Blame at Work: Implications for Theory and Practice from an Empirical Study

Ben Lupton (Manchester Metropolitan University

Atif Sarwar (Liverpool Hope University)

This is an Accepted Manuscript of an article published in 'Business and Professional Ethics Journal' on March 26, 2021, available online: https://doi.org/10.5840/bpej2021323109.

[Please, cite published version].

Cite as:

Lupton, B. & Sarwar, A. (2021). 'Blame at Work: Implications for Theory and Practice from an Empirical Study', *Business & Professional Ethics Journal,* 40(2), 157-188.

Abstract

Existing work in the field of business ethics has explored how concepts in philosophy and other disciplines can be applied to blame at work, and considers blame's potential impact on organisations and their employees. However, there is little empirical evidence of organisational blaming practices and their effects. This article presents an analysis of interviews with twenty-seven employees from a range of occupations, exploring their experience of blame, its rationale and impact. A diversity of blaming practices and perspectives is revealed, and in making sense of these the authors draw on recent theoretical developments—Skarlicki, Kay, Aquino, and Fushtey's (2017) concept of 'swift-blame,' and Fricker's (2016) notion of 'communicative blame.' The study also reveals a tension between a desire to avoid 'blaming' on the one hand, and a need for 'accountability,' on the other, and the authors explore the implications of the findings for organisations in seeking to 'manage' blame.

Introduction

There has been an increasing interest in blame in the organisational literature (Skarlikci et al 2017; Bhargava 2018; Lupton & Warren, 2018). Primarily, this literature has focussed on the impact of blaming practices within organisations - between colleagues, and between managers and their subordinates - with particular emphasis on the negative consequences of blame for organisational learning and innovation (Schilling and Kluge 2009; Provera, Montefusco and Canato 2010) and the potential of management interventions and approaches intended to mitigate these consequences (Provera, Montefusco and Canato 2010; Skarlicki et al 2017; Lupton & Warren, 2018). There is also some recognition of the potentially positive "practical, legal and psychological" benefits of blame to organisations (Skarlicki et al 2017, 223), at least in some of its manifestations. Recent work has sought to provide a theoretical underpinning to the discussion of organisational blame (Skarlicki et al 2017; Lupton & Warren, 2018). One strand of this discussion has been informed by debates in philosophy around the meaning of blame (Coates and Tognazzini 2013; Fricker, 2016), for example whether or not blame should be considered as a 'natural' and immediate emotional reaction, a dispassionate judgement or deliberative sanction to shape future behaviour (see also Lupton & Warren, 2018). There is also debate about whether it should be regarded as something inherently harmful, or something that is in fact constitutive of healthy and functioning human relationships (Strawson 1974; Scanlon 2008). The second strand draws on behavioural science. Here, Skarlicki et al make the distinction between 'swift blame' – blame of a "spontaneous and non-deliberative" (2017, 222) character - and more measured responses to error and wrongdoing in organisations. This distinction is underpinned by Kahneman's (2011) dual-processing theory. Swift-blame is identified as a form of 'system 1' thinking (automatic and involuntary) in contrast to the planned and intentional thinking in Kahneman's 'system 2'.

Alongside this theoretical discussion, the literature on organisational blame has also focused on the ways in which organisations can seek to control, temper or dispense with blame. Prominent amongst these are no-blame approaches (Provera, Montefusco and Canato 2010; Skarlicki et al 2017) which shift the focus from sanctioning individuals for mistakes, towards enabling the organisation to learn from error. Other approaches have also been suggested, for example implementation of, "systems of inquiry and accountability" (Skarlicki et al 2017, 230), mindfulness training (Skarlicki et al 2017) and the fostering of 'careful' blaming practices (Lupton & Warren, 2018).

Empirical studies of blame in work settings are sparse (see Provera, Montefusco and Canato 2010, for an exception). One consequence of this is that while the literature offers a developing understanding of the theoretical underpinnings and practical implications of blame, very little is known about how blame is understood and experienced by organisational actors. This is a significant lacuna for two reasons. Firstly, an appreciation of the lived experience of blame can shed light on the applicability and explanatory power of the concepts and definitions used in the theoretical literature. Our contention is that these concepts have potential applicability in the work settings (see Lupton & Warren, 2018) but this has not yet been explored empirically. Secondly, an understanding of how blame is practised and experienced in organisations provides for a more grounded assessment of the appropriateness and likely effectiveness of 'no-blame' approaches and other prescriptions and suggestions arising from the blame literature.

This article reports the findings of an empirical study of organisational blaming practices. It draws on interviews with twenty-seven respondents **in the United Kingdom**, drawn from a range of organisations and occupations. The aims are threefold. The first is to explore how blame in its organisational context is understood and experienced by people working in organisations, and what they consider its impact to be on individuals and organisations. The

second is to interpret these accounts in the light of recent conceptual work in the field (Fricker 2016; Skarlicki et al 2017; Lupton & Warren, 2018). The third aim is to offer reflections on organisational approaches to 'managing' blame that are advocated in the literature, for example the 'no-blame' idea, in the light of a new understanding of how organisational actors perceive blame and its consequences. The article contributes by offering an account of organisational blaming practices, and their theoretical underpinnings, which is more grounded in organisational experiences than has been hitherto possible. It starts with a review of the literature on blame and its manifestation in work organisations.

Blame in Organisations – Practical Issues and Theoretical Foundations

The impact of blame in organisations

There are arguments to be made that blame can serve useful functions in organisations. The dispensing of blame, by managers to subordinates, or between peers, can serve to control or shape behaviour and performance. Organisational employees will ordinarily seek to avoid blame for misdemeanours, mistakes or under-performance and will modify their conduct accordingly. This may happen through informal blaming or through formal disciplinary procedures, which are arguably formalised and codified systems of blame. Such action may be required by codes of professional conduct or employment law. As Skarlicki et al notes, blame in this context also reinforces lines of authority and buttresses power relationships, "maintaining structure – and stability – within an organisation" (2017, 225). As these authors observe, aside from the espoused organisational benefits, blame may also serve positive psychological functions for those dispensing it, for example in terms of perceptions of self-efficacy.

However, much of the discussion of blame in organisations has centred on its negative consequences. An employee subject to blame may experience a decline in psychological wellbeing and negative feelings (Skarlicki et al 2017), which may in turn affect relationships

with managers and colleagues, erode trust, and absorb resources –individual and organisational – that could be used more productively. This can have organisational consequences in the form of increased levels of interpersonal conflict, lower job satisfaction, recruitment difficulties arising from poor reputation as an employer, and higher labour turnover and absenteeism (Skarlicki et al 2017). More broadly, blame is identified as having a detrimental effect on organisational learning (Senge 2006) and thus may impact negatively on organisational performance. Fear of blame may discourage errors and 'near-misses' from being reported in the first place (Provera, Montefusco and Canato 2010; Waring 2010), and where they come to light, defensive behaviours might prevent individuals and organisations from engaging fully with the learning opportunities that mistakes offer (Vince and Saleem 2004). Cultures of blame (Skarlicki et al 2017; Lupton & Warren, 2018) may foster an environment where managers focus on individual errors rather than on systemic problems that need to be identified and addressed (Schilling and Kluge 2009). Finally, an environment where managers and colleagues are quick to blame is unlikely to be one which encourages innovation and risk-taking, behaviours that organisations often wish to encourage (Farson and Keyes 2002; Vince and Saleem 2004).

But, what is blame?

In assessing the impact of blame in organisations, much will depend on what 'kind' of blame is at issue, and indeed on the broader question of how blame is defined and understood. In a notable contribution to the organisational literature on blame, Skarlicki et al introduce the concept of 'swift blame' to capture blame that is a "knee-jerk reaction" (2017, 223), and is dispensed with, "little attempt to fully understand the circumstances and context surrounding a mistake or perceived harm" (2017, 223). Swift blame is identified by Skarlicki et al (2017) as the kind of blame primarily associated with the detrimental effects on individual well-

being and performance, and on organisational innovation and learning, that were discussed above.

Theoretically, Skarlicki et al (2017) ground swift blame in dual-processing theory (Kahneman 2011). They see this type of blame as a form of 'System 1' thinking, thoughts and feelings that are produced in response to a situation, automatically and without deliberative intent. System 2 thinking, on the other hand, involves planning, deliberation and intent. Kahneman showed that System 1 thinking is our default mode of decision-making as it is quicker and involves less effort. However, blaming under System 1 is fraught with difficulties as people's rapid assessments of wrongdoing are likely to be prone to error and misunderstanding, arising from a failure to consider the full circumstances, and the effect of behavioural biases and shortcuts that surface where there is insufficient time for evidence gathering and reflection. Skarlicki et al (2017, 223) also point out that we appear to be hardwired by evolution to, "quickly identify and deal with threats in the environment", suggesting that our tendency towards immediate blame responses may be quite deep-rooted.

Writing in a different intellectual tradition (philosophy) Fricker (2016, 168) also identifies potentially damaging forms of blame- or 'pathologies of blame' as she terms them, those that,

> ".. for instance.. spring from a censorious habit of finding fault, or from projected guilt or shame, from moralistic high-mindedness, naked vengeful drive, or the simple cruelty of seeking satisfaction from making someone feel bad."

These, and other forms of misapplied blame, in Fricker's view give blame a 'bad reputation' (2016, 168). It is notable that much work in philosophy has explicitly or implicitly sought to rehabilitate blame from this reputation. George Sher's book "In Praise of Blame" (2006) is perhaps the clearest exposition of this tendency, but there is a range of otherwise

different perspectives in philosophy that see blame as a central and appropriate feature of human social interaction.

The first of these is the 'affective' or 'emotional' account, the dominant perspective on blame in philosophy (Menges 2017). Here, blame is seen as an emotional response to transgression. Under this account, blame is, simply the "…negative feeling that we have when we feel that someone has acted badly" (Lupton & Warren, 2018:45). Under this view, when we blame someone, we tend to *feel* something and our blame reaction is driven, in its force and character, by how we feel about the transgression, not by 'rational' considerations, for example our assessment of what should change in the future. The emotional account suggests that the tendency to blame goes deep into our make-up, representing one of our suite of reactive attitudes (Strawson 1974) or moral sentiments (Wallace 1994) that shape our most basic interactions with others, and are indeed constitutive of them (Owens 2012; Franklin 2013).

The affective/emotional view of blame has been subject to critique in the philosophical literature. One concern with this account arises from the observation that blame is not always accompanied by an expression of an emotion (Fricker 2016). A second issue is the question of what emotion(s) underlie blame. Cases have been made for a range of emotions, including disappointment or contempt (Pickard 2013), or sadness (Goldman 2014), though the "standard view" (Menges 2017, 260) is to view blame primarily as a form of anger (Owens 2012). In the controlled environment of work organisations it might be difficult to make a case for the appropriateness of angry reactions (see Lindebaum and Geddes 2016 for a contrary view), though as Owens argues it is possible to separate out the appropriateness of blame as an angry reaction and the aptness of expressing it in particular circumstances.

The idea of a blame as a judgment, a cognitive process, is also present in the philosophical literature (Coates and Tognazzini 2013). Scanlon (2008) locates blame within the context of human relationships and sees it as a response to the impairment of a relationship caused by another's behaviour. Blame under this account is distinct from that in the affective account in that is essentially a judgment rather than an emotional reaction, but shares with it the perspective that blame is necessary for, and sustaining of, human relations. Not to make such a judgement and adjust one's view and relations with someone as result, would be strange in the context of 'normal' human relationships. Indeed, Scanlon suggests that not to blame someone when a relationship has been impaired by their action would be to treat them as someone who is not wholly rational, that is responsive to reasons not to act in such a way. Scanlon also talks of our standing relations to others (generally) based on our shared rationality – thus we might blame a stranger for violating the norms of behaviour that we would expect of them.

In some philosophical accounts blame is regarded as a sanction (see Sher 2006 for a discussion of this view). To blame, under this view, is to indicate that one does not approve of the act that has stimulated the blame, with the intention (or partly so, Fricker 2016) of making it less likely to happen again – on the grounds that people are averse to being blamed (particularly if that is accompanied by disciplinary or other sanctions). This sort of perspective may underpin some of the claims for positive benefits of blame in organisational settings reported by Skarlicki et al (2017) – disciplinary procedures and systems of accountability do have this character. However, it is a view that has been widely critiqued in the philosophical literature. The first criticism is that blame under this view is conceived as quite narrow in scope- it can only apply to things that people chose to do (Levy 2005) or can control (see Owens 2000), as things that are (arguably) beyond people's choice or control (e.g. their character or disposition) are not susceptible to force of the sanction. As Owens

(2000) points out, blame in practice ranges over a much wider scope (e.g. character failings, anti-social behaviour). A second criticism of the sanction-based view of blame is precisely that blame does not appear to have this considered, measured, forward-looking character that is implied (Tilly 2008) – it is often 'swift', and apparently fuelled by emotion.

One of the difficulties in reaching an understanding of blame is its diversity as a social practice. Blame, in different instances, may be emotional, judgemental, purposive, swift or deliberative – and indeed may incorporate more than one of those aspects. There has been a recent attempt in the philosophical literature (Fricker 2016) to develop an understanding of blame's core attributes whilst recognising this diversity of forms. Fricker adopts a 'minimal' definition of blame as, "finding fault with someone for their (inward or outward) conduct" (2016, 170), and develops a 'paradigm form' of blame, "Communicative Blame", "which displays blame's most basic point and purpose" (p171). Communicative blame involves a judgement of fault (and communication of that) with, "the added force of some emotional charge" (p172). Its purpose is to bring the wrongdoer to, "see or fully acknowledge the moral significance of what they have done or failed to do" (p173) and "with a view to their coming to see things differently and mend their ways" (p174). Whilst recognising our 'natural' tendency towards communicative blame, Fricker also recognises (like Owens, above) that we have the capacity to refrain from communicating blame where social or institutional contexts require it. Fricker thus draws on and incorporates elements of each of the different philosophical traditions that were discussed above, offering a flexible understanding of blame that is likely to have value in approaching the diversity of organisational blame.

Finally, it is worth locating Skarlicki et al's (2017) concept of swift blame in relation to philosophical theories of blame. The immediacy of swift blame offers a prima facie similarity with blame as conceived under the emotional/affective account. However, despite its apparent similarities, the two cannot be directly equated. Both refer to immediate and non-

deliberative reactions, but there is nothing explicit in the definition of swift blame to indicate that it necessarily has an emotional content. Swift blame's defining feature is its immediacy, and this may be as much a judgement as it is an emotional reaction. Indeed, its grounding in dual processing theory points in that direction. If swift blame is to be located within the 'evaluative' approaches to blame, it represents a particular version of it – a rapid judgement arising from system 1 thinking. However, this in itself highlights a nuanced difference between the two schools of thought. Swift blame is essentially presented as a failure to utilise the reasoning capacities available to us, albeit one that is 'natural'. By contrast, the blame judgments considered by Scanlon are seen as necessary and sustaining of human relationships. With reference to Fricker's ideas (2016), swift blame would represent a failure to refrain from communicating blame when the situation would render doing so to be appropriate.

'Managing' Blame

Notwithstanding the positive benefits of blame (noted earlier) most of the attention in literature has been on how to mitigate the impact of harmful blame. Prime among these has be discussion of 'no-blame' approaches –defined by Provera, Montefusco and Canato (2010: 1058) as, "a constructive attitude toward errors and near-misses". These were initially conceived in 'high reliability' environments – airlines, power stations and the like (Provera, Montefusco and Canato, 2010), but there are reasons to suggest that their underlying principles may be applicable more generally (Provera, Montefusco and Canato 2010; Skarlicki et al 2017). The main principle is that the organisation should focus on the systemic problems underlying errors rather than on punishing the individual(s) who made the error. In this way the organisation and individuals within it can devote their energies towards learning from mistakes and improving systems so that they do not re-occur (Vince and Saleem 2004; Schilling and Kluge 2009). The key elements of a no-blame approach are management

systems that encourage the reporting of error and do not sanction employees who report them, and the involvement of employees (including those involved in the 'error') in identifying and resolving system problems (Weick and Sutcliffe 2001). In moving the debate beyond high reliability organisations, Provera, Montefusco and Canato (2010) open up the possibilities for no-blame approaches that range more broadly than error-reporting. As Lupton & Warren (2018) notes, no-blame approaches rely on the development and fostering of values of openness, knowledge sharing and involvement, and as such the term 'no-blame culture' is often used (see also Skarlicki et al 2017, 228). Such cultures may also be conducive to encouraging innovation and risk-taking in organisations (Farson and Keyes 2002; Vince and Saleem 2004; Schilling and Kluge 2009) as employees are freed from the caution that may arise from the fear of blame.

To our knowledge the effectiveness of no-blame approaches has yet to be established in the academic literature, though Provera, Montefusco and Canato's (2010) empirical findings highlight the possibilities and potential difficulties. These relate to resources that would need to be invested in no-blame approaches (see also Skarlicki et al 2017) as weighed against the (uncertain) benefits, and the time investment and challenges in making the necessary cultural changes to support it, and conflicts with specific requirements for sanctions in regulated environments. Aside from the practical difficulties, Lupton & Warren (2018) notes that under many conceptions of blame it may be very difficult, and possibly counter-productive to restrain the emotional reactions to fault, or suspend the judgements made. This has led Lupton & Warren (2018) to suggest that rather than trying to remove blame, organisations may be better to temper its effects. This would involve organisations encouraging and supporting more measured reactions to error, mistakes and poor workplace behaviour. This finds some resonance in Skarlicki et al's (2017) alternative suggestions to no-blame as ways of dealing with the problems of swift blame. These are more careful and deliberative systems

for dealing with error and transgression (drawing on system 2, rather than system 1, thinking) and promotion and support for mindfulness in organisations.

The Study

The discussion so far has identified the potential impact of workplace blame; its negative impact on workplace relations and well-being, on organisational learning and innovation, as well as some more positive outcomes. It has considered what blame 'is', providing a theoretical underpinning to its different variants. Finally, it has identified proposals in the literature to mitigate the negative effects of blame, considering primarily the idea of 'no-blame'. As noted at the outset, there has not been, to our knowledge, an empirical investigation of how organisational actors understand blame, and there is very limited evidence (see Provera, Montefusco and Canato 2010) on how employees and managers view the likely effectiveness of 'no-blame' and other approaches to 'managing' blame. The study reported below seeks to address that. The research questions are as follows,

1. What do people working in organisations understand blame to be?
2. What impact do they perceive it to have on individuals and organisations?
3. In what ways do organisational actors think that organisations should 'manage' blame?

In relation the first question, the study seeks to interpret the responses using concepts from the literature, swift blame (Skarlicki et al 2017) and the different philosophical perspectives introduced above. In addressing the second and third questions, the study seeks to develop and understanding of blame in its organisational context, to identify its consequences for individuals and organisations, and the likely impact of strategies to reduce or mitigate blame.

In addressing these questions twenty-seven employees or recent former employees from a range of organisations and occupations were interviewed. Interviewees were recruited through networks and connections of the authors, with some 'snowballing' recruitment (Tracy, 2012)

via existing participants. Fourteen men and thirteen women were interviewed by the authors. Twenty-four of those people were currently in paid work, three were retired or between jobs. All respondents were based in the United Kingdom, and most were in professional, managerial or technical roles, placing limitations on the generalizability of the findings to other geographical and occupational settings. In particular, national culture may impact on blaming practices and the design does not allow us to explore this aspect. Respondents were recruited directly, rather than via their employer, and interviews took place away from the respondent's workplace (except by agreement). Participants were given assurances of confidentiality and anonymity, and informed consent was obtained from all individual participants in the study. They were also reminded that their employer would not be informed by the researcher that they were taking part in the study, and that they should consider any implications of this (and/or chose to disclose) before consenting to participate. Interviews typically lasted between one and two hours, were audio-recorded and later transcribed.

The design of the interviews was focused around the research questions reported above. The researchers explored with respondents their understanding of term 'blame' and their experience of it in organisational life. Views were sought on the impact of blame on the functioning of organisations, and on the people working within them. Respondents were asked how, in their experience, organisations managed (or should manage) blame, and to comment on the idea of no-blame and any experience they had had of such approaches. The interviews had a fluid structure, with the interviewer stimulating conversation around a particular topic with 'prompt' questions and then following through the line of discussion, with follow-up questions for clarification and to draw out examples. At the outset, it was anticipated that there would be some difficulties in encouraging respondents to talk about blame – as it is a potentially sensitive topic, and also as it was anticipated that some aspects of the discussion would have a rather

abstract character. To counter that, particularly the concern that it might be difficult to get the discussion started, a selection of vignettes was developed (Collett and Child 2011). These were short written fictional scenarios each illustrating an incidence of blame. In the initial interviews, the researcher prompted respondents for their thoughts on the vignette in question, why they thought that the characters were behaving in the way that they did, what the impact of that would be, whether the behaviour was appropriate and so on. Typically, respondents related to the vignettes, drawing out similarities with real events and engaging in discussion around those, before volunteering examples and reflections from their own experience. As a result, and as the interviewers' experience and familiarity developed, less and less use was made of the vignettes, and the interviews developed a more fluid and discursive character. As the vignettes were primarily used as a device to generate discussion, and were not used throughout, they are not referred to directly in the report of the findings.

Data from the interviews were subject to thematic analysis (Saunders, Lewis and Thornhill, 2016), supported by NVivo software. In respect of the early interviews, initial coding was carried out by the authors independently. Once the coding framework had been established in this way, the second author conducted the initial coding of each transcript, with the first author reviewing each transcript and analysis, and suggesting and agreeing additional codes or re-categorization.

Findings

The Meaning and Character of Blame

This section addresses the first research question around how blame is understood by people at work. Before presenting the data on this, it is worth noting that interview respondents saw blame within organisations and that in interpersonal relations outside work as the same phenomenon. No respondent suggested that organisational blame was a different character from 'general' blame. That is not to say that many of them did not recognise that blame may

have specific rationales and consequences in organisational settings, as will be discussed later.

There was widespread recognition amongst the respondents of the type of immediate, 'knee-jerk', form of blame which Skarlicki et al (2017) term 'swift blame',

> "Generally speaking, we blame first and then we think". (Retail Sales Operator)

> "It {blame} is a gut instinct….I think that things can {get} tricky when you respond on instincts, and the times that you do respond on instinct are the times that sometimes you ought to say, 'right, hang on a minute'. It's like the email you fire off and then you think, right, 'don't send', you know". (Education Team Leader)

> " ..we've all been in scenarios where we have let off that steam and blamed somebody, and actually when we've known the full story we think 'oh, probably wouldn't have said what I said'". (Health Services Manager)

> "He {an employee} is failing to understand the other person's position and what the actual context is, so therefore he has gone straight to blame". (Area Manager, Retail)

Inherent in these quotes is the notion that swift blame is regrettable, something that is instinctive, and a reaction that, with hindsight, would be better have been avoided. Also explicit in here is that this sort of blaming results from a failure to take time to think, reflect and understand. This resonates with Skarlicki et al's (2017) grounding of the swift blame idea in dual processing theory. Indeed, some respondents linked this sort of blaming with what would be recognised as system 1 and 2 thinking patterns,

> "I think that it {blaming} is because everybody has these conscious and unconscious bias{es} in their mind and that causes them to make a decision and judgement, and that causes them to blame because they think, 'well, somebody has got to be wrong'". (Police Sergeant)

The implication here, and in earlier quotes, is that moving away from rapid reactions, that rest on our system 1 biases and heuristics, will lead to more measured reactions to organisational failures. However, one respondent felt that the thinking patterns behind our immediate blaming reactions may function reasonably well, albeit with a fairly clear notes of caution,

> "In most situations, I would say seventy per cent of situations, it isn't clear and your initial reaction would maybe be right, you may be able to train yourself to do that analysis quite quickly, but your very, very tip of the reaction, very first thoughts may not always be correct and it would be very, very dangerous to assume that that was correct all the time". (Senior Manager, Regulatory Compliance)

It is clear then that organisational players recognise swift blame of the kind that Skarlicki et al (2017) identify. As noted earlier, the dominant view in the philosophy of blame is that blame is an emotional reaction. Some of the above quotations are suggestive of an emotional content to swift blame, but as discussed in our review of literature, the emotional element is not (at least explicitly) part of the swift blame definition. However, blame's emotional content (or otherwise) was something about which our respondents had plenty to say. Most recognised blame as having an emotional element, as these quotations illustrate,

> "I think that emotion plays a very big part in blame". (Head of Operations, Telecoms Company)

> "I think that the emotion causes the blame". (Executive Director, Legal Practice)

Some saw blame as a natural emotional reaction to wrongdoing, again in line with much of the 'blame as emotion' literature,

> "You know, I think it would be odd if people didn't have the reaction or response, because we all have emotions". (Senior Manager, Regulatory Compliance)

As observed earlier, there is a debate in the blame literature as to which emotions are central to blame. Some, for example Owens (2012) see anger as the primary emotional driver of blame. Again, this found a good deal of resonance in the data,

> "Yeah, I mean the anger is the natural reaction {when blaming} as you are responding to something out of your control, and someone has done something and you are responding to that action….". (Health Services Manager)

> "So, blaming feels more like, so, you are apportioning blame, you are apportioning responsibility and it feels angry". (Purchasing Manager)

Other emotions have been advanced in the literature as being constitutive of blame (Goldman 2014; Pickard 2013). The same respondent (unprompted) ruled out sadness and disappointment,

> "…{anger} versus sadness, disappointment is a reaction to what's happened, but it is a personal reaction…. Not necessarily linking that to the responsibility of someone else". (Purchasing Manager)

What this respondent seems to be saying is that while sadness or disappointment may be part of the suite of emotions that we feel when someone has wronged us or let us down, these emotions are in a sense un-directed, whereas the anger emotion is characteristic of blame as it is directed at another person.

Anger, when associated with swift blaming, could in the view of the following respondent lead to a failure to attribute blame correctly,

> "You know, you can get carried away with being angry and venting at the wrong person anyway or focusing your blame on the wrong person…" (Video Producer)

However, for this same respondent, anger is not sufficient for blame to take place, there needs also to be an attribution of fault,

> "I probably wouldn't use the word 'blame' in that situation {breaking a promise} I would say she felt anger, she felt betrayed. Blame is actually saying you didn't action, that's your *fault* (emphasis added). You did something that's your fault". (Video Producer)

Fault was present in other explanations of blame offered by the interviewees, commensurate with Fricker's (2016) 'minimal definition' of blame as a finding of fault,

> "Blame is about identifying somebody who is responsible for an action that is generally negative, because blame has a negative connotation to it…. You don't blame somebody for doing something good, it's their fault, because fault and blame I think they are in the same sentence" (School Teacher, retired).

This need to apportion responsibility when things go wrong emerged in a number of conceptions of blame,

> "For me, blaming someone is apportioning, it's apportioning responsibility, but not requiring action, it's just wanting to put some responsibility somewhere". (Video Producer)

Here the attribution of blame is sufficient purpose in itself, there is no utilitarian sanction or behaviour-shaping element to it. Of course, attributing blame to others *can* have a purpose, as these respondents identify,

> "I wonder if blame is a concept of where we are placing responsibility on somebody else or someone else without taking part of that responsibility ourselves". (Former Company Executive)

> "I've found it is almost like a relief for us to always have someone else to blame, it's always easier not to blame yourself". (Operations Executive, Transport)

Finally, the notion of blame as a judgment also appeared in the responses,

> "…blaming carries with it is sense of judging whether they should have been able to do it or not". (Purchasing Manager)

Here we pick up not only the judgment aspect of blame, but also the 'could have done otherwise' notion that has been prevalent in many philosophical debates on blame. These discussions have often had a metaphysical character – in a deterministic universe could anyone have done otherwise? (see Pereboom 2013)- but are also central to the debates between those who see blame as only appropriate for things that we choose or control (Levy

2005) and those who see blame as appropriate for involuntary actions (Adams 1985) or our character or way of being (Owens 2012).

However, there was some recognition amongst our respondents of the idea of blame, at least in part, as being designed to stimulate an appropriate reaction in another (Fricker 2016). Fricker identifies 'communicative blame' as the paradigm form of blame, one of the features of which is "geared specifically to bring us to feel the proper pang of remorse" (2016, 173), or as one respondent put it rather more directly,

> "But the blame is necessarily supposed to make people feel shit, excuse me for my English". (Retail Sales Operator)

The Impact of blame

This section addresses the second research question, how organisational actors understand the impact of blame. It starts with the positive views about the blame that were expressed. These were in a minority, and some of these were qualified – and sometimes accompanied by more negative views by the same respondent, but nevertheless they do represent streams of thought present in the data. As noted earlier, Skarlicki et al (2017) identify both organisational and individual benefits arising from blame. In terms of the former, a number of respondents drew attention to blame's 'disciplinary' function,

> "{Blame is effective} because it scares people into going, 'ok, well I'd better sort his out', rather than the more collaborative kind of approach of wrapping your hands, your arms, round somebody and trying to say 'let's work this out together', {it} probably doesn't come as such an impact". (Executive Director, Legal Practice)

> "I mean if he didn't blame anybody, and if he didn't raise it, then does he care? If there is no reaction and it is just kind of fine…. Any level of service is fine, then it's not setting the standard really that they want, and showing that they want it to be right

> first time……there has got to be some blame assigned to show that it matters". (Administrative Officer, University)

And, with an important qualification,

> "I've seen it {blame} used in a very skilful way…. Able to turn {it} on enough to get a reaction if you like. Also seen the same person getting it horribly wrong, going too far with it if you like". (Former Company Executive)

An absence of blame was seen by some respondents as creating an environment that lacked appropriate controls,

> "But {without blame} there is a risk that people get too cosy without a sense of accountability". (Senior Civil Servant "A")

> "… you know, if everybody held their hands up and no one was to blame, you know, I think no lessons would be learned". (Area Manager, Retail)

It is interesting that this last quote suggests that blame is a foundation for learning, which is in direct contrast with much of the literature, and the views of many of our respondents, that blame is an inhibitor of organisational learning. However, it was not the only such view expressed,

> "…and people say … 'I complain a lot', but they look at it is a useful contribution.. because the whole engine of blame, it's all about…. We humans want to improve ultimately, and they want to find out where the situation went wrong". (Management Consultant, retired)

The psychological benefits of blame articulated by our respondents differed from those set out by Skarlicki et al (2017), which concerned managers feeling that they are doing the right

thing. Here it was more about blame providing a sense of closure in the organisation more generally,

> "I think it is possibly human nature to have to pin something on somewhere {someone}… I don't know, maybe for closure". (Police Inspector "A")

> "… sometimes there is a relief for everybody else you know when somebody is taking the blame and everyone else thinks 'oh phew, it's not me this time', and actually, yeah it might have been my fault". (Team Leader, Education)

> "It's often the workforce upwards that is blaming, finding blame. Why do they do it? I think I would imagine because in those situations, because something has gone wrong and you want to go 'it's their fault'. So sometimes you are looking for a scapegoat". (School Teacher, retired)

Overwhelmingly, the respondents felt that blame had a negative impact in organisations, though as will be discussed later this depended on how blame was defined, understood and enacted. These detrimental effects were of two types, broadly reflecting Skarlicki et al's (2017) review, those relating to its impact on learning (which is addressed in a separate section below) and those relating to the impact on individual wellbeing and productivity, which are illustrate here,

> "… In my opinion {if} somebody is really susceptible to blaming and if that person blames all the time then you have an issue with employee wellbeing and so on and so forth". (Executive Director, Legal Practice)

> "…..the ones who managed it best are those who do not hold me overly responsible, do not blame me despite all of the circumstances… I've gone on to want to work for

> them much more, I think I've been more productive for those people". (Senior Civil Servant "B")

For some respondents the use of language and the manner in which blame was allocated had a strong bearing on its negative effect,

> " …so if someone came up to me and said, 'you are being blamed for this mistake', I become defensive. If somebody said to me… 'it was a mistake, let's find out how that mistake happened…..'". (Senior Manager, Regulatory Compliance)

> …"you have to be very be very careful about the language you use when you are actually apportioning blame, because it can be very divisive and you can end up in a situation where you can alienate yourself and the organisation, where that is actually isn't going to resolve anything".(Health Services Manager)

> ".. If you are accused unjustly of something in an angry way, then it isn't nice, and that relationship has to be repaired doesn't it? Whereas …. If you are calm and you know you say 'oh, whose eaten my lunch?' there is no aggression … and I'm still blaming you..but.. it's a lot easier to repair". (Team Leader, Education)

These quotes suggest that, contrary to a strand in the philosophical literature, 'dispassionate' blame may be possible, and may also reflect a recognition of the need to move away from swift blame to more measured interventions (Skarlicki et al 2017; Lupton & Warren, 2018).

Another 'function' of blame that emerged quite strongly in the data is its role in 'shifting responsibility'. This had a strong self-preservation element, and was seen as in some ways 'natural',

> "…you know, it is only human nature then to try and shift the blame to kind of save yourself, you know". (Executive Director, Legal Practice)

> "People don't want to feel they have done something wrong, because doing something wrong has a connotation against it, it's not a nice feeling… so they deflect the blame on other people". (Senior Manager, Regulatory Compliance)

It was also clearly viewed as a fairly widespread organisational practice, and the comments of some of the respondents echo quite closely those of some those in Provera, Montefusco and Canato's (2010) study,

> "Why the person was blamed, I think was a bit of a deflection if I'm entirely honest, by the officers who were investigating from the early team, not the night team, the officer who actually made the arrest from the other team, because they hadn't done their job properly." (Police Inspector "B")

> "….in the [x] industry…the blame culture was quite persuasive, where everyone else was to blame apart from yourself… quite often when people blame other people for their failings, nine out of ten the actual blame is usually something that has to do with them in the first instance". (Managing Director, Small Business)

Two issues are surfaced in the latter quotes. The first is the 'political' nature of blame as a social practice within organisations. As Fricker (2016, 181) notes, blame has a 'controlling' character, which can be benign and even emancipatory, in the sense of encouraging others towards a shared moral view. However, as Fricker also notes, it can also be used less benignly as control mechanism in the context of power relations (in her example, in the case of a patriarchal family). It seems likely that work organisations, in which power relations are inherent, will be a site for blame practices which seek to re-inforce or subvert power

relationships, or preserve the standing of one group in relation to another. The second issue is the idea of a 'culture' of blaming in organisations – something that will be discussed in more detail below.

Blame, Organisational Learning and Accountability

This section explores two issues that emerged strongly in the data. The first is the impact of blame on learning in organisations, and the second is blame's role in holding people accountable.

As discussed earlier, there is a strong theme the literature that sees blame as having a detrimental effect on organisational learning (Vince and Saleem 2004; Schilling and Kluge 2009). Blame was often contrasted with what were seen as more 'constructive' approaches to dealing with mistakes or failings.

> "When you are blaming someone I think the connotation is negative, when you are trying to understand the consequences, for me, then you are working towards like, okay, improvement and development and that is how it should be, but when you are actually blaming someone I think that is not constructive at all… by pointing the finger you're creating that other world of problems and complexities". (Retail Sales Operator)

> "…that {the best approach} is not blaming someone, its more just sort of an investigation of facts… consider how we can prevent this from happening again, being more constructive, sort of". (former Laboratory Technician)

> "I am the first person to say to them, 'it ain't the end of the world, we have got it wrong but what can we do to fix it, and actually the blame that comes from that I don't think that is the most important thing". (Police Inspector "B")

Some respondents referred to a ‘culture’ of blaming, capturing the idea that blaming can become a pervasive and accepted activity in organisations – and contrasting with the idea of ‘no-blame cultures’ as discussed and espoused in the literature (e.g. Skarlicki et al 2017). Blame cultures were seen as ‘destructive’ and to be avoided if opportunities to learn from error are to be taken,

> “Blame seems one dimensional and destructive to me. So, I think to avoid that culture must be the right one {approach}”. (Senior Civil Servant “B”)

> “So we give you the opportunity that, okay, we know, understand, that you are human, you make mistakes, but if this repeats itself this is a trend, this is what the consequences are and I think that way you know it gives you that opportunity of where we can provide like support……. {this approach serves} to prevent people from getting into these habits of culture of blaming”. (Operations Executive, Transport)

> “Well in my organisation I think as soon as we get a blame culture… then the rot sets in and nobody ever tells anybody anything. I run a small business and everybody has got to be honest and open up to their mistakes before damage is caused… as soon as there is blame, people don’t report it any more”. (Managing Director, Small Business)

While blame’s role as an inhibitor to organisational learning was fairly clear cut, perceptions of its role within organisational systems of control were more nuanced. The need to hold people accountable was seen as a legitimate organisational function, however trying to articulate the role that blame played in that proved difficult for respondents. Blame tended to have negative connotations for the respondents, so the prominent discourse was to disassociate ‘blame’ from ‘accountability’,

> "… she just couldn't do the job… so she had to know that I wasn't blaming her for not being able to do the job, but I was holding her accountable, so there was a difference……you know, I think there has to be accountability, there has got be a level of accountability… be we can do it in a positive, a positive {way}, blame is very negative, isn't it?" (Team Leader, Education)

> "we {in our organisation} don't use the word 'blame' really…. If my boss came to me and said 'look X you are accountable for this and I want to see some actions from it'… .I would be much more impassioned to say 'yeah… I've lost the mark there I need to sort this out', whereas if my boss rang me up and said 'you know, you are to blame' …. I think that is more to do with language, we associate blame with, you know, an incompetency – I would be like 'hang on a second'. (Area Manager, Retail)

Some respondents attempted to tease out a difference between accountability and blame more explicitly. One interviewee drew implicitly on the emotional/affective account of blame, and contrasted that with dispassionate judgements that they saw as associated with accountability,

> "….to me, I do think that accountability is the non-emotional allocation of blame". (Executive Director, Legal Practice)

Another saw blame as taking a narrower, individual perspective on organisational error, rather than taking a more measured, possibly system-2, approach to understanding the wider context.

> "Now, you can still do the accountability without blame. It (blame) is that transferring of your failings onto others as well. I think blame is more, to me it suggests that you are not sharing some of the responsibility for that outcome, it is not

> taking into account external factors in that outcome, it is not taking into account a person's relative level of training or experience or whatever, and it is trying to shift the responsibility onto another person and to disregard the institutional failings." (Senior Civil Servant "B")

Not all respondents were comfortable that notions of 'blame' and 'accountability' could be usefully separated out, or that this was the key distinction to be made,

> "Yeah, I think well to my mind this is not so much about whether blame and accountability are two different things or the same thing. I think if as an organisation you say we are going to stop the blame culture you have got this policy now called 'accountability', people would laugh at you – I think it is a bit of sophistry really…. Whether you call it blame or accountability you have certain organisations that will absolutely kill someone for making a mistake, and you have other organisations that will try and get learning from it and will try and support that individual to become better at their job". (Senior Manager, Professional Regulation)

Perspectives on the No-Blame idea

This section reports what the respondents said about the idea of no-blame approaches or cultures. None of the respondents had experience of working under explicit no-blame approaches, though some referred to initiatives in their organisations that might be regarded as congruent with such approaches. Furthermore, none worked in high reliability organisations where such approaches are known to be used (Provera, Montefusco and Canato 2010) and like these authors we were interested to see how respondents in other types of organisation understood such approaches and viewed their likely effectiveness. Generally speaking, the respondents were unfamiliar with the idea of no-blame, except in a very general sense, and were quite sceptical as to its appropriateness or value. There were exceptions, and

the section starts with a couple of examples of respondents who were able to articulate what they felt a no-blame approach might involve and what it might achieve.

> "…an organisation which allows people to make mistakes, and to grow and learn from them, it puts in a supportive framework where you can do that. It's those who are judging you are quite clear of their own failing and difficulties and their contribution to it, and they take a wider view of institutional and environmental failures for problems that led to your mistake, and don't focus to much on the individual. I think that can happen and the strongest organisations do that". (Senior Civil Servant "B")

> "So we have got training on this internal mandatory training, all.. of our staff, to be aware of people and their feelings and their thoughts…. So it is about being aware of changes in people and trying to understand why those changes are there, so you definitely can work with people to rein them in bit more, to feel a bit more empathetic with people, to try and ask rather than blame". (Senior Manager, Regulatory Compliance)

And the same respondent reported…..

> "So we have in our team a blame board. So, we have a big white board in our corner office, blame board {where people record}, 'I failed to do this' and 'why did it happen?', because we don't want blame and failure to be something we hide, we want to be in an open transparent environment". (Senior Manager, Regulatory Compliance)

This was a very recent initiative in the respondent's workplace at the time of the interview and as a result it was not possible to capture a sense of the impact and implications of this.

Both these respondents articulate a more measured, system 2, type approach to blame. The views of the following respondents are more sceptical, raising a number of concerns about the no-blame idea. The first was that it would, reflecting a discussion earlier in the article, undermine notions of accountability in the organisation.

> "I think where I struggle with the concept of the no blame culture is when it {be}comes an amnesty for bad behaviour, because for me if behaviour is inappropriate, then it is inappropriate and you know surfacing it by saying 'but we're' not, you know, we are not going to have blame attached', it is almost a sort of slap on the legs but don't do it again". (Purchasing Manager)

> "…but more likely the no -blame culture, I think that would create people being quite lethargic and you know not necessarily taking their responsibilities as seriously {as they would otherwise}, so finding the balance between the two {blame/no-blame} is important". (Executive Director, Legal Practice)

> "I remember going to a presentation a while ago by someone from {Organisation X) and somebody asked about no-blame culture and how important it was. This person said that he didn't quite like this phrase of 'no-blame culture' because you have to have people feeling accountable for doing a good job". (Senior Civil Servant "A")

> "If there was a no-blame culture you could end up with something that is like really floppy….. you've got to get the balance right between saying 'look I've spotted this mistake of yours, did you know that you have done that' and going to the person who made the mistake so the person has the opportunity {to respond}". (Senior Manager, Regulatory Compliance)

The above views focus on the impact on the organisations, of no-blame (as perceived) undermining accountability. Another perceived drawback was that refraining from blaming interfered with a psychological need for responsibility for wrongdoing to be attributed (together with the thought that if as a manager you don't attribute blame to others you then have to accept responsibility yourself),

> I don't think anybody will ever, there will never be a no blame culture because not to give blame means you have to accept responsibility {yourself, for what went wrong}, if you don't accept responsibility you give blame. It is like me saying that the officer {wasn't wrong}, in a way I am blaming, and I did, I do genuinely think she was {wrong}, so I am blaming her". (Police Sergeant)

A third set of concerns was around the possibilities of 'no-blame' in the context of the regimes of accountability that some organisations face. Skarlicki et al (2017, 225) refer to a range of legal (and quasi-legal) factors that may require or encourage managers to exercise blame. On the basis of the following respondents' comments those of public service accountability and professional regulation can be added, each of which was seen as proscribing the limits of no-blame,

> "It's difficult to see it {a no blame approach}, to see it survive against environmental factors, I think it is really particular in the civil service where there is public accountability….. now you can be as strong as you want but sometimes the court of public opinion, the need to restore public confidence in you mean you sometimes have to do it {be seen to blame someone}. It slightly betrays the no-blame culture, it doesn't survive on its own, it never survives on its own….. generally I think that the public thinks that civil servants are protected from blame and protected from accountability too much… we never take the blame, we sidle away from blame as

> opposed to politicians {it is said}..... some members of the public think we can do with being blamed more". (Senior Civil Servant "B")

> "… {it is said} that if professionals are not allowed to admit their mistakes without the full force of regulation you know coming down on them, then they simply won't admit mistakes and we won't be able to learn from it, and I see that point and I understand that……. But in situations when they were seeing professionals who were palpably off the pace and culpable of bad things happening to people, in my view there is sort of an ethical responsibility in that case to say 'well, actually, we need to stop this guy from being in that situation then'….. so I don't think the no-blame culture is something we should aim for or that we should worry about too much, what we ought to do is get systems where you can identify the people that aren't in the right place and move them out of it, other people who make genuine mistakes you concentrate on the remediation of that and their re-education if necessary". (Senior Manager, Professional Regulation)

Finally, some respondents felt that it would take a long time to successfully implement a no-blame approach.

> "I think it would be a long process to get to that kind of state {no-blame}. Because the feeling is always, well, 'what have you done about it?', and you know if they say 'well you know, we have learnt from it' that people looking {in} will say 'well you have just whitewashed it, you know, you have glossed over that by learning from it, we want somebody sanctioned". (Police Inspector "A")

> "I think that that could be achieved, but it will be years and years of learning to get there, reprogramming the way that we just naturally are as human beings". (Executive Director, Legal Practice)

These responses again underscore how ‘natural’ blame seemed to be to respondents, and difficult to ‘manage’, even when they accepted that its organisational consequences may be detrimental.

Discussion

The aims of this article are to explore how people working in organisations understand and experience blame, and in doing so to shed light on the question of how organisations might ‘manage’ blame. In making sense of the findings we draw primarily on the philosophical literature on blame, and on the management literature on ‘no-blame’ and related concepts. In this section we offer first our reflections on the concept of blame in the light of our novel findings on its manifestations in organisational settings. We then discuss our findings on the nature and impact of organisational blame.

The diversity in the interviewees’ views on blame reflect a diversity in perspectives in the philosophical and other literatures. Swift blame (Skarlicki et al 2017) was certainly recognisable in the respondents’ accounts as an organisational phenomenon (though interviewers and respondents did not mention the term explicitly), and generally seen as an undesirable, if inevitable, reaction to error or wrongdoing. This was seen as having many of the detrimental consequences that Skarlicki et al (2017) anticipate in terms of impairing workplace relations and inhibiting learning – which will be discussed in more detail below.

The study raises two interesting questions around swift blame. The first is whether it is best understood within the framework of system 1/system 2 thinking (Kahneman, 2011), in a sense as a failure to exercise cognition, an irrational and inferior response. The sense of blame as a necessary and adaptive response emerged in many of the accounts, and one respondent specifically framed ‘swift’ blame responses as useful – and generally reliable – heuristic. This is very much more in line with the view of Gigerenzer (2008) of rules of

thumb as effective adaptive responses rather than irrational ones, and we wonder whether incorporation of his work will be useful in developing the swift-blame idea. The second issue is, that while swift blame is clearly an empirically valid and useful concept, as noted in the introduction to the article, it is somewhat philosophically broad-ranging, potentially encompassing emotional reactions or dispassionate judgments, both of which may be 'swift'. The debate between those who see blame as an emotional reaction and those who see it (variously) as a judgement, recognition, protest or sanction (Coates and Tognazzini 2013) is a live one in the philosophical literature, and the range of views amongst the respondents reflected that. There was most support amongst the respondents for the idea of blame as an emotional response, and some support for the idea that the dominant emotion underlying it was anger. However, generally speaking, these emotional reactions were not seen as generalised emotional outpourings, but as ones accompanied with an attribution of fault. This emotion/attribution pairing (Fricker 2016) seemed characteristic of many respondents' conceptions of blame. However, blame was also articulated in different ways, as a signal that something was wrong and that it 'mattered', as a deliberative mechanism to control and shape behaviour, and as a mechanism to set and communicate standards (Coates and Tognazzini 2013; Lupton & Warren, 2018).

Philosophers have found blame to be a slippery and elusive concept, and perhaps it is not surprising that there is no strong consensus amongst everyday organisational actors – though reassuring (at least for philosophers!) that many of the key philosophical ideas find resonance in the views of the respondents. To our knowledge this study is not only a rare empirical examination of organisational blame, but also unique as a philosophically- grounded study of people's intuitions of blame more generally – and it is worth reflecting on what that tells us. Our interpretation of these findings is that blame is possibly too-broad ranging a concept, with too many different manifestations, to be fully captured by any of the different

philosophical views, even though all of them capture some of what was observed. Here we are in support of Fricker (2016, 166) who worries that, ".. the practice of blame is significantly disunified, and is therefore likely to have distinctive or otherwise central features that may not be present in all instances", rendering its analysis and 'capture' difficult. There was also much in the data to support Fricker's paradigm case of 'communicative blame', where a judgment of fault is combined with an emotional charge, which is designed to stimulate an appropriate response in the recipient- and has the function of aligning the standards of behaviour of the blamer and the blamee.

The discussion now moves onto some reflections on blame in organisational settings and implications for organisations. Firstly, there was considerable empirical support for many issues raised by Skarlicki et al's (2017) overview of the potential impact of blame in organisations. Blame was seen as having a positive organisational benefit in setting, communicating and enforcing standards of performance and behaviour, its characteristic force seen by some respondents as having a more powerful effect than more gently persuasive management interventions. It was also seen as having valuable psychological effects, both at an individual and social level. A number of respondents referred to the sense of 'closure' that the allocation of blame brought to organisational episodes, and the accompanying liberating effects arising from relief that the blame had not come in their direction.

On the other hand, blame's more negative effects, as articulated by Scarlicki et al (2017) in the context of swift blame, and more generally in the organisational learning (Vince and Saleem 2004; Schilling and Kluge 2009) and no-blame literatures (Provera, Montefusco and Canato 2010), were very much in evidence. Immediate and angry blaming was seen as detrimental to workplace relations and wellbeing, and counter-productive in the search for

solutions for organisational problems – though for some respondents a certain amount of blaming was seen as necessary to jolt people into reflecting fully on their actions (again resonant with Fricker's (2016) notion of communicative blame). Our respondents also talked of blame being used 'politically', with individuals or groups in organisations shifting blame onto others to protect themselves, or to advance their own interests over others.

One of the most interesting findings of the study was the tension that emerged in the interviewees' responses between organisations' need for control and discipline on the one hand, and the need for to encourage openness around error to enable organisational learning. Blame had a central place in making sense of, and seeking to resolve, this tension. The need to move away from blame responses to individual error, and cultures of blaming more generally, was overwhelmingly supported. However, holding people responsible for their actions and performance was seen as equally important. As observed earlier, a prominent discourse here was to distinguish between blame and accountability. Here accountability was essentially presented as 'good' blame – measured, careful and constructive – perhaps implicitly mapping on to Skarlicki et al's (2017) distinction between system1 swift blame and systems of 'accountability and control' that would be informed by system 2 thinking. However, delivering this in practice was seen as problematical by many respondents. Not all respondents 'bought' the distinction between accountability and blame as presented here, and many felt that removing swift blame was in any case unrealistic. That said, there was a good deal of support for more measured approaches to dealing with error and poor performance (Skarlicki et al 2017) at an organisational level, and more 'careful' blaming practices (Lupton & Warren, 2018) at an individual one, as alternatives to swift-blame and no-blame.

What of the no-blame idea? The findings suggest a good deal of scepticism about it. In our estimation, much of that reflects respondents' lack of exposure to it, and potentially a

lack of understanding of what it would involve in practice. A prominent concern was that no-blame approaches might lead to a 'carte-blanche' for poor behaviour or performance. Respondents in public service organisations drew attention to the desire of stakeholders outside the organisations (the public, the government) to attribute blame, and the limits that would put on trying to implement 'no-blame' within the organisation. Other responses raised the practical challenges of implementing no-blame approaches, both in terms of the investment in design and training (Skarlicki et al 2017) but also in terms of the extent of the cultural change required, as it seemed to cut across some of our core attitudes and desires.

We end the discussion by drawing together our thoughts on how, in the light of our findings, organisational blame reflects existing understandings of blame in the literature, and on where the organisational data surfaces new ideas and challenges. It should perhaps not be too surprising that blame concepts in 'general' life manifest themselves in organisational settings. The findings indicate that organisational actors have a ready familiarity with blame and also hold a diversity of views as to its meaning and character. While it is certainly true that in interviewing people about blame specifically and prompting for opinions, ideas and examples will necessarily surface a commentary on the topic in hand, there was a certain readiness in which responses were provided, and examples given, by all respondents that suggested strongly that blaming was a common and a familiar organisational practice. Furthermore, there was nothing in the data that suggested that *organisational* blame was seen as distinct from blame in the world outside. Rather, blame was clearly seen as a familiar activity which had manifestations in the workplace. The context of organisational life is likely to surface particular issues and challenges that might not arise, or be so pressing, outside the workplace, but our findings give us confidence to interpret blame in organisations using ideas and concepts that have been used to make sense of it more generally. Blame is at its core a *social* practice and is likely to be present in all settings where people interact. Indeed, work

organisations - where people (often) work together to deliver pre-defined outcomes, and in which formal hierarchical relationships and accountabilities are intertwined with more informal relations and mutual demands – are likely to bring blame to the fore in interesting ways.

Making sense of blame in organisational settings is complicated by the existing diversity in conceptions of blame, and by the fact that we found evidence of correspondence with many of them in organisational understandings and practice. As noted above, we found most support for blame as an immediate response, and as an emotional, often angry, response - and sometimes both. In itself, and to the extent to which this reflects blaming practices outside organisations, this provides some novel empirical support for what is probably the dominant view of blame in contemporary philosophy (Strawson, 1974; Wallace, 1994; Owens, 2012). However, this was not the whole story, for there was support in the findings for alternative conceptions, for example for blame as judgement of transgression (Scanlon, 2008), or as means to shape future behaviour. Indeed, our findings on organisational blame point to need for a more catholic conception of blame generally. Approaches to blame (e.g. Fricker's, 2016), that are able to capture the diversity of practice that we found in organisations, may have more explanatory traction both within and outside organisations. Rapid blame reactions – as per Skarlicki et al's (2107) 'swift blame' - are likely to be part of such a conceptualisation, but our data suggest that a clearer specification of the place of emotion within these reactions would be helpful.

Turning to the organisational context, the findings highlighted a tension -which may not be so prominent in non-organisational settings - between the need to hold people accountable while at the same time avoiding the damaging effects (to individuals and organisations) of blame of the immediate, emotional type that people most readily recognised. Thinking their

way through this issue was problematic for our respondents, and involved consideration of definitional and boundary issues which have no clear resolution. Sanctioning blame (no-blame approaches) seemed to respondents to offer too little accountability, tolerating blame was seen as a route to damaged work relationships and inhibited organisational learning, while institutionalising blame (e.g. through disciplinary procedures) was seen as not fully realistic. Finding an appropriate way of handling blame is likely to be challenging for organisations – the findings of our study help to show why, but also suggest that stimulating discussion among organisational actors about meanings, definitions, practices and outcomes is likely to be a necessary first step.

Conclusion

This article has contributed to the literature on blame in organisations in a number of ways. Firstly, it offers an original empirical account of organisational blaming practices, their meaning and their impact. Very little is known about how blame is understood and experienced by people working in organisations, and the empirical findings will help to put the discussion of organisational blame onto a firmer footing. Secondly, through the empirical analysis, we have been able to explore key concepts in the blame literature and examine their application in organisational settings. The article provides empirical support for the presence of swift blame (Skarlicki et al 2107) in organisational life, and evidence for its impact on individuals and institutions. Strong support in the data was found for the affective/emotional account of blame (Wallace 1994), though not exclusively so, and a diversity of perspectives on blame were surfaced, reflecting the range of views in the philosophical literature (Coates and Tognazzini 2013; Lupton & Warren, 2018). These points lead to the third, theoretical, contribution. Our examination of the swift blame concept in practice led us conclude that it would benefit from further theoretical development, in relation to its definitional precision and its underpinning in dual- processing theory. The diversity of blame perceptions pointed

us to the value of Fricker's (2016) notion of 'communicative blame' as valuable way of capturing and interpreting the range of blame forms and functions in organisations.

As that author notes (2016, 179) blame, even if conceived as natural, is not 'compulsory' – we may choose to refrain from it, though, "our social institutions will tend to impose their own constraints". Work organisations are presumably examples of the social institutions that Fricker has in mind, and the fourth contribution has been to explore how these 'constraints' on blame restraint might play out in practice. The findings suggest that, in the eyes of organisational actors, the need for accountability both within and from outside the organisation provides one such constraint, and as a result that many of the respondents, though often sympathetic to no-blame approaches in principle, found it difficult to conceive how they would operate effectively in practice. Encouraging care in blaming practices, and restraining immediacy and emotional charge (Skarlicki et al 2017; Lupton & Warren, 2018), may be a more realistic and achievable way forward.

The article concludes with some thoughts on the future direction of enquiry in this field. We are mindful that the analysis has taken place at a high level of abstraction. Our focus has been on the applicability of theoretical concepts to organisational life and we have offered what is, to our knowledge, a first empirical exploration of that. As a result we have not had space to explore the contextual issues that no doubt influence how blame is understood and enacted in specific organisational settings. National culture, organisation size and type, organisational culture, leadership styles and institutional factors are likely to be foremost amongst these. Making sense of the impact of these features is an important agenda for future analysis and research. In addition research that explicates and evaluates no-blame approaches in 'everyday' organisations would be a valuable empirical contribution to the field, as would ethnographic approaches that get a little 'closer to the action' than has been possible here.

Further conceptual development and empirical testing of the swift blame idea (Skarlicki et al 2017) would be useful, as would a fuller consideration than has been possible here of the potential contribution of 'communicative blame' (Fricker 2016) to an understanding of organisational blame. We trust that the discussion presented here will, as well as illuminating the practice of organisational blame, provide a useful foundation for such enquir**ies**.

References

Adams, Robert Merrihew. 1985. "Involuntary Sins". *The Philosophical Review* XCIV (1): 3-31.

Bhargava, Vikram R. 2018. "Firm Responses to Mass Outrage: Technology, Blame and Employment". *Journal of Business Ethics*. Available online https://doi.org/10.1007/s10551-018-4043-7. Accessed 11th June 2019.

Collett, Jessica, L., and Ellen Child. 2011. "Minding the gap: meaning, affect and the potential shortcomings of vignettes". *Social Science Research* 4 (2): 513-522.

Coates, D. Justin and Neal A. Tognazzini, eds. 2013. *Blame: Its Nature and Norms*. New York, NY: Oxford University Press,.

Farson, Richard and Ralph Keyes. 2002. "The Failure-Tolerant Leader". *Harvard Business Review* August: 64-71.

Franklin, Christopher Evan. 2013. "Valuing Blame". In *Blame: Its Nature and Norms*, edited by D. Justin Coates and Neal, A. Tognazzini, 207-233. New York, NY: Oxford University Press.

Fricker, Miranda. 2016. "What's the Point of Blame? A Paradigm Based Explanation". *Nous* 50 (1): 165-183.

Gigerenzer, Gerd. 2008. “Why Heuristics Work”. *Perspectives on Psychological Science* 3, (1): 20-29.

Goldman, David. 2014. “Modification of the Reactive Attitudes”. *Pacific Philosophical Quarterly* 95: 1-22.

Kahneman, Daniel. 2011. *Thinking, Fast and Slow*. New York, NY: Farrar, Straus and Giroux,.

Levy, Neil. 2005. “The Good, the Bad and the Blameworthy”. *Journal of Ethics and Social Philosophy* 2: 2-16.

Lindebaum, Dirk, and Deanna Geddes. 2016. “The Place and Role of (Moral) anger in Organizational Behaviour Studies”. *Journal of Organizational Behaviour* 37: 738-757.

Lupton, B. and Warren, R. (2018). “Managing without Blame? Insights from the Philosophy of Blame”. *Journal of Business Ethics.* 152, 41-52.

Menges, Leonhard. 2017. “The Emotion Account of Blame”. *Philosophical Studies* 174: 257-273.

Owens, David. 2000. *Reason Without Freedom*. London: Routledge.

Owens, David. 2012. *Shaping the Normative Landscape*. Oxford: Oxford University Press,

Pereboom, Dirk. 2013. “Free Will Skepticism, Blame and Obligation”. In *Blame: Its Nature and Norms*, edited by D. Justin Coates and Neal, A. Tognazzini, 207-233. New York, NY: Oxford University Press.

Pickard, Hanna. 2014. “Irrational Blame”. *Analysis* 73(4): 613-626.

Provera, Bernadino, Andrea Montefusco and Anna Canato. 2010. “A ‘No Blame’ Approach to Organizational Learning”. *British Journal of Management* 21: 1057-1074.

Saunders, Mark, N.K, Philip Lewis, and Adrian Thornhill. 2016. *Research Methods for Business Students*. London: Pearson Education.

Scanlon, T.M. 2008. *Moral Dimensions*. Cambridge, MA:Harvard University Press,.

Schilling, Jan, and Annette Kluge. 2009. "Barriers to organizational learning: An integration of theory and research". *International Journal of Management Reviews* 11(3): 337-360.

Senge, Peter. 2006. *The Fifth Discipline: The Art and Practice of the Learning Organization.* London: Random House.

Sher, George. 2006. *In Praise of Blame*. Oxford: Oxford University Press.

Skarlicki, Daniel P., Adam, A Kay, Karl Aquino and David Fushtey. 2017. "Must Heads Roll? A Critique of and Alternative Approaches to Swift Blame". *Academy of Management Perspectives* 31 (3): 222-236.

Strawson, P.F. 1974. *Freedom and Resentment, and Other Essays*. London: Methuen.

Tilly, Charles. 2008. *Credit and Blame.* Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press.

Tracy, Sarah, J. 2013. *Qualitative Research Methods*. Oxford: Wiley-Blackwell.

Vince, Russ, and Tahir Saleem. 2004. "The Impact of Caution and Blame on Organizational Learning". *Management Learning* 35 (2): 133-154.

Wallace, R, Jay. 1994. *Responsibility and the Moral Sentiments*. Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press.

Waring, J.J. 2005. "Beyond Blame: Cultural Barriers to Medical Incident Reporting". *Social Science and Medicine* 60 (9): 1927-1935.

Weick, Karl, E., and Kathleen, M. Sutcliffe 2001. *Managing the Unexpected. Assuring High Performance in an Age of Complexity*. Hoboken, NJ: Wiley.