

**An experimental investigation of the perceived credibility of complainants of  
sexual revictimization: Disbelief and victim-blame.**

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## Abstract

This study investigated whether attitudes towards a complainant of sexual assault are affected by the knowledge that the complainant had previously made a similar allegation. This was a 3 (previous allegation; none, child sexual assault or adult sexual assault) X 2 (whether the previous allegation was substantiated) X 2 (the implied mental health status of the complainant; mental health issue vs none) multifactorial, experimental study, employing independent-measures and hypothetical vignettes depicting stranger rape scenarios. The dependent variables were victim-blame and believability. The participants were 243 female undergraduate students. A MANOVA revealed several main and interactive effects. Allegations of sexual revictimization were associated with different levels of victim-blame and believability depending on when the previous assault occurred. A history of childhood sexual assault reduced the believability of the complainant and when combined with other factors increased the tendency to attribute victim-blame.

**Keywords:** rape complainant, sexual revictimization, victim-blame, false allegation, child sexual assault

## Introduction

Individuals who have experienced a sexual assault or child sexual abuse have a higher risk of subsequently being raped/sexual assaulted, sexual coerced, harassed or exploited in the future, compared with individuals without such experiences (Krahé & Berger, 2017; Messman-Moore, Coates, Gaffey, & Johnson, 2008; Nishith, Mechanic & Resick, 2000). This phenomenon is known as sexual revictimization. It typically includes assaults by different assailants and has been found to occur equally for men and women (Aosved, Long & Voller, 2011). It is estimated that about two-thirds of victims of childhood sexual assault (CSA) experience sexual revictimization following their initial assault (Classen, Paresh & Aggarwal 2005; Wager, 2012). Between 20-25% of sexual assault victims who report to the police are known to have made a previous allegation of sexual assault (Hohl & Stanko, 2015; Jordan, 2004). Yet it appears that individuals whose recent allegation suggests that they may have experienced sexual revictimization comprise one of the groups of victims who are the least likely to achieve justice due to their disproportionate rate of attrition from the criminal justice system (Jordan; 2001; 2004; Kelly, Lovett and Regan, 2005).

Hohl and Stanko's (2015) analysis of over 500 Metropolitan Police sexual assault cases found that where the police had recorded the previous allegations as being false reports, none of the recent allegations progressed to the Crown Prosecution Service (CPS). However, attrition for other instances of sexual revictimization did not appear to be disproportionately represented in the attrition figures. In cases where the previous allegation had been recorded as a false report, the police decision to either 'no-crime' or 'no-further-action' the subsequent complaint led to case attrition. Hohl and Stanko (2015) noted that the proportion of previous allegations recorded as false allegations far exceeded the established rates of false reporting nationally. Thus, it is likely these cases included genuine victims of sexual revictimization. Despite the findings from such case-file analyses, sexual revictimization has been largely negated in the literature which attempts to

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explain the systematic, but possibly unconscious biases known to contribute to the attrition of sexual assault cases.

Two attributional processes appear to impact on the decision-making of criminal justice personnel (and similarly affect the wider society), which contribute to attrition. These include the reluctance to believe allegations (see Saunders, 2012 for a discussion of false allegations) and where they are believed, the tendency to attribute blame to the victim. However, experimental studies of attitudes towards victims of adult sexual assault (ASA) have almost exclusively examined victim-blame and have largely ignored the tendency to disbelieve allegations.

Experimental studies investigating the impact of a history of sexual victimization of a current rape complainant upon attributions victim-blame, have typically found higher levels of victim-blame for the most recent allegation, in comparison to single rape complainants (Calhoun, Selby & Warring, 1976; Kanekar, Pinto & Mazumdar, 1985; Schult & Schneider, 1991; Sommer, Reynolds & Kehn, 2016; Tyson, 2003). However, McCaul, Veltum, Boyechko and Crawford (1990) found that sexual revictimization in the context of an acquaintance assault did not result in higher victim-blame. However, their two studies reported in the 1990 article were based on small sample sizes.

In Schult and Scheider's (1991) scenario-based study the participants presented with a case of sexual revictimization, in comparison to a single assault, demonstrated a greater belief that the victim had placed herself in a vulnerable position. Consequently, they felt the victim should accept some responsibility for what had happened. The authors speculated that the participants may have expected the victim to have learned lessons from her first assault which would have empowered her to protect herself from, or to prevent, a future assault. Alternatively, Calhoun et al. (1976) applied attribution theory to explain a similar finding in their study. They suggested that where observers identify a characteristic or trait that is repeated by an individual (e.g. episodes of

repeated sexual victimization), this is perceived as indicative of an underlying internal disposition.

Thus, the victim is deemed to have precipitated their own victimization to some degree.

Calhoun et al. (1976) suggested that internal dispositions exert less influence when the cause of the assault can be attributed to situational factors (e.g. when it is known that there is a high incidence of sexual assault in the geographical region of the alleged assault). To test this hypothesis, they manipulated the victim's prior history of sexual assault and the rape notoriety of the area where the alleged assault occurred (no previous incidents versus seven previous incidents). An interaction effect between the gender of the participant and these two manipulated variables was revealed. Women were most likely to believe that the victim's behavior had precipitated the assault in the context of revictimization where the recent incident occurred in a 'rape prone' area. Conversely, men attributed the greatest blame to the victim of revictimization when the incident was depicted as occurring in a relatively safe area. Thus, the men's responses conformed to the expectations of attribution theory (Heider, 1958). Whereas, women's attributions were more concordant with one of Shaver's (1985) dimensions in this defensive attribution theory; knowledge of the likely consequences or foreseeability (McCaul et al., 1990). One explanation for this gender difference is that women routinely engage in varied and more frequent precautionary self-protective behaviors (Gordon, Rigor & LeBailly, 1980). If it is assumed that the participants believed the victim was aware of the area's 'risky' reputation, then women may expect a female survivor of sexual assault to avoid the risky area. This notion is concordant with the finding that women are more likely to resort to behavioral blame and men tend to engage in dispositional blame when making attributions about rape (Krulowitz & Nash, 1979; Krulowitz & Payne, 1978). Such findings concur with Shaver's (1985) defensive attribution theory, in that if women identify with the female victim and they conclude that the victim's behavior contributed to her assault, then they can retain the illusion that their own anticipated behaviors would ensure their personal safety.

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With regards to perceptions of the believability of rape complainants, there are just two experimental studies (Davies and Wager, 2008; Vine and Wager, 2010) which examine victim-believability in the context of adult rape. Only one of these considered the impact of alleged sexual revictimization (Vine and Wager, 2010). In Vine and Wager's study believability, but not victim-blame, was negatively impacted by knowledge of a previous allegation of sexual assault. Thus, suggesting that if participants are given the opportunity to employ either victim-blame or disbelief, the tendency towards disbelief may be greater in the context of sexual revictimization.

With regards to the proportion of sexual assault allegations that are 'disbelieved', Sleath and Bull's (2012) scenario-based study using a police sample found that 40 percent of the officers endorsed the myth that women willingly have sex with someone, then later regret their actions and 'cry rape'. Thereby, suggesting that they disbelieve the veracity of the allegations. Importantly, this figure corresponds with the proportion (41%) of New Zealand police officers that Jordon (2004) noted dismissed rape complaints as false allegations. Similarly, Lees' (1997) study of UK detectives found that they consider approximately half of all rape complaints to be false allegations. However, Temkin's (1997) UK study found more conservative levels of disbelief, with 50 percent of the Sussex police officers she interviewed reporting that they believed that about a quarter of all rape complaints to be false allegations. Another way in which the police officers' disbelief in sexual assault complaints has been investigated is through an exploration of victims' experiences of reporting sexual assault to the police. Such studies have found that a significant proportion of victims perceive police officers to disbelieve their allegations. Temkin (1997) found that 26 percent of her UK interviewees and Jordan (2001) reported that 30 percent of her New Zealand interviewees felt that they had been disbelieved by the investigating officers at some point in the reporting and investigation processes. Furthermore, one factor found to potentiate the likelihood of an allegation being deemed a false complaint by the police is where a prior allegation of sexual

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assault has been recorded for the presenting complainant (Jordan, 2004; Kelly et al., 2005).

Importantly, in the UK investigating officers have immediate access to a complainant's history of interactions with the police within their own force area (but not across different forces) through the electronic police databases. Thus, if previous allegations have been reported and recorded officially, these would be readily visible to the officer, as would the outcome of the case. Hohl and Stanko (2015) identified that previous false allegations predict case attrition. Thus, it is likely that where previous allegations have not resulted in formal sanctions they will be thought of as false allegations and so lead to disbelief in any subsequent allegation.

### **This study**

Disbelief and denial have been evident in more naturalistic observations of individuals' and societal responses to child and adult sexual assault (Smart, 2000). Consequently, experimental research that strives towards ecological validity and real-world application, should be cognizant and inclusive of these potential reactions. However, to date, only one experimental study has examined the impact of sexual revictimization on victim believability. Therefore, this study is a development of the Vine and Wager (2010) study and investigates potential differences in perceptions of blameworthiness and believability between complainants with varied histories of prior sexual assault using a modified version of the Victim Blame/Believability Scale (Davies & Wager, 2008).

In addition to sexual victimization, another factor found to potentiate case attrition is the victim having a mental health issue (Ellison, Munro, Hohl & Wallang, 2015, Hester, 2013; Kelly et al., 2005). Davies and Wager's (2008) experimental study similarly found that an implied mental health issue both reduced the believability of the allegation and increased attributions of victim-blame. Consequently, it might be expected that implying the victim is experiencing a mental health issue might exacerbate the negative perceptions of victims with a prior history of sexual victimization. Given that victimization is often associated with a range of psychological disorders, and that new

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forms of victimization often trigger mental health issues arising from previous traumas (Nishith, et al., 2000), this combination of factors will reflect a realistic concern.

It was hypothesized that complainants with no known histories of sexual assault would be rated as more believable and less blameworthy than those who had made a previous allegation of sexual assault either in childhood or more recent adulthood. Importantly, most studies (with the exception of Vine & Wager, 2010) that have investigated the impact of a previous allegation of sexual assault have not distinguished between the potential differences in impact between prior assaults in childhood and adulthood. This is a considerable oversight since there appears to be an ingrained perception that victims/survivors of CSA uniquely and inherently experience extensive and enduring psychological damage (Rind, Tromovitch & Bauserman, 1998; Seligman, 1994). Thus, it is hypothesized that previous CSA, this will have a more pernicious impact on participants' attitudes towards the victim than previous ASA. It is also hypothesized that the impact of a previous history of sexual victimization will be moderated by whether the previous allegation was substantiated through the conviction of the accused. It is conceivable, that where previous allegations are not substantiated, current allegations are more likely to be perceived as fabricated.

The aim of this study was to test whether the attrition of cases of sexual revictimization from the criminal justice system can be explained by attitudinal biases held by people in general, rather than the police in particular.

### **Objectives**

This study had four key objectives: (1) To test the factor structure and the internal reliability of the modified Blame/Believability scale. (2) To determine whether having made a previous complaint of sexual assault and the mental health status of complainant impacts upon attributions of victim blame and believability. (3) To ascertain whether there is a differential impact of whether previous incidents of sexual assault/abuse occurred in childhood or adulthood. (4) To determine

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whether the substantiation of a previous allegation through the conviction of the offender enhances complainant credibility and impacts upon the degree of blame attributed to the victim.

## Methods

### Research Design

The study consisted of an experimental, between-subjects 3 X 2 X 2 factorial design, utilizing hypothetical case vignettes concerning an allegation of a sexual assault committed by a male stranger against a female victim, in which several variables are manipulated. The three manipulated independent variables were: a) A prior history of sexual abuse (no previous history, childhood sexual abuse, previous adult rape); b) Whether it is implied that the complainant was experiencing a mental health issue, and c) Where a previous allegation is present, whether this was substantiated with a conviction of the offender. The dependent variables were the two subscales on the Victim Blame/Believability Scale.

### Participants

An opportunistic sample of 243 female students was drawn from both undergraduate and post-graduate programs across a range of disciplines. Eighteen of the original responses contained incomplete information and on 11 one or more of the manipulation check questions was answered incorrectly, and thus were excluded from the analysis. Participants ages ranged between 18-69 years, with a mean age of 27 years. Ninety percent of this sample were white British or European.

### Measures

A modified version of the Victim-Blame/Believability Scale (Davies and Wager, 2008) which was originally a nine-item, five-point Likert-type scale with two dimensions; victim-blame and victim-believability, was developed for this study. Both subscales had previously attained satisfactory internal reliability, consistently producing Cronbach's alphas above 0.7. However, the original scale was designed to be used for a variety of personal crimes which were committed by

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strangers outside and thus it was refined to apply more specifically to cases of sexual assault. The items pertaining to the disbelief of the victim were increased to include those which could either be a false allegation (e.g. wholly fictitious) or a false account (exaggeration of the details of an actual incident). The additions to the scale were worded so that it could also be used for crimes committed by someone known to the victim. Finally, following comments made by participants in Davies and Wager's (2008) study, the wording at the beginning of the statements relating to victim-blame included the addition of a prefix phrase. Davis and Wager's participants had argued that the original victim-blame statements were nonsensical if they did not believe the allegation. Thus, the prefix to each of the blame statements was, 'if the incident actually happened'. The modified scale consisted of 14-items assessed on a 5-point Likert-type scale but was reduced to 11 items following the principle components analysis. The believability sub-scale consisted of six items including: "*Ms A is possibly attention seeking and thus fabricating the whole incident.*" The participants were required to indicate their agreement from 1= strongly agree, to 5= strongly disagree, with each of the statements. The midpoint (3 = undecided) allowed the participants to indicate their reluctance to make a firm decision. A low score on the scale is associated with disbelief. The victim-blame scale consisted of five items and included statements such as: "*Ms A should have been better able to defend herself*", which were responded to in the same manner as the believability sub-scale. A low score on this subscale was associated with blaming the victim.

### **The vignette**

Manipulation of the independent variables resulted in 10 variants of the vignette. The scenario did not include graphic details to avoid re-traumatizing past victims. The depicted scenario contained several features of a stereotypical rape context (Estrich, 1986), which are largely informed by prevalent rape myths (Burt, 1980). That is, the incident occurred at a relatively early hour of the evening, there was no suggestion of the victim having consumed alcohol, the incident occurred

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outside and the alleged attacker was a stranger. There was no suggestion of the complainant's pre-rape behavior which would have readily enabled the attribution of behavioral blame. The vignette was worded as the victim making the complaint to the police rather than as a statement of fact. An example of the vignettes is presented below showing the three manipulated variables in brackets.

The section in italics only occurred in the vignettes depicting sexual revictimization.

Ms A, a 21-year-old university student, presented herself at the local police station reporting that she had just been raped by an unknown individual as she walked home through the town center after an appointment with her psychiatrist [dentist]. She states that the assailant jumped out of a doorway and dragged her down an alleyway. Unfortunately, the area she refers to is just out of view of the CCTV cameras. She claims the assault happened at about 7 pm and doesn't recall there being any other eyewitnesses. *The officer's check of her details on the police computer indicates that she had previously made a sexual assault allegation three years ago [been the victim of alleged child sexual abuse when she was 8 years old]. Whilst an arrest was made the case did not proceed to court [The case progressed to court and resulted in the offender gaining a conviction for serious sexual assault].*

### **Procedure**

The participants were approached in the common areas of the university campus. The study was introduced as a survey exploring our understanding of rape allegations. They were presented with the invitation letter which included the web-link for the study which randomly allocated them to the experimental conditions. The rationale for the recruitment method stems from Collett and Childs' (2009) critique of vignette studies which have been conducted on classes of psychology students. They contend that the discipline of student's degree is likely to have an impact on his/her perceptions and attitudes. Consequently, by recruiting students from the 'public' areas rather than in specific classrooms a greater diversity of students was included and the

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influence of subject areas should have been randomly distributed throughout the different vignette scenarios.

The participants completed the study online and in their own time. No payment or reward was given to participants for their participation. The study was hosted by Psychdata, a web-survey provider. Initially, the participants were questioned about their demographic details before being presented with one of the vignettes and requested to complete the victim-blame/ believability scale. Finally, participants were presented with two or three manipulation check questions depending on the scenario they read. The study conformed to the British Psychological Society's ethical guidelines and was granted ethical approval by the Faculty Ethics Committee in June 2011.

### **Data Analysis**

The data was analyzed using SPSS version 22. Initially, statistical analysis was performed on the Victim Blame/Believability scale to enhance the validity of the measure. This included principle components analysis to ascertain the dimensionality of the scale and to determine which items should be retained, and internal reliability analysis using Cronbach's alpha. The total scores for each of the two subscales were used in two multivariate analyses of variance (MANOVA). The analysis was split into two different stages since the participants who had been presented with scenarios in which no previous complaints were indicated were excluded from the analysis investigating the impact of substantiation of the original sexual assault complaint; which equated to a loss of 50 participants for the second analysis.

### **Results**

#### **Principle components analysis of the Victim Blame/Believability scale**

An un-rotated Principle Components Analysis (PCA) was performed on the 14 items from the scale to determine the number of likely factors. Examination of the scree plot and eigenvalues indicated two factors. The Kaiser-Meyer-Okin value was 0.919, which exceeded the recommended

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value of 0.6 (Kaiser, 1970) and the Barlett's test of Sphericity (Barlett, 1954) attained statistical significance, supporting the factorability of the correlation matrix. Correlation coefficients were calculated between each of the two possible factors, which suggested there was little association between the factors. Consequently, a varimax (orthogonal) rotation was employed in the subsequent PCA. This revealed that the scale had two components with eigenvalues higher than 1.0, which when combined explained 57.97% of the variance. Additional inclusion criteria were applied to determine which items to retain. This included that factor loadings had to be 0.45 or above, which is deemed representative of a fair measure of the factor (Tabachnick and Fidell, 1997), and that there should be at least a difference of 0.2 between loadings on competing factors. Three items were found to have competing loadings and were thus removed from the final scale. With regards to the factor structure, Factor 1 (believability) explained 48.24% of the variance and factor 2 (victim-blame) explained a further 9.69% of the variance. The believability subscale included six items and the victim-blame scale included five items. Internal reliability scores for both scales attained a level of satisfaction (Nunnally, 1978): believability scale  $\alpha = .880$  and the victim-blame scale  $\alpha = .782$ . The scale items and their factor loadings are presented in Table 1 below.

**Table 1: Rotated Component Matrix of the Blame/ Believability scale**

<b>Item</b>	<b>Factor 1 Believability</b>	<b>Factor 2 Blameworthy</b>
Ms A is possibly attention seeking and thus fabricating the whole incident	.782	
It is doubtful that this incident actually took place	.754	
It's hard to believe these allegations	.746	
Ms A is possibly making up the allegations to hurt or take revenge on the alleged assailant	.736	
It is likely that Ms A isn't telling the whole truth and the incident is really less serious than she is claiming	.723	
It is likely that the details of this incident have been exaggerated	.661	.461
Ms A has possibly misinterpreted events	.621	.452*
If the incident actually happened, Ms A should of been better able to defend herself		.741
If the incident actually happened, Ms A should of known to be more cautious		.669
If the incident actually happened, Ms A ought to take some responsibility for her own welfare		.670
If the incident actually happened to, Ms A probably aggravated the unfolding of events	.448	.665
Ms A should take some responsibility for the alleged incident	.438	.631*
If the incident actually happened, it is unlikely that the alleged rapist would have targeted Ms A had she not acted somewhat provocatively		.626
If the incident actually happened, Ms a probably instigated its occurrence	.428	.541*

\* denotes items not included in the final scales

### **Descriptive Statistics**

#### **Believability subscale**

The possible range of scores was between six and 30 whereas the observed range of scores was from nine to 30 with a mean score of 22.25. A low score was associated with greater disbelief. The skewness for the scale was -.325 and Kurtosis was -.108. The scale, therefore, exhibited a negative skew suggesting that most of the participants demonstrated some belief in the complainant's allegations.

#### **The victim-blame sub-scale**

The possible range of scores is between five and 25 whereas the observed range of scores was between nine and 25 with a mean score of 20.23, a skewness score of -.540 and a Kurtosis

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score of -.381. The scores are negatively related to blameworthiness. The scale, therefore, exhibits a negative skew suggesting that most of the participants attribute relatively low levels of blame to the alleged complainant.

The means and standard deviations for the two subscales are presented in Table 2. These were calculated to highlight the main effects for each of the three manipulated variables. Across the different conditions of the manipulated variables, it appears that revictimization characterized by prior CSA is perceived to be the least believable allegation and where the complainant is attributed the greatest blame for their current assault.

**Table 2: Descriptive statistics**

Independent variable	Manipulation	Victim Blame		Believability	
		Mean	SD	Mean	SD
History of previous sexual assault	None (n = 50)	21.22	3.38	23.56	4.42
	Prior ASA (n = 83)	20.81	3.35	22.76	3.94
	Prior CSA (n = 80)	20.06	3.63	21.46	4.80
Implied mental health issue	No (n = 112)	20.58	3.51	22.55	4.52
	Yes (n = 101)	20.67	3.46	22.35	4.39
Substantiation of previous allegation	No (n = 91)	20.34	3.36	21.87	4.42
	Yes (n = 72)	20.57	3.36	22.44	4.46

**Inferential statistics**

A two-way MANOVA exploring the main and interactive effects of previous allegations and implied mental health status on victim blame and believability did not find a statistically significant interaction effect between these two independent variables. No main effects were found for mental health status on either level of victim-blame or believability, nor was a main effect found for previous allegations on levels of victim-blame. However, a significant main effect of previous allegations upon the believability of the allegation ( $F = (2, 213) 4.072, p = .018, \eta^2 = .038$ ) was

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revealed. Post Hoc analysis employing Tukey's identified that the difference was between no previous allegations (mean = 23.56, sd = 4.418) and a prior allegation of CSA (mean = 21.46, sd = 4.802,  $p = .021$ ). Where previous allegations of CSA were associated with a current complaint being deemed less believable than in cases where there was no history of previous sexual victimization or where the complainant had previously reported ASA (mean = 22.75, sd = 3.937).

A three-way MANOVA was computed to investigate potential main and interactive effects between the previous allegation (CSA or ASA), substantiation of the previous allegation (e.g. conviction of the offender), and the complainant's implied mental health status upon the victim-blame and believability. In relation to victim-blame, a statistically significant interaction effect was revealed between the nature of the previous allegation and whether this had been substantiated ( $F_{(1, 163)} = 6.273, p = .013, \eta^2 = .039$ ). Prior CSA and the conviction of the previous offender was associated with higher levels of victim-blame in response to the current allegation [means = 20.55 (sd = 3.354) vs 19.21 (sd = 3.994)]. Conversely, a prior allegation of ASA which resulted in the conviction of the assailant was associated with lower levels of blame [means = 20.08 (sd = 3.400) vs 21.49 (sd = 3.188)].

Figure 1: Victim-blame, previous allegation of sexual assault and mental health issues

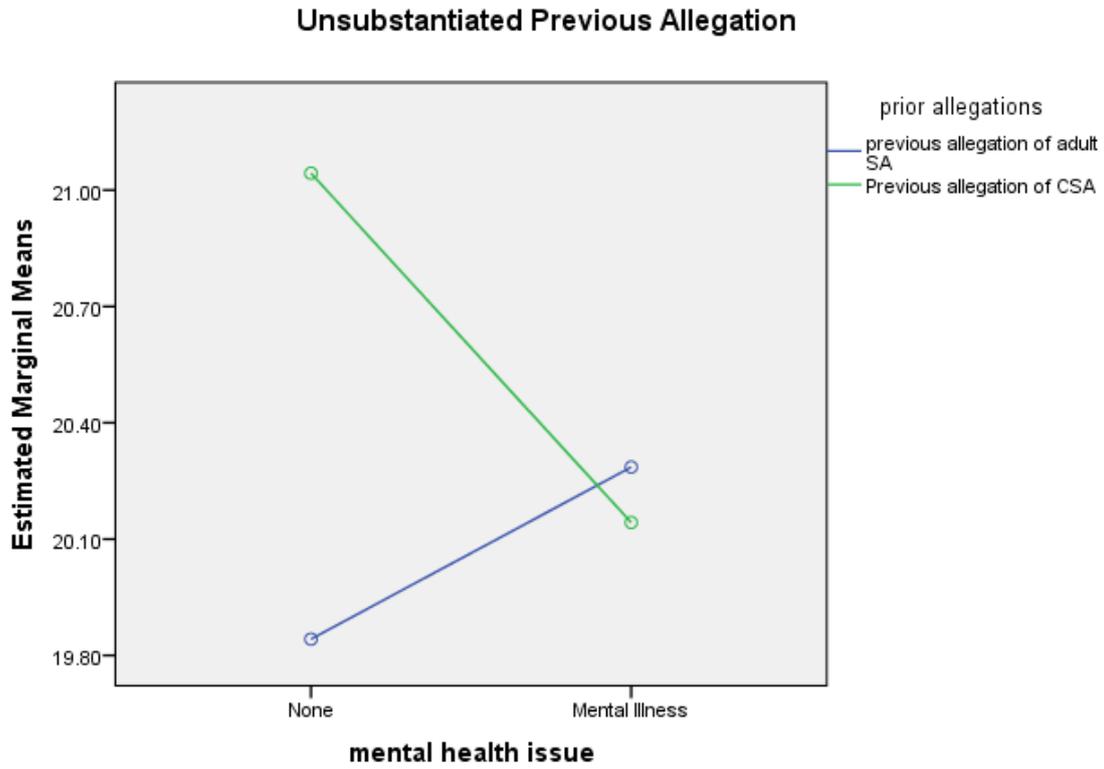
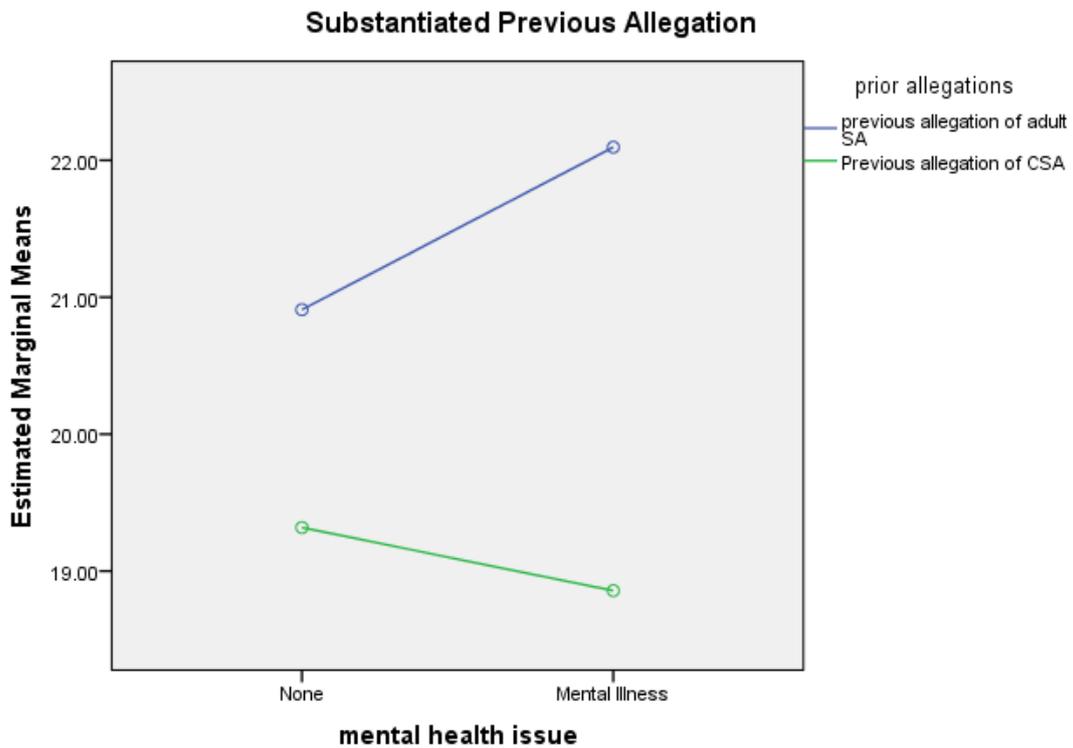


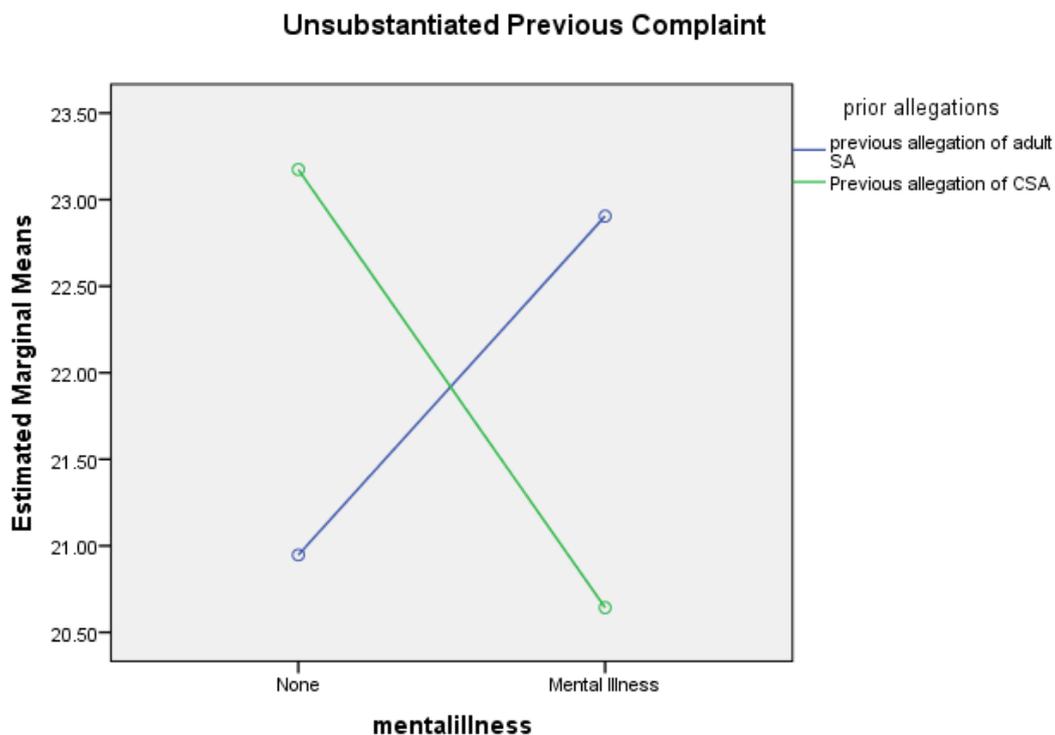
Figure 2: Victim-blame, previous allegation of sexual assault and mental health issues



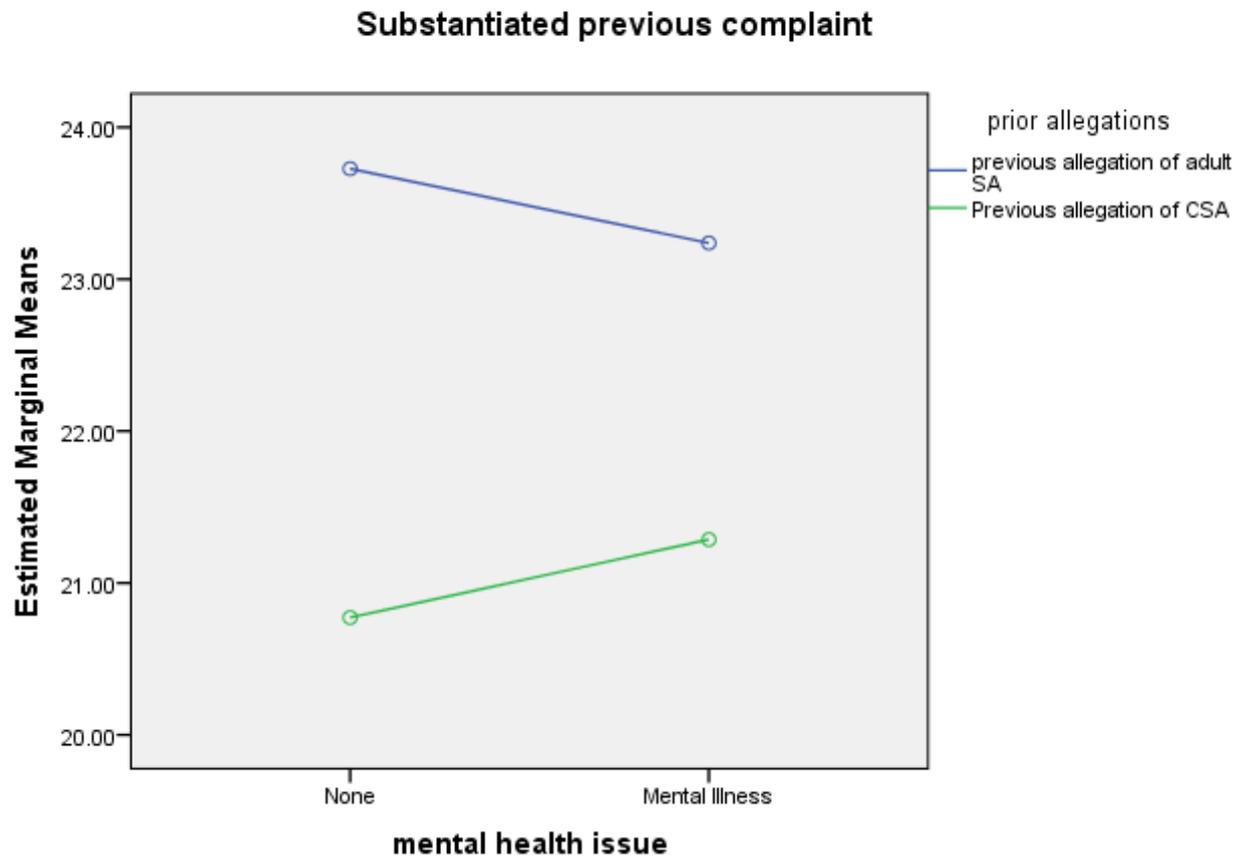
Additionally, a borderline interaction effect was found [ $F = (1, 163) 3.487, p = .064, \eta^2 = .022$ ] in which believability was enhanced by the suggestion that the complainant was experiencing a mental health issue where they had a history of unsubstantiated ASA [means: 20.95 (sd = 4.540) vs 22.90 (sd = 3.491)]. Whereas for a complainant with a history of CSA, their believability was diminished by such a suggestion [means: 23.17 (sd = 4.509) vs 20.64 (sd = 4.540)]. Conversely, where there was substantiation for the previous allegation, mental illness appeared to have little effect on the believability for complainants with histories of either ASA or CSA.

No main effects of substantiation of the allegation were evident for either victim blame ( $F = (1, 163) 0.003, p = .954, \eta^2 = .000$ ) or believability ( $F = (1, 163) 0.212, p = .646, \eta^2 = .001$ ).

**Figure 3: Believability, previous complaint of sexual assault, and mental health issues**



**Figure 4: Believability, previous complaint of sexual assault, and mental health issues**



**Discussion**

The Victim Blame/Believability scale, the scale was found to have two factors which relate to victim- blame and disbelief separately and each of these sub-scales demonstrated satisfactory internal reliability. This is concordant with the findings from the analyses using the original scale (e.g. Davies & Wager, 2008; Vine and Wager, 2010).

No significant interactive effects for previous allegations and the mental health status were found in relation to either victim-blame or believability. Contrary to expectations there were no significant main effects of mental health status on either victim-blame or believability. Whilst there was no main effect of previous allegations on victim-blame, there was a significant main effect on believability, where allegations made by complainants with a prior history of sexual assault were

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less likely believed. Thus, suggesting that the experimental hypotheses are only partly supported in this instance.

The null finding regarding mental health status contrasts with those from the naturalistic, case-file analyses which suggest that complainants with mental health issues are unlikely to progress through the criminal justice system (e.g. Jordan 2004). This tentatively suggests that the disproportionate rates of attrition for complainants with mental health issues are unlikely to be due to unconscious bias in the investigating police offices, but rather it might be better explained by officers making conscious decisions based on the welfare needs of the complainant and/or their judgment of the probability of the CPS pursuing the case.

The findings did reveal a significant main effect of revictimization on the believability of the complainant. This is consistent with Vine and Wager's (2010) findings. Specifically, a complainant who had made a previous allegation of CSA was significantly less likely to be believed than a complainant with no known prior history of sexual victimization or a prior history of ASA. There was no significant main effect of revictimization on levels of victim blame. This contrasts with most of the limited research findings to-date. Although, this is consistent with the findings of McCaul et al. (1990) who examined sexual revictimization which occurred in the context of acquaintance rape. However, it should be noted that McCaul et al. (1990) did not specify to their research participants when the previous sexual assault occurred (e.g. childhood or adulthood).

The analysis indicated that respondents showed a greater tendency to blame a sexual assault complainant who had prior experience of CSA when the previous abuser was convicted. However, lower levels of victim-blaming were associated with substantiation of a previous allegation where this referred to ASA. These findings are inconsistent with those of Vine and Wager (2010) who found a non-significant trend relation to victim-blame which demonstrated that substantiation of the previous allegation proved favorable in the case of CSA, but not prior ASA. A

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possible explanation for the divergent findings might be attributed to the different gender composition of the two samples. Vine and Wager's sample contained a significant proportion of males, whom they had identified as being more favorably swayed than females by the substantiation of the previous allegation.

When considering the implied mental health status of the complainant, whilst no overall main effect was revealed, there was an interaction with the substantiation of the previous allegation. A non-significant trend was evident, in which believability of complainants with unsubstantiated previous allegations was enhanced when the prior assaults were ASA and diminished when they were CSA if the complainant had a mental health issue. This finding contrasts with the overall detrimental effect of implied mental illness found in Davis and Wager's (2008) experimental study. Although, it is important to note that not all the hypothetical victims in their study were females alleging sexual assault. It is proposed that where it was suggested that the complainant had made a prior allegation of more recent ASA that the suggestion of mental illness would serve to further substantiate their earlier claim (i.e. mental illness is assumed to be a consequence of the previous victimization) and in turn, support this current allegation.

### **The strength of the study**

This study suggests that experimental studies investigating perceptions about rape victims may have been asking the wrong questions. The problem with the predominance of the application of attribution theory to our understanding of how others perceive alleged victims is that the theory only allows us to explore individuals' decision-making/information processing when they are addressing 'why' questions. To ask why something has happened means that we accept that it has occurred, when in reality, when confronted with information that breaches our moral boundaries we are more likely to ask 'did this really happen?' In previous experimental research of this type, the participants have almost been forced into adopting one defense mechanism when confronted

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with material that potentially conflicts with their just world beliefs (Lerner, 1977); that is to blame the victim. The strength of this study is that the participants were presented with two different defense mechanisms; denying that the incident occurred through disbelieving the allegations or believing that the incident occurred and attributing some responsibility to the victim.

### **Limitations of the study**

There were several limitations of this study which were due to the recruitment strategy employed, the sample obtained, and the nature of the questions asked. To prevent harm to potential participants the study was entitled 'our understanding of rape allegations' so that people would be able to make an informed choice about whether to participate right from the outset. Whilst the framing of the study in this way was done for ethical reasons, it also holds the potential for having attracted a biased sample. Due to the way in which the sample was recruited and the process that allowed participants to complete the study in their own time, in a location that felt comfortable to them, it is impossible to ascertain the rate of attrition and hence estimate the extent of any potential bias. It was assumed that survivors of sexual violence who felt there was potential for being retraumatized by participating in the study would self-select out of participating. However, due to the sensitivities around this issue, it may be that the self-selecting sample was either more compassionate towards or more skeptical of complainants of rape, with those feeling indifferent towards the issue being less inclined to complete the study. It is likewise anticipated that people who choose to work around sexual offending and victimization are equally either more passionate or more skeptical of rape allegations than the lay population. Consequently, the findings here might be more reflective of the practitioners to whom victims disclose rather than the family and friends to whom they make informal (but nonetheless often pivotal) disclosures.

Due to the paucity of male participants and the analyses being restricted to the responses from the female participants, it is not known whether these findings would generalize to male

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participants. Since gender has repeatedly been found to impact upon beliefs and attitudes towards victims of sexual violence, this factor presents a limitation of this study. Typically, in previous single assault rape attribution research, women have been found to hold more favorable attitudes towards rape complainants and thus it is anticipated that the negative bias found in this study might underestimate that which might be found with male participants.

It has been argued that the very act of asking respondents to consider victim blame may encourage respondents who have no natural inclination to engage in victim-blaming attitudes to behave in accordance with the questioning (Bohner, Bless, Schwarz & Strack, 1988). If this is the case, the results could be an overestimation of the extent of victim-blaming (and potentially disbelief of allegations). Thus, any differences in blaming tendencies associated with the manipulated variables are likely to demonstrate a smaller effect size, than that observed in this study. However, it is equally possible that some participants were motivated towards socially desirable responding (Bohner, 2001), which would lead them to be less likely to endorse statements that infer they hold victim-blaming attitudes. In which case, there would be an underestimation of the magnitude of effect.

Attitudinal studies, in general, have been criticized on the grounds of the relatively low overall mean scores found for victim-blaming which tend to contradict the reported experiences of victims and naturalistic studies of the treatment of victims in the criminal justice system (Anderson & Doherty, 2008). This study similarly found relatively low levels of victim blame, yet it did demonstrate considerably higher rates of disbelief, which is more consistent with the field studies.

Anderson and Doherty (2008) critique the use of positivist research methods, such as the experimental design of this study, when researching sexual assault. They argue that by focusing on a narrow range of individualistic and situational variables that research participation and dissemination might contribute to the proliferation of rape myths. Whilst this is a potential, it can

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also be argued that there is specific value in these studies. For example, the rationale for this study was prompted by the recognition victims of sexual revictimization risk falling prey to the injustice of case attrition and secondary victimization if they report their experiences. It is likely that through disbelief and aspersions of blame, these victims' recovery will be curtailed by their unmet needs for validation and vindication. That is, healing requires both the acknowledgment of the harm by others (being believed when disclosing) and having the blame laid firmly with the perpetrator. Such negated needs may place them at even greater risk of further victimization, mental health issues, and relationship problems. It is impossible to effect changes in practice without evidence, and it is difficult to gain appropriate evidence (from naturalistic studies), without the approval of gatekeepers. Their support is often difficult to attain when the rationale is perceived as condemning their current processes, practices, and personnel. Rather than condemning criminal justice agents as being defective in their proneness for exhibiting unconscious bias against certain groups of individuals, it was deemed preferable to show that this is a typical trend in the general population. A trend, which if not corrected for in the decision-making of criminal justice agents, could result in behaviour which is effectively discriminatory.

### **Implications for practice**

Current police practice in the UK means it is permissible, through intelligence held on police databases, that a complainant's history of previous confirmed or alleged victimization is easily accessible to investigating officers. Since there appears to be a high level of suspicion concerning allegations of sexual assault (Ask, 2009), it is conceivable that checking the history of a complainant may be commonplace. The results here suggest that knowledge of previous allegations of sexual victimization (particularly that which occurred during childhood) has the potential to have a prejudicial effect on the investigating officers' decision-making and/or interactions with the complainant. The potential consequence is a disproportionate rate of attrition of cases involving

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revictimization from the criminal justice process. One practical solution might be to prevent investigating officers from gaining awareness that a current complainant has made a previous allegation of sexual assault, through their restricting access to this type of information in the databases. However, in the UK it is the role of the officers to construct a case for the CPS, who ultimately decide whether to progress the case through the courts. Within this role, officers have a duty to include details of information that might challenge the credibility of the alleged victim, and thus render the case less likely to secure a conviction. If officers were to fail to disclose such information, particularly when it might be discovered by the defense team, they would be considered negligent.

Whilst disbelieving an allegation made by a complainant might lead to attrition due to the officers failing to investigate the case further, such unfounded disbelief might also contribute to attrition through victims' withdrawal of their complaints. Evidence indicates that victim withdrawal of statements from cases of sexual assault is negatively associated with victims' perceptions of the investigating police officer's demonstration of empathy (Maddox, Lee & Barker, 2011). Since it might be assumed that officers who intuitively disbelieve a complainant are unlikely to demonstrate empathy, officer disbelief might be indirectly linked to case attrition, with the effect being mediated through perceptions of empathy. Consequently, the most practical solution might be to train officers in relation to the prevalence and causes of sexual revictimization, in ways which avoid victim-blaming and in the importance of, and strategies for, demonstrating victim-empathy.

### **Directions for future research**

It must be kept in mind that the findings reported here were revealed in response to a scenario depicting an incident of stranger rape, one which conformed in many ways, to stereotypical characterization of rape. As such, the victim may have been perceived as less 'deserving' of the assault, than a victim of acquaintance or marital rape. This factor may have led to

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the lower rates of victim-blame than have been reported previously. With regard to believability, it might be anticipated that there would be a greater tendency to believe an allegation of stranger rape since it conforms to the stereotyped account. However, it might also be true that believability was lower than might be found in an acquaintance rape scenario, since it is difficult to conceive of how the victim's behavior may have precipitated the assault, and thus to retain our just world beliefs (Lerner, 1977), it is expedient to disbelieve the stranger assault allegation.

Another avenue for further research could be to test the assertion made here that victim-blame might be over-estimated since experimental studies have typically offered participants to employ only one defense mechanism to protect their just world beliefs. A similar vignette study might be used with half the participants only being asked to respond on the victim-blame sub-scale and the other half responding on both the victim-blame and disbelief sub-scales. If the contention is justified, it would be expected that participants who respond only on the victim-blame scale would attribute higher levels of victim-blame than the participants who are given the opportunity to respond by disbelieving the allegation.

There is a need for more research that investigates how observers/recipients make sense of rape allegations/disclosures by permitting the opportunity to give qualitative accounts of their understanding of a rape allegation. Such a study would allow for the full expression of all the ways in which an observer/recipient might cognitively process the allegation. The findings from such a study would be useful in devising training to improve the responses and attitudes of professionals who work with victims.

### **Conclusion and Implications**

The findings here, particularly in relation to allegations of sexual assault where a complainant is known to have made a previous allegation of CSA, correspond well with the old adage 'lightning never strikes in the same place twice'. Both espouse the erroneous belief, despite

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compelling evidence to the contrary, that bad things do not happen to the same people or places more than once. Meteorologists are well aware that lightning will regularly strike the tallest building/tree within a particular region during a storm and similarly, victimologists recognize that prior victimization is one of the strongest predictors of future victimization. However, such facts challenge our widely held belief in a just world and as a consequence, we are compelled to engage in the deployment of several self-defense mechanisms; denial/disbelief and/or victim-blaming. The findings here suggest that victims of sexual revictimization, particularly where the first known victimization occurred during childhood, are the most likely to experience secondary victimization by those to whom they disclose and it is conceivable they are they will experience little by way of justice should they choose to officially report their most recent victimization. Thus, it is likely that those who are the most vulnerable to victimization and who may suffer the most pernicious effects in the aftermath of sexual violence are those whose requests for assistance will be met with the least empathetic responses, which could ultimately compound their future safety, and their physical and psychological recovery. I would suggest that to eradicate/reduce this effect appropriate training for criminal justice agents and victim support workers needs to include raising awareness of both the prevalence of sexual revictimization and of our unfortunate tendency to make erroneous and persecutory attributions, and to offer guidance for how such a tendency might be counterbalanced by more rational and compassionate responding.

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