

ATTRIBUTION OF RESPONSIBILITY IN A CAMPUS STABBING INCIDENT

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Recent laboratory work has suggested a defensive attribution interpretation of the attribution of responsibility following an accident. The present study was an attempt to test these notions in a field situation. A questionnaire was devised concerning a campus stabbing incident in which one girl suffered severe consequences and her companion suffered less severe consequences. Results were compatible with defensive attribution. Those participants who most closely identified with the victim (females) perceived chance as a contributing factor less often when consequences were severe, and held the victim more responsible for her fate, than did participants who did not identify with the victim (male).

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Walster (1966) concluded that the more serious the consequences of an accident, the more responsibility would be assigned to the person potentially at fault. Although this is frequently cited in the current literature, recent work is making it increasingly clear that the situation is more complex, and is not well understood. Shaver (1970) was unable to replicate Walster's findings, and eventually concluded that a defensive attribution interpretation best fit his data. Specifically, attribution of responsibility is not so much related to severity of outcome, per se, as it is related to the perception that a similar accident could conceivably befall oneself. But Shaver's (1970) work, as well as Walster's (1966), seems complicated by the fact that the victim of the accident and the person potentially responsible for the accident are confounded – an observation made by Chaikin and Darley (1973) as a point of departure for further work. In a study designed to separate "victim" and "perpetrator" roles, and to lead participants to identify with one or the other, Chaikin and Darley (1973) obtained further evidence compatible with a defensive attribution interpretation. They concluded that, as severity of consequences increases, the likelihood of using chance as an explanation decreases. Further, the aspects of the situation which might be considered responsible depend on whether the observer identifies with the

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victim or with the perpetrator. In both cases, the choice of responsible causes is made in such a way as to protect the role that the individual expects to assume.

A study by Stokols and Schopler (1973), published concurrently with the study by Chaikin and Darley (1973), is somewhat difficult to interpret in light of the latter findings. Stokols and Schopler did not find any differential assignment of responsibility as a function of severity of consequences, as would be predicted from a defensive attribution framework. Another recent study (Jones & Aronson, 1973), in which attributions of responsibility in a case of rape were studied, revealed no sex differences. Since it would seem that, from a defensive attribution viewpoint, one would predict a sex difference (on the assumption that females would identify with the "victim" role more than would males), it is again difficult to reconcile with the earlier literature. There were, of course, a number of differences between these studies and that of Chaikin and Darley, but it is not obvious from a comparison of procedures what ingredients are essential to defensive attribution results.

Systematic investigation of the effects of several variables is called for. For example, the set with which participants go about their task may well be important. In some of these studies, participants are given an evaluative set (examination of clinical folders, mock jury decisions, etc.), while in others the evaluations being made are almost incidental to the manifest task (e.g., Walster, 1966). While these issues undoubtedly deserve careful scrutiny in the laboratory, it is tempting to turn to the field situation to see whether such a phenomenon seems to hold there.

A campus stabbing incident seemed to provide an interesting opportunity to do this. Two girls (sisters) were accosted by a young man who had a knife. The older of the two girls, a college sophomore, was stabbed several times and was later hospitalized (severe consequences). The younger girl, a freshman, was bruised and scratched, and was extremely frightened (less severe consequences). Since it was an incident quite "close to home" for college students, it seemed reasonable to expect that defensive attribution processes might well operate.

METHOD

PARTICIPANTS

Participants were 34 males and 41 females enrolled in an introductory psychology course. All but two males and two females indicated that they were freshmen; the four others indicated that they were sophomores. Of the 34 male participants, 16 received questionnaires dealing primarily with the older girl (severe consequences), and 18 received questionnaires dealing primarily with the younger girl (less severe consequences). Of the 41 female participants, 22 received questionnaires dealing primarily with the older girl, 19 with the younger girl.

PROCEDURE

Questionnaires were devised which purported to be concerned with the general problem of criminal behavior on or near campus. A cover sheet gave examples of some recent incidents (“Girls have been stopped on or near campus at night by exhibitionists, assault with attempt to rape has occurred, assault with apparent intent to kill has occurred, numerous burglaries have occurred”), and explained that some students in psychology were interested in various aspects of the problem. The first page contained eight questions designed simply to give credibility to the cover story. They dealt with opinions regarding the magnitude of the problem on campus, the advisability of increasing the campus police force, the adequacy of campus lighting, etc.

The material appearing on the next page of the questionnaire set the stage for examining the major question of the experiment, and also served to divide participants into two groups, one of which was to focus attention on the girl suffering severe consequences (the older girl) and the other of which was to focus attention on the girl suffering less severe consequences (the younger girl). It read as follows:

The following passage was adapted from an article appearing in the [campus newspaper] recently; a description of one of the latest campus crimes. Please read it carefully.

The [local newspaper] reported Saturday morning that a university sophomore student and her freshman sister were hitchhiking near the corner of Fifth and Van Buren Streets, when a man came up behind the older girl and stabbed her in the back. Both girls struggled with the man before the younger girl fled across the intersection with the man in pursuit. The younger girl narrowly escaped when rescuers pulled the attacker off her back. Her older sister suffered multiple stab wounds, and was reported in satisfactory condition after surgery.

For the purposes of this investigation, we want you to think of this as a description of two incidents...one involving the younger [older] of the two girls; the other involving the older [younger] of the two girls. In addition, for reasons which will be clarified later, we want you to answer the following questions as they apply to the incident involving the younger [older] girl.

This was followed by a series of questions. The question regarding the assignment of responsibility was worded as follows: “In any such incident as this one, responsibility for what happens may be placed on only one person or factor, or it may be placed on a number of people or factors. In this particular case: (a) How much responsibility do you feel should be assigned to the campus police? (b) ...to the attacker? (c) ...to the younger [older] girl? (d) ...to chance factors?” Each part was answered on a 6-point scale from *no responsibility at all* to *great deal of responsibility*. In addition, participants were asked to indicate what they considered to be the likelihood of a similar incident happening to themselves, how much punishment the attacker should get, and how much each of the girls had suffered in this incident. Each question was answered on a 6-point scale.

Questionnaires were distributed during two regularly scheduled class meetings by the teaching assistant, who was unfamiliar with the purpose of the study. For each of the classes, half the

questionnaires were about the younger girl, and half were about the older girl. A detailed explanation of the true purpose of the experiment was distributed to all participants at the next class meeting.

RESULTS

To check on the assumption that the severity of consequences was different for the two girls, an analysis of variance was done on the question regarding amount of suffering. It indicated that the difference in the severity of consequences perceived for the two girls was significant ($F = 22.59$, $df = 1, 70$, $p < .001$).

On the question regarding the probability that a similar incident could happen to them, female respondents had a mean slightly above the midpoint (3.54) and male respondents had a mean below the midpoint (2.24). The difference was statistically significant ($F = 15.38$, $df = 1, 71$, $p < .001$).

Analyses of variance were carried out for each of the questions regarding assignment of responsibility. No differences among groups emerged in the attribution of responsibility to campus police (means ranged from 2.75 to 3.36) or to the attacker (means ranged from 5.41 to 5.79). However, in the case of assignment of responsibility to the girl herself, a significant sex effect emerged. Female participants, with a mean of 3.02, attributed significantly more responsibility to the girl ($F = 7.67$, $df = 1, 70$, $p < .01$) than did male participants (mean = 2.03). There was no interaction with the age of the girl (i.e., severity of consequences).

Analysis of the item regarding assignment of responsibility to chance factors revealed a significant sex x age of girl interaction ($F = 5.12$, $df = 1, 71$, $p < .05$). Female participants attributed more responsibility to chance in the case of the younger girl (mean = 4.74) than in the case of the older girl (mean = 3.91). Male participants, on the other hand, attributed more responsibility to chance in the case of the older girl (mean = 4.62) than in the case of the younger girl (mean = 4.11).

DISCUSSION

This campus stabbing incident offered a unique opportunity to test the predictions from defensive attribution theory. Two different levels of severity of consequences were perceived by the participants, with the older girl seen as suffering the more severe consequences. From a defensive attribution viewpoint, then, chance should be invoked as an explanation less often in the case of the older girl, particularly by individuals who perceive themselves as potentially subject to the same incident.

The data indicated that females perceived themselves as more likely to occupy the victim's position than did males. And, in keeping with defensive attribution notions, female participants perceived chance as a contributing factor significantly more in the case of the less severe consequences (the younger girl) than in the case of the more severe consequences (the older girl). Male participants, on the other hand, actually perceived

chance as a contributing factor slightly more in the case of the older girl than in the case of the younger girl. If the assumption is made that the male participants identified more with the role of the perpetrator (the attacker), this reversal is predictable from defensive attribution (Chaikin & Darley, 1973).

Also in keeping with defensive attribution predictions are the data on attribution of responsibility to the girl herself. Overall, female participants held the girl more responsible than did male participants, thus, presumably, fulfilling self-protective needs.

In summary, the findings from this field incident are compatible with defensive attribution, as it has been demonstrated in the laboratory. Those participants who most closely identified with the victim (i.e., the female participants) perceived chance as a contributing factor less often when consequences were severe and, in general, held the victim more responsible for her own fate than did participants who did not identify with the victim. Further work of this sort is obviously needed before alternative interpretations can be ruled out (e.g., perhaps females are simply more prone to hold others responsible for their fates than are males), but it appears as if some process akin to that being pursued in laboratory work is indeed occurring in everyday behavior.

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