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SURF 2016 End of Semester Report

Research Interest: Investigating children's tendency to place blame on the victim.

Abstract: Do children also victim blame? For the past decades, the victim blaming literature investigated why adults may have the tendency to place blame on the victim. However, to our knowledge, the phenomenon has yet to be studied with American children. In this study, we propose to investigate whether children also victim blame like adults do. We hypothesized that providing additional, potentially negative information about the victim would lead to higher tendency to victim blame than conditions without an additional information (baseline) and with additional irrelevant information. We read vignettes to forty-two 4.5- to 11-year-old children ($M_{age}=7.2$ years, $SD=1.94$) and measured children's beliefs about the victim. There was a significant difference only between the scores for negative information condition ($M=1.21$, $SD=1.16$) and the scores for baseline condition ($M=0.71$, $SD=0.92$); $t=-2.11$, $P=0.04$. Also, the average of the negative information condition was higher than the baseline and irrelevant information condition, supporting our hypothesis. These findings suggest that children may also have the tendency to place blame on the victim.

1. Introduction

We initially proposed to investigate the relationship between children's tendency to believe the world as a just place (i.e., belief in a just world theory; Lerner 1980) and their tendency to place blame on victims (i.e., victim blaming; Lerner & Simmons, 1966). To study *why* children may victim blame, we first had to know whether children *do* victim blame. Several studies explored Italian children's victim blaming in the context of bullying (Gini, 2008). However, to our knowledge, the literature did not explore the phenomenon with American children. In addition, we wanted to know if children victim blamed in situations other than bullying. Over the summer, we designed an exploratory study to examine children's tendency to victim blame. We started collecting data after pre-registering the study on AsPredicted.org.

2. Methods and Procedures

2.1 Participants

We recruited forty-two 4.5- to 11-year-old children ($M_{\text{age}}=7.2$ years, $SD=1.94$) from towns near a university campus. All children participated in the study under parental consent, and children older than 8 years of age signed their own consent. Children were tested in a university lab or in a quiet room at their school. Seven additional children were excluded from the sample as they refused to complete the study.

2.2 Materials

2.2.1 Vignettes

We designed kid friendly vignettes to compare children's beliefs about the victim. The experimenters read five vignettes to children: three for the test conditions and two for the catch conditions. The three test conditions (baseline, negative information, and irrelevant information) were intended to measure the influence of additional information on how children view the victim. We also created three main stories: a story about a scientist who

hurts his eye due to a chemical explosion, a story about a boy who gets hit by a bike, and a story of a girl who gets hit by a ball. Children listened to one of the main stories for each condition. We counterbalanced the stories and the test conditions. Table A shows one of the main stories that was created in three test versions.

Test Conditions	Examples
Baseline – Condition with no additional information.	Jim is a scientist who works in a lab. Yesterday, he was working on a project at the lab. Suddenly, there was a chemical explosion at the table next to him and Jim hurt his eye.
Negative Information – Condition with potentially negative information about the victim. The information is not intended to change the causal relationship.	Jim is a scientist who works in a lab. Yesterday, when he was working on a project, Jim took his goggles off so he could look into his microscope. Suddenly, there was a chemical explosion at the table next to him and Jim hurt his eye.
Irrelevant Information – Condition with additional information that does not relate to the victim.	Jim is a scientist who works in a lab. Yesterday, when he was working on a project, his dog at home spent some time playing outside in the yard. Suddenly, there was a chemical explosion at the table next to him and Jim hurt his eye.

Table A. Type of test conditions and vignette example.

Every child received two additional vignettes (i.e., catch conditions) that clearly demonstrated a situation that was caused by a victim and a situation that occurred due to pure chance (i.e., free of blame). We used the catch conditions to compare children's responses from those of the test conditions. All vignettes described a situation of a victim who eventually became physically ill.

2.2.2 Questions

After reading each vignette, the experimenters asked children to repeat the story to check the children's understanding. The experimenters read the vignette again or corrected the information when children failed to repeat the vignette correctly. An open-ended question (e.g., "Why do you think [the accident] happened?") and two forced-choice questions (e.g., "Is it [victim]'s fault that he hurt his eye?") succeeded the comprehension question. We

measured children's answer for the forced-choice questions with two different scales. These questions were intended to measure whose (victim or offender) behavior children tend to focus more when evaluating the accident. The answers were recorded both with a datasheet and a video camera. The data from each subject was entered by two research assistants for reliability.

3. Results and Discussion

Does providing additional information about a victim change his/her perceived blameworthiness? Adults are more likely to place blame on the innocent, when given potentially negative information about the victim (e.g., the type of clothing or amount of alcohol consumed by an assault victim). Thus, even though adding more detail does not change who the perpetrator is, or the nature of the act, people tend to use the information to justify the situation as fair and blame the victim for his/her circumstances. In order to see whether this effect is also found with children, we conducted paired sample t-tests to compare children's victim blaming scores when given different types of information. There was a significant difference between the scores for negative information condition ($M=1.21$, $SD=1.16$) and the scores for baseline condition ($M=0.71$, $SD=0.92$); $t=-2.11$, $P=0.04$. The difference between the scores for baseline and the scores for irrelevant information condition ($M=0.76$, $SD=0.94$) had no statistical significance. The additional negative information, but not the irrelevant information, seems to alter children's perspective on the blameworthiness of the victim.

We can also examine the difference in children's response by looking at Figure A. The average score in negative information condition was always higher than baseline and irrelevant information conditions. Furthermore, the average score was the highest during Catch 1 condition, which clearly demonstrated a blameworthy behavior of the sufferer. The result represents that children do not victim blame in the negative information condition as

much as they do in a situation that is clearly the victim's fault. However, they also seem to blame more than in a situation of pure chance. Thus, young children tend to evaluate the blameworthiness of the victim by deciphering the relevance of the given information like adults do.

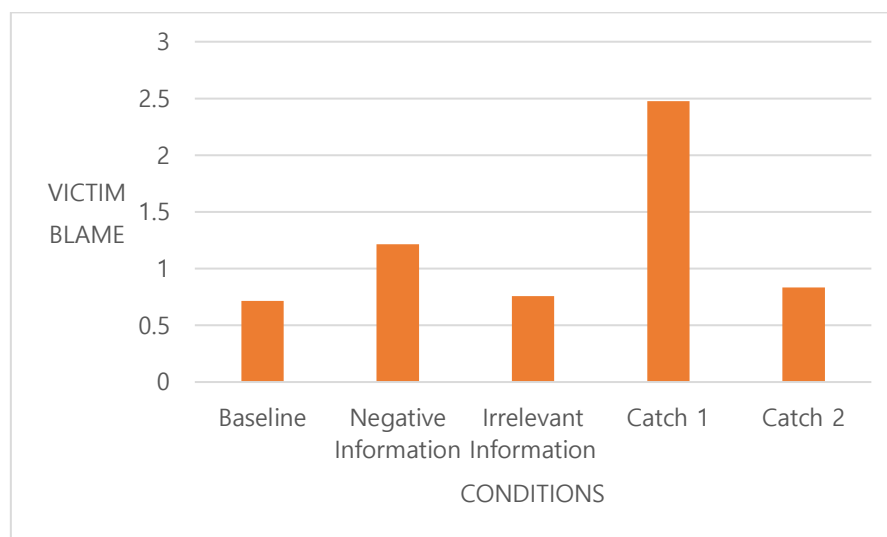


Figure A. Children's average score of victim blaming for each condition.

We will continue working on the project to meet the sample size we proposed. Once we finish collecting data, we hope to conduct a correlation analysis to observe the relationship between age and victim blaming. If children do victim blame in certain cases, as the current data seems to suggest, we will create a follow up study to understand why children may victim blame. The current adult literature argues that people are motivated to victim blame in order to justify the world as a fair place (Bruggen & Grubb, 2014). Believing in a fair world allows people to make long-term investments, which is a crucial aspect in people's everyday life (Hafer, 2000; Lerner, 1980). However, we would have to do further investigation in order to argue that children also have this same motivation when they do not make long-term investments like adults do. On the other hand, if the alternative hypothesis is true and children do not victim blame, we would have to investigate when and why there is a developmental shift in how people perceive the victim.

References

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