

## Counterfactual thinking and stereotypes: The nonconformity effect

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### *Abstract*

*Past research has shown that counterfactual thinking ('if only...') is related to judgements of responsibility for negative events. It has also shown that behaviours deviating from the target's own behavioural standard (intrapersonal norm) are likely to trigger counterfactuals—the so-called exceptional-routine effect. In the present research, we demonstrate that behaviours deviating from a social category's behavioural standard (social norm) are also likely to trigger counterfactuals—what may be called the nonconformity effect. Two studies investigated counterfactual thinking regarding a rape case, classifying counterfactuals according to their conformity versus nonconformity to relevant social norms, and their focus on actions versus inactions. In Study 1, participants with higher endorsement of the rape victim stereotype generated more counterfactuals on the victim's non-conforming inactions than did participants with lower stereotype endorsement. The presence of a nonconformity effect was confirmed in Study 2, where participants rated their agreement with externally generated counterfactuals. Moreover, in Study 2, counterfactuals focused on the victim's non-conforming inactions predicted responsibility attribution to the victim through the mediating role of perceived avoidability of the event. Copyright © 2004 John Wiley & Sons, Ltd.*

When people are faced with a negative event, they often think about what might have been if only something in the past had been different. For example, if a man is robbed of his wallet on the underground, he may afterwards think: 'If only I hadn't got in a crowded carriage . . .', 'If only I had buttoned up my jacket's inside pocket . . .', or 'If only I had been careful about the people around me, things would have been different'. Such imagined alternatives, called counterfactuals, suggest a hypothetical scenario where people mutate one or more antecedents so that they undo the factual outcome.

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Counterfactual thinking is widely used in causal explanation and responsibility attribution in everyday life. The event features that appear mutated in the counterfactual scenario are likely to play a role in the interpretation of the real event. In fact, they are likely to be perceived as its causes (Hilton, 1991). For example, the above-mentioned counterfactuals might lead a person to think: '*I was robbed because I got in a crowded carriage, because I didn't button up my jacket's inside pocket, because I wasn't careful about the people around me*'. Counterfactual thinking may also play a significant role in responsibility attribution. Some studies carried out in the judicial context have assessed the presence of a direct link between the number of counterfactuals focused on a certain target and the degree of responsibility assigned to that target (Bothwell & Duhon, 1994; Nario-Redmond & Branscombe, 1996; Wiener et al., 1994).

Given the consequences in terms of causal explanation of events and responsibility attribution, a thorough understanding of what elements are most likely to be mutated in a counterfactual simulation is of relevance for research on social judgement. In the present research, we aimed to demonstrate that in a socially embedded context, behaviours that do not conform to a social norm are most likely to be counterfactually mutated.

### COUNTERFACTUAL MUTABILITY

Previous research has shown the presence of certain regularities in counterfactual mutability (for reviews, see Miller, Turnbull, & McFarland, 1990; Roeser & Olson, 1995). Kahneman and Tversky (1982) observed that counterfactual mutations are usually focused on the main object of attention (the so-called '*focus rule*'). In one of their studies, Kahneman and Tversky presented participants with a car accident scenario in which a drunk driver had run a woman over, and asked them to play the role of either the victim's or the driver's relatives. Results showed that participants generated more counterfactuals focused on the target when they pretended to be his or her relatives. In addition to the focus rule, previous research has shown the presence of two main effects in counterfactual thinking, the *exceptional-routine effect* and the *action-inaction effect*.

With regard to the exceptional-routine effect, several studies have shown that in counterfactual simulation elements that are perceived to be exceptional or abnormal are more likely to be mutated than elements that are perceived to be normal (Gavanski & Wells, 1989; Kahneman & Miller, 1986; Kahneman & Tversky, 1982; Klauer, Jacobsen, & Migulla, 1995; Wells, Taylor, & Turtle, 1987). For example, people faced with Kahneman and Tversky's (1982) car accident scenario are more likely to mutate an exceptional event, such as the victim leaving work earlier than usual, than a routine event, such as the victim taking the usual route home. This effect has been explained by referring to *norm theory*, developed by Kahneman and Miller (1986). According to norm theory, our representation of what might have been generally consists of the representation of what would have been 'normal' according to us.

With regard to the action-inaction effect, previous counterfactual research has shown that actions are more mutable than inactions (Gleicher et al., 1990; Kahneman & Miller, 1986; Landman, 1987; Lundberg & Frost, 1992; Miller & Taylor, 1995; Zeelenberg, van der Pligt, & Manstead, 1998). Demonstrations of the action-inaction effect are based on assessments of emotional reaction after a negative event, with counterfactual thinking presumed to be the principal mediator. For example, in Landman's research (1987), participants felt that a student who received a poor grade after moving into a different class would experience more regret than a student who had also considered moving into another class, but eventually received a low grade remaining in the original class. Again, the explanation of this effect is based on norm theory, as people's actions are assumed to be in themselves a deviation, an 'exception' with respect to the 'normal' sequence of events.

### EXCEPTIONALITY AS NONCONFORMITY

So far, research on counterfactual mutability has focused on behaviours perceived as exceptional with respect to an *intrapersonal norm*—intended as the counterfactual target's behavioural standard (see Davis & Lehman, 1995; Roese, 1997). In real life, however, a target person is often perceived as a member of a social category, and the target's behaviours may therefore be perceived as exceptional with respect to a *social or stereotype-based norm*—intended as a social category's behavioural standard. Although previous studies have suggested that 'stereotype-inconsistent' behaviours might especially evoke counterfactual thoughts (Branscombe & Weir, 1992; Branscombe, Crosby, & Weir, 1993; Hegarty & Pratto, 2001), empirical evidence of the direct influence of stereotype-based norms on counterfactual mutability is still lacking. If shown, such an influence would indicate that the above-mentioned exceptional-routine effect may present itself as a *nonconformity effect*, according to which behaviours that do not conform to stereotype-based norms are more likely to be counterfactually mutated than conforming behaviours. The nonconformity effect might be especially evident when people generate counterfactuals about scripted events, for which a well-developed set of social behavioural prescriptions is available. Moreover, given that endorsement of stereotype-based norms regarding a social category may vary from one person to another, the nonconformity effect might be more likely to manifest itself in people with higher stereotype endorsement.

The nonconformity effect might also moderate the action-inaction effect. Some evidence of this type can be found in recent research showing that in socially framed events inactions may be as likely to be counterfactually mutated as actions (Catellani & Milesi, 2001; Davis, Lehman, Wortman, Silver, & Thompson, 1995; Feldman, Miyamoto, & Loftus, 1999; Gilovich & Medvec, 1994; N'gbala & Branscombe, 1997). In particular, Catellani and Milesi (2001) demonstrated that rape victims' inactions are mutated as much as their actions, whereas this does not happen for victims of different crimes. This may be because rape victims are stereotypically expected to enact a host of preventive behaviours, while the same does not hold for victims of different crimes (see Feldman, Ullman, & Dunkel-Schetter, 1998). These data suggest that the tendency to perceive actions as more exceptional than inactions may be constrained by expectations regarding how a target person should act in an event, a tendency that is likely to differ across social categories.

### NONCONFORMITY AND RESPONSIBILITY ATTRIBUTION

An empirical demonstration of the nonconformity effect may also throw further light on the relation between counterfactual thinking and responsibility attribution for negative events. Past research has assessed the presence of a direct link between the *number* of counterfactuals focused on a certain target and the degree of responsibility assigned to that target (Bothwell & Duhon, 1994; Nario-Redmond & Branscombe, 1996; Wiener et al., 1994). However, less attention has been devoted to the *type* of counterfactuals that are most likely to enhance responsibility attribution. As this issue is worthy of further investigation, we decided to make a distinction between counterfactuals focused on conforming *versus* non-conforming behaviours and on actions *versus* inactions, and to evaluate their links with responsibility attribution.

In relation to the *conformity dimension*, social judgement research has shown that stereotype-inconsistency increases responsibility attribution (Acock & Ireland, 1983; Branscombe et al., 1993; Butler & Geis, 1990; Condry & Dyer, 1976). Accordingly, one might argue that a counterfactual focus on a target's non-conforming behaviours, that is behaviours that violate stereotypic expectations, would lead to increased responsibility attribution to that target.

In relation to the *activity dimension*, some studies have shown the existence of a link between action-focused counterfactuals and responsibility attribution, suggesting that perceived causality may play a mediating role between the two (Turley, Sanna, & Reiter, 1995). A counterfactual focus on an antecedent action increases the probability that the action will be considered as the cause of the observed outcome (see Hilton, 1991); if the outcome is negative, this may lead to increased responsibility of the actor. The link between inaction-focused counterfactuals and responsibility attribution, on the other hand, has not been demonstrated so far. In this case, perceived causality is less likely to play a mediating role. Selecting something that did *not* happen as the possible cause of an observed outcome may sound rather awkward. Consistent with this idea, some studies have suggested that a counterfactual focus on inactions may be more likely when the person's aim is to assess how a given outcome might have been avoided (Catellani & Milesi, 2001; Mandel & Lehman, 1996; N'Gbala & Branscombe, 1997). If this is the case, perceived event avoidability (instead of perceived event causality) might be a mediating variable between inaction-focused counterfactuals and responsibility evaluation: the target person may be deemed responsible not *for having done* something that *caused* the negative outcome, but *for not having done* everything possible to *avoid* that outcome. Following from this, one might suggest that when stereotype-based norms triggered by a counterfactual target include the adoption of a preventive behaviour, counterfactual focus on the target's inactions, and not only on the target's actions, may lead to enhanced responsibility of that target.

The issue of whether and how stereotype-based norms might influence counterfactual mutability, and therefore responsibility attribution, was investigated in the present research by taking into account counterfactual thinking regarding a rape case.

## THE RAPE CONTEXT AND THE RAPE VICTIM STEREOTYPE

There is a long tradition of research on evaluation of rape cases (for a review see Krahe, 1991). It has been shown that in rape cases, unlike other judicial cases, the focus of attention is very likely to be on the victim's behaviour. Moreover, the presence of a strong rape victim stereotype has been highlighted (Borgida & Brekke, 1985; Branscombe & Weir, 1992; Brownmiller, 1975; Fitzgerald & Swann, 1995; Lonsway & Fitzgerald, 1995) which, by contrast, prescribes what a woman should or should not do to avoid rape. For example, a woman should not engage in a number of risky behaviours, such as accepting lifts from strangers (Acock & Ireland, 1983), or walking late at night (Pallak & Davies, 1982). At the same time, a woman is expected to assume a number of preventive behaviours, such as trying to escape and actively resist the rapist (Howard, 1984). Consistently, there is a tendency to blame rape victims for not having done enough to prevent the tragic outcome (e.g. *if a woman is raped, often it's because she didn't say 'no' clearly enough*) (Bell, Kuriloff & Lottes, 1994; Estrich, 1991; Feldman et al., 1998; Fitzgerald & Swann, 1995; Krahe, 1991). To summarize, rape victims are often evaluated not only for their actions (Turley et al., 1995), but also for their inactions, namely for not having done enough to avoid the rape.

## OVERVIEW AND HYPOTHESES

To investigate the influence of rape victim stereotype on counterfactual thinking and, consequently, responsibility attribution, two studies were carried out. In Study 1, we asked participants to generate counterfactuals regarding a given rape event; in Study 2, we asked other participants to assess their

agreement with other-generated counterfactuals regarding the same event, and to assign responsibility for the event. In both studies, participants' endorsement of the rape victim stereotype was assessed, in order to compare participants with higher versus lower stereotype endorsement.

First, we expected that participants with higher stereotype endorsement would focus counterfactuals on rape victims more than participants with lower stereotype endorsement.

Second, and most importantly, we expected participants with higher stereotype endorsement to generate more counterfactuals on the rape victim's behaviours that would not conform to relevant behavioural standards (the nonconformity effect).

Third, we expected that counterfactuals of participants with higher stereotype endorsement would be especially inclined to focus on the rape victim's non-conforming inactions. In other words, it was expected that they would focus their attention on what the victim did not do, but could/should have done, to avoid the negative outcome.

Finally, we expected that counterfactual focus on the rape victim's non-conforming inactions would be related to responsibility attribution to the victim, and that this relation would be mediated by perceived avoidability of the negative event.

## STUDY 1

In Study 1, we presented participants with an account of a rape case and asked them to generate counterfactuals about how, in the given case, things might have had a different, better outcome. Self-generated counterfactuals were classified according to: (a) target, (b) conformity *versus* nonconformity to stereotype-based norms regarding rape victims, and (c) focus on actions *versus* inactions. A comparison was then made between participants with a higher *versus* lower endorsement of rape victim stereotype.

### Method

#### *Participants*

Fifty-two undergraduate students (28 males, 24 females) attending the Faculty of Political Science of the Catholic University of Milan participated in the research on a voluntary basis. Their mean age was 23 years (ranging from 20 to 29).

#### *Instruments and Procedure*

All participants were presented with a two-page report of a rape case based on a true case. The rape report was very similar to the one employed in Catellani and Milesi (2001, Studies 1 and 2), except for the fact that the victims' behaviours were modified in order to balance their conformity versus nonconformity to stereotypical expectations regarding rape victims. The selection of the victim's behaviours was based on Krahé's work (1991) on the typical rape situation; that is, on stereotypical features and events that characterize 'normal' rapes. We chose six victim's behaviours from the profile described by Krahé (1991), and adapted them to our scenario ('*Getting frightened when the man took off the gun*', '*Trying to resist*', '*Crying*', '*Not trying to repair the car by herself*', '*Not paying attention*

to the road the man was taking', 'Not speaking anymore with the man'). We then chose six behaviours that instead represented an overt departure from the typical rape situation, and again we included them in our scenario ('Accepting a lift', 'Being pleasant with the man', 'Talking freely to the man', 'Not saying 'no' clearly', 'Not trying to run away', 'Not crying out for help'). The behaviours were balanced with regard to the action-inaction dimension.

In order to test whether the behaviours chosen were in fact perceived as conforming versus non-conforming to stereotype-based norms regarding rape victims, a pilot study was carried out. After reading the rape report, 20 participants (10 males, 10 females, same Faculty and mean age of the sample employed in the main study) were presented with the list of the victim's behaviours. They were asked to estimate the perceived adequacy of each behaviour to the way a woman should behave with a stranger, using a 9-point scale (1 = *inadequate behaviour*, 9 = *adequate behaviour*). In line with our predictions, the victim's non-conforming behaviours (e.g. 'Accepting a lift') were perceived as less adequate than the victim's conforming behaviours (e.g. 'Getting frightened when the man took off the gun'). This difference was significant for actions (conforming actions,  $M = 3.71$ ; non-conforming actions,  $M = 2.92$ ;  $t(19) = 2.56$ ,  $p < 0.05$ ) and highly significant for inactions (conforming inactions,  $M = 4.11$ ; non-conforming inactions,  $M = 2.60$ ;  $t(19) = 4.35$ ,  $p < 0.001$ ). Hence, the entire list of the victim's conforming and non-conforming behaviours was included in our scenario. With regard to the perpetrator's behaviours, they were equal in number to those of the victim, but they were only balanced with regard to the action-inaction dimension.

The report was about a young woman, Giulia, whose car had broken down and was forced to stop at the edge of the road; a police officer, Marco, who was almost at the end of his shift, and who was driving by, offered the woman a lift to the nearest garage. Giulia accepted but she felt a bit uncomfortable because she had had a prior conviction for marijuana possession; hence, she tried to be pleasant with the police officer. While driving, they talked quite freely, and Marco mistook the woman's pleasant manners for her willingness to have a sexual affair with him. He stopped the car and took the initiative. At first, Giulia tried to resist and struggled, but she got frightened when Marco took off the gun he still had on, and put it in the tray between the seats. When he began to undress Giulia, she was afraid of Marco's reactions and started to cry without saying or doing anything else. During the intercourse, Marco did not hit Giulia, who did not struggle anymore. The day after, Giulia charged the police officer with sexual abuse. In front of the judge, she stated that Marco had forced her to have sexual intercourse; Marco did not deny that he had had intercourse with Giulia, but argued that she had been completely willing.

The rape scenario was presented to the participants. After reading it, they were asked to think about the episode and, without looking at the text, to complete the highest possible number of sentences beginning with: 'The outcome might have been better, if only...'.

Once counterfactuals were generated, participants completed a scale assessing their endorsement of rape victim stereotype. This scale was based on Burt's (1980) original Rape Myth Acceptance Scale, reviewed by Lonsway and Fitzgerald (1995). According to the results of the pilot study, the original scale was reduced from 20 to 16 items (e.g. 'When a woman is raped, she usually did something careless to put herself in that situation', 'Many rapes happen because women lead men on'). Respondents rated their agreement on 9-point scales ranging from 1 (*completely disagree*) to 9 (*completely agree*). The 16 statements proved to form a reliable scale ( $\alpha = 0.85$ ).

### *Coding the Mutations*

Counterfactuals generated by participants were first classified according to their *target*. A distinction was made between *victim-focused counterfactuals* (e.g. '... if only Giulia had had a mobile phone.')



and *perpetrator-focused counterfactuals* (e.g. ‘... if only Marco hadn’t taken off the gun.’). Counterfactuals focused on other characters or situational factors (e.g., ‘... if only a bus had picked Giulia up.’) were also classified, but not included in the analysis as their frequency turned out to be very low ( $M=0.3$ ) and not significantly different across conditions. Only victim-focused counterfactuals were further classified according to the following two criteria.

*Conformity.* A distinction was made between *conforming counterfactuals*, focused on behaviours that conform to stereotypic expectations about rape victims (e.g. ‘... if only Giulia hadn’t got frightened when Marco took off the gun.’), and *non-conforming counterfactuals*, focused on behaviours that instead do not conform to stereotypic expectations (e.g. ‘... if only Giulia hadn’t accepted a lift.’) (see Branscombe & Weir, 1992; Krahe, 1991). This coding was used for all generated counterfactuals, including both counterfactuals focused on behaviours quoted in the text and counterfactuals focused on behaviours not explicitly quoted in the text, but inferred from it. For example, a counterfactual like ‘... if only Julia hadn’t been so nice to him.’ was not focused on behaviours explicitly quoted in the text, but on other non-conforming behaviours that were inferred from it, such as ‘Julia was pleasant to him’. Therefore, they were also coded as non-conforming counterfactuals.

*Activity.* *Action-focused counterfactuals*, in which a factual event was mentally undone, or subtracted (e.g. ‘... if only Giulia hadn’t talked freely to him.’), were distinguished from *inaction-focused counterfactuals*, in which an event that did not actually take place was instead mentally added (e.g. ‘... if only Giulia had cried out for help.’) (see Roese, 1997; Roese & Olson, 1993). Here again, the activity coding was used on all counterfactuals generated, both those closely mirroring events reported in the text and those simply inferred from it.

Two independent raters carried out the coding, with an overall agreement of 90%. In particular, agreement between the two raters was 95% for the target dimension, 84% for the conformity dimension and 91% for the activity dimension. Any discrepancies in coding were resolved through discussion.

## Results

### *Rape Victim Stereotype*

The mean score on the Lonsway and Fitzgerald’s scale (1995) was  $M=3.29$ . No significant effect of participants’ gender was observed. A median split on the unweighted mean score was made, which classified participants as either having a lower ( $M=2.41$ , scores  $< 2.56$ ) or a higher ( $M=4.20$ , scores  $\geq 2.56$ ) endorsement of stereotypic beliefs about rape victims.

### *Counterfactual Mutability and Rape Victim Stereotype*

The mean number of counterfactuals generated was 4.08 (the median was 4). The proportion of counterfactuals focused on the victim or the perpetrator out of the total number of counterfactuals generated was calculated. A mixed model analysis of variance, 2 (Stereotype Endorsement: lower vs. higher)  $\times$  2 (Target: victim vs. perpetrator) was then conducted on these proportions, with repeated measures on the second factor. A main effect of target emerged,  $F(1, 50) = 14.32$ ,  $p < 0.001$ , indicating that the mean proportion of victim-focused counterfactuals ( $M=0.59$ ) was higher than the mean

Table 1. Mean proportion of counterfactuals as a function of rape victim stereotype endorsement (Study 1)

| Counterfactual focus | Stereotype endorsement |                   |
|----------------------|------------------------|-------------------|
|                      | Lower                  | Higher            |
| Perpetrator          | 0.45 <sub>a</sub>      | 0.23 <sub>b</sub> |
| Victim               | 0.48 <sub>a</sub>      | 0.72 <sub>c</sub> |

Note: Means not having a common subscript differ at  $p < 0.01$ .

proportion of perpetrator-focused counterfactuals ( $M = 0.34$ ). This effect was qualified by a significant interaction between stereotype endorsement and target,  $F(1, 50) = 12.22$ ,  $p = 0.001$  (see Table 1). Post-hoc tests showed that high stereotypers generated a higher proportion of victim-focused counterfactuals ( $M = 0.72$ ; perpetrator-focused counterfactuals  $M = 0.23$ ,  $t(25) = 6.37$ ,  $p < 0.001$ ), while this did not happen for low stereotypers (victim-focused counterfactuals  $M = 0.48$ ; perpetrator-focused counterfactuals  $M = 0.45$ ,  $t(25) = 0.033$ , *n.s.*). This result was consistent with our first prediction that counterfactual focus would vary as a function of the participants' endorsement of stereotypic beliefs about the victim.

A further goal of Study 1 was to assess whether stereotype endorsement would be related to the generation of different types of victim-focused counterfactuals. A 2 (Stereotype Endorsement: lower vs. higher)  $\times$  2 (Conformity: conforming vs. non-conforming behaviour)  $\times$  2 (Activity: action vs. inaction) mixed ANOVA was therefore carried out on the proportion of victim-focused counterfactuals only, with conformity and activity as within-subject variables. A significant main effect of stereotype endorsement emerged,  $F(1, 50) = 9.75$ ,  $p < 0.01$ , due to the higher overall proportion of victim-focused counterfactuals in high stereotypers (see previous analysis). The stereotype endorsement by conformity interaction was also significant,  $F(1, 50) = 4.15$ ,  $p < 0.05$ . Follow-up tests showed that high stereotypers focused counterfactuals on the victim's non-conforming behaviours ( $M = 0.47$ ) more than low stereotypers ( $M = 0.22$ ),  $t(50) = 3.41$ ,  $p < 0.01$ , while the two groups did not differ with regard to counterfactual focus on conforming behaviours (higher stereotype endorsement  $M = 0.25$ ; lower stereotype endorsement  $M = 0.25$ ,  $t(50) = 0.01$ , *n.s.*). Finally, the stereotype endorsement by conformity by activity interaction was also significant,  $F(1, 50) = 4.11$ ,  $p < 0.05$ . As can be seen in Table 2, participants scoring higher on the rape victim stereotype scale generated a higher proportion of counterfactuals focused on the rape victim's non-conforming inactions (higher stereotype

Table 2. Mean proportion of victim-focused counterfactuals as a function of rape victim stereotype endorsement (Study 1)

| Conformity     | Stereotype endorsement |                   |
|----------------|------------------------|-------------------|
|                | Lower                  | Higher            |
| Conforming     |                        |                   |
| Actions        | 0.09 <sub>a</sub>      | 0.14 <sub>a</sub> |
| Inactions      | 0.16 <sub>a</sub>      | 0.11 <sub>a</sub> |
| Non-conforming |                        |                   |
| Actions        | 0.13 <sub>a</sub>      | 0.18 <sub>a</sub> |
| Inactions      | 0.09 <sub>a</sub>      | 0.29 <sub>b</sub> |

Note: Means within rows not having a common subscript differ at  $p < 0.01$ .



endorsement  $M = 0.29$ , lower stereotype endorsement  $M = 0.09$ ;  $t(50) = 3.35$ ,  $p < 0.01$ ). Thus, differences between the groups mainly related to the victim's non-conforming inactions. As predicted, high stereotypers focused their attention on what the victim did not do, but could/should have done, to prevent the incident from occurring. A similar finding was obtained through regression analysis, with counterfactuals focused on the rape victim's non-conforming inactions being significantly predicted by stereotype endorsement ( $\beta = 0.28$ ,  $p < 0.05$ ).

## Discussion

Results of the first study offered a clear confirmation of the influence of socially shared expectations on counterfactual mutability. In particular, our proposed interpretation of the exceptionality dimension as a nonconformity dimension proved to be fruitful in highlighting differences between participants with higher versus lower endorsement of the rape victim stereotype. In addition, the two groups were shown to differ with regard to the activity dimension, offering evidence that counterfactual focus on a target's actions versus inactions may be influenced by stereotype-based norms triggered by the target's social category.

## STUDY 2

Results of Study 1 were based on the analysis of self-generated counterfactuals. However, in a judicial context, people may also be confronted with externally presented counterfactuals. For example, attorneys may use counterfactuals as part of their argumentative strategy, and these counterfactuals may have important effects on the jurors' interpretations and attributions (Branscombe, Owen, Gartska, & Coleman, 1996; Nario-Redmond & Branscombe, 1996). In order to test whether our results might be extended from counterfactual *generation* to counterfactual *evaluation*, we presented participants in Study 2 with a list of counterfactual statements focused on the rape victim and varying according to conformity and activity dimensions. Participants were asked to rate their agreement/disagreement with each statement.

In line with the results of Study 1, we expected participants with higher stereotype endorsement to show more agreement with counterfactuals focused on the victim's non-conforming inactions as compared with participants with lower stereotype endorsement. We did not expect to find such a difference in the evaluation of the other types of counterfactual statements.

Study 2 was also designed to test how counterfactual thinking might be related to responsibility judgements. Consistent with our theoretical premises, we expected counterfactual focus on the rape victim's non-conforming inactions to predict responsibility attribution, through its effect on perceived avoidability of the event.

## Method

### *Participants*

Eighty-six undergraduate students (35 males, 51 females) were recruited in the same manner as in Study 1. Their mean age was 21 years (ranging from 20 to 29).

### *Instruments and Procedure*

All participants were confronted with the same rape report as the one provided in Study 1, except that in Study 2 participants were not asked to generate counterfactuals thereafter, but were presented with the following phrase:

*Some time later Giulia and Marco's case was tried before a jury. Here below are given the different opinions expressed by two of the jurors after they had thought about the case.*

A list of counterfactual statements followed, and participants were told that half of them had been generated by Juror 1, and the other half by Juror 2. The attribution of counterfactuals to Juror 1 and Juror 2 was counterbalanced among participants. All counterfactual statements began as follows: *'The outcome might have been better, if only ...'*. The content of counterfactuals was taken directly from those actually generated by participants in Study 1, and they were balanced with respect to the conformity and the activity dimensions.

A within-subject manipulation for the conformity dimension was used, such that all participants were presented with both conforming and non-conforming behaviours. A between-subject manipulation was used for the activity dimension. Half the participants were presented with three counterfactuals referring to the victim's *conforming actions* (e.g. *'... if only Giulia hadn't got frightened when Marco took off the gun.'*), and three counterfactuals referring to the victim's *non-conforming actions* (e.g. *'... if only Giulia hadn't talked freely to Marco.'*). The other half of the participants were presented with three counterfactuals referring to the victim's *conforming inactions* (e.g. *'... if only Giulia had paid attention to the road Marco was taking.'*), and three counterfactuals referring to the victim's *non-conforming inactions* (e.g. *'... if only Giulia had cried out for help.'*). All participants were asked to indicate their agreement with each of the two jurors, on 9-point scales ranging from 1 (*completely disagree*) to 9 (*completely agree*).

After the counterfactual evaluation task, participants were asked to rate the extent to which perpetrator and victim were responsible for the outcome, on scales ranging from 1 (*not at all responsible*) to 9 (*very responsible*). Next, they were asked to rate the extent to which the victim could have avoided the negative outcome, on a 9-point scale ranging from 1 (*not at all*) to 9 (*very much*). Finally, participants completed the Lonsway and Fitzgerald scale (1995), assessing endorsement of rape victim stereotype. The scale was presented in the same form as in Study 1, and again proved to be reliable ( $\alpha = 0.88$ ).

## **Results**

### *Rape Victim Stereotype*

The mean score on the Lonsway and Fitzgerald's scale (1995) was  $M = 3.15$ . As in Study 1, no significant effect of gender emerged. A median split on the unweighted mean score was made, which classified participants either with a lower ( $M = 2.20$ , scores  $< 2.50$ ) or with a higher ( $M = 4.01$ , scores  $\geq 2.50$ ) endorsement of the rape victim stereotype. Follow-up tests showed that the two groups significantly differed in their ratings of victim's responsibility, perpetrator's responsibility, and perceived avoidability of the rape incident. Participants with higher stereotype endorsement rated the victim as more responsible ( $M = 3.66$ ) than participants with lower stereotype endorsement ( $M = 2.18$ ),  $t(42) = 4.54$ ,  $p < 0.001$ . The reverse was true for the perpetrator's responsibility, although the difference was less marked (higher stereotype endorsement  $M = 7.93$ ; lower stereotype endorsement  $M = 8.41$ ,  $t(42) = 2.57$ ,  $p < 0.05$ ). Finally, perceived avoidability of the incident was rated as

Table 3. Mean agreement with victim-focused counterfactuals as a function of rape victim stereotype endorsement (Study 2)

| Conformity     | Stereotype endorsement |                   |
|----------------|------------------------|-------------------|
|                | Lower                  | Higher            |
| Conforming     |                        |                   |
| Actions        | 2.61 <sub>a</sub>      | 3.84 <sub>a</sub> |
| Inactions      | 4.77 <sub>a</sub>      | 4.45 <sub>a</sub> |
| Non-conforming |                        |                   |
| Actions        | 2.87 <sub>a</sub>      | 4.10 <sub>a</sub> |
| Inactions      | 2.68 <sub>a</sub>      | 5.59 <sub>b</sub> |

Note: Means within rows not having a common subscript differ at  $p < 0.01$ .

higher by participants with higher stereotype endorsement ( $M = 5.49$ ; lower stereotype endorsement  $M = 3.96$ ,  $t(42) = 3.79$ ,  $p < 0.01$ ).

#### Counterfactual Evaluation and Rape Victim Stereotype

A 2 (Stereotype Endorsement)  $\times$  2 (Conformity)  $\times$  2 (Activity) mixed ANOVA was conducted on counterfactual agreement ratings, with repeated measures on the third factor. A main effect of stereotype endorsement emerged,  $F(1, 82) = 14.95$ ,  $p < 0.001$ : generally, participants with higher stereotype endorsement showed higher agreement with the jurors' statements ( $M = 4.49$ ) than participants with lower stereotype endorsement ( $M = 3.23$ ). The stereotype endorsement by conformity interaction was also significant,  $F(1, 82) = 6.31$ ,  $p = 0.01$ . As in Study 1, participants with higher stereotype endorsement showed higher agreement with counterfactuals focused on the victim's non-conforming behaviours ( $M = 4.84$ ; lower stereotype endorsement  $M = 2.77$ ,  $t(84) = 4.96$ ,  $p < 0.001$ ), while the two groups did not significantly differ as to counterfactuals focused on conforming behaviours (higher stereotype endorsement  $M = 4.14$ ; lower stereotype endorsement  $M = 3.69$ ,  $t(83) = 0.99$ , *n.s.*). The stereotype endorsement by conformity by activity interaction was also significant,  $F(1, 82) = 6.29$ ,  $p = 0.01$ . As in Study 1, the mean agreement with counterfactuals focused on the victim's non-conforming inactions was significantly higher for high stereotypes ( $M = 5.59$ ) than for low stereotypes ( $M = 2.68$ ),  $t(41) = 5.61$ ,  $p < 0.001$  (see Table 3). This result was confirmed by regression analysis, with rape victim stereotype emerging as a significant predictor of agreement with counterfactuals focused on the victim's non-conforming inactions ( $\beta = 0.69$ ,  $p < 0.001$ ).

#### Counterfactuals, Perceived Avoidability, and Responsibility Attribution

As predicted, agreement with counterfactuals focused on the victim's non-conforming inactions was strongly correlated with the evaluation of the victim's responsibility ( $r = 0.52$ ,  $p < 0.001$ ). It was also positively associated with perceived avoidability of the rape incident ( $r = 0.42$ ,  $p < 0.001$ ), and negatively associated with the evaluation of the perpetrator's responsibility ( $r = -0.46$ ,  $p < 0.001$ ). Hence, focusing on what the victim should have done, but did not do, led participants not only to perceive the victim as more responsible for the event, but also to decrease the perpetrator's responsibility and to stress how the victim could have prevented the event from occurring. In relation

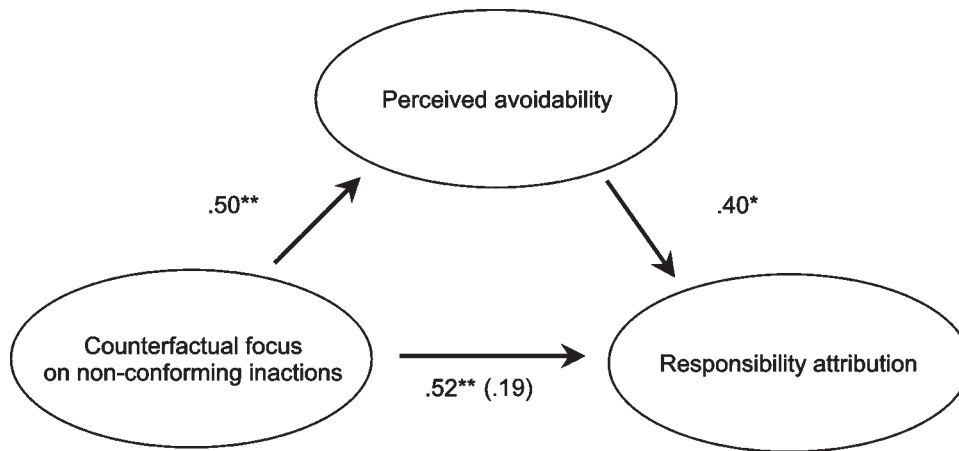


Figure 1. Path analysis depicting the mediating role of perceived avoidability. *Note:* Coefficients are standardized betas.  $N = 43$ .  $*p < 0.01$ ;  $**p < 0.001$

to counterfactuals focused on the victim's non-conforming actions, they too were related to the victim's responsibility ( $r = 0.50$ ,  $p < 0.001$ ) (for a similar result see Turley et al., 1995). However, they were unrelated to the perpetrator's responsibility ( $r = -0.02$ , *n.s.*) and to perceived avoidability ( $r = 0.17$ , *n.s.*). Finally, no significant correlation was found between counterfactuals focused on conforming behaviours (whether actions or inactions), and all the evaluations of responsibility and avoidability.

Additional analyses examined whether perceived avoidability mediated between the counterfactual focus on the victim's non-conforming inactions and the evaluation of responsibility. To qualify as a potential mediator, perceived avoidability must not only bear a significant relation to responsibility attribution, it must also significantly diminish the effect of counterfactual focus on responsibility attribution, when both counterfactual focus and perceived avoidability are entered into the analysis (Baron & Kenny, 1986). To test for mediation, we conducted a series of separate regression analyses (see Figure 1). First, the direct relationship between counterfactual focus on non-conforming inactions and responsibility attribution was significant,  $\beta = 0.52$ ,  $t(1, 41) = 3.93$ ,  $p < 0.001$ . Second, counterfactual focus was predictive of perceived avoidability,  $\beta = 0.50$ ,  $t(1, 41) = 3.39$ ,  $p < 0.001$ . Third, when counterfactual focus and perceived avoidability were entered into the equation simultaneously, perceived avoidability was predictive of responsibility attribution,  $\beta = 0.40$ ,  $t(1, 41) = 2.835$ ,  $p < 0.01$ . Furthermore, the predictive power of counterfactual focus decreased from  $\beta = 0.52$  to  $\beta = 0.19$ , a difference that was significant ( $Z = 2.26$ ,  $p < 0.03$ ; see Sobel, 1982).

## Discussion

Results of Study 2 offered a further confirmation of the relation between stereotype endorsement and counterfactual thinking, using a different procedure with respect to Study 1. Furthermore, data obtained in Study 2 offered new insights into the relationship between counterfactual thinking and responsibility attribution, by showing that focus on a target's (non-conforming) inactions may lead to increased responsibility attribution to the target. In addition, they showed that the link between counterfactual focus on inactions and responsibility attribution is largely mediated through perceived avoidability of the event. The more people think of what a target person could have done but did not,

the more they think that the negative outcome could have been avoided, and this in turn leads to enhanced responsibility of the target person.

## GENERAL DISCUSSION

The results of our studies add to previous research based on norm theory (Kahneman & Miller, 1986), according to which exceptional antecedents to a factual outcome are more likely to be counterfactually mutated than normal ones. We have shown that in a social context the *exceptional-routine effect*, frequently observed by past research on counterfactual thinking (Gavanski & Wells, 1989; Kahneman & Miller, 1986; Kahneman & Tversky, 1982; Klauer et al., 1995; Wells et al., 1987), may be redefined as a *nonconformity effect*, that is a significant tendency to mutate behaviours that do not conform to stereotype-based expectations. Although suggested as a possibility by past research (see Branscombe et al., 1993; Branscombe & Weir, 1992), the nonconformity effect has not been directly observed in previous research.

Our data show that the nonconformity effect may moderate another often-observed counterfactual mutability effect, namely the *action-inaction effect* (Gleicher et al., 1990; Kahneman & Miller, 1986; Lundberg & Frost, 1992). In both our studies, the tendency to mutate actions more than inactions did not emerge. On the contrary, participants with higher stereotype endorsement showed the opposite tendency, that is to mutate the rape victim's inactions more than the rape victim's actions. This result offers a confirmation of what has been suggested by some counterfactual research, namely that counterfactual mutability of inactions may prevail when attention is focused on how the negative event might have been prevented (see Davis et al., 1995; Davis & Lehman, 1995; Mandel & Lehman, 1996; N'gbala & Branscombe, 1997). In fact, 'normal' expectations regarding a rape victim involve precisely the adoption of a preventive behaviour (Bell et al., 1994; Estrich, 1991; Feldman et al., 1998; Fitzgerald & Swann, 1995; Krahe, 1991). Consequently, people who endorse these expectations are also more inclined to focus on what the victim could have done to prevent the crime from occurring, generating inaction-focused counterfactuals such as: '*The outcome might have been better, if only the victim had said 'no' more strongly*', or '*... if only the victim had cried out for help*'.

These results suggest that counterfactual focus on actions or inactions is not likely to depend only on a generic mental availability of the corresponding alternatives. It is also likely to depend on the expectations regarding the counterfactual target's social category, because such expectations include beliefs regarding the capacity, power, and duty of acting or not acting. Our studies provide a case in point: the generation of counterfactuals on a rape victim not saying 'no' more strongly is likely to depend not so much on generic expectations regarding what *victims* may do when assaulted, but on stereotypic expectations regarding what *rape victims* are likely to do or should do when assaulted (see also Catellani & Milesi, 2001).

Investigation on how stereotypic expectations may trigger counterfactuals should be further developed. In our studies, we did not distinguish between expectations based on the perceived frequency of a given behaviour in a social category (what a rape victim *is likely to do*), and expectations regarding what is perceived as normative for that social category (what a rape victim *should do*). According to the results of our pilot study, these two types of expectation were overlapping. Behaviours that characterize the 'normal' rape situation according to Krahe's work (1991) were evaluated by the pilot sample as adequate responses by women when assaulted. In contrast, behaviours deviating from the normal rape situation were perceived as inadequate. Therefore, in our studies, behaviours perceived as frequent or normal for rape victims were also perceived as normative for them. However, future research might fruitfully try to distinguish between

counterfactuals triggered by deviations from what is perceived as *normal* for a social category (e.g. 'Usually women don't accept a lift from a stranger.') and counterfactuals triggered by what is perceived as *normative* for the same category (e.g. 'Women shouldn't accept a lift from a stranger.'). In the latter case, a motivational process would interact with the cognitive one in favouring counterfactual generation: the 'prescribed' behaviour would be available to the person's mind not so much because of its frequency, but because of the normative relevance attributed to it.

An additional finding of the present research regards the relationship between counterfactual thinking and responsibility evaluation. While previous research has shown the existence of a direct link between action-focused counterfactuals and responsibility attribution (see Turley et al., 1995), we have shown that under certain conditions *inaction*-focused counterfactuals may also predict responsibility attribution, and that such a relationship is mediated by the perception that the negative event might have been prevented (see also Davis et al., 1995). Future research should investigate how different types of counterfactuals may be employed by people to convey social judgement not only in the judicial context, but also in other contexts of interpersonal and intergroup relations.

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