IF IT WERE TO HAPPEN TO ME, WOULD I SEE IT COMING? HOW IDENTIFYING WITH THE VICTIM INFLUENCES THE FORESEEABILITY OF A SEXUAL AGGRESSION

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If it were to happen to me, would I see it coming? How identifying with the victim influences the foreseeability of a sexual aggression

When learning of an aggression, people think that they could have foreseen it, which may lead to victim blame. We examined how position identification with the victim may affect this feeling of foreseeability and blame. Participants read a testimony, which ended either with or without a sexual aggression. To manipulate position identification, they were then asked to answer some questions phrased either in the active or passive voice. As expected, in the passive voice condition, participants identified more with the victim's position and blamed the perpetrator more on learning of the outcome. Moreover, they judged the aggression as less foreseeable. This study sheds new light on the role of perspective-taking in the hindsight bias.

Résumé
Après avoir pris connaissance d’une agression, nous avons tendance à surestimer sa prévisibilité, ce qui peut nous pousser à blâmer la victime. L’étude présentée ici examine dans quelle mesure l’identification à la victime affecte ce sentiment rétrospectif de prévisibilité et le blâme. Deux versions d’un témoignage relatant un même enchaînement de faits ont été créées, l’une allant jusqu’à la narration de l’agression, l’autre s’arrêtant juste avant celle-ci. Il était demandé aux participants de lire l’une ou l’autre version. Ils devaient ensuite répondre à un questionnaire présenté soit à la voix passive, soit à la voix active, et ce afin de manipuler l’identification à la victime.

Key-words
Hindsight bias, blame, position identification with the victim, linguistic voice

Mots-clés
Biais de rétrospection, blâme, identification à la position de victime, voix grammaticale.

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When informed of an aggression, people try to find out what happened and whether the victim made a “mistake”. They try to judge whether the person involved could have foreseen the fatal outcome that ultimately resulted from their previous behaviors. However, they often overestimate the foreseeability of the aggression after it has already occurred (Carli, 1999; Fischhoff, 1975), because they are unable to judge the situation as if they had not known the aggression. This “hindsight bias” happens even if they are explicitly asked to ignore their outcome knowledge (Fischhoff, 1975). Such a hindsight bias on people judgments is quite unfair, as the person involved in the aggression does not have the same outcome knowledge when performing the behaviors that yielded to the outcome. It then has significant consequences for trial verdicts (Harley, 2007) as it may portray the victim as partially responsible for the outcome: couldn’t he or she assess how risky his or her behavior was?

In this paper, we consider the motivational bases of the hindsight bias, which has received far less attention than its cognitive foundations (Guilbault, Bryant, Brockway, & Posavac, 2004). We suggest that, even for observers (e.g., a third person who may indirectly learn of it through written or oral testimony), evaluating the foreseeability of social transgressions may be a function of specific motivations. We argue that the motivations of a third person would depend on the distance taken by this person
regarding the event and the actors involved and that this distance would depend on the way this person is questioned about the story (i.e., the use of the passive vs. active voice).

**The illusion of foreseeability**

The illusion of foreseeability (one manifestation of hindsight bias) involves subjective reasoning of what one might have known at the time on the basis of the previous facts (Blank, Nestler, von Collani, & Fischer, 2008). If an outcome cannot be foreseen, one cannot undertake actions to alter the course of events. The illusion may then inform one of the core motivations pursued by human beings (cf. Fiske, 2004): maintaining or enhancing one’s sense of control. For instance, the murder of a stranger may remind us of our own vulnerability (Lerner, 1997; Pyszczynski, Greenberg, & Solomon, 1997). Finding a way to protect ourselves from this fate guides our interpretation of the murder and how we will find the person responsible for it. This sense-making might lead to perceiving this transgression as foreseeable. Hence, when the aggression to be judged does not directly implicate the self, witnesses judge it from a distant observer’s perspective and tend to overestimate its foreseeability, possibly to the detriment of the victim (e.g., Blank & Peters, 2010).

**Observer-actor perspectives and linguistic voice**

Yet, in many situations, people do not necessarily judge aggressions from the external and distant perspective of an observer. Although they are not directly involved in the events, they may put themselves in the shoes of the protagonists and consider the events in this light (see Lodewijks, de Kwaadsteniet, & Nijstad, 2005; van Zomeren & Lodewijkx, 2005, 2009). Consider the example of a trial involving a sexual aggression. The victim’s lawyer may encourage the judge or jury to take the position of his client. Defense lawyers may use different linguistic strategies to achieve this goal, either in their plea or in their questioning of witnesses. In this paper, we suggest that linguistic voice (i.e., active vs. passive voice), a common device used when reporting or questioning aggression in daily life (Bohner, 2001; Henley, Miller, & Beazley, 1995) or in the legal context (Charrow &
Charrow, 1979, p. 1325; Coleman, 1997), might be strategically used to influence the distance taken with the events and people involved.

More specifically, we suggest that, when being questioned about an aggression in the passive voice, people may pay more attention to the victim’s fate than when the active voice is used, especially when they share common features with the victim. Indeed, the passive voice can be seen as presenting correct information in an “incomplete or partial way under the cover of one or more literary masks” (Ng & Bradac, 1993, p. 145). It highlights the object of the action (“the woman - the object - was aggressed by the man” - the subject) and even enables the subject or agent to be removed from the sentence (“she was aggressed”) (Platow & Brodie, 1999). The object of the action is therefore more prominent in the passive voice than in the active voice (Andre, 1974). Even if the effects of linguistic voice on blame have already been widely investigated, no study has considered how this effect might be due to the distance taken with the actor and, more precisely, how the passive voice might reduce the distance from the victim. We thus expect that linguistic voice will affect hindsight judgments through its influence on the adoption of the victim’s position (vs. the observer’s).

**Position identification with the victim and hindsight judgments**

Especially, we will examine how linguistic voice may affect how people identify with the position of the victim. Position identification with the victim differs from an altruistic form of empathy with the suffering of the victim (or in other words, from an other-concern). It consists in a detached self-concern that one could have been in the same position as the victim: “It could have happened to me as well” (see Lodewijkx et al., 2005; van Zomeren & Lodewijkx, 2005, 2009). As a consequence, instead of applying the distant causal reasoning of an observer (e.g., Blank & Peters, 2010), witnesses who identify with the victim position may also apply a defensive strategy about an event that did not involve them. This event may thus become self-relevant in so far as observers may imagine themselves in the victim’s shoes. They
should thus care for the victim’s image, because they do not want to blame this person, whom they consider to be similar to themselves (see the defensive attribution hypothesis; Montada, 1992; Shaver, 1970).

When the aggression has actually taken place, external witnesses would thus be motivated to present the outcome as unforeseeable, because saying that the event could have been predicted by the victim would suppose that he or she was responsible for the outcome, and vicariously, they would also have been responsible if such an outcome happened to them. Subjective unforeseeability may help people save face and fulfill a self-protective function for self-related events (Blank et al., 2008; Mark, Boburka, Eyssell, Cohen, & Mellor, 2003). Also, when identifying with the victim’s position, they should consider the violence as senseless (van Zomeren & Lodewijx, 2005). Perceiving risk for oneself may reinforce a need for control and anger against the transgressor. Observers would be motivated to punish the perpetrator (see prosecutor’s mind; Tetlock 2002; Tetlock et al., 2007) as they feel that they could also be victims if such injustice remains unpunished.

Note that these motivations should not come into play when participants ignore whether the aggression took place or not (i.e., foresight), as the aggression is then only presumed and the aggressor has still the “benefit of the doubt”.

**Hypotheses and overview**

We present an experiment examining whether the influence of outcome knowledge on the perceived foreseeability of an aggression and derogation may be moderated by the linguistic voice used to probe participants’ judgments and memory for the events.

Hypothesis 1: Knowing the aggression (hindsight) would lead to overestimating its foreseeability (1.1.) and the blame of the people involved (1.2.), compared to a foresight situation where no outcome was known (this is the classic hindsight bias).

Hypothesis 2: We expected that the effects subsumed under Hypothesis 1 would be moderated by the linguistic voice.
Especially, we expected that such a hindsight bias would be lower when the participants are questioned in the passive than in the active voice both on judgments of foreseeability (2.1) and on perpetrator and victim blame (2.2).

Hypothesis 3: Passive voice would lead participants to identify with the victim’s position, especially in hindsight, as outcome knowledge might remind participants of their own vulnerability. Conversely, active voice would allow participants to keep an observer distance from the victim’s fate.

Hypothesis 4: We then expected that the moderation of the outcome knowledge effect by linguistic voice on foreseeability (4.1.) and blame (4.2.) would be mediated by position identification with the victim.

Method

Materials

We used an ambiguous stimulus set that narrated an incident of sexual harassment in the workplace between two colleagues. The scenario in this experiment was inspired by research on moral and sexual harassment in Belgium (Garcia, Hacourt, & De Thomaz, 2005; Garcia, Hue, Opdebeeck, & Van Looy, 2002) and interpersonal aggression (Begany & Milburn, 2002; Carli, 1999; Cyr Carmody & Washington, 2001; McCaul, Veltum, Boyechko, & Crawford, 1990; Montada, 1992). The scenario was pre-tested to ensure that it was equally composed of harassment-consistent and-inconsistent behaviors. We randomly distributed the selected behaviors and presented them as excerpts from the testimony of a woman, Valérie, concerning her relation with a male colleague, Patrick. In line with Carli’s research (1999), this testimony was told in the first person by the woman (see the appendix). We chose an outcome that was sufficiently unexpected and extreme to produce a hindsight bias (see Pezzo, 2003). This outcome was given after the testimony and related that Patrick raped her during a meeting he had arranged with her after an employees’ party (see Appendix).
Experimental design and procedure

This experiment occurred in two stages. We first introduced the manipulation of outcome knowledge. To do so, we used a classic hypothetical design used in research on the hindsight bias (for an overview, see Hoffrage & Pohl, 2003; Pohl, 2007; Schwarz & Stahlberg, 2003). In line with this classical design, participants were asked to read the ambiguous material previously described (see Appendix). The experimental group learnt of the sexual aggression (i.e., hindsight), whereas the control group did not receive any outcome at all (i.e., foresight). At this stage, the linguistic voice of the testimony and the outcome was not manipulated. Participants were asked to read it carefully and form an impression about the two characters in the story in 10 minutes.

One week later, participants returned to complete a questionnaire. We then manipulated the linguistic voice. We introduced each question by paraphrasing it either in the passive voice (where the victim was the grammatical subject) or in the active voice (where the perpetrator was the grammatical subject). This latter manipulation was done independently of the former, resulting in $2 \times 2$ (Outcome Knowledge [hindsight, foresight] × Linguistic Voice [passive, active]) design.

Participants

Undergraduate students (39 women, 4 men$^1$) voluntarily took part in this experiment and were assigned to the conditions at random. The mean age was 21.64 years ($SD = 2.99$).

Measures

Foreseeability

To manipulate the linguistic voice, we asked first participants to judge the likelihood of several outcomes that could have occurred during the appointment, among others the sexual aggression outcome that was presented in the hindsight condition. This measure was only used to manipulate the linguistic voice.

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$^1$ The exclusion of men did not affect the significance of the results
voice before the foreseeability judgment, without forcing participants in foresight to focus on the sexual aggression only. The instruction was the following in foresight: “Below is a series of events that could have occurred during the appointment after the party. Please indicate, by using the scale provided (1 = not at all likely, 9 = extremely likely), how likely you would have found, on the basis of the information you have about Valérie and Patrick, that…”. They had then to judge the likelihood of different outcomes, which were written either in the passive voice (e.g., “Valérie is raped by Patrick during the meeting”, “Valérie is offered a promotion by Patrick”; etc.) or in the active voice (e.g., “Patrick rapes Valérie during the meeting”; “Patrick offers a promotion to Valérie”; etc.).

The instruction and events given in hindsight was similar. But in line with instructions usually used in a hypothetical design (see Pohl, 2007), we asked participants in hindsight to ignore the outcome when judging the events. This allowed us to make the outcome irrelevant for the judgments and to examine to what extent the judgments were biased by the outcome knowledge: “Below is a series of events that could have occurred during the appointment after the party. Imagine that you ignore what happened during the appointment. Please indicate, by using the scale provided (1 = not at all likely, 9 = extremely likely), how likely you would have found, on the basis of the information you have about Valérie and Patrick, that…”.

After this manipulation of the linguistic voice through the likelihood judgments, we then asked participants in all conditions to assess the foreseeability of the outcome and especially the foreseeability of the rape (see Blank & Peters, 2010): “Please indicate the extent to which you would have found the rape as foreseeable, by using the scale provided (9-point scale, from 1 “not at all foreseeable” to 9 “very much foreseeable”).

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2. This measure was only used to manipulate the linguistic voice before the foreseeability judgment and is not analyzed in the results section. This would indeed lie beyond the scope of this paper, as likelihood judgments refer to another component of hindsight bias, which is quite different from the foreseeability feeling (see Blank et al., 2008).
**Blame**

Participants in hindsight were asked to indicate the extent to which they found that Valérie and Patrick were blameful for what happened during the appointment. We first asked them to evaluate the blame of Valérie on four items as following: “Please indicate the extent to which you find that …, by using the scale provided (9-point scales, from 1 “not at all” to 9 “very much”): Valérie is responsible for what happened during the appointment (1), she had control over what happened during the appointment (2), her behaviors in the story could be approved (3) and she desired to have sex with Patrick (4)”. They then evaluated the same dimensions for the perpetrator’s blame with the same instruction.

Participants in foresight had to assess the same items of blame in the same order (victim, perpetrator). However, the instructions were slightly different, as foresight participants were not informed of the sexual aggression. We asked them to imagine that the outcome of the testimony could have been a rape. This instruction was adapted as a function of the manipulation of the linguistic voice: “Please imagine that Valérie could have been raped by Patrick during the meeting (in the passive voice, vs. “please imagine that Patrick could have raped Valérie”, in the active voice)” Please indicate the extent to which you would have found that …”. This hypothetical situation allowed us to keep the foresight as an uncertain condition. It has been indeed shown that an event that could happen and had not actually occurred is not constructed the same way as when it already occurred: It appears more distant, less probable (Trope, Liberman, & Wakslak, 2007).

When analyzing, two blame indexes were computed: for the victim (alpha = .62) and for the perpetrator (alpha = .78).

**Position identification with the victim**

In line with previous research on position identification (van Zomeren & Lodewijkx, 2005, 2009), we asked participants to evaluate to what extent they “could be victims of such sexual aggression” (on a 9-point scale, from 1 “this could never happen
to me” to 9 “this could certainly happen to me”). Like the measure of blame, we asked foresight participants to “imagine that Valérie could have been raped by Patrick during the meeting (in the passive voice, vs. “Patrick could have raped Valérie”, in the active voice)” and then to evaluate to what extent they perceived they could be victims of such sexual aggression.

Results

Foreseeability

In line with a classical hindsight bias (hypothesis 1.1.), we could expect that outcome knowledge would lead to overestimating foreseeability. This would be confirmed by a main effect of Outcome Knowledge on foreseeability. Yet, we expected that this hindsight bias would only appear in the active voice and would be reduced or reversed in the passive voice (hypothesis 2.1.). This would be verified if we observe an Outcome Knowledge × Linguistic Voice interaction. As shown in Table 1, the passive voice led participants to reduce the aggression foreseeability in hindsight by comparison with foresight, reversing the hindsight bias. The typical hindsight bias was only observed in the active voice: participants in the active voice overestimated the foreseeability in hindsight by comparison with foresight. As a result, the main effect of Outcome Knowledge was not significant, $F(1, 38) = .11, p = .74$ (contrary to hypothesis 1.1.). In line with hypothesis 2.1., only the Outcome Knowledge × Linguistic Voice interaction on foreseeability was significant, $F(1, 38) = 9.30, p = .004, \eta_p^2 = .20$. The simple effect of outcome knowledge was significant both with the active, $F(1, 38) = 4.09, p = .05$, and the passive voice, $F(1, 38) = 5.20, p = .03$.

Blame

To determine whether outcome knowledge would increase the perpetrator’s blame and reduce the victim’s blame with the passive voice (hypothesis 2.2.), a $2 \times 2 \times 2$ (Outcome Knowledge [hindsight, foresight] × Linguistic Voice [passive, active] × Target [victim, perpetrator]) repeated-measures ANOVA was computed. In general, the perpetrator ($M = 6.97, SD = .17$) was
blamed more than the victim ($M = 4.11, SD = .18$), $F(1, 38) = 97.15, p < .001, \eta_p^2 = .72$. Yet, as expected in hypothesis 2.2., only the participants in the passive voice (Table 1) increased the blame of the perpetrator and reduced it for the victim when knowing the outcome. The active voice reversed these differences. This $2 \times 2 \times 2$ interaction confirmed hypothesis 2.2., $F(1, 38) = 13.25, p = .001, \eta_p^2 = .26$. The Outcome Knowledge × Target interaction was only significant in the passive voice, $F(1, 38) = 13.73, p < .001$. As expected, outcome knowledge significantly increased the perpetrator’s blame, $F(1, 38) = 11.73, p = .002$, while it marginally reduced the victim’s, $F(1, 38) = 3.30, p = .08$. No significant interaction was found in the active voice, $F(1, 38) = .96, p = .33$.

**Position identification with the victim**

We expected that the passive voice would lead participants to identify with the victim’s position in hindsight, while active voice would allow them to keep their distance from the victim’s position (hypothesis 3). This would be confirmed by an interaction between outcome knowledge and linguistic voice. As shown in Table 1, participants who were questioned in the passive voice overestimated the risk of also being victims when learning of the aggression. Conversely, position identification for participants in the active voice condition was not affected by outcome knowledge. This Outcome Knowledge × Linguistic Voice interaction was significant, $F(1, 38) = 4.43, p = .04, \eta_p^2 = .10$ (ANOVA). The simple effect of outcome knowledge was only marginally signifi-

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<th>Passive</th>
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<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Foresight</td>
<td>Hindsight</td>
<td>Foresight</td>
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<tr>
<td>M (SD)</td>
<td>M (SD)</td>
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<tr>
<td>PIV</td>
<td>4.2 (.59)</td>
<td>5.78 (.62)</td>
<td>5.36 (.56)</td>
<td>4.5 (.54)</td>
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<tr>
<td>Foreseeability</td>
<td>5.4 (.59)</td>
<td>3.44 (.62)</td>
<td>4.09 (.56)</td>
<td>5.67 (.54)</td>
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<tr>
<td>Derogation</td>
<td></td>
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<tr>
<td>PerB</td>
<td>5.72 (.35)</td>
<td>7.81 (.37)</td>
<td>7.54 (.33)</td>
<td>6.79 (.32)</td>
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<tr>
<td>VicB</td>
<td>4.57 (.36)</td>
<td>3.47 (.38)</td>
<td>4.04 (.34)</td>
<td>4.53 (.33)</td>
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</tbody>
</table>

Note: PIV = position identification with the victim; PerB = perpetrator blame; VicB = victim blame.
cant in the passive voice, $F(1, 38) = 3.38, p = .07$, and totally disappeared in an active form, $F(1, 38) = 1.23, p = .28$.

Contrary to expectations, foreseeability was not correlated with position identification (Table 2). This absence of correlation between these two measures prevented us from observing any mediated moderation on this variable. As shown in Table 2, only the victim’s blame was marginally correlated with the outcome foreseeability: The more the participants derogated the victim, the more they judged the outcome as foreseeable. Yet, both blame measures were highly correlated with position identification.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Measures</th>
<th>PIV</th>
<th>Foreseeability</th>
<th>PerB</th>
<th>VicB</th>
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</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>PIV</td>
<td>–</td>
<td>-.09</td>
<td>.38*</td>
<td>-.34*</td>
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<tr>
<td>Foreseeability</td>
<td>–</td>
<td></td>
<td>-.14</td>
<td>.26†</td>
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<tr>
<td>PerB</td>
<td>–</td>
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<td></td>
<td>-.45**</td>
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<tr>
<td>VicB</td>
<td>–</td>
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</tbody>
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Note: PIV = position identification with the victim; PerB = perpetrator blame; VicB = victim blame. * $p < .05$; ** $p < .01$; † $p < .10$.

**Mediated moderations**

To test whether the moderation of the outcome knowledge effect by linguistic voice on blame might be mediated by position identification with the victim (hypothesis 4.2.), we performed a mediated moderation analysis in line with the procedure proposed by Muller, Judd, and Yzerbyt model (2005).

We first began with the victim’s blame. We computed three equations in which outcome knowledge was the treatment variable, linguistic voice the moderator, and victim blame as the outcome variable (Table 3). Equation 1 confirmed that the overall effect of outcome knowledge on victim blame was marginally moderated by linguistic voice (first condition for a mediated moderation). Equation 2 also showed that the effect of outcome knowledge on position identification with the victim was significantly moderated by linguistic voice. In this respect, we needed to confirm two different steps in Equation 3 in order to provide evidence of mediated moderation: (1) the moderation of the outcome
knowledge effect on blame should be reduced compared to that in Equation 1 and (2) the average effect of the mediator on blame should be significant (Muller et al., 2005, p. 856). As expected, the moderation of the outcome knowledge effect on the victim was no longer significant and the effect of the mediator became marginally significant in Equation 3. Therefore, we conclude that the residual moderation of linguistic voice on outcome knowledge is no more significant when controlling position identification with the victim and that the moderation was mediated by this position identification.

Equations 4 and 5 showed a similar mediated moderation on perpetrator blame (Table 4). In Equation 4, the moderation of the outcome effect on perpetrator blame was significant, but the residual moderation of outcome knowledge in Equation 5 became less significant. Moreover, the mediator had a marginal effect on perpetrator blame in Equation 5. Because the moderation of outcome effect by linguistic voice remained significant in Equation 5, position identification with the victim only partially mediated this moderation on the perpetrator’s blame.
This paper examined how linguistic devices, particularly linguistic voice, may affect position identification with the victim and thereby moderate hindsight bias and blame. We hypothesized that identifying with the victim’s position (with the passive voice) would lead external observers to adopt self-defense mechanisms. They would then consider the aggression as unforeseeable by the victim and increase the perpetrator’s blame. Conversely, participants questioned in the active voice would keep an observer position and would therefore present a typical hindsight bias, by judging the aggression as foreseeable, to the detriment of the victim.

First, as expected, linguistic voice moderated the effect of outcome knowledge on the illusion of foreseeability and blame. Hindsight bias was typical in the active voice and reversed in the passive one. When being questioned in the passive voice, participants judged the events as unforeseeable in hindsight, yielding to a reversed hindsight bias. They also blamed more the perpetrator and tended to blame less the victim, compared to those in foresight.

This finding bears particular significance in view of the fact that past research on the hindsight bias has relied on formulations of

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Predictors</th>
<th>Equation 4 (criterion PerB)</th>
<th>Equation 2 (criterion PIV)</th>
<th>Equation 5 (criterion PerB)</th>
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<tr>
<td></td>
<td>β</td>
<td>t</td>
<td>β</td>
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<tr>
<td>X: OK</td>
<td>.25</td>
<td>1.94†</td>
<td>.1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Mo: LV</td>
<td>.15</td>
<td>1.18</td>
<td>-.02</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>XMo: OK × LV</td>
<td>-.54</td>
<td>-4.12***</td>
<td>-.32</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Me: PIV</td>
<td>.23</td>
<td>1.72†</td>
<td>.12</td>
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<tr>
<td>MeMo: PIV × LV</td>
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</table>

Note: LV = linguistic voice; OK = outcome knowledge; PIV = position identification with the victim; VicB = victim blame; Mo = moderator variable; Me = mediator variable.

Equation 4: \[ Y = \beta_0 + \beta_1X + \beta_2Mo + \beta_3XMo + \epsilon \]
Equation 5: \[ Y = \beta_0 + \beta_1X + \beta_2Mo + \beta_3XMo + \beta_4Me + \beta_5MeMo + \epsilon \]

* p < .05; ** p < .01; *** p < .001; † p < .10.

Discussion

This paper examined how linguistic devices, particularly linguistic voice, may affect position identification with the victim and thereby moderate hindsight bias and blame. We hypothesized that identifying with the victim’s position (with the passive voice) would lead external observers to adopt self-defense mechanisms. They would then consider the aggression as unforeseeable by the victim and increase the perpetrator’s blame. Conversely, participants questioned in the active voice would keep an observer position and would therefore present a typical hindsight bias, by judging the aggression as foreseeable, to the detriment of the victim.

First, as expected, linguistic voice moderated the effect of outcome knowledge on the illusion of foreseeability and blame. Hindsight bias was typical in the active voice and reversed in the passive one. When being questioned in the passive voice, participants judged the events as unforeseeable in hindsight, yielding to a reversed hindsight bias. They also blamed more the perpetrator and tended to blame less the victim, compared to those in foresight.

This finding bears particular significance in view of the fact that past research on the hindsight bias has relied on formulations of
the outcome in the active voice only. It may therefore be necessary to qualify the assumption that the hindsight bias is an ubiquitous, almost inevitable, phenomenon, a conclusion that recent meta-analyses (e.g., Guilbault et al., 2004) have heralded. Hence, researchers on hindsight bias should be advised to pay attention to the syntactic features of the outcome description (i.e., active vs. passive voice).

Also, note that the judgments of foreseeability tended to be positively correlated to the victim’s blame. This is not surprising given that this bias has often been pointed out as being related to blame (e.g., Carli, 1999). This further encourages us to consider the hindsight bias not only as a cognitive but also as a motivational phenomenon.

Second, and unsurprisingly, the foreseeability and the attribution of blame by the participants seemed to serve the interest of the character with whom they identified. Indeed, as expected, outcome knowledge tended to remind participants of their own vulnerability when the information was presented in the passive voice only. The passive voice had a differential effect in foresight, which has never been investigated in past research on linguistic voice (as the literature has only focused on hindsight judgments; for an overview, see Platow & Brodie, 1999). In a foresight situation where no aggression is proved and established, the perpetrator still has the “benefit of the doubt”. An aggression is still hypothetical and thereby psychologically distant (Trope et al., 2007). Instead of taking the victim’s position, foresight participants therefore distance themselves from him or her. In light of this analysis, it is not surprising that the passive voice did not lead participants in foresight to derogate more the perpetrator and less the victim. Position identification is quite variable and depends on the context, by decreasing and leading to less prosocial responses towards victims when there are, for instance, opportunities to blame the victims (van Zomeren & Lodewijkx, 2005) or when the aggression is still presumed and hypothetical (like in this study).

However, the effect on position identification was only marginally significant. Three reasons might explain this reduced effect. First of all, future studies should investigate if this marginal effect
might be due to the stimulus, which was too distant from the experience of the participants to arouse enough emotional involvement (i.e., professional context and student sample). Moreover, as the linguistic voice was manipulated at the retrieval stage in the present research, it is an open question whether the effect evidenced here would have occurred or would have been stronger had the manipulations been introduced in the original material (i.e., in the encoding stage). Finally, we were mainly interested in this study in a global feeling of position identification with the victim, rather than the mean of its particular components. However, for psychometric reasons, it is generally recommended to assess a construct with multiple items. Also, we might expect stronger results when using the scale developed by van Zomeren and Lodewijks (2005, 2009).

Third, the present study revealed more generally that external witnesses, and not only those directly involved in interpersonal aggressions, may also be guided by specific motivations in their appraisal of such an aggression and display different reactions as a function of the position taken (e.g., victim’s position [passive voice]). These motivations have particular influence on witnesses of events that violate social rules (e.g., interpersonal aggressions, rape, etc.) and are of high moral relevance. In such cases, we propose that retrospective biases are not only individual cognitive errors (as previous research on the hindsight bias has generally considered), but reflect motivations serving specific social functions (Tetlock, 2002). This study showed that the nature of these functions differs as a function of the social position implicitly assumed by the judge and as a function of the linguistic voice. Hence, when identifying with the victim’s position (with the passive voice), participants tended to more exculpate the victim (i.e., defensive attribution), because blaming this person may affect their own image (see intuitive politicians; Tetlock, 2002). Moreover, they also more severely blamed the perpetrator in hindsight, possibly in order to restore a sense of justice, like intuitive prosecutors (Tetlock, 2002).

These motivations to restore justice and exculpate the victim were no more present when considering the information in the active voice. Conversely, when considering the information in the
active voice, participants judged that the aggression could have been foreseen, to the detriment of the victim. This is consistent with just world theory (Lerner, 1980, 1997) and recent results suggesting that ingroup victim (in hindsight) may be more derogated than non-victim (like in foresight), because the victim’s situation threatens the beliefs in a just world of participants (see also Aguiar, Vala, Correia, & Pereira, 2008; Correia, Vala, & Aguiar, 2007). Assuming that the world is fair would then lead to concluding that the victim could have predicted his or her fate, and would therefore mitigate the role and the responsibility of the perpetrator. Indeed, placing the burden of responsibility on the perpetrator would suggest that the victimization was unfair and would hurt people’s sense of a just world. In this respect, our results showed that the perpetrator is as responsible in hindsight as in foresight when participants are questioned in the active voice. Further research should examine how the threat to the beliefs in just world might explain such findings and the hindsight bias and investigate the relation between such a threat and position identification with the victim.

Fourth, the moderation of the outcome knowledge effect on blame by linguistic voice was mediated by position identification with the victim. In the passive voice, the outcome knowledge led participants to take the position of the victim and in turn, led them to increase the blame of the perpetrator and to decrease that of the victim. Yet, this mediation was only partial and no relation between foreseeability and position identification was found. This analysis should however be treated with caution given the relatively small sample size and low statistical power.

Besides the fact that this partial mediation might be due to stimulus, to measure or to lack of statistical power, we might also expect other mediators to be responsible for the moderation. Among others, as previously said, we might expect the threat to the belief in a just world to play a major role. It is also likely that one possible mediator could be the recall of the outcome antecedents: besides motivation, participants who strongly identify with the victim’s position still need to find elements that support a higher perpetrator’s blame and that reduce that of the victim. Moreover, position identification with the perpetrator may also
constitute a potential mediator, which might explain that the position identification with the victim did not totally mediate the moderation of the outcome knowledge effect on the perpetrator’s blame.

This research also raises the issue of gender: would we have observed the same effect with a male sample, which could be more inclined to identify with the perpetrator? It has been shown that when considering the passive voice of a male sexual aggression against female victims, men reduce the responsibilities and penalties of the perpetrator or even the perceived harm of female victims (Bohner, 2001; Henley et al., 1995; Lamb & Keon, 1995; Platow & Brodie, 1999). In those studies, the passive voice led men to exonerate the perpetrator (contrary to the present study conducted with a female sample). Future research should investigate how the passive voice may lead to different effects as a function of the participants’ gender when judging a rape. Given that rapes are frequently reported in the passive voice, the importance of this question transcends intellectual curiosity and may bear significant societal implications (see for instance, Charrow & Charrow, 1979, p. 1325; Coleman, 1997; Henley et al., 1995).

References


Appendix

Stimulus and instruction

Voici les extraits du témoignage de Valérie relatant ses relations avec un homme, Patrick. Ces extraits proviennent, en fait, d’une interview que nous avons recueillie dans le cadre d’une étude sur la perception des événements et relations professionnels entre homme et femme. Étant donné la longueur de cette interview, nous n’avons repris ici que quelques extraits. C’est pourquoi ce récit risque de vous sembler parfois très disparate. Nous vous invitons à lire attentivement ces parties du témoignage afin de vous former une impression générale sur Patrick et Valérie.

Extrait 1 : Patrick est ponctuel, j’apprécie donc sa rigueur. Il reste poli envers tous ses collègues… Mais il dupe ses collègues sur ce qu’il est.

Extrait 2 : Patrick respecte équitablement les opinions de chacun, mais je suis naïve, car lorsque j’encourage les autres à se syndiquer, il m’humilie devant les collègues. Moi, je traite mes collègues équitablement.


Extrait 4 : Patrick n’a jamais posé de questions intimes à ses collègues et justement, je n’aime pas mélangier ma vie privée et ma vie professionnelle. Mais, comme j’aime toucher les gens à qui je m’adresse, il a raconté des blagues érotiques sur moi.

Extrait 5 : Lorsqu’il mangeait des tartines à midi, j’ai complimenté Patrick, car il se passionne pour le cinéma et surtout, car il collabore avec des personnes de l’extérieur. Pour certains, je lui ai frotté la manche. En fait, je suis séductrice. Et là, il m’a fait les yeux doux.

Extrait 6 : Je m’entends bien avec l’ensemble du personnel. Patrick considère tous ses collègues de manière égale et utilise des grilles d’évaluation objectives afin de tester les compétences du personnel, mais il aime contrôler ce que je fais. Je suis collab-
oratrice et lui, de son côté, encourage les employés à faire part des difficultés qu’ils rencontrent dans leur travail.

*Extrait 7*: Comme je porte des tenues provocantes, il critique mon apparence physique. De plus, il est indiscret quant à la vie privée de ses collègues… Même si j’aime séduire, je suis quand même membre d’une association luttant contre le harcèlement au travail.

*Extrait 8*: Je suis franche, je préfère rester discrète sur ma vie privée. Patrick est compréhensif et ne juge jamais ses collègues sur la base de leur vie privée.

*Extrait 9*: Lors de la fête du personnel, je n’ai pas bu d’alcool, mais je suis partie tard. Ce soir-là, Patrick m’a fixé un rendez-vous dans son bureau.

*Outcome (only presented in hindsight)*: Lorsque je suis arrivée, il m’a violée.