

Measuring Himpathy: Validating a New Scale of Gender Bias in Sexual Assault Evaluations

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Summary

This white paper introduces The Himpathy Scale, a novel instrument designed to measure individual differences in bias toward high-status male perpetrators of sexual violence. Drawing on philosopher Kate Manne's (2017) theory of himpathy, the undue sympathy extended to men who perpetrate sexual violence and who are perceived as having high social status, the study tested the scale's psychometric properties and predictive validity in a large U.S. college student sample (N = 1,093; ages 18-30).

Results confirmed a stable, unidimensional factor structure and strong internal consistency. Higher himpathy scores predicted greater concern and less blame for male perpetrators, increased victim blaming, and reduced support for punishment, when the perpetrator was male and the victim was female. The findings provide the first quantitative evidence that himpathy operates as a measurable social-cognitive bias that reproduces gendered differences in moral judgement and justice outcomes.

Background

Across courtrooms, media coverage, and campus responses to sexual assault, public discourse often extends compassion to male perpetrators of high status, portraying them as promising, misunderstood, and wrongly accused, while scrutinizing the behavior, credibility, and motives of female victims. Philosopher Kate Manne (2017) coined the term *himpathy* to describe such gendered moral bias as misplaced sympathy that powerful men receive in response to their misogynistic violence. Despite its conceptual power, until now no empirical tool existed to measure himpathy and to quantify its influence on judgements of sexual assault cases. This study aimed to fill this gap by developing and validating The Himpathy Scale, a short self-report measure assessing tendencies to side with male perpetrators and minimize their wrongdoing. Specifically, the study sought to 1) establish the scale's psychometric validity, and 2) test its predictive power in realistic sexual assault vignette evaluations.

Methods Overview

Participants were 1,093 U.S. undergraduate students (ages 18-30) recruited through Prolific, an online recruitment platform designed by academics for research purposes. The Himpathy Scale was developed through item generation rooted in feminist philosophy and psychology. Items captured tendencies to express sympathy for social consequences of male perpetrators accused of sexual violence, downplay their culpability, and endorse loyalty to them.

The study included:

1. Validation phase: Exploratory and confirmatory factor analyses established a coherent one-factor model with strong internal reliability ($\alpha > .90$).
2. Predictive phase: Participants read one of four news articles depicting a rape involving a high-status perpetrator in which the gender of perpetrator and victim was manipulated, and then rated their concern and blame toward both perpetrator and victim, and punishment toward the perpetrator.

Key Findings

- **Construct Validity**

The Himpathy Scale showed strong psychometric properties and correlated in expected directions with related constructs (e.g., rape myth acceptance and modern and old-fashion sexism) but remained empirically distinct.

- **Predictive Validity**

Higher himpathy predicted:

- Greater concern for perpetrator, above and beyond rape myth acceptance.
- Decreased perpetrator blaming, above and beyond rape myth acceptance.
- Decreased perpetrator punishment, above and beyond rape myth acceptance.
- Greater victim blaming (effect overshadowed by rape myth acceptance).
- Decreased concern for victim (effect overshadowed by rape myth acceptance).

- **Gender-Specific Effect**

The effects emerged only when the news article described the perpetrator as male and the victim as female. In other scenarios, himpathy did not significantly predict evaluative outcomes.

These results support the theoretical argument that himpathy is not a general empathic tendency, but a specific kind of bias rooted in patriarchal scripts of who deserves sympathy and who is held accountable for sexual violence.

Implications

The Himpathy Scale operationalizes an important theoretical construct and reveals how sympathy operates as a moral force. The finding that himpathy predicts bias only in male perpetrator/female victim cases reinforces the theoretical assumption of feminist philosophy that male social capital is prioritized and protected.

Policy and Practice Recommendations

- **Integrate Himpathy Assessment in Bias Training**

The Himpathy Scale can be used in educational settings, legal workshops, and Title IX trainings to raise awareness of implicit bias in evaluating sexual assault cases.

- **Juror Education**

Findings support the need for juror education emphasizing how himpathy bias influences judgements and narratives of “ruined futures” for male perpetrators.

- **Incorporate in Campus Climate Surveys**

The measure can help universities evaluate institutional-level bias that contributes to underreporting and re-traumatization of victims.

- **Promote Gender-Responsive Prevention Programming**

Prevention efforts should specifically address the tendency to sympathize with privileged male perpetrators and redirect attention and empathy toward victim’s recovery, safety, and pursuit of justice.

References

Manne, K. (2017). *Down Girl: The Logic of Misogyny*. Oxford University Press.