

The Role of Uncertainty and the Just-World Belief in Victim-Blaming

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Summary Increasing reports of crime make it crucial to study the dynamics of victims, perpetrators, and third parties. People's positive or negative outlook on the victim is less predictable when a situation is unclear. Also, a sense of justice plays a role in third-party judgment. Our study examines how situational outcomes and belief in a just world affect victim-blaming.

Keywords: Victim-blaming, Just-World-Theory, uncertainty, video-scenarios, JWT questionnaire

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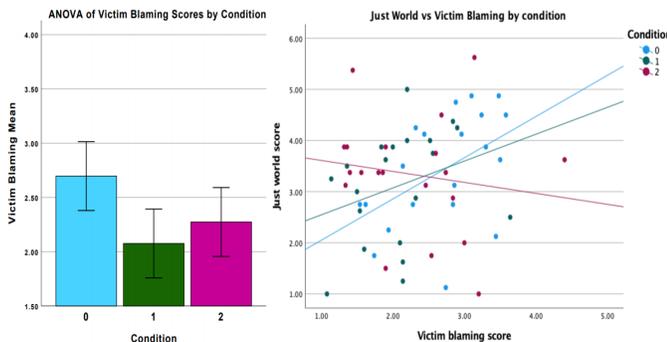
Introduction 3rd party observers are subject to complex interactions, and attribute blame and responsibility to both perpetrators and victims. In many cases, based on a certain outcome, people make adjustments according to an individualized standard, but when the outcome becomes unclear, people lose their standard to make a judgment. For example, 3rd party observers blamed victims more when a situation's outcome was neutral (Janoff-Bulman, 2004). Sometimes, the effect of victim blaming (VB) also depends on the Just World Theory (JWT) which addresses differences in the perception of daily social interactions by saying that in a world of justice, good people are rewarded while bad people are punished (Furnham, 2003). A stronger sense of the just world is found to correlate with more deprecation (Furnham & Procter, 1992). It is important to investigate whether the uncertainty of the context and the individual's belief in a just world play a role in VB.

Aims Here, we examined affective and emotional responses of individuals given a set of scenarios involving aggressive interactions between victims and perpetrators. Specifically, we will explore how third-party viewers respond in situations presenting uncertainty of an outcome and how that may relate to attributions about the victims in the scenarios. We also planned to examine how the just world belief contributes to the blame towards the victim differ depending on the context (i.e., perpetrator's outcome).

survey. Participants watched 12 snippets of real life news coverage. In order to test how the outcome of the perpetrator affected blame and emotion, participants were randomly given one of three versions of the survey. The C0 group was given no additional information about the perpetrator after the video; the C1 group was informed that the perpetrator was apprehended; and C2 group was informed that the perpetrator got away. Participants rated the level of blame associated with the victim on a 7-point likert scale over the course of five questions (composite scores were used for analysis), and which emotions they felt toward the victim. Of note, the words "victim" and "perpetrator" were not used; the characterization of people in each specific scenario were used. In addition, participants answered the JWT questionnaire (Lipkus, 1983).

Results Participants were more likely to blame the victim given no information about the perpetrator or when the perpetrator got away. The average victim-blaming score was higher in conditions C0 and C2 than in condition C1 (Figure 1a). The statistical difference between conditions C0, C1, and C2 was significant, $F(2, 59) = 4.007$, $p = 0.024$. The difference in victim-blaming was higher between C0 and C1 than the difference between C1 and C2 or C0 and C2. In the regression analysis (Figure 1b), under conditions C0 and C1, participants were prone to blame the victim more when they had a higher JWT score. The regression in only condition C0 was significant, $R^2 = 0.23$, $F(1, 18) = 5.398$, $p = 0.03$. Although participants seemed to blame the victim more when they were more indifferent towards the idea of a just world in condition C2, the regression was not significant for the condition C1 ($p = 0.20$) and C2 ($p = 0.52$).

Conclusion Our study supported the literature, and we found that when the situation is uncertain (C0), VB increased. When the uncertain situation and a stronger sense of justice both come into play, victim-blaming becomes more salient. More research needs to be done on why uncertainty increased VB and what factors of uncertainty influence the most.



Methods This study involved a total of 60 Northeastern University students, 19M and 41F, completing an online

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