

Blaming leaders for organizational accidents: Proxy logic in collective- versus individual-agency cultures

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Abstract

The current research investigates whether observers blame leaders for organizational accidents even when these managers are known to be causally uninvolved. Past research finds that the public blames managers for organizational harm if the managers are perceived to have personally played a causal role. The present research argues that East Asian perceivers, who are culturally oriented to focus on the causal influence of groups [Menon, T., Morris, M. W., Chiu, C., & Hong, Y. (1999). Culture and the construal of agency: Attribution to individual versus group dispositions. *Journal of Personality and Social Psychology*, 76, 701–717.], blame managers based on the behavior of the group, not only based on the behavior of the individual managers. We argue that perceivers first assign responsibility to the collectivity, the organizational unit or some group within it, and then extend responsibility to the manager representing it. We tested this proposal in a series of studies with a community sample in Japan and matched student samples of Japanese and Americans. Results show that perceivers who are culturally oriented to focus on collective-level causality (Japanese, more so than Americans; Asian Americans, more so than European Americans) blame leaders through proxy logic. Implications of this intuitive logic and of the cultural difference are discussed.

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Many of the worst accidents in industrialized societies result from the activities of corporations, or more literally from the actions that employees take in the course of their work. How do members of society assign blame for these accidents? Do they blame the corporations or individual persons within them? What simplifying logic do they use to reach definite conclusions about blame from these highly ambiguous events?

Previous findings hold that social perceivers assign blame to individuals through a logic that follows closely from their causal attributions to persons. Research has

found that perceivers blame persons proximal to the harmful outcome (Shultz & Schleifer, 1983). For example, an oil spill might be blamed on the boat pilot who was at the wheel when the tanker hit the reef. Alternatively, it might be blamed on higher-level managers who indirectly caused the crash through actions or failures to act in their roles as managers (Hamilton, 1978a). For example, the spill might be blamed on a supervisor who relayed faulty navigation information or one who overlooked the pilot's drinking problem.

However, the comprehensiveness of this model of person-focused blaming is thrown into question by recent cross-cultural findings. Menon, Morris, Chiu, and Hong (1999) found that East Asian perceivers, compared to North Americans, are oriented to assume collective

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agency; they are more likely to causally trace ambiguous outcomes, such as an accident, to properties of collectivities rather than properties of individual persons. East Asians might causally attribute the oil spill to the oil firm's aggressive strategy or the tanker crew's lax safety norms. In the present paper, we call this psychological tendency to focus on the causal influence of groups (or organizations) *collective agency orientation*. We also use the term, collective-agency-oriented cultures, to refer to cultures where people on average have strong collective agency orientation. Collective agency orientation is more specific than the broader concept of collectivism: Collective agency orientation focuses on a cognitive tendency in causal perceptions, whereas collectivism also encompasses many social values and attitudes. Given that past evidence for collective agency orientation is limited to East Asians, we will focus our arguments on East Asians. The notion that East Asians are oriented for collective agency raises questions about how they assign blame: Given that they see collectives as having caused the accident, do they exonerate individual persons from blame? Or do they nonetheless blame individuals, but through a different blaming logic than that which has been identified in the traditional (largely Western) literature?

In the present research, we propose that East Asians use a different logic in assigning blame to individuals for accidents and other negative corporate outcomes. In this logic the first step is assigning responsibility¹ to the collectivity, the organizational unit in which the problem arose. But then, in a second step, blame is extended from this collectivity to an individual manager who represents it, such as the CEO or division head. In this judgmental process, the perceiver pins blame on the leader as a symbolic *proxy* for the culpable collectivity. This manager's responsibility comes from being viewed as representing the collectivity, not from being perceived as playing a role in causing the outcome. Hence, East Asians can assign responsibility to leaders without attributing causality to persons. Furthermore, as we shall see, this proxy logic guides East Asian perceivers to blame managers in scenarios where North American perceivers judge the managers to be entirely innocent.

In the current studies, we empirically document the phenomenon of proxy blaming for the first time. We find

that East Asian perceivers respond to accident scenarios by blaming the surrounding organizational unit and then extending blame to the managers perceived to represent it. A model of the underlying judgment process is developed and several specific hypotheses about its boundary conditions are tested. Before developing these hypotheses, it is worthwhile to review the past research on blaming and on causal attribution that provide the springboard for our theorizing.

Traditional models of responsibility assignment

Responsibility assignment, as Brickman et al. (1982) noted, can refer to judgments of responsibility for a problem (who is blameworthy or at fault?) or judgments of responsibility for its solution (who is to remedy the matter?). Researchers have focused on the former meaning—judgments of who is at fault. Drawing on Heider's (1958) analysis of person perception, social psychologists (Shaver, 1985; Shultz & Schleifer, 1983; Weiner, 1995b) have argued that responsibility judgments hinge on the causal attributions to a target person. This model explains why accidents are often blamed on the low-level employees most proximal to the negative outcome.

Organizational and legal psychologists have augmented this model by incorporating the notion of social expectations (or roles) (Hamilton, 1978a; Hamilton & Sanders, 1981; Lloyd-Bostock, 1983). In these models, perceivers sometimes blame supervisors perceived to have an indirect causal role (Hamilton, 1978b; Hamilton, 1986). For instance, managers are blamed when they are perceived to have been negligent in carrying out duties or obligations of their organizational or occupational role.

Further insights have come from management research on causal attributions and leadership perception (Calder, 1977). In these models, the perceiver assigns blame (as well as credit) to the leader of an organization based on a romanticized conception of the leader as controlling the outcomes (Meindl, Ehrlich, & Dukerich, 1985). Extremely good or bad outcomes increase perceivers' motivation to understand and explain the events and hence increases their tendency to attribute outcomes to the leader (Meindl et al., 1985). Compared to the psychological models, this assumes a less detailed causal analysis by the perceiver. Yet it still assumes that perceivers make responsibility judgments based on attributions to individual persons.

Despite their differing emphases, these traditional models share a common premise—responsibility assignment hinges on causal attribution to persons. This *personal causality* logic of blaming is undoubtedly a major current in people's intuitions about responsibility assignment. However, it may not be the only one. The focus on personal causality may reflect the individualism of the

¹ Some theorists conceptually distinguish blame and responsibility according to criteria such as the following: (a) blame conveys emotional negativity whereas responsibility is affectively neutral (Weiner, 1995a), (b) actors can avoid blame by justifying their actions but they are still responsible for the harmful consequence (Shaver, 1985; Shultz & Darley, 1991), (c) the magnitude of the outcome affects blame more than it affects responsibility (Shultz & Darley, 1991; Weiner, 1995a). However, like most researchers, we used them synonymously. We study a class of outcomes—harmful organizational accidents—which are negative, never fully justified, and large in magnitude, so perceivers' responsibility judgments can be called blame.

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