The effect of passive voice on perceived responsibility of the perpetrator

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The effect of passive voice on perceived responsibility of the perpetrator

Abstract
The present study looks at the possible effect of passive voice use in verbal (as opposed to written) descriptions of crimes and its effect on potential jury members’ attributions of blame (and ultimately guilt and sentencing). Based on the results of previous research, it was hypothesized that for passive voice scenarios, less blame would be attributed to the perpetrator and a more lenient sentence would be prescribed, but the outcome of the current study did not support these hypotheses. However, results contrary to hypothesized outcome were obtained in that participants exposed to the passive voice version of the non-violent crime scenario (an identity theft scenario) assigned slightly harsher sentences (on average of 13.74 years longer) instead of more lenient sentences to the hypothetical perpetrator. Although still non-significant, these results may indicate some underlying social attitudes or beliefs about identity theft that warrant further investigation.

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THE EFFECT OF PASSIVE VOICE ON PERCEIVED RESPONSIBILITY OF THE PERPETRATOR

A THESIS

SUBMITTED TO THE FACULTY

OF

SCHOOL OF PROFESSIONAL PSYCHOLOGY

PACIFIC UNIVERSITY

HILLSBORO, OREGON

BY

PERA PHANICHAYAKARN

IN PARTIAL FULFILLMENT OF THE REQUIREMENTS FOR THE DEGREE OF

MASTER OF SCIENCE IN CLINICAL PSYCHOLOGY

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ABSTRACT

The present study looks at the possible effect of passive voice use in verbal (as opposed to written) descriptions of crimes and its effect on potential jury members’ attributions of blame (and ultimately guilt and sentencing). Based on the results of previous research, it was hypothesized that for passive voice scenarios, less blame would be attributed to the perpetrator and a more lenient sentence would be prescribed, but the outcome of the current study did not support these hypotheses. However, results contrary to hypothesized outcome were obtained in that participants exposed to the passive voice version of the non-violent crime scenario (an identity theft scenario) assigned slightly harsher sentences (on average of 13.74 years longer) instead of more lenient sentences to the hypothetical perpetrator. Although still non-significant, these results may indicate some underlying social attitudes or beliefs about identity theft that warrant further investigation.
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The Effect of Passive Voice on Perceived Responsibility of the Perpetrator

**Introduction**

Although our criminal justice system is assumed to be predicated upon fairness for both the accused and the accuser, many extraneous factors may influence the outcome of a case. With regard to sentencing, the punishment for specific crimes varies from state to state and can range from therapy to an extended prison sentence. For example, in Alabama, a conviction for second-degree rape can lead to anywhere from 2 to 20 years in prison, and a conviction for first-degree rape can result in a sentence ranging from 10 to 99 years in prison or even in a life sentence (Connecticut General Assembly Office Of Legislative Research, 2003). With such a range of potential outcomes for sentencing, it is important to consider factors (that are unrelated to the facts of a case) which may still play a role in the decision-making process of jurors or other decision makers.

One factor that may be related to decisions of guilt and the severity of a sentence that a perpetrator receives is the use of passive voice in the description of the crime scenario. According to Webster’s Online Dictionary (2011), passive voice is “the voice used to indicate that the grammatical subject of the verb is the recipient (not the source) of the action denoted by the verb.” In a sentence constructed with passive voice, the actor or perpetrator may be left out of the sentence construction, thus shifting the focus to the recipient of the action—in the case of crime scenarios, focus is shifted to the victim and away from the perpetrator (Lamb & Keon, 1995).

The purpose of the present study is to examine the effect of passive sentence construction on a potential jury member’s attribution of responsibility toward a perpetrator. Additionally, the
possibility that passive voice may ultimately affect decisions of guilt and the severity of a sentence that perpetrator receives will be examined.
In a seminal study conducted by Klenbort and Anisfeld (1973), the authors examined both the function of passive and active voice sentence constructions and the consequences of differences in markedness (defined as complexity in structure, frequency of use, and developmental period of acquisition). In this study, Klenbort and Anisfeld recruited 48 subjects (23 male and 25 female), ranging in age from 21-35. The subjects all had at least three years of college education with English as their native language. The researchers tested two hypotheses via the construction of two series of sentences. The first series (the Perspective series) was designed to test the hypothesis that, “in the passive the logical subject, assumed to be focal, will most likely be interpreted as the target of negation and denial than the logical subject” (Klenbort & Anisfeld, 1973, p. 192). The second series (the Responsibility series) was designed to test the hypothesis that, “the logical subject of the passive will more likely be interpreted as the bearer of responsibility than the logical object” (Klenbort & Anisfeld, 1973, p.192). For each of the two series, twenty active-passive sentence pairs were constructed with two choices for each pair. The alternate choice pairs for both series compared the logical subject with the logical object (direct or indirect). However, in the Perspective series, one of the choices denied the involvement of the logical subject in the sentential proposition and the alternate choice denied the involvement of the logical object in the sentential proposition. In the Responsibility series, one choice placed major casual responsibility for the sentential proposition on the logical subject and the alternative choice placed major casual responsibility for the sentential proposition on the logical object. Four packets of 20 sentences each were assembled, with each packet containing five active and five passive voice sentences from each series. Each of the four packets was presented to 12 subjects in written form, on an index card. The participants were instructed to read the sentence
on each card and to then determine which of the two following choices were most congruent with the initial sentence. Essentially, the participants were presented with active and passive voice sentences (from each of the series) and asked to choose between two alternative implications for each sentence. Although the authors found no significant results for active voice sentences, they did find that for the passive voice sentences, “the logical subject was interpreted by the subjects as the focal point of the information asserted by the sentence and as the carrier of overall responsibility for the sentential proposition.” (Klenbort & Anisfeld, 1973, p.189).

Klenbort and Anisfeld further suggested that the observed difference between the active and passive voice was attributable to, “their markedness asymmetry, the passive being marked and the active unmarked.” (1973, p. 189). Ultimately the authors concluded that, “the active offers a neutral structure for conveying information”, while the passive voice, “suggests special connotations in addition to the basic message.” (Klenbort & Anisfeld, 1973, p. 189).

In a later study, Lamb and Keon (1995) surveyed newspaper articles to examine the incidence of linguistic devices that avoided assigning responsibility to men as perpetrators and the effect of such styles of writing on the reader. First, the researchers attempted to establish whether such linguistic devices were present in newspaper articles. A computer search in the National Newspaper Index (1989-1982) was performed for articles from the New York Times, Philadelphia Inquirer, and Los Angeles Times that contained the words abusive man/husbands, abused wives/women, wife abuse, wife battering/beating, domestic violence, and rape in marriage. The study was limited to articles that discussed battering crimes within a general report. Thirty articles were selected for analysis, and the first 20 sentences of each article were coded. Two raters coded each sentence as falling into one of three categories: not about abuse, about abuse but no problems of responsibility, and about abuse with problems of responsibility.
Specific problems of responsibility were then coded as the *use of the passive voice, diffusion of responsibility, nominalization of the act, or obfuscating gender*. Of the 600 sentences examined, 71% were coded as having one of the four problems of responsibility, with an overall agreement of 93% between the two coders. Next, Lamb and Keon (1995) recruited a convenience sample of 240 respondents (120 men and 120 women; 193 White and 47 other ethnicities; mean age 27 years). Three versions of an actual newspaper article were composed. Version 1 was constructed in active voice, Version 2 was constructed in passive voice, and Version 3 was written in a style that diffused responsibility. One of the three versions was randomly assigned to participants, with the constraint that distribution to each gender was equal. Participants were then asked to read the vignette and choose one of five punishments ranging from *1 year therapy* to *10 years jail*. The authors found that younger participants selected harsher punishments when presented with the active voice paragraph than when presented with the other two versions. They also concluded that participants under 30-years-old appeared to have been influenced by passive voice to choose less severe punishments, whereas participants over 30-years-old were less likely to be influenced by the voice construction.

In other research also completed in 1995, Henley, Miller, and Beazley conducted a three-part study that examined the role of verb voice in relation to mass media and violence against women. In the first part of their study, Henley et al. performed a content analysis of newspaper articles for verb characteristics and hypothesized that for verb usage describing sexual violence against women, the ratio of passive to active voice would be greater than other verb categories. In this portion of their study, the researchers obtained full text newspaper articles from over 50 U.S. newspapers using a computerized newspaper database (Dialog Information Services/Knowledge Index News section). For every word searched, the researchers analyzed the
surrounding 30 words for verb form (passive vs. active voice, tense, etc.), and the patient and agent gender. Five verb categories of interest were selected: positive, neutral, nonviolent crime, sexual violence, and nonsexual violence. Prior to actual coding of the verbs of interest, coders were trained and practiced coding on similar data until acceptable interrater reliability was achieved. Instances of coder disagreement or ambiguity were addressed by consultation between coders and researchers. In addition, the coders were blind to the hypotheses of the research and to the year and source of the data they were coding. The results of a subsequent analysis supported their hypothesis. In particular, Henley et al. found that passive voice was a significantly more predominant construction for descriptions of male sexual and nonsexual violence. Conversely, active voice was predominant for male positive and neutral acts.

According to Henley et al. (1995, p. 69), “Among 1,501 verbs coded for voice in news stories from a large-circulation newspaper, sexual violence, as predicted, was written about more frequently in the passive than the active voice and had a passive-to-active ratio greater than those of three out of four comparison verbs”.

In the second part of their study, Henley et al. examined the possibility that the differences in frequency of usage of the verbs of Study 1 might be explained by typical semantic differential factors such as evaluation, potency, and activity. Based on prior research conducted by Osgood, Suci, and Tannenbaum (1957), Henley et al. reasoned that “the extreme negativity of such acts as rape and murder might cause writers (presumably unconsciously) to seek less immediacy through using the passive voice” (p. 71). In this case, the authors suggested that “the greater the negativity associated with the verb, the greater should be the use of the passive voice” (Henley et al., 1995, p. 71). In particular, they hypothesized that higher ratings toward the negative poles of the semantic differential scales for the verbs that were found to have higher
passive voice use in Study 1 would be found. Participants, comprised of 56 undergraduate and graduate volunteers and the acquaintance circle of a research assistant were included. The participants were asked to rank 10 words on five semantic differential scales. The 10 words included the infinitive forms of words identified in the first study (\textit{thank}, \textit{forgive}, \textit{touch}, \textit{rob}, \textit{rape}, and \textit{murder}) and four filler words that were chosen to be similar to the previous words and similarly balanced with regard to positive and negative valence (\textit{beat}, \textit{share}, \textit{steal}, and \textit{rescue}). The semantic differential scales included five bipolar adjective pairs: good/bad, active/passive, strong/weak, pleasant/unpleasant, and ethical/unethical. Booklets were prepared in which one of the ten words was placed at the top of each rating page and each of the five adjective pairs was placed on a separate line below, with each adjective from the pair serving as one pole of its scale. The participant was then asked to consider the word at the top of the page and mark a spot (from 1 to 7) along a sectioned line between each adjective pair. Correlational analysis was then conducted on passive-to-active voice ratios from Study 1 and the individual scales of Study 2 and the various semantic differential scales. Henley et al. found that the only significant correlation with the passive-to-active voice ratios from Study 1 was with the active/passive scale. In addition, they also found that four of the five semantic differential scales (active/passive, good/bad, pleasant/unpleasant, and ethical/unethical) were significantly and highly intercorrelated. Based on these results, Henley et al. (1995, p. 72) concluded that “the more active a word’s subjective evaluation in Study 2, the greater its proportion of passive voice usage in Study 1” and further suggested that the present research does provide “support for the notion that passive voice is more likely to be used for negatively evaluated acts.” (p. 72).

In the final portion of their research (Study 3), Henley et al. examined the effects of passive voice on reader perceptions. They hypothesized that when reports of violence toward
women (rape and battering) are written in passive voice (compared to active voice), readers would: (1) attribute less harm to the victim; (2) attribute more responsibility to victim/survivor; (3) be more accepting of rape myths, interpersonal violence, and battering, and have more negative attitudes toward rape victims; and (4) that all the effects would be stronger in male than female participants. For this portion of the study, the researchers prepared eight (one paragraph long) mock news reports on rape, battering, robbery, and murder. Two versions of each report were prepared, one in active voice and one in passive voice, and each with response scales for participants’ ratings of harm and responsibility. Participants were also required to complete a composite scale measuring attitudes relevant to rape, battery, and crimes in general. This composite scale consisted of the Rape Myth Acceptance Scale (Burt, 1980), the Acceptance of Interpersonal Violence Scale (Burt, 1980), the Attitudes Toward Rape Victims Scale (Ward, 1988), and a constructed measure of attitudes toward battery, mixed with 24 filler items. A final sample of 54 participants (30 female and 24 male; 39 monolingual and 15 bilingual native English speakers) was selected from their Psychology Department’s subject pool. Each participant responded to all eight stories in a single voice (either active or passive voice), rating the harm experienced by the victim and the relative degree of victim/perpetrator responsibility after reading each story. Hypothesis 1 (less harm attributed to victims of sexual violence with passive voice use) was partially supported in that it was found to be significant for males but not females. Hypothesis 2 (less responsibility attributed to perpetrators of sexual violence with passive voice use) was also partially supported as the effect of voice was found to be significant for males but not females. Hypothesis 3 (more acceptance of traditional beliefs about sexual violence with passive voice use) was supported in that more sexual violence accepting attitudes resulted from exposure to passive voice rather than active voice. Hypothesis 4 (all the effects
would be stronger in male than female participants) was supported in Hypotheses 1 and 2, but not in Hypothesis 3, as both male and female participants were affected by passive voice use to adopt more traditional attitudes toward violence against women.

Another study, conducted by Bohner in 2001, tested the hypothesis that in scenarios of sexual violence, passive voice as well as other distancing text features could modify attributions of responsibility. Bohner recruited 67 students (29 women and 38 men, median age 23 years) at a German university for a study on media effects. Participants were randomly assigned to view one of two silent video segments depicting a rape scene. The video segments differed in the number of details that could be interpreted in terms of prevailing myths about rape. Immediately after viewing the assigned video segment, participants were asked to retell in writing the scene they just viewed and to generate a concise headline for their report. The written material was then analyzed in terms of the acting person (victim vs. perpetrator), the type of action (rape vs. anything before or after the rape), and grammatical voice (active vs. passive). The headlines produced by participants were analyzed for degree of distancing and obscuring of agency. Participants were also asked to answer a questionnaire pertaining to the rape scene about their judgments of responsibility and severity. Participants’ rape myth acceptance was assessed by using a German adaptation of Costin’s R-scale (1985). Bohner found that passive voice was more frequently used to describe the rape itself as opposed to other actions depicted in the scenes. He also found that when details of the rape were easily interpretable in terms of rape myths, the use of passive voice correlated positively with rape-myth acceptance and perceived responsibility of the victim and negatively with perceived responsibility of the perpetrator. Ultimately, Bohner found that in scenarios of sexual violence, attributions of responsibility can indeed be modified by the use of passive voice and other distancing features.
In a more recent study by Frazer and Miller (2009), narratives of female violence against men were used to analyze the impact of perpetrator gender on verb voice. In the first portion of their research, the authors searched the Boston Globe for articles published between 2003 and 2004 about severe domestic violence. Two hundred articles were selected for analysis and coding was completed by two trained coders. Coding consisted of first identifying each verb that referred directly to the violent act that was the subject of the article and then coding that verb for active or passive voice, gender of the perpetrator, and gender of the victim. This analysis showed a trend toward increased use of the passive voice when men were perpetrators and women were victims. In the second half of their study, the researchers recruited 86 Northern Arizona University undergraduate students enrolled in a psychology course as participants (age range 18-25 years, \( M = 18.52 \)). Participants were presented with an information grid that provided data about the event, victim (name, gender, and age), perpetrator (name, gender, and age), weapon, date, and place where the event occurred. The materials were counterbalanced so that, for the target event, half of the grids specified a male victim and female perpetrator and the other half specified a female victim and male perpetrator. In addition to completing a brief demographic questionnaire, the participants were asked to write two 50- to 100-word stories that incorporated the information shown on each half of the grid. Similar to the first portion of their study, the researchers found an increased frequency in the use of passive voice when perpetrators were male and concluded that the media tendency to write about male-on-female violence appeared to extend to non-media writers as well.

Early research suggests that, with regard to sentence composition, the use of active voice is a more neutral method for conveying information than the passive. According to that research, the passive voice may modify the focal point of the sentence, as well as the carrier of
responsibility in that sentence and, “suggests special connotations in addition to the basic message.” (Klenbort & Anisfeld, 1973, p.189) Consequently, more recent studies indicate that a media bias to write about male-on-female violence in the passive voice exists and that this bias may extend to non-media writers as well. The studies reviewed further show that active or passive voice sentence construction may have an effect on attributions of responsibility and ultimately have an effect on the severity of sentencing a perpetrator may receive. For example, Lamb and Keon (1995) found that younger participants (under 30-years-old) were influenced by passive voice sentence construction to choose less severe punishments. Prior research also indicates that passive voice use in descriptions of violence against women and other news reports do play a role in the reader’s perception of blame; however, researchers have not directly addressed the role of this linguistic masking device in relation to other crimes and the jury decision making process.
The Present Study

Overall, a review of the current literature shows that much of the prior research has only addressed male-on-female violence and has further only examined the effect of sentence voice for written scenarios. Consequently, the goal of the present research is to examine the role of passive voice use in verbal (as opposed to written) descriptions of crimes and its effect on potential jury members’ attributions of blame (and ultimately guilt and sentencing). Unlike prior research, the present study will focus on non-gendered crimes or crimes other than male-on-female violence, to better evaluate the effect of sentence voice alone. In addition the effect of sentence voice on both violent and non-violent crimes will be examined. Based on the results of previous research, it is hypothesized that for passive voice scenarios, less blame will be attributed to the perpetrator and a more lenient sentence will be prescribed.
Methods

Participants

A total of 48 undergraduate students from a Pacific Northwest University were recruited for this study. Of those 48, ten were eliminated from the final sample due to incomplete responses. As a result, the final sample consisted of 38 individuals (23 women, 14 men, $M$ age = 19 years, age range: 18–21 years). The students received credit for participating as a partial requirement of their course work.

Materials

The study materials consisted of a brief demographic questionnaire (Appendix B), a brief written description of the audio recording that they will subsequently listen to and instructions on how to proceed (Appendix C), a total of eight different audio recordings of hypothetical crime scenarios (Appendix D), a questionnaire regarding their opinions of each crime scenario (Appendix E), and a brief questionnaire regarding their level of familiarity with each crime scenario and the number of times they chose to listen to each audio recording (Appendix F).

The brief demographic questionnaire consisted of information about the participants’ age, gender, race, ethnicity, level of education, and relationship status. The crime scenarios consisted of two overarching types of crimes, a non-violent crime scenario and a violent crime scenario. The non-violent crime scenario was an identity theft scenario and the violent crime scenario was a child abuse scenario. Although previous studies had utilized male-on-female domestic violence scenarios, identity theft and child abuse were instead selected in an attempt to help minimize gender bias for the hypothetical crime scenarios. In addition, the victim’s gender was excluded from all scenarios to minimize any gender effect. The eight different crime scenarios constructed for this study were then converted to individual audio recordings using a text to speech computer
program. The text was converted to an audio recording in order to more closely approximate
verbal nature of descriptions given in courtroom settings. A text to speech program was also used
to hold constant tone, inflection, and other speech characteristics between each of the eight
recordings. The eight crime scenario recordings were comprised of a violent crime-active voice-
male perpetrator (VAM) scenario, a violent crime-active voice-female perpetrator (VAF)
scenario, a violent crime-passive voice-male perpetrator (VPM) scenario, a violent crime-passive
voice-female perpetrator (VPF) scenario, a nonviolent crime-active voice-male perpetrator
scenario (NAM) scenario, a nonviolent crime-active voice-female perpetrator (NAF) scenario, a
nonviolent crime-passive voice-male perpetrator (NPM) scenario, and a nonviolent crime-
passive voice-female perpetrator (NPF) scenario. Finally, the individual scenarios were the
grouped into four blocks with two scenarios in each block. “Block A” consisted of VAM and
NPF scenarios, “Block B” consisted of VAF and NPM scenarios, “Block C” consisted of VPF
and NAM scenarios, and “Block D” consisted of VPM and NAF scenarios. Each participant was
presented with only one “Block” of scenarios (that included one violent crime and one
nonviolent crime) and the order of presentation was counter balanced to help minimize order
effects. The questionnaire regarding participants’ opinions of each crime scenario required the
participant to apportion balance of responsibility they believed should be assigned between the
perpetrator and victim from the scenario they have just heard, as well as to assign a sentence to
the perpetrator that they believed was appropriate.

Procedures

The study was conducted as an online survey through surveymon.com, a secure
Internet-based survey program. Upon entering the study site, participants were provided with
information regarding the study and asked to provide informed consent (Appendix A).
Participants were then asked to complete the brief demographic questionnaire. Next, participants were presented with a brief written description of the audio recording that they would subsequently listen to and instructions on how to proceed. After reading the description, the participant was presented with an audio recording of either a violent or nonviolent crime scenario description. Following this audio presentation, participants were asked to allocate the balance of responsibility (or blame) that they would attribute to the individuals (between the perpetrator and victim) in the scenario they have just heard, and then to assign a sentence to the perpetrator that they believed was appropriate. Participants were then asked to indicate their level of personal familiarity with the type of events in the crime scenario they had just heard and the number of times they chose to listen to the audio recording. The balance of responsibility scale was a numerical scale with values ranging from -50 to +50. Negative numerical values indicated greater responsibility attributed to the Perpetrator, and positive numerical values indicated greater responsibility attributed to the Victim. The value of 0 indicated equal responsibility attributed to both individuals in the scenario. The sentencing scale was also a numerical scale with values ranging from 0 years (or no sentence) to 140 years (or life imprisonment). The level of personal familiarity scale was a scale ranging from 0 to 10, with 0 representing no personal familiarity and 10 representing the highest degree of familiarity. Participants were also asked to indicate the number of times they chose to listen to the previous scenario by selecting a number on a scale ranging from 1 to 10+. Each participant was then asked to listen to a second audio recording of another crime scenario and required to answer the same series of questions as in the first scenario.
Results

An independent-samples $t$-test was conducted to evaluate the hypothesis that for violent crimes (in this case, a child abuse scenario), less blame would be attributed to the perpetrator in a passive voice description of the crime as opposed to an active voice description of the same crime scenario. There were minimal, non-significant differences in the allocation of responsibility between the passive voice ($M = -44.32, SD = 15.63$) and the active voice ($M = -44.31, SD = 18.15$) for the violent crime scenario, $t(36) = -.001, p = 1.00$.

Similarly, an independent-samples $t$-test was conducted to evaluate the hypothesis that for violent crimes, a more lenient (significantly lower) sentence would be assigned to the perpetrator in a passive voice description of the crime as opposed to an active voice description of the same crime scenario. Although participants hearing the passive voice scenario ($M = 67, SD = 50.64$) assigned slightly lower sentences to the hypothetical perpetrator than participants hearing the active voice scenario ($M = 70.50, SD = 52.46$), the results indicated that the differences were not significant, $t(36) = -.21, p = .84$.

The same analysis was also conducted for attribution of blame in non-violent crime scenarios with similar results. An independent-samples $t$-test was conducted to evaluate the hypothesis that for non-violent crimes (in this case, an identity theft scenario), less blame would be attributed to the perpetrator in a passive voice description of the crime as opposed to an active voice description of the same crime scenario. Although participants assigned slightly more blame to the perpetrator in the active voice scenario ($M = -33.00, SD = 22.00$) than the perpetrator in the passive voice scenario ($M = -29.06, SD = 15.93$), the results indicated that the differences were not significant, $t(36) = .61, p = .55$. 


An independent-samples $t$-test was also used to test the hypothesis that also for non-violent crimes, a more lenient (significantly lower) sentence would be assigned to the perpetrator in a passive voice description of the crime as opposed to an active voice description of the same crime scenario. Interestingly, on average, participants hearing the passive voice scenario ($M = 34.56$, $SD = 37.31$) assigned higher sentences to the hypothetical perpetrator than participants hearing the active voice scenario ($M = 20.82$, $SD = 18.41$). However, the results indicated that the differences were not significant, $t(20.33) = 1.36, p = .19$. 
Discussion

The purpose of the present study was to examine the effect of passive and active voice descriptions of crimes on blame (toward the perpetrator) and severity of sentencing. However the results of this study did not support the hypothesis that for passive voice (as opposed to active voice) descriptions of crimes, less blame would be attributed to the perpetrator and a more lenient sentence would be prescribed. Although previous research suggested that participants exposed to a passive voice description of a crime would interpret the victim as, “the focal point of the information asserted by the sentence and as the carrier of overall responsibility for the sentential proposition.” (Klenbort & Anisfeld, 1973, p. 189), this did not appear to be supported by the results of the current study. Instead, the results of this study indicated that for violent crimes (in this case, a child abuse scenario), the degree of blame that participants attributed to the perpetrator (versus the victim) and the length of the sentence participants assigned to the perpetrator did not significantly vary as a function of passive (or active) voice. In particular, very minimal differences in variability were noted for both attribution of blame and sentence length between passive and active voice versions of the violent crime scenario (with mean differences of .006 and 3.5 years respectively). Similar non-significant differences in attributions of blame and prescribed sentence length were also obtained for the non-violent crime scenario (in this case an identity theft scenario) but with an interesting outcome for average prescribed sentence length. Although not statistically significant, it should be noted that for prescribed sentence length in the non-violent crime scenario, participants exposed to the passive voice version of the scenario, on average assigned a more stringent sentence to the hypothetical perpetrator. Based on the results of prior research, it was hypothesized that participants exposed to the passive voice audio recording (for both violent and non-violent crime scenarios) would prescribe a more
lenient (lower) sentence than participants exposed to the active voice version of the scenarios. The result obtained was contrary to the proposed hypothesis, in that participants assigned an average of 13.74 years greater sentence to the perpetrators in the passive voice scenario.

When compared to the previous research, several differences in the design of the current study might account for the contradictory results. First, the types of crimes examined in prior research were not gender neutral (as they were in this study) and were focused on male-on-female violent crimes, such as rape and domestic abuse. When taken into account with the results of previous research, the outcome of the current study seems to suggest the possibility that the type of crime or more socially based elements (such as gender role stereotypes or belief in rape myths) of the crime scenario descriptions might account for some degree of variance in blame and sentence severity. Additionally, similar factors might account for the surprising results in which the participants exposed to the passive voice version of the scenario non-violent crime scenario assigned slightly harsher sentences (on average of 13.74 years longer) instead of more lenient sentences to the hypothetical perpetrator. This suggests the possibility that there may be some underlying socially based elements of identity theft crimes that are not present in the crime of child abuse.

Another difference in this study that might account for the absence of significant results was the lack of range in the ages of the participants in the sample. In 1995 Lamb and Keon found that younger participants (under 30-years-old) appeared to have been influenced by passive voice to choose less severe punishments, while participants over 30-years-old were less likely to be influenced by the voice construction of the sentence. As previously noted the age range (18-21 years) of the current sample was fairly limited and may have therefore lead to little variation in the effect of passive or active voice sentence construction in the sample.
Additionally, the stimuli employed in the current study may have contributed to the non-significant results. Specifically, the main stimulus materials in this study were audio recordings of the crime scenarios, while the main stimulus materials used in previous studies were written scenarios that were read (rather than heard) by the participants. As a result, it is possible that there may only be a significant effect for passive or active voice when information is actively read by the participant rather than gained passively through an audio recording.

Finally, another explanation for the non-significant results in the current study may simply be related to the small sample size and lack of heterogeneity. In comparison to previous studies, where sample sizes were as large as 240 participants, the current study had a final sample of 38 participants. Also as noted earlier, there was little variation in the age range of the participants in addition to little demographic variability.

Directions for Future Research

Based on the results of this study it may be beneficial for future research to take into account the format of the materials (i.e. text-based material versus audio recording) presented to participant. Consequently, future researchers might include the format of the stimulus material as an additional variable. It might also be beneficial for future researchers to further explore societal attitudes toward the nature of the crime presented. In addition, since there may be other underlying individual or societal attitudes and beliefs about certain types of crimes that influence participants’ attributions of blame, it could be useful to include measures that assess those beliefs. Finally, future research should include a larger and more heterogeneous sample, particularly with regard to a more diverse age range.
References


Appendices

Appendix A

Informed Consent

Study invitation, purpose, location, and dates:
You are invited to participate in a research project examining the potential relationships that exist between the description of a crime and a prospective jury member's decision making process. The study is expected to begin after IRB approval and to be completed by December 2013. All study information will be collected via the Internet and stored on a secure account owned by a student of the Pacific University School of Professional Psychology, within the College of Health Professions.

Participant characteristics and exclusionary criteria:
To participate in this study, you must be at least 18 years of age. If you are below the age of 18, please exit this survey immediately by closing the browser window.

Study materials and procedures:
In this study, you will be asked to complete a brief demographic survey. Once this is complete, you will be asked to listen to an audio description of a crime scenario. You will then be presented with a brief questionnaire with items regarding your opinions about the scenario you have previously heard and your personal experiences. Your participation is completely anonymous. There is no means of associating any information that you provide with you personally. You may opt out of the study at any time by closing the browser window. If you choose to close the window before completing the study none of your information can or will be
used. It should only take about 10 minutes to complete your participation in the study.

**Risks, risk reduction steps and clinical alternatives:**

a. **Unknown risks:**

Your participation in this project involves no foreseeable risks.

b. **Anticipated risks and strategies to minimize/avoid:**

Any risks involved in participation in this study are minimal and are not greater than those ordinarily experienced in daily life or during the performance of any routine computer operation. All data collected will be strictly anonymous. While SurveyGizmo allows the survey administer to determine whether or not to collect IP addresses as part of the survey data, IP addresses will not be collected during any phase of this study to insure anonymity.

c. **Advantageous clinical alternatives:**

This study does not involve experimental clinical trials.

**Adverse event handling and reporting plan:**

If you experience discomfort during the study procedure you should stop your participation immediately and Shawn Davis, Ph.D. at (503) 352-7319.

The Institutional Review Board office will be notified by Dr. Davis on or before the next normal business day if minor adverse events occur. Study investigators will consult with the IRB about changes that may need to be made to the protocol or other changes deemed necessary to minimize any minor adverse events.
The Institutional Review Board office will be notified by Dr. Davis within 24 hours if major adverse events occur. In such a situation, the study investigators will immediately discontinue recruitment and discuss with the IRB office the best solution in order to minimize any and all adverse events.

**Direct benefits and/or payment to participants:**

**a. Benefit(s)**

There is no direct benefit to you as a study participant.

**b. Payment(s) or reward(s)**

You will not be paid for your participation.

**Promise of privacy:**

Your participation is completely anonymous. There is no means of associating any information that you provide with you personally. As this is an online study, however, the security of information transmitted over the Internet cannot be guaranteed.

Results from participants will be available only to the experimenters. If a publication or conference presentation results from this experiment and findings are presented, all information will be presented terms of group data; no responses for a single individual will be presented. There is no means of associating your responses with your identity.

**Voluntary nature of the study:**

Your decision whether or not to participate will not affect your current or future relations with
Pacific University. There are no costs to you for your participation other than the time involved in completing the surveys. If you choose not to participate, you are free to withdraw at any time; withdrawal will not result in penalty.

If you withdraw (by closing your browser window) from the study at any point prior to completing the survey, your participation will be ended. In this situation, all data collected to that point will be erased and not used in any analyses. It will not be possible to withdraw from the study after completing the entire study survey, due to its anonymous nature. However, all data will be erased (and not used in any analyses) for any individual that does not complete the entire study survey (defined as not reaching the final page of questions and answering any questions on that page).

Participation in this project is voluntary and the only other alternative to this project is non-participation. If you decide to participate, you are free to not answer any question or withdraw at any time without prejudice or negative consequences.

**Contacts and questions:**
The researcher(s) will be happy to answer any questions you may have at any time during the course of the study. If you are not satisfied with the answers you receive, please call Pacific University's Institutional Review Board, at (503) 352-1478 to discuss your questions or concerns further. If you have questions about your rights as a research subject or become injured in some way and feel it is related to your participation in this study, please contact the investigators and/or the IRB office. All concerns and questions will be kept in confidence.
Statement of consent:
Since this is an on-line survey, signatures cannot be obtained. By clicking "I AGREE" I understand I will be taken to the study and that my continued participation in the survey denotes my consent to the following:

I have read and understand the above. All my questions have been answered. I am 18 years of age or over and agree to participate in the study. I have read and understand the description of my participation duties and I understand that I can print a copy of this form to keep for my records.

Remember that if you choose not to participate or to withdraw from participation, you can close your web browser at any time. *This question is required.

☐ I AGREE

☐ I DO NOT AGREE
Appendix B

Demographic Questionnaire

What is your age? ____

What is your gender?

☐ Female
☐ Male
☐ __________

What is your racial identity? (Check all that apply)

☐ American Indian / Alaska Native
☐ Asian
☐ Black or African American
☐ Hawaiian Native / Pacific Islander
☐ White
☐ Other

What is your ethnicity?

☐ Hispanic or Latino
☐ Not Hispanic or Latino

What country do you live in? (Drop box of all countries)

What state do you live in? (Drop box list of all US states)

What is your level of education?

☐ Some high school
☐ Completed high school
☐ Some college or technical school?
☐ 2 year degree
☐ 4 year degree
☐ Some graduate school
☐ Master’s degree
☐ Doctoral degree

I am currently:

☐ Not in school
☐ An undergraduate student
☐ A graduate student
☐ Other ___________

I am:

☐ Married or Partnered
☐ In a relationship
☐ Single
Appendix C

Audio Recording Description and Instructions

General Instructions

On the following screens, you will encounter scenarios relating to a hypothetical crime. Imagine yourself in the role of a jury member listening to each scenario and address the subsequent questions accordingly.

Scenario 1 Instructions

The perpetrator in the following scenario faces numerous charges including assault, child abuse, and endangering the welfare of a child. Please carefully listen to information about the case. Answer the questions following the audio recording based only on the information you have heard.

**Please make sure the audio volume on your computer is adjusted to a comfortable volume, then press "NEXT" to proceed.**

Scenario 2 Instructions

The perpetrator faces numerous charges including identity theft, forgery, and financial fraud. Please carefully listen to information about the case. Answer the questions following the audio recording based only on the information you have heard.

**Please make sure the audio volume on your computer is adjusted to a comfortable volume then press "NEXT" to proceed.**
Appendix D

Crime Scenarios

Violent Crime Scenarios (Audio Recordings):

Violent Crime, Active Voice, Male Perpetrator (VAM):
An anonymous call to a child-abuse hotline led police to a 10-year-old child who weighed just 32 pounds and bound, and locked in a closet. According to the final results of a police investigation, the father of the victim, James Smith, beat, tied up, starved and locked his child in a closet for over two days.

Violent Crime, Active Voice, Female Perpetrator (VAF):
An anonymous call to a child-abuse hotline led police to a 10-year-old child who weighed just 32 pounds, bound, and locked in a closet. According to the final results of a police investigation, the mother of the victim, Mary Smith beat, tied up, starved, and locked her child a closet for over two days.

Passive Voice:

Violent Crime, Passive Voice, Male Perpetrator (VPM):
An anonymous call to a child-abuse hotline led police to a 10-year-old child who weighed just 32 pounds, bound, and locked in a closet. According to the final results of a police investigation, the child was beaten, tied up, starved and locked in a closet for over two days by the father of the victim, James Smith.

Violent Crime, Passive Voice, Female Perpetrator (VPF):
An anonymous call to a child-abuse hotline led police to a 10-year-old child who weighed just 32 pounds, bound, and locked in a closet. According to the final results of the police investigation,
the child was beaten, tied up, starved and locked in a closet for over two days by the Mother of the victim, Mary Smith.

Non-violent Crime Scenarios (Audio Recordings):

Non-violent Crime, Active Voice, Male Perpetrator (NAM):

According to the results of a federal investigation, John Smith used the victim’s personal information to fraudulently obtain a driver's license in the name of the victim. He then used the license to withdraw more than 13,000 dollars from the victim's bank account. Mr. Smith also obtained numerous credit cards in the victim's name and charged approximately 20,000 dollars on those cards.

Non-violent Crime, Active Voice, Female Perpetrator (NAF):

“According to the results of a federal investigation, Mary Smith used the victim’s personal information to fraudulently obtain a driver's license in the name of the victim. She then used the license to withdraw more than 13,000 dollars from the victim's bank account. Ms. Smith also obtained numerous credit cards in the victim's name and charged approximately $20,000 on those cards.”

Non-violent Crime, Passive Voice, Male Perpetrator (NPM):

“According to the results of a federal investigation, the victim’s personal information was used to fraudulently obtain a driver’s license in their name. The license was then used to withdraw more than 13,000 dollars from the victim’s account. Numerous credit cards were obtained in the victim’s name and approximately 20,000 dollars in charges were made on those cards by John Smith.”

Non-violent Crime, Passive Voice, Female Perpetrator (NPF):
“According to the results of a federal investigation, the victim’s personal information was used to fraudulently obtain a driver’s license in their name. The license was then used to withdraw more than 13,000 dollars from the victim’s account. Numerous credit cards were obtained in the victim’s name and approximately 20,000 dollars in charges were made on those cards by Mary Smith.”
Appendix E

Crime Scenario Opinion Questionnaire

1. Who is more responsible for what happened?
Using the slider below, allocate the balance of responsibility that you would attribute to the individuals from the scenario you have just heard.

Negative numerical value indicates greater responsibility attributed to the Perpetrator. Positive numerical value indicates greater responsibility attributed to the Victim. 0 indicates equal responsibility between both individuals.

-50--------------------------------------------------------0--------------------------------------------------+50
Perpetrator Responsibility                  Equal Responsibility                  Victim Responsibility

2. What sentence do you believe the perpetrator from previous scenario should receive? *This question is required.
Using the slider, provide a sentence for the perpetrator from the previous scenario in number of years of imprisonment.

0 years----------------------------------------------70 years----------------------------------------140 years
No punishment                                                                                                 Life imprisonment

Your Suggested Sentence in Years

3. How many times did you listen to the audio recording of previous the crime scenario?

-- Please Select --
Appendix F

Crime Familiarity Question

1. What is your level of personal familiarity with the type of events that occurred in the scenario you have just listened to?

On a scale of 0 to 10, please indicate your level of familiarity with the type of events described in each of the scenarios you have just listened to.

0 indicates no degree of familiarity and 10 indicates the highest degree of familiarity.

0---------1---------2---------3---------4---------5---------6---------7---------8---------9---------10
No familiarity High familiarity