WHO'S TO BLAME? ACTION IDENTIFICATION IN ALLOCATING RESPONSIBILITY FOR ALLEGED RAPE

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Principles of action identification theory were examined for their relevance to the allocation of responsibility for alleged rape. Subjects learned of a rape incident in which the motives of the alleged perpetrator and victim were somewhat ambiguous. We induced subjects to identify the action of the target (the perpetrator or victim) in either low level terms (e.g., the action's details) or relatively high level terms (e.g., the action's effects or implications), and then exposed them to one of two mutually inconsistent conclusions regarding the respective responsibility of the perpetrator and victim for what happened. Extrapolating from research on the representation of one's own actions (e.g., Wegner et al., 1984), we predicted that subjects in the low level conditions would allocate responsibility between the perpetrator and victim in a manner that was consistent with the conclusion they were provided, but that subjects in the high level conditions would not show such judgmental emergence. Support for this general prediction was obtained. Discussion centered on the relevance of action identification processes to the resolution of judgmental ambiguity, the blaming-the-victim phenomenon, and the issue of change versus stability in social perception.

It is not uncommon for two people assessing the same event to reach remarkably divergent conclusions concerning the event and the individuals involved. Particularly when the event in question involves alleged wrongdoing by one individual toward another, observers tend to take sides, blaming either the alleged perpetrator or the alleged

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victim (cf. Sabini & Silver, 1982). The fact that observers do so even when the relevant information is lacking or ambiguous is taken by some as evidence for the top-down as opposed to bottom-up nature of the underlying cognitive processes (cf. Schneider, Hastorf, & Ellsworth, 1979; Wegner & Vallacher, 1977). On this view, interpersonal actions are seen through conceptual lenses (values, personal constructs, and the like) that can foster ill-considered and unfair allocation of blame between the participants. A corollary of this view is that to reach an unbiased assessment of what happened and who's to blame, one should pay close attention to the facts, postponing judgment until the objective evidence is assimilated.

No one would challenge the almost tautological notion that personal values, interpretive rules, and the like can undermine the goal of rendering an evaluative judgment based on an objective assessment of the relevant facts. The present research was designed to test a different perspective on the judgment process, however, one that calls into question the purportedly enhanced objectivity of conclusions reached after careful attention to the specific facts relevant to judgment. More to the point, we suggest what appears to be an irony regarding the allocation of blame (and perhaps social judgment generally): It is precisely when people suspend their personal interpretive rules in favor of a focus on factual details that they are most prone to render judgments that have only an equivocal tie to such details.

THE IDENTIFICATION OF ACTION

The framework for this idea represents an extension of action identification theory (Vallacher & Wegner, 1985, 1987; Wegner & Vallacher, 1986). The theory holds that an action has no single identity, but rather can be understood in many different ways, each of which could become prepotent under different circumstances and/or for different people. The particular identities available for representing an action are distinguishable in part by virtue of their relative level in an act identity hierarchy. Identities at relatively low levels in this hierarchy capture the details of the action, specifying how it is performed, whereas higher level identities convey the implications and consequences of the action, expressing why or with what effect the action is performed. Research has confirmed that people can reliably order act identities with respect to their relative level (Vallacher & Wegner, 1985) and that people can be induced to think about action in relatively low versus high level terms (e.g., Vallacher, Wegner, & Somoza, 1989;

This capacity to identify the same action at different levels sets the stage for both the maintenance of existing action representations and the emergence of new representations. Specifically, when people identify what they are doing in relatively high level terms, they tend to resist alternative identifications, even those provided by purported experts (Wegner et al., 1984) or conveyed in psychological interpretations of the action (Wegner et al., 1986). When people are led to think about their action in relatively low level terms, however, they become especially vulnerable to higher level identities for the action provided in the action context (Vallacher & Wegner, 1987; Wegner et al., 1984; Wegner et al., 1986). This tendency, termed emergence, is said to reflect people's preference for comprehensive understanding of what they are doing. Lower level identities are adopted primarily out of necessity, when the action cannot be performed effectively with only a high level representation in mind (e.g., Vallacher & Wegner, 1989; Vallacher, Wegner, & Frederick, 1987), or in response to explicit instructional sets that emphasize attention to the mechanics of action (e.g., Vallacher, Wegner, & Somoza, 1989; Wegner et al., 1984, 1986).

The emergence process has been implicated in a variety of action domains, including coffee drinking (Wegner et al., 1984, Exp. 2), going to college (Wegner et al., 1984, Exp. 1), dating (Wegner, Macomber, & Vallacher, 1982), egoism versus prosocial behavior (Wegner et al., 1986, Exp. 1), and cooperation versus competition (Wegner et al., 1986, Exp. 2). Emergence has also been shown to be an important basis for self-concept malleability in response to social feedback (Wegner et al., 1986, Exp. 2). Reliable individual differences in the tendency to demonstrate maintenance versus emergence have also been demonstrated (Vallacher & Wegner, 1989).

**ACTION IDENTIFICATION IN SOCIAL JUDGMENT**

To date, evidence for emergent action understanding has been limited to the identification of one's own behavior. In principle, though, the purported dynamics at work seem relevant to the identification of action generally—that of others' as well as one's own (Vallacher & Wegner, 1985; Vallacher, 1989). In observing the actions of others, after all, we are sometimes keenly aware of the specifics of what they're doing (e.g., their physical movements, gestures, or choice of words),
whereas at other times we are more attuned to higher level aspects of their behavior (e.g., their motives or values, the immediate and remote consequences of the act). And in much the same way that we prefer higher level identities for our own behavior, it is reasonable to assume that we typically seek to understand others' behavior in terms of goals, underlying motives, probable consequences, and the like, rather than simply in terms of bodily movement, speech characteristics, or basic, denotative action categories like driving a car, walking, or yelling.

Conceivably, then, stability versus malleability in social judgment reflects the same dynamics as those demonstrated for stability versus malleability in the identification of one's own action. Thus, in the same way that people can be led to new conceptions of what they are doing via the emergence process, perhaps they can be induced to adopt new interpretations of someone's behavior through interventions designed to center their attention on the lower level features of the behavior in question. Resistance to new conceptions of someone's behavior, meanwhile, is to be expected when people have in mind a relatively high level notion of the behavior.

From this perspective, influence attempts that simply provide a different characterization of someone's behavior are likely to fail, producing no change on the part of the observer, or to backfire, creating even stronger adherence on the part of the observer to his or her preferred conception. Successful influence instead necessitates the temporary avoidance of meaning through what might be considered "deconstruction" of the action (Derrida, 1976). From a deconstructed vantage point, the observer might then be inclined to embrace any plausible avenue of reconstruction provided by the influence agent. In this way, two people identifying the same action in low level terms can come to hold vastly divergent, even mutually inconsistent interpretations of the action and equally divergent assessments of the actor.

OVERVIEW OF PRESENT RESEARCH

If emergence is indeed relevant to social judgment, it may provide insight into the allocation of responsibility in instances of alleged wrongdoing. Often in such instances, the details of what happened are fairly clear, but considerable ambiguity exists regarding the intent and motivation of the characters involved. Particularly salient in this regard is the issue of rape (cf. Hopkins, 1984; Russell, 1984). Indeed, in rape cases a common defense strategy is to question the role of the victim, generating doubt in observers (and perhaps in the victim as well)
regarding her resistance to the alleged rape and even suggesting motives on her part, such as flirtation or seduction, that contributed to the incident (e.g., Koss & Harvey, 1987). The implicit complement to this strategy is to ascribe benign or at least understandable motives to the alleged perpetrator (e.g., expression of attraction, response to seduction). The purpose of the present study was to examine whether the emergence process is relevant to the acceptance of such action characterizations.

The nature of the alleged rape incident was such that the motives and intentions of the alleged rapist and victim were open to different interpretations. The incident was presented to subjects in the form of a police interview with either the alleged rapist or the ostensible victim. Subjects read the interview under either a low level or high level identification set, and then read a police summary concluding that the perpetrator should be charged with rape or that there were insufficient grounds to press charges. The basic prediction was that subjects who read a transcript concerning the incident under a low level set would subsequently identify the actions of the characters involved in line with the police summary to which they were exposed, and allocate responsibility between the participants in a manner that was consistent with the summary as well. The action identifications and responsibility allocations of subjects who read the transcript under a high level set, meanwhile, were not expected to be influenced by the police summaries.

METHOD

SUBJECTS AND DESIGN

Participating in exchange for credit in their psychology courses, 98 undergraduates were randomly assigned to the conditions of 2 (identification level) x 2 (police summary) x 2 (target of judgment) between-subjects design. The final sample size was 88 (61 women, 27 men) because of incomplete data from 10 of the subjects.

PROCEDURE

Subjects participated in small groups (n = 10–16) and were assigned to one of the eight conditions through the random distribution of questionnaire booklets. Subjects were asked to read a transcript of one
of two bogus interviews conducted by a police officer; one interview was with the alleged perpetrator of a rape (Larry), the other with the ostensible victim (Jane). The interviews elicited the respective accounts of Larry and Jane concerning the events leading up and including the alleged rape. Each transcript was approximately 1,000 words in length and provided the verbatim dialogue of the respective interview. Subjects were told that after reading the interview, they would be asked to make a number of judgments concerning the characters and events depicted. At the beginning of each transcript was a brief set of instructions intended to induce either a low level or high level identification set with respect to the events depicted in the interview. Upon completion of the interview, subjects encountered a bogus "Confidential Summary Report" ostensibly filed by the interviewing officer. For half the subjects, the Summary Report concluded that the case should be turned over to the District Attorney's Office with the recommendation of criminal prosecution of Larry for rape. For the remaining subjects, the Summary Report concluded that there were no grounds for criminal prosecution of Larry for rape. Subjects were provided approximately 10 min to read one of the two versions of the transcript and one of the two Summary Reports. Finally, subjects allocated responsibility between the perpetrator and victim, made a variety of judgments concerning the conduct of the character whose interview they read, indicated their impressions of him or her on trait dimensions, and rated how well each of 25 action identifications described what he or she had done.

Target of Judgment. The details and sequences of events were identical or very similar in the two interviews, although they differed with respect to implied intent, motivation, and responsibility. From Larry's perspective, his role in the events was essentially a response to flirtation on Jane's part, whereas from Jane's perspective the same events were presented as unprovoked rape. The sequence of events in both interviews begins with a minor exchange in an undergraduate class (Larry borrowing a pencil from Jane) that is presented as innocent by Jane (simply complying with a request) and as potentially seductive by Larry (compliance accompanied by a smile). The sequence continues with Jane popping buttons on her skirt as she retrieves a dropped pen, Jane leaving class and riding her bike home, Larry following Jane on his bike, Jane entering her apartment, Larry knocking on Jane's door, Jane allowing Larry in after he explains that he wants to return her pencil, and culminates in Larry knocking Jane down and having forceful sex with her. In their respective interviews, Larry and Jane provide depictions of these events that are
consistent with their overall portrayal of what happened (i.e., seduction or rape).¹

Identification Level. For all subjects, the Instructions at the beginning of the transcript noted that the interview was conducted as part of a standard police report. For subjects in the low level condition, the Instructions went on to emphasize paying close attention to the details of the events described in the interview. They were told to remember as many specific things about the incident as they could, including the particular words and behaviors depicted. The Instructions in the high level condition, in contrast, emphasized that subjects should pay attention to the meaning and implications of the events described in the interview. They were told to think about the motives and intentions behind the various words and behaviors depicted. Subjects in both conditions were then reminded that they would be asked several questions upon completion of the interview.

Police Summary. A "Confidential Summary Report" filed by the police officer who ostensibly conducted the interview with Larry or Jane followed the transcribed interview. There were two versions of this summary, one concluding that Larry had committed rape (Perpetrator to blame), the other concluding that Larry had responded to seductive behavior by Jane (Victim to blame). The rape conclusion stated that Larry had taken advantage of the trust and naivete of Jane, forcing her to have sexual intercourse against her will and despite her resistance. He was said to have shown no remorse for his act, and no sympathy for his victim. The summary concludes with the recommendation that the case be turned over to the District Attorney's Office for criminal prosecution. The seduction conclusion stated that Larry and Jane had engaged in some harmless flirtation, and that when Larry expressed his liking for Jane, she responded in a manner that could be considered seductive. Their subsequent sexual intercourse, though rough and forceful, was said to be a product of mutually understood consent. The summary concludes that it would be inappropriate to refer the case to the District Attorney's Office, as there are no grounds for criminal prosecution.

DEPENDENT MEASURES

Allocation of Responsibility. After reading the police summary, subjects completed two questionnaires from which several dependent

¹ Copies of the two interview versions and the two Confidential Summary Reports are available upon request from the first author.
measures were derived. The first questionnaire consisted of an item calling for an allocation of responsibility between the parties involved for what happened, 10 items tapping subjects’ judgments of the interviewee’s behavior in the purported rape incident, and 15 trait dimensions assessing subjects’ impressions of the interviewee’s personality. Identical questions and trait dimensions were employed in the perpetrator and victim versions of this questionnaire. Subjects responded to the allocation of responsibility item (“in thinking about what happened, how would you assign responsibility to Larry and Jane?”) along a 7-point scale, with higher numbers reflecting greater allocation to the alleged victim (Jane). As this question taps subjects’ overall assessment of responsibility with respect to both characters, it represents a basic test of the emergence hypothesis.

**Bad Conduct.** The 10 judgment items provided more specific assessments of the conduct of one of the characters (i.e., the interviewee). Each item was presented as a question with a 7-point response scale with appropriately labeled endpoints. Six of these items proved to be highly intercorrelated (average \( r = .52 \)), so responses to them were averaged (after reverse scoring when necessary) to create an overall measure of bad conduct (alpha = .83). The specific items (and their associated item-total correlations) were: “did Larry/Jane do anything wrong?” (.63), “should Larry/Jane be held accountable for what he/she did?” (.77), “how responsible is Larry/Jane for what happened?” (.60), “should Larry/Jane have behaved differently?” (.50), “is Larry/Jane likely to become involved in a situation like this again?” (.46), and “to what extent did Larry/Jane intend for the events you read about to happen?” (.45). High numbers on this measure reflect negative judgments of the interviewee’s conduct.

**Action Identification.** The second questionnaire consisted of 30 identities for the interviewee’s behavior. These identities had been generated by pilot subjects \((n = 28)\) who had been asked to list as many descriptions of either Larry’s or Jane’s behavior as they could after reading the interview with him or her, respectively. To the extent possible, the identities included in the two resultant versions of this questionnaire referred to the same points in the sequence of events (e.g., “Larry picked up a pencil” and “Jane dropped a pencil”) and reflected comparable meanings (“Larry committed a crime” and “Jane was the victim of crime”). Subjects rated each identity on a 7-point scale according to how well it described the behavior of the interviewee as depicted in the interview. Factor analyses (principal axis, varimax rotation) of these ratings revealed 3 interpretable factors with eigenvalues greater than 1.0 for the perpetrator’s behavior and 5 interpretable factors with
<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>FACTOR</th>
<th>LOADING</th>
<th>IDENTITY</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>&quot;Committed rape&quot;</td>
<td>.95</td>
<td>Committed a crime</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>.93</td>
<td>Raped a woman</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>.92</td>
<td>Forced himself on a woman</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>.79</td>
<td>Took advantage of a woman</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>-.68</td>
<td>Responded to a woman's seductive behavior</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>.62</td>
<td>Acted inappropriately</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>.57</td>
<td>Threatened a woman</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>-.47</td>
<td>Made love to a woman</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>.41</td>
<td>Held a woman down in her apartment</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>.30</td>
<td>Told a woman to take her clothes off</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Low level</td>
<td>.87</td>
<td>Noticed a woman's legs as she rode a bicycle</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>.83</td>
<td>Made small talk in a woman's apartment</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>.75</td>
<td>Returned a pencil to a woman</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>.68</td>
<td>Rode a bicycle</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>.49</td>
<td>Noticed a woman's blouse</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>.45</td>
<td>Picked up a pencil</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>.43</td>
<td>Almost fell asleep in class</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>.28</td>
<td>Tried to get a woman's attention after class</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>&quot;Expressed attraction&quot;</td>
<td>.67</td>
<td>Expressed his liking for a woman</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>.58</td>
<td>Demonstrated his sex appeal</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>.51</td>
<td>Followed a woman home</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>.46</td>
<td>Became sexually aroused over a woman</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>.36</td>
<td>Did a favor in class for a woman</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>.35</td>
<td>Played &quot;games&quot; with a woman</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

eigenvalues greater than 1.0 for the victim's behavior; the factors and their associated identities for the perpetrator and victim are presented in Tables 1 and 2, respectively. Subjects' score on each factor was their mean endorsement of the identities loading on that factor.

*Personality Impression.* The trait ratings were made on 7-point bipolar scales anchored by pairs of oppositely valenced traits reflecting a common dimension. As these ratings proved to be highly intercorrelated across subjects for both the perpetrator and victim versions (average \( r = .27 \) and .24, respectively), they were averaged (after reverse scoring when necessary) to create an overall measure of
TABLE 2
Act Identity Factors for Victim’s Behavior

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>FACTOR</th>
<th>LOADING</th>
<th>IDENTITY</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>&quot;Was victimized&quot;</td>
<td>.95</td>
<td>Was the victim of a crime</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>.78</td>
<td>Was taken advantage of by a man</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>.74</td>
<td>Was forced to do things against her will</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>.61</td>
<td>Was raped</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>.45</td>
<td>Rode a bicycle home</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>.31</td>
<td>Was followed home by a man</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>&quot;Established sexual relations&quot;</td>
<td>.70</td>
<td>Was attracted to a man</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>.68</td>
<td>Played “games” with a man</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>.66</td>
<td>Behaved seductively toward a man</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>.52</td>
<td>Made love with a man</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Low level (a)</td>
<td>.72</td>
<td>Took her clothes off</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>.58</td>
<td>Became sexually aroused with a man</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>-.58</td>
<td>Was threatened by a man</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>.57</td>
<td>Talked to a woman after class</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>.38</td>
<td>Let a man into her apartment</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Low level (b)</td>
<td>.70</td>
<td>Almost fell asleep in class</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>.49</td>
<td>Plead with a man to leave</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>.48</td>
<td>Tore her skirt in trying to reach a pen</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>.45</td>
<td>Made small talk in her apartment with a man</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>&quot;Defended herself&quot;</td>
<td>.91</td>
<td>Tried to resist a man’s advances</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>-.49</td>
<td>Acted inappropriately</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>.26</td>
<td>Tried to defend herself against a man</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

personality impression (alpha = .49 and .42, respectively, for the perpetrator and victim versions). The specific trait pairs (and their associated item-total correlations) were: honest–dishonest (.14), friendly–unfriendly (.19), impulsive–deliberate (.14), considerate–insensitive (.03), normal–deviant (.05), forceful–timid (.08), immoral–moral (.11), skeptical–gullible (.03), charming–lacking in charm (.14), foolish–not foolish (.28), flirtatious–not flirtatious (.15), trustworthy–untrustworthy (.17), insecure–self-confident (.04), calm–excitable (.24), and manipulative–not manipulative (.08). High numbers on the summary measure indicate a negative impression of the interviewee’s personality.
RESULTS

MANIPULATION CHECK

To assess whether the manipulation of identification level was effective in establishing the desired mental sets for reading the interview, pilot subjects \( (n = 37) \) read one of the two interviews under either the low level or high level instructions, but without exposure to the police summary. After reading the interview, they were asked to generate as many one-sentence descriptions of the interviewee's behavior as they could in five minutes. The resultant descriptions were subsequently rated for their identification level by two judges who were familiar with the concept of identification level, but who were blind to the hypotheses and identification level condition of subjects. These ratings were made on a 3-point scale where 1 represented clear low level, 3 clear high level, and 2 intermediate level or uncertainty. In the few cases (8%) of disagreement among judges, the descriptions were discussed until agreement was reached. The majority of subjects \( (n = 34) \) generated at least 5 descriptions \( (M = 13.7, \text{ range } = 3-23) \). Ratings for the first 5 descriptions were therefore averaged for each subject and analyzed in a 2 (target) \( \times \) 2 (identification level) ANOVA. As anticipated, subjects in the low level condition provided lower level descriptions for the interviewee's behavior than did those in the high level condition \( (M = 1.12 \text{ vs. } 1.83) \), \( F(1,31) = 16.61, p < .001 \).

ALLOCATION OF RESPONSIBILITY

A 4-way ANOVA (sex \( \times \) target \( \times \) identification level \( \times \) police summary) on the measure assessing allocation of responsibility between the perpetrator and victim revealed a highly reliable target effect, \( F(1,72) = 74.44, p < .0001 \). Although the perpetrator was allocated more responsibility than the victim by subjects generally \( (M = 2.75 \text{ on a 7-point scale, with lower numbers indicating greater perpetrator responsibility}) \), subjects who read the interview with the perpetrator allocated less responsibility to him (and hence more responsibility to the victim) than did subjects who read the interview with the victim \( (M = 3.72 \text{ vs. } 1.69) \). Learning of the incident from the perpetrator's perspective apparently established a relatively sympathetic attitude toward him on the part of subjects (both male and female). In absolute terms, though, the perpetrator was still considered as responsible as the victim in this condition.
Results also revealed a reliable sex x identification level interaction, $F(1,72) = 4.37, p < .04$. Subsequent simple effects analyses with the data blocked on identification level revealed a reliable sex difference among subjects in the low level condition, $F(1,72) = 4.53, p < .04$. Males who learned of the incident under a low level set allocated more responsibility to the victim ($M = 2.92$) than did females who learned of the incident under the same set ($M = 2.46$). This suggests that from the deconstructed vantage point engendered by low level identification, subjects tended to give the benefit of the doubt to the participant of their own sex when allocating responsibility—although in absolute terms the perpetrator was allocated more responsibility in both cases.

Particularly relevant to the present concerns is a highly reliable identification level x police summary interaction, $F(1,72) = 8.68, p < .004$. The pattern of means underlying this interaction, presented in Figure 1, is consistent with the emergence hypothesis. The interaction was decomposed through simple effects analyses that compared the two police summaries within each identification level condition. Results revealed that whereas the effect of police summary failed to reach statistical significance among subjects in the high level condition, $F(1,72) = 1.71, p < .20$, subjects in the low level condition allocated greater responsibility to the victim ($M = 2.95$) if they read a police summary blaming her as opposed to a police summary blaming the perpetrator ($M = 2.17$), $F(1,72) = 7.89, p < .006$. Thus, as predicted, only subjects induced to identify the event in relatively low level terms demonstrated emergence in accordance with the summary to which they were exposed.

BAD CONDUCT

Unlike allocation of responsibility, the bad conduct measure represents subjects' evaluation of only one of the characters involved (i.e., the character whose interview they read). Thus, approximately half the subjects ($n = 46$) evaluated the conduct of the perpetrator, and half evaluated the conduct of the victim ($n = 42$). A 4-way ANOVA performed on this measure revealed a highly reliable main effect for

2. Support for the emergence hypothesis is also provided by simple effects analyses performed with the data blocked on police summary. Among subjects who read the police summary blaming the perpetrator, subjects in the low level condition allocated greater responsibility to him than did subjects in the high level condition ($M = 2.17$ vs. $3.00$), $F(1,72) = 4.88, p < .03$. Among subjects who read the summary blaming the victim, in turn, low level subjects allocated greater responsibility to her than did high level subjects ($M = 2.95$ vs. $2.74$), $F(1,72) = 3.84, p < .05$. 
target, $F(1,72) = 33.85, p < .0001$, such that subjects who evaluated the perpetrator's conduct were harsher in their judgments than were subjects who evaluated the victim's conduct ($M = 3.35$ vs. $1.45$). This effect should be considered, though, in light of a reliable sex x target interaction, $F(1,72) = 9.54, p < .003$. Subsequent simple effects analyses revealed that whereas females evinced a highly reliable tendency to evaluate the perpetrator's behavior more harshly than the victim's behavior ($M = 3.58$ vs. $1.29$), $F(1,72) = 67.94, p < .0001$, males showed only a marginally reliable tendency to do so ($M = 2.87$ vs. $1.86$), $F(1,72) = 2.63, p < .11$.

Evidence for emergence is provided by the decomposition of a marginally significant identification level x police summary x target interaction, $F(1,72) = 2.69, p < .11$. Because half the subjects judged the perpetrator and half judged the victim, the emergence hypothesis was assessed through simple effects analyses for each target. For the perpetrator, a reliable police summary effect was obtained, $F(1,72) = 8.11, p < .006$, indicating that the perpetrator was judged more harshly by subjects who read the summary blaming him as opposed to the summary blaming the victim ($M = 3.75$ vs. $2.95$). When the data were blocked on identification level, however, results revealed that this effect was reliable only for subjects in the low level condition, $F(1,72) = 5.44, p < .02$ ($M = 4.20$ and $3.03$ for the perpetrator and victim blame summaries, respectively). Subjects in the high level condition were not differentially swayed by the perpetrator and victim blame summaries ($M = 3.40$ vs. $2.87$), $F(1,72) = 1.26$, ns (see Figure 2). For the victim-as-target condition, meanwhile, simple effects analyses failed to

**FIGURE 1**
Allocation of responsibility to victim by police summary and identification level.
find statistically reliable differences as a function of police summary in either identification level condition ($p_{s} > .10$).

Considered together, then, the allocation of responsibility and bad conduct data provide evidence of judgmental emergence. Subjects who learned of the alleged rape incident under a low level set showed differential allocation of responsibility between the perpetrator and victim in accordance with the avenue of emergence provided in the police summary, whereas subjects who learned of the same incident under a high level set were uninfluenced by the police summary they subsequently encountered. Subjects demonstrated this effect regardless of which target's interview they read. When making more specific judgments, however, only those low level subjects who read the interview with, and subsequently evaluated the perpetrator showed judgmental emergence in line with the summary blaming the perpetrator.

**ACT IDENTITY FACTORS**

Because the specific identities and resultant identity factors differed for the two targets of judgment, separate 3-way ANOVAs (sex x identification level x police summary) were performed on the identity factors for the perpetrator and victim. For the perpetrator, results revealed a marginally reliable identification level x police summary interaction for "committed rape," $F(1,42) = 3.18$, $p < .08$. Simple effects

**FIGURE 2**
Perpetrator's bad conduct by police summary and identification level.
analyses on this variable revealed that among subjects in the low level condition, the summary blaming the perpetrator tended to promote stronger endorsement of "rape" identities (e.g., raped a woman, forced himself on a woman) than did the summary blaming the victim (M = 3.00 vs. 1.95), F(1,42) = 3.27, p < .08; among high level subjects, the perpetrator- and victim-blame summaries did not promote differential endorsement of rape identities (M = 2.32 and 2.35, respectively), F < 1. Results for the other identity factors failed to reveal any statistically reliable effects.

Results for the factors reflecting identification of the victim's behavior provided stronger evidence of judgmental emergence on the part of subjects. In particular, a reliable identification level x police summary interaction was obtained for "established sexual relations," F(1,37) = 9.34, p < .004, and for "defended herself," F(1,37) = 6.12, p < .02. As Figures 3 and 4 illustrate, the means underlying each interaction conform to the pattern predicted by the emergence hypothesis. In accord with our analyses of the other measures, the interaction for each measure was decomposed by simple effects analyses that compared the two police summaries for each identification level condition.

The results of these analyses for "established sexual relations" reveals that among low level subjects, those who read the police summary blaming the victim were more likely to see the victim as having behaved seductively, played "games," and so on than were those who read the summary blaming the perpetrator (M = 2.02 vs. 1.42), F(1,37) = 6.60, p < .01. Among subjects in the high level condition, in contrast, the summary blaming the perpetrator tended to promote

FIGURE 3
Victim "Established Sexual Relations" by police summary and identification level

![Graph showing the relationship between victim-blame and perpetrator-blame summaries and identification level.](image-url)
stronger endorsement of these identities as compared to the summary blaming the victim ($M = 1.85$ vs. $1.40$), $F(1,37) = 2.98, p < .09$. Thus, if high level subjects were influenced at all by the police summary to which they were exposed, it was in a direction opposite that conveyed in the summary.

The pattern of means underlying the 2-way interaction for “defended herself,” meanwhile, suggests that among low level subjects, those who read the summary blaming the perpetrator identified the victim’s behavior as resistance and self-defense to a greater extent than did those who read the summary blaming the victim ($M = 3.37$ vs. $2.56$), $F(1,37) = 4.32, p < .04$. Among high level subjects, endorsement of these identities did not differ between the summary blaming the perpetrator and the summary blaming the victim ($M = 2.52$ vs. $3.19$), $F(1,37) = 2.08, ns.$

Correlational analyses were performed to determine whether, and to what extent, subjects’ identities for the perpetrator’s and victim’s behavior were related to their allocation of responsibility and assessments of conduct. Results demonstrated that subjects who identified the perpetrator’s behavior as “raping a woman” allocated responsibility to him rather than to the victim, $r(46) = -.75, p < .0001$,

3. Finally, a reliable sex effect was observed for the second low level factor, $F(1,37) = 4.82, p < .03$. As compared to males, females were more likely to identify the victim’s behavior as almost falling asleep in class, pleading with a man to leave, tearing her skirt in trying to reach a pen, and making small talk in her apartment ($M = 5.79$ vs. $4.94$).
and evaluated his conduct negatively, \( r(46) = .66, p < .0001 \). Endorsement of the other identity factors for the perpetrator were not significantly correlated with the allocation and bad conduct measures. In the victim-as-target condition, meanwhile, subjects who identified the victim’s behavior as “defending herself” allocated responsibility to the perpetrator rather than to her, \( r(42) = -.38, p < .005 \), and evaluated her conduct in relatively positive terms, \( r(42) = -.40, p < .004 \). Conversely, subjects who identified the victim’s behavior as “establishing sexual relations” tended to allocate responsibility to her, \( r(42) = .20, p < .10 \), and evaluated her conduct relatively harshly, \( r(42) = .54, p < .0001 \). Identifying the victim’s behavior in low level terms or as having been victimized was not associated with subjects’ allocation of responsibility or their evaluation of her conduct.

PERSONALITY IMPRESSION

An ANOVA performed on subjects’ impression of the interviewee’s personality revealed only a main effect for target, \( F(1,88) = 87.05, p < .0001 \). Subjects indicated a considerably more negative impression of the perpetrator (\( M = 4.08 \)) than of the victim (\( M = 3.21 \)). No other main effects or interactions approached statistical reliability.

Correlational analyses, however, indicated that subjects’ overall impression of the target’s personality was related to their assessments of his or her behavior. Thus, subjects who indicated a negative impression of the perpetrator allocated responsibility to him rather than to the victim, \( r(45) = -.41, p < .003 \), evaluated his conduct negatively, \( r(45) = .48, p < .001 \), and identified his action as “raping a woman,” \( r(46) = .45, p < .001 \). In the victim-as-target condition, meanwhile, subjects who indicated a negative impression of the victim allocated relatively more responsibility to her, \( r(41) = .47, p < .001 \), evaluated her conduct in a relatively negative manner, \( r(39) = .47, p < .001 \), identified her action as “establishing sexual relations,” \( r(41) = .45, p < .002 \), and did not look upon what she did as “defending herself,” \( r(41) = -.45, p < .002 \).

DISCUSSION

The present data suggest that the emergence process is relevant to the identification and evaluation of questionable behavior, even with respect to an emotionally charged topic such as rape. Thus, the results
indicate that the allocation of responsibility for an alleged rape is not influenced directly by persuasive arguments favoring one source of blame over another, nor by explicit instructions to think about the act in question in high versus low level terms. The results do suggest, however, that people's judgments vary in response to particular combinations of identification level and persuasive argument. In line with the emergence hypothesis, learning of an alleged rape incident under a high level set rendered subjects impervious to the summary arguments, whereas learning of the action under a relatively low level set rendered subjects susceptible to the influence of whatever argument they subsequently encountered. This general conclusion, as well as the more specific findings upon which it is based, has relevance for both topical and theoretical issues. The relevance to each set of issues is discussed in turn.

TOPICAL RELEVANCE

A primary focus in psychological research on rape concerns the potential for blaming the victim (e.g., Bond & Mosher, 1986; Feldman-Summers & Lindner, 1976; Jones & Aronson, 1973; Wiener & Rinehart, 1986). This potential is commonly ascribed to basic motives on the part of observers that promote selective processing of the details surrounding the event, if not disregard for such information altogether (e.g., Borgida & Brekke, 1985). Control motivation (e.g., Walster, 1966), belief in a just world (e.g., Lerner, 1980), and self-esteem protection (e.g., Shaver, 1970), for example, serve to bias judgments in a number of domains and thus are no doubt relevant to judgments of rape victims as well. Beyond these general biases, there are attitudes and beliefs specific to rape that can promote unjustified pejorative judgments of rape victims (Burt, 1980). Because judgmental biases and rape attitudes are assumed to be more or less salient across a wide variety of contexts, blaming the victim operates much like a default value in judgment, promoting inferences and evaluations that are more in touch with one's concerns than with the facts of the matter. Working from this assumption, the remedy for blaming the victim in a specific instance involves providing observers with information that is explicitly inconsistent with their judgmental proclivity. With respect to alleged rape, this means unambiguous behavioral evidence that the victim attempted to dissuade the perpetrator, resist his attack, and so forth, or perhaps characteriological evidence (e.g., sexual history, marital status) inconsistent with a pejorative view of the victim's role.
The present perspective calls this tack and its underlying premise into question. Of course, in the face of detailed information concerning the incident that unequivocally vindicates the victim, it is unlikely that anyone but the most prejudiced observer would manage to place the blame on the victim for a rape incident. The data from the present study, however, suggest that the information need not be all that unequivocal in the victim’s favor in order for victim blame tendencies to be diminished. Indeed, it is precisely when behavioral information is open to interpretation and observers’ attention is drawn to such information, that observers seem to suspend their personal judgmental orientation, demonstrating instead susceptibility to plausible avenues of emergence provided in the judgment context. This suggests that perhaps blaming the victim is not an inevitable consequence of being exposed to ambiguous information concerning the behavior associated with an alleged rape incident. By the same token, of course, the dynamics of emergence are such that observers focusing on the lower level act identities of a rape incident could be led to assign more rather than less responsibility to the victim for what happened.

The results concerning allocation of responsibility indicate in a general way how subjects felt about the respective roles played by the perpetrator and victim. Responsibility is a very broad concept, however, subsuming a variety of more specific and potentially independent dimensions (cf. Fishbein & Ajzen, 1973). It is conceivable, for example, that a rape victim could be seen as responsible by one criterion (e.g., flirtatious behavior), but as not at all responsible by another (e.g., premeditation). It’s also the case that in constraining subjects to allocate relative responsibility to the targets, this measure didn’t adequately assess the intensity of judged responsibility. Thus, a midpoint response could mean that subjects judged both targets as highly responsible for what happened, or as equally faultless. For these reasons, subjects were also asked to focus on a particular target, identifying what he or she did and evaluating his or her conduct with respect to specific dimensions.

As it happened, the various dimensions of judgment were highly intercorrelated and responses to them were averaged to yield an overall measure of bad conduct. By this measure, emergence was demonstrated only for those who read the interview with and judged

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4. To be sure, subjects in the present study were not provided information about the victim’s sexual history or respectability, and the inclusion of such information conceivably could have influenced subjects’ subsequent judgments, in line with previous research (e.g., Jones & Aronson, 1973).
the perpetrator. Thus, low level subjects evaluating the perpetrator considered his behavior more reprehensible if they read the summary blaming him than if they read the summary blaming the victim, whereas high level subjects did not show such differential evaluation. Evaluation of the victim's conduct, meanwhile, did not show evidence of emergence, nor did it vary in response to police summary or identification level. Instead, the victim's conduct was seen by subjects generally as less reprehensible than was the perpetrator's. This is certainly reasonable, given that it is the perpetrator's conduct, not the victim's, that ultimately must be judged with respect to guilt or innocence.

Although the victim's behavior might be considered an excuse for the perpetrator's behavior, it would not be subject to criminal prosecution. Although emergence was not manifest in direct assessments of how reprehensibly the victim behaved, it did find expression in subjects' identifications of her behavior. Thus, whereas low level subjects exposed to a summary blaming the victim were reticent to condemn her conduct, they nonetheless felt that she had behaved seductively ("established sexual relations") and they tended to feel that she had not adequately tried to defend herself against the perpetrator's attack. This suggests that even though people may avoid claiming that a rape victim intended for the incident to occur or should be held accountable for her behavior, they may nonetheless have some suspicions in this regard that are reflected in their construal of her behavior. Perhaps in courtroom situations, where judgments of responsibility carry significant consequences (i.e., guilt vs. innocent verdicts), the doubts implicit in these emergent identities would promote less sympathetic assessments of the victim's role in what happened. Future research devoted to this possibility is clearly warranted.

Interestingly, act identities explicitly referring to victimization (Jane was the victim of a crime, was forced to do things against her will, etc.) did not show evidence of emergence, nor was this identification tendency associated with differential allocation of responsibility or judgments of bad conduct. It remains for future research, of course, to determine whether these data are general across judgmental contexts. But within the contextual and paradigmatic constraints of this study at least, it appears that emphasizing the passivity and helplessness of a rape victim may not be the best tack in attempting to promote judgments sympathetic to her cause on the part of observers.

It would be of interest to learn whether these findings can be extended to the issue of self-blame among rape victims (e.g., Burgess & Holmstrom, 1974; Frazier, 1990; Janoff-Bulman, 1982; Katz & Mazur, 1979; Meyer & Taylor, 1986). Because the concept of emergence was
developed and tested in the context of the identification of one's own action, the extension to self-blame is quite plausible. By emphasizing variation in levels of identification and the dynamics that promote stability versus change with respect to identification level, the present perspective holds promise for going beyond documenting the phenomenology of self-blame to suggest how one might intervene to attenuate this tendency. Quite simply, if a rape victim's high level identity for what happened promotes self-blame or is otherwise considered maladaptive (e.g., "I probably led him on"), the most viable tack for effecting change would be to encourage immersion in the details of what happened, followed by the suggestion of a more adaptive high level understanding of the event. Note that this strategy, based on emergence reasoning, stands in contrast to the more intuitively effective (and seemingly sympathetic) tack of providing a more desirable high level identity directly (e.g., "you didn't let him on, you were an innocent victim"), while encouraging suppression of the event's details. Indeed, given the resistance to reidentification when one has a firmly held high level identity for one's behavior (e.g., Wegner et al., 1986), this approach, though well-intended, could backfire, producing more rather than less self-blame on the victim's part.

It should be noted that attitudes and beliefs concerning rape and rape victims are especially value-laden, forming for many people a system of thought that is highly resistant to change (Burt, 1980). Thus, for those people who strongly hold to the rape myth (i.e., the unquestioned belief that women have an unconscious desire to be raped or are in some way always at fault for their rape), efforts beyond the simple instructional sets employed in the present research may be necessary to overcome their baserate tendency to find fault with the victim. Indeed, in prior research on action identification, we have found that it is sometimes necessary to disrupt a person's action in order to render low level features of the action prepotent, and even then this precondition for emergent understanding is often shortlived (e.g., Vallacher et al., 1989; Wegner et al., 1984). Among observers in naturalistic settings, then, the potential for malleability in action identification and responsibility judgments may be notably constrained, particularly among those with strongly held beliefs concerning rape. Still, the possibility that observers could be induced to set aside their preconceptions concerning rape in favor of lower level identities is realizable in principle, and this potential is clearly of sufficient importance to warrant future research exploring how it could be made manifest in non-laboratory contexts.
IMPLICATIONS FOR THEORY

The evidence of judgmental emergence provided in this study parallels findings obtained in research on people’s identification of their own action (e.g., Wegner et al., 1984, 1986). This suggests that stability and change in person perception may conform to the same dynamics responsible for stability and change in self-perception. In this view, people come to know one another’s actions under identities that vary in their relative level. Sometimes we observe action that is highly familiar or for which there are clear implications and consequences; such actions are likely to be identified in relatively high level terms, and thus provide a stable foundation for making inferences about the actor. On other occasions, the actions of others are decidedly unfamiliar or devoid of obvious meaning; such actions are likely to be identified initially in lower level, movement-defined terms. Low level identification is an unstable state, however, and gives way readily to alternative identities that provide more comprehensive understanding of what was done. So appealing is movement to high level from a deconstructed low level state that widely divergent higher level identities, even those that are mutually inconsistent, are embraced as plausible notions of what the person did.

Although the form and function of movement between identification levels may be isomorphic for self-perception and person perception, the manifestation of action identification dynamics may differ somewhat between these two domains. Because act identities are guides to action performance (Vallacher & Wegner, 1985, 1987, 1989; Wegner & Vallacher, 1986), unfamiliar or otherwise difficult action tends to be identified by the performer at relatively low levels, in spite of the preference for higher level understanding. Such pressures to low level identification are lacking in identifying others’ actions, however, so the preference for high level identification in person perception is more likely to be expressed. This means that an action identified at low level by an actor might be identified by an observer at high level; stated more generally, actions performed by others are more likely to be spontaneously identified in terms of intentions, consequences, traits, and other classes of high level identification (cf. Ross, 1977; Uleman, 1987).\(^5\)

\(^5\) Elsewhere (Vallacher & Wegner, 1987), we have suggested how this difference between self- and person perception might underly the purported difference between actors and observers in their respective causal attribution tendencies (cf. Jones & Nisbett, 1971).
Because variation in level of action identification appears to play a pivotal role in both self- and person perception, it may prove illuminating in future research to examine how such variation maps onto other basic factors influencing the nature of social judgment. The segmentation of observed behavior into small versus large units and the implicit hierarchical relation between differentially sized units (Newtson, 1976), for instance, has an obvious parallel to low versus high level identification (cf. Vallacher & Wegner, 1985). The work on impression versus memory sets in the organization of person information (Hamilton, 1981), too, may be cast in identification level terms, with memory sets paralleling lower levels of identification (attention to particular behavioral descriptions) and impression sets paralleling higher levels (a concern with global judgments based on behavioral descriptions).

At the same time, one must be careful not to overstate the parallel between identification level and either unitization or encoding set. Whereas both these variables represent dichotomies (i.e., small vs. large units, memory vs. impression sets), level of action identification is a relative concept; an identity is only low or high in relation to other available identities. Conceivably, then, large units in the segmentation paradigm could correspond to relatively low level act identities if all-encompassing, integrative act identities were available to the observer. The behavior descriptions employed in the encoding set paradigm, meanwhile, seem to represent a moderate level of comprehensiveness (e.g., "read the evening paper after dinner") and thus could qualify as either low level identities with respect to yet more comprehensive identities (e.g., "learned about the day’s events," "followed a daily ritual"), or as high level identities with respect to more detailed identities ("turned pages," "followed lines of print").

The relative nature of identification level notwithstanding, the exploration of connections between this variable and other features of social cognitive processing would undoubtedly shed new light on the nature of social judgment. Thus, if variation in identification level does indeed prove to be an implicit accompaniment to otherwise distinct psychological processes (unitization, encoding set, etc.), then the possibility exists that simply asking people what they (or others) are doing may provide insight not only into issues centering on stability and change in social judgment, but into such phenomena as memory, person vs. situation attribution, and the subjective organization of information as well. This potential for theoretical gain clearly warrants future research.
CONCLUSIONS

It is commonly assumed that to reach a fair judgment regarding a target person, one should pay close attention to the facts. Such an orientation, the reasoning goes, allows the person to form a balanced assessment on his or her own, one that is resistant to the persuasive appeals of those who may have a vested interest in the outcome of the assessment. The present data would seem to call this assumption into question. Indeed, it appears that attention to the details of action make one especially vulnerable to the opinions of others regarding the meaning of the action.

This is not to suggest that high level identification is less prone to biased assessment than is low level identification. To the contrary, the high level identities people spontaneously impose on ambiguous actions may often reflect unquestioned stereotypes, personal values, and idiosyncratic judgmental proclivities. Once generated, moreover, the judgments and characterization of the actor that follow from high level identification tend to be resistant to change—unless, of course, an even higher level identity for the action in question is provided. But whereas high level identification encourages idiosyncratic judgmental tendencies that are sustained by selective information processing, low level identification is biased precisely because it is not selective. In effect, the person identifying action in low level terms is lost in the minutia of the action, and from this deconstructed state is willing to explore plausible avenues of emergence that are subsequently made available.

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