**The Psychology of Victim-Blaming**

When people want to believe that the world is just, and that bad things won’t happen to them, empathy can suffer.

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*Dandy PickPockets Diving: Scene Near St. James Palace*[*Isaac Robert Cruikshank / Lewis Walpole Library / Wikimedia*](https://commons.wikimedia.org/wiki/File:Dandy_pickpockets,_diving.jpg)

In August, the comedian and former *Inside Amy Schumer* writer Kurt Metzger reignited a national conversation about victim-blaming when he posted a series of rants on social media criticizing the ways women report being the victim of a crime and the effects of those reports on the accused. After the Upright Citizens Brigade theater in New York banned a performer in the wake of several women accusing him of sexual assault and abuse, Metzger took to Facebook.

"I know because women said it and that's all I need! Never you mind who they are. They are women! ALL women are as reliable as my bible! A book that, much like a women, is incapable of lying!” [Metzger wrote](http://www.nbcnews.com/news/us-news/ex-amy-schumer-writer-s-rants-rape-spark-firestorm-n633516) in a now-deleted Facebook post. He [went on](http://www.huffingtonpost.com/entry/inside-amy-schumer-writer-goes-on-lengthy-victim-blaming-rant_us_57b4b79ce4b095b2f5421f52) to seemingly criticize women for not going to the police, adding “If we ask them to even merely also post a vague account of what happened before asking us to believe that would like re-raping their rape!”

Metzger’s former boss and outspoken feminist Amy Schumer, was inevitably drawn into the storm of commentary and discussion that followed. Schumer publicly denounced Metzger’s comments, [tweeting](https://twitter.com/amyschumer/status/765970023710154753), “I am so saddened and disappointed in Kurt Metzger. He is my friend and a great writer and I couldn't be more against his recent actions.”

Victim-blaming comes in many forms, and is oftentimes more subtle, and unconscious than Metzger’s tirade. It can apply to cases of rape and sexual assault, but also to more mundane crimes, like a person who gets pickpocketed and is then chided for his decision to carry his wallet in his back pocket. Any time someone defaults to questioning what a victim could have done differently to prevent a crime, he or she is participating, to some degree, in the culture of victim-blaming.

While victim-blaming isn’t entirely universal (some individuals’ experiences, background, and culture make them significantly less likely to victim-blame), in some ways, it is a natural psychological reaction to crime. Not everyone who engages in victim-blaming explicitly accuses someone of failing to prevent what happened to them. In fact, in its more understated forms, people may not always realize they’re doing it. Something as simple as hearing about a crime and thinking you would have been more careful had you been in the victim’s shoes is a mild form of victim-blaming.

“I think the biggest factor that promotes victim-blaming is something called the [just world hypothesis](http://h/),” says Sherry Hamby, a professor of psychology at the University of the South and founding editor of the APA’s [*Psychology of Violence* journal](http://www.apa.org/pubs/journals/vio/). “It’s this idea that people deserve what happens to them. There’s just a really strong need to believe that we all deserve our outcomes and consequences.”

Hamby explains that this desire to see the world as just and fair may be even stronger among Americans, who are raised in a culture that promotes the American Dream and the idea that we all control our own destinies.

“In other cultures, where sometimes because of war or poverty or maybe sometimes even just because of a strong thread of fatalism in the culture, it’s a lot better recognized that sometimes bad things happen to good people,” she says. “But as a general rule, Americans have a hard time with the idea that bad things happen to good people.”

Holding victims responsible for their misfortune is partially a way to avoid admitting that something just as unthinkable could happen to *you*—even if you do everything “right.”

While victim-blaming often brings to mind crimes like sexual assault and domestic violence, it occurs across the board, explains Barbara Gilin, a professor of social work at Widener University. Murders, burglaries, abductions—whatever the crime, many people tend to default to victim-blaming thoughts and behaviors as a defense mechanism in the face of bad news. Gilin notes that, while people tend to be able to accept natural disasters as unavoidable, many feel that they have a little more control over whether they become victims of crimes, that they can take precautions that will protect them. Therefore, some people have a harder time accepting that the victims of these crimes didn’t contribute to (and bear some responsibility for) their own victimization.