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# When the Specter of the Past Haunts Current Groups: Psychological Antecedents of Historical Blame

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Groups have committed historical wrongs (e.g., genocide, slavery). We investigated why people blame current groups who were not involved in the original historical wrong for the actions of their predecessors who committed these wrongs and are no longer alive. Current models of individual and group blame overlook the dimension of time and therefore have difficulty explaining this phenomenon using their existing criteria like causality, intentionality, or preventability. We hypothesized that factors that help psychologically bridge the past and present, like perceiving higher (a) connectedness between past and present perpetrator groups, (b) continued privilege of perpetrator groups, (c) continued harm of victim groups, and (d) unfulfilled forward obligations of perpetrator groups would facilitate higher blame judgments against current groups for the past. In two repeated-measures surveys using real events (N1 = 518, N2 = 495) and two conjoint experiments using hypothetical events (N3 = 598, N4 = 605), we find correlational and causal evidence for our hypotheses. These factors link present groups to their past and cause more historical blame and support for compensation policies. This work brings the dimension of time into theories of blame, uncovers overlooked criteria for blame judgments, and questions the assumptions of existing blame models. Additionally, it helps us understand the psychological processes undergirding intergroup relations and historical narratives mired in historical conflict. Our work provides psychological insight into the debates on intergenerational justice by suggesting methods people can use to ameliorate the psychological legacies of historical wrongs and atrocities.

*Keywords:* historical blame, historical wrongs, group blame, group continuity, past

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Groups commit atrocities against other groups. Whether the Chinese establishment's genocide of the Uyghur people in the present day (Kirby, 2020), the U.S. enslavement of Africans in the 17th–19th centuries (Shah & Adolphe, 2019), or the Soviet Union's terror against Estonia during World War II (Mertelsmann & Rahi-Tamm, 2009), groups systematically persecute other groups of people. Throughout history, groups have carried out genocide, enslaved others, denied basic rights to entire communities, initiated war, displaced, imprisoned and tortured other groups, and destroyed the culture of Indigenous people. For many historical wrongs, the original wrongdoers and all the original victims have passed away. Yet, there are often lingering effects of these historical injustices, wherein the present members of the historical perpetrator group are called upon to share in the moral burden of the actions of their predecessors. This often raises the question of whether the current

generation can and should accept responsibility and blame for the unjust deeds of their forebears, in which they personally played no role.

This question of whether present groups can and should be held morally responsible for the past actions of their group members is relevant for understanding how people assess and respond to historical wrongs (e.g., genocide, slavery). It has raised philosophical and practical questions about the nature of collective responsibility, intergenerational justice, and the appropriateness of reparations and intergroup apologies (Barkan, 2000; Meyer, 2021; Smiley, 2023). Some people reject the appropriateness of such intergenerational responsibility. For example, in 2007, John Howard, then Australian prime minister, refused to accept guilt and blame for past actions and policies against Indigenous people, "I do not believe that the current generation of Australians should formally apologize and accept

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Preregistered study design, hypotheses, planned analyses, code, and data are available for the studies: Study 1: [https://osf.io/twm6j/?view\\_only=54cfa1109a7340999a06d16b1c9b3675](https://osf.io/twm6j/?view_only=54cfa1109a7340999a06d16b1c9b3675); Study 2: [https://osf.io/2ruxw/?view\\_only=b38c062164e24ba48c45fa94980462fd](https://osf.io/2ruxw/?view_only=b38c062164e24ba48c45fa94980462fd); and Studies 3 and 4: [https://osf.io/vb6dg/?view\\_only=5840aefba1c148509da8b8c0934f2584](https://osf.io/vb6dg/?view_only=5840aefba1c148509da8b8c0934f2584).

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formal analysis, investigation, visualization, and writing—original draft and an equal role in methodology and writing—review and editing. Jonathan E. Doriscar played a supporting role in conceptualization, data curation, and methodology. Mark J. Brandt played a lead role in supervision, a supporting role in conceptualization, data curation, and visualization, and an equal role in methodology and writing—review and editing.

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responsibility for the deeds of an earlier generation.” Currently, in the United States, there is backlash against the teaching of critical histories in schools. This backlash, mostly by White people, appears to be driven by the fear of being blamed for the atrocities of the past group members and being labeled as “oppressors.” For example, a recent bill introduced in the Florida legislature seeks to prohibit teaching of issues that make anyone feel guilt or anything that suggests that

An individual, by virtue of his or her race, color, sex, or national origin, bears responsibility for, or should be discriminated against or receive adverse treatment because of, actions committed in the past by other members of the same race, color, sex, or national origin. (Senate Bill 148, 2022)

Similarly, former President Donald Trump issued an executive order to prohibit workplace training or federal grants that promoted the idea that an individual is responsible for actions committed in the past by other members of their group (Executive Order No., 13950, 2020).

These examples deal with the normativity and legality of historical blame, and how historical blame can be a societally and politically important issue. However, regardless of the normative *can* and *should* questions, we have less knowledge about whether people *do* in fact blame current groups for their past actions. Further, if they do blame current groups, then *when* do they do it? *What* psychologically underlies those historical blame judgments? The answers to these descriptive questions are important because they provide insight into the psychological differences driving divergent construals of the past’s relationship to the present and the implications this has on present debates on policy, political conflicts, and intergroup relations.

### What Is Historical Blame?

Blame is a moral judgment that involves evaluating agents as being morally responsible or blameworthy for a moral or social wrongdoing (Alicke, 2000; Malle et al., 2014). Here, we are interested in a specific type of blame, historical blame. Historical blame occurs when a current group is blamed for the past wrongs of their group for which the original perpetrators are no longer alive. For example, blaming current Chinese people for the genocide of the Uyghur people in the present day is not an example of historical blame because there is no separation in time; the genocide is ongoing. However, blaming current White Americans for the enslavement of Africans in the 17th–19th centuries is an example of historical blame because the White Americans responsible for slavery are dead, and currently living White Americans were not alive during the atrocity. Thus, the historical dimension of time is important to the conceptualization of historical blame. The objects of blame are current group members who are separated in time, by decades or centuries, from the historical wrong and the original perpetrators.

### Theories of Blame

Current psychological theories of individual blame are insufficient to explain blame toward current groups for their predecessors’ actions. Psychological theories of blame model how people arrive at blame judgments (Alicke, 2000; Cushman, 2008; Malle, 2021; Malle et al., 2014). While these models differ in the details, such as the precise logic or order of information processing they follow, they share many of the same components. These components are

information people use to arrive at blame judgments and include perpetrator-relevant variables such as the agent’s characteristics, the agent’s action, and its outcomes (Malle, 2021). Information on the agent’s characteristics includes assessments of the intentionality and mental states (e.g., belief and desire) of the agent. Information on the agent’s actions includes assessments of causality and preventability, which refer to whether the agent caused the harm or failed in their capacity or obligation to prevent it, respectively. Finally, information on the outcomes of the agent’s actions includes assessments such as harm to the victim.

The idea is that upon detecting a norm-violating event, the perceiver considers information about the perpetrator, their action, and the outcomes (of the action). The perceiver then uses these as inputs to compute blame judgments toward the perpetrator accordingly (see Table 1, for a brief explanation of each of these criteria). These perpetrator-relevant variables are, however, all assumed to be properties of individuals and not groups, making current psychological theories of individual blame insufficient to explain historical blame.

Current theories focus on blame toward *individuals* for actions in the present, whereas historical blame considers blame for actions of *groups* in the past. To extend theories of individual blame to groups or collectives, we need to consider how characteristics like causality, intentions, and responsibility can be attributed to a group. Although there is philosophical disagreement over whether groups can have these characteristics (Smiley, 2023), psychological evidence suggests that people do in fact perceive groups to have minds (Waytz & Young, 2012) and intentions (Malle, 2010; O’Laughlin & Malle, 2002), and people have no problem attributing blame and responsibility to whole groups for the actions of a few individuals (Denson et al., 2006; Lickel et al., 2003).

Group blame becomes likely when a group is seen as entitative (Campbell, 1958; Hamilton & Sherman, 1996). Entitativity is when a group is perceived to be a unified agent due to perceptions of high interconnectedness, high degree of interaction, interpersonal bonds and influence, shared knowledge, norms, and common goals (Denson et al., 2006; Waytz & Young, 2012). As a result, entitative groups as a whole are attributed indirect causality or intentionality for the wrongdoing of a few because they are perceived to have encouraged or desired the harmful acts (Denson et al., 2006; Lickel

**Table 1**  
*Inputs Evaluated as Part of Blame Judgments*

Input	Meaning
Agent’s characteristics	
Intentionality	Agent’s volitional behavioral control over the event
Mental states	Agent has a mind capable of forming reasons, desires, and beliefs
Agent’s actions	
Causality	Agent’s causal involvement in the event
Capacity	Agent’s foresight of the consequences and the physical capacity to prevent the event
Obligation	Agent’s duty to prevent the event owing to their role, relationship, or context
Outcomes of agent’s actions	
Outcome	Results of the norm-violating event

*Note.* Inputs and meanings are from Alicke, 2000, Cushman, 2008, Malle, 2021, and Malle et al., 2014.

et al., 2001, 2003) or failed in their obligation or capacity to prevent the harmful acts (Lickel et al., 2003; Malle, 2010). Thus, blame in cases of entitative groups is underpinned by attribution of responsibility by commission and/or omission (Denson et al., 2006). In summary, when people see a group as entitative, it is possible to apply theories of individual blame to groups.

### The Historical Dimension of Time

However, theories of blame do not consider the historical dimension of time. That is, they do not consider scenarios where objects of blame may be separated in time from the historical wrong and the original perpetrators. For example, these theories considered cases where the perpetrator and other group members were contemporaries (e.g., in Lickel et al., 2003, parents and peers of the Columbine School shooters were held responsible). Blame toward groups in this case is comparatively straightforward once entitativity is factored in, as blame is based on perceiving other group members in the present to have facilitated or failed to prevent the act (i.e., indirect causality or intentionality; Denson et al., 2006; Lickel et al., 2003; Malle, 2010). In other words, members of entitative groups are blamed for indirectly causing or intending their contemporaries' wrongs.

When it comes to blaming noncontemporaries in the present for events that have taken place in the past, it is not straightforward to apply existing psychological theories of blame because current group members could not have prevented or facilitated the actions of group members in the past. For example, present-day White Americans could not have prevented slavery in America. Present-day group members cannot intend, cause, facilitate, or prevent harmful historical events from happening. Hence, existing criteria for blame in the current models of individual and group blame, with their focus on causal responsibility or intentionality (direct or indirect), are insufficient to explain blame toward group members who are temporally distant from the historical wrong. Specifically, they cannot explain how and why people attribute blame to the members of the current group for the wrongful actions of their predecessors.

This shortcoming of current psychological theories of blame is a theoretical problem because blame for past group actions is a relevant type of blame missed by current theories. A complete account of blame needs to account for all types of blame. It is a practical problem because blame for past group actions is central to debates about how societies should respond to their own historical wrongdoings (e.g., reparations for slavery in the United States, apologies for residential schools in Canada, returning stolen artifacts to former British colonies, teaching critical histories in schools). To contribute to these debates, moral psychology needs to understand the psychological inputs into historical blame judgments. Investigation into historical blame judgments can shed light on how people actually reason about these situations and what psychological factors might lead to divergences in people's construals of the past's bearing on the present.

### Historical Blame and the Time Dimension

To start to build a model of historical blame, we focus on the historical dimension of time missing from previous psychological theories of blame. That is, we consider the information and

perceptions people may have that psychologically link members of present-day groups to the same group in the past. Connecting the past to the present thus becomes central to the factors we propose as psychological inputs into historical blame judgments.

We derived our proposed factors from a conceptual analysis of the phenomena of a moral wrong. In a wrongdoing, there are three key components: the entity or agent (perpetrator) involved in wrongdoing, the action or behavior of the perpetrator, and the outcome of the perpetrator's actions (for perpetrator or victim). These three components also map onto the inputs to blame judgment (Malle, 2021). Similar to the models of blame we discussed above, the factors we test are related to these basic underlying perceptions of the perpetrator, their actions, and their outcomes. The key difference is that our factors consider the historical dimension of time, and this changes the nature of these inputs in order to capture continuity between the past and present.

Applying the historical dimension of time to the three components (the perpetrator, their actions, its outcomes), we identified four factors that connect or disconnect the past and present: connectedness of present and past perpetrator group (taps into characteristics of the perpetrator), present perpetrator group benefiting from their past actions (taps into outcomes), present victim group suffering from the past actions of the perpetrator group (taps into outcomes), and the present perpetrator group (not) doing anything to repair their past actions (taps into behavior or actions).

These factors are similar in their essence to previous work on inputs to blame judgments. But, because of the time considerations, the underlying components (perpetrator characteristics, behavior/actions, and outcomes) of blame judgments manifest differently. Hence, they do not identically map onto inputs from previous theories as discussed previously (e.g., intentionality, causality, preventability). These four factors serve as our starting point for the analysis of historical blame. It is possible that future scholarship will identify other important factors. In this present work, we explore the four factors that we derived based on our conceptual analysis, previous research on blame, and research adjacent to historical blame.

## Four Factors of Historical Blame

### *Connectedness of Perpetrator Group*

While current perpetrator characteristics in existing psychological theories of blame (e.g., intentionality) cannot help bridge the past and present, other perpetrator characteristics, such as the connectedness of groups over time, might help explain historical blame. In philosophy and legal theory, psychological connectedness is relevant for understanding the moral and legal responsibility of individuals and forms the basis of the statute of limitations (Parfit, 1984; Shoemaker et al., 2021). The idea is that people are deserving of blame at a later time point for a wrongdoing they did in the past only when they are sufficiently continuous with their past self. These connections could be memories, beliefs, values, goals, character, and so forth (Parfit, 1984). The reasoning is that with the passage of time, these connections might weaken, leading people to deserve less blame and punishment later. In one empirical study, people were less likely to think that an individual who did something wrong (e.g., drunk driving) deserved to be legally punished or morally criticized at a much later time point. This was because the wrongdoer was perceived to be less psychologically connected to

their past self (the person they were when they drove drunk long ago; Mott, 2018). Extending this idea of connectedness to the past to groups, we predicted that people would blame the current group when they perceive the perpetrator group in the past to be connected to the perpetrator group in the present.

There is evidence consistent with this idea. Group malleability (Wohl et al., 2015), essentialism (Denson et al., 2006; Haslam et al., 2000, 2002), and perceived collective continuity (Sani et al., 2007; Warner et al., 2016) have been implicated in intergroup attitudes, prejudice, forgiveness, and guilt. These constructs (malleability, essentialism, collective continuity) are not identical with each other, but they are all related to perceptions of the unchanging and time-invariant characteristics of group members, something we expect to be related to connectedness. Research in two intergroup contexts (Israeli Jews and Palestinians, and Greek and Turkish Cypriots) found that people who believed or were led to believe that groups could change in their characteristics were more likely to hold positive attitudes toward the outgroup, express willingness to compromise, express less intergroup anxiety, and more willingness to establish intergroup contact (Halperin et al., 2011, 2012). Work in Lebanon found that perceiving the postwar outgroup as discontinuous from the previous generation was correlated with positive intergroup attitudes (Licata et al., 2012). Two small experimental studies in Japan found that the Japanese assigned more guilt to current Americans when they were described as similar in personality to the Americans who dropped the atomic bombs on Japan (Goto et al., 2015).

These studies predominantly focus on intergroup attitudes (Halperin et al., 2011, 2012; Haslam et al., 2002; Warner et al., 2016), positive intergroup behavior like compromise or contact (Halperin et al., 2011, 2012), and often focus on ongoing conflicts (Halperin et al., 2011, 2012; Warner et al., 2016; Wohl et al., 2015). Thus, prior research only indirectly provides evidence about blame toward present groups for actions of their predecessors far removed in time. Some researchers have further suggested that motivation toward improving intergroup attitudes or contact might be disconnected from how people think about group blame and responsibility. Motivations concerning improving intergroup attitudes or contact may instead be driven by other goals such as power or needs of acceptance (Bilali & Vollhardt, 2019; Li et al., 2023; Mazziotta et al., 2014). In summary, these studies suggest but do not explicitly or directly test if connectedness of the perpetrator group over time might be related to historical blame judgments. Hence, we tested if the current perpetrator group is more likely to be blamed for their predecessor's actions if people perceive the current perpetrator group to be connected to their past.

### ***Continued Harm of Victim Group***

Considerations of the outcomes of perpetrator's actions in existing psychological theories of blame primarily feature harm to the victim (Alicke, 2000; Cushman, 2008). Harm in existing theories, however, is not considered a temporally prolonged phenomenon/outcome of the wrong. In our work, we add the historical dimension of time to harm and consider if the perception of continued harm to the victim group from the past wrong might incline people to blame current perpetrator groups for past wrongs.

There are philosophical arguments for the claim that enduring injustice forms the basis for claims to restitution (Spinner-Halev, 2012). One aspect of enduring injustice is continued harm to the victim groups as a result of the historical wrong (Spinner-Halev, 2012). Thus,

if victim groups are perceived to have not fully recovered after the historical wrong or are perceived to be still victims of past injustices, this might facilitate historical blame judgments because it serves as evidence for the enduring injustice. The idea of a current victim group still suffering from the harm inflicted by the original wrong plays a significant role in philosophical (Meyer, 2021), legal (Matsuda, 1987), and psychological (Bilali & Ross, 2012; Blatz & Philpot, 2010; Burns & Granz, 2022; Imhoff et al., 2013; Starzyk et al., 2019; Starzyk & Ross, 2008) discourse on intergenerational justice and reparations.

Legal claims for redress involve establishing privity, or a causal connection between past harm and current suffering of the victim group (Matsuda, 1987). Similarly, philosophical arguments for compensation to descendants are based on conditions of a threshold notion of harm, which says that if the way the ancestors were treated has led to descendants' well-being falling below a specified standard, then the descendants are entitled to compensation (Meyer, 2021). Consistently, psychological evidence finds that perceptions of ongoing harm due to past wrongs, such as genocide or forced relocation, are associated with guilt and support for reparations (Imhoff et al., 2013; Starzyk & Ross, 2008). In these studies, people who were led to believe that the current victim groups were not facing any negative consequences from the historical wrong expressed less guilt, less sympathy, and less support toward current victim groups. This psychological evidence lends support to our idea. However, it comes from small samples and does not test historical blame explicitly. More recent work (Starzyk et al., 2019) found an association between perceptions of continued suffering and support for reparations such that Canadian (minority) groups were more likely to support reparations for Indigenous groups when they perceived continued suffering of Indigenous groups due to Canadian human rights violations in the past.

All these studies establish that a historical continuity in victim groups' outcomes was commonly perceived by participants. The implications of this for blame attributions toward perpetrator groups were not explored. This is important as historical narratives of ongoing injustice can impact group attitudes, promote blame, anger, and contempt toward current perpetrator groups, and have downstream consequences on behavior (Freel & Bilali, 2022; Hirschberger, 2018). Thus, we test if perceiving temporal continuity in victim group's suffering into the present due to the historical wrong perpetrated against that group will lead to blame toward the current perpetrator group.

### ***Continued Benefits for Perpetrator Group***

Unlike harm, considerations of the outcomes of perpetrator's actions in existing psychological theories of blame do not feature benefits to the perpetrator as a prominent input to blame judgments (for an exception, see Inbar et al., 2012). We think this is a drawback for reasons outlined below and thus include benefits to the perpetrator as one dimension of the outcome component. Notably, we considered benefit as a temporally prolonged outcome, given our interest in historical blame. That is, we consider if the perception of continued illegitimate gains as a result of past wrong might incline people to blame perpetrator groups for past wrongs.

Continued benefits reaped by a perpetrator group from a historical wrong is another aspect of enduring injustice that forms the basis for claims to restitution (Spinner-Halev, 2012). This is echoed in legal contexts of reparations where claims of "unjust enrichment" from the wrongdoing at the expense of another are grounds for legal redressal (Sherwin, 2004). This legal claim does not require the beneficiary to

be the wrongdoer or the people at whose expense the benefit was gained to be hurt (Sherwin, 2004). The focus is on the beneficiary, whose gain is considered immoral or unjust. Some philosophers similarly argue that being a beneficiary of a wrongdoing or injustice in which they personally played no causal role creates moral responsibility (Butt, 2007; Goodin & Barry, 2014; Haydar & Øverland, 2014). Together, these perspectives suggest that people might view beneficiaries of a historical wrong to be morally in the wrong.

There is some indirect psychological evidence that continued benefits of the perpetrator group may be related to historical blame judgments. For example, members of privileged groups who felt guilty and angry about their group's advantages stemming from injustice or believed that their group experienced illegitimate privilege were more likely to support restitution efforts (e.g., affirmative action programs; Brown et al., 2008; Iyer et al., 2003; Leach et al., 2006). These studies did not directly test if perception of unjust gains from historical wrongs is associated with blame judgments for the wrong. More directly, historical narratives of ongoing injustice are predicted to result in anger and blame attributions (Bilali & Vollhardt, 2019; Freel & Bilali, 2022). Thus, in line with these different philosophical and psychological perspectives and evidence, we tested if the current perpetrator group is more likely to be blamed for their historical wrongs if they are perceived as beneficiaries of the historical wrong committed by their predecessors.

### *Obligations of Perpetrator Groups*

Considerations of perpetrator's actions in existing psychological theories of blame feature causality or preventability assessments. That is, these considerations include whether the agent caused harm or failed in their capacity or obligation to prevent it (Malle, 2021). While these backward-looking considerations of commission or omission in relation to the original wrong cannot apply for historical blame, other forward-looking behavioral considerations can be applied (Darby & Branscombe, 2014; Marsoobian, 2009).

Once a wrongdoing has occurred, members of the perpetrator group might be expected to right the wrong. This expectation may not be rooted in considerations of their causal involvement in the wrongdoing, but instead their prospective duties to simply help remedy the negative impacts of a situation. This is forward-looking responsibility, which focuses on an entity's obligations to remedy the harm (Darby & Branscombe, 2014; Marsoobian, 2009; Smiley, 2023). It is similar to the ameliorative obligations one expects of citizens once a natural disaster has taken place, an event they did not cause but the negative impact of which they are expected to help address. It is different from the backward-looking responsibility used by current psychological theories of blame, which is rooted in the agent's causality in the wrongdoing (Gilbert, 2006). Forward-looking responsibility is thus not based on whether the person caused the bad event but rather on their reparative duties after a bad event has happened. The same idea is echoed in distinctions made between causal and treatment responsibility (Iyengar, 1989; Philip et al., 1982; Quinn et al., 2001). Whereas the former focuses on the origin or the causal agent behind the problem, the latter focuses on those who failed to rectify or alleviate the problem.

As an example, people perceived Israelis, by virtue of their historical victimhood, as obligated to help Sudanese genocide victims and as guiltworthy for not helping (Warner & Branscombe,

2012). This is an example of forward-looking responsibility—the Israelis were not causally responsible for the Sudanese genocide. Yet, people judged them to have obligations and blamed them for not fulfilling these obligations. Similarly, people might perceive the descendants of historical perpetrator groups to have obligations to do something about the harm ensuing from historical wrongs, even if they were not causally to blame for the original wrong. Not doing something about its aftermath might make people perceive them to be blameworthy. In line with this, we predicted that blame for unfulfilled forward obligations to remedy the historical wrong might be directed most specifically at current perpetrator groups given their historical involvement with the victim group. Thus, we tested if present-day perpetrator groups are blamed for their past actions because people think the perpetrator group's descendants have failed in their forward obligations to remedy the historical wrong. When perpetrator groups engage in actions that serve to alleviate the negative impact of the historical wrong, it might be perceived as breaking the link between the present and past actions of perpetrators. Omission of such reparative actions or obligations might on the other hand facilitate perceptions of temporal continuity.

### **Interrelationships Among the Four Factors?**

We predict that the four factors will have independent effects on blame. However, these four factors are unlikely to be orthogonal to one another and may be related to and reinforce one another. For example, present perpetrator groups might be perceived as connected to past groups by virtue of them being beneficiaries of past wrongs or because they failed to undertake any reparative actions. Another possible interrelationship is that perceptions of continued harm to the victim reinforce perceptions of continued benefit to the perpetrator, or perception of continued harm to the victim feed into perceptions of fulfilled obligations of the perpetrator. Such interrelationships would be consistent with previous psychological theories of blame, where some inputs are thought to influence others (Alicke, 2000). However, the mechanisms by which these factors are interrelated are not part of our studies here. Here, we focus on whether these four factors each uniquely predict people's historical blame judgments.

### **Relationship With Historical Narratives**

Our focus on linking the past and present is also the crux of the work on historical narratives and historical memory. We see our approach as building on and complimenting this prior work. Historical narratives are social representations of how groups are connected over time, such that they tell the story of a group's history, how that history is related to the present circumstances, and how the group relates to other groups (Bilali & Vollhardt, 2019; Freel & Bilali, 2022; Hirschberger, 2018; Liu & Hilton, 2005; Sibley et al., 2008; Wertsch, 2008). Theoretical accounts of historical narratives posit that such narratives guide group members' attitudes, emotions, and behaviors, such as their intergroup orientations.

Our factors of historical blame can be thought of as the possible contents of historical narratives. Past research has explored the contents of historical narratives (Freel & Bilali, 2022). One important theme is beliefs about longstanding injustices, wherein present-day group outcomes are perceived as ongoing effects of past injustices. Such narratives are theorized to have downstream consequences on intergroup blame and emotions (Bilali & Vollhardt, 2019; Freel &

Bilali, 2022). Our factor of continued harm for the victim group takes inspiration from this theme of ongoing past injustices. We also extend this idea by exploring its other dimension: continued benefits for the perpetrator group.

There can be other themes that may be part of the historical narratives of different groups or group members. These themes might differ in how they construe a group's history, its relationship to the present, and its relationship to other groups, and thus have different intergroup and practical implications. We think that our other factors of historical blame, connectedness of the perpetrator group and obligations of the perpetrator group, can also be thought of as possible contents of historical narratives, which then lead people to have different views about the past's bearing on the present. This would consequently impact their attributions of historical blame. Thus, our work on historical blame is similar in its essence to the work on historical narratives, both of which put perceptions linking the past and present at its center.

### **Other Factors Related to Our Four Key Factors (Covariates)**

Our theory of historical blame proposes four factors related to the intergroup situation that predict historical blame. There are other aspects of the intergroup situation that prior work has identified that could be related to our variables of interest. These might also play a role in historical blame, and hence we include these variables as covariates.

#### ***Entitativity***

Entitativity perceptions assess the structure of groups in intergroup situations, which increases the likelihood of group blame (Denson et al., 2006; Lickel et al., 2003). Entitativity, as previously mentioned, has been used to explain blame toward current group members as a whole (Denson et al., 2006; Lickel et al., 2003). It is worth differentiating it from perceptions of group connectedness over time. While entitativity gets at the extent individual elements of a group share similarities at a particular point of time, connectedness over time captures how much the group at one point of time is similar to itself at a different time point. In entitativity, attribution of indirect intentionality or causality is the driving factor behind entitative groups being blamed (Denson et al., 2006; Lickel et al., 2003), which is not possible for historical blame. We also think connectedness over time, although related to entitativity due to both constructs' focus on group members' commonalities, is different due to the former's unique emphasis on the historical time dimension. Thus, we predict that connectedness will explain historical blame over and above entitativity. Accordingly, we will control for perceived entitativity when testing for the effects of perceived connectedness on historical blame. We do not expect entitativity to be helpful in explaining variation in historical blame, as entitative and tight-knit groups are more likely to commit historical wrongs, such as genocide.

#### ***Historical Recency***

Historical recency is another property of the situation that might be important for historical blame. Perceptions of continued suffering of victim groups (or privacy) are frequently studied with perceptions of historical recency of harmful events (Burns & Granz, 2022; Peetz

et al., 2010; Starzyk & Ross, 2008). The idea is that the more close or recent the harm is perceived, the more it is likely to be associated with continued suffering in the present. The temporal distancing of the past is thought to then serve the function of disconnecting the present conditions from the past wrong (Bilali & Vollhardt, 2019). However, the evidence for this is not straightforward, such that research has also found that temporal distancing also helps engender a more critical outlook toward the past's bearing on the present (Bilali & Vollhardt, 2019; Licata et al., 2018; Licata & Klein, 2010). In the context of this possible relationship between perceptions of continued victim suffering and historical recency of the past historical wrongs, we will control for perceptions of historical recency of the historical wrong. This will help estimate the effects of perceived continued suffering over and above the effects of perceived historical recency. Perceptions of historical recency may explain some variation in perceptions of continued suffering as a result of the past historical wrong, but this likely is only part of the explanation.

#### ***Historical Knowledge***

Another situational aspect linked with continued suffering and historical recency is that of historical knowledge and ignorance (Bonam et al., 2019; Burns & Granz, 2022; Liu & Hilton, 2005; Nelson et al., 2013). Knowledge of events can vary due to multiple factors (e.g., how much the events are part of historical narratives, cultural discussions, or educational curriculums). Lacking critical historical knowledge has implications for perceptions of the present. Research has found that ignorance of racism in the past is associated with perceiving past racism as historically distant and perceiving less racism in the present (Bonam et al., 2019; Burns & Granz, 2022; Nelson et al., 2013). Knowledge of the past perhaps then accounts for some variation in perceptions of continued suffering from historical wrongs. We will therefore control for familiarity with the historical wrong to estimate the effects of continued suffering on historical blame over and above the effects of knowledge about the historical wrong. In our final two studies, we use hypothetical events that have the advantage of ensuring equal familiarity across the sample.

#### ***Severity of Harm***

Finally, we will also include the harmfulness of the event as another situational characteristic, given its importance to moral judgments (Schein & Gray, 2018). Severity of harm forms an important part of blame judgments, such that blame judgments have been theorized and found to increase as the harmful nature of the moral wrong increases (Bornstein, 1998; Cushman, 2008; Mazzocco et al., 2004; Patil et al., 2017; Robbenolt, 2000). The historical events we test might vary in their perceived harmfulness (e.g., genocide vs. voting rights restrictions), which might bias blame judgments regardless of the perceived levels of our four main factors. Importantly, perceived severity of harm has also been found to be affected by intergroup considerations (i.e., ingroup vs. outgroup considerations), which might further affect blame judgments (Bilali et al., 2012). Therefore, we control for perceived harmfulness of the historical wrong.

#### ***Group Membership***

Historical blame and the proposed factors do not exist in a vacuum. Instead, we expect that these factors will be associated

with people's group memberships. Past work on related constructs suggests that group membership is important. For example, for perpetrator groups, continuity with their past of moral transgressions can result in identity threat and motivate them to dissociate with their past (Hirschberger, 2018; Roth et al., 2017). Similarly, victim groups might be more likely to see their groups' suffering as extended over time to create meaning of their group identity in the face of past trauma (Banfield et al., 2014; Bilali & Vollhardt, 2019; Freel & Bilali, 2022) or claim moral superiority (Bar-Tal et al., 2009). In a similar way, we expect that victim group members compared to perpetrator group members will be more likely to perceive the current perpetrator groups to be connected over time, the current victim group to be suffering from past wrong, the current perpetrator group to be benefiting from past wrong, and the perpetrator group to have unfulfilled obligations. Similarly, it is also likely that victim groups attribute more historical blame than perpetrator groups.

These possible group differences are expectations of mean differences between the groups on the key predictors and historical blame. However, we expect that both victim and perpetrator groups will use the perceptions they have to inform historical blame in the same way. That is, we expect that the relationship between the predictors and historical blame would not reliably differ as a function of group membership. People—whether they are members of victim groups, perpetrator groups, or some other group—who perceive the current perpetrator groups to be connected over time, the current victim group to be still suffering from past wrong, the current perpetrator group to be still benefiting from past wrong, and the current perpetrator group to have unfulfilled obligations should be more likely to attribute higher historical blame. This expectation of similar relationships extends beyond group membership to other individual differences, such as ideological identification or age (cf. Banfield et al., 2014; Bouchat et al., 2017; Burns & Granz, 2022; Rimé et al., 2015). That is, people of different ideologies or age groups might differ in their mean levels of the four factors or in historical blame, but the relationship between the predictors and historical blame wouldn't differ as a function of ideology or age. We test the idea that whenever and for whomever there are higher judgments on the four factors, there will be higher judgments of historical blame.

### The Present Studies

The primary purpose of the present studies is to simultaneously test the relationship between the four hypothesized factors and historical blame judgments across a range of possible contexts. Some of the proposed factors have been studied individually and applied to understand intergroup phenomena like prejudice, guilt, contact, compromise, reparations, and forgiveness in a limited number of intergroup situations (Brown et al., 2008; Čehajić et al., 2008; Halperin et al., 2011, 2012; Starzyk & Ross, 2008; Warner et al., 2016; Wohl & Branscombe, 2005; Wohl et al., 2015). We extend this work by testing all of the factors, testing them simultaneously, and testing them across a wide range of intergroup situations.

We predicted that when (a) current perpetrator groups are perceived to be connected to their predecessors, (b) current victim groups are perceived to be still suffering from the historical wrong, (c) perpetrator groups are perceived to be still reaping benefits from the historical wrong, and (d) the perpetrator groups are perceived to

have failed in their obligations to repair the wrongs, it would lead to current perpetrator groups being attributed blame for the past actions of their groups. We also tested if these factors were associated with historical blame over and above the effect of other covariates, such as severity of historical wrong, historical recency of the wrongs, familiarity or knowledge of historical wrongs, and entitativity.

We tested our hypotheses in four studies. Studies 1 and 2 establish the association between the four factors and historical blame for 25 real events and groups in a repeated-measures survey design. In these first two studies, we also test how victim and perpetrator group membership and event location are related to the relationship between the four factors and historical blame. Studies 3 and 4 establish the causality of the four factors in conjoint experiments using 12 hypothetical events and groups. We also test how these factors and historical blame are associated with support for compensation in Studies 3 and 4.

### Studies 1 and 2

Studies 1 and 2 were repeated-measures survey designs. Participants read brief one-sentence descriptions of a random subset of 25 real historical events, characterized by one group (perpetrator group) committing a wrong against another group (victim group). For each event, participants rated how connected they perceived the present perpetrator group to be to their group in the past (when the event happened), if they perceived the present victim group to be still suffering due to the historical wrong, if they perceived the present perpetrator group to be still benefiting from the historical wrong, and if they believed the present perpetrator group has fulfilled its obligations to ameliorate the wrongs of the past event. We used these ratings to predict if they thought the current perpetrator group deserved blame for the actions of their predecessors.

We did robustness checks to see if the results were held across event locations (U.S. and non-U.S. events) and group memberships (victim, perpetrator, or neither). We also did some exploratory analyses where we checked if age and ideology moderated the associations and reestimated the models after excluding participants with midpoint responses on historical blame (which might be indicative of a "do not know" response). All of these exploratory analyses are presented in Supplemental Materials and do not change the conclusions in the main text.

### Studies 1 and 2: Method

The two studies are similar except for the platform through which data were collected (Prolific vs. Michigan State University Psychology subject pool) and whether a quota sampling procedure was used. We describe the studies simultaneously, but Study 1 (Prolific) took place before Study 2 (University).

### Transparency and Openness

We report how we determined our sample size, all data exclusions (if any), all manipulations, and all measures in the study. Both studies were preregistered. We preregistered our study design, hypotheses, and planned analyses before the experiment ([https://osf.io/twm6j/?view\\_only=54cfa1109a7340999a06d16b1c9b3675](https://osf.io/twm6j/?view_only=54cfa1109a7340999a06d16b1c9b3675), [https://osf.io/2ruxw/?view\\_only=b38c062164e24ba48c45fa94980462fd](https://osf.io/2ruxw/?view_only=b38c062164e24ba48c45fa94980462fd)). The data and code are also available here. The studies were approved by the Michigan State University Institutional Review Board.

## Participants and Recruitment

For Study 1, we opened the study to 500 participants aged over 18 using Prolific, an online service that facilitates the crowdsourcing of research participants (Peer et al., 2017). The participants are more diverse than the average college sample and more naive than other crowdsourcing platforms like MTurk (Palan & Schitter, 2018). Participants were paid \$2.42 for doing the study (~15 min). A sample of 500 people provides high statistical power (95%) to detect a relatively small correlation ( $r \sim .17$ ). The preregistered quota sampling procedure specified that participants were to be evenly recruited from the White American, Black American, Asian American, and the Native American population on Prolific. Recent work in psychology has shed light on the discipline's skew toward Whiteness in all aspects of scholarship (Roberts et al., 2020; Salter & Adams, 2013). Thus, the rationale for even recruitment from each category was to ensure that (a) the blame judgments do not reflect only the experiences of White Americans and to ensure (b) we have enough participants who might belong to one of the victim groups to be able to test how group membership is associated with blame judgments. People were not recruited from the Hispanic American group (although they have historically been part of victim groups in various historical wrongs in U.S. American history) because we did not include events that had people from this group as victims. After 1 week, we had not met the 125 participants' goal for the Native American group, so we opened the survey to all potential participants to reach a total sample of 500. The final sample included 518 participants ( $M_{\text{age}} = 33.8$ , range [18, 68]; 46.2% female). Ethnicity was 36.2% White Americans, 25.8% African American, 24.3% Asian American, 8% Native American, and 5.7% other races/ethnicities or multiple races/ethnicities. Modal education level was a bachelor's degree (30.3%), and more than half (56.7%) of the sample had either bachelor's or master's education.

For Study 2, we opened the study to 500 participants in the Michigan State University psychology subject pool over the age 18. Participants received course credit for completing the study. Quota sampling was not used for this study owing to the limited number of participants from some of the ethnic categories in the university sample. The final sample included 495 participants ( $M_{\text{age}} = 19.35$ , range [18, 49]; 77.3% female). Ethnicity was 62.8% White Americans, 5.4% African American, 10.5% Asian American, 0.02% Native American, and 21.2% other races/ethnicities or multiple races/ethnicities.

## Materials and Procedure

Table 2 gives a full example of one stimuli event and the corresponding historical blame, predictor variables, and control variables measures. See Supplemental Materials for full details on measures and stimuli.

**Stimuli.** Participants read brief one-sentence descriptions of a random subset of 25 real historical events, characterized by one group (perpetrator group) committing a wrong against another group (victim group). See Supplemental Material for the full list of events. Brief stimuli descriptions are included in the labels of Figures 1 and 2. Table 3 gives ten examples of the events included (American and non-American). The full list of events was formed by consulting the psychological, philosophical, and political literature on historical wrongs, collective responsibility, reparations, intergroup conflict, and intergroup reconciliation, or through news articles and opinion pieces on such topics. Examples identified in

this literature were collected and used to create stimuli for the study. Events varied in their distance in the past, the location of the event, and the groups involved in the event. We aimed to use a wide range of events to ensure the generalizability of our findings across different situations and time periods. Participants were assigned to complete measures for 10 out of 25 randomly chosen events to prevent participant fatigue. Three events had perpetrators and a historical wrong with some overlap in time, which may not be clear instances of historical blame. Hence, we reestimated our main models again without these events to test for the robustness of our phenomenon of interest. Results were the same (see Supplemental Materials).

**Historical Blame.** For each of the 10 randomly selected historical events, participants were asked to rate how much current members of a group deserve blame for the historical wrong.

**Four Factors.** Participants were asked to indicate their opinion on the degree of connectedness they perceived between the perpetrator group at the time when the historical wrong happened and that group now (adapted from Bartels et al., 2013; Mott, 2018), their agreement on whether the current victim group continues to suffer as a result of the historical wrong (adapted from Banfield et al., 2014), their agreement on whether the current perpetrator group continues to benefit as a result of the historical wrong (adapted from Banfield et al., 2014), and their agreement on whether the perpetrator group has fulfilled obligations to right the historical wrong.

**Covariates.** Additionally, participants were asked to rate the perceived severity of the historical wrong, their perceptions of how far into the past the event occurred (adapted from Peetz et al., 2010), how entitative they perceived the perpetrator group to be (three items, Study 1  $\alpha = .84$ , Study 2  $\alpha = .83$ , adapted from Denson et al., 2006), and how familiar they were with the event, which were used as statistical controls.

**Moderators.** We tested if event location (whether the event is an American or non-American event) and group membership (whether the participant belongs to the victim group or perpetrator group or neither) moderate the relationship between our main predictors and blame. To examine moderation by event location, dummy coding was used to create the variable event vocation (American events = 1, non-American events = 0).<sup>1</sup> To examine moderation by group membership, two variables were created using dummy coding—perpetrator group and victim group—where perpetrator group (perpetrator group = 1, victim group = 0, neither = 0) and victim groups were coded (victim group = 1, perpetrator group = 0, neither = 0) for each participant for each event. This was to compare if the relationship between the four factors and historical blame differed for perpetrator and victim compared to neither group (the reference category). To estimate simple slopes, the reference category of the dummy codes was changed, and the models were reestimated. See Supplemental Materials for precise information on which groups were coded as victims or perpetrators for each event.

These analyses helped assess if the historical blame process is different for personally relevant events compared to those that might be less personal. The former analyses (American vs. non-American) showed if people reason differently about events that are part of their own historical past versus other international events. This gets personal relevance at the national or country level. The latter

<sup>1</sup> We originally preregistered effects coding but found that dummy coding was easier to communicate. Conclusions are identical across types of coding.

**Table 2***Example of One of the 25 Events and the Corresponding Outcomes, Predictors, and Covariates for the One Example Event*

Study material	Wording
Stimuli	Please answer the following questions about this historical event: Africans and African Americans were enslaved by White Americans through the 17th–19th centuries.
Historical blame	White people today deserve blame for the harm their group inflicted on Black people as part of slavery. (1 = <i>strongly disagree</i> , 7 = <i>strongly agree</i> )
Connectedness of perpetrator group	How much connectedness or similarity is there between White Americans when slavery happened and White Americans today? (1 = <i>completely disconnected</i> , 7 = <i>completely connected</i> ; see figure in Supplemental Material)
Continued harm of victim group	Black Americans are still suffering harm today (e.g., physical, psychological, or financial harms) as a result of the slavery. (1 = <i>strongly disagree</i> , 7 = <i>strongly agree</i> )
Continued benefit of perpetrator group	White Americans are still benefiting today (e.g., physical, psychological, or financial benefits) as a result of the slavery. (1 = <i>strongly disagree</i> , 7 = <i>strongly agree</i> )
Obligations of perpetrator group	Descendants of White Americans have fulfilled their obligations to remedy the wrongs of slavery. (1 = <i>strongly disagree</i> , 7 = <i>strongly agree</i> )
Entitativity of perpetrator group	To what degree can the behavior of White Americans be controlled or influenced by other White Americans? (1 = <i>not at all</i> , 7 = <i>a lot</i> ) To what extent do White Americans have common goals with each other? (1 = <i>not at all</i> , 7 = <i>a lot</i> ) To what degree do White Americans share knowledge and information with each other? (1 = <i>not at all</i> , 7 = <i>a lot</i> )
Severity of the event	How harmful was slavery? (1 = <i>not harmful at all</i> , 7 = <i>extremely harmful</i> )
Historical recency of the event	How long ago do you feel slavery took place? (1 = <i>feels very distant</i> , 7 = <i>feels very recent</i> )
Familiarity with the event	How familiar are you with American slavery? (1 = <i>not familiar at all</i> , 7 = <i>extremely familiar</i> )
Individual differences and demographics	Age, gender, sexual orientation, education, race/ethnicity, ideological identification

analysis (victim vs. perpetrator vs. other) looked only at U.S. American events, as participants could only be classified as perpetrator, victim, or other groups for these events, given the sample was American. These group analyses allowed us to check the impact of personal relevance at a more refined level as these were historical wrongs that the participants' groups were involved in as victims or perpetrators. They were thus more closely relevant to them at the level of their ethnic, racial, or gender group memberships. These moderation analyses also allow us to test for the robustness of the relationship between our predictors and blame (i.e., see if the relationship holds for all groups).

Apart from these preregistered analyses, we also explored moderation by ideology and age. These exploratory results are in Supplemental Materials. Ideology was measured using a 7-point scale, with two additional options (1 = *strongly liberal*, 4 = *moderate*, 7 = *strongly conservative*, 8 = *do not know*, 9 = *I have not thought much about it*). Participants who chose 8 or 9 were recoded as midpoint and scale responses were then centered at midpoint for analyses. Age was sample mean centered.

## Studies 1 and 2: Results

We found that people not only blame current groups for their past actions but responses are spread across the range of the scale (Figures 1 and 2). This suggests that at least some people blame current groups for their past wrongs across a range of different events. Why then are some current groups blamed more than others?

### Analytic Strategy

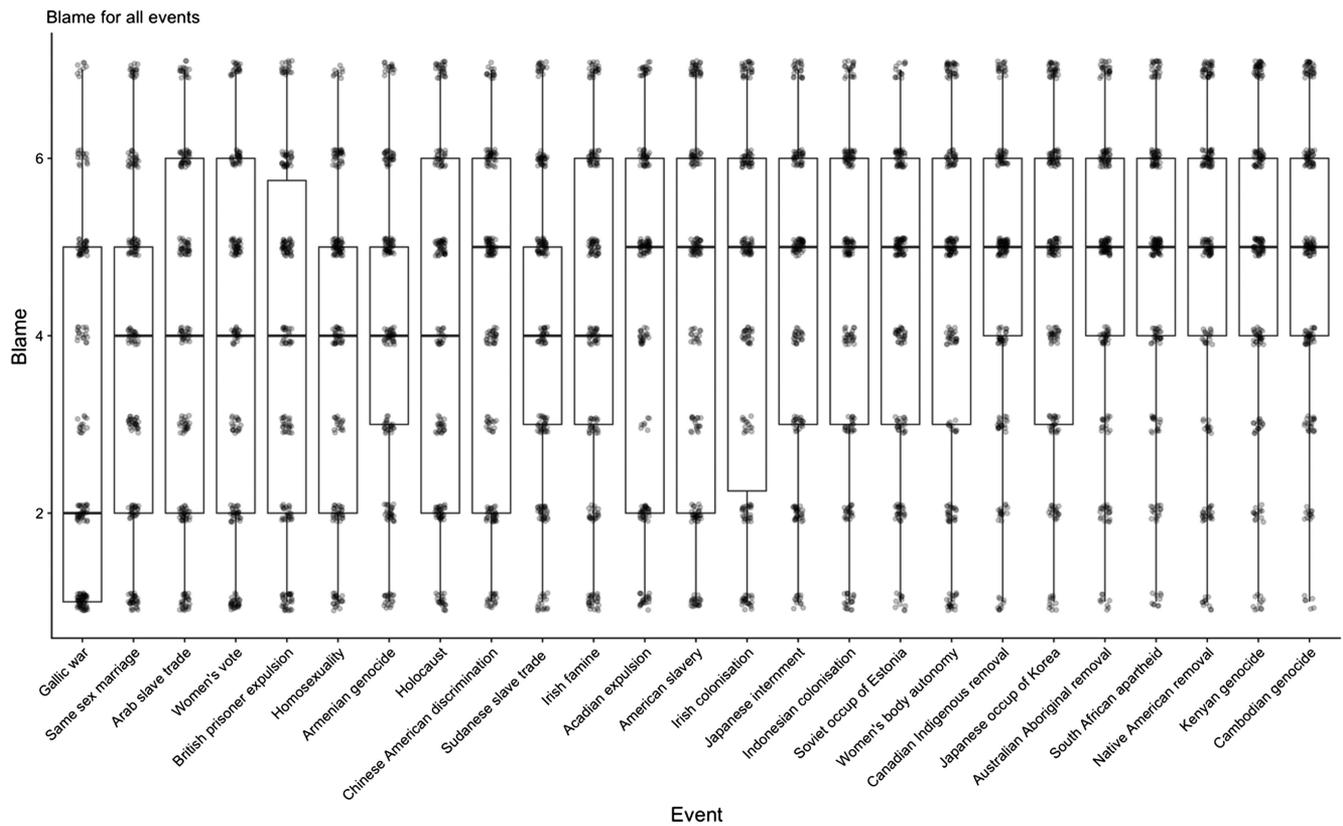
Correlation tables for person-centered predictors, historical blame, and covariates for both Studies 1 and 2 are in Supplemental Materials (Tables S27 and S28). Both Studies 1 and 2 had the same analytic procedure. We used multilevel models with historical events nested

in persons. We included a random intercept for both the historical events and the persons (Judd et al., 2012). Additional nonpreregistered models included random slopes for the four key predictors (these are presented in Supplemental Materials; estimates are similar to the preregistered models). The multilevel models allowed us to estimate the effects of the key predictors across a range of situations. All of the predictor variables were mean-centered within persons (Enders & Tofighi, 2007). Within-person centering allows us to control for stable individual differences (e.g., demographic variables). We regressed historical blame judgments on the four primary factors individually: perceived connectedness of the perpetrator group (Model 1), current suffering of the victim group (Model 2), continued benefit of the perpetrator group (Model 3), and fulfilled obligations of the perpetrator group (Model 4). Additional models were used to assess the associations when controlling for all four primary factors simultaneously (Model 5) and when including covariates (Model 6). See Table 4 for a summary of the main models that were estimated. Figure 3 summarizes the results from these models. Tables 5 and 6 show the coefficients for Models 1–6 summarized in Figure 3.

### Key Findings

Both studies had similar results. The four main factors were significant and in the expected direction, both when each factor was the only predictor in the model (Models 1–4) and when other factors and controls were included (Models 5 and 6). Thus, consistent with our hypotheses, we found that perceiving higher (a) connectedness between the past and present perpetrator groups, (b) continued harm to victim groups from past wrongs, (c) continued benefit to perpetrator groups from past wrongs, and (d) unfulfilled obligations of perpetrator groups, facilitates higher historical blame judgments.

**Figure 1**  
*Blame for All Events (Order From Lowest to Highest in Mean Blame) for Study 1*



Examining the control variables, we did not find that familiarity with the event or perceived entitativity of the perpetrator group to be replicable predictors of historical blame. Perceived historical closeness and harmful nature of the event were significant predictors of historical blame. The more historically recent and harmful the event was perceived, the more historical blame was attributed.

### **Robustness Checks**

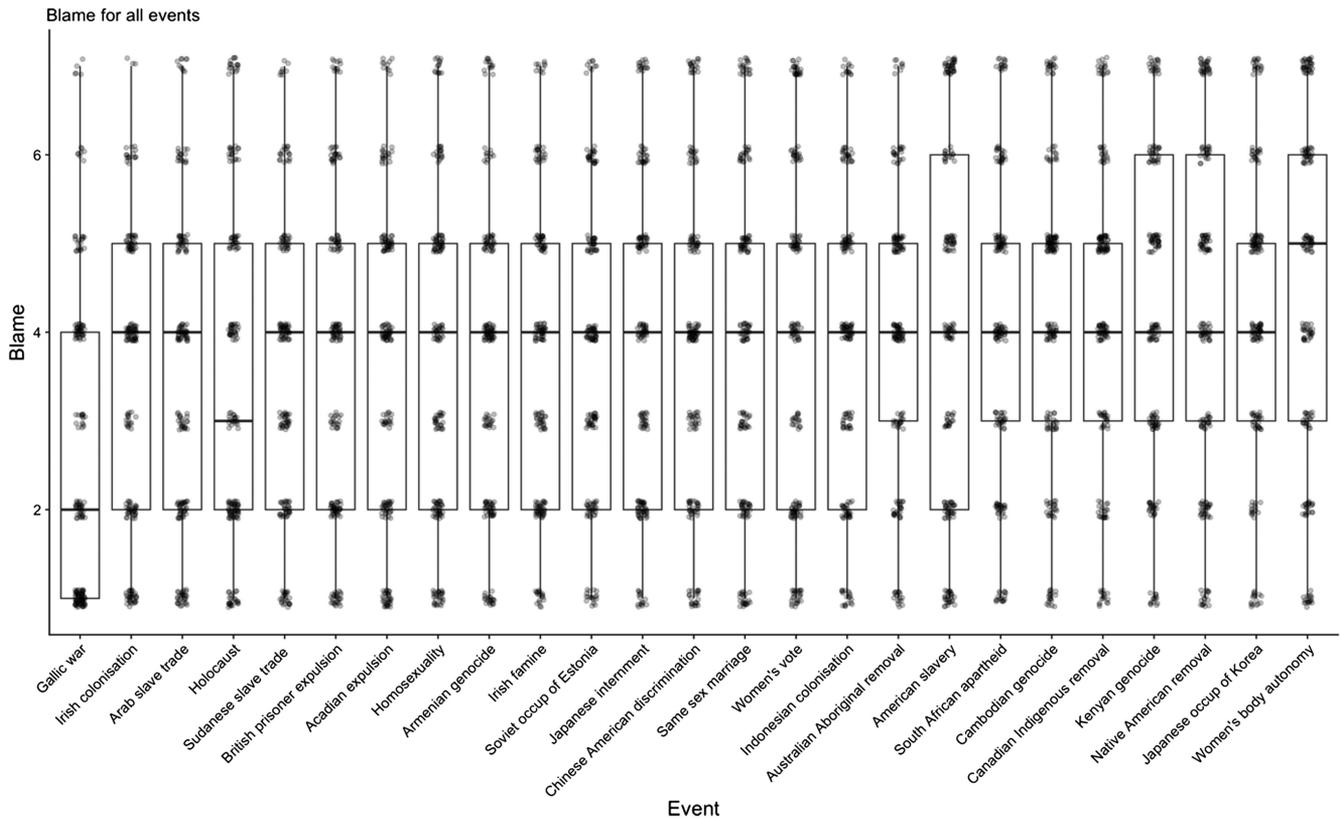
We tested for the robustness of the key predictors by testing if event location (whether the event was American or non-American event) moderated the effects of the four key predictors. We reran Model 6 (in Table 4) but also included the interactions between the four main factors and event location in the model, where event location was dummy coded (American events = 1, non-American events = 0). The regression coefficients of the interaction terms gave us slope comparisons of the American events with non-American events.

Event location did not reliably moderate the relationships between our predictors and blame across studies. Simple slopes are presented in Supplemental Material (Tables S5 and S17). The estimated interaction term between event location and the four factors is in Table 7. They show that the relationship between the predictors and historical blame was not significantly and reliably different for American versus non-American events.

Next, we tested if group membership (whether the participant belongs to the victim group, the perpetrator group, or neither) affected the relationship between the key predictors and blame judgments. We only used data from the U.S. American events as our samples were American. We added the interaction terms in our model containing all four factors and covariates (Model 6 in Table 4). We first dummy coded perpetrator group (perpetrator group = 1, victim group = 0, neither = 0) and victim group (victim group = 1, perpetrator group = 0, neither = 0). This made neither group as reference group. The interaction between perpetrator group dummy with each of the four main factors and victim group dummy with each of the four main factors served as the interaction terms in the model. The interaction terms tell us if the slopes of the four factors differ between the perpetrator and victim group with neither group. To test if the victim and the perpetrator groups differed, we ran Model 6 once again, but with the dummy codes for perpetrator (perpetrator group = 1, victim group = 0, neither = 0) and neither group (victim group = 0, perpetrator group = 0, neither = 1). This made the victim group the reference group. The interaction terms tell us if the slopes of the four factors differ between the perpetrator and neither group with the victim group. The interaction estimates are in Table 8 (simple slopes are in Supplemental Tables S8 and S20).

These show that the relationship between the four factors and historical blame was not significantly and reliably different for

**Figure 2**  
Blame for All Events (Order From Lowest to Highest in Mean Blame) for Study 2



perpetrator versus victim groups, or victim/perpetrator versus neither groups across studies. There was one exception in both studies. The relationship between perceived connectedness and blame was weaker for people who were from the perpetrator group compared to people from neither the victim nor perpetrator group. However, the simple slopes were significant (all  $ps < .01$ ) and positive (all  $bs > .18$ ) for the participants from the victim group, perpetrator group, and from neither group (Supplemental Tables S8 and S20). This suggests that all groups link perceived higher connectedness with higher blame, but that participants from the perpetrator group put less weight on this factor. We also tried alternate categorizations for victim and group membership based on intersectionality approaches (see Supplemental Materials). The results did not change. Again, we found that moderation by group membership was not replicable for all predictors except perceived connectedness, where its effect was weaker (but still positive and significant) for the perpetrator group (Supplemental Tables S33 and S34). Overall, as expected, how the four factors and historical blame were related to each other did not differ across perpetrator, victim, and neither group.

We also did some additional robustness checks as exploratory analyses, where we checked if there was moderation of the relationship between the four factors and historical blame by ideology or age and if the relationship between the predictors and blame still held if we excluded responses at the midpoint of the historical blame

measure. Our results were robust to these checks. Results are presented in Supplemental Materials (Tables S35–S39).

### Group Differences

While group membership did not moderate the relationship between the four factors and historical blame as expected, we did expect mean differences in the predictors and historical blame across groups. Consistently, we found that victim and neither perpetrator/victim groups significantly differ from perpetrator groups on their average levels of the four factors and historical blame. Victim and neither victim/perpetrator group perceived higher connectedness of perpetrator groups over time, higher continued suffering of victim groups from past wrong, higher continued benefit of victim groups from past wrong, and lower levels of perceived fulfilled obligations than perpetrator groups. They also attributed higher historical blame. Figures 4 and 5 show the distribution of all variables. Supplemental Tables S29–S32 show averages and significance tests for all predictors, controls, and historical blame judgments for each group.

### Studies 1 and 2: Discussion

In Studies 1 and 2, we found that perceiving higher (a) connectedness between past and present perpetrator groups, (b) continued harm of victim groups, (c) continued benefit of perpetrator groups,

**Table 3***An Example List of 10 of the 25 Events Used in Studies 1 and 2*

Example events used as stimuli (10 of 25)
The internment (forced relocation and incarceration in concentration camps) of Japanese Americans in the United States was carried out during World War II by the U.S. government.
Chinese Americans were subject to laws that discriminated against Chinese people in the 19th and 20th centuries (e.g., the Chinese Exclusion Act of 1882).
White Americans forced Native Americans to leave their ancestral land and move west from the 17th to the mid-20th century as part of the Indian Removal policies.
From the founding of the United States until 1920, men denied women the right to vote.
Women were denied bodily autonomy for many centuries.
The Roman Empire massacred and enslaved hundreds of thousands of people of Gaul (present-day France and Belgium) from 58 to 50 BC.
The Armenian genocide was carried out by Ottoman Turks (current-day Turkey) during World War I.
Japanese war crimes, including forced mass prostitution of females, were carried out from 1910 to 1945 during the Japanese occupation of the Korean peninsula.
Racial segregationist policies against non-White citizens of South Africa were enforced during Apartheid from the 1940s to the 1990s by the all-White government.
Africans were captured and sold by Arab Muslims in North and East Africa for hundreds of years (approximately 7th–18th centuries).

and (d) unfulfilled obligations of perpetrator groups are associated with higher historical blame judgments. This effect emerged controlling for covariates, replicated in two samples, was similar for both American and non-American events, and generally emerged when people were members of perpetrator, victim, or neither perpetrator nor victim groups. It also emerged for both liberals and conservatives and for most predictors across age groups. Although we were able to observe the predicted effects across a range of real-world events, we were not able to assess the causal effects of the four factors. It is possible, for example, that people first experience historical blame and then justify that historical blame with different perceptions of the situation (Alicke, 2000; Ditto et al., 2009). Alternatively, it is also possible that the relationship between our four factors and historical blame is confounded by a third variable. We therefore next test the causal effect of the four key factors.

### Studies 3 and 4

Studies 3 and 4 used conjoint experiment designs to estimate the causal effects of the four factors on historical blame. A conjoint

**Table 4***Description of the Main Models That Were Estimated for All Events*

Predictor	Model					
	1	2	3	4	5	6
Connectedness	x				x	x
Continued harm		x			x	x
Continued benefit			x		x	x
Fulfilled obligations				x	x	x
Controls	No	No	No	No	No	Yes

experiment typically involves presenting alternative scenarios that include multiple attributes. Each attribute has multiple possible levels (e.g., if sex is an attribute, male or female might be levels). Attributes are randomly varied in alternative scenarios. This allows researchers to estimate the overall effect of an attribute after accounting for the possible effects of the other attributes by averaging over effect variations caused by them (Bansak et al., 2019). A conjoint experiment thus allows us to test our multiple causal hypotheses simultaneously (Hainmueller et al., 2014). We used hypothetical events for this design, which may limit the extent to which the results apply to real-world historical atrocities. However, making events hypothetical was necessary to randomly assign the attributes we are testing. We think that this tradeoff is worth the cost because Studies 1 and 2 have already demonstrated the relevance of these factors for a multitude of real-world events. Demonstrating causality is necessary for ruling out alternative theoretical accounts (Alicke, 2000; Ditto et al., 2009). Additionally, recent work on the science of experiments shows in three different experimental paradigms that using events explicitly labeled as hypothetical did not affect the results of the experiments (Brutger et al., 2020).

In our two studies, participants read brief descriptions of 12 hypothetical historical events. In all cases, a perpetrator group committed a wrong against a victim group. For each event, we varied several different attributes about the situation and the groups. These attributes mapped onto the four primary factors and the covariates used in Studies 1 and 2. For each hypothetical event, participants then rated the extent to which they blamed current members of the perpetrator group. To assess if our analysis of blame extends to possible policy responses, for each event we asked participants' agreement on whether current members of the perpetrator group should compensate the victim group.

We also conducted exploratory robustness analyses to see if the four factors' effect on historical blame was moderated by group membership (historically privileged vs. marginalized), ideology, and age. In another exploratory analysis, we tested if the effect of the key factors on compensation was mediated by historical blame judgments. These exploratory analyses are present in the Supplemental Materials.

### Studies 3 and 4: Method

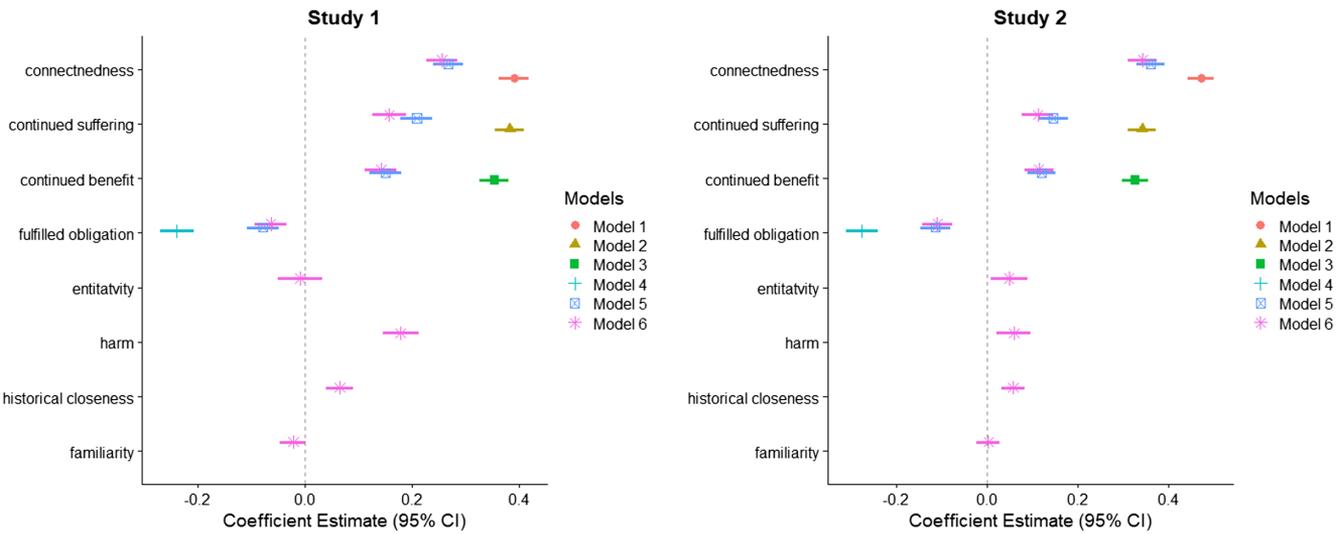
The two studies are similar except for the platform through which data was collected (Prolific vs. Michigan State University Psychology subject pool) and whether a quota sampling procedure was followed. We describe the studies simultaneously, but Study 3 (Prolific) took place before Study 4 (University).

### Transparency and Openness

We report how we determined our sample size, all data exclusions (if any), all manipulations, and all measures in the study. We preregistered our study design, hypotheses, and planned analyses before the experiment for Study 3 ([https://osf.io/vb6dg/?view\\_only=5840aefba1c148509da8b8c0934f2584](https://osf.io/vb6dg/?view_only=5840aefba1c148509da8b8c0934f2584)). The data and code are also available here. Study 4 was not preregistered but was exactly the same in all respects as Study 3, with the exception of the composition of our sample. The studies were approved by the Michigan State University Institutional Review Board.

**Figure 3**

*Estimates of the Relationship Between the Main Predictors and Blame for All Events in Studies 1 and 2*



*Note.* Models 1–4 only included one of our four key factors. Model 5 included all four key factors. Model 6 included all four key factors and the four covariates (see Table 4). See the online article for the color version of this figure.

**Participants and Recruitment**

For Study 3, we opened the study to 600 participants using Prolific. A sample of 600 people provides 80% statistical power to detect an average marginal component effect of .05 (calculated using the *cjpowerR* package, Schuessler & Freitag, 2020). The preregistered quota sampling was followed such that participants were to be evenly recruited from the White American, Black American, Asian American, Hispanic American, and the Native American population on Prolific. That is, 20% of participants were from each aforementioned category. However, because we did not meet the 125 participants goal for the Native American group after 1 week, we opened the survey to all potential participants to reach the total sample of 600. After removing participants who did not complete any of the trials, the final sample included 598 participants ( $M_{age} = 27.1$ , range [18, 68]; 59.2% female). Ethnicity was 26.1% White

Americans, 18.1% African American, 17.7% Asian American, 13.9% Hispanic American, 5.5% Native American, and 18.7% other races/ethnicities or multiple races/ethnicities. Modal education level was a high school diploma (30.3%), and 43.8% of the sample had either bachelor’s or master’s education. Participants were paid \$2.41 for doing the study (~15 min). We restricted the sample so that participants from Study 1 could not complete this study.

For Study 4, we opened the study to 600 participants in the Michigan State University psychology subject pool to participants over the age of 18. The final sample included 605 participants ( $M_{age} = 19.4$ , range [18, 58]; 69.6% female). Ethnicity was 68.9% White Americans, 7.3% African American, 9.9% Asian American, 2.5% Hispanic American, and 11.4% other races/ethnicities or multiple races/ethnicities. Participants received course credit for doing the study. We restricted the sample so that participants from Study 2 could not complete this study.

**Table 5**

*Study 1: Estimates (and Standard Errors) of the Relationship Between the Main Predictors and Blame*

Predictor	Model					
	Model 1	Model 2	Model 3	Model 4	Model 5	Model 6
Connectedness	0.390** (0.014)				0.268** (0.014)	0.256** (0.015)
Continued suffering		0.382** (0.014)			0.209** (0.015)	0.157** (0.016)
Continued benefit			0.354** (0.014)		0.150** (0.015)	0.142** (0.015)
Fulfilled obligation				-0.239** (0.016)	-0.079** (0.015)	-0.064** (0.015)
Entitativity						-0.01 (0.021)
Harm						0.179** (0.017)
Historical closeness						0.065** (0.013)
Knowledge						-0.022 (0.012)
Participant <i>N</i>	501	501	501	501	501	501
Total observation <i>N</i>	4,901	4,878	4,889	4,885	4,802	4,754

*Note.* These are estimates for figure 3 (left panel).  
\*\*  $p < .01$ .

**Table 6***Study 2: Estimates (and Standard Errors) of the Relationship Between the Main Predictors and Blame*

Predictor	Model					
	Model 1	Model 2	Model 3	Model 4	Model 5	Model 6
Connectedness	0.471** (0.015)				0.360** (0.016)	0.343** (0.016)
Continued suffering		0.341** (0.016)			0.145** (0.017)	0.111** (0.018)
Continued benefit			0.326** (0.015)		0.119** (0.016)	0.114** (0.016)
Fulfilled obligation				-0.277** (0.018)	-0.114** (0.017)	-0.111** (0.017)
Entitativity						0.048** (0.021)
Harm						0.058** (0.019)
Historical closeness						0.057** (0.013)
Knowledge						0.002 (0.013)
Participant <i>N</i>	483	483	483	483	483	483
Total observation <i>N</i>	4,785	4,772	4,771	4,760	4,704	4,668

Note. These are estimates for figure 3 (right panel).

\*\*  $p < .01$ .

### Materials and Procedure

**Stimuli.** Participants responded to 12 hypothetical historical events. The structure of each event involved one hypothetical perpetrator group committing a wrong against a hypothetical victim group. Across the 12 events, we used two types of wrongs: (a) invasion and displacement of people and (b) policies denying another group the right to own land and property. There were also two types of harms to the victim group or benefits to the perpetrator group as a result of the historical wrong: (a) cultural harm/benefits or (b) economic harm/benefits. This gave us four types of historical events—displacement of people leading to economic harm/benefits, displacement of people leading to cultural harm/benefits, policies denying right to land and property leading to economic harm/benefits, and policies denying right to land and property leading to cultural harm/benefits. Participants saw three trials for each type of historical event (12 trials in total), and these trials randomly varied on the attributes described next (Experiment 3 total events rated = 7,113, Experiment 4 = 7,172).

**Independent Variables.** Each hypothetical event was followed by information on various attributes of the groups and events (e.g., group connectedness, continued benefit, historical distance). We varied attributes to correspond to our four main factors (connectedness, continued harm, continued benefit, fulfilled obligations) and covariates (severity of harm, historical recency, entitativity) from Studies 1 and 2. As the experiments in Studies 3 and 4 used

hypothetical events, familiarity with the event was not included as an attribute. Information on these attributes was randomly varied in a conjoint design. While the 12 hypothetical events with all these attributes were consistently presented across all participants, the information on each of the attributes was unique to each participant because of randomization. The attributes that the events were varied on are listed in Table 9.

**Four Main Factors.** Connectedness of groups as a psychological construct could be conceptualized in multiple ways (e.g., territorial/geographical, historical, or cultural; Sani et al., 2007). Here we used a cultural connotation (i.e., values), given the relevance of values to moral judgments. The importance of values in self-continuity (Strohinger & Nichols, 2014) suggests they may also be a key component of the connectedness of groups. Continued harm and continued benefit have also been thought of in multiple ways (e.g., physical, psychological, cultural, or financial; Starzyk et al., 2019; Starzyk & Ross, 2008). Here we pick two of these connotations for our study, cultural and financial. We described fulfilled obligations as whether a group has done anything to aid the other group. This was inspired by survey items (Warner & Branscombe, 2012) used in past work to measure a group's obligation toward another group.

**Potential Confounds.** The potential confounds we manipulate map onto the covariates from Studies 1 and 2. Severity of the wrongdoing was described in the experiments in two ways, by how many people were affected by the wrong, and how long the wrongdoing lasted (end date of occupation/policies minus the start date of occupation/policies). Historical recency was captured by specifying the start of occupation/policies (Peez et al., 2010). Finally, entitativity was captured by describing how unified the group was at present (Campbell, 1958; Hamilton & Sherman, 1996).

**Outcome Variable.** Following each event, participants rated their blame judgment and support for compensation. Blame was measured with the item, "Members of Group X today deserve blame for the harm their group inflicted on members of Group Y as part of the (displacement/policies)" (1 = *strongly disagree*, 7 = *strongly agree*). Compensation was measured with the item, "Members of Group A today should provide aid to the members of Group B to compensate the members of Group B for the harm inflicted by the (displacement/policies)" (1 = *strongly disagree*, 7 = *strongly agree*). We tested how blame and compensation were related in both experiments. To do this, we nested people's blame judgments and

**Table 7***Interaction Estimates (and Standard Errors) Between Event Location and the Four Factors for Studies 1 and 2*

Predictor	Interactions with American versus non-American	
	Study 1	Study 2
Connectedness	-0.055 (0.031)	-0.047 (0.035)
Continued suffering	-0.043 (0.034)	-0.037 (0.037)
Continued benefit	0.053 (0.034)	0.021 (0.035)
Fulfilled obligation	0.064* (0.033)	0.024 (0.037)
Participant <i>N</i>	501	483
Total observation <i>N</i>	4,754	4,668

\*  $p < .05$ .

**Table 8**  
*Interaction Estimates (and Standard Errors) Between Group Membership and the Four Factors for Studies 1 and 2*

Predictor	Interactions with group membership					
	Study 1			Study 2		
	Perpetrator versus victim	Perpetrator versus neither	Victim versus neither	Perpetrator versus victim	Perpetrator versus neither	Victim versus neither
Connectedness	-0.178* (0.071)	-0.182* (0.087)	-0.004 (0.101)	-0.087 (0.074)	-0.299** (0.114)	-0.213 (0.126)
Continued suffering	0.034 (0.085)	0.167 (0.103)	0.133 (0.125)	-0.130 (0.084)	-0.201 (0.144)	-0.072 (0.154)
Continued benefit	0.026 (0.085)	-0.023 (0.096)	-0.049 (0.117)	0.008 (0.079)	0.249 (0.137)	0.241 (0.150)
Fulfilled obligation	0.004 (0.081)	0.013 (0.089)	0.010 (0.110)	-0.133 (0.081)	-0.078 (0.127)	0.055 (0.136)
Participant N	494	494	494	482	482	482
Total observations N	1,530	1,530	1,530	1,508	1,508	1,508

\*  $p < .05$ . \*\*  $p < .01$ .

compensation responses within persons, person-mean-centered blame, and regressed compensation on blame using a multilevel model. We found that they were strongly and positively associated in both studies (Experiment 3  $b = .52$ ,  $SE = .01$ ,  $p < .001$ ; Experiment 4  $b = .45$ ,  $SE = .01$ ,  $p < .001$ ).

**Demographics.** Participants reported their age, gender, sexual orientation, education, race/ethnicity, and ideological identification like Studies 1 and 2. We used these measures for conducting exploratory moderation analyses by group (privileged vs. marginalized), ideology, and age. Exploratory analyses are present in the Supplemental Materials.

### Studies 3 and 4: Results

#### Analytic Strategy

Both Studies 3 and 4 had the same analytic procedure. To test our hypothesis, we used ordinary least square regression with standard errors clustered at the respondent level (Hainmueller et al., 2014).<sup>2</sup> Results from Study 3 are in Figure 6, and the results from Study 4 are in Figure 7. Coefficients from these Figures 6 and 7 are shown in Tables 10 and 11, respectively. Both studies had similar results.

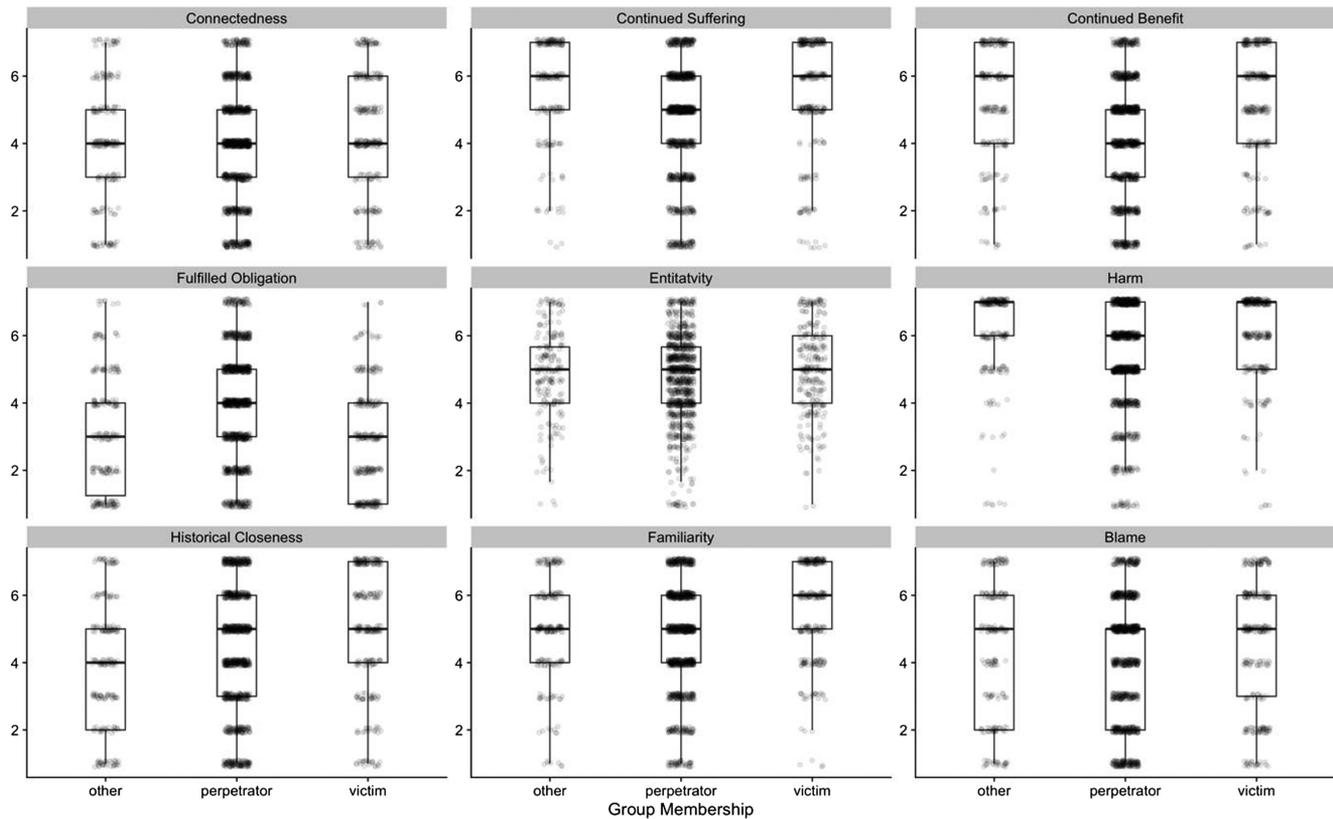
#### Key Findings

When examining the effect of the attributes on blame (Figures 6A and 7A), we found that, when current perpetrator groups are described as having connectedness with their past and when current victim group members have medium or poor outcomes as a result of historical wrong, people express more blame toward current members of the perpetrator group. This is compared to when current perpetrator groups do not have connectedness with their past and when current victim group members have good outcomes. We also find that when current perpetrator groups have fulfilled their obligations by giving aid to the victim group, people are less likely to blame the perpetrator group. The outcomes of the current perpetrator group as a result of the historical wrong also affected historical blame, but less consistently. In Study 3, both poor and medium outcomes were associated with less historical blame, but only the estimate for medium outcomes was significantly different from zero. In Study 4, poor outcomes were clearly and significantly associated with less historical blame, whereas medium outcomes were not significantly associated with historical blame. Among control variables, only historical recency had a significant positive effect on blame. Other factors, such as entitativity or severity of harm (number of people affected and duration of the wrong), were not important predictors of blame.

When examining the effect of the attributes on compensation (Figures 6B and 7B), we find similar results as we do for blame. People support compensation for the victim group when the current perpetrator group has connectedness with their past, when the current victim group has medium and poor outcomes as a result of historical wrong, when the current perpetrator group has not fulfilled

<sup>2</sup> We preregistered that we would use the cjoint package (Hainmueller et al., 2014) to estimate the average marginal component effect; however, it was not flexible enough to handle exploratory analyses suggested by the reviewers. Therefore, we estimated the average marginal component effect using the same underlying process as the cjoint package, but with a different set of functions than we anticipated at the preregistration stage.

**Figure 4**  
*Distribution of All Predictors and Historical Blame in Study 1*



their obligations, and when the current perpetrator group has good outcomes as a result of historical wrong. Other factors, like entitativity, severity of harm (number of people affected and duration of the wrong), and how long ago the wrong happened, were not important or reliable predictors of compensation. Together, these results suggest that the factors that cause blame are also useful for understanding what causes support for compensation.

### **Robustness Checks**

We additionally preregistered that we would test if the factors differed by whether the method of harm was policies or displacement and whether the type of harm was economic or cultural. Additional models showed that there were very few interaction effects, and none of these interactions were consistent across experiments (see Supplemental Materials). Of the four key predictors, there was only one interaction that was significant across both experiments when predicting blame. The effect of fulfilling the obligation was stronger for cultural harm than for economic harm. Although, for both types of harm, the effect of fulfilled obligations was different from zero and in the predicted direction.

We conducted additional exploratory analyses where we tested if historical blame mediated the effect of the four factors on compensation, and if the four factors' effects on historical blame were moderated by participants' group memberships, ideology, or age. We

found evidence consistent with mediation effect of historical blame on support for compensation. Further, our results were robust to group memberships, ideology, or age. Results are presented in Supplemental Materials.

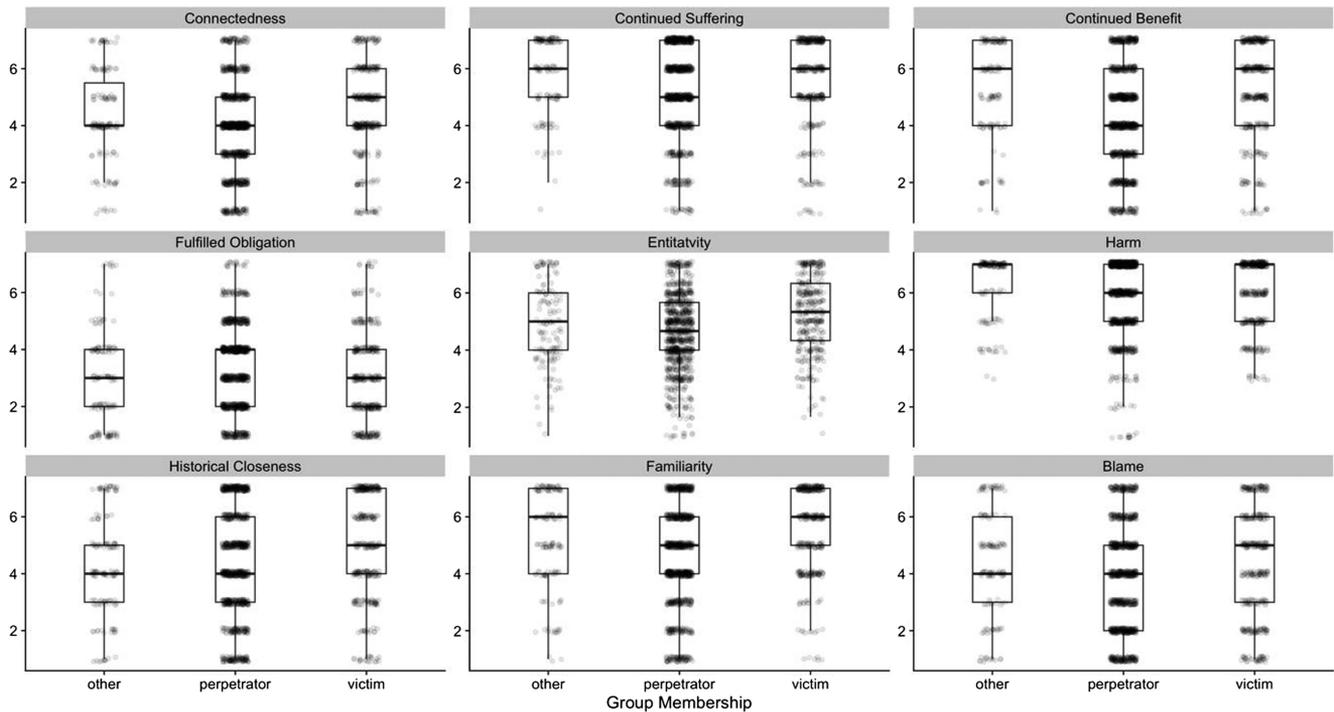
### **Studies 3 and 4: Discussion**

In Studies 3 and 4, we found that higher (a) connectedness between the past and present perpetrator groups, (d) continued harm of the victim groups, (c) continued privilege of the perpetrator groups, and (d) unfulfilled obligations of the perpetrator groups are causally associated with higher blame judgments against present-day perpetrator group for their group's actions in the past. These factors were also causally associated with support for compensation. This was replicated in two samples. We also find evidence that historical blame may be a mediator of the effect of the four factors on compensation. Finally, we did not find evidence of reliable moderation of the causal effects of the four factors on historical blame by group membership, ideology, or age.

### **General Discussion**

We tested four factors of blame toward current groups for their historical wrongs. We found correlational and causal evidence for our hypothesized factors across a broad range of hypothetical and

**Figure 5**  
*Distribution of All Predictors and Historical Blame in Study 2*



real events. We found that when people perceive current perpetrator group to have connectedness with their past, the current victim group to be suffering due to past harm, the current perpetrator group to be benefiting from past harm, and the current perpetrator group to have not fulfilled their obligations to remedy the wrong, historical blame judgments toward the current perpetrator groups are higher. On the whole, this was consistent across the location of the event (whether the participant was judging a historical American event or a historical non-American event), the group membership of the participant (whether the participant belonged to the victim or perpetrator group or neither/privileged or marginalized group), the ideology of the participant (whether the participant identified as a liberal or conservative), and the age of the participants. We also found that these factors were causally associated with behavioral intention, such as support for compensation to victim groups. Finally, we also found that historical blame attribution might mediate the effect of the key factors on support for compensation to victim groups. The four psychological factors that we identified as antecedents to perceptions of historical blame all help psychologically bridge the past and present. These factors provide psychological links between the past and present groups, in their characteristics (connectedness), outcomes (harm/benefit), and actions (unfulfilled obligations).

There were some exceptions and inconsistent findings. In Studies 3 and 4, the effect of continued benefits was mixed. Perpetrator groups benefiting from past wrongs showed a significant effect on historical blame for only one of two manipulated levels of the factor (medium outcomes in Study 3 and poor outcomes in Study 4). The effects at the other levels were not significant, although they were

still in the predicted direction. Results from all four studies taken together suggest that continued benefits are an important factor in historical blame. However, future studies should test this relationship more thoroughly in different experimental contexts.

Moderation analyses of the relationship between our factors and historical blame across the four studies showed inconsistent results. Results from all four studies are summarized in Supplemental Table S53. For most of our interactions, our studies had substantial power to detect a small effect size (see Supplemental Table S54). None of the moderators, event location, group membership, ideology, or age had any reliable impacts on the effect of all four factors on historical blame. The dominant finding was that of a nonsignificant moderation (approximately 75% of the 62 moderations), and the moderations that were significant were not replicated across studies in significance nor direction (e.g., the positive effect of continued suffering on historical blame was sometimes stronger for conservatives, sometimes weaker). Thus, we did not interpret any of the moderation results. Additionally, most of the significant moderations were indexing a small difference in the strength of the predicted relationship (for instance, in Studies 1 and 2, the relationship between connectedness and blame for perpetrator groups was weaker but still significant and in the predicted direction; for other examples, see Supplemental Tables S36, S38, and S51). The nonsignificant moderations forming the majority of the results were largely very small in size and inconsistent across studies in direction, making them difficult to detect and of unclear practical importance. Thus, our overall takeaway is that our predictions are largely supported across different moderators. Whenever and for whomever there are

**Table 9**  
*Attributes and Their Levels*

Attribute	Level
<b>Covariates</b>	
Historical wrong	Group X invaded Group Y and displaced Group Y, driving them out of their homeland.—OR—Group X instituted policies that denied Group Y the right to own land and property.
Start of occupation/policies	1,261, 1,460, 1,628, 1,811
End of occupation/policies	17, 58, 97, 147, 190 years later
People affected (severity)	10,000, 1 million, 10 million, 100 million
Entitativity	Group X today is (a highly unified/not a unified) group
<b>Four main factors</b>	
Continued benefits of perpetrator group	In part because of the occupation/policies, Group X today has a (rich/mediocre/poor) cultural heritage.—OR—Group X today is a (low-income/middle-income/high-income) country.
Continued harms of the victim group	In part because of the occupation/policies, Group Y (rich/mediocre/poor) today has a cultural heritage.—OR—Group Y today is a (low-income/middle-income/high-income) country.
Obligations	Since the time of the occupation, Group X (has given/has not given) aid to Group Y to help Group Y recover from the occupation/policies
Connectedness	Group X has (maintained its values throughout history/substantially changed its values over time)

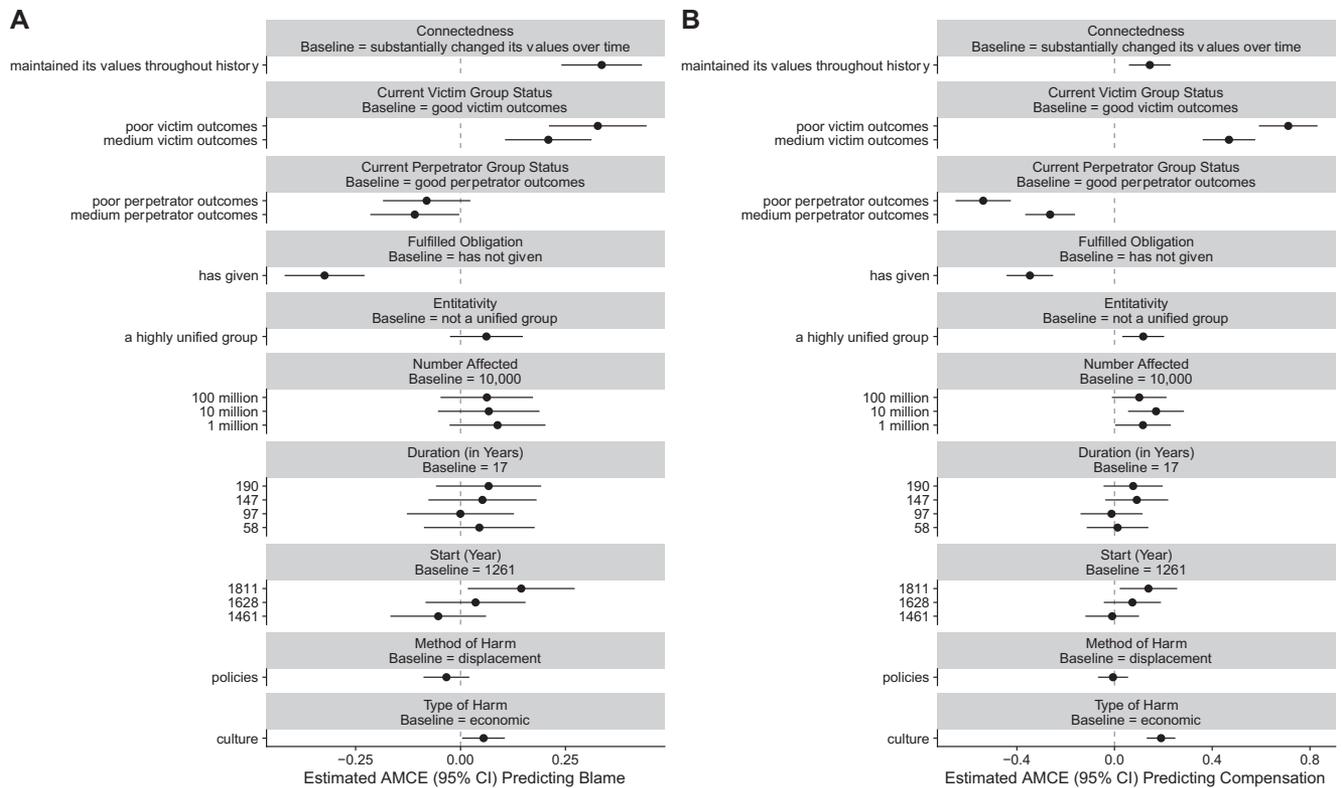
*Note.* The specific label for each attribute is different in the materials (e.g., participants do not see “entitativity” as the label). Attributes were presented to participants in the following order: start of occupation, end of occupation, people affected, continued benefits of perpetrator group, continued harms of the victim group, obligations, connectedness, and entitativity. See Supplemental Material, for example of events as they were presented.

higher judgments on the four factors, there are higher levels of historical blame.

Although there were no reliable moderations by group membership, it is important to note that group membership does matter. It

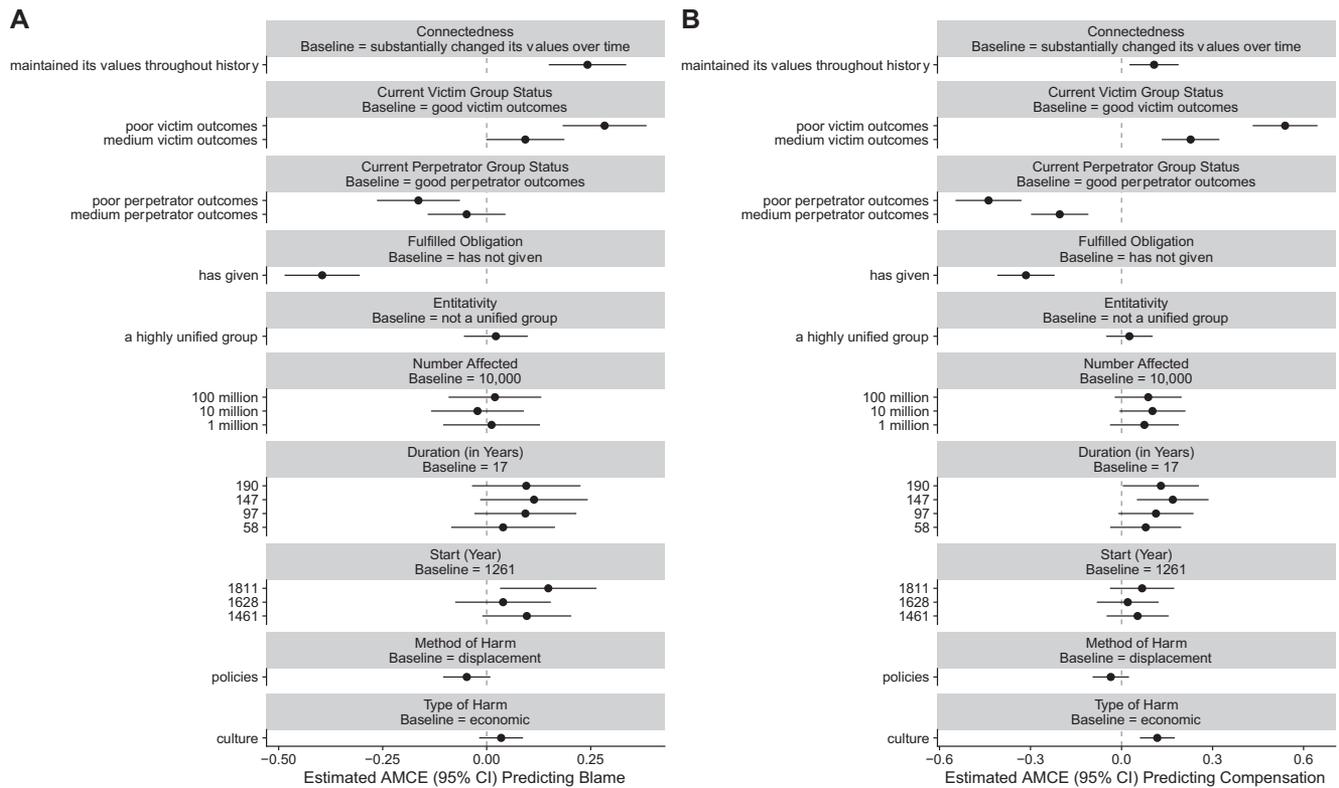
predicts mean levels of theoretically meaningful variables and historical blame judgments (Figures 4 and 5). For instance, members of victim groups compared to perpetrator groups perceived higher connectedness of perpetrator groups over time, higher continued

**Figure 6**  
*Estimates of the Relationship Between the Main Predictors and Blame (Left Panel) and Compensation (Right Panel) in Study 3*



*Note.* Estimates are the AMCE of each predictor. AMCE = average marginal component effect.

**Figure 7**  
*Estimates of the Relationship Between the Main Predictors and Blame (Left Panel) and Compensation (Right Panel) in Study 4*



*Note.* Estimates are the AMCE of each predictor. AMCE = average marginal component effect.

suffering of victim groups from past wrong, higher continued benefits of victim groups from past wrongs, and lower levels of perceived fulfilled obligations than perpetrator groups. They also attribute higher historical blame. Group membership just does not moderate the relationship between these variables and historical blame. Other individual differences, such as prejudice, colorblind ideology, or individualism, might also be associated with historical blame. We also suspect that these variables will have main effects on historical blame rather than interactive effects between the individual differences and the four factors.

**Theoretical Implications**

**Blame**

Our research extends psychological theories of blame by highlighting the historical dimension of time. Theories of blame attempt to explain blame toward individuals or groups for their actions in the present (Alicke, 2000; Denson et al., 2006; Lickel et al., 2001, 2003; Malle et al., 2014). In these theories, it is assumed that the blameworthy actions and their perpetrator co-occur at the same time. Hence, these blame theories are insufficient to explain blame toward current group members separated in time from when the historical wrong took place. The standard set of criteria (e.g., causality, intentionality, preventability, capacity, entitativity) that form the basis of evaluations in theories of blame (Alicke, 2000;

Denson et al., 2006; Lickel et al., 2003; Malle et al., 2014) does not help explain the type of blame highlighted in our research as they do not apply in such a case. Present-day group members cannot intend, cause, facilitate, or prevent historical harmful events from happening. Theories of blame claim that the blame process begins with the detection of harm, which leads people to collect information on these criteria before making a blame judgment (Malle et al., 2014). Our research suggests that while the blame process is engendered by registering a harmful event, people collect a different sort of information for historical blame than the information highlighted by current theories of blame events. This has implications for theories of blame.

First, our research identifies criteria for judgments of blame that have been overlooked. This includes the idea of forward responsibility, which is the responsibility for remedying or repairing harm after the event has happened (Smiley, 2023). This is in contrast to theories of blame, which use criteria like preventability and capacity, which rely on a backward-looking idea of responsibility (Gilbert, 2006). Thus, the theories focus on factors that occurred *before* the harmful event happened. Our research suggests that blame is also affected by factors that occur *after* a harmful event. The target might not have intended for the harm to happen, nor have caused it or were in a place to prevent it from happening, but they might be subject to blame because they failed to do anything afterward to address the harm. Similarly, the results for continued benefit suggest that psychological theories of blame do not consider

**Table 10**  
*Study 3: Coefficients (and Standard Errors) Predicting Blame and Compensation From Figure 6*

Attribute	Level	Blame		Compensation	
		<i>b</i>	<i>SE</i>	<i>b</i>	<i>SE</i>
Baseline: Displacement					
Method of harm	policies	-0.034	0.028	-0.006	0.031
Baseline: Economic					
Type of harm	culture	0.055*	0.026	0.190**	0.030
Baseline: 1,261					
Start (year)	1,461	-0.053	0.058	-0.010	0.056
Start (year)	1,628	0.036	0.061	0.073	0.060
Start (year)	1811	0.145*	0.065	0.139*	0.060
Baseline: 17					
Duration (in years)	58	0.045	0.067	0.012	0.064
Duration (in years)	97	0.000	0.065	-0.012	0.065
Duration (in years)	147	0.052	0.066	0.091	0.066
Duration (in years)	190	0.067	0.064	0.076	0.062
Baseline: 10,000					
Number affected	1 million	0.088	0.058	0.116*	0.058
Number affected	10 million	0.067	0.062	0.170*	0.058
Number affected	100 million	0.063	0.056	0.101	0.057
Baseline: Good perpetrator outcomes					
Current perpetrator group status	Medium perpetrator outcomes	-0.109*	0.054	-0.264**	0.052
Current perpetrator group status	Poor perpetrator outcomes	-0.081	0.053	-0.538**	0.058
Baseline: Good victim outcomes					
Current victim group status	Medium victim outcomes	0.209**	0.053	0.469**	0.055
Current victim group status	Poor victim outcomes	0.327**	0.059	0.711**	0.061
Baseline: Has not given					
Fulfilled obligation	Has given	-0.324**	0.049	-0.347**	0.049
Baseline: Has not maintained its values throughout history					
Connectedness	Maintained its values throughout history	0.336**	0.049	0.144**	0.043
Baseline: Not a unified group					
Entitativity	A highly unified group	0.062	0.044	0.118	0.044
Events <i>N</i>					7,172

Note. *SE* = standard error.

\*  $p < .05$ . \*\*  $p < .01$ .

factors that occur afterward, for example, if someone is deriving benefit from the wrongdoing afterwards.

Second, we highlight that the theories of blame rest on the assumption that the moral violation and the perpetrators co-existed at the same time. However, this assumption does not hold for historical judgments of blame. Thereby, we need criteria for blame judgments that are relatively unexplored in the blame literature, like the connectedness of perpetrator over time or the continued harm of victims and the continued benefit of perpetrators as important factors on which people base their judgments.

### Historical Narratives and Memory

The historical dimension of time is also central to work on historical narratives and memory. Specifically, this work focuses on the ways in which people establish a link between the groups' past and present and the implications these temporal representations have on attitudes and behavior (Bilali & Vollhardt, 2019; Freil & Bilali, 2022; Hirschberger, 2018; Liu & Hilton, 2005; Sibley et al., 2008; Wertsch, 2008). Accordingly, our work also contributes to this line of work. Our work identifies and tests factors that contribute to the perceptions of temporal continuity in groups, which might also serve as the contents of historical narratives or memories on which people and groups differ. While some of these factors have been explored

in work on historical narratives (e.g., continued suffering), other factors have either not been talked about or amply tested (e.g., continued benefit, forward obligations, connectedness). Future work on historical narratives can explore the extent to which these factors emerge and have an impact on historical narratives.

### Intergroup Reconciliation

Our work also makes contributions to theoretical perspectives on intergroup reconciliation which propose that reconciliation is an emotion regulation process (Čehajić-Clancy et al., 2016). This work puts emotions at the crux of the reconciliation process after an intergroup conflict. It posits that managing emotions like guilt and anger paves the way for successful reconciliation between groups. One important way to achieve this, according to the theory, is by cognitive change or targeting underlying beliefs through cognitive reappraisal. Our work on historical blame and its antecedences thus suggests the kinds of beliefs that would likely have to undergo change to observe changes in emotional responses. While some of these factors have been suggested in this work (e.g., connectedness), other factors that we have identified and tested can be incorporated more in future work on the cognitive inputs to emotional regulation and intergroup reconciliation.

**Table 11**  
*Study 4: Coefficients (and Standard Errors) Predicting Blame and Compensation From Figure 7*

Attribute	Level	Blame		Compensation	
		<i>b</i>	<i>SE</i>	<i>b</i>	<i>SE</i>
Baseline: Displacement					
Method of harm	policies	-0.048	0.029	-0.035	0.031
Baseline: Economic					
Type of harm	culture	0.035	0.027	0.118**	0.029
Baseline: 1,261					
Start (year)	1,461	0.096	0.055	0.053	0.052
Start (year)	1,628	0.039	0.059	0.020	0.052
Start (year)	1,811	0.148*	0.059	0.068	0.054
Baseline: 17					
Duration (in years)	58	0.039	0.064	0.080	0.060
Duration (in years)	97	0.093	0.062	0.113	0.063
Duration (in years)	147	0.114	0.066	0.169*	0.060
Duration (in years)	190	0.095	0.067	0.130*	0.064
Baseline: 10,000					
Number affected	1 million	0.012	0.059	0.075	0.058
Number affected	10 million	-0.022	0.057	0.102	0.056
Number affected	100 million	0.020	0.057	0.088	0.056
Baseline: Good perpetrator outcomes					
Current perpetrator group status	Medium perpetrator outcomes	-0.048	0.048	-0.204**	0.048
Current perpetrator group status	Poor perpetrator outcomes	-0.164**	0.051	-0.438**	0.055
Baseline: Good victim outcomes					
Current victim group status	Medium victim outcomes	0.093*	0.048	0.228**	0.048
Current victim group status	Poor victim outcomes	0.283**	0.052	0.539**	0.055
Baseline: Has not given					
Fulfilled obligation	Has given	-0.395**	0.046	-0.315**	0.048
Baseline: Has not maintained its values throughout history					
Connectedness	Maintained its values throughout history	0.242**	0.048	0.107**	0.041
Baseline: Not a unified group					
Entitativity	A highly unified group	0.022	0.039	0.026	0.039
Events N					7,172

Note. SE = standard error.

\*  $p < .05$ . \*\*  $p < .01$ .

### Collective Guilt

Collective guilt may be related to historical blame. Thus, we find it useful to clarify how historical blame may be related to the adjacent phenomenon of collective guilt (Wohl et al., 2006). Collective guilt is the emotion experienced when one perceives their own group to have committed immoral acts (Wohl et al., 2006). Historical blame is primarily different from collective guilt in three ways. First, the idea of historical blame solely focuses on past wrongs by group members for which the original perpetrators are not alive anymore. Thus, the historical dimension of time is important to its conceptualization. The objects of blame are group members separated in time from when the historical wrong took place and the actual perpetrators of the historical wrong. Collective guilt does not draw this distinction. Collective guilt is also experienced for contemporary wrongs by group members (Iyer et al., 2003). Thus, historical blame and collective guilt can be experienced for different events.

Second, collective guilt is affect-based or emotion-based, whereas judgments of blame are cognitive. It is conceptualized as the output of an information processing system that takes various criteria as inputs (Malle et al., 2014). The definition of collective guilt, in fact, presupposes that a blame judgment has already taken place. Third, collective guilt is a psychological experience primarily from the perspective of perpetrator group members, whereas

historical blame is a judgment that can be made from the viewpoint of the perpetrator, the victim, or a third party. That is, the subject of collective guilt is different from historical blame. People can blame their own group or other groups for past atrocities, whereas collective guilt is only about their own group's actions.

Taken together, these differences between historical blame and collective guilt suggest that historical blame may underlie feelings of collective guilt when events take place in the past and people are members of the perpetrator group. This is consistent with theories of emotion (Frijda et al., 1989; Mackie et al., 2000; Roseman et al., 1994) that suggest that emotions mediate the effects of cognitions on behavior. Thus, our study speaks to what might be considered as cognitive antecedents to the experience of the emotion of collective guilt, and thereby behavior such as support for reparations, apologies, and so forth. This is also consistent with recent work on intergroup reconciliation, which sees reconciliation as an emotion regulation process and cognitive change as an antecedent to that process (Čehajić-Clancy et al., 2016). We speculate that historical blame and its antecedents might provide the first input to the cognitive appraisal → emotion → behavior sequence proposed by theories of emotion (Frijda et al., 1989; Mackie et al., 2000; Roseman et al., 1994). It would therefore be useful in future work, to integrate work on historical blame with work on collective guilt, apologies, and forgiveness (Van Tongeren et al., 2014; Wohl et al., 2006) to get a full

understanding of both the cognitive and emotional processes operating in the contexts of historical wrongdoing.

### Strengths and Limitations

Our research has the following strengths. First, it extends the literature on blame and intergroup relationships by identifying the criteria involved in the historical blame process. Second, Studies 1 and 2 use a variety of real historical events from around the world, which help us generalize the relationship observed between our predictors and blame across situations. Typical studies only pick a few groups or events (Brown et al., 2008; Burns & Granz, 2022; Halperin et al., 2011; Starzyk & Ross, 2008, 2012; Wohl & Branscombe, 2005). This is a shortcoming because effects may be driven by idiosyncratic characteristics of the event. Our design avoids this problem. Third, studies about moral judgments predominantly involve studying the phenomenon in hypothetical situations with “raceless, genderless strangers,” and deprived of real-world context (Hester & Gray, 2020; Schein, 2020). Using real-world events in Studies 1 and 2 circumvents this limitation. We also establish causal relationships between our key predictors and blame using hypothetical events and groups in Studies 3 and 4. Fourth, although our studies used online and student samples of U.S. Americans, our studies used sample sizes larger and more diverse than have been typically used in past studies in the moral judgments and group processes literature. This is in contrast to the typical study in psychology, which mostly captures the psychological processes of White Americans and perpetuates epistemological bias against marginalized perspectives in science (Roberts et al., 2020; Salter & Adams, 2013). Our purposive oversampling of racial minority groups thus aimed to balance the analytic lens through which topics (such as historical blame) relevant to systemic power and privilege are studied (Salter & Adams, 2013). Fifth, we replicate our findings in two different types of samples which lends confidence to the validity and generalizability of our findings. Sixth, in answering our research question, we bring together the literature on moral judgments, group processes, and intergroup relations together from psychology, philosophy, legal studies, and politics.

Despite these strengths, there were some limitations. First, because we wanted to capture a diverse set of events and groups and because our samples were limited to U.S. Americans, we ended up with fewer events and groups in our studies that were personally and emotionally relevant to any particular ethnic, racial, or gender group member making the blame judgments. Thus, for some events in Studies 1 and 2 (and all events in Studies 3 and 4), the blame judgments in our study reflect the historical blame process as a third party. Although it is possible that the blame process may be different when people judge past events and groups in a conflict their own ancestors were involved in, the evidence from our studies is not clearly consistent with this. For example, we controlled for familiarity, and this did not meaningfully affect the estimates. We also estimated interactions between our key predictors and event location and group membership. Presumably, events located in the United States would be more relevant for our U.S. American sample. Similarly, presumably events where participants were members of either victim or perpetrator groups would be relevant for those participants. Across these different cases, we still found support for our predictions.

Although it is possible that these factors we considered did not directly tap into the relevance of all of the events, at this stage, we believe that the results suggest that the relationship between

predictors and blame is the same for personally or emotionally relevant events. More studies that focus on only personally relevant events will be necessary to confirm this, as some of our moderation tests had limited power to detect very small group differences (Supplemental Table S54). Notably, we predict similarity in the relationship between the key predictors and historical blame regardless of the judge’s identity. To the extent historical blame is attributed (by victim or perpetrator, by a citizen, or noncitizen), we expect that it will be determined by the key predictors to a similar degree for various people. Group differences should show up in the average differences in predictors and/or historical blame. That is, judging an atrocity in which one’s ancestors wronged against others might incline people to perceive less connectedness, less continued suffering, less continued benefit, and more fulfilled obligation. It might also incline them to attribute less historical blame. The crux of the historical blame process is that both these predictors and historical blame would move together in the predicted directions, even for people with different perspectives on the wrong.

Even if the historical blame process we captured is mostly from a third party’s perspective, they are still an important and useful phenomenon to understand. Third-party perspectives on historical wrongs are an understudied phenomenon in psychology (Vollhardt & Bilewicz, 2013). Groups and people are often put in a position to form such third-party judgments for both social and practical purposes with real-world implications, such as support for compensatory policies (Studies 3 and 4). We see this when the international community or national entities uninvolved in the original wrong frequently condemn another national group for its historical wrongs, often with implications for international relations (e.g., Armenian genocide, Erkoyun & Gumrukcu, 2021). Within a country, views of groups uninvolved in the original wrong have important political implications, such as their support for reparations or policies related to addressing historical wrongs in institutions such as schools and workplaces. For example, Pew recently found that the majority of all racial groups in the United States, except Black Americans, were against reparations for slavery (Pew Research Center, 2022). The extent of third-party blame toward perpetrators may go beyond shaping support for compensatory policies (such as in Studies 3 and 4) and shape other intergroup perceptions, such as trust, sympathy, caution, and threat, amongst others.

Second, our method for categorizing participants into victim and perpetrator groups may be another limitation. Consider the events where we categorized participants into victim or perpetrator groups based on their self-reported ethnicity. For example, for the event regarding Native American displacement, we categorized people who reported Native American as their ethnicity/race as a victim group member and people who reported White American as their ethnicity/race, as a perpetrator group member. We did not include measures of participants’ level of identification or attachment with these ethnic/racial groups, their subjective identification as “victims” and “perpetrators,” nor asked them about their direct descentance from original victims or perpetrators. These choices were made because group differences were not our primary focus, and we aimed to keep the study a manageable length. However, they might not have given us the complete picture of group membership and limited our inference about group differences in the historical blame process. Existing scholarship highlights the different ways members of victim and perpetrator groups might think of their status as “victim” or “perpetrator” (Bilali & Vollhardt, 2019). Future studies can thoroughly test these group differences by drawing out a more

complete picture of group membership and seeing if our results replicate.

Notably, our categorizations, although not perfect, were able to capture meaningful group differences. An analysis of the average levels of our predictors and historical blame in Studies 1 and 2 showed that victim and perpetrator groups differed on these variables in expected ways (Figures 4 and 5, Supplemental Tables S29–S32). These are in line with past literature on group differences in the construal of historical atrocities and trauma (Bilali & Vollhardt, 2019; Hirschberger, 2018; Li et al., 2023; Nelson et al., 2013; Shnabel & Nadler, 2008; Vollhardt & Bilewicz, 2013).

The third limitation of our studies was that we did not systematically include behavioral measures to test for their association with historical blame and its antecedents. We did include support for compensation in Studies 3 and 4 and found that historical blame might mediate the effects of the four factors on support for compensation. However, we are limited in that inference given that these were measured in the context of hypothetical events. Future research would benefit from systematically integrating the current research with behavioral intentions and actual behavioral outcomes. This could include measures such as signing a petition to support reparations or opposing the teaching of critical histories in school. These would help closely assess the practical implications of historical blame and its antecedents.

Fourth, our samples were restricted to U.S. participants which limits cross-cultural generalizability. Research in moral psychology suggests that culture shapes moral judgments in various ways, such as through religious differences, social ecology, and social institutions (Graham et al., 2016). Future work can test if historical blame and its antecedents work similarly in different cultural contexts.

Fifth, Studies 3 and 4 demonstrated a causal effect of our key predictors on historical blame. It is possible that the reverse causal relationship is also true; that is, people first experience blame and then try to rationalize that blame with different perceptions of the situation. We did not test this reverse causal relationship in our work, which would be an interesting future direction for our work. Such a relationship has been demonstrated for individual blame (Alicke, 2000; Ditto et al., 2009) and awaits demonstration for historical blame. Finding such a reciprocal relationship will not undermine our findings. It would suggest that historical blame and the predictors we have identified may have a mutually reinforcing relationship.

Finally, although we focused on these four factors, it is likely that there are other important factors as well that will add to the understanding of the historical blame phenomena. These should be theorized and investigated. For example, while our work did consider the connectedness of perpetrator group over time, it is also possible that connectedness of victim groups over time is also an important input to historical blame. Research on victim blame highlights victim characteristics that lessen blame toward the perpetrator (e.g., Alicke & Zell, 2009). This line of research suggests that victim characteristics, in addition to perpetrator characteristics, should be incorporated when studying blame. Our work focused on the straightforward components derived from the conceptual analysis of moral wrongdoing (i.e., perpetrators, their actions, their outcomes), which also mapped onto important components highlighted in theories of blame (Malle, 2021). However, future research on historical blame can incorporate aspects of blame that are relatively underemphasized in theories of blame, such as victim group characteristics (e.g., perceived morality of victim group over time).

## Conclusion

Many groups, societies, and nations are increasingly reckoning with the moral failings of their past, be it slavery, colonialism, genocide, wars, or invasions. These historical atrocities leave psychological legacies that have a direct bearing on intergroup relations in the present between those groups that had wronged and those that were wronged. In such times, one key question is: what would make a group free from blame for past wrongs?

Our research explored the question of when and why the past burdens the successors of some groups. In doing so, it highlights what would need to change (e.g., things perpetrator groups can do) to reduce blame and for intergroup relations to improve. For example, our work suggests that perpetrator groups need to show evidence that they have sufficiently changed their values and norms and are disconnected from their past members, or take action to ameliorate the legacy of the unjust past. Alternatively, it provides insight into psychological conditions under which perpetrator groups might accept blame and support actions that redress the continued impact of these wrongs, such as perceiving continued suffering or unearned benefits from the historical wrongs. Finally, historical wrongs play an important role in political discourse in many places around the world. Our research provides insight into the factors that can be used in political narratives to mobilize electoral support by inducing historical blame and promises for redress. Alternatively, it shows factors that can be used in political narratives to delink the past and present, diminish historical blame, and mobilize opposition against policies that redress past wrongs. Overall, it can help us better understand politics centered around invoking the past in the present and citizens' response to it. Future studies can test the function historical blame and its antecedents play in the context of interpersonal and intergroup group relations, support for restorative or preventative actions, and political discourse and action.

Here, we would note that not all blame reduction paths that we have identified might always lead to improvement in intergroup relations or bring about societal justice in the normative sense. For instance, imagine a scenario in which motivated political propaganda convinces members of victim groups that historical atrocities their group has suffered through have no bearing on their present conditions (i.e., there is no continued suffering from the past wrong). This might reduce historical blame toward current perpetrator groups and descriptively improve intergroup attitudes and harmony. However, such perceptions associated with blame reduction might not necessarily conform to the truth. Therefore, whether the “improvement” in intergroup relations that such perceptions bring about is normatively an improvement, from the perspective of justice and an accurate understanding of reality, is a complicated ethical matter needing philosophical or ethical addressal. There might be some ways that are more just than others in improving intergroup relations, a moral question worth asking.

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