

HARM AVOIDANCE OR BLAME AVOIDANCE? THE EFFECT OF PRIMING ON
REACTIONS TO SINGLE AND REPEAT ROBBERY VICTIMS

by

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Victims often do not receive the social support they need or expect from their peers. Explanations have focused on the just world hypothesis and defensive attribution, which involve two distinct motivational goals: harm avoidance and blame avoidance. It has been argued that similarity between victim and supporter is what determines which goal the supporter will adopt, but there may be other cues that can activate these motivational goals. The current study made use of mindset priming as a mechanism to increase the accessibility of these goals. Participants ($N = 217$) were either primed with harm avoidance, blame avoidance, or neutral priming and read vignettes describing a robbery victim who was either robbed once or twice, and either took preventative actions or did not. Results suggested that priming of motivational goals had only marginal effects on participants' attributions, evaluations, and supportive intentions towards the victim. The data provided evidence of a defensive attribution effect, such that victims who took preventative actions were perceived as more similar, and blamed less than victims who took no actions. In addition, repeat victims were blamed more than single victims only when they were dissimilar.

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1. INTRODUCTION

Over the last several decades there has been a great deal of research examining what happens to people when they become victims, and how people react to them. There are times when the suffering of another causes us to offer help as we recognize that the sufferer is in need. Other times however, people respond to the suffering of others negatively and do not provide needed support (Dunkel-Schetter, Blasband, Feinstein, & Herbert, 1992). Researchers have proposed various reasons for this, such as an inability of the potential supporter to recognize the victim's needs (Yee & Greenberg, 1998), the potential supporter's lack of ability to provide support (Dunkel-Schetter, et al., 1992), or the potential supporter's assessment of the costs of helping as being too high (Yee & Greenberg, 1998). Cutrona (1990) has suggested that people often fail to match the type of support offered to the victim's needs, and that offering the wrong type of support can have adverse effects for the victim, (see Greenberg & Ruback, 1992 for a similar argument). Other research shows that victims can make potential supporters aware of their own vulnerability, and can therefore elicit negative reactions including negative affective reactions, negative evaluations, blame and derogation, physical avoidance, rejection, and discrimination (Herbert & Dunkel-Schetter, 1992).

The present research attempts to identify factors that contribute to the failure of people to be supportive of a crime victim. I first present two theories that account for why victims are treated negatively (just world hypothesis and defensive attribution). I then introduce a variable previously not considered in the literature (priming of motivational goals), and discuss its implications for how victims will be evaluated according to defensive attribution principles.

1.1. JUST WORLD HYPOTHESIS

One reason potential supporters are often threatened by victims (and react negatively to victims) derives from supporters' worldview. The just world hypothesis (Lerner & Miller, 1978) is founded on the idea that people generally view the world as a place of justice, where good things happen to good people, and bad things happen to bad people. That is, people get what they deserve, and deserve what they get. Lerner theorized that the reason people possess this belief is that if good and bad things could happen randomly, then bad things could potentially happen to anyone. This view of the world as unpredictable is extremely threatening to one's sense of self as well as one's safety.

Lerner and his colleagues provided empirical support for this reasoning in a series of experiments. According to Lerner, people can maintain their belief in a just world by derogating the victim. Lerner and Simmons (1966) had subjects observe a confederate receive electric shocks for failing at a task. They found that subjects tended to derogate the "victim" when they were unable to intervene. Further, the greater the perceived injustice to the victim, the more subjects derogated her. Over the years numerous studies have replicated these results under various conditions and in different situations (for a review of this work see, Lerner & Montada, 1998).

1.2. DEFENSIVE ATTRIBUTION

While the just world hypothesis can account for some instances of victim blaming and derogation, there are other theories that offer explanations as well. One such theory is defensive attribution (Shaver, 1970b). Shaver's work initially focused on actors; that is, individuals who were perceived as responsible for the cause of a negative event. In a study where subjects were

observers of a negative event caused by another individual, dissimilar others were blamed and derogated, whereas similar others were less likely to be viewed as blameworthy (Shaver, 1970b). While Shaver (1985) acknowledged that the threat of negative consequences can cause people to find more fault in victims, he proposed a defensive attribution theory, which argues that observers are also motivated to avoid being blamed, should they find themselves in the same circumstances as the victim. A key question is to identify the conditions under which harm avoidance or blame avoidance are most likely to influence attributions of responsibility.

This question was addressed by Shaw and McMartin (1977), who proposed that when people are motivated to avoid harm, it becomes necessary to put as much distance as possible between themselves and the victim, in order to maintain the belief in control over the likelihood of negative events occurring to them. By blaming the victim (and thereby making internal attributions), the likelihood that the observer could be victimized in a similar way decreases. This reasoning is consistent with Lerner and Miller's (1978) just world hypothesis. Alternatively, when people are motivated to avoid blame, they are more concerned with being blamed by others should a victimization occur to them. The fact that a similar other has been victimized makes it more likely that the observers could be blamed should they be similarly victimized.

Shaver (1985) theorized that people will be more concerned with their own safety (harm avoidance) when the victim is dissimilar on one or both dimensions of personal and situational similarity. Alternatively, when a victim is perceived as similar on both of these dimensions, observers become concerned with the notion of being blamed for the victimization (blame avoidance), were it to happen to them. Thus, as a result of the desire to avoid blame, observers

minimize the amount of responsibility assigned to the victim, attributing greater responsibility to external factors.

There is a large body of literature that examines the effects of similarity on attributions of responsibility for negative events. Researchers have consistently found that similarity plays a major role in predicting whether or not someone will be blamed for the occurrence of a negative event. In a meta-analysis of 22 studies that used victim-observer similarity as an independent variable, Burger (1981) found strong support for the defensive attribution hypothesis. Sorrentino and Boutilier (1974) suggested that people who can anticipate being in a similar situation as a victim are less likely to attribute responsibility to the victim than people who do not anticipate being in a similar situation. Sorrentino and Boutilier (1974) found support for this hypothesis in an experimental paradigm similar to the one used by Lerner and Simmons (1966) where subjects evaluated a victim who had been given electric shocks for making errors in a learning task. Contrary to the Lerner and Simmons (1966) paradigm, subjects in this experiment were aware that they would be in the situation of the learner in the future. Sorrentino and Boutilier (1974) suggest that it is this difference that drove people to avoid derogating victims in their study. They further argued that the behavior of their subjects more closely resembled that which would follow defensive attribution (i.e., blame avoidance) than the belief in a just world. Lerner and Miller (1978) later addressed the issue of victim similarity, and stated that there seems to be a limitation to the belief in a just world. Empathy, rather than derogation, is evident when observers can imagine themselves in a similar situation in the future.

More recently, Dexter, Penrod, Linz, and Saunders (1997) examined how female observers evaluate female victims of rape. They found that these observers made high attributions of responsibility when the victims were dissimilar, and as similarity increased, attribution of

responsibility decreased. On the basis of this research, it is clear that similarity between the victim and the observer is an important determinant of how the observer will evaluate the victim. However, there are other variables that contribute to the evaluation process.

1.3. OTHER SOURCES OF MOTIVATION

Additional sources of motivation to attribute responsibility and blame have been identified. Many researchers have looked at severity of victimization as moderating attributions of responsibility (Robbennolt, 2000). However, findings regarding the effect of this variable have been inconsistent (Shaver 1970a, 1970b; Walster, 1967). Another source of motivation is the number of times a victim has been victimized. In an effort to examine this, Kirschbaum and colleagues (2003) investigated differences in the way people perceive single versus repeat burglary victims. Subjects read vignettes describing situations where someone was victimized either once, or twice. Findings indicated that people evaluated repeat victims more negatively, had less intention to help, and attributed more blame for the victimization than they did for single victims.

Responses to open-ended questions revealed that observers of repeat victims were more likely to comment that the victim should have done something to prevent the second victimization. These data suggest that a repeat victim who takes preventative measures after the first victimization might be seen as more similar to the observer. If taking such preventative measures equated to situational similarity, then when faced with a victim who is also personally similar, observers ought to seek blame avoidance under the tenets of defensive attribution.

Notwithstanding this, similar repeat victims are considerably more threatening to observers than dissimilar repeat victims. The reason for this involves the variable that defines the victim as similar. In this case, the victim has done the “right” thing by trying to prevent any subsequent

victimizations. Taking actions such as calling the police, changing behavior patterns, and taking protective measures make it clear that the victim has made a real effort to improve his or her situation. According to Kelley's (1972) augmentation principle, being victimized again despite taking such preventative measures makes the victimization particularly threatening to observers. In this case, the victim has done what any reasonable person would do, and in fact what "I" would do, and has still been victimized again. The implication is clear: something like this could happen to "me."

1.4. ACCESSIBILITY

Defensive attribution theorists have generally maintained that similarity is the key moderator of whether people respond in terms of blame or harm avoidance. However, it would be naive to assume that people do not enter everyday situations with emotional and cognitive experience. Rather, they enter situations with particular motivational goals more or less salient. People generally do not want to be victimized, and they also do not want to be blamed for negative events. Conceivably, if one of these concerns is highly accessible, it might override similarity to the victim in driving the evaluation process. That is, if someone's motivation to avoid harm were particularly accessible, we would expect this person to blame a similar victim. By the same token, we should expect that if someone's motivation to avoid blame is particularly accessible, even dissimilar others would *not* be blamed. The accessibility of particular motivational goals has not been addressed thus far in the context of defensive attribution.

It is even more interesting to consider the possibility of interactions between victim similarity and an observer's motivational goal. For example, based on the aforementioned study on repeat victims, we would expect dissimilar victims to be blamed more than similar victims when motivational goals have not been primed (Kirschbaum et al., 2003). However, if observers are

primed to think about avoiding future harm, similar victims could be blamed even more than dissimilar victims. The reason for this is that a repeat victim who has taken preventative measures after the first victimization (and therefore is likely to be perceived as being more similar by observers) may be more threatening than one who has not. While not blaming a similar victim can help one avoid being blamed if one should experience a similar misfortune, it would not be effective in reducing the motivation that was primed—harm avoidance. We could then expect observers to spend more time looking for ways to blame the victim in this situation. Kunda (1990) has noted that people attempt to arrive at a desired conclusion by searching their memory for beliefs and rules that support the desired conclusion. She has also suggested that it is possible for people to use accessible knowledge to create new beliefs and rules. The effort that is required to engage in such processing is greater than if the observer were able to make a snap decision.

Similarly, an observer who is motivated to avoid future blame might be less likely to blame a dissimilar repeat victim (i.e., one who has not taken preventative measures) than when the observer is either motivated to avoid harm or unmotivated in this regard. When we consider these possible interactions, it becomes clear that the accuracy of the predictions of defensive attribution theory could depend on the observer's motivational goals, and their accessibility.

To summarize, let us consider what defensive attribution would predict about how observers will respond when confronted with a repeat victim who either has or has not taken some preventative measure after the first victimization. The theory would suggest that victims who have not taken preventative measures will be perceived as dissimilar, which will lead to more blaming and derogation, and negative evaluations. The act of blaming and derogating will resolve the threat of future harm to observers' sense of self. Alternatively, victims who have

taken preventative measures will be perceived as similar, which will lead to less blaming and derogation, and positive evaluations. The lack of blame here effectively reduces the risk of observers being blamed, should something similar happen to them in the future. However, considering the dimension of the accessibility of motivational goals changes what would be expected when observers evaluate crime victims.

Assuming that the accessibility of motivational goals can affect decision-making, four hypotheses were generated.

1.5. HYPOTHESIS 1

When motivation to avoid future harm is primed, participants will be more likely to blame the victim regardless of the victim's similarity. In addition, when motivation to avoid future blame is primed, participants will be less likely to blame the victim regardless of similarity.

1.5.1. Rationale

Blaming the victim (making internal attributions) for the crime puts distance between the participant and the victim, making it less likely that the crime could happen to the participant. Similarly, blaming the victim, regardless of similarity makes it more likely that participants could be blamed if a similar event were to happen to them. The motivation to avoid harm makes blaming the victim likely, whereas the motivation to avoid blame makes blaming the victim unlikely.

1.6. HYPOTHESIS 2

When harm avoidance is primed, participants who read about a repeat victim who *has* taken preventative actions (and is therefore similar) should show the most negative evaluations and be least likely to have supportive intentions. In addition, participants in this condition will engage in the most effortful thinking, and therefore list the most thoughts when asked what factors were

considered in making evaluations of the victim's blameworthiness. Alternatively, when blame avoidance is primed, participants who read about a repeat victim who *has* taken preventative actions should show the most positive evaluations and be most likely to have supportive intentions.

1.6.1. Rationale

Participants primed with harm avoidance should be most concerned with a victimization happening to them. Similar repeat victims pose the greatest threat, and although it is not as easy to blame them, participants will work harder to find fault with the victim's behavior. The more threatening the victim is, the more blame is required to increase distance between participants and the victim. Participants primed with blame avoidance should be most concerned with avoiding blame for a negative event. Considering this and the fact that the victim is similar and more threatening should result in the strongest need to reduce the perceived likelihood that participants would be blamed if something similar happened to them.

1.7. HYPOTHESIS 3

When there is no priming of motivational goals, participants will evaluate repeat victims who *have not* taken preventative measures more negatively than single victims or repeat victims who *have* taken preventative measures.

1.7.1. Rationale

This will replicate the findings of Kirschbaum et al. (2003). It is easy to blame repeat victims for not taking actions to try to prevent a subsequent victimization.

1.8. HYPOTHESIS 4

When blame avoidance is primed, participants will evaluate repeat victims who *have not* taken preventative actions more negatively than repeat victims who *have* taken preventative actions and single victims, but this evaluation will not be as negative as when there is no priming.

1.8.1. Rationale

Although priming blame avoidance should reduce the overall negativity of the evaluations, dissimilar repeat victims should be held more accountable for the victimizations than similar repeat victims or single victims. Repeat victims are more threatening than single victims, and dissimilar repeat victims are easiest to blame.

In addition to these hypotheses, an exploratory path analysis was conducted to test Shaver's (1985) assumption that high perceived similarity leads to blame avoidance goals, and that it is this goal that causes positive evaluations and supportive intentions. An alternative pathway is suggested by research on similarity/attraction which has shown that high perceived similarity leads to increased liking and attraction (Byrne, 1997; McLaughlin, 1971). According to this reasoning, similarity could lead to liking and attraction, and this would then lead to less attributed blame and more supportive intentions. Essentially, the question is, do attributions of blame lead to evaluations, or do evaluations lead to attributions of blame?

2. METHOD

2.1. PARTICIPANTS AND DESIGN

Participants consisted of 228 female students living near a metropolitan university and enrolled in Introductory Psychology, who received credit towards fulfillment of class requirements for

their participation. Eleven subjects were dropped from the analysis for the following reasons: Suspicion ($n = 4$), missing data ($n = 5$), did not follow instructions ($n = 1$), and poor grasp of the English language ($n = 1$). The remaining 217 participants were randomly assigned to one of 12 conditions in a 3 X 2 X 2 between subjects factorial design. The independent variables consisted of primed motivational goal (harm avoidance, blame avoidance, and no prime), number of victimizations (repeat, single), and preventative actions (actions, no actions).

2.2. OVERVIEW OF PROCEDURE

Participants signed up for the study under the guise that two separate studies were being conducted in order to fill the one-hour time slot. The “first” study (the priming task) was described as a study of how people solve various cognitive tasks. The “second” study (the manipulation of victimization and assessment of evaluations) was described as a study of perceptions of crime victims. Each part of the study was conducted by a different experimenter, in a different room in order to reduce demand characteristics and suspicion that the two parts of the study were related (as prescribed by Bargh & Chartrand, 2000). Participants were run in groups of three to four. In the first study (i.e., priming task) participants were given a task involving the generation of either harm prevention tactics (i.e., harm avoidance), blame avoidance tactics, or a set of math problems used as a control condition.¹ After all participants completed the task, the first experimenter gave a false debriefing. Participants were subsequently met by the second experimenter who led them to a different room where the second

¹ It was suggested that asking female participants to complete math problems could lead to stereotype threat, which could in turn activate the motivational goal of harm avoidance. To test for this, math problems were scored, resulting in a mean score of 18.63 ($SD = 1.37$) out of 20. In addition, subjects’ math scores were not correlated with the number of harm avoidance thoughts subjects reported. No evidence of stereotype threat was obtained.

study (i.e., perceptions of crime victims) was conducted. Participants were then given a written description of a crime and asked to complete a questionnaire concerning their perceptions of the victim.

2.3. PROCEDURE AND MATERIALS

2.3.1. Priming

The purpose of the first part of the study was to prime motivational goals below conscious awareness: harm avoidance and blame avoidance. Bargh and Chartrand (2000) have outlined a procedure known as mindset priming, which involves the preactivation of specific motivations. This method has been used to show that goal-directed thought in one context can operate later in an unrelated context. What is primed is a way of thinking about a situation. Chaiken, Giner-Sorolla, and Chen (1996) used this technique successfully in a study where either accuracy or impression-management goals were primed.

Participants were asked to imagine that they were recently driving their car, and narrowly avoided a severe traffic accident with another driver. In the harm avoidance conditions, participants were asked to imagine that they felt relieved that no one got hurt. They were then asked to list some of their thoughts on how bad the accident could have been and why they would feel relieved. In the blame avoidance conditions, participants were asked to imagine that they felt relieved that they would not be held responsible for hurting anyone else or themselves. They were then asked to list some of their thoughts on how they could have been blamed for the accident, and why they would feel relieved.

2.3.2. Crime Vignettes

Participants then read one of four crime vignettes, each one corresponding to one of the combinations of the two victimization variables (repeat/actions, repeat/no actions, single/actions,

and single/no actions). Each vignette described a female student attending their university who was robbed near the university on her way home from class. In the repeat conditions the victim was described as subsequently having been robbed a second time. In all four vignettes, the description explained what was stolen and provided information about how the victim felt emotionally.

In the actions conditions, there was a description of specific things the victim did after the first victimization to prevent it from happening again (i.e., repeat/actions, single/actions). These included returning home and calling the police, calling the bank to cancel credit/ATM cards, acquiring pepper spray, finding a new route home from class, and walking with a friend. In the no preventative actions conditions, it was simply stated that the victim returned home and took no further action (i.e., repeat/no actions, single/no actions).

2.4. DEPENDENT MEASURES

After reading the description of the crime, participants were asked to complete a questionnaire containing multiple 7-point closed-ended questions and some open-ended questions. These items were designed to measure the key dependent variables: intention to provide support, perceived blameworthiness, and evaluation of the victim's actions. In addition, participants were asked to list the thoughts they had when they made their evaluations of the victim's blameworthiness. This task was designed to measure the amount of effortful thinking engaged in by participants. More thoughts listed indicated greater effortful thinking. The thought listing task was also designed to provide information about the effectiveness of the priming task. There was also an individual item designed to assess how well the participants identified with the victim. In addition, there were several items designed to check the effectiveness of the manipulations. These included an open ended item that asked participants to

describe what happened to the victim, and two 7-point bipolar items designed to measure whether or not participants felt the victim took preventative actions, and perceived similarity between themselves and the victim. The last set of questions asked for participants' age, sex, ethnicity, and their belief as to what the study was about. The purpose of the latter was to test for suspicion. Participants were subsequently given a full debriefing.

3. RESULTS

3.1. MANIPULATION CHECKS

Responses to the open ended question that asked participants to describe what happened to the victim were coded for mention of number of victimizations. Of the 104 participants in the single conditions, 103 mentioned just one victimization, whereas 107 of the 110 participants in the repeat conditions mentioned multiple victimizations, $\chi^2(1) = 198.40, p < .01$.

In order to determine whether participants were aware of whether or not the victim took preventative actions, participants' descriptions of what happened to the victim were coded for mention of the victim taking any such actions. Ninety-three of the 108 participants in the actions conditions mentioned such actions, whereas 104 of the 106 participants in the no actions conditions either stated that the victim did not take actions, or made no mention of actions, $\chi^2(2) = 167.13, p < .01$. In addition, an analysis performed on responses to an individual item, "How strongly do you believe that the victim asked herself, 'What can I do to prevent this from happening again?'" (7 = *Very Strongly*, 1 = *Not Very Strongly*) revealed that those in the actions conditions rated the victim as more likely to have asked herself this question ($M = 5.96, SD = 1.46$) than those in the no actions conditions ($M = 2.61, SD = 2.00$), $F(1, 205) = 260.87, p < .001$.

In order to test whether manipulating the victim's actions was a good manipulation of similarity, I analyzed responses to a second individual item that asked, "How similar are the victim's actions to what you would have done in a similar situation?" (7 = *Similar*, 1 = *Dissimilar*). Consistent with expectations, participants rated victims in the actions conditions as more similar ($M = 5.37$, $SD = 1.65$) than victims in the no actions conditions ($M = 2.60$, $SD = 1.57$), $F(1, 205) = 171.81$, $p < .001$.

The final independent variable was the manipulation of mindset priming. Through extensive searching of the literature on priming and automaticity, I concluded that there are no real standards for measuring the effectiveness of such priming. Some researchers (Chen, Schechter, & Chaiken, 1996) have suggested including thought listing items in order to detect the effects of priming, but this does not seem to be a universal rule. Nevertheless, a thought listing question was included in the questionnaire. This item was coded by two independent coders after a period of extensive training. During the training period, the coders were given pilot data in order to learn the coding scheme. Each coder independently made judgments, and results were discussed until all differences were resolved. Additional pilot data were then used to establish higher interrater reliability.

All thoughts were coded into one of three categories: harm avoidance (i.e., thoughts that indicated victim blaming or derogation), blame avoidance (i.e., thoughts that displaced blame from the victim, or praised the victim), and miscellaneous (i.e., all thoughts that did not fit into one of the aforementioned categories). Interrater reliability was high, (Cohen's Kappa = .83), and differences were resolved through discussion. In order to control for the total number of thoughts listed for each participant, ratios were calculated (i.e., harm avoidance to total, blame avoidance to total) and differences between conditions were tested. Consistent with what would

be expected had the manipulation been successful, participants primed with harm avoidance ($M = .44$, $SD = .34$) listed marginally more harm avoidance thoughts than participants primed with blame avoidance ($M = .32$, $SD = .28$) or control subjects ($M = .38$, $SD = .31$), ($F(2, 213) = 2.58$, $p < .08$). However, there were no differences in the number of blame avoidance thoughts listed.

3.2. MAJOR FINDINGS

An exploratory principle components analysis was conducted on all of the substantive questions in the questionnaire (i.e., nondemographic/manipulation check items) in order to detect the emergence of factors and reduce the amount of data. The method of rotation was promax, as it was expected that some factors would be correlated. A factor was retained if its eigenvalue exceeded 1. Items were included on a factor if they loaded on the factor at .40 or higher, and items that loaded at .40 or higher on multiple factors were excluded. The analysis resulted in three meaningful factors: Victim Blame (e.g., foolish/wise, careless/deliberate, irresponsible/responsible, $\alpha = .93$), Intentions to Support the Victim (e.g., “How strong would your intention be to be supportive?”, $\alpha = .85$), and Critical Negative Evaluations of the Victim (e.g., “To what extent do you believe that the victim could have tried harder to avoid becoming a crime victim?”, $\alpha = .72$) (see Table 1).

These three composite measures and an additional single item that assessed participants’ overall attitude towards the victim were submitted to a correlation analysis in order to determine whether or not a multivariate analysis would be appropriate. All four dependent measures were significantly correlated with one another at the .01 level (see Table 2). For this reason, all four of the dependent measures were submitted to a 3-way MANOVA. The analysis indicated that priming had no effect on participants’ blame, intentions to support, evaluations, and overall attitude towards the victim (Wilks’ Lambda = .943, $F(8, 404) = 1.51$, $p > .05$). However, the two

remaining independent variables, victim status (Wilks' Lambda = .941, $F(4, 202) = 3.18$, $p < .02$) and actions (Wilks' Lambda = .582, $F(4, 202) = 36.25$, $p < .001$) yielded significant differences in the means of the four dependent measures, such that repeat victims were judged more harshly than single victims and victims who took no actions were judged more harshly than victims who took actions. In addition to these main effects, there was a significant interaction between status and actions, (Wilks' Lambda = .939, $F(4, 202) = 3.29$, $p < .02$).

3.3. TESTS OF HYPOTHESES

Although there was no main effect for priming when all of the dependent measures were considered, I conducted a univariate analysis in order to test Hypothesis 1, which predicted a main effect for priming such that participants would blame the victim more when primed with harm avoidance than when primed with blame avoidance. Results showed that participants blamed victims marginally more when harm avoidance was primed ($M = 28.85$, $SD = 11.10$) than when blame avoidance was primed ($M = 25.67$, $SD = 11.16$), ($F(2, 205) = 2.73$, $p < .07$), providing partial support for Hypothesis 1.

Given the fact that the manipulation check for priming revealed only a marginal effect, I employed an alternate method of testing this hypothesis. I used participants' self-reports of harm avoidance and blame avoidance thoughts (taken from the thought listing) as one predictor (instead of the manipulated groups), victimization status (i.e., single, repeat) and actions (i.e., actions, no actions) as additional predictors, and then conducted two separate multiple regression analyses on victim blame. These analyses tested main effects, two-way, and three-way interactions. Results revealed a main effect of harm avoidance thoughts ($\beta = .27$, $p < .001$), such that the more harm avoidance thoughts participants listed, the more blame they attributed to the victim. There were no significant interactions. Results also revealed a main effect for blame

avoidance thoughts ($\beta = -.17, p < .003$), such that the more blame avoidance thoughts participants listed, the less blame they attributed to the victim.

There was also a significant three-way interaction ($\beta = -1.06, p < .05$). Closer examination of the interaction suggested that when the number of blame avoidance thoughts listed fell to one standard deviation below the mean, participants' attributions of blame towards repeat victims who took no actions was most affected. In this instance, participants blamed the victim the most compared to the other three conditions (i.e., repeat/actions, single/no actions, single/actions) (See Figure 1). Alternatively, when the number of blame avoidance thoughts listed was at the mean or one standard deviation above the mean, this difference was not as sharp.

Hypothesis 2 predicted a 3-way interaction such that participants primed with harm avoidance in the repeat/actions condition would show the most negative evaluations of the victim, and have the lowest intentions to be supportive. In addition, Hypothesis 2 predicted that participants would list the most number of thoughts in this condition. The 3-way interaction for evaluations of the victim was not significant, ($F(2, 205) = .395, p > .05$). Nor was the predicted 3-way interaction significant for intentions to be supportive, ($F(2, 205) = 2.67, p > .05$). Thus the data did not support Hypothesis 2. While the predicted 3-way interaction regarding the total number of thoughts listed was significant, ($F(2, 202) = 3.87, p < .025$), the data yielded no interpretable pattern.

Hypothesis 3 predicted that participants who were not primed with either of the two motivational goals would evaluate repeat victims who took no preventative actions most negatively compared to participants in the other three conditions that received no priming. Two dependent variables were used to measure these evaluations: overall attitude towards the victim and critical negative evaluations of the victim. This hypothesis was examined with a series of

planned comparisons. Consistent with this prediction, when participants were not primed with either motivational goal, their overall attitude towards the victim was more negative in the repeat/no actions condition ($M = 3.94$, $SD = 1.39$) than in the repeat/actions ($M = 5.41$, $SD = 1.12$), single/actions ($M = 5.28$, $SD = 1.18$) and single/no actions ($M = 4.89$, $SD = 1.28$) conditions, ($F(1, 205) = 13.91$, $p < .001$). However, regarding the second dependent measure, how critical participants were of the victim, no significant differences emerged.

Hypothesis 4 predicted that participants who were primed with blame avoidance would evaluate repeat victims who took no preventative actions more negatively than single victims who took no preventative actions, and single or repeat victims who took preventative actions, but not as negatively as when there was *no* priming. Two dependent variables were used to measure these evaluations: overall attitude towards the victim and critical negative evaluations of the victim. This hypothesis was also examined with a series of planned comparisons. Consistent with this prediction, when participants were primed with blame avoidance, their overall attitude towards the victim was more negative in the repeat/no actions condition ($M = 4.32$, $SD = 1.38$) than in the repeat/actions ($M = 5.22$, $SD = 1.17$), single/actions ($M = 5.56$, $SD = 1.15$), and single/no actions ($M = 5.00$, $SD = 1.27$) conditions. Participants primed with blame avoidance and in the repeat/no actions condition also had a more positive overall attitude towards the victim than participants who were not primed and were in the repeat/no actions condition ($M = 3.94$, $SD = 1.39$), ($F(1, 205) = 3.76$, $p < .05$).² However, once again the second dependent measure, how critical participants were of the victim, yielded no significant differences.

² P-value reflects a one-tailed test, since the direction of the differences between means was specified a priori.

3.4. ADDITIONAL ANALYSES

The data presented up to this point have suggested that the effects of priming may be equivocal. For this reason, I felt it may be worthwhile to collapse across the levels of priming and consider the effects of the other two independent variables, victimization status and actions by themselves. Specifically, it seemed important to examine the data for the presence of a defensive attribution effect. If such an effect did occur, I would expect a main effect for actions, such that dissimilar victims (did not take preventative actions) would be blamed more than similar victims (took preventative actions). However, this main effect should be qualified by an interaction between victim status and actions, such that participants would blame the more threatening (repeat) victim more when the victim was dissimilar (did not take preventative actions).

As shown in Figure 2, consistent with these predictions, the 2-way ANOVA revealed a significant main effect for actions such that dissimilar victims ($M = 33.77$, $SD = 8.47$) were blamed more than similar victims ($M = 20.19$, $SD = 9.45$), ($F(1, 213) = 130.99$, $p < .001$). In addition, the interaction revealed that participants did not differentiate in attributions of blame between single ($M = 20.37$, $SD = 8.50$) and repeat ($M = 20.02$, $SD = 10.39$) victims when the victim took preventative actions, but did differentiate in attributions of blame between single ($M = 30.26$, $SD = 8.65$) and repeat ($M = 37.09$, $SD = 6.86$) victims when the victim did not take preventative actions, ($F(1, 213) = 9.28$, $p < .01$). The main effect and interaction effect cumulatively suggest that participants engaged in defensive attribution when attributing blame to the victim.

3.5. PATH ANALYSIS

In order to better understand the nature of the relationship between the variables in this study, two models were tested using a path analysis in a structural equation framework. The first model

tested was the one proposed by Shaver (1985). According to this model, the victim's actions lead to judgments of similarity, which then lead to judgments of blameworthiness, which influence judgments of liking, which then influences the amount of intended support. The data provided partial support for this model, (Satorra-Bentler $\chi^2(3) = 33.67, p < .001$; CFI = .94; RMSEA = .15). A second model was tested in which actions lead to judgments of similarity, which lead to judgments of liking, which influence judgments of blameworthiness, which then influences supportive intentions. No support was obtained for this model (Satorra-Bentler $\chi^2(3) = 156.64, p < .001$; CFI = .68; RMSEA = .34).

4. DISCUSSION

Consistent with Hypothesis 1, participants primed with harm avoidance attributed more blame to the victim than participants primed with blame avoidance. In addition, participants' self reports of harm avoidance and blame avoidance thoughts predicted the amount of blame attributed to the victim, such that more harm avoidance thoughts led to increased blame, and more blame avoidance thoughts led to decreased blame. Furthermore, the three-way interaction between blame avoidance thoughts, victimization status, and preventative actions suggested that when people read about a victim that did not take preventative actions, a low number of blame avoidance thoughts caused repeat victims to be blamed more relative to single victims than when the number of blame avoidance thoughts was average, or high.

Contrary to Hypothesis 2, participants primed with harm avoidance who read about repeat victims who took preventative actions did not show more negative evaluations and less supportive intentions than participants in other conditions. In addition, and also contrary to

Hypothesis 2, participants primed with blame avoidance who read about repeat victims who took preventative actions did not show more positive evaluations and more supportive intentions than participants in other conditions. Consistent with Hypothesis 3, when no priming was administered, participants evaluated the most dissimilar and most threatening victim most negatively. Supporting Hypothesis 4, participants demonstrated this pattern when blame avoidance was primed as well, and as predicted, evaluations were not as negative as when motivational goals were not primed.

The findings presented here suggest that although motivational goals may be made accessible in ways other than those prescribed by defensive attribution (i.e., similarity cues), participants may rely on similarity more than other cues that could activate motivational goals. The marginal effects of priming on victim blame suggest that priming may have played some role in participants' attributions of blame, but not a very strong role. In fact, when victimization status and actions were considered separately from priming, very strong effects were shown, and patterns in the data were consistent with defensive attribution predictions.

According to defensive attribution, when people are confronted with a similar victim, they engage in the motivational goal of blame avoidance, and consequently make positive evaluations of the victim to alleviate the threat of being blamed should something similar happen to themselves. The findings here indicate that participants did not differentiate between similar repeat and single victims in their attributions of blame, which is consistent with the goal of blame avoidance. By not blaming the victim, participants were able to remove the threat of being blamed if something similar happened to them.

Alternatively, defensive attribution states that when confronted with dissimilar victims, people engage in the motivational goal of harm avoidance, and therefore attribute greater blame

to the victim in order to alleviate the threat of the possibility of a similar event happening to them. The findings here indicate that participants did treat dissimilar repeat and single victims differentially, attributing more blame to repeat victims than single victims. This is consistent with the goal of harm avoidance, and also with what the just world hypothesis suggests should occur.

In addition to these findings, the path analysis that compared two separate models that attempt to explain the relationship between the variables suggested that Shaver's (1985) model fit the data better than the alternative model (i.e., evaluations precede blame). Overall, the findings in the present study are consistent with defensive attribution.

These findings have important implications for understanding the conditions under which victims are more or less likely to receive social support. Potential supporters may rely on how similar the victim is on dimensions of personal characteristics, as well as situational ones. Consequently, victims may find it beneficial to seek support from those members of their social network who are most similar to them because such members will be less likely to blame the victims. However, the findings here indicate that situational similarity is highly important in determining whether potential supporters will adopt harm avoidance or blame avoidance (or make favorable judgments) as a motivational goal. Thus, it may be important for victims to act in ways that members of their social network deem appropriate. For example, crime victims may be more likely to receive social support when they take preventative measures (e.g., call the police) in response to being victimized, and this is especially more likely if the victim later becomes a repeat victim.

It is important to note however that not all people would agree that taking preventative measures after a criminal victimization is appropriate, and even those who do find such actions

appropriate may differentiate between the appropriateness of some actions over others (e.g., calling the police). Some social groups may have norms against involving the police, whereas others may prefer physically resisting a perpetrator (e.g., using pepper spray) (Greenberg & Ruback, 1992). Therefore, the similarity that potential supporters perceive in their victimized peer may depend in part on the social norms of the group to which they belong.

The findings presented here may not be limited to the context of criminal victimization. Repeat victimization is a potential problem in other domains. For example, cancer patients can become repeat victims when they undergo successful treatment, and later relapse. The same can be said of patients with liver disease who undergo transplant surgery, and subsequently incur liver problems. The actions that these victims take may play a significant role in determining how peers and physicians react to them. Situational factors such as lifestyle (e.g., lung cancer patient who continues to smoke after treatment, liver transplant patient who continues to drink alcoholic beverages) may provide the necessary cues supporters rely on for assessing similarity, which in turn could influence support decisions, and perhaps, ultimately influence the quality of medical care.

There are some caveats to the present findings. First, the participants were undergraduate female students, which could limit the generalizability. Research on gender differences in social support outcomes suggests that females are more likely to offer social support, as well as receive needed social support (Barbee, et al., 1993). In addition, only one type of victimization was examined (i.e., robbery). Some may argue that other kinds of victimizations, including other types of criminal victimization may elicit different reactions from potential supporters. A related criticism is that behavioral measures, rather than measures of intention may produce findings different from those presented here. Although intentions often do provide good indications of

behavior (Fishbein & Ajzen, 1975), more recent research suggests that intentions alone do not always predict behavior (Ajzen, 1985). Had behavior been measured in this study, we might have seen that in fact, intentions were not good predictors of behavior. Silver, Wortman, and Crofton (1990) conducted research that supports this hypothesis. They found that people often fail to appreciate the discomfort they will feel when in a position to give social support, and that this discomfort can cause changes in behavior from what the supporters originally intended.

Finally, the nature of the stimuli should be addressed. Hafer and Begue (2005) have argued that the use of hypothetical vignettes in experiments involving victimization manipulations may not have much emotional impact on participants. However, in the present study the vignettes were designed in such a way as to maximize participants' involvement. The victim was described as a fellow female student at the same university, who was victimized in a location that was familiar to most of the participants. In addition, real robberies similar to the one described in the vignette have occurred in the same vicinity, and have been publicized on more than one occasion (Stonesifer, 2005). It seems likely that the vignettes did have an emotional impact on the participants. In support of this argument, four 7-point bipolar measures of participant discomfort (upset, angry, scared, and agitated) were aggregated ($\alpha = .78$) to get an overall measure of involvement (possible range = 4-28). The mean of 15.05 ($SD = 5.31$) suggests that participants were moderately involved. For these reasons, it is reasonable to assume that the vignettes used in this study had some emotional impact on the participants.

The present study and the caveats discussed in the preceding paragraphs illuminate several possible directions for future research. First, we need to study the responses of diverse populations to the effects of repeat victimization in domains other than criminal victimization (e.g., illness, accidents). Secondly, these responses should be examined in a behavioral

paradigm. It is important to understand whether or not the effects described here would hold when actual behavior is measured, rather than behavioral intentions. One type of victimization that could be studied in a behavioral paradigm is divorce. It is easy to think of many ways in which victims of divorce could be blamed for their circumstances (e.g., the victim was too young to get married), and this may be especially true in the case of repeat victims. Identifying additional factors that contribute to how such victims will be received by their social support network is important as well. Clearly, additional research is needed on the impact of motivational goals on responses to repeat victims.

APPENDIX A

Tables

Table 1. *Factor Loadings and Eigen Values For the Three Components*

Factor Label	Eigen Value	Factor Loading
Blame	7.07	
Foolish/Wise		.86
Careless/Deliberate		.78
Bad/Good		.85
Irresponsible/Responsible		.89
Careless/Careful		.69
Naïve/Sophisticated		.52
Unaware/Aware		.54
Indecisive/Decisive		.84
Unintelligent/Intelligent		.79
Intentions to be Supportive	2.26	
How much sympathy?		.77
Intention to be supportive?		.81
How helpful?		.69

Table 1 (continued)

How bad do you feel?		.83
Doesn't need support/Needs support		.66
Critical	1.08	
How critical?		.61
To what extent could the victim have tried harder?		.78

Table 2. *Correlations Between Dependent Measures*

Dependent Measures	1	2	3	4
1. Victim Blame	1			
2. Supportive Intentions	.42*	1		
3. Critical Negative Evaluations	.39*	.30*	1	
4. Overall Attitude	.62*	.62*	.42*	1

* $p < .01$

APPENDIX B

Figures

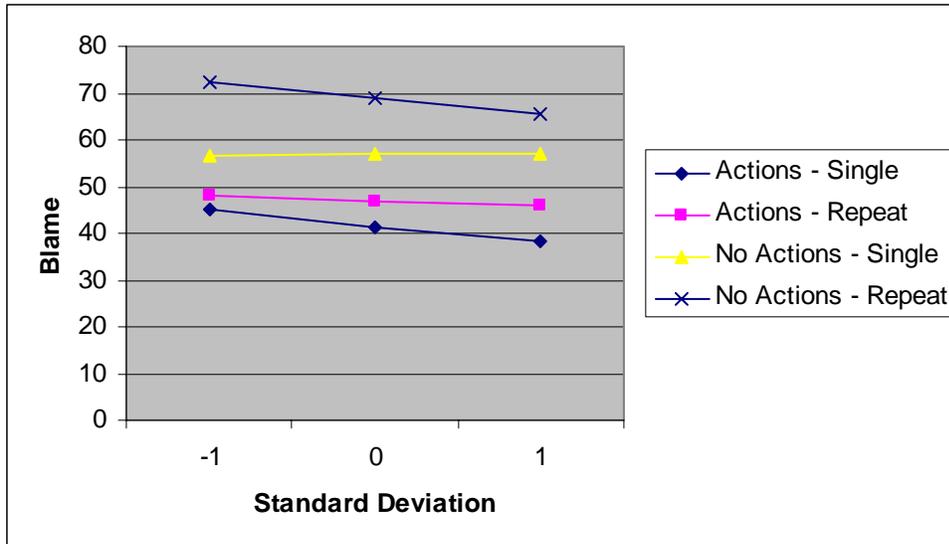


Figure 1. *Three-way interaction for self reports of blame avoidance, victimization status, and preventative actions on blame, where for repeat victims that did not take preventative actions, a low number of blame avoidance thoughts resulted in the most blame.*

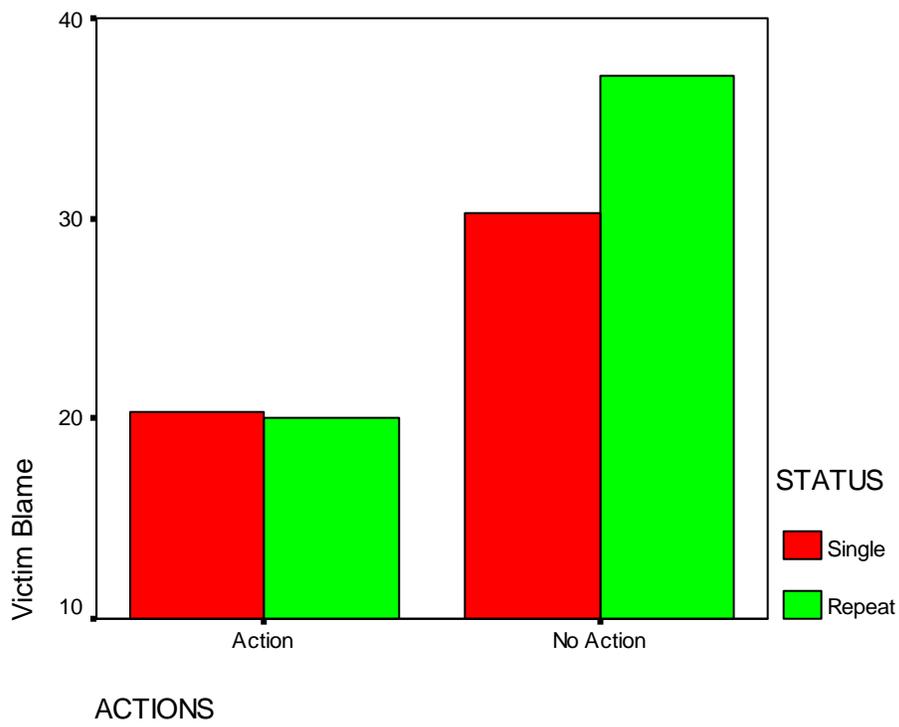


Figure 2. *Interaction effect between victimization status and actions on blame.*

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