

Are our attributions of blame simple or complex? A conceptual analysis and preliminary findings of observers' causal attributions for co-worker mistreatment in standardized video clips

Abstract

Attribution theory proposes that the locus of causality (internal/external) is a central, yet either-or dimension for observers' attributions of blame (moral responsibility) for negative behavior and negative events. Novel approaches in attribution theory suggest the existence of relational as well as conjunctive and multi-blame patterns for (ambiguous) mistreatment at work. The aim of this study is to conceptualize and empirically investigate whether observers make more than one (causal) attribution as bystander of co-worker mistreatment, and what their dominant strategies for attributing or "discounting" blame are. 999 Austrian workforce members responded to 16 standardized video clips with four female and four male professional actors in both the perpetrator and target role. The videos exhibited a workplace conversation including customer pressure and a direct verbal aggression by the perpetrator against the target (angry insult). Open ended questions about the possible cause(s) of the perpetrator behaviour allow to extract underlying beliefs and (multiple) causes for the aggressive behavior as well as rationalization/discounting mechanisms and conjunctive attributions. The preliminary findings suggest that while single internal attributions involving the perpetrator or the target's deservingness occur frequently, single situational causes (customer pressure, stress) are the most dominant attribution for the perpetrator's aggression. However, this external attribution was used to either discount blame from the perpetrator or to *explain* the perpetrators behaviour and inadequate coping, pointing to conjunctive attributions. Implications of preliminary findings are briefly discussed.

Keywords: Workplace mistreatment, attribution theory, locus of causality, conjunctive attributions, discounting blame

Introduction

Attribution theory research had its roots and heights in the second part of the 20th century (e.g. Heider, 1958; Kelley and Michela, 1980; Weiner, 1985). Austrian-born Fritz Heider (1944;

1958) believed that “normal” people act as naive psychologists when they try to make sense of their social world, and make causal attributions of own or other people’s behaviour our positive and negative outcomes via either an internal (dispositional) or external locus of causality (see also Malle, 2011). Heider was also the first to describe what has later been labelled the “fundamental attribution error” (Ross, 1977, Sabini et al., 2001), i.e. people’s tendency to locate the cause of a behaviour or an outcome (e.g., success or failure) in a person’s disposition as origin rather than in the situation or other contextual pressures. As Heider put it, “*Attributing change to a single concrete unit is a simpler organization than that to which an analysis in terms of a causal nexus with many conditions would lead to*” (Heider, 1944, p. 145).

The primary focus of this qualitative study is not the investigation of the fundamental attribution error when observing workplace mistreatment; rather the aim is to discuss and explore empirically if, and if yes how single or more complex patterns of causal structures arise when observing dyadic mistreatment in standardized video clips from a bystander perspective. The main argument of this study is that a mere distinction between internal and external locus of causality might not suffice for explaining observers’ attributions in interpersonal workplace mistreatment. To give an example adapted and extended from Heider (1944): A Person A screams at Person B, and Person B is hurt by the insult. Clearly, the enacted aggression of Person A itself caused Person’s B suffering, as a physical activity or other overt expression of aggression is not ambiguous, and hence might lend itself to single dispositional causal attributions. Here, origin and effects are part of own causal unit (Heider, 1944). However, the situation may also lead to more complex and “conjunctive” attributions in the eye of third parties, since observers of mistreatment at work usually have diverse alternative causes present beyond the mere aggressive act. The perceived locus of causality of the mistreatment might then to some extent depend upon whether the observers’ sensemaking will focus on the cause for the behaviour (aggressive act) or on the outcome (hurt target), on attributions involving the actors’ dispositions, or on perceived external (e.g. situational, organizational factors) or so-called relational causes (causes perceived to result from the relationship between the actors) that could explain the situation. The observer might even refrain from making any causal inference given the multitude of possible causes. On the other hand, the observer could only describe the person A’s act as bad, but not assign a cause or blame to the person (cf. Heider, 1944). Observers could also blame the target for the “mistreatment”, as in particular negative outcomes are often traced back to dispositions rather than to external factors (Weiner, 2010). Alternatively, the search for the locus of causality might involve various attributions about the

behaviour and/or the internal mental state of Person A which may affect the perceived stability and controllability of the aggressive behaviour (Weiner, 1985). For example, dispositional attributions might then involve inferences about a person's stable aggressive nature ("she is an aggressive person") or a person's lack of aggression control ("he cannot control his emotions"; cf. Malle et al., 2014). However, even the emergence of such "internal" attributional dimensions might not automatically imply a pure internal locus of causality, because they might be derived from or interact with perceived external causes provided by the context (e.g., observers may speculate how much the stressful situation has made Person A to lose control). Alternatively or in addition, the observer might reflect on the outcome on the target (person B) or the context when locating the cause of Person A's aggression. Typically, perceived harm or the perception of hypersensitivity or victim deservingness or other "external" factors may either foster or reduce ("discount") internal attributions against Person A, but not necessarily does a trade-off occur when two or more plausible causes are present. For example, an observer might find that the target is hypersensitive because of preceding conflicts with the "aggressive" perpetrator, who moreover seems unable to cope well with pressure and stress. Here, again, it would be difficult to decide whether the observers made either an internal or external attribution of cause for the mistreatment. The situation (stress) could be also considered as a necessary condition for the aggressive trait in Person A to occur, i.e. both internal and external causes in *conjunction* are then *needed* to make an attribution (McClure, 1998).

An even more challenging question lies whether and where causal attributions are equivalent with an assignment of responsibility, in particular *moral* responsibility (blame) for an aggressive act, if more than one factor is blamed for a behaviour or an outcome (Zedlacher and Snowden, 2023). Are observers mainly explaining what happened or are they also attributing blame on the cause? And, if multiple internal and external causes are listed, are then external factors used to "discount" blame (Kelly and Michela, 1980) from the aggressor or is the process reverse? An observer could first blame an external factor for the aggressive behaviour of the person A (e.g. a preceding provocative statement by Person B, a stressful day or pressure from above) which may override or at least to some extent (morally) excuse the behaviour of Person's A and/or make Person B seem more deserving of the mistreatment. Alternatively, person A could be considered an aggressive person or lacking adequate coping mechanisms and that the stressful situations at work has activated these "dispositions". In these cases, observers might then consider the stressful situation as a mere explanation without excusing Person A's disposition and without discounting any moral responsibility from Person A.

With the present study, various contributions to novel advances in attribution theory research are made. With the so-called discounting factor (Kelley, 1977; Kelley and Michela, 1980) it has been taken into account that people discount a cause of an action or an outcome when other plausible causes are present (Morris and Larrick, 1995). However, the discounting principle implies that when two causes for an effect are available, people discount one cause (McClure, 1998). In organizational practice, people might refer to more than one cause when they experience or witness mistreatment (see Eberly et al., 2011; Sabini et al., 2001; Wilkerson and Meyer, 2019). However, to the best knowledge of the author, causal schemata with multi-blame and so-called conjunctive attributions remains under-conceptualized and under-researched in the area of workplace mistreatment, in particular from an observer perspective (a few notable exception include Wilkerson & Meyer, 2019; Zedlacher & Snowden, 2023). Most experiments on attributions of blame pre-define the possible dimensions, i.e. provide specific pre-defined or manipulated categories of either internal or external causes or underlying dimensions to observers (e.g., Harvey et al., 2017), hereby reducing the complexity and “simultaneous” occurrence or the “conjunction” between internal and external attributions. In contrast to the “discounting effect” (Kelley and Michela, 1980), conjunctive attributions do not make the first cause less relevant or disappear when a second cause seems more plausible or confirming beliefs. Rather, the conjunction effect occurs when an explanation with two causes is rated as more probable than explanations with only one possible cause (McClure, 1998; Morris and Larrick, 1995). Moreover, in particular in cases of dyadic mistreatment observers may engage in relational attributions where the cause is located in the relationship of the actor (Eberly et al., 2011). However, this rather novel locus of causality has not yet been explored in detail (Zedlacher & Snowden, 2023). Via an open-question format this study leaves it up to the observer whether and how they provide an explanation, cause, or blame to the observed mistreatment, and how they might react to the situation.

This exploratory approach also allows shedding light on which underlying dimensions possibly affect the causal structure of internal, relational and external attributions for workplace mistreatment. Former studies have focused on exploring and logically extracting the dimensions of attributions for success and failure in achievement-related outcomes, social rejection, serious illnesses etc. (Weiner, 1985; see also Weiner et al., 2011; Mantler et al., 2003). For example, in achievement-related studies the underlying dimensions of *controllability* and *stability* are typically effort (controllable, unstable) and ability (non-controllable, stable), and they have been found to be decisive for the perceived locus of

causality and the emotional reactions and helping intentions (Weiner, 1985). However, the common underlying dimensions and patterns for causal attributions remain to be explored in the mistreatment context.

Moreover, with the research design the external validity of research on attributions is enhanced. Written vignette studies often make observers focus on the causal attributions related to the target, hereby possibly narrowing the focus of the study participants to victim-blaming (Sleed, 2002; Zedlacher & Yanagida, 2022). Video clips are more suitable to provide context, and for the observer to engage in the situation as a “bystander”.

In the following, I provide a brief theoretical overview on workplace mistreatment and aggression and its conceptualization as a multi-causal phenomenon. Before the research design and sample is explained in detail, foundations of attribution theory from a third party perspective are provided. The results sections presents a description of the preliminary findings of a content analysis on observers’ single or multi/conjunctive causal attributions, which are briefly discussed.

Theoretical Background

The definition and causes of “workplace mistreatment” and “aggression”

Employees at may experience a wide array of “workplace mistreatment” including perceptions of bullying, discrimination, harassment or incivility (McCord et al., 2018).

Interpersonal mistreatment at work involves one or more aggressive acts against co-workers, subordinates or supervisors. The aggression can be categorized as direct/indirect, passive/active, overt/covert; physical/verbal, and may be acute (one high-intensity act) or chronic (long-term, often low-intensity stressors) (Barling, 2007).

It is important to note that the term “aggression” implies a certain focus on the “agent’s” behaviour and wilfulness of the act rather than accidental harm (Anderson and Bushman, 2002). Moreover, according to Anderson and Bushman (2002), the perpetrator must believe that “*that the behavior will harm the target, and that the target is motivated to avoid the behavior*” (p. 28). In contrast, terms such as workplace bullying often imply a focus on the target’s experience or the outcomes of the behaviour without a focus on the perpetrator’s motives and intent (Einarsen et al., 2020).

In the literature, aggression sources and antecedents are multi-faceted (Schat and Kelloway, 2005). For example, Neuman and Baron (1998) cite social (e.g. unfair treatment, frustration-inducing events, provocations include insults, slights, other forms of verbal aggression, physical aggression, interference with ones attempts to attain an important goal), situational/organizational (e.g. environmental conditions) and personal factors (e.g. negative affectivity, hostile attributional style) to the emergence of an aggressive response to a trigger event. However, even for researchers the term “workplace aggression” carries a lack of conceptual clarity about the nature of the phenomenon and its multiple causes and predictors. Hershovis and Barling (2007) note that various definitions/criteria of workplace aggression and its predictors exist based on ideological assumptions of the researchers about the phenomenon per se: For example, aggression can be (mainly) understood and researched as a retaliatory response to a provocation and perceived injustice by the organization or co-workers (e.g. Folger & Skarlicki, 1998; Neuman & Baron, 1998; Jawahar, 2002). Such an approach might imply a higher occurrence of relational or target-related attributions. O’Leary Kelly and colleagues (1996) in their model of “organizational motivated aggression” highlight organizational factors such as downsizing as instigators or triggers for aggression, i.e. they argue that organizational dimensions make organizational members “*react more strongly to aspects of the relationships with the company, without assigning blame to the company*” (O’Leary Kelly et al., 1996). If aggression is understood as voluntary and counter-normative, i.e. deviant behaviour at work (see e.g. Robinson and Bennett, 1995), this approach then implies an “internal”, agent-related cause of aggression (see Hershovics & Barling, 2007).

Empirical evidence points to the existence of multiple predictors for workplace aggression to occur. The meta analysis by Hershovics and colleagues (2007) across 57 empirical studies shows that individual determinants (e.g. negative affectivity, trait anger) predict workplace aggression propensity, yet the situational predictors are distinct for interpersonal mistreatment (e.g. interpersonal conflict, distributive injustice) versus for aggression that is targeted towards the organization (e.g. job dissatisfaction, procedural injustice). Skarlicki et al. (1999) found empirical proof for the “popcorn” metaphor to emphasize that situational factors are a necessary, yet not sufficient condition for an individual’s aggressive behaviour: People with high negative affectivity are more likely to retaliate when there was low distributive or interactional injustice at work, whereas no retaliation occurred for people low on negative affectivity. While the aim of this study is on third party *attributions* rather than on empirical proof for the conjunction or multi-causality of different predictors of work, it is important to

take into account a possible fundamental attribution error when judging interpersonal aggression from an observer perspective. While observers people might indeed discern certain (external, “situational”) factors as enabling cause and or predicting the individual’s propensity to aggress, they might nevertheless be inclined to focus on person-related factors and motives (e.g. provocation by target, traits of perpetrators) in their attributions of *blame*.

Observers’ multi-blame attributions for workplace mistreatment and the discounting of blame

Observers, in their role as third parties, mostly see instances of acute and overt aggressive acts rather than are able to observe long-term, i.e. chronic aggression (Barling, 2007). An aggressive act is then to be considered a trigger event (or a series of trigger events) for a search for underlying causes. It may represent a disconfirmation of an expectation of how one should behave at work, or the outcome of the aggression might have negative and relevant implications and thus leads employees to start a causal search for why the event occurred (Brees et al., 2013, see Weiner, 1985). As pointed out in the introduction, observers may focus on one or different cues for their causal attributions including the behaviour itself, the actors involved in the behaviour, the outcome of the behaviour and other external contextual stimuli. Moreover, while the perceived cause of a behaviour or outcome is decisive for attributions of blame (moral responsibility), the perceived cause and (moral) responsibility might not necessarily concur (Shaver, 1985).

Importantly, aggressing against co-workers is a behavioural response to specific circumstances, i.e. it is considered an intentional act (often presumably with the aim to hurt a target) rather than an arbitrary act or an act with accidental harm (Brees et al., 2013; see Anderson and Bushman, 2002). However, from an observer standpoint, the intent to harm a target is more ambiguous, and might even be challenged. In order to make an internal attribution of cause *and* blame, judgments of intent (foreseeability, lack of coercion) and controllability of the behaviour (wilful aggression rather than a reflex) need to be (implicitly) made (Mantler et al., 2003).

As indicated in the introduction, observers’ causal attributions about (ambiguous) workplace mistreatment might lead to dominant person-related attributions where external blame is discounted in the presence of a possible internal cause. At the same time, observer might be unable to make causal inference or might only make a moral judgement about the behaviour, but not the person, i.e. the observer might refrain from attributions of moral responsibility

(Malle et al., 2014). However, observers' attributions may also involve more complex and potentially conjunctive inferences about the trigger event, the perpetrator's motives (e.g. retaliation to a provocation) and the target's harm before they assign blame. A recent study by Zedlacher and Snowden (2023) suggests in workplace bullying complaints by targets, third parties also make multi- or conjunctive attributions in addition to single directed attributions of causes and blame.

Multi-blaming might take into account various factors of equal importance that might simultaneously or subsequently affect attributions of blame. For conjunctive blaming, in particular the interaction between various loci of causality need to be explored in detail, and whether the multiple causes presented are each sufficient or necessary for the other cause to occur (see McClure, 1998; Morris and Larrick, 1995).

The Empirical Study

Many mistreatment situations cannot be experimentally constructed (Sleed et al., 2002). We nevertheless found it worthwhile to study causal attributions with video scenarios in contextualized, yet standardized conditions. Video scenarios are richer than written vignettes, and are potentially leading to more complex or conjunctive attributions of blame than a written vignette, where respondents often tend to focus on the target's behavior and blame (Sleed et al., 2002). Also, external validity of findings via video scenario results could be higher than the attributions made from a mere written description of a workplace mistreatment. However, the internal validity might be at risk, given the potential biases occurring from contextual descriptions and actor features as well as potential (gender) biases towards "perpetrator" and "targets". Hence, both situational noise, but also individual differences between actors, their acting of "aggression" and gender effects have to be taken into account.

Therefore, eight professional actors (four male and four female) in a comparable age range (37-48 years) were hired. All of the actors went through casting and pre-tests where they enacted different levels and expressions of "anger" to ensure a comparable level of attractiveness and likeability, perceived competence as well as skills in enacting different types of anger levels. During the shoot in Spring 2021, all actors were dressed in similar blue or grey blouses and shirts, decent shoes and black trousers or jeans ("business casual"). All scenarios were shot at the same rented office space without any other change in scenery, i.e., any noise was kept as little as possible. The author and two filmmakers directed the shooting of to make sure that the form and extent of anger and harm enacted was standardized as much as possible across all

actors. The filmmakers edited and cut the final actor/actress combinations. Camera focus and perspective were standardized throughout, and perpetrator/target clips were cut and re-combined together, so that all scenes by one actor/actress could be combined with other actors/actresses. This also ensured standardization as the aggression and target's reaction displayed by each actor was consistent across all respective combinations. In addition, all combinations included brief joint shoots by the respective actors of the scenario to ensure that participants saw both actors together in interaction at least once. The plot for each scenario was developed by the author and a research assistant, and tested and adapted in various test rounds with diverse respondents and other researchers from the workplace bullying field to make them easily understandable and brief, but containing all relevant information and ambiguous/different potential situational or individual causes and blame. The scenario lasted approx. 1.30 minutes and was preceded as well accompanied by additional written information.

In the experiments both perpetrator and target gender were manipulated as the study of gender biases in attributions for intent and controllability of aggression was a distinct focus of the study (not presented here). Every actor/actress who occupied a perpetrator role, also occupied at least once a target role in each scenario to account for possible actor and gender differences. In total there were 16 different version of actor and gender (perpetrator/target combination) in each scenario (see table 1). It is important to note that the respective clips were not shot 16 times, but each actor's clips were cut and combined with other actor's clips to ensure standardization across the different combinations.

Table 1: Research design of standardized video clips with four perpetrator:target gender combinations

Scenario 1: Angry Insult		Scenario 1: Angry Insult	
Perpetrator Gender	Target gender	Perpetrator Actor	Target Actor
Male	Male	A	B
		B	A
		C	D
		D	C
Female	Male	F	B
		E	A
		G	D
		H	C
Male	Female	A	F
		B	E
		C	H

		D	G
Female	Female	E	H
		F	G
		G	F
		H	E

Legend: A-D signify male actors, F-H females

Scenario details

Before the introductory clip, respondents received the information that the subsequent episode occurs between co-workers employed in an Austrian company. Without giving details about company purpose and context, the respondents were also presented the same possible situational attributions of blame in written form: The company suffers from delivery problems with their own suppliers lately. As a result, customers are putting pressure on the perpetrator (as the one person being in direct contact with the customer). Consistent behaviour and prior interactions between target and perpetrator were found to be important factors for attributions of blame both in the literature and in the pre-tests. Hence, the target and perpetrator were described as having loose work relationships without any severe conflicts in the past. Both roles had typical “average” Austrian names for average old workforce members. *Christian/e* receives a customer mail with an urgent demand for a sales list (the customer warns about changing the supplier). *Christian/e* forwards the mail to his/her colleague *Martin/e* at night and asks to have the final list ready first thing in the morning. However, *Martin/a* does not send any list in the morning. When *Christian/e* enters the office and asks *Martin/a* about the list, *Martin/a* answers that s/he needs to finalize another presentation first, which makes *Christian/e* become increasingly angry, and finally insults *Martin/a* (starting with “Are you failing at everything?!”) before leaving the room. The final camera shot is at *Martin/a* with a hurt face

The 16 standardized videos are accessible here:
https://drive.google.com/drive/folders/1eIGLfRqusB3T3SFODYxr_DMuYZ7w8lKl?usp=sharingW

Open-End questions: We posed the exploratory questions outlined below. The question 1 aimed to focus observers’ responses to the end of the video clip, where the perpetrator insulted the target. In addition, through the question we made sure that respondents focus on reasoning the aggressive behaviour by the perpetrator rather than other content in the video.

Open-ended question 1:

In your opinion, why has ChristianE talked like this with Martina at the end of the video lip? Please describe in detail the cause(s) for Christian's behavior at the end of the video (if you have not watched the video till the end, please watch it again).

Open-ended question 2:

Imagine you were a co-worker of both, and you find yourself a bystander to the situation in the office. How would you react?

Final sample

The clips were distributed with the support of a research institute among Austrian workforce members in Fall 2021. In total 999 respondents responded to two video clips exhibiting “direct anger” as well as “social exclusion”. In this study, we only present the preliminary findings on open ended-question for causal attributions for the “direct anger” scenario. 44.8 percent of respondents identified as male, 55 percent identified as female, and 0.2 percent identified as diverse. Age groups between 20 and 60 years were relatively evenly distributed among workforce members. 6.5 percent of 397 respondents were 60 years or older, and around 0.7 percent younger than 20 years old. Four percent of respondents had only compulsory education completed, 39 percent had an apprenticeship or medium level school degree as the highest degree, 25.6 percent of respondents had a high school level degree, and 30.7 percent a university or other tertiary education degree. 29 percent of respondents held either a top or a middle management position. The industry with the highest share of respondents were health and educational sector (approximately ten percent of respondents came from the health and the educational sector, respectively).

After the scenario, we asked questions related to the content of the scenario and the aggression to ensure that respondents had watched all videos. For the scenario, respondents had to confirm that who made an angry remark to whom. Those respondents who were not able to answer the question correctly were removed from the study. The final sample was 768 respondents.

Data analysis

A content analysis approach of summarization in the tradition of Mayring (2000) was applied. The aim of a content analysis of summarization is to extract the main and dominant themes across different cases via first paraphrasing the content, and then building higher categories and subcategories for each extracted theme via an iterative process. With the help from a second coder (research assistant) the author content-analyzed all answers deductively-inductively in

N-vivo: Each answer was paraphrased and then preliminarily coded into a so-called “node”. We first built nodes in alignment with the aggression sources as put forward in various aggression models (personal, interactional/provocation) and prior studies on conjunctive blame in the mistreatment context (Zedlacher & Snowden, 2023; Neuman & Baron, 1998). Anchor examples/codes help defining inclusion and exclusion criteria for a node (category). However, the categories might be re-labelled, deleted or shifted with new codes emerging from additional data. Then the nodes were extended or adapted continuously based on the answers provided. In addition, sub-nodes as “children” were built for further specification of the direction of cause or blame, and whether the cause or blame was a single concrete unit or occurring as conjunction or multi-blaming. Table 2 provides an overview of all causal attributions received from respondents via the open-ended question 1. As will be explained further below, the single attributions often are made while referring to the situation, i.e. might involve an internal cause, but do not necessarily involve a dispositional blame attribution. Moreover, some respondents were not able to assign a cause or blame when watching the video clip, but gave mere explanations of what happened in the video. As indicated with the frequency of each attribution pattern, single attributions involving blame prevail, but conjunctive and multi-blame causal attributions occurred as well.

Table 2: Overview on type and frequency of (causal) attributions

Main attributions of causes or blame	Frequency
perpetrator and target relationship or disposition blamed	24
only explanation without any attribution	94
gender-related causes attributed	11
undecided between multiple causes	10
Difficulty to make attributions or attribution not clear	59
<i>not clear or no cause provided</i>	36
<i>Observer unable to find a cause</i>	23
Target related attributions	103
<i>Causal attribution in target behavior without blame</i>	6
<i>single target-blaming</i>	97
Target is blamed for being slow and unreactive	80
Target provoked the aggression	10
consistent and repeated behavior of the target	7
Perpetrator related attributions	165
<i>impatience, frustration and impolite in the situation</i>	149
only behavior judged as unacceptable or impolite	3
<i>Perpetrator's disposition is egoistic and mean</i>	11

<i>bad day or thoughtless behavior</i>	5
Situation caused the aggression (single)	237
Multi or conjunctive attributions	142
<i>External stress as main factor, AND/ BUT internal attributions or lack of coping blamed</i>	77
<i>External stress AND / OR target's reaction blamed</i>	65

Preliminary results

Each category will be presented in detail below. In this preliminary study, the findings of the content analysis to question 1 are provided briefly and without a distinct analysis of gender effects on attributions of causes and blame.

Perpetrator-related attributions:

Many participants made attributions involving potential causes for the perpetrator's behavior in "internal" causes rather than in causes that stem primarily from the context, the target or the relationship between the perpetrator and the target. The majority of respondents in this category made attributions about the perpetrator being overwhelmed and frustrated or lacking patience to understand that the colleague needs to finish the presentation first. Hence, while the internal attribution of cause prevail in this category and make the perpetrator also bear the (moral) responsibility), the difficult situation with the customer or the colleague nevertheless explains the perpetrator aggression, yet without discounting blame from the perpetrator. For example, respondent 176 makes the following causal attribution (translated by the author): *"Because he is impatient. He was put off, but that is not enough for him. Even though the mail was sent in the night, he expects an answer in the very morning."*

Few respondents solely made moral judgements about the behavior (*"behavior is unacceptable"*) while showing understanding for the overall situation. A minority of participants in the category of perpetrator-related attributions make pure dispositional attributions about the perpetrator from the video clip (e.g., that the perpetrator is incompetent, egoistic or unfriendly). Most of these "dispositional" attribution come with a situation-specific explanation. For example, respondent 53 gives a variety of internal causes why the perpetrator has aggressed against the target: *"Impatience, own incompetence, making the other person "smaller" (humiliating) to feel better, stress, "delegate" blame."* Very rarely are perpetrator-related attributions made which excuse the perpetrator behavior as being uncontrollable or as arising from an exceptional bad day. If these attributions about thoughtlessness are made, they

mostly are made via a reference to the existing stress or the target's lack of response. One of the few examples is made by ID 685: *"He is annoyed and tense and is under pressure because of the potential loss through a costumer. Maybe in addition he also has a bad day."*

Target-related attributions:

There are frequent, yet fewer attributions which consider the the target's disposition or the target's behavior and reaction as the central cause of the perpetrator's aggression. Single target-caused attributions are mostly equivalent with blaming the target for the perpetrator's behavior. Many accounts are made with respect to the target being slow, incompetent and impolite in answering to the mail and customer needs. For example, respondent 605 makes the following attribution of cause and blame: *"Because Martin works too slowly and does not respond"*. Few accounts also explain the perpetrator's behavior as a direct reaction to the target's (purposeful) provocative behavior, as the following example by respondent 34 shows: *"Because Martin tries to put her off. He does tell her that he will send her [the file]but does not apologize, that it takes longer"*. A minority of respondents also attributes consistency to the target's behavior, i.e. they assume that the target has shown the same behavior in the past, thus excusing the perpetrator's behavior towards them. Only few respondents make a causal attribution involving the target without assignment blame.

Situation-caused attributions:

The majority of respondents views the stressful situation and/or the potential loss of the customer as the underlying and single cause for the perpetrator's behavior. Many of the accounts are single causal attributions (e.g. *"He was stressed because the customer threatened to quit"*, *"stress"*). Some of these situation-caused attribution explain that the perpetrator is overwhelmed because of the stress without blaming the perpetrator; i.e. here the situational causes have been the primary cue for explaining the perpetrator's behavior. This is different to the category on perpetrator-related attributions where mainly internal attributions are made, which can then be explained with the situation ("overwhelmed"). However, it is important to further analyze the effect of these patterns for helping intentions and intervention.

Multi- or conjunctive attributions between external and internal locus of causality:

We found instances where the stress and customer pressure was a necessary condition for the perpetrator behavior to occur (lack of adequate coping in stressful situations). In about half of

these explicit “multi-blaming” instances the external stimulus (costumer pressure) explained the perpetrator behavior and his/her lack of coping in the situation. In contrast to the perpetrator-related internal attributions that had references to the stressful situation, here the external stress was an explicit and necessary condition for the perpetrator blaming. The remaining conjunctive attributions involving external attributions were including the target’s reaction, i.e. both the stress and the provocation by the target explained (and mostly excused) the perpetrator behavior.

No assignment of causes / undecided between multiple causes /relational attributions

Many respondents made explicit that they were unable to make sense of causes in the story. Others only delivered explanations/descriptions of the story content without assigning cause or blame, or submitted an explanation that was not able to be coded. Pure relational attributions have been rarely made. Rather, the dispositions of the perpetrator and the target were seen as to contribute to the situation, which is different from blaming the relationship between the parties.

Discussion and outlook on further analyses

The preliminary analysis of answers to open ended questions about the possible reasons for workplace mistreatment in a video clip corroborate earlier findings that third parties interpret ambiguous accounts in very distinct and diverse ways (Zedlacher & Snowden, 2023). The aim of this study was not to find what affects the diverse attributions of causes and blame, but to investigate the causal structure of the qualitative answers.

We found that locus of causality in the perpetrator(’s behaviour) can be both rationalized/discounted, but also explained and augmented via external causes (customer pressure and stress). Hence, pure internal attributions are common, but are often made with reference to the situation (e.g. overwhelmed, nervous etc.). This makes discounting and rationalization of misconduct and aggression likely in organizational practice.

Conjunctive blaming is less common, and here rather than a perpetrator’s disposition, the responsibility for coping inadequately with the external pressure is mentioned. It has been known from other studies in the field that targets are often blamed for the continuation of the mistreatment, rather than for a disposition (see the discussion of onset and offset responsibility and “continuation responsibility”; e.g. Mulder et al., 2015). A more in-depth analysis of

findings and further research will shed light on how discounting and conjunctive blame patterns occur for workplace mistreatment, and whether gender biases occur in the perceived locus of causality and moral responsibility.

Moreover, target-blaming often occurred as a single internal attribution or provocation of the perpetrator. It is important to take into account how this might play out on helping intentions or lack of intervention by bystanders.

It is important to mention limitations of the study. In this preliminary study question 2 has not been analyzed, and potential gender effects have not been taken into account yet. One specific type of workplace mistreatment and direct aggression has been analyzed with specific internal and external causes as cues in the videos. Hence, the extracted attributional patterns are generalizable only to some extent. However, the primary aim of the study was to explore the existence of multi and conjunctive blaming as wells underlying dimensions of the locus of causality and their effect on bystander reactions, rather than suggesting that specific causes are more or less important in exist for any workplace mistreatment context.

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