

SCAPEGOATING

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Primary Disciplinary Field(s): Psychology, Sociology, Anthropology, Religious Studies, Political Science

1. Core Definition

Scapegoating is defined as the practice by which an undeserving individual or group is singled out for unmerited negative treatment, blame, or punishment. This process typically involves the systematic displacement of hostile impulses or frustrations onto a target that is perceived as weaker or less capable of retaliation than the actual source of the frustration. Fundamentally, scapegoating functions as a psychological defense mechanism at the individual level and a social control mechanism at the group level, providing a simplified explanation for complex failures or widespread anxiety.

The essence of the practice lies in the distortion of causality. When individuals or groups experience significant frustration, failure, or internal conflict, confronting the true, often complex or powerful, source of distress is avoided. Instead, this pent-up tension is safely redirected toward a vulnerable substitute--the **scapegoat**. This mechanism provides immediate, albeit temporary, psychological relief, allowing the perpetrator or blaming group to maintain internal cohesion and a sense of moral superiority or control without engaging in difficult self-reflection or system reform.

In social and psychological contexts, scapegoating is closely related to the defense mechanisms of **projection** and displacement. Projection involves attributing one's own unacceptable thoughts, impulses, or faults to another person, thereby externalizing internal conflict. Displacement then allows for the redirection of the corresponding aggression or blame toward the externalized target. While the targeted party receives intense negative attention, the underlying issues that caused the initial frustration remain unresolved, ensuring that the need for a scapegoat may recur.

2. Etymology and Historical Development

The term **Scapegoating** originates directly from the ancient Hebrew ritual described in the Book of Leviticus (Chapter 16), which details the Day of Atonement (**Yom Kippur**). During this ritual, two goats were selected: one was sacrificed as a sin offering to God, while the other--the goat designated for Azazel--was symbolically burdened with the sins and moral failings of the entire Israelite community. The priest would confess the community's transgressions over the goat's head, and the goat would then be driven out into the wilderness, ritually removing the collective guilt from the community and restoring purity.

This religious ritual established the foundational blueprint for the concept: the transfer of communal guilt onto an innocent carrier who is then ritually expelled to purify the group. The term transitioned into common language in the 16th century following William Tyndale's translation of the Bible, where the Hebrew phrase for the goat designated for Azazel was translated into English as "escape goat," which later became "scapegoat."

The modern, secular, and psychological application of the term solidified in the 20th century, particularly after sociological analysis of ethnic prejudice and large-scale violence. Scholars began to use **scapegoating theory** to explain how societal pressures, economic hardships, and political crises lead to the targeting of vulnerable minority groups, exemplified tragically by the persecution of Jews in Nazi Germany. This shift moved the concept from a conscious religious rite to an unconscious, powerful socio-psychological phenomenon rooted in prejudice and frustration.

3. Key Characteristics and Selection Criteria

The process of identifying and punishing a scapegoat relies on several critical characteristics, most notably a pronounced **power differential**. The group or individual initiating the blame must possess sufficient social, political, or physical power to impose negative consequences upon the target without fear of effective retribution. The selection of the target is rarely random; the scapegoat must often be perceived as already occupying a marginal or vulnerable social position, making the aggression against them socially palatable or even sanctioned.

Furthermore, effective scapegoating requires the ideological construction of the target as the "Other." This is achieved through **dehumanization** and stereotyping, processes which define the target group as fundamentally different, deficient, or morally corrupt. This ideological framework justifies the hostility and allows the perpetrators to maintain a clear conscience, believing that the punishment is deserved, even if the target is demonstrably innocent of the crimes or problems attributed to them.

Crucially, the mechanism must serve a functional purpose for the blaming group, primarily the preservation of group solidarity. By unifying members against a common, externally defined enemy, internal dissension and fracture are minimized. The shared act of identifying, blaming, and punishing the scapegoat reinforces shared values, boundaries, and collective identity, temporarily stabilizing the social system at the expense of the victim.

4. Scapegoating in Group Dynamics and Society

In group dynamics, scapegoating serves as a powerful instrument for managing internal conflicts and maintaining homeostasis. When tensions rise--whether due to competition, resource scarcity,

or ideological disagreement--the easiest way for the group leadership to restore order is to redirect the aggressive energy outward. This mechanism is frequently observed in institutional settings, such as workplaces where a single employee is blamed for corporate failures, or in family systems where an "identified patient" (often a child) absorbs the collective dysfunction of the unit.

On a macro-societal level, **political scapegoating** is a common tool used by populist or authoritarian leaders. During periods of severe economic decline, war, or social upheaval, complex systemic problems are simplified and attributed to specific, easily recognizable groups, such as immigrants, racial minorities, or political dissidents. This strategic deflection of blame prevents the public from holding the ruling elite accountable for policy shortcomings, simultaneously mobilizing a loyal base through fear and shared antagonism toward the identified enemy.

Sociologists often analyze this phenomenon through the lens of Social Identity Theory, which suggests that individuals derive self-esteem from their group membership. When the in-group's status is threatened, members seek to enhance their status by negatively comparing themselves to the out-group, leading directly to the persecution of the scapegoat group to achieve **positive distinctiveness**. The scapegoat thus becomes essential not because of their actual actions, but because of their utility in boosting the psychological well-being of the majority group.

5. Psychological and Criminological Context

Psychologically, the impulse toward scapegoating is heavily informed by the **Frustration-Aggression Hypothesis**, first formulated by Dollard et al. This hypothesis suggests that aggression is always a consequence of frustration, and while the initial target of aggression might be the source of the frustration, safer alternative targets are often substituted if the original source is too powerful or inaccessible. Scapegoating is therefore the purest manifestation of displaced aggression, where hostility is redirected down a social hierarchy.

Criminology examines how collective frustration translates into targeted, often violent, behavior against marginalized populations. Scapegoating dynamics are crucial components of phenomena like moral panics, where public anxieties about social disorder (e.g., drug use, juvenile delinquency) are amplified and focused on a symbolically defined "folk devil." This focusing of fear justifies overly punitive policy responses and often legitimizes hate crimes against the targeted group, who are inaccurately portrayed as the primary threat to the established social order.

The personal consequences for the scapegoat are severe, involving profound emotional distress, social isolation, and long-term psychological damage. Victims often internalize the blame and shame projected onto them, leading to self-doubt, depression, and difficulties forming trusting relationships. Conversely, the perpetrator, having discharged their aggression, experiences a temporary reduction in anxiety, reinforcing the use of scapegoating as a successful coping

strategy, thereby creating a cycle of relational abuse or systemic injustice.

6. Theoretical Models of Scapegoating

Beyond the Frustration-Aggression model, several sophisticated theoretical frameworks seek to explain the complex social function of scapegoating. One of the most influential is the **Mimetic Theory** developed by philosopher and literary critic René Girard. Girard argued that human desire is fundamentally mimetic (imitative); we desire what others desire, leading to inevitable rivalry and social chaos. When this rivalry threatens the existence of the community (a "mimetic crisis"), the group unconsciously unites against a single, arbitrary victim (the scapegoat). The unanimous violence against this victim resolves the crisis, leading to a temporary period of peace and the foundation of social structure, with the victim paradoxically becoming both guilty and sacred.

Another crucial sociological model is the functionalist perspective, which views scapegoating as a necessary mechanism for social stability. Proponents argue that the process of purifying the group by expelling the negative element helps define and reaffirm the group's moral boundaries and collective identity. The scapegoat serves a functional role by absorbing internal toxicity that would otherwise cause the system to fail, thus acting as a sociological pressure valve.

Furthermore, psychological systemic theory applies scapegoating analysis to closed systems, particularly families or small organizations. In these models, the scapegoat is not simply a victim of random aggression but an individual performing an essential, though painful, role in maintaining the system's dysfunctional equilibrium. The identification of a single "bad apple" diverts attention from the structural flaws and relational pathologies shared by the entire system, ensuring that fundamental change is avoided and the status quo is preserved.

7. Debates and Criticisms

While the concept of scapegoating is widely used, academic critics challenge its explanatory power, particularly when applied universally to all forms of prejudice. One primary critique focuses on the risk of oversimplification. Merely labeling a phenomenon as scapegoating often reduces complex socio-historical events--such as pogroms or genocides--to simple psychological displacement, potentially obscuring the role of specific institutional policies, economic opportunism, and deliberate political engineering that enable and organize prejudice.

A second major criticism addresses the deterministic nature of the Frustration-Aggression model. Modern scholarship suggests that aggression is not an inevitable, automatic consequence of frustration that must simply be redirected. Instead, aggressive responses, and particularly the selection of a scapegoat, are mediated by cultural learning, cognitive biases, and the presence of

social cues that sanction hostility against specific groups. Scapegoating is thus viewed less as a reflexive psychological release and more as a rationalized, goal-directed behavior within a supportive social context.

Finally, there is an ongoing ethical debate regarding the use of the term in political discourse. While identifying a scapegoat can highlight an injustice, critics argue that the focus on the mechanism of displacement can unintentionally pathologize the perpetrator while ignoring the deeper, structural foundations of oppression and inequality. Addressing systemic injustice requires more than recognizing displaced blame; it requires dismantling the institutional structures that establish and maintain the vulnerability of the targeted groups in the first place, ensuring they are perpetually available for selection as scapegoats.

Further Reading

[Scapegoating \(Wikipedia\)](#)

[Psychological Projection \(Wikipedia\)](#)

[Frustration-Aggression Hypothesis \(Verywell Mind\)](#)

[René Girard's Mimetic Theory \(Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy\)](#)