Crime Type, Proximity of Crime Perpetrator, and Just World Theory Attributions

We investigated the effects of crime type (rape, murder, theft) and perpetrator proximity to the victim (stranger, date, family member) on crime severity ratings and perpetrator and victim blame attributions through a 3 x 3 (Latin Square) mixed design. There were 2 significant main effects and 2 significant interaction effects. The 180 participants rated murder and rape as equally serious crimes and more serious crimes than theft. Participants blamed perpetrators more—and therefore victims less—in rapes and murders than they did in thefts. In addition, and unexpectedly, participants increasingly blamed victims when the perpetrator proximity decreased (from family member, to date, to stranger).

Rape is a reality for countless women and men every year. However, the harsh reality of this crime is further exacerbated by the attribution of blame to victims of rape. According to the Just World theory, people blame victims for their victimization in order to reconcile their own beliefs in a just and fair world (Lerner & Simmons, 1966). For example, people may devalue and reject, as well as blame, a victim for her rape because others need to maintain the belief that the victim deserved to be victimized. According to the Just World belief, people believe that only people who are deserving of victimization are victimized. Thus, people blame victims instead of sympathizing with them, which often leads rape victims not to report the crime. Rape needs to be further investigated in terms of blame attribution so that victim blame attribution can cease. If victim blame attribution were rectified, more victims would likely be willing to seek help and report crimes.

Past research has centered mostly on the variables responsible for victim blame attribution. Specifically, it has focused on (a) research participant characteristics (e.g., sex, age, ethnicity, educational level, beliefs/attitudes), (b) perpetrator characteristics (e.g., sex, ethnicity, socioeconomic status), and (c) victim characteristics (e.g., sex, ethnicity, sexual reputation). Past research, however, has not examined the actual crime characteristics (e.g., the type of crime and the perceived severity of the crime). It has also not expanded research on perpetrator characteristics to include the identity of the perpetrator (i.e., how close the perpetrator is to the victim).

Research conducted on victim blame attribution has shown that research participant variables such as sex, age, ethnicity, educational level, similarity to the victim, and beliefs affect how participants perceive rape victims. Research on participants’ sex and age has shown that men attributed more blame to female and male victims than women did (Grubb & Harrower, 2009; Jimenez & Abreu, 2003; Mitchell, Angelone, Kohlberger, & Hirschman, 2009; Sheldon-Keller, Lloyd-McGarvey, West, & Canterbury, 1994; Smith & Frieze, 2003; White & Robinson-Kurpius, 1999). Women, however, gave harsher sentences to perpetrators than men did (George & Martinez, 2002). Older adults (aged 60 to 84) also blamed the victim more in various instances of crime (a fire, a car accident, theft, being hit by a car), regardless of the outcome of the crime (either mild or severe) or the degree of responsibility attributed to the victim (either very irresponsible or not very irresponsible) than did 18-34 year old younger adults and 35-59 year old middle-aged adults (Adams-Price, Dalton, & Sumrall, 2004).

Past research on participants’ ethnicity has found that Caucasian participants assigned less blame to rape victims than Latino participants did, especially when the victims were also Caucasian (Jimenez & Abreu, 2003). More Asian than Caucasian participants also believed

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that women are responsible for preventing rape and that victims provoke their own rape (Lee, Pomeroy, Yoo, & Rheinboldt, 2005).

White and Robinson-Kurpius (1999) examined the educational level of participants and its impact on victim blame and found that male undergraduate students held the most negative views of rape victims and female graduate students held the most favorable views of rape victims. Overall, men held the least favorable views of rape victims across all educational levels.

Other research has examined the role of participant similarity to the victim. When participants identified themselves as similar to the victim in terms of personal characteristics, such as age and physical fitness as well as how likely they were to find themselves in similar situations, they attributed less blame to the victim (Feldman, Ullman, & Dunkel-Schetter, 1998; Grubb & Harrower, 2009).

Researchers have also studied participant attitudes and beliefs and how they contribute to victim blame attribution. Male participants with a high Just World (JW) belief blamed rape victims more than male participants with low JW beliefs (Kleineke & Meyer, 1990). Female participants, however, attributed less blame to rape victims when they reported a higher belief in the JW theory, which Lerner and Miller (1978) attributed to the perceived similarity to the rape victim. Brems and Wagner (1994) examined the role of feminist beliefs on victim blame attribution and found that male and female participants with high feminist attitudes attributed less blame to rape victims than male and female participants with more traditional gender role views. Relatedly, African-American men held more traditional gender roles than African-American women and were therefore more likely to blame rape victims than African-American women (Sapp, Farrell, Johnson, & Hitchcock, 1999). Participants with higher rape myth acceptance beliefs also blamed the victim more than participants with lower rape myth acceptance beliefs (Frese, Moya, & Megás, 2004). These research participant variables are important to keep in mind to explain why victims of rape may be blamed for their victimization when they are not perceived as being similar to the person attributing blame to them.

Characteristics of the perpetrator, such as sex, ethnicity, and socioeconomic status, also influence the attribution of blame. Participants blamed male perpetrators who raped male victims less (and thus assigned lower sentences) than male perpetrators who raped female victims (Anderson & Lyons, 2005; Mitchell et al., 2009). Male rape victimizations may be considered less severe than female victimizations because men play a more active role in sexual intercourse and because of the disbelief in the concept of male rape (Anderson & Lyons, 2005). When perpetrators were identified as African-American or of low socioeconomic status, participants also assigned more blame and harsher sentences to the perpetrator (Freeman, 2006; George & Martínez, 2002).

Researchers have also studied victim characteristics, such as sex, ethnicity, and sexual reputation, within the context of blame attribution. Participants blamed male victims more than female victims and homosexual victims more than heterosexual ones, possibly due to men’s perceived ability to fight off attackers and the misconception that homosexual men are more sexually promiscuous and thus invite rape to occur (Davies, Rogers, & Whitelegg, 2009; White & Robinson-Kurpius, 2002). Participants also blamed Latina and African-American victims more than Caucasian victims (George & Martínez, 2002; Jimenez & Abreu, 2003; Maier, 2008). Finally, participants blamed victims who had a “bad” reputation and who did nothing to resist the rape (either physically or verbally) the most, with prior sexual consent or a sexual history with the perpetrator (either a dating partner or spouse) increasing the amount of blame attributed (Cohn, Dupuis, & Brown, 2009; Monson, Langhinrichsen-Rohling, & Binderup, 2000).

Outside of research participant characteristics, perpetrator characteristics, and victim characteristics, few studies have examined type of crime and type of rape. Brems and Wagner (1994) examined the effect of crime type in rape versus theft cases and found that participants attributed less blame to the rape victim than to the theft victim. Adams-Price et al. (2004) also found greater victim blame the less severe the crime. Participants also blame victims of rapes differently depending on the perpetrator. Bell, Kuriloff, and Lottes (1994) found participants blamed victims of date rapes more than victims of stranger rapes. Frese et al. (2004) found participants blamed acquaintance rape victims the most, followed by marital rape and then stranger rape victims. Grubb and Harrower (2009) also found participants blamed seduction rape victims the most, followed by date, and then stranger rape victims. Finally, Sheldon-Keller et al. (1994) compared date rapes to friend rapes and found that participants blamed date rape victims less. Overall, these research studies seem to indicate that participants blame stranger rape victims the least. The type of crime and type of rape can therefore influence the amount of blame people attribute to the victim.

In summary, past research has studied how the attribution of victim blame is influenced by research participant characteristics, perpetrator characteristics, and victim characteristics, but almost no research has focused on blame attribution across different types of
crimes and how the perceived severity of the crime alters the amount of blame attributed to both the victim and the perpetrator. The limited research on crime type has found that participants blame victims in less severe crimes more (Adams-Price et al., 2004; Brems & Wagner, 1994), but the only crime considered has been theft, a crime of property, not of person (like rape).

We investigated participant perceptions of crime severity as well as quantifiable attributions of blame to both perpetrator and victim by manipulating the type of crime presented (i.e., rape, murder, theft) and how close the perpetrator was to the victim of the crime (i.e., stranger, date, family member). We tested the following four hypotheses: (a) participants exposed to a crime of theft would rate this type of crime as being less serious than participants exposed to rape or murder crimes, (b) participants would blame perpetrators of more severe crimes more than perpetrators of less severe crimes, (c) participants would blame victims of less severe crimes more than they would blame victims of more severe crimes, and (d) the degree of proximity of the perpetrator to the victim increased (from stranger to date to family member), participants would blame the victim more.

Method

Participants
The participants consisted of 180 undergraduate students at a small liberal arts college in the mid-Atlantic. There were 21% (n = 37) male and 79% (n = 143) female participants between the ages of 18–49, with a mean and median age of 21 and 20, respectively. The ethnicities of the participants were 81% (n = 145) Caucasian, 10% (n = 18) African-American, 5% (n = 9) Hispanic, and 4% (n = 8) Asian/Pacific Islanders. Almost 61% (n = 109) of the participants were residential students. Over 54% (n = 92) were single, 38% (n = 68) were in a relationship, 6% (n = 11) were engaged, 3% (n = 6) were married, 1% (n = 2) were cohabitating, and almost 1% (n = 1) were divorced. Only two participants (1%) had been convicted of a crime, and 26% (n = 46) of the participants had been the victim of a crime.

We recruited a convenience sample of participants from the communal areas or from classes on the college campus. Participants had to be at least 18 years of age and had to be undergraduate students of the college. They did not receive any reimbursement for their participation in the study.

Measures and Procedures
We handed out IRB-approved informed consent forms to all participants and instructed them to read and sign it before they could participate in the study. We then randomly assigned each participant to one of three experimental groups receiving packets with half-page vignettes to read describing three rapes, three murders, or three thefts. We distributed the packets in a double-blind manner and used a 3 x 3 Latin Square counterbalanced mixed factorial design. The vignettes were adopted, with permission, from Grubb and Harrower (2009). The three vignettes described a young woman who was raped, murdered, or stolen from by a stranger, her date, or her cousin in her college dormitory study lounge; all other details were kept constant. The young woman died by stabbing in the murder vignettes, and it was her purse that was stolen in the theft vignettes. In all three vignettes the young woman said “stop” when faced with the crime. After reading the three vignettes, participants answered three questions for each vignette in which they rated the seriousness of the crime, what type of sentence they would hand down to the perpetrator, and how well they believed the victim had prevented the crime from occurring in each of the three vignettes. They answered each question by marking an X along a 100mm graphic rating scale, ranging from “not at all” to “very” for the question about crime severity, “light” to “heavy” for the question about perpetrator sentencing, and “poorly” to “very well” for the question about victim crime prevention.

We also instructed participants to fill out a demographic questionnaire. When they returned the completed packet to us, we gave them a debriefing form and addressed any questions or concerns participants had.

Results
We used a metric ruler to determine where along the 100mm graphic rating scale participants had rated their questions and recorded that raw number (out of 100). We coded each of the nine survey questions in this manner. We reverse coded the victim crime prevention question in order to be consistent with the perpetrator blame attribution question (i.e., a score of 100 on each of the two questions would illustrate high perpetrator blame and high victim blame attribution).

We calculated three 3 x 3 mixed-design ANOVAs to examine the effects of the type of crime (rape, murder, theft) and the proximity of the perpetrator to the victim (stranger, date, family member) on severity of crime (Question 1), perpetrator blame (Question 2), and victim blame (Question 3). Main effects for crime type were significant across all three questions: crime severity, F(2, 177) = 131.67, p < 0.001, f = 1.22; perpetrator blame, F(2, 177) = 192.69, p < 0.001, f = 1.49; and victim blame, F(2, 177) = 14.73, p < 0.001, f = 0.40. See Table 1 for mean scores and standard deviations.

We used post-hoc LSD analyses to determine the nature of the differences among types of crime by sever-
ity of crime. These analyses revealed that participants rated rape and murder similarly and as significantly more serious \((M = 94.18, SD = 7.91; M = 93.69, SD = 8.94,\) respectively) than theft \((M = 58.43, SD = 24.35,\) both \(p < 0.001.\) Post-hoc LSD analyses also determined the nature of the differences among types of crime by perpetrator blame and revealed that participants attributed similar blame to murderers \((M = 93.57, SD = 8.71)\) and rapists \((M = 90.58, SD = 11.14)\) and significantly more blame to murderers and rapists than they did to thieves \((M = 50.39, SD = 22.59,\) both \(p < 0.001.\) A last set of post-hoc LSD analyses determined the nature of the differences among types of crime by victim blame and indicated that participants attributed significantly different amounts of blame to victims of all three crimes, with victims of theft \((M = 62.79, SD = 23.12)\) being blamed significantly more than victims of murder \((M = 52.44, SD = 26.32),\) and victims of rape being blamed the least \((M = 38.58, SD = 29.45):\) rape versus murder, \(p = 0.002,\) rape versus theft, \(p < 0.001,\) and murder versus theft, \(p = 0.022.\)

Main effects for proximity of perpetrator to victim were also significant across all three questions: crime severity, \(F(2, 354) = 15.12, p < 0.001, f = 0.29;\) perpetrator blame, \(F(2, 354) = 12.37, p < 0.001, f = 0.27;\) victim blame, \(F(2, 354) = 15.38, p < 0.001, f = 0.28.\) Nine corrected paired-sample t tests were calculated to compare the mean crime severity, perpetrator blame, and victim blame scores across perpetrator proximity. Statistically significant differences in mean crime severity ratings were found between stranger versus family member and date versus family member perpetrator: \(t(179) = 4.06, p < 0.001, t(179) = 3.54, p < 0.001, t(179) = 3.24, p < 0.001,\) respectively. Statistically significant differences in mean perpetrator blame attributions were also found between stranger versus family member and date versus family member perpetrator: \(t(179) = 3.84, p < 0.001, t(179) = 3.24, p < 0.001,\) respectively. Finally, statistically significant differences in mean victim blame attributions were found as well between stranger versus family member and date versus family member perpetrator: \(t(179) = 4.91, p < 0.001, t(179) = 3.73, p < 0.001, t(179) = 3.24, p < 0.001,\) respectively. None of the stranger versus date comparisons was statistically significant across mean crime severity, perpetrator blame, or victim blame scores.

Significant Crime Type x Perpetrator Proximity interactions were present for the first two questions but a nonsignificant interaction was present for the third question: crime severity, \(F(4, 354) = 14.59, p < 0.001, f = 0.40;\) perpetrator blame, \(F(4, 354) = 13.21, p < 0.001, f = 0.39;\) and victim blame, \(F(4, 354) = 0.31, p = 0.87.\)

### TABLE 1

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Question</th>
<th>Proximity</th>
<th>n</th>
<th>Rape Mean</th>
<th>SD</th>
<th>Murder Mean</th>
<th>SD</th>
<th>Theft Mean</th>
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<th>SD</th>
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Although significant interactions typically qualify main effects, the two significant interactions in this study did not change the interpretation of the effects of crime type on crime severity ratings (see Figure 1) or on perpetrator blame ratings (see Figure 2).

Discussion

The purpose of this study was to investigate the effects of type of crime and perpetrator proximity to the victim on perceived crime severity, perpetrator blame, and victim blame attributions. The first hypothesis was that participants exposed to a crime of theft would rate this type of crime as being less serious than participants exposed to rape or murder crimes. This hypothesis was supported (see Figure 1). Participants regarded theft as a less serious crime than murder or rape and regarded murder and rape as being similar in severity. The second hypothesis was that participants would blame perpetrators of more severe crimes more than perpetrators of less severe crimes. This hypothesis was also supported (see Figure 2). Participants attributed similar blame to murderers and rapists and significantly more blame to murderers and rapists than they did to thieves. The third hypothesis was that participants would blame victims of less severe crimes more than they would blame victims of more severe crimes. The data also supported this hypothesis (see Table 1). Participants blamed victims of theft the most, followed by victims of murder, and then victims of rape, whom participants blamed the least. The fourth hypothesis was that as the degree of proximity of the perpetrator to the victim increased (from stranger to date to family member), participants would blame the victim more. This trend was not evident in any of the crime scenarios. Participants blamed victims less as the proximity to the perpetrator increased. They blamed the victim the most when the perpetrator was a stranger, followed by when the perpetrator was a date, and blamed the victim the least when the perpetrator was a family member. Overall, both the type of crime and degree of perpetrator proximity significantly affected crime severity, perpetrator blame, and victim blame attributions.
Past research has mainly focused on crimes of rape and has not investigated other crimes, such as murder or theft, in depth. Brems and Wagner (1994) found that perpetrators were blamed more (and victims were blamed less) in rape cases than they were in theft crimes; our study confirmed their findings, suggesting that perpetrators receive harsher sentences for crimes that are physically damaging, such as rape, as opposed to crimes of property, such as theft. Greater blame and harsher sentences may be due to the fact that victims of more severe crimes are more likely to suffer worse side effects and elicit more sympathy from participants. Adams-Price et al. (2004), for example, found that older participants blamed victims more the less severe the outcome was. Many people regard murder as much more serious than rape because murder results in death. However, our findings suggest that murder and rape were viewed as similar in severity.

Additionally, these findings contradict literature regarding victim blame as a function of the identity of the perpetrator. Research about the type of rape on victim blame has shown that victims of stranger rape are blamed the least in comparison with victims of date or acquaintance rape (Bell et al., 1994; Frese et al., 2004; Grubb & Harrower, 2009; Sheldon-Keller et al., 1994). We were unable to confirm this finding. In the present study, participants blamed victims of rape, murder, and theft significantly more in stranger scenarios compared to date or family scenarios, suggesting that participants expect individuals to be more cautious when they are around strangers. The significant interaction effects, however, show that participants rated family rapes as most severe, most worthy of participant blame, and least worthy of victim blame. Past research has not focused much on crimes committed by family members, and individuals victimized by family members may be blamed less because one may not think it necessary to take precautions against family members as opposed to strangers. Date crimes are also a relatively new phenomenon that has not been researched extensively, especially in terms of crimes other than rape. Individuals with regular dating partners may also not think they need to protect themselves from dates (after all, they trust them enough to date them), so victims of date crimes may be blamed more for being perceived as trusting the perpetrator too much.

Our data do not seem to confirm or disconfirm Lerner and Simmons’s (1966) Just World theory in that there was a tendency for victim blame to increase when perpetrator blame was not very high. Rather than approach blame attribution from the perspective of crime severity, perhaps one should approach it from the perspective of a “calculus effect” in which victim blame increases when perpetrator blame is not high enough to “balance out.” When perpetrator blame is low or moderate, the “remaining” blame may still need to be attributed and the victim becomes the logical target. Future studies could try to assess this calculus effect by asking participants about the rationale behind their blame attributions of both perpetrators and victims.

The limitations of this study may have also contributed to the study’s findings. Two limitations, in particular, deserve mention here: a homogenous sample and a design that did not allow for a sensitive enough contrast effect. Past research has included participants of greater demographic diversity. The present study consisted mostly of traditional-age, female, Caucasian undergraduate students, whom the literature has found tend to attribute the least amount of blame to victims (Adams-Price et al., 2004; Grubb & Harrower, 2009; Jimenez & Abreu, 2003; Lee et al., 2005; Mitchell et al., 1999; Sheldon-Keller et al., 1994; Smith & Frieze, 2003; White & Robinson-Kurpius, 1999). In addition, although the Latin Square counterbalancing addressed order effects in the design, the great similarity among the three vignettes (altered only by crime type and perpetrator proximity) may have explained the similar ratings for rape and murder. It is unclear whether participants truly viewed rape and murder in the same light or whether their responses reflect a ceiling effect. One way to address this concern would be to replicate the study as a 3 x 3 between-subjects factorial design so that no participant reads more than one vignette. Bell et al. (1994), Grubb and Harrower (2009), and Sheldon-Keller et al. (1994) all used this design, which may also help explain why they all found that participants blamed stranger rape victims the least whereas we found the opposite.

The findings of this study have added to knowledge of how type of crime and perpetrator proximity affect crime severity, perpetrator blame, and victim blame attributions. Because participants rated rape and murder as equally serious, rape education and prevention need to be utilized more, and stricter laws need to be developed to reflect this seriousness. The findings of this study also raise many questions for future research. For instance, research focused on victim characteristics could investigate whether participants attribute more or less blame to individuals who have been a victim of numerous crimes, as well as whether they blame children, adults, or elderly in a similar manner, depending on whether participants view them as being more helpless or unaware of potentially dangerous situations. When looking at perpetrator characteristics, research could address why participants attribute less blame to victims of family perpetrators compared to victims of stranger perpetrators, and why rapes by family members are viewed as more severe and perpetrator blameworthy.

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than are other crimes or than are rapes by strangers or dates. Additionally, future research needs to expand the role that different crime types (e.g., assault, carjacking, arson) play in blame attribution, as well as the role that different types of perpetrators, such as friends, college roommates, first dates versus long-term dating partners, and especially spouses, play in blame attribution, given its potential impact on public policy regarding domestic abuse.

References