

Writing about rape: Use of the passive voice and other distancing text features as an expression of perceived responsibility of the victim

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The hypothesis that the passive voice is used to put the actor in the background and the acted-upon person in the focus of discourse is tested in the realm of sexual violence. German university students ($N = 67$) watched a silent video segment depicting a rape whose circumstances, depending on condition, could or could not be easily interpreted in terms of rape myths. Then they wrote down what they had seen, judged the responsibility of assailant and victim, and completed a rape-myth acceptance scale. Participants used the passive voice more frequently to describe the rape itself vs. other actions they had watched. When circumstances of the rape were easily interpretable in terms of rape myths, use of the passive voice correlated positively with rape-myth acceptance and perceived responsibility of the victim, and negatively with perceived responsibility of the assailant. The language of headlines that participants generated for their reports also reflected judgments of assailant and victim responsibility. Implications for the non-reactive assessment of responsibility attributions and directions for future research are discussed.

'Language exerts hidden power, like the moon on the tides.'

Rita Mae Brown, *Starting From Scratch*, 1988

Language may exert hidden power in the way we talk and write about the fact that a man rapes a woman. This study was aimed at identifying subtle linguistic indicators of blaming victims of sexual violence, and at relating these to direct judgments of responsibility. Judgments about assailant and victim in cases of rape have been studied extensively in social psychology, with a major focus on attributions of responsibility. How much responsibility a perceiver attributes to the assailant and victim, respectively, in a specific incident of rape was shown to depend on a number of variables (for an overview, see Pollard, 1992). Among these, powerful predictors of responsibility judgments are the perceiver's sex and his or her acceptance of rape myths (i.e. general stereotypic beliefs that exonerate rapists and blame victims of sexual violence; Burt, 1980). Male perceivers'

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judgments are usually more to the disadvantage of the victim than are female perceivers' judgments (e.g. Gilmartin-Zena, 1983; Kleinke & Meyer, 1990; but cf. Weis, 1982); individuals who are more accepting of rape myths tend to attribute less responsibility to the assailant and greater responsibility to the victim than do persons who reject these myths (e.g. Bohner, 1998; Check & Malamuth, 1985; Krahé, 1988).

Rape myth acceptance has been linked to the 'belief in a just world' (Lerner, 1980), a tendency to interpret events in a way that everyone gets what he or she deserves and—retrospectively—deserves what he or she got (for discussion, see Bohner, 1998). While this should be true for perceivers of both sexes, the motivational basis for the widespread belief in rape myths and its allied tendency of derogating victims in particular rape cases may differ between men and women. Whereas men may hold rape myth beliefs in order to rationalize their own behavioural tendencies towards sexual violence (Bohner, Reinhard, Rutz, Sturm, Kerschbaum, & Effler, 1998; Malamuth, 1986), women seem to maintain an illusion of invulnerability to the threat of rape by endorsing a stereotype of the 'typical rape victim' that is sufficiently different from themselves (Bohner, 1988; Bohner, Siebler, & Raaijmakers, 1999; Bohner, Weisbrod, Raymond, Barzvi, & Schwarz, 1993; Burt, 1980).

One problematic aspect of studies that addressed the link between rape myth acceptance (and other predictors) and the attribution of responsibility in cases of rape concerns the reactivity of the dependent measures that have usually been employed. It has been suggested that research participants often would not have spontaneously thought about causation or responsibility unless they were asked to do so by the researcher's direct questions (for a discussion, see Bohner, Bless, Schwarz, & Strack, 1988; Weiner, 1985). Krahé (1991) argued that especially in the context of sexual violence, at least some people may not spontaneously infer any potential responsibility of the victim unless prompted to do so by a researcher's question. Conversely, however, owing to considerations of social desirability, people may consciously avoid making judgments that reflect negatively on crime victims, and may thus mark lower levels on a scale of victim responsibility than their actual interpretation of an incident would suggest.

Linguistic indicators of responsibility attribution

It therefore seems desirable to examine more spontaneous and less reactive indicators of perceived responsibility of victim and perpetrator. In everyday discourse, beliefs that women are somehow responsible for becoming victims of sexual violence are likely to be expressed in many ways, not only in direct, explicit judgments. These beliefs may as well transpire in subtle features of the language people use when talking or writing about sexual violence (Reinholtz, Muehlenhard, Phelps, & Satterfield, 1995). One important aspect of language that has been discussed in this respect is the use of the grammatical passive voice. Penelope (1990) suggested that passive forms, in particular truncated, agentless passives, can fulfil various discursive functions that may easily go unnoticed at a conscious level: suggesting universality (e.g. 'it is widely understood that . . .'); obscuring agency by

placing the actor in the background, and the victim in the foreground, of discourse (e.g. 'the woman was raped'); or introducing interpretational ambiguity (see also Bolinger, 1980; Clark, 1992). In English, furthermore, the 'get'-passive seems to be especially well suited to suggest direct responsibility of the victim. The sentence 'the woman got raped', for example, may invoke the completion 'got *herself* raped' and may thus indicate the woman's active participation.

But even non-truncated passive forms, in which the acting person or entity is explicitly mentioned, seem to put greater emphasis on their *grammatical* subjects (i.e. their *semantic* objects). This assumed difference in meaning between active and passive voice was studied by Johnson-Laird (1968) using an ingenious experimental paradigm. Research participants were asked to produce simple diagrams to represent the meaning of two sentences. These sentences expressed seemingly equivalent arrangements of colours in the active vs. passive form (e.g. 'Blue follows Red' and 'Red is followed by Blue'). In another experimental condition, both sentences referred to opposite arrangements (e.g. 'Blue follows Red' and 'Blue is followed by Red'). For each sentence, participants were asked to colour a long narrow rectangle with crayon in a way that 'somebody else would have to be able to match the diagrams with the appropriate sentences' (p. 69). Johnson-Laird hypothesized that different meanings of active vs. passive would be reflected in the size of the areas coloured in the sentences' subject vs. object colours. His results showed that indeed most participants drew the *grammatical* 'subject areas' larger than the 'object areas' (e.g. for 'Blue follows Red' a small red area to the left and a large blue area to the right; for 'Red is followed by Blue', however, a large red area to the left and a small blue area to the right). This observed subject-object difference was even more pronounced for passive than for active sentences.

If one follows Johnson-Laird's (1968) interpretation that by using the passive voice the relevance of the grammatical subject, viz. the 'acted-upon' person or entity, is generally increased, it is plausible to assume that this should also be the case in texts about rape. Sentences like 'The woman was raped [by the man]' would then place more emphasis or relevance on the victim than would sentences like 'The man raped the woman'. However, this difference in emphasis need not necessarily imply a negative evaluation, as suggested, for example, by Penelope (1990). Rather, emphasizing the victim may also be used to express empathy (see also Lamb, 1991). Based on Johnson-Laird's findings, it is thus difficult to make unequivocal predictions concerning the function of the passive voice in discourse about sexual violence. It is possible that the use of the passive voice may trigger different interpretations depending on a recipient's prior attitude. Thus, descriptions of a rape using the passive voice may enhance a tendency to think negatively about the victim mainly in those recipients who believe in rape myths, particularly in cases where a perceiver may draw upon evidence that can easily be interpreted in terms of those myths (e.g. prior acquaintance between victim and perpetrator or victim's role-inconsistent behaviour; see Bohner, 1998). With other recipients, however, who do not believe in rape myths, the passive (vs. active) voice may instead elicit greater empathy and a positive evaluation of the victim.

A number of mainly descriptive studies examined the relative frequency of active and passive constructions (and other linguistic features) in English-language texts

about sexual violence. Henley, Miller, and Beazley (1995, Study 1) performed a computerized content analysis of US newspaper articles; they found that the verb form 'raped' was used more frequently in the passive (70%) than active (30%) voice. Passive forms were much less frequent with positive verbs ('thanked', 'forgave/forgiven': 27%), a neutral verb ('touched': 40%) and a 'non-violent' crime-related verb ('robbed': 56%). The highest prevalence of the passive voice, however, was found for the verb 'murdered' (76%). Henley and her colleagues interpreted these findings as indicating a widespread tendency of writers to place rapists' responsibility in the background by using subtle linguistic manipulations.

But these authors also discussed a number of alternative explanations for their findings. Because at the time of a newspaper crime report, the perpetrator is often not known or has not been legally convicted, it may logically be impossible or legally prohibited to name him explicitly. One may further assume that with less severe crimes, newspaper reports more often draw upon reports of the victim, which can be assumed to refer directly to the perpetrator's actions, whereas with more severe crimes, victim's reports are less likely to be available. This would also explain why the highest prevalence of the passive was found for the verb 'murdered'—here, drawing upon victim's reports is obviously impossible. With rape, reports from the victim's viewpoint are possible, but the woman may often not be willing to reveal her experiences to a newspaper.

In another archival study, Lamb (1991) examined scientific articles about men who batter women with respect to 'linguistic avoidance' (i.e. strategies of text construction that obscure the male perpetrators' responsibility). Apart from a high prevalence of *passive forms* (e.g. 'battered women'; 'the black women are abused at a . . . higher rate than white women'; p. 253),¹ Lamb identified additional text features that seem suitable for reducing the perceived responsibility of assailants, viz. 'nominalization' (e.g. 'the process of abuse') and 'diffusion of responsibility' by using distancing formulations that not only leave agency in the dark but also obscure the focal topic of violence (e.g. 'domestic disputes'). In Lamb's study, the amount of linguistic avoidance was correlated with authors' sex and professional background: male authors used avoidance more often than female authors, and social workers used it less often than sociologists and psychologists. Lamb interpreted her results as compatible with the hypothesis that the authors were motivated to play down the responsibility of men for the violence they use against women. However, she also discussed various alternative explanations. Among these are the writers' intention to distance *themselves* from emotionally disturbing content; their attempt to appear scientific and unbiased; theoretical preferences (e.g. for system theory accounts); and the goal of securing funding by emphasizing the needy status of 'battered women' (Lamb, 1991, pp. 255–256).

These archival studies indicate clearly that writers of texts about sexual violence do indeed often use linguistic features that are functional in obscuring the perpetrator's responsibility. However, the assumption that the use of these features stems from a motive to exonerate the assailants and to condemn the victims—

¹The participial construction 'battered women' was counted separately by Lamb (1991) and alone accounted for 28% of those sentences coded as 'problematic', whereas other passive constructions were less frequent (1.2%).

though not implausible—can hardly be supported by these data. The findings are, as the authors themselves make very clear, open to a number of alternative interpretations.

The present research

As a follow-up and extension of the literature discussed, the present study was designed to examine the following questions: (1) Can a preference for using the passive voice and other obscuring language in writing about rape be detected in persons who do not write professionally? (Previous studies had focused on journalists and scientists.) (2) Do variations in the rape scenario causally affect the use of such obscuring language features? (3) Is the use of obscuring language related to direct measures of attribution of responsibility? And is it a function of general acceptance of rape myths?

Because a sample of German students was to be studied, it seemed crucial to assume a functional equivalence of the relevant linguistic features in English and German. With respect to the active vs. passive voice, there is a *formal* equivalence, because the German language also features passive constructions that either contain a reference to the agent or may be truncated without explicit reference to an agent. However, the actual prevalence of the passive voice in German is very low, accounting for only about 7% of the finite verb forms (Brinker, 1990). According to a standard reference dictionary (Bibliographisches Institut, 1973, p. 92), the percentage of the passive voice in written German varies, depending on genre, between 1.2% (for 'trivial literature') and 10.5% (for 'functional literature'); in newspapers, its percentage is estimated to be 9%, a figure much lower than those reported by Henley *et al.* (1995) for their analyses of English-language newspapers.

In spite of these differences in general prevalence, we find similar assumptions about the *functional properties* of the passive voice in German philology. Various authors discussed the hypothesis that by use of the passive voice, especially in its truncated form, the actor is placed in the background, and the victim or acted-upon person placed in the foreground of discourse (Bibliographisches Institut, 1973; Brinker, 1990). In particular, Weisgerber (1963) argued against the view of interpreting the passive voice as just a pragmatically neutral reversal of perspective, pointing out instead that the passive allows for an interpretation of actions as 'occurrences' (p. 55).

In sum, then, it seems reasonable to assume both formal comparability and functional similarities in the use of the passive voice in English and German. The lower general prevalence of the passive in German may render it more difficult to detect any correlations between passive use and other variables, owing to potential floor effects or restrictions of range; if, however, such differences could be detected in spite of the low base rate, they would constitute even more compelling evidence of underlying implicit interpretations on the part of the language users. Other relevant text features that may suggest an obscuring of responsibility, such as nominalization and a choice of distancing expressions, also can be easily studied within the German language.

Hypotheses

To answer the research questions listed above, the influence of situational features on the use of the active vs. passive voice and other distancing text features in writing about a rape was studied. Furthermore, another focus of this study was the relationship between these linguistic features on the one hand, and direct attributions of responsibility as well as the general acceptance of rape myths on the other hand. Four hypotheses were tested.

A general inclination to obscure agency in sexual violence is addressed in H_1 : when writing about an observed rape, individuals more frequently use the passive voice to describe the perpetrator's actions during the actual rape as opposed to other actions contained in the rape scene (viz. the victim's actions; the perpetrator's actions both before and after the rape).

Based on the assumption that active–passive differences should reflect the degree of interpretability in the material to be described, H_2 states: the difference stated in H_1 is more pronounced if the rape scene contains numerous details that are easily interpretable in terms of rape myths than if the rape scene contains few such details.

H_3 deals with chronic individual differences in interpreting sexual violence: individual's use of the passive voice in describing the perpetrator's actions during the actual rape is positively correlated with their general rape myth acceptance, and this should be more pronounced to the extent that the rape scene contains details that are easily interpretable in terms of rape myths.

H_4 reflects the assumption that active vs. passive use can serve as an unobtrusive indicator of attribution of responsibility: individuals' use of the passive voice in describing the perpetrator's actions during the actual rape is negatively (positively) correlated with their direct judgments of the perpetrator's (victim's) responsibility.

Participants were also asked to generate *headlines* for their written descriptions. This was done to obtain a statement that concisely expresses the meaning and perspective taken in the text as a whole (Clark, 1992). Apart from coding for active vs. passive, it was analysed whether the headlines contained the words 'rape' or 'to rape' ('Vergewaltigung'/'vergewaltigen') at all, or if participants used indirect, distancing labels instead. Analogous to H_2 – H_4 , it was predicted that the use of more distancing formulations (see below for an exact definition) would be correlated positively with rape myth acceptance and with the scene's interpretability in terms of rape myths, and would be correlated negatively with the relative attribution of responsibility to the perpetrator (vs. victim).

Method

Participants and procedure

Sixty-seven students at a German university (29 female; 38 male; median age = 23 years) were recruited for a study on media effects and were assigned randomly to one of two conditions that were constituted by two different silent video segments to be watched. Each video segment depicted a rape. The relevant differences between them consisted of the number of details that could be interpreted in terms of prevailing myths about rape (Bohner, 1998; Burt, 1980; see below for details).

Immediately after watching one of the video segments, participants were asked to retell in writing the 'scene depicted in the video' on seven preprinted lines on an A4-sized sheet; participants were encouraged to fill the space provided. After writing, participants were asked to generate a concise headline for their report: 'If your above description were to appear as a newspaper article, what headline would you give it?' Subsequently, closed-ended judgments of perpetrator and victim responsibility as well as judgments of severity of the incident were assessed (see below). Then, participants were asked to complete a scale measuring rape myth acceptance. Finally, participants were thoroughly debriefed.

Content of rape video segments

Both video segments were of approximately equal length and depicted an interaction that—despite the differences described below—could unequivocally be identified as a rape (see Results section). The video segment that contained few details interpretable in terms of rape myths was taken from an episode of the German television soap opera *Die Schwarzwaldklinik* (*The Black Forest Hospital*): a young woman who is dressed inconspicuously is walking home at night; two men follow her and assault her; there is no indication of any previous interaction between victim and assailants; the men drag the woman into an alley, one of them puts a piece of clothing over her head and holds her down, the other rips off her slip and rapes her; when the assailants are disturbed by another person showing up in the alley, they flee.

The video segment that contained *many* details interpretable in terms of rape myths was taken from the US fiction film *Accused*: a woman can be seen alone in a bar; she is wearing a short skirt and a tight top; the woman and a man dance and seem to flirt with each other; after some time, the man pushes the woman onto the top of a pinball machine, rips off her clothes and rapes her.²

Judgments of responsibility and severity

Having finished their open description of what they had seen, participants answered five questions pertaining to the rape: (1) How much responsibility for the incident do you ascribe to the perpetrator? (2) How much responsibility for the incident do you ascribe to the woman? Each of these questions was followed by a scale from 1 = none at all to 7 = complete responsibility; (3) What sentence would you lay down for the perpetrator? (7-point scale ranging from acquittal to more than 10 years in prison); (4) How high do you estimate the risk of the perpetrator's committing subsequent offences? (scale from 1 = very low to 7 = very high); and (5) How severe do you estimate the psychological damage to the victim? (scale from 1 = very light to 7 = very severe).

Assessment of rape-myth acceptance

To assess participants' rape-myth acceptance (RMA), a 10-item version of Bohner's (1998) 'Vergewaltigungsmythenakzeptanz-Skala' (VMAS) was used. The VMAS is a German adaptation of Costin's (1985) R-scale. Item examples are: 'Women often provoke rape through their appearance or behaviour' and 'The defence in a rape trial should *not* be able to submit as evidence the sexual history of the alleged victim, (reverse scored). Each item was followed by a scale from 1 = not at all true to 7 = completely true. In a series of studies, the VMAS proved to have satisfactory to good internal consistency (Cronbach's alpha between .70 and .80), good test-retest reliability (r_{tt} in the range of .81 to .85 over three weeks) and high construct validity (Bohner, 1998).

²Of course, the two video segments differ in many respects other than their interpretability in terms of rape myths. Ways of controlling for such extraneous factors would have been to either pilot test a large pool of available rape videos in order to preselect a range of suitable stimuli, or to produce videos specifically for the purpose of this study. Both options did not seem feasible to us in terms of the costs involved.

Results

Preliminary analyses

Texts. Each text was divided into semantically meaningful action units by two independent coders. Every single action was to be coded as a unit, independent of whether it was formulated as a main sentence, a subordinate clause or a participial construction (for a discussion of unitizing in content analysis, see Krippendorf, 1980). These action units were then assigned to one of eight categories that were formed by combining the following dichotomous criteria: (1) *acting person* (victim vs. perpetrator); (2) *type of action* (rape vs. anything before or after the rape); and (3) *grammatical voice* (active vs. passive). *Nominal* forms (e.g. 'and then the rape occurred') were coded as passive because of their impersonal nature. About 25% of all action units could not be coded in any of the eight relevant categories (e.g. 'it is night') and were disregarded for further analysis. The agreement between the two coders was satisfactory to very good: the correlation between raters for number of action units identified was $r(63) = .93$, $p < .001$; in 59 cases (91%), either unitization was exactly matched, or one unit assigned by one coder was split into two units by the other coder. The mean correlation for the number of units the coders assigned to each of the eight categories was $r(63) = .85$.³ For further analyses, each participant's category frequencies were thus averaged over the two coders.

Headlines. In analysing participant's self-generated headlines, five categories were used that were thought to represent (from 1 to 5) increasing levels of distancing and obscuring of agency: headlines that contained (1) the verb 'to rape' ('vergewaltigen') in the active voice; (2) the verb 'to rape' ('vergewaltigen') in the passive voice *with* mention of the acting person; (3) the verb 'to rape' ('vergewaltigen') in the passive voice *without* mention of the acting person (= truncated passive); (4) no verb, but the noun 'rape' ('Vergewaltigung'); (5) neither the verb 'to rape' ('vergewaltigen') nor the noun 'rape' ('Vergewaltigung'). Inter-coder reliability for this variable was perfect.

Effects of video segments on closed-ended measures. To check if the two video segments were indeed both interpreted as a rape but elicited different perceptions of perpetrator and victim responsibility, the overall means on the five rating measures were inspected, and the means were compared between video segments via *t*-tests for independent samples. The same was done for an index of severity of the incident, which was formed by averaging all five judgments (after reverse-scoring the item pertaining to the woman's responsibility).

Overall, participants perceived high responsibility of the perpetrator and low responsibility of the victim (grand mean = 6.61 and 2.21, respectively), laid down a high sentence ($M = 5.06$; a value of 5 representing 'up to 5 years in prison') and gave high estimates of both the perpetrator committing similar acts in the future ($M = 5.61$) and the victim suffering from severe psychological consequences ($M = 6.61$). The index of severity of the incident yielded a grand mean of 5.87.

³Only 65 of the 67 participants provided codeable texts.

Table 1. Mean number of action units generated by participants, grouped by actor, action category and grammatical voice

Action category	Perpetrator		Victim	
	Rape	Other	Rape	Other
Voice				
Active	1.89	1.18	.38	1.85
Passive	.58	.19	.05	.12
Total	2.47	1.37	.43	1.97
Per cent passive	23.4	14.0	10.9	5.8

As expected, type of video segment affected responsibility judgments. Participants watching the *Black Forest Hospital* video judged the perpetrator as more responsible ($M = 6.91$) and the victim as less responsible ($M = 1.52$) compared to participants who watched the segment taken from *Accused* ($M = 6.32$ and 2.88 , respectively; $t(65) = 3.21$ and -3.64 , respectively, both $ps < .01$). No significant effects of type of video segment were found for the other three items. The five-item index of severity was significantly affected by type of video, with means of 6.09 vs. 5.65 for *Black Forest Hospital* and *Accused*, respectively ($t(65) = 2.40$, $p < .02$).

Main analyses

Use of the passive voice in describing different action content. The texts that participants generated were between 17 and 80 words in length ($M = 47.62$; $SD = 10.64$). The mean of action units per text was 8.35 , of which 6.23 (75%) could be assigned to one of the eight relevant action categories. Of the latter, 2.90 (47%) referred to the rape itself, whereas 3.33 (53%) referred to events before or after the rape. Table 1 shows the mean number of units in each relevant category, collapsed across the two video conditions. The bottom line in Table 1 shows the relative proportion of passive constructions used to describe each possible combination of acting person and type of action.

Although, overall, the passive (15%) was used much less frequently than the active (85%), the pattern of results clearly supports H_1 . Participants used the passive voice more frequently, in both absolute and relative terms, when they described the perpetrator's actions during the rape itself, as opposed to any other of the perpetrator's actions or the victim's actions. A t -test for dependent measurements comparing the proportion of passive constructions pertaining to the perpetrator's actions during the rape ($M = .25$) with the proportion of passive constructions pertaining to other action categories ($M = .09$) yielded a statistically significant effect ($t(62) = 2.95$, $p < .01$; effect size $r = .35$).⁴

⁴For this analysis, $N = 63$ because of missing data.

Table 2. Correlations between passive index and judgments of responsibility/rape myth acceptance

Variable	Video 1: Few potentially rape- myth consistent details (‘Black Forest Hospital’)		Video 2: Many potentially rape-myth consistent details (‘Accused’)
	Total N = 63	N = 30	N = 33
RMA	.21*	.03	.35*
Index of Severity of the Incident ^a	-.14	.07	-.33*
Victim responsibility	.17†	.18	.24†

* $p < .05$; † $p < .10$; all p values one-tailed.

Note: RMA = rape-myth acceptance; ^aIndex consisting of five items: perpetrator responsibility; victim responsibility (reverse scored); proposed sentence; estimated risk of the perpetrator’s committing subsequent offences; estimated harm to victim. For this variable, valid N from left to right: 62, 29, 33.

Use of the passive voice as a function of video content and sex of participant. To test H_2 , we conducted an ANOVA that included the repeated measurement factor of *action content* (actions of perpetrator during rape vs. all other actions) and the between participant factor *type of rape scene* (few vs. many details interpretable in terms of rape myths). Contrary to H_2 , however, the predicted interaction of these two factors was not obtained ($F < 1$). An increased use of the passive voice was thus found *overall*, independent of variations in the specific rape scene to be described. Additional analyses showed that use of the passive voice was also independent of sex of participant (all F s < 1).

Use of the passive voice, direct attribution of responsibility, and rape-myth acceptance. Each participant was assigned the mean of the 10 RMA item scores as his or her RMA score (after reverse-scoring of negatively formulated items). The grand mean of RMA was 2.78 (SD = .71). Replicating previous results (Bohner, 1998), males had higher RMA scores ($M = 3.00$) than females ($M = 2.48$; $t(65) = 3.18$, $p < .01$).

To test H_3 , RMA scores were correlated with an index that reflected the difference between relative frequency of passive use in describing the perpetrator’s actions during the rape minus relative frequency of passive use in describing other actions (‘passive index’). The theoretical range of this passive index runs from -1 to $+1$; the empirical range observed in our sample was $-.42$ to $+1.00$, the mean was $+.16$.⁵ To test H_4 , the index of severity of the incident as well as the single item pertaining to the woman’s responsibility were correlated with the passive index.

Table 2 shows the correlations for the full sample, as well as for each video condition separately. On the whole, the sign of coefficients was as predicted, reflecting a positive correlation between the passive index and RMA as well as

⁵For two participants, this index was mathematically undefined because of missing statements in one of the two categories. Therefore, only 63 cases were included in this analysis.

Table 3. Means of rape-myth acceptance and of responsibility attributions as a function of participants' self-generated headlines

Variable	Category of headlines				
	(1) ^a N = 7	(2) N = 4	(3) N = 9	(4) N = 33	(5) N = 14
RMA	2.67	3.23	2.30	2.77	3.00
Index of Severity of the Incident ^b	6.11	6.47	6.04	5.84	5.67
Victim responsibility	1.29	1.25	1.33	2.67	2.43

Note: (1) use of verb 'to rape' ('vergewaltigen') in active voice; (2) use of the verb 'to rape' ('vergewaltigen') in passive voice with explicit mention of perpetrator; (3) use of verb 'to rape' ('vergewaltigen') in passive voice without explicit mention of perpetrator (truncated passive); (4) use of noun 'rape' ('Vergewaltigen'); (5) indirect expression.

^aIndex consisting of five items: perpetrator responsibility; victim responsibility (reverse scored); proposed sentence; estimated risk of the perpetrator's committing subsequent offences; estimated harm to victim. For this variable, valid N from left to right: 7, 3, 9, 32, 14.

perceived victim responsibility, and a negative correlation between the passive index and perceived severity. The magnitude of these correlations, however, is rather low. Looking at the two video conditions separately, it becomes evident that the predicted correlations were clearly obtained with the video sequence taken from the film *Accused*, the content of which provided more detail that could be interpreted in a rape myth consistent fashion. For this video segment, use of the passive voice increased, as predicted, with increasing levels of RMA, supporting H₃. Also as predicted, participants who used more passive constructions perceived the incident as less severe and ascribed more responsibility to the victim, but these correlations were only significant for participants who watched the segment from *Accused* (thus partially supporting H₄); no significant correlations were found for participants who had watched the sequence taken from the *Black Forest Hospital*.⁶

Headlines. Table 3 shows the means of participants' RMA and attribution of responsibility as a function of the five categories of headlines. As can be seen in the table, the absolute frequencies of verb forms in these headlines were quite small. Differences between active and passive voice within the verb categories (1)–(3) could not be detected (the absolute values of respective *t* tests were all smaller than 1). Further tests were thus conducted to see whether nominalization or indirect description in headlines may serve a 'distancing' function and reflect a more negative (positive) view of the victim (perpetrator). To do so, planned comparisons were computed, pinpointing categories (1)–(3), in which the verb 'to rape' ('vergewaltigen') was used, against categories (4) and (5), in which nominal or indirect expressions were used instead.

⁶A comparison of the magnitude of correlation between the two video conditions yielded no significant results, although a trend emerged for the correlation between the passive index and the index of perpetrator responsibility ($z = 1.56, p < .06$, one-tailed; all other $p > .10$).

For RMA, this analysis yielded no systematic effect ($t < 1$). We did, however, find support for the idea that more nominal/indirect headlines are associated with lower perceived severity ($t(60) = 2.07, p < .03$) and attributions of higher responsibility to the victim ($t(62) = -2.74, p < .01$, one-tailed). These t -tests and the means in Table 3 indicate that those participants who did use the verb 'to rape' ('vergewaltigen') in either the active or the passive form could be differentiated from those participants who used either the noun 'rape' ('Vergewaltigung') or an indirect paraphrase to summarize the observed incident.

Discussion

The results of this study indicate that when describing the fact that a man raped a woman, non-professional writers use the passive voice relatively more frequently than when describing other actions in the same story context. Overall, the active voice was more prevalent than the passive voice in all conditions and action categories, but this simply reflects the generally higher prevalence of the active in the German language. It should be emphasized, however, that—in spite of this low basic frequency of the passive voice—substantial correlations between RMA and passive use as well as between direct attributions of responsibility and passive use were obtained when the rape scene allowed some latitude for rape myth consistent interpretations, thus the finding that the passive is frequently used to describe male acts of sexual violence against women generalized from newspaper and scientific articles (Henley *et al.*, 1995; Lamb, 1991) to spontaneous written descriptions elicited from students.

One could argue that it might be more expedient to include in the present analysis only those active sentences that could have been put in the passive according to typical practice and grammatical correctness.⁷ However, I refrained from restricting the analysis in such a way for two reasons. First, participants faced no restrictions whatsoever in how to express what they had seen. So even if a given active expression found in a participant's write-up could not be converted to passive directly, an alternative way of expressing the same piece of information in the passive (using a different verb or phrase) would almost always have been available. Furthermore, some participants did generate rather awkward or even grammatically incorrect passive expressions when describing the perpetrator's actions (e.g. using a direct passive ('sie wurde aufgelauert') where the verb would call for an impersonal indirect passive ('es wurde ihr aufgelauert')). It therefore seemed problematic to impose a criterion of typicality or grammatical correctness on deciding if a given active expression could have been put in the passive. None the less, it might be useful in future research to include other, more controlled ways of establishing the prevalence of passive use in descriptions of sexual violence. This could be done, for example, by comparing descriptions of acts of sexual violence to those of a range of non-violent acts by the same actor, or by using a forced-choice paradigm in which active vs. passive descriptions would be presented and the participant be asked to choose the most appropriate alternative. The latter

⁷I would like to thank an anonymous reviewer, who pointed this out.

approach, however, would also involve giving up many of the advantages of studying natural language production in an unobtrusive fashion.

The analysis of participants' self-generated headlines strongly suggests that other strategies of linguistic distancing, such as nominalization and the use of expressions that altogether avoid the verb 'to rape' and the noun 'rape', go along with heightened attributions of responsibility to the victim. Thus, strategies other than the use of the passive vs. active voice may yield additional, perhaps more reliable, indicators of linguistic avoidance (see also Lamb, 1991). The assessment of these strategies by eliciting and content-coding participants' open-ended descriptions should thus be considered as an alternative or supplement to the usual closed-format attribution ratings. These conclusions are still rather tentative on the basis of a single study; researchers should continue to examine the question of what linguistic categories could be instrumentalized in the assessment of attribution of responsibility.

The present findings go beyond the results of the archival studies discussed in the introduction. They demonstrate that the use of the passive voice and other distancing strategies are employed not only by professional journalists and scientists, but also in the relatively 'spontaneous' writing of non-professional people. Furthermore, this study is the first to provide a direct correlational link between these particular linguistic strategies and direct judgments of responsibility: when the case to be judged provided some degree of interpretability, individuals who used more passive and other distancing strategies also tended to ascribe greater responsibility to the victim (and less responsibility to the assailant) when asked to provide these direct judgments. Finally, individuals who were generally more accepting of rape myths used more passive forms to describe the actions of a rapist during the rape than did individuals who rejected rape myths. Again, this was true to the extent that the circumstances of the rape contained details that could be interpreted in a rape myth consistent way (e.g. friendly interactions between victim and rapist before the rape; role-inconsistent appearance and behaviour of the victim, etc.). These correlational findings support the idea that use of the passive voice and other distancing text features reflect anti-victim attitudes and judgments.

A direct comparison between this study, which used German-speaking participants, and previous studies conducted in English-speaking countries is difficult, not only because of differences in the studies' respective methodology, but also because of the different base-rates of the passive voice in the two languages studied. It therefore seems desirable to conduct further studies of the kind described here with participants who speak English and other languages so as to broaden the basis of our conclusions. In addition, future studies on the perception of sexual violence might address additional text features that have been shown to correlate with causal attributions so as to further explore non-reactive alternatives to direct judgments.

Now that it has been established that the authors of newspaper articles (Henley *et al.*, 1995, Study 1) and scientific essays (Lamb, 1991), as well as non-professional writers (the present study), often use the passive voice and other obscuring language in describing men's violence against women, and that the degree of passive use may be correlated with the writers' anti-victim attitudes and direct

attribution of responsibility to the woman (the present study), an interesting next step would be a thorough analysis of the effects that this kind of language may have on readers of these accounts. Would people who read a text about a rape in the passive (as opposed to active) voice interpret the perpetrator's and victim's actions differently?

Some preliminary results in this regard were reported by Henley *et al.* (1995, Study 3), Lamb and Keon (1995), as well as Bohner (1998): these researchers exposed participants to texts about rape or other forms of interpersonal violence; these texts were experimentally varied, using the active vs. passive voice. Whereas Henley and colleagues (1995) observed that the passive (vs. active) voice caused a lower perceived responsibility of the perpetrator in male participants but not in female participants, no differences between active and passive voice were found by Lamb and Keon (1995). In a recent study by Bohner (1998; see also Herberg, Klingemann, Potgeter, Litters, & Bohner, 1996), a more complex pattern emerged: individuals with low RMA were uninfluenced by active vs. passive descriptions and generally ascribed a high responsibility to the assailant; individuals with high RMA, however, tended to perceive a lower responsibility of the assailant in the passive than in the active condition if the text contained details that were interpretable in terms of rape myths. But if such details were lacking, high-RMA participants attributed an even *greater* responsibility to the assailant in the passive than in the active text conditions. These mixed findings indicate that further theoretical and empirical work is necessary to delineate more precisely both the conditions of active vs. passive use and its effects on readers' interpretations.

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