

Survivors as Agents: How Linguistic Agency Impacts Support for Survivors and Perpetrators of Sexual Assault

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Abstract

News media has become increasingly supportive of women who report sexual assault, potentially increasing public support for survivors. Support in the news typically involves granting survivors agency, but theories of morality would predict that linking agency to survivors over perpetrators may have deleterious effects, leading readers to blame survivors more and perpetrators less. We hypothesized that a linguistic pattern in which survivors are framed more agentially than perpetrators is prevalent in news media and influences who readers blame. Across 1,738 sentences from 494 politically varied news articles, a linguistic pattern emerged; in liberal sources, survivors were framed more agentially than perpetrators. We tested how this pattern shaped blame. College participants ($N = 1,238$) read sentences where survivors or perpetrators were agentic. Men who read sentences framing survivors (vs. perpetrators) agentially blamed perpetrators less. These findings demonstrate how supportive language can inadvertently reinforce victim-blame by causing people to think perpetrators are less blameworthy.

Keywords

gender, social cognition, sexual assault, agency, moral typecasting, socialization

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Introduction

Public concern for survivors of sexual assault has grown in recent decades (Basile et al., 2016; The White House, 2014), with heightened awareness and an increase in what constitutes sexual assault following the #MeToo movement (Jaffe et al., 2021; Szekeres et al., 2020). Current news media, too, are often supportive of sexual assault survivors, especially when their situation aligns with cultural notions of “real” rape (i.e., being attacked by a stranger; Stewart et al., 1996). News coverage of sexual assault rarely presents explicit rape myths, often shows sympathy for survivors when the assault involves weapons, results in hospitalization, or happens with strangers, and covers #MeToo positively—though this positivity occurs more in liberal than conservative sources (De Benedictis et al., 2019; Sacks et al., 2018). Media also often highlight survivors’ growth, resilience, and pursuit of justice. An intuitive hypothesis is that exposure to such media coverage increases support for survivors, consistent with theories of affective framing (Flusberg et al., 2024; Levin, 1987; Olson & Fazio, 2001). Indeed, people evaluate sexual assault “survivors” more positively than sexual assault “victims” (Papendick & Bohner, 2017). Yet, theories of morality imply that this supportive language may actually backfire, leading instead to victim blame (Gray & Wegner, 2009).

Theories of moral typecasting and dyadic morality posit that moral transgressions involve a dyad: the agent who causes the suffering and the patient who receives it (Gray et al., 2012). Agents are perceived as having more self-control and intentional thought, while patients are perceived as experiencing more pain and fear (Gray & Wegner, 2011). Even when a recipient is not specified, perceivers will infer one, as it is the perceived harm to a recipient that moves an act from merely bad to truly immoral (Schein & Gray, 2018). As such, perceptions of moral agency and patiency tend to be inversely related. The more agency a target is perceived to have, the more blame and less suffering perceivers tend to attribute to them (Gray et al., 2012). Agent and patient roles

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also tend to generalize across situations. When a target is perceived as agentic in one situation, this typecasting limits perceptions of their capacity to suffer in future situations (Gray & Wegner, 2011).

In cases of sexual assault, we asked how attributions of responsibility look when the person who was assaulted is talked about agentially. In dyadic moral models, thinking of someone agentially inhibits thinking of them as suffering from the event and instead leads to increased attributions of responsibility and blame. The individual is less likely to be considered a victim and is thought to be less sensitive to pain (Gray & Wegner, 2009). By contrast, thinking of someone as vulnerable tends to inhibit thinking of them as an agent. The individual is considered less able to perpetrate wrongdoing and more sensitive to pain. According to moral typecasting theory, sexual assault perpetrators should be considered highly responsible for the assault if framed as moral agents aggressing against a victim. However, suppose *survivors* are framed more agentially and perpetrators framed less so, perhaps through the use of supportive linguistic cues. In that case, moral dyadic theories would predict that perpetrators would be blamed less, considered less able to perpetrate wrongdoing, and perceived as more sensitive to pain, whereas survivors would be blamed more, considered more able to perpetrate wrongdoing, and perceived as less sensitive to pain.

Indeed, subtle changes to language can strongly influence people's perceptions about responsibility (Niemi & Young, 2016). Consider the statement, "He raped her." This conveys a greater sense of responsibility for the perpetrator than the statement, "She was raped." This latter format omits the perpetrator as a linguistic agent, focusing only on the survivor. Research supports the importance of language in conveying responsibility. When an individual's actions are written in active (vs. passive) voice, that individual will be considered more responsible (Bohner, 2001; Henley et al., 1995). People blame individuals who are described as performing an action more than those who are described as receiving an action (Fausey & Boroditsky, 2010). Therefore, we tested competing hypotheses about how supportive news coverage of sexual assault survivors impacts perceptions of responsibility. Importantly, beliefs about sexual assault are tied to stereotypes about gender and sexual orientation, leading us to anticipate that linguistic patterns around sexual assault likely vary with the gender of the survivor and perpetrator. Thus, we focused our studies on one instantiation of sexual assault (i.e., men assaulting women) as it is the most prevalently encountered in media and day-to-day life (Stop Street Harassment, 2018).¹

Language that is supportive of sexual assault survivors in news coverage could have favorable or insidious effects on public perceptions. On one hand, framing women who have experienced sexual assault as survivors gives agency and may reduce stigma associated with being victimized (Dunn, 2005). For example, labeling oneself as a survivor (vs. a victim) is associated with greater post-traumatic growth (e.g.,

positive psychological changes after a traumatic event; Western et al., 2024). Furthermore, affective framing effects demonstrate congruence between how positively a message is framed and perceivers' subsequent beliefs (Flusberg et al., 2024). For example, people perceive a product more positively when framed as percent lean rather than percent fat, and a medical treatment more positively when framed as having a 90% survival rate rather than a 10% mortality rate (Flusberg et al., 2024; Levin, 1987). Therefore, supportive language that frames sexual assault survivors as agentic could lead to more supportive public opinion about sexual assault survivors and harsher punishment for perpetrators.

On the other hand, agentic framing may backfire. For example, people evaluate women labeled as sexual assault survivors (vs. victims) more positively, but blame them more (Papendick & Bohner, 2017). When women are agentic, they violate norms for how women *should* behave and often experience backlash (Rudman & Phelan, 2008). Consider some common rape myths like "she asked for it" or "rape accusations are often used as a way of getting back at guys" (Payne et al., 1999). These statements frame women agentially, deflecting responsibility away from the perpetrator and onto the survivor. While recent analysis indicates rape myths like these are rarely stated in modern news media (Sacks et al., 2018), supportive language emphasizing women as capable survivors may, unfortunately, mimic some of the same salubrious effects of rape myths by encouraging readers to attribute more agency to survivors and less blame to perpetrators. Thus, patterns of such supportive language in the media could be recapitulated in readers' minds in an assimilative fashion, causing them to think of subsequent sexual assault survivors they encounter as more blameworthy.

Gender Differences

Sexual assault is embedded in a gendered cultural system, which typically leads women and men to have different feelings and experiences surrounding sexual assault, and to hold different gender role beliefs. Exposure to a cultural pattern of sexual assault survivors as agentic may thus interact with the beliefs and identities people hold. For example, some limited past work has demonstrated that men were more willing than women to blame sexual assault survivors when assault was described passively (i.e., without an agent; Henley et al., 1995). We explored two reasons for a similar gender difference to persist in the current work: defensive attribution and traditional gender role ideologies.

Defensive Attribution. Defensive attribution is a heuristic people use to protect their view of themselves and the world (Shaver, 1970). According to defensive attribution, people assign blame in ways that help them psychologically distance themselves from negative outcomes. For example, people told to look for similarities between themselves and a perpetrator of a crime blamed the perpetrator less than those

told to look for differences (Shaver, 1970). Men may engage in this protective heuristic when reading about sexual assault cases in which men rape women. Specifically, men who perceive themselves as similar to perpetrators may evaluate perpetrators more leniently and be especially vigilant in seeking reasons to exonerate perpetrators, such as learning that sexual assault survivors tend to be agentic and thus more blameworthy.

Gender Role Beliefs. It is also possible that egalitarian gender ideologies, not gender identity specifically, interact with supportive framing of survivors as agentic. Traditional gender stereotypes dictate that women should be warm, friendly, and supportive, but not assertive, aggressive, or independent (i.e., agentic; Sczesny et al., 2019). A linguistic pattern of survivors as agentic violates this expectation. Indeed, ambivalent sexism theory posits that hostile and benevolent sexist beliefs operate in tandem to maintain the traditional gender hierarchy by punishing women who disrupt it and protecting women who abide by it (Bareket & Fiske, 2023; Glick & Fiske, 1996). Traditional gender ideologies may thus amplify observed effects, causing people to react especially negatively to sexual assault survivors once they have learned that sexual assault survivors tend to be agentic and thus threats to the traditional gender hierarchy. In line with this thinking, women who hold traditional gender role beliefs evaluate sexual assault survivors who fight back more negatively than those who do not (Ryckman et al., 1992), people blame women survivors more if they violate traditionally feminine body size expectations (i.e., higher waist-to-hip ratio; Paganini et al., 2023), and benevolent sexists blame victims more when they do not align with traditional gender stereotypes (Abrams et al., 2003; Sibley & Wilson, 2004; cf. Masser et al., 2010). Thus, people who hold traditional gender ideologies may be especially reactive to a cultural pattern of survivors being agentic, leading them to blame survivors more and exonerate their perpetrators. As men tend to hold stronger traditional gender ideologies than women (e.g., hostile sexism, rape myths; Bareket & Fiske, 2023), gender differences by condition could owe to men holding stronger gender role beliefs than women, causing moderation by gender role beliefs to masquerade as an effect of participant gender. We explore these potential boundary conditions in the current work.

Present Studies

In the current studies, we tested our theory that cultural patterns of supportive language in news coverage shape beliefs within the population. First, we quantified linguistic agency in news sources to test whether framing survivors agentially is a prevalent cultural pattern that people encounter. Second, we examined how exposure to a linguistic-agency-bias favoring survivors (*survivor-agency-bias*) versus perpetrators (*perpetrator-agency-bias*) shapes readers' support for

subsequently encountered sexual assault perpetrators and survivors. We expected a cultural pattern in which women survivors were described as agents and men perpetrators were described as objects more often than the reverse (Study 1). We anticipated that survivor-agency-bias would result from news media using survivor-type framing, highlighting survivors' growth and resilience. Because this framing is supportive of survivors, it could be perceived in two ways: this pattern could either (a) align with affective framing theories (Flusberg et al., 2024; Levin, 1987; Olson & Fazio, 2001) causing people to be more critical of perpetrators and blame them more for the assault, or (b) align with dyadic morality theories (Gray & Wegner, 2009), causing people to be more lenient toward perpetrators of sexual assault and blame survivors more. Therefore, we tested whether exposure to this cultural pattern via externally valid news sentences influenced how culpable survivors are perceived (Study 2) and whether this effect replicated using more internally valid stimuli (Study 3), including participant gender as a possible moderator. The present work is novel in applying established theories of morality and framing to characterize news coverage of traumatic events and their impact on the public, using a method emphasizing external validity and experimental control to capture cultural exposure and test its causal influence (Weisbuch et al., 2017).

Transparency and Openness

We report how we determined sample size, exclusions, manipulations, and measures, and we followed Journal Article Reporting Standards (Kazak, 2018). Data were analyzed using R (R Core Team, 2024) with the lme4 (D. Bates et al., 2015) and effectsize (Ben-Shachar et al., 2020) packages. Assumptions for all statistical models were tested. All data, analysis code, and research materials are available on OSF: <https://osf.io/kg4nx/overview>

Study 1

We have hypothesized that people are frequently exposed to linguistic patterns framing survivors of sexual assault as agentic, which may carry over into how supportively people evaluate survivors of sexual assault and their perpetrators more generally. Thus, in Study 1, we conducted an extensive content analysis using the Cultural Snapshots approach (Lamer et al., 2025; Pauker et al., 2026; Weisbuch et al., 2017) to identify cultural patterns of linguistic agency in news coverage of how survivors are framed. A cultural pattern is any covariation of cues frequently encountered by a social group. Cultural patterns can be powerful mechanisms of socialization because of their subtlety and prevalence (Lamer et al., 2022; Miyamoto et al., 2006; Weisbuch et al., 2009).

Quantifying a cultural pattern before conducting experimental studies is valuable groundwork for several reasons.

Tracing a belief back to patterns people frequently see in their social environments can provide comprehensive evidence for socialization mechanisms (e.g., Weisbuch & Ambady, 2009). Linking content analyses with experimental approaches draws on the strengths of both methodologies, enabling scientists to establish a tighter link between culture and beliefs than either methodology alone allows. Demonstrating that a pattern exists does not mean that it affects perceivers. The pattern may be too subtle, or co-occurring patterns may drown out its effects. At the same time, testing an experimental effect with only artificial stimuli that do not reflect the patterns typically encountered by a population can limit researchers' conclusions. Taking and quantifying snapshots from people's environments enables researchers to determine whether a pattern is prevalent and use ecologically valid snapshots as experimental stimuli. As such, systematically identifying cultural patterns is a valuable way to gain causal knowledge about how cultural phenomena influence beliefs.

We hypothesized that people encounter survivor-agency-bias, a linguistic pattern in which survivors are described more agentically than perpetrators, which could inadvertently contribute to a culture in which perpetrators are treated more leniently, and survivors are held somewhat accountable for their own assault. To test this, we quantified how agentically survivors and perpetrators of sexual assault are framed in popular news sources in the United States. Specifically, we explored whether there is a pattern of survivor-agency-bias in which survivors are described as agents and perpetrators are described as objects more often than the reverse. We hypothesized that survivor-agency-bias could emerge in two ways: survivor-type language or victim-blaming. We coded the snapshots to identify the presence of survivor-type language and victim-blaming, aiming to understand reasons for survivor-agency-bias. We expected survivor-type language to explain survivor-agency-bias in politically liberal sources, but victim-blaming to explain survivor-agency-bias in politically conservative sources.

Method

We did not preregister hypotheses or the data analysis plan for the linguistic agency coding of the content analysis. We preregistered the coding process, our hypotheses, and the data analysis plan for the victim-blame and survivor-type language coding: https://osf.io/tw7r4/overview?view_only=93504af061c04eea92c21cc88cf3e3ed. All data, analysis code, and research material for Study 1 are available here: <https://osf.io/kg4nx/overview>

Article and Sentence Selection. We examined how US news media describes women who have reported being assaulted and men who have been accused of assault. We will refer to these individuals as survivors and perpetrators. We sampled commonly encountered materials to quantify the cultural

pattern, selecting articles from 10 of the most popular news sources in the United States that ranged in political skew (Watson, 2020). We selected sources coded as politically left, center left, center, center right, and right according to All-Sides (2019) at the time of article selection (i.e., 2019). We selected two sources for each category that were popular and frequently read in the United States.² For each source, we selected one article published every week of a given year (i.e., July 28, 2019 to July 25, 2020).³ We selected the first article published each week that detailed a sexual assault case (see Supplemental Material for more on the selection criteria).

From each article, we selected the first sentence in which both the survivor and perpetrator were mentioned, only the survivor was mentioned, only the perpetrator was mentioned, and the title—yielding 1,779 sentences from 494 articles.⁴ We aimed to gather a representative sample of sentences from the whole article, so we varied whether we started selecting sentences from the beginning or end of the article by week to ensure that sentences did not vary as a function of where they appeared in the article.

Sentence Coding

Linguistic Agency. We focused on the linguistic framing of agency most closely tied to the definition of agency itself: “the ability to take action or to choose what action to take” (Cambridge Dictionary, 2023). We quantified who was described as a *linguistic agent* (i.e., a person doing an action), and who was described as a *linguistic object* (i.e., a person receiving action). We hypothesized that linguistic agency communicates subjective perceptions of agency to readers and news stories tend to describe survivors as agents and perpetrators as objects more than the reverse.

To code linguistic agency, we followed established methods for coding qualitative data in content analyses (Burla et al., 2008). Before coding the sentences, six research assistants coded a training set of 48 sentences to ensure interrater reliability. For example, in the sentence, “Two women accuse actor James Franco of sexual exploitation in lawsuit,” (Dobuzinskis, 2019) the only verb to code was *accuse*. The two survivors were doing the action of accusing, and James Franco was the object of their action. Every verb in a sentence was coded in this way. Agreement was calculated conservatively as to whether *all* coders put the same number for each of the four codes (i.e., perpetrator and survivor being agents and objects). Calculated in this way, agreement was 90%. Sentences on which there was any disagreement were discussed and resolved as a group with the guidance of the senior author. After training, research assistants each coded a subset of the sentences independently. The final sample contained 1,738 sentences.⁵ We also had the sentences rated on their subjective agency by a separate sample of participants (see Supplemental Material for these results).

Once all sentences were collected, trained research assistants coded every verb. For each, they coded who was doing an action (i.e., agent) and who was the target of someone

else's action (i.e., object). The total frequency of the perpetrator and survivor doing or receiving an action was tallied for each sentence. We then calculated each sentence's *linguistic-agency-bias* score. If the survivor was framed more agentically than the perpetrator, we assigned the sentence a value of 1 (i.e., *survivor-agency-bias*). If the perpetrator was framed more agentically than the survivor, we assigned the sentence a value of -1 (i.e., *perpetrator-agency-bias*). If there was no difference in how agentically the survivor and perpetrator were framed (i.e., they were described as agents and objects with equal frequency), we assigned the sentence a value of 0.⁶ We averaged across the sentences in an article to yield a linguistic-agency-bias score for each article ($M = -0.01$, $SD = 0.51$, $N = 494$).

Victim-Blame and Survivor-Type Language. We hypothesized that a cultural pattern of survivor-agency-bias would mostly likely arise via survivor-type language framing the woman as a capable agent but could also emerge due to victim-blame language highlighting how the woman's actions led to the assault. Using the concepts identified in Table 1, two research assistants coded each sentence for the presence of the 16 victim-blame and 14 survivor-type language themes, and one additional research assistant resolved disagreements.

Given the ideologies embedded within political conservatism and liberalism, we further hypothesized that the way survivor-agency-bias emerges would depend on the news source's political lean. Specifically, we hypothesized that, consistent with feminist approaches to providing people agency over their actions (Dunn, 2005), liberal sources would grant agency to women who have been assaulted by describing them as survivors rather than victims and highlighting their accomplishments (e.g., getting a promotion) and actions to get justice (e.g., notifying the authorities). Conversely, we hypothesized that, consistent with past work linking conservative ideologies to rape myth endorsement (Anderson et al., 1997), conservative sources would grant agency to women who have been assaulted by highlighting their actions as reason for the assault having taken place.

We developed the coding criteria for victim-blame using the Illinois Rape Myth Acceptance scale (Payne et al., 1999) items as a guide. We translated each item into an action that could be coded for in the sentences from the content analysis. For example, one item read, "If a woman is sexually assaulted while she is drunk, she is at least somewhat responsible for what happened." Therefore, the corresponding code is related to any mention in the sentence of a woman survivor drinking alcohol or consuming drugs. See Table 1 for a full list of codes.

To our knowledge, there is no established and validated measure of survivor-type language. Therefore, we conducted a review of the academic literature across related disciplines (e.g., clinical psychology, sociology, women's studies) to

create a measure of how sexual assault survivors define their own experiences of survivorhood and how others perceive language and actions around survivorhood. To do this, a team of research assistants systematically developed themes relevant to survivor-type language (e.g., mentioning coping and social support). Next, they searched the literature for articles discussing these themes. For example, they searched "coping with sexual assault" in Google Scholar and chose an article about actions taken by the survivor against the perpetrator. They wrote down all the themes from this article. They continued this process until they reached saturation in the themes (i.e., each new article yielded the same themes as the themes already on the list). This extensive review produced the following themes: highlighting a woman's actions against a perpetrator (Thompson, 2000), a woman coping with and moving past the assault emotionally (Schwark & Bohner, 2019; Sinko et al., 2021, 2022; Thompson, 2000), a woman moving past the assault professionally (Schwark & Bohner, 2019; Sinko et al., 2021, 2022), a woman moving past the assault interpersonally (Schwark & Bohner, 2019; Sinko et al., 2021, 2022), and a woman labeling herself as survivor (Levy & Eckhaus, 2020; Williamson & Serna, 2018).

Coders were first trained on 100 sentences, achieving 94% agreement. For each sentence with disagreement, they discussed their reasoning as a group, came to a unanimous decision, and agreed to follow that coding procedure for the remainder of the stimulus set. An interrater reliability analysis was performed to assess the degree to which coders consistently assigned the presence of victim-blame or survivor-type language themes to sentences in the stimulus set. The marginal distributions of ratings indicated that 30% of the time, the coders indicated "yes" as their response. Given the low prevalence rate of "yes" responses, we used Byrt et al. (1993) formula for Cohen's (1960) kappa to calculate an appropriate index of interrater reliability. The resulting kappa indicated substantial agreement, $\kappa = .95$. Interrater reliability suggested that coders had excellent agreement on victim-blame and survivor-type language ratings.

Results

Linguistic Agency. To test for a politically skewed pattern of survivor-agency-bias, we regressed linguistic-agency-bias onto source lean.⁷

Political lean predicted linguistic-agency-bias, $b = -0.05$, 95% CI [-0.08, -0.02], $SE = 0.02$, $t(492) = -3.92$, $p = .001$, $f = 0.15$, 90% CI [0.07, 0.22]. Highly conservative news sources framed perpetrators more agentically than survivors, $b = -0.11$, 95% CI [-0.18, -0.03], $SE = 0.04$, $t(492) = -2.81$, $p = .005$, $f = 0.13$, 90% CI [0.05, 0.20], whereas highly liberal news sources framed survivors more agentically than perpetrators, $b = 0.10$, 95% CI [0.02, 0.18], $SE = 0.04$, $t(492) = 2.55$, $p = .011$, $f = 0.11$, 90% CI [0.04, 0.19] (Figure 1).

Table 1. Codes Used to Identify the Presence of Victim-Blame Language and Survivor-Type Language in Sentences.

Victim-Blame Language	Survivor-Type Language
<p>She Asked for It</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Mentions woman was drinking or doing drugs (e.g., mentions woman consumed alcohol or was under the influence of any drug). • Mentions what woman is wearing (e.g., mentions anything about what clothing she was wearing like a short skirt or dress, high heels, or had cleavage showing). • Mentions woman choosing to go to a vulnerable location (e.g., walking in places that are not well lit, walking alone at night, going somewhere without her phone or without someone knowing where she is going, going somewhere where other people don't frequently go, or leaving an alcoholic drink unattended). • Mentions woman's past sexual history (e.g., any prior sexual relationships or sexual partners that the woman had or mentions anything about her being promiscuous). <p>It Wasn't Really Rape</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Mentions woman does not physically resist or fight back (e.g., woman's lack of struggle against the perpetrator, mentions she did not hit or fight him). • Mentions presence or absence of a weapon (e.g., the woman had a weapon to fight back against the perpetrator, including pepper spray, a taser, a knife, a gun, or anything used as a weapon such as a key or a sharp object). <p>She Lied</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Mentions woman's initial agreement to have sex (e.g., if woman agreed to any kind of sexual intercourse before changing her mind). • Mentions woman's motivation to negatively influence the perpetrator or mentions woman's motivations beyond the assault for making the allegations (e.g., mentions that the woman would have something to gain from accusing the perpetrator, mentions that the woman comes from a lower social class or that the perpetrator has a position of power over the woman such as being her employer or a politician). • Mentions woman's mental health issues (e.g., history of depression, anxiety, addiction, or other mental health issues). • Mentions woman cheating on past partners (e.g., mentions woman's infidelity in previous relationships or mentions the woman had been talking to more than one person at a time). • Mentions established informal relationship (e.g., mentions that the woman and the perpetrator had been intimate before or had been seeing each other casually or mentions that the woman and the perpetrator were friends or knew each other). • Mentions special favors or promotions that were received as a result (e.g., mentions benefits like promotions, money, or notoriety that the woman gained from the perpetrator as a result of the assault). <p>He Didn't Mean To</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Mentions man's strong desire for sex (e.g., mentions the man can't control himself or he was just following his impulses or mentions that the man was sexually impulsive/driven by innate desires for sex). • Mentions man getting carried away sexually (e.g., mentions the man was unable to stop his sexual advance once he started or mentions the man did not mean to go so far and could not stop himself). • Mentions man was drinking or doing drugs (e.g., mentions man consumed alcohol or was under the influence of any drugs). • Mentions man's prestige or positive reputation (e.g., mentions that he is a well-respected member of a community, his positive contributions to society, that he is well liked by many or mentioning people's generally positive impression/interactions with him. Mentions that someone with the reputation/prestige he has would not be capable of sexual assault). 	<p>Woman's Actions Against Perpetrator</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Mentions the woman going to the police or other authorities to report the assault. • Mentions the woman testifying against the perpetrator in court. <p>Coping With and Moving Past the Assault Emotionally</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Mentions the woman sought social support from another person (e.g., talked with friends and/or family, went to a support group, met other women who have had similar experiences). • Mentions woman attended counseling or therapy for support. • Mentions woman avoiding contact with the perpetrator (e.g., quitting job to avoid him, removing herself from spaces where he may be, or blocking his ability to reach her by phone or on social media). • Mentions woman feeling comfortable with herself and her identity (e.g., mentions inner strength or self-acceptance). • Mentions woman is able to feel positive emotions and process negative emotions. <p>Moving Past the Assault Professionally</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Mentions woman's evidence of career success since the assault (e.g., job promotion, other professional successes). • Mentions woman being able to function (e.g., able to do things she usually would like to get ready for the day and to leave the house). • Mentions woman being able to contribute to society since the assault (e.g., attending social functions, community events). <p>Moving Past the Assault Interpersonally</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Mentions woman's evidence of relationship or family success since the assault (e.g., got married, had children, moved in with a partner, was able to repair affected relationships, be an active parent for their children, reconnect with family members). • Explicitly mentions woman's ability to relate to others or trust others since the assault (e.g., mentions she was able to relate to others or trust others since the assault). • Mentions woman's ability to be in a romantic relationship since the assault (e.g., entering a new relationship, taking a step such as moving in together in an existing relationship, having sexual relations). <p>Labeling Herself as a Survivor</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Mentions woman labeling herself as a survivor or labeling the experience as rape/sexual assault.

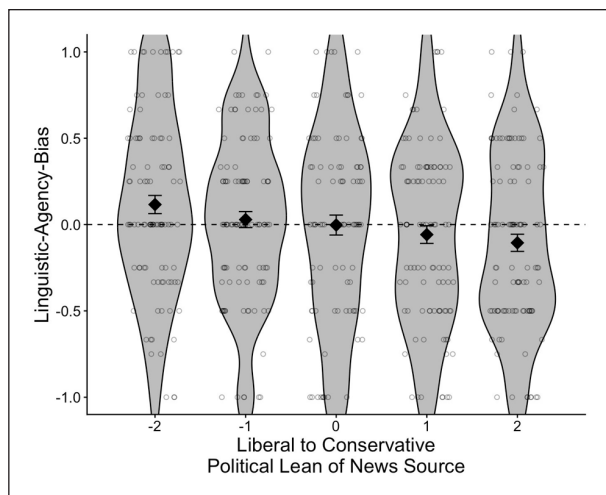


Figure 1. Whether survivors or perpetrators were attributed more agency varied by political lean. Survivor-agency-bias (survivors more agentic than perpetrators) was observed in highly liberal sources, whereas perpetrator-agency-bias (perpetrators more agentic than survivors) was observed in highly conservative sources. Note that the individual data points and violin plots reflect average linguistic-agency-bias for each article. Error bars reflect standard error.

Victim-Blame and Survivor-Type Language. We explored how agency was attributed to survivors through either victim-blame or survivor-type language. We regressed survivor-type language, a count variable indicating the number of survivor-type themes in the article ($M = 1.11$, $SD = 1.07$, $N = 494$), onto linguistic-agency-bias, source lean, and their interaction using a Poisson multilevel model.

Interestingly, political lean did not predict survivor-type language, $b = -0.04$, 95% CI $[-0.10, 0.02]$, $SE = 0.03$, $z = -1.22$, $p = .224$, Incidence rate ratios (IRR) = 0.96, 95% CI $[0.91, 1.02]$.⁸ However, linguistic-agency-bias did, $b = 0.50$, 95% CI $[0.34, 0.67]$, $SE = 0.09$, $z = 5.87$, $p < .001$, $IRR = 1.65$, 95% CI $[1.40, 1.96]$; sentences attributing more agency to survivors than perpetrators were more likely to feature survivor-type language. Source lean did not moderate this effect, $b = -0.03$, 95% CI $[-0.14, 0.09]$, $SE = 0.06$, $z = -0.47$, $p = .636$, $IRR = 0.97$, 95% CI $[0.87, 1.09]$.

Political lean also did not predict victim-blame, a count variable indicating the number of victim-blame themes in the sentence ($M = 1.03$, $SD = 1.10$, $N = 494$), $b = 0.02$, 95% CI $[-0.05, 0.08]$, $SE = 0.03$, $z = 0.52$, $p = .603$, $IRR = 1.02$, 95% CI $[0.96, 1.08]$. Linguistic-agency-bias did not predict victim-blame, $b = -.04$, 95% CI $[-0.21, 0.13]$, $SE = 0.09$, $z = -0.46$, $p = .643$, $IRR = 0.96$, 95% CI $[0.81, 1.14]$. There was no interactive effect, $b = -0.10$, 95% CI $[-0.22, 0.01]$, $SE = 0.06$, $z = -1.72$, $p = .085$, $IRR = 0.90$, 95% CI $[0.80, 1.01]$.

Sentences that granted survivors more linguistic agency than perpetrators were also more likely to contain survivor-type language. Survivor-agency-bias in liberal sources may then owe to a greater presence of survivor-type language in

those sources. Indeed, survivor-type language was significantly more likely to occur in liberal than conservative sources, $b = -0.07$, 95% CI $[-0.13, -0.01]$, $SE = 0.03$, $z = -2.27$, $p = .023$, $IRR = 0.93$, 95% $[0.88, 0.99]$.

Discussion

People typically spend substantial time with media, including scrolling through social media for news (Pew Research Center, 2025). Estimates suggest that people spend about 60 min per day consuming news media (Ofcom, 2025), meaning that the cultural patterns present in news media could be an important socializing agent. In Study 1, an extensive content analysis of 494 articles from 10 news sources ranging in political skew revealed evidence of cultural patterns of linguistic-agency-bias. Both survivor-agency-bias and perpetrator-agency-bias were observed in sexual assault coverage in the news. As the political lean of news sources became more liberal, survivors were described more agentially than perpetrators, whereas the opposite was true for highly conservative sources. We had hypothesized that survivor-agency-bias would be observed across the political range in news media due to survivor-type framing in liberal sources and victim-blaming in conservative sources. Instead, when survivors were attributed agency, both liberal and conservative sources tended to use survivor-type framing, not victim-blaming, in those sentences. By contrast, victim-blaming was unrelated to linguistic-agency-bias and was no more common in conservative than liberal sources. However, there was a difference in the frequency with which liberal and conservative sources used survivor-type language. Liberal sources were significantly more likely to use survivor-type language than conservative sources, helping to explain the observed cultural pattern of survivor-agency-bias in liberal sources. We next tested whether survivor-agency-bias (vs. perpetrator-agency-bias) influences support for sexual assault perpetrators and survivors.

Study 2

Study 1 suggested that people encounter different cultural patterns depending on the political lean of their preferred news sources, with survivor-agency-bias most frequently encountered in liberal sources and perpetrator-agency-bias most frequently encountered in conservative sources. Subtle and prevalent cultural patterns such as these can shape beliefs in small, yet powerful ways (Lamer et al., 2022; Miyamoto et al., 2006; Weisbuch et al., 2009). For example, subtle televised patterns in which gender-stereotypical characters were treated more positively than gender-counterstereotypical characters caused girls to feel more pressure to act feminine (Lamer et al., 2022), and subtle patterns in which slim women were treated more positively than average-weight women caused women to feel more pressure to be slim (Weisbuch & Ambady, 2009). We hypothesized that a subtle

pattern of survivor-agency-bias could cause readers to become more or less supportive of sexual assault survivors (vs. perpetrators). Framing effects theories (Flusberg et al., 2024; Levin, 1987; Olson & Fazio, 2001) would suggest that supportive framing in the news should lead people to support sexual assault survivors more, whereas dyadic morality theories (Gray et al., 2012; Gray & Wegner, 2011; Schein & Gray, 2018) would suggest the opposite: linguistic framing that grants agency to survivors (vs. perpetrators) should lead people to blame perpetrators less and survivors more.

We also hypothesized that these effects may differ based on gender identity. Not only do women have a heightened fear of and experience with sexual assault that may increase its personal relevance and perceived similarity (PS) to survivors, but men tend to endorse hostile sexism and accept rape myths more than women (Bareket & Fiske, 2023). Thus, we hypothesized that gender identity may moderate how perceivers react to language that frames sexual assault survivors as agentic.

Method

Participants. Data collection occurred in Fall 2021. The final sample consisted of 518 undergraduate students from the southeastern United States (76% women, 24% men; 80% White, 6% Multiracial, 5% Black/African American, 5% Asian/Pacific Islander, 4% Latinx, <1% Native American, <1% Middle Eastern, <1% Other (not specified); $M_{\text{age}} = 18.47$ [$SD = 0.99$]; 88% heterosexual, 7% bisexual, 1% lesbian/gay, 1% pansexual, 1% asexual, 1% questioning, <1% demisexual, and <1% other (not specified).⁹ We sampled college students, a convenient and readily available data source that matched the primary dependent variable about college disciplinary boards. Furthermore, sexual assault is common on college campuses (Basile et al., 2016), rendering this population especially relevant to the current work. See Supplemental Material for exclusions.

Using Munsch and Willer's (2012) reported effect size as a starting point ($d = 0.59$), we conservatively anticipated a small to medium effect size ($d = 0.35$). An a priori power analysis using G*Power indicated 427 participants would yield .95 power (~213 of each gender). We recruited participants until we reached this number, but continued recruiting until the end of the semester to collect a large enough sample of men. We set the academic term as the a priori stopping rule.

The analysis plan, data collection stopping rules, and hypotheses were preregistered; see https://osf.io/xpjc7?view_only=99d01f69b7224d19904ee68f1229bb42. See Supplemental Material for deviations from the preregistration.

Experimental Manipulation. We generated experimental conditions from the sentences sampled in Study 1 using a systematic set of rules. Specifically, we looked to the subset of

sentences that mentioned both the perpetrator and survivor, but no one else (e.g., no mention of police officers or lawyers). From this subset, we selected the two sentences from each source that contained the strongest perpetrator-agency-bias and the two sentences from each source that contained the strongest survivor-agency-bias based on the difference score calculated in Study 1. For the survivor-agency-bias condition, we included the two sentences from each news source in which the survivor was an agent most often and the perpetrator was an object most often ($n = 20$ sentences). For the perpetrator-agency-bias condition, we did the opposite. Each condition thus contained two sentences from each source, and every sentence mentioned both parties but no one else (see example sentences in Table 2). Participants were randomly assigned to one of these two conditions. They read and rated each sentence in random order on a scale from 1 *extremely negative* to 7 *extremely positive*.

Sexual Assault Perceptions. Participants were told they would be asked to answer questions about a random set of Student Conduct Board cases that had occurred on campus. All participants across both conditions read the same scenarios. These scenarios were developed and validated in past research, having been designed to describe sexual assault cases in neutral language (see Munsch & Willer, 2012 and Appendix A). The two scenarios were shown in random order and described an instance of a man sexually assaulting a woman. After reading each scenario, participants rated how responsible each party was for the incident (e.g., How responsible is Amy for the incident?) on a scale of 1 *not at all responsible* to 7 *very responsible*. They next made the same ratings for how justified and likable each party was. Finally, participants reported what punishment should be imposed on each party: 1 *no punishment*, 2 *probation (next violation leads to suspension)*, 3 *suspension from the university for one year*, or 4 *permanent dismissal from the university*. We z-scored each item and averaged them to yield a Blame Index of how much participants blamed survivors vs. perpetrators ($\alpha = .82$, $M = 2.28$, $SD = 0.21$).¹⁰ Prior to averaging, we reverse-scored perpetrator responsibility, perpetrator punishment, survivor likability, and survivor justifiability.

Procedure. Participants completed the study online and were randomly assigned to the survivor-agency-bias or perpetrator-agency-bias condition before evaluating the sexual assault scenarios. We also included a measure of gender stereotypes, the Ambivalent Sexism Inventory (ASI; Glick & Fiske, 1996), and the modified version of the Illinois Rape Myth Acceptance scale (McMahon & Farmer, 2011). Given their overt nature, we anticipated that these measures would be less sensitive to the experimental manipulation but included them as potential outcomes and moderators. The manipulation did not significantly affect these outcomes (see Supplemental Material), but we report their role as moderators below.

Table 2. Sentences Participants Read in the Survivor-Agency-Bias ($n = 20$) and Perpetrator-Agency-Bias ($n = 20$) Conditions.

Survivor-Agency-Bias	Perpetrator-Agency-Bias
“Christine Blasey Ford, whose allegations of sexual assault against Supreme Court Justice Brett Kavanaugh rocked his confirmation hearing last year, said Sunday that although coming forward to tell her story was traumatic, she’s ‘thankful’ it started a larger conversation about the subject.” (Duster, 2019)	“He evidenced his dedication to furthering the careers of female film stars by touting a lucrative \$10 million contract he gave to Gwyneth Paltrow, one of his accusers, and rattled off a list of social justice films he helped bring to the big screen over his four decades in Hollywood.” (Sheets, 2019)
“Three women who work for him, or previously did so, have filed lawsuits accusing Howard of sexual misconduct and harassment and gender discrimination.” (Adone, 2020)	“Cosby is currently serving a sentence of three to 10 years for drugging and sexually assaulting Andrea Constand at his home outside Philadelphia in 2004.” (Chappell, 2019)
“In 2017, Mr. Halperin was accused by more than a dozen women of workplace sexual assault or misconduct during his time at ABC News, leading to his being fired from both NBC News and Showtime.” (“Donna Brazile Defends Helping Disgraced Journalist,” 2019)	“Three of the teens admitted to having consensual sexual intercourse with the woman, while the other nine denied having any physical interaction with her.” (Lovell, 2019)

Results

Sexual Assault Perceptions. To examine how survivors and perpetrators of sexual assault were rated, we regressed the Survivor vs. Perpetrator Blame Index onto Sentence Condition (i.e., survivor-agency-bias [1] or perpetrator-agency-bias [-1]), Participant Gender (i.e., women [1] or men [-1]), and their interaction. We expected that when survivors (vs. perpetrators) were described agentically, it could yield positive or negative effects on how subsequently encountered survivors and perpetrators were evaluated. We also considered that effects of sentence condition may vary by participant gender.

Consistent with dyadic morality theories, those in the survivor-agency-bias condition ($M = 2.28$, $SD = 0.21$, $n = 261$) blamed the survivors (vs. perpetrators) significantly more than those in the perpetrator-agency-bias condition ($M = 2.27$, $SD = 0.21$, $n = 261$)¹¹, $b = 0.02$, 95% CI [0.001, 0.04], $SE = 0.01$, $t(514) = 2.05$, $p = .041$, Cohen’s $f = 0.09$, 90% CI [0.01, 0.16].¹² There was also a main effect of gender: men ($M = 2.36$, $SD = 0.22$, $n = 122$) blamed the survivors (vs. perpetrators) significantly more than women ($M = 2.25$, $SD = 0.20$, $n = 396$), $b = -0.05$, 95% CI [-0.07, -0.03], $SE = 0.01$, $t(514) = -5.04$, $p < .001$, $f = 0.22$, 90% CI [0.15, 0.30]. However, these main effects were qualified by an interaction, $b = -0.03$, 95% CI [-0.05, -0.01], $SE = 0.01$, $t(514) = -2.80$, $p = .005$, $f = 0.12$, 90% CI [0.05, 0.20]. Men in the survivor-agency-bias condition ($M = 2.41$, $SD = 0.20$, $n = 59$) blamed the survivor (vs. perpetrator) more than men in the perpetrator-agency-bias condition ($M = 2.31$, $SD = 0.24$, $n = 63$), $b = 0.05$, 95% CI [0.02, 0.09], $SE = 0.02$, $t(514) = 2.78$, $p = 0.006$, $f = 0.12$, 90% CI [0.05, 0.20]. Women were not influenced by condition, $b = -0.01$, 95% CI [-0.03, 0.01], $SE = 0.01$, $t(514) = -0.77$, $p = .442$, $f = 0.03$, 90% CI [0.00, 0.11].

While parsimonious, one drawback of using a single scale score that averages across survivors and perpetrators is that it obscures whether survivor-agency-bias led participants to

blame survivors more or perpetrators less. Thus, we conducted follow-up analyses on separate Blame Indices for perpetrators and survivors. Linguistic-agency-bias interacted with participant gender to influence perpetrator blame ($b = 0.02$, 95% CI [0.01, 0.03], $SE = 0.01$, $t(514) = 3.44$, $p < .001$, $f = 0.15$, 90% CI [0.08, 0.22]), but not survivor blame ($b = -0.02$, 95% CI [-0.04, 0.01], $SE = 0.01$, $t(514) = -1.43$, $p = .154$, $f = 0.06$, 90% CI [0.00, 0.14]). Men in the survivor-agency-bias condition ($M = 2.21$, $SD = 0.27$, $n = 59$) blamed the perpetrator less than men in the perpetrator-agency-bias condition ($M = 2.38$, $SD = 0.27$, $n = 63$), $b = -0.04$, 95% CI [-0.06, -0.02], $SE = 0.01$, $t(514) = -3.85$, $p < .001$, $f = 0.17$, 90% CI [0.10, 0.24]. Women were not influenced by condition, $b = 0.001$, 95% CI [-0.01, 0.01], $SE = 0.01$, $t(514) = 0.15$, $p = .882$, $f = .01$, 90% CI [0.00, 0.06]. See Figure 2.

Exploratory Moderators. To unpack gender differences in responding to linguistic-agency-bias, we added gender ideologies to the model of survivor (vs. perpetrator) blame, looking for two-way interactions between gender ideologies and condition. Although rape myth acceptance, hostile sexism, and benevolent sexism each predicted blaming the survivor (vs. perpetrator) less (rape myths: $b = 0.13$, 95% CI [0.11, 0.15], $SE = 0.01$, $t(510) = 13.88$, $p < .001$, $f = 0.61$, 90% CI [0.53, 0.69]; hostile sexism: $b = 0.11$, 95% CI [0.09, 0.13], $SE = 0.01$, $t(510) = 9.41$, $p < .001$, $f = 0.42$, 90% CI [0.34, 0.49], benevolent sexism: $b = 0.06$, 95% CI [0.03, 0.09], $SE = 0.02$, $t(510) = 4.06$, $p < .001$, $f = 0.18$, 90% CI [0.11, 0.25]), they did not interact with condition (rape myths: $b = -0.0002$, 95% CI [-0.02, 0.02], $SE = 0.01$, $t(510) = -0.03$, $p = .979$, $f = 0.001$, 90% CI [0.00, 0.00]; hostile sexism: $b = -0.01$, 95% CI [-0.03, 0.01], $SE = 0.01$, $t(510) = -1.00$, $p = .317$, $f = 0.04$, 90% CI [0.00, 0.12], benevolent sexism: $b = -0.03$, 95% CI [-0.06, 0.004], $SE = 0.02$, $t(510) = -1.73$, $p = .085$, $f = 0.08$, 90% CI [0.00, 0.15]).¹³ The only interactions to emerge were with hostile

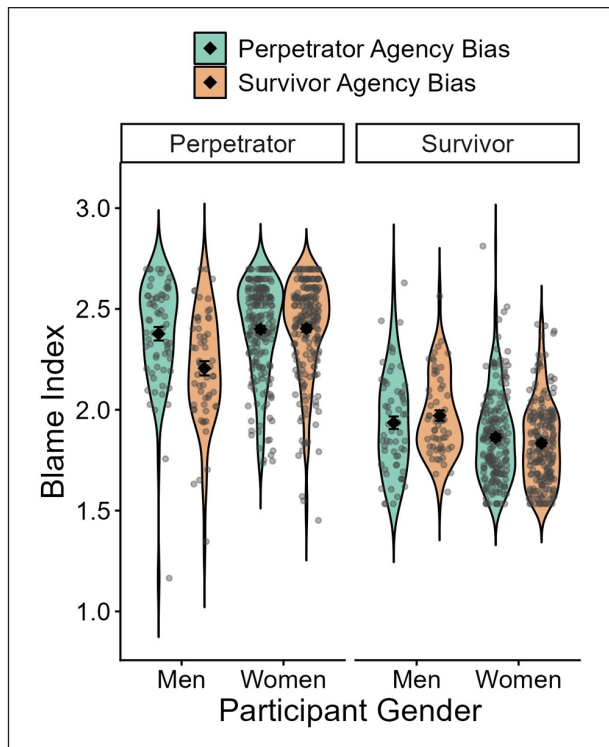


Figure 2. Perpetrator and Survivor Blame Indices graphed by sentence condition and participant gender. Men blamed perpetrators less in the survivor-agency-bias (vs. perpetrator-agency-bias) condition. There was no significant effect on survivor blame. Error bars reflect standard error. Note that figures depict standardized blame indices averaged across z-scored items to enable condition comparisons. The values should not be compared directly between perpetrators and survivors as a 2 on the z-scored Perpetrator Blame Index, for example, is not equivalent in its raw score to a 2 on the z-scored Survivor Blame Index.

and benevolent sexism. Each scale produced significant three-way interactions with gender and condition such that men low on each ideology showed the effect of linguistic-agency-bias most strongly (hostile sexism: $b = 0.09$, 95% CI [0.02, 0.15], $SE = 0.03$, $t(510) = 2.63$, $p = .009$, $f = 0.12$, 90% CI [0.04, 0.19], benevolent sexism: $b = 0.11$, 95% CI [0.06, 0.17], $SE = 0.03$, $t(510) = 3.93$, $p < .001$, $f = 0.17$, 90% CI [0.10, 0.25]).

Discussion

Study 2 demonstrated that linguistic agency can impact how blameworthy perpetrators and survivors of sexual assault seem. Critically, these effects were not limited to just survivors and perpetrators *described* as agentic or not, but generalized from exposure to patterns of linguistic agency to subsequently encountered sexual assault survivors and perpetrators. When exposed to news story snapshots of people's social ecologies exhibiting survivor-agency-bias (vs.

perpetrator-agency-bias), men found perpetrators less blameworthy. Blame did not categorically flip from perpetrators to survivors but subtly increased or decreased depending on whether survivors and perpetrators were described agentic. As one would expect, perpetrators were blamed more than survivors, regardless of condition, but reading news story sentences with survivor-agency-bias (vs. perpetrator-agency-bias) was enough to make men blame perpetrators less for sexually assaulting someone. Overall, these findings are consistent with moral typecasting theory (Gray et al., 2012), suggesting unintended negative consequences of agentic framing for sexual assault survivors.

Participant gender was an important moderator of effects. Men reacted to cultural patterns of survivor-agency-bias (vs. perpetrator-agency-bias) by blaming the perpetrator less, whereas women did not. We had hypothesized that this moderation may be due to (a) men looking for reasons to exonerate perpetrators or (b) gender differences in endorsement of traditional ideologies. Although gender was a significant moderator, traditional gender ideologies did not explain this effect. Our exploratory analyses indicated that men's stronger response was not attributable to gender differences in ambivalent sexism or rape myth endorsement. Women who strongly endorsed gender stereotypes did not show significant effects of condition.

In Study 3, we reassess gender ideologies but also consider perceived similarity to the survivors and perpetrators of assault. Perceived similarity not only allows us to assess defensive attribution among men but also to consider whether similarity may moderate effects among women. Strong personal relevance and fear can both shift how people respond to cues in their environment (Dillard & Anderson, 2004; Petty & Cacioppo, 1986). For example, in the Elaboration Likelihood Model, when a topic has strong personal relevance, people attend to cues central to an argument's quality than when a topic is less personally relevant. Women's unresponsiveness to linguistic agency may owe to a similar logic; sexual assault may often have high personal relevance to women and induce fear, shifting their attention away from peripheral information like linguistic agency patterns and toward other cues.

Most women have direct or indirect experience with assault and fear being assaulted (Christensen et al., 2023; Stop Street Harassment, 2018). For example, in 2023, 55% of women reported that they sometimes or often worried about being sexually assaulted (Cox, 2024), and ample evidence reveals the many ways that women adapt their daily behavior in an attempt to avoid sexual victimization (e.g., avoiding certain places at certain times, carrying pepper spray, only wearing particular clothing; Jacobsen, 2025). Women who feel similar to the survivor may thus not respond to linguistic cues because they rigidly support the survivors or are attending closely to the details of the assault in making their evaluations. One purpose of Study 3 is to explore these explanations for gender differences.

Finally, Study 2 made use of snapshots taken from news articles about sexual assault. Many have argued for the importance of such an approach, noting that perception adapts to the covariation of cues people see in their environments (Todd & Gigerenzer, 2000; see Weisbuch et al., 2017). Individuals develop their heuristics for what to attend to by learning the relationships among various cues. Therefore, a pattern of linguistic agency may be especially noticeable when it occurs in the context of other cues with which it typically co-occurs. Nonetheless, this approach is not without its limitations. Co-occurring cues may amplify or weaken an effect, reducing precision in estimating linguistic agency's true effect strength. In Study 3, we balanced the limitations of the social-ecological approach by carefully constructing sentences high in survivor-agency-bias or perpetrator-agency-bias. This stimulus set equated the situations described across conditions—matching sentence by sentence for who was mentioned, sentence length, and details of the case.

Study 3

Study 2 provided evidence that linguistic agency shapes blame in the context of sexual assault. Reading news sentences that focused on survivors' agency led men to blame survivors (vs. perpetrators) more than reading news sentences that focused on perpetrators' agency. These news sentences directly reflect commonly encountered social ecologies. Yet the sentences naturally vary in many ways (e.g., mentioning famous cases, sentence length). The purpose of Study 3 was to isolate linguistic agency from potentially co-occurring cues in the stimuli and replicate and extend Study 2. Therefore, we included a more streamlined stimulus set to isolate the role of linguistic agency in shifting blame. We also included measures to allow for further exploration of mechanisms related to dyadic morality (i.e., perceived mind) and gender differences (i.e., rape myth endorsement, ambivalent sexism, feminist beliefs, and PS to survivors and perpetrators).

Method

Participants. Data collection occurred in Fall 2023. The final sample consisted of 720 undergraduate students from the southeastern United States (81% White, 5% Asian/Pacific Islander, 5% Multiracial, 4% Black/African American, 4% Latinx, <1% Other (not specified), <1% Native American, <1% Middle Eastern; $M_{\text{age}} = 18.6$ [$SD = 1.26$]; 86% heterosexual, 8% bisexual, 2% pansexual, 1% lesbian/gay, 1% asexual, 1% questioning, <1% demisexual, and 1% other [not specified]). Using a priori exclusion criteria, seven participants were excluded before reaching this final sample. See Supplemental Material for details on exclusions.

Given changes to our experimental stimuli, we conservatively set our sample size goal ($N = 622$) to 20% above that of Study 2 ($N = 518$). We decided a priori to continue data

collection until we reached 311 men or until the end of the semester, whichever came first.

The analysis plan, data collection stopping rules, and hypotheses were preregistered; see <https://osf.io/kg4nx/files/xpjc7>. See Supplemental Material for deviations from the pre-registration.

Experimental Manipulation. As in Study 2, participants were randomly assigned to read sentences featuring survivor-agency-bias or perpetrator-agency-bias. In contrast to Study 2, we created these sentences rather than selecting preexisting sentences from news stories collected in Study 1. This approach balanced out the strengths and limitations of Study 2 by enabling us to closely equate sentences across the two conditions. To create the stimuli, we wrote novel sentences about sexual assault using the Study 2 stimulus set as the starting point for the sentence content. Across conditions, we matched sentence structure, whether the assault was confirmed or alleged, and sentence length as closely as possible. Therefore, the key difference between sentences by condition was who was the agent of action: survivor or perpetrator.

We began generating each stimulus pair by using a sentence from Study 2 as a template (e.g., "The Los Angeles Opera, where Domingo is general director, was responding to accusations made by eight singers, a dancer and others in the classical music world in a report by the Associated Press," Reuters, 2019). Our goal was to remove any reference to famous cases, people, locations, or sources that could influence readers. Therefore, we wrote a novel sentence with similar content but without reference to known individuals (i.e., "Eight women—all singers in the classical music world—made accusations against the Opera general director, Mr. Carter."). If a sampled sentence was from the survivor-agency-bias condition, we then made a matching sentence for the perpetrator-agency-bias condition. We aimed to have similar sentence structure and length focused on the same situation as in the survivor-agency-bias condition, but with the agent of action flipped (i.e., "The general director of the Opera, Mr. Carter, admitted to the accusations from eight women—all singers in the classical music world.") See full stimulus set on OSF: <https://osf.io/kg4nx/files/exv6a>. Note that both conditions contained the same number of sentences that communicated about the assault as alleged or confirmed.

Sexual Assault Perceptions. Participants read the same sexual assault scenarios from Study 2, along with two other vignettes: a control vignette about a non-sexual assault event in which a man stole an iPad from a woman to assess whether effects generalize to women and men, broadly, and a filler vignette about a woman who cheated off another woman for a class assignment to reduce suspicion about gender that may arise from having all perpetrators be men. Participants first

saw the two sexual assault scenarios and then the two non-sexual assault scenarios. They made the same responsibility, punishment, justifiability, and likability ratings as Study 2, and we calculated a Blame Index with the same statistical approach ($\alpha = .81$, $M = 1.82$, $SD = 0.19$).

We also included items to explore mind perception as a mediator. Participants rated survivors and perpetrators on perceived control of the situation (e.g., How much control did Amy have over the situation?) on a scale of 1 *no control* to 7 *complete control*, and experienced trauma (e.g., How traumatic do you think the incident was for Amy?) on a scale of 1 *not at all traumatic* to 7 *very traumatic*. We averaged the items to yield a Mind Index of how much participants attributed a mind to survivors vs. perpetrators ($\alpha = .63$, $M = 2.15$, $SD = 0.63$). Prior to averaging, we reverse-scored perpetrator control and survivor trauma to yield an index in which higher values meant that participants attributed more perceived mind to survivors (vs. perpetrators).

We also measured items to explore perceived similarity as a moderator. Using Batson et al.'s (2005) items to assess perceived similarity, participants rated how similarly they felt to the survivors and perpetrators: "How similar to you did you perceive Amy to be?" on a scale of 1 *not at all similar* to 9 *very similar*; "To what extent did you perceive yourself and Amy to be part of the same group?" from 1 *not at all* to 9 *very much*; "To what extent would you use the term 'we' to describe yourself and Amy?" from 1 *not at all* to 9 *very much*. Similarity to the survivors and perpetrators was not correlated, so we kept these scales separate rather than calculating a difference score. We averaged the items to yield separate perceived similarity to Survivor ($\alpha = .91$, $M = 4.56$, $SD = 1.95$) and perceived similarity to Perpetrator ($\alpha = .90$, $M = 1.57$, $SD = 1.01$) scores.

Procedure. Participants completed this study in a single session in-lab and were randomly assigned to the survivor-agency-bias or perpetrator-agency-bias condition before evaluating the sexual assault scenarios and a set of exploratory moderators and mediators: perceived mind, the modified version of the Illinois Rape Myth Acceptance scale (McMahon & Farmer, 2011), Feminist Women's Movement scale (FWM; Fassinger, 1994), ASI (Glick & Fiske, 1996), a gender stereotype measure, perceived similarity to the targets, and an open-ended question asking participants to describe the sexual assault vignettes in their own words (see preregistration for more detail on the exploratory hypotheses: https://osf.io/a2g8n/overview?view_only=b85072b40b3745c78e346791c1f141dd). A correlation table with all measures is available in the Supplemental Material.

Results

Those in the survivor-agency-bias condition ($M = 1.83$, $SD = 0.20$, $n = 356$) blamed the survivors (vs. perpetrators) significantly more than those in the perpetrator-agency-bias

condition ($M = 1.80$, $SD = 0.18$, $n = 364$), $b = 0.02$, 95% CI [0.003, 0.03], $SE = 0.01$, $t(716) = 2.32$, $p = .021$, $f = 0.09$, 90% CI [0.02, 0.15]. Interestingly, this main effect was not qualified by an interaction as it had been in Study 2, $b = -0.01$, 95% CI [-0.03, 0.001], $SE = 0.01$, $t(716) = -1.83$, $p = .069$, $f = 0.07$, 90% CI [0.00, 0.13]. A main effect of gender persisted, though, such that men ($M = 1.88$, $SD = 0.21$, $n = 178$) blamed the survivors (vs. perpetrators) significantly more than women ($M = 1.79$, $SD = 0.17$, $n = 542$), $b = -0.04$, 95% CI [-0.06, -0.03], $SE = 0.01$, $t(716) = -5.28$, $p < .001$, $f = 0.20$, 90% CI [0.14, 0.26].

Follow-up analyses separating perpetrator and survivor blame indices indicate that effects were again most pronounced on perpetrator blame, but with an interesting twist (see Figure 3). When isolating perpetrator blame, a main effect of sentence condition emerged ($b = -0.01$, 95% CI [-0.02, -0.001], $SE = 0.01$, $t(716) = -2.10$, $p = .037$, $f = 0.08$, 90% CI [0.01, 0.14]), but so did an interaction with participant gender ($b = 0.01$, 95% CI [0.001, 0.02], $SE = 0.01$, $t(716) = 2.24$, $p = .026$, $f = 0.08$, 90% CI [0.02, 0.15]). Men in the survivor-agency-bias condition ($M = 1.80$, $SD = 0.28$, $n = 88$) blamed the perpetrator less than men in the perpetrator-agency-bias condition ($M = 1.89$, $SD = 0.27$, $n = 90$), $b = -0.02$, 95% CI [-0.04, -0.005], $SE = 0.01$, $t(716) = -2.50$, $p = .013$, $f = 0.09$, 90% CI [0.03, 0.15]. Women did not, $b = 0.001$, 95% CI [-0.01, 0.01], $SE = 0.01$, $t(716) = 0.14$, $p = .888$, $f = 0.01$, 90% CI [0.00, 0.05]. By contrast, both women and men in the survivor-agency-bias condition ($M = 1.54$, $SD = 0.19$, $n = 356$) blamed survivors more than those in the perpetrator-agency-bias condition ($M = 1.52$, $SD = 0.18$, $n = 364$): $b = 0.02$, 95% CI [0.0004, 0.03], $SE = 0.01$, $t(716) = 1.97$, $p = .049$, $f = 0.07$, 90% CI [0.00, 0.14]. However, this effect should be interpreted cautiously, given its proximity to the significance threshold.¹⁴

Mind Perception Mediator. Using PROCESS (model 8; Hayes, 2022), we explored mind perception as a mechanism through which sentence condition influenced blame. Attributing more mind to the survivor (vs. perpetrator) strongly correlated with blaming the survivor (vs. perpetrator) more, $b = 0.21$, 95% CI [0.19, 0.22], $SE = 0.01$, $t(715) = 26.18$, $p < .001$, $f = 0.98$, 90% CI [0.90, 1.05]. However, sentence condition did not significantly influence perceived mind, $b = 0.01$, 95% CI [-0.04, 0.06], $SE = 0.03$, $t(716) = 0.42$, $p = .674$, $f = 0.02$, 90% CI [0.00, 0.07], nor did it interact with participant gender to do so, $b = -0.002$, 95% CI [-0.05, 0.05], $SE = 0.03$, $t(716) = -0.07$, $p = .943$, $f = 0.003$, 90% CI [0.00, 0.02]. Accordingly, there was no moderated indirect effect on blame through perceived mind, $\beta = -.001$, 95% CI [-0.02, 0.02].

Exploratory Moderators

Perceived Similarity. We explored the possibility that perceived similarity to the perpetrator and survivor explained men's and women's responses to linguistic-agency-bias.

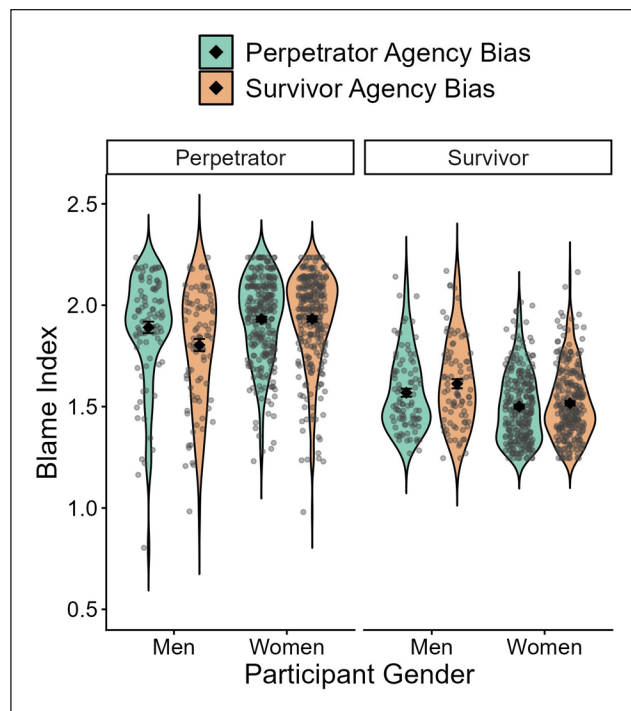


Figure 3. Standardized Perpetrator and Survivor Blame Indices graphed by sentence condition and participant gender. Men blamed perpetrators less in the survivor-agency-bias (vs. perpetrator-agency-bias) condition. Both women and men blamed survivors more in the survivor-agency-bias (vs. perpetrator-agency-bias) condition. Error bars reflect standard error.

Including both variables in the model yielded a four-way interaction of condition, gender, and similarity, $b = -0.01$, 95% CI $[-0.02, -0.0006]$, $SE = 0.005$, $t(704) = -2.10$, $p = .036$, $f = 0.08$, 90% CI $[0.01, 0.14]$. Men who felt most similar to the perpetrator, but least similar to the survivor were influenced by linguistic-agency-bias, $b = 0.03$, 95% CI $[0.003, 0.06]$, $SE = 0.01$, $t(704) = 2.15$, $p = 0.032$, $f = 0.08$, 90% CI $[0.02, 0.14]$. By contrast, men who felt least similar to the perpetrator and most similar to the survivor were *not* significantly influenced, $b = -0.07$, 95% CI $[-0.15, 0.004]$, $SE = 0.004$, $t(704) = -1.85$, $p = .065$, $f = 0.07$, 90% CI $[0.00, 0.13]$. Perhaps unsurprisingly, similarity to the perpetrator was quite low; 1 SD above the mean was 2.58 on the 9-point scale. This variation was nonetheless statistically meaningful, but should be interpreted with these raw values in mind. Similarity did not moderate any effects for women, $b = -0.004$, 95% CI $[-0.02, 0.01]$, $SE = 0.008$, $t(704) = -0.48$, $p = .635$, $f = 0.02$, 90% CI $[0.00, 0.08]$.

Gender Ideologies. As in Study 2, rape myth acceptance, hostile sexism, benevolent sexism, and feminist beliefs predicted blaming the survivor (vs. perpetrator) less (rape myths: $b = 0.14$, 95% CI $[0.13, 0.16]$, $SE = 0.008$, $t(712) = 18.38$, $p < .001$, $f = 0.69$, 90% CI $[0.62, 0.76]$; hostile sexism: $b = 0.09$, 95% CI $[0.08, 0.11]$, $SE = 0.008$, $t(712)$

$= 11.96$, $p < .001$, $f = 0.45$, 90% CI $[0.38, 0.51]$, benevolent sexism: $b = 0.04$, 95% CI $[0.02, 0.06]$, $SE = 0.01$, $t(712) = 3.76$, $p < .001$, $f = 0.14$, 90% CI $[0.08, 0.20]$, feminism: $b = -0.10$, 95% CI $[-0.11, -0.08]$, $SE = 0.009$, $t(712) = -10.06$, $p < .001$, $f = 0.38$, 90% CI $[0.31, 0.44]$). However, these gender role ideologies did not interact with condition (rape myths: $b = 0.005$, 95% CI $[-0.01, 0.02]$, $SE = 0.008$, $t(712) = 0.61$, $p = .539$, $f = 0.02$, 90% CI $[0.00, 0.08]$; hostile sexism: $b = 0.01$, 95% CI $[-0.004, 0.03]$, $SE = 0.008$, $t(712) = 1.49$, $p = .137$, $f = 0.06$, 90% CI $[0.00, 0.12]$, benevolent sexism: $b = 0.02$, 95% CI $[-0.001, 0.04]$, $SE = 0.01$, $t(712) = 1.86$, $p = 0.064$, $f = 0.07$, 90% CI $[0.00, 0.13]$, feminism: $b = -0.0003$, 95% CI $[-0.02, 0.02]$, $SE = 0.009$, $t(712) = -0.04$, $p = .971$, $f = 0.001$, 90% CI $[0.00, 0.00]$). The only interaction to emerge was a three-way interaction with benevolent sexism. In contrast to Study 2, linguistic-agency-bias influenced men with the *highest* benevolent sexism scores, $b = 0.06$, 95% CI $[0.02, 0.09]$, $SE = 0.02$, $t(712) = 3.34$, $p < .001$, $f = 0.13$, 90% CI $[0.06, 0.19]$.

Discussion

Study 3 replicated the effects of linguistic-agency-bias observed in Study 2. Blame shifted as a function of patterns of survivor vs. perpetrator agency bias. Although effects on the Survivor vs. Perpetrator Blame Index initially suggested that linguistic-agency-bias had a similar effect on women and men participants, follow-up analyses revealed the same moderation by participant gender that emerged in Study 2: men who read news sentences in which survivors were agentic blamed perpetrators less than men who read news sentences in which perpetrators were agentic. Study 3 also provided some preliminary evidence that women and men alike blame survivors more after reading a linguistic pattern of survivor-agency-bias than perpetrator-agency-bias. However, this effect awaits replication given its proximity to the significance threshold.

Gender Differences: What We Know and What Questions Remain. Effects were typically stronger for men than women, suggesting that existing beliefs and identities moderate how people respond to a cultural pattern of linguistic-agency-bias. For men, similarity moderated the effects of survivor-agency-bias akin to defensive attribution (Shaver, 1970). Survivor-agency-bias had its strongest effects on men who felt most similar to the perpetrator and most dissimilar from the survivor. Thus, when reading about sexual assault, men who feel even slightly similar to sexual assault perpetrators and dissimilar from survivors may protect themselves by looking for reasons to exonerate the perpetrators and blame the survivors, such as cultural patterns of survivor-agency-bias.

No moderators *overshadowed* gender in predicting an effect of linguistic-agency-bias. We had hypothesized that traditional gender ideologies could amplify effects predicted by dyadic morality theories and be better moderators of

linguistic-agency-bias than gender. That is, people who endorse more traditional views of gender may react especially negatively to sexual assault survivors (vs. perpetrators) once they have learned that sexual assault survivors tend to be agentic and thus threats to the traditional gender hierarchy (see Bareket & Fiske, 2023). Yet traditional gender ideologies did not moderate effects. Regardless of hostile sexism, feminism, and rape myth acceptance, agentic framing of sexual assault survivors led men to blame perpetrators less and both women and men to blame survivors more. The one caveat was benevolent sexism; in Study 3, men high in benevolent sexism were especially likely to show an effect of linguistic-agency-bias. However, this moderation was inconsistent between Studies 2 and 3. In Study 2, the opposite was true: men *low* in benevolent sexism were especially like to show an effect. Benevolent sexism has had inconsistent relationships to sexual assault beliefs and evaluations in past work, sometimes varying in the direction of its influence by the stereotypicality of the target or the gender of the perceiver (Abrams et al., 2003; Bareket & Fiske, 2023; Masser et al., 2010; Sibley & Wilson, 2004). Clarifying the role of benevolent sexism in responding to sexual assault broadly and linguistic agency specifically will be valuable to future theorizing, as will more work to understand why women and men respond differently to linguistic agency.

Future work should also directly test personal relevance as a boundary condition for the effects of linguistic agency. We had reasoned that the salience of the topic (sexual assault) would limit women's susceptibility to subtle, perhaps peripheral cues to blame. Indeed, women rated the news sentences as more negatively valenced than men (see Supplemental Material). We measured salience by testing perceived similarity to survivors described in the vignettes, which did not moderate women's responses to linguistic agency. However, perceived similarity can be causally influenced by blame, rather than acting as a moderator of it (Amacker & Littleton, 2013). Items that more directly assess personal relevance of sexual assault (e.g., fear of sexual assault victimization, behaviors performed to reduce risk) may reveal more about the mechanisms behind women's reactions to linguistic-agency-bias. Women who do not consider sexual assault as personally relevant may be more susceptible to subtle cultural patterns, and thus blame perpetrators less and survivors more after learning that survivors of sexual assault are agentic. We regard this possibility as speculative, as we do not have data to provide evidence for or against it. However, future work should further disentangle this and other explanations for gender differences.

Mediating Mechanism. Theories of dyadic morality point to mind perception as the mechanism through which agency influences blame (Gray et al., 2012). Perceivers believe that targets high in agency can act intentionally and control their behavior. By contrast, perceivers believe that targets low in agency can suffer and experience negative outcomes at the hands of another's actions; they do not control behavior, they experience it. To explore this as a mediating mechanism, we

included questions about how much control each survivor and perpetrator had over the situation described in the vignettes and how much trauma each party experienced. Although perceived mind significantly predicted blaming the survivor (vs. perpetrator), no indirect effect of condition on blame through mind perception emerged. We considered two reasons why the perceived mind mediation was not significant. First, our measure of perceived mind was somewhat limited. We asked about two things: perceived control over the situation and experienced trauma. Yet, mind perception touches on more dimensions than that. A more thorough measure could include questions about intentionality, forethought, experienced suffering, pain tolerance, sadness, and need for professional support/therapy. Because our measure of perceived mind was limited, measurement imprecision may have reduced our ability to detect an indirect effect, even if mind perception plays a role in the underlying process (Gonzalez & MacKinnon, 2021). Second, an unmeasured mediator may lie between condition and mind perception. Consistent with Gonzalez and MacKinnon (2021), the absence of a significant indirect effect may reflect model misspecification, such that additional unmeasured processes intervene between sentence condition and mind perception that we did not capture. The current work is distinct from much of the past work on moral typecasting. In past work, a person is typically described as high or low in agency, and then *that* individual is evaluated on dimensions such as punishment and responsibility. Here, we tested whether evaluations of sexual assault perpetrators and survivors *generally* are influenced by a pattern of survivor- (vs. perpetrator-) agency-bias. We were interested in whether a cultural pattern of survivors being described agentially generalized to how subsequently encountered sexual assault survivors and perpetrators were evaluated as a means of socializing norms about rape. Therefore, an important mediator between condition and mind perception for specific targets may be mind perception for sexual assault perpetrators and survivors generally. It will be important for future work to test these possibilities as they could reveal evidence of mechanism for how highly impactful norms, like judging perpetrators of sexual assault, are socialized.

Summary. Overall, these findings are consistent with the social influence literature demonstrating that cultural patterns subtly influence people's beliefs about groups (Weisbuch et al., 2017) and provide valuable lay and scientific understanding of the small, but important ways news coverage impacts perceptions of sexual assault. Supportive language (i.e., in the form of survivor-agency-bias) ultimately led men to blame perpetrators less, consistent with moral typecasting theory. As we would hope and expect, perpetrators were always blamed more than survivors, on average. Yet, patterns of linguistic agency in sentences led to significant *shifts* in blame, which could yield important consequences for how perpetrators are treated and sentenced, and even whether survivors think it is worthwhile to report assault.

General Discussion

Who is given agency matters. Conservative sources tended to write about perpetrators agentically, whereas liberal sources tended to write about survivors agentically, a difference owing in part to more survivor-type framing in liberal sources. We hypothesized that such framing could be beneficial for public perceptions of sexual assault survivors, consistent with framing effects. Yet supportive framing of survivors backfired, leading people to focus on survivors' actions *too much*. Consistent with moral typecasting theory, moral agency and patiency had an inverse relationship in the context of sexual assault: when survivors (vs. perpetrators) were described as agents in news story excerpts, subsequently encountered sexual assault perpetrators were blamed less (by men). Moral typecasting theory would predict that when survivors are portrayed more agentically, they would be considered more blameworthy and more resilient to pain (Schein & Gray, 2018). This resilience to pain makes the transgression seem less harmful, subtly decreasing perceptions of perpetrator culpability.

Together, these studies paint a picture of how social ecologies reinforce victim blame, or more accurately perpetrator exoneration, through subtle linguistic cues. Study 1 took an extensive look at how sexual assault is talked about in popular news. Studies 2 and 3 then each contributed a unique lens to understanding how linguistic cues shape support for survivors and perpetrators. The former emphasized ecological validity, testing how readers' perceptions change when reading sentences taken directly from news sources. The latter emphasized experimental control, testing how readers' perceptions change when reading sentences carefully constructed to be similar on key features like sentence length and scenario content. Combined, they are consistent with the theory that culturally prevalent features of writing reinforce that sexual assault survivors are somewhat responsible for sexual assault, and their perpetrators are less blameworthy. Such subtle shifts in blame could affect broader decisions made by survivors, perpetrators, juries, peers, and the media. For example, perceiving perpetrators as more blameworthy could shape how survivors are treated (e.g., whether their actions are the focus of media speculation), whether survivors are even willing to report assault, and how severely assault is punished (e.g., how long of a prison sentence judges deem acceptable).

Theoretical Implications

This work extends scientific knowledge on morality. First, moral agency and patiency can be manipulated via repeated subtle linguistic cues, in this case, patterns of who is doing or receiving the action. In past work, agency and patiency have been manipulated with a single statement, making it clear whether the target is an agent or patient (e.g., moral agent: "George gives \$100 of it away to a local charity" vs. moral

patient: "George's supervisor steals \$100 of it"; Gray & Wegner, 2011). Second, moral agency can be generalized to a group (e.g., sexual assault perpetrators). Moral typecasting posits that identifying someone as a moral agent in one situation will lead to viewing them as a moral agent in another situation (Gray & Wegner, 2009). Here, the results take this one step further. Participants generalized from specific instances about women survivors and men perpetrators of sexual assault to *other* women survivors and men perpetrators of sexual assault. Effects were small and, interestingly, specific to sexual assault. Judgments of responsibility did not generalize to women survivors and men perpetrators of another crime (i.e., theft; see Supplemental Material for results). This suggests that people are generalizing agency to survivors or perpetrators of sexual assault, not women or men generally. Fourth, these findings highlight how testing moral typecasting in the context of emotionally laden, real-world events can introduce otherwise invisible moderators to moral judgment. In the context of sexual assault evaluations, this work shows that survivor-agency-bias shapes men's evaluations, consistent with defensive attribution processes, but does not impact women, regardless of gender ideology. Future research should examine personal relevance more directly (e.g., fear of sexual assault victimization, prior victimization) as potential boundary conditions that render women immune to cultural patterns of linguistic framing in evaluating sexual assault.

Outcome Considerations

The present studies point to the value of highlighting perpetrators' actions more than survivors' actions in the context of sexual assault. Survivor-agency-bias has direct and measurable outcomes, leading perpetrators to be evaluated more positively and, to some extent, survivors more negatively than perpetrator-agency-bias. Although these data would prescribe writing about sexual assault by focusing on men's actions and agency, we hesitate to strongly prescribe a certain linguistic agency style, as questions remain about how other important outcomes could change in response to survivor-agency-bias (vs. perpetrator-agency-bias). For example, perpetrator-agency-bias may heighten women's fear of assault or negatively impact survivors' mental health relative to survivor-agency-bias. These outcomes warrant further study and highlight the importance of being intentional in interpreting the results.

Second, survivor- or perpetrator-agency-bias may impact evaluations more strongly if sexual assault cases replicate the linguistic pattern people saw. For example, someone in the survivor-agency-bias condition may blame survivors more if subsequently encountered survivors are described as agentic. In other words, the effect of survivor-agency-bias (vs. perpetrator-agency-bias) may be weaker for survivors who are described as passive. Indeed, past work has shown that women evaluated sexual assault survivors differently as a function of

both the survivors' behavior (i.e., whether they fought back) and their own beliefs (i.e., whether they held more traditional or feminist beliefs; Ryckman et al., 1992). In the current work, participants in both conditions read and evaluated the same vignettes, which were intended to be neutral descriptions of the events. However, those two vignettes naturally varied in how agentically each party was described. Because vignettes were written in a way to describe actions taken during and immediately following the assault, both survivors and perpetrators were described as agents often and with similar frequency. For example, the perpetrator in one vignette was described as a linguistic agent 10 times, whereas the survivor was described as a linguistic agent 19 times. In the second vignette, the perpetrator was described as a linguistic agent 21 times, and the survivor was described as a linguistic agent 17 times. Linguistic-agency-bias scores for each vignette revealed a slight survivor-agency-bias (9) in the first vignette and a slight perpetrator-agency-bias in the second vignette (-8). Thus, we analyzed the vignettes separately to see if the linguistic-agency-bias condition consistently influenced one vignette more than another. The vignettes varied in other potentially meaningful ways, but we treat this as a preliminary test. However, no consistent patterns emerged across the two experimental studies, suggesting that the way vignettes were written did not interact with condition effects. Nonetheless, how subsequently encountered survivors and perpetrators are described should be considered as a potential moderator for future work; manipulating the agency of survivors and perpetrators in the outcome variable may reveal additional boundary conditions for linguistic-agency-bias effects.

Third, the current studies relied on measuring the proposed mediator (i.e., mind perception). Although this variable represents a theoretically plausible mechanism linking sentence condition to blame, such measurement-of-mediation designs are limited in their ability to establish causality (Pirlott & MacKinnon, 2016). When mediators are not experimentally manipulated, effects may be attributable to unmeasured confounding variables, and the causal pathway from mediator to outcome cannot be definitively established. Future research should therefore incorporate experimental approaches that directly manipulate the proposed mediators (i.e., manipulation-of-mediator designs). For example, a double randomization design would involve first manipulating sentence condition and then independently manipulating perceived mind (e.g., by explicitly indicating experienced suffering and felt control for each party). Such manipulation-of-mediator designs would provide stronger tests of the causal processes underlying these effects than designs that rely solely on measured mediators.

Fourth, the measurement of the primary outcome (i.e., Blame Index) also warrants consideration. Factor analytic results indicated that the blame measure primarily reflects a single predominant dimension of survivor-directed blame, consistent across both EFA and PCA. However, these results also indicated that there was relatively modest variance, and

some items, particularly those assessing survivor punishment, showed weaker performance given their limited response range (see Supplemental Material). We suggest that future work would benefit from improving the scale to capture blame more precisely.

Generalizability

While the goal of this work was theory testing (Klein & Sherman, 2024), it is worth considering how stimuli and sample characteristics could intersect with linguistic-agency-bias. Participants were college students who made ratings about the sexual assault experiences of other college students, prompting the question of whether sample characteristics could moderate effects. Beliefs about women being blameworthy for sexual assault are prominent across cultures (Xue et al., 2019), and thus, we would expect these results to apply across sample characteristics. In support of this hypothesis, controlling for age and race (coded as person of color vs. White) did not eliminate any key effects in Study 2 or 3. Nonetheless, moderators may emerge regarding sample or stimulus characteristics. Since our goal was to lay the groundwork for understanding agency and blame in one instantiation of sexual assault (e.g., men assaulting women), we did not specify the racial identity, relationship status, transgender status, or other characteristics that could have influenced culpability. These factors could interact with linguistic-agency-bias's effects. For example, Black women are stereotypically considered more masculine and agentic than White or Asian women (Johnson et al., 2012; Rosette et al., 2016). Survivor-agency-bias may thus yield an even larger penalty for Black women. Other characteristics could amplify or diminish effects similarly.

Conclusion


The present work establishes that framing survivors of sexual assault more supportively has unintended consequences consistent with moral typecasting theory: men blame perpetrators less. While not exclusive to liberal sources, survivor-agency-bias is more common in these sources, owing in part to the use of survivor-type language. Future research should explore a broader range of outcomes, including those that assess potential benefits of survivor-agency-bias, and examine how linguistic-agency-bias interacts with social identities and influences perceived mind to more fully understand mechanisms, moderators, and impacts of linguistic agency.

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Ethical Considerations

The studies reported in this manuscript were approved by the Institutional Review Board Research Ethics Committee (approval number IRB-21-06531-XM) on July 28, 2021.

Consent to Participate

An informed consent statement was provided to participants in the survey. Participants indicated they read the form and by continuing they were agreeing to be in the study. Participants did not provide written documentation of consent. Their willingness to respond to the survey constituted documentation of their consent. This procedure was approved by the Institutional Review Board.

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Declaration of Conflicting Interests

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Data Availability Statement

All data, analysis code, and research materials are available on OSF: <https://osf.io/kg4nx/overview>

Supplemental Material

Supplemental material is available online with this article.

Notes

1. We did not broaden to other forms of sexual assault in the current work because sexual assault is inherently tied to sociocultural beliefs about gender. Thus, the effects observed for instances of men assaulting women may look similar to or different from other instantiations of assault. For example, beliefs about gay or lesbian survivors may be biased by heterosexism, beliefs about men survivors may be biased by masculinity norms (E. A. Bates et al., 2019), and beliefs about transgender and non-binary survivors may be biased by transphobia (Thomas et al., 2016; Wakelin & Long, 2003). Thus, we lay the groundwork for understanding how agency and culpability are attributed to survivors and perpetrators by focusing on instances involving perpetrators who identify as men and survivors who identify as women.
2. Sources: Huffington Post and New York Times (Left), CNN and The Guardian (Center Left), NPR and Reuters (Center), Fox News and Washington Times (Center Right), and Daily Mail and Washington Examiner (Right).
3. If a relevant article for a given week could not be found, we found articles that could be used to supplement that week up to a month in either direction of that week.
4. We also coded the author bylines. These articles were written by 345 unique authors or author pairs, though author bylines were not provided for 50 of the articles.
5. Upon further inspection of the sentences, we determined that a small subset of sentences had to be excluded for the following reasons: the sentence was a title that did not refer to the perpetrator or survivor ($n = 32$), the sentence was chosen in

error as it did not address the targets that the article was about ($n = 8$), or there was an error in transcribing the sentence ($n = 1$).

6. While this transformation limited the range of bias scores, we opted for this approach for two reasons: (a) we felt that this categorical coding better captured the most important factor that readers would glean from reading the sentences (i.e., not how many specific times a person performed a verb, but instead who tended to perform more of the verbs) and (b) there were outliers in either direction that could have had undue influence on the results ($M = -0.12$, $SD = 1.82$, $\min = -8$, $\max = 6$).
7. The effect of source lean on linguistic-agency-bias remained significant even if a random intercept of author was included in the model, $b = -0.05$, 95% CI $[-0.09, -0.02]$, $SE = 0.02$, $t(301.91) = -3.13$, $p = .002$.
8. IRR are the recommended effect size for Poisson multilevel regression (Austin et al., 2018; Cameron & Trivedi, 2014) and are interpreted relative to a null value of 1.
9. Note that participants could select multiple sexual orientations and thus totals may equal more than 100%.
10. Using a 3 SD cutoff, there were three outliers in the sample above the upper bound. Winsorizing these three values does not significantly change any statistical outcomes.
11. These means are very similar despite the significant difference because these are raw means, which do not account for the number of women and men in the sample.
12. Cohen's f values start at 0 and can only be positive. Unlike Cohen's d , for example, they cannot indicate directionality. Thus, 90% confidence intervals for f are equivalent to 95% confidence intervals for effect sizes that can be either positive or negative (see Lakens, 2014).
13. We also measured gender stereotypes of agency using items we created. However, this measure did not differ by participant gender, did not predict blame, and did not interact with condition (see Supplemental material). Thus, we report exploratory analyses on the established measures.
14. Perhaps unsurprisingly, the two survivor punishment items had little variance, with almost all participants responding 1 *no punishment*. This rendered all responses other than "1" statistical outliers (>3 SDs). For parsimony, we retained these items in the Blame Indices reported throughout the manuscript. However, we also ran all analyses without these two items. All analyses remained the same in terms of statistical significance except for Survivor Blame in Study 3, which became non-significant: $b = 0.02$, 95% CI $[-0.0001, 0.04]$, $SE = 0.01$, $t(716) = 1.95$, $p = 0.052$, $f = 0.07$, 90% CI $[0.00, 0.13]$.

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Appendix

Sexual Assault Vignettes

Rob and Amy are college sophomores who began dating after meeting at a party. Things were going so well that Amy began to tell her friends that she was falling in love with Rob. Amy had never had sex, while Rob had had sex with two previous girlfriends. Amy said that she was willing to engage in sexual activities with Rob that did not involve intercourse. Rob continued to ask her to have intercourse with him despite this, and Amy always replied that she did not feel ready. One night after they had dated for 6 weeks, Rob told Amy that unless she had sex with him that night, he was no longer interested in dating her. Amy began to cry and was clearly very upset, but then she agreed. They went ahead and had (protected) intercourse. Amy was very upset and confided in her RA who encouraged her to bring the case before the Student Conduct Board.

Ethan and Lisa are college seniors who met at a party thrown by a mutual friend. They spent most of the party talking and dancing with each other, and when the evening was over, they made plans to get together for a few drinks on Friday. Ethan came by Lisa's house and they walked to a nearby bar. The bar was fairly crowded when they arrived, but they managed to find a booth toward the back. Initially, they both seemed a little uneasy and made a lot of small talk about the weather and the day's happenings. When the waitress came, Ethan and Lisa both ordered drinks. As the evening progressed, they both became more talkative, freely expressing their views on movies, books, school, politics, and any other topic that came up between them. Their conversation flowed easily, and they both seemed to enjoy each other's company. After Lisa and Ethan had a few drinks, Ethan walked Lisa home and went inside her apartment. Later, they started to fool around. After kissing for some time, Ethan attempted to escalate the sexual activity. Suddenly, Lisa said she was tired and did not want to fool around anymore. Ethan continued to escalate the sexual activity, and Lisa put up almost no resistance. He undressed her and had sex with her. Lisa called the campus police after he left, and the campus police notified the Student Conduct Board.