

BEARDING THE GOAT: ONE VIEW OF SCAPEGOATING

William C. Wasmund

United Methodist Children's Home

ABSTRACT: Scapegoating can be a particularly insidious, vicious form of peer predation which is hard to recognize. It is often associated with ego deficiencies, so the expression of feelings and perceptive supervision help to identify the problem. Then, addressing the social climate to reduce predation allows time to help both parties identify their roles, improve their social competence, and mediate their identity concerns. The life-space interview is a valuable tool in this process.

The phenomenon we call scapegoating – one child setting up another for failure – is often very perplexing for child care workers. Scapegoats constantly allow or even prompt others to ridicule or tease them. While most prevalent during elementary and middle school ages, some continue their misguided roles into adulthood, and it is particularly alarming when the behavior becomes so dysfunctional that residential treatment is necessary. It often seems to others that scapegoats unnecessarily bring their problems upon themselves and compel others to react negatively toward them. However, if this maladaptive social pingponging continues long enough, the scapegoat's mental health may deteriorate to depression or even decompensation.

The problem can be particularly difficult to resolve in residential facilities, perhaps because pains of confinement and the predatory nature of the children can conspire to create an environment in which bullies become better bullies and victims better victims. When a number of new children enter a cottage, when the cottage social climate is particularly self-centered, or when some children are allowed to acquire unequal social status, scapegoating can become a serious and destructive problem.

The Scapegoat

Scapegoats are like lightning rods, energetically attracting ridicule and animosity. They often pursue the mistaken goal of "retaliation and revenge," because they think revenge is their only means to achieve importance (Dreikurs, 1964, p. 62). At some point in their lives, they began to believe that others did not like them, and their daily experi-

ences continue to confirm that opinion. They are desperate for recognition because those most important to them have been angry or dissatisfied. This resembles other behaviors we observe that are supported by destructive, self-fulfilling beliefs: Aggressive children, who believe fighting protects their rights, must then fight incessantly to protect those rights; and smokers, who believe that cigarettes calm them, find themselves smoking more to combat the excitation caused by nicotine.

Psychologically, scapegoats tend to be intra- and interpersonally inadequate: They seem utterly inept, incompetent, and inadequate in important aspects of life; they are excitable and impulsive, socially unskilled, and emotionally isolated. They are at odds with themselves and therefore with others; their continued conflicts prevent them from achieving or forming satisfying relationships with others. They typically lack the ego defense mechanisms most of us use to protect our self concepts. What few ego defenses they do have are primitive – like denial (It didn't happen") and projection (Well, if he hadn't . . .).

Reasoning with them can be especially difficult because they have difficulty accepting responsibility for their own behavior and are excitable. Some scapegoats may have been neglected and never learned how to protect their rights, meet their needs, or achieve their wants. Others may have been assigned this role by their families to appease their parents or siblings. Still others may have developed perfectionistic traits because they were taught to feel guilty and blamed for other's failures or misfortunes. Whatever the cause, scapegoats tend to be under- or unsocialized and inconsiderate of themselves. As a result, they may also have problems with hygiene, dress and manners.

As their interpersonal conflicts intensify, they become socially and emotionally isolated. Each perceived injustice confirms their theory that they are impotent pawns in an unfair world. Their isolation and attention deficits make it difficult for them to interpret social cues accurately or to mediate conflicts with others successfully, so their isolation and feelings of desperation worsen. As authority figures or therapists, our anger or frustration can intensify their feelings of powerlessness and inferiority. They probably feel more like Bowie and Crockett under siege in the Alamo than Lewis and Clark exploring a new world filled with opportunity. They perceive an external locus of control and believe that their fate is in others' inept hands.

Intrapersonally, they have trouble getting along with others because they feel inferior and incompetent and believe that whatever they do is valueless. Ironically, they often possess significant abilities, but they can't seem to channel or develop those abilities productively. On one hand, they recognize their need for dependence upon others; on the

other, they rebel against it because it suggests further evidence of failure or helplessness. They behave inadequately because they feel inadequate, even though they could be very different. Because their defense systems are not very effective, they may be chronically anxious, untrusting; they lack emotional stamina, are often explosive, impulsive, and pessimistic; and their poor defense mechanisms allow them to be besieged by doubt and guilt. Scapegoats are often empathetic and intuitive, so one way to help them is to solicit their opinions or involve them in helping others. However, one should take care that this is not merely gratuitous because they are suspicious and worry as much about motives as deeds.

It's frustrating when scapegoats histrionically deny their part in these faulty interactions. Because their roles are so obvious, we may decide that this must be deliberate, antagonistic behavior. Our impressions often seem to be confirmed when scapegoats vehemently denounce us as part of the problem if we do not immediately make things right or fair. Things are seldom simple in practice, and scapegoats' other problems often complicate the situation. Fortunately, their primitive ego defenses often allow their other problems to be easily recognized; but we should remember that scapegoats often taunt others long after the fact because they hold grudges and seek revenge, so we might not be observing new problems.

The Provocateur

Those who scapegoat weaker children do so for a variety of reasons, but those who persist may be satisfying some psychological deficiency (like, dominating others to feel more adequate). Provocateurs may be influential, generally positive children who cannot tolerate weakness or frustration. Others may be passive-aggressive children who derive satisfaction by appearing to help child care workers while actually creating disorder to frustrate them. Others might simply believe that igniting another student keeps child care workers' attention directed away from them. In peer group programs, this phenomenon has an interesting, utilitarian twist. Since children are expected to help one another in these programs, some children scapegoat others so they can help to resolve the ensuing problem – in effect, getting credit for fixing what they surreptitiously broke earlier. That's a variation on the saying, "If you're not part of the solution, you're part of the problem." They are both.

Scapegoats often have some unusual characteristics (like physical disability or unattractiveness, developmental delays, attention deficits, borderline personalities, confused personal or sexual identities), so they may be especially repugnant to more "normal" peers who are establish-

ing their own social or sexual identities. Many adolescents dislike homosexuals because they unconsciously fear it is contagious. Because they want to appear competent and “cool,” they avoid incompetent peers for fear of “uncoolness by association.” Self description (forming a personal identity) is achieved by inclusion (“Yes, I am like that”) and by exclusion (“No, I am not like that”), and some children define themselves by excluding those who personify undesirable traits. Because they cannot exclude their associates in residential settings, they may demean or persecute those whom they consider socially undesirable or inept. Ostracizing scapegoats allows them to declare their rejection of weakness or inferiority and enables them to define their identities.

We may make the situation worse by reacting angrily when scapegoats bring unnecessary trouble onto themselves or selfishly disrupt others’ plans. We forget that they are doing the best they can, and we may mistakenly decide that they are only seeking undue attention. Our anger can confirm the provocateurs’ opinion that scapegoats deserve (and even ask for) scapegoating. They may model our anger and feel justified expressing their own.

Interaction and Intervention

Sports commentators often say that the officials always see the *second* personal foul. That’s often the situation with scapegoating: Scapegoats are socially unskilled, so they get caught; provocateurs are slicker and get away. Like sports officials, child care workers cannot be everywhere or see everything, and scapegoating is hard to recognize. Their behavior can be so disrupting and seem so spontaneous that we do not look for an antagonist. Furthermore, provocateurs are subtle and scapegoats are annoying, so it is easy to believe that they get what they asked for.

When unrecognized, scapegoating may escalate because the combatants interpret the lack of staff intervention as tacit endorsement. Each child’s behavior and attitudes are reinforced – the provocateur’s superiority and antagonism and the scapegoat’s inferiority and retaliation. Social inequity increases, and the attack-retaliation cycle intensifies. The provocateurs’ superior social skills enable them to continue to win favor from child care workers, so they presume that their behavior is endorsed. The scapegoats’ inferior social skills prevent them from winning favor and confirm their feelings of inferiority and injustice.

The social climate of the cottage profoundly affects whether scapegoating will be identified. If the climate is *laissez-faire* or so individualized that social interactions are not monitored closely, scapegoating can

be very hard to detect. If the cottage climate encourages able children to help those who are less able, predation is more apparent and more easily corrected. Often only especially perceptive child care workers recognize the social dynamics involved in scapegoating. Child care workers who encourage children to express their frustrations recognize scapegoating more easily than those who simply strive for order and conformity. Perceptive child care workers recognize legitimate cries for help and regard scapegoats as barometers of their cottage's therapeutic climate. So, when scapegoats cry "Wolf!," there may be one; and especially in the peer group example, they may be hiding in sheep's clothing.

Even when we recognize scapegoating, it can be difficult to separate the combatants long enough to resolve the issue. Worse, provocateurs are usually popular and may have other children on their side, so we may be outnumbered when we address the problem. We may be tempted to ignore the situation or to just pacify those involved; but when we only work with scapegoats, we often fail because they continue to retaliate. When we only work with provocateurs, the problem may merely submerge. Muzzling provocateurs and rescuing scapegoats are only temporary strategies because one will not agree to a truce while the other continues to attack. Coordinating the treatment of scapegoats and provocateurs reduces the interactions which perpetuate the problem. In order to establish a lasting truce, it is usually easier to neutralize the provocateurs because they are more mature and less ego-involved. We can often appeal to their ego ideals by explaining that "real" men or women do not taunt those who are weaker.

Scapegoats will not stop reacting to provocation simply because we ask them to, and we often find our work with the scapegoat dashed by the indignation and jealousy of the other children; so it is important to improve the social climate – the attitudes of other children – as we improve the functioning of individuals. As scapegoats see us address the provocateurs, they realize they have allies who will intervene fairly. So, some of the intervention might occur in the presence of both parties, and responsibility for the incident assigned fairly. Scapegoats know they get too excited and angry to explain what happened, so relationships with adults are important to reduce their anxiety; but this is much easier to do after the provocateurs are neutralized. Unless scapegoats learn to become more socially adequate and to transfer their experiences to new situations, our protection of them may only confirm their basic inferiority and justify their retaliation and revenge. In either case, the provocateurs smolder about the preferential treatment their prey is receiving, and scapegoats may continue to retaliate while hiding behind the child care worker's protection.

Sometimes the way we perceive situations helps us to find solutions. For example, we might tell a man whose nose was broken in three places that he should learn to stay out of those places. Scapegoats must learn to make themselves less vulnerable, while provocateurs learn to manage their anger. The former involves developing more effective social skills; the latter, finding comfort in their own identities so they don't feel they must respond. While this is occurring, we can monitor their interactions closely and assign responsibility for incidents that occur. Vulnerability aside, scapegoats precipitate many of their problems and need to accept increasing responsibility for them. As long as they deny their role, they will not look for alternatives; and they need alternatives far more than moralisms, so appealing to their self-interests ("How is this getting you what you want?") is more productive than judging ("You are acting like a . . .").

Scapegoats are often mistrustful, so developing a therapeutic relationship is more productive than scolding or accusing. Demeaning or responding angrily actually reinforces the undesired behavior and confirms scapegoats' negative opinions about themselves and their relationships with others. When we must remove them from conflicts, we might tell them "You don't seem ready to deal with this constructively now" or "This situation is a little too much for you to handle, so let's discuss it after you have had more time to think about it." If they continue to retaliate, we should maintain appropriate, reasonable limits and help them see their roles in situations; but we must do this sensitively in order to preserve our relationship with them. Simply yielding to undue demands for attention only reinforces their poor self concept and strengthens their conviction that these behaviors will produce the feelings of belonging they crave. On the other hand, if we misdiagnose these children as simple "attention-seekers" and withhold affection, we can make the situation worse. Encouraging scapegoats when they behave appropriately will reduce the time we spend intervening when they behave inappropriately; and it is more productive to be an advocate than a referee.

The Life-Space Interview

Their emotionality and poor ego defenses often cause them to lack effective "cause and effect" reasoning ability – it is difficult for them to see the stages of the scapegoating cycle or their own roles in problems, especially since they feel so certain that they are right. The life-space interview can be particularly useful in developing and preserving our relationships with these children. "Many ego-damaged children are per-

ceptually confused [about] what goes on around them, because they have already woven together a 'delusional' system of life interpretation. . . . Many times they don't seem to 'get the hang' of [social interactions] unless one puts it together for them . . . in the [life-space interview]" (Wineman, 1972, p. 240). Here's an example of this confusion:

During class another boy accused Allen of not helping with his cottage chores earlier in the morning. When the teacher reminded the boys that class was not the place to discuss the incident, Allen threw his books on the floor and bolted from the classroom. A child care worker intercepted him and asked what was the matter. Allen threw a chair, pushed past the worker, and continued his flight from the school. The worker caught up with Allen and escorted him to an office in another building.

Although the office occupant had a good relationship with Allen, Allen would not sit down, threatened to destroy the computer and began to throw papers and damage wall charts. The staff member restrained Allen until he regained some composure, but Allen threatened, "You're mine, and so's your computer! I'll get you for restraining me. I hate you all!"

Although Allen is 17 years old and the oldest in the cottage, he is physically delayed and has recently begun testosterone injections to precipitate pubescence. He was abused at home, and a host of previous out-of-home placements had ended in unplanned discharges. Although of low average intelligence, his impulsivity and emotional conflicts have prevented him from achieving academically, and he reads on the third grade level (when he reads at all). Allen is terribly threat sensitive, mistrusting, and pessimistic. He's not fond of supervision and is at odds with his cottage peers.

After the restraint, the following discussion occurred:

"Allen, why do you think I restrained you?"

"Because I said I was going to mess up your computer and your other stuff. But I wasn't really going to do that. I just said it to make you mad."

"Well, what did I do that you wanted to make me mad?"

"You restrained me!"

"But Allen, that happened later."

"Yeah, right. Well, you didn't really do anything; I was already mad."

"Well, who made you mad?"

"Mr. Jones. He shouldn't have brought me over here."

"What should he have done?"

"Nuttin. Just let me be."

"Could he really ignore you when you're throwing things?"

"Well, I wouldn't have been throwing stuff if that teacher hadn't told me to shut up."

"You mean the whole thing is Mr. Harris' fault?"

"No, Mike's. He told me I didn't help this morning. I did help some, and Mike was just trying to make me look bad. Now everybody thinks I'm dumb and lazy. They always do. They never listen to me. They never believe me."

"Why do you think that is?"

"Because no one likes me."

"Why do you think that is?"

"Because no one likes me. Mike wasn't helping either this morning. He just wanted to make me look bad."

"Well, what did you do when he said that?"

"Nuttin. The teacher said I shouldn't talk."

"But you did do something."

"All right. I ran out of class."

"Is running out of class a good way to get people to see your side?"

"Well, they won't believe me anyway. There's nothin' else to do!"

"Then it's hopeless, isn't it?"

"Yeah. You should put me in another cottage so I can get some help."

"Which one?"

"Well not in Champion, 'cuz they're crazy."

"Allen, that's all the cottages we have. Do you really think things would be better anyway? Didn't you have the same trouble at the other places you've been?"

"Yup, I already told you no one likes me."

"Aren't you tired of going from place to place making enemies? What would have happened if you had stayed in class and just explained the facts?"

"It wouldn't work. I get too mad when Mike tries to make me look stupid."

"So you're saying when people accuse you of something you don't know what else to do except get mad?"

"Yup. He makes me mad, man. I should kill him."

"So he needs help with that and you say the other guys see it too. So you're not alone after all. But do you give anyone a chance to help when you just let Mike push your buttons? What else could you do when Mike says stuff like that?"

"I could have asked Keith to help. He was with me this morning, he knew I did my chores, and he can talk real good."

"Yes, you could find out what other people think to see if you're looking at it right. You think that'll work?"

"It might. Then I wouldn't have to let Mike push me around."

"Well, what do you think is next?"

"Gotta get back to class."

"Yeah, and what are you going to do?"

"I gotta check with the other guys so we can get Mike to stop. That way I won't have to kill him."

"The teacher may have work for you to make up, you know."

"Yup. I'd better tell them my plan so they know what's goin' on. We gotta get to the bottom of this."

The goals in this interchange were to provide emotional first aid to check Allen's escalating anger, preserve the relationship, and increase his self-awareness and his repertoire of acceptable, productive responses. In general, three goals of the life-space interview are to interpret the underlying anxieties as motivating factors in the acting out, resolve the acting-out incident so that problems don't compound and cause more acting out, and control the child's impulsivity to demonstrate protection and security (ibid. p. 263).

In summary, scapegoating can be a particularly insidious, vicious form of peer predation which is hard to recognize. It is often associated with ego deficiencies, so the expression of feelings and perceptive super-

vision help to identify the problem. Then, addressing the social climate to reduce predation allows time to help both parties identify their roles, improve their social competence, and mediate their identity concerns. The life-space interview is a valuable tool in this process.

REFERENCES

- Brendtro, L.K. & Ness, A.E. (1983). *Reeducating Troubled Youth*. Hawthorne, NY: Aldine Publishing, pp. 78-79.
- Dreikurs, R. (1964). *Children: The Challenge*. New York, NY: Hawthorn/Dutton, pp. 57-67.
- Vorrath, H.H. & Brentro, L.K. (1985). *Positive Peer Culture*. (2nd ed.). Hawthorne, NY: Aldine Publishing, p. 112.
- Wineman, D. (1972). "The Life-Space Interview" in *Children Away from Home* (Whitaker, J.K. & Trieschman, A.E., eds.) Hawthorne, NY: Aldine, pp. 236-266.

About the Author:

Bill Wasmund began his career twenty years ago as a child care worker in Minnesota. Since then he has worked with troubled children as a caseworker, group therapist, school psychologist, and program director. A proponent of peer group therapy, Mr. Wasmund has helped implement programs in Michigan, Missouri, Texas, Virginia and West Virginia. His other articles concern staff selection and performance and peer group treatment research and issues.