

When it's alright to be immoral: the influence of target related factors on moral judgements

Emilia PASCAL¹ & Mioara CRISTEA²

Alexandru Ioan Cuza University of Iași, Romania¹,
Heriot-Watt University, United Kingdom²



Moral judgements & their biases



- complex, rarely objective & **biased**:
 - **Consequences** of an action (Baron & Hershey, 1988);
 - The **transgressor** (Nadelhoffer & Feltz, 2008) & **the victim** (Arhiri & Holman, 2008);
 - **Direct vs. indirect transgression**;
 - **Similarity** between the participant & the target (Pascal, 2019)

The defensive attribution theory

- the attribution of responsibility for an accident increases with **the severity of the consequences** (Walster, 1966);
- future studies were unable to replicate the original findings
- mediating factors (Shaver, 1970)



Mediating factors of the defensive attributions effect



Personal relevance

perceived resemblance of **personal characteristics** (gender, age, behaviours) between the reader and the transgressor



Situational relevance

perceived similarity between the **circumstances of the situation** and a possible **future situation** that the reader might encounter

Explanations of the effect



Motivational explanations

Personal similarity with the transgressor activates **blame avoidance** mechanisms (Shaver, 1970)



Non motivational explanation

Empathy/sympathy for the transgressor = less blame (Gould & Sigall, 1977).

Previous findings (Pascal, 2019)

- Personal similarity between self & the transgressor influenced the moral judgments
 - Participants similar to the target judged the transgression less severely in both scenarios (cheating vs. driving);
- The mediators were both **motivational & non motivational** with similarity leading to:
 - More empathy;
 - Increased possibility of being in a similar situation in the future.

Aim of the present study

- ✓ To further test the similarity bias in a different cultural context (i.e., UK).
- ✓ To study the separate influence of each factor related to the target.
- ✓ To test the interaction effects between the three factors (i.e., target's gender & nationality and participant's gender).



Procedure

- $N=180$ participants
- Two transgressions scenarios : cheating vs. driving;

Elsa is a **British citizen** living in the UK. She is **driving** her personal car to the supermarket to do her weekly grocery shopping. She is in a hurry as the supermarket closes in an hour, so she engages in an **illegal overtake** of another vehicle and **does not notice a pedestrian** crossing the street. She brakes abruptly but cannot avoid **hitting the pedestrian** who is immediately taken to hospital **with a leg fracture**.

Ayesha is a **Pakistani citizen** who works, together with her boyfriend, in a **UK-based company**. They have been together for more than two years now and things are going very well. One evening, Ayesha finds herself working overtime together with a colleague to whom she feels **physically attracted**. While discussing over a task, Ayesha and her colleague kiss and, before she knows it, they go to his place where they have **sexual intercourse**. One week later, Ayesha's **boyfriend finds out** about it and he becomes **very distressed**.

Variables





RESULTS

01**Target's nationality:
driving scenario (immoral)***

$$F_{(1,182)}=6,213, p=.01$$

$$M_B=2.75, SD_B=.07$$

$$M_P= 3.10, SD_P=1.06$$

02**Target's & participant's
gender: driving scenario
(immoral)**

$$F_{(1,182)}=13.158, p< .001$$

**Target's nationality:
cheating scenario (wrong)*****02**

$$F_{(1,179)}= 4,706, p=.03$$

$$M_B = 1.25, SD_B=.48$$

$$M_P= 1.11, M_P=.38$$

03**Target's gender and nationality & participant's
gender : driving scenario (immoral)**

$$F_{(1,182)}= 3.637, p=.05$$

*** Higher scores = more permissive evaluations**

Interactions effects in the driving scenario (immoral)

01

British men evaluate Pakistani men less harshly ($t_{(43)}=-2.128, p=.03$).

02

British women judge the transgression less immoral if done by Pakistani women ($t_{(50)}=-2.356, p=.02$) compared to if done by British women ($p=ns$)

03

Male participants judged male transgressors more harshly ($t_{(85)}=-2.284, p=.02$), while female participants judged female transgressors more harshly ($t_{(98)}=-2.989, p=.004$)

Overview of the results

1

Marginally significant interaction

British men evaluated Pakistani men more leniently; the same applied to British women who judged transgressions less immoral if done by Pakistani women.

2

Significant interaction between participant's and target's gender

Male transgressors were judged more permissively by men. Similarly, female transgressors were judged more permissive by women.

3

Nationality in the driving scenario

Immigrants were judged more leniently, compared to British citizens.

4

Cheating scenario

No significant differences related to the morality judgments. Nationality impacted on how wrong or right participants considered the behavior with transgression being considered more wrong if done by an immigrant.

Explanations?



The similarity bias

Pascal (2019)

Not supported (the manipulation was ineffective in influencing perceived similarity).



Higher standards for the ingroup

Staggs et al. (2018)

Ingroup members are expected to reciprocate loyalty and trust.



A reversal of ingroup bias

Dunne (2018)

In group favouritism does not persist when ingroup members breach group norms, e.g., transgressions.

Conclusions

- Moral judgements are biased by both personal and situational factors, e.g., gender or nationality of the transgressor as well as gender similarity with the transgressor.
- Moral judgments can impact our way of life in many aspects, from selecting a reliable banker to voting for what we perceive as an honest president;
- Implications for intergroup relations (e.g., ingroup favouritism) and conflict resolution.



Thanks!

Do you have any questions?



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