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Authors

Korman, Joanna
Cusimano, Corey J.
Smith, Jessica E.
et al.

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Not so bad after all? The role of explanation features in blame mitigation

Joanna Korman

Brown University

Corey J. Cusimano

Brown University

Jessica E. Smith

Brown University

Andrew E. Monroe

Florida State University

Bertram F. Malle

Brown University

Abstract: Previous work on the role of explanations in blame mitigation used an outdated distinction between “person” and “situation” causes and examined which causes better excuse a negative behavior. This approach fails with intentional behaviors, which are explained by reasons, not causes. A recent model of blame (Malle, Guglielmo, & Monroe 2012) suggests that reason explanations function as justifications for negative intentional behaviors—reducing blame by citing socially acceptable beliefs or desires. But which reason types—beliefs or desires—are most effective in reducing blame? Participants recounted an offense they had committed, provided a blame rating, explained the behavior, and provided a second blame rating. Offenders’ explanations contained far more belief reasons than desire reasons. However, at high levels of initial blame, even belief reasons ceased to be effective.