

What is Fair Punishment for Alex or Ahmed? Perspective Taking *Increases* Racial Bias in Retributive Justice Judgments

Jan-Willem van Prooijen · Jennifer Coffeng

Published online: 14 August 2013
© Springer Science+Business Media New York 2013

Abstract Previous research frequently found that perspective taking may reduce various sorts of racial biases. In the present research, we propose that perspective taking may *increase* racial bias in the specific context of retributive justice judgments, that is, evaluations of what punishment is considered fair for offenders. In two studies, we manipulated whether or not participants took the perspective of a target offender, who was named either Alex or Ahmed. Results revealed evidence for racial bias under conditions of perspective taking in both studies: Perspective taking increased punishment for Ahmed, but not for Alex, in a theft case (Study 1). Furthermore, perspective taking decreased punishment for Alex, but not for Ahmed, in the case of less severe offense that is less clearly intentional (Study 2). The consequence is similar in both studies: More severe retributive justice judgments for Ahmed than for Alex under conditions of perspective taking.

Keywords Perspective taking · Punishment · Racial bias · Prejudice · Retributive justice

J.-W. van Prooijen (✉)
Department of Social and Organizational Psychology, VU University Amsterdam, van der
Boechorststraat 1, 1081 BT Amsterdam, The Netherlands
e-mail: j.w.van.prooijen@vu.nl

J.-W. van Prooijen
The Netherlands Institute for the Study of Crime and Law Enforcement (NSCR), Amsterdam, The
Netherlands

J. Coffeng
Department of Public & Occupational Health, VU Medical Center, EMGO+ Institute, Amsterdam,
The Netherlands

The criminal justice system of many nations is symbolized by lady justice wearing a blindfold. This blindfold means that when evaluating transgressions, the justice system should be blind to the offender's ethnicity, gender, sexual orientation, political affiliation, and other social categorizations that are irrelevant to the nature of the transgression. As such, the criminal justice system seeks to impose punishment on criminal offenders by using procedures that apply equally to everyone. One of the main purposes of this system is to satisfy lay people's desire for *retributive justice*, which is defined as people's sense that offenders received fair and appropriate punishment, commensurate with the severity of the transgression (e.g., Carlsmith & Darley, 2008; Gerber & Jackson, 2013; Gollwitzer & Bücklein, 2007; Hogan & Emler, 1981; Van Prooijen & Kerpershoek, 2013; Vidmar, 2002). In reality, however, lay people's retributive justice judgments are rarely immune to the impact of social categorizations. For instance, in many countries, specific ethnic groups are stereotypically more strongly associated with crime than others. These expectations frequently lead people to desire more severe punishment for offenders who belong to negatively stereotyped ethnic groups (e.g., Arabs; Blacks) as opposed to offenders who are from non-stereotyped groups (e.g., Whites) for the same transgression (cf. Graham, Weiner, & Zucker, 1997; Johnson, Whitestone, Jackson, & Gatto, 1995; Sweeney & Haney, 1992). Such racial bias in retributive justice judgments may contribute substantially toward perpetuating social inequality, by promoting systematic unequal treatment of offenders depending on their ethnicity.

Various empirical studies indeed suggest that people respond differently toward offenders depending on their ethnicity. For instance, Bodenhausen and Wyer (1985) found that participants were more punitive and expected more recidivism, if the offender was Arab instead of American, particularly in the context of stereotypically consistent offenses. In addition, people evaluate evidence differently for suspects from negatively stereotyped ethnic groups (Johnson et al., 1995; but see Sargent & Bradfield, 2004) and have more negative expectations about them, which increases police officers' likelihood to shoot instead of not shoot a possibly armed person (Correll, Park, Judd, & Wittenbrink, 2002). More generally, many studies find a "similarity-leniency" effect such that people are more lenient toward perpetrators from their ingroup as opposed to an outgroup (Kerr, Hymes, Anderson, & Weathers, 1995; Sommers & Ellsworth, 2000). It must be noted that, in line with the black sheep effect (Abrams, Marques, Bown, & Henson, 2000; Marques & Paez, 1994), the opposite pattern may also be expected in a variety of situations, in that people sometimes punish offenders from their ingroup more severely (Gollwitzer & Keller, 2010; Kerr et al., 1995; Van Prooijen, 2006; Van Prooijen & Lam, 2007). But when the relevant intergroup distinction involves an ethnic group that is stereotypically associated with crime, more severe punishment of the stereotyped offender is a frequently occurring pattern (Sweeney & Haney, 1992).

For both scientific and societal reasons, it is important to understand what moderating factors attenuate or accentuate such racial bias in retributive justice judgments. A variable that is directly suggested by literature on prejudice and discrimination is perspective taking, defined as the extent to which people try to see the world from another individual's viewpoint (Batson, 1991). Perspective taking frequently has been proposed as a possible antidote against prejudice and

discrimination due to its potential to stimulate communal concern for others. Research indeed found that perspective taking reduces various sorts of racial biases (e.g., Dovidio et al., 2004; Galinsky & Moskowitz, 2000; Todd, Bodenhausen, Richeson, & Galinsky, 2011). The influence of perspective taking on punishment preferences in reaction to offenders has not been well established, however. In the present contribution, we propose that, in the specific case of punishing offenders, perspective taking is likely to backfire and to instead *increase* racial bias. Thus, taking the perspective of an offender may lead to more severe punishment if the offender carries the name Ahmed as opposed to Alex. In the following, we introduce our line of reasoning in more detail.

Perspective Taking and Retributive Justice

People are often required to take the perspective of others when ascribing mental states to them. It has been noted that perspective taking is a central component in people's cognitions, emotions, and behaviors in many social situations (e.g., Batson, 1991; Davis et al., 2004). For instance, taking the perspective of others who experience some form of misfortune has been found to evoke empathy, which is characterized by an emotional experience that resembles the emotional experience of the victim (Batson, Eklund, Chermok, Hoyt, & Ortiz, 2007; Loewenstein & Small, 2007). Moreover, a cognitive implication of perspective taking is that it increases the extent to which people perceive the self as connected to another person, such that other becomes more "self-like" and self becomes more "other-like" (Galinsky, Wang, & Ku, 2008). As a consequence of such increased perceptions of a shared identity, perspective taking has been found to improve intergroup attitudes and decrease various expressions of prejudice (Dovidio et al., 2004). Likewise, perspective taking has been found to decrease stereotyping and ingroup bias (Galinsky & Moskowitz, 2000), to decrease automatic racial bias (Todd et al., 2011), and to increase liking of, and helping behavior toward, members of an ethnic outgroup (Shih, Wang, Bucher, & Stotzer, 2009).

Perspective taking does not under all circumstances lead to a more positive communal connection with others, however. Research by Epely, Caruso, and Bazerman (2006) reveals that, in the context of competitive resource allocations, perspective taking may induce people to take more from a common pool due to "reactive egoism," that is, increased expectations that the other will behave selfishly. Perspective taking thus leads people to expect more egoism from others in situations where egocentric biases are likely to occur. Furthermore, in the context of intergroup interactions, perspective taking can actually increase prejudice due to an activation of negative metastereotypes (i.e., stereotypic expectations of how the outgroup member perceives the ingroup; Vorauer & Sasaki, 2009). Relatedly, a recent study reveals that whereas perspective taking may decrease negative intergroup perceptions among members who identify weakly with their ingroup, it may increase negative intergroup perceptions among high identifiers (Tarrant, Calitri, & Weston, 2012). Finally, research by Okimoto and Wenzel (2011a) explicitly focused on the implications of perspective taking for revenge on

offenders. Their results indicate that perspective taking decreases revenge when there is ambiguity about the extent to which the offender had immoral motives, but it increases revenge if the offender clearly had immoral motives. These effects emerged only among participants with high interdependent self-construal. Taken together, the research literature suggests that perspective taking has the potential to not only improve, but also deteriorate interpersonal perceptions and behaviors.

Building on these insights, we propose that the effects of perspective taking on punitive reactions to offenders are a two-edged sword. On the one hand, perspective taking can lead to more leniency toward offenders, for instance, because of increased empathy, a sense of identification, or a greater ability to appreciate extenuating circumstances. Consistent with this reasoning, perspective taking has been found to increase situational attributions for behavior (Vescio, Sechrist, & Paolucci, 2003). But on the other hand, perspective taking may also lead to more severity toward offenders, for instance, because of increased attributions of selfishness (Epley et al., 2006) or an increased desire to distance the self from the offender (Okimoto & Wenzel, 2011a). In the present research, we investigate the possibility that whether or not perspective taking leads to more leniency or severity toward offenders depends on racial stereotypes.

Our line of reasoning is based on the idea that when people try to take the perspective of an offender, they largely base themselves on their assumptions about the motives that drove the offender's behavior. To make sense of these motives, people are likely to resort to their existing mental frames of reference about what characteristics offenders typically have, and what typically drives their behavior. These mental frames of reference frequently contain ethnic stereotypes. Indeed, research that was conducted in the Netherlands—where Moroccans constitute the ethnic group that is most stereotypically associated with crime (e.g., Gordijn, Koomen, & Stapel, 2001)—reveals that people disproportionately classify faces with stereotypically criminal features as Moroccan (Dotsch, Wigboldus, & Van Knippenberg, 2011). Ethnic stereotypes are thus part of the mental schemes that people have about offenders, and as such, people may heuristically use these stereotypes when trying to take the perspective of an offender. The implication of this is that ethnic stereotypes may reinforce a perceiver's attributions for an offense under conditions of perspective taking, which increases the extent to which people regard the offender's behavior as diagnostic for the offender's character. As a consequence, perspective taking is more likely to increase punishment for a negatively stereotyped offender (Ahmed) than for a non-stereotyped offender (Alex).

Conversely, when people are confronted with an offender from a non-stereotyped ethnic category, perspective taking may more easily lead to benevolent (e.g., situational, or non-selfish) attributions for the behavior of the offender. In such cases, the potentially beneficial effects of perspective taking are not hampered by negative ethnic stereotypes, which increase the potential of perspective taking to induce empathy and communal concern among perceivers. These relatively more benevolent perceptions are suggested by the potential of perspective taking to reduce the fundamental attribution error, and hence, to increase situational attributions for behavior (Vescio et al., 2003). This could mean that taking the perspective of a non-stereotypes offender may lead to less severe punishment

recommendations due to increased empathy, or a greater susceptibility to possible extenuating circumstances. As a consequence, taking the perspective of an offender is more likely to decrease punishment for a non-stereotyped offender (Alex) than for a negatively stereotyped offender (Ahmed).

In the following, we present two studies that were both conducted in the Netherlands. As mentioned previously, the Moroccan population currently is the most negatively stereotyped ethnic group in the Netherlands, and in the Dutch, media and political debate this group is most explicitly associated with crime. Indeed, research reveals that “criminal” is the trait most frequently mentioned by Dutch participants as part of cultural stereotypes about Moroccans (Gordijn et al., 2001). Furthermore, in a virtual environment, Dutch participants held more distance and experienced more negative affect as indicated by levels of skin conductance, when confronted with an avatar (i.e., virtual person) that had Moroccan as opposed to White facial features (Dotsch & Wigboldus, 2008). In both studies, we therefore manipulated the offender’s ethnicity by giving the offender either a typical Dutch name (Alex) or a typical Moroccan name (Ahmed).

Study 1

In Study 1, we tested our line of reasoning in the context of a crime that is consistent with Dutch stereotypes about Moroccans: The offender was caught stealing laptops. Following our line of reasoning, we predicted that participants would assign more severe punishment to Ahmed than to Alex under conditions of perspective taking.

Method

Participants and Design

The hypothesis was tested in a 2 (perspective taking: perspective vs. control) \times 2 (offender’s name: Alex vs. Ahmed) factorial design. A total of 61 participants (23 men, 38 women; $M_{\text{age}} = 21.05$ years, $SD = 3.36$) were recruited from the student cafeterias. The study was part of a battery of unrelated studies that lasted a total of 20 min, and participants received 2.50 Euros for their participation.

Procedure

Upon arrival in the laboratory, participants were seated in separate cubicles. The stimulus materials were presented on computers. Depending on offender’s name condition, participants were informed that they would read a story about a target person named *Alex/Ahmed*. We then manipulated perspective taking through a procedure that has been frequently used and validated in previous research (e.g., Batson et al., 2007; Galinsky & Moskowitz, 2000; Todd et al., 2011; Vorauer & Sasaki, 2009). Participants in the perspective taking condition were instructed to try to imagine the situation through the eyes of the target person and to evaluate the

situation from his perspective. In the control condition, participants were instructed to evaluate the situation as objectively as possible. Participants then read the following offense description (manipulated information in *italics*):

A man named *Alex/Ahmed* noticed that employees from VU University Amsterdam regularly leave their offices open when they need to go away for a short period of time. Because *Alex/Ahmed* knows that many employees have expensive equipment in their offices, he often walks in the university's corridors, and frequently manages to steal belongings of employees such as laptops, iPods, mobile phones, and wallets. One day, however, *Alex/Ahmed* is caught in the act when stealing a laptop of one of VU University's employees. He is handed over to the police.

Participants then responded to the items that constituted the dependent variable. Retributive justice was measured with the following items: "How severely should the offender be punished?" (1 = *not at all*, 7 = *very much*), "What punishment does the offender deserve?" (1 = *very mild punishment*, 7 = *very severe punishment*), "What punishment would you consider fair?" (1 = *very mild punishment*, 7 = *very severe punishment*), "What punishment would you consider justified?" (1 = *very mild punishment*, 7 = *very severe punishment*), and "What punishment would you consider appropriate?" (1 = *very mild punishment*, 7 = *very severe punishment*). These items were averaged into a reliable retributive justice scale ($\alpha = .92$). To check the offender's name manipulation, we asked dichotomously if participants remembered the name of the offender (Alex versus Ahmed). Participants were then informed that the study ended. At the end of the battery of studies, they were debriefed, paid, and thanked.

Results and Discussion

Manipulation Check

None of the participants made a mistake when indicating the name of the offender. This reveals that all participants correctly perceived the offender's name.

Retributive Justice

We conducted a 2 (perspective taking) \times 2 (offender's name) ANOVA on the retributive justice scale. Results revealed a significant interaction only, $F(1, 57) = 4.40$, $p = .04$; $\omega^2 = .05$. The means and standard deviations are displayed in Table 1. To further analyze this interaction, we conducted simple main effect analyses. These analyses revealed that participants recommended more severe punishment for Ahmed than for Alex in the perspective taking condition, $F(1, 57) = 6.93$, $p = .011$; $\omega^2 = .09$. No such effect was found in the control condition, $F < 1$. Furthermore, perspective taking did not influence retributive justice recommendations for Alex, $F < 1$, but it increased recommended punishment for Ahmed compared to the control condition, $F(1, 57) = 7.05$, $p = .01$; $\omega^2 = .09$. Thus, in the

Table 1 Means and standard deviations of retributive justice judgments as a function of perspective taking and offender's name—Study 1

Offender's name	Perspective taking			
	Perspective		Control	
	<i>M</i>	<i>D</i>	<i>M</i>	<i>SD</i>
Ahmed	5.20	0.71	4.32	1.01
Alex	4.35	1.00	4.52	1.10

Note Means are on 7-point scales, with higher values indicating more severe punishment recommendations

context of the present study (i.e., stealing laptops), these findings support the assertion that perspective taking increases punishment for Ahmed, but they do not support the assertion that perspective taking decreases punishment for Alex.

Study 2

Study 2 was designed to extend the findings of Study 1 in two ways. First, although the findings support the general hypothesis that perspective taking leads to more severe punishment for Ahmed than for Alex, we found evidence for only part of the underlying rationale: Perspective taking increased punishment for Ahmed relative to the control condition, but it did not decrease punishment for Alex relative to the control condition. We reason that this may be caused by the nature of the offense that we examined in Study 1. Notably, Study 1 took place in the context of an unambiguously intentional offense that is consistent with Dutch stereotypes about Moroccans (i.e., theft). When examining such an unambiguously intentional offense, it may be relatively hard to empathize with an offender and for instance assume extenuating circumstances (Vescio et al., 2003). It stands to reason that increased lenience as a function of perspective taking can only be expected when the offense is not very severe, or when there is some ambiguity about the motives for the offense. In other words, increased leniency toward offenders following perspective taking is more likely in situations where people are capable of experiencing empathy for the offender, or when there is a realistic possibility that the offender indeed did not have malevolent motives, such as offenses that may involve negligence (cf. Okimoto & Wenzel, 2011a).

In Study 2, we examined the effects of perspective taking on racial bias in the context of a somewhat more ambiguously motivated offense. Notably, it was described how a traffic warden caused an accident, in which a motor cyclist was badly injured, by parking a car with malfunctioning brakes on a steep hill—an incident that is likely to be interpreted as negligence or stupidity by most people. In such a situation, one might expect that particularly Alex, not Ahmed, benefits from the effects of perspective taking. Whereas perspective taking has to potential to increase empathy (Batson et al., 2007) and situational attributions for behavior (Vescio et al., 2003), people may find it easier to make such benevolent evaluations when they hold no a priori negative expectations about the offender. Put differently,

in the introduction, we argued that perspective taking increases the extent to which perceivers regard the offender's behavior as diagnostic for the offender's character when they hold negative stereotypes about the offender. As a consequence, negative stereotypes may disrupt such benevolent evaluations when perspective-takers try to make sense of irresponsible behavior with harmful consequences. Thus, in Study 2, we again expected more severe punishment for Ahmed than for Alex under conditions of perspective taking.

As a second extension, in Study 1, we did not collect data on various important issues, including ethnicity of the participants, perceived intentionality, stereotypic appraisals, and a manipulation check of the perspective-taking manipulation. In Study 2, we did collect data on all these issues. We asked participants about the nationality of both their parents, assessed how intentional participants perceived the offense to be, and checked whether the name Ahmed elicited more negative appraisals than Alex. Furthermore, although the perspective-taking manipulation was frequently validated in previous research (e.g., Batson et al., 2007; Galinsky & Moskowitz, 2000; Todd et al., 2011) and exerted the predicted effects in Study 1, we wanted to establish empirically that this manipulation indeed influenced the extent to which participants tried to take the perspective of the offender in our study. Hence, we incorporated such a check in Study 2.

Method

Participants and Design

The hypothesis was again tested in a 2 (perspective taking: perspective versus control) \times 2 (offender's name: Ahmed versus Alex) factorial design. A total of 72 participants (39 women and 33 men; $M_{\text{age}} = 22.24$ years, $SD = 2.59$) were recruited from student cafeterias at VU University Amsterdam. They were individually approached by the second author to fill out a short questionnaire in exchange for a candy bar.

Procedure

Participant read a scenario about how a motor cyclist was harmed as a result of the target offender's actions. The scenario read as follows (manipulated information in italics):

At an intersection downtown a motor cyclist collides with a moving empty car with faulty brakes, which was parked earlier by a traffic warden. The motor cyclist has various broken bones and needs to be in a wheelchair for about a year. The traffic warden, the thirty-year-old *Alex van der Veer/Ahmed Gaza* from the city of Enschede has worked a couple of years for the parking company. *Alex was born in Enschede/Ahmed was born in Marrakech but lives in the Netherlands since four years.* Although *Alex/Ahmed* knew that the brakes were malfunctioning, he chose to park the car on a steep hill.

While reading the scenario, in the perspective-taking condition, participants received instructions to “imagine a day in the life of *Alex/Ahmed*, as if you were standing in his shoes and see the world through his eyes. Try to evaluate the behavior of *Alex/Ahmed* from his perspective.” In the objective condition, participants received instructions to “evaluate the behavior of *Alex/Ahmed* as objectively as possible. Try to evaluate this incident from an objective point of view.”

We then measured the dependent variables and manipulation checks. To measure retributive justice, we asked the following questions: “To what extent should the offender be punished?” (0 = *not at all*, 6 = *very much*), “How severely should the offender be punished?” (0 = *not severely*, 6 = *very severely*), “What punishment for the offender would be fair?” (0 = *very mild punishment*, 6 = *very severe punishment*), “What punishment for the offender would be appropriate?” (0 = *very mild punishment*, 6 = *very severe punishment*). These four items were aggregated into a reliable retributive justice scale ($\alpha = .83$). To measure perceived intentionality, we asked the following question (0 = *not at all*, 6 = *very much*): “How intentional do you believe that the offender’s behavior is?” To check whether or not the manipulation of the target’s name influenced stereotypic appraisals, we asked participants to evaluate the offender on the following dimensions: (0 = *lazy*, 6 = *energetic*); (0 = *bad*, 6 = *good*); and (0 = *stupid*, 6 = *smart*). These three dimensions were averaged into a reliable indicator of stereotypic appraisals ($\alpha = .68$). To check the perspective-taking manipulation, we asked the following question: “To what extent did you place yourself in the shoes of the offender?” (0 = *not at all*, 6 = *very much*). We also asked participants whether one or both of their parents were born abroad and asked in an open-ended format to indicate the country of birth for both their father and their mother. The study then ended, and participants were given their candy bar.

Results and Discussion

Manipulation Checks

The manipulations were checked with 2 (perspective taking) \times 2 (offender’s name) ANOVAs. The analysis on the check of the perspective-taking manipulation revealed a perspective-taking main effect only, $F(1, 68) = 4.06$, $p = .048$; $\omega^2 = .04$. Participants placed themselves more in the shoes of the offender in the perspective-taking condition ($M = 3.31$, $SD = 1.19$) than in the control condition ($M = 2.72$, $SD = 1.30$). These results reveal that participants perceived the perspective-taking manipulation as intended.

On the stereotypic appraisal scale, we found a significant main effect of the offender’s name only, $F(1, 68) = 5.33$, $p = .024$; $\omega^2 = .06$. Participants evaluated Ahmed with more negative appraisals ($M = 1.85$, $SD = 0.70$) than Alex ($M = 2.24$, $SD = 0.72$). These results reveal that more negative appraisals were activated when the offender had the name Ahmed rather than Alex, as expected.

Perceived Intentionality

We did not find main or interaction effects on the measure of perceived intentionality, $F_s(1, 68) > 2.83$, $p_s > .09$. Importantly, the overall mean ($M = 2.50$, $SD = 1.55$) was significantly lower than the scale midpoint of 3.0, $t(71) = -2.74$, $p = .008$. These results reveal that participants did not perceive the crime as very intentional, as intended in our experimental setup. Moreover, perceived intentionality was significantly correlated with retributive justice judgments, $r = .50$, $p < .001$.

Retributive Justice

A 2 (perspective taking) \times 2 (offender's name) ANOVA on the retributive justice scale revealed a significant perspective-taking main effect, $F(1, 68) = 5.61$, $p = .02$; $\omega^2 = .06$, and a marginally significant main effect of the offender's name, $F(1, 68) = 3.79$, $p = .06$; $\omega^2 = .04$. Participants were less punitive overall in the perspective-taking condition ($M = 3.22$, $SD = 0.85$) than in the control condition ($M = 3.60$, $SD = 0.57$). Furthermore, participants were more punitive toward Ahmed ($M = 3.57$, $SD = 0.74$) than toward Alex ($M = 3.25$, $SD = 0.73$). More important was that these main effects were qualified by the predicted interaction, $F(1, 68) = 4.12$, $p = .046$; $\omega^2 = .04$. The means and standard deviations are displayed in Table 2.

Simple main effect analyses revealed that, consistent with the Study 1 findings, participants recommended more severe punishment for Ahmed than for Alex in the perspective-taking condition, $F(1, 68) = 7.91$, $p = .006$; $\omega^2 = .09$. No such effect was found in the control condition, $F < 1$. Furthermore, the perspective-taking manipulation did not influence punishment recommendations for Ahmed, $F < 1$, but perspective taking decreased punishment recommendations for Alex in comparison with the control condition, $F(1, 68) = 9.68$, $p = .003$; $\omega^2 = .11$. These results indicate that, for an offense caused by negligence, perspective taking decreased recommended punishment for Alex, but it did not influence recommended punishment for Ahmed. We suspect that the offense in Study 2 was insufficiently severe to find an increased punitive drive when taking the perspective of Ahmed. Still, we clearly observe that, in this low-severity offense, Ahmed does not benefit from perspective taking in the way that Alex does, a finding that we try to explain through additional exploratory analyses below.

Table 2 Means and standard deviations of retributive justice judgments as a function of perspective taking and offender's name—Study 2

Offender's name	Perspective taking			
	Perspective		Control	
	<i>M</i>	<i>SD</i>	<i>M</i>	<i>SD</i>
Ahmed	3.54	0.87	3.60	0.60
Alex	2.89	0.72	3.61	0.55

Note Means are on 7-point scales, with higher values indicating more severe punishment recommendations

Thus, as in Study 1, this study again revealed evidence for racial bias in retributive justice judgments under conditions of perspective taking. Moreover, whereas in the case of relatively severe and clearly intentional crimes, perspective taking increases the severity of punishment for Ahmed (Study 1), in the case of offenses that are less severe perspective taking decreases the severity of punishment for Alex (Study 2). Perspective taking thus indeed has the potential to both increase and reduce recommended punishment depending on the offender's ethnicity.

Participants' Ethnicity

It turned out that none of the participants had a Moroccan father or mother. However, five participants had at least one parent that was born in a country where Ahmed is a common name (i.e., Turkey or Pakistan). We created a measure of participants' ethnicity that dichotomously classified whether or not at least one parent was born in one of these countries. When this measure was included as a covariate in the analysis on retributive justice judgments, the crucial interaction remained significant, $F(1, 67) = 4.05$, $p = .048$; $\omega^2 = .04$, and participants' ethnicity was a non-significant covariate, $F < 1$. These analyses reveal that controlling for participants' ethnicity does not change the results reported here.

Exploratory Analyses

Why did perspective taking not decrease punishment also for Ahmed in the case of such a low-severity offense? We conducted additional exploratory analyses to find out why racial bias persists in the perspective-taking condition even in the context of likely negligence. If taking the perspective of Ahmed leads people to believe more strongly that the offender's behavior is diagnostic of his character, as we argued in the introduction—and to hence base their retributive justice judgments more strongly on their negative stereotypic beliefs—one should expect stronger correlations between stereotypic appraisals and retributive justice in the Ahmed perspective-taking condition than in the other conditions. Indeed, we found such a stronger correlation specifically for the appraisal item referring to the moral dimension of the offender's character (Bad vs. Good): This item had a strong negative correlation with retributive justice judgments when participants took the perspective of Ahmed, $r = -.68$, $p = .002$, but not in the other three conditions, $r = -.15$, $p = .26$. These correlations differ significantly according to Fisher's *r*-to-*z*-test, $z = -2.27$, $p = .02$. Likewise, the moral dimension of people's stereotypes was associated with perceived intentionality only when taking the perspective of Ahmed, $r = -.66$, $p = .003$, not in the other three conditions, $r = -.12$, $p = .38$. Again, these correlations differ significantly, $z = -2.29$, $p = .02$. These findings suggest that taking the perspective of Ahmed activates the associative links between stereotypical beliefs that Ahmed is a bad person, the belief that Ahmed conducted the negligent act intentionally, and retributive justice judgments.

General Discussion

The two studies reported herein support the idea that taking the perspective of an offender exacerbates racial bias in retributive justice judgments. Also, the findings suggest that two complementary underlying processes are responsible for this phenomenon: In the case of a stereotype-consistent crime that was unambiguously motivated by selfish intent (Study 1), perspective taking leads to more severe retributive justice judgments if the offender belongs to an ethnic group that is stereotypically associated with the crime (Ahmed), not if the offender is not from a stereotyped ethnic group. When the crime is less severe and the motives for the offender's actions are somewhat more ambiguous (Study 2), perspective taking makes people reluctant to give the negatively stereotyped offender the benefit of the doubt, this in contrast to an offender who does not carry negative ethnic stereotypes (Alex). In both cases, the ultimate result is similar, namely that Ahmed receives a harsher retributive evaluation than Alex, because he either suffers more (Study 1) or benefits less (Study 2) from the effects of perspective taking. Taken together, it can be concluded that racial bias in retributive justice judgments is particularly likely to occur when evaluators take the perspective of the offender. Moreover, these studies support the idea that perspective taking is a double-edged sword that can either increase or decrease punishment, depending on the offender's ethnicity.

Theoretical Contributions

The present findings converge with recent insights that perspective taking does not under all circumstances lead to more positive social relations. Although there is little doubt that perspective taking is important in establishing empathy (e.g., Batson et al., 2007), and certainly has the potential to reduce racial bias (Dovidio et al., 2004; Galinsky & Moskowitz, 2000; Todd et al., 2011), a growing body of research suggests that perspective taking may under some circumstances be harmful to interpersonal relations (e.g., Epley et al., 2006). Of particular relevance to the current research, previous findings reveal that perspective taking can sometimes increase prejudice (Vorauer & Sasaki, 2009) and can sometimes lead to more revenge toward perpetrators (Okimoto & Wenzel, 2011a). The studies presented here expand on these findings by illuminating that perspective taking can increase racial bias when determining punishment of offenders. As such, the present research makes a novel contribution by (1) illuminating the dark side of perspective taking in the context of punishment and (2) delineating the conditions that set the stage for racial bias in retributive justice judgments to occur.

Punishment is commonly conceived of as a behavioral instrument that is used to re-establish a sense of justice in the community after norms have been violated (Carlsmith & Darley, 2008; Okimoto & Wenzel, 2011b). At the same time, most people would agree that unequal punishment based on one's ethnicity is unfair. In this sense, it is interesting to note that these findings are related to previous research suggesting that perspective taking can sometimes promote unfair behavior. Batson, Klein, Highberger, and Shaw (1995) found that perspective taking can lead to

preferential treatment in allocation decisions. The idea here is that when distributing scarce resources between multiple parties, taking the perspective of one party may—due to an increase in empathy—lead an allocator to unfairly benefit that party at the expense of others who are equally or more entitled to the resources. These effects emerged when allocating others to tasks that have either positive or negative consequences, or when helping an ill child at the expense of others who were more needy. Consistent with the findings of Batson and colleagues, the present findings challenge the common assumption that perspective taking is an important prerequisite to establish justice.

An alternative way of interpreting these findings is the notion that instructing people to evaluate the situation objectively (i.e., our control conditions) reduces racial bias in retributive justice judgments. Importantly, this is an alternative way of formulating the same conclusion. Trying to evaluate a situation objectively is the direct opposite of perspective taking, as it entails a state of mind that seeks to look at the objective facts while trying to ignore subjective mental inferences about what the target offender might feel or think. As such, instructions to be objective are a common control condition in perspective-taking research (e.g., Batson et al., 2007; Galinsky et al., 2008; Todd et al., 2011; Vorauer & Sasaki, 2009). The finding that no racial bias in retributive justice occurs when perspective taking is actively discouraged, whereas racial bias does occur when perspective taking is actively encouraged, points at the same overarching conclusion: Perspective taking increases racial bias in retributive justice judgments.

Strengths, Limitations, and Future Research

The results obtained in the present studies were based on relatively short, newspaper-style scenarios describing an offense. There are both strengths and limitations associated with such an approach. A limitation is that our scenarios do not offer participants the rich and engaging context that people experience when they actually witness a crime in real life. As such, one might question the generalizability of the present findings to the justice perceptions of crime witnesses. But at the same time, one might wonder how often people witness crime in their everyday life. Most of the time when people learn about a criminal offense, they learn about it through a third party, such as a newspaper article, the internet, a news flash on the radio, or public discourse. Such crime descriptions typically do not offer more information than the scenarios presented here. Moreover, people clearly experience urges to punish based on such limited descriptions, as indicated by a plethora of studies on retributive justice using short scenarios in their stimulus materials (e.g., Carlsmith, Darley, & Robinson, 2002; Gollwitzer & Bücklein, 2007; Van Prooijen, 2006; Van Prooijen & Kerpershoek, 2013). It has been noted before that short pieces of written text can be sufficiently engaging to elicit genuine justice-based reasoning (Van Prooijen & Van den Bos, 2009).

Although the present findings challenge the universality of the assertion that perspective taking decreases racism (Dovidio et al., 2004; Galinsky & Moskowitz, 2000; Todd et al., 2011), the present studies do not offer solid evidence for the

underlying mediational processes that are responsible for our findings. The exploratory analyses of Study 2 are consistent with our assumption that taking the perspective of a negatively stereotyped offender leads people to perceive the criminal behavior as diagnostic for an offender's character. But, these analyses were of a post hoc nature, and do not provide solid evidence for mediation or a causal chain (Spencer, Zanna, & Fong, 2005). Moreover, although the main finding that perspective taking increases racial bias in sentencing was supported in both studies, the underlying mechanism seemed different in the two studies: After all, perspective taking increased punishment for Ahmed in Study 1, but it decreased punishment for Alex in Study 2. There are various explanations possible for this difference, and based on the present studies, it is impossible to tell with certainty how these differential patterns should be explained. One possibility is that the crime in Study 2 was less intentional, and hence, participants made more situational attributions for Alex (cf. Vescio et al., 2003). But another possibility is that the crime in Study 2 generally was less severe, and hence, people were more able to experience empathy (although as noted, only Alex benefitted from this). Clearly, there are important avenues for further research here to examine these processes in more detail. Moreover, future research may use both bigger and more diverse samples to assess the robustness of the findings presented here.

Another limitation of the present findings is that we examined only retributive justice judgments without testing the effects on punitive behaviors. There is a growing body of research testing the antecedents and consequences of behavioral punishment, for instance in social dilemma situations (for an overview, see Balliet, Mulder, & Van Lange, 2011) as well as mock jury simulations (Sommers & Ellsworth, 2000; Sweeney & Haney, 1992). Our findings allow for conclusions about the influence of perspective taking on racial bias in punitive preferences, but whether these preferences lead to actual discriminatory punitive behaviors remains an open question. Furthermore, one should be reluctant to draw inferences about the fairness of court trials from these findings. Legal scholars are likely to evaluate criminal cases in a different way than the lay people from our samples (i.e., undergraduate students). Indeed, evidence for racial bias in court trials suggests that although ethnicity does play a role in sentencing decisions, the effects are complex and inconsistent, and strength of evidence is the most influential variable on both the verdict and the size of the punishment (e.g., Taylor & Hosch, 2004). One might speculate that legal scholars are trained to look at criminal cases as objectively as possible. Given that this mirrors the control conditions of our studies, it is possible that legal scholars are less prone to racial bias than lay people, a proposition that awaits further testing.

Whereas the present studies focused on racial bias in the context of taking the perpetrator's perspective, an interesting avenue for future research would be to test how these dynamics play out for racial bias in the context of victims. It is well established that perspective taking increases empathy and caring for victims (e.g., Batson et al., 2007; Loewenstein & Small, 2007). To the best of our knowledge, however, research has not yet examined to what extent it matters if this victim has the name Alex or Ahmed. This may be of importance, particularly given that empathy is not the only possible reaction that people display toward victims. As

explained by Just World Theory, people frequently have the tendency to blame, derogate, or avoid innocent victims as a consequence of the belief that victims to some extent deserved their fate, hence re-establishing a sense of justice (Lerner & Miller, 1978; for a review, see Hafer & Bègue, 2005). Indeed, research found that negative reactions to an unknown victim can be stimulated by factors that are associated with perspective taking, such as attitudinal similarity (Novak & Lerner, 1968) and social self-construal (Van Prooijen & Van den Bos, 2009). Integrating these insights, it may be speculated that perspective taking increases empathy when Alex is victimized, but that it increases blaming when Ahmed is victimized; a fruitful hypothesis to test in further studies.

Concluding Remarks

Punishment is an indispensable tool in our society to reinforce social norms, to deter potential offenders, and to establish a sense of justice. Inspired by an egalitarian ideology, most people are morally convinced that ethnicity should not matter in these punishment decisions. Given previous findings that perspective taking reduces racial biases in various situations (e.g., Dovidio et al., 2004), one might therefore be tempted to stimulate perspective taking in people who have the responsibility to punish offenders. The present findings reveal the contrary, namely that perspective taking may be dysfunctional in establishing an equal application of retributive justice: In the specific context of punishing offenders, perspective taking may increase racial bias. Objectively evaluating the facts while refraining from taking the perspective of offenders may thus be the key toward establishing punishment that is fair to both Alex and Ahmed.

References

- Abrams, D., Marques, J. M., Bown, N., & Henson, M. (2000). Pro-norm and anti-norm deviance within and between groups. *Journal of Personality and Social Psychology*, 78, 906–912.
- Balliet, D., Mulder, L. B., & Van Lange, P. A. M. (2011). Reward, punishment, and cooperation: A meta-analysis. *Psychological Bulletin*, 137, 594–614.
- Batson, C. D. (1991). *The altruism question: Toward a social-psychological answer*. Hillsdale, NJ: Erlbaum.
- Batson, C. D., Eklund, J. H., Chermok, V. L., Hoyt, J. L., & Ortiz, B. G. (2007). An additional antecedent of empathic concern: Valuing the welfare of the person in need. *Journal of Personality and Social Psychology*, 93, 65–74.
- Batson, C. D., Klein, T. R., Highberger, L., & Shaw, L. L. (1995). Immorality from empathy-induced altruism: When compassion and justice conflict. *Journal of Personality and Social Psychology*, 68, 1042–1054.
- Bodenhausen, G. V., & Wyer, R. S., Jr. (1985). Effects of stereotypes on decision making and information-processing strategies. *Journal of Personality and Social Psychology*, 48, 267–282.
- Carlsmith, K., & Darley, J. M. (2008). Psychological aspects of retributive justice. In M. P. Zanna (Ed.), *Advances in Experimental Social Psychology* (Vol. 40, pp. 193–236). San Diego, CA: Elsevier.
- Carlsmith, K. M., Darley, J. M., & Robinson, P. H. (2002). Why do we punish? Deterrence and just deserts as motives for punishment. *Journal of Personality and Social Psychology*, 83, 284–299.

- Correll, J., Park, B., Judd, C. M., & Wittenbrink, B. (2002). The police officer's dilemma: Using ethnicity to disambiguate potentially threatening individuals. *Journal of Personality and Social Psychology*, 83, 1314–1329.
- Davis, M. H., Soderlund, T., Cole, J., Gadol, E., Kute, M., Myers, M., & Weihing, J. (2004). Cognitions associated with attempts to empathize: How do we imagine the perspective of another? *Personality and Social Psychology Bulletin*, 30, 1625–1635.
- Dotsch, R., & Wigboldus, D. H. J. (2008). Virtual prejudice. *Journal of Experimental Social Psychology*, 44, 1194–1198.
- Dotsch, R., Wigboldus, D. H. J., & Van Knippenberg, A. (2011). Biased allocation of faces to social categories. *Journal of Personality and Social Psychology*, 100, 999–1014.
- Dovidio, J. F., ten Vergert, M., Steward, T. L., Gaertner, S. L., Johnson, J. D., Esses, V. M., Riek, B. M., & Pearson, A. R. (2004). Perspective and prejudice: Antecedents and mediating mechanisms. *Personality and Social Psychology Bulletin*, 30, 1537–1549.
- Epely, N., Caruso, E. M., & Bazerman, M. H. (2006). When perspective taking increases taking: Reactive egoism in social interaction. *Journal of Personality and Social Psychology*, 91, 872–889.
- Galinsky, A. D., & Moskowitz, G. B. (2000). Perspective-taking: Decreasing stereotype expression, stereotype accessibility, and in-group favoritism. *Journal of Personality and Social Psychology*, 78, 708–724.
- Galinsky, A. D., Wang, C. S., & Ku, G. (2008). Perspective-takers behave more stereotypically. *Journal of Personality and Social Psychology*, 95, 404–419.
- Gerber, M. M., & Jackson, J. (2013). Retribution as revenge and retribution as just deserts. *Social Justice Research*, 26, 61–80.
- Gollwitzer, M., & Bücklein, K. (2007). Are “we” more punitive than “me”? Self-construal styles, justice-related attitudes, and punitive judgments. *Social Justice Research*, 20, 457–478.
- Gollwitzer, M., & Keller, L. (2010). What you did only matters if you are one of us: Offenders' group membership moderates the effect of criminal history on punishment severity. *Social Psychology*, 41(1), 20–26.
- Gordijn, E. H., Koomen, W., & Stapel, D. A. (2001). Level of prejudice in relation to knowledge of cultural stereotypes. *Journal of Experimental Social Psychology*, 37, 150–157.
- Graham, S., Weiner, B., & Zucker, G. S. (1997). An attributional analysis of punishment goals and public reactions to O. J. Simpson. *Personality and Social Psychology Bulletin*, 23, 331–346.
- Hafer, C. L., & Bègue, L. (2005). Experimental research on just world theory: Problems, developments, and future challenges. *Psychological Bulletin*, 131, 128–167.
- Hogan, R., & Emler, N. (1981). Retributive justice. In M. J. Lerner & S. Lerner (Eds.), *The justice motive in social behavior* (pp. 125–144). New York: Plenum.
- Johnson, J. D., Whitestone, E., Jackson, L. A., & Gatto, L. (1995). Justice is still not colorblind: Differential racial effects of exposure to inadmissible evidence. *Personality and Social Psychology Bulletin*, 21, 893–898.
- Kerr, N. L., Hymes, R. W., Anderson, A. B., & Weathers, J. E. (1995). Defendant-juror similarity and mock juror judgments. *Law and Human Behavior*, 19, 545–567.
- Lerner, M. J., & Miller, D. T. (1978). Just world research and the attribution process: Looking back and ahead. *Psychological Bulletin*, 85, 1030–1051.
- Loewenstein, G., & Small, D. A. (2007). The scarecrow and the tin man: The vicissitudes of human sympathy and caring. *Review of General Psychology*, 11, 112–126.
- Marques, J. M., & Paez, D. (1994). The ‘black sheep effect’: Social categorization, rejection of ingroup deviates, and perception of group variability. In W. Stroebe & M. Hewstone (Eds.), *European Review of Social Psychology* (Vol. 5, pp. 37–68). New York: Wiley.
- Novak, D. W., & Lerner, M. J. (1968). Rejection as a consequence of perceived similarity. *Journal of Personality and Social Psychology*, 9, 147–152.
- Okimoto, T. G., & Wenzel, M. (2011a). The other side of perspective taking: Transgression ambiguity and victims' revenge against their offender. *Social Psychological and Personality Science*, 2, 373–378.
- Okimoto, T. G., & Wenzel, M. (2011b). Third-party punishment and symbolic intragroup status. *Journal of Experimental Social Psychology*, 47(4), 709–718.
- Sargent, M. J., & Bradfield, A. L. (2004). Race and information processing in criminal trials: Does the defendant's race affect how the facts are evaluated? *Personality and Social Psychology Bulletin*, 30, 995–1008.

- Shih, M., Wang, E., Bucher, A. T., & Stotzer, R. (2009). Perspective taking: Reducing prejudice towards general outgroups and specific individuals. *Group Processes & Intergroup Relations*, 12, 565–577.
- Sommers, S. R., & Ellsworth, P. C. (2000). Race in the courtroom: Perceptions of guilt and dispositional attributions. *Personality and Social Psychology Bulletin*, 26, 1367–1379.
- Spencer, S. J., Zanna, M. P., & Fong, G. T. (2005). Establishing a causal chain: Why experiments are often more effective than mediational analyses in examining psychological processes. *Journal of Personality and Social Psychology*, 89, 845–851.
- Sweeney, L. T., & Haney, C. (1992). The influence of race on sentencing: A meta-analytic review of experimental studies. *Behavioral Sciences and the Law*, 10, 179–195.
- Tarrant, M., Calitri, R., & Weston, D. (2012). Social identification structures the effects of perspective taking. *Psychological Science*, 23, 973–978.
- Taylor, T. S., & Hosch, H. M. (2004). An examination of jury verdicts for evidence of a similarity-leniency effect, an out-group punitiveness effect or a black sheep effect. *Law and Human Behavior*, 28, 587–598.
- Todd, A. R., Bodenhausen, G. V., Richeson, J. A., & Galinsky, A. D. (2011). Perspective taking combats automatic expression of racial bias. *Journal of Personality and Social Psychology*, 100, 1027–1042.
- Van Prooijen, J.-W. (2006). Retributive reactions to suspected offenders: The importance of social categorizations and guilt probability. *Personality and Social Psychology Bulletin*, 32, 715–726.
- Van Prooijen, J.-W., & Kerpershoek, E. F. P. (2013). The impact of choice on retributive reactions: How observers' autonomy concerns shape responses to criminal offenders. *British Journal of Social Psychology*, 52, 329–344.
- Van Prooijen, J.-W., & Lam, J. (2007). Retributive justice and social categorizations: The perceived fairness of punishment depends on intergroup status. *European Journal of Social Psychology*, 37, 1244–1255.
- Van Prooijen, J.-W., & Van den Bos, K. (2009). We blame innocent victims more than I do: Self-construal level moderates responses to just world threats. *Personality and Social Psychology Bulletin*, 35, 1528–1539.
- Vescio, T. K., Sechrist, G. B., & Paolucci, M. P. (2003). Perspective taking and prejudice reduction: The mediational role of empathy arousal and situational attributions. *European Journal of Social Psychology*, 33, 455–472.
- Vidmar, N. (2002). Retributive justice: Its social context. In M. Ross & D. T. Miller (Eds.), *The justice motive in everyday life* (pp. 291–313). Cambridge University Press.
- Vorauer, J. D., & Sasaki, S. J. (2009). Helpful only in the abstract? Ironic effects of empathy in intergroup interaction. *Psychological Science*, 20, 191–197.