



Will Innocent Victims Be Blamed Less When Mimicked?

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Abstract: In current study, we intended to, from the perspective of embodied cognition theory, explore the interactions of mimicry, identity similarity and the threat to just world belief (JWB) on the blame attitude of innocent victims. A completely random design of experiment with three factors: mimicry (mimicry vs. no mimicry) * identity similarity (high vs. low) * threat to JWB (high vs. low) was conducted on 160 college students. First, we found a significant interaction between mimicry and threat to JWB. Second, mimicry also significantly interact with identity similarity. Third, no statistically significant interactions were found among the three factors. Conclusion: innocent victims will be blamed less after mimicked when the event threatens bystanders' JWB and the identity between bystanders and victims differentiates.

Keywords: Innocent victim; Victim blame; Embodied cognition; Mimicry; Threat to JWB; Identity similarity

1 Introduction

Innocent victims of crimes, especially sexual assaults, fear to interact with others because of other people's biased attitudes [1]. Although individuals often try to act kindly to others' distress and loss [2], innocent victims who are thought to be entirely or partly responsible for their unfortunate experiences are often devalued [3]. Thus, innocent victims have to prove that they were not blamed for what happened to themselves. The process is referred as victim blame [4].

Why are innocent victims usually blamed? One potential explanation is derived from just-world theory. According to the core of just-world theory, individuals are motive to perceive the world as a fair and just place. That is, bad deeds, as well as good, may rebound on the doer. This justice motive is often known as just world belief [5]. If the perpetrator of a crime is not caught, the event then poses a threat to JWB of the individuals (the evil is not rewarded with evil). Hence, in order to protect JWB from threats, individuals tend to believe that innocent victims must have done something immoral to deserve the unfortunate events [6]. Studies have confirmed that the higher the event threatens people's JWB, the more people blamed the innocent victim [7].

Another potential explanation is from the perspective of identity similarity. When identifying themselves as similar to the innocent victims, the participants tended to view the innocent victim as the in-group person, thus showing more liking, endorsement, and favor to them relative to the out-group person [8]. Identity similarity could

be manipulated based on personal characteristics (like age, race, sex), or experience/situation (i.e., similarity of actual experiences or perceived vulnerability to those experiences). For instance, by assessing participants' sexual victimization histories to manipulate to the rape victim, Miller and her colleagues found that the harsher punishment was assigned to the culprit under high similarity level, and in turn less blame was attributed to the innocent victim [9].

However, the studies on the relationship between threats to JWB and identity similarity have not reached a consistent conclusion. Correia, Pereira, and Vala found that in their study 1, when social environment was less threatening to JWB, group identification did not reduce the blame; yet when such threat was high enough, group identification functioned as a buffer for blaming attitudes [10]. However, no interaction was found in their study 2 [10]. It suggests that there may be other variables that regulate the influence of identity similarity and threat to JWB on blame attitude.

Recently, studies about embodied cognition provide us a new insight. Against traditional view, embodied cognition argues that it is our body experience and the interaction between our body and environment that shapes who we are and what we think [11]. Mimicry is a facilitator of social bonds in humans. It elicits empathy by working as a feedback mechanism about the other person's emotional state [12]. Studies found that deliberate mimicry is conducive to taking the mimickers' perspective and inferring their mental or emotional states [13]. Accordingly, engaging in behavioral imitation contributes to better empathy and emotion recognition through increased muscle resonance and increased activation in reward-relation brain regions. Thus, mimicry can not only increase the similarity at identity and behavioral level, but in the cognitive level.

Mimicry can also alter the threat level to the JWB by influencing individuals' self-conception. Studies showed that when mimicking others made participants identify themselves as the victim. It gave them a false sense that they experienced such misfortune, and thus better understanding the bitterness the real victim experienced. Subsequently, this "illusion" made them view the world as less just and fair, thereby eliciting more empathy and further allocating less blame to the innocent victim [7]. To sum up, we have reasons to believe that mimicry may be the variable which regulate the relationship between identity similarity and the threat to JWB.

Thus, we hypothesized that: 1) There will be main effects of threat to JWB, identity similarity, and mimicry 2) There will be interaction effects between identity similarity and threats to JWB, identity similarity and mimicry, and threats to JWB and mimicry 3) There will be an interaction effect among mimicry, identity similarity and threats to JWB. That is, mimicry regulates the relationship between mimicry and threats.

2 Method

2.1 Participants and Design

To examine how the three factors impact innocent victim blame, we designed the experiment as a completely random design with three factors: mimicry (mimicry vs. no mimicry) * identity similarity (high vs. low) * threat to JWB (high vs. low).

The experiment included 160 participants majoring in psychology and computer at a University in Wuhan, 20 for each group (half male and half female). All participants were aged from 18 to 22 years old, and rewarded with a pen or notebook for their participation.

2.2 Materials

Videos

According to the experimental design, we filmed the video clips: Jing firstly acted to introduce herself, including her name, identity (student vs. not student), and what she usually did (study and part-time job vs. hanging out with friends in pub and no job) to control the identity similarity between Jing and participants. Then she narrated the story she “experienced”. In one ending, the rapist had not been caught because Jing dared not to tell anyone what happened the night, thus did not report the event to the police (high threat to JWB). In another ending, Jing reported the incident to the police, and the rapist was caught (low threat to JWB). We combined the video materials into high/low identity similarity - high/low threat to JWB of four situations.

Questionnaire

To measure innocent victim blame, a questionnaire developed by Bal and Van de Bos ($\alpha = .93$) [14] was introduced to the participants. The questionnaire includes 8 items. Scores range from 1 (strongly disagree) to 7 (strongly agree). The higher the score, the more victim blame.

2.3 Procedure

In the laboratory, a laptop, a keyboard, and the questionnaire were used to present the stimulus information and register the data. Upon entry into the laboratory, participants were asked to sign the consent form. Then they were told to watch the video clip we filmed. For the mimicry groups, participants were told to copy every behavior including facial expressions, gestures, and postures of the interviewee/victim. For the non-mimicry groups, participants were required not to present any body movements and facial expressions. After that, a questionnaire on the desk was need to be filled out. After completing the scale, participants left room and were debriefed, appreciated, and rewarded for their participation.

3 Results

We performed a completely random analysis of variance by taking blame as the dependent variable, and identity similarity, mimicry, and threat to JWB as the independent variables. Descriptive statistical results are shown in Table 1. The results showed that there was a main effect of identity similarity, $F(1, 152) = 71.930, p < 0.001, \eta_p^2 = 0.321$, mimicry, $F(1, 152) = 72.845, p < 0.001, \eta_p^2 = 0.324$, and threat to JWB, $F(1, 152) = 9.977, p < 0.05, \eta_p^2 = 0.046$. Moreover, there were significant interactions between identity similarity and mimicry, $F(1, 152) = 4.918, p < 0.05, \eta_p^2 = 0.031$, as well as

between threat to JWB and mimicry, $F(1,152) = 252.506, p < 0.05, \eta_p^2 = 0.046$. However, no significant interactions between identity similarity and threat to JWB ($F(1,152) = 0.022, p > 0.05$), and among identity similarity, threat to JWB, and mimicry ($F(1,152) = 2.307, p > 0.05$) were observed.

Table 1. Descriptive statistics of the degree on innocent victim blame of each group (this table is self-drawn)

		Threat to JWB		Mimicry		No-mimicry	
				<i>M</i>	<i>SD</i>	<i>M</i>	<i>SD</i>
High	High	23.15	5.57	32.95	6.79		
	Low	24.00	6.26	25.95	6.13		
Low	High	30.45	4.33	41.35	6.83		
	Low	28.55	4.26	37.45	6.27		

Next, we conducted a simple effect analysis on the interaction between threat to JWB and mimicry. As shown in Figure 1, regardless of identity similarity, the mimicry-present ($M = 26.275, SD = 5.765$) groups assigned significantly less blame to innocent victim than mimicry-absent groups ($M = 31.700, SD = 8.450$) in low-threat scenarios, $t = -3.354, df = 78, p < .01$. However, although the level of blame of the mimicry-present groups ($M = 26.700, SD = 6.094$) was also significantly lower than that of the mimicry-absent groups ($M = 37.150, SD = 7.957$), $t = -6.594, df = 78, p < .001$, the positive effect of mimicry was more obvious in high-threat scenarios.

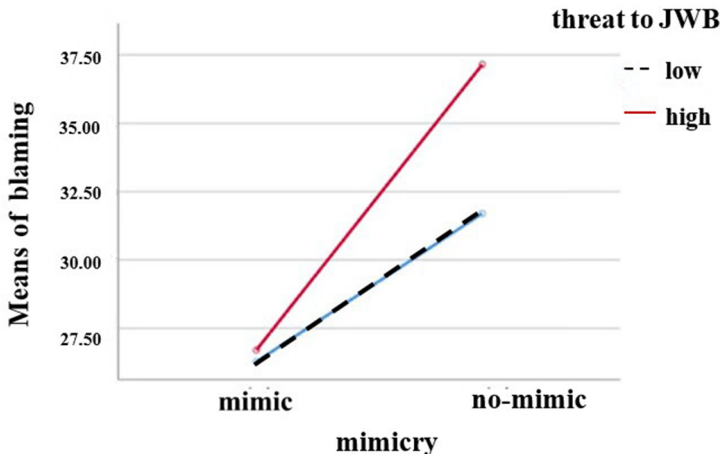


Fig. 1. The interaction between mimicry and threat to JWB (this figure is self-drawn)

As shown in Figure 2, we also conducted a simple effect analysis on the interaction between identity similarity and mimicry. Regardless of threats level, for high-identity-

similarity groups, the mimicry-present ($M = 23.575$, $SD = 5.861$) groups attributed significantly less blame than mimicry-absent groups ($M = 29.450$, $SD = 7.306$), $t = -3.967$, $df = 78$, $p < .01$. However, for low-identity-similarity scenarios, the positive effect of mimicry was more obvious, though mimicry-present groups ($M = 29.400$, $SD = 4.325$) also attributed significantly less victim blame than mimicry-absent groups ($M = 39.400$, $SD = 6.766$), $t = -7.875$, $df = 78$, $p < .001$.

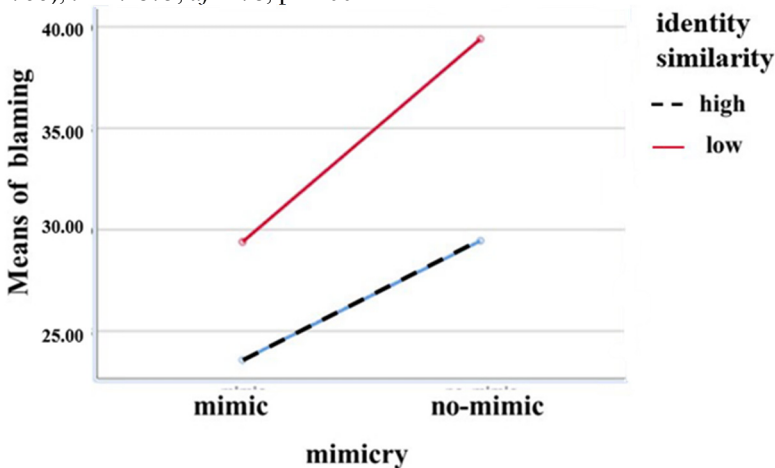


Fig. 2. The interaction between mimicry and identity similarity (this figure is self-drawn)

4 Discussion

The major concern of current study was to investigate whether mimicry was a moderator variable over identity similarity and threat to JWB, serving as an efficient way to weaken the victim blame. In line with our assumptions, we found several key findings. First, there were main effects of threat to JWB, identity similarity, and mimicry on victim blame. Second, there were statistically significant interactions between mimicry and identity similarity, mimicry, and threat to JWB as well. But, no interaction effect among three variables was found. We speculate that it may be because there is no interaction between identity similarity and threat to JWB. This is consistent with some of the existing research results^[10-11].

As Figure 1 depicted, despite the identity similarity, participants under both low-threat and high-threat circumstances have demonstrated a significant downfall of blame to the innocent victims in the mimicry-present groups, compared with the no-mimicry groups. The effect was rather distinct in high-threat conditions. The interaction between identity similarity and mimicry also prominent, due to what Figure 2 manifested, the blame attached to the innocent victims have seen a drastic decrease in high-identity-similarity and low-identity-similarity scenarios simultaneously when mimicry was presented in contrast to the no-mimic group, and the positive effect of mimicry was more evident in low-identity-similarity scenarios. These two figures were plotted respectively through the simple effect analyses on the interaction between threat to JWB and

mimicry and the interaction between identity similarity and mimicry, based on the data from the completely random designed three-factor-experiment, engaged in 160 participants.

As predicted, there was an interaction between mimicry and threat to JWB, such that when mimicry was allowed, threats to JWB did not significantly impact the victim blame. However, when mimicry was not allowed, participants in high-threat groups blame the innocent victim more. According to the JWB, the innocent victim is always devalued and viewed as out-group member under non-caught situations (high threat to JWB). When required to copy the behaviors in our study, participants' facial motor areas in brains were more strongly activated to better understand innocent victim's feelings, hence force, showed more empathy and liking. That is, the innocent victim was increasingly viewed as an in-group instead of out-group member after being mimicked, thereby less blame being assigned. On the other hand, when the "rapist" in our videos was caught (low threat to JWB), participants were unlikely to adopt disassociation strategy [15-16]. They did not view the innocent victim as out-group person. Therefore, mimicry functioned as reducing victim blame under such situations were not so prominent. Accordingly, when participants were required to imitate others' behaviors, victim blame was more dramatically reduced at the high-threat scenarios than their low-threat counterparts.

There was an interaction between mimicry and identity similarity, such that victim blame was weakened more at the low-identity-similarity scenarios than their high counterparts. According to social identity theory, people may categorize themselves and others into the same or different group, and one important index is similarity level [17]. More specifically, the more similarity people perceive to the target, the stronger the self and the target are glued; thus, the less blame being assigned when misfortune happens. In our study, mimicry not only increased self-other behavioral similarity, but also understandings of victims' emotions, thus eliciting empathy of participants. Accordingly, in low-identity-similarity scenarios, participants not only viewed the victim as in-group person, but showed more understanding to the victim's suffering through mimicry. Thus, the score of blame plummeted.

Consistent with Silvia's study [8], we found no interaction between threat to JWB and identity similarity. The potential explanation is that identity similarity and threats are two independent variables in victim blame, so that no matter how threatening the situation is, people tend to favor the in-group rather than out-group person.

5 Conclusion and implication

The current study extends previous research by providing empirical evidences. It indicated that mimicking is conducive to reducing the degree to which innocent victims were being blamed for their involvement in the crime. Although identity similarity can affect the blame of victims to a certain extent, sometimes it is hard for us to change our identity. In addition, intentional mimicry provides us a new perspective. Through mimicry, not only can we become more congruence with the victims at behavioral level, but also at the cognitive level. In other words, we may share similar self-conception with the victim, and this temporarily revised self-conception will influence our JWB and

will also help us better understand what the victim suffered and how the innocent victim feels. Thereby, mimicry protects innocent victims from secondary victimization. Qualitative method may be undertaken to explore the how innocent victims were blamed and their cognitive and behavioral changes in future studies.

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