

## Blaming the Victim in the Case of Rape

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At the heart of “A Theory of Blame” is the Path Model of Blame, a map of the four or five information-processing steps that Malle, Guglielmo, and Monroe (this issue) propose are necessary and sufficient to account for observers’ ascription of blame to norm violators. The path model outlines the routes to blame from event detection onward and includes judgments of agent causality and intentionality as well as finer distinctions involving consideration of the agent’s reasons, obligations, and capacity to act in relation to the event.

Our recent research has focused on cases that may represent exceptions to standard models of blame, including perhaps the Path Model of Blame—sexual assault<sup>1</sup> and rape.<sup>2</sup> On one hand, rape involves a clear perpetrator (the rapist) and a clear victim (the individual who is raped); observers may be expected to assign blame to the perpetrator and to the perpetrator alone. On the other hand, assigning some degree of blame to rape victims is not uncommon (e.g., Bieneck & Krahe, 2011; Catellani, Alberici, & Milesi, 2004; Jones & Aronson, 1973; Krahe, 1991; Krahe, Temkin, & Bieneck, 2007; McCaul, Veltum, Boyechko, & Crawford, 1990). Indeed, the basic pattern of relatively lenient judgments of perpetrators alongside relatively harsh judgments of victims in the case of rape has been found in examinations of legal and medical proceedings, as well as social psychological experiments in which participants assign blame in the case of rape versus nonsexual crimes such as robbery (e.g., Bieneck & Krahe, 2011; Campbell, Wasco,

Ahrens, Sefl, & Barnes, 2001; Daly & Bouhours, 2010; Krahe et al., 2007; McGuire, Donner, & Callahan, 2012). In this commentary, we investigate whether the Path Model of Blame accommodates the phenomenon of victim blaming, as often observed in the case of rape.

The most straightforward application of the model to the case of rape proceeds as follows (Figure 1, left panel). First, observers detect rape as the norm-violating event. Second, observers detect the rapist as the causal agent. Third, observers determine the rapist’s intentions and reasons. Finally, observers assign some degree of blame to the rapist. As such, the path model accounts for how observers might assign blame to the perpetrator, that is, the rapist, in the case of rape. How might the path model apply to the victim? Following event detection is determination of agent causality: Did the victim cause the rape? A negative answer here results in no blame assigned to the rape victim (Figure 1, right panel).

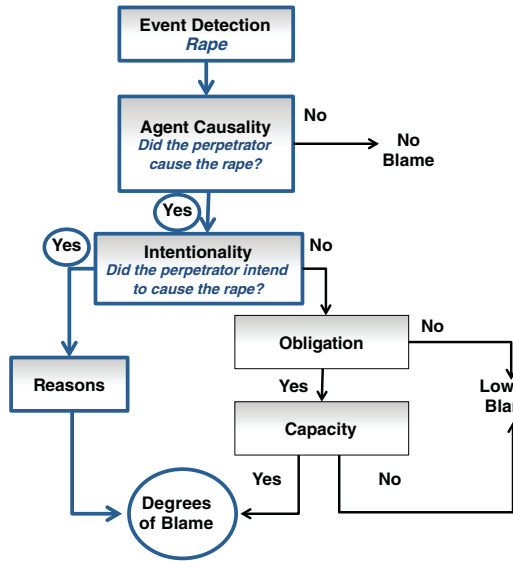
Yet, as evidence indicates, observers often assign blame to rape victims (e.g., Bieneck & Krahe, 2011; Catellani et al., 2004; Jones & Aronson, 1973; Krahe et al., 2007; McCaul et al., 1990). For illustration, we start with a case study: Recently publicized incidents at Patrick Henry College (PHC), which highlight the complex psychology of blame in the case of sexual assault. When a PHC student brought her own experience of sexual assault to the attention of the Dean of Student Affairs, she received the following response (Feldman, 2014): “You are in part responsible for what happened, because you put yourself in a compromising situation... Actions have consequences” (para. 72). The suggestion here is that *responsibility* and, likely, *blame* are appropriately assigned at least in part to the alleged victim. But if the perpetrator (and not the victim) in the case of sexual assault is the causal agent (Figure 1, left panel), how are we to make sense of victim blaming? Can both the victim and the perpetrator be causal agents? According to the dean’s statement just presented, a victim, by her “action” of being present, can be “in part responsible” for the perpetrator’s decision to rape her.

We turn to the question of whether the Path Model of Blame accommodates victim blaming. We think that Malle et al. specify a series of conditions that

<sup>1</sup>Sexual assault has been defined by the National Institute of Justice: “Sexual assault covers a wide range of unwanted behaviors—up to but not including penetration—that are attempted or completed against a victim’s will or when a victim cannot consent because of age, disability, or the influence of alcohol or drugs. Sexual assault may involve actual or threatened physical force, use of weapons, coercion, intimidation, or pressure” (National Institute of Justice, 2010).

<sup>2</sup>Rape has been defined by the National Institute of Justice: “Most [rape] statutes currently define rape as nonconsensual oral, anal, or vaginal penetration of the victim by body parts or objects using force, threats of bodily harm, or by taking advantage of a victim who is incapacitated or otherwise incapable of giving consent. Incapacitation may include mental or cognitive disability, self-induced or forced intoxication, status as minor, or any other condition defined by law that voids an individual’s ability to give consent” (National Institute of Justice, 2010).

**PERPETRATOR FOCUS MODEL 1**



**VICTIM FOCUS MODEL 1**

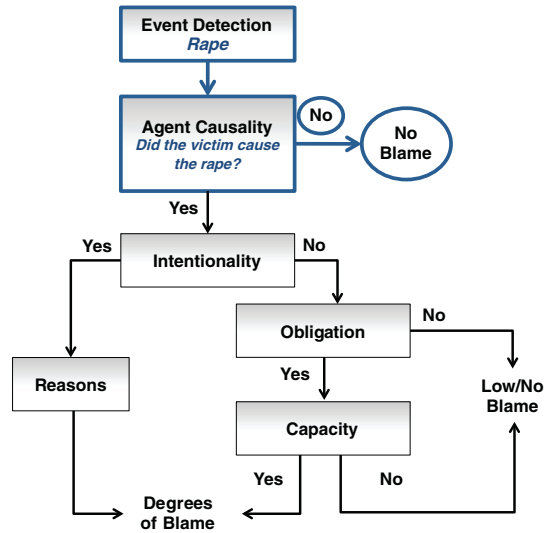


Figure 1. Malle et al.'s Path Model of Blame applied to evaluation of the perpetrator (left panel) and the victim (right panel) in the case of rape. (Color figure available online.)

may pave the way for victim blaming (Figure 2). First, victim blaming requires ascribing causality to the victim for the perpetrator's action; such ascriptions of causality are consistent with the dean's statement. The next question is whether the victim intended to cause herself to be raped. Assuming the

answer is "No," the next step is to determine whether the victim had an obligation to prevent causing the rapist to rape her. If the answer here is "Yes," the next step is to determine whether the victim had the capacity to fulfill her obligation. If the answer here is "Yes," then the victim will be ascribed some degree of blame (Figure 2). If not, "low blame" and "no blame" judgments remain options.

**VICTIM FOCUS MODEL 2:  
A PATH TO VICTIM-BLAMING**

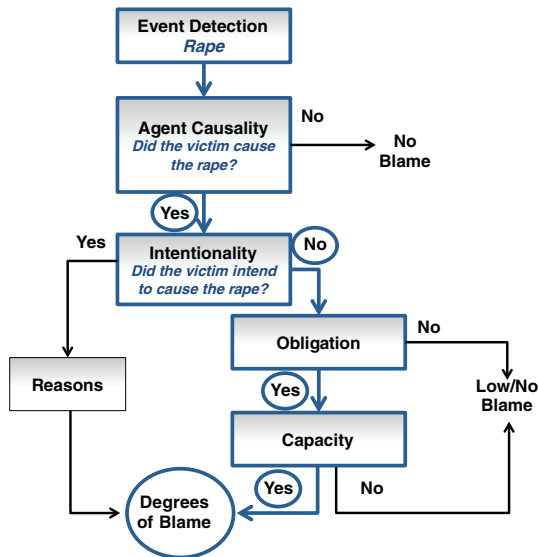


Figure 2. Malle et al.'s Path Model of Blame applied to evaluation of the victim in the case of rape. Note. Here, when the victim is determined to have caused the event at least in part, degrees of blame may be assigned to the victim. (Color figure available online.)

Let's take a closer look at the critical notion of obligation. The dean's statement represents a certain pattern of responses to sexual assault and sexual assault victims. The dean implies that the alleged (female) victim should have known to not put herself in a "compromising situation", for example, studying in private with another (male) student, the alleged perpetrator. She should have predicted that her own assault would follow from the situation, and therefore she should have met an implicit obligation to prevent the assault.

Our own recent research has targeted the impact of ideological factors on people's attitudes toward victims of sexual versus nonsexual crimes. We found, across a number of experiments, that participants rated sexual crime victims (i.e., hypothetical victims of rape and molestation) as more contaminated and less injured relative to nonsexual crime victims (i.e., hypothetical victims of stabbing and strangling). Moreover, perceptions of sexual assault victims as contaminated versus injured were predicted by ambivalent sexism, moral valuation of purity norms, and male gender. We also measured whether participants implicitly ascribed causality to the victim: Participants predicted whether he or she would be the next word in the following sentence stem: "George raped Julie

because ...” (Garvey & Caramazza, 1974; Hartshorne, 2013; Hartshorne & Snedeker, 2013; Pickering & Majid, 2007). The vast majority of participants selected *he*, implicitly ascribing causality to the rapist. In other words, most participants may have considered reasons why George caused the event (e.g., “because he is prone to violence,” “... is a terrible person,” “...wanted to teach her a lesson,” “...couldn’t control his desire”). Notably, though, the participants who selected “she” were more likely to report sexist attitudes and conservative moral values (including concern for purity and respect for authority). These participants may have been more likely to consider Julie’s causal role in the event (e.g., “because she was walking alone at night,” “...was drunk and passed out,” “...was wearing a short skirt”). Consistent with their implicit ascription of causality to the victim, the participants who completed the sentence stem “George raped Julie because...” with *she* were also more likely to rate sexual crime victims as less injured and to associate at an implicit level (based on a Single-Category Implicit Association Test) rape with *sex* rather than rape with *harm*.

Future work is needed to determine the precise relationship between blame and each of the measures used in our research: explicit assessments about injury and contamination of sexual assault victims, implicit associations between rape and sex versus rape and harm, and implicit ascriptions of causality to rape victims. Nevertheless, the cognitive processes underlying these attitudes are likely to play some role in blame judgments, including victim blaming. For example, sexism and moral valuation of purity and authority, which we found to track with implicit and explicit attitudes toward sexual assault victims, may relate to attitudes about female sexuality that may, in turn, explain the sentiments expressed in the dean’s statement. Specifically, benevolent sexism involves attributing a woman’s worth in part to her sexual and spiritual “purity,” whereas hostile sexism involves condemning women who do not adhere to traditional gender norms including ideals of female purity (Glick & Fiske, 1997). Women may be seen by some as under an *obligation* to keep themselves pure and to prevent themselves from being defiled or contaminated by sexual assault.

It is worth noting at this point that we have explored two possible interpretations of the evidence: Either victim blaming is an important exception unaccounted for by the path model (Figure 1, right panel) or victim blaming can, in fact, be accommodated by the path model (Figure 2). An important normative question remains: Is victim blaming rational? We think not, in accordance with the official position of the administration of PHC. The PHC Office of Communication released a statement in the aftermath

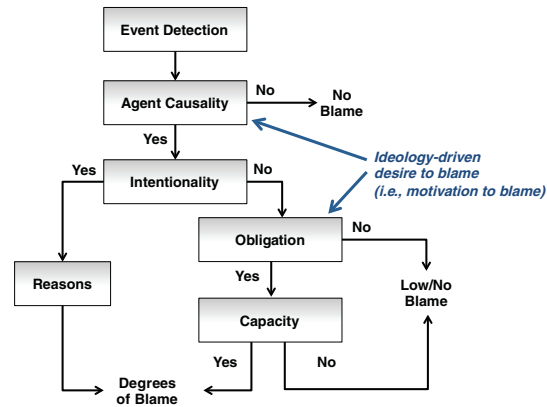


Figure 3. Within the Path Model of blame, agent causality and obligation judgments represent potential targets of ideology-driven desire to blame that may increase victim blaming in the case of rape.

of the media explosion involving their response to sexual assault (Dreher, 2014):

Patrick Henry College believes it is offensive to suggest that persons who have been assaulted are somehow ‘responsible’ for the crime that has been perpetrated against them. The College and its administrators do not take the view, and have never taken the view, that female students somehow are responsible if they have been subjected to a sexual assault. (para. 21)

Indeed, evidence suggests that ideological factors may be strong drivers of victim blaming in the case of sexual assault. We suggest further that ideological motivation to blame the victim affects information processing particularly at the agent causality and obligation nodes of the path model (Figure 3). Yet the path model does not appear to allow for the key influence of ideology or motivated cognition on victim blaming. If it is not a desire to blame the victim in service of sexism or the maintenance of purity and authority norms that informs what is meant by *obligation* in the path model as applied to sexual assault, then what are the factors that enable rational judgments about obligation or even causation? We call on Malle et al. to clarify their position on whether victim blaming (in general or specifically in the case of sexual assault) represents an exception to the path model and the extent to which motivated cognition has a role to play in victim blaming.

## Note

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