

## **EASP 2014 Preconference: Causation, counterfactuals and blame**

Convenors: Mark Alicke (Ohio University), Denis Hilton (University of Toulouse) and Keith Markman (Ohio University)

While attribution theory has long been an established topic in social psychology, new perspectives on how people explain and respond to social behaviour have been brought to bear in other fields such as cognitive psychology, judgment and decision-making, moral psychology, philosophy and artificial intelligence. In this pre-conference, we have invited a number of social psychologists and cognitive scientists take stock of these recent developments in order to reassess major positions in attribution theory, and to explore ways in which classic attribution theory can contribute to current debates in other fields. These include questions such as: What is the exact relation between causal and counterfactual reasoning? How are judgments of actual cause determined? What are the relations between judgments of cause, responsibility and blame? Do judgments of cause constrain those of blame, or vice-versa? How do norms, intentions and beliefs intervene in causal judgments and evaluations of behaviour? What is the relation between these judgments and (moral) emotions such as regret, shame and guilt? And so on.

Attendance at the pre-conference is 30 euros, which will include lunch and two coffee breaks.

We will inform you of how you can pay once your registration is officially confirmed.

For further information please contact Denis Hilton at [hilton@univ-tlse2.fr](mailto:hilton@univ-tlse2.fr)

## Programme

9h00	Registration
9h15-10h00	Mark Alicke. <i>Norms Versus Badness in Causal Judgment</i>
10h00-10h45	Bertram Malle. <i>From Cause Through Intentionality to Blame: A Theory And Its Evidence</i>
10h45-11h05	<i>Coffee break</i>
11h05-11h50	William Jimenez-Leal. <i>Counterfactuals and blame attribution in the context of groups</i>
11h50-12h35	Denis Hilton. <i>The role of causal structure in generating counterfactuals and attributions of responsibility, cause and blame</i>
12h35-13h45	<i>Lunch break</i>
13h45-14h30	Ruth Byrne. <i>Counterfactual thoughts in Elevation-Inspired Emulation</i>
14h30-15h15	Patrizia Catellani. <i>Counterfactual is better: The effectiveness of counterfactual defences</i>
15h15-15h35	<i>Coffee break</i>
15h35-16h20	John McClure. <i>Is intentionality the lodestar of explanation?</i>
16h20-17h	General discussion

## Abstracts (with co-authors)

### *Norms Versus Badness in Causal Judgment*

Mark D. Alicke (Ohio University)

Dorian Bloom (Ohio University)

David Rose (Rutgers University)

Abstract: Psychological research on causal judgment from the past thirty years has identified two influential causal principles that were absent from traditional philosophical treatments; namely, the degree to which an actor's behavior or its outcomes are surprising or counternormative, and the degree to which the observer approves or disapproves of them. We present two studies that support the view, derived from the Culpable Control Model (CCM) of blame, that observers validate blaming the most culpable source of harmful outcomes by elevating the source's causal involvement in the event regardless of whether the source's behavior is normative or counternormative.

### *Counterfactual thoughts in Elevation-Inspired Emulation*

Ruth Byrne & Eoin Gubbins (Trinity College, Dublin)

Two experiments examine the counterfactual thoughts that people create about elevating experiences and the formation of intentions to emulate moral goodness. Participants recalled autobiographical memories of morally good and bad experiences, from the recent and remote past. When they created counterfactual alternatives to reality and thought if only<sup>1</sup> about morally good experiences, they mentally deleted aspects of what happened, they imagined how things could have been worse, and they formed intentions to emulate that were general aspirations. In contrast, when they created alternatives to morally bad experiences, they mentally added aspects to what happened, they imagined how things could have been better, and they formed intentions to change that were specific plans. The results indicate that heuristics in the creation of counterfactual alternatives lead people to form general aspirations following elevating experiences, that require further cognitive work to translate into specific plans.

### *Counterfactual is better: The effectiveness of counterfactual defences*

Patrizia Catellani (Catholic University of Milan)

While we know a lot about how generating counterfactuals influences attribution of responsibility and blame, we know much less as regards the same influence when counterfactuals are employed in communication, for example in defensive communication. Defences often do

not achieve the desired effect because recipients interpret them as mere attempts by defendants to exonerate themselves from responsibility in negatively evaluated events. We argue that this is less the case when people use counterfactual communication to defend themselves. In a series of studies, we manipulated the target and the direction of counterfactuals employed in defensive messages. Compared to factual defences, both other-focused upward and self-focused downward counterfactuals reduced responsibility attributed to the defendant and increased the convincingness of the defense, thus inducing a more positive evaluation of the defendant. Discussion focuses on counterfactuals as subtle and indirect strategies to increase the persuasiveness of defensive communication.

***The role of causal structure in generating counterfactuals and attributions of responsibility, cause and blame***

Denis Hilton & Christophe Schmeltzer (University of Toulouse)

We distinguish two kinds of causal pre-emption scenarios (pre-empting and pre-empted), and show that these have quite different implications for judgments of actual cause. We confirm these predictions in Experiment 1 which varies causal structure (classic pre-emption vs. auto-preemption) but using the same contents. In Experiment 2, we use pre-emption scenarios taken from Mandel (2003) which similarly vary in causal structure but which use different contents, and find the same pattern of counterfactual generation and judgments of actual cause, responsibility and blame as found in Experiment 1. Both experiments validate the entailment model of responsibility and blame judgments proposed by Fincham & Jaspars (1980).

***Counterfactuals and blame attribution in the context of groups***

William Jiménez-Leal & Camilo Arias (Universidad de los Andes)

Several situations of blame attribution involve actions of people in the context of groups. Aspects such as obligations are more salient in these cases. I argue that the easiness to undo an action in the context of a group is a good predictor of judgments of blame only when the normative aspects of the situation are clear. In two experiments we show that generation of counterfactual thoughts is more likely when a) people acknowledge the norms implied in the situation and b) the mental states of the participants in the situation are explicit. Results are discussed in terms of the culpable control model and a recent proposal by Malle et al (2014).

***From Cause Through Intentionality to Blame: A Theory And Its Evidence***

Bertram F. Malle (Department of Cognitive, Linguistic, and Psychological Sciences Brown University)

I introduce a theory of blame that specifies the information processing path that generates judgments of blame. This path leads from the detection (and initial evaluation) of norm-violating events and a judgment of *agent-causality* to a judgment of *intentionality*, which

bifurcates further processing into either ascriptions of *reasons* (agent's beliefs and desires) or determinations of (counterfactual) *preventability*—finally producing a judgment of blame. I examine the claimed sequentialness of these processes (e.g., in contrast to “blame first” models) and present evidence from two experimental paradigms that focus on cognitive processing: one that captures information search and another that captures information updating.

### ***Is intentionality the lodestar of explanation?***

John McClure, Briar Moir (Victoria University of Wellington)  
Denis Hilton (University of Toulouse)

Research comparing judgments of intentional and physical causes in causal chains shows the people see intentions as better explanations than physical causes that produce the same effect. This effect is accentuated when the intentional action is performed with foresight about the outcome. This research has not directly examined judgments about intentionality. Studies incorporated belief and desire from Malle's model of intentional action and Hart and Honoré's distinction between voluntary and deliberate actions. Foresight shapes judgments of intent and deliberateness but not voluntariness. Agents' desire and belief predict judgments of cause whereas moral evaluations play a primary role in blame judgments.