

## The Influence of Beliefs on Sexual Assault Attributions and Perceptions

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*This study investigated the relation between fundamentalist religious beliefs, victim alcohol consumption, and victim–perpetrator relationship on blaming a sexual assault victim and perceptions of the assault. Male and female participants (N = 124) read vignettes that varied female victim alcohol consumption (she drank 3 drinks or she did not drink) and couple relationship (acquaintances on a first date, steady dating partners, or married). Contrary to prior research, participants did not blame the victim more or hold her more responsible for the attack if she was drinking at the time of the assault. Participants were more likely to perceive the assault as a crime and to label the assault a rape if it was a first date as opposed to a dating couple or married couple. Program ideas to decrease victim blame are discussed.*

**R**APE IS A SERIOUS CRIME THAT CONTINUES TO be prevalent in modern society. Sexual assault is an important problem on college campuses, with estimates as high as 15–30% of college women experiencing rape (Abbey, 1991; Koss, Gidycz, & Wisniewski, 1987). Although the common conception of rape is a stranger attacking, rape usually occurs between acquaintances. According to Bureau of Justice Statistics (1999), 69% of rapes reported to police involved cases in which the victims knew their assailants. However, rape is an underreported crime, with only 44% of rape victims reporting the attack to police (Bureau of Justice Statistics, 1999). Abbey, Ross, McDuffie, and McAuslan (1996a) reported that 95% of rapes among college students occurred between acquaintances. This number is higher than the Bureau statistics because it is based on an anonymous survey rather than police reports, and acquaintance-rape victims are less likely to report the crime to the police than are stranger-rape victims. In the majority of cases, sexual assault victims are women and the assailants are men (Abbey, 1991). For this reason, the current study dealt with sexual assault that occurs between female victims and male perpetrators.

A prevalent problem in society is the tendency to blame rape victims (Abbey, 1991; Whatley, 1996).

Blaming the victim may arise from attributions of personal characteristics such as sexual promiscuity, personality dimensions, decisions such as those involving alcohol use, or the situation and circumstances surrounding an attack. This tendency to blame the victim may lead to the crime not being reported because the victim blames herself, and, consequently, the underreporting of rape perpetuates the belief that rape is not a serious crime. In addition, a victim who feels that others blame her for the attack may in turn blame herself, and this self-blame could cause psychological problems (Katz & Burt, 1988).

Religious beliefs, such as fundamentalism, may influence perceptions and attributions of sexual assault. Altemeyer and Hunsberger (1992) found that religious fundamentalism is related to prejudice and discrimination against minorities, homosexuals, and women. Altemeyer and Hunsberger define fundamentalism as believing in one set of teachings that include the essential and exact truth about God and humanity and the special relationship believers have with God. In addition, this truth “must be followed today according to the fundamental, unchangeable practices of the past” (Altemeyer & Hunsberger, 1992, p. 118). It is likely that the more conservative beliefs among fundamentalists may extend to more tradi-

tional gender role beliefs. Thus, women who defy the traditional norms for women, perhaps by drinking alcohol or having consensual sex outside of marriage, may be deserving of a sexual assault, according to fundamentalists. Because the woman was not conducting herself in a manner consistent with the traditional view of a “lady,” fundamentalists may believe that she deserves anything bad that happens to her. The present study postulated that religious fundamentalism would be linked to blaming a sexual assault victim more and less negative outcome perceptions of the assault.

A second factor that may influence perceptions and attributions of sexual assault pertains to whether alcohol use is involved. A disappointing statistic reported by Anderson and Cummings (1993) is that 19% of the men surveyed admitted to getting a woman drunk in order to force sex. Alcohol is a common feature of sexual assault. In a study that compared college women’s dates that did versus did not involve sexual aggression, Muehlenhard and Linton (1987) found that 55% of male assailants and 53% of female victims reported being intoxicated at the time an assault occurred. A national survey of college students by Ullman, Karabatsos, and Koss (1999) yielded similar data. Forty-two percent of women who were assaulted reported they were drinking prior to the assault; 53% of these women also reported that the assailant was drinking prior to the assault (Ullman, Karabatsos, and Koss, 1999). In a simulated acquaintance-rape trial, “jurors” acknowledged that drinking, by either the victim or the offender, was a contributing factor of the assault (Fischer, 1995). Both society and the assailant use drinking by the assailant as an excuse to justify deviant behavior (Abbey, 1991). For example, the assault is not the assailant’s fault because he could not control his actions due to a drunken state. In addition, alcohol use increases the likelihood of misperception and decreases a woman’s ability to resist attack (Abbey, 1991).

There is a tendency for female victims to be blamed if they were drinking at the time the assault occurred (Abbey, 1991). If a rape occurs when a victim was under the influence of alcohol, she is more likely to feel responsible herself for the attack, which can lead to self-blame (Abbey, 1991). Previous research (Abbey, Ross, McDuffie, & McAuslan, 1996a, 1996b; Aramburu & Leigh, 1991) has speculated that societal beliefs about women who drink lead to blaming a victim who was drinking when an assault occurred. Attributions of responsibility fall on the assault victim who drinks due to her inebriated state. People say she should have known better, or she was asking for it. Abbey (1991) found that participants

view women who drink as loose and sexually available. This study examined the hypothesis that participants will blame a victim who drank alcohol prior to the attack more than a sober victim, and have less negative outcome perceptions if the assault involved the victim drinking.

As mentioned earlier, the majority of rapes occur between acquaintances. Bridges (1991) found that participants rated acquaintance rape as less serious than stranger rape. Participants stated that a woman who was raped by an acquaintance would suffer less psychological damage than would a woman who was raped by a stranger. In addition, male participants were less likely to label an assault as rape if it occurred between married partners (Bridges, 1991; Simonson & Subich, 1999). Cahoon and Edmonds (1992) also found that men were less likely to define a marital rape scenario as rape. These findings suggest the notion that sexual intercourse is viewed as the duty of a wife. The purpose of this study was to examine the perception of an assault based on victim–perpetrator relationship (married, dating, or acquaintances). Due to the previously documented tendency to view sexual assault between sexual partners as less serious, the present study postulated that participants would blame a victim more if she had engaged in previous consensual sex with the assailant. In addition, we hypothesized that participants would have less negative outcome perceptions if the victim and perpetrator had engaged in previous consensual sex.

The focus of this study was to examine the influence of fundamentalist religious beliefs, victim alcohol consumption, and victim–perpetrator relationship on attributions and perceptions of a sexual assault. The present study predicted that participants higher in religious fundamentalism would blame the victim more and would have less negative outcome perceptions than those participants lower in religious fundamentalism. The study explored the hypothesis that participants would blame the victim more and have less negative outcome perceptions if she consumed alcohol before the attack as opposed to being sober. Finally, we hypothesized that participants would attribute more blame to the victim and have less negative outcome perceptions if she had previously engaged in consensual sex with the assailant.

## Method

### Participants

One hundred and twenty-four (28 men, 96 women) college students from psychology classes completed the survey for extra credit. The age range was from 18 to 39 years of age ( $M = 20.5$ ). The majority of the participants were Caucasian (90%). Seven percent of

the participants were African American, and three persons identified themselves as another ethnicity.

### Design and Materials

The present study used a  $2 \times 3$  factorial design. There were two levels of victim drinking (she drank three drinks or she did not drink) and three levels of relationship between the victim and assailant (first date, dating 6 months, married). Participants read a vignette that varied victim alcohol consumption and victim–perpetrator relationship. The couple who had been dating for 6 months and the married couple had engaged in previous consensual sexual intercourse. The male assailant consumed four drinks in every scenario. See Appendix A for the vignettes.

To ascertain participants' perception of the victim, the assailant, and the assault, we included 20 perception questions. Questions asked to what extent the outcome was due to victim or assailant drinking, victim inability to control the situation, victim or assailant sexual behavior, victim–assailant relationship, societal expectations of men to be sexually aggressive, societal expectations of women to be flirtatious, victim's personality, assailant's personality, and victim or assailant misperception of the situation. In addition, questions asked to what extent the victim or assailant was to blame, to what extent the victim or assailant was responsible, and to what extent the victim got what she deserved. There were additional outcome perception questions that asked to what extent the assault was a violation of the victim's rights, a rape, or a crime. The 6-point Likert scale for these items ranged from 1 = *not at all* to 6 = *definitely*. See Appendix B for a full list of the 20 perception questions.

The 6-item Religious Fundamentalism Scale (McFarland, 1989) measures religious fundamentalism. The 5-point Likert scale for these items ranged from 1 = *strongly disagree* to 5 = *strongly agree*. A higher score meant a stronger religious fundamentalist belief. This scale was highly reliable, with a Cronbach's alpha of .88. A sample question from this scale is, "I am sure the Bible contains no errors."

The survey ascertained demographic information, including age, sex, ethnicity, year in college, membership in a sorority or fraternity, and religious affiliation. In addition, questions about frequency of childhood and current church attendance were asked; the scale for these questions ranged from 1 = *twice a week* to 7 = *never*.

### Procedure

Students completed the survey in groups ranging in size from 1 to 35 persons in classrooms at a

college campus. Written consent was obtained before participation. Participation was anonymous. Participants read one of the six vignettes, and then answered survey questions in the following order: vignette perception questions, demographic questions, and religious fundamentalism questions. Participants took as much time as needed to complete the survey, usually 20 min. Upon completion of the survey, each participant placed her or his signed consent form in a large manila envelope, and then placed the completed survey in a large box with a hole cut out of the top. These procedures were implemented to enhance anonymity. At the end of each session, we debriefed the participants and answered any questions.

### Results

A preliminary analysis of correlations between victim blame and outcome perception revealed some significant correlations (see Table 1). Overall, participants who blamed the victim were more likely to rate the assault as due to the victim's sexual behavior, personality, and misperception of the situation. Attributions of blame also related to attributions of responsibility. Participants who perceived the victim as deserving of what she got were more likely to attribute the assault to her personality, less likely to label the assault as a rape or a crime, and less likely to state that it was a violation of her rights. If the participants perceived the victim as responsible for the assault, they were more likely to attribute the assault to something about her personality and her misperception of the situation. However, increased perception of victim responsibility decreased the likelihood of the assault being labeled a rape or crime, and of viewing it as a violation of the victim's rights.

Religious fundamentalism did not correlate with the perceptions and attributions of the assault. Thus, the data did not support the first hypothesis.

Victim's alcohol consumption was not a factor that influenced victim blame or responsibility (based on responses to Questions 5 and 12 in Appendix B), as the multivariate analysis of variance (MANOVA) was insignificant,  $p > .10$ . In addition, a MANOVA revealed that victim alcohol consumption was not related to outcome perception,  $p > .10$  (based on Questions 16, 19, and 20 in Appendix B). Therefore, there was no direct evidence that alcohol consumption prior to an attack led to victim blame or less negative outcome perceptions, and thus the second hypothesis was not supported.

The couple's relationship influenced outcome perceptions (Questions 16, 19, and 20 in Appendix B), multivariate,  $F(6, 232) = 4.059, p < .01$ . Follow-up univariate analyses of variance (ANOVAs) revealed

**TABLE 1**  
**Correlations Between Religious Fundamentalism, Attributions, and Perceptions**

	Funda- mentalism	She drinks	She deserves	She to blame	Sexual behavior	Respon- sible	Person- ality	A crime	Misper- ception	Violation of rights
Fundamentalism	—									
She drinks	.05	—								
She deserves	.02	-.07	—							
She to blame	.13	.22*	.13	—						
Sexual behavior	.12	.31**	.03	.28**	—					
Responsible	.10	.13	.14	.53**	.54**	—				
Personality	.13	.08	.27**	.25**	.47**	.39**	—			
A crime	-.06	-.14	-.20**	-.17	-.26**	-.39**	-.18	—		
Misperception	.07	.21	.08	.42**	.37**	.35**	.41**	-.17	—	
Violation of rights	-.05	-.00	-.42**	-.11	-.11	-.32**	-.05	.59**	-.05	—
A rape	-.15	-.08	-.34**	-.16	-.16	-.29**	-.02	.77**	-.06	.71**

Note. *Fundamentalism* refers to the participants' scores on the Religious Fundamentalism Scale. *She drinks* refers to the extent to which the assault is due to Melanie's drinking. *She deserves* refers to the extent to which Melanie deserved to be assaulted. *She to blame* is the extent to which Melanie is to blame for the assault. *Sexual behavior* is the extent to which the assault was due to Melanie's sexual behavior. *Responsible* is the extent to which Melanie is responsible for the assault. *Personality* refers to the extent that the assault is due to something about Melanie's personality. *A crime* refers to the extent that the assault is a crime. *Misperception* is the extent to which the assault is due to Melanie's misperception of the situation. *Violation of rights* is the extent to which the assault is a violation of Melanie's rights. *A rape* is the extent to which the assault was a rape.

\* $p > .05$ . \*\* $p > .01$ .

this effect was due to whether the assault was perceived as a rape,  $F(2) = 3.835$ ,  $p < .05$ , or as a crime,  $F(2) = 10.54$ ,  $p < .01$ . Table 2 shows the means and standard deviations for these findings. Participants were more likely to label the assault a rape and a crime if it was a first date, as opposed to a dating couple or a married couple. Thus, there was partial support for the third hypothesis. Although previous consensual sex did not lead to victim blame, it influenced the way the assault was perceived.

### Discussion

Religious fundamentalism did not relate to victim attributions or perceptions of the assault. Apparently, religious fundamentalism does not predict derogation of a rape victim in the same way it predicts ethnic or minority prejudice. Perhaps individuals with religious fundamentalist beliefs feel compassion toward rape victims.

Results show that participants did not blame a victim or hold her more responsible if she consumed alcohol prior to a sexual assault. This finding contradicts previous research that has found participants

blame victims who drink alcohol prior to an attack (Abbey, 1991; Aramburu & Leigh, 1991). Researchers have speculated that female sexual assault victims who consume alcohol prior to the attack are blamed more due to societal beliefs about women who drink (Abbey, 1991; Abbey et al., 1996a, 1996b; Hammock & Richardson, 1993). However, because this finding was not replicated in the present study, it is possible that college students' views on blaming the victim are changing.

Previous consensual sex did not yield more victim blame. However, the victim–assailant relationship influenced outcome perceptions. The data indicate that the assault was more likely to be labeled a rape or perceived as a crime if it involved acquaintances on a first date versus a dating couple or a married couple. In other words, participants viewed the assault as more serious if the couple never had sexual relations, whereas participants interpreted the assault as less serious if the couple was dating or married and had previously had consensual sexual intercourse. This finding reinforces the stereotype that sexual assaults typically occur among people who do not

TABLE 2

## The Impact of Relationship on Outcome Perceptions

To what extent was this ...	First date		Dating 6 months		Married	
	<i>M</i>	<i>SD</i>	<i>M</i>	<i>SD</i>	<i>M</i>	<i>SD</i>
a rape?	4.95	.108	4.62	.103	4.56	.102
a crime?	4.95	.119	4.55	.113	4.20	.112

know each other well, whereas in reality stranger rapes are relatively rare (Abbey et al., 1996a). It appears that society has more difficulty accepting a sexual assault if it occurs between a couple who are sexually involved with one another. In addition, perceiving an assault as less serious might discourage women from reporting an assault if the perpetrator is her boyfriend or husband; this interpretation helps explain why police and criminal justice data overrepresent stranger rapes and underrepresent acquaintance rapes (Abbey et al., 1996b).

This study was limited in that the majority of participants were traditional college-age students. In addition, the majority of participants were women. This situation created an unbalanced representation of men and women, so analyses investigating sex difference could not be performed. Future research should examine possible sex differences for the results found in this study.

Young adults need educational programs and rape prevention programs to decrease victim blame and to convey the seriousness of sexual assault. Foubert (2000) succeeded in changing fraternity men's attitudes about rape and likelihood of committing rape over a period of 7 months. He used identification with a male rape victim and extended the experience of the male victim to that of female victims. In addition to viewing a tape and hearing lectures about how sexual assault is a form of violence, the participants learned how to help a female rape victim. Lanier, Elliott, Martin, and Kapadia (1998) found that an educational rape awareness program that utilized a theatrical production had the most influence on college students with tolerant views about date rape. Men on several college campuses have established programs to encourage rape awareness and prevention (Stasio, 2001). Rape prevention programs can lead to empathizing with the victim. This empathy could then contribute to less derogation of the victim. It is hoped that awareness and action will lessen the derogation of rape victims and, ultimately, decrease the crime of rape.

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## APPENDIX A

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### Vignettes

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#### Vignette 1

Keith and Melanie are fellow classmates at the state university. They have had a few classes together. They are both seniors. One night, they go out on their first date. Their first date consisted of dinner at a restaurant. Both Keith and Melanie consumed a few drinks (she consumed three, he consumed four) along with dinner. Both Melanie and Keith had a buzz, but they were not completely wasted. Following dinner, they went back to Melanie's apartment to watch a movie. While watching the movie, they engaged in kissing and sexual touching. When Keith suggested that they have sex, Melanie adamantly said "No." Keith ignored her protests, forced himself on her, and completed the act of intercourse.

#### Vignette 2

Keith and Melanie are fellow classmates at the state university. One night, they go out on their first date. They have had a few classes together. They are both seniors. Their first date consisted of dinner at a restaurant. Keith consumed four drinks along with dinner. Keith was not wasted, but he had a buzz. Melanie did not consume any alcohol. Following dinner, they went back to Melanie's apartment to watch a movie. While watching the movie, they engaged in kissing and sexual touching. When Keith suggested that they have sex, Melanie adamantly said "No." Keith ignored her protests, forced himself on her, and completed the act of intercourse.

#### Vignette 3

Keith and Melanie, fellow classmates at the state university, have been dating for close to six months. They are both seniors. They have engaged in sexual intercourse on several occasions. One night, they go out to dinner at a restaurant. Both Keith and Melanie consumed a few drinks (he consumed four, she consumed three) along with dinner. Both Keith and Melanie had a buzz, but they were not completely wasted. Following dinner, they went back to Melanie's apartment to watch a movie. While watching the movie, they engaged in kissing and sexual touching. When Keith suggested that they have sex, Melanie adamantly said "No." Keith ignored her protests, forced himself on her, and completed the act of intercourse.

#### Vignette 4

Keith and Melanie, fellow classmates at the state university, have been dating for close to six months. They are both seniors. They have engaged in sexual intercourse on several occasions. One night, they go out to dinner at a restaurant. Keith consumed four drinks along with dinner. Melanie did not consume any alcohol. Keith had a buzz, but he was not completely wasted. Following dinner, they went back to Melanie's apartment to watch a movie. While watching the movie, they engaged in kissing and sexual touching. When Keith suggested that they have sex, Melanie adamantly said "No." Keith ignored her protests, forced himself on her, and completed the act of intercourse.

#### Vignette 5

Keith and Melanie, fellow classmates at the state university, have been married for six months prior to which they dated for two years. They are both seniors. They regularly engage in sexual intercourse. One night, they go out to dinner at a restaurant. Keith and Melanie both consumed a few drinks (he consumed four, she consumed three) along with dinner. Both Melanie and Keith had a buzz, but they were not completely wasted. Following dinner, they went back to their apartment to watch a movie. While watching the movie, they engaged in kissing and sexual touching. When Keith suggested that they have sex, Melanie adamantly said "No." Keith ignored her protests, forced himself on her, and completed the act of intercourse.

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**APPENDIX A (continued)**


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**Vignettes**


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**Vignette 6**

Keith and Melanie, fellow classmates at the state university, have been married for six months prior to which they dated for two years. They are both seniors. They regularly engage in sexual intercourse. One night, they go out to dinner at a restaurant. Keith consumed four drinks along with dinner. Melanie did not consume any alcohol. Keith had a buzz, but he was not completely wasted. Following dinner, they went back to their apartment to watch a movie. While watching the movie, they engaged in kissing and sexual touching. When Keith suggested that they have sex, Melanie adamantly said "No." Keith ignored her protests, forced himself on her, and completed the act of intercourse.

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**APPENDIX B**


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**Vignette Perception Questions**


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1. To what extent was the outcome due to Melanie's drinking?
  2. To what extent was the outcome due to Keith's drinking?
  3. To what extent was the outcome due to Melanie's inability to control the situation?
  4. To what extent did Melanie get what she deserved?
  5. To what extent is Melanie to blame?
  6. To what extent is Keith to blame?
  7. To what extent was the outcome due to Melanie's sexual behavior?
  8. To what extent was the outcome due to Keith's sexual behavior?
  9. To what extent was the outcome due to Keith and Melanie's relationship?
  10. To what extent is the outcome due to societal expectations for men to be sexually aggressive?
  11. To what extent is the outcome due to societal expectations for women to be flirtatious?
  12. To what extent is Melanie responsible for the outcome?
  13. To what extent is Keith responsible for the outcome?
  14. To what extent is the outcome due to Melanie's personality?
  15. To what extent is the outcome due to Keith's personality?
  16. To what extent was the outcome a crime?
  17. To what extent was the outcome due to Keith's misperception of the situation?
  18. To what extent was the outcome due to Melanie's misperception of the situation?
  19. To what extent was the outcome a violation of Melanie's rights?
  20. To what extent was this rape?
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