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## The Societal Perception and Judgements of Sexual Violence Targeting Victims from Varying Demographic Backgrounds

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**The Societal Perception and Judgements of Sexual Violence Targeting Victims from  
Varying Demographic Backgrounds**

An honors thesis presented to the  
Department of Psychology,  
University at Albany, State University of New York  
in partial fulfillment of the requirements  
for graduation with Honors in Psychology  
and  
graduation from The Honors College.

Hanna Bogart

Research Advisor: Ho Kwan Cheung, Ph.D.

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# JUDGEMENTS OF SEXUAL VIOLENCE

## **Abstract**

Sexual violence affects people of all color and gender, but extant research has mostly focused on reactions toward female (and often White) survivors. With a sample of 77 undergraduate University participants ( $M_{age} = 18.82$ ), the current study examined the effects of survivors' race and gender on recommended punishment of the sexual violence incidents. The results indicated that severity of the assault and recommended punishment for the perpetrator had a significantly positive relationship, such that individuals' recommended more severe punishments for more severe sexual violence incidents. Furthermore, sexual violence incidents involving female victims were recommended more severe punishments than those involving male victims. Additionally, the most commonly believed rape myths were in relation to the accidental nature of sexual assault, and false accusations of sexual assault. This study's implications emphasize that we need to be more consciously aware of our in-group biases and stereotypes, and that it is our duty to both respect and assist any disclosure of sexual violence.

*Key words:* sexual assault, perceived severity, perpetrator recommended punishment, Social Reactions Questionnaire - Shortened (SRQ-S), rape myths, Acceptance of Rape Myths (RMAS), sexual violence victim demographics, victim-blaming

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JUDGEMENTS OF SEXUAL VIOLENCE

**List of Tables**

Table 1. Means, Standard Deviations, and Correlations Among Measures ..... 16

Table 2. Recommended Punishment versus Gender ..... 18

**Table of Contents**

**Abstract**..... ii  
**Acknowledgements** ..... iii  
**List of Tables** ..... iv

**Introduction**..... 1  
    A. Literature Review and Hypothesis Development ..... 3  
    B. Severity of Sexual Assault ..... 5  
    C. Victim Demographics ..... 6  
    D. Overview of the Present Study ..... 9

**Methods**..... 10  
    A. Participants..... 10  
    B. Materials and Measures ..... 11  
    C. Procedure ..... 15

**Results** ..... 15  
    A. SRQ-S ..... 18  
    B. RMAS ..... 19  
    C. Personal Experience ..... 19

**Discussion**..... 20

**References** ..... 28

**Appendix**..... 32

## **Introduction**

Over half of our population is women, and yet within that predominant population in the United States, roughly one in five women has experienced completed or attempted rape (Injury Prevention & Control, 2019). Continuing to examine statistics in the United States, even more alarming is that over a third of women experience sexual assault in their lifetimes (Injury Prevention & Control, 2019). However, this is not simply a women-specific issue. Recent statistics suggest that about one in five men in the U.S. experience sexual assault in their lifetimes, and one in thirty-eight will experience attempted or completed rape (Injury Prevention & Control, 2019). Given its pervasive nature, it is necessary to closely examine sexual assault's impact on those victimized, so that we can better understand this impact and design possible remediation strategies.

To date, research on sexual assault has mostly focused on the psychological wellbeing and post-trauma experiences of survivors, and how a wide range of factors impact survivors' ability to heal. These factors can include whether the source they disclose to is formal or informal, if they receive a negative response (e.g., Davis, 1991), the severity of the assault (e.g., Ullman et al., 2007), whether they were under the influence of alcohol, among others. Most of this research has been conducted on the likelihood of victims' developing posttraumatic stress disorder (PTSD), and how general societal attitudes toward the disclosure of sexual assault negatively impacts survivors' mental health. However, there has been insufficient research specifically on the nature of the responses from direct or indirect observers of sexual assault incidents. A more astute awareness of societal perceptions of sexual violence will help better inform steps toward a more efficient judicial system, survivor recovery, sexual violence awareness programs, and many other critical areas in need of improvement. The little research

## JUDGEMENTS OF SEXUAL VIOLENCE

that has been conducted on this topic has found that sexual assault is often related to negative social reactions from others and avoidance coping by survivors, which can contribute to survivors' self blame, and ultimately, the development of PTSD (DeCou et al., 2017; Ullman, 2001, 2007). These studies often overwhelmingly focus on female (and usually White) survivors, which can be limiting as other marginalized groups are equally, if not more, susceptible to sexual assault.

Prior work on societal reactions toward sexual assault was largely conducted at least 10 years ago. Given the recently evolving social landscape regarding sexual assault, especially with the #MeToo movement, it is important to re-examine the degree to which such reactions and attitudes have changed (or not). Understanding how third-party observers perceive instances of sexual violence is a key factor in improving societal outlook, advocacy, and institutions to aid survivors of sexual violence. As such, in order to extend our understanding of antecedents of negative judgments toward sexual assault survivors, I conducted an experimental study to examine the role of survivors' social identity on people's judgments about sexual assault incidents. Specifically, using a mixed scenario-based study design, I examined the effects of severity (low vs. high severity), target's gender (male vs. female), and target's race (White vs. Black) on people's reactions toward sexual assault incidents (i.e., perceived severity and recommended punishment).

In addition, extending the work done by Ullman (2007), I examined people's general attitudes toward sexual assault in order to investigate potential changes that may have occurred since Ullman's (2007) work. Ullman's work allowed her to assess how survivors of sexual violence felt that society reacted to disclosures of sexual assault, and the overall perception retained by and prevalent rape myths that society believed. By extending and making small

## JUDGEMENTS OF SEXUAL VIOLENCE

alterations to Ullman's measures, I am able to investigate current societal perceptions of sexual violence, to both understand how perspectives have changed over time and to acknowledge areas of perception that need improvement. Altogether, this can shed light on the source of individuals' biased attitudes toward sexual assault, and allow me to capture a more nuanced and inclusive perspective of perceivers' attitudes toward different survivors of sexual assault.

### **Literature Review and Hypothesis Development**

Sexual assault is formally defined as an act where someone intentionally sexually touches another person without that person's consent, or coerces, whether physically or emotionally, that person into engaging in a sexual act against their will (RAINN, 2019). Sexual assault can take many forms, from unwanted sexual contact or threats to rape. Contrary to common beliefs that sexual assault only occurs to women, people of different social identities are equally susceptible. Merely in college, one in five women and one in sixteen men are sexually assaulted. This is likely to be a substantial underestimation, as 63% of sexual assaults were not even reported (NSVRC, 2018). Additionally, since so many people are uneducated about the definition of not only sexual assault, but consent as well, there may be people who are not even aware they have been a victim or a perpetrator. According to the National Sexual Violence Research Center, one in five women will be raped at one point in their lifetime, and for children before the age of eighteen, the rape prevalence rate is one in four girls and one in six boys (NSVRC, 2018). It is extremely likely that the majority of people alive today know at least five women, and at least six children. Therefore it is relatively safe to say that the majority of people also happen to know a survivor of sexual assault or rape, regardless of whether or not they are aware of this.

While existing statistics show men and women both experiencing sexual violence, a further look at the statistics revealed that not all racial groups experience sexual violence at a

## JUDGEMENTS OF SEXUAL VIOLENCE

similar rate. A study looking at the prevalence of sexual assault when examining race noted that Black people were once again the most victimized group, besides the group of Native Americans. It is conclusive that Black people suffer higher rates of sexual assault, regardless of the victim's gender, and yet, White women make up 80% of the reports of sexual violence (EROC, 2015). For example, a study conducted a bit over a decade ago, using a Sexual Assault Nurse Examiner standardized database, noted that of the 1172 patients who were at a hospital due to being sexually assaulted, 59.1% of the victims were Black, and only 38.6% of the victims were White (Avegno, 2009). Additionally, the patients of color were also found to be significantly more likely to have been assaulted by a perpetrator they previously knew.

These numbers become even more alarming when race and gender are considered concurrently. Compared to White women, women of color experience higher rates of victimization. Two in five Black women from the ages twelve and up will experience rape in their lifetime, and the rate with which rape victims of color are believed is half as low as that for White women (NIPSVS, 2011). Stereotypes regarding Black women's sexuality, such as how they are viewed as more promiscuous, perpetuate the idea that they are willing participants in their own victimization, and as such not only is their suffering minimized, but they are targeted more (Women of Color Network, 2014). Women of color are overall subjected to much higher rates of sexual violence, and they are believed and provided help, legal recourse, and resources far less.

Such group differences underscore the misleading nature of our overly simplistic focus on sexual assault. There is essentially no research conducted on people's perceptions of sexual assault. While there is work conducted on victim blaming, which is definitely a form of opinionated perception, these studies solely focus on how victim blaming impacts victims'

## JUDGEMENTS OF SEXUAL VIOLENCE

healing, not what victim blaming stems from. That is, this body of research on sexual assault perception revolves around how perception impacts victims, but not what these perceptions are, or what the predictors are to these attitudes.

Among this very limited body of research, one particular study by Ullman (2007) examined the most common positive and negative reactions that a survivor received in response to the disclosure of their sexual assault. Specifically, with a sample of community volunteers, college students, and those who sought help from mental health agencies, Ullman (2007) examined a variety of social reactions that sexual assault survivors may receive, from emotional support to victim blaming. Ullman (2007) found that while people were understanding toward stereotypical incidents of rape (e.g., rape by stranger), they were very negative toward incidents that did not fit that prototype (e.g., rape by romantic partners, alcohol-related assault). This finding further asserted the variability of possible responses people have toward sexual assault, and that not all sexual assault incidents are perceived equally. Next, I will detail key characteristics in sexual assault incidents that may be related to different outcomes.

### **Severity of Sexual Assault**

One important factor that influences people's perceptions of sexual assault is the severity of the assault itself. One of the purposes of the present study is to examine whether the *perceived* severity of a sexual assault incident can differ even when the assault is the same in severity, due to the difference in the social identity of the alleged victims. As a result, severity was both manipulated and measured, so as to thoroughly assess societal perception. A severe assault will make clear that violence, and therefore a crime, irrefutably occurred. This lack of a grey area is expected to cause participants to mete out a clear and more severe punishment for the perpetrator. A more severe assault will also elicit more public pity and support for the victim,

## JUDGEMENTS OF SEXUAL VIOLENCE

causing there to be an increase in the severity of the punishment. A more severe assault will also be far more widely publicized in the news and the media, meaning even more people will hear about it, and fight for justice as a result.

Men and women disagree on what constitutes sexual assault, but it is clear that the more severe an incident of sexual violence is, the more consensus there is that a crime occurred and repercussions need to be dealt out (The Economist, 2020). A more severe assault will also evoke cultural morals, and people will therefore feel inclined to administer justice appropriately. There is very little data gathered on the correlation between the severity of sexual violence and the recommendation of punishment for the perpetrator, but there is plenty of research regarding how severe the assault is and the punishment that the perpetrator actually receives. There is a positive correlation between these two variables, although it obviously is situationally dependent. However, the overall findings indicate that in general, when someone sexually assaults another person in a more severe manner, they receive a more severe verdict (Ullman, 2010). Therefore, I hypothesized that:

Hypothesis 1: Severity of the sexual assault incident is related to recommended punishment such that the more severe the incident, the more serious the recommended punishment.

### **Victim Demographics**

Another factor that heavily impacts people's perception of sexual assault is the race of the victim who was assaulted. It would be expected based on social identity theory that people are intrinsically motivated to favor members of their in-group, and therefore relate to and sympathize more in a case where the victim is of the same race of that person themselves (Tajfel & Turner,

## JUDGEMENTS OF SEXUAL VIOLENCE

1979). However, systematic racism in our society is so prevalent that regardless of the participants' race, Black victims are taken less seriously. In light of this deeply-rooted racism, people are more likely to recommend an increase in the perpetrators punishment when the victim is White, as the racism in our society models more sympathy for White people. Data indicate that Black rape survivors are victim-blamed far more, and are less likely to disclose their assaults as a result (Donovan, 2008). More people of color are assaulted than White people, despite how Black people who experience sexual violence disclose even less than White people. This further emphasizes our racist society, as even with lower disclosure rates, Black people still have far higher assault statistics (Women of Color Network, 2014). A study examining forced sexual encounters, when taking race of the victim into effect, found that the complaints of Black women were taken seriously much less than those of the White women, and demonstrated that there would likely be a less severe punishment recommended for the perpetrator who assaulted a person of color (Foley et al., 1995). Therefore, I hypothesized that:

Hypothesis 2: Race of the sexual assault victim and recommended punishment are related such that incidents involving Black victims will be recommended less serious punishments compared to incidents involving White victims.

Finally, gender of the sexual assault victim can also be a key factor driving reactions toward sexual assault incidents. Stereotyping has led to the belief that women are the weaker sex, and rape culture has normalized violence against them. Women of color are perceived to be far more promiscuous, and the way they are often exoticized and fetishized causes the sexual violence that is enacted upon them to be normalized, and often perceived to be desired by them. Society seeks to force people into their gender roles, and to curb deviance from this expectation.

## JUDGEMENTS OF SEXUAL VIOLENCE

A woman who is performing gender in a more masculine or even overly feminine manner will be perceived to have been ‘asking for’ the sexual violence, and as such, will not bring forth as much societal outrage.

Society does not expect men to be assaulted as they are anticipated and demanded by societal beliefs to stand up for themselves. With the patriarchal society that we live in today, we tend to view men as pillars of strength, and to see a man ‘emasculated’ would be incredibly jilting. This would spark outrage in the public’s eye, and would likely lead to a recommendation for a more severe punishment for the perpetrator from the participants. A study that examined the impact of sexual assault-related stereotypes on the attribution of blame also noted that a perpetrator who assaulted a male victim was much more likely to receive a more harsh punishment, while also noting that the sexuality of the male victim also impacted the punishment, which is an interesting area for future research (Stuart, 2016). However, another study that examined sexual scripts and victim accountability demonstrated that male victims are often not believed upon disclosure of being assaulted/rape, which could mean that the perpetrator would receive a lighter sentence, or no sentence at all (Levine, 2017). I would suspect that these cases would certainly be extraneous variables, and that if the survivors were indeed believed, then the sentence would indicate a harsher punishment for perpetrators of men.

While men and women are both penalized when deviating from their prescribed social norms, men are given far less latitude to violate their roles. This can be explained by the precarious nature of manhood, which is expected to constantly be maintained and tended to, unlike womanhood (Vandello, Bosson, Cohen, Burnaford, & Weaver, 2008). Challenges to masculinity often result in that man lashing out in aggressive behavior to reaffirm their manhood to whoever is around. Men feeling particularly threatened by challenges to their masculinity will

## JUDGEMENTS OF SEXUAL VIOLENCE

want to lash out to protect their gender's manhood if one of their own is subjected to severe sexual violence. This culminates such that if a man is more severely assaulted this will be jarring to people as it does not conform to their schema of the stereotype of hegemonic masculinity, and the participants will be more likely to recommend a severe punishment as a result. Additionally, hearing about a woman being assaulted is far more commonplace, and it will not elicit a strong reaction from the participants, as it's normalized in our current society. Therefore, I hypothesized that:

Hypothesis 3: Gender of the sexual assault victim and recommended punishment are related, such that incidents involving victims that are men will be recommended more serious punishment compared to incidents involving victims that are women.

### **Overview of The Present Study**

This study seeks to examine how people perceive sexual violence incidents so as to inform action toward improving victim outreach and mental health advocacy, the judicial system, and third-party observers' reactions toward victims of sexual violence. Specifically, this study investigated how people perceive sexual assault incidents of varying severities and with survivors of various demographics. The study was a 2 (incident severity: low vs. high) x 2 (target's race: White vs. Black) x 2 (target's gender: male vs. female) mixed-design experiment. The incident severity factor was varied within-subjects, while the target race and gender factors were varied between-subjects. This design totaled up to 8 conditions, with each participant receiving two conditions.

I hypothesized that a more (vs. less) severe incident of sexual violence will allow for a more conclusive acceptance that a crime has occurred, and therefore participants will

## JUDGEMENTS OF SEXUAL VIOLENCE

recommend a more severe punishment for the perpetrator when the incident is more (vs. less) severe. Furthermore, systematic racism in our society models far less sympathy for people of color than for White people, and I thus hypothesized that participants will recommend a more severe punishment for perpetrators whose victims are White (vs. Black). Finally, I hypothesized that the gender roles that are deeply ingrained in our society will result in participants' recommending a more severe punishment for perpetrators whose victims are male (vs. female).

Unfortunately, these predictions culminate such that women of color who are the victims of sexual assault, or any sexual violence for that matter, regardless of the degree of severity, will have their perpetrator receive the least serious punishment. This study seeks to examine and better understand these perspectives, so as to help change societal outlook and attitudes for the better. In addition, measures were included to explore whether the overall societal judgments of common responses to sexual assault and rape myths are still believed at the level they were about a decade ago. The SRQ-S and RMAS were included to assess the overall societal perception of sexual violence, in addition to the direct assessment of participants' reactions to the vignettes describing incidents of sexual assault. Responses to the vignettes reveal an immediate and specific reaction to a unique incident of sexual assault, but the SRQ-S and RMAS allowed for a broader and all-encompassing ascertainment of participants' perspective on many myths, stereotypes, and opinions related to sexual violence.

### **Method**

#### **Participants**

In total, 96 participants were recruited; however, 19 participants provided no responses. Therefore, participants were 77 undergraduate college students recruited from the University at Albany (Albany, NY, USA), from the ages of 18 and up (48 females, 26 males, 2 participants

## JUDGEMENTS OF SEXUAL VIOLENCE

who identified as another gender, one reported to be a transgender male, and one gender fluid participant). One participant did not report demographic information. Of the remaining participants, 66 reported being heterosexual, 4 reported being homosexual, and 6 reported other for sexual orientation (reported as bisexual). Median age was 19 years old ( $M = 18.82$ ,  $SD = 1.51$ ; mean age among women = 18.71 years, mean age among men = 19.09 years). Participants were recruited using the University at Albany Department of Psychology participant pool, using the online recruitment SONA System for course credit. Upon completion of the survey, participants received 0.5 research credits. Fifty percent of the respondents indicated that they were Caucasian, 19.74% African American, 18.42% Hispanic or Latino, 6.78% Asian, 2.63% American Indian or Alaskan Native, 1.32% native Hawaiian or Pacific Islander, and 1.32% Other (this participant did not further specify their racial group membership).

### **Materials and Measures**

**Vignettes.** There were eight possible vignettes that a participant could receive, with randomization such that each participant received two vignettes. Each participant received a vignette about an assault of low severity, and one of high severity, and the other conditions of target gender and race were randomized. All of these 8 vignettes, based on the same template, were created for the purposes of this study. Each of the vignettes were the same, except for the severity and the target's race and genders that were manipulated. Each of the vignettes were two paragraphs in length. Incident severity was manipulated by varying the area of the victim that was groped (buttocks for the mild vignette and genitals for the severe vignette).

The first statement in the vignettes made it clear that someone was being charged for an alleged assault that occurred the previous night, and then in the rest of the paragraph detailed the

## JUDGEMENTS OF SEXUAL VIOLENCE

demographics of the victim who went to a party that previous night, and who was eventually separated from their friends. The next paragraph detailed how the alleged victim was located by the exit of the party, when a person exiting with a group groped the specified body region of the victim in passing. Finally, it was mentioned that it was reported that the incident was incredibly brief, and it was clear the alleged perpetrator and the alleged victim were not acquainted and had never interacted prior to the incident. Please see the Appendix for full text of the vignettes.

**Perceived Severity.** This measure was created for this study's responses to the vignettes, and asked participants to respond to two questions about the perceived severity of the alleged assault they read about in the immediately preceding vignette. These two items were averaged together into a single measure of perceived severity. The first question asked, "How severe would you rate the sexual experience?", and the second question asked the participant how much emotional harm they believed the person who was allegedly sexually assaulted would suffer from. The responses to these questions were recorded on a Likert-type scale. The lowest number (0) indicated a response of not at all severe or no harm to the victim, and the highest number (4) indicated a response of extremely severe or extreme harm to the victim.

**Recommended Punishment.** This measure was created for this study's responses to the vignettes, and asked the participants to choose from a Likert-type scale of 1-5 to indicate the level of punishment that the alleged perpetrator should receive, from the vignette that corresponded with these following questions. The sanctions were in accordance with the Community Rights and Responsibilities at a university, and ranged on a Likert scale of 1-5, increasing in severity as they increased in number. The participants could choose from 1 = a conduct warning, 2 = a disciplinary warning, 3 = disciplinary probation, 4 = removal from the residence (temporary suspension), and 5 = expulsion from the university. The higher the number

## JUDGEMENTS OF SEXUAL VIOLENCE

on the scale that the participant chose, the more severe the punishment they felt the perpetrator deserved.

**Manipulation Checks.** The manipulation checks were the last set of questions participants received after each vignette. The participants were asked to simply indicate the gender (male or female) and ethnicity (White or Black) of the victim of the alleged sexual assault in the vignette.

**Social Reactions Questionnaire-Shortened (SRQ-S).** The SRQ-S is a measure created to assess the most common societal responses to victims of sexual violence. The theoretical and empirical work from the pilot study conducted by Ullman (1996a, 1996b, 1996c) allowed for the development of the version of the SRQ used in her later study focusing on the psychometric characteristics of the SRQ (Ullman, 2000). The scale that Ullman (2000) used was developed from a preliminary checklist of both negative and positive reactions that was built from literature on the responses sexual assault victims were commonly offered, and was 48 items in length. Participants who had confirmed and disclosed their sexual assault were then requested to indicate on this list of reactions which responses they had personally experienced, with a simple yes/no. Ullman (2017) later condensed this scale into a 16-item scale, the Social Reactions Questionnaire-Shortened (SRQ-S), that is more accessible.

This is one of the very first measures to assess third-party perception and responses to the disclosure of sexual violence, and was used to examine societal perceptions of sexual assault a little over a decade ago (Ullman, 2007). I chose to include this measure to assess the extent of the change between societal perceptions a decade ago compared to now. I wanted to determine the amount to which we have societally progressed and improved in our attitudes toward sexual assault over the last decade.

## JUDGEMENTS OF SEXUAL VIOLENCE

In my study I altered the SRQ-S so that it was able to be taken by the general public, and was not response-specific only to victims of sexual assault. This measure of the SRQ-S still included 16 statements that the participants were asked to read and rate their agreement with. The statements were reactions that people sometimes have upon the disclosure of a sexual assault, such as “Treated them differently in some way than before they told them, that made them uncomfortable”. The participants were asked to rate the question to indicate how often they felt these reactions occurred to the disclosure of a victim. The response options were 1 = never, 2 = rarely, 3 = sometimes, 4 = frequently, and 5 = always.

**Rape Myth Acceptance Scale.** Martha Burt introduced the Rape Myth Acceptance Scale (RMAS) in 1980, and it is the first method created to evaluate an individual’s level of belief in rape myths. I chose to include this measure to assess participants’ level of belief in rape myths in our present society, in comparison to close to two decades ago. The RMAS is a 20-item measure. Each statement is something that people often believe when hearing about a person who has experienced an alleged unwanted sexual experience. A statement could be as follows: “If a person is sexually assaulted while they are drunk, they are at least somewhat responsible for letting things get out of control”. Participants were asked to choose their answer from a Likert scale to indicate how much they agreed with these statements. The response options the participants were able to choose from were 1 = none, 2 = a bit, 3 = somewhat, 4 = a lot, and 5 = completely.

**Personal Experience.** Participants were asked three brief questions about their own experience with sexual assault, and they were asked to respond by choosing either yes or no. They were asked if they had ever heard about someone experiencing sexual violence, if they had

## JUDGEMENTS OF SEXUAL VIOLENCE

ever witnessed someone experiencing sexual violence, or if they had ever experienced sexual violence.

### **Procedure**

Upon providing informed consent, participants were randomly assigned to one of the eight conditions. All participants were given two vignettes: one representing a mild sexual assault scenario and another representing a severe sexual assault scenario. To avoid order effects, the vignettes were randomized within the condition. After reading each vignette, participants were asked to respond to corresponding questions to indicate the severity of the sexual assault scenario and the amount of emotional harm they believed the victim suffered. Participants were then asked to recommend a punishment for the perpetrator in the given scenario, based on the University Sanctions in accordance with the Community Rights and Responsibilities. After each of the two vignettes, a manipulation check was presented to participants to verify they were paying attention. Upon completing the final vignette, participants were presented with the Social Reaction Questionnaire-Shortened version (SRQ-S), followed by the Acceptance of Rape Myths (RMAS) scale. Participants were then asked to briefly share their own personal experiences with sexual assault with the use of three questions. Finally, participants were asked demographic questions, followed by a debriefing. Upon completion, participants received 0.5 research credits and were given a list of both on-campus and off-campus resources for survivors of sexual violence and a variety of forms of counseling.

### **Results**

The analyses I performed on my data were *t*-tests and correlation tests. Given the small sample size, it will be difficult to obtain the three-way interaction implied by the study design,

## JUDGEMENTS OF SEXUAL VIOLENCE

particularly with the number of conditions in this study. Means, standard deviations, and correlations are presented in Table 1.

*Table 1.* Means, Standard Deviations, and Correlations Among Measures.

	Gender	Sexual Orientation	Ethnicity	Age	Mild Perceived Severity	M Rec. Punishment	Severe Perceived Severity	S Rec. Punishment	SRQ-5	RMAS
Gender	1									
Sexual Orientation	.15	1								
Ethnicity	-.00	.01	1							
Age Interval	-.12	-.08	.18	1						
Mild Perceived Severity	-.04	-.12	.15	.33**	1					
M Recommended Punishment	-.08	-.14	.16	.12	.43**	1				
Severe Perceived Severity	-.08	-.03	.07	.16	.43**	.31**	1			
S Recommended Punishment	-.11	-.05	.08	.04	.26*	.60**	.64**	1		
SRQ-5	-.11	.09	.01	.08	.03	-.08	.19	.03	1	
RMAS	-.43**	-.18	.06	.10	-.06	.05	-.13	-.03	-.16	1

\*\* . Correlation is significant at the 0.01 level.  
 \* . Correlation is significant at the 0.05 level.

Hypothesis 1 predicted that as the severity of the alleged sexual assault increased, participants' recommended punishment for the perpetrator would also increase. I first tested this hypothesis with a correlational analysis. Supporting Hypothesis 1, positive correlations were found in both severity conditions, such that as participants perceived the assault as more severe, they increased the recommended punishment for the perpetrator. Specifically, within the Low Severity condition, there was a significant positive correlation between perceived severity and recommended punishment,  $r = .43, p < .001$ . Within the High Severity condition (where degrees of freedom are lower because one participant ceased to respond after the Mild Vignette and its corresponding questions), there was a significant positive correlation as well,  $r = .64, p < .001$ . Second, I conducted a paired-samples  $t$ -test to compare recommended punishment between the Low and High Severity conditions. As predicted, recommended punishment was significantly higher in the High Severity condition ( $M = 3.00, SD = 1.06$ ) than the Low Severity condition ( $M = 2.39, SD = 0.91$ ),  $t(73) = 5.75, p < .001$ . Thus, I observed support for Hypothesis 1. Participants recommended a harsher punishment for perpetrators of more severe sexual assault.

## JUDGEMENTS OF SEXUAL VIOLENCE

Hypothesis 2 predicted that when the victim of an alleged sexual assault was Black (vs. White), the perpetrator would receive a lesser punishment. Within the Low Severity condition, there was found to be no significant difference in the recommended punishment for perpetrators who assaulted Black victims ( $M = 2.49, SD = 0.85$ ) versus White victims ( $M = 2.26, SD = 0.94$ ),  $t(71.98) = 1.10, p = .274$ . Similarly, there was no significant difference in perceived severity of the assault based on victim race (White victim condition:  $M = 2.15, SD = 0.74$ ; Black victim condition:  $M = 2.11, SD = 0.58$ ),  $t(70.74) = 0.26, p = .799$ . Within the High Severity condition, there was found to be no significant difference in the recommended punishment for perpetrators who assaulted Black victims ( $M = 2.73, SD = 1.08$ ) versus White victims ( $M = 3.18, SD = 1.02$ ),  $t(59.91) = 1.79, p = .078$ , and perceived severity did not differ based on victim race (Black victim condition:  $M = 2.73, SD = 0.78$ ; White victim condition:  $M = 2.95, SD = 0.71$ ),  $t(58.40) = 1.23, p = .222$ . Thus, contrary to Hypothesis 2, I observed no significant differences in recommended punishment or perceived severity depending on the victim's race. Incidents with Black survivors were not recommended a less serious punishment or perceived as less severe than those with White survivors.

Hypothesis 3 predicted that assaulters of male (vs. female) victims would receive a more severe punishment. Within the Low Severity condition, there was no significant difference in recommended punishment depending on whether the gender of the victim was female ( $M = 2.38, SD = 0.91$ ) or male ( $M = 2.40, SD = 0.94$ ),  $t(32.89) = 0.08, p = .295$ , and perceived severity did not differ depending on whether the gender of the victim was female ( $M = 2.18, SD = 0.67$ ) or male ( $M = 2.00, SD = 0.65$ ),  $t(34.71) = 1.06, p = .298$ . In the severe condition there was no significant difference in perceived severity depending on whether the gender of the victim was female ( $M = 2.97, SD = 0.83$ ) or male ( $M = 2.77, SD = 0.66$ )  $t(62.47) = -1.10, p = .274$ , and

## JUDGEMENTS OF SEXUAL VIOLENCE

perceived severity did not differ depending on whether the gender of the victim was female ( $M = 3.26$ ,  $SD = 1.16$ ) or male ( $M = 2.76$ ,  $SD = .92$ ),  $t(62.47) = 1.98$ ,  $p = .051$ .

Table 2. Recommended Punishment versus Gender.



## SRQ-S

I examined participants' beliefs about common responses received by sexual assault victims by investigating SRQ-S scores. Cronbach's alpha for the SRQ-S was .80 ( $M = 3.15$ ,  $SD = 0.49$ ). I compared items indexing positively-valenced reactions to sexual assault victims (e.g., upon disclosure, victims are offered support and resources;  $M = 3.28$ ,  $SD = 0.60$ ) to items indexing negatively-valenced reactions to sexual assault victims (e.g., victims are treated in a manner that made them uncomfortable after disclosure;  $M = 3.11$ ,  $SD = 0.66$ ). Although the means were very similar, participants' responses indicated they perceived victims to receive slightly more positive than negative responses upon disclosure of sexual violence. Participant gender was not correlated with SRQ-S scores, indicating that women and men had similar

## JUDGEMENTS OF SEXUAL VIOLENCE

perceptions of the responses that sexual assault victims receive,  $r(69) = -.11, p = .344$ . SRQ-S scores were not correlated with recommended punishment in either the Low Severity condition,  $r(70) = .03, p = .782$ , or the High Severity condition,  $r(70) = -.08, p = .513$ .

### **RMAS**

I examined participants' level of endorsement of rape myths by investigating their RMAS scores. Cronbach's alpha for the RMAS scale was .80 ( $M = 2.13, SD = 0.39$ ). The most agreed-with statement in this measure was "All people should have access to self-defense classes" ( $M = 4.19, SD = 0.95$ ). While most of the means for the 20 items were found to be low, the highest means were found on RMAS statements regarding to the commonality of unintentional sexual assault or false accusations. These statements are: "Accusations of sexual assault are often used as a way of getting back at people" ( $M = 2.22, SD = 0.88$ ), "People don't usually intend to force sex on someone, but sometimes they get too sexually carried away" ( $M = 2.12, SD = 0.92$ ), and "Sexual assault happens when someone's sex drive gets out of control" ( $M = 2.23, SD = 1.20$ ). I also observed that women were less accepting of rape myths than were men, as revealed by the correlation between participant gender and RMAS scores,  $r = -.43, p < .001$ . RMAS scores were not correlated with recommended punishment in either the Low Severity condition,  $r(68) = .05, p = .665$ , or the High Severity condition,  $r(68) = -.03, p = .825$ .

### **Personal Experience**

For the first question in this measure, 63.8% of the participants responded that they had ever heard about someone being assaulted. The second question asked whether the participants had ever witnessed sexual assault occur, and 47.9% of the participants said yes. Finally, for the last question about if the participant had ever personally experienced sexual violence, 43.6% of the participants reported yes.

## JUDGEMENTS OF SEXUAL VIOLENCE

### **Discussion**

The present study addresses the issue of sexual violence by examining how bystanders perceive instances of sexual assault, as understanding how society perceives this issue is an important step toward improving attitudes that negatively impact victims, has implications on the judicial system (a system that is not often favorable toward survivors), informs designing more effective awareness and advocacy programs, and so much more. I conducted this study to examine the role of survivors' demographics on people's judgments about sexual assault incidents. I examined the effects of assault severity (low vs. high severity), target's gender (male vs. female), and target's race (White vs. Black) on people's reactions toward the sexual assault incidents (i.e., perceived severity and recommended punishment). Furthering the work done by Ullman (2007), I examined the differential judgments of participants to general attitudes and prevalent stereotypes towards sexual assault, and asked participants to identify if they co-aligned themselves with these various perspectives and beliefs.

The results of my study demonstrate that there is a clear positive correlation between assault severity and recommended punishment for the perpetrator. This aligns with my hypothesis that as an assault increases in severity, it becomes both more clear that a crime has been committed, and draws more outrage and shock from the public, so that on a moral basis and legal standing, people are more likely to seek a harsher punishment for the perpetrator of a more severe crime of sexual violence.

There is also a correlation between gender of the victim and the recommended punishment for the perpetrator, which does not align with my hypothesis regarding this correlation at all. For the correlation of recommended punishment and gender, I hypothesized that it would be more of a shock to traditionally masculine and stereotypical gender roles if a

## JUDGEMENTS OF SEXUAL VIOLENCE

male was sexually assaulted, so a male victim would lead to a more severe recommended punishment for the perpetrator. However, the results indicate that a female victim causes an increase in the severity of the recommended punishment. This likely culminates such that the previous theorizing on sexual scripts is demonstrated here, and that as men are expected to be hegemonically masculine, they are therefore perceived as weak when sexually victimized, and as a result, lended less support and outcry. On the other hand, women are still stereotypically perceived as the weaker gender in our society, despite the steps we have taken to diminish this outdated notion, so there is more support lent to a woman victim. Sexual violence against women may be normalized, but as it is indeed more expected, people are more likely to rally to protest this far more common violence against women, and give far less support and grief when the victim is male. Men are looked down upon for being weak, as their masculinity is often used as a form of their currency, and a male victim will often be ostracized and disbelieved as a result.

My final hypothesis was in regard to the correlation between the recommended punishment of the perpetrator, and the race of the victim. I had expected to discover that due to societally ingrained racism and discrimination, there would be a less severe punishment recommended for perpetrators whose victims are Black, and a more severe punishment recommended for perpetrators whose victims are White. However, the data did not reveal this to be the case at all. While there was no statistically significant correlation between these variables, there was something potentially interesting for future research. My sample size for this study was far smaller than I had hoped for, and as a result, there were so few participants for each of the 8 conditions that it was difficult to find any correlation statistically significant at all. Regarding the correlation between recommended punishment and race of the victim, it is likely that there would have been a finding that was indeed statistically significant, had the sample size been bigger. The

## JUDGEMENTS OF SEXUAL VIOLENCE

data I gathered indicated that the recommended punishment would likely have been more severe for Black victims, which is cause for further future investigation.

If it were easy enough to separate people out into one identity, that would make things in our society extremely different. However, it is extremely important to mention that people remain intersectional and complex, with all aspects of their identities overlapping and intertwining. No one's identities are ever separate, and each aspect of who they are impacts and informs all other parts, such that their gender and race and sexuality and all other identities are forever one. While this should be a lovely sentiment, it unfortunately leaves many people with multiple identities that are all discriminated against at an extreme disadvantage. In our society, to just look at ethnicity and gender, being a woman of color forces these people to suffer unique harassment and discrimination due to their "double jeopardy" of stigmatized identities. This makes studies of this nature more of a challenge, as someone cannot simply separate people's identities into clear-cut components, so as to assess the impact of a sole demographic, as every identity of each individual person is interconnected to create the basis for both their experiences, and who they are personally.

In addition to participants' reactions to the 8 conditions representing specific sexual assault incidents, a secondary aim of this study was to examine people's general perceptions of sexual assault by using the SRQ-S. The primary difference from the SRQ-S in Ullman's (2007) study is the way the measure was created for rape survivors, and mine was tailored to be for the general public to assess overall differential judgements. Ullman's (2007) work can be subdivided into two categories. Ullman did not solely examine the negative perspectives or reactions that people have to disclosures of sexual assault, as she wished to also examine the type and prevalence of positive responses people share as well. For example, a negative reaction would be

## JUDGEMENTS OF SEXUAL VIOLENCE

blaming the victim for what happened to them, and a positive reaction would be offering them support and letting them know that they are not alone. Ullman found that the positive reactions (i.e., provided support and information) had a consistent positive rating, and found this to be less consistent for the negative social reactions (i.e., told them to get on with their lives), as participants likely were influenced in their answers by their interpretation of the statements.

The results of my study indicate that participants responded very similarly to both positive and negative reactions, and felt that victims in today's society received a similar amount of positive and negative reactions to sexual assault disclosure. This is interesting, as it would be expected for participants to receive a certain amount of negative reactions from society, but the fact that people also felt they would receive the same amount of support indicates a turning point in the acceptance and support for victims of sexual assault, which has increased from the past decade. This measure allowed for a fascinating look at the changed societal perception from a decade ago in comparison to now, in regard to how people respond and react to the disclosure of sexual violence. It gives positive insight to the changing attitudes in our society, as we have become more supportive and believing of survivors stories, and gives hope for an even greater change for the better as we continue to work toward understanding and preventing sexual violence.

The RMAS scale demonstrated that there was an overall low mean for each of the 20 questions regarding rape myths that were prevalent at one point in time. This scale was first created in the 1980's and found there to be a higher mean of these rape myth statements than found in my study, indicating that our societal tolerance to victim-blaming and slut-shaming has decreased. With the prevalence of the #MeToo movement, and the increase in support for victims of sexual assault, the public eye has been drawn to these issues in manners it never has

## JUDGEMENTS OF SEXUAL VIOLENCE

before. With all of the prominent and powerful men in our society who have been thrust into the limelight in a very negative manner over accusations of sexual assault, such as politicians, and proven to be guilty, people are far more inclined to believe in both the survivor's stories, and the bodily autonomy of women (and people as a whole). Additionally, the correlation between gender and RMAS scores that I observed indicates that women are less accepting of rape myths than men. While our society as a whole is more progressive than in decades past, women tend to still surpass men in their disbelief of toxic rape myths.

Fascinatingly, the statements in the RMAS that were about victim-blaming or slut-shaming received extremely low ratings from the participants, and the most highly believed rape myths were about false accusations of sexual assault, or how sexual assault is often not on purpose, but simply because the perpetrator gets too sexually carried away. These findings indicated to me a fear in our current #MeToo climate, of having the finger be pointed at you, despite the incident rates of false accusations being extremely low. Even if someone is falsely accused, most of the cases of sexual violence that are verified to have occurred allow the perpetrator to walk free, so someone who is innocent is at an incredibly small risk of being found guilty. It is of course important to acknowledge that Black men are falsely accused at the highest rate in our society, due to still-prevalent racism. Today, people are more likely to fear being accused of sexual assault, as evident through the agreement with the statements about sexual assault simply being sex that went too far. This shows the attempt to take the blame off the perpetrators, and make them no longer culpable for their actions, so as to label their actions as merely an accident. It is more likely that a perpetrator today would attempt a defense of an accidental assault, rather than put the blame on the victim.

## JUDGEMENTS OF SEXUAL VIOLENCE

The section asking about participants' personal experience about sexual assault found that over half of them had heard about someone being sexually assaulted, thus demonstrating the impact sexual assault has on all of us as a society. Additionally, almost half of the participants indicated that they had indeed witnessed someone experiencing sexual assault or violence of some manner, and that a shocking 43.6% of these participants had experienced sexual assault themselves. Above, I described that 1 in 5 women experience sexual assault in their time previous to or during college, but the data from my study indicate that it is about 2.18 in 5 women who suffer this experience. These data further demonstrate the barriers to disclosing sexual violence, and how our national numbers on sexual assault are considered inaccurate, as there is a significant amount of people who do not disclose their assaults (at least to formal sources, such as doctors or the police). Perhaps the anonymity of my study allowed for more people than usual to step up and share that they experienced sexual violence.

The measure of personal experience allowed for an indication of further research implications, as close to half of the participants indicated that they had witnessed sexual assault, but I neglected to ask if they personally, or someone else, intervened. While there certainly is plenty of research on the bystander effect, and barriers to disclosing a personal sexual assault, there are a lot of implications for future research on why people did, or did not, step in when witnessing sexual violence. The severity of the witnessed assault, a personal relation (negative or positive) to either the victim or the perpetrator, and the intimidating nature of the perpetrator may be factors that would impact the intervention of a bystander.

The RMAS measure that was found to indicate a mean lower than the midpoint of the 1-5 Likert scale also provides implications for future research. It is easy to make a sweeping statement and say that we are more progressive as a society, and that we are more supportive of

## JUDGEMENTS OF SEXUAL VIOLENCE

victims of sexual assault. However, this finding is perhaps due to the subject pool it was gathered from. There are implications here for research on the disparity between current college students, and people who were in college in the 1980's, when this measure was created. It would be fascinating to examine the data for the RMAS of a group of older participants, perhaps in their 50s or later, and compare it to people currently in their 20s. We accept as general knowledge that as a person ages, they become more resistant to both change, and learning new ideas or perspectives. It would be interesting to investigate if this applies to rape myths, and how newer generations are more progressive/receptive of change than older generations.

There are some important limitations to this study, the primary and more predominant being the sample size of 77 participants. Ideally, for a study of this nature, particularly one investigating the overall perspective of society, a sample size of several hundred would have been obtained. However, due to time constraints, this was simply unobtainable, so while it is impressive that there were correlations found at all with such a small sample, the data would have been far more conclusive were the sample size to be larger. Additionally, I was very interested in finding participants with a wide range of demographics, but my participants were predominantly White females. Even more frustratingly, this is the population that receives the spotlight the most, when it comes to societal awareness of victims of sexual violence, and the oftentimes unacknowledged victims that are male or people of color were not as present in my study. I am unaware of the specific demographics of the Psych 101 research pool, so while the University at Albany has a wide range of student demographics, perhaps this sample is due to the demographics of the research pool. However, national data indicate that far more women are experiencing sexual violence than men, so perhaps more women simply identified with this study and chose to participate in it. Whatever the reasons, this also provides areas for future research,

## JUDGEMENTS OF SEXUAL VIOLENCE

as a researcher who has the ability to recruit a wider range of participants could look for results I was unable to obtain.

This study does indicate that as a society we need to be aware of two things: (1) that a more mild level of sexual violence certainly does occur, which we need to be more proactive in both recognizing and stopping, and (2) that men are indeed liable to becoming victims of sexual violence, that there is both nothing wrong with that, and that we need to acknowledge this more. As humans, we are all vulnerable beings who deserve our bodily autonomy, and can fall victim to sexual violence. If there is anything to take away from this study, it is that we need to support our fellow people, to respect and assist a disclosure of sexual assault, to not place negative judgements on victims of sexual violence, and to treat all people as equals (regardless of their demographics). Being aware of our in-group bias, and the stereotypes we hold, whether in reference to gender or race, is something we should never neglect, and it is something we should work on being proactive about fixing every day. No matter the demographics, people who experience sexual assault are deserving of justice, regardless of the stereotypes and personal biases that someone possesses, and they should rest easy knowing that they have our support in their disclosure, and their fight for justice (or choice to not seek justice).

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## Appendix

### Full Text of the Study Vignettes.

#### Low Severity Condition:

A person is being charged with unknown consequences after an incident that allegedly occurred last night. A [Caucasian female] student attending the university went to a house party. Typical to college house parties, the music was loud and the lights were dim at this gathering. The student was there with two friends, who reported that they were unable to stick together for too long due to the crowded nature of the party.

The student was by the exit to the party, when a group of people walked by them to leave. One of the people in this group became far too close in proximity than necessary to the student. As that person pushed past the student, their bodies fully made contact, and the person grabbed the [student's buttocks].

A house resident reported that the incident was brief and that neither the student nor the person who is being charged were acquainted, and that they had never interacted prior to the incident.

#### High Severity Condition:

A person is being charged with unknown consequences after an incident that allegedly occurred last night. A [Caucasian female] student attending the university went to a house party. Typical to college house parties, the music was loud and the lights were dim at this gathering. The student was there with two friends, who reported that they were unable to stick together for too long due to the crowded nature of the party.

The student was by the exit to the party, when a group of people walked by them to leave. One of the people in this group became far too close in proximity than necessary to the student. As they pushed past the student, their bodies fully made contact, and the person grabbed the [student's genital region with such force that the student was pushed back against the wall].

A house resident reported that the incident was brief and that neither the student nor the person who is being charged were acquainted, and that they had never interacted prior to the incident.

#### Conditions:

The conditions that were randomized in the first bracket in either of these vignettes were in relation to the alleged victim's demographics. The second bracket includes the differentiation between the mild or severe level of the assault. The possible combination were:

- (a) Mild Vignette, White female
- (b) Mild Vignette, White male
- (c) Mild Vignette, Black female
- (d) Mild Vignette, Black male
- (e) Severe Vignette, White female

## JUDGEMENTS OF SEXUAL VIOLENCE

- (f) Severe Vignette, White male
- (g) Severe Vignette, Black female
- (h) Severe Vignette, Black male

### SRQ-S.

1	2	3	4	5
Never	Rarely	Sometimes	Frequently	Always

1. Told them that they were irresponsible or not cautious enough
2. Reassured them that they are a good person
3. Treated them differently in some way than before they told them that made them uncomfortable
4. Told them to go on with their life
5. Comforted them by telling them it would be all right or by holding them
6. Tried to take control of what they did/decisions they made
7. Has been so upset that they needed reassurance from the friend
8. Made decisions or did things for them
9. Told them that they could have done more to prevent this experience from occurring
10. Provided information and discussed options
11. Told them to stop thinking about it
12. Expressed so much anger at the perpetrator that the victim had to calm them down
13. Avoided talking to them or spending time with them
14. Treated them as if they were a child or somehow incompetent
15. Helped them get information of any kind about coping with the experience
16. Made them feel like they didn't know how to take care of themselves.

## JUDGEMENTS OF SEXUAL VIOLENCE

### **RMAS.**

1	2	3	4	5
None	A bit	Somewhat	A lot	Completely

1. If a person is sexually assaulted while they are drunk, they are at least somewhat responsible for letting things get out of control.
2. Although most people wouldn't admit it, they generally find being physically forced into sexual activity a real "turn-on."
3. If a person is willing to "make out" with another person, then it's no big deal if they go a little further and continue with more unwanted sexual activity.
4. Many people secretly desire to be sexually assaulted.
5. Most people who sexually assault people are not caught by the police.
6. If a person doesn't physically fight back, you can't really say that they were sexually assaulted.
7. People from nice middle-class homes almost never sexually assault others.
8. Accusations of sexual assault are often used as a way of getting back at people.
9. All people should have access to self-defense classes.
10. It is usually only people who dress suggestively that are sexually assaulted.
11. If the person who sexually assaults someone doesn't have a weapon, you really can't call it a sexually assault.
12. Sexual assault is unlikely to happen in the victim's own familiar neighborhood.
13. People tend to exaggerate how much sexual assault affects them.

## JUDGEMENTS OF SEXUAL VIOLENCE

14. A lot of people lead someone on and then they cry sexual assault.
15. It is preferable that a police officer of the same gender as the victim conduct the questioning with them.
16. A person who “teases” the attacker deserves anything that might happen.
17. When people are sexually assaulted, it’s often because the way they said “no” was ambiguous.
18. People don’t usually intend to force sex on someone else, but sometimes they get too sexually carried away.
19. A person who dresses in skimpy clothes should not be surprised if someone else tries to force them to have sex.
20. Sexual assault happens when someone’s sex drive gets out of control.