Predicting Social Reactions to Sexual Assault Disclosures: When Disclosed Experiences Stray from the Typical Rape Script

Anne L. Steel, Anna E. Jaffe, & David DiLillo

University of Nebraska-Lincoln

Introduction

- Social reactions to victims' disclosure of sexual assault play a key role in victims' post-assault recovery.
  - Negative reactions (e.g., blaming the victim) have been linked to greater mental health problems among victims (Sigurvinsdottir & Ullman, 2015).
  - Positive reactions (e.g., providing emotional support) have been associated with more adaptive coping (Ullman & Peter-Hagene, 2014).
- Given the influential role of reactions to disclosure, researchers have sought to identify factors that predict these responses.
  - For example, victims receive more negative reactions when disclosing to formal (e.g., police officers) versus informal support sources (e.g., family members; Filipas & Ullman, 2001).
  - Compared to European American victims, ethnic minority victims are met with more negative reactions (Ullman & Filipas, 2001).
- The characteristics of the disclosed assault might also influence others' reactions to disclosure.
  - Drawing upon script theory (Fiske & Taylor, 1991), researchers have argued that victims are less likely to acknowledge their experiences as assault when they do not match societal definitions of sexual assault (Littleton et al., 2007).
  - It is plausible that those responding to disclosures of assaults that stray from typical rape scripts are also less likely to acknowledge these experiences as assaultive. As a result, they may express more victim blame and provide less emotional support.
- In the present study, we examined the role of two factors—victims' prior consensual sexual activity with the perpetrator(s) and use of resistance during the assault—in predicting responses to disclosure. Societal rape scripts suggest that sexual assault is perpetrated by a stranger and involves greater resistance by the victim (Littleton et al., 2007).
  - We hypothesized that prior consensual sexual activity with the perpetrator(s) and less resistance by the victim would independently predict higher victim blame and lower emotional support.
  - We also expected that prior consensual sexual activity and less resistance would interact to predict the highest level of victim blame and the lowest level of emotional support.

Method

Participants

- Participants were 34 undergraduate women (M_{age} = 20.5, SD = 2.08) who reported an attempted or completed sexual assault occurring since the age of 14 and indicated that they had disclosed this experience to at least one person.
- These women were recruited at a large Midwestern university for a larger, multi-wave study; data collection for this study is ongoing.
- Participants identified as European American (94.1%), African American (8.8%), Hispanic/Latino (8.8%), Asian American (2.9%), and other (8.8%). Participants were permitted to identify more than one ethnicity; thus, the total percentage exceeds 100%.
- The majority of participants (94.1%) identified as heterosexual.

Measures

- **Prior consensual sexual activity with the perpetrator.** Participants identified an index sexual assault (i.e., the assault "most upsetting" to the participant) and indicated the number of perpetrators involved in that assault (up to three perpetrators). The majority identified one perpetrator (n = 31; 91.2%), while two participants identified two perpetrators and one identified three perpetrators. Participants were then asked to indicate whether—prior to their unwanted sexual experience—they had engaged _willingly_ in sexual activity with the perpetrator(s). Based on their responses, participants were categorized into mutually exclusive groups: (a) had _not_ engaged in prior consensual activity with _all_ perpetrators involved in the incident (coded 0; n = 22) or (b) had engaged in prior consensual activity with _all_ perpetrators involved in the incident (coded 1; n = 12).
- **Use of resistance during the assault.** Participants used a Likert-type scale ranging from 0 (_not at all_) to 4 (_very much_) to rate the degree to which they used 16 different strategies (e.g., "screamed, shouted, or yelled;" "kicked or kneed") to resist the sexual advances. Ratings on each item were summed, resulting in a total score ranging from 0 to 64.
- **Reactions to disclosure.** The blame and emotional support subscales of the Social Reactions to Disclosure Questionnaire (SRQ; Ullman, 2000) were used to assess others' responses to participants' disclosure of sexual assault. The six-item blame subscale measures the degree to which others respond by blaming the victim for the assault (e.g., "Told you that you could have done more to prevent this experience from occurring"). The six-item emotional support subscale assesses the degree to which others respond by expressing care (e.g., "Held you or told you that you are loved"). Participants used a Likert-type scale ranging from 1 (_never_) to 5 (_always_) to rate the degree to which they received responses on each of these subscales; thus, total scores for each subscale ranged from 6 to 30.

Results

- **Victim blame.** Marginally significant findings from a multiple regression analysis revealed that the main and interactive effects of prior consensual activity with the perpetrator(s) and resistance during the assault predicted victim blame, R^2 = .221, $F(3, 33)$ = 2.831, p = .055.
  - There was a significant conditional main effect of prior consensual sexual activity with the perpetrator(s) on victim blame (b = -4.375, p = .027). When holding resistance constant at zero, victims who had previously engaged in consensual sexual activity with the perpetrator(s) received lower levels of victim blame than did those who had not engaged in consensual sexual activity with the perpetrator(s).
  - There was a significant conditional main effect of resistance during the assault on victim blame (b = -.215, p = .027). Among those who had not previously engaged in sexual activity with the perpetrator(s), the use of greater resistance during the assault was associated with lower levels of victim blame.
  - There was a significant interaction effect of prior consensual activity with the perpetrator(s) and resistance during the assault on victim blame (b = .444, p = .010), such that the effect of resistance on blame was greater for those who endorsed prior consensual activity with the perpetrator(s). In fact, whereas resistance was negatively associated with blame for those who did not have prior consensual activity with the perpetrator(s), the association between resistance and blame was positive in those that did endorse prior consensual activity (see Figure 1).
- **Emotional support.** A multiple regression analysis revealed that the main and interactive effects of prior consensual sexual activity with the perpetrator(s) and resistance during the assault did not significantly predict emotional support, R^2 = .080, $F(3, 33)$ = .872, p = .466.
  - The conditional main effects of prior consensual sexual activity with the perpetrator(s) and resistance during the assault on emotional support were not significant.
  - The interaction effect of prior consensual activity with the perpetrator(s) and resistance during the assault on emotional support was also non-significant (p > .10). Given that the small sample size may have resulted in low power, trends were visually examined in Figure 2. These trends suggest that, whereas resistance may be positively associated with emotional support for those who did not have prior consensual activity with the perpetrator(s), the association between resistance and emotional support may be negative in those that did endorse prior consensual activity. Larger samples are needed to determine if these trends may reflect significant associations.
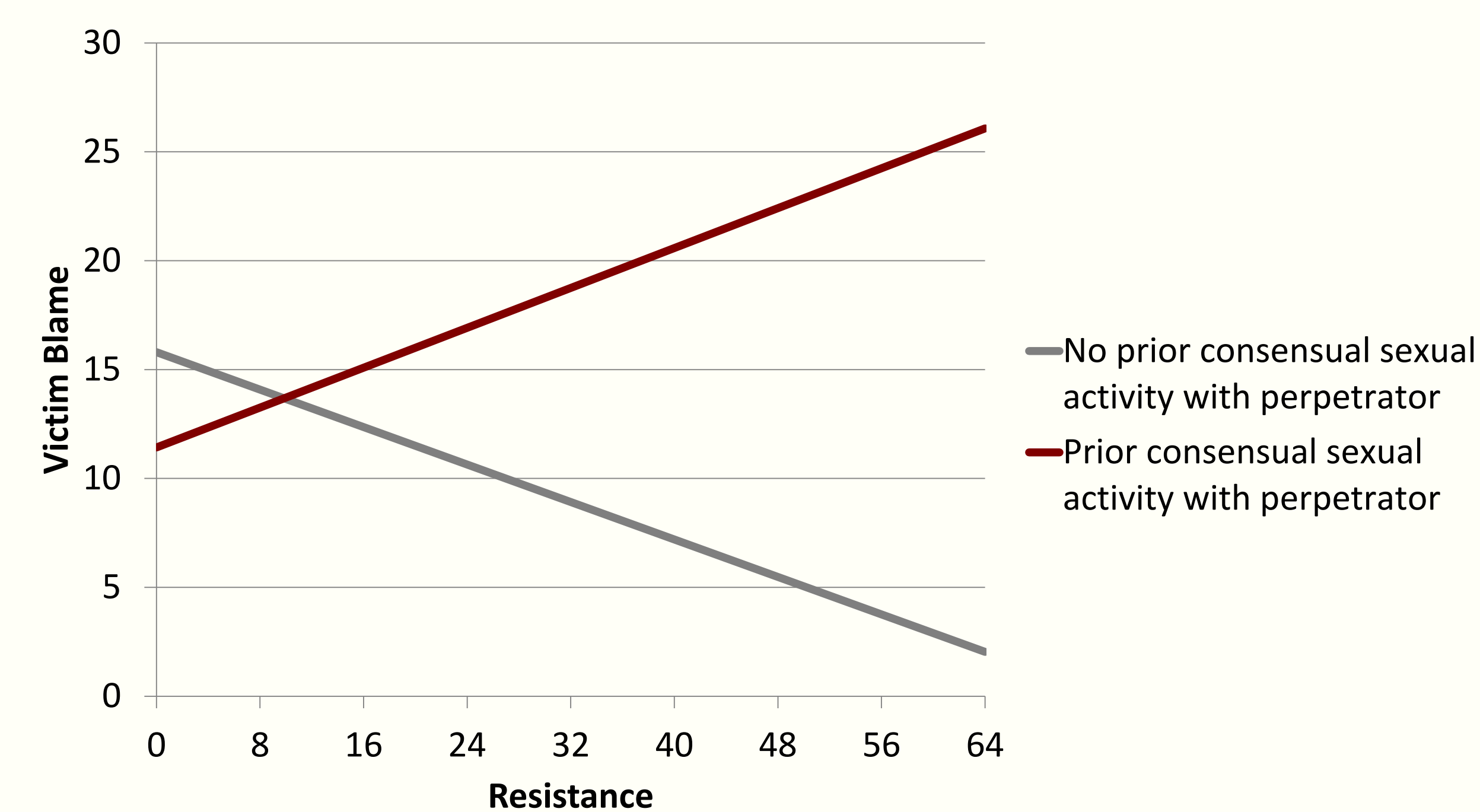

Figure 1. Interaction between prior consensual activity with the perpetrator(s) and resistance during the assault predicting victim blame.
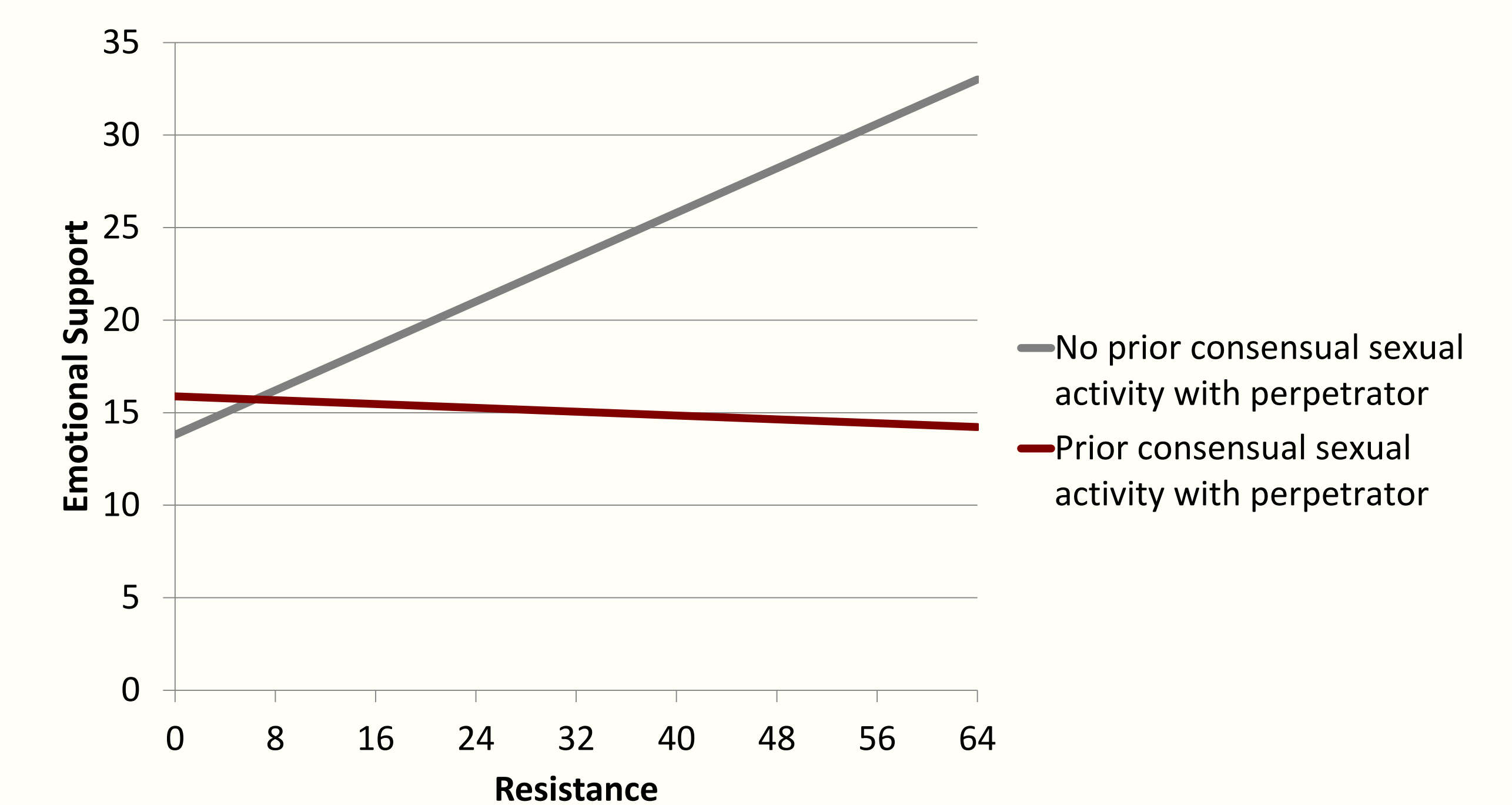

Figure 2. Non-significant interaction between prior consensual activity with the perpetrator(s) and resistance during the assault predicting emotional support.

Discussion

- Our findings suggest that the association between victim resistance and social reactions to disclosure may depend on victims' prior consensual sexual activity with the perpetrator(s).
  - Supporting our hypotheses, victims who did not have a history of prior consensual activity with the perpetrator(s) were less likely to be blamed and more likely to be supported when they used greater resistance during the assault (though findings regarding emotional support were non-significant). These findings are consistent with script theory in that victims whose experiences more closely matched societal definitions of sexual assault received less blaming and more supportive responses.
  - Contrary to our hypotheses, victims with a history of prior consensual activity with the perpetrator(s) were less likely to be blamed and more likely to be supported when they used less resistance during the assault. Given both a precedence of consent and low levels of victim resistance, responders may be less likely to acknowledge the occurrence of a sexual assault. As a result, they might not deem these experiences worthy of blame or support. On the other hand, responders may be more inclined to acknowledge sexual assaults involving higher levels of victim resistance. In such cases, victims' history of prior consensual sexual activity with the perpetrator (a factor inconsistent with typical rape scripts) may lead others to respond with more blame and less support.
- Limitations: Though we discussed trends in the current study, the findings regarding victim blame were only marginally significant, and the findings regarding emotional support were non-significant. Although these non-significant findings may be due, in part, to low power resulting from a small sample size, replication is needed to determine the significance of these findings in larger samples.
- Conclusions: Our findings suggest that others' responses to victims' disclosures of sexual assault are influenced by the characteristics of the assault situation. Others' misconceived notions about sexual assault—including overly narrow definitions that do not include the full range of experiences that constitute sexual assault—could contribute to harmful responses to victims' disclosures. This highlights the need to expand sexual assault interventions to include education for those likely to be responding to victims' disclosures.