"Why me?" is a common response to personal misfortune. One cognitive strategy used to make sense of traumatic or victimizing experiences is to interpret one’s role in the experience, which may involve self-blame (Janoff-Bulman, 1992). Accordingly, many people experiencing misfortunes, including medical illness, accidents, and sexual victimization, express some degree of self-blame (Davis, Lehman, Silver, Wortman, & Ellard, 1996; Janoff-Bulman & Lang-Gunn, 1988). Although self-blame is a common cognitive coping strategy, self-blame does not facilitate emotional recovery. For example, numerous studies have documented the adverse effects (e.g., posttraumatic stress, depression) of self-blame on recovery after rape or sexual assault (Koss & Figueredo, 2004) or sexual abuse (Daigneault, Tourigny, & Hébert, 2006). In addition to interfering with emotional recovery, self-blame for sexual assault predicts risk for future sexual revictimization (Miller, Markman, & Handley, 2007). As such, researchers need to identify factors that promote women’s self-blame following sexual victimization to inform both treatment and prevention programs.

According to the extant literature, it appears that women’s self-blame following sexual victimization partly depends on their closeness to the perpetrator. In a campus-based study, Frazier and Scales (1997) found that acquaintance rape victims reported significantly greater self-blame than victims of stranger rape. Likewise, B. L. Katz (1991) examined women’s self-reports of closeness to the perpetrator in a continuum of pre-rape relationships: “stranger,” “acquaintance,” “close friend,” and “intimate others.” Closeness with the perpetrator preceding the sexual assault predicted self-blame and longer recovery time. Immediately following the rape, B. L. Katz found that victims of stranger rape blamed themselves the least, whereas victims of friend rape blamed themselves the most. Apart from B. L. Katz (1991), few other researchers (i.e., Culbertson, Vik, & Kooiman, 2001; Small & Kerns, 1993) have studied friend perpetrators. Taken together, the available literature suggests that studying perpetration by friends and romantic partners will be helpful for understanding women’s risk for self-blame following sexual victimization.

Levels of self-blame may vary not only by women’s closeness to their perpetrators but also by the type of sexual victimization experienced. Sexual victimization may be defined broadly in terms of sexual contact, sex-
ual coercion, attempted rape, and rape (Koss & Oros, 1982; Testa, VanZile-Tamsen, Livingston, & Koss, 2004). Sexual contact involves coerced or forced fondling, kissing, or sexual touch without penetration. Sexual coercion involves capitulating to unwanted sexual penetration due to overwhelming verbal pressure or because the perpetrator is in position of authority (e.g., a boss or teacher). Attempted rape involves a perpetrator’s use of physical force, threats of force, or intoxication to attempt sexual penetration, whereas rape involves the use of these same tactics to obtain sexual penetration. Across this spectrum of sexual victimization, almost 80% of adolescent and college-aged women report such experiences (Smith, White, & Holland, 2003). However, findings on the association between self-blame and the type of sexual victimization have been inconsistent. For example, Ullman, Townsend, Filipas, and Starzynski (2007) found support for the hypothesis that female victims may view more severe sexual assaults involving greater force as more serious than those involving psychological pressure; their results suggested that more forcible assaults were associated with less self-blame. In contrast, Nurius, Norris, Young, Graham, and Gaylord (2000) reported that college women who perceived a sexually aggressive acquaintance as more threatening and controlling also reported greater self-blame.

These inconsistent results might be due to the fact that different perpetrators tend to use different sexually coercive tactics. Unmarried women who are intimate with perpetrators are more likely to experience psychological pressure (e.g., verbal bullying) than forceful coercive tactics (e.g., use of physical force; Abbey, BeShears, Clinton-Sherrod, & McAuslan, 2004; Katz & Tirone, 2010; Nurius et al., 2000). Small and Kerns (1993) found that friends and partners of middle and high school students were equally likely to engage in unwanted sexual fondling, whereas partners were more likely than friends to force intercourse. These findings suggest that researchers need to identify the types of sexual victimization most commonly perpetrated in different types of close relationships that promote self-blame.

Janoff-Bulman (1979) proposed that self-blame can be conceptualized as behavioral and characterological. Behavioral self-blame involves attributing negative events to one’s controllable actions; for example, a rape victim might blame herself for some extent for her rape because she hitchhiked or drank too much. In contrast, characterological self-blame involves attributing negative events to one’s disposition or character; for example, a rape victim might blame herself for being a bad judge of character or “an easy target.” Janoff-Bulman (1979) predicted that behavioral self-blame would help victims because it could provide them with a sense of control over future risk for harm. Despite the conceptual distinction between behavioral and characterological self-blame, however, both forms of self-blame predict emotional distress and inhibit recovery among rape victims (e.g., Koss & Figueredo, 2004; O’Neill & Kerig, 2000). Although research has found that these theoretically distinct constructs function similarly in terms of predicting postrape recovery, we examined both forms of self-blame to see whether one or both might be affected by a broad range of sexual victimization experiences by a friend, a partner, or both, to advance knowledge of self-blame in these circumstances.

Specifically, we conducted two studies to examine differences in self-blame for sexual victimization perpetrated within the context of a close relationship as compared to more distant relationships or strangers. We defined a close relationship as involving either a friend or romantic/sexual partner rather than a first date, a coworker, a neighbor, or other known person in a more distant relationship. The term sexual victimization refers to any report of rape, attempted rape, sexual coercion, or unwanted sexual contact perpetrated against the respondent as defined by the Sexual Experiences Survey (Koss & Oros, 1982; Testa et al., 2004). The terms close sexual victimization and distant sexual victimization refer to sexual victimization perpetrated within a close and distant relationship, respectively. Study 1 investigated associations among close sexual victimization experiences and self-blame from adolescence through college, as assessed at one point in time. In contrast, Study 2 prospectively examined close sexual victimization and self-blame among women in their first year of college, a transitional stage in which women are at elevated risk for sexual victimization (Fisher, Daigle, & Cullen, 2009).

**Study 1**

Adolescent and college-aged women show disproportionately high rates of sexual victimization (Smith et al., 2003), and, once victimized, many women report further repeated episodes of sexual victimization over time, or revictimization (Himelein, 1995). Humphrey and White (2000) found that victimization was more common among younger adolescent women as compared to college women, and almost 70% of women victimized as adolescents were later revictimized. Although many past studies have examined self-blame related to a single incident of sexual victimization (e.g., B. L. Katz, 1991; Ullman et al., 2007), our focus was on self-blame related to the cumulative number of events women reported as perpetrated by friends and partners during adolescence and into college.

Women’s sexual refusal assertiveness (SRA) may influence their actions during an unwanted sexual
encounter, as well as their psychological functioning after the event. SRA involves the extent to which an individual directly, verbally refuses to participate in unwanted sexual activity (Morokoff et al., 1997). Research suggests that greater assertiveness with men is a protective factor against women’s sexual victimization (Greene & Navarro, 1998; Livingston, Testa, & VanZile-Tamsen, 2007). Unfortunately, however, women may be particularly inhibited from behaving assertively with partners or friends (VanZile-Tamsen, Testa, & Livingston, 2005), especially if they feel sexually obligated, invested in the relationship, or both. When a partner or friend initiates a perpetration event, women may be less likely to directly resist for fear of damaging the relationship. In turn, low SRA may predict self-blame following the event.

Our first hypothesis was that women’s self-blame would be positively associated with the number of close sexual victimization experiences. In contrast, we expected that the number of experiences of distant sexual victimization would not predict women’s self-blame. Our second hypothesis was that women who reported more experiences of close sexual victimization would also report less SRA. Our third hypothesis was that decreased SRA could account for the expected association between close sexual victimization and increased self-blame. Finally, because we examined a range of sexual victimization experiences, we explored the associations between self-blame and different types of close sexual victimization varying in severity (unwanted contact, sexual coercion, attempted rape, and rape).

Method

Participants. Undergraduate women (N = 139) from a small public college participated in the study. Participants identified themselves as White (82%), Asian (8%), African-American/Black (3%), Hispanic (6%), or other (1%). The mean age was 19.37 (SD = 1.13). All college class ranks were represented, with 35% freshmen, 37% sophomores, 18% juniors, and 10% seniors. We recruited female participants through a voluntary psychology pool and collected data in campus classrooms. Participants received two extra credits (assigned to a specific course) for their involvement.

Measures. Participants completed demographic questions regarding their age, race, year in school, sexual orientation, current dating status (i.e., not dating anymore, dating more than one person, dating casually but exclusively, dating one person exclusively, living together, engaged, married), age of first sexual intercourse (defined as any penetration by a boy’s or man’s penis into the participant’s vagina, mouth, or anus, regardless of whether he ejaculated, with her consent), and number of sexual intercourse partners.

We assessed sexual victimization using the Sexual Experiences Survey (SES; Koss & Oros, 1982, updated by Testa et al., 2004), a self-report measure of 11 behaviorally-specific items assessing sexual contact, sexual coercion, attempted rape, and rape. A representative item is, “How many times have you ever been fondled, kissed, or touched sexually when you didn’t want to because a boy or man threatened or used some degree of physical force (twisting your arm, holding you down, etc.) to make you?” Evidence for reliability and validity is well-established in a sample of women aged 18 to 30 (Testa et al., 2004).

To assess sexual victimization during adolescence and into college rather than child sexual abuse, SES instructions specified that participants should consider experiences with a boy or man since the age of 15. For any item that participants experienced, participants identified their relationship to any perpetrator(s) at the time and how many times the event occurred with each perpetrator. We created several composite variables based on women’s relationships with the perpetrations. More specifically, close sexual victimization was the sum of all SES incidents perpetrated by partners and friends, whereas distant sexual victimization was the sum of all SES incidents perpetrated by other acquaintances (e.g., co-workers, bosses, casual dates, neighbors). We also created additional composite variables by summing the number of different types of sexual victimization across the four subscales with separate scores calculated for perpetration by friends and by partners. Because SES scores were positively skewed, we used a logarithmic transformation (log[score + 1]), to normalize the distributions, although we report untransformed means for ease of interpretation.

The 12-item Behavioral and Characterological Self-Blame Scale (BCSB; O’Neill & Kerig, 2000) has two six-item subscales. We revised scale instructions that asked participants “to rate their level of agreement with each of the following statements” to specify “when you have experienced unwanted sexual attention or contact from boys or men.” This instruction allowed us to compare self-blame levels across women with and without previous sexual victimization histories. Most young women, regardless of their victimization history, experience some form of unwanted sexual attention (e.g., unwelcome sexual comments, staring; Timmerman, 2005). Participants rated each item on a 6-point scale (1 = strongly disagree, 6 = strongly agree); items are summed within each dimension for scoring. In the present research, the estimates of internal consistency (Cronbach’s alpha) were .84 and .73 for behavioral and characterological self-blame, respectively.

We assessed SRA with a six-item subscale of the
Sexual Assertiveness Scale (SAS; Morokoff et al., 1997). A representative item is, “I refuse to have sex if I don’t want to, even if my partner insists.” Participants responded on a 5-point scale (1 = 0% of the time, 5 = 100% of the time). Responses are summed, with higher scores reflecting greater refusal assertiveness. The internal consistency estimate (Cronbach’s alpha) was .64.

Procedure. The study protocol was approved by the college’s Institutional Review Board. We recruited female participants for a study of “Women’s self-views and interactions with men.” One to two undergraduate female researchers met the participants for data collection sessions in campus classrooms. Participants sat at individual desks to ensure privacy while responding to questions. After providing informed consent, participants anonymously completed self-report paper-and-pencil measures in sessions lasting less than an hour. During the debriefing, participants received information about free, on-campus counseling services.

Results
Sample characteristics. More than half the sample, 64.2% (n = 102), reported at least one experience of sexual victimization enacted by a boy or man since age 15. One or more experiences of unwanted sexual contact was most commonly reported (52%), followed by sexual coercion (26%), completed rape (15%), and attempted rape (12%). Similar proportions of the sample reported at least one act of perpetration by a partner (29%), friend (25%), or other acquaintance (21%). Only 4% reported stranger perpetration. When we compared cumulative SES experiences across close versus distant relationships, women reported significantly more episodes of sexual victimization in a close relationship involving a friend or partner (M = 3.66, SD = 9.18) than episodes involving a more distant perpetrator (M = .80, SD = 2.25), t(158) = 3.96, p < .001, Cohen’s d = .43. Univariate t and chi-square tests revealed that women who reported at least one episode of close sexual victimization (47.7%; n = 76) did not differ from women who did not report close sexual victimization (51.6%; n = 82) in age, race, year in school, sexual orientation, current dating status, age of first sex, or number of sexual partners, ps > .05. Likewise, women who reported at least one episode of distant sexual victimization (26.4%; n = 42) did not differ demographically from women who did not report any distant sexual victimization (73.6%; n = 117), ps > .05.

Association between close or distant victimization, self-blame, and SRA. Table 1 shows the zero-order correlations calculated among the primary study variables: cumulative frequency of close and distant sexual victimization, both types of self-blame, and SRA. Our first and second hypotheses were supported. Cumulative close sexual victimization was significantly positively related to both types of self-blame and negatively related to SRA. In contrast, cumulative distant sexual victimization was unrelated to women’s self-blame.

SRA as a mediator. Next, we tested our third

<p>| TABLE 1 |</p>
<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Zero-Order Correlations Among Cumulative Sexual Victimization Experiences by a Close Perpetrator, a Distant Perpetrator, Sexual Refusal Assertiveness, and Women’s Self-blame for Unwanted Sexual Experiences (N = 159)</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>1.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1. Close sexual victimization a</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2. Distant sexual victimization a</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>3. Sexual refusal assertiveness b</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>4. Behavioral self-blame c</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>5. Characterological self-blame c</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Note. ** p < .01, *** p < .001.

a Number of sexual victimization experiences since age 15.
b Possible scores range from 6 to 30.
c Possible scores range from 6 to 36.
hypothesis that SRA would mediate the relation between cumulative close victimization and self-blame. We calculated separate hierarchical multiple regression equations for each type of self-blame. In the first block predicting characterological self-blame, close sexual victimization was a significant predictor, $\beta = .27$, $p < .001$, overall model, $F(1, 155) = 11.85$, $p < .01$. In a second block, SRA significantly added to the model, $\beta = -.22$, $p < .001$, and the beta weight associated with past close victimization was reduced, $\beta = .19$, $p < .05$, overall model, $F(2, 154) = 10.01$, $p < .001$. Sobel’s test revealed that the partial mediating path via SRA was significant (Preacher & Leonardelli, 2003). In predicting behavioral self-blame, close sexual victimization was a significant predictor, $\beta = .29$, $p < .001$, in block 1, overall model, $F(1, 155) = 13.81$, $p < .01$. In block 2, SRA did not add to the model ($\beta = -.11$, ns), and close sexual victimization remained significant, $\beta = .25$, $p < .05$, overall model, $F(2, 154) = 7.88$, $p < .05$. Although we had expected that women who reported more cumulative close victimization would blame themselves due to fewer direct sexual refusals, there was partial mediation for characterological self-blame only.

**Exploratory associations among close perpetrator type, victimization experience, and self-blame.** Next, we conducted exploratory analyses to describe associations among different forms of sexual victimization perpetrated by friends versus partners and women’s self-blame. In our sample, 25.3% reported at least one sexual victimization experience perpetrated by a friend. Within this subsample, 80% reported unwanted contact, 20% reported sexual coercion, 10% reported attempted rape, and 32% reported one or more completed rapes by a friend. Further, 29.7% of the sample reported at least one act of sexual victimization perpetrated by a partner. Within this subsample, 70% reported unwanted contact, 62% reported sexual coercion, 11% reported attempted rape, and 8% reported one or more completed rapes by a partner. These descriptive statistics show that sexual victimization was common in both types of close relationships.

We used zero-order correlations to explore the associations between friends’ and partners’ cumulative perpetration of different types of sexual victimization (unwanted contact, sexual coercion, attempted rape, or rape) and women’s self-blame. Significant associations appear in Table 2. Friend unwanted sexual contact was related to both behavioral and characterological self-blame. In contrast, although friend attempted rape was related to behavioral self-blame, friend attempted rape was unrelated to characterological self-blame. No other forms of sexual victimization perpetrated by friends were related to women’s self-blame. With regard to partners, significant relations occurred between characterological self-blame and partner unwanted contact, sexual coercion, and rape. Partner sexual coercion was also related to behavioral self-blame, but no other type of victimization perpetrated by partners was related to behavioral self-blame.

**Discussion**

As expected, past sexual victimization perpetrated by a friend or partner was positively associated with women’s self-blame for unwanted sexual experiences. This finding converges with past research that suggests that a woman is especially likely to blame herself for rape by someone with whom she shares a close relationship (B. L. Katz, 1991). Our study also extends this finding to suggest that women may blame themselves for a range of sexual victimization experiences within

**TABLE 2**

**Significant Zero-Order Correlations Between Different Types of Friend and Partner Perpetration and Women’s Self-Blame**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Characterological Self-Blame</th>
<th>Unwanted Contact</th>
<th>Sexual Coercion</th>
<th>Attempted Rape</th>
<th>Completed Rape</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Friends</td>
<td>.21”</td>
<td>–</td>
<td>–</td>
<td>–</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Partners</td>
<td>.18”</td>
<td>.17”</td>
<td>–</td>
<td>.24”</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Behavioral Self-Blame</th>
<th>Unwanted Contact</th>
<th>Sexual Coercion</th>
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<th>Completed Rape</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Friends</td>
<td>.31”</td>
<td>–</td>
<td>.18”</td>
<td>–</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Partners</td>
<td>–</td>
<td>.19”</td>
<td>–</td>
<td>–</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

*Note. Only statistically significant correlations are presented: * $p < .05$, ** $p < .01$. 


close relationships.

We found mixed support for the hypothesis that SRA would mediate the effect of close sexual victimization on self-blame. Compared to victimization by distant perpetrators, close sexual victimization was associated with lower SRA. This finding is consistent with research suggesting that direct refusal of unwanted sexual advances may be inhibited within the context of a close relationship (e.g., VanZile-Tamsen et al., 2005). Our mediational analysis showed that the effect of close sexual victimization on characterological self-blame, but not behavioral self-blame, was partially accounted for by women’s SRA. Perhaps women view their own SRA as primarily dispositional rather than situationally determined; alternatively, low assertiveness and characterological self-blame may reflect low self-esteem that arises from close sexual victimization.

Exploratory analyses revealed that, in general, friend perpetration was more often related to behavioral self-blame, whereas partner perpetration was more often related to characterological self-blame. Unwanted sexual contact and attempted rape by friends, both nonpenetration experiences, were related to behavioral self-blame. It is possible that many women who experience friend perpetration may attribute it, at least in part, to their own friendly behaviors falsely communicating sexual availability. Friends may be excused as having misread a woman’s behavior as indicating openness to sexual contact (but not penetration). In contrast, rape and sexual coercion by partners, as well as unwanted contact, were associated with characterological self-blame. Perhaps women blame themselves for being the kind of person who became involved or maintained a romantic or sexual relationship with a sexually insistent man. Future research may explore these possibilities.

**Study 2**

College women are at a high risk for sexual victimization, and this risk may be increased among women during the transition to college. For example, Humphrey and White (2000) found that the risk of college victimization is greatest during the first year and declines during the next four years on campus (see also Fisher et al., 2009; Gross, Winslett, Roberts, & Gohm, 2006).

First-year women in college also may be vulnerable to shifts in their views about themselves and the world because of the developmental transition that is occurring. According to Janoff-Bulman (1992), “role transitions that occur as we move through our lives—entering kindergarten, high school, and college, getting a job, getting married, becoming a parent—typically involve life changes that could affect more general, abstract views of ourselves and our world” (p. 44). Accordingly, sexual victimization experiences during one such transition—the first year of college—have the potential to exert particularly strong effects on a woman’s sense of herself as in control of such experiences (behavioral self-blame) and as the type of person who is vulnerable to such treatment (characterological self-blame).

Self-blame reactions in general vary across developmental stages (Bybee, Merisica, & Velasco, 1998). Although self-blame has been established as a reaction to trauma in adulthood, developmental research by Bybee et al. (1998) found self-blame, particularly remorse and regret, was a common reaction among adolescents to guilt-producing events (not necessarily involving sexual victimization). Feelings of remorse and regret become more prevalent with age, nearly doubling from 5th (27.2%) to 11th grade (49.7%). Sexual victimization perpetrated by a friend or partner may constitute a specific type of guilt-producing event, which would indicate that young women starting college may be at risk for self-blame after experiencing close victimization.

Study 1 provided evidence that sexual victimization perpetrated by friends or partners is common and that such experiences are positively associated with women’s self-blame. However, an alternative explanation for those findings is that women who have dispositional self-blaming tendencies are also more likely to be targeted by sexually predatory men for friendships and romance. Therefore, to establish temporal precedence between these constructs, longitudinal research is needed to examine the relation of self-blame scores with close sexual victimization over time. In Study 2, we hypothesized that self-blame scores would increase during the first year of college as a function of subsequent close sexual victimization.

**Method**

**Participants.** At baseline, 41 female students (none involved in Study 1) were recruited during their first year at a state university. Most were 18 years old (with one 19 year old) and were recruited through a voluntary subject pool or through class announcements. The sample was predominantly White (83%), although women also identified as Asian (7%), African-American/Black (7%), or other (2%). Most (95%; n = 39) completed both baseline and follow-up assessments. For compensation, participants earned two course credits (i.e., extra credit for an assigned course) at baseline and $10 at follow-up.

**Measures.** As in Study 1, the BCSB (O’Neill & Kerpig, 2000) and SES (Koss & Oros, 1982; Testa et al., 2004) were administered at both baseline and follow-up. However, SES items at follow-up pertained only to experiences that occurred since baseline in order to index first-year college victimization.
Procedure. We recruited female participants for a study of “Women’s self-views and interactions with men: A two part study.” Prior to participating, all participants provided written informed consent and verbally agreed to participate in baseline (in October) and follow-up sessions (in April). We requested names and contact information to schedule follow-up sessions. Data were anonymous given that participants were assigned an identification number known only to them to match baseline and follow-up responses. Participants responded to measures via computer in individual lab rooms. All received telephone calls to schedule the follow-up and e-mail reminders prior to their appointment. Debriefings were held after the follow-up. The Institutional Review Board approved all study procedures.

Results and Discussion

Of the 29 women who participated in both assessments, 23% (n = 9) reported that they had experienced at least one episode of close sexual victimization between baseline and follow-up. Within this subgroup, the average number of experiences perpetrated within a close relationship from October to April during the first year of college was 4.89 (SD = 3.86, range 1-11). Only 7% (n = 3) reported victimization outside of a close relationship.

We expected that women who experienced close sexual victimization would also report increased self-blame for unwanted sexual attention or contact over time, in contrast to other women. To test this prediction, behavioral and characterological self-blame were the two dependent variables in a 2 (time; baseline or follow-up) x 2 (sexual victimization by a close perpetrator; present or absent) mixed MANOVA. Results showed a main effect of close sexual victimization, F(2, 36) = 7.88, p < .001, Pillai’s Trace = 0.30, but not time, F(2, 36) < 1, ns, such that participants with close sexual victimization reported greater self-blame than participants without close sexual victimization. As expected, there was a significant time x close sexual victimization interaction (see Figure 1), F(2, 36) = 4.93, p < .02, Pillai’s Trace = 0.22. Table 3 lists the results of post hoc comparisons with a Bonferroni correction. Simple effects analyses conducted at baseline revealed no between-group differences in behavioral self-blame, t(37) = 1.46, ns, or characterological self-blame, t(37) = 0.47, ns. In contrast, at follow-up, there were significant between-group differences such that women who reported close sexual victimization reported greater behavioral self-blame, t(37) = 4.34, p < .001, Cohen’s d = 1.81, and greater characterological self-blame, t(37) = 3.27, p < .01, Cohen’s d = 1.34, than women who did not experience close sexual victimization. As in past research, we found that the transition to college was a high-risk time for victimization (e.g., Gross et al., 2006). Study 2 results also suggested that close sexual victimization predicted subsequent self-blame, but self-blame at baseline did not predict subsequent close sexual victimization. In other words, women’s levels of self-blame at baseline were not elevated within the close sexual victimization group; in contrast, self-blame scores were elevated after women experienced close sexual victimization.

General Discussion

Our research showed that victimization in a close relationship by a friend or partner predicted women’s greater self-blame. In Study 1, women’s cumulative experiences of close victimization since the age of 15 predicted greater self-blame. In Study 2, 23% of the sample reported at least one episode of close sexual victimization over the first year of college. After their close victimization experiences, these women perceived themselves as both having acted in ways that contributed to unwanted sexual attention and contact (behavioral self-blame) and as being dispositionally vulnerable to such experiences (characterological self-blame). Our findings extend those of B. L. Katz (1991), who suggested that rape by friends and partners was especially harmful to women in terms of self-blame; our results further suggest that a range of sexual victimization in close relationships, not just rape, may elicit self-blaming responses. Particularly in light of the prevalence of perpetration by friends and partners, it is necessary to move beyond the broad categorization of perpetrators as either strangers or acquaintances. The distant versus

![FIGURE 1](image_url)

Changes in behavioral and characterological self-blame over the first year of college as a function of time and close sexual victimization.

Note. BSB = behavioral self-blame; CSB = characterological self-blame.
close perpetrator distinction appears to be critical to advance understanding of women’s responses to sexual victimization.

A focus on these close relationship contexts may account for discrepancies in the past literature regarding tactics used by perpetrators and women’s self-blame (e.g., Nurius et al., 2000; Ullman et al., 2007). These inconsistencies are likely due, in part, to the tendency for different perpetrators to use different tactics (e.g., Abbey et al., 2004). Similarly, descriptive statistics reported in Study 1 indicated that rape was infrequently perpetrated by partners and sexual coercion was infrequently perpetrated by friends. We also found that different types of victimization by friends versus partners were associated with women’s greater self-blame. Specifically, in Study 1, friend unwanted contact was related to both behavioral and characterological self-blame, and attempted rape was related to women’s behavioral self-blame. In contrast, partner unwanted contact and rape were related to women’s characterological self-blame, and partner sexual coercion was related to behavioral and characterological self-blame. These results suggest that both the perpetrator relationship and the type of victimization may affect how women interpret victimization experiences.

Specific relational factors may lead women to blame themselves for victimization, especially when perpetrated within a close relationship context. It is likely that women are often less direct in sexually refusing a friend or partner compared to another acquaintance, due to concerns about the relationship (e.g., VanZile-Tamsen et al., 2005), which may increase self-blame. Study 1 provided some support for this idea in that SRA partially mediated the effect of close sexual victimization on characterological self-blame. However, because this finding was a partial effect and because SRA did not mediate the effect of close sexual victimization on behavioral self-blame, other explanations must be considered. Another possibility is that women victimized by a friend or partner blame themselves for having chosen a close relationship with that person. Self-blame could be especially high if a woman is strongly invested in the relationship, if she maintains the relationship after the victimization experience, or both. Some women may maintain or even deepen a relationship with a friend or partner after sexual victimization in order to justify or excuse his behavior (Parrot, 1999). Another explanation of the relationship between close victimization and self-blame involves women’s sense of sexual obligation. In the context of past consensual sexual activity, a woman’s refusal may be seen as less legitimate (Shotland & Goodstein, 1992), and she may therefore blame herself more for a partner’s or friend’s use of sexual pressure or force.

To extend these preliminary findings, future research should examine the effects of perpetration within different types of close relationships, including spouses, relatives, and nonsexual close friendships. Research on situational factors within different types of close relationships that affect how women respond to unwanted sexual advances also is needed. Presumably, women care about both friends and partners who may perpetrate against them, and concerns for the relationship and self-consciousness may increase self-blame (Nurius et al., 2000). Other aspects of these relationships, including level of commitment, conflict, and sexual obligation, also may influence women’s appraisals of and responses to perpetration by partners.

### Table 3

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>First-Year Close Victimization</th>
<th>F(1, 37)</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Absent (n = 30)</td>
<td>Present (n = 9)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Behavioral Self-Blame</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Time 1</td>
<td>14.57a</td>
<td>17.78a</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Time 2</td>
<td>13.53a</td>
<td>23.00b</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Characterological Self-Blame</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Time 1</td>
<td>13.56a</td>
<td>14.33a</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Time 2</td>
<td>12.23a</td>
<td>18.22b</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

*Note:* Means with different superscripts differ significantly; *p < .05, **p < .01, ***p < .001.
 versus friends. Finally, because self-blame interferes with women’s recovery from rape (Koss & Figueredo, 2004; O’Neill & Kerg, 2000), studies that examine emotional recovery from close sexual victimization specifically are warranted. A related area of research is to consider secondary victimization related to perpetration by friends or partners. How others respond to disclosures of close sexual victimization likely impacts recovery.

The current findings, along with past research, may inform sexual victimization prevention programs for college women. A focus on risk in close relationships in prevention efforts seems necessary given the high rates of close sexual victimization reported in these two studies. Past research shows that women who reported that they were less confident about whether a perpetrator’s behavior actually reflected threat also tended to blame themselves for his behavior (Nurius et al., 2000), suggesting the importance of self-assurance in responding to perpetration. In addition, immediate, initial responses of self-blame in response to perpetration significantly predicted psychological barriers and emotional responses that deflected assertive behavior. Similarly, Study 1 indicated that low SRA may partially explain the relationship between close perpetration and characterological self-blame. This finding is consistent with past research indicating that women perceive less threat, and are less likely to behaviorally resist unwanted sexual advances, in the context of a close relationship (VanZile-Tamsen et al., 2005).

Furthermore, prevention programs focused on close sexual victimization for first-year college women are needed. Results from Study 2 suggest that first-year college women are at high risk for close sexual victimization and often respond with elevated self-blame. It is troubling to note that other research has demonstrated that college women’s self-blaming responses to victimization predict future revictimization (Miller et al., 2007). More generally, young women who blame themselves for perpetration by a friend or partner early in their college careers also may develop a pattern of excusing men for other types of unacceptable behavior (e.g., physical or emotional abuse) that may interfere with the development of healthy close relationships later in life.

Taken together, research suggests that prevention programs should proactively address sexual assertiveness and self-blame for women, including a focus on initial cognitive and behavioral responses to unwanted advances (e.g., worry about threatening relationship, embarrassment) by friends and intimate partners. Preparing women for such experiences while acknowledging their concerns for the relationship may increase their ability to perceive risk, directly assert themselves, and reduce self-blame in response to perpetration. Educational programs should specifically address sources of self-blame and expose common victim-blaming tendencies such as assuming consent unless the woman expresses “enough” resistance (McGregor, 2005). Even if direct sexual refusals ultimately fail to prevent women’s victimization, educated women should be less likely to blame themselves for the perpetrator’s actions.

Our results must be viewed in light of the limited sample size in Study 2 and the homogeneity of both samples. Further, the results on past sexual victimization relied wholly on self-report, which may be subject to a variety of cognitive biases related to initial interpretation of the event and memory. Of note, not all women may experience perpetration by friends or partners as victimizing or traumatic, especially when perpetration involves less severe forms. Nevertheless, this research suggests that distinguishing close sexual victimization from distant sexual victimization has important applied and research implications. Attention to close sexual victimization is critical to understand and prevent women’s harmful self-blaming reactions to victimization. Women are not to blame for being sexually victimized, regardless of their relationship to the perpetrator.

References


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