

Pats on the Back or Pointing the Finger: Judgments of Praise and Blame

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Abstract

Interpersonal judgments of others may differ based on participants' deterministic versus libertarian attitudes as well as the amount and kind of information provided about a target individual. The two studies reported here explored how four factors impact judgments of blame and praise: 1) deterministic attitudes, 2) perceived similarity to the judged individual, 3) the childhood background information provided, and 4) an ability-versus-effort explanation of behavior. Based on vignette portrayals, blame was reduced when disability versus lack of effort was described as a possible explanation, when participants perceived themselves as similar to the target individual, when information about childhood hardships was provided, and when libertarian attitudes were lower (Study 1 only). Fewer factors were related to praiseworthiness, with coming from an impoverished childhood being the only consistent finding across the two studies. Judgments of blame fit more clearly with hypotheses generated from psychological theories, but praiseworthiness predictions are not as easily explained.

Keywords: *blame; praise; determinism; interpersonal judgment.*

Introduction

What factors influence the assignment of praise or blame? Our judgments of others are affected by a variety of factors, including possible assumptions about the nature of choice as well as knowledge about the individual involved and relevant background factors.

Judgments, Moral Responsibility, and Free Will/Determinism

Philosophers as well as psychologists have been interested in moral judgments. From a philosophical perspective Kane (2002, 2009) and others have argued that free will, freely choosing an action, is a prerequisite to moral responsibility and ultimately blame (or praise). Some philosophers might consider determinism the Monopoly "Get Out of Jail Free" card; Smilansky (2005, p. 259) considers determinism "the great eraser," reducing guilt and blame for oneself and others.

However, as B. F. Skinner (1948; 1972) rightly argued, behavioral consequences are not justified by what is fair but rather by what is best for the individual and society. Even if ultimately a person, given their genetic endowment and environmental past and present, could do no other than what they chose to do at any given time, praise or blame, shaping the behavior with rewards and/or punishments, is necessary for the betterment of the individual.

Applying a free will-determinism perspective to interpersonal judgments, individuals who believe that the choices we make are ultimately determined by genetic, past environmental, and current environmental factors, believing that people make choices but that only one outcome is possible in any given decision-making situation, may be less likely to blame or praise others for their actions. Some indirect support, using an experimental manipulation, was found for this concept in a recent study. Savani, Stephens, and Markus (2011) reported negative interpersonal consequences associated with "activating the concept of choice." A simple manipulation - pushing a key when participants observed someone in a video making a choice versus touching an object - increased victim blaming and reduced empathy for disadvantaged individuals. Making choice salient impacted interpersonal judgments.

Interpersonal Judgments and Attribution Theory

Classic attribution research in social psychology has differentiated judgments of others versus ourselves. According to the fundamental attribution error, we are more likely to use dispositional explanations for the behaviors of others compared to ourselves (Heider, 1958; Ross, 1977). In other words, we are more likely to ascribe others' behavior to internal causes, resulting in higher levels of blame and possibly praise.

Factors that might affect the tendency to blame or praise others include 1) perceived similarity to the target individual, 2) more information about childhood hardships suffered by the target individual, and 3) more biologically-based explanations of the behavior. Perceived similarity could reduce the tendency to judge

others with dispositional attributions. Logically, the more like us we perceive another to be, the more we might assume that their reasons for acting would be similar to ours. In research related to blame attribution in rape cases, perceived similarity to the victim or perpetrator was related to attributions of blame to the victim (Grubb & Harrower, 2009).

According to the dual processing model of attribution (Gilbert & Malone, 1995), providing additional background information may facilitate moving from an initial dispositional attribution to the second level where additional information is taken into account. Being a victim, providing information about previous hardships suffered, is one way to deflect blame (Gray & Wegner, 2011). This technique is used by defense attorneys to ameliorate jurists' decisions. For example, when jurists learned more about terrorist Zacarias Moussaoui's background of childhood abuse, they became less judgmental and more sympathetic (Clark, 2006). Similarly, college students were more sympathetic, less blaming toward a hypothetical target person when the person was described as having a childhood background with significant hardships (Ogletree & Archer, 2011).

Moreover, the type of additional background information provided might further impact judgments of others. Perceiving the accomplishment/misdeed as the result of biologically based characteristics, versus environmental factors, might also affect "blameworthiness" or "praiseworthiness." Participants in one study assigned less blame when a biological explanation such as a chemical imbalance was given than when an environmental explanation such as being abused as a child was given (Monterosso, Royzman, & Schwartz, 2005).

Comparable research related to "praiseworthiness" has not been conducted, although Feather's model of deservingness (Feather, McKee, & Bekker, 2011) is relevant here. According to the model and related evidence, the degree of effort tied to a positive or negative outcome is predicted to be related to emotions (including admiration and resentment) regarding the outcome. An extrapolation could be that individuals would be given more admiration related to their degree of effort, compared to having "natural" ability or talent. Especially in societies that emphasize the work ethic, perhaps greater praise would result from effort rather than natural talent.

The Present Research

In the two studies here participants rated target individuals described in one of eight vignettes in a 2 X 2 X 2 design: 1) scenarios described either a "blameworthy" problem or "praiseworthy" accomplishment; 2) scenarios gave either an effort or ability explanation; and 3) scenarios described the target individual as growing up in an inner city or exclusive neighborhood. In addition, participants rated their own similarity to the target individual and completed assessments of libertarian and deterministic attitudes.

Our hypotheses were the following:

- 1) More libertarian attitudes, supporting free will, would be associated with greater blame/praise while more deterministic attitudes would be associated with less blame/praise.
- 2) Perceived similarity to a target individual would decrease assigned blame and increase assigned praise.
- 3) Target individuals would be blamed less and praised more when the childhood background portrayed was one of hardship versus one of privilege.
- 4) Target individuals would be blamed less when disability explanations, rather than lack of effort, were associated with the portrayed problem but would be praised more if the accomplishment was the result of effort rather than ability.

Study 1

Method

Participants. Students (222 women, 80 men) in an undergraduate teaching theater class in human sexuality at a central Texas university participated in the research. The majority described their socioeconomic status as upper-middle, middle, or lower-middle class (94%) and indicated that they were 25 years of age or younger (92%). Regarding ethnicity, 56% reported their ethnicity as Caucasian, 26% as Hispanic, 8% as African-American, 2% as Asian, and 8% as "other."

Materials and procedure. Participants completed a 48-item questionnaire that included demographic questions, seven questions about a scenario describing a target individual "Alex," the 18-item Belief in Genetic Determinism Scale (BGD; Keller, 2005), and the 17-item Free Will-Determinism Scale (FWD; Stroessner & Green, 1990).

Regarding the scenario, participants read one of eight randomly distributed descriptions of "Alex" varying in type of accomplishment/problem (finalist in the Bellini International Vocal Competition/academic problems in college), childhood background information (exclusive neighborhood/inner city), and effort/(dis)ability manipulation. All descriptions were two paragraphs long, with the initial 45-word paragraph describing either the accomplishment or the problem. The childhood background and effort/(dis)ability manipulations were done in the second paragraph that was 70 to 72 words in length.

The ability manipulation in the praiseworthy condition described Alex as having a natural singing talent; "Alex, taking advantage of this biological ability, entered and won several vocal competitions." In the effort condition, Alex was described as being given voice lessons, practicing diligently, and "Through hard

work Alex excelled and won several vocal competitions.”

The comparable manipulation in the academic problem (college probation/suspension) vignettes portrayed Alex in the disability condition as follows: “Alex consistently scores low on standardized tests and may have an intellectual disability.” For the effort condition, Alex was described as “having academic problems because of a lack of motivation and effort. Alex is mainly interested in having fun.”

After reading the descriptions, participants were asked three questions, using five-point scales, regarding how “praiseworthy” (how exceptional, admirable, and deserving of recognition) or “blameworthy” (degree of sympathy, result of personal decisions, how deserving of negative consequences) the accomplishment/problem was and their perceived similarity to Alex. Three manipulation check items, again rated using a five-point scale, were also included: the degree to which Alex’s outcome was the result of effort, the result of inherited ability (or lack thereof), and the difficulty of Alex’s upbringing,

Participants then completed the determinism/free will scales. The BGD (Keller, 2005) is an assessment of participants’ beliefs that traits and behaviors are the result of genetic determinants. One item, for example, is “I believe that many talents that individuals possess can be attributed to genetic causes.” The FWD (Stroessner & Green, 1990) consists of three subscales: Libertarian (“I have free will in life, regardless of group expectations or pressures”), Religious-Philosophical Determinism (“My choices are constrained by God”), and Psychosocial Determinism (“Because of my background influences, I have no real free will”). For consistency we again used five-point, rather than seven-point (in the case of the BGD) or nine-point (in the case of the FWD), scales.

Results and Discussion

Manipulation checks. Three one-way ANOVA’s were performed on the manipulation check items. The effort/ability manipulation was significant for Alex’s effort/lack of effort, $F(1, 301) = 13.23, p < .001$ but not for (dis)ability, $F(1, 301) = 3.28, p < .10$. The childhood background manipulation was significant on the rated difficulty of Alex’s upbringing, $F(1, 301) = 380.92, p < .001$.

Blameworthiness and praiseworthiness. The three “blame” items for those reading the academic problems scenarios were combined for a total “Blameworthiness” score (Cronbach’s alpha = .65). Similarly, the three “praise” items were combined for those reading the vocal competition scenarios for a total “Praiseworthiness” score (Cronbach’s alpha = .77).

Regressions. Regressions were performed separately for “blameworthiness” and “praiseworthiness,” with the effort/(dis)ability manipulation, the childhood background manipulation, participants’ rated similarity to Alex, and the four measures of libertarian/deterministic attitudes as predictors. Since

we had no predictions regarding moderating or mediating effects among the predictors, we decided to use forward-entry, letting the variables enter in the order of their strength¹.

The final model for “blameworthiness” was significant at the .001 level, $F(4, 136) = 10.89$, adjusted $r^2 = .22$, with four predictors. The effort/inability manipulation entered first ($\beta = -.34$), followed by the libertarian scale ($\beta = .24$), perceived similarity ($\beta = -.18$), and the childhood background manipulation ($\beta = -.15$). Greater blame was associated with lack of effort, more libertarian attitudes, lower perceived similarity to Alex, and the exclusive neighborhood background.

The final model for “praiseworthiness” was also significant at the .001 level, $F(2, 143) = 18.47$, adjusted $r^2 = .19$, with two predictors; greater praise was positively associated with growing up in the inner city instead of the exclusive neighborhood ($\beta = .40$) and lower psychosocial determinism scores ($\beta = -.18$).

To explore the relation of blameworthiness/praiseworthiness to determinism variables, both before and after accounting for participants’ perceived similarity, the ability-effort manipulation, and the childhood background manipulation, bivariate and partial correlations were computed and are given in Table 1. In general the libertarian/determinism variables were not strongly impacted by perceived similarity and situational manipulations.

As predicted, libertarian attitudes were associated with greater blame while deterministic attitudes were associated with less praise. Support was also found for lower blame associated with perceived similarity to the target individual and for the disability, versus lack of effort, explanation of Alex’s academic difficulty. Finally, as hypothesized, target persons with an inner city background were blamed less. For praiseworthiness, the inner city/exclusive neighborhood manipulation was significant but not the effort/ability manipulation.

The second study attempted to replicate and broaden these findings using different domains of accomplishments/problems to see if the same predictors would be found for “blameworthiness” and “praiseworthiness” with different scenarios. Rather than singing accomplishments, as in the first study, outstanding academic performance was described in praiseworthiness scenarios in the second study, and difficulty keeping a job, rather than academic problems, was used in the “blameworthiness” scenarios.

¹ We tested for gender effects in the forward regressions, but this variable did not enter in either the praise or blame regressions nor were gender effects hypothesized. In addition, stepwise regressions (entering determinism variables in the first step followed by the remaining variables in the following step) were performed; this did not change the variables entered in these analyses. The partial correlations in Table 1 reflect these minimal changes.

Table 1

Bivariate and Partial Correlations for Libertarian/Determinism Variables with Blameworthiness and Praiseworthiness: Study 1

Scale/subscale	Blameworthiness		Praiseworthiness	
	Bivariate	Partial ^a	Bivariate	Partial ^a
BGD	.04	.06	.06	.02
LIB	.29***	.26**	.05	.06
PSY-SOC	-.14	-.09	-.22**	-.20*
REL-PHIL	-.01	.04	-.05	-.05

Note. BGD = Belief in Genetic Determinism Scale scores, LIB = Libertarianism Subscale, PSYSOC = Psychosocial Determinism Subscale, REL-PHIL = Religious-Philosophical Subscale.

^aAfter controlling for the effects of participants' perceived similarity, the ability-disability manipulation, and the background (exclusive neighborhood-inner city) manipulation.

* $p < .05$, ** $p < .01$, *** $p < .001$

Study 2

Method

Participants. Undergraduates in a teaching theater lifespan developmental course at a central Texas university completed the questionnaire. The majority of the 330 participants were women ($n = 259$), were 18 to 21 years of age ($n = 245$), and indicated that their socioeconomic status was upper middle or middle class ($n = 253$). Regarding ethnicity, 56% were Caucasian, 35% were Hispanic, 5% were African American, 2% were Asian, and 2% were another ethnicity.

Materials and procedure. As in Study 1, eight vignette versions were randomly distributed to participants. Demographic questions were followed by the scenarios with related questions identical to the first study. Participants again completed the 18-item Belief in Genetic Determinism Scale (BGD; Keller, 2005), and the 17-item Free Will-Determinism Scale (FWD; Stroessner & Green, 1990).

The target individual was described in the initial paragraph (50 or 52 words long) as having just won an academic award (praiseworthiness scenarios) or having difficulty keeping a job (blameworthiness scenarios). The academic award was associated with a \$1,000 check and the honor of giving a brief speech at commencement. The blameworthiness condition described an outgoing individual who had no trouble being hired but, after a short time of employment, was fired following job-related problems.

The second paragraph (73 to 76 words) manipulated effort/(dis)ability and childhood background (inner city/exclusive neighborhood). In the praiseworthiness effort/ability manipulation, Jordan was described as follows: effort explanation—Jordan “excelled by working very hard and was accepted at a premier university; now Jordan’s effort at the university level has been recognized with this award”; ability explanation—Jordan “inherited a sharp mind, Jordan easily excelled and was accepted at a premier university; now Jordan’s ability at the university level has been recognized with this award.” The blameworthiness manipulation described Jordan’s academic experience before employment as follows: effort explanation—“Jordan, though, had academic problems because of a lack of motivation and effort. Jordan did not go to college and is mainly interested in having fun”; ability explanation—“Jordan struggled with academic problems there, though, and did not go to college. Jordan consistently scores low on standardized tests and may have an intellectual disability.”

Results and Discussion

Manipulation checks. Three one-way ANOVA’s were again preformed on the manipulation check items. The effort/ability manipulation was significant for Jordan’s effort/lack of effort, $F(1, 326) = 10.94, p < .001$ and for ability/disability, $F(1, 326) = 12.00, p < .001$. The childhood background manipulation was also significant on the rated difficulty of Jordan’s upbringing, $F(1, 328) = 620.34, p < .001$.

Blameworthiness and praiseworthiness. As in Study 1, the three “blame” and three “praise” items were combined for “Blameworthiness” (Cronbach’s $\alpha = .64$) and “Praiseworthiness” (Cronbach’s $\alpha = .83$) scores, respectively.

Regressions. Forward-entry multiple regressions were again performed separately for “blameworthiness” and “praiseworthiness.” Predictor variables entered were the effort/(dis)ability manipulation, the childhood background manipulation, participants’ rated similarity to Jordan, and the four measures of libertarian/deterministic attitudes².

The final model for “blameworthiness” was significant at the .001 level, $F(4, 151) = 13.52$, adjusted $r^2 = .24$, with four predictors. The effort/disability manipulation entered first ($\beta = -.40$), followed by the childhood background manipulation ($\beta = -.25$), rated similarity ($\beta = -.21$), and religious-philosophical determinism ($\beta = -.14$). Greater blame was associated with lack of effort, the exclusive neighborhood background, lower perceived similarity to Jordan, and lower religious-philosophical determinism scores.

The final model for “praiseworthiness” was also significant at the .001 level, $F(1, 157) = 43.35$, adjusted $r^2 = .21$, with the only significant predictor being the childhood background manipulation; greater praise was positively associated with growing up in an inner city instead of the exclusive neighborhood ($\beta = .47$).

As in Study 1, we explored how blameworthiness/praiseworthiness was related to determinism variables both before and after accounting for participants’ perceived similarity, the ability-effort manipulation, and the childhood background manipulation; bivariate and partial correlations are given in Table 2.

In general the predictors in the second study were similar to the first study except for the libertarian/determinism variables. Neither libertarian nor psychosocial determinism attitudes were predictors in the second study. Instead, religious-philosophical determinism was negatively related to blame; however, based on bivariate/partial correlations, the relation with blame was only significant after the effects of other predictors were controlled. Also, even though the bivariate correlation between genetic determinism and praiseworthiness was significant, the partial correlation was not.

² We again tested for a gender effect in the forward regressions and also performed stepwise regressions, with the determinism variables entering in the first block. Genetic determinism entered in the praiseworthiness stepwise regression but not in the forward regression; however, for blameworthiness, religious-philosophical determinism failed to enter in the stepwise regression but was a significant predictor using forward entry. The bivariate and partial correlations in Table 2 support these results; religious-philosophical determinism was significantly correlated with blameworthiness only after controlling for the effects of the manipulations and perceived similarity.

General Discussion

Regarding our first hypothesis related to libertarian/deterministic attitudes, we found weak support. Greater blame was associated with stronger libertarian attitudes (Study 1) and lower religious-philosophical determinism (Study 2). Also, in the first study less praise was associated with participants’ scoring higher on psychosocial determinism. These associations were all in the predicted direction; greater blame was associated with more strongly believing that one has the freedom to make choices while believing that choice is constrained, whether due to psychosocial or religious influences, reduced praise and blame. However, the correlations were not consistent over the two studies. As Nichols (2007) pointed out, even determinists personally experience emotional reactivity, judging and blaming others for undesirable behavior. Similarly, Rogerson, Gottlieb, Handelsmann, Knapp and Younggreen (2011) emphasized the important role of nonrational influences on ethical judgments, including initial affective responses that are often automatically elicited.

In this research, then, individual differences in libertarian/deterministic attitudes only weakly influenced interpersonal judgments, before or after accounting for the effects of other variables. However, making choice more salient, as in the Savini research (Savini et al., 2011), demonstrates the subtle role that manipulating perceived choice can have on interpersonal judgments. Also, in the two studies considered here situational manipulations were effective, especially for blameworthiness. Providing potential biologically-based explanations or more information about a person’s childhood may help individuals move from a libertarian perspective to recognizing some determinants of behavior when making negative interpersonal judgments.

Consistent with our hypotheses, based on attribution theory, and with previous research (Gray & Wegner, 2011; Grubb & Harrower, 2009; Monterosso et al., 2005; Ogletree & Archer, 2011), blame was lower when participants regarded themselves as more similar to the target individual, when the target individual was portrayed as having a disadvantaged childhood background, and when a disability versus lack of effort explanation was given. However, the only consistent praiseworthiness finding across the two studies was a disadvantaged childhood background being related to more praise. This finding could be interpreted as consistent with the deservingness model (Feather et al., 2011); participants may have assumed that someone coming from a hardship, versus privileged, background had to expend more effort.

Table 2

Bivariate and Partial Correlations for Libertarian/Determinism Variables with Blameworthiness and Praiseworthiness: Study 2

Scale/subscale	Blameworthiness		Praiseworthiness	
	Bivariate	Partial ^a	Bivariate	Partial ^a
BGD	-.02	-.04	.20*	.13
LIB	.07	.13	.09	.07
PSY-SOC	-.02	-.10	-.08	-.06
REL-PHIL	-.14	-.16*	.04	-.06

Note. BGD = Belief in Genetic Determinism Scale scores, LIB = Libertarianism Subscale, PSYSOC = Psychosocial Determinism Subscale, REL-PHIL = Religious-Philosophical Subscale.

^aAfter controlling for the effects of participants' perceived similarity, the ability-disability manipulation, and the background (exclusive neighborhood-inner city) manipulation.

* $p < .05$

Similarity did not enhance praiseworthiness as predicted. One possibility could be that the accomplishments described (finalist in the Bellini International Vocal Competition or Outstanding Undergraduate Academic Award) did not elicit enough participants feeling similar to the target individual. Alternatively, perhaps perceived similarity to another does not enhance admiration for an outstanding accomplishment because admiration may be mixed with feelings of envy and jealousy.

For judgments of praiseworthiness, the relative role of effort versus ability in judgments was also not clear since the manipulation was not significant in either of the vignette studies. Although we had predicted that individuals would be considered more deserving if the accomplishment was due to hard work and effort versus a natural ability, no support was found for this prediction. How deservingness is related to inherent ability is not clear. Feather's model applies primarily to "situations where there is some degree of personal causation rather than an external locus of control," (Feather et al., 2011, p. 2). Inherited characteristics such as beauty or natural talent would not be considered due to an external locus of control, but they would also not be due to hard work. Perhaps at least in some arenas natural talent is as praiseworthy as effort.

Although they considered a different precursor of judgments of praise and blame, Pizarro, Uhlmann, and Salovey (2003) also found disparate results related to blame and praise. Scenarios in three experiments manipulated the role of control in moral judgments; impulsive acts were considered less blameworthy than deliberate acts, but the degree of control did not impact praiseworthiness. Conflict between first-order and second-order or metadesires was considered as a

possible explanation for the discrepancy. Blameworthy actions, based on impulsive, first-order desires, may be oppositional to second-order, socially appropriate desires. However, good deeds are assumed to be desired so, whether impulsive or deliberate, would be in concordance with both first-order and second-order agentic motivations. The second-order motive analysis could perhaps be applied to the effort vs. ability distinction, assuming that greater effort could be interpreted as indicative of stronger second-order motivation. However, since no significant difference in praiseworthiness was found based on this manipulation, that explanation for the discrepant results for praiseworthiness, compared to blameworthiness, is not viable for our results.

Based on more extensive research and clearer theoretical predictions, judgments of blame are better understood at this point in time than are judgments of praise. Although praiseworthiness and blameworthiness may seem to be conceptual opposites on a one-dimensional continuum of judgment valence (positive/negative interpersonal judgments), the models for explaining these judgments may be structurally different. Feather's model (Feather et al., 2011), examining discrete emotions as a function of deservingness, may be a useful starting point for exploring praiseworthiness in more depth. Although only positive emotions are listed in the model related to deserved outcomes for others, perhaps exploring additional emotions such as jealousy for others' outcomes might lead to a better understanding of our praiseworthiness judgments.

We make important interpersonal decisions daily, ranging from our reactions to close friends and family members to choosing the leaders of our countries.

Understanding decisions, both the rational and irrational components, may help us understand ourselves better as well as be more tolerant of others in a diverse world.

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