

# Perceptions of Male and Female Rape Victimization as Moderated by Perceived Attractiveness

Dan J. Seaman  
Melissa E. Werlinger  
Keri A. Wolter

Faculty Sponsor: Carmen R. Wilson-VanVoorhis,  
Department of Psychology

## ABSTRACT

The influence of victim gender and attractiveness level on perceptions of male and female rape victims was assessed across four manipulated conditions. One hundred and thirty female undergraduate psychology students read a rape scenario, with an accompanying photograph of the victim and answered a questionnaire regarding perpetrator sentencing, victim responsibility, victim encouragement, victim initiation, victim provocation and likelihood of rape. Scenarios differed by victim gender (male, female) and victim attractiveness (attractive, unattractive). A 2 x 2 multivariate analysis of variance was computed for the nine dependent variable participant questions. Overall, unattractive male victims were perceived as most initiating, and provoking of the attack. The attractive female was seen as more provoking than the unattractive female and attractive male. Possible explanations are based in socially accepted stereotypes, belief of rape as a sexual act, and adherence to the attractiveness phenomenon and just-world hypothesis.

## INTRODUCTION

Rape is widely perceived as a demonstration of violent behavior that reflects the assailant's sexual impulses: arising from physical excitement and attraction towards the victim (DeJong, 1999). Specifically, the assailant's primary motivation is often assumed to be that of sexual gratification, instead of the deviant criminal act itself. Despite strong evidence that rape serves to increase the perpetrator's sense of power through domination, infliction of pain and degradation of the victim, perceptions of victimization still rest heavily on factors of physical attractiveness (Schneider, Soh-Chiew Ee & Aronson, 1994). Moreover, society tends to focus on the sexual aspects of rape, which then colors their perceptions of the assailant and the victim. For instance, according to Smith, Pine and Hawley (1988), sex-role stereotypes and myths about rape (e.g., "women have an unconscious wish to be raped") affect judgments of both male and female victims.

Factors that influence attitudes toward victimization (such as stereotypes) arise from socially accepted values and ideals. In essence, these attitudes derive themselves from society's belief in the attractiveness phenomenon and just-world hypothesis. The attractiveness phenomenon supports the notion that attractive qualities are good, while unattractive qualities are bad. As a result, individuals will then equate the unattractive person with bad qualities,

thus non-consciously perceiving their victimization as more justifiable. Those considered physically attractive are, in general, more socially competent, report higher satisfying interpersonal relationships and receive preferential treatment throughout life (Penn & Mueser, 1997). Conversely, the perceptions of a physically attractive individual being perceived as a probable victim of rape, is one of the few instances where attractive attributes are seen negatively.

Myers (1999) describes the just-world hypothesis as “the tendency of people to believe that the world is just and that people, therefore, get what they deserve and deserve what they get.” This theory may lead people to falsely assume that unattractive women behaviorally provoke the rape, because they would not be considered likely targets otherwise (Gerdes, Dammann & Heilig, 1988). In essence, unattractive victims may then be rated as careless or at fault for the crime. Specifically, if individuals accept the notion that stereotypically attractive victims are more likely targets of rape, due to sexual stigmas attached to the act, then they may be more inclined to believe that an unattractive victim acted or dressed in a way that precipitated the crime (DeJong, 1999).

In Schneider, Soh-Chiew Ee and Aronson’s investigation (1994), female victims were rated more harshly, blamed more often and thought to have encouraged the crime via undesired behavior compared to their male counterparts. Furthermore, participants felt that female victims should accept more blame, feel more blame for the rape and, in effect, blame themselves more (Schneider et al., 1994). In addition, females are often expected to modify their own behavior in order to avoid being raped and/or placed in a sexually deviant situation. The previous results are congruent with gender-role stereotypes of women: weak, vulnerable, naive, submissive and so forth (Schneider et al., 1994).

Most, if not all data collected in the current area of study centers on the victimization of women as rape sufferers and excludes the male population. Yet, “estimates of male victimization among non-institutionalized and non-military male populations vary from 5% to 20% of all reported rapes and sexual assaults” (Schneider et al., 1994). The U.S. Department of Justice indicates that in 1994, 25,560 men claimed that they were victims of rape or sexual assault. In institutional settings, approximately 290,000 men reported being sexually assaulted by other inmates, in comparison to 162,640 women who reported being the victims of rape in 1994 (Kramer, 1998). Due to the social taboo associated with male same-sex rape, the actual prevalence may be higher than statistics suggest.

Considering these mixed results of previous rape-attractiveness research and the lack of literature on male victimization, the current study focuses on examining physical attractiveness effects on both male and female rape victimization. Moreover, the influence of various levels of attractiveness has on perceptions of rape victims will also be discovered. Primary emphasis will be placed on the assailant’s length of sentencing, victim blame, victim responsibility, sexual gratification, encouragement and provocation. The current hypothesis is that unattractive victims and female victims will be rated more harshly and be perceived as (a) more responsible for the rape; (b) more likely to receive blame; and (c) more likely to have provoked the rape, compared to their counterparts.

## **METHOD**

### **Participants**

One hundred and thirty female undergraduate students were solicited from the General Psychology human subjects pool at the University of Wisconsin-La Crosse and received course credit for their participation. As expected, the participants were predominantly

European American and ranged in age from 18-21 years old. The present study involved rape scenarios in which the perpetrator is male and half of the victims were also male; therefore, since male homophobia has been shown to affect rape perception, only female participants were used. Specifically, this alteration was done to eliminate male homophobia as a confounding variable in the research. As evident in Seltzer's findings (1992), heterosexual men are in general less tolerant of homosexual males than are heterosexual women.

### **Procedure**

Upon greeting and receiving informed consent, participants were randomly assigned to groups that featured a rape scenario with manipulated victim variables. The fictional scenario depicted an incident involving a 20-year-old college student whose car broke down as the result of a broken fan belt. A man in a passing vehicle stopped and offered to take the victim to a nearby service station. Instead he drove to a deserted dirt road, confronted the victim with a gun and forced the engagement of oral and vaginal or anal sexual activity. After being abandoned by the perpetrator, the victim made their way back to the highway and was eventually picked up by a State Patrol.

Attached to each scenario was a photograph of the presumed victim according to one of four conditions: attractive male, unattractive male, attractive female or unattractive female. In essence, the scenarios remained constant across all groups, except for the victim's gender and level of attractiveness of the attached picture. In order to have more control; each gender's attractive and unattractive photograph featured the same individual but with manipulated attributions. These physical attributions were manually altered to reflect societal perceptions of attractiveness (e.g., greasy hair, blemishes, make-up and so forth). To determine the effectiveness of the manipulations, each condition was piloted and chosen by a convenient sample of individuals who differed in terms of gender and age. For instance, the male and female picture rated highest, yet most equal in attractiveness were chosen for the attractive conditions; those rated lowest yet most equal were chosen for the unattractive conditions.

An altered questionnaire was also used to measure the participant's perceptions of rape victimization after reading the scenario and viewing the photograph. The questionnaire contained eleven questions that were scored on a seven-point Likert scale anchored at one and seven. The questionnaire focused on perpetrator sentencing, likelihood of rape, victim blame and responsibility. Both the scenario and questionnaire were taken from Smith, Pine and Hawley's literature (1988) concerning previous work and are available as Appendixes A and B.

After returning the informed consent, scenario and questionnaire, participants were given a written debriefing that explained the nature of the study, its motivation or purpose and true objectives. Furthermore, the importance of the research, previous literary evidence that surround the hypotheses, contact phone numbers and emergency help lines were also included. Finally, participants had the opportunity to ask the researcher any specific questions regarding the study and future results that it may yield.

## **RESULTS**

Analysis on the manipulation checks revealed that the attractiveness manipulations were effective. See Table 1. The attractive female was rated as the most attractive victim, followed by the attractive male and unattractive female victim being rated similarly attractive, and the unattractive victim being rated as least attractive. Participants rated the scenarios with the female victims as more believable than the scenarios with the male victim, although both sce-

narios were rated above the midpoint on the seven point Likert scale for believability. See Table 1. A 2 (Victim Gender: male, female) x 2 (Victim Attractiveness: attractive, unattractive) multivariate analyses of variance (MANOVA) was computed for each of the nine dependent variable items. All analyses were tested at an alpha level of .05.

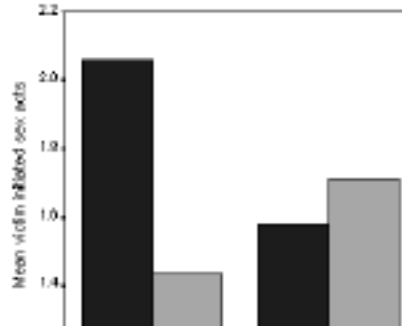
The MANOVA revealed that there was a significant main effect of Victim Gender on Innocence/Guilt of the defendant. The MANOVA also revealed a significant interaction of Victim Gender and Victim Attractiveness on the participants' responses to the "Victim provoked sex acts" and "Victim initiated sex acts" items. See Figure 1 and 2.

Since the factorial ANOVAs revealed significant main effects and interactions, means were compared using a post hoc Neuman-Keuls test. According to the test, unattractive males (M = 3.17) were rated as the most unattractive victim compared to all other manipulated conditions. Furthermore, their mean ratings were significantly different when looking at the likelihood that the victim encouraged (M = 2.42) and initiated (M = 2.08) the sexual acts. In essence, since unattractive males were seen as the most unattractive victim, they were perceived as encouraging and initiating the sexual acts.

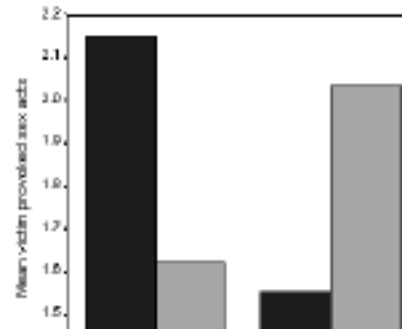
**DISCUSSION**

The guilt of the perpetrator and years sentenced to prison remained fairly constant across all levels of the independent variables. Furthermore, there was no significant difference in the amount of sexual pleasure the rapist received. Regardless of the victim's gender and attractiveness level, the perpetrator was seen as receiving much sexual gratification from the incident. Specifically, participants perceived the rape as a serious crime; however, they tended to view the episode in sexual terms. In essence, the participants supported the notion that the deviant act was actually a demonstration of violent behavior, but that it was stimulated by the assailant's attraction to his victim (DeJong, 1999).

Consistent with the hypothesis, unattractive victims were rated more harshly than attractive victims. For instance, they were perceived as encouraging the sexual acts through undesired behavior, and participants felt as though the unattractive males and females were more responsible for the rape in and of itself. Moreover, unattractive males were rated as both initiating and provoking the sexual acts compared to their attractive counterparts. This may be due to the socially accepted notion that stereotypically attractive victims are more likely targets of rape, because of the sexual stigmas attached to the act. In essence, individu-



**Figure 1: Interaction of Victim Gender and Victim Attractiveness on "Victim Initiated Sex Acts" items.**



**Figure 2: Interaction of Victim Gender and Victim Attractiveness on "Victim Provoked Sex Acts" items.**

als may be more inclined to believe that an unattractive victim acted or dressed in a way that precipitated the crime (DeJong, 1999). The previously stated misconceptions often derive themselves from society's belief in the attractiveness phenomenon and just-world hypothesis. As a result, individuals equate the unattractive person with bad qualities, thus non-consciously perceiving their victimization as more deserving and justifiable.

Participants rated attractive females as provoking the sexual acts, while males were perceived as both encouraging the rape and less likely to have been forced to partake in the acts by the perpetrator. According to Gerdes, Dammann and Heilig (1988), the explanation is that attractive women are stereotyped as displaying seductive behavior, and therefore, increase sexual arousal so much that men cannot control themselves. In essence, attractive females are perceived as provoking the assailant more than other victims, because of their ability to arouse the male population. The current study yields similar results on male victimization, which stems from work done by Smith, Pine and Hawley's (1988). In their investigation, male victims were also judged as more likely to have initiated and encouraged the sexual acts. Socially, it is often believed that men are incapable of functioning sexually unless they are aroused and that they are able to engage in sexual activity in a variety of intense emotional states, which includes but is not limited to fear and anger (Smith et al., 1988). In addition, sex-role stereotypes may further influence perceptions of male rape victimization, because "men are expected to initiate sexual encounters and to be more interested in sex for sex's sake than women are" (Smith et al., 1988).

The study's results paralleled the hypothesis when looking at participant's perceptions concerning unattractive victims. However, unattractive males were rated more harshly than female victims regardless of attractiveness level. A post hoc Neuman-Keuls test revealed that unattractive males were seen as the most unattractive victim compared to all other manipulated conditions. In essence, the unattractive male was found to be significantly more unattractive than the female victim, which means that they were incompatible in terms of physical attributions. Therefore, since male and female unattractive means were not equal, the male was thought to have encouraged, initiated and provoked the sexual acts more because his overall score was lower.

## REFERENCES

- DeJong, W. (1999). Rape and physical attractiveness: Judgements concerning likelihood of victimization. *Psychological Reports*, 85, 32-34.
- Gerdes, E.P., Dammann, E.J., & Heilig, K.E. (1988). Perceptions of rape victims and assailants: Effects of physical attractiveness, acquaintance, and subject gender. *Sex Roles*, 19, 141-153.
- Kramer, E. (1998). When men are victims: Applying rape shield laws to male same-sex rape. *New York University Law Review*, 73, 293-331.
- Penn, D.L., & Mueser, K.T. (1997). Physical attractiveness in schizophrenia. *Behavior Modification*, 21, 78-86.
- Schneider, L.J., Soh-Chiew Ee, J.S., & Aronson, H. (1994). Effects of victim gender and physical and psychological trauma/injury on observers' perceptions of sexual assault and its after effects. *Sex Roles*, 30, 793-808.
- Seltzer, J. (1992). Individual differences in male reactions to gay males and lesbians. *Journal of Applied Social Psychology*, 22, 1222-1239.
- Smith, R.E., Pine, C.J., & Hawley, M.E. (1988). Social cognitions about adult male victims of female sexual assault. *The Journal of Sex Research*, 24, 101-112.

**Table 1: Manipulation Checks for Victim Attractiveness Manipulation**

Victim	Mean	SD
Male		
Unattractive	3.121 <sup>a</sup>	.154
Attractive	5.139 <sup>b</sup>	.147
Female		
Unattractive	4.875 <sup>b</sup>	.156
Attractive	5.661 <sup>c</sup>	.167

<sup>a</sup> Student-Newman-Keuls post-hoc test revealed differences in rating of unattractive male victim and attractive female victim. Means with different superscript letters are different at  $p < .05$ .

**Table 2: Manipulation Check for Believability Manipulation**

Victim Gender	Mean	SD
Male	.23	1.49
Female	6.23	1.13

Responses were recorded on a Likert scale anchored at 1 (not at all likely) and 7 (very likely).

**Table 3: Main Effect of Victim Gender on Innocence/Guilt of Perpetrator**

Innocence/Guilt	Mean	SD	F	Sig.
Female	6.13	.92	4.262	.041
Male	5.74	1.24		

## Appendix A:

Modified Version of Smith, Pine and Hawley's Rape Scenario (1988):

Note: Manipulated words are in Bold.

On November 21st, 1999, **Brian(or Karen)** Harris, a 20 year old college student was traveling on Interstate I-90 west of Rochester, Minnesota. On a relatively deserted stretch of highway, **Mr.(Ms.)** Harris's auto broke down as the result of a broken fan belt. **He(he)** was offered and accepted a ride to a service station by the defendant, David Reirt. According to **Mr.(Ms.)** Harris, the defendant suddenly pulled off the highway onto a deserted dirt road and confronted **him (her)** with a gun. **Mr.(Ms.)** Harris stated that **he (she)** was forced to disrobe and the defendant did likewise. Then **Mr.(Ms.)** Harris was told by Mr. Reirt that **he (she)** and the defendant were going to "play a little game called "69." For the next 30 minutes, **Mr.(Ms.)** Harris and the defendant engaged in **oral/vaginal/anal** sexual activity. **Mr.(Ms.)** Harris stated that **he(he)** was left in the deserted field with **his (her)** clothes as the defendant drove off. **He(he)** made **his(her)** way to the highway and was eventually picked up by the State Patrol, to whom **he(he)** reported the incident.

The defendant was apprehended later that day in Holmen, Wisconsin. He was identified by **Mr.(Ms.)** Harris as the assailant. A gun was found in his possession and identified by **Mr.(Ms.)** Harris as the weapon used in the episode. **Mr.(Ms.)** Harris pressed charges and,

under Minnesota law, the defendant was charged with rape, an offense punishable by a prison term of 5-20 years.

At the trial held in Austin, Minnesota, the defendant acknowledged that the alleged sexual acts had occurred, but he claimed that the sexual incident occurred at the suggestion of **Mr.(Ms.) Harris.**

**Appendix B:**

Juror Questionnaire: For each question, please circle the number that corresponds best to your response.

1. What is your judgment of the innocence or guilt of the defendant?

1	2	3	4	5	6	7
I am certain						I am certain
he is not guilty						he is guilty

2. The crime of rape is punishable by a term of 5 to 20 years in prison. If you found the defendant guilty, how many years' imprisonment would you recommend?

\_\_\_\_\_ years in prison.

3. What is your judgment of the likelihood that Mr.(Ms.) Harris was forced by the defendant to engage in the sex acts?

1	2	3	4	5	6	7
Extremely						Extremely
unlikely						likely

4. What is your judgment that, as the defendant claimed, Mr.(Ms.) Harris encouraged the sex acts?

1	2	3	4	5	6	7
Extremely						Extremely
unlikely						likely

5. What is your judgment that, as the defendant claimed, Mr.(Ms.) Harris initiated the sex acts?

1	2	3	4	5	6	7
Extremely						Extremely
unlikely						likely

6. How likely do you feel that Mr.(Ms.) Harris provoked the sex acts?

1	2	3	4	5	6	7
Extremely						Extremely
unlikely						likely

7. How sexually pleasurable do you feel the incident was for the defendant?

1	2	3	4	5	6	7
Extremely unpleasurable						Extremely pleasurable

8. How sexually pleasurable do you feel the incident was for Mr.(Ms.) Harris?

1	2	3	4	5	6	7
Extremely unpleasurable						Extremely pleasurable

9. How personally responsible do you feel that Mr.(Ms.) Harris was for the sexual episode that occurred?

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

10. How would you rate the attractiveness of Mr.(Ms.) Harris?

1	2	3	4	5	6	7
Not at all attractive						Extremely attractive

11. After reading the scenario of the sexual episode that occurred between Mr.(Ms.) Harris, how believable do you feel it is that this situation actually did or could take place?

1	2	3	4	5	6	7
Extremely unlikely						Extremely likely