Empathy at the Crossroads: Unravelling the Power of Empathy in Assessing Blame

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Abstract

The current study sought to investigate whether empathy—an individual's relative ability to comprehend others' thoughts, emotions, and intentions— can act as a personality trait that mitigates the swiftness of blame attributions in the context of the workplace. Davis' (1980) Interpersonal Reactivity Index was adapted and employed to assess participants on three subcomponents of empathy — Empathic concern, Fantasy, and Perspective-taking — allowing for the appraisal of empathy as an aggregate multidimensional measure. A cross-sectional vignette-based survey was subsequently employed to capture the appraisals of blame in a sample of 264 participants aged 18 to 87 years. Results revealed a significant positive relationship between empathy and individuals' cognitive effort in assigning blame. Greater scores on the IRI questionnaire corresponded to greater cognitive efforts in the process of attributing blame, suggesting that empathy may indeed act as a buffer against swift blame attributions. Results also provided partial corroboration for the surmise that empathy would be related with a prominent motivation to seek out additional blame-relevant information. However, the analysis suggested no significant relationship between empathy and the lenience of participants' blame appraisals. The results prompted further interest in other idiosyncratic and societal factors in shaping the process of swift blame attribution.

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Judgements of culpability are a prominent underlying feature of social interaction and conflict in an array of situations which impact our relationships with our environment. When observing or hearing about an interpersonal conflict or an allegation involving misconduct, it is not uncommon for different individuals to interpret an identical conflict in different ways. While one person might deem a situation as severe, outrageous and troubling, another person might appraise the same situation as innocuous. What the current study aims to investigate is whether the extent to which individuals attribute blame in such situations depends on their personality. Of particular interest is the role of empathy in the extent to which individuals attribute blame in social judgements unfolding in professional environments.

In the workplace, when things go wrong, it is natural for managers and team leaders to try and identify the root cause of the problem so that they can prevent similar issues from occurring in the future. On some occasions, it can be easy to identify a culprit and assign blame; for instance, when employees overtly display offensive behaviour, interpretations and guidelines can be more straightforward. On other occasions, however, it is much more difficult, such as when evidence and intentionality of wrongdoing are ambiguous or unclear. In such social conundrums where evidence for a culprit is often unknown, ambiguous, or insufficient, blame assignment is often unpremeditated. It is common for many to tend to instinctively locate a culprit, quickly attribute judgement and, accordingly, retribution to the recipient of their blame, not necessarily solving the problem, and often falling short of ascertaining why the mistake occurred in the first place. This is what we term "swift blame" (Malle ,2014; Skarlicki et al., 2017; Roulet & Pichler, 2020), whereby individuals are quick to point fingers and assign fault, instead of engaging in more deliberate and constructive approaches to addressing mistakes and encouraging honesty

and growth. Swift blame attributions can lead to ramifications which ultimately estrange us further from our individual and community goals, from sustaining social relationships and from understanding why certain behaviours really occur in the workplace (Malle 2014; Skarlicki et al., 2017; Roulet & Pichler, 2020). While the existing literature has provided support for the notion that the extent of people's engagement with blame-relevant evidence tends to impact their blame attributions, less research has examined how individual differences may impact the choice to engage in more deliberate thinking in response to organisational social dilemma, and whether this may predict more lenient or "compassionate" blame attributions. I will therefore investigate the relationship between empathy, and this so called "swift" blame attribution process in the context of workplace wrongdoing.

Literature Review

What is Blame? The innate human instinct of pointing fingers

One might assert that people engage in blame simply because it is an appropriate behavioural response to violations of rules and expectations (Malle et al., 2014). Indeed, when someone transgresses our moral expectations, it is only appropriate that we respond with an attribution of blame triggered by our reactive emotions in response to said transgression. But then, how does our appraisal of blame differ depending on how interested we are in understanding the circumstances surrounding the transgression at hand? Though many theories exist on the antecedents of moral judgements, most models agree that these rely on a combination of inferences about the severity of an event's outcome and the agent's mental states (Frith & Singer, 2008; Malle et al., 2014). In these blame judgements, we assimilate available information relevant to critical concepts such as the cause of the social norm violation, the

potential identity of the culprit, the gravity of the consequences, as well as their intentionality and reasoning (Malle et al., 2014). Concurrently, judgements of blame oftentimes encompass a necessity to understand other's emotional and motivational states (Frith & Singer, 2008; Malle et al., 2014). This makes the case for my interest in exploring empathy as related to the extent to which individuals might be motivated to evaluate all the aforementioned circumstances surrounding a blame attribution. When attributed conscientiously, blame can bring on an array of benefits. For instance, blame attributions can be functional and allow for the establishment of a sense of responsibility that encourages people to reflect on their behaviour, learn from their mistakes, and ultimately strive for improvement. Despite this, blame becomes dysfunctional when its underlying processes are automatic and fingers are pointed hastily (Roulet & Pichler, 2020), bringing on considerable ramifications.

Swift Blame: The Double-Edged Sword of Instant Accountability

In this framework, the present study conceptualises *swift blame* as spontaneous blame judgements in reaction to adverse outcomes, in which evidence of culpability is either not sought or not acknowledged (Skarlicki et al., 2017). Notably, in situations in which blame-relevant information is scarce, one-sided or incomplete, individuals may rely on stereotypes, preconceived notions, or personal biases to hastily assign blame (Sanchez & Dunning, 2021; Roulet & Pichler, 2020; Morris et al., 2005). Such displays of automaticity are as some may say a blessing and a curse. Though it may be time efficient, our tendency to cut the path short leaves us vulnerable to blame attribution errors which may bring forth considerable consequences in our social environment. The current study sought to advance the existing research on blame by investigating the concept of swift blame, conceptualised as a manifestation of low information

processing effort as well as low cognitive effort when attributing culpability, that in turn likely

result in more severe and apathetic interpretations of accountability.

The Role of Empathy in Swift Blame Assignment

It is plausible that intrinsic individual factors might affect the valuation of a moral dyad

and the ease at which a blame attribution is made. For instance, personality characteristics such

as beliefs, values and even age or gender differences can affect the direction of a blame

attribution (Gleichgerrcht & Young, 2013; Ramsøy et al., 2015). The current study proposes

empathy as one such relevant factor which has been found to play a prevalent role in social

behaviour, notably social judgements and blame attributions (Morris et al., 2005; Chambers &

Davis, 2012; Ramsøy et al., 2015; Skarlicki et al., 2017; Roulet & Pichler, 2020; Sanchez &

Dunning, 2021). Empathy can be defined as the ability of an individual to feel and understand

others' emotions and thoughts, which can emotionally synchronise said person with others and

drive them to make appropriate responses (Davis, 1980,1983). Lovell (1991) conceptualizes

empathy as "a complex of human characteristics— disposition, perception, cognition, affect, and

communication—which equip a person (in greater or lesser degree) to understand another,

particularly the other person's perspective". Thus, the current study will consider empathy as a

multidimensional construct which combines the cognitive and the emotional underpinnings of

our perception of others' mental states (Davis, 1980, 1983), which is highly relevant to blame.

Specifically, propensities such as "fantasy" (a tendency to identify with fictitious characters in

books and movies), "empathic concern" (a tendency to feel compassion and concern for others

undergoing negative experiences) and "perspective-taking" (a tendency and ability to take on the

point of view of others) make up different facets of empathy that appear to be considerably

relevant in the process of swift blame. In this study I explain why such inherent tendencies could

be expected to mitigate the incidence of swift blame in people's blame attributions when evaluating a conflict, by for instance displaying an increased motivation to engage with available evidence, to make less severe blame attributions, and to spend more time looking for additional evidence to inform and support their decision.

What Aspects of Empathy Might Lead to Lowered Engagement in Swift Blame?

In the scope of empathy, a central motivator for behavior is the welfare of another person in physical or emotional distress, accompanied by an ability to experience situations from their perspective (Davis, 1980, 1983). In line with this reasoning, when faced with a moral judgement of someone else's behavior, the degree of salience of such motivators should influence the outcomes of people's blame attributions. The following query comes into question: In the absence of sufficient evidence surrounding a mistake, and if given the opportunity to spend time unveiling the information and circumstances surrounding it, what kind of individuals would take it? And why? This conundrum constitutes the subject of my investigation.

According to perspective-taking theory, otherwise termed "Theory of Mind", individuals who seek to understand other's mental states must expend significant cognitive effort to conceive the world from another's point of view (Gilovich et al., 2000; Galinsky & Ku, 2004; Morris et al., 2005; Lin et al., 2010; Malle et al., 2014; Laurent et al., 2016; Skarlicki et al., 2017; Reich et al., 2021). Though it can be a visceral and intuitive process (Davis, 1980, 1983; Malle et al., 2014; Ramsøy et al., 2015), accumulated empirical evidence suggests that empathy can also be rational and thought-through, this is what we refer to as cognitive empathy. Cognitive empathy is believed to be a complex "higher route" reasoning of the subjective mental states of others by means of perspective-taking (Davis, 1983; Malle et al., 2014), which necessitates a considerable number of cognitive resources, attention and time (Gilovich et al., 2000; Morris et al., 2005; Lin

et al., 2010; Malle et al., 2014; Laurent et al., 2016; Skarlicki et al., 2017). So, in what ways can cognitive empathy counter the processes of swift blame?

In social dilemmas or conflicts, the promptness with which a decision is made can be viewed as a considerable estimate of the degree of decision ease or motivational conflict underlying a decision. To date, an extensive body of prior research is clinical and social neuroscience has pointed to empathy as an intrinsic factor facilitating "cooperative" or prosocial decision outcomes in moral dilemmas (Morris et al., 2005; Chambers & Davis, 2012; Ramsøy et al., 2015; Skarlicki et al., 2017). If empathy is indeed related to a sensibility to others' thoughts, emotions, and intentions, then it seems congruent to expect that individuals with prominent levels of empathic ability should therefore have acute motivators to expend more effort in assessing all sides of a blame scenario. If one is motivated to comprehend and weigh all relevant circumstances surrounding a moral judgement, then it should follow that cognitive effort involved in assessing the blame-relevant information available to them and in reaching a decision should then be significantly higher than that of someone less interested in understanding the perspectives of all parties involved. Thus, I expected that greater empathic ability would relate to lowered proclivity to engage in 'swift blame', as indicated by a higher self-reported information-processing and decision-making effort in assigning blame.

Hypothesis 1a: Empathic ability will be positively related to respondents' self-reported information processing effort.

Hypothesis 1b: Empathic ability will be positively related to respondents' self-reported decision-making effort.

Moreover, recent findings suggest that cooperative attitudes — in contrast to more punitive attitudes — are intuitive in social dilemmas (Ramsøy et al., 2015; Rand et al., 2012). On this account, it seems fair to assume that individuals with greater empathic ability may gauge a situation with more lenient outcomes. Specifically, empathy subcomponents perspective-taking and empathic concern (Davis, 1980, 1983) could likely direct an observer's attention to significant features of an other's situation that may not be salient, or may simply change the observer's appraisals so that they match the other's appraisals, including the emotional experience of a negative situation. Reich and colleagues (2021) suggest that individuals are more likely to positively evaluate the performance of and develop lenient attitudes toward those whose perspective they take in workplace mistreatment scenarios. In fact, their findings propounded the possibility that the act of taking the perspective of another promoted prosocial responses to workplace mistreatment scenarios even when that individual was clearly the instigator of mistreatment (Reich et al., 2021). Similarly, Gleichgerrcht and Young (2013) investigated specific aspects of emotional responding which resulted in either utilitarian or non-utilitarian judgements. Their findings revealed a key relationship between moral judgment and empathic concern – a subconstruct of empathy (i.e., feelings of warmth and compassion in response to someone in distress) (Davis, 1980,1983) – whereby participants who conveyed utilitarian judgements also showed significantly reduced empathic concern on an independent empathy measure (Gleichgerrcht & Young, 2013).

If empathy is conceived as a cognitive capacity or as a capacity to take to heart interests that go beyond our own, the rationale for the current research seems to be the following: empathy may allow us to consider the interests and emotions of others as our own. It can thus be considered an antidote of sorts to swift blame because it extends the scope of one's motivation to

"cut the path short", in that the situation of others provides incentives to act that go beyond one's individual interests, requiring more effortful engagement with the scenario at hand. Thus, it was expected that individuals with higher empathic ability would report more lenient appraisals of blame. As such;

Hypothesis 2: Empathic ability will relate negatively with the severity of respondents' blame attribution.

When one engages in swift blame, evidence of culpability is either not sought or not acknowledged when making a judgement. In the context of organisational misconduct, a lack of complete information regarding the circumstances leading up to a mistake and the parties involved in an act of deviance can lead to judgement errors which may bring about unfair retribution and strengthen "finger-pointing" attitudes (Khatri et al., 2009; Skarlicki et al., 2017; Roulet & Pichler, 2020; Sanchez & Dunning, 2021). As mentioned in Hypotheses 1a, 1b and 2, empathy as an interest in and an effort to comprehend other's thoughts, feelings and intentions is expected to act as a buffer against swift blame attribution processes and retributive blame outcomes. In line with this reasoning, third-party reactions to workplace deviance are contingent on the degree of perspective and concern, and the amount of blame-relevant information available provides people with nuanced incentives to either settle on the most plausible interpretation of the readily available evidence or to seek out additional evidence to inform a blame decision (Gleichgerrcht & Young, 2013; Fiori et al., 2016; Roulet & Pichler, 2020). It seems congruent to propose that more empathic individuals might show greater motivation to reduce the ambiguity resulting from accusations of misconduct directed at someone else (Roulet & Pichler, 2020). The current study measured this motivation as the willingness to further

investigate the circumstances surrounding the alleged misconduct. It is hereby assumed that more empathic individuals will readily seek out additional blame-relevant information if given the chance. I further hypothesise that individuals with lower empathic ability will not feel as compelled to do this. On this account:

Hypothesis 3: Empathic ability will relate positively with the time (in hours) that respondents are willing to spend investigating the case further.

Methods

The present study scrutinised the relationship between different manifestations of swift blame and empathy as a multifaceted personality trait. Given the complexity of empathy as a construct, this relationship was assessed specifically along the sub facets of perspective-taking and empathic concern. While I did not hypothesise this relationship for every sub facet of empathy, I will measure and assess them separately for exploratory purposes.

Participants

Participants consisted of a sample of 264 individuals recruited via messaged participation requests as well as the Prolific platform, of which only 182 individuals passed more than one of the three total attention checks. The sample was comprised of 105 females and 71 males, with ages ranging from 18 to 87 years (*M=35.7, s = 14.25*). A percentage of 35.7% of our participants were students.

Procedure

Participants were first asked to answer a set of questions scrutinising their thoughts, feelings, and opinions on a wide range of topics. These were assessed using several questionnaires as personality measures. Of particular interest was the measure of empathy. For this particular

study, they responded to a series of items relating to their ability to take on other people's

perspectives, how they relate to characters in fictional stories and how they experience the

situations of others in their social environment. Thereafter, participants were asked to assume the

hypothetical role of a manager and evaluate a low-level ambiguous incident of workplace

misconduct in a cross-sectional vignette-based survey in which they had to assess the degree of

culpability of a character (see Appendix B). The vignette was tailored to emulate a particular

class of event; one that was ambiguous and created a conflict between fast intuitive reactions and

a controlled deliberation of the ambiguous situation, given that no concrete information

explicitly confirmed that the employee was to blame for the event.

Measures

      Empathy. Subjects completed a task that assessed their level of empathic ability. To

measure empathy as a multidimensional construct, I adapted Davis' (1980) Interpersonal

Reactivity Index scale (see Appendix A). Participants were asked 21 questions regarding

different sub-constructs of empathy. (i.e., "*I try to look at everybody's side of a disagreement*

before I make a decision"). Davis' (1980) 28 -item multi-dimensional tool consisted of four

subscales thought to yield two cognitively oriented empathy scales and two emotionally oriented

empathy scales. These include Perspective Taking (the ability to shift to another's emotional

perspective), Empathic concern (feeling warmth or compassion for others), Fantasy (the ability

to put oneself in a fictional situation) and Personal Distress (feeling fear or anxiety in response to

seeing others in distress). For practical reasons, the survey was adapted to the current study with

only three subscales and 21 items following the removal of the Personal Distress index. The

perspective-taking, empathic concern and fantasy subscales were kept as they were originally

proposed in Davis' (1980) indexed measure of empathy. From those indices, I was able to obtain

an overall score of empathy as an individual trait in itself, which I also included in the statistical analysis. All items were assessed on a 6-point Likert scale (1 = "*Does not describe me*", 5 = "*Describes me extremely well*").

Swift Blame Attributions. Based on participants' answers to the items following the blame scenario vignette, the swiftness of their blame attributions was assessed by means of a series of proxy measures. Namely, swift blame was indexed as (1) the general level of blame attributed, (2) its severity and (3) participants' self-reported information and (4) decision-making effort when assigning blame. Other significant proxy measures included (5) participants' confidence in having enough information to answer the questions and (6) the number of hours they would be willing to spend deliberating prior to making a judgement or attribution of blame.

General Blame. This measure referred to the general blame that participants deemed fitting to attribute to the subject in the vignette using the information made available to them. This measure was of interest because, with an ambiguous scenario, it allowed for interpretation of the extent to which responsibility was attributed to the character. General blame was indexed from three items on a 7-point Likert scale ((see Appendix C).

Blame Severity. this measure reflected the severity, or lenience, of the blame attribution. The measure was indexed from three distinct items (measured on a 7-point Likert-scale; "Arianne's error seems: 1 = Not serious, 7 = Serious", "Arianne's error seems: 1 = Minor, 7 = Major" and "Arianne's error seems: 1 = Insignificant, 7 = Significant", with higher scores reporting a more severe blame attribution.

Self-Reported Information Processing Effort. This measure referred to the amount of cognitive effort that participants reported in processing the information provided in the vignette. This measure was deemed an appropriate proxy for swift blame as it reflects the extent to which

individuals engaged with the available evidence before assigning blame (see Appendix C).
Indexed from six distinct items (, it was measured on a 7-point scale (1= Strongly disagree, 7 =
Strongly agree).

Self-Reported Decision-Making Effort. Participants indicated the amount of cognitive
effort that they expended in adjudicating the blameworthiness of the vignette character. This
measure was assessed with a single item "How much effort did you put into making this
decision?", on a 7-point Likert scale (1 = No effort, 7 = A lot of effort).

Confidence in Having Enough Information. Participants indicated the extent to which
they felt satisfied with the amount and detail of the information made available to them as
evidence for their blame appraisal. This proxy was key in assessing swift blame, as it essentially
provided insight into how respondents gauged the ambiguity of the scenario. It was indexed from
three distinct items (, and measured using a 7-point scale (1 = Strongly disagree, 7 = Strongly
agree).

Time (hours) willing to investigate the case. This measure was used as a proxy for swift
blame in that it was intended to assess the motivation of participants to further examine the
circumstances surrounding the mistake. It was measured with a single item, "How many hours
would you be willing to spend on investigating the case and understanding the context
surrounding the error?" on a slider scale ranging from 0 to 10 hours.

Results

The investigative focal point of the present research was the interplay between the complex
multidimensional construct that is empathy and swift blame appraisals in the context of the
workplace. A bivariate correlation analysis was conducted, which revealed several significant

correlations among the study variables. Namely, empathy was positively correlated with self-reported decision-making effort when attributing blame as well as the self-reported information processing effort upon assigning blame. Similarly, empathic concern as a subcomponent of empathy was also significantly related to both decision-making effort and information processing effort. Interestingly, perspective-taking was only significantly related to decision-making effort, and not information processing effort . Despite moderate to small effect sizes, these findings suggest that empathy may in fact be a relevant personality factor in mitigating the swiftness of blame attributions, lending support to Hypotheses 1a and 1b.

In contrast, the results did not favor the expected effect of empathy on the outcomes of the blame appraisal itself. Though the correlation analysis revealed a negative relationship between empathy and the severity of the blame attribution, this relationship was neither strong nor significant. Similarly, the negative correlation found between empathy and general blame was also non-significant. As mentioned above, empathy as an indexed measure correlated positively with the amount of self-reported decision-making effort (Hypothesis 1b). But contrary to what was expected, this proxy measure of swift blame was found to correlate positively with the severity of the blame attribution.

Table 1.

Intercorrelations Among Empathy Scales and Swift Blame Proxy Variables

	M	SD	1.	2.	3.	4.	5.	6.	7.	8.	9.
1. Empathy (aggregate)	4.25	.63									
2. *Perspective-Taking*	4.28	.76	.700**								
3. *Empathic Concern*	4.51	.79	.748**	.376**							
4. *Fantasy*	3.97		.763**	.246**	.318**						
5. Decision-making effort	5.12	1.384	.261**	.193**	.231**	.183*					
6. Information processing effort	4.99	.96	.231*	.109	.234**	.174*	.663**				
7. Confidence in information sufficiency	2.86	1.41	.103	.105	.096	.055	.044	-.133			
8. General blame attribution	4.34	.91	-.109	-.064	-.131	-.024	.082	.096	.205**		
9. Severity of blame attribution	5.11	1.13	-.047	-.016	-.014	-.051	.222**	.192**	-.058	.138	
10. Time (hours) willing to investigate the case	3.43	2.19	.103	-.008	.094	.101	.196**	.189*	-.189*	-.047	.103

Note: N=182.
**$p < 0.01$
*$p < 0.05$

It was further hypothesized that empathic ability would relate positively to participants'

readiness to seek out more resources to assess the situation before attributing blame, and

accordingly, more blame-relevant information (Hypothesis 3). Two proxy measures were used to

investigate this assumed effect, the confidence in having enough information and the Time

(hours) willing to investigate the case (see Table 1). Interestingly, the correlation between

empathy and these measures of swift blame did not yield the expected results either.

Contravening the hypothesized effect, participants' confidence in having enough information

was in fact positively correlated with empathy. Nonetheless, the association was neither strong

nor significant. Empathy was indeed positively related to the amount of time the participants

were willing to spend investigating the circumstances of the blame scenario. Although the

direction of this relationship showed congruency with the hypothesis, this relationship was,

again, non-significant. The associations between these two proxies and all three sub-facets of

empathy were also non-significant.

Discussion

The aim of the present study was to assess whether individual differences in empathic

ability – as indexed by a multidimensional aggregate empathy construct – would be related to the

swiftness and severity of decisions regarding blame appraisals in workplace settings. First,

results from the correlation analysis provided initial support for the expected effects of empathy

on observer blame appraisals. As expected, greater scores on the IRI empathy questionnaire

corresponded to greater information and decision-making efforts in the process of attributing

blame. This corroborated my premise that empathic ability might be related to more extensive

and deliberate decision-making in social dilemmas of culpability and can thus reduce the

likelihood of engaging in swift blame. Second, despite the support found for Hypotheses 1a and 1b, my second hypothesis was not supported by the results, as more empathic individuals did not report more lenient blame appraisals. Third, despite no significant relationship having been found between empathy and the time participants were willing to spend investigating the case further, a significant relationship was nonetheless found between decision-making and this measure of swift blame. Considering the findings relating to Hypotheses 1a and 1b, this suggests that empathy may still play an indirect effect on individuals' willingness to further reflect on the circumstances surrounding a conflict.

Theoretical Implications

Empathy and Swift Blame: Information-Processing, and Cognitive Effort

This study offered several significant theoretical implications. First, the results provided support for the notion that empathy may act as a "higher route" process in the context of blame appraisal, with higher empathy scores were associated with greater cognitive investment in processing information and reaching a decision when attributing blame. This finding was in line with perspective-taking theory, which posits that people who feel motivated to understand another's experiences may expend significant cognitive resources to assess a multitude of factors that may have contributed to the situation, thus engaging in the "higher route" of empathy (Gilovich et al., 2000; Morris et al., 2005; Lin et al., 2010; Malle et al., 2014; Laurent et al., 2016; Skarlicki et al., 2017). Interestingly, these findings were nonetheless contradictory to those of several previous studies. While Ramsøy and colleagues (2015) reported a significant relationship between higher EQ scores on faster response times to a similar social dilemma, my results showed no such association, and in fact suggested the contrary. Empathy may not serve as

an enhancing "heuristic" (Chambers & Davis, 2012; Ramsøy et al., 2015) alleviating processing demands in the blame attribution process, but instead as a "higher route" process that increases the cognitive effort needed to carefully assess the evidence for a blame decision.

If we further examine empathy by its subcomponents, we find similar relationships. Both Fantasy and Empathic Concern were positively correlated with the information-processing and decision -making measures of swift blame, further supporting the interpretation of empathy as a buffer against hasty blame decisions. However, perspective-taking was significantly correlated with decision-making effort but not with information processing effort. This would suggest that although participants' cognitive processing was not more extensive because of being able to put themselves in the vignette character's shoes, this perspective-taking might predict the cognitive conflict associated with making a blame decision. Despite my efforts, I was unable to offer an adequate conclusive interpretation for this particular finding.

Empathy and Swift Blame: The Severity of Blame Attributions

Moreover, it was hypothesised that empathy should predict more lenient blame appraisals and thus mitigate the severity of blame attributions relative to the degree of punishment believed to be appropriate in response to the vignette scenarios (Hypothesis 2). Given the inherent affinity for perceiving the feelings and thoughts of others which is characteristic of empathy (Davis, 1980, 1983), it seems fair to assume that the feelings of compassion which may arise from engaging in perspective-taking should prompt a certain desire to reduce the blame recipient's distress (Reich et al., 2021). The results suggested no such effect. In fact, self-reported decision-making effort was positively related to the severity of blame appraisals. This finding contradicted my underlying rationale regarding the outcomes of swift blame and instead pointed to a greater

incidence of blame severity when individuals engage in more ruminative processing of the available blame-relevant information. Again, contrary to the findings of Ramsøy and colleagues (2015) and Gleichgerrcht and Young (2013), these results suggest that higher empathic affinity may not guarantee cooperative or non-utilitarian responses to proposed blame scenarios. That is, taking the perspective of the blame recipient in the vignette did not preclude participants from ultimately attributing blame and retribution. Similarly, our data was inconsistent with Reich and colleagues' (2021) claim that the cognitive act of perspective-taking can lead to prosocial outcomes even in instances where the individual whose perspective is taken deserves considerable blame.

In understanding these unexpected findings, it can be proposed that the effects of empathy on evaluations of moral dyads could be moderated by an array of distinct individual traits (Galinsky & Ku, 2004; Lin et al., 2010; Lakshman, 2013). Effortful or "higher route' empathy could promote prosocial behavior but not always do so (Sanchez & Dunning, 20121; Roulet & Pichler, 2020). It was assumed that more empathic individuals may form more lenient attitudes for an accused recipient of blame by refraining from swiftly pointing fingers and instead thinking actively about the circumstances surrounding this blame. Another alternative argument appears equally plausible here: perhaps it is this active reasoning that brings in conflicting considerations of compassion, justice, and injustice. Moreover, perhaps our ability to take on the perspective of another in a given situation is contingent on whether we have previously shared their feelings in our own prior experiences (Reich et al., 2021). These factors might also explain the unexpected findings.

Empathy and Swift Blame: The Willingness to Further Investigate the Conflict

Finally, in line with perspective-taking theory, I found partial support for the supposition that higher levels of empathy would be related to an enhanced willingness to seek out additional blame-relevant information prior to deciding a course of action (Hypothesis 3) (Fletcher et al., 1986; Joireman, 2004). It is noteworthy that although the number of hours participants were willing to spend investigating the circumstances of the blame scenario was not found to be significantly related to empathy, it was however significantly related to decision-making effort. These findings suggest that empathy may not directly or consciously impact the willingness to further inquire about the circumstances surrounding an act of wrongdoing. Nevertheless, and in line with Roulet & Pichler (2020), the inherent empathic tendency to expend more time and effort in making a blame appraisal may very well predict this willingness to seek out additional information. One possible explanation for this discrepancy was the ambiguity of the proposed vignette, where no evidence explicitly pointed to the accused individual (i.e., Arianne) as guilty and deserving of blame.

Practical implications

In the scope of organisational behaviour, the exertion of swift blame attributions can stifle the psychosocial environment within the organisation, as they can exacerbate conflict, bring about stigmatisation of a blamed individual, and turmoil in the relations among employees (Khatri et al., 2009; Skarlicki et al., 2017; Roulet & Pichler, 2020). To combat swift blame, it seems important to cultivate a culture of empathy in the workplace. This means that instead of assigning blame, individuals should focus on understanding the root causes of problems and working together to find solutions. In this way, even when individuals deserve blame and fair

retribution, a considerate approach to appraising their culpability can imply dramatic discrepancies in the outcomes of blame. By feeling understood, individuals are more likely to react positively to feedback or sanctions when they have made a mistake and feel encouraged to perform better in the future.

Notably, the results suggested that a greater effort in decision-making was significantly related with the willingness of participants to uncover more information and further study the circumstances surrounding an error. This finding entails significant implications for the work environment. If the institutional environment encourages their employees to consider each other's perspective when conflicts arise, this will likely allow for careful consideration of the available evidence, which will ultimately counter any tendencies towards swift blame in the organisational climate. On the contrary, if the environment creates a greater level of ambiguity surrounding errors in the workplace, thereby preventing blame-relevant information to surface in the narrative, cultures of swift blame will persist (Roulet & Pichler, 2020). In attempting to reduce swift blame attributions and encourage constructive feedback within organisations, team leaders might reap the benefits of defining and approaching the problem as a whole. By asking the right questions managers can tackle the swift processing underlying counterproductive blame cultures and actively take a step towards discussing problems in ways which promote psychological safety and trust as opposed to toxicity and contempt.

Limitations and Future Directions

Whilst high empathy may generally mitigate the swiftness of blame attributions, it is not an automatic effect, and does not necessarily reduce the severity of said attributions. Further research is needed to fully comprehend the nature of this relationship. A noteworthy limitation in

our study is that empathy as a multidimensional construct operates in combination with many other intrinsic traits. As such, the relationship between empathy and swift blame appears to be one that is complex and can be influenced by a variety of factors such as individual prior experiences and beliefs, as well as the social and cultural context of the situation which can foster or hinder the blame appraisal process and its outcomes. I believe that a promising direction for future research on the underpinnings of swift blame would be to investigate such other determinants closer.

Second, the findings from data collected in one part of the world might not be generalizable to other continents or cultures. Because empathy is typically developed and experienced in specific cultural contexts, overlooking the implications of differences in cultural value structures for empathic dispositions might in fact limit the accuracy of the research findings. In contrast with those from collectivistic societies, persons from individualistic societies tend to place greater emphasis on independency and "ego-focused" emotions (Kitayama et al., 1994), and thus it seems reasonable that they may seldom engage in perspective-taking or doing so may demand more cognitive resources (Kitayama et al., 1994; Galinsky & Ku, 2004). Ergo, the role of empathy as a potential buffer against swift blame might not be extended to an individualistic society where individuals have less incentives to behave prosocially. A possible future direction for the workplace blame attribution research is to investigate how empathy and such situational differences like cultural value systems coexist in relation to workplace blame attributions.

Third, experiences generally rely strongly on prior experiences and the respective emotions they give rise to. In the workplace, extrinsic determinants like work culture and

climate, company values and competitiveness among employees can be a significant mediator for the relationship between empathy and blame. Because the sample was comprised of individuals who merely assumed a hypothetical managerial role, the applicability of our findings to the organisational setting remains in question. Further research could thus benefit from investigating the effects of empathy on blame appraisals for a sample specifically comprised of professionals. Finally, one other relevant implication of the study design for the validity of the findings is that the spontaneity of evaluations to a hypothetical scenario can potentially be negated with conscious effort because participants might try to counteract spontaneous evaluation when they are conscious of their biasing potential.

Conclusion

The current study has illuminated the relationship between swift blame and empathy in social decision-making and moral judgements. One way to interpret the current findings is that empathy, through the processes of perspective-taking and emotional concern for others, can allow individuals to implement more conscious practices when it comes to assessing social decision-making dilemma. Ultimately, it is important to note that empathy does not necessarily mean that blame is completely avoided or excused. Rather, it allows for a more nuanced and deliberate approach to attributing responsibility, increasing cognitive effort in the blame appraisal process, and taking into account the complexity of human behaviour and the various factors that can influence it. Although the current findings do not provide support for the claim that fostering empathy in organisational climates may reduce negative blame attributions, it may nonetheless contribute to reducing the incidence of judgement errors as followed by more careful consideration of information and circumstances surrounding a mistake. Nonetheless, the small effect sizes and multitude of non-significant results point to the possibility that empathy as a

buffer against swift judgements merits further investigation and examination of other

explanatory variables which could have influenced the outcomes of blame appraisals. Overall,

despite its limitations, empathy can be a powerful force underlying blame attributions.

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Appendix A

Interpersonal Reactivity Index Scale (Davis, 1980) Reduced to Three-Subscales of Empathy

The following statements inquire about your thoughts and feelings in a verity of situations. For

each item, indicate how well it describes you from "1 = Describes me very accurately" to "7 =

Does not describe me accurately".

1. I daydream and fantasize, with some regularity, about things that might happen to me.

2. I often have tender, concerned feelings for people less fortunate than me.

3. I sometimes find it difficult to see things from the "other guy's" point of view.

4. Sometimes I don't feel very sorry for other people when they are having problems.

5. I really get involved with the feelings of the characters in a novel.

6. I am usually objective when I watch a movie or play, and I don't often get completely caught up in it.

7. I try to look at everybody's side of a disagreement before I make a decision.

8. When I see someone being taken advantage of, I feel kind of protective towards them.

9. I sometimes try to understand my friends better by imagining how things look from their perspective.

10. Becoming extremely involved in a good book or movie is somewhat rare for me.

11. Other people's misfortunes do not usually disturb me a great deal.

12. If I'm sure I'm right about something, I don't waste much time listening to other people's arguments.

13. After seeing a play or movie, I have felt as though I were one of the characters.

14. When I see someone being treated unfairly, I sometimes don't feel very much pity for them.

15. I am often quite touched by things that I see happen.

16. I believe that there are two sides to every question and try to look at them both.

17. I would describe myself as a pretty soft-hearted person.

18. When I watch a good movie, I can very easily put myself in the place of a leading character.

19. When I'm upset at someone, I usually try to "put myself in his shoes" for a while.

20. When I am reading an interesting story or novel, I imagine how I would feel if the events in the story were happening to me.

21. Before criticizing somebody, I try to imagine how I would feel if I were in their place.

Appendix B

Blame Scenario Vignette

Participants were presented the following vignette:

"Assume you are the manager of a customer service support unit. Arianne, one of your employees, has a history of low performance and is frequently late for work. She has struggled with keeping up, completing tasks accurately, and providing adequate customer service. As a result, she was put on probation. However, lately she has made a noticeable effort to improve her work. You agree that she has arrived on time most days and is beginning to meet her performance targets. She has also been actively seeking feedback from her colleagues and customers in order to improve the quality of her work.

Yesterday, you received a complaint from a client claiming that Arianne provided them with wrong advice, which cost the company a week in labor and external expenses. Arianne denies this claim. You look into the situation, but it is not clear what actually happened, and Arianne's explanation seems odd. Because Arianne is on probation, you need to decide what to do."

Appendix C

Swift Blame Questionnaire Items

General Blame

Indicate the extent to which you agree with the following statements about Arianne:

- At fault for the error

- Responsible for the error

- To be blamed for the error

All items were answered on a 7-point Likert scale (1 = Strongly disagree, 7 = Strongly agree).

Severity

Arianne's error seems:

- Not serious (1) to Serious (7)

- Minor (1) to Major (7)

- Insignificant (1) to Significant (7)

Time (hours) willing to investigate the case

As a manager who has numerous demands, how many HOURS would you be willing to spend on investigating the case and understanding the context surrounding the error?

- Time (Hours): 0 to 10 on a slider scale

Reflection: Decision-making Effort

How much effort did you put into making this decision? Participants reported their answers on a 7-point scale (1 = No effort, 7 = A lot of effort).

Confidence in having sufficient information

Reflecting on the case that you just read, consider the amount of information that was presented to you and indicate the extent to which you agree with the following statements:

- I felt I had enough information to answer the questions about the case.

- The case provided all the information that I needed to make my judgment.

- The case had adequate amount of detail.

All items were answered on a 7-point Likert scale (1 = Strongly disagree, 7 = Strongly agree).

Reflection: Information-processing effort

Reflect on your decision-making process and indicate the extent to which you agree with the following statements:

- I didn't take a lot of time to decide what to do about Arianne.

- I was very careful about my decision.

- I thought very hard about how to respond to Arianne.

- I didn't pay much attention while evaluating the case.

- I concentrated a lot while making this choice.

- It was difficult for me to make this choice.

All items were answered on a 7-point Likert scale (1 = Strongly disagree, 7 = Strongly agree).