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The Influence of Sexual Orientation on Attributions of Blame Toward Victims of Sexual Assault

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ABSTRACT

Previous research has indicated that the sexual orientation of a sexual assault victim influences perceptions of blame. Although researchers have studied perceptions of blame toward straight and lesbian sexual assault victims, none have yet assessed perceptions of blame toward bisexual victims. The purpose of the current study is to examine perceptions of blame toward a female sexual assault victim and to determine whether the victim's sexual orientation impacts the level of attributed blame. Despite no previous research examining the impact of bisexuality on victim blaming, misconceptions that bisexual females are highly sexual, promiscuous, and untrustworthy make it likely that this population would be subject to greater levels of blame than either straight or lesbian victims. After random assignment to a vignette description of a sexual assault and completion of a victim-blaming questionnaire, results failed to support our hypotheses; participants did not blame the bisexual victim of sexual assault more than either the straight or lesbian victims. Further contrary to expected findings, males did not hold more blaming attitudes than females across conditions. Nonetheless, this study is important given the finding that attributions of blame influence whether sexual assault victims choose to disclose their assault, the failure of which can lead to negative mental health outcomes. Ultimately, the current study was a first step in understanding whether bisexual assault victims are evaluated differently than their straight and lesbian counterparts.

KEYWORDS

Victim blaming; sexual assault; rape; rape myth; sexual orientation; bisexuality; homosexuality

Research has suggested that bisexual females are subject to greater levels of sexual victimization across the lifespan, relative to their lesbian and straight female counterparts (Balsam, Rothblum, & Beauchaine, 2005; Hequembourg, Livingston, & Parks, 2013; Walters, Chen, & Breiding, 2013). Bisexual females also perceive the greatest negative reactions and the least amount of support when disclosing their sexual assault to both formal and informal support systems, such as law enforcement or family and friends (Long, Ullman, Long, Mason, & Starzynski, 2007). In addition, both male and female survivors of assault who identify as either gay, lesbian, or bisexual often neglect to mention their sexual minority status when disclosing their assault to others, for fear of further victimization and discrimination (Katz-

Wise & Hyde, 2012). Finally, evidence has indicated that the prevalence of sexual assault, lack of social support, and fear of negative consequences to disclosure has a profoundly negative effect on the mental health of female bisexual sexual assault victims (Balsam et al., 2005; Hequembourg et al., 2013; Katz-Wise & Hyde, 2012; Long et al., 2007; Walters et al., 2013).

Despite these concerning findings, there is a paucity of research exploring how sexual orientation affects perceptions of blame in cases of sexual assault—and among the extant literature, bisexual female victims of assault have been disregarded completely (see Davies, Pollard, & Archer, 2001; Ford, Liwag-Mclamb, & Foley, 1998; Wakelin & Long, 2003; White & Robinson-Kurpius, 2002). Because many assault victims do not disclose their sexual assault out of fear of being perceived as responsible (Sable, Danis, Mauzy, & Gallagher, 2006), a greater understanding of how sexual orientation influences these perceptions is required. The current study aims to determine the extent to which individuals hold blaming attitudes toward a bisexual female victim of sexual assault, and whether those attitudes differ for female victims identified as straight or lesbian.

Victim blaming and mental health impacts

In the context of sexual assault, research has suggested that individuals often blame the victim and exonerate the perpetrator of culpability (Suarez & Gadalla, 2010). Although sexual assault is never a victim's fault, the persistence of rape myths—negative and false beliefs about rape and rape victims—imply that a victim's behavior prior to their assault is the reason for their sexual assault (Burt, 1980; Payne, Lonsway, & Fitzgerald, 1999; Suarez & Gadalla, 2010). Survivors are often interrogated about what they were wearing or how much alcohol they had consumed at the time of assault (Burt, 1980; Payne et al., 1999; Suarez & Gadalla, 2010). Such questions serve to minimize the experiences of sexual assault survivors and to displace the responsibility from the perpetrator of the assault to the victim by implying that the attire or intoxication level of the victim caused the assault (Bohner, Siebler, & Schmelcher, 2006; Ferguson & Ireland, 2012; Loughnan, Pina, Vasquez, & Puvia, 2013). Although studies have shown that attire (Loughnan et al., 2013) and intoxication level (Ferguson & Ireland, 2012) increase perceived blame toward the victim and reduce the perceived responsibility of the perpetrator, there has been very little research exploring whether sexual orientation influences perceptions of blame (Davies et al., 2001; Ford et al., 1998; Wakelin & Long, 2003; White & Robinson-Kurpius, 2002).

In the context of sexual orientation, bisexual females have reported higher levels of depression, anxiety, and posttraumatic stress in the aftermath of a sexual assault, relative to their straight and lesbian counterparts (Long et al., 2007; Sigurvinssdottir & Ullman, 2015; Ullman & Peter-Hagane, 2014). Moreover, victim-blaming research has highlighted that a lack of support after a sexual assault significantly predicts pathological outcomes in victims



(Ullman & Peter-Hagane, 2014). Given that bisexual females have reported inadequate social support to their disclosures of sexual assault (Long et al., 2007), and are already at risk for poor mental health outcomes (see Bostwick, Boyd, Hughes, & McCabe, 2010; Bostwick, Boyd, Hughes, West, & McCabe, 2014; Flanders, Dobinson, & Logie, 2017; Volpp, 2010), a better understanding of how victim blaming affects this vulnerable community is long overdue.

Victim blaming in the context of sexual orientation

Although bisexual females are more likely to experience sexual violence compared to lesbians and straight females (Balsam et al., 2005; Cantor et al., 2015; Hequembourg et al., 2013; Walters et al., 2013), few studies have explored whether sexual orientation influences victim blaming (Davies et al., 2001; Ford et al., 1998; Wakelin & Long, 2003; White & Robinson-Kurpius, 2002). A review of the extant literature reveals only four studies specifically exploring whether sexual orientation influences the perception of blame toward adult female victims of sexual assault (e.g., Davies et al., 2001; Ford et al., 1998; Wakelin & Long, 2003; White & Robinson-Kurpius, 2002). These vignette studies focused on differences between perceptions of straight female victims and lesbian victims but, unfortunately, excluded bisexual female victims entirely. Nonetheless, some noteworthy findings emerged. First, male participants endorsed significantly more victim-blaming attitudes, regardless of the victim's sexual orientation (Davies et al., 2001; Ford et al., 1998; Wakelin & Long, 2003; White & Robinson-Kurpius, 2002), a result not unique to research on victim blaming and sexual orientation given that males generally endorse more victim-blaming attitudes toward sexual assault victims overall, irrespective of other potential blaming factors (Lonsway & Fitzgerald, 1994; Suarez & Gadalla, 2010).

Second, these studies suggest equivocal findings regarding differences between the perceived blameworthiness of straight female and lesbian victims. Two vignette studies (see Ford et al., 1998; Wakelin & Long, 2003) found that straight females were blamed significantly more for their assault relative to lesbians, and that male perpetrators were evaluated as less responsible and more sympathetic when the assault victim was straight (Ford et al., 1998; Wakelin & Long, 2003). To account for these findings, Wakelin and Long (2003) proposed the potential sexual attraction hypothesis: When there is a perceived potential for sexual attraction between a female victim and her male perpetrator, participants perceive a victim as more blameworthy and as “unconsciously desiring” to be assaulted. Indeed, in accordance with rape myths, research has found that many individuals perceive females as having the desire to be sexually assaulted (Burt, 1980; Ford et al., 1998; Payne et al., 1999; Wakelin & Long, 2003). With the perception that a straight female can potentially be attracted to a male perpetrator, participants may see this victim

as blameworthy (Ford et al., 1998; Wakelin & Long, 2003). In contrast, the normative belief that a lesbian victim would not have the potential to be attracted to her male perpetrator (due to her same-sex sexual attraction), she would thus not be perceived as “wanting it” in the same manner (Ford et al., 1998; Wakelin & Long, 2003). According to this theory, whether attraction to the perpetrator actually exists is irrelevant; the potential for attraction is enough for individuals to blame victims significantly more (Wakelin & Long, 2003).

The results are also mixed with respect to research on victim blaming among lesbian victims of sexual assault. Although lesbian victims of assault have been blamed less than their straight female counterparts in previous victim-blaming vignette research, Wakelin and Long (2003) nonetheless found that participants believed that lesbian victims could have avoided being sexually assaulted significantly more than straight female victims. The authors attributed this perception to the participants’ belief that lesbians should have “known better” about the perpetrator’s sexual intention and somehow avoided the outcome. In addition, negative attitudes toward homosexuality positively correlate with assigning more blame to lesbian victims of assault (White & Robinson-Kurpius, 2002) and with traditional gender roles, which also significantly predicts blame toward lesbian victims (White & Robinson-Kurpius, 2002).

Although this limited compendium of vignette research exploring the influence of sexual orientation on perceptions of blame enables a greater understanding of the role that orientation plays in the context of sexual assault, it is not without limitations. Most importantly, the oversight of bisexual female victims negates a population of individuals who are at an equivalent or greater risk of sexual victimization than their straight female and lesbian counterparts. Gaining an understanding of how bisexual victims of assault are perceived necessarily allows for supports tailored to their specific needs.

A second limitation involves the choice of vignettes used in previous research. Most studies on sexual orientation and victim blaming have used vignettes that depict a “stranger rape” scenario (Davies et al., 2001; Wakelin & Long, 2003; White & Robinson-Kurpius, 2002). Scenarios that depict a female being sexually assaulted by an unknown perpetrator (stranger rape) generally elicit lower levels of victim blame relative to scenarios where the victim had some form of prior contact or relationship with her perpetrator, although not necessarily in a sexual manner (“acquaintance rape”; Grubb & Harrower, 2009; Hammock & Richardson, 1997). Stranger rape scenarios have been used to explore whether heterosexism is directly responsible for increased victim blame (Davies et al., 2001; Wakelin & Long, 2003; White & Robinson-Kurpius, 2002). In the context of a situation where it is not easy to blame the victim—as in cases of stranger rape—heterosexism has generally not been found to increase overall blame toward the victim (Davies et al., 2001; White

& Robinson-Kurpius, 2002). As the prevalence of stranger rape is significantly lower than sexual assaults that occur between acquaintances (Statistics Canada, 2006), the use of stranger assault vignettes is not representative of the realities of sexual assault for most victims and fails to acknowledge the perceived ambiguity of sexual assault between acquaintances (Grubb & Harrower, 2009; Weihe & Richards, 1995). Although victims should never be held responsible in any way, victim blaming in cases of sexual assault happens most in North American society when consent and enjoyment are perceived as ambiguous between acquaintances or intimate partners (Grubb & Harrower, 2009; Hammock & Richardson, 1997). The current study therefore used a vignette depicting a sexual assault between acquaintances, as it was more representative of the realities of sexual assault in North America.

Focus of the current study

Based on previous research, there are reasons to believe that bisexual females may be subject to more blame than either straight or lesbian female victims of sexual assault. First, Long and colleagues (2007) found that bisexual females perceived the least amount of support when disclosing their sexual assault to formal support services (e.g., doctor or emergency room nurses), relative to either straight or lesbian victims. A second consideration is how the sexualization of assault victims change perceptions of blame. Studies examining the role of sexualization on victim blaming have shown that when female victims—whose sexual orientation is unknown—are perceived as highly sexual, participants exhibit more blaming attitudes and less concern than when female victims are not portrayed this same way (Loughnan et al., 2013). In relation to perceptions of bisexuality, Mulick and Wright (2002) found that bisexual males and females face higher levels of discrimination than do gay males and lesbians from the straight, gay, and lesbian communities. This “double discrimination” toward bisexual females stems from the misconception that these women are hypersexual, promiscuous, incapable of monogamy, and untrustworthy (Klesse, 2011; Wright, Bonita, & Mulick, 2011). Based on bisexual males and females’ negative evaluations of support, and the discrimination faced because of the prevailing stereotype of hypersexuality among bisexual females, it is reasonable to expect greater victim-blaming attitudes exhibited toward bisexual female victims of sexual assault.

The current study therefore examined whether a victim’s sexual orientation would impact the level of blame attributed to them in a fictional sexual assault scenario. To our knowledge, this study is the first to examine how bisexual females are perceived in instances of sexual assault. Based on patterns of previous sexual orientation and victim-blaming research, we proposed three hypotheses: First, that a fictional bisexual female victim would be blamed more than either a straight or lesbian victim in a case of

sexual assault; second, that the straight victim would be blamed more than the lesbian victim; and, third, that male participants would endorse more blaming attitudes than female participants, regardless of the victim's sexual orientation. We focused solely on female victims of sexual assault perpetrated by males given that most sexual assault happens with females as victims and males as perpetrators (Black et al., 2011; Tjaden & Thoennes, 2000).

We also explored the relationship between sexual assault disclosure on participant perceptions of blame in this context, given previous evidence indicating that sexual assault disclosure from friends or family members reduces victim-blaming attitudes toward that specific individual (Perilloux, Duntley, & Buss, 2014). As bisexual women perceive the least amount of support when disclosing a sexual assault to others, it is important to understand how participants may respond to an unknown and hypothetical victim, and whether sexual orientation will influence perceptions (Long et al., 2007). To our knowledge, no research has yet determined whether these findings extend to perceptions of blame toward an unknown victim.

Methodology

Participants

Participants were recruited primarily from the research participant pool at a sizeable western Canadian university and via snowball sampling through several Web sites, including Twitter, Facebook, and a sexuality research site (orgasmresearchlab.com). Student participants were awarded a 0.5% course credit in approved courses for completing the study. Nonstudent participants were entered into a draw for one of three \$50 gift certificate prizes.

The initial sample consisted of 400 participants; however, those who failed to complete a threshold number of questions (50% or more) were excluded from analyses, leaving 366 participants (92% completion rate). Participants ranged in age from 17 to 73 years ($M_{age} = 23.50$, $SD = 7.77$). Seventy-four percent ($n = 270$) of respondents identified as female, 21% ($n = 76$) identified as male, and 5% ($n = 20$) did not provide their gender. Those who did not identify their gender were excluded from analyses, due to the sample size being too small to derive meaningful results. The final sample size therefore consisted of 346 participants.

Approximately 50% ($n = 175$) of participants identified as Caucasian, 21% ($n = 74$) as South Asian, 14% ($n = 48$) as Asian, and 11% ($n = 39$) as other/mixed ethnicity. Three percent ($n = 10$) of participants failed to disclose their ethnicity. Ninety-one percent ($n = 315$) identified as straight, 1.7% ($n = 6$) identified as gay or lesbian, and 7.2% ($n = 25$) identified as bisexual. We also asked participants whether a friend or family member had ever disclosed to them an experience of sexual assault, to which 50% ($n = 174$) answered yes

and 50% ($n = 172$) answered no. Chi-square analyses indicated no significant differences between males and female in relationship status, χ^2 (2, $N = 346$) = .72, $p = .70$, ethnicity, χ^2 (4, $N = 346$) = 3.44, $p = .49$, sexual orientation, χ^2 (2, $N = 346$) = 2.90, $p = .24$, or reported level of completed education, χ^2 (5, $N = 346$) = 2.24, $p = .25$. However, an independent samples t test revealed significant differences between males and females in reported age, $t(341) = 4.74$, $p < .001$, with male participants being older ($M = 27.20$, $SD = 12.69$) than female participants ($M = 22.51$, $SD = 5.34$).

Design

The study involved a 4 (victim sexual orientation [straight, lesbian, bisexual, no orientation stated]) \times 2 (participant gender) \times 2 (disclosure of sexual assault [yes, no]) randomized, between-group, quasi-experimental design.

Measures

Sexual assault vignettes

The vignettes used in the current study depicted the sexual assault of a fictional female, Sarah, by a fictional male acquaintance named Josh, and they had been modified from those used in previous research (see Lawler, 2003; Loughnan et al., 2013). All vignettes were identical, apart from the specification of the victim's sexual orientation, identified explicitly in the vignette and through information regarding the organization where the victim volunteered (see Appendix A). The victim's sexual orientation in the control condition was not indicated.

If the victim was straight—or her sexual orientation was not stated—she volunteered at the local animal shelter; if the victim was a lesbian, she volunteered at the local lesbian, gay, bisexual, and transgender (LGBT) resource center; if the victim was bisexual, she volunteered at the local bisexual resource center. Volunteer activity was included in the vignette with the intention of making the victim's sexual orientation salient. To that effect, participants were asked a series of questions to test the strength of this manipulation. These included being asked to identify Sarah's sexual orientation, the organization where she volunteered, the city wherein she resided, and the name of the friend who hosted the house party to which she was invited. Only the question regarding Sarah's sexual orientation was used as a manipulation check to ensure that participants were aware of Sarah's orientation as specified in the vignette.

Reaction to assault questionnaire (Davies, Pollard, & Archer, 2006)

The reaction to assault questionnaire involves two separate scales—one to assess blame and responsibility of the victim, and the other to determine reactions toward

the perpetrator—in response to the sexual assault described in the vignette. The 11-item victim blame measure uses a 7-point Likert scale ranging from 0 (*pro-victim*) to 6 (*anti-victim*) to determine participant beliefs regarding the sexual assault victim's responsibility, the perceived severity of the assault, and the level of trauma that was likely to be experienced by the victim. Summed total scores range from 0 (*no victim blame*) to 66 (*severe victim blame*). Questions included, "How responsible do you think Sarah was for what happened to her at Josh's house?" and "How much blame do you think Sarah is responsible for because she didn't try hard enough to escape?" Anchor points of the scale used neutral language to avoid priming participants that our intent was to study victim blaming. Previous research on the victim blame scale reported strong internal consistency reliability at $\alpha = .88$ (Davies et al., 2006). In the current study, Cronbach's alpha indicated very strong reliability at $\alpha = .92$.

The 5-item reaction to the perpetrator measure uses the same 7-point Likert scale ranging from 0 (*pro-victim*) to 6 (*anti-victim*) to measure overall perceptions of the perpetrator and whether he should receive any punishment because of his actions. Summed total scores range from 0 (*negative perception of perpetrator*) to 30 (*positive perception of the perpetrator*). Questions included, "Should Josh be punished for what he did to Sarah?" and, "Josh would not have behaved this way if he wasn't drunk. How much do you agree?" Previous research reported $\alpha = .75$ for the reaction to the perpetrator scale (Davies et al., 2006); in the current study, Cronbach's alpha indicated similar reliability at $\alpha = .72$.

Demographic information

Participants provided information about their age, gender, ethnicity, current relationship status, and highest level of education. They were also asked to identify their sexual orientation by indicating whether they identified as straight, lesbian, or bisexual. Finally, participants indicated, via yes or no response options, whether a friend or family member had ever disclosed to them a previous experience of sexual assault.

Procedure

The study was completed entirely online using the survey software Qualtrics (qualtrics.com). Once informed consent was obtained, participants were randomly assigned to one of four conditions. Each participant read a vignette depicting the sexual assault of a fictional female—who was either straight, lesbian, or bisexual—by a male acquaintance. In the fourth (control) condition, the sexual orientation of the female was not indicated. Participants then answered manipulation check questions regarding aspects of the vignette they had just read, followed by the perceptions of blame and responsibility toward the victim and perpetrator scales



and, finally, the demographic questions. The entire study took approximately 30 minutes to complete.

Results

The analysis of the manipulation check revealed that participants reliably deduced the victim's sexual orientation from reading the vignette. Eighty-one percent of participants correctly recalled the victim's sexual orientation. However, all participant results were included and placed in the sexual orientation group identified by the participant, regardless of whether they were correct or not. This decision was predicated on the assumption that participants would complete the subsequent questionnaire based on the condition to which they believed they had been assigned, not to the condition in which they were actually assigned.

A 4 (victim sexual orientation [straight, lesbian, bisexual, no orientation stated]) \times 2 (participant gender) \times 2 (disclosure of sexual assault [yes, no]) factorial analysis of covariance—controlling for age—was conducted to evaluate the effects of condition, gender, and disclosure of sexual assault on victim blame and perpetrator responsibility endorsements. Univariate follow-up analysis of variance tests were conducted with a Bonferroni adjusted alpha of .01. Checks of assumptions revealed no issues with homogeneity of variance or normality.

Victim blame

Our analysis revealed a significant main effect of victim sexual orientation on the victim blame scale, $F(3, 326) = 4.15, p = .007$, partial $\eta^2 = .040$. Follow-up analyses indicated that the victim in the straight ($M = 14.55, SE = 1.51; 95\% CI [11.59, 17.51]$) and bisexual conditions ($M = 14.05, SE = 1.34; 95\% CI [11.42, 16.68]$) were blamed significantly more than the victim in the control condition, where sexual orientation was not identified ($M = 8.46, SE = 1.58; 95\% CI [5.34, 11.57]$). Despite these findings, significance was not obtained for our first hypothesis. That is, we did not determine that a bisexual victim of sexual assault would be blamed more than either a straight or lesbian victim—given that victim blame scores in the bisexual condition were not significantly higher than in either the straight ($p = 1.00$) or lesbian ($p = .10$) conditions. Further, statistical significance was not reached for our second hypothesis—that the straight victim would be blamed more than the lesbian victim ($M = 9.75, SE = 1.52; 95\% CI [6.77, 12.74]$), $p = .15$ —though scores were trending in the expected direction.

Unexpectedly, no support was found for our third hypothesis, as our analysis failed to reveal a significant main effect for gender. Male participants did not score higher than female participants on the victim blame scale, $F(1, 326) = .935, p = .334$, partial $\eta^2 = .003$. Nonetheless, scores were in the expected direction, with male participants holding slightly higher levels of

blaming attitudes toward the victim ($M = 12.45$, $SE = 1.35$; 95% CI [9.79, 15.10]) than their female counterparts ($M = 10.96$, $SE = .695$; 95% CI [9.59, 12.33]), $p = .334$.

Although no explicit hypotheses on the direction of a relationship were made, we explored whether the disclosure to participants of sexual assault by a friend or family member would influence victim blame endorsements. Results indicated a significant effect for the victim blame scale, $F(1, 326) = 8.40$, $p = .004$, partial $\eta^2 = .026$. That is, participants who indicated that a friend or family member had disclosed a sexual assault to them reported more victim blame ($M = 9.47$, $SE = 1.09$; 95% CI [7.33, 11.61]) than those who did not know a sexual assault survivor ($M = 13.93$, $SE = 1.06$; 95% CI [11.85, 16.01]). No statistically significant interaction effects were observed on the victim blame scale.

Reactions to the perpetrator

Results indicated a nonsignificant main effect of victim sexual orientation, $F(3, 326) = 1.03$, $p = .381$, partial $\eta^2 = .009$, and, contrary to expectations, a nonsignificant main effect of gender, $F(1, 326) = 3.38$, $p = .067$, partial $\eta^2 = .010$ on the reaction to the perpetrator scale. Nonetheless, with respect to gender effects, scores were in the expected direction and approached significance. Male participants reported more positive attitudes toward the perpetrator ($M = 5.74$, $SE = .51$; 95% CI [4.74, 6.74]) than their female counterparts ($M = 4.67$, $SE = .26$; 95% CI [4.15, 5.19]).

A small but significant main effect for disclosure of sexual assault to a family or friend was observed, $F(1, 326) = 3.02$, $p = .010$, partial $\eta^2 = .010$, revealing that participants who indicated that a friend or family member had disclosed a sexual assault to them reported more negative reactions toward the perpetrator ($M = 4.70$, $SE = .40$; 95% CI [3.89, 5.51]), relative to those who did not know a sexual assault survivor ($M = 5.71$, $SE = .40$; 95% CI [4.93, 6.49]). There were no significant interaction effects observed on the reaction to perpetrator scale.

Discussion

The purpose of this study was to expand on the existing literature of victim blame by exploring whether victim sexual orientation influences perceptions of blame toward female sexual assault victims. To the best of our knowledge, this is the first study to explore bisexuality as a factor influencing victim blaming. First, we hypothesized that a fictional bisexual victim would be blamed significantly more than either a straight or lesbian victim in a case of sexual assault and, second, that a straight victim would be blamed significantly more than one described as lesbian. Although results were in the

expected direction and approached significance, no difference in victim blame for straight, bisexual, or lesbian victims was found; victims in each condition were perceived to be similarly at fault, and each perpetrator was attributed similar responsibility. These findings are inconsistent with previous research, as past studies have found that straight females are perceived as more responsible for their sexual assault than lesbian victims (Ford et al., 1998; Wakelin & Long, 2003).

Although not related to our hypotheses, it was established that bisexual and straight victims were perceived as more responsible for their assault relative to the victim whose sexual orientation was not specified (control condition), albeit with small effect sizes. A possible explanation for this finding is the potential sexual attraction hypothesis (Wakelin & Long, 2003). Female victims whose sexual orientation is in line with the perpetrator's gender are often perceived to be more at fault in cases of sexual assault, as participants likely perceive the victim as deriving sexual pleasure from the assault or are seen as "wanting it" (Wakelin & Long, 2003). Because of the potential for straight and bisexual victims to be attracted to their male perpetrator, participants may have seen these victims as more blameworthy than a victim whose sexual orientation was unknown. Because the control condition did not specify the sexual orientation of the victim, participants may not have held the potential sexual attraction of the victim in mind when answering questions about the assault. For this hypothesis to have fully been met, participants would have had to blame the lesbian victim significantly less than the straight and bisexual victims; this was not the case. Extending the potential sexual attraction hypothesis, it is possible that participants may need the victim's sexual orientation to be made explicit before they ascribe more blame. In the control condition, the orientation of the victim was never made salient, and so participants may not have considered the victim's sexual orientation. Perhaps it is not just the potential for attraction that contributes to victim blame, but also that this attraction needs to be made explicit to participants before there is an obvious increase in attributions of blame toward victims.

Contrary to expectations, support was not indicated for our third hypothesis, as we failed to find gender differences in perceptions of blame toward the victim and the perpetrator. Studies within sexual orientation and victim blame research often find that male participants perceive victims as more responsible (Ford et al., 1998; Wakelin & Long, 2003; White & Robinson-Kurpius, 2002). Indeed, the difference between genders is not unique to sexual orientation and victim blame research, as males generally hold more negative attitudes toward sexual assault victims overall (Suarez & Gadalla, 2010). Though the results of the current study were not statistically significant, they were nonetheless in the expected direction, given that males did hold more negative attitudes toward the victim and more positive perceptions of the perpetrator. A potential explanation for the lack of significance for our third hypothesis may be the nature of a homogenous sample—most of our participants were young and had some level of postsecondary education. Previous

research has indicated that younger age and higher levels of education result in less discriminatory attitudes toward sexual assault victims (Burt, 1980; Kassing, Beesley, & Frey, 2005; Suarez & Gadalla, 2010). The age and education level of the male participants in this study may have mediated the more negative attitudes toward sexual assault victims generally seen in victim blame research.

We also explored how participants would perceive an unknown victim if a friend or family member had disclosed to them an experience of sexual assault. To the best of our knowledge, no research has examined how familiarity to a victim of sexual assault influences perceptions of blame toward an unknown victim. Our findings revealed a significant decrease in the amount of blame prescribed to the vignette victim, as well as a more negative perception of the perpetrator among participants who had been disclosed to; both findings indicate lower levels of victim blaming. It is possible that knowing a victim of sexual assault changes the prototype of what a sexual assault “victim” looks like. That is, the problematic rape myths prevalent in society may lose their significance with personal connections to victims of assault, inducing a reluctance to place blame and responsibility onto a victim with whom we have a relationship. This newly developed prototype may then extend to unknown victims, who are thus perceived similarly to loved ones. It is important and unfortunate to note that, although victim blaming was significantly reduced with previous knowledge of a victim in the current study, participants still placed some responsibility for sexual assault on the victim. It therefore behooves researchers to continue investigations into variables that influence victim blame, including the role of disclosure, as well as to explore the flip side of this equation—the role of knowledge of the perpetrator on perceptions of perpetrator responsibility.

Limitations and future directions

There were several limitations to the present study. First, there is the possibility of selection bias of both female and male participants to this study, with the potential that only participants comfortable with discussing sexual assault, and those holding less victim blaming attitudes, elected to participate. Most participants were recruited from a western Canadian university, making generalizations to the larger community difficult. However, given that as many as 1 in 5 female university students are subject to sexual victimization (Krebs, Lindquist, Warner, Fisher, & Martin, 2007; Muehlenhard, Peterson, Humphreys, & Jozkowski, 2017), it is incredibly important to understand university students’ perceptions of blame in cases of sexual assault.

Another way in which participants were recruited to this study was through a sexuality research Web site (orgasmresearchlab.com) that advertises and promotes ongoing sexuality and gender research. It is likely that participants directed to this study via that Web site hold more sex-positive attitudes than the general population and may have been potentially less

likely to place blame on the victim. On the other hand, participants comfortable enough to engage in a sexuality research study have distinctly different characteristics from those who elect not to participate (Dunne et al., 1997; Strassberg & Lowe, 1995), regardless of the method used to recruit them—leading us to conclude a degree of sample homogeneity despite the various methods used to attract participants to this study.

Second, although we did obtain some lesbian, gay, and bisexual (LGB) participants, we did not obtain a large enough sample size of to draw any robust conclusion from their data. As bisexual females are at a higher risk of sexual victimization than lesbians and straight females (Balsam et al., 2005; Cantor et al., 2015; Hequembourg et al., 2013; Walters et al., 2013), it is important to develop an understanding of how bisexual victims are perceived within both the straight and LGBTQ communities. Future researchers should therefore direct their efforts at recruiting larger samples of gay, lesbian, and bisexual participants. Similarly, there were significantly fewer male participants recruited to this study relative to females, making it difficult to draw decisive conclusions from this sample as well.

Third, although social desirability was arguably controlled for by running the present study online (Booth-Kewley, Larson, & Miyoshi, 2007), there is still the possibility that participants answered questions in socially desirable ways. This limitation relates to the ecological validity of the vignettes used. Although the vignettes were constructed to represent what could reasonably be reported in a newspaper, there is always the possibility that participants responded differently than they would have had they encountered a sexual assault in real life. Further, as this story was of a fictional female victim of sexual assault, it may not have been perceived as “real” enough for participants to have any sort of emotional response to the assault, thus impacting the results further.

Fourth, although 81% of participants correctly identified the sexual orientation of the victim, some participants were clearly confused as to the condition in which they had been randomly assigned. Nineteen percent of participants incorrectly answered the sexual orientation manipulation check question, and their data was subsequently analyzed in the condition to which they believed they had been assigned. This decision assumed that participants would complete the subsequent questionnaire based on the condition to which they believed they had been assigned and not the condition to which they were actually randomly assigned. Participants may have also been unsure as to which condition they were placed into as the volunteer activity included in the vignettes may have confused participants with regard to the sexual orientation of the victim, Sarah. As the lesbian condition vignette stated that Sarah volunteered at the LGBT resource center, participants could have perceived Sarah as being either lesbian, bisexual, or even transgendered. Though we addressed this potential concern by ensuring that results were analyzed according to the sexual orientation condition participants indicated—not the sexual orientation condition to which they were assigned—future researchers

adopting vignette methodologies should nonetheless take greater care in ensuring that sexual orientation is a clear and salient condition.

Despite these limitations, future investigations should extend the focus of research with follow-up studies that attempt to replicate the findings of the current study. As perceptions of bisexual victims had never been assessed prior to this study, it is necessary to replicate and extend this research to include more diverse recruitment methods and samples before conclusions can be drawn regarding how bisexual victims of sexual assault are perceived. In addition, as the current study found significant differences in victim blame between participants who did and did not know a sexual assault victim, it is important to further evaluate whether victim prototyping suitably explains these findings and to examine the role that personal experiences of sexual violence play in victim-blaming attitudes.

Conclusions and implications

This study was, to our knowledge, the first to explore perceptions of blame toward bisexual victims of sexual assault. Our study examined how a bisexual victim of assault would be perceived in comparison to straight and lesbian victims. Although we obtained unexpected results, the underlying argument of our study remains the same: A greater understanding of how sexuality influences perceptions of blame in cases of sexual assault is required. At a practical level, education around how victims of assault are perceived by others, regardless of sexual orientation, ultimately aids in creating environments that allow all victims to recover from the trauma of sexual assault. Given that this study was the first of its kind to examine how bisexuality influenced victim blaming, additional research is required to further our understanding of biphobia's role in victim blaming.

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Appendix A

Sarah is a single, bisexual (lesbian/straight/no sexual orientation indicated), professional woman who lives in Toronto. Sarah lives alone with her dog in a one-bedroom apartment. She enjoys sports, dining out, walking her dog, and volunteering at her local bisexual resource center (LGBT resource center/animal center/animal center).

One evening, Sarah was invited to a house party hosted by her friend Max. When she got to the party, Max introduced Sarah to Josh. Josh was new in town and asked Sarah many questions about where to go and what to do in Toronto. Sarah and Josh found that they had a lot in common. They were both amazed to learn that they had attended the same college, but graduated a few years apart. The two spent the remainder of the party talking. Sarah felt very comfortable talking to Josh and found herself discussing her job, family, and the fact that she had just ended a two-year romantic relationship.

When the party was breaking up, Josh invited Sarah to his apartment a few doors down to have a few more drinks, to which she agreed. Josh made some drinks and sat down next to Sarah on the couch. Josh began to make sexual advances to Sarah, who told him that she was not interested in having sex with him and told him to stop. Josh then began kissing Sarah and touching her breasts. At this point, Sarah asked Josh to stop and said that she wanted to leave, but Josh became angry. He then pinned her arms down and got on top of her. Sarah again asked Josh to stop, but he yanked down her skirt and underwear and proceeded to have sex with her. When he had finished, Josh stood up and went into the kitchen and Sarah left the house.