The Blame Game: Economic Crisis Responsibility, Discourse, and Affective Framings

Christian von Scheve, Veronika Zink, Sven Ismer

Freie Universität Berlin

Department of Sociology

Author Note

Christian von Scheve, Department of Sociology and Cluster "Languages of Emotion",

Freie Universität Berlin; Veronika Zink, Department of Sociology and Cluster "Languages of

Emotion", Freie Universität Berlin; Sven Ismer, Department of Sociology and Cluster "Lan-

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this article should be addressed to Christian von Scheve, E-mail: scheve@zedat.fu-berlin.de.

Abstract: Key elements of discourse on the recent economic crisis are attributions of crisis responsibility. Such attributions are assumed to have consequences for audiences' thoughts and actions in domains relevant to the crisis. Although studies have suggested ways to conceptualize attributions of responsibility, their effects on social action remain poorly understood. This essay develops an empirically grounded theoretical model and methodological tool to reconstruct ideal-typical attributions of responsibility from discourse along the dimensions of attribution targets and attributed logics of action. It further proposes that combinations of these ideal types constitute affective framings that influence how the crisis is perceived and how an audience may act in crisis relevant domains.

Introduction

The recent economic crisis, ongoing since 2008, is a paradigmatic expression of what Beck (1992) established with regard to the risk society: the complex networking and shifting of financial risks by various international financial market actors has created a global and long-term space of concern and uncertainty that affects almost everyone, regardless of class or status. Naturally, in times of crisis, one likes to know who is responsible, who is going to take the blame, and what measures can be taken to forfeit similar events in the future. The question of responsibility is one of the major avenues on which the process of the social construction of any crisis proceeds. It is not only eminent for any sociological understanding of crises, but also critical for how a specific crisis proceeds and develops, and how societies at large react upon a crisis. In the case of the recent economic crisis, this is well illustrated by a statement issued by the Obama Administration in February 2010 regarding the implementation of a "Financial Crisis Responsibility Fee", a tax to be paid by financial firms as long as they benefited from the US's "Troubled Assets Relief Program":

"Excessive risk undertaken by major financial firms was a significant cause of the recent financial crisis […] The fee would […] provide a deterrent against excessive leverage for the largest financial firms" (Page, 2010: 197f).

Depending on who or what is deemed responsible for a crisis thus significantly influences individuals' and institutions' courses of action in domains affected by the crisis, thus shaping the ways in which the crisis develops. What difference does it make, for example, when responsibility is attributed to specific individuals, such as Richard Fuld, former chairman of *Lehman Brothers*, or to groups and associations, for instance "the bankers" and "greedy capitalists", or to still larger and more abstract entities, such as "casino capitalism"[i], "interest rates" or "the structure of certain financial products"?

One can assume that attributions of responsibility in public discourse lead to distinct interpretations of the financial crisis in the public, which in turn may have considerable effects

on how the crisis is perceived and how various actors, e.g. households, corporations, or regulators, contemplate on overcoming and avoiding it in the future and how they act in response to a crisis. For example, if responsibility for the economic crisis is attributed to systemic shortcomings and developments, such as fundamental flaws in the design of economic institutions or challenges related to globalization and transnationalization, actors might interpret and act upon the crisis differently than when responsibility is attributed to particular individuals, such as Richard Fuld or Jimmy Cayne, former CEO of *Bear Stearns*. The latter possibility is nicely illustrated by *Time Magazine's* list of "25 People to Blame for the Financial Crisis"[ii].

However plausible this conjecture might seem, we know very little about how certain elements of discourse – in this case attributions of responsibility for the crisis – can be linked to social phenomena *outside* the discourse, i.e. phenomena that are distinct from the textual and symbolic realm constituting discourse, in particular how audiences and the public make sense of and act upon a situation. Although media and discourse studies as well as certain types of content analysis have proposed ways in which elements of discourse can be related to widely shared patterns of thought and action (for example by providing frames and models of interpretation and scripts for action), they are largely mute about the specific *kinds* of actions that are likely to be taken in view of certain framings and portrayals (e.g., Gerhards et al., 2007; Iyengar, 1991).

Our aim in this essay is to contribute to this question and to shed some light on the possible ways in which attributions of responsibility in public discourse affect how people think, feel and might act in the specific domain to which the attributions relate. At the same time, disentangling attributed responsibility in discourse on the crisis is a contribution to opening up the "black box" of modern financial markets, as Latour (1994: 36) famously exercised for the malfunctioning overhead projector. Based on the assumption that social reality consists of diverse networks comprised of various entities, financial markets can be understood as a paradigm example of such a network and the crisis as a "network outgrowth" (Callon, 2007).

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To achieve this goal, we take the present financial crisis as a case study and look at attributions of responsibility in one particular element of discourse, namely media reports in a major German weekly. Our analysis then proceeds along three steps. First, and mainly on theoretical grounds, we illustrate our understanding of crises and attributions of responsibility as dynamic social constructions and discuss selected proposals of how elements of discourse can be linked to patterns of affect, thought, and action. Specifically, we will discuss the role of attributed actions, understandings of discourse frames as actants, and the importance of affective framings. In a second, methodological and empirical step, we propose – in the sense of an empirically grounded theoretical model (Charmaz, 2006) – an approach to derive ideal types of attributions from discourse along the lines of *agency* and the underlying *logic of action*. We will do so by analysing coverage of the recent financial crisis in the major German weekly *Der Spiegel*. As a key element of the model, the third step then establishes how ideal typical attributions of responsibility constitute specific *affective frames*, which we see as critical in approximating ensuing patterns of thought and action. We will conclude our essay with a summary and a look ahead.

Discourse and the Attribution of Responsibility

Ever since Comte (1822), sociological scholarship dealing with crises has attended to the question of how they arise and how they may be prevented in the future through sociological insight. This usually includes two interwoven aspects of crises: first, identifying the causes of a crisis and establishing who or what is responsible for it; and, second, pinpointing the consequences of this knowledge for social action in domains relevant to the crisis. Although a wealth of research in sociology has contributed to investigating the causes and characteristics of the ongoing financial crisis (e.g., Lounsbury and Hirsch, 2011; MacKenzie, 2011; Polillo, 2011; Sinclair, 2010), sociological insight is likewise concerned with reconstructing and understanding the social processes through which "causes" and "responsibilities" for the crisis

are *socially constructed* in public debate and discourse (Juko, 2010). In this vein, existing research in economic sociology has attended more generally to the question of how discourse and financial markets mutually influence one another, showing that public discourse has a substantial impact on financial market dynamics and frames decision-making of financial market actors (Juko, 2010: 30f; see also Knorr-Cetina, 2007, and Clark et al., 2004). Hence, it is an equally interesting question who is widely *made* responsible and what is widely *considered* the cause of the crisis. Importantly, as postulated by the Thomas Theorem, the repercussions of both "objective" and "attributed" causes and responsibilities similarly manifest "objective" consequences.

Existing scholarship on the attribution of responsibility for certain events has primarily focused on content analyses of media reports, such as mass media coverage on elections and sporting events (Iyengar, 1991; Tennert and Stiehler, 2001), failure and success of European Union politics (Gerhards et al., 2009, 2007), or the financial crisis with regard to its xenophobic implications (Becker et al. 2010). These studies commonly rely on (a) psychological *attribution* theories and (b) the principles of *frame analysis* as the study of media effects (Scheufele, 1990).

(a) Attribution theory basically states that social behaviour is predominantly oriented around the (interpersonal) attribution of causes for an event or behaviour (Shaver 1985). Beliefs resulting from different kinds of attributions then influence how one thinks and acts independently of the "objective" truth of such a belief (Thomas and Thomas, 1928). Shaver (1985) has emphasized that attributions not only refer to the causal connections between an action and ensuing consequences, but simultaneously also contain certain conceptions of responsibility.

(b) Frame analysis argues that discourse, in particular media, construct social reality by "framing images of reality [...] in a predictable and patterned way" (McQuail, 1994: 331;

cited in Scheufele, 1999: 105). In conjunction with "individual frames", i.e. cognitive schemas guiding meaning making, media framings influence how actors interpret and understand events and how they subsequently act upon these events (ibid.). Studies looking at the effects of attributions of responsibility in different domains have mostly investigated how media frames tend to influence individual frames which then are supposed to change beliefs and attitudes and to bring about different courses of action (e.g., Iyengar, 1991; Gerhards, 2007, 2009). Although both theoretical traditions have proven fruitful in research on attributions of responsibility in many ways, they are not without problems.

First, some have argued that the uses of psychological attribution theories in sociological analysis are in many cases inadequate, because these theories are clear-cut behavioural accounts of individual action based on how actors subjectively perform attributions. Hence, in cases in which attributions are understood as information on "perceived causes" provided to an actor rather than as cognitive processes, *attributional* theories may be the more suitable explanatory tools (Crittenden, 1983). Attributional theories offer insights into the ways in which information on causes, reasons, or explanations provided through various channels, in particular texts as elements of discourse, may influence actors' thoughts and actions (ibid.). For example, studies on "moral panic" frequently refer to attributions of claims and concerns in discourse and suggest that they may trigger "irrational" collective behaviour (see Critcher, 2008, for an overview). Proponents of Critical Discourse Analysis argue that attributions stated in different genres of text and talk systematically change the social cognitive structures of an audience and hence their propensities for certain actions (van Dijk, 1990). Finally, research in the tradition of conversation analysis has provided insights into how attributions as part of accounts and justifications in communications contribute to the change of beliefs and may lead to different courses of interaction (Antaki, 1994; Manuso and Spitzberg, 2008). Although

these studies clearly add a genuinely sociological perspective to psychological accounts of attribution, the effects of attributions portrayed in discourse on actors' thoughts and actions are far from established in both paradigms, theoretically and empirically.

Second, although frame analysis has its roots in Goffman's (1974) symbolic interactionist understanding of frames, its application to discourse predominantly employs a more restrictive sender-receiver logic (Reese, 2010: 21) in which discourse frames tend to "shape" certain cognitive structures. Downplaying the interactive component in how media frames operate on the human mind clearly constitutes a theoretical and conceptual limitation in disclosing the links between discourse frames and actors' thoughts and actions. In the social movements literature, for example, the concept of "frame resonance" (Snow and Benford, 1988) suggests a more interactive understanding of how the framing of certain issues may "resonate" with an audience (based on consistency, empirical credibility, and credibility of claim makers) and promote mobilization. Moreover, although frame analysis has proven to be a fruitful approach in studying media effects, findings are far from consistent with regard to the consequences of discourse frames on actors' thoughts and actions (see Scheufele, 1999, for an overview).

Hence, we suggest complementing existing studies on attributions of responsibility along two lines. Firstly, we contribute to a more explicit sociological understanding of how attributions of responsibility can be interpreted by an audience, in particular using theories of social action that are not limited to meaningful intentional behaviour. Secondly, we specifically attend to the affective dimensions of framing and highlight their implications for frame resonance and social action.

Attributions as Actions and Affective Framings

Three strands of research and theorizing may offer novel insights into understanding the repercussions of attributions of responsibility outside the discourse arena: accounts of social

actions as constituted through attributions of others' actions; understandings of discourse frames as actants; and research on the affective implications of framings.

Attributed Actions

In a recent theoretical account of attributions, Schulz-Schaeffer (2009) argues that mere attributions of action, e.g. in discourse or through speech acts, can be interpreted *as actions* under certain circumstances. In comparing Weber's and Luhmann's concepts of action, he suggests that actions of Other that are taken up by Ego are in most cases *attributed* actions. This is because of the principles of intersubjectivity and symbolic interaction and the axiomatic inaccessibility of intentions that constitute any kind of action in the first place (Schulz-Schaeffer, 2009). Because social action is by definition oriented towards the actions of others, it can (also) result from orientations towards *attributed* actions, which are carried out either by the self or by third parties (e.g., statements in discourse). Schulz-Schaeffer assumes that the definition of the situation (Thomas and Thomas, 1928) is the foundation of any consequences for action resulting from attributed actions. Most importantly, he suggests that also attributions that are not actively carried out by Ego, but are rather adopted from frames containing pre-fabricated definitions of the situation, can constitute social action (Schulz-Schaeffer, 2009: 10ff.). In our view, this is particularly relevant for discourse frames. Since attributions of responsibility usually contain ascriptions of actions, we follow Schulz-Schaeffer and suggest that attributions of responsibility in discourse can be constitutive of social action given that the recipients of discourse orient their own actions toward these attributions.

Discourse Frames as Actants

A second line of thought conducive to overcoming dualistic sender-receiver logics in discourse framing-effects is implied by Actor-Network Theory (ANT; Callon, 2007; Latour, 1996). ANT departs from the classical paradigm of meaningful intentions as defining elements of action and argues that social interaction is constituted by relationships between "actants". Actants need not be conscious and goal-directed entities, but simply need to be able to

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"make things happen" within a network of other actants (Cerulo, 2009: 534). From this per-spective, an actant can be anything that facilitates social interaction between other actants, it can "literally be anything provided it is granted to be the source of an action" (Latour, 1996b: 373). Although applications of ANT have mainly focused on nonhuman entities, for example computers, machines, and animals, this definition also holds for texts, symbols, and mental concepts (Cerulo, 2009). There can be no doubt that framings of responsibility in discourse can be the source of action and "make things happen", as required by ANT's premises. Hence, the task at hand is to further specify the links between attributed actions in discourse and likely consequences for audiences' action tendencies.

Affective Framings

Recent studies in media psychology and behavioural economics have shown that affect, which is often involuntarily triggered while interpreting frames, is a major factor influencing action, in particular decision-making (e.g., Cheung and Mikels, 2011; Gross and D'Ambrosio, 2004). Although these studies are conducted in tightly controlled laboratory experiments, they are important in showing that the behavioural tendencies intimately tied to how we affectively perceive the world are essential conditions for social action. This does not mean that reflexive and deliberative interpretations have no say in how discourse influences what we think and do. Rather, and in line with theorizing in the sociology of emotion (e.g., von Scheve, 2013), it suggests that "affective framings" are an intuitive and pre-reflexive road to social action. The importance of affect is mirrored in recent research in communication studies attending to the complex links between media framings, emotions, and actions in attributions of responsibility and crisis news reports. These studies mainly focus on anger and sadness, showing that affec-tive framings can indeed influence an audience's feelings and behavioural intentions towards an issue (Kim and Cameron, 2011). At the same time, they point out the importance of the in-teraction between media and individual frames (Kepplinger et al., 2012). In a similar vein,

studies on mobilization and moral panic have touched on the issue of the emotional consequences of different framings of responsibility (Jasper, 1998).

Attribution Targets and the Logics of Action

Based on the research summarized above, our approach thus seeks to combine principles of frame analysis with pertinent sociological theories taking a more interactive stance towards discourse effects. To disclose the specific repercussions of attributions of responsibility for the financial crisis, we build on previous research to first identify and reconstruct different kinds of attributions from discourse. Gerhards and colleagues (2007) have developed a methodologically pertinent categorization scheme for different kinds of attributions and how they foster specific interpretations of an event. The scheme suggests that various facets of attributions, for example by whom they are communicated (e.g., political commentators, academics, political figures, etc.), for which event they are stated, and which kinds of cause-effect relations they imply, influence how the social reality of responsibility is construed. Regarding responsibility for the financial crisis, we will capitalize on the categorization of the "targets" of attributions in discourse, i.e., on who or what is held or made responsible for the crisis. Furthermore, we focus on *causal* attributions, i.e. on attributions implying that the target is causally implicated – usually through certain actions – in bringing about the event (Gerhards et al., 2007). Finally, we concentrate on *actual* causal attributions (ignoring prognoses) and do not further specify the category of *desirability*, presuming that the economic crisis is, for the most part, an undesirable event.

In this vein, we will, firstly, focus on those elements of discourse that are necessary to attribute actions or have considerable influence on how responsibility is construed. This primarily includes various entities that are the *targets of attributions*, i.e. to whom responsible agency is essentially ascribed, no matter whether these are human actors or non-human entities. Here, we also partly draw on ANT, but from a slightly different angle, since the broader

approach to actors suggested by ANT offers a theoretical toolbox for disentangling different agents to which responsibility is attributed.

Secondly, we capitalize on the attributed *logics of action*, e.g., whether a target is described as being "capable" of acting intentionally and in a goal-directed way or rather "makes things happen" just because it exists. Every action can potentially lead to negative and undesirable consequences, but the interpretation of the blameworthiness of an attribution target depends on the framing of the target's "authorship" or "actorhood" as, for example, intentionally causing financial tremors or as acting out of good faith, unwillingly precipitating the crisis. Hence, we suggest that the implications of attributions of responsibility essentially depend on framings of the *capability* of acting ascribed to an actant.

In sum, we will basically "deal with two different questions: the question of agency (who are the actants or agents of an action?) and the question of actorhood (who is imputed to be the author?)" (Schulz-Schaeffer, 2006: 137).

Analysis of Discourse Data

Although the two ideal types of attribution targets and logics of action are based on theoretical considerations (primarily understood as "sensitizing concepts", Charmaz, 2006), their concrete manifestations and categorizations need to be based on empirical data. We therefore conducted an analysis of discourse data related to the economic crisis 2008/9. This case study is a contribution to a grounded theory and the development of a methodological tool rather than the test of theoretical assumptions. Our aim was, first, to identify the theoretically deduced elements of attributions of responsibility through inductive discourse analysis and, second, to further qualify these elements with regard to their affective meaning and their potential to instil specific forms of thought and action.

Our discourse data comprise articles from the German weekly *Der Spiegel*, all of which were published between September 2008 and September 2009.[iii] Eight coders involved in the study first independently identified all articles (excluding interviews) published between Sept.

2008 and Sept. 2009 that were related, in the broadest possible sense, to the economic crisis. In a second step, out of these 448 articles, each of the coders independently "voted" the one most pertinent article in terms of financial crisis coverage in each of the 46 issues of *Der Spiegel* published during that time. For each of the issues, we selected the one article that received the most votes for analysis. Hence, 46 articles were selected for in-depth analysis covering the entire timeframe from Sept. 2008 to Sept. 2009. The coding of attributions of responsibility for each article was done by at least two independent coders using MaxQDA software and a coding manual (available upon request). Data were then integrated into a single MaxQDA file for final analysis. In total, we identified 233 attribution statements that were categorized in a two-dimensional matrix along different targets of attributions and logics of action. All discrepancies that arose during this process were discussed during group meetings, and we were able to resolve all.[iv]

Attribution Targets

Our data revealed a wide variety of different kinds of attribution targets, from politicians and managers to companies and governments, to social and economic developments and political ideas. Looking at the range of targets to which crisis responsibility is ascribed, it is striking to see that many entities are, although incapable of acting in a more traditional sense, portrayed as social actors on a regular basis. This concerns, for example, the "industry lobby", the "Obama administration", "interest rates", and the much quoted "casino capitalism," all of which are frequently framed as responsible "entities that do things" within the network structure of the modern economy (Latour, 1988: 303).

In terms of ANT, each of these entities can be considered an actant, and in our data we coded countless depictions of the market as a complex and occasionally confusing assembly of persons, organizations, structures, products, and interests portrayed as actants that are more or less responsible for the crisis. Regarding potential logics of action and the affective dimen-

sion of framings, attributed responsibility needs a modicum of plausible assumptions of causality – in the sense that an acting entity can actively contribute to bringing about an undesirable situation. Hence, it seemed reasonable to further categorize the wide variety of attribution targets regarding their *potential capacity for intentional, goal-directed action*, or on a continuum from human subjects to abstract objects and the very network structure underlying financial markets and the economy. Therefore, we categorized attribution targets on a continuum stretching from

(1) specific, named individuals (human subjects) to

(2) collective actors (e.g., groups, organizations, associations) to

(3) ideologies, belief systems, economic or political systems, to

(4) the network structure (see Table 1).

The first category comprises all those individuals who are clearly identified by their names, positions, or job titles, for example "Merkel's policies" or

> *"Paulson's decision against supplying public funds for the rescue of Lehman caused last week's massive turbulences"* (Der Spiegel 39/2008: 76).[1]

The second category refers to collective and corporate actors, such as occupational groups, companies, governments, or nation-states (e.g. "the USA," or "Wall Street"). One frequent example are "bankers" and "politicians" as occupational groups, as the following example illustrates:

> *"Our reconstruction of the capital offence, committed by bankers and tolerated by politicians, shows why the big crash might still be in store"* (Der Spiegel 47/2008: 44)

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[1] All quotes are own translations. German originals are available upon request from the authors.

The third category subsumes abstract phenomena that, however, still contain references to human agency. Macro-social consequences of implemented actions, such as institutionalized belief systems, ideologies, or political programs, belong to this category. Although these entities can – in principle – be altered by certain means, they often *appear* as unchangeable constants in the sense of "existential causes" on account of their persistence and longevity. An illustrative and recurring example are financial products, for instance the infamous credit default swaps (CDS):

> *"In the financial crisis, CDS operate as an accelerant setting fire on other sectors of the market because they have been distributed without securitization, and – cut into unrecognizable pieces – integrated into CDOs [Collateralized Debt Obligations]"* (Der Spiegel 47/2008: 44).

The fourth category contains attributions referring to highly entangled nets of responsibilities and deeply interwoven causations. Whereas the former three categories can be considered elements or nodes in the network of the financial economy, this category refers to the network *structure*, including systemic macro-processes and developments that are, at least in the short run, almost impossible to manage or control. This comprises economic and social developments exhibiting virtually autopoietic characteristics, for example inflation, transnationalisation, or chain reactions, as the following citation shows:

> *"This furious downward spiral pictures in a miniature version the chain reaction that later caused the world system to totter"* (Der Spiegel 47/2008: 44).

Logics of Action

Our data comprise various logics of action implied in attributions of responsibility. These logics carry different normative connotations that are likely to have an impact on the interpretation of attribution targets and their affective framing. Our data show that actions of an attribution target are generally portrayed in relation to different intentions, motives, and contexts. For example, did a named individual act to the best of her knowledge, or did they

act out of questionable motives? Was an action the result of existing constraints or based on a choice between alternatives? Interestingly, a broad variety of logics of action are attributed to collective targets or the network structure. Among other things, macro-processes and economic developments are frequently framed as intentional and goal-directed actors with genuine motives and goals. For example, "vagabond capital" is framed as "driving financial markets all around the world into ruin." To categorize different types of logics, we looked at empirically observable attributions of "authorship" (Schulz-Schaeffer, 2006), where authorship comprises the *capability* to act within the network of various actants (Latour, 1991), i.e. attribution targets' abilities to intentionally control their own and other actants' "programs of action" (Latour, 1994: 32) in the crisis. While some targets are portrayed as directly influencing the actions of others and thus as being immediately responsible for the crisis, others are framed as involved only indirectly. Finally, some attribution targets seem to lack agency completely. Even though these agents are portrayed as responsible, they are framed as lacking capability and as not being in control of their "programs of action", hence *appearing* as acting rather unintentionally with respect to the causes of the crisis.

We have specified the attributed logics of action through three inductively derived categories related to ascribed *authorship* (see Table 1):

(1) strong capability, direct intentional causation,

(2) weak capability, indirect causation,

(3) lack of capability, indirect unintentional causation.

Logics of action construed as strongly capable and directly implicated in causing the crisis belong to the first category. Given the general undesirability of a crisis, these logics are often explicitly construed as moral violations and normative transgressions (e.g., as being unscrupulous, greedy, or irresponsible), as the following example shows:

> *"In retrospect it appears as if some traders intended to organize the perfect crime"* (Der Spiegel 47/2008: 44).

The second category contains logics with weak capability according to which an entity is portrayed as acting in "good faith" or to the best of its knowledge. This includes actions that have been handed-down or are habitual or unintended (thus escaping normative judgment) as well as mistakes committed by named individuals.

"They [the investors] became the victims but, usually without knowing, they have also been the most useful accomplices on this path into catastrophe" (Der Spiegel 47/2008: 44).

The third category comprises logics characterized either by a lack of capability or by the mere existence of a target. These attributions are characterized as mostly unintentional and provide almost descriptive information about the consequences of a target's existence for the course of the crisis, as illustrated by the following example:

"Because out there in the countryside of the USA, there was an unhealthy boom in the housing and mortgage market" (Der Spiegel 47/2008: 44).

Table 1 shows the categories of attribution targets and the logics of action with prototypical attribution statements edited for length and clarity.

< Table 1 about here >

Affective Framings and Action Tendencies

Since we are interested in how attributions of responsibility may affect how audiences think and act in relevant domains, we seek to establish links between ideal typical attributions and likely consequences for social action. This is done by showing how ideal types of attributions establish specific affective framings and how these framings may be related to different courses of action.

The Affective Dimension of Attributions of Responsibility

In view of affective framings, research on social movements provides invaluable insights. Concerning the portrayal of undesirable social developments and resulting resentment,

contempt, or outrage, Gamson (1992: 32, italics added) notes that the "heat of a moral judgment is intimately related to beliefs about what acts or conditions have caused people to suffer underserved hardship or loss. The critical dimension is the *abstractness* of the target. Vague, abstract sources of unfairness diffuse indignation and make it seem foolish […]. At the other extreme, if one attributes undeserved suffering to malicious or selfish acts by clearly identifiable persons or groups, the emotional component […] will almost certainly be there." This does not mean that attributing responsibility to "vague" targets yields no affective dimension. Jasper (1998: 411), for example, argues that natural disasters or vague environmental threats lead to emotions such as grief and despair, mainly because of their non-intentionality. On the other hand, technological threats that are clearly attributable to the intentional actions of actors (e.g., nuclear energy) tend to favour emotions like anger and outrage.

These assumptions are supported by a number of emotion theories. Although the crisis as an undesirable event is connoted mostly negatively, a variety of factors can be used to further specify unpleasant emotions. Looking at responses to undesirable events, the *causative instance* (attribution target) and the *degree of control* (authorship) can be used to further specify unpleasant emotions (Ortony et al., 1988). Here, Ortony's and colleagues' model distinguishes undesirable "actions" from "events". Actions can be carried out by individual or collective actors, both to which responsibility and authorship can be assigned, thus leading to contempt or anger (Ortony et al., 1988: 54). Events refer to all other attribution targets and are linked to emotions like worry, fear, or uncertainty. Another factor in this model is the *perceived control over events* that allows distinguishing fear (no control) from anger (high control). Actions of named individuals appear in principle controllable (thus producing rage or anger), whereas ideologies and network structures can only be changed over the long term (promoting fear and anxiety).

Similarly, a particular logic of action favours distinct emotional reactions. Although Ortony and colleagues (1988: 54) point out the significance of attributed "intentionality" in differentiating emotions in response to undesirable *events*, our data show that "intentionality" or "capability" are frequently attributed to all kinds of targets. According to this theory, we assume that the stronger the attributed capability, the more clearly frames will be interpreted as "actions" rather than "events". Hence, audiences tend to associate attributions of strong capability (category 1) with emotions such as anger, rage, or contempt *directed at the responsible actants*. The more the implied logics of action lack capability, the more the interpretation shifts in the direction of an "event", thus implying emotions such as worry, fear, or uncertainty (category 3) *directed at the self*.

In our view, the affective consequences of attributions of responsibility can thus only be adequately described when both dimensions – targets and logics – are considered in their respective combinations. In this sense, a two-dimensional space of affective framings emerges in which emotions such as anger, rage, and contempt are associated with combinations of category 1 and 2 attribution targets and category 1 action logics. Conversely, category 3 and 4 attribution targets with category 2 and 3 action logics suggest emotions such as fear, anxiety, and uncertainty.

It is imperative for our argument to note that these theoretically derived affective framings need to be based on shared cultural interpretive models of an audience, i.e. shared individual frames of an audience. Based on this structure of affective framings, it becomes possible to outline some consequences for ensuing action tendencies.

Affective Framings and Action Tendencies

Since our argument is basically limited to patterns of action tendencies arising in domains relevant to the discourse, we focus on a particular set of actions pertinent to the economy, i.e. decisions involving risk and uncertainty. One the one hand, emotions may *directly* influence perceptions of risk and uncertainty and thereby impact actions and decisions. The

more "affectively charged" mental images activated in a situation are and the more intense the emotions triggered, the greater the assumed weight in making decisions (Loewenstein and Lerner, 2003). Whereas moderately intense emotions become part of actors' deliberative processes as supportive information, strong emotions can completely eclipse reasoning (ibid.).

On the other hand, emotions also *indirectly* influence the perception of uncertainty as they affect the cognitive assessment of probabilities and consequences of action. First, they have an impact on the sensitivity to perceived probabilities by "affectively colouring" the consequences of decision options (Slovic, 2006). Second, emotions influence the degree of deliberative information processing, both with respect to their intensity and valence (pleasantness vs. unpleasantness). Pleasant emotions seem to be more associated with the use of simple information processing heuristics than unpleasant emotions, which apparently exhibit a greater propensity for reflexive thought. In this vein, Lerner and Keltner (2000, 2001) have pointed out the importance of anger and outrage and fear and uncertainty for decision-making under risk. They demonstrate that actors feeling anger and outrage tend toward more risk-taking behaviour than actors who feel fear or anxiety. They also suggest that emotions differing in view of the underlying appraisal of uncertainty (e.g., "outrage" vs. "concern") are linked to different uses of heuristics in decision-making. Outrage, which is associated with a high degree of certainty, tends to promote heuristic decision-making, whereas fear and anxiety are generally accompanied by in-depth deliberative thought (ibid.).

In summary, and in assessing likely action tendencies associated with specific ideal types of attributions of responsibility, we suggest that emotions like outrage and anger tend to lead to optimistic assessments of uncertainty and thus to more risk-taking patterns of action, whereas fear and anxiety generally imply pessimistic assessments of a situation and more risk-averse action tendencies.

Discussion

Crises such as the recent economic crisis generally raise questions concerning their causes, controllability, and future preventability, which are frequently taken up in discourse and politics. Public discourse largely shapes how a crisis is perceived, experienced, and subjectively interpreted. A key element of this interpretation is how responsibility for a crisis is construed. This not only affects how a crisis is socially constructed in broader terms, but also how different audiences align their actions in the face of a crisis. The aim of this essay was to shed some light on the possible ways in which attributions of responsibility may shape action tendencies of an audience in a crisis related domain, thereby in turn affecting the future course of a crisis and macro-economic developments more generally.

We have suggested a theoretically plausible and empirically grounded analytical tool to identify ideal types of attributions of responsibility and proposed likely action tendencies associated with these ideal types. Building on previous studies in frame analysis and theories of social action, we have suggested that the affective dimension of frames is a necessary link in understanding the consequences of attributions of responsibility outside the discourse arena. To assess these affective framings, we have focused on two dimensions of attribution: the targets of attributions and the logics of action ascribed to these targets.

To reconstruct the affective framing of attributions, the combination of both dimensions is critical and results in an emotional space stretching along two context-specific clusters of unpleasant emotions. The more responsibility is attributed to named human subjects or collective actors and the stronger the ascribed capability and intentionality in action, the more we suspect audiences respond with arousing unpleasant feelings *directed at the responsible entity*, for example anger and outrage. Conversely, the more responsibility is attributed towards rather abstract entities (e.g., ideologies, the network structure of the economy) and to actions

that lack capability, the more audiences respond with unarousing unpleasant emotions *directed at the self*, such as fear, anxiety, and uncertainty. Based on more recent research, we have then argued that the former cluster of emotions generally is associated with risk-averse and withdrawal-related action tendencies, whereas the latter favour risk-taking and approach-related tendencies.

On a more general account, this categorization scheme for attributions of responsibility allows assessing a hitherto hidden dimension of crisis-related discourse. Analyses using our theory-driven methodological tool may, firstly, reconstruct the different ways in which responsibility is attributed to different entities. Secondly, combinations of attribution targets and logics of action reveal some of the affective dimensions of a certain discourse. This dimension is much debated in cultural studies and the social sciences, but seldom do we find any concrete suggestions of how this affective dimension can be determined. Thirdly, and on a much more speculative account, the affective dimension of attributions can be related to likely action tendencies of audiences. We might assume, for example, that when responsibility for a crisis is overwhelmingly attributed to named individuals or collective actors with strong capabilities for action, affective response such as outrage and anger emerge which in turn foster risk-taking and offensive action tendencies. This might manifest in making risky economic decisions or engaging into protests and social movements. Conversely, when responsibility is attributed to abstract entities, such as ideologies or network structures, or when an attributed logic of action lacks capability, affective responses such as fear or anxiety may emerge which in turn promote risk-averse actions that manifest in withdrawal, caution or the withholding of consumption.

Needless to say, the latter two contributions of this essay require many preconditions to be met and need further backing by empirical studies. Also, we do not suggest to explain crisis-related actions solely on the basis of their affective precursors or through exposure to dis-

course. Rather, we see the potential of our proposal in a more interactive account of the repercussions of discourse outside the symbolic realm of texts and representations. Understanding discourse as an actant and attributed actions as constituents of social action opens up new ways of understanding the effects of discourse on how audiences think, feel and might act. The often pre-reflexive affective reactions to others' (attributed) actions form a constitutive element of a more profound understanding of the interaction between situational definitions and patterns of social action. Our approach thus provides a framework for analysing attributions of responsibility and to systematically consider their implications for social action.

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Tables

Table 1. The two dimensions of attributions of responsibility: Attribution targets (columns) and logics of action (rows). Cells contain prototypical attribution statements from the discourse data that have been edited for length and clarity. Numbers in brackets represent the incidence of actual codings in the data. The cell *Named Individuals / Lack of Capability* with zero incidence contains a prototypical dummy sentence.

	(1) Named Individuals	(2) Collective and Corporate Actors	(3) Systems, Ideologies, Belief Systems	(4) Network Structure
(1) Strong Capability	The arsonist who sparked the financial crisis has a famous name: Alan Greenspan. [18]	The bankers are the ones who squandered trillions, ruined the global economy, but took care of themselves. [95]	Vagabond financial capital drove the financial markets and the whole world to the brink of ruin. [50]	The crisis is feeding the crisis, risks and credit losses are rising, and with them write-downs and losses. [37]
(2) Weak Capability	Schröder had overlooked that his policies, over the long term, paved the way for crisis. [16]	One cause of the crisis is the regulatory failure of governmental oversight and of the politicians. [70]	Faith in "self-controlling markets" is responsible for the disaster of the financial crisis. [19]	The market failure has grave impacts on the lives of all, as we are experiencing right now through the crisis. [4]
(3) Lack of Capability	The head of Dresdner Bank could not prevent the fall into crisis. [0]	The USA is the epicenter of the crisis. [63]	Anglo-American capitalism clearly stands at the origin of the crisis. [48]	Since the bursting of the housing bubble, shock waves have rolled through the global financial system. [46]

ⁱ See Strange (1986).

ⁱⁱ http://content.time.com/time/specials/packages/article/0,28804,1877351_1877350_1877339,00.html

ⁱⁱⁱ We decided on the magazine *Der Spiegel* since it is Germany's most widely distributed news magazine based on reach and circulation. Although one can assume that such a narrow focus on only print media leads to certain biases in the evaluation and can in no way represent an entire discourse, selecting from just one major type of media nevertheless allows for statements to be made about forms of attributions of responsibility and their consequences for thoughts and actions.

^{iv} Regarding actors as targets of attributions we achieved an intercoder reliability of $\kappa_{target} = 0.893$ and, regarding the logic of action, a reliability of $\kappa_{logic} = 0.701$.