

Scapegoat Theory

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Scapegoat Theory

Primary Disciplinary Field(s): Social Psychology; Sociology

Proponents: Gordon Allport; John Dollard (Related Frustration-Aggression Hypothesis)

1. Core Principles

The **Scapegoat Theory** is a socio-psychological explanation for the origins and maintenance of prejudice, positing that intergroup hostility is often the result of displaced aggression. This mechanism occurs when individuals or large groups experience significant levels of frustration, disappointment, or economic hardship, but are unable to direct their resulting anger or hostility toward the true, powerful source of the frustration (such as complex political systems, economic downturns, or foreign adversaries). Instead, this pent-up aggression is redirected and "vented" onto a safer, usually more vulnerable and already marginalized, target group.

The chosen target group--the **scapegoat**--becomes the recipient of collective blame for societal failures and personal misfortunes. By projecting their anxiety and frustration onto this external group, the dominant populace achieves a temporary psychological release, alleviating the internal pressure of their collective suffering. The prejudice exhibited is therefore functional; it serves as a mechanism for emotional regulation and externalizing societal problems, allowing the frustrated group to maintain a positive self-image by defining themselves in opposition to the despised 'other.'

A key tenet of this theory is the idea of displacement. The aggression generated by the frustration must find an outlet, and the selection of the scapegoat is based less on objective reality and more on availability and susceptibility. The target group must be easily identifiable, typically lacking significant power or influence, and often already subject to pre-existing negative stereotypes, making them an ideal, low-risk vessel for the dominant group's hostility.

2. Historical Development

The term 'scapegoat' originates in the ancient religious ritual described in the Book of Leviticus, where, on the Day of Atonement, a goat was symbolically burdened with the sins of the community and driven into the wilderness to carry away the guilt. This foundational concept of transferring collective blame and impurity serves as the metaphor for the modern social psychological theory.

The academic development of **Scapegoat Theory** in the 20th century was heavily influenced by the Frustration-Aggression Hypothesis, first proposed by John Dollard and colleagues in 1939. This seminal work established the link that frustration, the blocking of goal-directed behavior, reliably leads to aggression. Scapegoat theory specifically adopted the nuance of this hypothesis which allowed for aggression to be displaced when the source of frustration could not be attacked directly. Social psychologists, particularly Gordon Allport in his influential 1954 work *The Nature of*

Prejudice, integrated this displacement principle to explain widespread prejudice and the eruption of intergroup conflict following periods of economic stress or national defeat.

Following World War II, the need to explain mass atrocities and institutionalized hatred propelled the **Scapegoat Theory** into prominence. Researchers sought frameworks that could account for how entire populations could turn violently against a minority group. Although later nuanced by more complex sociological and political theories, the concept provided an initial, powerful psychological lens through which to analyze the role of collective trauma and anger in fueling discrimination and persecution.

3. Key Concepts and Components

Frustration-Induced Aggression: The foundation of the theory lies in the premise that significant individual or societal frustration (e.g., job loss, economic instability, political humiliation) creates a strong drive toward aggression. The intensity of the aggression is directly correlated with the magnitude of the frustration experienced.

Displacement: This is the critical mechanism where the aggressive impulse is redirected from the original, inaccessible or dangerous source to a safer, more vulnerable target. The scapegoat serves as a substitute target, bearing the brunt of hostility meant for the true source of discontent.

Generalized Blame: Scapegoating involves attributing virtually all of society's ills--economic, social, moral, and political--to the target group. This cognitive simplification avoids the complexity of structural problems, allowing the majority group to focus their anger and solidify their in-group cohesion through shared hatred of an external enemy.

Vulnerability and Visibility: The chosen scapegoat is typically a minority group that is easily identified (through distinct cultural, religious, or physical markers) and lacks the political or social power necessary to defend itself or retaliate effectively, thus minimizing the risk to the frustrated majority.

4. Applications and Examples

The most profound and frequently cited historical application of **Scapegoat Theory** involves the persecution of the Jewish people in Europe, culminating in the **Holocaust**. Proponents of the theory argue that the severe economic depression and hyperinflation experienced by Germany following their defeat in World War I generated immense national frustration, humiliation, and distress among the German populace. This societal anger needed a vent.

As the original source content indicates, the theory suggests that the Nazi regime successfully utilized the long history of anti-Semitic stereotypes to channel this widespread societal anger and frustration onto the Jewish community. The Jews were blamed for the country's severe economic problems, political corruption, and national decline. By making the Jewish population the

scapegoat, the Nazi leadership provided a focused target for the collective rage, effectively externalizing complex national failures and allowing the German majority to feel justified in their prejudice and subsequent actions.

Beyond this extreme historical example, the theory has been applied to numerous sociological situations, including episodes of anti-immigrant sentiment during periods of high unemployment, outbreaks of racial violence following economic recessions, and the targeting of political opposition groups by authoritarian regimes seeking to deflect responsibility for internal crises. In contemporary politics, the theory often explains why minority groups are frequently blamed for job shortages or increased crime rates, serving as easily consumable explanations for complex socioeconomic issues.

5. Criticisms and Limitations

While offering a powerful psychological explanation for the redirection of hostility, **Scapegoat Theory** faces several critical academic limitations. A primary criticism is that the theory is overly reductionist, tending to simplify complex, multifaceted societal phenomena--such as genocide or deeply institutionalized racism--down to a single, temporary psychological state of displaced anger. Critics argue that this explanation often neglects the crucial roles played by political ideology, institutionalized discrimination, and the active construction of hatred by political elites.

Furthermore, the theory is often criticized for its inability to explain the specifics of target selection. If frustration merely requires an outlet, why are certain groups consistently chosen over others? The theory inadequately addresses the role of pre-existing cultural narratives and historical animosities that make certain groups "ready-made" targets. Prejudice often persists even when objective measures of societal frustration are low, suggesting that factors like social learning, conformity to in-group norms, and the desire to maintain social hierarchy are frequently more significant drivers than simple frustration displacement.

In modern social psychology, many scholars prefer more integrated models, such as **Social Identity Theory** or **Realistic Conflict Theory**, which acknowledge the role of anger and frustration but place greater emphasis on the human desire for positive social distinction (in-group favoritism) or the tangible competition for limited resources. These alternative frameworks provide a broader scope for understanding how prejudice is institutionalized and maintained structurally, rather than merely being a psychological accident of redirected frustration.

Further Reading

[Scapegoating](#) (Wikipedia entry detailing the social psychological phenomenon).

[Gordon Allport](#) (Biographical and academic profile focusing on his work on prejudice).

[Frustration-Aggression Hypothesis](#) (Detailed entry on the theory's intellectual precursor).

The Nature of Prejudice (Information on Allport's foundational text applying the theory).

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