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The Linguistics of Sexual Assault:

How the Dissonance of Individuals' Perpetrator Expectations and The
Ordering of Information Effects Perceptions of Sexual Assault

By

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An Honors Thesis Submitted in Partial Fulfillment of the
Requirements for Graduation from the
Western Oregon University Honors Program

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June 2020

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

This thesis could not have been done without the endless advice, support, and revisions from my thesis advisor, Dr. Deborah Brannan. Additional thanks extend to the support received from Saskia Layden for revisions and Dr. Gavin Keulks.

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Abstract

This study was an investigation into the framing of sexual assault cases and how media may sway the opinions of the public through their choice use of language to describe the case. Most commonly we see stories present victims' irresponsibility along with characteristics of the perpetrator that are inconsistent with societal stereotypes of assaulters. This may influence the public's perceptions of justice and accuracy of the statements made about the crime. The researcher hypothesized that by using paradoxical language around the assaulter and ordering information so victim's irresponsibility is presented first, there would be lower perceived perpetrator responsibility responses. Participants for this study included seventy undergraduate students at a mid-sized university in the pacific northwest. In Condition A, participants read an article where victims irresponsibility was presented first and included paradoxical language surrounding the perpetrator. In Condition B, the case was presented so that victim testimony and evidence was presented first and lacked any language about the perpetrator's life outside of the reported assault. After reading one of these framings of the same assault, participants took a short survey designed on a Likert scale to examine perceived perpetrator and victim responsibility along with perceived accuracy and justice of the case. Two of the presented fifteen questions yielded statistical significance.

The Linguistics of Sexual Assault:
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Sexual assault has become a dominant issue in our society as we discuss prominent cases which have been highlighted by the United States media outlets. In 2014, male-to-female sexual aggression reports claimed that every year approximately 1.3 million women will experience sexual assault (Davis, George, Hall, Parrott, Tharp, & Stappenbeck, 2014). Additionally, within studies of female college students, approximately 15-20% of women have experienced a rape or attempted rape (Brenner, McMahon, Warren, & Douglas, 1999). This is a prominent social issue that has gained attention alongside the recent momentum of various worldwide women's empowerment movements.

With the increasing media attention towards sexual assault cases, from the 'Me Too' movement and sexual assault allegations made against famous celebrities and political leaders such as President Donald Trump (Relman, 2020) and Bill Clinton (Relman, 2018) and Supreme Court member Brett Kavanaugh (Cranley & Mark, 2018), it is of urgent importance to understand how language impacts our perception of these cases. When learning about cases of sexual assault, many of us rely on popular media outlets, granting these sources a great deal of power in the relay of information. Often perceptions of the victims and perpetrators in any given case are largely shaped by the presentation and dissemination of information by popular media outlets. Media framing however is known to impact not only the public's perception of a single case, but also

cases that come after it. If multiple cases are framed in such a way to doubt the victim, this may set a precedent and make it more difficult for future cases to reach legal proceedings (Waterhouse-Watson, 2016). Even small changes in language used by reporters may have a large impact on perceptions and it is essential that the language used to describe cases of sexual assault is carefully considered (Wilkinson, 2008).

There is also a trend in media portrayals of sexual assault as cases are often presented in such ways that suggest the events are isolated incidents rather than a larger global issue (Jewkes, 2002). By presenting cases of sexual assault as isolated events, it is much easier to place the blame on a single individual rather than noticing the injustices or issues with the larger system (Jewkes, 2002). Recognition of this trend is crucial as it has the power to shift perspectives of where issues lie and may impact how individuals react and respond to the crime. Simple shifts in language by the media including referring to the victim as the 'alleged victim' or referring to the crime as an 'allegation' may undermine the victim's report and credibility within the situation (Easteal, Holland, & Judd, 2015).

In discussing complex legal allegations, language often manipulates how individuals perceive the situation and directs attention to the victim of a crime rather than the perpetrator. The implicit biases integrated into language influence how observers respond to the situation and can allow for the dismissal of particular crimes (Wilkinson, 2008). When it comes to cases of sexual assault, choice use of language in the courts may mitigate perpetrator responsibility while increasing victim irresponsibility to lead to the dismissal of these crimes or lighter sentences. Despite the research that has been

conducted on the court systems however, there seems to be little research within how these cases are presented to the public through media outlets.

Language is an integral part of communications and small changes in vocabulary may frame information in a specific light, possibly skewing ideas about the subject. Specifically for sexual assault, research has found that there is great discrepancy as to how individuals refer to the term ‘unwanted sex,’ despite the fact that this term is used as synonymous to the term ‘rape’ (Hamby & Koss, 2003). Following further investigation regarding the perceptions of language around sexual assault, the use of the term ‘unwanted sex’ made individuals less likely to believe a crime should be reported and even mitigated the actions of rape (Wilkinson, 2008). Their study demonstrated one way in which a small shift in language may be used to impact how we view a case of sexual assault and, to some degree, excuse the actions of the perpetrator. Given the popularity of the term ‘unwanted sex,’ it has the potential to replace the term ‘rape’ in popular media and could make all cases presented in the future more questionable as it sets the tone for future perceptions.

Currently, there exists no legal terminology to properly describe the perpetrator of a crime as anything more than a stranger to the victim, despite the fact that the majority of rapes are by acquaintances rather than strangers (Gidyez, McNamara, & Edwards, 2006). On the rare occasion that these cases do reach popular media sources, it is extremely problematic that the appropriate language is already lacking from a legal standpoint. There are then expected complications with messages surrounding sexual assaults when the media is lacking the proper terminology from the original court case

proceedings. In court cases, researchers found varying levels of the following aspects in sexual assault reports: erotic characterization of the assault, the distinction between sexual assault and violence, the character of the assaulter, resistance, and the avoidance of taking responsibility for the assault (Coates, Bavelas, & Gibson, 1994). These themes specifically were known to mitigate perpetrator responsibility where the character of the assaulter was taken into account to mitigate their actions as an abnormal behavior, or avoiding responsibility by using non-agency grammar which removes the perpetrator as an active and involved agent of the crime.

Given the complexities of writing a news article lacking any framing, it seems crucial to understand how the different common frames of sexual assault cases may impact perceptions. Moving forward, we will examine the different lenses common in sexual assault cases including: social expectations for perpetrators, perpetrator testimony and framing, and victim irresponsibility. Based on how these are phrased, we will further look into perceived accuracy of statements and perceived justice for these reports from the public's point of view.

Societal Expectations for Perpetrators

One of the most well-known theories is the 'myth of evil' which suggests that we have specific ideas as to what evil crime-doers look like and have a particular mold that distinguishes this 'evil' (Cole, 2006). Moreover, when people are presented with cases where the crime does not fit the pre-made mold that has been accepted, cognitive dissonance is the result. This can create inconsistencies between the reality and

expectations that we have for perpetrators, making us question whether or not they have committed the crime since they fail to display the prerequisites that is expected.

In this, individuals often tend to focus on many cases in the media when they meet the typical stereotypes for the ideal victim and perpetrator. Male assaulters that are considered most commonly are those who are poor, psychotic, uneducated, or immigrants so that female victims may be seen as vulnerable and powerless to the perpetrators actions (Custers & Van den Bulck, 2013). Further naming of the perpetrator and victim may also show changes in how they are perceived and reports published that were less sympathetic to the victim often named the perpetrator while adding excuses for his actions (Alat, 2006 & Clark, 1992). Should the assaulter not fit into the favorable mold, this defense for his behavior is common in media articles. We also see an increase in victim blaming when the woman is considered deviant to the culture--women who do not conform to the cultural gender roles (Jekwes, 2004).

Additionally, certain variables may move the blame onto the woman if she is not acting in ways that align with societal expectations. Should the victim behave in ways that do not align with our generalized expectations--predetermined molds for victim behavior---this may further increase doubt regarding victim credibility. For example, men view women in a more sexualized manner than women do and women who drink alcohol are commonly considered sexually promiscuous (Abbey & Harnish, 1995). This leads to an increase in perceived victim irresponsibility for men observing sexual assault cases and adds more doubt to women's credibility when the woman has been drinking.

The environment and state that both the victim and perpetrator are in at the time of the crime may further impact perceptions of the crime. In one study, researchers found

that college students who read about a date rape judged the perpetrator more harshly when the woman was drinking alone instead of with her friends (Norris & Cubbins, 1992). While these are seemingly small details, how these are emphasized and presented in a case might shift blame to the victim.

All this considered, individual changes in how people perceive a case based on rape-supportive attitudes that we may hold. Biased attitudes towards rapes fall into a few characteristics: blaming the victim, minimizing the psychological impact, and justifying the perpetrator (Frese, Moya, & Megias, 2004). These biases have been suggested to have an impact on the way information regarding rape is perceived (Johnson & Russ, 1989). This suggests that the case will be perceived differently depending on the level of rape-supportive attitudes an individual may already have and thus before even reading an article, the reader may have opinions regarding victim reliability and perpetrator blame.

Perpetrator Testimony & Framing

The framing of a case is crucial and there are a few variables which have been fairly consistent regarding the legal rhetoric that surrounds sexual assault cases. Researcher Elrich (2001) noted that judges have often used agentless grammatical construction to dismiss sexual assault crimes. For example, in a report it may be filed that ‘the offenses involved touching,’ which fails to connect the offender to the action. Judges may alternatively use terms such as ‘they occurred’ or ‘it happened’ which is extremely vague and fails to fully report the sexual crime that had occurred. This also separates the perpetrator from the crime while putting the victim and the perpetrator in one category, an idea of unity instead of distinguishing the criminal actions of the perpetrator.

Reports of this in legal cases were known to downplay and mitigate perpetrator responsibility (Coates & Wade, 2004). Furthermore, perpetrators seem to follow a pattern in using language to defend, excuse, or rationalize their actions in ways to deem their responses to be justified or reasonable (Lord, Davis, & Mason, 2008). One way in which this could be achieved was through substituting “I” for “we” or “you,” taking the focus off of the perpetrator (Lord et. al, 2008). In this approach, the focus of the assault is moved from the perpetrator to something or someone else.

Other than courtrooms and police reports, there has also been evidence to how perpetrators may use non-agency grammar to mitigate their own actions of assault. Lord and colleagues (2008) focused on how stance-shifting may be used when discussing a crime to take responsibility away from the perpetrator. The researchers reviewed previous studies relating to this topic indicating that when information of a crime is directly related to an offender, it is likely to be more accurate.

Previous research also indicated how particular themes arise in discussion of a crime: dominance or entitlement and the use of erotic or violent language (Adams, Towns, & Gavey, 1995). These themes were known to alter perceptions on violence towards women. The researchers used stance-shift analysis, an empirical technique to measure the word usage patterns. Stance-shifting language suggests a repositioning of the frame of an interaction and a projection of criminal responsibility away from the perpetrator. The findings indicated that perpetrators claimed there were unspoken words or agreements, and they often dissociated themselves with the crime to deflect blame (Adams, Towns, & Gavey, 1995). By removing the perpetrator from the language of the crime, perpetrators mitigated their own responsibility and actions within the crime. This

indicates that shifting the focus away from the perpetrator may in fact reduce perpetrator responsibility (Adams, Towns, & Gavey, 1995).

Other such studies on the language used in sexual assault allegations include Ehrlich's (2001) detailed case study on discursive strategies used in courtroom talk. Findings from this study indicated that the accused in sexual assault crimes used non-agency phrases such as 'our pants were unbuttoned' were used. Through using non-agency grammar the action of the perpetrator removing the victims pants becomes unclear as the perpetrator is not associated with the unwanted action (Ehrlich, 2001). This is a clear use of using non-agency language to separate the perpetrator from the action which is unfortunately commonly used in courtroom allegations of sexual assault that appears to mitigate perpetrator responsibility when on trial.

Victim Irresponsibility

Sexual assault allegations are known to be rarely filed with reports often abandoned early on in the reporting process. Many reports are rejected at the stage of case filing before the cases are studied in depth. This is often because the victims claims are discredited by investigators who question their reliability and it is decided no further research is needed for the case (Frohmann, 1991). In examining police reports, researcher Frohmann (1991) found that prosecutors may look for discrepant accounts or ulterior motives, using official records, criminal connections, and typifications of rape-relevant behavior to discredit victim allegations. This suggests a level of bias based on the organizational context of report filing so that prosecutors will actively look for issues in a victim's version of a sexual assault claim to dismiss such cases. This may lead to having

judges hurry along or dismiss sexual assault allegations early to avoid long processes involved in sexual assault claims so other cases may be addressed.

By focusing on the victims actions and behaviors, prosecutors put less emphasis on the perpetrator of a crime and focus instead on the credibility of the victim. Findings suggested that when a case of sexual assault is discussed without including language pertaining to the perpetrator's distinct actions and role in the situation, the crime may be taken less seriously. This idea is further discussed in a study on victim responsibility where Lea (2007) found that the victim's clothing, attractiveness, previous sexual history, and level of intoxication were considered in reviewing cases of sexual assault and perpetrator responsibility. Lea's study further emphasizes that variables outside of the perpetrators actions such as the victims actions or the situation may influence and mitigate perpetrator responsibility.

As for the public, Burt (1980) found that over 50% of a random sample of adults endorsed rape-supportive attitudes. These can include common misconceptions which shift blame onto the victim for her behavior rather than onto the perpetrator. These beliefs may also show misperceptions of sexual intent and may skew ideas of whether the sexual encounter was consensual or not (Abbey & Harnish, 1995). While this is not an attitude that is found in every individual, those who have rape-supportive attitudes may be more influenced over the behaviors of the victim than the perpetrator.

Other variables present in considering the victim irresponsible or unreliable include whether or not the victim suffers from a mental illness or has consumed alcohol around the time of the encounter. Despite the fact that having a mental illness may give further reasoning to describe the victim as vulnerable, this often has the opposite effect

and can influence perceptions as to how reliable the victims testimony is (Waterhouse-Watson, 2016). A woman's drinking may also be considered synonymous with her sexual promiscuity and by having consumed alcohol, individuals reading encounters between men and women may see the woman as being more interested in sexual activities with the man (Abbey & Harnish, 1995). However, by focusing on the woman's consumption of alcohol, it may present female drinking as the issue and push the blame onto the victim while minimizing the impact of the rape (Meyer, 2010).

Perceived Accuracy & Justice

When people search for news regarding the state of our world, many rely on the internet as a source for information. One of the more prominent issues people have faced however is the spread of misinformation, as seen most prominently with the 2016 election (Pennycook, Cannon & Rand, 2018). How information is perceived as reliable is essential in determining the validity of a situation and making an informed opinion, however we have limitations in understanding our surroundings.

While we are able to note changes in perceptions by small language changes such as referring to rape as unwanted sex, there is little information to how the writing of articles shapes our perceptions. With so many variables it is hard to fully understand the scope and impact of which language has on us. However, initial reports are essential in our understanding as once we read information presented in one place, we are more likely to believe later stories and their framing if they match the first articles we read (Pennycook, et al., 2020). Often though, the first articles are published towards the beginning of the proceedings and may not include all of the information of a case.

Reporters will also often attempt to fairly present the story which means equal time for both sides, even if the evidence is not equal to support the presented claims (Easteal, Holland, & Judd, 2014).

Given our perceptions of these cases, attitudes may change as to what would be considered an appropriate action moving forward. This may include attitudes that the perpetrator should serve less or more time and may either create public outrage against the actions of the perpetrator against the victim for claiming false accusations.

Present Study

Sexual assaults are rarely reported and therefore rarely attract media attention. When they do, we see what is known as the 'New York Times' effect. This is where well known media platforms will pick up a case from local news sources and then spread any known information. Influenced by this initial framing by a well-known national media source, other news sources will then report on a case and reiterate this initial framing (Pennington & Birthisel, 2016). Understanding how this initial framing sways opinions is therefore essential, along with an understanding of the overall issue.

While research has been conducted to observe how language of sexual assault has been handled in courts or legal cases (Coates, et al., 1994) and how perpetrators obscure perceptions of their crime (Coates & Wade, 2004), no studies have been conducted to observe how the general public may be influenced by the framing, ordering, and descriptions of both the victim and the perpetrator in regards to cases of sexual assault. Language of violence against women in general has been seen to use such techniques to distance acts of violence or assault from the broader issues of sexual assault and work to

reinforce gender roles in culture (Eastel, et al., 2014). When an ideal, “socially acceptable” victim and perpetrator are presented, the crime seems to be judged more harshly by the media. In contrast, we may see the blame shift to the victim when the individuals or situation is deviant from what is expected.

Using non-agency grammar and separating the perpetrator from the actions of the crime has been seen to be commonly used in all stages of a report of sexual assault--from the initial report, to the courtroom, to media coverage. This combined with talk of victim irresponsibility and how the testimony of the perpetrator is weighed, people may see differences in how a sexual assault case is perceived and individuals’ opinions on the justice associated with the outcome. Individuals may also consider where this information is coming from as this alters perceived accuracy. It is essential to have reliable resources reporting on the crime with the lens and understanding that framing has a large impact on how people may perceive a situation.

While perpetrators may be judged more harshly when they fit the ‘ideal’ stereotypes including those who are poor, psychotic, uneducated, or immigrants, sexual assault reports show a sharp contrast when the individual does not fit this mold. While many of these cases might not make it to the media, those that do are often successful male athletes, celebrities, or people in positions of power. These cases are crucial as they often rely on vindicating the perpetrator through claiming these accusations are false; this was a one-time only offense, or this is in part due to the male’s testosterone, something uncontrollable. Despite overwhelming evidence or having an ‘ideal’ victim, the media is able to influence our understanding of the situation and where the blame lies.

Additionally, as more emphasis is placed on the perpetrator, there is very little language around the victim which sows seeds of doubt into the story. By talking little of the victim outside of their actions leading up to the assault while discussing the perpetrator in great detail, we may shift the blame easily onto the victim. This may be further emphasized when the personality characteristics of the perpetrator doesn't seem to match up with the victim's report. Reporters may also order the information in a way so that either the victim or perpetrator's story is presented first. The ordering of information may also have an impact on how the story is perceived. Despite knowing that how we order and frame information changes people's perceptions, we have very little information as to how this may be effective in swaying opinions of sexual assault cases presented in the media.

In addressing these common linguistic styles, the researcher wishes to examine how individuals perceive an assault and the weight of the responsibility that falls on the victim and perpetrator. By reading an article in which either the perpetrator is spoken of first and his accomplishments unrelated to the actual assault are highlighted, or where the victims account is heard first with the removal of any information irrelevant to the situation at hand, the researcher hypothesizes that there will be a notable change in blame for the situation. Further, the researcher hypothesizes that by speaking of the perpetrator in ways which do not align with societal expectations for sexual predators and ordering the information so the victims irresponsibility and perpetrators testimony comes first, this will lead to lower perceived perpetrator responsibility.

Method

Procedure

Participants were students at Western Oregon University enrolled in a psychology course. Students found and took the course through the university's online SONA system. Participants were compensated through SONA credit which may be used in their psychology courses at Western Oregon University for extra credit. The survey included one of two randomized articles describing a case of sexual assault that had been taken and edited from an article posted by the Washington Post regarding the case of Brock Turner. Once reading a version of the article, all students took the same survey regarding their perceptions of the case.

This study was approved by the IRB board. Then, students were to take the study which was published on Qualtrics. Once students opened the study, they received a form which highlighted what the experiment was and what benefits and risks were involved with the study. Before continuing, all students consented to taking the survey and were informed that they could stop at any point as their participation was voluntary. Participants were randomly assigned to either article one or two through the Qualtrics program which they were asked to read before proceeding. Once they had read the article, all participants received the same survey (see Appendix C) which was a series of 15 questions arranged on a Likert scale regarding their perceptions of perpetrator responsibility, victim irresponsibility, and perceived accuracy and justice of the case reported on. Finally, participants were given a debriefing form with resources for future contact, a review of the study, and thanks for their participation. There was no further contact with participants.

Participants

Seventy participants partook in this study online through finding it on SONA. All seventy consented to take the study after being informed of the sensitive material the study covered. 82% of the participants identified as female, 14% identified as male, and 1.4% identified as either transgender male or gender nonconforming. The mean age of participants was $M=22.11$ ($SD=5.25$). Participants included 81.4% of those identifying as white, 20% identifying as Latinx, 8.5% identifying as Asian, 5.7% as black or African American, and 1.4% identifying as either Middle Eastern, Native Hawaiian, or other.

Materials

The Articles. The researcher used two articles to address three common themes of sexual assault reports for a perceived abnormal perpetrator. Both articles were based off of an article by the Washington Post in 2016 regarding the case of Brock Turner (Miller, 2016). In this case, the reporter uses language of the assaulter being an ‘all-star athlete’ with a clean record, they fail to name the victim while presenting her irresponsibility in drinking, and Brock Turner’s testimony is presented first before evidence or other claims. These methods have been highlighted above to mitigate perpetrator responsibility for a crime. To mitigate preconceived perceptions of the case, the names were changed along with the sport the perpetrator had been playing.

Within the first version of the article (see Appendix A) much of the original language and ordering which was used in the original article was presented. This was altered however in the second article in which perpetrator testimony was moved to the end of the article (see Appendix B). Additionally, the victim was given a name and the

evidence of the case was presented first. The researcher also removed any information regarding the perpetrators life outside of the particular crime so the article focused on the crime itself.

Measures

Perpetrator Responsibility. To test for perpetrator perceptions, two questions regarded common attitudes of perceived perpetrator responsibility. As the perpetrator was described in such a way that didn't align with societal norms for perpetrators, the questions regarded if fault lay on the perpetrator and if outside information should influence his sentencing time. These statements were designed on a seven-point Likert scale from 1 (*strongly disagree*) to 7 (*strongly agree*).

Victim Irresponsibility. In testing for victim responsibility, the question of if consent was given, the victims responsibility in the actions, and how she could have acted differently were addressed. These questions were also designed on a seven-point Likert scale from 1 (*strongly disagree*) to 7 (*strongly agree*).

Perceived Accuracy & Justice. To test for perceptions of accuracy and justice for the result of the situation, ten questions in total were asked. This covered perceptions of if the report itself was accurate, if consent occurred, if sentencing time was adequate, and if the case was solved effectively. Nine of these questions were designed on a seven-point Likert scale from 1 (*strongly disagree*) to 7 (*strongly agree*). The last question however, regarded where the blame fell and was on a four-point scale between the fault lying on the perpetrator or the victim.

Results

To test the hypothesis that the ordering of information and emphasis on the perpetrator's life outside of the crime impacted perceived responsibility of a sexual assault case, an independent samples t-test was performed on the measure statistics of each individual question within the two conditions. Of the 15 questions, there were slight to average differences in responses with two questions yielding statistically significant results (see Appendix D).

The first of the results that found significance was the statement 'I believe Savannah held partial responsibility'. Those who read the article which presented her irresponsibility and the perpetrators testimony first, judged her responsibility in the crime more harshly ($M=2.91$, $SD=1.877$) than the group which reordered information ($M=2.29$, $SD=1.592$). The mean difference was significant $t(63.163)=1.488$, $p<.05$.

The second statement which found significance was 'I believe the perpetrator should have served less time'. Those who read the article which began with the perpetrators testimony and the victims irresponsibility were more supportive of the idea that he should have served less than six months for the accusations ($M=2.67$, $SD=1.362$) than the group which reordered the information ($M=1.89$, $SD=1.034$). The mean difference was significant $t(59.237)=2.658$, $p<.05$.

Discussion

The study of language's impacts has been widely studied before; however, there are few published studies regarding the use of language in regards to reports on sexual assault. Moreover, there are few studies that examine the perceived perpetrator responsibility in a crime depending on how it is framed. The present study aimed to study the relationship between perceived perpetrator responsibility for a sexual assault crime and the use of ordering and irrelevant information in reports on sexual assault allegations. Within fifteen questions asked regarding different common perceptions of sexual assaults, only two had statistical significance. These included believing the victim had more or less responsibility in the encounter and agreement to the perpetrator serving less than six months for the crime. Aside from these variables, while some questions showed a difference in response, it was not statistically significant.

Implications of this study suggest that there may be some impact in how a case is presented with how it is perceived by the readers. However, the researcher hypothesizes that this has the potential to have more impact with those harboring rape supportive attitudes (Abbey & Harnish, 1995). While the researcher had originally anticipated to include a test on rape supportive attitudes, the researcher feared this would prime the volunteers to respond one way or another.

Prior research had examined other aspects in which small shifts in language such as replacing the term rape with unwanted sex may impact perpetrator blame (Wilkinson, 2008) however no research had been conducted on how people in general are impacted by the use of ordering of information and the inclusion of the perpetrators outstanding record in sexual assault claims. While researchers had examined how common language

shifts have moved the blame from the perpetrator to a shared responsibility between the perpetrator and victim (Ehrlich, 2001), there was not a study directly discussing and examining how this shift in language may impact perceived perpetrator responsibility for the general public. The present study sought to explain how the ordering and inclusion of the perpetrators' irrelevant accomplishments may impact perceptions of the reported assault in the media. While previous studies have studied these variables in court cases and police reports, these studies did not relate directly to the general public's perceptions (Coates, et. al, 1994).

Limitations to this study included a few variables including sample size and population. Additionally, the language of the thesis focused on male to female aggression and sexual assault as it is highlighted often in media, which may yield different results in regards to same sex assault or individuals who are transgender or gender nonconforming. The study also focused on college students in the pacific northwest which might not address the more common perceptions of the general population in the United States.

Further research may test for rape supportive attitudes in participants and expand the population sample to be more representative of the general population. Further research may also include a within subject's design to eliminate individual differences that potentially may have skewed the current data. The subject of choice language in media reports on sexual assault is still largely unexplored and further research is necessary to see how we may impact perceived perpetrator responsibility in sexual assault crimes based on small shifts in language. Because of the increasing media attention on sexual assault, this research is even more relevant and necessary to see how

best the media should present sexual assault claims to the general public without unknowingly impacting people's perceptions.

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Appendix A: All-American Track Star Found Guilty of Sexually Assaulting Unconscious Woman

After having four whiskey drinks at home, the woman was driven to Harvard campus to meet female friends. From there, the young women went to the party. The woman testified that she acted “silly” at the party, singing loudly and dancing goofily. At some point, she met James. According to James’ testimony, he and the woman danced and kissed at the party. Sometime around midnight, he asked her whether she would like to go back to his dorm and she said yes, James testified.

They held hands as they left the party, but then she slipped and they both fell, he said. Once on the ground, they started kissing near a trash bin, and when he asked whether he could touch her genitals, she once again agreed, he testified. When he asked her whether she liked it, she replied “uh huh” and they started “dry humping” he claimed in court.

Suddenly, he felt sick from the seven beers and two sips of whiskey he had drunk, however, he stumbled away from her thinking he was going to be sick, James testified. That’s when another man appeared and asked what he was doing.

When James was put in a headlock, James got scared and tried to run, only to get tackled.

“I started screaming for help,” he testified.

But the court also heard evidence contradicting James’ claims.

The other man painted a different picture of what he found that night. And one of the victim’s friends testified that she had seen James try to kiss the victim’s sister, only to be rebuffed. Then there was the physical evidence, including her DNA on his hand and bruises to her body,

Although James’ blood-alcohol content was twice the legal driving limit, he testified he remembered what happened that night. The woman, whose BAC was more than three times the limit, did not.

She would wake up more than three hours later in the hospital with pine needles in her disheveled hair, dried blood on her hands and elbows, and no clue how she got there. James was a member of Harvard’s varsity track team, one of the best in the country. He was an All-American track star in high school, so good he tried out for the U.S. Olympic team before he could vote.

Suddenly, he was accused of rape.

Earlier this month, James went on trial. And on Wednesday, a jury found him guilty of three felonies including assault with intent to rape an intoxicated woman and sexually penetrating an unconscious person with a foreign object.

It was a stunning fall from grace for James. Once a record setting prodigy, he is now a convicted sex offender at age 20.

It was also a landmark case in the nationwide struggle to combat sexual assault on campus, at least according to prosecutors.

During the trial, they argued that despite his squeaky clean image and exalted status as an athlete, James deserved no special treatment.

After the guilty verdict, prosecutors again argued that the case set an important national precedent.

“Today a jury of Worcester County residents gave a verdict which I hope will clearly reverberate throughout colleges, in high schools, anywhere where there may be any doubt about the distinction between consent and sexual assault,” District Attorney said in a statement. “No means no, drunk means no, passed out means no, and sex without consent means criminal assault.”

But critics argued that the jury was harsh on James and treated an ambiguous and alcohol-fueled moment with black and white certainty.

“This was not a clear-cut case, and I hope the jury got it right,” commented one man on a local TV station’s coverage of the verdict. “Of course James made some terrible mistakes, but I will always wonder if consent happened or not.”

Appendix B: Man Found Guilty of Sexually Assaulting Unconscious Woman

“Today a jury of Worcester County residents gave a verdict which I hope will clearly reverberate throughout colleges, in high schools, anywhere where there may be any doubt about the distinction between consent and sexual assault,” District Attorney said in a statement. “No means no, drunk means no, passed out means no, and sex without consent means criminal assault.”

20 year old Savannah woke up in the hospital with pine needles in her disheveled hair, dried blood on her hands and elbows, and no clue how she got there. Three hours earlier Savannah had been found by an eyewitness who had seen a man over her body, assaulting her. As this case went to court, we found that one of the victim’s friends testified that she had seen the perpetrator James try to kiss the Savannah’s sister, only to be rebuffed. Then there was the physical evidence, including her DNA on his hand and bruises to her body.

Earlier this month, James went on trial, And on Wednesday, a jury found him guilty of three felonies including assault with intent to rape an intoxicated woman and sexually penetrating an unconscious person with a foreign object.

Although James’ blood-alcohol content was twice the legal driving limit, he testified he remembered what happened that night. The woman, whose BAC was more than three times the limit, did not.

After having four whiskey drinks at home, Savannah was driven to Harvard campus to meet up with her friends. From there, Savannah went to the party. Savannah’s friends testified that she acted “silly” at the party, singing loudly and dancing goofily. At some point, she met James. According to James’ testimony, he and the woman danced and kissed at the party. Sometime around midnight, he asked her whether she would like to go back to his dorm and James testified that she said yes.

He held her hand as they left the party, but then Savannah slipped and fell, he said. Once on the ground, he started kissing her near a trash bin, and when he asked whether he could touch her genitals, he had testified that she had agreed. He claimed in court that when he asked her whether she liked it, she replied “uh huh” he started “dry humping” her.

Suddenly, he felt sick from the seven beers and two sips of whiskey he had drunk, however, he stumbled away from her thinking he was going to be sick, James testified. That’s when another man appeared and asked what he was doing.

James was put in a headlock and when he tried to run, he got tackled by one of the men.

This was considered a landmark case in the nationwide struggle to combat sexual assault on campus. During the trial, they argued that despite his squeaky clean image and exalted status as an athlete, James deserved no special treatment. After the guilty verdict, prosecutors again argued that the case set an important national precedent.

Appendix C:

Questions:

Scale 1-7 (Strongly Disagree-Strongly Agree)

Perpetrator Responsibility

James wasn't fully at fault for his actions

His prior history of nonviolence should be a factor while discussing his sentencing time

Victim Responsibility

I believe Savannah had consented during the encounter but changed her mind

I believe that Savannah held partial responsibility

Savannah could have acted differently to prevent the situation

Accuracy of the Statements Regarding the Crime

I am certain the assault happened as described

I believe the assault was exaggerated to gain more attention

I believe the assault was minimized to reduce perpetrator responsibility

Perceived Justice For the Crime

This case led to a sentencing of 6 months, I believe this was appropriate

I believe that the perpetrator should have served more time

I believe the perpetrator should have served less time

This encounter was consensual

I believe this case was resolved effectively

I believe it is unjust this case led to the perpetrators loss of scholarships and ability to compete.

I believe the fault laid mainly on: (victim-perpetrator)