

Reading Group Guide
Credible, by Deborah Tuerkheimer

1. Before reading *Credible*, what were your thoughts and attitudes about the causes, frequency, and outcomes of sexual assault? Where did these ideas come from? What do you understand differently having read the book?
2. What is the crucial “trio of claims” that makes up any allegation of abuse? What are the “three mechanisms” of dismissal that are often used to counter these claims?
3. What makes up the “cluster of forces” Tuerkheimer refers to as the *credibility complex*?
4. How does culture—“our communal system of meaning”—influence what and how we think and feel about the way the world works? What are the many different sources of cultural messaging? Given that “none of us can transcend cultural norms or avoid their imprint on our inner workings,” how might we foster awareness of problematic cultural influences, inaccurate understandings, and biases?
5. How are we “primed by our culture and our law to rely on [powerful] men and take on faith their descriptions of reality” even to the extent that we doubt our own experience or that of those we care about most?
6. What are examples of the “stark power imbalances”—hierarchies, inequalities, vulnerabilities, and privileges—that pervade our social experience? How are these explained or justified despite the endurance of myths of equality and fairness in the United States? How do power imbalances influence the occurrence of and response to sexual assault and harassment?
7. What is the relationship between credibility and power? What are the *credibility discount* and *credibility inflation*? How are they the result of patriarchal social power?
8. What is the origin of the status quo in any society? Why is it seemingly so important to preserve?
9. How does the law, in all its labyrinthine complexity, drive the *credibility complex*? What are the many ways that the legal system works against justice in sexual assault and harassment cases?
10. What are the particular challenges faced by women of color, particularly Black women, when making claims of sexual assault and harassment? What further vulnerabilities and injustices are revealed by an intersectional consideration of the complex and varied identities of survivors?
11. What are the various and understandable reasons that many victims choose not to come forward with their allegations?
12. Why is the response of those to whom sexual assault is first disclosed so important? What does “betrayal trauma theory” add to our understanding of this dynamic? What might influence a survivor’s choice about who to confide in first?
13. What is “the stranger rape paradigm”? How does it serve as “a huge impediment to coming forward about sexual assault”? What is the “perfect victim” standard? How does it affect each of the three claims in an allegation? What is the “monster abuser” myth? How does this concept allow many abusive men to escape accountability?
14. How are rape myths “a pillar that supports sexual violence” by men against women? How do these myths “reinforce patriarchal structures”?
15. Why is it that many people “are highly motivated to doubt the occurrence of sexual abuse”? How might “the ubiquity of sexual abuse...[disrupt] our understanding of ourselves and our relationships”? Why else might the ordinariness of sexual violence be “unbearable”? What effects does this have on our response to sexual assault?
16. How are employment hierarchies and economic vulnerabilities important components of workplace sexual harassment? How do these factors impact a victim’s ability to complain

- about harassment? What “best practices” should companies adopt to protect their employees from harassment and cultivate a safe work environment?
17. What is the “resistance requirement” that is built into the criminal law of rape? What are the legal origins of this requirement? What could explain placing the burden of responsibility onto the victim?
 18. What are the various double-binds regarding their demeanor and behavior that victims confront when reporting abuse? What should first responders, hospital personnel, investigators, and anyone in a position to judge the credibility of an accuser understand about the complex physical and neurobiological effects of trauma?
 19. What might explain why, despite data that reliably places false claims of sexual assault at a mere 5 percent, “the woman who lies about sexual abuse is a cultural mainstay”? Where might we, without realizing it, “absorb the message that women cannot be trusted when they recount rape or harassment”? What “caricatures of lying accusers” often distort our judgments?
 20. What is it about memory and an ignorance of how it works that makes Jim Hopper, an expert in the neurobiology of trauma, conclude that it “is a major reason why sexual assault is the easiest violent crime to get away with”?
 21. What are the many ways that police officers and investigators mishandle claims of sexual assault? What are the various forces—individual and institutional—that contribute to this neglect and harm?
 22. What can be done to bolster fairness and accuracy in our credibility judgments given that “no one is immune from the effects of cultural forces that upgrade the believability of men accused and downgrade the believability of the accuser—not even victims”?
 23. How is the “distrust of sexual assault accusers...formalized in the law”? How are the “unduly burdensome requisites” applied only in sexual assault cases supposedly explained or justified? What are the “unique corroboration requirement,” the “prompt complaint” rule, and the “cautionary instruction”? How do they hinder the successful prosecution of cases?
 24. What are the various forms of “blame-shifting” in cases of sexual assault? What cultural myths about women and women’s sexuality help make blame-shifting such an effective mechanism for protecting abusers? Why, in a patriarchal society, is “female sexuality...uniquely threatening”? Why, historically, have men controlled women’s sexuality? To what extent does this dynamic remain in place today?
 25. What is the “just world” theory? Why does it endure despite so much evidence to the contrary? How does this deeply held belief in a “just world” affect our ability to respond to sexual assault and its victims fairly and helpfully?
 26. What is Kate Abramson’s concept of the “norm of self-doubt” experienced by many victims and survivors of sexual assault? How can self-doubt and self-blame impede healing?
 27. In what ways is “the cultural obligation to keep men at bay...imposed on women early in life”? What are the reasons often offered for why boys and men aren’t responsible for their own behavior? How do these explanations fall short? Where and how do girls “learn that their self-worth is attached to caring for others”? How might we change this socialization?
 28. What is the 1962 Model Penal Code? What are some of the particularly harmful concepts and ideas within the Code that still exert a dangerous and powerful influence on the treatment of sexual assault cases?
 29. What is the *care gap*? How are we “oriented to the pain of the powerful”? Why are we, as Fatima Goss Graves argues, “conditioned to care more about people with power and influence”? What explains “the very human impulse not to intervene”? How can we

- improve our ability to care about victims of sexual assault, particularly those who are most vulnerable and marginalized?
30. What are *coverture* and the marital rape exemption? How do these ideas still influence cultural understandings of, and legal responses to, sexual assault?
 31. What is particularly damaging about *institutional betrayal* for victims of sexual assault and harassment?
 32. What does Tuerkheimer mean by “a credible accusation is one that disrupts the status quo in a meaningful way”? Why is “a true finding of credibility” potentially so essential to a survivor?
 33. What are the potential benefits and limitations of a restorative justice approach to sexual assault cases?
 34. What are the varied conceptions of punishment held by survivors of sexual assault? In what ways is punishment a social “communication device”? What messages are conveyed when an abuser is punished, or not punished?
 35. What are the many potential ways—individual, institutional, cultural, legal—to provide survivors with both “validation and vindication”?
 36. What “guideposts”—including improved understandings of “belief,” better reasoning about abuse allegations, eliminating blame-shifting, shrinking the care gap, and reforming laws and procedures—does Tuerkheimer argue are necessary to dismantle the *credibility complex*?