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Assessing the Role of Commitments to

Liking the Victim on Victim Blaming

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The present research investigated M. J. Lerner's (1965) just world hypothesis by manipulating prior commitments to liking the victim and measuring attributions of victim blame. Participants recorded their just world beliefs using C. Dalbert, L. Montada, and M. Schmitt's (1987, English version as cited in Dalbert, 1999) Just World Beliefs Scale. Participants then read a story about a victim of a violent assault and recorded their perceptions of the victim's blame. The victim varied by likeability (likeable vs. unlikeable) and gender; conditions also varied by commitments to the victim's likeability (prior commitment vs. no prior commitment). It was predicted that high just world believers who made a prior commitment to liking the victim would attribute greater blame to the victim than would participants who did not make prior commitments to liking the victim. It was further predicted that high just world believers who made prior commitments to liking the victim would place greater blame on the victim's behaviour than on his or her character. Although results supported the prediction that prior commitments to the victim's likeability would affect the severity of victim blame, they did not support any distinctions in victim blaming across levels of just world beliefs or the likeability of the victim. Some possible practical implications from these research findings are discussed.

When unjustified aggressive acts are committed, there is a tendency for people to attribute blame to the victim (Lerner & Miller, 1978; Montada, 1998). This is especially true when certain victim or scenario criteria are met, such as when the victim is innocent (Correia & Vala, 2003; Hafer, 2000; Jones & Aronson, 1973), or the consequences are severe (Correia & Vala, 2003; Hill, 1975; Walster, 1966; Wyer, Bodenhausen, & Gorman, 1985). Other research also indicates that certain observer characteristics can be predictive of victim blaming, such as whether the observer has a high belief that the world is a just place (Lerner, 1965; Lerner & Miller, 1978; Montada, 1998) or whether he or she strongly identifies with the victim (Chaikin & Darley, 1973; Gold, Landerman, & Bullock, 1977; Hill, 1975; Muller, Caldwell, & Hunter, 1994). The current paper will examine the influence on victim blame of some victim criteria, such as the likeability of the victim, and some observer characteristics, such as whether the observer has high just world beliefs or whether he or she has made prior commitments to liking the victim.

Among the theories that attempt to explain why observers sometimes blame the victim, Lerner's (1965) just world hypothesis is the most extensively researched. This hypothesis proposes that there are people who believe that the world is a just place and that people generally get what they deserve (high believers in a just world) and there are those who do not (low believers). When something bad happens to a person, high just world believers typically assume that it must have been a bad person and that he or she deserved to have bad things happen. When the victim is innocent or attractive, derogating the victim's character becomes more difficult and, as such, observers will turn to blaming the victim's behaviour as a means of relieving the threat to their just world beliefs (Jones & Aronson, 1973; Lerner & Miller, 1978).

Based on these research findings and Lerner's (1965) just world hypothesis, the current study investigates whether victim blaming might also be influenced by variations of the victim's likeability. Are observers more likely to attribute blame to a likeable victim than to an unlikeable victim? According to Lerner's (1965) just world hypothesis, the prediction would be yes—if the observer has a high just world belief. This is because an attack against the likeable victim would pose a greater threat to the observer's belief in a just world. Predicting then that high just world believers are more likely to attribute blame to a likeable victim, could we expect this phenomenon to occur more frequently when observers have made commitments to liking the victim prior to learning that he or she has been victimized?

Investigators have uncovered some indirect links between the likeability of a victim and observers' tendencies to blame or derogate that victim. Correia and Vala (2003) investigated secondary victimization by evaluating whether participants would be more likely to rate a victim as attractive and likeable, or to derogate the victim, when the victim's innocence was manipulated. They found that high just world believers rated innocent victims as more likeable than non-innocent victims. In addition, Jones and Aronson (1973) examined blame judgements placed on innocent victims (virgins or married women) versus non-innocent victims (divorcees) of sexual assault, and found that participants rated innocent victims as being significantly more to blame for the sexual assault than non-innocent victims. Considering that high just world believers rate innocent victims as being more likeable (Correia & Vala, 2003) and as being more to blame for crimes against them (Jones & Aronson, 1973), then one might expect that high just world believers would rate more likeable victims as being more to blame for crimes against them.

Although the research literature does reveal such indirect links, direct links between the victim's likeability and the blame attributed are lacking. The reason for this is that among research investigating the links between victim likeability and victim blaming, very few studies actually manipulate the victim's likeability as an independent variable. Rather, there is a common tendency to assess it as part of the dependent measure. Although these investigations are useful for determining participants' like for a victim following an attack, they do not offer any insight into the direct effect of a victim's likeability on victim blame.

Even among those investigators who manipulate the victim's likeability as part of their independent measure, there has been little attempt to tease apart the victim's likeability from other factors that may influence victim blame. The failure to properly separate these variables leads to interpretational limitations of the studies' results. For example, in their investigation of victim-related predictors for blaming or helping a victim, Haynes and Olson (2006) measured participants' ratings of victim blame following manipulations of both the victim's character (likeable vs. unlikeable) and responsibility (high vs. low). They found a significant main effect for likeability, as participants attributed more blame to the likeable victim (a volunteer children's sports coach) than to the unlikeable victim (a drug dealer). However, they primed for victim likeability in the same vignette as the accident, and this priming was only done after investigators had already informed participants that the character was a victim of a car accident that had left him paralyzed. A review of the research literature on liking reveals that people develop significantly less liking for strangers who are in a negative losing situation than for those in winning situations (Lott & Lott, 2001). By combining the likeability of the character with his or her status as a victim, researchers may be priming participants to stereotype the character as a victim before they have even decided whether or not he or she is likeable. It seems reasonable

that the character's status as a victim might negatively influence their intended priming for the likeable victim. Findings from research using this type of procedure may offer valuable insight into observers' responses to victims who were unknown to them prior to the incident (i.e., only known as a *victim*). However, they offer no insight into situations in which the victim was known to the observer prior to the negative event.

Again, the purpose of the present study is to determine whether differences in participants' ratings of victim blame can be influenced by their prior commitments to either liking or not liking the victim. Are observers more likely to blame a victim if they have made a previous commitment to liking that person? To evaluate the effects of prior commitments for victim liking on blaming, half of the participants rated the character's likeability prior to their gaining knowledge that the character is a victim. We argue that by including this procedure, we will limit these participants' ability to relieve the threats to their just world beliefs by eliminating the option for victim derogation for those who made prior commitments to liking the victim. Our main hypothesis is that among those participants who like the victim, those who rate the victim's likeability prior to learning that the character had been victimized will judge the victim as being more behaviourally responsible for the attack than will those who rate the victim's likeability after reading about the attack. This effect is expected to be greater among high just world believers.

Further, consistent with Lerner's (1965) just world hypothesis, we also predict that participants with high just world beliefs will attribute more blame to the victim in an effort to relieve the threat against their beliefs than will low just world believers. Finally, because observers tend to rate innocent victims as being more responsible for attacks against them (Haynes & Olson, 2006) and because innocent victims are typically perceived to be more

likeable (Correia & Vala, 2003), we also predict that among high just world believers, those who perceive the victim to be more likeable will attribute more blame to the victim than will those who perceive the victim to be less likeable. We do not expect to see a significant difference in victim blaming across likeable versus unlikeable group conditions for participants who are low just world believers.

## Method

### *Participants*

The present study used a convenience sample, in which the researchers solicited 227 female and 109 male participants ( $N = 336$ ) from the psychology student population. This sample was gathered from students registered in a psychology database which offered mark incentives to students for their participation in psychological research. Since these credits are applied to psychology courses, our sample consists of predominantly psychology students. The webpage listed the present study as an online questionnaire which should take approximately 30 min to complete. The data for this study were collected over a two-semester period. Each participant received .5 credits towards a participating psychology course of their choice for their involvement in this study. The modal age of participants was 20 years, with 74.1% ( $n = 237$ ) of the sample 20 or under. Participants were excluded if they had already completed this study, or if English was not their first language. Two participants were excluded from the analysis (1 woman and 1 man) as a result of incomplete survey responses due to early withdrawal from the study. Fourteen additional participants (8 women and 6 men) were also excluded from the analysis due to ineffective priming for the victim's likeability among these participants. This reduced the total sample size analysed for this study by 16 participants ( $N = 320$ , 218 women & 102 men).

### *Materials*

The initial contact for this study included a viewing of a brief description of the purpose and procedures of this study on the psychology subject pool's webpage. To view the letter of initial contact for the main study, refer to Appendix A. To view the letter of initial contact for the pilot study, refer to Appendix B. A cover letter was then presented to all students who ultimately decided to participate in this research project. This cover letter acted as the letter of informed consent. To view the cover letter for the main study, refer to Appendix C. To view the cover letter for the pilot study, refer to Appendix D.

Participants were given a battery of online questionnaires including Dalbert, Montada, and Schmitt's (1987, English version as cited in Dalbert, 1999) General Belief in a Just World Scale (GBJWS), a four-item Blame/Responsibility Scale (as taken from Hafer, Begue, Choma, & Dempsey, 2005), and Rubin's (1970) 13-item Liking Scale (LS) which was revised to include only 12 of the original 13 items. Each participant was also presented with an event vignette, and a victim-likeability vignette (priming for either a likeable or an unlikeable victim).

*Belief in a Just World.* Earlier investigations of factors relating to beliefs in a just world relied on Rubin and Peplau's (1973, 1975) 20-item Belief in a Just World Scale (BJWS). However, this scale has been found to have low reliability ranging from .60 to .70 (Lea & Fekken, 2001) and low validity (Furnham, 2003). Instead, the present study employed Dalbert et al.'s (1987) General Belief in a Just World Scale (GBJW) since it is thought to have the highest validity of all just world belief scales to date, displaying a Cronbach's alpha of .82 (Furnham, 2003). To view Dalbert et al.'s GBJW Scale see Appendix E. The GBJW Scale presents participants with six items that measure their perceptions of fairness in the world, such as "I am confident that justice always prevails over injustice" (Dalbert, 1999, p. 96). Participants rate their beliefs regarding each of these six statements using a 6-point rating scale, with 6 being *strongly*



*agree* and 1 being *strongly disagree*. Participants' ratings are then averaged across all six items. In this study, participants whose scores range from 1 to 3.5 were categorized as low just world believers, while those averaging scores above 3.5 were categorized as high just world believers.

Dalbert et al.'s (1987) GBJW Scale was administered to all participants as the second procedure following the cover letter in each condition. By employing the GBJW scale, we intended to identify high just world believers versus low just world believers. During the final data analysis, we expected to see differences among high believers who made prior commitments to liking or not liking the victim on victim blaming. Those participants displaying low just world beliefs acted as a comparison group for interpreting these results.

*Event vignette.* The event vignette is approximately 200 words in length, and describes a situation in which an innocent victim is unjustly attacked. See Appendix F to view the event vignette. The present study included both a male and a female victim but our final analyses were collapsed across gender. This vignette was designed to threaten participants' beliefs in a just world.

We conducted a pilot study prior to performing the main study which validated our event vignette by demonstrating that the event described was sufficiently threatening to high just world believers' beliefs that the world is fair.

*Desirable/undesirable victim vignettes.* Certain descriptive adjectives (e.g., *warm* or *cold*) can prime people to infer other personality attributes about a person (e.g., *warm* may imply friendliness, while *cold* may imply aloofness) (Weissbach & Zagon, 1975). As such, we primed participants to perceive the victim as either likeable or unlikeable by including desirable or undesirable adjectives taken from Spence, Helmreich, and Holahan's (1979, as cited in Holahan & Spence, 1980) Extended Personality Attributes Questionnaire (EPAQ). We expected that by

using some desirable adjectives to describe the victim in the likeable victim vignette participants would infer other attributes about the victim that would lead them to like him or her. Five adjectives were taken from the EPAQ and used in this vignette to prime for the likeable victim (e.g., *kind*, *helpful*, etc.). To view the likeable victim vignette see Appendix G. By using undesirable descriptors in the unlikeable victim vignette the opposite effect was expected. To view the undesirable victim vignette see Appendix H. This study was only concerned with participants' perceptions of the likeability of each victim's character. By including only written vignettes instead of videos or photographs, researchers attempted to eliminate the victim's physical attractiveness as a possible confound. Each vignette was approximately 200 words in length, and each was presented following the administration of the GBJW scale, but prior to presentation of the event vignette. There were four victim character vignettes included in this study (each one differing by gender and likeability of the victim). Our pilot study confirmed that each of these vignettes accurately primed for the intended likeability of the victim.

Due to both limitations on the anticipated number of participants and the presumption that it would not adversely affect the research, researchers did not include a neutral victim condition. This allowed for a greater sample size in each of the other two conditions, and thus, provided more statistical power during the final analysis. It should also be noted that the victim was not, at any time, referred to as a *victim* in either of these likeability vignettes. In an attempt to ensure that no victim stereotypes would be attached to the character prior to any ratings of the character's likeability, the victim was only referred to by name.

*Likeability scale.* Participants rated the victim's likeability using Rubin's (1970) Liking Scale (LS). This is a 13-item scale, which the researchers converted into a 12-item 9-point scale. Because the character in each vignette was a fictional person that was not known to the

participants, researchers dropped the first item in the scale which read, “When I am with [friend], we are almost always in the same mood.” To view this revised version of Rubin’s (1970) Like Scale see Appendix I. Participants were presented with statements, such as “Christine is one of the most likeable people I know,” and were instructed to rate these statements from 9 (*not true*) to 1 (*definitely true*). Participants’ like for the victim was operationally defined as an average of 5 or less on this scale. Participants’ dislike for the victim was defined as an average score greater than 5 on the LS. We chose to use Rubin’s (1970) Like Scale for this study because, unlike other bipolar adjective scales, the LS asks participants to directly state the degree to which they like or dislike the victim. As such, this scale is a more direct measure of commitments to liking or disliking the victim.

We were able to evaluate whether participants differed in their ratings of victim blaming by presenting the LS to half of the participants prior to reading the event vignette and to the other half following the event vignette. Any differences in their subsequent responses were thought to depend on whether participants made prior commitments to either liking or disliking the victim prior to reading the event vignette.

*Ratings of victim blame.* Hafer et al. (2005) report that the current research literature identifies distinctions between blame versus responsibility (Mantler, Schellenberg, & Page, 2003, as cited in Hafer et al., 2005), as well as behaviour versus character blaming (Janoff-Bulman, 1979; Karuza & Carey, 1984). In their study on commitments to long-term deserved outcomes in high just world believers, Hafer et al. controlled for these distinctions by creating a four-item scale to measure participants’ degrees of victim blame/responsibility that was significantly inter-correlated on all four items. This resulted in their four-item Blame/Responsibility Rating Scale which includes two questions that target behaviour blame and

two questions that target character blame. Blame attributions are based on a 7-point rating scale that range from 1 (*not at all responsible/not at all to blame*) to 7 (*totally responsible/entirely to blame*). The present study used this blame scale because, although victim blaming as a whole is the primary interest, providing separate blame options for participants' responses allowed for more accurate reporting of blame judgements. We anticipated that more participants in the desirable victim condition would find it difficult to attribute blame to the victim's character, and thus, would attribute more blame to the victim's behaviour. It was expected that these participants would have higher scores on the question, "To what extent do you think that Christine's *behaviour* is to blame for the incident?" Those in the undesirable victim condition were expected to attribute more blame to the victim's character. It was expected that they would have higher scores on the question, "To what extent do you think that Christine's *character* is to blame for the incident?" By offering both behaviour and character blaming as possible options, participants could unambiguously attribute blame where they felt blame was due. To view the blame/responsibility scale, see Appendix J. Scores on all four items were combined to produce the measure of victim blame as rated by participants. Scores ranging from 0 to 2.3 constituted attributions of little to no victim blame. Scores ranging from 2.4 to 4.7 constituted moderate blame, while scores ranging between 4.8 to 7 constituted severe victim blame. These particular cut-points were used because they most closely reflect levels of blame attributions in the real world. For example, a mid-way cut-point would not accurately reflect victim blaming in real world scenarios because this dividing point would only allow for attributions of "little to no" or "severe" blame. This would not allow participants to attribute "moderate" blame when they felt that the victim deserves more than just a little blame but not quite severe blame. Thus, by

including all three possible options for blame attributions we hope to offer participants the blame options that they are most likely to have available to them in real world settings.

*Procedure.*

Participants who scored between 1 and 3.5 on the GBJW Scale were assigned to the low just world beliefs group, whereas the remaining participants were assigned to the high just world beliefs group. This 3.5 cut-point is the most logical and most commonly used by researchers when discriminating between high and low just world believers since it marks the half-way point between high and low just world beliefs (i.e., the total scale ranges from 1 to 7). The experimental conditions were identical for both groups. The approximate time for each participant to complete the study was 10 min. Prior to performing any procedures, all participants viewed a cover letter which informed them that participation was voluntary and that there would be no penalty for choosing not to participate in the research. To view the cover letter for the main study, see Appendix C. To view the cover letter for the pilot study, see Appendix D.

All participants completed the GJWB scale first. Each participant was categorized as being either a high or low just world believer based on his or her scores on the GBJW scale. Each participant then completed one of eight possible conditions. Conditions differed based on manipulations of three independent variables: prior commitments to liking the victim (those who rated the victim's likeability prior to the event vignette versus those who rated the victim's likeability following the event vignette), victim's gender (male versus female), and the victim's likeability (likeable versus unlikeable).

## Results

Participant gender was initially examined but because there were no significant gender differences associated with victim blaming the variable was collapsed for the final analyses. This

resulted in a 2 (just world beliefs)  $\times$  2 (victim's likeability)  $\times$  2 (participants' prior commitments to liking the victim) analysis of variance (ANOVA) being conducted to evaluate the effects of these factors of severity of victim blaming. Just world beliefs were divided into high versus low just world believers. The victim's likeability was divided into likeable versus unlikeable.

Participants' prior commitments to liking the victim were divided into prior commitments versus no prior commitments. The means and standard deviations for these three factors are presented in Table 1. The ANOVA indicated no significant interaction effects between just world beliefs and the victim's likeability,  $F(1, 312) = .38, p = .54, \eta^2 = .00, MSE = .20$ , between just world beliefs and prior commitment to liking the victim,  $F(1, 312) = .27, p = .60, \eta^2 = .00, MSE = .20$ , between the victim's likeability and prior commitments to liking the victim,  $F(1, 312) = 1.03, p = .31, \eta^2 = .00, MSE = .20$ , and between just world beliefs, the victim's likeability, and prior commitments to liking the victim,  $F(1, 312) = .75, p = .39, \eta^2 = .00, MSE = .20$ . Results further indicated no significant main effects for just world beliefs,  $F(1, 312) = 1.14, p = .29, \eta^2 = .00$ , or for the victim's likeability,  $F(1, 312) = 1.78, p = .18, \eta^2 = .00$ . Results did, however, indicate a significant main effect for prior commitments to the victim's likeability,  $F(1, 312) = 4.17, p = .04, \eta^2 = .01$ , indicating that victim blaming was greater among participants who had made a prior commitment to the victim's likeability ( $M = 1.27, SD = .04$ ) than among those who had not made any prior commitments ( $M = 1.16, SD = .04$ ).

During the final data analysis we omitted one of our anticipated comparisons. We had anticipated that high just world believers who made a prior commitment to liking the victim would attribute greater blame to the victim than would participants who did not make prior commitments to liking the victim. This led to our further prediction that high just world believers who made prior commitments to liking the victim would place greater blame on the victim's

behaviour than on his or her character. However, because no significant effect was found between prior commitments versus no prior commitments among high just world believers we did not include any investigation of behaviour versus character blame distinctions in our analyses.

### Discussion

The current study investigated Lerner's (1965) just world hypothesis, which proposes that high just world believers will attribute more blame to victims in an effort to relieve the threats against their just world beliefs. It was anticipated that attributions of victim blame would be greater among participants who have high just world beliefs than among low just world believers who would not feel as threatened by the victimization scenario, and as such, would attribute less blame to the victim.

Results did not support this prediction as there were no significant differences in victim blame across just world beliefs. This result is surprising given the wealth of research indicating that high just world believers tend to place greater blame on the victim than do low just world believers (Jones & Aronson, 1973; Lerner, 1965; Lerner & Miller, 1978; Montada, 1998). On the surface, it might seem that the event vignette was not threatening enough to high believers' beliefs that the world is just. In this case, no significant differences would be found in victim blaming across high versus low just world believers since victim blaming is thought to result from threats to high just world believers' assumptions that the world is fair and just. When these assumptions are not violated, no increase in victim blaming is expected. However, the outcome of the pilot study conducted prior to the main study does not support this explanation as participants in the pilot study rated the scenario as being very threatening.

A more parsimonious explanation for the lack of differences in victim blame across high versus low just world believers is that the results may have been affected by the inclusion of *prior* commitments to the victim's likeability. This study differs from most other investigations into victim blaming in the sense that the researchers included a victim vignette, whereby participants might feel they know the victim as a *person* rather than as simply a *victim*. Perhaps by gaining a better picture of the victim as a person with certain characteristics and a described personality, high just world believers are less likely to blame the victim for crimes against him or her. As such, the differences in victim blaming across high versus low just world believers would be minimized. Further investigation into this possibility might be a useful addition to this field of research. For instance, future investigators may wish to manipulate how well the observer knows the victim (e.g., a full description of victim's personality versus no description) in their investigations of differences in blame attributions between high and low just world believers.

It was also predicted that among high just world believers, those who perceived the victim to be likeable would attribute more blame to the victim than would those who perceived the victim to be unlikeable. This hypothesis is consistent with Lerner's (1965) just world hypothesis that proposes that an unjustified attack on a likeable victim may be seen as a greater threat to high believers' just world beliefs. If the results had supported this prediction, it would have revealed the need to study victim-likeability as an independent rather than a dependent variable in future investigations of possible causes for victim-blaming.

Interestingly, there was no significant interaction effect found for the victim's likeability and participants' just world beliefs on victim blaming, nor was there any main effect found for the victim's likeability on victim blaming. One possible explanation for this result is that it is not the victim's likeability *per se* that has an effect on whether observers will blame a victim for



crimes against him or her, but rather it may be how well the observer knows *and* likes the victim that is the true influence. Considering that previous research investigating the influence of victim likeability on victim blaming has not teased apart these two variables, it could be that a confound exists between liking and knowing the victim.

Lastly, we had anticipated that among high just world believers there would be differences in participants' judgments of victim blame depending on whether the participant made prior commitments to either like or dislike the victim's character. It was predicted that high just world believers who had made prior commitments to liking the victim would attribute more total blame to the victim, and would attribute more blame to the victim's behaviour. This was expected because once the participants committed themselves to liking the victim, they would be less able to blame the victim's character, but should still need to blame the victim to relieve the threats to their just world beliefs. As such, we had predicted that participants would use the only blame option left available to them, which was to blame the victim's behaviour.

Results for this prediction were unexpected and suggest some intriguing avenues for future enquiry. There was significantly greater victim blaming across participants who had made prior commitments to the victim's likeability as compared to participants who had made no prior commitments to the victim's likeability. However, there was no significant interaction between the victim's likeability and participants' prior commitments to the victim's likeability. Therefore, victim blame was greatest when participants made prior commitments to the victim's likeability *regardless* of whether they committed themselves to either liking or disliking the victim. One potential explanation is that the simple act of committing oneself to either liking or not liking a victim will lead an observer to place more blame on that victim. The results of the present study suggest that whether the victim is a likeable or an unlikeable person is irrelevant when

considering the blame that will be attributed. Rather, what does appear to be relevant is whether the observer has made a commitment to the victim's likeability. In the real world, this would apply to situations in which the victim was known to the observer prior to becoming a victim. This is an interesting finding, as it suggests that perhaps an observer of a violent crime will attribute more blame to the victim simply because that victim was known to him or her prior to the incident. Perhaps when an observer knows the victim well or has committed him/herself to either like or dislike the victim this may lead the observer to feel a stronger connection to the victim. This connection, in turn, may lead the observer to feel more vulnerable to the victimization situation based on his or her connection to the victim. This perceived vulnerability may lead to greater attributions of victim blame in an effort to distance oneself from the connection and thus, the situation. Clearly, more research will be needed to add further support to this claim. However, these results indicate that an important distinction should be made in future studies investigating victim blaming—was the victim known to the observer prior to the event? It appears that by teasing apart prior commitments to the victim (versus no prior commitments) researchers may develop a much clearer picture of the mechanisms involved in the common phenomenon of victim blaming.

One possible limitation of the present study might be raised involving participants' identification with the victim and the effects that this may have had on their attributions of victim blame, although we do not believe that this has influenced our findings. Research indicates that an observer's attributions of victim blame can be influenced by whether or not he or she identifies with the victim (Chaikin & Darley, 1973; Gold, Landerman, & Bullock, 1977; Hill, 1975; Muller, Caldwell, & Hunter, 1994). A shared gender between the observer and the victim appears to be among the strongest factors correlating identification with the victim and victim

blame. For example, Hill (1975) found that female observers attributed significantly greater blame to female victims than did male observers to female victims. In an effort to reduce the effect of identification with the victim on victim blaming, the present study included event vignettes with both a female and a male victim. However, a greater number of participants completed the survey with a female victim. Based on a review of the research literature on victim gender, we do not feel that this imbalance compromised our findings. For instance, in their research on observers' decisions to derogate, blame, or help the victim, Haynes and Olson (2006) included only a male victim in their vignette (see also Hill, 1975). No limitations resulting from these procedures were cited in either of these investigations.

Findings from this study and subsequent research in this area may have valuable practical implications in both legal and social settings. Developing a better understanding of victim blaming in cases where the victim is known to the observer can assist law enforcement agents when interpreting eyewitness statements, and it may also aid jurors in determining the accuracy of such statements during court proceedings. Further, for victims of aggressive acts who are being blamed for the attack by friends and/or acquaintances, the recognition that this is a common phenomenon, and that they are not alone in experiencing this, may help them to cope and to heal. Implications for future research also result from the present study's findings of a possible link between observers' prior commitments to the victim and the level of blame attributed to that victim. Since this constitutes a new avenue for research in this area, these results will hopefully motivate more researchers to consider this link as a possible issue deserving more investigation.

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Table 1

*Means and Standard Deviations for Severity of Victim Blaming*

High Just World Beliefs									
	Likeable Victim			Unlikeable Victim			Total		
	<i>M</i>	<i>SD</i>	<i>N</i>	<i>M</i>	<i>SD</i>	<i>N</i>	<i>M</i>	<i>SD</i>	<i>N</i>
Prior Commitment	1.3	.6	55	1.2	.5	36	1.2	.5	91
No Prior Commitment	1.1	.3	38	1.2	.5	47	1.2	.4	85
Low Just World Beliefs									
Prior Commitment	1.3	.4	50	1.4	.5	34	1.3	.5	84
No Prior Commitment	1.1	.3	25	1.2	.4	35	1.2	.4	60

## Appendix A

### Letter of Initial Contact for Main Study



*Study Information*

You will be asked to read two short vignettes and to complete a series of online questionnaires concerned with people's perceptions of aggressive acts. If you have previously completed this survey you will not receive course credit for your participation.

*Eligibility*

All participants must be fluent in English and must not have previously participated in this study.

*Study Name*

VLVB

*Abstract*

Participants will engage in an online reading of two vignettes followed by the completion of three short questionnaires designed to target people's perceptions of aggressive acts.

*Description*

This study is concerned with how people perceive events surrounding aggressive acts. Participants will engage in an online reading of two vignettes accompanied by three short questionnaires. In exchange for participation, students will receive .5 credit toward a participating psychology course.

*Duration*

30 minutes

*Credits*

.5 credit

*Researcher*

Dr. Jan Cioe/Dr. Michael Woodworth/Julie Whitteker

Email: julie.whitteker@gmail.com

## Appendix B

### Letter of Initial Contact for Pilot Study

*Study Information*

You will be asked to read two short vignettes and to complete an online questionnaire following each vignette. These vignettes will describe characters and the questionnaires that follow are designed to tap into your perceptions of these characters. If you have previously completed this survey you will not receive course credit for your participation.

*Eligibility*

All participants must be fluent in English and must not have previously participated in this study.

*Study Name*

VLVB

*Abstract*

Participants will engage in an online reading of two vignettes each of which will be followed by the completion of a short questionnaire designed to target people's perceptions of the characters contained in the vignettes.

*Description*

This study is concerned with people's perceptions of a character's personality following a brief description of the character. Participants will engage in an online reading of two vignettes, with each vignette accompanied by a short questionnaire. In exchange for participation, students will receive .5 credit toward a participating psychology course.

*Duration*

30 minutes

*Credits*

.5 credit

*Researcher*

Dr. Jan Cioe/Dr. Michael Woodworth/Julie Whitteker

Email: [julie.whitteker@gmail.com](mailto:julie.whitteker@gmail.com)

## Appendix C

### Cover Letter for Main Study



OKANAGAN

*VLVB***PLEASE READ THE FOLLOWING CAREFULLY**

Hello,

My name is Julie Whitteker. I am currently completing my psychology honours degree at UBC Okanagan. I am conducting this research under the supervision of Dr. Michael Woodworth and Dr. Jan Cioe. Should you have any questions regarding this study, you may contact me at **julie.whitteker@gmail.com**, or you may contact the supervisors of this study, Dr. Michael Woodworth (**807-8731** or **michael.woodworth@ubc.ca**) or Dr. Jan Cioe (**807-8732** or **jan.cioe@ubc.ca**).

You have been asked to participate in a psychological study which will investigate people's judgments when aggressive acts are involved. The purpose of this study is to present you with two short stories, following which your perceptions about these stories will be evaluated through a series of questionnaires. You will be asked to answer questions about what you have read. Because you will be reading about aggressive acts, **you should not participate in this study if exposure to aggression makes you uncomfortable**. This study will require approximately 30 minutes of your time. We request that you complete this survey in a private quiet setting, and that you not consult with others on your answers.

All of your responses will be completely confidential. You will be asked to provide your age and gender but it will be requested that you not provide your name on any of the documents. You will also be asked to provide your student ID number for credit assignment purposes; this ID number will not be retained by the researchers or stored with your questionnaire data. Only

the principal investigators and I will see your answers, which will be stored in a password-protected computer.

Your participation in this study is strictly voluntary. You are free to withdraw from this study at any time without penalty until you have finalized the online questionnaire. Once you have submitted the online questionnaires, you will be agreeing to participate and to have your data included in the study. The data cannot be removed after this point.

Your participation in this study will benefit researchers, both in this study and in the field of social psychology. The answers you provide in this questionnaire will help psychologists to better understand people's perceptions surrounding aggressive acts. I, the researcher, will also benefit from the experience of conducting this research. The data from this project will be analyzed and presented in an undergraduate honour's thesis, in public presentations, and submitted for publication in academic journals.

At the end of Semester 2 you will be able to find out the results of the study by going to Dr. Jan Cioe's homepage at UBCO (<http://web.ubc.ca/okanagan/psycomp/faculty/jcioe.html>). If you have any questions or concerns about how you are treated or what your rights are as a participant in research, you can contact the Behavioral Research Ethics Board (BREB) at **(604) 827-5114** or **[breb.rise@ors.ubc.ca](mailto:breb.rise@ors.ubc.ca)**.

## Appendix D

### Cover Letter for Pilot Study



OKANAGAN

*VLVB***PLEASE READ THE FOLLOWING CAREFULLY**

Hello,

My name is Julie Whitteker. I am currently completing my psychology honours degree at UBC Okanagan. I am conducting this research under the supervision of Dr. Michael Woodworth and Dr. Jan Cioe. Should you have any questions regarding this study, you may contact me at **julie.whitteker@gmail.com**, or you may contact the supervisors of this study, Dr. Michael Woodworth (**807-8731** or **michael.woodworth@ubc.ca**) or Dr. Jan Cioe (**807-8732** or **jan.cioe@ubc.ca**).

You have been asked to participate in a psychological study which intends to tap into people's judgements of a previously described character. The purpose of this study is to present you with two short stories, following which your perceptions about the characters in these stories will be evaluated through a questionnaire. You will be asked to answer questions about what you have read. This study will require approximately 30 minutes of your time. We request that you complete this survey in a private quiet setting, and that you not consult with others on your answers.

All of your responses will be completely confidential. You will be asked to provide your age and gender but it will be requested that you not provide your name on any of the documents. You will also be asked to provide your student ID number for credit assignment purposes; this ID number will not be retained by the researchers or stored with your questionnaire data. Only



the principal investigators and I will see your answers, which will be stored in a password-protected computer.

Your participation in this study is strictly voluntary. You are free to withdraw from this study at any time without penalty until you have finalized the online questionnaire. Once you have submitted the online questionnaires, you will be agreeing to participate and to have your data included in the study. The data cannot be removed after this point.

Your participation in this study will benefit researchers, both in this study and in the field of social psychology. The answers you provide in this questionnaire will help psychologists to better understand people's perceptions surrounding aggressive acts. I, the researcher, will also benefit from the experience of conducting this research. The data from this project will be analyzed and presented in an undergraduate honour's thesis, in public presentations, and submitted for publication in academic journals.

At the end of Semester 2 you will be able to find out the results of the study by going to Dr. Jan Cioe's Home Page at UBCO (<http://web.ubc.ca/okanagan/psycomp/faculty/jcioe.html>). If you have any questions or concerns about how you are treated or what your rights are as a participant in research, you can contact the Behavioral Research Ethics Board (BREB) at **(604) 827-5114** or **[breb.rise@ors.ubc.ca](mailto:breb.rise@ors.ubc.ca)**.

## Appendix E

Dalbert, Montada, and Schmitt's (1987) General Belief in a Just World Scale

Please circle the responses within 6 = strongly agree and 1 = strongly disagree that best corresponds to your beliefs for each of the following statements.

	Strongly agree	Agree	Slightly agree	Slightly disagree	Disagree	Strongly disagree
1 I think basically the world is a just place	6	5	4	3	2	1
2 I believe that, by and large, people get what they deserve	6	5	4	3	2	1
3 I am confident that justice always prevails over injustice	6	5	4	3	2	1
4 I am convinced that in the long run people will be compensated for injustices	6	5	4	3	2	1
5 I firmly believe that injustices in all areas of life (e.g., professional, family, politics) are the exception rather than the rule	6	5	4	3	2	1
6 I think people try to be fair when making important decisions	6	5	4	3	2	1

## Appendix F

### Event Vignette

**Please read the following paragraph.**

It was 8:00 in the morning. Christine was walking to school. Christine had almost reached her campus when she looked down briefly to skip to the next song on her ipod. While Christine was looking down a man grabbed her from behind. He dragged her deep into the bushes that lined the walkway. The man brutally beat and stabbed Christine before stealing her wallet, her laptop, and her ipod. Christine suffered severe injuries including a broken arm, a crushed jaw bone, and fractured ribs from the brutal beating, and a punctured right lung from the stabbing. Doctors say that Christine will need reconstructive surgery to make her jaw fully functional again. However, Christine's face will likely never look the same. Christine's recovery will be lengthy and painful. In a matter of seconds, Christine's life completely changed. Sadly, because Christine was looking down when she was jumped, she never saw the man who attacked her. Furthermore, because Christine had been walking along a hidden pathway that rarely gets used, there were no eye witnesses to the attack. Consequently, authorities have no leads on Christine's attacker and the odds of capturing him are minimal.

## Appendix G

### Likeable Victim Vignette

**Please read the following paragraph.**

Christine is a warm and caring individual who always tries to keep her friends and family happy. She is always eager to help others when they are in need. Christine is also very strong-willed and independent. When she creates new goals for herself she works diligently until those goals are achieved. She always knows what to do in any given situation, and she is always the first one that people call when they need advice or just a friend to talk to. Christine also has a fun side. Her sense of humour is top notch. She is gifted with the talent of fast witty humour and because of this she is a riot to hang out with. Although Christine is very intelligent and usually puts considerable thought into all that she does, she also tries not to take life too seriously. She believes that the most important things in life are friends, family, and living a happy and healthy life.

## Appendix H

### Unlikeable Victim Vignette



**Please read the following paragraph.**

Christine is 20 years old. She does not have very many friends. People often tell her that she might have more friends if she stopped being so whiny. Because of her constant complaining, and her tendency to be self-absorbed, people usually find it difficult to spend time with Christine. People are embarrassed to go to restaurants with Christine because she has a tendency to be so fussy that she will return her meal to the kitchen repeatedly. When she asks people to do things, like go to lunch or to a movie, people often lie and say that they have made other plans. Christine is so gullible, that she believes them most of the time. The few times that Christine actually realizes that people are lying just so they don't have to spend time with her, she never calls them on it. Her family says this is because Christine is spineless and weak.

Appendix I

Rubin's (1970) Like Scale Revised

Please answer the following questions regarding your impressions of Christine. Circle the number that best corresponds to your chosen answer from 9 = Not true and 1= Definitely True.

	Not true								Definitely True
1. I think that Christine is unusually well adjusted.	9	8	7	6	5	4	3	2	1
2. I would highly recommend Christine for a responsible job.	9	8	7	6	5	4	3	2	1
3. In my opinion, Christine is an exceptionally mature person.	9	8	7	6	5	4	3	2	1
4. I have great confidence in Christine's good judgment.	9	8	7	6	5	4	3	2	1
5. Most people would react very favourably to Christine after a brief acquaintance.	9	8	7	6	5	4	3	2	1
6. I think that Christine and I are quite similar to each other.	9	8	7	6	5	4	3	2	1
7. I would vote for Christine in a class or group election.	9	8	7	6	5	4	3	2	1
8. I think that Christine is one of those people who quickly wins respect.	9	8	7	6	5	4	3	2	1
9. I feel that Christine is an extremely intelligent person.	9	8	7	6	5	4	3	2	1
10. Christine is one of the most likeable people I know.	9	8	7	6	5	4	3	2	1
11. Christine is the sort of person whom I myself would like to be.	9	8	7	6	5	4	3	2	1
12. It seems to me that it is very easy for Christine to gain admiration.	9	8	7	6	5	4	3	2	1

Appendix J

Hafer, Begue, Choma, and Dempsey's (2005) Blame/Responsibility Scale

Please answer the following questions as accurately and truthfully as you can. Please note that you may choose any response that falls on or between 1 (not at all responsible/not at all to blame) and 7 (totally responsible/entirely to blame).

## Blame/Responsibility Scale

	Not at all responsible/not at all to blame						Totally responsible/entirely to blame
1 To what extent do you think that Christine's behaviour is responsible for the fact that she was attacked?	1	2	3	4	5	6	7
2 To what extent do you think that Christine's personality is responsible for the fact that she was attacked?	1	2	3	4	5	6	7
3 To what extent do you think that Christine's behaviour is to blame for the fact that she was attacked?	1	2	3	4	5	6	7
4 To what extent do you think that Christine's character is to blame for the fact that she was attacked?	1	2	3	4	5	6	7

## Appendix K

### Debriefing Letter

All characters and events that you have just read about were completely fictional. As such, none of your responses on any questions will in any way affect any real persons. We thank you for your participation which will greatly help the researchers, the field of social psychology research, and the greater good for society. Should you have any questions regarding the procedures or findings of this study, you may contact me at **julie.whitteker@gmail.com**, or you may contact the supervisors of this study, Dr. Michael Woodworth (**807-8731** or **michael.woodworth@ubc.ca**) or Dr. Jan Cioe (**807-8732** or **jan.cioe@ubc.ca**). At the end of semester 2 you will be able to find the results of the study on Dr. Jan Cioe's Home Page at UBCO (<http://web.ubc.ca/okanagan/psycomp/facutly/jcioe.html>).

## Appendix L

### Threatening Event Vignette Validation Scale



**Please circle the response that most accurately reflects your opinions regarding the following questions. Please try to answer as truthfully as you can.**

1. Did you feel that the attack against Christine was unjust? **YES NO**
  
2. Did you feel that the scenario described in the story was threatening? **YES NO**
  
3. Do you feel threatened by the possibility that a similar type of attack  
could ever happen to you? **YES NO**