

Police Officers' Judgements of Blame in Family Violence: The Impact of Gender and
Alcohol.

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Abstract

This study investigated police officers' judgements of blame to both victims and assailants of family violence. Furthermore, the impact of these judgements on the reported likelihood of charging the assailants with assault was examined. The sample was selected from operational police officers of the Queensland Police Service. The sample included 51 male officers and 46 female officers. Ethnicity was not examined. However, 1.3% of police officers identify as Indigenous and 5.8% of officers come from non-English speaking backgrounds. The subjects were presented with one of eight case vignettes of assault. In these vignettes two factors were varied, the victim gender (male and female), and alcohol consumption of the victim and assailant (both the assailant and the victim were drunk, neither were drunk, the assailant was sober and the victim drunk, and the assailant was drunk and the victim sober). A third independent variable was included, gender of the police officer. Male and female police officers showed no differences in judgement of blame and reported likelihood of charging. However, the level of blame attributed to both the assailant and the victim varied with the victim gender and the alcohol consumption of the disputants. Male victims were more likely to be blamed than female victims. Drunk victims were blamed more than sober victims. Furthermore a relationship was found between the level of blame allocated to the victim and the reported likelihood of charging the assailant. These results indicate that police officers hold gender stereotypes which influence the way they respond to family violence.

Police Officers' Judgements of Blame in Family Violence: The Impact of Gender and Alcohol.

Victims of violence are entitled to receive an efficient and effective response from police. However, much of the literature examining the policing of domestic violence has been extremely critical of police response (Morley & Mullender, 1994). The main criticisms levelled at the police are that they tended to treat domestic violence as a civil matter, saw it as dull and uninteresting, and were reluctant to press charges (Grace, 1995), they felt powerless to control violence (Sherman, 1992), and they considered police responses to domestic violence to be ineffective and dangerous (Buzawa and Buzawa, 1990). Furthermore, research has indicated that police view victims of domestic violence as being responsible for the crimes committed against them. Victims are blamed because they are seen as provoking the violence and could avoid the violence by being more accommodating to their assailants. (Hart, 1993).

The tendency of people to assign blame to victims is a phenomenon that has been identified and researched in a variety of settings. Much of this research has investigated the crimes in which the victims are women - rape and domestic violence. The likelihood of police arresting the assailant has been shown to be affected by a range of extralegal factors (Berk & Loseke, 1981). However, the link between level of blame assigned to both victims and assailants and subsequent likelihood of charging has not been investigated. It is hypothesised that the level of blame attributed to the victim by police

may be a factor in the identified reluctance of police to charge the assailants of domestic violence.

Much of the research examining the assigning of blame to victims and assailants has been carried out using college students (Critchlow, 1985; Howard, 1984a; Howard 1984b; Kristiansen & Giulietti, 1990; Leigh & Aramburu, 1994; Richardson & Campbell, 1980). These studies have been implicitly justified by assumptions about the generality of the attribution processes. However, unlike students, police officers are not naive decision makers but have specialised knowledge, have to take responsibility for their decisions, and have previous experiences dealing with domestic violence. It is unrealistic to assume these factors will not have an impact on the police attribution of blame (Wortley, 1997). Furthermore, the relationship between the attributions and the subsequent charging behavior can only be examined using subjects who have an understanding of the criminal justice system, the legislation and the subsequent consequences of their actions.

The research presented in this paper examines the attribution of blame by police officers to both the assailant and the victim in a family violence situation. In all situations the perpetrator of the violence was male. The impact of police officer gender on assignment of blame was investigated. Furthermore, the victim gender and the presence or absence of alcohol was varied to investigate the impact of these extralegal factors on the assignment of blame by police officers.

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Mixed results have been identified in studies examining the gender of the attributer on the level of both victim and assailant blame in domestic assaults. Kristiansen and Giulietti (1990) found that male students blamed wife assault victims less than female students. Cohen and Sugarman (1980) found that men blamed the assailants more than women. The just world hypothesis (Lerner, 1980) states that victims are blamed because we need to see the world as predictable, just and that negative events can be controlled. Consequently, negative events only happen to those who are culpable. Victims are seen as having provoked that attack or failing to do something to control the fate which has befallen them. The just world hypothesis would predict that the greater the perceived similarity between ourselves and the victim, the greater the blame assigned to the victim. In opposition to the just world hypothesis the defensive attributions (Shaver, 1970) predicts victim blame to decrease as the similarity between the observer and victim increases. Shaver (1970) postulated this phenomenon as a defence mechanism, protecting the observer from blame in a similar situation.

Hillier and Foddy (1993) suggested that the difference in the attributers' attitudes toward the role of women is the critical factor and there are gender differences in these attitudes. Their research examined the importance of observer characteristics in determining blame in wife assault. Using respondents selected from the community, they found respondents with traditional attitudes to women's roles blamed victims more and assailants less than their non-traditional counterparts. Furthermore, they found that the men blamed victims more than women and women blamed assailants more than men. They suggested that the attribution of blame was more complex than the simple application of universal causal

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schema and involved the individual's prior beliefs and attitudes towards women's roles. Women who swear, drink to excess, and act in an independent or non-nurturing fashion may be seen as 'provoking' negative reactions and therefore blameworthy.

Little attention has been paid to the impact of the victim gender on the attribution of blame. In most studies the victim gender has been female. However, Howard (1984b) found that female victims received higher attributions of blame than male victims. Furthermore, more blame was attributed to the character of female victims than male victims and more blame was attributed to the behavior of male victims than female victims. Women were perceived as more likely to be victimised than men. She interpreted her results as support for gender stereotypes structuring reactions to victims.

Both field (Black, 1980) and archival (Berk & Loseke, 1981) investigations reveal that the legal seriousness of a domestic assault has little or no impact on its legal outcome. Extralegal factors are primary determinants of arrest policies. Influential extralegal factors include the assailants and victims drinking behavior. Alcohol is commonly seen as a cause of violence and antisocial behavior. However, despite estimates of as high as 53% of domestic violence incidences are alcohol related (Ireland, 1995) there is no evidence that alcohol actually causes domestic violence (Kantor & Straus, 1987). There is an abundance of research literature to indicate that violence occurs without alcohol being involved. However, if the cause of the event is attributed to the alcohol then less of a causal role would be attributed to the assailant and the level of blame assigned to the assailant reduced.

No clear picture has resulted from research examining police officers' attributions of blame to drinking assailants. Research has found that police officers hold the drinking assailants responsible for their actions (Aramburu & Leigh, 1991; Corenblum, 1983; Leigh & Aramburu, 1994; Waaland & Keeley, 1985). Lavoie, Jacob, Hardy and Martin (1989) found that police officers did not attribute significantly more responsibility to a man if he was intoxicated. However, research by Richardson and Campbell (1980) has indicated that a drunken assailant is blamed less than a sober one. The pattern of results is clearer when examining the attribution of blame to victims who have been drinking. Police officers gave more consideration to whether the victim, rather than the assailant, had been drinking before the assault and intoxicated victims were blamed for their assault (Aramburu & Leigh, 1991; Richardson & Campbell, 1980; Waaland and Keeley, 1985).

The differential assignment of blame to the victim and assailants by police is not an issue of practical significance unless it translates into differential charging responses. The link between attitudes and behavior is one of the most controversial areas of social psychology (Kraus, 1995). There are many factors, both situational and dispositional, that influence behavior. It is important to try to determine if the judgements of blame are impacting on the reported behavior of police officers. Berk and Loseke (1985) indicated that perpetrator intoxication significantly increased the probability of arrest.

There were three main aims of the research reported here. The first was to examine the impact of the gender of the police officers, the victim gender, and the presence of alcohol

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on the attribution of blame to victims of family violence. It was anticipated that an interaction would be found between the gender of the police officer and the victim gender with female officers blaming female victims more than male officers. Furthermore, this interaction would be modified if the victim was drunk, with drunk female victims being blamed more than sober female victims. The second was to explore these factors in relation to the assignment of blame to assailants of family violence. It was expected that males who assaulted females would be blamed more than males who assaulted males. The third and final aim of this research was to examine the relationship between the police officer's assignment of blame and their reported likelihood of charging the assailant with assault. It was hypothesised that the more blame assigned by the police officer to the assailant the more likely they would report charging the assailant.

Method

Subjects

The subjects in this study were operational officers in the Queensland Police Service (QPS). Approximately 12% of Queensland police officers are female and a stratified sampling technique was employed to ensure equal representation of males and females. A very small percentage (1.3%) of the police officers identify themselves as Indigenous and a further 6.8% were either born overseas or had a parent born overseas and are bilingual. Consequently, ethnicity was not included as a study variable. In the resulting sample (N

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= 97), 52% were male and 48% female. The police officers ranged in age from 21 years to 51 years with a mean of 29.47 years ($SD = 6.56$). When asked their marital status, 40.8% reported they were married, 35.7% were single, 13.5% were in a defacto relationship and 5.1% were divorced. All police officers reported receiving some training in responding to domestic violence situations.

Materials

The data for this study were collected with a questionnaire, which was based around eight vignettes depicting family violence. These vignettes were designed to vary two factors; the victim gender (male or female) and the presence of alcohol (both parties intoxicated, neither intoxicated, only the victim intoxicated; only the assailant intoxicated). In all vignettes the assailant was male and the level of injury remained constant. Each of the vignettes describes an argument over money between the assailant (Greg) and either his wife or his brother (Sam). Greg strikes Sam resulting in considerable bruising.

The vignettes were designed so the victim does not appear to retaliate against the assailant's actions. A clear distinction between the roles of victim and assailant was maintained so there was no suggestion of mutual combat between the disputants. The Senior Sergeant of the Domestic Violence Co-ordination Office of the Queensland Police Service examined these vignettes for ecological validity. The vignettes were in the following format with the alternative wording in italics

Greg and his wife (*brother*) Sam are at home one evening having a BBQ. Greg has a few drinks (*does not drink alcohol*), Sam does not drink alcohol (*has a few drinks*). The couple (*men*) begin arguing over money. Greg gets extremely angry and throws a bottle at the kitchen window, smashing the glass. Sam attempts to calm Greg, at which point he turns and punches her (*him*) in the side of the head. The police are called by a neighbour reporting a disturbance, *and they arrive to find (Greg/Sam/them both) heavily intoxicated*. Sam has a black eye and considerable bruising, (*and claims Greg tends to get violent when consuming alcohol*). Greg has no visible injuries.

Following the vignette the police officers was asked to allocate independent levels of blame to both the assailant and the victim. Police officers could allocate a level of blame from 0 to 10 to each disputant, 0 indicating no blame and 10 indicating high blame. Furthermore police officers were asked to indicate on a seven-point Likert scale their likelihood of charging the assailant with assault with 1 indicating not likely and 7 indicating highly likely. Under Queensland criminal law the offence depicted in the vignettes would be considered either a common or aggravated assault. The usual response in this situation, where the police officer did not see the assault occur, would be to charge the assailant by way of a complaint and summons. This would depend on the victim stating that he or she would be prepared to act as complainant.

Procedure

Questionnaires were mailed out to 80 male and 80 female operational police officers. Each police officer was presented with a questionnaire containing one of the eight vignettes. Participation in the study was voluntary for all police officers and the response rate was 61%.

Results

A manipulation check was performed. Respondents were asked to indicate, on a seven point scale, the importance of alcohol in the case. A one-way ANOVA was performed with this variable as the dependent variable and presence of alcohol as the independent variable. Significant differences were found among the four categories of intoxication ($F(3,94) = 30.84, p < .001$). Post-hoc analysis indicated that if neither the victim or the assailant had been drinking the importance of alcohol was significantly less ($M = 1.77, SD = 1.51$) than in the other 3 categories (both drinking, only the victim drinking and only the assailant drinking). No significant differences were found among these 3 categories.

Attribution of blame was examined using a three-way multivariate analysis of variance (MANOVA). The two dependent variables were the attribution of assailant blame and the attribution of victim blame which were negatively correlated ($r = -.41, p < .001$). The three independent variables were the gender of the police officers (male or female), the gender of victim (male or female) and the presence of alcohol (both the victim and

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assailant intoxicated, neither intoxicated, only the victim intoxicated, only the assailant intoxicated). The number of police officers responding to each manipulation was reasonably even with cell sizes ranging from five to eight. Unfortunately, low cell sizes reduce the power of the analysis by reducing the degrees of freedom and violates the assumption of homogeneity of the variance-covariance matrices. To control for this Pillais criterion were reported (Olson, 1979).

Significant main effects were found for victim gender ($F(2,79) = 5.85, p < .01$) and the presence of alcohol ($F(6,160) = 5.75, p < .001$). No main effect was found for police officer gender. No significant interaction effects were found.

For the main effects the univariate analyses were examined to assess the contribution of the dependent variables. Victim gender was significantly related to both attribution of victim blame ($F(1,80) = 9.65, p < .01$) ($\eta^2 = .10$) and attribution of assailant blame ($F(1,80) = 4.95, p < .05$) ($\eta^2 = .06$). The means and standard deviations are presented in Table 1. The assailant was blamed more if he assaulted his wife than if he assaulted his brother. The victim was blamed more if he was assaulted by his brother than if she was assaulted by her husband.

Insert Table 1 about here

The significant multivariate main effect for the presence of alcohol was also explored using the univariate analyses. Attributions of blame to both the assailant ($F(3,80) = 2.76$, $p < .05$) ($\eta^2 = .09$) and the victim ($F(3,80) = 11.71$, $p < .001$) ($\eta^2 = .30$) were significantly related to the presence of alcohol. Post-hoc analyses were carried out using Tukey's HSD. The means for victim blame and assailant blame are plotted in Figure 1.

Insert Figure 1 about here

Overall assailants were blamed more than victims. However a drunk victim was blamed more than a sober victim. However, a sober victim with a sober assailant was blamed more than a sober victim with a drunk assailant. A drunk assailant with a sober victim was blamed more than a sober assailant with a drunk victim.

Paired comparison t-tests were performed to examine the relationship between victim blame and assailant blame in each of the four alcohol conditions (Table 2). As there were four comparisons, a Bonferroni adjusted alpha of 0.002 was used to indicate significant disagreement among the participants at a $p < .01$ level. Assailants were blamed more than victims in all conditions except when the assailant was sober and the victim was drunk. In these circumstances equal levels of blame were attributed to both the victim and the assailant.

Insert Table 2 about here

To examine the relationship between attribution of blame and reported likelihood of police charging a standard multiple regression analysis was performed. The dependent variable was the reported likelihood of charging and the two independent variables were attribution of victim blame and attribution of assailant blame. A significant relationship was found between the reported likelihood of charging and the attributions of blame ($F(2,93) = 6.83, p < .01$). The multiple adjusted R^2 was .11. Examination of the beta weights of the regression indicated that only the attribution of victim blame significantly contributed to the prediction of the likelihood of charging ($\beta = -.28$). The lower the level of blame attributed to the victim the higher the reported likelihood of charging the assailant. Attribution of assailant blame was not significantly related to the reported likelihood of charging.

Police officers responded across the full scale when indicating their likelihood of charging the assailant (Figure 2). The mean was 4.40 with a standard deviation of 1.85.

Insert Figure 2 about here

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To further explore factors which impact on the likelihood of charging a 3-way ANOVA was performed with likelihood of charging as the dependent variable and gender of victim, gender of the police officer and level of intoxication as the independent variables. A significant main effect was found for gender of victim ($F(1,80) = 11.34, p < .001$) ($\eta^2 = .12$). Police officers were more likely to charge the assailant with assault when the victim was female ($M = 4.51, SD = 1.84$) than when the victim was male ($M = 3.19, SD = 1.81$). An ANCOVA was performed partialing out the effects of victim and assailant blame on the likelihood of charging. A significant but weaker main effect was found for gender of the victim ($F(77,1) = 6.12, p < .05$) ($\eta^2 = .07$).

Discussion

This research examined the impact of police officer's gender, the victim's gender and alcohol use by the assailant and victim on police officers' attribution of blame to victims and assailants, and the officers reported likelihood of charging the assailant. Each independent variable will be discussed with relation to attribution of blame. The relationship between blame and charging will then be explored. Finally, concerns with this research, and the implications of these findings for police practices will be discussed.

No differences were found between female and male police attributions of blame to either victims or assailants. Consequently, no support was found for theories of attribution that predicted male and female officers would assign different levels of blame to male and female victims (Lerner, 1980, Shaver, 1970). This may result from increased levels of

training ensuring some measure of uniformity among police officers in their attitudes to domestic violence. Alternatively, female officers may not have felt the need to defend themselves by assigning victim blame as they did not identify with the victims.

Police officers blamed male victims more than female victims and blamed assailants more if they hit a female victim rather than a male victim. Unfortunately, the impact of victim gender on both assailant and victim blame may be confounded by the difference in the relationship between the assailant and the victim. Both victims were family members, however, the male victim was a sibling whereas the female victim was a wife. Sibling violence is one of the least understood and researched areas of family violence. Violence between adolescence siblings is a common form of family violence but the least likely to be reported to the authorities (Pagelow, 1989). It is not possible from this research to separate the impact of gender and relationship

In our society there are strong stereotypical attitudes towards males. As part of their growing up men negotiate physical violence and are expected, as adults, to be able to manage violence (Stanko & Hobdell, 1993). Fighting between male siblings is perceived as 'normal' behavior and male victims are generally perceived to be able to resist attack. Police blaming both assailants of male victims and the male victims for the violence may be reflecting these stereotypical attitudes. However, males are far more likely than females to be the victim of violence (Stewart & Homel, 1995) and males are entitled to protection against violence.

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The police officers blamed drunk victims more than sober victims. More blame was attributed to a drunk assailant when his victim was sober, than a sober assailant when his victim was drunk. When the assailant was sober and the victim was drunk both were equally blamed for the assault. When police officers assigned blame to both victims and assailant's, there was no interaction between gender and alcohol consumption.

Consequently, there was no support for police officers' gender stereotypes influencing their attitudes toward alcohol consumption and family violence.

The level of blame to both victims and assailants was influenced more by the victim's drinking than the assailant's drinking. Police officers appear to consider drunk victims responsible for their victimisation by either provoking the violence or not evading the violence. No evidence was found that police officers are using alcohol consumption by the assailant to excuse their behavior.

Police officers responses indicated that they were less likely to charge assailants when they blamed the victim. Officers blamed female victims less than male victims.

Consequently, police were more likely to charge the assailant when the victim was female than when the victim was male. There was no relationship between the level of blame attributed to the assailant and the police officers expressed likelihood of charging the assailant. Although expressed behavioral intentions are weak and unreliable guides to behavior this finding provides some link between the attribution of blame and the possible charging of the assailant.

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These findings were surprising considering the literature reporting a reluctance of police officers to charge in husband-wife domestic violence. It appears that overall, police officers were reluctant to become involved in family violence, but this reluctance was more apparent when the victim was male than when the victim was female. It may be that, regardless of the circumstances surrounding the assault, police officers are less likely to charge the assailant of a male than a female. Alternatively, because of increases in police training about domestic violence, police are sensitised to issues surrounding domestic violence and therefore consider charging to be the appropriate response.

Access to police officers is essential for research concerning the impact of attributions on the decision making processes of criminal justice professionals. However, negotiating access to police officers and developing appropriate methods for investigating these phenomena makes this type of research difficult. Vignette research is an excellent tool for examining the relative impact of different factors on police officer's decision making. However, only a few factors can be varied in any one study and the studies are open to criticisms concerning both external and ecological validity. Further research is needed to examine the attribution of blame by police officers, including more contextual information about blame attributions and how these attributions impact on professional practice.

Police officers' decision to charge is not restricted to judgement of guilt or innocence of the assailant but to a range of extralegal factors having an impact on the circumstances of the offence. Furthermore, police officers' attribution of blame to victims has more

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influence on their subsequent decisions than their attribution of blame to the assailant. Despite increasing numbers of female officers, Queensland police officers appear to hold stereotypical attitudes towards male-male violence, blame male victims for their victimisation and are less likely to charge in situations of male-male violence. Police officers have considerable discretion in how they chose to deal with situations. This discretion is justified by the philosophy of individualised justice - the response of the criminal justice system is determined by the degree of an offender's responsibility. However, there is a fine line between discretion and disparity. Contrasting this philosophy is that all people have the right to protection regardless of gender and that similar offences should receive similar responses from system. The results of this study have indicated that police officers' stereotypes of gender roles are influencing their judgement of the violence.

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Figure 1:

Mean blame allocated to the victim and the assailant by intoxication levels of the victim and the assailant.

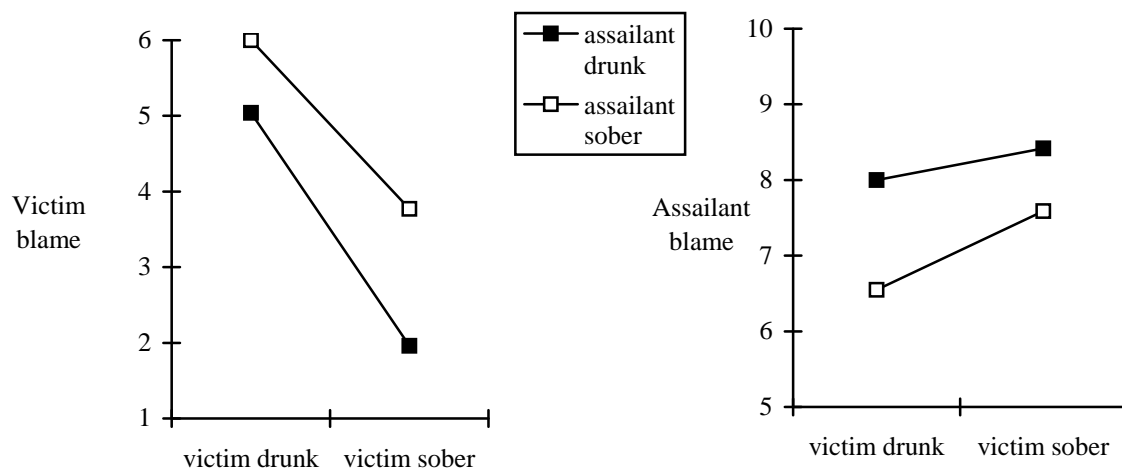


Figure 2

Police officers reported likelihood of charging the assailant

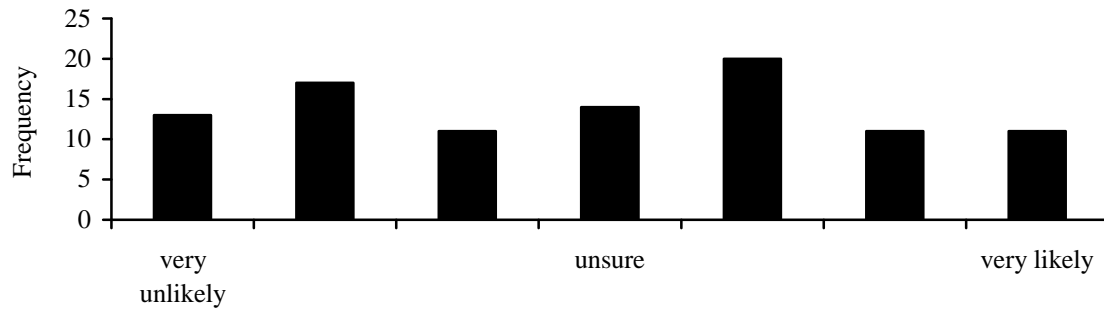


Table 1

Means and standard deviations for attribution of victim blame and assailant by victim gender.

	Male victim (brother)	Female victim (wife)
Attribution of assailant blame		
<i>M</i>	6.98	8.13
<i>SD</i>	2.35	2.04
Attribution of victim blame		
<i>M</i>	5.14	3.53
<i>SD</i>	2.64	2.87

Table 2

Means and Standard Deviations for Blame in the Four Alcohol Conditions.

	Assailant blame		Victim blame		df	<i>t</i> -value
	Mean	SD	Mean	SD		
Both drunk	8.00	1.64	5.04	2.46	23	6.12**
Neither drunk	7.59	1.99	3.77	2.62	21	4.52**
Only victim drunk	6.55	2.68	6.00	2.46	26	.72
Only assailant drunk	8.42	2.12	1.96	2.29	23	7.35**

** $p(\text{adj.}) < .01$