

Attributional Complexity and the Camera Perspective Bias in Videotaped Confessions

G. Daniel Lassiter, Patrick J. Munhall, and Ian P. Berger

Ohio University

Paul E. Weiland

University of Toledo

Ian M. Handley

University of Florida

Andrew L. Geers

University of Toledo

Prior research has established that simply altering the perspective from which a videotaped confession is recorded influences judgments of the confession's voluntariness and the suspect's guilt. This study examined whether, when evaluating a videotaped confession, a higher degree of attributional complexity would buffer people from the contaminating effects of camera perspective. We found that although people high and low in attributional complexity differed in their overall verdicts and voluntariness assessments, they were comparably swayed by the camera's perspective. That is, consistent with prior demonstrations of the camera perspective bias, the proportion of guilty verdicts and the proportion assessing the confession was voluntary were both significantly greater when the camera focused on the suspect rather than focused equally on the suspect and the interrogator. Theoretical and practical implications of these findings are discussed.

According to the Innocence Project, coerced or false confessions obtained during police interrogations are a significant contributor to many of the wrongful convictions that have recently been uncovered with the aid of DNA testing (Innocence Project, 2001). The severity of the problem of coerced or false confessions influencing trial outcomes was made dramatically clear when in 2003 Illinois Governor George Ryan pardoned four death-row inmates because his investigations revealed that these people's confessions were the result of coercive influences. As one means of combating such injustices, there is an increasing reliance within the criminal justice system on videotape technology to record and present confession evidence.

An apparent advantage of videotaping an interrogation and confession is that such a procedure should make it possible for trial fact finders to determine objectively and accu-

rately whether a confession was voluntary or coerced and, consequently, whether it should carry any weight in their decisions concerning the guilt or innocence of a defendant. However, despite the seeming objectivity associated with the making and subsequent evaluation of a videotaped interrogation and confession, the scientific literature on illusory causation suggests that the videotaping procedure has the potential to influence judgments in a manner that is unintended and far from salutary.

WHEN AND WHY DOES ILLUSORY CAUSATION OCCUR?

Illusory causation occurs when people ascribe unwarranted causality to a stimulus simply because it is more noticeable or salient than other available stimuli (McArthur, 1980). In the first systematic demonstration of illusory causation in the social domain, Taylor and Fiske (1975) had observers view a

casual, two-person conversation. The vantage point of the observers was varied by seating them in different locations around the two interactants. After the conversation ended, observers rated each interactant in terms of the amount of causal influence he or she exerted during the exchange. The results revealed that greater causality was attributed to whichever person observers happened to be facing, which, of course, was determined by their seating position—an entirely incidental factor that logically should have had no bearing on the causal judgments of the observers.

Early attempts to specify a mediator of illusory causation emphasized memory processes (cf. McArthur, 1980). Generally, it was argued that salient information tends to be more memorable than nonsalient information, and this difference in memory is responsible for the greater causality ascribed to salient information. A recent study (Lassiter, Geers, Munhall, Ploutz-Snyder, & Breitenbecher, 2002), however, suggests that illusory causation may have more to do with how people initially pick up or register information from an observed interaction than with how they subsequently remember that information (McArthur, 1980). That is, the point of view from which people observe an interaction appears to influence the initial registration or perceptual organization of information from the ongoing interaction, which in turn directly influences causal attributions and related judgments.

ILLUSORY CAUSATION AND VIDEOTAPED CONFESSIONS

Under certain circumstances, we have no doubt that the videotape method, compared with more traditional methods of evidence presentation, can improve assessment of the voluntariness and reliability of confessions. Certainly, if interrogators use obviously assaultive coercion, any reasonable observer will recognize the illegitimacy of the confession. However, such third-degree intimidation has been replaced by nonassaultive psychological manipulation that is not always recognized as coercive but, as research has shown, can nonetheless lead to false admissions of guilt (Lassiter, 2004). In this age of psychologically oriented interrogation techniques, videotaping interrogations and confessions may not be a surefire preventive against convicting the truly innocent. In the United States and in many other countries (such as Canada, Australia, and the United Kingdom) videotaped interrogations and confessions are typically recorded with the camera focused on the suspect (Geller, 1992). Positioning the camera in this manner appears straightforward and logical because trial fact finders presumably need to see directly what the suspect said and did to best assess the voluntariness and veracity of his or her statements.

The illusory causation phenomenon, however, suggests the alarming possibility that the default camera perspective taken when recording criminal confessions (i.e., focused on

the suspect) could have an unintended prejudicial effect on trial participants' subsequent evaluations of the voluntariness of the confessions. More specifically, observers of a videotaped confession recorded with the camera focused on the suspect compared with the same confession recorded from a different camera perspective, might be more likely to judge the confession as voluntary (i.e., attributable to the suspect). Considerable empirical data now exist indicating that this is not simply a possibility; it is a reality.

EVIDENCE FOR A BIASING EFFECT OF CAMERA PERSPECTIVE ON EVALUATIONS OF VIDEOTAPED CONFESSIONS

In an initial demonstration of the biasing effect of camera perspective, Lassiter and Irvine (1986) showed participants a mock, videotaped confession recorded with the camera either focused on the suspect, focused equally on the suspect and interrogator, or focused on the interrogator. After the presentation of the confession, participants were asked to indicate the degree to which they believed it was coerced or involuntary. The confession was judged to be the least coerced in the suspect focus condition, more coerced in the equal focus condition, and the most coerced in the detective focus condition.

In a follow-up investigation, Lassiter, Slaw, Briggs, and Scanlan (1992) demonstrated that this *camera perspective bias* generalized across different crimes (i.e., rape, drug trafficking, and burglary) and that the suspect focus videotapes produced greater perceptions of voluntariness relative to both audiotape and transcript versions of the confessions. This result (later replicated) suggests that focusing the camera on the suspect led observers to judge these particular interrogations to be *less* coercive than they would have judged them had the confessions been presented in a more traditional format.

Nearly a dozen subsequent studies have shown that the camera perspective bias in videotaped confessions is robust and pervasive (Lassiter, 2002). It influences not only judgments of voluntariness but also perceived likelihood of guilt and sentencing recommendations; perceived likelihood of guilt is greater and sentencing recommendations are more severe when the suspect focus videotape of a confession is viewed. This bias occurs in the context of elaborate trial simulations (involving a homicide), with jury-eligible adults as well as college students serving as triers of fact. It is not reduced by the opportunity for decision makers to deliberate before rendering their judgments, and it persists even when they are made to feel particularly accountable for their evaluations. Finally, urging mock jurors to concentrate on the content of the confession, rather than the manner in which it was presented, does not diminish the prejudicial effect of camera perspective (see Lassiter, Geers, Munhall, Handley, & Beers,

2001 for a more detailed review of these and additional studies).

Although various situational factors have failed to curb the camera perspective bias in videotaped confessions, considerably less research has focused on the potential moderating influence of individual differences that naturally exist among decision makers. The only study to date that has investigated such dispositional influences was conducted by Lassiter et al. (1992), who examined whether individual differences in need for cognition (Cacioppo, Petty, Feinstein, & Jarvis, 1996) were related to susceptibility to the camera perspective bias. Despite the fact that people high in need for cognition are naturally motivated to be effortful and critical thinkers, they were no less immune to the biasing effect of camera perspective than their low need-for-cognition counterparts. Briggs and Lassiter (1994) conducted two additional tests of a possible moderating influence of need for cognition on the tendency to manifest the illusory causation phenomenon by having participants view “getting acquainted” conversations from different visual perspectives. These investigators also reported no significant relationship.

Despite the failures of Lassiter et al. (1992) and Briggs and Lassiter (1994) to find an association between need for cognition and susceptibility to the camera perspective bias or illusory causation phenomenon, we believe the search for possible individual difference moderators should be continued. As Ellsworth (1993) reminded us, no complete understanding of juror decision making can be achieved without taking into account the important role played by individual differences among jurors. The purpose of our research, then, was to investigate another individual difference variable that the social and personality literature suggests might predict which decision makers would tend to be more resistant to the prejudicial influence of camera perspective when evaluating the voluntariness of videotaped confessions.

INDIVIDUAL DIFFERENCES IN ATTRIBUTIONAL COMPLEXITY

Fletcher, Danilovics, Fernandez, Peterson, and Reeder (1986) contended that people differ both in their motivation to generate explanations for social behavior and in the complexity of explanations they generally produce. These differences, it is argued, are the result of people varying in terms of the complexity of attributional schemata they possess for organizing and interpreting social stimuli. To measure these purported differences, Fletcher et al. (1986) developed the Attributional Complexity Scale (ACS). The 28-item ACS contains seven attributional subcomponents—motivation to explain behavior, preference for complex explanations, presence of causal metacognitions, awareness of the causal importance of social interaction, tendency to infer complex internal attributions, tendency to infer abstract, contemporary external attributions, and tendency to infer external causes

operating from the past. People whose responses indicate that they are high (low) across these various subscales are considered to be attributionally complex (simple). Several studies have reported that the full scale’s psychometric properties (e.g., internal reliability, test–retest reliability, convergent and discriminant validity) are good (Fletcher et al., 1986; Flett, Pliner, & Blankstein, 1989).

A number of investigations have shown that individual differences in attributional complexity (as measured by the full scale) do influence a variety of judgments and decision processes. For example, people who score relatively high on the ACS tend to generate more spontaneous and complex causes for social behavior (Fletcher et al., 1986), spend more time processing relevant information when the causal issues are especially difficult (Fletcher, Rosanowski, Rhodes, & Lange, 1992), and, when given adequate time to process carefully, more accurately judge the traits and attitudes of others (Fletcher, Reeder, & Bull, 1990). Murphy (1994) provided evidence that attributional complexity is positively related to the amount of information initially selected from the environment. Importantly, attributionally complex people selected not only more information but also more causally diagnostic information than did their attributionally simple counterparts. Using discriminant analyses, Murphy (1994) further demonstrated that initial information selection predicted the later causal judgments of attributionally complex people. Overall, these studies indicated that higher levels of attributional complexity are associated with more thoroughgoing information processing (from the information acquisition stage to the information integration stage), which in turn is associated generally with less biased and more accurate causal judgments.

Although attributionally complex people often perform better on judgment tasks that involve causal reasoning, evidence indicates that they may, in certain instances, perform more poorly than their attributionally simple counterparts do. For example, Devine (1989) and Fletcher et al. (1990) found that attributionally complex people were actually more prone to the correspondence bias—that is, the tendency to overattribute situationally constrained behavior to dispositional causes. This result reminds us that even a variable that generally improves judgments may sometimes exacerbate particular judgmental biases (cf. Lerner & Tetlock, 1999).

CAN GREATER ATTRIBUTIONAL COMPLEXITY MODERATE THE PREJUDICIAL EFFECTS OF CAMERA PERSPECTIVE?

Need for cognition is associated primarily with differential motivation among people to apply effortful thought processes to a wide range of cognitive challenges (Cacioppo et al., 1996), whereas attributional complexity reflects individual differences specifically with regard to expertise in causal inference (Fletcher et al., 1992; Murphy, 1994). As such, we

believe attributional complexity may succeed as a moderator of the camera perspective bias and illusory causation phenomenon where need for cognition failed.¹

We reasoned that evaluating the voluntariness of a confession (in this instance, one 30-min in duration) presents a challenging attributional problem for observers—that is, did the confessor freely choose to admit guilt or were such self-incriminating statements the result of coercive pressure emanating from the interrogator? It is exactly situations of real-world significance like this that should permit individual differences in attributional complexity to manifest themselves. That is, Fletcher et al. (1990) found that conditions that call for and allow in-depth attributional processing are precisely the ones that provide attributionally complex people with the motivation to draw on their more sophisticated causal schemata to produce more complete and accurate explanations for observed behavior. That being the case, and given the aforementioned evidence that differences in attributional complexity are associated with differences in information acquisition and integration (Murphy, 1994), we anticipated that attributionally complex people would be more likely to base their evaluations of the videotaped confession on relevant causal information and to ignore nondiagnostic factors such as the perspective from which the confession was originally videotaped. In doing so, they should then show less of a camera perspective bias than their attributionally simple counterparts.

In light of the aforementioned reports of a heightened susceptibility of attributionally complex people to the correspondence bias (Devine, 1989; Fletcher et al. 1990), we also thought that higher levels of attributional complexity might be associated with perceiving the confession as resulting more from internal causes. If this were the case, it might be expected that attributionally complex people would evaluate the confession to be more voluntary overall than attributionally simple people.

METHOD

Participants

Ninety-one male and female Ohio University undergraduates participated in small groups in exchange for partial course credit.

Videotaped Confession

The videotaped stimulus (approximately 30-min long) consisted of a partial recreation of the interrogation and confession of Bradley Page, a college student convicted of the man-

slaughter of his romantic partner, Bibi Lee, based largely on his disputed confession. Many psychological and legal experts viewed Page's confession as an instance of a coerced compliant confession (Kassin & Wrightsman, 1985) and his ensuing conviction as a miscarriage of justice (e.g., Pratkanis & Aronson, 1991). Elliot Aronson, who was called to testify at Page's trial as an expert on "noncoercive" persuasion, was given access to audiotapes of the interrogation, and he provided the following brief account of what essentially transpired while Page was in custody.

After inducing Brad to waive his rights to an attorney ("We're all friends, here, aren't we?"), the police interrogators had him go over his story several times. During the interrogation, they kept asking him how he could possibly have left his girlfriend alone in the park and driven back home. Brad felt terribly guilty about it, saying several times, "It was the biggest mistake of my life!" Each time they asked the question, his guilt appeared to grow.

Finally, the interrogators told Brad that late on the night that Bibi had disappeared he had been seen near the site of the shallow grave [where Lee's body was recovered] and that his fingerprints had been found on a rock that had been used as the murder weapon. Neither of these statements was true. Brad said that he had no recollection of having left his apartment that night and had no idea how his fingerprints could have gotten on the murder weapon (he didn't even know what the weapon was). But he had no reason to distrust the interrogators, so, understandably, he became terribly confused and asked them if it is possible for a person to "blank it out." The interrogators informed him that such things were common occurrences and that it might help him relieve his *guilty* conscience if he closed his eyes and tried to imagine how he *might* have killed Bibi *if he had killed her*. Brad proceeded to do as he was told, inventing what he later described as an imaginative scenario. Two hours after his alleged confession, when he was told that the police considered it to be a confession, he appeared genuinely astonished and immediately recanted. (Pratkanis & Aronson, 1991, pp. 175–176, emphasis in original)

Our partial reenactment of the Page interrogation and "confession" was recorded simultaneously by two video cameras, each taking a different visual perspective. (These stimulus tapes were professionally produced with the assistance of the telecommunications department at Ohio University.) A suspect focus version of the confession was made with the camera positioned so that the front of the suspect from the waist up and the back of the detective (part of his head and one shoulder) were visible. An equal focus version of the confession was made with the camera positioned so that the sides of both the suspect and detective from the waist up could be seen equally well.

Procedure

On arrival, participants were seated at a long table in front of a video monitor. The experimenter informed participants that

¹Fletcher et al. (1986) reported a moderate correlation of .36 between the Need for Cognition Scale and the ACS. Importantly, they also found that the two scales produced different patterns of relationships with several other variables (e.g., social desirability, dogmatism, and internal–external locus of control). Based on these results, the researchers concluded that the two scales measure different, albeit somewhat related, constructs.

their task was to assume the role of trial jurors, thereby helping researchers “discover how people in real courtrooms make decisions about the validity of confession evidence.” Participants read a brief description of the concept of coercion and then were randomly assigned to view either the suspect focus or equal focus version of the videotaped confession.

After viewing the confession, participants, individually and without any prior group discussion, wrote down first their verdicts (guilty or not guilty) and then their assessments of the voluntary status of the confession (voluntary or involuntary). Participants also provided confidence ratings for their verdicts and voluntariness assessments on separate 9-point scales (1 = *not confident*, 9 = *extremely confident*). After completion of the dependent measures, participants filled out the 28-item ACS (Fletcher et al., 1986). Finally, participants were debriefed and dismissed from the experiment.

RESULTS

As has been done in previous studies using the ACS, a median split was performed on the distribution of attributional complexity scores ($Mdn = 31.5$, range = -15 to 72 , Cronbach's $\alpha = .88$) to classify participants as either high or low in attributional complexity.²

Because the verdict and voluntariness data are categorical in nature, log linear analyses were conducted on these two dependent measures. Both measures were analyzed with camera perspective (suspect focus vs. equal focus) and attributional complexity (high vs. low) as the predictor variables. The analysis of the verdict data revealed a nearly significant main effect of attributional complexity, $\chi^2(1, N = 91) = 3.04$, $p = .08$, with participants high in attributional complexity rendering a greater proportion of guilty verdicts (.94) than participants relatively low in attributional complexity (.84). In addition, consistent with prior demonstrations of the camera perspective bias, the proportion of guilty verdicts rendered in the suspect focus condition (.96) was significantly greater than that observed in the equal focus condition (.83), $\chi^2(1, N = 91) = 4.75$, $p = .03$. Importantly, the two-way interaction was not significant, $\chi^2(1, N = 91) = 1.02$, $p = .31$. This result indicates that the verdicts of participants high and low in attributional complexity were similarly contaminated by camera perspective (see Table 1).

The pattern of results on judgments of voluntariness mirrored that obtained for verdicts (see Table 1). Participants high in attributional complexity assessed the confession as significantly more voluntary (.66) than participants relatively low in attributional complexity (.41), $\chi^2(1, N = 91) = 7.37$, p

TABLE 1
Proportion of Guilty Verdicts and Proportion Assessing Confession Was Voluntary as a Function of Camera Perspective and Attributional Complexity

Measure	Camera Perspective	
	Equal-focus	Suspect-focus
High Attributional Complexity		
Guilty verdicts	.89 (27)	1.00 (20)
Voluntariness assessments	.52 (27)	.85 (20)
Low Attributional Complexity		
Guilty verdicts	.75 (20)	.92 (24)
Voluntariness assessments	.35 (20)	.46 (24)

Note. Parenthetical entries are cell sizes.

< .01. The proportion of participants judging the confession to be voluntary in the suspect focus condition (.64) reliably exceeded that found in the equal focus condition (.45), $\chi^2(1, N = 91) = 4.89$, $p = .03$. Again, higher levels of attributional complexity conferred no defense against the camera perspective bias as the two-way interaction was nonsignificant, $\chi^2(1, N = 91) = 1.63$, $p = .20$.

Although using a median split has been the norm in analyzing attributional complexity data, such a procedure may be less powerful than taking advantage of participants' actual scale scores. Therefore, we also conducted a logistic regression analysis on the voluntariness and verdict data, with raw attributional complexity scores and camera perspective as the predictors. The results were comparable with those found for the above analyses. That is, there were significant effects of camera perspective ($\chi^2 s[1, N = 91] = 3.94$ and 4.14 , $p < .05$, for the verdict and voluntariness data, respectively), but no evidence of Attributional Complexity \times Camera Perspective interactions ($\chi^2 s < 1$ for both the verdict and voluntariness data). The main effects for attributional complexity found using the median-split procedure did not attain significance in the logistic regressions ($p > .13$).

Our failure to find a moderating effect of attributional complexity on the camera perspective bias may be a consequence of relying on dichotomous dependent variables, which are often considered less sensitive than comparable continuous variables. The decision to use such categorical variables is attributable to the growing expectation within the legal-psychology community that jury simulation research abandon psychometrically attractive continuous variables in favor of more ecologically valid dichotomous and categorical ones (Diamond, 1997). It is possible, however, to create potentially more sensitive scalar measures by combining participants' verdicts and voluntariness judgments with their corresponding confidence ratings.³ Specifically, positive

²Because attributional complexity data were collected after the manipulation of camera perspective, it is possible that this manipulation influenced participants' responses. To assess this possibility, we conducted a t test on attributional complexity scores, with the camera perspective manipulation as the independent variable. No significant effect emerged ($p > .10$).

³Separate analyses of the confidence ratings for voluntariness assessments and verdicts revealed no significant effects of the independent variables on either measure. Overall, participants were quite confident of the appropriateness of their verdicts ($M = 7.30$) and voluntariness judgments ($M = 6.25$).

confidence values were assigned to “guilty” and “voluntary” responses, whereas negative confidence values were assigned to “not guilty” and “involuntary” responses, resulting in a continuum of scores ranging from -9 (maximum confidence that the confession [suspect] was involuntary [not guilty]) to +9 (maximum confidence that the confession [suspect] was voluntary [guilty]). This “scalarization” technique is used often in mock juror research (e.g., Kassin & Sukel, 1997). Moreover, Diamond (1997) noted its real-world validity for predicting juror changes in verdict preference after deliberation (i.e., jurors who expressed less confidence in their predeliberation verdict choice were more likely to change).

Separate 2 (Camera Perspective) \times 2 (Attributional Complexity [based on median split]) analyses of variance (ANOVAs) were performed on the scalar versions of participants’ guilt and voluntariness judgments (see Table 2 for means). The ANOVA on the scalar guilt measure revealed a marginally significant main effect of attributional complexity, $F(1, 87) = 3.12, p = .08$, a significant main effect of camera perspective, $F(1, 87) = 4.10, p < .05$, and a nonsignificant two-way interaction ($F < 1$). The ANOVA on the scalar voluntariness measure revealed significant main effects for both attributional complexity, $F(1, 87) = 7.03, p < .01$, and camera perspective, $F(1, 87) = 4.56, p < .05$, but no significant interaction of the two ($F < 1$).

For completeness sake, we subjected the two scalar versions of the dependent variables to separate regression analyses using raw attributional complexity scores and camera perspective as the predictors. These analyses also failed to provide evidence that attributional complexity moderates the camera perspective bias.

Flett et al. (1989) noted that psychometric analyses indicate that at least some of the ACS subscales (each consisting of only four items) yield low internal consistency coefficients; therefore, they recommended that results involving the individual subscales of the ACS be interpreted with caution until further work on the psychometric properties of the scale (particularly its subcomponents) is conducted. With

TABLE 2
Means for Scalar Versions of Guilt and
Voluntariness Measures as a Function of Camera
Perspective and Attributional Complexity

Measure	Camera Perspective	
	Equal Focus	Suspect Focus
High Attributional Complexity		
Guilt	6.26 (27)	7.25 (20)
Voluntariness	.52 (27)	4.05 (20)
Low Attributional Complexity		
Guilt	3.70 (20)	6.50 (24)
Voluntariness	-2.30 (20)	-.17 (24)

Note. Guilt and voluntariness scales both ranged from -9 to +9, with higher numbers indicating greater confidence in the guilt of the suspect and in the voluntariness of his confession, respectively. Parenthetical entries are cell sizes.

this caveat in mind, we made a final attempt to find support for the notion that higher levels of attributional complexity confer some resistance to the biasing effect of camera perspective by conducting all the previously mentioned analyses separately on each of the seven subcomponents of the ACS. No significant two-way interactions emerged.

Supplemental Data Set

Devine (1989) found that although attributionally complex people made normatively inappropriate internal attributions for another person’s externally constrained behavior, they were in fact less sure of the correctness of their judgments than were attributionally simple people. Devine argued that this meant that on some level, attributionally complex people were somewhat sensitive to the influence of the situation on the person’s behavior. As noted in Footnote 3, we did not find any significant effects with regard to participants’ confidence in either their verdicts or voluntariness assessments. Nonetheless, Devine’s results suggest the possibility that a more indirect assessment of people’s reactions to the videotaped confession might provide evidence for the predicted moderation of the camera perspective bias.

To examine this possibility, we collected data from an additional 64 participants (Ohio University undergraduates) using the same methods as previously described, with the exception that participants were asked to address only the following question: “If the suspect were convicted, how severe should his sentence be?” Participants responded on a 9-point scale (1 = minimum sentence, 9 = maximum sentence). This measure has been used once previously to assess the camera perspective bias, and the results showed that people observing a suspect focus version of a confession recommended more severe sentences (Lassiter et al., 2001). Interestingly, in that study, path analyses revealed that sentence recommendations were partially mediated by voluntariness and guilt judgments but also were directly affected by the camera perspective manipulation. The significant variance in sentence recommendations unaccounted for by the voluntariness and guilt judgments suggests this measure may possess the extra sensitivity needed to expose the moderating effect of attributional complexity we are seeking.

Data were analyzed using both the median-split procedure ($Mdn = 36$ on the ACS) and the regression approach.⁴ A 2 (Camera Perspective) \times 2 (Attributional Complexity) ANOVA revealed a significant effect of camera perspective, with participants recommending more severe sentences in the suspect focus condition ($M = 7.46$) than in the equal focus condition ($M = 6.58$), $F(1, 60) = 4.70, p < .05$. The recommended sentences of participants high in attributional complexity were more severe ($M = 7.21$) than those of participants low in attributional complexity ($M = 6.71$), although

⁴A t test revealed no effect of the camera perspective manipulation on responses to the ACS ($t < 1$).

this difference was not significant ($p = .23$). Finally, the two-way interaction also failed to achieve significance. The regression analysis yielded a comparable pattern of results, with the camera perspective manipulation being the only predictor to reach significance ($\beta = .49, p < .05$). Thus, a more indirect dependent variable, and a truly continuous one at that, was no more successful in turning up a moderating effect of attributional complexity on the camera perspective bias than the measures used in the main investigation.⁵

DISCUSSION

In 11 previous studies, various attempts were made to reduce the biasing effect of camera perspective on decision makers' evaluations of videotaped confessions (Lassiter et al., 2001). Heightening the accountability of decision makers, allowing them to deliberate in groups before rendering their judgments, explicitly forewarning them of the bias, and having a judge, in the context of an elaborate trial simulation, provide detailed instructions about how to evaluate confession evidence, all failed to diminish the prejudicial effect of camera perspective. The current study was different from all but one of the prior investigations in that it focused on a potential moderating factor that was dispositional, rather than situational, in nature. Nonetheless, the outcome was the same. No evidence was found to indicate that possessing a high level of attributional complexity insulates one from the camera perspective bias in videotaped confessions.

Interestingly, there was some evidence that people high and low in attributional complexity did differ in their overall verdicts and voluntariness assessments. That is, people higher in attributional complexity were more inclined to view the confession as voluntary and tended to render more guilty verdicts. As noted earlier, Devine (1989) and Fletcher et al. (1990) reported that people high (relative to low) in attributional complexity tended to perceive another's behavior as arising more from internal causes, even when the observed behavior could readily be explained by strong situational forces. Given that an interrogation constitutes a situation in which external pressures to confess are great, our results may be viewed as a conceptual replication of these earlier findings.

WHY DID ATTRIBUTIONAL COMPLEXITY FAIL TO MODERATE THE CAMERA PERSPECTIVE BIAS?

It is surprising that those people who are presumably the most capable in terms of their ability to reason thoroughly and accurately about the causal underpinnings of events were

just as susceptible to the camera perspective bias as their attributionally simple counterparts. Prior research has shown that differences between attributionally complex and simple people are most apparent when they are confronted with difficult causal problems and under conditions that encourage and allow in-depth attributional processing (Fletcher et al., 1990, 1992). We believe these conditions were met in our study.

Participants from the beginning were told to assume the role of trial jurors and read information describing the importance to our system of justice of being able to distinguish between voluntary and involuntary confessions. The videotaped interrogation and confession lasted nearly half an hour; when finished, participants were allowed as much time as they needed to provide their evaluation, so it appears both encouragement and the opportunity for assiduous processing were achieved in our investigation.

We believe also that the task of assessing the voluntary status of the videotaped confession was sufficiently challenging to allow for differences between attributionally complex and simple people to emerge. Voluntary assessments across the four cells of the design ranged from a low of .35 to a high of .85, indicating that an obvious, readily extractable answer to the voluntariness question could not be discerned easily from viewing the interrogation and confession. It might be argued that the variability in voluntariness assessments is a reflection of the task being too baffling or difficult, and thus participants were at a loss as to how to respond. However, the fact that participants expressed considerable confidence in their judgments (see Footnote 3) does not support such an interpretation.

Perhaps the judgment differences associated with variability in attributional complexity obtained in previous studies do not generalize to instances of juridical decision making. However, a recent mock jury study (Pope & Meyer, 1999) that also used videotaped stimulus materials found significant effects associated with individual differences in attributional complexity. Moreover, in the current study, attributionally complex and simple people did think differently about the information, as reflected in their varying verdicts and voluntariness assessments. Apparently, it just was not the kind of processing difference that would influence whether one was or was not affected by the camera perspective bias.

This latter point is consistent with recent data (Lassiter et al., 2002) showing that point-of-view effects in causal attribution are largely a consequence of differences in perceptual segmentation, which, for the most part, occur before the kind of cognitive elaboration in which attributionally complex people are likely to excel. Thus, it appears that attributionally complex and simple people initially registered information from the observed interaction in a similar fashion; it was at this stage of processing that the biasing effects of camera perspective took root. Even though attributionally complex and simple people likely differed in terms of the thoroughness

⁵Separate analyses performed on the seven subscales of the ACS also yielded no evidence of a moderating influence of attributional complexity on the camera perspective bias.

and sophistication with which they subsequently reflected on the information extracted, the damage was already done and could not be easily remedied (cf. Wilson & Brekke, 1994).

If this reasoning is correct, why did level of attributional complexity not produce variation in initial information selection when prior research (Murphy, 1994), as noted earlier, has shown exactly such differences can occur? One possibility is that Murphy (1994) used written stimulus materials to examine information acquisition patterns, whereas in the current study, the target stimulus was a videotaped ongoing interaction. Massad, Hubbard, and Newton (1979, p. 529) warned “that the generalization from studies using written, and hence preselected and, to a degree, preprocessed, stimulus information to studies using ongoing behavior must be done cautiously.” They noted, for example, that research on the effects of observational goals on memory for behavior shows that an impression formation goal confers a memorial advantage over a straightforward memorization goal when written behaviors are the stimuli (Hamilton, Katz, & Leirer, 1980). However, the exact opposite pattern evinces when the to-be-remembered behavior is presented as a continuous ongoing stream of information (Cohen & Ebbesen, 1979). It is possible, then, that attributional complexity influences information acquisition or pick up only when the information is presented in certain formats. We believe that researchers interested in gaining a fuller understanding of the attributional complexity construct might well benefit from empirically pursuing this issue.

The fact that attributional complexity did not moderate the camera perspective bias may, at first blush, appear to undermine the significance of the present research for the ACS literature. We believe that such a view is shortsighted. The publication norm of omitting null hypothesis results from empirical journals has the potential to impede nuanced, inductive theory development. Lerner and Tetlock (1999) were able to achieve exactly this with their flexible contingency model of the effects of accountability on decision makers’ susceptibility to various judgmental biases. Their model, however, could not have been developed without the extant literature containing instances of accountability attenuating, amplifying, and having no effect on bias. In the same way, the potential for a complete understanding of the construct of attributional complexity as it relates to various causal judgment biases can be achieved only when the published literature accurately represents the full array of effects or non-effects, as the case may be, associated with the ACS.

PRACTICAL IMPLICATIONS OF THE CURRENT RESEARCH

Over the last several years, many legal scholars, criminal justice practitioners, political leaders, and social scientists have called for the universal adoption of videotaping as a “quick fix” for the problem of some innocent people being induced

to incriminate themselves when confronted by standard police interrogation tactics. Our study adds to a growing body of evidence that indicates that the indiscriminate application of the videotaping procedure to solve the problem of coerced or false confessions slipping through the system could potentially make things worse.

As pointed out earlier, in the United States and in many other countries, videotaped interrogations and confessions are customarily recorded with the camera lens directed at the suspect. One reason for this particular positioning of the camera is likely the belief that a careful examination of not only suspects’ words but also their less conspicuous actions or expressions, will ultimately reveal the truth of the matter.

The empirical validity of such beliefs aside, we have shown across a dozen studies that focusing the video camera primarily on the suspect in an interrogation has the effect of impressing on viewers the notion that his or her statements are more likely freely and intentionally given and not the result of some form of coercion. Moreover, previous studies showing judgments derived from suspect focus videotapes significantly deviate from judgments based on “control” media (transcripts and audiotapes) leads us to conclude that the greater perception of voluntariness associated with suspect focus videotapes is an unmistakable bias of the most serious kind—one that runs contrary to the cornerstone of our system of justice, the presumption of innocence.

Are we thus recommending that videotaped interrogation and confession evidence not be used at all in courts of law? No, because data from our overall program of research do not paint an entirely negative picture with regard to the use of videotaped confessions in the courtroom. As found previously (Lassiter et al., 2001), videotaped confessions that focused on both the suspect and the interrogator equally generated judgments comparable with those based on more traditional presentation formats (i.e., audiotapes and transcripts). Thus, it is clear that the videotaping procedure per se is not inherently prejudicial. Rather, it is the manner in which the videotaping procedure is implemented that holds the potential for bias. It appears, then, that the advantages associated with the videotape method—for example, a more detailed record of the interrogation is provided to trial participants—can be maintained without introducing bias if an equal focus perspective is taken by the video camera.

Finally, although many attempts to find a moderator of the camera perspective bias have so far produced null results, we wish to remind the reader that this is only the second systematic attempt to identify a dispositional, as opposed to a situational, moderator. As such, we believe it is far too soon to discontinue the search for possible individual differences in the extent to which camera perspective influences evaluations of videotaped confessions. Until policies are enacted that prevent suspect focus videotaped confessions from making their way to court, continued research into the nature and pervasiveness of the illusory causation phenomenon appears warranted.

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