

Why blame feels hard to take

October 3 2013

When something we do produces a positive result, we actually perceive it differently than we would if that same action yielded a negative result. In particular, people feel a greater connection between voluntary actions and their outcomes if those outcomes are good than if they are bad. The discovery, reported on October 3 in *Current Biology*, yields important insight into notions about personal responsibility.

"Our result suggests that people may really experience less responsibility for negative than for positive outcomes," says Patrick Haggard of the Institute of Cognitive Neuroscience at University College London. "This is not merely a retrospective justification about how well we have done: the actual experience that we have changes, even in basic aspects like its timing."

The researchers used a standard approach to explore a phenomenon known as "sense of agency," which refers to the feeling that one's voluntary [actions](#) produce some external sensory event. For instance, Haggard explains, if you flip a light switch and a light comes on, you often experience those events as nearly simultaneous, even if there is a bit of a lag.

Haggard's team wondered whether our perception of time might depend on the emotional outcome of an action. To find out, they tested people by asking them to press a key. Those key presses were followed with negative sounds of fear or disgust, positive sounds of achievement or amusement, or neutral sounds. Participants were then asked to estimate when they had made the action or when they had heard the sound.

These studies reveal that individuals sense a longer time lag between their own actions and the [response](#) when those responses are negative than when they are positive. In other words, people actually experience a lower sense of agency for actions associated with a negative outcome.

The findings may help to explain why people are generally ready to take credit for good outcomes but not to accept responsibility for bad ones, the researchers say. It might also reveal why blame can be so much harder to accept than praise.

People may actually experience different levels of responsibility in the two situations. But that's not to say that they shouldn't be held responsible for their actions.

"The way we experience agency is not the same as the fact of agency," Haggard says. "We have to take responsibility for what we actually do, not just for how we experience things."

More information: *Current Biology*, Yoshie et al.: "Negative emotional outcomes attenuate sense of agency over voluntary actions." [dx.doi.org/10.1016/j.cub.2013.08.034](https://doi.org/10.1016/j.cub.2013.08.034)

Provided by Cell Press

Citation: Why blame feels hard to take (2013, October 3) retrieved 24 January 2023 from <https://medicalxpress.com/news/2013-10-blame-hard.html>

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