



All Faculty Publications

2017-04-11

Johnny Depp, Amber Heard, and the Reasons We Blame Victims

Jason B. Whiting

Brigham Young University - Provo, jason.whiting@byu.edu

Follow this and additional works at: <https://scholarsarchive.byu.edu/facpub>

 Part of the [Family, Life Course, and Society Commons](#)

BYU ScholarsArchive Citation

Whiting, Jason B., "Johnny Depp, Amber Heard, and the Reasons We Blame Victims" (2017). *All Faculty Publications*. 2705.
<https://scholarsarchive.byu.edu/facpub/2705>

This Peer-Reviewed Article is brought to you for free and open access by BYU ScholarsArchive. It has been accepted for inclusion in All Faculty Publications by an authorized administrator of BYU ScholarsArchive. For more information, please contact scholarsarchive@byu.edu, ellen_amatangelo@byu.edu.

Johnny Depp, Amber Heard, and the Reasons We Blame Victims

4/11/2017

In May of 2016, actress Amber Heard accused her husband Johnny Depp of hitting her with a phone and assaulting her. She posted pictures of injuries to her face and filed for divorce. This ignited an ongoing debate between Heard and Depp, which has continued with personal accusations and bitterness. When the story appeared, outsiders chose sides and complete strangers weighed in online with certainty about what happened and who was at fault. Some comments blamed him: “I believe her. He's the idiot that didn't do a prenup. Get that money girl.” Even more attacked her: “She's lying! The police didn't even find any evidence that Johnny Depp hit her. I wouldn't blame him if he really did kick her butt, because she deserves it!” And, “I can see her flapping that mouth of her's [sic] cursing at him, telling him ‘hit me, hit me, I'll bury you in the public eye’. . . How trashy of you, Amber, especially after his mum just died.”



By GabboT-Black Mass 11, CC BY-SA 2.0

It is impossible, of course, to know what exactly happened in this messy debacle, but as a researcher of domestic violence I was interested in the finger pointing and accusations. When a case of violence comes to light, a curious thing happens. There is outrage, but it is often directed at all parties, including the victim. In the Johnny Depp and Amber Heard case, it is not clear who is at fault or what happened, but in Heard's accusations, she claims to be the victim. Nevertheless, in a study I did with colleagues, we examined the public's reactions to this claim and found that four times as many people attacked her rather than him. Our purpose was not to determine the accuracy of Heard's allegations or decide if she was a victim or a perpetrator. We simply wanted to analyze the social media comments that followed her claims.

In the months after the story broke, we gathered and analyzed hundreds of posts from Facebook and comments on news sites. People were often judgmental, sarcastic, and angry with both Depp and Heard, as well as their fellow commenters. Over 37% of the posts specifically blamed or attacked Heard, with people questioning her story, credibility, and character. Only 9% of the comments blamed Depp. People cited evidence and made their cases for and against each, while others made comments about domestic violence or got into arguments. Although the details of this situation are clearly debatable, strong reactions often happen in situations where someone has been injured. Even in other cases where it is more obvious someone has been victimized, many criticize the one being hurt. Why? Here are four reasons we blame victims.

1. We like Certainty

It is upsetting to hear about people hurting each other, and explaining it helps us feel better. Creating a simple reason is easy, but most cases of domestic violence are messy. Outsiders hear a few details, and assume they know how best to solve the problem. Sometimes this includes expecting the victim to fix it. For instance, it is common to tell victims to leave abusers, but this can be excruciatingly [difficult](#), and if it

doesn't happen, a friend or professional who "knows best" can become frustrated. Being certain feels good, but it may be wrong and hurtful.

2. We Like Fairness

Little kids complain that things aren't fair, and adults want the world to be fair as well. Unfortunately, this desire for people to "get what they deserve" can get misinterpreted when someone is suffering. Outsiders sometimes make the mistake called the "just world fallacy," believing that victims must have caused their own woes. Researchers have found that observers create reasons for other's misfortunes even if there is no evidence for them. In one study, people watched a woman solving problems and receiving electric shocks when she made a mistake. Afterwards, they criticized her appearance and personality and said she deserved the shocks. This unfortunate tendency also occurs when rape victims get blamed for dressing provocatively or for drinking.

3. We Like Safety

I worked with a client who was molested by an 8th grade teacher, and when she reported it she was ignored at first, and then publicly shamed by angry students and parents who rallied to the instructor's cause. It was easier to attack a powerless girl than it was to accept that a beloved teacher was also a predator. In our study, many of the harsh attacks on Amber Heard were from women. This may have been to protect their own sense of safety. In other words, it was too scary to believe that if it could happen to her, then it could happen to anyone, so she must have done something to cause it. What we can't control, we can't prevent, and we all want safety.

Being certain feels good, but it may be wrong and hurtful

4. We Don't Want to Hate Someone We Like

Similarly, people are reluctant to think badly of someone they already like. This is a type of [denial](#), where it is easier to blame the victim than accept that nice people can also do awful things. For example, in the Johnny Depp accusations, someone posted: "Not once

was he characterized as a bad person. Now all of a sudden she's making him look like an abuser?" Comments like these suggest that since Depp is a beloved movie star he is not capable of hurting his wife. However, most violence is not perpetrated by psychopaths, but otherwise normal people, who have a mix of good and bad traits. We assume that we know someone from their friendly public face, and it is hard to adjust these impressions and accept that likable people can do hurtful things.

Of course, bad things do happen to those who don't cause it. Even if a "reason" exists for victimization, no one deserves to be hurt. Most violent relationships are complicated, and it is rarely helpful to rush to judgment, which usually makes things worse. It is better to hold abusers responsible for their choices than blame someone for being a victim. This will help us move towards the safe world we all want.

This blog was originally posted on [Psychology Today](#).

References

Whiting, J. B., Dansby, R. A., Cravens, J. D., & Banford-Witting, A. (2017). *Blaming victims of intimate partner violence: A content analysis of online social media comments*. Manuscript submitted for publication.