Citation for published version:
Bongiorno, R, Langbroek, C, Bain, PG, Ting, M & Ryan, MK 2020, 'Why Women are Blamed for Being Sexually Harassed: The Effects of Empathy for Female Victims and Male Perpetrators', *Psychology of Women Quarterly*, vol. 44, no. 1, pp. 11-27. https://doi.org/10.1177/0361684319868730

DOI:
10.1177/0361684319868730

Publication date:
2020

Document Version
Peer reviewed version

Link to publication

Psychology of Women Quarterly, R., Langbroek, C., Bain, P., Ting, M. and Ryan M., Why Women Are Blamed for Being Sexually Harassed: The Effects of Empathy for Female Victims and Male Perpetrators, Psychology of Women Quarterly (Journal Volume Number and Issue Number, forthcoming) pp.1-17. Copyright © 2019 The Author(s). Reprinted by permission of SAGE Publications.

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Download date: 20. Jul. 2024

Psychology of
Women Quarterly

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Journal:	*Psychology of Women Quarterly*
Manuscript ID	PWQ-18-294.R2
Manuscript Type:	Original Article
Qualitative Skills:	
Quantitative Skills:	ANOVA, ANCOVA, MANOVA, MANCOVA, Experimental studies (RCT)
Topical Expertise:	Sexual harassment, Vignette studies

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Why Women are Blamed for Being Sexually Harassed: The Effects of Empathy for Female Victims and Male Perpetrators

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This research was supported in part by funding from a European Research Council Consolidator Grant: (ERC-2016-COG Grant 725128) awarded to the final author.

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Abstract

The #MeToo movement has highlighted the widespread problem of men’s sexual harassment of women. Women are typically reluctant to make a sexual-harassment complaint and often encounter victim-blaming attitudes when they do, especially from men. Informed by the social identity perspective, two experiments examined the influence of empathy—both for women who are sexually harassed and for male harassers—on men’s and women’s propensity to blame victims. In Study 1, university students (N = 97) responded to a vignette describing a male student’s harassment of a female student. Men blamed the victim more than women, which was explained by their greater empathy for the male perpetrator but not lesser empathy for the female victim. Using the same vignette, Study 2 asked university students (N = 135) to take either the male perpetrator’s or the female victim’s perspective. Regardless of participant gender, participants who took the male-perpetrator’s perspective versus the female-victim’s perspective reported greater victim blame, and this was explained by their greater empathy for the male perpetrator and lesser empathy for the female victim. Together, the findings provide evidence to suggest that male-perpetrator empathy may be equally or more important than female-victim empathy for explaining victim blame for sexual harassment. Implications for social-change, including policies to limit male-perpetrator empathy when processing women’s sexual-harassment complaints in organizational settings, are discussed.

Keywords: empathy, victim blame, sexual harassment

Why Women are Blamed for Being Sexually Harassed: The Effects of Empathy for Female Victims and Male Perpetrators

The sexual harassment of women by men is a pervasive and often hidden social problem (Fitzgerald & Cortina, 2018). In an effort to break the silence that often surrounds this form of abuse, millions of women have become involved in the #MeToo movement, using social media platforms like Twitter and Facebook to share their experiences of sexual harassment and its negative effects on their lives (Raihani, 2017). Yet the backlash against this movement (Solnit, 2018) has exposed the stigma that continues to surround women who are sexually harassed, and why reporting this form of abuse can actually worsen outcomes for victims (Bergman, Langhout, Palmieri, Cortina, & Fitzgerald, 2002). Consistent with this backlash, research shows that women are frequently blamed for being harassed through a focus on their purportedly provocative behaviors (Australian Human Rights Commision, 2017; De Judicibus & McCabe, 2001; McDonald, Graham, & Martin, 2010). Research also shows that men, more than women, blame women for being harassed and endorse other negative views about female victims that help limit the culpability of male perpetrators (Lonsway, Cortina, & Magley, 2008).

To effectively address the problem of sexual harassment, it is important to understand men's more negative attitudes than women towards women who are sexually harassed. Existing theory and research suggests men's lesser empathy for female victims is likely to be important (Batson & Ahmad, 2009; Diehl, Glaser, & Bohner, 2014). In the current research, we focus on how empathy—both for women who are the targets of sexual harassment (female-victim empathy), but also for men who are accused of sexual harassment (male-perpetrator empathy)—influences men's and women's responding. Our research is informed by the social identity perspective, which considers how people's group affiliations and propensity to take the perspective of ingroup members influences their social responding

(Tajfel & Turner, 1986; Turner, Hogg, Oakes, Reicher, & Wetherell, 1987). Using this theoretical framework, we extend the typical focus on empathy's prosocial effects when it is directed towards victims (e.g., see Batson & Ahmad, 2009) to also consider the potential negative consequences of empathy for perpetrators. We test the hypothesis that both lesser empathy for female victims and greater empathy for male perpetrators will be important for explaining why men compared to women (Study 1), or people primed to focus on the male perpetrators' compared to the female victim's perspective (Study 2), are more likely to blame women for being sexually harassed.

Sexual Harassment: Definition, Prevalence and Effects

In many countries around the world, including the United States, United Kingdom, and Australia, sexual harassment is considered a form of sex discrimination. In Australia, where we conducted our research, sexual harassment is defined by the Australian Sex Discrimination Act 1984 as unwelcome sexual advances or requests for sexual favors that could reasonably be anticipated to offend, humiliate or intimidate the harassed person (Commonwealth of Australia, 2016, p. 37). Sexual harassment encompasses a wide range of behaviors including staring or leering; unwelcome touching; and sexual insults or taunts (Australian Human Rights Commision, 2014). Sexual harassment occurs in a range of contexts, including in the workplace (Ilies, Hauserman, Schwochau, & Stibal, 2003); educational institutions (Australian Human Rights Commision, 2017; Rosenthal, Smidt, & Freyd, 2016); public spaces (The Australia Institute, 2015) and online (Barak, 2005; Megarry, 2014).

Both women and men can be victims or perpetrators of sexual harassment. In this research we focus on male-to-female harassment, which extensive research indicates is the most prevalent form (Berdahl, Magley, & Waldo, 1996; Fitzgerald & Cortina, 2018; Paludi & Paludi, 2003). A recent Australian survey, representative of the population in terms of respondent gender, age and residential area, found that one third (33%) of women compared to less than one in ten (9%) men had experienced sexual harassment since the age of 15, with the majority of women (90%) and men (61%) indicating their harasser was male (Australian Human Rights Commision, 2012). However, the prevalence of sexual harassment is likely to be much higher, as the 2012 survey asked respondents whether they had experienced sexual harassment using the legal definition, rather than scales that list specific behaviors that are considered sexual harassment (Ilies et al., 2003)

Victims report a range of negative physical, psychological and job/academic related effects from being sexually harassed, including post-traumatic stress, increased depression, greater levels of job/academic withdrawal and stress, and reduced productivity (Chan, Lam, Chow, & Cheung, 2008; Rosenthal et al., 2016; Willness, Steel, & Lee, 2007). The negative effects of sexual harassment are exacerbated by victim blame, which we focus on in the current research, and which relates to beliefs that women are sexually harassed, at least in part, because of their provocative behavior towards men (Jensen & Gutek, 1982). Considered a form of secondary victimization, being blamed for experiencing sexual harassment can help to explain why the job and health related outcomes for women who make a complaint are no better and can actually be worse than for those who do not report the abuse (Bergman et al., 2002). A fear of being blamed also contributes to very low rates of reporting (Australian Human Rights Commision, 2017; Jensen & Gutek, 1982) and to self-blame, which is a cause of additional psychological distress for women who are sexually harassed (Collinsworth, Fitzgerald, & Drasgow, 2009)

Gender Differences in Attitudes to Sexual Harassment and the Role of Empathy for Female Victims

Women and men tend to have different attitudes and beliefs about sexual harassment and how it affects women. Meta-analytic reviews suggest that unless the behavior is extreme (e.g., sexual coercion), men are much less likely than women to perceive it as sexual harassment (Blumenthal, 1998; Rotundo, Nguyen, & Sackett, 2001). For instance, men are much less likely than women to consider derogatory remarks or dating pressure (e.g., unwanted, repeated requests for a date) as sexual harassment (see Rotundo et al., 2001). Men are also more likely than women to believe that women: fabricate or exaggerate sexual-harassment claims; have ulterior motives for filing a complaint; or are to blame for being sexually harassed due to behaving or dressing in a provocative manner or failing to clearly discourage men's sexual advances (Bitton & Danit, 2013; De Judicibus & McCabe, 2001; Diehl et al., 2014; Herzog, 2007; Lonsway et al., 2008; McCabe & Hardman, 2005; Russell & Trigg, 2004).

Existing theory and research suggest that people's negative attitudes towards disadvantaged or stigmatized groups – including men's greater likelihood of blaming women for being sexually harassed – can be explained by their lack of empathy for the victim or the victim group due to a failure to consider their perspective (for a review see Batson & Ahmad, 2009). Empathy is defined in different ways (Batson & Ahmad, 2009), but here we follow Batson, Early, and Salvarani (1997) to define empathy as an other-oriented emotion that relates to the welfare of a person or group in need, including feelings such as sympathy, compassion and concern. This form of empathy, also referred to as empathic concern, is an emotional response that can be distinguished from perspective-taking. Perspective-taking involves considering a situation from another's perspective, which can promote feelings of empathy towards that person, but does not always do so (Batson, Eklund, Chermok, Hoyt, & Ortiz, 2007; also see Tarrant, Calitri, & Weston, 2012).

To understand how empathy may contribute to negative attitudes towards female victims of sexual harassment, Diehl et al. (2014, Study 1) measured men's and women's victim empathy along with their endorsement of a measure of sexual harassment myth acceptance (Lonsway et al., 2008), incorporating people's tendencies to deny sexual harassment, downplay its consequences, and blame the victim. A hierarchical regression showed that sexual harassment myths were endorsed more by men than by women, but when the measure of participant's victim empathy was included in the model, the effect of participant gender on endorsement of these myths became non-significant. They interpreted this finding as indicating that gender differences in victim empathy could explain gender differences in sexual harassment myth acceptance, although this was not based on a direct test of mediation or moderation.

The social identity perspective (Tajfel & Turner, 1986; Turner et al., 1987) provides a useful theoretical framework for understanding why women compared to men may have more empathy for woman who are sexually harassed and may thereby be less likely to blame victims. According to this perspective, people define themselves not just as individuals, but as members of social groups. Different social contexts emphasize the salience of one (or potentially multiple) group memberships in common with others (e.g., gender, ethnic or political groups), and the perception of similar others as interchangeable with the self. In a case of male-to-female sexual harassment (and presuming other groups memberships are equivalent) women's shared gender-group membership with the victim would facilitate their greater likelihood of taking the victim's perspective, which can facilitate empathy (Batson, Chang, Orr, & Rowland, 2002; Batson, Polycarpou, et al., 1997; Vescio, Sechrist, & Paolucci, 2003). Women's greater empathy for a female victim may in turn make them less likely than men to blame the victim (for a recent review on group membership as a basis for empathy, see Vanman, 2016).

According to social identity theory, people will generally take the perspective of those they consider ingroup (rather than outgroup) members within a given social context. However, the theory also specifies that typical patterns of ingroup-outgroup responding are not inevitable, and can be affected by a range of social factors including those that promote outgroup perspective-taking (Haslam & Reicher, 2012; Reicher, Cassidy, Wolpert, Hopkins, & Levine, 2006; Reicher, Haslam, & Smith, 2012; Reicher, Hopkins, Levine, & Rath, 2005). For instance, in relation to national identity (e.g., being Bulgarian), ingroups can be mobilized to protect vulnerable religious and ethnic outgroups (e.g., Bulgarian Jews during World War II) by political leaders who focus attention on the perspectives and experiences of those outgroups (Reicher et al., 2006)

In other research that has focused specifically on sexual harassment, Diehl et al. (2014; Study 2) found that when men read about a case of sexual harassment from the perspective of the female victim (compared to both a neutral control and an account from the male perpetrator's perspective) their endorsement of myths about sexual harassment were lower and equivalent to that of women. Diehl et al. (2014) speculated that this effect for men was likely due to outgroup perspective-taking leading to greater empathy for the female victim; however, they did not examine this empirically (for related research on the positive effect of outgroup perspective taking, see Batson et al., 2002; Batson, Polycarpou, et al., 1997).

The Role of Empathy for Male Perpetrators

Existing research examining the effects of empathy, including explaining why women are blamed for being sexually harassed, has primarily focused on its prosocial effects when it is directed towards victims or those in need. However, there are two perspectives in cases of male-to-female harassment—the female victim's and the male perpetrator's—which leaves open the possibility that men have more negative attitudes towards women who are sexually harassed because they are more likely than women to feel empathy for the male perpetrator's predicament. In research reported by Diehl et al. (2014; Study 2), participants were more likely to endorse myths about sexual harassment after reading about a case of sexual harassment from the male perpetrator's (compared to the female victim's) perspective, but the researchers attributed this finding to lesser empathy for female victims and did not consider possible effects of male-perpetrator empathy. To reduce men's greater likelihood of blaming women for being sexually harassed, addressing their greater empathy for male perpetrators may be just as important as promoting their empathy for female victims.

The need to consider how empathy for the male perpetrator could affect men's attitudes towards female victims is also consistent with the social identity perspective (Tajfel, 1978; Tajfel & Turner, 1986; Turner et al., 1987). As people derive an important part of their identities from their existing social groups, they are motivated to evaluate their ingroups as positive and moral (Leach, Ellemers, & Barreto, 2007; Tajfel & Turner, 1986). Accusations of ingroup wrong-doing, as in the case of a man's sexual harassment of a woman, may pose a threat to men's sense of their gender group as moral. To reduce this threat, men may afford male perpetrators the benefit of the doubt and interpret events in a way that is biased towards that perpetrator's perspective. Men may believe, for example, that the male perpetrator did not mean to cause harm, that what occurred was based on a misunderstanding, or that the allegations are false—accounts that are frequently provided by men defending allegations of sexual harassment in court (McDonald et al., 2010; Tata, 2000)

We argue that the role of male-perpetrator empathy has been overlooked in empirical research on responses to sexual harassment. However, existing research on responding to male-to-female sexual assault does support the notion that people can interpret events in a way that is biased towards the perspective of the ingroup male perpetrator, and that this can have negative implications for their attitudes and behaviors towards female victims. For instance, Bal and van den Bos (2010) found that male students were more likely to derogate, blame, and distance themselves from a female-rape victim when the male perpetrator was a fellow student rather than a professor or a working adult. Along similar lines, Bongiorno, McKimmie, and Masser (2016) found that both men and women were more likely to use common excuses for rape (e.g., a female victim's counter-normative behavior, such as their failure to forcefully resist their attacker) to help exonerate a male perpetrator who was from a culturally similar, rather than culturally dissimilar, background to themselves.

Overview of the Current Studies

In summary, we argue that understanding average gender differences in attitudes towards victims of male-to-female sexual harassment relies on understanding the effect that ingroup perspective-taking has on men's and women's empathy for both the female victim and the male perpetrator. We argue that women's shared gender-group membership with the victim facilitates their greater focus on her perspective, promoting greater victim empathy and reducing the likelihood that women will blame a woman for being sexually harassed. In a similar way, we argue that men's shared gender-group membership with a male perpetrator facilitates a greater focus on the male-perpetrator's perspective, prompting relatively greater empathy for that perpetrator (i.e., due to having to defend allegations of sexual harassment) and relatively greater blame of the female victim.

The social identity approach locates people's tendencies to take the perspectives of ingroup members as important for understanding their social responding. Consistent with this focus, we will also examine whether it is possible to shift the predicted participant gender differences in responding to male-to-female sexual harassment by asking men and women to focus on the perspective of either the male student or the female student before making their responses. Following the perspective-taking manipulation, we predict that differences in levels of empathy for the male perpetrator, the female victim, and victim blame will be a function of whose perspective participants focus on, rather than participant gender.

We conducted two studies to examine our hypotheses. In Study 1, we asked male and female participants to read a vignette describing a case of male-to-female sexual harassment, before completing measures of empathy for the female victim, the male perpetrator, and victim blame. In Study 2, we used the same vignette and measures as Study 1, but experimentally manipulated perspective-taking by asking participants to consider how the female student's allegations had affected the male student's life (male-perpetrator perspective), or to imagine how the male student's behavior had affected the female student's life (female-victim perspective). We predicted that men more than women (Study 1), or participants who focused on the male- rather than the female-student's perspective (Study 2), would report greater victim blame, and that this would be explained by their relatively greater perpetrator empathy independent of their relatively lesser victim empathy.

Study 1

In this study we chose the context of female students being sexually harassed by male students within a higher-education setting. Participants were self-identified male and female Australian university students who responded to a vignette describing a female student's serious allegation of sexual harassment against a male student living in the same residential college. We considered this scenario suitable for our research aims based on surveys in Australia (e.g., Australian Human Rights Commision, 2017) and other comparable countries (e.g., The United States, see Rosenthal et al., 2016) which show that male-to-female sexual harassment is a serious and prevalent issue in higher education. Victim blame is also common and contributes to very low reporting rates (i.e., less than 6% of those harassed had reported the abuse; Australian Human Rights Commision, 2017).

Study Design and Hypotheses

The measured variable of participant gender (male, female) represented the two levels of our design. Victim blame was our key outcome measure and male-perpetrator empathy and female-victim empathy were the mediators. We examined the prediction that compared to women, men would report greater victim blame (Hypothesis 1); and that men's greater propensity than women to blame the victim would be explained by their relatively lesser empathy for the female victim (Hypothesis 2a), and by their relatively greater empathy for the male perpetrator (Hypothesis 2b).

Method

The study was approved by a university ethical review committee and administered online. Participants demonstrated their consent at two points: (a) by clicking an icon to continue at the bottom of the online consent form; and (b) by submitting the completed survey. We kept personally identifying information (e.g., names and email addresses) separate from responses to manage risks associated with the potential for online confidentiality breaches. These procedures are in accordance with the guidelines established by the Board of Scientific Affairs Advisory Groups on conducting internet-based research (Kraut et al., 2004). We conducted analyses using IBM SPSS Statistics 23 software.

Participants. We advertised the survey as ‘Judgments about the Behavior of Students’ and targeted Australians currently enrolled as university students to complete the survey online. We advertised the survey to first year psychology students at an Australian university in the state of Queensland, using the SONA online management system connected to the School of Psychology’s Research Participation Scheme. We also advertised the survey through a page created on Facebook, which was shared throughout student networks via chain-referral sampling. Students from the School of Psychology Research Participation Scheme received course credit. Students recruited via the Facebook page were given the opportunity to be entered into a prize draw to win a $100 gift certificate.

We recruited 61 participants (14 men, 47 women) from the Psychology Research Participation Scheme. We initially recruited 46 participants through Facebook, however 4 recruits (1 man, 3 women) identified that they were not currently enrolled as students, so 42 participants recruited through Facebook were retained for the analysis (11 men, 31 women).

The vast majority of participants recruited through Facebook were students in Queensland (*n* = 39, 93%); the same state as those recruited through the Psychology Research Participation Scheme.

Our total number of participants for initial analyses was 103 (25 men; 78 women: M_{age} = 20.19 years, *SD* = 3.95). All participants were Australian citizens, and the majority (*n* = 98, 95%) had English as a first language. Eighteen participants (17%) had lived in university college residences, slightly more than the actual proportion (10%) of Australian students who live in university college residences (Australian Bureau of Statistics, 2013).

Materials and Procedure.

Instructions. Participants were provided with the following initial instructions: “This project is seeking input from Australian students concerning how Australian universities should deal with allegations of sexual harassment amongst students. You will be asked to read and respond to a case based on actual events. Please carefully read the following case before making your responses.”

Vignette. Following the instructions, participants were presented with the sexual harassment vignette. To ensure realism, our vignette was based on actual incidents of sexual harassment reported by female students in university college residences in Australia (Australian Human Rights Commision, 2011), and on cases of sexual harassment handled by the Australian Human Rights Commission (Australian Human Rights Commision, 2008, 2014). The scenario details also reflected the most typical male-to-female pattern of sexual harassment uncovered in the recent large-scale survey of Australian university students (Australian Human Rights Commision, 2017), which found that almost twice as many women (32%) as men (17%) had been sexually harassed on campus and harassers were: overwhelmingly male (77%); from the student population (68%); and that harassment commonly occurred in residential colleges (Australian Human Rights Commision, 2017).

The vignette was:

> An Australian female student reported being sexually harassed by an Australian male student who was living in the same college as her on campus. She alleged that the harassment occurred over the span of several months, taking place in several different locations, including corridors and in the dining and common rooms in the college. On the first day at the college, after being allocated rooms in the same corridor, the female student alleged that the male student came up behind her while she was unpacking and told her that she had a “really nice ass” and that he wouldn't mind if she came to his room whenever she felt like “having some fun” with him.
>
> The female student also claimed that whenever she was in the common room at the same time as the male student, he would come over and stand or sit as close as he could to her, often slapping her bum or attempting to put his arm around her waist. After asking him not to touch her, the female student claimed that she would often have to leave the common room, and that the male student would react by calling out after her that he was “just trying to get cosy” and that she “really needed to relax”. The female student also reported that the male student often made a point of sitting opposite her during dinner and would attempt to stroke her leg with his foot under the table and made sexual gestures at her, including licking his lips and sucking on his fingers.
>
> The female student also alleged that the male student had sent several pornographic images to her email, usually accompanied by explicit descriptions of sexual acts he wanted her to engage in with him.
>
> The female student claimed that on several occasions, the male student had also come back to the college after going out drinking, and would bang loudly on her door to be let in because he wanted a "cuddle". After refusing to unlock her door, the

> female student claimed that the male student would yell insults at her, accusing her of being "frigid" and "ugly".
>
> After repeatedly asking the male student to leave her alone, she finally sought help from a grievance officer in the college to intervene and stop the harassment. When spoken to by the grievance officer about his behaviour, the male student admitted to most of the allegations. However he insisted that he had only been "joking around" and was just trying to "liven things up a bit in college". He indicated that he had never meant to upset the female student and had actually thought she had "enjoyed the attention".

Measures. After reading the vignette, participants completed the dependent measures. We used multiple items for all measures and composite scores were calculated as means. Participants then completed the comprehension check, a suspicion check, and demographic items.

Victim empathy. First, we measured empathy for the female victim. Consistent with our definition of empathy as *empathic concern* (see Batson & Ahmad, 2009), the four items we used to measure empathy were: "empathy", "concern", "sympathy", and "compassion". We selected items with high face validity from previous studies (e.g., see Batson, Polycarpou, et al., 1997; de Vos, van Zomeren, Gordijn, & Postmes, 2013; Tarrant, Dazeley, & Cottom, 2009) and excluded those that were not clear measures of the construct (e.g., excluding "indifferent" (reverse scored) from de Vos et al. 2013 and "warm" from Batson et al., 1997).

Similar to previous studies (e.g., Batson, Polycarpou, et al., 1997), these empathy items were presented randomly along with 13 distractor items describing other emotion states (e.g., "anger", "disgust"). Participants were asked to indicate how much they experienced the following emotions towards the female student while reading about the case. Participants rated each item on a 7-point Likert-type scale from 1 (*not at all*) to 7 (*a great deal*).

For the current sample, Cronbach's alpha was .71 for scores on this 4-item empathy measure. This variable was negatively skewed (see Table 1) and where relevant for analyses (i.e., as a dependent variable in a *t*-test), we corrected for negative skew using a square-root transformation (*z*-score = 1.22; Tabachnick & Fidell, 2007). Results for the transformed and untransformed variable was nearly identical, with significance tests generating the same conclusions in all cases. For ease of interpretation, we report the results for the untransformed variable.

Perpetrator empathy. We used the same items to measure empathy for the male perpetrator, adapting the wording of the initial question by asking participants to indicate how much they experienced the following emotions towards the male student while reading about the case. Cronbach's alpha was .70 for scores on this 4-item measure of perpetrator empathy. This variable was positively skewed (see Table 1), which we corrected for using square-root transformation (*z*-score = 2.55) where relevant for analyses (i.e., as a dependent variable in a *t*-test). As the results for the transformed and untransformed variables were nearly identical, with significance tests generating the same conclusions in all cases, for ease of interpretation we report the results for the untransformed variable.

Victim blame. To measure the blame attributed to the female victim, we used four items based on a victim blame measure from Bongiorno et al. (2016). The original items assessed a victim's responsibility and provocative behaviors in a context of sexual assault (including mentioning rape). For the present study, we developed the items to assess judgments of responsibility and provocative behavior in response to our sexual harassment scenario. The items were: "It's likely that the female student flirted with the male student at some point"; "the female student should be willing to take some responsibility for what happened"; "the female student is unlikely to have encouraged the attention she received from the male student" (reverse scored); "It's very unlikely that the female student led the male student on" (reverse scored). These reflected the types of victim blaming reported in the survey into sexual harassment and assault at Australian universities, indicating high face validity (Australian Human Rights Commision, 2017, p. 161-2).

These items were randomized and embedded with a number of distractor items expressing opinions about the male and female student (e.g., "It's normal for male students to act this way towards female students"; "Most male students would not engage in this type of behavior"). Participants rated each item on a 7-point Likert-type scale from 1 (*strongly disagree*) to 7 (*strongly agree*). Cronbach's alpha for scores on this 4-item victim blame measure was .75.

Comprehension and suspicion checks. To check if participants had read to the end of the vignette, they were asked to indicate whether the male student admitted or denied most of the female student's allegations ("admit", "deny", "I can't remember"). To test for suspicion, participants were also asked to indicate what they thought the purpose of the study was. Because men and women can have different views of what constitutes sexual harassment, we also measured whether participants perceived the behavior of the male student as sexual harassment (i.e., "In your opinion, was the male student's behavior sexual harassment?" 1 = *no, not at all*, 7 = *yes, very much*).

Results

Data Analysis Plan. Our analyses followed three phases. First, we performed preliminary analyses on comprehension and suspicion checks. Second, we performed *t*-tests for Hypothesis 1 that men would report greater victim blame than women. Third, we ran multiple mediation analyses to test Hypotheses 2a and 2b that men's greater victim blame would be explained by their relatively lesser empathy for the female victim and by their relatively greater empathy for the male perpetrator.

Preliminary Analyses of Manipulations and Measures. Of the 103 Australian university students who were screened for inclusion in the initial analyses, we excluded 6 participants (4 women recruited from 1st Year and 2 women recruited from Facebook) who incorrectly answered the question about whether the male student admitted or denied most of the female student's allegations. No participants guessed the research aims in the suspicion check. This resulted in a final sample of 97 participants (25 men, 72 women). Using victim blame as the dependent variable, we used G*Power (Faul, Erdfelder, Lang, & Buchner, 2007) to perform a post-hoc power analysis, which indicated that even though the sample sizes of men and women differed, there was reasonable power (.78) to detect the observed Cohen's *d* of .64.

Ratings of whether the male student's behavior was perceived as sexual harassment approached the ceiling point of 7 (M = 6.35, SD = .90). Perceptions of the behavior as sexual harassment by men (M = 6.16, SD = .80) and women (M = 6.42, SD = .93) were not significantly different, t(95) = 1.23, df = 95, p = .22, 95% CI [-.16, .67].

Correlations. Table 1 shows correlations between the measures for male and female participants respectively. Victim blame was negatively correlated with female-victim empathy for both men and women, while male-perpetrator empathy was positively correlated with victim blame for women but not for men. Male-perpetrator and female-victim empathy were uncorrelated, confirming the appropriateness of examining their distinct effects. The highest correlations for both men and women were between victim blame and empathy for the female victim (r = -.55, r = -.37 respectively).

Main Analyses. To test Hypothesis 1, independent samples *t*-tests were conducted on victim blame (see Table 1 for Means [*SD*s] for male and female participants). Consistent with predictions, men were more likely to blame the victim than women were, t(95) = 2.65, p =. 01, 95% CI [1.24, .18,], Cohen's d = .64.

Examining Hypotheses 2a and 2b, we first compared levels of empathy (see means in Table 1). Men reported more empathy for the perpetrator than women, *t*(95) = 2.51, *p* = .014, 95% CI [.95, .11], Cohen's *d* = .56. For victim empathy, the difference in men's and women's empathy for the female victim was not statistically significant, *t*(95) = -1.70, *p* = .09, 95% CI [-.07, -.87], Cohen's *d* = .38 (See Table 1 for means).

The mediating roles of perpetrator and victim empathy were tested using multiple mediation with Hayes' (2013) PROCESS macro for SPSS (with 5000 bootstrap samples), including female-victim and male-perpetrator empathy as parallel mediators. As shown in Figure 1, when both mediators were entered into the model, the significant participant gender effect for victim blame became non-significant. Only the mediation effect through male-perpetrator empathy was significant, indicated by a 95% confidence interval not including zero (male-perpetrator empathy: mean indirect [unstandardized] effect = .17; *SE* = .11, 95% CI [.016, .482]; female-victim empathy: mean indirect [unstandardized] effect = .19; *SE* = .13 95% CI [-.014, .540]). That is, men's greater propensity than women to blame the female victim was mediated by their greater empathy for the male perpetrator, in support of Hypothesis 2b. Inconsistent with Hypothesis 2a, men's greater propensity than women to blame the victim was not mediated by their lesser empathy for the female victim.

Discussion

In Study 1, we tested our hypotheses that when responding to a case of male-to-female sexual harassment, gender differences in victim blame are explained by gender differences in empathy for the female victim and the male perpetrator. Consistent with Hypothesis 1, men were more likely than women to blame the victim. Inconsistent with Hypothesis 2a, men's relatively greater victim blame was not explained by their lesser empathy than women for the female victim. However, consistent with Hypothesis 2b, men greater feelings of empathy for the male perpetrator did help explain why they were more likely than women to blame the victim.

Even though empathy for the male perpetrator was significantly higher for male than female participants, for both men and women means for this measure were below the scale midpoint. While we cannot conclude that men felt strong perpetrator empathy overall, variation in empathy within this range was still consequential for victim blame. This suggests that even small changes in perpetrator empathy may influence people's judgements about culpability and responsibility. Such judgments may transfer into other practical outcomes, including reducing men's willingness to intervene as bystanders when they witness other men sexually harassing women, or to encourage women to make a formal complaint or access services (e.g., counselling) to overcome related trauma.

Empathy for the female victim was clearly associated with lesser victim blame, consistent with the positive effects of victim empathy outlined in the literature (e.g., Diehl et al., 2014; Batson & Ahmad, 2009). However, empathy for the female victim did not mediate the gender effect for victim blame because we did not find significant gender differences in female-victim empathy, which was high overall. This lack of significant gender difference suggests that men's empathy for female victims may be similar to women's in this type of scenario, even though men feel relatively greater empathy than women for a male perpetrator, and are thus more likely to blame woman for being sexually harassed.

Study 1 established a link between gender differences in male-perpetrator empathy and victim blame. However, if ingroup perspective-taking underlies average gender differences in responding to sexual harassment, it should be possible to shift male and female participant's typical patterns of responding by asking them to focus on the perspective of either the male or female student before making their responses.

Study 2

In Study 2, we used the same vignette and student population as Study 1, but this time, we experimentally manipulated perspective-taking by asking male and female participants to write a paragraph from the male- or female-student's perspective before making their responses. We predicted that participant's levels of empathy for the male perpetrator, the female victim and subsequent victim blame would vary as a function of whose perspective they focused on when considering the allegations. This prediction was also informed by findings reported in Study 2 of Diehl et al. (2014), whereby both men and women who read about a case of sexual harassment from the male-perpetrator's, rather than the female-victim's perspective, showed greater endorsement of myths about sexual harassment.

Study Design and Hypotheses

We implemented a 2 (perspective-taking: male student, female student) x 2 (participant gender: male, female) between-participants design. As in Study 1, victim blame was our key outcome measure and male-perpetrator empathy and female-victim empathy were the mediators. We examined the prediction that participants who considered the male perpetrator's (compared to the female victim's) perspective would report greater victim blame (Hypothesis 3). We proposed that this would be explained by their relatively lesser empathy for the female victim (Hypothesis 4a), and by their relatively greater empathy for the male perpetrator (Hypothesis 4b).

Method

A university ethical review committee approved Study 2, which was administered online. Participant consent and the management of risks associated with online confidentiality breaches were identical to Study 1.

Sample size determination. We used the effect size for victim blame from Study 1 (Cohen's d = .64) as our best proxy indicator of the perspective-taking effect. A power analysis using G*Power (Faul et al., 2007), recommended a sample of 62 to replicate the Study 1 effect with power equal to .80. While we did not predict participant gender effects, we estimated a sample size to examine participant gender interactions based on a medium effect (f = .25), resulting in a recommended sample of 128. We aimed for a sample 30% higher than this to account for unequal cell sizes and failures on the comprehension, suspicion and manipulation checks.

Participants. Our recruitment and reimbursement methods were similar to Study 1, which we conducted in the previous academic year. We initially recruited 122 participants (30 men, 92 women) through a similar Facebook page to Study 1, which was shared by a different co-author to a new network of student connections. Six of these recruits (2 men, 7 women) were excluded for not being students. To avoid contamination effects, a further 2 (women) were excluded because they indicated that they had recently completed another study about sexual harassment being run in parallel with the current study. Thus, we retained 111 participants recruited through Facebook (28 males, 83 females) for analyses, the vast majority of whom were students in the state of Queensland (n = 101, 91%). We also recruited 61 participants from the new student cohort on the Psychology Research Participation Scheme (30 men, 31 women). When we became aware that the overall quota for women had been passed, we restricted further data collection to men in the Psychology Research Participation Scheme, without making this explicit to participants, and this is why the proportion of men from this sample was higher than in Study 1. Thus, the total sample was 172 (58 men; 114 women: M_{age} = 19.73 years, SD = 1.75). That vast majority (n = 159, 92.4%) were Australian citizens and had English as a first language (n =158, 91.9%). One-hundred and four participants (60.5%) had lived in residential colleges, a higher proportion than Study 1 due to a co-author sharing the Facebook page for the survey throughout a network of students living in college residences.

Materials and Procedure.

Instructions and vignette. Participants were given the same initial instructions and vignette as Study 1. We incorporated the following additional instructions for the perspective-taking manipulation, adapted from Batson et al. (1997): “As you read the case, we want you to try and take the perspective of the [female/male] student described. Please try to imagine how the [female/male] student would be feeling about the [male student’s behavior/female student's allegations] and how it has affected [her/his life]. After reading the case, you will be asked to write a brief paragraph from the [female/male] student’s perspective.” After reading the vignette, participants were asked to: “Please now take a minute or two to write about the case you just read from the perspective of the [female/male] student described. We would like you to write down how you think the [female/male] student would be feeling about the [male student’s behavior/female student's allegations] and how it would affect [her/his] life.”

Measures. Following the vignette, participants completed identical measures to Study 1. Participants completed the items measuring empathy for the male perpetrator first (α = .72), followed by items measuring empathy for the female victim (α = .78) followed by the victim blame items (α = .72).

As in Study 1, the scale measuring empathy for the male perpetrator was significantly positively skewed and the scale measuring empathy for the female victim was significantly negatively skewed (see Table 2 for the Skewness index for each variable). In each case, we corrected for skew using square-root transformation (perpetrator empathy z-score = 1.29; victim empathy z-score = 1.90). Results for the transformed and untransformed variables were nearly identical, with significance tests generating the same conclusions in all but one case. We report the results for the untransformed variables for ease of interpretation, noting the one difference below.

After our key measures, which were also embedded amongst a number of distractor items as in Study 1, participants completed the same measures as Study 1 for whether the actions were sexual harassment, the comprehension check, the suspicion check, and demographic items. Participants recruited through Facebook were also asked to indicate whether they had recently completed another study on sexual harassment via a link on Facebook that we were running in parallel with the current study.

Results

Data Analysis Plan. As in Study 1, our analyses followed three phases. First, we performed preliminary analyses on comprehension and suspicion checks and measures. In the second phase, we performed ANOVAs (analyses of variance) to test Hypothesis 3 that participants who considered the male perpetrator's (rather than the female victim's) perspective would endorse greater victim blame. These analysis would also allow us to examine if there were any main or interaction effects for participant gender. In the third phase, we ran multiple mediation analyses to test Hypothesis 4a and 4b that greater victim blame shown by participants who considered the male perpetrator's (rather than the female victim's) perspective would be explained by their relatively lesser empathy for the female victim and relatively greater empathy for the male perpetrator

Preliminary Analyses of Manipulations and Measures. Of the 172 Australian university students who satisfied the screening criteria, 18 were excluded (1 man and 4 women from the Research Participation Scheme and 2 men and 11 women from Facebook) because they incorrectly answered the question about whether the male student admitted or denied most of the female student's allegations, strongly suggesting that they had not read the full scenario.

Next, we examined whether participants passed the perspective-taking manipulation check. Of the remaining 154 participants, the majority (*n* = 135, 87.7%) passed this check (e.g., male student perspective-taking: “*I think the male student would be quite shocked by the allegations from the female student. He seemed to be having ‘a bit’ of fun and didn’t mean to insult the female student. He would also feel quite upset that it has been taken to this level which is now a serious matter.*”; female student perspective-taking: “*The female would be feeling abused and uncomfortable, and basically unsafe in her own environment. Furthermore, as she is forced to deal with this person in a college environment (where it may seem ‘uncool’ to speak out about it, she would feel alone and helpless to stop the harassment.*”).

Participants who failed the perspective-taking manipulation check either wrote very little, made judgmental remarks, and/or took the alternative perspective (e.g., failed male perspective-taking who also took the victim’s perspective: “*The male student would possibly feel threatened and could put the rest of his life in jeopardy. Although I think its fair, what the woman did according to her situation - considering the female gave the offender knowledge that what he was doing was wrong and she didn't like it. The male offender deserves what he gets.*”; failed female perspective-taking: “*She never really told me she didn’t like what I was doing, and now everyone thinks I’m a weirdo*”. Across the two experimental conditions, similar numbers of male and female participants failed the perspective-taking manipulation check (e.g., failed female student perspective-taking: 4 men, 3 women; failed male student perspective-taking: 4 men, 8 women). No participants guessed the research aims in the suspicion check. This resulted in a final sample of 135 participants (47 men, 88 women), including 68 participants (23 men, 45 women) in the female student perspective-taking condition, and 67 participants (24 men, 43 women) in the male student perspective-taking condition.

The male student’s behavior was clearly perceived as sexual harassment (M = 6.01, SD = 1.10). Using a 2 (perspective-taking: male student, female student) x 2 (participant gender: male, female) between groups analysis of variance to identify differences on this measure, there was a significant main effect for perspective-taking: $F(1, 131) = 4.96$, $p = .028$, $\eta_p^2 = .036$, with participants in the female student perspective-taking condition ($M = 6.25$, $SD = .85$) agreeing more strongly than those in the male student perspective-taking condition that the male students' behavior was sexual harassment ($M = 5.76$, $SD = 1.26$). There was no main effect for participant gender $F(1, 131) = .12$, $p = .731$, $\eta_p^2 = .001$, and the interaction was not significant $F(1, 131) = .850$, $p = .358$, $\eta_p^2 = .006$.

Correlations. Table 2 shows correlations between the measures for participants in the male student versus female student perspective-taking conditions. Victim blame was negatively correlated with victim empathy for participants who took the female student's perspective, but not for participants who took the male student's perspective. In both perspective-taking conditions, victim blame was positively correlated with male-perpetrator empathy. As in Study 1, male-perpetrator empathy and female-victim empathy were uncorrelated in both perspective-taking conditions, confirming the appropriateness of examining their distinct effects. The highest correlation in the female student perspective-taking condition was between female-victim empathy and victim blame ($r = -.37$). In the male student perspective-taking condition, the highest correlation was between male-perpetrator empathy and victim blame ($r = .35$).

Main Analyses. We performed an analysis of variance (ANOVA), using a 2 (perspective-taking: male student, female student) x 2 (participant gender: men, women) design, for the key measure of victim blame. Supporting Hypothesis 3, there was a significant main effect of perspective-taking on victim blame (see means in Table 2). Participants who took the male student's perspective attributed greater blame to the victim than participants who took the female student's perspective, $F(1, 131) = 5.50$, $p = .021$, $\eta_p^2 = .04$, 95% CI (Mean difference) [.10, .88]. The main effect for participant gender on victim blame was not significant, with a similar level for men ($M = 3.03$, $SD = 1.25$) and for women ($M = 3.09$, $SD = 1.15$), $F(1, 131) = .11$, $p = .737$, $\eta_p^2 = .01$. The interaction between participant gender and perspective-taking was also not significant, $F(1, 131) = 1.50$, $p = .222$, $\eta_p^2 = .011$.

To examine Hypotheses 4a and 4b, we first conducted preliminary analyses to establish how perspective-taking and participant gender were related to male perpetrator and female-victim empathy. For each empathy measure we used a 2 (perspective-taking: male student, female student) x 2 (participant gender: male, female) analysis of variance, with both factors between-subjects. For male-perpetrator empathy there was a main effect of perspective-taking (see means in Table 2), with participants who took the male student's perspective reporting significantly more empathy for the male perpetrator than participants who took the female student's perspective, $F(1, 131) = 20.11$, $p = < .001$, $\eta_p 2 = .13$, 95% CI (Mean difference) [.49, 1.18]. The main effect for participant gender was not significant, with men's and women's empathy for the male perpetrator not differing significantly: ($M = 2.86$, $SD = 1.22$ and $M = 2.64$, $SD = 1.02$ respectively) $F(1, 131) = 1.18$, $p = .279$, $\eta_p^2 = .01$. The interaction between participant gender and perspective-taking was also not significant, $F(1, 131) = 2.11$ $p = .149$, $\eta_p^2 = .02$.

For victim empathy, there was a significant main effect of perspective taking (see means in Table 2), with participants who took the female student's perspective reporting significantly more empathy for the victim than participants who took the male student's perspective, $F(1, 131) = 4.17$, $p = .043$, $\eta_p 2 = .03$, 95% CI (Mean difference) [-.76, -.02]. However, this difference was not significant using the transformed variable ($p = .072$). The main effect for participant gender was not significant, with women's and men's empathy for the female not differing significantly ($M = 5.53$, $SD = 1.19$ and $M = 5.53$, $SD = .92$ respectively), $F(1, 131) = .00$, $p = .983$, $\eta_p^2 = .00$. The interaction between participant gender and perspective-taking was also not significant, $F(1, 131) = .03$, $p = .861$, $\eta_p^2 = .00$.

To test the full mediation effects of male-perpetrator and female-victim empathy for the link between perspective-taking and victim blame (Hypotheses 4a and 4b), multiple mediation analyses using Hayes' (2013) PROCESS macro for SPSS (using 5000 bootstrap samples) were performed, with male-perpetrator empathy and female-victim empathy as parallel mediators. Bootstrapping is a more robust technique and does not rely on normally distributed variables (Erceg-Hurn & Mirosevich, 2008), so we used the untransformed empathy measures. For female-victim empathy, even though the main effect of perspective-taking was not significant in the ANOVA after correcting for skew, this main effect was significant when we used bootstrapping (p = .037, see Figure 2). Bias corrected 95% confidence intervals for both female-victim empathy (mean indirect [unstandardized] effect = .12; SE = .06 95% CI [.013, .251]) and male-perpetrator empathy (mean indirect [unstandardized] effect = .26; SE = .13, 95% CI [.076, .571]) did not include zero, showing that both were significant mediators. As shown in Figure 2, when both mediators were entered into the model, the significant direct effect of perspective-taking on victim blame became non-significant, suggesting full mediation. Thus, greater victim blame for participants who took the male (as opposed to the female) student's perspective was explained by both their lesser empathy for the female victim and their greater empathy for the male perpetrator.

Discussion

In Study 2, we experimentally manipulated perspective-taking by asking participants to focus on either the male or the female student's perspective before making their responses. Consistent with our predictions, we found that participants who took the perspective of the male student accused of sexual harassment, rather than the female student who was the target of the harassment, attributed relatively more blame to that victim (Hypothesis 3). Mediation analyses demonstrated that this occurred because participants who considered the male-perpetrator's perspective felt relatively less empathy for the female victim (Hypothesis 4a) and relatively greater empathy for the male perpetrator (Hypothesis 4b). There were no main effects or interactions for participant gender for any of our key measures.

The findings replicate the Study 1 results for perpetrator empathy and highlight why men may show greater victim blame as a result of a greater focus on the male perpetrator's (as opposed to the female victim's) perspective. Higher mean scores for male perpetrator empathy for participants who took his perspective were not indicative of high levels of empathy for that perpetrator. Nevertheless, the mean for that condition ($M = 3.1$) was closer to the scale midpoint of 4 on a 1 to 7 Likert-type scale than the lowest point. Moreover, the perspective taking manipulation had a much stronger effect on perceptions of the perpetrator than of the victim, with effect sizes for the perspective-taking manipulation four times larger for perpetrator empathy than for victim empathy. Thus, even in response to allegations involving an unambiguous case of sexual harassment, participants thought the female victim was more blameworthy arising from their greater empathy for the male perpetrator after considering his, rather than the victim's perspective.

The effect of perspective-taking on empathy for the female victim, while weaker than the effect shown for empathy for the male perpetrator, was also consistent with our hypotheses, showing that empathy for a female victim is important for explaining lesser victim blame, and is facilitated by a greater focus on the victim's (as opposed to the perpetrator's) perspective.

General Discussion

The goal of this research was to examine how empathy—both for a female victim of sexual harassment and for a male perpetrator—influences men's and women's likelihood of blaming the victim for being harassed. Our predictions were derived from the social identity perspective, which considers how group-based affiliations and ingroup perspective-taking affects social responding. We expected that relatively lesser empathy for a female victim and relatively greater empathy for a male perpetrator would be exhibited by men compared to women (Study 1), and by participants who took the male-perpetrator's rather than the female-victim's perspective (Study 2), and that both would be important for explaining greater victim blame. We found partial support for our predictions relating to empathy for a female victim, and full support for our predictions relating to empathy for a male perpetrator.

Overall, our findings suggest that in cases of male-to-female sexual harassment, ingroup perspective-taking based on men's shared gender category with the male perpetrator could predispose them to feel relatively more empathy for the male perpetrator and relatively less empathy for the female victim than women. In Study 1, men's greater tendency to endorse victim blame was explained by their greater empathy for the male perpetrator, but not by their lesser empathy for the female victim. This finding suggests that men need not feel lesser empathy for a female victim than women to feel relatively greater empathy for a male perpetrator and to thereby be more likely than women to blame a woman for being sexually harassed.

In Study 2, we examined whether a perspective-taking manipulation would affect men's and women's responding. The social identity approach outlines a range of social factors that can transform typical patterns of ingroup-outgroup responding, including those that promote outgroup perspective-taking (Reicher, 2004; Reicher et al., 2006; Reicher et al., 2005). Consistent with this view, we found that male and female participants asked to take the perspective of the male student accused of sexual harassment, rather than the female student who had been the target of abuse, reported relatively greater empathy for the male perpetrator and relatively less empathy for the female victim, with both helping to explain their greater tendency to blame the victim.

In both studies, there was no correlation between female-victim empathy and male-perpetrator empathy, underscoring the importance of examining their distinct effects on victim blame. However, men asked to focus on the female victim's perspective (as opposed the male perpetrator's perspective), in Study 2 had relatively less empathy for the male perpetrator and relatively more empathy for the female victim and they blamed the female victim less. There is a corollary for women, though, as Study 2 also showed that women prompted to consider the male perpetrator's perspective (as opposed to the female victim's perspective) had relatively more empathy for the male perpetrator, relatively less empathy for the female victim and blamed the victim more.

These findings are based on a clear-cut case of sexual harassment, whereby the male perpetrator admitted to most of the alleged behaviors, and participants recognized his behaviors were sexual harassment. While it cannot be concluded that participants felt a strong amount of empathy for the male perpetrator, the effect that participant gender (Study 1) and perspective-taking (Study 2) had on perpetrator empathy was clear across studies and was consequential for victim blame. Indeed, means for victim blame were above 3 on a 1 to 7 Likert-type scale for men in Study 1, and for those who took the male-student's perspective in Study 2, with standard deviations above 1 indicating sizeable variation in scores. In a less clear-cut case of sexual harassment, including where the male perpetrator denies the allegations or where details are not fully disclosed, it is possible that empathy for the male perpetrator would be higher than was found here, and lead to even greater levels of blame towards female victims.

Our novel findings relating to empathy for male perpetrators highlight the importance of examining its influence on how both men and women respond to allegations of male-to-female sexual harassment. Men accused of sexual harassment and other forms of sexual violence against women have generally not been considered acceptable or likely targets of empathy (see Batson, Polycarpou, et al., 1997 for a discussion of the improbability of inducing empathy for perpetrators of gender-based violence, p. 116). However, more recent research has uncovered that a lack of support for female victims is related to views of the male perpetrator, including a belief that ‘good guys’ do not rape (Martinez, Wiersma-Mosley, Jozkowski, & Becnel, 2018; McKimmie, Masser, & Bongiorno, 2014). The current findings extend this work by showing that feeling empathy for men who sexually harass women based on taking the male perpetrator’s perspective is an important factor in helping to explain why women are likely to be blamed for their own sexual harassment, especially by men, but also by women where the male-perpetrator’s perspective and outcomes become a focus.

Practice Implications

Many interventions to tackle male violence against women and promote men’s positive bystander behavior currently use strategies to increase men’s empathy for women by encouraging them to focus on the woman’s perspective and experiences (Banyard, Eckstein, & Moynihan, 2010; Foubert, Godin, & Tatum, 2009; Zapp, Buelow, Soutiea, Berkowitz, & Dejong, 2018). Our findings suggest that it may be equally important for interventions and social-change campaigns to be focused on reducing empathy for male perpetrators. This could be achieved by challenging myths that women provoke men’s sexual harassment or often lie about being sexually harassed (see Lonsway et al., 2008). The ‘I Believe Her’ campaign (Brown, 2018) is one such effort, with this slogan being used as a hashtag on social media to counter claims in high-profile cases that men accused of sexual violence are likely to be the victims of women’s false accusations. Additional efforts that may be effective for reducing empathy for male perpetrators include challenging media reports that give undue prominence to their professional accomplishments or that focus on how the man’s life will be negatively affected if there is a finding of sexual violence against him (LaChance, 2016).

Another important practice implication stemming from our findings for male perpetrator empathy are that they can be used to improve how complaints of sexual harassment are handled within universities and other organizations. To ensure that appropriate action is taken against male harassers, organizations may need to implement training to ensure that decision makers, who are often other men, are made aware of this potential bias and trained to not be unduly influenced by their empathy for that perpetrator. Additional steps to ensure a collegial relationship does not exist between decision makers and the accused are also likely to be necessary. This may be especially important in cases where students are sexually harassed by members of staff and concern for the fellow staff member (and their career) outweighs concern for the welfare of students (for related report findings, see Bull & Rye, 2018).

Limitations and Future Directions

In the current research, we examined our hypotheses in a university student context with student samples who self-selected to participate in research about sexual harassment. Thus, one limitation is that we cannot determine if their responses are representative of the larger student population. Although we did not gather this information, it is possible that student's familiar with the issue of sexual harassment (e.g., because they had experienced it themselves or knew of someone who had), or with a more feminist outlook, were more likely to participate. Their responses may therefore be different—and potentially more muted in terms of the effects of perpetrator empathy and victim blame—to students who chose not to participate.

Future research should also examine whether empathy for male perpetrators is important for understanding why women are blamed for being sexually harassed in alternative populations and contexts, including in cases where women are sexually harassed in the workplace (Ilies et al., 2003) and online (Barak, 2005; Megarry, 2014). Examining reactions to different types of sexual harassment (see, Fitzgerald, Gelfand, & Drasgow, 1995; Fitzgerald et al., 1988; Lim & Cortina, 2005) will also be important for establishing the generalizability of our findings. The scenario used in the current research involved unwanted sexual attention aimed at establishing a sexual relationship amongst peers. Future research is needed to examine the effect of empathy for men who sexually harass women they are in a position of power over, such as a male boss who harasses a female employee, or in rarer and more severe cases involving sexual coercion (i.e., where bribery or force is used, see Fitzgerald et al., 1988; Langhout et al., 2005).

Beyond the issue of victim blame, examining other responses to male-to-female sexual harassment will also enhance our understanding of the effects of empathy for male perpetrators. For instance, it may also help to explain when people are willing to be involved in a cover up of the abuse, such as by discouraging woman from lodging a formal complaint or by highlighting the risks to them for doing so (Cesario, Parks-Stamm, & Turgut, 2018). Male-perpetrator empathy may also help explain endorsement of other myths about sexual harassment, such as why people doubt a women's claims that they were sexually harassed, or downplay the harm it caused (Lonsway et al., 2008). Future research can also examine outcomes relating to the male perpetrator, including assessing the extent to which they are considered blameworthy and what punishment is considered appropriate (McDonald et al., 2010).

Future research should also examine how people's endorsement of traditional gender-role beliefs (e.g., benevolent sexism, see Glick & Fiske, 1996) or their general endorsement of group based dominance and inequality (e.g., social dominance orientation, see Pratto, Sidanius, Stallworth, & Malle, 1994) influences the pattern of results for participant gender (Study 1) and perspective-taking (Study 2) shown here. Existing research shows that sexism is a significant predictor of victim blame for male-to-female sexual harassment (De Judicibus

& McCabe, 2001). It therefore follows that an individual (either male or female) who is high in sexism or who believes in the primacy of some groups over others, would also be inclined to show greater empathy for a male perpetrator or more resistant to instructions to focus on the female-victim's perspective. Alternatively, individuals low in sexism, or who do not believe in the primacy of some groups over others, may show greater empathy for victims and be more resistant to instructions to focus on the male-perpetrator's perspective.

In the current research, we focused on the most common form of sexual harassment: male-to-female. Thus, our findings cannot be generalized beyond a victim who is female and a perpetrator who is male. In addition to the need to replicate the current findings using this particular intersection of identities, future research is need to determine whether alternative intersections of gender with the victim and perpetrator categories influences the pattern of results shown here. In a case of female-to-male sexual harassment, it is possible that women may feel more empathy for the perpetrator than men because the same ingroup bias shown by men when the perpetrator is male may also be shown by women when the perpetrator is female. For men responding to allegations of male-to-male sexual harassment, their level of perpetrator empathy may rely more on beliefs about their own likelihood of being a target (for related theorising, see Foubert et al., 2009; Schewe, 2002).

Beyond gender, the implications of other types of intersectionality of the victim and perpetrator categories, including their national or ethnic backgrounds should also be examined. In the current research, we deliberately left the ethnicity of the victim and perpetrator ambiguous, describing them only as “Australian students”. However, it is possible that varying the nationality or ethnicity of the victim and the perpetrator may also affect the how people respond. For instance, where an ethnic majority man is accused of sexual harassment by a woman from an ethnic minority rather than the ethnic majority, ethnic similarity to the perpetrator (and ethnic dissimilarity to the victim) may result in ethnic majority men and women feeling relatively more perpetrator empathy, along with relatively lesser victim empathy, and to endorse victim blame more (for related findings involving sexual assault allegations, see Bongiorno et al., 2016).

The current research focused on (male-to-female) sexual harassment but beyond this form of abuse, perpetrator empathy may be important for explaining inadequate support for victims of other forms of abuse, including domestic violence and child sexual abuse. In light of recently exposed cover-up of child sexual abuse within religious institutions (Commonwealth of Australia Royal Commission into Institutioanl Responses to Child Sexual Abuse, 2017), and police failures to protect women from men's sexual violence (Parratt & Pina, 2017), it would be valuable to examine whether concern for the perpetrator's predicament—in addition to a lack of empathy for victims—can help explain inadequate support received by victims more generally.

Concluding Comment

The #MeToo campaign has highlighted the extent to which the sexual harassment of women by men is an ongoing obstacle to gender equality. Adequately responding to this form of abuse relies on understanding and ultimately overcoming victim-blaming and other related attitudes, which are more likely to be endorsed by men than women (Lonsway et al., 2008). While previous research has highlighted the importance of increasing empathy for victims to facilitate more pro-social responding (Batson & Ahmad, 2009), we have shown that empathy for a male perpetrator contributes to increased victim blame in a clear case of sexual harassment. Perpetrator empathy is typically higher in men (when considering male perpetrators), but it can be increased among women when they take the perspective of a male perpetrator. A greater focus on this negative side to empathy is warranted, and will help us understand why women who are victims of sexual harassment are often blamed, rather than supported, when they experience abuse.

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Table 1

Study 1 Descriptive Statistics and Correlations for Victim Blame, Female-Victim Empathy and Male-Perpetrator Empathy

Study 1	Range	Skewness index^	*M* (*SD*)		1	2	3
			Men	Women			
1. Victim blame	1-5.75	1.34	3.15 (1.03)	2.44 (1.20)	–	-.37**	.28*
2. Victim empathy	2.75-7	-3.31	5.33 (1.10)	5.73 (.98)	-.55**	–	.04
3. Perpetrator empathy	1-4.75	4.18	2.35 (1.02)	1.82 (.87)	.12	-.07	–

Note. Correlations for men reported on bottom left and for women on top right. ^Skewness index is the Skewness statistic divided by its standard error.

*$p < .05$. **$p < .01$.

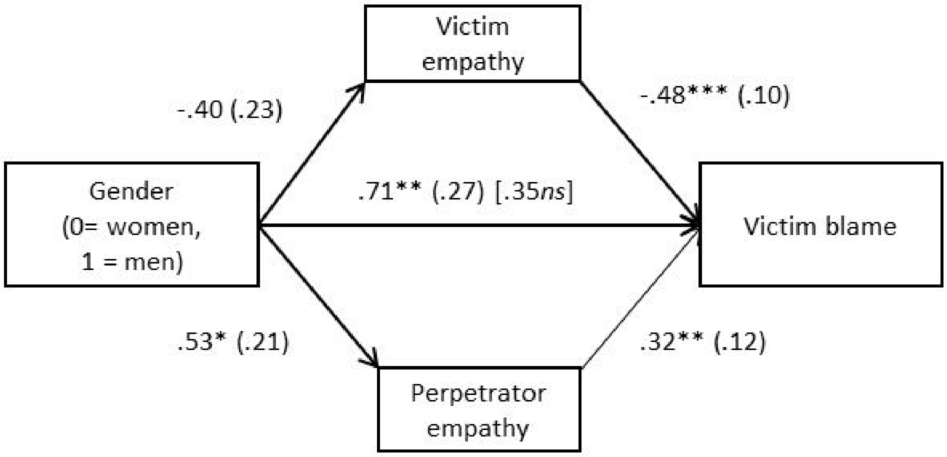
Table 2

Study 2 Descriptive Statistics and Correlations for Victim Blame, Female-Victim Empathy and Male-Perpetrator Empathy

Study 2	Range	Skewness index^	*M* (*SD*)		1	2	3
			Male Perspective	Female Perspective			
1. Victim blame	1-6.5	1.67	3.35 (1.24)	2.79 (1.05)	–	-.37**	.26*
2. Victim empathy	2.25-7	-3.75	5.33 (1.19)	5.72 (.97)	-.17	–	.02
3. Perpetrator empathy	1-6.25	4.00	3.10 (1.04)	2.34 (1.03)	.35**	.02	–

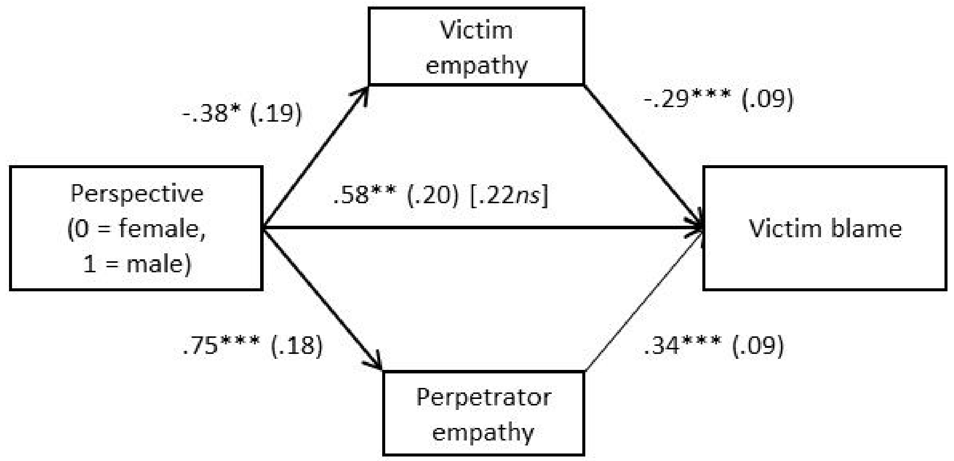
Note. Correlations for male perspective reported on bottom left and for female perspective on top right. ^Skewness index is the Skewness statistic divided by its standard error

**p* < .05. ***p* < .01.


Victim empathy
-.40 (.23)
-.48*** (.10)
Gender (0= women, 1 = men)
.71** (.27) [.35*ns*]
Victim blame
.53* (.21)
.32** (.12)
Perpetrator empathy

Note. Unstandardized coefficients (SE); *ns* = non significant.
**p* < .05 , ***p* < .01, ****p* < .001.

Figure 1. Mediation model from Study 1 showing the effect of participant gender on victim blame mediated by empathy for the female victim and empathy for the male perpetrator.


Victim empathy
-.38* (.19)
-.29*** (.09)
Perspective (0 = female, 1 = male)
.58** (.20) [.22*ns*]
Victim blame
.75*** (.18)
.34*** (.09)
Perpetrator empathy

Note. Unstandardized coefficients (SE); *ns* = non-significant
*$p < .05$, **$p < .01$, ***$p < .001$

Figure 2. Mediation model from Study 2 showing the effect of perspective-taking on victim blame mediated by empathy for the female victim and empathy for the male perpetrator.