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FlashReport

To escape blame, don't be a hero—Be a victim

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ABSTRACT

In situations where people (or their lawyers) seek to escape blame for wrongdoing, they often use one of two strategies: frame themselves as a hero (hero strategy) or as a victim (victim strategy). The hero strategy acknowledges wrongdoing, but highlights previous good deeds to offset blame. The victim strategy also acknowledges wrongdoing, but highlights the harms suffered by the perpetrator to deflect blame. Although commonsense suggests that past good deeds can offset blame from transgressions, *moral typecasting* (Gray & Wegner, 2009) suggests otherwise. Despite past good deeds, heroes remain blameworthy as moral agents. On the other hand, victims are moral patients and thus incapable of blame. Three studies found that victim strategy consistently reduced blame, while the hero strategy was at best ineffectual and at worst harmful. This effect appeared to stem from how the minds of victims and heroes are perceived.

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How do you escape blame for doing something immoral? One option is the *hero strategy*: Remind people of your previous good deeds—ideally, something very good that earns you credit against your wrongdoing. This is the strategy defense attorneys use when they point out a defendant's record as pillar of the community or rescuer of orphans. Another option is the *victim strategy*: Escape blame by highlighting some harm you suffered to turn yourself into a victim rather than a harm-doer. This is the strategy attorneys use when they point out how much a defendant has suffered in life, whether at the hands of parents, lovers, or society. Both strategies are frequently used by attorneys (Spence, 2005), but does either work?

According to the belief in a just world (Lerner & Miller, 1978) and the halo effect (Thorndike, 1920), the hero strategy should be effective in escaping blame. A just world means that those who do good deserve reward, not punishment or blame. The halo effect suggests that the positive glow from past heroism can generalize to reduce blame in other contexts (Alicke, 2000; Alter, Kernochan, & Darley, 2007), but this may only work when moral transgressions are ambiguous.

Seeming to argue against the hero strategy is the finding that people punish hypocrites (Cha & Edmondson, 2006); however, the hero strategy examined here highlights objective good deeds, not simply self-promotion. Do-gooder derogation also seems to argue against the hero strategy (Monin, Sawyer, & Marquez, 2008), but such

derogation only occurs when good deeds make others look bad, which is not the case for impartial observers passing judgment (e.g., juries).

At first blush, the victim strategy seems a poor choice; after all, people are only too happy to blame victims for their plight (Lerner & Miller, 1978). However, victims can also evoke sympathy and decrease blame when their plight is directly linked to the offence (Weiner, 1980). Moral typecasting (Gray & Wegner, 2009) suggests that even completely unrelated victimhood can help escape blame. Moral typecasting holds that people classify others as either moral agents (doers of good/evil) or patients (recipients of good/evil). As these roles are enduring and mutually exclusive, typecasting suggests that victims—moral patients—should be seen as relatively incapable of evil and earn less blame than moral agents. Alternatively, despite their previous good deeds, heroes remain blameworthy as moral agents.

Typecasting thus suggests that, ironically, a random victim would be blamed less for a misdeed than someone like Mother Theresa, who devoted her life to helping others. The present studies tested the power of the victim and hero strategies in escaping blame. It was predicted that the victim strategy would help escape blame, whereas the hero strategy would be ineffectual and even counterproductive.

If victims do earn less blame than heroes, two possible mechanisms may explain this effect. The first is emotion—victims may elicit more sympathy than heroes, with sympathy leading to reduced blame (Weiner, 1980). The second is mind perception. People generally perceive the minds of others along the two independent dimensions of Agency (the capacity for intentional action) and Experience (the capacity for feeling) (Gray, Gray, & Wegner, 2007). Legal definitions suggest that perceptions of Agency lead to increased blame (i.e., *Mens rea*, Hart & Honoré, 1985), while some research hints that perceptions of Experience may be inversely related to blame (Gray & Wegner,

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2009). We suggest that, relative to heroes, victims will be seen as less capable of Agency and more capable of Experience and that this—not sympathy—will be linked to blame judgments.

Three experiments tested the power of victimhood in escaping blame. Experiment 1 used between subjects comparisons of heroes, victims and neutral targets, and also assessed mind perception and sympathy. Experiment 2 used a more sensitive within-subjects measure for measuring blame, while Experiment 3 used memory as a proxy for blame.

Experiment 1: victims escape blame

This experiment asked participants to make blame and punishment judgments concerning a moral transgression. Information about the transgressor framed him as either a past victim, hero, or neutrally. It was expected that previous victimhood would help offset blame, while previous good deeds would not.

Method

Participants were recruited from on and near an urban university campus, in dining halls, parks, and train stations. They were offered either a candy bar in compensation and/or the heartfelt thanks of the experimenter. In this study, 90 participants were recruited (43 female, 46 male, $M_{age} = 20$). One was excluded for failing to follow instructions.

Participants read a brief vignette about a man named George. It began with “Every week, George gets paid \$600, and every week...” and ended differently depending on condition. In the *hero* condition, it ended with “he gives \$100 of it away to a local charity.” In the *victim* condition, it ended with, “his supervisor steals \$100 of it. He tells George that he'll just fire him if he complains.” In the *neutral* condition, it ended with “he spends it on normal things.”

Participants then evaluated George's perceived mind, by rating his relative capacity for self-control, intentional thought, pain and fear. Each capacity was rated on a 5-pt scale with anchors “Less than average” and “More than average.” Participants also rated their sympathy towards George on a 5-pt scale from “None at all” to “Extreme sympathy.”

On the next page, participants read that “One day during the week, George sees a woman in front of him drop \$10. Rather than give it back, he picks up the money and keeps it.” Blame and punishment were each assessed on a 5-pt scale from “None at all” to Extreme.”

Results and discussion

Blame

The answers to the blame and punishment questions were significantly correlated, $r(87) = .47$, $p < .001$, so were averaged to form a blame index. A one-way ANOVA with condition (*hero/neutral/victim*) as the independent variable and the blame index as the dependent variable revealed a significant effect, $F(2,86) = 4.37$, $p < .05$.¹ LSD tests revealed that the *victim* received significantly less blame ($M = 2.58$, $SD = 1.05$) than both the *hero* ($M = 3.26$, $SD = .87$), $p < .01$, and *neutral* target ($M = 3.06$, $SD = .77$), $p < .05$, which did not differ from each other ($p > .41$), see Fig. 1.

Mechanism

Correlations between Agency (combining self-control and intentional thought), Experience (combining pain and fear), sympathy, and the blame index were examined. While sympathy did not significantly

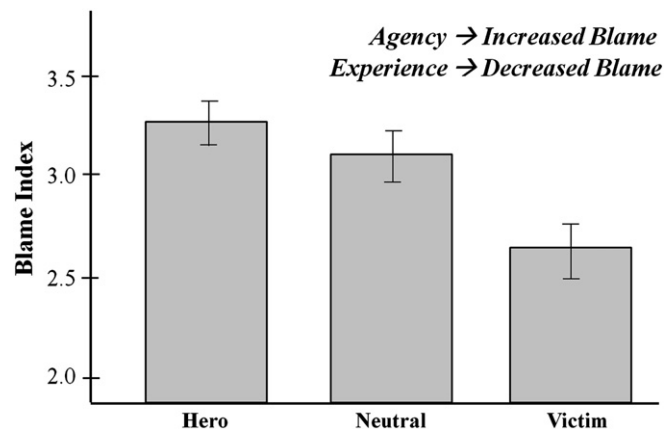


Fig. 1. Between subjects blame assignments to a hero, victim, and neutral target (Experiment 1). Blame assignments are fully accounted for by mind perception. Error bar—1 S.E.

correlate with the blame index, $r(87) = -.14$, $p > .19$, both Agency and Experience were linked to blame in the expected way. Increased Agency was linked to increased blame, $r(87) = .32$, $p < .01$, and increased Experience was linked to decreased blame, $r(87) = -.21$, $p < .05$. To construct a composite measure that contrasted the mind perception profiles of moral agents and moral patients, the Experience measure was subtracted from the Agency measure. This “typecasting index” fully accounted for the difference in blame between conditions when entered as a covariate into an analysis of covariance (ANCOVA), $F(1,85) = 7.11$, $p < .01$, with remaining variance accounted for by condition dropping to $F(2,85) = .80$, $p > .45$.

These results reveal that past victimhood, but not heroism, reduces blame for unambiguous misdeeds, and that these differences in blame are linked to mind perception and not sympathy.

Experiment 2: virtue is its own punishment

The first experiment found that victimhood, but not heroism, helps escape blame. We might expect from moral typecasting that heroes should be assigned more blame than average people; such increased blame might be found with more sensitive relative comparisons. For example, many real-world contexts (e.g., corporate malfeasance) require selecting the most blameworthy person among many. We suggest that such relative comparisons will be kind to victims but cruel to heroes.

Method

Participants (93 female, 111 male, 12 unspecified, $M_{age} = 24$) were recruited as in Study 1. Fifteen were excluded for incomplete responses.

Participants received a questionnaire with descriptions of two people, Jeffrey and Michael, initially described as a previous *hero*, a *victim* or *neutral* target. The *hero* condition described that Jeffrey/Michael had started a charity organization in college. The *victim* condition described that Jeffrey/Michael had been hit by a drunk driver in college, though he had long since recovered. The *neutral* condition described that Jeffrey/Michael had worked at a hardware store in college.

After this initial information, participants read a scenario in which Jeffrey and Michael commit an act of workplace negligence that almost costs a woman her life. Specifically, they are working as cooks and ignore her request for a peanut-free salad, though she is severely allergic to them. The woman then threatens to sue unless either Jeffrey or Michael is fired.

¹ Note that when analyzed separately, the effect of condition on blame remained significant, $p < .001$, but punishment did not follow suit, $p = .38$, perhaps because the target transgression is not typically punished. The means revealed the same pattern, however.

Participants then answered two questions. The first was “If you had to choose, who should be held more responsible for their peanut incident?” and the second was “If you had to choose, who should be the employee fired from the restaurant?” Participants answered both questions by circling either the name Michael (coded -1) or Jeffrey (coded 1).

Results and discussion

The answers to the two blame questions were significantly correlated, $r(193) = .61$, $p < .001$, and so were averaged to form a blame index. For each condition, this index was submitted to a one-sample t -test with zero as a test value. In each condition, the value was significantly different from zero, with the *hero* blamed more than the *victim* ($M = .27$, $SD = .85$), $t(65) = 2.60$, $p < .05$; the *neutral* target blamed more than the *victim* ($M = .31$, $SD = .90$), $t(71) = 2.89$, $p < .01$; and the *hero* blamed more than the *neutral* target ($M = .33$, $SD = .84$), $t(62) = 3.14$, $p < .01$,² see Fig. 2.

These results suggest that, relative to an average person, victimhood helps escape blame while heroism hurts. Importantly, this was found with events both long since passed and unrelated to the transgression.

Experiment 3: memories of immorality

The first two experiments found that previous victimhood helps escape blame, and depending on the sensitivity of the measure, past heroism is either ineffectual or counterproductive. Both previous experiments used survey methods to assess blame, however: this final experiment seeks to replicate the findings of the first experiments with an alternative measure of blame. Pizarro, Laney, Morris, and Loftus (2006) find that increased perpetrator blame leads to increased accessibility for the memory of a misdeed. Therefore, we predicted that the misdeeds of victims should be the least accessible, followed by those of neutral targets, followed by the most accessible misdeeds of heroes.

Method

Participants (91 female, 70 male, 4 unspecified, $M_{\text{age}} = 32$) were recruited as in Study 1. Each read a page-long vignette about the morning of a businessman named Graham. The vignette began with some general information (e.g., Graham is 34, works in Chicago, majored in English), with one sentence casting him as a *hero*, *victim* or *neutral* target. In the *hero* condition, the sentence read: “In his junior year he often did charity work, and at the end of that year, he worked for Habitat for Humanity, helping to build houses for victims of disasters overseas.” In the *victim* condition, it read: “In his junior year he was struck by a drunk driver. Both his legs were broken and he received a concussion. Although he fully recovered, it took him some time to walk again.” In the *neutral* condition, it read: “In his junior year he worked for a few months in a hardware store back in his home town. He mostly worked in the paint counter, mixing colors and tints for customers.”

During his morning commute, Graham does many neutral things (e.g., has breakfast, drives to the train station, prepares for a morning meeting), but also commits one morally questionable act: He picks up and keeps \$10 dropped by a woman walking in front of him. After reading the vignette, participants did an unrelated filler task for 3–4 min before being asked to recall five things about Graham. We were interested in the accessibility of this misdeed in memory.

Two different measures assessed the accessibility of the misdeed: whether it was recalled (*recall*), and if recalled, its order in the recall

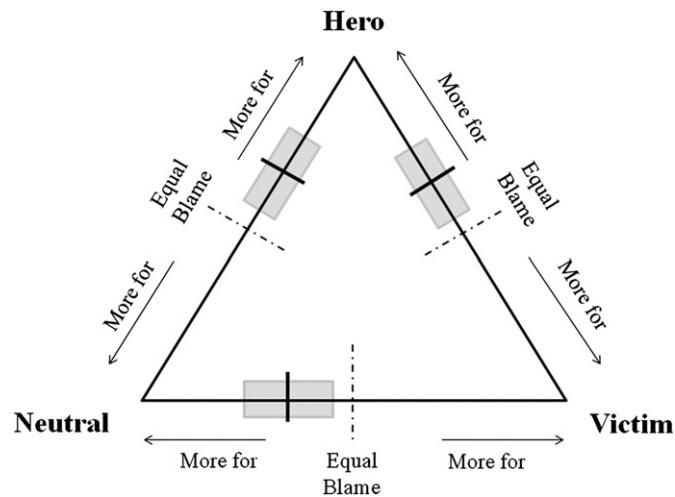


Fig. 2. Relative blame assigned to hero, victim and neutral target in pairwise comparisons (Experiment 2). Error box = 1 S.E.

list (*order*). Past research suggests that more accessible information is recalled earlier (Rabinowitz, Mandler, & Patterson, 1977), so *order* could yield more subtle information missed by the coarser *recall* measure. Two coders independently coded the recall sheets (with 100% agreement), for *recall* and *order* (coded 1 if it was the first item, 2 if it was second, etc...).

Results and discussion

In the *hero* condition, 38 of 56 participants (68%) recalled Graham taking the money; in the *neutral* condition, it was 31 of 49 (63%); in the *victim* condition, only 25 of 59 (42%) recalled the misdeed. Three pairwise Chi-squared tests confirmed that the incident was recalled less in the *victim* condition than either the *hero*, $\chi^2(1) = 5.89$, $p < .05$, or the *neutral* conditions, $\chi^2(1) = 4.13$, $p < .05$. While there was no difference in misdeed *recall* between the *hero* and *neutral* conditions, $\chi^2(1) = .16$, there was a difference in *order* between these two conditions, such that the misdeed was recalled earlier in the list the *hero* condition ($M = 2.16$) than in the *neutral* condition ($M = 2.87$), $t(67) = 2.34$, $p < .05$.³

This alternative measure of blame, validated by previous research (Pizarro et al., 2006), echoes the results of the previous experiments. The coarse measure of recall found that victimhood is effective at escaping blame while heroism is ineffective. The finer measure of order found that heroism is actually counterproductive.

General discussion

Through three studies, we found that it pays to be a victim when trying to escape blame. Heroes, on the other hand, are afforded little clemency, and depending on the situation, may actually earn increased blame. This effect did not appear to be stem from differences in sympathy, but instead from perceptions of the mind of the perpetrator—specifically the capacities of Agency and Experience.

These studies are consistent with a dyadic account of morality, which divides people into the two mutually independent roles of moral agent and moral patient (Gray & Wegner, 2009). Previous moral agents, whether they did good or evil, remain typecast as agents for future misdeeds and are punished accordingly. Conversely, previous victims are typecast as moral patients and are therefore

² When analyzed separately, responsibility and punishment displayed similar patterns and were all either significant or marginally significant, all individual $ps < .08$.

³ Comparing the order of recall between the victim condition and the other conditions is not appropriate because of the different rates of recall. Nonetheless, the order for hero is earlier than that of the victim ($p < .05$).

relatively incapable of earning blame for their misdeeds. Finding that virtue is futile and victimhood powerful when escaping blame may seem surprising in light of beliefs about a just world, but these results make sense when viewed through the lens of dyadic morality (Gray & Wegner, 2009). Of course, substantial research documents the belief in a just world, so future studies should document when exactly typecasting or belief in a just world applies. One such study in the domain of torture suggests that blaming the victim occurs only when participants feel personally involved in the plight of the victim (Gray & Wegner, 2010).

Though this research highlights the drawbacks of heroism and the benefits of victimhood, it would be negligent not to affirm the importance of virtue in other domains. Not only do virtuous deeds help the recipient of the deed, but research suggest that even small acts of good can serve to significantly improve the doers mood (Dunn, Aknin, & Norton, 2008). Furthermore, doing good makes people physically more agentic, potentially helping good-doers to complete goals and resist temptation (Gray, 2010). Even within a legal context, people with previous good acts are afforded the benefit of the doubt when causal involvement or guilt is ambiguous (Alicke, 1994; Alter et al., 2007).

What these studies suggest, however, is that once guilt is determined, the strategy is clear. Whether you are trying to defend yourself against a spouse's wrath for a missed birthday or save yourself from execution for a grisly murder, your task is to become the ultimate victim: regale the jury with stories of childhood abuse, of broken hearts and broken arms. Though a temptation might arise to call friends and colleagues to speak to your moral fiber, the only fiber to which they should attest is the thread of victimhood running through your life. Virtue may have its place, even in the courts, but when the executioner's hand is near, weep your victimhood as softly as you can.

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