

## Obscuring Causality in Rape Discourse: a Quantitative Analysis of Variation in Argument Structure

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### 1. Introduction

The verbs *rape* and *sexually assault* share grammatical properties with other words for violent crimes (e.g. *murder*, *assault*, *batter*). They are conventionally transitive with agentive subjects and direct object patients. The events in the world that *rape* and *sexually assault* describe motivate this argument structure; there is always at least one participant who causes the event or performs the act and at least one participant to whom the act is done. Since assailants willfully cause these events, they typically occur as agents in subject position, and since victims are unwillingly acted upon, they occur as patients in direct object position. While all of these events involve at least two people—an agent/assailant and a patient/victim—it is common for one or both of them to go unmentioned. In this paper, I analyze variation of agent/patient mentions in discourse about rape and sexual assault. Specifically, I am interested in what motivates speakers to choose one construction over another and how these choices potentially affect the perception of causation, blame, and responsibility.

### 2. Background

A variety of grammatical constructions make it optional to mention agents and patients. Agents can be eliminated through passive constructions and subjectless infinitives. The patient may not be expressed in habitual or generic uses. And in the case of nominalization, neither the patient nor agent needs to be present:

- (1) Passivization: She was raped.
- (2) Subjectless infinitive: It's immoral to rape someone.
- (3) Generic/habitual use: Frats don't rape. People rape.
- (4) Nominalization: The rape happened last Friday night.

Speakers may choose not to mention one or more event participant, because their role is seen as irrelevant or unimportant, or because they are unknown to the speaker. For instance, one may use an anticausative construction, like *the toy broke*, instead of the transitive *something or someone broke the toy*, because toys can become broken through a

variety of causes which may be irrelevant to the fact that the toy is broken. The verbs *rape* and *sexually assault* differ from *break*, though, in that much more is known about their causes, since they entail sentence and volition on the part of the agent. It is always humans who most directly cause and are most directly affected by sexual violence. Additionally, because they describe serious crimes, it is expected that neither the agent nor patient is irrelevant or unimportant.

Failing to mention the agent/assailant and patient/victim leaves the causes and consequences of the event implicit. This can give the impression that there is no one to blame for sexual violence and there are no negative effects. Especially when the agent is not mentioned, there is a sense that sexual violence is naturally occurring and outside of human control. The examples below from newspaper articles illustrate this:

- (5) Rape happens wherever people congregate because schmucks are everywhere (Bryer, 2007).
- (6) Sometimes a certain brother doesn't do the right thing and a bad situation occurs where somebody is victimized (Ding, 2010).
- (7) Rapes will happen (Belinsky, 2006).
- (8) Therefore, there would be incentives for all members of the [fraternity] house to make sure that sexual assault does not occur (Ding, 2010).

The constructions used in each of these examples represent a choice of how to describe an event and frame the role of the participants. All of these sentences could be revised so that they do mention agents/assailants and patients/victims, even if the specific identity of the participant is unknown.

These subtle variations can have a big effect. Past research has shown that leaving the agent implicit in an event description alters the perception of responsibility and blame. Fausey and Boroditsky (2010) demonstrate this in their work on anticausative constructions. They found that listeners attribute greater blame to a participant that appears as the subject of a transitive verb than if that event is described with an anticausative construction. In anticausatives, the agent is not mentioned, meaning that their role in causing the event is implicit. Sample excerpts from their study are below:

- (9) Transitive: Mrs. Smith followed her friends and as she stood up, she flopped her napkin on the centerpiece candle. She had ignited the napkin!
- (10) Anticausative: Mrs. Smith followed her friends and as she stood up, her napkin flopped on the centerpiece candle. The napkin had ignited! (Fausey & Boroditsky, 2010)

In their study, participants attributed significantly less blame to implicit agents, like Mrs. Smith in the second example. When Mrs. Smith's role in the event was made explicit, though, as in the first example, study participants not only blamed her more, but also recommended harsher financial compensation for the damages. This discrepancy in blame and punishment persisted even when study participants watched identical video recordings of an event before reading about it.

This demonstrates that argument structure has a measurable effect on how listeners perceive causation, intention, and blame. Leaving the agent implicit alters the perception

of his or her responsibility. In light of this, it is likely that there are pragmatic, rhetorical, or interactional motivations for choosing one type of construction over another.

Lamb (1991) considers this very issue with respect to academic articles about men who batter their wives. She found that many scholars in general, especially male writers, obscured the agentive role of batterers through passivization, nominalization, and ambiguous reference. She proposes a number of reasons for why a writer would choose these constructions. One possibility is that agentless constructions evoke less discomfort, since they are less vivid. Another explanation is that this style of writing could reflect the author's theoretical perspective about blame and causation in the case of domestic violence. They may not view batterers as singularly responsible for their actions, but rather see other factors, such as societal norms and personal history, as contributing to violent behavior. She also considers the possibility that use of agentive, transitive constructions could come across as politically anti-male and be offensive to some readers.

### 3. The Study

The present study analyzes variation in argument structure in descriptions of rape and sexual assault. My goal is to expand upon past research and explore the possible motivations for and effects of leaving event participants implicit in rape discourse. Because causality and blame are hotly debated issues in discourse about sexual violence, this topic is important in the broader social and legal context. This paper addresses the following questions:

- Do men and women differ in how they describe rape and sexual assault?
- What may influence a speaker/writer to leave agents or patients implicit?
- As discussion of sexual violence has increased and become more mainstream, has there been any change in how it is discussed over time?

Specifically, I looked at variation in descriptions of rape or sexual assault within the student-run newspapers at Dartmouth College in Hanover, NH. While sexual violence, gender relations and sexism are a part of campus dialogue at most American universities, these topics are particularly prominent at Dartmouth. A number of factors contribute to the salience of these issues among students, faculty, administrators, and alumni, making this data source useful. The college was all-male from its founding in 1769 until 1972. Many students and alumni are fiercely loyal to the school and cherish the long-standing social traditions which some argue contribute to misconduct and unhealthy gender relations. These include single-sex Greek houses, unfettered access to alcohol, and competitive drinking events. 50-60% of students are members of social Greek houses, most of which are single-sexed. The majority of parties and social events take place in all-male fraternities. Most importantly, Dartmouth has a higher number of sexual assault reports than any of its peer institutions<sup>1</sup>, despite having the smallest student body and being located in a low-crime rural area (Narula, 2010). Discussion about sexual violence on campus is often played out in the student newspapers. This means that articles and editorials not only report on actual events, but also debate the causes, consequences, prevention, and significance of rape and sexual assault in the abstract.

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<sup>1</sup> The report compared campus crime statistics among schools in the Ivy League, Stanford, University of Chicago, MIT, and Duke.

Among the three largest publications, *The Dartmouth*, *The Dartmouth Review* and *The Mirror*, there were 290 articles written between 1993<sup>2</sup> and 2012 that discuss sexual violence. And in total, there were 1343 references to rape or sexual assault, excluding headlines and direct quotes. In gathering data, I searched each publication's online database for the words *rape* and *sexual(ly) assault*. I included every article that mentioned either of these, whether referencing an actual event or discussing the topic in the abstract. The unit of analysis for this study is reference to an event (actual or hypothetical) of sexual violence.

Each excerpt was coded for the lexical item and phrase type (VP or NP) used to refer to the event and whether or not the assailant or victim was mentioned. If an assailant was mentioned, I also noted whether it occurred in subject position, in a by-phrase, or with no direct syntactic relationship to the predicate. Each excerpt was also coded for author gender, year of publication, name of publication, article type (news or opinion piece), whether the event was real or hypothetical, and whether or not the victim or assailant was affiliated with the college. I conducted a multiple regression with Rbrul to test which nonlinguistic factors significantly correlated with each of the four dependent variables: assailant mention, victim mention, syntactic position of assailant, and nominalization.

#### 4. Results

Overall, 290 (21.59%) of the 1343 total excerpts contained a reference to the assailant, and 515 (38.35%) mentioned the victim. Of the 290 assailant mentions, 108 (37.24%) occurred in subject position, 40 (13.79%) in a by-phrase, and 142 (48.97%) elsewhere in the sentence. The authors used over 40 different words and phrases to describe rape and sexual assault. Some of the most common include *rape*, *sexual(ly) assault*, *date rape*, *sexual violence*, *sexual offense*, *sexual(ly) abuse*, *violate*, *incident*, and *take advantage of*. The event was expressed as a verb in 224 (16.68%) of excerpts and as a noun phrase in the remaining 1119 (83.32%).

Three of the independent variables significantly correlated with mention of an assailant. The strongest predictor was affiliation with the college ( $p < 0.003$ ), followed by year of publication ( $p = 0.017$ ), and finally the actuality of an event ( $p = 0.003$ ). Authors were more likely to mention an assailant when the event participants had no affiliation with Dartmouth and when the event was real, as opposed to hypothetical. Assailant mention also decreased over time. Interestingly, the author's gender had no effect. These same variables, in addition to gender, also correlated with reference to a victim. Actuality of an event showed the strongest effect ( $p = 4.96e^{-22}$ ), followed by affiliation with the college ( $p < 0.00001$ ), gender ( $p < 0.021$ ), and year of publication ( $p < 0.002$ ). Female authors were more likely to mention the victim of an assault than male authors. None of the independent variables in the data set showed a statistically significant correlation with syntactic position of the assailant. The factors that significantly predicted nominalization were identical to those that predicted victim mention. However, it is not clear that nominalization by itself necessarily obscures causality, as Lamb's (1991) analysis suggests. For this reason, I only present and discuss the results for assailant and victim mention.

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<sup>2</sup> Although these publications existed beforehand, only the issues from 1993 and later are available electronically.

Figure 1 Rates of assailant mention by affiliation with Dartmouth

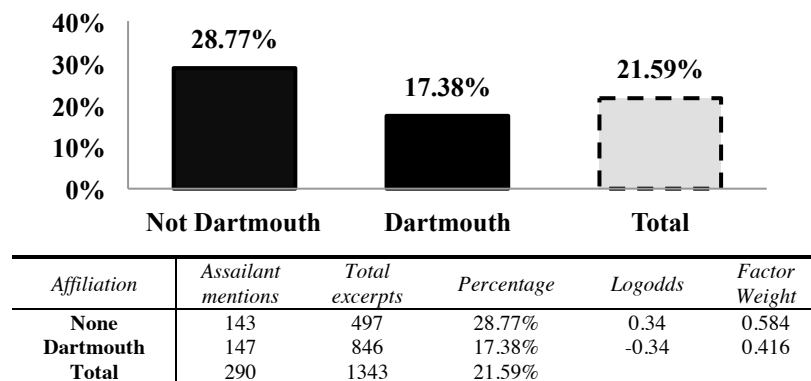


Figure 2 Rates of assailant mention by year of publication

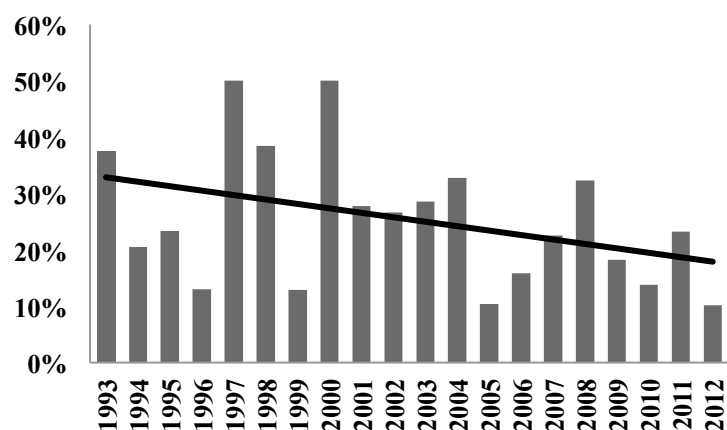


Figure 3 Rates of assailant mention by actuality of event

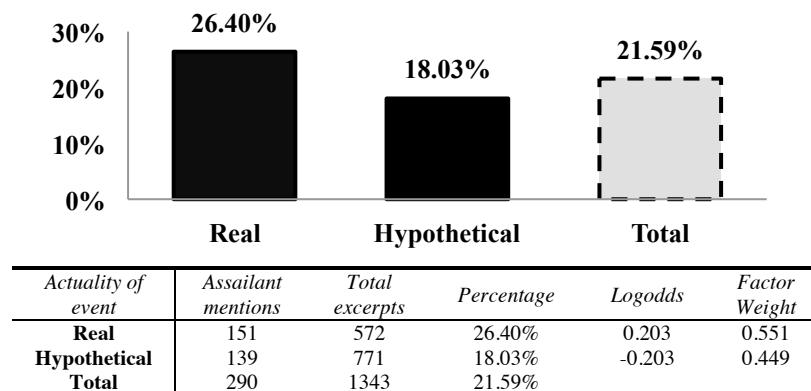


Figure 4 Rates of victim mention by actuality of event

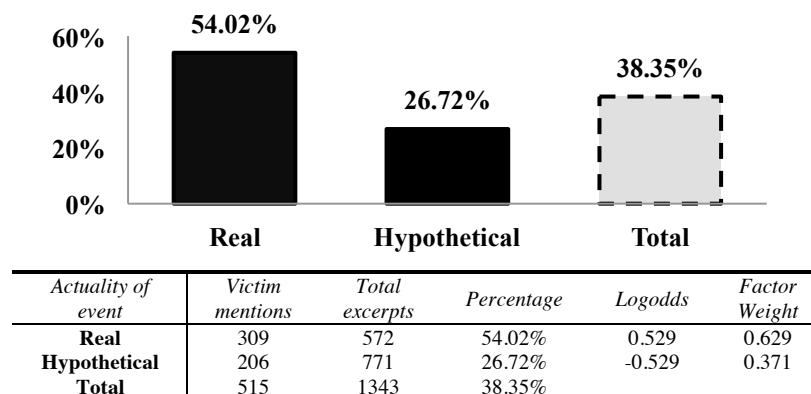


Figure 5 Rates of victim mention by affiliation with Dartmouth

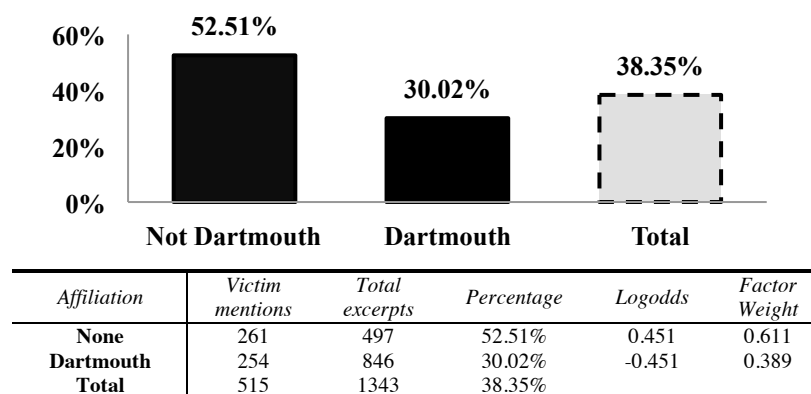


Figure 6 Rates of victim mention by gender of author

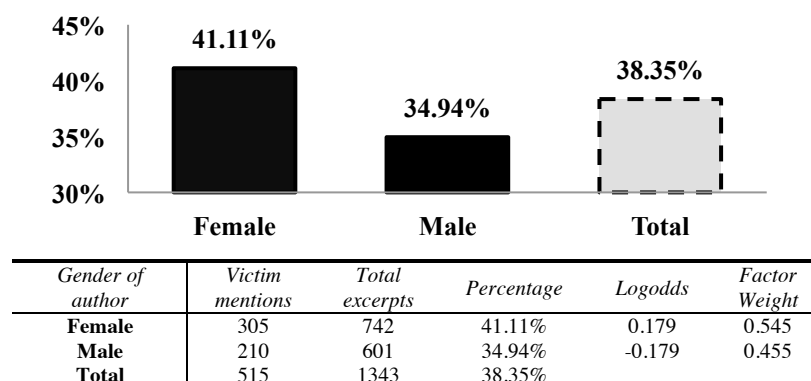
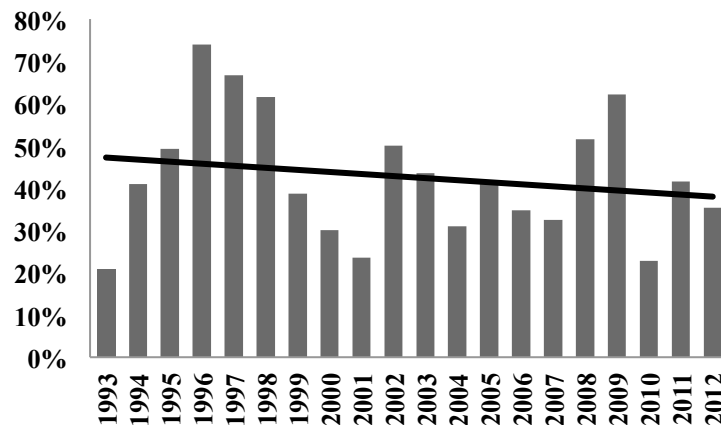


Figure 7 Rates of victim mention by year of publication



Overall, these results demonstrate that nonlinguistic factors correlate with how an author describes rape and the role of the assailant and victim.

## 5. Discussion

It seems unsurprising that the discussion of hypothetical events involves fewer explicit references to participants, but it is difficult to pinpoint exactly why this is. Even when a rape is hypothetical, it is still necessary for there to be a hypothetical assailant and victim, and it is acceptable to mention these. However, it is possible that the participants are mentioned less often because they are not real and, therefore, have no real bearing on the world. Hypothetical rapists do not need to be punished for their crimes and cannot threaten a community's safety. Likewise, hypothetical victims are not actually affected by the events. Perhaps hypothetical event participants with no potential for affecting or interacting with the real world are deemed less mentionable as a result.

One finding that is more surprising is that the author's gender does not have as much of an effect on participant mention as might be expected. Lamb's (1991) study, discussed above, found that male writers were much more likely than female writers to use constructions that obscured the agency of batterers or eliminated them entirely. However, in this study, men and women were equally likely to mention the assailant and equally likely to put that assailant in subject position or a by-phrase. The one gender difference arose in the case of victim mention, where women were more likely to mention the victim of a rape than men were. One explanation for this could be that female writers are more likely to identify with the victim and emphasize the victim's experience, because they as women are more likely to have been or to become victims of sexual assault. Interestingly, though, both men and women overall are much more likely to mention the victim than the assailant, even though the existence of both participants (whether hypothetical or in actuality) is equally obligatory.

One of the strongest trends that emerges from this analysis is the negative correlation between participant mention and Dartmouth affiliation. If either the assailant or victim was a Dartmouth student, authors were less likely to make their role in the event explicit. A

likely reason for this is the strong loyalty many students and alumni have for the college, which motivates some to obscure the blame and negative consequences of fellow students' actions. This loyalty can also result in defensiveness against criticisms, or perceived criticisms, of the college and its students. This can make some reluctant to accuse their classmates of sexual assault for fear of backlash. The defensiveness and backlash against those who speak out are apparent throughout many opinion pieces and overtly discussed in a number of articles. The following quote from a female student illustrates this hesitance to point fingers:

- (11) "I think it's perceived as radical or man-hating to even acknowledge that there is a problem – there's sort of this association with feminism," Elisabeth Ericson '11 said. "And also this sense that if you're saying there is a problem with sexual assault on this campus, then, by extension, you are accusing individual frat brothers of being rapists – they get very defensive and say 'Oh, but I'm not like that,' or 'my friend wouldn't do that.' There's this personal defensiveness that I think gets in the way of maybe acknowledging that there might be systemic factors" (Narula, 2010).

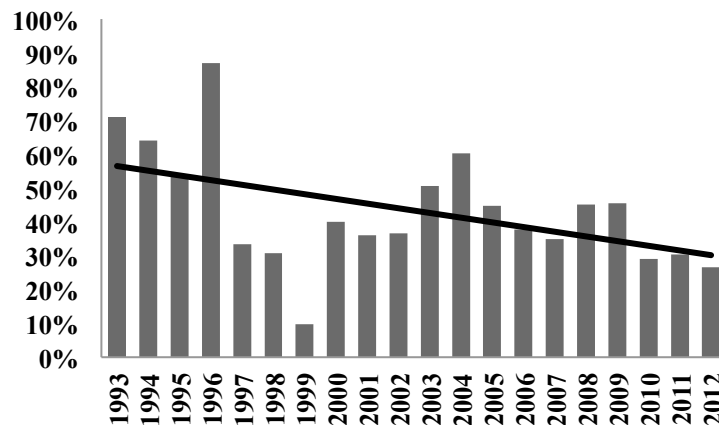
That students feel the need to tread lightly when talking about rape is further exemplified by an excerpt from an article about a "Speak Out" event, where victims share their stories:

- (12) All of the readers wore Dartmouth clothing in order to emphasize that the intention of the event was not to speak against Dartmouth but to raise awareness of sexual assault (Jackling, 2007).

In this instance, the fact that rape victims speaking out against assault must explicitly and visually express their school spirit in order to not appear critical of the college suggests that speaking out against being raped is somehow speaking ill of Dartmouth. These associations present a possible explanation for why rapists and victims who are Dartmouth students are much less likely to be mentioned.

The trend that is perhaps most surprising is the inverse relationship between year of publication and participant mention. As time progressed between 1993 and 2012, authors made fewer explicit references to assailants and victims of rape. It is not immediately clear what is behind this pattern. But it is revealing to consider it alongside a simultaneous lexical shift from *rape* to *sexual assault* over this same two-decade period:

Figure 8 Events described as 'rape' by year of publication



As this graph shows, use of the word *rape* declined from 1993 to 2012. This was accompanied by an increase in phrases like *sexual assault*, *sexual violence*, *abuse*, etc.

Although they are often used interchangeably throughout the newspaper articles, the word *rape* differs from the phrase *sexual assault* along a number of dimensions. First, *rape* is canonically a transitive verb, which means it typically takes a subject and a direct object. *Sexual assault*, on the other hand, occurs most often as a noun phrase. So while *sexual assault* still refers to an event with at least two participants, speakers or writers are not obligated to make any mention of these participants. Semantically, *rape* refers to a specific type of crime, while *sexual assault* refers to a broad class of crimes. In addition to this, *rape* is a more powerful, evocative and upsetting word than *sexual assault*.

It is possible that this lexical shift from *rape* to *sexual assault* is due in part to an increased sensitivity to and inclusion of a broader class of crimes in the discussion of sexual violence. It is also possible that writers have made this lexical shift because of a more general change in their goals and reasons for writing about the topic. The word *rape* is evocative and shocking. This makes it effective for activism and consciousness-raising. In contrast, *sexual assault*, as a phrase, is less striking. So while words with shock-value can be effective for grabbing readers' attention, they may not hold their attention, because readers may become too uncomfortable and shut down. Therefore, using terms like *sexual assault* over *rape* may be more effective in promoting comfortable, open discussions.

Impressionistically, there seems to be a change in the perspectives of students writing about sexual assault over the two-decade period from 1993 to 2012. Not only has there been an increase in the number of articles written about this topic (see Figure 9), there also seems to be a diversification of the political goals these articles represent. Specifically, it appears that a greater number of non-activists have entered the public discourse about sexual violence as time has progressed, although activists on campus continue to make powerful consciousness-raising contributions to the school's newspapers.

Figure 9 Number of excerpts per year

<i>Year of publication</i>	<i>Number of excerpts</i>	<i>Year of publication</i>	<i>Number of excerpts</i>
<b>1993</b>	24	<b>2003</b>	140
<b>1994</b>	39	<b>2004</b>	58
<b>1995</b>	73	<b>2005</b>	29
<b>1996</b>	23	<b>2006</b>	164
<b>1997</b>	6	<b>2007</b>	40
<b>1998</b>	13	<b>2008</b>	31
<b>1999</b>	31	<b>2009</b>	66
<b>2000</b>	10	<b>2010</b>	145
<b>2001</b>	119	<b>2011</b>	125
<b>2002</b>	60	<b>2012</b>	147

## 6. Conclusion

This study has demonstrated that nonlinguistic factors have the potential to motivate a speaker's choice of one event description over another. Although *rape* has a high degree of transitivity, the agents causing rape and the patients affected by it are left implicit more often than they are explicitly mentioned. The failure to mention the assailant of a rape positively correlates with events that are hypothetical and involve Dartmouth students. There was also a significant decrease in references to assailants over time. These factors had the same predictions for references to the victim. Male authors were also slightly less likely to mention a victim when discussing rape.

Regardless of the motivation behind the failure to mention rapists and victims in event descriptions, the effect is still potentially harmful. As Fausey and Boroditsky (2010) explain, listeners are more likely to attribute blame to event participants when they are explicitly expressed as the agents of the event. Listeners also demand harsher punishments for these event participants. A general underspecification of the agents and assailants of rape in public discourse has the potential to affect public opinion about who is at fault for rape and to what extent. This public opinion is important for a number of reasons: (1) juries of the general public determine guilt in criminal courts, and (2) victims who do not view their attackers as entirely culpable are less likely to report the crime.

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