Deviant Behavior

ISSN: (Print) (Online) Journal homepage: www.tandfonline.com/journals/udbh20

Perspective-Taking Does Not Reduce Victim Blaming in Work-Related Situations

Petr Houdek, Štěpán Bahník, Lucie Vrbová & Jiří Hájek

To cite this article: Petr Houdek, Štěpán Bahník, Lucie Vrbová & Jiří Hájek (2025) Perspective-Taking Does Not Reduce Victim Blaming in Work-Related Situations, Deviant Behavior, 46:4, 500-512, DOI: 10.1080/01639625.2024.2354349

To link to this article: https://doi.org/10.1080/01639625.2024.2354349

DEVIANT BEHAVIOR
2025, VOL. 46, NO. 4, 500–512
https://doi.org/10.1080/01639625.2024.2354349

Routledge
Taylor & Francis Group

Perspective-Taking Does Not Reduce Victim Blaming in Work-Related Situations

Petr Houdek, Štěpán Bahník, Lucie Vrbová, and Jiří Hájek

Faculty of Business Administration, Prague University of Economics and Business, Prague, Czech Republic

ABSTRACT

According to the just-world theory, people tend to blame innocent victims for the misfortune they experienced to preserve the belief in a just world. Our preregistered experimental study ($N = 404$; a university participants pool) employed work-related scenarios to test the possibility of reducing victim-blaming by taking a victim's perspective. We also explored whether "victim-blaming" occurs for both undeserved negative and positive outcomes, i.e. attributions of blame or virtue in scenarios including demotions, dismissals, public reprimands, and removal of responsibilities as negative outcomes; and bonuses, promotions, salary raises, and job hirings as positive outcomes. We found that victim-blaming followed from the just-world belief only in scenarios where an individual gains unjust benefit. The belief in a just world could thus lead to the misattribution of positive work outcomes and could result in biased human resources management. Taking the victim's perspective did not reduce attributions of blame and virtue. However, participants considered the outcomes more deserved when they took the perpetrator's perspective. This finding may be a warning that if a perpetrator's perception framework is more accessible for assessing a particular situation, the victims will be blamed more.

ARTICLE HISTORY
Received 26 July 2023
Accepted 7 May 2024

Introduction

Victim blaming is a pervasive issue where individuals attribute the misfortune or adversity someone experiences to the victims themselves, erroneously holding them responsible for situations or outcomes they did not cause. This bias leads to unjustly assigning fault to victims rather than acknowledging external factors or the actions of perpetrators or others. For instance, consider a new employee who struggles to navigate an organization's unintuitive and complex corporate culture. This difficulty does not usually reflect their incompetence but rather the opaque and challenging environment they are thrust into (Weber and Camerer 2003). Similarly, when team members suffer under poor management, characterized by an oppressive and toxic leader, the resultant low engagement and productivity are often not due to the team's lack of effort or commitment. Despite this, the executives of companies may respond by terminating these employees, overlooking the root cause: the detrimental impact of the leader on team morale and performance (Deshpande, George, and Joseph 2000; LaVan and Martin 2008). Bystanders of cyberbullying incidents may fail to support the victim, instead blaming them for the harassment they endure. This misplaced blame suggests that the victim somehow "deserved" their suffering, ignoring the perpetrators' responsibility and the social dynamics at play (Weber, Köhler, and Schnauber-Stockmann 2019).

CONTACT Petr Houdek petr.houdek@gmail.com Faculty of Business Administration, Prague University of Economics and Business, W. Churchill Sq. 1938/4, Žižkov, Prague 3 130 67, Czech Republic

Victim blaming can have profound and detrimental effects, especially within groups and organizations, largely due to moral disengagement. Moral disengagement refers to the mechanisms by which individuals rationalize their inaction or harmful actions, effectively disconnecting themselves from the ethical implications of their behavior (Johnson and Connelly 2016; Kish-Gephart et al. 2014). Moral disengagement allows bystanders and other organization members to justify their lack of empathy, indifference, or even their participation in the malice. The victims' colleagues may convince themselves that the victims somehow provoked their own misfortune or that the negative outcomes the victims experience are deserved. This rationalization process is usually rooted in the belief in a just world (Lerner and Miller 1978), an adaptive psychological mechanism to preserve the notion that the world is fundamentally fair. The rationalization of victim-blaming is thus a way to maintain an inner sense of order and justice when faced with unjust real suffering. This defense mechanism protects the observer's moral self-image, enabling them to overlook the harm being done or to absolve themselves of responsibility for intervening (Boyle and Walker 2016).

As a result, victim-blaming, fueled by the belief in a just world, not only harms the individuals who are directly targeted but also contributes to a toxic culture within an organization or group. It perpetuates a cycle of indifference and inaction toward unethical behavior (Newman et al. 2020). The belief that victims deserve their fate discourages empathy and support for those in need, further isolating them and potentially exacerbating the initial harm (Frieze, Hymer, and Greenberg 1987). Understanding and addressing the underlying mechanisms of victim-blaming is crucial for fostering a more supportive, ethical, and inclusive environment in any group or organization.

For these reasons, our study aims to test a debiasing technique for victim-blaming. We chose perspective-taking as a promising technique because it can be a valuable tool for eliminating attribution errors and strengthening empathy for the victim (Galinsky and Ku 2004; Galinsky and Moskowitz 2000; Pugh et al. 2016). At the same time, we examine whether victim-blaming results from the belief in a just world or other attributional biases (Lerner 1980; Lerner and Simmons 1966), thereby exploring the psychological underpinnings that lead individuals to assign fault to victims. As one of the few studies on the topic, we test whether an analogous mechanism occurs for positive events, i.e., if people attribute merit to beneficiaries of positive injustice. This dual approach allows us to understand how the belief in a just world influences attributions not only of blame in adverse situations but also of virtue in favorable ones. Our study, therefore, measures the effect of the intervention in attributions of blame and merit, providing insight into how individuals rationalize both negative and positive outcomes regarding justice.

Theories behind victim-blaming effect

Victim-blaming is often understood as an adaptive psychological mechanism to uphold the belief in a fundamentally just world, a concept that varies in strength among individuals and cultures (Furnham 2003; Hafer and Bègue 2005; Lerner and Miller 1978; Nudelman and Otto 2021). The just-world hypothesis posits that individuals have a deep-seated need to believe in an orderly, predictable, and moral world. The presence of innocent victims, who suffer without apparent reason, challenges this belief, not by undermining the world's stability but by questioning the fairness of outcomes – where good actions are expected to lead to rewards and bad actions to punishments (Lerner 1980; Lerner and Simmons 1966). When faced with situations where assisting the victim or penalizing the wrongdoer is not feasible, individuals may resort to moral disengagement. This process involves a form of motivated reasoning that shifts the blame onto the victim, attributing their suffering to their own poor choices, lack of abilities, or character defects, thereby resolving the cognitive dissonance caused by witnessing unjust suffering (Runions et al. 2019).

However, there are alternative theoretical explanations. People are more likely to blame innocent victims when they believe in a just world (van den Bos and Maas 2009); nevertheless, they may also blame victims based on simple associative processes, which do not require the belief in a just world (Gawronski and Bodenhausen 2006; Strack and Deutsch 2004). According to the associative models of

cognition, people form and rely on associations between concepts in their environment without necessarily engaging in deep, evaluative thinking (Shanks 2010). In the context of victim-blaming, when an individual is seen in conjunction with a negative event, an automatic association may form, leading to a negative evaluation of the victim regardless of their actual responsibility or innocence (van den Bos and Maas 2009).

Similarly, as theorized by Kahneman and Miller (1986), the perpetrator's behavior could be perceived as given and immutable as the "presupposed background of the story." The fact that there is a negative event can induce an impression that a victim's behavior is the only possible cause for the outcome. Victim blaming can thus be a straightforward implication of the fundamental attribution error (Miller and Ross 1975; Ross 1977). From this theoretical point of view, people tend to attribute the adverse outcomes to somebody rather than to situational factors, and thus, in a situation where a victim is the most salient part of the story, they attribute blame to the victim.

In organizational settings, managers tend to explain failures in terms of employees' characteristics and thus blame innocent victims for organizational misfortune (Martinko, Harvey, and Douglas 2007); victims of rudeness are therefore evaluated by managers as being deviant themselves (Kluemper et al. 2019). The risk of such attributional biases could be even higher in hierarchical organizations (Aquino et al. 1999; Magee and Galinsky 2008) because managers and individuals endorsing values of loyalty and obedience to authority blame victims more intensively and hold more stigmatizing attitudes toward them (Niemi and Young 2016).

Two valences of victim-blaming

While most studies on victim-blaming related only to adverse events happening to victims, we explored whether a similar effect can also occur for positive events. That is, we used work-related scenarios describing situations where something good and something bad happened to a person. Although the just world theory literature is largely unconcerned with research on beneficiaries of injustice (Gaucher et al. 2010; Hafer and Bègue 2005), the theory directly implies that undeserved benefits should also threaten the belief in a just world, and people should rationalize the undeserved benefit as actually deserved by "good people" (Benson 1992) to maintain the belief in a just world. We thus hypothesized that just as people tend to blame victims for their misfortunes to preserve their belief in a just world, they might also attribute positive outcomes to individuals' inherent goodness, even if those outcomes are unearned. This attribution process helps maintain the illusion that the world is a fair place where good things happen to good people and bad things to bad ones.

By this mechanism, the belief in a just world could contribute to the Matthew effect (Merton 1968), usually epitomized by the adage: "the rich get richer, and the poor get poorer." A person who is better off due to an undeserved benefit will gain merits as well, while already suffering victims will also be blamed for their misfortune. In the following text, we use the label "victim" (of misattribution) for individuals evaluated for desert (i.e., either blame or credit) and distinguish whether something positive or negative happened to them.

We test whether the perception that the outcome was deserved is associated with participants' belief in a just world. This association with the belief in a just world would indicate an effect of victim-blaming rather than of the direct association between the positive or negative event and the beneficiary/victim.

Perspective taking as a debiasing tool

Our study explored whether taking the victim's perspective could reduce attributions of blame (and virtue). On the one hand, perspective-taking increases affective empathy and cognitive closeness, which should weaken the association between the negative outcome and the victim (Ku, Wang, and Galinsky 2015). This expectation is based on studies showing that active consideration of another person's experience or situation leads to a more intensive identification with this person, thus reducing

fast intuitive judgments and lowering stereotypization of the person or their identity (Galinsky and Ku 2004; Galinsky and Moskowitz 2000). By introducing a more deliberate process, perspective-taking should diminish the intuitive need to restore the perception of the world as just by blaming the victim whose perspective of the event people have just considered (Soll, Milkman, and Payne 2016).

Perspective-taking reduces fundamental attribution error (Hooper et al. 2015), thus leading to more situational attributions for others' negative outcomes and a more intensive willingness to help them (Gould and Sigall 1977; Toi and Batson 1982). Taking the victim's perspective should thus strengthen the tendency to consider other interpretations of an event, resulting in less victim-blaming.

On the other hand, trying to see things from someone else's point of view can sometimes have negative effects, such as making people feel threatened, competitive, or bad about themselves (Ku, Wang, and Galinsky 2015; Pierce et al. 2013; Sassenrath, Hodges, and Pfattheicher 2016). Additionally, research by Catapano, Tormala, and Rucker (2019) found that when people are made to come up with arguments that go against their own beliefs, they become less willing to change their attitudes. Also, in line with the just-world theory, emotional involvement with victims can increase the blame attributed to them because people may think more about what the victim could have done to avoid the negative outcome (Kahneman and Miller 1986; Lerner 1980).

Summarizing these contradictory predictions, perspective-taking may not suppress victim-blaming if directed toward individuals with dissimilar societal roles or competing values due to reduced empathic concern (Epley, Caruso, and Bazerman 2006). For these reasons, we used loosely described victims of common work-related situations. We also compare the effect of taking the victim's perspective with taking the perpetrator's perspective and with taking the independent observer's perspective as well as with no perspective-taking. Therefore, we can distinguish between the general effect of perspective-taking and the specific effects of taking the perspective of a victim or perpetrator.

Current study

This study aims to explore the psychological mechanisms underpinning victim blaming within the context of both negative and positive events in an organizational context. Unlike previous research that predominantly focuses on adverse outcomes, our investigation extends to the attribution of merit in instances of positive injustice, thereby offering an understanding of how the belief in a just world influences perceptions of both blame and virtue. Individuals with a stronger belief in a just world may be more inclined to rationalize outcomes as deserved, aligning with their need to see the world as fair and orderly, where good deeds are rewarded, and bad deeds are punished.

Next, our research uniquely tests perspective-taking as a debiasing technique, examining its efficacy in mitigating victim blaming by fostering empathy and situational attributions. By comparing the effects of adopting the perspectives of victims, perpetrators, and neutral observers, we aim to uncover the conditions under which perspective-taking can effectively reduce blame attributions to victims.

Based on the described literature, we formed the following non-preregistered hypotheses:

Hypothesis 1: The belief in a just world will be positively associated with higher ratings of desert.

Hypothesis 2: Taking the perspective of the victim will lead to lower ratings of desert compared to the control conditions (not taking any perspective, taking the perspective of the perpetrator, or taking the perspective of an observer).

Hypothesis 3: Empathy will be negatively associated with higher ratings of desert in negative scenarios and vice versa for positive scenarios.

Hypothesis 4: There will be an interaction between the belief in a just world and the valence of the scenario on ratings of desert.

Methods

Pre-registration of the study, as well as materials, data, and analysis code, can be found at: https://osf.io/7jdks/

Participants

We recruited 424 participants from a laboratory participant pool consisting mainly of students at Czech universities, which is also open to the general public. The study was conducted in sessions with up to 17 participants, and participants were invited some time in advance, so the final sample size differed slightly from the planned 400.

The set of studies included an instructional manipulation check (Oppenheimer, Meyvis, and Davidenko 2009) and three items in scales that instructed participants to pick a specific response. According to a pre-registered exclusion criterion, we excluded from the analysis 20 participants who failed to correctly answer the instructional manipulation check or at least two of the items in the scales. Out of the remaining 404 participants, 70% were women. Regarding employment, 71% were students, 22% were employed, and the remaining 7% had some other employment status. The median age of the participants was 23.5 years ($IQR = 5$). Power analysis for the design used in the study is complex, but the final sample size would have sufficient power ($1\text{-}\beta = .80$) for an effect of the size $r = .14$, using a correlation test.

Procedure and design

The study was conducted as a part of a set of unrelated studies on computers in a lab. After reading instructions related to the present study, each participant completed 8 study trials. The study used a 4 (perspective) × 2 (valence) "counterbalanced" design; the trials differed in instructions regarding perspective-taking (none, victim's perspective, perpetrator's perspective, or observer's perspective) and related to one of 8 scenarios which differed in their valence (4 scenarios related to a positive event and 4 to a negative event). The valences were fixed for the scenarios, and the instructions were randomized for each participant, such that each participant got each type of instruction for exactly one positively valenced scenario and for exactly one negatively valenced scenario.

During each trial, participants read a short work-related scenario presenting a case of a person who obtained some benefit (positive scenarios) or was harmed (negative scenarios). In the control condition, no extra instructions were given. In the other three conditions, participants were asked to take the perspective of one of the persons in the scenario – the victim (or beneficiary for the positive scenarios), the perpetrator, or an observer – and write down feelings they believed that the person had during the situation. Afterward, they were asked to what degree had been the benefit or harm deserved on a 7-point scale. The answer was submitted by a button, which led to the next trial.

Later in the study, participants filled the perspective-taking and empathic concern parts of Davis' Interpersonal Reactivity Index (Davis 1980) and the General Belief in a Just World Scale (Dalbert, Montada, and Schmitt 1987).

Materials

The study used eight newly created scenarios, which all described work-related situations where a person received a certain benefit or was harmed by their superior or management of an organization. The situations resulting in harm were: an employee was demoted by a business owner; an employee was dismissed by a company's management; a civil servant was the target of bossing by a mayor; an academic received a public reprimand by a dean of a university and had responsibilities removed. The situations resulting in benefits were: an employee received a bonus from a manager; an employee got a promotion from a company's management; an employee got

a salary raise from a company's management; an administrator was hired for a job by a department at a university. In all the cases, the scenarios described the situation such that there was no clear reason why the person should have received the benefit or should have been harmed. One example scenario with instructions for the three conditions asking the participant to take someone's perspective and the question measuring the dependent variable is provided below:

> Thomas has been a civil servant at a small-town city hall for 15 years. During the first 15 years under a previous mayor, his career was without significant problems and due to his experience, Thomas gained the trust of the mayor and was charged with the leadership of several important projects. Last year, a new mayor took office after the elections. The mayor brought with him a couple of new employees to the city hall, and he did not communicate with Thomas much. Thomas, therefore, felt left out of decision-making and out of work on interesting projects. When the new mayor was giving Thomas work to do, he was reserved and contemptuous. He also often checked Thomas during work and disrupted him during his meetings with citizens. When Thomas was administering finances from European funds, the new mayor unfairly accused Thomas of corruption and even threatened him with legal action, which he did not pursue in the end. A couple of colleagues told Thomas that the new mayor criticized him behind his back and made fun of him. Last month, the new major ordered Thomas to go to a medical checkup which would evaluate his ability to perform his job in the future.
>
> [Victim] Try to take the perspective of Thomas and imagine how he feels in the situation.
>
> [Perpetrator] Try to take the perspective of the new mayor and imagine how he feels in the situation.
>
> [Observer] Try to take the perspective of Thomas's colleagues and imagine how they feel in the situation.
>
> To what degree are Thomas's work problems deserved according to you?
>
> (not deserved at all) 1 - 2 - 3 - 4 - 5 - 6 - 7 (fully deserved)

Measures

Rating of desert

Participants were asked to rate to what degree the victim deserved their treatment on a scale from 1 (not deserved at all) to 7 (fully deserved). The question emphasized that the rating should be according to the participant so that they did not rate the desert from the perspective of any person involved in the situation.

Empathic concern

Perspective-taking was measured using seven items related to empathic concern from the Davis' Interpersonal Reactivity Index (Davis 1980). The items were in the form of statements such as "I often have tender, concerned feelings for people less fortunate than me.," which were rated on a scale ranging from 1 (does not describe me well) to 5 (describes me very well). The scale had a reasonable internal consistency, $\alpha = .73$.

Perspective-taking

Perspective-taking was measured using seven items related to perspective-taking from the Davis' Interpersonal Reactivity Index (Davis 1980). The items were in the form of statements such as "I try to look at everybody's side of a disagreement before I make a decision.," which were rated on a scale ranging from 1 (does not describe me well) to 5 (describes me very well). The scale had a reasonable internal consistency, $\alpha = .73$.

Belief in a just world

Belief in a just world was measured using six items from the General Belief in a Just World Scale (Dalbert, Montada, and Schmitt 1987) with statements such as "People usually receive the outcomes

Table 1. Descriptive statistics for personality and demographic variables and correlations between them. Numbers in brackets represent 95% confidence intervals for the correlations.

Variable	*M*	*SD*	1	2	3	4
1. Empathic concern	3.83	0.62				
2. Perspective taking	3.59	0.64	.27** [.18, .36]			
3. Belief in a just world	3.36	0.84	.13** [.03, .22]	.10 [−.00, .19]		
4. Age	24.66	6.18	−.00 [−.10, .10]	−.05 [−.14, .05]	.01 [−.08, .11]	
5. Sex (female)	0.70	0.46	.23** [.13, .32]	.04 [−.06, .14]	.10* [.00, .20]	−.06 [−.16, .04]

that they deserve.," which were rated by participants on a scale ranging from 1 (strongly disagree) to 6 (strongly agree). The scale had a reasonable internal consistency, $\alpha = .72$.

Results

The preregistered analysis was conducted using a mixed-effect regression. The answer to the question of whether the outcome was deserved served as the dependent variable. Perspective served as a predictor, and it was coded using simple coding where the victim's perspective condition was compared to the other three control conditions[1] (one not taking the perspective of anyone and two active control conditions where participants were supposed to take the perspective of the perpetrator or an observer).

We also included as predictors the belief in a just world and valence of the scenario as well as their interaction together and with perspective (including the triple interaction). Random intercepts for participants and items were included in the model.[2] The belief in a just world was centered before analysis. Table 1 provides descriptive statistics for personality and demographic variables and correlations between them.

Participants considered the victim/beneficiary to deserve the outcome to a similar degree when they took the perspective of the victim/beneficiary and when they took no perspective, $t(2808.0) = -1.28$, $p = .20$, $b = -0.08$, 95% CI = [−0.21, 0.04], or the perspective of the perpetrator, $t(2808.0) = 1.02$, $p = .31$, $b = 0.07$, 95% CI = [−0.06, 0.20] (see Table 2). Taking the perspective of an observer led to somewhat lower ratings of desert in comparison to taking the perspective of the victim/beneficiary, $t(2808.0) = -1.68$, $p = .09$, $b = -0.11$, 95% CI = [−0.24, 0.02], even though the effect was not significant. Taking the perspective of the victim/beneficiary therefore did not seem to help with attributions of blame versus virtue (i.e., victim blaming). See Figure 1 for the average ratings of desert by condition and scenario valence.

Belief in a just world did not influence the ratings of desert, $t(402.0) = 1.02$, $p = .31$, $b = 0.04$, 95% CI = [−0.04, 0.11], but the association between the ratings of desert and the belief in a just world was stronger in positive than negative scenarios, $t(2808.0) = 2.32$, $p = .02$, $b = 0.13$, 95% CI = [0.02, 0.24]. No other effect was significant.

While participant with higher belief in a just world judged that the beneficiaries deserved their outcome more in the positive scenarios, $t(402.0) = 2.26$, $p = .02$, $b = 0.10$, 95% CI = [0.01, 0.19], there was no significant association of the belief in a just world and ratings of desert for the negative scenarios, $t(402.0) = -0.50$, $p = .62$, $b = -0.03$, 95% CI = [−0.13, 0.07] (see Table 2).

[1] While the preregistration described the reported analysis, it incorrectly named it as effect coding.

[2] Note that we did not include random slopes in the models because of the relatively small number of scenarios used in the study. Random slopes would allow for variation of the effect of valence across participants and variation of the effects of conditions and individual differences across scenarios, and their inclusion is recommended to control the false positive rate (Barr et al. 2013; but see also Bates et al. 2018). The results should be interpreted with this limitation in mind, and the observed effects should be replicated using a larger sample of scenarios.

Table 2. Results of regression models. The numbers in brackets display 95% confidence intervals for the estimates.

	All scenarios		Positive scenarios		Negative scenarios	
Predictors	*Estimates*	*p*	*Estimates*	*p*	*Estimates*	*p*
(Intercept)	3.08 (2.24–3.92)	**<.001**	3.68 (2.20–5.16)	**<.001**	2.48 (1.69–3.27)	**<.001**
Valence (positive)	1.20 (−0.48–2.87)	.160				
No perspective	−0.08 (−0.21–0.04)	.200	−0.20 (−0.37 – −0.03)	**.024**	0.03 (−0.16–0.22)	.765
Perpetrator's perspective	0.07 (−0.06–0.20)	.309	0.08 (−0.09–0.25)	.341	0.05 (−0.14–0.24)	.594
Observer's perspective	−0.11 (−0.24–0.02)	.092	−0.15 (−0.32–0.02)	.082	−0.07 (−0.26–0.12)	.466
Belief in a just world (BJW)	0.04 (−0.04–0.11)	.306	0.10 (0.01–0.19)	**.024**	−0.03 (−0.13–0.07)	.620
Valence * No perspective	−0.23 (−0.48–0.03)	.087				
Valence * Perpetrator's perspective	0.03 (−0.23–0.29)	.809				
Valence * Observer's perspective	−0.08 (−0.34–0.18)	.538				
Valence * BJW	0.13 (0.02–0.24)	**.021**				
No perspective * BJW	−0.09 (−0.24–0.07)	.277	0.05 (−0.15–0.25)	.627	−0.22 (−0.44–0.00)	.054
Perpetrator's perspective * BJW	−0.03 (−0.18–0.13)	.738	−0.00 (−0.21–0.20)	.973	−0.05 (−0.27–0.18)	.669
Observer's perspective * BJW	−0.08 (−0.24–0.07)	.288	0.06 (−0.14–0.27)	.544	−0.23 (−0.45 – −0.00)	**.045**
Valence * No perspective * BJW	0.27 (−0.04–0.58)	.084				
Valence * Perpetrator's perspective * BJW	0.05 (−0.26–0.35)	.772				
Valence * Observer's perspective * BJW	0.29 (−0.01–0.60)	.062				
Marginal R^2 /Conditional R^2	0.100/0.537		0.005/0.621		0.004/0.332	

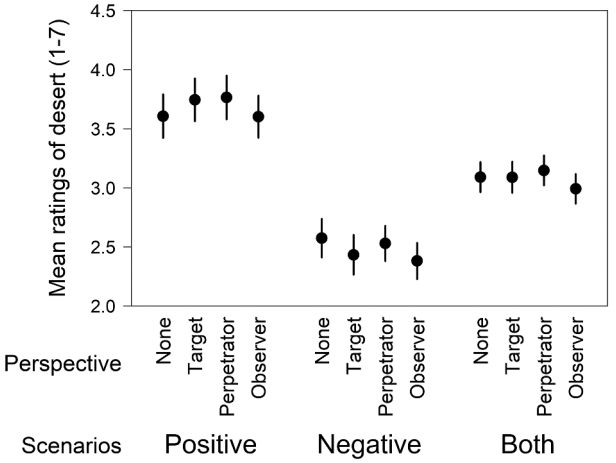

Figure 1. Mean ratings of the desert. The figure displays mean ratings of desert separately for the four conditions and separately for scenarios with positive and negative valence, and for all scenarios combined (Both). The error bars show 95% confidence intervals for the means. The confidence intervals do not take into account the dependency of the data, so they do not correspond exactly to the analysis reported in the text.

Next, we included a centered measure of empathic concern as well as its interaction with the valence of the scenario and condition in the model. Empathic concern was associated with lower ratings of desert, $t(401.0) = -4.05$, $p < .001$, $b = -0.21$, 95% CI = [−0.31, −0.11], but the effect was moderated by valence, $t(2801.0) = 3.47$, $p < .001$, $b = 0.26$, 95% CI = [0.11, 0.41]. Exploring the interaction, separate models for positive and negative scenarios showed a significant association of empathic concern with lower ratings of desert only for negative scenarios, $t(401.0) = -4.99$, $p < .001$, $b = -0.34$, 95% CI = [−0.47, −0.20], but not for positive scenarios, $t(401.0) = -1.22$, $p = .23$, $b = -0.08$, 95% CI = [−0.20, 0.05]. A similar model with perspective-taking as a predictor (including scenarios of both valences) did not show any significant effect of perspective-taking or its interaction with the valence of the scenario or condition.

In an exploratory analysis using the perspective of the perpetrator as the baseline condition, we looked more deeply at the effect of taking the perspective of the perpetrator. While taking the perspective of the perpetrator did not lead to higher ratings of desert than taking the perspective of the victim, as mentioned above, it led to higher ratings of desert than taking no perspective, $t(2808.0) = -2.30$, $p = .02$, $b = -0.15$, 95% CI = [−0.28, −0.02], as well as taking the perspective of the observer, $t(2808.0) = -2.70$, $p = .007$, $b = -0.18$, 95% CI = [−0.31, −0.05].

Discussion

Our study has two main null findings with two important nuances. First, we showed that victim-blaming in an organizational context does not have to stem from the idea of a just world. Nevertheless, believing in a just world is associated with a judgment that random success is deserved. Second, the study shows that simple debiasing in the form of perspective-taking of a victim may not be an effective intervention in eliminating victim-blaming. Nevertheless, taking the perspective of a perpetrator leads to a higher perceived desert of the person affected by the perpetrator's behavior compared to an observer's perspective and no perspective at all.

Our results did not suggest a victim-blaming effect following the belief in a just world in scenarios where the victim was harmed. However, it seemed to be present for the scenarios where an individual gains unjust benefits. Participants believing in a just world were more likely to judge that the success of an employee was deserved. It is also worth noting, as is clear from Figure 1, that our participants generally rated situations from all perspectives as rather undeserved.

Studies have found a strong tendency to give managers and leaders credit for underserved organizational successes (Bligh, Kohles, and Pillai 2011; Frollová, Tkacik, and Houdek 2023). Good job performance tends to be explained as a result of an individual's exceptional decision-making skills or effort (Staw, McKechnie, and Puffer 1983) without consideration of external factors or random shocks which influence the performance far more (Liu and de Rond 2016; Nisbett and Wilson 1977). We uniquely showed that a similar outcome bias could be found in the evaluation of individuals due to the belief in a just world. The belief in a just world could thus lead to misallocation of the perceived desert of the positive work outcomes and could result in unjust and biased human resources management. If people believe in a just world and tend to place individuals as the key agents of positive events and therefore discount situational and other factors (Standing et al. 2006), there are limited opportunities for learning to improve the organization's processes because the causes of success are not correctly identified.

The instruction to take the perspective of the victim did not reduce the perceived desert of the outcome of the victim. This result contrasts with studies showing that perspective-takers are likely to adopt the target's values or beliefs (e.g., Galinsky, Wang, and Ku 2008). Our results are also in opposition to studies establishing perspective-taking as an effective technique for correcting biased or stereotypical thinking (Davis et al. 1996; Galinsky and Ku 2004; Galinsky and Moskowitz 2000). Nevertheless, our results could be influenced by a possible floor effect if participants in the control condition were already taking the victim's perspective as a default. As our scenarios seemed to have led to low judgments of the desert, limited variance might have made it harder to find the

effect of interventions. Another possible limitation of our study's intervention is that we did not measure the participants' motivation to take the victim's perspective or to reduce their bias. Motivation can moderate the effectiveness of debiasing strategies, such that people who are more motivated to be accurate or fair are more likely to benefit from perspective-taking or other interventions. Therefore, it is possible that some of our participants did not engage in perspective-taking or did not try to overcome their biased judgments, which could explain the lack of effect of our manipulation. Our results fall within a growing number of studies showing that the impact of small-scale interventions (or nudges) may be contingent on a variety of factors and cannot be expected to consistently change people's deep-rooted biases or preferences (DellaVigna and Linos 2022; Maier et al. 2022).

Future research should focus on the more fine-grained exploration of reasoning or emotions people experience when they take the perspective of a victim and what factors affect the content of possible mental constructs or emotions. In our study, some of the participants could, when taking the victim's perspective, seek the reasons why they deserved their fate, others why they did not deserve it. The victim was also described only in a short vignette and taking the victim's perspective (by writing down feelings they believed that the person had) may not necessarily provoke sufficient empathy or concern. Nevertheless, this objection may not be so strong because in case of negative outcomes, we found a significant association of empathic concern with lower ratings of the desert.

While we did not find an effect of taking the victim's perspective, our results suggest that perspective-taking could lead to attitude amplification, as taking the perspective of the perpetrator led to the higher perceived desert of the person affected by the perpetrator's behavior. The fact that the undeserved outcomes are rationalized by the perpetrator as deserved may lead to the dynamism of Matthew's effect, with the victims being held liable for bad luck and the beneficiaries being rewarded for luck at the same time. According to the perpetrator's perspective, victims invite abuse through their personalities, actions, and even their inactions (Cortina, Rabelo, and Holland 2018). This tendency can be potentially dangerous because it means that if a perpetrator's perception framework is readily accessible or more intuitive to people for assessing a particular situation, the victims will likely be blamed (Anderson, Beattie, and Spencer 2001). At the same time, perpetrators can be expected to have more power and greater opportunities to present their perspectives in an organization, such as in cases of bullying and organizational tyranny (Ashforth 1994; Tepper et al. 2006). The perpetrator's perspective could also lead to higher ratings of the desert of the positive outcome which, again, establishes the Matthew's effect.

Most of an employee's day-to-day job is unlikely to be directly witnessed by stakeholders or supervisors (Carpenter et al. 2017). We expect stakeholders to take the perspective of executives rather than managers; and managers to take the perspective of fellow managers rather than employees. Their perceptions of the desert of the outcome of the job are formed through attributional processes that can be susceptible to biases and fallacies (Bligh, Kohles, and Pillai 2011; Kluemper et al. 2019). The results of our experimental study show that attributions of blame and virtue may lead to an attributional error with real-world impact, i.e., if there are organizational mistakes and failures, innocent employees are blamed (Cortina, Rabelo, and Holland 2018), if there is an organizational success, even employees who do not contribute to it receive bonuses.

Disclosure statement

No potential conflict of interest was reported by the author(s).

Funding

This study was funded by the Internal Grant Agency of Faculty of Business Administration, Prague University of Economics and Business, under No. IP300040 and the Czech Science Agency (GACR) project No. 22-29520S "Behavioral Organizational Politics: Experiments in Prosocial Political Behavior."

Notes on contributors

Petr Houdek is a Head of the Research and Science Center, and an Associate Professor at the Prague University of Economics and Business and at the Charles University, Czech Republic. His primary research interests include behavioral economics, social psychology, and management sciences. In particular, he is interested in the biological drivers of behavior, decision making biases, dishonesty, and deception.

Štěpán Bahník is an Associate Professor at the Department of Management of the Faculty of Business Administration, Prague University of Economics and Business. His research examines moral judgment and moral behavior, anchoring effect, and processing fluency. He is also interested in open science, psychological methodology, statistics, programming, and intersections between psychology and computer science.

Lucie Vrbová studied Corporate Economics and Management at Prague University of Economics and Business, where she also received her doctoral degree (PhD) in Economics and Management. She is currently working as an Assistant Professor at the Department of Management, Faculty of Business Administration, Prague University of Economics and Business.

Jiří Hájek studied Business Administration at Prague University of Economics and Business, where he also received his doctoral degree (PhD) and currently is Head of Project Management Office at Prague University of Economics and Business, and also teaches project management at the Department of Management.

Authors' contributions

P.H. and Š.B. designed the study. L.V. and J. H. performed the experiments. Š.B. analyzed the data. P.H. and Š.B. wrote the paper with input from all authors.

Availability of data and material (data transparency)

https://osf.io/7jdks/

Compliance with ethical standards

All the procedures performed in studies involving human participants were in accordance with the ethical standards of the institutional and national research committee and with the 1964 Helsinki Declaration and its later amendments or comparable ethical standards. Ethical approval was waived by the Research Ethics Committee at the Center of Science and Research at the Faculty of Business Administration at the Prague University of Economics and Business in view of the low-risk nature of the study's design and anonymity of the collected data.

Informed consent

Informed consent was obtained from all individual participants included in the study.

References

Anderson, I., G. Beattie, and C. Spencer. 2001. "Can Blaming Victims of Rape Be Logical? Attribution Theory and Discourse Analytic Perspectives." *Human Relations* 54(4):445–67.

Aquino, K., S. L. Grover, M. Bradfield, and D. G. Allen. 1999. "The Effects of Negative Affectivity, Hierarchical Status, and Self-Determination on Workplace Victimization." *Academy of Management Journal* 42(3):260–72.

Ashforth, B. 1994. "Petty Tyranny in Organizations." *Human Relations* 47(7):755–78.

Barr, D. J., R. Levy, C. Scheepers, and H. J. Tily. 2013. "Random Effects Structure for Confirmatory Hypothesis Testing: Keep it Maximal." *Journal of Memory and Language* 68(3):255–78.

Bates, D., R. Kliegl, S. Vasishth, and H. Baayen. 2018. "Parsimonious Mixed Models." *arXiv preprint arXiv:1506.04967v2*.

Benson, D. E. 1992. "Why Do People Believe in a Just World?: Testing Explanations." *Sociological Spectrum* 12 (1):73–104.

Bligh, M. C., J. C. Kohles, and R. Pillai. 2011. "Romancing Leadership: Past, Present, and Future." *The Leadership Quarterly* 22(6):1058–77.

Boyle, K. M. and L. S. Walker. 2016. "The Neutralization and Denial of Sexual Violence in College Party Subcultures." *Deviant Behavior* 37(12):1392–410.

Carpenter, N. C., B. Rangel, G. Jeon, and J. Cottrell. 2017. "Are Supervisors and Coworkers Likely to Witness Employee Counterproductive Work Behavior? An Investigation of Observability and Self–Observer Convergence." *Personnel Psychology* 70(4):843–89.
Catapano, R., Z. L. Tormala, and D. D. Rucker. 2019. "Perspective Taking and Self-Persuasion: Why 'Putting Yourself in Their Shoes' Reduces Openness to Attitude Change." *Psychological Science* 30(3):424–35.
Cortina, L. M., V. C. Rabelo, and K. J. Holland. 2018. "Beyond Blaming the Victim: Toward a More Progressive Understanding of Workplace Mistreatment." *Industrial and Organizational Psychology* 11(1):81–100.
Dalbert, C., L. Montada, and M. Schmitt. 1987. "Glaube an eine gerechte Welt als Motiv: Validierungskorrelate Zweier Skalen." *Psychologische Beiträge* 29:596–615.
Davis, M. H. 1980. "A Multidimensional Approach to Individual Differences in Empathy." *JSAS Catalog of Selected Documents in Psychology* 10:85.
Davis, M. H., L. Conklin, A., Smith, and C. Luce. 1996. "Effect of Perspective Taking on the Cognitive Representation of Persons: A Merging of Self and Other." *Journal of Personality & Social Psychology* 70(4):713–26.
DellaVigna, S., and E. Linos. 2022. "rcts to Scale: Comprehensive Evidence from Two Nudge Units." *Econometrica* 90 (1):81–116.
Deshpande, S. P., E. George, and J. Joseph. 2000. "Ethical Climates and Managerial Success in Russian Organizations." *Journal of Business Ethics* 23(2):211–17.
Epley, N., E. M. Caruso, and M. H. Bazerman. 2006. "When Perspective Taking Increases Taking: Reactive Egoism in Social Interaction." *Journal of Personality & Social Psychology* 91(5):872–89.
Frieze, I. H., S. Hymer, and M. S. Greenberg. 1987. "Describing the Crime Victim: Psychological Reactions to Victimization." *Professional Psychology, Research and Practice* 18(4):299–315.
Frollová, N., M. Tkacik, and P. Houdek. 2023. "The Leadership Fallacy: How Misattribution of Leadership Leads to a Blaming Game." Available at SSRN 4326571.
Furnham, A. 2003. "Belief in a Just World: Research Progress Over the Past Decade." *Personality & Individual Differences* 34(5):795–817.
Galinsky, A. D. and G. Ku. 2004. "The Effects of Perspective-Taking on Prejudice: The Moderating Role of Self-Evaluation." *Personality & Social Psychology Bulletin* 30(5):594–604.
Galinsky, A. D. and G. B. Moskowitz. 2000. "Perspective-Taking: Decreasing Stereotype Expression, Stereotype Accessibility, and In-Group Favoritism." *Journal of Personality & Social Psychology* 78(4):708–24.
Galinsky, A. D., C. S. Wang, and G. Ku. 2008. "Perspective-Takers Behave More Stereotypically." *Journal of Personality & Social Psychology* 95(2):404–19.
Gaucher, D., C. L. Hafer, A. C. Kay, and N. Davidenko. 2010. "Compensatory Rationalizations and the Resolution of Everyday Undeserved Outcomes." *Personality & Social Psychology Bulletin* 36(1):109–18.
Gawronski, B. and G. V. Bodenhausen. 2006. "Associative and Propositional Processes in Evaluation: An Integrative Review of Implicit and Explicit Attitude Change." *Psychological Bulletin* 132(5):692–731.
Gould, R. and H. Sigall. 1977. "The Effects of Empathy and Outcome on Attribution: An Examination of the Divergent-Perspectives Hypothesis." *Journal of Experimental Social Psychology* 13(5):480–91.
Hafer, C. L. and L. Bègue. 2005. "Experimental Research on Just-World Theory: Problems, Developments, and Future Challenges." *Psychological Bulletin* 131(1):128–67.
Hooper, N., A. Erdogan, G. Keen, K. Lawton, and L. McHugh. 2015. "Perspective Taking Reduces the Fundamental Attribution Error." *Journal of Contextual Behavioral Science* 4(2):69–72.
Johnson, J. F. and S. Connelly. 2016. "Moral Disengagement and Ethical Decision-Making." *Journal of Personnel Psychology* 15(4):184–89.
Kahneman, D. and D. T. Miller. 1986. "Norm Theory: Comparing Reality to Its Alternatives." *Psychological Review* 93 (2):136–52.
Kish-Gephart, J., J. Detert, L. K. Treviño, V. Baker, and S. Martin. 2014. "Situational Moral Disengagement: Can the Effects of Self-Interest Be Mitigated?" *Journal of Business Ethics* 125(2):267–85.
Kluemper, D. H., S. G. Taylor, W. M. Bowler, M. N. Bing, and J. R. B. Halbesleben. 2019. "How Leaders Perceive Employee Deviance: Blaming Victims While Excusing Favorites." *Journal of Applied Psychology* 104(7):946–964.
Ku, G., C. S. Wang, and A. D. Galinsky. 2015. "The Promise and Perversity of Perspective-Taking in Organizations." *Research in Organizational Behavior* 35:79–102.
LaVan, H. and W. M. Martin. 2008. "Bullying in the U.S. Workplace: Normative and Process-Oriented Ethical Approaches." *Journal of Business Ethics* 83(2):147–65.
Lerner, M. J. 1980. *The Belief in a Just World: A Fundamental Delusion*. New York: Springer.
Lerner, M. J. and D. T. Miller. 1978. "Just World Research and the Attribution Process: Looking Back and Ahead." *Psychological Bulletin* 85(5):1030–51.
Lerner, M. J. and C. H. Simmons. 1966. "Observer's Reaction to the 'Innocent Victim': Compassion or Rejection?" *Journal of Personality & Social Psychology* 4(2):203–10.
Liu, C. and M. de Rond. 2016. "Good Night and Good Luck: Perspectives on Luck in Management Scholarship." *The Academy of Management Annals* 10(1):409–51.

Magee, J. C. and A. D. Galinsky. 2008. "Social Hierarchy: The Self-Reinforcing Nature of Power and Status." *The Academy of Management Annals* 2(1):351–98.
Maier, M., F. Bartoš, T. D. Stanley, D. R. Shanks, A. J. Harris, and E. J. Wagenmakers. 2022. "No Evidence for Nudging After Adjusting for Publication Bias." *Proceedings of the National Academy of Sciences* 119(31):e2200300119.
Martinko, M. J., P. Harvey, and S. C. Douglas. 2007. "The Role, Function, and Contribution of Attribution Theory to Leadership: A Review." *The Leadership Quarterly* 18(6):561–85.
Merton, R. K. 1968. "The Matthew Effect in Science: The Reward and Communication Systems of Science Are Considered." *Science* 159(3810):56–63.
Miller, D. T., and M. Ross. 1975. "Self-Serving Biases in the Attribution of Causality: Fact or Fiction?." *Psychological Bulletin* 82(2):213–25.
Newman, A., H. Le, A. North-Samardzic, and M. Cohen. 2020. "Moral Disengagement at Work: A Review and Research Agenda." *Journal of Business Ethics* 167:535–70.
Niemi, L. and L. Young. 2016. "When and Why We See Victims As Responsible: The Impact of Ideology on Attitudes Toward Victims." *Personality & Social Psychology Bulletin* 42(9):1227–42.
Nisbett, R. E. and T. D. Wilson. 1977. "The Halo Effect: Evidence for Unconscious Alteration of Judgments." *Journal of Personality & Social Psychology* 35(4):250–56.
Nudelman, G. and K. Otto. 2021. "Personal Belief in a Just World and Conscientiousness: A Meta-Analysis, Facet-Level Examination and Mediation Model." *British Journal of Psychology* 112(1):92–119.
Oppenheimer, D. M., T. Meyvis, and N. Davidenko. 2009. "Instructional Manipulation Checks: Detecting Satisficing to Increase Statistical Power." *Journal of Experimental Social Psychology* 45(4):867–72.
Pierce, J. R., G. J. Kilduff, A. D. Galinsky, and N. Sivanathan. 2013. "From Glue to Gasoline: How Competition Turns Perspective Takers Unethical." *Psychological Science* 24(10):1986–94.
Pugh, B., H. Ningard, T. V. Ven, and L. Butler. 2016. "Victim Ambiguity: Bystander Intervention and Sexual Assault in the College Drinking Scene." *Deviant Behavior* 37(4):401–18.
Runions, K. C., T. Shaw, K. Bussey, R. Thornberg, C. Salmivalli, and D. S. Cross. 2019. "Moral Disengagement of Pure Bullies and Bully/Victims: Shared and Distinct Mechanisms." *Journal of Youth & Adolescence* 48:1835–48.
Sassenrath, C., S. D. Hodges, and S. Pfattheicher. 2016. "It's All About the Self: When Perspective Taking Backfires." *Current Directions in Psychological Science* 25(6):405–10.
Shanks, D. R. 2010. "Learning: From Association to Cognition." *Annual Review of Psychology* 61:273–301.
Soll, J. B., K. L. Milkman, and J. W. Payne. 2016. "A User's Guide to Debiasing." Pp. 924–50 in *The Wiley Blackwell Handbook of Judgment and Decision Making*, edited by G. Keren and G. Wu. Chichester: Wiley-Blackwell
Standing, C., A. Guilfoyle, C. Lin, and P. E. D. Love. 2006. "The Attribution of Success and Failure in it Projects." *Industrial Management & Data Systems* 106(8):1148–65.
Staw, B. M., P. I. McKechnie, and S. M. Puffer. 1983. "The Justification of Organizational Performance." *Administrative Science Quarterly* 28(4):582–600.
Strack, F. and R. Deutsch. 2004. "Reflective and Impulsive Determinants of Social Behavior." *Personality and Social Psychology Review* 8(3):220–47.
Tepper, B. J., M. K. Duffy, C. A. Henle, and L. S. Lambert. 2006. "Procedural Injustice, Victim Precipitation, and Abusive Supervision." *Personnel Psychology* 59(1):101–23.
Toi, M. and C. D. Batson. 1982. "More Evidence That Empathy Is a Source of Altruistic Motivation." *Journal of Personality & Social Psychology* 43(2):281–92.
van den Bos, K. and M. Maas. 2009. "On the Psychology of the Belief in a Just World: Exploring Experiential and Rationalistic Paths to Victim Blaming." *Personality & Social Psychology Bulletin* 35(12):1567–78.
Weber, R. A. and C. F. Camerer. 2003. "Cultural Conflict and Merger Failure: An Experimental Approach." *Management Science* 49(4):400–15.
Weber, M., C. Köhler, and A. Schnauber-Stockmann. 2019. "Why Should I Help You? Man Up! Bystanders' Gender Stereotypic Perceptions of a Cyberbullying Incident." *Deviant Behavior* 40(5):585–601.