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When things go wrong: Lay perceptions of blame

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ABSTRACT

In the real world decisions are often made that produce poor outcomes that were not intended by the decision-maker. What influences the blame which lay observers place on a single decision-maker when the decisions go wrong? Three studies presented scenarios featuring decisions that subsequently produced poor consequences. In no scenario was there any suggestion that the poor consequences were intended by the decision-maker. Study 1 found higher attributions of blame and greater willingness to fire the decision-maker when the consequences were relatively easy to predict and severe. Well-trained decision-makers were blamed more, especially if the problem was easy to predict. Resultant death did not attract more blame than other severe consequences. Study 2 showed that well-paid decision-makers attracted more blame, regardless of other factors, but whether the participant was (virtually) harmed was not important. Study 3 found little effect of independently inducing anger on the blame attributed or a firing decision, but angrier respondents were slightly more willing to fire the decision-maker. Overall, the results indicate that the extent to which decision-makers are blamed for unintentional mistakes is fairly predictable from a simple additive model.

1. Introduction

This paper investigates how lay people hold decision-makers accountable for poor decisions when the damage done is unintentional.

1.1. Problem statement

That lay people hold decision-makers accountable for making poor decisions is obvious from even a brief glance at media reports. For example, consider the following headline taken from *Time* magazine: “25 people to blame for the financial crisis: The good intentions, bad managers and greed behind the meltdown” (“25 people to blame”, 2009). On 19 November, 2010 an explosion at the Pike River coal mine on the west coast of New Zealand killed 29 miners. Mackie (2012), a journalist covering the enquiry into the disaster, wrote: “It's with a heavy heart I've listened to a long list of problems, inadequacies, mistakes, and oversights at Pike River mine. And yes, it's enough to make your blood boil, so I understand the desperation to make someone accountable.”

In both the global financial collapse and the Pike River disaster, as in many other instances, there is no indications that the decision-makers intended harm. Indeed, the decision-makers themselves may suffer. For example, the Pike River Coal Company, already in some financial trouble at the time of the disaster, was bankrupted by it and its key decision-makers became unemployed (For more details, see Royal Commission on the Pike River Coal Mine Tragedy, 2012). Thus, these situations differ from most of those studied in previous research where the intention to harm or otherwise of the decision maker has investigated.

For example, Darley and Pittman (2003) point out that where harm is accidental, there is no moral outrage and no punishment or compensation is necessary. Where the perpetrator has been negligent, low moral outrage results and the perpetrator is required to compensate the victim. However, when the harm is inflicted intentionally, there is high moral outrage, and belief that the offender should also be punished. Such beliefs are closely linked to legal theories (Hart & Honoré, 1985), and a large number of studies indicate that calibrated retribution is an important ingredient in both people's beliefs about the punishment of criminals and actual legal systems (e.g., Davis & Kemp, 1994; Keller, Oswald, Stucki, &

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Gollwitzer, 2010; LaFave, 2000; Rossi, Simpson, & Miller, 1985; Sanderson, Zanna, & Darley, 2000).

In the present paper we concentrate on decisions which bring about unintentional rather than intentional harm (e.g., Karlovac & Darley, 1988). Such a concentration also suggested that we should ignore issues related to the decision-maker's state of mind, and instead focus on aspects of the decision-making situation and identifiable characteristics of the decision-maker. In short, this paper fills an existing gap in the literature by focussing on situations where no harm was intended and by examining a number of different factors that might influence the attribution of blame in such situations.

1.2. Some factors potentially affecting blame

A number of other factors other than state of mind might be important for how lay people attribute blame when harm is caused by decision-makers.

In general, people wish to impose more retributive punishment, and are likely to assign more blame, where the consequences of the decision are more harmful (e.g., Davis & Kemp, 1994; Sanderson et al., 2000). Another aspect of the situation that may be important is how predictable harm might be. For example, one might expect that a reasonably trained doctor might readily identify and successfully treat many common disorders while rare ones or those for which no cure is known might defeat the best efforts of even the most expert specialist.

It is well-recognised that some decision-makers are better equipped for the task than others (e.g., Taylor, 1995). As an extreme example, few modern societies hold children or the mentally ill accountable for their actions in the same way that normal adults are held accountable. Thus, one might also anticipate that well trained and experienced decision-makers would be held more accountable than those with less training.

Reactions to the global financial collapse suggest that the bankers and financiers were thought particularly blame-worthy because they were very well-paid. Although, to our knowledge the effect of pay itself has not been investigated, the effect of status has, and higher status individuals are held more accountable for their mistakes (Fragale, Rosen, Xu, & Merideth, 2009). We might then expect that higher paid decision-makers would be blamed more if things go wrong.

A decision maker whose faulty decision produces harm to others can expect both the victims and observers to get angry. The role anger plays in the blaming and attribution process has been the subject of both research and theorising. Thus, for example, following an Israeli fire disaster in Israel for whose consequences responsible authorities were blamed, considerable anger was reported by both observers and those directly affected, particularly the latter (Benzion, Shahrabani, Shavit, & Weiss, 2012). Darley and Pittman's (2003) model of justice assignment envisages the level of moral outrage felt as a mediating variable between judgments of the perpetrator's state of mind and the subsequent recommended punishment. There is also evidence that an onlooker to injustice is likely to feel anger if she or he or another who was cared for was harmed. Otherwise little anger, or moral outrage, is produced (Batson et al., 2007; O'Mara, Jackson, Batson, & Gaertner, 2011). These considerations led to two rather different expectations. Firstly, people might be more inclined to blame and punish decision-makers, if they themselves are harmed. Secondly, they may be more inclined to blame the decision-maker if they already feel anger from some unrelated event.

1.3. Scenarios

Scenarios, which enable systematic manipulation of influential factors, have been frequently used in previous research on causal attributions and blame (e.g., Fragale et al., 2009; McClure, Hilton, & Sutton, 2007; Moir, 2014). Such studies not only enable the researcher to study a range of different independent variables but also any interactive effects they might have. In all three studies presented below, a single decision-maker, often a chief executive officer (CEO), made a decision that later turned out to have harmful consequences. The different scenarios featured various combinations of different factors that might affect accountability and blame. In all these studies, the respondents were asked after each scenario to rate the blame they felt should be attributed to the decision maker and their belief as to whether the decision-maker should be fired. In Study 1 respondents were also asked how bad the decision was. Further information about the specific factors investigated is given before each study.

2. Study 1

Study 1 presented scenarios to respondents, and varied the following factors systematically: whether the consequences of the faulty decision involved death; the severity of the consequences; the level of training of the decision-maker; and whether in the decision-maker's profession it is thought easy or difficult to predict the consequences of the decision. Choice of these factors was based partly on previous work outlined in Section 1.2 above, and partly on a pilot study in which respondents were presented with lists of factors that might affect accountability and asked to rate the factors for importance. The four factors chosen for Study 1 were those scoring highest in importance in that study.

2.1. Method

2.1.1. Participants and procedure

In this study we used two samples: The main reason for this was to see whether important results would replicate across two rather different groups, the more so as the two different groups were effectively recruited by convenience sampling. Forty-five university students and 44 members of the general public who were neither secondary nor tertiary students completed the questionnaire. The students completed the questionnaire at the start of a scheduled class. The general public were recruited by postgraduate students and mostly completed their questionnaires at home. Both students and general public were given chocolates in appreciation of their participation. Twenty-one of the students were male and 23 female (no information provided by one). Nineteen members of the general public were male, the rest female. The students had a median age in the range 15–24 years with none over 34 years of age; the general public had a median age in the range 25–34 years, and 20 were 35 or over.

2.1.2. Questionnaires

The questionnaires presented respondents with scenarios that systematically varied five variables: 2 (severity of consequence: mild or severe) × 2 (type of consequence: fatal or non-fatal) × 2 (training of CEO: well versus little trained) × 2 (predictability of poor outcome: hard versus easy) × 2 (base scenarios: Sets 1 or 2). The first four variables were within-subject factors, the last was a between-subject factor.

At the outset the respondents read that “the questionnaire concerns the consequences and blame that decision-makers should experience if their decision leads to things going wrong”. The questionnaires then presented scenarios to the respondents. In every scenario a single decision-maker took a decision which turned out badly. Key parameters of the scenarios were varied. Four basic scenarios were used but each respondent only saw two base scenarios, which varied in whether fatalities might be involved.