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# Effects of Accusations on the Accuser: The Moderating Role of Accuser Culpability

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*Recent research has shown that people can enhance their own reputations by accusing others of faults they possess. However, it is unclear by what mechanism accusing others of one's own misdeeds helps to enhance the reputation of the accuser, and there is no evidence for boundary conditions for this devious tactic. The present research provides evidence that accusations suggest information about the accuser's values and that it is the assumed values of the accuser that are responsible for increases in the accuser's reputation. Furthermore, the present research demonstrates that accusations may only be effective in increasing an individual's reputation when the individual has faults to deflect. When an individual possesses no faults, accusations can actually damage the individual's reputation.*

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**Keywords:** *projection; accusations*

**P**ast research on attitudes toward people, objects, or issues has clearly shown that providing negative information about targets typically produces more negative evaluations of those targets (e.g., Fiske & Taylor, 1991; Petty & Cacioppo, 1981). Of interest, even unsubstantiated accusations can produce negative evaluations. For example, in the consumer literature, accusations have been shown to damage individuals' perceptions of consumer products and behaviors toward them (e.g., Loh, 1985). In a legal setting, Kassin, Williams, and Saunders (1990) found that the credibility of an expert witness in a court trial can be damaged simply by asking accusatory questions of that witness (i.e., Isn't it true that your work is poorly regarded by your colleagues?). Similarly, Wegner, Wenzlaff, Kerker, and Beattie (1981) found that a political candidate was rated negatively when accusations were made or suggested, regardless of whether the accusations came from a credible newspaper (e.g., the *Washington Post*) or a newspaper of questionable credibility (e.g., the *National Enquirer*). Thus, the simple act of accusing or suggesting negative information about an individual,

regardless of the accuser's reputation, is enough to damage the reputation of that individual, even when the accusation remains to be proven (for further discussion of the harmful effects of accusations on targets, see Allport & Postman 1947; Pratkanis & Aronson, 1992; Rosnow, 1980; Rosnow & Fine, 1976).

Although research has clearly demonstrated that merely suggesting negative information about an individual can have dire consequences for the target of the accusation, research has only begun to examine how making accusations affects perceptions of the accuser. In a directly relevant line of research, Rucker and Pratkanis (2001) examined how accusations could be used as a self-presentational tactic. Rucker and Pratkanis found that an individual who was suspected or culpable of some misdeed or crime could deflect blame away from himself by accusing others of being guilty of the same crime. Across multiple studies, accusations were found to reduce suspicions about the accuser. That is, by accusing individuals of a crime for which one was suspected or culpable, the accuser was seen as a less likely suspect.

In one experiment, for example, participants watched a videotape of three individuals playing a game where it was possible to deceive other players to benefit one's own standing in the game. Participants were given feedback that indicated one of the three players was deceiving the other two (the feedback was vague with

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regard to which of the individuals was being deceptive). Participants then reported the extent to which they believed each player was being dishonest. This condition constituted the control condition. In a second condition, before making their decision, half of the participants saw one player accuse the other two players of lying. Individuals who witnessed this accusation, relative to the control condition, rated the accuser as more honest. Thus, a negative accusation about others led the accuser to be seen more positively than when the accusation was not made.

Of importance, this effect does not appear to be tied to an exculpatory aspect of the accusations. In the research reported by Rucker and Pratkanis (2001), the accuser never claimed to be innocent himself. Although in some studies another's guilt implied the accuser must be innocent (i.e., there was one and only one guilty party), other scenarios used situations in which both the accuser and the accused could be guilty. For example, another experiment described a scenario in which a copy of a chemistry test was stolen and distributed to multiple students. One student who had access to the stolen test accused others of using it to cheat on the actual test. In this situation, there was no restriction on how many people actually cheated on the test. Thus, the accuser's accusation did not remove the possibility that he too was guilty (see Rucker & Pratkanis, 2001, for further elaboration).

Rucker and Pratkanis used the term "projection" to describe this phenomena because it appeared that accusers deflected away some of their own negativity by projecting their suspected improprieties onto others. Although this effect was demonstrated across multiple studies, Rucker and Pratkanis (2001) did not find any moderators of the effect and did not examine potential mediators. Thus, although clearly demonstrating the effectiveness of projection, it remains unclear what the boundary conditions of the effect are and why projection is a successful social influence tactic. Uncovering when projection is most likely to work and explaining why it does work are the goals of the current research.

#### EXPLAINING PROJECTION

Before addressing our presumed moderator and mediator of projection, it is worth considering explanations that do not provide a viable account for the effect. Perhaps the most notable of these is the notion of spontaneous trait transference introduced by Skowronski, Carlston, and their colleagues (Mae, Carlston, & Skowronski, 1999; Skowronski, Carlston, Mae, & Crawford, 1998). Research on spontaneous trait transference has demonstrated that behaviors an individual communicator describes in others can become associated with the communicator. In a typical experiment in

this paradigm, participants are given a picture of an individual paired with a statement the individual makes regarding another person. For example, participants might be given a picture of a woman who describes a friend in the following manner: "He hates animals. Today he was walking in the store and he saw this puppy. So he kicked it out of his way." Participants will see dozens of such communicator-statement pairings. After the pairing phase, participants are asked what traits they believe each communicator possesses. Individuals are inclined to rate the communicators as possessing the traits they had simply described in others (e.g., the women describing her friend would be perceived as cruel herself). These researchers suggested this occurs because of a simple association process that incidentally links the attributes described in others to the self.

Recall that in the projection studies conducted by Rucker and Pratkanis (2001), accusers were seen more favorably when they made unfavorable comments about others. This, of course, is the opposite of the effect found in research on spontaneous trait transference. In the projection research, when a person accused others of being dishonest, this individual was not seen as more dishonest (trait transference) but rather was seen as more honest than if the accusation was not made. The different results between spontaneous trait transference and projection are likely due to one of a number of critical differences between the paradigms. Perhaps the most important difference between these paradigms is that the work on projection involves a situation in which accusers are potentially culpable themselves of the negative attribute they accuse others of possessing. Thus, the accusation functions to deflect blame away from an initially culpable source. In the spontaneous trait transference research, the individuals making the accusations are not perceived as being culpable, and thus, there is nothing negative to deflect. As will be discussed later, prior culpability of the accuser is the moderator of projection examined in the present research.

A second difference between the projection and transference paradigms has to do with the amount of processing involved. The projection paradigm uses procedures in which an individual has unlimited time to read about the facts of the situation and carefully weigh what conclusions to draw. In contrast, the transference paradigm uses procedures that encourage simple associative processing. Thus, projection-type effects are likely to be the result of effortful and intentional processing, whereas transference effects are more likely to be the result of effortless and incidental processing.

There are additional differences between the paradigms. For example, projection involves accusations made by a single individual, whereas the transference paradigm involves multiple accusations paired with mul-

tipl individuals. However, we view the two most significant differences as those discussed (for a more detailed discussion of the incidental processing involved in spontaneous trait transference, see Carlston & Mae, in press).

Thus, although spontaneous trait transference is an interesting phenomenon in its own right, and bears some similarities to the projection paradigm (e.g., a source says something about someone else and inferences about the source are assessed), it does not provide a viable explanation for the projection effect. Furthermore, the different findings of spontaneous trait transference are likely due to the striking methodological differences of each paradigm.

#### ACCUSATIONS AS VALUE-LADEN INFORMATION

If projection cannot be explained by spontaneous trait transference, what does cause the effect? We suggest that when people make an accusation they, intentional or not, convey information about their underlying attitudes and values. For example, a person who is always accusing others of being late might be assumed to value promptness. More generally, accusations seem to lead individuals to believe the accuser values what he accuses others of not valuing. For example, Rucker and Pratkanis (2001, Experiment 4) found that when a student suspected of cheating on a test accused another student of cheating, the accusing student not only was seen as less likely to have cheated on the test but also was seen as more honest. In this research, accusations did more than deflect blame away from the accuser; accusations appeared to convey something about the characteristic traits or values of the accuser.

In brief, we argue that in projection, accusers are seen as valuing what others are accused of not valuing, and this in turn alleviates initial suspicions of the accuser. One implication of accusations as conveying value-laden information is that projection should be most effective for individuals who themselves are culpable (i.e., guilty or suspected of being guilty) on the dimension of the accusation. Nonculpable individuals seem less likely to benefit from making accusations toward others because they are already viewed as blameless on the critical dimension of the accusation. An example is useful for clarification. If someone suspected of being a liar accuses another person of being dishonest, it suggests, at least in some circumstances, that the accuser thinks dishonesty is bad. Because the accuser is seen as frowning on dishonesty, perceivers may conclude that the accuser must value honesty and, hence, perceive the person as more honest than if the accusation was not made. However, if someone who is known already to value honesty (i.e., clearly nonculpable of being deceitful) accuses another of being dishonest, the accusation does not carry any additional information about what the accuser

values (i.e., the person was already assumed to value honesty). Consequently, there is no additional information to make perceivers change their perception of the accuser, at least in terms of honesty. Thus, the projection effect should be most likely to occur when accusers are initially culpable themselves on the dimension of the accusation than when accusers are clearly nonculpable. Furthermore, we expect that the projection effect would be mediated by a perceived change in the values of the accuser.

#### THE PRESENT RESEARCH

Based on the accusations as value-laden information idea, in this article, we test the hypothesis that the culpability of the accuser on the dimension of the accusation (i.e., culpable or nonculpable) will moderate the influence of accusations on the accuser's own reputation. Whereas culpable individuals may benefit from accusations by changing perceptions of their values related to their deficit, clearly nonculpable individuals (i.e., those positive on the dimension of the accusation) should not show an increase from making the same accusation because nonculpable individuals are already perceived to have positive values and thus the accusation does not provide additional value information.

In the first experiment, an individual did or did not accuse his coworkers of having a bad work ethic, and he was either culpable or nonculpable of having a poor work ethic himself. Following from the reasoning outlined above, we predicted that the culpable individual (i.e., one suspected of a poor work ethic) would benefit from making accusations related to others' poor work ethic but a nonculpable individual (i.e., one assumed to have a positive work ethic) would receive no such benefit.<sup>1</sup> In addition, in our second experiment, we directly examine whether perceptions of values mediate the effect of accusations on impressions. Finally, because prior research has already clearly shown that the effects of accusations damage the target of the accusation, regardless of the accuser's reputation (Kassin et al., 1990; Rucker & Pratkanis, 2001; Wegner et al., 1981), we only focus on the effects that accusations have on the accuser, because these effects hold the novel phenomena.

#### EXPERIMENT 1

##### *Method*

##### *PARTICIPANTS*

Participants were 80 Ohio State University (OSU) undergraduates who took part in the experiment for partial fulfillment of a course requirement in their introductory psychology course. Participants were randomly assigned to the four cells of a 2 (employee culpability:

culpable or nonculpable)  $\times$  2 (accusation: present or absent) between-subjects factorial design.

#### PROCEDURE

Students participated in the experiment in groups of 8 to 10. After arriving, participants were told that they would be completing an experiment that was related to work being done by the industrial/organizational psychology program at OSU. Participants were informed that researchers at OSU were working with several large companies in nearby cities to help improve the methods used to evaluate employees' performance in the workplace and that the students would be asked to comment on current methods of employee evaluation. To lend credibility to the cover story, participants were told that the companies were interested in student perceptions because the companies wanted to use evaluations that would be deemed fair by those entering the workforce (i.e., the students in several years).

Next, the experiment was described as one where participants would take the role of a personnel manager and actually evaluate an employee. They were informed that they would evaluate a real person from a company working with the university on the project to help them get a better feel for how the evaluation could be improved to make it more accurate and informative. Finally, participants were told that after evaluating the employee, they would complete a questionnaire to evaluate the difficulty of the task and to provide feedback on how to improve the evaluation format.

After the experimenter answered any questions participants had about the task, participants were given a packet labeled "employee evaluation" to complete. The first page of the packet contained a brief recap of the task instructions. In addition, the first page informed participants that they would be given commentary from the employee's direct supervisor and commentary from the employee being evaluated. The instructions also indicated that for the purposes of confidentiality, identifying information regarding the employee or company was replaced by pseudonyms. This was done to reinforce participants' beliefs that they were evaluating a real person and thereby enhance the mundane realism of the experiment. The following page of the packet contained a summary of the employee's performance, ostensibly written by the employee's supervisor. The next page contained comments participants believed were written by the employee being evaluated. After reading both the supervisor and employee commentaries, participants evaluated the employee on a series of dependent measures that inquired about the employee's performance. Participants were then fully debriefed and thanked for their participation.

#### INDEPENDENT VARIABLES

*Employee culpability.* Participants read a supervisor evaluation that either portrayed the employee as culpable of performing poorly in terms of his work performance or clearly portrayed the employee as nonculpable of having performed poorly. Participants in the culpable employee condition read the following:

This employee has been doing a good job, but there is an area of concern. Regarding productivity, this employee failed to meet two crucial deadlines; one in the *Doveland* project and another in the *Rineheart* project. The employee finished both projects several days after his contribution was required. The employee's tardiness did not lead to any long-term or serious implications, but efficiency is something we need in our employees and want to be known for as a company. This type of behavior should be corrected in upcoming projects.

For participants in the nonculpable employee condition, the above text was replaced by the following:

This employee has been doing a good job, and there are no areas of concern. Regarding productivity, this employee succeeded in meeting two crucial deadlines; one in the *Doveland* project and another in the *Rineheart* project. The employee finished both projects several days before his contribution was required. This did not lead to any long-term or serious implications, but efficiency is something we need in our employees and want to be known for as a company. This type of behavior should be maintained in upcoming projects.

*Accusation.* Participants in the no accusation condition read mundane commentary from the employee about an upcoming conference. Participants in the accusation condition read the same commentary but also read the following accusation the employee made about his coworkers' own work performance:

I would like to comment on my involvement in the *Doveland* and *Rinehart* projects. Several of my coworkers in this project, Mr. *Doe* and Mr. *Smith*, displayed a blatant lack of industry and pride in the project goals. They spent a good deal of time slacking off. For example, I've noticed some of them arriving 15, sometimes 20 minutes, late—a daily habit. I've further noticed that others participate in lengthy phone conversations during working hours. I personally feel that both Mr. *Doe* and Mr. *Smith* should be held accountable for their unprofessional behavior as it negatively reflects on the company's finished products.<sup>2</sup>

#### DEPENDENT MEASURE

The dependent measure consisted of five items that assessed perceptions of the culpable/nonculpable employee's performance. Specifically, the items asked

how productive, hardworking, efficient, task-focused, and competent the employee was. The items were each measured on a 7-point scale anchored from *not at all to extremely*.

### Results

The five dependent measures of performance were collapsed to form a composite measure of performance (Cronbach's  $\alpha = .84$ ). The measure was submitted to a 2 (employee culpability)  $\times$  2 (accusation) ANOVA. A significant interaction emerged,  $F(1, 76) = 11.42, p < .001$ , and is depicted in Figure 1. Examining the simple effects, it is clear that culpability of the employee moderated the effect of making accusations toward others. Replicating the original projection work by Rucker and Pratkanis (2001), the culpable employee was rated as performing better when he accused others of not performing well ( $M = 5.12, SD = .82$ ) than when he did not ( $M = 4.54, SD = .71, F(1, 38) = 5.72, p < .05$ ). However, the nonculpable employee, who had received praise for his work ethic, actually suffered from accusing others of not performing well ( $M = 5.89, SD = .68$ ) compared to not making such an accusation ( $M = 6.36, SD = .54, F(1, 38) = 5.86, p < .05$ ).

### Discussion

The results from Study 1 replicated and extended prior research on the effects of making accusations on perceptions of the accuser. Replicating research by Rucker and Pratkanis (2001), the culpable employee was seen as performing better when he accused others of what he was guilty of (i.e., a poor work ethic). In addition, as predicted by the accusations as value-laden information hypothesis, the nonculpable employee did not benefit from making accusations toward others. In fact, the nonculpable employee not only failed to benefit but actually undermined his own reputation by making an accusation. Taken together, these results suggest that the accuser's culpability on the dimension of his accusation is an important moderator of the projection effect. In the initial Rucker and Pratkanis (2001) research, the accuser was always presumed guilty or under suspicion himself, and the current findings suggest that this negative cloud over the accuser may be necessary for an accuser to benefit from making an accusation.

The results from Study 1 are consistent with the idea that accusations are useful to enhance one's reputation, but only for a culpable accuser for whom the accusation provides positive value information on the dimension of his initial negativity. That is, we hypothesized that accusations provided positive information about the values, or expressed values, of the culpable employee that helped to deflect his initial poor performance. However, accusations presumably provided no additional information

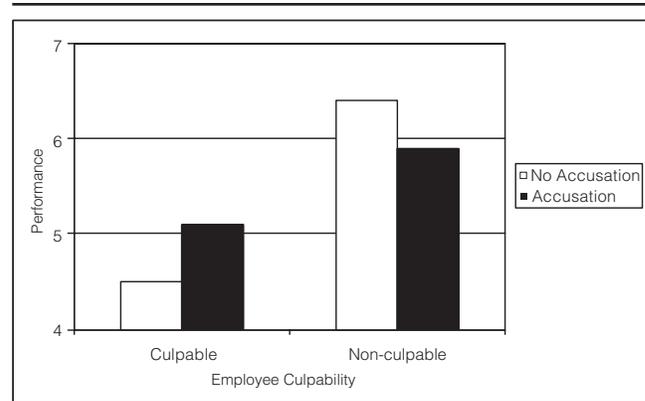


Figure 1 Performance as a function of employee culpability and remark type, Experiment 1.

about the work attitudes of the nonculpable employee because his past performance suggested that he already had a strong work ethic. Therefore, because the accusation added no additional information about the nonculpable employee's values toward work, perceptions of his competence were not affected in the same manner.

The fact that the nonculpable employee suffered from making accusations warrants further discussion. Why would an individual who is initially perceived as performing well be viewed as performing more poorly after accusing others of performing poorly, whereas an individual who is perceived as performing poorly be seen as performing better? What is responsible for this asymmetry?

A possible solution may lie in the type of value information being extracted from the accusation in the different conditions. On one hand, accusations provide positive information about the employee's values regarding work ethic (i.e., he frowns on people who don't work hard). On the other hand, the accusation contains a second piece of negative information about the employee's values regarding friendliness and cooperativeness in the workplace (i.e., he points fingers and tattletales on his fellow employees). Most accusations have these two components. One component provides some specific accusation-relevant information about performance (i.e., accusing others of dishonesty implies a value of honesty, accusing others of tardiness implies a value of promptness). A second component is interpersonal in that accusing others is not something a person looking out for other people would do. Accusations suggest that you may be unfriendly or not a team player. In sum, the accusation used in Experiment 1 has two different implications. First, the accusation has an implication for the extent to which the person values hard work, which may be used to infer a healthy work ethic. Second, the accusa-

tion has an implication regarding the extent to which the person values cooperativeness in the workplace.

Past research on person perception is consistent with the idea that the same comment from an individual can carry different types of information. For example, Carlston and Shovar (1983) suggest that self-serving attributions have both negative and positive consequences for the individual commenting on his own performance. Specifically, Carlston and Shovar (1983, Experiment 2) found that individuals who made self-serving attributions (i.e., blamed failure on external factors or success on internal factors) relative to individuals who made clearly non-self-serving attributions (i.e., blamed failure on internal factors or success on external factors) were seen as possessing more ability but also were seen as being less modest and more dishonest. Thus, the same comment about an individual's own performance carried with it information about both one's ability and one's modesty. Furthermore, similar to the use of accusations, the utility of self-serving attributions is likely to depend on initial characteristics of the individual making the attributions. Self-serving attributions would be most useful to an individual who had failed at a task (where an excuse for failure may be worth risking modesty) but might be detrimental for a successful individual (where an internal attribution for success would sacrifice modesty and there is little need to boost perceptions of ability).

In addition to the research on self-serving attributions, research on self-handicapping has found that self-handicapping may preserve an individual's performance on the dimension of the ability (to the self or others) but negatively affect him on other dimensions. For example, Rhodewalt, Sanbonmatsu, Tschanz, Feick, and Waller (1995) found that participants who witnessed an individual who self-handicapped himself were sometimes willing to give him the benefit of the doubt when it came to ability (i.e., rated ability equal to that of non-self-handicappers) but nonetheless rated the self-handicapper more negatively on global dimensions of personality (e.g., friendliness). This study also suggests that individuals can and do sift out different types of information from the same comment.

Taken together, past research on self-serving attributions and self-handicapping suggests that comments that might help preserve an individual's status or make a person seem positive in one aspect can actually lead to a more negative evaluation on another dimension, such as modesty. Although these data do not speak directly to the effect of accusations on one's reputation, they do suggest that people can focus on and extract different types of information from the same comment.

Returning to the present findings, the two types of information conveyed by the accusation we used, values

about work ethic and cooperativeness, also parallel dimensions deemed important in other work on person perception. For example, Rosenberg and colleagues (Rosenberg, Nelson, & Vivekanathan, 1968; Rosenberg & Sedlak, 1972) argued that at least two distinct dimensions underlie person perception: competence and sociability.<sup>3</sup> These researchers had participants sort 64 traits into different categories. Rosenberg and colleagues then used multidimensional scaling techniques (Kruskal, 1964a, 1964b) to examine models that contained from one to five dimensions. The researchers found that a two-dimensional model fit the data reasonably well and therefore made interpretations of each of the dimensions. The first dimension, intellectual desirability, was used to describe traits associated with intelligence, competence, or work ethic. These traits run along a continuum with some being relatively undesirable (e.g., unintelligent, foolish, clumsy) and others being desirable (e.g., intelligent, industrious, skillful). The second dimension, social desirability, was used to describe traits associated with sociability or friendliness. These traits run along a continuum with some being relatively undesirable (e.g., unsociable, irritable, cold) and others being desirable (e.g., tolerant, helpful, warm). Rosenberg et al. (1968) suggested that people formed impressions of others on the basis of these dimensions.

The dimensions of competence/intelligence versus warmth/sociability identified in prior research map onto the value-laden inferences people could make based on the accusation we used in Study 1. Specifically, inferences about the accuser's work ethic could be classified into a competence or intellectual desirability dimension, and inferences about the accuser's friendliness or tolerance could be classified into the dimension of warmth or sociability. The asymmetry between accusations made by the culpable versus nonculpable employees can be resolved by considering which value-laden inference, work ethic or friendliness, is most likely to influence a person's perception of the accuser.

An additional factor worthy of consideration is that prior research has shown that people tend to pay more attention to information that is novel or nonredundant with the person's existing knowledge (Hastie & Kumar, 1979; Higgins & Bargh, 1987; Higgins & King, 1981; Olson, Roese, & Zanna, 1996). For example, Hastie and Kumar (1979) found that people were better able to recall inconsistent information as opposed to consistent information. In an experiment by Bargh and Thein (1985), participants were either told about a person who behaved honestly but occasionally dishonestly or about a person who behaved mostly dishonestly but occasionally honestly. These researchers found that participants processed and recalled dishonest behaviors better for the individual who behaved mostly honestly but recalled

honest behaviors better for the individual who behaved mostly dishonestly; that is, people processed and recalled the information that was inconsistent with the overall character of the person. Furthermore, research has shown that people find a greater need to explain inconsistent information than consistent information. Consequently, inconsistent information has been found to instigate more attributional processing (e.g., Crocker, Hannah, & Weber, 1983; Hastie, 1984; Pyszczynski & Greenberg, 1981).

If, as prior research would seem to suggest, participants in our experiment focused on the nonredundant/inconsistent, value-laden information inferred from the accusation, the asymmetry between culpable and nonculpable individuals can be explained. Specifically, participants may have relied more on work ethic information implied by the accusation when the accuser was initially culpable of having a poor work ethic (where positive work ethic information is nonredundant and extremely novel) but relied more on unfriendliness information implied by the accusation when the accuser was nonculpable and possessed a strong work ethic (where negative sociability information is nonredundant). If so, the work ethic information would convey positive value information about the culpable employee's performance (e.g., he must have said that because he values hard work), which would help compensate for his reported poor initial performance. The friendliness information, however, would convey negative value information about the nonculpable employee's performance (e.g., he must have said that because he does not value good relations in the work place). Consequently, one would expect that the culpable employee would benefit from the inferred positive value-laden information because it is novel but the nonculpable employee would suffer from the inferred negative value-laden information because it is novel.

Thus, the impact of accusations as a function of an individual's initial culpability might be explained by a differential focus on inferred value information related to the dimensions of competence and social desirability. In sum, when the employee is culpable of not being productive, the information that is not redundant with prior knowledge is the inferred information about the employee's work ethic. A focus on this information leads one to conclude that the employee values hard work. For the nonculpable employee, however, the information that is not redundant is the inferred information about the employee's sociability. A focus on this information leads one to conclude that the employee may not be a nice person with whom to work. If this is true, the effects of accusations on perceptions of the culpable employee should be mediated by the perceived work ethic of the employee, but the effects of accusations on perceptions

of the nonculpable employee should be mediated by the perceived friendliness of the employee.<sup>4</sup>

## EXPERIMENT 2

To test the hypothesis that people are relying on inferred information that is nonredundant with the initial information about the employee, Experiment 2 was conducted. Specifically, our second study sought to replicate the first and test whether perceived work ethic mediates the effect of accusations on performance ratings for culpable individuals but perceived friendliness mediates the effect of accusations on performance ratings for nonculpable individuals. In this experiment, we included measures to assess perceptions of the individual's work ethic and sociability. If our hypothesis is correct, we expect that for the culpable individual, the increase in rated performance should result from a change in the perception of the person's work ethic. For the nonculpable individual, the decrease in rated performance should result from a change in the perception of the person's friendliness.

### Method

#### PARTICIPANTS

One hundred and eighteen OSU students participated in the experiment for partial fulfillment of a course requirement in their introductory psychology course. As in Experiment 1, participants were randomly assigned to the cells of a 2 (employee culpability: culpable or nonculpable)  $\times$  2 (accusation: present, absent) between-participants design.

#### PROCEDURE

The experiment followed the same design as Experiment 1, except it included additional questions to assess the two potential mediators delineated earlier. Following the manipulations, participants first rated the work performance of the employee on the same five measures used in Study 1. Next, participants completed measures of the employee's work ethic and friendliness. To measure perceptions of the employee's work ethic, two questions assessing perceptions of how much the employee valued and was concerned with productivity were included. Second, to measure perceptions of friendliness, two questions assessing perceptions of likability and friendliness were included. All questions were answered on 7-point scales ranging from *not at all* to *extremely*.

### Results

#### OVERALL EFFECTS

The five items assessing performance were again highly correlated (Cronbach's  $\alpha = .93$ ) and therefore were collapsed into a composite measure. As in Experi-

ment 1, a 2 (employee culpability)  $\times$  2 (accusation) ANOVA produced a significant two-way interaction,  $F(1, 114) = 10.32, p < .01$  (see Figure 2). Breaking down the interaction by employee culpability, when an employee culpable of performing poorly accused another of performing poorly, he was rated as performing better ( $M = 4.94, SD = .93$ ) than when he did not make such an accusation ( $M = 4.37, SD = 1.01$ ),  $F(1, 55) = 5.02, p < .05$ . However, when the employee was nonculpable of performing poorly, he was rated as performing more poorly when he accused others of performing poorly ( $M = 6.11, SD = .78$ ) than when he did not make this accusation ( $M = 6.55, SD = .68$ ),  $F(1, 59) = 5.44, p < .05$ . These results replicate the obtained interaction and simple effects reported in Experiment 1.

Next, we examined the effect accusations had on perceptions of work ethic and sociability. The two items assessing work ethic were combined to form an index of work ethic (Cronbach's  $\alpha = .84$ ), as were the two items assessing likability combined to form an index of sociability (Cronbach's  $\alpha = .88$ ). For perceived work ethic, there was a significant Employee Culpability  $\times$  Accusation interaction,  $F(1, 114) = 5.47, p < .05$ . The nonculpable employee was seen as possessing an equal amount of work ethic regardless of whether he made an accusation ( $M = 6.52, SD = .75$ ) or not ( $M = 6.2, SD = .92$ ),  $F(1, 59) = 2.16, ns$ . However, the culpable employee was seen as possessing a better work ethic when he made an accusation ( $M = 5.18, SD = 1.33$ ) than when he did not ( $M = 3.95, SD = 1.18$ ),  $F(1, 55) = 13.67, p < .001$ .

A significant two-way interaction also emerged for friendliness,  $F(1, 114) = 20.81, p < .001$ . The nonculpable employee was seen as significantly less friendly when he made an accusation ( $M = 3.74, SD = 1.64$ ) than when he did not ( $M = 5.83, SD = .89$ ),  $F(1, 59) = 37.98, p < .001$ . The culpable employee, however, was seen as equivalent in friendliness regardless of whether he made an accusation ( $M = 4.63, SD = 1.17$ ) or not ( $M = 4.55, SD = 1.31$ ),  $F(1, 55) = .05, ns$ . These findings are consistent with the idea that people are focusing on and inferring different types of information from the accusation based on the employee's initial culpability.

#### MEDIATIONAL ANALYSES

The two potential mediators examined, work ethic and friendliness, were tested using a series of regression models. Specifically, for both the culpable and nonculpable employee conditions, the utility of perceived work ethic and perceived friendliness as mediators were each tested separately using the Sobel mediation test (Sobel, 1982). For the culpable employee, the effect of accusations on perceptions of performance was completely mediated by perceptions of his work ethic. Specifically, when perceptions of work ethic were

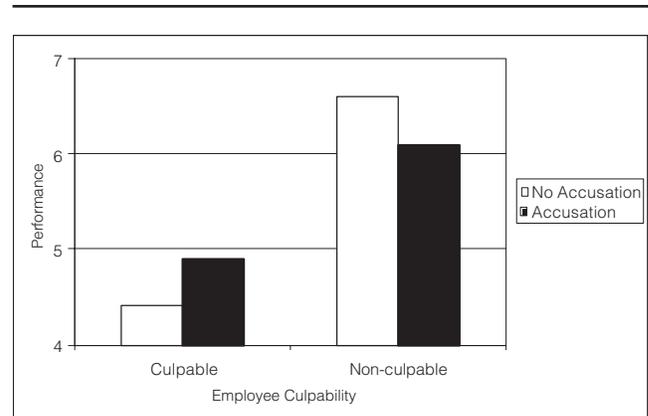


Figure 2 Performance as a function of employee culpability and remark type, Experiment 2.

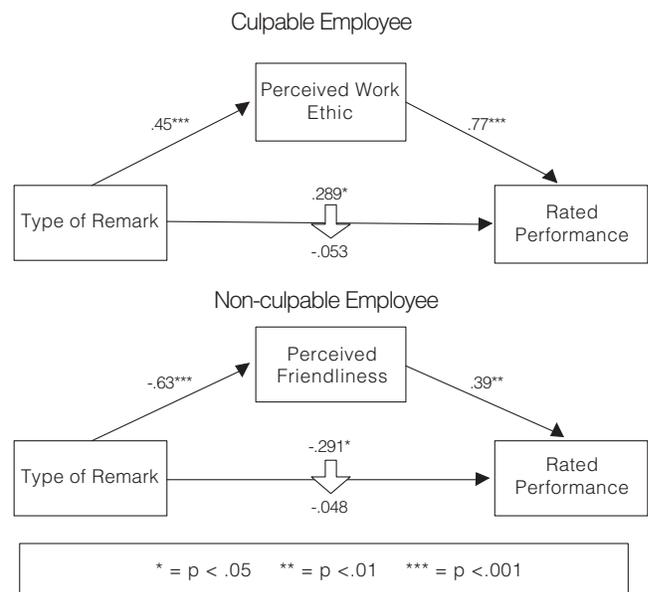


Figure 3 Successful mediational models, Experiment 2.

\* $p < .05$ . \*\* $p < .01$ . \*\*\* $p < .001$ .

included as a mediator, the direct effect of accusations on perceived performance disappeared. This was a significant drop ( $z = 3.32, p < .001$ ). However, perceptions of friendliness did not mediate the relationship at all for the culpable employee ( $z = .222, p = .824$ ).

The picture for the nonculpable employee, however, is the mirror image of that for the culpable employee. Perceptions of work ethic did not mediate the effect of the accusation on performance ratings ( $z = 1.44, p = .15$ ). When perceived friendliness was included as a mediator, however, there was a significant drop in the direct effect of the statement made on performance ratings ( $z = 2.39, p < .05$ ). The successful mediators at each level of employee culpability are presented in Figure 3.

### Discussion

Experiment 2 replicates and extends the findings of Experiment 1. As in the first study, the initial culpability of the employee moderated the effectiveness of the projection tactic. Whereas the culpable employee garnered more favorable impressions of his performance by accusing others of negative qualities he possessed himself, the nonculpable employee received a less favorable impression of his performance by making the same accusation. Of importance, this experiment extends the findings of Experiment 1 by examining the mechanisms responsible for producing each of these effects.

The mediational analyses suggest that the mechanism has to do with what people are inferring from the accusation. As delineated by Rosenberg and colleagues (Rosenberg et al., 1968; Rosenberg & Sedlak, 1972; see also Fiske, Cuddy, Glick, & Xu, 2002), people appear to be making one of two types of inferences to form impressions about the work performance of the individual in our scenarios. For the culpable employee, the accusation leads to inferences about the degree to which the accuser values, or appears to value, competence (work ethic). For the nonculpable employee, however, the accusation leads to inferences about the degree to which the accuser values or appears to value being friendly or sociable. Consequently, based on these different inferences, different impressions of the accuser are formed.

The inferences that are drawn for each employee are those that are nonredundant with prior knowledge. For the culpable employee, the nonredundant inference is a positive one about the employee's work ethic. Focusing on one's work ethic leads people to infer that the employee culpable of performing poorly must, in reality, value hard work. If the employee does not value it, then why complain about it in others? People then infer that individuals who value hard work are hardworking themselves, leading to increased performance ratings. For the nonculpable employee, the nonredundant inference is a negative one about the employee's friendliness and cooperativeness. Focusing on this dimension leads people to infer that the individual does not value friendliness and cooperativeness. If the person valued the friendship of his colleagues, he presumably would not complain about them. The fact that the employee does not value cooperativeness leads the perceivers to lower ratings of the employee's job performance. An employee who does not get along well with others is perceived to be less likely to be effective on the job than one who cultivates cooperation.

### GENERAL DISCUSSION

The present research examined the tactic of projection and sought to expand our understanding of why

accusations can enhance perceived characteristics of the accuser. Before the current research, although it was clear that accusing others of one's own misdeeds could deflect blame away from oneself and thereby enhance one's own reputation, nothing was known about the boundary conditions of the tactic, and nothing was known about why the tactic worked. The present research empirically tested a potential boundary condition of the projection tactic and examined one mechanism by which the tactic appears to work. We hypothesized that accusations lead to inferences about the values or characteristics of the accuser. Furthermore, we hypothesized that the same accusation would lead to different inferences about an accuser who was initially culpable or nonculpable on the dimension of the accusation. We expected only an initially culpable individual would benefit from making accusations toward others.

The findings of the present research confirmed this hypothesis. In both studies, the effects of accusations were moderated by the accuser's initial culpability. The projection effect uncovered in earlier research was found to hold only for a person who was initially culpable on the dimension of the accusation. An accusation only served to enhance an individual's reputation when it contained value information that directly contrasted an initial flaw of the accuser. Furthermore, in our second experiment, we found empirical evidence that accusations deflected negative qualities away from the accuser by influencing perceptions of the accuser's values. Specifically, we found that by accusing others of not valuing a particular quality (e.g., having a strong work ethic), the accuser is seen as valuing that quality (e.g., having a strong work ethic), which in turn compensates somewhat for their initial culpability.

This research helps to shed light on the initial projection studies by Rucker and Pratkanis (2001). Recall that in this research, participants rated an individual as being more honest if he accused others of being dishonest. This effect can be explained by the nonredundant, value-laden information contained in the accusation. In that experiment, participants had no indication that the accuser was honest. In fact, he was under suspicion of being dishonest. Consequently, any information that hinted that this individual valued honesty or was honest would be nonredundant with what was known or suspected about him. It seems probable that when the individual suspected of dishonesty accused others of being dishonest, participants in that experiment inferred that the accuser must have valued honesty and therefore was honest himself.

Of importance, the present research produced a new effect as well. In both studies, we found that not only did the employee who was perceived positively on the dimension of the accusation not benefit from making

accusations but he actually damaged his own reputation by doing so. In our second study, we were able to show that this nonculpable employee suffered because people inferred that he was unfriendly. Because individuals already knew the employee was competent, they focused on the nonredundant information about sociability that could be inferred from the accusation. Focusing on this negative inference led participants to lower their ratings of this employee's performance. Thus, the present research not only expands our knowledge of when the projection tactic is most likely to occur but also provides initial evidence regarding one mechanism by which the tactic works. In addition, the current research provides an initial foray into the effects of accusations by nonculpable accusers on the accuser.

It should be noted that the present research used a situation designed to be similar to occurrences in the real world. Personnel managers often have to judge an employee's merits without ever interacting with that individual directly. Their decisions influence a host of factors in an employee's life, including promotions and pay raises. It would be useful for these individuals to have an appreciation for the effects uncovered here. Imagine a scenario in which two employees make a complaint that a fellow coworker is irresponsible and lazy. One of these employees is known to be somewhat irresponsible and lazy, whereas the other is known to be responsible and diligent. What is likely to happen when a supervisor must evaluate the accusing employee? Sadly, the findings of our studies suggest that the irresponsible employee will benefit from having accused his coworker of what he himself is guilty of but the responsible employee will likely suffer for having accused his coworker.

Unfortunately, the work environment is not the only place where accusations can have these effects. In the political arena, underhanded politicians who accuse others of their own improprieties may gain favor while simultaneously dragging an otherwise righteous opponent through the mud. When initially righteous opponents are drawn into accusatory campaigning, they are likely to suffer. Or, the perpetrator of a crime may point the blame toward others leading an innocent to be scrutinized while the true criminal evades detection. Making the public aware of the effects of accusations might help assuage some of these detrimental effects. Thus, beyond the present research adding to our theoretical understanding of accusations, it may have practical implications as well.

#### FUTURE DIRECTIONS

Several directions can be followed in this line of research. First, to better understand the projection tactic, it would be useful to search for other moderators of its impact. Specifically, it would be interesting to know if

there are circumstances under which culpable individuals would not benefit from accusing others of their own misdeeds. Given the importance of an accuser's perceived values, future research may be directed at examining how to change the values people extract from accusations. For example, perhaps if people are highly confident of the actual characteristics an accuser possesses (i.e., they are certain an individual is dishonest or lazy), they will be less likely to fall prey to the projection tactic.

Another possible moderator of the effects we observed is the novelty of the accusation relative to what is known about the accuser. In the present studies, the accusation provided novel information about work ethic for the culpable employee, but this information was redundant with one's knowledge about the nonculpable employee. Perhaps making an accusation that contains novel information relative to what is known about the accuser could reverse our obtained findings. For example, if the nonculpable employee in the present studies were to accuse others of not being very friendly or cooperative, the novel information that would be extracted is that the accuser values friendliness. The inferences of valuing friendliness could outweigh or negate the negative social consequences of making the accusation observed in the present studies. Thus, the negative consequences of making the accusation for the nonculpable employee might be attenuated or reversed. For the culpable employee, a similar accusation about friendliness would not address the accuser's lack of work ethic. In fact, an irrelevant accusation by a negative source (i.e., an accusation that does not project one's own faults) might have unfavorable implications for the accuser. These possibilities represent fruitful lines of future inquiry.

Potential for another line of future research is inspired by recent research by De Bruin and Van Lange (2000). These researchers examined the role of a person's social value orientation (McClintock, 1972) in response to Rosenberg's distinction between intellectual versus sociability information. These researchers suggested that people whose social value orientation was proself (i.e., tend to evaluate others on the basis of intelligence and competence) would use intellectual versus sociability information differently from those whose social value orientation was prosocial (i.e., tend to evaluate others on the basis of sociability). In support of this idea, De Bruin and Van Lange found evidence that the impressions of individuals who differed in their value orientation were differentially driven by intellectual and sociability information. Specifically, for prosocial individuals, competence information about an individual did not affect the impressions they formed about the individual, but competence information did affect the impressions of proself individuals. Conversely, sociability information affected the impressions of prosocial indi-

viduals but affected proself individuals only under certain circumstances (see De Bruin & Van Lange, 2000). Given that projection functioned in the present context through perceptions of work ethic and competence (because that was the nature of the accusation), it may be interesting to see if the effect in this context is moderated by an individual's social value orientation. Specifically, projection of negative competence information may be more effective when used on proself individuals who are inclined to focus on competence information, as opposed to prosocial individuals who do not appear to use competence information as much. However, the effects we found for positive individuals might be more pronounced among prosocial individuals who are more concerned about sociability.

Earlier, we discussed past research on self-serving attributions (Carlston & Shovar, 1983) and self-handicapping (Rhodewalt et al., 1995) that found comments about one's own performance could carry both positive and negative information. Consequently, although an individual may improve others' perception of his ability by using self-serving attributions, he may damage his own perceived modesty. Experiment 2 clearly showed that the accusations clearly conveyed both positive and negative information and that the information used by the participant was the nonredundant information. However, we found no costs associated with the use of projection by the culpable employee (or advantages of accusations for the nonculpable employee). The culpable employee was equally liked regardless of whether he made accusations toward his coworkers. However, there may be costs associated with the use of this tactic that the present research did not measure. For example, the repeated use of accusations, especially by a culpable accuser, might eventually arouse suspicions about the motives of the accuser. Research has shown that suspicion about an individual's motives leads that individual to be perceived in a more negative light (see Fein & Hilton, 1994). Similar to the boy who cried wolf, multiple uses of accusations may eventually harm the accuser. Of course, if the use of projection truly has no negative consequences, the need to find methods to diffuse the tactic becomes critical.

In addition to examining costs for a culpable accuser, it would be worthwhile to investigate when a nonculpable accuser might benefit, or at least not suffer, from using accusations. One possible moderator might be whether being unfriendly is relevant to the dimension of evaluation (e.g., productivity). In the present research, we used a situation where being unfriendly could plausibly have implications for work productivity because being unfriendly with coworkers may be seen as detracting from cooperativeness and teamwork, and thus overall productivity. However, consider a situation in which a

nonculpable employee accused another individual of stealing in the workplace and the judgment of interest was the trustworthiness of the nonculpable employee. In this situation, the inference of being unfriendly does not necessarily have implications for a person's trustworthiness. Therefore, a nonculpable accuser may not be judged as less trustworthy, even if he is less liked. Alternatively, if the negative social connotations of accusations are producing a halo effect such that an individual is seen as more negative on all dimensions of his character, then accusations by a nonculpable source might have negative consequences in multiple domains, even those to which friendliness is not directly related. This should be explored in future research.

Finally, although the results for the culpable individual cannot be explained by spontaneous trait transference, we cannot rule out the possibility that spontaneous trait transference processes help to account for the results we obtained for the nonculpable accuser. The nonculpable accuser described the target in a negative way, and this could have led negative traits to be associated with the accuser. Although we do not favor the trait transference account for the current results because it cannot parsimoniously account for the results of both culpable and nonculpable accusers, as can the accusations as value-laden information perspective, future research could focus on delineating when accusations will influence perceptions of the accuser as a result of the values they convey versus the result of spontaneous trait transference. For example, in the current research, people had ample time to process the information and the task was made highly involving and consequential (i.e., it involved judgments about real people). As considerable work on dual process models of attitude formation and change have shown (e.g., see Eagly & Chaiken, 1993; Petty & Cacioppo, 1986), if the likelihood of thinking about the accuser was reduced, a less effortful association process might have accounted for the results. Spontaneous trait transference may be more likely to occur when people are less motivated to process information, whereas value inference will occur when people are more motivated to process the available information, or perhaps, spontaneous trait transference did occur in the present studies but was overridden by more effortful processing. These are intriguing possibilities that future research might address.<sup>5</sup>

We end by giving a moral to our story. Accusations can serve to either enhance or diminish perceptions of the accuser. Although we might hope that accusations would damage those using them for ulterior motives, our research suggests that accusations sometimes benefit the wicked and harm the righteous.

## NOTES

1. In the present research, we use the term "culpable" to identify individuals who are clearly guilty of possessing the negative quality they accuse others of possessing (i.e., are nonproductive). The term "nonculpable" is used to describe individuals who do not possess the negative quality and actually possess a positive quality (i.e., are productive). Although nonculpable also could be used to describe a person who has a neutral quality, we chose to include the possession of the positive quality to ensure the individual was unequivocally nonculpable.

2. We used an accusation that did not contain explicit claims that the accuser was innocent or that the accused was responsible for his poor performance. As mentioned earlier, past research shows that the projection effect does not require such claims (Rucker & Pratkanis, 2001), and according to the accusations as value-laden information hypothesis, it is the perceived change in values that exonerates the accuser, not explicit claims of innocence.

3. The researchers also suggested a three-dimensional model may be possible, although the improvement in fit was not great. However, this three-dimensional solution still contained the same two dimensions as the two-dimensional model but also contained a third dimension called active-passive (see Rosenberg, Nelson, & Vivekanathan, 1968, for further details).

4. The reader may question why impressions of friendliness should affect performance ratings. First, cooperativeness may be seen as a critical component of work performance. In this case, lacking friendliness may be seen as a shortcoming in performance. Second, there are a number of theories and findings that suggest that not liking an individual can be enough to derogate the person on other dimensions (Asch, 1946; Heider, 1958). For example, research on halo effects has found that if a person does not like an individual on one dimension, they are less favorable toward the person on other dimensions as well (Nisbett & Wilson, 1977).

5. Mae, Carlston, and Skowronski (1999) examined need for cognition (NFC) (Cacioppo & Petty, 1982) to ascertain whether spontaneous transference occurred to a greater extent for individuals more likely to process information in a peripheral manner (i.e., individuals low in NFC). They found no effect of NFC on participants' likelihood of showing spontaneous trait transference. However, it is possible that elaboration was constrained to be relatively low in the research by Mae et al. (1999). If so, individual differences in NFC may not have been strong enough to overcome situational constraints, or it may have been that there were no value inferences to conflict with the spontaneously transferred traits. Thus, even highly thoughtful people showed the trait transference effect.

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