Reactions to victims and defendants of varying degrees of attractiveness

JERRY I. SHAW*

San Fernando Valley State College, Northridge, Calif. 91324

Detailed examination of the Landy & Aronson (1969) data on judging criminal behavior revealed a curious bias in which Ss' impressions seemed to be considerably more negative toward an unattractive victim than toward an attractive victim, but only slightly more negative toward an unattractive defendant than toward an attractive defendant. The present experiment obtained statistical support for this interaction effect using four dependent measures: favorability of impression, similarity, identification, and trust. The findings were interpreted in terms of Lerner's (1965) theory of the "belief in a just world" and with an expanded version of Walster's (1966) "defensive attribution" theory.

The properties of individuals which influence the manner in which they are evaluated by other persons have long concerned theorists in the field of social perception (Heider, 1944, 1958; Asch, 1946; Jones & Davis, 1965; Kelley, 1967). Recently, Landy & Aronson (1969) raised this issue in the context of judging criminal behavior, and they found that the attractiveness of both victim and defendant affected the harshness with which the latter person was judged. That is, Ss imposed an especially severe prison sentence on the defendant when either the victim was an attractive person or when the defendant himself was an unattractive person.

Although not mentioned in their study, further inspection of the Landy & Aronson (1969) data disclosed the possibility of a curious bias in the Ss' impressions of the two parties. Ss felt considerably more negative about the unattractive victim than about the attractive victim, but only slightly more negative about the unattractive defendant than about the attractive defendant. On a scale where "9" meant "extremely negative (unfavorable)" and "1" meant "extremely positive (favorable)", the mean impression ratings for the four experimental conditions were: 2.52 (attractive victim), 7.64 (unattractive victim), 5.53 (attractive defendant), and 7.08 (unattractive defendant). Although the significance level of this interaction was not reported, the possibility¹ that such an effect exists prompted the present investigation.

METHOD

The Ss were 88 male and female students recruited from two junior-level psychology courses at San Fernando Valley State College. The E

visited the Ss in their classrooms and enlisted their aid to "help develop forms for use in a subsequent experiment on how persons form impressions of others." It was felt that by treating Ss as "research colleagues" rather than as the object of study, they would be encouraged to give honest and frank answers.

Unlike the Landy & Aronson (1969) procedure, whereby Ss received a full case account of a negligent automobile homicide, Ss were given only the description of a stimulus person who was identified as either a "defendant" or as a "victim" in an automobile accident. In each case, the individual was presented as either an attractive or an unattractive person. The two levels of defendant and victim attractiveness comprised the four conditions of a 2 by 2 factorial design.

The actual descriptions were two of those used in the Landy & Aronson (1969) experiment. Specifically, the attractive version portrayed the stimulus person as a "noted architect who was prominent in the community and who, at the time of the accident, was on his way to the Lincoln Orphanage, of which he was a founding member, with Christmas gifts." The unattractive version described the stimulus person as a "janitor unknown by many of the firm's other employees who was twice divorced, having three children by his first wife, who had since remarried. He had two misdemeanors on his criminal record in the past 5 years, including breaking and entering and a drug violation. His traffic record showed three tickets in that time."

After reading the descriptions, Ss were requested to react to them by responding to a series of 9-point scales asking (1) their impression of the stimulus person, (2) how similar they were to the stimulus person, (3) how much they identified with the stimulus person, and (4) how much they

trusted the stimulus person. After Ss had finished indicating their reactions, they were informed as to the purpose of the experiment and thanked for their participation.

RESULTS

Table 1 presents the means and standard deviations of the Ss' reactions on four dependent measures in each of the four experimental conditions. As a check on the effectiveness of the attractiveness manipulation, the mean impression rating for the attractive description (5.52) was compared with the mean impression rating for the unattractive description (2.20) and yielded a significant difference ($F = 81.88$, $df = 1,81$, $p < .001$).

If we compare our data on favorability of impression with that obtained by Landy & Aronson (1969), we find that the same pattern occurs in each whereby the unattractive victim is judged to be highly negative relative to the attractive victim, but the discrepancy in judgment between the unattractive and the attractive defendant is comparatively less.² Analysis of variance indicates that this interaction is significant for the present data beyond the .001 level of confidence ($F = 24.54$, $df = 1,81$).

Analyses of variance performed on the other dependent variables yielded in each case a significant interaction as described above. That is, differences in perceived similarity, identification, and trust were larger for Ss' reactions to victims than for their reactions to defendants. F values and significance levels for these interactions were: similarity, $F = 4.18$, $p < .04$; identification, $F = 9.98$, $p < .002$; trust, $F = 8.63$, $p < .004$; all $df = 1,81$.

The main effect for attraction also reached significance in each of the four analyses, indicating that Ss judged the stimulus person more harshly in the unattractive condition than in the attractive condition. T tests were conducted, comparing the two conditions of attractiveness separately for victims and defendants for each of the four dependent variables (see Table 1), and they revealed that the unattractive victim was consistently judged more negatively than the attractive victim (all $p < .001$), but the unattractive defendant was not judged to be less similar nor more difficult to identify with than was the attractive defendant.

DISCUSSION

Although fully cognizant of the many dangers involved in attempting to draw inferences about actual jury behavior, it is obviously tempting to speculate on the findings of the present experiment. Since the manipulation of attractiveness creates a bigger discrepancy in Ss' reactions when applied to a victim than to a

*Requests for reprints should be sent to Jerry I. Shaw, Dept. of Psychology, San Fernando Valley State College, Northridge, Calif. 91324.

Table 1
Means and Standard Deviations of Ss' Reactions to Victims and
Defendants of Varying Degrees of Attractiveness

	Attractive		Unattractive		t Value
	Mean	SD	Mean	SD	
			Victim		
Favorability of Impression	6.04	1.09	1.36	1.38	16.71†
Similarity	3.25	1.85	0.97	2.06	5.42†
Identification	4.80	1.72	0.68	0.97	12.35†
Trust	5.00	2.19	1.08	1.17	10.31†
			Defendant		
Favorability of Impression	4.40	1.08	3.04	1.71	4.25†
Similarity	1.82	1.90	1.18	2.10	1.39
Identification	2.14	2.56	1.91	2.70	< 1.00
Trust	4.48	1.89	2.88	1.77	3.90*

Note—All mean values are expressed on scales from 1 to 9, with higher values indicating more positive ratings. All t tests are two-tail tests and have 86 df.

* $p < .01$, † $p < .001$

defendant, it suggests that vilification of the victim in criminal proceedings would constitute an especially potent defense strategy. Evidence that defense lawyers are aware of this possibility is provided by Smith (1966), who in quoting a famed criminal attorney, Percy Foreman, notes that "The best defense in a murder case is the fact that the deceased should have been killed regardless of how it happened." Smith (1966) goes on to describe a case in which Foreman, representing a woman who had admitted to shooting her husband, so effectively denounced the victim that he felt "the jury was ready to dig up the deceased and shoot him all over again."

Practical implications aside, are there any theoretical formulations by which the results may be explained? It appears to the author that there are at least two plausible explanations. The first follows from Lerner's (1965) theory of the "belief in a just world." Lerner states that people come to believe that the world is a just and predictable place, and that this belief leads them to expect a reasonable fit between merit and reward, i.e., people get what they deserve. Since the victim of a crime receives a negative outcome, this reasoning implies that people will expect that he probably deserved it. A logical extension of this notion is that the perceiver's bias that the world is just will be stronger when confronted with an unattractive rather than an attractive victim, since the former person's character indicates that if

anybody deserves his fate, surely he does. Accordingly, it may be expected that Ss will judge an unattractive victim far more severely than an attractive victim. Contrariwise, since this perceiver bias is less relevant to the perpetrator of a crime, it should not produce a similar divergence in evaluations of the defendant.

The second explanation derives from Walster's (1966) theory of defensive attribution, elaborated further by Shaver (1970) and by Shaw & Skolnick (1971). The expanded theory states that the observer of an unfortunate incident will be motivated to differentiate himself from the victim in order to insulate himself from a similar misfortune. However, as personal similarity between the victim and observer increases, a different motivation may occur. In these instances, the observer may react sympathetically to the victim so as to avoid blame in case a similar misfortune were to befall himself. On the one hand, the observer is attempting to avoid the occurrence of a similar misfortune; on the other, he seeks to avoid blame if a similar misfortune occurs. In the present study, the Ss may have considered the possibility that they, too, might become the victim of a crime. If so, the "occurrence-avoidance" and "blame-avoidance" attribution tendencies may account for the differential harshness with which the attractive and unattractive victims were judged. That is, since Ss perceived themselves as more similar

to the attractive victim than to the unattractive victim ($t = 5.42$, $df = 86$, $p < .001$), they may have reacted sympathetically toward the former (to avoid possible blame) and harshly toward the latter (to avoid a future occurrence).

REFERENCES

- ASCH, S. E. Forming impressions of personality. *Journal of Abnormal & Social Psychology*, 1946, 41, 258-290.
- HATTON, D. E., SNORTUM, J. R., & OSKAMP, S. The effects of biasing information and dogmatism upon witness testimony. *Psychonomic Science*, 1971, 23, 425-427.
- HEIDER, F. Social perception and phenomenal causality. *Psychological Review*, 1944, 51, 358-374.
- HEIDER, F. *The psychology of interpersonal relations*. New York: Wiley, 1958.
- JONES, E. E., & DAVIS, K. E. From acts to dispositions: The attribution process in person perception. In L. Berkowitz (Ed.), *Advances in experimental social psychology*. Vol. 11. New York: Academic Press, 1965. Pp. 219-266.
- KELLEY, H. H. Attribution theory in social psychology. In D. Levine (Ed.), *Nebraska symposium on motivation*. Lincoln, Neb: University of Nebraska Press, 1967.
- LANDY, D., & ARONSON, E. The influence of the character of the criminal and his victim on the decisions of simulated jurors. *Journal of Experimental Social Psychology*, 1969, 5, 141-152.
- LERNER, M. J. Evaluation of performance as a function of performer's reward and attractiveness. *Journal of Personality & Social Psychology*, 1965, 1, 355-360.
- SHAW, K. G. Defensive attribution: Effects of severity and relevance on the responsibility assigned for an accident. *Journal of Personality & Social Psychology*, 1970, 14, 101-113.
- SHAW, J. I., & SKOLNICK, P. Attribution of responsibility for a happy accident. *Journal of Personality & Social Psychology*, 1971, 18, 380-383.
- SMITH, M. Percy Foreman: Top trial lawyer. *Life*, 1966, 60, 92-101. Cited by D. Landy and E. Aronson. The influence of the character of the criminal and his victim on the decisions of simulated jurors. *Journal of Experimental Social Psychology*, 1969, 5, 141-152.
- WALSTER, E. Assignment of responsibility for an accident. *Journal of Personality & Social Psychology*, 1966, 3, 73-79.

NOTES

1. A possibly similar phenomenon appears in a recent study by Hatton, Snortum, & Oskamp (1971), who report that witnesses accept antivictim information more readily than they do antidefendant information.

2. The ratings scales were reversed in the present experiment from those used by Landy & Aronson (1969). Higher values in the present experiment signify more positive ratings, whereas higher values in the latter study signify more negative ratings.