BLAMING VICTIMS OF RAPE
STUDIES ON RAPE MYTHS AND BELIEFS ABOUT RAPE

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Avhandlingen för avläggande av filosofie doktorsexamen i psykologi, som med vederbörligt tillstånd av samhällsvetenskapliga fakultetsstyrelsen vid Göteborgs universitet kommer att offentligen försvaras fredagen den 9 november 2018, klockan 10:00 i sal F1, Psykologiska institutionen, Haraldsgatan 1, Göteborg.

Fakultetsopponent: Dr. Afroditi Pina, Keynes College, University of Kent, United Kingdom

Föreliggande uppsats grundar sig på följande artiklar:


III. Adolfsson, K., Strömwall, L. A., & Landström, S. (Submitted for publication). “There is no time”: Swedish professionals' perspective on meeting, treating and interacting with rape victims.

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Rape is a crime characterized by low reporting and conviction rates. Many victims who do report, drop out during the justice process. This is a problem both for the victims themselves and for the legal certainty of societies. One explanation for low reporting rates is victims’ justified fear of being badly treated, mistrusted, and blamed. Victim-blaming attitudes have been extensively studied and reported both among the general public and among professionals in the justice and healthcare systems. Several variables have been investigated to understand victim blaming, both aspects of the rape situation and variables connected to personal beliefs. However, previous studies have predominantly investigated only a few variables at a time. The aim of this thesis was partly to experimentally investigate whether situation-specific variables or participants’ personal beliefs are more important in seeking to understand blame attribution. Possible effects of age, gender, force, and number of perpetrators were also investigated. In addition, the aim was to include the perspective of professionals who meet, treat, and interact with rape victims. All three studies were conducted using a multi-analytical approach incorporating both analyses of variance (ANOVAs) as well as more elaborated and exploratory analyses.

In Study I, the effects of victim and participant age, participant gender, sympathy for the victim, trust in the justice system, belief in a just world, and rape myth acceptance (RMA) were investigated in three experiments, employing a vignette methodology. In total, 877 Swedish adolescents and adults read scenarios describing common acquaintance rape situations. Victim age (18 or 31 years) was manipulated, but did not affect attributed blame. Effects of participant age and gender varied markedly across scenarios. Sympathy for the victim and RMA were the best individual predictors of attributed blame, indicating that blame attributions are more affected by personal beliefs than by situation-specific variables. Study II investigated effects of multiple perpetrators and their use of force on blame attributions, in two experiments. A total of 2928 participants read a vignette where number of perpetrators or perpetrators’ use of force was manipulated. Subsequently, they completed items rating blame, RMA, just-world beliefs, sympathy for the victim, perception of consent, and trust in the legal system. No effect of force was found, but the depicted victim of a multiple-perpetrator rape was attributed more blame than the victim of lone-perpetrator rape. The best individual predictors of attributed blame were participants’ perception of consent, sympathy for the victim, and RMA. In line with Study I, the results indicated that participants’ beliefs about rape were more predictive than situational factors. In Study III, the thesis was broadened by including the perspective of professionals encountering victims of rape. A total of 237 police employees, prosecutors, and healthcare personnel responded to a survey concerning barriers and problematic practices as well as questions regarding rape myths, belief in a just world, and trust in the justice system. Profession, age, and RMA affected their estimates of false rape reports, while age and profession affected trust in the justice system. Lack of resources was the most prominent barrier, and detailed and repeated questioning of the victims was the most highlighted problematic practice. The results further identified professionals’ need for more education in order to improve treatment of rape victims.

In conclusion, this thesis indicates that personal beliefs are more predictive of blame attributions than are situational factors related to the rape itself. RMA, sympathy for the victim, and perception of consent were the most predictive variables of both victim and perpetrator blame. It also highlights the requirement for more resources and knowledge among professionals in both the justice and healthcare systems. This thesis has implications for future projects to prevent victim blame with the long-term goal of reducing attrition rates. It identifies what to focus on: reducing RMA, increasing sympathy for rape victims, and increasing awareness of the concept of sexual consent.