

Rape as a gendered and gendering crime: Observer reactions to (non-) stereotypical victimization

Eva Mulder*, Antony Pemberton, Job Vossen
INTERVICT, Tilburg University, Netherlands

Background

Survivors of rape not only have to physically and psychologically cope with the intrusive act they have suffered, but the aftermath of rape also frequently includes (extensive) interaction with criminal justice authorities and providing explanations towards third parties. The term secondary victimization was coined to describe the unfortunate instances where reactions by social surroundings to rape survivors' ordeals compound rather than ameliorate their suffering. Examples of these observer reactions include the minimizing of the victimization, and/or derogating and blaming the survivor. Although it is generally agreed upon that secondary victimization is especially likely to befall survivors of sexual violence, little is known about the underlying mechanisms of negative observer reactions. Several theories propose that negative reactions are related to observers' feelings of threat or discomfort that flow from the confrontation with a disturbing morally significant event (e.g., Just World Theory; System Justification Theory). In line with this reasoning, we expect negative reactions towards survivors of rape are partially influenced by a consistency or conflict between the actual rape and the observer's stereotypical notions of what rape is, and what it means to be a (rape) victim/survivor.

Aims

In this study, we were especially interested in what is theoretically described as the gendered and gendering nature of rape as a crime. Specifically, the first aim was to examine how observer reactions to rape survivors depend on the perceived adherence or defiance of survivors to gender stereotypes. The second aim was to experimentally test whether rape victimization in itself exerts an influence on the perceived gender of the survivor.

Methods

In this experimental vignette study, a sex-gender distinction was used to describe survivors of rape who either did or did not adhere to feminine or masculine stereotypes. A sample of 147 undergraduate law students (102 female, 42 male) read one of four versions of a character description, which varied according to sex (male or female) and gendered traits (masculine/agentive or feminine/communal) of the person described, followed by a rape scenario. Furthermore, in half of the sample, several questions relating to the evaluation of the rape survivor's character were asked after the character description but before the rape scenario, while in the other condition these questions were asked after the rape scenario.

Results

Statistical analyses indicated that gendered descriptions of victims affected observers' ratings

of victim traits and characterological blame, as well as perceived severity of the crime. Results also point to 'feminization', meaning that respondents are inclined to attribute more feminine qualities to a masculine victim after victimization.

Discussion/Conclusion

Although more research is needed, we may conclude that treatment of rape victims not only depends on their sex but also the way they are perceived in terms of gender stereotypes. The overlap between social constructs of femininity and victimhood can have negative connotations for both masculine and feminine stereotyped survivors of rape. Rape of feminine people may generally be perceived as less severe or more inevitable, whereas masculine survivors may at times be denied either their masculinity or survivor status.