

2021

## Relationship Between Religious Beliefs and Systems, Educational Levels, and Victim Blaming

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# Walden University

College of Social and Behavioral Sciences

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Frances Runyon

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Walden University  
2021

Abstract

Relationship Between Religious Beliefs and Systems, Educational Levels, and Victim

Blaming

by

Frances Runyon

MA, Walden University 2015

BS, Baker College, 2013

Dissertation Submitted in Partial Fulfillment

of the Requirements for the Degree of

Doctor of Philosophy

Counseling Psychology

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## Abstract

Sexual assault and victim blaming are a severe problem. Being sexually assaulted increases the risk of physical and mental health issues for the victims. When the victims are blamed for being sexually assaulted, their physical and mental health issues increase substantially. Many victims do not seek help or support services because of the fear of being blamed. People believe in a just world, and blame the victims because it is more difficult to accept that bad things happen to good people. When people admit that bad things can happen to good people, they acknowledge that these things can happen to them. The purpose of the present study was to discover if there was a relationship between religious beliefs and systems, educational levels, and victim blaming. This study used convenience sampling by recruiting 220 participants via the internet. A two-way ANOVA with a 3 X 4 factorial design was used to explore the data for any relationships or interactions between religious beliefs and systems, educational levels, and victim blaming. This study was done to uncover any relationships or interactions that negatively affected sexual assault victims. The results indicated a significant effect of religiousness on victim blaming attitudes. The higher the religiousness score, the higher the victim blaming attitude score. Discovering what might influence victim blaming can help facilitate effective support for sexual assault victims. Effective support systems can lead to positive social change. Support systems can improve their healing process, or they can lead to more harm. Removing harm and increasing help can have a significant positive effect on their lives and result in positive social change.

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## Dedication

I need to acknowledge that God, my mother, and Cody were instrumental in my journey. I want to dedicate this work to my mother. She was always my biggest supporter and never gave up on me. She believed I could do anything, even when I could not see it myself. She may not have lived to experience this journey with me in person, but she continues to encourage and inspire me.

I would also like to dedicate this work to my son, Cody. He has been my beacon at the end of the tunnel. He has been the one most affected by the struggles I have experienced and still supported me unconditionally. I only hope that I can be an inspiration to him to follow his dreams and never give up.

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## Chapter 1: Relationship Between Religious Beliefs and Systems, Educational Levels, and Victim Blaming

Sexual assault and victim blaming are severe problems in the United States. With as many as one in four women and one in six men reporting being sexually assaulted annually, it becomes a financial burden for the victims and society when they seek professional assistance (National Sexual Violence Resource Center, 2018). Sexual assault has one of the highest annual costs for crimes in the United States, at over \$125 billion, followed by \$93 billion for assault, \$71 billion for murder, and \$61 billion for drunk driving (National Sexual Violence Resource Center, 2018). The financial burden is not the only concern. Victim blaming has a profound effect on the victims and their recovery (Fox & Cook, 2011).

Too often, sexual assault leads to victim blaming and revictimization of the individuals. When sexual assault victims turn to others for help and feel like others are blaming them for being sexually assaulted, they become even more traumatized (DeCouet et al., 2016; Greeson et al., 2016; Simmel et al., 2016; Starzynski et al., 2017). Sexual assault victims may turn to family, friends, professionals, and their religious systems for support during this traumatic experience. Supporting those who need it without causing more damage can create positive social change. Helping sexual assault victims work through the trauma helps the victims to move forward. When these victims remain traumatized, they are at risk of physical, emotional, and mental health issues that can be costly for everyone (National Sexual Violence Resource Center, 2018). The resources available are limited, and the funding for these resources is continuously at risk

of being cut. With the rising costs of health care in all fields, (physical, mental, and emotional), it is ideal for keeping the costs down with as few interactions as possible.

When identifying what influences victim blaming, there is a starting point for effecting positive social change among sexual assault victims. Those within these support systems must be aware of weaknesses and learn to overcome them. Ineffective support systems can cause more damage if they are blaming the victims. The objective of this study was to discover if educational levels and religious beliefs and systems influenced victim blaming of sexual assault victims.

This chapter includes a discussion of the background research, the gap in the literature, and why it is essential for positive social change. The problem statement will include a discussion of the gap in the literature and existing research for sexual assault and victim blaming. This section also includes how significant the problem is and how relevant it is to facilitate effective support systems for sexual assault victims and eliminate victim blaming. In this chapter I also explain the purpose of the study, uncovering ineffective support systems due to victim blaming. The chapter includes the research questions and the hypotheses. The theoretical framework for this study was the just world theory (Lerner, 1971). Words are clearly defined so that the understanding will be clear. The chapter also includes discussion of the assumptions, scope, and delimitations and the rationale for them. The chapter ends with the limitations, the significance of increasing the knowledge base in this area, and a summary.

## **Background**

Sexual assault is a severe problem in the United States, with more than one-fourth of women reporting sexual assault in their lifetime (National Sexual Violence Resource Center, 2018). These figures do not include unreported or men reporting sexual assaults. Previous research on sexual assault on college campuses has included how masculinity influences sexual assault (Saucier et al., 2015; Seabrook et al., 2016). Saucier et al. (2015) and Seabrook et al. (2016) proposed that masculinity and fitting in played a role in whether they blamed the victims. Still, other researchers have concluded that alcohol or drug consumption plays a role in whether sexual assault victims are blamed (Hayes et al., 2016; Swan et al., 2016).

Research on sexual assault has also included how the victim dressed, whether they were on a date with the perpetrator, and even if the victim was sexually active with them or others in the past (Adolfsson & Strömwall, 2017; Hayes et al., 2016; Niemi & Young, 2014; Persson et al., 2018; Rogers et al., 2016; Swan, et al., 2016; Tuliao et al., 2017). Previous researchers also explored whether sexual assault education influenced victim blaming of sexual assault victims (Baker et al., 2014; Fox & Cook, 2011; Greeson & Campbell, 2012; Greeson et.al., 2016; Palm et al., 2015). Building on sexual assault education, researchers have explored how sexual assault education has improved community responses toward sexual assault victims (Hakimi et al., 2018; Palm et al., 2015).

The research has been limited to sexual assault education and is limited in regard to how educational levels influence blaming sexual assault victims. What research there

is tends to be controversial. Some believe as people's educational level increases, their victim blaming decreases (Burns & Garcia, 2017; Nagel et al., 2005; Zhang & Hong, 2013). Kuppens and Spears's (2014) study did not have similar results. They suggested that those with higher educational levels were better at responding with answers they deemed most appropriate rather than how they felt. To account for responses that may not be honest, they used direct and indirect questions to help understand whether the answers accurately represented what the participants felt (Kuppens & Spears, 2014).

The previous and current research is limited when exploring religious beliefs and systems and their influence on victim blaming (Blanchard-Fields et al., 2012; Johnson, 2013). Blanchard-Fields et al. (2012) suggested that those who held the same traditional family values and beliefs as the religious belief system were not blamed as quickly as those who did not. Johnson (2013) suggested that educating the clergy on sexual assault would help decrease victim blaming.

There was a gap in the literature on how religious beliefs and systems and educational levels influenced victim blaming. The research has proven that sexual assault is a severe problem and that when it leads to victim blaming, it becomes significantly worse for the victims. Research has shown some causes of victim blaming but has failed to indicate whether educational levels combined with religious beliefs and systems influence victim blaming. Sexual assault has a significant impact on mental, physical, and emotional health (Artime et al., 2018; Creech & Orchowski, 2016; Frey et al., 2017; Gilmore, et al., 2018; Hakimi, et al., 2018; Kelley & Gidycz, 2017; Kirkner et al., 2018; Overstreet et al., 2017; Rosellini, et al., 2017; Scott et al., 2018; Simmel et al., 2016;



Swartout et al., 2011). It is imperative to understand how to prevent revictimization of sexual assault victims. There needs to be some understanding of how support systems can be useful.

### **Problem Statement**

Sexual assault is an event that can lead to post-traumatic stress disorder (PTSD), depression, suicidal ideation, eating/sleeping disorders, substance abuse disorders and physical illnesses (Callan et al., 2014; Kelley & Gidycz, 2017; Swartout et al., 2011). It is vital that sexual assault victims are given all the support available for recovery before other conditions or disorders arise. Religious beliefs and systems are a source of support for people during traumatic events and the recovery process (Frey et al., 2017). Enduring a traumatic event and relying on less than supportive religious beliefs and systems hinders the recovery process (Johnson, 2013).

When sexual assault victims do not feel supported by family, friends, or society they may experience victim blaming (Lerner & Miller, 1978; Niemi & Young, 2014). Research supports that many sexual assault victims do not report a sexual assault due to victim blaming (DeCouet al. , 2016; Harber et al., 2015 ). When victims do not report a sexual assault, they may not be given resources available to assist them through this traumatic time (Greeson et al., 2016).

Previous research done on sexual assault training revealed that the more individuals in sexual assault or religious support systems know about sexual assault, the less likely they are to blame the victims (Baker et al., 2014; Greeson & Campbell, 2012; Greeson et al., 2016; Johnson, 2013; Palm et al., 2015; Senn & Forrest, 2016). The

research on educational levels was limited to whether educational levels influence discrimination of minority populations, and did not explore whether they influenced victim blaming. The gap in research lies in how these same beliefs and systems play a role in victim blaming and how educational levels influence either religious beliefs or victim blaming (Chapin & Coleman, 2017).

### **Purpose of the Study**

I designed this study to explore whether educational levels or religious beliefs and systems influence victim blaming. I used a quasi-experimental study to determine whether these variables influenced victim blaming of sexual assault victims. I explored the independent variables of educational levels and religiousness separately and together. I also investigated if they influenced victim blaming of sexual assault victims.

### **Research Questions and Hypotheses**

Research Question 1 (RQ1): What is the relationship between the religious beliefs of participants and victim blaming of sexual assault victims?

Null Hypothesis ( $H_0$ ): People with stronger religious beliefs will not exhibit different levels of victim blaming than those with low or no religious beliefs.

Alternative Hypothesis ( $H_a$ ): People with stronger religious beliefs will exhibit higher levels of victim blaming than those with low or no religious beliefs.

Research Question 2 (RQ2): What is the relationship between educational levels of participants and victim blaming of sexual assault victims?

Null Hypothesis ( $H_02$ ): People with higher educational levels will not exhibit different levels of victim blaming of sexual assault victims than those with lower educational levels.

Alternative Hypothesis ( $H_a2$ ): People with higher educational levels will exhibit lower levels of victim blaming of sexual assault victims than those with lower educational levels.

Research Question 3 (RQ3): Is there an interaction between religious beliefs and educational levels on victim blaming of sexual assault victims?

Null Hypothesis ( $H_03$ ): There is no interaction between religious beliefs and educational levels that impact victim blaming of sexual assault victims.

Alternative Hypothesis ( $H_a3$ ): There is an interaction between religious beliefs and educational levels that impact victim blaming of sexual assault victims.

### **Theoretical Framework**

The theoretical framework for this study is based on Lerner's just world theory. Lerner suggested that people make sense of the bad things happening to people by assuming people get what they deserve (Lerner, 1971; Lerner, 1980; Lerner, 1998; Lerner & Miller, 1978). When people accept that bad things can happen to anyone, they begin to fear it may happen to them (Lerner, 1980). It is easier to live with the belief that it cannot and will not happen to them than to accept bad things happen to good people (Lerner, 1980).

People prefer to believe the world is fair than to take action when it is not fair or just (Lerner & Simmons, 1966). The process of blaming the victim is a defense

mechanism (Lerner, 1998). It allows people to take no responsibility for bad things happening and will enable them to hide behind the pretense that they are not vulnerable to bad things. The same just world theory allows people to pretend that prejudice and discrimination are not a problem as long as it does not have an impact on them (Hafer & Begue, 2005; Lerner, 1980). I will cover Lerner's just world theory more thoroughly in Chapter 2.

### **Nature of the Study**

Attitudes toward rape victims (ATRVs) was the dependent variable in this study. Educational levels and religious beliefs and systems were the independent variables. I compared the four levels of religiousness, believing, bonding, behaving, and belonging. I also compared the five levels of education, did not complete high school, high school graduate, some college, undergraduate degree, and graduate degree. Because of the many levels of education and religiousness, I used a two-way ANOVA, with 4 X 5 factorial design. I recruited participants by posting invitations online and provided a link to the survey for them to participate.

### **Definitions**

*Attitudes Toward Rape Victims:* The way victims are viewed, credible, deserving, or blamed for being sexually assaulted. The ATRVs was designed to measure the participant's attitudes towards sexual assault victims (Ward, 1988).

*Consent:* The individual must be of age, mental capacity, not under the influence of drugs or alcohol, and physically able to say "yes" (U.S. Department of Justice, 2019).

*Educational Levels:* The highest grade or degree that one completes (National Center for Education Statistics, 2018).

*Religiousness:* The extent to which people are religious, and the degree of their belief in God, gods, or other spiritual entities (Saroglou, 2009).

*Sexual Assault:* U.S. Department of Justice (2019) defines sexual assault as any non-consensual sexual act, including when the victim is unable to consent, regardless of federal, state, or tribal laws.

*Survivor:* A person who experienced any degree of sexual assault. The terms victims and survivors are frequently used interchangeably. Survivor is used more often to denote strength and the ability to survive after this traumatic experience (Niemi & Young, 2014).

*Victim:* A person who experienced any degree of sexual assault (Niemi & Young, 2014).

### **Assumptions**

I assumed that all the participants answered honestly and not try to respond in a way that they felt was more acceptable. I also assumed that the participants were willing, as the recruitment process asked people to participate and did not offer any incentives. I assumed that the number of participants would produce effective statistical results. I assumed that the dependent variable outcome would be normally distributed.

### **Scope and Delimitations**

I developed this study to explore whether religious beliefs and systems and educational levels influenced victim blaming of sexual assault victims. I chose to focus

on victim blaming in relation to sexual assault because it is a problem that does not appear to be decreasing. The only limit was that participants must be 18, which allowed any adult to participate. Another delimitation was that I did not account for any differences in sexual assault situations. For instance, in previous research (Adolfsson & Strömwall, 2017; Hayes et al., 2016; Niemi & Young, 2014; Persson et al., 2018; Tuliao et al., 2017), the participants were more likely to blame the victim when the perpetrator was someone they knew (spouse, intimate partner, or a date), and I did not account for these variables. Each of these variances has been shown to play a role in victim blaming. I limited the ability to identify any variances between situations and victims and assumed victim blaming was equal across all scenarios. The ATRVS did not account for any variances in the victim's gender or age (males/females/children). Research has shown there was less victim blaming when the victim is a child or male compared to when the victim was female (Hockett et al., 2016) (Nagel et al., 2005) (Niemi & Young, 2014) (Piatek, 2015) (Rogers et al., 2016).

In previous research, victim blaming was reported to happen more frequently when victims knew their attacker (Chapin & Coleman, 2017). Past research results have shown that when victims were women, the women were blamed for being sexually assaulted more often than men or children were blamed (Hockett et al., 2016). The inability to obtain any variances of victim blaming attitudes toward men, women, children, or circumstances of rape with the ATRVS was a delimitation. Therefore, the results may not be generalized across different types of sexual assault victims or cases.

Another delimitation of this study was the inability to ensure all levels of education and religiousness were represented equally in the outcomes.

### **Limitations**

Along with delimitations, there were some limitations to this study. One limitation was the inability to ensure all religiousness and educational levels were represented equally. A methodological limitation was the use of a convenience sample. A large portion of the internet resources for posting the study was websites that attracted people with higher educational levels. There was a significant skew toward higher levels of education represented in the results. The websites where recruitment took place were diverse. However, the actual results were not representative of the general population due to the lack of participants without some college/university. Another limitation was the inability to ensure all participants' responses were honest, which was a concern whenever using self-report measures. The participants with higher educational levels may recognize what the most socially desirable responses were and answer accordingly.

An area of concern was whether the participants would respond honestly. The selection of questions the ATRVS uses help to decrease responses the participants think society deems appropriate (Ward, 1988; Ward et al., 1992). The ATRVS includes questions about victims from different perspectives. It is not perfect, but it helped to reduce responses that may lack the whole truth of their attitudes.

### **Significance**

This study has important implications for sexual assault survivors and their healing process. Sexual assault is a significant problem that does not appear to be going

away (Centers for Disease Control and Prevention, 2017; National Sexual Violence Resource Center, 2018). Effective help is necessary to ensure the victims are not victimized again. Victim blaming harms the healing process (Crippen, 2015). Sexual assault is a traumatic experience. When victims experience victim blaming, they are traumatized more (Crippen, 2015). Religious systems are support systems that many victims turn to after they have been sexually assaulted (Johnson, 2013). These support systems should be positive and not guilty of blaming the victim.

Positive social change happens when sexual assault victims can find effective support systems and work through the experiences they have endured. They can become productive and stronger when given valuable support and guidance (Fox & Cook, 2011; Greeson et al., 2016). It is essential that all support systems understand their role in victim blaming and how to avoid it (Johnson, 2013). Support systems must see any biases they harbor and work through them before they try to support or guide victims (Fox & Cook, 2011; Greeson et al., 2016; Johnson, 2013). To be an effective support system should be the ultimate goal.

### **Summary**

Sexual assault is a severe problem that affects a significant number of people (National Sexual Violence Resource Center, 2018). It is a traumatic event, after which most need a support system for assistance (Centers for Disease Control and Prevention, 2017). Too often, sexual assault leads to many other problems, like physical, mental, and emotional health issues (Fox & Cook, 2011). Without proper support systems in place, they may become worse. It is a horrific event to try and overcome with help. Victim



blaming has been a type of defense mechanism that allows people to believe it cannot happen to them (Lerner, 1971; Lerner, 1998; Lerner & Simmons, 1966). In this study, I investigated whether educational levels or religious beliefs and systems influenced victim blaming. It is beneficial to understand how to prevent support systems from victim blaming as a step toward creating effective support systems.

In Chapter 2, I outline the areas explored. Chapter 2 includes a comprehensive review of Lerner's just world theory as the theoretical foundation for the study. Chapter 2 also assessed the mental health risks associated with sexual assault and victim blaming. The chapter concludes with previous research on religious beliefs and systems and educational levels and their influences on victim blaming.

## Chapter 2: Literature Review

Sexual assault is a traumatic event that happens to one in five women and one in four girls under 18 (National Sexual Violence Resource Center, 2018). These numbers do not include unreported or sexual assaults on the male population. Sexual assault is a severe problem in the United States and can lead to other problems for the victims (Centers for Disease Control and Prevention, 2017; National Sexual Violence Resource Center, 2018). The prevention of sexual assault would be ideal. Until this is a perfect world where there are no sexual assaults, it is everyone's responsibility to help those who are sexually assaulted. Some of the issues that sexual assault victims face are victim blaming and mental health problems.

Victim blaming refers to society blaming the victims rather than the people or events that are the source leading to them being victims. Sexual assault can lead to mental and physical health issues without victim blaming. When the sexual assault victims experience victim blaming afterward, the risk of mental or physical health issues can increase leading to more harm (Chapin & Coleman, 2017; Creech & Orchowski, 2016; DeCou, et al., 2016; Dworkin et al., 2016; Fox & Cook, 2011). There needs to be a way to help these victims without causing more physical or mental health problems (Frey et al., 2017). The sexual assault alone can be traumatic. Blaming the victim can only lead to more trauma for the victims.

This review of the literature includes an assessment of sexual assault, some contributing factors, and some consequences for the sexual assault victims when society is blaming them. I begin the literature review by identifying the areas explored and the

theoretical foundation for this investigation. The theoretical foundation was based on Lerner's research on victim blaming. The discussion continues with victim blaming and the influence it has on sexual assault victims, which lead to an investigation about the mental health risks associated with victim blaming. The inquiry on mental health risks led to a closer examination for a connection between victim blaming and biases/prejudices. I also explore how educational levels and religious beliefs and systems influence bias/prejudice and victim blaming. Future exploration can help facilitate effective programs for sexual assault victims. Sexual assault and victim blaming are serious problems. A better understanding of contributing factors and ways to prevent victim blaming is vital for support systems to be effective.

### **Literature Search Strategy**

To thoroughly explore the literature, I performed a search using databases in the Walden Library, PsycINFO, PsycARTICLES, SAGE Journals, and the Criminal Justice Database. Outside of Walden Library, the search included GOOGLE Scholar, Centers for Disease Control and Prevention, and the National Sexual Violence Resource Center. Within these databases, the search included articles meeting the criteria of full text, peer-reviewed and between the years 2013 – 2019, except for theories of victim blame. The most relevant articles on victim blaming kept leading the search back to Lerner's just world theory (Lerner & Miller, 1978).

The key words for *sexual assault* and *victim blaming* combined returned very few results, so the search needed to be expanded. I increased the key words to include *levels of education*, *religious beliefs*, and *revictimization*. The gap in the literature became

apparent as the results were still limited and not relevant to this study. As I continued the search, it was necessary to add the following keywords to the search.: *rape, self-blame, just world, racism, prejudice, discrimination, religion, spiritual, education, higher education, belief systems, support systems, support, recovery, victimization, injustice, violent crimes, sexual violence, intimate partner violence, marital rape, date rape, and bias*. Many of these did not focus on sexual assault, although they did have comparable information for sexual assault victims and victim blaming.

### **Theoretical Framework**

The theoretical framework for this study was based on Lerner's just world theory. In Lerner's (1980) theory, he stated that people find it hard to admit that bad things can happen to them. The way they make sense of this is to say that people get what they deserve (Lerner, 1980). Lerner acknowledged that people realize bad things can and do happen to good people. People normalize the event to prevent them from feeling any injustice when they blame the victims (Lerner, 1998). The belief that people get what they deserve is not limited to victims. This belief includes socioeconomic status, promotions, and justice in the legal system (Lerner, 1998).

In Lerner's studies, he acknowledged that the belief in a just world allows people to feel no obligation for helping victims or taking a stand against those who do blame victims for their hardships or being victimized (Lerner & Simmons, 1966; Lerner, 1971; Lerner & Miller, 1978). Believing in a just world allows bystanders to remain bystanders without a sense of obligation or guilt for allowing bad things to happen to others and doing nothing about it (Lerner & Miller, 1978). People prefer to believe they are exempt

from undesired events happening; this belief has led to blaming the victims (Lerner & Miller, 1978). Admitting that bad things happen to good people puts everyone at risk of admitting it could happen to them.

It is unrealistic to think good people are exempt from ever experiencing negative things in their lives. However, according to Lerner (1971), Lerner and Miller (1978), Lerner and Simmons (1966) people justify victim blaming by assuming that the world is just and only those who deserve negative things will experience negative things in their lives. According to Lerner (1980), people will rationalize ways to blame the victim as a way of decreasing their guilt for allowing negative things to happen to others. Just world theory continues to be referenced in research as an explanation for discrimination, biases, and victim blaming (Lerner, 1980). Hafer and Begue (2005) agreed that just world theory allows people not to feel guilty when allowing or failing to prevent injustice. People who believe in a just world are more likely to blame victims and make no attempts to help victims of injustice (Hafer & Begue, 2005). It is easier to have prejudices and biases when the belief is that people get what they deserve, while allowing them to decrease their guilt for not helping victims of injustice.

Victim blaming has been a severe problem, especially for sexual assault victims. While Lerner's theory of a just world is appropriate for this study, I explored other approaches as well. According to the path model of blame, victim blaming is a process using causality, mental state, and preventability (Malle et al., 2014). Results from this model have been controversial when referring to sexual assault (Niemi & Young, 2014). Niemi and Young (2014) found that the path model was not as useful for the victims as it

was for the perpetrator because it attributed obligation on the victims not to become victims. Malle et al., (2014) notion of obligation on behalf of the victims, leads to less responsibility on behalf of the perpetrator.

The theory of system justification allows rationalization to allow the status quo with things like victim blaming of sexual assault victims (Jost et al., 2004). Jost et al. (2004) suggested that following the status quo allows people to accept self-defeating behavior because they believe it is what is deserved. Counterproductive behavior is an area of concern for sexual assault victims, but this approach did not give the best fit for this study.

Fox and Cook (2011) researched victim blaming of sexual assault victims and found that sexual assault education helped to decrease victim blaming. However, they did not explore the causes of victim blaming, just preventative measures. Preventing victim blaming is desirable. Understanding what leads to victim blaming is necessary to find a solution. These approaches help shape victim blaming, the problems that can accompany it, and the positive impact of sexual assault education. However, Lerner's theory of a just world was the best approach for this study.

Lerner's theory has been studied for over 50 years and continues to be the foundation for research in understanding human behavior (Bartholomaeus & Strelan, 2019). Bartholomaeus and Strelan (2019) compared just world theory and its relation to the self and others in general. Their results indicated that people believe in the just world theory, but the degree of their belief depended upon whether it was about themselves or others in general (Bartholomaeus & Strelan, 2019). Nartova-Bochaver et al. (2019)

researched just world theory and how it influences college students' well being. They found that belief in a just world plays a role in students' well being and their perception of how others view them (Nartova-Bochaver et al., 2019). Westfall et al. (2019) compared how just world theory and physical attractiveness influence each other. Their results indicated that physical attractiveness is a powerful force that can play a role, at least in part, in belief in a just world (Westfall et al., 2019).

Another recent study of just world theory explored mother-blame for sexual abuse in children (Toews et al., 2019). The results from their study indicated that the belief in a just world played a role in mother-blame (Toews et al., 2019). The emphasis of the research was the importance of belief in just world theory in the workplace (Cheng et al., 2019). They found that within the work environment, employees need to feel the work environment is just and fair (Cheng et al., 2019).

Lerner's theory was the basis for a study on honesty, and Schindler et al., (2019) found that people with a strong belief in a just world were influenced to be more honest. While those who do not believe in a just world were more likely to be dishonest, they also found that life experiences that were unjust in their personal life decreased their belief in a just world (Schindler et al., 2019). Lerner's just world theory has been used for decades and is still being used in understanding human behavior (Lerner, 1980). Just world theory is a firm foundation for studying victim blaming of sexual assault victims.

## Literature Review of the Variables

### Sexual Assault and Victim Blaming

Most states define sexual assault as any nonconsensual vaginal, oral, or anal penetration using force, threats, or taking advantage of someone who is unable to consent (National Institute of Justice, 2019). The perpetrator can be a stranger, acquaintance, intimate partner, family member or friend (National Institute of Justice, 2019). When the sexual assault is committed by a family member, friend, or intimate partner, it contributes to victim blaming attitudes (Hill, Stein et al., 2018; Persson et al., 2018). Previous research established participants were more likely to blame the victims when the perpetrator was not a stranger (Hill et al., 2018; Persson et al., 2018; Simmel et al., 2016; Starzynski et al., 2017).

Sexual assault is not equal across all the states. Some states may consider attempted penetration as a sexual assault while some states have loopholes that allow sexual assault by a spouse or intimate partner to go unpunished (National Institute of Justice, 2019). The ability to prove marital rape can be another area that becomes problematic for the sexual assault victims. Some states only consider marital rape as a sexual assault if there is proof of physical force.

These gray areas, loopholes, and law variations contribute to victim blaming attitudes. If the government cannot agree across states about what defines sexual assault and who is a perpetrator, it is more challenging to attribute the blame to the perpetrator. When laws and society cannot distinctly define who is responsible for the sexual assault, it can only produce reasons for allowing the sexual assault victims to be the source of



blame rather than the perpetrators. When people's perceptions become skewed and sexual assault victims are held accountable for the traumatic experience they endured, it can lead to severe mental health issues.

### **Sexual Assault and Mental Health**

Sexual assault has a profound effect on the mental health of sexual assault victims (Artime et al., 2018; Hill et al., 2018; Kirkner et al., 2018; Overstreet et al., 2017).

Previous research concurs that sexual assault victims have a greater risk of mental health concerns (Hakimi et al., 2018; Kirkner et al., 2018). These mental health risks can include PTSD, depression, suicidal ideation, alcohol and drug abuse, eating and sleeping disorders.

These risks increase when sexual assault victims do not seek some form of help or support (Starzynski et al. 2017). The evidence indicates that the sooner sexual assault victims obtain mental health treatment, the better the probability of their recovery (Scott et al., 2018; Simmel et al., 2016). Effective treatment and support are necessary for the recovery process. The sooner they receive treatment, the better the outcome when the treatment is effective, or at least perceived as helpful by the sexual assault victims (Callan et al., 2014; Overstreet, Berenz et al., 2017). The dilemma is whether the treatment is effective (Scott et al., 2018; Simmel et al., 2016). The treatment received may be effective, but if the sexual assault victims perceive it as unhelpful or feel it is judgmental, it loses its effectiveness (Simmel et al., 2016). Part of being effective is understanding what is helpful and what is harmful when responding to and working with sexual assault victims (Starzynski et al., 2017). The mental health of sexual assault

victims is in jeopardy when they do not receive beneficial support. Suicidal ideation is a dangerous symptom of sexual assault (Gilmore et al., 2018; Rosellini et al., 2017). These mental health risks only increase when the sexual assault victim is a minority (Hakimi et al., 2018). Not obtaining treatment and delaying treatment can lead to chronic problems (Kirkner et al., 2018). When sexual assault victims acquire treatment, and it is ineffective, it can be worse than not receiving any treatment (Kirkner et al., 2018). It is essential to understand why treatment and support systems are ineffective. Some possible reasons for ineffective treatment and support systems are biases, prejudices, and victim blaming. It is necessary to take a look at some variables that may cause these biases, prejudices, and victim blaming attitudes. Educational levels and religious beliefs were a useful place to start this investigation.

### **Educational Levels**

According to the National Center for Education Statistics (2018), a little more than 50% of the population have an associates degree or higher level of education. The attainment of a college degree may play a role in blaming sexual assault victims. Blaming sexual assault victims is a form of bias, prejudice, and discrimination. Research results for higher educational levels exhibited fewer biases, prejudices, and discrimination (Burns & Garcia, 2017; De Vroome et al., 2014; Erhart, 2016; Zhang & Hong, 2013). There is some controversy as to whether educational levels do decrease biases, prejudices, and discrimination.

Researchers have attempted to show that higher educational levels reduce discrimination. Discrimination is not limited to age, race, gender, or sexual orientation; it

occurs whenever people are mistreated because of bias. If they experience any bias, they may sense discrimination implied or real. Blaming victims for what has happened to them is a type of bias or prejudice (Callan et al., 2014; Piatek, 2015). Kuppens and Spears (2014) reported that self-report measures of prejudice were lower when educational levels were higher. They also noted that these results were limited to the explicit measures.

Kuppens and Spears (2014) asserted that explicit (direct) measures might show a significant difference in self-reported prejudice, but the implicit (indirect) measures did not show a significant difference. Explicit measures are clearly defined prejudices which are easy to measure. The participants with higher educational levels responded with answers that were more politically correct, rather than how they may have felt (Kuppens & Spears, 2014). Their responses on explicit measures matched what they were taught society deemed as acceptable responses.

However, the participants with higher educational levels had very similar responses to those with lower educational levels when they responded to the implicit measures portion of the questions (Kuppens & Spears, 2014). Implicit measures are implied and not as easy to uncover or measure. Explicit measures gave respondents the ability to use controlled processing for their answers (Kuppens & Spears, 2014). The implicit measures were spontaneous responses without enough time to use controlled processing (Kuppens & Spears, 2014). With spontaneous responses, the participants' results were the same for lower and higher educational levels. They also asserted that individuals with higher levels of education might be better at hiding their prejudices

(Kuppens & Spears, 2014). The ability to hide prejudices and biases on explicit measures appeared to be easier for those with higher educational levels while it was more difficult to hide when the spontaneous or implicit measures were compared (Kuppens & Spears, 2014). Still, other researchers found that educational levels were not significant for determining biases, prejudices, victim blaming, or discrimination.

Hayes et al. (2016) indicated that educational level might not play a role in victim blaming. Hayes et al. (2016) allowed only some college levels to be measured with no comparison of levels of education. However, their results indicated that college students might use situational factors when determining blame (Hayes et al., 2016). Situations like the victims' consumption of alcohol or drugs, dressing or acting provocatively, flirting or sleeping with the perpetrator in the past played a greater role in victim blaming than the educational levels of participants in their study.

On the other hand, Nagel et al. (2005) argued that higher education does decrease prejudice and victim blaming. Their analysis was limited to explicit measures or controlled processing responses. They indicated that educational levels might play a role, but a more significant factor could be the participants' age. They found that the ages of the participants played a substantial role in determining whether they blamed the sexual assault victims. The researchers hypothesized that younger participants were more aware of violence against women. That may be why they scored lower in victim blaming attitudes than the older participants. Younger participants exhibited less victim blaming than older participants.

Still another factor that may influence victim blaming is sexual assault education. Fox and Cook (2011) also suggested that education decreases victim blaming. They suggested that sexual assault education reduced victim blaming (Fox & Cook, 2011). Participants knew more about sexual assault and the revictimization caused by victim blaming after they completed a course on sexual assault (Fox & Cook, 2011). A weakness of their study was that the participants were already interested in the class due to their majors. As students, they were already interested in sexual assault education. It may be that they already have a better understanding of sexual assault before taking the course.

When reviewing studies on educational levels, there was some controversy as to what degree of education, if any, plays a role in victim blaming. The only area that was evident was that sexual assault education increases the effectiveness of support systems. However, there was some controversy when comparing current research on educational levels and biases, prejudices, and victim blaming. Results have shown the ability to use controlled processing as a variable that enables participants to distort their true feelings. Other research has revealed that sexual assault played the most significant role in predicting victim blaming. Still, other research implied that age might play a more significant role in victim blaming. Unfortunately, these results did not give a well-defined answer to what role educational levels play in victim blaming. Another area that may play a role in victim blaming is religious beliefs and systems.

## **Religious Beliefs and Systems**

Support systems can be a positive way to help sexual assault victims effectively. Some research supported the theory that religious beliefs and systems assist traumatized sexual assault victims in their healing process (Adolfsson & Strömwall, 2017). Others suggested that people in support systems that lack sexual assault awareness education can lead to more victim blaming and cause more harm than help (Fox & Cook, 2011; Swartout et al., 2011). However, researchers have replicated studies that support systems are vital to healing from traumatic experiences (Frey et al., 2017; Greeson & Campbell, 2012; Greeson, Campbell, et al., 2016; Harber et al., 2015; Nwoke et al., 2016; Stewart et al., 2001). These studies also include what types of support systems are most effective in the healing process. Support systems can come in the form of friends, family, professionals, and religious beliefs and systems (Nwoke et al., 2016). There does not appear to be any disagreement that effective support systems are a valuable tool for those experiencing trauma.

The strength of the participant's religious beliefs and how diligently they follow those beliefs play a role in how much attribution of blame the participants put on the victims (Blanchard-Fields et al., 2012). Religious support systems may be imposing their beliefs and consciously or subconsciously blaming the victims, causing more harm (Blanchard-Fields et al., 2012). The results from previous research are mixed and indicated that religious beliefs and systems could be positive or negative support systems. Therefore, it was necessary to understand what makes a difference in it, being positive or negative.

There needed to be an understanding of how much religious beliefs and systems influence the participants' attitudes toward sexual assault victims. Johnson (2013) found that participants with firm beliefs were more likely to blame sexual assault victims, while those without steadfast beliefs were less likely to blame sexual assault victims. Rating the level of religious beliefs was necessary to understand to what extent the participants allowed their religious beliefs and systems to influence their opinion of sexual assault victims. When the members of the religious systems exhibit victim blaming, it becomes ineffective as a support system (Johnson, 2013). Religious systems should be a positive support system for sexual assault victims. Blanchard-Fields et al. (2012) agreed that the stronger the religious beliefs, the higher the risk of blaming the sexual assault victims. The participants that held more traditional family values (no premarital sex, monogamous and no divorce) were more likely to blame the victims if they did not hold these same traditional family values (Blanchard-Fields et al., 2012). Sexual assault victims that practiced premarital sex, committed adultery, or were divorced were more likely to be blamed for being sexually assaulted (Blanchard-Fields et al., 2012). It was more difficult for the participants to blame sexual assault victims that were practicing these traditional family roles (Blanchard-Fields et al., 2012). Religious beliefs and systems influenced traditional family roles. Traditional family roles and religious beliefs and systems influenced attitudes towards sexual assault victims.

### **Religious Beliefs and Education**

Victims may turn to their religious systems before turning to a sexual assault professional or legal system (Johnson, 2013). The religious systems that many sexual

assault victims turn to for support may lack the training for sexual assault victims (Johnson, 2013). Exploring religious systems and beliefs and the degree of victim blaming would increase the understanding of what is helping and what is leading to revictimization. Educating members in religious systems about sexual assault, revictimization, and effective ways to assist victims can be beneficial (Johnson, 2013). Sexual assault education and levels of education are not the same things. Sexual assault education focuses on victimization, coping skills, and the recovery process for sexual assault victims. Educational levels refer to how long one spends in the educational system. Sexual assault education has proven to be an effective way to help sexual assault victims (Fox & Cook, 2011). Levels of education and sexual assault education have different influences on victim blaming. Research has shown that sexual assault education is beneficial in decreasing victim blaming.

However, the higher the level of education obtained and its influence on victim blaming has mixed results (Fox & Cook, 2011; Palm et al., 2015). The research on educational levels, biases, prejudices, and victim blaming does not paint a clear picture. For example, participants who have higher educational levels may skew the results using controlled processing. Controlled processing allows them to consider the options and respond after weighing their choices. However, these same participants may respond to answers differently than expected when it is spontaneous. In addition, the research was limited when comparing whether the combination of religious beliefs and educational levels influence blaming sexual assault victims. There needed to be a more thorough



examination of how influential educational levels and religious beliefs and systems impact victim blaming.

### **Summary**

Sexual assault is a traumatic event that too many people experience. Preventing revictimization is necessary for their recovery. Too often, the traumatic event of sexual assault is the beginning of the problems sexual assault victims endure (Greeson et al., 2016). While this traumatic event is a genuine concern for mental health, when they become revictimized by the support systems they turn to for help, it becomes compounded (Greeson & Campbell, 2012). Support systems should be supportive, not harmful in any way.

Research has shown that sexual assault education helps to decrease victim blaming of sexual assault victims (Fox & Cook, 2011). The research as to whether higher levels of education play a role in victim blaming of sexual assault victims was mixed. Some research has shown that those with higher levels of education tend to score lower on biases and prejudices (Kuppens & Spears, 2014). Kuppens and Spears (2014) also questioned whether these lower levels of biases and prejudices might not measure intrinsic biases (Kuppens & Spears, 2014). They hypothesized that people with higher educational levels find it easier to disguise their biases (Kuppens & Spears, 2014). While educational levels have mixed results, there was no question that effective support systems are beneficial for recovery.

Indications from current research support systems are critical components for recovery from traumatic events (Nwoke et al., 2016). These support systems come in

many forms, and many sexual assault victims depend on their religious systems for that support. Unfortunately, the research was limited to how effective religious systems are for sexual assault victims and their healing process. Some research indicates that religious systems rely on their belief systems and may be revictimizing those who turn to them for support (Blanchard-Fields et al., 2012). The more emphasis the participants put on their religious beliefs and systems, the more likely they were to blame the victims.

Having a higher level of education did not prove to be an effective way to prevent the biases sexual assault victims faced. Religious systems without sexual assault training tend to be less effective, and they need to be effective for the number of sexual assault victims that turn to them (Johnson, 2013). There needed to be a way to identify why systems are futile in implementing an effective treatment system for sexual assault victims' recovery.

### Chapter 3: Research Method

The purpose of this study was to understand whether educational levels and religious beliefs and systems influenced victim blaming. Sexual assault can lead to mental health issues (Artime et al., 2018; Centers for Disease Control and Prevention, 2017; Gilmore et al., 2018; Kirkner et al., 2018; Rosellin et al., 2017). Victim blaming increases the risk of mental health issues for sexual assault victims (Artime et al., 2018; Centers for Disease Control and Prevention, 2017; Gilmore et al., 2018; Kirkner et al., 2018; Rosellini et al., 2017). Understanding how to decrease the risks of mental health issues for these sexual assault victims is necessary, because it happens too frequently (Adolfsson & Strömwall, 2017; Blanchard-Fields et al., 2012; Chapin & Coleman, 2017; Crippen, 2015; Harber et al., 2015; Nagel et al., 2005; Niemi & Young, 2014; Persson et al., 2018; Piatek, 2015; Tuliao et al., 2017). It was evident that there was a serious problem with sexual assault and victim blaming. The focus for this study was whether victim blaming is influenced by educational levels, religious beliefs and systems.

#### **Research Questions and Hypotheses**

RQ1: What is the relationship between the religious beliefs of participants and victim blaming of sexual assault victims?

*H<sub>0</sub>1*: People with stronger religious beliefs will not exhibit different levels of victim blaming than those with low or no religious beliefs.

*H<sub>a</sub>1*: People with stronger religious beliefs will exhibit higher levels of victim blaming than those with low or no religious beliefs.

RQ2: What is the relationship between educational levels of participants and victim blaming of sexual assault victims?

*H<sub>0</sub>2*: People with higher educational levels will not exhibit different levels of victim blaming of sexual assault victims than those with lower educational levels.

*H<sub>a</sub>2*: People with higher educational levels will exhibit lower levels of victim blaming of sexual assault victims than those with lower educational levels.

RQ3: Is there an interaction between religious beliefs and educational levels on victim blaming of sexual assault victims?

*H<sub>0</sub>3*: There is no interaction between religious beliefs and educational levels that impact victim blaming of sexual assault victims.

*H<sub>a</sub>3*: There is an interaction between religious beliefs and educational levels that impact victim blaming of sexual assault victims.

I used a quantitative research design to understand whether these variables influenced victim blaming of sexual assault victims. This quantitative research included a combination of two questionnaires. First, I included a concise explanation of these questionnaires along with the rationale behind combining them. Also, an explanation of the methodology used to measure victim blaming attitudes, educational levels, and the degree of religious beliefs. I also expounded on how degrees of religious beliefs and educational levels shaped attitudes toward blaming victims. Next, I provide an in-depth discussion of the instruments used to measure victim blaming attitudes, religious beliefs, and educational levels. Finally, I continued with why I chose these instruments and details why these instruments are the best for this study. I conclude the chapter with any

threats to validity or reliability for this study and a conclusion. I scrutinized the threats and explained future research suggestions. First are the reasons for this research. Next, I tell how I completed it with enough detail that will have similar results when duplicated. Furthermore, a thorough explanation of why it may not be valid or reliable and how to improve validity and reliability in future research.

### **Research Design and Rationale**

The design of this study was a quasi-experimental quantitative design. The dependent variable was victim blaming of sexual assault victims. The independent variables included religious beliefs and systems and educational levels. The two-way ANOVA results demonstrated whether educational levels, religious beliefs and systems, or a combination of these variables had an interaction between them or on victim blaming of sexual assault victims.

I analyzed the data from the two-way ANOVA collected from surveys. The surveys combined included a measurement of religiousness and attitudes toward rape victims. In addition, I gathered educational levels in the demographic information (See Appendix A; *did not complete high school, high school graduate, some college, undergraduate degree, graduate degree*). The religious beliefs and systems variable used a scale designed to measure the participant's degree of religiousness (*believing, bonding, behaving, belonging*). The attitudes toward rape victims variable used a scale designed to measure the participant's attitude toward rape victims. I chose these scales because they measure attitudes toward rape victims and religiousness precisely. I chose the Four Basic Dimensions of Religiousness Scale (4-BDRS; Saroglou, 2009) and Attitudes Toward

Rape Victims Scale (ATRVs; Ward, 1988) because they measure the degree of influence religious beliefs and systems have on participants' attitudes and attitudes toward rape victims.

I was able to compare all variables using the ATRVS because I could use it with both IVs. The comparison of educational levels and the 4-BDRS scores to show any interaction of educational levels and religious beliefs and systems had on each other and if they played a significant role in attitudes toward sexual assault victims (Saroglou, 2009). These results indicated an interaction between the independent variables and if the interaction or lack of interaction played a significant role in victim blaming.

The use of these surveys was appropriate for this study because I discovered an interaction between independent variables and their influence on the dependent variable. The benefits of surveys include being done promptly, economically, confidentially, and efficiently. Participants were more likely to complete surveys that were not time-consuming, than something in which the participants needed to invest a considerable amount of their time.

These survey methods also allowed me to reach a wide variety of participants for the sampling. The results from the survey aided in understanding whether educational levels influence victim blaming and whether religious beliefs and systems influence victim blaming. I also explored whether any interaction between educational levels and religious beliefs and systems influenced victim blaming.

## **Methodology**

## **Population**

Participants for this study included anyone 18 and over. The participants needed to represent the general population, and the only limits were age. There were no other requirements as it was appropriate for all genders, religious affiliations, educational levels, socioeconomic status, marital status, or any other group.

I collected the data with the use of the internet for the demographic information, ATRVS (Ward, 1988) and 4-BDRS (Saroglou, 2009) results. The instrument I used to collect data was Survey Monkey. Using the internet allowed me to obtain the general population to be represented except for those who did not have access to the internet. According to Ryan (2018), close to 90% of the general population has access to the internet. The internet is readily available to the general population and was a valuable tool for obtaining participants. I recruited the participants using Facebook groups and the following web pages: Academic Writing Coach, Ask Big Rapids, Euforia Warriors, Grace's Pure Romance Palace, Let's Talk Reed City, Dissertation Survey Exchange, Student Survey Exchange 2019/20. The population should have been diverse because of the diversity of these websites. However, most participants were students working on their research and responded with the agreement that I would participate in their research in return. These results did not represent the general population, and future research should include more participants without any college.

## **Sampling and Sampling Procedures**

With millions of people living in the United States of America, the best way to obtain a representative sample was to use convenience sampling. The purpose of this

sample was to be able to generalize the results across the entire population. The only eligibility requirement I used was age to represent the general population. Because the study included all educational levels and various religiousness, there were no limitations for participants. The data from the study used the demographics to ensure everyone was 18 and over. The demographics also collected the level of education of each participant. I determined the sample size using G\*Power 3.1.9.3 for a two-way ANOVA, with 4 X 5 (4 religiousness levels and five educational levels) factorial design. I used fixed effects, special, main effects, and interactions with a statistical power of .80, Alpha of .05, and a high effect size of .40, determined from previous research, a sample size of 100 per group (educational levels and religiousness) was determined to be an effective size for this study.

### **Procedures of Recruitment and Participation**

I recruited participants using the internet (Facebook groups and pages (Academic Writing Coach, Ask Big Rapids, Euforia Warriors, Grace's Pure Romance Palace, Let's Talk Reed City, Dissertation Survey Exchange, Student Survey Exchange 2019/20) and provided a link to participate in the survey. During the recruitment process, I conveyed that their participation was voluntary and confidential. I asked the participants demographic questions about their age, gender, educational level, and religion. There was no identifying information collected, ensuring each participant's rights and confidentiality were respected. If they decided to participate, they were invited to click on the link to the survey where they gave their consent after reading more about the research process.



The first portion of the survey was an informed consent document including their right to participate and discontinue at any time, and the contact information in the event they desired to contact someone or want to see the results. I followed the APA guidelines for informed consent outlined the survey goals, duration, confidentiality, and contact information (American Psychological Association, 2019). Then the participants were asked if they wanted to continue to the survey. If their answer was no, the next page was a thank you for their time. If the answer was yes, I explained that clicking on the link to the survey was their signature on the informed consent and acknowledged that they understand the informed consent page. Also, on this page, I asked them to print out a copy for their records. When they finished the survey, the next page was an expression of my gratitude for their participation. This page included a reminder that there was no need to follow up unless they had questions or concerns. I also included contact information again if they did not print it out earlier.

### **Instrumentation and Materials**

#### **4-Basic Dimensions of Religiousness Scale**

I used the 4- Basic Dimensions of Religiousness Scale (4-BDRS) to measure participants' degree of religiousness. Saroglou (2009) created this scale to measure the degree to which people allow their religiousness to influence their behaviors. The author developed this instrument to address a few concerns that were raised from previous instruments (Saroglou, 2011). Previous scales measured religious orientation and did not accurately measure the degree to which people made decisions and allowed their attitudes to be defined by their religious beliefs (Saroglou, 2009). Previous scales were designed

with Christian traditions as the basis and were not culturally diverse enough (Saroglou, 2011). Saroglou (2009) wanted a scale that would cover many religious/spiritual beliefs and be reliable and valid across the various ethnicities and beliefs or lack of beliefs (Saroglou, 2011). This scale has been used to measure religious prejudice, intolerance, moral values, and compassion toward others (Clobert et al., 2014; Deak & Saroglou, 2017; Saroglou, 2009).

The scale uses a 7 point Likert scale (1 = *Strongly disagree*, 2 = *Disagree*, 3 = *Somewhat disagree*, 4 = *Neither agree or disagree*, 5 = *Somewhat agree*, 6 = *Agree*, 7 = *Strongly agree*) with 12 items to measure four levels of religion (believing, bonding, behaving, and belonging) (Saroglou, 2009). The four levels were scored individually for each participant, then the mean for the 12 items was scored, as suggested by Dr. Saroglou (Saroglou, 2011). I used the cumulative score for the four levels to understand the degree of religiousness for each participant. Saroglou (2011) defined believing as beliefs in a higher power, bonding as feelings and actions, behaving as adhering to a moral code, and belonging as cohesion within the group. Reliability for the cumulative score of the four levels ranged from .82–.94 for Cronbach's alpha across 14 countries and all major religions (Dimitrova & Dominguez, 2016; Saroglou, 2011). There continues to be data collected in other ethnicities and countries with similar results.

Reliability is when the results are consistent regardless of when or who is being tested (Creswell, 2014). When testing and retesting the 4-BDRS results have been similar using the same or different participants (Clobert et al., 2014; Deak & Saroglou, 2017; Dimitrova & Dominguez, 2016; Saroglou, 2009; Saroglou, 2011). The 4-BDRS had

consistent results across test/retest, gender, ethnicity, and several different interpretations of the instrument, indicating it was reliable (Saroglou, 2009; Saroglou, 2011). Having consistent results does not mean the instrument effectively measures the degree of religiousness. It is also important that an instrument measures what it is supposed to measure, so validity must also be explored.

I determined the 4-BDRS to be an adequate construct for measuring religiousness by exploring other researcher's examination of the validity (Dimitrova & Dominguez, 2016; Saroglou, 2011). External validity means the results are representative of the population it is intended to measure, or the results can be generalized (Creswell, 2014). The work by other researchers has shown the results are able to be generalized across different ethnicities and religious beliefs (Dimitrova & Dominguez, 2016; Saroglou, 2011). Content validity has been established for this scale by Saroglou and other researchers who have used it in their research (Clobert et al., 2014; Deak & Saroglou, 2017; Dimitrova & Dominguez, 2016).

The content validity was also established by comparing the 4-BDRS to several other instruments, the Attachment to God Inventory (Beck & McDonald, 2004), the Religious and Spiritual Struggles Scale (Exline et al., 2014), the Spiritual Assessment Inventory (Hall & Edwards, 2002), the Centrality of Religiosity Scale (CRS; Huber & Huber, 2012), and the Attitudes toward God Scale (ATGS-9; Wood, et al., 2010). The results in comparison for the 4-BDRS were, the goodness of fit index GFI was greater than .90, the root-mean-square error of approximation RMSEA was less than .08, with a change of .01 or less for the 4-BDRS. These results indicated that the extent or dimension

of religiousness was what the 4-BDRS measured (construct validity). Each question was designed to elicit responses to help determine the degree of religiousness (content validity).

### **Attitude Toward Rape Victims Scale**

The attitudes towards rape victims scale (ATRVS) is valid and reliable for research in sexual victimology, investigation of rape-related attitudes and behaviors across cultures (Ward, 1988). The ATRVS has been validated by comparing with four other scales, Sexual Conservatism (SC; Burt, 1980), Adversarial Sexual Beliefs (ASB; Burt, 1980), Acceptance of Interpersonal Violence (AIV; Burt, 1980), and Attitudes Toward Women Scale (AWS; Spence & Helmreich, (1972); Spence et al., 1973).

The ATRVS was used to measure participants' attitudes toward victims of sexual assault. Ward (1988) created this scale in 1988 to measure attitudes toward rape victims as opposed to blaming victims, which she felt did not accurately reflect how people treat victims of sexual assault based on their attitudes or feelings toward the victims. This scale assessed power and rape, the resistance a woman was expected to use during rape, the victim's responsibility for the prevention of rape, how victims are perceived, and false beliefs or rape myth acceptance (Ward, 1988; Ward et al., 1992). This scale has been used to measure positive and negative attitudes toward victims of sexual assault. It has been used to compare male and female attitudes and different ethnicities/cultures (Ward et al., 1992).

### **Reliability**

The scale is a 5 point Likert scale consists of (1 = *Strongly disagree*, 2 = *Disagree*, 3 – *Neither agree nor disagree*, 4 = *Agree* 5, – *Strongly agree*). The 25 items and can be completed in a couple of minutes by a person with a sixth-grade reading level as well (Ward, 1988). The 25 item survey has a Cronbach's alpha score of .83, which is above the .80 necessary for reliability (Ward et al., 1992). Test-retest reliability revealed a Pearson correlation of  $r = .80$  (Ward, 1988).

### **Validity**

The ATRVS was most correlated with the Attitudes Toward Women according to the Pearson correlations ( $r = -.61$ ,  $p < .0005$ ) (Spence & Helmreich, 1972; Spence et al., 1973; Ward, 1988; Ward et al., 1992). Other significant relationships found were acceptance of interpersonal violence ( $r = .26$ ,  $p < .0005$ ) and adversarial sexual beliefs ( $r = .41$ ,  $p < .0005$ ) (Spence & Helmreich, 1972; Spence et al., 1973; Ward, 1988; Ward et al., 1992). Lee and Cheung (1991) found this scale met face, criterion, and construct validity when compared to the Attitudes toward Women Scale (AWS; Spence & Helmreich, 1972; Spence et al., 1973) and the Traditionality-Modernity Factor Scale (TMFS; Hchu, 1971; Hchu & Yang, 1972).

Both the 4-BDRS and ATRVS had a good to excellent Cronbach alpha score (Saroglou, 2009; Saroglou, 2011; Saroglou, 2014; Ward, 1988; Ward et al., 1992). The higher the Cronbach alpha score, the greater the results can be viewed as reliable. Both scales have been used and translated for use across different cultures (Saroglou, 2009; Saroglou, 2011; Saroglou, 2014; Ward, 1988; Ward et al., 1992).

### **Threats to Validity**

A threat to internal validity was instrumentation. The instrumentation was reliant on the participants' ability to log on to the secure website, complete the survey, and submit without any problems. When internet accessibility becomes an issue, the participants may have an attitude or mood change that can lead to a threat due to maturation. Attrition or the lack of a response to all questions or not completing the survey was another threat to internal validity, and it can make the outcome unknown for those participants (Creswell, 2014; Field, 2013). If the participants failed to answer, attempted to do the survey multiple times, had a website, network, or submission issues, it could lead to threats to internal validity. I included steps to prevent participants from completing the survey multiple times and allowed them to exit and return later if necessary.

External validity threats are when the participant's responses fail to represent generalizability (Creswell, 2014; Field, 2013). The ATRVS and 4-BDRS have been shown to have external validity across multiple cultures when comparing them to similar instruments measuring the same dependent variables (Spence & Helmreich, 1972; Spence et al., 1973; Ward, 1988; Ward et al., 1992). The greatest threat to external validity was also its greatest strength: the inability to control the situational, physical, or emotional environment while completing the survey. My lack of control during the completion did not allow me to determine whether responses to the survey were influenced by the participant's situation, physical, or emotional environment at the time of completion. At

the same time, this allowed me to predict that these were responses that would be seen in the real world and were generalizable.

The benefits of using surveys outweighed potential risks, especially with preventative measures taken to reduce threats (Fox, 2016). Threats to validity can be reduced with proper planning and implementation of the survey (Fox, 2016). The threats to validity can be reduced but never eliminated when working within the behavioral sciences (Bernard & Bernard, 2012; Creswell, 2014; Field, 2013). I increased the number of participants, taking measures to prevent filling out the survey multiple times, allowing the participants to return to finish at their convenience were all ways used to reduce the threats to validity.

### **Ethical Procedures**

I provided participants with an informed consent letter explaining that they had the right to refuse to participate or drop out at any time, their responses were completely confidential, no identifying information was collected, and all information will be stored in locked files that are password protected. Also, no email addresses or IP addresses were collected, ensuring their anonymity. Survey Monkey was the tool used to collect the data and their encryption SSO, SSAE-16 SOC II compliant data centers. These compliant data centers met Health Insurance Portability and Accountability Act (HIPPA) guidelines (Survey Monkey, 2019). The participants received an explanation that their participation included a brief survey, and their ability to save and return to complete the survey at their convenience and did not include filling out an informed consent. They were also be given

contact information if they had any questions or wanted the results of the study. The data collected will be kept securely for five years and destroyed after that.

### **Summary**

In conclusion, this chapter outlined the research process, including who was recruited, where they were recruited from, what type of research design was used, how the participants were protected, and hotline numbers if participants experience a negative reaction or trigger from the survey. The process included the identification of the quantitative research design and rationale (two-way ANOVA, 4 X 5 factorial design), methodology (demographics, ATRVS and 4-BDRS), target population (18+ years old), sampling procedures, recruitment procedures (Facebook groups and pages (Academic Writing Coach, Ask Big Rapids, Euforia Warriors, Grace's Pure Romance Palace, Let's Talk Reed City, Dissertation Survey Exchange, Student Survey Exchange 2019/20), the instruments used were (ATRVS and 4-BDRS), possible threats to validity with these instruments (external and internal), and ethical procedures (informed consent and confidentiality precautions).



## Chapter 4: Results

This chapter begins with the purpose of the study, then the research questions and hypotheses for the study. Then I covered the data collection steps and the results. I concluded the chapter with a summary of data collection, interpretation of results, and a brief overview of what is included in the final chapter. The purpose of this study was to discover if there is a relationship between religious beliefs and systems, educational levels, and victim blaming. The research questions and hypotheses were:

RQ1: What is the relationship between the religious beliefs of participants and victim blaming of sexual assault victims?

*H<sub>0</sub>1*: People with stronger religious beliefs will not exhibit different levels of victim blaming than those with low or no religious beliefs.

*H<sub>a</sub>1*: People with stronger religious beliefs will exhibit higher levels of victim blaming than those with low or no religious beliefs.

RQ2: What is the relationship between educational levels of participants and victim blaming of sexual assault victims?

*H<sub>0</sub>2*: People with higher educational levels will not exhibit different levels of victim blaming of sexual assault victims than those with lower educational levels.

*H<sub>a</sub>2*: People with higher educational levels will exhibit lower levels of victim blaming of sexual assault victims than those with lower educational levels.

RQ3: Is there an interaction between religious beliefs and educational levels on victim blaming of sexual assault victims?

$H_{03}$ : There is no interaction between religious beliefs and educational levels that impact victim blaming of sexual assault victims.

$H_{a3}$ : There is an interaction between religious beliefs and educational levels that impact victim blaming of sexual assault victims.

### **Data Collection**

Data collection began on April 21st, 2020 and concluded on June 30th, 2020. I recruited participants using Facebook groups and pages (Academic Writing Coach, Ask Big Rapids, Euforia Warriors, Grace's Pure Romance Palace, Let's Talk Reed City, Dissertation Survey Exchange, Student Survey Exchange 2019/20). There were 220 participants with an 81% completion rate. More than 60% of the participants were between 18 and 35, with the 18 and 25 age range having the highest response rate of 36.4%. The results consisted of mostly women (82.3%), Caucasian (77.7%), and having at least some college education (98.8%). I combined the categories "did not finish high school," and those who "completed high school" because there were so few participants in these categories (.2% combined). The lack of participants who had not entered college was low because most participants were researchers and students that agree to participate in studies in return for participants for their research. The majority were single (48.2%) or married (40.5%), (88.7% combined). The demographic data results are presented in tables 1, 2, 3, 4, 5, and 6.

**Table 1***Descriptive Statistics (N=220)*

		Age	Gender	Education	Marital status	Race/Ethnicity
N	Valid	220	220	220	220	220
	Missing	0	0	0	0	0

**Table 2***Age (N=220)*

		Frequency	Percent	Valid Percent	Cumulative Percent
Valid	18 – 25	80	36.4	36.4	36.4
	26 – 35	59	26.8	26.8	63.2
	36 – 45	38	17.3	17.3	80.5
	46 – 55	19	8.6	8.6	89.1
	56 – 65	13	5.9	5.9	95.0
	66+	11	5.0	5.0	100.0
	Total	220	100.0	100.0	

**Table 3***Gender (N=220)*

		Frequency	Percent	Valid Percent	Cumulative Percent
Valid	Female	181	82.3	82.3	82.3
	Male	39	17.7	17.7	100.0
	Total	220	100.0	100.0	

**Table 4***Educational Level (N=220)*

		Frequency	Percent	Valid Percent	Cumulative Percent
Valid	Some College	27	12.3	12.3	12.3
	Undergraduate Degree	46	20.9	20.9	33.2
	Graduate Degree	147	66.8	66.8	100.0
	Total	220	100.0	100.0	

**Table 5***Marital status (N=220)*

		Frequency	Percent	Valid Percent	Cumulative Percent
Valid	Single	106	48.2	48.2	48.2
	Married	89	40.5	40.5	88.6
	Divorced	22	10.0	10.0	98.6
	Widowed	3	1.4	1.4	100.0
	Total	220	100.0	100.0	

**Table 6***Race/Ethnicity (N=220)*

		Frequency	Percent	Valid Percent	Cumulative Percent
Valid	Missing Data	2	.9	.9	.9
	African American	4	1.8	1.8	2.7
	Asian/Indian Subcontinent	17	7.7	7.7	10.5
	Caucasian	171	77.7	77.7	88.2
	Hispanic/Latino	10	4.5	4.5	92.7
	Native American	5	2.3	2.3	95.0
	Pacific Islander	1	.5	.5	95.5
	Two or More Races	10	4.5	4.5	100.0

## Results

The ATRVS is a 25-item scale assessing attitudes toward rape victims' credibility, deservingness, victim-blame, and denigration (Johnson, 2013). Responses are interval variables scored on a 5-point scale from 1 to 5, *disagree strongly* to *agree strongly*. I reverse scored eight of the 25 items. All items are totaled with a range of 25 to 78, with higher scores representing more unfavorable attitudes toward rape victims. The mean ATRVS of this sample was 41.77, with a minimum of 25 and a maximum score of 78, illustrated in Table 7.

**Table 7**

*ATRVS (N=220)*

	N	Minimum	Maximum	Mean	Std. Deviation
ATRVS	220	25.00	78.00	41.77	12.12
Valid N (listwise)	220				

There are six assumptions to be met to ensure a two-way ANOVA is an appropriate test for the data (Laerd Statistics, 2017). Before doing a two-way ANOVA, the data needed to pass three assumptions. The dependent variable (DV) was measured at a continuous level, and the data met this assumption. The next assumption is that there need to be two or more independent variables (IV) measured as categorical; the data passed this assumption. The third assumption, independence of observations, was met; each participant was in one group.

I checked the last three assumptions using SPSS statistical procedures. The fourth assumption was that there were no outliers. The fifth assumption was that the DV

residuals were normally distributed. The final assumption was the variance of the DV residuals should be equal. I explored these in greater detail by setting up the data and running the two-way ANOVA.

I used a two-way ANOVA with post hoc tests to determine whether there was a statistically significant interaction. I set the data up by defining the DV and IVs, the ATRVS as the DV, and the educational levels and results from the 4-BDRS as the IVs. I also included giving them value labels. The following value labels (*1 = did not graduate, graduate/diploma/GED, 2 = some college, 3 = undergraduate degree, 4 = graduate degree*) were assigned for educational levels. The 4 BDRS were assigned the following value labels (*1 = believing, 2 = bonding, 3 = behaving, 4 = belonging*). The education levels had to be adjusted because only two participants completed surveys in Level 1.

Then profile plots were set up with the education-BDRS and BDRS-education variables. Once I had the variables set up, it allowed me to test the means of the independent variables. Then I ran a Turkey Post Hoc test to check that the equal variances assumption was met. I included descriptive statistics, estimates of effect size, and the homogeneity tests. In the next step, I examined the predicted values and by creating three new variables. I made these variables by checking unstandardized in both the predicted values and residuals and studentized boxes in the Save section. Studentized is the residual divided by an estimate of its standard deviation that varies from case to case, depending on the distance of each case's values on the independent variables from the means of the independent variables (Laerd Statistics, 2017). I used these new variables to test the last three assumptions, according to Laerd (no significant outliers in

any cell of the design, normality dependent variable (residuals) should be approximately normally distributed for each cell of the design, variance of the dependent variable (residuals) should be equal in each cell of the design) (Laerd Statistics, 2017). I split the files to compare groups to test for outliers and normality. I explored the IVs using the RES 1 variable (residuals), checking the normality plots. Then I unsplit the files for further analysis, so next, they were unsplit before the next step.

I assessed some outliers as greater than three box lengths from the box's edge in a boxplot. There are three possible reasons for outliers: data entry errors, measurement errors, or genuinely unusual values (Laerd Statistics, 2017). I ruled out the first two reasons, and I determined that these were genuinely unusual values. The next step I had to do, was to determine how to handle these outliers. My available options were to run a robust two-way ANOVA, modify the outliers, transform the DV, or include the outliers. I eliminated the robust two-way ANOVA because SPSS Statistics does not offer a robust test. I considered modifying and transforming data, but I ran the tests for normal distribution and homogeneity of variances. The results for both the IVs were not normally distributed as assessed by the Shapiro-Wilk's test ( $p < .001$ ).

The next options available were transforming data or carrying on regardless. I completed the assumption of homogeneity of variances and found it was violated as assessed by Levene's test for equality of variances ( $p < .001$ ). The options available were transform, carry on regardless, perform robust analysis, and weighted squares regression. I created scatter plots with the residuals and predicted values for ATRVS. I determined that the group sizes were approximately equal and significant. The next step was to run

the two-way ANOVA anyway because the results were somewhat robust to the heterogeneity of variance (Laerd Statistics, 2017). I did not transform or modify anything, nor did I run a robust two-way ANOVA because SPSS Statistics does not offer a robust test.

### **Research Question 1**

The RQ1 was: What is the relationship between participants' religious beliefs and victim blaming of sexual assault victims? The  $H_0$  for RQ1 was that people with stronger religious beliefs would not exhibit different levels of victim blaming than those with low or no religious beliefs. The  $H_a$  was that people with stronger religious beliefs would exhibit higher victim blaming levels than those with low or no religious beliefs. There was a statistically significant interaction between religiousness and ATRVS scores,  $F(69, 106) = 1.589, p = .016, \text{partial } \eta^2 = .508$  as seen in Table 8. The evidence was sufficient to reject the null hypothesis.



**Table 8***Tests of Between-Subjects Effects (N=220)*

Dependent Variable: Blame Total

Source	Type III Sum of Squares	df	Mean Square	F	Sig.	Partial Eta Squared
Corrected Model	18329.086 <sup>a</sup>	113	162.204	1.240	.132	.569
Intercept	188083.350	1	188083.350	1437.454	.000	.931
Religiousness	14345.422	69	207.905	1.589	.016	.508
Education	595.175	2	297.587	2.274	.108	.041
Religiousness * Education	4444.038	42	105.810	.809	.779	.243
Error	13869.550	106	130.845			
Total	416090.000	220				
Corrected Total	32198.636	219				

a. R Squared = .569 (Adjusted R Squared = .110)

Rejecting the null hypothesis led to further exploration of the ATRVS scores and 4-BDRS scores. I created a simple histogram of the means for both scales to visually represent the levels of victim blaming attitudes with the differences in levels of religiousness. The 4-BDRS has four dimensions, believing, bonding, behaving, and belonging. The believing dimension represents the least amount of religiousness. Believing is the participant's beliefs or what religion means to them (Saroglou, 2009). The bonding dimension represents the participant's emotions/rituals and inner peace (Saroglou, 2009). The next dimension is behaving, and this represents norms and self-control (Saroglou, 2009). The final dimension is the highest religiousness and represents group/community and collective identity (Saroglou, 2009). The mean 4-BDRS of this

sample was 43.60, with a minimum of 12 and a maximum score of 84, illustrated in Table 9.

**Table 9**

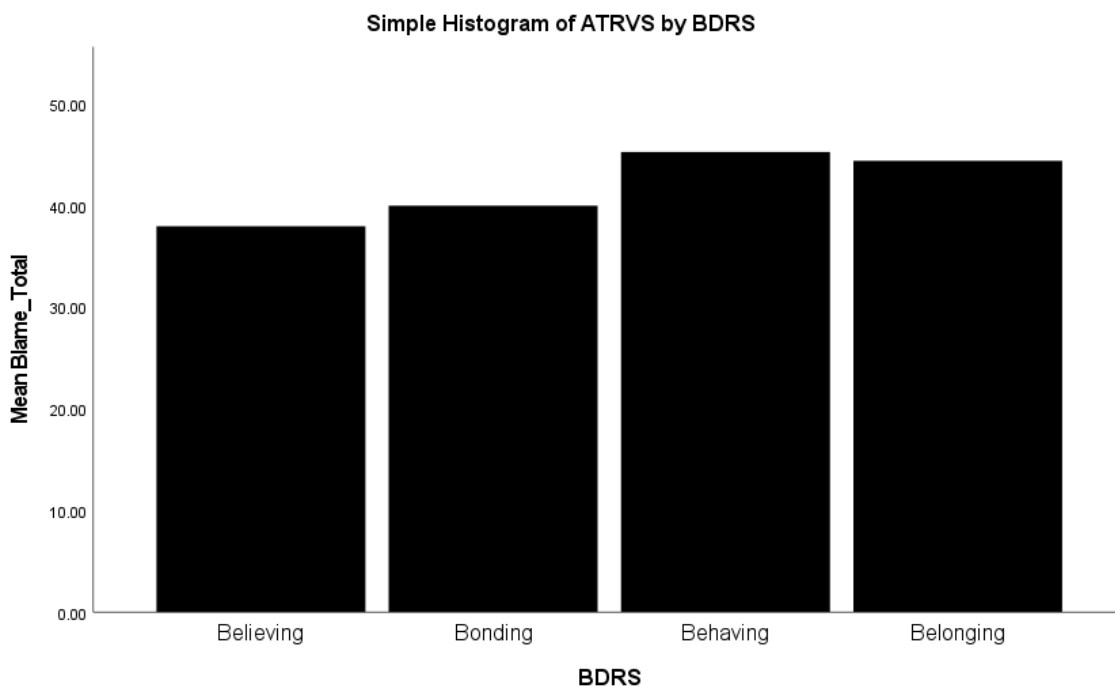
*4-BDRS and ATRVS (N=220)*

<u>Descriptive Statistics</u>					
	N	Minimum	Maximum	Mean	Std. Deviation
Blame Total	220	25.00	78.00	41.77	12.12
Religiousness Total	220	12.00	84.00	43.60	19.88
Valid N (listwise)	220				

Figure 1 shows the results for the degree of victim blaming when comparing the four levels of religiousness. The mean ATRVS of this sample was 41.77, with a minimum of 25 and a maximum score of 78, illustrated in Table 9. As seen in Figure 1, the lowest dimension of religiousness (believing) scored lower on the ATRVS than the other three dimensions. However, the highest dimension of religiousness (belonging) was not the highest score. Belonging did score significantly higher than believing. The highest level of victim blaming was the third-highest level of religiousness (behaving).

Figure 1

*ATRVS by BDRS (N=220)*



The numbers for behaving and belonging can be deceptive without exploring the frequency for each dimension of religiousness. Comparing the percentage of participants in each group shows that the largest number of participants fell into two dimensions (behaving 32.7% and believing 29.5%). There was only 15.9% in the belonging dimension. This dimension had significantly fewer participants than the two highest dimensions, illustrated in Table 10. From this table, it is obvious that there were approximately twice as many participants in both the believing and the behaving dimensions.

**Table 10***BDRS Frequency*

BDRS		Frequency	Percent	Valid Percent	Cumulative Percent
Valid	Believing	65	29.5	29.5	29.5
	Bonding	48	21.8	21.8	51.4
	Behaving	72	32.7	32.7	84.1
	Belonging	35	15.9	15.9	100.0
	Total	220	100.0	100.0	

The behaving dimension scored higher on the ATRVS than the belonging dimension. However, when comparing the total participants in the two dimensions, I must question how the results would differ if they were equal participants in each dimension. There were twice as many participants in the behaving dimension compared to the belonging dimension. Even with this limitation, it was evident that the higher a participant scored on the ATRVS was directly related to how strong their religiousness scores were. The higher the religiousness score, the higher the ATRVS score. Unfortunately, higher scores on the ATRVS directly correlates to higher victim blaming of sexual assault victims.

**Research Question 2**

The second research question was, what is the relationship between participants' educational levels and victim blaming of sexual assault victims? The null hypothesis was people with higher educational levels would not exhibit different levels of victim blaming of sexual assault victims than those with lower educational levels. There was not a statistically significant interaction between educational levels and ATRVS scores,  $F(2,$

106) = 2.274,  $p = .108$ , partial  $\eta^2 = .041$ . The evidence was not sufficient to reject the null hypothesis.

### **Research Question 3**

The final question was, is there an interaction between religious beliefs and educational levels on victim blaming of sexual assault victims? There was not a statistically significant interaction between religiousness and educational levels on ATRVS scores,  $F(42, 106) = .809$ ,  $p = .779$ , partial  $\eta^2 = .243$ . The evidence was not sufficient to reject the null hypothesis.

### **Summary**

The first research question was the only one with a statistically significant relationship. There was a statistically significant relationship between religiousness and victim blaming. The greater the religiousness, the greater the victim blaming. The second and third research questions were not statistically significant. There was no statistically significant relationship between educational levels and victim blaming. There was no statistically significant interaction between educational levels and religiousness on victim blaming. These results failed to reject the null hypothesis. In the final chapter, there will be an interpretation of these findings, discussion of the limitations, recommendations, implications, and a conclusion with future research suggestions.

## Chapter 5: Discussion

When sexual assault victims turn to their religious systems or belief systems for help dealing with the trauma, they may be revictimized instead of receiving the assistance they need. The purpose of this study was to discover if there is a relationship between religious beliefs and systems, educational levels, and victim blaming of sexual assault victims. The results of this study indicate that there is a relationship between the level of religiousness and victim blaming. The higher participants scored on religiousness, the higher they scored on the ATRVS. These results indicate that those with higher religiousness exhibit more victim blaming attitudes.

### **Interpretation of the Findings**

Previous research on educational levels and victim blaming had mixed results. Some research stated that higher educational levels had lower victim blaming attitudes (Burns & Garcia, 2017; De Vroome et al., 2014; Erhart, 2016; Zhang & Hong, 2013). However, Kuppens and Spears (2014) disagreed with those findings. They stressed that explicit and implicit measures of victim blaming did not have the same results. The direct response (explicit) indicated that higher educational levels were less likely to blame the victim. However, the indirect response (implicit) had similar results across all educational levels. Participants with higher educational levels may have responded with what they believed to be politically correct responses (Kuppens & Spears, 2014).

Current research on religiousness and victim blaming in cases of sexual assault was limited. According to the limited research available, religious systems help sexual assault victims in the healing process (Adolfsson & Strömwall, 2017). There is an

agreement that sexual assault victims may turn to their religious beliefs and systems during this time. However, it does not indicate whether these religious beliefs and systems are useful. Understanding whether these systems are effective is why this study was critical.

The results of this study supported previous research that there was a relationship between religiousness and victim blaming (Blanchard-Fields et al., 2012; Fox & Cook, 2011; Johnson, 2013; Swartout et al., 2011). Sexual assault victims may turn to their religious beliefs and systems for help dealing with the traumatic event. The sexual assault victim will often turn to someone within their religious organization to support them through the traumatic experience. The sexual assault victim should be able to expect effective help and unconditional support. However, these results indicate that participants with firm religious beliefs were more likely to blame the victim. According to the results of this study, religiousness is related to victim blaming. Unfortunately, this can lead to more harm when the sexual assault victims turn to them for help.

Previous research results have shown how effective organizations can be when they have the proper training (Fox & Cook, 2011; Greeson & Campbell, 2012; Greeson et al., 2016; Johnson, 2013). When religious organizations and members are one of the most relied on resources for sexual assault victims, it is critical that they are effective and not causing more harm. I did not compare religiousness and sexual assault training, but the results indicate that further exploration could be beneficial. Religious organizations are considered robust support systems for those within them. This study revealed that religiousness might not be an effective support system when referring to sexual assault

victims. Even when the sexual assault victims are a member of the religious organization, they are still faced with higher victim blaming.

Previous research results have indicated that those holding more traditional moral values because of their religiousness are more likely to blame victims (Blanchard-Fields et al., 2012; Fox & Cook, 2011; Johnson, 2013; Swartout et al., 2011). These attitudes make them less effective and possibly lead to more trauma for the victims. When the level of religiousness influences the support system's victim blaming attitude, it becomes ineffective. The results from this study indicated that those with higher religiousness scored higher in victim blaming attitudes. The higher the victim blaming attitude scores, the higher the risk of blaming sexual assault victims for being sexually assaulted. When victim blaming is a factor with individuals that may be a support system, it is less likely to be an effective support system.

People holding intense religiousness expecting sexual assault victims to have the same moral beliefs and traditions is dangerous for those who turn to them for support. These systems should not blame sexual assault victims for being assaulted because they are not married, have been divorced, have alternate sexual lifestyles, etc. They should be viewing the assault as something the perpetrator is responsible for, not the victim. The simple fundamental truth is if someone says no, it becomes the perpetrator's fault, no matter what the victim's lifestyle, morals, or traditional beliefs are. Training these individuals within these religious organizations is a good start for decreasing victim blaming of sexual assault victims.



### **Limitations**

There were some limitations to this study. Although gender was not an area that was explored, it should be noted that more than 80% of the participants were female. The general population is approximately 50% for each gender in the United States as of the 2010 Census (U.S. Census, 2021). I did not explore gender nor age, and they were limitations. The youngest levels of 18 and 25 and 26 and 35 were more than 60%. The age of the general population in the United States, according to the 2010 Census, those who were 18 and 24 represents less than 10%, and 25 and 44 represents less than 27% of the general population (U.S. Census, 2021). Those numbers do not come close to 60%, and they include the next age group of 36 and 45.

Another limitation was the lack of lower educational levels of participants. Only two percent of the sample did not have some college. I desired to have equal representation across each level (did not complete high school, high school graduate, some college, undergraduate degree, and graduate degree). The participants within the first two levels were combined and still did not represent two percent. So I removed these two groups from the study. In 2018, only 42% of Americans had acquired a bachelor's or higher degree (National Center for Education Statistics, 2018). So the results from this study were missing a significant number of participants without an undergraduate degree.

There were limitations with ATRVS for this study. The ATRVS was designed for attitudes toward female sexual assault victims and only applied to female victims. The ATRVS did not include attitudes toward sexual assault victims that were men, children, or intimate partners. Results from previous research have shown that women are more

likely to be blamed than men or children when sexually assaulted (Hockett et al., 2016).

Future research should include a thorough examination across gender, age, and prior/current relationship with the perpetrator.

### **Recommendations**

Future research should include a broader range of educational levels and more male participants. This study's participants consisted predominantly of college level, with more than 65% having obtained a graduate degree. There was also a significant discrepancy in participant genders; more than 80% were female. Future research should include how the gender of the participants influences attitudes and how the gender and age of the sexual assault victims influences participant's attitudes toward sexual assault victims.

Another area for future exploration is attitudes toward sexually assaulted men, children, and intimate partners (current or past). I was not allowed to explore whether the victim's age or gender influenced participant's attitudes towards sexual assault victims or if they were intimate partners with this study. Recent research results indicated that victim blaming attitudes happen more frequently for women than men or children (Chapin & Coleman, 2017; Hockett et al., 2016; Niemi & Young, 2014; Persson et al., 2018).

Intimate partners, especially spouses, may be overlooked as it is not always considered sexual assault because they are or were in a sexual relationship with their perpetrator. Sexual assault perpetrated by a present or past intimate partner accounts for close to half of the reported rapes in the United States (Centers for Disease Control and

Prevention, 2017). Studies have shown a relationship between sexual assault victims and victim blaming when they are intimate partners (Persson et al., 2018). When the perpetrator is an intimate partner, some states in the United States have loopholes that protect the perpetrator from prosecution (National Institute of Justice, 2019). More research should include whether the laws regarding intimate partner and sexual assault legalities influence attitudes toward sexual assault victims.

### **Implications**

Sexual assault has a profound effect on the mental health of sexual assault victims (Arttime et al., 2018; Hill et al., 2018; Kirkner et al., 2018; Overstreet et al., 2017). Sexual assault is only the beginning of the problems associated with sexual assault for many victims. Sexual assault often leads to victim blaming, which is the revictimization of sexual assault victims (Fox & Cook, 2011). The risk of physical, emotional, and mental health issues increases with sexual assault and continues to increase with revictimization (DeCou et al., 2016; Greeson et al., 2016; Simmel et al., 2016; Starzynski et al., 2017). Victim blaming revictimizes not only victims of sexual assault but also diminishes the chances victims will report the assault or seek support for the trauma they are experiencing.

Positive social change comes from preventing sexual assault. Prevention is not as effective as possible. Previous research indicated that sexual assault prevention programs have not proven effective with behavior (Bonar et al., 2019; Wright et al., 2020; Yeater & O'Donohue, 1999). There is not enough evidence to show that sexual assault prevention programs influence preventative behaviors. Subsequently, there has to be adequate

support for these victims of sexual assault. Sexual assault victims should feel free from judgment when they reach out for help or report an assault. Sexual assault victims have already endured a traumatic experience. They do not need to be traumatized any further.

Positive social change would be to ensure every individual that experiences sexual assault has nonjudgmental and effective support. Sexual assault happens too often. Victim blaming also decreases the chances that sexual assault victims will report the assault or ask for help coping with their horror. Which also decreases the chances that sexual assault victims will report the assault or ask for help coping with the horror they experience (Burt, 1980; Jost et al., 2004; Saucier et al., 2015; Seabrook et al., 2016; Shaw et al., 2016; Tuliao et al., 2017). The victim suffers without any assistance and may encounter the perpetrator on other occasions, especially if it happened on a date or with a previous intimate partner. When the sexual assault victims feel they cannot confide this horror with someone in a religious organization without any judgment, they may become traumatized instead of beginning a recovery path.

Those within religious organizations must be more empathetic toward sexual assault victims. It is common to blame the victims, and when they are sexual assault victims, victim blaming tends to increase (Adolfsson & Strömwall, 2017; Blanchard-Fields et al., 2012; Crippen, 2015; Malle et al., 2014; Persson et al., 2018; Piatek, 2015; Toews et al., 2019). When it involves sexual assault, victim blaming tends to be more common. With religious organizations being a resource that people rely on when dealing with problems, they should be adequately trained to help those who turn to them.

Training individuals within religious organizations about sexual assault has proven to decrease victim blaming of sexual assault victims (Johnson, 2013).

This study has shown that religiousness has a relationship with victim blaming of sexual assault victims. It would be beneficial for those in religious organizations to understand this and ensure support systems are effective. As long as they are unaware of their victim blaming attitudes, they are not going to change. Allowing their attitudes to influence them may cause revictimization when they believe they are helping. Positive social change comes about when a problem is identified and work to solve it begins. The problem is blaming the sexual assault victims instead of placing the blame on the perpetrator. Education is key to effecting positive social change. First, it would be beneficial to educate support, legal, and court systems to ensure they are not revictimizing. Then, it would be beneficial to educate the general population to ensure they are not revictimizing. Once people are aware of their victim blaming attitudes, they will have the opportunity to reconsider their attitudes toward victims and whom they blame.

### **Conclusion**

Victim blaming of sexual assault victims frequently leads to revictimization. Sexual assault is a traumatic experience and may lead to physical, mental, and emotional health issues (Artime et al., 2018; Creech & Orchowski, 2016; Frey et al., 2017; Gilmore et al., 2018; Hakimi et al., 2018; Kelley & Gidycz, 2017; Kirkner et al., 2018; Overstreet et al., 2017; Rosellini et al., 2017; Scott et al., 2018; Simmel et al., 2016; Swartout et al., 2011). Sexual assault victims can overcome the trauma with effective help. The problem

is the help sexual assault victims seek may be ineffective or causing more trauma. Research has proven that victim blaming is real and overcoming it is challenging. Educating people about sexual assault decreases victim blaming, but educating everyone is nearly impossible. The goal is to ensure support systems helping sexual assault victims have the necessary education to be effective.

With one in four women reporting sexual assault in their lifetime, it is safe to say everyone knows someone who has been or will be sexually assaulted (National Sexual Violence Resource Center, 2018). That number does not include men and children or people who do not report sexual assault. Sexual assault victims need to have a safe and effective treatment available. The last thing they need is to feel like they are to blame for the horror they are experiencing. Unfortunately, victim blaming happens, but sexual assault victims should feel free from any blame when seeking help. When they sense the support system is blaming them, they may become more traumatized.

All the physical, emotional, and mental health issues that could arise from being sexually assaulted are enough reasons to help these individuals. When factoring in being blamed for the sexual assault, these physical, emotional, and mental health issues increase significantly. Everyone should strive to reduce the trauma as much as possible for these victims. The results from this study indicated that there was a significant interaction between higher religiousness and victim blaming of sexual assault victims. When higher religiousness leads to higher victim blaming, it is time to ensure those within the religious systems understand their victim blaming role. Hopefully, knowing

will lead them to become educated in sexual assault to decrease the chances of blaming these victims.

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## Appendix A: Demographics

Demographics

**Age** 18–25\_\_\_ 26-35\_\_\_ 36-45\_\_\_ 46-55\_\_\_ 56-65\_\_\_ 66+\_\_\_

**Gender** M\_\_\_ F\_\_\_

**Race/Ethnicity**

Asian/Indian Subcontinent\_\_\_ African American\_\_\_

Hispanic\_\_\_ Native American\_\_\_

Pacific Islander\_\_\_ White\_\_\_

Two or More Races\_\_\_

**What best describes your religious affiliation/denomination? (Only check one box)**

Apostolic\_\_\_ Assembly of God\_\_\_ Baptist\_\_\_

Catholic\_\_\_ Christian Reformed\_\_\_ Church of Christ\_\_\_

Church of God\_\_\_ Church of the Nazarene\_\_\_ Episcopal\_\_\_

Evangelical\_\_\_ Full Gospel\_\_\_ Jehovah's Witness\_\_\_

Jesus Christ of Latter-Day Saints\_\_\_ Lutheran\_\_\_

Methodist\_\_\_ Non-denominational\_\_\_ Orthodox\_\_\_

Pentecostal\_\_\_ Presbyterian\_\_\_ Seventh Day Adventist\_\_\_

Wesleyan\_\_\_ Other: Please Specify\_\_\_\_\_

**Marital status** Single\_\_\_ Married\_\_\_ Divorced\_\_\_ Widowed\_\_\_

**Education level** Did not complete high school\_\_\_ High school graduate\_\_\_

Some college\_\_\_ Undergraduate degree\_\_\_ Graduate degree\_\_\_