

# Beliefs About the Strauss-Kahn Case in France and Germany: Political Orientation and Sexual Aggression Myths as Local Versus Global Predictors

Selina Helmke, Psychology Department, University of Bielefeld, Germany

Pia-Renée Kobusch, Psychology Department, University of Bielefeld, Germany

Jonas H. Rees, Psychology Department, University of Bielefeld, Germany

Thierry Meyer, Psychology Department, Paris West University Nanterre La Défense, France

Gerd Bohner, Psychology Department, University of Bielefeld, Germany

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# Beliefs About the Strauss-Kahn Case in France and Germany: Political Orientation and Sexual Aggression Myths as Local Versus Global Predictors

Selina Helmke, Psychology Department, University of Bielefeld, Germany  
Pia-Renée Kobusch, Psychology Department, University of Bielefeld, Germany  
Jonas H. Rees, Psychology Department, University of Bielefeld, Germany  
Thierry Meyer, Psychology Department, Paris West University Nanterre La Défense, France  
Gerd Bohner, Psychology Department, University of Bielefeld, Germany

In May 2011, Dominique Strauss-Kahn, head of the International Monetary Fund and a prominent member of the French Socialist Party, was charged with attempted rape. Extensive media coverage led people across the globe to speculate about intentions and responsibilities. While the case was pending, we conducted two parallel Internet surveys, with French and German participants ( $N = 1,314$ ). We examined how strongly exoneration of the alleged perpetrator depended on acceptance of modern myths about sexual aggression (AMMSA) and identity attributes that are temporarily salient as a function of local context (gender, political left-right orientation, nationality). AMMSA was a global predictor of exonerating the alleged perpetrator across national sub-samples, whereas the predictive power of gender and left-right orientation varied locally: For French respondents, left-wing political attitudes predicted exoneration of the alleged perpetrator, whereas only for German respondents, being male predicted exoneration. We conclude that the interplay of global (sexual aggression myths) and local (social identification) factors affects the lay assessment of ambiguous cases of sexual violence.

In May 2011, French politician Dominique Strauss-Kahn (DSK) was arrested in New York City after a hotel employee reported that he had sexually assaulted her. At that time, DSK was head of the International Monetary Fund (IMF). As a prominent member of the Socialist Party, he was regarded as the most promising challenger for the 2012 French presidential election. His arrest came as a huge surprise, as exemplified by headlines such as “The downfall of DSK: France is in shock and the IMF is in turmoil” (*Economist*, May 21, 2011). The DSK affair was reported on the front page of more than 150,000 international daily newspapers (Danglade 2013). An unexpected major event calls for an explanation that fulfills both an epistemic need and a need to sustain a positive view of oneself and one’s own group (Tajfel and Turner 1986). As part of the international media coverage, forensic experts, psychiatrists, social psychologists (Kruglanski 2011), and lay people gave their opinions about the case. Considering the exceptionally high status of the alleged perpetrator (a well-known, rich and influential White male), and the low status of the alleged victim (an unknown young, poor, Black immigrant female), the

majority of explanations focused on the alleged perpetrator rather than the alleged victim.

In the present research, we used this case to study the factors that may influence individuals’ adherence to perpetrator-exonerating beliefs. We focused on two European countries, France and Germany. Apart from language differences, these countries share a similar cultural background, and attitudes about politics and sexuality are comparable in both. The French had somewhat less trust in politicians than the Germans, but held similar attitudes about homosexuality (ESS Round 6: European Social Survey 2013). To what extent do predictors of perpetrator-exonerating beliefs change as a function of national or local context? What are the motives to exonerate a high-status male suspected of having forced a low-status female to have sex against her will? We suggest that leniency toward the alleged perpetrator will be observed as a function of general beliefs about rape. We thus analyzed perceivers’ acceptance of modern myths about sexual aggression (AMMSA; Gerger et al. 2007). We regard AMMSA as a global predictor, as it predicts judgments about ambiguous

rape cases quite generally (Bohner et al. 2009). On the other hand, we analyzed social identification processes (Campbell 1958). A considerable number of observers and the alleged perpetrator shared similar identity attributes at the time of judgment (gender, nationality, and political orientation). We argue that, as observers defended a positive view of themselves and their groups, they were motivated to exonerate the alleged perpetrator to the extent that they perceived him as similar to themselves in terms of these attributes. We consequently hypothesized that identity attributes would be contingent or *local* predictors, because their salience and cognitive accessibility may vary as a function of the local political context.

## 1. Exonerating the Alleged Perpetrator

### 1.1. From Global to Local Predictors

When confronted with a crime, people sometimes tend to exonerate the perpetrator and blame the victim. Such tendencies may reflect efforts to maintain a general belief in a just world (Lerner and Miller 1978). In cases of sexual violence, a perpetrator-exonerating function is fulfilled by the acceptance of rape myths. Not only do rape myths resemble just-world beliefs applied to sexual violence, they also fulfill the more gender-specific functions of rationalizing own aggressive tendencies (mainly for men) and reducing anxiety by distancing the self from the victim (mainly for women; Bohner 1998; Bohner et al. 2009). Various studies have demonstrated a strong link between individuals' acceptance of rape myths and their attribution of blame to victims instead of perpetrators in particular cases of sexual violence (Abrams et al. 2003; Bohner et al. 1993; Check and Malamuth 1985; Lonsway and Fitzgerald 1994; for a meta-analysis, see Suarez and Gadalla 2010). Recently, Gerger and colleagues (2007) have introduced the AMMSA scale; this self-report instrument measures a broader concept of myths about sexual aggression with relatively subtle items (see also Megías et al. 2011). AMMSA may be defined as the adherence to “descriptive or prescriptive beliefs [...] that serve to deny, downplay, or justify sexually aggressive behavior that men commit against women” (Gerger et al. 2007, 425). Research with the AMMSA scale has shown that people use myths about sexual aggression as a cognitive schema when processing ambiguous case information: Higher AMMSA is associated with a tendency

to blame the victim and exonerate the perpetrator, and this is true particularly when case descriptions contain ambiguous or irrelevant information (Eyssel and Bohner 2011; Süßenbach, Bohner, and Eyssel 2012). Individual differences in AMMSA thus affect individuals' tendencies to blame the victim, particularly in highly ambiguous cases of sexual violence.

From the observer's point of view, both the alleged victim and the alleged perpetrator may be classified in terms of multiple categories (e.g., gender, ethnicity, nationality, social status, religion, political affiliation, personality, etc.) that may vary in their importance or salience because of situational factors. A victim who is perceived as a minority member may thus be placed in double jeopardy, as negative prejudices against minorities have been shown to go hand in hand with sexual aggression myths (Aosved and Long 2006; Süßenbach and Bohner 2011; Suarez and Gadalla 2010). Although this aspect may have been relevant in the DSK case, where the alleged victim was an immigrant from Africa with a low-status occupation, our empirical focus was on the alleged perpetrator because – at least initially – he was the main target of media attention. (We will come back to the importance of victim attributes in section 4. “Discussion”).

Theories of social identification (Campbell 1958; Tajfel and Turner 1986) suggest that similarity is a component of group membership. We hypothesized that the alleged perpetrator's similarity to the observer would constitute a local predictor of observer's motivation to exonerate the perpetrator. This exoneration, in turn, would serve to protect against a threat to the sense of own identity. As Bal and van den Bos (2010) have shown, male observers blamed and derogated a victim of sexual assault more strongly if the male perpetrator was similar rather than dissimilar to themselves. This pattern supports the assumption of just-world theory that “[a]s events become closer to [the individual's] world [...], the concern over injustices increases greatly, as does the need to explain or make sense of the events” (Lerner and Miller 1978, 1031). Generally, gender can be considered an established predictor of blaming the alleged victim in rape cases, such that men engage in blaming female victims of sexual viol-

ence more than women do (Grubb and Harrower 2008; Grubb and Turner 2012).

Apart from gender, shared political attitudes are an important factor in perceptions of interpersonal similarity and liking. Research has shown that pairs of friends are likely to share similar political ideologies along a “liberal-conservative” continuum. Furthermore, when judging the friendship potential of an unfamiliar target person, people rely on perceived similarities in political ideology, and this effect remains significant even when more specific attitudinal (dis-)similarities are controlled for (Potéat et al. 2011). From the French point of view, DSK’s Socialist Party affiliation was a very salient attribute, as DSK was preparing to run for the French presidential election and expected to be the main challenger of then-president Nicolas Sarkozy. In France, his arrest changed the political scenery and drastically affected prevailing political discourses by fueling speculations about a new Socialist candidate (the future president François Hollande) challenging Sarkozy in the elections to be held one year later. In other countries, DSK’s political orientation was less salient for lay observers. In neighboring Germany, for instance, media reports were also readily available, but public reactions were less dominated by political considerations, political affiliation, or national identification.

A third obvious attribute is nationality. DSK was a familiar French political figure who was perceived by many French citizens as representing their nation as head of a prestigious international organization. A Frenchman’s spectacular arrest in a foreign country, in front of national and international television cameras, and surrounded by a group of American police officers, made his nationality salient in an intergroup context. The fairness of this public exhibition in handcuffs (the “perp walk”) was widely and critically discussed in France, where publishing images of suspects in handcuffs was outlawed in 2000.

### 1.2. Relations Between Predictors

Rape myths and political orientation have common roots. As they are associated with world views emphasizing the defence of the ingroup against perceived outgroup threat and lack of control, right-wing political ideologies sustain

myths legitimizing the disadvantaged position of powerless people and minorities (Duckitt 2001). Typically, AMMSA forms part of a more general pattern of right-wing ideologies and prejudiced attitudes toward various minorities. Süßenbach and Bohner (2011), for example, report substantial positive correlations between participants’ AMMSA scores and intolerant ideological attitudes such as social dominance orientation (Sidanius and Pratto 1999) and right-wing authoritarianism (Altemeyer 1988). By contrast, left-wing ideologies emphasize equality and the fair distribution of common resources. Accordingly, right-wingers should be more susceptible to perpetrator-exonerating beliefs than left-wingers. However, a left-wing political orientation does not immunize an individual against exonerating perpetrators or blaming victims of sexual assault, or – more generally – against self-defensive beliefs. Liberals and conservatives may express similar levels of intolerance toward outgroup members when their identity is threatened (Brandt et al. 2014). Both left-wing and right-wing political attitudes may lead to victim-blaming and legitimizing beliefs if the motivation to defend one’s own identity is triggered, for example if a member of the ingroup is accused of immoral and violent behavior. In line with this reasoning, conspiracy theories flourished in France immediately after DSK’s arrest. According to a poll conducted on May 18, 2011, a majority of French citizens (57 percent) believed that DSK was the innocent victim of a plot staged by his political opponents. Interestingly, the proportion of people believing in a plot was particularly high (70 percent) among supporters of the Socialist Party (CSA 2011). This contrasts sharply with the intuitive assumption that left-wingers should be less susceptible to conspiracy beliefs (Imhoff and Bruder 2013) and, relatedly, that right-wing, but not left-wing orientation is usually reported to be positively correlated with perpetrator-exonerating beliefs such as rape myth acceptance (Süßenbach and Bohner 2011). In France, many left-wing political leaders, including a former minister of justice, supported DSK in the media with no word about the alleged victim.

### 1.3. Research Design

Although the charges against DSK were eventually dismissed without trial, the case remained ambiguous for sev-

eral months (May to August 2011) and received considerable media coverage in France and elsewhere. The DSK case thus presented a unique opportunity for examining the assumed distinction between a *global* predictor of alleged perpetrator exoneration (AMMSA), which is expected to be identical across two countries with similar cultural backgrounds, and *local* predictors of exoneration contingent upon perceived similarity to the alleged perpetrator in terms of gender, nationality, and political orientation. We thus investigated French and German participants' reactions to the allegations brought forward against DSK during the months when the case was tried in the New York courtroom.

As outlined above, perpetrator exoneration in an ambiguous rape case may be affected by general beliefs about rape such as AMMSA and – more specifically – by aspects reflecting the similarity of perceiver and alleged perpetrator (gender, political orientation, nationality). We derived differential hypotheses regarding the global vs. local effects of AMMSA, gender, and political attitudes on the endorsement of perpetrator-exonerating beliefs in France and Germany, respectively. Let us first consider the global effects of AMMSA. Independent of nationality and political preferences, people high in AMMSA should be motivated to exonerate alleged perpetrators of sexual violence, including DSK, and to derogate low-status victims (here an anonymous, uneducated Black woman). Hence, for both France and Germany we predicted that AMMSA would be positively associated with the endorsement of perpetrator-exonerating beliefs relating to DSK, because the core content of sexual aggression myths fits well with a case of alleged rape and may be used as a cognitive schema to interpret that ambiguous case (Bohner et al. 1993; Eyssel and Bohner 2011; Süssenbach, Bohner, and Eyssel 2012). This is the global pattern that we predicted for both Germany and France in the present study as well.

When it comes to predicting perpetrator-exonerating beliefs in Germany, AMMSA and a more right-wing political attitude should have partly overlapping effects (Süssenbach and Bohner 2011). In France, however, where DSK's left-of-center party affiliation is salient, a *left*-wing political orientation should become a local predictor in

terms of the alleged perpetrator's perceived similarity to the observer. Firstly, French (vs. German) respondents should see DSK as more similar to themselves because he shares their nationality and was among the potential candidates for the French presidential elections. Moreover, from an intergroup point of view, nationality was a salient attribute for French observers because DSK was arrested in a foreign country that applied judicial principles that were perceived as somewhat dissimilar from French laws. Secondly, for French (but not for German) respondents, these perceptions of similarity should further increase as a function of their left-wing political attitude and/or their support for the Socialist Party. In France, the usually overlapping effects of AMMSA and right-wing ideology should thus be decoupled in the case of DSK. We predicted that defending DSK as someone similar to oneself would be a more potent motive in France than in Germany because of the greater salience and importance of his left-wing political affiliation. Thirdly, gender should be a local predictor in Germany but not in France because gender, in comparison to political party affiliation, was less salient in France than in Germany. The political orientation may have been so salient in France that it could have overshadowed other similarity factors. DSK's arrest had concrete immediate consequences with regard to political choices in France. For the German public, however, DSK's most prominent feature remained his gender.

#### 1.4. Hypotheses

To sum up, we conceptualized AMMSA and similarity to the accused (in terms of participant's country of origin, left-right political orientation, and gender) as global vs. local predictors, respectively, of perpetrator-exonerating beliefs regarding the DSK case. AMMSA was hypothesized to be a global predictor of exonerating the alleged perpetrator DSK in both France and Germany, resulting in a main effect of AMMSA (Hypothesis 1). Country of origin was hypothesized to be a local predictor of DSK-related perpetrator-exonerating beliefs, such that French respondents would agree with these beliefs more than German respondents (Hypothesis 2). The predictive power of political attitudes was also hypothesized to vary locally between France and Germany: In France, people with a



political left-wing (vs. right-wing) orientation, i.e. indicating higher (vs. lower) perceived similarity to the accused, should agree (vs. disagree) with perpetrator-exonerating beliefs, whereas in Germany no such effect should occur, resulting in an interaction effect of political attitude and nationality (Hypothesis 3a). The predictive power of gender, on the other hand, should vary locally between Germany and France in the opposite fashion: In Germany, males (vs. females) should be motivated to exonerate DSK whereas in France, the predictive power of gender should pale in comparison with more salient political categories, which would yield an interaction effect of gender and nationality (Hypothesis 3b). Finally, French supporters of the Socialist Party should be particularly motivated to exonerate DSK, both compared to French supporters of a major right-of-center party (the Union pour la Majorité Présidentielle; UMP) and compared to German supporters of both the Social Democratic Party of Germany (SPD) and their main right-of-center competitor, the Christian Democratic Union (CDU; Hypothesis 3c).

## 2. Method

### 2.1. Participants

We conducted parallel Internet surveys on “society-related attitudes and intimate relationships” in French and German. To acquire participants in the two countries, the respective internet links were distributed at the authors’ universities and via mailing lists of the French and German Psychological Societies. Recruitment of participants was thus based on a snowball process, generating large heterogeneous convenience samples in each country. Data collection took place between 21 June and 31 July 2011, a period when the DSK case was still pending, and hence, ambiguous (see Appendix for a chronology of the case).

In total, 1,356 participants completed the survey. For ease of expression, we refer to participants who completed the French survey as “French participants” ( $n = 524$ ), and to participants who completed the German survey as “German participants” ( $n = 832$ ). Data from participants who were (a) neither residents nor nationals of either France or Germany, or (b) residents of Germany but French nationals or *vice versa* were excluded from the analyses.

This left us with a final sample of 512 French participants and 802 German participants. The gender ratio was comparable in the French (68.9 percent female, 31.1 percent male) and German subsamples (72.4 percent female, 27.6 percent male),  $\chi^2(1, N = 1,314) = 1.86, p = .17$ . The French sample was slightly older ( $Md = 27$  years, range 18–82) than the German sample ( $Md = 26$  years, range 18–75),  $z = 2.55, p = .011$  (Wilcoxon signed ranks test). As a proxy for socioeconomic status, we assessed net personal income; French respondents reported higher income than German respondents (under 1,000 euros: 45.6 percent vs. 64.2 percent; 1,000 to 1,999 euros: 29.2 percent vs. 17.1 percent; 2,000 to 2,999 euros: 14.7 percent vs. 10.1 percent; over 3,000 euros: 10.5 percent vs. 8.7 percent),  $z = 4.54, p < .001$ , (Wilcoxon signed ranks test).

### 2.2. Materials

Beyond sociodemographics, the survey consisted of four main measures: a scale assessing AMMSA, a measure of beliefs exonerating the alleged perpetrator (DSK), a control measure of conspiracy beliefs regarding an unrelated issue (Lady Diana’s death), and single-item measures of political left-right orientation and party affiliation. Participants also completed a number of measures that are not of central interest for the current paper and will not be further discussed.

While the AMMSA scale and the political measures had already been validated and widely used, the items assessing perpetrator-exonerating beliefs and unrelated conspiracy beliefs were newly developed for this study. Because of the urgency of the pending DSK case, we did not pilot-test these items; we do, however, report reliability indices for the new scales from the current study in the section below.

#### 2.2.1. Acceptance of Modern Myths about Sexual Aggression

We used a short version of the AMMSA scale (Gerger et al. 2007) consisting of eleven items (e.g., “A lot of women strongly complain about sexual infringements for no real reason, just to appear emancipated”; response scale from 1, completely disagree, to 7, completely agree). A parallel eleven-item French version was prepared for the purpose of this study. Cronbach’s alpha was .85 for French participants and .90 for German participants.

### 2.2.2. Perpetrator-exonerating Beliefs Regarding the Strauss-Kahn Case

Participants read a short text vignette describing the case regarding DSK:

Currently the case of the French politician and former chief of IMF Dominique Strauss-Kahn (DSK) is discussed a lot in the media. He is accused of having raped a hotel employee. In a poll conducted by the television program *20 minutes* (May 2011) a majority of French thought that DSK was the victim of a conspiracy.

As there are specific ethical and legal regulations in France (Guigou 2000), the vignette had to be phrased in a way that avoided any explicit statement regarding the suspect's guilt: in a pending judiciary case any defendant is presumed innocent in France. People were therefore asked to indicate their agreement or disagreement with statements assuming a conspiracy against DSK, i.e. exonerating the alleged perpetrator. After reading the vignette, participants completed four items: (1) "Do you think the opinion of the majority in this poll assuming a conspiracy reflects reality?"; (2) "Do you think celebrities like DSK are often condemned prematurely?"; (3) "Do you agree with the minority in this poll who thought that DSK was guilty?" (reverse-coded); and (4) "When you first heard about the DSK case, did you immediately think this could be a conspiracy?" (scale from 1, completely disagree, to 7, completely agree). Responses were averaged to form an index of perpetrator-exonerating beliefs regarding the DSK case (Cronbach's alpha = .65 and .66 for French and German participants, respectively).

### 2.2.3. Conspiracy Beliefs Concerning Lady Diana

According to the literature about conspiracy beliefs, a person who believes in a conspiracy theory regarding one specific event is prone to believe in conspiracies regarding other events as well (Imhoff and Bruder 2013; Goertzel 1994; Wagner-Egger and Bangerter 2007; Wood, Douglas, and Sutton 2012). To control for a potential effect of general conspiracy beliefs, we therefore included a vignette that briefly described the events leading to the death of Lady Diana in a car crash in Paris in 1997; this was followed by five items measuring conspiracy beliefs surrounding this issue (see Wagner-Egger and Bangerter 2007). One item read "Do you think Diana is in fact still alive and just wanted to withdraw completely from public

life?"; response scale from 1, completely disagree, to 7, completely agree. Responses were averaged to form an index of conspiracy beliefs regarding Lady Diana (Cronbach's alpha = .77 and .74 for French and German participants, respectively).

### 2.2.4. Political Orientation

To assess political left-right orientation, we used a single self-report item from the World Value Survey (2006): "In political matters people talk of 'the left' and 'the right'. How would you place your views on this scale, generally speaking?" Participants could move a pointer along a line with the endpoints *left-wing* and *right-wing*. When the mouse button was released, the pointer snapped to the nearest of eleven equal-spaced positions; responses were coded accordingly as 1, left-wing, to 11, right-wing. We also assessed political party affiliation using the multiple choice item "Which political party would you vote for if parliamentary elections were held next week?"; response options comprised the main political parties in each country. Among the response alternatives for French respondents, the most relevant for our study were the Parti Socialiste, of which DSK is a prominent member, and their main right-of-center competitor, the Union pour la Majorité Présidentielle (UMP). Among the response alternatives for German respondents, the most relevant for comparison purposes were the Social Democratic Party of Germany (SPD) and the Christian Democratic Union (CDU). These comparisons make sense because left-right-orientation is closely linked to party affiliation (Inglehart and Klingemann 1976). According to both expert ratings (Huber and Inglehart 1995) and content analyses of party manifestos (Franzmann and Kaiser 2006), the French PS and the UMP's precursor UDF (Union for French Democracy) take similar positions on the left-right continuum as the German SPD and CDU, respectively.

### 2.3. Procedure

After following the internet link to the survey, participants read informed consent instructions mentioning that the survey was anonymous and addressing participants of 18 years or older, that participation was voluntary, and that they could withdraw from the study at any time without

incurring any penalties. The next screen asked for demographic information, including age, gender, nationality, country of residence, and net personal income. This screen also contained the left-right orientation and party affiliation items. Items on the following screens assessed conspiracy beliefs regarding Diana, perpetrator-exonerating beliefs regarding DSK, and AMMSA. To control for potential effects of the position in which the AMMSA scale appeared, participants were randomly assigned to one of two order conditions: Either (1) AMMSA, (2) conspiracy beliefs regarding Diana, (3) exonerating beliefs regarding DSK; or (1) conspiracy beliefs regarding Diana, (2) exonerating beliefs regarding DSK, (3) AMMSA. This variation did not affect the results and will not be further discussed. Participants could leave their e-mail address if they wished to participate in a prize draw. They also received a contact e-mail address for comments or questions regarding the study.

### 3. Results

#### 3.1. Mean Differences Between Country Samples

Comparison of means between the two country samples (see Table 1 for descriptive and test statistics) showed that French respondents were more likely than German respondents to exonerate the alleged perpetrator DSK; this result supports Hypothesis 2, indicating a local effect of similarity in terms of nationality. With Cohen's  $d = 0.38$ , this effect was between small and medium (Cohen 1988). Other differences emerged as well, as shown in Table 1: AMMSA and Diana-related conspiracy beliefs were both somewhat higher among French than German respondents. Finally, French and German respondents did not differ in their overall levels of left-right orientation; this closely resembled, with a slight skew to the left, the pattern obtained from previous representative samples (European Values Study Group 2006), also yielding no difference in left-right orientation between France ( $M = 4.8$ ,  $SD = 2.12$ ) and Germany ( $M = 4.7$ ,  $SD = 1.83$ ).

#### 3.2. Gender Differences within Country Samples

Within the French sample, the only key variable showing a gender effect was AMMSA, with men ( $M = 3.16$ ) reporting higher scores than women ( $M = 2.67$ ),  $t(509) = 5.09$ ,  $p < .001$ . These means closely resemble those found in an

internet-based validation study of the thirty-item German AMMSA scale (Gerger et al. 2007, 432). No significant gender effects were found among French participants for perpetrator-exonerating beliefs, conspiracy beliefs concerning Lady Diana, or left-right orientation, all  $ps > .13$ .

Within the German sample, a comparable gender effect was found for AMMSA ( $M = 2.79$  and  $2.49$ , respectively),  $t(800) = 3.44$ ,  $p = .001$ . These means were somewhat lower than those observed by Gerger et al. (2007). An additional gender effect was found for perpetrator-exonerating beliefs, where men ( $M = 3.51$ ) exonerated DSK more than women did ( $M = 3.27$ ),  $t(798) = 2.76$ ,  $p = .006$ . This effect, together with the absence of a gender effect in the French sample, supports Hypothesis 3b. Furthermore, German men ( $M = 1.63$ ) agreed less with Diana-related conspiracy beliefs than did German women ( $M = 1.92$ ),  $t(797) = -4.35$ ,  $p < .001$ . Finally, as in the French sample, there was no gender effect on political left-right orientation,  $p > .14$ .

#### 3.3. Analysis of Zero-order Correlations

The pattern of intercorrelations among measures (see Table 2) was in line with our predictions. AMMSA correlated positively with perpetrator-exonerating beliefs about DSK in both Germany and France, which supports Hypothesis 1. Furthermore, for French participants, left-right orientation (higher values indicating a more right-wing orientation) correlated negatively with DSK-related perpetrator-exonerating beliefs,  $r(411) = -.10$ ,  $p < .05$ , which supports Hypothesis 3a. For German participants, the correlation was positive and marginally significant,  $r(777) = .07$ ,  $p = .07$ . Gender, on the other hand – as already reported in the previous section – was linked with perpetrator-exonerating beliefs in Germany,  $r(800) = .10$ ,  $p = .01$ , but not in France,  $r(512) = -.01$ ,  $p = .78$ , thus supporting Hypothesis 3b. The correlations of DSK-related perpetrator-exonerating beliefs with conspiracy beliefs regarding Lady Diana were positive and of similar magnitude in both countries ( $r = .15$  and  $.16$ , respectively). Consequently, we included these unrelated conspiracy beliefs as a control variable in subsequent analyses.



**Table 1: Means and standard deviations of measures by country, differences, and effect size estimates**

	Mean (standard deviation) France	Mean (standard deviation) Germany	<i>t</i> -test for difference <sup>a</sup>	Cohen's <i>d</i>
DSK	3.79 (1.25)	3.33 (1.14)	<i>t</i> (1310) = 6.76***	0.38
AMMSA	2.82 (1.02)	2.57 (1.10)	<i>t</i> (1311) = 4.11***	0.23
Diana	2.09 (1.06)	1.84 (0.87)	<i>t</i> (1309) = 4.64***	0.26
LRO	4.54 (2.33)	4.39 (1.66)	<i>t</i> (1192) = 1.32	0.08

**Notes:**

Seven-point scales (except LRO, which was measured on an eleven-point scale).

DSK = exonerating beliefs regarding Dominique Strauss-Kahn

AMMSA = acceptance of modern myths about sexual aggression

Diana = conspiracy beliefs regarding Lady Diana

LRO = political left-right orientation.

<sup>a</sup> Variations in degrees of freedom due to missing values.\*\*\**p* < .001.**3.4. Global versus Local Predictors of Perpetrator-Exonerating Beliefs: Multiple Regression Analyses**

To control for mutual overlap among variables, our main hypothesis tests relied on multiple regression analysis. Because some variances differed between countries (see Table 1), all predictor variables were z-standardized within country. The country variable itself (initially coded 1=France and 2=Germany) was also z-standardized to provide a complete set of centered predictors (Cohen et al. 2003, chap. 7). In an initial multiple regression analysis, the dependent variable was alleged perpetrator-exonerating beliefs regarding DSK, and the independent variables were country, gender (initially coded 1=female, 2=male), conspiracy beliefs regarding Lady Diana, AMMSA, and left-right orientation. As our hypotheses involved differential predictions for the two country samples, product terms carrying the interactions of gender by country, AMMSA by country, and left-right orientation by country were also included as independent variables.

**Table 2: Inter-correlations of measures in France and Germany**

France	AMMSA	Diana	LRO	Gender
DSK	+.17***	+.15**	-.10*	-.01
AMMSA		+.20***	+.20***	+.22***
Diana			-.06	-.06
LRO				+.03
Germany	AMMSA	Diana	LRO	Gender
DSK	+.31***	+.16***	+.07 <sup>†</sup>	+.10**
AMMSA		+.24***	+.29***	+.12***
Diana			+.03	-.15***
LRO				+.05

**Notes:**

DSK = exonerating beliefs regarding Dominique Strauss-Kahn

AMMSA = acceptance of modern myths about sexual aggression

Diana = conspiracy beliefs regarding Lady Diana

LRO = political left-right orientation

Gender was coded female = 1, male = 2

Valid *N* for the reported correlations varies between 412 and 512 in the French subsample, and between 778 and 800 in the German subsample.<sup>†</sup>*p* < .10; \**p* ≤ .05; \*\**p* ≤ .01; \*\*\**p* ≤ .001

Overall, the multiple regression analysis revealed significant main effects of country, conspiracy beliefs regarding Lady Diana, AMMSA, and left-right orientation, but no significant main effect of gender. As can be seen in Table 3, French participants agreed more than German participants with perpetrator-exonerating beliefs about DSK (supporting Hypothesis 2); the more participants believed in a conspiracy regarding Lady Diana, the more they also tended to exonerate DSK; participants scoring higher (vs. lower) on AMMSA also agreed more (less) with perpetrator-exonerating beliefs about DSK (supporting Hypothesis 1), and so did participants with a more left-wing (vs. right-wing) orientation. The country and left-right orientation effects, however, were qualified, as hypothesized, by an interaction effect of left-right orientation by country that was close to conventional levels of significance, *t*(1,180) = 1.91, *p* = .06, and whose positive sign suggested that a left-wing orientation may be a stronger predictor in France than in Germany (Hypothesis 3a).

**Table 3: Results of multiple regression predicting exonerating beliefs regarding DSK**

Predictor variable	Beta coefficient	<i>t</i> (1180)	<i>p</i>
Country (France = 1, Germany = 2)	-.18	-6.53	<.001
Gender (female = 1, male = 2)	+.02	+0.76	.45
Diana	+.11	+3.81	<.001
AMMSA	+.23	+7.83	<.001
Left-right orientation (LRO)	-.06	-2.18	.03
AMMSA x country	+.03	+1.12	.26
LRO x country	+.05	+1.91	.06
Gender x country	+.07	+2.40	.02

*Notes:*

AMMSA = Acceptance of modern myths about sexual aggression

LRO = political left-right orientation

Diana = conspiracy beliefs regarding Lady Diana.

At the same time, a significant gender by country interaction emerged,  $t(1180) = 2.40$ ,  $p = .02$  (as predicted in Hypothesis 3b). The AMMSA x country interaction was far from significant,  $p = .26$ .

Following up on these results, we conducted separate hierarchical multiple regression analyses of perpetrator-exonerating beliefs regarding DSK within each country sample, using AMMSA, left-right orientation, and gender as independent variables. Conspiracy beliefs regarding Lady Diana were included in the model as an additional independent variable in a second step of the hierarchical analysis, in order to test if any effects would change once unrelated conspiracy beliefs are controlled for.

The results, as shown in Table 4, support our Hypotheses 1, 3a, and 3b. For French participants, both AMMSA and left-

right orientation significantly predicted perpetrator-exonerating beliefs regarding DSK: Participants reporting higher AMMSA or a more left-wing orientation exonerated DSK more. Gender was unrelated to the dependent variable. In Germany, by contrast, AMMSA and gender (marginally) were predictors of perpetrator-exonerating beliefs regarding DSK: Individuals scoring higher on AMMSA and males exonerated DSK more. Left-right orientation was unrelated to perpetrator-exonerating beliefs regarding DSK. For France, the pattern remained unchanged when conspiracy beliefs regarding Lady Diana were included in the regression model (although perpetrator-exonerating beliefs regarding DSK and conspiracy beliefs concerning Lady Diana did show some overlap). For Germany, the pattern became even clearer once conspiracy beliefs regarding Lady Diana were controlled for: AMMSA remained a significant predictor and the effect of gender changed from marginal to significant.

**3.5. Party Preference and Perpetrator-Exonerating Beliefs**

To test Hypothesis 3c, we focused our analyses on those French participants expressing a preference for either the PS (the party that DSK belonged to;  $n = 156$ ) or its main right-of-center competitor, the UMP ( $n = 46$ ), in comparison with those German participants expressing a preference for one of these parties' closest counterparts in Germany, either the SPD ( $n = 139$ ) or its main right-of-center competitor, the CDU ( $n = 90$ ). Using perpetrator-exonerating beliefs regarding DSK as the dependent variable, we performed a 2x2 analysis of variance with the between-subjects factors Country (France vs. Germany) and Party (left-of-center vs. right-of center). The ANOVA yielded a main effect of Party,  $F(1, 427) = 10.16$ ,  $p = .002$ , which was qualified by a significant interaction effect of Country by Party,  $F(1, 427) = 13.07$ ,  $p < .001$ . As predicted, PS supporters exonerated DSK more ( $M = 3.96$ ) than supporters of the UMP ( $M = 3.12$ ), the SPD ( $M = 3.38$ ), or the CDU ( $M = 3.43$ ). Post-hoc tests (Tukey HSD,  $p < .05$ ) indicated that supporters of the French PS reported more exonerating beliefs than supporters of the three remaining groups, whereas the perpetrator-exonerating beliefs in those remaining groups did not differ significantly. These results support Hypothesis 3c.

**Table 4: Results of hierarchical multiple regression analyses predicting exonerating beliefs regarding DSK separately for French and German participants**

Predictor variable	Beta coefficient	<i>t</i> <sup>a</sup>	<i>p</i>
Analysis for France			
Step 1			
AMMSA	.21	4.23	<.001
Left-right orientation	-.14	-2.81	<.01
Gender	-.07	-1.50	.14
Step 2			
AMMSA	.19	3.63	<.001
Left-right orientation	-.13	-2.59	.01
Gender	-.06	-1.28	.20
Diana conspiracy beliefs	.10	2.10	.04
Analysis for Germany			
Step 1			
AMMSA	.30	8.33	<.001
Left-right orientation	-.02	-0.64	.53
Gender	.06	1.71	.09
Step 2			
AMMSA	.27	7.27	<.001
Left-right orientation	-.02	-0.53	.60
Gender	.08	2.26	.03
Diana conspiracy beliefs	.11	3.20	.001

*Notes:*

AMMSA = Acceptance of modern myths about sexual aggression.

<sup>a</sup> Degrees of freedom are 409 and 408 for steps 1 and 2, respectively, in the French sample, and 774 and 773 for steps 1 and 2, respectively, in the German sample.

Gender was coded female = 1, male = 2

**4. Discussion**

As an event of international interest and a politicized ambiguous case of sexual violence, the DSK case has attracted lay explanations that were grounded in rape myths and social identification. Our results extend the literature on antecedents and consequences of perpetrator-exonerating beliefs in a number of ways. First, rape myths were correlated with more lenient attitudes toward the alleged perpetrator. This global predictor applied independently of the country (here France vs. Germany). Second, we expected that other identity attributes (gender, nationality, and political orientation) would depend on the observer's local context as they were more or less obvious and hence more or less relevant for self-identity at the time of judgment. Following this rationale, individual variation in judgment regarding ambiguous cases of sexual violence could be predicted more precisely with an accurate knowledge of the local political context.

**4.1. Global and Local Predictors of Perpetrator-exonerating Beliefs**

As expected, we found acceptance of modern myths about sexual aggression (AMMSA) to be a global predictor of perpetrator-exonerating beliefs regarding DSK in both French and German samples. At the same time, however, the predictive power of political left-right orientation as well as the predictive power of gender – two other individual difference variables commonly linked with myths about sexual aggression – varied locally, i.e. by country. In Germany we found a trend toward a positive correlation of left-right orientation with DSK-related, perpetrator-exonerating beliefs, which is in line with the general finding that right-wingers blame victims of sexual violence more than left-wingers do (Süssenbach and Bohner 2011). In France, however, this relation was reversed and we observed a significant negative correlation of left-right orientation and perpetrator-exonerating beliefs concerning DSK. This result is in line with our notion of a local tendency to respond to an identity threat, as left-wing observers and the alleged perpetrator shared a political identity.

A left-wing political orientation does not immunize people against the endorsement of perpetrator-exonerating beliefs when such beliefs are functional in defending the self and one's (e.g. political) ingroup. DSK's party affiliation was an

important part of the public debate in France, as he was a designated candidate for the French presidential election. French people were thus motivated to process the judicial case in more depth than people in Germany. Only in the French context, then, could knowledge of DSK's party affiliation result in a similarity-based motivation to exonerate him. In Germany, where other categories were more salient, the predictive power of left-right orientation was weak, and other identity-relevant features, such as gender, significantly affected the perception of the case. To sum up, AMMSA emerged as a global predictor of perpetrator-exonerating beliefs in a sexual assault case in both Germany and France, whereas identity-relevant concerns in the form of political orientation came into play as local predictors in France, where the alleged perpetrator's political affiliation was salient, or in the form of gender in Germany, where other (political) categories were less salient.

In general, myths about sexual violence and right-wing ideologies have common features as they are based on worldviews that elevate the ingroup and derogate outgroups. Generally, perpetrator exoneration could serve to sustain such worldviews. However, a temporarily and, in the present case, locally salient threat to identity had the power to uncouple rape myth acceptance from political orientation. Our data show that leniency toward the alleged perpetrator may fulfill a need to sustain and boost one's own identity to the same extent and independently of a left-wing or right-wing identification. The interplay and functioning of local predictors can only be understood if we take into account that they are embedded in the respective political context.

#### 4.2. Limitations and Outlook

Some limitations of the present study warrant further discussion. In this section we first address our study's correlational nature and the lack of evidence for the assumed processes. Then we turn to additional variables that could be examined in future studies in order to paint a more complete picture of the dynamics of perpetrator exoneration in cases of sexual violence.

##### 4.2.1. Limitations of the Current Design

Cross-sectional data comparing naturally (and not experimentally) formed groups do not provide the most solid

grounds for claims of causality. It could be argued that a general adherence to perpetrator-exoneration may be a causal underlying factor influencing related political attitudes and not *vice versa* as in the model we suggest. However, we contend that this reverse order of causality is implausible as it would not explain the local differentiation between France and Germany regarding the link between left-right orientation and perpetrator-exonerating beliefs.

Another potential weakness of the current study is that our assumptions about observers' perceived similarity to the accused driving the local effects must remain speculative. Following a social identification model (Campbell 1958), we argue that similarity is the main dimension mediating the impact of local predictors, that is, of left-right orientation (in France) and gender (in Germany), on perpetrator exoneration. We were able to support these assumptions by demonstrating the predicted differences by country in correlation patterns. To corroborate our assumption regarding the underlying process, however, future studies should explicitly assess perceived similarity or experimentally manipulate it (see Glaser et al. 2014).

##### 4.2.2. Outlook: Additional Variables to be Addressed in Future Studies

As mentioned above, from the perceiver's point of view, the alleged perpetrator and victim could *both* be categorized in terms of multiple categories (age, gender, ethnicity, nationality, social status, political affiliation, religion, etc.), but we focused on DSK's political affiliation and gender only. It would also be interesting to consider the victim's perceived (dis-)similarity to the observer (for an overview, see Grubb and Harrower 2008). Put differently, which features were prominent on the victim side? And would our results have been different had the alleged victim not been a Black female of comparably low social status? Various studies have shown that rape myth acceptance goes hand in hand with a host of intolerant and discriminatory beliefs (Aosved and Long 2006; Süssenbach and Bohner 2011), including racism (Suarez and Gadalla 2010). Therefore, in a case of sexual violence, the risk to be blamed by observers high in rape myth acceptance might be even higher for a Black victim. By the same token, the perpetrator might be more readily exonerated. If the alleged victim in the DSK case had been White, with a European background and a

high level of education, rape myths might not have been as easily applicable to explain this situation. As a consequence, AMMSA might have been a less strong global predictor of exonerating beliefs regarding DSK. On the other hand, AMMSA has been found to predict the exoneration of alleged perpetrators also in cases where both defendant and plaintiff could be assumed to belong to participants' ingroup (Eyssel and Bohner 2011; Gerger et al. 2007).

The orthogonal variation of victim and perpetrator attributes might also lead to effects that are independent of observers' attitude. In line with this reasoning, George and Martínez (2002) found that (mainly White) North American participants exonerated the perpetrator of an interracial rape (Black on White or White on Black) more than they exonerated the perpetrator of an intraracial rape (White on White or Black on Black). Interestingly, this finding emerged regardless of whether the perpetrator was Black or White, so it does not easily lend itself to an account of similarity-based perpetrator-exoneration to defend against a threat to the integrity of one's own identity.

Nevertheless, female observers might feel a need to distance themselves from the victim in order to feel secure. Rape myths can fulfill the function of distancing oneself from the victim. Women who endorse rape myths believe that rape just happens to a certain kind of women, who are different from them (Bohner 1998; Gerger et al. 2007; Lonsway and Fitzgerald 1994). On the one hand, such distancing should be easier if the victim is dissimilar to the self; on the other hand, invoking rape myths may become increasingly necessary if the victim is similar to the self. In the present study we did not measure the similarity between the observer and the victim. Future research might further investigate the perception of similarity between observers and victims of violence (Bohner and Lampridis 2004).

Another important variable to be addressed in future research is the degree of ambiguity of a given case. The case of DSK was still pending and, hence, ambiguous at the time of data collection for this study. It would also be interesting to study the effects of similarity in clearly unambiguous cases. Here, effects of perceived similarity might reverse: As research on the "black sheep effect" has shown,

individuals often do not defend an ingroup member who is undeniably guilty, but instead evaluate such an ingroup member even more negatively than a similarly culpable outgroup member (Marques, Yzerbyt, and Leyens 1988).

## 5. Conclusion

The international impact of the DSK case presented a unique opportunity to study motivated social cognition in relation to a sexual violence case charged with political relevance. On the one hand, adherence to sexual aggression myths contributed to reducing alleged perpetrator responsibility at a global level. This result is well in line with a host of findings linking sexual aggression myths with case-related judgments that differ widely in their particulars (Abrams et al. 2003; Eyssel and Bohner 2011) and go beyond the context of France and Germany (Hantzi et al. 2013; Megías et al. 2011).

On the other hand, the political consequences of the judicial case were particularly salient and important in France as compared to Germany. The local association between left-wing political orientation and perpetrator-exonerating beliefs among French participants appears to be at odds with literature that predicts a correlation of perpetrator-exonerating beliefs in rape cases with right-wing ideologies. It is indeed more in line with research showing that ideological proximity could be more important than the right or left orientation of political attitudes *per se* (Brandt et al. 2014).

In Germany, another local predictor that was overshadowed by political discourses in France came to the forefront: gender. We suggest here a social-identification explanation based on a threat to one's self-worth via perceived similarity with the alleged perpetrator. The low level of identification with the alleged victim remains to be explored further: People feeling socially close to an alleged perpetrator tend to exonerate this individual, and such effects of closeness will depend on which social categories are salient (for example gender, nationality, or political orientation).

Other, global, predictors should remain significant independent of social categorization. A host of literature has



investigated the effects of individual-difference variables on political and legal judgments. By now, numerous global predictors have been identified. Few studies, however, have taken into account one crucial aspect of many politicized conflicts and controversial cases of violence potentially affecting local predictors: Independently of our

general attitudes (global predictors such as attitudes about sexual violence), we may feel more or less similar to the actors on the public scene or the parties in the courtroom, depending on various social categories (local predictors) that are salient at the time and in the context of judgment.

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## Appendix

Chronology of the Dominique Strauss-Kahn Case, May to August 2011

(based on Drew 2011; Eligon 2011a, 2011b; McKeon 2012; Nelsson 2011)

May 13, 2011

DSK checks in at the Sofitel Hotel, New York City.

May 14, 2011

Nafissatou Diallo, a housekeeper at the hotel, asserts that DSK has sexually assaulted her. DSK admits that there was sexual contact, but asserts that it was consensual. On the same day he is arrested.

May 15, 2011

Photographs of DSK in handcuffs (“perp walk”) publicized worldwide.

May 16, 2011

DSK detained in New York’s Rikers Island jail because of the risk that he might leave the USA.

May 18, 2011

Diallo testifies that the sexual relation with DSK was not consensual. DSK re-tires as Managing Director of the IMF.

May 19, 2011

DSK charged with felony. Bail of one million \$US granted after he agrees to remain under house arrest.

May 20, 2011

DSK is released from Rikers Island jail.

May 23, 2011

Newspaper reports suggest semen was found on Diallo’s work uniform.

June 6, 2011

DSK’s lawyers say that they would need six weeks to prove that DSK is not guilty.

July 1, 2011

Diallo’s credibility is called into doubt.

July 5, 2011

French politician Christine Lagarde succeeds DSK as IMF managing director.

August 22, 2011

The prosecution recommends dismissal of the indictment against DSK.

August 23, 2011

DSK released without trial after the Supreme Court of the State of New York has dismissed the case, following the prosecutors’ recommendation.

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**Selina Helmke**

selina.helmke@uni-bielefeld.de

**Pia-Renée Kobusch**

pia-renee.kobusch@uni-bielefeld.de

**Jonas H. Rees**

jonas.rees@uni-bielefeld.de

**Thierry Meyer**

thierry-marcel.meyer@u-paris10.fr

**Gerd Bohner**

Gerd.Bohner@uni-bielefeld.de