

# “She Deserved It”: Effects of Sexism Norms, Type of Violence, and Victim’s Pre-Assault Behavior on Blame Attributions Toward Female Victims and Approval of the Aggressor’s Behavior

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## Abstract

Effects of ambivalent sexism, sexism norms, victim behavior, and type of violence on male students’ reactions to male violence against women in intimate relationships were examined. Participants judged a scenario depicting an act of sexual or non-sexual violence against a female partner who had either shown overtly sexual or non-sexual behavior toward another man. Generally, high (vs. low) hostile sexism, high (vs. low) hostile sexism norm feedback, and victim’s overtly sexual (vs. non-sexual) behavior led to stronger victim blame and perceived approval of the aggressor’s behavior. The victim of non-sexual violence was blamed more than the rape victim, particularly if she had behaved in an overtly sexual manner.

## Keywords

ambivalent sexism, feminine gender-role stereotypes, sexual and non-sexual violence, social norms, victim behavior

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Judgments about the blameworthiness of rape victims are frequently influenced by extra-legal information. For instance, this information may concern the victim's appearance, such as her clothing or general attractiveness, as well as the victim's lifestyle and behavior, such as her relationship status or degree of resistance to the attack (see Krahe, 1985; Pollard, 1992; Viki & Abrams, 2002a; Whitley, 1996, for a review). The influence of such information is often explained in terms of its link with sexist attitudes that prescribe how a woman should and should not behave (Pollard, 1992). Ambivalent sexism theory (Glick & Fiske, 1996) describes two forms of sexist attitudes: *Hostile sexism* (HS) and *benevolent sexism* (BS). In a complementary way, HS and BS serve to maintain and justify men's structural power: Women are rewarded with benevolent care if they embrace traditional roles that serve men (e.g., housewives and maternal types), or they are punished with hostility if they challenge or threaten the status quo of male dominance (e.g., feminists, career women, and sex bombs; Eckes, 1994; Six & Eckes, 1991). Ambivalent sexism, gender inequality, and male dominance exist across cultures (Glick, 2006; Glick et al., 2000) and violence against women is a persistent problem that crosses the lines of race, ethnicity, nationality, social class, religion, age, and sexual orientation (Marin & Russo, 1999). Therefore, it appears reasonable and also necessary to address these issues and their potential interrelations on a global level, which is the aim in the present article. Nevertheless, it is also a fact that different socio-cultural settings vary considerably with regard to the normatively accepted level and scope of sexism, oppression of women, and violence against women that prevail in them. Most of the studies cited and also the one presented in this article have used white, Western European or North American student samples. Therefore, cross-cultural and cross-class generalizations have to be treated with caution.

## **Ambivalent Sexism and the Justification of Violence Against Women**

In correspondence with ambivalent sexism theory, previous research has demonstrated that ambivalent sexists (i.e., who are high in HS as well as BS) indeed characterize subtypes of women in a more polarized fashion than non-sexists (i.e., who are low in HS as well as BS). In addition, HS has been found to account for negative evaluations of non-traditional women, whereas BS accounted for positive evaluations of traditional women (Glick, Diebold, Bailey-Werner, & Zhu, 1997; Sibley & Wilson, 2004). Concerning judgments of violence against women, several studies have shown that ambivalent sexists' gender-role stereotyped perception of female rape victims has a crucial impact on their self-reported victim blame and rape proclivity (Abrams, Viki, Masser, & Bohner, 2003; Masser, Viki, & Power, 2006; Viki & Abrams, 2002b). Apart from affecting rape perception, sexism and traditional sex-role attitudes have also been found to contribute to the justification of non-sexual domestic violence against women (Gentemann, 1984; Glick, Sakallı-Uğurlu, Ferreira, & de Souza, 2002; Hillier & Foddy, 1993; Sakallı-Uğurlu, 2001; Saunders & Size, 1986).

In line with the distinction between HS and BS in ambivalent sexism theory, Abrams et al. (2003) demonstrated that HS and BS contribute to the justification of male violence against women in different ways. These authors used stranger and acquaintance rape scenarios to assess rape perception in male students. They argued that those students with strong ambivalent sexist attitudes would perceive the victim of acquaintance rape (as opposed to stranger rape) as having instigated the sexual attention of the aggressor deliberately, which, in turn, violated the sexual morality and purity that they expect from women. Different effects of HS and BS on reactions toward the rape scenarios were predicted: BS participants would attribute more blame to the victim of acquaintance rape (relative to stranger rape) because they only regard obedient women as worthy of protection. HS participants, however, should use role-expectancy violation to justify their violent inclinations toward women. Therefore, they would show stronger rape proclivity toward the victim of acquaintance rape. Both of these predictions were supported. Furthermore, the relationship between BS and victim blame was mediated by participants' belief that the victim had behaved "inappropriately," whereas the relationship between HS and rape proclivity was mediated by participants' belief that the victim had "really wanted to have sex." Other research also used the scenario technique to manipulate the victim's violation of (vs. adherence to) traditional gender roles and thereby trigger sexist interpretations of the act of violence as something the victim "deserved" or "really wanted." Specifically, in these studies, factors such as the victim's relationship status, clothing, political activities, or whether she was acquainted with her aggressor or not were manipulated (Masser et al., 2006; Viki & Abrams, 2002b; Whatley, 1996, 2005).

These operationalizations, however, have failed to consider the crucial motivational forces behind most violent actions against women, namely, jealousy and male proprietariness (Daly & Wilson, 1988, 1998). In terms of these motives, male physical violence could be explained as a reaction to perceived female infidelity, which poses a severe threat to male dominance and authority (Daly & Wilson, 1998). The violent reaction is then aimed at the re-establishment or defense of such power. For the reason that ambivalent sexists are particularly concerned with the maintenance of male dominance, "provocative" victim behavior that threatens this power should facilitate the justification of violent reactions. Findings that have been reported by Hillier and Foddy (1993) are in line with this assumption. These authors studied sexist reactions to non-sexual violence against "provocative" victims. For this purpose, they had developed scenarios describing high- and low-provocation incidents of wife assault (e.g., wife admits to having an affair/wife desires to go to work). As predicted, participants holding traditional (vs. egalitarian) sex-role attitudes blamed the victim more and the aggressor less for the assault, especially if the victim's behavior had been of the "highly provocative" type.

## **Aims of the Present Study**

The results by Hillier and Foddy (1993) illustrate that general sex-role attitudes can bias judgments of victim blame in cases of non-sexual violence against women.

However, to date, studies that have examined the particular relationship between ambivalent sexist attitudes, as measured by the Ambivalent Sexism Inventory (ASI; Glick & Fiske, 1996), and justifications of violence against women have mostly concentrated on sexual violence. Conversely, the effect of “provocative” victim behavior on judgments of victim blame has predominantly been addressed in relation to non-sexual violence (see Graham & Rawlings, 1999, for a review). Nevertheless, issues of power are also highly relevant in the domain of male sexual violence against women (see Groth, Burgess, & Holmstrom, 1977). To fill these two existing gaps in research, our study addressed effects of ambivalent sexist attitudes as well as “provocative” victim behavior on judgments of both sexual and non-sexual male violence against women in intimate relationships.

Another important aspect regarding the link between sexist attitudes and male violence against women concerns the fact that sexist attitudes function as socially shared norms in justifying such violence. Social norms are defined as “rules and standards that are understood by members of a group, and that guide and/or constrain social behavior” (Cialdini & Trost, 1998, p. 152). Accordingly, discrimination against women appears to be guided by such norms in the sense that it is legitimized by arguments based on societal or cultural standards for proper gender-role behavior (e.g., Rozee, 1993). To provide an example, Heise, Ellsberg, and Gottemoeller (1999) analyzed cross-national data on violence against women and identified a set of events that had preceded male violence. Consistently, these events implied violations of gender norms (e.g., disobedience toward husband, refusal of sex, and not having food ready on time).

Furthermore, specific evidence for the influence of social norms on judgments of sexual violence against women comes from recent studies that experimentally manipulated social norms concerning rape myth acceptance (RMA; which has been shown to correlate strongly with HS; Eckes & Six-Materna, 1999; Gerger, Kley, Bohner, & Siebler, 2007; Glick & Fiske, 1996) and ambivalent sexist attitudes (Bohner, Pina, Viki, & Siebler, 2010; Bohner, Siebler, & Schmelcher, 2006; Eyssel, Bohner, & Siebler, 2006; Michaelis & Bohner, 2005). For instance, Bohner et al. (2006) presented male students with alleged feedback about their peers’ RMA scores. Either extremely low or extremely high RMA scores were provided as feedback on social norms which affected participants’ self-reported rape proclivity. This norm-feedback paradigm was also effectively applied to demonstrate effects of sexism norms (HS/BS) on students’ rape proclivity and victim blame in reaction to acquaintance rape scenarios (Michaelis & Bohner, 2005). However, it is still an open empirical question how ambivalent sexism norms influence justifications of non-sexual violence against women.

## Hypotheses

### *Victim’s Pre-Assault Behavior*

Previous research concerning sexist justifications and power motives in male violence against women demonstrated that victims who had violated gender-role prescriptions

evoked anti-victim attitudes (Abrams et al., 2003; Graham & Rawlings, 1999; Hillier & Foddy, 1993; Masser et al., 2006; Viki & Abrams, 2002a; Wilson, Johnson, & Daly, 1995). Accordingly, we predicted that participants in our experiment would show stronger approval of the aggressor's behavior and more victim blame toward a female victim of intimate partner violence if she had behaved in an overtly sexual (vs. non-sexual) manner toward another man (Hypothesis 1).

### *Sexism Norms*

In previous research manipulating norm feedback (Michaelis & Bohner, 2005), HS feedback predicted victim blame as well as rape proclivity. Taking into account these previous findings, we predicted that participants who had received high HS (and low BS) norm feedback would show stronger approval of the aggressor's behavior and blame the victim more than participants who had received low HS (and high BS) norm feedback (Hypothesis 2). We used high HS and low BS feedback in the one condition and low HS and high BS feedback in the other condition for two reasons: First, we wanted to separate potential effects of high HS feedback on the dependent variables from effects of high BS feedback. Second, we wanted to rule out the possibility of obtaining feedback effects that are merely due to priming of low versus high values.

### *Victim's Pre-Assault Behavior × Sexism Norms*

Furthermore, we predicted the following interaction effect: The effect described in Hypothesis 2 would be more pronounced for participants who had read a scenario depicting a female victim who had behaved in an overtly sexual manner than for participants who had read a scenario depicting a female victim who had behaved in a non-sexual manner (Hypothesis 3).

### *Self-Reported Ambivalent Sexism*

In addition to ambivalent sexism norms, we explored participants' self-reported HS and BS as predictors of victim blame and approval of the aggressor's behavior. In accordance with previous research (Michaelis & Bohner, 2005), we predicted that higher HS would be associated with stronger approval of the aggressor's behavior (Hypothesis 4). Potential effects of BS and interaction effects between norm feedback and participants' self-reported HS and BS were also examined, but we made no specific predictions because previous studies had produced somewhat inconsistent findings in this respect.

### *Type of Violence*

Apart from victim behavior, we varied the type of violence that the aggressor exerted against the victim. To our knowledge, there is no previous research that has simultaneously investigated and compared effects of (ambivalent) sexism norms on judgments

of both, non-sexual and sexual types of violence against women. Therefore, we analyzed the effect of type of violence on victim blame and approval of the aggressor's behavior in an exploratory fashion.

## Method

### *Pilot Testing of Materials*

We conducted two pilot studies to develop appropriate scenarios depicting violent acts against women as well as a set of items that reliably assess victim blame. In Pilot Study 1, 40 male German university students ( $M$  age = 24.4 years) completed the HS subscale of the ASI (German version by Eckes & Six-Materna, 1999) and read five text scenarios depicting acts of sexual violence against a woman committed by her intimate relationship partner. Then, they rated each scenario by a set of items designed to assess victim blame. The *victim's pre-assault behavior* toward another man (sexual vs. non-sexual) in each scenario was varied between participants. Based on the results, one scenario was selected for further use because compared to the other scenarios, it had produced (a) the highest reliability of a four-item victim blame index ( $\alpha = .89$ ), (b) a sufficiently high mean range (z-standardized = -0.76 to 2.90), and (c) significant effects of both, participants' HS,  $F(1,36) = 10.09$ ,  $p = .003$ , and *victim's pre-assault behavior*,  $F(1,36) = 5.35$ ,  $p = .03$ , on the victim blame index.

In Pilot Study 2 ( $n = 37$  male students;  $M$  age = 24.6 years), after the assessment of ambivalent sexism, only the selected scenario was presented in  $2 \times 2$  versions, varying in the male protagonist's behavior (non-sexual violence vs. sexual violence) and in his female partner's preceding behavior toward another man (sexual vs. non-sexual) that he reacted to. Again, the reliability of the four-item victim blame index was good ( $\alpha = .91$ ). Univariate ANOVAS with HS (high vs. low according to median-split), *victim's pre-assault behavior*, and *type of violence* as independent variables were performed. Again, HS,  $F(1,29) = 5.75$ ,  $p = .02$ , and *victim's pre-assault behavior*,  $F(1,29) = 4.02$ ,  $p = .05$ , significantly predicted victim blame. There were no significant main effects for the type of violence or interaction effects, so it could be assumed that both types of violence were affected similarly by HS and *victim's pre-assault behavior*. This justified the parallel operationalization and investigation of these different types of violence in the main study. The wordings of the four scenario versions and the five victim blame items used in the main study are reported below in the "Materials" section.

### *Main Study*

**Participants and design.** Participants were 163 male students from the University of Bielefeld, Germany. Their age ranged from 17 to 54 years ( $M = 25.60$ ,  $SD = 6.00$ ) and, on average, they were in their fifth semester of study and German by nationality (93%). The data from one participant were excluded from the statistical analyses because of insufficient German language skills. The assessment procedure (see below) required participants to imagine themselves in the role of a partner in an intimate heterosexual relationship who is enraged by his girlfriend's behavior toward another man

and reacts violently toward her. Following previous studies on reactions to acquaintance rape (committed by a man against a woman) that had used a similar assessment procedure (e.g., Bohner et al., 2006), we assumed that for homosexual men, the situation and role in which they had to imagine themselves would not represent a meaningful behavioral template that could possibly emerge in their own intimate life. For this reason, the data of three participants who had indicated a homosexual orientation were also excluded from the analyses. The exclusion of the four participants did not meaningfully affect any of the main results.

*Norm feedback* (high HS/low BS vs. low HS/high BS), *victim's pre-assault behavior* (overtly sexual vs. non-sexual), and *type of violence* (sexual vs. non-sexual) were varied between conditions, yielding a  $2 \times 2 \times 2$  between-subjects design. Participants were randomly assigned to one of the eight experimental conditions.

**Procedure.** Participants were recruited on campus and were asked to take part in a short computer-based experiment on "attitudes regarding relationships between men and women." To create the impression that the study consisted of ostensibly unrelated parts, study materials were presented in distinct "modules." Participants first completed the German version of the ASI by Eckes and Six-Materna (1999). Afterwards, they were informed that because participants are often interested in how peers have responded to the questionnaire, they would see the same items again, this time accompanied by mean scores values of their fellow male students. The norm feedback followed: Fake mean scores (extremely high vs. low scores) were shown separately for each ASI item. Subsequently, a short written scenario that portrayed an act of sexual versus non-sexual violence was presented and participants indicated their degree of approval of the aggressor's behavior and victim blame in reaction to the scenario. Finally, participants were asked for some demographic information and completed a suspicion check that consisted of one open-ended question asking for any assumptions they may have concerning the purpose of the study. After completion of the experiment, participants received a chocolate bar as compensation and were thoroughly debriefed.

### Materials

**Ambivalent sexism.** The ASI consists of the subscales HS (11 items) and BS (11 items). Example items are "A good woman should be set on a pedestal by her man" (BS), and "Once a woman gets a man to commit to her, she usually tries to put him on a short leash" (HS). The response scale ranged from 1 (*do not agree at all*) to 7 (*agree completely*). Internal consistencies were high, so all respective items were averaged to form indices of HS ( $\alpha = .88$ ) and BS ( $\alpha = .79$ ).

**Norm feedback.** Participants received alleged feedback about other male students' mean responses to the ASI items. For a detailed description of the generation of the fake mean scores, see Michaelis and Bohner (2005). In brief, HS and BS subscale means had been obtained from a student sample ( $n = 188$ ; HS:  $M = 3.74$ ,  $SD = 0.90$ ; BS:  $M = 4.20$ ,  $SD = 0.98$ ). Based on these means, low and high norm values for each ASI item were generated. These values ranged in an area below  $M - 1 SD$  (low norm

value) and in an area above  $M + 1 SD$  (high norm value), respectively. Participants who received high HS feedback simultaneously received low BS feedback and vice versa. An English translation of an exemplary screenshot from the high HS/low BS feedback condition would read as follows:

We know that many participants are interested in how other people responded. Therefore, we will show you the mean value of male students surveyed in the last year for every single question you have responded to already.

“Once a woman gets a man to commit to her, she usually tries to put him on a short leash.”

On average, male students from Bielefeld responded: 2.0.

**Scenario measure.** The four scenario versions selected on the basis of the pilot studies were used to manipulate the *victim's pre-assault behavior* and the *type of violence*. The female protagonist's pre-assault behavior was meant to induce a high or low level of provocation by violating (vs. adhering to) gender-role expectations and threatening (vs. maintaining) male power. The scenario ended with the male protagonist either raping his girlfriend (sexual violence) or brutally hurling his girlfriend against a car and hustling her into the car (non-sexual violence). The ethnicity of the protagonists in the scenarios was not specified; however, the names that we used (Nadine/Sebastian) probably caused participants to think of members of their own ethnic group. An English translation of the four scenario versions is shown below. The texts in brackets represent the variations of *victim's pre-assault behavior* and *type of violence*:

Sebastian wants to pick his girlfriend Nadine up from a party. She does not appear at the meeting point. After a while Sebastian enters the house to look for her. He discovers her on the dance floor. She does not see him. [*non-sexual behavior*: She is dancing with an acquaintance who whispers something into her ear. Hereupon Nadine starts grubbing in her handbag, hands him a Tylenol pill and gets him a glass of water from the bar. *overtly sexual behavior*: She nestles very closely to her dancing partner, whispers something into his ear and leads his hand to her bottom.] Sebastian is getting angry because she takes care of other men while he is waiting for her. He approaches her, grabs for her hand and drags her out to the parking lot. [*non-sexual violence*: He hurls her against a parked car. Nadine falls down and knocks her knee. Sebastian pulls her up, opens the front passenger's door and hustles her on to the seat. *sexual violence*: He heaps her up onto the bonnet of a parked car, unzips his trousers and says that she can have fun with him now. Nadine defends herself and says that she does not want to sleep with him. Sebastian forces himself between her legs and simply does it.]

**Victim blame and approval of the aggressor's behavior.** Based on previous scenario-based studies (Abrams et al., 2003; Viki & Abrams, 2002b) and our own pilot tests, the following five items were used to assess the degree to which participants blamed the victim for the outcome of the situation (label: victim blame): “Considering her own behavior: Should Nadine have anticipated such an ending?” (1 = *not at*

all anticipated such an ending to 7 = surely anticipated such an ending), “Who is mainly responsible for the situation to have taken that course?” (*Sebastian or Nadine*; forced choice), “Was Sebastian’s action in this situation justified?” (1 = not at all justified to 7 = absolutely justified), “Do women who behave like Nadine deserve such reactions from their partners?” (1 = do not deserve such reactions at all to 7 = absolutely deserve such reactions), and “How much sympathy do you feel for Nadine in regard to this situation?” (1 = no sympathy at all to 7 = very much sympathy). After reverse coding the sympathy item and z-transforming all items, they were averaged to form a standardized index of victim blame (empirical range from  $-0.87$  to  $+2.80$  with higher values indicating a higher degree of blame;  $\alpha = .88$ ). To assess participants’ self-reported approval of the aggressor’s behavior, we used a single item that read: “Would you have acted similarly?” (1 = would surely not have acted like that to 7 = would surely have acted like that; Abrams et al., 2003; Bohner et al., 2006; Bohner, Jarvis, Eyssel, & Siebler, 2005). This item was also z-transformed (empirical range from  $-0.37$  to  $+5.78$  with higher values indicating a higher degree of approval of the aggressor’s behavior).

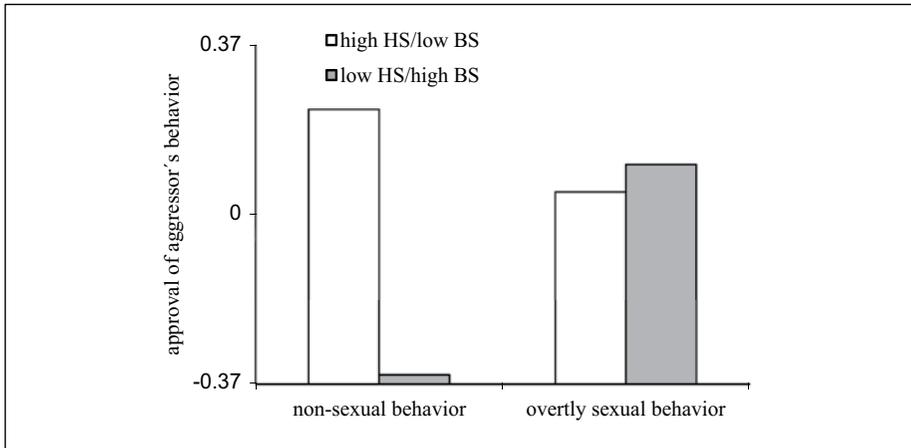
**Demographic information.** Participants provided personal information that covered their age, major, number of semesters, sexual orientation, nationality, and first language.

## Results

The effects predicted in the hypotheses as well as the possible impact of type of violence were investigated via univariate  $2 \times 2 \times 2$  ANCOVAs with *victim’s pre-assault behavior*, *norm feedback*, and *type of violence* as between-participant factors, and participants’ HS and BS entered as simultaneous covariates. Two ANCOVAs were run, one with approval of the aggressor’s behavior as the dependent variable and one with victim blame as the dependent variable. Covariate-adjusted mean scores will be reported throughout. Just like in previous research (e.g., Eckes & Six-Materna, 1999), HS and BS were positively correlated,  $r = .45, p < .001$ .

### Test of Main Hypotheses

Hypothesis 1 predicted that stronger approval of the aggressor’s behavior and more victim blame would be shown toward a female victim of intimate partner violence if she had behaved in an overtly sexual (vs. non-sexual) manner toward another man. This prediction was supported for victim blame. That is, the female protagonist who had behaved in an overtly sexual manner was blamed more ( $M = 0.29, SD = 0.61$ ) than the female protagonist who had behaved in a non-sexual manner ( $M = -0.28, SD = 0.61$ ),  $F(1,149) = 34.39, p < .001, \eta^2 = .19$ . Contrary to our prediction, however, the female protagonist who had behaved in an overtly sexual manner did not provoke stronger approval of the aggressor’s behavior than did the female protagonist who had behaved in a non-sexual manner,  $F < 1.00$ .

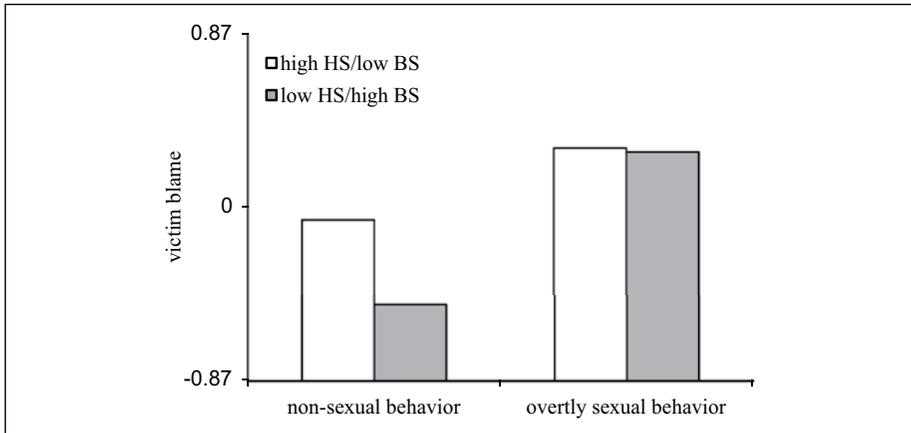


**Figure 1.** Approval of the aggressor's behavior as a function of *norm feedback* and *victim's pre-assault behavior* (empirical z-range from  $-0.37$  to  $+5.78$  with higher values indicating a higher degree of approval of the aggressor's behavior).

Note. The figure depicts covariate-adjusted mean scores.

Hypothesis 2 was supported in that participants who had received high HS/low BS feedback expressed more victim blame ( $M = 0.12$ ,  $SD = 0.61$ ) than participants who had received low HS/high BS feedback ( $M = -0.11$ ,  $SD = 0.61$ ),  $F(1,149) = 5.25$ ,  $p = .02$ ,  $\eta^2 = .034$ . Hypothesis 2 was marginally supported for approval of the aggressor's behavior: Participants who had received high HS/low BS feedback tended to show stronger approval of the aggressor's behavior ( $M = 0.14$ ,  $SD = 0.92$ ) than participants who had received low HS/high BS feedback ( $M = -0.12$ ,  $SD = 0.93$ ),  $F(1,149) = 3.07$ ,  $p = .08$ .

Hypothesis 3 predicted an interaction effect between *norm feedback* and *victim's pre-assault behavior* on participants' self-reported victim blame and approval of the aggressor's behavior. For approval of the aggressor's behavior, the interaction effect was significant (see Figure 1 for the pattern of means),  $F(1,149) = 4.56$ ,  $p = .03$ ,  $\eta^2 = .030$ . Simple effects tests revealed that stronger approval of the aggressor's behavior was shown toward the female protagonist who had behaved in a non-sexual manner if participants had received high HS/low BS feedback ( $M = 0.23$ ,  $SD = 0.93$ ) relative to low HS/high BS feedback ( $M = -0.35$ ,  $SD = 0.94$ ),  $F(1,149) = 7.52$ ,  $p = .01$ ,  $\eta^2 = .048$ . In addition, if participants had received low HS/high BS feedback, stronger approval of the aggressor's behavior was shown toward the female protagonist who had behaved in an overtly sexual manner ( $M = 0.11$ ,  $SD = 0.93$ ) than toward the female protagonist who had behaved in a non-sexual manner ( $M = -0.35$ ,  $SD = 0.94$ ),  $F(1,149) = 4.71$ ,  $p = .03$ ,  $\eta^2 = .031$ . None of the other simple main effects was significant, both  $F$ s  $< 1.00$  (for high HS/low BS feedback and overtly sexual behavior:  $M = 0.05$ ,  $SD = 0.92$ ). For victim blame, the predicted interaction effect of *norm feedback* and *victim's pre-assault behavior* was also significant (see Figure 2 for the pattern of means),



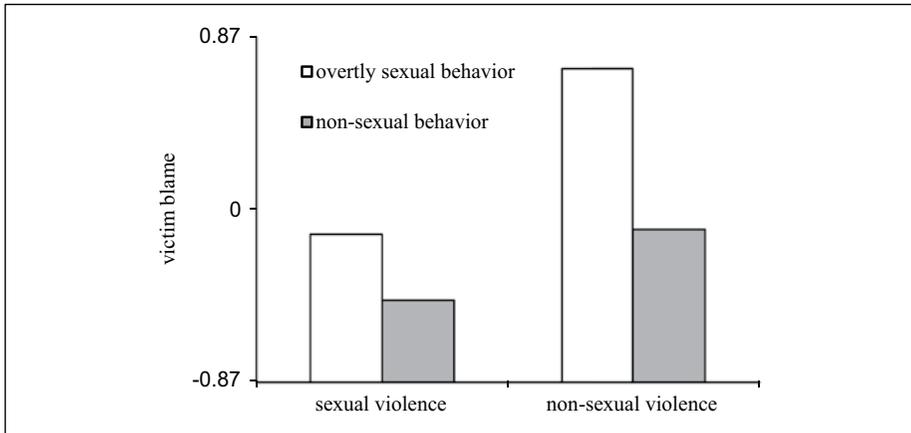
**Figure 2.** Victim blame as a function of *norm feedback* and *victim's pre-assault behavior* (empirical z-range from  $-0.87$  to  $+2.80$  with higher values indicating a higher degree of victim blame).  
 Note. The figure depicts covariate-adjusted mean scores.

$F(1,149) = 4.37, p = .04, \eta^2 = .028$ . In both the high HS/low BS and the low HS/high BS feedback conditions, the victim who had behaved in an overtly sexual manner ( $M = 0.30, SD = 0.61$ ; and  $M = 0.28, SD = 0.61$ , respectively) was blamed more than the victim who had behaved in a non-sexual manner ( $M = -0.06, SD = 0.61$ ;  $M = -0.49, SD = 0.61$ , respectively),  $F(1,149) = 7.01$  and  $31.69$ , respectively, both  $ps < .01$ . Furthermore, the simple main effect of norm feedback was significant within the condition of non-sexual victim behavior,  $F(1,149) = 9.54, p = .002$ , but not in the condition of overtly sexual victim behavior,  $F < 1.00$ .

Hypothesis 4 predicted a main effect of participants' own HS on approval of the aggressor's behavior. The hypothesis was supported by a marginally significant effect of the HS covariate,  $F(1,149) = 3.60, p = .06, \eta^2 = .024$ . In addition, a significant effect of participants' own HS on victim blame was obtained,  $F(1,149) = 22.89, p < .001, \eta^2 = .133$ . Finally, no effects of participants' BS were found on either dependent variable, both  $Fs < 1.00$ .

### Exploratory Analyses: Type of Violence

The exploratory analyses of effects of *type of violence* on participants' self-reported victim blame and approval of the aggressor's behavior yielded a number of interesting effects. Stronger approval of the aggressor's behavior was shown toward the victim of non-sexual violence ( $M = 0.27, SD = 0.93$ ) than toward the rape victim ( $M = -0.25, SD = 0.93$ ),  $F(1,149) = 11.95, p = .001, \eta^2 = .074$ . A similar but stronger main effect of *type of violence* emerged on victim blame: The victim of non-sexual violence was blamed more ( $M = 0.31, SD = 0.62$ ) than the rape victim ( $M = -0.29, SD = 0.53$ ),



**Figure 3.** Victim blame as a function of *type of violence* and *victim's pre-assault behavior* (empirical range of z-scores from  $-0.87$  to  $+2.80$  with higher values indicating a higher degree of blame).

Note. The figure depicts covariate-adjusted mean scores.

$F(1,149) = 37.26, p < .001, \eta^2 = .20$ . This main effect was qualified by a significant interaction between *type of violence* and *victim's pre-assault behavior*,  $F(1,149) = 6.06, p = .015, \eta^2 = .039$ . The pattern of means for this interaction is presented in Figure 3. Attributions of blame toward the victim of non-sexual violence were amplified by exposure to a female protagonist who had behaved in an overtly sexual manner ( $M = 0.71, SD = 0.62$ ) rather than in a non-sexual manner ( $M = -0.10, SD = 0.63$ ),  $F(1,149) = 33.80, p < .001, \eta^2 = .185$ . A weaker, but also significant, simple main effect of *victim's pre-assault behavior* on victim blame appeared for sexual violence,  $F(1,149) = 5.94, p = .02, \eta^2 = .038$  (overtly sexual victim behavior:  $M = -0.13, SD = 0.61$ ; non-sexual victim behavior:  $M = -0.46, SD = 0.61$ ),  $F(1,149) = 5.94, p = .016, \eta^2 = .038$ .

## Discussion

In this study, we investigated factors contributing to the justification of violence against women. Whereas previous research had demonstrated effects of ambivalent sexism on gender-role stereotyped judgments of female victims of violence, the current work examined the role of an alleged victim's pre-assault behavior that is inconsistent (vs. consistent) with traditional gender-role expectations. As predicted, the degree of participants' self-reported victim blame depended on whether the victim had behaved in an overtly sexual or non-sexual manner toward a man who was not her partner. Specifically, more blame was attributed to the female protagonist who had behaved in an overtly sexual manner. Accordingly, our manipulation of the victim's adherence to traditional gender-role expectations via sexual versus non-sexual pre-assault behavior was effective (see also Abrams et al., 2003; Hillier & Foddy, 1993; Viki & Abrams, 2002b).

Another aim of our study was to replicate previous research on effects of alleged sexism norm feedback on male students' self-reported victim blame and rape proclivity in reaction to sexual violence against women. Our study demonstrated that participants who had been given the impression that their peers endorse strong HS attitudes (and weak BS attitudes) blamed the victim more than participants who had received weak HS (and strong BS) norm feedback. This effect clearly replicates findings by Michaelis and Bohner (2005). In addition, in line with previous research on effects of norm feedback on participants' self-reported rape proclivity (Bohner et al., 2006; Eyssel et al., 2006; Michaelis & Bohner, 2005), we found a marginally significant effect of *norm feedback* on approval of the aggressor's behavior. To explain this weaker main effect relative to the effects obtained in previous studies, it has to be taken into account that the present study investigated HS feedback rather than RMA feedback as was done in previous research (Bohner et al., 2006; Eyssel et al., 2006). Only Michaelis and Bohner (2005) had investigated effects of HS feedback, however, in the context of judgments of acquaintance rape. These scenarios may have elicited negative reactions toward the victim from both the BS and HS perspectives (see Abrams et al., 2003). In contrast, in the present study, high feedback regarding one component of ambivalent sexism was always accompanied by low feedback regarding the other component and the scenarios differed between conditions with regard to type of violence and type of victim behavior. This operationalization may have diffused judgments of approval of the aggressor's behavior more strongly than the operationalization used in the previous studies. This is also indicated by the fact that *norm feedback* significantly interacted with *victim's pre-assault behavior* in predicting approval of the aggressor's behavior and victim blame.

Specifically, we found that only for the female protagonist who had behaved in a non-sexual manner, high HS (and low BS) feedback resulted in higher approval of the aggressor's behavior and stronger victim blame than high BS (and low HS) feedback. In addition, we found that high BS (and low HS) feedback resulted in lower approval of the aggressor's behavior for the female protagonist who had behaved in a non-sexual manner relative to the female protagonist who had behaved in an overtly sexual manner. This pattern of results suggests that normative sexism feedback, as implemented in this study, is effective in manipulating anti-victim attitudes toward women whose behavior complies with gender-role expectations but less so in manipulating such attitudes toward women whose behavior violates gender-role expectations and who are generally evaluated more negatively. In terms of ambivalent sexism theory, one may interpret this finding in the way that female victims who adhere to traditional gender roles are perceived as particularly worthy of protection if benevolent attitudes that highlight the subservience of such roles have been rendered salient (see Glick & Fiske, 1996).

It has to be noted, however, that the confounded presentation of HS and BS feedback in each feedback condition limits the informative value of the feedback effects. For instance, we cannot unambiguously state whether the reported interaction effect between high HS/low BS norm feedback and non-sexual victim behavior was caused by participant's impression that others hold high HS attitudes, or by their impression

that others hold low BS attitudes, or by the contrasting presentation of both kinds of sexist attitudes (for a related discussion, see Bohner, Ahlborn, & Steiner, 2010). We can clearly state, however, that distinct effects were observed for the two feedback conditions and that norm feedback had an effect (on victim blame) above participants' own self-reported sexism. Participants' self-reported HS emerged as a marginally significant predictor of approval of the aggressor's behavior and a significant predictor of victim blame. This result is consistent with previous findings (e.g., Abrams et al., 2003; Masser et al., 2006; Michaelis & Bohner, 2005; Viki & Abrams, 2002b).

At this point, a remark should be made about the very low overall means for approval of the aggressor's behavior and the overall weaker effects on this dependent variable compared to victim blame. These findings can be explained by the fact that physical abuse of a woman is in and of itself both, extreme and a crime. So, stronger tendencies toward showing such behavior could obviously not have been expected in a rather liberal student sample. In a comparable sample, even participants who had been identified as sexually coercive based on their past behavior did not produce rape proclivity mean scores that were substantially higher than those observed in the present study (see Bohner et al., 2005).

Furthermore, a remark should be made about the stronger anti-victim attitudes obtained for the female protagonist who had behaved in an overtly sexual (vs. non-sexual) manner. With regard to the actual kinds of behavior that were used to manipulate the victim's adherence to traditional gender-role expectations (see "Method" section), one could argue that the female protagonist who had behaved in an overtly sexual manner obviously cheated on her boyfriend, whereas the female protagonist who had behaved in a non-sexual manner did not. Therefore, the more negative reactions toward the promiscuous protagonist might have been less due to gender-role violation than to the fact that cheating per se has serious negative implications for a relationship.

Finally, the present research is innovative in that it examined effects of *norm feedback* and *victim's pre-assault behavior* in the context of both, male sexual and non-sexual physical violence against women. In general, *victim's pre-assault behavior* influenced victim blame judgments toward both types of violence. This is in line with findings in previous research on reactions to rape and wife beating. Interestingly though, we found victim blame and approval of the aggressor's behavior to be more pronounced in the non-sexual violence condition. This finding may indicate that features of the situation depicted in the scenarios, which were the same for each type of violence, may have made a non-sexual violent reaction appear more logical and justifiable (in terms of sexist thinking) than a sexual violent reaction. To identify these features, we took a closer look at the scenarios used in the current study and compared them to scenarios used in previous studies on reactions to acquaintance rape.

The acquaintance rape scenarios used in previous studies described situations in which a potential sexual encounter between a female and a male protagonist takes place, the female protagonist refuses to go further, and is then raped by her acquaintance (e.g., Abrams et al., 2003; Abrams & Viki, 2002b; Masser et al., 2006). We would argue that sexist justifications of rape might be specifically and distinctively

dependent on the occurrence of this potential sexual pre-attack encounter between victim and aggressor in which the victim can be perceived as having sexually provoked her aggressor. This argument is supported by findings from previous acquaintance rape studies which could show that participants who scored high (vs. low) on HS or rape myth acceptance relied on the neutralizing cognitions that "a woman who says no actually means yes" and that the woman "really wanted to have sex" because she had aroused the sexual attention of her aggressor (Abrams et al., 2003; Bohner et al., 1998; Masser et al., 2006). In such a situation, the focus of the neutralizing and justifying cognitions appears to be mainly on the potential motives of the female victim.

In contrast, we would argue that for justifications of non-sexual violence against a female relationship partner, the focus may be more on the aggressor's emotions and motives related to jealousy and re-establishing power. In the acquaintance rape scenarios, the aggressor can be assumed to feel challenged to demonstrate his power by the woman who provokes him by her "token resistance" (Masser et al., 2006) rather than to feel that she threatens his power. In the scenario used in our study, however, the aggressor's power is clearly threatened by a potential rival and the threat is even aggravated by the fact that he has been unaware of his girlfriend's potential unfaithfulness that he only coincidentally uncovers in this situation. The scenarios used in the current study resembled those used by Hillier and Foddy (1993) which had depicted incidents of non-sexual wife assault. Our scenarios portrayed a situation in which the female protagonist had an encounter with a man who was not her partner and approached him in either an overtly sexual or non-sexual manner. This was followed by aggressive behavior by her partner. For those participants who were asked to identify with the male protagonist in this situation, their subsequent judgments may have been driven by the perception of the violent reaction as a logical and justifiable mean to express anger and forcefully and actively re-establish power. After completion of the experiment, some participants from the non-sexual violence condition actually reported that their scores on the dependent variables were driven by anger at the female protagonist. In contrast, participants in the sexual violence condition may have perceived the reaction of the male protagonist as less logical and justifiable because a potential sexual encounter between the victim and the aggressor had not taken place and a potential sexual provocation of the aggressor by the victim could not be observed.

## Recommendations for Further Research

From the explanatory and critical comments on our results in the "Discussion" section, different recommendations for further research can be derived. First, the feedback effects should be further explored in a study that uses a bigger sample and compares all four possible feedback combinations of High vs. Low  $\times$  HS and BS.

Second, with regard to distinct dynamics that may underlie (judgments of) different forms of violence against women, we recommend further research on interrelations between situational triggers of violence against women and the sexism-based justification of violence. Specifically, it should be explored more thoroughly under which circumstances (a) sexual violence against women is more likely to occur than

non-sexual violence (and vice versa), (b) sexist attitudes facilitate the justification of sexual violence, and (c) sexist attitudes facilitate the justification of non-sexual violence. These issues could be addressed by using open-ended scenarios of conflicts in intimate relationships. After reading the scenarios, participants could be asked to report how the situation would have ended if they were the male protagonist and to provide reasons for their answer. One could also provide participants with options from which to choose—for instance, “Would you have screamed at/slapped/tried to have sex with your girlfriend in a similar situation?”

Finally, to assure that effects of *victim's pre-assault behavior* can be attributed to gender-role violations with relative certainty, the presentation of the scenario could be altered as follows: The perception of the male protagonist could be held constant across feminine gender-role conditions, and only participants' knowledge about the female protagonist's behavior could be varied. To illustrate, the scenario used in the current study could be altered in the following way: In both conditions of *victim's pre-assault behavior*, the male protagonist sees his girlfriend talking to a male dancing partner and treats her violently after this observation. However, contrary to the operationalization in the current study, the male protagonist in the newly developed scenario would not have overheard the conversation between his girlfriend and the male stranger. Only the participant would get to know, for instance, that the female protagonist had told the stranger that she wanted to sleep with him (overtly sexual behavior) versus that she had a headache (non-sexual behavior). Such an operationalization would prevent that the protagonist observes actions that bear different implications for the relationship. Only the participant would perceive and judge different kinds of victim behavior.

## Conclusion

To summarize, our results replicated previous findings that have demonstrated a significant impact of ambivalent sexism norms, self-reported ambivalent sexist attitudes, and feminine gender-role stereotypes on justifications of rape. Importantly, we showed that these factors are also relevant to justifications of non-sexual violence against women. Finally, we highlighted that specific situational and motivational aspects that have a strong impact on the occurrence of and reactions to non-sexual violence against women might not equally affect the occurrence of and reactions to sexual violence against women. This point is of major importance with regard to the prevention of violence against women as well as the sexist treatment of victims.

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