Observers' Evaluations of Couples Involved in Date Rape

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Ninety volunteer men and women viewed photographs of low-, medium-, and high-attractive male and female couples and read a brief description of a date rape incident. Consistent with previous research, women rated the high-attractive woman as less responsible for the date rape than the low-attractive woman. Observers' evaluations of the couples did not confirm a linear relationship between victim attractiveness and responsibility attributions, and they held the medium-attractive woman most responsible. The results are discussed in terms of just world *theory, gender bias, attractiveness bias,* and *similarity to the target.*

MUCH OF THE RESEARCH ON RAPE FOCUSES ON rape committed by a stranger or a relative. There are, by contrast, few studies of date rape even though it appears to be one of the more common types of rape. Muehlenhard and Linton (1987) reported that, out of 635 college student participants (341 women and 294 men), 77.6% of the women and 57.1% of the men had been involved in some form of unwanted sexual aggression in a dating relationship. Yet these incidents remain unreported, presumably because the victim was acquainted with the assailant and because women who are the victims of date rape are often held responsible for their own victimization. Specifically, victim derogation and attributions of responsibility for the incident are stronger in date rape situations than in stranger rape, with more victim responsibility being attributed by male than female observers (Bridges, 1991; Bridges & McGrail, 1989; Jackson, 1991).

One possible explanation for the weaker responsibility attribution by female observers may be explained by *observer empathy* (Deitz, Littman, & Bentley, 1984), a form of sex bias in which observers identify or empathize with targets of the same sex. What observer empathy doe *not* explain is why female observers would attribute responsibility for date rape to the victim at all. One possible explanation for victim responsibility or victim derogation, especially by female observers of a female victim with whom there should be empathy, is Lerner's (1980) *just world hypothesis* which proposes that people, "get what they deserve and deserve what they get." The behavioral outcome of this belief is that observers who are asked to make responsibility attributions for someone else's positive or negative consequences will more often attribute the cause to the individual's behavior or moral disposition rather than to external causes such as luck, chance, or fate. According to Lerner, belief in a just world reflects the human need for a sense of control over the events that take place in life (viz., avoid the seven deadly sins and bad things will be

avoided in life). To protect this sense of control, especially in the case of negative consequences, victims are considered responsible for their own negative experience. The implication for victims of date rape is the tendency of observers to view the victim as a contributor to their own victimization.

Another observer bias relevant to date rape situations is the *attractiveness bias* (Dion & Dion, 1987), which supports the stereotype that "what is beautiful is good." According to this bias, attractive people are seen most often as good people, having good internal qualities and therefore good outcomes in life. In a study of attractiveness bias in date rape, Deitz et al. (1984) found that observers were more certain of the guilt of a defendant charged with raping an attractive victim than a defendant charged with raping an unattractive victim. MacCoun's (1990) mock juror research on attractiveness bias indicated that jurors who viewed an attractive defendant were significantly more likely to ask for acquittal than those who viewed an unattractive defendant in a simulated larceny case. Yet, Fredricks and Arenson (1992) found only a marginal effect for attractiveness in causal attributions for other socially undesirable behaviors such as "needling someone." The implication is that attractiveness bias may vary with the type of crime or the model of research.

Most published studies on attractiveness bias have manipulated the attractiveness of *either* the victim *or* the assailant, and research participants are left to imagine or infer the physical attractiveness of the other person. This experimental manipulation results in victim/assailant pairs that are sometimes matched on attractiveness and sometimes not. This variability in attractiveness levels may be appropriate in studies of stranger rape where the assailant typically "selects" a victim, but is less appropriate in studies of date rape. What this methodology fails to replicate is the more common reality in which dating couples have similar levels of attractiveness.

Date rape is a crime that presupposes interpersonal attraction. Positive intracouple attractiveness is predicted by the matching hypothesis wherein attraction between dating partners is based in part on similar attractiveness (Stevens, Owens, & Schaefer, 1990). When date rape occurs in a context where consensual sex is a possibility and the perpetrator is just as likely to be a steady date as first date, the presumption is that the victim and the assailant experience some initial attraction to each other (Koss, Dinero, Seibel, & Cox, 1988).

If it is true that most dating couples possess a similar level of attractiveness, then the current knowledge about *attractiveness bias* in date rape is incomplete. Because the literature focuses on *either* the victim *or* the assailant, we can say little about this bias as it relates to the victim and the assailant, who are most likely to be a dating couple and similar in attractiveness.

Another omission in the research on the role of attractiveness in rape situations is the failure to examine more than two levels of attractiveness. As stated earlier, most studies manipulate high and low attractiveness of either the victim or the assailant, consequently researchers pay little attention to average levels of attractiveness. Because attractiveness is assumed to be a normally distributed variable and because most research participants are likely to fall into the average range of this variable, attractiveness may be a more effective variable when it includes a level with which most observers can identify.

This study was designed to examine observer evaluations of dating couples involved in date rape where the dating partners are *matched* on physical attractiveness. Rather than using only high versus low levels of attractiveness as most studies have done, the present study also added a medium level of attractiveness to determine if a linear relationship between attractiveness and responsibility attributions could be confirmed for both targets.

More specifically, this study of observers' perceptions of couples involved in date rape examines: (a) the degree to which attractiveness influences observers' evaluations of the dating partners, who are matched for low-, medium-, or high-attractiveness; (b) the degree of responsibility attributed to each dating partner; and (c) the degree to which gender bias influences those evaluations and responsibility attributions.

Method

Participants

Ninety general education psychology students (45 men and 45 women) were solicited as volunteers with permission from their instructor. Because general education psychology courses are taken by all students at the university, each class reflected the general university population, which is predominantly Caucasian.

Materials

Photographs of low-, medium-, and high-attractive male and female couples were selected on the basis of pretesting. Thirty male and 30 female photographs were pretested for attractiveness on a 9-point Likert scale. Photos with the lowest, middle, and highest mean score were selected for the low-, medium-, and high-attractive conditions respectively. Male mean scores chosen for the attractiveness conditions

were: low ($M = 3.38$, $SD = 1.70$), middle ($M = 4.88$, $SD = 1.26$), and high ($M = 6.38$, $SD = 1.20$). Female target mean scores chosen for the attractiveness conditions were: low ($M = 4.00$, $SD = 1.67$), middle ($M = 5.75$, $SD = 1.95$), and high ($M = 7.88$, $SD = 1.08$).

Two copies of the Personal Attribute Inventory (PAI; Parish, Bryant, & Shirazi, 1976a), one to rate the female target and one to rate the male target, were used. The PAI consists of 50 positive (e.g., kind, strong, compassionate) and 50 negative adjectives (e.g., foolish, irresponsible, conceited). The PAI requires respondents to choose 30 adjectives from the list that best describe the target person and is scored by summing the number of negative adjectives selected. Thus, a PAI score of 30 indicates a very negative evaluation of the target person (Parish, Bryant, & Shirazi, 1976b) and gives us a global measure of the degree to which observers may negatively evaluate one or the other of the dating pair.

In addition to the PAI, participants were asked to indicate what percentage of responsibility for the date rape (%-Responsibility), out of 100% total, they attributed to each dating partner. Two questions (one for each target) assessed the respondent's perception of the target's responsibility for the incident. Assessment of responsibility was limited to 100%, and participants were asked to make a responsibility attribution for the date rape (%-Responsibility), staying within the 100% limit. They could attribute responsibility to either target or both.

The following date rape scenario was read by the participants: "Mike and Susan had been dating for a couple of weeks when he invited her to his parents' cabin for the weekend. Unable to spend the entire weekend, Susan agreed to go for just one night. On Friday, after classes, they each packed a duffel bag and left for the cabin in Mike's car. Susan thought Mike was extremely handsome, and she was hoping this would be a lasting relationship. Mike felt the same way, which is why he wanted to spend the night with her. Once inside the cabin Mike suggested they take a shower together. When she protested he became more insistent. Susan became frightened and confused, but the more she resisted the more Mike persisted. Intercourse followed. On the drive home neither of them had anything to say. Mike dropped Susan off at the dorm. One week later, after speaking with her counselor, Susan filed a charge of date rape against Mike."

Design and Procedure

Each general education psychology class was randomly assigned to one of three conditions: low-attractive couple, medium-attractive couple, and high-attractive couple. All participants were presented with the same sequentially ordered six-page test booklet: a consent form, a biographical information form, the photographs of either the low-, medium-, or high-attractive couple who were matched for attractiveness and the date rape scenario, a PAI to rate the male dating partner, a PAI to rate the female partner, and the question for the responsibility attribution (%-Responsibility). Participants were instructed to proceed sequentially through the test booklet and to record their responses where instructed.

Results

Scores for the PAI were analyzed with a $2 \times 3 \times 2$ (Participant Sex × Attractiveness Level × Target Sex) mixed ANOVA. Because the %-Responsibility scores were interdependent (i.e., had to total 100%) the scores were analyzed separately for the male and female dating partner using two 2×3 (Participant Sex × Attractiveness Level) ANOVAs. Tukey a was used on all post hoc tests of significance to control Type I error at $p < .05$.

Personal Attribute Inventory

Individual cell means and standard deviations for PAI scores for all three conditions are listed on Table 1. The ANOVA for the PAI scores revealed no main effect for couple attractiveness, $F(1, 84) = 1.59$, $p = .20$, but the effect for participant sex approached significance, $F(1, 84) = 3.36$, $p = .07$, and indicated that men gave slightly more negative ratings than women did. There was a strong main effect for target sex, $F(1, 84) = 245.84$, $p < .001$; the male target was rated more negatively than the female target. The analysis revealed one significant interaction, $F(1, 84) = 8.14$, $p < .005$, between participant sex and target sex (Figure 1). Tukey a procedure revealed a significant difference between the number of negative characteristics ascribed by men and women to the female target, $p < .05$.

Percentage of Responsibility for the Date Rape

Individual cell means listed in Table 1 illustrate the same trend being exhibited by participants for targets on percentage of responsibility as on the PAI scores.

Male target responsibility. The ANOVA results for the %-Responsibility attributed to the male target for the date rape revealed a strong main effect for participant sex, $F(1, 83) = 6.11$, $p < .01$, in that the men and women in this study differed in responsibility attributions to the male target. There was also a strong main effect for attractiveness, $F(2, 83) = 4.09$, $p < .02$. Tukey a tests indicated the high-attractive male target was evaluated to be more responsible for the date rape

TABLE 1

Individual Cell Means and Standard Deviations of PAI and Responsibility Scores

	Att-level	PAI Scores		Responsibility	
		Male	Female	Male	Female
Men	Low	22.80 (5.25)	11.46 (6.37)	55.66 (17.71)	44.33 (17.71)
	Med	22.93 (3.86)	14.20 (7.46)	53.40 (26.29)	39.33[a] (24.39)
	High	22.20 (4.91)	12.26 (7.49)	66.66 (14.47)	33.33 (14.74)
Women	Low	24.06 (4.14)	7.26 (4.39)	72.66 (15.45)	27.33 (15.45)
	Med	24.20 (2.95)	10.00 (4.76)	58.93 (23.23)	41.06 (23.26)
	High	23.13 (4.65)	9.13 (7.11)	76.33 (13.81)	23.66 (13.81)

Note: n = 15 for all cells

[a]Scores for the male and female targets did not add to 100% in the medium-attractive condition due to scores of 00% attributed to both targets.

(*M* = 71.50, *SD* = 14.75; *p* < .05) than the medium-attractive (*M* = 58.10, *SD* = 24.6) target. It is important to remember, however, that %-Responsibility scores for the male and female target people were related. Therefore, higher responsibility ratings for the male target will result in lower responsibility attributed to the female target.

Female target responsibility. ANOVA results for the %-Responsibility attributed to the female target showed a significant main effect for participant sex, *F*(1, 84) = 5.29, *p* < .05, in that the women showed sex bias by rating the female target less responsible than the men did. There was also a main effect for attractiveness level, *F*(2, 84) = 3.50, *p* < .05. An *attractiveness bias* consistent with the literature appears for the female target in that the high-attractive female target was attributed less responsibility (*M* = 28.50, *SD* = 14.75) than the low-attractive female target (*M* = 35.83, *SD* = 18.48). Tukey *a* analysis did not reach significance for the high- and low-target differences. More interesting, however, was the post hoc finding that the medium-attractive female target was held significantly more responsible (*M* = 40.5, *SD* = 23.42; *p* < .05) than the high-attractive female target.

Table 1 lists the individual cell means for %-Responsibility and illustrates that the high-responsibility score attributed to the medium-attractive female target came mostly from the women in the study, which if significant, would have directly conflicted with previous indications of *gender bias*.

Discussion

Overall the results of the study confirmed the existence of a sex bias. Men were more negative than women in their evaluations of the female targets and in their attributions of responsibility to the female target. The results also confirmed that an *attractiveness bias* exists; the women attributed less responsibility to the high-attractive female target. However, the inclusion of a third, medium level of attractiveness provided data which suggests that the relation between attractiveness level and observer evaluations is not necessarily a linear one as we might implicitly assume. Though not statistically significant, the cell means for the PAI show the same trend for the medium-attractive targets as the %-Responsibility scores. The lack of significant results may be due to the smaller range of possible scores (i.e., 1–30). Because

FIGURE 1

Target Gender ✕ Participant Gender interaction effect indicating participants favored their own gender by rating them less negatively.
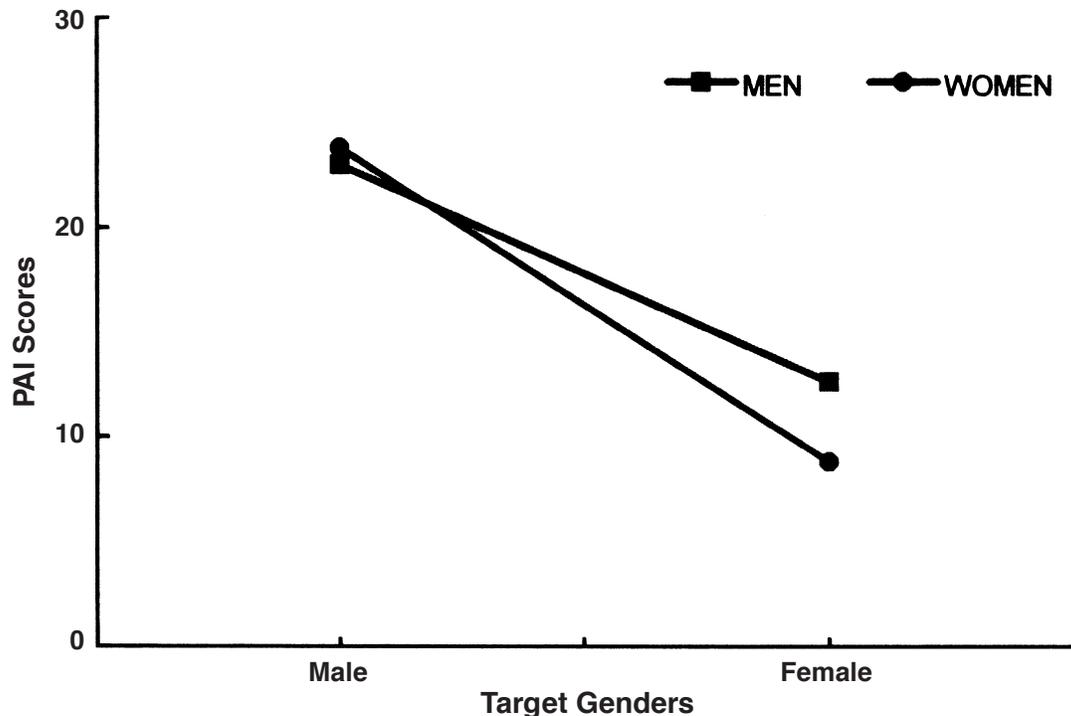
the percentage of responsibility scores had to total 100%, the male target scores varied in relation to the female target scores. Standard deviation scores revealed substantial variability in observer perceptions.

Although the male target was attributed more responsibility for the incident ($M = 64.13$, $SD = 20.67$; $p < .001$) than the female target ($M = 34.67$, $SD = 19.84$), many of the raw scores were equally distributed for both targets. These distributions may have resulted in the combined scores for the female targets' responsibility reaching a level of approximately one third of the total responsibility for the occurrence of "date" rape.

The *just world theory* and *attractiveness bias* collectively explain the greater attributions of responsibility to the low-attractive female target, but they are insufficient to explain the finding that medium-attractive female targets are more responsible. According to *just world theory,* to protect the illusion of controllability, it is often necessary to make defensive attributions. Women, even though they were less negative than men in their response to the female target, attributed some responsibility to the female target. This responsibility attribution to those who are

victimized, however tempered by sex bias, serves to protect the illusion of controllability and safety from harm. The inclusion of an additional bias for perceived similarity to the target (i.e., attractiveness level) may combine with sex identification and increase the threat to the participant's belief in a just world. The result might be an increase in defensive attributions. Because the dating couples were matched for attractiveness and because participants are more likely to identify with a medium level of attractiveness, it is not surprising that women attributed the highest percentage of responsibility to the medium-attractive female target.

The significance of response differences and participant sex differences show that observers are not united in their perceptions of date rape. No one theoretical framework is sufficient to explain the variety and pattern of observers' reactions found in this study, but the addition of concepts such as *gender bias, attractiveness bias,* and *similarity to the target* to the predictions of *just world theory* appears to come close.

Future research may lead date rape investigations to a more realistic setting in which the victim and the assailant are similar to each other on more dimen-

sions than just attractiveness. Although several sexual aggression models have been proposed, research has failed to discover any pre-indications of intent that would predict sexual aggression on the part of either member of the dating couple. If in further investigations, intent can be based on positive intracouple attraction and similarities on other dimensions, then the foundation for such research has been laid. On the other hand, if we continue to find support for responsibility attributions to the victims and personality derogation as a causal factor for sexual aggression, then we can expect that date rape will continue to be an occurrence that is believed to be avoidable. As such, sex education programs will want to include items on the avoidance of "date rape." This of course is not a new concept, but perhaps it is one that has not been conveyed as meaningfully as it should be.

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