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**the just  
world hypothesis  
and the attribution of  
agency to a victim**

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**ABSTRACT**

A study was designed to test the just world hypothesis in a situation where the derogation of an innocent victim was socially proscribed. In a 3 X 2 design, experimental subjects were asked to indicate their affect for an alleged victim of Nazi atrocities. In one condition, the victim supposedly received severe maltreatment. In the two remaining conditions, the severity of the maltreatment was either moderate or low. It was predicted that, contrary to the just world hypothesis, increased severity of maltreatment of the innocent victim would not result in his increased derogation. Rather, it was predicted that the restoration of justice would be realized by the attribution of increased agency of the victim in his suffering and decreased attribution to him as a victim of circumstance, as the severity of the suffering increased. The results supported the predictions, though the increased attribution of agency and decreased attribution of victimization by circumstance were found only in the case of extreme severity of maltreatment.

Lerner (1965, 1970) has proposed that individuals believe that the world is just; i.e., individuals see themselves and others as deserving the rewards and punishments which accrue to their acts. There follows a tendency to attribute negative traits or deeds to a suffering victim and to attribute positive traits or deeds to a successful person. Furthermore, if a victim is obviously innocent of any misdeeds, this will threaten the notion of a just world. In order to restore his belief in a just world, the individual will, in such circumstances, downgrade, reject, or dislike the innocent victim.

A well-known experiment by Lerner and Simmons (1966) lends support to the phenomenon of the derogation of an innocent victim. Subjects were instructed to watch a videotaped confederate who was supposedly participating in a paired-associate learning task in which an electric shock stimulus was used. In one condition, the subjects could decide, midpoint in the experiment, to reward the victim for her work and terminate the shocks. In a second condition, subjects were led to believe that, after the midpoint break, the study would go on and the victim would continue to be shocked. In both conditions, subjects were asked to assess the victim's attractiveness. The results supported the just world hypothesis. When subjects knew that they could reward the victim and terminate shock (thus restoring justice), they regarded the subject as more attractive than when they knew the victim would continue to be shocked.

Two further conditions in the Lerner and Simmons (1966) experiment suggest that the greater the apparent innocence of a suffering victim, the greater the

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consequent derogation of that victim's attractiveness. In one case, the victim was rated for attractiveness after the shock-motivated learning trials. In another, subjects were led to believe that the victim had agreed to withstand the shock in order for other subjects (confederate victims) to receive credit for participation in the study. As predicted, the altruistic victim received lower attractiveness ratings than the victim who was at the endpoint of the experiment.

Several recent studies (Aderman & Berkowitz, 1970; Brehm, Costanzo & Speck, 1972; Aderman, Brehm & Katz, 1974) have suggested that observational settings affect an observer's reactions to an innocent victim. Thus, such variables as whether subjects are alone or in a group, or whether they are instructed to imagine themselves as the victim, are said to mediate observer's reactions. Brehm *et al.* speculated that being in a group inhibits empathetic responses. And Aderman *et al.* found that in an «imagine self» condition, when subjects were told to imagine themselves as the victim, the victim was rated as more attractive than when the empathy-inducing instructions were missing.

Following the findings that a manipulation of empathy can affect the extent to which an innocent victim is derogated by an observer, the present study sought to investigate reactions to an innocent victim when derogation was inappropriate because of some socially-induced empathy. Specifically, it was predicted that the more severe maltreatment of an alleged victim of Nazi atrocities would not, along the predictions of the just world hypothesis, lead observers to derogate the victim all the more strongly. This prediction rests on an assumption that the social repugnance at Nazi atrocities in World War II has created a setting in which empathy for the victims of those atrocities is socially induced and derogation is socially proscribed. One need not cite at any length the popular novels, movies, and theatre productions which deal at a deep emotional level with the plight of Jews in Nazi Germany, evoking, as they do, genuine empathetic responses. Nor need one belabor the inappropriateness of anti-semitic sentiments in a social climate where such sentiments immediately evoke, with notable effectiveness, allusions to Hitler's Reich.

The prediction that increased empathy would attenuate an observer's derogation of an innocent victim does not in itself add to the research surrounding the just world hypothesis. What previous studies have assumed, however, is that when empathy is increased, empathy itself somehow mediates the derogation of an innocent victim. But this mediation is inevitably measured unidimensionally; i.e., it is established by the absence of negative affect for the innocent victim. What is ignored is the pos-

sible expression of derogation in attributional dimensions other than affect and attractiveness.

In the instance of victims of Nazi atrocities, one might well expect that an observer would hesitate to dislike the victim because of socially-induced empathetic responses. But what of the attribution of agency? Could not the observer, while avoiding direct derogation of the victim, still attribute negative traits to him by seeing him as an agent in his own suffering, rather than solely a victim of circumstance? This question of agency derives from the issue of the externality and internality of attributions and follows logically a distinction made by Jones and Davis (1965) between actors and observers in the attributional process. That is, if the just world hypothesis prevails, as the severity of the maltreatment of a victim of Nazi atrocities increases, the empathy-inducing factor should decrease. And as that empathetic identification with the victim decreases—as the victim becomes increasingly detached from the observer—, dispositional attributions to him increase. In short, the observer perspective (in which situationality as a locus of control dominates) is attenuated as empathy is reduced and the victim is seen increasingly more as an agent in his own suffering.

The present study also predicts, then, that in a situation where derogation of an innocent victim is proscribed, the just world hypothesis will prevail in the attribution of increasingly more personal agency (dispositional attributions) than circumstantial agency (situational attributions) as the severity of the consequences of a predicament increases.

## method

### Subjects

A total of thirty-two female undergraduate students volunteered from two introductory psychology courses to participate in the study without payment. Subjects were usually run in groups of five. Two subjects were not used in the analysis because they were suspicious of the procedures.

### Procedure

Subjects arrived at a large experimental room where the experimenter explained the purpose of the study. Subjects were told that, «the study you have volunteered to participate in is designed to see how independent observers react to actual case histories from the Nuremberg Trials which followed the discovery of Nazi atrocities in World War II». They were then presented with a typed copy of the bogus

case in a manila folder and asked to read it in detail and carefully.

*Manipulation of severity of consequences.* Each subject was given a case history of J. Z., a fictitious individual who was reportedly arrested by the Nazis in 1940. In every instance, the victim was described as

a Jew who, before the onset of the pogroms against Jewish citizens, was a baker in a small Northern German town. He did not, as far as the evidence shows, resist or take special notice of the rise of Nazism in his country. In 1940, much to his surprise, he was arrested and transferred to a relocation camp for Jews in Southern Germany.

The severity of the alleged victim's maltreatment in the relocation camp was manipulated by supplying different endings to the foregoing account.

In the case of extreme severity (extreme condition), subjects were told that, «While in the relocation camp, J. Z. was cruelly tortured by the Nazis and died as a result of his maltreatment.» In the case of moderate severity (moderate condition), the case history concluded with the statement that, «While in the relocation camp, J. Z. was cruelly tortured by the Nazis, but was finally released when the Allied troops moved into Germany.» In the Low condition, no mistreatment of the victim was cited: «J. Z. remained in the relocation camp, but was finally released when Allied troops moved into Germany.»

*Dependent measures.* Subjects were given five minutes to read and think about the case history. They were then asked to indicate how they felt about the victim on a bipolar adjectival, likert-type scale with endpoints marked «like» (+3) and «dislike» (-3). Subjects were then told that the 0 midpoint on the 7-point scale represented neither positive nor negative affect for the victim, but something in the nature of an «indecisive judgment» or «insufficient information for judgment.» They were told that the intensity of their feelings *vis-à-vis* the endpoint adjectives could be indicated in a descending magnitude from the endpoint to the 0 midpoint.

Subjects were then given a second scale, identical to the first, except that the endpoints were marked «not responsible» and «responsible.» They were instructed to assess the extent to which the subject in the case history was «responsible for the fate which befell him; i.e., to what extent did he somehow deserve his fate?» In a third dependent measure, using the same scale with endpoints labeled «not a victim» and «a victim,» subjects were asked to judge the extent to which they thought the alleged captive was «simply a victim of circumstances—a victim of the situation.» In these latter two scales, as in the first, the 0 midpoint represented either an indecisive

judgment or inadequate information to render a judgment of the locus of causality.

A final dependent measure was given to ascertain whether subjects differed in their attitudes towards the treatment of Jews by the Nazis, since such attitudes might well affect the subjects' attitudes towards the alleged victim and the consequent determination of the victim's personal agency in his suffering. On a scale identical to the foregoing scales, subjects were asked to rate the treatment of Jews by the Nazis as «inexcusable» or «excusable.»

**results**

A one-way analysis of variance of subjects' ratings of the victim showed no significant differences ( $p < .5$ ) between the three communications. In the Extreme ( $\bar{X} = 3.2$ ), Moderate ( $\bar{X} = 3.4$ ), and Low ( $\bar{X} = 3.6$ ) conditions, subjects tended to rate the victim midway on the scale between positive and negative affect («like» and «dislike» respectively).

Mean scores for situational and dispositional attributions by the type of communication appear in Table 1.

TABLE 1. Mean Scores for Situational and Dispositional Attributions by Type of Communication

| Communication condition | Attribution type  |                   |
|-------------------------|-------------------|-------------------|
|                         | Situational       | Dispositional     |
| Extreme                 | 4.20 <sup>c</sup> | 2.60 <sup>d</sup> |
| Moderate                | 6.30 <sup>a</sup> | 1.60 <sup>b</sup> |
| Low                     | 6.20 <sup>a</sup> | 1.30 <sup>b</sup> |

Note. N = 10 subjects per left-hand column cell, with measures repeated across attribution type. Higher means indicate greater situationality or dispositionality of attributions, respectively. Cells not sharing a common subscript differ at the .05 level by Tukey's ratio.

Scores were analyzed in a two-factor (3 × 2), repeated measures, split-plot analysis of variance for communication condition and attribution type, with measures for situationality and dispositionality repeated across the attribution factor. The summary analysis of variance (see Table 2) reveals a significant main effect for attribution type and a significant two-way interaction for the attribution and communication factors.

TABLE 2. Summary of the Analysis of Variance of Attribution. Scores by Type of Communication

| Source                      | df | MS     | F        |
|-----------------------------|----|--------|----------|
| Communication condition (A) | 2  | 1.62   | 1.53     |
| Error                       | 27 | 1.05   |          |
| Attribution type (B)        | 1  | 212.82 | 469.06 * |
| A X B                       | 2  | 17.72  | 30.05 *  |
| Error                       | 27 | .45    |          |

\*  $p < .001$

An exact test of the predictions regarding the attribution of agency to the victim was afforded by an internal analysis of the significant main effect and interaction. For this purpose Tukey's  $q$  ratio for the *a-posteriori* comparison of means was used, with an estimate of  $q'$  at the .05 level and a pooled error estimate by MS within cell. The results (see Table 1) indicate that in the Extreme condition subjects found the victim less a captive of circumstance and more responsible for his maltreatment than in the Moderate and Low conditions. In these latter two conditions, there were no significant differences between the two types of attributions, with observers judging the victim very much a captive of circumstance and not at all responsible for his maltreatment.

A one-way analysis of variance of mean scores for subjects in the Extreme ( $\bar{X}=1.0$ ), Moderate ( $\bar{X}=1.3$ ), and Low ( $\bar{X}=1.0$ ) conditions on attitudes towards the treatment of Jews in Nazi Germany revealed no significant difference ( $p < .4$ ) between the groups. Each group of subjects showed disapproval at the extreme end of the scale.

#### discussion

The data suggest that, when derogation of an innocent victim is proscribed, extreme maltreatment will lead to an observer's greater perception of the victim's responsibility for that maltreatment. Those subjects who were led to believe that the victim was killed by his captors perceived the victim as more greatly responsible for his predicament and indicated indecisive reactions to his victimization by circumstance or situation. Subjects who believed that the victim was either tortured and released or simply released were equally convinced that he was not at all responsible for his predicament and decidedly the victim of circumstance.

It is clear, then, that the death of the victim was the decisive discriminating stimulus in making an attribution of personal agency to the victim. In both the Moderate and Low conditions, the victim was released from captivity, and the element of torture in the Moderate condition did not mediate the death-release dimension apparently employed by the subjects in their assessments of the victim. Since, except for the death of the victim in the Extreme condition and the report of torture in the Moderate condition, subjects received the same information on the subject in all conditions, we must conclude that the

attribution of agency to the harshly maltreated victim supports the just world hypothesis. There is no reason to believe that an innocent victim who dies as the result of his maltreatment is personally responsible for his demise, unless it is to restore some belief in justice. The fact that an empathetic setting was socially created by the issue of Nazi atrocities—a creation supported in the failure to find direct derogation of victims in any condition—adds to the strength of this conclusion.

It should be noted that, owing to the nature of the case histories, it was deemed better to take a single measure of affect for the victim, rather than to measure affect (or attractiveness) indirectly by composite scores on a series of bipolar adjectival scales, as in the Lerner and Simmons (1966) study. This was to reduce the subjects' suspicion of the measurement of a number of traits for a victim who, unlike the victim in the Lerner and Simmons study, was not physically present (at least via television monitors) to the subjects. As such, this measurement does not exactly replicate the dimension of affect tapped in that study. On the other hand, the measurement of the attribution of agency, it seems to the authors, is the most direct measurement of the just world hypothesis: To what extent is an innocent victim responsible for his plight? Any attribution of responsibility under such circumstances offers unequivocal support for the just world hypothesis.

The use of causal dimensions as channels of negative attribution in this study has some far-reaching implications. Aderman *et al.* (1974) conclude that, rather than just world considerations, empathy-inhibiting instructions account for the strong derogation of innocent victims in the Lerner and Simmons (1966) study. They also offer evidence that, in empathy-inducing situations, victims are not derogated. The present results, however, offer evidence of derogation by the attribution of personal responsibility in an empathy-inducing situation, while at the same time replicating the findings of Aderman *et al.* on the dimension of affect. Clearly dimensions other than affect can act as channels of derogation.

An interesting incidental aspect of the study concerns the Brehm *et al.* (1972) speculation concerning the effects of group size and anonymity on the derogation of victims. In the present study subjects were guaranteed anonymity and had no way of knowing that they were assessing the same victim as another subject in the group. Future studies might employ such a case history procedure as a control of these variables.

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