

**Just an Instance of “Wrong Place at the Wrong Time” But Only for Some:
An Exercise in Victim Blame**

**Michèle Schlehofer
Salisbury University**

I am an Assistant Professor of Psychology at Salisbury University, a small (7,000 students) state school located in rural Maryland. One of the courses that I teach is an undergraduate course in social psychology. The course typically contains a mixture of sophomores, juniors, and seniors, all of whom have at least had our introductory level psychology course. Throughout the duration of the course, I encourage students to avoid making internal attributions for individuals' behavior, and instead think of individual behavior in an ecological framework which includes social, community, and systems-level influences. I have found that many students are accustomed to taking an individualistic approach when explaining social behavior. Unfortunately, this often results in “victim blame,” where students see individuals as the sole or primary cause of their own misfortune. Early on in my social psychology courses, I introduce a short, yet powerful, exercise to demonstrate victim blame and the just-world hypothesis (Rubin & Peplau, 1975). The exercise is borrowed and adapted from Smith (2002).

To start the exercise off, I distribute a short story for students to read. There are actually two versions of the story, but students are unaware of this fact. Both versions entail a description of a woman who was murdered by a mugger; however, the circumstances surrounding her being at the “wrong place at the wrong time” differ.

Version 1 reads as follows:

Once upon a time, a husband and a wife, named Sue, lived together in a part of the city separated by a river from the places of employment, shopping and entertainment. The husband had to work nights. Each evening he left his wife and took the ferry to work, returning in the morning.

The wife soon tired of this arrangement. Restless and lonely, she would take the next ferry into town and develop relationships with a series of lovers. Anxious to preserve her marriage, she always returned home before her husband. In fact, her relationships were always limited. When they threatened to become too intense, she would precipitate a quarrel with her current lover and begin a new relationship.

One night she caused such a quarrel with a man we will call Lover 1. He slammed the door in her face, and she started back to the ferry. Suddenly, she realized that she had forgotten to bring money for her return fare. She swallowed her pride and returned to Lover 1's apartment. But Lover 1 was vindictive and angry because of the quarrel. He slammed the door on his former lover, leaving her with no money. She remembered that a previous lover, who we shall call Lover 2, lived just a few doors away. Surely he would give her the ferry fare. However, Lover 2 was still so hurt from their old quarrel that he, too, refused her the money.

Now the hour was late and the woman was getting desperate. She rushed down to the ferry and pleaded with the ferryboat captain. He knew her as a regular customer. She asked if he could let her ride free and if she could pay the next night. But the captain insisted that rules were rules and that he could not let her ride without paying the fare.

Dawn would soon be breaking, and her husband would be returning from work. The woman remembered that there was a free bridge about a mile further on. But the road to the bridge was a dangerous one, known to be frequented by highwaymen. Nonetheless, she had to get home, so

she took the road. On the way a highwayman stepped out of the bushes and demanded her money. She told him she had none. He seized her. In the ensuing tussle, the highwayman stabbed the woman, and she died. Thus ends our story. There have been six characters: Husband, Wife, Lover 1, Lover 2, Ferryboat Captain, and Highwayman (Smith, 2002).

Version 2 is a slight adaptation of the story, depicting the victim not as an adulterer, but as a widow:

Once upon a time, a widow, named Mary, lived together in a part of the city separated by a river from the places of employment, shopping and entertainment. She had to work nights to support her three young children. Each evening she brought her children to a babysitter's house and took the ferry to work, returning in the morning. It was necessary for her to pick her children up directly after work so that the babysitter could go to her day job.

The wife soon tired of this arrangement. Unhappy with her circumstances, she was often quarrelsome with her employer and co-workers. Anxious to keep her job, which she needed to support her children, she always performed her work duties adequately and returned home in time to pick up her children from the babysitter.

One night she was on her way home and realized that she had forgotten to bring money for her return fare. She swallowed her pride and approached a co-worker whom we will call co-worker 1 to borrow money. But her co-worker was vindictive and angry because of a quarrel she had started at work. He slammed the door on her, leaving her with no money. She remembered that another co-worker, who we shall call co-worker 2, lived just a few doors away. Surely he would give her the ferry fare. However, this second co-worker was still so hurt from their old quarrel that he, too, refused her the money.

Now the hour was late and the woman was getting desperate. She rushed down to the ferry and pleaded with the ferryboat captain. He knew her as a regular customer. She asked if he could let her ride free and if she could pay the next night. But the captain insisted that rules were rules and that he could not let her ride without paying the fare.

Dawn would soon be breaking, and she needed to pick her children up from the babysitter's house before the babysitter left for work. The woman remembered that there was a free bridge about a mile further on. But the road to the bridge was a dangerous one, known to be frequented by highwaymen. Nonetheless, she had to get home, so she took the road. On the way a highwayman stepped out of the bushes and demanded her money. She told him she had none. He seized her. In the ensuing tussle, the highwayman stabbed the woman, and she died. Thus ends our story. There have been six characters: Babysitter, Wife, Co-Worker 1, Co-Worker 2, Ferryboat Captain, and Highwayman.

Following time to read the scenario, I ask students "Please list, in descending order of responsibility for this woman's death, all the characters. In other words, the one most responsible for her death is listed first; the next most responsible, second; and so forth." After students are done listing the characters, I ask everyone who read the story about "Sue" who listed the woman as either the most or 2nd most responsible person to raise their hands. I then ask everyone who read the story about "Mary" who listed the woman as either the most or 2nd most responsible person to raise their hands.

What generally happens is that those reading about "Sue" (the adulterer) tend to overwhelmingly list her as the most or 2nd most person responsible for her death. However, those reading about "Mary" (the widow) do not often list her as responsible for her own death.

Time permitting, I ask individuals to raise their hands if they listed the “highwayman” as most or 2nd most responsible for the woman’s death; again breaking down the results by version of the story (“Sue” or “Mary”). Those reading about “Sue” often do not list the highwayman as a responsible party; those reading about “Mary” generally see the highwayman as the primary person responsible for her death.

At this point, I explain the difference between the two scenarios, and ask students to discuss the reasoning behind their ratings. Students reading about “Sue” often give reasons justifying their belief in her personal responsibility by saying things such as, “she is the one who chose to cheat on her husband,” “she chose to be out late at night,” “she shouldn’t have been cheating on her husband,” and “her ex-lover (or ferry boat captain) has no responsibility to help her out.” Interestingly, some students reading about “Mary” agree that she is the one who chose to be out late at night; these students argue “she should have gotten a day job.” However, although believing that Mary made a bad decision in taking a night job, in my experience many students often still feel that the highwayman holds primary responsibility for her murder.

After revealing the differences between the scenarios, I introduce the concept of “victim blame” and explain how the “results” of our class demonstration demonstrate victim blame. Students definitely seem to understand the concept after this exercise, and can readily come up with their own examples.

One twist on this exercise that I have tried in the past is to only run students through Version 1 of the scenario (describing the adulterer) and then ask them if they think their perceptions of responsibility would change if the woman was instead a widow working the night shift. This approach did not work very well. Most students felt that their perceptions of responsibility would not differ (despite the empirical evidence to the contrary). It might be that students are hesitant to admit (or are just unable to foresee) that their reasoning might be inconsistent across the two scenarios.

In addition to demonstrating victim blame, I use this exercise to springboard into a discussion about defensive attributions. I tell the students that one way to psychologically cope with threatening information, such as reminders that one might be a crime victim if out alone late at night, is to minimize the information’s relevance by convincing ourselves that it could never happen to us. Related, the just world hypothesis predicts that we often assume that bad things happen to bad people, and good things happen to good people. By having this type of beliefs, we can explain away threatening anecdotal experiences with rationalizations that the victims “deserved” it, and since we are “good” (and supposedly do not act in this way), this negative event would not happen to us. Thus, there is a good reason why we rely so heavily on victim blame: it helps us maintain a positive outlook about our own lives and a positive view of the self. In my lecture I mention research that supports this belief empirically. For instance, Summers and Feldman (1984) found that many people see women who have been victims of domestic violence as responsible for their abuse; similarly, Abrams, Viki, Master, and Bohner (2003) found that rape survivors are often viewed as somehow having caused their rape experience. Once I introduce students to the concept, they are often quick to identify other

situations in which just-world beliefs are commonly held (e.g., homeless people; the unemployed).

Overall, I have found this to be a fun exercise for students that helps them understand victim blame and our natural tendency form defensive (and hence self-protective) attributions in order to maintain a positive view of the self.

References

- Abrams, D., Viki, G. T., Masser, B., & Bohner, G. (2003). Perceptions of stranger and acquaintance rape: The role of benevolent and hostile sexism in victim blame and rape proclivity. *Journal of Personality and Social Psychology, 84*, 111-125.
- Rubin, Z., & Peplau, L. A. (1975). Who believes in a just world? *Journal of Social Issues, 31*, 65-89.
- Smith, R. A. (2002). *Instructor's Resource Manual for Weiten's Psychology: Themes and Variations* (5th Ed.). Belmont, CA: Wadsworth (pp. 651-652, 677).
- Summers, G., & Feldman, N. S. (1984). Blaming the victim versus blaming the perpetrator: An attributional analysis of spouse abuse. *Journal of Social and Clinical Psychology, 2*, 339-347.