

THE EFFECT OF SOCIAL STATUS ON BLAME JUDGMENTS

by

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Abstract

Blame judgments are social acts that people use to regulate the behavior of others. Blame judgments are unique in that they are almost always directed at an agent. Because of this social aspect, blame judgments may be subject to certain social constraints such as hierarchy and status. The current study suggests that social status will affect judgments of blame. Additionally, the current study suggests that mental state inferences of intentionality, knowledge, and preventability may explain social statuses affect on judgments of blame. Data show that individuals high in social status (e.g. CEO) receive the highest amounts of blame for bringing about a negative event compared to individuals low in social status (e.g. Staff Member). Data also show that individuals high in social status were viewed as acting more intentionally, having more knowledge, and having a greater ability to prevent harm compared to individuals with low social status. This social influence on blame and its precursors suggests that, going forward, moral psychological research ought to broaden its view of the path to blame to include not only factors originating from the event (e.g., amount of harm caused), or from the perceiver (e.g., attitudes and prejudices), but also the social situation in which blame judgments are rendered.

Keywords: social status, blame judgments, mental state inferences

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The Effect of Social Status on Blame Judgments

In April of 2010, BP oil company caused the largest oil spill in oil drilling history. More than 200 million gallons of crude oil spilled into the Gulf of Mexico and it took almost four months to finally stop the oil from leaking into the gulf. Many species of wildlife were negatively affected from this incident, including many people living in the area. Following this event, a lot of questions were raised as to who should be held responsible. The company itself was fined billions of dollars but many people believed this wasn't enough. Many focused on BP's CEO, Tony Hayward. As one of the top officials in the company, Hayward was blamed for the accident, repeatedly testified before Congress, and eventually engaged in a widespread public apology campaign. Interestingly, blame for Hayward appeared to ignore the fact that he likely had nothing to do with the specific series of events that caused the spill; instead, people appeared to blame Hayward because he was a high status member of the company. The present study will investigate the impact of perceived status on people's mental and moral judgments of blame.

Whereas past research primarily conceptualized blame judgments in terms of their cognitive or emotional properties, blame judgments are also social. That is, blame is a tool people use to regulate the behaviors of others. Blame judgments are unique in the family of moral judgments in that blame is nearly always directed at an agent. Unlike judgments of badness or wrongness, which are directed at behaviors, blame singles out and sanctions an individual. Because of this social aspect, blaming may be subject to social constraints like the requirement of warrant (i.e., justification, see; Monroe & Malle, under review) and possibly also constraints associated with hierarchy and status. Recent work Ferber and Monroe (2016) demonstrates that the social status of moral judges affect their willingness to publicly express blame; however, no work to date has examined how the social status of *moral judges* affect

blameworthiness. Thus, the present work examines how the perceived social status of offenders affects judgments of blame as well as whether differential mental state ascriptions explains these effects.

Below I review recent research outlining the process of blame. I then provide evidence outlining the role of causality, intentionality, reasons and obligation when carrying out blame judgments. Finally, I describe how target attributes—specifically perceived power and status—may affect this process.

The Process of Blame

Malle, Guglielmo and Monroe (2012; 2014) argue that moral judgments follow a specific processing path whereby perceivers integrate information about events, agents, and their mental states in order to arrive at a moral judgment of blame. Importantly this process can be quick and intuitive when information is obvious (a man holding a smoking gun over a corpse) or it can be slow and deliberative when information is obscured (Malle & Holbrook, 2012; Monroe & Malle, 2017).

Specifically, Malle et al., (2012; 2014) argue that the process of blaming begins when perceivers *detect a norm violation* (e.g., “Joe hit Sally with a flyswatter while she was not looking”). After detecting a norm violation, a perceiver searches for a responsible *causal agent* (in this case, Joe). If the norm violation was caused by a non-agent (e.g., a gust of wind blowing the flyswatter into Sally), no blame is assigned. People may be angry at non-agents (e.g., rain on our picnics or rocks denting our cars), but people do not blame or admonish the rocks and the rain. By contrast, if the event was caused by an agent, people then attempt to determine whether the norm violation was caused *intentionally*. If the agent is perceived to have acted intentionally then blame is graded depending on the agent’s *reason* for acting. Minimal blame is assigned if

the agent acted for a morally justified reason (e.g., “Joe hit Sally with a flyswatter to kill the wasp that was about to sting her.”) and maximum blame is assigned if the agent acted for morally bad reasons (e.g. “Joe hit Sally with a flyswatter because he thought it was funny.”) Alternatively, if people perceive the agent to have caused harm unintentionally, the perceivers grade their judgments of blame based on the agent’s *obligation* and *capacity* to prevent harm. If the agent was not expected to prevent (no obligation) the event and did not have the ability or knowledge to prevent the event (no capacity) then perceivers assign low amount of blame; however, if the agent was expected to prevent the event and had the ability to do so then higher degrees of blame would be assigned (Malle, et al., 2012; 2014).

Whereas few studies to date have tested the entirety of this model (see Monroe & Malle, 2017, under review for exceptions), evidence for the importance for each of the informational nodes of the model is well established. Below I briefly review evidence for each of the key nodes of the model: causality, intentionality, reasons, and obligation. In particular, I focus on the intentionality and the obligation nodes of the model as the societal status of agents may affect people’s perceptions of these nodes.

Evidence for Causality

One prominent demonstration of the effect of causality information on moral judgments come from Pizarro, Uhlmann, and Bloom (2003). They argue that lay assessments of moral responsibility are sensitive to the manner in which intentions affect outcomes, and it may be the case that individuals discount moral blame for actions that lack a specific link between intentions and actions (Pizarro et al., 2003). For example, in one study, participants were asked to judge the moral responsibility of an agent that: (a) saved the life of a little girl or (b) murdered his enemy by stabbing him with a knife. The chain of events either followed a normal causal chain (normal

condition) or followed a “deviant” causal chain (deviance condition). The important part here is that the versions of the story in the deviant condition were: the protagonist prepared to lunge forward (in both cases), but before he could lunge he was hit by an oncoming jogger, which caused him either to knock the little girl out of harm’s way, or to plunge the knife into his enemy’s stomach (Pizarro et al., 2003). The authors found that judgments of moral responsibility were discounted for both positive and negative causally deviant behaviors, even though the intentions clearly were the cause of the outcomes (Pizarro et al., 2003). Three additional experiments following this basic setup found very similar results. Across all four experiments, the authors found that participants reduced moral responsibility for acts that were “causally deviant” (acts in which intentions and outcomes were present, but not linked in the intended manner) (Pizarro et al., 2003). Their research suggests that people are sensitive to the way an agent causes harm (or help). When causality is clear cut, moral judgments are strong; however, when an agent harms or helps in a way that is causally strange or unexpected people blame and praise these deeds less, even though the outcome is identical.

Evidence for Intentionality

Malle (2006) argues that intentionality judgments are deeply ingrained in human cognition and a central component in the evaluation of responsibility and blame. Across a series of studies Malle (2006) developed a five-component model of intentionality that places intention to perform an action as the central antecedent of an intentional action. For an intention to be ascribed, a relevant desire for an outcome and one or more relevant belief about the action leading to the outcome are required; additionally, for the action to be performed intentionally, skill and awareness have to be present as well (Malle, 2006). Following these ideas, additional

authors provide evidence that speak to the relationship between intentionality and moral judgments.

There is evidence to support that individuals assign more blame for acts that are perceived as intentional compared to acts that are perceived as unintentional (Ames & Fiske, 2013; Darley & Pittman, 2003; Lagnado & Channon, 2008). Ames and Fiske (2013) found this to be true even when unintentional harms were equally as damaging as intentional harms. Across five studies, they demonstrated that people are more motivated to assign higher levels of blame to intentional acts compared to unintentional acts of the same magnitude. Their work suggests that harmful acts perceived as intentional elicit higher levels of blame compared to unintentional acts (Ames & Fiske, 2013). Additional work done by Lagnado and Channon (2008) found very similar results. That is, participants in their study rated intentional actions as more blameworthy than unintentional actions. Further pointing to intentionality's effect on judgments of blame. Lastly, Darley and Pittman (2003) argue that the reason why intentional acts lead to higher levels of blame is due to the fact that individuals react with moral outrage which leads to a desire to punish and blame. This punishment seeks to modify future behavior through the deterrence of future negative acts. Darley and Pittman (2003) argue that individuals are more motivated to blame and assign higher levels of blame to intentional actions compared to unintentional actions because of a social desire to hold agents responsible for their actions. So, previous research provides evidence that intentional acts elicit higher levels of blame compared to unintentional acts and this is most likely due to a strong social desire to regulate behavior.

The Intentional Path: Evidence for Reasons

Woolfolk, Doris, and Darley (2006) argue that when assigning responsibility, perceivers closely attend to the actor's perceived *identification* with an outcome. Woolfolk et al., (2006)

define identification in terms of an actor's intentions, thoughts, and feelings toward committing a deviant act; what people might more colloquially refer to as an actor's *reasons* for action. Across three experiments, Woolfolk et al., (2006) found that participants' attribution of responsibility for an action to be influenced by the actor's *identification* with the action, even when the action was placed under extreme coercive pressure. For example, in one study Woolfolk et al., (2006) demonstrate that people make more negative moral judgments of a person who is forced by hijackers to shoot his friend when the person harbors a secretly desire to kill his friend, compared to when the person lacks such a desire. In general, one might think that extreme coercion (being threatened with a gun) would be sufficient to reduce blame; however, this study highlights the impact of an agent's reasons for acting. When the person has a secret desire to kill, people ignore the coercion, and blame him as if he were free.

Similarly, Reeder, Monroe, and Pryor (2008) argue that people's explanations of everyday behavior focus on the goals, reasons, or motives of agents. Using Milgram's paradigm, the authors examine how people glean reason from information (e.g., what was the teacher trying to do?) from situational cues, and how this information shapes judgments of Milgram's teacher's moral character. In their third study, the authors found that perceivers relied on both the prompts issued by the experimenter (e.g. "I am responsible for this experiment; the experiment requires that you go on teacher.") and the statements of concern the teacher made about the learner (e.g. "Mark stopped and asked the experimenter, 'Do you want me to keep going?'"") to make inferences about reason and morality (Reeder, et al., 2008). When perceivers did not have this information they were more likely to rate the teacher as more motivated by evil than good. This suggests that when providing specific reasons (situational constraints) for behavior, individuals are more likely to blame the situation for causing an action than an agent. In their fourth study,

the authors sought to test this idea more directly. All participants read about a teacher who was completely obedient, but the level of pressure applied by the experimenter varied across conditions (Reeder, et al., 2008). Results from this study mirrored that of their third study, and also found that as the level of coercion applied by the experimenter decreased, perceivers tended to attribute the teacher's behavior to relatively more hurtful than helpful motivation (Reeder et al., 2008). Overall, Reeder et al., (2008) provides substantial evidence that when judging a person's morality, perceivers rely heavily on situational cues to make inferences about a person's motives and moral character. This suggests that when assigning judgments of blame, perceivers will readily take into account various situational cues or constraints placed on an agent. Providing further evidence that when assigning blame, certain reasons (situational constraints) can affect the level of blame assigned to an agent.

In a separate set of studies Pizarro, Uhlmann, and Salovey, (2003) highlight the importance of reasons by examining how people's moral judgments are affected when a person endorses conflicting sets of desires. In one study, Pizzaro et al., (2003) gave participants information about an agent's second-order desires and hypothesized that this would result in a discounting of blame. The results showed that telling participants that an agent who performed a negative act rejected his own impulse caused greater blame discounting. That is, participants assigned less blame to agents when they were presented with the agents second-order desires, which explained the agent's unwillingness or regret for their transgressions. This suggests that blame is mitigated when an agent expresses guilt or aversion to committing a deviant act.

The Unintentional Path: Obligation to Prevent Harm

In contrast to the large amount of research on causality, intentionality, and reasons. Little research has been done regarding obligations and their impact on blame. There is evidence to

support the notion that individuals who possess higher status within a hierarchy have a stronger obligation to prevent negative outcomes and are blamed more for those outcomes when they occur (Hamilton, 1986). However, more recent work strongly suggests that an agent is not considered blameworthy for an action even if they are morally obligated (Buckwalter & Turri, 2015; Chituc, Henne, Sinnott-Armstrong, & Brigard, 2016). These authors provide evidence that while an agent can be seen as morally obligated to perform an action (e.g. rescue a drowning child), participants strongly disagreed that an agent is blameworthy for failing to perform said action. The present work will seek to test these opposing views on obligation and blame, by examining whether people with higher status are perceived as more obligated to prevent harm, and therefore more blameworthy when they fail to do so. Below I review research examining how people conceptualize status and outline its possible effects on moral judgment.

Social Effects on Blame: Hierarchy and Status

When a morally deviant act is committed, people almost always seek an explanation as to why it occurred and subsequently seek to assign blame. However there are many social factors (e.g., power, status, etc.) that can affect the perceived blameworthiness agents. Here I review the evidence for social factors influencing judgments of blame, and more specifically, I focus on the perceived status of agents as moderator for moral judgments.

Hierarchy and status are necessary components to maintain social order within a society. A linear ranking of individuals is needed to maintain order between those higher in status (e.g. a leader) and lower in status (e.g. a subordinate). Rai and Fiske (2011) argue that motives for hierarchy create moral expectations that individuals at the top of the hierarchy are entitled to more and better things than individuals at the bottom of the hierarchy. However, this entitlement does not come without a price. While those at the top of the hierarchy feel a greater sense of

entitlement, they may also be judged as morally responsible for the actions of their subordinates (Rai & Fisk, 2011; Shultz, Jaggi, & Schleifer, 1987).

Hamilton (1978) argues that society is responsive to the fact that different roles may necessitate different standards of accountability. That is, superiors can be held morally responsible for the actions of their subordinates. Hamilton's (1978) main argument explains that different roles can lead to different rules for determining responsibility, and high status roles invoke more stringent rule sets and therefore are subject to higher attributions of responsibility and blame. His work suggests that social status within a society plays an important role when assigning judgments of blame. Individuals actively use and incorporate this information when making these types of judgments. Hamilton (1978) explains that individuals perceive an agent with high social status, within a hierarchy, as requiring more responsibility and blame for a harmful act compared to an agent with low social status in the same hierarchy.

Similarly, Pfeiler, Wenzel, Weber, and Kubiak (2017) argue that status bounds the moral judgments people are socially allowed to express. They show that individuals in a lower status positions express less anger towards someone in a higher status position for similar infractions.. In a social interaction, an individual may express anger in an attempt to change the behavior of the anger-eliciting person (Pfeiler et al., 2017); however, perceived or real status affects who is allowed to engage in this form of behavior regulation. Across two experiments the authors examine how social status determines anger expression and behavioral reactions toward experienced anger. In both experiments the participants were told to work on a computerized problem-solving task, but were constantly disturbed by a confederate making noise. Afterwards participants were told their performance on this task was below average; whereas, the confederate received praise for their performance. The results demonstrated that participants

expressed less anger when they had a lower status position, compared to when they were of equal status with the confederate (Pfieler et al., 2017).

Similarly, evidence provided by Shultz et al., (1987) supports the claim that superiors are held morally responsible for the actions taken by their subordinates. In their study, participants were given questionnaires that contained four stories in which one person caused harm to another person. In each story, there was also a third person (the vicarious person) who was either equal or superior to the perpetrator in social status (Shultz et al., 1987). The results indicated that if the third person was superior in status to the perpetrator they were judged as being morally responsible for the actions taken by the perpetrator. The authors explain these results by arguing that a person who is superior in social status to the perpetrator is, in a valid sense, causally implicated in the resulting harm (Shultz et al., 1987). That is, within a hierarchy an individual with high social status is seen as being morally responsible for the actions taken by an individual with low social status.

The Present Study

The goal of the present study is to examine how perceived social status affects moral judgments of blame. Three key predictions guide our study. First, following from previous research, we predict that targets viewed as having higher social status (e.g., a CEO) will be blamed more for bringing about a harmful outcome compared to people with low status (e.g., a company staff member). Second, drawing on the Path Model of Blame, we predict that inferences about an agent's intentionality, an agent's knowledge, and an agent's ability to prevent harm will predict moral judgments of blame. Third, I predict that inferences about an intentionality, an agent's knowledge, and an agent's ability to prevent harm will mediate the effect of perceived status on blame.

Methods

Participants

We recruited a total of 246 participants from Appalachian State University subject pool. Participants were compensated with course credit. Of the 246 participants, 39 identified as male and 207 identified as female. The average age in the sample was 19.49 years ($SD = 1.63$).

Design and Procedure

The experiment manipulated perceived status using a four-level within-subjects design. Participants read a brief vignette where a company begins a new program that has a foreseeable effect of harming the environment (see below).

“A company has decided to invest in a new program. This program will almost double the company’s annual earnings but in turn will harm the environment. While the company is aware of the effect of causing harm to the environment they decide to move forward with the new project. In the end, everything precedes as anticipated: the new program doubles the company’s annual earnings and the environment is harmed.”

After reading the vignette participants were asked to make judgments about four different agents, each with different levels of status in the company: the company CEO (high status); the Operations Manager (medium status), a Staff member (low status), and a Shareholder (very low status). The order of the agent was randomized for each participant. Each participant responded to same four questions for each agent: “How much blame would you assign [agent] for harming the environment?” (0 no blame - 100 lots of blame). “Did the [agent] intentionally harm the environment?” (1 absolutely no - 7 absolutely yes); “Did the [agent] know the environment would be harmed?” (1 absolutely no - 7 absolutely yes); and “Could the [agent] have prevented the harm to the environment?” (1 absolutely no – 7 absolutely yes).

Afterwards, participants were presented with all four agents and were asked to allot the proportion of blame each one deserved: “Thinking about the four people you just evaluated, what share of the blame do you think each agent deserves (Numbers must sum to 100)?” Following this measure, participants responded to a manipulation check question that assessed participants’ perceptions of the agents’ status: “How much status do the following people have in the company?” This was measured using a sliding bar scale (0 none - 100 lots) for each agent. Lastly, participants completed a short demographic measure and were debriefed and thanked.

Results

Manipulation Check

We first tested whether participants perceived the agents to possess differential amounts of status using a within-subjects ANOVA. The analysis confirmed the prediction. Participants perceived the CEO as possessing the most status ($M = 95.02$, $SD = 10.20$), followed by the operations manager ($M = 76.28$, $SD = 16.78$) and, the shareholder ($M = 41.54$, $SD = 27.78$), and staff member ($M = 34.43$, $SD = 19.59$), $F(3,717) = 591.7$, $p < .001$, partial $\eta^2 = .71$. Planned contrasts demonstrated that participants perceived the CEO as having significantly more status than the operations manager ($p < .001$), and the operations manager had more status than the shareholder and the staff member ($p < .001$); the shareholder and staff member, however, were perceived as having equal (and low status, $p = .001$).

Effects of Status on Blame and Mental State Ascriptions

I predicted that agents with higher perceived status would be perceived as more blameworthy, more knowledgeable, more able to prevent harm, and as causing harm intentionally compared to agents with lower perceived status. I tested these predictions using four within-subjects ANOVA (one for each judgment). The analyses confirmed each of my

predictions. Status significantly affected blame judgments, $F(3,684) = 172.1, p < .001$, partial $\eta^2 = 0.43$ (See Figure 1). Additionally, perceived status affected mental state judgments, including: knowledge ascriptions, $F(3,735) = 116.5, p < .001$, partial $\eta^2 = .32$; perceptions of preventability, $F(3,735) = 130.8, p < .001$, partial $\eta^2 = 0.35$; and intentionally attributions, $F(3,735) = 138.9, p < .001$, partial $\eta^2 = 0.36$ (See Figure 2). Across each inference, the high status agent (i.e., CEOs) received the strongest judgments of blame, knowledge, preventability, and intentionality, followed by the moderate status agent (i.e., the operations manager), and judgments of blame, knowledge, preventability, and intentionality were lowest for the low-status staff member and shareholder.

Status and Zero-Sum Blame Ascriptions

In addition to examining how people ascribe blame to agents with different status, we sought to test whether this effect replicates when we explicitly put the agents in tension with one another by asking people to make zero-sum blame judgments. To test this prediction, we asked participants to decide on the proportion of blame each agent deserved, but the total blame could not sum to more than 100%. We used a within subjects ANOVA to test this prediction. The results indicated that the largest amount of blame was assigned to the CEO ($M = 52.84, SD = 17.87$), followed by the Operations Manager ($M = 26.40, SD = 12.71$), the Shareholder ($M = 10.85, SD = 8.62$) and finally the Staff Member ($M = 9.92, SD = 6.70$), $F(3,735) = 490.8, p < .001$, partial $\eta^2 = 0.67$. Planned contrasts demonstrated that the CEO received a significantly larger share of blame compared to the other three agents ($ps < .001$). The operations manager received the second largest share of blame, receiving significantly more blame than the staff member and the shareholder ($ps < .001$). The shareholder and the staff member received the least and equivalent amounts of blame ($p = .16$)

Mediation Analysis

Additionally, we conducted a mediation using bootstrapping with 10,000 samples (Hayes, 2013, model 4). The mediation analysis showed that the initial direct effect of perceived status on blame was significant, $b = 0.474$, $SE = .079$, 95% CI [0.318, 0.631]. Additionally, perceived status predicted perceived knowledge, $b = 0.018$, $SE = .006$, 95% CI [0.006, 0.030], intentionality, $b = 0.019$, $SE = .006$, 95% CI [0.006, 0.031], and the ability to prevent harm, $b = 0.023$, $SE = .006$, 95% CI [0.012, 0.034]. Entering status, knowledge, intentionality, and ability to prevent harm, simultaneously into the model showed a significant indirect effect, indicating mediation, indirect $b = 0.184$, $SE = .061$, 95% CI [0.069, 0.307]. The direct effect of status on blame was still significant, though substantially smaller, $b = 0.290$, $SE = .066$, 95% CI [0.161, 0.420]. Moreover, blame judgments were significantly predicted by perceived knowledge, $b = 4.643$, $SE = .879$, 95% CI [2.911, 6.375] and intentionality, $b = 3.372$, $SE = .755$, 95% CI [1.886, 4.859], and the ability to prevent harm, marginally predicted blame, $b = 1.633$, $SE = .841$, 95% CI [-0.024, 0.420].

Discussion

The goal of the present study was to examine how perceived social status affected moral judgments of blame as well as whether different mental state ascriptions could explain these effects. First, we predicted that individuals perceived as having higher social status (e.g., CEO) would be blamed more for bringing about a negative event than individuals perceived as having lower social status (e.g. a company staff member). The results confirmed this prediction. We found that individuals viewed as having high social status were assigned higher levels of blame for bringing about a negative event compared to individuals low in social status.

Second, we predicted that inferences about an intentionality, an agent's knowledge, and an agent's ability to prevent harm would predict moral judgments of blame. Whereas individuals with high social status would be perceived as having greater intentionality, knowledge, and the ability to prevent a harmful event compared to individuals with low social status. The results also confirmed this prediction. Individuals high in social status were viewed as acting more intentionally, having more knowledge, and having a greater ability to prevent harm compared to individuals with low social status. This suggests that one reason why people ascribe more blame to individuals with higher social status is because they perceive high status individuals having more morally-relevant mental states (e.g., more intentionality).

Third, we predicted that inferences about intentionality, knowledge, and an agent's ability to prevent harm would mediate the effect of perceived status on blame. The results largely confirmed this prediction. We found that intentionality inferences and knowledge ascriptions significantly mediated the effect of status on blame, and judgments of an agent's ability to prevent harm were marginally significant mediators of blame. That is, the degree to which a participant perceived an agent as having higher status, they also viewed that agent as acting more intentionally, having more knowledge, and having a stronger ability to prevent harm; these factors then in turn explained people's increased blame judgments of the agent. Importantly, however, these mental state factors only partially mediated the effect of perceived status on blame. Thus, this suggests that when assigning blame, status exerts both a direct effect on blame (i.e., more status results in more blame) and an indirect effect on blame via mental state ascriptions of intentionality, knowledge, and preventability.

Previous research has outlined the importance of intentionality, preventability, and knowledge when making judgments of blame (Malle et al., 2012). Following the Path Model of

Blame, these mental state ascriptions play an important role when assigning blame to an agent. The current study adds to this body of research by further pointing to the importance of these mental state ascriptions. We showed for the first time that these mental state ascriptions can predict the level of blame assigned to an agent of perceived social status. Agents higher in social status are viewed as bringing about a harmful event more intentionally, possessing more knowledge about a harmful event, and having a greater ability to prevent a negative event compared to agents lower in social status. Higher levels of these mental state ascriptions predicted higher levels of blame.

Future research should seek to expand these findings through additional studies. Specifically, the current study assessed social status within a company setting; however future research could expand on this effect by examining status in different domains (e.g., politics). Due to the novelty of this study it is crucial that future research expands on the role of mental state ascriptions when assigning judgments of blame. Additionally, one explanation for the present findings is that people have a stronger desire to blame individuals at the tops of organizations (relative to more junior individuals). Thus, one question for future work to consider is whether, when people view high-status people behaving immorally, this inspires increased feelings of resentment or anger, which in turn causes people to inflate their beliefs that high status people could have stopped the event, knew what they were doing or acted intentionally, thereby increasing blame. As the present studies did not assess people's affective responses to the immoral behavior, we cannot rule out this explanation, and we believe it would be an exciting avenue for future work.

Despite these limitations, the present findings suggest that decisions about blame are cognitive as well as deeply social. With regard to the cognitive aspect, I demonstrate, consistent

with past research, that blame judgments are responsive to variations in agents' perceived mental states (e.g., knowledge and intentionality) as well as agent's perceived ability to prevent harm. Importantly, however, my study goes beyond reifying the cognitive inputs to blame to demonstrate the social framework in which decisions to blame are situated. That is, even when the details of an event are identical (a company makes decision that harms the environment), people appraise the mental states and moral standing of the individuals involved differently based on their perceived social status. This social influence on blame and its precursors suggests that, going forward, moral psychological research ought to broaden its view of the path to blame to include not only factors originating from the event (e.g., amount of harm caused), or from the perceiver (e.g., attitudes and prejudices), but also the social situation in which blame judgments are rendered.

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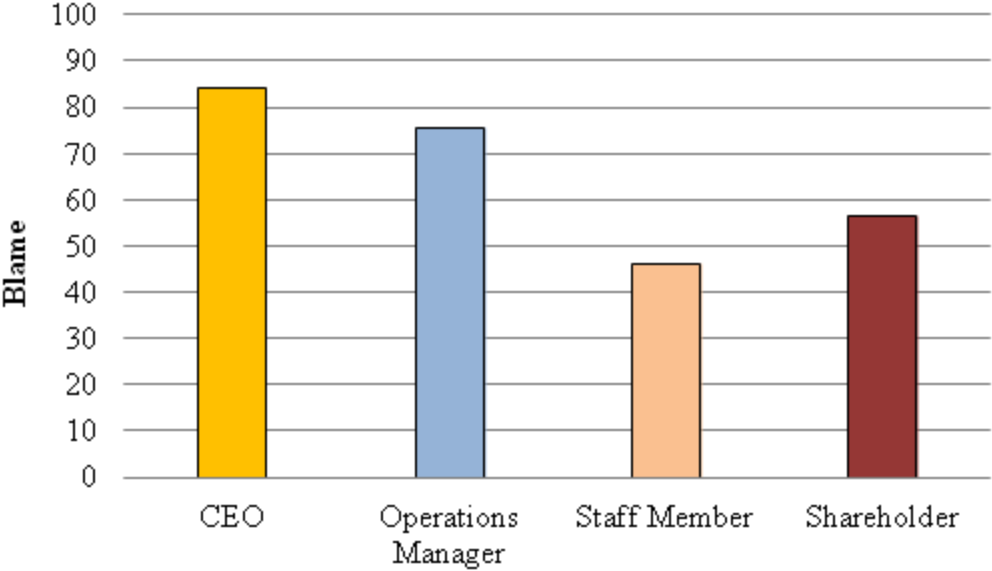


Figure 1. The assignment of blame judgments. This figure illustrates the amount of blame that was assigned to each agent, averaged across all participants.

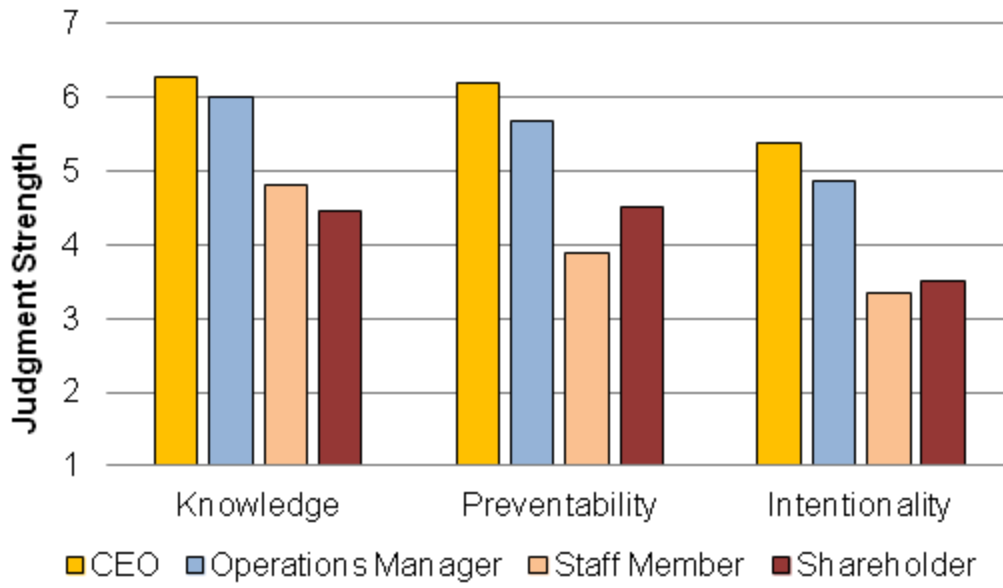


Figure 2. The assignment of mental state inferences. This figure illustrates the level of mental state ascriptions that were assigned to each agent, averaged across all participants.