PARENT AS BOTH PERPETRATOR AND VICTIM: BLAME AND PUNISHMENT IN A CASE OF CHILD NEGLECT

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Attributions of responsibility typically increase as outcome severity increases. In defensive attributions, similar others are assigned less responsibility in more severe instances. The current study utilized a child neglect paradigm to explore defensive attributions when the actor may be perceived as both perpetrator and victim. Participants read a newspaper article in which a parent left a child unattended in a hot car, with details based on participants' random assignment to one of four experimental conditions (outcome severity: mild vs severe; actor gender: male vs female). Results failed to support the defensive attribution hypothesis for attributions of controllability, responsibility, and blame. However, group differences based on actor-observer similarity of gender and parenting status were found for empathy, and empathy predicted social punishment.

Keywords: defensive attributions; responsibility; blame; empathy; parenting role

The natural tendency of people to desire an understanding of the world in which we live is the basis for attributions. Attributions answer the question of "why?" and provide explanations for events. Although a number of different attribution theories and theorists exist, all share the goal of understanding why certain events occur and explaining the process by which people come to conclusions regarding their environment (Kelly, 1955; Weiner, 1995).

Attributional searches are more likely to follow negative, rather than positive, events. Individuals are more likely to seek causal explanations after experiencing unfavorable or undesirable outcomes than after experiencing desirable outcomes (Boninger, Gleicher, & Strathman, 1994). Unanticipated events, as is often the case for negative events, also produce more explanation searching than predicted events (Pyszczynski & Greenberg, 1981; Wong & Weiner, 1981).

Much of the attribution research exploring attributions after a significant negative event focuses on the attributions made by the person to whom the event happened.

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Common types of attributions include self-blame based on character, self-blame due to behavior, blame for others, and chance. A meta-analysis of research published between 1982 and 1998 reports a link between an attribution of character self-blame and more negative outcomes, such as poor adjustment or symptoms of depression following the negative event (Hall, French, & Marteau, 2003). When a negative dispositional attribution was made about the self, following a negative event, this was shown to be more predictive of maladjustment and depressive symptoms than when attributions were made about one's behavior, others' behavior or chance. Essentially, thinking of oneself as a bad person led to poorer outcomes than other types of attribution. However, as a whole, the body of literature has not found consistent associations between type of attribution and outcome (Downey, Cohen Silver, & Wortman, 1990; Hall et al., 2003; Hall & Marteau, 2003).

Although attributions made by individuals in the situation may be related to their personal psychological and behavioral outcomes (e.g., increased depression and/or isolative behavior), the attributions made by observers to a situation have important implications as well. For example, legal decisions of guilt and punishment are made based on the attributions of the judge and/or jury presented with the case. Attributions made by friends, family, and community members impact the social climate the individual faces, including the amount of social support he/she might receive. Because of legal and societal implications, studying observers' attributions of blame and responsibility is important. In addition to blame and responsibility, the construct of controllability must also be considered.

Controllability, Blame, and Responsibility

Constructs of controllability, blame, and responsibility, although distinguishable, are sometimes treated as the same. It is important to consider each aspect when understanding implications of observer's attributions. Some researchers have failed to differentiate (Zucker & Weiner, 1993) or have even combined (Tennen, Affleck, & Gershman, 1986) these constructs. Theoretically, however, controllability is distinct from both blame and responsibility and is regarded as a necessary precondition to judgments of blame and responsibility (Shaver, 1985; Weiner, 1995). Controllability refers to the existence of a cause-and-effect pattern. Without controllability, observers have no basis for further judgments.

In addition to requiring controllability, blame also requires responsibility (Shaver, 1985). Responsibility judgments are based on the extent to which actors can be deemed accountable for their actions. Although Weiner (2006) argues that both controllability and intentionality are necessary precursors to responsibility, Shaver (1985) allows for consideration of special circumstances that may influence whether the individual is determined to be held responsible for producing the outcome. Especially in instances of omission, rather than commission, an actor may be deemed responsible even when appearing to act without intention. Additionally, people have a cognitive tendency to assume intention in the actions of others (Rosset, 2008). This intentional bias is automatic (Rosset, 2007), but can be overridden with effort (Rosset, 2008).

Following both controllability and responsibility, blame, as a psychological construct, is central to the observer, rather than the actor (Shaver, 1985). Both blame and re-

sponsibility judgments rely on the observer's interpretation of an event, but blame also accounts for relevant justifications that might mitigate an actor's blameworthiness. Likewise, an observer's individual cognitive and motivational biases influence determinations of blame (Alicke, 2000).

Weiner (1995) further clarifies the importance of deciphering responsibility from blame. While responsibility, he explains, is a neutral attribution, blame is negative. A person can be responsible for a positive, negative, or neutral outcome, but is only blamed for a negative outcome. He further identifies a relationship between responsibility, blameworthiness, and outcome severity, with outcome severity (as a mitigating factor) influencing attributions of blame but not those of responsibility. For example, compared to situations with severe outcomes, little blame might be assigned to the actor in situations with mild outcomes. Responsibility outcomes, however, are unlikely to differ as mild outcomes would not serve to mitigate responsibility in the same way as they mitigate blame.

Taken together, the sequence of attributional constructs is controllability first, then responsibility, and finally blame. Magnitude reduces at each step, with attributions of controllability stronger than responsibility and responsibility stronger than blame (Mantler, Schellenberg, & Page, 2003). However, research that has differentiated between the three constructs has found inconsistent results for this pattern. For example, Weiner, Perry, and Magnusson (1988) found blame ratings that exceeded those of responsibility in exceptionally reprehensible scenarios. More recently, Mantler et al. (2003) investigated the three constructs using a scenario involving serious illness. They varied whether the actor had AIDS or lung cancer and found results to support the hypothesized pattern for both illnesses. Participants rated the actor as more responsible than blameworthy and more in control than responsible.

This pattern of controllability, responsibility, and blame results in an outcome or behavioral response (Mantler et al., 2003), with blame generally most strongly associated with the outcome. Mantler and colleagues (2003) examined outcome responses of emotional reactions and behavioral intentions such as social distancing in their study of attributions for serious illness. They found that judgments of blame, but not controllability or responsibility, were significantly related to outcome responses. Additionally, Graham, Weiner, and Zucker (1997) found both responsibility and blame to be linked with a desire to punish, while controllability was not associated with punishment.

Social psychological theory and research have established the sequential order that underlies attributions of controllability, responsibility, and blame. In addition to the order and strength of the attributions, predictions can be made with regard to the outcomes associated with the attributions. However, these relationships may not be as straightforward as originally anticipated.

Defensive Attributions

Despite the general need to attribute responsibility of an accident with severe consequences to a particular actor, the perceiver's similarity to the actor can override the effect of outcome severity and result in defensive attributions (Shaver, 1970). Defensive attribu-

tions occur in cases where perceivers understand that, given their similarity to the actor, such an accident could also happen to them. Therefore, instead of assigning responsibility to the actor, the perceiver assigns responsibility elsewhere.

Shaver (1970) also summarized the roles of personal and situational relevance, with personal relevance occurring when the perceiver shares a specific, not-easily-changeable characteristic with the actor, and situational relevance occurring when the perceiver can easily imagine himself/herself in the same temporary situation as the actor. The perceiver's relevance is important, as defensive attributions would be unlikely if the observer could not imagine himself/herself in a similar position by virtue of personal and/or situational characteristics. Shaw and McMartin (1977) summarized the roles of both personal and situational relevance by describing responsibility attributions as positively correlated with outcome severity when observers lacked personal relevance to the actor but as negatively correlated with outcome severity when observers had high personal relevance to the actor. They found, however, that this relationship exists only when situational relevance is also high.

More recently work by Kouabenan, Gilibert, Medina, and Bouzon (2001) replicated previous findings in support of Shaver's defensive attribution hypothesis in cases of high situational relevance by examining attributions following accidents in the workplace. Individuals made more external causal attributions for members of their own group and more internal causal attributions for members of the other group, especially when the accident was serious.

Gender in defensive attributions. Consistent gender differences have been found in attribution research, such that men assign more responsibility than women to victims of rape (Bottoms, 1993; Deitz, Blackwell, Daley, & Bentley, 1982) and wife assault (Hillier & Foddy, 1993). Because the perpetrator in these situations is likely male and the victims female, these results are consistent with defensive attribution theory that suggests men identify to a greater degree with the perpetrator than the victim and assign responsibility accordingly.

In a study of child sexual abuse, Back and Lips (1998) hypothesized that greater responsibility would be attributed to female than male victims, but no significant differences were found. However, perceiver gender differences were found. Specifically, male attributors assigned more responsibility to the victim than female attributors. Additionally, Kouabenan et al. (2001), in their workplace study, investigated the role of gender in defensive attributions. In one of two studies, an interaction between gender and situational relevance occurred, such that men engaged in greater defensive attributions than women. Because the study stimulus materials used only male characters, they recommended investigation of gender as a personal relevance variable in future research that varies the gender of both the target and the perceiver.

Empathy in defensive attributions. Empathy can be defined as "the cognitive act of adopting another's perspective," "a cognitively based understanding of others," and "an affective reaction to the emotions of others" (Davis, 1996, p. 11). As such, empathy is multidimensional and includes both cognitive and affective elements. Empathy is the

ability to understand the behavior of others and/or respond appropriately to another's emotions. Empathy is not the same as sympathy, which can be defined as an "emotional state or condition that is not identical to the other's emotions, but consists of feelings of sorrow or concern for another" (Eisenberg & Miller, 1987, p. 91-92).

Paralleling the types of relevance in defensive attributions, empathy is commonly researched in two distinct forms: trait and state. Trait empathy can be either an individual's general ability to empathize with others, or it can be based upon general similarities between individuals which allow for greater empathy toward the other (Deitz et al., 1982; Haegerich & Bottoms, 2000).

For example, trait empathy may explain one consistent finding within jury simulation studies. Specifically, female mock jurors are more likely than their male counterparts to rate female defendants as not guilty and view them as credible (Plumm & Terrance, 2009; Schuller & Hastings, 1996). By virtue of their similarity (gender), women are better able to empathize with women defendants than are men.

Empathy based on similarity (trait empathy) is akin to personal relevance factors in defensive attributions. State empathy, on the other hand, is one's ability to imagine himself/herself in another person's situation and is therefore similar to situational relevance factors. Research on empathy has found that when individuals feel empathy toward another, they are more likely to have favorable opinions of that individual and to care about his/her general well-being (Aderman, Brehm, & Katz, 1974; Batson, Turk, Shaw, & Klein, 1995; Krebs, 1975). Compared to those who do not feel empathy, individuals who feel empathetic toward another are also more likely to find him/her not responsible for negative behavior (Sulzer & Burglass, 1968). Defensive attributions, or the diminished attribution of blame and responsibility that occurs in situations of similarity, are likely linked to feelings of empathy for the actor.

Perpetrators as victims in defensive attributions. To investigate the role of suffering on attributions, Shaw and McMartin (1977) varied whether or not the perpetrator, as well as bystanders, of an automobile accident suffered injuries. Although no main effects were found for suffering, an interaction with gender did occur. Male perceivers assigned less punishment to the perpetrator when he suffered injuries than when he did not. Suffering did not influence the amount of punishment assigned by females. Since the stimulus materials of this study only involved a male character, the defensive attribution can be explained by the personal relevance variable of gender. The perpetrator's suffering reduced the amount of punishment male participants assigned because, in their similarity, male participants could better anticipate the same accident happening to them and would not want to bear punishment after suffering injuries. Judgments of female participants, who lack similarity to the perpetrator, were not influenced by the perpetrator's suffering.

Lowe and Medway (1976) also used a scenario in which the perpetrator suffered an undesirable consequence and is described as a victim as well as a perpetrator. In their sample of college students, the victim/perpetrator was assigned more responsibility when similar, rather than dissimilar, to the college students and when the outcome was severe. If

the participants perceived the similar actor as a victim rather than perpetrator, the finding of greater responsibility to the similar other (rather than chance) would serve to reduce the perception that a severe outcome could happen to them as well and is therefore consistent with defensive attribution theory.

PURPOSE

No other, or more recent, research has investigated defensive attributions in a case where the perpetrator may also be perceived as a victim. Thus far, findings indicate that similarity can increase attributions of responsibility in such instances. However, it is unclear whether similarity based on situational or personal characteristics will impact attributions of responsibility in these scenarios. Additionally, no research in this area has studied attributions of blame as distinct from attributions of responsibility.

Child neglect scenarios provide an interesting context to examine issues of defensive attributions and the effects of similarity. The number of cases of children being left in a vehicle has risen dramatically in the last few decades, with reports ranging from 34 to 38 children dying on average each year since 2000 (Breed, 2007; KidsAndCars.org, 2014; McLaren, Null, & Quinn, 2005). This is a unique situation in which the event usually appears to be an accident, the perpetrator may also be perceived as a victim, and the severity of the outcome can be easily manipulated. Therefore, such incidents are useful paradigms for studying the way such factors affect people's assignment of responsibility and blame. In addition to possible legal charges, parents in these cases may suffer from social punishment. Feelings of empathy as well as other individual variables also might influence determinations of blame and responsibility.

To this end, this study investigated attributions of controllability, responsibility, and blame assigned to the parent in a scenario where a child is left unattended in a vehicle on a hot day. Actor gender (mother or father) and outcome severity (child dehydration or child fatality) were varied. To study similarity, participant characteristics of gender and parenting status (parent or non-parent) comprised the other main variables of interest.

First, it was hypothesized that attributions of controllability, responsibility, and blame would be highly correlated but that participants would perceive greater controllability than responsibility and greater responsibility than blame. It was also expected that blame would be correlated most highly with, and the best attributional predictor of, the outcomes of social and legal punishment.

The second hypothesis anticipated a main effect for outcome severity, such that participants were expected to assign greater controllability, responsibility, and blame when the outcome was severe rather than mild.

Third, it was expected that participants who were similar to the actor on both gender and parenting status characteristics would assign less responsibility and blame than participants who were dissimilar on both characteristics. However, the relationship between outcome severity and attributions was less clear when the participant was similar to the

actor based on only one characteristic. Therefore, no formal hypotheses were developed regarding differences involving participants who were similar based on only one characteristic but the current study explored the relationship between attributions and similarity based on gender and parenting status characteristics separately.

Similar patterns were expected for feelings of empathy. The fourth hypothesis was that participants who were similar to the actor in terms of gender and parenting status would experience more empathy than dissimilar participants, but no formal hypotheses were developed for participants who were similar based on only one characteristic.

Finally, participant feelings of empathy, as well as participant similarity based on gender and parenting status, were expected to predict less social and legal punishment.

METHOD

Participants

A convenience sample of 369 participants was recruited to participate in this study. Participants were recruited via email and through the use of social networking websites and were entered into a random drawing to receive monetary compensation for their participation.

Of the 369 participants who volunteered for the study, 41 withdrew before completing the study, and 5 failed the manipulation check, resulting in 323 participants upon which all subsequent analyses were based. The sample was comprised of 201 women and 122 men, ranging in age from 21 to 80 years old (M = 39.93, SD = 13.61). Participants were from both the United States and Canada, with the majority of participants identifying as Caucasian (94.70%). The majority of the participants (91.30%) did not personally know anyone who had experienced an event similar to the one depicted in the study. Of the 323 participants, 179 reported that they had children while 142 responded as having no children.

Materials

The study was based on a 2 (actor gender: mother vs. father) by 2 (outcome severity: mild vs. severe) between-subjects design, with four conditions. A hypothetical narrative developed by the researcher to appear as a newspaper article was used in the study. In the narrative, a parent (either the mother or father) forgets to drop his/her child off at daycare on the way to work and leaves the child in the car on a hot summer day. The severity of outcome was varied depending upon condition. In the mild outcome condition, the child is found shortly after being left and is taken to the hospital, treated for mild dehydration, and released the same day. In the severe outcome condition, the child is not found for several hours and is taken to the hospital but pronounced dead of hyperthermia.

Dependent Measures

Before completing the primary dependent measures, participants completed a manipulation check asking them to identify who left the child in the car to ensure they read and understood the newspaper article.

Controllability, responsibility, and blame. Attributions of controllability, responsibility, and blame were each assessed using items adapted from Mantler et al. (2003; see Appendix A). For controllability, participants indicated the extent to which they agreed with each of four statements on a 7-point scale ranging from 1 (strongly disagree) to 7 (strongly agree). Statements included "Leaving the child in the car was under the mother's/father's personal control," and "The mother/father had no control over what caused the child to be left in the car." Items were reverse coded as necessary such that higher scores indicated greater assignment of controllability. Participants' responses to the four items were averaged to maintain the 1 to 7 scale.

Similar subscales were created for responsibility and blame. Using the same 7-point scale to measure agreement, four items assessed participants' attributions of responsibility, and four additional items assessed blame. Statements for responsibility included "The mother/father is accountable for leaving the child in the car" and "The child being left is a result of the mother's/father's negligence." For blame, statements included "It is the mother's/father's fault that the child was left in the car" and one reverse-coded item, "The parent should not feel guilty." Responses to the responsibility and blame items were separately averaged. As with the scale for controllability, the scales ranged from 1 to 7, with higher scores indicating greater assignment of responsibility and blame. Items from the three scales were intermingled for presentation to participants.

Reliability estimates were lower in the current sample than found by Mantler et al. (2003) with Cronbach's alphas of .52 for controllability, .74 for responsibility, and .63 for blame. However, use of Cronbach's alpha for determining scale reliability has been criticized, most notably for underestimating reliability, especially in scales with few items (Lucke, 2005; Raykov, 1997). Nonetheless, because of the relatively low alphas for the controllability and blame scales, additional analyses were conducted to investigate the relationships among the items within each scale. For the control scale, the Cronbach's alpha did not improve if an item was deleted, thereby indicating that the low alpha was not due to an inappropriate item. Factor analysis supported the inclusion of all four items, with the four-item scale explaining 43.15% of the variance and individual item loadings on a single factor ranging from .59 to .76. Therefore, the four-item blame scale was retained in later analyses.

Along with the acceptable Cronbach's alpha of .74, factor analysis supported the use of four items in the responsibility scale. The items explained 60.79% of the variance, and the individual items' factor loadings ranged from .73 to .81. For the blame scale, additional investigation showed improvement in Cronbach's alpha if one item was deleted. Without the item "The mother/father deserves having the child left in the car," the scale's alpha increased from .63 to .75. Factor analysis supported use of the three-item scale, with 67.78% of the variance explained by the items and factor loadings ranging from .69 to .89. Thus, the three-item scale of blame was used in all subsequent analyses.

Legal and social punishment. Participant endorsement of behavioral responses was assessed using questions related to legal and social punishment (see Appendix B). As

in previous research (Carlsmith, 2006), legal punishment was assessed by an item assessing the magnitude of punishment deserved on a scale from 1 (no punishment) to 7 (severe punishment). Participants' views of the actor as a parent were assessed using two questions. Participants responded to the question "How fit is the mother/father as a parent?" on a scale from 1 (not at all fit) to 7 (completely fit), and they answered the question "Should the mother's/father's (other) children be removed from her/his custody?" using a scale from 1 (definitely not) to 7 (definitely yes). The fitness item was reversed, and the three items were averaged to create a legal punishment scale, with higher scores indicating more punishment ($\alpha = .78$).

Social punishment was determined using a brief series of questions intended to assess the likely community response following an incident in which a child is left unattended in a vehicle on a hot day. Participants rated their agreement with four statements on a scale from 1 (strongly disagree) to 7 (strongly agree). Items included "The community should be outraged that a mother/father would do this to her/his child" and the reverse-coded "If I had been friends with the mother/father before this incident, I would continue to be friends with him/her." After reverse coding as needed, responses were averaged, with higher scale scores indicating more social punishment ($\alpha = .84$).

Perceptions of victim and perpetrator. Participants' perceptions of the parent as a victim as well as a perpetrator were assessed using two separate questions. Participants were asked to indicate the extent to which they believed the parent was a victim using a scale from 1 (not at all) to 7 (completely). A second question, using the same response scale, asked the extent to which participants believed the parent to be a perpetrator.

Empathy. Participants' feelings of empathy toward the parent were measured using a six-item questionnaire adapted from Haegerich and Bottoms's (2000) and Plumm and Terrance's (2009) defendant-specific empathy questionnaires (see Appendix C). The empathy questionnaire asked participants to indicate the extent to which they felt empathy for the parent on a 7-point scale ranging from 1 (not at all) to 7 (very much). For example, one item asked how much respondents could "really feel what the parent must have been feeling the day of the accident." Responses were averaged, with higher scores reflecting more empathy for the parent ($\alpha = .89$).

Demographics. Following completion of all other measures, participants' demographic information was collected via a short series of questions asking about gender, parenting status, age, and ethnicity.

PROCEDURE

Potential participants were contacted via email or social networking websites and invited to participate in the study. The invitation asked potential participants to read a newspaper article and answer questions about the article and themselves. The electronic invitation included a link to a SurveyMonkey website that was used to facilitate data collection.

Participants were randomly assigned to one of four conditions created by the 2 (actor gender: mother vs. father) X 2 (outcome severity: mild vs. severe) factorial design. After being presented with the informed consent information and agreeing to participate, participants read the newspaper article. When finished reading, participants completed the manipulation checks, the questionnaire assessing attributions of controllability, responsibility, and blame as well as the punishment and empathy questionnaires. Then, participants completed the demographic questionnaire and, for those participants who identified as parents, the parental status questions.

Following completion of all measures, participants were thanked, debriefed, and given instructions for entering into a drawing to win a gift card as compensation for their time. All procedures were approved by the Institutional Review Board of the university where the data analyses occurred.

RESULTS[1]

Controllability, Responsibility, and Blame

Bivariate correlational analyses were conducted to determine the correlation between the constructs of controllability, responsibility, and blame. As expected, the three scales were significantly correlated ($r = .64$ for controllability and responsibility; $r = .57$ for controllability and blame; $r = .79$ for responsibility and blame; $p < .001$ for all; see Appendix D).

A repeated-measures test was conducted to determine if the means for the scales of controllability, responsibility, and blame differed from one another. The overall test violated the assumption of sphericity, Mauchly's $W(2) = .88$, $p < .001$, with epsilon > .75. Therefore, the Greenhouse-Geisser adjustment was made, and the omnibus test was found to be significant, $F(1.79, 576.72) = 4.91$, $p = .01$. Follow-up tests were conducted using a Bonferroni adjustment for multiple pair-wise comparisons. As expected, participants attributed significantly more control ($M = 6.38$, $SD = .81$) than responsibility ($M = 6.28$, $SD = .93$), $p < .05$. However, contrary to the hypothesis, significantly less responsibility was attributed than blame ($M = 6.39$, $SD = .93$), $p < .001$. Participants' attributions of control and blame did not differ, *ns*.

To test the hypotheses involving differences in attributions of controllability, responsibility, and blame, a 2 (actor gender: mother vs. father) X 2 (outcome severity: mild

1. Taken together, the study's scales contain 31 items. Missing cases were found in 26 of these 31 items, ranging from one missing case (0.31%) to ten missing cases (3.10%). For each variable that had missing data, tests of mean differences on related variables were conducted to ensure that the participants who did not respond to an item did not differ from participants who did respond to the item. No differences were found.

   Because missing cases were found to be missing at random, regression analyses were used to input values for missing cases. Using regression to predict values of missing cases is supported for data sets of this size with low percentages of missing cases and is preferred over simple mean substitution (Tabachnick & Fidell, 2007).

vs. severe) X 2 (participant gender: male vs. female) X 2 (participant parenting status: parent vs. non-parent) factorial multivariate analysis of variance (MANOVA) was conducted.

Results of the MANOVA revealed a significant main effect for participant gender, Wilks' $\lambda = .97$, $F(3, 303) = 2.67$, $p < .05$, $\eta_p^2 = .03$. Follow-up analyses of variance (ANOVAs) uncovered a significant difference in attributions of responsibility, $F(1, 305) = 6.33$, $p < .05$, $\eta_p^2 = .02$. Greater responsibility was attributed to the parent by the male participants ($M = 6.43$, $SD = .79$) than by the female participants ($M = 6.18$, $SD = 1.00$). A marginally significant difference was also found for attributions of blame, $F(1, 305) = 3.67$, $p = .06$, $\eta_p^2 = .01$ such that greater blame was assigned to the parent by the male participants ($M = 6.51$, $SD = .85$) than by the female participants ($M = 6.32$, $SD = .97$).

The original MANOVA also revealed a marginally significant main effect for outcome severity, Wilks' $\lambda = .98$, $F(3, 303) = 2.51$, $p = .06$, $\eta_p^2 = .02$. Follow-up ANOVAs showed significant differences for attributions of control, $F(1, 305) = 6.75$, $p = .01$, $\eta_p^2 = .02$, as well as for attributions of responsibility, $F(1, 305) = 5.56$, $p < .05$, $\eta_p^2 = .02$. More control was assigned to the parent when the outcome was severe ($M = 6.47$, $SD = .76$) compared to when the outcome was mild ($M = 6.28$, $SD = .86$). Likewise, more responsibility was assigned to the parent when the outcome was severe ($M = 6.38$, $SD = .91$) compared to when the outcome was mild ($M = 6.17$, $SD = .95$). A marginally significant difference was found for attributions of blame, $F(1, 305) = 3.54$, $p = .06$, $\eta_p^2 = .01$, such that more blame was assigned to the parent when the outcome was severe ($M = 6.46$, $SD = .91$) compared to when the outcome was mild ($M = 6.32$, $SD = .95$).

No main effect or interactions were found for participants' parenting status nor was there a significant interaction involving actor gender and participant gender, which would have indicated an effect based upon similarity.

Empathy

Similar to the MANOVA, a 2 (actor gender: mother vs. father) X 2 (outcome severity: mild vs. severe) X 2 (participant gender: male vs. female) X 2 (participant parenting status: parent vs. non-parent) factorial ANOVA was conducted to test for differences in participants' feelings of empathy for the parent. Results revealed main effects for actor gender, $F(1, 305) = 7.36$, $p < .01$, $\eta_p^2 = .02$, and outcome severity, $F(1, 305) = 6.90$, $p < .01$, $\eta_p^2 = .02$. However, both of these main effects were qualified by a significant four-way interaction, actor gender by outcome severity by participant gender by participant parenting status, $F(1, 305) = 4.97$, $p < .05$, $\eta_p^2 = .02$.

Simple effects analyses revealed significance when the outcome was severe, the mother was acting, and the participant was female. Under these conditions, participants who were parents reported feeling more empathy ($M = 4.36$, $SD = 1.56$) than participants who were not parents ($M = 3.10$, $SD = 1.36$), $F(1, 47) = 8.10$, $p < .01$, $\eta_p^2 = .15$. Similar results were found when the outcome was severe, the father was acting, and the participant was male. Parents reported feeling more empathy ($M = 3.92$, $SD = 2.83$) than non-parents ($M = 2.83$, $SD = 1.29$), $F(1, 24) = 5.46$, $p < .05$, $\eta_p^2 = .19$. No differences for parenting

status were found when the participant was not the same gender as the parent in the article nor when the outcome was mild.

Legal and Social Punishment

Ordinary least squares regression analyses were conducted to test the final hypothesis and determine what factors predict the assignment of legal and social punishment. The following variables were included in the models using the enter method: dichotomous participant characteristics of gender similarity and parenting status similarity, the continuous variables of perception of the parent as a victim and perception as a perpetrator, scales for attributions of controllability, responsibility, and blame, and the empathy scale. The variable of outcome severity was also included to account for the variation due to manipulated condition.

The regression model significantly predicted the assignment of legal punishment, $R^2 = .49$, $F(9, 297) = 31.16$, $p < .001$. (See Table 1.) Outcome severity predicted legal punishment ($\beta = .26$, $p < .001$) such that the severe outcome condition was associated with greater legal punishment than the mild outcome condition, and attributions of responsibility predicted legal punishment ($\beta = .31$, $p < .001$), such that greater attributions of responsibility were associated with greater legal punishment. Legal punishment was also predicted by perceptions of the parent as a perpetrator ($\beta = .27$, $p < .001$), such that greater perception of the parent as a perpetrator was associated with greater assignment of legal punishment. Finally, as anticipated, participants' feelings of empathy for the parent predicted assignment of legal punishment ($\beta = -.25$, $p < .001$). Greater feelings of empathy were associated with less severe legal punishment.

A second regression model also significantly predicted the assignment of social punishment, $R^2 = .42$, $F(9, 299) = 23.68$, $p < .001$. (See Table 1). Perceptions of the parent as a perpetrator predicted assignment of social punishment ($\beta = .28$, $p < .001$), such that greater perception of the parent as a perpetrator was associated with greater assignment of social punishment. As expected, the degree to which participants felt empathy for the parent ($\beta = -.33$, $p < .001$) also significantly predicted social punishment. Feelings of empathy for the parent were associated with less severe social punishment.

Table 1

Predictors of Legal and Social Punishment

	Legal Punishment			Social Punishment		
Predictors	B	*SE*	*β*	B	*SE*	*β*
Outcome Severity	.71	.12	.26*	.20	.12	.07
Parent Similarity	.18	.12	.07	.03	.13	.01
Gender Similarity	-.15	.12	-.06	-.22	.13	-.08
Controllability	-.03	.10	-.02	.10	.10	.06
Responsibility	.46	.11	.31*	.06	.12	.04
Blame	-.11	.11	-.07	.14	.12	.09
Perceived Victim	-.05	.04	-.06	-.06	.04	-.07
Perceived Perpetrator	.19	.03	.27*	.19	.04	.28*
Empathy	-.22	.04	-.25*	-.29	.05	-.33*
R^2		.49*			.42*	

*$p < .001$

DISCUSSION

As in previous research, the constructs of controllability, responsibility, and blame were highly correlated (Mantler et al., 2003), indicating consistency in participants' judgments. Also consistent with Mantler et al.'s progression from control to responsibility to blame was the finding that participants attributed more control than responsibility. However, participants also attributed more blame than responsibility. Although counter to Mantler et al., the higher blame ratings were consistent with Weiner et al.'s (1988) findings that blame, as a psychological construct, exceeds responsibility ratings in situations that the perceiver finds exceptionally reprehensible. It is likely that the situation presented in the current study was considered extremely reprehensible; however, this perception was not measured. Future research should continue to explore the sequence for judgments of controllability, responsibility, and blame, perhaps while varying reprehensibility of the situation.

Examination of group differences in attributions revealed a significant difference for participant gender. Male participants attributed more responsibility and more blame than female participants, regardless of condition. The finding that men assign more responsibility and/or blame than women is abundant in the literature, but it is usually in the context of attributions toward the victim of rape (Caron & Carter, 1997) or sexual harassment (De Judicibus & McCabe, 2001). Because the victim in these situations is typically

presented as a female, greater blame and responsibility assigned to the victim by male participants than by female participants is consistent with the defensive attribution hypothesis.

In the current study, however, male participants attributed more blame and responsibility than female participants regardless of the gender of the parent. This finding has many possible implications, including issues related to community support and jury trials. Parents in these situations may receive less support from male friends and community members, and attorneys may find male judges or male-dominated juries more likely to convict if charges are brought upon the parent. Additional research should be done to corroborate this finding of gender difference and determine what other factors, such as sexism or endorsement of traditional parenting roles, might also account for this difference.

As expected, outcome severity influenced attributions. In the severe outcome condition where the child dies, participants attributed greater controllability, responsibility, and blame to the parent than in the mild outcome condition where the child was injured. This difference is consistent with past research that examined attributions for negative events (Robbennolt, 2000). It is likely that, when the outcome was mild, participants felt less threatened by the situation than when the outcome was severe and, therefore, had less reason to search for control, responsibility, and blameworthiness in the parent.

However, contrary to the defensive attribution hypothesis, the outcome severity difference did not interact with any of the other variables of interest, nor did similar perceivers make differential attributions compared to dissimilar perceivers. Because participants viewed the parent as more perpetrator than victim, defensive attributions would have been indicated by similar participants assigning greater responsibility and blame to the parent than non-similar participants.

Unlike previous research that has found effects for personal and/or situational relevance (Kouabenan et al., 2001; Shaw & McMartin, 1977), similarity based neither on gender, parenting status, nor both influenced attributions. One possibility for the lack of difference is the operationalization of personal and situational relevance. Past research has found effects for similarity based on situational relevance only (Kouabenan et al., 2001) as well as for personal relevance in cases of high situational relevance (Shaw & McMartin, 1977). Shaver (1970) explains situational relevance as the ability of the perceiver to see himself/herself in the same circumstances as the actor. While it would likely be difficult for most non-parents to imagine the daily tasks associated with caring for an infant, many parents likely also found it difficult to imagine forgetting their child in the car.

Future research might investigate parenting status as a personal versus situational variable as well as the potential influence of other situational variables, such as employment status of parents, on attributions made in situations where the child is left in the car. It is possible that parenting status in general might act as a personally relevant variable while more specific types of parenting, like dual working parents or a single parent who works, would serve as a situationally relevant variable in influencing perceptions.

While participant similarity variables did not interact in attributions, the relationship of these similarity variables with other participant responses, such as empathy, is important as well because many of these variables relate to behavioral outcomes.

Unlike for attributions of control, responsibility, and blame, a participant similarity interaction did occur for feelings of empathy. In the severe outcome situation, participants who were parents experienced greater empathy toward the acting parent than participants who were not parents, but only when the participants were the same gender as the parent in the scenario. In other words, when relevance based on gender was high, relevance based on parenting status resulted in greater feelings of empathy. Mothers were better able to see themselves in the shoes of other mothers, but not fathers. The same was true for fathers; they could empathize with fathers but not with mothers. Similarity on both characteristics was needed in order to feel more empathy, perhaps because the roles of parenthood are often understood in gendered definitions of "mother" and "father" rather than simply "parent."

Along with attributions of responsibility and blame (Graham et al., 1997; Mantler et al., 2003), feelings of empathy are associated with well-being outcomes, such as social support (Batson et al., 1995). Even though the similarity variables did not directly impact the attributions, more empathy experienced by the parents indicates an important difference dependent upon both parenting status and gender.

While investigating group differences in attributions and feelings of empathy is useful for understanding the cognitive components that underlie individuals' responses, perhaps even more beneficial is an understanding of what factors predict behavioral outcomes such as punishment. In the case of a parent who leaves his/her child in the car, both legal and social punishment outcomes need to be considered. It had been hypothesized that individual factors of empathy and similarity would predict these punishment outcomes. Therefore, the regression models included the following variables as predictors: outcome severity; participant characteristics of gender similarity and parenting status similarity; attributions of controllability, responsibility, and blame; perceptions of the parent as a perpetrator and a victim; empathy.

Legal punishment was predicted by outcome severity, with the more severe outcome associated with more severe legal punishment. Legal punishment was also predicted by attributions of responsibility, with greater assigned responsibility associated with more severe legal punishment. While some research has shown blame to be most highly correlated with behavioral outcomes (Mantler et al., 2003), blame is a psychological construct. The theoretical framework of responsibility as a legal construct, rather than a psychological one, supports this relationship between responsibility and legal punishment.

Not surprisingly, perception of the parent as a perpetrator was associated with more severe legal punishment. However, perception of the parent as a victim was not a significant predictor of legal punishment. Following from the idea that participants may have believed that the parent suffered enough, it was informally hypothesized that perception as a victim may have been associated with less severe legal punishment. However, the results support a more traditional and straightforward relationship between perception and legal

punishment. Only the degree to which the parent was viewed as a perpetrator predicted legal punishment. This finding is applicable to the courtroom. If a case in which a child died after being left in the car was prosecuted, it could be advantageous for the defense attorney to mitigate the perception of the parent as a perpetrator. Additionally, these results suggest that portraying the parent as a victim would not be beneficial.

Participants' feelings of empathy for the parent predicted legal punishment as well. Greater empathy was associated with less severe legal punishment. Being able to empathize with the parent's situation is, in part, the ability to see one's self in that position. Combined with the finding that the more severe outcome is a significant predictor of legal punishment, the inverse relationship of empathy reflects the defensive attribution hypothesis.

While neither participants' gender similarity nor parenting status similarity predicted legal punishment in the regression, the earlier analyses showed that, of gender similar participants, parenting status similar individuals had higher scores on the empathy scale than parenting status dissimilar individuals. Therefore, it follows that similar participants felt more empathy but that those feelings of empathy, rather than the similarity itself, determines punishment. As found by Haegerich and Bottoms (2000), it is possible for non-similar individuals to also experience empathy. This might be especially true if they are similar on some other characteristic. For example, a childcare provider or nanny may not be a parent but could still feel empathy for the parent because of the situationally relevant similarity that he/she experiences on a regular basis as part of performing regular childcare duties.

Social punishment includes the factors related to social support that would be important for a parent who has experienced leaving his/her child in the car, regardless of the severity of the outcome. Unlike legal punishment, severity of social punishment was not associated with outcome severity. Whether the child died or required hospitalization, participants assigned equal social punishment. While the severity of the outcome influences the legal definition of the act and the associated punishment, the response from the community does not differ. Friends or acquaintances are just as likely to judge a parent whose child was only mildly injured as they are to judge a parent whose child dies after being left. In the current study, the child was found by a passerby, rather than the parent. In the mild condition, perceivers might understand that the child could have died had it not been for the luck of someone seeing the child and therefore assign social punishment accordingly. Future research might investigate assignment of social punishment between severe outcome conditions where the child dies and mild outcome conditions where the parent rescues the child to determine if the parent actively preventing the child's death mitigates assignment of social punishment.

Perception of the parent as a perpetrator was associated with greater social punishment. Perpetrator is typically considered a legal term, but gaining that label as a result of committing a crime results in social punishment as well as legal. Like legal punishment assignment, perception of the parent as a victim did not predict social punishment.

Because the parent might be portrayed as both a perpetrator and a victim, future research should explore whether these labels are on two ends of a single continuum or if

they are separate constructs. Such information would allow for a better understanding as to whether the promotion of one perception would automatically lead to the diminishment of the other. As with legal punishment, greater feelings of empathy for the parent were associated with less severe social punishment. Participants who were able to view themselves in the parent's situation were likely to agree with providing social support.

The current study has strengths in its sample, which is heterogeneous by age and geographic location, allowing for a more diverse and potentially representative sample than similar studies as well as in its materials, which have shown to be effective for providing the study's conditions in a believable manner. However, as with all research, there are some limitations. The scale used for attributions of blame did not have adequate psychometric properties as originally written. Although the modified scale showed good reliability, future research should investigate measures for attributions of all three types: controllability, responsibility, and blame, in order to ensure good psychometrics.

Conclusion

Although the current study did not validate the defensive attribution hypothesis in attributions of controllability, responsibility, and blame, differences in empathy based on similarity to the actor were found and empathy subsequently predicted the behavioral outcomes of legal and social punishment. Numerous legal and societal implications exist and further research is needed to better understand defensive attributions in situations where the perpetrator can also be seen as a victim.

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Received: 9/2014
Accepted: 9/2015

Hanson, B. L., Terrance, C. A., & Plumm, K. M. (2015). Parent as both perpetrator and victim: Blame and punishment in a case of child neglect. [Electronic Version]. *Applied Psychology in Criminal Justice, 11*(3), 162-184.

APPENDIX A

Controllability, Responsibility, and Blame

Thinking about the newspaper article that you just read, please indicate the extent to which you agree or disagree with each statement.

Strongly Disagree						Strongly Agree
1	2	3	4	5	6	7

Controllability:

1. The child being left in the car was under the mother's/father's personal control.

2. It was something that the mother/father did that caused the child to be left in the car.

3. The mother/father could have prevented the child from being left in the car.

4. The mother/father had no control over what caused the child to be left in the car.

Responsibility:

5. The mother/father is accountable for the child being left in the car.

6. The mother/father is responsible for the child being left in the car.

7. The child being left in the car is a result of the mother's/father's negligence.

8. The mother/father should be held personally liable for the child being left in the car.

Blame:

9. It is the mother's/father's fault that the child was left in the car.

10. The mother/father is to blame for the child being left in the car.

11. The mother/father should not feel guilty for the child being left in the car.

*12. The mother/father deserves having her/his child left in the car.

*Item not retained for main analyses.

APPENDIX B

Legal and Social Punishment

1. How severe of a punishment, if any, do you think the mother/father deserves?

No Punishment						Severe Punishment
1	2	3	4	5	6	7

2. How fit is the mother/father as a parent?

Not at All Fit						Completely Fit
1	2	3	4	5	6	7

3. Should the mother's/father's (other) children be removed from her/his custody?

Definitely Not						Definitely Yes
1	2	3	4	5	6	7

4. If I had been friends with the mother/father before this incident, I would continue to be friends with her/him.

Strongly Disagree						Strongly Agree
1	2	3	4	5	6	7

5. The mother/father deserves the support of the community.

Strongly Disagree						Strongly Agree
1	2	3	4	5	6	7

6. I have doubts about the mother's/father's character.

Strongly Disagree						Strongly Agree
1	2	3	4	5	6	7

7. The community should be outraged that a mother/father would do this to her/his child.

Strongly Disagree						Strongly Agree
1	2	3	4	5	6	7

APPENDIX C

Empathy

Please answer the following questions about your perspective on the situation.

Not at All			Moderately			Very Much
0	1	2	3	4	5	6

1. I can really imagine the thoughts running through the father's/mother's head.
2. I can really feel what the father/mother must have been feeling the day of the accident.
3. I can experience the same feelings that the father/mother experienced.
4. I can take the perspective of the father/mother and understand why the accident occurred.
5. I can really see myself in the father's/mother's shoes.
6. I feel like I can easily take the perspective of the father/mother.

APPENDIX D

Descriptive Statistics and Correlations for Dependent Variables

Variable	*M*	*SD*	*2*	*3*	*4*	*5*	*6*	*7*	*8*
1. Controllability	6.38	.81	.64*	.57*	.32*	.32*	-.31*	.26*	-.26*
2. Responsibility	6.28	.93		.79*	.48*	.40*	-.35*	.35*	-.38*
3. Blame	6.39	.93			.38*	.37*	-.38*	.32*	-.32*
4. Legal Punishment	3.62	1.38				.77*	-.28*	.49*	-.50*
5. Social Punishment	3.13	1.40					-.33*	.48*	-.53*
6. Perceived Victim	2.69	1.68						-.27*	.40*
7. Perceived Perpetrator	4.12	1.99							-.36*
8. Empathy	3.81	1.59							

*$p<.001$