

Interpersonal Blame and Perceptions of Choice

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Abstract Blame judgments may be impacted by choice at both a situational level (through vignette manipulation) and an individual level (assessments of attitudes). College students, 264 women and 73 men, from a central Texas university read one of six vignettes describing a target individual, a freshman student having academic problems, and completed free will and agency attitude items. Vignettes manipulated choice wording (made a choice, no choice, or neutral) and target's background (inner city or advantaged). Greater blame was associated with a privileged background and with a choice mindset, but not with individual-level assessments for free will and agency. Perhaps using choice wording and describing a wealthier background leads to the perception that target individuals “could have done otherwise,” resulting in more blame.

Keywords Blame · Choice mindset · Interpersonal judgments

Introduction

Understanding blame is crucial to promoting positive relationships on a personal as well as global level. As Shaver (1985; Shaver & Drown, 1986) notes, blame is often mistakenly considered synonymous with causing and/or being responsible for an event. A person may contribute

to the cause of and assume responsibility for an event but not accept blame (as politicians tend to do). Blame may be related to an observer's not accepting or disagreeing with another's justification for an unfortunate event.

According to Shaver (1985) as well as a recent theory of blame (Malle, Guglielmo, & Monroe, 2014), whether or not an action is committed intentionally is crucial in assigning blame. Perceptions of intentionality may be influenced by the degree of choice a person has. If an act is perceived as unintentional, blame is dependent upon obligation and capacity to act (Malle et al., 2014), which in turn may be impacted by background factors, such as an impoverished childhood that may limit the ability to act.

Choice could impact judgments of blame in the following two ways: (1) as a situational variable that could be experimentally manipulated so that situations that involve a focus on choice, creating a “choice mindset,” may result in more blame than similar situations without such an emphasis, and (2) as an individual variable, in which those who believe that behavior is freely chosen, versus determined, would be expected to judge individuals more harshly.

In one of the few studies we found that considered choice as a situational variable impacting blame, Savani, Stephens, and Markus (2011) manipulated a “choice mindset” by assigning participants to either a “choice” or control condition in which a video of a person was shown. Participants were asked to press the spacebar either when they saw the actor make a choice (choice condition) or touch an object (control condition). Victim blaming was greater and empathy was less among participants in the choice, versus the control, condition.

Related to individually held beliefs about choice, Smilansky (2005) has argued that determinism is “the great eraser” (p. 259); how can people be blamed if the only outcome of a choosing situation was the choice made? How could they be assigned responsibility as well as blame for such an event? A

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logical prediction then would be that individuals who believe in free will, that a person “could have done otherwise,” would be more likely to assign blame to others. Therefore, individuals who believe in free will may be more likely to blame others than those who believe people’s actions are determined by the interaction of genes and environmental factors.

Psychologists (e.g., Skinner, 1948, 1971) and philosophers (e.g., Dennett, 1984) have both argued that moral responsibility is not dependent upon free will. Similarly, Bandura (2006), regarding free will and agency, has persuasively stated, “It is not a matter of ‘free will,’ which is a throwback to medieval theology, but in acting as an agent, an individual makes causal contributions to the course of events” (p. 165).

However, moral responsibility, agency, and free will are often confounded in the views of laypersons (Feldman, Baumeister, & Wong, 2014; Monroe, Dillon, & Malle, 2014) as well as in the assessments of free will (Nadelhoffer, Shepard, Nahmias, Sripada, & Ross, 2014; Ogle-tree, 2013). As a result, free will has not only been associated with desiring retribution (Rakos, Laurene, Skala, & Slane, 2008) and punitiveness (Carey & Paulhus, 2013) but also with increased helping and reduced aggression (Baumeister, Masicampo, & DeWall, 2009).

The research here considered choice as both a situational variable and an individual-level variable. We manipulated choice directly and indirectly. We wanted to corroborate Savani et al. (2011) results using a very different direct manipulation using “choice,” “no-choice,” or neutral wording to describe a scenario. The indirect manipulation described an individual from an impoverished versus wealthy background, related to the assumption that socioeconomic background impacts the capacity to act, the range of choices that one has or is perceived as having.

At the individual level, we separated items assessing participants’ attitudes related to agency and free will and also asked participants to rate their perceived similarity to the target person, based on the fundamental attribution error research (Ross, 1977). Just as we may understand situational limitations on our own choices, if we perceive others as similar to ourselves, we may be more likely to also understand restrictions on their choices.

We predicted that “choice” wording and having a wealthy background would result in greater blame. Also, blame was hypothesized to relate positively to free will and agency but negatively to perceived similarity.

Method

Participants

Participants, 73 men and 264 women, in a teaching theater section of Lifespan Development at a central Texas

university were offered an extra credit option for completing a survey. Most participants were between 18 and 25 years of age (96 %) and described their socioeconomic status as upper middle (27 %), middle (50 %), or lower middle class (17 %). Students indicated their ethnicity as Hispanic (35 %), Caucasian (49 %), African-American (9 %), Asian (4 %), or other (3 %).

Materials and Procedure

After completing demographic items, participants read one of six randomized descriptions of a hypothetical individual “Taylor.” In a 2 (childhood background) × 3 (choice wording) design, Taylor, an incoming freshman living in a dorm, was described as having an inner city or exclusive neighborhood background. Regarding the “choice” wording, Taylor was described as making choices, as not having choices, or with neutral words unrelated to choice. The first paragraph with “choice” condition variations in brackets is given below:

Taylor is a 19-year-old college student who [*chose* to live; had *no choice* except to live; is living] in a dorm related to university policy for freshmen students. The university assigns roommates, and [Taylor did not know; gave Taylor *no choice* regarding; Taylor did not know] who the roommates would be. Now Taylor has two roommates who [*choose* to spend; spend; spend] a lot of time partying since they are away from home for the first time and without parental supervision. Because Taylor’s roommates invite a variety of people over, others are frequently drinking, etc. in the room. Taylor was reared to not be a tattletale and [*chooses* to not turn in the roommates to college authorities in this situation; feels like turning the roommates into campus authorities is *not a choice*; feels like turning the roommates into campus authorities is not the right thing to do]. Taylor’s grades are slipping, and attending class is becoming harder and harder due to late nights of partying. From Taylor’s perspective, [the best *choice* in this situation is; there is *no choice* except; there is little to be done except] to give up for the semester.

In several instances, to keep paragraphs approximately the same length and convey comparable meaning, the wording of two of the three “choice” conditions was identical. For example, in the phrasing, “The university assigns roommates, and [Taylor did not know; gave Taylor no choice regarding; Taylor did not know],” the wording of the “choice” and “neutral” manipulations were necessitated by the typical policy for freshmen. Similarly, in the following wording, “Now Taylor has two roommates who [choose to spend; spend; spend],” the coherence of the

description of Taylor necessitated that the “neutral” and “no-choice” wording be the same. Overall, there were four instances of inserting “choice” wording (“chose,” “choose,” “chooses,” “choice”) and four instances of inserting “no-choice” wording (“no choice,” “no choice,” “not a choice,” “no choice”) in the first paragraph.

The second paragraph was 68 words in length and described Taylor as growing up in either an inner city neighborhood or in an exclusive neighborhood. The paragraph included several more choice/no-choice/neutral wordings in the appropriate versions.

After reading the vignettes regarding Taylor, participants then completed four “blame” items (Cronbach’s alpha of .65), an item assessing participants’ perceived similarity to Taylor, nine items assessing free will attitudes (Cronbach’s alpha of .78, after dropping two reverse-scored items), and thirteen items assessing agency (Cronbach’s alpha of .87, after dropping reverse-scored items). For consistency, all items were scored on a five-point scale. The free will and agency item end points were “strongly disagree” and “strongly agree”; because Cronbach’s alphas improved when reverse-scored items were dropped, these items were excluded from the free will and agency scales in subsequent analyses.

Items assessing blame asked participants how much sympathy they felt for Taylor, how deserving Taylor was of the outcome, the degree to which Taylor’s situation was the result of personal choices, and the extent to which Taylor’s problems were due to lack of effort. The free will items included the following: an item (“I have free will even when my choices are limited by external circumstances”) from the Rakos et al. (2008) free will factor of the Free Will and Determinism Scale; three items (e.g., “I have free will in life, regardless of group expectations or pressures”) from Stroessner and Green’s (1990) libertarianism factor of the Free Will–Determinism Scale; two items (e.g., “I am able to override the genetic and environmental factors that sometimes influence my behaviors”) from the Baumeister et al. (2009) free will–determinism manipulation; and three items (e.g., “Even if all environmental and genetic factors remain the same, I believe multiple outcomes are possible when a person makes a decision”) that we added.

Three of the agency items (e.g., “I am in charge of the decisions I make,”) were identical or similar to items from the Rakos et al. (2008) personal agency factor of the Free Will and Determinism Scale; two additional items (“Career success is important to me”) were identical or similar to items from the Stillman et al. (2010) career performance measure. We added the remaining eight items (e.g., “The choices I make related to my classes are very important”).

Results

A 2 (background) \times 3 (choice wording) ANOVA was performed on blame, to examine the possible effects of the paragraph manipulation. Both independent variables were significant, with greater blame associated with coming from a more exclusive neighborhood, $F(1,330) = 5.03$, $p < .05$, $\eta_p^2 = .02$; and with choice wording, $F(2,330) = 6.34$, $p < .01$, $\eta_p^2 = .04$. Regarding the choice wording, Bonferroni post-hoc tests indicated that the “choice” wording was significantly different from both the “no-choice” and “neutral” wording (which were not significantly different from each other).

To examine the effect of participant variables, a forward regression was also performed on “blame,” with choice wording, childhood background, free will scores, agency scores, and participants’ perceived similarity to Taylor as predictors. Because the “no-choice” and “neutral” wording versions of the choice wording manipulation were not significantly different, these conditions were combined for this analysis. Three predictors, choice wording, background, and perceived similarity, entered the final model for blame, $F(3,328) = 7.20$, $p < .001$, $r^2 = .06$ (see Table 1).

Discussion

Support was found here for the impact of the situational manipulation of a choice mindset on blame, but not for the impact of individual beliefs related to free will and agency. In agreement with the Savani et al. (2011) research using a very different manipulation, participants who read the choice wording vignette rated “Taylor” as deserving more blame. Also as predicted, providing information about a target’s impoverished, versus advantaged, childhood background reduced blame, congruent with the Malle et al. (2014) model related to capacity to affect an outcome and in agreement with previous research (Ogletree & Archer, 2012). In addition, students’ perceived similarity to “Taylor” was negatively related to blame, perhaps reducing the tendency to make the fundamental attribution error (Ross, 1977) because of a better understanding of situational components that limit a person’s capacity to choose.

However, participants’ beliefs related to free will and agency were unrelated to blame in this scenario. If relatively few college students in the USA support a deterministic perspective, as indicated in previous research (Ogletree & Oberle, 2008), demonstrating a link between free will and blame may be challenging. Also, the choice manipulation in this instance may have overridden potential individual differences related to “could have done

Table 1 Significant predictor variables for blame judgments

Variable	<i>B</i>	95 % C.I. for <i>B</i>	β	r^2	<i>t</i>	<i>p</i>
Choice wording ^a	1.03	.41 to 1.66	.18	.03	3.25	.001
Background	-.70	-1.3 to -.12	-.13	.05	-2.37	.019
Perceived similarity	-.32	-.61 to -.04	-.12	.06	-2.24	.025

The r^2 value represents the additional variable included with each successive model

^a “No-choice” and “neutral” versions combined

otherwise” beliefs. Perhaps if more personal descriptors of “Taylor,” such as being “easily influenced,” had been included, personal beliefs related to free will/determinism might have been triggered.

Participants being college students from a particular area of the United States is a limitation of this research; their attitudes may not be reflective of other adults. In addition, the impact of a choice mindset on blame may have reflected the cultural biases of an individualistic society. Savani et al. (2011) did not find a choice manipulation effect with Indian undergraduates at the M. S. Ramaiah Institute of Technology in empathy for a young boy from Africa.

Tolerance toward others may be enhanced and blame reduced if behavior is framed in terms of situational components that reduce an individual’s capacity to choose. Enhancing understanding of factors influencing decisions of others, especially those who are very different from us, may promote less judgmental and blaming attitudes and help promote global interactions facilitating mutual cooperation rather than interactions based on fear and aggression.

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