

Similarity based moral judgments within the school context*

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BACKGROUND

Bullying has numerous side effects on the well-being of children affecting up to 50% of pupils (Modecki et al., 2014).

Besides the immediate and long term physical and emotional effects suffered by the victims, the bystanders and the general school climate are also negatively influenced by the toxic environment created (Vanderbilt and Augustyn, 2010).

Bystanders' active or passive encouragement has been investigated by numerous studies, because of its crucial role in preventing and reducing these types of incidents, and one of the factors that could help explain their (in)actions is the way they evaluate the transgression itself.

The perceived similarity between the self and the victims of a transgression or the situation they are in, can activate empathy towards them and determine a more harsh evaluation of the perpetrator's actions (Pascal, 2019). However, perceiving that the bullies' actions were accidental, or did not mean any real harm can determine a more lenient evaluation and a condemnation of the victim.

AIM OF THE STUDY

Our study aimed to understand the way young students evaluate physical and psychological bullying and uncover the factors that shape these perceptions.

To reach this goal we investigated a series of three factors related to their previous experiences, the way they interpret the bullying actions, and the just world beliefs, that could have effects on the perceived immorality of two transgressions.

Namely we hypothesized that participants that have been victims of similar situations in the past, would perceive the bully's actions as being less accidental and more intentional, and that this type of judgment would be associated with a more severe evaluation of the transgression. We also aimed to complete the existing literature by showing that more subtle factors, such as their belief in a just world, can also influence their perceptions.

METHODOLOGY

Participants

Participants (N=190, $M_{age}=22.71$, $SD=4.39$), recruited in the early 2020, through the Heriot Watt STREP system and social media (i.e., Facebook), attended a group testing session in a Meeting Room within the University.

Design

A 2x2 between-subjects design was used with personal similarity with the victim (high vs. low) and type of transgression (psychological vs. physical bullying) as independent variables. The personal similarity with the victim was manipulated through their description (gender and nationality).

Measures and materials

Participants evaluated *the perceived immorality* and the *agent's intention* for the two transgressions on a 5 point Likert scale. They also appreciated, on the same scale, the degree of *personal and situational similarity* (if they experienced a similar transgression in the past). Finally, they filled in the *Belief in a just world Scale* (Lucas, Alexander, Firestone & LeBreton, 2007), a 10-items scale that measures the extent to which individuals believe in a world that is fair and where people get what they deserve.

Fat shaming (Scenario 1)

Mario, a student from Italy, is using the school bus to go to the high school. One day, while seated in the back of the bus, Mario overheard one of his classmates saying some unpleasant remarks about his weight. The comments affected Mario more than ever before. Consequently, he became over conscious about his weight and began avoiding his other peers.

Physical altercation (Scenario 2)

Andreas is a young man from Spain who plays football in the high school team. His team is currently preparing for a game with another high school, therefore, Andreas has been training daily on the school football field with his teammates for the past few weeks. One day, during trials, one of his teammates pushed him while he was preparing to score. Consequently, Andreas fell off and broke his left leg.

RESULTS

Manipulation check

Our results revealed that the personal similarity manipulation was not effective ($t(76)=-.501$, $p=.618$); participants in the high similarity condition ($M=1.39$, $SD=.737$) did not perceive themselves as more similar to the victim compared to those in the low similarity one ($M=1.47$, $SD=.784$). Consequently, we analysed only the effects for the past situational similarity, namely the influence of having been in a similar situation in the past.

Moderated mediation

The moderated mediation was analysed using PROCESS (Hayes, 2013), in SPSS, the model template number seven.

The index of moderated mediation showed that, for the **psychological bullying situation**, past situational similarity predicts agent's intentions but only for the participants that scored high on the belief in a just world $CI = [-.5090, -.0099]$, for the participants that had low scores or medium scores the confidence intervals contained the value zero.

The perceived degree of intention attributed to the perpetrator predicted the perceived morality $CI = [-.4285, -.1136]$, participants who attributed more intention to the agent considered the transgression as being less moral.

The direct effect of past experience with similar situations was significantly lower compared to the moderated mediated effect (see Fig1).

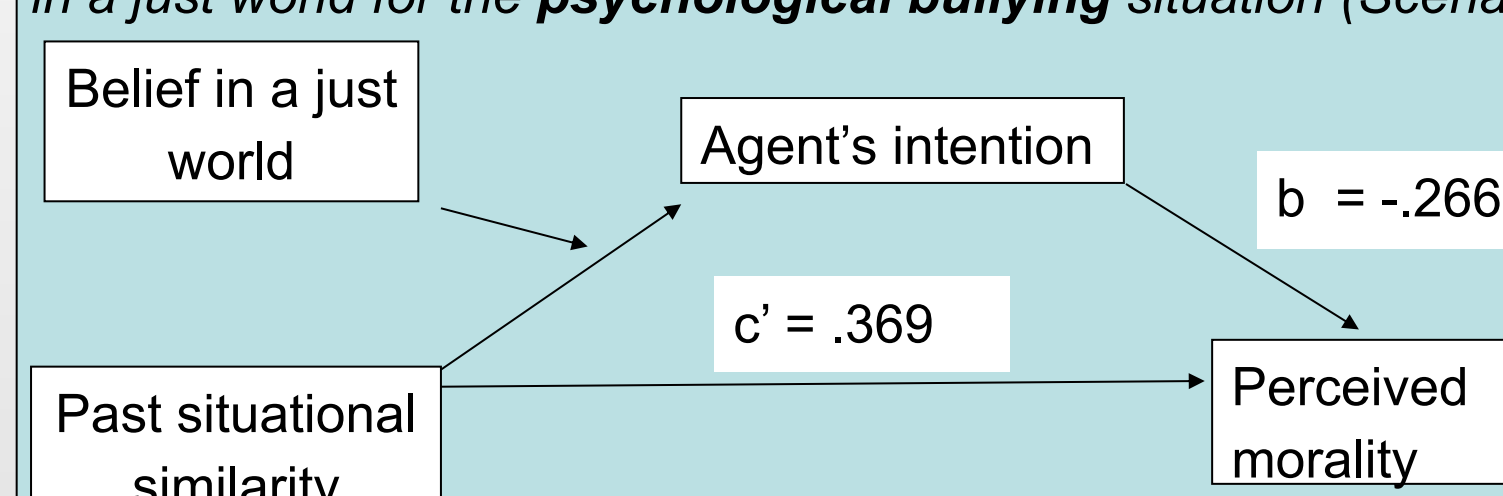
For the **physical altercation**, we obtained similar results, as the index of moderated mediation showed that past situational similarity predicts agent's intentions but only for the participants that scored high $CI = [.3376, 1.0380]$ or medium at the belief in a just world $CI = [.1173, .5946]$, for the participants that had low scores, the confidence intervals contained the value zero.

The perceived degree of intention attributed to the perpetrator predicted the perceived morality $CI = [-.5333, -.2899]$, participants who attributed more intention to the agent considered the transgression as being less moral.

The direct effect of past experience with similar situations did not have a significant direct effect of moral judgments (see Fig2).

Figure 1

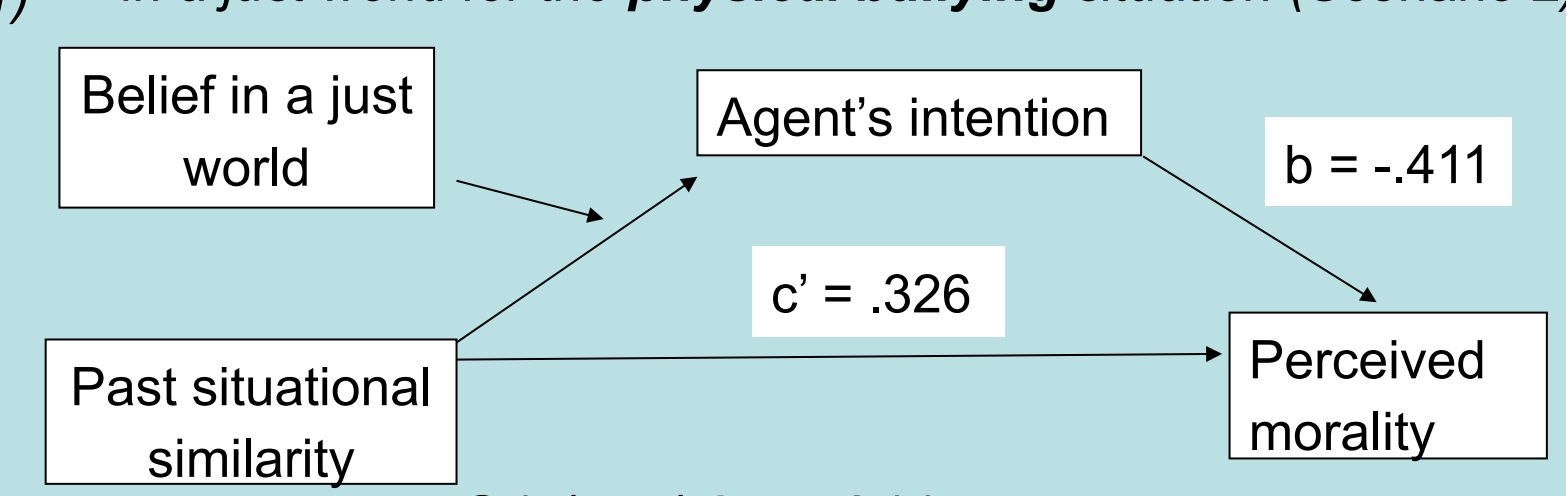
The effect of past situational similarity on the perceived morality of the transgression through agent's intention moderated by the Belief in a just world for the **psychological bullying** situation (Scenario 1)



C1 (low) $b = .102$
C2 (average) $b = -.056$
C3 (high) $b = -.215$
B $t(78) = -3.473$, $p < .001$
C' $t(78) = 2.084$, $p = .0404$
A $t(77) = -2.012$, $p = .0476$
W \rightarrow M $t(77) = -2.209$, $p = .0301$
Interaction $t(77) = 2.207$, $p = .0303$

Figure 2

The effect of past situational similarity on the perceived morality of the transgression through agent's intention moderated by the Belief in a just world for the **physical bullying** situation (Scenario 2)



C1 (low) $b = .011$
C2 (average) $b = -.343$
C3 (high) $b = -.676$
B $t(78) = -6.734$, $p < .001$
C' $t(78) = 1.879$, $p = .063$
A $t(77) = .917$, $p = .337$
W \rightarrow M $t(77) = .964$, $p = .337$
Interaction $t(77) = -2.575$, $p = .011$

CONCLUSIONS & DISCUSSIONS

- Our study investigated the effects of personal and situational similarity on the moral evaluations of the transgressions that occurred within the school premises, namely in the school buss and on the school football field. Because the personal similarity manipulation was not efficient, despite previous studies showing its efficacy in other contexts (Pascal, 2019), we focussed only on situational similarity.
- The situational similarity had a significant effect on the perceived immorality of the transgression, but the direct effect was either statistically insignificant (Scenario 2) or very reduced (Scenario 1). The moderated mediated effect was significant: participants that have been in a similar situation in the past tended to attribute more intention to the perpetrator, and in turn evaluated the transgression as more immoral. However, this relation was only significant for participants with high beliefs in a Just World.
- Future interventions aiming to address the issue of bullying could benefit from focussing on explaining the intentionality of the bullying acts, so that all students appreciate them correctly, not only the students that believe in a just world.