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THE INFLUENCE OF POSITIVE AND NEGATIVE VICTIM CREDIBILITY ON THE ASSESSMENT OF RAPE VICTIMS; AN EXPERIMENTAL STUDY OF EXPECTANCY–CONFIRMATION BIAS

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ABSTRACT

The influence of prior credibility information about a rape victim on the subsequent questioning and assessment of the victim by the police was studied in two related experiments. It was hypothesized that the number and type of questions asked would be influenced by the type of prior information the subjects had received. Furthermore, evaluation of the victims' report was expected to be biased toward the manipulated level of victim credibility. In Experiment 1 law students were either given negative, positive or no victim credibility information before participating in a simulated victim interview. Analysis of the number and type of questions asked during the interview, and the attributed victim or assailant responsibility measured after the interview confirmed the hypothesis for the number and type of questions. The expected bias with regard to the final evaluation of the victim and the assailant was only partially confirmed. Irrespective of the prior information on victim credibility, attributions of responsibility were related to stereotypical beliefs about rape and estimated percentage of false crime reports. In Experiment 2 these results were partially replicated using a sample of vice squad detectives. These police officers appeared to be more sympathetic towards rape victims than were the law students. The discussion focused on the complexity of expectancy confirmation research and the rather positive results found in this study.

INTRODUCTION

The interest on the part of the government and politicians in the position of victims of sexual offences notwithstanding (De Beaufort, 1979; Terwee-van Hilten, 1988), only a fraction of the cases actually makes it to court. Many attempts to report a sexual offence do not get beyond the officers of the vice squad. Metz and Rijpkema (1979) have found that 54% of the cases heard did not result in an official report. A mere 10% actually resulted in a conviction.

Carrying out the police investigation of a sexual offence is by no means an easy task. The officer is required to examine whether reported facts and circumstances are accurate and sufficient to justify an official report, before initiating legal proceedings against the alleged offender. A central consideration in an officer's assessment of a case is the degree to which the victim has given rise to the events under consideration and thus is (jointly) responsible for the offence (*i.e.* victim responsibility). The officer has to make this assessment individually

and usually only has the testimony of the victim who is more often than not also the only witness. Hard evidence is often lacking. Under these circumstances a variety of subjective factors related to the assessor may come into play. These factors may compromise the neutrality that should characterize the case assessment made by an officer of the vice squad. As a result, victims of sexual offences, instead of receiving help, may be regarded with suspicion and distrust, their integrity and credibility cast into doubt (Cann *et al.*, 1981; Viano, 1989).

In this article, we report data on how the assessment of a rape victim may be biased by attributions concerning the victim's credibility offered by a secondary source (*e.g.* a colleague of the assessor) prior to the assessment. First, however, we briefly review the evidence regarding the influence of victim and observer characteristics on the perception and evaluation of rape victims.

ATTRIBUTIONAL BIAS RESULTING FROM VICTIM AND OBSERVER CHARACTERISTICS

Experimental research has indicated that various victim and observer characteristics, unrelated to the actual or reported facts and circumstances of the crime, may seriously prejudice observers' attributions of responsibility to victim and assailant (*e.g.*, Best and Demmin, 1982; Klemmack and Klemmack, 1976; Koppelaar and Winkel, 1986; Krahé, 1988; Landy and Aronson, 1969; Sigall and Ostrove, 1975; Winkel and Koppelaar, 1992; de Winter and Winkel, 1993).

De Winter and Winkel (1993) found that white victim support workers regarded a coloured rape victim as less credible and more responsible for her fate compared to other white victim support workers who were shown a white rape victim. In fact, both victims were one and the same person, who was cosmetically transformed to appear coloured. Koppelaar and Winkel (1986) demonstrated a relationship between non-verbal aspects of the victim's self-presentation and biased attributions about the victim. They showed subjects a videotaped interview with a rape victim (an actress) who presented exactly the same case either in an extremely emotional manner (trembling, crying, sobbing voice) or in an emotionally restrained manner. Subjects who saw the emotionally restrained version described the woman as less careful, more responsible for the rape and less credible.

Krahé (1988) investigated the effects of stereotypic beliefs about rape in observers and of information about the victim's pre-rape behaviour. Subjects were presented with a rape account in which the victim's pre-rape behaviour was either role-conforming (finished work at her office) or role-discrepant (had a drink on her own in a pub). Both behaviours were irrelevant with respect to subsequent events. She found that subjects high in stereotypical beliefs about the definition and cause of rape (Burt, 1980) attributed more responsibility to the victim and less responsibility to the assailant when the victim had engaged in role-discrepant behaviour prior to the rape. Best and Demmin (1982) likewise found that rape victims who conformed to the stereotypical female role model

were perceived to be less responsible than women who did not. A limitation of these studies is that they were not carried out with police officers, but with students, members of the general public and other non-professionals.

ATTRIBUTIONAL BIAS RESULTING FROM TRANSFER OF TASKS AND INFORMATION

In addition to (irrelevant) characteristics of the victim, we believe situational characteristics present in the criminal justice system may also bias the assessment of rape victims. A typical example (Winkel and Koppelaar, 1992) is where the member of the vice squad, whose task it is to take down a report of a sexual offence, is not the first person to see the victim. The victim reporting the rape will often first meet the officer on duty or the station officer. The victim is then referred to a member of the vice squad or, if no one is present, the station officer takes down the victim's details and a preliminary statement. This then forms the prior information about the victim that will be made available to the member of the vice sqaud.

According to the classic theories concerning halo effects and implicit personality, people strive after a consistent set of impressions and cognitions (Asch, 1946). As a result perceivers may selectively interpret, attribute or recall characteristics of a target person in a way that confirms their expectations (Kelley, 1950; Darley and Gross, 1983). A similar expectancy-confirmation process is described in labelling theory (Goffman, 1961, 1963; Scheff, 1966). A target person who is labelled as deviant is rewarded for behaviour consistent with this label. This may reinforce the expected behaviour in the target person and so results in a self--fulfilling prophecy.

Consistent with these views, negative prior information concerning the rape victim that is transferred from the station officer to the member of the vice squad may create negative expectancies in the vice squad officer. As a result, the subsequent interview process may be biased towards these expectancies, and thus affect final judgments based on the interview. Positive prior information, on the other hand, may result in favourable post-interview impressions of the victim. This type of bias has been demonstrated in such diverse areas as education (Rosenthal and Jacobson, 1968), military (Eden and Shani, 1982) and psychotherapy (Lange *et al.*, 1991). Furthermore, the expectancy-confirming effect of prior information has been demonstrated both in the judgment of the perceiver as in the behaviour of the target person (Snyder and Swann, 1978; Brophy, 1983).

In the area of law and policing only a few experimental studies have been conducted on the effects of prior information. In a field experiment, Koppelaar and Van der Steen (1987) requested police officers to attribute blame to either a man or a woman having a (simulated) fight. Before arriving at the scene the police officers had received over their radio negative or neutral information about either the man or the woman. It was found that negative prior information increased the amount of blame attributed to either the man or the woman in comparison to

neutral prior information. These effects, however, could not be replicated in a sample of university students.

PRESENT STUDY

The two experiments presented in this paper are aimed primarily at replicating the expectancy-confirming effect of prior information in the context of the assessment of rape victims by the police. Because this assessment ideally should be based on the information gathered by the vice squad officer from questioning the victim, we will try to assess the influence of prior information on the process of interviewing the victim. This will contribute to the understanding of the mediating processes involved in the expectancy-confirmation effect. Specifically, it is hypothesized that negative or positive prior information about the credibility of the victim will create either a trusting or distrusting attitude towards the victim and her report claim. This attitude will be reflected in the type and amount of questions asked during the victim interview. As a result, the final assessment of the case, which is based on the collected information, will be biased toward the expected level of victim credibility.

Our first objective was to explore the relationship between the type of prior information and the questions posed by the investigating police officer. Clearly an officer decides for him or herself during the examination what questions he or she puts to the victim and at what stage he or she has gathered sufficient information to initiate legal proceedings. Using a simulated rape victim interview procedure (Bijl, 1986) we investigated whether the officer questions the victim in an expectancy-confirming manner, according to the economical principle as formulated by Gulotta and De Cataldo Neuberger (1983; p. 10): perceivers tend to seek sufficient cause for behaviour and to seek information that economically confirms their commonsense hypothesis.

Given a negative expectation of the trustworthiness of the victim, a confirmatory interview strategy implies that an officer will try to catch the victim out in an inconsistency. He or she is expected to be thorough and critical. Given a positive attitude, on the other hand, the officer is expected to take less time in conducting the interview. He or she will take the credibility of the victim and her story for granted.

Police officers with a distrusting expectancy towards a rape victim will tend to ask different kinds of questions compared to officers with a trusting expectancy. For example, a distrusting officer may direct more attention to the question whether or not the victim provoked or even invited the offender to his behaviour. On the basis of results of previous research in a comparable setting (Bijl, 1986; Koppelaar *et al.*, 1987) we hypothesized that rape victims with high expected credibility will be asked more questions relating to the actual rape, while victims with low expected credibility will be questioned more about the circumstances leading up to and following the actual rape.

Our second objective was to examine whether negative impressions about a rape victim can be carried over from the police officer on duty to the vice squad officer. We tested this by providing law students playing the role of police officers (Experiment 1) and police officers (Experiment 2) with a case description apparently prepared by a 'fellow officer' that contained a positive, a negative or no statement about the credibility of the victim. After the simulated rape victim interview, we measured the degree of responsibility attributed to the victim and to the assailant.

Our third objective was to increase the power of the experimental tests by measuring and controlling for individual differences associated with differences in the dependent measures. Stereotypical beliefs about the causes of rape and characteristics of rape victims and rapists have been shown to influence social attributions and to some extent legal evaluations in rape cases (Mazelan, 1980). We therefore included a measure of the extent to which subjects hold these stereotypical beliefs (Rape Myth Acceptance Scale: Burt, 1980). Furthermore, we assumed that the amount of *a priori* distrust of crime reports in general could differentially affect the examination and evaluation of the specific crime report that we used in our experiments. The amount of distrust of crime reports was measured by asking each subject to estimate the percentage of falsely reported crimes in the Netherlands.

Our final objective was to examine the robustness of the expectancy--confirmation effect across different subject samples. The reason for doing so is the fact that only few studies addressing attributional bias in the legal system have been carried out with subjects employed in legal professions. Therefore we used law students in Experiment 1 and replicated this study with a sample of police detectives in Experiment 2.

Experiment 1

Method

OVERVIEW

Subjects individually participated in a simulated rape victim interview. Before the interview, subjects were randomly assigned to one of the three experimental conditions, given general instructions and presented with a description of the case which included the experimental variable. After reading the case, subjects completed a short questionnaire including a check on the manipulation of the experimental variable and a preliminary case assessment. Next, the simulated rape interview was carried out. Type and number of posed questions were recorded during the interview. After the interview, a second questionnaire including the dependent measures (final assessment) was completed. Finally, subjects were debriefed and post-experimentally interviewed (see Figure 1).

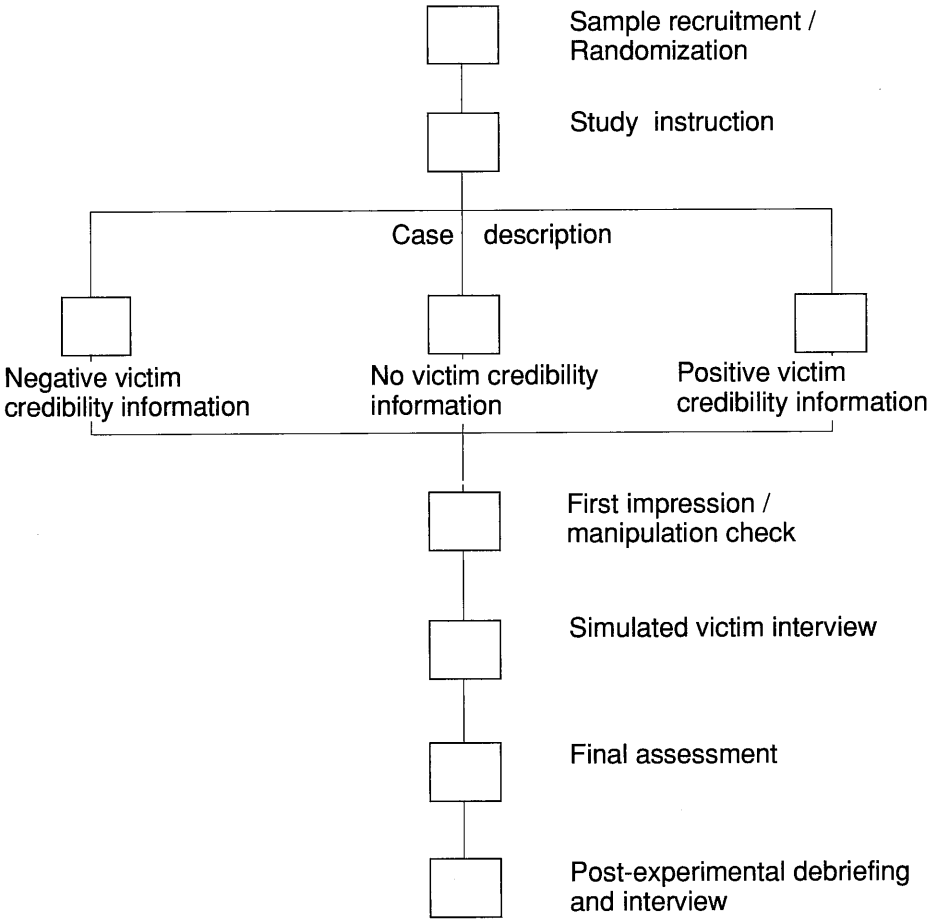

Figure 1. Flow chart of the experimental procedure.

To prevent treatment differences between subjects within conditions, a complete protocol was written for the experimental procedure, including all verbal and written instructions, a time schedule and standardized answers to possible questions from subjects. Before the experiment, the experimenters were extensively trained to follow this protocol.

SUBJECTS

Ninety-three third and fourth year law students of the Free University and the University of Amsterdam participated on a voluntary basis. They were approached during lectures and after exams. They were told that they would

receive ten guilders (approximately US$5.00) for participation in a psychological experiment about the (police) questioning of rape victims. They were also told that the experiment would be conducted individually and that it would last approximately one hour. In order to control for differential expectations about the purpose and content of the experiment, standardized answers were given to questions from potential subjects. Of those who agreed to participate in the experiment, nine students did not show up for the experimental session. The final sample included forty-five female and forty-eight male subjects. The average age was 23.8 years. Before the subjects arrived for the experimental session, they were randomly assigned to one of the three experimental conditions. Thirty-one subjects received a report with positive prior victim credibility information, thirty-two subjects received negative information and thirty subjects received no credibility information.

PROCEDURE

Study instruction. After arriving for the experimental session, subjects were given a written instruction explaining the procedure:

> This study is about reporting a rape to the police. The information about this particular case is selected from the archives of the police. The case was handled in 1988. You have to imagine you are a police detective. You are assigned to the case. First you will read an introductory report about the case that has been written by the officer on duty after a short conversation with the victim. After reading this report you will have to indicate your first impression of the case on a short questionnaire. Subsequently you will have to question the victim in order to investigate whether or not a rape has been committed. The woman you will see in front of you is not the real victim but an experimental assistant. But all information about the actual victim is stored in a data-base. After each question the assistant will show you a card with the victims' answer from the data-base. *You can ask as many questions as you need to decide whether or not a rape has occurred* (to be clear: we are interested in what you would ask as a police detective). When you think your information is sufficient to make a decision about the case you may stop questioning. You will then be asked to indicate your final judgement on a questionnaire.

In order to create a similar frame of reference for all subjects, the instruction also included section 242 of the Dutch Penal Code: He who by means of violence or threat forces a woman to have extra-marital intercourse, shall be punished as guilty of rape with a prison sentence of at most 12 years.

After the instruction, the experimenter recapitulated the procedure and re-emphasized the fact that rape reports are sometimes incorrect and that the main task of the subjects is to question the victim to determine whether a real rape has

occurred. Before starting the actual procedure subjects were given a few minutes to enter into their role as a police officer and to visualize the situation.

Experimental manipulation. Subjects read the introductory report about the case from the officer on duty. This report contained background information about the victim and a description of the reported events. In addition, the case description contained the manipulation of the independent variable. It included either a positive statement about the credibility of the woman (I trust her), a negative credibility statement (I don't quite trust her), or no credibility statement at all. These differences represented the three levels of the independent variable: positive, negative and no prior victim credibility information. The case description in the negative victim credibility information condition reported as follows:

> Dear [subject],
> This morning a woman reported to us she was raped. Because you weren't in I have taken care of her and had a short conversation with her about the events.
> I don't quite trust her.
> I have written down a few things about the case for you: [list containing: date of report; name, date of birth, marital status and residence of the victim]. Margaret [the victim] reported this to me:
> She went to a party of her friend Carla who lives 30 miles south of Utrecht. She had to take a bus to get there. She planned to return home with the last bus at midnight. But the party was very exciting so she missed her bus. Unfortunately she couldn't stay for the night at Carla's place. Peter, a friend of Carla's offered her to stay over in his house. Margaret went home with Peter. She decided to sleep on the floor. But a little later she got sick and had to throw up. After that she couldn't sleep. She took her sleeping bag and lay down on bed next to Peter. She told me she was raped by him shortly after. Next morning she took the bus home and came over to the police station.

First questionnaire. Immediately after reading the case description, subjects were given a short questionnaire and asked to state their first impressions about the case. The purpose of this questionnaire was to check the validity of the manipulation of the independent variable (see below).

Simulated rape victim interview. Subsequently, subjects questioned the victim by means of a simulated rape victim questioning procedure (Ten Kate and Van Koppen, 1984). During the interview the number and type of questions asked were recorded. Subjects were free to stop questioning at any time. Only a few subjects required more than 30 minutes. All simulated interviews were recorded on audio tape.

Second questionnaire. After the simulated rape victim interview, subjects completed the second questionnaire (see below) including measures of attributed responsibility to the woman and to her assailant, Rape Myth Acceptance (RMAS) and subjective estimate of false crime reports. After completing the second questionnaire, subjects were debriefed and post-experimentally interviewed. The post-experimental interview included questions about type(s) of information used to arrive at the final judgement, about the presumed purpose of the experiment, and about the effectiveness of the experimental procedures.

MEASURES

Manipulation check. The first questionnaire was used to measure the validity of the manipulation of the independent variable. To this end, subjects were asked to rate the credibility of the rape victim presented in the case description. Victim credibility could be rated on a scale from *absolutely not (1) to absolutely so* (9). The mean credibility judgement in the negative prior information condition ($M = 5.22$) differed significantly from the positive information condition ($M = 5.97$; $t(90) = 1.84, p < .03$), thus supporting the validity of the experimental manipulation.

Number and type of questions. For the simulated rape victim interview procedure, designed by Ten Kate and Van Koppen (1984) and further developed by Bijl (1986), and Bunnik and Kuijper (1989), specific questions of the subject were previously linked to specific answers from the victim. All corresponding answers were recorded on cards and stored in a physical data-base. The employed data-base contained more than 900 question-answer pairs based on previous qualitative studies of actual police interviews with rape victims. In order to facilitate the (manual) search for required answer-cards, the questions were divided into nine categories including background information about the victim, the situation prior to the rape, events during the rape, the aftermath of the rape, questions about the interview procedure and a special category for miscellaneous questions.

Before the interview, subjects were instructed to imagine they are questioning the rape victim to determine whether or not a real rape has been committed. The experimenter assumed the role of the victim. When a subject posed a question, the corresponding answer card was selected from the data-base by the experimenter and shown to the subject. Non-answerable questions were replied with 'Data-base has no answer to your question'. For each subject the total number of questions asked during the interview and the relative number of questions per category were recorded and used as dependent measures in the analysis.

Attributed victim and assailant responsibility. The second questionnaire contained two measures of the final case assessment: responsibility attributed to the victim and to the assailant. Subjects were asked to indicate the extent of

attributed responsibility on a rating scale from *absolutely not* (1) to *absolutely so* (9) for each of ten questions.

The first measure, attributed victim responsibility, is the unweighted mean of the scores on four questions, including 'To what extent is the woman guilty of what has happened?' and 'To what extent has the woman's behaviour caused the situation?'. For this composite a Cronbach's alpha of .93 was obtained.

The second measure, attributed assailant responsibility, is the unweighted mean of the scores on six questions, including 'To what extent has a true rape been committed?' and 'To what extent has the man forced the woman to have sexual intercourse with him?'. For this measure a Cronbach's alpha of .90 was obtained.

The product-moment correlation between attributed victim responsibility and attributed assailant responsibility is –.63 ($n = 91$; $p < .001$).

Rape myth acceptance. In addition, the second questionnaire included a translated version of the 19-item Rape Myth Acceptance Scale (RMAS) developed by Burt (1980). The RMAS measures a person's readiness to accept certain rape myths specifying stereotypic beliefs about victims, assailants and circumstances of rape. Rape myth acceptance has been shown to be a powerful influence on social attributions and to some extent legal evaluations of rape victims (*e.g.*, Mazelan, 1980). The scale includes such items as 'Women who are raped while hitchhiking get what they deserve', 'Every woman can resist a rapist if she really wants to', and 'Women who wear mini-skirts, tight tops, or no bra are asking for trouble'. Subjects have to indicate their acceptance of these statements on a scale from *completely disagree* (1) to *completely agree* (9). Because the RMAS was translated to Dutch for the present study, its reliability was examined. After deletion of 8 items, a mean score of 2.43 ($SD = 1.1$) and a Cronbach's alpha of .79 were obtained (Burt reports an alpha of .88). RMAS scores did not vary significantly between the experimental groups.

Estimate of false crime reports. Finally, subjects were asked to estimate the percentage of falsely reported crimes in the Netherlands. This percentage was used as an indication of subjects' general distrust of crime reports. The mean estimated percentage of false crime reports is 17.9% ($SD = 14.5\%$) in the present sample.

Results

NUMBER OF QUESTIONS

Overall the 93 subjects asked 3212 questions during the simulated interview, with mean number of 34.5 questions per subject. A 3×2 between-groups analysis of covariance (ANCOVA) was performed on mean number of questions.[1] Independent variables consisted of victim credibility information (negative, none,

and positive) and subject gender. Covariates were rape myth acceptance and distrust of crime reports.[2]

The results indicated that as expected the number of questions varied significantly with victim credibility information, $F(2, 83) = 3.26, p < .05$. No significant effect of subject gender was found, $F(1, 83) = 1.73$, *ns*, and the two covariates provided no reliable adjustment of the observed means, $F(2, 83) = .63$, *ns*. The adjusted means in Table 1 show that subjects in the negative victim credibility condition asked most questions ($M = 39.8$), followed by subjects in the control condition ($M = 31.7$) and the positive victim credibility condition ($M = 31.3$). The strength of the association between prior victim credibility information and number of questions asked is small, with partial $\eta^2 = .073$.

TABLE 1

Adjusted and Observed Mean Number of Questions as a Function of Victim Credibility Information and Subject Gender

		Adjusted mean	Unadjusted mean[a]	Sd
Victim credibility information				
–Negative	(n = 30)	39.8[b]	41.7	11.2
–None	(n = 28)	31.7	30.3	12.6
–Positive	(n = 30)	31.3	31.2	15.6
Gender of subject				
–Female	(n = 44)	36.4[c]	36.2	15.1
–Male	(n = 44)	32.2	32.7	14.5

[a] Grand mean = 34.4; Sd = 14.8

[b] Adjusted for covariates rape myth acceptance, distrust of crime reports, interaction between gender x victim credibility information and main effect of gender.

[c] Adjusted for covariates, rape myth acceptance, distrust of crime reports, interaction between gender x victim credibility information and main effect of victim credibility information.

Post hoc comparisons indicated that subjects in the negative victim credibility condition asked significantly more questions than subjects in either the control condition ($F(1, 89) = 3.88, p < .05$) or the positive victim credibility condition ($F(1, 89) = 5.76, p < .05$). The difference between the control and positive victim credibility condition was nonsignificant.

TYPE OF QUESTIONS

Table 2 presents the relative distribution of questions *per* question category. Questions were recategorized into six classes: *before the party, during/after the*

TABLE 2

Percentage of Questions per Category as a function of Victim Credibility Information

	Victim credibility information			Total
	Negative (n = 32)	Control (n = 30)	Positive (n = 31)	
Question category				
Before party	5.3%	6.9%	6.5%	6.1%
After party	**15.3%**	12.3%	**10.7%**	13.0%
Before rape	19.2%	16.3%	17.3%	17.8%
During rape	**23.7%**	27.0%	27.8%	25.9%
After rape	19.1%	19.1%	18.2%	18.8%
Other[a]	17.5%	18.4%	19.4%	18.3%
	(100%)[b]	(100%)[c]	(100%)[d]	(100%)[e]

Note. $X^2 = 20.56$; df = 10; $p < .001$; cell values with largest deviations from expected values are boldfaced.

[a] This category includes questions about: 1) the identity and personal characteristics of the victim and the assailant; 2) the motives for and circumstances of reporting the rape to the police; 3) the procedure of the simulated rape interview, and 4) miscellaneous topics (including non-answerable questions).

[b] N = 1275

[c] N = 974

[d] N = 963

[e] N = 3212

party, before the rape [in the home of the assailant], *during the rape, after the rape,* and *other questions* [identity, background, motives etc.].

The overall results in Table 2 show that most questions are concerned with events during the rape (25.9%) while the least number of questions are focused on events before the party (6.1%). Furthermore, contingency table analysis indicates that the distribution of questions is significantly associated with prior victim credibility information, $X^2(10, N = 93) = 20.56, p < .001$. From Table 2 it can also be seen that in the negative victim credibility condition fewer questions were posed about events during the rape and more questions about the preceding events than in both the control and positive victim credibility conditions.

As before, analysis of covariance (ANCOVA) was performed, with attributed victim responsibility as the dependent variable, and victim credibility information and subject gender as the independent variables. Covariates were rape myth acceptance and distrust of crime reports.

The results revealed a nonsignificant main effect for victim credibility information, $F(2, 81) = .58$, *ns*, a significant effect for subject gender, $F(1, 81) = 5.12$, $p < .05$, and a significant overall effect for the covariates, $F(2, 81) = 18.23$, $p < .001$. The adjusted marginal means, displayed in Table 3, show that female subjects assigned more responsibility to the victim than male subjects. The strength of the relationship between adjusted victim responsibility and subject gender is weak, however, with partial $\eta^2 = .059$.

The two covariates were significantly associated with the dependent variable. High attributed victim responsibility was associated with high rape myth acceptance, $r = .46$, $p < .001$, and high distrust of crime reports, $r = .47$, $p < .001$. Moreover, both covariates uniquely adjusted the attributed responsibility scores when entered in the model after all other effects.

TABLE 3

Adjusted and Unadjusted Means of Attributed Victim Responsibility as a Function of Victim Credibility Information and Subject Gender

		Adjusted mean	Unadjusted mean[a]	Sd
Victim credibility information				
–Negative	(n = 31)	4.21[b]	4.45	1.9
–None	(n = 29)	4.63	4.36	2.2
–Positive	(n = 29)	4.64	4.63	2.1
Gender of subject				
–Female	(n = 44)	4.92[c]	4.80	2.3
–Male	(n = 45)	4.07	4.17	1.8

Note. Range = 1 to 9; low score indicates low victim responsibility.

[a] Grand mean = 4.48; Sd = 2.1

[b] Adjusted for covariates rape myth acceptance, distrust of crime reports, interaction between gender x victim credibility information and main effect of gender.

[c] Adjusted for covariates rape myth acceptance, distrust of crime reports, interaction between gender x victim credibility information and main effect of victim credibility information.

Analysis of covariance using the same independent variables and covariates as above, but with attributed assailant responsibility as the dependent variable, showed a significant main effect for victim credibility information, $F(2, 82) = 4.89$, $p < .01$, a nonsignificant effect for subject gender, $F(1, 82) = 1.46$, *ns*, and a significant overall effect for the covariates, $F(2, 82) = 13.72$, $p < .001$. The adjusted marginal means are displayed in Table 4. From Table 4 it becomes clear that subjects who received positive victim credibility information attribute the highest degree of responsibility to the assailant ($M = 7.41$), followed by subjects who received no victim credibility information ($M = 6.66$) and subjects who received negative victim credibility information ($M = 6.36$). The size of the effect of victim credibility information on the degree of attributed assailant responsibility is small, with partial $\eta^2 = .11$.

Post hoc comparisons indicated that subjects who received positive victim credibility information attributed a higher degree of responsibility to the assailant ($M = 7.36$), than either control group subjects who received no victim credibility information ($M = 6.66$; $F(1, 81) = 4.49$, $p < .05$) or subjects who received negative victim credibility information ($M = 6.36$; $F(1, 81) = 8.86$, $p < .01$). Subjects

TABLE 4

Adjusted and Unadjusted Means of Attributed Assailant Responsibility as a Function of Victim Credibility Information and Subject Gender

		Adjusted mean	Unadjusted mean[a]	Sd
Victim credibility information				
–Negative	(n = 31)	6.36[b]	6.19	1.8
–None	(n = 29)	6.66	6.85	1.5
–Positive	(n = 30)	7.41	7.42	1.4
Gender of subject				
–Female	(n = 45)	6.99[c]	7.04	1.6
–Male	(n = 45)	6.64	6.59	1.6

Note. Range = 1 to 9; low score indicates low assailant responsibility.

[a] Grand mean = 6.81; Sd = 1.6

[b] Adjusted for covariates rape myth acceptance, distrust of crime reports, interaction between gender x victim credibility information and main effect of gender.

[c] Adjusted for covariates rape myth acceptance, distrust of crime reports, interaction between gender x victim credibility information and main effect of victim credibility information.

receiving no victim information and subjects receiving negative victim information did not differ significantly in the degree of attributed assailant responsibility, ($F(1, 81) = .63$, *ns*).

Inspection of the pooled within-group correlations among covariates and the dependent variable showed that low attributed assailant responsibility was significantly associated with high rape myth acceptance, $r = -.48$, $p < .001$, and high distrust of crime reports, $r = -.38$, $p < .001$. However, only distrust of crime reports uniquely adjusted the observed scores of attributed assailant responsibility.

Experiment 2

Method

SUBJECTS

Thirty detectives from various police departments in the Netherlands participated on a voluntary basis. The detectives were approached during a course at the police academy (the course content was unrelated to sexual offences). Detectives who had recently participated in a training programme dealing with sexual offences were excluded from the experiment. Of those who agreed to participate, only one detective did not show up for the experimental session. The final sample included seven female and twenty-three male detectives. The average age in the sample is 32.5 years. Subjects were randomly assigned to the three experimental conditions before they showed up for the experimental session. Nine subjects received a report with positive prior victim credibility information, eleven subjects received negative information and ten subjects received no victim credibility information.

PROCEDURE AND MEASURES

The design, procedure, and variables of Experiment 2 were identical to Experiment 1. A number of minor changes were necessary in the experimental instruction to allow for the different professional background of the police sample (*e.g.*, by contrast with the students, police detectives did not have to imagine themselves being police officers).

To check the validity of the experimental manipulation, mean victim credibility judgements were obtained for all three experimental conditions from the first (short) questionnaire. The mean victim credibility judgements did not differ significantly across the experimental conditions. However, the size and direction of the mean difference between the negative ($M = 5.82$) and positive ($M = 6.67$) victim credibility conditions were almost identical to the size and direction of the mean difference between the same conditions in Experiment 1. The nonsignificant result of the manipulation check is therefore probably due to the smaller sample size in Experiment 2.

The mean Rape Myth Acceptance score (RMAS) in the police sample was 1.96 ($SD = 0.8$). The difference in mean RMAS score between the student sample

(Experiment 1: $M = 2.43$) and police sample was significant, $F(1, 120) = 5.01$, $p < .05$. RMAS scores did not vary significantly between the experimental groups.

As in Experiment 1, subjects were asked to estimate the percentage of falsely reported crimes in the Netherlands. The mean estimated percentage of false crime reports was 17.4% (SD = 14.0%) in the police sample. The observed mean difference in estimated percentage of estimated false crime reports between the student sample (Experiment 1: $M = 17.7\%$) and the police sample was nonsignificant, $F(1, 120) = .23$, *ns*.

Results

NUMBER OF QUESTIONS

Altogether the 30 detectives asked 1501 questions, with mean number of 51.5 questions per detective, on average almost 50% more than the number of questions per student in Experiment 1. Analogous to Experiment 1, a 3 × 2 between-groups analysis of covariance (ANCOVA) was performed on mean number of questions with victim credibility information (negative, none, and positive) and subject gender as independent variables. Rape myth acceptance scores and estimated percentages of false crime reports (distrust of crime reports) were used as covariates. The adjusted and observed means are displayed in Table 5.

Contrary to Experiment 1, the results showed no significant effect of victim credibility information, $F(2, 22) = .48$, *ns*. Consistent with the results of Experiment 1, no significant effect of subject gender was found, $F(1, 22) = .54$, *ns*, and the set of the two covariates provided no reliable adjustment of the observed mean number of questions, $F(2, 22) = 2.75$, *ns*.[3]

However, *post hoc* comparisons based on the results of Experiment 1 indicate that subjects in the negative credibility condition asked significantly more questions than subjects in the control condition, $F(1, 28) = 4.28$, $p < .05$. The difference between the control and positive credibility conditions is not statistically significant. In addition, the difference between the negative victim credibility condition and the combined conditions of no victim credibility information and positive victim credibility information is statistically significant, $F(1, 28) = 2.12$, $p < .05$.

TYPE OF QUESTIONS

Table 6 presents the relative distribution of questions asked during the simulated victim interview *per* question category. Similar to the student sample overall the highest percentage of questions concerns the category *during the rape* (27.8%), and the lowest percentage falls into the category *before the party* (7.5%). Further analysis shows that the distribution of questions is significantly associated with prior victim credibility information, $X^2(10, N = 30) = 39.81$, $p < .001$. From Table 6 it can be seen that police officers in the negative victim credibility condition ask more questions about events after the actual rape and about the identity and

TABLE 5

Adjusted and Observed Mean Number of Questions as a Function of Victim Credibility Information and Subject Gender

		Adjusted mean	Unadjusted mean[a]	Sd
Victim credibility information				
–Negative	(n = 11)	58.4[b]	61.4	15.7
–None	(n = 10)	53.9	44.0	22.2
–Positive	(n = 9)	48.3	47.9	19.6
Gender of subject				
–Female	(n = 45)	56.4[c]	56.6	13.4
–Male	(n = 46)	50.7	50.0	21.7

[a] Grand mean = 51.5; Sd = 20.1
[b] Adjusted for covariates rape myth acceptance, distrust of crime reports, interaction between gender x victim credibility information and main effect of gender.
[c] Adjusted for covariates rape myth acceptance, distrust of crime reports, interaction between gender x victim credibility information and main effect of victim credibility information.

background characteristics of the victim, and fewer questions about events during the rape than police officers in both the control group and positive victim credibility condition.

ATTRIBUTED VICTIM RESPONSIBILITY

Analogous to Experiment 1, the effect of victim credibility information on the degree of attributed victim responsibility was analyzed with analysis of covariance, using subject gender as a second independent variable. Rape myth acceptance and distrust of crime reports were again employed as covariates.

Contrary to our hypothesis, but consistent with the results of Experiment 1, no statistically significant main effect for victim credibility information was found, $F(1, 22) = .06$, *ns*. The main effect of subject gender was also nonsignificant, $F(1, 22) = .53$, *ns*. The two covariates, however, reliably adjusted the degree of attributed responsibility to the victim, $F(2, 22) = 5.29$, $p < .05$. The adjusted and observed marginal means are displayed in Table 7.

Irrespective of the nonsignificant effect of victim credibility, it becomes clear however that subjects in the police sample, on average, attribute less responsibility to the victim than subjects in the student sample (compare Experiment 1: Table 3).

TABLE 6

Percentage of Questions per Category as a function of Victim Credibility Information

	Victim credibility information			Total
	Negative (n = 11)	Control (n = 10)	Positive (n = 9)	
Question category				
Before party	7.8%	9.6%	**5.1%**	7.5%
After party	10.4%	14.5%	10.5%	11.6%
Before rape	20.3%	24.5%	23.8%	22.5%
During rape	25.2%	30.1%	29.7%	27.8%
After rape	**16.9%**	**6.5%**	13.3%	12.9%
Other[a]	19.4%	14.9%	17.5%	17.6%
	(100%)[b]	(100%)[c]	(100%)[d]	(100%)[e]

Note. $X^2 = 39.81$; df = 10; $p < .001$; cell values with largest deviations from expected values are boldfaced.

[a] This category includes questions about: 1) the identity and personal characteristics of the victim and the assailant; 2) the motives for and circumstances of reporting the rape to the police; 3) the procedure of the simulated rape interview, and 4) miscellaneous topics (including non-answerable questions).

[b] N = 644

[c] N = 429

[d] N = 428

[e] N = 1501

Both covariates were found to provide unique adjustment of the observed attribution scores when entered into the model after all other predictors. Only one of the covariates, rape myth acceptance, was significantly correlated with the dependent variable. Consistent with the findings of Experiment 1, a high degree of responsibility attributed to the victim was associated with high rape myth acceptance, $r = .47$, $p < .01$.

ATTRIBUTED ASSAILANT RESPONSIBILITY

Analysis of covariance with attributed assailant responsibility as the dependent variable, using the same covariates and independent variables as above, revealed no significant main effects for victim credibility information, $F(2, 21) = .82$, *ns*. and subject gender, $F(1, 21) = .47$, *ns*. In addition, the covariates provided no

TABLE 7

Adjusted and Unadjusted Means of Attributed Victim Responsibility as a Function of Victim Credibility Information and Gender

		Adjusted mean	Unadjusted mean[a]	Sd
Victim credibility information				
–Negative	(n = 11)	3.66[b]	3.91	1.7
–None	(n = 10)	3.60	3.55	1.6
–Positive	(n = 9)	3.39	3.36	2.0
Gender of subject				
–Female	(n = 7)	3.32[c]	3.14	1.6
–Male	(n = 23)	3.78	3.77	1.8

Note. Range = 1 to 9; low score indicates low victim responsibility.
[a] Grand mean = 3.63; Sd = 1.7
[b] Adjusted for covariates age, rape myth acceptance, distrust of crime reports, interaction between gender x victim credibility information and main effect of gender.
[c] Adjusted for covariates age, rape myth acceptance, distrust of crime reports, interaction between gender x victim credibility information and main effect of victim credibility information.

reliable adjustment of the dependent variable, $F(2, 21) = 1.48$, *ns*. The adjusted and observed means are displayed in Table 8.

From the table of means it becomes clear that – regardless of the nonsignificant experimental effect – police detectives, on average, attribute more responsibility to the assailant than law students (compare Experiment 1: Table 4).

Discussion

Altogether, the data obtained in Experiments 1 and 2 demonstrate that the gathering of information during a victim interview is guided by an expectancy-confirming strategy. As expected, the number of questions asked during the interview was found to vary with the credibility information concerning the rape victim presented before the interview. Both law students and police officers asked significantly more questions when they had been given negative prior victim credibility information than subjects who received no prior victim credibility information. These results are consistent with the findings of Skov and Sherman

TABLE 8

Adjusted and Unadjusted Means of Attributed Assailant Responsibility as a Function of Victim Credibility Information and Gender

		Adjusted mean	Unadjusted mean[a]	Sd
Victim credibility information				
–Negative	(n = 11)	7.25[b]	7.00	1.3
–None	(n = 9)	7.70	7.87	0.8
–Positive	(n = 9)	8.10	7.93	1.5
Gender of subject				
–Female	(n = 7)	7.86[c]	7.91	1.1
–Male	(n = 22)	7.51	7.45	1.4

Note. Range = 1 to 9; low score indicates low victim responsibility.
[a] Grand mean = 7.56; Sd = 1.3
[b] Adjusted for covariates age, rape myth acceptance, distrust of crime reports, interaction between gender x victim credibility information and main effect of gender.
[c] Adjusted for covariates age, rape myth acceptance, distrust of crime reports, interaction between gender x victim credibility information and main effect of victim credibility information.

(1986) who showed that negative credibility information generally has a higher diagnostic value than neutral or positive prior information. Our data suggest that this phenomenon played a role when our subjects were seeking information that they could use to decide whether a rape had been committed or not. The prior information that the victim may not be telling the truth makes it less certain for the subjects that a rape had indeed occurred. The more uncertain the subjects are, the greater their need for information. A police officer not only has to assess the facts as accurately and completely as possible, he or she also needs to assess the reliability of the facts and the existence of possible motives for submitting a false rape report.

Prior victim credibility information presented before the victim interview influenced both the number of questions and the type of questions asked during the interview. As hypothesized, subjects who received negative victim credibility information were less interested in the rape itself, but showed a preference for information about the events that took place before the rape (students) or after the rape (police officers). This finding is consistent with the view that people will prefer information that allows them to distinguish best between competing

hypotheses (Trope and Bassok, 1982). For example, while investigating the possibility that a rape had occurred, the question whether the victim did have sexual intercourse with her assailant is less diagnostic than the question whether she left the assailants' house immediately afterwards.

Furthermore, it is interesting to speculate why police officers and law students who received negative victim credibility information searched for clues in different places. Since they were mainly focused on the legal definition of rape the law students might have directed their questions more to events preceding the rape, in order to establish whether before the rape the woman had agreed to have sex or not. The police detectives may have focused on the events following the actual rape as a result of the 'detective attitude' (or a similar form of professional doubt) which may have been triggered by the fact that the woman didn't leave the house immediately after the rape and waited until next morning to report the events to the police. The fact that the vice squad detectives on average posed almost 50% more questions during the victim interview than law students before reaching their final assessment, may also have resulted from the 'detective attitude'.

Although prior information about the victim's credibility influenced the gathering of information, it had no clear effect on the conclusions drawn by the subjects about the responsibility of either the victim or her assailant. The only exception was found in Experiment 1, where law students who received positive victim credibility information attributed more responsibility to the assailant. The present research apparently failed to replicate the effect of prior information on evaluation of target persons as reported in previous research of the expectancy-confirmation process (*e.g.* Lange *et al.*, 1991; Snyder and Swann, 1978). The most likely explanation for this is that in earlier studies there was no opportunity to gather additional information about the presented case. In the present study (which is closer to real life), the subjects had ample opportunity to gather additional information which may have reduced the expectancy-confirmation bias since the subjects could review and change their thoughts before giving a final judgment.[4]

In contrast to most previous findings (*e.g.* Selby *et al.*, 1977) subject gender had no independent influence on attributed responsibility. However, Krahé *et al.* (1988) also didn't find a relationship between gender and restrictive vs. sympathetic judgements of rape victims. A striking exception to these results was found in Experiment 1 where female law students attributed significantly more responsibility to the victim than did male law students. This could be due to a tendency of the female students to protect themselves from identifying too much with the victim (who could have very well been a student, given her background characteristics). Female students may have preferred to blame the victim for her behaviour in order to preserve their belief in a just world rather than to accept the disturbing notion that the same things could happen to themselves for no reason at all (Ryan, 1971). This explanation has generally not been supported by research (*e.g.* Denkers, 1996).

Consistent with previous research (Bijl, 1986; Krahé, 1988), the more stereotypical the subjects' beliefs about rape (especially the law students), the more responsibility to the victim and less responsibility to the assailant they attributed. In addition to this, the positive relationship between the estimated general percentage of false crime reports and the responsibility of the victim (as found in Experiment 1) replicates the findings reported by De Winter and Winkel (1993).

We may conclude that the experimental procedures of most of the previous studies on the effects of prior information were too simple to cover the complex process of information gathering and interpretation. The procedures used in this study appear to have more ecological validity: first, we did not confine ourselves to students as subjects, but also investigated the behaviour of professionals; second, the experimental procedures allowed the subjects to gather additional information (which is the way it mostly happens in real life) instead of taking a decision on the basis of the information they received beforehand only. However, the fact that subjects were not questioning an actual victim may have influenced the information gathering process and the subsequent attributional decision making in a subtle manner. For example, subjects thinking that they and their questioning were the focus of inquiry may have been less motivated to seek additional credibility information from the victim in comparison to police officers on duty conducting an interview with an actual rape victim.[5] This issue needs to be addressed in future research, for instance by replicating the study design using professional actors to role-play the alleged rape victim in a face to face interview and training them to limit their answers to the specific question–answer pairs in the data-base.

The outcome of this study is in a way reassuring since police officers did not show much bias in their final judgment (which might hurt real victims badly if it were to occur in reality). More than the students, they used the possibility of checking out the (false negative) prior information. It was also found that police detectives were more gentle in their evaluation of the rape victim, more severe in their judgment of the assailant and were less stereotypical in their beliefs with respect to rape and rape victims than law students. These findings indicate that police officers (at least in the Netherlands) may be generally more sympathetic towards rape victims than often believed. It would be interesting to investigate whether this mildness and subtlety holds out against stronger forms of prior negative victim information.

AUTHOR NOTES

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NOTES

1 Analyses were conducted by the SPSS/PC+ 5.0.2 MANOVA programme using the regression approach (SSTYPE UNIQUE) to adjust for unequal cell size. Before all reported analyses of covariance in Experiment 1 and Experiment 2, pre-analyses were performed indicating no violations of the assumptions of normality, linearity, homogeneity of variance, homogeneity of regression and reliability of the covariates.

2 Another covariate, age of subject, was included in earlier runs, but discarded in the final analyses reported in this article. Elimination of this covariate did not change the pattern of the results obtained in both experiments.

3 Although the single covariate distrust of crime reports uniquely adjusted the mean number of questions, $F(1, 22) = 5.42, p < .05$, a nonsignificant correlation between distrust of crime reports and mean number of questions was obtained, $r = -.37$, *ns*. Repeating the analysis without the other covariate rape myth acceptance, or without any covariates at all (ANOVA) did not change the pattern of the obtained results.

4 An anonymous reviewer of an earlier draft of this article suggested to us that according to the elaboration likelihood model of Petty and Cacioppo (1986) there are two routes which may impact the persuasive influence of a message on subsequent judgements or attitude change: central and peripheral. If it can be assumed that subjects participating in the simulated rape victim interview were able to elaborate the provided information in a central manner, this could also explain the lack of effect on the responsibility attributions after the interview. It is possible that given the ambivalent nature of the presented rape case the quality of the information obtained during the interview caused a central elaboration process reducing the influence of the superficial prior victim information. Also the presence of the experimenter in the role of the victim during the interview may have served to hold the subject accountable for attending to the information at hand, thereby preventing the subject from attending to more superficial (peripheral) qualities of the victim. This suggests that police officers working with actual rape victims may be less influenced by peripheral qualities like prior victim credibility information, if they are given the opportunity to carefully (*i.e.* centrally) process the information at hand.

5 We would like to thank an anonymous reviewer for suggesting this possible influence on the results of this study to us.

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