Remembering a Just World: Motivated Recall of Victim Culpability

Sahil Sharma
New York University

Research over the last 30 years has demonstrated that individuals will often blame the victim for his or her misfortune. Just World Theory (Lerner, 1980) argues that individuals do so because they are motivated to perceive their world as fair and just. Gender seems to moderate the effect of Belief in a Just World (BJW) on victim blame. Conflicting evidence suggests that this motivation affects women in different ways from men—she either blames the victim more (Janoff-Bulman, 1980) when there is a threat to the just world or less (Foley & Pigot, 2000) regardless of threat. It is less clear whether just world concerns impact recall of actual victim culpability. In this paper, we investigate whether individuals misremember information about victim responsibility for a sexual assault in order to satisfy the goal to believe that the world is just. We hypothesize that individuals whose just world motive has been experimentally heightened will be more likely to misremember details of a sexual assault in a way that confers responsibility on the victim. Results showed that memory mediates victim-blame. Men, when faced with a high threat to their belief in a just world, blamed the victim more than did women and misremembered the victimization of a female to inculcate greater blame.

Imagine you are out with your friends and you see a couple at the bar. You glance at them and then you continue to talk to your friends. Later, you receive a phone call from the police and you find out that the woman has been sexually assaulted, and that the man has not been apprehended. The officer then asks you to provide any information you can about what you observed. What would you say to the officer? If, during your attempt to recall relevant information, you thought of the way the woman was dressed or the amount of drinks it appeared she had consumed, you would not be alone. While societal norms have taught us that victims of sexual assault are *never* to blame, individuals still often wonder what the victim could have changed or should have done to prevent the victimization.

Such reactions can perhaps be explained as a rational reflection of these people's personal experiences—if in their own lives, they have avoided misfortune such as sexual assault, it might be reasonable for them to believe that the victim must have somehow contributed to their negative outcomes. However, research by Melvin Lerner suggests that this belief may not be an entirely rational extrapolation based on personal experience. Rather, individuals may, in fact, have a *need* to believe that the world is just, and they will work to circumvent threats to that belief. According to the Belief in a Just World (BJW) theory, people want to believe that the world is fundamentally just. Maintenance of the belief in a just world implies believing that only good people receive good outcomes and only bad people receive bad outcomes (Lerner, 1980). When an unjust act occurs, such as an assault, the theory predicts that people will first try to restore justice. However, if restoring actual justice does not seem possible, they will engage in strategies such as denial or reinterpretation of the event. For example, observers have been found to restore perceived justice by attributing more negative traits and behaviors to the victims and thus blaming the victim for their injustice (Hafer, 2000).

Lerner has suggested that people differ in the extent to which they believe that the world is a just place, and that these differences can be evaluated with self-report methods. BJW has been measured by specific self-report scales, and the construct validity of these scales has

been tested against many varying situations of injustice (Hafer & Bègue, 2005).For instance, individuals may be chronically higher in the need to believe in a just world (see Hafer & Bègue, 2005, for a review). Therefore, chronically high just world believers, as indicated by these scales, are predicted to be more motivated to defend their belief in justice.

There are important moderators of belief in a just world. Evidence suggests that gender may also interact with BJW, though the research is conflicting. Kleinke and Meyer (1990) found that men with high BJW blamed rape victims more than did those with low BJW, while women did not vary by BJW levels. Similarly, Foley and Pigott (2000) found that men with high BJW awarded less to the victim in damages than did men with a low BJW. Women attributed the same level of responsibility to the plaintiff, regardless of BJW, but interestingly, those with high BJW actually awarded *more* damages to the victim. These findings may suggest that women blame female victims less because they are sympathetic to wrongs against gender in-group members. However, other research suggests that individuals are actually *more* likely to blame similar others than dissimilar others, in an effort to assuage concerns that they may suffer a similar fate to the victim's (Janoff-Bulman, 1982). In this case, women (especially those with high BJW) would actually blame rape victims *more* than will men in an effort to maintain perceived control over avoiding sexual assaults themselves.

There are also situational factors that might temporarily enhance or attenuate an individual's need to believe the world is just. One such factor that enhances the threat to the just world is when the victim's suffering continues or the perpetrator is not punished for his alleged crimes (Hafer, 2000). It is more threatening to learn that someone has victimized another and gotten away with it than to learn that they have been caught and prosecuted.

While a good deal of research has investigated the various factors affecting threat to BJW, less is understood about *how* victim blaming occurs. One such strategy that people use to blame the victim might be through the memory of the victimization. Indeed, memories are often distorted from the objective facts. People often cannot remember every small detail from an event, and thus forget numerous facts (Barrouillet, Bernardin, Portrat, Vergauwe, & Camos, 2007). Sometimes, however, such distortions of memory occur because of

motivational factors (e.g., McDonald & Hirt, 1997; Sanitioso, Kunda, & Fong, 1990). For instance, Sedikides and colleagues showed that individuals better recall self-affirming feedback compared to self-threatening feedback, apparently in order to preserve their self-esteem and identity (Sedikides, Green, & Pinter, 2004). Recent evidence suggests that motives other than self-esteem preservation, such as efforts to maintain the status quo, may also influence memory. In addition, these errors in recall appear to be specific to motivationally relevant information, and not just the result of cognitive load (e.g., Hennes & Jost, 2012).

Justice may be another motive that biases information processing, in this case directing memory towards victim blame. For example, it is possible that, after learning that a rape victim was intoxicated, an individual simply concludes that this intoxication led the victim to be assaulted. Another possibility, though, is that when people are motivated to see the world as a just place, victim blame may be facilitated by distorted information processing. For instance, the individual may be better able to recall the provocative dress of the victim, or how flirtatiously she was acting because they are so motivated to restore perceived justice.

Indeed, recent evidence suggests that people selectively recall and fabricate information to further their beliefs that people deserve their fortunes and misfortunes. For instance, Callan, Kay, Davidenko, and Ellard (2009) found that participants who were told that a lottery winner was a good person remembered the winnings as being higher than did participants who were told the winner was a bad person. They also remembered more good things about themselves after winning (versus losing) a coin flip.

As the lottery study suggests, justice motivation can even influence cognitive processing of objectively probabilistic events (such as a coin flip) for which it is clearly irrational to infer causality. The memory biases that Callan and colleagues report were not related to objective responsibility (i.e., participants were asked to recall the amount of the lottery prize rather than, for instance, the number of tickets the winner had bought). In many real-life situations, however, such as the dynamics of court cases, the attribution of blame is often a central objective. Various factors can objectively increase or decrease the likelihood of events, such as sexual assaults or car accidents, implicating responsibility as a central

consideration in analysis of these events. Therefore, the present research hopes to address how victim-blaming occurs following non-chance events.

In this study, then, we will explore the following question: how is cognitive processing of events of victimization modulated by threat to just world beliefs? We make several hypotheses in this study: First, consistent with previous research (Lerner, 1980), we predict that victim blame will be stronger when the belief in a just world has been threatened. Further, we expect this blame to be facilitated by decreased accuracy in recall of incriminating facts about the victim, and increased accuracy of exonerating information about the perpetrator. Most importantly, we expect this effect to be stronger for men, above and beyond any gender differences in chronic levels of BJW.

METHOD

Participants. 171 adult participants (80 female) were recruited from the online webservice Mechanical Turk. Participants were 78% White, and ranged in age from 18-73 ($M = 33$, $SD = 13$). Sixty-six percent of participants had at least a college education and participants were on average slightly liberal ($M = 4.25$, $SD = 2.17$), as reported on a 9-point scale ranging from extremely liberal to extremely conservative. Participants were restricted only to the United States and received $0.50 each for their participation.

Target Article: Participants were randomly assigned to one of two conditions and asked to read an article from the *Herald Times*, an online paper covering local news in Indiana. The article reports a sexual assault of a twenty-year-old female student by another male student at Indiana University. This actual article contains numerous descriptions about the victim, the perpetrator, and the crime, including clothing, GPA, academic major, descriptions about the victim's injuries, and the victim's blood alcohol level. The article was edited slightly to remove racial and other identifying information about the parties, but was otherwise largely unaltered. In the high threat to the belief in a just world ("high threat") condition, participants read that the perpetrator was still on the loose. In the low threat to the belief in a just world ("low threat") condition, the perpetrator was in police custody.

This manipulation has been found in numerous BJW studies to temporarily impact participants' motivation to believe in a just world, such that those in the "high threat" condition are more motivated to restore their belief that the world is just than are individuals in the "low threat" condition (see Hafer & Bègue, 2005, for a review).

Manipulation Check. First, participants were asked to recall if the perpetrator was caught or not.

Blame. Participants were asked the degree to which they attribute overall blame to the perpetrator or victim. Participants were asked "To what extent was the victim responsible for the assault?" and "Overall, to what extent was the offender responsible for what happened with the victim?" The participants indicated the degree to which they endorsed each statement on a 9-point scale ranging from 1 (strongly agree) to 9 (strongly disagree).

Behavior Attributions. Participants were then asked to make judgments about the behavior of both the victim and the perpetrator. They reported the extent to which participants agreed with the statements "The victim was acting promiscuously," "The perpetrator acted responsibly," and "The victim acted responsibly," on a 9-point scale ranging from 1 (strongly agree) to 9 (strongly disagree). Because responses to these items were highly correlated with each other, we created an aggregate measure of behavioral attribution ($\alpha = .76$).

Trait Attributions. Participants were also asked to indicate their degree of agreement or disagreement with three statements regarding the victim's and perpetrator's character on a 9-point scale ranging from 1 (strongly agree) to 9 (strongly disagree). Statements were, "To what extent do you feel that the victim's character was responsible for her being forced to have sex with the offender?", "The victim is a responsible person," and "The perpetrator is a violent person." These items did not demonstrate a high level of intercorrelation, so we treated each item individually in our analyses.

Recall. Participants' ability to recall details from the article was also measured. They were given seven free response or multiple-choice questions asking them to recall information attributing blame to the victim, and information

attributing blame to the perpetrator. Questions included "Do the victim's parents blame her for the assault?" and "What are the perpetrator's charges?" (see Appendix).

Belief in a Just World: Participants then completed the *Just World Scale* (Lipkus, 1991), which assesses participants' chronic need to believe that the world is a just place. Participants report their degree of agreement with seven items, such as "I feel that people get what they are entitled to have," on 6-point scales ranging from 1 (strongly disagree) to 6 (strongly agree). This scale demonstrated adequate reliability in our sample (α = .89), so scores on all seven items were averaged into a single index of Belief in a Just World.

Participants provided basic demographic information and were debriefed.

RESULTS

Manipulation Check Most participants correctly reported whether the perpetrator had been caught. Of the 21 (12%) participants who answered incorrectly, 17 were in the not caught condition and four were in the caught condition. Because the pattern of results did not differ when these participants were excluded, all data is presented here.

Victim Blame Bivariate correlations between BJW, victim blame, behavior attributions, and trait attributions are presented in Table 1.

We first assessed the interaction between gender and threat condition on victim blame. We also wanted to ensure that any gender differences observed were maintained after adjusting for chronic levels of belief in just world. Therefore, Belief in Just World was entered as a covariate. An analysis of covariance (ANCOVA) was conducted and consistent with previous research, higher scores on BJW predicted greater victim blame $F(1,166) = 12.25$, $p = .001$. There was a marginal main effect of gender, $F(1,166) = 3.29$, $p < .08$ such that men tended to blame the victim more ($M = 3.55$, $SD = 2.47$) than did women ($M = 2.61$, $SD = 2.18$). There was no main effect of condition, $F(1,166) < 1$. However, there was a significant interaction between gender and condition, $F(1,166) = 3.94$, $p < .05$. Simple effects analyses revealed that gender did not moderate victim blame when the perpetrator had been caught $t(166) < 1$. Yet when the perpetrator had not been caught, men

($M = 3.79$, $SD = 2.46$) blamed the victim to a greater extent than did women ($M = 2.12$, $SD = 1.79$), $t(166) = 2.61$, $p = .01$ (see Figure 1). Thus, particularly when the perpetrator had not been caught, men were more inclined to blame the victim for her injustice than were women.

We also evaluated whether gender and condition impacted perpetrator blame. An ANCOVA revealed that higher BJW predicted less perpetrator blame $F(1,166) = 3.74$, $p < .06$. There was also a marginal main effect of gender $F(1,166) = 2.79$, $p < .10$ such that men tended to blame the perpetrator less ($M = 7.77$, $SD = 1.89$) than did women ($M = 8.38$, $SD = 1.62$). There was no main effect of condition $F(1,166) < 1$ nor a significant interaction effect between gender and condition, $F(1,166) < 1$ (see Figure 2). This suggests that men tend to blame perpetrators less for sexual assaults than do women, but that this tendency is not affected by threat condition.

Behavior Attributions Consistent with the overall blame attribution findings, higher BJW also predicted greater victim blame through negative behavioral attributions $F(1,166) = 12.64$, $p < .001$. There was also a main effect of gender $F(1,166) = 12.39$, $p = .001$, such that men tended to blame the victim's behavior more ($M = 4.08$, $SD = 1.86$) than did women ($M = 2.86$, $SD = 1.79$). There was no main effect of condition $F(1,166) < 1$. There was a significant interaction between condition and gender $F(1,166) = 3.91$, $p = .05$. Simple effects analyses revealed that gender did not moderate victim blame when the perpetrator had been caught $t(166) = 1.19$, $p = n.s.$. However, when the perpetrator had not been caught, men ($M = 4.30$, $SD = 1.84$) blamed the victim's behavior to a greater extent than did women ($M = 2.51$, $SD = 1.54$), $t(166) = 3.81$, $p < .001$ (see Figure 3). Thus, particularly when the perpetrator had not been caught, men were more inclined to believe that the victim engaged in negative behaviors that ultimately conferred blame upon her.

Trait Attributions An ANCOVA was conducted on responses to the statement, "To what extent do you feel that the victim's character was responsible for her being forced to have sex with the offender?" Findings were similar to those of victim blame and behavior attributions. Higher scores on BJW predicted greater blame on the victim's character $F(1,166) = 6.13$, $p < .02$. There was a main effect of gender $F(1,166) = 11.52$, $p = .001$ such that overall, men attribute

TABLE 1. Bivariate correlations between Belief in Just World and Victim Blame.

	Belief in Just World Scale	Victim Blame	Perpetrator Blame	Negative Behavioral Attributions	Victim Character	Victim Promiscuity	Victim Responsible Person	BAC	Reported Victim Intoxication
Belief in Just World Scale	1	.297**	-.185**	.323**	.251**	.200**	.174*		
Victim Blame	.297**	1		.734**	.689**	.536**			.175**
Perpetrator Blame	-.185*	-.331**	1	-.252**	-.363**	-.300**		.235**	.212**
Negative Behavioral Attributions	.323*	.734**	-.252**	1	.732**	.703**		-.192**	.260**
Victim Character	.251**	.689**	-.363**	.732*	1	.466**		-.223**	
Victim Promiscuity		.536**	-.300**	.703**	.466**	1			
Victim Responsible Person	.174*						1		-.197**
BAC			.235**	-.192**	-.223**			1	
Reported Victim Intoxication		.175**	.212**	.260**			-.197**		1

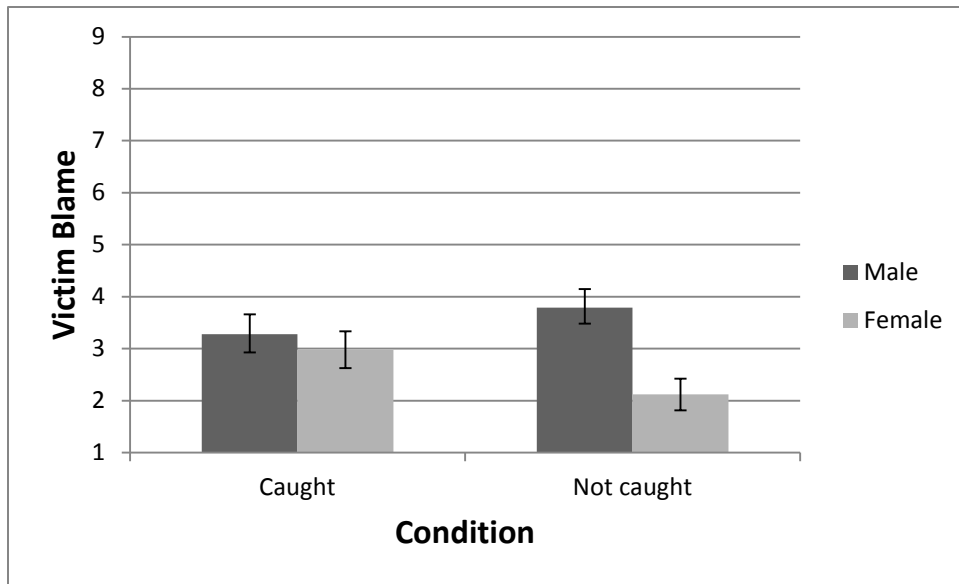*indicates p < .05*; ** indicates *p < .01*; *** indicates p < .001.*

FIGURE 1. Victim Blame as a function of gender and threat condition
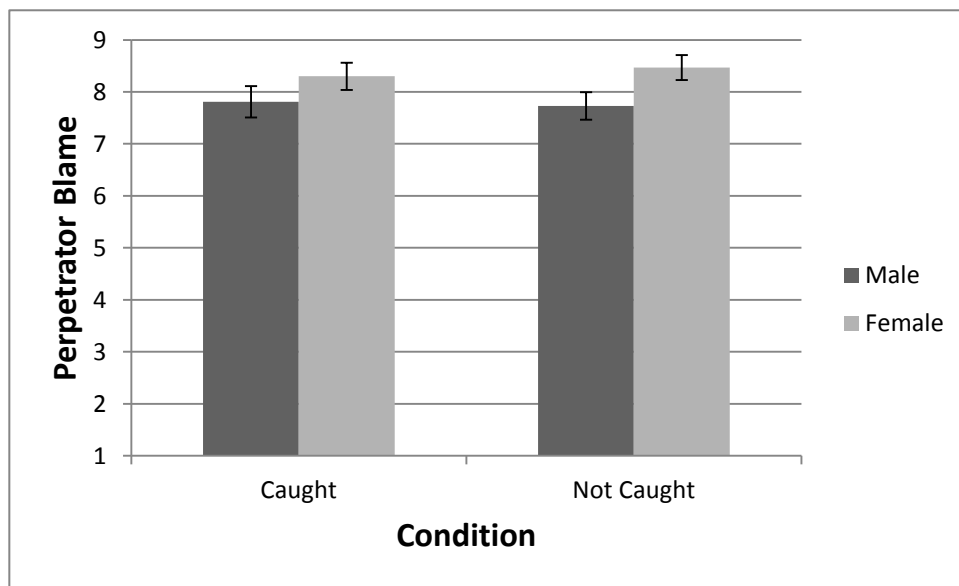

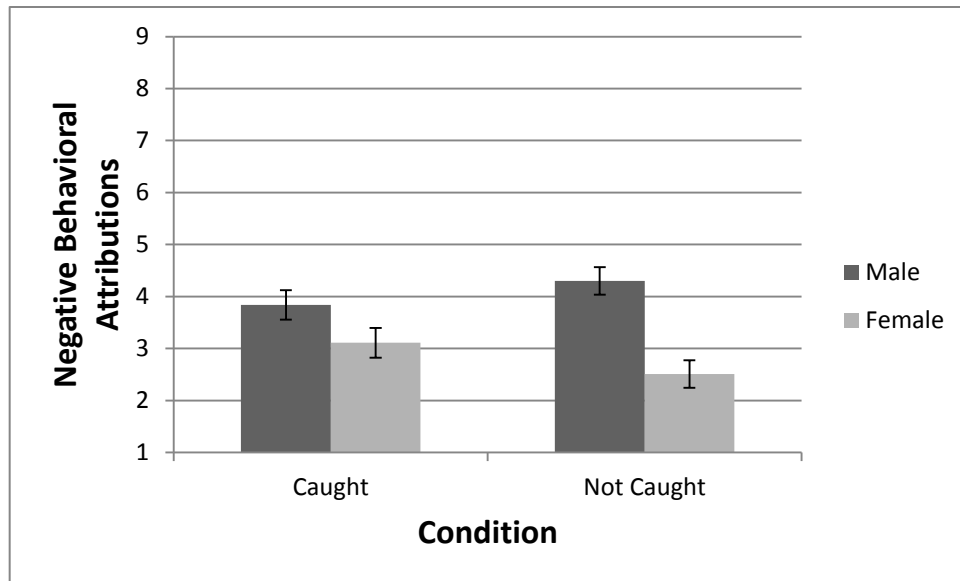FIGURE 2. Perpetrator Blame as a function of gender and threat condition

FIGURE 3. Negative Behavior Attributions as a function of gender and threat condition
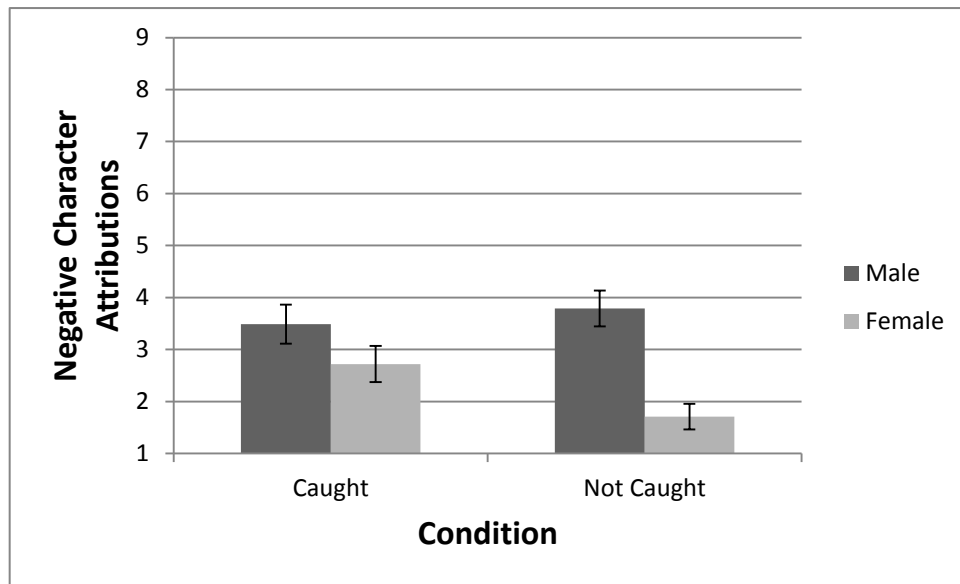

FIGURE 4. Negative Trait Attributions as a function of gender and threat condition
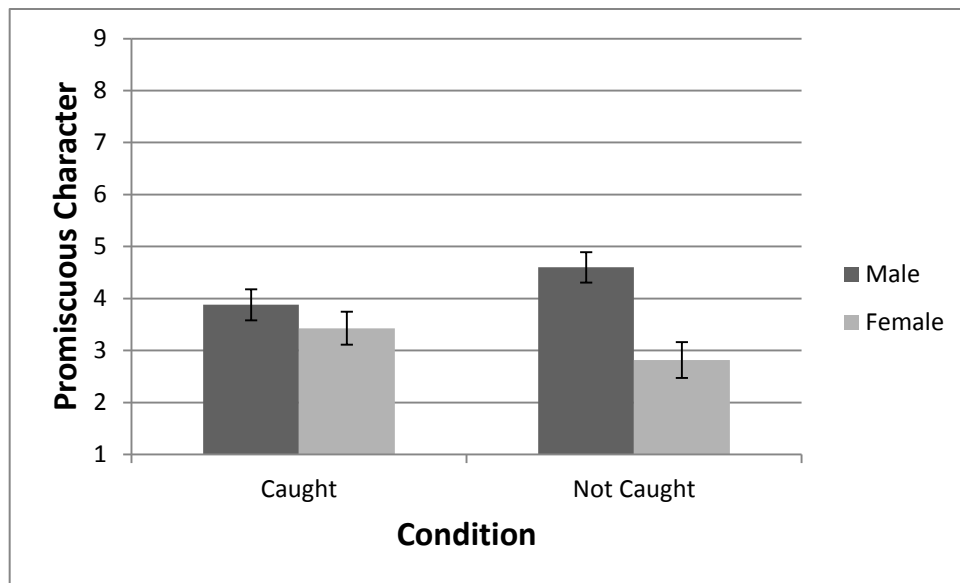
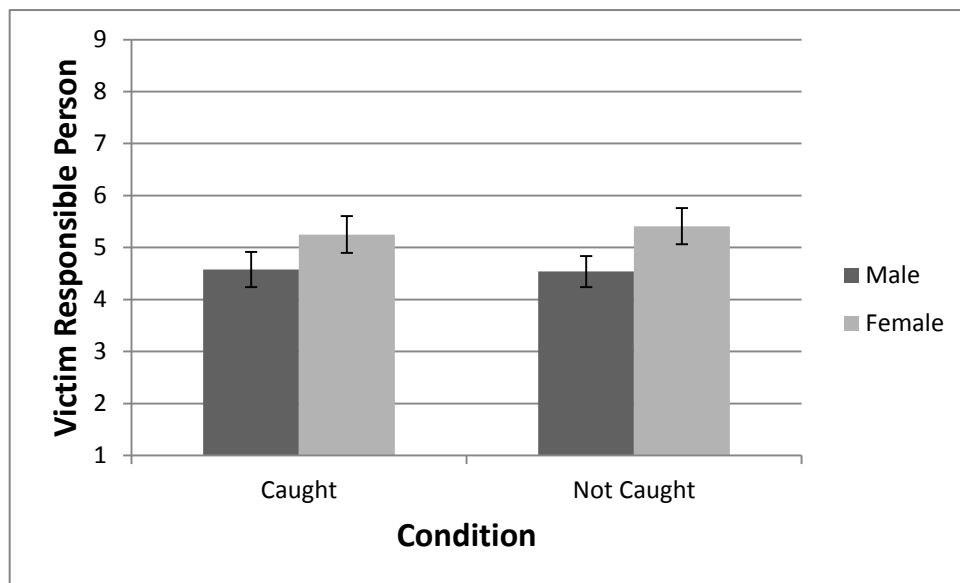FIGURE 5. Promiscuous Character as a function of gender and threat condition

FIGURE 6. Victim Responsible Person as a function of gender and threat condition

TABLE 2. Distribution of responses to the question, "Was the victim conscious during the incident?"

	Conscious	**Not Conscious**
Male Not Caught	15%	**85%**
Female Not Caught	0%	**100%**
Male Caught	19%	**81%**
Female Caught	13%	**87%**

$\chi^2(3) = 10.72$, $p < .02$ (Percentages are within gender by condition. Correct answers are in bold.)

TABLE 3. Distribution of responses to the question, "What are the perpetrator's charges?"

	Less Strict	**Correct Charge**	Most Strict
Male Not Caught	29%	**52%**	19%
Female Not Caught	18%	**82%**	0%
Male Caught	28%	**67%**	5%
Female Caught	30%	**67%**	2%

$\chi^2(9) = 22.02$, $p < .009$ (Percentages are within gender by condition. Correct answers are in bold.)

more negative character traits to the victim ($M = 3.65$, $SD = 2.41$) than did women ($M = 2.29$, $SD = 2.07$). There was no main effect of condition $F(1,166) < 1$, but there was a marginal interaction between condition and gender $F(1,166) = 3.76$, $p < .06$. Simple effects analyses showed that gender did not moderate victim blame when the perpetrator had been caught $t(166) = 1.13$, $p = n.s.$. However, when the perpetrator had not been caught, men ($M = 3.79$, $SD = 2.38$) blamed the victim's character to a greater extent than did women ($M = 1.71$, $SD = 1.43$) $t(166) = 3.69$, $p < .001$. (see Figure 4). Thus, men in the not caught condition made significantly more derogatory trait attributions upon the victim than did women.

ANCOVA analyses were also conducted to assess how participants responded to the statement, "the victim is a promiscuous person".

Higher scores on BJW predicted greater blame on the victim's character $F(1,166) = 3.66$, $p < .06$. There was a main effect of gender $F(1,166) = 8.82$, $p < .01$ such that overall, men tended consider the victim to be more promiscuous ($M = 4.26$, $SD = 1.97$) than did women ($M = 3.18$, $SD = 2.11$). There was an interaction between condition and gender $F(1,166) = 4.66$, $p < .05$. Simple effects analyses revealed that gender did not impact victim blame when the perpetrator had been caught $t(166) < 1$. However, there was a significant difference for gender when the perpetrator was not caught $t(166) = 3.54$, $p = .001$. When the perpetrator was not caught, men ($M = 4.60$, $SD = 2.02$) attributed promiscuous traits to the victim more than did women ($M = 2.82$, $SD = 2.01$) (see Figure 5). Thus, particularly when the perpetrator had not

been caught, men were more inclined to believe that the victim was a promiscuous person.

We also evaluated how participants responded to the statement, "The victim is a responsible person". Higher scores on BJW predicted stronger beliefs that the victim was not a responsible person $F(1,166) = 9.04$, $p = .003$. There was a main effect of gender $F(1,166) = 8.21$, $p = .005$ such that men ($M = 4.56$, $SD = 2.13$) thought the victim was less of a responsible person than did women ($M = 5.25$, $SD = 2.24$). There was no main effect of condition $F(1,166) < 1$ nor a significant interaction effect between gender and condition, $F(1,166) < 1$. Simple effect analysis showed that gender marginally impacted victim blame when the perpetrator had been caught $t(166) = 1.78$, $p < .08$, such that men thought the victim was not a responsible person ($M = 4.58$, $SD = 2.22$) to a greater extent than did women ($M = 5.13$, $SD = 2.40$). When the perpetrator was not caught, men thought the victim was not a responsible person ($M = 4.54$, $SD = 2.07$) to a greater extent than did women ($M = 5.41$, $SD = 2.03$), $t(166) = 2.33$ $p = .021$ (see Figure 6). Therefore, men were more likely to dismiss the victim as being irresponsible when the perpetrator had not been caught.

Recall Consistent with our predictions, for the recall of victim's state of consciousness, a chi square test showed a significant interaction of gender and condition $\chi^2(3) = 10.72$, $p < .02$. Follow up analyses revealed that when the perpetrator had been caught, there was no effect of gender, $p = n.s.$ However, within participants who learned that the perpetrator had not been caught, 85% of men remembered the victim was unconscious compared to 100% of women, $p < .05$. (See Table 2).

Consistent with our predictions, a chi square test demonstrated a significant interaction of gender and condition on memory of the perpetrator's charges, $\chi^2(9) = 22.02$, $p = .009$. Follow up analyses revealed that when the perpetrator had been caught, gender did not moderate memory of the charges, $p = n.s.$, but when the perpetrator had not been caught, males (52%) were significantly less likely to correctly remember the perpetrator's charges then were women (82%). However, of those who answered incorrectly, men were significantly more likely than women to remember a *greater* charge (19% vs. 0%), $p < .05$ (See Table 3).

There was not a significant omnibus effect of gender and condition on how likely participants were to misremember the victim's clothing. $\chi^2(9) = 10.24$, $p < .12$. However, in line with our predictions, follow-up analyses revealed that within participants who learned that the perpetrator had not been caught, men (38%) were significantly less likely than women (62%) to correctly remember the victim's outfit, $p < .05$. There was no effect of gender on memory for participants who learned the perpetrator had been caught, $p = n.s.$ However, for those who answered incorrectly in the perpetrator not caught condition, men were significantly *more* likely (35%) than women to remember that she was dressed *more* conservatively (12%), $p < .05$.

There was also no omnibus interaction of gender and condition on the victim's injuries, $\chi^2(6) = 6.12$, $p = n.s.$ However, follow-up analyses

TABLE 4. Distribution of responses to the question, "What was the victim wearing?"

	1	**2**	3
Male Not Caught	35%	**38%**	27%
Female Not Caught	12%	**62%**	27%
Male Caught	16%	**49%**	35%
Female Caught	15%	**50%**	35%

$\chi^2 2(9) = 10.24$, p < .12 (Percentages are within gender by condition. Correct answers are in bold. 1=conservative clothing; **2=accurate clothing**; 3=least conservative clothing)

TABLE 5. Distribution of responses to the statement, "Indicate all of the injuries the victim sustained in the assault".

	1	**2**	3
Male Not Caught	13%	**83%**	4%
Female Not Caught	9%	**88%**	3%
Male Caught	21%	**70%**	9%
Female Caught	11%	**87%**	2%

$\chi^2(6) = 6.12$, *p = n.s* (Percentages are within gender by condition. Correct answers are in bold. 1=minor injuries, **2=accurate charge injuries**, 3=severe injuries.)

TABLE 6. Distribution of responses to the question, "Do the victim's parents blame her for the assault?"

	Blame	No Blame
Male Not Caught	**54%**	46%
Female Not Caught	**74%**	27%
Male Caught	**42%**	58%
Female Caught	**63%**	37%

$\chi^2(3) = 8.81$, *p* < .04 (Note: Percentages are within gender by condition. Correct answers are in bold.)
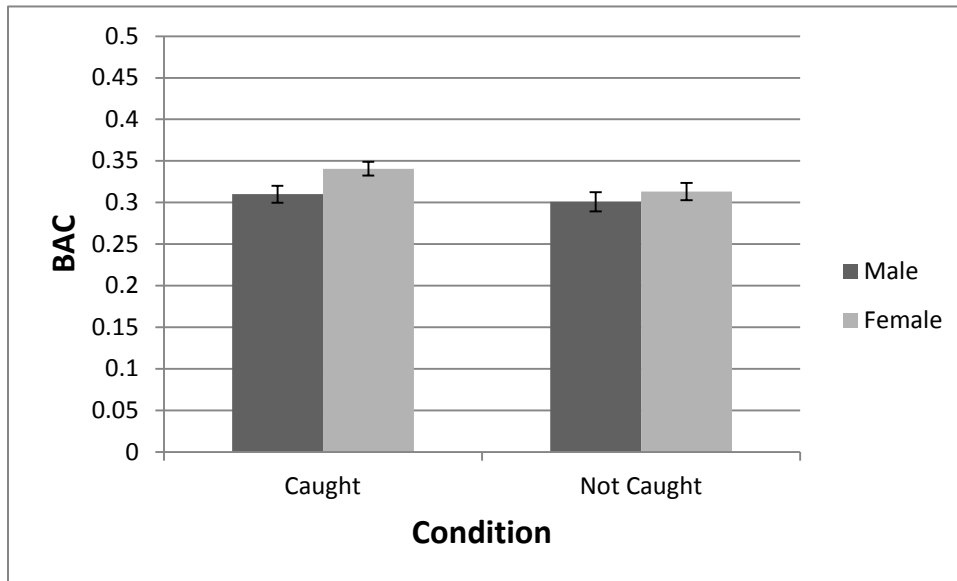
FIGURE 7. Memory of BAC as a function of gender and threat condition

revealed that within participants who learned that the perpetrator had been caught, men were less likely (70%) than women (87%) to correctly remember the victim's injuries, $p < .05$. There was no effect of gender on memory for participants who learned the perpetrator had *not* been caught, $p = n.s.$

A chi square test showed a significant interaction effect of gender and condition on memory of parental blame, $\chi^2(3) = 8.81$, $p < .04$. Inconsistent with our predictions, when the perpetrator had not been caught, gender did not moderate memory of parental blame, $p = n.s.$ However, when the perpetrator had been caught, men were less likely to correctly remember that the victim's parents blamed her (42%) than were women (63%), $p < .05$ (see Table 4).

Surprisingly, an ANCOVA revealed that BJW did not have a significant impact on memory of the victim's Blood Alcohol Content, $F(1,166) = 1.50$, $p = n.s.$ There was a marginal effect of gender $F(1,166) = 2.81$, $p < .10$, but men tended to remember the victim's BAC as *lower* ($M = .31$, $SD = .07$) than did women ($M = .33$, $SD = .06$). There was also a marginal effect for condition $F(1,166) = 3.40$, $p < .07$, but in contrast to our hypothesis, participants who were in the perpetrator not caught condition ($M =$

.31, $SD = .07$) misremembered the BAC to be *lower* than participants in the perpetrator caught condition ($M = .33$, $SD = .06$). There was no interaction between condition and gender, $F(1,166) < 1$. Simple effects analyses revealed that when the perpetrator was not caught, there was no gender difference in recalled BAC, $t(166) < 1$. However, when the perpetrator was caught, men recalled the BAC to be lower ($M = .31$, $SD = .07$) than did women ($M = .34$, $SD = .06$), $t(166) = 1.93$, $p < .07$. This suggests that men tended to remember the victim as being *less* intoxicated than did women, especially when the perpetrator had been caught.

An ANCOVA showed that higher scores on BJW predicted greater reported intoxication $F(1,166) = 6.97$, $p < .01$. There was also a main effect of gender, $F(1,166) = 4.27$, $p = .04$, but men remembered the victim to be *less* intoxicated ($M = 7.66$, $SD = 2.04$) than did women ($M = 8.42$, $SD = 1.52$). There was no main effect of condition $F(1,166) < 1$ nor an interaction effect of gender and condition, $F(1,166) = 2.24$, $p = n.s.$ Simple effects analyses revealed that when the perpetrator was not caught, men thought the victim was less intoxicated ($M = 7.48$, $SD = 2.14$) than did women ($M = 8.68$, $SD = .84$), $t(166) = 2.47$, $p < .02$, but there was no gender difference when

the perpetrator had been caught, $t(166) < 1$. Therefore, in the not caught condition, men tended to remember that the victim was *less* intoxicated than did women.

DISCUSSION

We hypothesized that individual's situational increases in the motivation to believe that the world is just would lead to increased victim blame, and that this blame would be facilitated by greater recall of incriminating facts about the victim. We also expected these effects to be more apparent among men. Indeed, this study demonstrated that men were more likely to blame the victim of a sexual assault, and less likely to blame the perpetrator, especially when there was a high threat to their BJW. Our findings suggest that the motivation to defend the just world led men in particular to perceive the victim in a more negative light, derogating both her character traits and her behaviors. Men believed the victim to be more promiscuous and her behaviors to be more responsible for the assault when the perpetrator was not caught. Extending findings by Foley and Pigot (2000), men were more affected by the threat to BJW, and higher threat led to greater belief in victim culpability, while there often was no significant difference in blame attribution among women in under both conditions. This is consistent with previous research that suggests that people are more sympathetic to the plights of similar others than to dissimilar others.

Along with reporting overall higher victim culpability, men cognitively distorted information from the news story to ultimately confer blame on the victim in the high threat condition. Men were more likely than women to misremember that the victim was conscious, perhaps to facilitate the perception that she consented to the sexual encounter. However, some recall findings were inconsistent with our predictions. For instance, men misremembered the perpetrator as having more severe charges than he actually received. However, misremembering charges may have been a way for men to convey that the perpetrator was unfairly charged. We also found that when men misremembered the victim's outfit, they actually recalled her dressing more conservatively rather than more provocatively than she was actually dressed. This finding might indicate that when men face a threat to the just world, they are more inclined than women to blame the victim

via her character or behavior, rather than clothing. Overall, while men blamed the victim more when there was a greater threat to the just world, our findings regarding memory biases were mixed. Specifically, while in some situations memory errors were consistent with more victim blame, in other situations they were consistent with less. It may be that learning that an in-group member (another male) has assaulted someone is also threatening, and this threat leads to poorer information processing. This possibility should be investigated in future research.

Although our experiment provides some support that justice motives affect recall, further studies should investigate whether biased information processing occurs during encoding or during the retrieval of memories. When exactly do people distort information and how can this distortion be remedied? In addition, it is unclear from our research whether the desire to blame the victim leads people to misremember information, or whether biased memory processing leads individuals to conclude that the victim was to blame. Perhaps participants could be asked to recall questions after a longer period of time after reading the news story. The questions asked in this study may not have been challenging enough for participants or may not have been worded to precisely measure blame, and instead may have gauged other sentiments aside from derogation.

Further studies may also investigate other paradigms of injustice, aside from assault, to test whether the gender effects seen here persist. For instance, the nature of sexual assault may have evoked more prominent differences in men and women's reactions toward the victim, especially since the victim was female. A car accident, perhaps, could serve as an additional paradigm to evaluate whether men and women differ in blame attribution. It is unclear whether women blame sexual assault victims less because they are similar to them and they are empathizing, or whether women simply blame any victim less than men do. Further, even though many researchers study BJW via vignettes in which participants are not directly involved, effects might be shown more acutely when participants themselves are eyewitnesses to the just-world-threatening event.

Despite these limitations of this study, our findings have suggestive implications for the courtroom. How reliable are eyewitness testimonies? How can eyewitness testimonies

be made more reliable and accurate? Our research suggests that eyewitnesses may misremember information from a crime given what they know about the victim's suffering. Continued suffering, such as when the perpetrator is not caught, creates a greater threat to the witness's just world. Thus, their cognitive processing of the event may be affected by their motivation to re-instate a just environment. Eyewitnesses may exaggerate details conferring blame on the victim rather than providing objective facts about the situation. Furthermore, our research suggests that during *voir dire,* attorneys may consider the effects of gender on victim blame before selecting potential jurors. These findings can help lawyers restore justice to victims who must defend themselves when a juror's sense of justice has been threatened.

This study may also be helpful during Truth Commissions, which are held to reveal crimes committed by government officials or even non-state actors. These commissions are invoked to issue retribution for human rights violations committed by the government against citizens of that nation (Hayner, 1994). The unrest is analogous to threats to the just world, insofar as they inflict mass injustice on the citizens. But how are these officials chosen for prosecution, and what evidence provided by witnesses is deemed admissible? By better understanding the mechanisms through which people blame victims, we may become better equipped to remedy, rather than exacerbate, injustice to individuals who suffer at the hands of others.

References

Barrouillet, P., Bernardin, S., Portrat, S., Vergauwe, E., & Camos, V. (2007). Time and cognitive load in working memory. *Journal of Experimental Psychology: Learning, Memory, and Cognition, 33,* 570-585.

Callan, M. J., Kay, A. C., Davidenko, N., & Ellard, J. H. (2009). The effects of justice motivation on memory for self- and other-relevant events. *Journal of Experimental Social Psychology*, *45,* 614-623.

Correia, I., & Vala, J. (2003). When will a victim be secondarily victimized? The effect of observer's belief in a just world, victim's innocence and persistence of suffering. *Social Justice Research, 16,* 379-400.

Foley, L.A. & Pigott, M. A, (2000), Belief in a just world and jury decisions in a civil rape trial. *Journal of Applied Social Psychology*, *30*, 935-951.

Hafer, C. L. (2000). Do innocent victims threaten the belief in a just world?: Evidence from a modified Stroop task. *Journal of Personality and Social Psychology, 79,* 165-173.

Hafer, C. L., & Bègue, L. (2005). Experimental research on Just-World Theory: Problems, developments, and future challenges. *Psychological Bulletin, 131,* 128-167.

Hennes, E. P., & Jost, J. T. (2012). Motivated information processing in the service of the system: The case of anthropogenic climate change. Unpublished manuscript.

Janoff-Bulman, R. (1982). Esteem and control bases of blame: "Adaptive" strategies for victims versus observers. *Journal of Personality*, *50,* 180-192.

Lerner, M. J. (1980). *The belief in a just world: A fundamental delusion.* Perspectives in Social Psychology. New York: Plenum Press.

McDonald, H. E., & Hirt, E. R. (1997).When expectancy meets desire: Motivational effects in reconstructive memory. *Journal of Personality and Social Psychology, 72,* 5-23.

Rubin, Z. & Peplau L. A. (1975) Who believes in a just world? *Journal of Social Issues, 31,* 65-89.

Sanitioso, R., Kunda, Z., & Fong, G. T. (1990). Motivated recruitment of autobiographical memory. *Journal of Personality and Social Psychology, 59,* 229-241.

Sedikides, C., Green, J. D., & Pinter, B. (2004). Self-protective memory. In D. R. Beike, J. M. Lampinen, & D. A. Behrend (Eds.), *The self and memory* (pp. 161–179). New York, PA: Psychology Press.

Appendix

Recall Questionnaire

1. Has the perpetrator been caught?
    a. Yes
    b. No

2. What was the victim's blood alcohol content?
    0 - 0.05 - 0.09 - 0.14 - 0.18 - 0.23 - 0.27 - 0.32 - 0.36 - 0.41 - 0.45 - 0.5

3. How intoxicated was the victim at the time of the assault? (0, not at all
    intoxicated; 9, extremely intoxicated)
4. What was the victim wearing?
    a. Blue sweater, black knee-length skirt, and flats
    b. Black tank top, blue jeans, and flats
    c. Black shirt, blue knee-length skirt, and high heels.
5. Indicate all of the injuries the victim sustained in the assault.
    a. Dislocated shoulder, cuts on face, severe vaginal injuries
    b. Bite marks, swollen buttocks, severely bruised knees, cracked rib
    c. Mild bruising, shoulder pain, mild vaginal injuries

6. What are the perpetrator's charges?
    a. Three counts of sexual deviate conduct, three counts of rape, one
        attempted murder charge
    b. One count of rape, one count of deviate sexual conduct, one count of
        criminal confinement
    c. DUI, one count of sexual deviate conduct
    d. Three counts of rape, three counts of deviate sexual conduct, one
        count of criminal confinement

7. Do the victim's parents blame her for the assault?
    a. Yes
    b. No
8. Was the victim conscious during the incident?
    a. Yes
    b. No