2014

# College Students' Perceptions of Sexual Assault Reporting and Proceedings

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**CLAREMONT McKENNA COLLEGE**

# COLLEGE STUDENTS' PERCEPTIONS OF SEXUAL ASSAULT REPORTING AND PROCEEDINGS

SUBMITTED TO

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FOR

SENIOR THESIS

Spring 2014

April 28, 2014

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## Author Note

The author would like to thank Dr. Daniel Krauss for his generous mentorship and feedback, and for challenging her to put forward her best work during this project and over the past four years. She would also like to thank her family for their unwavering love and support, as well as the wonderful and supportive community of her friends in the Psychology Department. Finally, the author would like to dedicate her research to the memory of Tamar Hanna Kaplan, who first inspired her interest in this work.

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**Abstract**

Sexual assault among college students in the US has prompted debate about how to prevent and punish such crimes. Under Title IX and the 2011 *Dear Colleague Letter* from the Office for Civil Rights, universities are required to undertake the prevention, investigation, and punishment of sexually violent offenses on college campuses. However, the vast majority of victims do not report their assaults, whether on campus or to the police. The current study investigated the effect of victim reporting on perceptions of sexual assault. Two undergraduate samples, one from a small liberal arts college ($n$ = 197) and another recruited using Amazon Mechanical Turk ($n$ = 56), were randomly assigned to read a vignette of an alleged sexual assault including one of four reporting conditions: no reporting, reporting to on-campus administrators, reporting to law enforcement, or reporting both on campus and to law enforcement. Outcome measures included whether the participant believed an assault had taken place, measures of victim and perpetrator culpability, and scales measuring the extent to which the participant accepts rape myths (RMA) and believes in a just world (JWB). Results failed to demonstrate an effect of victim reporting type, but did find a significant effect of gender such that males blamed the victim more and were less likely to believe an assault had taken place than females. RMA also mediated this relationship, such that the effect of gender on perceptions was accounted for by differences in RMA. Implications and directions for future research are discussed.

# College Students' Perceptions of Sexual Assault Reporting and Proceedings

In the past several years, sexual assault prevention and advocacy have become priorities nationwide, with President Barack Obama even convening a special task force in January of 2014 to tackle the issue. Research over the past 25 years has consistently revealed a high prevalence of sexual assault among college students, particularly towards women. Although self-reported rates of sexual assault vary, this research demonstrates that sexual assault is far from rare among female college students and often goes unreported to authorities. One of the most recent large-scale studies of college sexual violence, the "Campus Sexual Assault" (CSA) study, surveyed a random sample of 5,446 undergraduate women from two large public universities and found that about 1 in 5 women (19%) reported being the victim of an attempted or completed sexual assault during college (Krebs et. al., 2009). In addition, the study found that the victim was physically coerced in 5% and incapacitated by drugs or alcohol in 11% of reported cases.

Despite the high rate of sexual assault on college campuses, a National College Women Sexual Victimization (NCWSV) survey of 4,446 female college students found that only 2.1% of college women who experienced sexual victimization (rape, sexual contact, sexual coercion, or threats) reported the incident to a police agency and only 4% reported to campus authorities (Fisher, Daigle, Cullen, & Turner, 2003). In a recent nationally representative survey, even when rape was narrowly defined as "penetration of the victim's vagina, mouth, or rectum without consent," only 11.5% of victims reported the rape to law enforcement officials (Wolitzky-Taylor et. al., 2011). However, in the NCWSV study, almost 70% revealed the incident to someone other than police or

campus authorities, indicating that most victims do report to someone about the assault (Fisher, Daigle, Cullen, & Turner, 2003).

The alarming gap between rates of sexual assault and reporting rates demonstrates victims' reluctance to tell officials about their victimization. Understanding the factors surrounding victims' reporting decisions is especially important given that perpetrators often commit multiple assaults. One study found that of the 7% of college men who admitted to committing an assault, 63% reported committing multiple offenses, with an average of six each (Lisak & Miller, 2002). Unfortunately, research investigating the social impediments to reporting sexual assault and its possible effects on stopping repeat offenders has been limited. For example, Sable, Danis, Mauzy, and Gallagher (2006) investigated the perceived importance to college students of obstacles that prevent reporting for both female and male victims. Their study found that the most important obstacles included: 1) feelings of shame, guilt, and not wanting loved ones to know; 2) worries about confidentiality; and 3) fear of not being believed. Although these common barriers to reporting have been identified, research on sexual assault has largely failed to examine the actual social stigmatization and peer perceptions of victims who do report. Past research has investigated social and contextual determinants of perceptions of sexual assault victims and perpetrators (e.g., Bell, Kuriloff, & Lottes, 1994; Burczyk & Standing, 1989), yet no research has yet examined the effects of reporting on these perceptions. Therefore, the present study sought to examine the influence of different types of reporting on college students' perceptions of sexual assault.

**Legal Background: Title IX and On-Campus Proceedings**

Due to its unique status as both a criminal act and a civil rights violation, the investigation and prosecution of sexual assault cases on college campuses has a controversial history. Although defined as a criminal offense by the United States Code (10 U.S.C. § 920), sexual assault that occurs on a college campus can also be investigated by campus authorities under Title IX of the Education Amendments of 1972 (20 U.S.C. § 1681 *et seq.*). Normally thought of in the context of women's sports, Title IX actually prohibits all "discrimination on the basis of sex" (p. 2), including sexual harassment and sexual violence, in educational institutions that receive federal aid (U.S. Department of Education, 2011). Because the anti-discrimination mandate of Title IX has been extended to include acts of sexual violence, universities receiving federal funding must address claims of sexual assault involving university students, whether occurring on or off-campus (U.S. Dept. of Education, 2011).

The Title IX mandate to prohibit sexual discrimination is enforced by the Office for Civil Rights (OCR) of the Department of Education. The OCR has historically been criticized for its vague guidelines on universities' responsibilities regarding sexual harassment/sexual violence concerns. Schools have possessed broad discretion in interpreting the OCR's guidelines and only the schools who blatantly failed to comply with the mandate were reviewed and sanctioned, often weakly (Walker, 2010). In 2011, the OCR attempted to address these complaints by issuing a so-called *Dear Colleague Letter* that more clearly outlined the guidelines schools must follow in preventing and addressing complaints of sexual discrimination. The new guidelines state three goals when a school "knows or reasonably should know" (p. 4) about the occurrence of

harassment/violence: 1) elimination of the harassment; 2) prevention of its recurrence; and 3) addressing its effects. In addition, schools must publish grievance procedures as well as a "notice of nondiscrimination" (p.4), and must designate an employee as a Title IX coordinator to oversee procedures and ensure legal compliance (U.S. Dept. of Education, 2011).

The new OCR guidelines have generated debate over whether or not the OCR has overstepped its mandate in protecting victims at the expense of due process. For example, the *Dear Colleague Letter* specifies that the standard of proof in Title IX investigations must be a preponderance of the evidence standard. A preponderance of the evidence standard requires only that the incident is more likely than not to have occurred (i.e., has at least a 51% chance of having occurred). Given that the criminal justice system requires the more stringent standard of proof beyond a reasonable doubt, legal scholars argue that the due process rights of the accused might be violated by the much lower preponderance standard (Triplett, 2012). Another controversial guideline discourages schools from allowing cross-examination during the proceedings, a policy stemming from the potential for revictimization of the complainant. Despite this concern, many legal commentators argue that removing cross-examination inhibits due process by limiting the adversarial nature of the proceeding and the Sixth Amendment right to confront one's accuser (Triplett, 2012).

Most criticisms of the *Dear Colleague Letter* focus on the potential for false accusations and harm to the alleged perpetrator. Consequently, perceptions of victims may be shaped by perceptions of the credibility of Title IX proceedings as compared to traditional criminal proceedings. In other words, because students may perceive on-

campus Title IX proceedings to be less fair than criminal proceedings and/or biased in favor of the victim, they may view a victim of sexual assault more negatively or be less likely to believe her if she initiates an on-campus investigation than if she reports to law enforcement.

**Previous Research**

As noted above, previous research on the topic of victim/perpetrator perceptions has primarily focused on social and contextual factors involved in the sexual assault incident. The most extensive and consistent research in this area examines the effect of participant (i.e., rater) gender on perceptions of the relative culpability of the victim and perpetrator (e.g., Grubb & Harrower, 2009). Studies have also examined the effects of victim and perpetrator gender, with less consistent results (e.g., Burczyk & Standing, 1989; Mitchell et. al., 2009). Other variables that have been shown to affect perceptions include perpetrator motivation (Mitchell et. al., 2009), the extent to which the victim knows the perpetrator (i.e., stranger rape vs. date/acquaintance rape) (Bell, Kuriloff, & Lottes, 1994; Grubb & Harrower, 2009), race of the victim and perpetrator (George & Martinez, 2002), and alcohol/drug use of the victim and perpetrator prior to the assault (Grubb & Turner, 2012; Maurer & Robinson, 2007). Participant individual difference variables, such as perceived similarity to victim and perpetrator, belief in a just world, and acceptance of rape myths have also been identified as factors affecting perceptions of victims and perpetrators (e.g., Grubb & Harrower, 2009; Hayes, Lorenz, & Bell, 2013).

**Gender.** Previous research on the effects of participant gender on perceptions has consistently demonstrated a robust gender difference, with males blaming victims more, blaming perpetrators less, and being less likely to label the incident sexual assault than

females. In Bell, Kuriloff, and Lottes' (1994) seminal study, college student participants read one of four vignettes describing male perpetrator/female victim rape scenarios and answered a questionnaire including, among other scales, questions about the responsibility of the woman in the rape. Although overall blame of the victim was relatively low, men were significantly more likely to attribute higher blame to the female victim than were women. Xenos and Smith (2001) replicated these results with a sample of Australian adolescents and young adults, finding that regardless of education level, males held more negative views of rape victims in general than females on measures of victim blame, deservingness, responsibility for the rape, and credibility. They also blamed the victim more in vignettes describing sexual coercion. Similar results have been consistently demonstrated in other research (see e.g., Grubb & Harrower, 2009; Maurer & Robinson, 2007; Mitchell et. al., 2009) and have been found across varying types of sexual offenses, such as instances of marital rape (Whatley, 2005). Because of this existing body of research, participant gender was included in the present study as an expected predictor of views toward victims and perpetrators.

In contrast to participant gender, research examining the effect of *victim* gender has produced less consistent findings. In one of the original experiments on this topic, Burzyck and Standing (1989) asked 72 male and 72 female undergraduate students to evaluate the personality traits of one of four short character descriptions: female victim (who had been sexually assaulted in the past), female non-victim, male victim, or male non-victim. The researchers found a so-called "sympathy effect" for female victims, regardless of participant gender, such that female victims were evaluated more positively than both male victims and female non-victims, with no difference between evaluations

of male victims and non-victims. Mitchell et. al. (2009) evaluated the effect of victim gender more directly by presenting 171 undergraduate participants with a mock report of an alleged sexual assault, followed by a questionnaire measuring perceptions of the victim and perpetrator. The researchers found no effect of victim gender on perceptions of the victim, although they did find that participants assigned longer sentences to the perpetrator if the victim was female, partially supporting Burzyck and Standing's "sympathy effect". Because the vast majority of peer sexual assault victims are female and the vast majority of perpetrators are male, victim gender was not manipulated in the current study and instead the most common, male-on-female scenario was presented.

**Other contextual variables.** Researchers have examined various contextual factors that influence perceptions of sexual assault. A significant body of research has investigated the effects of alcohol use on perceptions of victims and perpetrators. In Grubb and Turner's (2012) literature review examining rape myth acceptance, gender role conformity, and substance use in victim blaming, the authors found that the effect of alcohol use on attributions of blame varies. Some research indicates that perpetrators are blamed more for taking advantage of a victim who has been drinking; however, the more common result is that greater blame is attributed to the victim for making herself vulnerable through intoxication. Conversely, when perpetrators have been drinking, they tend to be blamed less for their actions than sober perpetrators (Grubb & Turner, 2012). Overall, Grubb and Turner's review of alcohol use suggests negative effects on perceptions of victims, and neutral or positive effects on perceptions of perpetrators.

Specific research on alcohol use in sexual assaults presents a more nuanced picture of perceptions. For example, in a large online study of undergraduates (n=652)

using two-part vignettes of heterosexual assault, Maurer and Robinson (2007) investigated the effects of female alcohol consumption, male alcohol consumption, or both parties' consumption in the first part of the vignette (prior to the assault) on perceptions of sexual intent. The researchers found that the male actor was perceived to have greater sexual intent when he was the only one drinking, and the female actor was perceived to have less sexual intent when only the male was drinking than in the three other conditions. After presenting the second part of the vignette in which an assault takes place, participants were asked to rate each actor's responsibility for the incident and the extent to which they believed a rape had occurred. Interestingly, drinking behavior did not affect perceptions of responsibility or belief a rape had occurred, which the researchers attribute to a removal of hindsight bias, since ratings of sexual intent were given before any information about an assault.

Race of perpetrators, victims, and participants has also been investigated as a potential factor in blame attributions and perceptions. In George and Martinez's (2002) vignette-based study of 332 primarily white and Asian undergraduates, interracial rapes (Black man against White woman/White man against Black woman) were less likely to be rated as "definitely rape" than intraracial rapes (Black man against Black woman/White man against White woman). In addition, victims in interracial rapes were seen as more culpable and less credible, and perpetrators were seen as less culpable, than in intraracial rapes. George and Martinez's results indicate that racial stereotypes about sexuality may have effects on perceptions of sexual assault. Because blacks are often stereotyped as promiscuous, black women may be seen as more blameworthy and as having invited the attack when assaulted by a white man compared with a black man. The

stereotype at play is less clear when white women victims are blamed more if their assailant is black than white; George and Martinez suggest that white women may be blamed more based on negative stereotypes about the disrepute of white women who "fraternize" with black men.

The study also examined whether the assault was perpetrated by a stranger or an acquaintance. George and Martinez's findings indicated that victims who knew their assailant were perceived to be more culpable than victims who were attacked by a stranger. Additionally, perpetrators of acquaintance rape were assigned shorter hypothetical prison sentences than perpetrators of stranger rape. These findings confirm previous research indicating that victims are blamed more and perpetrators blamed less in instances of acquaintance/date rape than in stranger rape (e.g., Bell, Kuriloff, & Lottes, 1994).

Finally, perpetrator motivation has been investigated as a potential factor in perceptions of victims and perpetrators. Mitchell et. al. (2009) used the perpetrator's verbal exchanges with the victim in a vignette describing an assault to vary the perpetrator's apparent motivation as either sexually motivated or violently motivated. Participants who read the vignette with a sexually-motivated perpetrator assigned more blame to the victim, less blame to the perpetrator, and were less likely to call the incident rape than those who read about a violently-motivated perpetrator. These effects were dependent on participant gender, such that the difference in perceptions was significantly greater for men than women in the sexually-motivated condition. Mitchell et. al.'s study demonstrates the potential effect of the widely-held, but erroneous, belief that perpetrators of sexual assault are motivated by overwhelming sexual desire and therefore

cannot control their actions. Experts on sexual violence believe the majority of perpetrators are actually violently motivated and use the assault to assert power and control. However, laypersons may be less likely to assign blame to the perpetrator if they hold the false belief that the crime was sexually motivated.

**Rape Myth Acceptance and Just World Belief**. Beyond research on gender, race, alcohol, and other contextual factors, researchers have investigated the acceptance of rape myths as an indicator of attitudes towards victims of sexual violence. Burt (1980) was one of the first researchers to describe rape myths, defined as "prejudicial, stereotyped, or false beliefs about rape, rape victims, and rapists" (p. 217), and developed a Rape Myth Scale to measure individuals' belief in rape myths. The scale includes items such as "Any female can get raped" and "Women who get raped while hitchhiking get what they deserve," scored on a 7-point Likert scale. Burt's early work found that rape myth acceptance is predicted by factors like sex role stereotyping, acceptance of interpersonal violence, gender, age, and education.

Hayes-Smith and Levett (2010) also found gender to be a significant predictor of Rape Myth Acceptance (RMA), such that females are less likely to believe rape myths than males. Grubb and Turner's (2012) literature review found similar results, in addition to finding that males engage in higher levels of victim-blaming than females--unsurprisingly, given that RMA can be seen as one measure of victim-blaming. Higher RMA has also been linked with higher sexual aggression in males (Burgess, 2007) and a lower likelihood of labeling an incident as sexual assault (Burt, 1980). The present study examines RMA as a potential mediator of gender's effects on perceptions of sexual

assault, such that higher acceptance of rape myths should mediate the relationship between gender and perceptions.

Higher RMA and victim-blaming have also been linked to greater belief in a just world (JWB), a well-researched concept in forensic and social psychology that measures "the degree to which people feel that the world we live in is just and fair" (Hayes, Lorenz, & Bell, 2013, p. 203). In Hayes, Lorenz, and Bell's (2013) study of 351 undergraduates, JWB was measured by participants' responses to statements about themselves, such as "I feel that the world treats *me* fairly" (emphasis added), and about others (e.g., "I feel that the world treats *others* fairly"). These responses were then compared to participants' scores on a measure of RMA. The researchers found that, while higher JWB with respect to oneself predicted lower endorsement of rape myths, higher JWB with respect to others predicted higher endorsement of rape myths. These findings suggest that the belief in a just world for others is related to RMA, since those with a high JWB are likely to endorse myths such as "I believe the victim of a rape gets what she deserves." Therefore, JWB may mediate the relationship between RMA and perceptions of victims and perpetrators. The present study examines RMA and JWB as individual difference measures and as potential mediators of gender's effects on perceptions of victims and perpetrators.

**Reporting and severity of proceeding.** Although no research has been performed on the effects of reporting and to whom the victim reports, limited qualitative research has investigated the effect of delayed reporting on mock juror's perceptions of the victim. Ellison and Munro (2009) presented groups of nine mock jurors with an in-person, 75-minute trial reconstruction in which the victim either reported her assault

immediately after it occurred or after a delay of three days. The researchers then asked the jurors to reach a verdict as a group and recorded the jurors' group deliberation. Although no quantitative data was collected, Ellison and Munro's descriptions of the deliberations provide evidence of qualitative differences in how the jurors viewed the credibility of the victim in each condition. Jurors who viewed a trial in which the victim waited three days to report saw the delay as "a significant stumbling block… [which] seriously weakened the prosecution case. As one put it, 'it's no good, it swings against her favour the fact that it's taken three days to report'" (p. 209). Similarly, jurors in the immediate reporting condition weighed this fact in the victim's favor, with one even saying, " 'she phoned the police straight away so she'd been raped'" and others claiming that she wouldn't have had enough time to fabricate a story. While their methodology does not allow for conclusive results, Ellison and Munro's study supports the hypothesis that reporting is an important factor in others' perceptions of the victim and the assault.

**Hypotheses**

The present study seeks to examine the effect of reporting/proceeding type (victim does not report; victim reports to campus authorities; victim reports to law enforcement; victim reports to both campus authorities and law enforcement) on student perceptions of the victim and perpetrator as presented in a sexual assault vignette. Although previous research has not addressed perceptions based on what agency/institution the victim reports to, Ellison and Munro's (2009) work on delayed reporting suggests that not reporting the incident at all would have a negative impact on perceptions of the victim and the credibility of the assault. In addition, the differences between traditional criminal proceedings and Title IX proceedings may lead peers to

believe that an assault reported to law enforcement is more likely to be legitimate than an on-campus report. This difference in perceived legitimacy could also influence perceptions of the victim and perpetrator, making one or the other appear more culpable. In other words, participants may blame the victim less and the perpetrator more if she reports to the police than to campus authorities because the perpetrator may be viewed as having caused sufficient harm to merit the victim taking legal action.

**Hypothesis 1.** It is hypothesized that the victim will be seen as more culpable and the perpetrator as less culpable if the victim does not report or reports only to campus authorities. In contrast, it is hypothesized that the victim will be seen as less culpable and the perpetrator as more culpable if the victim reports to a more "serious" agency (i.e. law enforcement) or reports to both campus authorities and law enforcement.

**Hypothesis 2.** It is also hypothesized that perceptions of whether a sexual assault occurred will vary by proceeding type. Specifically, scenarios in which the victim does not report or reports only on campus will be less likely to be viewed as a sexual assault than scenarios in which the victim reports to law enforcement or both on campus and to law enforcement.

**Hypothesis 3.** In addition to reporting/proceeding condition, participant gender is expected to affect perceptions, such that women will assign less blame to the victim, more blame to the perpetrator, and be more likely to perceive the event as a sexual assault than men.

**Hypotheses 4a and 4b.** RMA is also expected to mediate the relationship between gender and perceptions of the assault, such that women being less likely to believe rape myths than men will account for gender differences in perceptions. In turn,

belief in a just world (JWB) is expected to mediate the relationship between Rape Myth Acceptance (RMA) and perceptions of the assault.

## Method

### Participants

253 participants were recruited from two independent samples: students from a small liberal arts college and a national sample of university students. The first sample (125 women, 72 men, *M* age = 19.6 years, age range: 18-23) was recruited through SonaSystems, an online experiment participation database through which students in psychology classes fulfill their participation requirement for class credit. Participants from Sample 1 primarily reported their ethnicity as Caucasian (49.2%), with 27.4% indicating Asian, 10.7 % other, 7.1% Hispanic/Latino, and 5.1% African-American.

The second sample was recruited using Amazon Mechanical Turk, an online crowd-sourcing marketplace where workers complete tasks for monetary compensation. 798 participants were initially asked to complete a brief survey for $0.05 in monetary compensation in which they indicated their gender, age, highest level of education completed, and whether they were currently enrolled at a four-year undergraduate college or university. Based on the data, those participants who indicated that they were currently enrolled either part or full-time at an undergraduate institution (*n* = 132) were invited to participate in a second study for additional monetary compensation of $0.75. Out of these, 56 (42.4% response rate) completed the same materials as Sample 1. Participants from Sample 2 (22 women, 34 men, *M* age = 25.4 years, age range = 19-53) primarily reported their ethnicity as Caucasian (46.4%) or Asian (37.5%), with 10.7% indicating African-American and 1.8% each reporting Hispanic/Latino, Native American, or other.

## Procedure

Four levels of one independent variable (reporting type) were manipulated. Participants were randomly assigned to one of four vignette conditions: no reporting, reporting to campus authorities, reporting to law enforcement, or reporting to campus authorities and law enforcement. The participants completed an online survey involving three parts: reading a short vignette describing an incident of alleged sexual assault, answering a series of questions related to the vignette, and completing a series of scales and a demographic questionnaire. Upon completion of the survey, participants read a debriefing statement and either received class credit (Sample 1) or minimal monetary compensation (Sample 2).

## Materials

**Vignette and perception measures.** The vignette described an instance of acquaintance assault of a young woman by a male classmate at a party, followed by a description of her reporting action (see Appendix A). After reading the vignette, participants answered three general comprehension questions about the incident described. They also answered a manipulation check question asking about the reporting action taken by the victim (none, reported on campus, reported to police, reported both on campus and to police). All participants were then presented with the United States Code's definition of sexual assault (see Appendix B). They were then asked whether or not the vignette described an incident of sexual assault, how confident they were in their decision on a 7-point Likert-type scale, and what the most important factors were in their decision. Only 14% of all participants answered "no" to the dichotomous "verdict" variable of whether or not an assault took place. To increase response variability and create a

continuous variable, verdict (coded as 1 = yes, -1 = no) was multiplied by participants' confidence in their decision to form a "verdict x confidence" scale ranging from -7 (very confident no assault occurred) to 7 (very confident an assault did occur).

Participants were asked a series of questions about their perceptions of the culpability of the victim and perpetrator (see Appendix C). The questions were based on George and Martinez's (2002) scale of victim and perpetrator culpability, in which they assessed a variety of constructs including cause, responsibility, and blame (e.g., "To what extent did [the victim's] behavior cause the sexual intercourse to occur? To what extent did [the perpetrator] intend for sexual intercourse to occur?"). The Victim Culpability and Perpetrator Culpability questionnaires each consisted of 6 items, scored on a 7-point Likert-type scale, with higher scores indicating greater victim or perpetrator culpability.

The six individual items measuring perceptions of the victim were summed to create a total Victim Blame Scale, with a possible range of 6 to 42. For each sample individually, reliability analyses revealed high internal consistency, Sample 1 Cronbach's $\alpha = .87$ ($n = 164$), Sample 2 Cronbach's $\alpha = .92$ ($n = 42$)[1]. The same procedure was repeated to create a total Perpetrator Blame Scale for the six items measuring perceptions of the perpetrator, with a possible range of 6 to 42[2]. Reliability analyses of each sample

[1] All reliability analyses were conducted with participants from Condition 4 excluded, see Results section.

[2] The normality of the dependent variables was tested using histograms, as well as skewness and kurtosis statistics divided by their standard errors. The Verdict x Confidence scale ($M$=4.40, $SD$=3.80) was found to have a skew value of -10.53 and a kurtosis value of 5.97, indicating extreme negative skew and a leptokurtic distribution. Since the scale was computed from a dichotomous variable, the extreme value was expected. The Victim Blame Scale ($M$=19.45, $SD$=7.77) was positively skewed with a skew value of 3.71, and the Perpetrator Blame Scale ($M$=37.33, $SD$=4.77) was extremely negatively skewed and leptokurtic with a skew value of 10.33 and kurtosis value of 11.82. Again, the skew is not surprising given that overall blaming of assault victims tends to be low, and overall blaming of assault perpetrators tends to be high. For ease of interpretability, no transformations were performed on the scales.

also showed high internal consistency, Sample 1 Cronbach's α = .82, Sample 2 Cronbach's α = .89.

**Individual difference scales.** After completing the Victim and Perpetrator Culpability questionnaires, participants were asked to complete the 7-item Global Belief in a Just World Scale (GBJWS) (Lipkus, 1991), scored on a 6-point Likert-type scale, that measures the degree to which an individual believes in a fair and just world (see Appendix D). The GBJWS has been shown to have high internal consistency and reliability, with a mean reliability coefficient across 20 studies of α = .81 (Hellman, Muilenburg-Trevino, & Worley, 2008). Participants then completed a 14-item, shortened version of McMahon and Farmer's (2011) modified version of the Illinois Rape Myth Acceptance Scale, which was revised and updated to make it more applicable to contemporary college students. The experimenters reported that the modified scale had a high degree of internal reliability, Cronbach's α = .87 (McMahon & Farmer, 2011). In the current study, redundant scale items were removed to provide a shortened form of McMahon and Farmer's scale (see Appendix E). Items were scored on a 5-point Likert-type scale, with higher scores indicating greater agreement with rape myth statements.

The 7 items of the GBJWS scale were combined to form a total just world belief (JWB) score with a possible range of 7 to 42 ($M$ = 18.87, $SD$ = 5.23). Reliability analyses on both samples demonstrated good internal consistency, Sample 1 Cronbach's α = .79, Sample 2 Cronbach's α = .84. The 14-item rape myth acceptance (RMA) scale was also combined to form a total RMA score with a possible range of 14 to 70 ($M$ = 27.18, $SD$ = 9.37). Reliability analyses on both samples demonstrated high internal consistency, Sample 1 Cronbach's α = .86, Sample 2 Cronbach's α = .87.

# Results

## Manipulation Check

Preliminary analyses were conducted to ensure that the manipulation had been effective across conditions and to check for missing data. Less than 1% of data was missing from all dependent and demographic data. Out of the 253 participants from both samples, 100% of participants in the "No Reporting" condition ($n$ = 76), 97% in the "On Campus" reporting condition ($n$ = 69), 97% in the "Police" reporting condition ($n$ = 61), and 26% in the "Both On Campus and Police" reporting condition ($n$ = 47) correctly answered the manipulation check question. Because nearly three-quarters of the "Both On Campus and Police" condition failed the manipulation check question, and because many fewer participants were assigned to that condition than others in Sample 1, participants in the latter condition were excluded from all analyses. This left a combined sample $N$ of 206.

## Sample Comparisons

Analyses were then conducted to determine group-level demographic differences in Samples 1 and 2, excluding results from participants in Condition 4 of both samples. A series of two-tailed t-tests were conducted on the demographic variables of gender, age, years of university attended, whether the participant had personally been or knew someone who had been sexually assaulted, marital status, ethnicity, and political affiliation. All variables except political affiliation were significantly different across samples at the .05 significance level (see Table 1 for means and t-tests).

A multivariate analysis of variance (MANOVA) was conducted to test for differences in the dependent variables of verdict x confidence, victim blame, and

Table 1

*Sample Demographic Comparisons Using Independent Samples t-test*

| | Sample 1 | | Sample 2 | | | |
|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|
| | *M* | *SD* | *M* | *SD* | *t* | df |
| Gender[a] | 1.59 | .49 | 1.36 | .49 | 2.72** | 203 |
| Age | 19.61 | 1.22 | 24.95 | 5.94 | -5.79** | 42 |
| Years of undergraduate university | 2.42 | 1.30 | 3.62 | 1.23 | -5.42*** | 203 |
| Are/know victim of sexual assault[b] | 1.36 | .48 | 1.60 | .50 | -2.86** | 203 |
| Marital status[c] | 1.00 | .00 | 1.31 | .56 | -3.57*** | 41 |
| Race/Ethnicity[d] | 3.87 | 1.84 | 3.21 | 1.93 | 2.04* | 203 |
| Political Affiliation[e] | 2.49 | 1.58 | 2.21 | 1.26 | 1.05 | 203 |

[a]Gender includes 1 (Male) and 2 (Female). [b]Are/know victim of sexual assault includes 1 (Yes) and 2 (No). [c]Marital status includes 1 (Never married), 2 (Married), 3 (Divorced). [d]Race includes 1 (Asian), 2 (African-American), 3 (Hispanic/Latino), 4 (Native American), 5 (White), 6 (Other). [e]Political affiliation includes 1 (Democrat), 2 (Republican), 3 (Independent), 4 (Libertarian), 5 (Green Party), 6 (Other).
*$p < .05$. **$p < .01$. ***$p < .001$.

perpetrator blame, as well as RMA and JWB, between Samples 1 and 2. There was a significant main effect of sample on these variables, $\lambda = .78$, $F(5,200) = 11.13$, $p < .001$, $\eta^2 = .22$. Univariate ANOVAs were conducted on each of the three dependent variables in the model. There was a significant univariate effect of sample on verdict x confidence, $F(1,204) = 4.20$, $MSE = 59.81$, $p = .042$, $\eta^2 = .02$, such that participants in Sample 1 ($M = 4.67$, $SD = 3.45$) had higher verdict x confidence ratings than participants in Sample 2 ($M = 3.33$, $SD = 4.84$). There was similarly a significant univariate effect of sample on victim blame, $F(1,204) = 10.95$, $MSE = 630.90$, $p = .001$, $\eta^2 = .05$, such that participants in Sample 1 ($M = 18.56$, $SD = 7.08$) blamed the victim less than participants in Sample 2 ($M = 22.90$, $SD = 9.36$). No significant effect of sample on perpetrator blame was found.

Univariate ANOVAs were also conducted on RMA and JWB. There was a significant univariate effect of sample on JWB, $F(1, 204) = 18.84$, $MSE = 25.41$, $p <$

.001, $\eta^2 = .09$, such that participants in Sample 1 ($M = 18.10$, $SD = 4.83$) had lower belief in a just world than participants in Sample 2 ($M = 21.88$, $SD = 5.80$). There was a parallel effect of sample on RMA, $F(1,204) = 39.13$, $MSE = 74.04$, $p < .001$, $\eta^2 = .16$, such that participants in Sample 1 ($M = 25.29$, $SD = 7.91$) were less accepting of rape myths than participants in Sample 2 ($M = 34.60$, $SD = 10.94$). Because of the differences in verdict x confidence ratings, victim blame, JWB, and RMA, main analyses of the independent variables were conducted on Sample 1 and Sample 2 separately.

**Main Analyses: Hypotheses 1-3**

**Sample 1.** A MANOVA was used to determine the effects of reporting condition and participant gender on ratings of verdict x confidence, victim blame, and perpetrator blame. There was a significant multivariate main effect of gender on these variables, $\lambda = .93$, $F(3,156) = 3.74$, $p = .012$, $\eta^2 = .07$. Contrary to the hypothesis, there was no main effect of reporting type on these variables, and no significant interaction effect was found. Univariate ANOVAs were conducted on each of the dependent variables in the model. Because the assumption of homogeneity of variance was violated for verdict x confidence (Levene's $F = 15.86$, $p < .001$), Welch's $F$ statistic was used. Consistent with the hypothesis, there was a significant effect of participant gender on verdict x confidence ratings, $F(1,108) = 9.20$, $p = .003$, $\eta^2 = .05$, such that female participants ($M = 5.89$, $SD = 2.72$) were more likely to label the incident sexual assault and had higher confidence in their decisions than male participants ($M = 3.66$, $SD = 4.09$). Also consistent with the hypothesis, there was a significant effect of gender on ratings of victim blame, $F(1,158) = 6.18$, $MSE = 48.63$, $p = .014$, $\eta^2 = .04$, such that male participants ($M = 20.32$, $SD = 7.01$) blamed victims more for the assault than female participants ($M = 17.31$, $SD = 6.89$).

Contrary to the hypothesis, there was no significant difference between male and female ratings of perpetrator blame.

In order to better understand the relationships between verdict x confidence, victim blame, and perpetrator blame, a simultaneous linear regression was conducted using victim blame and perpetrator blame to predict verdict x confidence. The overall model was significant and accounted for 29.3% of the variance in verdict x confidence, $F(2, 161) = 33.33$, $MSE = 8.52$, $p < .001$. Consistent with expectations, victim blame negatively predicted verdict x confidence ($b = -.14$, $b^* = -.29$, $SE = .04$, $t = -3.98$, $p < .001$), such that every unit increase in victim blame predicted a decrease of .29 in verdict x confidence (with lower verdict x confidence ratings indicating less confidence that the incident was a sexual assault). Conversely, perpetrator blame positively predicted verdict x confidence ($b = .27$, $b^* = .35$, $SE = .06$, $t = 4.83$, $p < .001$), such that every unit increase in perpetrator blame predicted an increase of .35 in verdict x confidence. Squared part correlations revealed that perpetrator blame and victim blame accounted for 10.2% and 7.0% of the variance in verdict x confidence, respectively. While it appears that perpetrator blame is a slightly stronger predictor of verdict x confidence than victim blame, there is no way to test for the significance of this difference.

**Sample 2.** As in Sample 1, MANOVA was used to determine the effects of reporting condition and participant gender on ratings of verdict x confidence, victim blame, and perpetrator blame. There were no significant multivariate main effects of either reporting condition or gender, and there was no significant interaction of reporting condition and gender.

**Mediational Model**

**Hypothesis 4a.** In order to test the hypothesis that rape myth acceptance (RMA) accounts for the effects of gender on verdict x confidence ratings and levels of victim blame, a mediation analysis was conducted on Sample 1. Because participant gender did not have a significant effect on perpetrator blame, this dependent variable was excluded from the mediation analyses.

To determine if RMA mediated the relationship between participant gender and verdict x confidence ratings, we used Baron and Kenny's (1986) four-step mediation procedure. First, a linear regression was conducting using participant gender as the predictor and verdict x confidence ratings as the criterion. As predicted, gender significantly predicted verdict x confidence ratings ($b$ = 1.72, $b^*$ = .25, $SE$ = 0.53, $t(163)$ = 3.24, $p$ = .001), with female participants having an increase of .25 in verdict x confidence ratings over males (overall model: $F(1,162)$ = 10.52, $MSE$ = 11.25, $p$ = .001, $R^2$ = .061). Next, a linear regression was conducted using gender as the predictor and RMA as the criterion. Gender significantly predicted RMA ($b$ = -6.32, $b^*$ = -.40, $SE$ = 1.16, $t(163)$ = -5.47, $p < .001$), with female participants having a decrease of .40 in RMA scores compared to males (overall model: $F(1,162)$ = 29.92, $MSE$ = 53.11, $p < .001$, $R^2$ = .156). Finally, a linear regression was conducted using RMA as the predictor and verdict x confidence ratings as the criterion variable. RMA significantly predicted verdict x confidence ratings ($b$ = -.167, $b^*$ = -.382, $SE$ = 0.03, $t(163)$ = -5.26, $p < .001$), with each unit increase in RMA predicting a decrease of .38 in verdict x confidence ratings (overall model: $F(1,162)$ = 27.67, $MSE$ = 10.23, $p < .001$, $R^2$ = .146).

Gender and RMA were then entered together as predictors of verdict x confidence ratings. The overall model was significant, $F(2,161)$ = 14.97, $MSE$ = 10.16, $p < .001$, and

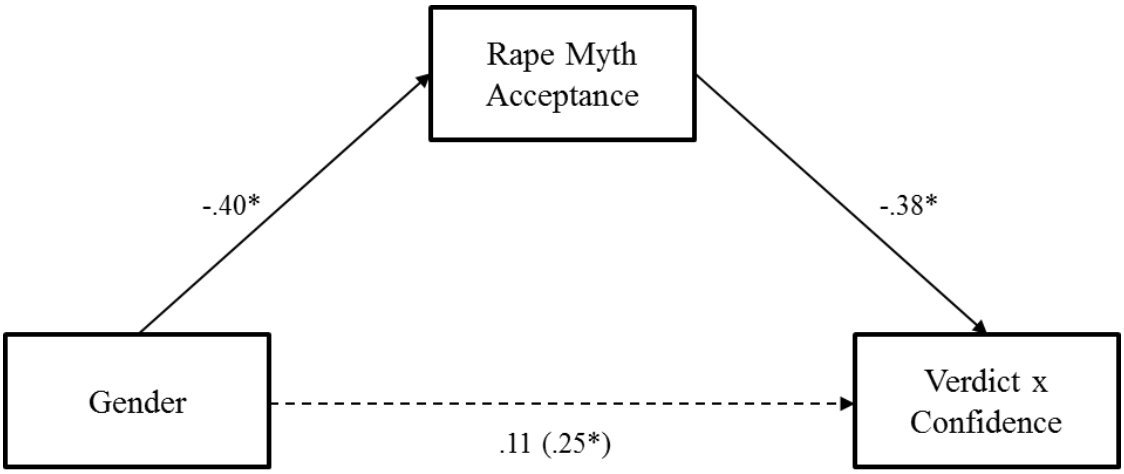


*Figure 1.* Standardized regression coefficients for the relationship between gender and verdict x confidence ratings as mediated by RMA. The standardized regression coefficient between gender and verdict x confidence without RMA included is in parentheses.
*$p \leq .001$.

accounted for 15.7% of the variance in verdict x confidence ratings. RMA was a significant predictor ($b$ = -.15, $b^*$ = -.34, $SE$ = .03, $t(163)$ = -4.28, $p < .001$). With the mediator variable of RMA entered into the model, gender no longer significantly predicted verdict x confidence ratings, $t(163)$ = 1.45, $p$ = *ns*. RMA therefore significantly mediated the relationship between gender and verdict x confidence ratings (see Figure 1).

A similar procedure was followed to test for RMA as a mediator of participant gender's effect on ratings of victim blame. Gender significantly predicted victim blame ($b$ = -3.01, $b^*$ = -.21, $SE$ = 1.10, $t(163)$ = -2.74, $p$ = .007), with female participants having a decrease in victim blame of .21 compared with males (overall model: $F(1,162)$ = 7.50, $MSE$ = 48.15, $p$ = .007, $R^2$ = .044). As shown previously, gender significantly predicted RMA. Finally, RMA significantly predicted victim blame ($b$ = .48, $b^*$ = .54, $SE$ = .06, $t(163)$ = 8.08, $p < .001$), with each unit increase in RMA predicting an increase of .54 in ratings of victim blame (overall model: $F(1,162)$ = 65.23, $MSE$ = 36.0, $p < .001$, $R^2$ = .287). When entered together as predictors, gender and RMA together accounted for

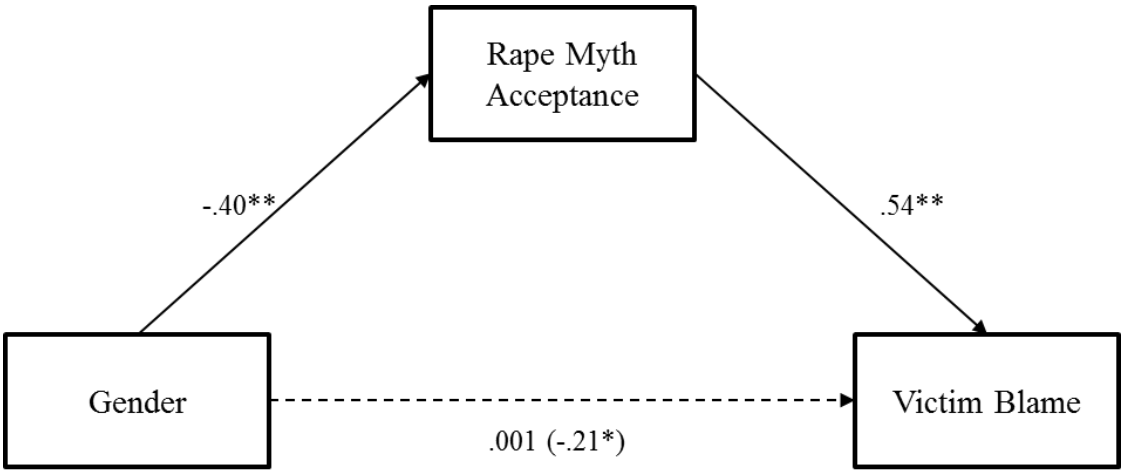


*Figure 2.* Standardized regression coefficients for the relationship between gender and victim blame as mediated by RMA. The standardized regression coefficient between gender and victim blame without RMA included is in parentheses.
*$p < .01$. **$p < .001$

28.7% of the variance in victim blame, $F(2,161) = 32.41$, $MSE = 36.14$, $p < .001$. RMA was a significant predictor, $b = .48$, $b^* = .54$, $SE = .07$, $t(163) = 7.41$, $p < .001$. With the mediator variable of RMA entered into the model, gender no longer significantly predicted victim blame, $t(163) = .02$, $p = ns$. RMA significantly mediated the relationship between gender and victim blame (see Figure 2).

**Hypothesis 4b.** Having found that RMA mediated the relationships between gender and verdict x confidence/victim blame ratings, a second mediation analysis was conducted to test the hypothesis that JWB would mediate RMA's relationships to verdict x confidence/victim blame ratings. A similar procedure was followed as before to determine the mediation effects of JWB on RMA's relationship with verdict x confidence ratings. As shown previously, RMA negatively predicted verdict x confidence ratings. Next, a linear regression was conducted using JWB as the predictor and verdict x confidence as the criterion. JWB did not significantly predict verdict x confidence ratings, $t(163) = .09$, $p = ns$ (overall model was not significant). Because no relationship

was found between JWB and verdict x confidence ratings, no further steps in the mediation analysis were conducted.

We next examined the mediation effects of JWB on RMA's relationship with victim blame. Again, as shown previously, RMA positively predicted victim blame. Next, we found that JWB did significantly predict victim blame ($b$ = .41, $b^*$ = .28, $SE$ = .11, $t(163) = 3.69$, $p < .001$), with each unit increase in JWB predicting an increase of .28 in ratings of victim blame (overall model: $F(1,162) = 13.63$, $MSE = 46.46$, $p < .001$, $R^2$ = .078). JWB was also found to predict RMA ($b$ = .16, $b^*$ = .26, $SE$ = .05, $t(163) = 3.40$, $p$ = .001), with each unit increase in JWB predicting an increase of .26 in RMA (overall model: $F(1,162) = 11.56$, $MSE = 21.91$, $p = .001$, $R^2 = .067$). When entered together as predictors, JWB and RMA together accounted for 30.8% of the variance in victim blame, $F(2, 161) = 35.86$, $MSE = 35.07$, $p < .001$. However, RMA remained a strong significant predictor of victim blame ($b$ = .45, $b^*$ = .50, $SE$ = .06, $t(163) = 7.33$, $p < .001$), and JWB became less predictive than when entered alone in the model, although it was still significant ($b$ = .22, $b^*$ = .15, $SE$ = .10, $t(163) = 2.22$, $p = .028$). Therefore, JWB was not found to mediate the relationship between RMA and victim blame.

## Discussion

The present study investigated the effects of victim reporting on students' perceptions of the likelihood that a sexual assault occurred, that the victim was to blame, and that the perpetrator was to blame. The study adds to a growing body of research on perceptions of sexual assault, and uniquely investigates the potential impact of the victim's reporting choice, both whether she reports and to whom she reports. Our findings also add to previous work on the effects of participant gender and the

relationships between rape myth acceptance, belief in a just world, and perceptions of sexual assault.

The results of the MANOVA from Sample 1 are inconsistent with the primary hypotheses that reporting condition would affect perceptions of the assault, the victim, and the perpetrator. Contrary to the hypotheses, there were no significant differences in perceptions between the no reporting condition, the on-campus reporting condition, and the reporting to law enforcement condition on any of the dependent variables. The results suggest several possibilities. First, the victim's choice to report may truly have little to no effect on students' perceptions of the assault. It is possible that students do not view the victim's decision to report as indicative of whether or not sexual assault occurred. Consequently, they may think of the report as separate from the culpability of either actor. From a theoretical perspective, this distinction between the assault and the victim's decisions afterward is logically correct, since victims may choose to report or not report based on a number of factors unrelated to the assault. In other words, students may be correctly deducing that there is not necessarily a relationship between an assault having occurred and the victim's decision to report or not. The same logic can be applied when thinking about the agency to whom the victim reports. Students may correctly see her choice of campus administrators or law enforcement as unrelated to whether the assault occurred or the culpability of either actor.

An alternative explanation for our null findings may lie in the specific manipulation used in this study. Because the manipulation came at the end of the vignette and contained only two brief sentences about the victim's reporting decision, participants may have ignored the information in the face of more salient details about the incident.

Although almost all participants in Conditions 1-3 passed the manipulation check, the high number of participants in Condition 4 who failed the check supports the interpretation that participants only gave cursory attention to this detail. Passing the manipulation check for Condition 4 involved correctly identifying two pieces of information: that the victim reported on campus *and* that she reported to law enforcement. While having to correctly identify both reporting actions made this question more difficult than in the other conditions, the high number of participants who were not able to recall both details immediately after reading the vignette speaks to the overall weakness of the manipulation.

Additional evidence for the manipulation's lack of saliency comes from the question in which participants ranked the importance of various factors to their verdict decisions. The factor of "Alicia's response to the incident the next day" was ranked 6$^{th}$ out of the 10 factors on average, with only 35% of participants from both samples ranking it as one of the 1$^{st}$ -5$^{th}$ most important factors. Admittedly, this could be a true representation of the importance of reporting to participants' verdict decisions. However, this factor was rated as less important on average than the factor of "Alicia's response to the incident that night" ($M$ = 5.36), suggesting that participants may have been more focused on the victim's immediate response than her eventual action. A more salient manipulation that included greater detail about the victim's report and the proceeding that followed may have yielded greater effects. Alternatively, a larger sample size could have allowed for more statistical power to detect small effects of victim reporting.

Our third hypothesis, that gender would significantly affect perceptions of the assault, the victim, and the perpetrator, was supported by our findings. These results are

unsurprising given the extensive body of research that has documented gender effects on perceptions of sexual assault. Unlike some previous research, however, we did not find an effect of gender on perceptions of the perpetrator. Our findings suggest that perceptions of the victim's culpability are more variable and susceptible to influence, while the perpetrator is consistently seen as highly culpable across genders ($M_{Sample1}$ = 37.43, $SD$ = 4.59, maximum possible = 42). This lack of variability between genders reflects a lack of variability in perpetrator blame overall; compared to the victim blame scale, there was much less variance in perpetrator blame ($SD_{VictimBlame}$ = 7.08), which is most likely due to a ceiling effect on the perpetrator blame scale.

Additionally, the null effect of gender on perpetrator culpability in combination with a significant gender effect on verdict confidence could suggest that levels of victim blame are more influential than perpetrator blame on participants' belief that an assault occurred. This interpretation makes sense in the context of how sexual assault cases are often conceptualized. When a case rests on whether or not consent was given, the actions of the perpetrator can become almost secondary to how the victim behaves in response. Consequently, how men and women differently perceive the victim's actions prior to and after the assault may ultimately decide the case, rather than the actions of the perpetrator. However, a linear regression indicated that victim blame and perpetrator blame both significantly predict belief that an assault occurred. Our findings suggest that perpetrator blame is, in fact, an important predictor of belief that an assault occurred, but may not differ between men and women because both genders view perpetrators as highly blameworthy and variability is thus limited. Victim blame is not more strongly predictive

of verdict than perpetrator blame, but may be more susceptible to influence by factors like participant gender or rape myth acceptance.

The discovery of a mediational model between gender, rape myth acceptance, and perceptions is one of the most important and original findings of the study. Previous studies have focused on the effect of gender without investigating the underlying mechanisms of men and women's different perceptions of sexual assault. The current study builds on the research of Grubb and Turner (2012), which found a strong relationship between gender, rape myth acceptance, and victim blaming. Our findings further elucidate this relationship by demonstrating that rape myth acceptance accounts for a significant proportion of the variance in verdict x confidence and victim blame that was previously attributed to gender. In more general terms, men and women perceive sexual assault and victims differently to the extent that they are more or less likely to believe rape myths. It is not gender *per se* that influences perceptions, but rather participant belief in rape myths, which happens to differ between genders.

This finding holds several implications for understanding gender differences in opinions about sexual assault and the function that rape myths play in exacerbating those differences. Since rape myths are incorrect beliefs about the victim and perpetrator's role in a sexual assault, it follows that education attacking these myths has the potential to lessen the extent to which they are believed. Importantly, our model demonstrates that education about the inaccuracy of rape myths may help bridge the gap between men and women's perceptions of sexual assault. The knowledge that most "inherent" differences in how men and women think about assault are due to differences in belief, rather than innate characteristics, can open the door for increased efforts to dispel such beliefs.

Although influencing men's acceptance of rape myths presents a difficult task, our findings support the potential efficacy of a growing trend in sexual violence education to focus on male youth culture, which tends to promote rape myths and victim-blaming.

Finally, the current study identified significant differences in the dependent variables of verdict x confidence and victim blame between Sample 1 and Sample 2. These differences may have to do with the discrepancies between the samples in participants' individual difference variables, and especially the higher ratings of RMA in Sample 2. Differences in RMA may be due to the demographic differences between samples; Sample 1 was taken from a small, private liberal-arts college in Southern California, whereas Sample 2 was drawn from a diverse array of undergraduate students across the United States. Participants in Sample 1 were also younger, more likely to have been a victim or to personally know a victim of sexual assault, had never been married, and were more likely to be white than participants in Sample 2. However, there was no difference in political affiliation between the samples, which is perhaps surprising given that political beliefs are likely to be correlated with participants' views on culpability and rape myth acceptance.

The difference in perceptions between the samples may be partially attributable to demographic factors, but may also be influenced by unmeasured variables such as education about sexual violence and exposure to Title IX guidelines. Notably, the college from which Sample 1 was drawn recently revised its sexual assault policy to meet the new OCR guidelines. The college administration has advocated for greater sexual violence education on campus, and all students are notified via email when an alleged sexual assault has been reported. Students from Sample 1 may therefore be more aware

of the prevalence of sexual assaults and the legal definition of nonconsensual sex. Future research should investigate the impact of these kinds of policy interventions and whether they actually change student perceptions of sexual assault.

**Strengths and Limitations**

The current study encompasses several theoretical and methodological strengths. First, our research investigated a new variable in the sexual assault perceptions literature by looking at potential effects of victim reporting. Despite our null findings, studies like Ellison and Munro's (2009) highlight the potential for continued investigation of reporting as an influencing factor in the courtroom and elsewhere. Future research should examine this factor across various populations and contexts, such as college administrators overseeing Title IX sexual assault claims.

Secondly, this study was the first to investigate a mediational model between gender, rape myth acceptance, and perceptions. Mediations allow for a more nuanced understanding of relationships among the variables, and investigating one mediator of gender may pave the way for other mediators to be explored. Additionally, the null finding that belief in a just world does not mediate rape myth acceptance's effect on perceptions rules out one potential explanation for the variance in RMA. The inclusion of JWB as a second layer of potential mediation helped to increase confidence in rape myth acceptance as a discrete set of attitudinal beliefs, rather than as consequences of a global belief about the justice of the world.

The current study also suffered from several limitations, both methodologically and practically. The most limiting, as has been discussed previously, is that of the weakness of the reporting manipulation. Interpretation of the null finding of reporting is

limited by the relative unimportance of this factor to participants' decision-making. Future research should attempt to make the reporting manipulation more salient with a detailed description of the victim's choice and action taken. In addition, details of the investigation and proceedings that occur on campus and through the police would help determine if participants believe, as legal commentators have suggested, that due process rights are violated in on-campus proceedings and if this impacts perceptions of the assault.

Related to the weakness of the manipulation, participants in the "Both On Campus and Police" reporting condition had to be excluded from analyses because they overwhelmingly failed the manipulation check. Even if participants who failed the check had not been removed, the online survey tool used in this study disproportionately assigned participants to conditions such that this condition had markedly less participants than all others. Combined with the fact that Sample 1 contained a largely unequal ratio of female to male participants, this left the number of males in the "Both" condition at only a handful of participants ($n$ = 11). Leaving out an entire condition due to these unforeseen issues constitutes a significant flaw in testing the original hypotheses, and meant that we were unable to determine possible multiplicative effects of the victim reporting to two different agencies.

The study also suffered from a lack of statistical power in Sample 2 due to the low response rate of the initially recruited participant pool. By using a prescreen on Mechanical Turk and inviting qualified participants individually to take the survey, the initial pool was dramatically reduced. Removing the prescreen and instead using "trick" questions (e.g. "What university/college do you attend?") to ensure the eligibility of

participants for the survey would increase the response rate without compromising the validity of the sample.

A final limitation is that of ecological validity. Although the current study maintains internal validity through the use of random assignment and elimination of confounding variables in the vignette, the vignette format limits the degree to which participants responded as they would have outside of the experimental setting. Reading a fictional description of an assault is unlikely to match the experience of adjudicating an actual assault, hearing about it secondhand, or even reading about it. The use of psychometric scales to indicate participants' perceptions also holds the potential for participant bias. Especially in relation to socially sensitive topics like sexual assault, participants may have given the "good" or socially desirable response rather than their actual beliefs. Unfortunately, conducting a more ecologically valid experiment on this topic is difficult because of the ethical considerations of simulating a more life-like incident. Future research should consider different presentation mediums, such as audio and video representations of the assault, to capture more ecologically valid responses. However, the verisimilitude of stimuli has generally not been found to have large effects in simulated juror decisions (Bornstein, 1999, but cf. Wiener, Krauss, & Lieberman, 2011).

**Future Research**

As mentioned previously, future research on this topic is needed to understand the relationship between reporting and perceptions. Creating a more salient manipulation and teasing apart the effects of reporting and proceedings will help to determine if reporting does, in fact, influence perceptions of sexual assault, or if the null findings of this study

are supported. Future research should also consider perceptions of the different proceeding types themselves, as this could help to inform universities and policy makers on how best to conduct non-criminal proceedings on campus and evaluate the fairness of their proceedings to both the victim and the alleged perpetrator.

Another important area for future research lies in the relationship between rape myths and perceptions of sexual assault. In addition to increasing education about rape myths, the current study underlines the need for further research on how rape myths persist and how attitudes about sexual violence can be changed. A vital component of this research must focus on further dispelling the validity of rape myths through consistent demonstration that they are false. Significant research has been conducted to negate certain of the misconceptions about victims and perpetrators. For example, previous research has investigated the actual behaviors of victims during an assault (e.g., Hauffe & Porter, 2009; Woodhams, Hollin, Bull, & Cooke, 2011). Woodhams, Hollin, Bull, and Cooke (2011) found that in single perpetrator rapes, although 60% of victims struggled and 40% sought verbal help, 33% of victims obeyed a wish of the perpetrator, 8% "froze," and only 17% and 13% kicked and punched their perpetrators, respectively. Research in this area challenges the commonly-held myth that a victim must physically resist in order for an assault to have taken place. Similar research has helped contradict other persistent rape myths, including the prevalence of assaults and the behaviors of victims after assaults (e.g., Millar, Stermac, & Addison, 2002).

On the other hand, certain rape myths have yet to be discredited by empirical, methodologically valid research. Specifically, research on actual perpetrator motivations and false allegations of assault has yet to yield definitive results. While theoretical

frameworks have been proposed for perpetrator's motivations, careful research with perpetrators must be conducted in order to more completely refute the belief that most perpetrators are primarily sexually motivated and cannot control their desire. Research on serial sex offenders with paraphilic, or abnormal, sexual tendencies lends credence to the sexually-motivated framework, yet the extent to which perpetrators can control their behavior requires more nuanced and extensive research. Similarly, research on false allegations of rape is vital in determining the legitimacy of the extremely pervasive belief that many rape accusations are false. While researchers have provided varying estimates of false allegation rates (e.g., Kelly, 2010), further attempts must be made to improve on the methodological difficulty of discerning "false" allegations from those that are "true," or, as Kelly suggests, redefining the way in which false allegations are conceptualized. Until rape myths have been consistently and empirically refuted, it is difficult to assert that those who believe such myths are incorrect, thus limiting the efficacy and influence of sexual violence education.

Finally, given the importance of rape myth acceptance in predicting perceptions of sexual assault, future research should investigate the effects of campus policy and sexual violence education on changing students' beliefs and RMA. Much of sexual violence education has focused on prevention, usually by cautioning potential victims about how to avoid assault. More recently, educational programs have begun to address prevention through bystander intervention programs, which show promising results (see Banyard, Moynihan, Cares, & Warner, 2014). In order to improve perceptions after an assault occurs, however, researchers should develop and test the efficacy of programs aimed specifically at dispelling rape myths. Additionally, future research needs to

examine the effects of campus policy changes under the new Title IX guidelines on student perceptions and acceptance of rape myths.

**Conclusions**

The current study adds to a growing body of research on the perceptions of sexual assault by investigating the new variable of victim reporting and replicating the effect of participant gender. Additionally, this study contributes a new mediational model that identifies rape myth acceptance as a strong mediator of gender's effects on perceptions of the assault and the culpability of the victim. In order to fully understand the misconceptions behind rape myths and how they are maintained in male culture, future research needs to continue to investigate RMA as a key factor in sexual assault. Finally, future research using a more salient manipulation is needed to determine the effects of on-campus and police proceedings, as well as new Title IX policies, on student perceptions of sexual assault.

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# Appendix A

## Vignette

**Please carefully read the following scenario. You will be asked questions about the scenario after reading, so please pay careful attention to the details of the story.**

Alicia is a sophomore in college and attends a public university, where she studies biology. After a particularly stressful week, she decides to go to a house party with a group of friends of both genders. Alicia has had a couple of shots of vodka when one of her classmates, George, comes over and starts talking to her. Alicia has had a couple of classes with George, and generally likes talking to him. George has already had a couple of beers, and after talking for about half an hour, he offers to get Alicia another drink. Alicia follows George to the fridge and grabs herself a beer while he makes a mixed drink for himself. After continued conversation, George asks Alicia to come upstairs with him to talk somewhere quieter. The two find an empty bedroom and talk while finishing their drinks.

At one point, Alicia begins to kiss George. After a couple of minutes, George takes off Alicia's shirt and pushes her back onto the bed. He begins to unbutton her jeans, at which point she stops kissing him and tries to pull his hands away. George tells her, "C'mon, you're the one who came upstairs with me" and pulls her jeans off while continuing to say things about Alicia clearly wanting this. Alicia remains silent and lies still while George engages in sexual intercourse with her, then leaves the room. Alicia leaves a few minutes later, finding a friend to drive her home.

The next day, Alicia tells her best friend about what happened the night before. Her friend tells Alicia that she shouldn't have gone upstairs with George, but that what George did was wrong and possibly illegal.

Condition 1: Alicia is upset, but decides not to tell anyone else about the event.

Condition 2: Alicia decides to tell the Dean of Students about the event. The Dean opens an investigation into the incident.

Condition 3: Alicia decides to go to the local police and report the event. The police department opens an investigation into the incident.

Condition 4: Alicia decides to tell the Dean of Students about the event, and also reports the event to the local police. The Dean and the police department both open investigations into the incident.

## Appendix B

### Verdict and Verdict Confidence

**Please carefully read the following definition of sexual assault and respond to the questions that follow.**

Legal Definition of Sexual Assault:
Any person who—

**(1)** commits a sexual act upon another person by—

**(A)** threatening or placing that other person in fear;

**(B)** causing bodily harm to that other person; or

**(2)** commits a sexual act upon another person when the other person is incapable of consenting to the sexual act due to—

**(A)** impairment by any drug, intoxicant, or other similar substance, and that condition is known or reasonably should be known by the person; or

**(B)** a mental disease or defect, or physical disability, and that condition is known or reasonably should be known by the person;

is guilty of sexual assault.

1) Do you think an incident of sexual assault took place in this scenario?
___ Yes
___ No

2) How confident are you in your decision about whether or not a sexual assault took place?

| Not at all confident | | | Somewhat confident | | | Extremely confident |
|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|
| 1 | 2 | 3 | 4 | 5 | 6 | 7 |

3) What were the most important factors in your decision? Please rank from 1 = most important to 10 = least important.

___Alicia's decision to attend the party

___Alicia's alcohol consumption

___George's alcohol consumption

___Alicia's initiation of physical contact

___Alicia's behavior when George begins to unbutton her jeans

___George's behavior when Alicia tries to pull his hands away

___George's verbal statements

___Alicia's response to the incident that night

___Alicia's response to the incident the next day

___Other: _____

## Appendix C

## Victim Culpability Scale

1) To what extent was Alicia responsible for having sexual intercourse with George?

| Not at all responsible | | | Somewhat responsible | | | Completely responsible |
|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|
| 1 | 2 | 3 | 4 | 5 | 6 | 7 |

2) To what extent did Alicia have a choice in having sexual intercourse with George?

| No choice at all | | | Somewhat of a choice | | | Complete choice |
|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|
| 1 | 2 | 3 | 4 | 5 | 6 | 7 |

3) To what extent did Alicia's behavior cause the sexual intercourse to occur?

| Did not cause | | | Somewhat caused | | | Completely caused |
|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|
| 1 | 2 | 3 | 4 | 5 | 6 | 7 |

4) How much was Alicia to blame for having sexual intercourse with George?

| Not at all to blame | | | Somewhat to blame | | | Completely to blame |
|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|
| 1 | 2 | 3 | 4 | 5 | 6 | 7 |

5) To what extent was Alicia aware of the potential consequences of her earlier behavior with George?

| Not at all aware | | | Somewhat aware | | | Very aware |
|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|
| 1 | 2 | 3 | 4 | 5 | 6 | 7 |

6) To what extent did Alicia intend for sexual intercourse to occur?

| Did not intend at all | | | Somewhat intended | | | Completely intended |
|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|
| 1 | 2 | 3 | 4 | 5 | 6 | 7 |

Perpetrator Culpability Scale

1) To what extent was George responsible for having sexual intercourse with Alicia?

| Not at all responsible | | | Somewhat responsible | | | Completely responsible |
|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|
| 1 | 2 | 3 | 4 | 5 | 6 | 7 |

2) To what extent did George have the capacity to have acted differently in his sexual encounter with Alicia?

| Could not act differently | | | Could somewhat act differently | | | Could completely act differently |
|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|
| 1 | 2 | 3 | 4 | 5 | 6 | 7 |

3) To what extent did George's behavior cause the sexual intercourse to occur?

| Did not cause | | | Somewhat caused | | | Completely caused |
|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|
| 1 | 2 | 3 | 4 | 5 | 6 | 7 |

4) How much was George to blame for having sexual intercourse with Alicia?

| Not at all to blame | | | Somewhat to blame | | | Completely to blame |
|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|
| 1 | 2 | 3 | 4 | 5 | 6 | 7 |

5) To what extent did George act selfishly in having sexual intercourse with Alicia?

| Not at all selfishly | | | Somewhat selfishly | | | Very selfishly |
|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|
| 1 | 2 | 3 | 4 | 5 | 6 | 7 |

6) To what extent did George intend for sexual intercourse to occur?

| Did not intend at all | | | Somewhat intended | | | Completely intended |
|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|
| 1 | 2 | 3 | 4 | 5 | 6 | 7 |

# Appendix D

## Global Belief in a Just World Scale

1. I feel that people get what they are entitled to have.

| Strongly disagree | | | | | Strongly agree |
|---|---|---|---|---|---|
| 1 | 2 | 3 | 4 | 5 | 6 |

2. I feel that a person's efforts are noticed and rewarded.

| Strongly disagree | | | | | Strongly agree |
|---|---|---|---|---|---|
| 1 | 2 | 3 | 4 | 5 | 6 |

3. I feel that people earn the rewards and punishments they get.

| Strongly disagree | | | | | Strongly agree |
|---|---|---|---|---|---|
| 1 | 2 | 3 | 4 | 5 | 6 |

4. I feel that people who meet with misfortune have brought it on themselves.

| Strongly disagree | | | | | Strongly agree |
|---|---|---|---|---|---|
| 1 | 2 | 3 | 4 | 5 | 6 |

5. I feel that people get what they deserve.

| Strongly disagree | | | | | Strongly agree |
|---|---|---|---|---|---|
| 1 | 2 | 3 | 4 | 5 | 6 |

6. I feel that rewards and punishments are fairly given.

| Strongly disagree | | | | | Strongly agree |
|---|---|---|---|---|---|
| 1 | 2 | 3 | 4 | 5 | 6 |

7. I basically feel that the world is a fair place.

| Strongly disagree | | | | | Strongly agree |
|---|---|---|---|---|---|
| 1 | 2 | 3 | 4 | 5 | 6 |

# Appendix E

## Modified Illinois Rape Myth Acceptance Scale

1) If a girl is raped while she is drunk, she is at least somewhat responsible for letting things get out of control.

| Strongly disagree | | | | Strongly agree |
|---|---|---|---|---|
| 1 | 2 | 3 | 4 | 5 |

2) When guys rape, it is usually because of their strong desire for sex.

| Strongly disagree | | | | Strongly agree |
|---|---|---|---|---|
| 1 | 2 | 3 | 4 | 5 |

3) It shouldn't be considered rape if a guy is drunk and didn't realize what he was doing.

| Strongly disagree | | | | Strongly agree |
|---|---|---|---|---|
| 1 | 2 | 3 | 4 | 5 |

4) If a girl doesn't physically fight back, you can't really say it was rape.

| Strongly disagree | | | | Strongly agree |
|---|---|---|---|---|
| 1 | 2 | 3 | 4 | 5 |

5) A lot of times, girls who say they were raped agreed to have sex and then regretted it.

| Strongly disagree | | | | Strongly agree |
|---|---|---|---|---|
| 1 | 2 | 3 | 4 | 5 |

6) When girls go to parties wearing slutty clothes, they are asking for trouble.

| Strongly disagree | | | | Strongly agree |
|---|---|---|---|---|
| 1 | 2 | 3 | 4 | 5 |

7) Guys don't usually intend to force sex on a girl, but sometimes they get too sexually carried away.

| Strongly disagree | | | | Strongly agree |
|---|---|---|---|---|
| 1 | 2 | 3 | 4 | 5 |

8) If both people are drunk, it can't be rape.

| Strongly disagree | | | | Strongly agree |
|---|---|---|---|---|
| 1 | 2 | 3 | 4 | 5 |

9) If the accused "rapist" doesn't have a weapon, you really can't call it a rape.

| Strongly disagree | | | | Strongly agree |
|---|---|---|---|---|
| 1 | 2 | 3 | 4 | 5 |

10) Rape accusations are often used as a way of getting back at guys.

| Strongly disagree | | | | Strongly agree |
|---|---|---|---|---|
| 1 | 2 | 3 | 4 | 5 |

11) If a girl goes to a room alone with a guy at a party, it is her own fault if she is raped.

| Strongly disagree | | | | Strongly agree |
|---|---|---|---|---|
| 1 | 2 | 3 | 4 | 5 |

12) Rape happens when a guy's sex drive gets out of control.

| Strongly disagree | | | | Strongly agree |
|---|---|---|---|---|
| 1 | 2 | 3 | 4 | 5 |

13) If a girl doesn't say "no" she can't claim rape.

| Strongly disagree | | | | Strongly agree |
|---|---|---|---|---|
| 1 | 2 | 3 | 4 | 5 |

14) A lot of times, girls who claim they were raped just have emotional problems.

| Strongly disagree | | | | Strongly agree |
|---|---|---|---|---|
| 1 | 2 | 3 | 4 | 5 |