

## ASSIGNMENT OF RESPONSIBILITY FOR AN ACCIDENT<sup>1</sup>

ELAINE WALSTER  
University of Minnesota

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This experiment tested the proposition that the worse the consequences of an accidental occurrence, the greater the tendency of Ss to assign responsibility for the catastrophe to some appropriate person. The experiment also tested the specific proposition that an accident victim would be assigned increasing responsibility for his accident as its severity increased. Data supported these hypotheses. There seemed to be 2 ways of judging the same behavior as more responsible for the accident when accidental consequences were severe: (a) Ss could perceive the responsible person as more careless when accidental consequences were severe; (b) Ss could perceive the responsible person's behavior correctly, but apply stricter moral standards in judging the behavior when accidental consequences were severe. Data indicated that only the 2nd method of assigning responsibility was utilized by Ss.

People have no real control over many of the things that happen to them. Cars can fail to start in the morning; students can get measles just before a final exam; air and rail accidents can kill the traveler; and floods, plagues, and hurricanes can destroy entire communities. Control over all environmental events is impossible both because techniques for preventing some accidents are unknown and because precautionary steps may be impractical considering the rarity of the occurrence and the number of variables involved. We acknowledge, then, that some kinds of accidents are bound to occur, and that these accidents could happen to anyone. And when we hear of an accident, for the most part we sympathize with the helpless victim of fate.

Often, however, if we feel the accident is a serious one and we reflect on it at some length, we begin to have vague feelings that perhaps this accident was not beyond the victim's control. For example, the thought may cross our mind that the flood victim should have had enough foresight to build his home further from the river; that the victims of political persecution should have anticipated the inevitable and emigrated before real persecution began. Disasters are also sometimes judged by observers (and by the victims themselves) to be punishment for the

victim's sinful lives (Freud, 1949; Rosenman, 1956; Takashi, 1951) or the results of their practical ineptness (Wolfenstein, 1957).

When the victim is not identified or seems blameless, we still probably have a tendency to wonder if someone could not have prevented the catastrophe. Although many disaster reports explicitly deny that victims and observers tend to blame others for disasters (Bucher, 1957), the reports themselves reveal a tremendous number of attempts to assign responsibility to *someone*. Victims and observers ask: "Did the airline officials really inspect the airplanes which crashed?" (Bucher, 1957); "Were the buildings razed in the tornado of inferior materials?" (Perry & Perry, 1959); "Would the officials have decreased disaster damage if their warning and evacuation instructions had been more forceful?" (Clifford, 1956; Wallace, 1956).

Do people commonly ask "Who is to blame?" when hearing of an accident? And if so, under what conditions is such a tendency to assign responsibility especially pronounced? We hypothesized that the tendency to try to assign responsibility to someone when we hear about an accident increases as the consequences of the accident become more serious.

We reasoned: When we hear of a person who has suffered a small loss, it is easy to feel sympathy for the sufferer, attributing his misfortune to chance and acknowledging that unpleasant things like the accident can hap-

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pen to a person through no fault of his own. As the magnitude of the misfortune increases, however, it becomes more and more unpleasant to acknowledge that "this is the kind of a thing that could happen to anyone." Such an admission implies a catastrophe of similar magnitude could happen to *you*. If we can categorize a serious accident as in some way the victim's fault, it is reassuring. We then simply need to assure ourselves that we are a different kind of person from the victim, or that we would behave differently under similar circumstances, and we feel protected from catastrophe.

But what if it is not possible to discredit the victim? Does one also gain reassurance from attributing responsibility for the catastrophe to *someone else*? Probably so. If a serious accident is seen as the consequence of an unpredictable set of circumstances, beyond *anyone's* control or anticipation, a person is forced to concede the catastrophe could happen to him. If, however, he decides that the event was a predictable, controllable one, if he decides that *someone* was responsible for the unpleasant event, he should feel somewhat more able to avert such a disaster. He can protect himself by putting people like the ones responsible away—isolating them so they cannot cause calamities, or reforming them so they will not cause them. Or, he can simply assure himself that the people in contact with himself are different or that their behavior could be controlled by him.

## METHOD

### *Experimental Design*

The following experiment was designed to test the hypothesis that the worse the consequences of an accidental event, the greater the tendency for people to assign responsibility for the accident to someone possibly responsible for the accident.<sup>2</sup> Included in

<sup>2</sup> Why have we limited ourselves to the situation where someone is *possibly* responsible for a catastrophe when our rationale indicated simply that the desire to assign responsibility to someone increased directly with the severity of the experimental consequences? It must be recognized that we do not expect the subjects to surrender all standards of judgment and habits of reasonableness in order to satisfy their desires to assign responsibility. The tendency we propose will naturally have the strongest effect when the objective evidence as to the responsibility of our stimulus person is ambiguous. If the objective evidence becomes overwhelming either that

the design is a test of the proposition that the more serious the negative consequences the victim suffers, the more we feel that *he* is in some way responsible for the punishment he received.

To test these propositions subjects were asked to rate the responsibility of a young man for an accident. He was described as having taken reasonable safety precautions to avoid the accident. The severity of consequences of the accident were beyond the man's control. One-half of the time the consequences were inconsequential (as trivial as a dented fender). One-half the time the consequences were serious (as serious as demolishing a car or injuring a person).

Four conditions were set up. Only potentially responsible person suffers: inconsequential damage, I; considerable damage, II; persons in addition to the potentially responsible person suffer: inconsequential damage, III; considerable damage, IV.

We predicted that more responsibility would be assigned to the careful young man when the consequences of the accident were considerable (Conditions II and IV) than when the consequences were inconsequential (Conditions I and III). Condition I is the control group for Condition II; Condition III is the control group for Condition IV. No comparisons between Conditions I-II and III-IV are planned. Conditions I-II and III-IV are, then, in effect, two parallel experiments—Conditions III-IV testing *generally* whether or not more responsibility is assigned to a possibly responsible person when an accidental occurrence is serious than when it is not; Conditions I-II testing *specifically* whether or not increased responsibility will be assigned to the *victim* for a severe accident, even when the victim is the *only one* who suffers any negative consequences from the accident. We anticipated subjects might feel sympathy for the young man in Condition II. In spite of this we still expected that subjects would assign him greater *responsibility* for his suffering when it was considerable than when it was inconsequential.

In this experiment we also wanted to investigate some of the techniques used in assigning responsibility to someone for an accident. There seemed to be two possible ways of finding a person at fault: The person blamed for the mishap could be perceived as more careless under some conditions than others. Subjects could perceive the blamed person's behavior identically in all conditions, but the severity of the standards by which subjects judged him could alter. Behavior which would normally be deemed acceptable could under some conditions be judged as inadequate or immoral.

### *Procedure*

Subjects were 44 women and 44 men from an introductory psychology course at the University of Minnesota.

the stimulus person is objectively responsible (or not responsible) for an accident, the subject's desire to assign responsibility can have little effect on his perception of that person's responsibility.

## ASSIGNMENT OF RESPONSIBILITY

The experimental situation was arranged so that when the subjects gave their opinions about the stimulus person they would be confident that the experimenter was accepting this information as indicative of the stimulus person's characteristics. The objective was to avoid making the subject fearful that his opinions were in some way telling the experimenter about *his* personality. In order to avoid making the subjects feel like subjects, the experimenter treated them as if they were part of the research staff. Two subjects were scheduled for each hour. The experimental room to which the subjects reported had books and tapes piled in disarray on the tables. After both subjects arrived, they were told that instead of serving as subjects in a usual experiment, they would have a chance to actually help select the *materials* and *procedures* to be used in testing a hypothesis.

A hypothetical research project was then described to the subjects as an investigation of the effect of extreme fear on a soldier's ability to make accurate evaluations of others. Previous "inconclusive" research in this area was described to the subjects and then a "research design" was explained. It was stated that soldiers would be listening to tape recordings under either fear or control conditions—that is, either a few hours before the soldiers knew they were to engage in a mock battle (fear condition) or a few hours before they were to be given a pass into town (control condition). These recordings would contain descriptions of a real person. Soldiers would then be asked to evaluate the person described and give their hunches as to how the person described would react in some situation not described on the tape. By comparing hunches with what in fact happened, soldiers' accuracy under fear-arousing conditions could be estimated.

At this point the subjects' part in the selection of research materials was explained. Subjects were told first to help in the selection of appropriate tapes. The experimenter showed the subjects how the tape recorder worked and then told the subjects she wanted each of them to listen to one of the tapes being considered and to ascertain if they had any trouble understanding what the people were talking about. When they had heard the whole thing the experimenter said she would then like them to fill out the same kind of questionnaire the soldiers would be given, expressing *their own* reactions to, and hunches about, the person described. The experimenter stated that the subjects' reactions to the tape would allow her to eliminate any tapes that were misleading, too hard, or too easy. Subjects were also asked to comment on the intelligibility of the questionnaire.

The preceding rationale was designed to encourage the subjects to be frank and open in expressing their feelings about the young man described on the tape.

Each subject still had to be assigned to an experimental condition. Random assignment was made in the following way. After demonstrating the tape recorder to the subjects ( $S_1$  and  $S_2$ ), the experimenter handed  $S_1$  one of the four tapes saying "Why don't

you get started on this tape?" The experimenter also gave him a questionnaire. The experimenter indicated that  $S_2$  could listen to one of the remaining tapes on the recorder across the hall. The experimenter took  $S_2$  to this room, gave him a tape and a questionnaire, and indicated that he should return to the experimenter's office when he was finished so they could all talk about their reactions to the tapes. Tapes were assigned in a random manner to  $S_1$  and  $S_2$ .

Tapes I-IV were for the most part identical. The boy purportedly described on all tapes was "Lennie B." First his mother described Lennie. She indicated that he was a good boy; that he had a few neighborhood problems when he was very young, but that things were fine at the present time. She then discussed her feelings about child rearing. A school craft instructor then spoke. He said Lennie was a nice, enthusiastic person. The only negative thing mentioned about the boy was that he had not finished one of his craft projects. The incomplete work was attributed to both a lack of skill and a lack of money; Lennie was described as conscientious on the work he did complete.

Then came the experimental communication. The accident was described. The description of Lennie's behavior prior to the accident was identical on all tapes. A neighbor (who spoke in a casual, unemotional voice at all times) stated:

that was late this summer. Lennie had just bought a car—it was about 6 years old or so. He and his buddy drove up to Duluth and parked at the top of this hill. Lennie's buddy said Lennie did set the handbrake, but while they were gone the car started rolling. Some camp police who checked the car later said the brake cable was pretty badly rusted and must have broken. Anyway, the car started rolling . . . .

On Tapes I and II identical possibilities were presented: Lennie might have damaged his own car either a great deal or not at all, depending upon whether or not his car was stopped against a tree stump a short way ahead.

On Tape I the car was stopped and Lennie's possession suffered no real damage.

[Tape I]: If the car had run all the way down the hill it would have crashed into a big tree that's at the bottom. But the car didn't go very far at all. . . . It rolled against an old stump that was sticking out a little way into the street and stopped. The car just got a tiny dent in the front bumper and that's all. Lennie didn't have any insurance at the time.

On Tape II the car was not stopped and thus the damage was serious.

[Tape II]: The car might have rolled to a stop against an old stump that was sticking out a little way into the street just in front of where the car was parked. Instead, the car just missed it and went rolling all the way down the hill. The car really hit this big tree that's at the bottom

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and then kind of bounced off it onto some others. The car was completely totaled; the impact bent the frame, rocked the engine off its mounts, bent the drive shaft—just completely ruined the front end. Lennie didn't have any insurance at the time.

It should be noted that on Tapes I and II Lennie's behavior is identical and so are the *possible* consequences; only the actual consequences differ.

On Tapes III and IV we introduced the possibility that someone in addition to Lennie could be hurt by the accident.

On Tape III, as on Tape I, the actual damage was inconsequential.

[Tape III]: If the car had run all the way down the hill, it would have crashed into this store that's right at the bottom, and probably hurt either a kid or the grocer that were in the store. But the car didn't go very far at all. It rolled against an old stump that was sticking out a little way into the street and stopped. The car just got a tiny dent in the front bumper and that's all. Lennie didn't have any insurance at the time.

On Tape IV, as on Tape II, the damage was tremendous:

[Tape IV]: The car might have rolled to a stop against an old stump that was sticking out a little way into the street just in front of where the car was parked. Instead, the car just missed it and went rolling all the way down the hill. The car really crashed through the window of this store that's right at the bottom. It hit a kid that was standing at the counter and the grocer. The kid was just dazed a little, but the grocer was hurt pretty badly. He was in the hospital all last year. Lennie didn't have any insurance at the time.

From this point on, the tapes were again identical. A high-school history teacher indicated that Lennie was an average student who tried to contribute to the class. Finally a neighbor spoke and explained he really did not know the boy.

After hearing one of tapes described above, the subjects expressed their opinions on the following questions:

1. Do you feel that any responsibility should be assigned to Lennie for the automobile accident?

Depending on which tape the subject received, one of the following phrases was inserted in parenthesis after the word "accident": Tapes I and III (in which his fender was dented); Tape II (in which his car was demolished); Tape IV (in which the child and the grocer were hurt). The subject could check one of four alternatives ranging from "Lennie was not at all responsible; the accident was completely beyond his control" to "Lennie was completely responsible for the accident."

How much *carelessness* the subjects attributed to Lennie was assessed in the next section of the questionnaire:

We'd like your "hunches" about several facts not supplied on the tape.

1. Lennie owned a car for five months before the accident occurred. Make as good a guess as you can whether or not he ever had his *brakes checked* during that period. (A 15-point scale was provided which ranged from 1, "I'm extremely sure he had a brake check," to 15, "I'm extremely sure he did *not* have a brake check.")

2. Lennie's friend told their neighbor that Lennie pulled the *handbrake* before parking on the hill. How convinced are you that Lennie in fact did so? (On the scale provided for this question, 1 indicated "Extremely sure he pulled the handbrake, and 15, "Extremely sure he did *not* pull the handbrake.")

3. Do you think that Lennie turned his wheels toward the curb before parking on the hill? (The subject could check one of four alternatives in answer to his question ranging from 1, "He probably turned his wheels toward the curb *as far as possible*," to 4, "He probably did *not* turn his wheels toward the curb at all.")

The *moral standards* the subject professed, and by which he presumably judged Lennie, were assessed in the third section of the questionnaire. This section was headed:

We are interested in your personal convictions in these questions.

4. How often is a person "morally responsible" for having his brakes and other safety devices checked? (The subject then had his choice of either filling in a blank stating "Every \_\_\_\_\_ months (years)" or checking a box stating "A person is *not* morally responsible for having his brakes and safety devices checked.")

Although a record was kept of the number of months the subject indicated, answers were recorded as follows: 1 was assigned to replies of "A person is *not* morally responsible." This was the most lenient standard possible. The number 2 was assigned for replies of "every 2-2½ years." The most severe standard possible ("everyday—every 2 months") was assigned a score of 6.

5. Do you feel it is "morally wrong" not to have automobile insurance? (The subjects could check one of four alternatives, ranging from 1, "A person is *not* morally responsible for having insurance," to 4, "It is extremely wrong not to have insurance.")

The last question on the questionnaire asked the subjects how much they liked Lennie.<sup>3</sup>

## RESULTS

Our primary interest is in whether or not subjects judged identical behavior on a per-

<sup>3</sup> In all conditions Lennie was rated almost identically on this filler question. (Condition means varied from 7.3 to 7.5 on a 15-point scale ranging from "Disliked him extremely much" to "Liked him extremely much.")

## ASSIGNMENT OF RESPONSIBILITY

TABLE 1  
MEAN RESPONSIBILITY ASSIGNED FOR THE ACCIDENT AND THE TECHNIQUES FOR ASSIGNING RESPONSIBILITY BY CONDITION

	Only driver punished		Others also punished	
	Mild consequences	Severe consequences	Mild consequences	Severe consequences
Amount of responsibility assigned <sup>a</sup>	2.5	3.0	2.6	3.2
Subjects' "personal convictions" <sup>b</sup>				
Frequency of brake checks	3.2	3.7	3.8	4.2
Responsibility for insurance	2.4	2.5	2.5	3.1
Strictness index <sup>c</sup>	(5.5)	(6.2)	(6.5)	(7.3)
Carelessness imputed to driver <sup>d</sup>				
Failure to check brakes	10.5	11.1	11.9	10.9
Failure to pull handbrake	4.1	4.7	5.1	4.8
Failure to turn wheels	3.5	3.7	3.5	3.6
Carelessness index	(25.0)	(26.9)	(27.4)	(26.6)

<sup>a</sup> The higher the mean, the more responsibility assigned to Lennie.  
<sup>b</sup> The higher the mean, the stricter the moral code professed by subjects.  
<sup>c</sup> A strictness index could be computed for only 72 of the 88 subjects since only 72 students answered both the brake and insurance questions. (The brake check question was rewritten after the first 16 subjects experienced difficulty in answering it.)  
<sup>d</sup> The higher the mean, the more careless Lennie is rated.

son's part as more responsible for an accident when the accident was severe than when the accident was inconsequential. The results presented in Table 1 indicate clearly that judgments are dependent upon the severity of consequences.

When told that Lennie *might* have demolished his car or *might* have hit the grocery store and the store patrons if he had not been barely stopped by the tree stump, subjects rated his responsibility for the accident at 2.5 and 2.6, respectively. They felt Lennie was somewhere between "only slightly responsible" and "somewhat responsible" for the accident, on the average. When he was not lucky enough to stop against the stump the responsibility assigned was 3.0 if *his car* was demolished and 3.2 if the grocer was hit and the grocer's store damaged. On the average, Lennie is judged slightly more than "somewhat responsible" but less than "very much responsible" for the accident when the consequences were severe.

Significantly more responsibility is assigned to Lennie for the severe accidents than for mild ones ( $F = 8.73$ ,  $df = 1/84$ ,  $p < .01$ ). This is true even when the accidents in which Lennie alone suffers and the accidents in which others suffer also are analyzed separately. More responsibility is assigned to Lennie by subjects hearing Tape II than by those hearing Tape I ( $t = 2.2$ ,  $p < .05$ , two-

tailed), and more by subjects hearing Tape IV than by those hearing Tape III ( $t = p < .06$ , two-tailed).

When the above data are analyzed in greater detail, a peculiar finding appears. Data from men and women subjects were tabulated separately. Early in the experiment it became apparent that although the men judged Lennie as considerably more responsible when he hit the grocer ( $M = 3.4$ ) than when he *might* have done so ( $M = 2.5$ ), women rated him equally responsible in Conditions III and IV ( $M = 3.0$ ). Sex of subject seemed to interact with the severity of accident in Conditions III and IV in determining the amount of responsibility assigned to Lennie ( $F = 4.25$ ,  $df = 1, 21$ ,  $p < .05$ ).

In addition, this means that *women* judged Lennie significantly more responsible for the accident in which he dented his fender if the neighbor mentioned the possibility that *he could have* hit the grocer and a car ( $M = 3.0$ ) than if the neighbor only mentioned the possibility that Lennie might have destroyed his own car ( $M = 2.4$ ,  $t = 4.39$ ,  $df = 21$ ,  $p < .001$ ). Men did not assign more responsibility to Lennie as the *possible* consequences of the accident were increased. Women assign so much responsibility to Lennie when he could have hit a person and

more responsibility to him when he in fact *does* hit someone is not clear.

We can now begin to investigate how subjects go about assigning additional responsibility to "someone" when an accident is severe.

1. Do subjects perceive the responsible person as more careless if the accident is severe than they would if consequences were inconsequential?

A total carelessness measure was computed by adding together the three carelessness scores after variances of the three scores had been equalized. From an examination of Table 1 it does not seem that there is a general tendency to impute greater carelessness to Lennie in Conditions II and IV than in I and II— $F = 1.06$ ,  $df = 1/84$ , and this is not significant.

When accidental consequences are severe (Conditions II and IV), Lennie is judged more responsible for the accident. And yet, it does not seem that this increased responsibility is a result of the imputation of greater carelessness to him.

2. Do subjects judge the same behavior more strictly when the behavior results in serious consequences?

Question 4<sup>4</sup> asked: "How often is a person 'morally responsible' for having his brakes and other safety devices checked?" Subjects judging Lennie in the severe accident conditions indicated that a person was *morally* obligated to have a safety check much more often than did other subjects. Subjects judging Lennie in Condition I (when he might have demolished his car) indicated that a person was only obligated to have a safety check every 11.3 months ( $M$  on derived index = 3.2). When Lennie's car was demolished, however, subjects judged his behavior by more severe personal standards—they felt a person was morally obligated to have a brake check every 9.0 months ( $M = 3.7$ ). Similarly, the subjects rating Lennie's behavior from Tape III required a safety check every 7.8 months ( $M = 3.8$ ). In Condition IV, when Lennie's car actually

hit others, subjects' standards became the most severe; the subjects felt one was obligated to have his car checked every 7.1 months ( $M = 4.2$ ). Thus, the "moral convictions" subjects profess on Question 4 are stricter under severe than under mild accident conditions ( $F = 4.07$ ,  $df = 1/68$ ,  $p < .05$ ). A slightly stronger moral censure was applied to people who did not own automobile insurance by those subjects judging Lennie under severe accident conditions than by subjects in Conditions I and III, but these differences were nonsignificant.

An index of "strictness of the subjects' standards" was computed by adding together subjects' scores on Questions 4 and 5. As was predicted, the standards subjects profess (and the standards by which they presumably judge Lennie) increase in strictness as the "accidental" consequences become more severe ( $F = 5.62$ ,  $df = 1/68$ ,  $p < .05$ ).

#### DISCUSSION AND SUMMARY

How much support, then, is there for the hypothesis that the tendency to assign responsibility to someone possibly responsible for an accident increases as the consequences of the accident become more serious? This proposition was clearly supported by our data. Lennie was judged as more responsible for the accident when consequences were severe than when consequences were trivial.

It seems, too, that the convictions subjects profess and the standards they presumably use in judging Lennie are significantly more severe when accidental consequences are serious. In all conditions, Lennie was *described* as having taken identical safety precautions. There is no indication that subjects *perceived* Lennie as having taken fewer safety precautions in one condition than in another. But, the convictions subjects expressed concerning how careful one should be were harsher when accidental consequences were serious than when consequences were mild.

In the introduction it was suggested that it might even be reassuring to assign responsibility for a severe accident to someone who was not a victim of the catastrophe. To test this suggestion that a nonvictim will be increasingly blamed for increasingly severe accidents, a third set of conditions would have

<sup>4</sup> Data from only 72 subjects are available. The "moral responsibility for having brakes checked" question was rewritten after the first 16 subjects reported difficulty in answering the original question.

to be run. Conditions III-IV are *not* a clear test of this suggestion. If it could be demonstrated that the only victim subjects perceived in Condition IV was the shopkeeper, then the increased responsibility assigned to Lennie in Condition IV would be a demonstration of this phenomenon. Unfortunately, however, Lennie was also a minor victim in Condition IV. (His car must have been damaged in the accident, too.) Thus, there is no way to clearly determine whether increased responsibility will be assigned to a nonvictim for a serious accident *from the data available*.

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\* Asterisk indicates author for whom the address is supplied.