

Scapegoating

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Scapegoating is the practice of singling out any party for unmerited negative treatment or blame. A scapegoat may be a child, employee, peer, ethnic or religious group, or country. A whipping boy or "fall guy" is a form of scapegoat.

Etymology

The word "scapegoat" is a mistranslation of the word Azazel. The Septuagint, an early Greek translation of the Old Testament, had incorrectly translated Azazel as ez ozel - literally, "the goat that departs" - and translated the word as tragos apompaios, meaning "goat sent out". The error was further promulgated in the Latin Vulgate, which rendered the word as caper emissarius, or "emissary goat". William Tyndale rendered the Latin as "(e)scape goat" in his 1530 Bible. This translation was later appropriated in the King James Version of the Bible (Leviticus chapter 16) in 1611.

History

Ancient Syria

A concept superficially similar to the biblical scapegoat is attested in two ritual texts in archives at Ebla of the 24th century BC. They were connected with ritual purification on the occasion of the king's wedding. In them, a she-goat with a silver bracelet hung from her neck was driven forth into the wasteland of 'Alini'; "we" in the report of the ritual involves the whole community. Such 'elimination rites', in which an animal, without confession of sins, is the vehicle of evils (not sins) that are chased from the community are widely attested in the Ancient Near East.

Ancient Greece

The Ancient Greeks practiced a scapegoating rite in which a cripple or beggar or criminal (the pharmakos) was cast out of the community, either in response to a natural disaster (such as a plague, famine or an invasion) or in response to a calendrical crisis (such as the end of the year). The scholia refer to the pharmakos being killed, but many scholars reject this, and argue that the earliest evidence (the fragments of the iambic satirist Hipponax) only show the pharmakos being stoned, beaten and driven from the community.

Psychology and sociology

A medical definition of scapegoating is:

"Process in which the mechanisms of projection or displacement are utilised in focusing feelings of aggression, hostility, frustration, etc., upon another individual or group; the amount of blame being

unwarranted."

Scapegoating is a tactic often employed to characterize an entire group of individuals according to the unethical or immoral conduct of a small number of individuals belonging to that group, also known as guilt by association. (Stereotyping)

Scapegoated groups throughout history have included almost every imaginable group of people: genders, religions, people of different races or nations, people with different political beliefs, or people differing in behaviour from the majority. However, scapegoating may also be applied to organizations, such as governments, corporations, or various political groups.

Mobbing is a form of sociological scapegoating which occurs in the workplace. Didier Anzieu has explored the connection with the psycho-dynamics of group formation: 'group members' identifications with the heroism of the group's founder' were strengthened by 'the designation of one group member as a victim or scapegoat ("One of us is bad")'.

Projection

Unwanted thoughts and feelings can be unconsciously projected onto another who becomes a scapegoat for one's own problems. This concept can be extended to projection by groups. In this case the chosen individual, or group, becomes the scapegoat for the group's problems. 'Political agitation in all countries is full of such projections, just as much as the backyard gossip of little groups and individuals'. Jung considered indeed that 'there must be some people who behave in the wrong way; they act as scapegoats and objects of interest for the normal ones'.

In psychopathology, projection is an especially commonly used defense mechanism in people with the following personality disorders:

antisocial personality disorder
borderline personality disorder
narcissistic personality disorder
paranoid personality disorder
psychopathy

In management

Scapegoating is a known practice in management where a lower staff employee is blamed for the mistakes of senior executives. This is often due to lack of accountability in upper management.

For example, a teacher who constantly gets blamed or accused of wrongdoing could be a scapegoat if said teacher is only guilty of doing her job so well that she makes her coworkers and supervisory administration look bad. This could result in letters being placed in permanent files,

condescending remarks from co-workers and constant blame finding from administration.

The "scapegoat mechanism" in philosophical anthropology

Literary critic and philosopher Kenneth Burke first coined and described the expression "scapegoat mechanism" in his books *Permanence and Change* (1935), and *A Grammar of Motives* (1945). These works influenced some philosophical anthropologists, such as Ernest Becker and Rene Girard.

Girard developed the concept much more extensively as an interpretation of human culture. In Girard's view, it is humankind, not God, who has the problem with violence. Humans are driven by desire for that which another has or wants (mimetic desire). This causes a triangulation of desire and results in conflict between the desiring parties. This mimetic contagion increases to a point where society is at risk; it is at this point that the scapegoat mechanism is triggered. This is the point where one person is singled out as the cause of the trouble and is expelled or killed by the group. This person is the scapegoat. Social order is restored as people are contented that they have solved the cause of their problems by removing the scapegoated individual, and the cycle begins again. The keyword here is "content", scapegoating serves as a psychological relief for a group of people. Girard contends that this is what happened in the case of Jesus. The difference in this case, Girard believes, is that he was resurrected from the dead and shown to be innocent; humanity is thus made aware of its violent tendencies and the cycle is broken. Satan, who is seen to be manifested in the contagion, is cast out. Thus Girard's work is significant as a re-construction of the Christus Victor atonement theory.