

Misattribution of Arousal: Why Your Heart Isn't Always Love

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Misattribution of arousal is a term in psychology, which describes the process whereby people make a mistake in assuming what is causing them to feel aroused.

Experiment

To test the causation of misattribution of arousal, Donald Dutton and Arthur Aron (1974) conducted the following experiment. This text taken from their paper:

Male passersby were contacted either on a fear-arousing suspension bridge or a non-fear-arousing bridge by an attractive female interviewer who asked them to fill out questionnaires containing Thematic Apperception Test pictures. Sexual content of stories written by subjects on the fear-arousing bridge and tendency of these subjects to attempt postexperimental contact with the interviewer were both significantly greater. No significant differences between bridges were obtained on either measure for subjects contacted by a male interviewer. A third study manipulated anticipated shock to male subjects and an attractive female confederate independently. Anticipation of own shock but not anticipation of shock to confederate increased sexual imagery scores on the Thematic Apperception Test and attraction to the confederate. Some theoretical implications of these findings are discussed.

As the men finished the survey, the woman explained she would be available to answer any questions regarding her project, giving her phone number and name to the male subjects.

Dutton and Aron wondered if the participants were more likely to call the woman because they were physically attracted to her or not. However, Dutton and Aron had to take into consideration that some factors of the men, such as the possibility of some men already involved in a relationship or how an individual male interpreted the woman's body gestures.

Therefore, Dutton and Aron had the woman survey the men under two conditions: immediately after they crossed a 450-foot (140 m)-long bridge or after they had crossed and had enough time to rest. In the first condition, the men who were surveyed during their cross over the bridge would have caused their arousal level to increase as they were speaking to the woman. Conditions, such as experiencing winds during their walk and the nervous feeling may have contributed to their fast paced heartbeats and rapid breathing.

In the other condition, the woman had approached the men after they had crossed the bridge. They had enough time to rest and get their heartbeat and breathing at a normal pace.

Results

As a result, the men who were approached on the bridge were found to be more aroused and could have mistaken their arousal from the bridge for the arousal they experienced from the

attractive woman's presence. There was a large amount of those in the first condition who called the woman and asked her for a date, whereas there was a lower number in men who called the woman after crossing the bridge and resting. Similar results were found when a male approached women in the same situation.

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