

OBSERVER'S REACTION TO THE "INNOCENT VICTIM": COMPASSION OR REJECTION?¹

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Under the guise of an experiment on the perception of emotional cues, 72 undergraduate female Ss observed a peer (victim) participating in a paired-associate learning task. The victim, as a result of making the usual errors, appeared to receive severe and painful electric shocks (negative reinforcement). In describing the suffering victim after these observations, Ss rejected and devalued her when they believed that they would continue to see her suffer in a 2nd session, and when they were powerless to alter the victim's fate. Rejection and devaluation were strongest when the victim was viewed as suffering for the sake of Ss ("martyr" condition). These results offer support for the hypothesis that rejection and devaluation of a suffering victim are primarily based on the observer's need to believe in a just world.

Recent experiments by Milgram (1963, 1964) provide important insights into the manner in which a social order can employ relatively normal people to commit cruel acts. A related problem is how societies which produce cruelty and suffering maintain even minimal popular support. What must occur is that the people come to accept the misery and suffering as well as the norms and laws which produce these conditions. There is evidence already available to account for how this acceptance might occur in those who feel responsible for the suffering of others. Davis and Jones (1960), Glass (1964), and Lerner (1965a) have shown that when a person has harmed someone, he may devalue his victim. Apparently the persecutor justifies his behavior by persuading himself that the victim deserved what happened to him.

These experiments, however, do not tell us how the average citizen—the observer or bystander who has not harmed the victim—comes to terms with the suffering he sees around him. Heider (1958) and others have noted that in some cases people reject, or

at least blame, those who are unfortunate. However, they have also pointed out that compassion or sympathy for the suffering person may also occur. As yet no one has spelled out the conditions under which these various reactions occur or the processes underlying them.

It was proposed in an earlier paper (Lerner, 1965b) that people must believe there is an appropriate fit between what they do and what happens to them—their outcomes. It was reasoned that if people did not believe they could get what they want and avoid what they abhor by performing certain appropriate acts, they would be virtually incapacitated. It seems obvious that most people cannot afford, for the sake of their own sanity, to believe in a world governed by a schedule of random reinforcements. To maintain the belief that there is an appropriate fit between effort and outcome, the person must construe this as a relatively "objective" belief—one that applies to everyone (Festinger, 1954). If this is true, then the person who sees suffering or misfortune will be motivated to believe that the unfortunate victim in some sense merited his fate.

There are some data relevant to this assertion. Lerner (1965b) found that observers persuaded themselves that a fortuitously rewarded worker had performed better than his partner who was deprived, also by chance. In the same vein, Walster (1966), replicating

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the finding of Shaw and Sulzer (1964), illustrated that the more serious the outcome of a person's acts the more an observer will want to find the person responsible for the outcome. A more general interpretation of these findings is that people will arrange their cognitions so as to maintain the belief that people get what they deserve or, conversely, deserve what they get.

The key to the relation between these studies and the rejection of a victim is the realization that there seem to be two senses in which people are considered to be deserving. They are seen as deserving if they have behaved in an appropriate or commendable fashion, and, in another sense, are considered deserving if they are personally good and desirable. If the person is motivated to believe he lives in a world where he can obtain the things he wants and avoid threatening events, then it seems likely that these two paths to reward (performance versus personal worth) can be ordered in terms of preference for the individual. It would be preferable for a person to believe that desired goals come as a result of appropriate acts rather than of personal characteristics, since he is more able to change and control his behavior than his intrinsic personal worth. Some support for this assertion is found in the previously mentioned experiments. Lerner found that the fortuitous reward had no effect on the perceived attractiveness of the two workers, but merely on the judged worth of their performance. Walster also found this variable unaffected by her experimental conditions.

One interpretation of these findings is that the experimental situations provided by Lerner and Walster enabled their subjects to modify their cognitions of the behavior of the person judged, and therefore the subjects had no need to alter, to any significant degree, their evaluations of the other's personal worth. Although this is mostly conjecture, these notions do provide some hypotheses about when the bystander will reject or repudiate a suffering victim. The main hypothesis is that rejection is the result of the observer's attempt to maintain his belief in a just world. Also, this rejection will occur pri-

marily when this need is not satisfied by the assignment of misdeeds to the victim.

Obviously, then, the clearest test of the hypothesis requires that the victim be perceived as virtually innocent—his behavior did not merit the suffering. Two other factors are required to reproduce the situation of the deprived or persecuted victim in society. One of these is that the observer believes the suffering he sees will probably continue in one form or another—the suffering is not a single, relatively isolated event in the victim's life. The other required element is that the observer is powerless to help the victim—given that he acts within the rules of the system in which the event takes place.

To approximate these conditions in a laboratory setting, groups of students who volunteered to participate in an experiment on the perception of emotional cues found themselves observing another experiment in which a subject was receiving extremely painful electric shocks. After seeing the victim suffer for 10 minutes, there was an intermission. Before observing the next 10-minute session the observers were given an opportunity to rate the attractiveness of the victim. It was expected that in this condition (midpoint) the observers, faced with the prospect of seeing an innocent victim continue to suffer, would be compelled to devalue the personal characteristics of the victim.

On the other hand, if the observer believes the suffering is at an end and no permanent harm was done, he would have less need to reject the victim. Accordingly, the ratings of the victim in the previously described condition (midpoint) were compared with ratings made by subjects in two other conditions. In one condition the subjects believed the 10-minute session they had observed constituted all the suffering the victim would undergo in that experiment—the experiment was over except for the ratings (end-point condition). In the other condition the subjects believed they were watching a video tape of a victim who was now fine and in good spirits (past-event condition).

A third condition, in which rejection should be eliminated or reduced, would be one in which the observer is convinced he can al-

leviate the victim's suffering and/or provide him with compensatory rewards. Again, the victim's suffering would not threaten the observer's belief in a just world, and the observer can then afford, at least, to be objective in his appraisal of the victim. To test this prediction some subjects in this experiment were given an opportunity to vote after seeing the victim suffer during the initial session. Before making their ratings of the victim the observers learned that their votes were successful in placing the victim in a positive-reinforcement condition for the next session in which she would be certain to be paid a considerable amount of money (reward condition).

Actually there are two different processes which would predict less rejection in this "reward condition." The theoretical notions presented in this paper require that the observer be convinced that the victim's fate will actually be altered in order to prevent rejection of the victim. A prediction derived from the theory of cognitive dissonance (Festinger, 1957) would be that the observer's cognition that he has acted on behalf of the victim is sufficient to prevent rejection. To test this latter prediction, some additional subjects participated in a condition quite similar to the reward condition, except that they were not told of the outcome of their votes before they made their ratings of the victim (reward-decision condition).

The final hypothesis tested in this experiment provides the severest test of the ideas presented in this paper. Although it is commonly believed that people will admire and feel compassion for a person who has suffered for the sake of others, the suffering of someone who has acted out of altruistic motives should be most threatening to the belief in a just world. If this is true, then the observer should reject the willing martyr even more than the innocent victim. The hypothesis was tested in this experiment by having the innocent victim reluctantly agree to undergo the negative reinforcement so that the observers could observe her and thereby satisfy a course requirement to participate in an experiment (martyr condition).

The underlying hypothesis of this experiment is that observers, in order to maintain

their belief in a just world, will devalue the personal characteristics of an innocent victim. To test this hypothesis specific predictions were made concerning the way in which observers will describe the personal characteristics of someone they have just seen suffering. The predictions are: If observers believe the victim's suffering will continue, they will describe her as a less attractive person than when they believe her suffering is ended (Hypothesis 1), when they see the victim after the event as apparently unaffected by the experience (Hypothesis 2), or when they have successfully arranged for her suffering to be changed to reward (Hypothesis 3). The observers will describe the victim as less attractive when they have merely decided to reward her than when they receive confirmation that she will be rewarded (Hypothesis 4). Finally, a victim who reluctantly agrees to continue suffering for the sake of the observers will be judged less attractive than a victim whose suffering is ended (Hypothesis 5).

METHOD

Subjects

The subjects were 75 female students who volunteered to participate in this experiment as part of the requirements for a course in introductory psychology.³ They were exposed to the experimental situation in small groups of 4-10 subjects, pre-assigned on a nonsystematic basis to one of the various conditions. No subjects doubted the experimental ruse; however, 3 subjects were not included in the analysis because they had learned in advance of the true nature of the experiment.

Procedure

The subjects gathered in a waiting room a few minutes before the scheduled experiment and were joined by a confederate (the "victim"), who was a girl of their own age dressed as another student. The subjects and the victim then accompanied the experimenter to the observation side of a one-way-mirror testing room, where it was established that the subjects were to take part in a study on the

³The selection of female students was determined by a number of considerations. One was the desire to keep the subjects the same sex as the victim and the experimenters. The main consideration in the choice of females was based on the generally accepted stereotype as well as some data from Schopler and Bateson (1965) indicating that females would be more likely than males to exhibit compassion—thus providing the clearest test of the hypotheses.

perception of emotional cues, while the victim, identified as another student, was to take part in a study on human learning with another experimenter. At this point, all subjects were asked to complete a set of bipolar adjective scales designed to describe their "personality traits," and a "personal attribute inventory" consisting of forced-choice pairs of personal characteristics equated for social desirability.

When the forms had been completed, the experimenter gave as a rationale for the experiment, the following explanation:

Military officers, as well as business administrators, are presently very interested in studying the effects of emotional situations on learning and performance. I'm sure you all know people who, when they are faced with stressful or exciting situations, are able to continue working well in spite of their emotional state and other people who seem to fall apart and are unable to perform well when faced with the same emotional situation. Now obviously it is very important to leaders in a war situation or on an industrial assembly line, for example, to be able to make quick, accurate decisions as to which of the people working under them will be able to continue work under conditions of elation or stress, and which workers should be pulled off the job before their work is seriously affected by their emotional state. Often, these decisions must be made on the basis of only a few minutes' observation. As yet, we do not have any reliable cues which these people could use to make their important decisions. So today, we are taking advantage of a human learning study which Dr. Stewart is conducting to observe someone performing in an emotion-arousing situation. Your job will be to observe closely the emotional state of the worker and to watch for cues which indicate her state of arousal. Dr. Stewart is running her subjects under three different conditions: some subjects are rewarded for making correct responses, and these subjects usually earn between \$2.00 and \$8.00 for their work; other subjects receive electrical shocks for incorrect responses made to the learning task; and a third group of subjects is neither rewarded nor punished during the learning task, but is used as a control group.

At this point, the curtains covering the one-way mirror were opened to show the test room, where a memory drum was seen on a table with two chairs drawn up to it. Dr. Stewart was observed "adjusting" the shock equipment and electrode leads next to the memory drum. A technician was also adjusting the television camera. The experimenter explained that previous observers had relied most heavily on changes in skin color of the subject as an indication of her emotional state, and that in order to see what other possible cues could be used the observers today would watch the task over a television monitor. The curtains were then closed, and the subjects were directed to watch the monitor. At this point, Dr. Stewart entered the observation

room and asked her subject (the victim) to accompany her. Before leaving the room, Dr. Stewart informed the experimenter that she was "running subjects in the shock condition today."

The subjects then watched what was actually a 10-minute video tape in which the victim was seen entering the next room with Dr. Stewart and, after being strapped to the "shock apparatus," attempted to learn pairs of nonsense syllables. During the task, the victim received several apparently painful electric "shocks" for incorrect responses, and reacted to them with both exclamations and expressions of pain and suffering. Of course, the victim was not actually shocked, but merely gave a very effective performance.

Following the tape, the subjects received one of the following sets of instructions, depending on the experimental condition to which they had been assigned⁴:

1. Midpoint ($N = 14$): The subjects were told they were at the midpoint in the experiment, and there would be another session of equal length after they made their first ratings of the victim.

2. Reward ($N = 14$): After being told that they had just seen the first session in the experiment, the subjects were asked to vote, by private ballot, as to what condition (negative reinforcement, positive reinforcement, or control) they would like to see the same person (victim) perform in for the second session. Ostensibly this choice was to enable them to select the condition which would provide the best opportunity to test out their hunches about what cues indicated the victim's state of arousal. Actually, it was designed to allow the subjects to

⁴Some of the important considerations in designing the basic situation were that the subjects should have a legitimate reason for seeing the suffering but in no way feel responsible for the victim's fate. Second, it should appear to be clearly inappropriate for the observer to interfere in any way with what was happening. Also, the victim should appear to have arrived at her fate through the normal channels of activity. In this experiment the victim had merely signed up for an experiment in human learning, of which there were a number being conducted at that time. It would also appear conceivable in terms of what the subjects had learned in their course work that someone could be administered "negative reinforcement" (shock) in that kind of experiment. Additionally, it was important to choose a task (paired-associate learning) in which it was obvious to the subjects that anyone would, especially in the early stages, make a number of errors. The first two considerations were intended to allow the subject to feel that she was not responsible for the victim's fate. The latter two were designed to make it extremely difficult for the subject to perceive the victim's behavior as responsible for her suffering. In addition to these factors the victim's suffering was portrayed as so intense that the subjects would be unlikely to be satisfied by merely deciding the victim had acted unwisely or lacked an inordinate amount of foresight.

after the victim's fate and provide her with some rewards. After the vote the experimenter announced that the group had elected to observe the positive-reinforcement condition. One of the subjects in this condition voted for the control rather than the reward condition.

3. Reward decision ($N=11$): The instructions were the same as the reward condition, but the subjects were not told of the outcome of the vote prior to making their ratings. One subject in this condition voted for the neutral rather than the positive-reinforcement condition.

4. End point ($N=14$): The subjects were told the experiment was over, and they were asked to make their ratings of the victim.

5. Past event ($N=10$): This condition was similar to the end point, except that the subjects were told that they would see a video tape of someone who had been shocked in the past. They were given an opportunity to meet the victim and see that she was fine and had in fact been paid a sum of money.

6. Martyr ($N=9$): The subjects were given the same instructions as the end point with these exceptions. When Dr. Stewart entered the room to get her subject and announced that they were running only negative-reinforcement conditions that day, the victim protested that she would not take part in an experiment in which she would be shocked. Dr. Stewart then urged her to continue for the sake of the observers (subjects) who would not be able to obtain lab credits for participating in an experiment if she (the victim) refused to do her part so they could observe her. It was also pointed out to her that her refusal would create a great deal of inconvenience and trouble for the observers (subjects), but, of course, the decision to participate or not was up to her. After a few moments of persuasion, based on the elicitation of altruistic motives, the victim agreed to participate "if it is necessary for all of them [subjects] to get credit." Three psychologists who observed this scene in rehearsal agreed with no reluctance whatever that the victim created the impression of acting generously from altruistic motives when she agreed to go on with her part in the experiment.

Measures

Following the exposure to the video tape and the experimental instructions, the subjects filled out a number of scales in order to describe the "impression which the person you saw [victim] gives others of what she is like." These scales, including those the subject had initially filled out to describe herself, were designed to allow the observer to describe the attractiveness of the victim as well as to create any desired degree of similarity. There were also some questions and scales designed to lend validity to the experimental ruse.

Two different measures of the attractiveness of the victim were employed: (a) The ratings on the 15 highly evaluative bipolar scales (e.g., likable-unlikable and mature-immature) were combined to yield

an overall index of attractiveness. The range of possible scores was from 15 to 135 (the higher the score the more positive the rating). On the basis of previous work with these scales, the attractiveness rating the subject ascribed to herself, initially, was subtracted from that ascribed to the victim to yield the final measure used in the analysis. (b) The subjects rated the victim in response to five questions about her "Social Stimulus Value": "How would people in general react to this person after a brief acquaintance, in terms of getting to know him (her) better?" (Would prefer not to become further acquainted =1, would be intensely interested =6). "How easily would this person fit in with your friends?" (Probably not easily =1, would be eagerly sought out =6). "Some people are able to gain admiration and respect from others very easily and other people are not. How easily can this person gain admiration from others?" (Very easily =1, very difficult =6). Similar to the preceding but the terms "affection and liking" were substituted for "admiration." "From the impression this person gives, how likely is he (she) to be able to get the things he (she) wants out of life?" (Will have to struggle for what she wants =1, the things he (she) wants will come very naturally and easily =6). The responses to each of these questions were combined to yield a second index of the victim's attractiveness.

To measure similarity the subject's description of herself on a 20-item, forced-choice scale was compared with her postexperimental description of the victim. (Some examples are: Item 6, good sense of humor, good sense of fairness; Item 17, tend to be insecure, tend to be selfish). The number of similar choices was used as the measure of ascribed similarity.

In order to learn more about the subjects' general reaction to the experiment, they were asked to respond freely to three general questions. "Were the instructions given clearly . . . etc.?" "How did you feel about cooperating in this experiment?" "What . . . in your words . . . was the experiment about?" The subjects were also given an opportunity to express any other reactions: "Additional comments and constructive criticism." Besides testing the effectiveness of the experimental ruse, these questions were intended to allow the subject to react to all aspects of the experimental situation.

RESULTS

An examination of Table 1 reveals that there was a clear difference between the attractiveness (bipolar scales) of the victim in the midpoint and the reward conditions ($t = 2.95$, $p < .01$, Hypothesis 3). Also, it appears that the reward-decision condition elicited as much rejection⁵ as the midpoint condition, and con-

⁵ The use of the term "rejection" here is based on findings of previous research using this instru-

TABLE 1
RATINGS OF THE VICTIM

	Past event (<i>N</i> = 10)	Reward (<i>N</i> = 14)	Reward decision (<i>N</i> = 11)	Midpoint (<i>N</i> = 14)	End point (<i>N</i> = 14)	Martyr (<i>N</i> = 9)
Attractiveness ^a (bipolar scales)	-11.10	-5.07	-25.18	-25.78	-12.85	-34.00
Social stimulus value ^a	18.70	19.21	15.27	14.71	17.00	14.11
Similarity ^b	11.60	9.42	9.36	9.36	9.82	8.78

Analyses of variance

	<i>df</i>	Attractiveness		Social stimulus value		Similarity	
		<i>MS</i>	<i>F</i>	<i>MS</i>	<i>F</i>	<i>MS</i>	<i>F</i>
Conditions	5	1381.0	4.00*	53.38	3.86*	9.57	1.08
Error	66	344.9		13.82		8.83	

^a The more positive (less negative) the rating the more attractive the victim.

^b The higher the rating the greater the perceived similarity.

* $p < .005$.

siderably more than the reward ($t = 2.68$, $p < .01$, Hypothesis 4). The means of the past-event and end-point conditions are virtually identical and lie between reward and midpoint. Although closer to reward, they are not reliably different from either reward or midpoint (Hypotheses 1 and 2). The end-point condition provided the most appropriate control and test for the martyr conditions. A comparison of the means in these two conditions yields a t of 2.66 ($p < .01$, Hypothesis 5). Apparently, the martyr condition elicited the lowest ratings of attractiveness.

The responses to the Social Stimulus Value index of attractiveness present a pattern similar to the one described above. When the subjects believed they successfully assigned the victim to the reward condition, they rated her as considerably less negative than when they were uncertain as to whether they were successful (reward decision versus reward $t = 2.64$, $p < .02$, Hypothesis 4) or when they were powerless to alter her fate (reward versus midpoint $t = 3.19$, $p < .005$, Hypothesis

ment. In an earlier experiment with similarly obtained female subjects, it was found that there was a tendency for them to rate others slightly higher than themselves with the two scores being highly correlated. Even after an experience with another person who had harmed the subjects somewhat, the lowest mean rating was not lower than -10. Obviously, then, the mean in the midpoint condition is considerably lower than those found with a number of different subjects rating a number of other people.

3). Again the means in the past-event and end-point conditions fell between those in the reward and midpoint (Hypotheses 1 and 2). However, with this measure the past-event mean was significantly higher than the midpoint ($t = 2.59$, $p < .02$). The martyr condition again elicited the greatest amount of rejection, but the difference between the ratings in this condition in comparison with those in the end point was not significant ($t = 1.81$, $p < .08$, Hypothesis 5).

There were no reliable differences in the similarity attributed to the victim among the experimental conditions. The most likely interpretation of this is that the measure of similarity which was constructed for this experiment was not adequate to pick up what differences may actually have been elicited. A more sensitive measure or one that measured other aspects of similarity might have yielded significant results.

Some of the most interesting data in this experiment were found in the written comments. Although a complete analysis of the contents of these comments is not within the scope of this paper, some of the preliminary findings can be reported. It should be remembered in interpreting these comments that they were written before the subjects were disabused of the experimental ruse. As one might expect, the comments varied from extremely positive (e.g., "I think it is about the

most interesting experiment I have been able to participate in. I enjoyed it very much.") to extremely negative (e.g., "I thought there was no sense in the experiment and it was very cruel.").

Also, the comments tended to be either predominantly positive or negative, rather than equivocal or ambivalent. Sixty-five of the 72 subjects provided responses easily codable into either positive or negative, and the majority, 40 of the 65, responded positively.

By using these comments, coded as either positive or negative, it was possible to test an important prediction from the theoretical ideas presented in this paper. It was stated earlier that when a person is confronted with the sight of someone suffering the observer will be compelled to decide that either he lives in a cruel, unjust world where innocent people can suffer or that he lives in a just and good world and the victim deserves his suffering. If this reasoning is true, then those subjects who rejected the situation should rate the victim much more positively (or rather, less negatively) than did those who wrote something positive about the experiment. This hypothesis was confirmed by the data. The subjects who responded negatively to the situation rated the victim -5.16 (the bipolar adjective scales), and those who responded positively gave a mean rating of -24.35 . A comparison of these two means yields a t of 3.73 , $df = 63$, $p < .001$.

This clear negative relation between the reaction to the experimental situation and the reaction to the victim also indicates that the rejection of the victim observed in this experiment did not merely reflect a global negative response to everything in the environment caused by the subject being forced to undergo the stress of seeing someone else suffer.

DISCUSSION

In general, the data provide good support for the hypotheses. As expected, the least rejection occurred when the observer has actually altered the fate of the victim and allowed her to obtain a reward. When the observer was unable to stop the suffering, other than by an act of open rebellion against the

experimenter, she chose to devalue and reject the victim. Also supported was the hypothesis that acting to benefit a suffering victim is not sufficient to insure that the law-abiding observer will not reject the victim. The crucial element seems to lie in the observer's becoming aware that the victim will be compensated or at least that his suffering is at an end.

The amount of rejection which appeared in the martyr condition was somewhat surprising, but theoretically important. Although all safeguards were taken to insure that the impression which the victim created truly represented someone acting out of altruistic motives, there is no way of insuring that this was the case—other than by an elaborate set of control conditions. However, given that the data do represent a real finding, and there is every reason to believe this is true, then they provide strong support for the assertion that people have a great need to believe in a good and just world. Apparently the martyr's suffering threatens this need more than suffering of less nobly motivated people.

The written comments provided equally important support for the assertion that the observer is faced with a conflict when he sees someone suffering. The subjects who verbally condemned the experiment exhibited much less rejection of the victim. Why some observers rejected the experiment and others rejected the victim is an important, but as yet uninvestigated, question. The usual, but untested, answer provided for this question centers around the concept of identification. But certainly to say that those observers who identify with the victim will show compassion, and not reject him, merely substitutes another concept for an answer. In this vein, it is important to note that one of the most frequently used indexes of identification, perceived similarity, did not reveal any systematic differences among the conditions. However, as stated earlier this may well have resulted from employing an inadequate instrument to measure similarity.

There are a number of important questions and related hypotheses raised by the findings of this experiment.

A note of caution in generalizing these results may be appropriate. In the strictest

sense, the findings of this experiment were obtained from female subjects only, and some reservations about extending the conclusions to men may be in order.

One untested, but extremely interesting, hypothesis which follows from the earlier discussion is that if observers can attribute the victim's suffering to something the victim did or failed to do they will have less need to devalue his personal characteristics (other things being equal). The observers' belief in a just and predictable world will not be threatened.

Another question is when does the actual rejection occur? A reasonable hypothesis is that some, if not all, of the rejection will occur merely with the cognition that the observer will see the victim suffer. It may not be necessary actually to observe the suffering to elicit rejection. Some support for this notion is found in the fact that subjects in the reward condition did not actually have to see the victim being paid, in order for the condition to be effective. They merely had to be sure that the subject would get a good deal of money and the suffering would be at an end.

The most compelling question raised by these data is under what conditions will a person whose suffering derives from altruistic motives be reacted to with compassion and admiration rather than rejection.

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