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The relevance of social hierarchy for the attribution of moral responsibility

Short Abstract: What are the main features that influence our attribution of moral responsibility? The aim is to argue that *social hierarchy* is a key factor radically overlooked. It is well known that intentionality as well as the valence of the outcome strongly influence our attribution of blame and praise for an action. To investigate the relevance of social hierarchy, we used of a variant of the boss vignette introduced by Knobe and others. In our scenarios we manipulated the valence of the side-effect (good versus bad side-effects) and asked for the attribution of blame versus praise for a company action to both, a boss and an employee. At the same time we kept the intentionality of boss and employee concerning the side-effect neutral and constant. Interestingly, social hierarchy strongly modulates the attribution of blame and praise. Furthermore, we put this into an intercultural context comparing the data from Germany, United Arabic Emirates (UAE) and China. In all cultures the main effect of hierarchical difference between boss and employee has the same tendency and is strongly significant: the boss deserves more blame and less praise than the employee. Furthermore, while the role of the boss leads to the same results in all culture, for the role of the employee we can observe some intercultural differences: the employee in Germany deserves more blame and less praise than the employees in UAE and China. I argue that this may be a result of the different understanding of social hierarchies. Additional studies will be presented which will be the basis for a qualified evaluation of the role of social hierarchy for the attribution of blame and praise. Thus, we have to integrate social hierarchy as an essential factor in our theory of the attribution of moral responsibility.

Long Abstract: What are the main features that influence our attribution of moral responsibility? It is well known that intentionality as well as the valence of the outcome strongly influence our attribution of blame and praise for an action. To investigate the relevance of social hierarchy, we used of a variant of the boss vignette introduced by Knobe and others. In our scenarios we manipulated the valence of the side-effect (good versus bad side-effects) and asked for the attribution of blame versus praise for a company action to both, a boss and an employee. At the same time we kept the intentionality of boss and employee concerning the side-effect neutral and constant. Interestingly, social hierarchy strongly modulates the attribution of blame and praise. Furthermore, we put this into an intercultural context comparing the data from Germany, United Arabic Emirates (UAE) and China. In all cultures the main effect of hierarchical difference between boss and employee has the same tendency and is strongly significant: the boss deserves more blame and less praise than the employee. Furthermore, while the role of the boss leads to the same results in all culture, for the role of the employee we can observe some intercultural differences: the employee in Germany deserves more blame and less praise than the employees in UAE and China. I argue that this may be a result of the different understanding of social hierarchies: while in Germany the hierarchy between boss and employee is rather weak, it is vertical and very strong in the UAE and China; this was also proven by data of the same participants. This intercultural aspect will be enriched soon by new data from USA.

In general, this leads to the discussion whether social hierarchy is an independent new factor to be accounted for in a systematic theory of attributing moral responsibility or whether it should rather be considered as a minor modulating aspect. To prove that it actually is a strong factor for the attribution of moral responsibility, for our recent studies, we created a vignette in which we distinguish the role of the decision maker from the social authority. While in our

former studies we arranged it such that the boss is not only the social authority but at the same time makes the decision, we now produce a scenario of a technician in a company who is enabled to make one specific and important decision while the boss remains the ultimate authority. If in such scenarios, the boss still receives more blame for a bad outcome of an action of the company than the technician who made the decision, then this proves the importance of social hierarchy as an independent factor. Actually, in a first explorative study, this result has just been confirmed. Additional studies are in the evaluation process which will be the basis for a qualified evaluation of the role of social hierarchy for the attribution of blame and praise.