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Observer reactions to emotional victims of serious crimes: stereotypes and expectancy violations

Alice K. Bosma ^a, Eva Mulder^a, Antony Pemberton^a and Ad J. J. M. Vingerhoets ^b

^aINTERVICT, Tilburg University Tilburg, The Netherlands; ^bDepartment of Medical and Clinical Psychology, Tilburg University, Tilburg, The Netherlands

ABSTRACT

Negative observer reactions towards victims may be related to people's expectations of the characteristics and demeanor of an *ideal* victim. We examined how expressed emotion, victim sex, and type of victimization influence observers' perceptions of victim credibility, victim character, and harm. Our hypothesis was that angry victims, male victims, and victims of sexual violence are perceived less positively than sad victims, female victims, and victims of physical violence. Additionally, we anticipated that expectancy violations following expressed agentic/high status, or passive/low-status emotions of the victim would lead to negative reactions. Participants ($N=335$) read a written victim impact statement, by a male or female victim of a sexual or physical assault, in which anger or sadness was expressed. The results show that observers generally respond more negatively to male victims than to female victims, and to victims expressing anger rather than sadness. However, a two-way interaction between expressed emotion and type of crime revealed that expressed emotion only significantly influences character derogation and victim credibility in cases of physical violence. Finally, emotion expectancy violations based on *ex-ante* expectations lead to derogation and diminished credibility. The discussion focuses on how emotion expectancy violations seem intimately tied to stereotype-ridden features of victimization.

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Victimization; emotion; expectancy violation; gender stereotypes; observer reactions

Victimization can have a significant impact on the well-being of the victim, not in the least because of reactions of third parties after primary victimization has occurred. Negative reactions to the victim following his or her victimization may exacerbate the victim's suffering, which is referred to as *secondary victimization* (Montada, 1994; Orth, 2002). In this article, we examine negative reactions in relation to the adherence to or breaking with, stereotypes about the type of victimization, gender, and emotion.

Ever since victims have been granted a more prominent role in criminal justice, discussions about the appropriateness and consequences of the expressions of certain emotions have flared up. Some argue that the victim's participation, such as through a Victim Impact Statement (VIS), in a trial may influence the sentencing of the offender (for an overview of

CONTACT Alice K. Bosma  a.k.bosma@tilburguniversity.edu  INTERVICT, Tilburg University, Postbox 90153, 5000 LE Tilburg, The Netherlands

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the debate, see Pemberton & Reynaers, 2011). For example, concerns have been raised regarding the possibility that vengeful attitudes of the victim or unwarranted sympathy with an emotional victim may distort perceptions of what punishment should be imposed on the offender (Bandes & Salerno, 2014; Nuñez, Myers, Wilkowski, & Schweitzer, 2017). However, leaving aside the implications for the justice procedure, self-expression is also expected to have major consequences for how the victim him- or herself is perceived and acknowledged. In the current study, we focus on expressions of anger and sadness by male and female victims of sexual and physical violence and examine how these factors influence observers' perceptions of victims in terms of their character, credibility, and suffering. Of particular interest is the question whether (violations of) normative expectations of observers regarding emotional display for certain types of victims promote secondary victimization of the victim.

The ideal victim

Most people have an implicit idea of what victims (should) look like and how they should behave. Christie (1986) argued that the image that most readily comes to mind is the 'person or a category of individuals who – when hit by crime – most readily are given the complete and legitimate status of being a victim' (p. 18). In Christie's conception, the *ideal* victim is weak, respectable, and blameless. With regard to sex, though not one of Christie's formal criteria, the ideal victim is usually a female figure. Christie does not, however, address the issue of what emotions ought to be displayed by the ideal victim. In fact, whereas Christie's analysis does not extend so far as to include the appropriate behaviors and demeanor of a victim *post-victimization* (for example, in the courtroom), ad hoc narratives (such as a victim impact statements) might be used to reassert one's position as (ideal) victim (as suggested by Balfour, Du Mont, & White, 2017; Polletta, 2009). Communication of the 'right' emotions is expected to be an essential ingredient in successfully coming across as a blameless victim.

The (ideal) emotional victim

Research on the emotional victim effect (EVE; Ask & Landström, 2010) suggests that observers generally expect victims to express emotions of negative valence in an intensity that is in line with the perceived severity of the victimization (also: Golding, Fryman, Marsil, & Yozwiak, 2003). Although any emotion that brings about unpleasant associations, such as sadness, fear, or anger, may be classified under 'emotions of negative valence', the types of emotions that seem to befit the stereotypical victim are those that correspond with the ideal victim portrayal of someone who is vulnerable, powerless, and passive (Dunn, 2008; Lamb, 1999). In other words, regardless of what emotions victims *experience* in reality in reaction to injustice (Smith & Lazarus, 1993), observers are likely to expect them to *express* emotions that signal passivity and low status (e.g. Regan & Baker, 1998). The stereotypical victim is generally not associated with a display of emotions that signal high status or agency. In the current study, passive/low status emotions include those emotions that are, in psychological studies, generally interpreted to signal submission, conformity, and lack of power. Examples include emotions such as fear, sadness, guilt, and shame (Tiedens, 2001; Timmers, Fischer, & Manstead, 1998). Agentic/high status emotions, in contrast, include those emotions that are generally interpreted

to signal initiative, discipline, and an exertion of (self-)control and power over one's social environment. Examples include emotions such as pride, anger, and contempt (Brody & Hall, 1993). In the current design, we chose sadness to represent the first class of emotions and anger to represent the second class of emotions in a written vignette.

Support from real-life settings for the idea that victims are generally expected (and hence 'prescribed') to express the first class of emotions rather than the second can be found in a series of interviews with US district court judges, conducted by Schuster and Proppen (2010). These authors found that judges believe that expressions of grief (especially when related to loss of life but not expressed in an excessive manner) are more appropriate in the setting of the courtroom than expressions of anger. The expression of compassion by the victim is generally admired, but not in the context of domestic violence. In that case, the expression of compassion elicits suspicion by the judges. The pattern described by Schuster and Proppen perfectly fits the profile of the ideal victim. Sadness and compassion are a much better fit with the passive and low-status position of the victim, but these emotions should not be expressed too intensely or in the wrong context (e.g. a domestic violence victim voicing compassion might undesirably signal complicity). Counterexamples are given by Van Dijk (2009) when he analyses the stories of multiple non-passive victims. For example, Sabine Dardenne, one of the victims of the infamous Belgian kidnapper and child abuser Dutroux, displayed anger in her court testimony and refused to forgive: 'I hope he chokes in his apologies' (Van Dijk, 2009, p. 10). This expression of agentic emotions caused her status as victim to become a matter of dispute not only in the media but even in the courtroom.

Victim sex

In the description of the ideal victim, notions of victimhood show significant overlap with notions of (stereotypical) femininity. Both descriptions of stereotypical feminine women and stereotypical victims include associations that refer to weakness, innocence, vulnerability, defenselessness, and naivety (Carpenter, 2003; Cermele, Daniels, & Anderson, 2001). Important for the current study is that both femininity and victimhood are frequently associated with the expression of low status and passive emotions (Brody & Hall, 1993; Plant, Hyde, Keltner, & Devine, 2000), as well as with general (intense) emotionality (Fischer, 1993; Hutson-Comeaux & Kelly, 2002). Previous studies found female victims to be perceived as less credible when they shared their experiences in an emotionally inexpressive way rather than with sadness (Ask & Landström, 2010), but did not find this effect for male victims (Landström, Ask, & Sommar, 2015). This seems related to the default implicit assumption to equate men with higher status relative to women (Nussbaum, 2016; Tiedens, 2001), making the acknowledgment of the male (emotional) victim to some extent an inherent contradiction (Doherty & Anderson, 2004). In cases of sexual violence, many authors found male victims to be blamed or ridiculed more than female victims, particularly by male observers and significantly more so when the victim was described as homosexual or as having been assaulted by a female perpetrator (for an overview of the literature, see Davies & Rogers, 2006). On the other hand, Wrede, Ask, and Strömwall (2015) demonstrated that victims who express sadness are generally perceived as warmer, but that only for male victims this results in a greater perceived need of support. The difference between these results may be due in part to the type of

victimization described in the vignette, namely sexual violence in the first case as opposed to robbery in the latter. In the current study, we hope to shed more light on the (seeming) contradictions in observer reactions to male (emotional) victims by including both male and female victims of sexual and non-sexual forms of violence.

Type of victimization

In relation to the above, observers may have specific sets of stereotypes of victims that depend on the type of victimization they have experienced. There is ample reason to suspect that sexual victimization, in particular, is likely to elicit different reactions than other forms of victimization. First, sexual victimization is generally perceived to be among the most severe crimes (Frieze, Hymer, & Greenberg, 1987; Miller, Cohen, & Rossman, 1993; Waters, Hyder, Rajkotia, Basu, & Butchart, 2005). The assumed severity of the crime may subsequently lead to the expectation that its victims experience and express very intense emotions (Rose, Nadler, & Clark, 2006). Second, in addition to the perceived severity and assumed violence of the crime, rape is frequently called a gendered crime (Rumney & Morgan-Taylor, 1997). The vast majority of identified rape victims is female. Finally, rape is considered a gendering crime; i.e. the act itself may lead the victim to become perceived as more feminine than before (Bonthuys, 2008). This fact is likely to create the expectation in the general public that victims of sexual violence are particularly likely to express feminine, hence passive and low status, emotions. The sexual dimension of the victimization is therefore hypothesized to shape particular expectations of how the victim should express him- or herself.

Notably, studies comparing observer reactions to sexual victimization and to other types of severe victimization are still lacking in the current literature. Many studies that examine reactions toward victims have employed vignettes that describe a sexual assault, or different forms of sexual victimization (Grubb & Harrower, 2009; Pedersen & Strömwall, 2013; van der Bruggen & Grubb, 2014). Most research focused solely on one type of victimization (e.g. Bal & Van den Bos, 2012; Hafer, 2000), removing the opportunity to test whether and how the sexual nature of a crime influences reactions to victims in comparison to non-sexual crimes. One study did find differences in attributions of blame towards victims (and perpetrators) of rape and robbery, with more blame attributed to victims of rape (Bieneck & Krahe, 2011). These two types of victimization admittedly seem to differ on many dimensions, including the perceived severity of the crime and the goal of the violence (e.g. whereas rape may be perceived as aggression in itself directed at the victim's body and being, robbery might make use of instrumental violence if the victim is 'in the way' in order to retrieve an item of material value). To facilitate reliable comparison as much as possible, the current study compares sexual violence (a rape) with physical violence (an attack). Both are interpersonal contact crimes that directly target the body of the victim, are perceived as serious enough to justify a VIS in a legal setting, and may be assumed to cause severe physical and psychological harm (Sadler, Booth, Nielson, & Doebbeling, 2000). However, we have refrained from describing the victimization in more detail in the vignette to make respondents to rely on their (implicit/stereotypical) first associations when reading about such as crime. We expect the sexual versus non-sexual dimension of the crime to influence a broad range of assumptions in the observers.

Summarizing the above findings regarding observer expectations, our first set of hypotheses entails that:

H1a: Respondents more often expect passive and low-status emotions, rather than agentic and high status, emotions from victims in general.

H1b: Respondents expect more passive and low-status emotions from female victims compared to male victims – irrespective of the type of victimization.

H1c: Respondents expect more passive and low-status emotions from victims of sexual violence compared to victims of physical violence – irrespective of the sex of the victim.

H1d: Respondents expect more intense emotions from female victims compared to male victims – irrespective of the type of victimization.

H1e: Respondents expect more intense emotions from sexual violence victims compared to physical violence victims – irrespective of the sex of the victim.

Reactions to (non)-stereotypical victims

Social psychological theories have consistently posed that people go out of their way to retain their (implicit) beliefs and worldviews, and may initially greet counterevidence with denial and negativity to avoid the experience of justice related distress (e.g. Festinger, 1962; Jost, Banaji, & Nosek, 2004; Lerner, 1980; Rudman & Glick, 2001). Studies specifically about victims of sexual violence have shown that both particularly stereotypical victims (Howard, 1984) and non-stereotypical victims (Doherty & Anderson, 2004) run the risk of being met with more negative reactions from their social surroundings than victims who are less easily classified in one of the two categories. In the current study, we aim to test whether victims who do not adhere to the stereotypes about victimization (i.e. male victims; angry victims) in general are met with more negative reactions than ideal victims (i.e. female victims; sad victims). We expect that the former group will be perceived as less credible, their character will be evaluated less positively, and their physical and psychological harm will be acknowledged to a lesser extent. The aforementioned leads us to the following hypothesis:

H2a: Respondents generally perceive victims as less credible, evaluate their character more negatively, and judge the harm of the victimization to be less severe when the victims are male rather than female and when the victims express agentic/ high-status emotions (i.e. anger) rather than passive/ low-status emotions (i.e. sadness).

With few previous studies to deduct specific hypotheses regarding the comparison between sexual violence and non-sexual violence, we abide by existing theory, as well as Bieneck and Krahe's study (2011) in the formulation of the following hypothesis:

H2b: Respondents generally perceive victims of sexual violence as less credible, and evaluate their character more negatively, than victims of physical violence.

H2c: Respondents judge the harm of sexual victimization to be more severe than the harm of physical violence.

The evaluation of a victim is likely to be the result of the different factors we have manipulated, which together form an image either of a normative/stereotypical victim, or a victim

that diverges from this image in one or more ways. We, therefore, expect sex of the victim, type of crime, and emotional expression to interact with each other in eliciting negative observer reactions. However, neither theory nor empirical studies conducted thus far have provided a strong foundation on which we hypothesize the direction of the interactions. We will thus examine interaction effects in an exploratory manner.

Expectancy violations and emotional display

Nuancing the previous hypotheses, negative reactions toward victims may not always be associated with specific attributes of a victim and/or his or her performance, but rather be caused by a *violation* of the observer's prior expectations of the victim's performance or attributes (e.g. Ellison & Munro, 2008; Hackett, Day, & Mohr, 2008; Lens, van Doorn, Pemberton, & Bogaerts, 2014). For example, Wrede (2015) demonstrated that a greater overlap between the observer's expectation and the victim's displayed emotion is associated with higher perceived victim credibility. Similarly, Lens et al. (2014) found that in order for a victim to receive sympathetic reactions, the intensity of an emotional response should match the perceived severity of the crime. More precisely, an intense emotional response (a combination of anger, sadness, fear, anxiety, and disgust) of a victim in a low crime severity condition did not reflect observers' expectations about the victims' demeanor, which was associated with character derogation of the victim.

Previous research has consistently measured expectancy violations *after* the manipulation (Ask & Landström, 2010; Lens et al., 2014) and after dependent variables (Hackett et al., 2008). In these instances, the participants' expectations could easily have been influenced by the manipulated information, or even by their own answers regarding the (other) victim ratings. In this case, respondents may (re)adjust their expectations after they have been confronted with a story of victimization in order to, for example, relieve injustice-related distress caused by the story (Lerner, 1980) in the same way as respondents may blame or derogate the victim. In the current study, we operationalize an expectancy violation as the inconsistency between respondents' *ex-ante* expectation of a victim's emotional reaction and the emotional expression of the victim. We hypothesize that expectancy violations lead to negative reactions by the observer towards the victim:

H3: Respondents who experience an expectancy violation perceive victims as less credible, evaluate their character more negatively, and judge the harm of the crime to be less severe compared to respondents who do not experience an expectancy violation.

Summary

In sum, we aim to study more closely how victims' expressed emotion in relation to the victim's sex and the type of victimization influence observer reactions. We hereby build on the literature on gender-related victim stereotypes about emotions (Ask & Landström, 2010; Landström et al., 2015). The current study additionally explores the effect of specific emotions (rather than general negatively valenced emotionality) for male victims and female victims. Complementing the study by Wrede et al. (2015), we focus on the negative reactions towards male vs. female and sad vs. angry victims rather than positive

perceptions such as need for support. Moreover, we attempt to gain a deeper understanding of the effect of the sexual dimension of a crime through the comparison of victims of sexual violence and victims of another severe non-sexual crime. Finally, we evaluate the effect of an emotion expectancy violation based on ex-ante expectations on negative observer reactions related to character evaluation, victim credibility, and the perceived extent of experienced harm. In the current design, respondents are explicitly asked what emotion they expect of the victim after the sex of the victim and type of victimization have been announced, but *before* the manipulation of expressed emotion.

Method

Sample and participant selection

We determined our sample size to detect a small to medium effect between conditions using G*Power (Faul, Erdfelder, Lang, & Buchner, 2007), which yielded a sample size of 325. Initially, 358 participants took part in the study, but 23 had to be excluded because they failed to answer the manipulation check correctly. More precisely, they did not acknowledge the type of violence that was presented in the vignette appropriately.¹ The analysis report concerns the final sample, which consisted of 335 Participants (66% female, age range 17–71, $M_{\text{age}} = 35.5$, $SD_{\text{age}} = 11.3$). They were recruited online from Prolific Academic, a UK based platform similar to Amazon MTurk, specifically created for research purposes. Participants were eligible if they had not previously participated in relevant studies by the authors on the same website, currently resided in the UK,² and had an approval rate of 95% or higher on the website.

The application of these criteria resulted in an eligible participant pool of 7503. Participants completed the study online, which took approximately 5 min. Participants were paid £ 0,65 for their participation.

Procedure and design

Participants were randomly assigned to one of eight cells in a 2 (victim sex: male vs. female) \times 2 (type of victimization: sexual vs. physical violence) \times 2 (expressed emotion: sadness vs. anger) between participants design. First, participants were informed that the study examined emotions after particular life events. They were then shown a (neutral) profile picture of a person unknown to them, either a man or a woman. In the next window, the person was identified as either Tom ($n = 174$) or Lisa ($n = 161$), aged 25, who became a victim of either sexual ($n = 181$) or physical ($n = 154$) violence less than six months ago. Participants were informed that within two weeks time, Tom/Lisa would give a VIS (according to UK terminology: victim personal statement) at a court hearing, during which the victim would focus on the emotional impact of the victimization. Participants were then asked which emotion, and how intensely, they thought the victim would *primarily* express (even though the victim would likely express multiple emotions in the statement). Participants were requested to pick only one emotion so that this emotion would correspond to their strongest expectations, rather than picking several emotions that they expect to a smaller degree. Subsequently, participants read an excerpt of the written statement,³ which was said to be selected by the researchers

as being the most representative of the whole statement, and which communicated either sadness, representing a passive/low status emotion ($n = 166$) or anger, representing an agentic/high status emotion ($n = 169$), see [Appendix](#) for the entire vignette. The emotion was merely expressed through text in accordance with the textual format of the VIS. The vignette was designed in such a way that it covered common dimensions that are used to describe and differentiate emotions: feelings, appraisals, actions, and action tendencies. The descriptions of anger and sadness were derived from Roseman, Wiest, and Swartz (1994), and Deffenbacher, Oetting, Lynch, and Morris (1996). Finally, participants judged the severity of the crime, evaluated the victim's credibility and character, filled out short demographic questions, and were debriefed. In the last part of the questionnaire, other variables, not of interest for the current study, were measured.⁴

Assessments and measures

Independent variables

The independent variables of this study consisted of the type of crime that the victim experienced (sexual violence/physical violence), the sex of the victim (male/female), and the emotion that the victim expressed (sadness/anger, which represented passive/low status or agentic/high status emotions) (see [Appendix](#)). An additional independent variable included in this study was expectancy violation. Participants were asked what emotion they expected from the victim *before reading the vignette*. Comparing the *ex-ante* expectation to the actually expressed emotion, we were able to code a variable that reflected whether there was an expectancy violation. When a participant expected an agentic/high-status emotion but was confronted with a sad victim, this was coded as an expectancy violation. Similarly, when a participant expected a passive/low-status emotion as the predominantly expressed emotion, while (s)he was confronted with an angry victim, this was coded as an expectancy violation. When the participant expected an emotion not related to status (happiness, disgust), the confrontation with both the angry and the sad victim was coded as an expectancy violation. No expectancy violation was marked when the participant expected a passive emotion and was presented with the sad VIS or when the participant anticipated an agentic emotion and was presented with the angry VIS. This measure differs from previous explicit measures of expectancy violations such as those applied by Ask and Landström (2010) and Lens et al. (2014), who measured the expectancy violation *ex-post*. The reason for this methodological choice was to prevent the given scenario from influencing the expectations of the respondents.

Dependent variables

Several questions measured expectations and judgments about the victim, with answer ratings from 1 (not at all) to 5 (extremely). In two questions, i.e. *expected emotion* and *sex of the observer*, participants had to select one answer. The order of the response alternatives was randomized.

Expected emotion. Participants had to rate on a 1–5 scale which single emotion they *primarily* expected the victim to express. They could choose between anger, contempt, disgust, fear, happiness, and sadness. The response alternatives 'anger' and 'contempt' were combined to represent agentic/ high-status emotions, while the response

alternatives 'sadness' and 'fear' were combined to represent passive/ low-status emotions. Disgust and happiness were combined to form the category 'other.'

Expected intensity of the emotion. Participants rated how intense they expected this primary expected emotion to be on a 1–5 scale.

Victim credibility. Participants were first asked how credible (1–5 Likert scale) they thought Tom/Lisa was in their role as a victim through the rating of the following items: honest, trustworthy, unreliable (reversed), insincere (reversed), and dependable. Cronbach's alpha was .84 so that items were collapsed into one measure of victim credibility.

Character evaluation. Participants rated (1–5 Likert scale) to what extent they thought other people would find Tom or Lisa as a person to be: assertive, bright, incompetent (reversed), cold (reversed), friendly, and likable (Cronbach's alpha = .77). These items map on to the dimensions of respectively competence and warmth: two universal dimensions of character evaluation that have been identified in the previous literature (Fiske, Cuddy, & Glick, 2007). However, Fiske et al. (2007) also confirm that the perceptions of competence and warmth are likely to highly correlate in response to individuals. Due to the high Cronbach's alpha in the current study, the items were combined as an overall measure of character derogation, i.e. to test whether victimization may cause the target person to be evaluated less positively in general.

Perceived harm. Perceived harm was measured by two separate statements that evaluated the perceived harm of the offense. Physical harm of the offense was measured by asking: 'To what extent do you think Lisa/Tom was *physically* harmed?', the perceived psychological harm of the offense was evaluated with the question: 'To what extent do you think Lisa was *psychologically* harmed?'. Both questions required participants' ratings on a 1–5 Likert scale. The correlation between the two questions was low enough to consider them to measure different constructs ($r = .31, p < .001$), and were hence kept as separate variables.

Sex of the observer. Sex of the observer (male/female/not indicated) was added as a control variable. Although not our main variable of interest, it was included because previous research has consistently demonstrated that the sex of the observer influences empathic reactions as well as those that resort to victim blaming or derogation, with male observers responding more negatively to victims than female observers (e.g. Davies, Rogers, & Whitelegg, 2009; Whatley & Riggio, 1993).

Data analysis plan

Data analyses were conducted in three phases. The first step concerned the expectations of participants. Descriptive analyses were performed to identify participants' expectations. Chi-square tests of independence compared whether passive/ low-status emotions were expected more than agentic/ high-status emotions in victims in general, in male or female than in male victims and in victims of sexual assault than in victims of physical

violence. *T*-tests were used to compare the expected intensity of emotions between male and female victims and between victims of sexual versus physical violence.

In the second step, observer reactions towards the emotional victim were analyzed using a three-way MANCOVA that included the type of victimization, sex of the victim, and expressed emotion as independent variables, observer sex as control variable, and victim credibility, character evaluation, and perceived psychological and physical harm as dependent variables.

Finally, in the third step, we conducted a MANCOVA to evaluate the effects of expectancy violations. Hence, expectancy violation was entered as the independent variable, while character evaluation, victim credibility, and the two measures of perceived harm were entered as dependent variables, again controlling for sex of the observer.

Results

Observer expectations

In total, 22.4% of the respondents expected the victim to express an agentic/ high-status emotion (contempt or anger), whereas passive/low-status emotions (sadness and fear) were anticipated by 68.7% of the respondents. Finally, 9% of the respondents expected an emotion that related to neither of the two described categories.⁵ No differences in emotion expectations were found between male and female respondents. Respondents more frequently experienced an expectancy violation when victims expressed anger rather than sadness, $\chi^2(1) = 74.18, p < .001$. Based on the odds ratio, the odds of respondents experiencing an expectancy violation were 7.88 times higher if the victim expressed anger than if the victim expressed sadness, which is giving support for H1a.

Contrary to H1b, participants expected male victims to display agentic/high status and passive/low status emotions as often as female victims, $\chi^2(2) = 4.167, p = .125$. Contrary to H1c, participants expected similar emotions for sexual violence and physical violence victims, $\chi^2(2) = 3.503, p = .174$. This means that no differences were found in frequencies of expectancy violation between victims of sexual violence compared to victims of physical violence ($\chi^2(1) = .018, p = .893$), or between female victims and male victims ($\chi^2(1) = .276, p = .599$).

As predicted by H1d, independent samples *t*-tests showed that respondents expect female victims to experience their emotions more intensely ($M = 4.56, SD = 0.70$) than male victims ($M = 4.36, SD = 0.66$), $t(333) = 2.729, p = .007$, Cohen's $d = 0.294$. In support of H1e, respondents further anticipated victims of sexual violence to experience their emotions more intensely ($M = 4.59, SD = 0.57$) than victims of physical violence ($M = 4.29, SD = 0.76$), $t(275.372) = 3.970, p < .001$, Cohen's $d = 0.442$.

Observer reactions

To evaluate general observer reactions (H2), a three-way MANCOVA was conducted that included type of victimization, sex of the victim, and expressed emotion as independent variables, observer sex as control variable, and victim credibility, character evaluation, and perceived psychological and physical harm as dependent variables. The correlations and

Table 1. Correlations for victim credibility, character evaluation, perceived physical harm, and perceived psychological harm ($N = 335$).

Variables	1	2	3	4
1. Victim credibility	–			
2. Character evaluation	.61**	–		
3. Perceived phys. harm	.31*	.08	–	
4. Perceived psych. harm	.25**	.24**	.31**	–

* $p < .05$, ** $p < .01$.

descriptive statistics are presented in Tables 1 and 2. Hypothesis 2 received partial support, as explained in more detail below.

The MANCOVA showed a main effect for sex of the victim, Hotelling's $F(4, 323) = 4.168$, $p = .003$, $\eta_p^2 = .049$; type of victimization, Hotelling's $F(4, 323) = 8.888$, $p < .001$, $\eta_p^2 = .099$; and emotion expressed, Hotelling's $F(4, 323) = 2.758$, $p = .028$, $\eta_p^2 = .033$. Sex of observer also had a main effect, Hotelling's $F(4, 323) = 4.168$, $p < .001$, $\eta_p^2 = .076$.

Sex of the victim

Male victims were hypothesized to be evaluated more negatively, perceived as less credible, and thought to suffer less from the victimization compared to female victims. The MANCOVA confirmed a significant main effect for sex of the victim on victim credibility, $F(1, 326) = 4.757$, $p = .030$, $\eta_p^2 = .014$, and character evaluation, $F(1, 326) = 13.943$, $p < .001$, $\eta_p^2 = .041$. As anticipated, respondents generally evaluated male victims' characters less positively ($M = 3.62$, $SD = 0.68$) than female victims' characters ($M = 3.88$, $SD = 0.62$, Cohen's $d = 0.399$). They also perceived male victims as less credible ($M = 3.95$, $SD = 0.65$) than female victims ($M = 4.08$, $SD = 0.62$, Cohen's $d = 0.205$). No significant effects were found for sex of the victim on perceived physical harm, $p = .114$, or psychological harm, $p = .677$.

Expressed emotion

Angry victims were expected to be evaluated more negatively, perceived as less credible, and thought to physically and psychologically suffer less from the victimization than sad victims. However, as a main effect, expressed emotion was only found to be associated with character evaluation, $F(1, 326) = 8.243$, $p = .004$, $\eta_p^2 = .025$. Victims who expressed the agentic/high status emotion of anger were evaluated less positively ($M = 3.65$, $SD = 0.68$) than victims who expressed the passive/low status emotion of sadness ($M = 3.84$, $SD = 0.63$, Cohen's $d = 0.290$). No main effects for expressed emotion were found on

Table 2. Means and standard deviations of victim credibility, character evaluation, perceived physical harm, and perceived psychological harm ($N = 335$).

Reaction	Sex of the victim				Expressed emotion				Type of victimization			
	Male		Female		Sadness		Anger		Sex. viol.		Phys. viol.	
	<i>M</i>	<i>SD</i>	<i>M</i>	<i>SD</i>	<i>M</i>	<i>SD</i>	<i>M</i>	<i>SD</i>	<i>M</i>	<i>SD</i>	<i>M</i>	<i>SD</i>
Credibility	3.95	.65	4.08	.62	4.05	.61	3.98	.65	4.08	.63	3.93	.64
Evaluation	3.62	.68	3.88	.62	3.84	.63	3.65	.68	3.76	.66	3.72	.66
Phys. harm	3.59	.81	3.73	.95	3.60	.91	3.70	.85	3.81	.94	3.47	.77
Psych. harm	4.74	.53	4.77	.64	4.80	.59	4.70	.57	4.90	.33	4.58	.75

victim credibility, $p = .202$, perceived physical harm, $p = .307$, or perceived psychological harm, $p = .154$.

Type of victimization

The MANCOVA showed a significant main effect for type of victimization on victim credibility, $F(1, 326) = 5.029$, $p = .026$, $\eta_p^2 = .015$; perceived physical harm, $F(1, 326) = 15.023$, $p < .001$, $\eta_p^2 = .044$; and perceived psychological harm, $F(1, 326) = 24.985$, $p < .001$, $\eta_p^2 = .071$. No effect was found regarding character evaluation, $p = .684$.

In contrast to H2b, victims of sexual violence were perceived as more credible ($M = 4.08$, $SD = 0.63$) than victims of physical violence ($M = 3.93$, $SD = 0.64$, Cohen's $d = 0.236$). However, in line with H2c, respondents expected victims of sexual violence to have suffered more physical harm ($M = 3.81$, $SD = 0.94$) and psychological harm ($M = 4.90$, $SD = 0.33$) than victims of physical violence ($M = 3.47$, $SD = 0.77$, Cohen's $d = 0.396$ and $M = 4.58$, $SD = 0.75$, Cohen's $d = 0.552$).

Sex of observer

Sex of the observer was found to have an effect on victim credibility, $F(1, 326) = 12.658$, $p < .001$, $\eta_p^2 = .037$; character evaluation, $F(1, 326) = 4.669$, $p = .031$, $\eta_p^2 = .014$; and perceived physical harm, $F(1, 326) = 15.488$, $p < .001$, $\eta_p^2 = .045$. Female respondents generally evaluated victims more positively ($M = 3.78$, $SD = 0.67$) and rated them as more credible ($M = 4.10$, $SD = 0.64$) than did male respondents ($M = 3.66$, $SD = 0.62$, Cohen's $d = 0.186$ and $M = 3.85$, $SD = 0.62$, Cohen's $d = 0.397$). Female respondents also perceived the physical harm of victimization to be higher ($M = 3.79$, $SD = 0.85$) than male respondents did ($M = 3.40$, $SD = 0.91$, Cohen's $d = 0.443$).

Interaction effects

Interaction effects were found for type of victimization * emotion expressed on victim credibility, $F(1, 326) = 5.091$, $p = .025$, $\eta_p^2 = .015$ and for type of victimization * emotion expressed on character evaluation, $F(1, 326) = 5.593$, $p = .019$, $\eta_p^2 = .017$. All other interaction effects were non-significant.

As shown in [Figures 1](#) and [2](#), univariate tests with Bonferroni correction revealed that victims of physical violence were seen as less credible ($M = 3.82$, $SD = 0.70$) when they expressed anger than when they expressed sadness ($M = 4.06$, $SD = 0.72$), $p = .017$, Cohen's $d = 0.337$. Victims of physical violence were also evaluated less positively ($M = 3.55$, $SD = 0.72$) when they expressed anger than when they expressed sadness ($M = 3.92$, $SD = 0.74$), $p < .001$, Cohen's $d = 0.507$. We did not find a similar effect for victims of sexual violence.

Observer reactions after expectancy violations

To test hypothesis 3, we conducted a MANCOVA with expectancy violation as the independent variable, and character evaluation, victim credibility, and the two measures of perceived harm as dependent variables, while controlling for sex of the observer.

As expected, the MANCOVA showed a main effect of expectancy violation, Hotelling's $F(4, 329) = 3.254$, $p = .01$, $\eta_p^2 = .038$. Participants who experienced an expectancy violation perceived the victim as less credible ($M = 3.92$, $SD = 0.66$) than participants who were

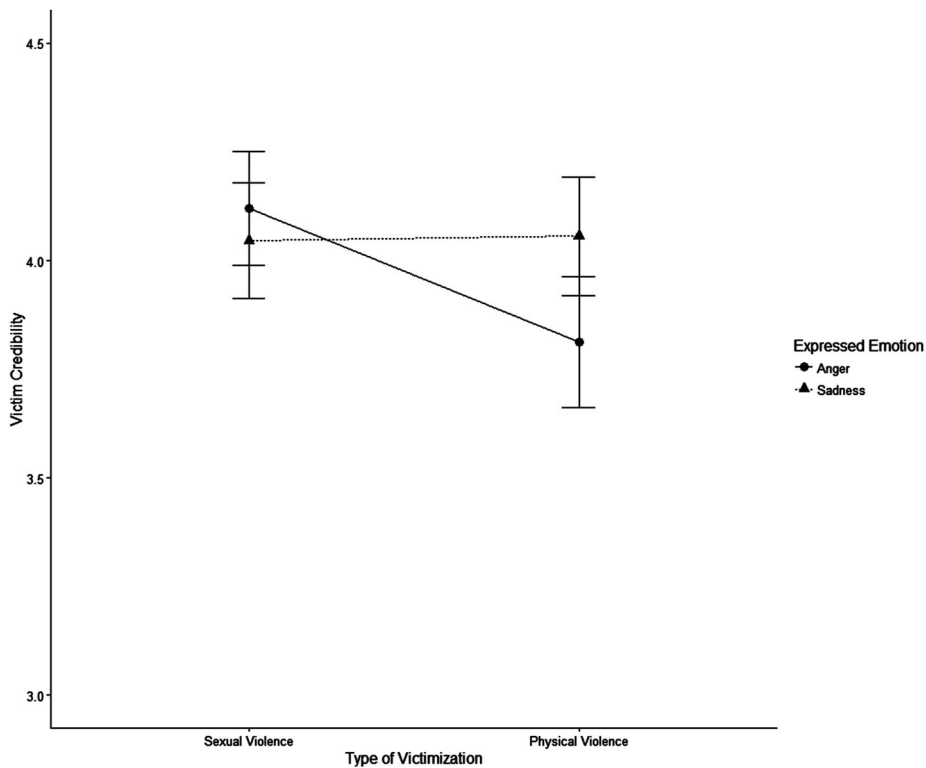


Figure 1. Interaction effect type of crime on victim credibility.

confronted with a victim who expressed the emotion they expected ($M = 4.13$, $SD = 0.60$, Cohen's $d = 0.332$), $F(1, 332) = 7.589$, $p = .006$, $\eta_p^2 = .022$. Furthermore, the victim's character was rated as less favorable ($M = 3.62$, $SD = 0.67$) when their expectation was violated compared to when it was not ($M = 3.88$, $SD = 0.63$, Cohen's $d = 0.399$), $F(1, 332) = 11.610$, $p = .001$, $\eta_p^2 = .034$. There were no significant differences between the two groups of participants regarding the degree of physical harm ($p = .848$) and psychological harm ($p = .106$) they believed the victim experienced.

Sex of the observer was associated with the reaction toward the victim, Hotelling's $F(4, 329) = 5.076$, $p = .001$, $\eta_p^2 = .058$. Female participants rated the victim as more credible ($M = 4.10$, $SD = 0.64$) than male participants ($M = 3.85$, $SD = 0.62$, Cohen's $d = 0.396$), $F(1, 332) = 8.9$, $p = .003$, $\eta_p^2 = .026$. Female participants also thought that the victim experienced more physical harm ($M = 3.8$, $SD = 0.85$) than male participants did ($M = 3.4$, $SD = 0.91$, Cohen's $d = 0.454$), $F(1, 332) = 12.022$, $p = .001$, $\eta_p^2 = .035$.

Discussion

The present study was designed to evaluate whether the emotional display of a male or female victim of physical or sexual violence affects how the victim is evaluated regarding character, credibility, and suffered harm. Respondents more often expected victims to express passive/low status rather than agentic/high-status emotions. In support of H1d and H1e, observers anticipated female victims and victims of sexual violence to express

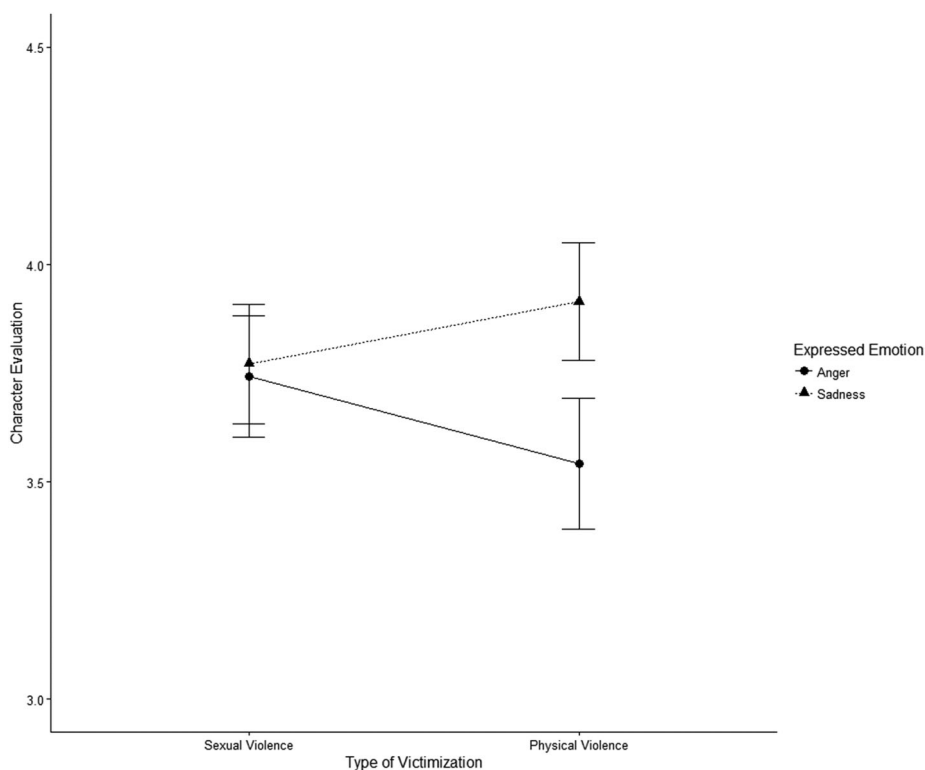


Figure 2. Interaction effect type of crime on character evaluation.

more intense emotions than male victims or victims of physical violence. On the other hand, contrary to H1b and H1c, victim sex and type of victimization were not associated with the type of emotion observers expected.

Partial support was found for H2a, which predicted that observers would evaluate victims more negatively, and perceive the crime to be less severe, when victims are male, and when victims express anger. Specifically, male victims suffered more character derogation and were perceived as less credible. Additionally, high status/agentive emotional expressions were met with less positive character evaluations. Contrary to H2b, victims of sexual violence were perceived as more credible than victims of physical violence. In line with H2c, victims of sexual violence were thought to suffer more physical and psychological harm. An interaction effect was found between type of crime and expressed emotion, implying that respondents reacted more negatively to victims of physical violence when they communicated anger rather than sadness.

Finally, we found support for H3. When emotion expectancy violations occurred, victims were perceived as less credible, and their character was evaluated less positively.

Thus, results partially corroborate findings of several previous studies that examined observer reactions to victims of crime. In accordance with those findings (e.g. Davies & Rogers, 2006), the current research shows that male victims are generally perceived less positively than female victims. This effect was not significantly influenced by either the type of crime or the emotion expressed during the aftermath. It thus seems that the

strategies (e.g. emphasizing the type of harm that has occurred or expressing certain emotions most strongly) male victims can employ to receive acknowledgment and sympathy as a victim are very limited.

Also in line with previous findings (e.g. Ask & Landström, 2010; Hutson-Comeaux & Kelly, 2002; Landström et al., 2015), we found that observers who experience an expectancy violation generally judge the victim as less credible and their character as less positive. The current study once more shows that respondents more often expect passive/ low-status emotions from victims rather than active/ high-status emotions. This is not to say that anger does not play an essential role in the experience of injustice. Indeed, authors have found that anger is the emotion most frequently *experienced* after perceived injustice (Mikula, 1986; see for the expectations about experienced emotions also Wrede & Ask, 2015), but people generally do not *express* this anger in public situations (Van Kleef, 2016). Plant et al. (2000) moreover suggest that people may suppress the expression of emotions that are inconsistent with their gender role. Following their line of reasoning, we speculate that people expect victims to suppress agentic/ high-status emotions once they take up (or find themselves in) the victim role, which is essentially a stereotypically passive role.

We are not the first to propose that the acceptance and acknowledgment of a victim, and how we respond behaviorally to them, by the social environment largely depends on the perceived appropriateness of their (emotional) demeanor or the extent to which the victim matches the criteria of the ideal victim (Van Kleef, 2016). However, studies based on the theory of cognitive dissonance have continuously shown that an incongruence between experience and expectation may lead people to adjust their attitudes or verbal opinions in order to realign the two (e.g. Festinger, 1962; Proulx, Inzlicht, & Harmon-Jones, 2012). Studies that ask participants about their expectations after the experience cannot determine what possible effects the inclination to reduce cognitive dissonance may have had on the variable of expectancy violation. Hence, this way of measuring may obfuscate the confounding effects of cognitive dissonance reduction. The present study accounts (at least to a certain extent) for these effects by measuring respondents' expectations before any emotion was expressed in the VIS, and hence before the possibility of cognitive dissonance.

Additionally, our results indicate that the effects of emotional expression on victim credibility and victim derogation depend on the context, in this case on the type of victimization experienced. Specifically, manipulations of expressed emotion created variety in reactions to victims of physical violence but had no such effect in cases of sexual violence. Possibly, *on the one hand*, victimization by sexual violence is perceived as so significant and overwhelming that it becomes the main source of information on which observers base their judgments, drowning out any more nuanced individual differences such as how the victim expressed him- or herself afterward. On the other hand, a victim's expression of anger after having been involved in physical violence may implicate the victim as an active agent both in the aftermath and during the assault. In other words, respondents may interpret the victim's expression as an indication of their behavior during victimization. This consideration may be precluded in the sexual violence condition due to the perceived nature of sexual violence as something that 'anticipates and seeks its target's subjection as a subject of fear, defencelessness, and acquiescence to injury', to be distinguished from 'subject-subject violence' (Marcus, 1992, p. 396).

An alternative explanation is that the expectation of a certain emotion in a victim of sexual violence versus a victim of physical violence carries very different connotations. This potential connotational difference has already been established in several studies comparing the perception of emotional expression by women versus men. For example, Barrett and Bliss-Moreau (2009) found that respondents generally attribute the display of intense emotions by a woman to her (emotional) character, whereas the same emotional display by a man is attributed to situational factors. Furthermore, Shields and Crowley (1996) conducted a vignette study in which respondents read about a man versus a woman who responds 'emotionally' to discover that his or her car has been stolen. The authors found that whereas emotionality in female target persons was associated with excessive crying and general hysteria, the emotionality of a male target person was associated with a much less intense description of 'being upset' and thereafter rationalized. Likewise, in the current study, observers may generally have had very different associations for the assembled construct of 'agentic/passive victim of sexual violence' than for 'agentic/passive victim of physical violence.' Both may be described as angry, but the actual meaning of the term anger depends on which type of victimization it is coupled. This line of reasoning may simultaneously explain why no interaction effect was found between victim sex and expressed emotion: the anger/sadness of a female victim may have been interpreted very differently than the anger/sadness of the male victim. The findings thus imply that the extent to which a dimension can be isolated from the context in which it occurs is limited, and hence it partially fails as a predictor of reactions to victims.

To summarize, we suggest that the effects of a victim's emotional expression on the (negative) reactions of observers depend on two important factors: (1) the individual observers' concrete expectations, and (2) contextual factors such as the circumstances of the victimization.

Limitations

We believe the current study to suffer from three main limitations concerning the expectancy violation variable, the written form of the vignette, and the comparison between sexual and physical violence.

First, the expectancy violation variable was included in the analysis as an independent variable. However, the expectancy violation was, in fact, the result of the (in)consistency between respondents' preexisting expectations and the manipulated emotional expression of the victim, and hence was not itself manipulated. This limits the extent to which causal inferences can be drawn from the findings. Furthermore, although respondents were given multiple answering options regarding the emotion, they expected the victim to express, the VIS was limited to the phrasing of anger versus sadness, representing agentic/high status and passive/ low-status emotions. However, it is possible that respondents who expected, for example, fear and were faced with an expression of sadness experienced more of an expectancy violation than those who expected sadness in the first place. Our choice of measurement in the current study did not allow for the examination of 'degrees' of expectancy violation but instead defined it as a dichotomous (yes/no) variable. In reality, expectancy violations are likely to be much more nuanced. Respondents were also allowed to indicate only one emotion that they expected from the

victim. Yet, in reality, they may have anticipated different emotions to a similar extent diminishing the actual amount of cases in which a true expectancy violation occurred.

Second, previous researchers have criticized written vignettes for their 'sterile environment' (Smith, Winer, & George, 1983, p. 103) and lack of external validity because of the way participants get acquainted with the scenario (Collett & Childs, 2011). Particularly when one is interested in reactions that are brought about by strong emotions, a written vignette may not be the most reliable elicitor. We do believe that asking the respondents what emotion they expected of the victim after hearing about the victimization, but *before* the VIS was given, increased their cognitive involvement. Additionally, the experimental VIS were created to resemble ones that were written by real victims.

Third, although we remain convinced of the importance of comparing the effects of different forms of victimization on observer reactions, particularly to disentangle the effects of the sexual dimension of a crime in an empirical setting, we acknowledge that adequate comparisons are particularly difficult. Sexual violence may often be experienced as more traumatic than physical violence (Bennice, Resick, Mechanic, & Astin, 2003), and was, as expected, perceived as more harmful in the current study.

Future research

In light of the above, some might argue that the best form of prevention of secondary victimization would be to instruct particular victims not to express anger in public settings such as the courtroom. We do not believe this to be the appropriate course of action, partly because other factors relating to negative observer reactions (i.e. maleness) are less easily manipulated in real life, and partly because requesting victims to adjust in this way seems ethically undesirable. On the basis of our findings that negative reactions towards victims are related to expectancy violations relying on stereotypes, we suggest that future research could focus on strengthening awareness of these stereotypes as a fruitful approach to reduce negative responses to victims. Part of this may entail studying what stereotypes are most accessible under certain conditions. For example, the current results indicate that expressed emotion influences observers' judgments in cases of physical violence, but that this effect does not hold in cases of sexual violence. To gain a greater understanding of the underlying mechanisms, follow-up studies would benefit from more open-ended questions that tap into the respondents' interpretations of the different forms of violence they are confronted with, as well as the different expressions of emotion by the victims. Future studies may take up the challenge to shed more light on the interaction between various factors that create a multitude or even hierarchy of ideal victims.

Besides studying how to raise awareness of stereotypes, future studies should also focus on how stereotypes may be countered through different methods. Possibly, providing more detailed information may be helpful to counter the presumably stereotypical thinking that mediates negative reactions to the victim. Future studies could experiment with the quantity and quality of information about the victim that they provide to respondents. Sharing a more personal narrative might increase the likelihood that the victim is seen as a person rather than, as someone who needs to be assessed through the ideal victim criteria.

Notes

1. The manipulation check, which took the form of a simple ‘right or wrong’ question tested whether participants understood the experimental condition they were in. Participants were asked whether they had read about a victim of sexual or physical violence. In the sexual violence condition, only one participant reported she had read about a victim of physical violence. In the other condition, however, 22 people answered the manipulation check incorrectly, 16 of which had read the story about a female victim. Participant sex was equally divided in this group. Although not a part of the current study, we speculate that people are quicker to infer sexual acts from a physical violence script when the victim is female rather than male.
2. This criterion was added because of our vignette (see [Appendix](#)), that was written in such a way that it resembles the UK practice with regard to victims’ voice in court.
3. Take note that participants were *not* instructed to imagine themselves to attend the court hearing or to behave as mock jurors. Instead, they took on the role of third parties who read an excerpt of the statement.
4. These additional variables were related to *feminization* of the victim. This part will be reported in a separate paper.
5. Not surprisingly, happiness was never chosen. The 9% thus entirely refers to the expectation of disgust.

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ORCID

Alice K. Bosma  <http://orcid.org/0000-0003-0048-3914>

Ad J. J. M. Vingerhoets  <http://orcid.org/0000-0001-8840-6379>

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Appendix

Vignette

[The vignette that we used is about [Tom/Lisa], who experienced [sexual/physical] violence and consequently is [angry/sad].

In two weeks time, Lisa [Tom] will give a victim personal statement during a court hearing. During this five minute speech, she [he] will be allowed to share the impact the victimization has had on her. She [He] has decided to focus on the emotional impact of the crime

[Set of questions about expected emotion and intensity]

You will now read part of Lisa's [Tom's] victim personal statement. We have chosen the section that we felt was most representative of her complete statement.

Anger condition. 'The rape [attack] changed my life. I feel very angry since it happened. I often feel the blood rushing through my body, and it feels as if I would explode. I often have to clench my fists to restrain myself from punching something. I try to control myself, but sometimes I can't help it. I get into stupid arguments with friends or family. When I think about how unfair it was, I feel like yelling and hitting someone or saying mean things. If I were to see him again, I think I would break down on the spot and try to hurt him as much as possible.'

Sadness condition. 'The rape [attack] changed my life. I feel very sad since it happened. I often feel a lump in my throat, and I feel like doing nothing. I often have to clench my teeth to restrain myself from breaking into tears when I speak. I try to control myself, but sometimes I can't help it. I refuse to go out and do fun things with friends or family. When I think about how horrible it was, I feel like crying, I want to be comforted, and I wish I could return to being my old self. If I were to see him again, I think I would break down on the spot and be unable to do anything.'