

# Scapegoating

## Notes to facilitators

The theme of scapegoating is very personal and is best discussed in a supportive environment. There may be an initial reluctance to speak as people wonder how honest the other group participants will be about their experiences of scapegoating.

Ask the group to recall the feelings associated with being blamed by others. These are usually quite easy to remember, but not always easy to talk about. Allow the group some time to acknowledge these incidents privately before asking them to share their experiences.

A more difficult task is to ask them to acknowledge times when they deliberately sought out others to blame. Many of us are introduced to this way of dealing with difficulty at an early age.

If no experiences are shared, you can invite people to talk about their difficulty with the theme. If this proves too difficult, then ask the group to speak about their reaction to the examples in the text. This will allow people to talk about the theme in a detached way.

## Possible learning objectives

1. To reflect on experiences of being blamed and of blaming others.
2. To examine experiences of family and community life which use scapegoating as a way of securing order.
3. To look at the ways we use scapegoating in daily life.
4. To recall relationships where difficulties were dealt with without scapegoating others.
5. To consider relationships and events where we had freedom to choose alternative paths.

## Resources for group discussion

Some background notes:

### 1. Holding people accountable to agreements made is not scapegoating

Making someone a scapegoat is different from holding someone to account for what they are paid to do or for agreements that they have made.

### 2. 'I am all alone and they are all together'

'I am all alone and they are all together' is the experience of the scapegoat. It is an anxiety or fear common to modern life. There can be many relationships between people and within groups that make us feel uneasy or insecure. A great fear in modern life is the fear of being made a scapegoat.

### 3. Getting out of relationship is the beginning of the move to scapegoat

Every time we begin to move away from really connecting with people; every time we begin to gossip about them or label them, thus dehumanising them, we are beginning a dynamic that could end up in scapegoating.

### 4. Scapegoating others is easier when we have moved out of a personal relationship with them

When we scapegoat others we are denying that we are responsible for the state of our relationships. We blame others for our difficulties. Every time we assert that another person is 'bad' or 'did wrong', we are scapegoating.

### 5. The scapegoated person is often an arbitrary choice

Scapegoating has existed between people, groups and societies for many centuries and is one of the strongest mechanisms for generating closeness within a group at the expense of others who are deemed to be 'guilty'. The scapegoat is no more responsible for this than anyone else. The final victim is an arbitrary choice.

### 6. Successful scapegoating generates myths within the group remaining

Scapegoating generates myths about people and groups. The scapegoat in myths is always both the person who caused the trouble. When this person is ejected or driven out, peace and stability follow in their wake. This is true for communal myths and for the stories people tell today about those they have scapegoated.

## Activity: Taking the blame

Think of a time when you felt isolated, blamed or made into a scapegoat. What happened, and how did you feel about it? Take some time to think about this. Then, if you like, tell others in the group about the experience.

## Blaming others

Let us now see if we can acknowledge the different ways in which we isolate, blame or scapegoat other people. This can be more difficult to identify. It is easier to talk about when we were the scapegoat, than to acknowledge when we scapegoated others.

### Example 1

Audrey and Martha have found it impossible to get over a disaster.

*'We had worked for ages planning to get the senior citizens' outing arranged. It was agreed that I would make all the arrangements at the destination – access to toilets when we arrived, meals and the show in the evening. Martha was to have the hall opened up for shelter and order the bus.'*

*It was a good job that the hall was open, because even though she had booked the bus ages ago, she had booked it for the wrong date. Everyone arrived at the hall on time, but there was no bus and it was too late to make alternative arrangements.*

*We have not spoken for months now and if I turn up at an event and find she is there too I make a point of ignoring her.'*

Audrey and Martha met a difficulty they had not foreseen, but rather than talk about it, Audrey gives in to her feelings and anxieties and scapegoats her friend.

When relationships become unclear because of some unforeseen event or when agreements are apparently broken, a very common reaction is for one party to seek to place the blame on the other. This is usually easier than meeting together and acknowledging each person's responsibilities.

### Example 2: Being in a crowd or mob

*'I remember being caught up in a crowd swarming out of a sports stadium and having to stay with the movements of the crowd. I had to keep in step; otherwise I ran the risk of being trampled. As the crowd quickened up I had to as well, all the time running the risk that with one trip I might fall and be trampled on.'*

Being part of the crowd means that our actions and the actions of those around us seem as one. We become, in a sense, indistinguishable from each other. If a tragic incident occurs and someone is trampled underfoot, the crowd ensures that no single person is held responsible. In a very deep sense, the person who is trampled on is the victim – a scapegoat of the crowd. A central feature is that scapegoats are always chosen at random.

### Activity: part of the crowd

- What crowd or mob experiences have you had?
- Who was being scapegoated?
- Was it a referee, perhaps?

Think about this on your own then take time to share your different experiences in the group.

## Scapegoats of my tradition

As members of a group or tradition, we are usually given subtle cultural advice on how to conduct our lives with those who are different from us. We learn to tolerate them but we do not come to feel close to them. There remains some sense that ‘they are not quite like us’.

### Example 3

*‘Michael Hara and I lived in the same terrace of houses. His mother Mary was a special friend of my mother who often said that “Mary was a devout Catholic woman”. Mary came from the Republic of Ireland, a different country to mine if you were brought up within the unionist/pro-British tradition.*

*When we visited the Hara’s house I was told that it “felt different” to other houses we visited.*

*These women visited one another and became friends across the Protestant/Catholic divisions. My mother told me that they “were exceptional Catholics, they could be trusted”.*

*In a subtle way I learned and gave three messages. One, I was a tolerant person because I knew “them” and liked “them” and, two, I was different and superior to them and three, I learned that “good Catholics” were always the exception. I could, like many other Protestants, say “but some of my best friends are Catholics”.*

Other groups have their similar phrases – do you recall any out of your experience?

### Example 4: Tolerance, intolerance and scapegoating

*‘I learned to be tolerant of other people’s religion, but I was told that my religious tradition was superior and right.*

*This was how I was encouraged to see those who were different to me. To be tolerant meant to accept those who were no real threat to me.*

*Thinking back, those we were intolerant of were those from traditions or political outlooks that really challenged ours in terms of size and numbers.*

*Could it be that “to be tolerant” of others is actually a very weak form of relationship, costing me very little change?’*

When we are intolerant of others, we see these ‘others’ as a real threat to our way of life and customs. In such an atmosphere of perceived threat it is easier to blame ‘the others’ for all the misfortunes we meet, making it very difficult to reach out ‘to them’ against the wishes of ‘our side’.

### **Activity: creating differences**

Look back at your own experiences and describe how your family, community and school helped to establish your identity.

- Who did you learn to treat in an exceptional or different way?
- Did the people you treated in an exceptional way belong to your community?
- In what ways were you protected from seeing yourself as being intolerant?

To experience being scapegoated as members of a group leaves a deep memory. This memory is a hurt that fuels retaliation thereafter.

These feelings return to us when the atmosphere between groups is uncertain. The feelings lessen our freedom to act in any other way than the way we did before, frantically seeking a scapegoat. All of us have been scapegoats of others at some time. We are all hurt people and we all have caused hurt too.

All agreements secured by victimising a person or group are uneasy.