THE ROLE OF RAPE MYTH ACCEPTANCE AND BELIEF IN A JUST WORLD ON VICTIM BLAME ATTRIBUTION: A STUDY IN JAPAN

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This study examined the moderating role of rape myth acceptance (RMA) and belief in a just world (BJW) on victim blame attribution in either an alleged stranger or date rape case. As hypothesized, RMA and BJW were both significant predictors of victim blame behavior for the Japanese college students who participated in the study. Further, Japanese participants blamed the victim of date rape more than the victim of the stranger rape. The similarities and differences between findings from this study and those from Western countries are discussed.

Key words: rape, rape myth acceptance, just world, Japan

BACKGROUND

Recent cross-cultural studies illustrate that violence against women has become a universal phenomenon and a common concern in most societies (Garcia-Moreno, 2000; Rozee, 1993). Heise, Ellsberg, and Gottelmoeller (1999) reported that almost every society in the world has social institutions that legitimize, veil, and reject the existence of gendered abuse. Rape and other forms of violence against women may be the most pervasive yet least recognized human rights issue in the world today. Despite the worldwide prevalence of this social concern and the “culturally driven” nature of this problem (Burt, 1980), most of the research in the perception of rape has been conducted in Western countries. Wasti, Bergman, Glomb, and Drasgow (2000) noted that neglecting the cross-cultural study of violence against women is a serious limitation.

Unfortunately, Japanese society is not impervious from this serious crime. According to the Japan’s National Police Agency, rape cases known to police jumped approximately 40% from 1,500 cases in 1995 to 2,076 cases in 2005. Some investigations on young adult women in community surveys revealed that the rate of rape experience in their sample ranged from 5.2% to 6.9% (Sasagawa, Konishi, & Ando, 1998; Sei Boryoku Higai Kenkyukai, 1996). Furthermore, using Japanese female college students, researchers found that more than a half of their sample have been sexually molested, while only 1.8% of them have been reported being raped (Ishikawa, 1995; Konishi, 1996). Ando et al. (2000) also discovered that approximately a half of their participants (48.6%) have experienced unwanted and forced body contact, and 68% of participants reported...
these experiences as being “the most unforgettable negative experience” in their lives.

A large body of cross-cultural research has shown that victims of rape suffer from similar deleterious symptoms. For instance, women who are raped frequently experience symptoms of depression, anxiety, and posttraumatic stress (Atkeson, Calhoun, Resick, & Ellis, 1981; Boudreaux, Kilpatrick, Resnick, Best, & Saunders, 1998; Santiago, McCall-Perez, Gorcey, & Beigel, 1985). In Japan, researchers also reported the similar effects (Ando, et al., 2000; Omata, 2002). Additionally, some researchers suggest that rape victims may experience trauma from the actual assault and also from reactions by others they know.

A growing body of research proposes that exploring the social perceptions of rape victims by others is crucial because such perceptions appear to represent a significant component of victims’ treatment and recovery processes. For instance, researchers report that negative perceptions of rape victims, such as blaming the victim for being raped, were notably associated with increased psychological distresses, delayed recovery, and poor perception of physical health (Ullman, 1996; Ullman & Siegel, 1995). Consequently, rape victims suffer not only from the actual assault, but also from the negative reactions of people around them, a phenomenon called secondary victimization.

Given the prevalence and nature of violent crime against women and the frequency of significant psychological distress following rape, it is imperative to explore attitudes and perceptions of rape victims of the general public by identifying factors that contribute to secondary victimization. It is hoped that by raising public awareness of such tendencies, the psychological sufferings of rape victims by secondary victimization could be minimized. As of yet, Yamawaki and Tschanz (2005) have examined the effects of traditional gender role on attitudes toward rape victims by comparing American and Japanese college students. However, to date, the study of attitudes toward rape victims in a Japanese population is severely limited. The current study is designed to examine the patterns of attitude toward rape victims in Japan using alleged heterosexual rape scenarios. Rape myth acceptance (RMA) and belief in a just world (BJW) have been selected as predictors of victim blame attribution and explored in this study.

The Role of Rape Myth Acceptance on Victim Blame Attribution

A massive amount of empirical research conducted in Western countries has successfully identified factors that make rape victim blame more likely. One of the most widely explored factors is rape myth acceptance. Burt defined rape myth as “prejudicial, stereotyped, or false beliefs about rape, rape victims, and rapists” that may create hostile attitudes towards rape victims (1980, p. 217). Lonsway and Fitzgerald (1994) further argue that such beliefs about rape serve to deny and justify male sexual aggression against women. Social psychologists have found a significant correlation between rape myth acceptance and victim blame attribution (Bohner, 2004; Bridges, 1991; Burt, 1980; Check & Malamuth, 1983; Frese, Moya, & Megiás, 2004; Mason, Riger, & Foley, 2004).

Specifically, individuals who accept these prejudicial and false beliefs about rape are likely to blame the rape victim for being raped. Such studies have been conducted in Japan. For instance, Obuchi, Ishige, Yamanoha, and Inoue (1985) found that RMA is
more prevalent in sex offenders than in non-sex offenders as well as in college male students.

One factor that may influence such false beliefs about rape is culture. In fact, Burt (1980) implies that the prevalence of rape myth acceptance should be different from culture to culture wherein rape myths are more or less widely accepted. Burt further suggests that RMA is extensively associated with gender-role stereotypes. That is, individuals who have rigid gender-role stereotypes tend to have a high degree of rape myth acceptance. Therefore, the prevalence of rape myths in a particular culture is likely to be influenced by the prevalence of sex-role stereotypes within the culture. In their study of attitude toward rape victims, Yamawaki and Tschanz (2005) found that traditional gender roles mediate the victim blame attribution. That is, the national difference of attitude toward victim is mediated by the national difference in gender role traditionality. Their study indicated that Japanese tended to hold greater traditional gender roles than did Americans. Therefore, rape myths might be widely accepted in Japan. Thus, it is anticipated that the relationship between victim blame attribution and rape myth acceptance found in research conducted in Western countries will also be found in Japan.

The Role of Belief in a Just World on Victim Responsibility

Another factor concerning rape victim attribution that has been closely explored in Western countries is the effect of belief in a just world on attributions of blame. According to Lerner (1980), people tend to believe in a just world. That is, the belief that people tend to get what they deserve and deserve what they get. Lerner and Simmons (1966) suggest that individuals have the need to believe that the world is a just place so that they can increase their sense of competence, control, and capacity to live with confidence in the future. Lerner (1980) further attests that individuals feel the need to maintain their just world belief. When their just world belief is threatened, they tend to reorganize their cognition so that they can maintain a sense of what is just. For instance, when people hear about a woman being raped, they tend to perceive the victim’s fate as deserved because she somehow created the situation that led to the rape.

Rape victim blame attribution occurs as a reaction to a threat to the belief in a just world. In reality, however, the world is not always in a just place. People tend to deal with unjust situations by blaming individuals who suffer from unfortunate circumstances. In fact, researchers have found a strong relationship between one’s belief in a just world and victim blame attribution not only in the cases of rape (Furnham & Boston, 1996; Murray, Spadafore, & McIntosh, 2005; Lambert, & Raichle, 2000), but also in situations involving domestic violence (Rosewater, 1993), being HIV positive (Cadwell, 1991), and unemployment (Kieselbach, 1997).

The existence of beliefs in a just world has been also identified in Japan. For instance, Furnham and Reilly (1991) found that both British and Japanese endorsed the similar scores on the Just World Scale. One notable study related to rape victim attribution was investigated by Tanaka (1999). He found that individuals with high BJW tend to evaluate other people’s misfortune more negatively than individuals with low BJW, while individuals with high BJW tend to assess their own misfortune less negatively
than individuals with low BJW. That is, strong believers in a just world, in comparison to weak believers, tend to show harsh attitudes toward people in social adversity. Moreover, since there is a significant relationship between beliefs in a just world and rape victim blame attribution in Western countries, Japanese participants may also demonstrate the strong relationship between beliefs in a just world and rape victim blame attribution.

The Effect of Familiarity between Victim and Perpetrator on Victim Blame Attribution

This study also examined the effect of the relationship between victim and perpetrator. For instance, past research has shown a linear relationship between the intimate victim-perpetrator relationship and rape minimization (Bridges, 1991; Simonson & Subich, 1999; Yamawaki & Tschanz, 2005). Yamawaki and Tschanz (2005), for example, found that stranger rape was more likely than acquaintance rape to be defined as rape, and marital rape was less likely than acquaintance and date rape to be characterized as rape. When sexual assault occurs in the context of an intimate relationship, the perpetrator has been perceived as less responsible for misreading the situation (Kowalski, 1992) and his behavior has been viewed as more acceptable (Bostwick & DeLucia, 1992).

Therefore, the purpose of this study is to examine the effects of rape myth acceptance, just world beliefs, and types of rape on rape victim blame using Japanese undergraduate students. Moreover, this study also examines the relationship between rape myth acceptance and beliefs in a just world on rape victim blame attribution in Japan.

METHOD

Overview of the Design

This study is a 2 (type of scenario) × 2 (sex of participants) between-groups design with the measure of victim blame as the dependent variable. Researchers in Western countries found interaction effects of rape myth acceptance and just world belief with type of rape on victim blame attribution (Frese et al., 2004; Wyer, Bodenhausen, & Gorman, 1985). Therefore, both variables were selected as moderators to explain the relationship between the independent variables and the dependent variable.

Participants

Participants in this study were 142 undergraduate students (69 female and 73 male) from the department of education at a large urban public university in Japan. They participated in this study in exchange for extra credit or in fulfillment of course requirements. Age of the participants ranged from 18 to 23 (mean age of 19.87; SD = 2.12), and 98% of them were single.

Materials

Rape scenarios

Brief alleged rape scenarios were created and used in this study. Participants were asked to read either a stranger or a date rape scenario in Japanese¹, which instructed them to “Imagine that you hear about a woman who claims that a stranger [her date] raped her. Please circle the number that best matches your degree of agreement or disagreement with each statement.” The scenarios used in this study were alleged heterosexual rape cases in which there is no clear description of forced intercourse. Examining rape

¹ある日あなたはある女性が、見知らぬ《デートした》男からレイプされたと主張していると、耳にしました。あなたがその女性についてどの様に考えるかを、下記の回答を注意深く読んで、番号に丸をつけてください。
perception using ambiguous rape cases is important because generally, most rape cases are not reported or prosecuted. Thus people around the victim will not know exactly what happened to the rape victim, and the situations around the alleged rape will likely be unclear.

Victim Blame Measure (VBM)

In order to examine the blame attributed to the victim by participants, the Victim Blame Measure was created and used in this study. This measure consists of eight items, which were as follows: 1) She was raped because she unconsciously set up a situation in which she was likely to be attacked; 2) She is at fault, at least in part, for being raped; 3) She must have misbehaved; 4) She did nothing wrong; 6) Perhaps she was not careful enough; 7) She has some responsibility for being raped; and 8) Somehow, she provoked this situation. Item #5 is reversed and summed with the other items. Responses to the questions on the VBM were assessed on a Likert Scale that ranged from 1 (strongly disagree) to 7 (strongly agree). Higher scores reflect the endorsement of greater attributions of blame to the victim in the alleged sexual assault.

Rape Myth Acceptance Scale (RMAS)

The Rape Myth Acceptance Scale was developed by Burt in 1980 and is still widely used in rape perception studies to examine a respondent’s rape-supportive beliefs. The RMAS consists of 10 items, and respondents indicate their agreement with statements on a scale from 1 (strongly disagree) to 7 (strongly agree). Items on the scale include the following: “In the majority of rapes, the victim is promiscuous or has a bad reputation,” and “A woman who goes to the home or apartment of a man on their first date implies that she is willing to have sex.” Higher scores indicate endorsement of rape-supportive beliefs. In this study, a change was made to the rape myth acceptance scale. The original version has two items about women from different ethnicities. Due to the high degree of homogeneity expected in the Japanese sample, these items were removed from this scale.

The RMAS, along with all materials used in this study, were translated into Japanese by a professional translator and translated back into English by a graduate student who is fluent in both Japanese and English. The back translated materials were checked for their accuracy by another graduate student who is fluent in both Japanese and English.

Belief in a Just World for Others Scale (BJWS)

The original Belief in a Just World Scale was developed by Rubin and Peplau (1975) to examine the degree to which people believe that they get what they deserve and deserve what they get. However, some researchers have questioned the unidimensionality of this scale, claiming that this scale only measures a global belief in a just world (Messick, Bloom, Boldizar, & Samuelson, 1985). For example, researchers, such as Lipkus, Dalbert and Siegler (1996) suggest that it is beneficial to construct the multidimensional aspect of individuals’ beliefs about what is just, and they made a distinction between BJW for self and BJW for others or in general. Using this multidimensional BJW scale, Bègue and Bastounis (2003) found that the BJW for others scale was significantly correlated to discrimination and stigmatization of others, while the BJW for self was weakly or not related to these variables. Therefore, in order to examine the observer’s attitude toward alleged rape victim, the BJW for others scale was used in this study.

The BJW for others consists of 8 items, and the response options of this scale ranged from 1 (strongly disagree) to 6 (strongly agree). Items on the scale include the following: “I feel that people get what they deserve,” “I feel that when people meet with misfortune, they have brought it upon themselves.” and “I feel that people treat each with the respect they deserve.” Higher scores indicate endorsement of a participant’s belief that what happens to others is the consequence of what they deserve. The reported Cronbach’s alphas in Bègue and Bastounis’ study (2003) ranged from .80 to .91.

Procedure

Participants were told that the study would examine their perception of an alleged heterosexual rape incident. After informed consent was obtained, the research procedure was introduced using a standardized script. An equal number of participants were randomly assigned to the stranger and date rape scenarios. The ratio of males and females who were assigned to these scenarios was approximately equal. The participants were first asked to complete the Belief in a Just World Scale (Rubin & Peplau, 1975), the Rape Myth Acceptance Scale (Burt, 1980), and a demographic survey. Then, they were asked to complete the Victim Blame Measure after they read the assigned scenarios.
RESULTS

Reliabilities, Means, and Correlations among Measurements

Reliability coefficients for the dependent variables and selected moderator variables were as follows: the VBM = .90, the RMAS = .80 and the BJWS = .77, respectively. The reliability levels of the dependent measure and moderator instruments were all acceptable. Table 1 shows the means and standard deviations for each variable for males and females, and Table 2 shows the correlations among the VBM, RMAS, and BJWS measures.

Preliminary Analyses

In order to examine the structure of the Victim Blame Measure, principal component analysis with a varimax rotation was performed on all eight items that were created in this study. The result of this analysis showed that all items loaded onto one component (total variance of 61%). Therefore, all items were used as the attribution of blame on the alleged rape victim.

All measurements were centered prior to the analyses (Jaccard, Turrisi, & Wan, 1990). In order to examine whether both predictors (RMA and BJW) could have independent relationships with the types of rape, an analysis of variance (ANOVA) was performed. It showed that there was no significant effect from type of rape on any of the

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Table 1. Dependent and Moderator Variable Means and Standard Deviations as Function of Sex and Scenario</th>
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<tr>
<td>Variable</td>
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<tr>
<td></td>
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<tr>
<td>VBM</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>RMAS</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>BJWS</td>
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Note. VBM = victim-blame measure; RMAS = Rape Myth Acceptance Scale; BJWS = belief in a just world scale.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Table 2. Correlations among the Dependent Variable and the Moderator Variables</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Correlated Variables</td>
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<tr>
<td>1. VBM</td>
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<tr>
<td>2. RMAS</td>
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<tr>
<td>3. BJWS</td>
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</tbody>
</table>

Note. VBM = victim-blame measure; RMAS = Rape Myth Acceptance Scale; BJWS = belief in a just world scale.
predictors. This result implies that all predictors could be tested as independent predictors to determine whether they predicted the effects of type of rape on the victim blame measure.

Attribute of Victim Blame

Hierarchical regression analyses were performed to test the impact of type of scenario, RMA, BJW, and sex of the participants on the victim blame measure (see Table 3). In the first model, both predictors, types of rape, and sex were entered to assess the main effects for all predictor variables. Significant main effects for type of rape, RMA, and BJW were obtained (β = 0.22; β = 0.45; β = 0.16, ps < 0.03, respectively). As a previous study indicated (Yamawaki & Tschanz, 2005), external observers tend to blame the victim in the alleged date rape scenario more than the victim in the stranger rape scenario. Further, as hypothesized, main effects of RMA and BJW on blaming the rape victim were found. Specifically, individuals who scored high on the RMAS tended to blame the rape victim more than individuals who scored low on the RMAS. Further, individuals who scored high on the BJWS were inclined to blame the alleged rape victims more than individuals who scored low on the BJWS. Main effect of sex was not found from this analysis.

Because the type of scenario, RMA, and BJW had significant main effects, these main effects qualified by the significant interaction effects with type of rape, sex, RAM and BJW on victim blame. Thus, in the second model, the interaction terms (RMA × Type of rape, BJW × Type of rape, RMA × Sex, and BJW × Sex) were entered. This analysis showed that there was a significant RMA × Sex interaction effect (β = 0.21, p < 0.04).

Table 3. Regression Analysis of the Effects of Scenario, Sex, RMA, and BJW on the Victim Blame Measure

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Regression Step</th>
<th>β</th>
<th>t</th>
<th>significance</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Step 1</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Scenario</td>
<td>.216</td>
<td>3.12</td>
<td>.002</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>RMA</td>
<td>.453</td>
<td>6.00</td>
<td>.0001</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>BJW</td>
<td>.161</td>
<td>2.17</td>
<td>.03</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Sex</td>
<td>.051</td>
<td>.73</td>
<td>ns</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Step 2</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>RMA × scenario</td>
<td>.066</td>
<td>.658</td>
<td>ns</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>BJW × scenario</td>
<td>.095</td>
<td>1.29</td>
<td>ns</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>RMA × sex</td>
<td>.216</td>
<td>2.11</td>
<td>.036</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>BJW × sex</td>
<td>.137</td>
<td>1.848</td>
<td>ns</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Step 3</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>RMA × scenario × sex</td>
<td>.082</td>
<td>.793</td>
<td>ns</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
However, no other significant interaction effect was obtained from this analysis (both $p = ns$). In the third model, the three-way interaction term (RMA × Type × Sex) was entered. This analysis showed no three-way interaction effect. Simple effects analysis was performed to further investigate the pattern of interaction effect. This analysis showed a different relational pattern between male and female participants relating RMA to the victim blame measure. Male participants hold stronger RMA than female participants, and RMA moderated the victim blame attribution in both the stranger-rape and the date-rape scenario.

**DISCUSSION**

Overall, the outcomes of this study are consistent with previous studies conducted in Western countries. The scenario main effect indicated that Japanese individuals tend to blame the rape victim in the date rape scenario more than the victim in the stranger rape scenario. That is, others made different judgments about the rape victim depending on the familiarity between the victim and her perpetrator. This negative perception of date rape victims can be particularly problematic due to the prevalence of date or acquaintance rape in Japan. Xie, Meng, and Yamagami (1995) found that 82% of their female sample in Japan reported being raped by their date or acquaintance. Despite the prevalence of date or acquaintance rape, Asian participants, in contrast to Caucasians, tended to show a stronger stereotypical idea that most rapists are strangers (Lee, Pomeroy, & Yoo, 2005). Thus it is crucial to inform people that rape can happen to any woman.

This study further revealed that Japanese college students’ rape myth acceptance and belief in a just world have significant associations with victim blame attribution. In particular, Japanese individuals who scored high on either the RMAS or the BJWS tend to perceive the alleged rape victim as somehow responsible for being raped, as not careful enough, and as having misbehaved. These patterns are similar to the ones that were found in studies conducted in Western societies.

In addition to findings mirroring those of studies conducted in Western nations, there were some unique patterns found in this study. Studies conducted in Western countries indicate that the gender differences on victim blame attribution show mixed results. Some studies show that males tend to blame rape victims more than females (Brekke & Borgida, 1988; Kleinke & Meyer, 1990), while others have found no gender difference (Krahe, 1988; Yarmey, 1985). The majority of these studies have examined the impact of gender on victim blame without taking into account the observers’ cognitive characteristics (e.g., belief in rape myth). The present study considers this factor on victim blame attribution, and demonstrated that the gender differences on victim blame was explained by the different level of RMA between males and females.

The results of this study indicate that both Japanese men and women who scored high on the BJWS tended to blame the rape victim more than those who scored low on the BJWS. This finding is different from the finding of Kleinke and Meyer (1990). They reported that there was a significant sex × just world belief interaction effect on rape
victim blame. That is, men with high belief in a just world blamed rape victims more than did men with low belief in a just world, while women with high belief in a just world blamed rape victims less than women with a low belief. Kleinke and Meyer’s explanation of their finding was that women tend to identify with the rape victim because they share the same vulnerability of being raped, and they are thus less likely to blame her. It is not certain that this difference is influenced by any cultural specific factors or not. The difference might be explained by the different rape scenarios used in this study. The rape scenario that was used in the present study was particularly ambiguous, which would inhibit the female participants from identifying with the victim in the scenario. Thus they were less likely to feel vulnerable, and as a result they might maintain a psychological distance from the victim in the scenario.

This study revealed that rape myth acceptance has greater influence for the Japanese participants than belief in a just world. As Higgins (1996) argues, a belief that is stronger with a history of frequent, consistent, and clear, will be activated to make a social perception of others. Further, Higgins and Bargh (1987) assert that the relative accessibility of the stored knowledge is a major determinant in making judgments about others or situations. Therefore, it can be speculated that rape myth acceptance might be readily accessible and much more prevalent than belief in a just world for Japanese persons, including when making judgment of rape victims.

It is also important to note that prevention programs are most effective when they are readily available and clear. Because the majority of the victims of sexual assaults in Japan are young adult women, sexual assault outreach efforts should be targeted to this population and should educate them in order to minimize the occurrence of secondary victimization.

In their meta-analysis, Flores and Hartlaub (1998) found evidence that some intervention strategies such as human sexuality courses, workshops, and video interventions, appear to be successful in reducing rape myth acceptance. Creating such intervention programs designed to reduce the level of rape myth acceptance in Japan might also reduce the likelihood of secondary victimization. Unfortunately, there is no study involving the examination of intervention strategies to reduce false beliefs about rape and rape victims in Japan.

Limitations

Perhaps the most serious limitation of the present research was the reliance on samples of convenience. The participants of this study were individuals to whom the researchers had ready access, rather than a randomly selected Japanese population. Specifically, the participants of this study were all college students. Therefore, generalizability to non-college sample is uncertain and need to be examined in the future study. In turn the results should be interpreted with caution. However, it is important to note that rape myths acceptance tend to be higher in less educated individuals and older adults (Burt, 1980), the findings of this study may intensify with non-college samples.

Another limitation, which is inevitable with any rape perception study that examines rape myth acceptance for the purpose of predicting victim blame attribution, is that the
measurement of rape myth acceptance is similar to the measure of attitude toward victim blame attribution (Lambert & Raichle, 2000). In fact, Lonsway and Fitzgerald (1994) assert that studies investigating the relationship between rape myth acceptance and victim blame attribution are actually similar to the studies of validation of the rape myth scale and do not, therefore, actually make a contribution toward our understanding of rape perception.

Finally, even though Japanese women demonstrate less rape myth acceptance than do Japanese men, there was no gender difference on victim blame attribution. Despite the fact that this study confirmed that rape myth acceptance was one of the predictors of blaming the victim, the reason why the effect of gender was not found is still unclear. Because gender effects on victim blame have been mixed in studies conducted in both Western societies and Japan, there is a need to examine such inconsistency in the future.

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