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How victim framing shapes attitudes towards sexual assault

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Abstract

Crimes typically involve a perpetrator and a victim, but alleged perpetrators are often cast as the true victim, as happened recently in the case of U.S. Supreme Court nominee Brett Kavanaugh. Across two experiments, we investigated the efficacy of this type of victim framing. Participants read a brief report about an alleged college campus sexual assault and expressed their support for the male and female protagonists. The report either framed the woman as the victim (of sexual assault), the man as the victim (of false accusations), or was relatively neutral about victimhood (baseline control). Relative to baseline, the framing manipulation was effective at eliciting more support for the character described as a victim, regardless of participants gender or political affiliation. These findings suggest that the language of victimhood, or its co-opting to cast alleged perpetrators in a more favorable light, can shape public opinion about a politically polarized issue.