Original Articles

The influence of religious concepts on the effects of blame appraisals on negative emotions

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A B S T R A C T

This research examined the regulatory effects of religious concepts on appraisal-emotion processes, focusing on concepts related to God and the relationships between blame appraisals and anger and guilt. In two experimental studies (Studies 1 and 2), blame appraisals were manipulated while participants were exposed to a God or neutral prime, in the context of a failed laboratory task. In an event-sampling study (Study 3), daily blame appraisals and emotions were measured repeatedly in naturalistic environments and their relationships under high perceived moral unacceptability were examined in relation to participants’ the tendency to focus on God (God-focus). All three studies consistently found evidence that higher activation of God concepts was associated with a weaker relationship between other-blame and anger. In contrast, God concepts did not moderate the relationship between blame and guilt. The results also indicate that both self- and other-blame can contribute to guilt, and God concepts exert no consistent effects on the blame appraisals. These findings support the God-prosociality link, imply that supernatural monitoring effects influence anger but not guilt, and suggest that thoughts of God can lower anger but do not mitigate nor magnify guilt.

1. Introduction

Religions generally advocate the need to stay away from destructive feelings, suggesting that religious concepts may have the power to regulate negative emotions. Indeed, there have been findings showing negative relationships between religion variables (e.g., religiosity) and negative emotions, but they speak little about underlying regulatory processes. One central religious concept, the notion of God, could also have the capacity to regulate emotions, perhaps by influencing the underlying thoughts. This idea remains largely unexplored. The present research seeks to fill this gap by examining how God-related concepts regulate the relationships between blame appraisals and negative emotions, specifically anger and guilt.

The idea of God is central to many religions. In many cultures, God is viewed as a spiritual being that is omnipotent and omniscient, controlling both world affairs and mundane activities (Kapitan, 1991). Research has accumulated good evidence that thoughts about God play a role in how humans behave and relate to each other. While the outcomes are not always desirable (e.g., Bushman, Ridge, Das, Key, & Busath, 2007; Johnson, Rowatt, & LaBouff, 2010), there is strong evidence that concepts of God can inspire prosociality. Correlational data showed that religiosity was positively associated with prosocial traits and intentions to help (e.g., Batson et al., 1989; Saroglou, 2002; Saroglou, Delpierre, & Dernelle, 2004). Also, experimental studies that exposed participants to word primes related to God found enhanced altruistic responses (e.g., Pichon, Boccato, & Saroglou, 2007; Randolph-Seng & Nielsen, 2007; Shariﬀ & Norenzayan, 2007; Shariﬀ, Willard, Andersen, & Norenzayan, 2016).

The God-prosociality link is compatible with two complementary perspectives. First, according to the shared beliefs perspective, many theistic faiths teach prosocial values and, in theory, exposure to these faiths should reinforce in memory associations between God and communal concepts (Krause & Ellison, 2003). For instance, the New Testament advocates forbearance, love, and kindness (Galatians 5:22-23) and the Qur’an teaches righteousness and charity (Al-Baqara 2:277). Also, scholars have argued that although some people may have negative views of religion, most still view religions positively (e.g., Armstrong, 2009). Consistently, research have shown that people generally regard their religion well, as advocating virtues such as forgiveness, magnanimity, and fairness (Schumann, McGregor, Nash, & Ross, 2014). Given that religious ideas can spread through many channels (e.g., education, media, social interaction), and likely more so in highly interconnected societies (Batson & Stocks, 2004; Granqvist, Mikulincer, & Shaver, 2010), believers and non-believers alike may develop similar conceptualizations of God and exhibit similar learned responses when God is brought to mind.
Second, it has been theorized that the concept of an omniscient and omnipresent God was developed, over millennia, to enable a large population of genetically unrelated people to co-exist (Norrenzayan, 2014). This supernatural policing mechanism is thought to be effective in maintaining societal order should policing and legal structures fail. It presumably works because when God is brought to mind, one is reminded that He is omniscient enough to be able to scrutinize all human affairs and omnipotent enough to have the power to punish misbehavior (Johnson & Kruger, 2004; Shariff & Norrenzayan, 2007). As a result, one is likely to feel compelled to act prosocially.

Both perspectives support the idea that God concepts can trigger regulatory processes that attenuate negative emotions. According to the shared beliefs perspective, many religions contain precepts advocating self-control, such as “be not quick in your spirit to become angry” (Ecclesiastes 7:9, ESV) and “to forgive and overlook others’ misdeeds” (Quran 3:13). Hence, associations between ideas of God and inhibition of negative emotions could develop, strengthened over time such that the activation of God concepts would facilitate inhibitory effects on socially harmful emotions. According to the supernatural monitoring theory, thoughts of a watchful God would activate expectations of divine protection or reprisal contingent on one’s behavior. Negative emotions perceived as displeasing to God might thus be down-regulated, so as to get into the Deity’s good favor. However, there remained little research to validate these claims.

To fill these gaps, the current research examined the causal effects of God concepts on two negative emotions, anger and guilt. To understand anger and guilt, it is important to examine blame appraisals. According to appraisal theories, events are interpreted along cognitive dimensions called appraisals (e.g., Lazarus, 1991; Roseman, 1984; Scherer, 1984). Appraisal theorists argue that appraisals associated with the blaming of others vs. the self are central to anger and guilt, respectively (Smith & Ellsworth, 1985; Smith & Lazarus, 1993). That is, in the context of a negative, unwanted situation (e.g., the loss of a goal, an infringement of moral expectations), other-blame, which involves attributing the event to another person, is associated with anger, whereas self-blame, which involves attributing the event to the self, is related to guilt.

Evidence supporting the relationship between other-blame and anger is robust. For instance, participants reported more anger when recalling events that other people were responsible for as compared to events that they were responsible for (Ellsworth & Smith, 1988). Reports of anger and other-blame measured using event-sampling correlated positively (Nezlek, Van Mechelen, Vansteelandt, & Kuppens, 2008). These relationships are highly replicable (e.g., Rosemen, Antoniou, & Jose, 1996; Smith & Ellsworth, 1986; Smith & Lazarus, 1993; Tong et al., 2007).

However, it appears that both self-blame and other-blame could predict guilt. For instance, participants reported more guilt when recalling events that they were responsible for as compared to events that other people were responsible for (Ellsworth & Smith, 1988; see also Ellsworth & Tong, 2006; Smith & Ellsworth, 1986; Smith & Lazarus, 1993). These are evidence that self-blame and guilt are related. However, in a study that measured appraisals and emotions under naturalistic contexts (Smith & Ellsworth, 1987), the reverse was found. Guilt was associated with higher other-blame and lower self-blame. In an event-sampling study conducted also under naturalistic contexts, guilt was positively predicted by external, situational attribution and was not predicted by internal attribution (Tong et al., 2007). Social norms that discourage the blaming of others could be at play in the naturalistic studies, which examined actual emotions in everyday life. By casting blame on others, one feels angry, but because making accusations may not be the appropriate thing to do, one also feels guilty. Such norms are more salient in real life (because social interaction is common), as compared to socially-isolated laboratory contexts (e.g., Ellsworth & Smith, 1988; Ellsworth & Tong, 2006), in which case casting blame leads to anger with little or no feelings of guilt.

Also, appraisal-emotion processes can be affected at one of two levels (Kuppens, van Mechelen, & Rijmen, 2008). First, the appraisal itself could be influenced, such that different individuals appraise the same event differently. Secondly, the appraisal-emotion relationship could be moderated, such that the relationship could be positive, negative, or non-existent across different individuals. Both processes are independent. That is, an antecedent factor may influence only the appraisal but not the appraisal-emotion relationship, or vice versa. Many studies have found evidence of personality variables (e.g., trait anger) influencing either or both levels (e.g., Kuppens et al., 2008; Tong, 2010), but appraisal research has not examined whether appraisal-emotion processes are susceptible to religious influences.

With regard to the relationship between other-blame and anger, predictions could be drawn from the God-prosociality link. If thoughts of God encourage prosocial, relationship-building tendencies, they should activate magnanimous responses towards perceived transgressors. Two hypotheses could be made. First, we expected the activation of God concepts to be associated with lower levels of other-blame. Second, if God concepts do down-regulate emotions that are adverse to relationship-building, they should attenuate the association between other-blame and anger. That is, when God is brought to mind, other-blame becomes less predictive of anger, as compared to when God is out of mind.

However, it seemed more difficult to make predictions for guilt. One difficulty is that, as noted, both self- and other-blame could predict guilt. Another difficulty is that, regardless of which blame appraisal is predictive of guilt, two competing accounts seemed possible concerning the moderating role of God concepts. The first account starts with the observation that theistic religions generally also teach self-forgiveness. For instance, the New Testament preaches redemption and salvation, and Islam advocates forgiveness for one’s sin (e.g., Surat A1-Imran, III, verses 133–135). Belief in divine grace has also been found to correlate negatively with guilt (Watson, Morris, & Hood, 1988). Ideas of God could therefore inspire self-exonerating emotive processes that are sympathetic to the self. Hence, according to the guilt mitigation account, firstly, God concepts could be associated with lower self-blame. Secondly, God concepts could weaken the relationship between blame and guilt, be it self- or other-blame. If blaming oneself generates guilt, ideas about God should reduce the impact, lowering guilt as a consequence. If blaming others bleeds guilt, the same self-pardoning moderating effect could be expected. That is, if blaming people makes one feels guilty, thinking about God would soften this effect, making the person feels less guilt.

However, the guilt mitigation account seems at odds with the supernatural monitoring theory. The theory implies that because thoughts of a watchful God highlight moral boundaries and make personal misconducts salient, they should increase guilt rather than diminishing it. Indeed, positive correlations between religiosity and guilt have been found (e.g., Albertson, O’Connor, & Berry, 2000; Francis & Jackson, 2003; Luyten, Corveleyn, & Fontaine, 1998). Research has also shown that perceiving God as ruling or punishing is associated with guilt (Braam et al., 2008). Hence, thinking about God could induce proachful emotive processes such that disproportionally higher levels of guilt would result, higher than what would be the case without God in mind. Hence, according to the guilt magnification account, firstly, God concepts could be associated with higher self-blame. Secondly, God concepts could strengthen the blame-guilt relationship. If self-blaming increases feelings of guilt, ideas of God should exacerbate the process and make one feels more guilt. If casting blame on others creates guilt, God concepts should also magnify the process, rendering the person feeling more remorseful for his or her accusatory thinking.

This leads to another potential contribution of this research. The supernatural monitoring theory has found empirical support but research has yet to address this: what emotions do reminders of God affect as part of their bigger impact to motivate people to behave prosocially? Both weakened anger and some feelings of guilt can contribute to