It was not me: Attribution of blame for criminal acts in psychiatric offenders

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Abstract

The current article addresses the psychometric qualities of the German Version of Gudjonsson’s Blame Attribution Inventory (GBAI), a self-report scale for measuring attribution of blame for crime. The GBAI was administered to a criminal sample of forensic and criminal inmates (n = 107). Findings indicate that the German version of the Gudjonsson Blame Attribution Inventory possesses acceptable test–retest stability and good internal consistency. Factor analysis reproduced the three basic dimensions of the GBAI: external attribution, mental-element attribution, and guilt-feeling attribution. Forensic patients had higher mental-element attribution and guilt-feeling attribution scores than the prison inmates. Interestingly, sexual offenders who were prisoners, showed the lowest guilt-feeling attribution, while sexual offenders who were forensic patients had the highest guilt-feeling attribution scores. Since earlier research reported a tendency of faking good in sexual offenders, we suggest that the forensic sexual offenders may demonstrate a social desirable response tendency in an attempt to gain sympathy and/or earlier parole. All in all, our data show that the German version of the GBAI is a valuable tool for measuring attributional styles of offenders.

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1. Introduction

Individuals permanently attempt to construct causal explanations for their own behaviour and the behaviour of others and the nature of these attributions may, in turn, influence their future behaviours [1]. According to Wortman [2] and Storms and McCaul [3], attribution may function to enhance the individual’s feelings of control over the environment, help to protect self-esteem and a sense of personal worth, and in these ways, attributions may reduce anxiety and feelings of guilt.

While attribution has been primarily studied in the domain of social psychology, it also bears strong relevance to forensic issues. For example, attribution of blame for crime is different in offenders who committed violent crimes and those who committed crimes against properties, with the former group more often blaming external factors (e.g., society, other people) than the later group (e.g., [4]). Attribution theory, as originally developed by Heider [1], emphasizes that there are two possible ways in which people may interpret their behaviour, namely internal and external attribution. Internal attribution occurs when the cause for the behaviour is attributed to individual qualities. External attributions occur when social and environmental pressures are believed to be the cause of behaviour. Gudjonsson [5] argued that when people attribute their own undesirable act to an external force, they reduce their feelings of guilt about the act. Individuals who committed a crime during a state of mental illness may attribute blame to external factors. This type of attribution may also have the effect of reducing feelings of responsibility. Whether such internal attributions reduce feelings of responsibility depend on a third type of attribution, which is largely independent of the internal–external dimension and...
which concerns the perception of self-determination or perceived freedom to act [6]. Thus, this attributional dimension has to do with the extent to which the causes of the behaviour are perceived as being beyond self-control. Gudjonsson and Singh [4,7] developed and subsequently revised the Gudjonsson Blame Attribution Inventory (GBAI), which intends to measure these three dimensions of attribution of blame: external attribution (e.g., blaming the crime on society); mental-element attribution (e.g., blaming the crime on mental illness); guilt-feeling attribution (e.g., feelings of regret concerning the offence). In general, research indicates that attributional interpretations are crucial in ascribing responsibility for actions to oneself or to others [8]. Although the internal–external and guilt-feeling dimensions are clearly relevant to criminal behaviour, relatively few studies have systematically addressed this issue [5]. Gudjonsson and Singh [4] examined the relationship between type of offence and attribution of blame in a sample of 139 criminals. Among the different groups of offenders, participants who were incarcerated for sexual offences reported the strongest feelings of remorse as measured with the GBAI, followed by offenders who had committed violent acts against other persons. In addition, violent offenders (e.g., homicide) had the highest mental-element scores on the GBAI, followed by sexual offenders. With regard to external attribution, violent offenders exhibited the highest scores, while sex offenders displayed the lowest scores. In a follow-up study [9], these findings were replicated in a sample of 98 Icelandic criminals, suggesting that attributional interpretations tapped by the GBAI show cross-cultural stability.

The way offenders attribute blame for their criminal acts may be related to a range of important factors, including their mental state [5], their personality [5,7], and the reason why they confess to the police [10]. For example, excessive guilt about the criminal act may be associated with depressive illness requiring treatment [9]. Mental-element attribution may be relevant to issues surrounding criminal responsibility, whereas external attribution of blame, at least in extreme cases, may be indicative of a personality disorder [7]. Lack of remorse and a strong tendency to externalise blame are often considered to be predictors of reoffending [11,12]. There are, indeed, good reasons to assume that externalisation of blame is related to impulsivity [13] and high psychotism scores on the Eysenck Personality Questionnaire (EPQ; e.g., [14]). Both impulsivity and psychotism are considered to be closely related to antisocial personality (e.g., [14]).

Although it is widely recognized in Germany that the way in which offenders talk about their offences and the extent to which they have feelings of remorse might be important predictors of their criminal career (e.g., [12]), there are no standardized scales for measuring these predictors. Therefore, we translated the GBAI into German. The first goal of the present study was, then, to collect and evaluate psychometric data on this German version of GBAI [7]. Secondly, we investigated the relationship between type of offence and attribution of blame in different criminal groups (i.e., forensic and prison inmates).

2. Methods

2.1. Participants

The GBAI was administered to a criminal sample of 107 participants. There were two groups. Prison inmates (n = 48) were recruited from a prison in Eusenkirchen, Germany. They had a mean age of 42.0 (S.D. = 11.2). Forensic patients (n = 59) were recruited from the Forensic Institute at Düren, Germany. There mean age was 39.4 (S.D. = 10.9). They all completed the GBAI after they had given their informed consent.

2.2. Instruments

2.2.1. GBAI

All participants completed the German translation1 of the Blame Attribution Inventory (GBAI; [7]). As a check on the quality of the translation, the scale was back translated and ambiguous formulations were removed. The GBAI consist of 42 items that tap 3 attributional dimensions: external attribution (15 items; e.g., “Other people are to blame for my crimes”), mental-element attribution (9 items; e.g., “I would certainly not have committed the crime(s) I did, if I had been mentally well”), and guilt-feeling attribution (18 items; e.g., “I feel very ashamed of the crime(s) I committed”). Although the original questionnaire was rated on a two-point scale, the responses on the German GBAI are made on five-point scales ranging from 0 = “I do not at all agree” to 4 = “I fully agree”. The rationale behind the change of the amount of answer possibilities (e.g., five instead of two answer options), is that compared to ‘true/false’ formats, it provides finer discriminations among participants and results in more reliable scores [15]. Scores are summed for the three subscales, resulting in an external attribution score, a mental-element score, and a guilt-feeling score.

2.3. Procedure

Participants were told that data obtained with the GBAI would be treated confidential. The prison inmates completed the questionnaire in groups of 5–10 patients. Forensic patients completed the German version of Gudjonsson’s Blame Attribution Inventory during an individual session. All participants were instructed to respond honestly to GBAI items.

3. Results

3.1. Factor analysis

Using principal-components analysis the 42 items of the GBAI were factor analysed for the pooled data of the 107 participants. As was the case in the Gudjonsson and Singh [7] study, three major factors emerged. These were rotated using Varimax procedures. Loadings found in the current study and that of Gudjonsson and Singh [7] are shown in Table 1. As can be seen, with the exception of a handful of items (i.e., [19,35,36]), factor loadings found in our study parallel those reported by Gudjonsson and Sing [7].

3.2. Reliability

Test–retest reliability was evaluated by administering the GBAI to a fresh sample of 18 male forensic patients on two separate occasions, 6 weeks apart. The patients all had committed serious crimes and were drawn from the Forensic

1 A copy of the German version of the GBAI can be obtained from the first author.
I have no serious regrets about what I did. I should not punish myself for what I did. There is no such thing as an innocent victim in my case. I feel annoyed that I was caught. I constantly have the urge to punish myself for the crime(s) I committed. I have no need to feel ashamed of what I did. I fear that people will never accept me because of the crime(s) I committed. I would have been better of if I had been caught. I hate myself for the crime(s) I committed. The crime(s) I committed was very much out of character. I feel no remorse or guilt for the crime(s) I committed. What I did was beyond my control. I was in full control over my actions. I was under a great deal of stress/pressure when I committed the crimes. I would certainly not have committed the crime(s) I did if I had been mentally well. I must have been crazy to commit the crime(s) I did. I was very depressed when I committed the crime(s). Society is to blame for the crime(s) I committed. I was feeling no different to usual at the time of the crime(s). I would not have committed the crime(s) I did if I had not lost control of myself. I was fully aware of what I was doing at the time of the crime(s). I did not deserve to be caught for the crime(s) I committed. I should not blame myself for the crime(s) I committed. I was in no way provoked into committing a crime. I had very good reasons for committing the crime(s) I did. I could have avoided getting into trouble. I would very much like to make amends for what I did. I deserve to be severely punished for the crime(s) I committed. I sometimes have nightmares about the crime(s) I committed. Other people are to blame for my crimes. I have no excuse for the crime(s) I committed. I had very good reasons for committing the crime(s) I did. I could have avoided getting into trouble. I would very much like to make amends for what I did. I deserve to be severely punished for the crime(s) I committed.
mental-element attribution and guilt-feeling attribution was .48 (p < .01), while that between external attribution and guilt-feeling attribution was −.31 (p < .01).

3.3. Validity

To explore the validity of the German version of the GBAI, both groups were compared to each other. A multiple analyses of variance (MANOVA) was conducted to evaluate differences between groups with regard to the GBAI subscales. The two groups differed significantly with regard to mental-element attribution scores [F(1, 105) = 26.96; p < .001] and guilt-feeling attribution scores [F(1, 105) = 11.22; p < .001]. For the external attribution scale, there were no significant group differences [F(1, 105) < 1.0]. Table 2 shows mean scores of prisoners and forensic patients. As can be seen from Table 2 forensic patients had significantly higher mental-element attribution and guilt-feeling attribution scores than the prisoners [t(105) = 5.19; p < .001] and [t(105) = 3.35, p < .01], respectively.

3.4. Type of crime and attribution

As another exploration of the validity of the German GBAI, we performed a MANOVA comparing groups versus type of offences. We inspected the records of the criminal offences. On the basis of this, participants were reassigned to a violent crime group (e.g., murder; n = 31 forensic patients and 18 prisoners), a non-violent crime group (e.g., fraud; n = 9 forensic patients and 5 prisoners), and a sexual offence group (e.g., rape; n = 19 forensic patients and 25 prisoners). A 2 (group) × 3 (crime) × 3 (subscales) MANOVA was conducted. There was a significant interaction effect of group × crime for the guilt-feeling attribution subscale Wilks’ Λ = .82, F(2, 101) = 7.05; p < .001. More specifically, post hoc tests with Bonferroni adjustment made it clear that within the group of prisoners, those who committed a sexual crime showed significant lower guilt-feeling scores than the other crime groups (i.e., mild and violent), and sexual crime group of forensic patients. Although within the forensic patient group, differences between the subscales were not significant, sexual offenders showed exactly the opposite pattern, i.e., the highest guilt-feeling scores. Fig. 1 displays the interaction effect of crime conditions by subscales within the criminal offender groups.

4. Discussion

The results presented above show that the German version of the GBAI possesses satisfactory psychometric properties. To begin with, although some items had factor loadings below the recommended .30 [16], the overall pattern reproduces the three factor solution of the original GBAI as described by Gudjonsson and Singh [7]. Second, overall, test–retest stability of the German GBAI was acceptable with the mental-element attribution scale displaying good stability and the external attribution and guilt-feeling subscales having somewhat lower stability. Compared to the test–retest stability data reported by Gudjonsson [5], our test–retest correlations were relatively low. We suspect that this has to do with our sample of forensic patients. Given the fact that they received treatment, it may well be the case that their causal interpretations of the crime they had committed changed over time. The German GBAI also has good internal consistency and this time, Cronbach’s alpha were higher than those reported by, for example, Dolan [17].

Third, we obtained evidence for the validity of the GBAI in that forensic patients displayed higher scores on the mental-element and guilt-feeling attribution scales than the prison inmates. Furthermore, prisoners who had committed a sexual crime displayed the lowest scores on guilt-feeling attribution, while forensic sex offenders showed the highest guilt-feeling scores (see Fig. 1). In contrast to earlier work [4,9], our findings...
did not support the notion that the more interpersonal the offence (e.g., sexual and violent crime), the more guilt-feeling (i.e., remorse) the offenders claims to feel and/or the more they tend to attribute blame to mental factors. Indeed, the lack of remorse found in our prisoner sex offenders, may indicate a good predictor of reoffending. This is in line with studies demonstrating that sexual offenders often show the highest recidivism rates [18]. The fact that the forensic sex offenders showed the highest guilt-feeling attribution may indicate that (since these offenders received treatment) they have learned that it is socially desirable to show remorse in order to get earlier parole.

One important limitation of the present study is that factor analysis of the German GBAI. Considering the GBAI consists of 42 items, a minimum of 400 participants would normally be required for factor analysis. The low number of participants in contrast to the large number of items probably explains the unstable nature of some of the loadings. Future research should use larger samples to support the validation of the German GBAI.

In sum than, our findings demonstrate that the German version of the GBAI is a valuable tool for measuring attributional styles that offenders use when interpreting the cause of their criminal behaviour. The data of the present study suggest that those offenders with low guilt-feeling scores are prisoners who committed sexual offences, while forensic patients who committed sexual offences may have learned how to present themselves in a desirable way. This indeed is in line with earlier research of Cima et al. [19] in which it was demonstrated that sexual offenders showed the most pronounced tendency to endorse bizarre and atypical responses on a scale measuring malingering (i.e., SIMS; [20,21]). Of course, the exact relationship between type of crime, blame attributions, and mental illness is far from clear and further research is necessary to clarify this point.

References