

University Students' Attitudes About Attributing Blame in Domestic Violence

Sharon Aneta Bryant^{1,2} and Gale A. Spencer¹

This study examined university students' attitudes about attributing blame in incidents of domestic violence. The Domestic Violence Blame Scale (DVBS), which measures the attribution of blame for domestic violence to situational, perpetrator, societal, and victim factors, was used. The DVBS was administered to a voluntary sample of university students. Significant gender differences were found, with male students more likely to attribute blame to the victim for domestic violence than female students. Significant differences were also found between students with and without a prior history of violence in their family of origin. Students with prior experience of violence were more likely than their counterparts to ascribe blame for domestic violence to societal factors.

KEY WORDS: dating violence; domestic violence; college students; blame.

There is a historical tendency to blame victims of domestic violence in the United States at both the societal and individual level. At the societal level, this phenomenon is reflected in our judicial system, where domestic violence is relegated to family court with the victim as the complainant. Recently, federal law and several state laws (e.g., California, Connecticut, New York) have begun to change whereby both the state and the federal government are now taking responsibility for protecting the victim by becoming the complainant (Domestic Violence Act of 1995; Family Offense Intervention of 2000; Procedures for Family Offense Matters of 2000; Violent Crime Control and Law Enforcement Act of 1994). However, although federal law exists, it does not ensure that the law is enforced unilaterally. Thus, certain aspects of the judicial system (e.g., police officers, judges, officers of the court) may be more likely to maintain a fairly unenlightened attitude toward victims.

At the individual level, many studies have shown the tendency of individuals to blame victims of interpersonal violence for their assault (Kristiansen & Guilietti,

1990; Stewart & Maddren, 1997). Most attribution research studies have tended to focus on rape victims and their assailants, whereas others are laboratory or workshop based in which students are asked to pass judgment on dating vignettes and attribute blame to the assailant or the victim (Fisher, 1986; Holcomb *et al.*, 1991). However, this research project examines how university students reported that they would attribute blame in husband to wife domestic violence, and how this attribution of blame may influence their use of violence in dating relationships.

Studies examining the relationship between gender and blaming victims of intimate violence has yielded mixed results. Some research indicates that male students are more likely than female students to make harsher judgments about victims of intimate violence (Kaneker *et al.*, 1985; Schult & Schneider, 1991; Thornton & Ryckman, 1990). Other researchers have found that women blame victims of intimate violence more than men (Kristiansen & Guilietti, 1990; Stewart & Maddren, 1997). Other studies have found that both male and female use of dating aggression is related to their belief that dating violence was justified (O'Keefe, 1997; Riggs & O'Leary, 1996). Still others indicate that individuals who hold more feminist positions are more likely to be sympathetic in their attitudes toward victims of intimate violence (Fisher, 1986; Shortland & Goodstein, 1983).

¹Decker School of Nursing Binghamton University Binghamton, New York.

²To whom correspondence should be addressed at Kresge Center for Nursing Research, Decker School of Nursing, Binghamton University, P. O. Box 6000, Binghamton, New York 13902-6000; e-mail: sbryant@binghamton.edu.

There are some indications that young adults, as a group, were more likely to hold negative attitudes toward the use of physical violence (e.g., slapping) than other groups (Cate *et al.*, 1982; Henton *et al.*, 1983). When young adults have prior experiences with dating violence, they are more likely to view slapping as an acceptable behavior than those without violent dating experiences (Cate *et al.*, 1982). This finding does not necessarily mean that young peoples' attitudes about violence cause their violent behaviors; rather it may indicate that an individual's attitude about violence must change if he/she wants to remain in a violent relationship. In 1982, Cate *et al.* found that approximately half of their respondents were involved in a relationship in which they had experienced violence, indicating that attitudes condoning violence may be a rationalization for its use (Makepeace, 1986; O'Keefe, 1997).

The current research examined university students' attribution of blame regarding domestic violence, their use of violence in dating relationships, and the relationship between the attribution of blame and their use of violence. The Domestic Violence Blame Scale (DVBS) was used to measure attitudes about domestic violence and the Straus Conflict Tactic Scale (CTS) (Petretic-Jackson *et al.*, 1994; Straus, 1979) was used to measure the use of violence in dating relationships. The following research questions were addressed in this study: (1) What is the prevalence of dating violence in a sample of university students? (2) How does attribution of blame in incidents of domestic violence vary by demographic characteristics? (3) What is the relationship between attitudes about attribution of blame in domestic violence situations and the use of violence in dating relationships?

METHOD

Subjects

The study was conducted in a public university in upstate New York. The university is located in a suburban setting, 10 miles from a city of 53,000. Approximately 12,000 undergraduate and graduate students were enrolled at the time of the study. However, only undergraduate students were sampled.

This study received approval from the University Human Subjects Review Committee prior to the administration of the questionnaire. Students were asked to consent to participate in the study; those who consented to participate completed the questionnaire. The researchers and the Chair of the University Human Subjects Committee were available by telephone to answer questions. Anonymity was protected because students were not asked to give their names, and all data is reported at the aggregate level.

Table I. Characteristics of the Sample

Personal characteristics	% Females (<i>n</i> = 216)	% Males (<i>n</i> = 129)
Age		
18–19 years	21 (43)	26 (33)
20–23 years	61 (130)	71 (91)
24–32 years	9 (18)	2 (3)
33–49 years	10 (22)	2 (2)
Educational level		
Freshman	11 (23)	17 (22)
Sophomore	18 (38)	16 (20)
Junior	17 (36)	19 (24)
Senior	55 (118)	49 (63)
Race/ethnicity		
Caucasian	70 (151)	58 (75)
Asian	8 (17)	12 (15)
African American	9 (19)	10 (13)
Latino	7 (16)	11 (14)
Biracial/other	6 (12)	9 (11)
Sorority/fraternity		
Yes	20 (43)	21 (27)
No	80 (170)	70 (102)
Previous history of violence in family of origin		
Yes	24 (51)	18 (23)
No	76 (165)	82 (107)
Use of dating violence		
Yes	21 (51)	67 (90)
No	79 (189)	33 (44)
Type of dating violence		
Emotional	16 (31)	40 (51)
Physical	16 (32)	62 (79)
Sexual	0	.1 (1)

Five hundred surveys were distributed from March through May 1997. Of the 350 (70%) that were returned, 346 were considered valid. The four that were not valid included missing data on the required DVBS and CTS scales. Respondents were selected from required health and wellness courses.

Table I describes the characteristics of the population. Respondents ranged in age from 18 to 49 years (mean = 22). The majority of the students (58%) were between the ages of 20 and 23. Sixty-four percent of the sample was women. Twenty percent (*n* = 76) of the students were members of fraternities or sororities. Most of the students (68%) were Caucasian.

Design

A descriptive correlational study was conducted to examine university students' attribution of blame in domestic violence incidents, their use of violence in dating relationships, and the relationship between the attribution

of blame and their use of violence. Frequencies were used to describe the characteristics of respondents. *t*-Tests for independent samples were used to examine differences between groups (e.g., gender, previous history of violence, use of violence, participation in sports, and membership in fraternities and sororities). Pearson's correlation statistic was used to describe the relationship of the attitudes about domestic violence as measured by the DVBS, and use of violence as measured by the Straus Conflict Tactic Scale.

Survey Instruments

The DVBS was designed for use in research and clinical settings. It assesses the amount of blame an individual attributes to victims of domestic violence, as well as the amount of blame an individual attributes to situational and societal factors that support domestic violence (Petretic-Jackson *et al.*, 1994). Table II lists the major concepts of the DVBS and the mean for each concept. This scale restricts the definition of domestic violence to physical assault or violence between marital partners, and identifies the husband as the assailant and the wife as the victim (Petretic-Jackson *et al.*, 1994). The questionnaire consists of 23 questions that represent victim, perpetrator, societal, and situational variables common to domestic violence (Petretic-Jackson *et al.*, 1994). Items are scored using a 6-point Likert scale with "1" representing strong disagreement and "6" representing strong agreement with the statement. According to Petretic-Jackson *et al.* (1994), the DVBS has adequate reliability and validity. Similar factor mean scores and blame factor rankings have been found in a variety of populations (e.g., college students, mental health professionals, physicians).

The Straus Conflict Tactic Scale was chosen because it specifically measures tactics (reasoning, verbal aggression, and physical violence) used by individuals to resolve conflict. The CTS was originally developed to assess the conflict situations within families and has been used as the basis for two national family violence surveys (Gelles & Straus, 1988; Straus *et al.*, 1980).

The CTS is a 7-point Likert scale, 19-item questionnaire that lists various tactics that might be used to resolve conflicts. The CTS is one of the standard instruments used by researchers of domestic and dating violence to quantify the nature and extent of interpersonal violence in intimate relationships. Form R of the CTS, is more specific to the conflict resolution that occurs within dating relationships (Straus, 1979). The original questionnaire was designed to elicit both the participants's participation in conflict resolution and the participants's perception of their partner's participation. However, in this study only the subject's participation was analyzed.

The conflict tactics on the questionnaire are arranged in order of increasing coerciveness and social disapproval. The CTS starts with tactics that most respondents positively value (e.g., "discussed an issue calmly") and progresses to more socially disapproved tactics (e.g., "beat him/her up"). The conflict tactics on the questionnaire fall into one of three categories, which form the three basic summative scales of the CTS. The categories/scales are reasoning tactics, verbal aggression tactics, and violence/physical aggression tactics. Within the violence category there are three subsets: minor violence, severe violence, and very severe violence. A fourth scale was added to measure sexual aggression; this scale was not part of the original CTS R form but was developed by Mertin (1992).

Prior to completing the CTS, subjects were instructed to indicate how many times in the last 12 months they used any of the conflict tactics listed (see Table III). Respondents chose from the following response categories: 0 = never, 1 = once, 2 = twice, 3 = three to five times, 4 = six to ten times, 5 = eleven to twenty times, and 6 = more than twenty times.

RESULTS

Prevalence of Dating Violence

Thirty-nine percent ($n = 135$) of the students reported that they used emotional abuse, physical violence, or sexual violence in a dating relationship in the past 12 months. Of those respondents: 23% ($n = 79$) stated that they used emotional abuse, 30% ($n = 104$) stated that they used physical violence, and 0.3% ($n = 1$) stated that they used sexual violence.

Students' Attribution of Blame

Table IV presents the relationship between demographic factors and the DVBS. There was a significant gender difference ($t = 7.464$, $p < .001$) in the victim blame scale. Male students were more likely to blame the victim for provoking her husband to commit domestic violence. No other gender differences were found for the other blame constructs.

A significant difference was found between individuals with a prior history of family violence on DVBS. Individuals with a prior history of violence were more likely to assign blame to the society for fostering views that increased domestic violence ($t = 3.013$, $p < .001$).

There is a significant difference between the responses of members and non-members of fraternities and sororities on the DVBS. Members of fraternities and sororities were more likely to assign blame to the perpetrator for

Table II. DVBS Conceptual Definitions

DVBS concepts	Definitions
Situation blame	<p>Assigns blame for domestic violence to situational or contextual factors. Five items measure this concept:</p> <ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1. Domestic violence more likely to occur in unstable homes. 2. Domestic violence more likely to occur in families with poor interpersonal relationships. 3. Husband abuse of alcohol and drugs causes domestic violence. 4. Domestic violence more likely to occur in slum or "bad" areas. 5. Domestic violence more likely to occur in families that are socially isolated. <p>Scores range from 1 to 5. Mean = 3.88 <i>SD</i> = 1.20</p>
Perpetrator blame	<p>Belief that battering spouses or partners are mentally ill or psychologically disturbed and unable to control their violent behavior. This concept is measured by five statements:</p> <ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1. Husbands who physically assaults their wives should be locked up. 2. Husbands who physically assaults their wives are mentally ill. 3. Domestic violence can be attributed to peculiarities of the husband's personality. 4. Husbands who physically assaults their wife cannot control their violent behaviors. 5. Husbands who physically assaults their wives had dominant aggressive fathers who also engaged in domestic violence. <p>Scores range from 1 to 5. Mean = 3.95 <i>SD</i> = 1.01</p>
Societal blame	<p>Assigns blame for domestic violence to societal values. Six items measure this concept:</p> <ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1. Sex and violence in the media influences the husband to physically assault his wife. 2. Domestic violence is the result of women being regarded as property by society. 3. Domestic violence is a by product of a male dominated society. 4. Society accepts domestic violence in marriage. 5. Marital stress increases the likelihood of domestic violence. 6. Society condones husbands physically striking their wives. <p>Scores range from 1 to 6. Mean = 3.28 <i>SD</i> = 0.96</p>
Victim blame	<p>Assigns blame to the victim for either encouraging or provoking violence, deserving violence, or exaggerating the effects of domestic violence. Seven statements measure this concept.</p> <ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1. Wife provokes domestic violence. 2. Wives encourage domestic violence by using bad judgement. 3. Domestic violence can be avoided by the wife trying harder to please husband. 4. Rise in women's movement caused domestic violence. 5. Wives exaggerate the physical and psychological effects of domestic violence. 6. Society gives husbands the prerogative to strike their wives in their homes. 7. Wives deserve it <p>Scores range from 1 to 7. Mean = 1.64 <i>SD</i> = 0.79</p>

Table III. Conflict Tactic Scales Definition

Reasoning	The use of rational discussion, argument, and reasoning—an intellectual approach to the dispute. Scores range from 0 to 18.
Verbal aggression	The use of verbal and nonverbal acts which symbolically hurt the other, or the use of threats to hurt the other. Scores range from 0 to 36.
Physical aggression	The use of physical force against another person as a means of resolving conflict. It includes minor violence, severe violence, very severe violence, and sexual aggression.
Minor violence	Consists of hitting, slapping, pushing, grabbing, or throwing something at his/her dating partner. Scores range from 0 to 18.
Severe violence	Consists of hitting or trying to hit his/her dating partner with an object other than his/her hand. Scores range from 0 to 6
Very severe violence	Consists of kicking, biting, hitting with a fist, choking, threatening with a knife or gun, or using a knife or firing a gun. Scores range from 0 to 18.
Sexual aggression	Using some form of sexual conflict with his/her partner. Scores range from 0 to 12.

participating in domestic violence than students who were not members of these organizations ($t = 2.16, p < .05$).

A significant difference was found between the responses of freshman, sophomores, juniors, and seniors, on the DVBS. Juniors and seniors were more likely than freshmen and sophomores to assign blame to the media for fostering attitudes that influence domestic violence ($t = 2.472, p < .01$).

Table IV. Differences in the DVBS by Demographic Factors

	Situational Perpetrator	Societal	Victim	
Gender				
Male	3.96	3.85	3.21	2.05
Female	3.83	4.01	3.28	1.43
<i>t</i> -Test	1.037	-1.613	-.627	7.475***
Prior history of violence				
Yes	3.85	3.94	3.56	1.72
No	3.89	3.95	3.18	1.65
<i>t</i> -Test	-.311	-.044	3.040***	.652
Fraternity and sorority membership				
Yes	4.02	4.10	3.15	1.73
No	3.84	3.86	3.28	1.63
<i>t</i> -Test	1.175	2.163*	-1.110	.845
Educational level				
Freshman-Sophomore	3.77	3.94	3.08	1.74
Juniors-Seniors	3.93	3.95	3.34	1.63
<i>t</i> -Test	-1.253	-.047	-2.472**	1.162

* $p = .05$. ** $p = .01$. *** $p = .001$.

Attribution of Blame and the Use of Violence in Dating Relationships

A significant correlation was found between students who used minor and their attribution of blame on the situational blame scale, and students who used severe violence in dating relationships and their attribution of blame on the situational blame scale (see Table V). University students who participated in minor violence were less likely to attribute blame in domestic violence incidents to situational factors ($r = -.109, p < .05$); similarly, those individuals who used severe violence also were less likely to attribute blame to situational factors ($r = -.114, p < .05$).

Significant correlations were found among students who participated in the use of verbal aggression, minor violence, severe violence, and very severe violence and their attribution of blame in domestic violence situations to the victim (see Table V). Students who participated in these forms of violence were more likely to blame the victim for domestic violence on the DVBS (verbal aggression $r = .111, p < .05$; minor violence $r = .276, p < .01$, severe violence $r = .179, p < .01$, very severe violence $r = .318, p < .01$).

Significant correlations were found between male and female students regarding the use of violence in dating relationships and their attribution of blame (see Table V).

Female students who participated in very severe violence were more likely to attribute blame to the

Table V. The Relationship Between Attribution of Blame and Use of Violence in Dating Relationships

	Perpetrator	Situational	Societal	Victim
All students				
Verbal aggression	.003	-.061	.033	.111*
Minor violence	-.007	-.109*	.021	.276**
Severe violence	-.046	-.114*	.000	.179**
Very severe violence	-.011	-.072	.037	.318**
Sexual violence	-.089	-.083	-.063	.054
Women students				
Verbal aggression	.030	-.057	.070	.019
Minor violence	.061	-.128	.016	.072
Severe violence	.037	-.062	.036	.004
Very severe violence	.154*	-.035	.047	.009
Sexual violence	-.015	-.042	-.007	-.077
Male students				
Verbal aggression	-.083	-.098	-.061	.261**
Minor violence	-.082	-.098	.015	.416**
Severe violence	-.139	-.210*	-.024	.230*
Very severe violence	-.052	-.142	.058	.365**
Sexual violence	-.220*	-.205*	-.150	.058

* $p = .05$. ** $p = .01$.

perpetrator ($r = .154$, $p < .05$). The only significant findings for female students related to their use of violence and the DVBS scale (see Table V).

Significant correlations were found among male students who use verbal aggression, minor violence, severe violence, very severe violence, and sexual violence and attribution of blame in domestic violence situations. Male students who participated in sexual violence were less likely to blame the perpetrator ($r = -.220$, $p < .05$). There were significant correlations among males who participated in severe violence and in sexual violence and their scores on the DVBS scale (see Table V). These students were less likely to attribute blame to situational factors (severe violence $r = -.210$, $p < .05$, and sexual violence $r = -.205$, $p < .05$). Male students who participated in verbal aggression, minor violence, severe violence, and very severe violence were more likely to blame the victim on the DVBS scale (verbal aggression $r = .261$, $p < .01$, minor violence $r = .416$, $p < .01$, severe violence $r = .230$, $p < .05$, and very severe violence $r = .365$, $p < .01$).

DISCUSSION

The prevalence rate of dating violence in this study was 39%. This included students who reported using emotional abuse, physical violence, or sexual violence in a dating relationship in the past 12 months. This finding falls within the range reported in the literature (Clark

et al., 1994; Waryold, 1996; White & Koss, 1991). The low percentage of reported sexual assaults in this sample (less than 1%) may be due to multiple reasons. Specifically, for this sample, educational programs on date rape are conducted regularly in residence halls and in university wide settings, in addition public safety strictly enforces the university rules against sexual harassment and assault. However, the most likely explanation is that students fail to report sexual violence, due to the intimate nature of those crimes (e.g., embarrassment that the campus community will learn of the incident, and fear of reprisal from the perpetrator or his/her friends; Waryold, 1996).

Significant differences were found in how students attributed blame in domestic violence incidents. Male students were more likely than female students to attribute blame to victims of domestic violence, and male students who used violence in their dating relationships were more likely to attribute blame in domestic violence incidents to the victim. These findings are supported in the research literature. Many studies have found that males are more likely than females to blame victims, especially men who hold more traditional attitudes about familial relationships (Holcomb *et al.*, 1991; Kanekar *et al.*, 1985; Schult & Schneider, 1991; Thornton & Ryckman, 1990). In contrast, women are more likely to identify with victims of violence and therefore more likely to blame the perpetrator of violence (Kleinke & Meyer, 1990). These previous findings are supported by this study: females who participated in dating violence were more likely to blame the perpetrator; and men who participated in dating violence were more likely to blame the victim. Both males and females who participate in dating violence are less likely to acknowledge how their behaviors relate to the level of violence in their relationships. Therefore, more research is needed which focuses on mutual partner violence in dating relationships.

Older students (juniors and seniors) and students with a prior history of violence in their family of origin were more likely to attribute blame in domestic violence situations to societal factors. This finding suggests that these students identify factors in the external environment that may play a role in domestic violence situations. Prior research has yielded mixed results when examining the relationship between societal factors such as violence in society and in the media and use of violence. Recent episodes of violence, both in schools and universities may be due to individuals becoming more desensitized to violence. This desensitization may be due to the levels of violence in films, television programs, advertisements, and literature; and may lead to individuals incorporating violent behavior into their dating relationships.

Negative correlations were found between all students who used violence in their dating relationships and their attribution of blame on the situational blame scale, however, only students who used minor and severe violence were found to have significant correlations on the situational blame scale. On the other hand, a significant positive correlation was found between all students who used violence in their dating relationships and their attribution of blame on the victim blame scale. These findings suggest that perpetrators of violence are more likely to blame the victim for their participation in dating violence and less likely to blame the situation which reflects poorly on the perpetrator (see DVBS Conceptual Definitions, Table II).

Two limitations were identified in this study. First, a convenience sample of university students attending a public upstate New York university was used, and therefore, the results cannot be generalized to all university students. Although random selection of subjects is the preferred method of data collection, on sensitive topics individuals tend to self-select. Therefore, targeting particular groups often counters the effect of self-selection. Second, the investigators obtained only self-reports of violent and abusive experiences and current use of violence, which may not reflect participants' actual experiences and behaviors.

The findings of this study suggest that universities need to play an active role in designing and providing educational programs targeting the use of violence in interpersonal relationships. Efforts to reduce interpersonal violence in colleges and universities should be two pronged. First, programs should focus on stopping individual violence through prevention activities. Programs where students have practice role modeling dating scenarios should be offered. Educational programs that address dating and domestic violence should be included in the health and wellness courses, as well as in campus wide programming (e.g., residence halls, take back the night, guest speakers). Cosponsoring workshops with student organizations such as intramural athletic and Panhellenic councils, ethnic, and religious organizations (e.g., Black student organization, Asian student organization, Jewish student organization, International student organization, Intra Christian fellowship), as well as with the gay and lesbian student organizations may insure that diverse groups of students attend. These programs should be offered frequently throughout the school year. In addition, all incoming students both freshman and transfer students should be required to attend programs on dating violence; these programs should address safety issues, reporting issues and prosecuting practices of the campus. Using attitudinal scales, such as the DVBS, as part of an educational program may help

students to understand how their attitudes can predispose them to use violence in interpersonal relationships, and increase their awareness of their own potential for participation in acts of violence.

Second, colleges and universities must demonstrate that they will prohibit violence on campus through strong enforcement of rules governing acceptable behavior. Programs should be offered by campus security, which clearly explain the ramifications of dating violence, and the legal procedures for prosecuting perpetrators. Moreover, many universities have begun to initiate campus community policing where public safety officers are assigned to campus residential communities. These officers participate in campus events and integrate into the life of the campus. Thus, students may feel more comfortable confiding in community police.

Prior research has shown that many students believe university governance systems do not adequately address violence related behaviors on campus. This perception leads to apathy within the student body, which results in students not reporting incidents of interpersonal violence. Therefore, it is imperative that campuses begin to change the environment to one that does not tolerate participation in violence. Universities must alert their campuses about any act of violence respond to the violent act in a timely fashion, and publicize the university policy regarding participation in such acts. Once it becomes a campus norm that students are disciplined or expelled for interpersonal violence; dating violence rates on universities will decrease and the campus will be a safer place for all students.

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