

*In press, Psychological Science*

**Who's the “real” victim? How victim framing shapes attitudes towards sexual assault**

Stephen J. Flusberg<sup>1</sup>

James van der Vord<sup>2</sup>

Sarah Q. Husney<sup>2</sup>

Kevin J. Holmes<sup>3</sup>

<sup>1</sup>Department of Psychology, SUNY Purchase College

<sup>2</sup>Department of Psychology, Colorado College

<sup>3</sup>Department of Psychology, Reed College

**Acknowledgments**

We would like to thank our reviewers and editor, as well as Paul Thibodeau and Nan Elpers for helpful feedback on earlier drafts of this paper. We would also like to thank Casey Pollard and Olivia Schultz for their help developing some of the initial ideas explored in this paper.

Experiment 1 was presented at the 31<sup>st</sup> Annual Convention of the Association for Psychological Science and the 41<sup>st</sup> Annual Conference of the Cognitive Science Society, and archived as abstracts in the conference proceedings.

### Abstract

People accused of sexual assault are often described as the “real” victim by their defenders, but the impact of “victim framing” on public opinion is unknown. We investigated this issue across four experiments ( $N = 2,614$ ). Online U.S. participants read a report about an alleged sexual assault that framed the female accuser as the victim (of assault), the male alleged perpetrator as the victim (of false accusations), or was neutral about victimhood (baseline). Relative to baseline, participants generally expressed more support for the victim-framed protagonist and less support for the other protagonist. The consistency of these effects varied with how often the victim frame was instantiated and whether the report described a fictionalized or real-world case. Across all contexts, however, participants who identified the victim-related language as influencing their evaluations exhibited strong framing effects. This suggests social-pragmatic reasoning is a key mechanism by which victim framing shapes moral judgments.

*Keywords:* victim framing, victim blaming, communication, language and thought, moral evaluation, social-pragmatic reasoning

### Statement of Relevance

The widespread practice of blaming victims of sexual assault for what happened to them has received increased scrutiny in the wake of the #MeToo movement. But this is not the only way in which supporters of an alleged assailant attempt to mitigate blame and punishment. We provide the first systematic investigation of victim *framing*—the act of describing an alleged perpetrator as the “real” victim—a rhetorical strategy frequently deployed by accused assailants and their defenders in response to assault allegations. Our findings reveal that victim framing shapes attitudes towards the individuals involved in assault cases by prompting observers to infer that the victim label was chosen intentionally to signal who deserves support. This research advances our understanding of linguistic framing, has significant real-world implications for how we communicate about sexual assault and other crimes, and will be of interest to scientists, journalists, lawyers, victim advocates, and the general public.

**Who's the “real” victim? How victim framing shapes attitudes towards sexual assault**

In a confidential July 2018 letter leaked to the media, Dr. Christine Blasey Ford alleged that U.S. Supreme Court nominee Brett Kavanaugh sexually assaulted her at a party in the 1980s. On September 16, Ford spoke publicly about her accusations, providing a detailed account of the event and its aftermath—an account she reaffirmed under oath before the Senate Judiciary Committee. On September 21, the conservative-leaning *Washington Times* published an article with the headline, “*Christine Blasey Ford is not the victim here—Brett Kavanaugh is*” (Chumley, 2018). Kavanaugh was confirmed on October 6.

This is hardly the first time an alleged perpetrator of sexual assault has been cast by their defenders as the “real” victim in an effort to mitigate blame. This rhetorical device, which we call *victim framing*, is distinct from the more frequently discussed act of *victim blaming*: holding the victim of a crime responsible for what happened to them, often by citing their behavior (e.g., choice of clothing) as a cause of the attack (Niemi, 2017). The apparent goal of *victim framing*, by contrast, is to directly foster empathy for the perpetrator. This is arguably justifiable in cases where the alleged perpetrator is innocent. However, false allegations of sexual assault are rare (2-10% of cases; Lisak et al., 2010), and *victim framing* can also be deployed by guilty parties as a bid for public support. Despite anecdotal evidence for its increasing prevalence in the #MeToo era (Hesse, 2019), *victim framing* has received little attention from researchers. Whether it has any measurable impact on how people evaluate sexual assault cases is an open question.

On the one hand, decades of research have shown that subtle linguistic cues shape reasoning (e.g., Holmes et al., 2021; Loftus & Palmer, 1974; Thibodeau & Boroditsky, 2011; Tversky & Kahneman, 1981). Casting perpetrators as victims might encourage people to view

them through that lens, leading to increased support. On the other hand, victim framing could have the opposite effect if observers suspect the alleged perpetrator is merely evading responsibility for their actions. It might also backfire if the victim label focuses observers' attention on the perpetrator, which has been shown to make their accuser seem less blameworthy (Niemi & Young, 2016).

In light of recent high-profile instances of victim framing, the lack of targeted research on the topic, and diverging predictions about its efficacy, we set out to systematically assess the effects of victim framing and the mechanisms that drive them. All materials and data, including preregistered methods and analysis plans for Experiments 2-4, are available on the Open Science Framework: <https://osf.io/dytjb/>

## **Experiment 1**

### **Method**

#### **Participants**

We recruited a convenience sample of 606 participants through Amazon's Mechanical Turk (Buhrmester et al., 2011). We aimed for 100 participants per condition, comparable to other linguistic framing studies. Participants in all experiments were located in the U.S., at least 18 years old, and reliable MTurk performers ( $\geq 95\%$  rating). Table 1 shows participant demographic data. All experiments received IRB approval.

**Table 1: Demographic data for all experiments**

	<b>Experiment 1</b>	<b>Experiment 2</b>	<b>Experiment 3</b>	<b>Experiment 4</b>
Month of data collection	December 2018	July 2019	August 2019	August 2019
<i>N</i> (sampled/analyzed)	606 / 606	847 / 808	615 / 599	626 / 601
% female/male	44% / 56%	46% / 53%	47% / 53%	47% / 52%
Mean age ( <i>SD</i> )	n/a	36.4 (11.7)	35.6 (10.6)	36.8 (11.6)
% by race/ethnicity	73% White, 9% Black, 6% Asian, 5% Latinx, 5% multiracial	71% White, 10% Black, 10% Asian, 5% Latinx, 4% multiracial	71% White, 12% Black, 6% Asian, 6% Latinx, 4% multiracial	66% White, 15% Black, 7% Asian, 6% Latinx, 5% multiracial
% Democrat/Republican	45% / 28%	48% / 23%	51% / 20%	45% / 26%

### **Design, Materials, & Procedure**

The experiment consisted of a 3 (frame: assault victim vs. allegation victim vs. baseline) × 2 (sparse vs. rich detail) between-subjects design. Participants were told the study was about news consumption, and were randomly assigned to read a news report describing an alleged sexual assault on a college campus. Such incidents are common, receive media attention, and often feature competing claims of victimhood. In the court of public opinion, and sometimes in the literal courtroom, a broad sample of adults form judgments of these cases.

We varied which individual was described as the victim in the headline and main text of the report and how much detail was provided about the alleged assault and the timing of the accusations (see Table 2). We included the detail manipulation to mirror variability in media coverage about sexual assault, and to see whether victim framing would be less effective when

more details are available. Participants in the *sparse* and *rich* detail conditions were able to advance to the next screen after 15 or 25 seconds, respectively.

**Table 2: News report stimuli used in Experiments 1-2.** Participants received one of the three headlines, followed by either the sparse or rich detail paragraph. The end of the paragraph was framed in a way that was consistent with the headline, for a total of six unique reports.

	<b>Assault Victim</b>	<b>Allegation Victim</b>	<b>Baseline</b>
<b>Headline</b>	<i>Victim of Sexual Assault Faces Long Road Ahead - May 4, 2018</i>	<i>Victim of Sexual Assault Allegations Faces Long Road Ahead - May 4, 2018</i>	<i>Students Embroiled in Sexual Assault Investigation Face Long Road Ahead - May 4, 2018</i>
<b>Sparse Detail</b>	Emma Sawyer, a student at Livingston University, filed a complaint against fellow student David Bradley, alleging that Bradley sexually assaulted her at a campus party last fall. University authorities are investigating Sawyer's allegations, which Bradley has firmly denied.		
<b>Rich Detail</b>	Emma Sawyer, a student at Livingston University, filed a complaint against fellow student David Bradley, alleging that Bradley sexually assaulted her at a Halloween party hosted by the Sigma Chi fraternity last fall. In the complaint, Sawyer claimed that Bradley lured her to a private bedroom in the fraternity house and proceeded to remove her clothing, pin her to a bed, and force himself onto her despite her protestations. University authorities are investigating Sawyer's allegations, which Bradley has firmly denied. Bradley also questioned why the allegations had not surfaced until six months after the purported incident and noted that he and Sawyer were both intoxicated on the night in question.		
<b>Framing</b>	Reactions on campus are polarized, but friends have rallied around Sawyer. "Emma is a victim of sexual assault who deserves to be believed," said a close friend of both students. "She has been traumatized by this experience. The investigation ahead is going to be long and grueling, but I know she will survive it."	Reactions on campus are polarized, but friends have rallied around Bradley. "David is a victim of false allegations who deserves to be believed," said a close friend of both students. "He has been traumatized by this experience. The investigation ahead is going to be long and grueling, but I know he will survive it."	Reactions on campus are polarized, but friends have rallied around both Sawyer and Bradley. "Emma and David should each be allowed to tell their side of the story," said a close friend of both students. "This experience has been challenging for both of them. The investigation ahead is going to be long and grueling, but I know the truth will come out."

**Support.** After reading the report, participants answered eight questions assessing their level of *support* for the two protagonists. Using scales from 0 (none/not at all) to 6 (a lot/very), participants indicated how much *empathy* they had for Emma and David, how *believable* each of them was, how much *harm* each had experienced as a result of the incident, and how *responsible* each was for the incident (reverse-scored). Questions about Emma and David were interleaved throughout this and the following sections, with the order of the protagonists randomized across participants. For each participant, we computed a mean “support” score for each protagonist by averaging their responses to these four questions ( $\alpha = .83$  for each measure across Experiments 1-3).

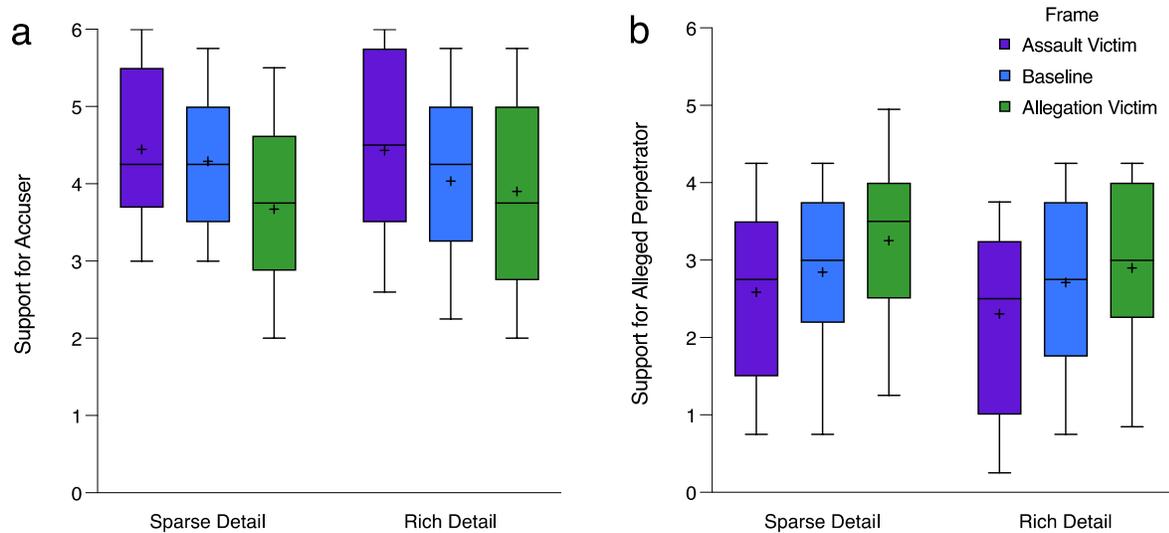
**Additional Measures.** Participants also rated how apt the words “victim” and “survivor” were for describing Emma and David and provided their general opinion of each protagonist. These data were collected for a different project assessing the connotations of “victim” and “survivor” labels (Schultz et al., 2020) and will not be discussed further. Next, participants indicated whether the report reminded them of any recent real-life news stories and completed measures of personal experience with sexual assault, acceptance of interpersonal violence (Burt, 1980), and the modified Illinois Rape Myth Acceptance Scale (McMahon & Farmer, 2011). Finally, participants answered basic demographic questions. Further details and analyses of these measures are provided in the Supplemental Material.

## Results

Participants in the baseline condition expressed more support for Emma ( $M = 4.16$ ,  $SE = .08$ ) than David ( $M = 2.78$ ,  $SE = .09$ ),  $t(196) = 9.12$ ,  $p < .001$ ,  $d = .65$ . This suggests that there was relatively little victim *blaming* in the absence of victim *framing*.

To assess the effects of victim framing, we conducted separate 3 (frame)  $\times$  2 (detail) ANOVAs on support scores for each protagonist. In both analyses, there was a main effect of frame (support for Emma:  $F(2, 600) = 13.95, p < .001, \eta_p^2 = .04$ ; support for David:  $F(2, 600) = 12.01, p < .001, \eta_p^2 = .04$ ). Planned contrasts showed that support for Emma was higher than baseline ( $M = 4.16, SE = .08$ ) in the assault victim condition ( $M = 4.44, SE = .08$ ),  $t(400) = 2.34, p = .02, d = .23$ , and lower than baseline in the allegation victim condition ( $M = 3.79, SE = .10$ ),  $t(399) = -2.93, p = .004, d = .29$ . Conversely, support for David was higher than baseline ( $M = 2.78, SE = .09$ ) in the allegation victim condition ( $M = 3.07, SE = .09$ ),  $t(399) = 2.35, p = .02, d = .23$ , and lower than baseline in the assault victim condition ( $M = 2.45, SE = .10$ ),  $t(400) = -2.53, p = .01, d = .25$ ; see Figure 1.

There was also a main effect of detail on support for David,  $F(1, 600) = 5.86, p = .02, \eta_p^2 = .01$ , with more support when the report had sparse detail ( $M = 2.89, SE = .08$ ) than when it had rich detail ( $M = 2.64, SE = .07$ ). There was no main effect of detail on support for Emma,  $F(1, 600) = .02, p = .89, \eta_p^2 < .01$ , and no interaction between frame and detail for either protagonist (Emma:  $F(2, 600) = 1.86, p = .16, \eta_p^2 = .01$ ; David:  $F(2, 600) = .38, p = .69, \eta_p^2 < .01$ ). Thus, victim framing was effective regardless of the level of detail about the incident, but additional graphic details decreased support for the alleged assailant. In exploratory cross-experiment analyses, participant background characteristics did not moderate the framing effects (see Supplemental Material).



*Figure 1.* Support for (a) the accuser and (b) the alleged perpetrator in Experiment 1, by frame and level of detail. In all figures, boxes denote the interquartile range (middle line = median), whiskers extend from the 10th to the 90th percentile, and the ‘+’ sign denotes the mean.

## Discussion

Experiment 1 demonstrated that victim framing works: relative to baseline, participants expressed more support for whomever was labeled the victim—and less support for the other individual—regardless of the level of detail provided about the incident. We sought to replicate these results in Experiment 2 using a larger sample and preregistered design.

## Experiment 2: Replication

### Method

#### Participants

Following our target sample size and exclusion criteria (preregistered for Experiments 2-4), we recruited 847 new participants through MTurk. Participants who failed an initial attention

check were prevented from completing the study ( $n = 39$ ). Our final sample ( $N = 808$ ) provided >99% power to detect the main effect of frame based on the Experiment 1 effect sizes (per G\*Power 3.1; Faul et al., 2007). See Table 1 for participant demographics.

### Materials & Procedure

Experiment 2 was identical to Experiment 1 with one exception: before the *personal experience* measure, participants were shown the report again and asked to provide a rationale for their evaluation of the protagonists by (1) copying and pasting the part of the report they found most influential into a text box and (2) indicating any other information that contributed to their evaluation. This enabled us to investigate participants' reliance on the victim frame for their evaluations.

### Results

Participants in the baseline condition expressed more support for Emma ( $M = 4.37$ ,  $SE = .07$ ) than David ( $M = 2.69$ ,  $SE = .08$ ),  $t(269) = 12.34$ ,  $p < .001$ ,  $d = .75$ , again indicating low levels of victim blaming in the absence of victim framing.

As shown in Figure 2, the results partially replicated Experiment 1. In 3 (frame)  $\times$  2 (detail) ANOVAs, there was a main effect of frame on support for each protagonist (Emma:  $F(2, 802) = 3.07$ ,  $p = .047$ ,  $\eta_p^2 = .01$ ; David:  $F(2, 802) = 6.87$ ,  $p = .001$ ,  $\eta_p^2 = .02$ ). Support for Emma was lower than baseline ( $M = 4.37$ ,  $SE = .08$ ), albeit not significantly, in the allegation victim condition ( $M = 4.17$ ,  $SE = .08$ ),  $t(537) = -1.89$ ,  $p = .059$ ,  $d = .16$ , but was similar to baseline in the assault victim condition ( $M = 4.41$ ,  $SE = .07$ ),  $t(537) = .41$ ,  $p = .68$ ,  $d = .04$ . Conversely, support for David was lower than baseline in the assault victim condition ( $M = 2.38$ ,  $SE = .08$ ),

$t(537) = 2.69, p = .007, d = .23$ , but similar to baseline in the allegation victim condition ( $M = 2.79, SE = .08$ ),  $t(537) = .88, p = .38, d = .08$ .

Unlike in Experiment 1, there was a main effect of detail on support for Emma,  $F(1, 802) = 6.61, p = .01, \eta_p^2 = .01$ , with more support when the report had sparse detail ( $M = 4.43, SE = .06$ ) than rich detail ( $M = 4.21, SE = .06$ ), but no main effect of detail on support for David,  $F(1, 802) = .51, p = .47, \eta_p^2 < .01$ . Mirroring Experiment 1, however, there was no interaction between frame and detail for either protagonist (Emma:  $F(2, 802) = .44, p = .65, \eta_p^2 < .01$ ; David:  $F(2, 802) = .21, p = .81, \eta_p^2 < .01$ ), again showing that the level of detail about the incident did not moderate the framing effects.

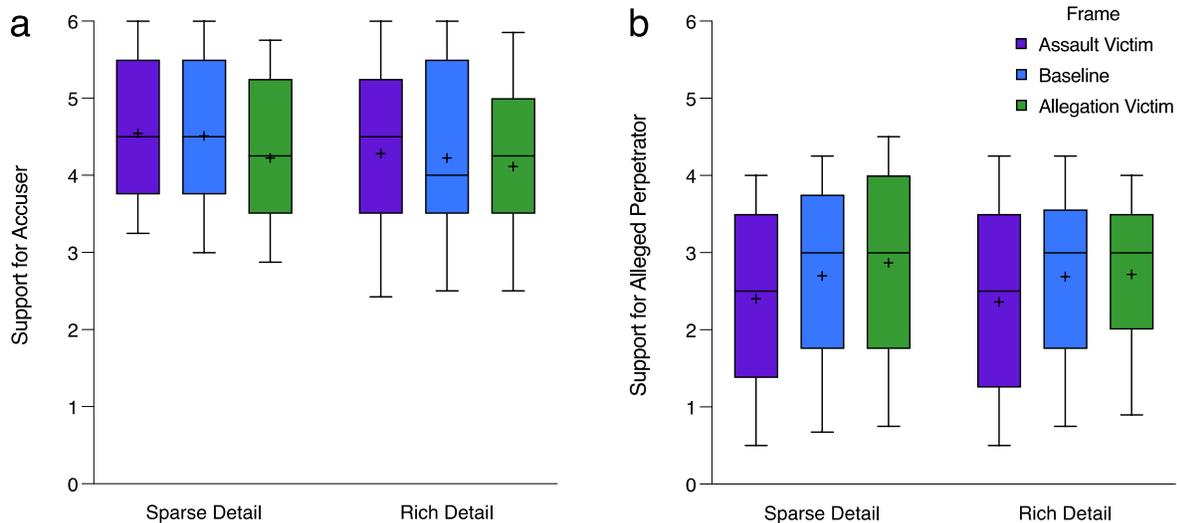
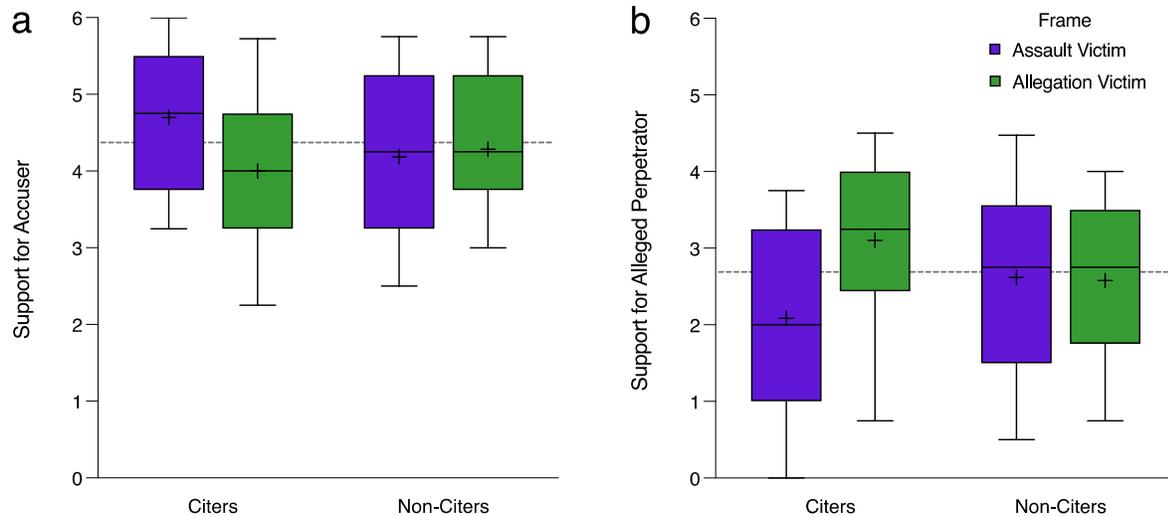


Figure 2. Support for (a) the accuser and (b) the alleged perpetrator in Experiment 2, by frame and level of detail.

We used automatic text coding to determine whether participants' rationales in the two framing conditions included the victim-related language from the report (i.e., the words "victim," "traumatized," "survive," or cognates with the same root). Across both conditions, 43% of participants ("citers") included one or more of these victim-related words in their rationales. In 2 (assault vs. allegation victim)  $\times$  2 (citers vs. non-citers) ANOVAs on support for each protagonist, the interaction was significant (Emma:  $F(1, 534) = 14.71, p < .001, \eta_p^2 = .03$ ; David:  $F(1, 534) = 20.58, p < .001, \eta_p^2 = .04$ ). As shown in Figure 3, the overall framing effect was driven by citers: for them, support for Emma was higher in the assault victim than allegation victim condition,  $t(227) = 4.69, p < .001, d = .62$ , while support for David was higher in the allegation victim than assault victim condition,  $t(227) = -5.79, p < .001, d = .77$ . In contrast, for non-citers, there was no significant difference between conditions for either protagonist ( $ps > .46, ds < .09$ ). We also conducted preregistered analyses on *support difference scores* (support for Emma - support for David) in Experiments 2-4 that corroborated the main findings (see Supplemental Material).<sup>1</sup>

---

<sup>1</sup> Per reviewers' suggestion, here we report analyses of the support ratings that comprise the difference scores.



*Figure 3.* Support for (a) the accuser and (b) the alleged perpetrator in the assault victim and allegation victim conditions of Experiment 2, for participants who cited victim-related language as influential (“citters”) and those who did not (“non-citters”). Dashed line = baseline mean.

## Discussion

Experiment 2 partially replicated Experiment 1: participants expressed less support for the non-victim-framed protagonist relative to baseline, regardless of how much detail was included about the incident. As in many replication studies, the effect sizes were smaller (Open Science Collaboration, 2015). Notably, we observed strong victim framing effects among *citters*—participants who indicated that the victim-related language influenced their decision-making. This suggests that social-pragmatic reasoning may be a key driver of these framing effects. That is, citters may have reasoned that the victim-related language was chosen by the writer to be informative and adjusted their evaluations accordingly (Grice, 1975; Sher & McKenzie, 2006; Sperber & Wilson, 1986).

Our goals in Experiment 3 were to replicate the moderating effect of citing victim-related language and to examine whether a minimal instantiation of the victim frame would still yield reliable framing effects. While more elaborate linguistic framing often yields stronger effects (Flusberg et al., 2020; Thibodeau, 2016), a single instantiation of a frame can be sufficient (Thibodeau & Boroditsky, 2011).

### **Experiment 3: Minimal Framing**

#### **Method**

#### **Participants**

We recruited 615 new participants through MTurk, using the CloudResearch platform (Litman et al., 2017). Sixteen failed an initial attention check. Our final sample ( $N = 599$ ) provided >88% power to detect the main effect of frame based on the effect sizes across Experiments 1-2 and >85% power to detect the interaction of frame and citing victim-related language based on the Experiment 2 effect sizes. See Table 1 for participant demographics.

#### **Materials & Procedure**

Experiment 3 was identical to Experiment 2 except for one critical difference: the reports were modified to include only minimal victim framing, one instance in the headline and one near the end (see Table 3).

**Table 3: News report stimuli used in Experiment 3.** Sparse and rich detail sections remained unchanged from Experiments 1-2.

	<b>Assault Victim</b>	<b>Allegation Victim</b>	<b>Baseline</b>
<b>Headline</b>	<i>Victim of Sexual Assault Braces for Investigation - May 4, 2018</i>	<i>Victim of Sexual Assault Allegations Braces for Investigation - May 4, 2018</i>	<i>Students Brace for Sexual Assault Investigation - May 4, 2018</i>
<b>Framing</b>	Reactions on campus are polarized, but one student said, “Emma is the real victim here.” A university representative declined to comment.	Reactions on campus are polarized, but one student said, “David is the real victim here.” A university representative declined to comment.	Reactions on campus are polarized. A university representative declined to comment.

## Results

In the baseline condition, participants again expressed more support for Emma ( $M = 4.36$ ,  $SE = .09$ ) than David ( $M = 2.32$ ,  $SE = .09$ ),  $t(201) = 12.59$ ,  $p < .001$ ,  $d = .89$ .

In 3 (frame)  $\times$  2 (detail) ANOVAs on support scores, the main effect of frame was in the expected direction, though not significant (Emma:  $F(2, 593) = 1.59$ ,  $p = .21$ ,  $\eta_p^2 = .01$ ; David:  $F(2, 593) = 2.31$ ,  $p = .10$ ,  $\eta_p^2 = .01$ ); see Figure 4. As in Experiment 1, there was a main effect of detail on support for David,  $F(1, 593) = 4.47$ ,  $p = .04$ ,  $\eta_p^2 = .01$ , with more support when the report had sparse detail ( $M = 2.48$ ,  $SE = .08$ ) than when it had rich detail ( $M = 2.25$ ,  $SE = .08$ ), but no main effect of detail on support for Emma,  $F(1, 593) = .21$ ,  $p = .65$ ,  $\eta_p^2 < .01$ . There was no interaction between frame and detail for either protagonist (Emma:  $F(2, 593) = .28$ ,  $p = .75$ ,  $\eta_p^2 < .01$ ; David:  $F(2, 593) = .50$ ,  $p = .61$ ,  $\eta_p^2 < .01$ ).

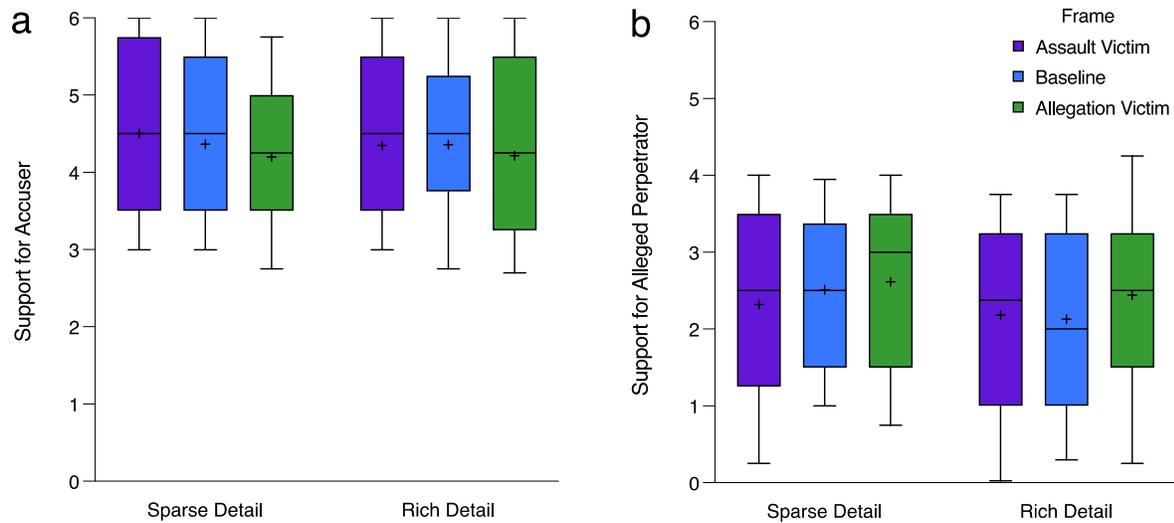
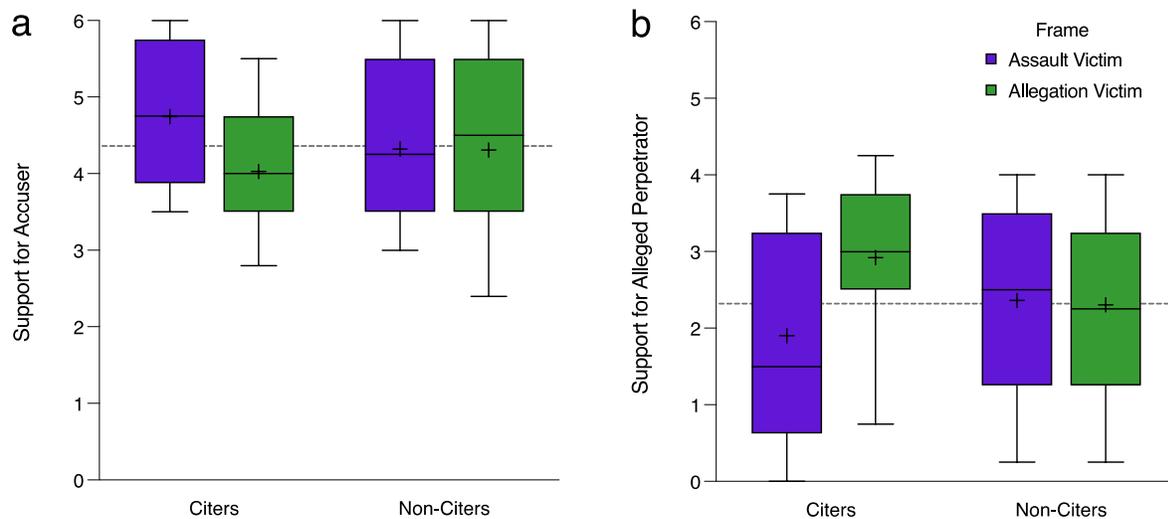


Figure 4. Support for (a) the accuser and (b) the alleged perpetrator in Experiment 3, by frame and level of detail.

Although the victim framing effects were not statistically significant in Experiment 3 alone, a cross-experiment comparison showed that the magnitude of these effects was comparable to the more elaborate framing of Experiments 1-2. In 3 (frame)  $\times$  2 (experiment: 1-2 vs. 3) ANOVAs, there was a main effect of frame on support for each protagonist (Emma:  $F(2, 2007) = 9.60, p < .001, \eta_p^2 = .01$ ; David:  $F(2, 2007) = 12.15, p < .001, \eta_p^2 = .01$ ), as well as a main effect of experiment on support for David,  $F(1, 2007) = 24.10, p < .001, \eta_p^2 = .01$ , with more support with elaborate than minimal framing. There was no main effect of experiment on support for Emma,  $F(1, 2007) = 2.43, p = .12, \eta_p^2 < .01$ , and no interaction between frame and experiment for either protagonist (Emma:  $F(2, 2007) = .92, p = .40, \eta_p^2 < .01$ ; David:  $F(2, 2007) = 1.50, p = .22, \eta_p^2 < .01$ ), suggesting that minimal and elaborate victim framing did not differ qualitatively in efficacy.

As in Experiment 2, the framing effects were moderated by whether participants cited the victim-related language (in the minimally framed report, just “victim”) as influential. In 2 (assault vs. allegation victim)  $\times$  2 (citors vs. non-citors) ANOVAs on support for each protagonist, the interaction was significant (Emma:  $F(1, 393) = 6.65, p = .01, \eta_p^2 = .02$ ; David:  $F(1, 393) = 13.05, p < .001, \eta_p^2 = .03$ ). As shown in Figure 5, citors (30% of participants in the framing conditions) showed significant framing effects (Emma:  $t(118) = 3.52, p < .001, d = .65$ ; David:  $t(118) = -4.34, p < .001, d = .81$ ), while non-citors (70%) did not (Emma:  $t(275) = .09, p = .93, d = .01$ ; David:  $t(275) = .34, p = .74, d = .04$ ).



*Figure 5.* Support for (a) the accuser and (b) the alleged perpetrator in the assault victim and allegation victim conditions of Experiment 3, for citors and non-citors of victim-related language. Dashed line = baseline mean.

## **Discussion**

The main effect of frame, though not significant in Experiment 3, did not differ reliably from the previous experiments that used a more maximal instantiation of the framing language. Critically, we found confirmatory evidence for the moderating effect of citing this language: only those who cited the word “victim” as informing their evaluations exhibited significant victim framing effects.

In Experiments 1-3, participants evaluated a fictionalized scenario, controlling for familiarity but limiting ecological validity. The report in Experiment 4 described a real event: Dr. Ford’s allegations against now-Justice Kavanaugh. Data were collected approximately ten months after Kavanaugh’s Supreme Court confirmation, providing a natural cover story for participants accustomed to expressing attitudes towards salient sociopolitical events in online studies. This minimized any demand characteristics associated with our design.

### **Experiment 4: Real Event**

#### **Method**

##### **Participants**

We recruited 626 new participants through MTurk using CloudResearch. Twenty-five failed an initial attention check. Our final sample ( $N = 601$ ) provided >88% power to detect the main effect of frame based on the effect sizes across Experiments 1-2 and >85% power to detect the interaction of frame and citing victim-related language based on the Experiment 2 effect sizes. See Table 1 for participant demographics.

## Materials & Procedure

The report described Dr. Ford's allegations and closely matched the previous experiments (see Table 4). The support questions concerned the individuals in the new reports (Ford:  $\alpha = .85$ ; Kavanaugh:  $\alpha = .89$ ), and the question about whether the report reminded participants of real-life news stories was replaced with one assessing their *familiarity* with the case described (see Supplemental Material). The method was otherwise identical to the previous experiments.

**Table 4: News report stimuli used in Experiment 4.**

	Assault Victim (Ford)	Allegation Victim (Kavanaugh)	Baseline
<b>Headline</b>	<i>Victim of Sexual Assault Braces for Investigation - September 27, 2018</i>	<i>Victim of Sexual Assault Allegations Braces for Investigation - September 27, 2018</i>	<i>Nation Braces for Sexual Assault Investigation - September 27, 2018</i>
<b>Sparse Detail</b>	Christine Blasey Ford, a psychology professor at Palo Alto University, testified before the Senate Judiciary Committee today, alleging that U.S. Supreme Court nominee Brett Kavanaugh attempted to sexually assault her at a house party in the 1980s when both were in high school. The Senate Judiciary Committee is investigating Ford's allegations, which Kavanaugh has firmly denied.		
<b>Rich Detail</b>	Christine Blasey Ford, a psychology professor at Palo Alto University, testified before the Senate Judiciary Committee today, alleging that U.S. Supreme Court nominee Brett Kavanaugh attempted to sexually assault her at a house party in the 1980s when both were in high school. In her testimony, Ford claimed that Kavanaugh lured her to a private bedroom, attempted to remove her clothing, pin her to a bed, and force himself onto her despite her protestations, but that she eventually escaped. The Senate Judiciary Committee is investigating Ford's allegations, which Kavanaugh has firmly denied. Kavanaugh also questioned why the allegations had not surfaced until 36 years after the purported incident, and only just before his Supreme Court confirmation hearing.		

---

<b>Framing</b>	Reactions across the nation are polarized, but friends have rallied around Ford. “Christine is a victim of sexual assault who deserves to be believed,” said a high school friend of both. “She has been traumatized by this experience. The investigation ahead is going to be grueling, but I know she will survive it.”	Reactions across the nation are polarized, but friends have rallied around Kavanaugh. “Brett is a victim of false allegations who deserves to be believed,” said a high school friend of both. “He has been traumatized by this experience. The investigation ahead is going to be grueling, but I know he will survive it.”	Reactions across the nation are polarized, but friends have rallied around both Ford and Kavanaugh. “Christine and Brett should each be allowed to tell their side of the story,” said a high school friend of both. “This experience has been challenging for them. The investigation ahead is going to be grueling, but I know the truth will come out.”
----------------	--	--	--

---

## Results

In the baseline condition, participants expressed more support for Ford ( $M = 3.81$ ,  $SE = .12$ ) than Kavanaugh ( $M = 2.61$ ,  $SE = .13$ ),  $t(203) = 5.04$ ,  $p < .001$ ,  $d = .35$ .

As shown in Figure 6, the effects of victim framing were somewhat inconsistent overall. In a 3 (frame)  $\times$  2 (detail) ANOVA on support for Ford, there was a main effect of frame,  $F(2, 595) = 3.12$ ,  $p = .045$ ,  $\eta_p^2 = .01$ , and an interaction,  $F(2, 595) = 3.30$ ,  $p = .04$ ,  $\eta_p^2 = .01$ . When the report had sparse detail, support for Ford was higher in both framing conditions compared to baseline (assault victim:  $t(196) = 2.91$ ,  $p = .004$ ,  $d = .41$ ; allegation victim:  $t(201) = 3.18$ ,  $p = .002$ ,  $d = .45$ ). When the report had rich detail, support for Ford did not differ significantly from baseline for either framing condition ( $ps > .86$ ,  $ds < .03$ ). In the analogous ANOVA on support for Kavanaugh, there were no significant effects ( $ps > .16$ ,  $\eta_p^2$ s  $< .01$ ).

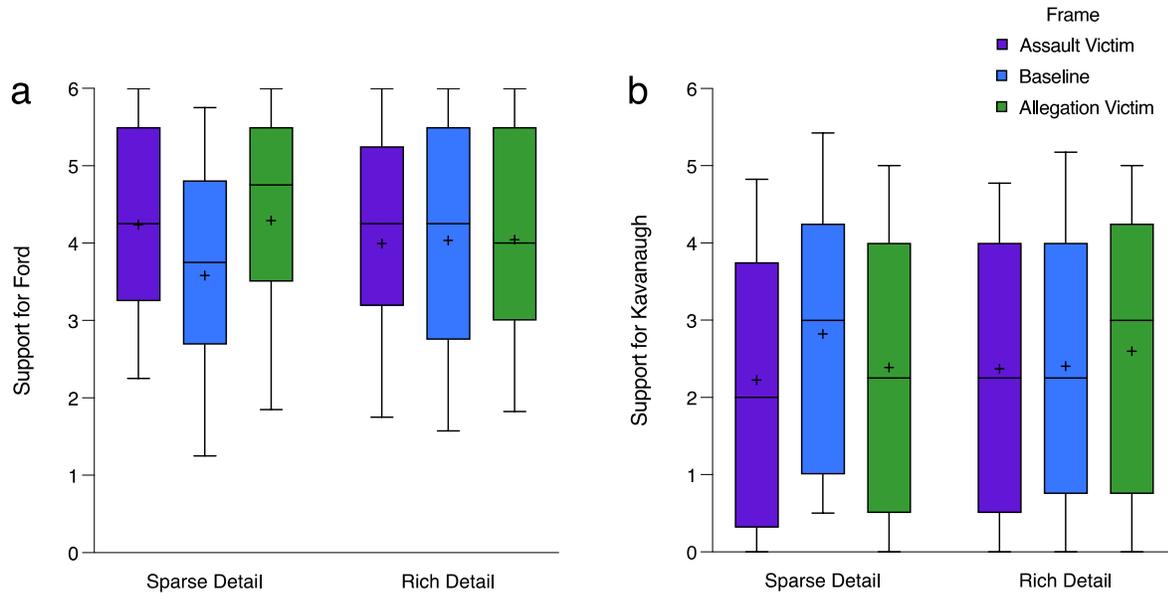


Figure 6. Support for (a) the accuser (Ford) and (b) the alleged perpetrator (Kavanaugh) in Experiment 4, by frame and level of detail.

A cross-experiment comparison showed that victim framing was somewhat less effective for the real event in Experiment 4 than the fictionalized vignette in Experiments 1-2, which also used a maximal instantiation of the frame. In a 3 (frame)  $\times$  2 (experiment: 1-2 vs. 4) ANOVA on support for the accuser, the interaction was significant,  $F(2, 2099) = 8.54, p < .001, \eta_p^2 = .01$ , with victim framing having a stronger effect on support for the fictionalized accuser than on support for Ford. In the analogous ANOVA on support for the alleged perpetrator, the interaction was not significant,  $F(2, 2099) = 1.99, p = .14, \eta_p^2 < .01$ . In both ANOVAs, there was also a main effect of experiment (accuser:  $F(1, 2099) = 9.86, p = .002, \eta_p^2 = .01$ ; alleged perpetrator:  $F(1, 2099) = 8.75, p = .003, \eta_p^2 = .004$ ), with more support overall for the fictionalized protagonists than for Ford and Kavanaugh.

Critically, however, the effects of victim framing were again moderated by whether participants cited the victim-related language as influential. In 2 (assault vs. allegation victim)  $\times$  2 (citors vs. non-citors) ANOVAs on support for each protagonist, the interaction was significant (Ford:  $F(1, 393) = 14.82, p < .001, \eta_p^2 = .04$ ; Kavanaugh:  $F(1, 393) = 27.95, p < .001, \eta_p^2 = .07$ ). As shown in Figure 7, citors (37% of participants in the framing conditions) showed the same framing effects as in Experiments 2-3 (Ford:  $t(144) = 3.08, p = .002, d = .51$ ; Kavanaugh:  $t(118) = -5.26, p < .001, d = .87$ ), while non-citors showed framing effects in the *opposite* direction (Ford:  $t(249) = -2.57, p = .01, d = .33$ ; Kavanaugh:  $t(249) = 2.20, p = .03, d = .28$ ).

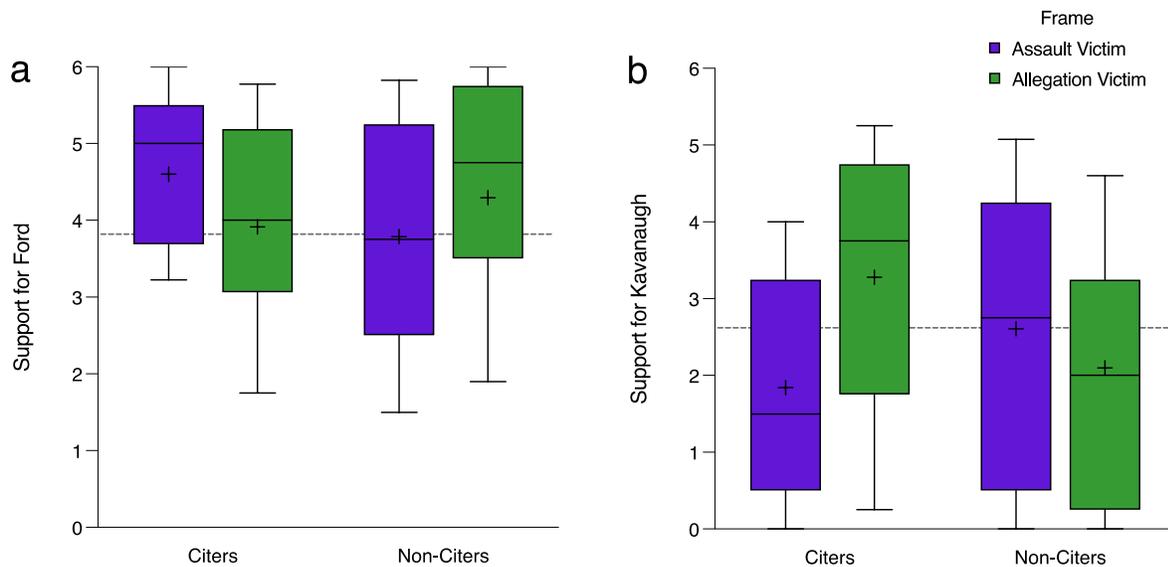


Figure 7. Support for (a) the accuser and (b) the alleged perpetrator in the assault victim and allegation victim conditions of Experiment 4, for citors and non-citors of victim-related language.

Dashed line = baseline mean.

## Discussion

We again observed significant victim framing effects for participants who cited the victim-related language as influential. This is noteworthy because the report concerned a high-profile, familiar case, suggesting that victim framing has ecological validity. We also observed a *reverse* framing effect for non-citers, who expressed more support for Ford when Kavanaugh was labeled the victim, and vice versa. One possibility is that these participants reacted negatively to the victim frame based on their prior beliefs and pointed to other aspects of the report to justify their elevated support for the non-victim-framed individual. An exploratory analysis detailed in the Supplemental Material supports this explanation: *non*-citers in the allegation victim condition were more ideologically liberal and less accepting of rape myths than those in the assault victim condition. That is, participants inclined to back Ford from the outset may have been put off by the portrayal of Kavanaugh as the victim, leading them to redouble their support for Ford. On this interpretation, people use social-pragmatic reasoning to infer what the frame is communicating; when this inference runs counter to strongly held convictions, they reject it and victim framing backfires.

## General Discussion

We investigated the consequences of victim framing across four experiments. Participants read about an alleged sexual assault that framed the accuser as the victim (of assault), framed the alleged perpetrator as the victim (of false allegations), or was neutral about victimhood (baseline). Relative to baseline, participants generally expressed more support for the victim-framed protagonist and less support for the other protagonist. The strength and consistency of these effects varied with how often the victim frame was instantiated in the report

and whether the case was fictionalized or real. Across all contexts, however, participants who explicitly cited the victim-related language from the report as influencing their evaluations exhibited strong victim framing effects.

These results provide the first empirical demonstration that victim framing can shape public opinion. While previous work suggests that drawing attention to alleged perpetrators increases support for their victims (Niemi & Young, 2016), labeling an alleged perpetrator a victim appears to have the opposite effect, garnering support for him and reducing support for his accuser. That said, we also replicated a range of findings from the victim blaming literature, suggesting that our experiments elicited participants' genuine attitudes towards the protagonists. An exploratory cross-experiment analysis, detailed in the Supplemental Material, revealed that participants who reported more personal experience with sexual assault and less rape myth acceptance, as well as female and more liberal participants, expressed more support for the accuser and less support for the alleged perpetrator. Similar observer characteristics have previously been linked to support for assault victims and perpetrators (Grubb & Turner, 2012; Hayes et al., 2013; Nagel et al., 2005; Niemi & Young, 2016; Suarez & Gadalla, 2010). Notably, the effects of victim framing remained significant when controlling for demographic factors, and were not moderated by them. This suggests that victim framing and observer characteristics contribute independently to people's evaluations of alleged perpetrators and their accusers.

The effects of victim framing are broadly consistent with a dyadic account of moral reasoning. This view argues that people evaluate moral violations by comparing the situation at hand to the prototypical schema of an immoral act: an intentional agent inflicting harm on a vulnerable patient (Gray & Wegner, 2011; Schein & Gray, 2018). Once someone has been

judged a moral agent or patient, they become “typecast” in that role, with patients seen as less capable of committing immoral acts like assault (Gray & Wegner, 2009). Victim framing may nudge people to slot whomever is labeled a victim into the patient role, resulting in increased empathy and reduced blame attributions.

Our findings also implicate social-pragmatic reasoning, as we found reliable framing effects only when participants indicated that the victim-related language influenced their evaluations. Observers draw inferences about speakers’ communicative intentions in context, trusting that specific words and phrases were chosen to be informative (Goodman & Frank, 2016; Grice, 1975; Sperber & Wilson, 1986). Even “logically equivalent” phrases—like saying a basketball player *makes* 40% versus *misses* 60% of their shots—convey different information about the speaker’s perspective that observers readily infer (Sher & McKenzie, 2006). Such inferences seem to underlie associated framing effects; for example, judging that a player who *misses* 60% of their shots is worse than a player who *makes* 40% (Leong et al., 2017). In this case, observers infer that the *miss* frame was chosen to communicate a negative evaluation of the player, and their own judgments therefore shift in that direction.

Victim framing may work in a similar way. Participants who cited the victim-related language as influential inferred that the author of the report chose to describe one individual as a victim *for good reason*—to signal they deserve support—and would have used similar language to describe the other individual if warranted. Those who failed to make this pragmatic inference, weighed other information more highly, or were motivated to counteract the frame cited other aspects of the report and exhibited no (or reverse) framing effects. Importantly, the contrast between citers and non-citers is not merely a product of attentional differences. The two groups

spent roughly the same amount of time reading the reports, and the rationales of non-citers typically included relevant factual information about the case (see Supplemental Material).

While most explanations of framing effects invoke basic cognitive processes like heuristics or analogy (e.g., Thibodeau & Boroditsky, 2011; Tversky & Kahneman, 1981), our findings highlight the critical role of social-pragmatic reasoning.

There is a curious connection between the social-pragmatic account and the concept of *experimenter demand* in psychological research. Both explanations propose that participants use the victim frame to infer how much support each protagonist deserves. The demand account goes a step further, arguing that participants also infer the researcher's hypothesis from the choice of frame and suppress their genuine attitudes to accede to it. Disentangling these accounts is difficult in framing studies, and most research does not directly address the issue. Our experiments contained relatively few demand characteristics, however. We used a between-subjects design and provided a plausible cover story—that we were interested in how people consume news reports. This cover story was especially strong in Experiment 4, as online studies often invite participants to express attitudes towards salient sociopolitical events. That said, sometimes experimenter demand can reflect real-world processes of attitude change. Much of what people think and do is a result of social influences, and our experimental context captures how people adjust to the intentions, beliefs, and norms communicated by others—especially in ambiguous situations. Victim framing may work in part by eliciting a kind of conformity to what is communicated, though further research is needed to fully tease out the underlying mechanisms.

In sum, we have shown that victim framing in the context of sexual assault is an effective rhetorical strategy, leading to increased support for whomever is labeled a victim, whether they are the alleged perpetrator or the accuser. The power of victim framing comes from using social-pragmatic reasoning to draw inferences from the framing language, but this can backfire when prior convictions motivate people to resist what they infer. Whether these findings generalize beyond gender-stereotypical assault scenarios in an American context, to cases involving individuals with marginalized identities and domains other than sexual assault, is an important direction for future research. Nevertheless, we have shown that the language of victimhood—or its strategic deployment to cast alleged perpetrators in a more favorable light—can shape attitudes towards sexual assault in line with the ideological interests of the communicator, despite the polarized nature of current public discourse. These findings serve as a cautionary warning to journalists, lawyers, victim advocates, jurors, and the general public about the consequences of how we communicate about sexual assault.

### References

- Buhrmester, M., Kwang, T., & Gosling, S. D. (2011). Amazon's Mechanical Turk: A new source of inexpensive, yet high-quality, data? *Perspectives on Psychological Science*, 6(1), 3-5.
- Burt, M. R. (1980). Cultural myths and support for rape. *Journal of Personality and Social Psychology*, 38(2), 217–230.
- Chumley, C. K. (2018, September 21). Christine Blasey Ford is not the victim here -- Brett Kavanaugh is. *The Washington Times*.  
<https://www.washingtontimes.com/news/2018/sep/21/christine-blasey-ford-not-victim-here-brett-kavana/>
- Faul, F., Erdfelder, E., Lang, A.-G., & Buchner, A. (2007). G\*Power 3: A flexible statistical power analysis program for the social, behavioral, and biomedical sciences. *Behavior Research Methods*, 39(2), 175–191.
- Flusberg, S. J., Lauria, M., Balko, S., & Thibodeau, P. H. (2020). Effects of communication modality and speaker identity on metaphor framing. *Metaphor and Symbol*, 35(2), 136-152.
- Goodman, N. D., & Frank, M. C. (2016). Pragmatic language interpretation as probabilistic inference. *Trends in Cognitive Sciences*, 20(11), 818-829.
- Gray, K., & Wegner, D. M. (2009). Moral typecasting: divergent perceptions of moral agents and moral patients. *Journal of Personality and Social Psychology*, 96(3), 505–520.
- Gray, K., & Wegner, D. M. (2011). Morality takes two: Dyadic morality and mind perception. In M. Mikulincer & P. R. Shaver (Eds.), *The social psychology of morality: Exploring the causes of good and evil* (pp. 109–27). American Psychological Association.

- Grice, H. P. (1975). Logic and conversation. In P. Cole & J. Morgan (Eds.) *Syntax and semantics* (vol. 3; pp. 41–58). Academic Press.
- Grubb, A., & Turner, E. (2012). Attribution of blame in rape cases: A review of the impact of rape myth acceptance, gender role conformity and substance use on victim blaming. *Aggression and Violent Behavior, 17*(5), 443–452.
- Hayes, R. M., Lorenz, K., & Bell, K. A. (2013). Victim blaming others: Rape myth acceptance and the just world belief. *Feminist Criminology, 8*(3), 202–220.
- Hesse, M. (2019, July 16). For Robert Foster’s defenders, men are victims and #MeToo is the real villain. *Washington Post*. [https://www.washingtonpost.com/lifestyle/style/for-robert-fosters-defenders-men-are-victims-and-metoo-is-the-real-villain/2019/07/15/e17e7836-a4d4-11e9-b8c8-75dae2607e60\\_story.html](https://www.washingtonpost.com/lifestyle/style/for-robert-fosters-defenders-men-are-victims-and-metoo-is-the-real-villain/2019/07/15/e17e7836-a4d4-11e9-b8c8-75dae2607e60_story.html)
- Holmes, K. J., Doherty, E. M., & Flusberg, S. J. (2021, in press). How and when does syntax perpetuate stereotypes? Probing the framing effects of subject-complement statements of equality. *Thinking & Reasoning*. <https://doi.org/10.1080/13546783.2021.1963841>
- Janoff-Bulman, R., Timko, C., & Carli, L. L. (1985). Cognitive biases in blaming the victim. *Journal of Experimental Social Psychology, 21*(2), 161–177.
- Leong, L. M., McKenzie, C. R., Sher, S., & Müller-Trede, J. (2017). The role of inference in attribute framing effects. *Journal of Behavioral Decision Making, 30*(5), 1147–1156.
- Litman, L., Robinson, J., & Abberbock, T. (2017). TurkPrime.com: A versatile crowdsourcing data acquisition platform for the behavioral sciences. *Behavior Research Methods, 49*(2), 433–442.

- Lisak, D., Gardinier, L., Nicksa, S. C., & Cote, A. M. (2010). False allegations of sexual assault: An analysis of ten years of reported cases. *Violence Against Women, 16*(12), 1318-1334.
- Loftus, E. F., & Palmer, J. C. (1974). Reconstruction of automobile destruction: An example of the interaction between language and memory. *Journal of Verbal Learning and Verbal Behavior, 13*(5), 585–589.
- McMahon, S., & Farmer, G. L. (2011). An updated measure for assessing subtle rape myths. *Social Work Research, 35*(2), 71–81.
- Nagel, B., Matsuo, H., McIntyre, K. P., & Morrison, N. (2005). Attitudes toward victims of rape: Effects of gender, race, religion, and social class. *Journal of Interpersonal Violence, 20*(6), 725–737.
- Niemi, L. (2017). Victim blaming. In K. L. Nadal (Ed.), *The SAGE Encyclopedia of Psychology and Gender* (pp. 1756–1757). SAGE.
- Niemi, L., & Young, L. (2016). When and why we see victims as responsible: The impact of ideology on attitudes toward victims. *Personality and Social Psychology Bulletin, 42*(9), 1227–1242.
- Open Science Collaboration (2015). Estimating the reproducibility of psychological science. *Science, 349*(6251), aac4716.
- Schein, C., & Gray, K. (2018). The theory of dyadic morality: Reinventing moral judgment by redefining harm. *Personality and Social Psychology Review, 22*(1), 32–70.
- Schultz, O. Flusberg, S. J., & Holmes, K. J. (2020, June). *Victim or survivor?* How everyday language frames sexual assault. Poster accepted for presentation at the 2020 Society for

the Psychological Study of Social Issues Summer Conference, Denver, CO (canceled due to Covid-19).

Sher, S., & McKenzie, C. (2006). Information leakage from logically equivalent frames.

*Cognition*, 101(3), 467–494.

Sperber, D., & Wilson, D. (1986). *Relevance: Communication and cognition* (Vol. 142). Harvard University Press.

Suarez, E., & Gadalla, T. M. (2010). Stop blaming the victim: A meta-analysis on rape myths.

*Journal of Interpersonal Violence*, 25(11), 2010–2035.

Thibodeau, P. H. (2016). Extended metaphors are the home runs of persuasion: Don't fumble the phrase. *Metaphor and Symbol*, 31(2), 53–72.

Thibodeau, P. H., & Boroditsky, L. (2011). Metaphors we think with: The role of metaphor in reasoning. *PLOS ONE*, 6(2), e16782.

Tversky, A., & Kahneman, D. (1981). The framing of decisions and the psychology of choice.

*Science*, 211(4481), 453–458.