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AUTHOR Nario, Michelle R.; Branscombe, Nyla R.
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ABSTRACT

Whether satisfaction or dissatisfaction is experienced is a function of the type of comparisons against which the outcome is evaluated. Something appears good because it seems better than something else. This study examined the consequences of downward comparisons, or worse-world counterfactuals involving evaluations of both the victim and assailant in the context of a rape scenario. Male and female subjects (N=106) were randomly assigned to one of four conditions. They simulated these outcomes: worse for the victim because of her own actions; worse for the victim because of the assailant's actions; worse for the assailant because of his own actions; or worse for the assailant because of the victim's actions. After reading identical event information, subjects who imagined how a victim might have made the outcome worse for her assailant increased the blame assigned to her. This is in comparison to scenarios in which subjects imagined how the assailant's own actions might have made the outcome worse for himself. The specific function of downward comparisons is hypothesized to be contingent upon the nature of the comparison and its relationship to the actual event consequences. (ABL)

Imagining Better or Worse Outcomes

by

Changing Victim or Assailant Behaviors

Michelle R. Nario and Nyla R. Branscombe

University of Kansas

Running Head: 1992 MPA Presentation

ABSTRACT

This research examined the consequences of downward comparisons, or worse-world counterfactuals involving evaluations of both the victim and assailant in the context of a rape scenario. After reading identical event information, subjects who imagined how a victim might have made the outcome worse for her assailant increased the blame assigned to her. This is in comparision to when subjects imagined how the assailant's own actions might have made the outcome worse for himself. The specific function of downward comparisons is hypothesized to be contingent upon the nature of the comparison and its relationship to the actual event consequences.

Whether we experience satisfaction or dissatisfaction with an outcome is a function of the type of comparisons against which we evaluate that outcome. Something appears good because it seems better than something else. Something is bad only when its worse than some other alternative (Folger, 1984). When reality is compared to a more favorable outcome, we call this an upward comparison: She was raped... If only she had avoided it. When reality is compared to a less favorable outcome -- a downward comparison results: She was raped... Well, at least she wasn't killed.

Much of the previous work on counterfactual thinking has focused on counterfactuals that improve negative outcomes "if only" a better outcome had occurred instead. There have been fewer studies examining the effects of hypothetical worse worlds. In fact, Kahneman and Miller (1986) proposed that such worse world comparisons might even be harder to imagine.

One notable exception is the work of Taylor, Wood, and Lichtman (1983). They suggest that downward comparisons may actually facilitate victim coping. Imagining hypothetical worse outcomes minimizes the victim's experience by reframing it as fortunate relative to others who are worse off by comparison. This research, however, focuses on the perceiver's mental processes and does not address the effects that worse-world comparisons might have on victims' perceptions of themselves.

Therefore, downward comparisons may have very different implications depending on the status of the perceiver and how the counterfactual reflects upon the final outcome. Given a rape scenario, involving evaluations of both victim and assailant -- does a downward comparison improve the picture such that the rape no longer seems so bad ("at least she's alive"). Or, does it increase the discrepancy between the rape and what might have otherwise compensated for it, like some act of retaliation ("if only she had shot him").

Whenever better alternatives are available in memory, subjects are expected to be more dissatisfied with their original outcomes: Something better was missed. However, downward comparisons may also promote dissatisfaction: If the hypothetical worse world

is perceived as justifiable, it may appear preferable to the original outcome in which the assailant now appears to have escaped justice. According to Folger's (1984) work, attributions of blame and resentment are predicted whenever circumstances/actions produce an unjustifiable outcome and a better outcome is imaginable.

In the present study, we were interested in the consequences of different types of outcome simulations. Outcomes can be imagined as better or worse than the original scenario. But what happens to subjects' attributions of blame when they consider how a bad outcome (rape) might have been even worse for either the victim or the assailant.

Counterfactual comparisons usually imply the retrospective undoing of some event occurring in the past. However, hypothetical simulations can also include prospective possibilities for future alternatives as well.

METHOD

All subjects read the *identical* scenario involving a spontaneous date between two co-workers. The story included several ambiguous details concerning the evening, as it progressed. Each subject encoded the same exact event; there were no scenario or instructional differences except for the incomplete sentence stem that subjects completed. Therefore, any judgment differences can be attributed to the mental comparisons generated after the fact.

Male and female (n=106) subjects were randomly assigned to one of four conditions. They simulated an outcome either: worse for the victim because of her own actions; worse for the victim because of the assailant's actions; worse for the assailant because of his own actions, or worse for the assailant because of the victim's actions. Each sentence stem began: "Besides the rape, the outcome could have been worse for (HIM/HER) if (HE/SHE)... Within each experimental condition, subjects were free to generate any particular counterfactual they wanted. Consequently, the effects generalize across a variety worse-outcome responses.

After this mutation task, subjects completed dependent measures assessing victim and assailant blame. Additionally, we measured other attributions of target responsibility,

causality and assailant guilt. In this presentation, I'll be focusing on the measures of target blame which ranged from 0 to 100% for both the victim and the assailant.

RESULTS

Analyses revealed a significant three-way interaction between the repeated measure[1] of which person was the target of blame (victim or assailant), whose behavior was the focus of attention, and whether the counterfactual condition was worse for the victim or worse for the assailant, F (1,98) = 7.60, $p.<.01$. Mancova analyses took into account subjects pre-measured Just World (Rubin and Peplau, 1975) and Rape Empathy (Deitz, Blackwell, Daley, and Bentley, 1982) scores. Rape Empathy was the only pre-measure significantly related to the blame variables. Therefore, by partialing out the variance of this covariate, the effects obtained are over and above subjects' motivational tendencies to blame or sympathize with either target.

The attached figure illustrates the percentage of blame subjects assigned to both targets in each of the experimental conditions. The dotted line shows when the focus of attention is on the victim's behaviors (IF SHE); the solid line reflects when the focus is on the assailant's behaviors (IF HE).

When subjects imagined an outcome worse for the victim, they typically generated alternatives in the SHE FOCUS such as: "Besides the rape.. she could have gotten pregnant," "She could have resisted more and been killed;" or in the HE FOCUS: "He could have given her AIDS," or "He could have beaten her." In this Worse for the Victim Condition, focus of attention did not make a difference in the relative blame assigned to either target. Whether he made it worse for her or she made it worse for herself -- the assailant still averaged 75 percent of the blame while the victim averaged 25 percent.

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[1] When a difference score involving the percentage of assailant blame minus the percentage of victim blame is analyzed with ANCOVA, the results completely coincide with the conclusions presented here. That is, the interaction between focus and outcome is significant, F (1,97) = 6.73, $p.<.05$.

However, when the comparison is changed to an outcome imagined as worse for the assailant, blame assignment critically depends on whose behaviors are most prominent in the simulation. The assailant's blame remains at 75 percent for all conditions *except* when he is the focus of an outcome that could have been worse for him. In this condition, subjects simulated that: "He could have been caught and imprisoned," or "He could have screwed up and got shot." Not only did the assailant commit rape -- he also appears to have escaped justice/retribution. In this condition, his blame is significantly elevated to 85 percent while the victim's blame decreases to 15 percent. The victim's involvement is not salient in simulations comparing how: "He could have been convicted but was not." As a consequence, when the assailant is most blameworthy, the victim is least to blame.

On the other hand, when the victim's behaviors are implicated in an outcome that could have been worse for the assailant, subjects simulated: "She could have had him arrested," or "She could have shot him in self-defense." In this condition, the emphasis is on the victim who had an opportunity to seek revenge, but missed it. Her blame is the highest in this condition. Although the assailant's blame remains constant at 75 percent, the victim's blame increases to 35 percent, on average.

Some subjects in this condition implied that because the victim missed her chance to get the attacker back, she may have wanted the sex after all. This explanation is consistent with our previous findings (Branscombe and Coleman, 1991): When alternatives to rape included simulations where the victim could have consented to mutual sex, subjects rated the victim as even more blameworthy ($\underline{m}$=61.6) than the assailant ($\underline{m}$=43.4). Not only could the victim have avoided the rape -- she could have made the outcome even better. In this present study, the counterfactual comparison emphasizes her opportunity to vindicate the crime which makes the rape seem even worse by comparison: imagining a worse outcome for the assailant simultaneously creates a better outcome for the victim.

Conversely, when the alternative compares how the outcome could have been even worse for the victim, the rape no longer appears so bad -- at least this is according to those observing and not experiencing the victimization.

In conclusion, the specific function of downward comparisons may be contingent upon both the perceiver and the nature of the comparison itself. When comparisons involve evaluations of another person whose fate is discrepant with the imagined outcome -- attributions may serve to rectify this discrepancy. For example, when observers witness an event that is discrepant with expectations of imagined justice, dissatisfaction may result producing attributions of blame and resentment. Subsequently, the target of such attributions may depend on the actor whose behaviors are seen to be responsible for the discrepancy.

In future research, we hope to tease apart the conditions influencing the selection of counterfactuals (upward, downward or otherwise). We're also interested in determining which simulations will serve as the basis for relative comparison, and how these particular comparisons will then govern subsequent reactions.

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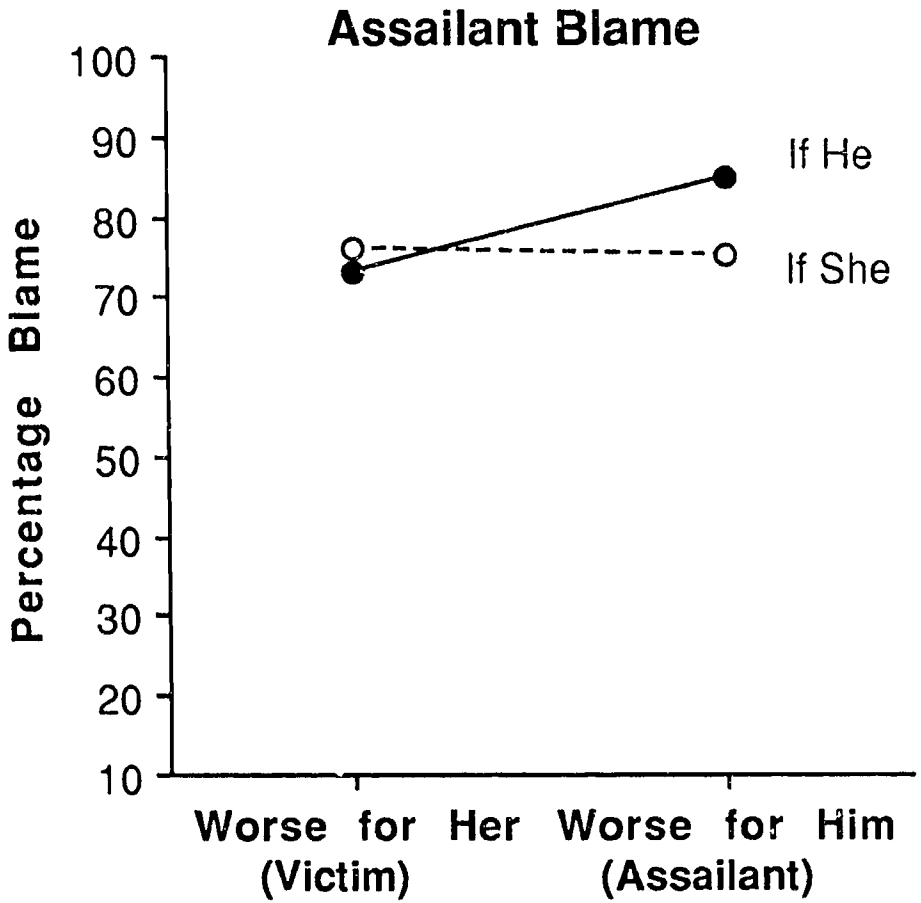
Assailant Blame
Percentage Blame
100
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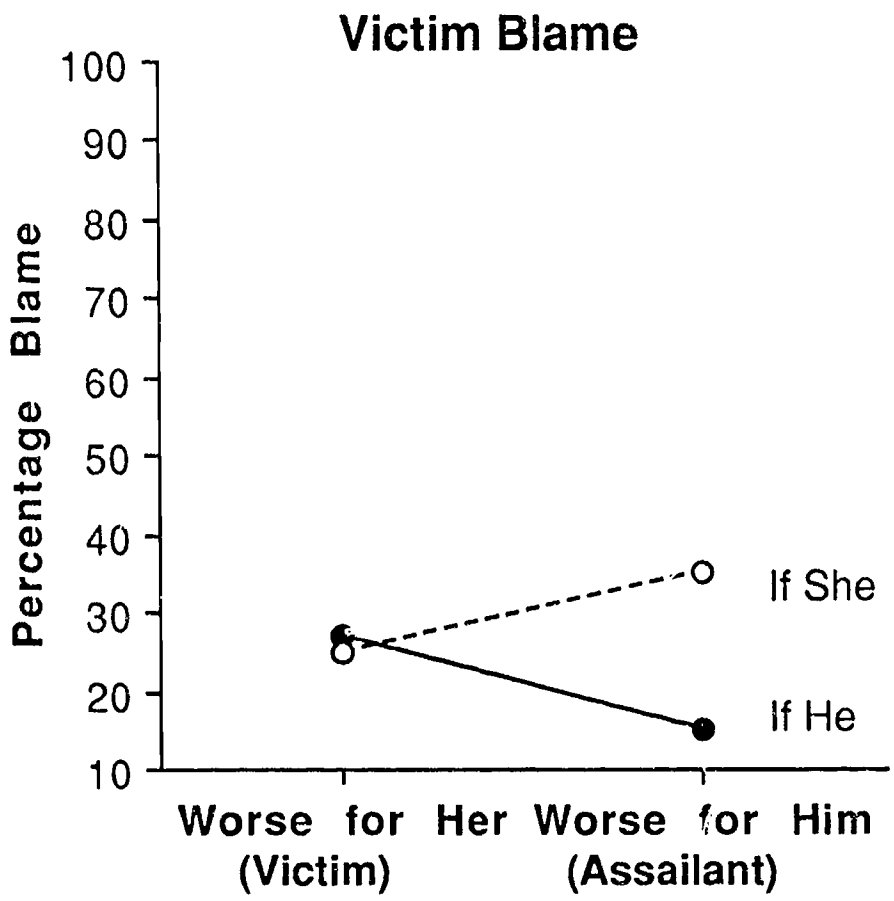
If He
If She
Worse for Her (Victim)
Worse for Him (Assailant)


Victim Blame
Percentage Blame
100
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If She
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Worse for Her (Victim)
Worse for Him (Assailant)

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