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You shouldn't feel that way! Extending the emotional victim effect through the mediating role of expectancy violation

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Recent research has shown that the 'emotional victim effect' (an emotional victim is more readily believed than a nonemotional victim) is mediated by *expectancy violation*: people base their judgments about a victim's credibility on their expectations of the victim's suffering. Victims whose behavior is inconsistent with these expectations suffer a loss of credibility. In this article, we further examine the role of expectancy violation and explore possible *negative effects* of a victim's highly emotional post-crime reaction. Using several mediations, we demonstrate three important contributions to the existing literature. First, we demonstrate that, in the same way as expectancy violation mediates the effect from nonverbal emotional expression on perceived credibility, this mediating effect would also hold for the *verbal* expression of emotions. Second, we demonstrate that expectancy violation mediates the effect from a victim's verbal emotional expression on the observer's attitude toward the victim. More specifically, we demonstrate that a highly emotional written Victim Impact Statement (VIS) could lead to secondary victimization, dependent on the observer's expectations regarding the effects of the crime. Third, this article is the first to demonstrate that expectancy violation leads to a negative effect on people's acceptance of the VIS in the criminal justice procedure.

Keywords: emotional victim effect; expectancy violation; emotions; victim credibility; victim derogation

People hold different expectations about how victims are affected by, and respond to, different crime types. Such expectations in turn influence people's judgments of victims. For example, previous research has consistently shown that the emotionality of a victim's demeanor affects his/her perceived credibility (Ask, 2009; Ask & Landström, 2010; Baldry & Winkel, 1998; Baldry, Winkel, & Enthoven, 1997; Bollingmo, Wessel, Eilertsen, & Magnussen, 2008; Kaufmann, Drevland, Wessel, Overskeid, & Magnussen, 2003; Mulder & Winkel, 1996; Winkel & Koppelaar, 1991). More specifically, research suggests that a nonemotional style of self-presentation, as compared to an emotional one, is more likely to result in secondary victimization by the victim's environment (Ask & Landström, 2010; Baldry, 1996; Baldry et al., 1997; Nadler & Rose, 2003; Winkel & Koppelaar, 1991), that is, nonemotional victims run a higher risk of further victimization by their environment; encountering disbelief, little sympathy, and insufficient support. Although the mechanisms behind this

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emotional victim effect (EVE) are relatively unexplored, Ask and Landström have recently found empirical evidence for a mediating role of *expectancy violation*: if observers' expectations of a rape victim's post-crime reaction are inconsistent with the latter's display of emotions, the victim's credibility decreases.

In the research presented here, we further examine the mediating role of expectancy violation and explore possible *negative effects* of a victim's highly emotional post-crime reaction. More specifically, whereas most EVE studies have dealt with the nonverbal expression of emotions and showed that victims who react in an emotional manner (e.g., crying, sobbing) are perceived as more truthful than victims who react in a controlled, calm, numb, or unemotional manner (e.g., Ask & Landström, 2010; Baldry & Winkel, 1998; Bollingmo et al., 2008; Hackett, Day, & Mohr, 2008; Winkel & Koppelaar, 1991), we examine credibility penalties to *highly emotional, written* Victim Impact Statements (VISs) for different crime types. That is, we measured the influence of crime severity on observers' judgments, by holding constant the emotionality of the VIS. Examining the effects of the verbal expression of emotions is especially important given the fact that, for example in a small country as the Netherlands, the written VIS is being used about 3000 times per year (Lens, Pemberton, & Groenhuijsen, 2010).

We offer three novel propositions. First, we argue that, in the same way as expectancy violation mediates the effect from nonverbal emotional expression on perceived credibility (Ask & Landström, 2010), this mediating effect would also hold for the *verbal* expression of emotions. Second, and in line with the first proposition, we argue that expectancy violation mediates the effect from a victim's verbal emotional expression on the observer's attitude toward the victim. More specifically, we argue that a highly emotional written VIS could lead to secondary victimization, dependent on the observer's expectations regarding the effects of the crime. And third, we argue that a discrepancy between the victim's emotional reaction to a certain crime and the observer's expectations can have practical implications in the criminal justice procedure. More specifically, we argue that expectancy violation would lead to negative effects on the extent to which observers think that the described consequences of the crime for the victim should be taken into account when determining the punishment of the offender.

Expectancy violation

Using Bond et al.'s (1992) expectancy violation model, Ask and Landström (2010) have recently shown that people base their judgments about a victim's credibility on their *expectations* of the victim's suffering: if a victim then behaves in a way that is inconsistent with these expectations, loss of credibility ensues. This expectancy violation model thus carries two important implications: (1) people hold expectations about the consequences of a certain crime; and (2) people make judgments about the truthfulness of the victim's suffering based on these expectations. These findings are in line with research by Hackett et al. (2008, p. 333), who argue that it is 'expectancy violation rather than emotional expressiveness per se that biases observers' perceptions of rape victim credibility,' and Klippenstine and Schuller (2012), who showed that the perceived typicality of a rape victim's emotional response influences observers' perceptions.

It goes without saying that this relationship between the observers' expectations and a victim's emotional demeanor can especially have far-reaching consequences in the legal realm, where the perceived credibility of a victim is often of crucial importance. Since the 1980s, it has become routine for the criminal justice system to involve crime victims in the sentencing process. The United Nations Declaration of Basic Principles of Justice for Victims of Crime and Abuse of Power (1985) gives victims of crime the right to be heard at appropriate stages of the criminal proceedings. This involvement sometimes entitles victims to make an *oral or written* statement about the consequences (emotional and otherwise) of their victimization: the VIS. Making such a statement often includes the expression of intense emotions.

In this article, we argue that making a written VIS can have negative consequences, depending on the observers' *expectations* about the crime and its emotional effects. If a victim makes a VIS in a way that is inconsistent with the observers' expectations, this incongruity might lead to a negative veracity judgment. This would be an addition to previous research that examined the effects of both nonverbal and verbal emotional expression on credibility judgments. For example, Rose, Nadler, and Clark (2006) manipulated both nonverbal and verbal reactions of the victim and found support for the proportionality rule: victims are expected by observers to react in a way that is proportional to the seriousness of the offense. An overly intense emotional display following a minor offense is seen as an unusual reaction and in turn affects perceptions of a victim negatively, in the same way as does a victim's failure to display strong emotions in relation to a serious crime. Also, as Silver, Wortman, and Crofton (1990) have found, victims who display either too little or too much distress in the eyes of the observers are likely to elicit negative reactions. Moreover, previous research (e.g., Winkel & Koppelaar, 1991) leads us to expect that a discrepancy between the observers' expectations and the victim's verbal emotional expression not only influences the observers' veracity judgment but also generates a negative attitude toward the victim.

In line with previous work by Klippenstine and Schuller (2012) showed that the emotionality of the victim influences participants' guilt assessments, we argue that a discrepancy between the observers' expectations and the victim's emotional demeanor can also have negative implications in the criminal justice procedure. More specifically, we offer the novel proposition that a discrepancy would lead to negative effects on the extent to which observers think that the described consequences of the crime for the victim should be taken into account when determining the punishment of the offender.

We formulated five hypotheses. First, we predict that a highly emotional *written* VIS would be regarded as more credible from a victim of a severe crime than from a victim of a less severe crime (Hypothesis 1). Second, we predict that observers would be more likely to expect a highly emotional written VIS from a victim of a severe crime than from a victim of a less severe crime (Hypothesis 2). Third, we predict that expectancy violation would mediate the effect of crime severity on the participants' veracity judgment (Hypothesis 3). Fourth, we predict that a 'mismatch' between the observers' expectations and a victim's emotional demeanor would negatively influence the observers' general impression of and sympathy for the victim and would increase victim blaming (Hypothesis 4). Finally, we predict that a mismatch would negatively influence the extent to which the participant would think that the

described consequences of the crime for the victim should be taken into account when determining the punishment of the offender (Hypothesis 5).

Method

Participants and design

Seventy-seven students and two lecturers (10 men and 69 women) at AVANS University of Applied Sciences in Breda, a city in the south of the Netherlands, with ages ranging from 16 to 59 years ($M = 19.08$, $SD = 4.91$), voluntarily participated in the study.¹ Participants were randomly assigned to either a high or a low crime severity condition.

Materials and procedure

The participants were seated at separate tables in a lecture hall. They were told to work on the experimental task quietly and individually. The participants were given written instructions informing them that they were about to read a scenario and that they subsequently had to answer a number of questions. They were assured that there were no 'right' or 'wrong' answers and that the results of the experiment would be treated confidentially. A brief background section stated that a crime had taken place, that a suspect had been arrested, that the criminal trial would take place today, and that the victim would have the opportunity to make a VIS on the consequences of the crime. The first paragraph of the VIS was the same in both scenarios: the victim stated that she had been cycling home after a night out with friends when she saw someone (the suspect) standing at the side of the road. She stated that she recognized this person from the club she and her friends had been to, and believing that he was having trouble with his bicycle, she had stopped to help him.

Crime severity

In the high-crime severity condition, the victim continued her statement by declaring that the suspect immediately started to touch her inappropriately. After making it clear to him that she did not want this, the suspect became violent and eventually raped her. In the low crime severity condition, the victim continued her statement by declaring that the suspect immediately started to swear at her and threatened to hurt her. In this scenario, the participants were told that no physical violence had been inflicted. To reduce possible confounds, in neither of the two scenarios was any additional information about the victim, the suspect, or the trial given to the participants.

Victim Impact Statement

The scenario of the VIS was based on a recent study of victim's emotional reactions to violent crimes (Lens et al., 2010):

This crime has turned my whole life upside down. I don't sleep anymore, I barely eat and I constantly feel anxious. Anxious that this will happen to me again or that I will meet the offender again. I don't dare to be out on the street on my own. I constantly feel

tense, restless and sad. I am not who I once was, I am no longer the enjoyable friend or the fun, spontaneous daughter. ...Why did this have to happen to me? What did I do to deserve this? I am disgusted by the offender! What possessed him? I did not even know him. I am so mad. Very often at the wrong people. Then I have to take it out on the person standing closest to me. It is just so unfair, I have become a completely different person.

Participants read about a victim displaying high levels of both avoidance (fear, sadness, anxiety) and hostile (anger, disgust) emotions. For both conditions (high and low crime severity) the emotionality of the VIS was held constant, allowing for testing the influence of crime severity. Having read the scenario, the participants were asked to digest the scenario for a while and subsequently turn the page to answer a number of questions.

Dependent Measures

Veracity judgments

In line with previous work by Ask and Landström (2010), the participants were asked to make a dichotomous veracity judgment, indicating whether or not they believed that the victim had suffered the consequences as indicated in the VIS, and to assign a confidence rating to the certainty of the expressed consequences (1 = *absolutely unsure*, 7 = *absolutely sure*).

Expectancy violation

As a measure of expectancy violation, and in line with previous work by Ask and Landström (2010), the participants were asked to assess to what extent the consequences, as described in the VIS, matched the consequences that they would expect from a rape/threat victim (1 = *did not match at all*, 7 = *matched completely*).

Attitude toward the victim

Three items regarding the observers' attitude toward the victim were adapted from a study by Aguiar, Vala, Correia, and Pereira (2008). As a measure of victim derogation, the participants were asked to indicate their general impression of the victim on a 7-point scale, ranging from 1 (*extremely negative*) to 7 (*extremely positive*) (with the lower range of scores indicating victim derogation). Furthermore, they were asked to indicate their feelings of sympathy for the victim on a 7-point scale, ranging from 1 (*no sympathy at all*) to 7 (*very strong sympathy*). As a measure of victim blaming, the participants were asked to rate the extent to which they found the victim was to blame (1 = *no blame at all*, 7 = *full blame*).

Influence VIS

Finally, the participants were asked to indicate whether or not they believed that the described consequences of the crime for the victim should be taken into account when determining the punishment of the offender (*yes* or *no*).

Results

Veracity judgments

The participants were asked to make a dichotomous veracity judgment, indicating whether or not they believed that the victim had suffered the consequences as indicated in the VIS, and to assign a confidence rating to the certainty of the expressed consequences. In support of Hypothesis 1, a logistic regression analysis showed that the participants in the high crime severity condition significantly more often believed that the victim had suffered the consequences as indicated in the VIS ($n = 38$, 95.0%) than the participants in the low crime severity condition ($n = 21$, 53.8%); $\text{Exp}(B) = 0.061$, $p < 0.001$. Moreover, the difference in confidence ratings for the high crime severity condition ($M = 3.78$, $SD = 0.70$) and the low crime severity condition ($M = 2.95$, $SD = 0.99$; $t(76) = 4.26$, $p < 0.001$) was statistically significant, indicating that the participants in the high crime severity group were significantly more certain that the victim had suffered the expressed consequences than the participants in the low crime severity group. The magnitude of the differences in the means was high (Cohen's $d = 0.97$).

To test the hypothesis that the participants in the high crime severity condition were more certain about the credibility of the expressed emotions because they *expected* more severe consequences of severe crimes (Hypothesis 3), we conducted mediated regression analyses. Using simple mediation (1000 bootstrap resamples) provided by Preacher and Hayes (2004, 2008), we estimated a regression-based causal model for the effect of crime severity on confidence ratings through the mediating effect of expectancy violation. As Figure 1 shows, the total and direct effects of crime severity on confidence ratings are 0.828, $p < 0.001$, and 0.309, *ns*, respectively. The difference between the total and direct effects is the total indirect effect through expectancy violation, with a point estimate of 0.5180 and a 95% BCa bootstrap CI of 0.2391–0.8538. These results confirmed Hypothesis 3: participants in the high crime severity condition were more certain about the credibility of the expressed emotions because they *expected* more severe consequences of severe

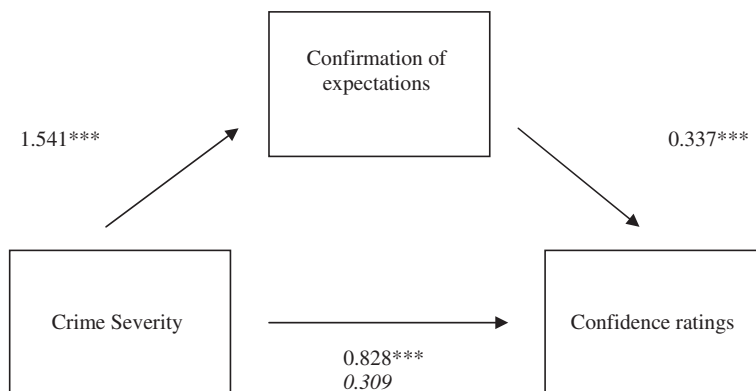


Figure 1. The mediating effect of expectancy violation on confidence ratings. This figure shows unstandardized linear regression coefficients. The italicized coefficient (0.309) is the effect after controlling for the mediator variable.

*** $p < 0.001$.

crimes. Furthermore, the direction of the *a* path is consistent with our hypothesis that the participants in the low crime severity condition would experience higher levels of expectancy violation than the participants in the high crime severity condition: participants were more likely to expect a rape victim to experience the consequences as described in the VIS ($M = 5.23$, $SD = 1.17$) than they would a threat victim ($M = 3.67$, $SD = 1.31$). This confirmed Hypothesis 2.

Attitude toward the victim

The participants' attitude toward the victim was measured with three variables: victim derogation, feelings of sympathy for the victim, and victim blaming.

Victim derogation

As a measure of victim derogation, the participants were asked to indicate their general impression of the victim, ranging from 1 (*extremely negative*) to 7 (*extremely positive*). Differences between the high crime severity condition ($M = 3.63$, $SD = 1.03$) and the low crime severity condition ($M = 2.79$, $SD = 1.01$; $t(77) = 3.63$, $p = 0.001$) were statistically significant, indicating that the participants in the high crime severity condition had a more positive impression of the victim than the participants in the low crime severity condition. The magnitude of the differences in the means was high (Cohen's $d = 0.82$).

Feelings of sympathy

The differences in feelings of sympathy for the victim in the high crime severity condition ($M = 5.43$, $SD = 1.20$) and the low crime severity condition ($M = 3.97$, $SD = 1.25$; $t(77) = 5.28$, $p < 0.001$) were also statistically significant, indicating that the participants in the high crime severity condition displayed higher levels of sympathy for the victim than the participants in the low crime severity condition. The magnitude of the differences in the means was very high (Cohen's $d = 1.19$).

Victim blaming

No significant differences between the two groups of participants were found for victim blaming, with the low ratings indicating that victim blaming was equally unlikely for the high crime severity condition ($M = 2.40$, $SD = 1.28$) and the low crime severity condition ($M = 2.49$, $SD = 1.45$; $t(77) = 0.28$, *ns*).

With regard to Hypothesis 4, we conducted three separate mediated regression analyses to test the mediating effects of expectancy violation on the relationship between crime severity and victim derogation, the participants' feelings of sympathy for the victim, and victim blaming. First, we conducted a mediated regression analysis for victim derogation. As Figure 2 shows, the total and direct effects of crime severity on victim derogation are 0.830, $p < 0.001$, and 0.490, *ns*, respectively. The difference between the total and direct effects is the total indirect effect through expectancy violation, with a point estimate of 0.341 and a 95% BCa bootstrap CI of 0.0959–0.6903. The results of this mediated regression analysis indicate that expectancy violation significantly mediates the effect of crime severity on victim

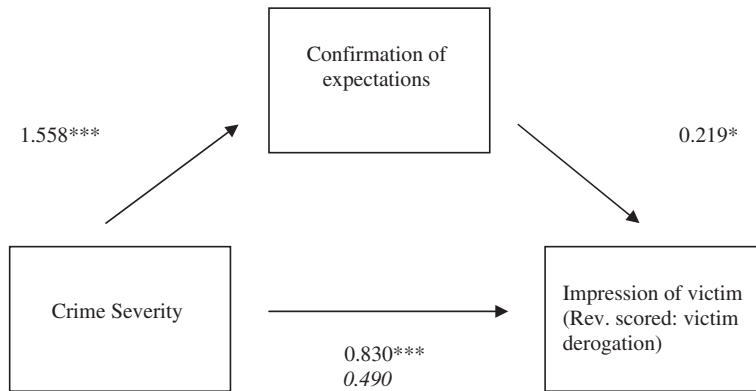


Figure 2. The mediating effect of expectancy violation on victim derogation. This figure shows unstandardized linear regression coefficients. The italicized coefficient (*0.490*) is the effect after controlling for the mediator variable.

* $p < 0.05$; *** $p \leq 0.001$.

derogation: delivering a highly emotional VIS in the low crime severity condition leads to higher levels of expectancy violation, which in turn leads to higher levels of victim derogation.

Second, we conducted a mediated regression analysis for the participants' feelings of sympathy for the victim. As Figure 3 shows, the total and direct effects of crime severity on the participants' feelings of sympathy for the victim are 1.451, $p < 0.001$, and 0.857, $p < 0.01$, respectively. The difference between the total and direct effects is the total indirect effect through expectancy violation, with a point estimate of 0.594 and a 95% BCa bootstrap CI of 0.1813–1.1225. The results indicate that expectancy violation significantly mediates the effect of crime severity on the participants' feelings of sympathy for the victim: delivering a highly emotional VIS in the low crime severity condition leads to higher levels of expectancy violation, which in turn leads to less sympathy for the victim.

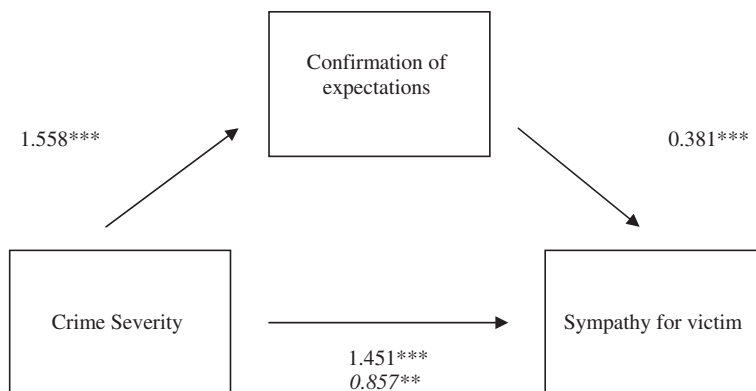


Figure 3. The mediating effect of expectancy violation on the participants' sympathy for the victim. This figure shows unstandardized linear regression coefficients. The italicized coefficient (*0.857*) is the effect after controlling for the mediator variable.

** $p < 0.01$; *** $p < 0.001$.

Third, we conducted a mediated regression analysis for victim blaming. The total and direct effects of crime severity on victim blaming are -0.087 , *ns*, and -0.309 , *ns*, respectively, indicating no total or direct effect of crime severity on victim blaming. Furthermore, the results of the *b* path show that there was no significant effect of expectancy violation on victim blaming. A mediation effect could, therefore, not be established.

In sum, regarding Hypothesis 4, mediating effects were found for victim derogation and the participants' feelings of sympathy for the victim. No mediating effects were found for victim blaming.

Influence VIS

With regard to Hypothesis 5, the participants were asked to indicate whether or not they believed that the described consequences of the crime for the victim should be taken into account when determining the punishment of the offender (dichotomous: *yes* or *no*). A logistic regression analysis showed that the participants in the high crime severity condition were as likely to accept an influence of the VIS ($n = 34$, 85.0%) as were the participants in the low crime severity condition ($n = 30$, 78, 9%): $\text{Exp(B)} = 0.662$, *ns*.

As Figure 4 shows, the total and direct effects of crime severity on the participants' acceptance of an influence of the VIS are 0.413 , *ns*, and -0.576 , *ns*, respectively. However, crime severity can still exert an indirect effect on an influence of the VIS through expectancy violation in the absence of an association between crime severity and an influence of the VIS (Hayes, 2009, Preacher & Hayes, 2004, 2008). The difference between the total and direct effects is the total indirect effect through expectancy violation, with a point estimate of 0.978 and a 95% BCa bootstrap CI of $0.1467-2.0172$. These results show that crime severity exerts an

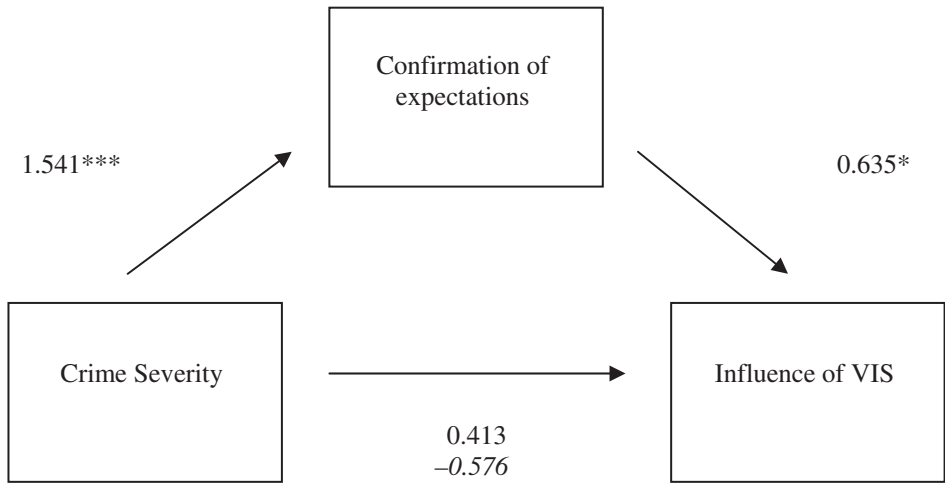


Figure 4. The indirect effect of expectancy violation on an influence of the VIS on the punishment of the offender. This figure shows unstandardized linear regression coefficients. The italicized coefficient (-0.576) is the effect after controlling for the mediator variable. * $p < 0.05$; *** $p < 0.001$.

indirect effect on an influence of the VIS through expectancy violation: delivering a highly emotional VIS in the low crime severity condition leads to higher levels of expectancy violation, which in turn leads to lower levels of acceptance of an influence of the VIS on the punishment of the offender.

Discussion

The current study found an additional support for the claim that the emotional demeanor victims display affects their perceived credibility (e.g., Ask, 2009; Ask & Landström, 2010; Bollingmo et al., 2008; Kaufmann et al., 2003; Nadler & Rose, 2003). However, unlike previous studies that focused on the positive effects of nonverbal expression on perceived credibility, we addressed the potentially *negative* effects of delivering a highly emotional *written* VIS for different crime types. In line with our hypotheses, we showed that a highly emotional written VIS is regarded as more credible from a victim of a severe crime than from a victim of a less severe crime. In addition, we found mediating effects of expectancy violation: Observers more readily *expect* a highly emotional written VIS from a victim of a severe crime than from a victim of a less severe crime and, in turn, base their credibility judgments on these expectations. Moreover, a ‘mismatch’ between the observers’ expectations and a victim’s emotional demeanor negatively influences the observers’ attitude toward the victim. More specifically, a mismatch leads to victim derogation and less sympathy for the victim. No significant effects were found for victim blaming: In both the high crime severity condition and the low crime severity condition, participants were equally unlikely to blame the victim for the crime. Furthermore, a mediated regression analysis of the participants’ acceptance of an influence of the VIS on the punishment of the offender showed that a ‘mismatch’ between the observers’ expectations and a victim’s emotional demeanor negatively influences the extent to which observers think that the described consequences of the crime for the victim should be taken into account when determining the punishment of the offender.

The findings of this study complement previous research in a number of important ways. First, most EVE studies have dealt with the *nonverbal* expression of emotions and they have consistently shown that victims who deliver their VIS crying and sobbing and struggling to maintain control are perceived as more truthful than victims who deliver their VIS in an emotionally ‘neutral’ manner (e.g., Ask & Landström, 2010; Baldry & Winkel, 1998; Bollingmo et al., 2008; Hackett et al., 2008; Kaufmann et al., 2003; Winkel & Koppelaar, 1991). For example, Rose et al. (2006) conclude that in the ‘typical’ experimental VIS study researchers present participants with a crime and with a victim of that crime whose VIS is either very emotional or mild. Instead of manipulating emotionality, we focused on observer’s judgments of highly emotional victims of *different crime types*, and addressed the *verbal* expression of emotions by asking participants to read a written VIS. Making this distinction is highly important given the fact that victim involvement in the criminal justice process may include either the delivery of an oral or a written statement. Furthermore, in a relatively small country such as the Netherlands, the written VIS is being used about 3000 times per year (Lens et al., 2010). Second, although recent EVE research suggests that the credibility of the victim may benefit from an emotional statement (e.g., Ask & Landström, 2010), we showed that victims

making a highly emotional VIS actually run a risk of secondary victimization by their environment: In comparison to victims of severe crimes, victims of less severe crimes who make a highly emotional VIS run the risk to be derogated and to be treated with less sympathy. Third, this article is the first to empirically show that expectancy violation leads to a negative effect on people's acceptance of the VIS in the criminal justice procedure.

A number of limitations of this study should be noted. First, our sample of participants (i.e., students at a University of Applied Sciences) lacked personal experience with an evaluation of VISs, which may limit generalization of the present findings. It could be that professionals involved in the criminal justice procedure (e.g., police, judges) develop more fine-grained schemas for victims' reactions to crime and thus rely less on stereotypical expectancies than the students in our study (see also Ask & Landström, 2010). Wessel, Drevland, Eilertsen, and Magnussen (2006) have shown that credibility ratings of court judges, unlike those of lay people, were not influenced by the emotions displayed by the witness. Then again, other studies have shown that even experienced professionals are susceptible to victims' emotions. Frohmann (1991), for example, suggested that a rape victim's demeanor has a substantial influence on the victim's perceived credibility in the eyes of prosecutors. Furthermore, much research in the fields of law and psychology has successfully employed student samples in studies concerning legal issues (e.g., Ask & Landström, 2010; Klippenstine & Schuller, 2012; Mulder & Winkel, 1996; Winkel & Koppelaar, 1991). Second, another issue related to our sample of participants is that the low number of men in this study restrained us from examining gender effects. As previous research found some gender effects (e.g., Klippenstine & Schuller, 2012), future research could take into account possible differences. Third, the participants' credibility ratings and attitude toward the victim could only be based on the content of the VIS, as no further information about the victim or the situation was given. This may also limit generalization of the findings presented here, as the effects may be dependent on other variables as well (e.g., gender, status, and criminal background of the victim). For example, in their review article Spellman and Tenney (2010) assessed which factors determine whether a testimony in and out of court is perceived as credible. They conclude that inferences regarding credibility may be multiply determined by characteristics of the informant, the listener, and of the specific situation. Fourth, we did not differentiate between different kinds of emotional expectations that might be violated. Observers may have expectations concerning *whether* or not a victim displays emotions, *what* kind of emotions are suitable for a victim to experience in the given situation, and the *degree* of emotional display by the victim. For example, research by Vrij and Fischer (1997) suggested that the type of emotion that is displayed plays a role in expectancy violation: angry victims are seen as less credible than sad victims. However, as the victim in our scenario was judged to be both angry and sad, we cannot draw any conclusion about this distinction. Differentiating between different types of emotions would have gained more insight into the influences of emotional expression on observers' judgments. Fifth, as this study was conducted to explore whether crime severity would influence observers' reactions to emotional VISs, we only manipulated crime severity and not victim emotionality. However, we realize that by adding a condition in which the victim showed less emotion we could have drawn more elaborate conclusions about the expectancy violation theory.

Implications

The relevance of this study is apparent. By delivering a VIS, victims have the opportunity to actively participate in the legal system and express the psychological impact of their victimization. In the Netherlands only, the written VIS is being used about 3000 times per year and victims state that they find this very helpful (Lens et al., 2010). However, although victims state the VIS to be helpful, is delivering an emotional VIS always beneficial for a crime victim? As our study has shown, the answer to this question is no. Whether a victim is evaluated as credible depends on the observer's expectations. A 'mismatch' between the observers' expectations and a victim's emotional demeanor negatively influences both the perceived credibility of the victim and the observer's attitude toward the victim (i.e., victim derogation and less sympathy for the victim). Moreover, a mismatch leads to a negative effect on people's judgment about the extent to which the VIS should be taken into account when determining the punishment of the offender. These findings not only suggest that professionals in the criminal justice system should be made sensible to these possible 'judgment flaws', but also that victims realize that the content of their statement and their emotional demeanor could influence criminal justice outcomes.

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Note

1. As this study only contains 10 men we were not able to examine gender effects.

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