative reactions in part derived directly from participants' violated expectations, (rather than, say, only from possible negative connotations of anger). Hence, although the emotion of anger has traditionally been linked to the experience of injustice (Nussbaum, 2016), and "third-party concern" in the form of anger has even been hailed as the "hallmark of human morality" (Haidt &

Joseph, 2004, p. 58), this anger is apparently not to be expressed by the victim him- or herself. At least, not in the particular setting of the courtroom in the aftermath of victimization (also Bosma, 2019).

It was also found that, when quantitative differences were established, observers generally reacted more negatively to male than female victims. Chapter 2 found that male victims suffered more character derogation and were perceived as less credible than female victims. In Chapter 4, (male) participants attributed more blame to male victims compared to female victims. Participants also evaluated male targets more negatively and expressed more negative emotions toward them, but this was not unique to the victim condition. Where differences were found, these findings thus support the greater part of extant research on differential reactions to male and female victims (van der Bruggen & Grubb, 2014); though it should be emphasized that frequently no statistical effect of victim gender was found.

Notably, 'negative reactions' did not always seem the most accurate description of the range of reactions participants displayed in response to the stories of sexual victimization. In fact, as noted above, the increased attribution of feminine and decreased attribution of masculine traits to victims – victim feminization – only concerned the attribution of traits generally considered positive. As such, I would suggest that some reactions are more aptly described as reactions of 'normalization'. In the case of victim feminization, sexual victimization was normalized by construing the victim as more stereotypical (Cohen, 2014). Additional and more elaborate normalizing responses were demonstrated in Chapters 5 and 6. For example, Chapter 5 demonstrated that observers could seemingly accept the facts of the claim (e.g., B tried to undress A after A said no) yet create a story that did not carry the connotations of 'real' sexual assault (e.g., B did not hear or misinterpreted A's 'no'). In both chapters, observers regularly (re)framed the described event as relatively 'normal' by depicting it as a case of misunderstanding and miscommunication. By doing so, the severity of the event can be discursively diminished and the accused need not be branded 'a rapist': a label that seems to require malice and intentionality. As such, the event – in its 'objective reality' – is rendered relatively non-threatening (also Hindes & Fileborn, 2019).

Reactions to Male and Female Victims

As described above, the quantitative differences found in observer reaction to male and female victims were to the disadvantage of the male victim. However, considering that oftentimes no statistically significant differences were found, it remains difficult to ascertain whether one type of victim overall receives *more* negative reactions than the other. My investigation of reactions to male and female victims additionally included the question whether reactions to male and female victims might differ qualitatively, and/or have qualitatively different underlying processes. In the studies of Chapter 2 and 4, we distinguished no qualitative patterns in observer reactions as a function of victim gender. One reason for this, as suggested in both chapters, might be that (sexual) victimization has a particularly strong influence on perceptions of those victimized, and as such

trumps other distinguishing features such as the person's gender, emotional expression, etc. (i.e., 'hierarchy of impression formation'; McKimmie et al., 2014). Alternatively, as noted in Chapter 4, a potential methodological reason for the lack of perceptible diversity in observer reactions was that the type of design failed to allow for the measurement of (nuanced) distinctions in participant responses. As such, I decided that in order to investigate potential differences in (underlying processes of) observer reactions, perhaps a qualitative rather than a quantitative approach served best. Therefore, a number of qualitative studies were conducted to investigate whether differences in reactions between male and female victims may be more subtle or indirect, or alternatively, to uncover by which processes observers arrive at the *same* evaluations of male and female victims.

Having conducted these studies, I found that observer reactions to men and women who report stories of sexual victimization were indeed to a certain extent comparable. Participants rarely expressed surprise or otherwise indicated that they found the event 'abnormal' when they read about the sexual victimization of a man rather than a woman. This in itself is noteworthy, although it necessitates the disclaimer that – in accordance with requirements of the ethical review board – participants generally knew beforehand that they would be confronted with a scenario of transgressive sexual behavior. Still, the explicit notion that men *cannot* be victims of rape or unwanted sexual advances as predicated by male rape myths (Turchik & K. Edwards, 2012) seldom featured in participant responses.

However, subtle differences in observer reactions did exist, for instance in the ways participants explained the event for male and female victims. In the studies of both Chapter 5 and 6, one of the most striking findings was the apparent ease with which participants interpreted or explained the sexual encounter between a man and a woman in terms of miscommunication (also Hindes & Fileborn, 2019; Jeffrey & Barata, 2020). Participants also used this 'explanation' in the condition with two men but less so, and in that case seemed to construe the situation as a (potentially experimental) homosexual encounter (also Davies et al., 2013). Overall, it seemed that participants had more difficulty providing a clear and elaborate account of the sexual victimization of a man. Indeed, participants in Chapter 5 on average used fewer words to describe events leading up to the male sexual assault claim, and were less likely to label the event unambiguous sexual assault, or an attenuated version of 'love gone wrong' (Gilmore, 2017).

Chapter 6 most clearly demonstrated that victims in situations that largely resemble what is normal or expected (though not necessarily 'ideal') do not always benefit from more sympathetic third-party reactions. This chapter showed that especially a young woman who found herself the subject of unwanted sexual advances was allowed very few courses of action if she wanted to remain blameless. This was mostly determined through reference to 'normal' sexual scripts like the hookup script (Holman & Sillars, 2012). Participants frequently emphasized that the female student was supposed to *know* the normal sequence of events on a night out such as described, including the risk it entailed, and to behave accordingly. When she did not, observers blamed her ("she shouldn't have stayed"), distanced themselves ("I would never have…"), or derogated her by calling her naïve and foolish. Clearly, this is another way that 'the normal' can have a binding

or limiting effect on victims (Cahill, 2000; Gilmore, 2017; Ridgeway & Kricheli-Katz, 2013). As such, the role of normativity was shown to manifest itself in various ways in observer reactions to both male and female victims.

Variety and Nuances in Observer Reactions

Extending on the traditional experimental methods in rape perception research, studies in this dissertation employed methods that tapped into more spontaneous and subtle observer reactions. These methods included self-report measures that inquired into a greater variety of observer reactions, but also more indirect methods and qualitative approaches. Although the inclusion of a Single Target Implicit Association Test and discourse analysis in the same dissertation might be somewhat uncommon, both implicit measures and qualitative methods come equipped with ways to tap into more subtle and covert observer reactions (Mulder, 2018).

Using these methods, differences were found not only in attributions of blame, but also in reactions of distancing, derogation, perceived crime severity, feminization, and the expression of positive and negative emotions. Although no definite patterns were discovered in participants' expressions of one particular reaction over another, the importance was demonstrated of extending the investigation beyond victim blame. For instance, the data in Chapter 6 suggested that participants felt more at ease to distance themselves from or derogate a potential victim when they were first able to articulate a disclaimer such as "of course, I am not blaming Lisa/Lucas". Awareness of such rhetorical strategies is important because they can make statements seem more objective, nuanced, and agreeable, and hence potentially more convincing when used in conversations with others (D. Edwards & Potter, 1993)[42]. Chapters 5 and 6 also showed that the range of observer reactions included more than direct responses toward the victim. An important additional class of reactions seemed to be formed by descriptions and explanations of the event, as well as by responses that focused on (the intent of) the accused.

Importantly, this complexity and variety in observer reactions seemed in part to derive from the meanings they assigned to (the interplay between) different elements of claims of sexual assault. This is perhaps most clearly illustrated in the comparison between the ways participants construed an event as 'sexual assault' in Chapter 5 compared to Chapter 6. In Chapter 5, participants seemed to describe the essence of a 'real' sexual assault as the victim saying no (or not giving consent), and the accused persisting regardless. In Chapter 6, this type of friction was clearly present in the vignette, where the protagonist declared (s)he was not interested in sex and pushed the other's hand away multiple times, yet the other person continued his pursuit despite these signs of refusal. Notably, whereas the actions of (verbal) resistance and subsequent persistence were mostly sufficient for the frame of sexual assault in participants' relatively abstract descriptions in Chapter 5, participants were much more reluctant to label nonconsensual sex as sexual violence

[42] Edwards and Potter's (1993) 'Discursive Action Model' pays particular attention to such strategies as ways of establishing a speaker's accountability (also Anderson & Doherty, 2008).

when confronted with a detailed scenario in Chapter 6. In that case, participants frequently implied that a 'no' was only valid when accompanied by physical resistance or escape attempts. This comparison suggests that the acknowledgment of sexual violence can depend on what meanings observers ascribe to specific actions.[43] In this case, what was required for participants to construct something as 'sexual assault' seemed to vary as a function of a description's level of abstraction.

Theoretical and Practical Implications

Mapping (Negative) Observer Reactions

As demonstrated once more in a recent survey by Amnesty International (Kanne & Driessen, 2020; discussed more elaborately in the next section), those who share their stories of sexual victimization often encounter negative reactions from their social surroundings (R. Campbell, Ahrens et al., 2001; Ullman, 2010; Williams, 1984).[44] Although Lerner (1980) already suggested that negative observer reactions come in many shapes and forms, experimental research has to date provided little insight into the variety of these responses. This can in part be explained by the employment of quantitative answering formats that measure a limited number of specified observer reactions, combined with vignettes that describe relatively straightforward non-debatable rape scenarios (but see e.g., Anderson & Doherty, 2008; Deming et al., 2013; McKimmie et al., 2014).

The findings of this dissertation have more clearly demonstrated that observer reactions are indeed varied and complex, incorporating many more (nuanced) responses to victimization than explicit victim blame.[45] It is conceivable that a number of these reactions are not typically perceived as 'negative', even if they can have a detrimental impact on victims. As was the case in Chapter 5, third parties may for instance react to claims of victimization by mitigating responses that suggest there are 'two sides to every story' (also Hindes & Fileborn, 2019; Mulder & Bosma, 2018). However, Gilmore (2017) notes the potential harm of such responses. In her words, "they render as unknowable and undecidable both physical evidence and verbal testimony. They deflect a more rigorous engagement with narratives, persons, evidence, and scenes of abuse that are *complicated*" (p. 6; emphasis added). She further insightfully remarks:

[43] Another example can be found in the participant responses to the one open-ended question included in the study of Chapter 3. Participants more often interpreted the word 'sexual assault' as penetrative assault in the female target condition, whereas they more frequently referred to inappropriate touching and other 'less severe' forms of sexual harassment in the male target condition.

[44] The survey indicated that of the Dutch respondents who indicated that they had experienced rape, approximately half had shared this with another person. Of those who had shared their experience, approximately 40 percent reported negative reactions from others (Kanne & Driessen, 2020).

[45] Writing about rape in South Africa, Gqola (2015) has likened the mapping of all possible public responses to sexual violence to a "cartographic exercise", of which she warns "Cartography – map-making – like plotting along a line also makes things much tidier than they really are. It makes things appear much simpler, yet responses to rape are not simple and tidy" (p. 101).

> [T]he vernacular formulation 'nobody really knows what happened' makes a legal claim that has been successfully adopted in every-day life as a reasonable response to news about rape. Yet (…) 'nobody knows what really happened' is the starting point of a trial. Like the presumption of innocence, it names a suspension of judgment rather than the imposition of doubt. Only in cases of sexual violence do people feel virtuous, objective, and fair when they claim that the conditions that typically initiate and guide a legal proceeding moot it from the outset. (p. 7)

The type of response quoted here also illustrates the findings of this dissertation that observer reactions to victimization entail more than direct judgments of the victim. It seems important to take note of the possibility that an observer can acknowledge the suffering of a victim while still detaching it from the 'objective' harm done 'in reality', or can express sympathy for the victim while being adamant that the accused does not deserve punishment. Questions within experimental research that focus exclusively on the victim are likely to miss such additional strategies of trivializing, normalizing, and excusing sexual violence. Indeed, from a social constructionist perspective, researchers might do well to examine labelling itself as a revealing observer reaction. The categorization as, for instance, 'victim' or 'perpetrator', and 'sexual violence' or 'bad sex' can inform us about an observer's moral evaluation of an event and the actors involved (Cahill, 2016; Loseke, 1999). Overall, it seems the investigation into negative observer reactions would do well to employ a broader focus.

Although it remains difficult to say if, and in what ways, negative reactions differ qualitatively from each other, it seems fair to suspect differences in when people feel entitled to express one type of reaction, or offer one type of narrative, over the other. Social movements such as #MeToo may very well affect the type of explanations and reactions that are thought reasonable and acceptable in response to stories of sexual violence. Indeed, it will be interesting to see if we recognize the effects of #MeToo and similar movements in the new developments of for instance RMA scales.

Understanding Negative Observer Reactions

Besides mapping the negative reactions third parties may display toward victims, rape perception research has been interested in the question *why* third parties at times react negatively to victims (e.g., Lerner, 1980; Shaver, 1985). As elaborately described in Chapter 1, the answer to this question is frequently sought in the inherent needs and motives of the individual (observer). However, as has been suggested in this dissertation, when detached from the socio-cultural context, inherent needs and motives cannot adequately explain (variances in) negative observer reactions (Howard, 1984b; Temkin & Krahé, 2008; Ullman, 2010). I return here to a discussion of the JWT (Lerner, 1980), which suggests that negative observer reactions may result from the distress an observer experiences in witnessing the innocent (i.e., undeserved) suffering of others.

Undoubtedly, neither men nor women deserve to be raped, and both victims who express sadness and anger can be presumed to suffer from their experience. Yet findings of this dissertation and other research have (for the most part) demonstrated that these victims may not be able to count on similar observer reactions (e.g., overviews in Nitschke et al., 2019; van der Bruggen & Grubb, 2014). What is it then, besides an individual need for justice, that influences (the expression of) negative observer reactions? Or, what is it that makes us perceive one case of suffering as more or less just than the other? Although it might be extreme suffering and emphasized innocence that are a greater threat to inherent justice beliefs (Hafer, 2000), this two-dimensional depiction makes it seem as if (the experience of) injustice is 'in fact' stable, and that it is solely the threatened individual observer who does all the (re)interpretative work. The suggestion that justice, as a judgment of appropriateness, depends on the socio-cultural context (Lerner, 1980) has in effect mostly been lost in empirical research on observer reactions to victims.

I would suggest that strengthening the explanatory capacity (and ecological validity) of research that seeks to account for negative observer reactions requires accompanying the utilization of concepts like justice, suffering, and innocence with more critical examinations of their meanings. In other words, we ought to "retain awareness of the contextual variability of concepts and their multiple strategic effects" (Alcoff, 2018, p. 173). With regard to the concept of 'innocence', for instance, much academic and activist work has gone into illustrating how particular groups of people are consistently constructed as 'non-innocent', regardless of their behavior or experiences (e.g., Goff et al., 2014; Smiley & Fakunle, 2016).[46] Perhaps then, research would do better to treat perceived innocence and suffering as components of third-party sense-making (and the cultural discourses third parties draw from), rather than as fixed and tangible factors that exert a unidirectional influence on a receptive observer. In this, I join Ellison and Munro (2010) in arguing "the importance of story-construction models which acknowledge the role of jurors [observers] as active, interpreting participants, who filter the evidence presented through a complex mesh of pre-conceived schemata and expected narrative forms" (p. 97). Although individual needs such as the justice motive surely play their part, socio-cultural context largely shapes what observers find unjust, as well as how they are able and entitled to express their reaction to injustice.

Admittedly, many rape perception studies exist that do not rely on the JWT framework. Experimental research that incorporates scales on RMA and gender roles attitudes, or manipulates variables relating to victim (and/or gender) stereotypes, rape scripts and myths has done much to add to the understanding of negative observer reactions (e.g., overviews in Gravelin et al., 2019; van der Bruggen & Grubb, 2014). The combination of prevalence studies on RMA and studies that examine the effect of RMA on observer reactions has shown that widely accessible discourses on sexual violence oftentimes negatively affect the position of the victim. Yet RMA (and other) scales

[46] Reports of police violence resulting in the deaths of Black men and protests of the Black Lives Matter Movement convincingly point to racist constructions of guilt and of innocence (Black Lives Matter, n.d.). It should additionally be noted that the groups Lerner (1980) himself mentioned at the beginning of his book on the JWT – people with mental illnesses and poor immigrants – are presumably also examples of groups easily constructed as 'non-innocent'.

still provide us with little insight into *how* culturally available myths are employed in judgment formations of victims. Furthermore, the manipulation of variables related to stereotypes, scripts, and myths (e.g., victim resistance, alcohol consumption, appearance) shows that many factors besides victimization influence observer reactions, but again does not illuminate *how* this influence is exerted. It is likely that the 'influence' does not describe a straightforward or even unilateral relationship. Observers give meaning to the factors that influence them (e.g., E. Finch & Munro, 2007), and to a certain extent choose which of the available scripts, stereotypes and myths to draw upon in their judgment of a situation and (alleged) victim (Frith & Kitzinger, 2001; Loseke, 1999). Additionally, the creation of experimental conditions necessarily divorces a chosen victim characteristic or other factor from the web of factors that might be equally relevant and/or interact with the chosen factor (Ellison & Munro, 2015). A victim who has consumed alcohol might be found to receive more blame than a victim who was sober (e.g., Wenger & Bornstein, 2006), but understanding (and confronting) this relationship requires insight into the way this relationship is narrated (E. Finch & Munro, 2007).[47]

I would hence suggest that the questions of *what* and *why* need to be supplemented by the question of *how* negative third-party reactions to victims come to be expressed. This 'how' includes a focus on which meanings observers assign to identities and events, and from what discourses they draw in their sense-making, as such acknowledging that observers are "essentially social" (Lea, 2007, p. 496). In this regard, reading beyond one's own academic discipline and focus of study, and attaining a basic grasp of, in this case, social constructionism seems beneficial.[48]

Normality

As discussed in the main findings, it seems that notions of 'the normal' play an integral part in both the why and how of negative observer reactions. Although 'why' and 'how' are not always easily distinguishable, findings that seem to pertain to the former were that participants generally reacted more negatively to victims whose character or behavior violated normative expectations (also Hackett et al., 2008; Masser et al., 2010). Chapter 2 explicitly demonstrated that negative observer reactions to victims in part derive directly from a violation of their expectations.

[47] It might be suggested that the relationship between alcohol consumption and victim blame relates to the finding that alcohol consumption increases the risk of (sexual) victimization (overview in Abbey et al., 2001). However, 'objective risk' does not seem to suffice in explaining (moral) judgments blameworthiness. Specifically, while research has also demonstrated the influence of alcohol consumption on the likelihood of sexual *aggression* (Abbey et al., 2001), other studies have shown that the perpetrator's alcohol use typically serves to *mitigate* the blame he receives (Finch & Munro, 2007).

[48] Although I mostly focus here on how (social-psychological) experimental rape perception research may benefit from the incorporation of knowledge from other disciplines, the opposite is equally true. To Alcoff's (2018) suggestion, for instance, that it is "possible that as sexual violation has entered public discourse (…), certain norms have emerged about how one would 'normally' respond to such events in one's life" (p. 66), there are several informative empirical studies that investigate precisely this 'possibility' (e.g., Hackett et al., 2008; Wrede & Ask, 2015).

Additionally, it was shown in Chapter 4 that the status of 'victim' in itself triggered negative reactions from participants, especially from those who more strongly endorsed values that related to normativity.

The influence of the normal on the 'how' of observer reactions has also been demonstrated in the current findings. The findings suggest that observers in part arrive at judgments of victims and sexual assault stories by resorting to what they regard as (or know is regarded as) normal or expected. Participants were for instance found to endorse a certain image of the normal and legitimate (behavior and demeanor of a) victim that included resistance during, and sadness after victimization. The influence of the normal was additionally shown in the way observers used scripts (i.e., descriptions of how an event normally unfolds) to diminish the severity of sexual violation or to redirect responsibility (Hindes & Fileborn, 2019). Moreover, participants also drew from understandings of what is '*not* normal' in their reinterpretation of sexual assault claims. In Chapter 5, several participants suggested that a female claimant's engagement in casual sex or a male claimant's homosexual encounter were plausible reasons for false allegations. These reasons only 'make sense', however, because available discourses of female promiscuity and homosexuality tend to construct such acts as shameful (Hamilton & Armstrong, 2009; Kiss et al., 2020; Sivakumaran, 2005). This last finding implies that tackling the rape myth that claimants frequently lie about rape (e.g., K. Edwards et al., 2011) necessitates targeting discourses that construct female promiscuity and male homosexuality as things we expect someone to lie about.

In light of the findings above, one way to improve third-party responses to victims of sexual violence may be to focus on (third-party) expectations and representations of the normal. Currently, information about rape (victims), especially as disseminated in the media, tends to include restricted and stereotypical descriptions of sexual violence (O'Hara, 2012), depicting victims as weak and helpless (Schwark, 2017).[49] Clearly, (social) media play an essential role in the formation and explication of discourses around sexual violence and victimhood, not in the least because they provide relatively accessible platforms for people to tell their stories of harm and injustice (Gilmore, 2017). As such, they contribute to the "*social resources* for sense-making" (Loseke, 1999, p. 131), or, potentially, the "deep reservoir of bias" (Gilmore, 2017, p. 5) that the public draws from in their reaction to victimization stories. Because presentations within the media are bound to influence public perceptions, creating (or allowing for) more diversity and nuance in the portrayal of victimhood may serve to enlarge the array of features that define a '(legitimate) victim'

[49] For this reason, a number of scholars have suggested exchanging the label 'victim' for a word that carries more positive connotations, such as 'survivor' (e.g., Dunn, 2005; van Dijk, 2020). However, the label 'survivor' might also be deemed inappropriate by third parties (Papendick & Bohner, 2017), and some people who have been victimized do not identify with its 'positive' connotations of strength, agency and closure (Mardorossian, 2014). Additionally, although "what we call something, the label on a category, is important" (Loseke, 1999, p. 176), we might be imbuing the label with too much power if we proclaim that an exchange of words will successfully combat negative social responses. Indeed, changing labels paradoxically suggests that while our understanding of victimhood is socially constructed, the label 'victim' is not. Perhaps for this reason, Alcoff (2018) suggests "the better response than a general repudiation of the word 'victim' is to address directly the faulty connotations it mobilizes" (p. 172).

(Easteal et al., 2015).[50] Hence, especially initiatives that seek to promote awareness of sexual victimization could include voices of victims with different demographic traits (e.g., in relation to age, race, and gender), different narrations of victimization (e.g., redemptive and traumatic stories), and different ways of reacting to their experience (e.g., in terms of reporting behavior and emotional display).[51] A more inclusive representation of victims and their stories might then aid in the reduction of expectancy violations, but might also serve to critically reexamine the 'prototypical' victimization as that which is easily explained, or needs no further explanation (and/or public outrage).

Complexity

The examination of how participants arrived at particular judgments also leads me to suggest that the range of varied and complex participant responses not only signals the possible subtlety and nuance in negative reactions. It also – perhaps predominantly – illustrates the *difficulty* third parties may experience in attempting to make sense of stories of sexual victimization. In fact, negative reactions toward victims might often be a byproduct of the efforts observers engage in in order to make sense of victimization. The qualitative data collected in this dissertation reveal how often the sense-making efforts of participants included contradictions, self-corrections, and explicit articulations of the difficulty of evaluating the scenario. Regarding this difficulty, Alcoff (2018) maintains that, in fact, "some uncertainty is warranted given the rapid pace of change but also the complexity of the problem. Though many advocates today like to say that 'rape is rape,' in truth, some incidents are ambiguous" (p. 4; also Cahill, 2016; Gavey, 2005). If rape perception studies continue to predominantly depend on vignettes that depict 'non-debatable' (stranger) rape in combination with quantitative response scales, they leave a significant portion of (reactions to) experiences of sexual violation unexplored.

The difficulty of making sense of sexual victimization, connected to the finding that assigned meanings to elements in sexual assault stories can vary greatly, could have important implications for the ways we teach and learn about sexual violence. Common discourse is permeated with relatively simple catchphrases that seem to define rape, such as 'rape is about power' and 'no means no' (Alcoff, 2018). In some cultures, awareness of rape may currently also include the knowledge that freezing is a common response to sexual assault (Kanne & Driessen, 2020). However, the findings of this dissertation demonstrate that 'knowing' such things in the abstract does not imply that a "no" or freeze response is actually recognized as such 'in practice'.

[50] Brian Yorkey's *13 Reasons Why* is an example of a TV-series that has explicitly aimed to do so by depicting male on male rape in one of its episodes, eliciting significant backlash from viewers. In an interview, Yorkey has insightfully commented: "If there's a greater sense of backlash about this scene, especially it being hard to watch, 'disgusting,' or inappropriate, that goes to the point that we need to be talking about the fact that things like this happen. The fact that this would be somehow more disgusting than what happened to Hannah and Jessica [female rape victims in the show], I'm shocked but not surprised" (Lockett, 2018).

[51] Gilmore (2017) suggests something similar when she affirms "the necessity of producing texts such as memoir and *testimonio* that challenge prevailing notions of gender and trauma in the public sphere" (p. 100).

Indeed, the findings imply that one can agree with these catchphrases without empathically imagining how they might manifest in daily life. Related to this, knowing something in the abstract does not necessarily result in behavioral change. As noted by Hirsch et al. (2018), for instance, although nearly all students they interviewed about sexual consent practices understood "the legal standards for consent", interviewees rarely mentioned actual practices of eliciting or granting consent as part of their own sexual experiences (p. 28). Potentially, rape education programs and other initiatives may thus seek to encourage participants to look beyond the outward appearance of a phrase or action (such as 'freezing' or 'affirmative consent'), and examine its potential meanings and the different ways it can feature in interactions of (unwanted) sex.[52] I also understand this to be part of Alcoff's (2018) important suggestion to "develop an understanding of the complexity and context-dependence of our terms and concepts" (p. 49).

In the next section, the complexity of (judicially) making sense of sexual violence, as well as the challenges of capturing this complexity in research, are illustrated with specific reference to current developments in the Netherlands.

Making Sense of Sexual Victimization in the Netherlands

An awareness of the complexities in determining the meaning of sexual victimization seems of particular importance in light of recent debates in the Netherlands concerning the definition of rape and (other forms of) sexual violence. In 2019, the Dutch Minister Grapperhaus of Justice and Security announced he would propose a new punishable offense, namely 'sex against the will', to supplement the crime of rape (Rijksoverheid, 2020).[53] His proposal to criminalize sex against the will was presented as an attempt to modernize criminal legislation on sexual crimes, and to facilitate the reporting of experiences that are currently difficult to prosecute as rape in the Netherlands, such as nonconsensual sex without apparent force or physical resistance (e.g., because the victim was incapacitated or responded by 'freezing').

Perhaps unsurprisingly, amending the legal definitions of sexual violence to make them more representative of our times has thus far proven to be a difficult endeavor. The Dutch Council for the Judiciary (*Raad voor de Rechtspraak*), for instance, has criticized Grapperhaus' proposal as too vague, in part because it remains unclear when someone should, and how someone sufficiently can, determine whether the other party is (un)willing to engage in sex (de Rechtspraak, 2020). Amnesty International has condemned Grapperhaus' proposal for different reasons,

[52] Relatedly, Freyd and Smidt (2019) in their article distinguish between *training* and *education* on sexual assault and harassment, and suggest prioritizing the latter. They argue that rather than "compliance and a rule-based process" that is characteristic of training, there is a need for "complex understanding [and] critical thinking" as provided by education (p. 489).

[53] The introduction of 'sex against the will' as a new offense is part of a broader modernization of the Dutch legislation pertaining to sexually transgressive behavior, which also includes, for instance, the criminalization of sexual harassment and 'sexchatting' between adults and children, and the acknowledgment of forced penetration (of male victims) by the offender as rape (Rijksoverheid, 2020).

suggesting that instead of creating a new offense, the legal definition of rape should be expanded or amended to be based on consent rather than force. This would make nonconsensual sex 'rape' instead of 'sex against the will' (Amnesty International, 2019). Notably, in their reactions both Amnesty International and the Dutch Council for the Judiciary seem to endorse the view that it is recommendable to consider public opinion in amendments of the law.[54]

In fact, Amnesty International has partly supported its own argument to criminalize nonconsensual sex as rape by referring to the results of a survey they commissioned on the opinion of the Dutch public regarding rape (Kanne & Driessen, 2020; NRC, 2020).[55] By comparing the published results of Amnesty International's survey to some of my own findings, I hope to emphasize with more specificity the complexity of public perceptions of sexual violence, and the implications of the way in which these are measured.

Several relevant findings of this dissertation show relatively large discrepancies with the public opinion survey conducted on behalf of Amnesty International (Kanne & Driessen, 2020).[56] First, Amnesty's survey revealed that 78 percent of their respondents agreed that penetration without consent is rape, also when no force or violence was used.[57] Agreement rose by an additional 10 percent when the victim was said to be intoxicated, or to 'freeze'. As mentioned previously, the study in Chapter 6 employed a vignette that largely adhered to these descriptors: it included verbal non-consent, penetration, intoxication, and a freeze response. However, in this study, nearly half of the participants indicated disagreement or 'neutrality' (scores anywhere from 1 to 4 on a 7-point scale) in response to the statement "Lisa/Lucas has become the victim of sexual violence", with a total mean score of 4.63. Of the 52 respondents, 67.3 percent (n = 35) explicitly stated in their spoken (qualitative) response that they felt doubtful or reluctant to describe the scenario of nonconsensual sex as "violence", and almost no one labeled the event "rape". Hence, although responses to Amnesty's survey suggested that most people subsume nonconsensual sex under sexual violence, a significantly lower percentage may actually be inclined to do so when confronted with a more detailed scenario.

Additionally, the survey referred to by Amnesty International indicated that only 4 percent of respondents agreed that "if you go home with someone after a date and kiss each other, you

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[54] Judge Jacco Janssen of the Council for the Judiciary explicitly stated in an interview "it is good to align the sex offense legislation with the way it is thought about in the society" (NOS, 2020). In Dutch: "*Het is goed om de zedenwetgeving op een lijn te brengen met hoe er in de samenleving over wordt gedacht*".

[55] The survey was conducted by I&O Research. The specific aim of the survey was to uncover the knowledge and attitude of the Dutch society regarding rape, and the way in which it should be punishable (Kanne & Driessen, 2020, p. 4). Data were collected in June 2020 amongst a representative sample of more than two thousand Dutch respondents.

[56] The findings in this paragraph were not described in Chapter 6 itself, which focused on the qualitative analysis of the ATSS data rather than the quantitative and verbal responses to the study's statements.

[57] Original statement in Dutch: "*Ik vind dat penetratie zonder wederzijdse instemming verkrachting is, ook als er geen dwang of geweld wordt gebruikt*".

basically consent to intercourse" (Kanne & Driessen, 2020, p. 39). Yet in the study of Chapter 6, 36.5 percent (n = 19) of the participants mentioned 'going home with someone' as a factor that contributed to the assignment of at least some responsibility to Lisa/Lucas. Again, this seems to imply that even if people in general seem to reject a particular rape myth, it may still feature in their subsequent sense-making efforts and blame attributions in response to a specific story of sexual victimization. This finding echoes that of a study conducted by Ellison and Munro (2010), in which respondents mostly disagreed with rape myths as measured in an RMA-questionnaire, but still employed nuanced and adapted versions of such myths when confronted with a particular rape allegation.

A Further Reflection on Complexity

The findings described above indicate that a reliance on relatively abstract statements coupled with quantified responses potentially risks providing a somewhat distorted image of third-party perceptions of sexual victimization.[58] In this case, although participants in Amnesty's survey reported endorsing relatively inclusive definitions of rape, it need not imply actual acknowledgment of more ambiguous cases as sexual violence. Hence, I reiterate that a certain wariness seems in order regarding the interpretation of research findings that give little insight into the meanings given to the concepts of interest.

This wariness, or rather, awareness, also seems advisable in the *interpretation* of sexual victimization stories itself, especially when these stories do not fit the mold of stereotypical rape (Krahé, 2016; Temkin & Krahé, 2008). As suggested in Chapters 5 and 6, especially in ambiguous and complex cases, people may lack the tools to make sense of events, and subsequently fall back on stereotypes, scripts, and myths (Kang et al., 2012; Loseke, 1999; McKimmie et al., 2014). Gash and Harding (2018) additionally note that *legal* discourse often permeates public responses to stories of sexual assault, in effect undermining goals that pertain to acknowledgment, connection, and awareness raising. They suggest that "even when – as is true in the vast majority of cases – victims of sexual violence avoid making claims in formal legal venues, their discussions and feelings of sexual violation are often evaluated through the lens and with the imprimatur of the law" (p. 3). As a consequence, victims (and/or those who have suffered negative sexual experiences) may be prevented from telling their stories, or having their stories *heard* the way they were intended (Gilmore, 2017). As summarized by Alcoff (2018):

> The idea that rape is a simple, straightforward matter actually works to dissuade the many victims from coming forward who feel that their own experience had complexity and ambiguity, and it inhibits the vitally necessary process of being able to discuss one's experience with others. (p. 9)

[58] This is not to say that my own study provides the 'accurate' image of third-party reactions. In fact, the small sample size and specific subset of participants severely limit the generalizability of my findings.

Indeed, as my colleagues and I have argued elsewhere, (successfully) narrating one's experience can offer victims a means (to attempt) to make sense of their own experience, (re)establish a sense of an agentic self, and (re)connect with others (Pemberton et al., 2019). Potentially then, the reduction of negative social reactions requires providing the observer with a richer, more flexible, and nuanced language of sexual victimization (Alcoff, 2018; Gilmore, 2017).[59]

Clearly, the legal system cannot provide the leniency for such discursive openness, but neither should it be assumed "the singular arena for justice" (Alcoff, 2018, p. 46). In fact, Alcoff warns explicitly against treating the legal system as "the principal site for redressing the problem of sexual violations" (p. 14).[60] To return to the Dutch legislative proposal then, the amendment of legal definitions may serve a number of (admirable) purposes, but cannot necessarily be assumed to contribute to the acknowledgment of victimization experiences. Certainly, the endorsement of "a uniform terminology with agreed-upon definitions" (Alcoff, 2018, p. 49) is not likely to make the social other more tolerant to ambiguity and complexity in recounted stories. If the public starts endorsing 'sex against the will' as another (legal) category to measure experiences against, this may even prevent them from listening openly to the accounts of others. This is not to say that amendments to the law are not crucial, but people should also be aware of the (inevitable and necessary) misalignment between victimization experiences and their judicial appearance (Pemberton et al., 2019). This promisingly entails that although precise categorization and exact labelling are among the important tasks of the legal system, they are not required for the acknowledgment of experiences of sexual violation in the public realm (Gash & Harding, 2018).

Limitations and Future Research

The empirical chapters of this dissertation include brief discussions of their individual limitations. I will not repeat all of those here, but focus on some of the overarching limitations I perceive in my research.

Accounting for the Socio-Cultural Context

In this dissertation, I have argued that (experimental) rape perception research would do well to consider more explicitly the socio-cultural context in which observer reactions to (victims of) sexual violence take place. However, as I have come to endorse this argument more strongly over the course of my research, it is not fully incorporated in every empirical chapter of this dissertation. Especially in the quantitative studies, the (socio-cultural) meanings participants

[59] Initiatives such as the Swedish #talkaboutit campaign, which encouraged sharing stories of 'grey area' sexual interactions (Karlsson, 2019), may contribute to the creation of this richer language and imagination of what negative sexual experiences and sexual violence may entail.

[60] The Dutch Council for the Judiciary takes a similar position in emphasizing the importance of realizing that criminal law is not a "medicine" for all forms of unwanted sexual behavior (de Rechtspraak, 2020).

assigned to particular concepts have remained largely hidden. For instance, in the study of Chapter 2, we manipulated emotional display in a victim impact statement. Although a manipulation check was included to verify that participants had identified the expressed emotion as either anger or sadness, it remains possible that participants had different associations with these emotions depending on who expressed them (e.g., victim vs. non-victim or man vs. woman; Shields & Crowley, 1996). Additionally, Chapter 4 included several quantitative scales that measured, amongst others, attitudes toward homosexuality and gender roles. Such scales can be presumed to temporarily capture a dominant discourse of (attitudes toward) sexuality and gender, but, especially in these changing times, may quickly become outdated. We sought to include modern versions of such scales, but with no insight into the meanings participants assigned to the items, it remains difficult to fully grasp their explanatory value.

Future (experimental) rape perception research may still have much to gain from the combination of quantitative and qualitative methods. When possible, traditional scales such as those measuring RMA and gender role attitudes could be supplemented with open response forms to gain more insight into participants' interpretations of the items. Taking social constructionism seriously also implies acknowledging that discourses change over time and vary across settings (Best, 2016; Loseke, 1999). For rape perception studies to take this variability into account, they need to be conducted across (sub)cultures and at frequent intervals. At this moment, for instance, #MeToo and related initiatives are likely to have caused a shift in how people talk about sexual victimization (McDonald, 2019). Even if these developments have not changed 'internal' attitudes of individual observers, they may well influence their public expression.

Diversity of Sample, Setting, and Stimuli

Another limitation pertains to the samples employed in these studies. Most of the studies were conducted online with British respondents, while the two lab studies included Dutch and German university students. It is plausible that participant groups with other characteristics react differently to victims and have access to different types of discourses to make sense of sexual victimization. Factors such as observers' nationality, education level, age cohort, and ethnic background may all influence their opinions of sexual violence and victimhood. Although data on these factors were frequently collected, their potential impact was not always examined. The quantitative studies only controlled for observer gender (and infrequently for age and victimization experience), and no demographic variables were included in the qualitative analyses. However, it would be interesting to examine further how observers' upbringing, experiences, and social environment influence their reactions and sense-making in confrontation with stories of sexual victimization.

Further limitations relate to the fact that most studies were vignette studies conducted in an online setting. As a possible consequence, there was no need for participants to engage intensively with the provided story, nor was there much incentive for them to empathically imagine how the (alleged) victim experienced the event. Although this type of setting is relatively representative of

observer reactions that take place online, e.g., on social media platforms, they do not accurately reflect situations in which victims actually share their stories face-to-face with their family, friends, or acquaintances. Future research could extend its focus to include settings in which observers both attempt to make sense of victimization stories, and manage their own accountability as responder (D. Edwards & Potter, 1993). Examples may include analyses of real (online) responses to stories of sexual assault (e.g., Bogen et al., 2019; Mulder & Bosma, 2018), and of more naturalistic conversations between people (e.g., Anderson & Doherty, 2008; Ellison & Munro, 2009a, 2009b, 2010).

Finally, a socio-contextual approach in rape perception research also involves diversifying the characteristics of the victim (and perpetrator) of sexual violence. In this dissertation, I have mostly operationalized normative and non-normative stories of sexual assault by the manipulation of victim gender, but clearly a number of other important (victim) stereotypes are likely to weigh in on judgment formations of victims of sexual assault, of which race might be the most prominent (Franklin & Garza, 2018; Katz et al., 2017). Interactions between victim gender, race, and social class are also likely to result in different third-party descriptions and explanations of sexual victimization (Crenshaw, 1990; Ridgeway & Kricheli-Katz, 2013). Additionally, not only stereotypes that relate to the victim are bound to have an influence. Hence, a primary focus on the victim may have somewhat hindered identification of other types of sense-making strategies that relate to the accused or the event itself. Future research may (continue to) allow for participant responses to a wider range of stimuli related to a story of sexual assault. Indeed, assuming that a moral situation of victimization necessarily consists of the perception of a victim *and* perpetrator (Gray & Wegner, 2009), much might be learned from including observers' perceptions of both the accused and the dynamics between the two parties.

Conclusion

This dissertation was written in a time marked by fervent attempts to change perceptions of sexual violence and attitudes toward victims. Starting in 2017 and continuing today, #MeToo has publicly demonstrated the scope of sexual violence, highlighting the varying experiences that form part of its continuum, and revealing the large number of people that have had these experiences. The possibility to share victimization experiences has been shown to be crucial (e.g., Pemberton et al., 2019; Ullman, 2010), yet all too often, those who share their stories are met with negative responses from their social surroundings.

When Lerner (1980) pondered how such negative observer reactions to the suffering of others could be 'normal', he located the explanation in an inherent *need* to believe in a just world. However, I have argued that a more complete understanding of negative observer reactions also requires us to critically turn to this 'just' world, and investigate it precisely as the context in which negative observer reactions can apparently become 'normal'. Indeed, in this dissertation, negative observer reactions were found to result in part from normative expectations of sex and violence,

victimhood, and gender, and relatedly from the difficulty of making sense of (ambiguous) stories of sexual violation.

As such, in this final chapter I have suggested that public discourse may benefit from a more inclusive, flexible, and richer language to allow for the acknowledgment of victims and the complexity (and at times ambiguity) of stories of sexual victimization. Perhaps rape perception research may find a somewhat similar benefit in the use of more diverse and encompassing methods, which can provide a deeper insight into the complexity (and at times ambiguity) of *observer sense-making and reactions to* stories of sexual victimization.

Summary

Victims of injustice and misfortune have often faced subsequent negative reactions from their social surroundings, such as blame, derogation, and distancing. Research has consistently demonstrated this phenomenon in response to victims of sexual violence, and has mapped out the potentially detrimental consequences of this for the victim. The question why observers might react without sympathy to the suffering of others has been the center point of several theories, most notably the Just World Theory (Lerner, 1980). Less is known, however, about how observer reactions come about, or what enables their expression. This may in part result from rape perception research' frequent neglect of the socio-cultural context in which observers make sense of victimization and form their judgments of victims. Indeed, a starting point of this dissertation is that concepts such as justice, victimhood and violence are socially constructed, and that observer reactions to victims can hence not be adequately understood without more fully incorporating the socio-cultural context in which those reactions take place. In this sense, we must pause to consider 'injustice' in relation to society's proclamations of 'the normal'. The current thesis hence addresses the overarching question of how 'the normal' features in observer perceptions of sexual assault and observer reactions to both male and female (alleged) victims. It does so using experimental vignette studies in combination with a wide range of methods, including validated quantitative scales, indirect measures, and qualitative approaches.

The first chapter of this dissertation presents a broad and interdisciplinary theoretical framework that draws from empirical rape perception research, as well as from theoretical insights gleaned from the disciplines of social psychology, critical victimology, philosophy, and gender studies. In this chapter, I argue that traditional rape perception research is typically characterized by a narrow focus on the individual observer, thereby overlooking the broader socio-cultural context in which the observer makes sense of injustices like victimization. Key (social) constructs that are of importance here are sexual violence, victimhood, and gender. The chapter continues with an exploration of what a fuller acknowledgment of the socio-cultural context may entail practically within (experimental) rape perception studies. I suggest that it is likely to require an expansion of the type of observer reactions investigated, and of the means of measurement. Additionally, a fuller acknowledgment of the socio-cultural context is likely to necessitate a closer examination of the meanings that participants assign to the key concepts and variables within a given study.

The following chapters include empirical investigations into the role of normativity in observer reactions to male and female victims of sexual violence. Chapter 2 centers around the proposition that negative observer reactions are related to people's stereotypical conceptions of the 'ideal victim' (Christie, 1986), i.e., to the characteristics, behavior and demeanor expected of a truly blameless victim. An online vignette study was conducted to test the effect of the type of crime (physical vs. sexual), victim gender (man vs. woman) and type of emotion expressed in a victim impact statement (anger vs. sadness) on various observer reactions toward the victim. In

partial support of the hypotheses, it was found that participants typically reacted more negatively to male victims compared to female victims, and to victims who expressed anger rather than sadness. Results additionally show that victims who expressed a different emotion than the observer had a priori expected were evaluated less positively and perceived as less credible.

Chapter 3 explores the entwinement of normative conceptions of femininity and victimhood. Taking as its premise that gender is socially construed and malleable, its main hypothesis describes the expectation that sexual assault may influence observers' perceptions of a victim's gendered identity. In three experimental studies, participants were asked to rate a target person on masculine and feminine character traits and appearance. The latter variable was measured by means of an innovative pictorial measure. The target person was shown on a photo, and was described either as having been victimized by, or accused of sexual assault. In the control condition, no information was given about the target person. In the third study, two experimental conditions were added that described a male victim of physical assault, and a man who had willingly engaged in a one-night stand with his male classmate. Results reveal that both male and female victims of sexual assault were consistently ascribed fewer negative masculine traits than target persons in other conditions, and more positive feminine traits than target persons in the accused condition. Hence, the study provides some empirical support for the theoretical notion that rape is a gendering crime with the potential to 'feminize' the victim. It is suggested that victim feminization may be an attempt by the observer to normalize (male) sexual victimization.

Employing both explicit and more indirect measures, Chapter 4 reports a more direct investigation into the influence of normativity concerns on various observer reactions to victims of sexual assault. Amongst others, it tests the hypothesis that reactions to male and female victims of sexual violence are qualitatively different, and/or reflect different underlying concerns. Specifically, it was expected that concerns over normativity play a bigger role in the reactions toward male victims compared to female victims. Results from a lab study and online study demonstrate that observers' values related to binding group norms typically served as much better predictors of negative reactions to victims than observers' concerns over harm did. Of note is that these binding values in contrast predicted positive reactions to target persons who had not been victimized. The conducted studies provide no evidence of different (underlying mechanisms of) reactions toward male compared to female victims, yet seem to suggest that sexual victimization is sufficiently 'non-normative' in itself to warrant negative social reactions.

Chapter 5 pays closer attention to the extent to which observers judge the veracity of sexual assault claims, and how they subsequently construct plausible accounts of what has happened, and who is responsible. The chapter describes a quantitative and qualitative frame analysis of participants' written descriptions of the likely events that led to a victim's allegation of sexual assault. The analysis shows that although participants mostly accepted the facts of the claim, they drew upon various frames, e.g., of consensual sex and miscommunication, to construct the event as something other than 'real' sexual assault. Additionally, differences were found in observers' employment of frames in response to male versus female claims of sexual assault, where

participants were more likely to draw upon (more elaborate) frames of sexual assault and miscommunication in response to female claimants, and (more elaborate) frames of consensual sex and trivialization in response to male claimants. These findings seem to support the idea that people may have easier access to 'common knowledge' when making sense of female compared to male stories of sexual violence.

Chapter 6 describes an elaborate vignette study in which participants were requested to voice aloud, during intermittent breaks, their immediate reactions to a story of nonconsensual sex. In this study, third-party sense-making was made more challenging through the description of an ambiguous or 'grey area' encounter that defied many elements of the traditional rape script. Similarly to the previous chapter, this chapter employs a qualitative analysis to address the question how participants describe the encounter and attribute responsibility. The analysis demonstrates that participants strategically employed scripts of casual sex and gender stereotypes to describe the event as predictable and not serious, with the pursuer's actions requiring little explanation. These descriptions stand in contradistinction to the portrayal of the targeted person, who is positioned as both abnormal and responsible. The results illustrate the ways in which predominant discourses influence interpretations of encounters as transgressive or 'just' sex.

The final chapter summarizes the main findings of the empirical chapters before reflecting on several important theoretical and practical implications. The findings of this dissertation demonstrate that observers have particular (normative) expectations of the demeanor, behavior, gender, and even character of the victim. When victims do not meet these expectations, observers are more likely react negatively by, for instance, derogating or distancing from the victim. Results also point toward the notion that victimization alone may suffice as the non-normative occurrence that triggers negative social responses. When quantitative differences were found, they demonstrated a negative observer bias toward male victims compared to female victims. However, the latter chapters also illustrates that adherence to the (gender) norm may facilitate victim blame and diminishment of crime severity. Such subtle differences can only be detected through the use of more qualitative methods, which allow for a more thorough insight into the meaning that observers attach to particular actions, and the manner in which they construct 'plausible explanations' of claims of sexual violation.

Together, the findings of this dissertation demonstrate that observer reactions are indeed varied and complex, incorporating many more (nuanced) responses than blatant victim blame alone. Notions of the normal seem to influence observer expectations and give shape to descriptions and explanations of sexual victimization. If we hope to understand complex phenomena such as rape culture, rape perception research would do well to allow for the detection of nuanced narratives that relate to normalizing, trivializing, and excusing sexual violence. This not only requires an expansion of the traditional methods used, but also an acknowledgment that the concepts and reactions we study acquire their meaning in a particular socio-cultural context. By means of a reflection on the proposal to criminalize 'sex against the will' in the Netherlands, this chapter ends by suggesting that we may not need more categories of sexual violence in order to

enhance empathic understanding, but rather a greater tolerance for ambiguity and complexity in recounted (victim) stories.

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Appendices

Appendix A

Chapter 2: Instructions and Vignette

[The vignette represents a victim impact statement given by [Tom/Lisa], who experienced [sexual/physical] violence consequently expresses [anger/sadness].]

In two weeks time, Lisa [Tom] will give a victim personal statement during a court hearing. During this five minute speech, she [he] will be allowed to share the impact the victimization has had on her. She [He] has decided to focus on the emotional impact of the crime.

[Set of questions about expected emotion and intensity]

You will now read part of Lisa's [Tom's] victim personal statement. We have chosen the section that we felt was most representative of her complete statement.

Anger condition

'The rape [attack] changed my life. I feel very angry since it happened. I often feel the blood rushing through my body, and it feels as if I would explode. I often have to clench my fists to restrain myself from punching something. I try to control myself, but sometimes I can't help it. I get into stupid arguments with friends or family. When I think about how unfair it was, I feel like yelling and hitting someone or saying mean things. If I were to see him again, I think I would break down on the spot and try to hurt him as much as possible.'

Sadness condition

'The rape [attack] changed my life. I feel very sad since it happened. I often feel a lump in my throat, and I feel like doing nothing. I often have to clench my teeth to restrain myself from breaking into tears when I speak. I try to control myself, but sometimes I can't help it. I refuse to go out and do fun things with friends or family. When I think about how horrible it was, I feel like crying, I want to be comforted, and I wish I could return to being my old self. If I were to see him again, I think I would break down on the spot and be unable to do anything.'

Appendix B

Chapter 3: Additional Verbatim Vignettes

Accused condition - Study 1 and 2

Michael [Melanie] has been accused of sexually assaulting someone during a fraternity party [party] at his [her] college. The alleged victim has reported the incident to the University Board. Michael [Melanie] states that any sexual activity between them was consensual. Michael [Melanie] explains that they had both had a lot to drink. He [She] states that the alleged victim did not resist his [her] advances, or signal clearly that Michael [Melanie] was overstepping any boundaries.

Accused condition - Study 3

Michael has been accused of sexually assaulting someone during a fraternity party at his university. The incident has been reported to the University Board.

The alleged victim is a male student of the same university. Although the alleged victim claims otherwise, Michael states that the sexual activity between them was consensual. Michael explains that they had both had a lot to drink. He states that the alleged victim did not explicitly object to his sexual advances, nor did he physically resist when Michael undid the alleged victim's belt.

The University Board is currently conducting an investigation.

Victim sexual assault condition - Study 3

Michael has become a victim of sexual assault during a fraternity party at his university. The incident has been reported to the University Board.

The alleged perpetrator is a male student of the same university. Although the alleged perpetrator claims otherwise, Michael states that the sexual activity between them was without consent. Michael explains that they had both had a lot to drink. He states that when the alleged perpetrator started making sexual advances, he told him to stop several times. However, when the alleged perpetrator started undoing Michael's belt, he was too confused and scared to physically resist or start shouting.

The University Board is currently conducting an investigation.

Victim physical assault condition - Study 3

Michael has become a victim of physical assault during a fraternity party at his university. The incident has been reported to the University Board.

The alleged perpetrator is a male student of the same university. Although the alleged perpetrator claims otherwise, Michael states that the assault came out of nowhere. Michael explains that they had both had a lot to drink. He states that when the alleged perpetrator started shoving him, he told him to stop several times. However, when the alleged perpetrator started beating on him, Michael was too confused and scared to defend himself or escape.

The University Board is currently conducting an investigation.

Consensual sex condition - Study 3

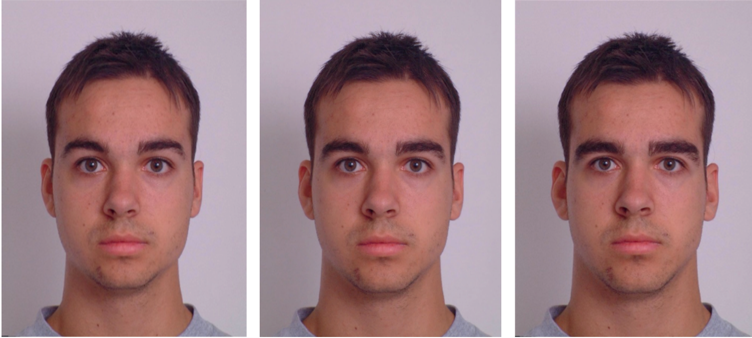
Michael had a one-night stand with an acquaintance during a fraternity party at his university. The acquaintance is a male student of the same university.

Although Michael states he has only slept with girls so far, on this evening he met a guy who he instantly liked. Michael explains that they had both had a lot to drink. He states that after they had talked for quite a while, he was the one who started flirting. The other student responded positively to his advances and after a great evening at the party, they went home together to Michael’s place.

Appendix C

Chapter 3: Images Used in Feminization Measure

Feminized, original, and masculinized faces Study 1 and 3



Feminized, original, and masculinized faces Study 2

Reference

DeBruine, L., & Jones, B. (2017). Young adult White faces with manipulated versions (Version 1). *figshare*. https://doi.org/10.6084/m9.figshare.4220517.v1

Appendix D

Chapter 4: Vignette Study 2 Male Victim

Lucas is a student attending a medium-sized university in the south of England. He has nearly completed the third year of his bachelor in physiotherapy. He enjoys student life and mostly achieves good grades on his exams. In his free time, he works in a small grocery store that sells biological products. He also babysits in his neighborhood to earn some extra money. Lucas has had a relationship for nearly two years. His girlfriend lives nearby, and they often have dinner together or go to the gym. He also enjoys meeting up with his friends to go for drinks in the city or to go to the cinema. Other hobbies include playing hockey and travelling.

Near the end of his third year at university, something traumatic happens to Lucas.

On a Thursday night, Lucas and his friends go to a student bar. His girlfriend decides to stay at home because she has exams the next day. His friends leave the bar early, but Lucas is enjoying himself and knows some people there, so he stays longer. One of his classmates introduces him to Paul because Paul happens to come from the same town as Lucas. Paul offers to buy him another beer and Lucas accepts. They start a conversation and find that they get along well together. They joke around and spend most of the evening with each other. At the end of the night, they both have to go in the same direction and Paul suggests having one final drink at his place. Lucas readily agrees and they take a bus to reach the student house were Paul lives. Once inside, Lucas notices he feels quite dizzy from the alcohol. Paul also appears drunk, and suddenly starts making sexual advances. Lucas laughs it off at first and changes the topic of the conversation.

When Paul persists, Lucas declares that he is not interested in him that way. Wanting to be polite, however, Lucas accepts another drink and they sit on the sofa talking about other things. After a while, Paul starts making sexual advances again: he pins Lucas down on the sofa and starts touching him, ignoring his refusals and attempts to free himself. While trying to undo Lucas' belt, Paul is clearly becoming more aroused. He smiles that Lucas is just playing hard to get, and that he can tell Lucas wants to have sex with him. Paul lowers his trousers, grabs Lucas by his hair and pushes Lucas' head towards his erect penis. Lucas feels that Paul is physically stronger, and does not resist. Lucas performs oral sex on Paul. After a while, Paul tells Lucas to undress himself completely. Paul goes into the bedroom to get a condom. At this point, Lucas finds his way to the door and quietly leaves.

Appendix E

Chapter 5: Vignette and Instructions

Vignette

On the following page, you will read about a student named Michael [Melanie]. Michael [Melanie] claims [s]he has been sexually assaulted by a fellow student during a party on campus. The incident has been reported to the University Board. Please read the text on the following page very carefully: you will be asked to reflect on it in detail, and will not be able to return to the text.
The alleged perpetrator is a male student of the same university. Michael [Melanie] explains that the incident happened late at night at a campus party celebrating the completion of the exams. Although the alleged perpetrator claims otherwise, Michael [Melanie] states that the sexual activity between them was without consent. Michael [Melanie] recounts that they had been drinking. [S]he states that when the alleged perpetrator started making sexual advances, [s]he told him to stop several times. However, when the alleged perpetrator started undoing Michael's [Melanie's] belt, [s]he was too confused and scared to physically resist or start shouting.

The University Board is currently conducting an investigation.

Instructions

On the previous page, you were provided with some information about Michael's [Melanie's] (alleged) victimisation. Of course, as is often the case, many gaps remain. Based on your own knowledge and experience, please describe in detail what you think is most likely to have happened between Michael [Melanie] and the other student. Feel free to add any other thoughts you may have about the event. For the purpose of this study, it is very important that you are as elaborate as possible in your description.

In this specific case, what is the best way forward in your opinion? Again, please be as elaborate as possible.

Appendix F

Chapter 6: English Translation Vignette Female Student Condition

On a Thursday evening in May 2018, Lisa and her friends depart to a bar where their student association has organized a party. Lisa is 23 at that moment, and is in the second year of her study pedagogics. She enjoys student life, the freedom, and the parties, but she also manages to pass her courses without much difficulty. She lives together with two housemates.

As soon as Lisa and her friends walk into the bar, they notice that there is already a lively atmosphere. *'We were somewhat late, I think shortly after twelve, because we had had dinner at home first and had drunk a few beers. The majority at the party was already quite tipsy, but in a nice way. Many people knew each other, and there was laughing and dancing'.*

When Lisa is talking to a few classmates, one of them introduces her to Thomas. Lisa says that she was immediately impressed. '*This was a rather well-known DJ who was just walking around at this party. I think not everyone knew him because you sort of need to like that kind of music. But I had already been to a party where he was DJ-ing a couple of times, and he is just really good at what he does. I had never met him and now I was just casually talking to him. I did immediately say that I was a huge fan of his music of course, so it may not have been all that casual after all'.*
There is at once a good connection between Lisa and Thomas, and for most of the evening, they keep talking to each other. '*He was witty, told good stories, showed interest, and did not at all behave like some kind of local celebrity. And he kept on ordering rounds of beer and gin tonic*'.

[1-minute break]

Lisa's friends return home at some point because they have to work the next day, but Lisa decides to stay longer. When Lisa looks back at her student time before that evening, she describes it as a period in which everything seemed to come easy to her.

'I was happy with my study pedagogics and had my best friends living in the same city. I had already completed most courses for that year, the summer was approaching, and I had a lot of free time without re-sits. I did have a side job at that moment, but it was behind the reception desk of a hotel in the area, so I wouldn't really call that intensive work. Besides that, I spent my time on sports – I played soccer at a student club – and I was busy planning a trip to South-Africa where some of my relatives live'.

At the end of the night when the bar begins to empty, Thomas proposes Lisa to have one more drink at his place. '*He said he had expensive whisky at home that we could try. I am not much of a*

whisky-drinker, but I didn't say that. I was also quite curious how he lived of course'. Lisa says they were both very tipsy at that moment: *'I did have some difficulty unlocking my bike'.* But Thomas lives close by, and a little while later they are sitting on the couch with music and a glass of whisky. Lisa compliments Thomas on the decoration of his apartment and the many records that are lined up in wooden crates along the wall. Then a turning point in the evening takes place.

[1-minute break]

'I took off my vest because it was warm, and he said something like 'you don't have to leave it that', like he wanted me to take off more. I thought he was making a joke. I don't remember if I reacted to it, I think I laughed a bit'. Not much later, Thomas pulls Lisa towards him and starts to fondle her over her clothes. *'That really startled me, I detached myself and stood up. I said that that was not the intention here. He looked at me and asked if maybe I wasn't interested in men. I admitted that I was bisexual, but also told him that I did not want sex with him. He held up his hands, as if to say 'it's fine', and I said I needed to use the toilet'.* Lisa sits in the bathroom for a while and tries to calm down. She drinks some water and wets her face.

[1-minute break]

When Lisa returns, Thomas asks if she is okay. Lisa shrugs and says that she felt rather uncomfortable, to which Thomas replies that he 'does not want to do anything that Lisa doesn't want to do'. He suggests watching some TV, to which Lisa agrees. Yet it does not take long before Thomas moves closer to her again, and starts to stroke her over her jeans. Lisa does not react and keeps staring straight ahead. '*I pretended I was extremely engrossed in what was happening on the TV, but I had no idea what it was. For a really long time I kept saying to myself: But wasn't it a nice evening? This is a temporary misunderstanding… I just really couldn't think straight anymore'.*

Thomas persists and starts unbuttoning Lisa's jeans. '*I pushed his hand away a couple of times, but he kept continuing with more persistence. I don't know what was the cause of it, but I just couldn't get it through to him that I really didn't want to. He just kept waving it away and not taking it seriously. Maybe it was because of the alcohol. But then, he could also have noticed that I wasn't game. I sat practically frozen on the couch, I remember that I was suddenly sweating immensely'.* Thomas takes notice of a different bodily reaction, however. After a hesitant silence: '*He remarked that I was wet down there* ['*stiff*' in male target condition]. *I find it hard to admit this; this is what I might be most ashamed of'.*

[1-minute break]

When Thomas wants to take off Lisa's jeans, Lisa states again that she does not want that. Thomas says that that is no problem. Subsequently, he unbuttons his own trousers and asks for a blowjob. Lisa obeys a single minute, but then detaches herself. '*Suddenly I said very loudly 'I am going home now!' He just remained sitting where he was, even said that I shouldn't forget my bike key and whether I wanted a bottle of water for on the way. I biked home like crazy'.*
'When I think back, I wonder if I couldn't have left sooner. Then it might have never happened! I have never told anyone. Out of shame, and because I did not want people to see me differently. Since recently, I have a boyfriend though, and I sometimes doubt whether I should tell him. I am afraid it may otherwise get in the way of the relationship'.

[1-minute break]

Original Dutch Vignette Female Target Condition

Op een donderdagavond in mei 2018 vertrekken Lisa en haar vrienden naar de kroeg waar hun studentenvereniging een feest heeft georganiseerd. Lisa is op dat moment 23 en zit in het tweede jaar van haar studie pedagogiek. Ze geniet van het studentenleven, de vrijheid en de feestjes, maar weet ook zonder veel moeite haar vakken te halen. Ze woont samen met twee huisgenoten.

Zodra Lisa en haar vrienden de kroeg binnenlopen merken ze dat de sfeer er goed in zit. *"We waren aan de late kant, ik denk iets over twaalf, omdat we eerst thuis samen gegeten hadden en wat biertjes hadden gedronken. De meesten op het feest waren al flink aangeschoten maar wel op een gezellige manier. Veel mensen kenden elkaar en er werd gelachen en gedanst."*

Wanneer Lisa met een aantal studiegenoten staat te praten introduceert één van hen haar aan Thijs. Lisa zegt meteen onder de indruk te zijn. *"Dit was een vrij bekende DJ die hier zo maar op het feestje rondliep. Ik denk dat niet iedereen hem kende want je moet wel een beetje van die soort muziek houden. Maar ik was al een aantal keer naar een feest geweest waar hij draaide en hij is gewoon heel goed in zijn vak. Ik had hem nog nooit ontmoet en nu stond ik hier een beetje casual met hem te kletsen. Ik zei wel meteen dat ik enorm fan was van zijn muziek natuurlijk, dus zo casual was het misschien ook weer niet."*

Het klikt meteen tussen Lisa en Thijs en het grootste deel van de avond blijven ze met elkaar praten. *"Hij was gevat, had goede verhalen te vertellen, toonde interesse en gedroeg zich totaal niet als één of andere local celebrity. En hij bleef maar rondjes bier en gin tonic bestellen."*

[1-minute break]

De vrienden van Lisa keren op een gegeven moment huiswaarts omdat ze de volgende dag moeten werken maar Lisa besluit langer te blijven. Als Lisa terugkijkt op haar studententijd vòòr die avond beschrijft ze het als een periode waarin alles voor de wind leek te gaan:

"Ik was tevreden met mijn studie pedagogiek en had mijn beste vrienden in dezelfde stad wonen. Ik had voor dat jaar de meeste vakken al afgesloten, de zomer kwam er aan en ik had veel vrije tijd zonder herkansingen. Ik had op dat moment wel een bijbaan maar dat was achter de receptie van een hotel in de buurt dus dat zou ik niet echt intensief werk noemen. Verder besteedde ik mijn tijd aan sporten – ik voetbalde op dat moment bij een studentenclub – en ik was bezig een reis naar Zuid-Afrika te plannen waar familie van me woont."

Aan het eind van de avond als de kroeg begint leeg te lopen stelt Thijs aan Lisa voor nog één drankje bij hem thuis te doen. *"Hij zei thuis een dure whisky te hebben die we konden proberen. Ik ben zelf niet zo van de whisky maar dat zei ik maar niet. Ik was ook wel benieuwd naar hoe hij woonde natuurlijk."* Lisa zegt dat ze op dat moment allebei flink aangeschoten waren: *"ik had wel enige moeite mijn fiets van het slot te halen."* Maar Thijs woont vlakbij en even later zitten ze op de bank met muziek en een glas whisky. Lisa complimenteert Thijs met de inrichting van zijn studio en de vele platen die in houten kratten langs de muur staan. Dan vindt er een wending in de avond plaats.

[1-minute break]

"Ik deed mijn vest uit omdat het er warm was, en hij zei iets van 'daar hoef je het niet bij te laten hoor', alsof hij wilde dat ik meer uittrok. Ik dacht dat hij een grapje maakte. Ik weet niet meer of ik er op reageerde, ik denk dat ik een beetje lachte." Niet veel later trekt Thijs Lisa naar zich toe en begint haar over haar kleren te betasten. *"Toen schrok ik echt, ik maakte me los en stond op. Ik zei dat dat niet de bedoeling was. Hij keek me aan en vroeg of ik soms niet in mannen geïnteresseerd was. Ik gaf toe dat ik biseksueel was, maar zei ook tegen hem dat ik geen seks met hem wilde. Hij hield z'n handen op, zo van 'het is al goed' en ik zei dat ik naar de wc moest."* Lisa blijft een poos zitten in de badkamer en probeert te kalmeren. Ze drinkt een paar slokken water en maakt haar gezicht nat.

[1-minute break]

Wanneer Lisa terugkomt, vraagt Thijs of het wel goed gaat. Lisa haalt haar schouders op en zegt dat ze zich nogal ongemakkelijk voelde, waarop Thijs zegt dat hij "niets wil doen wat Lisa niet wil doen." Hij stelt voor nog wat tv te kijken, waar Lisa mee instemt. Toch duurt het niet lang voor Thijs weer dichterbij komt zitten en Lisa over haar broek heen begint te strelen. Lisa reageert niet en blijft strak voor zich uitkijken. *"Ik deed alsof ik enorm verdiept was in wat er op*

tv speelde maar ik had geen idee wat het was. Tot heel lang bleef ik maar tegen mezelf zeggen: 'maar het was toch een leuke avond? Dit is even een misverstand'... Ik kon ook gewoon echt niet helder meer nadenken."

Thijs zet door en begint de broek van Lisa open te knopen. *"Ik duwde zijn hand een paar keer weg maar hij bleef maar doorgaan met meer vasthoudendheid. Ik weet niet waar het door kwam, maar het lukte me maar niet hem te doen inzien dat ik ècht niet wilde. Hij bleef het maar een beetje wegwimpelen en niet serieus nemen. Misschien kwam het door de drank. Maar ja, hij had ook kunnen merken dat ik geen game was. Ik zat daar zo goed als verstijfd op de bank, ik weet nog dat ik opeens enorm zweette."* Thijs gaat echter op een andere lichamelijke reactie in. Na een vertwijfelde stilte: *"Hij merkte op dat ik nat was daar beneden. Ik vind dit moeilijk om toe te geven, hier schaam ik me misschien nog het meest voor."*

[1-minute break]

Wanneer Thijs de broek van Lisa uit wil doen zegt Lisa nog een keer dat ze dat niet wil. Thijs zegt dat dat geen probleem is. Hij knoopt vervolgens zijn eigen broek los en vraagt gepijpt te worden. Lisa gehoorzaamt een enkele minuut maar maakt zich dan los. "Opeens zei ik heel hard 'Ik ga nú naar huis!' Hij bleef gewoon zitten waar hij zat, zei zelfs nog dat ik mijn fietssleutel niet moest vergeten en of ik nog een flesje water mee wilde voor onderweg. Ik ben keihard naar huis gefietst."

"Als ik eraan terug denk, vraag ik me af of ik niet eerder weg had kunnen gaan. Dan was het misschien nooit gebeurd! Ik heb het nooit aan iemand verteld. Uit schaamte en omdat ik niet wil dat mensen me anders gaan zien. Sinds kort heb ik echter een vriend en twijfel ik af en toe of ik het hem moet vertellen. Ik ben bang dat het de relatie in de weg zou kunnen staan."

[1-minute break]

Dankwoord

Het voelt passend een dankwoord te schrijven in een lockdown tijdens de winterse dagen van het nieuwe jaar, in een tijd dat zelfs ik het liefst mijn armen Inspector Gadget-stijl uit zou strekken om alle mensen om wie ik geef in een grote groepsknuffel te verzamelen. In plaats daarvan zal ik proberen met woorden te omarmen.

Om een proefschrift succesvol af te ronden zijn doorzettingsvermogen, flexibiliteit en plan- en organisatievaardigheden nodig. Zo schrijf ik dat momenteel in mijn sollicitatiebrieven. Het solliciteren is dan ook een proces dat voornamelijk aanspraak maakt op de *agentic self*: wat heb *ik* als individu allemaal bereikt? Gelukkig laat een dankwoord meer ruimte over voor de erkenning van een mens in verbinding met anderen. Laten we dus eerlijk zijn: om een proefschrift succesvol af te ronden zijn *ook* samenwerking, relativering en een gevoel van verbondenheid nodig. Dit punt bereiken was niet gelukt zonder de aanwezigheid en steun van een heleboel mensen. Ik wil een aantal daarvan bij naam noemen, met het risico dat ik onterecht een naam vergeet.

Om maar een statement te maken (zie eerdere pagina's in dit proefschrift), allereerst mijn hartelijke dank aan de 'socio-culturele context' waarin mijn PhD-project kon gedijen. Daarmee bedoel ik natuurlijk met name INTERVICT. Ik ben dankbaar dat ik deel heb uitgemaakt van dit mooie instituut, ook na de hoogtijdagen. Ik heb er topcollega's getroffen en enorm veel vrijheid en leerplezier in mijn werk ervaren. Pauline en Pien, jullie zijn geweldige kantoorkamergenoten geweest. Leyla, ik mis je vrolijke verschijning in mijn deuropening wel een beetje! Jij hebt me geleerd hoe je de werkweek het best kan beginnen, namelijk met Silly Tilly Comedy. Valérie, ik had me geen betere stagiaire kunnen wensen. Vivi, dank voor je betrokkenheid en het waarborgen van de goede sfeer op de gehele zesde verdieping. Conny, jij bent een van de weinigen die van mijn eerste tot laatste dag mijn collega is geweest. Ik heb veel bewondering voor je! Bedankt dat je zorg hebt gedragen voor INTERVICT, ook/vooral toen er nog maar een handjevol van ons over waren. Ook mijn dank aan de collega's van Criminal Law.

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mannelijk motorrijden nou eigenlijk echt is, of in je nauwkeurige feedback op mijn werk. Fijn dat ik naderhand altijd even mocht bellen om te vragen wat er nu eigenlijk geschreven stond!

Antony, jij bent wat mij betreft een ware geleerde. Ik hoef niet bij je aan te kloppen voor praktische PhD-zaken (het mocht wel, je wist veelal gewoon niet hoe het zat), maar dat geeft des de meer tijd om het over de echt interessante dingen te hebben. Het enthousiasme dat ik als student voelde na een scriptieafspraak met jou voel ik nog steeds als we weer eens een namiddag, liefst in Utrechts café, van gedachten wisselen. De verhouding tussen ons heeft nooit veel geleken op dat van student en begeleider, en ik ben dankbaar dat we elkaar kennen in gelijkwaardigheid en vriendschap (hoewel ik ook een beetje mijn hart vasthoud voor de laudatio). Hopelijk zetten we de samenwerking, of in ieder geval de gedachtewisseling, in de toekomst voort.

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Dear Kathy, thank you for your kind willingness to welcome me in Sheffield for a research stay. And when we had to cancel that at the very last moment due to Covid-19, thank you for the enlightening online talks.

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To the members of the reading committee, thank you for the time you have spent reviewing my dissertation, and for the much broader contributions you make to the humanities and social sciences every day.

Mijn paranimfen, Alice en Stephanie! Stephanie, I know your Dutch is nearly perfect, but true to form, I am going to address you in English. You are so tough and so caring at the same time, it’s almost heartbreaking. I am in awe of how you have shaped your life despite plenty of challenges,

and succeed at doing a PhD *and* having a lovely family of three. Your passionate determination to act justly and stand up for others not only make you a victimologist at heart, but also a terrific friend. And I just loved working with you on our discourse analysis!

Alice, hoe had ik zonder jou gekund?! Vooral door jou heb ik het idee dat ik mijn PhD-traject niet alleen hoefde te doorstaan, en toen bij mijn exit-gesprek werd gevraagd welke factoren positief hadden bijgedragen aan het afronden van mijn proefschrift stond jouw naam bovenaan. Ik ben ontzettend blij en dankbaar dat wij een team vormden binnen INTERVICT en daarna. Mijn leukste momenten op werk waren veelal samen met jou, buiten de deur lunchen, bier- en boekenclub, katjes knuffelen (of van een afstand bewonderen), veel te veel brainstormen en dan ook nog een hoop artikelen in de Google Drive produceren. Ik denk en hoop dat we altijd weer een projectje vinden om aan samen te werken.

Soms wordt je wereld tijdens het schrijven van een proefschrift even heel klein: je stort in een diep dal door een *p*-waarde van boven de .05 of blijft malen over de structuur van je theoretisch kader. Gelukkig heb ik mensen die mijn wereld vergroten en me herinneren aan wat echt belangrijk is.

Eerst een paar middelbare schoolvrienden. Rozemarijn, ik ben altijd zo onder de indruk van jouw nuchterheid, openheid en sterke wil. Binnenkort weer eens koffie of wijn drinken? Nicole, wij blijven bijna onopgemerkt constanten in elkaars leven, en daar ben ik heel blij mee. Je doordachte kijk op dingen, je humor en je durf zijn eigenschappen die ik enorm aan je waardeer. Dat moet deze grijze muis (ha!) toch even gepiept hebben.

Eek, ze vonden het vroeger op school maar een onwaarschijnlijke vriendschap - de druktemaker en de stille - maar wij wisten wel beter! Toen al noemden we onszelf met enige trots *nerds*, en met onze liefde voor fantasyboeken en online games waren we dat ook wel een beetje. Gelukkig wel veelzijdige nerds: samen de eerste verre ouderloze reis naar India gemaakt, en 10 jaar later naar het verbluffende Japan, om de andere trips maar even buiten beschouwing te laten! Je bent een van de stoerste chicks die ik ken en ik kan alleen maar zeggen, sign me up for more adventures, of dat nu in het buitenland of Amsterdam is!

Ankie! Een PhD doorkomen is tot daaraantoe, maar het leven (‘O lijf!’), poei. Gelukkig ben jij er. Ik zal nooit vergeten hoe je, toen er een gevecht uitbrak in een Vietnamese kroeg, me instinctief de hoek induwde en voor me ging staan. Papspiertjes? In ieder geval een hart van goud! Stappen, reizen (van India tot Ameland), ziekte (van dengue tot corona), en hartzeer: we hebben al flink wat voor elkaar gezorgd, maar ook altijd enorm veel plezier gemaakt. Onze recente reis naar de Canarische eilanden voegt daar nog eens een dosis mooie herinneringen aan toe. En tuurlijk, we worden ouder en iets minder onbezonnen, maar samen zijn we nog altijd licht genoeg voor de voetjes van de vloer. En dan heb je een dansfeestje, bam!

Mark, jij hebt als mijn meest recente vriend mijn PhD-eindsprint waarschijnlijk van het dichtstbij meegemaakt (sorry?). Zonder jou had ik deze (corona)tijd als een stuk onaangenamer ervaren! Ik ben heel blij dat je een jaar geleden hoffelijk mijn bijna over datum vlees aanvaarde, en dat we sindsdien tig rondjes door Den Bosch en de Moerputten hebben gelopen, wijntjes hebben gedronken, platen geluisterd en planten bewonderd. Verre van vinkgor.

Maria the Curious! How wild you are, I love it! You travel from one place to another; you housesit, babysit, dogsit, but hardly ever ‘sit still’. And yet you are always there for the people you care about, including me. Thank you for letting me share in some of your wonderful adventures – amongst others with stubborn Boublik in Paris, and farting Toto and Gigi in Amsterdam – and for your enthusiasm about art and the important things in life. I have no doubt we have formed a lasting friendship, and one of my resolutions for 2021 is to visit your exhibition in Palermo!

Job, het grootste deel van mijn PhD-traject heb je naast me gestaan, me gesteund, lief gehad en aangemoedigd. Met jou waren anti-kraakpanden als droomkastelen, en het dagelijks leven kleurrijker. Als geen ander heb je me geïnspireerd, me tot nadenken aangejaagd. Het is geen pijnloos proces geweest, maar ik ben je er dankbaar voor. Ik hoop dat je in jouw evaluatie tot soortgelijke conclusies komt. En Jimi blijft uiteraard de allerliefste hond die ik ooit gekend heb.

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Komen die vocalen nog, of moet ik beginnen? My dearest Isabelli, there you have it, gratefulness is one of your keywords in life and now I get to fix in print how grateful I am to you. This gratefulness started the day I sat myself down next to you in class with a hangover big enough not to notice the ‘I’m cool by myself’ aloofness you thought you had going on. It does not seem that long ago that we danced the windmill in the Warhol, diagnosed each other with all the DSM-disorders we saw fit, and (mostly you) turned to wine to talk about the more intimate stuff. Now you are a therapist of the type I would like to keep on speed dial: openminded, kindhearted and amazingly intelligent. I promise to call as your friend instead, and to always bring borrelnootjes when I visit you. I am very happy we keep investing in our friendship. And you know what they say about friendship (or wine, I may be misquoting): *the older it is, the gooder it is also*!

Rosa, cousin time! Een van de fijnste gevoelens is om gekend te worden. En na bijna dertig jaar hechte vriendschap kan ik zeggen, ik ben heel gelukkig door *jou* gekend te worden. Bedankt voor

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