

***PERCEIVED SIMILARITY - POSSIBLE FACTOR IN INDUCING MORAL  
BIASES<sup>PPPPPPPP</sup>***

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*Abstract: The defensive attribution theory states that, in case of accidents with severe consequences, people tend to attribute less responsibility to chance and more responsibility to the people who caused them. A mediating factor of this effect is the perceived similarity with the person who caused the accident, in the sense that, if there is increased similarity, the effect seems to be reversed: the more severe the consequences, the less responsibility is attributed.*

*In the present study we extend this bias in the area of moral evaluation, expecting that people will make a less harsh evaluation of the immorality of an action, if they perceive themselves to be similar with the person who committed the transgression, and will consider the same action as being more immoral if the person who commits it is different from them. We describe in detail a research plan that allows the testing of these assumptions.*

***Keywords: defensive attribution theory, responsibility, motivational bias, moral bias, perceived similarity.***

Accidents are part of our daily life and are diverse in form, nature and consequences. If we take the example of a person driving a car at night, failing to see a pedestrian who is wearing dark clothes and is crossing the street, and hits him/her with the car, we try to establish who and how much responsibility has for the accident. Perhaps we hold the driver responsible, because he/she should have been more careful when driving the car, or maybe the pedestrian has also part of the responsibility, because he/she also should have been more careful when crossing the street, especially at night, and should have been aware that the dark clothes would make him/her more difficult to see. Or perhaps we could hold a third party responsible for this accident, because if the streets had been better illuminated, the driver would have been able to spot the pedestrian.

### **Attribution theory - overview**

The attribution theory is concerned with how people process information when assigning causality for different events (DeJoy, 1989). It is concerned with studying the processes involved in deciding how much responsibility should be assigned to an individual for an accident with severe or mild consequences, and how much other external uncontrollable factors have contributed to the outcome. The attribution theory views the individual as "intuitive", constantly examining probabilities in order to understand and predict occurrences in the environment. The psychological explanations for the misattributions are related to people's constant need to search for causes and for explanations for everything that

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is happening around them, even if there are random accidents, and especially if they have severe or tragic consequences.

The studies on which the theory of defensive attributions was based assert the fact that attributing responsibility for an accident to the agent is influenced by its consequences: if the consequences are more severe, then more responsibility is attributed to the agent (Walster, 1966). The reverse effect of the same bias was noticed on the victims of various accidents: if the accident was more severe, then more responsibility was attributed to the victims (Coates, Wortman, & Abbey, 1979). This attribution bias, both in the case of victims and in the case of agents, was initially explained in terms of anticipating the future: if the consequences of an accident are more severe, then we are motivated to attribute it to the agent/victim in order to minimize the contribution of uncontrollable factors and to reduce the possibility of it happening to us (Walster, 1966). Nevertheless, previous studies have not been able to explain the aforementioned effect (Walster, 1967, Shaver, 1970, Shaw & Skolnick, 1971), thus leading to new discoveries related to the factors which influence these causal attributions. Extensive research that followed in the next decades showed that the causal attributions are influenced by numerous other factors, not only the severity of the accident, such as perpetrator culpability, self-protective motivations and perpetrator characteristics (Nisbett & Ross, 1980).

### **Blame avoidance, harm avoidance and belief in a just world**

Shaver (1970) proposes a more complex explanation for the misattributions of responsibility, which is based on two possible motivations: blame avoidance and harm avoidance. Blame avoidance can cause people to assign less responsibility to the perpetrator because they anticipate that they could find themselves in a similar situation in the future and are motivated to avoid being blamed. On the other hand, harm avoidance could determine individuals to assign more blame to both the perpetrator and the victim, because assigning responsibility to the victim and the perpetrator decreases the importance of chance and other external factors, and thus diminishing the possibility that the same accident could happen to the observer (Shaver, 1985). This type of reasoning is consistent with the just world hypothesis (Lerner & Miller, 1978), which is another possible explanation that can account for some of the misattribution of responsibility. It is based on people's need to believe that, in general, everybody gets what they deserve. Their belief can be maintained by derogating either the victim or the perpetrator, depending on the position of the subject, considering that the victim did something to cause the accident in which (s)he was involved and that the perpetrator is solely responsible for the consequences of the accident and is a bad person (Lerner and Simmons, 1966).

A key factor in determining people to engage in blame avoidance, and assign less responsibility to the perpetrator, in order to avoid being blamed themselves in a similar situation, or engage in harm avoidance and assign more responsibility to the perpetrator in order to diminish the chance that the same accident could happen to them, is related to the perceived probability that the observer could find himself/herself in a similar situation (Shaw and McMartin, 1977). If the observer anticipates that it is possible to find himself/herself in a similar situation then, most probably, (s)he will assign less responsibility to the perpetrator -

blame avoidance, but if the observer anticipates a low probability to be involved in a similar accident, then (s)he will assign more responsibility to the perpetrator – harm avoidance. A key factor that makes people to make one choice or the other is personal and situational similarity (Shaver, 1985) to the victim or the perpetrator.

### **Victim observer similarity**

Most studies that investigated and found support for the defensive attribution hypothesis manipulated victim-observer similarity (Burger, 1981). For example, Sorrentino and Boutilier (1974) used an experimental setting where participants had to assign responsibility to a person who was receiving electric shocks for making errors in a learning task, and manipulated situational similarity by informing participants that later on in the experiment they would be in the learner's position. They found that the participants who were aware of the fact that they themselves would be in the victim's position assigned less responsibility. In another study, Dexter, Penrod, Linz, and Saunders (1997) manipulated personal similarity and found that female observers were less likely to attribute responsibility to victims of rape when they were dissimilar.

### **Perpetrator observer similarity**

The perceived similarity between the observer and the perpetrator was very little investigated compared to the victim-observer similarity, but it also influences the attribution of responsibility. One mechanism is related to motivational factors: a similar observer is motivated to attribute less responsibility for the consequences of an accident because he/she is motivated to avoid future responsibility (Shaver, 1970). Vidmar and Crinklaw (1974, p. 114). This idea can be expressed in a simple and concise sentence: "People need to believe that serious accidents could never happen to them, or if they could, no one would ever blame them for the consequences".

Another explanation of the misattributions of responsibility in the case of perpetrators similar to the observer is related to the fact that we relate more easily and we empathize more with similar persons. Observers are less likely to blame perpetrators if they can identify and empathize with them in order to symbolically protect themselves from the blame (Campbell, 2002). Experimental studies (Regan & Totten 1975, Gould & Sigall 1977) have also proven that the simple instruction to empathize with the subject caused them to attribute less responsibility.

A third possible and very simple explanation is related to likeability of the perpetrator – people tend to like persons that are similar to them, and studies show that likeability is associated with the attribution of little responsibility (Heaven, Connors & Pretorius, 1998).

### **Denying situational and personal similarity – self-protective motives**

Studies show that in some conditions subjects can, for self-protective motives, deny the personal similarity with the perpetrator and the possibility of ever being in a similar situation. For example, studies that used driving scenarios described persons who were driving while under the influence of alcohol, but noticed that, despite statistical data that indicates otherwise, participants deny the possibility of being in a similar situation. They identified

themselves with the perpetrator when the unsafe behavior was of low intensity, but strongly denied any situation similarity when the perpetrator was either speeding or diving under the influence.

Another factor that influences participants' willingness to identify with a perpetrator, even in the face of obvious similarity, is represented by the consequences of the accident: if the consequences are severe, then observers tend to deny the possibility of being in a similar situation (Robbennolt, 2000).

It appears that if we want to study the defensive attribution hypothesis and the role of observer – perpetrator personal and situation similarity, it is best to do so by using behaviors that represent a moderate breach of moral norms and that do not have very severe consequences.

### **Moral biases**

In this article we will focus on the defensive attribution theory, especially on the relation between perpetrator - observer similarity, the way it influences the attribution of responsibility for an accident and the way it alters the judgment on the immorality of an actor's actions.

The term "moral bias" may be defined from two perspectives. The first one is the perspective of choosing the deontological alternative in the detriment of the utilitarian one in moral dilemmas (Sunstein, 2005). This was viewed as a moral bias, because the "more moral" version, which would cause the least harm and the most good, was not chosen. However, an increasing number of authors (Baron, 2013) have recently become cautious in overlaying the term "bias" over the preference for a certain perspective (deontological versus utilitarian), and the moral bias was defined as judging an action as more or less immoral based on factors which should be irrelevant, or should matter very little (Baron, 2013).

Previous studies have shown that moral judgments may be affected by numerous factors, among which the consequences of actions – the consequence bias (Baron and Hershey, 1988), the person who performs the action – the actor observer bias (Nadelhoffer & Feltz, 2008), the chosen words and their order in presenting moral dilemmas – the framing effect (Sinott-Armstrong, 2008).

It has already been proven that personal motivations and interests can affect moral judgments and that the manner in which we judge a situation or a person is influenced by the self-interest bias (Bocian & Wojciszke, 2014). In this paper we propose that similar but more subtle motivations, like blame avoidance, could also bias observers' evaluation of the immorality of an action.

The defensive attribution process suggests that one of the reasons why we assign less responsibility to similar perpetrators is related to anticipation of the increased possibility of finding himself/herself in a similar situation, and the fact that when we are in such a situation we would also like to be judged lightly. The very same mechanism could cause observers to make less harsh judgments regarding the immorality of an action, in the case of a similar perpetrator, and to blame a dissimilar perpetrator more easily.

**Research:**

The presented theoretical background leads to the following objective: to extend and verify whether the defensive attribution processes also leads to biased evaluations in the field of morality. Will the manipulation of the perceived similarity between the agent and the subject cause the subjects to have more permissive judgments towards the immorality of the agent's actions?

We also propose a detailed methodology which allows the direct testing of the aforementioned assumptions.

**General objective**

Extending the theory of defensive attributions in the field of moral biases: concretely, testing the existence of a new bias which could affect moral decisions –the perceived similarity between the subject and the perpetrator. We also propose a distinction between personal and situational similarity and their separate manipulation in order to allow us to examine which of them is more responsible for the biased attributions of immorality.

The independent variables are:

- Perceived personal similarity with the perpetrator
- Perceived situational similarity with the perpetrator
- The dependent variables are:
  - Perceived morality in a situation which involves the transgression of a rule (situation no. 1)
  - Perceived morality in a situation which involves the transgression of a moral norm (situation no. 2)

**Method:**

The participants will read two stories which describe persons who transgress either a rule or a moral norm. Situation no. 1, which involves the transgression of a rule, will describe a person that illegally overtakes another car in traffic and as a result hits a pedestrian who is taken to the hospital with a broken leg. The personal similarity will be manipulated by the description of the perpetrator: the participants in the increased personal similarity group will read about a 21 year-old student, with the same gender as the participant, who was driving with legal speed, but who illegally overtook a car because he/she was in a hurry to get to university courses. All the participants from the increased similarity group must have a driver's license. The participants from the decreased similarity group will read a story about a retired person, 69 years old, with a gender different from that of the participant, who was driving with legal speed, but who illegally overtook a car because he/she was in a hurry to get to the market. All the participants from the decreased similarity group must not have a driver's license.

Situational similarity will be assessed by asking the participants whether they have ever illegally overtaken a car.

Situation no. 2, which involves the transgression of a moral norm, will describe a person who is studying at the same university and in the same group with his/her boyfriend/girlfriend and who cheats on him/her with a colleague. After the other person finds

out, they decide to break up, and he/she decides to abandon college. The personal similarity will be manipulated by the description of the person who cheated. In the increased similarity condition the participants will read about a person who has the same gender and nationality as them. The participants from the decreased similarity group will read the same story, but the gender and the nationality of the person who cheated will be different from those of the participant.

Situational similarity will be assessed by asking participants whether they have ever cheated on their boyfriend/girlfriend.

After reading the stories, the participants will answer questions related to how immoral the action committed by the perpetrator was (illegal overtaking and cheating), how responsible he/she is for what happened to the victim (breaking the leg and dropping out of college), how responsible is the victim is or how much exterior factors have contributed.

Manipulation check will be done by asking the subjects how similar they consider themselves to the character in the story.

The questionnaire will also include three questions that will allow us to understand which reasons are the most important in the biased judgment of morality: empathy, sympathy or harm avoidance. Participants should empathize more easily with a similar perpetrator, and this should determine them judge him/her more permissively. Other theories suggest that we like the persons that resemble us more, so another possible reason for the bias in moral judgment could be the fact that we simply are more tolerant towards the people that we like, and more inclined towards forgiving them. Another possible reason could be related to blame avoidance: if participants anticipate a high probability of the fact that they themselves could be in the future in a similar situation, then they could judge the action more permissively because they wish to be judged the same, too.

### **Expected results:**

1. Participants from the increased similarity group will evaluate the action as less immoral than the participants in the decreased similarity group.
  - 1.1. The level of empathy felt towards the perpetrator will moderate the aforementioned effect.
  - 1.2. The anticipation of the possibility of finding himself/herself in a similar situation in the future will also moderate the effect.
  - 1.3. The likeability of the perpetrator will also moderate the effect.
2. Participants from the increased similarity group will attribute less responsibility to the perpetrator and more responsibility to the victim and external factors than the participants in the decreased similarity group.
3. Participants from the increased similarity group will empathize more with the perpetrator than the participants in the decreased similarity group.
4. Participants from the increased similarity group will consider the perpetrator as being more likeable as compared to the participants in the decreased similarity group.
5. Participants from the increased similarity group will consider the perpetrator as being more likeable as compared to the participants in the decreased similarity group.

6. Participants from the increased similarity group will appreciate a being more likely to be in a situation similar to the perpetrator.
7. There will be an interaction effect between personal and situation similarity.

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