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Reconsidering Motivation to Blame and the Distinction between Private and Public Blame

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Malle, Guglielmo, and Moore (2014) offer a cohesive and expansive perspective on blame that includes impressive efforts to organize, clarify, and advance an area of research that has enjoyed considerable attention across multiple decades. As is often the case with prospering topics, the literature on blame and related constructs does not suffer from a shortage of partially overlapping terms that sometimes are defined imprecisely. Therefore, the paper makes a clear contribution by offering explicit and thorough treatment of how to situate blame within a nomological network that has been only partially or implicitly addressed in past research. Additionally, the Path Model of Blame subsumes prior models and offers new insights that address limitations of past work. The model is clearly specified and simple relative to its explanatory power.

Simplicity, however, is a double-edged sword. Malle et al. (2014) explain in detail how their Path Model of Blame does not require additional components to (a) accommodate some seemingly inconsistent views and (b) account for “problematic” phenomena that often pose challenges to models of blame. Even if the model is capable of handling these issues without revision, it may understate the role of some important sources of variability in blame judgments. We view the issues we raise in our commentary as potential opportunities to fine tune and extend a well-crafted theory. Specifically, we suggest that research on motivation to blame is not necessarily incompatible with the Path Model of Blame because the CIV (concept activation, information acquisition, value setting) layer appears to include functionally equivalent processes. Additionally, we believe it may be useful to further differentiate between private and social blame. We hope our ideas help to build a complete theory of blame that represents and explains all facets of the phenomenon.

Motivation to Blame and Microprocesses that Underpin Blame Criteria

Malle et al. (2014) introduce the Path Model of Blame as a means to represent the criteria people use to determine whether and how much to blame others (i.e., event detection, intentionality, obligation, capacity, reasons). They take great care to explain that the model is conceptual; it should not be misinterpreted as implying a rigid, temporal order or deliberate conscious reasoning. To add additional explanatory power, Malle et al., also present the CIV layer, which addresses factors that influence how people gather and weigh information germane to each criterion (i.e., “microprocesses”). Together, the Path Model of Blame and the CIV layer identify major components of blame judgments and provide a framework that provides theoretical space for a host of social-cognitive processes that influence blame. At the same time, however, Malle et al. devote considerable attention to questioning theories that feature motivated blame on both conceptual and empirical grounds.

We believe Malle et al. (2014) may have prematurely dismissed the concept of motivation to blame because components of the CIV layer appear to accommodate it. In short, the “blame-early” processing that Malle et al. argue against, appears to be consistent with some of the information processing that occurs at each node of the Path Model. Given that the order of the Path Model is conceptual, the difference between it and “blame-early” models may be slight.

When discussing the CIV layer, Malle et al. (2014) posit that people often take cognitive shortcuts when processing information relevant to blame criteria. One class of shortcuts is preset values, which includes dispositional inferences and expectations for behavior (e.g., “Monisha tends to be reckless;” “the rival always intentionally harms us”). From our perspective, it is difficult to differentiate the notion of a preset value from that of a motivation to blame.

Preset values are associated with specific agents and activate knowledge structures that cause perceivers to jump rapidly to a blame judgment. Likewise, motivated reasoning accounts suggest that prior beliefs or preferences lead people to process information heuristically in a way that increases the likelihood that they reach their desired conclusion (e.g., Ditto, Pizarro, & Tannenbaum, 2009; Kunda, 1990). In both cases, perceivers process information in a superficial way that causes judgments to be consistent with their prior understanding of the facts. Therefore, from a conceptual perspective, the CIV layer appears to support a role for motivation or desire to blame.

Malle et al. (2014) also question some of the empirical evidence that supports “blame-early” models and argue that conclusions about the existence of motivated blame are premature. Even if one is willing to accept all of the specific points Malle et al. raise, other areas of research have investigated similar processes and provide substantial evidence that individuals are sometimes motivated to blame others. In the sections that follow, we review two lines of evidence that offer converging support for motivated blame.

Belief in a Just World

Just world theory states that people have a need to believe that their world is a just place where people usually get what they deserve (Lerner, 1977; for reviews see Lerner & Miller, 1978; Hafer & Bègue, 2005). Confronting innocent victims is threatening to individuals’ belief in a just world, which motivates them to attempt to restore justice. One way to restore justice is to punish perpetrators for their wrongs or compensate victims of misfortune; however, another strategy is to blame the victims and persuade oneself that the victims were somehow deserving of their misfortune either due to their bad character or bad actions (Lerner, 1977). For example, observers who were confronted with a victim of undeserved suffering chose to compensate that victim if they felt they could effectively do so (Lerner & Simmons, 1966). However, if observers were unable to compensate the victim, they chose instead to derogate her character in an attempt to make her suffering seem more deserved (and therefore maintain their belief in a just world). Since this original publication, dozens of studies on belief in a just world have led to similar conclusions (see Hafer & Bègue, 2005). Just world theory, therefore can explain phenomena such as people’s tendency to blame rape victims for being assaulted, a tendency that is difficult to explain if one does not acknowledge a role for motivation in blame judgments. In summary, research on belief in a just world demonstrates that people’s motivations influence their propensity to blame others for perpetrating or experiencing injustice.

Do-gooder Derogation

People sometimes derogate individuals or groups who violate norms for moral reasons (Monin, Sawyer, & Marquez, 2008; Minson & Monin, 2012). For example, participants in a laboratory study (a) completed a task and (b) evaluated a fellow participant who refused to complete the task (Monin et al., 2008). The task consisted of choosing which of three suspects in a photo line-up was most likely to be guilty of a recent burglary. Participants reviewed a photo and information about each suspect (e.g., whether he had an alibi); the information was structured such that the lone African American suspect in the line-up was very likely to blame for the burglary. Participants liked a fellow participant (i.e., a moral rebel) who refused to participate in the task (arguing it was racist) if they had not yet performed the task themselves. However, participants derogated this same moral rebel, if they had first participated in the task (and chose the African American suspect) prior to evaluating the moral rebel. Moreover, dislike of the moral rebel was mediated by imagined reproach (i.e., participants who had already completed the task imagined the moral rebel would dislike them for their choice and appeared to proactively reject the rebel instead). Thus, the same act can be praised by some and denigrated by others depending on whether it has implications for their self-concept (Monin et al., 2008; see also Minson & Monin, 2012). Although this research did not investigate judgments of blame per se, it is likely that the motivation to derogate the moral rebel’s character may extend to blaming the rebel for not complying with social norms.

Taken together, research on belief in a just world and do-gooder derogation provides additional evidence that individuals are more likely to derogate (and by extension, blame) others when they are motivated to protect their cherished beliefs or self-image, even when the targets are seemingly undeserving of such denigration in the absence of such motivation. In our view, this and other research provides evidence to support the notion that motivation to blame affects the way people process information, which in turn influences perceived blameworthiness. Importantly, we believe the CIV layer can accommodate this phenomenon without much difficulty.

Differences between Private and Social Blame

Malle et al. (2014) make a valuable contribution by shining a spotlight on social blame, which has received less attention in the literature than private blame. Emphasizing the importance of social blame, they suggest that “blame’s primary and original function is to publicly regulate community members’ conduct.” Although social blame undoubtedly plays a key role in sustaining groups by enforcing norms, it seems impossible to verify blame’s primary or original function. Claiming that the norm-

enforcing function of social blame is primary unnecessarily casts a shadow over the functions of private blame. In particular, private blame is a means to mitigate personal risk of exploitation from cheating, social loafing, and other forms of opportunism. Individuals usually cannot unilaterally impose social censure as a means to induce cooperation, but they can unilaterally decide whether or how much to interact with an individual in the future. Therefore, private blame has a direct path to influencing behavior, whereas social blame operates in conjunction with others.

Rebalancing the theory to focus on both individual and social regulation may involve more explicit consideration of the amount or type of evidence required to elicit private and social blame. Specifically, as Malle et al. (2014) acknowledge, the overall burden of proof seems likely to be higher for social than private blame. Given that social blame requires warrant and there are potential costs associated with misattributing blame, people need to process information systematically to ensure that their case will withstand scrutiny. For private blame, however, the evidence for each blame criterion does not need to be explicitly represented in memory or fully articulated; heuristic processing is often sufficient. When determining intentionality, for example, people often take into account the factors that may underlie an actor's subjective reasons for behaving in a certain way, including trait inferences and demographic characteristics (i.e., the causal history of reasons; Malle, 2011). To the extent that stereotype activation is automatic (Devine, 1989), stereotypes may influence people's assessments of intentionality in the absence of awareness and motivation to correct for them (cf. preset values; Malle et al., 2014). The warrant requirement of social blame may prompt people to evaluate intentionality using more controlled processing that can identify and adjust for sources of bias produced by heuristic processing. Along similar lines, the literature on cheating detection suggests that people act on cues that are not explicitly represented in memory (Johnson-Laird & Byrne, 1991; Legrenzi, Girotto, & Johnson-Laird, 1993; see also Cosmides, 1989; Gigerenzer & Hug, 1992). Very slight facial expressions or body movements trigger behavior reactions to cheating without entering conscious awareness (e.g., Brown & Moore, 2002; Ekman & Friesen, 1969; Öhman, 1986), and similarly subtle cues may influence private blame but cannot provide warrant for social blame. We do not intend to conflate avoidance behavior and blame; our point is simply that if these nonverbal cues are sufficient to influence behavior, they may also influence how people process information when evaluating blame criteria. In short, private and social blame may both hinge on the criteria specified by the Path Model, but the amount or way that people process information to assess each criterion may

differ in systematic ways not currently specified by the theory.

Drawing a sharper distinction between private and social blame also brings into focus the possibility that the two may differ in some instances (cf. Kant, 1784; Kreps & Monin, 2011; Rawls, 1997). For any eliciting event, observers are likely to assess blame privately, and then consider whether social blame is warranted. In many instances, private and social blame (or lack of blame) may match; that is, people are willing to share what they really think about the situation. When evidence for blameworthiness is weak or when people wish not to reveal their own values, people may choose to alter their own behavior (e.g., distance themselves from the target), but not seek social censure. Moreover, people do not always feel entitled to act on their moral outrage elicited by injustice (Miller, Effron, & Zak, 2009), which suggests that people may not always feel entitled to publically blame others for transgressions (e.g., if people lack a vested self-interest or have not been personally victimized by the transgression). In short, private blame is not always constrained by social blame. Additionally, situations may arise when people may wish to incite social disapproval, even if they do not personally blame the actor. That is, people may strategically use social blame as a tactic to achieve or maintain standing in a group. To be fair, Malle et al., (2014) provide some examples of when people may attempt to implicate social blame despite having limited evidence (e.g., the blame game; scapegoating; see Section V), but statements about how social blame constrains or is primary to private blame may unintentionally minimize these instances. In any case, it seems useful to more systematically explore the antecedents and consequences of the two types of instances when private and social blame differ.

Malle et al. (2014) are correct that social blame is an important phenomenon, and their theory is not necessarily incompatible with the points raised above. We believe, however, that putting private and social blame on more equal footing leaves more room to appreciate unique aspects of both private and social blame and the interplay between them.

In conclusion, Malle et al. (2014) present an impressive and fairly comprehensive model that organizes, integrates, and extends past theorizing on blame, thus advancing our understanding of cognitive and social blame. We believe their model could be further improved by explicitly incorporating a role for the motivation to blame and more precisely delineating the processes that lead to consistencies or inconsistencies in individuals' willingness to blame privately and publicly.

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