

Scapegoating

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

1. Core Definition

Scapegoating is defined as the practice of assigning blame, fault, or responsibility for a problem, misfortune, or failure onto an individual or group who is often innocent or disproportionately less responsible than the assigned blame suggests. This psychological and sociological phenomenon involves the projection of negative feelings and frustration from the frustrated party (the community or primary group) onto an innocent or peripheral target, thereby relieving the tension and anxiety experienced by the frustrator. The target, or **scapegoat**, serves as a convenient and often powerless repository for communal or systemic failings that the group is unwilling or unable to address internally.

The core mechanism of scapegoating involves displacement, where aggression or frustration directed at an unattainable, unknown, or dangerous source is redirected toward a safer, weaker, and readily available target. For example, a community struggling with complex socioeconomic decline might find it easier to blame a specific, visible minority group for "all the theft and vandalism," rather than confronting issues like poverty, lack of resources, or governmental failure. This practice is inherently unjust, as the blame is showered upon the individual or demographic regardless of their actual culpability.

In a societal context, scapegoating frequently operates along existing fault lines of prejudice and marginalization. Groups that are already vulnerable, such as ethnic, political, religious, or racial minorities, are frequently chosen as scapegoats because they lack the social power to defend themselves effectively. By identifying an external 'enemy' or internal 'pollutant,' the primary group achieves a temporary sense of moral superiority and internal cohesion, unifying against the perceived source of evil or misfortune.

2. Etymology and Historical Development

The term **scapegoat** originates from ancient religious rituals described in the Hebrew Bible, specifically the Book of Leviticus (Chapter 16), detailing the ceremony for Yom Kippur (the Day of Atonement). During this annual ritual, two goats were selected. One goat was sacrificed to God, and the high priest would ceremonially lay his hands upon the head of the second goat, confessing all the sins and iniquities of the Israelites, thus symbolically placing the community's guilt onto the animal. This goat, often referred to as the goat for Azazel, was then driven out into the wilderness to carry the sins away from the community, ensuring ritual purification.

The translation of the Hebrew term for the goat that was sent away varied, but William Tyndale

coined the term "scapegoat" in his 1530 translation of the Bible, merging 'escape' and 'goat.' While the original religious practice was designed as a sacred mechanism for atonement and cleansing, the term evolved over subsequent centuries into a secular concept describing the unfair placement of blame.

The transition from a religious ritual to a sociological concept was cemented in the 20th century, particularly through the studies of anthropology and psychology. Scholars began applying the term to explain historical injustices, such as the persecution of Jews in Europe or political purges during periods of societal crisis. The formalized study of scapegoating as a socio-psychological mechanism gained prominence after World War II, as academics sought to understand how entire populations could be mobilized against marginalized groups based on false premises.

3. Key Characteristics

Displacement of Aggression: Scapegoating involves transferring blame or hostility from the true, often complex or systemic source of frustration onto an innocent or less powerful substitute. This process serves to satisfy the immediate need to assign responsibility.

Target Vulnerability: The chosen scapegoat is typically a minority, a marginalized group, or an individual who is already relatively powerless within the social hierarchy, making them an easy and safe target for externalized frustration.

Unifying Function: The act of identifying and persecuting a scapegoat often serves to strengthen the internal cohesion of the blaming group. By focusing hostility outward, internal divisions are temporarily suppressed, and the group identity is reinforced against a common, externalized 'threat.'

False Justification: The rationale for blaming the scapegoat relies heavily on prejudice, stereotypes, and fabrications. The accusations leveled against the target are often disconnected from reality, serving merely to rationalize the existing aggression.

4. Psychological and Sociological Mechanisms

Psychologically, scapegoating is closely related to the defense mechanisms of displacement and projection. Displacement occurs when an individual cannot express anger or frustration toward the actual source (e.g., an economic system or a political leader) and redirects that feeling toward a safer target. Projection involves attributing one's own undesirable traits, flaws, or failures onto the external scapegoat. This allows the primary group to maintain a positive self-image by denying their own role in the problem.

In the realm of social psychology, the **Frustration-Aggression Hypothesis**, formalized by John

Dollard and his colleagues, provides a key explanatory framework. This theory posits that frustration--the blocking of a goal-directed activity--always leads to some form of aggression. When the source of the frustration is too powerful or unknown (e.g., widespread unemployment), the resulting aggression is displaced onto an accessible minority group. This mechanism is frequently exploited by political leaders seeking to divert attention from genuine policy failures.

Sociologically, scapegoating reinforces **in-group and out-group dynamics**. By defining the scapegoat as the 'other,' the primary group (the in-group) establishes clear boundaries, defining who belongs and who does not. Historical examples abound, demonstrating how political or religious groups are unfairly blamed for national crises, poverty, or epidemic disease. For instance, historical research confirms how American society has frequently utilized the scapegoating of specific demographics, such as Black people, by unfairly linking them to disproportionate rates of criminal activity as a means of justifying systemic oppression and avoiding the examination of deep-seated societal inequalities.

5. Significance and Impact

The significance of scapegoating lies in its profound impact on social stability, justice, and human rights. While it offers a short-term psychological release for the frustrated majority, its long-term consequence is the institutionalization of prejudice and discrimination. Scapegoating provides a false, simplified explanation for complex societal misfortunes, preventing productive engagement with the actual causes of problems, such as systemic injustice or economic collapse.

Historically, the practice of scapegoating has been a precursor or justification for extreme forms of persecution, including ethnic cleansing and genocide. When a group is successfully established as the source of all communal evil, the public sentiment can be manipulated to justify severe measures against them, from economic exclusion to physical violence. The process transforms the victim into a symbol of collective sin, thereby dehumanizing them and making their persecution socially acceptable.

6. Debates and Criticisms

One central debate surrounding the concept of scapegoating involves the challenge of distinguishing between genuine accountability and unfair blame. Critics argue that the term can sometimes be overused, potentially labeling any criticism directed at a minority group as "scapegoating," thereby obscuring instances where a group or individual may genuinely bear some responsibility for an outcome. The scholarly application of the term must therefore be rigorous, focusing only on cases where the blame is clearly disproportionate, misdirected, or entirely fabricated.

Furthermore, scholars debate the efficacy of scapegoating as a social mechanism. While it may

temporarily unify a group, prolonged reliance on externalizing blame often impedes genuine societal progress. If the real causes of poverty, conflict, or disease are never addressed because blame is continually displaced onto a vulnerable group, the underlying issues will persist or worsen, leading to cyclic frustration and renewed aggression.

7. Further Reading

[Scapegoating \(Wikipedia\)](#)

[Leviticus 16 \(Biblical Source\)](#)

[Displacement and Projection \(Psychological Theory\)](#)

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