

Frustration as a Moderator of Scapegoating Behavior using Rothschild et al.'s Dual-Motive Model

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Climate change is one of the most pressing and wide-spread issues in the world. However, it is also one of the most controversial issues, and conversations surrounding climate change often end with one party blaming another. Individuals may engage in scapegoating, which is defined as “the act of blaming and often punishing a person or a group for a negative outcome that is due, at least in large part, to other causes,” as a result of various threats to the self (Rothschild et al., 2012, 1148). Rothschild et al. propose a “dual-motive” model of scapegoating. They found that when climate change was framed to be the result of the culmination of typical individual practices (e.g. driving a car to work instead of biking), individuals experienced a threat to their moral identity and blamed climate change on a third-party entity (e.g., large oil companies). They also found that when climate change was framed as a massive, uncontrollable event, individuals were more likely to feel a threat to their own sense of personal control, and scapegoated to restore a sense of order and control. These findings support the idea that individuals can be motivated to engage in scapegoating behavior either to protect their sense of moral goodness, or to maintain a sense of personal control over the world. The aim of my study is to begin to explore individual differences in scapegoating behavior as a result of threats to one’s moral values and/or sense of personal control in the context of climate change. I investigated whether variation in temperament, specifically proneness to frustration, moderates scapegoating behavior in the climate change context. Frustration is related to negative feelings towards goal blockage and is a more fundamental aspect of individual human nature. I hypothesized that individuals with higher levels in frustration proneness would be more likely to scapegoat China in the context of climate change.

I used Amazon’s Mechanical Turk to recruit 988 participants to take the survey I created for this study. The survey consisted of a short questionnaire on frustration (Adult Temperament Questionnaire – Short Form: Frustration Scale; Evans, D.E., & Rothbart, M.K., 2007) as well as a number of other standard questionnaires on various personality and attitude factors including locus of control, personal need for structure, guilt and shame proneness, and perceived personal control. Each participant was also asked about their beliefs and attitudes towards climate change. Participants were then randomly assigned to one of three conditions: the value threat condition, where they were told that climate change is largely a result of individual actions and were asked a set of questions about their own environmentally-destructive habits; the control threat condition, where they were told that climate change is both massive and inexplicable, and were presented with a set of questions meant to threaten their sense of personal control over climate change; or the no threat condition, where they were asked to fill out a lifestyle and personality survey that was completely unrelated to climate change. All participants then filled out a survey asking them questions about their feelings of guilt towards contributing to climate change as well as their senses of personal control over climate change. They were then presented with information about China’s greenhouse gas emissions and were given the opportunity to state how much they blame China for climate change and how much China should be punished for climate change.

Our first finding is that for scapegoating, there was a main effect of threat condition $F(2,920) = 4.692, p < .01$. Participants in the value threat condition were equally likely to scapegoat as those in the control threat condition, and participants in both of these groups were more likely to scapegoat than participants in the no threat condition. Our findings replicated the findings of Rothschild et al. (2012). The next major finding was that there was a positive, significant correlation between frustration scores and scapegoating tendencies $r = .093, p < .05$. This means that participants with higher proneness to frustration were more likely to scapegoat China for climate change. There was no interaction of threat condition, meaning that the relationship between frustration and scapegoating does not depend on threat condition. It was also found that frustration scores were correlated with high scores in personal need for structure, low scores in perceived control, and a more external locus of control – all of which were associated with increased scapegoating. However, a multiple regression analysis found that frustration independently accounts for some portion of scapegoating behavior above and beyond the other measured individual difference variables. Overall, frustration appears to have a small but significant relationship with scapegoating in the context of climate change that is not fully accounted for by other related personality factors associated with goal blockages and feelings of control. I would recommend further research into other aspects of temperament as potential predictors of scapegoating behavior, as our fundamental traits as humans could affect our engagement in this type of behavior well beyond proneness to frustration.

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