

Himpathy Beyond Gender: Predicting Bias Toward High-Status Perpetrators of Sexual Assault

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Summary

This white paper summarizes the first study of himpathy, the undue sympathy extended to usually male perpetrators of sexual violence who are perceived to have high-status, using the newly developed and validated Himpathy Scale. Drawing on extant literature on the role of rape stereotypicality, one's perception of how much a specific case fits the events of most rape scenarios (Masser et al., 2010; McKimmie et al., 2014; Starosta et al., 2025), and the feminizing effect of sexual violence (Mulder et al., 2020), the study tested The Himpathy Scale's predictive capabilities in a large U.S. college student sample (N = 869; ages 18-30) and examined himpathy's relationship with rape stereotypicality and perceived perpetrator masculinity in the evaluations of a specific rape scenario.

Results nuanced our previous findings showing that greater himpathy leads to more positive judgements of both male and female rape perpetrators of high status. Importantly, how stereotypical a scenario was perceived to be shaped the effects of himpathy: Participants high in himpathy reported more concern for the male perpetrator when they perceived the scenario as less stereotypical and more concern for the female perpetrator when they perceived the scenario as more stereotypical. Finally, although the perceived masculinity of the perpetrator did not influence the effect of himpathy, results showed that, in the female perpetrator/male victim condition, the more masculine the perpetrator was perceived to be the less blame and punishment was assigned to her.

Background

Previous literature has shown that the more a rape scenario deviates from the traditional rape script, which is characterized by ideas that the perpetrator is a socially deviant stranger male of lower class and the victim a woman who fits traditional gender roles, physically fights the attacker, and immediately reports to the police, the less favorable the victim is judged and the more favorable the perpetrator is. While much evidence exists on how these biases operate (e.g., through cognitive dissonance), much less attention has been paid to why these biases exist and continue to be employed when evaluating rape cases. One possible explanation is offered by system justification theory, which posits that stereotypes serve the purpose of maintaining the status-quo in a hierarchical society. Applied to rape scenarios then, stereotypes about what happens in a typical rape serve to exclude privileged men, mostly, from being seriously considered capable of being rapists, effectively shielding them from accountability. This study aimed to provide empirical support to the aforementioned assertion by assessing how stereotypes about rape and himpathy, the moral and emotional form of bias in favor of powerful perpetrators of sexual assault (Manne, 2017), influence one's evaluations of a rape scenario. The newly developed Himpathy Scale was used: Unlike existing measures of gender bias and system justification, The Himpathy Scale captures moral-emotional sympathy directed at high-status perpetrators, a bias that legitimizes social hierarchies through compassion.

Methods Overview

Participants were 869 U.S. undergraduate students (ages 18-30) recruited through Prolific, an online recruitment platform designed by academics for research purposes. To replicate previous findings, the newly developed Himpathy Scale was used to predict judgements about the perpetrator and victim of a rape scenario in which the perpetrator was of high-status. To examine himpathy's relationship to rape stereotypicality and perceived perpetrator masculinity, participants were asked to comment on how typical they thought the rape scenario was and how masculine they believed the perpetrator to be.

Key Findings

- **Himpathy as more than gender-bias**

Higher himpathy predicted, as expected:

- Greater concern for perpetrator.
- Decreased perpetrator blame.
- Decreased perpetrator punishment.
- Greater victim blaming.
- Decreased concern for victim.

Across gendered conditions, The Himpathy Scale remained predictive, indicating the construct extends beyond gendered bias toward a broader affinity to social hierarchy. Specifically, these effects, in contrast to previous findings, occurred similarly when the perpetrator was depicted as male and when depicted as female. Due to the greater statistical power of this study, the himpathy trait captured by The Himpathy Scale cannot be reduced to simply gender bias, but a more complex loyalty to powerful individuals.

- **Rape Stereotypicality**

Greater perception of rape scenario as stereotypical predicted, consistent with previous literature:

- Decreased concern for perpetrator.
- Greater perpetrator blaming.
- More perpetrator punishment.
- Greater concern for victim.
- Decreased victim blaming.

Additionally, rape stereotypicality interacted with participants' himpathy bias such that:

- Greater himpathy predicted greater concern for the male perpetrator the less stereotypical the scenario was perceived to be.
- Greater himpathy predicted greater concern for the female perpetrator the more stereotypical the scenario was perceived to be.

- **Perpetrator Masculinity**

Although how masculine the perpetrator was perceived to be did not influence himpathy's effects on rape judgements, it was predictive of the following outcomes when the perpetrator was female:

- Greater perceived perpetrator masculinity predicted decreased perpetrator blame.
- Greater perceived perpetrator masculinity predicted decreased perpetrator punishment.

These results expand our understanding of himpathy as a complex gendered bias employed for the defense of socially powerful individuals in the context of rape that interacts with internal culturally inherited scripts of what rape entails and with ideas of masculinity.

Implications

The Himpathy Scale captures an important bias used to shield rape perpetrators from accountability. The finding that himpathy predicts bias in favor of both male and female perpetrators of high status suggests that it reflects a broader loyalty to power, in which gender is a component out of several.

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 empathy bias influences judgements and narratives of “ruined futures” for male perpetrators and gets used in conjunction with traditional rape scripts.

- **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 perpetrators and redirect attention and empathy toward victim’s recovery, safety, and pursuit of justice.

References

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