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Brief report

Perceived threat, blaming attribution, victim ethnicity and punishment

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ABSTRACT

In cases of inter-group crime, research has shown that attitudes of majority population members toward a supposed defendant are influenced by his or her ethnicity, and, moreover, that levels of perceived (group) threat toward out-group defendants can impact on levels of punishment severity which members of the majority population believe they should receive. However, little research has focused on the ethnicity of the victim and/or on blaming attribution. Based on the theory of Defensive Attribution and Integrative Threat Theory, the purpose of the current study was to extend current understandings to examine a conceptual model in which 1) victim ethnicity moderates and 2) blaming attribution mediates the relationship between ethnic threat perceptions and the support for harsh punitive sanctions toward an out-group perpetrator involved in an intra/inter-racial offence. The study included 230 Israeli-Jewish students, who read a scenario describing an Arab perpetrator of crime and either a Jewish or Arab victim, and answered questions regarding perceived Arab threat, perpetrator blaming and attitudes to punishment. In line with hypotheses, findings showed that blaming attribution toward the perpetrator partially mediated the relationship between threat perceptions and support for harsh punitive sanctions. Furthermore, results showed that ethnic similarity between the observer and victim moderated the relationship between threat perceptions and punitiveness. Results suggest the importance of highlighting understandings of majority-minority relations in the field of criminology.

The question of what determines the attitudes we hold toward others who are different from us is critical in a time of mass immigration and heterogeneous societies (Tartakovsky & Walsh, 2016). In criminology, the question of how we attribute blame and perceive the appropriate punishment toward those suspected of committing a crime from a different ethnic background to our own is a sensitive issue and relates to issues of fairness in the judicial system. To date, social psychology research on intergroup relations has examined the role of *perpetrator* ethnicity on attitudes toward punishment for in/out-group offenders (Fishman, Rattner, & Turjeman, 2006; Halabi, Statman, & Dovidio, 2015; Ousey & Unnever, 2012), in particular through studies which have examined attitudes toward African-American offenders (Lowery, Burrow, & Kaminski, 2018; Wheelock, Semukhina, & Demidov, 2011) and, following 9/11, Arab offenders (Niwa et al., 2016; Smooha, 2013; Strabac & Listhaug, 2008). In addition, criminological theory has examined the relationship between blaming attribution and attitudes to punishment (Cramer, Clark, Kehn, Burks, & Wechsler, 2014) and between threat perception and blame (Quillian, 1995), yet these three aspects have not been integrated. The current study extends existing social psychology and criminology theory by examining a conceptual model examining the relationship between threat perceptions and punitive attitudes toward Arab offenders with an examination of *victim* ethnicity and blaming attribution as moderator and mediator variables respectively in the relationship between perceptions of threat and punitive attitudes.

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“Fear of the other” and attitudes toward punishment

Heterogeneous societies are often characterized by ongoing struggles for socio-economic resources, political power and knowledge (Allport, 1954; Bobo, 1999; Quillian, 1995) which can have a major effect on negative attitudes (Canetti-Nisim, Ariely, & Halperin, 2008; Raijman, 2013; Shechory-Bitton & Soen, 2016). One of the leading theories explaining intergroup tensions is Integrated Threat Theory (ITT, Stephan & Stephan, 1996) which describes four types of threat that out-group members may possess for the dominant social group: realistic threat (competition for concrete resources), symbolic threat (resulting from a perception of intergroup differences in cultural norms), intergroup anxiety (out-group fear) and negative stereotypes. Empirical research suggests that realistic and symbolic threat perceptions are the main factors in predicting negative attitudes toward minority groups (e.g. Quillian, 1995; Riek, Mania, & Gaertner, 2006; Schlueter & Scheepers, 2010; Vergani & Tacchi, 2016).

Quillian (1995) examined national survey data in 12 European Countries and found that perceived threat as a function of poor economic conditions and the size of the minority group relative to the majority group, explain the formation of prejudice toward minorities. A meta-analysis involving 95 samples (Riek et al., 2006) revealed that both realistic and symbolic threat have a positive correlation with negative out-group attitudes. In the area of criminology, ITT has informed a wealth of research on social control policy including incarceration (Jordan & Maroun, 2016; Lowery et al., 2018; Olzak & Shanahan, 2014), police use of force (Ferrandino, 2015; Smith & Holmes, 2014) and punitive attitudes (Bratina, Cox, & Fetzer, 2016; Chiricos, Welch, & Gertz, 2004; King & Wheelock, 2007). Pickett (2016) suggests that perceived Latino threat (economic and symbolic) was related to greater support for expanding police powers (e.g. police profiling use of force) among white respondents. Consistent with these results, a cross-national analysis in 27 European countries has revealed that supporting of harsh punitive sanctions is related to individuals' belief that their country's employment situation is worsening due the size of out-group population (Ousey & Unnever, 2012). According to this view, as the relative size of the out-group racial population increases, in-group members are likely to feel threatened, and may feel the need to protect their privileged social and economic positions by supporting harsh social control policy toward out-group members (Gorodzeisky & Semyonov, 2015; King & Wheelock, 2007; Schneider, 2008).

Blaming attribution and ethnicity

While theory and empirical research support a relationship between threat perception and attitudes to punishment, many questions remain unanswered about the mechanisms and nuances of this relationship. The current study examines two of these: 1) to what extent can the relationship between threat and attitudes to punishment be explained (mediated) by the attribution of blame; 2) to what extent is the identity of the victim important in the relationship between threat and attitudes to punishment?

Psychological research indicates that blame is a common social behavior when negative and unexpected events occur (Levy & Ben-David, 2008; Malle, Guglielmo, & Monroe, 2014; Suarez & Gadalla, 2010). According to the Defensive Attribution Theory (Shaver, 1970), blaming attribution is influenced by the similarity between the observer and those who are involved in the crime. Much of the research relating to blaming attribution has focused on the blaming of a victim, on the basis of perceived similarity or difference between the observer and the victim. Bell, Kuriloff, and Lottes, (1994) showed that the more observers perceive themselves as being similar to the victim, the less blame they are likely to attribute to them. Several studies found that women tend to blame female rape victims less than men (Bruggen & Grubb, 2014; Levy & Ben-David, 2008; Suarez & Gadalla, 2010).

Some, though limited, studies have linked the desire to punish criminal offenders with perceived measures of blaming. For example, research has shown offender blaming was positively associated with favoring harsh punitive sanctions, whereas victim blaming was positively related to favoring lenient punishment options (Cramer et al., 2014; Shechory-Bitton & Zvi, 2015; Sjöberg & Sarwar, 2018). Research has also shown a link between perceived threat and blaming attribution, such that observers may often blame out-group members as a consequence of their threatening actions (Quillian, 1995). For example, Aberson (2015) suggests a relationship between views of African-Americans as economic threat and placing blame on them for poor outcomes and economic insecurity. As such, limited research has suggested that perceived threat may lead to heightened levels of blame and that levels of blame may predict punishment severity. In the model that we propose, we integrate these aspects to suggest that the level of blame attribution will (partially) mediate the relationship between perceived threat and punishment severity. In other words, it is not the perceived threat alone, but rather perceived threat as leading to higher levels of blame which will then predict attitudes to punishment.

Ethnic background of the victim

An additional variable that may influence attitudes to punishment is the ethnic background of the victim (Bruggen & Grubb, 2014; Korn, 2009). Ethnic match between the observer and the *perpetrator* has been found to be correlated with less punitive sanctions (Alesina & La Ferrara, 2014; Fishman et al., 2006). For example, Jewish participants suggest less punitive sanctions toward a Jewish driver, as compared with an Arab driver, who was guilty in a car accident in which an innocent pedestrian was injured (Halabi et al., 2015). When examining the perception toward *victims* involved in interracial offence, research has shown more positive and empathic attitudes toward minority victims as compared to majority victims (Saucier, Brown, Mitchell, & Cawman, 2006; Saucier, Hockett, Zanotti, & Heffel, 2010). Yet, findings are not consistent as a systematic review on rape victim blaming (Bruggen & Grubb, 2014) shows that people express more negative attitudes toward African-Americans than toward white victims. Overall, research examining the role of victim ethnicity in understanding attitudes to punishment is very limited. Those studies which have been carried out show a tendency to perceive interracial crime as more severe when ethnic similarity between the victim and observer exist. For example,

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