

**Understanding the Relationship Between the Personality Trait Neuroticism and Swift
Blame in an Organizational Setting**

Ellen V. Neijenhuis

S3990362

Department of Psychology, University of Groningen

PSB3E-BT15: Bachelor Thesis

2223_1b_03

Supervisor: Maja Graso

Second evaluator: Teodora L. Heihal

In collaboration with: Caram C. Alves, Luna van den Bemd, Ainhua G. Balson, Pilvi
Kupiainen, Melanie S. Gava

June 26, 2023

Abstract

Swift blame is a spontaneous and reflexive type of blame manifested by automatic cognition (i.e., system one thinking). This form of blame has negative consequences in an organizational setting, such as decreasing work-life quality and generating a maladaptive blame culture. To gain insight into this relatively new concept, I will examine the relationship between the personality trait neuroticism and swift blame. I hypothesize that individuals with high scores on neuroticism will engage more in swift blame than individuals who score low on neuroticism. The 182 participants of this study were asked to evaluate a vignette using swift blame items. Additionally, they completed two items of the BIG-10, measuring neuroticism. Correlational analysis revealed no significant relationships between Neuroticism and the proxy variables Confidence in Information, Time, Blame, and Severity. There was, however, a positive correlation between Neuroticism and Reflection Effort and Effort Self-report. This means neurotic participants reflected more on their blame decisions than participants with low neuroticism scores. These results provide no concrete support for the hypothesis and might even indicate that individuals who score high in neuroticism engage less in swift blame in an organizational setting than individuals scoring low in neuroticism.

Keywords: swift blame, neuroticism, dual process theory, system one thinking, organizations

Understanding the Relationship Between the Personality Trait Neuroticism and Swift Blame in an Organizational Setting

A manager of an important publicity agency arrives stressed at work. It is her first day back at the office after being ill. She misses a sticky note, which causes her to be late for an important meeting. Without a second thought, she blames the secretary for not alerting her. She dismisses hearing out her secretary, who claims that she is innocent. However, it is only later that she discovers the secretary's note in the trash among the other papers she threw away herself.

This is an example of an easily made, unjustified blame attribution in an organizational setting. Such spontaneous, uncontrolled blame attribution, defined as *swift blame*, has consequences (Skarlicki et al., 2017). In the example above, it might have caused negative emotions like fear, shame, and anger by the secretary. It could also have a negative impact on the secretary's quality of work, her life, and the interpersonal relationship between the manager and the secretary (Skarlicki et al., 2017). Therefore, it is important to understand what is happening in this scenario. Why did the manager blame her secretary so fast? What caused her sudden blame attribution? It could be her circumstances or her mood, but could it also be that she always blames reflexively?

From a broader perspective, this raises a question: Are certain people more prone to engaging in this uncontrolled type of blame than others? One way to look at this question is by differentiating individuals by their personality traits. Based on the existing literature on blame and related constructs like decision-making and jumping to conclusions, the personality trait most likely linked to swift blame, is *neuroticism* (e.g., Bhelkar, 2017; Hilbig, 2008; Hirsh & Inzlicht, 2008). Therefore, in this paper, I will explore the possible association between the personality trait *neuroticism* and the concept of swift blame, and I will test

whether a higher level of neuroticism correlates with a greater tendency to engage in swift blame.

Theoretical Foundation

Blame and Its Functional and Dysfunctional Consequences

In the Cambridge Dictionary ‘to blame’ is described as “to say or think that someone or something did something wrong or is responsible for something bad happening.” (Cambridge Dictionary, n.d.). Research has taken many different viewpoints on blame, conceptualizing it as an evolutionary (Cooley, 1964), a social (Lupton & Warren, 2018), and a moral construct (Smith, 2013). It is present in all forms of social groups (e.g., organizations) to detect and discourage harmful behavior (Alicke, 2000). Therefore, it has the functional effects of maintaining the social order and/or holding people accountable for infringement of moral, ethical, and legal concerns. In an organizational context, blame can be used as support to give out a punishment for a violation of organizational functioning (Weber, 1978), in that case, blame can give managers the positive feeling that they manage and lead morally just (Smith, 2013).

However, blaming can have negative consequences as well. Being blamed can evoke negative emotions in those who are being blamed, for instance, fear, anger, shame, and guilt by employees (Sitkin & Bies, 1994). These emotions are related to a decrease in the quality of work life (Catino, 2009) and psychological well-being (Ryff & Keyes, 1995). These negative emotions do not only influence the individuals that are being blamed but further negatively affect the functioning of employees as well, by spreading the blame culture to coworkers and within teamwork (Stuewig et al., 2010). These blaming attributions among coworkers can lead to hard and negative interpersonal feelings (Jordan & Troth, 2004). It can generate a culture where the focus lies on creating fear and suppression (Voskuil, 2017). This blame culture can suppress organizational learning because the quick identification of a culprit

allows organizations to ignore underlying issues within the organization itself (Skarlicki et al., 2017). That means, if a person is to blame, there is no need for the organization to change, even though the bigger or underlying problem might be within the organization itself. All these negative consequences are even more likely to arise when blame is erroneous and attributed in an uncorrected and reflexive manner (Skarlicki et al., 2017).

Swift Blame: Uncorrected Judgment and System One Thinking

The act of blaming an individual spontaneously, and without consideration of context is defined as *swift blame* (Skarlicki et al., 2017). To date, little research has been done on swift blame. However, existing literature on related constructs, such as general blame, decision-making, and jumping to conclusions, provide a theoretical framework which makes it possible to hypothesize how swift blame relates to neuroticism.

The difference between swift blame and general blame attributions is that the former is a manifestation of system one thinking (Skarlicki et al., 2017). System one thinking is part of the dual-process theory, which suggests two distinct and competing systems of information processing: ‘system one’ and ‘system two’ (Kahneman, 2003, 2011). System one is a more instinctive, implicit, and automatic way of thinking and responding, whereas thinking and responding in system two is planned, intentional and explicit. In system one processing, a decision is made by relying on cognitive shortcuts, *heuristics*, and without extensive thinking or considering context before deciding (Kahneman, 2011). The heuristics of an individual are shaped through their experiences and triggered by cues in the context available to the decision-maker (Nitschke et al., 2022). The use of heuristics in a blame situation aligns with the culpable control model of Alicke (2000).

In this model, Alicke (2000) states that when blame is assigned with the use of system one thinking, in other words, swift blame, it is vulnerable to biases and influences of affective relationships with the individuals and/or blame situations. System one thinking is responsible

for certain judgment errors in logical reasoning and risky choices, such as denominator neglect (i.e., a distorted perspective on the probability for something to happen; Evans et al., 1983) and the belief bias (i.e., the tendency to judge on predetermined opinions or feelings instead of content; Evans & Curtis-Holmes, 2005; Sanchez & Dunning, 2020). In an organizational context, when a blaming decision is made with these biases and affective influences, it can manifest as judgment errors, wrongful attributions, and blaming without considering additional evidence and context (Skarlicki et al., 2017).

I discussed the negative consequences of blame, particularly uncorrected swift blame. However, it is likely that not everybody engages in such blame. Therefore, I examine the possible differentiating role of the personality trait neuroticism in the engagement of swift blame.

Personality Antecedents to Swift Blame: Neuroticism

One aspect that could influence the use of swift blame in an organizational setting is personality. This is because different personality traits are known to influence a person's organizational functioning (e.g., Rahaman, 2014), including job performance (Barrick & Mount, 1991), team performance (O'Neill & Allen, 2011), and job satisfaction. (Kong et al., 2020). Though there are multiple studies about personality traits in organizations, they have not been related to blame or specifically swift blame. Based on the findings on for example decision-making styles (e.g., Denburg et al., 2009; Xu, 2020) and the dual process theory (e.g., Behelkar, 2017), the personality trait neuroticism is most likely linked to the concept of swift blame. Therefore, I am measuring the personality trait neuroticism in an organizational blame context.

Neuroticism is mostly considered one of the traits of the five-factor model, together with extraversion, conscientiousness, openness, and agreeableness (McCrae & Costa, 2003). It is otherwise named negative emotionality (Harkness et al., 1995) or emotional instability

(Digman, 1990). The main characteristic of neuroticism is the tendency for experiencing negative affect. According to Costa and McCrae (1992), neuroticism encompasses six factors: anxiety, hostility, depression, self-consciousness, impulsivity, and emotional sensitivity. In this section, I will further discuss how these aspects of neuroticism relate to decision-making styles and system one processing that indicate swift blame.

Neuroticism and decision-making

When neurotic individuals encounter a stressful situation, they are prone to experience feelings of negative affect like anxiety, fear of failure, embarrassment, and impulsivity (Costa & McCrae, 1992). The experience of negative affect is correlated with cognitive failures (e.g., memory lapses; Sutin et al., 2020), and the aspect of anxiety relates to more performance deficits (e.g., making blunders; Humphreys & Revelle, 1984). To avoid experiencing this negative affect, individuals high in neuroticism tend to engage in avoidance behavior in stressful decision-making situations (McGregor & Elliot, 2005).

As a result, individuals could refrain from gathering information about the situation and from using their knowledge to draw conclusions (Hilbig, 2008). Neurotic individuals might avoid looking into a situation and engage in impulsive behaviors instead (Corr, 2002). This aligns with other research suggesting that neuroticism is associated with impairments in decision-making and an impulsive and risk-averse decision-making style (Milgram & Tenne, 2000; Lauriola & Levin, 2001; Rahaman, 2014; Watson, 2001). Thus, instead of thoroughly thinking a blame situation through, these impulsive and avoidant decision-making styles prone in neurotic individuals could possibly result in swift blame.

Neuroticism and system one thinking

An underlying explanation for these maladaptive coping mechanisms of neurotic individuals in a blame situation might be the relation between neuroticism and system one thinking. Of the Big Five personality traits, neuroticism is likely to suppress system two

thinking (Behelkar, 2017). Not only is there support for the suppression of system two thinking in neuroticism, but also for an elevated tendency of engaging in system one thinking (Hilbig, 2008). Since swift blame is a manifestation of system one thinking, the association between neuroticism and system one thinking suggests a link between neuroticism and swift blame.

As mentioned earlier, an expression of system one thinking in swift blame is through heuristic processes. According to the research by Bhelkar (2017) and Hilbig (2008), neuroticism is positively related to heuristic thinking. Furthermore, Hirsh and Inzlicht (2008) found a rapid, automatic, neurophysiological, and negative affective response to uncertainty in people high in neuroticism. This negative emotional arousal is found to increase the propensity to limited processing of social information, meaning an increase of influence of superficial cues (e.g., affective relationship with others) instead of content cues (e.g., evidence for the accusation; Baron et al., 1992). These feelings of negative affect that are salient in neurotic people influence judgments with negative biases, like the belief bias (i.e., the tendency to judge on predetermined opinions; Forgas & Bower, 1987). Consequently, these heuristics and biases can lead to quick and intuitive judgments and rash decisions in a blame process in an organizational setting (Forgas & George, 2001).

Overview of the Study

I argued how swift blame can be seen as a manifestation of system one thinking applied to blame, and why I expect to observe the positive relation between neuroticism and system one thinking. Formally, I hypothesize that individuals that score high on the personality trait neuroticism engage more in swift blame than individuals that score low on neuroticism. In this exploratory study, the definition of swift blame defined by Skarlicki et al. (2017) is used to conceptualize swift blame. It is a vignette-based study, where participants read an ambiguous and potentially blameworthy case and answered follow-up questions about

it. In the following section, I detail how I tested the relationship between blame attribution and neuroticism.

Methods

Sample

Initially, 264 individuals opened the online study link. Of these 264 participants, only 182 proceeded and completed the study. Therefore, the final number of participants is 182. Of these participants, 102 individuals participated through a Prolific advertisement and the remaining 80 participants are a convenience sample, gathered by us through social media in our personal circle. The total sample consisted of 57.7% females ($n = 105$) 39.0% males ($n = 71$) and 3.2% ($n = 6$) with no response on gender. Of these participants, 35.7% was a student at the moment of response ($n = 65$) and the average years of working experience was 15 years. The age ranged from 18 to 87 years ($M = 35.7$; $SD = 14.3$). It is a heterogeneous sample pool because there were no selection criteria like culture or English proficiency, to participate in this study.

Procedure

Participants were asked to complete an online survey through Qualtrics. First, they were given general information about the research and were asked for consent. Participating in the study was voluntary and information gathered from the research was anonymous and treated as confidential. The participant's anonymity was ensured by the absence of any identifying personal data collection or meta-data. After the general information, the study entailed a neuroticism scale, a vignette about a blame scenario with associated questions, and questions about demographic information. The participants answered the survey online and independently. We (i.e., the researchers) were not present at the time of response and therefore had a passive role during the study.

Vignette

For this cross-sectional study design, we used a vignette of a blame scenario in an organizational context. This allowed us to operationalize swift blame and implement features like the organizational context, ambiguity, and moral dilemmas to distinguish participants in their blaming attributions. It is based on other research using vignettes (e.g., Peckston et al., 2022; Murdoch & Gonsalkorale, 2017).

The survey included a vignette of approximately 160 words, describing a blame scenario in an organizational setting. The complete vignette is presented in Appendix A, but in summary, participants were presented with a situation about a possible error of a colleague, Arianne, after a customer complaint. They received information about the employee's functioning before the incident and about the customer complaint. However, because one crucial feature of the scenario was ambiguity, we aimed to give the participants not too detailed information. The vignette was presented in such a way that there were no clear right or wrong answers about the situation. The reason for this was to provide participants with the opportunity to engage in swift blame, but not to induce it. The vignette was supposed to elicit blame judgments about the situation and differentiate between participants in the type of judgments. Therefore, after reading the vignette, participants answered follow-up questions about their perspectives on the blame dilemma.

Measures

The survey consisted of measurements for the variable Neuroticism and the proxy variables for swift blame: Confidence in Information, Effort Reflection, Effort Self-report, Time, Blame, and Severity.

Neuroticism

The independent variable Neuroticism is measured with two items about neuroticism of the Big Five Inventory-10 (BFI-10; Rammstedt & John, 2007). I chose this short measure for neuroticism to balance the complete length of the survey and because of the limited time

and resources for this project. The Neuroticism items used from the BFI-10 were: 'I see myself as someone who is relaxed, handles stress well' and 'I see myself as someone who gets nervous easily.'. A seven-point Likert scale (1 = *strongly disagree*, 7 = *strongly agree*) was used to indicate the level of neuroticism people reported. For further analyses, the first item is coded in reverse. The two items have an average interitem correlation of 0.67 and a Cronbach's alpha of .80 ($r = 0.68$). This is quite high but not as high as you might expect from two items measuring the same construct, neuroticism. Nevertheless, the conclusions of our data remained the same when I analyzed the data by each item separately. Therefore, the two items are aggregated into one scale for the correlational analysis, as used in the official scale of the BIG-10 (Rammstedt & John, 2007).

Swift Blame

There are not yet scales for measuring swift blame, due to the relative uniqueness of this construct. Therefore, we identified six factors that directly align with Skarlicki et al. (2017) conceptualizations of swift blame. Based on those definitions, we created items for our vignette in an organizational context. The complete list of items about the blame scenario is presented in Appendix B.

Confidence in Information Sufficiency

One feature of swift blame according to Skarlicki et al. (2017) is that it happens without consideration of context. Therefore, the proxy variable Confidence in Information intended to measure if participants felt they received enough information to form judgments and blaming attributions. This variable was measured by the question: 'Reflecting on the case that you just read, consider the amount of information that was presented to you and indicate the extent to which you agree with the following statements:' with three statements such as 'I felt I had enough information to answer the questions about the case.'. The response range

was a Likert scale from 1 = *strongly disagree* to 7 = *strongly agree*. The Cronbach's alpha for these statements was .89.

Effort Self-report

The proxy variable Effort Self-report measured the amount of effort participants put into their blaming attributions. This is a crucial aspect of swift blame, since engaging in swift blame happens spontaneously and without effort (Skarlicki et al., 2017). Therefore, a higher score on Effort Self-report suggested that participants put effort into their blame attribution and did not engage in swift blame. This scale consisted of one question: 'How much effort did you put into making a decision', with a Likert scale from 1 = *no effort* to 7 = *a lot of effort*.

Reflection Effort

Another measure regarding the effort of the participants was the variable Reflection Effort, which measured the amount of effort the participants thought, in hindsight, that they put into their blaming decisions. Just as the scale Effort Self-report, a higher score on Reflection Effort indicated less engagement in swift blame, because swift blame happens without effort (Skarlicki et al., 2017). For the scale Reflection Effort, participants were asked 'Reflect on your decision-making process and indicate the extent to which you agree with the following statements:', with six statements like 'I was careful about my decision'. Respondents could answer on a seven-point Likert scale (1 = *strongly disagree*, 7 = *strongly agree*). The Cronbach's alpha for this scale was .80.

Reflection Effort and Effort Self-report both measured the amount of effort participants put in the blame situation, but they are not the same. This is because the variables have a relatively low covariation, below .85 ($r = .66$). Because they are two different measures for effort, it increases the generalizability of this construct.

Time Spent on Allegation

The proxy variable Time is constructed to measure the amount of time participants put in a blaming situation as described in the vignette. If they did not want to invest time, it was an indication of swift blame because swift blame decisions are spontaneous, quick, and without consideration of context (Skarlicki et al., 2017). Therefore, Time is measured with the statement: ‘As a manager who has numerous demands, how many HOURS would you be willing to spend on investigating the case and understanding the context surrounding the error?’ with a sliding scale from 0 hours to 10 hours.

General Blame

The proxy variable Blame is a general blame variable, constructed because the swift blame variables are relatively exploratory. This general blame variable intended to measure the amount of blame participants attributed to Arianne, to comprehend the blame attributions of participants. For the variable Blame, participants answered the question ‘Indicate the extent to which you agree with the following statements about Arianne:’. Followed by three statements as: ‘To be blamed for the error’ on a seven-point (1 = *strongly disagree*, 7 = *strongly agree*) Likert scale. These three statements had a Cronbach’s alpha of .72.

Severity of Allegation

Severity is another general blame variable, measuring the severity of the blame attribution participants made. This variable gives more insight into how severe participants thought the mistake of Arianne in the scenario was. The question measuring Severity is: ‘Arianne’s error seems:’ with three Likert scales from 1 = *Not serious* to 7 = *Serious*, 1 = *Minor* to 7 = *Major*, and from 1 = *Insignificant* to 7 = *Major Significant*. The Cronbach’s alpha for this measure was .83.

Demographics

At the end of the survey, the demographics of the participants were asked. These demographics were: gender (*Male, Female, Gender-diverse, I do not want to say*), if they

were a student at the moment of response (*No, Yes, I do not want to say*), age, and the approximate years of working experience they had. Answering these questions was not obligatory, meaning participants could skip these questions if they wanted to.

Results

The analysis of our data, collected through the survey, is performed in the software program JASP version 0.17.1. Standard statistical methods were used when analyzing the data. A correlational analysis was performed to test the hypothesis that a higher score on the personality trait neuroticism correlates positively with the tendency to engage in swift blame.

Assumptions Testing

Prior to the correlation analysis, the assumptions for Pearson's correlations were tested. Considering that the tested variables were measured on a seven-point scale, continuity is assumed for these scales. Aside from continuity, a normal or near-to-normal distribution of the variables is concluded, based on the QQ-plots of the variables (Appendix C). For the assumption that each participant answered the questions of both variables, the related pairs with a missing response were excluded from the analysis. The last two assumptions; linearity and absence of outliers were not applicable to this dataset, because of the Likert scale measurements. Therefore, the assumptions cannot fully be met. With that in mind, the correlational analysis was performed on the dataset.

Hypothesis Testing

With the statistical correlation analysis, we assessed if Neuroticism is significantly correlated with one or more of the six proxy variables of swift blame. Accordingly, six correlations were tested, as presented in Table 1 below. To check for significant effects, Pearson's r - and p -value are examined.

The first correlation was Neuroticism and Confidence in Information, and these variables did not correlate significantly, $p = 0.987$. This implies that the level of neuroticism

was not associated with the confidence of having enough information to attribute blame. The second test was the correlation between Neuroticism and Effort Self-Report, which proved moderately correlated, $p = 0.017$. This means that participants that scored higher on neuroticism reported that they put more effort into the blame decision than participants that scored low on neuroticism. Third, the correlation between Neuroticism and Reflection Effort appeared strongly significant, $p = <.001$. Participants with high scores on Neuroticism thus reported significantly more effort when they reflected on their blaming process than participants with low scores on Neuroticism. Fourth, the relation between Neuroticism and Time appeared not significant, $p = 0.308$, which shows that neuroticism is not associated with the amount of time participants would invest in this situation in real-life. As fifth, the data showed no significant relationship between Neuroticism and Blame, $p = .146$. This entails that the level of neuroticism was not related to the amount of blame participants attributed. Lastly, the correlation between Neuroticism and Severity was evaluated and showed a non-significant relationship, $p = 0.569$. There was no association found between the level of neuroticism and the severity of the allegation.

Additional Exploratory Findings

Since this study is exploratory, I also discuss some other findings of the proxy variables for swift blame. When examining the means of these variables (see Table 1), two means are particularly worth mentioning. First, Confidence in Information has a relatively low mean. Because one critical feature of the vignette was the ambiguity, this mean suggests that this was accomplished. Secondly, the means of the proxy variables severity and blame, in other words the general blame variables, are above four (i.e., the mean with a Likert scale of seven with a standardized distribution). This means that participants considered Arianne her mistake quite severe and thought she should be blamed. Thus even though we provided on

average not enough information for participants, they did attribute blame and judged Arianne for her mistake.

Concerning the intervariable correlations for swift blame, multiple significant relationships are presented in Table 1. For instance, there are significant moderate correlations between Reflection Effort and Severity ($p = .010$) and Effort Self-report and Severity ($p = .003$). This implies that the participants that put more effort into the blame decisions, evaluated the mistake of Arianne as more severe as opposed to participants that put less effort into these decisions. Furthermore, the variable Time correlates mildly with Reflection Effort ($p = .011$) and moderately with Effort Self-report ($p = .008$). This means that participants that put more effort into the blame decision, also said they would invest more time into these decisions if it was a real-life situation, than participants that put less effort into this blame decision. Lastly, there is a strong correlation between Blame and Severity ($p < .001$), which implies that participants that attributed more blame also regarded the mistake of Arianne more severe. This supports the reliability of the operationalization of general blame in our study.

Table 1

Correlations and descriptive statistics of variables

	<i>M</i>	<i>SD</i>	Pearson's Correlations <i>r</i>						
			1.	2.	3.	4.	5	6.	7.
1. Neuroticism	3.98	1.55	-	.00	.31***	.18*	.08	.04	.11
2. Confidence in Information	2.87	1.41	-	-	-.13	.04	-.19*	-.06	.21*
3. Reflection Effort	5.00	0.97	-	-	-	.66***	.19*	.19**	.10

4. Effort Self-report	5.12	1.38	-	-	-	-	.20**	.22**	.08
5. Time	3.43	2.19	-	-	-	-	-	.14	-.04
6. Severity	5.11	1.13	-	-	-	-	-	-	.32***
7. Blame	4.35	0.91	-	-	-	-	-	-	-

Discussion

In this study, I examined the relationship between the personality trait neuroticism and the tendency to engage in swift blame in an organizational setting. The proposed hypothesis was that a higher score on neuroticism is associated with more swift blame. There is importance in understanding what predicts swift blame. Because swift blame happens reflexively and without consideration of context (Skarlicki et al., 2017), it has even more negative consequences in an organization than general blame (e.g., Sitkin & Bies, 1994; Stuewig et al., 2010). In line with the literature on neuroticism (Hilbig, 2008; McGregor & Elliot, 2005), neuroticism should relate to system one thinking and dysfunctional decision-making styles in a blame context. Therefore, I expected that individuals who score high on neuroticism, blame without consideration of information and put less effort and time into their blame decisions.

The results of this study do not give concrete support for the hypothesis that higher neuroticism is related to more engagement in swift blame. It is difficult to give a conclusive answer to this hypothesis because it was an exploratory study. However, the study showed no significant relationship with our construct of swift blame. That is to say, this study showed that higher neuroticism is not related to confidence in having enough information and investing time in the blame situation. Similarly, neuroticism did not relate to a higher amount of blame participants attributed or the severity of this blame attribution. Neuroticism only appeared to be strongly positively related to the amount of effort participants reported that

they put in the blame situation. Thus, individuals higher in neuroticism thought and reflected significantly more extensively about the scenario and the blaming questions than participants low in neuroticism.

Theoretical and Practical Implications

This positive link between self-reported effort and neuroticism is an indication that individuals high in neuroticism engaged less in swift blame instead of more swift blame. This is because swift blame is defined as a spontaneous, reflexive form of blame, where individuals do not consider the situation (Skarlicki et al., 2017). Therefore, these findings are contrary to my expectations based on the literature discussed earlier.

An explanation for this finding is that participants in this study might not have experienced anxiety and negative affect. Individuals high in neuroticism were expected to experience anxiety and negative affect in a blame scenario because these feelings are prone in individuals high in neuroticism and particularly in a stressful situation like a blame context (Costa & McCrae, 1992). Based on Hilbig (2008), McGregor and Elliot (2005), and Corr (2002), I expected these feelings in participants to result in abstention from considering information, impulsive behaviors, and use of heuristics. However, in this study, unlike a real-life blame situation, there was nothing at stake, and no personal affective relations or motivations played a role in the decision-making process about the vignette. Participants filled in the survey alone, without limited time or any other kind of pressure. This removed the stress component of the situation and might have prevented the experience of anxiety and negative affect prone to neurotic individuals. This in turn may have countered the engagement in heuristics and automatic thinking. Therefore, it could be that aspects like over-self-consciousness, fear of failure, or overthinking were more salient during a survey study than the aspects of anxiety and negative affect, which would align with the tendency to procrastinate and an avoidance decision-making style associated with neuroticism (Rahaman,

2014). This could be why highly neurotic people engaged in more reflection effort, resulting in less swift blame.

A practical implication of these findings is that it gives a positive perception of the trait neuroticism. Neuroticism is associated with negative characteristics (Costa & McCrae, 1992). However, this study indicates that neurotic individuals put more effort into blame decisions, which indicates less swift blame. This can be seen as a positive reaction to a blame situation and emphasizes the positive side of neuroticism.

Furthermore, this exploratory study can serve as a starting point for further research about swift blame and personality in an organizational context. Because of the explorative nature of this study, it can be used as a starting point for research in multiple directions and contexts. For example, when researchers can find the strengths and weaknesses in the way individuals attribute blame, based on personality traits like neuroticism, they could explore if specific and targeted interventions can be designed to prevent engaging in swift blame. While we did not examine interventions or consequences of blame in our study, organizations might want to consider implementing practical interventions at the workplace to reduce swift blame. For example, mindfulness exercises can be applied to encourage reflection (Kay & Skarlicki, 2020), or tasks from clinical settings can be adjusted to organizations aiming to reduce system one thinking in decision-making (Sanchez & Dunning, 2021).

Limitations, Strengths, and Future Directions

While considering the implications of this study, some limitations and strengths of this study are to be kept in mind. Alongside the strengths and weaknesses, suggestions for further research to overcome these limitations are provided.

Up to now, very few studies have been done on swift blame and only one paper cites the definition of swift blame as a construct. We constructed swift blame based on the descriptions of Skarlicki et al. (2017). The study included six proxy variables of swift blame,

each relating to a different aspect of swift blame mentioned by Skarlicki et al. (2017), which made it a useful measure for our exploratory survey and gave us insight into multiple aspects of swift blame at once. However, the operationalization of swift blame in our study was not tested beforehand. Even though vignettes of real-life scenarios are generally tougher to validate because participants evaluate them from their perspective, this is a limitation of this study. We cannot draw conclusions about the validity or reliability of this measurement of our proxy variables for swift blame. This means we cannot be sure that our proxy variables actually measure the construct of swift blame that it is supposed to measure. Consequently, this reduces the external validity of the study, because all the conclusions are conjectural. We invite others to continue the operationalization of swift blame to aid and encourage further research in swift blame.

The second aspect of our study, neuroticism, was measured with a noticeably abridged version of the BFI-10 (Rammstedt & John, 2007). Even though the BIG-10 retained enough validity and reliability for this study, Rammstedt & John (2007) found that there are losses in validity and reliability compared to more extensive personality questionnaires, the BIG-44, and the NEO-PI-R. In this study, this could have influenced for instance the number of participants that scored high on the neuroticism items and makes it less reliable that people that scored high on the items are indeed neurotic individuals. Aside from that, we only measured neuroticism of the big five personality types. Further research could not only look at neuroticism more thoroughly but could also examine other personality traits like extraversion and conscientiousness.

Limitations regarding our sample were that we used convenience sampling, which limits the participants to people in our circle, and resulted in a small sample size. Another way of sampling might give a larger sample size. In turn, this would give the study more power.

This might be good for further research because in this study there were no results found for most of the variables.

Lastly, our sample was very heterogeneous because the participants were of all ages, cultures, genders, and work settings. For instance, the youngest participant was 18 years old, and the oldest participant was 87 years old. There was also a big variation in work experience ($SD = 12.9$). This could have affected the outcomes and effect sizes. The relationships between neuroticism and swift blame could be dependent on age or work experience, where older people and those who have more work experience could have evaluated the organizational vignette differently. In general, with such a heterogeneous sample, the possibility of confounding variables is more likely. Future research could focus on a specific organization or subgroup of participants, to rule out certain confounding variables.

Conclusions

Taken together, the results of this study give no concrete support for the hypothesis that the personality trait neuroticism is related to more engagement in swift blame. Neuroticism was related to more self-reported effort and reflection effort in the blame dilemma. This implies that people high in neuroticism put more effort into their blaming decisions than individuals low in neuroticism. Therefore, this study suggests that individuals high in neuroticism engage less in swift blame, in contrast to individuals low in neuroticism. However, this was an exploratory study, so further research can build upon this study to deepen the knowledge and understanding of the relationship between these constructs. In turn, this can contribute to the prevention of swift blame in organizations.

References

- Alicke, M. D. (1994). Evidential and extra-evidential evaluations of social conduct. *Journal of Social Behavior and Personality*, 9(4), 591–615.
- Alicke, M. D. (2000). Culpable control and the psychology of blame. *Psychological Bulletin*, 126(4), 556–574. <https://doi.org/10.1037/0033-2909.126.4.556>
- Baron, R. S., Inman, M. L., Kao, C. F., & Logan, H. (1992). Negative emotion and superficial social processing - motivation and emotion. *Motivation and Emotion*, 16, 323-346. <https://doi.org/10.1007/BF00992970>
- Barrick, M. R., & Mount, M. K. (1991). The big five personality dimensions and job performance: a meta-analysis. *Personnel Psychology*, 44(1), 1-26. <https://doi.org/10.1111/j.1744-6570.1991.tb00688.x>
- Belhekar, V. M. (2017). Cognitive and non-cognitive determinants of heuristics of judgment and decision-making: General ability and personality traits. *Journal of the Indian Academy of Applied Psychology*, 43(1), 75-84.
- Cambridge Dictionary. (n.d.). Blame. In *Dictionary.Cambridge.org*. Retrieved February 15, 2023, from <https://dictionary.cambridge.org/dictionary/english/blame>
- Catino, M. (2009). Blame culture and defensive medicine. *Cognition Technology & Work*, 11(4), 245–253. <https://doi.org/10.1007/s10111-009-0130-y>
- Cooley, C. H. (1964). *Human nature and the social order*. Schocken Books.
- Corr, P. J. (2002). JA Gray's reinforcement sensitivity theory: Tests of the joint subsystems hypothesis of anxiety and impulsivity. *Personality and Individual Differences*, 33(4), 511-532. [https://doi.org/10.1016/S0191-8869\(01\)00170-2](https://doi.org/10.1016/S0191-8869(01)00170-2)
- Costa, P.T., & McCrae, R.R. (1992). *NEO-PI-R professional manual*. Psychological Assessment Resources.

- Denburg, N. L., Weller, J. A., Yamada, T. H., Shivapour, D. M., Kaup, A. R., LaLoggia, A., Cole, C. A., Tranel, D., & Bechara, A. (2009). Poor decision making among older adults is related to elevated levels of neuroticism. *Annals of Behavioral Medicine*, 37(2), 164-172. <https://doi.org/10.1007/s12160-009-9094-7>
- Digman, J.M. (1990). Personality structure: Emergence of the Five-Factor Model. *Annual Review of Psychology*, 41, 417–440. <https://doi.org/10.1146/annurev.ps.41.020190.002221>
- Evans, J. S. B., Barston, J. L., & Pollard, P. (1983). On the conflict between logic and belief in syllogistic reasoning. *Memory & Cognition*, 11(3), 295-306. <https://doi.org/10.3758/BF03196976>
- Evans, J. S. B. T., & Curtis-Holmes, J. (2005). Rapid responding increases belief bias: Evidence for the dual-process theory of reasoning. *Thinking & Reasoning*, 11(4), 382-389. <http://dx.doi.org/10.1080/1354678.0542000005>
- Forgas, J. P., & Bower, G. H. (1987). Mood effects on person-perception judgments. *Journal of Personality and Social Psychology*, 53(1), 53-60. <https://doi.org/10.1037/0022-3514.53.1.53>
- Forgas, J. P., & George, J. M. (2001). Affective influences on judgments and behavior in organizations: An information processing perspective. *Organizational Behavior and Human Decision Processes*, 86(1), 3-34. <https://doi.org/10.1006/obhd.2001.2971>
- Harkness, A.R., Tellegen, A., & Waller, N. (1995). Differential convergence of self-report and informant data for multidimensional personality questionnaire traits: Implications for the construct of negative emotionality. *Journal of Personality Assessment*, 64(1), 185–204. https://doi.org/10.1207/s15327752jpa6401_13

- Hilbig, B. E. (2008). Individual differences in fast-and-frugal decision making: Neuroticism and the recognition heuristic. *Journal of Research in Personality*, 42(6), 1641-1645. <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.jrp.2008.07.001>
- Hirsh, J. B., & Inzlicht, M. (2008). The devil you know: Neuroticism predicts neural response to uncertainty. *Psychological Science*, 19(10), 962-967. <https://doi.org/10.1111/j.1467-9280.2008.02183.x>
- Humphreys, M. S., & Revelle, W. (1984). Personality, motivation, and performance: A theory of the relationship between individual differences and information processing. *Psychological Review*, 91(2), 153–184. <https://doi.org/10.1037/0033-295X.91.2.153>
- Jordan, P. J., & Troth, A. C. (2004). Managing emotions during team problem solving: Emotional intelligence and conflict resolution. *Human Performance*, 17(2), 195–218. https://doi.org/10.1207/s15327043hup1702_4
- Kahneman, D. (2003). A perspective on judgment and choice: Mapping bounded rationality. *American Psychologist*, 58(9), 697–720. <https://doi.org/10.1037/0003-066X.58.9.697>
- Kahneman, D. (2011). *Thinking, fast and slow*. Farrar, Straus, and Giroux
- Kay, A. A., & Skarlicki, D. P. (2020). Cultivating a conflict-positive workplace: How mindfulness facilitates constructive conflict management. *Organisational Behavior & Human Decision Processes*, 159, 8-20. <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.obhdp.2020.02.005>
- Kong, W., Yang, Y., Zhang, F., Wang, H., & Feng, D. (2020). Mediating role of occupational stress and job satisfaction on the relationship between neuroticism and quality of life among Chinese servants: A structural equation model. *Health and Quality of Life Outcomes*, 18. Article 34. <https://doi.org/10.1186/s12955-020-01295-2>
- Lauriola, M., & Levin, I. P. (2001). Personality traits and risky decision-making in a controlled experimental task: An exploratory study. *Personality and Individual Differences*, 31(2), 215–226. [https://doi.org/10.1016/S0191-8869\(00\)00130-6](https://doi.org/10.1016/S0191-8869(00)00130-6)

- Lupton, B., Warren, R. Managing Without Blame? Insights from the Philosophy of Blame. *Journal of Business Ethics*, 152(1), 41–52. <https://doi.org/10.1007/s10551-016-3276-6>
- McCrae, R. R., & Costa, P. T. (2003). *Personality in adulthood: A five-factor theory perspective*. Guilford Press.
- McGregor, H. A., & Elliot, A. J. (2005). The shame of failure: Examining the link between fear of failure and shame. *Personality and Social Psychology Bulletin*, 31(2), 218–231. <https://doi.org/10.1177/0146167204271420>
- Milgram, N., & Tenne, R. (2000). Personality correlates of decisional task avoidant procrastination. *European Journal of Personality*, 14(2), 141–156. [https://doi.org/10.1002/\(SICI\)1099-0984\(200003/04\)14:2<141::AID-PER369>3.0.CO;2-V](https://doi.org/10.1002/(SICI)1099-0984(200003/04)14:2<141::AID-PER369>3.0.CO;2-V)
- Murdoch, A., & Gonsalkorale, K. (2017). Attributions of blame in acquaintance rape scenarios: The role of blame scale presentation order. *Psychiatry, Psychology and Law*, 24(6), 853–865. <https://doi.org/10.1080/13218719.2017.1315787>
- Nitschke, F. T., McKimmie, B. M., & Vanman, E. J. (2022). The Effect of Heuristic Cues on Jurors' Systematic Information Processing in Rape Trials. *Psychology of Women Quarterly*, 46(4), 484–500. <https://doi.org/10.1177/03616843221118018>
- O'Neill, T. A., & Allen, N. J. (2011). Personality and the prediction of team performance. *European Journal of Personality*, 25(1), 31–42. <https://doi.org/10.1002/per.769>
- Peckston, D. C., Urwin, R., McMullan, R., & Westbrook, J. (2022). Student and clinician perceptions of medical student mistreatment: A cross-sectional vignette survey. *BMJ Open*, 12(9), 1–8. <https://doi.org/10.1136/bmjopen-2022-061253>

- Rahaman, H. S. (2014). Personality and decision-making styles of university students. *Journal of the Indian Academy of Applied Psychology*, 40(1), 138-144.
- Rammstedt, B. & John, O.P. (2007). Measuring personality in one minute or less: A 10-item short version of the Big Five Inventory in English and German. *Journal of Research in Personality*, 41(1), 203–212. <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.jrp.2006.02.001>
- Sanchez C, Dunning D. (2020). Jumping to conclusions: Implications for reasoning errors, false belief, knowledge corruption, and impeded learning. *Journal of Personality and Social Psychology*. 120(3), 789-815. <https://doi.org/10.1037/pspp0000375>
- Sitkin, S. B., & Bies, R. J. (1994). *The legalistic organization*. Sage Publications
- Skarlicki, D. P., Kay, A. A., Aquino, K., & Fushtey, D. (2017). Must heads roll? a critique of and alternative approaches to swift blame. *Academy of Management Perspectives*, 31(3), 222–238. <https://doi.org/10.5465/amp.2015.0118>
- Sutin, A. R., Aschwanden, D., Stephan, Y., & Terracciano, A. (2020). Five Factor Model Personality Traits and Subjective Cognitive Failures. *Personality and Individual Differences*, 155, Article 109741. <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.paid.2019.109741>
- Smith, A. H. (2013). *Moral blame and moral protest*. (D. J. Coates & N. A. Tognazzini, Eds), Oxford University Press
- Stuewig, J., Tangney, J. P., Heigel, C., Harty, L., & McCloskey, L. A. (2010). Shaming, blaming, and maiming: Functional links among the moral emotions, externalization of blame, and aggression. *Journal of Research in Personality*, 44(1), 91-102. <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.jrp.2009.12.005>
- Truxillo, D. M., Bauer, T. N., Campion, M. A., & Paronto, M. E. (2006). A field study of the role of big five personality in applicant perceptions of selection fairness, self, and the hiring organization. *International Journal of Selection and Assessment*, 14(3), 269-277. <https://doi.org/10.1111/j.1468-2389.2006.00351.x>

Ryff, C. D., & Keyes, C. L. M. (1995). The structure of psychological well-being revisited.

Journal of Personality and Social Psychology, 69(4), 719–727.

<https://doi.org/10.1037/0022-3514.69.4.719>

Voskuil, K. (2017, April 8). Justitiemedewerkers durven angstcultuur niet te bespreken.

BNDDeStem. <https://www.bndestem.nl/binnenland/justitiemedewerkers-durven-angstcultuur-niet-te->

[bespreken~a414a1fd/?referrer=https%3A%2F%2Fwww.google.com%2F](https://www.bndestem.nl/binnenland/justitiemedewerkers-durven-angstcultuur-niet-te-bespreken~a414a1fd/?referrer=https%3A%2F%2Fwww.google.com%2F)

Watson, D. C. (2001). Procrastination and the five-factor model: A facet level analysis. *Personality and Individual Differences*, 30(1), 149-158.

[https://doi.org/10.1016/S0191-8869\(00\)00019-2](https://doi.org/10.1016/S0191-8869(00)00019-2)

Weber, M. (1978). *Economy and society*. University of California Press.

Xu, H. (2020). Big five personality traits and ambiguity management in career decision making. *The Career Development Quarterly*, 68(2), 158-172.

<https://doi.org/10.1002/cdq.12220>

Appendix A

Vignette

Assume you are the manager of a customer service support unit. Arianne, one of your employees, has a history of low performance and is frequently late for work. She has struggled with keeping up, completing tasks accurately, and providing adequate customer service. As a result, she was put on probation.

However, lately she has made a noticeable effort to improve her work. You agree that she has arrived on time most days and is beginning to meet her performance targets. She has also been actively seeking feedback from her colleagues and customers in order to improve the quality of her work.

Yesterday, you received a complaint from a client claiming that Arianne provided them with wrong advice, which cost the company a week in labour and external expenses. Arianne denies this claim. You look into the situation but it is not clear what actually happened and Arianne explanation seems odd. Because Arianne is on probation, you need to decide what to do.

Appendix B

Swift blame questionnaire

Severity

Arianne's error seems to:

	1	2	3	4	5	6	7	
	(1)	(2)	(3)	(4)	(5)	(6)	(7)	
Not serious	•	•	•	•	•	•	•	Serious
Minor	•	•	•	•	•	•	•	Major
Insignificant	•	•	•	•	•	•	•	Significant

Blame

Indicate the extent to which you agree with the following statements about Arianne:

	Strongly disagree (1)	Disagree (2)	Somewhat disagree (3)	Neither agree nor disagree (4)	Somewhat agree (5)	Agree (6)	Strongly agree (7)
At fault for the error	•	•	•	•	•	•	•
Responsible for the error	•	•	•	•	•	•	•
To be blamed for the error	•	•	•	•	•	•	•

Time

As a manager who has numerous demands, how many HOURS would you be willing to spend on investigating the case and understanding the context surrounding the error?

TIME (Hours) (1 - 10)	
-----------------------	---

Effort Self-report

How much effort did you put into making this decision?

NO EFFORT 1 - A LOT OF EFFORT 7

Confidence of Information

Reflecting on the case that you just read, consider the amount of information that was presented to you and indicate the extent to which you agree with the following statements:

	Strongly disagree (1)	Disagree (2)	Somewhat disagree (3)	Neither agree nor disagree (4)	Somewhat agree (5)	Agree (6)	Strongly agree (7)
I felt I had enough information to answer the questions about the case.	•	•	•	•	•	•	•
The case provided all the information that I needed to make my judgment.	•	•	•	•	•	•	•
The case had an adequate amount of detail.	•	•	•	•	•	•	•

Reflection Effort

Reflect on your decision-making process and indicate the extent to which you agree with the following statements:

	Strongly disagree (1)	Disagree (2)	Somewhat disagree (3)	Neither agree nor disagree (4)	Somewhat agree (5)	Agree (6)	Strongly agree (7)
I didn't take a lot of time to decide what to do about Arianne.	•	•	•	•	•	•	•
I was very careful about my decision.	•	•	•	•	•	•	•
I thought very hard about how to respond to Arianne.	•	•	•	•	•	•	•
I didn't pay much attention while evaluating this case.	•	•	•	•	•	•	•
I concentrated a lot while making this choice.	•	•	•	•	•	•	•
It was difficult for me to make this choice.	•	•	•	•	•	•	•
Please select 'neither agree nor disagree'.	•	•	•	•	•	•	•

Appendix C

Figure 1

QQ-plots linearity and normality checks