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Theories of Victim Blame

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Abstract

Sexual assault is a serious, traumatic incident that is all too common on college campuses. Following the ordeal, those who are assaulted are often blamed. Victim blame occurs when the victim, rather than the perpetrator of a crime, is held at least partially responsible for the crime. This study seeks to determine the values that lead to victim-blaming behavior. After responding to the Ambivalent Sexism Scale, Belief in a Just World Measure, Sexual Script Scale, and Updated Illinois Rape Myth Acceptance Scale, participants read a vignette depicting an encounter where an individual was not physically able to consent to a sexual act. Participants were then asked the proportion of blame placed on the victim and perpetrator and if the event was considered rape. There were no differences in victim blaming behavior and determination of rape between men and women, but high rape myth acceptance and hostile sexism increased victim blame and decreased certainty that the event described was rape.

Keywords: sexual assault, rape, victim blame, rape myth, sexism

Theories of Victim Blame

Victims of sexual assault face a variety of challenges, even beyond the crime itself. One likely repercussion of sexual assault is victim blaming. Victim blaming occurs when the victim of a crime is told that they are responsible for the crime committed against them and often occurs in the context of rape (Maier, 2012; Perilloux, Duntley, & Buss, 2014). Many people victim blame—police, lawyers, judges, and perhaps most damaging to victims, friends and family (Maier, 2012). The current study intends to determine which of four major theories behind victim blaming (*Ambivalent Sexism, Just World Belief, Sex Roles, and Rape Myth Acceptance)* best predicts victim blaming, with both male and female victims and perpetrators involved in both homosexual and heterosexual rapes.

Victim blaming behavior may be based in unequal attitudes towards men and women. Researchers have suggested that there are two sorts of sexism: *hostile sexism*, which refers to negative sexism (e.g., women are inferior to men), and *benevolent sexism* (Glick & Fiske, 1996). Benevolent sexism is more complicated—it tends to be positive and include prescriptive ideas about women, but still may have negative repercussions (Glick & Fiske, 1996). For example, one item from the Ambivalent Sexism Inventory developed by Glick and Fiske (1996) is that women are more moral than men. Although this initially seems like a positive thought at first glance, this may undermine women in everyday situations, such as the workplace (Glick and Fiske, 1996). Research suggests that high benevolent sexism is related to lower perpetrator blame as well as sentencing rapists to shorter prison sentences (Viki, Abrams, & Masser, 2004). Viki and colleagues (2004) suggest that perhaps this sort of sexism is not corrected by society because it is seen as "prosocial". In studies, marital rapists who have high benevolent sexism scores are often not blamed as much as other abusers (Durán, Moya, Megías, & Viki, 2010).

Furthermore, both hostile and benevolent sexism is linked to objectification of women, including self-objectification by women (Liss, Erchull, & Ramsey, 2011; Swami, Coles, Wilson, Salem, Wyrozumska, & Furnham, 2010). Overall, although benevolent sexism is often not viewed as harmful, there is a growing body of evidence suggesting that it contributes highly to victim blaming behaviors.

Another theory that has been implicated in victim blame is the *Just World Theory* (Hayes, Lorenz, & Bell 2013; Van Deursen, Pope, & Warner, 2012). The Just World Theory refers to the idea that the world, overall, is a good, safe place. However, those who score highly in just world belief often maintain their idyllic worldview by ignoring contrary information (Van Deursen, Pope, & Warner, 2012). In one study, Hayes, Lorenz, and Bell (2013) found evidence to suggest that this corresponds to accepting rape myths. In another study, Van Deursen and colleagues (2012) found that those who had high just world belief and were extrinsically religious—that is, those who use religion as a tool—blame victims significantly more than those whose religion motivates their lives. There also appear to be gender differences in Just World Belief (Kleinke & Meyer, 1990). Kleinke and Meyer (1990) found that women high in Just World Belief victim blamed less than women low in Just World Belief, whereas men victim blamed more when they were high in Just World Belief.   Combined, these studies suggest that those who believe the world is a good, safe place may blame victims in order to maintain their own sense of control.

Another theory on why individuals victim blame is based on *sex roles.* Also referred to as *sex scripts*, explain how men and women are expected to behave in sexual relationships (Bateman, 1991). Batemen (1991) uses the initiator and gate keeper model. This suggests that men are supposed to gain sexual experience whereas women are expected to remain chaste, even when they would prefer not to. Thus, there is a communication impasse that is solved through

signaling, such as allowing a man to pay for the date or returning to his apartment. When these

signals are misinterpreted, rape may occur, and 27.5% of men call it justified (Bateman, 1991).

Through sex roles, women who have previously consented to sex are expected to continue

consent, so women with sexual histories are victim blamed and doubted more than women who

are not sexually active (L'Armand & Pepitone, 1982; Schuller & Hastings, 2012). Alcohol may

reinforce these roles (Cowley, 2014), and sex roles have been linked to less negative attitudes

towards rape (Check & Malamuth, 1983). After reading a vignette depicting a rape, male

participants were asked how likely they would behave like the man (the perpetrator) in the story

(Check & Malamuth, 1983). Their results showed that men 44% of men who scored highly in

sex role stereotyping would commit rape, versus about 33% of men overall. Although both

numbers are surprisingly high, these researchers suggested that high adherence to sex roles

influence how individuals view sexual crimes.

Sex scripts are highly related to another theory surrounding victim-blame, referred to as

rape myth acceptance. Rape myths are commonly accepted beliefs about the details surrounding

sexual assaults. For example, rape myths suggest that a "real" rape involves a conservatively-

clad female victim and male perpetrator, where the victim does not know her rapist, and alcohol

or drugs are not involved (Roden, 1991). Any of these aspects may lead to victim blaming—she

should not have worn that, or drank so much, or allowed a man to spend money on her. Bieneck

& Krahé (2011) showed that rape victims received more blame than robbery victims, especially

when alcohol was involved or the perpetrator was known to the victim. Thus, the further from

the idealized rape, the more blame the victim received for sexual assault. Rape myth acceptance

is correlated not only with victim blaming (Blumberg & Lester, 1991; Cowley, 2014), but also

consideration of actually committing rape (Bohner, Reinhard, Rutz, Sturm, Kerschbaum, &

Effler, 1998). Several studies have shown that men adhere to rape myths more strongly than women (Blumberg & Lester, 1991; Bohner et al., 1998; Hayes, Lorenz, & Bell 2013; Johnson, 1995), though women who believe rape myths are more likely to victim-blame as well (Cowan, 2000). Thus, when individuals internalize these myths they are less sympathetic to the victim and more likely to question if a sexual assault actually occurred.

Several of the above theories incorporate gender and gender roles. Most research on rape victims involves female victims. This is because male sexual assault is less reported and less discussed in general than sexual assault on women (Judson, Johnson, & Perez, 2013). However, the National Sexual Violence Resource Center reports that 1 in 6 boys will experience sexual abuse before they turn 18, and 1 in 33 men are victims of rape, making male victims a significant population (Finkelhor, Hotaling, Lewis, & Smith, 1990; Tjaden & Theonnes, 1998). The small body of research that exists agrees that male victims experience a great deal of victim blame, potentially more blame than women in similar situations (Judson et al., 2013; Strömwall, Alfredsson, & Landström, 2013). Furthermore, Judson et al. (2013) found that this effect is compounded by a high just world belief in the observer. Certainly, however, more research must be done on this subject.

Not only does the gender of the victim matter for victim blame, but so does gender of the observer. A large body of evidence suggests that men victim blame more than women (Blumberg & Lester, 1991; Hayes et al., 2013; Munsch & Willer, 2012). On the other hand, other researchers have found no gender differences in victim blaming behavior (Check & Malamuth, 1982; Johnson, 1995; L'Armand & Pepitone, 1982). An alternative explanation to describe this discrepancy is that gender is a third variable; rather than gender directly influencing victim blame, it may be that men are simply more likely to score higher on scales of rape

acceptance, hostile sexism, or sexual scripts (Blumberg & Lester, 1991; Crippen, Krebs, & Minerd, 2014; Hayes et al., 2013; Johnson, 1995). Thus, gender of the participant could play a role in the results in the current study.

The main research question for this experiment is which of the four theories presented best predict victim blame and rape status. Participants completed the Ambivalent Sexism Scale (Glick & Fiske, 1996), Belief in Just World measure (Lucas, Zhdanova, & Alexander, 2011), Updated Illinois Rape Acceptance Scale (IRMA; Payne, Lonsway, & Fitzgerald, 1999; McMahon & Farmer, 2011), and the Sexual Script Scale (Sakaluk, Todd, & Lachowsky, 2013). Following completion of the questionnaires, participants read vignettes involving heterosexual and homosexual rapes involving both male and female victims and perpetrators. Participants were then asked to assign blame to the situation by percentages, so that the total percentage totaled 100%, as well indicate if the scenario was perceived as rape. It is expected that male victims, especially in the homosexual scenario, would be blamed more and would be less likely to have the incident described as rape. It was also expected that both male and females victims will experience victim blame, but the theories that most strongly explain the victim blaming behavior will be different because male victims will be unexpected and, thus, not follow rape myths, whereas female victims will be blamed based off sexism. Lastly, it is thought that men would victim blame more than women, and that high victim blame will be correlated with not considering the event rape.

Method

Participants

Participants consisted of 92 undergraduate students, voluntarily recruited from psychology classes from a small Midwestern private university. There were 41 men and 50

women in the study. One participant chose the nondisclosure option. Age and further

demographics were not collected.

Materials and Procedure

  Participants completed the 22-item Ambivalent Sexism Scale (Glick & Fiske, 1996), the

16-item Belief in Just World measure (Lucas, Zhdanova, & Alexander, 2011), the 22-item

Updated Illinois Rape Acceptance Scale (Payne, Lonsway, & Fitzgerald, 1999; McMahon &

Farmer, 2011), and the 33-item Sexual Script Scale (Sakaluk, Todd, & Lachowsky, 2013)

through Qualtrics. Participants completed the four surveys in randomized order to prevent

carryover effects. After completing these questionnaires, the participants read a vignette

describing a rape in which two individuals have been drinking and begin to kiss. The victim then

passes out only to wake up to the perpetrator performing oral sex on them. The gender of both

the victim and perpetrator were changed by using different names. Thus, there were four

scenarios that consisted of heterosexual rape with a male or female victim or homosexual rape

with a male victim. The vignettes are available in Appendix A. The participants were then

asked, adding to 100%, who was to blame for this incident to determine victim blame.

Participants were then asked how strongly, if it all, they believed the act was rape on a 5-point

Likert scale (1=*definitely not rape*; 5=*definitely rape*), and then self-reported their gender,

including a *do-not-wish-to-respond* option. Finally participants read the debriefing statement,

which included the purpose and hypothesis of the study as well as the number to the counseling

center, and were thanked for their time.

Results

Hypothesis One

It was expected that male victims would receive more victim blame and have the incident described as rape less often, especially in the homosexual scenario. A 2 (Gender of Perpetrator: male, female) x 2 (Fender of Victim: male, female) Analysis of Variance (ANOVA) was conducted on participants' blame of victims. This analysis revealed no significant effects, $F(1, 88) = 1.06$, $p = 0.45$, $\eta_p^2 = 0.01$. No other effects were significant, Fs < 1.06.

Furthermore, there were also no significant effects between a 2 (Gender of Perpetrator: male, female) x 2 (Gender of Victim: male, female) ANOVA on participant's certainty of the event being rape, Fs < 1.59.

A median split (median = 2.25) was conducted on the average IRMA scores. A 2 (IRMA Scores: low, high) x 2 (Gender of Victim: male, female) ANOVA was conducted on participants' blame of victims. This analysis revealed an interaction between IRMA score and victim blame, $F(1, 87) = 4.31$, $p = 0.04$, $\eta\rho^2 = 0.05$. As shown in Figure 1, when the victim was female, people who endorse rape myths attributed more blame to her ($M = 38.67$) than to the male victims ($M = 17.90$)

Hypothesis Two

It was expected that both male and female victims would receive victim blame, but victim blame on men would be based on rape myths while victim blame on women would be most strongly related to hostile sexism. On average, the victims received a moderate percentage of the blame ($M = 23.76$), significantly greater than ideal victim blame of 0%. As shown in Tables 1 and 2, IRMA was the best predictor of victim blame and certainty that the event was rape. People high in IRMA were more likely to victim blame and were less certain the vignette depicted a rape. There was no difference in regression for male and female victims.

As shown in Table 3, IRMA was highly correlated with hostile sexism. To reach a fuller understanding of the data, IRMA was removed from regression. In this regression, hostile sexism was found to be a significant predictor of how strongly the event was called rape, as shown in Table 4. People who are high in hostile sexism are less likely to call the vignette rape. This effect was not present for victim blame.

Hypothesis Three

One individual chose the did-not-wish to respond option for gender and was eliminated from all participant gender analyses. It was hypothesized that there would be gender differences between victim blaming behaviors. To test this, a one-way (Gender: male, female) ANOVA was conducted on participants' placement of blame on victims. There were no significant effects, F < 0.42. This suggests that there is no inherent difference in how men and women victim blame.

A one-way (IRMA Scores: low, high) ANOVA was conducted on Gender. A significant effect was found, $F(1, 87) = 6.65$, $p = 0.001$, $\eta\rho^2 = 0.07$. Men ($M = 2.47$) are more likely to believe rape myths than women ($M = 2.11$). This effect is shown in Figure 2.

A median split (mdn = 3.35) was conducted on the average hostile sexism scores. A one-way (Hostile sexism: low, high) ANOVA was conducted on Gender. A significant effect was found, $F(1, 87) = 5.54$, $p = 0.02$, $\eta\rho^2 = 0.06$. Men ($M = 3.42$) are more likely to believe in hostile sexism than women ($M = 2.96$). This effect is shown in Figure 2.

<div align="center">**Discussion**</div>

Overall, the Updated Illinois Rape Myth Acceptance Scale was the best predictor of both victim blame and determination of rape. The scores on the IRMA correlated highly with the scores of hostile sexism, suggesting that the two are related and people who are more prone to hostile sexism are also more likely to believe in rape myths. Considering that the IRMA was

developed to detect stereotypes concerning rape and rape victims, who are often female, it may be that the IRMA measures a specific form of hostile sexism. This fits in with current research concerning male victims of rape, where victims are either ignore entirely or considered to have wanted the intercourse (Davies, Gilston & Rogers, 2012; Grey & Shepherd, 2013).

Although there was no outright difference in gender, whether it was the victim, the perpetrator, or the study participant, there were effects when the data were closely examined. The gender of the perpetrator did not matter. However, female victims were more likely to be blamed when the participant adhered highly to rape myths. Thus, when rape myths are present, women are blamed more harshly than men. This further demonstrates the relationship between hostile sexism and rape myth acceptance.

The relationship between gender and victim blame has been widely disputed in social psychology research. Some researchers (Blumberg & Lester, 1991; Grubb & Harrower, 2009; Hayes et al., 2013; Munsch & Willer, 2012, Schneider, Mori, Lambert, & Wong, 2009) suggest that men victim blame more than women. However, this study found that there was no direct influence of gender and that men did not inherently victim blame more than women. Rather, I found that men are more likely than women to score highly on the two most relevant scales, hostile sexism and rape myth acceptance, instead of simple gender difference. Other researchers (Check & Malamuth, 1982; Johnson, 1995; L'Armand & Pepitone, 1982) have found this relationship as well. Furthermore, it is logical that these individuals would blame the victim more, as they are less likely to consider the incident rape. After all, if high IRMA or hostile sexism individuals consider the event not to be rape, then there is no reason to assign all of the blame to the perpetrator. Thus, more victim blame occurs.

Overall, the victims in the vignettes receive a great deal of blame. On average across all vignettes, participants did receive slightly less than a quarter of the blame. Although this is similar to the amount of blame placed on the victims in other studies (Kahn, Rodgers, Martin, Malick, Claytor, Gandolfo, & ... Webne, 2011; Strömwall et al., 2009), this still implies that victims are at least partially responsible for crimes committed against them.

In future experiments, a homophobia scale may be useful. While two homosexual scenarios were presented, none of the scales measure for homophobia itself. Heteronormativity is measured into benevolent sexism, but this not the same as homophobia. Considering that White and Yamawaki (2009) found that homophobia is a significant predictor of victim blame for homosexual victims, it may be beneficial to include a scale such as the Heterosexual Attitudes towards Homosexuals (Larsen, Reed & Hoffman, 1980). Clearly, this will likely not influence victim blaming in heterosexual scenarios, this predictor may be useful in future studies involving homosexual assaults.

Another potential factor in victim blaming may be the race of both the victim and perpetrator. Because vignettes were used and not pictures, none of the characters are actually described ethnically. However, it is likely given the predominately white make-up of the school and the Western names used that most participants imagined the characters as white. By using names that are associated with other ethnicities or through the use of pictures, race could be readily researched in this scenario. For example, Donovan (2007) suggested black and white female victims are treated differently. Donovan's (2007) data showed white women were blamed more when she was assaulted by a black man, while black women were blamed more in general because they were considered "promiscuous" (Donovan, 2007). In a study of just the participant's race, Scheider et al. (2009) suggested that the race of a third party influenced victim

blame in a stranger rape scenario after finding that white men victim blamed significantly more than women and Hispanic and Asian men. With racism measured by the Right Wing Authoritarian Scale (Altmeyer & Hunsberger, 1991) or primed through implicit tests, future research could attempt to determine how strongly racism influences victim blame, if a difference between races is present at all.

One potential flaw of the design of this experiment is that the surveys may have primed the individuals to consider their views on sexual assault and the roles of men and women. The IRMA is clearly focused on rape, while the Belief in a Just World measure is focused on justice, and the sexual script scale discusses sex, often explicitly. This may have influenced the results of the vignettes. McConnell and Fazio (1996) found that gender-marked language leads to significantly different sexism scores, and it is conceivably that I found a similar, though unintended, result in this experiment. In future experiments, it may be useful to separate the completion of the scales and the vignette-based portions of the experiment by several weeks, in order to circumvent possible priming effects.

In conclusion, victims of sexual assault are blamed for the crimes committed against them. Overwhelming evidence suggests that false rape cases are rare, yet college campuses do not report rape (Belknap, 2010; Lisak, Gardinier, Nicksa, & Cote, 2010; Yung, 2015). Furthermore, in 2014, most college campuses in Ohio did not provide adequate support systems for survivors, even though guidelines are suggested by the state (Krivoshey, Adkins, Hayes, Nemeth, & Klein, 2013). Victims, often women, must protest loudly for their voices to be heard, such as Columbia student Emma Sulkowicz who made national news for carrying her mattress across campus until the college acknowledged her rapist as such (Davis, 2014). By providing

better education, focusing on dispelling rape myths and reducing hostile sexism, John Carroll can

be a safer community for men and women alike.

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Table 1

	β	t	*p*
Hostile Sexism	-0.21	-1.72	0.088
Benevolent Sexism	-0.017	-0.16	0.88
Just World Belief	0.17	1.69	0.095
Sex Script Scale	0.094	0.883	0.38
IRMA	-0.38	-3.31	0.001*

Table 1: Regression model for prediction of calling the event rape.

Table 2

	β	t	*p*
Hostile Sexism	-0.35	-2.90	<0.001**
Benevolent Sexism	-0.072	-0.63	0.53
Just World Belief	0.16	1.54	0.13
Sex Script Scale	0.012	0.11	0.91

Table 2: Regression model for prediction of calling the event rape, without the IRMA.

Table 3

	Victim Blame	Rape	HS	BS	IRMA
Victim Blame	1	-0.353**	0.13	0.081	0.380**
		$p = 0.001$	p = 0.209	$p = 0.440$	$p < 0.001$
Rape		1	-0.35**	-0.22*	-0.434**
			$p = 0.001$	$p = 0.038$	$p < 0.001$
HS			1	0.499**	0.525**
				$p < 0.001$	$p < 0.001$
BS					0.379**
					$p < 0.001$

Table 2. Correlations table between significant results.

Table 4

	β	t	*p*
Hostile Sexism	-0.43	-0.33	0.74
Benevolent Sexism	-0.040	-0.35	0.72
Just World Belief	-0.075	-0.73	0.47
Sex Script Scale	-0.78	-0.78	0.43
IRMA	0.47	3.85	0.001**

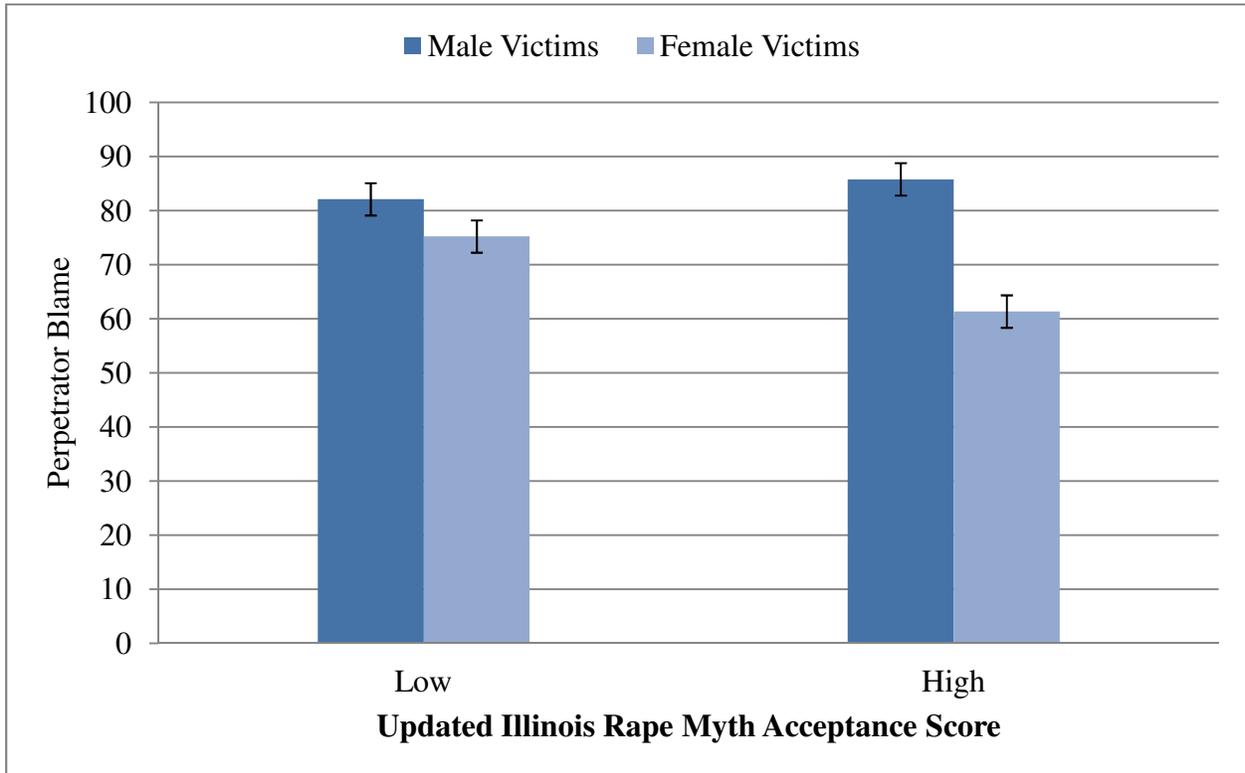*Table 3:* Regression model for prediction of victim blame.

Figure 1

Figure 1. Interaction between IRMA score and victim's gender on perpetrator blame.

Individuals with high IRMA scores blamed the perpetrator less (and the victim more) when the

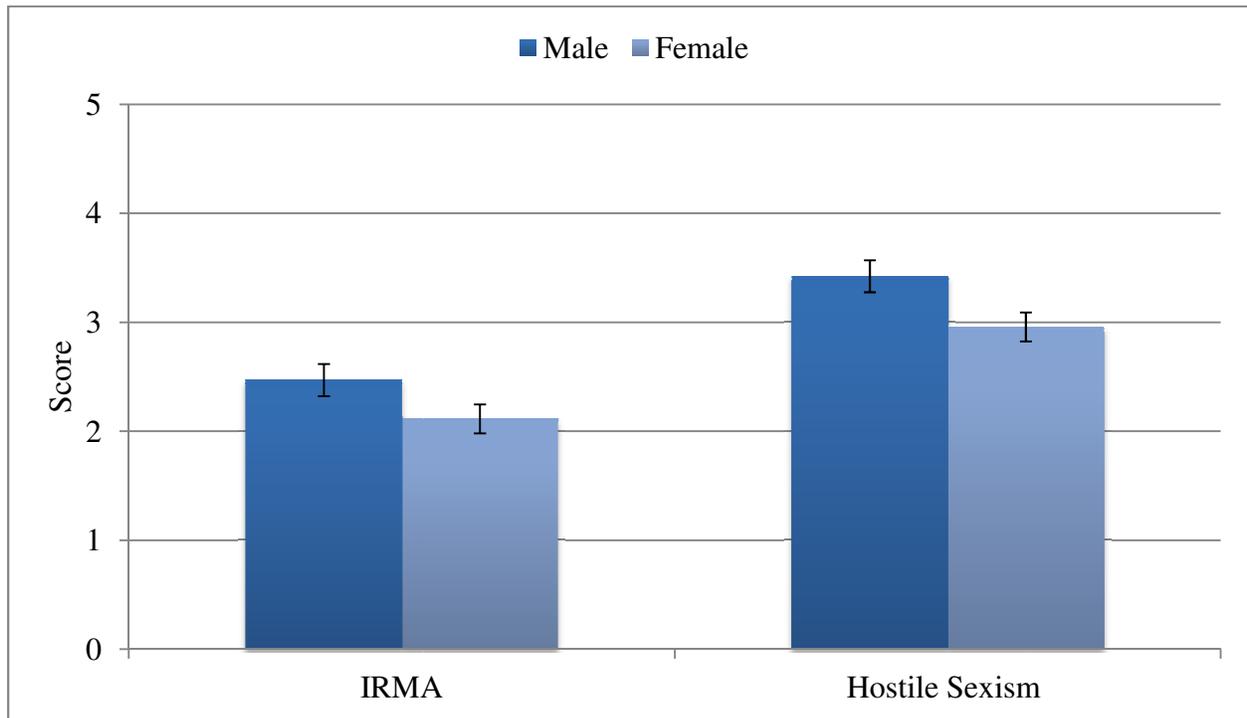victim was female. Standard error bars represented.

Figure 2

*Figure 2.*IRMA and hostile sexism scores by gender. Men are more likely to accept rape myths

and hostile sexism than women. Standard error bars represented.

Appendix A: Vignettes

1. Male Victim and Male Perpetrator

   Matt and Ethan are at a party and have been drinking. They have met before in class last year and have been friends since. They hang out for a while and talk to one another. They start to make out on a couch. Soon after, Matt leads Ethan to one of the bedrooms, and Ethan is hesitant but follows. Ethan passes out once he reaches the bed. He doesn't know long he is out. When he wakes up, Matt is performing oral sex on him.

2. Female Victim and Male Perpetrator

   Matt and Jenny are at a party and have been drinking. They have met before in class last year and have been friends since. They hang out for a while and talk to one another. They start to make out on a couch. Soon after, Matt leads Jenny to one of the bedrooms, and Jenny is hesitant but follows. Jenny passes out once she reaches the bed. She doesn't know how long she is out. When she wakes up, Matt is performing oral sex on her.

3. Male Victim and Female Perpetrator

   Linda and Ethan are at a party and have been drinking. They have met before in class last year and have been friends since. They hang out for a while and talk to one another. They start to make out on a couch. Soon after, Linda leads Ethan to one of the bedrooms, and Ethan is hesitant but follows. Ethan passes out once he reaches the bed. He doesn't know how long he is out. When he wakes up, Linda is performing oral sex on him.

4. Female Victim and Female Perpetrator

   Linda and Jenny are at a party and have been drinking. They have met before in class last year and have been friends. They hang out for a while and talk to one another. They start to make out on a couch. Soon after, Linda leads Jenny to one of the bedrooms, and Jenny

is hesitant but follows. Jenny passes out once she reaches the bed. She doesn't know how

long she is out. When she wakes up, Matt is performing oral sex on her.