Relationship Closeness and Self-reported Willingness to Falsely Take the Blame

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One reason people falsely confess is to protect the true perpetrator. The current study examined whether relationship closeness influences people’s self-reported willingness to falsely take the blame. Utilizing theoretical work from the prosocial area, three potential mediators were investigated. Participants (N = 131) were randomly assigned to think of either a close or a casual friend and then read one of two scenarios that described a minor offense committed by the friend. Participants’ willingness to take the blame was assessed, as well as their perceptions of reciprocity, feelings of empathy, and distress concerns related to their relationship with the offending friend. Results showed that, in both scenarios, participants more often took the blame in the close friend condition than in the casual friend condition. Reciprocity and empathy each uniquely and independently mediated relationship closeness, whereas distress concerns did not. Differences in the two scenarios, which describe different offenses, are discussed. Copyright © 2017 John Wiley & Sons, Ltd.

People admit guilt, plead guilty, and confess to crimes that they did not commit (Drizin & Leo, 2004; Leo & Ofshe, 1998; Redlich, 2010). The reasons that people falsely claim responsibility for another person’s offense are diverse, ranging from pressure exerted by investigators during interrogation, to delusions, to a desire to protect the guilty party (Gudjonsson, 2003; Kassin & Wrightsman, 1985). In considering the latter reason, one factor that may determine why innocent people sometimes admit to wrongdoing for protection reasons is the extent to which they share a close relationship with the offender. Drawing on theoretical perspectives derived from research on prosocial behavior, this paper investigates whether relationship closeness influences people’s self-reported willingness to take the blame for another person’s transgression. Research that examines how reciprocity, empathy, and distress influence helping is applied in order to understand how relationship closeness might prompt one to falsely take the blame.

**TYPES AND ESTIMATES OF FALSE CONFESSIONS**

The bulk of the literature on false confessions has focused on “coerced false confessions” – that is, false confessions that are induced by police during a custodial...
interrogation. Factors leading to coerced false confessions have been the subject of many studies over the last three decades, and recommendations for reducing their occurrence include encouraging the use of electronic devices to record interrogations, eliminating the presentation of false evidence, and instituting time limits on interrogations (Kassin et al., 2010; Madon, Yang, Smalarz, Guyll, & Scherr, 2013). However, sometimes people falsely confess without any pressure from police. This type of false confession has been referred to as a “voluntary false confession” (Gudjonsson, 2003; Kassin & Wrightsman, 1985). In comparison to coerced false confessions, research on voluntary false confessions is scarce. Although there may be some overlap in the factors that increase the likelihood of both types of confessions occurring, voluntary false confessions may arise for reasons that are distinct from those found in traditional investigations of coerced false confessions.

Estimating the extent to which people voluntarily falsely confess is difficult. In part, this is because there may be more than one reason for falsely confessing. For example, individuals may be motivated to confess in order to protect a truly guilty person, but may not actually do so until subjected to police pressure (Redlich, Summers, & Hoover, 2010). Researchers have largely relied upon self-reports to estimate a prevalence rate. In general, self-reported false confessions have tended to range from 7% to 53% depending on the sample and the definition of the behavior (e.g., Steingrimsdottir, Hreinsdottir, Gudjonsson, Sigurdsson, & Nielsen, 2007; Redlich et al., 2010; Sigurdsson & Gudjonsson, 1996). To determine whether these confessions are voluntary or coerced, or both, researchers have examined participants’ rationale for confessing.

One of the primary reasons people cited for their decision to falsely admit guilt, plead guilty, or confess in these studies was to protect another person who was actually guilty, a motivation that suggests a voluntary element to the behavior. Jones’ (2011) interviews with 50 women in an English prison indicated that some women reported pleading guilty for crimes they did not commit due to the desire to help their partner. Similarly, in studies of incarcerated adolescents, over 50% reported falsely confessing in order to protect the perpetrator, and 32% reported entering a false guilty plea to protect the perpetrator (Malloy, Shulman, & Cauffman, 2014). In a study of Icelandic students, about 14% of the sample indicated falsely confessing to police, parents, or teachers, and 62% of these students claimed to do so in order to cover for another person (Gudjonsson, Sigurdsson, Bragason, Einarsson, & Valdimarsdottir, 2004). If researchers take lesser offenses into consideration, the extent to which individuals falsely and voluntarily confess, plead guilty, or admit guilt for another person’s offenses may be even higher than indicated by the estimates reported here.

Very few studies have directly examined the rate of voluntary false confessions using experimental methods. Pimentel, Arndorfer, and Malloy (2015) used a modified version of the cheating paradigm (Russano, Meissner, Narchet, & Kassin, 2005) to examine adolescents’ and adults’ likelihood of taking the blame for another person’s wrongdoing. During testing, each participant witnessed a confederate use his or her cell phone to obtain answers to test items. Shortly after the tests were scored, the experimenter confronted the participant and confederate by telling them that he or she knew that one of them had cheated, but admitted to not being sure which one of them was the true offender. Next, without the experimenter present and prior to being separated for questioning, the confederate feigned being on academic probation and made a plea for the participant to take the blame. Approximately 48% of participants falsely took the blame for the confederate by signing a confession statement, and 69% of participants...
who falsely took the blame cited a desire to protect the confederate as a reason for their decision. This finding is particularly noteworthy given that the offender was a stranger.

**RELATIONSHIP WITH OFFENDER**

Studies identifying factors that fuel people’s decisions to voluntarily take the blame for another’s misconduct are limited. In general, researchers have approached the phenomenon from an individual difference perspective (Gudjonsson & Sigurdsson, 1999; Gudjonsson, Sigurdsson, Asgeirsdottir, & Sigfusdottir, 2006; Gudjonsson et al., 2004; Sigurdsson & Gudjonsson, 1996), but situational causes may also operate. In Malloy et al.’s (2014) study, for example, the vast majority of juveniles indicated that the perpetrator was a friend or family member. Likewise, of Icelandic students who reported falsely confessing for another person, 70% had done so for a friend, 14% for a relative, and 8% for a romantic partner (Gudjonsson, Siguardsson, & Einarsson, 2007). Thus, there appears to be a connection between the offender and the false confessor in self-reported voluntary false confessions.

Theories pertaining to helping behavior may provide some guidance in understanding this pattern. By taking the blame for another person’s offending behavior, the false confessor is providing a form of aid to a person in need. Within the prosocial literature, the relationship between the provider and recipient has been shown to have an impact on people’s helping behavior. For example, people are more likely to help those who share their biological makeup (Burnstein, Crandall, & Kitayama, 1994), who belong to the same social group (Brewer & Brown, 1998; Flippen, Hornstein, Siegal, & Weitzman, 1996), those with whom they have a close relationship, and those who are viewed as part of their own self-identity (Cialdini, Brown, Lewis, Luce, & Neuberg, 1997). This tendency to help individuals with whom one shares a relationship appears to be even stronger when people are under pressure to act quickly (Righetti, Finkenauer, & Finkel, 2013). Other research indicates that people desiring a communal relationship feel badly after refusing to acquiesce to an individual’s request for help, whereas a decline in affect is not observed among participants desiring an exchange relationship (Williamson, Clark, Pegalis, & Behan, 1996). These lines of research all suggest that the relationship between the giver and receiver of aid matters.

Applying these findings to the context of a blame-taking situation, we tested the hypothesis that people are more likely to take the blame for another person’s offending behavior when they perceived their relationship with that person as close rather than casual. We also examined three potential explanations for this hypothesized effect, all of which are suggested by the literature on helping: feelings of reciprocity, empathy, and distress.

**POTENTIAL MOTIVATORS OF BLAME-TAKING BEHAVIOR**

**Reciprocity**

Reciprocity has been conceptually defined as both a pattern of exchange behaviors within a given relationship and as a general norm thought to guide behavior (Gouldner,
Research indicates that reciprocity influences helping behavior (Regan, 1971; Wilke & Lanzetta, 1970). Feelings of obligation and gratitude have been postulated to underlie some types of reciprocal behavior, particularly in situations in which there is some cost related to helping (Bartlett & DeSteno, 2006). Moreover, the degree to which reciprocity guides helping behavior can be influenced by relationship factors. For example, Rotkirch, Lyons, David-Barrett, and Jokela (2014) found that participants rated reciprocity and expressions of gratitude to be more important in their friendships than in their sibling relationships, suggesting that reciprocity may be more important in non-kin relationships.

Only one study, which we previously discussed, has directly examined whether reciprocity influences participants’ tendency to voluntarily confess for another person’s wrongdoing. In Pimentel et al.’s (2015) study, participants witnessed a confederate cheat on a test and were given an opportunity to take the blame for the confederate’s offense. Prior to the test, half of the participants received a favor from the confederate in the form of a free beverage whereas the other half did not. Contrary to the authors’ hypothesis, receiving an unsolicited gift was unrelated to confession rates, suggesting that participants did not feel obligated to return the favor. However, it is important to note that confederates in this study were strangers to participants, and the behavior used to increase pressure to reciprocate entailed a rather small favor.

In the context of ongoing relationships, specifically those labeled as casual versus close friendships, the pattern of exchanges between two individuals might predict willingness to take the blame. Close friends are likely to spend much more time together in comparison to casual friends, leading to more potential opportunities to reciprocate. There may be greater anticipation of future repayments in such relationships. One proxy for measuring perceptions of reciprocity includes individuals’ beliefs about the degree to which their friend would engage in the helping behavior for which they are being asked to engage. We predicted that expectations about what the friend would do if the situation were reversed would be associated with people’s decisions regarding how willing they would be to take the blame. In the present study, we investigated whether perceived reciprocity would mediate the effect of one’s relationship with an offender (i.e., casual vs. close friend) on their willingness to take the blame for the offender’s transgression.

Empathy

A second factor that might promote blame-taking behavior is empathy. Empathy involves experiencing emotions such as sympathy and compassion for another person. Empathic feelings are associated with more prosocial moral reasoning and less disengagement of personal responsibility (Paciello, Fida, Cerniglia, Tramontano, & Cole, 2013). Furthermore, empathy appears to be a motivating force in people’s decisions to provide aid to those in need (Batson, Duncan, Ackerman, Buckley, & Birch, 1981; Toi & Batson, 1982).

The relationship between the provider and recipient of help has also been shown to influence the degree of empathic concern shown. In Maner and Gailliot’s (2007) study, empathy mediated the effect of relationship type on participants’ willingness to help in a hypothetical situation. More specifically, empathy was only linked to helping when participants imagined a kin in need rather than a stranger in need.
Although empathy has been measured by having participants indicate the degree to which they feel emotions such as compassion, we broadened this to apply to the current study by assessing the extent to which a fear of consequences for the offender and feelings of protection toward the offender served to influence participants’ decisions to take the blame or not. We sought to examine whether these feelings would mediate the effect of one’s relationship with the offender on people’s willingness to falsely take the blame.

**Distress**

Distress emotions include feelings such as alarm, worry, and trouble. Though related to empathy, distress is a conceptually distinct construct (Batson, Fultz, & Schoenrade, 1987). Batson and colleagues (Batson et al., 1981; Batson, O’Quin, Fultz, Vanderplas, & Isen, 1983; Toi & Batson, 1982) contend that distress may be evoked by seeing others in need, and that people are impelled to help, in part, because of an egocentric tendency to alleviate their own personal feelings of distress. In Batson et al.’s (1981) and Toi and Batson (1982) studies, when it was not possible for participants to escape reminders of a person’s need, participants who felt distress were just as likely to help as participants who felt empathy. However, when escape was possible, participants experiencing distress engaged in less helping behavior.

In the current study, we sought to investigate distress as it related to people’s concern about how their relationship with the offender would be affected by their decision to take or not to take the blame for the offender’s transgression. Distress related to relationship concerns would likely matter more in close friendships than in casual friendships, and this, in turn, might relate to people’s willingness to falsely take the blame. However, it is also possible that relationship distress would be unrelated to willingness to take the blame in friendships if participants were also experiencing a high level of empathy.

**THE CURRENT RESEARCH**

Although identifying associations between self-reported blame-taking behavior and situational factors is important, attempting to elucidate the causal relations may lead to a greater understanding of the processes that underlie this phenomenon. The purpose of this research was to experimentally manipulate relationship closeness to examine its effect on participants’ willingness to take the blame for a perpetrator’s offending behavior. We hypothesized that relationship closeness would affect participants’ willingness to take the blame for another person’s misconduct in hypothetical scenarios. More specifically, we predicted that participants who imagined a close friend engaging in an offense would be more willing to take the blame than participants who imagined a casual friend engaging in the offense. In order to examine whether the potential effect of relationship closeness on willingness to take the blame generalizes, we included two scenarios that described different offenses, either driver negligence or shoplifting. Lastly, we sought to explore potential mechanisms that could contribute to understanding why close relationships might lead to a greater willingness to claim responsibility for another’s offense. We focused on perceived reciprocity, empathy,
and distress associated with fears about how the relationship with the offender would be affected.

**METHOD**

**Participants**

Participants \( (N = 131) \) were college students who were a part of a psychology department participation pool from a large southeast university. Participants completed an online survey in exchange for credit in their psychology courses. Data from one person were removed because of a failure to complete the majority of items. The final sample of 130 participants consisted of 84 women, 43 men, and three individuals who did not provide information regarding sex. On average, participants were 22.19 years old (SD = 6.31). There were 26 African Americans, six Asian Americans, 85 European Americans, 11 individuals who selected “Other”, and two individuals who did not identify their ethnicity.

**Experimental Design**

A 2 (relationship closeness: casual vs. close friend) \( \times \) 2 (scenario: driver negligence vs. shoplifting) between-subjects factorial design was utilized. Researchers manipulated participants’ relationship closeness with the perpetrator by randomly assigning participants to read one of two descriptions that defined either a casual friendship or a close friendship and then asking participants to think of a specific person who fitted the corresponding definition. The type of offense in the scenarios was manipulated by randomly assigning participants to read a description of an offense committed by the previously identified friend that entailed either driver negligence or shoplifting.

**Materials and Measures**

*Relationship Closeness Manipulation*

Participants assigned to the casual friend condition read the following description:

Casual friends are people who you may not spend a lot of time with. Typically, these are people you feel comfortable talking with, but generally do not share much personal information with. Additionally, these are not the people you would rely on in times of difficulty. Casual friends are people you may or may not have known for a while and you may not feel that you know all that well. Think of a person who you consider a casual friend who fits this description.

Participants assigned to the close friend condition read the following description:

Close friends are people who you spend a lot of time with. Typically, these are people you feel comfortable sharing personal information with. Additionally, these are people who you would rely on during times of difficulty. Close friends are usually people you have known for a while and feel that you know pretty well. Think of a person who you consider a close friend who fits this description.
In both descriptions, participants were told that this person should not be someone who is a romantic or sexual partner. In addition, participants were asked to write a few sentences describing this person and why the person fit the description.

**Relationship Closeness Manipulation Check**

As a manipulation check of the relationship closeness, participants completed a modified version of the Unidimensional Relationship Closeness Scale (URCS; Dibble, Levine, & Park, 2012). This scale measured the level of closeness between participants and the specific friend. It consisted of 11 statements (e.g., “This person is a priority in my life”) that participants responded to on a seven-point scale with anchors 1 (strongly disagree) and 7 (strongly agree). Higher scores indicated closer relationships ($\alpha = 0.98$). In addition, participants indicated the sex of the specific friend and the length of time they have known this person. Participants also reported how difficult it was to think of a specific person who fit the description of a close or casual friend on a five-point scale with anchors 1 (not at all difficult) and 5 (very difficult).

**Scenario Manipulation**

Scenarios were written using gender-neutral language, and the friend was referred to as “this person.” Each scenario described a situation in which the participant witnessed the friend engage in an offense. In the driver negligence scenario, the friend pulls into traffic while distracted and hits another vehicle. In the shoplifting scenario, the friend attempts to steal an item while shopping. In both scenarios, an authority figure appears on the scene and makes the assumption that it was the participant rather than the friend who had committed the offense. Thus, participants in both scenario conditions are placed in a position in which it is possible for them to take the blame as a way to protect their friend.

**Scenario Manipulation Check**

Participants’ perceptions of the scenario’s realism, the seriousness of the offense, and the offender’s responsibility were included to measure potential differences between the two scenarios. First, participants indicated their agreement to 11 statements that assessed their perceptions of how realistic the scenario was in general (e.g., “This is an unrealistic situation”), for them personally (e.g., “I could see this situation happening to me”) and for the person they were thinking of (“It was difficult for me to imagine this person being in this situation”). Responses were made on a five-point scale with anchors 1 (strongly disagree) and 5 (strongly agree). Items were reverse scored as necessary so that higher scores indicated greater realism ($\alpha = 0.82$). Second, participants indicated their agreement to three statements that assessed how serious they believed the transgression described in the scenario was (e.g. “This behavior is considered serious by society’s standards”) on the five-point Likert scale described earlier. Two of the three items were reverse scored so that high scores indicated a greater perception that the transgression was serious ($\alpha = 0.84$). Third, participants’ perceptions about the friend’s degree of responsibility and their own degree of responsibility for the transgression were assessed with four items (e.g., “This person should be held
responsible for his/her own actions”; “I feel responsible for the outcome of this person’s actions”). One item was reverse scored so that high scores indicated a greater belief that the friend was responsible for the transgression ($\alpha = 0.79$).

Blame-taking Willingness

Two questions measured participants’ willingness to take the blame for the friend’s transgression. Participants indicated their level of agreement with the statements “I would take the blame for this person” and “I am willing to take the blame for this person” on a five-point scale with anchors 1 (strongly disagree) and 5 (strongly agree). Participants’ responses to these two questions were averaged to represent participants’ willingness to take the blame for the friend ($r = 0.85, p < 0.001$).

Mediators: Reciprocit y, Empathy, and Distress

To measure the potential mediators, participants responded to a series of statements that assessed their feelings of reciprocity, empathy, and distress. Responses to these statements were made on a five-point scale with anchors 1 (strongly disagree) to 5 (strongly agree). For reciprocity, participants responded to two items: “If the situation were reversed, I believe this person would take the blame for me;” and “It is likely that this person would do the same for me if I was the one at fault.” Participants’ responses to these items were averaged such that greater scores indicated more perceived reciprocity ($r = 0.66, p < 0.001$).

For empathy, participants responded to two items: “Fear of how the consequences (e.g., legal trouble, social disapproval) would affect this person’s future influenced my decision to take or not take the blame;” and “Feelings of protection toward this person influenced my decision to take or not take the blame.” The items were averaged such that greater scores indicated more empathic concern ($r = 0.59, p < 0.001$).

For distress, participants responded to two items that assessed the extent to which feelings of “concern that the friend would be upset or mad at me” and “concern about how my relationship with this person would be affected” influenced their decision to take the blame or not. The items were averaged such that greater scores indicated more relationship distress ($r = 0.61, p < 0.001$).

Procedures

After providing informed consent, participants read the description of either a close or a casual friend and then wrote about the friend they identified. Next, participants completed the URCS and answered questions about their friend. Afterwards, participants imagined their friend in either the driver negligence or shoplifting scenario. Next, participants’ perceptions about the scenario and the offense were measured, along with their feelings of reciprocity, empathic concern, and relationship distress. Participants’ willingness to take the blame for the friend was also assessed. Lastly, participants’ demographic information was collected.
RESULTS

Preliminary Results

Relationship with Offender

Preliminary analyses indicated that relationship closeness (i.e., casual vs. close) was manipulated effectively. Participants thinking of close friends reported a closer relationship ($M = 5.54, SD = 1.14$) than did participants thinking of casual friends ($M = 2.76, SD = 1.14; t(128) = 13.87, p < 0.001, d = 2.43$) and also indicated knowing close friends for a greater number of months ($M = 79.48, SD = 67.81$) than was the case for casual friends ($M = 31.06, SD = 33.25; t(125) = 5.12, p < 0.001, d = 0.91$). Although participants found it more difficult to think of a specific casual friend ($M = 2.18, SD = 1.26$) than of a specific close friend ($M = 1.54, SD = 1.09; t(128) = 3.12, p = 0.002, d = 0.55$), these overall low averages for participants in both conditions suggests that it was not difficult to think of a person who fitted the description.

Sex Differences

The effect of relationship closeness did not vary by participant sex or the friend’s sex [$\chi^2(1, N = 127) = 3.07, p = 0.080, \phi = 0.16$, and $\chi^2(1, N = 129) = 0.19, p = 0.665, \phi = 0.04$, respectively]. However, participants tended to identify a friend of the same sex more often than a friend of the opposite sex [$\chi^2(1, N = 126) = 32.22, p < 0.001, \phi = 0.51$]. The sample was divided such that 50% of female participants identified female friends, 26% of male participants identified male friends, 16% of female participants identified male friends, and 8% of male participants identified female friends. There was no significant differences in participants’ willingness to take the blame based on sex [$t(1, 125) = 0.78, p = 0.434, d = 0.14$] or the sex of their friend [$t(1, 127) = 0.33, p = 0.743, d = 0.06$].

Perceptions of Scenarios

We performed a series of analyses to examine whether participants perceived differences between the driver negligence and shoplifting scenarios. First, participants rated the driver negligence scenario as more realistic ($M = 3.55, SD = 0.65$) than the shoplifting scenario ($M = 2.86, SD = 0.52$) [$F(1,126) = 50.36, p < 0.001, d = 1.27$]. However, as indicated by a significant interaction between relationship closeness and scenario, this difference was larger among participants in the close friend than casual friend condition [$F(1,126) = 18.41, p < 0.001, d = 0.77$]. Second, participants perceived the shoplifting scenario as more serious ($M = 4.20, SD = 0.89$) than the driver negligence scenario ($M = 3.32, SD = 0.76$) [$F(1,126) = 36.91, p < 0.001, d = 1.08$]. There was no difference in perceived seriousness based on relationship closeness and there was no interaction effect [$F(1, 126)$ values $\leq 0.68, p$-values $\geq 0.410, d \leq 0.14$]. Third, participants believed their friend was more responsible for the offense in the shoplifting scenario ($M = 4.28, SD = 0.64$) than in the driver negligence scenario ($M = 3.24, SD = 0.62$) [$F(1, 125) = 87.93, p < 0.001, d = 1.68$]. There was no
difference in rating of responsibility based on relationship closeness nor was there an interaction effect [$F(1, 125)$ values $\leq 0.39$, $p$-values $\geq 0.535$, $d \leq 0.11$].

**Main Analyses**

**Non-mediated Model**

We effect-coded the experimental manipulations of relationship closeness (casual vs. close friend) and scenario (driver negligence vs. shoplifting) as $-1$ versus $+1$, respectively. We used MPlus to test their main and interactive effects on willingness to take the blame, corresponding to the model depicted in Figure 1 that includes only the paths a, b, and c, the results for which are presented in Table 1. Results revealed significant main effects for both relationship closeness and scenario. Consistent with our primary hypothesis, participants reported greater willingness to take the blame when the relationship with the offender was close than casual ($Path a, b = 0.21, 95\% CI [0.03, 0.39], t = 2.28, p = 0.020, d = 0.40$). Participants were less willing to take the blame in the shoplifting scenario than the driver negligence scenario ($Path b, b = -0.50, 95\% CI [-0.68, -0.32], t = -5.39, p < 0.001, d = 0.95$). There was no interaction between relationship closeness and scenario on blame taking ($p = 0.709$).

**Mediated Model**

We next considered reciprocity, empathy, and distress as potential mediators by evaluating their ability to convey indirect effects of relationship closeness and scenario effects on taking the blame. Significance tests of the effects in the mediated model were based on bias-corrected confidence intervals generated from 1000 bootstrap draws of the data (Shrout & Bolger, 2002). Bootstrapping does not require multivariate
normality of model effects, is more robust than alternative methods, and is therefore preferred for evaluation of the mediated model, which includes testing of specific indirect effects, which frequently evidence skewed distributions (Preacher & Hayes, 2004). However, in allowing for non-normal distributions, exact values of $t$ and $p$ are not calculated, although statistical significance and inexact $p$-values are indicated by confidence intervals.

Results of preliminary analyses that considered the mediators one at a time provided no support for distress as a mediator of the effect of relationship closeness on taking the blame, inasmuch as the corresponding indirect effect through distress was not significant ($p > 0.05$). Although distress did convey a significant indirect effect of the scenario manipulation on willingness to take the blame ($p < 0.05$), this was no longer the case when either reciprocity or empathy (or both) was included as a mediator in the model. By contrast, the indirect effects revealed in the preliminary analyses involving reciprocity and empathy remained significant and stable across all subsequent analyses that included all three of the potential mediators. Therefore, in considering possible mediators, we excluded distress but retained reciprocity and empathy in the final mediated model, which includes all the paths depicted in Figure 1. Results of the final mediated model are presented in Table 2.

In the context of the mediated model, the direct effect of relationship closeness on participants’ willingness to take the blame was not significant (path a, $b = 0.02$, 95% CI: $0.15–0.18$, ns, $d = 0.04$), though it did evidence significant indirect effects through both reciprocity (path f × d, $b = 0.15$, 95% CI: $0.07–0.29$, $p < 0.01$, $d = 0.38$) and empathy (path i × e, $b = 0.05$, 95% CI: $0.01–0.12$, $p < 0.05$, $d = 0.12$) – suggesting that the effect of close relationship on willingness was substantially mediated by empathy and reciprocity. The direct effect of the scenario remained significant (path b, $b = -0.30$, 95% CI: $-0.46$ to $-0.13$, $p < 0.01$, $d = 0.74$), and also evidenced significant indirect effects through both reciprocity (path g × d, $b = -0.14$, 95% CI: $-0.26$ to $-0.04$, $p < 0.01$, $d = 0.34$) and empathy (path j × e, $b = -0.05$, 95% CI: $-0.13$ to $-0.00$, $p < 0.05$, $d = 0.12$). Detailed results regarding the constituent direct effects of these indirect effects are provided in Table 2.

Table 1. Effects of relationship closeness and scenario on willingness to take the blame in the non-mediated model (2 × 2 ANOVA)

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Path</th>
<th>Variable</th>
<th>$M$ (SD)</th>
<th>$b$</th>
<th>95% CI</th>
<th>$p$</th>
<th>$d$</th>
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</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>a</td>
<td>Closeness</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
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<td></td>
<td>Casual</td>
<td>2.14 (1.23)</td>
<td>0.211</td>
<td>0.033–0.389</td>
<td>0.020</td>
<td>0.40</td>
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<td></td>
<td>Close</td>
<td>2.58 (1.08)</td>
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<td></td>
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<td></td>
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<tr>
<td>b</td>
<td>Scenario</td>
<td></td>
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<td></td>
<td>Driver negligence</td>
<td>2.87 (1.05)</td>
<td>-0.497</td>
<td>-0.675 to -0.319</td>
<td>&lt; 0.001</td>
<td>0.95</td>
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<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Shoplifting</td>
<td>1.87 (1.08)</td>
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<tr>
<td>c</td>
<td>Closeness × scenario</td>
<td></td>
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<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Casual, driver negligence</td>
<td>2.69 (1.18)</td>
<td>0.034</td>
<td>-0.144 to 0.212</td>
<td>0.709</td>
<td>0.13</td>
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<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Casual, shoplifting</td>
<td>1.63 (1.05)</td>
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<td></td>
<td>Close, driver negligence</td>
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<td>Close, shoplifting</td>
<td>2.12 (1.08)</td>
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</table>

Note. Paths correspond to those depicted in Figure 1. Willingness to take the blame was measured on a five-point scale with anchors 1 (strongly disagree) and 5 (strongly agree). CI, confidence interval.
As hypothesized, relationship closeness influenced people’s willingness to falsely claim responsibility for a friend’s transgression. The nature of this effect was such that participants reported greater willingness to take the blame when a close friend rather than a casual friend committed an offense. This finding is consistent with research on prosocial behavior that highlights the connection between the giver and receiver of aid as a significant predictor of helping (e.g., Brewer & Brown, 1998; Burnstein et al., 1994; Flippen et al., 1996). In addition, this finding aligns well with the tendency of voluntary false confessors to report that they have most often falsely confessed for another’s transgression when the perpetrator was a friend (Gudjonsson et al., 2007; Malloy et al., 2014).

In order to better understand why relationship closeness influences people’s willingness to take the blame, we identified three constructs from the helping literature and examined their potential to mediate the observed effect. The constructs included reciprocity, empathetic concern for the offender, and distress associated with concerns about the participant–offender relationship. Although all three constructs predicted participants’ willingness to falsely take the blame when considered individually, only reciprocity and empathy uniquely and independently mediated the effect of relationship closeness on blame-taking willingness.

Reciprocity may be more important in non-kin relationships than in kin relationships (Rotkirch et al., 2014). Within the non-kin friendships examined in our study,

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Table 2. Effects of relationship closeness and scenario on willingness to take the blame in mediated model

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Path</th>
<th>Variable</th>
<th>b</th>
<th>95% CI</th>
<th>p</th>
<th>d</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>a</td>
<td>Closeness</td>
<td>0.018</td>
<td>-0.148–0.179</td>
<td>ns</td>
<td>0.04</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>b</td>
<td>Scenario</td>
<td>-0.304</td>
<td>-0.458 to -0.134</td>
<td>&lt; 0.01</td>
<td>0.74</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>c</td>
<td>Closeness × scenario</td>
<td>-0.029</td>
<td>-0.178–0.108</td>
<td>ns</td>
<td>0.14</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>d</td>
<td>Reciprocity</td>
<td>0.500</td>
<td>0.301–0.678</td>
<td>&lt; 0.01</td>
<td>1.15</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>e</td>
<td>Empathy</td>
<td>0.191</td>
<td>0.004–0.366</td>
<td>&lt; 0.05</td>
<td>0.39</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>f</td>
<td>Closeness</td>
<td>0.307</td>
<td>0.128–0.482</td>
<td>&lt; 0.01</td>
<td>0.58</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>g</td>
<td>Scenario</td>
<td>-0.274</td>
<td>-0.445 to -0.072</td>
<td>&lt; 0.01</td>
<td>0.52</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>h</td>
<td>Closeness × scenario</td>
<td>0.102</td>
<td>-0.094–0.277</td>
<td>ns</td>
<td>0.39</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>i</td>
<td>Closeness</td>
<td>0.247</td>
<td>0.069–0.422</td>
<td>&lt; 0.01</td>
<td>0.47</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>j</td>
<td>Scenario</td>
<td>-0.247</td>
<td>-0.444 to -0.073</td>
<td>&lt; 0.01</td>
<td>0.47</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>k</td>
<td>Closeness × scenario</td>
<td>0.107</td>
<td>-0.063–0.282</td>
<td>ns</td>
<td>0.41</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

| f × d | Closeness via reciprocity | 0.154 | 0.067–0.293 | < 0.01  | 0.38  |
| g × d | Scenario via reciprocity | -0.137 | -0.257 to -0.042 | < 0.01  | 0.34  |
| h × d | Interaction via reciprocity | 0.051 | -0.045–0.152 | ns      | 0.25  |
| j × e | Closeness via empathy | 0.047 | 0.006–0.122 | < 0.05  | 0.12  |
| k × e | Interaction via empathy | 0.020 | -0.007–0.081 | ns      | 0.10  |

Note. Paths correspond to those depicted in Figure 1. The mediation model for which results are presented excludes distress as a potential mediator. CI, confidence interval.

†Effects tested through bias-corrected bootstrapping procedure which precludes calculation of exact p values. “ns” corresponds to p > 0.05.

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DISCUSSION

As hypothesized, relationship closeness influenced people’s willingness to falsely claim responsibility for a friend’s transgression. The nature of this effect was such that participants reported greater willingness to take the blame when a close friend rather than a casual friend committed an offense. This finding is consistent with research on prosocial behavior that highlights the connection between the giver and receiver of aid as a significant predictor of helping (e.g., Brewer & Brown, 1998; Burnstein et al., 1994; Flippen et al., 1996). In addition, this finding aligns well with the tendency of voluntary false confessors to report that they have most often falsely confessed for another’s transgression when the perpetrator was a friend (Gudjonsson et al., 2007; Malloy et al., 2014).

In order to better understand why relationship closeness influences people’s willingness to take the blame, we identified three constructs from the helping literature and examined their potential to mediate the observed effect. The constructs included reciprocity, empathetic concern for the offender, and distress associated with concerns about the participant–offender relationship. Although all three constructs predicted participants’ willingness to falsely take the blame when considered individually, only reciprocity and empathy uniquely and independently mediated the effect of relationship closeness on blame-taking willingness.

Reciprocity may be more important in non-kin relationships than in kin relationships (Rotkirch et al., 2014). Within the non-kin friendships examined in our study,
closer relationships were associated with greater expectations of reciprocity, namely that one’s friend would provide similar help if the participants were in need of someone to falsely take the blame. Accordingly, these greater expectations of reciprocity predicted greater likelihood of taking the blame and served to mediate the effects of relationship closeness. When relationship closeness is low, such as in casual friendships, individuals may perceive themselves to have an exchange relationship in which one neither expects nor desires unsolicited favors. In such relationships, expectations about reciprocal behavior may be lower and provision and acceptance of unsolicited favors may even be avoided. Consistent with this idea, Williamson and Clark (1992) found that helping actually caused a decline in pleasant feelings among those participants desiring an exchange relationship with the person in need.

Empathy also mediated the effect of relationship closeness on willingness to take the blame for the offender’s behavior. Empathic feelings of protection and concern were greater among participants thinking of a close rather than a casual friend. This is consistent with Batson and colleagues work indicating that empathy can motivate altruistic behavior (Batson et al., 1981; Toi & Batson, 1982). Distress also predicted willingness to take the blame, but it did not uniquely predict it when both reciprocity and empathy were entered into a model. Furthermore, relationship closeness was unrelated to distress concerns – thus, distress failed to mediate the effect of relationship closeness on participants’ willingness to take the blame.

These findings are important for several reasons. First, very little experimental work has investigated the causes and processes associated with non-custodial, voluntary false confessions. Our study confirms patterns observed within the false confession literature regarding the association between relationship closeness and false confessions, and builds on this research by establishing causal relations through the use of experimental methods. Second, by utilizing research within the prosocial literature, we have taken a theoretical approach to understanding the role of relationship closeness in voluntary false confessions. This approach offers several avenues for investigating other situational factors that may influence blame-taking behavior, such as intentionalty of the offense and seriousness of the offense. Third, our work identifies mediating variables that are important in people’s decisions to take the blame for another person.

**Nature of Offense**

In our study, the effect of relationship closeness on people’s willingness to take the blame was examined using two scenarios. Although the scenarios were written to be somewhat similar, because they describe different offenses, it is not surprising that there were differences in participants’ perceptions of the offenses. For example, participants rated the shoplifting scenario as more serious and attributed more responsibility to the offender compared with the driver negligence scenario. Additionally, conceptually, the shoplifting offense is clearly a criminal offense, whereas the driver negligence may also have a civil violation element to it. Despite these differences, the effect of relationship closeness remained a significant predictor of willingness to take the blame, suggesting that the effect we observed may characterize a wide variety of offenses. This point notwithstanding, the fact that participants reported a greater willingness to take the blame for the offender in the driver negligence scenario than the shoplifting scenario, and that the effect of scenario on willingness to take the blame was mediated by reciprocity and empathy, warrants some discussion.
Although there are several plausible reasons why participants’ willingness to take the blame was dependent on the scenario, one noteworthy explanation is the difference in the perceived responsibility of the offender. Weiner’s (1979) attribution theory, which involves judgments about the controllability of a behavior, has been applied to the study of helping behavior. Research tends to confirm the idea that the level of perceived controllability of the help seeker’s situation influences both people’s willingness to help and their actual helping behavior (Betancourt, 1990; Meyer & Mulherin, 1980). Furthermore, perceptions of controllability are associated with people’s emotional responses to the individual in need. When the reason for aid is considered controllable (i.e., intentional), people tend to experience less concern, less empathy, and more anger; in turn, people are less willing to offer aid under these conditions (Meyer & Mulherin, 1980). In our research, the driver negligence scenario involved an accidental offense, whereas the shoplifting scenario involved a more intentional offense. Consistent with attribution theory predictions, participants experienced greater empathy and were more willing to take the blame when an accidental offense was committed (i.e., driver negligence). However, due to other differences between the scenarios, including perceptions of realism and seriousness, as well as potential differences in the likelihood of a civil litigation, our conclusion that the effect of scenario was due to attributional differences must remain speculative.

**Limitations**

We chose to study the broader concept of blame-taking rather than specific false confessions, which typically involves an admission of guilt to authority figures and a signed confession that includes the details of the crime. Although the two are not the same, they are similar in that an individual is faced with the opportunity to take responsibility for another person’s offense. Thus, the present results are likely to be relevant to false confessions, though conclusions must be considered with caution prior to replication involving a confession outcome.

Overall, willingness to take the blame for another person was relatively low, with participants being somewhat disinclined to take the blame, as evidenced by their average response being below the midpoint of the response scale. However, this may not be particularly surprising given that people sometimes underestimate their likelihood of being influenced by situational pressures. For example, within the false confession literature, people acknowledge that false confessions occur, but they often report that they themselves would never confess to a crime they did not commit (Henkel, Coffman, & Dailey, 2008). This point is underscored by Pimentel et al.’s (2015) empirical work in which almost half of the participants took the blame for another person’s cheating. Furthermore, the person for whom participants took the blame in the Pimentel et al. (2015) study was essentially a stranger, someone whom participants had only known for minutes. Our research suggests that the rate of blame-taking behavior would be higher in naturalistic settings involving close friends.

In our study, we used hypothetical scenarios to measure people’s self-reported willingness to take the blame rather than actual blame-taking behavior. As is true with all studies using hypothetical scenarios, it is possible for there to be a mismatch between people’s beliefs about their potential behavior and their actual behaviors. However, within the prosocial literature, hypothetical scenarios have long been used as a way to...
test theoretical ideas when it is ethically questionable or logistically difficult to create helping situations in the laboratory. Furthermore, although interviews of real-life confessors offer valuable information about false confessions, such studies are unable to demonstrate causal relations. Investigations, such as ours, that use experimental methodology to test theory-based hypotheses can reveal causal effects, thereby providing explanations regarding the conditions in which people report a greater willingness to falsely take the blame. Although future research, particularly studies that include behavioral measures, is needed to replicate the patterns observed in this study, the application of prosocial theories to the area of voluntary false confessions is an important step in understanding why such behaviors occur.

CONCLUSION

The present study applied theory from the prosocial behavior literature to explain voluntary blame-taking, specifically factors in the offender–confessor relationship. Perceived reciprocity and empathy were identified as underlying mechanisms that help to explain people’s greater willingness to falsely take the blame for close rather than casual friends. This study can provide insights for law enforcement officers into the circumstances that increase the chance of obtaining a voluntary false confession. In cases in which there are multiple potential suspects, it is important that investigators consider the possibility that a presumption of guilt for specific persons within the group of suspects may be incorrect. That is, people can be motivated to take the blame even when innocent, particularly in situations in which suspects have formed close relationships with one another.

REFERENCES


