

Emotional rape victims seen as more believable

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Distressed rape complainants are perceived to be more credible than those who control their emotions, a University of Queensland study has found.

UQ School of Psychology Ph.D. candidate Faye Nitschke said the findings were alarming, given that emotion is not related to honesty or accuracy.

"On average, only nine percent of [rape](#) allegations made to police in

Australia, the United States and Europe proceed to trial," Ms Nitschke said.

"In up to 88 percent of rape cases, the defendant and [complainant](#) know each other—so-called acquaintance or date rape—and the complainant's testimony about consent is critical.

"If the complainant is not perceived to be credible, these cases do not progress through the criminal justice system."

Ms Nitschke's research was conducted in collaboration with Associate Professors Blake McKimmie and Eric Vanman.

The team analyzed 20 studies involving 3,128 participants who were criminal justice professionals, community members and mock jurors.

"We found that rape complainants with distressed emotional demeanor were perceived as more credible than their emotionally-controlled counterparts and complainants who displayed other emotions," Ms Nitschke said.

"Many rape complainants don't become distressed when giving evidence, so the effect of emotion in credibility decisions may be one explanation for the disproportionately high number of rape cases which do not proceed to trial in the criminal justice system."

Ms Nitschke said a particularly concerning finding was that of criminal justice professionals, including judges, [police officers](#) and trainees being influenced by the emotion of complainants when judging credibility.

"As emotional demeanor is not a reliable indicator of honesty, and victims not being seen as credible is a key reason why cases don't progress through the [criminal justice system](#), addressing misperceptions

about a complainant's level of emotionality should be a priority" she said.

"To improve the fairness and accuracy of how allegations of sexual assault are evaluated, we need effective methods for reducing reliance on a complainant's emotional demeanor."

The [systematic review](#) was published in *Psychological Bulletin*.

More information: Faye T. Nitschke et al. A meta-analysis of the emotional victim effect for female adult rape complainants: Does complainant distress influence credibility?, *Psychological Bulletin* (2019). DOI: [10.1037/bul0000206](https://doi.org/10.1037/bul0000206)

Provided by University of Queensland

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