The Effects of Attributions for Crime on Attitudes Toward Prison Reform
Megan O’Toole & Gail Sahar

Abstract

Early attribution research suggests that when individuals view criminal behaviors as highly internal, controllable, and stable, they tend to support more severe and retributive forms of punishment. Although crime continues to be a top concern among Americans, such research has slowed since the last major prison reforms of the 1980s. This study aims to revisit this topic, particularly by examining how attributions for crime relate to opinions on goals of punishment and support for prison reform. To do so, college participants completed surveys in response to one of five criminal conviction scenarios with no offender background information. Correlational analyses and a path model provided strong support for causal stability and liberalness positively correlated with support for prison reform. Attributional analyses and a path model provided strong support for blame and anger, retributivism, and minimal support for reform. Additionally, factors such as social justice system knowledge and source of crime information were additionally examined.

Introduction

• Attribution Theory: attitudes toward controversial issues occur according to dimensions of locus, control, stability (Heider, 1958)
• Attributional Dimensions:
  - Locus: cause is internal or external to the actor
  - Control: cause is within or outside of the actor’s control
  - Stability: cause is stagnant or subject to change
• Early Attribution Studies on Educational Achievement:
  - Teachers who attributed failed exams to internal, controllable, and stable causes assigned responsibility, felt blame / anger, had low expectancy for improvement, and failed the students (Weiner, 1976)
• Punishment Philosophies:
  - Retributivism: just deserts; make the offender suffer
  - Utilitarianism: rehabilitate, send general message, prevent re-offense
• Criminal Justice System Relevance:
  1. Crime → internal / controllable → responsibility → blame and anger → support for retributive punishment (Weiner et al., 1976)
  2. Crime → external / uncontrollable → not responsible → no blame or anger → support for utilitarian punishment
  3. Crime → stable → high expectancy of re-offense → support for retributive punishment (Carroll & Payne, 1997)
  4. Crime → unstable → low expectancy of re-offense → support for utilitarian punishment
• Current Gaps in Literature:
  - Research on attitudes toward crime slowed since 1980 prison reforms
  - Current pathways stop short of views on prison reform and provide attributional cues in scenarios rather than being naturalistic
• Study Relevance & Contribution:
  - Crime remains a societal problem, but there exists little motivation to intervene at the corrections level
  - Such research may highlight sources of certain attitudes toward reform, which may benefit future campaigns

Hypotheses

• Hypothesis I: Crime → Internal & controllable → John is responsible → Blame → Anger → Focus on retributive punishment → Opinion that prisons should be more punitive → Minimal support for reform
• Hypothesis II: Crime → External & uncontrollable → John is not responsible → Minimal blame → Minimal anger → Focus on utilitarian punishment → Opinion that prisons should be more rehabilitative → Great support for reform
• Hypothesis III: Crime → Stable → High likelihood of re-offense → Focus on retributive punishment → Opinion that prisons should be more punitive → Minimal support for reform
• Hypothesis IV: Crime → Unstable → Low likelihood of re-offense → Focus on utilitarian punishment → Opinion that prisons should be more rehabilitative → Great support for reform
• Exploratory Analyses: The roles of political ideology, criminal justice system knowledge, and source of crime information were additionally examined.

Methods

150 liberal arts college students completed 37 question surveys

Scenario read: “John was found guilty of committing X crime. He is being sent to prison.”

• John’s crime was presented as being either murder, sexual offense, violent assault, robbery, or drug offense
• Specific to John: 7-pt Likert-scales addressed perceptions of seriousness, suggested punishment severity, attribution dimensions, affective reactions, expectancy of re-offense, and support for utilitarian v. retributive purposes of punishing him
• General Reform: 7-pt Likert-scales addressed attitudes toward reform necessity, desired type (punitive v. rehabilitative), and funding support
• Participant Factors: additional questions addressed political ideology, criminal justice system knowledge, and source of crime information

Correlations Between Attributions, Punishment Philosophies, & Reform Opinions

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Results

• Participant Demographics:
  - Age: 18 - 23 years old (M = 20, SD = 1.35)
  - Gender: 31.3% (n = 47) male, 68.7% (n = 103) female
  - Race: 4.7% Asian, 33.3% Black, 7.3% Hispanic, 84.0% White
• Hypothesis I: fully supported with correlations and path model
• Hypothesis II: partially supported; purpose rehabilitate was unrelated
• Hypotheses III & IV: stability positively correlated with expected likelihood of re-offense, but this did not relate to punishment purposes
• Conservatism positively correlated with support for retributivism and negatively correlated with support for increased reform funding
• Criminal Justice system knowledge positively correlated with agreement that prison system change is necessary
• Participants who gathered crime information from proximity or experience agreed most strongly that prison system change was necessary; those who gathered information from media agreed least

Discussion

• Findings:
  - Participants who naturally made internal and controllable attributions for John’s crime were ultimately more likely to support retributive punishment goals and less likely to support reform funding
  - Internality and controllability appear to be the most important attributes for issues of prison reform
  - Political ideology, criminal justice system knowledge, and source of crime information all appear to influence attitudes toward reform
• Limitations & Future Studies:
  - New England college students have limited exposure to crime
  - Punishment purposes questions might be reworded to better represent participants beliefs about the necessity of prison rehabilitation separate from a direct purpose of punishment
• Implications:
  - If anti-prison reform attitudes seem to stem from internal, controllable attributions for crime, perhaps reform campaigns might benefit from publicizing information that corrects this fundamental attribution error

References

• Heider, F. (1958). The psychology of interpersonal relations. Farmington, MI, USA: Gale.