SEETHING BUT QUIET: POWER DIFFERENTIALLY
AFFECTS PUBLIC VS. PRIVATE EXPRESSIONS OF BLAME

by

Lauren Renae Ferber

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Approved by:

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Andrew Monroe, Ph.D., Thesis Director

_____
Shawn Bergman, Ph.D., Second Reader

_____
Andrew Smith, Ph.D., Departmental Honors Director

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Lauren Ferber

Appalachian State University

Abstract

Blame is an important social act that evolved to become an integral part of social regulation. Blame is associated with significant social costs for the person facing blame (e.g., social isolation, punishment) as well as for the person expressing blame (e.g., criticism if blame is improperly given). Because of these social costs, blame must be justified or warranted by the perpetrators mental states or the severity of the outcome. The current study suggests that power is a role constraint that will uniquely affect public blame while leaving private blame unaffected. Data show that when confronting moral violations people may privately blame as they please; however, deciding when and how to express public blame is constrained by social status and power.

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**Seething but Quiet: Power Differentially Affects Public vs. Private
Expressions of Blame**

People face social interactions every day and sometimes these interactions include

dealing with moral violations. Moral violations can range from something relatively small

(e.g., someone stealing a pack of pens from work) to something more severe (e.g., a

politician embezzling money). When moral violations occur, who and how to blame must be

determined; however, it is not uncommon for these blame judgments to appear different

across people. For example, famous TV personalities or major newscasters may loudly

proclaim a politician as corrupt while a neighbor or coworker might appear to be indifferent

towards the situation. The current study will investigate what might cause this difference in

blame judgments.

Social Importance of Blame

Blame is an important social act that evolved to become an integral part of social

regulation. Blame allows humans to regulate others' behaviors so they align with community

interests and social expectations for sharing, reciprocity, self-control, and recognition of

others. One prominent model that describes how people make moral judgments is the Path

Model of Blame (Malle, Guglielmo, & Monroe, 2014). According to this model, people

move through a number of information processing steps rights and vulnerabilities (Malle et

al., 2014).

The first step in this model is detection of a norm-breaking event. People are quick to

evaluate events that deviate from their own beliefs or norms (Van Berkum, Holleman,

Nieuwland, Otten, & Murre, 2009), and while this detection is mandatory in the process of

blaming, it can be done without appointing blame. For example, people might believe that a

behavior was bad, but not blameworthy (e.g., killing in self-defense). Once perceivers detect

a norm violation, they consider who caused the outcome (Cushman, 2008; Lagnado & Channon, 2008) and whether the causal agent is a morally eligible agent (Guglielmo, Monroe, & Malle, 2009). A baby might cause crayon marks on a wall, but most people would agree that a baby is not morally eligible to be blamed because the baby doesn't understand that the behavior was wrong.

Once a causal agent has been deemed morally eligible, intentionality is assessed. The concept of intentionality in adults is composed of five components: desire, belief, intention, skill, and awareness (Malle & Knobe, 1997). While intentionality is composed of these five components, people do not deliberate these components every time they make a moral judgment, but rather quickly calculate intentionality (Barrett, Todd, Miller, & Blythe, 2005). Lastly, for intentional acts people consider a person's reasons and justifications for acting. Undesirable actions are often fueled by unpleasant reasons, however an action that is deemed justified (e.g., standing up against a bully) is blamed less (Howe, 1991). For unintentional behaviors people consider a person's obligation (e.g., *should* they have prevented the event) and capacity (e.g., *could* they have prevented the event) to prevent the event are considered. If the agent should of, and could of, prevented the event, blame could still be assigned even if the event was unintentional.

Critical to this model are two assumptions. First, that people can move through the process of blaming as outlined above quickly and intuitively. Thus people need not consciously reflect on every step of the model. Seeing a person laughing happily while holding a smoking gun over a corpse would allow people to fill in all of the information needed to make a blame judgment without having to spend time on reflection.

The second critical assumption is that blame originated, and still functions, as a social regulator. Blame is associated with significant social costs for the person facing blame (e.g., social isolation, punishment) as well as for the person expressing blame (e.g., criticism if blame is improperly given). Because of these social costs, blame must be justified or warranted by the perpetrators mental states or the severity of the outcome. When people are blamed without warrant, they perceive events to be more immoral and have a more negative effect on personal relationships (Mikula, Scherer, & Athenstaedt, 1998). Because of these social costs there is an important distinction between blame judgments that people make privately compared to *publicly* expressed judgments.

Private vs. public blame

Voiklis and Malle (2016) created a model for processes of social and moral cognition in the context of social regulation of norm violations. Once a perceiver arrives at a private blame judgment, he or she must decide whether *public* moral criticism is warranted. At this point if warrant meets the threshold (and this threshold can vary across people and situations), public blame or criticism is likely to be delivered. Public judgments of blame must be warranted because of the social cost of blaming and being blamed (e.g., damaged reputation, the possibility of reactive aggression), thus people may be reluctant to express blame if they feel the judgment is not sufficiently warranted. Contrastingly, private judgment of blame does not face the same level of scrutiny (because they exist only in one's head), and therefore one can blame privately as much as one likes. Voiklis and Malle (2016) hypothesized that other considerations, such as role constraints may inhibit public blame judgments and criticism. The current study suggests that power is one such role constraint that will uniquely affect public blame while leaving private blame unaffected.

Social Power and its Behavioral Effects

Power has been defined in a variety of ways; some definitions focus on the ability to socially influence others, while other definitions are focused on where power is located and distributed, or the experience of feeling power (e.g., emotional experience) (Keltner, Gruenfeld, & Anderson, 2003). French and Raven (1959) suggest that power consists of the following bases: reward-, coercive-, legitimate-, expert-, and referential-power. Reward power is thought to come from the perception that an agent has the ability to mediate rewards (e.g., if goals are reached, one receives an end-of-year bonus). Coercive power is similar to reward based power; the difference stems from the expectation of punishment if there is a failure to conform (e.g., if goals are not reached, one is fired) rather than expectation of rewards. Legitimate power, sometimes also referred to as authority power, draws from the perception that an agent has a legitimate right to influence others. The legitimate right to influence is followed by an obligation to accept this influence (e.g., parents restricting their child's activities). Expert power is given when an agent is thought to have special knowledge or expertise (e.g., an IT specialist fixing a computer). Referent power is drawn from identification, or feeling of oneness, with an agent or group (e.g., charismatic leader who makes others feel comfortable in their presence). Maner, Kaschak, and Jones (2010) describe power as the ability to influence the outcomes of other people. Similarly, Keltner et al. (2003) define power as an individual's capacity to modify others states by providing or withholding resources or administering punishment; in this case, both resources and punishment can be material or social. Importantly, common across all of these definitions is a view that power involves the ability to influence others.

Power is often seen as the force behind displays of actions, such that individuals with power are more action oriented than those without power, even when power is not directly experienced (Galinksy, Gruenfeld, & Magee, 2003). Further, some research suggests, that the effects of power may spill into the moral domain. For example, people with power are more likely to violate politeness-related communication norms (Brown & Levinson, 1987) or to behave in hostile ways (Keltner, Capps, Kring, Young, & Heerey, 2001).

Galinsky et al. (2003) specifically studied if concepts and behavioral tendencies associated with power are activated whenever possession of power is implied or when a past experience is recalled. The first experiment found that participants who possessed structural power in a group task were more likely to act than those who did not have power, even though power and action were two different contexts in this study. In experiment two, participants were asked to recall a situation where they either possessed power over someone else, or in which someone else possessed power over them. Participants primed with high power were more likely to act against an annoying stimulus, suggesting that the experience of power leads to goal-directed behavior. The final experiment showed that priming high power (in the same way as experiment two) led to action in a social situation regardless of whether that action had prosocial or antisocial consequences.

Maner et al. (2010) looked further into power influencing action and found that not only does power raise approach-oriented tendencies (e.g., positive affect, attention to rewards, socially inappropriate behavior), but it also has a direct effect on low level processes in the motor system. Priming power made participants more likely to move their hand closer to the immediate environment when responding to auditory cues. These effects on action are thought to be largely influenced by power activating behavioral approach systems. Further,

Keltner et al. (2003) showed that individuals with high power show positive affect, attention to rewards, automatic information processing, and disinhibited behavior, while those with low power show negative affect, attention to punishment/others interests, controlled information processing, and inhibited social behavior.

Together, the previous research shows that power has a significant impact on behavioral tendencies such as approach orientation, affect, and information processing. However, while the existing work clearly demonstrates the effect of power increasing approach motivations in non-moral domains, it remains unclear whether power would have a similar effect on decisions of moral import such as *publicly* expressing moral judgments of blame.

The Current Experiment

The current study will investigate the role power plays in private and public blame decisions. Our hypothesis is rooted in Voiklis and Malle's (2016) model for processes of social and moral cognition. Based on this model and other research discussed, we hypothesize that private judgments about blame will be high and consistent across power conditions (high, low, and control) because it is not subject to scrutiny from peers. By contrast, we predict that power will intensify people's expressions of public blame relative to low power or control. Previous research suggests that power increases approach oriented tendencies (e.g., positive affect, attention to rewards, socially inappropriate behavior), which suggests that people with high power are more likely to express what others hold in (Anderson & Berdahl, 2002; Briñol, Petty, Valle, Rucker, & Becerra, 2007).

Method

Participants

Participants (*n* = 189) were undergraduate students from Appalachian State University who were completing studies for credit. The sample was largely composed of females (*n* = 140), and the average age in the sample was 19.6 years (*SD* = 1.37). The majority of participants identified as White (83.6%), with fewer participants identifying as African American (5.8%), Asian (5.3%), Latin/Hispanic (3.7%), Middle Eastern (1.1%), or Native American (.5%).

Materials and Procedure

Participants were tested in a lab setting in groups of one to three. Before beginning the study, participants signed an informed consent and were given time to ask questions. Participants were told that they would be completing two separate studies. The experimenter informed participants that the first study was a pilot study on student experiences. The power manipulation was embedded in this first task. Using the same manipulation task as Galinsky et al. (2003), participants were randomly assigned to one of three writing tasks: high-power, low-power, and control. Participants assigned to the high power condition (*n* = 64) were asked to write about a situation where they controlled the ability of another person or persons to get something they wanted, or were in a position to evaluate those individuals. Participants in the low-power condition (*n* = 65) were asked to recall a time when someone else had control over your ability to get something you wanted, or was in a position to evaluate you. Finally, participants in the control condition (*n* = 60) were asked to write about an activity that they do every day.

After participants completed the writing task, participants were told that they had completed the first study and would move on to the other study which focused on making judgments of others. Participants were told that they would read about two participants (Andy and Jon) who played an economic game in a previous laboratory experiment. The game the Andy and Jon played was described as follows:

Each player was paid $5 for participating in the experiment, but could increase their earnings by playing a game where they could contribute money to a shared pool. Whatever money they contributed to the pool would be multiplied by 4, split, and then returned to the players. If one player contributes $0 to the pool, but the other player contributes at least $1, then the person who contributed $0 gets all of the money. If both players contribute $0 neither of them wins any money AND they lose the $5 they started out with. Each player made their contribution decision confidentially; however, players were allowed to chat using an instant messaging program before making their decisions.

Participants then read a supposed transcript of a text conversation between Andy and Jon. In the conversation Andy and Jon each agree to contribute all of their $5 stake to the pool; however, after Jon makes his contribution decision, Andy defects, winning the game, and resulting in Jon losing his $5.

After reading the scenario, participants responded to two questions (in a counterbalanced order): (1) participants were asked, to rate, privately, how much blame they thought Andy deserved on a 1 (no blame at all) to 9 (extreme blame) Likert scale, and (2), participants responded to an open-ended question where they were asked to describe what

they would say to Andy if they saw him face-to-face. Afterwards, participants completed a

demographics questionnaire and were then thanked and debriefed.

Results

The current study tested two hypotheses. In line with Voiklis and Malle (2016), we

predicted that feeling powerful would intensify people's expressions of public blame relative

to the low-power or control conditions. Contrastingly, we predicted that private blame

judgments, because they are unobservable, would be high and consistent across conditions.

Prior to analyses, two RAs who were blind to condition coded the open-ended responses for

the public blame question ($\alpha = .95$). We then conducted a one way to examine the effects of

power on the severity of participants' expressions of public blame. The ANOVA revealed a

significant effect of power on public blame; $F(2, 188) = 9.25$, $p < .001$, $d = .63$ (see Figure

1). A Tukey post hoc test indicated that public blame in the high power condition was

significantly harsher compared to both the low power condition ($p < .001$) and the control

condition ($p = .001$); however, there was not a significant difference between the low power

and control conditions ($p = .97$). By contrast, examining the effect of power on private blame

showed that manipulating power did not significantly affect private blame $F(2, 188) = 1.83$, p
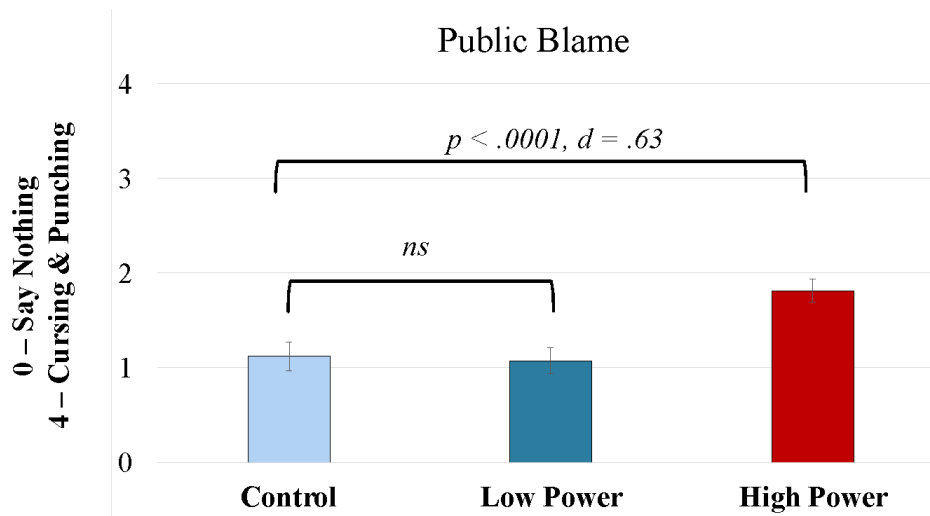
$= .163$ (See Figure 2).

Figure 1. Power increased people's willingness to express public blame toward third parties relative to control and low power conditions. Error bars = ±1 SE.
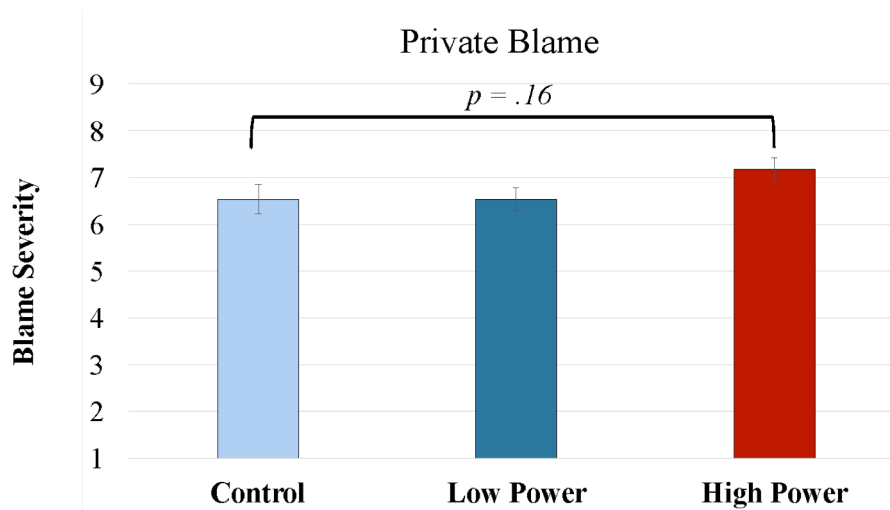

Figure 2. Private blame remained strong and constant across the power manipulation conditions. Error bars = ±1 SE.

Discussion

The current study examined the effect of power on moral behavior, specifically, how power affects private versus public blame judgments. The data show that priming people with high power intensified expressions of public blame: what people would actually say or do to a person committing a moral transgression. Contrastingly, private blame judgments

remained severe across conditions (control, low power, high power). These findings support our hypotheses that while power appears to unleash public expressions of blame, private blame judgments remain unaffected.

One explanation for these findings is that the social constraints on public judgments of blame, namely needing to produce judgments that are warranted (i.e., justified), limit people's willingness to publicly express blame. When blame is inappropriately expressed, there can be major social costs (e.g., loss of face, loss of status, reactive aggression). Power may allow people to expresses public blame because it allows people to feel more confident and justified in their judgments (Brown & Levinson, 1987; Galinsky et al., 2003; Keltner et al., 2001; Keltner et al., 2003; Maner et al., 2010). That is, being high power, even temporarily, may make people more confident that the level of blame they are expressing is appropriate. While the present studies do not test this possibility, ongoing work in the lab will examine whether this greater sense of justification is associated with willingness to express harsher public expressions of blame. For example, we will collect ratings of "rightness" or appropriateness of public blame. If high-power people perceive their own social blaming as more right or appropriate compared to low-power people, that would be a first piece of evidence that power increases feelings of warrant, which in turn disinhibits public expressions of blame.

Additionally, future work should consider possible moderators of our effect. Power is not static but interacts with contextual factors, culture, and individual difference variables (Keltner et al., 2003). For example, one potential moderator is whether power is solid versus tenuous (e.g., if the position is easily overthrown). One might predict that when power is solid, public blame will be harsher because there are little to no repercussions for

inappropriate actions. By contrast, when power is tenuous, blame judgments might be kept private because of the possibility of power being taken away or status removed.

The current study found that those with power are more likely to express feelings of blame, which may allow them to have their opinion heard and frustrations released. On the other hand, those with low power appear to hold feelings of frustration or anger in, and may perceive that their opinions do not matter. The difference in ability to healthily express frustration may differentially affect workplace satisfaction, such that those who do not express frustration are less likely to feel satisfied than those that actively express their annoyance. In order to combat this possible effect, human resource departments could focus on developing environments where all members feel comfortable voicing frustrations in a healthy manner.

Overall, we know that people face social interactions every day, and sometimes these interactions include dealing with moral violations. Moral violations can range from something relatively small (e.g., someone stealing a pack of pens from work) to something more severe (e.g., a politician embezzling money). The present work demonstrates that when confronting these moral violations people may privately blame as they please; however, deciding when and how to express public blame is constrained by social status and power.

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