Gender-Based Attributions and Morality: A Sports-Event Application

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ATTRIBUTION THEORIES have largely ignored the effects of gender (Heider, 1958; Kelley, 1973) or sought cross-situational predictions for the foci of men's and women's attributions (Dweck & Licht, 1980; Howard, 1984). Few formulations address the possibility that gender-based attributions are situation specific, and they rarely provide a theoretical rationale for why situation and gender might interact in the first place (Frieze, Whitley, Hanusa, & McHugh, 1982; McHugh, Fisher, & Frieze, 1982; McHugh, Frieze, & Hanusa, 1982).

A theoretical position that sheds light on gender and attributions is that of differential moral development of men and women. Gilligan (1983) claimed that in Western societies mother-centered early socialization leads to a rule-and-rationality based morality in men that maximizes self-interest. In contrast, women learn to emphasize relationships, and their ensuing morality is empathic, responsive to others' needs, and sensitive to context-specific circumstances. Thus, attributions of the two sexes may be due to the fact that men resolve moral dilemmas through an instrumental and women through a socio-emotional logic that Gilligan called the ethic of care.

Croxton and Klonsky (1982) and Duquin (1984) tested male/female attributions for hypothetical sports scenarios and found that women indeed appealed to a socio-emotional ethic. Men were more likely to activate the "notion of self-interest and focused on competition, utility value and individual responsibility" (Duquin, 1984, p. 298). For them, rule-breaking was an accepted and understood dimension of competition.

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The current study tested gender-based attributions in a highly involving real-life sports event: a Canadian hero's loss of his gold medal during the Olympic Games at Seoul. Ben Johnson lost the medal for using a banned performance-enhancing steroid. Immediately after the event, the Canadian media offered various explanations for this shattering event. Some placed the blame on Johnson, others blamed his handlers (such as his coach and/or his physician). Still others blamed the competitiveness in society. More novel hypotheses suggested error in Olympic testing or that Johnson's water bottle was sabotaged.

Ten days after Johnson's dethroning, 400 University of Toronto students filled out questionnaires, of which 347 were completed (87 by men and 260 by women). Respondents apportioned blame for the incident to dispositional factors (Johnson himself) and to external factors (his handlers, society at large, error in testing, or sabotage). In addition, respondents' views about the role of "too much emphasis on winning" in sports and their tolerance for deviance (how wrong they found drug use under hypothetical conditions) were measured. Questions were rated on a 7-point scale, on which higher scores represented more blame.

It was predicted that men would attribute more blame to Johnson and that they themselves would be more tolerant of deviance in sports. They were also expected to downplay the role of too much emphasis on winning. Women were expected to blame factors other than Johnson, to be less tolerant of deviance in sports, and to apportion more blame to too much emphasis on winning.

Results showed that men and women did not significantly differ on their attribution of blame to the handlers ($M = 5.86$ vs. 5.76) or to society in general ($M = 3.97$ vs. 4.15). However, as expected, male respondents were more likely than female respondents to think that Johnson was knowingly using steroids ($M = 3.87$ vs. 3.43), one-tailed $t(345) = 1.76$, $p < .05$. Men found error in testing ($M = 1.69$ vs. 2.22), one-tailed $t(345) = -3.05$, $p < .01$, or sabotage ($M = 3.36$ vs. 4.03), $t(345) = -2.50$, $p < .01$, much less likely than women. Moreover, men significantly downplayed the role of too much emphasis on winning in sports in Johnson's demise ($M = 2.52$ vs. 2.75), one-tailed $t(345) = -1.96$, $p < .05$, and showed significantly more tolerance toward performance-enhancing drug use under a variety of circumstances ($M = 2.69$ vs. 3.29), one-tailed $t(345) = -4.52$, $p < .01$.

The present findings demonstrate the efficacy of gender in determining the locus of attributions. Moreover, gender-based attributions seem to have been linked to the situation-specific sources of morality evoked in men and women. Although there was some overlap between the two sexes, female respondents were more reluctant to blame Johnson. In the present case, blaming him would have meant to re-victimize a poor, Black, uneducated

young man with the intellectual capacity of a 9-year-old, characteristics highly publicized by the media.

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