

Rape blame as a function of alcohol presence and resistance type [☆]

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Abstract

Attributions of rape blame may be related to variables such as alcohol presence and resistance type used during a sexual assault. The current study sought to assess participants' attributions of responsibility for a sexual assault based on these two variables through the use of several written scenarios. Two hundred and thirteen male and female college students participated in the study. Results indicated that responsibility ratings given to the victim varied by the presence of alcohol but not by resistance type. If the female target had been drinking, she was judged as being more responsible for the assault than if she had not been drinking. However, how she resisted the assault did not affect ratings of her responsibility. Additionally, participant gender was found to not be an important factor for attributing blame to the woman target. Future research should focus on two important factors: 1) how participants' judgments of blame may change during actual alcohol administration and 2) how the use of video, rather than written vignettes, may produce stronger effects.

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1. Introduction

Rape can be interpreted as being motivated by a need for power, control, or dominance and sexual fulfillment on the part of the perpetrator (Muehlenhard & Linton, 1987). Often, however, it may be the victim who is blamed for the rape. For example, a female target attacked by a male perpetrator may be perceived to be at fault for her own rape depending on how provocative her clothes were (Abbey, Cozzarelli, McLaughlin & Harnish, 1987), where the rape actually occurred (Muehlenhard & Linton, 1987); if and how much alcohol she drank (Corcoran & Thomas, 1991; George, Gournic, & McAfee, 1988; Norris & Cubbins, 1992), and how clear she was in stating she did not want sexual relations to occur (Osman & Davis, 1999). In this study, the main interest was the concept of date rape, defined as “forced intercourse that happens on a date or between acquainted or romantically involved individuals” (Jenkins & Dambrot, 1987). Because date rape occurs at higher frequencies than other types of rape (Muehlenhard & Linton, 1987) and several determinants of it will be briefly reviewed.

1.1. Perceptions of date rape and female resistance

If a man’s intention is to have intercourse with a woman, he may be more likely to perceive friendly cues from her as being more sexual in nature (Abbey, Zawacki, & McAuslan, 2000). Concurrently, he may believe that any refusal on her part actually signifies “yes” or “persuade me to say yes” (Abbey, Buck, Zawacki, & Saenz, 2003). Sometimes, because a woman may feel ambivalent about having sex and may not want to be thought of as “easy” (Osman, 2003) she may decide to engage only in intimate touching and kissing, hoping that if they go further, it will be the man’s responsibility and not hers. Muehlenhard and Hollabaugh (1988) described this as token resistance: the woman may desire to have sex but feels it is prudent to stop the male or at least put up some protest beforehand. Men who endorse beliefs in token resistance often feel that most women engage in this behavior. Thus these men are less likely to believe that a rape has occurred unless there is strong evidence of the woman’s refusal in the form of both a strong verbal (e.g. screaming, shouting, crying) and a strong physical (e.g. kicking, pushing) refusal (Osman & Davis, 1999).

1.2. Alcohol expectancies and perceptions of date rape

When alcohol is introduced into a dating situation, both men and women may view themselves and others as more sexually available because they expect alcohol to have a direct affect on sexuality (Abbey et al., 2000; George, Stoner, Norris, Lopez, & Lehman, 2000). Norris and Cubbins (1992) showed that male and female participants were more likely to think that a rape had occurred only if both partners in a dating dyad had been drinking, but less likely to have if just the female had been drinking. Additional studies have shown that male college drinkers with strong alcohol sexual expectancies were more likely to rate a female target in a date rape scenario as having been more sexually aroused prior to the assault (Abbey et al., 2000, 2003; George et al., 2000; Norris, Davis, George, Martell, & Heiman, 2002).

1.3. Summary

In sum, there are a number of factors that may predict the extent to which a woman may be blamed for a date rape. The presence of alcohol, as well as the type of resistance a woman uses during a sexual assault

may affect others' perceptions of how willing she was to participate in the act. Researchers have long noted that men who endorse traditional sex roles of male dominance are more likely to be tolerant of sexual harassment and blame the woman more for a rape occurring (Burt, 1991; Burt & Albin, 1981; Check & Malamuth, 1983; Lonsway & Fitzgerald, 1994; Muehlenhard & Linton, 1987).

1.4. Aims of the current study and research hypotheses

The first aim of this study was to investigate how women attribute blame in an ambiguous sexual situation. Male subjects were also sampled in order to compare male to female attributions of fault. The second aim of this study was to investigate whether men and women differ in their views of token resistance. This would be one of the first studies to empirically research how women view a female target that is assaulted in such a scenario, and if they hold her responsible.

The final aim of this study was to investigate how person variables contribute to alcohol's influence on perceptions of sexual assault (e.g. alcohol expectancies and prevailing attitudes towards the dating script and gender roles).

In this study, several hypotheses were proposed. First, a main effect for alcohol presence was predicted such that both male and female participants would blame the female target more than a male perpetrator if alcohol were present in a written description of a date rape. Second, an interaction between resistance type used by the female and participant gender was predicted such that in scenarios where a low level resistance was used, the more responsibility the woman would be given for the date rape, regardless of whether the participant judging her was male or female. On the other hand, in scenarios where the woman used a high level resistance type, we predicted that both male and female participants would assign less blame to her for the sexual assault.

Additionally, we explored how rape blame would be correlated to alcohol-related expectancies, specifically those regarding sex, power and aggression. This was assessed through the use of the Alcohol Expectancies Questionnaire 3 (AEQ-3) (George, Frone, Cooper, & Russell, 1995). Based on recent research findings (Abbey et al., 2003, 2000; Norris & Cubbins, 1992), a priori predictions were made that scores on these two subscales of the AEQ-3 would significantly correlate with ratings of responsibility. It was predicted that higher endorsement of these two subscales would be related to higher ratings of responsibility, due to participants' rating someone under the influence of alcohol as more sexual and more sexually aggressive, thus believing that the male perpetrator has not done anything wrong. Because alcohol activates these expectancies, this significance should operate more in scenarios in which the female target is drinking. Finally, a priori predictions were made that scores on the Attitudes Towards Women Scale (AWS) (Spence & Helmreich, 1972) would correlate with ratings of responsibility toward the female. Men who endorse traditional sex roles were expected to be more likely to victim blame; therefore higher endorsement of sex role stereotypes may be associated with how much responsibility is attributed to a woman in a date rape scenario.

2. Methods

2.1. Participants

Participants were undergraduate students enrolled in three psychology courses in a state university located in the southeastern United States. For participating in the study, students were offered course credit amounting to one credit hour. The sample included 213 men and women aged 18–23 ($M=20.76$,

SD=2.84). Approximately, one third of the sample size was male ($N=70$), with and 143 were female participants. Males' average age was 20.64, (SD=2.408) and females 20.81, (SD=3.028). In this study, Caucasian students accounted for 86.4% of the participants ($N=184$), African American students accounted for 4.2% ($N=9$) and other ethnicities accounted for the remaining 9.4%. In the sample, 46% of the participants were single ($N=98$), while 39.4% were “steadily dating” ($N=84$), 11.3% ($N=24$) were “dating casually”, while the remaining 3.3% ($N=7$) were married.

According to a Modified Quantity Frequency Index (Noel, 2002, described below), participants ($N=212$, 1 did not report) reported drinking a mean of 25.46 days (SD=8.049) of the last 90 days; 55% of males ($N=34$) and 67% of females ($N=96$) reported that they had experienced no recent major change in their drinking. 81.4% of males ($N=56$) and 86.7% of the female participants ($N=124$) stated that they had had at least one drink within the last 90 days.

2.2. Procedures

Data collection started in January 2005 and ended in May 2005. Participants were told via Informed Consent that they would be taking part in a study on social judgments “to see how individuals viewed other people in several social situations.” Additionally, they were told they would be asked several questions about their current and past alcohol use. Finally they were informed that their participation was completely voluntary. Because filling out the experimental packet did not require a signature, participants were instructed to keep the informed consent that included contact information for the principal investigator.

2.3. Measures

2.3.1. Demographic information

Participants recorded their age, gender, ethnicity, marital status, current educational status, and current employment status.

2.3.2. Alcohol Expectancies Questionnaire 3

The Alcohol Expectancies Questionnaire 3 (AEQ-3) (George et al., 1995) is divided into 8 different subscales, each with 5 items. In this study, sexual enhancement and power and aggression were the only two subscales that were used because, in theory, power and dominance, as well as sexual fulfillment were the expectations most likely to explain why a perpetrator would decide to sexually aggress against a female when she was drinking (Check & Malamuth, 1983; Lonsway & Fitzgerald, 1994; Muehlenhard & Linton, 1987). George et al. (1995) listed high internal consistency reliabilities for both the sexual enhancement subscale ($\alpha=.93$) and the power and aggression subscale ($\alpha=.83$).

2.3.3. Quantity-Frequency-Variety Index

The Quantity-Frequency-Variety Index (QFV) (Noel, 2002; adapted from Cahalan, Cisin, & Crossley, 1969) is a brief questionnaire that yields a 90-day drinking summary and is used to identify infrequent drinkers (less than once per month) through potential problem drinkers. The scale identifies type of preferred alcoholic beverage as well as typical drinking patterns and amount of alcohol consumed on a daily, weekly and monthly basis. In an earlier study with 197 participants drawn from a similar population at the same university, mean frequency of self-reported hard liquor

drinking was about three days a week, wine about one day per week and beer about four days per week. Amount per drinking occasion averaged about 6 standard drinks, but ranged from one to about 10. Chronbach's alpha for the three frequency measures was .70 and was .64 for the measures of amount per occasion.

2.3.4. *Attitudes Towards Women Scale*

The shortened version of the Attitudes Towards Women Scale (AWS), (Spence & Helmreich, 1972; Spence, Helmreich, & Stapp, 1973) consists of 25 items reflecting the level at which participants hold traditional or liberal views of women. Participants are asked to rate women in educational, vocational, etiquette, sexual and dating behaviors and practices and their roles in marriage. Higher scores on this scale indicate stronger endorsement of women's traditional roles. This scale has been shown to have a test–retest reliability of .94 with $\alpha = .91$. (Muehlenhard & Linton, 1987).

2.3.5. *Written vignettes*

Participants were instructed to read three short written scenarios. The first and third scenarios were distracter vignettes. The first one dealt with a law school student having difficulty in his first year. Participants were told to determine whose fault it was that the student was not doing well. The third scenario told about a basketball player who was very highly recruited but did not play well in her first year. Participants were asked to determine whose fault it is that the player did not play well.

The scenario of interest was the second scenario. This vignette was specifically constructed for use in this study and was based on previous vignettes in the literature (Norris & Cubbins, 1992; Osman, 2003). This vignette asked participants to take the role of an emergency counselor. The woman and the man were “Emily” and “Larry.” The words “raped” and “sexually assaulted” were not used in the scenarios. Participants read the following: “You are working the late shift at a crisis counseling center. It is about 2:30 a.m. and the center appears to be headed for another calm night. You are about to go on your lunch break when you are told you have a client in emergency who needs to speak with you. She is brought into your office and tells you that she has just been assaulted at a party.”

2.4. *Manipulations*

The first portion of the vignettes centered on if the woman consumed alcohol during the date. Participants were randomly assigned to one of these two conditions.

2.4.1. *Alcohol present condition*

Participants were told, “The woman appears to be intoxicated. Her eyes are bloodshot, and the smell of alcohol hits you strongly from across the room. You ask her if she had been drinking, and she states that she had been doing tequila shots.”

2.4.2. *Alcohol absent condition*

Participants were told, “While listening to Emily, you do not notice any apparent signs of alcohol consumption. She did not smell of alcohol, and when asked, she stated that she had not been drinking.”

The second part of the vignette dealt with the manner in which the woman target resisted the assailant's sexual advances. Again, random assignment determined condition.

2.4.3. High resistance condition

Participants were told “the woman states that she tried to forcefully push her assailant away, and screamed ‘No, no’. The man proceeded to have sex with the woman anyway, she tells you.”

2.4.4. Low resistance condition

The scenario read, “She states that they (the man and woman) were mutually kissing, when she suggested to him that they better stop. She then states they went back to kissing for a while. She then tried to leave and the man proceeded to have sex with the woman anyway.”

2.5. Dependent measures

Participants were asked to make judgments assessing the responsibility of the woman for the assault. The following questions were asked and were responded to on a 7-point Likert-type scale (1—Definitely not, 7—Definitely):

Do you think Emily was flirting with Larry? (Question #1)

Do you think Emily wanted to have sex with Larry? (Question #2)

Do you think Emily was “leading Larry on”? (Question #3)

Should Larry have had sex with Emily? (Question #4)

Should Larry have continued to try to have sex with Emily, even if force was used? (Question #5)

Did Emily do anything wrong? (Question #6)

Did Larry do anything wrong? (Question #7).

The final two questions (Questions #8 and #9) asked participants to mark on a continuous line how much each character in the scenario was responsible for the sexual intercourse that occurred. A score was calculated measuring inches from zero (on the left) to the hash mark. The closer participants marked to “0”, the more they felt the character in question held no responsibility for the rape. The closer participants marked to 7, the more they felt the character held complete responsibility for the rape occurring.

Emily and Larry have had sex. To what extent is this Emily's responsibility? (Question 8)

Emily and Larry have had sex. To what extent is this Larry's responsibility? (Question 9)

3. Results

3.1. Manipulation check

All of the 213 participants in the study reported reading the scenario of interest to completion. None noted any significant differences in realism between the scenario of interest and the two distracter scenarios. Further, no participants noted knowing which scenario was the scenario of interest. Additionally, there were no significant differences on the 5th dependent measure question, which asked if sexual intercourse should still occur even if force is to be used. This helped verify that participants did indeed note that force was used in the written scenarios.

3.2. Preliminary analyses

Participants were exposed to one of four combinations of written scenarios, varied by the type of resistance used and if alcohol was present or not. There were about twice as many female participants than

Table 1
Means and standard deviations for dependent measures by gender

Dependent measure	<i>M</i>	SD
1. Do you think Emily was flirting with Larry?		
Overall	4.42	1.29
Males	4.37	1.36
Females	4.45	1.25
2. Do you think Emily wanted to have sex with Larry?		
Overall	2.38	1.20
Males	2.39	1.22
Females	2.37	1.19
3. Did you think Emily was “leading Larry on”?		
Overall	3.42	1.48
Males	3.73	1.39
Females	3.27	1.50
4. Should Larry have had sex Emily?		
Overall	1.26	.649
Males	1.49	.897
Females	1.15	.449
5. Should Larry have continued to try to have sex with Emily, even if force was used?		
Overall	1.08	.369
Males	1.19	.597
Females	1.02	.144
6. Did Emily do anything wrong?		
Overall	2.83	1.57
Males	3.14	1.50
Females	2.67	1.59
7. Did Larry do anything wrong?		
Overall	6.58	.946
Males	6.56	.973
Females	6.58	.936
8. Emily and Larry have had sex. To what extent is this Emily’s responsibility?		
Overall	2.43	1.84
Males	2.75	1.81
Females	2.26	1.84
9. Emily and Larry have had sex. To what extent is this Larry’s responsibility?		
Overall	6.06	1.15
Males	5.96	1.33
Females	6.12	1.04

Note. The range of scores for Questions 1 through 7 was as follows: 1=Definitely Not; 4=Maybe; 7=Definitely. For Questions 8 and 9: 1=None of the responsibility; 7=All of the responsibility. Additionally, Question 5 was used as a manipulation check in this study.

males in the four conditions as follows: Hi Alcohol/Low Resistance (Males=13, Females=27), Low Alcohol/Low Resistance (Males=17, Females=39), Low Alcohol/High Resistance (Males=22, Females=29) and High Alcohol/High Resistance (Males=18, Females=48).

3.3. Hypothesis testing

For all participants, overall means and standard deviations were calculated for each of the dependent measures. These findings are shown in [Table 1](#).

A 2 (participant gender) \times 2 (resistance type, high or low) by 2 (alcohol presence, present or absent) analysis of variance was done to test the first hypothesis, which supposed a significant main effect of alcohol presence. When answering how responsible Emily was for the sexual intercourse, a between subjects ANOVA revealed a significant main effect for alcohol $F(2,12)=6.385, p=.012$. For the alcohol condition ($M=2.931, SD=.196$) versus the no alcohol condition ($M=2.256, SD=1.82$). Thus, the female was given more responsibility when alcohol was present than when it was not. When answering how responsible the male was for the sexual intercourse, analysis of variance revealed a significant main effect for alcohol $F(2,12)=6.499, p=.012$: alcohol present condition ($M=5.794, SD=.121$) versus alcohol absent condition ($M=6.216, SD=.113$).

The second hypothesis tested the interaction of resistance level and participant gender. However, the analysis showed no significant main effects or interactions in the data. The final hypothesis stated that findings for the female victim's and the male perpetrator's responsibility would correlate with scores on the Attitudes towards Women Scale and the Alcohol Expectancies Questionnaire 3. The only scale that significantly correlated with attributions of responsibility to Emily was the Attitudes Towards Women scale $r(2,12)=.58, p=.001$. That is, the more participants endorsed traditional attitudes about women's place in society, the more likely they were to blame Emily for the rape.

4. Discussion

This study's results were consistent with the findings from previous research ([Corcoran & Thomas, 1991](#); [George et al., 1988](#); [Norris & Cubbins, 1992](#)), as participants were indeed more willing to blame the woman for the sexual assault when she used alcohol. Participants' perception of the date rape may have been influenced by thinking that the woman was more sexually available to the male since she was drinking, as reported by [George et al. \(2000\)](#). As stated by [Abbey et al. \(2003\)](#), when either partner is drinking, he or she may be seen in more sexual terms. In the alcohol present condition, it was implied that the female drank a large amount of alcohol. As such, participants may have felt this indicated she wanted sex, when in fact she did not. [Norris et al. \(2002\)](#) suggested that males in particular who hold these beliefs may be more likely to look favorably at forced sexual intercourse on a date, often times deeming it as appropriate. This may have happened in the current study.

No other hypotheses in this study were supported. The failure to find an interaction between gender and resistance type is contrary to the results reported by [Osman and Davis \(1999\)](#), who found that with strong evidence for physical resistance, there was greater likelihood of the assault being labeled rape. This hypothesis may not have been supported because of how resistance type was described in the vignettes. It may not have been evident enough to participants that the woman was strongly attempting to flee her attacker. They may have felt instead that she simply was confused as to what she wanted, especially when she was intoxicated, or ambivalent about continuing touching and kissing. Participants may not have been clear on how traumatic the assault really was to her, as well.

Our final hypothesis was not fully supported. Scores on the AEQ-3 subscales of sexual enhancement and power and aggression were not associated with ratings of the woman's responsibility. This was contrary to previous research (Check & Malamuth, 1983; Lonsway & Fitzgerald, 1994; Muehlenhard & Linton, 1987) and may have had something to do with the disproportionate numbers of women versus men participating in the study. Little experimental alcohol expectancy research was done with female samples to establish the conditions under which powerful or aggressive expectancy sets influence perceptions of other women who have been drinking and have been assaulted. Further research would help clarify this relationship.

Secondly, as predicted, the AWS correlated with ratings of responsibility for the female target. This is consistent with previous research (Burt, 1991; Burt & Albin, 1981; Check & Malamuth, 1983; Lonsway & Fitzgerald, 1994; Muehlenhard & Linton, 1987), which demonstrated that individuals who endorse more traditional beliefs are more likely to blame the victim for the sexual assault. Regardless of participant gender, the more conservative they were in their views towards women, the harsher they judged the female target. Perhaps women who step out of traditional roles, especially sexually, may be seen in a more unfavorable light. As a result, participants may have blamed her more for the assault.

4.1. Limitations

The concept of token resistance was hard to define in this study. No pilot test was designed for the different scenario types to determine if they adequately reflected participants' ideas of "token resistance." Perhaps the vignettes reflected only low level resistance, not "token resistance". The best definition of token resistance still comes from Muehlenhard and Hollabaugh (1988) yet for the purpose of empirical study, this concept is still difficult to operationalize. Researchers may find it a daunting task to try to get participants to discriminate between a simple low level of resistance, and resisting to appear socially acceptable.

4.2. Future directions

Future studies may seek to develop a current and empirically supported operationalized definition of token resistance given its potential importance. This would be instrumental in determining how widespread the belief of token resistance is among men. Additionally, this would help determine proper interventions for reducing risky sexual situations which may place women in danger of sexual assault. It is especially important for women to understand how to exercise caution when choosing to drink, especially in situations where sex may occur, and when they are ambivalent in their desires or ambiguous in their behavior. Researchers must continue to study the unique interplay of a woman's refusal style, and her success in warding off an assailant. With more research, women may become better educated at how to avoid an attacker, while men may become better educated at listening to a woman's refusal and taking it seriously.

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