

The Impact of Social Status on Attributions of Responsibility in Instances of Sexual Assault

An Honors Thesis (PSYS 499)

by

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Abstract

Research into attitudes toward sexual assault has primarily focused on the influence of rape myth adherence and sexist beliefs (Cohn et al., 2009; Durán et al., 2010; Ferrão & Gonçalves, 2015; Rollero & Tartaglia, 2019). Further, the focus of research is typically on the victim and their characteristics (Jones & Aronson, 1973). The current research analyzed how a perpetrator's achieved social status influenced participants' attributions of responsibility for an instance of sexual assault to either the perpetrator or the victim, as well as how observer gender impacted attitudes. I predicted that an observer (i.e. a participant) would be most likely to assign responsibility for the assault to the survivor if the observer identified as male and if the perpetrator was of a higher social status.

I used a 2x2 design to randomly assign participants to one of two conditions wherein they were asked to read a fictional account of sexual assault and then respond to a series of questions related to who they perceived to be at fault. The primary measure of this study was the MacArthur Scale of Subjective Social Status; participants were also asked questions regarding their moral beliefs and their personal demographics.

The data did not show the predicted interaction nor an effect of social status on perceptions of responsibility, but there was a small main effect of gender. The discussion covered limitations related to generalizability and suggestions for future study.

Key words: sexual assault, attitudes, gender, social status, attributions of responsibility

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Process Statement

I have been exposed to social science research since my freshman year when I was recruited to be a research assistant by my thesis advisor, Dr. Andy Luttrell. Under his mentorship I participated in research related to attitude development and morality, so I wanted to apply what I had learned from that experience to my senior thesis. In addition, I had the opportunity in the fall of my junior year to participate in a Virginia Ball Center (VBC) immersive learning project, which allows undergraduate students to work with a small group of their peers and a faculty mentor to problem-solve and make tangible change for their community. Each semester-long project has a different topic in order to allow students to explore different academic interests; the project I was involved in was an examination of sexual assault on college campuses. Our primary deliverable was the first episode of an informational podcast that aimed to provide facts and resources to our peers and community members. After spending the entire semester researching and learning about sexual violence on college campuses, I had a deep desire to continue this research for my senior thesis, especially because one of the most disturbing trends I learned about was the prevalence of victim-blaming. I wanted to combine my passion for women's issues with my knowledge of psychology research to learn more about how people develop their opinions about survivors of sexual violence, as well as their opinions about the perpetrators of violence. The development of a psychology research study involves four main sections: the literature review over relevant past research, the methods section that outlines the materials and procedure, the results section that covers statistical analyses, and the discussion to further elaborate on the results in layman's terms.

Developing My Study

I had never been the primary investigator on a research study before, so the process of getting started was not as smooth as I was hoping. At first I had planned to continue an established line of research into the influence of rape myth adherence and sexism on victim-blaming, but I was advised against that because it likely would not have added new perspectives to the established literature. I had to go back to the drawing board numerous times, but I eventually decided upon perpetrator social status as the primary variable I wanted to manipulate because it had not yet been extensively studied. I had been told going into the research process that time management was going to be the most important skill to this project, but that did not truly become evident until I began my research. I had trouble processing the sheer amount of published research studies that I had to sift through and unfortunately became overwhelmed fairly frequently. The development of my literature review was one of the more difficult parts of my thesis because I had never had to do research of this scale before and was not mentally prepared for the self-discipline it required, but I believe this process eventually helped to strengthen my research and writing skills.

Once I got past the research portion I greatly enjoyed developing the method section and the survey measures that I gave to participants. I found an established measure for subjective social status that streamlined the methods section since I did not have to create my own measure; this could have been difficult otherwise if I had had to calculate the validity of an original scale. I did have to create my own scales for perceptions of responsibility, but Likert scales (scales with seven multiple-choice options, typically ranging from “not at all” to “very much”) are fairly straightforward so I overall did not have much trouble with developing the methods. Even so, the methods section did have an important challenge that I had not previously

anticipated regarding personal biases. The primary research question was in regard to how and to whom participants assigned blame; as such, the measures had to ask participants about their perceptions. When I first began, I had phrased the measures as yes or no questions (ex: Was the perpetrator at fault?) because I had a personal perception of how consent operates, namely that a person either has consent from their partner or they don't. An obvious flaw in this structure that I had not considered was that other people do not have the same background in sexual violence research that I do. As such, they may not have the same strong opinions on consent and may want more options (ex: not at all at fault, partially at fault, very much at fault, etc). I likely would have gotten very uniform answers from participants that would not have revealed the nuances of the data had I framed the questions with yes or no answers. The selection of language for my survey questions was thus very intentional in order to avoid guiding the participants to one answer or another based on my own biases on the subject.

The methods section was also around the time in the fall semester when I started work on my grant proposal. I knew going into this year that I would want to apply for the internal grant offered by Ball State's ASPiRE program because it would allow me to recruit a large, diverse sample. Psychology research often has to rely on college students for their studies and thus cannot be easily generalizable; especially during COVID I knew that the research pool on-campus would not provide the desired sample size. For the grant proposal I had to outline the purpose of my study and what I wanted to use the funding for; I was surprised at how difficult this was, not because of a lack of material but because I had to keep my proposal under one page. I have learned over the course of my four years that it is much harder to condense a lot of information into less pages, and this proposal was no exception. I was lucky to be awarded a grant and was thus able to recruit 250 participants of varied ages and backgrounds.

The grant application process was similar to the IRB proposal, though without the page limit restrictions. My concern going into the IRB process was that I would face obstacles due to the nature of my research because the ethics surrounding psychology experiments are meant to protect human subjects. These concerns ended up not being a problem because I allowed participants to skip any problems they did not want to answer and provided information for hotline resources. I received approval on my original proposal as well as my modification; my advisor wanted to rationalize the compensation price (\$1) by adding more questions since our compensation would be higher than the standard pay for the length of my survey. To resolve this issue, Dr. Luttrell appended questions that were not used in my data analysis but were still relevant to his personal research. The proposals for both the grant and the IRB were not as fatiguing as expected, but I would have struggled much more had I not had guidance from my peers and advisor.

Once my study was approved and I had been granted funds I was able to move into the data collection portion of the study. I was again lucky to have received the grant because this meant I was able to gather participants much quicker than some of my peers; people are much more willing to answer surveys if they are being compensated. I gathered my desired sample size within a day and was then able to begin data analysis. I delayed analysis more than I should have, however, because spring semester was when I lost a significant amount of motivation to complete my assignments. I took a couple weeks off from working on my thesis to give myself a mental break, and though this required me to do some catch-up later on I do not regret taking this break and think it helped prevent me from getting too overwhelmed or burnt-out. I would say the data analysis was the most difficult part of my thesis because I had not had to use the statistical programs for a couple semesters and had to refresh myself on the procedures and

meanings of the statistical results. Once I got through that portion, however, the discussion section was much easier because I just had to explain the results in straightforward terms and outline implications, limitations, and areas for future research. This is often considered to be the most fun to write because it is an area of the paper that allows the researcher to be creative and speculative about future directions.

A useful resource throughout the year-long process was my PSYS 499 capstone class through the Department of Psychological Science. We did not get to meet as often as usual due to COVID restrictions, but our class time every other week was a way to gauge where I was at and bounce ideas off of peers who were experiencing similar challenges as I was. Their feedback and suggestions helped to improve my paper and kept me grounded at times when I did feel overwhelmed or lost in the details of my project. I especially appreciated having them when we had to figure out how to do an oral presentation of our research (a requirement for departmental honors) because no one had ever had to do the online format before. Overall, I felt supported and guided by my advisor and my peers from the beginning of my research project to the very end.

Personal Realizations & Challenges

One of the main realizations I had over the course of these two semesters was that I need to prioritize my own physical and mental health over schoolwork. I am a student who takes school very seriously and always have, but I have gotten to the point where I will not lose sleep over an assignment; for the most part, unless they are end-of-semester deadlines professors will be willing to offer extensions (and if they are willing to offer, there is no reason to decline if needed). I put significant time, effort, and care into my thesis and I believe it to be a work I can be proud of long into the future, and I could not have satisfactorily completed this work without

acknowledging my own well-being. Whether it be through extra sleep or just taking a couple days off of work and homework, I think at the end of the semester I am a better student because I took care of myself first. Also, I think that by respecting my time and well-being I was better able to manage my responsibilities because when I scheduled time for breaks I was better able to predict how quickly I would be able to complete a given task.

Further, I became very aware that even though I am typically quite organized and determined, I am not able to complete work in a timely manner unless I set hard deadlines for myself. I had originally planned to start research the summer before my senior year, but I did not follow through with this plan. This was due to a variety of circumstances but primarily because I did not feel motivated to do the work without having a set due date or person to turn in my work to. I thus realized that I needed to communicate my personal deadlines to either my advisors or peers in order to follow through, because though I am willing to neglect my own deadlines I will not neglect agreements that I make with others. It would have been nice to realize this earlier in the research process, but I did figure it out by the end when I needed to do edits and final drafts.

My two primary challenges were the absence of my advisor due to paternity leave and my lack of motivation during the year. Dr. Luttrell was gone for a couple months in the spring semester during the time where I was primarily working on the data analysis and results section. I had known about this ahead of time so I was able to plan around it, but the difficulties I experienced during this time are related to deadlines, as discussed in the previous paragraph. My data collection occurred much faster than some of my peers, so while others were waiting for participants I had already gathered my data and should have been able to move smoothly into writing the results. However, since Dr. Luttrell was gone and my class was on pause to allow for data collection, I did not have any people to report progress to for a time and

thus did not do much work. This time was useful in that I was able to step away from the rigor of the study for awhile, but the time away also made it harder to regain motivation when necessary. My motivation had admittedly been low the entire year due to mental exhaustion and senioritis, but by mid- to late spring I was barely able to work on assignments unless they were due the day-of. My grades were unaffected because I still completed work that was at or above standard, but the self-discipline needed to balance coursework, part-time work, a social life, and all my mundane responsibilities was barely present for most of the spring. I am honestly not entirely sure how I made it to the end unscathed, but I likely owe that to the work ethic that was fostered by my parents. I faced difficulties throughout the entire semester, some small and some more significant, but was still able to finish with a project that I can confidently say I worked hard on and am exceedingly proud of.

What It Means

One of the primary reasons I am so proud of my thesis is because it has such clear relevance to the real world. My degree programs have made me increasingly aware of women's social justice concerns over the past four years and my research into sexual violence on college campuses felt like a way to create tangible progress in acknowledging and unlearning harmful biases. I studied how people's social identities can influence perceptions of responsibility in instances of sexual violence, which can be critical even outside of a college setting. The statistics I learned about in my VBC course initially felt staggering and unsolvable, but I felt that I could make my own contribution to the solution through empirical research. I believe that all contributions to reducing rates of sexual violence are impactful and I this was the first step in my personal journey to make change in my community. The combination of my degree programs

and the Honors College have prepared me to be a well-rounded, socially-aware student and I cannot wait to continue to apply this knowledge to future contexts.

The Impact of Social Status on Attributions of Responsibility in Instances of Sexual Assault

Higher education is a common part of life for students of many backgrounds and identities. While college can include traditions such as all-nighters and sporting events, college campuses also hold a threat of danger for many students. In fact, as of 2015, an average of one in five women and one in 16 men who are enrolled in an undergraduate program are expected to experience sexual assault during their time at college (National Sexual Violence Resource Center, 2015). The way that university officials, law enforcement, friends, and family perceive instances of sexual violence can directly influence the aftermath of these experiences. With such high numbers of people experiencing sexual violence, an understanding of what variables influence attitudes toward parties in an instance of sexual assault is critical. In order to counteract the prevalence of sexual violence, it is critical to understand why this behavior has been tacitly allowed for so long. There is of course not one single answer to this question, but one issue is that perpetrators are rarely held accountable for their actions. The purpose of this study, therefore, is to understand which factors influence blame attribution in order to best develop administrative policies and practices that can counteract subconscious biases. An acknowledgement of how and why observers place blame on people involved in instances of sexual assault would provide improved clarity for a subject that is so often overlooked. This study aims to determine whether achieved social status and observer gender are relevant factors in how people develop opinions about those involved in such occurrences.

Terminology

The specifics of how sexual assault is perpetrated often vary from situation to situation; even so, nearly all scenarios involve at least two sides, that of the victim and that of the perpetrator(s). The victim (alternatively referenced as a survivor) is the one who experiences the

unwanted contact (for information on terminology best practice, see RAINN, 2021). The perpetrator is the one who initiates the unwanted contact; the perpetrator may be an acquaintance, friend, or family member of the victim, or they may be a stranger. Perpetrators come from a variety of backgrounds and they do not have any unifying behavior in terms of how they perpetrate assault. Victim blaming can be broadly defined as when “the victim(s) of a crime or an accident is held responsible--in whole or in part--for the crimes that have been committed against them. This blame can appear in the form of negative social responses from legal, medical, and mental health professionals, as well as from the media and immediate family members and other acquaintances” (The Canadian Resource Centre for Victims of Crime, 2009). In the context of sexual violence, it is when the victim is blamed for the violence as a consequence of their actions, clothing, or general behavior. For example, a common form of victim blaming is to say that a woman was dressed in a revealing outfit and thus invited attention. Victim blaming is an issue because it commonly places the onus of responsibility onto the victim and effectively absolves the perpetrator of their role. Victims are blamed more often than perpetrators, which results in a societal bias that assumes victims are the ones who *always* instigate instances of assault or that their behavior somehow encouraged the violence they experienced.

Predictors of Blame

Rape Myth Adherence

Rape myth adherence describes a set of beliefs regarding instances of sexual violence; for example, the idea that women lie about instances of rape, or that assault is a consequence of a woman’s clothing (Burt, 1980). Rape myth adherence is a significant predictor of victim blaming (Ferrão & Gonçalves, 2015; Rollero & Tartaglia, 2019). Many studies that measured

the influence of rape myth adherence on attitudes of sexual assault surveyed students, though studies do vary based on the measurement tools used. Two of the most commonly used tools are the Rape Myth Acceptance Scale (RMAS; Burt 1980), and the Illinois Rape Acceptance Scale (IRMAS), the most recent version of which was developed by McMahon and Farmer in 2011. Both scales measure the influence of rape myths on how participants assign blame in a variety of situations. A high adherence to rape myths results in more blame assigned to the victims of the situation rather than the perpetrators, whether it be specifically for situations of date rape (Basow & Minieri, 2011), situations that involved alcohol (Hammock & Richardson, 1997; Nason et al., 2019), or just general surveys of participants attitudes toward sexual assault (Bendixen & Nøstdahl, 2014; Cohn et al., 2009; Paul et al., 2014).

Sexism

Sexism is defined as “prejudice or discrimination based on sex or gender, especially against women and girls” (Masequesmay, 2021). Ambivalent sexism describes a broad combination of hostile and benevolent sexist beliefs (Glick & Fiske, 1996). Hostile sexism describes the negative views toward people who do not conform to traditional gender stereotypes, while benevolent sexism describes the positive views toward people who *do* conform to those stereotypes. The influence of sexist beliefs on victim blaming seems to vary depending on the context of the scenario, but there is a reliable positive relationship wherein the more ambivalent sexism a participant displays, the more likely they will be to victim blame (Abrahms et al., 2003; Yamawaki, Darby, & Queiroz, 2007). However, context can change the effects of sexism on an individual’s behavior. For example, participants who held benevolent sexist beliefs were more likely to victim blame when they were presented with a scenario about date/acquaintance rape, but not when presented with scenarios of stranger rape (Pedersen and

Strömwall, 2013). The same study found that an adherence to hostile sexism does not have any impact on participants' tendency to victim blame. Further, significant effects of hostile and benevolent sexist beliefs depend on the male perpetrator's relationship status and his apparent sexist beliefs. Specifically, people with benevolent sexist beliefs blame victims more in situations with married perpetrators who themselves held benevolent beliefs (Durán et al., 2010).

The studies on rape myth acceptance and sexism have provided solid evidence for certain socialized beliefs as being influential in sexual assault attitudes. This evidence is generalizable outside the United States since some relevant studies were conducted with non-US populations. However, many other factors besides just rape myth acceptance and sexism also play into observers' attitudes. To isolate just a couple, the current research will aim to examine observer gender and perpetrator social status in an attempt to better understand who holds certain beliefs about situations of sexual assault.

Gender

Men and women are socialized to present differing behaviors and beliefs. Although it may seem plausible that men and women differ in their propensity to blame sexual assault on survivors, research results have been mixed. Studies across many cultures and languages have found that, overall, men are more likely to victim blame in hypothetical scenarios involving female victims (Bendixen et al., 2014; Durán et al., 2010; Yamawaki & Tschanz, 2005). This may be due to defensive attribution, which is a tendency for people to make attributions in order to defend themselves from harm or blame (Jhangiani, Tarry, & Stangor, 2014). Since men are more likely to perpetrate sexual violence (Greenfeld, 1997), men may be more likely to identify with the perpetrator and will consequently victim blame in order to avoid feelings of blame or guilt themselves. However, other studies have found no significant gender difference for

attributions of responsibility (Cohn et al., 2009; Pedersen & Strömwall, 2013). Though Pedersen and Strömwall failed to find evidence of gender differences, they suspected that their lack of findings may have been a consequence of the structure of Swedish society. By this they meant that due to the more egalitarian nature of their society there may be less gender differences in perception as compared to societies that have more of a gender divide. Others have voiced similar critiques regarding the conflicting results for whether or not observer gender makes a difference in attributions of assault (Ferrão & Gonçalves, 2015); those critics called for more cross-cultural research, especially outside of an undergraduate setting, because they believed the variety of results may result from a lack of diversity in the research participants.

Social Class & Social Status

Brock Turner was a Stanford University student who was convicted of assaulting an unconscious woman at a college party in 2015. Legal precedent meant he faced up to fourteen years in prison for the three felonies he was charged with. He is a notable example of the importance of social class in legal and criminal decisions because, despite being charged with three felonies, he only received a sentence of six months in jail and ultimately only served three. Speculation about the reason for such a short sentence for three felonies, outside of the usual critiques of rampant rape culture, fell on Turner's character references during the trial and a letter written by his father before the sentencing (Miller, 2016). The character references, cited by the judge in the explanation of the sentencing, supposedly proved that Turner primarily showed "good behavior," the assumption being that the assault was an unexpected outlier for his usual character and thus did not deserve a severe sentencing (Levin, 2016). Turner's father also vouched for his character in a letter that focused on the impact of the incident on Turner rather than showing remorse for the survivor's situation. His father referenced Turner's enrollment at

Stanford, his high GPA, and his former status as an “Olympic hopeful” for swimming, along with a description of his usually happy demeanor and friendly personality (Miller, 2016). He never directly stated it, but the father’s likely underlying motivation for listing Turner’s accomplishments was to show readers that he could not deserve a severe sentence because he was such a proficient, well-rounded young man. Though an anecdotal example, Turner’s experience of support hinted at a larger pattern of sympathy for those who have achieved a higher social status that has not been exhaustively studied with empirical methods. Encyclopaedia Britannica defined social status as the following:

“the relative rank that an individual holds...in a social hierarchy based upon honor or prestige. Status may be ascribed...or achieved...achieved status may be based on education, occupation, marital status, accomplishments, or other factors”

(Social status, 2002).

Status can come from either factors assigned at birth or those an individual earns, but for the purposes of this study I will focus primarily on achieved status. For example, Turner’s status came from his educational background, athletic ability, and high academic success.

Both the victim’s and perpetrator’s social status could influence observers’ perceptions of which person deserved more blame, but prior research has not examined this directly and has focused more on the influence of victim characteristics on responsibility. The earliest study into victim responsibility would likely be Jones and Aronson (1973), though they took a different approach as compared to the current study; they hypothesized that more respectable victims of assault (married women or virgins) would be found *more* at fault for their attack because “the more respectable the victim the

greater the need to attribute fault to [their] actions since it is more difficult to attribute fault to [their] character.” This hypothesis was based on existing research on just world beliefs, which say that people are biased to believe that those who do good things will receive good things and vice versa. In line with this theory, participants suggested longer prison sentences for perpetrators who assaulted a married woman as opposed to a divorced woman (Jones & Aronson, 1973). While the findings were compelling, an attempt at replicating this study was unsuccessful (Kahn et al., 1977). The attempted replication also added more variables but were unable to find significant trends for either the original study or their modified version; this may suggest that attributions of fault for victims is a more nuanced process than initially thought. When both the victim and perpetrator social character are manipulated to be good (i.e. not much partying, low sexual activity) or bad (i.e. higher levels of partying, more sexual activity), both male and female participants held victims and perpetrators with good reputations to be less responsible than those with bad reputations (Cohn et al., 2009).

The context of a situation can also have important implications for people’s perceptions; for example, research into courtroom communication has highlighted how a person’s social status may cause a bias effect. An analysis of how Western social constructions of femininity interact with race and occupational status to influence perceptions of assault victims argued that occupational status could have a major impact on an individual’s reputation (Phipps, 2009). It specifically hypothesized that those of a working-class status, no matter the gender, are seen as less respectable, less credible as victims of assault, and are treated poorly within the legal system. These claims would have serious implications for courtroom verdicts and rates of conviction for sexual

violence perpetrators; for instance, if the victim is of a working-class background and the perpetrator is white-collar, the jury may automatically be more inclined to favor the perpetrator in a court case. Further, testimonies from a person with high occupational status resulted in higher perceptions of the speaker's trustworthiness, intelligence, and accuracy in identifying the culprit (Jules & McQuiston, 2013). For the purposes of this study, that might suggest that high status perpetrators might receive less blame as compared to a low status perpetrator due to perceptions of their intelligence and trustworthiness. However, the act of assigning blame to either perpetrators or victims of sexual violence has a complicated nature and is not dependent on only one variable.

Past research has examined how a perpetrator's social status, as operationalized by his occupation, affects observers' attitudes towards them. When given an ambiguous scenario that described the perpetrator's social status along with a description of an assault, participants were most likely to describe it as assault when the perpetrator was an athlete, followed in order by college student, politician, and reporter (Henry et al., 2019). Though both athletes and politicians would likely be considered people of a high social status, it is notable that the politician was labeled guilty of assault less often than a college student, a demographic that does not typically have much social sway. However, it may not always be as simple as high or low social status provoking judgements of responsibility; status may interact with other features of a case, such as the cause of a victim being unconscious (i.e. cold medicine versus alcohol) during an assault. In this case, perpetrators of a lower social status who assaulted victims under the influence of alcohol were seen as guilty more often than those of a higher status when the victims were under the influence of alcohol (Pica et al., 2017). The victim was found to be more

responsible for the assault in a few respective contexts, specifically when under the influence of alcohol, when the victim was female, and when the perpetrator was a star athlete. That would suggest significant patterns of blame in instances of sexual assault that are especially critical for violence on college campuses where social gatherings, athlete status, and drugs can be exceptionally common. However, it is also possible that perpetrator status is only relevant to attributions of guilt if a victim is presenting stereotypical behavior in the aftermath of an assault, such as showing strong emotions and reporting the incident quickly; the faster a victim reported the assault, the more important perpetrator status was to attributions of guilt. Otherwise, victim behavior alone was found to be the most significant factor in judgements about a scenario (Franiuk et al., 2020).

These examples all show compelling evidence of social class as a predictor of victim blaming. However, results did not always agree with each other on *how* class was a predictor, namely whether high social status worked in the perpetrator's favor or not. Some studies indicated that it did, some said it did not, and others only found a significant relationship when in conjunction with additional situational factors. Past research has primarily focused on the influence of victim characteristics on people's perceptions of an instance of sexual violence. As such, the current study aims to add to this literature by focusing on the perpetrator's characteristics specifically and how those characteristics might influence an observer's perception of responsibility.

Current Research

As reviewed earlier, rape myth adherence and sexist beliefs are reliable predictors of victim blaming. However, the existing research on gender and social status presents a less clear

picture. For example, some researchers found that men were more likely to victim blame (Yamawaki & Tschanz, 2005), while others found no relationship between gender and victim blaming (Cohn et al. 2009). This discrepancy may be explained by other factors; for example, the theory of defensive attribution would say that men may be more likely than women to blame a victim if the perpetrator is male. It is notable that no studies found women to be more likely to victim blame, nor did they consider non-traditional gender identities and how they might differ. With respect to social status, past research has been devoted to the impact of victim characteristics (Jones & Aronson, 1973; Phipps, 2009), but not as much research has looked at how perpetrator social status might impact observer attitudes. This is especially true for research into how observers might decide to assign blame in instances of sexual assault. Past research into the effects of both victim and perpetrator social status found primarily that a higher social status led to lower perceptions of responsibility for the perpetrators (Cohn et al., 2009; Jules & McQuiston, 2013).

In sum, despite some preliminary evidence, we do not have a sufficient understanding about whether/how perpetrator status matters in assigning blame. The current research aims to extend the literature on sexual assault by analyzing the intersection between the gender of the observer and the social status of the perpetrator. I predict that if an observer is a stranger to both the perpetrator and the victim, they will be most likely to assign responsibility for an assault to the victim if the observer identifies as male and if the perpetrator is of a higher social status. This research is critical for considerations of higher education student affairs policy and the ways in which law enforcement and administration might interact with those involved in instances of sexual violence.

Method

Participants

Participants were recruited through Prolific, an online research platform where participants can voluntarily sign up for and complete surveys in exchange for monetary compensation. They were compensated \$1 upon completion. All subjects must be 18 years or older to participate.

I had 251 participants in total but only kept 246 participants for analysis. I excluded participants from the analysis if they were not at least 18 years of age, if they did not complete a satisfactory percentage of the survey (80% and below), and if they failed to accurately respond to the attention checks. Of those who were kept, 118 participants identified as male (48.0%), 119 identified as female (48.4%), 8 identified as nonbinary (3.3%), and one person chose to self-describe (0.4%). The participants ranged in age from 18 to 70, but the average age was 31.7.

Since gender was a primary aspect of the hypotheses, we also excluded participants who did not identify as either male or female in the interest of achieving the desired power for our analyses. I recoded a new variable that used only the responses from male and female participants.

Materials

Independent Variable: Vignettes

This study used two original descriptive vignettes for the purpose of creating two possible conditions (see Appendix A). The vignettes described an instance of sexual assault between two university students, Jane and John, in John's university-owned housing. The vignettes differed only in that Condition 1 indicates a higher social status for both characters while Condition 2 has a lower implied social status. Social status was manipulated by changing

the university type, their places of employment, and where the two met. These differences were meant to prompt and thus reveal potential biases participants may have held against John based on his social status.

Measured Variables

Perceived Responsibility. Participants responded to two 7-point Likert scales regarding the degree to which they believed Jane and John respectively had responsibility for the event in question. The Likert scales were identical with 1 equaling “not at all responsible” and 7 equaling “completely responsible.”

Gender. Gender was measured through a multiple-choice question that had options of “man,” “woman,” “nonbinary,” or “other.” Those who responded “other” had the option to use a fill-in-the-blank option to self-describe their gender identity.

Social Status. Observers reported their perception of John’s social status using the MacArthur Scale of Subjective Social Status (SSS) (Adler et al., 2000) (see Appendix B). This scale was developed by Adler et al. (2000) to measure participants’ perceptions of their own subjective social status in comparison to other people in their society. The original measure uses two subscales, the first for an individual’s place in comparison to all other people in the United States and the second for their place in their community. Participants only reacted to the first subscale for this study. The measure uses an image of a ten-rung ladder to represent levels of status in society wherein the bottom rung is the people with least amount of money, education, and job respectability, and the highest rung is those with the most. Participants were asked to select the rung that they feel best represents their place in society using a multiple-choice question structure; the measure was modified for this study to ask participants about what they perceive to be John’s subjective social status rather than their own. Participants saw the SSS

twice; the first time they saw the scale it was modified to ask them to report John's SSS rather than their own, and the second was the original. No other significant modifications were made to the scale.

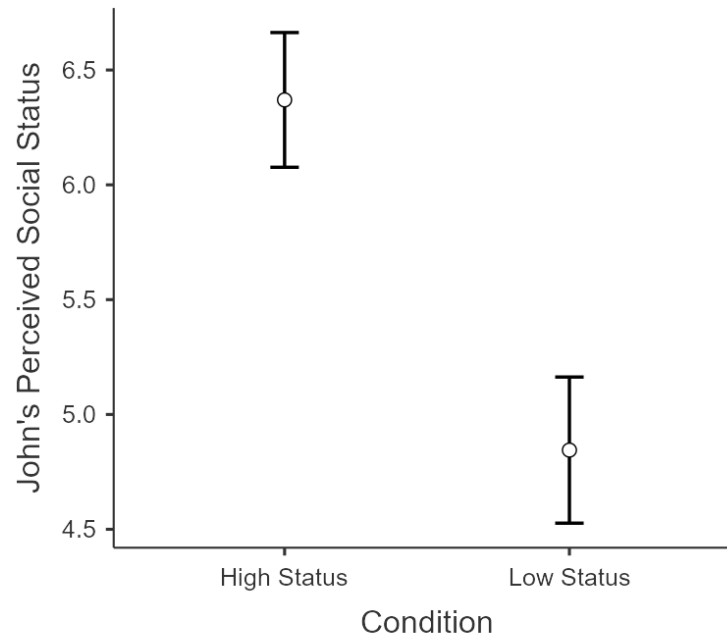
Procedure

Participants were asked to complete a Qualtrics survey after choosing to take the study through Prolific. They read a description of the current research and a consent form before beginning the survey. Once they agreed to participate, the participants read their randomly assigned vignette, either Condition 1 or Condition 2. An attention check that preceded the survey questions asked a multiple choice question about where Jane and John met. Another two attention checks were included in the middle of the study that asked respondents to choose a specific multiple choice response and type the first word of the question, respectively. A failure to pass the attention checks did not skip a participant to the end of the survey, but their responses were examined before data analysis to determine whether or not they would be kept for analysis. After the initial attention check, participants reported their perception of the characters' respective responsibility in the vignette, John's apparent social status using the MacArthur SSS, other supplementary measures, and finished with a demographic questionnaire (see Appendix C).

Results

In order to test the effectiveness of the manipulation of the perpetrator's social status in the vignette, I analyzed participants' perceptions of the perpetrator's social status using a one-way analysis of variance (ANOVA). The ANOVA showed an effect of condition where those in the high status condition perceived the perpetrator to be of a higher status ($M = 6.37$, $SD = 0.15$) than those in the low status condition ($M = 4.84$, $SD = 0.16$), $F(1, 233) = 48.195$, $p < 0.001$, $\eta^2 = 0.171$ (Figure 1). As such, the manipulation of the perpetrator's social status was effective.

Figure 1
Manipulation Check for Perceived Perpetrator Status



Estimated Marginal Means - Condition				
Condition	Mean	SE	95% Confidence Interval	
			Lower	Upper
High Status	6.37	0.149	6.08	6.66
Low Status	4.84	0.162	4.53	5.16

Hypotheses

The purpose of this study was to determine whether there was an effect of perpetrator social status and observer gender on perceptions of fault in instances of sexual violence. First, in order to test whether John or Jane was found to be more at fault overall, I conducted a two-tailed paired t-test comparing how much people saw John as at fault and how much they saw Jane as at fault. Results showed that John ($M = 3.57$, $SD = 1.20$) was found to be more at fault than Jane ($M = 2.09$, $SD = 1.08$) for the sexual assault described in the vignette, $t(245) = 11.3$, $p < 0.001$, Cohen's $d = 0.722$.

I used a 2 x 2 factorial ANOVA on the perceived fault of the perpetrator to test whether the perpetrator's social status and the participant's gender influenced the participants' perceptions of the perpetrator's responsibility. Table 1 is the ANOVA table, and Figure 2 shows a graph of the results. The results showed a marginally significant main effect of gender where female participants were more likely to see John as at fault ($M = 3.68$, $SD = 1.18$) than men were ($M = 3.42$, $SD = 1.21$), regardless of status condition, $F(1, 233) = 3.15$, $p = 0.08$, $\eta^2 = 0.013$. This ANOVA showed no other significant effects for either condition ($p = 0.68$) or the interaction between condition and gender ($p = 0.46$).

The same 2 x 2 factorial ANOVA was also conducted on the perceived fault of Jane. Results did not support main effects of condition ($p = 0.90$) or gender ($p = 0.47$), nor did they support a two-way interaction ($p = 0.42$).

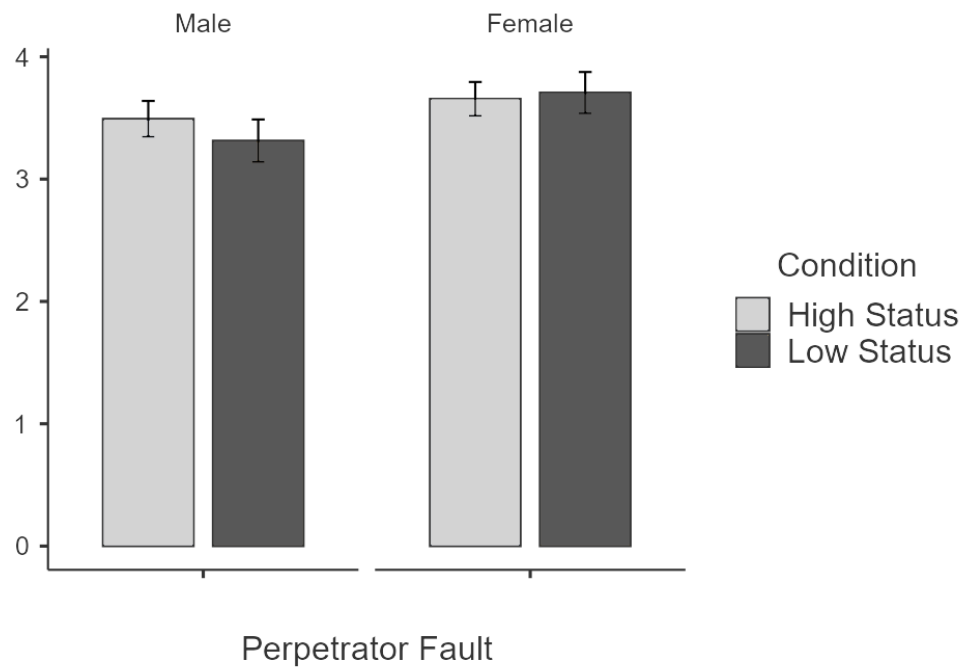
I created a composite fault measure by subtracting Jane's fault from John's fault in order to conduct a final 2 x 2 factorial ANOVA. This analysis also did not support main effects of condition ($p = 0.86$) or participant gender ($p = 0.16$), nor a two-way interaction ($p = 0.40$).

Table 1

ANOVA on Perceived Fault of Perpetrator

	SS	df	MS	F	p
Perpetrator's Social Status	0.24	1	0.24	0.17	0.68
Participant Gender	4.54	1	4.54	3.15	0.08
Status x Gender	0.77	1	0.77	0.54	0.46
Residuals	335.51	233	1.44		

Figure 2
Perceived Fault of the Perpetrator as a Function of Perpetrator Social Status and Participant Gender



Exploratory Analyses

Exploratory correlational analyses were conducted to determine whether there were any relationships between the following variables: perceived fault of John, perceived fault of Jane, perceived social status of John, and recommended punishment for John. Table 2 provides a summary of the results. The results showed a positive correlation between John's fault and the recommended punishment: when participants saw John to be more at fault they recommended a more severe punishment for him, $r(248) = 0.68, p < 0.001$. A correlational analysis between John's social status and how much participants saw him to be at fault was nonsignificant.

Table 2*Exploratory Correlations Between Independent Variables*

	1	2	3	4
1. John's fault	--			
2. Jane's fault	-0.64**	--		
3. John's status	0.15*	-0.08	--	
4. Punishment	0.68**	-0.51**	0.14*	--

* $p < .05$, ** $p < .001$

Discussion

The purpose of the current research was to examine the intersection between observer gender and perpetrator social status to see what condition resulted in the most victim blaming. Previous research has consistently shown support for the idea of rape myth adherence and sexist beliefs as predictors of victim blaming (Cohn et al., 2009; Durán et al., 2010; Ferrão & Gonçalves, 2015; Rollero & Tartaglia, 2019), specifically where individuals who endorse rape myths and sexist beliefs are more likely to victim-blame. Gender as a predictor is more debated because some research supported observer gender as a factor, primarily with men being more likely to victim blame than women (Bendixen et al., 2014; Durán et al., 2010; Yamawaki & Tschanz, 2005), while other studies did not find such support (Cohn et al., 2009; Pedersen & Strömwall, 2013). Social status, specifically achieved social status for the purposes of this study, describes the achievements an individual earns that help represent their social standing, such as educational attainment, employment, or other accomplishments. Perpetrator social status as a predictor of victim blaming has not been directly assessed; past research into the relationship between social status and attributions of responsibility have focused primarily on how the social

status of the victim plays a part (Jones & Aronson, 1973). I therefore predicted that the participants would be most likely to assign blame to the victim if the participant was male and if the perpetrator was of a high social status.

The data did not support this predicted interaction. I also did not find a main effect of social status because participants in this study did not blame the high status perpetrator any more or less than the low status one. This was inconsistent with past research because studies had shown that individuals with a higher social status were typically seen as less responsible (Cohn et al. 2009; Pica et al., 2017). Since the manipulation check was effective, it is unlikely that these nonsignificant results were due to the vignettes' inability to manipulate perceived social status.

Gender was also not a factor in how participants assigned responsibility to the victim; since past research was inconclusive on whether or not gender had an effect, these results support the idea that observer gender does not have an impact on victim blaming. However, women were more likely to see the perpetrator as at fault as compared to men; this suggests that gender is only relevant for considerations of *perpetrator* responsibility, but not victim responsibility. This may be a consequence of the social climate in recent years regarding the #MeToo social media campaign, which brought accountability to perpetrators who were in positions of power. An increased awareness and sensitivity to issues of sexual harassment may have led female participants to be less forgiving in how they appraised the perpetrator's behavior in the vignette. These findings outline an important nuance of the research regarding attributions of responsibility for perpetrators of sexual violence. The positive correlation between perpetrator fault and recommended punishment could suggest that a perception of reduced blame is related to a lower willingness to punish the perpetrator.

The lack of significant results in the current research does not detract from the importance of the subject matter because it still has implications for how people interpret instances of sexual violence. An understanding of how people develop their perceptions of responsibility and what social identities may influence those opinions can directly inform university policies. Although this preliminary evidence failed to find evidence that social status influences people's opinions in these scenarios, other social identities may still have an influence in certain contexts. University administrators can allow both the current and future research into perceptions of responsibility to guide policy procedures for instances of sexual violence on college campuses.

The large, diverse sample size means these results are likely generalizable to the broader United States population. Further, the exploratory studies revealed important patterns that would not have been apparent otherwise, specifically in reference to the nuances of how and to whom participants assigned blame. However, the study also contained relevant limitations that may have inhibited the expected effects of social status and limit the conclusions one can draw from the effects of gender. First, there are several reasons why I did not find evidence that social status mattered. The lack of evidence was potentially a consequence of participants not paying attention to the manipulation, but the successful manipulation check indicates that while it did not factor into their perceptions, the participants did notice the manipulation. Another limitation may have been the artificial nature of the vignette; the participants may have been less inclined to seriously consider social status as a factor since they knew the scenario is fictitious, and thus may react differently if presented with a more realistic depiction. Additionally, since it was fictional the manipulation may have been too ambiguous; while participants did notice the manipulation, the lack of detail could have prevented them from connecting the social status to

degree of responsibility. A final limitation related to social status is that the social status was manipulated for both the perpetrator and the victim. Social status did not matter when both parties were of a similar status, but in the context of a status disparity (i.e. high status perpetrator and low status victim, or vice versa) participants may have more reason to consider social status as a factor in responsibility.

Second, although I did find that men blamed the perpetrator less than women did, there are reasons to avoid over-generalizing from this finding. The participants were all people who had chosen to participate in a study related to sexual violence, so though the sample size was large it may not be representative of the broader population. The research platform chosen for this study, Prolific, also has a tendency to have liberal-leaning samples, so the data was potentially skewed by political orientation although I did not measure political affiliation and could not test this possibility directly. Another limitation was that the demographic section of the survey did not include a question about racial or ethnic background. This variable was not part of the hypotheses, but exploratory analyses into the demographics may have revealed a response pattern related to racial and ethnic background, social status, and/or perceptions of responsibility. Accounting for race and ethnicity could change the conclusions from this data because different backgrounds foster different social norms; social norms have a direct influence on how people relate to one another and interpret each others' actions. As such, the participants' social beliefs likely guided their survey responses.

The language of the vignette was also potentially a limitation because while participants had certain reactions to this specific fictional scenario, we cannot be sure that those response patterns would be the same if the vignette was modified. For example, participants may respond differently if the vignette suggested certain racial or ethnic identities for the characters, similarly

for sexual orientation. Also, women may not still blame the perpetrator more than men if the perpetrator was a woman and the victim was a man.

The most important limitation to generalizing from the observed effect of gender was that I only retained the participants who identified their gender to be either male or female in order to maintain the desired degree of power. As such, nonbinary participants were not included in the analyses; though they were a small percentage of the total sample size (3.3%), their inclusion is critical in order to have a holistic understanding of the influence of gender on perceptions of responsibility. Overall, there were several limitations to this study that prevent a concrete conclusion related to gender effects on perceptions of responsibility.

I would recommend future studies related to the limitations of the current research. Primarily this would involve the examination of nonbinary identities; the inclusion of other gender identities would be an important contribution to literature related to perceptions of sexual violence because the results are not generalizable otherwise. Just as researchers cannot only study men or only study women and assume the results are representative, studies that use gender as an independent variable cannot be considered representative of nonbinary identities unless nonbinary participants are included. Similarly, an examination of patterns of racial and ethnic backgrounds may reveal cultural influences that could be important in legal settings, such as how a jury may be biased toward one party or another. Finally, future research could manipulate the context of the participants' decision. This study did not ask the participants to consider any specific context when assigning responsibility to the perpetrator and victim; future studies could investigate the potential effects of asking participants to imagine a courtroom environment, or a setting outside of a college campus. Environment can have important effects on participant mindsets and follow up studies should take this into consideration.

In sum, this research found that participants assigned more responsibility to a male perpetrator of sexual violence than to the female victim; this was especially true for female participants. Contrary to the hypothesis, the study did not find that the social status of either the perpetrator or the victim influenced participants' perceptions of responsibility for this specific vignette. These results are important preliminary evidence for how people develop opinions towards instances of sexual assault and the implications of this study can inform university policies and procedure to help protect victims on campuses all across the country.

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Appendix A

Condition 1: John and Jane both attend an Ivy League university in the United States. Jane works an office job on campus and John has an internship with a local company. They met at one of John's varsity athletic competitions and have not known each other very long. One night when they are hanging out in John's university-owned apartment, John attempts to initiate sexual contact. Jane does not want to because she is tired, but due to his persistence she reluctantly agrees in order to make him stop asking. Jane is upset afterwards because she felt it was nonconsensual, but John does not agree.

Condition 2: John and Jane both attend a small community college's regional campus in the United States. Jane works an office job on campus and John works at a fast food restaurant. They met at a campus party recently and have not known each other for very long. One night when they are hanging out in John's university-owned apartment, John attempts to initiate sexual contact. Jane does not want to because she is tired, but due to his persistence she reluctantly agrees in order to make him stop asking. Jane is upset afterwards because she felt it was nonconsensual, but John does not agree.

Appendix B

Italics indicate where modifications occurred, underline indicates original

Instructions: Think of this ladder as representing where people stand in the United States.

At the **top** of the ladder are the people who are the best off – those who have the most money, the most education, and the most respected jobs. At the **bottom** are the people who are the worst off – those who have the least money, least education, the least respected jobs, or no job. The higher up you are on this ladder, the closer you are to the people at the very top; the lower you are, the closer you are to the people at the very bottom.

Where would you place yourself on this ladder?

Please place a large “X” on the rung where you think *John stands/you stand* at this time in his/your life relative to other people in the United States.



Appendix C

Questions (after presentation of vignettes)

1. *Where did Jane and John meet?*

- a. Party
- b. Class
- c. Work
- d. Athletic event

2. *Based on Jane's perspective that what happened was assault, to what degree do you believe John was at fault?*

- Likert scale: 1=Not at all his fault, 7=Completely his fault

3. *Based on Jane's perspective that what happened was assault, to what degree do you believe Jane was at fault?*

- Likert scale: 1=Not at all her fault, 7=Completely her fault

4. *MacArthur Scale of Subjective Social Status*

Instructions: Think of this ladder as representing where people stand in the United States. At the top of the ladder are the people who are the best off – those who have the most money, the most education, and the most respected jobs. At the bottom are the people who are the worst off – those who have the least money, least education, the least respected jobs, or no job. The higher up you are on this ladder, the closer you are to the people at the very top; the lower you are, the closer you are to the people at the very bottom.

Where would you place John on this ladder?

Please place a large "X" on the rung where you think John stands at this time in his life relative to other people in the United States.



5. *Now imagine Jane chooses to report the incident to law enforcement. Based on what you know, how severely do you believe John should be punished?*

- Likert scale: 1= He should not be punished at all, 7=very severely

6. *Have you been or do you know someone personally who has experienced an instance of sexual assault?*

- a. Yes
- b. No

7. *Age*

Participants can type their answer, only numeric responses allowed

8. *Gender*

- a. Man
- b. Women
- c. Non-binary
- d. Not listed

9. *Highest educational attainment*

- a. Did not complete high school
- b. Some high school
- c. High school diploma or its equivalent
- d. Some college courses
- e. Postsecondary vocational certificate
- f. Associate's/Bachelor's
- g. Some graduate courses
- h. Master's
- i. PhD

10. *MacArthur Scale of Subjective Social Status (SSS), no modifications (see Appendix B)*