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What is This?
A Case of Collective Responsibility: Who Else Was to Blame for the Columbine High School Shootings?

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Two studies examined perceptions of collective responsibility for the April 20, 1999, shootings at Columbine High School in Littleton, Colorado. Collective responsibility refers to the perception that others, besides the wrongdoers themselves, are responsible for the event. In Study 1, the authors assessed perceptions of the shooters’ parents and their peer group (the Trenchcoat Mafia), whereas Study 2 tested perceptions of collective responsibility across a range of groups. In both studies, perceptions of a target group’s entitativity predicted judgments of collective responsibility. This relationship was mediated by two situational construals that justify applying collective responsibility: responsibility by commission (encouraging or facilitating the event) and responsibility by omission (failing to prevent the event). Study 2 also determined that perceptions of authority predicted judgments of collective responsibility for the Columbine shootings and was mediated by inferences of omission. Future directions in collective responsibility research are discussed.

**Keywords:** collective responsibility; responsibility; entitativity; blame; interdependence; attribution

On April 20, 1999, a tragedy struck Littleton, Colorado. Two students, Eric Harris and Dylan Klebold, entered their high school and brutally killed 12 of their classmates and a teacher. The two young men then committed suicide in the school library, where many of their victims were slain. In the days that followed, news coverage of the event gripped the United States and evoked intense discussion in the public at large. Who was, in fact, ultimately to blame for this horrible incident? It was unambiguous that Eric Harris and Dylan Klebold carried out the actions that resulted in the deaths of their victims. Nonetheless, in the minds of many, blame for the incident was not confined to the young men but extended to parents, friends, and others with whom the killers were associated. Instances such as this, in which blame is extended beyond those who committed a blameworthy event, can be described as instances of collective responsibility (Feinberg, 1970; May, 1987). The goal of the present research was to understand how people make judgments of collective responsibility in everyday life by focusing specifically on the factors that predicted how lay people judged collective responsibility for the killings at Columbine High School.

Most analyses of perceived responsibility, beginning with Heider’s (1958) seminal examination of lay social reasoning, focus on understanding how people judge the responsibility of individuals for their actions (Shaver, 1985; Weiner, 1995). Much less work has been done to understand people’s reactions to events, such as the Columbine High School shootings, in which others besides the individual(s) who directly carried out the act also are blamed for the event. Our goal is to investigate situations...
in which others who are not behaviorally involved in an event might be blamed for it. Although a few writers (e.g., V. L. Hamilton, 1978, 1986; V. L. Hamilton & Sanders, 1981; May, 1987; Sanders et al., 1996; Shultz, Jaggi, & Schleifer, 1987) have considered when and why others besides the individual who carried out a blameworthy act may be blamed for that act, no one has laid out and tested a larger framework of the variables that are likely to play a role in making these judgments. Our research of the Columbine shootings was aimed at testing a theoretical model in which we examined perceivers’ assessment of the nature of the association between the killers and others, as well as perceivers’ construal of the event itself, to predict the extent of collective responsibility assigned to different targets.

**Association Between Wrongdoer and Others as a Basis for Assigning Collective Responsibility**

Our analysis (see also Lickel, 2000) begins with the assumption that the degree of perceived association between a wrongdoer and others will influence the assignment of collective responsibility. In particular, we hypothesized that the nature of the group to which the wrongdoer belongs may influence the extent to which other members of that group are held responsible for the person’s actions. Recent research on the perception of group entitativity suggests that lay people see some groups as being particularly tight-knit entities in which group members are bound closely together in some fashion. Entitativity (Campbell, 1958) is the perception that a group is a unified and coherent whole in which the members are perceived to be bonded together in some way (e.g., Gaertner & Schopler, 1998; D. L. Hamilton, Sherman, & Castelli, 2002; Lickel, Hamilton, & Sherman, 2001; Lickel et al., 2000; Welbourne, 1999; Yzerbyt, Corneille, & Estrada, 2001). This research literature has documented not only that people see variability among groups in their perceived entitativity but also that perceivers have a rich intuitive understanding of the characteristics and operation of different types of social groups. In our view, people use this knowledge about social groups to understand and make inferences about events related to groups, including making judgments of collective responsibility (Lickel et al., 2001). In analyzing people’s reactions to the Columbine shootings, our hypothesis was that those groups perceived to be closest to Harris and Klebold would be held most responsible for the actions of the two shooters.

Beyond a group’s entitativity, however, we also hypothesized that the nature of the authority relationship between the wrongdoer and the target of responsibility would predict the extent to which the target was held responsible. Congruent with the analyses of others (e.g., V. L. Hamilton & Sanders, 1981), we hypothesized that authority figures are often held responsible for the actions of subordinates, even if they themselves had no direct causal relation to the misdeed that was carried out. Indeed, in legal settings, authority over a wrongdoer forms the primary basis for collective or vicarious responsibility (Hart & Honore, 1959.) Thus, we predicted that groups and individuals with more authority over Harris and Klebold would be perceived to be more collectively responsible for the Columbine shootings.

Although instances of collective responsibility have not been widely examined, there is some evidence that perceivers blame people other than the person who committed a blameworthy act (Chiu & Hong, 1992). Other findings support the role of authority as a predictor of collective responsibility. For example, Shultz et al. (1987) and Sanders et al. (1996) studied the effect of authority on collective responsibility judgments and verified that superiors were held more responsible for a wrongdoer’s actions than were peers of the wrongdoer. Nonetheless, in spite of past theory on the subject, no research has directly measured the extent to which perceivers’ perceptions of entitativity between a wrongdoer and another person are related to judgments of collective responsibility. Thus, one of our primary questions regarding people’s reactions to the Columbine shootings concerned the extent to which perceptions of entitativity and authority predict the people and groups that were considered responsible for Harris and Klebold’s killings.

**Situational Construals That Predict Judgments of Collective Responsibility**

A further goal of our research was to understand why perceptions of entitativity and authority would predict collective responsibility judgments for the Columbine shootings. Perhaps any indication of an association to a wrongdoer cues the perceiver to extend blame to that person. We believe that the process is a bit more complicated. Because people’s judgments of collective responsibility are part of an attempt to make sense of threatening situations, their reasoning is likely to include construals of the event that substantiate their beliefs about who is to blame. Thus, we proposed that perceptions of entitativity and authority predict judgments of collective responsibility because they cue certain construals about the event that seem to justify holding individuals collectively responsible for another’s wrongdoing. Our model focuses on two construals that have been identified in previous philosophical treatments of collective responsibility (e.g., Feinberg, 1970; May, 1987).

May (1987), in particular, suggested two reasons why a person who did not make a direct causal contribution to
an event may nonetheless be held responsible for the event. First, people may be held responsible if they indirectly encouraged or benefited from the conduct of the blameworthy person who carried out the negative action. Thus, for example, a person at a demonstration might be held responsible (morally, if not legally) for violent acts committed by others at the demonstration because the person’s presence at the demonstration helped to create the conditions for the violence and acted to encourage the violent acts committed by others. This first justification for collective responsibility can be described as an inference of responsibility by commission. Second, May (1987) argued that people could be held responsible for the actions of others because they should have prevented the blameworthy action committed by the other person. Thus, people at a demonstration may be held responsible for the violent acts of others because they should have acted to prevent the violence from taking place. This second justification for collective responsibility can be described as an inference of responsibility by omission.

Psychologists have invoked the ideas of omission (e.g., V. L. Hamilton, 1986; Shultz et al., 1987) and commission (e.g., Sanders et al., 1996) in their writings on collective responsibility, but until the present research there has not been an empirical assessment of the extent to which these inferences are related to perceivers’ judgments of collective responsibility. We propose that these construals are cued by the nature of the association a target has to a wrongdoer and serve to justify holding that individual responsible even in the absence of any evidence of that person’s direct involvement in the act.

A Model of Collective Responsibility

The ideas we have developed can be summarized in a model of collective responsibility, shown in Figure 1. The model proposes that there is a relationship between people’s perceptions of the association between a wrongdoer and a potential target of collective responsibility such that higher perceived entitativity leads to greater perceptions of collective responsibility. However, the model also proposes that that relationship is mediated by two possible inferences about the event, responsibility by commission and responsibility by omission. These inferences are used by the perceiver to explain why the judgment of collective responsibility applies in a given instance. The model further proposes that persons or groups with authority over the wrongdoer are more likely to be judged collectively responsible and that this relationship is most often mediated by inferences of omission. We tested the predictions in two studies assessing judgments of collective responsibility for the shootings that took place at Columbine High School in Littleton, Colorado, on April 20, 1999.

STUDY 1

Study 1 was conducted 9 days after the killings occurred. The study specifically focused on two groups that media reports indicated were the primary targets of collective responsibility judgments: the parents of the two young men (Eric Harris and Dylan Klebold) and a group called the Trenchcoat Mafia, a peer group with whom Harris and Klebold were associated. Although we expected perceivers to rate both groups as having high collective responsibility for the shootings, we hypothesized that their judgments for the two groups would be driven by different construals of the event. Based on past theoretical and legal writings arguing that parents and other authority figures may be held responsible for reasons of omission (e.g., Hart & Honore, 1959), we hypothesized that construals of responsibility by omission (failure to prevent the event) would primarily predict judgments of responsibility for the parents. Construals of responsibility by commission (facilitating or encouraging the event) were expected to primarily predict judgments of responsibility of the Trenchcoat Mafia.

Furthermore, although both target groups were expected to be rated high in perceived entitativity, we further hypothesized that individual differences among participants in their perceptions of entitativity between Harris and Klebold and their parents, and Harris and Klebold and the Trenchcoat Mafia, would predict the extent to which participants assigned responsibility to the parents and to the members of the Trenchcoat Mafia. Finally, we hypothesized that this relationship between entitativity and collective responsibility for both target groups would be mediated by perceivers’ inferences of commission and omission.

Method

Participants

Participants were 113 individuals recruited at the University Center at the University of California, Santa Barbara, 9 days after the shootings.
MATERIALS AND PROCEDURES

Potential participants were approached by a researcher and were informed that a study was being conducted regarding the “recent shootings at Columbine High School in Colorado,” that the survey would take approximately 15 min, and that they would be paid $2 for their participation. Those who agreed to participate were given a questionnaire and were told that we were specifically interested in learning their opinion about the degree to which other people, besides the two men who committed the killings, should be considered responsible for the event. The questionnaire contained sets of questions about their perceptions of the parents and the Trenchcoat Mafia (the order of these sections was counterbalanced across participants). Participants rated all questions on 9-point scales with descriptive anchors at each end of the scale. Upon completion of the packet, participants were fully debriefed by the researcher and were paid for their participation.

Collective responsibility. Collective responsibility for each group was assessed as the degree to which members of the group should be considered responsible or be held accountable for the shootings (parents \( \alpha = .73 \), Trenchcoat Mafia \( \alpha = .90 \)).

Perceived entitativity. The perceived entitativity of each target group was assessed as the cohesiveness, the amount of interaction, and the degree to which Harris and Klebold were considered core members versus peripheral members of the group (parents \( \alpha = .83 \), Trenchcoat Mafia \( \alpha = .73 \)).

Situational construals: Responsibility by commission and by omission. The four questions that assessed perceptions of commission asked the degree to which members of each group were perceived to have directly or indirectly contributed to the event, knew about some or all of the plans to attack the high school, shared Harris and Klebold’s negative attitudes toward Columbine High School, and were secretly or privately glad that Harris and Klebold engaged in their killing spree. The four questions created to assess perceptions of omission asked the degree to which members of each group should have prevented the killings, should have known about Harris and Klebold’s plan, had the ability to prevent the killings, and had a responsibility to prevent the killings if they had knowledge of the plan to attack the high school. For each of the two target groups, the above eight items were submitted to separate maximum likelihood factor analyses with oblique rotation. These analyses yielded the same general pattern for both groups. The four items intended to index perceptions of omission all loaded on one factor (which accounted for 23% of the variance for parents and 9% of the variance for the Trenchcoat Mafia), and the four items intended to index commission all loaded on a second factor (which accounted for 14% of the variance for parents and 39% of the variance for the Trenchcoat Mafia). Based on the results of these parallel analyses, we created composite indices of parental omission (\( \alpha = .64 \)) and commission (\( \alpha = .60 \)) that were only modestly correlated, \( r = .29, p < .01 \), as well as composite measures of Trenchcoat omission (\( \alpha = .62 \)) and commission (\( \alpha = .84 \)) that were also positively correlated, \( r = .61, p < .001 \), but still distinct.

Results

MEAN COMPARISONS OF THE TWO GROUPS

A series of paired sample \( t \) tests tested mean differences in perceptions of the two target groups. Of interest, participants believed that the Trenchcoat group (\( M = 4.61 \)) and the parents (\( M = 4.94 \)) should be held equally responsible for the shootings, \( t(111) = 1.21, \text{ ns} \). These mean ratings are important in documenting that participants perceived a considerable degree of collective responsibility for both groups (nearly to the midpoint of the 9-point scale), even though there were not allegations that either the parents or the Trenchcoat Mafia had been directly involved in the shootings.

Although both groups were rated as equally responsible, we hypothesized that participants would hold the two groups responsible for the shooters’ actions for different reasons. Specifically, we predicted that participants would perceive the Trenchcoat group as having contributed to the event to a greater degree than the parents (i.e., responsibility by commission), whereas the parents would be viewed as having failed to prevent the event to a greater degree than the Trenchcoat group (i.e., responsibility by omission). As predicted, the Trenchcoat Mafia was seen as more likely to have contributed to the actions of the shooters (\( M = 6.03 \)) than were the parents (\( M = 3.14 \)), \( t(112) = -15.97, p < .001 \). However, participants perceived both groups to be equally guilty of failing to prevent the event from occurring (\( M = 6.87 \) for parents, \( M = 6.81 \) for Trenchcoat), \( t(112) = .37, \text{ ns} \). Again, these high mean values reflect the extent to which both groups were perceived as responsible in this respect.

Finally, there were differences in the perceived entitativity of the two target groups. The two shooters were perceived as being more tightly interconnected with the Trenchcoat group (\( M = 6.48 \)) than with their respective parents (\( M = 3.54 \)), \( t(106) = -14.97, p < .001 \). This difference was not expected and will be discussed below.
PREDICTING PERCEPTIONS OF COLLECTIVE RESPONSIBILITY

Although the mean differences reported above provide some support for our hypotheses that different groups can be held collectively responsible for different reasons, our next set of analyses provided a more precise test of these hypotheses by examining the unique contributions of each situational construal (i.e., responsibility by commission and omission) for predicting judgments of collective responsibility for the parents versus the Trenchcoat Mafia. Thus, for each group, a regression analysis was conducted in which inferences of commission and omission were simultaneously entered as predictors of collective responsibility.

Trenchcoat Mafia: Responsibility by commission. Results of the first simultaneous regression analysis revealed that both commission (\(\beta = .52, p < .001\)) and omission (\(\beta = .25, p < .01\)) were significant, unique predictors of judgments of collective responsibility for members of the Trenchcoat Mafia. However, examination of the squared part correlations revealed that perceived commission uniquely explained 17% of the variance in collective responsibility judgments for the Trenchcoat group, whereas perceived omission uniquely explained only 4% of the variance. A test of the difference between the standardized regression coefficients (see Cohen & Cohen, 1983, Appendix 2) confirmed that commission was the stronger predictor of Trenchcoat members’ responsibility, \(t(109) = 17.25, p < .001\).

Parents: Responsibility by omission. The second regression analysis also revealed that both parental commission (\(\beta = .33, p < .01\)) and omission (\(\beta = .50, p < .001\)) were unique and significant predictors of collective responsibility judgments for the shooters’ parents. However, squared part correlations showed that responsibility by omission uniquely accounted for 23% of the variance in collective responsibility responses for the parents, whereas responsibility by commission uniquely accounted for only 10% of the variance. Again, the difference in magnitude between these two coefficients was significant, \(t(108) = 13.38, p < .001\). Thus, as predicted, the parents were held responsible primarily for reasons of omission, whereas the Trenchcoat Mafia had been held responsible primarily for reasons of commission.  

ENTITATIVITY AND RESPONSIBILITY

In our third set of analyses, we tested our hypothesis that the direct relationship between perceived entitativity and collective responsibility would be mediated through the two situational construals of responsibility by commission and omission. Because we hypothesized that these mediators would function differently for the two groups, we conducted these analyses separately for the Trenchcoat Mafia and the parents using procedures outlined by Baron and Kenny (1986).

Trenchcoat Mafia. Results of the analysis for the Trenchcoat group supported the prediction that higher ratings of entitativity predicted higher levels of collective responsibility, \(\beta = .43, p < .001\). (Perceptions of entitativity accounted for 18.8% of the variance in collective responsibility judgments for the Trenchcoat group.) This represents the relationship to be mediated. We already know from analyses described previously that both commission and omission were significantly related to judgments of collective responsibility for the Trenchcoat group. Furthermore, results of two regression analyses revealed that entitativity was a significant predictor of both responsibility by commission, \(\beta = .50, p < .001\), and responsibility by omission, \(\beta = .38, p < .001\), the two potential mediating variables. Finally, the direct relationship between entitativity and collective responsibility was no longer significant after controlling for these two mediators, \(\beta = .11, ns\). Sobel tests of the mediational roles of commission (\(z = 3.938, p < .001\)) and omission (\(z = 2.343, p < .05\)) were both significant. These results are consistent with the hypothesis that inferences of commission and omission mediate the relationship between perceptions of entitativity and judgments of collective responsibility.

Parents. Results of the analysis for parents did not support the hypothesis that differences in participants’ ratings of entitativity of the boys’ families would predict ratings of collective responsibility, \(\beta = -.15, ns\). Thus, mediational tests were not pursued for judgments of the parents. We address this analytical outcome below and outline hypotheses for why it occurred.

Discussion

This study is one of the first to examine judgments of collective responsibility for an actual event. Furthermore, it is the first study to empirically demonstrate that two alternative situational construals (responsibility by commission and responsibility by omission) operate independently to predict judgments of collective responsibility. For those in a position of authority (the shooters’ parents), judgments of collective responsibility were predicted primarily by omission. In contrast, members of a peer group such as the Trenchcoat Mafia were held collectively responsible primarily by commission. In addition, variation among participants in the extent to which they saw the Trenchcoat Mafia as high in entitativity strongly predicted judgments of collective responsibility, and this relationship was mediated both by inferences of commission and omission.

Although the results of Study 1 provided an informative perspective on collective responsibility judgments
for the Columbine High School shootings, a number of questions and issues remain. One unresolved issue concerns the low ratings of entitativity for the boys’ families, a result that is surprising in light of our past research in which families were rated extremely high in entitativity compared to other groups (Lickel et al., 2000). Our interpretation of this surprising result is that the low ratings of the parents may have reflected a belief that, in light of the events that transpired, these young men probably did not come from families with close relationships. Even if this inference is valid, perceivers probably still consider these young men to be closer to their parents than with most other groups, and this assessment of relative entitativity is probably what underlies perceivers’ judgments of collective responsibility. Thus, we hypothesized that if perceptions of the parents were assessed in a context of other potentially relevant reference groups for Harris and Klebold, the entitativity ratings for their families would be high relative to other groups. Moreover, the variation in perceived entitativity among different groups should predict which groups were perceived to be collectively responsible for the shootings.

We tested these ideas with a second study completed 1 month after the shootings. Participants in Study 2 were asked to evaluate a variety of groups (including the parents and the Trenchcoat Mafia) whose relationship to the killers had been discussed by the media. Rather than predicting individual difference variance in the extent to which participants considered a particular group (such as the parents) responsible, in Study 2 we used a nested correlational design in which each participant rated 14 groups. We then analyzed the extent to which the between-group differences in perceived entitativity predicted the extent of collective responsibility assigned to those groups. We also examined the extent to which perceivers’ inferences of commission and omission for these different groups mediated the relationship between entitativity and collective responsibility. Finally, to more directly investigate the relationship between authority and responsibility for the Columbine shootings and to determine whether it was mediated through inferences of omission rather than commission, participants also rated the authority of each group in relation to Harris and Klebold.

STUDY 2

Method

PARTICIPANTS

Participants were 109 persons recruited at the University of California, Santa Barbara, University Center 1 month after the shootings. They were paid $5 dollars for participating.

MATERIALS AND PROCEDURE

The procedure followed that described in Study 1. Materials were contained in a questionnaire packet that assessed perceptions of a sample of 14 groups. These groups (shown in Table 1) were selected on the basis of media reports indicating that they had some potential relevance to the Columbine shootings. For each item in the questionnaire, the entire sample of groups was assessed on a single page of the questionnaire. For example, the question regarding the degree to which each group should be held accountable for the shootings was contained on one page, and participants rated the accountability of all 14 groups on that page. Measures were adapted from Study 1 to assess perceived entitativity, responsibility, omission, and commission. All ratings were made on 9-point scales. Entitativity was assessed by three items: the degree of cohesiveness, the degree of interaction, and the degree to which members of the group could influence the behavior of Harris and Klebold. Because correlations among these items demonstrated significant intercorrelation (cohesiveness-interaction, $r = .75$; cohesiveness-influence, $r = .70$; interaction-influence, $r = .71$), these items were averaged to form a composite measure of entitativity for each of the 14 groups. Responsibility was assessed by the same two items used in Study 1: the degree to which members of the group should be considered at all responsible or be held accountable for the shootings. These items ($r = .86$) were averaged to form a composite measure of responsibility for each of the 14 groups. Inferences of omission were assessed by two items used in Study 1: the degree to which members of each group were perceived to have directly or indirectly contributed to the event and knew about some or all of the plans to attack the high school. These items ($r = .61$) were averaged to form a composite measure of omission for each of the 14 groups. Inferences of commission were assessed by two items used in Study 1: the degree to which members of each group should have prevented the killings and had a duty to prevent the killings if they had knowledge of the plan to attack the high school. These items ($r = .54$) were averaged to form a composite measure of omission for each of the 14 groups. In addition, a single item was added to assess the extent of authority versus peer relationship between the members of each group and Harris and Klebold.

Results

MEAN COMPARISONS OF GROUPS

We first examined the mean ratings of the 14 groups on all variables. As seen in Table 1, the 14 groups varied considerably in the extent to which they were regarded as responsible for the shootings. Furthermore, high lev-
TABLE 1: Study 2: Mean Ratings for Each Target Group

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>Collective Responsibility</th>
<th>Entitativity</th>
<th>Omission</th>
<th>Commission</th>
<th>Authority</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Parents</td>
<td>6.36 (2.27)</td>
<td>6.65 (1.86)</td>
<td>8.44 (1.01)</td>
<td>4.68 (2.09)</td>
<td>7.17 (2.17)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Trenchcoat Mafia</td>
<td>5.58 (2.44)</td>
<td>7.79 (1.54)</td>
<td>8.11 (1.60)</td>
<td>7.00 (2.14)</td>
<td>3.29 (3.10)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Teachers and counselors</td>
<td>3.58 (2.21)</td>
<td>4.28 (1.75)</td>
<td>6.76 (1.65)</td>
<td>3.00 (1.78)</td>
<td>6.54 (2.31)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Principal of high school</td>
<td>3.17 (2.03)</td>
<td>3.07 (1.56)</td>
<td>6.60 (1.67)</td>
<td>2.59 (1.68)</td>
<td>6.82 (2.48)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Extended family</td>
<td>3.11 (1.97)</td>
<td>4.37 (1.70)</td>
<td>6.37 (1.95)</td>
<td>2.59 (1.61)</td>
<td>5.53 (2.26)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Other friends of Harris and Klebold</td>
<td>3.06 (1.96)</td>
<td>5.41 (1.70)</td>
<td>6.74 (1.81)</td>
<td>3.87 (2.08)</td>
<td>2.28 (1.78)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Police</td>
<td>2.79 (1.74)</td>
<td>2.21 (1.21)</td>
<td>6.77 (1.58)</td>
<td>2.50 (1.60)</td>
<td>7.14 (2.53)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Jocks</td>
<td>2.36 (1.97)</td>
<td>3.50 (1.62)</td>
<td>5.24 (2.07)</td>
<td>3.32 (1.85)</td>
<td>3.80 (2.76)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Local authorities</td>
<td>2.14 (1.59)</td>
<td>1.89 (1.14)</td>
<td>6.01 (1.87)</td>
<td>1.76 (1.22)</td>
<td>7.14 (2.46)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Goths</td>
<td>2.02 (1.37)</td>
<td>3.81 (1.76)</td>
<td>4.90 (2.28)</td>
<td>3.22 (1.99)</td>
<td>3.44 (2.48)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Students who knew Harris and Klebold</td>
<td>1.92 (1.31)</td>
<td>3.76 (1.58)</td>
<td>5.56 (2.02)</td>
<td>2.87 (1.66)</td>
<td>2.21 (1.55)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>People in neighborhood</td>
<td>1.72 (1.27)</td>
<td>2.76 (1.40)</td>
<td>4.81 (2.05)</td>
<td>2.25 (1.66)</td>
<td>3.72 (1.99)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Local church groups</td>
<td>1.67 (1.46)</td>
<td>2.20 (1.31)</td>
<td>4.90 (2.14)</td>
<td>1.56 (0.88)</td>
<td>5.29 (2.59)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Other students who didn’t know Harris and Klebold</td>
<td>1.31 (0.84)</td>
<td>2.15 (1.14)</td>
<td>4.43 (1.83)</td>
<td>2.10 (1.30)</td>
<td>2.32 (1.68)</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

NOTE: Ratings were made on 9-point scales. Groups are ordered by ratings of collective responsibility. Standard deviations are reported in parentheses.

eels of entitativity were roughly paralleled by high levels of responsibility. Particularly noteworthy is the high rating of entitativity and responsibility assigned to the parents. This finding supports our hypothesis that the very low ratings of entitativity in Study 1 were due to participants implicitly comparing the Harris and Klebold families to other families when making judgments of entitativity rather than to the other groups potentially responsible for the Columbine shootings.

ENTITATIVITY AND RESPONSIBILITY

We next examined the extent to which variation among groups in perceived entitativity predicted variation among groups in collective responsibility. Furthermore, insofar as there was a relationship between entitativity and responsibility, we determined the degree to which this relationship was mediated by inferences of commission and omission.

The first regression analysis predicted ratings of collective responsibility from ratings of entitativity. The data for this analysis consisted of each participant’s ratings of the 14 groups on the composite indices of entitativity and responsibility. Because of the nested design (i.e., each participant provided ratings for each group), this analysis must account for the lack of independence among the 14 observations contributed by each participant. Thus, for these and subsequent regression analyses, hierarchical regression techniques were utilized in which dummy-coded variables (one for each participant) were first entered to control for individual difference variation. After controlling for individual difference variation at this first stage, the unique relationship between predictor and criterion variables could be determined.

To determine the relationship between entitativity and collective responsibility, we entered the participant dummy-coded variables on the first step of a hierarchical regression predicting between-group variation in ratings of collective responsibility. We entered the variable representing between-group variation in entitativity on the second step. The results of this analysis indicated that groups perceived as highly interdependent with Harris and Klebold were correspondingly rated as highly responsible for the Columbine shootings, (β = .59, p < .001).

Situational construals as mediators. We next examined the degree to which the relationship between perceptions of entitativity and collective responsibility was mediated by inferences of commission and omission (see Baron & Kenny, 1986). We first determined the extent to which inferences of commission and omission were related to judgments of collective responsibility. Results of these regression analyses (again controlling for individual difference variation on the first stage of a hierarchical regression) indicated that both commission (β = .42, p < .001) and omission (β = .41, p < .001) were significant predictors of collective responsibility. The second set of analyses revealed significant relationships between entitativity and commission (β = .67, p < .001) and between entitativity and omission (β = .50, p < .001). Thus, the preconditions for conducting mediational analysis have been met. Moreover, the final analysis revealed that, consistent with our theoretical framework, the direct relationship between perceived entitativity and collective responsibility was greatly reduced after controlling for the two mediators, although it remained significant (β = .24, p < .001). Both commission (β = .26, p < .001) and omission (β = .34, p < .001) had a significant
relationship to collective responsibility when entitativity was included as a predictor. Sobel tests indicated that commission ($z = 8.929, p < .001$) and omission ($z = 12.448, p < .001$) were both significant mediators of the relationship between entitativity and collective responsibility.

**AUTHORITY AND RESPONSIBILITY**

We next examined the extent to which variation in perceived authority predicted the degree of collective responsibility assigned to groups related to the Columbine incident. An initial regression analysis revealed that authority had a small but significant relationship to perceived collective responsibility ($\beta = .16, p < .001$). Based on earlier writings (e.g., Shultz et al., 1987), we predicted that this relationship would be mediated through an inference of responsibility by omission, but not by commission. This hypothesis was confirmed. Regression analyses indicated that perceptions of authority predicted inferences of omission ($\beta = .26, p < .001$). Furthermore, when omission was included with authority in a regression analysis predicting responsibility, the relationship between authority and responsibility became nonsignificant ($\beta = .03, ns$). A Sobel test indicated that omission was a significant mediator ($z = 8.405, p < .001$) of the relationship between perceived authority and responsibility.

In contrast, commission did not mediate the relationship between authority and responsibility to any degree. In fact, authority had a slight negative relationship to perceptions of commission ($\beta = –.08, p = .01$). Not surprisingly, when commission was included with authority in a regression analysis predicting collective responsibility, it did not reduce the relationship between authority and collective responsibility ($\beta = .20, p < .001$). Thus, inferences of commission did not mediate the relationship between authority and collective responsibility.

**Discussion**

In contrast to Study 1, which examined the two groups (the parents and the Trenchcoat Mafia) that were the primary focus of media discussion of collective responsibility, the systematic investigation of a much wider range of groups in Study 2 advances our understanding of how people make judgments of collective responsibility. Several findings are particularly noteworthy. For example, groups with whom the killers were closely connected (e.g., their parents, members of the Trenchcoat Mafia) were held more highly responsible than were groups with weaker ties to the killers (e.g., people who lived in the killers’ neighborhood, local community leaders). Furthermore, the relationship between perceptions of entitativity and collective responsibility was mediated by inferences of commission and omission.

Study 2 also provided useful information concerning the role of authority in collective responsibility judgments. Although perceptions of authority predicted judgments of responsibility, this relationship was substantially weaker than the relationship between entitativity and collective responsibility. Whereas entitativity accounted for 30% of the variance in collective responsibility ratings, perceptions of authority predicted only about 2% of the variance in responsibility ratings for the Columbine tragedy. However, as predicted, the relationship of authority to responsibility was mediated through inferences of omission (failure to prevent the event) rather than commission (contributing to the event). These findings empirically support past work (e.g., Shultz et al., 1987) that discussed the relationship between authority and collective responsibility in terms of omission rather than commission (but see Note 4).

**GENERAL DISCUSSION**

The tragedy of the Columbine shootings provided a unique opportunity to test theoretical ideas about how and why people decide that members of groups are responsible for the actions of fellow group members. The present studies linked two aspects of social perception that we proposed were crucial in understanding how judgments of collective responsibility are made. First, we investigated how the association between wrongdoer and target persons (namely, the closeness or entitativity of the group and the degree of authority over the wrongdoer) is related to the extent to which the target persons are considered responsible for the wrongdoer’s actions. Entitativity was shown to strongly predict judgments of collective responsibility; groups in which the members are seen as closely bound to the killers are rated as entailing high levels of collective responsibility. Although perceptions of authority also predicted judgments of collective responsibility, its relationship was weaker than that of entitativity. Second, our results suggest that the type of perceived association of a target group to a wrongdoer predicts judgments of collective responsibility because it provides cues that members of the target group might either have contributed to, or failed to prevent, the wrongdoer’s actions.

Other recent work expands on and is consistent with the results of these studies. In one study (Lickel, 2000, Study 2), a manipulation of the degree of interaction and communication among people within a group had an effect on participants’ inferences of commission and omission and on the degree of collective responsibility assigned to group members after a wrongdoing. The results of this experimental work add to our confidence...
in the causal role of entitativity in perceiver’s judgments of collective responsibility. However, future work is still needed to fully understand the process by which lay people make judgments of collective responsibility and how the phenomenon of collective responsibility fits within the larger scope of social perception and intergroup processes. We outline these future directions below.

The Process of Collective Responsibility Judgments

One crucial issue for future work regards the dynamics between individual and collective responsibility. In the present research, we studied perceptions of collective responsibility. We did not assess the extent to which perceivers believed that Harris and Klebold (the perpetrators of the Columbine shootings) were seen as individually responsible (which in this case was not in doubt). More generally, however, there is likely to be a relationship between the extent to which perceivers see an individual as responsible for an event and the extent to which they also hold fellow group members responsible for the event. However, there is currently very little known about the relationships between these judgments.

Another important issue concerns the interplay between inferences of commission and omission. The present research showed that groups that elicit high levels of perceived responsibility by commission also may elicit high levels of perceived responsibility by omission. However, it also seems that in some contexts perceivers may focus on a single explanatory construal as the justification for collective responsibility. In Study 1, for example, collective responsibility for the parents was predicted more by construals of responsibility by omission, whereas collective responsibility for the Trenchcoat Mafia was predicted more by construals of responsibility by commission. Future research is needed to articulate the variables that moderate when these different construals are most likely to underlie judgments of collective responsibility.

For example, one possibility is that the extent to which the act is perceived as furthering the goals of the group will influence the extent to which general perceptions of entitativity lead to an inference of responsibility by commission. In follow-up data to the studies discussed in the present article, we found that perceivers saw the Columbine shootings as being consistent with the goals of the Trenchcoat Mafia but not with the goals of the parents of the shooters. This difference may help explain why inferences of commission were more important in judgments of collective responsibility for the Trenchcoat Mafia than for the parents. In a similar vein, in Study 2, we found that inferences of responsibility by omission, but not commission, mediated the relationship between authority and responsibility. However, the perceived role of responsibility by commission may have dramatically increased if the act were seen as furthering the goals of a leader.

We should stress that the model we examined in the present research includes only a subset of the variables that are likely to influence collective responsibility judgments. Thus, it is not intended to be a comprehensive model of collective responsibility. Future work will be needed to identify other important variables that shape these judgments. For example, in some instances, an inference different than omission and commission also may be used to make a judgment of collective responsibility. Just as research on individual responsibility (e.g., Alicke, 2000; Gervey, Chiu, Hong, & Dweck, 1999) has suggested that both behavioral and dispositional inferences may play a role in blame judgments, we believe that another route to blaming a group may be through seeing the group, as a whole, as sharing the same bad character as the one group member who committed the wrongdoing. Presumably, this tendency to generalize the bad qualities of an actor to every member of that actor’s group would be stronger to the extent that the group is perceived to be high in entitativity.

To identify other construals that might predict judgments of collective responsibility, it will be important to incorporate methods that examine the types of explanations (e.g., omission, commission, dispositional inferences) that people spontaneously use when making judgments of collective responsibility. In the present research, participants were directed to use particular scales that we had developed to detect inferences of omission and commission. Furthermore, more research is required in which people’s spontaneous judgments of collective and individual blame are assessed for events. In our ongoing work, we are utilizing open-ended responses to examine the spontaneous interpretations and inferences that people make when responding to situations in which collective responsibility might apply because inferences of omission and commission may be only two of a number of routes that lead to collective responsibility judgments.

The Role of Collective Responsibility in Intergroup Relations

A second important issue concerns the role of collective responsibility in intergroup relations. In the present research, the perceivers had no personal involvement with either the killers or the victims. We expect that perceptions of collective responsibility would change substantially if one were a member of a group directly involved in or affected by the event. To the extent that
the perceiver has some ingroup relationship to the victim, perceptions of collective responsibility will likely be intensified and influenced by ingroup-serving biases. Such judgments may then translate into retaliatory behaviors. In fact, collective responsibility may be an integral component of the process by which many intergroup conflicts escalate and are perpetuated over time (e.g., Boehm, 1987).

Just as it is important to understand how sharing an ingroup relationship to the victim of an event may influence judgments of collective responsibility and how these judgments may play a role in intergroup conflicts, it is also important to understand the reactions of the people who share an ingroup relationship to the wrongdoer. Insofar as group members perceive themselves as psychologically interconnected with fellow group members, they may to some degree hold themselves responsible for the wrongdoings of their ingroup and feel a sense of shame or guilt as a result (Dooijse, Branscombe, Spears, Manstead, 1998; Schmader, Lickel, & Ames, 2002). Understanding group members’ affective reactions is important because such reactions may predict specific behavioral responses group members make to the event (Schmader et al., 2002). With regard to collective responsibility, we expect that members of a group may engage in several different strategies to limit the extent to which they are held responsible, such as attempting to repair the damage that was done by their ingroup member or distancing themselves from the event. These reactions may be predicted by the emotional response that people have to the actions of ingroup members (Lickel, Schmader, & Barquissau, in press).

Conclusion

When tragic events occur as a result of human action, people feel a need to assign responsibility. The present research demonstrates that people look beyond the individuals who directly caused an event and also may assign blame to those who are merely associated with the wrongdoers. Much more remains to be understood about how and why perceivers make judgments of collective responsibility, as well as the consequences of those judgments. We hope that the framework developed in this research will stimulate further investigation of this understudied phenomenon.

NOTES

1. Analyses of cases in which causality for an event is split ambiguously among agents, or in which the actions of an agent were coerced by another, fall outside the scope of the present analysis. We focus on how other people, who did not have a direct causal role in the event and who did not coerce the acts committed by the agent, may nonetheless be blamed for the event because they share a social relationship with the wrongdoer.

2. Heider (1958) noted that people are sometimes held responsible for merely being associated with an event, even though they did not cause the event to occur. Heider referred to this as responsibility by association. We suggest that one primary form of responsibility by association is having a common group membership with the person who caused the event. The goal of the present research was to examine the factors that predict the degree of responsibility that occurs by sharing a social association to the Columbine shooters.

3. A variety of group properties may influence the extent to which people see a group as high in entitativity. We operationalized entitativity in terms of the degree of interpersonal interaction and influence that people had with Harris and Klebold. These variables have been shown to be highly predictive of perceptions of entitativity (Lickel et al., 2000) and are congruent with past conceptions of the bases of shared responsibility. In particular, V. L. Hamilton and Sanders (1981) have proposed that one basis for assigning responsibility is the extent to which the members of the group were close to or high in “solidarity” with the wrongdoer. Future research will examine how other aspects of entitativity are related to collective responsibility judgments.

4. In situations where the individual’s negative actions are coerced by an authority figure, one would predict a stronger link between authority and commission. For example, people blame Adolph Hitler for the executions of Jews carried out by officials in Nazi concentration camps during World War II because he gave the order that directed the actions of his subordinates. In the case of the Columbine shootings, we hypothesized a weak link between authority and commission because the shooter’s actions did not seem to be coerced.

5. We also assessed the degree to which participants had been exposed to media coverage about the shootings. Although media exposure had some relationship to collective responsibility judgment (i.e., media exposure was negatively related to Trenchcoat responsibility and was positively related to parental responsibility), none of the results reported here were changed by controlling the degree of media exposure participants had to the event.

6. To assess the correlations among variables in this study, a correlation matrix was generated for each participant based on each participant’s ratings of the 14 groups. The median correlation coefficient for each variable pair was then determined from the correlation matrices of the 109 participants. The median correlations are cited in the text.

7. The regression analyses conducted in Study 2 differed from those conducted in Study 1. In Study 1, the regression analyses predicted responsibility for a single group (either the parents or the Trenchcoat Mafia) on the basis of variation among participants in the perceived entitativity (and the measures of commission and omission) of a single group. In contrast, Study 2 employed a nested design designed to focus on between-group comparisons. Thus, the regression analyses for Study 2 were focused on predicting between-group variance in responsibility based on variation among groups in entitativity, commission, and omission.

8. Perceptions of authority and entitativity were unrelated to each other ($\beta = -.02, n.s.$).

REFERENCES


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