



New Research: Blaming Others Is Contagious

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Scientists have identified a highly contagious virus, which we can only stamp out together. No, this contagion is not another strain of flu or spyware spreading from computer to computer.

It's blame. That's right, good-old-fashioned, it's-not-my-fault—she's-responsible, point-the-finger-at-the-other-guy blame.

According to a study appearing in next month's *Journal of Experimental Social Psychology*, blaming someone else for one's mistakes is a socially contagious condition—the behavior literally spreads from one person to the next.

And the effect isn't just limited to those caught up in ricochets of blame ("He did it!" "No, she did it!"). Instead, the blame contagion contaminates mere witnesses to the finger-pointing, and it infects their behavior in completely unrelated contexts.

In an experiment conducted by USC's Nathanael Fast and Stanford's Larissa Tiedens, people were asked to read a passage reporting on California Gov. Arnold Schwarzenegger's handling of a 2005 special election: the Republican leader had called for a special election for several initiatives (at a cost of millions), but none of the initiatives passed. However, some of the people read a version of the article in which the governor blamed special interests for the defeat of his propositions. Others read a version of the story in which the governor took full responsibility for the defeat.

Later the researchers asked all the participants to write a short essay about a time in their lives when they had failed, including in it an explanation as to why they had failed.

Fast's team then blind-coded the essay responses—they didn't know which passage people had read. Instead, they just scored each essay on the basis of how much blame participants had placed on others.

Participants blamed others twice as much—for their own personal failures—if they read the article about Schwarzenegger blaming the special interests. (In case you were wondering, the pattern was the same for both Republicans and Democrats.)

Considering how small the blame catalyst was, the result was remarkable. The researchers did variations on the experiment—people read stories about who was to blame for someone not being able to find a job, a philanthropic organization that was poorly managing its money, etc. Each time, the pattern repeated itself.

When the participants were exposed to stories in which someone laid the blame squarely on another's shoulders, they were more likely to blame others for their own problems.

The blame contagion, according to Fast, is not a new phenomenon. It's a fundamental part of the human psyche—the need to protect one's ego. When we see someone defend his ego, we reflexively defend our own self-images as well.

But Fast does think that the 24-hour news cycle, the Internet, and social networking (Twitter, Facebook) are exposing us to much more blaming behavior than ever before.*

And while others have remarked how this is changing news, politics, and media itself, Fast suggests the effect is much more intimate and immediate. All this blaming could be transforming how we interact with people in our own lives.

It would work like this: Watching cable news, a mom hears Glenn Beck or Keith Olbermann blaming President Obama for poor leadership on the war in Afghanistan. A few minutes later, she insists to her husband that it is his fault that she didn't get the dry cleaning: he should have reminded her of the errand. Her son, having witnessed his mother's blame game, later posts a Facebook status update that his low grade on the algebra quiz was due to his teacher's poor teaching ability. The kid's friends later reply ...

The good news is that there are some antidotes for the blame contagion. People in positions of authority need to own up to their responsibility in making mistakes. The benefit here is two-fold. It will cut down on the blame-contagion effect, and it will encourage others to admit their own culpability.

Most importantly, we need to change from a culture of blame to one where we can admit mistakes and learn from them. I'm not blaming you. Really, I'm not. I'm not blaming anybody.

*Fast's experiment may explain why Internet comments so rapidly disintegrate into vitriolic name-calling—because blaming keeps getting passed on in different contexts. "If you read one comment by someone who is really being a jerk, you might not reply. But then you read another comment, then blast someone else entirely," says Fast.