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The Effect of Different Counterfactual Thoughts on Blaming-The-Victim Consequences

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Abstract

Victim-blaming defines holding victims accountable for incidents and the arising negative consequences they experience. A potential explanation of said phenomenon explored by previous research is counterfactual thinking. Comparing what actually happened to what might have happened had the victim or perpetrator behaved differently may vary the level of victim-blaming. We present counterfactuals focusing on either victim or perpetrator of the given scenario. We also vary whether counterfactual thoughts contain a more- or less-than comparative statement. More-than comparisons are usually processed easier than less-than comparisons. Therefore, we hypothesize that this asymmetry influences judgment such that more-than counterfactuals are judged more impactful than their less-than counterpart. Moreover, we hypothesize that counterfactuals focusing on the perpetrator will be similarly judged as more impactful. The study displays a 2x2 between-subjects design with participants assigned to either victim or perpetrator and more-than or less-than counterfactual conditions. Impact was measured based on ease of generating the counterfactual, the victim's responsibility, the blame ascribed to the victim, and the plausibility of the counterfactual. Results show no significant difference in judged impact between the more-than vs. less-than counterfactual condition. However, a significant difference in judged impact on all four dependent variables was found for the victim vs. perpetrator condition, such that the perpetrator condition was judged more impactful. The study grants new insight into victim-blaming and racial assault in the workplace. Future research may focus on a greater manipulation of the scenario to further investigate the more-than vs. less-than asymmetry.

Keywords: blaming-the-victim, counterfactual thoughts, comparison judgment, racial discrimination

The Effect of Different Counterfactual Thoughts on Blaming the Victim Consequences

“Well, if you had not worn these colorful cultural accessories, no one would have discriminated against you. It’s your fault if you don’t want to dress appropriately.” By shifting the focus of an offense from perpetrator to victim, blame for the consequences may easily be assigned to the victim (Schoellkopf, 2012). This phenomenon of holding the victim responsible for the crime, often discussed in social psychology, describes blaming-the-victim effects. Through attribution processes such as the fundamental attribution error, individuals attribute others’ actions to their personality by neglecting situational influences, resulting in blame assignment (Ross, 1977). Furthermore, believing that the victim had done something wrong and deserves what happens to them, namely, Just World Theory may also lead to both the victim and others finding blame in the victim’s actions (Schoellkopf, 2012; Strömwall et al., 2013).

Habitually, following negative events are thoughts about alternative outcomes, namely counterfactual thoughts (Roese, 1997). Victims often engage in thoughts that compare reality to an imagined course of events and a different outcome. Such counterfactual thoughts have a functional purpose and may influence not only victims’ well-being but also the extent of victim-blaming effects (Epstude & Roese, 2008). The different types of counterfactuals elicit distinctive reactions among individuals. However, there is a lack of understanding as to which counterfactuals evoke the greatest blaming-the-victim effects, resulting in a lack of knowledge on decreasing such negative impact.

Previous findings, among other things, display that specific counterfactual thoughts, for example, more-than comparisons, are generated with greater ease, therefore, are judged as more impactful (Hoorens & Bruckmüller, 2015). However, a gap of understanding remains. To completely fill this gap between victim blaming and counterfactuals, the present study will explore the effects of different counterfactual thoughts on the judged impact of victim

blaming. More-than and less-than, other generated counterfactuals focusing on either victim or perpetrator will shed light on victim-blaming attitudes in response to difficult situations.

Blaming-the-Victim

Blaming the victim effects describe the assigned blame victims receive after aspects that could have changed the situation's outcome are evaluated (Branscombe et al., 2003). Past research on victim blaming commonly focuses on sexual assault cases. This may be assigned to the fact that victims of rape tend to show higher levels of self-blame following the traumatizing event (Branscombe et al., 2003). Following this, the likelihood of having engaged in counterfactual thoughts is higher, with individuals experiencing lower levels of psychological well-being. These lower levels of well-being are reflected in depression, anxiety, or reduced feelings of control.

Victim blaming often arises in connection with counterfactual thoughts, as people imagine the victim to have had more control and influence in the situation to prevent a negative outcome (Alicke et al., 2008). Upon viewing blame ascribed by individuals unrelated to the situation, the focus of the counterfactual must be considered. Through the counterfactuals focus, namely, self- or other-focus, attention is shifted toward the individual targeted by the thought, who is thus being most likely ascribed the blame (Branscombe et al., 2003; Epstude & Roese, 2008). Yet, when solely engaging in other-focus counterfactuals, evidence suggests that the attention and, thus, the generation of counterfactuals follows the leading actor of the scenario (Marques et al., 2014). Translating this into blame assignment, individuals are most likely to blame the perpetrator as the main actor of the scenario. However, when counterfactuals with the victim as the focal actor were generated for individuals, the blame was most likely assigned to the victim (Creyer & Gürhan, 1997).

Moreover, engaging in upward counterfactual thinking leads to greater posttraumatic stress caused by the comparison to a better-imagined outcome (Barnett & Maciel, 2019). Individuals imagine a course of events in which the negative outcome could have been

prevented and blame the victim for not taking different actions (Davis et al., 1995). Such that, despite objectively seeing no reason for blame, the counterfactual thought, for example, “If only the victim had not made the stupid decision to go to the unusual store, he wouldn’t have been harmed” (Alicke et al., 2008, p.1372.) increases the chance of the victim being blamed.

Blaming the victim effects thus find origin in counterfactual thoughts and are controlled by the individual characteristics shaping such thoughts. Different combinations of characteristics influence the extent to which these are judged as impactful and the extent to which victims are blamed for a negative outcome. The present research will investigate how and under which circumstances different combinations of characteristics influence judgment and victim blaming. To elicit a greater understanding of counterfactuals’ impact, the different characteristics and their purpose must be understood.

Counterfactual Thoughts

Specifically, thoughts of what could have been suggest paths to what may yet be. The consideration of alternative outcomes to real-world events and facts, and the pondering about ‘what if’ scenarios are essential to human cognition (Byrne, 2016). This psychological process of comparing reality to an imagined course of events is named counterfactual thinking (Roese, 1997). Counterfactual thoughts thereby solely focus on events of the past. With the counterfactual's comparative nature comes functional purpose, influencing both individuals' behavior and affective state (Epstude & Roese, 2008). An example is the formation of intentions and decision-making for future behavior (Byrne, 2016).

Direction

Counterfactuals vary greatly in impact, depending on which characteristics and content they hold (Roese, 1994). The characteristics describe the direction, structure, focus, and more-than, less-than comparison. Direction describes the upward or downward comparison of the counterfactual. This refers to whether the alternative compares better or worse to the past situation. Upward comparisons commonly generate negative feelings among

individuals as situations that could have been better, compared to the past, are imagined. Downward counterfactuals contrarily elicit positive emotions as situations that are worse compared to the past are imagined (Branscombe et al., 2003; Roese, 1994).

Structure

Next, the counterfactual structure describes the addition or subtraction of specific behavior relevant to the situation (Roese, 1994). Additive counterfactuals encompass engaging in specific behavior when thinking about the alternative. Contrastingly, subtractive counterfactuals compare the past to an alternative from which the behavior is reduced or eliminated.

Focus

Thirdly counterfactuals may differentiate in focus. It is distinguished between self and other focus (Epstude & Roese, 2008). Self-focus respectively describes counterfactual thoughts that focus on personal behavior, whereas other-focus counterfactuals focus on another person's behavior. The self-focus counterfactual is more common, as individuals hold greater knowledge about personal behavior, so this information is readily available for generating a counterfactual thought (Roese & Epstude, 2017). With the ease of generation and relevance to the self, self-focused counterfactual thoughts are also preferred to other-focus counterfactuals.

More-Than vs. Less-Than

Lastly, with more-than, less-than comparison, it is referred to as comparing the phrasing of engagement in specific behaviors (Wolfin & Epstude, 2023). More-than counterfactuals describe the alternative imagined in which there could have been more engagement in behavior to elicit a certain outcome. Less-than counterfactuals describe the lesser engagement in a specific behavior to achieve the same outcome, i.e., "I could have been more attentive." vs. "I could have been less inattentive.". With the more-than, less-than comparison comes an asymmetry; more-than comparisons have previously been judged more

impactful, which relates to the greater favorability and ease they are generated with (Hoorens & Bruckmüller, 2015; Skylark, 2021). Ease of generation may be linked back to Kahnemann & Miller's (1986) Norm Theory, in which similarly the comparison of reality to alternatives is discussed. With the Norm Theory comes the idea that the higher the accessibility of imagining an alternative outcome is, namely its normality, the higher the affective state experienced. In terms of counterfactuals, this leads back to the ease of generating a counterfactual or alternative. Miller and McFarland (1986) provide further evidence for this link by showing that individuals who experience greater ease in generating an alternative caused by an abnormality of the situation at hand experience more sympathy for victims and stronger responses. Given that more-than counterfactuals are generated with greater ease, the link may be established that they are likewise judged as more impactful than their less-than counterpart.

With the more impactful effect of more-than-comparatives, the resulting intention for future behavior can be considered stronger, explaining its functional purpose (Woltin & Epstude, 2023). Furthermore, supporting the functional purpose, more-than statements are additionally believed to be more appropriate in predicting future behavior (Halberg & Teigen, 2009). However, this more significant impact only holds to some extent, as more-than comparative counterfactuals with an additive structure did not yield a greater plausibility or ease (Woltin & Epstude, 2023). Thereof, it is essential to consider that the regret of inaction, as part of the subtractive counterfactual thought, weighs heavily on the judged impact.

Blame Assignment and Counterfactual Thinking

Counterfactual thoughts occur in various situations where individuals would have hoped for a different outcome (Sanna & Turley, 1996). The counterfactual thought has been found to result from harmful events due to the negative emotions arising. Suitably, counterfactual thoughts are, therefore, commonly researched in the context of blame assignments following such harmful actions (Alicke et al., 2008). Negative affect more easily triggers the thought of the situation having a different, better outcome. Evidence shows that

counterfactual thinking, specifically upward counterfactuals after harmful situations, leads to greater blame assignment than engagement in factual thinking (Mandel & Dhimi, 2005). Burgess and Holmstrom (1986) extend this by providing evidence that rape victims seek comfort in the downward comparison remarking that they could have been more seriously wounded or even killed. Moreover, this downward counterfactual thinking will likely reduce the victim's posttraumatic stress following sexual assault (Barnett & Maciel, 2019). Although these findings relate to self-blame and coping of the victim, specifically, blame assigned to the victim by others has been of great interest for said research lately.

As mentioned above, counterfactuals entail various features, and dependent on the combination of these, different affective states are generated. In a previous study by Woltin and Epstude (2023), the influence of different counterfactuals was evaluated, yielding that upward, more-than counterfactuals have the most significant impact. In line with this, Goldinger et al. (2003) present that greater blame is ascribed when the counterfactual is generated more easily. Linking back to the asymmetry as mentioned above, the easier generation and more impactful judgment of more-than counterfactuals may thus lead to greater blame assignment. To extend previous research, we designed the current research to provide further evidence for the asymmetry between more-than and less-than comparisons. Moreover, we aim to gather evidence for conditions under which the more significant impact of more-than comparisons holds for blaming-the-victim effects.

The Current Research

Accordingly, the focus of the present study will be the impact of counterfactual thoughts in victim blaming of racial assault. Although the link between counterfactual thinking and victim blaming has been made, research still lacks an understanding of whether different counterfactual thoughts influence the blame assignment of racially assaulted victims. The topic is of great relevance as both blaming the victim and racial discrimination have been critical societal topics in the past and to this day (Greenwood, 2022). With the *Black Lives*

Matter and *Me-Too* movements, the light was shed on systematic racial discrimination, and victim-blaming of sexually assaulted victims was dismantled (Campbell, 2021; Sen, 2022). Given counterfactuals' functional basis, research on these variables is moreover essential to understand which characteristics lead to the greatest blame of the victim. Additionally, results will offer an understanding of how counterfactuals' comparative nature affects individuals' feelings, opinions, and judgments. This will also help identify contributing factors in creating specific alternative outcomes and provide insight into counterfactuals' influence on victims' ability to cope.

Theory and Hypothesis Development

The present study will investigate the influence of different counterfactual characteristics on judged impact. The impact is defined as the *blameworthiness* of the actor, the *responsibility* of the actor, the *plausibility* of counterfactual, and the *ease* of coming up with counterfactual thought. Following this, the research question arising reads, '*How do counterfactual thoughts impact victim-blaming attitudes in response to difficult situations (such as workplace harassment)?*'.

More-Than vs. Less-Than Comparison. The first variable to be investigated is the more-than, less-than comparison of the counterfactual. According to literature, the more-than, less-than comparison is followed by an asymmetry (Hoorens & Bruckmüller, 2015). This asymmetry describes that individuals show preference and support more commonly for more-than counterfactual thoughts rather than less-than counterfactuals. One reason behind the asymmetry may be cognitive fluency, which leads to smoother processing of 'more-than' statements (Alter & Oppenheimer, 2009; Unkelbach & Greifeneder, 2013). Furthermore, the more fluent the process, the greater the plausibility and ease of coming up with, linking back to the variables influencing the judgment of impact. Skylark (2021) provides evidence for individuals' preference towards more-than statements. With this comes the ease of generating

those and the plausibility of support behind them. Therefore, individuals may judge more-than counterfactuals are easier and more plausible.

Moreover, the prevalent impact of more-than comparisons evokes greater reactions among individuals (Wolfin & Epstude, 2023). The more-than comparison highlights the gap between adverse outcomes and alternatives, influencing individuals' judgment. Thereof, greater negative emotions are perceived by individuals engaging in the more-than counterfactual comparison. This is predicted to translate into greater responsibility for the negative outcome and hence greater assigned blame. Participants will be exposed to either one more-than or one less-than (upward) counterfactual directed to the victim as well as the perpetrator. Thus, it is hypothesized that more-than comparisons influence individuals victim blaming judgment more heavily than less-than comparisons, independent of the actor.

H1: The more-than-counterfactual thought regarding the victim will be judged more impactful than the less-than-counterfactual.

H2: The more-than-counterfactual thought regarding the perpetrator will be judged more impactful than the less-than-counterfactual comparison.

Victim vs. Perpetrator. As mentioned above, victims tend to receive blame following counterfactual thinking. However, it is hypothesized that the counterfactual addressing the perpetrator will be judged as more impactful. Marques et al. (2014) present evidence for this by showing that the counterfactuals focusing on the main actor of a given situation are generated more easily. Furthermore, when comparing victim and perpetrator, the perpetrator receives more blame regardless of being the focus of the scenario. The ease of generating the counterfactual and the blameworthiness of the perpetrator may be attributed to the perpetrator's proximity to the failure and control over the negative outcome of the situation (Creyer & Gürhan, 1997). Moreover, as mentioned above, blame is most assigned to the actor responsible for the negative outcome, in other words, the perpetrator (Marques et al., 2014). Nonetheless, the salience of the counterfactual and the individual it is directed to also plays an

important role, as blame is most likely assigned to the main actor (Creyer & Gürhan, 1997). Therefore, in line with the literature, it is predicted that the focal individual of the given counterfactual will be assigned blame; however, the overall impact will be judged as greater for the perpetrator.

H3: The counterfactuals for the perpetrator will be judged as more impactful than the victims.

Table 1

The Present Research Design

		Counterfactual Thought	
		Level 1 More-Than (N=131)	Level 2 Less-Than (N=132)
Manipulation of Situation (Actor)	Level 1 Perpetrator (N=119)	If perpetrator more..., then... (N=57)	If perpetrator less..., then... (N=62)
	Level 2 Victim (N=144)	If victim more..., then... (N=74)	If victim less..., then... (N=70)

Note. This table displays the four different conditions of the current research.

Method

Participants

Prior to the study, the number of participants required was calculated using a G*Power analysis. Based on the similar variables of Wolpin & Epstude (2023; Study 5), the desired effect size for the current study is $f^2 = 0.0625$. The current study holds two groups and four response variables; therefore, in a MANOVA Global Effects design with $\alpha = 0.5$ and a power $(1-\beta) = 0.8$, the calculated sample size need is at 196 such that the desired number of participants lies at 200 (Faul et al., 2007).

Overall, 311 English-speaking participants in total were recruited via the platform Prolific over the course of one day. Hereby we oversampled the calculated sample size needed

to compensate for potential dropouts. 17 participants were excluded from the study due to not granting consent to use their data after the debriefing. 294 completed the entire study and received a compensation of 1.50£. The study included a manipulation check, exploring whether participants participated attentively by asking who the main actor of their condition was. Following a crosstabs analysis, 26 participants indicated the wrong actor for the victim condition, three for the perpetrator condition, and two indicated they were unsure. This left a total of 263 participants for the analysis, suiting the calculated sample size needed better. The age range was between 18 and 82 ($M= 40.21$, $SD= 13.4$), while the distribution of gender was 47.5% of male, 51.7% female, .4% other, and .4% preferred not to say.

Design

The study is a 2x2 between-subjects design. The first independent variable is the manipulation of counterfactual comparison, with the first level being a ‘more-than’ comparison and the second level a ‘less-than’ comparison. The second independent variable is the actor of the situation at which the counterfactual is directed. The levels of this variable are the perpetrator and victim of the situation. Participants will be assigned to one of the four conditions: more-than perpetrator counterfactual, more-than victim counterfactual, less-than perpetrator counterfactual, or less-than victim counterfactual. Lastly, a control variable to measure participants' political orientation towards societal issues was added to the questions.

Procedure

Prior to data collection, the Ethics Committee of the University of Groningen approved the questionnaire used for the research. Following this, the data was analyzed using the Statistical Package for the Social Sciences (SPSS).

Upon entering the survey environment, participants received information regarding the study and had to grant their consent. To be included in the study, participants must have been 18 years of age or older. Once completed, participants entered the experimental situation. A scenario describing a difficult incident at work was presented to all participants (see Appendix

A). The study's protagonist was racially discriminated against through ambivalent comments and actions. Subsequently to the scenario, participants were randomly assigned to one of the four conditions in which they were presented with either a more- or less-than comparison counterfactual about the victim's or about the perpetrator's actions (for examples, see appendix B). The counterfactuals described how the situation could have happened from the perspective of an HR employee trying to process the situation. Thus, the scenario at hand will be compared to a better situation in which individuals could have engaged in a particular behavior more or less than initially described. After thoroughly reading through the counterfactual received, participants proceeded to the questionnaire in which they had to judge the impact of the counterfactual. Succeeding the impact, individuals were asked about their political outlooks. Lastly, participants received some questions regarding their demographics, such as age, gender, and nationality.

Measures

The questions related to the variables, ease, responsibility, blameworthiness, and plausibility, were taken and adapted from the Woltin and Epstude (2023) study. The variable responsibility was added for functional purposes. All variables were measured on a 7-point Likert scale (1 = Not at all, 7 = Very much). The following questions were considered as most suitable to the variables measuring impact and situation presented; “*How **easy** do you think it was for the HR Employee to come up with these arguments?*”, “*To what extent do you think the victim is also **responsible** for what happened?*”, “*To what extent do you also **blame** the victim for what happened?*” and “*How **plausible** do you think it is the argument of the HR employee?*”.

Following the questionnaire about the impact of counterfactuals, participants were asked to answer another set of questions addressing their political views and opinion on social issues; “*What is your political orientation when it comes to social issues (e.g., minority rights)?*”. With answering possibilities displaying a 7-point Likert scale ranging from

progressive to conservative (1=Progressive, 4=Center, 7=Conservative). This question provides insight into whether participants are more likely to justify racially assaulting actions, influencing their judgment of impact.

Results

The data was analyzed with a Multivariate Analysis of Variances (MANOVA) using the Statistical Package for the Social Sciences (SPSS, version 28.0). The initial sample consisted of 311 participants. 17 participants were excluded as they did not accept the debriefing. Another 31 participants were excluded following the manipulation check, leaving 263 participants for the analysis. The main effect explored was the Victim vs. Perpetrator counterfactual. Additionally, two interaction effects were tested (More-Victim vs. Less-Victim and More-Perpetrator vs. Less-Perpetrator).

Assumption Checking

Prior to analyzing the main and interaction effects, the assumptions of MANOVA were checked. Following the random sampling method, the first assumption of independent samples is met. Secondly, the dependent variables are continuous variables measured at an interval level, meeting the second assumption. As the sample size is rather large, the third assumption, multivariate normality, is proposed to be met as well (Tabachnick & Fidell, 2013). Next, based on Box's Test of Equality of Covariance Matrices, the assumption of Homogeneity of covariance matrices was tested. The results presented a non-significant result for the More vs. Less counterfactual condition $Box's M=11.653, F=1,146, p=.323$. However, the victim vs. perpetrator condition showed a significant result at $Box's M=55.37, F=5.5, p<.001$, as sample sizes in the cells were unequal. Thus, for this condition, the test statistic was analyzed using Pillai's trace alternative to Wilks' Lambda (Tabachnick & Fidell, 2013). Lastly, the assumption of collinearity was checked using the Variance Inflation Factor (VIF). All results showed a value lower than 5, indicating the assumption is met (Tabachnick & Fidell, 2013).

Descriptive Values

Upon examining the descriptive values of the analyses, the distribution of participants shows 74 participants in the Victim, More-than condition, 70 in the Victim, Less-than condition, 57 participants in the Perpetrator, More-than condition, and lastly 62 participants in the Perpetrator, Less-than condition. For descriptive statistics of the individual conditions, see Table 2 below. The descriptive values for the more-than condition on each dependent variable are as follows; Ease $M=5.1$ ($SD=1.43$), Responsibility $M=2.73$ ($SD=1.64$), Blame $M=2.22$ ($SD=1.47$) and Plausibility $M=4.21$ ($SD=1.91$). The descriptive values for the less-than counterfactual differ slightly, with Ease showing $M=5.08$ ($SD=1.31$), responsibility displaying $M=2.42$ ($SD=1.62$), Blame $M=2.02$ ($SD=1.52$), and Plausibility presenting $M=4.3$ ($SD=1.86$). The means between the two conditions show the greatest difference for responsibility, yet the MANOVA will display whether this difference is significant. Upon analyzing the descriptive values for the Victim vs. Perpetrator condition, the victim condition presents for Ease $M=4.76$ ($SD=1.23$), for Responsibility $M=2.75$ ($SD=1.63$), Blame $M=2.34$ ($SD=1.54$) and lastly, for Plausibility $M=3.31$ ($SD=1.72$). The reflected values for the perpetrator condition on Ease are $M=5.46$ ($SD=1.23$), on Responsibility $M=2.35$ ($SD=1.61$), Blame $M=1.85$ ($SD=1.41$), and lastly on Plausibility $M=5.4$ ($SD=1.37$). The Plausibility variable displays the greatest difference visible; the significance of this difference is, however, to be determined by the MANOVA.

Table 2*Descriptive Statistics of Interaction of Conditions*

Condition		Ease_All <i>M (SD)</i>	Responsibility_All <i>M (SD)</i>	Blame_All <i>M (SD)</i>	Plausibility_All <i>M (SD)</i>
More-than	Victim	4.81 (1.40)	2.87 (1.47)	2.45 (1.34)	3.27 (1.69)
	Perpetrator	5.40 (1.40)	2.54 (1.83)	1.93 (1.61)	5.44 (1.43)
Less-than	Victim	4.70 (1.40)	2.63 (1.79)	2.23(1.74)	3.36 (1.77)
	Perpetrator	5.52 (1.07)	2.18 (1.37)	1.77 (1.21)	5.36 (1.32)

Note. This table displays the Means and Standard Deviations of the Dependent Variables for each interaction condition of More-Less and Victim-Perpetrator counterfactual.

Multivariate Analysis of Variances

Two MANOVAs, one for each condition (More-than vs. Less-than and Victim vs. Perpetrator) with the four dependent variables (Ease, Responsibility, Blame, and Plausibility) were conducted. The first analysis for the main effect of the victim vs. perpetrator condition presents a significant difference in means across the four dependent variables $F(4,258)=37.182, p < .001, \eta_p^2=.366$. Thus, the analysis displays evidence for the main effect of the victim vs. perpetrator condition, providing support for H3. When reviewing the dependent variables individually, differences are evident most strongly for plausibility (see Table 3). The effect sizes in Table 3 reflect the differences in means of conditions displayed above. As presented, in the perpetrator counterfactual condition, the victim was judged significantly less blameworthy and responsible. Moreover, the counterfactual was judged significantly more plausible and easier to generate, as shown by the corresponding effect sizes. On the other hand, contrary to expectations, the results present no significant effects for the more-than vs. less-than counterfactual condition $F(4,258)=.732, p=.571, \eta_p^2=.011$. Although the more-than counterfactual condition was judged slightly more impactful, the difference is non-significant. Thus, no interaction effects resulted in no support for H1 and H2 (see Table 3 for individual dependent variables).

Table 3*Tests of Between-Subjects Effects*

Source	Dependent Variable	df	F	Sig.	Partial Eta Squared
Condition_ML	Ease_All	1	.007	.931	.000
	Responsibility_All	1	2.36	.126	.009
	Blame_All	1	1.24	.266	.005
	Plausibility_All	1	.12	.726	.000
Condition_VP	Ease_All	1	18.464	<.001	.066
	Responsibility_All	1	3.896	.049	.015
	Blame_All	1	7.163	.008	.027
	Plausibility_All	1	114.271	<.001	.305

Note. This table displays the between-subjects effects of the MANOVA for both the More vs. Less and Victim vs. Perpetrator conditions. Condition_ML = More vs. Less, Condition_VP = Victim vs. Perpetrator.

Exploratory Regression Analysis

Overall, the manipulation for the More-than vs. Less-than condition was not strong enough to generate a significant difference, showing no support for hypotheses one and two. The manipulation between Victim and Perpetrator conditions was, however, strong enough to display a significant difference across all dependent variables. This provides support for hypothesis three, implying that counterfactuals addressing the perpetrator are judged as more impactful. As ease was argued to play a significant role in predicting the asymmetry between the counterfactuals' judged impact, an exploratory analysis with ease as predicting variable was carried out to generate further insight. A linear regression analysis with Ease and the Victim-Perpetrator condition on each dependent variable (Responsibility, Blame, and Plausibility) provided new insights. For the regression, Ease was centered to the mean to increase the interpretation of coefficients. The victim-perpetrator condition was dummy coded as it was a categorical variable, with resulting values being Victim = 0 and Perpetrator = 1.

Upon analyzing regression on responsibility, neither the victim-perpetrator condition ($b = -0.28$, $SE B = 0.21$, $\beta = -.085$, $p = .179$) nor the ease condition as dependent variable ($b = -0.15$, $SE B = .097$, $\beta = -.029$, $p = .163$) generated significant results. Moreover, for the regression on blame, the ease condition likewise does not present significance ($b = -0.036$, $SE B = .089$, $\beta = -.033$, $p = .68$). The victim-perpetrator condition, however, presents significance ($b = -0.45$, $SE B = .19$, $\beta = -.15$, $p = .02$) which reflects the earlier mentioned findings of the MANOVA. The interaction term, however, as seen in Table 4 below, does not reflect the significance of the victim-perpetrator condition. Lastly, for the regression of ease and victim-perpetrator on plausibility, the victim-perpetrator condition similarly displays significant results ($b = 1.83$, $SE B = .193$, $\beta = .484$, $p < .001$). The ease condition, nevertheless, does not show evidence for statistically significant results ($b = 0.16$, $SE B = .09$, $\beta = .91$, $p = .17$). Yet, upon reviewing the interaction effect between the two conditions, the regression presents a significant result as given below in Table 4. This implies that the ease and victim-perpetrator condition have a stronger impact on blame ascribed to the victim than ease alone. However, as seen above, they are not stronger than the victim-perpetrator condition alone. This interaction effect presents the influence of ease on the dependent variable, respective to the counterfactual condition individuals are in. Additionally, in Appendix C, the slope plots of the regression analyses are displayed to represent the interaction effects visually.

Table 4

Regression analysis of Victim-Perpetrator and Ease Interaction on Dependent Variables

Interaction Ease Victim- Perpetrator	b	$SE B$	β	p
Responsibility	-.056	.153	-.029	.717
Blame	-.051	.142	-.029	.720
Plausibility	.433	-.144	.196	.003

Note. This table represents the regression analysis results of the Victim-Perpetrator and Ease interaction effect on the dependent variables Responsibility, Blame, and Plausibility.

Discussion

Findings and Theoretical Implications

Understanding the impact of distinctive counterfactual thoughts on blaming the victim effects is crucial to provide insight into the power of adaptive thinking and is thus sought. The present research findings present that regardless of being introduced to counterfactuals with the victim or the perpetrator as focal actors, participants judge the perpetrator counterfactual as significantly more impactful. Thus, it is in accordance with the predictions and previous findings suggesting blame is more commonly assigned to the actor responsible for the negative outcome (Marques et al., 2014). The counterfactual is not only evaluated to ascribe the victim less blame but, moreover, to be generated with greater ease, seen as more plausible, and the perpetrator was additionally held more responsible. The aspect of impact displaying the greatest difference between victim and perpetrator conditions is the plausibility of the counterfactual. This suggests that participants see the counterfactual that targets the perpetrator as the most reasonable. These findings present a noteworthy contribution to the field as they support previous research and extend the proposed asymmetry regarding the more-than vs. less-than counterfactual thoughts to victim vs. perpetrator counterfactual thoughts.

Despite previous findings portraying the asymmetry between more-than and less-than counterfactuals, the current study does not extend these findings (Hoorens & Bruckmüller, 2015; Skylark, 2021). No statistically significant difference was found between the impact judged for the more-than and less-than counterfactual condition. Ease, which is said to be the driving fact behind this asymmetry, did not show its significance, implying that the more-than vs. less-than asymmetry is not robust enough. The abovementioned Norm Theory was thus not extended nor supported (Kahnemann & Miller, 1986). Unexpectedly, the responsibility ascribed to the victim shows the greatest difference between more-than and less-than counterfactual; nonetheless, the results were also non-significant.

To build up on the previous findings surrounding ease as the driving factor behind the asymmetrical judgment of counterfactuals, the exploratory analysis with ease as an independent variable in the regression was run. The regression of the victim-perpetrator condition on plausibility displays the most significant results, which is likewise reflected by the MANOVA results. Ease, on the other hand, which was the variable of interest, did not generate any significant findings when regressed on the dependent variables individually. However, upon acting as an interaction term with the victim-perpetrator condition, ease shows to have a significant relationship with plausibility. In other words, the easier one comes up with the counterfactual in either the victim or perpetrator condition, the more likely one is to judge this counterfactual as plausible. This finding supports available literature discussing the asymmetry of counterfactuals (Skylark, 2021; Woltin & Epstude, 2023). Nonetheless, previous findings present an asymmetry with ease acting as a facilitator in the more-than vs. less-than counterfactual condition. Whereas the results of the present study solely provide a difference in plausibility judgments between the victim and perpetrator counterfactual. Creyer and Gürhan, (1997) provide evidence for the differential judgment of victim and perpetrator counterfactuals, yet the judgment of plausibility is not discussed. Thus, the present research provides new findings within the field and an opportunity for a more specific investigation of this relationship.

Strengths and Limitations

The study presents several strengths; firstly, the sample exceeds the desired size with 263 participants in total such that results and effect sizes allow for more accurate values. Furthermore, the large sample size comes with great variability. Although sampled in the United Kingdom, a total of 23 nationalities recorded are reflected within the sample. This grants great generalizability of the findings and strengthens the study's external validity.

There is little research on victim blaming and counterfactual thinking in a workplace setting; thus, the current research extends previous findings. Racial discrimination as an

offense and the workplace setting have thus far been seldom discussed, providing new insights into the field. Building on this, specifically the main effect found in the mean difference between the victim vs. perpetrator condition, adds to existing findings. It is in line with the predictions and previous research, yet the novelty of the setting and offense expands the body of literature (Creyer & Gürhan, 1997; Marques et al., 2014).

Lastly, the study's manipulation is straightforward and applies to an everyday setting, namely the workplace. Accordingly, many people may feel familiar with the situation, allowing them to identify with the scenario at hand.

Contrarily to the strengths, several limitations of the study must also be discussed. As reflected by the results, the manipulation was not strong enough to generate statistically significant findings, displaying the first limitation. There may be several reasons why the manipulation was too weak; for one, the counterfactual thoughts provided are too similar, making participants judge them similarly, despite their assigned condition. Furthermore, the crime displayed by the perpetrator might not be strong enough for participants to judge this as impactful, as everyday racial discrimination is still common in the UK (TUC, 2022).

Lastly, the scenario presents a racially discriminating offense as part of novel research. Previous research examining blaming-the-victim effects has focused on sexual assault scenarios, which have generated significant effects (Barnett & Maciel, 2019; Branscombe et al., 2003; Schoellkopf, 2012; Strömwall). Participants may incline to judge this as more impactful than a racial discrimination offense, resulting in more significant findings due to lesser exposure to sexual assault.

Practical Implications

Alongside the theoretical implications presented above, the study holds several practical implications. The adaptive function of counterfactuals can be made use of by paying attention to the counterfactual generated or offered. Understanding the plausibility behind the counterfactual thought may incline individuals to engage in less victim-focused thoughts,

resulting in less blaming of the victim effects. Although the current study focuses on other-generated counterfactuals, results give insight into how victims, by focusing on the perpetrator rather than themselves, may reframe their thought such that they engage in less self-blame.

Moreover, given that the results do not provide evidence for a significant difference between the more-than and less-than conditions of behavior engaged in, the focus of counterfactuals should lie on the focal actor rather than the behavior. Thus, when generating counterfactuals, ruminating about the actions taken will not noticeably help prevent blaming the victim effects. Rather by focusing on the perpetrator, greater emotional impact is perceived, and thereof judgment of the perpetrator is more impactful. Therefore, interventions focusing on decreasing victim blaming may shift the overall focus toward the perpetrator rather than the actions taken by the victim.

Future Directions

Given the non-significant results of the manipulation of the study, several factors provide an opportunity for future exploration. Upon reflecting, one of the potential reasons for the non-significant difference between more-than and less-than counterfactuals may be the weak manipulation and crimes by the perpetrator. As faint racial discrimination is still common in the workplace, the crimes may seem too familiar and not substantial enough to be judged as impactful by the participants (TUC, 2022). Campbell et al. (2014) describe this in terms of a desensitization bias, in which repeated exposure changes the emotional experience, further influencing social judgment. Therefore, it is suggested that future research includes several scenarios in which the offense of discrimination differs in strength to understand better the relationship between racial discrimination, counterfactual thinking, and blaming-the-victim effects. Additionally, to differences in strengths, future research may include scenarios with respect to a change of setting. Alicke et al. (2008) argue that different settings and different acts of negative consequences provoke distinct reactions among individuals.

Thirdly, as highlighted, victim-blaming effects have thus far primarily been studied in terms of sexual assault offenses (Barnett & Maciel, 2019, Branscombe et al., 2003). The workplace, as well as the racial assault setting, poses new insights. The findings did not fully support the hypotheses, suggesting that future research may explore the reasons behind this. It is posited that such exploration looks at different crimes within a workplace setting, evaluating how different scenarios at the workplace impact victim-blaming, offering valuable research for situations in an everyday setting.

Reflected by the results, plausibility presented the strongest difference between the victim and perpetrator conditions. Plausibility was predicted to be judged following a similar process as ease, yet ease did not show any significance. Skylark (2021) argues that with the preference of statements comes greater ease of generation, which is linked to the counterfactual's judged plausibility. As plausibility and ease generated significantly different results, the question arises as to which underlying concepts affect the distinctive judgment of the two, offering opportunities for future research. Furthermore, the ease of generation was linked to the asymmetry following the more-than vs. less-than counterfactuals by Woltin & Epstude, (2023). However, the present study displays the difference in the judgment of plausibility for the victim vs. perpetrator condition. Marques et al. (2014) offer a potential explanation for the more impactful judgment of the perpetrator counterfactual, as the perpetrator is more proximal to the negative outcome of a situation. However, there is no specific link made to the judgment of plausibility. Thus, this offers the possibility to measure the uncertainty around the victim vs. perpetrator counterfactuals to understand better how reasonable individuals judge a counterfactual.

Moreover, the current study focuses solely on other-generated counterfactuals and the thereof judged impact. Future research may, in line with Woltin & Epstude (2023), explore how self-generated counterfactuals impact blaming the victim effects in a similar scenario. Such research may give insight into the topic of self-blame and coping by victims.

Lastly, offering entirely new directions is the exploration of regret in combination with counterfactual thinking and blame assignment. Wanting to avoid feelings of regret, in other words, perceiving regret aversion, motivates individuals to change their future behavior for the better, with counterfactuals acting as guidelines for this (Byrne, 2016; Epstude & Roese, 2008). The affective state individuals hold following the counterfactual thought range from a negative emotional valence describing feelings of regret, shame, and guilt to a positive valence such as feelings of satisfaction, relief, and compassion (Byrne, 2016). These emotions experienced depend highly on the type of counterfactual generated (Roese, 1997). Therefore, the influence of such emotions experienced following exposure to a counterfactual shapes individuals' actions and behavior. Such influence may also have an effect on the judged impact of counterfactuals, posing an opportunity for future research to investigate the link between regret aversion and judgment of counterfactuals.

Conclusion

Concludingly, when engaging in counterfactual thoughts, regardless of whether characters have engaged in more or less crucial behavior than the original scenario, no significant difference in judged impact between those conditions is found. Nevertheless, when focusing the counterfactual on either the victim or perpetrator, results show that the perpetrator, in any case, receives significantly more blame, and the associated counterfactual is judged more plausible. Hence, when generating counterfactual thoughts, paying more attention to the focal actors and outcomes rather than the behaviors themselves can help in preventing the ascription of blame to the wrong individual, specifically the victim.

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Appendix A

Efia Nartey has recently become the manager of a small team in the research department of her company. She is a person of color and is proud to show this by wearing traditional accessories of her home country Ghana and listening to Ghanaian music when working in her own office. Furthermore, she actively promotes diversity in the workplace, encouraging her employees to be open to different cultures.

Efia also makes sure to fully engage in her job, producing some of the best job outcomes in the research department of her company. It has always been important for her to ensure that everyone feels comfortable at work and that there is an open atmosphere in her team. When her team suddenly started distancing from her, she wondered what was going on. After asking around, an employee of hers told her that her co-worker Lisa Hemington the co-leader of the research department, is not happy about Efia's work regarding diversity. She tells colleagues that it is very unprofessional of Efia to engage in her diversity work and attend a diversity workshop instead of a seminar related one.

Lisa is indeed very strict about her work guidelines and does not tolerate behavior that in her opinion deviates from the primary tasks of the team. She likes to encourage competitive work behavior as she believes that it produces the best outcomes. Furthermore, Lisa is frustrated with Efia's advertising of workplace diversity as she thinks this is distracts employees from the things that matter for the team's success. Although not supportive of Efia's behavior, Lisa likes to comment on it by giving her two-sided compliments such as: 'I didn't expect you to be so good at your job,' 'that music you're listening to sounds interesting.' or 'You're so brave to be wearing those bright necklaces.', leaving Efia staggered.

After a few months, Lisa encourages the company to organize a small award show, rewarding the best employees of specific departments. Efia shows not only excellent work outcomes but also displays high satisfaction among her team. Nonetheless, this evening, she is

excluded from all the awards and completely disregarded by her department. Lisa on the other hand sits among the jury members and also earns two prizes.

Efia Nartey has decided she does not want to deal with Lisa's behavior anymore and consults the HR department.

Appendix B

HR Statement More-Than Counterfactual Victim

This unfortunate situation could have been avoided if Efia Nartey had listened more to what her employees advised and adhered more to the general work ambiance rather than engaging in behavior deemed appropriate by herself.

The current events would not have occurred if Efia had followed the overarching theme of work attire; her colorful statements surprised many. Indeed, she should have also engaged in more work-related workshops; many of her employees were confused by her missing out on these.

This unpleasant situation could have been easily avoided if Efia Nartey had obeyed the workplace guidelines more, focusing on her work and team. Furthermore, if Efia had paid more attention to Lisa's hints regarding her diverging work behavior this could have been avoided.

HR Statement Less-Than Counterfactual Victim

This unfortunate situation could have been avoided if Efia Nartey would have engaged less in diversity work and cultural statements by adhering to the general work ambiance rather than engaging in behavior deemed appropriate by herself.

Further, the current events would not have occurred if Efia had worn fewer Ghanaian accessories and listened to music on her terms, as this surprised many. She should have promoted less diversity work and attended less diversity focused workshops to leave her employees less confused about the work circumstances.

Lastly, it can be seen that this spiteful situation could have easily been avoided if Efia had been less hesitant about her employee's reactions and hints from Lisa regarding her diverging work behavior.

HR Statement More-Than Counterfactual Perpetrator

This unfortunate situation could have been avoided if Lisa Hemington had been more open to understanding the importance of diversity and adhered more to the general work ambiance of respecting one another rather than engaging in behavior deemed appropriate by herself.

Moreover, the current events would not have occurred had Lisa been more accepting of Efia's accessories and music at work. She should have been more tolerant towards Efia's celebrating and cherishing of her culture, while at the same time achieving exceptional job outcomes.

It can be seen that this spiteful situation could have been easily avoided if Lisa had only been more open to Efia's effort of making the workplace more diverse and if she had given Efia more opportunities for rewarding her determination of performing well on both the job and the workplace atmosphere.

HR Statement Less-Than Counterfactual Perpetrator

This unfortunate situation could have been avoided if Lisa Hemington had been less narrow-minded about promoting diversity at the workplace and less determined about engaging strictly in work-relevant behavior.

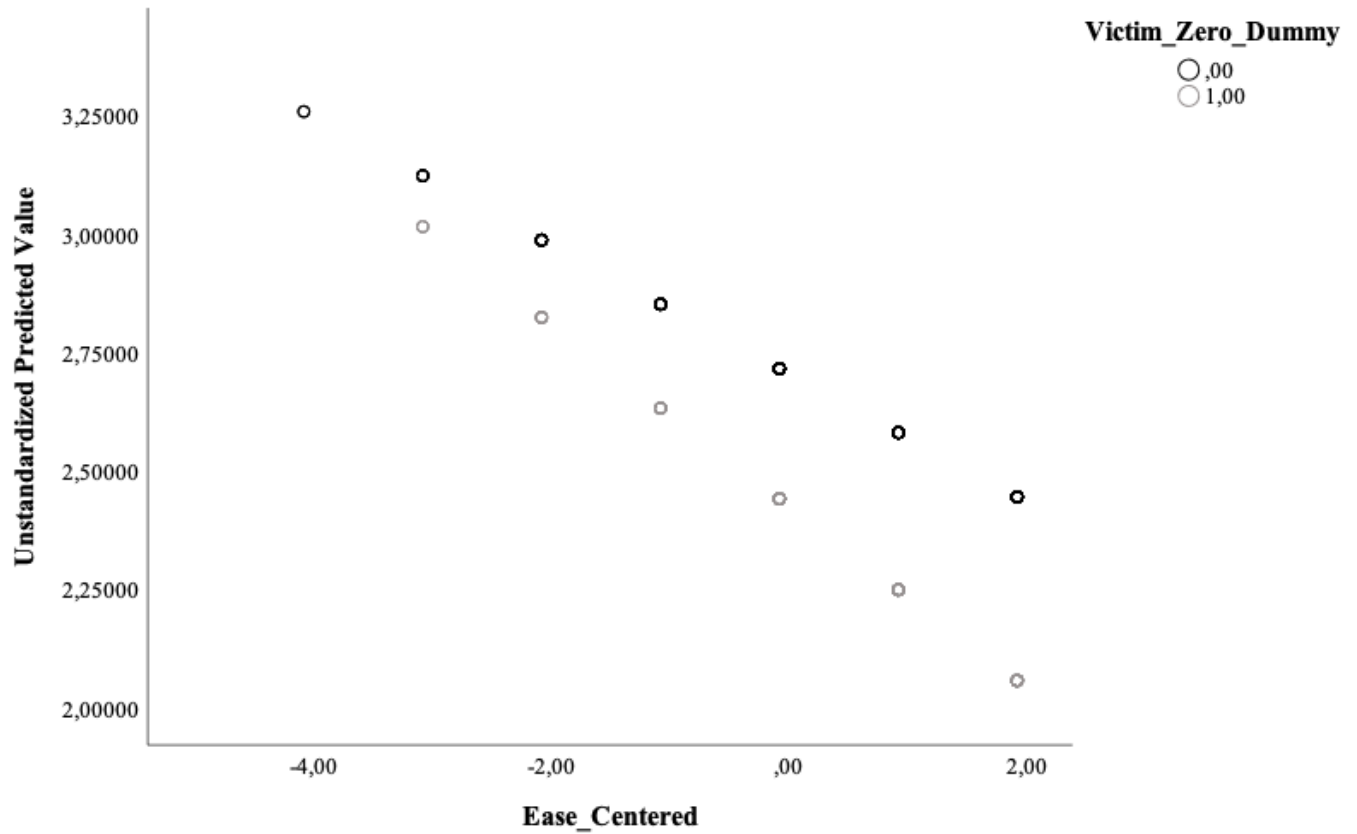
Moreover, the current events would not have occurred had Lisa been less disapproving of Efia's choice of accessories and music at work. She should have been less intolerant of Efia engaging in a Diversity workshop, and she should have been less critical towards Efia's behavior and performance.

It can be seen that this spiteful situation could have been easily avoided if Lisa had only been less ignorant about Efia's effort of performing well on both the job and the workplace atmosphere. She should have been less focused on herself, also giving Efia a place to win an award for her determination of performing well on both the job and the workplace atmosphere.

Appendix C

Figure 1

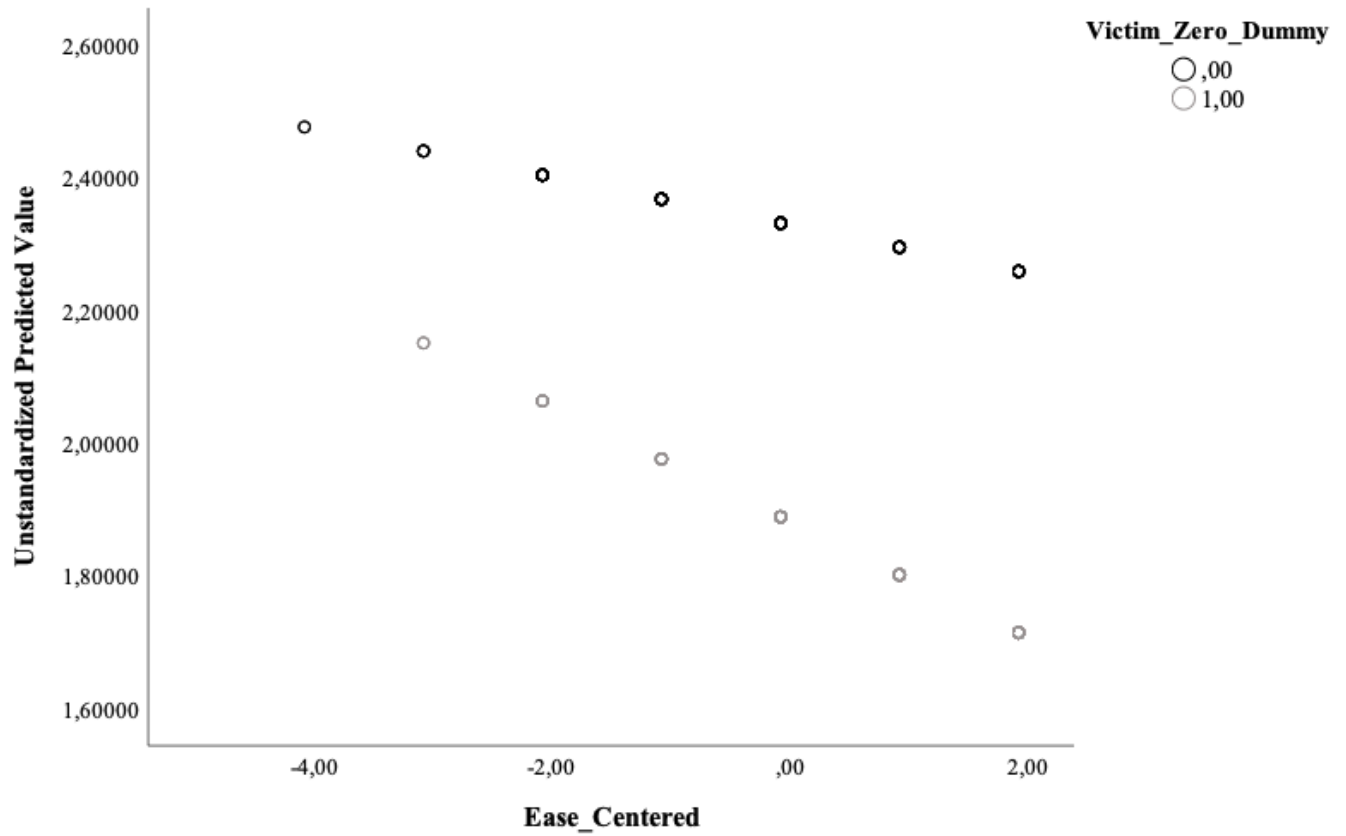
Scatterplot Regression of Ease with Victim-Perpetrator Interaction on Responsibility



Note. The scatterplot above displays the regression of Ease on the dependent Variable Responsibility, with the Victim-Perpetrator condition as the interaction term. 0 = Victim condition and 1 = perpetrator condition following dummy coding.

Figure 2

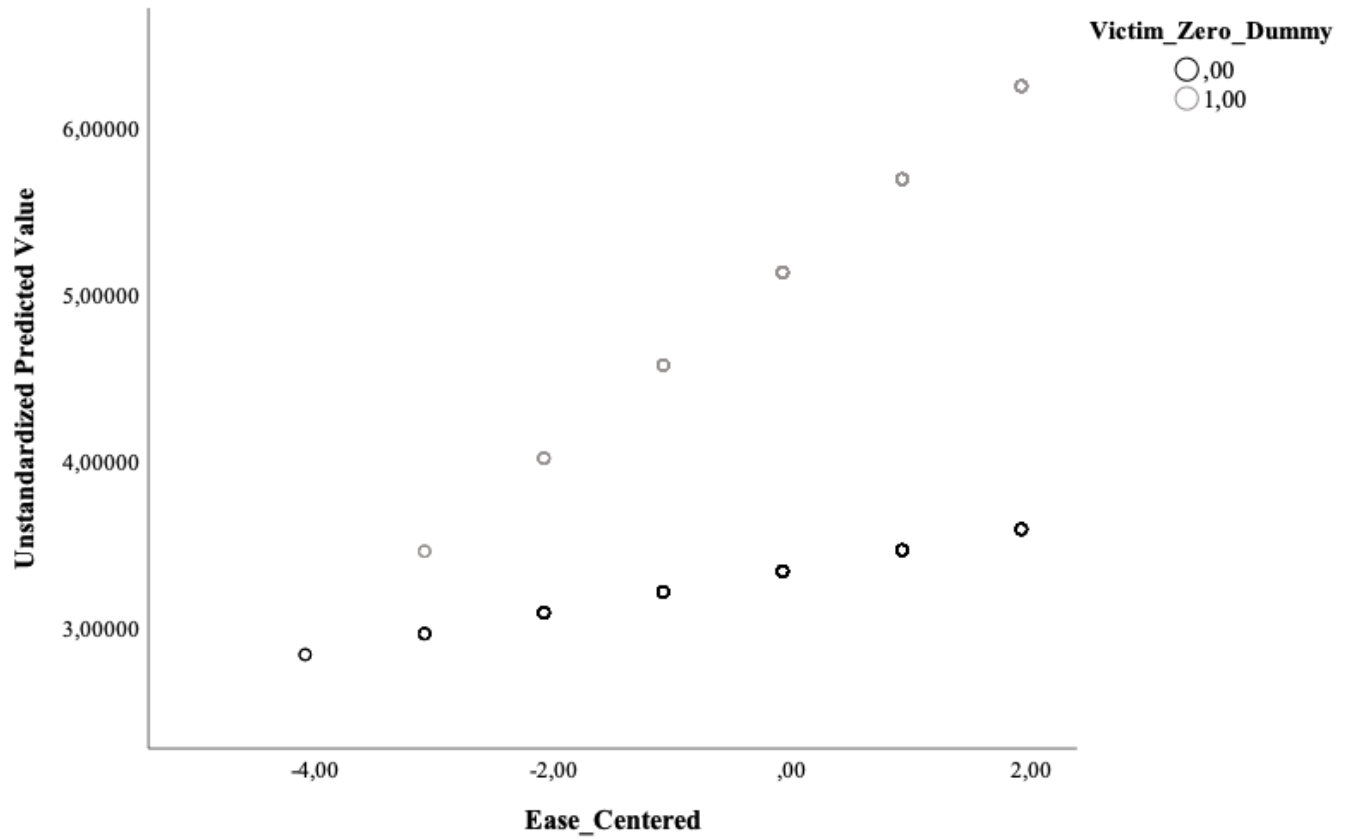
Scatterplot Regression of Ease with Victim-Perpetrator Interaction on Blame



Note. The scatterplot above displays the regression of Ease on the dependent Variable Blame, with the Victim-Perpetrator condition as the interaction term. 0 = Victim condition and 1 = perpetrator condition following dummy coding.

Figure 3

Scatterplot Regression of Ease with Victim-Perpetrator Interaction on Plausibility



Note. The scatterplot above displays the regression of Ease on the dependent Variable Plausibility, with the Victim-Perpetrator condition as the interaction term. 0 = Victim condition and 1 = perpetrator condition following dummy coding.