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## **Multiple Perpetrator Sexual Assault: The Relationship Between the Number of Perpetrators, Blame Attribution, and Victim Resistance**

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Multiple Perpetrator Sexual Assault: The Relationship Between the Number of Perpetrators,  
Blame Attribution, and Victim Resistance

A Thesis Presented in Partial Fulfillment of the Requirements  
for the Masters in Forensic Mental Health Counseling  
John Jay College of Criminal Justice  
City University of New York

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### Abstract

Sexual assault has been and continues to be a prevalent public health and social problem that can lead to severe ramifications for the victim. There has been growing research on multiple perpetrator sexual assault (MPSA) and how it qualitatively differs from single assailant offenses. However, there is a paucity of studies investigating the differences between sexual assault perpetrated by duos versus three or more individuals and how it affects victim behavioral responses and blame attribution. This study aimed to examine the relationship between the perceived level of victim blame and the number of perpetrators in MPSA cases contingent on the degree of victim resistance exhibited. Firstly, it was hypothesized that the level of victim blame will increase as the number of perpetrators increase. Secondly, it was predicted that the level of perceived victim blame will increase as the displayed level of victim resistance decreases. Using a two (degree of victim resistance) by three (number of perpetrators) design, a sample of 713 individuals were randomly assigned to one of six conditions. Results indicated that the level of reported victim blame was highest in the lone offender condition, but there were no differences between groups when more than one assailant was present. The level of perceived victim blame was higher in the low victim resistance condition compared to the high victim resistance condition. Understanding the characteristics of MPSA and how it affects observer blame attribution may aid in the training and education of professionals working with MPSA victims.

Sexual assault is a long-standing and widespread phenomenon that transcends both cultural and national boundaries (Grubb & Turner, 2012). According to the 2015 National Crime Victimization Survey (Truman & Morgan, 2016), 1.6 per 1000 individuals aged 12 and over were a victim of sexual assault or rape in the United States. Sexual assault is often perpetrated by a single individual, but can also involve more than one assailant (Hauffe & Porter, 2009; Horvath & Kelly, 2009). From 2005 to 2010, it was reported that 10% of all sexual assaults committed against women were perpetrated by two or more people (Planty, Langton, Krebs, Berzofsky, & Smiley-McDonald, 2013). With the growing recognition that sexual co-offending is qualitatively different from assault executed by lone offenders, there has been a proliferation of studies investigating the dynamics of group sexual aggression and characteristics of the corresponding victims (Morgan, Brittain, & Welch, 2012). In particular, victim responses during group assaults such as resistance strategies used and whether consent was provided has received considerable attention due to its legal implications (Woodhams, Hollin, Bull, & Cooke, 2012).

The prevalent endorsement of stereotypes and rape myths that depict ‘typical’ victims of sexual assault often result in a victim being discredited by the criminal justice system when little to no resistance is exhibited or when consent is ambiguous (Weiss, 2009; Woodhams et al., 2012). This consequently may lead to victim blaming and affects discretionary decisions made by third party observers, such as first responders, prosecutors, and jurors. Despite the potential for severe legal ramifications, there is a paucity of research examining third party observer perceptions of victims of sexual assault with regards to both the amount of resistance displayed and the number of assailants involved. Thus, this study aims to examine victim blame attribution based on the degree of victim resistance exhibited within the context of sexual assault perpetrated in groups.

The labels 'group' and 'gang rape' were initially used to describe sexual co-offending where more than one perpetrator engaged in the assault, but were later replaced with the term 'multiple perpetrator rape' (MPR; Horvath & Kelly, 2009). Subsequently, Morgan and colleagues (2012) suggested the use of 'multiple perpetrator sexual assault' (MPSA) as a more suitable term, considering that MPR encapsulates the attempt and completion of rape only and excludes other incidents of sexual assault. In line with the proposition of Morgan et al. (2012), this paper will utilize MPSA to refer to all acts involving sexual violence committed by two or more individuals, inclusive of rape.

There is a general consensus that MPSA is comparatively more complex than single perpetrator assault (Hauffe & Porter, 2009; Morgan et al., 2012). Lone offenders act on their own urges and goals while additional group processes and influences are implicated in MPSA, such as conformity, group think, and deindividuation (Harkins & Dixon, 2010). In an attempt to examine these motivating and maintaining factors that drive group sexual aggression, the Multifactorial Theory of Multiple Perpetrator Sexual Offending (MTMPSO) was developed (Harkins & Dixon, 2010, 2013). It is the most comprehensive theoretical model to date of MPSA and postulates that individual behavior in a group and within group relations and dynamics result from an interaction between individual, sociocultural, and situational factors. Individual factors comprise of leadership and deviant sexual interests while sociocultural variables include rape culture and rape myths (da Silva, Woodhams, & Harkins, 2015; Grubb & Turner, 2012). Situational factors raised by da Silva and colleagues (2015) include membership in unique organizations such as fraternities and male bonding. According to MTMPSO, the interplay of these factors leads to the internalization of sociocultural conventions and values that influence perpetrator attitudes and beliefs (Harkins & Dixon, 2010), which in turn facilitate group processes and establish group norms that favor sexually violent behavior (Harkins & Dixon, 2010).

In addition to comparisons between lone and MPSA, there has been some research examining differences within MPSA groups. Reports indicate that the most common number of perpetrators in MPSA cases range from two to three offenders (da Silva, Woodhams, & Harkins, 2014; Horvath & Kelly, 2009; Porter & Alison, 2006). While it could be argued that duos should be categorized as groups and studied as such, social psychologists have found that dyads are not necessarily subjected to the same group level phenomena as groups comprised of more than two individuals (Moreland, 2010; Williams, 2010), such as majority and minority influence, socialization, and alliance formation. Studies that have investigated this new area of interest have found significant differences in offender and victim characteristics and behaviors in duos compared to larger assailant groups (da Silva et al., 2014; Hauffe & Porter, 2009; Woodhams & Cooke, 2013). These include, but are not limited to, the level and type of perpetrator violence and victim resistance strategies. These findings suggest that the specific number of perpetrators in co-offending can influence the nature of the assault and corresponding responses of the victim.

### **Association between Victim Resistance and Perpetrator Group Size**

The relationship between victim resistance and group size is thought to be moderated by perpetrator aggression (da Silva et al., 2014; Hauffe & Porter, 2009; Morgan et al., 2012). Resistance encompasses physical and verbal behavior that is evoked as a reaction to potential threat (Ullman, 2007a). Examples of aggressive behavior include using excessive violence to confine and sexually assault the victim, possession and use of weapons, and a higher number of completed vaginal, anal, and oral rapes. Based on the level of aggression displayed by the perpetrator or perpetrators, the victim cognitively assesses the situation and responds in a manner that will increase their chances of surviving the assault, whether it be enhancing or diminishing resistance (Woodhams & Cooke, 2013). For instance, in cases of MPSA,

involuntary freezing or the fear of an escalation of violence or death may lead victims to comply with the perpetrators' demands instead of resisting (Woodhams et al., 2012).

Attempts to provide a theoretical explanation for the varying degree of victim resistance in MSPA incidents have produced mixed results. Porter and Alison (2004) conducted an archival study that investigated the characteristics of offender-victim interactions in 223 accounts of gang-related sexual violence. The authors found variations in victim behavior in response to four distinct typologies of offender behavior: dominance, submission, co-operation, and hostility. These themes conform to what the authors refer to as the interpersonal circumplex that conceptualizes the offender-victim relationship as interdependent and mutually influencing. Thus, specific behaviors displayed by the offender would affect the activeness and explicitness of the victim's intent to resist. In this study, victims responded with direct and forceful verbal and physical resistance when faced with hostile perpetrator behavior.

Porter and Alison's (2004) findings that higher levels of perpetrator aggression provoked greater resistant behavior from the victim was not supported by later studies. Hauffe and Porter (2009) applied the same circumplex framework to examine differences in the type and level of victim resistance displayed in 60 single offender and 60 MSPA offenses and compared predictions of victim hostility in response to assailant aggression based on the principle of complementarity (Hauffe & Porter, 2009; Kiesler, 1983). Complementarity on the cooperation-hostility axis implies that violent perpetrator behavior is likely to produce an aggressive response from a victim and vice versa. On the dominance-submission dimension, it suggests an opposite reaction where a dominant offender restricts victim resistance and is more likely to produce submissive behavior and vice versa. However, they only found evidence for the application of complementarity on the dominance-submission continuum. Results indicated that victims of lone offender sexual assault displayed significantly more

resistance overall compared to group assault victims. Despite the tendency for group offenses to engage in more aggressive behavior, victims did not respond with the same level of hostility and resistance.

These contrasting results were replicated in Woodhams and Cooke's (2013) investigation of offender violence and victim resistance in 89 MPSA stranger cases. Results showed that the number of perpetrators was significantly related to the degree of victim resistance such that when larger groups were perpetrating the assault, the victim displayed a lower level of resistance. However, they also reported a significant positive association between perpetrator non-sexual aggression and victim resistance as consistent with the principle of complementarity on the cooperation-hostility axis. These discrepant results suggest that the underlying mechanisms that facilitate the degree and type of victim resistance is complex and may not solely be dependent on group size and aggression.

### **Theoretical Explanations for Blame Attribution**

Despite what is now known about the characteristics and nature of MPSA, there is a dearth of research investigating victim blame as an outcome variable in single offender assault cases versus MPSA incidents. Victim blame is defined as a shift in the culpability of an event from the perpetrator to the victim (Grubb & Turner, 2012). Blame can be subdivided into two primary typologies: characterological and behavioral blame (Janoff-Bulman, 1979). In the former, blame is assigned based on static factors such as personality while the latter is attributed to dynamic variables such as the way in which the victim responds and interacts with the perpetrator (Davies, Rogers, & Whitelegg, 2009).

Attribution is defined as the deduction of causality (Kelley & Michela, 1980). Theoretical explanations of attribution were first studied and developed in the social psychology literature (Kelley & Michela, 1980). It was argued that individuals attempt to understand the actions of others by inferring a potential or perceived cause for their behavior,

which subsequently affects responses to that particular action. Kelley and Michela (1980) suggest that these attributions are influenced by information processing, beliefs, and motivations of the observer. With regards to information, an attribution of a person's reaction to a stimulus at a given point in time is based on the extent of its consensus, consistency, and distinctiveness from other individuals' reaction to the same stimulus (Kelley, 1967). Additionally, pre-existing beliefs and expectations about what consequences are likely to result from which specific causes and vice versa influence the manner in which information is processed and contribute to attribution formation (Kelley & Michela, 1980). Lastly, the need to seek a specific explanation for another's behavior in contrast to the motivation for a more open-minded, objective understanding will also result in vastly different concluding attributions.

Building upon prior research on attribution, Shaver (1985) developed the Attribution of Blame Theory. Blame assignment is described as a process through which one aims to determine the cause of a negative event, whether any individual is responsible, and who should be blamed for it. Causality precedes responsibility, which in turn precedes blameworthiness. He also suggested that blame ascription is based on five aspects: casual responsibility, intent, use of force, awareness of possible ramifications, and appreciation of the moral implications of one's behavior.

Other theories commonly cited to explain victim blame attribution are the Defensive Attribution Hypothesis and the Just World Theory (Grubb & Turner, 2012; Lerner & Matthews, 1967; Shaver, 1970). According to the Defensive Attribution Hypothesis, individuals attempt to highlight differences with another person who could potentially be responsible for a misdeed (Shaver, 1970). In addition, observer judgments of personal similarity with the assailant leads to a lower level of ascribed perpetrator blame and a higher level of victim blame. It is proposed that this acts as a form of self-protection to reduce the

blame others may direct at the observer if they are to be similarly victimized in the future (Grubb & Turner, 2012). An application of the Defensive Attribution Hypothesis can be seen in the theoretical explanation for the link between victimization history and the degree of victim blame (Mason, Riger, & Foley, 2004; Workman & Freeburg, 1999). An observer who has been a victim of past sexual violence is more likely to relate to another individual who has been sexually assaulted and identify similarities with that person (Mason et al., 2004). With an increase in self-reported personal relevance, subsequent levels of blame ascribed to the victim is reduced (Workman & Freeburg, 1999).

The Just World Theory posits that there is a need for people to subscribe to the belief of an ordered and fair world in which each individual's fate is brought upon by their prior actions and behaviors (Lerner & Matthews, 1967). Hence, when it is seemingly impossible to blame the suffering of a victim on some unwarranted event, just world beliefs causes individuals to attribute this suffering to the innately bad characteristics of the victim. This serves to validate and maintain such attitudes (Grubb & Turner, 2012). It is also suggested that third party observers use the just world theory to justify blame attribution when the victim has made decisions that increase his or her vulnerability to sexual assault, such as excessive alcohol or drug consumption (Grubb & Turner, 2012). However, it is important to note that research provides little support for the Just World Theory in predicting attributions of responsibility and results are mixed (Furnham, 2003; Hafer & Bègue, 2005; Hammond, Berry, & Rodriguez, 2011).

In response to these theories of attribution, Alicke (2000) developed the culpable control model of blame that combined the elements of individual expectations and affective responses with the extant role of motivational and cognitive biases in explaining blame ascription. This model differed from the earlier theories by emphasizing the effect of subconscious, spontaneous reactions to variables of an event on the assignment of blame. The

author postulated that these spontaneous evaluations trigger the need to ascribe blame to the party that induces the most negative affect or whose actions validate negative expectations.

### **Relationship between Victim Resistance, Group Size, and Blame Attribution**

The amount of resistance reported by the victim plays a significant role in sexual assault cases as it can affect the attribution of blame by third party observers. There is robust empirical support for the association between perceived victim blame and the degree of victim resistance displayed whereby lower levels of reported victim resistance is associated with higher levels of victim blame (Ullman, 2007a, 2007b; Weiss, 2009; Woodhams et al., 2012). Resistance strategies utilized by victims, particularly physical ones, are regarded as strong evidence of non-consensual behavior (Ullman, 2007a). Hence, the social expectation that all victims will resist under the circumstance of unwanted sexual contact perpetuates victim blaming if they do not or are unable to exhibit resistance (Ullman, 2007a). This suggests that victim resistance may interact with group size to influence victim blame, considering the previously examined literature that proposes a relationship between the degree of resistance exhibited and the number of assailants present (Ullman, 2007a; van der Bruggen & Grubb, 2014; Weiss, 2009; Woodhams et al., 2012).

Additionally, the previously discussed theories of attribution and blame may provide explanations for the relationship between group size and blame attribution. It is suggested that third party perceivers are driven to identify the cause of an event, particularly if it engenders negative outcomes (Alicke, 2000; Kelley & Michela, 1980; Shaver, 1985). In line with the Defensive Attribution Hypothesis (Shaver, 1970), observers may be motivated to decrease any perceived similarity with a victim of MPSA as opposed to lone sexual assault. Distancing themselves from the seemingly more dangerous and violent incidents of MPSA (Adolfsson, Strömwall, & Landströmwall, 2017) functions as an act of self-preservation. From a culpable control model perspective, unfavourable spontaneous reactions to MPSA

would reflect more negligence on the part of the victim for failing to prevent the assault involving more assailants (Alicke, 2000).

Moreover, Just World Beliefs (Lerner & Matthews, 1967) may serve to validate the fact that an individual targeted by two or more perpetrators must have acted or behaved in a manner that provoked such attention. Thus, it is reasonable to assume that a victim of MPSA would be considered more blameworthy than a victim who was targeted by just one assailant. Similarly, the need to maintain justice can result in negative spontaneous responses to the suffering of a victim which consequently diminishes standards by which victim blame may be justified (Alicke, 2000). Additionally, perceivers might assume that MPSA victims had relinquished more control over the harmful event than lone perpetrator assault victims, particularly when resistance is low, which serves to further validate blame attribution (Alicke, 2000).

Result from a study conducted by Ullman (2007b) supported this relationship between group size and blame attribution. The author compared self-reported positive and negative responses received by female victims of single offender sexual assault with MPSA after disclosure of victimization. Positive reactions were operationalized as information or tangible support, emotional aid, and validation of the incident. Negative reactions to disclosure included victim blame, stigma, egocentric behavior from the service provider, control over the victim's decisions, and distraction of the victim. Although there were no differences in positive social reactions directed at victims of both lone and group sexual offending, victims of MPSA reported receiving a higher level of negative social reactions and had an overall poorer level of functioning as opposed to victims of a single assailant. An earlier study by Ullman and Filipas (2001) similarly found that victims were subjected to greater negative social responses that include victim blame and stigma when disclosing incidents of more severe sexual victimization. Despite these noteworthy results, Ullman (2007b) failed to look

at third party observer judgments which may have differed in comparison to the victim's assessment of their own situation and societal reactions.

Building on Ullman's (2007b) work, Adolfsson and colleagues (2017) examined blame attribution and its relation with rape myth acceptance and just world beliefs between MPSA and lone perpetrator cases using experimental vignettes. In the MPSA condition, a female victim was sequentially raped by two assailants while a third passively watched. Victim blame was found to be significantly higher in the MPSA group compared to the lone assailant scenario. Beliefs in a just world was reported to have a positive correlation with victim blame, but a nonsignificant negative correlation with perpetrator blame. The authors suggest that this result emphasizes that there is a greater need to maintain and restore views of a just world in MPSA versus lone perpetrator cases. Additionally, each individual in the MPSA condition was ascribed differing levels of blame, where the first active perpetrator received the most blame and the passive assailant was considered to be the least blameworthy. Despite these noteworthy results, this study failed to clearly distinguish sexual assault perpetrated by two as opposed to three individuals due to the inclusion of the passive assailant.

### **Study Overview**

To date, studies investigating the relationship between victim resistance and blame attribution have described the impact of the number of perpetrators and perpetrator aggression on subsequent victim resistance strategies. However, these studies have failed to specifically examine observer behavioral victim blaming within the context of MPSA. Observer perceptions of the victim and formation of blame attributions can affect subsequent decision making and the manner in which they interact with rape survivors. Third party observers can range from family and friends to prosecutors and first responders. Negative social reactions directed at the victim is important to consider as it has been shown to reduce

disclosure rates and the provision of support and sympathy towards the victim, diminish their credibility, and increase judgements of self-blame (Ahrens, 2006; Brown & Testa, 2008; Ullman, Townsend, Filipas, & Starzynski, 2007). Hence, this study aims to utilize and build upon the current theoretical knowledge and empirical findings of the sexual assault literature, particularly Adolfsson colleagues' (2017) study, by investigating the relationship between victim blame and the number of perpetrators in MPSA cases contingent on the degree of victim resistance exhibited. Based upon the research conducted to date, it is hypothesized that: 1) the level of victim blame will increase as the number of perpetrators increase and 2) the level of perceived victim blame will increase as the displayed level of victim resistance decreases.

## **Methods**

### **Research Design**

A factorial design was employed to investigate the relationship between the variables of interest. The independent variables in this study were the number of perpetrators (one, two or three) and the degree of victim resistance (low or high). The dependent variable was the level of perceived victim blame.

### **Participants**

A total number of 875 participants were recruited via Amazon Mechanical Turk (Mturk). Participants could take part in this study if they were a U.S. citizen, spoke English, held a driver's license or a state identification card, and aged at least 18 years and older. Out of these, 162 participants were excluded from the sample for either not providing informed consent, failing the manipulation check question or for incomplete responding. This left a final sample size of 713, which constituted 87.9% of participants who had completed the survey. Monetary compensation in the amount of \$0.68 was paid to participants for their accepted human intelligence tests (HITs; see procedure) within 30 days of completion. This

was calculated based off the median hourly wage for Mturk workers to produce optimal results (Kosuri & Jeglic, 2016). Participants were randomly assigned to one of six conditions with a sample of 122 (17.1%) in condition one (L1), 120 (16.8%) in condition two (H1), 109 (15.3%) in condition three (L2), 114 (16.0%) in condition four (H2), 114 (16.0%) in condition five (L3), and 134 (18.8%) in condition six (H3). Of the entire sample, 383 (53.7%) were males and 329 (46.1%) were females, with one individual identifying themselves as “other.” Subjects had an age range of 18 to 76 years ( $M = 37.47$ ,  $SD = 12.23$ ). A total of 523 (73.35%) of participants identified themselves as Caucasian, 42 (5.89%) as African American, 22 (3.09%) as Hispanic, 88 (12.34%) as Asian, 9 (1.26%) as being of other racial origin, and 29 (4.07%) as having two or more racial identities. The reported years of completed formal education ranged from 1 to 25 years ( $M = 14.67$ ,  $SD = 3.74$ ), four cases were omitted as the reported years of completed formal education was equal to or greater than their corresponding age. A total number of 152 (21.3%) subjects stated that they had been a victim of past sexual violence.

### **Procedure**

Participants were recruited for this study through Mturk, an online recruiting platform. A HIT with a short description of this study was posted on Mturk (See Appendix A). Any individual with an Mturk account was able to view the posted HIT. At the beginning of this study, a consent form was presented to participants that described the goals of this study and other issues relating to confidentiality and mental health resources available (See Appendix B). Participants were required to read and provide informed consent by selecting “Yes, I agree to participate” at the bottom of the page before proceeding with the study. Participants were randomly assigned to one of six vignettes. Participants were asked to read the scenario and answer two manipulation check questions, the Victim-Perpetrator Blame Scale, and demographic questions. The items were not randomized to standardize the survey-

taking process across all participants. Upon completion, participants were presented with a debriefing statement (See Appendix C). The majority of participants completed the study within 15 minutes ( $M = 12.3$ ,  $SD = 9.7$ ).

### **Materials**

**Vignettes.** A total of six vignettes were developed by the authors and encompassed samples adapted from scenarios that had been designed and utilized in past research studies conducted by Rusinko, Bradley and Miller (2010), Sleath and Bull (2010), and Starfelt, Young, White, and Palk (2015). The vignettes in this study depict a hypothetical rape scenario that differ based on the number of perpetrators present and the degree of victim resistance (See Appendix D for a full description of the scenarios). All vignettes were reviewed for accuracy and realism by experts in the field of sexual violence prevention.

**Manipulation check.** There were two manipulation check questions in this study. The first assessed participants' judgment of the degree of resistance displayed by the victim (1 = no resistance, 4 = high resistance) and was used to determine whether there was a difference between low and high resistance conditions. The second question served to determine whether respondents were cognizant of the number of perpetrators present in their assigned condition. Participants were included in the final sample only if the reported number of perpetrators corresponded to the condition in which they were placed in. The reported degree of resistance was not a basis for exclusion.

**Victim-perpetrator blame.** To date, there is no standardized, published version of a Victim-Perpetrator Blame Scale (VPBS) that examines blame attribution. Hence, items were adapted from previous studies conducted by Krahe, Temkin, Bieneck, and Berger (2008), Sleath and Bull (2010), and Starfelt et al. (2015) to form an 11-item measure that was scored based on a 7-point Likert scale (1 = not at all; 7 = completely/entirely). The first five questions looked at victim blame and possible attainable scores range from 5 to 35. An

example of one item is “How much do you think Jane is to blame for what happened?” The next five items were related to perpetrator blame and scores range from 5 to 35. One example is “How much do you think John should be held criminally liable for this incident?” A high score reflects greater victim blame and lower perpetrator blame attribution. These items were constructed based on theoretical conceptualizations and findings from prior studies and have demonstrated good reliability (Sleath & Bull, 2010; Starfelt et al., 2015). The remaining question pertained to whether the incident would legally be constituted as rape and was employed to evaluate ecological validity (Krahé et al., 2008). The Cronbach’s alpha for the L1, H1, L2, H2, L3, and the H3 conditions were .96, .95, .95, .95, .95, .94 respectively. Refer to Appendix E for a full list of questions and items used.

**Demographic information.** Participants were asked to record their gender, age, ethnicity, the number of years of completed formal education, and victimization history (whether they had been a victim of past sexual violence).

## Results

Descriptive statistics of the VPBS scores are summarized in Table 1 (See Table 1). Across all conditions, participants reported that rape had occurred to a large extent in the depicted scenarios (1 = not at all; 7 = completely/entirely;  $M = 6.40$ ,  $SD = 1.16$ ). Additionally, 287 (83.2%) of participants assigned to the low victim resistance condition perceived the level of resistance to be moderate or less. A total of 301 (81.8%) of participants allocated to the high resistance group correspondingly reported the level of resistance to be high. This suggests that the manipulation of victim resistance was successful.

### Effects of Group Size and Victim Resistance

A between-subjects 3 x 2 factorial ANOVA was performed to examine the influence of the number of perpetrators (one, two or three) and the degree of victim resistance (low or high) on the level of perceived victim blame. The results revealed a main effect for group

size,  $F(2, 707) = 10.13, p < .001, \eta_p^2 = .028$ . Additionally, there was a statistically significant main effect for the degree of victim resistance,  $F(1, 707) = 17.93, p < .001, \eta_p^2 = .025$ , indicating that there was a difference between the level of blame in the low resistance condition ( $M = 23.58, SD = .54$ ) as compared to the high condition ( $M = 20.41, SD = .52$ ). There was no interaction between the number of perpetrators and the degree of victim resistance,  $F(2, 707) = 1.23, p = .292, \eta_p^2 = .003$ . Post hoc analysis using Tukey's HSD showed that the mean level of victim blame in the single perpetrator group ( $M = 24.34, SD = .52$ ) was significantly different from the duo group ( $M = 21.09, SD = .67$ ),  $p = .001$  and the three assailant group ( $M = 20.55, SD = .64$ ),  $p < .001$ . The difference in the level of perceived victim blame between the duo and three perpetrator group was not significant,  $p = .769$  (See Figure 1).

### Discussion

The goal of the present study was to investigate the relationship between the number of perpetrators and victim resistance on blame attribution in MPSA cases. Overall, there was an impact on the number of perpetrators on victim blame, but only between the single and MPSA groups. Additionally, we found that perceived victim blame increased as the degree of victim resistance decreased. The responses of participants indicated that blame attributions were made with the acknowledgement that rape had occurred in the hypothetical scenarios.

In contrast to what was expected, there was a greater ascription of blame towards single assailant groups as opposed to the multiple offender conditions, which is inconsistent with past research (Adolfsson et al., 2017; Ullman, 2007b). Prior studies have consistently indicated that MPSA is associated with a higher rate of aggressive and violent behaviors, as well as a greater probability of subsequent victim injury (Hauffe & Porter, 2009; Morgan et al., 2012; Ullman, 2007). It is speculated that during MPSA, victims mentally assess and come to the conclusion that the perpetrators have access to a superior amount of resources

due to their larger numbers (Woodhams & Cooke, 2013). This cognitive appraisal may lead victims to believe that they will be physically overpowered regardless of the amount of resistance they engage in (Hauffe & Porter, 2009). Victims may also psychologically feel helpless due to a perceived lack of control when accosted by more than one perpetrator (Hauffe & Porter, 2009; Woodhams et al., 2012). Hence, it is possible that these emotions experienced by the victim may likewise translate to respondents' perceptions of the depicted assaults, leading to an increase in empathy for the victim and subsequently less victim blaming (Ferrão & Gonçalves, 2015). Additionally, observers may have perceived a diffusion of responsibility amongst the two or three perpetrators involved (Adolfsson et al., 2017), which simultaneously resulted in a lower level of reported victim blame for MPSA cases since the number of culpable assailants have increased.

Although the mean level of perceived victim blame was higher in the dyad condition compared to the three assailant group, this difference was not statistically significant. In this study, the depicted actions of the second and third perpetrators were identical and they served similar roles as accomplices to the first offender. This may have attenuated the effect of having three assailants present as opposed to just two. Considering that offender aggression and potential victim injury were also kept constant, the distinction made between dyads and three individuals within the context of victim blame ascription may have been redundant (Hauffe & Porter, 2009; Morgan et al., 2012; Ullman, 2007). In order to assess this, future studies could portray the perpetrators engaging in different, but equally active behaviors before and during the assault. Describing each unique assailant in more detail may also be pertinent in emphasizing their individual participation and involvement in a group setting.

As hypothesized, the level of victim blaming that participants reported was significantly higher when the amount of victim resistance exhibited was low compared to when it was high across all conditions. This inversely proportional relationship between

victim resistance and victim blame is consistent with past research (Sleath & Bull, 2010; Ullman, 2007a; van der Bruggen & Grubb, 2014; Weiss, 2009). Societal expectations of victim resistance suggest that if the victim does not effectively resist or fails to do so, it indicates that they had subconsciously wanted sex (Weiss, 2009). Hence, an individual is only judged as a true victim of sexual assault if they had resisted against the perpetrator (Sleath & Bull, 2010). In turn, this rape myth belief can facilitate the blameworthiness of the victim based on the respective level of displayed resistance (van der Bruggen & Grubb, 2014). Furthermore, the high victim resistance condition in this study consisted of forceful physical and verbal resistance strategies while the low victim resistance condition only included nonforceful verbal resistance. Considering that physical resistance is the most explicit and widely accepted indicator of non-consent (Ullman, 2007a), its inclusion in the high resistance condition may also have contributed in augmenting the differences in perceived resistance between groups. However, it is crucial to note that the effect sizes obtained for the two hypotheses were very small which suggest there is a significant amount of variance that has yet to be accounted for.

### **Limitations and Future Research**

This study is not without limitations which need to be considered when interpreting the findings of this study. Firstly, it is likely that participants who possessed an Mturk account and used Mturk as opposed to other platforms to participate in web-based studies were not completely representative of the general population. Although research has shown that users of Mturk represent a diverse range of ethnicities, ages, and socioeconomic statuses, they also tend to be younger, predominately female, and more educated than the general population (Mason & Suri, 2012; Paolacci, Chandler, & Ipeirotis, 2010). Moreover, the nature of Mturk which allows online users to filter out HITs that they do not qualify for, lack interest in or provide a certain amount of monetary compensation may have led to a self-

selection bias. In addition, there was a lack of control over the setting in which the participants chose to complete the questionnaire. Hence, the extent to which disturbances in the surrounding environment acted as confounding variables was unknown. However, attempts were made to minimize such external influences on participant responding by only including subjects who had passed the manipulation check question.

Another limitation was the manner in which victim blame was operationalized using the VPBS in this study. Based on the definition of victim blame in the current literature (Grubb & Turner, 2012), it was assumed that blame attributed to the victim was a collective attitude of higher levels of victim blaming along with lower levels of perpetrator blame. Hence, total scores obtained on the VPBS were a combination of perceptions on both the victim and the perpetrator. Although unlikely, it is possible that some participants may have ascribed responsibility of the sexual assault to both the perpetrator and the victim at equally high or low levels, affecting the validity of this instrument in measuring victim blame. Future research should develop standardized instruments to measure victim and perpetrator blame as two separate constructs and analyze them accordingly to determine if such a distinction is necessary or redundant.

### **Conclusion and Implications**

In conclusion, this study did not find evidence for an increase in perceived victim blame with an increase in the number of perpetrators involved. However, victims of single perpetrator sexual assault were blamed at a greater level than MPSA victims. Victim resistance was also shown to negatively affect victim blame allocation. This study's findings have important implications for the training of mental health treatment providers working with sexual assault victims. Learning about the characteristics of the assault and behavioral responses of the victim may help clinicians understand their clients' mental state and prepare for potential reactions the victim might receive from third party observers.

Additionally, the results of this study may be useful in designing programs for community psychoeducation regarding the prevalence of secondary victimization due to victim blaming attitudes (Adolfsson et al., 2017). It is only with the knowledge of rape myth beliefs and other personal biases that victim blaming and re-victimization can be prevented. Such awareness is also crucial considering the potential ramifications of attributing blame on victims, such as the loss of social support, decrease in credibility, increase in self-blame, increase in the probability of the development of mental illness symptoms, and a lowered rate of successful recovery (Ahrens, 2006; Brown & Testa, 2008; Ullman et al., 2007; Yamawaki, 2007).

Considering the fact that research in this area is still in its infancy, more studies should be conducted to investigate the effects of MPSA on victim blaming and explore other potential variables that may help to further explain the dynamics of this relationship.

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## Means and Standard Deviations of the VPBS Scores Across All Conditions

Table 1

*Means and Standard Deviations of the VPBS Scores Across All Conditions*

Victim Resistance	Number of Perpetrators	VPBS	
		<i>M</i>	<i>SD</i>
Low	1	26.70	11.05
	2	22.02	9.48
	3	22.03	10.46
High	1	21.98	9.34
	2	20.17	10.24
	3	19.08	9.25

The Estimated Marginal Means of scores on the VPBS as a function of the Number of Perpetrators and the Degree of Victim Resistance

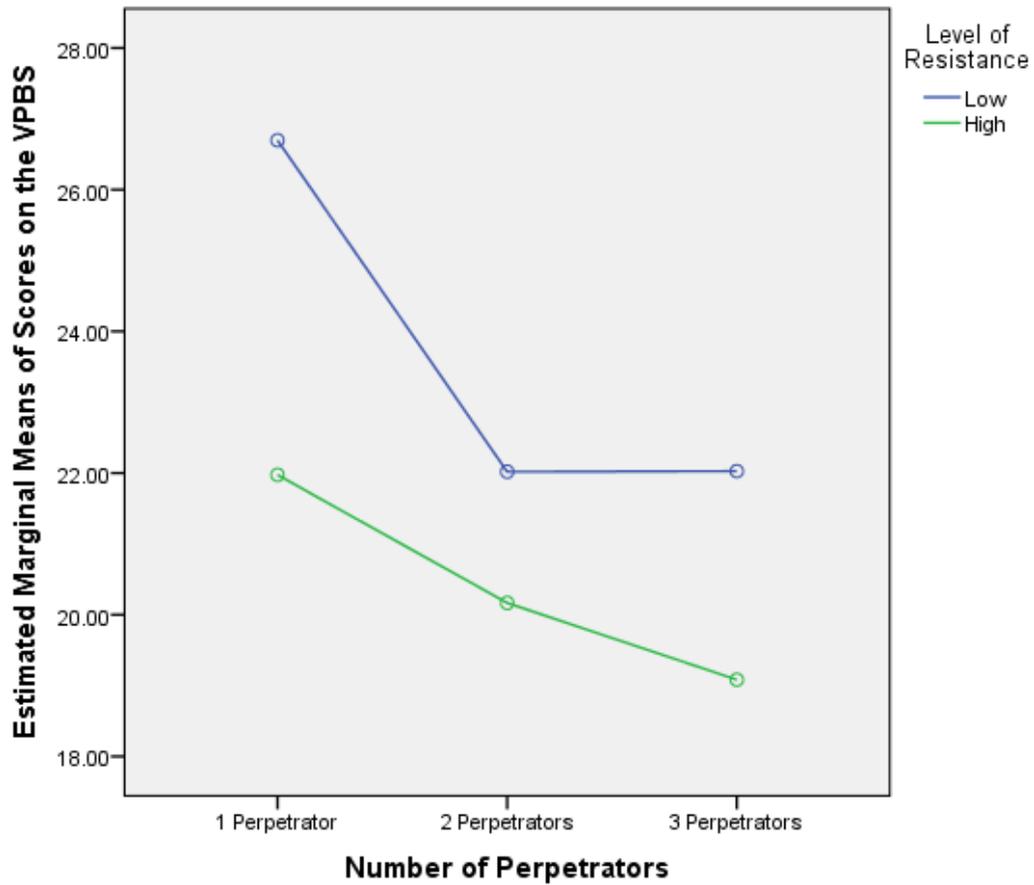


Figure 1. The estimated marginal means of scores on the VPBS as a function of the number of perpetrators and the degree of victim resistance.

## Appendix A

### Website Posting of the Study

You are invited to participate in a study that aims to evaluate perceptions of victim blame in sexual assault cases conducted by Yi Jin Lim and supervised by Dr. Elizabeth Jeglic of CUNY John Jay College of Criminal Justice, New York. We are seeking adults who are at least 18 years old, speak English, are U.S citizens, and hold a driver's license or a state identification card. This study involves reading a scenario and answering an online questionnaire that should take approximately 20 to 30 minutes to complete. Participation is completely anonymous, confidential, and voluntary. You are free to discontinue at any time while taking the survey. You will receive compensation when your HIT has been approved.

## Appendix B

## Consent Form

City University of New York

John Jay College of Criminal Justice

Department of Psychology

Perceptions of Victim Blame in Sexual Assault

Dear Participant,

You have been invited to participate in an online research study that seeks to evaluate perceptions of victim blame in sexual assault cases. Please read through the following information carefully.

**Procedures**

If you are a U.S Citizen, speak English, hold a driver's license or a state ID, and are 18 years of age or older, you will be eligible to participate in this study. If you agree to participate, you will be asked to read a scenario and answer a series of questions about your opinions on victim blame. This questionnaire should take approximately 20 to 30 minutes to complete.

**Risks and Benefits**

It may be possible that the scenario or some of the questions about your opinions may cause you to experience slight discomfort or distress. If you wish to speak to someone or seek professional help, you can reach out to Safe Horizon at (212) 227-3000. They provide a variety of services including crisis intervention, counseling, and community programs for

victims of violent crime. You can also contact the National Sexual Assault Hotline at 1(800) 656-4673. They provide all-day, free, and confidential services. Another available resource is the New York State Coalition Against Sexual Assault at 1(800) 942-6906. Additionally, a possible breach of confidentiality may occur should problems arise during the compensation process or if you choose to contact the requester directly. Refer to the “Compensation” and “Confidentiality” sections for more information. There are no known direct benefits. However, we hope that the information and data collected from this study will be useful in helping to understand factors that influence victim blame.

### **Compensation**

You will receive a reimbursement of \$0.68 as payment for your participation when your HIT has been approved. Your response can be rejected and if you have any queries, you can directly contact the requester. However, note that according to Amazon Mechanical Turk policy, your email address will automatically be included into the message so that the requester can contact you and clarify any questions that you may have.

### **Confidentiality**

All data collected during this study will be kept private and in a locked file. Only researchers will have access to these records. Any identifying information that is collected during this study will remain confidential, will not be disclosed, and will eventually be removed. Your Mturk worker’s ID will be retained during the initial stages of the study for compensation purposes, will not be shared with anyone outside of the research team, and will subsequently be replaced and deleted to anonymize your response. This will ensure that your survey response cannot be traced back or linked to your personal information. Although every reasonable effort has been taken, confidentiality during actual internet communication

procedures cannot be guaranteed. Future publications, presentations or reports that result from this study will not identify you by name.

### **Participant's Rights**

If you have decided to participate in this study, please understand your participation is voluntary and you have the right to withdraw your consent, discontinue participation at any time or choose not to participate without penalty.

### **Questions, Concerns or Complaints**

Please do not hesitate to ask questions or voice any concerns or complaints you may have regarding this study. You may contact the study investigator at [yijin.lim@jjay.cuny.edu](mailto:yijin.lim@jjay.cuny.edu) or her supervisor at [ejeglic@jjay.cuny.edu](mailto:ejeglic@jjay.cuny.edu). If you have any questions about your rights as a research participant or if you would like to talk to someone other than the researchers, you can contact CUNY Research Compliance Administrator at 646-664-8918.

### **Signature of Participant**

If you agree to participate in this study, are a U.S Citizen, speak English, have a driver's license or a state ID, and are 18 years of age or older, please check the appropriate box and click "Next."

## Appendix C

### Debriefing Statement

Thank you for your participation in this study. The present study aims to investigate the relationship between third party observer perceptions of victim blame, the number of perpetrators present in cases of multiple perpetrator sexual assault, and the degree of victim resistance exhibited. Previous studies have shown that offender group size influences violent behaviors utilized during the assault and subsequent victim responses, such as the amount of resistance. Additionally, research has suggested that the manner in which the victim resists directly impacts how much people would blame the victim for the incident as opposed to the perpetrator.

You were asked to read a scenario that depicted the occurrence of a hypothetical rape in which there was either one perpetrator, two perpetrators or three perpetrators present. The victim was also described to have engaged in either low or high resistance behaviors. After reading the scenario assigned to you, you were asked to complete a questionnaire that assessed your perceptions of victim and perpetrator blame. We expect to find an increase in the level of blame ascribed to the victim as the number of perpetrators increase. We also hypothesize that judgments of victim blame will be higher when the victim is perceived to have engaged in less resistance.

Your participation in this study is greatly appreciated. Results from the present study will help build on existing research regarding factors that influence the blame experienced by victims of multiple perpetrator sexual assault and how treatment can be modified to cater to their specific needs.

In the event that you are experiencing any psychological distress and wish to speak to a professional, you can reach out to Safe Horizon at (212) 227-3000, the National Sexual

Assault Hotline at 1(800) 656-4673 or the New York State Coalition Against Sexual Assault at 1(800) 942-6906. If you have any further queries or concerns or would like to receive a summary of the findings of this study, please do not hesitate to contact the study investigator Yi Jin Lim at [yijin.lim@jjay.cuny.edu](mailto:yijin.lim@jjay.cuny.edu) or her supervisor, Dr. Elizabeth Jeglic, at [ejeglic@jjay.cuny.edu](mailto:ejeglic@jjay.cuny.edu).

## Appendix D

## Vignettes

Condition 1 (L1): John and Jane are at a college house party. John realizes that Jane has been stealing glances and smiling at him from across the room ever since he arrived. Soon after, she approaches him and John notices that she is wearing a low cut blouse and a short skirt. Although this is their first time interacting with each other, John had previously heard rumours that Jane had slept with multiple members of the football team. They hit it off quickly and after chatting for a while, Jane suddenly places her arms around his neck and kisses him. She then leads him to one of the upstairs bedrooms where they continue kissing. As John takes off her blouse, Jane begins to feel uncomfortable and suggests that they should stop. John ignores her and continues kissing and undressing her. Jane again murmurs no but John holds her arms down and proceeds to have sexual intercourse with her.

Condition 2 (H1): John and Jane are at a college house party. John realizes that Jane has been stealing glances and smiling at him from across the room ever since he arrived. Soon after, she approaches him and John notices that she is wearing a low cut blouse and a short skirt. Although this is their first time interacting with each other, John had previously heard rumours that Jane had slept with multiple members of the football team. They hit it off quickly and after chatting for a while, Jane suddenly places her arms around his neck and kisses him. She then leads him to one of the upstairs bedrooms where they continue kissing. As John takes off her blouse, Jane begins to feel uncomfortable and suggests that they should stop while forcefully pushing John away. John ignores her and continues kissing and undressing her. Jane starts screaming and tries to kick and scratch him but John holds her arms down and proceeds to have sexual intercourse with her.

Condition 3 (L2): John and Jane are at a college house party. John realizes that Jane has been stealing glances and smiling at him from across the room ever since he arrived.

Soon after, she approaches him and John notices that she is wearing a low cut blouse and a short skirt. Although this is their first time interacting with each other, John had previously heard rumours that Jane had slept with multiple members of the football team. They hit it off quickly and after chatting for a while, Jane suddenly places her arms around his neck and kisses him. She then leads him to one of the upstairs bedrooms where they continue kissing. At this time, Tyler, one of John's friend, enters the room. As John and Tyler take off her blouse, Jane begins to feel uncomfortable and suggests that they should stop. John and Tyler ignore her and continue kissing and undressing her. Jane again murmurs no but Tyler holds her arms down and John proceeds to have sexual intercourse with her.

Condition 4 (H2): John and Jane are at a college house party. John realizes that Jane has been stealing glances and smiling at him from across the room ever since he arrived. Soon after, she approaches him and John notices that she is wearing a low cut blouse and a short skirt. Although this is their first time interacting with each other, John had previously heard rumours that Jane had slept with multiple members of the football team. They hit it off quickly and after chatting for a while, Jane suddenly places her arms around his neck and kisses him. She then leads him to one of the upstairs bedrooms where they continue kissing. At this time, Tyler, one of John's friend enters the room. As John and Tyler take off her blouse, Jane begins to feel uncomfortable and suggests that they should stop while forcefully pushing them away. John and Tyler ignore her and continue kissing and undressing her. Jane starts screaming and tries to kick and scratch them but Tyler holds her arms down and John proceeds to have sexual intercourse with her.

Condition 5 (L3): John and Jane are at a college house party. John realizes that Jane has been stealing glances and smiling at him from across the room ever since he arrived. Soon after, she approaches him and John notices that she is wearing a low cut blouse and a short skirt. Although this is their first time interacting with each other, John had previously

heard rumours that Jane had slept with multiple members of the football team. They hit it off quickly and after chatting for a while, Jane suddenly places her arms around his neck and kisses him. She then leads him to one of the upstairs bedrooms where they continue kissing. At this time, Tyler and Derek, John's friends, enter the room. As John and his friends take her blouse, Jane begins to feel uncomfortable and suggests that they should stop. John, Tyler, and Derek ignore her and continue kissing and undressing her. Jane again murmurs no but his friends hold her arms down and John proceeds to have sexual intercourse with her.

Condition 6 (H3): John and Jane are at a college house party. John realizes that Jane has been stealing glances and smiling at him from across the room ever since he arrived. Soon after, she approaches him and John notices that she is wearing a low cut blouse and a short skirt. Although this is their first time interacting with each other, John had previously heard rumours that Jane had slept with multiple members of the football team. They hit it off quickly and after chatting for a while, Jane suddenly places her arms around his neck and kisses him. She then leads him to one of the upstairs bedrooms where they continue kissing. At this time, Tyler and Derek, John's friends enter the room. As John and his friends take off her blouse, Jane begins to feel uncomfortable and forcefully pushes them away. John, Tyler, and Derek ignore her and continue kissing and undressing her. Jane starts screaming and tries to kick and scratch them but his friends hold her arms down and John proceeds to have sexual intercourse with her.

## Appendix E

## Manipulation Check Question

1. Based on the scenario you have just read, how much resistance do you think Jane displayed?
2. Other than Jane, how many people were present in the room at the time of the assault?

## Victim-Perpetrator Blame Scale

1. How much do you think Jane is to blame for what happened?
2. In your opinion, did Jane communicate to John that she did not consent to sexual intercourse?
3. To what extent do you think Jane could have avoided the incident?
4. How sorry do you feel for Jane?
5. Overall to what extent do you think Jane is responsible for what happened?
6. How much do you think John is to blame for what happened?
7. To what extent do you think John had control over the situation?
8. In your opinion, did John know right from wrong in this situation?
9. Overall to what extent do you think John is responsible for the incident?
10. How much do you think John should be held criminally liable for this incident?
11. To what extent do you believe that rape has occurred?

\*For L2, H2, L3, and H3, items 6 to 10 will change accordingly:

6. How much do you think John and his friend/s are to blame for what happened?
7. To what extent do you think John and his friend/s had control over the situation?
8. In your opinion did John and his friend/s know right from wrong in this situation?
9. Overall to what extent do you think John and his friend/s are responsible for the incident?

10. How much do you think John and his friend/s should be held criminally liable for this incident?