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Why do people criticize others for suffering irrationally?

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Abstract

People sometimes criticize others for feeling sad, especially when they judge that person's sadness to be irrational. According to canonical models of blame, these reactions reflect attributions of control over the negative emotion. However, some scholars have recently suggested that blame reactions towards other's emotions ignore attributions of control, and instead, reflect negative reactions to the emotion itself. We present a study that adjudicates between these two competing views. Our results support control-based models of blame and criticism. We also identify two cues that people rely on when attributing control over emotions; namely, how well calibrated the emotion is to its eliciting circumstances and the sufferer's capacity to think rationally. In sum: People will criticize others for their emotional suffering when they judge both that the suffering is irrational, and that the sufferer is sufficiently rational to recognize this fact, and so can choose to stop feeling upset.