Kluwer Mediation Blog

Scapegoating and other fallacious fun

Laura May Skillen · Friday, March 4th, 2022

Mediators are well acquainted with parties blaming one another for problems. Scapegoating in particular can get in the way of coming to terms, instead leading to an escalation of bad feelings and an increasingly toxic relationship. However, what is less well-known is that 'scapegoating' can mean and imply different things, each of which calls for different mediation techniques. This blog post will introduce the fallacy of scapegoating and a newly-identified fallacy of bad-be-gone, with strategies for dealing with each.

What's the difference between a fallacy and a cognitive bias?

Because this post deals with fallacies, which are often discussed in the same breath as 'cognitive biases', it is worth clarifying what the difference is. Cognitive biases are where our thoughts are distorted: for example, confirmation bias is where our thoughts are distorted by existing beliefs such that we are more likely to agree with things we already agree with and disregard other information, while one version of projection bias is where we think others are at the core similar to us, and prone to the same motivations and logics. There are many, *many* different types of cognitive bias.

Fallacies are a bit different—they are *reasoning* errors. Here, it's not that our thoughts are distorted, it's that our logic is (which might nevertheless lead to distorted perception).

What is scapegoating?

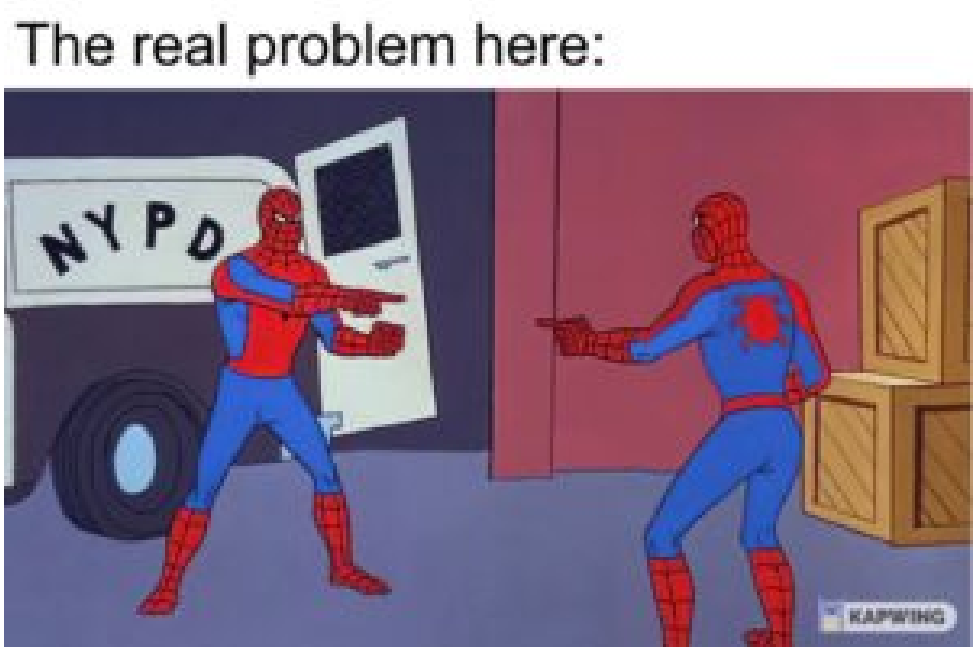
Bo Bennett, in his fabulous book on logical fallacies, describes scapegoating as "Unfairly blaming an unpopular person or group of people for a problem or a person or group that is an easy target for such blame" [1]. The core of the modern conception of scapegoating then involves blaming an undeserving Other, because they are easy to blame.

However, scapegoating historically has an additional meaning as "the transfer and disposal of evil" [2]. Saul Scheidlinger explains the term's origin as a story from Leviticus (16:8-10), where two goats are chosen for sacrifice. One is symbolically laden with the "sins of the Jewish people" [3] and then sent out to be devoured by a demon. The second goat, without added sins, is sacrificed in the temple (though as Scheidlinger points out, the fate of the 'good' goat is not discussed in the context of scapegoating). The goat that is sent off to be devoured is the 'scapegoat', and thanks to its ability to carry away sins, means that the people are rendered 'more good'. This notion of dying for others' sins and thereby rendering them more good is, needless to say, a rather important story

in the Christian Bible.

This second meaning of the word ‘scapegoating’ is then about projecting one’s problems onto an Other. We have feelings about this Other: either we despise them for their badness and therefore cast them out, or we see that we have the same bad qualities as the Other and pressure them to fix themselves. This makes for an uneasy relationship with our scapegoats (Figure 1).

Figure 1: Pointing the finger at our scapegoat and their bad qualities, though our scapegoat looks strangely familiar…



Introducing ‘bad-be-gone’

In my PhD research, I identified this secondary meaning of scapegoating as an informal fallacy—a fallacy based on content rather than form—and called it ‘bad-be-gone’. The central idea is that **punishing/removing a symbolic person or group of people will resolve underlying problems**—as when the cursed goat is sent off to be devoured by demons. In my Brexit case study, there was the notion that leaving the EU would solve any and all problems the UK might have.

The bad-be-gone fallacy is related to the fallacies of causal reductionism (assuming a single cause/reason when there are multiple) and oversimplified cause (something either is or is not a cause, rather than being one of multiple contributors)—though differs in that the blamed person may not necessarily have any relation to the ‘cause’ of problems. It also relates to the fallacy of *argumentum ad odium* (appeal to spite), where ill-will or hatred is substituted for evidence.

To summarise simply:

- scapegoating: we blame them because they’re easy to blame
- bad-be-gone: get rid of them and all my problems will go away

What do the fallacies of scapegoating and bad-be-gone imply for mediators?

Mediators and marriage counsellors alike already reframe problems from the individual on the other side of the table to the situation at hand ("it's not you against me, but us against the problem"). This can help to de-escalate tension and move parties to a problem-solving mindset, rather than a mindset of attack. To help in this process, when parties start blaming one another, it can be worth considering whether the fallacies of scapegoating or bad-be-gone are at play. While they can be related, each is associated with different mediation strategies and techniques. Tables 1 and 2 give examples of scapegoating and bad-be-gone; note how the phrasing in the examples differs, depending on what fallacy is being applied.

Scapegoating

Does one party appear to be *scapegoating* another simply because it's easy to do so? This reveals several things about their underlying needs and emotions. For instance, it indicates that the party recognises there is an underlying problem that needs solving and that they need the uncomfortable emotions and fall-out to go away. Perhaps they are using the scapegoat to let out frustration or to try and avoid shame. The mediator could use the party's recognition of the problem to move the situation forward to problem-solving. This can help avoid the uncomfortable emotions becoming the focus of discussion.

Table 1: Scapegoating examples and explanations

Scapegoating example	Explanation	Underlying needs and emotions (e.g.)	Actual problem (e.g.)
"If you'd double-checked the locks, the house wouldn't have been broken into."	A partner or child can be both easy and possible to blame, even though they did not break into the house themselves. They may be easier to blame than an unknown criminal who actually committed the crime.	Need to feel safe and secure at home; desire to restore these emotions by identifying a proximal cause.	Ensuring safety of the home.
"We couldn't proceed with the project because our administrative assistant forgot to schedule a meeting. As a result, we lost funding."	An assistant is easy to blame, even if it seems unlikely an entire project will fail because of one minor task being missed.	Need to feel in control and avoid emotions of guilt or shame for project failure or loss of funding. Desire to be seen as competent at work, make money etc.	Lack of processes in the workplace that ensure priority tasks are assigned and followed up.

“Our quality of life is suffering because they’re letting in too many immigrants.”	Foreign Others, who have fewer rights than citizens, are easy to blame, though there are multiple better reasons living standards might be declining. Migrants can be particularly easy to blame because the group is undefined and non-specific; this allows for ‘good’ immigrants that a person knows personally to be excluded from critique.	Desire to have a good quality of life and meet basic needs, plus avoid shame associated with sense of failure to meet own expectations or keep up with the Joneses.	Ability to meet basic needs; actual decline in living standards; mismatch between expectations and reality. (This is a complex issue!)

Key strategies against scapegoating:

- Identification of neutral shared problem
- Use of mirroring and other communication techniques to emerge parties’ needs
- Problem-solving

Bad-be-gone

Alternatively, perhaps one party is blaming the other because they don’t understand the complexity of the situation, or that the other party was not in fact involved. They think that getting rid of or punishing the second party will make all underlying problems go away (the fallacy of bad-be-gone). This may call for problem mapping, or a facilitated dialogue where the full nature of associated problems can be explored. However, this won’t by itself resolve any negative emotions that have become imbued in the relationship—it doesn’t feel good to have someone treat us as the sole cause of any issues, particularly if we feel those issues are not actually our fault. These emotions will need to be redressed if the parties do desire an ongoing relationship, perhaps through transformational means.

Table 2: Bad-be-gone examples and explanations

Bad-be-gone example	Explanation
“I’m sick of your irresponsibility; if you move out, we won’t have problems with people breaking into the house anymore.” “You’re grounded—maybe not seeing your friends this month will help you remember to lock the door.”	Here, there’s the perception that punishing or removing the partner/child would have stopped the problem and/or will stop the problem in future. Their forgetting to lock the door may have facilitated the break-in, but per the scapegoating example above, they themselves did not commit the break-in. It’s unlikely that getting rid of or punishing the partner/child will make the problem of security go away. Speaking like this will likely damage their relationship with that partner/child.
“Let’s fire the admin assistant who forgot to schedule the meeting; that way, we won’t have problems with projects in future.”	As above, there are other explanations for a project failing; firing the assistant and expecting things to change will not resolve underlying problems within the organisation. It may make other assistants and staff anxious about their jobs, leading to a toxic working environment.

“Once we leave the EU, our border security will improve, and our fishing industry will flourish once more.”	The UK always had border checks and migration controls; the EU freedom of movement only pertained to EU citizens, and there were limited entitlements to public funds and right to remain. Meanwhile, nearly half the UK’s fish was exported to the EU, and new customs controls would make this unfeasible/less profitable. In short, getting rid of the EU (or leaving it) would not resolve perceived issues with migration or the fishing industry. This type of discourse would also make it harder to have ongoing relations or negotiations with the EU, given the public could now feel more negative towards the body and critical towards politicians trying to make new deals with the EU.

Key strategies against bad-be-gone:

- Reality testing (will removing this person/group really make the problem go away?)
- Problem mapping and process-tracing
- Facilitated dialogue to explore underlying problem(s)
- Trust-building and empathy-generating processes to transform the parties’ relationship

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Laura May Skillen is the former Executive Director of the International Mediation Institute and a negotiation and mediation lecturer. Her doctoral research asked “in what ways does blame make villains in politics” and covered the gamut from literature studies and linguistics to psychology and neuroscience, victimology to political science. Her expertise includes emotions, polarisation, blame, and international politics. Feel free to connect with her on LinkedIn or ResearchGate—or even both!

References[+]

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