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Blame contagion: The automatic transmission of self-serving attributions

Nathanael J. Fast^{a,*}, Larissa Z. Tiedens^b^a Department of Management and Organization, University of Southern California, 701 Exposition Blvd., HOH 404, Los Angeles, CA 90089, United States^b Department of Organizational Behavior, Stanford University, 518 Memorial Way, Stanford, CA 94305, United States

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ABSTRACT

When people blame others for their mistakes, they learn less and perform worse. This problem is magnified when blame becomes embedded in the shared culture of groups and organizations. Yet, little is known about whether—and, if so, how—the propensity to blame spreads from one person to another. Four experiments addressed this issue, demonstrating that blame is socially contagious: observing an individual make a blame attribution increased the likelihood that people would make subsequent blame attributions for their own, unrelated, failures (Experiments 1, 2, and 4). Results also indicated that this “blame contagion” is due to the transmission of goals. Blame exposure led to the inference and adoption of a self-image protection goal (Experiment 3), and blame contagion was eliminated when observers had the opportunity to alleviate this self-image protection goal via self-affirmation (Experiment 4). Implications for research on causal attributions, social contagion, and cultural transmission are discussed.

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Introduction

Richard Nixon had many admirable leadership qualities that helped him become the 37th President of the United States. He was also known, however, to harbor an intense need to enhance and protect his self-image, a chronic goal that led to a propensity to blame others for his personal shortcomings. According to former aids, Nixon's self-serving tendency to blame spread like a cancer throughout his administration, and it was this widespread tendency to blame that ultimately led to his political downfall (Gergen, 2000). Similarly, but in a different context, NASA's culture of excuse making and finger pointing became increasingly rampant over a period of years and is believed to be a key factor behind disasters such as the Columbia Shuttle accident in 2003 (Mason, 2004; Oberg, 2003). These and similar examples highlight an important fact: the spread of blame is detrimental to individual and collective well-being and overall performance.

In the present research we seek to shed light on *how* blame—defined as the act of attributing a personal failure to another person or event (see Campbell & Sedikides, 1999; Snyder & Higgins, 1988; Tennen & Affleck, 1990)—might spread from one individual to another in social settings. We do so by examining whether blame is socially contagious. In contrast to previous work, which has focused primarily on differences in personality, cultural background, or situation-based incentives to blame, we test the hypothesis that merely *observing* someone make a blame attribution for a failure increases the odds that the observer will adopt a self-image protec-

tion goal and, as a result, engage in subsequent blaming for other, unrelated, failures.

Why do people blame, and with what consequences?

People are generally motivated to cultivate and defend a positive self-image (Greenwald, 1980). One common way that people protect their self-image, especially when threatened, is to blame other people and/or external circumstances for their failures in order to avoid having to admit the painful truth that they are responsible for an undesirable outcome (Blaine & Crocker, 1993; Bradley, 1978; Miller, 1976; Snyder & Higgins, 1988; Zuckerman, 1979). But this form of self-protection comes at a cost. Repeated blaming leads to several negative consequences, including decreased health and well-being (Tennen & Affleck, 1990) and damage to one's reputation (Forsyth, Berger, & Mitchell, 1981; Forsyth & Mitchell, 1979; Lee & Robinson, 2000; Lee & Tiedens, 2001). Blaming is also harmful in-group settings. Groups and organizations in which blame is routinely expressed are less psychologically rewarding for their members, less conducive to learning and innovation, and less productive than those in which people feel safe to take personal responsibility for their own mistakes (Edmondson, 1996, 1999; Gittel, 2003). And, companies whose executives attribute failures to external factors suffer from inferior stock performance relative to otherwise comparable companies (Lee, Peterson, & Tiedens, 2004).

Given these far-ranging negative outcomes, understanding the psychological processes that facilitate the development and spread of blame is important. To date, researchers have identified a variety

* Corresponding author.

E-mail address: nathanaf@usc.edu (N.J. Fast).

of factors that influence how people respond to failures, including personality traits (Peterson & Seligman, 1984; Wood, Giordano-Beech, Taylor, Michela, & Gaus, 1994), cross-cultural differences (Kashima & Triandis, 1986; Mennon, Morris, Chiu, & Hong, 1999; Morris, Mennon, & Ames, 2001; Yamaguchi, 2001), and the presence or absence of negative consequences for taking responsibility for one's mistakes (Barach & Small, 2000; Edmondson, 1999) (for reviews see Fiske & Taylor, 1991; Zhao & Olivera, 2006). In the present work, we move beyond these lines of research to examine the possibility that blame is socially contagious.

Blame contagion

Social contagion refers to the automatic transference of a psychological state or behavior from one person to another (e.g., Barsade, 2002; Neumann & Strack, 2000). Thus, we define "blame contagion" as the tendency for a person to engage in blaming behaviors shortly after being exposed to another individual making a blame attribution for a failure. Importantly, our definition of blame contagion does not apply to instances in which an individual is motivated to blame as a result of having *been blamed* by others, or to cases where one is persuaded or influenced to make a specific attribution for a *particular* event. Instead, it refers to a phenomenon where the target and topic of an individual's blame need not be related to the target and topic of the blame that was overheard.

No previous work has examined whether causal attributions are contagious. However, it is well established that observers tend to mimic and/or "catch" a variety of other behaviors and states displayed by others, including both physical movements (Chartrand & Bargh, 1999; Chartrand, Maddux, & Lakin, 2005) and affective states (Barsade, 2002; Hatfield, Cacioppo, & Rapson, 1994; Neumann & Strack, 2000; Sy, Côté, & Saavedra, 2005). These effects are most frequently believed to be a result of the perception-behavior link (Chartrand & Bargh, 1999), which suggests that any observable movement, posture, or expression of one person has the potential to be mimicked by another person. For instance, emotional contagion takes place when people mimic specific facial expressions and then automatically adopt emotions that are consistent with the expressions (Hatfield et al., 1994).

It is unlikely, though, that the perception-behavior link would lead to blame contagion, because blame attributions do not involve a distinct posture or behavior that can be mimicked. But blame does have one feature that could be transmitted from actor to observer: a *goal* of protecting one's self-image. More specifically, observers of an individual who publicly blames others for a mistake could infer that the individual is seeking to protect his or her self-image (Blaine & Crocker, 1993; Bradley, 1978; Miller, 1976; Snyder & Higgins, 1988; Zuckerman, 1979), and to the degree that observers do perceive such a self-image protection goal, it could activate a similar goal in the observer. This possibility is consistent with evidence that goals can be primed by the environment (Gollwitzer & Bargh, 2005) and that goal-oriented behaviors of others can serve as such primes (Aarts, Gollwitzer, & Hassin, 2004), making goals socially contagious. Specifically, Aarts et al. (2004) showed that exposure to a socially acceptable behavior that implies a goal (e.g., working in order to make money) activates the same goal among individuals who already hold the goal (e.g., undergraduates who needed cash worked harder on a task for which they were paid).

Taken together, these findings indicate that blame might be contagious. Specifically, observers of blame may automatically infer, adopt, and pursue (via subsequent blaming) a self-image protection goal. Accordingly, we examine both the idea that blame is contagious as well as the idea that goal transference is the mechanism that drives the effect. If blame contagion is, indeed, caused by

the transmission of a self-image protection goal, then the effect should be eliminated when participants are given an opportunity to boost their self-image before making an attribution for a mistake. Self-affirmation—which involves writing about and/or being primed with a value or belief that is especially important to one's sense of self—is a commonly used method to demonstrate that a process is driven by self-image protection motives (see e.g., Cohen, Aronson, & Steele, 2000; Fein & Spencer, 1997; Steele, 1988). Self-affirmation tasks enhance self-esteem and reduce defensiveness by reminding people what is truly important to them and, as a result, lessen the tendency to defensively protect one's self-image (see Sherman & Cohen, 2006; Sherman & Kim, 2005). Thus, based on the idea that blame contagion is a result of the goal of protecting one's self-image, we predict that the opportunity to self-affirm will block the blame contagion effect.

In testing these predictions, we aim to demonstrate for the first time that blame attributions can spread from one person to another. Along with identifying a novel determinant of blame, such evidence would highlight a possible mechanism through which relationships, groups, and organizations can come to be characterized by blame and blaming. Also, by examining whether self-image protection goals are contagious, we join with others to extend contagion research beyond effects related to the perception-behavior link (e.g., mimicry of physical behaviors, movements, and facial expressions). Finally, we hope to contribute a better understanding of the emerging literature on goal contagion by testing the idea that blame—a socially undesirable behavior (Forsyth & Mitchell, 1979; Forsyth et al., 1981; Leary & Baumeister, 2000; Lee & Robinson, 2000; Lee & Tiedens, 2001)—can produce goal contagion. Such a finding would offer a clear exception to the notion that socially undesirable behaviors do not elicit goal contagion—a possibility raised by Aarts et al. (2004).

Overview of the present experiments

We conducted four experiments to test these predictions. In Experiments 1 and 2 we examined the hypothesis that exposure to blame by another individual (a politician in Experiment 1, and a student in Experiment 2) leads to subsequent blaming for one's own, unrelated, failures. Next, we explored the mechanism for this effect. In Experiment 3 we tested the idea that observing an actor make a blame attribution for a personal failure leads to both the inference and adoption of a self-image protection goal. An alternative possibility, social learning (i.e., coming to believe that blame is more socially appropriate after observing it), was also examined. In Experiment 4 we tested the hypothesis that blame contagion is eliminated when individuals are given an opportunity to boost their self-image via a self-affirmation task.

Experiment 1

In Experiment 1 we tested the hypothesis that people are more likely to make a blame attribution for a personal failure after first observing another individual engage in blame. We asked participants to read a news clip about a failure by the Governor of California, Arnold Schwarzenegger. In one condition, the news excerpt included a statement by Schwarzenegger blaming special interest groups for the failure (blame condition). In a second condition, participants read about Schwarzenegger taking full ownership of the failure (responsibility condition). Later in the experiment, participants recalled and wrote about an unrelated failure of their own. After writing about the failure, they were asked to explain what caused the failure. We predicted that those who had earlier been exposed to blame would be more likely to make blame attributions for their own failures.

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