

Why is the “blame game” so popular around the globe?

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“Don’t measure a gentleman’s heart with a petty man’s scheming” is an old Chinese adage describing the cognitive bias towards others based on one’s egocentric and negative worldview.

In Chinese folklore and literature, we have seen many examples, such as in the [*Romance of the Three Kingdoms*](#), warlord Cao Cao killed two innocent hosts whom he suspected were planning to kill him, but in fact, the hosts were burnishing the knives to kill the pig so they could prepare a feast for Cao Cao. In academia, the adage also has a root—the term “projection” shares the definition, referring to one’s tendency to inaccurately direct one’s own feelings, motives, or intentions to others[1].

A possible explanation for the motivation of such a mentality is that people’s blame on others serves as “a [defense mechanism](#) in which intolerable feelings, impulses, or thoughts are falsely attributed to other people” [1].



Figure. A blame game is a virus. Source: *ChinaDaily* (CC BY 4.0).

[A recent study](#) published in *Personality and Individual Differences* corroborated such an explanation [2]. In this study, the authors found out that those with poor emotion regulation are more likely to blame others for their own poor decisions when experiencing negative emotions because blaming others reduces their own negative emotions (such as anger, guilt, and shame). This may explain why poor emotion regulators prefer to place blame on others rather than accept responsibility for their actions.

Mindsponge-based reasoning [3] could be used to explain this psychological pathway further. [Mindsponge theory](#) holds that individuals choose to accept or reject new information based on compatibility with one's core values. Being compatible suggests acceptance of information, whereas being incompatible indicates a denial. In this case, when unexpected events or underperformance in certain undertakings emerge as new information, the natural self-protective mindset will likely conflict with the idea of pointing fingers at their own shortcomings for the cause of such negative events.

Therefore, those who lack the processing capability to self-reflect and control their emotions tend to blame others to eject such undesirable ideas. This is

because by blaming others, one would shift the perceived costs of one's own shortcomings to the mental representations of other people or events. By doing so, one's own thoughts and behaviors will be perceived to be more positive than they actually are, which in turn, helps protect one's self as the central mental construct. On the other hand, people with higher processing capability, including emotional regulation, can better buffer against criticisms and negative experiences toward themselves in general.

References

1. Colman AM. (2015). [A Dictionary of Psychology](#). Oxford University Press.
2. Kaufmann M, Quirin M, Baumann N. (2022). [Blaming others: Individual differences in self-projection](#). *Personality and Individual Differences*, 196, 111721.
3. Vuong QH. (2023). [Mindsponge Theory](#). De Gruyter.

