Journal of Experimental Social Psychology 77 (2018) 11–23

Contents lists available at ScienceDirect

Journal of Experimental Social Psychology

journal homepage: www.elsevier.com/locate/jesp

How much blame does he truly deserve? Historicist narratives engender uncertainty about blameworthiness, facilitating motivated cognition in moral judgment

Michael J. Gill*, Nick D. Ungson

Lehigh University, USA

ARTICLE INFO

Handling editor: Robbie Sutton

Keywords:
Blame
Blame mitigation
Historical and biological causes
Moral judgment

ABSTRACT

When reprehensible conduct is explicable in terms of the offender's life history or underlying biology, blame is mitigated. Despite their shared capacity for blame mitigation, here we focus on differences between historical and biological explanations for bad conduct. We argue that historical explanations generate greater uncertainty about blameworthiness than do biological explanations. They do so because they have both competing and tentative implications regarding agent control. Furthermore, we argue that the blame uncertainty engendered by historical explanations enables motivated cognition in the blame process. We provide evidence for these claims in four studies. In Study 1, we show that computer mouse trajectories are less direct—suggesting uncertainty—when blame assessments are made in cases of historical as compared to biological causation. Studies 2, 3, and 4 test our claims regarding susceptibility to biased cognition. Predisposition to blame was measured in Studies 2 and 3 and manipulated in Study 4. In all studies, predisposition to blame was more potent in shaping blame judgments in cases of historical as compared to biological causation. Evidence suggests that this happened because cases of historical causation are relatively amenable to divergent construals regarding agent control, whereas the implications of biological causation are more definitive. Discussion centers on the importance of motivation—a "merciful mindset"—for effecting blame mitigation in cases where the offender has endured an unfortunate life history.

Robert Harris brutally murdered two teenaged boys. He clearly derived joy from his cruelty and behaved in a light-hearted, playful manner afterward. For example, Harris laughed as he proposed to his accomplice that they dress as police officers and visit the parents of the dead boys to break the news to them. Robert Harris personified "evil." Perhaps unsurprisingly, then, he was put to death for his crimes (Watson, 1993).

Although a harsh response comes naturally in the case of Harris, research suggests that such harsh responses can be tempered by information about the biological and historical causality behind wrongdoing (Cheung & Heine, 2015; Gill & Cerce, 2017). In general, existing work highlights similarities of biological and historical explanations: Both mitigate blame and punishment. Here, however, we emphasize a difference. Our central claim is that, although biological and historical explanations often lead to similar conclusions about reduced blameworthiness, those conclusions are more uncertain when connected to historical as opposed to biological causation. In addition to providing evidence for this differential uncertainty, our studies will explore an important consequence of it: When rendering blame judgments, utilization of history information will be especially vulnerable to disruption by both dispositional and contextually activated propensities to blame harshly. Indeed, we will show that historical explanations—as compared to biological—are uniquely amenable to divergent construals, which can either underline or undermine their mitigating force.

Before elaborating on the theoretical foundations of our predictions, we will briefly review existing literature on the blame mitigating effects of both biological and historical explanations for bad conduct.

1. Biological causation and the mitigation of blame

Weiner, Perry, and Magnusson (1988) (see also Weiner & Kukla, 1970) were pioneers in providing evidence of blame mitigation via information about biological causation. They found consistent evidence across a variety of stigmatizing conditions that stigmata (e.g., obesity) attributed to biological causes received less blame than those same stigmata attributed to "choice." Similarly, Alicke (1990) found that blame for a variety of transgressions was mitigated when the wrongdoer suffered from brain dysfunction. Phelan (2005) manipulated

* Corresponding author at: Lehigh University, Psychology, 17 Memorial Drive East, Bethlehem, PA 18015, USA.
E-mail address: m.gill@lehigh.edu (M.J. Gill).

https://doi.org/10.1016/j.jesp.2018.03.008
Received 3 July 2017; Received in revised form 22 March 2018; Accepted 23 March 2018

whether a perpetrator's mental illness was attributed to genetic or non-genetic factors. Blame for criminal activity was reduced for the perpetrator with a genetic disorder. Shariff et al. (2014) varied participants' exposure to information about biological determinism. Across studies, diverse types of information about biological determinism reduced punitiveness toward a violent offender. Finally, Aspinwall, Brown, and Tabery (2012) showed that U.S. state trial judges were less harsh when punishing a hypothetical violent psychopath if psychopathy was explicitly connected to underlying neurobiology rather than not. Taken together, these studies provide compelling evidence that perceived biological causation mitigates blame.

2. Historical causation and the mitigation of blame

The literature also provides evidence that blame can be mitigated via information about historical causation. For example, Stalans and Henry (1994) found that members of a community sample preferred juvenile court (less severe) to adult court (more severe) for a juvenile murderer with a long history of being a target of violence at home. Similar results—with important qualifications to be discussed below—have been presented by Najdowski, Bottoms, and Vargas (2009); Nunez, Dahl, Tang, and Jensen (2007); and Wasarhaley, Golding, Lynch, and Keller (2013). Relatedly, Garvey (1998) found that around one-third of eligible jurors said they would be more reluctant to apply the death penalty to a murderer who had been violently abused early in life.

In addition, Gill and his colleagues have provided relevant evidence with their work on *historicist narratives*, or story-like accounts of how a target came to possess potentially blameworthy features. Most recently, Gill and Cerce (2017) showed how—and why—historicist narratives can reduce blame and spiteful impulses toward a variety of transgressors. In other work, Gill and his colleagues have focused on history information in the context of intergroup attitudes. They have shown that information about an unfortunate history can heighten compassion for a potentially blameworthy outgroup (Gill & Andreychik, 2009; Gill, Andreychik, & Getty, 2013), increase guilt upon admitting to derogatory thoughts about them (Gill & Andreychik, 2007), and increase the extent to which they automatically activate empathy-based rather than animus-based implicit associations (Andreychik & Gill, 2012). All these results are consistent with a blame-mitigating role of information about historical causation.

3. Differences between biological and historical accounts

In our review of the literature on blame mitigation, a difference between biological versus historical explanations has stood out: The literature provides many examples of history information failing to mitigate blame, whereas such null effects are conspicuously absent for biological information. Indeed, the literature suggests that it is not uncommon for people to disregard information about an offender's unfortunate history. For example, Najdowski et al. (2009; discussed above) found that abuse history mitigated blame only when the offender had killed his or her long-term abuser. The exact same history information had no effect when the offender had shoplifted, committed a drug offense, or murdered a peer. Thus, the effect of history information was rather circumscribed (see also Nunez et al., 2007; Stalans & Henry, 1994).

Beyond showing such limited effects, the literature also reveals many null effects. For example, Weiner et al. (1988) had participants make judgments of a child abuser who either was or was not "abused as a child, experiencing severe stress and a near nervous breakdown" (p. 742). Unlike their manipulations of biological causation (see above), this manipulation of offender history had no effect on blame. Relatedly, Alicke (1990) had participants indicate whether they would reduce blame of an offender who had endured a history of deficient socialization. They would not (although, as noted above, they would reduce blame if the offender had brain-based disturbances of cognition). Stevenson, Bottoms, and Diamond (2010) analyzed discussions of mock jurors who deliberated regarding the proper sentence for a murderer whose defense attorney had argued that he suffered long-term abuse. Jurors were most likely to argue to their peers that this past abuse should be ignored.

In short, although history information does powerfully mitigate blame in some cases, there is also evidence suggesting that it is sometimes disregarded. In contrast, we find no evidence suggesting that biological accounts are similarly disregarded.

4. History versus biology: differing levels of uncertainty about blameworthiness

Although there are a host of potential trivial explanations for the just-noted differences (e.g., file drawers full of null effects of biological information), we believe that these differences point to a substantive issue of theoretical and practical importance. One likely explanation is highlighted by Gill and Cerce (2017). They argued that some prior work assumed that history information will be mitigating when it describes *prior suffering* by the offender (e.g., child abuse). Thus, blame mitigation was conceptualized as an empathy-based process: Comprehension of another's suffering fosters non-blame. The null effects of history information in such studies, then, suggest that information about suffering per se is insufficient for blame mitigation. Thus, Gill and Cerce argued that, to elicit mitigation, history information must convey something more than "mere suffering." Specifically, they proposed that history information must *explain how the offender became a bad person*. Thus, they developed the concept of the *historicist narrative*, defined above as a story-like explanation of how an offender developed her morally offensive character traits. Gill and Cerce provided abundant evidence that historicist narratives mitigate blame and that, in line with their theoretical arguments, narratives need not contain any suffering at all to elicit blame mitigation. Rather, the narrative must create the sense that the offender lacked *control of self-formation*, or control over the process of his or her character development.

Here, we offer a different account. Our core claim is that, during the process of blame ascription, people's utilization of historical information—even when it is a well-constructed explanatory narrative—is more easily disrupted than is their utilization of biological information. What creates this difference in susceptibility to disruption? We propose that historical explanations create relative uncertainty about a transgressor's (reduced) blameworthiness, whereas biological explanations create relative certainty in such assessments. We propose that this difference in uncertainty exists even when the magnitude of mitigation is similar across the two types of explanation.

What creates this difference in uncertainty? Our explanation assumes that there are several mediating inferences that are important in shaping blame ascriptions. Of course, this assumption is a cornerstone of the blame literature, which identifies several of the most important mediating inferences. Here, we will focus on two of them: (1) Did the wrongdoer have *freedom of action*, could she "just say no" at the moment of action (this is the same concept that Weiner, 2006, calls "controllability"[1])?; (2) Did the wrongdoer possess *self-formative control*, guiding the creation of her own character traits (Gill & Cerce, 2017)? Notably, Gill and Cerce provided strong evidence for the importance of distinguishing between these two dimensions of perceived control.

To elaborate, we propose two underlying causes of blame uncertainty. First, uncertainty is created because historical causes are associated with *competing implications* for blameworthiness. This

[1] Because our approach involves two distinct concepts of controllability—freedom of action, control of self-formation (Gill & Cerce, 2017)—it would not make sense to call just one of them "controllability."