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A Study of Empathy Towards Male Victims of Sexual Violence: The Effects of Gender and Sexism

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Abstract

Sexual violence is a major social phenomenon that has serious deleterious consequences on victims, regardless of their gender. However, the disclosure of sexual violence, met with empathy, could help to alleviate the victim's pain by having a positive impact on their psychological wellbeing. Empathy could also reduce harmful attitudes and promote more favorable attitudes towards the victim. Thus, since empathy appears to be essential when listening to the disclosure of sexual violence, it is necessary to study the determinants of these empathetic responses. The current research contributes to the literature by studying empathy towards male victims of sexual violence depending on factors relating to gender and sexism. Both the perpetrator's and participant's gender are taken into account as well as participants' levels of hostile and benevolent sexism towards men. Hostile sexism towards men refers to the antipathy towards men and their domination whereas benevolent sexism can be characterized by a traditional admiration for men's role as protectors. With this objective in mind, 174 participants from the general population were recruited on social networking sites and completed a questionnaire on the LimeSurvey platform. Statistical analyses showed relatively high levels of empathy overall towards male victims of sexual violence. The gender of the perpetrator as well as the gender of the participant do not appear to have a predictive effect on empathy. However, the results do show an impact of hostile and benevolent sexism on empathy; benevolent sexism predicted less empathy whereas hostile sexism predicted more empathy towards male victims of sexual violence in female participants. These findings provide avenues for future research as well as new perspectives for the development of programmes aiming to promote empathy in order to increase positive responses to victims of sexual violence.

Keywords Empathy · Gender · Disclosure · Sexism · Sexual violence

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Introduction

Sexual violence is a major societal problem which affects people of all genders. The World Health Organization (WHO) defines sexual violence as "any sexual act, attempt to obtain a sexual act, unwanted sexual comments or advances, or acts to traffic, or otherwise directed against a person's sexuality using coercion, by any person regardless of their relationship to the victim, in any setting including but not limited to home and work" (Krug, 2002, p 149). Such violence can be committed through different coercive strategies such as manipulation, persistent touching, intoxication, verbal pressure or physical force (Benbouriche & Parent, 2018).

Data, whether collected from official sources or self-reported questionnaires, appear to illustrate a rather clear pattern concerning perpetration and victimization. Women are victimized more often than men are, and men perpetrate more often than women do. To illustrate this, self-report data indicates that a large proportion of women report having been sexually victimised (62.7%), compared to 37.5% of their male counterparts (Krahé et al., 2021). Other studies have illustrated through research conducted with men from the general population that approximately 30% of men report having used sexually coercive strategies (Abbey et al., 2021; Trottier et al., 2021). Yet, these data may heavily underestimate the prevalence of female perpetrators. Indeed, not all cases of sexual violence are reported to the police (Le Goaziou, 2013). Although very few women are judicialized, 26–41% of women report having used sexually coercive strategies to force their partner to engage in sexual relations without their consent (Parent et al., 2018). Krahé et al., (2021) found that, whilst 17.7% of their male sample reported having committed acts of sexual violence, a smaller yet still substantial 9.4% of their female counterparts also reported having perpetrated such acts.

Although official data clearly suggest discrepancies in terms of the rates of male and female perpetration, figures tend to consistently show a larger proportion of male, rather than female, perpetration. Nonetheless, part of the picture still remains blurry as academic research shows that cases of male sexual victimization are undisclosed and underreported at greater rates than female victimization (Peterson et al., 2011). To illustrate this, McLean (2013) stated that only between 5 and 10% of disclosures were made by men. Questions arise, therefore, concerning the reasons which inhibit or discourage male victims from coming forward. In order to understand this silence, it seems necessary to understand how these disclosures would be received in the first place, if someone were to disclose. As the testimonies of female victims are regularly called into question, particularly by men (Klettke et al., 2016), it appears legitimate to ask whether this is also the case regarding male testimonies. As with much research on the topic of sexual violence, most studies have focused on female victims when examining the disclosure of sexual violence. As such, we must use these studies as the building blocks to extrapolate why men may or may not disclose their experiences. Struckman-Johnson and Struckman-Johnson (1992) have put forward suggestions as to why men may not do so. One suggestion was the feeling of shame

or embarrassment surrounding their victimization. The other was that men may not in fact recognize or label their experience as victimization as most incidents do not involve penetration or the use (or threat) of force.

Sexual Violence Disclosure and Subsequent Reactions

Disclosure may be vitally important for seeking out support and confronting the devasting consequences of sexual violence. A large majority of victims *do* disclose their experiences (Sylaska & Edwards, 2014). Two types of support are sought out from formal (e.g. medical personnel, police) and informal sources (e.g. friends, family, partner). Only 5–15% of rapes were reported to the police in the last decade according to a variety of victimization studies (Le Goaziou, 2013). Faucher (2007) suggests that these low disclosure rates originate from several factors, both internal (feelings of guilt and shame) and external (fear of judgement, of retaliation by the perpetrator, of not being believed and of coming forward without the guarantee of the offence being pursued).

Nonetheless, although the large majority of sexual violence incidents are not reported to the police, they are at least reported to informal sources. Indeed, Ahrens et al.'s (2007) study indicates that 70% of victims reveal their experiences of sexual violence at least to a loved one. The reasons highlighted for this disclosure are primarily the need to talk to someone, the need for support and the need for advice (Jacques-Tiura et al., 2010). Reactions to disclosure can be diverse, ranging from positive to negative, which in turn will have affect the victim's experience of disclosure. Ahrens et al. (2007) specifically identify blame, doubt and the refusal to help as negative reactions. To not believe the person who discloses and to subsequently blame them are identified as the least helpful reactions according to victims (Sylaska & Edwards, 2014). When social reactions are negative, the victim may suffer from secondary victimization; they not only suffer the sexual violence but also the inadequate reactions of their loved ones (Campbell & Raja, 1999). These reactions may lead to greater feelings of shame, of being at fault and result in isolation and withdrawal (Jacques-Tiura et al., 2010). They may choose to no longer reveal their victimization (Ahrens, 2006), preventing them from seeking support from formal sources (Franklin & Garza, 2021). These negative reactions are often associated with post-traumatic distress (Borja et al., 2006) and are a major risk factor for developing and maintaining psychopathologies, and even more so in ethnic (Jacques-Tiura et al., 2010) and sexual (Untied et al., 2018) minorities. As such, whilst disclosure may have positive consequences when met with positive social reactions, the effects of negative social reactions may sometimes be more harmful than not disclosing at all.

Fortunately, victims report mostly positive reactions following their disclosure to informal sources (Ahrens et al., 2007; Jacques-Tiura et al., 2010). These positive reactions act as protective factors which may attenuate the victim's suffering (Jossé, 2011) by validating their experiences and providing them with support (Ullman, 2010). As such, they are associated with psychological health benefits as well as the reduction of negative symptoms (Sylaska & Edwards, 2014). Positive reactions

include tangible offers to help, emotional support, help mobilizing other resources and empathy (Ahrens et al., 2007).

Empathy Towards Victims of Sexual Violence

Empathy towards victims is vital when listening to sexual violence testimonies. In the context of sexual violence, empathy is defined as the ability to understand the perspectives, emotions and responses of the victim and/or the perpetrator (Smith & Frieze, 2003). Showing empathy towards a victim predicts more positive attitudes towards them (Sakallı-Uğurlu et al., 2007), which translates into, among other things, greater credibility attributed to them and reduced trivialization of their suffering. Empathy also reduces detrimental attitudes towards the victim such as the attribution of responsibility (Smith & Frieze, 2003). Furthermore, empathy predicts the redirection of victims to external resources such as seeking out health professionals and filling out official police reports (Franklin & Garza, 2021). Perceiving empathy from the police is also positively correlated with the intention of bringing their case to court (Maddox et al., 2011).

Expressing empathy towards a victim who discloses may be dependent on multiple factors. Many individual (e.g. gender, prior personal experience of victimization; Osman, 2011, 2016), situational (e.g. stranger vs acquaintance rape; Franklin & Garza, 2021) and attitudinal (e.g. rape myth acceptance; Miller et al., 2011) factors affect the empathy of those confronted with the disclosure of a sexual violence incident. Nevertheless, most research focuses on female victims of male perpetrators. As gender seems to impact empathy, and very few studies have examined empathy towards male victims, it seems necessary to broaden our knowledge on this topic.

Sexism and Gender in the Perception of Sexual Violence Cases

Sexism, or traditional attitudes concerning gender, is defined as a set of dominant traditional ideologies whose function is to maintain gender inequality (Sarlet & Dardenne, 2012). Glick and Fiske (1996) coined the term 'ambivalent sexism' illustrating its dual nature with both a hostile and a benevolent facet. Hostile sexism towards men illustrates antipathy towards men and their domination, superiority and exertion of control in intimate relationships (Rollero et al., 2014). Benevolent sexism, however, is characterized by relatively positive, although condescending, beliefs (Zawisza et al., 2012) consisting of a traditional admiration for men's role as protectors and providers of financial security. Benevolent sexism also refers to the belief that women must provide domestic and maternal care, as expected by men (Rollero et al., 2014). Therefore, sexist attitudes may affect the way in which male victim testimonies are perceived.

The term 'victim', in the context of sexual violence, tends to have female connotations (Mulder et al., 2019). As men are viewed as virile, representing strength and dominance in our society, it seems difficult to accept that they can be victims. Myths such as 'men cannot be raped' or 'sexual violence is less severe for men

than for women' minimize the impact sexual violence has on male victims. These societal beliefs, that a man *could and should have* defended himself, prevent men from reporting such incidents (Groth & Burgess, 1980). Hence, men's 'masculinity' becomes, in part, responsible for the blame attributed to them (Howard, 1984). As such, male victims are blamed more than female victims (Davies et al., 2009).

This effect is reinforced when the perpetrator is female. In a study conducted by Struckman-Jonhson and Struckman-Jonhson (1992), participants judged the rape of a man by a woman as less likely to occur, as less traumatic than a rape committed by a man and that they would blame the victim more. Acts of sexual violence committed by women are less likely to be labelled as such compared to the same incidents committed by men (Russel et al., 2011). Men victimised by women are often perceived as having encouraged the sexual relations and even as having enjoyed it (Struckman-Johnson & Struckman-Johnson, 1992). As men are societally seen as 'predators' and women as 'prey' (Castiglione et al., 2014), it appears difficult to imagine that a woman could force a man to engage in sexual relations.

As sexism is believed to affect the way in which male victims of sexual violence are perceived, it appears necessary to further such findings by examining empathy towards male victims and the manner in which sexist attitudes affect empathetic responses.

The Current Study

Disclosure may be important in the victim's process of rebuilding their life, however, the way which the disclosure is received may also be a determining factor. The current study therefore aims to examine empathy towards male victims of sexual violence, more specifically depending on the perpetrator's gender, the participant's gender, and the participants' level of sexism. Identifying the predictors of empathy will enable us to determine the conditions under which victims are more susceptible to receive empathy. Based on the literature reviewed, we hypothesize the that: (a) men will receive less empathy when they are victimized by a woman than if the perpetrator is male; (b) women will exhibit more empathy towards victims than men; and (c) individuals presenting high levels of sexism, both benevolent and hostile, will display less empathy towards male victims.

Method

Procedure

The research protocol was developed, and informed consent was obtained, in accordance with the principles laid down by the Helsinki Declaration. Participants were recruited using an ad published on social networking sites, especially on French students' Facebook groups, with a link to the questionnaire developed on LimeSurvey. The study was presented as research examining personality and sexual behavior to avoid any expectation effects. Participants had to be 18 or above to be eligible.

They were invited to read an information form and after having given their consent, participants responded to sociodemographic questions concerning their age, gender, socio-professional category and sexual orientation. A questionnaire about sexism towards men was then presented, as well as a sexual violence vignette to read which was followed by a questionnaire measuring empathy towards the victim.

Preliminary analyses allowed us to determine the study's duration, which was estimated as 1148.56 s ($SD = 554.5$). Only the participants who responded within a time frame similar to $\pm$ two standard deviations were kept to limit any biases due to concentration (such as either rushing through the study, or being inattentive and distracted). Attention checks were introduced which also reduced the number of responses retained.

Participants

The total number of participants was 245, however, only 174 responses were kept for statistical analyses. The responses of 2 non-binary individuals were discarded, 32 were eliminated due to attention checks, and 37 were eliminated due to the time they took to complete the study.

The mean age was 22.44 years ($SD = 5.119$). Women represented 82.2% of the sample ($n = 143$). The majority were students ($n = 140$, 80.5%). Multiple sexual orientations were represented, with the vast majority of participants self-identifying as exclusively heterosexual (69.4%).

Materials

Sexism Towards Men Questionnaire

Sexist attitudes towards men were measured using the Ambivalence Toward Men Inventory (AMI; Glick & Fiske, 1999). It is made up of 20 items divided into two subscales, one measuring benevolent sexism, with items such as "men are more willing to put themselves in danger to protect others", and the other measuring hostile sexism, with items such as "men usually try to dominate conversations when talking to women". Preliminary analyses showed that both the benevolent and hostile sexism subscales demonstrate good internal consistency, with Cronbach's alpha coefficients of 0.84 and 0.88, respectively.

Vignettes

Participants were randomly assigned to one of two conditions corresponding to two sexual violence situations developed as part of this research. In one situation, Lucas, a man, describes having been the victim of sexual touching by a young woman, Sarah, at a party the night before. In another situation, Lucas claims to have been

the victim of sexual touching by Théo, a man. In both conditions, the situations described (i.e., the social context and act committed) were strictly identical, only the perpetrator's gender changed.

Empathy Questionnaire

After having read one of the sexual violence situations, participants responded to a modified version of the Interpersonal Reactivity Index (IRI; Davis, 1980), to assess their empathy towards the male victim. The original version of the IRI is made up of 28 items measuring different empathy facets: affective (referring to the participant's affective responses to others' emotions) and cognitive (referring to the ability to adopt other's perspectives and to attribute thoughts and emotions to them) (Lancelot et al., 2009). An adapted version was used in Franklin and Garza's (2021) study to investigate participants' empathy towards a rape victim after reading a vignette. As this study was conducted in France, we took the 10 questions used in their study which we translated into French with the help of the French translation of the original IRI validated by Gilet et al. (2013). For each item, participants had to indicate the degree to which the statement corresponds to them on a scale ranging from 1 (does not describe me at all) to 7 (describes me completely). A mean score was computed. A Cronbach's alpha value of 0.86 illustrates the scale's good internal consistency.

Statistical Analyses

Statistical analyses were conducted using SPSS. Initial bivariate analyses using the Student and Mann–Whitney tests were conducted to assess empathy depending on the perpetrator's and participant's gender. Bivariate correlations were then conducted to examine the link between both facets of sexism (benevolent and hostile) and empathy.

Multivariate analyses were then conducted. A linear multiple regression model was developed to study the predictors of empathy including the participant's gender and their level of sexism, both hostile and benevolent.

A moderation analysis was conducted using SPSS' add-on, PROCESS (Hayes, 2017), to examine the effect of sexism on the relationship between participant gender and empathy.

Results

Preliminary Analyses

First, the random assignment of participant to conditions was checked. T-tests illustrated that there were no significant differences between participants in both

conditions concerning their age ($t(172) = 1.123$, $p = 0.263$), and their levels of benevolent ($t(172) = 1.054$, $p = 0.293$), or hostile sexism ($t(172) = 1.573$, $p = 0.118$). Furthermore, no significant differences were found between groups concerning participant gender ($\chi^2 = 0.003$, $p = 0.955$) or their socio-professional category ($\chi^2 = 4.257$, $p = 0.119$). Participants' sexual orientation was not a source of significant differences between groups either ($\chi^2 = 5.384$, $p = 0.250$). Descriptive statistics can be found in Table 1.

Bivariate Analyses

Comparison of Participant Empathy Towards Male Victims Depending on Perpetrator and Participant Gender

T-tests were conducted to test the effect of perpetrator and participant gender on empathy. No significant difference was found concerning empathy towards male victims whether the perpetrator was a woman or a man ($t(172) = 0.917$, $p = 0.360$).

Mann–Whitney's U test showed a significant difference between male and female participants concerning their empathy towards a male victim ($U = 1115$, $p < 0.001$). Women displayed greater empathy ($M = 5.155$, $SD = 1.079$) than men ($M = 6.074$, $SD = 0.832$).

Comparison of Participant Level of Sexism Depending on Their Gender

Mann–Whitney's U test showed a significant difference between male and female participants concerning their level of hostile sexism ($U = 1445$, $p = 0.002$) and a marginally significant difference concerning their level of benevolent sexism ($U = 2655.5$, $p = 0.084$). Men displayed more benevolent sexism ($M = 1.194$, $S.D. = 1.071$) than women ($M = 0.809$, $S.D. = 0.714$), whereas women displayed more hostile sexism ($M = 2.312$, $S.D. = 1.041$) than men ($M = 1.626$, $S.D. = 0.970$).

Table 1 Descriptive statistics of individual and demographic characteristics of participants

Variables [scale]	Mean (SD) or Mode (%)
Gender	Women (82.2%)
Age	22.44 (5.119)
Socio-professional category	Student (80.5%)
Sexual orientation	Heterosexual (68.4%)
Benevolent sexism [0; 5]	0.877 (0.799)
Hostile sexism [0; 5]	2.190 (1.060)
Empathy [1; 7]	5.910 (0.946)

N = 174; N/A = Not applicable or not appropriate

Bivariate Correlations

Bivariate correlations showed that levels of hostile sexism were positively correlated with levels of benevolent sexism ($r=0.316$, $p<0.01$). An increase in hostile sexism was associated with an increase in benevolent sexism.

A significant negative correlation was found between empathy and benevolent sexism ($r=-0.206$, $p<0.01$); empathy diminished with higher levels of benevolent sexism. The correlation between hostile sexism and empathy was marginally significant ($r=0.144$; $p<0.10$); empathy increased with higher levels of hostile sexism.

Multivariate Analyses

Multiple Linear Regression: Prediction of Empathetic Responses Towards a Male Victim of Sexual Violence

Multiple linear regressions were conducted with variables correlated with empathy to determine its predictors. As the perpetrator's gender did not demonstrate an impact in our bivariate analyses, this variable was excluded. The results (displayed in Table 2) illustrate that the model was statistically significant ($F(3, 170)=11.754$, $p<0.001$), explaining 17.2% of the variance in empathy. When holding the other predictors constant, participant gender appeared to be the best predictor of empathy towards the victim, followed by benevolent sexism. Hostile sexism, however, was a predictor which barely reached marginal significance.

Additional Moderation Analysis: Understanding the Effect of Participant Gender

The analyses demonstrated a marginally significant predictive effect of hostile sexism and significant predictive effects of benevolent sexism and participant gender. However, participant gender was also a source of differences concerning levels of hostile and benevolent sexism as illustrated above. It therefore appeared pertinent to conduct supplementary analyses concerning the moderating effect of benevolent (Model 1) and hostile (Model 2) sexism in relation to participant gender and victim empathy.

Table 2 Multiple linear regression: Empathy

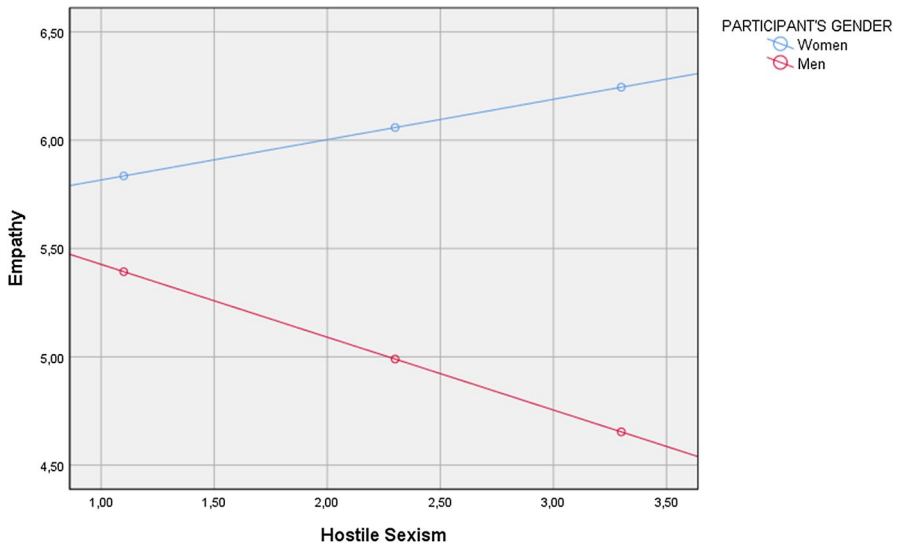|	B	SE	BETA	t	p
Constant	5.934	0.179		33.073	0.000
Participant gender	−0.754	0.185	−0.306	−4.069	0.000
Benevolent sexism	−0.225	0.091	−0.190	−2.475	0.014
Hostile sexism	0.114	0.070	0.128	1.644	0.102
R			0.414		
R^2			0.172		
F			11.754		0.000

Fig. 1 Graphical representation of the interaction effect between participant gender and hostile sexism on empathy

Results indicate that model 1 was statistically significant (F (4,172)=8.859, $p < 0.001$), explaining 17.3% of the variance in empathy. Only participant gender ($t(172) = -2.44$, $p = 0.016$) appeared to be a significant predictor of victim empathy as benevolent sexism was only a marginally significant predictor ($t(172) = -1.75$, $p = 0.082$). No interaction effects was found between benevolent sexism and participant gender (t(172)=−0564 $p = 0.574$). Participants' levels of benevolent sexism therefore did not appear to moderate the effect of participant gender on empathy towards male victims.

The results illustrated that the second model was also statistically significant ($F(4,169) = 11.453$, $p < 0.001$), explaining 21.3% of the variance in empathy. Participant gender, in this case, was not a predictor of empathy ($t(172) = 0.381$), $p = 0.703$). Only hostile sexism ($t(172) = 2.582$, $p = 0.011$), benevolent sexism ($t(172) = -2.17$, $p = 0.031$) and the interaction between hostile sexism and participant gender ($t(172) = -2.9851$, $p = 0.003$) were significant predictors. The interaction effect between hostile sexism and participant gender explained 4.15% of the variance in empathy. Concretely, this means that participant gender only has an effect at a certain level of hostile sexism. More precisely, the Johnson-Neyman method allowed us to specify that, at a level of hostile sexism equal or above 1.059, the effect of gender appeared to be significant whereby men displayed less empathy than women. As the mean hostile sexism score was of 2.190 (with a possibility of scores ranging from 1 to 5, see Table 1), this illustrates that from a relatively low level of hostile sexism (close to 1), women are more empathetic towards victims, whereas men display less empathy. This interaction effect is presented in Fig. 1.

Discussion

The aim of this study was to examine empathy towards male victims of sexual violence, depending on the perpetrator's gender, the participant's gender and their levels of hostile and benevolent sexism.

The results illustrate relatively high levels empathy displayed by our participants. These results are reassuring since victim perception, as well as empathy towards them, are linked to the reactions expressed by the recipient of the disclosure. As positive reactions to disclosure are associated with psychological benefits and fewer negative health symptoms (Sylaska & Edwards, 2014), these would reduce the likelihood of the victim suffering from additional detrimental consequences. Nonetheless, empathy was still found to vary depending on the participant's gender and their levels sexism.

Perpetrator Gender

There does not appear to be a relationship between perpetrator gender and empathy; whether a man is assaulted by a man or a woman, this does not affect the empathy displayed towards them. These results contradict those reported by Osman (2011) who found that more empathy was expressed to victims of male perpetrators compared to female perpetrators. These differences may be explained by the varying methodologies used. In Osman's (2011) study, participants completed the Rape-Victim Empathy Scale (RVES; Deitz et al., 1982), which measures empathy towards rape victims without reading a vignette. Our vignette may have increased empathy towards male victims of female perpetrators similarly to those of male perpetrators by facilitating participants' ability to take the victim's perspective. Alternatively, our findings may differ from Osman's (2011) as they looked at an instance of rape, whereas our vignette spoke about sexual touching. The discrepancy in perceived severity of the act may explain these divergent findings.

These new results may also reflect a change in society, where sexual violence cases are mediatized and the need to believe victims and display positive reactions is emphasized. This societal change may have also been driven by changes in legal definitions of sexual violence which have traditionally excluded men in terms of victimization and women in terms of perpetration. To illustrate this, the U.K. government's Sexual Offences Act (2003) included men as possible victims of sexual violence by including the penile penetration of the vagina, mouth or anus as rape. Similarly, the U.S. Department of Justice (2012) changed the definition of rape which used to only include penile penetration of the vagina. Furthermore, since 2018 in France, all forms of non-consensual penetration, including the act of being forced to penetrate the perpetrator, are included in the definition of rape (Article 222–223 of the French penal code). Excluding men as victims, legally, further delegitimizes their experiences as sexually violent in a similar way as does excluding women as potential perpetrators, which would help to explain such low rates of disclosure in male victims.

Benevolent Sexism

Adherence to benevolent sexism appeared to produce less empathy in our participants. The traditional view which regards men's role as protectors and financial security providers has a negative impact on empathy towards male victims of sexual violence. Listening to a man disclose, whilst viewing them as virile protectors, makes it difficult to understand their perspective. This situation may originate from cognitive dissonance, a state of psychological discomfort. This dissonance may be resolved through reduced empathy towards the victim. Alternatively, benevolent sexism's effect on empathy may be explained through mechanisms of attribution of responsibility (Deitz et al., 1984). Adherence to benevolent sexism has already demonstrated its impact in regards to female victims (Abrams et al., 2003). Women, when seen as behaving inappropriately, have more responsibility placed on them for the violence they endured. Therefore, it is conceivable that benevolent sexism towards men may have a similar effect. Men, strong and protective according to benevolent sexism, *could and should have* defended themselves. As such, they may also been held responsible.

Hostile Sexism

Hostile sexism, however, marginally significantly predicted greater empathy. This may illustrate that the antipathy felt towards men and their domination produces greater empathy towards male victims. The additional statistics conducted demonstrate a larger complexity of these results.

As our preliminary analyses suggested that hostile sexism predicted greater empathy, the significant results of subsequent moderation analyses demonstrate that this was only the case for the female sample. This may be interpreted as women being generally more empathetic, whereby empathy acts as a protective factor against sexism. Nonetheless, this result may also be interpreted in a different manner. Women may be hostile towards men when gender conservatism is high (Zawisza et al., 2012). However, a situation in which a man is the victim of sexual violence defies this gender role conservatism, giving women no reason to feel hostility towards him. Nevertheless, more than maintaining these empathy levels, the results show an increase in women's empathy with their levels of hostile sexism. This increase could potentially be explained by the activism women are involved in; displaying hostility towards men and their power may be an expression of feminism (Zawisza et al., 2012). Since feminist movements are deeply involved in the fight against sexual violence, this could explain their higher levels of empathy towards the victims of such violence. The increase in hostile sexism towards men would explain, through high levels of feminism, the occurrence of women's greater empathy towards victims.

Conversely, hostile sexism predicted lower levels of empathy in men. Male participants who displayed high levels of hostile sexism were less empathetic towards male victims. The moderating effect of gender on the relationship between hostile sexism and empathy is coherent as hostile sexism is linked to rape myth acceptance concerning men (Davies et al., 2012); with myths such as 'a man who was

raped has lost his virility', 'a man can defend himself', 'a man cannot be raped'. Hostile sexism displayed by men may explain their difficulty in understanding the victim's perspective if they believe that it is impossible for men to be assaulted. Such results replicated past findings (Osman, 2011; Sakallı-Uğurlu et al., 2007; Smith & Frieze, 2003). As men are statistically less frequently victims of sexual violence than women (Debauche et al., 2017), and the experience of victimization is a source of greater victim empathy (Osman, 2016), this would explain gender's effect on empathy.

Limitations

The present study has allowed us to identify predictors of empathy towards male victims of sexual violence. However, this research contains some methodological flaws. Firstly, the study was conducted online. The conditions under which the participants responded could therefore not be controlled. Participants who responded too slowly or too quickly compared to the determined mean duration of the study were excluded, however, this does not guarantee that participants responded under ideal conditions. Furthermore, as sexual violence is a highly mediatized topic, it is conceivable that a social desirability bias may have interfered. Participants may have presented themselves favorably by conforming to current social expectations, therefore displaying greater empathy.

Moreover, placing the sexism questionnaire before the vignette and empathy questionnaire could potentially have induced some form of bias if participants deduced some of the study's goals. This could have influenced responses, which would explain the lack of differences between empathy displayed towards male sexual violence victims of either male or female perpetrators.

Finally, our sample was not representative of the general population. Indeed, the majority of participants were young, female students. A gender bias in survey participation has been repeatedly reported, in that women respond more to surveys than men (Becker, 2022) and young women are overrepresented in gathered from studies published on social media platforms such as Facebook (Batterham, 2014). Hence, a larger sample is needed, especially with more male participants. It would also have been informative to recruit people of a variety of different ages as Klettke et al. (2016) demonstrated a generational effect on the credibility awarded to victims of sexual violence. Perhaps using platforms such as Prolific Academic would enable a more representative sample (Peer et al., 2017).

Future Research and Implications

An avenue for future research concerns the contexts in which disclosures occur. Although victim perception (e.g. empathy for the victim) is linked to the social reaction expressed by the person listening to the disclosure (Edwards et al., 2020), it may not be the only factor linked to the social reactions truly expressed. In fact, the context in which the disclosure happens (e.g., distress, drinking alcohol), is also

linked to the social reactions (Edwards et al., 2020). As such, despite a certain level of empathy towards the victim, it is possible that the social reactions expressed may be negative due to the context. Moreover, the perceptions which victims have of the social reactions expressed towards them is also important (Dworkin et al., 2019). Despite someone's empathy, if the victim does not perceive it as such, it is possible that they will not reap the expected psychological health benefits. Furthermore, it is sometimes empathy towards the perpetrator which has the greatest impact on victim blaming (Bongiorno et al., 2020). As such, victims may still be confronted with negative social reactions such as the attribution of responsibility if the person they are disclosing to feels empathy towards the perpetrator.

These results also have practical implications. From a general population perspective, developing programs aiming to improve empathy towards victims of sexual violence, whether male or female, should have beneficial impacts on today's society. Indeed, programs aiming to reduce levels of men's hostile sexism towards men should also lead to higher levels of empathy towards male victims of sexual violence. Similarly, programs which aim to reduce benevolent sexism should also improve empathetic responses. This may increase victims' willingness and likelihood to disclose their experiences.

Likewise, it may be appropriate to implement such interventions with members of law enforcement such as police officers. As police officers are likely to be the victim's first point of contact with the criminal justice system, increasing their empathetic responses, either directly through targeting empathy or indirectly through targeting hostile and benevolent sexism, may improve victims' experiences of formal disclosure. Research conducted by Gracia et al. (2011, 2014) has illustrated that police officers displaying high levels of benevolent sexism tend to have attitudes supporting what they call conditional law enforcement. This refers to a type of policing which is dependent on whether or not the victim wants to press charges. However, officers who display high levels of empathy and low levels of sexism prefer unconditional law enforcement whereby they should police such crimes regardless of the victims willingness to press charges. Alternately, interventions could target police officers who are specialized in rape cases. Turgoose et al. (2017) found that many of these members of law enforcement suffer from compassion fatigue and burnout. Furthermore, high levels of burnout were associated with lower levels of empathy. As such, by helping these individuals cope with their stressful work environment, their levels of empathy may increase which may help them cope with, and respond to, disclosures of violent crimes such as rape in a more positive manner. Positive experiences when formally disclosing may increase the likelihood that victims will engage with the criminal justice system (Lea et al., 2003; Maddox et al., 2011). Conversely, negative experiences with members of the criminal justice system could lead to 'secondary victimization' whereby the victim may feel as they have experienced another rape or violation following their disclosure (Campbell, 1998).

Conclusion

Sexual violence is a highly mediatized topic currently, as its consequences are devastating for victims, regardless of their gender. Reassuringly, our findings suggest that, when confronted with the disclosure of sexual violence experienced by a man, individuals are generally empathetic. As such, victims of sexual violence who disclose their experience should be able to take advantage of the benefits to their psychological health as well as a reduction in negative symptoms through empathy expressed by those listening to their disclosure. Nonetheless, empathy is dependent on multiple factors, individual, situational as well as attitudinal. This study has allowed us to discuss the involvement of gender in empathy, whilst also highlighting the predictive role of benevolent and hostile sexism.

Sexism, still to this day, has a grave impact on our society as it still harms male and female victims of sexual violence. The deconstruction of gender stereotypes and all prejudicial thinking around sexual violence is necessary for men's disclosures to be met with empathy. This is vital in order to facilitate the reporting of sexual violence as well as promoting the rebuilding of victims' lives.

Declarations

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