

ATTACHMENT AND ASSESSMENT OF BLAME IN DATE RAPE SCENARIOS

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In a questionnaire survey, 2060 students entering university rated various written scenarios involving "date rape." Each rater rated the behavior of both the aggressor and the victim for how "excusable" his/her behavior was, on a 7-point scale. Half of the students in the sample received a version of the questionnaire in which the aggressor and victim were in a long-term dating relationship; the other raters received a version in which the aggressor and victim were casual friends. Males rated the behavior of the aggressor as more excusable and the behavior of the victim as less excusable in the scenario in which the couple were dating steadily than in the scenario in which they were friends. These results are discussed in light of attachment theory.

Keywords: attachment, assessment, blame, date rape, dating, relationship, males, excusable, attachment theory.

Research by psychiatrists (e.g., John Bowlby 1969, 1973), ethologists (e.g., Robert Hindohde, 1982) and developmental psychologists (e.g., Mary Ainsworth, 1970 and Alan Sroufe, 1988) have substantiated the functional uniqueness of the attachment relationship in infancy and early childhood. In the early years of life, an attachment bond is a close enduring relationship with a particular other who is defined as stronger and wiser. Functionally, the unique purpose of the attachment relationship is to contribute to the probability of survival by protecting the altricial young from danger or the threat of danger. This function is achieved through behaviors (e.g., crying, calling, reaching, clinging) which maintain or restore close proximity to the attachment figure.

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Thus an attachment relationship is functioning well, by definition, when the youngster feels safe and secure.

Recently, investigators have extended the theory and investigation of attachment relationships to adolescence and young adulthood. Robert Weiss (1982) demonstrated that intimate relationships for adults meet the same criteria as attachment relationships for young children. Sheldon and West (1989) demonstrated that young adult college students assign unique functions to the role of “lover” compared to “best friend” and “friend” and that these functions are the same attachment functions identified for infants and young children. Thus current research supports the claim that a primary function of an intimate relationship for adults is to provide a sense of safety and security, and protection from harm, both in the present and enduring for the future (West & Sheldon, 1988).

In the Sheldon and West (1989) article cited above, a panel of college students was asked to judge each of 36 relationship characteristics as being most closely identified with “lover,” “best friend” or “friend.” The task was not forced choice: each characteristic could be judged as most closely identified with more than one of the three types of relationships. A subset of these characteristics was theoretically identified by the investigators as attachment characteristics, based on Bowlby’s theory of the attachment behavioral system (1969). The question of interest was whether the panel of young adults, who were blind to the theoretical classification of the characteristics, would preferentially associate the attachment characteristics with the “lover” relationship. The results provided strong support for the identification of attachment functions – and only attachment functions – with the “lover” relationship uniquely.

The study reported here presents a different perspective on the meaning of the attachment relationship for young adults and suggests that it may be the case that certain “rights” assumed by some to be associated with such a relationship may, in fact, impede safety and security within the relationship.

METHOD

Students ($n = 2,540$) entering a large public university were asked to participate in an anonymous questionnaire study, given during their first week of residence at the university. Students were surveyed in groups of twenty to thirty during the first ten minutes of an orientation session on substance abuse and sexual assault. Trained student facilitators (recruited from the medical school and other graduate programs) distributed and collected the questionnaires.

The two-page questionnaire included basic demographic information (age, gender, year in college, relationship status, location of childhood residence), information on use of alcoholic beverages and experiences of “date rape” and four scenarios, described below. The primary purpose of the study was to assess how perceptions of blame for date rape vary with reported use of alcohol by the aggressor and/or the victim (Canterbury, Grossman, & Lloyd, 1993). The scenarios depicted “typical” circumstances of date rape in a collegiate setting. The questionnaire was prepared in two versions. In three of the four scenarios, the versions differed in use of alcohol or other drugs by the aggressor and/or the victim in the scenario. In the fourth scenario, the versions differed in the nature of the relationship between the aggressor and the victim: in one version (“Attachment Scenario”) they were depicted as having dated for several years and considering marriage; in the other version (“Friends Scenario”) they were depicted as having a casual friendship. Half of the raters received each version; on both versions, raters were asked to rate how “excusable” the behavior of the aggressor and the victim was on a scale of 1 = *excusable* to 7 = *inexcusable*. In this paper, we report the results for the fourth scenario only; the text of the Attachment and Friends scenarios are given in Figure 1.

Attachment Scenario: Carly and Luke are both third year students in college. They met when Carly decided to take tennis lessons to improve her game. Luke was her instructor. Soon after the lessons began, they began dating steadily. Two semesters later, they were still dating and having more fun than ever. It had even crossed Carly’s mind that this might be the man she would one day marry. The only problem they seemed to have was Carly’s refusal to have sex with Luke. One night, in Carly’s room, Luke wouldn’t take no for an answer and forced her to have intercourse with him. After it was over, Carly was upset, got up and left. Luke called her later to apologize, but she hung up on him.

Friends Scenario: Carly and Luke are both third year students in college. They met when Carly decided to take tennis lessons to improve her game. Luke was her instructor. Two semesters later, they were still playing tennis occasionally. On the one time that Luke asked her for a date, Carly refused because she was not interested in him romantically – One day after tennis, Luke accompanied Carly home to borrow a book. Once inside her apartment, he forced her to have intercourse with him. After it was over, Carly was upset, got up and left. Luke called her later to apologize, but she hung up on him.

Usable questionnaire responses were obtained from 2060 (81%) students. The median age was 18 years old; 93% were age 18 or younger. The sample includes 951 (46%) males and 1109 (54%) females. Fifty-three percent were either dating different people (24%) or dating one person (29%); 46% were single, not dating anyone. Most students grew up in the suburbs (53%) or in a small city (20%); 15% came from a rural environment and 11% spent most of their childhood before age 16 in a large city.

The "Attachment Scenario" version was completed by 469 males and 538 females; the "Friends Scenario" version was completed by 482 males and 571 females. There are no statistically significant differences (at the $p < .05$ level) in age, dating status or childhood residential environment between those who completed the different versions.

RESULTS

Table 1 summarizes the results of the ratings, by sex of the rater. These ratings were analyzed using an analysis of covariance, with sex as the covariate, for the aggressor and for the victim. For both analyses, the covariate term was statistically significant ($F(1,2054) = 52.3$ for aggressor; $F(1,2054) = 49.0$ for victim; in both cases, $p < .0001$). The difference in the ratings of the aggressor's behavior in the two scenarios was highly significant ($F(2,2054) = 77.7$, $p < .0001$), as was the difference in the ratings of the victim's behavior ($F(2,2054) = 15.4$, $p < .0001$).

TABLE 1
ASSESSMENT OF EXCUSABLE BEHAVIOR IN DATE RAPE SCENARIOS
BY GENDER OF RATER AND TYPE OF SCENARIO

MALE RATERS (N = 951)				
SCENARIO	RATINGS FOR AGRESSOR		RATINGS FOR VICTIM	
	MEAN	SD	MEAN	SD
Attachment	6.3	1.2	1.9	1.5
Friends	6.8	0.7	1.5	1.0
FEMALE RATERS (N = 1117)				
SCENARIO	RATINGS FOR AGRESSOR		RATINGS FOR VICTIM	
	MEAN	SD	MEAN	SD
Attachment	6.7	0.7	1.3	0.9
Friends	6.9	0.5	1.4	1.0

Notes: SD = Standard Deviation; Scale for ratings ranges from 1 = *excusable* to 7 = *inexcusable*. Statistically significant differences are (1) between male and female raters, for both aggressor and victim, on the Attachment Scenario and (2) for male raters only, between the Attachment Scenario and the Friends Scenario for both aggressor and victim (see text for details of statistical tests of significance).

An examination of Table 1 reveals that the differences in ratings between the scenarios occurs for males rather than females. For male raters, the aggressor's behaviors are judged *more* excusable in the Attachment scenario than in the Friends scenario, while the victim's behavior is judged *less* excusable in the Attachment scenario than in the Friends scenario. Males and females differ in their ratings for both aggressor and victim in the Attachment scenario but not the Friends scenario. Males rate the aggressor's behavior as *more* excusable and the victim's behavior as *less* excusable than do females.

DISCUSSION

Although the statistically significant differences in the ratings are numerically small, they still might reflect real differences in a sense of entitlement, given the strong social bias against admitting that sexual aggression is ever excusable behavior. The male raters in this study seem to react to the scenarios with the expectation that the aggressor has more of a "right" to have sex (i.e., his behaviors are somewhat more excusable) and the victim less of a right to say no (i.e., her behaviors are somewhat less excusable) when there is a love or incipient love (i.e., an attachment) relationship.

In attachment terms, this leads to a paradox: the relationship that should enhance and protect safety and security may *decrease* safety, to the extent that the right to refuse sexual advances is impugned. But this paradox is itself best understood in the context of the meaning and expectations associated with attachment relationships.

Each person's first attachment relationship is with, in Bowlby's terms, "a stronger, wiser other" (1969) who offers the protection of superior size, experience and skills. The infant and young child cannot care for him/herself or even make decisions about what is best for his/her well-being. This is the role of the attachment figure; secure attachment depends on the attachment figure assuming that role competently and lovingly.

But, as noted in the Introduction, contemporary research has demonstrated that attachment persists as a necessary and separate function of close relationships into adolescence and young adulthood. Many of the characteristics of the early infant-attachment figure relationship are carried forward, at least in expectations, for the pair-bonded intimate relationship of adulthood.

If the expectation of superiority in judgment, ability and decision-making is also carried forward, then we might expect results such as were observed in this study: the victim (i.e., the subordinate) is given less right to refuse the aggressor (i.e., the superordinate) than is true in relationships with less attachment elements.

The fact that this pattern of response is typical of male raters and not female raters might be related to the differences in male and female moral development (Miller, 1976 & Gilligan, 1982). These results could be interpreted to agree with the hypotheses that males tend to make judgments from the basis of set expectations and “rules,” while females make judgments from the basis of relational effects. . All raters gave very high scores – indicating inexcusable behavior – to the aggressor in both scenarios. Similarly, all raters gave very low scores - indicating excusable behavior-to the victim in both scenarios. The differences cited in this paper should not be interpreted to mean that male raters ever judge “date rape” to be “excusable” behavior. Rather, the interpretation points to a need to investigate more subtle differences in expectations and entitlements contingent on relational circumstances.

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