

Critical DISCUSSION

Passion through Misattribution?

In his first-century Roman handbook *The Art of Love*, Ovid offered advice on romantic conquest to both men and women. Among his more intriguing suggestions to a man was that he take a woman in whom he is interested to the gladiator contests, where she could be easily aroused to passion. He did not say why this should be so, however. It was not until 1887 that a psychological explanation for this bit of wisdom was offered:

Love can only be excited by strong and vivid emotion, and it is almost immaterial whether these emotions are agreeable or disagreeable. The Cid wooed the proud heart of Donna Ximene, whose father he had slain, by shooting one after another of her pet pigeons (Adolf Horwicz, quoted in Finck, 1887, p. 240)

These romantic tactics should strike a familiar chord. As discussed both in

Chapter 11 and earlier in this chapter in the discussion of self-perception, we often judge what emotion we are experiencing through a process of cognitive appraisal. Although the physiological arousal of our autonomic nervous system provides us with the information that we are experiencing an emotion, the more subtle judgment of *which* emotion we are experiencing often depends on our cognitive appraisals of the surrounding circumstances. As we also noted in Chapter 11, arousal from one source (for example, the gladiator contest) can carry over to intensify the arousal experienced from a different source (for example, the beloved) (Zillmann & Bryant, 1974; Zillmann, 1978, 1984).

Ovid and Horwicz are thus suggesting that a person who is physiologically aroused (by whatever means) might attribute that arousal to love or sexual passion—to the advantage of any would-be lover who happens to be at hand.

There is now solid experimental evidence for this phenomenon, but disagreement about the process underlying it. In a study conducted in a natural setting, an attractive female experimenter approached men who were alone and were crossing a rickety, swaying bridge suspended over 200 feet above rocks and rapids. The assumption was that crossing the bridge produced high physiological arousal due to fear. She asked

each man to help her with a psychological study by writing an imaginative story to a picture (see the discussion of the Thematic Apperception Test in Chapter 14). After he had finished writing, the woman offered him her telephone number in case he was interested in knowing more about the study. In control conditions, a male experimenter was used or the experimenter approached men who were crossing a low, non-arousing, stable bridge. The stories were scored for sexual imagery and a record was kept of which men later telephoned the experimenter.

The results showed that men who encountered the female experimenter on the high bridge put more sexual imagery in their stories than did men in the control conditions. They were also more likely to telephone later (Dutton & Aron, 1974).

Perhaps you can detect flaws in this study. Maybe only macho men cross the high bridge and only wimps cross the low bridge, and it is this difference in subject populations that produces the differential results. Or perhaps the woman herself acted differently or appeared more attractive on the high bridge than on the low bridge. Some researchers have also suggested that the presence of the woman on the bridge reduces the man's fear and that this would enhance her attractiveness (Kenrick &

Cialdini, 1977; Riordan & Tedeschi, 1983).

To control for these several possibilities, several additional studies have now been conducted. In one, male subjects were physiologically aroused in one of three ways: by running in place, by watching a videotape of a comedy routine, or by watching a videotape of a grisly killing. They then watched a tape of a woman who was dressed and made up to look either attractive or unattractive. Finally, all subjects rated the woman on several scales, including her general attractiveness and the degree to which they would be interested in dating her and kissing her.

The results showed that no matter how the arousal had been obtained, subjects liked the attractive woman more and the unattractive woman less than did control subjects who had not been aroused. The high arousal intensified both positive and negative reactions to the woman (White, Fishbein, & Rustein, 1981).

Because arousal in this study was elicited in several ways, the fear-reduction hypothesis cannot explain the results, but the misattribution hypothesis can. Another set of investigators, however, has offered yet another possible interpretation: *response facilitation*, a well known phenomenon in psychology. When an organism is aroused, whatever

response it is most likely to make in the situation—called the dominant response—will be facilitated or intensified. (We discuss response facilitation in a quite different context in Chapter 19.) If the subject's dominant response in these studies is attraction to the woman, then this will be intensified by the additional arousal. Note, too, that if the subject's dominant response in the situation is to *not* be attracted to the woman, then the arousal would intensify this negative response, exactly what was found in the study described above (Allen, Kenrick, Linder, & McCall, 1989).

There is an empirical way to distinguish between the two explanations. The misattribution explanation implies that the effect will only occur if the person is unaware of the true source of arousal—so that he or she can plausibly misattribute it to the targeted person. The response facilitation explanation, however, implies that the effect will occur whether or not the person is aware of the true source of arousal.

Accordingly, another study was conducted in which male subjects were aroused by exercise. Some subjects were made aware of their arousal and its cause just before seeing a videotape of the attractive woman; others were not. The results showed that aroused subjects were more attracted to the woman than unaroused subjects even when they

were aware of the arousal and its cause (Allen, Kenrick, Linder, & McCall, 1989). This finding supports the response facilitation explanation. The verdict is not final, however: an earlier study found that aroused subjects were more likely to be attracted to the woman when they were distracted from the true source of their arousal than when they were not (White & Kight, 1984).

But whatever the specific mechanism, the phenomenon itself appears to be genuine. Readers of both sexes should feel encouraged to buy a pair of tickets to the hockey game.