

# Emotional Disclosure and Victim Blaming

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Victim blaming occurs when people are unfairly held responsible for their misfortunes. According to just world theory, witnessing another's victimization threatens just world beliefs, which arouses distress. Victim blaming redeems just world beliefs, thereby reducing distress. However, negative emotions can also be resolved through emotional disclosure, suggesting that disclosure can prevent victim blaming. Two experiments confirmed this prediction. In Study 1 participants viewed a woman being victimized or a woman in a nonvictimizing conflict. Participants then disclosed or suppressed the emotions aroused by these scenes and 1 week later evaluated the woman they had viewed. Disclosure reduced blaming of the victim but did not affect blaming of the nonvictim. Further, the more distress participants disclosed, the less they blamed the victim. Study 2 replicated the primary results of Study 1 and also showed that (a) disclosure exclusively reduces blaming of victims; it does not moderate judgments of victimizers, and (b) the effects of disclosure on blaming applies across genders. These 2 studies confirm that victim blaming is a form of emotion management (per just world theory), and that emotional disclosure prevents blaming by supplying an alternative mode of emotion management. This research also suggests that emotional disclosure moderates social perception, in general.

*Keywords:* victim blaming, disclosure, suppression, social judgment

*Supplemental materials:* <http://dx.doi.org/10.1037/emo0000056.supp>

Victims are often blamed for their own misfortunes. Rape victims are accused of provoking their attacks, terminally ill patients are chastised for their lack of optimism or spiritual faith, and disaster survivors are faulted for living in vulnerable areas (Crawford, 1977; Pollard, 1992). For victims, this blaming is experienced as insult added to injury. It impugns their morals, demeans their judgment, and diminishes their right to sympathy at the height of their suffering (Chapple, Ziebland, & McPherson, 2004). Victim blaming contributes to victims' self-blame, self-silencing, and distrust of others. It also heightens their anxiety, depression, and post-traumatic stress disorder (Campbell & Raja, 2005).

Blaming those most deserving of compassion may appear paradoxical if not perverse. Yet it can serve an important psychological function, which is to protect belief in a just world. According to just world theory (Lerner, 1980), most people implicitly believe

that the world is fundamentally fair and rational and that misfortunate is inversely related to one's prudence, competence, and virtue. These "basic beliefs" (see Janoff-Bulman, 1989) provide the bedrock of psychological security people need to live purposeful lives in a world that is often unpredictable, malicious, and hazardous. Importantly, just world beliefs need not be consciously averred. According to Janoff-Bulman (2010), these beliefs arise in infancy and are built around early experiences of trust, security, and acceptance. Basic beliefs typically become salient during misfortune, when they are most starkly challenged. Indeed, what makes disasters traumatic is not just material loss or physical injury but how these events violate fundamental beliefs in a just, meaningful world (Janoff-Bulman, 1989; Silver, Boon, & Stones, 1983).

Encountering victims can threaten just world beliefs, which produces a discomforting dissonance (Lerner & Goldberg, 1999). Victim blaming reduces this dissonance. If victims' misfortunes can be ascribed to their own poor judgment or deficient character, then their hardships become compatible with a fair if sometimes harsh world. We might pity the drunk dancing near a precipice, but his self-induced peril does not challenge existential fairness and his mishaps therefore do not threaten our just world beliefs.

The just world balance sheet can be similarly rectified for encounters with genuine victims; people who are not responsible for their travails. This is done by unduly attributing victims' plights to their thoughts, characters, or actions; in short, by victim blaming. Consistent with this dissonance-reduction framing, victim blaming increases when other ways to sustain just world

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This article was published Online First March 23, 2015.

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We thank Elyse Castillo for help with data coding and interpretation, and Shashwat Dave, Khusboo Jani, Naomi Kim, and Amanda Riley for help administering this study.

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beliefs, such as helping victims or punishing victimizers, are absent (see Furnham, 2003; Hafer & Bègue, 2005; Lerner & Goldberg, 1999, and Lerner & Miller, 1978 for reviews).

### Victim Blaming as Emotion Regulation

Framing victim blaming as a psychological defense implicates the mediating role of emotions. Indeed, Lerner says he “assumed from the beginning that witnessing an injustice is stressful and emotionally arousing” (Lerner & Miller, 1978, p. 1045). Hafer and Bègue (2005), in a recent review of just world theory, also claim that victim blaming serves to temper disturbing emotions that victims arouse. Victim blaming therefore serves as a form of emotional management through reappraisal (e.g., Gross, 2002) in that it reconstitutes the cognitions from which threatening emotions arise. Yet, although emotions are central to the just world theory of victim blaming, their moderating effect on victim blaming has never been empirically confirmed (Hafer & Bègue, 2005). The present research was designed to do so.

### Resolving Emotions Through Disclosure

The just world approach to victim blaming suggests a bleak scenario. Witnessing another’s victimization threatens just world beliefs which produces disturbing negative emotions. To quell these emotions victims are blamed. However, victim blaming might not be so inevitable. If blaming is a response to negative emotions, and if these emotions can be otherwise resolved, then blaming should be diminished. The question then is how to resolve disturbing emotions before victim blaming occurs.

Emotional disclosure may supply the means to reroute the distress-to-blaming circuit. James Pennebaker’s extensive research on emotional disclosure and health demonstrates how emotions can be resolved through expression (Pennebaker, 1990). Pennebaker and others have shown that talking or writing about negative experiences improves physical health, emotional well-being, academic achievement (see Pennebaker & Chung, 2011), and even short-term memory (Klein & Boals, 2001). Notably, the kinds of events Pennebaker’s participants disclose conspicuously implicate just world beliefs such as sexual assaults, job loss, bereavement, betrayal, disasters, and serious illness (Pennebaker, 1990).

Harber and Pennebaker (1992) draw upon the discrepancy theory of emotion (e.g., Mandler, 1975; Simon, 1967) to explain how disclosure resolves emotions. According to discrepancy theory, emotions arise when new information conflicts with established beliefs (or schemas). Emotions subside when beliefs and information realign. Harber and Pennebaker argue that disclosure promotes this realignment. By translating disturbing events into language disclosure reduces the imagistic, emotive whole of a traumatic event into smaller, more easily parsed propositions. Beliefs are thereby gradually realigned to events, discrepancies are reduced, and the emotions arising from belief/event discrepancies therefore dissipate.

Consistent with this emotional assimilation model, disclosures are most effective when they address both thoughts and feelings (thus facilitating emotion/belief alignment) rather than only thoughts or only feelings (Pennebaker & Beall, 1986). Thought intrusions aroused by disturbing events diminish after emotional disclosure (Klein & Boals, 2001), which also indicates the cogni-

tive resolution that disclosure affords. Likewise, traumatic symptoms often abate when new meanings are obtained (Silver et al., 1983), indicating that relief arises from realigning valued beliefs with challenging information. In sum, disclosure appears to reduce disturbing emotions by reconciling the belief/event discrepancies that create them (e.g., Mandler, 1975).

If emotions induce blaming (as Lerner proposed), and if disclosure relieves emotions (as Pennebaker has shown), then disclosure should reduce victim blaming. The present research tests whether emotional disclosure has this moderating effect on victim blaming.

### Evidence That Disclosure Moderates Social Judgment

The effect of emotional disclosure on social perception is largely unexplored. However, our research on emotional disclosure and forgiveness indicates that disclosure affords more equitable judgments (Harber & Wenberg, 2005). In these studies, participants recalled a person who had betrayed them, a neutral person, or a friend. “Disclosure” participants then wrote their thoughts and feelings regarding their assigned target (e.g., betrayer, acquaintance, friend), and “suppression” participants wrote only factually and unemotionally about their target. All participants then rated how close they felt toward their respective targets.

As predicted, participants who disclosed subsequently *felt closer* to a betrayer than did those who suppressed. Confronting emotions played a central role in this redeemed closeness; the more hostility participants expressed toward their betrayers, the closer they then felt toward them. Disclosure had no effect on attitudes toward friends or neutral contacts, people unlikely to arouse the strong negative emotions that disclosure resolves. To date, there has been no other research relating emotional disclosure to social judgment.

### Present Studies

The present studies had two goals. The first was to show that emotional disclosure reduces victim blaming. If emotional disclosure does reduce victim blaming, then the central role of emotions in Lerner’s just world theory of victim blaming would, for the first time, be demonstrated. Demonstrating that emotional disclosure reduces victim blaming would also provide additional evidence that disclosure affects social perception, generally.

The second goal was to show that disclosure *exclusively* affects judgments of victims, and that it has no effect on nonvictims or on victimizers. Nonvictims—even if engaged in conflict—do not represent threats to just world beliefs and therefore do not arouse the emotions that produce belief-protective blaming. Attitudes toward victimizers should also be unaffected by emotional disclosure, even though such people can generate very negative emotions. This is because victimizers do not necessarily threaten just world beliefs. A just world can include bad people (as well as disease agents, natural disasters, and other hazards). However, in a just world the havoc wreaked by such people should be constrained by the prudence, competence, and character of potential victims, or by the intercession of others. Victimization that occurs despite these constraints, to an innocent victim who is not rescued or avenged, represents a profound just world threat, and thus motivates victim blaming. If disclosure exclusively reconciles the emotions created by just world threats, then disclosure should exclusively reduce blaming of victims. It should have no effect on victimizers or on anyone else.

Demonstrating that disclosure moderates judgments of victims, and only victims, would confirm the emotional dynamics that just world theory proposes. It would also provide valuable clues to the mechanisms underlying emotional disclosure.

### Study 1

Study 1 tested whether emotional disclosure moderates the blaming of victims, but not of embattled nonvictims. "Victim" participants viewed a young woman being sexually assaulted (Jodie Foster in *The Accused*), and "nonvictim" participants viewed documentary footage of Margaret Thatcher debating economic policy. After viewing their assigned movie clips disclosure participants freely expressed their thoughts and feelings about what they had seen, and "suppression" participants wrote only about surface facts without expressing any feelings or opinions. One week later participants evaluated the woman they viewed (i.e., the rape victim or Mrs. Thatcher). Disclosure was predicted to moderate blaming of the rape victim, but not of Mrs. Thatcher.

### Participants

Participants ( $n = 55$ ) were college undergraduates (mean age = 21.14,  $SD = 5.44$ ) who received partial course credit as compensation. The sample consisted mostly of women (78.2%) and was ethnically diverse (African American = 11%, Asian = 26%, Hispanic = 20%, Middle East = 5%, White = 24%, and Other = 5%). Participants were run individually in two separate 30-min. sessions. All experimental conditions were counterbalanced.

### Procedure

Participants were taken to a semidarkened room and seated in front of a large (27 in.) Toshiba Model 27A33 TV monitor with feed from a Zenith XBV243 DVD player. They were told that the study concerned the effects of time on recall, a bogus explanation that justified the experimental procedures without revealing the actual purpose of the study. Participants were told that they would watch a brief (5 min.) movie clip and then provide written impressions of this movie. They would return in 1 week to provide further impressions. The experimenter then activated the DVD player, darkened the room, and left participants alone to view their assigned videos. Participants indicated when their assigned movie ended by pressing a buzzer.

**Victim versus nonvictim film clips.** Participants watched one of two videos. "Victim condition" participants viewed a scene from *The Accused* (Jaffe, Lansing, & Kaplan, 1988), a dramatic movie loosely based on an actual gang rape that occurred in a Massachusetts bar. In this scene a young woman named Sarah, played by Jodie Foster, flirts with and dances with one of the patrons. This man becomes steadily more aggressive in his advances, which Sarah first playfully rebuffs and then with increasing alarm and effort attempts to halt. The man ignores Sarah's protests, places Sarah upon a pinball machine and rapes her while other bar patrons passively watch or cheer him on. Several of these men then join the assault upon Sarah, who struggles desperately against them.

The scene clearly portrays Sarah as an unwilling crime victim. However, it also shows Sarah drinking heavily, wearing revealing

clothing, and dancing in a suggestive manner. These aspects of Sarah's behavior present a veneer of moral ambiguity surrounding her assault. None of Sarah's actions justify what is done to her. However, for viewers motivated to blame her Sarah's dress, demeanor, and behavior may supply the means to do so.

"Nonvictim condition" participants viewed an excerpt from *Thatcher: The Downing Street Years* (British Broadcasting Corporation, 1993) depicting British Prime Minister Margaret Thatcher's economic policy conflicts. The scene shows Mrs. Thatcher arguing her position and her political adversaries challenging her. This scene was selected because like *The Accused* it depicts a lone woman in conflict against a number of men. Also, Mrs. Thatcher's demeanor—inflexible, scoffing, and argumentative—could provide a basis for blaming. However, Mrs. Thatcher is clearly not a victim and her struggles, though intense, do not challenge just world beliefs. Consequently, suppressing or expressing feelings about the *Thatcher* clip were not expected to affect evaluations of Mrs. Thatcher.

After signaling that their film clip had ended, participants waited 1 min while the experimenter supposedly gathered materials for the next task. In fact, this pause allowed participants to ruminate on their assigned movies and, especially for *Accused* participants, to more fully register the distressing aspects of the assault they had just viewed.

**Writing tasks.** Following the 1-min consolidation period, participants were asked to complete a brief writing exercise. This exercise was modeled after Pennebaker's writing and disclosure paradigm (Pennebaker, 1994) and has been employed in previous studies on disclosure and social judgment (Harber & Wenberg, 2005). Participants in the disclosure condition received written instructions to freely express their deepest thoughts and feelings about their assigned movie. Participants in the "suppression" condition were instructed to write only about superficial details of their assigned movie, such as how many people were in the movie and what these people were wearing. Suppression participants were explicitly forbidden from disclosing any personal feelings or opinions concerning their assigned movies.

All participants were given a sheet of lined paper on which to complete their writing tasks and 15 min. to complete their writing in private. They were instructed to write continuously and to not worry about spelling, grammar, or other stylistics. After completing their writing tasks, participants were informed to return in 1 week to complete the study, during which time they were to refrain from discussing their assigned movie clips. For participants in the victim/suppression condition, this delay would likely prolong exposure to emotions that *The Accused* evoked, leading to a heightened need to victim-blame. It would likewise permit negative attitudes toward Sarah to crystallize. However, this "fermentation of distress" was not expected to occur for the victim/disclose participants, who had an opportunity to resolve their emotions.

**Target evaluation.** One week after Session 1 participants evaluated the woman they had viewed (i.e., "Sarah" in *The Accused* or Mrs. Thatcher in *Thatcher*). Participants used 5-point Likert scales to rate how much this woman: had shown bad judgment, could have done more for herself, was sympathetic and likable, was irresponsible, was moral, was someone participants could identify with, and whether she had caused her own difficulties. Scales ranged from 1 = *not at all* to 5 = *a great degree*. Participants also completed a set of manipulation check items

addressing how much they emotionally disclosed in the writing task, whether they experienced persistent thoughts and feelings aroused by their assigned movie, and which emotions they currently experienced when recalling their assigned movie.

The survey packet also included the Just World Scale (Lipkus, 1991) to determine whether explicit just world beliefs moderated outcomes, and a General Background Survey that collected information on participants' gender, age, and ethnicity, and whether the participants themselves or anyone close to participants had been victims of serious physical assaults. After completing the survey packet, participants were fully debriefed, thanked for their contributions, and dismissed.

## Data Management

Measures of victim blaming, completeness of disclosures, persisting and current responses to movies, and histories of victimization were consolidated into summary scales. Scales were formed by summing and averaging component items, as follows:

**Target blaming.** The seven items related to blaming comprised a Woman Blaming subscale,  $\alpha = .75$ .<sup>1</sup>

**Disclosure complete.** Three items concerned the degree to which participants felt they had fully disclosed the thoughts and feelings evoked by their assigned movies. These items included "degree completely expressed what you wanted to say," "how completely did writing describe how you felt," and "to what degree did the writing task feel restricting" (reverse coded). These items comprised a Disclosure Complete subscale,  $\alpha = .82$ .

**Persisting effects.** Six survey items concerned the enduring emotional effect that movie clips had on participants. These addressed degree of persistent voluntary thoughts, persistent and intrusive thoughts, sleep disturbance, being bothered by the movie, desires to talk about the movie, and feeling that the movie will "stay with you." These items comprised a Persisting Effects subscale,  $\alpha = .78$ .

**Negative emotions.** Five survey items concerned negative emotions evoked by recalling the movie, including sadness, anger, happiness (reverse coded), fear, and disgust. These items comprised a Negative Emotions subscale,  $\alpha = .85$ .

**History of victimization.** Participants were identified as having a personal history of victimization if they reported that either they, or someone close to them, had ever been the victim of a physical assault. Fifty-five percent reported personal victimization, thus defined.

## Manipulation Checks

**Responses to movie scene.** Victim participants (i.e., those who viewed *The Accused*) reported more persisting effects arising from their movie ( $M = 2.10$ ,  $SD = 0.91$ ) than did nonvictim participants (i.e., those who viewed *Thatcher*;  $M = 1.56$ ,  $SD = 0.45$ ),  $F(1, 49) = 10.06$ ,  $p = .003$ . Victim participants also experienced more negative emotions when recalling their assigned movie ( $M = 3.31$ ,  $SD = 0.93$ ) than did nonvictim participants ( $M = 1.95$ ,  $SD = 0.44$ ),  $F(1, 51) = 25.27$ ,  $p < .001$ . These results confirm that *The Accused* was more emotionally disturbing than was *Thatcher*.

**Disclosure compliance.** Participants wrote extensively, averaging 236 words ( $SD = 80.48$ ), which is equivalent to one page of

double-spaced, typed text. This indicates a high level of engagement with the task. Disclosure participants wrote more words ( $M = 257.41$ ,  $SD = 82.66$ ) than did suppression participants ( $M = 214.81$ ,  $SD = 73.68$ ),  $F(1, 50) = 3.95$ ,  $p = .05$ . Victim participants tended to write more ( $M = 250.04$ ,  $SD = 89.65$ ) than did nonvictim participants ( $M = 219.95$ ,  $SD = 66.49$ ), but not significantly so,  $F(1, 50) = 2.67$ ,  $p = .14$ . Disclosure participants, overall, reported that they expressed their thoughts and feelings more completely ( $M = 4.00$ ,  $SD = 0.79$ ) than did suppression participants ( $M = 2.43$ ,  $SD = 1.14$ ),  $F(1, 51) = 32.87$ ,  $p < .001$ , further indicating that disclosure instructions were understood and followed.

## Demographic Effects on Blaming

Age was unrelated to blaming,  $r(52) = .06$ ,  $p = .70$ , and so was ethnicity,  $F(1, 45) = 1.67$ ,  $p = .16$ . There were too few men to reliably test for gender effects, although previous research shows men tend to blame more than women (Pollard, 1992).

Victimization history affected blaming. Among victim condition participants, those who had themselves been victims of a physical assault or knew of a close friend/relative who had been victimized ( $n = 16$ ) were less likely to blame Sarah, the victim ( $M = 2.64$ ,  $SD = 0.82$ ) than were participants with no such history of victimization ( $M = 3.41$ ,  $SD = 0.87$ ),  $F(1, 27) = 5.98$ ,  $p = .02$ . This result suggests that those who have themselves been victimized may empathize more with other victims.<sup>2</sup> Victimization history did not affect blaming of Mrs. Thatcher,  $F(1, 22) = 2.14$ ,  $p = .16$ .

## Principal Analyses

The main prediction of this study was that emotional disclosure would reduce blaming but only among victim participants. This prediction was tested in a 2 (Movie condition)  $\times$  2 (Writing condition) analysis of variance (ANOVA). Results confirmed the predicted interaction,  $F(1, 49) = 5.58$ ,  $p = .022$ ,  $\eta^2 = .102$ ,  $B = 0.96$ , 95% CI [0.14, 1.77] (see Figure 1). Simple effects tests showed, as predicted, that emotional disclosure only reduced blaming among victim participants (i.e., those who viewed the sexual assault). Victim participants who suppressed their emotions blamed Sarah, the victim, more than victim participants who disclosed their emotions,  $t(27) = 2.21$ ,  $p = .04$ ,  $d = 0.82$ ,  $M_{Diff} = 0.71$ , 95% CI [0.05, 1.37]. Blaming by victim/suppress participants also exceeded blaming by nonvictim/suppress participants,  $t(25) = 2.25$ ,  $p = .02$ ,  $d = 1.06$ ,  $M_{Diff} = 0.71$ , 95% CI [0.14, 1.28], and trended toward greater blaming than displayed by nonvictim/disclose participants,  $t(27) = 1.68$ ,  $p = .11$ ,  $d = 0.64$ ,  $M_{Diff} = 0.47$ , 95% CI [-0.10, 1.04].

## Disclosure Content

The interaction of victim condition and disclosure condition confirmed that disclosure selectively reduces victim blaming. In

<sup>1</sup> One item, "was sympathetic and likable (reverse coded)," was omitted because it diminished scale reliability.

<sup>2</sup> Personal victimization does not always induce empathy toward victims, and can sometimes lead to heightened aggression (Yeung & Leadbeater, 2007).



order to better understand this result, the nature and extent of participants' writing was examined.<sup>3</sup> Four dimensions were extracted from subjects' writing samples for this purpose:

1. Generalized distress: Negative emotions without a particular target, including feelings of shock, sadness, and confusion, plus overall intensity of emotional reaction.
2. Anger: Anger directed at abusers, bystanders, the world at large, or others.
3. Boredom: Explicit statements of boredom, and other signs of disengagement from or disinterest in the events depicted in the movie.
4. Identification with the heroine: Expressions of sympathy and/or solidarity with the heroine, and favorable comparisons participants made between the heroine and themselves.

### Content Differences by Experimental Condition

Expressions of distress, anger, and identification were selectively high among victim/disclose participants. Boredom was selectively high among nonvictim/disclose participants. These results reconfirm that the movies had their intended emotional effects and also that participants faithfully followed experimental instructions.

### Relation Between Disclosure Dimensions and Blaming

The four disclosure dimensions were correlated to blaming of the victim (Sarah) and the nonvictim (Mrs. Thatcher). These were partial correlations with gender,<sup>4</sup> personal victimization history, and just world beliefs entered as control variables, because these variables were related to blaming. Correlations were computed only for disclosure participants because suppression participants, in keeping with instructions, rarely expressed these thoughts and feelings in their writing samples.

Table 1 presents these partial correlations. For victim participants, disclosing more generalized distress led to less blaming (as a marginal effect). Anger and identification were unrelated to

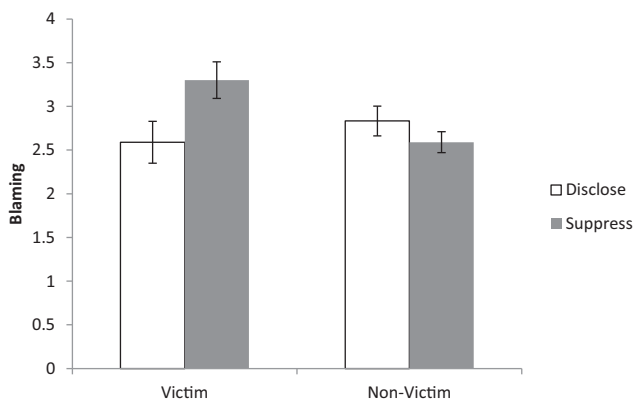


Figure 1. Blaming a victim or a nonvictim due to disclosure or suppression, Study 1.

Table 1  
Correlations Between Disclosure Scales and Blaming, Accused/Disclose and Thatcher/Disclose, Study 1

Disclosure/Blaming correlations	Accused/disclose (df = 8)		Thatcher/disclose (df = 8)		Difference between correlations	
	r	p	r	p	z	p
Distress/Woman blame	-.55	.10	.47	.18	-1.78	.08
Anger/Woman blame	-.29	.42	.61	.06	-1.59	.11
Boredom/Woman blame	—	—	-.50	.14	—	—
Identification/Woman blame	-.24	.51	-.08	.83	0.31	.61

Note. Because boredom was uniformly rated as *none at all* for accused/disclose participants, correlations between boredom and blaming were not conducted for this condition.

blaming among victim participants. Among nonvictim participants, there was a marginal and positive correlation between expressed anger and blaming. This may reflect participants' antipathy toward Mrs. Thatcher as well as toward her political opponents.

### Amount Written

If disclosure moderates victim blaming then more complete disclosures might lead to less blaming. We examined this in a moderated multiple regression (MMR; Aiken & West, 1991). Experimental conditions were transformed into three sets of dummy variables, with victim/disclose being the comparison condition in each set. Interaction terms were the cross-products of dummy variables and words written. These variables were regressed on blaming in a hierarchical model, with all three dummy variables entered first, words written entered next, and the three interaction terms entered last. The amount written moderated blaming, and this effect differed by the experimental condition,  $\Delta R^2 = .37$ ,  $\Delta F(7, 44) = 7.92$ ,  $p < .001$  (see Figure 2).

For victim/disclose participants, the more they wrote, the less they blamed,  $b = -.008$  (.002)  $t = -4.30$ ,  $p < .001$ , 95% CI ( $b$ ) [-0.011, -0.004]. For victim/suppress participants, the more they wrote, the more they blamed,  $b = .007$  (.002)  $t = 4.11$ ,  $p < .001$ , 95% CI ( $b$ ) = [0.004, 0.011]. Recall that suppression participants could write only about the objective features of the event, but not the thoughts and feelings this event produced. These constraints may have been like reexperiencing the event, heightening rather than resolving disturbing emotions, therefore lead to more extreme victim blaming.

The amount written had no effect on blaming of Margaret Thatcher, regardless of disclosure condition; Thatcher/Suppress:  $b = .001$  ( $SE = .003$ )  $t = 0.32$ ,  $p = .75$ , 95% CI ( $b$ ) [-0.004, 0.006], Thatcher/Disclose:  $b = .003$  ( $SE = .002$ )  $t = 1.36$ ,  $p = .15$ , 95% CI ( $b$ ) [-0.002, 0.008]. Mrs. Thatcher was not a victim and should therefore not arouse emotions demanding resolution. The

<sup>3</sup> Details about coding methods, reliability analyses, and subscale formation related to these supplemental analyses are available in the supplemental materials.

<sup>4</sup> Gender was included because of documented gender differences in blaming (Deitz et al., 1984).

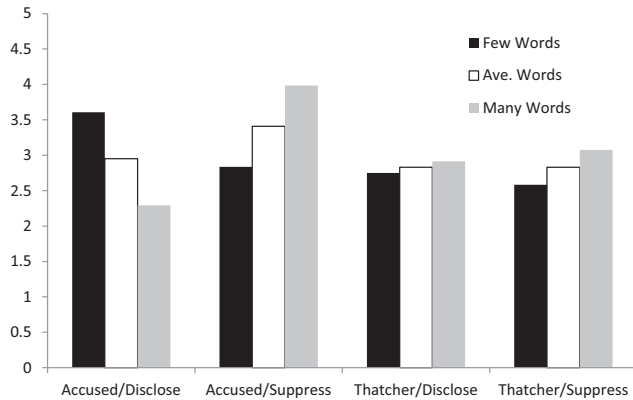


Figure 2. Effect of words written on blaming a victim or a nonvictim, due to disclosure or suppression, Study 1.

amount written should therefore have little effect in such conditions, and results showed it did not.

### Individual Differences in Just World Beliefs

Just world beliefs were positively related to increased blaming among victim participants,  $r(29) = .53$ ,  $p = .003$ , but were unrelated to blaming among nonvictim participants,  $r(24) = -.27$ ,  $p = .21$ . These results provide further evidence that *The Accused*, but not *Thatcher*, represented a threat to basic beliefs. However, moderated multiple regression showed that just world beliefs did not alter the effects of disclosure on blaming among *The Accused* participants,  $b = 0.027$  (0.26),  $t = 0.10$ , 95% CI ( $b$ ) [-0.49, 0.54]. Thus, emotional disclosure reduced victim blaming regardless of participants' explicit just world beliefs.

### Discussion

As predicted, emotional disclosure moderated blaming of a victim, but not of an embattled nonvictim. This result provides the first direct confirmation that victim blaming is a form of emotion management, as just world theory proposes. It also demonstrates that disclosure can moderate social judgment more generally. Internal analyses reinforced the role that emotions play in victim blaming. The more distress that victim/disclose participants expressed, and the more they wrote, the less they blamed the victim.

### Study 2

Study 1 confirmed that emotional disclosure reduces blaming of victims but does not affect judgment of nonvictims. However, several important questions remained unanswered. Study 2 was designed to address these.

### Does Disclosure Reduce Blaming of Victims Only, or of Perpetrators as Well as Victims?

According to Lerner and Miller (1978), victim blaming arises from the discomfort created by threats to just world beliefs. Victims are blamed because they are the unique source of this discomfort. An alternative explanation is that victim blaming arises from a more generalized distress, which then colors all those

associated with victimization, perpetrators as well as victims. If so, then victim blaming might arise from simple misattribution (Schachter & Singer, 1962), such that witnesses derogate anyone associated with assaults and the negative emotions assaults arouse.

If victim blaming arises from a generalized distress that taints all those involved in victimization, then alleviating this distress should likewise benefit all associated with it—perpetrators as well as victims. However, if blaming arises only from the just-world threats that victims represent, and if disclosure selectively addresses these threats, then disclosure should only affect judgments of victims, and no one else involved in victimizations. Study 2 tested whether disclosure has these targeted effects and reduces blaming of victims but not of victimizers.

### Gender and Victim Blaming

Does disclosure differently affect men's and women's propensity to victim-blame? Victim blaming studies generally show men to blame more than women (Bell, Kuriloff, & Lottes, 2006; Pol-lard, 1992), but Acock and Ireland (1983) report no gender difference. Evidence of gender differences in disclosure is more mixed. Snell, Miller, and Belk (1988) report that men disclose less than women, but Epstein, Sloan, and Marx (2005) report no gender differences in willingness to disclose. The sexes appear to equally benefit from disclosure (Esterling, Antoni, Fletcher, Margulies, & Schneiderman, 1994), suggesting that disclosure might affect blaming equally across genders. Study 1 did not recruit enough male participants to determine if gender affects the moderating effect of disclosure on blaming. Study 2 did so.

### Reliability of Disclosure Effects on Victim Blaming

The moderating effect of emotional disclosure on blaming is a novel finding. A third goal for Study 2 was to demonstrate that this result is reproducible.

### Participants

Participants ( $n = 90$ ) were college undergraduates (mean age = 21.00,  $SD$  5.63) who received partial course credit as compensation. The sample consisted of 46 men and 44 women, and was ethnically diverse (African American = 14%, Asian = 31%, Hispanic = 23%, Middle Eastern = 6%, White = 13%, and Other = 12%). Participants were run individually in two separate 30-min. sessions. Men and women were assigned to experimental conditions in a counterbalanced order, so that they were equally represented in all conditions. Half of the participants (50.6%) reported that they, or a close associate, had been physically assaulted.

### Procedure

Study 2 was nearly identical to Study 1, with one important modification. A set of *adversary blaming* questions was added to the follow-up questionnaire and was worded so as to apply to the men in *The Accused* and to the men in *Thatcher*. These adversary blaming questions addressed the degree to which the men in the movies: could have done more to reduce the conflict, made the conflict worse, were at all excusable, wanted this conflict to happen, got carried away, and were basically bad people. The

adversary blaming questions immediately followed the victim blaming questions.

### Data Management

Subscales were developed using Study 1 procedures. Manipulation checks thus derived included *persisting effects* of the movie ( $\alpha = .83$ ), *negative emotions* the movie currently evokes ( $\alpha = .86$ ), and *disclosure completeness* ( $\alpha = .82$ ).<sup>5</sup> The two principal outcome subscales measured *heroine blaming* ( $\alpha = .68$ ) and *adversary blaming* ( $\alpha = .91$ ). Heroine blaming (blaming Sarah or Mrs. Thatcher) and adversary blaming (blaming Sarah's assailants or Mrs. Thatcher's opponents) were both converted to standardized scores in order to permit comparisons between them.

### Manipulation Checks

**Responses to movie scene.** *The Accused* was experienced as more disturbing than *Thatcher*. Victim participants, who viewed *The Accused*, reported more persistent negative emotions ( $M = 2.20$ ,  $SD = 0.82$ ) compared with nonvictim participants, who viewed *Thatcher* ( $M = 1.38$ ,  $SD = 0.34$ ),  $F(1, 85) = 37.29$ ,  $p < .001$ . Recalling their assigned movie also generated more negative emotions among victim participants ( $M = 3.55$ ,  $SD = 0.77$ ) than among nonvictim participants ( $M = 1.86$ ,  $SD = 0.44$ ),  $F(1, 85) = 159.71$ ,  $p < .001$ . In sum, the movies had their intended emotional affects, much as they did in Study 1.

**Disclosure compliance.** As in Study 1, participants wrote extensively, averaging 244 words ( $SD = 90.45$ ), which is very similar to Study 1. As in Study 1, disclosure participants wrote more ( $M = 263.00$ ,  $SD = 100.06$ ) than suppression participants ( $M = 223.47$ ,  $SD = 74.40$ ),  $F(1, 86) = 5.34$ ,  $p = .02$ . Victim participants wrote more ( $M = 287.33$ ,  $SD = 84.07$ ) than nonvictim participants ( $M = 200.89$ ,  $SD = 75.24$ ),  $F(1, 86) = 26.82$ ,  $p < .001$ .

Participants' self-reports mirror these word counts. Disclosure participants reported that they more completely expressed their thoughts and feelings ( $M = 2.95$ ,  $SD = 0.68$ ) than did suppression participants ( $M = 1.88$ ,  $SD = 0.66$ ),  $F(1, 85) = 62.10$ ,  $p < .001$ . Experimental conditions interacted such that victim/disclosure participants reported disclosing more completely than did other participants,  $F(1, 85) = 7.04$ ,  $p = .01$ . This interaction likely occurred because the strong emotions aroused by *The Accused* generated greater disclosure motives, as was intended.

**Engagement by gender:** The amount written by men ( $M = 239.41$ ,  $SD = 101.32$ ) and by women ( $M = 249.02$ ,  $SD = 78.38$ ) did not differ,  $F(1, 88) = 0.25$ ,  $p < .62$ . However, in their self-reported extent of disclosure men ( $M = 2.82$ ,  $SD = 0.94$ ) felt they had disclosed marginally more than did women ( $M = 2.50$ ,  $SD = 0.73$ ),  $F(1, 88) = 3.18$ ,  $p < .08$ .

### Demographic Effects on Blaming

Age was unrelated to blaming of Sarah, the victim in *The Accused*,  $r(45) = .01$ ,  $p = .93$ , or to blaming of Mrs. Thatcher,  $r(45) = .13$ ,  $p = .39$ . Age was negatively related to blaming of the attackers in *The Accused*,  $r(45) = -.37$ ,  $p = .01$ , but was unrelated to blaming of Mrs. Thatcher's adversaries,  $r(45) = -.01$ ,  $p = .96$ . Ethnicity was unrelated to blaming of either Sarah in *The Accused*,

$F(5, 38) = 0.36$ ,  $p = .87$ , or her attackers,  $F(5, 38) = 0.44$ ,  $p = .82$ , and it was unrelated to blaming of Mrs. Thatcher,  $F(5, 39) = 1.17$ ,  $p = .34$ , or her adversaries,  $F(5, 39) = 0.75$ ,  $p = .59$ . Gender, which was a particular focus of this study, is discussed in detail below.

Personal experience with victimization was, overall, unrelated to blaming Sarah or her attackers,  $p$  values  $> .05$ . However, when restricted to women (who predominated in Study 1), participants who experienced victimization were more likely to blame Sarah's attackers,  $M = 1.03$ ,  $SD = 0.20$ , than those who had not experienced victimization,  $M = 0.64$ ,  $SD = 0.40$ ,  $F(1, 19) = 8.76$ ,  $p = .008$ . In contrast with Study 1, there was no difference among victimized and nonvictimized female participants in their blaming of Sarah,  $p = .85$ . Victimized participants, across both genders, blamed Mrs. Thatcher less ( $M = -.49$ ,  $SD = 0.80$ ) than did nonvictimized participants ( $M = .02$ ,  $SD = 0.79$ ),  $F(1, 40) = 4.23$ ,  $p = .05$ . Personal victimization did not affect blaming of Mrs. Thatcher's adversaries,  $p = .39$ .

### Principal Analyses

A primary goal of Study 2 was to demonstrate that disclosure selectively moderates blaming of victims but does not affect blaming of perpetrators. This prediction was tested in a 2 (Movie condition)  $\times$  2 (Writing condition)  $\times$  2 (Target condition: heroine vs. adversaries) mixed design ANOVA. The three-way interaction was significant,  $F(1, 86) = 6.70$ ,  $p = .01$ ,  $\eta^2 = .07$ . Separate two-way interactions examined how movie and writing conditions affected blaming of the targeted women, the women's adversaries, and the degree to which the women were blamed relative to their male adversaries.

**Disclosure and blaming of female targets.** Emotional disclosure differentially moderated blaming of Sarah (the victim) and Mrs. Thatcher (the nonvictim),  $F(1, 86) = 5.22$ ,  $p = .03$ ,  $\eta^2 = .06$ ,  $b = -.91$ , 95% CI  $[-1.70, -0.12]$  (see Figure 3). Simple effects tests showed that disclosure only reduced blaming of Sarah and had no effect on blaming of Mrs. Thatcher. Victim/suppress participants were more likely to blame Sarah than were victim/disclose participants,  $t(43) = -2.33$ ,  $p = .03$ ,  $d = 0.70$ ,  $M_{Diff} = -0.73$ , 95% CI  $[-1.37, -0.10]$ . Blaming of Sarah by victim/suppress participants also exceeded blaming of Mrs. Thatcher by nonvictim/suppress participants,  $t(41) = 3.91$ ,  $p = .001$ ,  $d = 1.19$ ,  $M_{Diff} = 1.02$ , 95% CI  $[0.49, 1.54]$ ; and by nonvictim/disclose participants,  $t(42) = 3.09$ ,  $p = .004$ ,  $d = 0.93$ ,  $M_{Diff} = 0.84$ , 95% CI  $[0.29, 1.40]$ . Disclosing or suppressing had no effect on evaluations of Mrs. Thatcher,  $t(43) = 0.72$ ,  $p = .48$ ,  $d = 0.22$ ,  $M_{Diff} = 0.17$ , 95% CI  $[-0.31, 0.66]$ . These results closely mirror those from Study 1 and demonstrate that the effect of emotional disclosure on victim blaming is reliable.

**Blaming the victim versus blaming the assailants.** Disclosure moderated blaming of Sarah, the victim in *The Accused*, but did not affect blaming of Sarah's assailants,  $F(1, 43) = 5.73$ ,  $p = .02$ ,  $\eta^2 = .12$  (see Figure 4). Victim/disclose participants blamed Sarah less than they blamed her assailants,  $t(23) = -4.40$ ,  $p < .001$ ,  $d = 1.13$ ,  $M_{Diff} = 0.96$ , 95% CI  $[0.51, 1.41]$ . Victim/suppress participants did not blame Sarah less than her assailants,  $t(20) =$

<sup>5</sup> The item regarding "how much did you completely express what you wanted to say" was removed because it weakened the overall subscale.

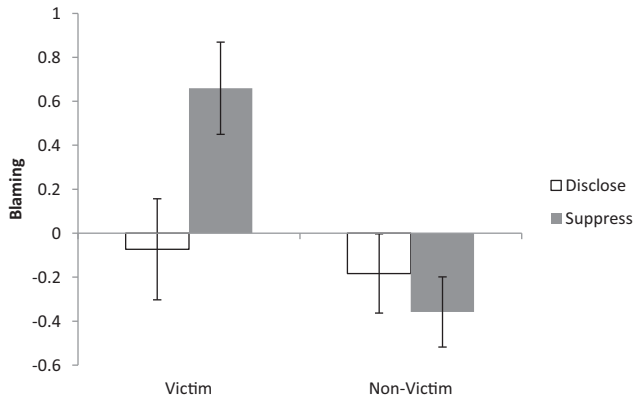


Figure 3. Blaming of victim or a nonvictim due to disclosure or suppression, Study 2.

0.92,  $p = .37$ ,  $d = .30$ ,  $M_{Diff} = 0.21$ , 95% CI [-0.26, 0.68]. These findings provide critical evidence that disclosure selectively reduces blaming of victims, and does not reduce blaming others involved in victimization.

**Disclosure and blaming of women's adversaries.** Not surprisingly, the men in *The Accused* were evaluated as much more blameworthy than those in the Thatcher documentary,  $t(88) = 17.45$ ,  $p < .001$ ,  $d = 3.68$ ,  $M_{Diff} = 1.75$ , 95% CI [1.55, 1.95]. Emotional disclosure did not affect blaming of the women's adversaries, either as a main effect across movie conditions,  $t(88) = 0.09$ ,  $p = .93$ ,  $d = 0.02$ ,  $M_{Diff} = 0.02$ , 95% CI [-0.44, 0.40], or as a moderator interacting with movie condition,  $F(1, 86) = 0.57$ ,  $p = .45$ ,  $\text{Eta}^2 = .007$ ,  $B = 0.15$ , 95% CI [-0.25, 0.55]. These null results further indicate that, as predicted, emotional disclosure selectively moderates blaming of victims and not of victimizers—even though victimizers, like victims, arouse powerful emotions.

**Gender and blaming.** Participants' gender had a main effect on blaming Sarah (the victim), such that men blamed her more than did women,  $t(43) = 2.33$ ,  $p = .03$ ,  $d = 0.69$ ,  $M_{Diff} = 0.73$ , 95% CI [0.10, 1.36] (see Figure 5). This finding is consistent with past research on gender and victim blaming (Bell et al., 1994; Pollard, 1992). However, this gender difference was not moderated by disclosure,  $F(1, 41) = 0.08$ ,  $p = .78$ ,  $\text{Eta}^2 = .002$ ,  $B = 0.17$ ,

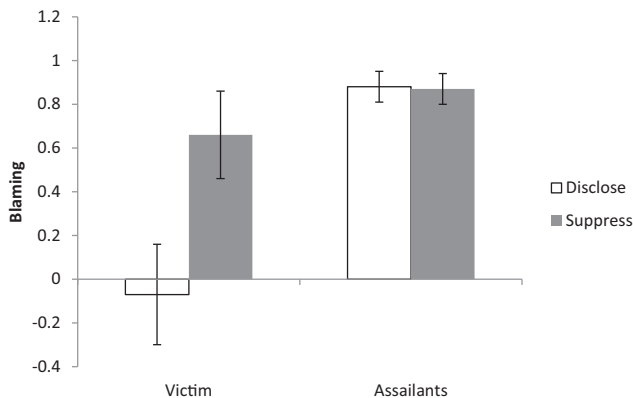


Figure 4. Blaming of victim and assailants due to disclosure or suppression, Study 2.

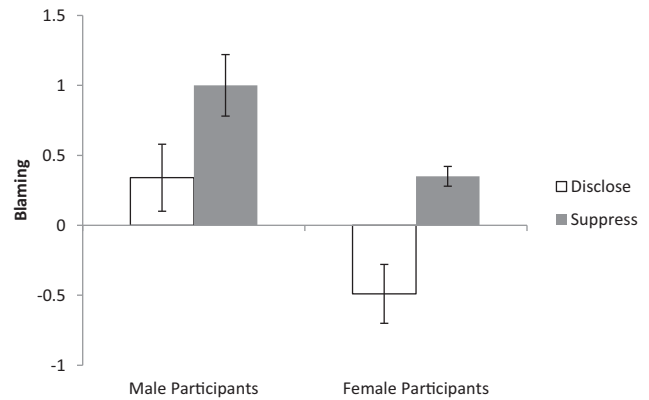


Figure 5. Blaming of assault victim due to participant gender, Study 2.

95% CI [-1.05, 1.38]. Thus disclosure reduced victim blaming across genders.

Participant gender did not affect blaming of male assailants in *The Accused*,  $t(43) = 0.42$ ,  $p = .68$ ,  $d = 0.13$ ,  $M_{Diff} = 0.04$ , 95% CI [-0.16, 0.24]. However, male participants who disclosed blamed the assailants slightly more than men who suppressed, and female participants who disclosed blamed the assailants slightly less than females who suppressed,  $F(1, 41) = 3.81$ ,  $p = .06$ ,  $\text{Eta}^2 = .09$ ,  $b = 0.38$ , 95% CI [-0.01, 0.78]. Because none of the simple effects were significant, it is difficult to characterize the nature of this marginal interaction.

Among nonvictim participants, men were more likely to blame Mrs. Thatcher ( $M = -.04$ ,  $SD = .82$ ) than were women ( $M = -.53$ ,  $SD = .74$ ),  $t(43) = 2.07$ ,  $p = .05$ ,  $d = 0.63$ ,  $M_{Diff} = 0.48$ , 95% CI [0.01, 0.95]. Also, men were marginally more likely to blame Mrs. Thatcher's political adversaries ( $M = -.73$ ,  $SD = 0.65$ ) than were women ( $M = -1.04$ ,  $SD = 0.47$ ),  $t(43) = 1.80$ ,  $p = .08$ ,  $d = .55$ ,  $M_{Diff} = 0.31$ , 95% CI [-0.04, 0.65]. Gender and disclosure conditions did not interact regarding evaluations of Mrs. Thatcher,  $F(1, 41) = 0.26$ ,  $p = .61$ ,  $\text{Eta}^2 = .006$ ,  $B = 0.24$ , 95% CI [-0.72, 1.20] or her adversaries,  $F(1, 41) = 0.26$ ,  $p = .61$ ,  $\text{Eta}^2 = .006$ ,  $B = .18$ , 95% CI [-0.52, .88].

In sum, men were more likely than women to blame women and women's adversaries in both *The Accused* and *Thatcher*. However, this gender difference was not moderated by disclosure.

## Disclosure Content

The same four disclosure dimensions used in Study 1 (distress, anger, boredom, and identification) were again used to explore relations between disclosed emotions and subsequent judgments.

**Disclosure dimensions and blaming.** Partial correlations (controlling for gender, age, and personal exposure to victimization—as in Study 1) were computed between the disclosure dimensions and heroine-blaming, and between disclosure dimensions and antagonist-blaming (see Table 2). Results mirror Study 1. Among nonvictim participants, blaming of Mrs. Thatcher was unrelated to disclosed distress, anger, identification, or boredom.

Partial correlations between disclosure ratings and adversary blaming showed that victim/disclose participants who expressed more distress were marginally more likely to blame Sarah's assailants. However, neither expressed anger nor identification with



Table 2  
Correlations Between Disclosure Scales and Blaming, Accused/  
Disclose and Thatcher/Disclose, Study 2

Disclosure/Blaming correlations	Accused/ disclose ( <i>df</i> = 15)		Thatcher/ disclose ( <i>df</i> = 15)		Difference between correlations	
	<i>r</i>	<i>p</i>	<i>r</i>	<i>p</i>	<i>z</i>	<i>p</i>
Distress/Woman blame	-.44	.08	.31	.24	-1.94	.06
Anger/Woman blame	-.19	.48	-.16	.55	-0.08	.94
Boredom/Woman blame	—	—	-.14	.62	—	—
Identification/Woman blame	-.50	.05	.23	.39	-1.92	.06
Distress/Men blame	.41	.10	-.40	.12	2.10	.04
Anger/Men blame	-.11	.68	-.08	.78	0.07	.94
Boredom/Men blame	—	—	-.11	.70	—	—
Identification/Men blame	.10	.70	.36	.17	-0.68	.50

Note. Because boredom was uniformly rated as *none at all* for accused/disclose participants, correlations between boredom and blaming were not conducted for this condition.

Sarah was related to assailant blaming. Among nonvictim/disclose participants, none of the disclosure dimensions correlated with blaming of Mrs. Thatcher's adversaries.

**Amount written.** The interactive effect of amount written by experimental condition on blaming was again analyzed. Unlike Study 1, amount written did not affect degree of victim blaming among accused/disclosure participants,  $b = .002$  (.002),  $t = 0.66$ ,  $p = .51$ , 95% CI [-0.003, 0.006]. Amount written was marginally related to increased blaming of assailants among accused/disclosure participants,  $b = .002$  (.001),  $t = 1.74$ ,  $p = .09$ , 95% CI [0.000, 0.004].

**Just world beliefs.** Individual differences in just world beliefs were not related to increased blaming among victim participants,  $r(44) = .20$ ,  $p = .20$ , but were marginally related to blaming among non-victim participants,  $r(44) = .26$ ,  $p = .09$ . These results differ from Study 1 wherein just world beliefs were selectively related to blaming of Sarah, the rape victim in *The Accused*. Moderated multiple regression showed that as in Study 1, the moderating effects of disclosure on victim blaming were not affected by just world beliefs,  $B = 0.45$  (0.38),  $t = 1.19$ ,  $p = .34$ , 95% CI [-0.30, 1.20]. Just world beliefs were unrelated to blaming of men in either *The Accused*,  $r(44) = -.13$ ,  $p = .40$  or in *Thatcher*,  $r(44) = .01$ ,  $p = .94$ . There was also no interaction between just world beliefs and blaming of Sarah's assailants,  $b = -0.01$  ( $SE = 0.20$ ),  $t = -0.05$ ,  $p = .96$ , 95% CI [-0.41, 0.39].

### General Discussion

Victim blaming, according to Just World Theory, serves to manage troubling emotions. Encountering victimization threatens highly valued if implicit just world beliefs, which arouses strong negative emotions (Lerner, 1980). These emotions motivate efforts to restore just world beliefs and blaming the victim provides a means to do so (Hafer & Bègue, 2005). Blaming in this framework is a form of reappraisal, modifying the cognitions from which disturbing emotions arise (e.g., Gross, 2002).

Until now the hypothesized central role of emotions in victim blaming had not been confirmed. The present research employed emotional disclosure to address this issue. According to Penne-

baker (1990), strong emotions can be assimilated by expressing them though language. If emotions motivate blaming, and if emotional disclosure alleviates negative emotions, then disclosing emotions aroused by witnessing victimization should reduce victim blaming. The present research confirmed this prediction.

In two studies participants viewed a woman victimized or a woman in conflict but not victimized. Participants then disclosed or suppressed the emotions aroused by the woman they viewed and a week later they evaluated this woman's contribution to her own travails. Results from both studies showed, as predicted, that disclosure reduced blaming, and did so only among participants who viewed the victimization. These findings confirm that emotions are central to victim blaming, and that by disclosing emotions victim blaming is reduced.

However, demonstrating that emotional disclosure reduces victim blaming is not sufficient to confirm the just world theory explanation of victim blaming. An alternative explanation is that blaming is due to misattribution of negative affect (e.g., Schachter & Singer, 1962). In this case, viewing victimization creates a pall of negative emotion over all those involved, victims as well as victimizers. If blaming is caused by misattribution of global negative affect or by related mood effects (e.g., Forgas & Bower, 1987), then alleviating emotions through disclosure should reduce blaming of anyone involved with victimization, victimizers as well as victims. But if victim blaming is uniquely caused by threats to just world beliefs then disclosure should only affect judgments of victims, who represent such threats.

Study 2 addressed this question by permitting participants to evaluate the male antagonists in *The Accused* and in *Thatcher*, as well as the heroines in these movies. Victimizers did arouse strong emotions and they were harshly judged. However, emotional disclosure only reduced blaming of the victim; it did not reduce blaming of the victimizers. These results strongly indicate that blaming arises from emotions uniquely aroused by victims, in accord with just world theory.

### Disclosure Content Moderates Reduced Blaming

The more that participants confronted negative emotions in their writing the less they blamed the victim, which accords with Pennebaker's disclosure and coping model (Pennebaker, 1990). Generalized distress (upset + intensity) was the strongest reaction expressed by victim/disclose participants. In both studies, the more these participants expressed generalized distress, the less they blamed the victim (albeit marginally so). Disclosing distress only reduced blaming of victims; it did not reduce blaming of the nonvictim (in either study) nor did it reduce blaming of victimizers (in Study 2). Instead, the more distress victim/disclose participants expressed, the *more* they blamed victimizers. Disclosing distress therefore appears to change how victimizations are perceived and, arguably, produces fairer evaluations of these events.

It is noteworthy that disclosing general distress (reflecting shock, confusion, and dismay) had these salutary effects, but that disclosing anger did not. Anger, unlike generalized distress, typically addresses a specific target (e.g., the men who attacked), and arises from an assessment of causality (e.g., the woman suffered *because* of the men who attacked her). If disclosure operates by helping people make sense of troubling events (Harber & Pennebaker, 1992; Pennebaker, 1990), then disclosing emotions indica-

tive of confusion (i.e., general distress) may be more important than disclosing emotions indicative of resolution (i.e., anger).

Analyses of the amount disclosed produced mixed results. In Study 1, the more that victim/disclosure participants wrote, the less they blamed, suggesting a dose-response effect. A complementary finding was that the more that victim/suppress participants wrote, the more they blamed. Writing factually without disclosing emotionally might be equivalent to reexperiencing the disturbing event, heightening the emotions that lead to victim blaming.

However, these findings were not replicated in Study 2, making it difficult to draw reliable inferences from them. Perhaps the content of disclosure matters more than the quantity of disclosure.

### Implications for Emotional Disclosure

Harber and Pennebaker (1992) argue that emotional disclosure advances coping through emotional assimilation. Assimilation draws on discrepancy theories of emotion (e.g., Mandler, 1975), such that emotions arise when information disrupts beliefs (or schemas). Emotions direct attention to these disparities (Simon, 1967) and they remain potent until the disparities are resolved (Horowitz, 1986). Assimilation, say Harber and Pennebaker, occurs when the agendas of emotions are met; when existing beliefs and new information realign. Disclosure promotes assimilation by accommodating disturbing events to valued beliefs (see Harber & Pennebaker, 1992, for a detailed argument).

The present studies support the assimilation model of disclosure. If disclosure operates simply as an undifferentiated cathartic release then it should moderate judgments of all those associated with victimization, victims and victimizers both. This did not occur. Instead, disclosure selectively changed attitudes toward the victim, whose undeserved suffering challenges just world beliefs—the kind of psychological problem that, according to the assimilation model, disclosure should selectively address.

### Disclosure and Social Perception

The effects of emotions on social perception are well established (Clore & Huntsinger, 2007; Forgas & Bower, 1987; Haidt, 2001). The present studies on disclosure and victim blaming and the Harber and Wenberg (2005) research on disclosure and closeness toward offenders provide a valuable addition to this research topic. They show that confronting difficult emotions through disclosure leads to more charitable, and arguably fairer, judgments of those who arouse these emotions. Social perception therefore need not be passively filtered through transient emotions. Emotion-based biases can instead be corrected by confronting rather than suppressing negative feelings.

### Individual Differences, Disclosure, and Blaming

There are many individual differences that contribute to victim blaming (Furnham & Procter, 1989), to emotional disclosure (Norman, Lumley, Dooley, & Diamond, 2004; Snell et al., 1988), and perhaps to the relation of disclosure to blaming. Although such differences were not the focus of this research, several important ones were examined.

**Gender.** Men and women differ in blaming women victimized by men (Deitz, Littman, & Bentley, 1984), and also differ in their

propensities to disclose emotions (Snell et al., 1988). Study 2 recruited equal numbers of men and women to determine if gender moderates the effects of disclosure on victim blaming. Results showed that men were more likely to blame, overall. Men were more likely to blame the victim, but they were also more likely to blame victimizers and also embattled non-victims (i.e., Ms. Thatcher). Men and women in the victim/disclose condition did not differ in how much they disclosed, although men felt that they disclosed marginally more than did women. However, the critical issue was whether blaming was jointly affected by disclosure and gender. It was not; disclosure reduced victim blaming by men and women equally, indicating that the salutary effects of disclosure on victim blaming apply across genders.

**Just world beliefs.** Self-reported endorsement of just world beliefs were associated with increased victim blaming in Study 1 but were not related to victim blaming in Study 2. Self-reported just world beliefs did not affect the interaction between disclosure and victim blaming in either study. Just world theorists assert that just world beliefs often operate implicitly and that responses to just world threats can be, and often are, unrelated to declared just world beliefs (Hafer & Bègue, 2005).

**Identification with the victim.** Study 1 participants who had themselves suffered physical assault or knew close others who had been victimized were less likely to victim-blame. Women in Study 2 who had been victimized did not show this increased lenience toward victims, but they were more critical of victimizers.<sup>6</sup> Women in Study 2, overall, were less likely to blame the female victim than were men. Finally, victim/disclose participants in Study 2 (but not in Study 1) who expressed identification with the victim were less likely to blame her. These results, although varying between studies, collectively indicate that those who identified more strongly with the victim regarded her more sympathetically, blamed her less, and sometimes blamed her attackers more. This pattern supports Lerner and Miller's (1978) suggestion that identification with victims reduces blaming.

Reduced victim blaming among those who had themselves suffered victimization might also reflect changes in fundamental beliefs. People who have suffered sexual assault are less likely to believe in a just and benevolent world (Frazier, Conlon, & Glaser, 2001; Frazier et al., 2013). Perhaps because victims are less wedded to just world beliefs, they are less threatened by witnessing injustices and are therefore less motivated to blame victims.

### Practical Implications

**Victim support.** In America, 1 in 3 women will be victims of sexual assault during their lifetime (National Sexual Violence Resource Center, 2005). Many victims seek sympathy and affirmation but are instead blamed for their travails (Pollard, 1992), and are therefore subject to the secondary victimization this blaming creates (Campbell & Raja, 2005). The present research suggests a practicable way to spare victims the secondary assault of blaming. Encouraging witnesses to disclose the thoughts and feelings aroused in them by victims' experiences should, according to the present research, reduce their propensity to victim-blame.

<sup>6</sup> Note that Study 1 was comprised primarily of women.

**Criminal justice.** The present research also has implications for adjudicating crimes involving assault. Jurors on these cases often encounter disturbing information that may shock their beliefs in a just world (Deitz, Blackwell, Daley, & Bentley, 1982). However, sequester rules often prevent jurors from disclosing their troubling thoughts and feelings to anyone, even fellow jurors, before formal deliberation. This mandated silence can last for weeks. These conditions mirror those of the victim/suppress subjects in the present studies and may therefore induce jurors to victim-blame—to the disadvantage of victim/plaintiffs. Attacks on victims' credibility, judgment, and character by defense attorneys might capitalize on sequestered jurors' heightened just-world conflicts, further compromising victims' cases.

### Conclusion

Encountering another's victimization can pit compassion toward victims against protection of one's own just world beliefs. In this apparently zero-sum contest just world beliefs often win, leading to victim blaming. The present research suggests that emotional disclosure transforms this binary choice into a negotiated compromise. It accommodates valued beliefs to the events that threaten these beliefs and thereby defuses the disturbing emotions that produce victim blaming. By relaxing the need to defend just world beliefs, emotional disclosure may make the world more just.

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Received April 28, 2014

Revision received December 4, 2014

Accepted December 5, 2014 ■