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Men's Perceptions of an Acquaintance Rape: The Role of Relationship Length, Victim Resistance, and Gender Role Attitudes

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Abstract

Sexual aggression is a persistent and prevalent issue in the United States, which often results in a number of psychological, emotional, and physical consequences for victims. The current study examined whether the length of relationship between the victim and perpetrator, level of victim resistance, and observers' gender role attitudes play a role in observers' perceptions of an alleged sexual assault. Participants included 297 male college students from a public university in the Northeastern United States. Contrary to hypotheses, there were no significant effects for length of relationship on participants' attributions. Relative to no resistance, verbal and physical strategies by the victim predicted higher levels of victim credibility, perpetrator culpability, and perpetrator guilt, as well as lower levels of victim culpability and perceived victim pleasure. Endorsement of traditional adversarial sex role beliefs and hostile sexist attitudes, as opposed to egalitarian attitudes, were associated with the attribution of less credibility to the victim, perceived victim trauma, perpetrator culpability, perpetrator

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guilt, and shorter recommended prison sentences, as well as greater victim culpability and perceived victim pleasure. Laypersons' perceptions of sexual assault merit further study, as they are relevant to juror decision making and third party responses to sexual victimization (e.g., peer support for victim) and can contribute to the secondary victimization and recovery of survivors of sexual assault.

Keywords
acquaintance rape, perceptions, gender roles, relationship length, resistance

The body of literature that has developed around the prevalence of sexual aggression clearly indicates that a substantial number of women are sexually victimized at some point in their lives (Finkelhor, Hotaling, Lewis, & Smith, 1990; Fisher, Cullen, & Turner, 2000; Koss, Gidycz, & Wisniewski, 1987; Spitzberg, 1999; Tjaden & Thoennes, 2006). The majority of these women are victimized by someone known to them, such as a friend, colleague, dating partner, or spouse (Abbey, Clinton, McAuslan, Zawacki, & Buck, 2002; I. Anderson, 2007; Fisher et al., 2000; Gavey, 1991), and the term "acquaintance rape" has been introduced to encompass these varied non-stranger sexual assaults (Parrot & Bechhofer, 1991). The experience of being sexually assaulted is often accompanied by a host of short- and long-term physical and psychological consequences (e.g., emotional disturbances, physical injury, unwanted pregnancy, diseases, secondary victimization, and an increased risk of revictimization; Boudreaux, Kilpatrick, Resnick, Best, & Saunders, 1998; Burnam et al., 1988; McMullin & White, 2006; Sarkar & Sarkar, 2005; White Kress, Trippany, & Nolan, 2003). Unfortunately, the majority of female victims, particularly those who are assaulted by someone they know, do not report the experience and do not seek medical or psychological treatment afterward (Peterson & Muehlenhard, 2007). Even when the assault is reported, sexual assault cases generally have low rates of arrest, prosecution, and conviction (Alderden & Ullman, 2012).

One reason for the underreporting of sexual assault is that observers tend to minimize victimization by sexual assault relative to other crimes, often approaching these victims with more skepticism or blame, and exonerating or justifying the actions of the perpetrator (Bieneck & Krahé, 2011; Sizemore, 2013); this effect is exacerbated in cases of acquaintance rape (Bridges & McGrail, 1989). Thus, an extensive literature has been developed to explore the variety of "extra legal" factors that can influence observers' perceptions of sexual assault (see Feild, 1979; Pollard, 1992; Ward, 1995). This literature

has explored a number of similar constructs (e.g., blame, responsibility, credibility, culpability) captured by the umbrella term "victim blame," as well as a separate, but related construct, evaluation about whether an incident constitutes rape. Research regarding perceptions of victim blame and rape evaluation is necessary to understand the attitudes and behavior of those who may influence the physical, psychological, and legal outcome of victimization, such as jurors, police, prosecutors, medical and mental health providers, and family/friends. The reactions of these diverse groups may influence the extent of distress and dysfunction a victim may experience, as well as his or her ultimate recovery from the sexual assault and likelihood of obtaining justice (I. Anderson & Lyons, 2005; Brown & Testa, 2008; Ullman, 1996; Ullman & Siegel, 1995; Ward, 1995). It is hoped that expanded knowledge about perceptions of victim blame and rape evaluations will aid the assessment and treatment of sexual victimization via improved education and outreach.

The Influence of Offense Characteristics

Previous research regarding perceptions of sexual assault has examined the influence of a variety of situational variables on attributions of blame and evaluations of rape. These variables include the gender, race, physical appearance, relationship status, or substance use of the victim and/or perpetrator, as well as the perpetrator's motivation for the assault, and the resistance displayed by the victim (Angelone, Mitchell, & Pilafova, 2007; Feild, 1979; George & Martinez, 2002; Mitchell, Angelone, Kohlberger, & Hirschman, 2009; Pollard, 1992; Ward, 1995). One situational variable whose role in shaping observer perception is in need of clarification is that of victim-perpetrator relationship (VPR). Most of the early work in this area focused on stranger versus marital rape in heterosexual dyads; however, subsequent research included non-marital examples of acquaintance rape. In general, the more intimate the relationship between the victim and perpetrator, the greater the victim blame and less agreement that an incident constituted rape (Ben-David & Schneider, 2005; Bridges & McGrail, 1989; L'Armand & Pepitone, 1982; Monson, Byrd, & Langhinrichsen-Rohling, 1996; Rebeiz & Harb, 2010; Simonson & Subich, 1999). A variety of explanations have been offered for this finding, most of which revolve around gendered scripts for dating and sexual encounters (Abrams, Viki, Masser, & Bohner, 2003; Buddie & Miller, 2001). That is, men are considered the sexual initiators and women are the primary gatekeepers of sex, maintaining responsibility for both their male partner's behaviors and their own behaviors (Jozkowski & Peterson, 2013). Thus, misconceptions about rape include the belief that this is an act that primarily occurs between strangers. The attributions literature has mostly

compared the effects of specific labels of relationship status (i.e., marital vs. acquaintance vs. stranger) on observer perceptions of victim blame, rather than considering varying degrees of acquaintanceship, despite the wide range between casual acquaintanceship and marriage. Therefore, the current study examined whether the *length* of a relationship (i.e., first date, 2 weeks, 2 years) between a dating couple can influence observer perceptions.

Victim resistance, another foci of the present study, is a variable whose role in shaping observer perception is also in need of clarification. Given traditional sexual scripts, a woman is expected to provide "token resistance" to sexual advances, saying "no" when she actually intends to have sex (Muehlenhard & Hollabaugh, 1988). One early study to examine victim resistance and traditional sexual scripts included three resistance conditions (no resistance vs. verbal resistance vs. combined verbal and physical resistance) in a stranger rape stimulus (Krulewitz & Nash, 1979). The researchers argued that if a woman demonstrated forceful resistance (combined verbal and physical) that exceeded perceptions of token resistance (verbal only), then this situation would clearly demonstrate non-consent. Consistent with their hypotheses, the indication of forceful resistance by a woman led to *higher* ratings of agreement that an incident constituted rape, when compared with the verbal only or no resistance conditions. However, subsequent research has not been entirely consistent, with some researchers finding that any overt resistance (combined verbal and physical) in a stranger rape contributed to lower victim blame (McCaul, Veltum, Boyechko, & Crawford, 1990), while others have found that physical resistance was associated with higher ratings of victim blame (Deitz, Littman, & Bentley, 1984).

Researchers suggest that compared with a stranger rape, acquaintance rape represents a highly ambiguous situation adding complexity to decision making and judgments of blame (Cohn, Dupuis, & Brown, 2009). Indeed, observers tend to minimize the seriousness of an acquaintance rape and attribute lower perpetrator blame relative to stranger rape (Pollard, 1992; Viki, Abrams, & Masser, 2004). However, this ambiguity may contribute to the lack of consistency in the literature regarding the resistance manipulation. For example, some researchers have found that compared with a no resistance condition, participants perceived lower levels of victim blame when the victim verbally and/or physically resisted (Kowalski, 1992; Ong & Ward, 1999). Other researchers have found that participants perceived lower levels of victim fault and responsibility when she physically resisted, compared with the lack of resistance (Ryckman, Kaczor, & Thornton, 1992) or when she verbally protested (Brady, Chrisler, Hosdale, Osowiecki, & Veal, 1991). One explanation for the discrepancies in the literature could be related to the varying discrete manipulations of resistance. For example, some researchers

have compared verbal and combined verbal/physical conditions, while others have compared physical and no resistance conditions. At present, there is a lack of research examining how different levels of victim resistance (i.e., no resistance, verbal resistance only, and physical resistance only) affect participants' attributions about an acquaintance rape.

The Influence of Observer Characteristics

Another line of research has highlighted a variety of person factors that play a role in observer attributions. In fact, one of the most ubiquitous variables examined in this literature is participant gender (Bell, Kuriloff, & Lottes, 1994; Brems & Wagner, 1994; Foley, Evancic, Karnik, King, & Parks, 1995; Schult & Schneider, 1991; Szymanski, Devlin, Chrisler, & Vyse, 1993; Thornton, Ryckman, & Robbins, 1982; Whatley, 2005). Relative to women, men tend to attribute greater blame, responsibility, and pleasure to a victim of sexual assault. In other words, men are more likely to interpret a victim's behavior as more provocative and inviting of sexual activity than intended. However, relative to men, women attribute greater blame and responsibility to the perpetrator. Women are also more likely to label an unwanted sexual encounter as rape, to support prosecution for the crime, and to recommend longer prison sentences. Of note, this area has not been wholly consistent, with some researchers demonstrating a lack of differences in attributions between genders (Abrams et al., 2003; Acock & Ireland, 1983; L'Armand & Pepitone, 1982; Viki et al., 2004; Yamawaki, 2007).

Several theories suggest that men's propensity for rape is driven by traditional and adversarial attitudes about gender roles (Burt, 1980; Check & Malamuth, 1985). Thus, these concepts have been examined as other observer characteristics, which may impact attributions of blame. Traditional gender role attitudes emphasize women as fragile, passive, submissive to men, and holding primary responsibility for maintaining the home. In contrast, egalitarian gender role attitudes deemphasize a dominant/submissive gender dichotomy, promote equal opportunity and rights for women and men, and encourage shared responsibility for maintaining the home (McHugh & Frieze, 1997). Gender role attitudes may guide societal norms and expectations for heterosexual interactions during dating and sexual encounters. Those with traditional gender role attitudes may expect men to be dominant and aggressive, and women to be passive and reluctant to engage in sexual activity (Yamawaki, 2007). Sexually assaultive behaviors and subsequent victim blame may be by-products of these cultural attitudes, which promote misconceptions (i.e., rape myths) about sexual assault and victims (Burt, 1980).

Taken further, some researchers suggest that gender role attitudes may mediate the relationship between a variety of person/situational factors (including participant gender) and perceptions of victim blame (Abrams et al., 2003; K. B. Anderson, Cooper, & Okamura, 1997; Frese, Moya, & Megías, 2004). Measures such as the *Attitudes Toward Women Scale* (AWS; Spence & Helmreich, 1972) have been widely used in the literature, and demonstrate that individuals who hold traditional gender role attitudes tend to blame the sexual assault victim and excuse the perpetrator to a greater extent than individuals who hold egalitarian attitudes (I. Anderson & Lyons, 2005; McHugh & Frieze, 1997; Twenge, 1997). In fact, traditional gender role attitudes are one of the substantial predictors of rape myth acceptance, providing support for the premise that sexist ideology shifts the blame from perpetrators to victims and contributes to the pervasiveness of sexual assault (Suarez & Gadalla, 2010; Yamawaki, 2007). In a recent study, male and female observers were asked to read a vignette portraying a dating couple, and to indicate their perceptions of the victim and perpetrator (Angelone, Mitchell, & Lucente, 2012). The data suggested that gender played a limited role; however, gender role attitudes, as measured by the AWS, far eclipsed any gender effects. In fact, egalitarian attitudes were consistently associated with less victim blame and greater perpetrator responsibility, predicting over and above gender. This finding may help to explain the inconsistent gender effect on perceptions of victim blame. Because men tend to hold more traditional gender role attitudes than women, it is possible that these attitudes may mediate the relationship between gender and victim blame. Given that men may be more susceptible to the influence of gender role attitudes on their perceptions of blame (Abrams et al., 2003), the present study focuses entirely on male observers.

Recent examinations of gender role attitudes on perceptions of sexual assault have included the *Ambivalent Sexism Inventory* (ASI; Glick & Fiske, 1996). The ASI builds on the notion of traditional sexism to suggest two opposing, yet related attitudes: Hostile Sexism (HS) and Benevolent Sexism (BS). *HS* is used to describe overt, subjectively negative sexism. HS represents the more commonly understood form of sexism, espousing that men and women have different gender roles that are often adversarial in nature. In contrast, *BS* encompasses a set of attitudes toward women that are subjectively positive, but are stereotypical in viewing women as restricted to traditional roles (Glick & Fiske, 1996; Masser, Lee, & McKimmie, 2009). BS represents an atypical viewpoint of sexism, such that gender roles are cooperative, with men occupying the dominant role in society and serving as protectors of women, who occupy submissive roles in society. Because BS is outwardly positive, these attitudes imply that women are delicate, pure,

helpless, and need to be guarded by men. The research demonstrates that HS and BS are moderately correlated and occur simultaneously across a wide variety of cultures, especially those with a large gender role power differential (Glick & Fiske, 1996; Glick et al., 2000). The HS subscale is correlated with the AWS and other traditional measures of gender role attitudes, whereas BS is not captured by earlier measures of gender role attitudes (Glick & Fiske, 1997; McHugh & Frieze, 1997).

Following suit, there is a growing literature examining the influence of BS and HS on observer perceptions of sexual assault. The results suggest that participants endorsing high levels of BS tend to blame the victim to a greater extent, blame the perpetrator to a lesser extent, minimize the seriousness of the assault, and to recommend shorter prison sentences than participants with low levels of BS, for sexual assaults perpetrated by acquaintances rather than strangers (Abrams et al., 2003; Viki et al., 2004; Yamawaki, 2007). These findings suggest that observers high in BS perceive women on dates as engaging in behaviors that violate expectations of feminine purity and innocence, and therefore contribute to their own victimization; thus, BS is a primary predictor of victim blame in acquaintance rape. Similarly, the research demonstrates that participants who endorse high levels of HS blame the victim to a greater extent, tend to minimize the seriousness of the assault, and excuse the perpetrator to a greater extent than participants low in HS for both stranger and acquaintance rape scenarios (Cohn et al., 2009; Yamawaki, 2007). These authors suggest that HS is related to beliefs that a victim is exaggerating his or her problems and seeking benefits or control/power via their sexuality. As the ASI has seen a growth in its use over the last decade, most of the research has focused on the differential moderating influences of HS and BS on perceptions of victim blame in acquaintance versus stranger rape. However, there is lack of research comparing the ASI subscales with the widely used AWS. Despite this, some researchers have suggested that the AWS is dated, and that the ASI may be a better tool for contemporary use, considering the inclusion of BS as a unique construct (Forbes, Collinsworth, Jobe, Braun, & Wise, 2007; McHugh & Frieze, 1997).

The present study builds on previous literature by examining three key variables on male observer attributions of an acquaintance rape. Our primary goal was to add to the growing literature regarding gender role attitudes and observer perceptions of victim blame by examining both the widely used AWS and the relatively newer ASI, to determine the unique predictive utility of these measures. In addition, we examined the predictive utility of two situational variables over and above the aforementioned gender role attitudes to clarify several unanswered questions. That is, we intended to examine whether VPR length and victim resistance are

predictive of observer perceptions after controlling for gender role attitudes. We hypothesize the following:

Hypothesis 1: Traditional gender role attitudes, as measured by the AWS, would be significantly predictive of greater victim blaming as reflected in attributions about the victim (i.e., culpability, credibility, trauma, and pleasure) and attributions of the perpetrator (i.e., culpability, guilt, and sentencing recommendations).
Hypothesis 2: Traditional gender role attitudes, as measured by the HS and BS subscales, would be significantly predictive of greater victim blaming over and above scores on the AWS.
Hypothesis 3: Longer VPR length would be significantly predictive of greater victim blaming.
Hypothesis 4: Victim resistance would be significantly predictive of lower victim blaming, with physical resistance exerting a stronger effect than verbal resistance.

Method

Participants

A total of 297 male participants from a public university in the Northeastern United States were recruited through a psychology department participant pool. Data from 13 participants were excluded from analyses because they failed a manipulation check, leaving a final sample of 284 participants. The group of participants excluded from data analyses was not significantly different from the final sample in age, but were less likely to self-identify as White, $\chi^2(1, N = 297) = 3.70$, $p = .05$. The final sample had a mean age of 19.65 ($SD = 2.01$) years. With respect to ethnic background, 77% ($n = 219$) of participants self-identified as White, 8% ($n = 22$) as African American, 7% ($n = 21$) as Latino, 4% as Asian American ($n = 10$), and 4% ($n = 11$) as unspecified ethnic background.

Materials

Stimulus. Participants were randomly assigned to read one of nine vignettes that described a male-on-female acquaintance rape. The vignettes were identical except in the information that each provided about the VPR length and degree of victim resistance. For VPR length, there were three conditions: first date, dating for 2 weeks, or dating for 2 years. For victim resistance, there were three conditions: no resistance, verbal resistance only ("*she told him to*

*stop and that she didn't wanted to go any further . . . [he] allegedly continued in spite of her verbal protest*s"), or physical resistance only ("*she pushed him away and attempted to get up . . . [he] allegedly continued in spite of her physical protests"*). The victim, who was described as an 18-year-old female college student, went to a movie with the perpetrator, who was described as a 20-year-old male college student. After the movie ended, it was raining heavily, so the couple ran to the victim's nearby apartment to wait out the rain. There, they talked and began to kiss, and shortly afterward, the sexual assault occurred. The vignette concluded with a statement that the perpetrator admitted to the police that he had a sexual encounter with the victim, but he maintained that the sexual intercourse was consensual.

Attribution Questionnaire. Attributions about the victim and perpetrator were measured with a 10-point Likert-type questionnaire based on one developed by George and Martinez (2002) that had been previously used in a number of other studies (Angelone et al., 2012; Angelone et al., 2007; Mitchell et al., 2009; Sizemore, 2013). The questionnaire assesses a variety of constructs associated with attributions of blame, including victim culpability, victim credibility, victim pleasure, victim trauma, perpetrator culpability, perpetrator guilt, and sentencing recommendation for the perpetrator.

Attributions regarding the victim. Four independent constructs were measured in association with the victim, representing both multi-item and individual-item variables. *Victim culpability* was measured with nine items concerning the victim's responsibility for the assault, intent to have sex with the perpetrator, fault for the assault, and capability to have changed the outcome of the assault, with higher scores reflecting increased responsibility for the assault attributed to the victim. The items were averaged to yield a single victim culpability rating (α for the present study = .81). *Victim credibility* was measured with seven items that concern the definitiveness and genuineness of the victim's refusal, with higher scores reflecting increased belief that the victim did not want to engage in sexual intercourse with the perpetrator. One item was dropped as it decreased reliability substantially. The remaining six items were averaged to yield a single victim credibility rating (α for the present study = .65). *Victim pleasure* was measured by one item that asked respondents to estimate how much pleasure the victim experienced from the assault on a 10-point scale (1 = *none at all*, 10 = *very much*). *Victim trauma* was also measured by one item that asked respondents to estimate how much trauma the victim experienced from the assault on a 10-point scale (1 = *none at all*, 10 = *very much*).

Attributions regarding the perpetrator. Three constructs were measured in association with the perpetrator, representing both multi-item and individual-item variables. *Perpetrator culpability* was measured with nine items mirroring those used to measure victim culpability. One item was dropped as it decreased reliability substantially. The remaining eight items were averaged to yield a single perpetrator culpability rating (α for the present study = .72). *Perpetrator guilt* was measured by averaging three items that asked participants to rate how much they believed the incident constituted rape, how guilty they believed the perpetrator was of committing rape, and how likely they would be to convict the perpetrator of rape (α for the present study = .86). *Sentencing recommendations* were measured by one item that asked participants to rate how long the perpetrator should be incarcerated if convicted of rape on a 10-point scale (1 = *no time at all*, 10 = *more than 40 years*).

ASI (Glick & Fiske, 1996). The ASI consists of two subscales, each measuring a different form of sexism. Eleven items comprise the HS subscale, which reflects combative views toward women and negativity toward women's larger role in society (e.g., "Women seek to gain power by getting control over men"). Higher scores indicate more hostile and stereotypically sexist views. The other 11 items comprise the BS subscale, which reflects overtly positive and chivalrous views of feminine submission and male protection (e.g., "Women should be cherished and protected by men"). Items for each subscale are rated on a 6-point Likert-type scale (0 = *strongly disagree*, 5 = *strongly agree*) and averaged. Higher scores reflect higher levels of hostile or benevolent sexism (for the present study, α = .85 for HS and α = .74 for BS).

AWS–Short Form (Spence, Helmreich, & Stapp, 1978). The AWS is a 15-item scale that assesses attitudes regarding the role of women in society. Sample items include, "Women should worry less about their rights and worry more about being good wives and mothers" and "A woman should be as free as a man to propose marriage." Items are rated on a 5-point Likert-type scale (0 = *strongly agree*, 5 = *strongly disagree*). Higher scores indicate egalitarian attitudes while lower scores indicate traditional sex role stereotypical attitudes (α for the present study = .79).

Paulhus Deception Scales: Version 7 (PDS; Paulhus, 1998). The PDS is a 40-item measure that was included to control for participants' tendencies to respond to the dependent variables in a socially desirable manner. Items are scored on a 5-point Likert-type scale (1 = *not true*, 5 = *very true*). Higher scores indicate greater socially desirable responding (α for the present study = .77).

Memory/manipulation check. Participants were presented with five multiple-choice items concerning details of the vignette they had read. Those who correctly answered four out of five items were considered sufficiently engaged in the study to remain included in the data analysis. As noted in the "Participants" section, this resulted in the removal of 13 out of 297 participants.

Procedure

Participants reported to a computer lab to participate in this study. The computer lab consisted of 10 computers, each separated by a privacy screen to ensure confidentiality of responses. Upon arrival, participants were each assigned to a computer, and instructed to read and sign a hard copy of the informed consent. Participants were assured that their data were anonymous, and that withdrawing from the study at any time would not prevent them from receiving credit for participating. Participants were told that they would be asked to read a "brief crime report" describing a case of an alleged sexual assault, and that the researcher was interested in both their impressions of, and memory for, certain details about the case. Each participant was randomly assigned to read one of nine vignettes. The researcher then read the instructions for the study aloud. After all questions and comments were addressed, participants were asked to begin the study by reading the brief crime report on the computer and completing the subsequent questionnaires as the items appeared on the screen. After the participants completed the study, they were debriefed and thanked for participating.

Results

Table 1 presents means, standard deviations, and intercorrelations among the attribution variables, gender role attitude scales, and PDS. The pattern of correlations among the attribution variables indicates that higher scores on victim credibility, victim trauma, perpetrator culpability, perpetrator guilt, and perpetrator sentencing were associated with lower scores on victim culpability and victim pleasure. Scores on AWS were correlated with each attribution variable such that more egalitarian sex role attitudes were associated with less victim blaming and more perpetrator responsibility. The pattern of correlations between scores on HS and the attribution variables were a mirror image of those observed with AWS, with higher HS associated with more victim blaming and less perpetrator responsibility. The size of the correlation coefficients between the HS subscale and the attribution variables were larger than those obtained between AWS and attribution variables. Scores on the BS

Table 1. Intercorrelations Among Continuous Independent and Dependent Variables.

	1	2	3	4	5	6	7	8	9	10	11
1. PDS	—	.19*	.22**	−.01	.11	−.11	−.08	.10	.08	.14*	.13*
2. AWS		—	−.53**	−.15**	.30**	−.29**	−.33**	.21**	.18**	.21**	.14*
3. HS			—	.18**	−.42**	.43**	.34**	−.23**	−.21**	−.30**	−.18**
4. BS				—	−.05	.07	.05	−.02	.05	.02	.05
5. VCr					—	−.60**	−.51**	.46**	.39**	.59**	.32**
6. VCu						—	.50**	−.35**	−.31**	−.47**	−.19**
7. VP							—	−.40*	−.27**	−.39**	−.16**
8. VT								—	.34**	.59**	.41**
9. PCu									—	.55**	.13*
10. PG										—	.43**
11. PS											—

Note. $N = 284$. PDS = Paulhus Deception Scales; AWS = Attitude Toward Women Scale; HS = hostile sexism; BS = benevolent sexism; VCr = victim credibility; VCu = victim culpability; VP = victim pleasure; VT = victim trauma; PCu = perpetrator culpability; PG = perpetrator guilt; PS = perpetrator sentencing.
*$p < .05$. **$p < .01$.

subscale were not significantly correlated with the attribution variables or AWS, and were weakly correlated with HS.

Gender Role Attitudes, Victim Resistance, and VPR Length as Predictors of Victim and Perpetrator Attributions

Hierarchical multiple regression analyses were used to predict the four victim (culpability, trauma, credibility, pleasure) and three perpetrator (culpability, guilt, sentencing) attributions. Intercorrelations between the predictor variables were not so high as to suggest multicollinearity, nor did examination of the variable inflation factors suggest multicollinearity. For each regression, PDS was entered on the first step to control for the tendency to respond in a socially desirable manner. AWS was entered on the second step. To investigate the additional utility of more contemporary measures of gender role beliefs, HS and BS were added on the third step. VPR length was entered on the fourth step with successive levels coded in length of relationship in weeks: 0 = *first date*, 2 = *2 weeks*, 104 = *2 years*. Victim resistance was entered on the fourth step using dummy variable coding. In the first set of analyses, the no resistance condition served as the reference group (coded as 0). The verbal resistance condition (coded as 1) served as one resistance variable and allowed for a comparison between the verbal and no resistance conditions. The physical resistance condition (coded as 1) served as the other

Table 2. Hierarchical Multiple Regression Analyses Predicting Attributions Regarding Victim Credibility and Trauma.

	Victim Credibility				Victim Trauma			
Predictor	β	*t*	R^2	ΔR^2	β	*t*	R^2	ΔR^2
Step 1			.01				.01	
PDS	.11	1.92			.10	1.73		
Step 2			.09	.08***			.05	.04**
AWS	.29	4.93***			.20	3.34**		
Step 3			.19	.10***			.07	.02
BS	.03	0.56			.03	0.44		
HS	−.37	−5.70***			−.17	−2.39*		
Step 4			.27	.08***			.08	.01
VPR	.09	1.73			−.02	−0.37		
Verbal	.30	4.86***			.11	1.66		
Physical	.28	4.60***			.05	0.68		

Note. PDS = Paulhus Deception Scales; AWS = Attitude Toward Women Scale; BS = benevolent sexism; HS = hostile sexism; VPR = relationship length; Verbal = victim resistance compared with no resistance; Physical = physical resistance compared with no resistance.
*$p < .05$. **$p < .01$. ***$p < .001$.

resistance variable and allowed for a comparison between the physical and no resistance conditions. A follow-up set of fourth step analyses were conducted with the verbal condition (coded as 0) serving as the reference group to allow for a comparison between the verbal and physical conditions. Because these were not significant, tables for them were not created, but the regression coefficients are reported in the text.

Attributions regarding victim credibility and victim trauma. Regressions for attributions of victim credibility and victim trauma are summarized in Table 2. Step 1 approached significance on the victim credibility regression, with higher PDS scores associated with higher victim credibility, $F(1, 282) = 3.68$, $p = .056$. PDS was not a predictor of victim trauma. Step 2 was significant for both equations, victim credibility—F change $(1, 281) = 24.27$, $p < .001$; victim trauma—F change $(1, 281) = 11.17$, $p = .001$, with higher AWS scores associated with higher victim credibility and trauma. Step 3 was significant for the victim credibility regression, F change $(2, 279) = 16.22$, $p < .001$, and approached significance for the victim trauma regression, F change $(2, 279) = 2.86$, $p = .059$, with higher HS scores associated with lower victim credibility and victim trauma. The regressions diverged on Step 4, which was

Table 3. Hierarchical Multiple Regression Analyses Predicting Attributions Regarding Victim Culpability and Pleasure.

	Victim Culpability				Victim Pleasure			
Predictor	β	*t*	R^2	ΔR^2	β	*t*	R^2	ΔR^2
Step 1			.01				.01	
PDS	−.11	−1.91			−.08	−1.32		
Step 2			.09	.08***			.11	.10***
AWS	−.28	−4.83***			−.32	−5.61***		
Step 3			.19	.10***			.14	.03**
BS	−.01	−0.25			−.03	−0.45		
HS	.38	5.96***			.23	3.50**		
Step 4			.25	.06**			.18	.04*
VPR	.01	0.06			−.02	−0.37		
Verbal	−.26	−4.18***			−.18	−2.77**		
Physical	−.21	−3.34**			−.19	−3.02**		

Note. PDS = Paulhus Deception Scales; AWS = Attitude Toward Women Scale; BS = benevolent sexism; HS = hostile sexism; VPR = relationship length; Verbal = victim resistance as compared with the no resistance condition; Physical = physical resistance as compared with the no resistance condition.
*$p < .05$. **$p < .01$. ***$p < .001$.

significant for the victim credibility regression, F change (3, 276) = 10.92, $p < .001$. At this step, the verbal resistance condition and the physical resistance condition were associated with higher credibility as compared with the no resistance condition. A follow-up analysis comparing the verbal and physical resistance conditions to each other was not significant, $\beta = -.02$, $t(282) = -0.29$, $p = .77$. Resistance was not a significant predictor of victim trauma. BS and relationship length were not significant predictors of either victim credibility or victim trauma.

Attributions regarding victim culpability and victim pleasure. Regressions for attributions of victim culpability and victim pleasure are summarized in Table 3. A similar pattern of results was found across the four steps of both regressions, with the direction of the effects reflecting a mirror image of those found for victim credibility and trauma. In both analyses, Step 1 (PDS) was not a significant predictor of attributions. Step 2 was significant, victim culpability—F change (1, 281) = 23.28, $p < .001$; victim pleasure—F change (1, 281) = 31.51, $p < .001$, with higher AWS scores associated with lower victim culpability and victim pleasure. Step 3 was significant, victim culpability—F change (2, 279) = 17.84, $p < .001$; victim pleasure—F change (2,

Table 4. Hierarchical Multiple Regression Analyses Predicting Attributions Regarding Perpetrator Culpability, Guilt, and Sentencing.

	Perpetrator Culpability				Perpetrator Guilt				Sentencing Recommendation			
Predictor	β	*t*	R^2	ΔR^2	β	*t*	R^2	ΔR^2	β	*t*	R^2	ΔR^2
Step 1			.01				.02				.02	
PDS	.08	1.32			.14	2.37*			.13	2.18*		
Step 2			.03	.02**			.06	.04**			.03	.01*
AWS	.17	2.82**			.19	3.23**			.12	1.97*		
Step 3			.06	.03*			.11	.05**			.05	.02
BS	.09	1.59			.08	1.32			.08	1.38		
HS	−.17	−2.51*			−.26	−3.81***			−.14	−2.04*		
Step 4			.10	.04**			.16	.05**			.05	.00
VPR	.04	.67			−.01	−.26			−.01	−.07		
Verbal	.09	1.37			.23	3.55***			.07	1.01		
Physical	.22	3.21**			.23	3.53***			−.01	−.15		

Note. PDS = Paulhus Deception Scales; AWS = Attitude Toward Women Scale; BS = benevolent sexism; HS = hostile sexism; VPR = relationship length; Verbal = victim resistance compared with no resistance; Physical = physical resistance compared with no resistance.
*$p < .05$. **$p < .01$. ***$p < .001$.

279) = 6.14, $p = .002$, with higher HS scores associated with higher victim culpability and victim pleasure. Step 4 was significant, victim culpability—F change (3, 276) = 6.43, $p < .001$; victim pleasure—F change (3, 276) = 3.75, $p = .012$. The verbal resistance condition and the physical resistance condition were associated with lower victim culpability and victim trauma as compared with the no resistance condition. Follow-up analyses comparing the verbal and physical resistance conditions to each other were not significant. BS and relationship length were not significant predictors of either victim culpability, β = .05, $t(282) = 0.88$, $p = .38$, or victim pleasure, β = −.02, $t(282) = -0.24$, $p = .81$.

Attributions regarding perpetrator culpability, perpetrator guilt, and perpetrator sentencing. Table 4 presents a summary of the regressions for attributions of perpetrator culpability, perpetrator guilt, and sentencing length. On Step 1 of the perpetrator guilt and sentencing regressions, higher PDS was associated with higher perpetrator guilt, $F(1, 282) = 5.46$, $p = .02$, and longer sentences, $F(1, 282) = 4.74$, $p = .03$. PDS was not a predictor of perpetrator culpability. Step 2 was significant in all three regressions and in a similar direction, perpetrator culpability—F change (1, 281) = 7.96, $p = .005$; perpetrator guilt—F change (1, 281) = 10.81, $p = .001$;

sentencing—$F(1, 281) = 3.86$, $p = .05$, with higher AWS scores associated with higher perpetrator culpability, perpetrator guilt, and longer sentences. Step 3 was significant on the perpetrator culpability and guilt regressions only, perpetrator culpability—F change $(2, 279) = 4.01$, $p = .02$; perpetrator guilt—F change $(2, 279) = 7.67$, $p = .001$, with higher HS associated with lower perpetrator culpability and guilt. Step 4 was also significant for perpetrator culpability and guilt, perpetrator culpability—F change $(3, 276) = 3.66$, $p = .013$; perpetrator guilt—F change $(3, 276) = 5.49$, $p = .001$. With respect to perpetrator culpability, the physical resistance condition, but not the verbal resistance condition, was associated with higher perpetrator culpability as compared with the no resistance condition. The physical and verbal conditions were not significantly different from each other, although the difference approached significance, $\beta = .12$, $t(282) = 1.87$, $p = .06$. In the case of perpetrator guilt, the verbal resistance condition and the physical resistance condition were associated with higher perpetrator guilt as compared with the no resistance condition. A follow-up analysis comparing the verbal and physical resistance conditions to each other was not significant, $\beta = -.01$, $t(282) = -0.04$, $p = .97$. BS and relationship length were not significant predictors for any of the perpetrator attribution variables.

Discussion

Gender Role Attitudes and Blame Attributions

We examined the ability of three gender role attitude measures (AWS, HS, and BS) and two situational variables (VPR length and victim resistance) to predict attributions of blame in an acquaintance rape. The findings regarding the AWS and HS are interesting in light of the literature suggesting that these measures assess the same construct. HS has been associated with men's likelihood to report proclivity toward sexually assaulting an acquaintance (Abrams et al., 2003; Masser, Viki, & Power, 2006). Similarly, convicted male rapists have demonstrated higher levels of conservative gender role beliefs, as measured by the AWS, compared with convicted nonsexual offenders and non-convicted men (Scott & Tetreault, 1987; Segal & Stermac, 1984). In line with previous research, we found that gender role attitudes play a critical role in observer perceptions. The AWS demonstrated a consistent influence across each of the seven dependent measures. The results indicate that observers who hold traditional gender role attitudes attributed greater victim culpability and victim pleasure, lower victim credibility, victim trauma, perpetrator culpability, and perpetrator guilt, and recommended shorter prison sentences relative to those with egalitarian attitudes.

After controlling for the AWS, we found that HS (but not BS) was similarly predictive of observer perceptions. That is, individuals with combative and adversarial gender role attitudes, as measured by the HS subscale, also attributed greater victim culpability and victim pleasure; they also attributed lower victim credibility, victim trauma, perpetrator culpability, and perpetrator guilt, and recommended shorter prison sentences relative to those with less adversarial gender role attitudes. HS was a significant predictor of these attributions over and above the AWS, and HS demonstrated stronger correlations with the dependent measures. Therefore, the HS subscale may be a better tool, relative to the AWS, for tapping contemporary expressions of sexist attitudes.

In the current study, BS was not a significant predictor of any of the seven attributions after controlling for AWS. While the literature indicates that BS may be important in distinguishing reactions to acquaintance rape versus stranger rape, BS may play a constant role within differing levels of acquaintanceship. Perhaps it is the extent to which the victim's behavior violates stereotypical feminine behavior in the context of the relationship that is important; previous researchers have found that an acquaintance rape victim was held more responsible for being assaulted if the incident occurred in the context of marital infidelity versus a neutral condition (Viki & Abrams, 2002). It may be that in the context of a dating relationship, a victim who initiates the date, pays for her partner, or engages in other types of nontraditional behavior would activate BS attitudes in a more powerful manner.

VPR Length, Victim Resistance, and Blame Attributions

In terms of the situational variables, the findings are less striking than those concerning gender role attitudes, but partially support the hypotheses. Despite the prediction that VPR length would be associated with perceptions of victim blame, there were no significant effects across all seven dependent variables. However, the victim resistance variable demonstrated a fairly consistent pattern across a large number of attributions. In general, some type of overt resistance was predictive of higher levels of victim credibility, perpetrator culpability, and perpetrator guilt, and lower levels of both victim culpability and victim pleasure. Except for perpetrator culpability, there were no differences between verbal resistance and physical resistance.

The lack of support for longer VPR length being predictive of greater victim blame is intriguing. It was anticipated that women who were raped by someone they did not know well would be seen as more credible and less culpable (and a perpetrator as more culpable), in part because this is the more stereotypical sexual assault scenario. The current findings suggest that any

engagement in a romantic relationship, regardless of length, is associated with a consistent level of observer blame attributions, at least for male participants. However, it is possible that VPR length may play a role in a victim's reporting of sexual assault reflecting greater susceptibility to misconceptions about sexual assault (e.g., rape myths) originally thought to affect observer attributions. For example, a victim in a new relationship may be more willing to pursue legal action against the male participants, while a victim who is in a serious relationship may be less likely to do so.

On the contrary, the finding regarding victim resistance is consistent with stereotypes and common misconceptions regarding sexual assault. Scarcely a generation ago, state laws required rape victims to demonstrate that they had actively attempted to fight off a perpetrator (S. Schwartz, 1983). Such policies reflected a belief about "real" rape victims, which falsely categorized victims who were too frightened or otherwise unable to resist as having consented to the attack through inaction or implied consent. The current findings suggest that such stereotypes of "real" rape victim behavior are still influential in observer perceptions today: Those victims who resist in a manner that is consistent with the stereotype (i.e., active resistance) are perceived to have greater credibility and less blame than those who do not resist. Interestingly, this pattern does not hold up for perpetrator culpability in that physical resistance is perceived differently than verbal resistance. This finding suggests that men perceive some level of ambiguity when evaluating other men in sexual situations, potentially highlighting the ongoing belief about token resistance strategies used by women. Therefore, it would be interesting to examine whether the type of verbal resistance used by the victim would affect observer perceptions. In other words, because educational strategies have focused on a "no means no" tactic (Cohn et al., 2009), manipulating whether a victim actually verbalizes "No!" compared with an alternative verbal resistance strategy might explain some of the inconsistency in the literature. In addition, these data could inform risk reduction programs about the need to highlight the wide variety of physical, verbal, and nonverbal cues that women may use to indicate their lack of consent.

Implications and Future Directions

As the current study focused on male college students, our findings may provide some insight into the college culture of the United States. Understanding male college students' perceptions of acquaintance rape is particularly important, given that the vast majority of sexual assaults are committed by men, female college students are at greatest risk of sexual victimization, and approximately 90% of these victims know their offenders (Fisher et al., 2000;

Tjaden & Thoennes, 2006). One of the potential reasons for increased rates of offending in college males involves the university atmosphere. Prior research suggests that college males are more accepting of sexual aggression, due in part to advocacy for sexual offending by supportive male peers (M. D. Schwartz & DeKeseredy, 1997). In fact, narrow views of masculinity, homophobia, sexual objectification of females, conformity, and secrecy may contribute to the prevalence of sexual aggression committed by college fraternity members (DeKeseredy & Kelly, 1995). Furthermore, male peer support may be one of the most potent predictors of perpetration of sexual aggression. In the present study, endorsement of hostile sexism and repressive attitudes toward women were similarly associated with the attribution of more victim blame and less perpetrator responsibility. Although we did not examine fraternity membership or athletic team involvement as demographic variables in the current study, it is interesting to consider the degree to which subcultural pro-aggression cues may have influenced our participants.

Nonetheless, the current study adds to the body of literature on perceptions of acquaintance rape and highlights the importance of gender role attitudes on such attributions of blame. It is clear that future research should continue to examine this construct, specifically utilizing the HS as a primary mechanism for predicting blame. From a methodological standpoint, there are several similarities and differences between the current study and other investigations of gender role attitudes that are relevant. First, the literature has largely demonstrated a significant relationship between the HS and BS subscales across a wide variety of samples. In the current study, the correlation, while significant, demonstrated a reduced effect relative to previous research. Because it is unclear how this might affect the findings, it is possible that participants in the current study responded to the measures in a manner that differed from past investigations. One reason for this could be the sole use of male participants in the present study; previous work has often examined both men and women, and the overall correlations may be different when using a single gender sample. Future research would do well to examine the differential response to gender role attitude measures and control for sex of participant when examining variables of interest.

In addition, much of the work examining the ASI in relation to attributions about sexual assault has included participants from different geographical locations, especially Great Britain. It is entirely possible that cultural differences may play a role in the observed data. In addition, much of the previous research using the ASI to predict perceptions of a sexual assault has examined the BS and HS subscales as moderating rather than predictor variables. Thus, the manner of statistical analyses was different from those of the current study.

Related, one of the concerns about work in this area is the use of different scales and items across studies to measure attributions about the victim and perpetrator. For example, some researchers have utilized single items, and others have utilized multi-item scales. Some have measured responsibility, while others have included culpability, credibility, foreseeability, and other similar variables. Therefore, it is possible that the varied measurement tools and constructs across studies account for differences in findings. The field will be improved with the development of "gold standard" measures used consistently across studies much the same way that gender role attitudes has been advanced through the development and adoption of instruments such as those used in the present study.

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