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AMBIVALENT SEXISM AND THE IMPACT OF VICTIM ATTRACTIVENESS ON
BELIEVABILITY

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By

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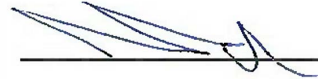
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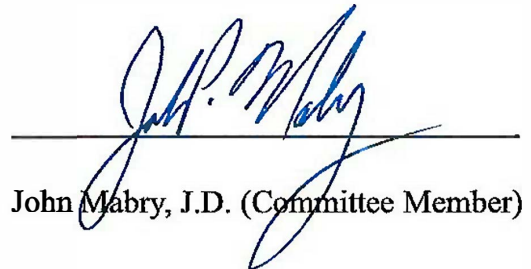
By

A handwritten signature in blue ink, appearing to read "Jaclyn Maass", written over a horizontal line.

Jaclyn Maass, Ph.D. (Committee Chairperson)

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John Mabry, J.D. (Committee Member)

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Abstract

Evidence suggests that one in five college women will be sexually victimized during their time in higher education. In spite of this prevalence, it is still one of the most underreported crimes. One major factor that prevents victims from coming forward about their experiences is the fear of not being believed. Several different factors may contribute to people's likelihood of believing accounts of sexual assault. Personal perception, rape myth acceptance, and physical appearance can all contribute to believing victims. The presence of ambivalent sexism can also play a role in this. Ambivalent sexism is made up of two separate constructs: benevolence and hostility. The current research investigated the impact of victims' attractiveness on the believability of their sexual assault accounts when moderated by ambivalent sexism. Based on the halo effect, I hypothesized that a more attractive victim may be believed more than a less attractive victim (H1a). Based on victim blaming, I hypothesized that a more attractive victim may be believed less than a less attractive victim (H1b). Additionally, I hypothesized that those with high levels of hostile sexism would be more inclined to believe a more attractive victim than the less attractive victim (H2a), and those with high levels of benevolent sexism would be more likely to believe the less attractive victim compared to the more attractive victim (H2b). Participants ($N = 177$) read a mock sexual assault testimony paired with a confederate photograph of the supposed victim. These photographs were normed based on perceived attractiveness from the Chicago Face Database. The photographs with the highest and lowest ratings were used for the more and less attractive victim conditions, respectively. Participants then completed a believability questionnaire, the Ambivalent Sexism Inventory, and some demographic information. The entire study was completed online through Qualtrics. Hypotheses 1a and 1b were tested through an independent samples t -test; the results were not significant.

Hypotheses 2a and 2b were tested using simple slope analysis. Hypothesis 2a was not supported statistically. The test for Hypothesis 2b reached marginal significance, but in the opposite direction as predicted. Those high in benevolent sexism were more likely to believe the more attractive confederate victim compared to the less attractive victim. These results could hold implications primarily for case solvability and jury selection. Limitations included a possible ceiling effect, limiting the ability to find a statistically significant effect. The population also skewed young with an average age of 25. Future research should include measures for rape myth acceptance, feminism, religiosity, and political affiliation.

Keywords: ambivalent sexism, attractiveness bias, jury selection

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I would also like to offer my sincere thanks to the friends I have made along the way. From words of encouragement, to late night coffee dates, to simply comradery. They have truly made this process some of the best years of my life. Finally, without the constant support of my loving family, this process would not have been possible.

Ambivalent Sexism and the Impact of Victim Attractiveness on Believability

One in five college women will be sexually victimized during their time in higher education (Muehlenhard et al., 2017). In spite of this prevalence, it is still one of the most underreported crimes (Nason et al., 2019; Venema et al., 2021). One issue with sexual assault cases is that they often lack physical evidence and rely on testimony from both sides (i.e., “he said she said”). A major factor that prevents victims from coming forward about their experiences is the fear of not being believed (Whiting et al., 2021). Not only can this cause immense interpersonal trauma, but it can also mean that offenders are not prosecuted. This might lead to subsequent victimization. Several different factors may contribute to people’s likelihood of believing accounts of sexual assault.

Victim believability plays a very important role in the judicial process from the time of the assault to possible convictions. When a potential crime is reported, law enforcement must take the solvability of the crime into account. Due to high crime rates and understaffing, police precincts do not have the time to dedicate to cases they deem unsolvable (Keatley & Clarke, 2022). The cases with the highest likelihood of being solved are the ones that get assigned to detectives. To determine the likelihood that a case can be solved, law enforcement consider ‘solvability factors’, including availability of hard evidence, reliability and cooperativeness of victims and eyewitnesses, and presence of leads on potential suspects (Savino & Turvey, 2011). Cases that are deemed to have low solvability are often not pursued, in favor of more promising cases. The believability of a victim coming forward to law enforcement would factor into this decision (Campbell et al., 2015; Richards et al., 2019). Such believability may be based on personal perceptions, biases, or misconceptions rather than factual information.

Rape Myths

Rape myths are widely held false beliefs about the motives behind sexual assault. These myths serve to downplay the negative impacts these assaults have on victims. They serve to place the perpetrator on a pedestal and blame the victim for their actions (Suarez & Gadalla, 2010). The stereotypical “real rape” scenario is a blitz attack that takes place at night in seclusion (Bongiorno et al., 2016; McKimmie et al., 2014; Stuart et al., 2019). The perpetrator is generally a strong male who is a stranger to the victim. This stranger is generally wielding a weapon of some kind and uses this weapon to harm the victim. As does any false stereotype, these myths only serve to decrease awareness and action in sexual assault cases (Bongiorno et al., 2016; Suarez & Gadalla, 2010). Much of these beliefs are held on a subconscious level.

Contrary to common misconceptions, most sexual assaults are carried out by individuals who are acquainted with the victims, rather than strangers. An acquaintance can be anyone from a first date to an intimate partner or friend. Additionally, victims of sexual assault often do not sustain severe physical injuries (Lilley et al., 2023; Waterhouse et al. 2016). Researchers have found that two-thirds of sexual assault victims do not sustain any bodily injuries. In 4% of cases, outpatient treatment was required, and only 1% of cases required inpatient treatment (Feist et al., 2007). These misconceptions about common injuries only serve to further harm victims. These fallacies become an increasing problem when they are believed by the public as jury samples are pulled from the general population. The more an individual endorses these myths, the less likely they will be to believe victims (Chapleau et al., 2007; Nason et al., 2019; Rinehart et al., 2023). Believing false stereotypes about sexual assault may prevent individuals from believing victims if their account does not match the details of the myth.

Based on a series of studies conducted on rape myth acceptance, evidence suggests that it does play a critical role in juror decision making (Leverick, 2020). Rape myths were frequently brought up in deliberation rooms in very realistic mock trial studies. Researchers found that previously held beliefs about real rape significantly predicted outcomes for jurors in these realistic trial scenarios. Additionally, a large portion of the mock juror participants held views that aligned with the stereotype of real rape (Leverick, 2020). Rape myth acceptance does not always look like overt sexism. Much of these beliefs are held on a subconscious level. While systematic change is possible, it can be difficult to adjust your mindset to incorporate ideas outside of your existing perceptions.

Personal Perception

One factor that influences a person's credibility and believability is our perception of them. Many things can impact the way that people perceive others. According to social identity theory, individuals favor members of their ingroup more positively than those of an outgroup (Harrison et al., 2008). This occurs even when there has been no interaction or previous hostility between the two social groups. Ingroup biases could potentially influence individuals to question the credibility of outgroup members who accuse their peers of violent crimes. Even something as miniscule as a change in dialect can impact perception. Researchers have found that foreign accents have been correlated with harsher sentences in court proceedings (Romero-Rivas et al., 2022). Individuals were more likely to rate native speakers more positively than those with accents. Additionally, something as simple as wearing a pair of eyeglasses to court can fundamentally change the way that you are perceived (Fleischmann et al., 2018; Merry, 2013), as people who wear glasses are often judged to be smarter and more trustworthy (Leder et al., 2011).

First impressions are highly related to subsequent feelings towards others. Within seconds of meeting a stranger, human beings have already made implicit judgements based on their physical appearance (Han et al., 2018). The concept of anchoring and adjustment refers to the tendency for people to anchor their opinions of others on their first initial impressions and adjusting their latter feelings based on that first impression (Furnham & Boo, 2011). Our perceptions of others have impacts in many other areas as well. There is evidence to suggest that individuals are more likely to rate confederates more positively if they are physically attractive (Han et al., 2018; Lenoir & Stocks, 2019). This mechanism is called the halo effect or the attractiveness bias (Klebl et al., 2022; Verhulst et al., 2010).

These biases have been observed in many settings, one of them being the justice system. Jurors were found to deem attractive people guilty less often (Cothran et al., 2017; Kramer et al., 2023; Patry, 2008). This tendency has been termed the attractiveness leniency effect (Mazzella & Feingold, 1994). Attractiveness bias has also been shown as early as infancy, alluding that these biases are innate and not a cognitive choice (Langlois et al., 1990). This leads us to question if a similar effect can be found on the opposite side of the spectrum. When moderated by sexism, does the attractiveness of victims of sexual assault impact the rate at which they are believed?

Halo Effect

If one positive attribute is exhibited by a stranger, you may be more likely to automatically attribute other positive qualities to that person. This phenomenon is called the Halo effect (Han et al., 2018; Klebl et al., 2022; Lenoir & Stocks, 2019; Verhulst et al., 2010). The halo effect can be observed in many settings with an array of positive qualities such as intelligence, personality traits, success, charisma, and talent. The attractiveness bias is a phenomenon that falls under the umbrella of the halo effect. Someone who appears physically

attractive is more likely to have other positive qualities automatically attributed to them (Klebl et al., 2022; Verhulst et al., 2010). Facial attractiveness is not the only factor that can contribute to the halo effect. Researchers have found that those that present with positive personality traits and attitudes are perceived as more attractive than if they were to present with negative personality traits (Han et al., 2018).

The halo effect can also impact the opposite side of the spectrum, and for traits other than physical appearance (Álvarez-García et al., 2014; Hartung et al., 2010; Lenoir & Stocks, 2019). Once we have assigned negative attributes to others, we tend to automatically associate other negative attributes to these individuals as well. Disruptive behaviors, hyperactivity and impulsivity can all negatively affect perceptions of others (Álvarez-García et al., 2014; Lenoir & Stocks, 2019). However, the positive attributes often outweigh the negative in terms of forming lasting views of people (Lenoir & Stocks, 2019). It is also common for individuals to make snap judgments of others based solely on their appearance. This serves as a mechanism to enhance personal safety as individuals are more likely to make quick judgments in areas with higher crime rates (Lenoir & Stocks, 2019).

Upon first glance at any individual, people have already begun to form impressions of trustworthiness. These impressions can be swayed by things like tattoos, facial piercings, facial expressions and displayed emotions. Dangerous decisions theory is a theoretical perspective that aims to classify the subsequent actions of judges and juries after making these initial judgments (Korva et al., 2013; Porter & Brinke, 2009). These decisions can be dangerous due to the unforgiving nature of the justice and prison systems. Additionally, researchers have found that facial attractiveness, visible facial scars or tattoos, baby-facedness, and race can all contribute to

perceived threat and trustworthiness (Johnson & King, 2017). All of these variables play roles in how judges evaluate credibility regardless of case evidence (Korva et al., 2013).

A sharp new suit and a fresh haircut can make a world of difference for defendants on trial. Dressing in a professional manner can change the overall perceptions of trustworthiness and potentially guilt. Those that present themselves in more of a pristine manor are likely to be perceived in a more positive regard. In a study geared to assess implicit biases in hiring job candidates, researchers found that when a male presented wearing earrings, his perceived credibility went down (Seiter & Sandry, 2003). When a man was wearing a nose ring, he was much less likely to be hired. These implicit judgements are surely present in the courtroom as well.

Sexism

The views that a person holds toward women may impact how likely they are to believe a female victim of sexual assault. This holds for both men and women, as both can hold biased views toward women. Sexist beliefs are indicative that one sex is considered superior or more valuable in some way to the other. Ambivalent sexism can be split into two categories: hostility and benevolence (Begany & Milburn, 2002). There are two types of sexism (hostile and benevolent), both of which can have negative impacts of believability. For those who are high in hostile sexism, their beliefs can be characterized primarily by an endorsement of male superiority, power, and sexual dominance (Bareket & Fiske, 2023; Begany & Milburn, 2002; Glick & Fiske, 1996). These individuals believe that women are in general, incompetent and must be supervised in important settings. Individuals displaying hostile sexism hold unfavorable opinions towards women who seek positions of authority over men. To the hostile sexist, women

are not capable of succeeding in these positions (Bareket & Fiske, 2023; Begany & Milburn, 2002; Glick & Fiske, 1996).

For those high in benevolent sexism, their beliefs encompass the stereotypical gender norms in society. These individuals believe that women in general are weak, incapable, and only belong in positions of traditional female roles (Bareket & Fiske, 2023; Begany & Milburn, 2002; Glick & Fiske, 1996). Those high in benevolent sexism believe that women need to be taken care of and provided for by men. Additionally, those high in benevolent sexism think women are meant to be cherished as homemakers. Benevolent sexists have a positive view of women who fall into traditional gender roles (Begany & Milburn, 2002; Durán et al., 2011; Glick & Fiske, 1996). While holding these ideologies is not inherently bad, research shows that men and those who endorse such traditional gender roles are more likely to believe rape myths (Suarez & Gadalla, 2010).

Both subsets of sexist beliefs endorse male superiority and systematic authority. According to this, only men belong in higher positions in governments and corporate institutions. According to the literature, it appears that hostile and benevolent attitudes towards women have been associated with an increase in rape myth acceptance (Chapleau et al., 2007) and victim blaming (Rollero & Tartaglia, 2019). Theoretically, an attractive woman may automatically be perceived as more provocative simply because of her appearance. Those high in ambivalent sexism may be more inclined to believe that she was inviting it or failed to protect herself adequately through her clothing or behavior (Paliliunas & Frizell, 2021; Wolfendale, 2016). When presented with accusations of sexual assault against men, those high in benevolent sexism were more likely to believe that the victim led on the perpetrator, and those high in hostile sexism were more likely to believe that the victim wanted sex with the perpetrator (Abrams et

al., 2003; Bareket & Fiske, 2023; Durán et al., 2011; Hammond et al., 2018). These narratives fit the preconceived prejudices these individuals have against women.

The Present Study

The attractiveness of women can play a major role in how they are treated by men, in particular, sexist men. Researchers discovered that when a woman literally or metaphorically emphasizes a man's power, he is likely to find her more attractive (Bargh & Raymond, 1995). In contrast, it is not out of the ordinary for men to be wary of sexually attractive women. Some men may fear that women will use their appeal to dominate men (Glick & Fiske, 1996).

Beauty can affect the way that people are perceived as well as the way they are believed. Men were found to be more likely to believe sexual assault victims when they were attractive as they assumed their attractiveness made them more likely to be sexually harrassed (Seiter & Dunn, 2000). They also perceived the unattractive confederates as more deceptive and therefore were found to be less likely to believe these individuals. It is not just the physical appearance of the person, but also their attire that can influence perception. Research revealed that victims of sexual assault were believed at a higher rate when they were dressed in modest clothing (Paliliunas & Frizell, 2021). Emotions displayed by the victims can also impact the way they are believed. According to previous studies, those that present with little emotion or positive emotion were believed less (Keskin et al., 2023). Those that showed signs of shame were more likely to be believed (Keskin et al., 2023).

Believability and credibility are closely related constructs within the realm of psychology (Brodsky et al., 2010). Believability pertains more to specific instances and stories that are up for interpretation and can vary from person to person. Someone can be believed without necessarily being a credible source. Someone who is credible however, possesses qualities of expertise,

trustworthiness, reliability, experience, and consistency (Brodsky et al., 2010). Both of these constructs play crucial roles in how individuals perceive information, people, or additional sources. For the purposes of this study, questionnaires were geared to address both ends of this spectrum.

The present study further investigated the role that physical attractiveness plays in believability of a sexual assault victim when moderated by ambivalent sexism. The first research question was: how does the physical attractiveness of a sexual assault victim affect their believability? Two competing hypotheses were tested.

- Hypothesis 1a: Based on the halo effect, a more attractive victim may be believed more than a less attractive victim.
- Hypothesis 1b: Based on victim blaming, a more attractive victim may be believed less than a less attractive victim.

The second research question was: how does participants' sexism affect the relationship between victim attractiveness and believability?

- Hypothesis 2a. Hostile sexism will moderate the relationship such that participants with higher levels of hostile sexism will be more inclined to believe a more attractive victim compared to a less attractive victim, whereas those with lower levels of hostile sexism will be inclined to believe victims regardless of physical appearance.
- Hypothesis 2b. Benevolent sexism will moderate the relationship such that those high in benevolent sexism may be more inclined to believe the less attractive victim compared to the more attractive victim, whereas those low in benevolent sexism will be inclined to believe victims regardless of physical appearance.

Method

Participants

Participants were recruited through a global email blast at the University of Central Oklahoma sent to all students, faculty and staff, as well as social media platforms such as Facebook and Instagram. There was no compensation offered. A total of 199 people completed the study, although 22 were removed from data analysis. Thirteen participants were removed due to spending too long on the survey (more than two standard deviations above the mean), and nine participants were removed due to spending too much time on the vignette (more than two standard deviations above the mean), for a final sample size of $N = 177$. Demographic information regarding age, sex, sexual orientation, race/ethnicity, and past experience with sexual assault was collected. Participants ranged from 18 - 62 years of age ($M = 25.93$, $SD = 9.66$). Two participants elected to not report their age. Participants reported their sex as follows: 130 individuals self-identified as female, 36 identified as male, 5 identified as non-binary/third gender, 1 identified as other, and 5 preferred not to say. Sexual orientation was as follows: 96 participants identified as heterosexual, 49 identified as bisexual, 10 identified as homosexual, 17 identified as “other” (asexual, pansexual, unsure, etc.), and 5 preferred not to answer. Ethnicity was made up of 125 White, 6 Black/African American, 5 Asian, 5 American Indian or Alaska Native, 1 Native Hawaiian or Pacific Islander, 6 “Other” (Hispanic/Latino and Middle Eastern), 1 prefer not to say, and 28 multi-racial. Participants were asked if they had ever experienced/been a victim of sexual assault: 70 said no, 94 said yes, and 13 preferred not to say. Participants were asked if they had ever pressured someone else into sexual activity with them: 163 said no, 10 said yes, and 4 preferred not to answer.

Materials

This study utilized the Chicago Face Database (Ma et al., 2015). All photographs were normed based on several factors including subjective ratings of attractiveness and objective physical measurements. The present study used two photographs from the database to represent the victim in a fictional sexual assault vignette. The female with the lowest attractiveness rating was used for the less attractive victim condition and the female with the highest attractiveness rating in the database represented the victim in the high attractiveness condition. See Appendix A for both photographs.

The Ambivalent Sexism Inventory

The Ambivalent Sexism Inventory (Glick & Fiske, 1996; Appendix B) was used to measure hostile and benevolent sexism. This scale is a self-report measure consisting of 22 items using a 6-point Likert-scale ranging from 1 (strongly disagree) to 6 (strongly agree). This measure consists of two subscales- hostile sexism and benevolent sexism, with 11 statements each. The order of all 22 items were randomized for each participant. Responses to each subscale were summed, with higher scores indicating a higher endorsement of hostile or benevolent sexist beliefs, respectively. The order of all 22 items were randomized for each participant.

Believability Measure

In order to assess believability, items were compiled from three different measures to capture believability of the story as well as believability of the victim. The questionnaire includes three items from the juror decision making scale to assess overall believability and plausibility of the victim and her story (Willmott et al., 2018), seven items from the narrative believability scale to measure perceptions of the narrative as well as overall belief in the victim (Yale, 2013), and eight items from the witness credibility scale which measure perceptions of the

victim (Brodsky et al., 2010). All 18 items on the composed believability scale were answered on a 6-point Likert scale ranging from 1 (strongly disagree) to 6 (Strongly agree). The order of all 18 items were randomized for each participant. Responses were summed for a single believability score ranging from 18-108. The believability measure is provided in Appendix C.

Sexual Assault Vignette

The sexual assault vignette (Appendix D) was comprised of two vignettes used in previous research. The pre-tested vignette (Kaufmann et al., 2003) depicted an ambiguous sexual assault scenario where a woman invited an old friend over for dinner. The man misinterpreted her intentions and proceeded to persuade the woman to have sex with him. She unwillingly complied. Some of the verbiage was updated to read more naturally (“drawing room” changed to “living room”). In order to add further ambiguity, the ending of the vignette was altered to include the perspective of the supposed perpetrator (Nason et al., 2019).

Procedure

The study was conducted online through Qualtrics. Participants received a link to participate through a global email. Participation took on average approximately 13 minutes. Participants were first taken through informed consent procedures. Participants were randomly assigned to two conditions; a more attractive victim condition ($n = 93$) and a less attractive victim condition ($n = 84$). Participants were presented with the respective photographs displayed above the written vignette. In order to ensure participants were paying attention to the photograph, they were asked to describe the facial expression of the victim in the image. To ensure that participants read the entirety of the vignette, participants were asked to write a two sentence summary of the vignette at the bottom of the page. All participants passed both

attention checks. They then completed the believability measure, the Ambivalent Sexism Inventory and a demographics questionnaire.

Results

The first research question addressed two competing hypotheses: Based on the halo effect, Hypothesis 1a predicted that a more attractive victim would be believed more than a less attractive victim. Based on victim blaming, Hypothesis 1b predicted that a more attractive victim would be believed less than a less attractive victim. An independent-samples *t*-test revealed no significant effect, $t(175) = -.98, p = .33$. There was no significant difference in believability scores between the less attractive ($M = 70.74, SD = 12.55$) and more attractive victim conditions ($M = 72.63, SD = 13.08$).

The second research question was whether participants' sexism would moderate the relationship between attractiveness and believability. This was tested separately for hostile and benevolent sexism. For hostile sexism, Hypothesis 2a predicted that those with higher levels of hostile sexism would be more likely to believe a less attractive victim compared to a more attractive victim, but at lower levels of hostile sexism, people would be inclined to believe victims regardless of physical appearance. Simple slope analyses were conducted to test the moderating role of hostile sexism on the attractiveness manipulation. We looked at the effect of attractiveness at low, medium and high hostile sexism. There was no significant difference in attractiveness conditions when hostile sexism was high ($b = -3.15, t(173) = -1.31, p = .19$), average ($b = -1.42, t(173) = -0.83, p = .41$), or low ($b = .32, t(173) = .13, p = .89$).

For benevolent sexism, Hypothesis 2b predicted that those high in benevolent sexism would be more inclined to believe the less attractive victim compared to the more attractive victim, whereas those low in benevolent sexism will also be inclined to believe victims

regardless of physical appearance. The average score for benevolent sexism was $M = 32.27$ ($SD = 7.42$). We looked at the effect of attractiveness at low, medium and high benevolent sexism.

There was no significant difference in attractiveness conditions when benevolent sexism was low ($b = 1.02$, $t(173) = .38$, $p = .70$) or average ($b = -2.09$, $t(173) = -1.10$, $p = .27$). However, when benevolent sexism was high, attractiveness did predict believability with marginal significance ($b = -5.17$, $t(173) = -1.93$, $p = .056$). The negative beta coefficient indicates that the more attractive victim was marginally more believable than the less attractive victim, when benevolent sexism was high.

Discussion

The goal of this research was to determine the extent to which victim attractiveness plays a role how likely someone is to believe a sexual assault victim when moderated by hostile and benevolent sexism. Hypothesis 1a, that a more attractive victim may be believed more than a less attractive victim, was not supported. Hypothesis 1b, that a more attractive victim may be believed less than a less attractive victim, was not supported. Hypothesis 2a predicted that those high in hostile sexism would be more likely to believe a more attractive compared to the less attractive victim; this hypothesis was not supported. The simple slope analysis for hypothesis 2b reached marginal significance, but in the opposite direction. Those high in benevolent sexism were more likely to believe the more attractive victim compared to the less attractive victim.

Broadly speaking, the results of the current study contribute to the extensive body of research that highlights how personal biases influence perceptions of others (Han et al., 2018; Klebl et al., 2022; Verhulst et al., 2010). This work also supports that a person's level of sexism affects their perceptions of others and how they make decisions on their character (Abrams et al., 2003; Chapleau et al., 2007). While the attractiveness of the victim may not affect believability

in all cases, it does appear to be a relevant factor based on a person's type and degree of sexism. For those high in benevolent sexism, their views can be characterized by a strong endorsement of stereotypical gender norms in society. These individuals view women as incapable, weak, best suited for traditional female roles, and in need of protection from men (Bareket & Fiske, 2023; Begany & Milburn, 2002; Glick & Fiske, 1996). The halo effect can be defined by the natural affinity towards more attractive individuals. When someone is perceived as more attractive, we are more likely to automatically attribute other positive qualities to that person (Han et al., 2018; Klebl et al., 2022; Lenoir & Stocks, 2019; Verhulst et al., 2010). These biases are believed to be so innate that they can be observed as early as infancy (Langlois et al., 1990). Theoretically, someone with high levels of benevolent sexism may believe that a more attractive woman would be more likely to be sexually victimized due to their appearance, and vice versa. Higher levels of attractiveness may also intersect with the belief that women are virtuous and meant to be cherished and protected by men. These individuals may not hold the same levels of empathy for those they deem as less attractive.

I initially argued that those high in hostile sexism would blame the more attractive woman more than the less attractive victim, which was not supported by the data. Since hostile sexism is characterized by a strong endorsement of patriarchal norms, male superiority, and sexual dominance (Bareket & Fiske, 2023; Begany & Milburn, 2002; Glick & Fiske, 1996), it is possible that those high in hostile sexism are simply inclined to not believe the woman, regardless of her other personal attributes.

Implications

The results of this study may have implications for the general public, jurors, lawyers, and police officers. Many people are directly affected by sexual victimization. One in five

college women will experience sexual victimization during their time in higher education (Muehlenhard et al., 2017). Even this statistic may be under-reporting, as 53% of participants in the current study, which consisted primarily of college students, reported having experienced or been a victim of sexual assault. With sexual assault occurring at such a high rate, it is especially important for the general public to confront their own biases in believing accounts of sexual victimization. From the moment a victim comes forward with their experiences, the way they are perceived can have major impacts on their legal case. Friends and family members are most often the first individuals to be approached in these situations. If these individuals show hesitation or any inclination towards not believing the victims, it may affect their likelihood to report the crime. Even when they do still proceed with legal action, the doubt elicited by their trusted acquaintances could plant seeds of doubt in their own minds, in turn, making them seem less credible in general.

First responders are largely involved in which cases are deemed worth pursuing. Their biases, whether related to the victim's attractiveness or their own potentially sexist beliefs, could directly impact the victim's case. Specifically, uniformed officers who are initially assigned to these cases play a significant role in the assessment of the solvability of the case. Solvability is an important factor that is considered when deciding which cases need precedent as there are limited resources to spend (Keatley & Clarke, 2022; Savino & Turvey, 2011). Law enforcement may move on from cases where victim credibility is called into question (Campbell et al., 2015; Richards et al., 2019), so an officer's initial impression of the victim's believability could dramatically impact whether the case is even pursued/investigated. First responders and uniformed officers are not the only people in the justice system that would potentially be affected by their own biases.

Once in the court system, defense attorneys, prosecutors, judges, and juries all play significant roles in how sexual assault cases are handled. While, in theory, juries are selected at random, in reality, they are meticulously hand-picked from a sample of summoned citizens. This process is called *voir dire* (Otis et al., 2014; Schniederjans & Hollcroft, 2005). The results of this study may also have important implications on the process of *voir dire*. During this phase, both the prosecution and defense have the opportunity to ask prospective jurors any questions they believe are necessary in order to construct the jury. This provides each side a (limited) opportunity to remove potential jurors using peremptory strikes, which do not require any justification (Schniederjans & Hollcroft, 2005). These questions are typically aimed at assessing how the jurors might ultimately decide the case (Otis et al., 2014). The questions can vary widely, from seemingly trivial to deeply personal (Rosario, 2021; Schniederjans & Hollcroft, 2005). While the process is intended to ensure an impartial jury, legal teams often seek to influence the jury selection in a way that aligns with their strategy and favors their case. In regards to sexual assault cases, it may be within reason for prosecution teams to ask questions that target benevolent sexism. For example, if a client would be perceived as less conventionally attractive, it would be best to strike potential jurors who show signs of benevolent sexism. Or, if their client would be considered conventionally attractive, it would be best to keep those who show signs of benevolent sexism. This could be accomplished by asking questions during *voir dire* from the Ambivalent Sexism Inventory (Glick & Fiske, 1996) such as “Do you think women tend to have a more refined sense of culture and better taste than men?” This question may be suitable as it is less blatantly about sexism, so people may be more likely to answer honestly, especially since a response of ‘yes’ would not be openly attributing a negative attribute to women.

Limitations

The results of this study do hold important implications for real-world cases, however, the current study is not without limitations. There was a possible ceiling effect in this study as the average believability score across both conditions was approximately 72, out of a possible maximum believability score of 108. This could be due to several factors, including a lack of ambiguity in the sexual assault vignette or the current trends in our cultural climate. The text was meant to be presented in an ambiguous manner, however, there was more content in the story from the supposed victim's point of view, with only a minor comment of disagreement from the supposed perpetrator. This text was also written more than 20 years ago, before the "Me Too" movement (Jaffe et al., 2021). The #MeToo movement was initially started in 2006 and gained widespread attention in 2017 when it began trending on Twitter, with thousands of women using the hashtag to share their experiences. Perceptions of sexual assault and definitions of what constitutes sexual assault have changed drastically since this movement (Jaffe et al., 2021; Szekeres et al., 2020). Even though the vignette included the woman taking purposeful actions to advance the physical relationship (e.g., she admits to kissing him), there were also clear physical actions taken (e.g., pushing him away) to indicate her dissent. Due to shifting ideologies and views of sexual assault, people may be more inclined today to definitively qualify an event as sexual assault when there is a single questionable moment or any possibility of withdrawal of consent. The vignette in question may have been ambiguous when it was initially written in 2003, but the public today may be primed to believe sexual assault victims regardless of other factors.

Another potential limitation of this study is the average age of our participants. While participant ages ranged from 18 to 61 years old, the sample skewed toward a younger age with

approximately 75% between the ages of 18 and 27. Also, this age range makes it difficult to generalize the results to the entire population. The ability to generalize is especially important in this context because juries are made up of people of a wide range of ages. People of the younger generation may be more impacted by the #MeToo movement than older generations as those born after 1995 are more likely to consider the internet as a normal aspect of their everyday lives (Fietkiewicz et al., 2016).

Future Directions

Future research should address the main limitations of the current study by identifying a more ambiguous vignette and targeting a wider population. Not only did the sample in the current study skew young, but the population of the utmost importance is uniformed officers. These individuals are the ones that ultimately decide how these cases are handled. Future research should investigate biases that may exist in police work including sexist beliefs and the attractiveness bias. Additionally, generational differences are becoming more prevalent as time goes on. Studying benevolent sexism and believability in older generations may prove to be beneficial.

In addition to extending the population of interest, it may be best to conduct this research using alternative materials including the way that the victim's story is provided and the measure of believability. Extend to decision making. The vignette included in the current study may be improved by first pilot testing for ambiguity to reduce the possibility of ceiling effects. An alternative format may also be beneficial to better simulate a real trial (e.g., transcripts or videos from real court cases). Further embedding the victim's account within the rest of the details of a trial would also extend the ecological validity of the current study. For example, in an actual court case, the victim's account would be reported within the context of the rest of the evidence

and testimony (e.g., eyewitness accounts, police testimony, any physical evidence, character witnesses). The outcome being measured can also be extended to include not only believability of the victim, but also the impact of that believability on verdict decision making.

It may be valuable for future research to investigate the role of additional individual differences, in regard to both the participant and the supposed victim. For example, Smith (2020) reported that certain populations are especially unlikely to report cases of sexual assault, including males and people of color. One of the main reasons for not reporting sexual assault is the fear of not being believed (Whiting et al., 2021), so researchers could investigate how believability may differ based on the gender and/or race of the supposed victim. The level of feminism in the participant may also be an important individual difference. While some levels of feminism are beneficial, high levels may cause individuals to believe all sexual assault victims regardless of any mitigating factors. Future research should also include measures for political ideologies, religiosity, social media usage, and specifically rape myth acceptance. There is already research linking rape myth acceptance and not believing victims of sexual assault (Rinehart et al., 2023). However, there is a lack of literature linking rape myth acceptance, victim attractiveness, and ambivalent sexism.

The main takeaway from this study is the fact that those with higher levels of benevolent sexism were more likely to believe a less attractive victim over a more attractive victim. It was the interaction between the participant's level of sexism and the attractiveness of the victim that impacted believability, rather than the facts of the case. This shows an important bias in how we perceive others in general, but especially victims of violent crime. Benevolent sexism may initially be seen as 'not as bad' as hostile sexism, but the results of this study indicate that this construct can play an important role in skewing perceptions of women and their credibility

regarding sexual assault. Sexism is still very present in our society, as I was able to elicit these responses out of a fairly young sample. Those who present with these ideologies could serve on juries for sexual assault cases, so it is important to understand how characteristics of the victim may impact their decision making. Legal teams should be aware of these potential biases to aid in selecting an unbiased jury.

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Appendix A

Chicago Face Database Stimuli (Ma et al., 2015)

Face utilized in the less attractive condition:



Face utilized in the more attractive condition:



Appendix B

The Ambivalent Sexism Inventory (Glick & Fiske, 1996)

Below is a series of statements concerning men and women and their relationships in contemporary society. Please indicate the degree to which you agree or disagree with each statement using the following scale: 0 = disagree strongly; 1 = disagree somewhat; 2 = disagree slightly; 3 = agree slightly; 4 = agree somewhat; 5 = agree strongly.

1. (B-I) No matter how accomplished he is, a man is not truly complete as a person unless he has the love of a woman.
2. (H) Many women are actually seeking special favors, such as hiring policies that favor them over men, under the guise of asking for "equality."
3. (B-P)* In a disaster, women ought not necessarily to be rescued before men.
4. (H) Most women interpret innocent remarks or acts as being sexist.
5. (H) Women are too easily offended.
6. (B-I)* People are often truly happy in life without being romantically involved with a member of the other sex.
7. (H)* Feminists are not seeking for women to have more power than men.
8. (B-G) Many women have a quality of purity that few men possess.
9. (B-P) Women should be cherished and protected by men.
10. (H) Most women fail to appreciate fully all that men do for them.
11. (H) Women seek to gain power by getting control over men.
12. (B-I) Every man ought to have a woman whom he adores.
13. (B-I)* Men are complete without women.
14. (H) Women exaggerate problems they have at work.

15. (H) Once a woman gets a man to commit to her, she usually tries to put him on a tight leash.
16. (H) When women lose to men in a fair competition, they typically complain about being discriminated against.
17. (B-P) A good woman should be set on a pedestal by her man.
18. (H)* There are actually very few women who get a kick out of teasing men by seeming sexually available and then refusing male advances.
19. (B-G) Women, compared to men, tend to have a superior moral sensibility.
20. (B-P) Men should be willing to sacrifice their own well being in order to provide financially for the women in their lives.
21. (H)* Feminists are making entirely reasonable demands of men.
22. (B-G) Women, as compared to men, tend to have a more refined sense of culture and good taste.

Note. Copyright 1995 by Peter Glick and Susan T. Fiske. Use of this scale requires permission of one of the authors. A Spanish-language version of the ASI is available from the authors. H = Hostile Sexism, B = Benevolent Sexism, B-P = Protective Paternalism, B-G = Complementary Gender Differentiation, B-I = Heterosexual Intimacy, * = reverse-scored item.

Scoring Instructions

The ASI may be used as an overall measure of sexism, with hostile and benevolent components equally weighted, by simply averaging the score for all items after reversing the items listed below. The two ASI subscales (Hostile Sexism and Benevolent Sexism) may also be calculated separately. For correlational research, purer measures of HS and BS can be obtained

by using partial correlations (so that the effects of the correlation between the scales is removed).

Reverse the following items (0 = 5, 1 = 4, 2 = 3, 3 = 2, 4 = 1, 5 = 0): 3, 6, 7, 13, 18, 21.

Hostile Sexism Score = average of the following items: 2, 4, 5, 7, 10, 11, 14, 15, 16, 18, 21.

Benevolent Sexism Score = average of the following items: 1, 3, 6, 8, 9, 12, 13, 17, 19, 20, 22.

Appendix C

Believability Measure

Instructions: please rate how much you agree or disagree with each of the statements below about Jane Doe and her account.

1. There was important information missing from this story.*
2. There were lots of “holes” in this story.*
3. It was easy to follow the story from beginning to end.
4. It was hard to follow this story.*
5. I believe this story could be plausible.
6. This story seems to be true.
7. All of the facts in this story agreed with each other.
8. The complainant’s story was complete in the sense that no aspects were missing or left unsupported by the evidence.
9. The complainant’s version of events was plausible, in that you think what they said happened, is both possible and likely.
10. Overall, I believe the complainant’s description of events.
11. The complainant was trustworthy.
12. The complainant was truthful.
13. The complainant was dependable.
14. The complainant was honest.
15. The complainant was reliable.
16. The complainant was self-assured.

Note- * indicates a reverse-coded item

Notes- * Indicates a reverse-coded item. Questions 1-7 were taken from Yale's Narrative Believability Scale (Yale, 2013). Questions 8-10 were from Willmot's Juror Decision Making Scale (Willmott et al., 2018). 11-16 were from Brodsky's Witness Credibility Scale (Brodsky et al., 2010).

Appendix D

Sexual Assault Vignette (Kaufmann et al., 2003; Nason et al., 2019)

“I had invited my old friend over to my house for dinner. During dinner we drank a couple of bottles of red wine and talked for a while about the old days. After we finished eating, he comes round the table and bends down towards me. He gives me a long hug and tells me he thinks I’m cute. I remember bending my head a little to the side and I smiled shyly. And then he starts stroking my neck and says he thinks I’m really attractive. He used to think so when we were in school, too. I take his hand and lift it away from my neck, holding his hand in mine for two or three seconds, something like that, saying: thanks for the compliment. I remember looking at him and ruffling his hair a little. I give him a kiss. First on the cheek. Then on the mouth. We stand there kissing for a bit. Afterwards I asked him if we could just be friends: ‘Aren’t we just friends?’ I ask. After that, maybe just a few minutes later, I collect the plates and go to the kitchen. I start washing up. He comes after me into the kitchen. First I hear his footsteps, and then suddenly he presses his body against mine, from behind. He asks me why I invited him and what the point of the dinner was. I turn around, hold him around the waist and stroke his chest. I told him I wanted to know how he was doing, how people from school were getting on. Then he puts his arms around me and tells me that he wants me. He kisses me, several times, and strokes my neck, his hand moves towards my breasts. I remember responding in some sort of way. I think I grazed his butt. Then he presses his hips against mine, rubs against me, and repeats that he wants me. We just stand like that for a while. We go into the living room, towards the sofa. I think we’re holding hands. We kiss a bit on the way. I open the top button in his shirt. He strokes my breasts again, squeezing. When we get to the sofa he puts his arms around me. Holds me hard around the waist. He does not let me go. I say something to him, but he doesn’t answer.

Only holds me harder. It all turned out differently from what I had expected. Then I push him away, gently, telling him that this is sort of wrong. He doesn't listen. Just puts his hand up my skirt and grabs my crotch. 'What do you think you're doing?', I say. He just smiles. He lays on top of me and pulls up my dress. Then he takes my underwear off. He holds my arms above my head. I remember him pulling down his pants. He penetrates me several times. After that all I want is for it to be over quickly. I don't know how long he takes, but when he is finished, he just puts his clothes on and leaves." - Kaufmann et al., 2003

"She says she told him that she was uncomfortable going any further and asked him to stop. However, she states that he did not stop and forced her to have sexual intercourse with him. The man reports that they had sexual intercourse, but said she did not tell him she was uncomfortable or ask him to stop." - Nason et al., 2019