Unbidden confession as an evolved pre-emptive strategy against punishment: A preliminary investigation with prisoners

Todd K. Shackelford [a,*], James R. Liddle [b], Jesse M. Bering [c], Greg Shalkoski [c]

[a] Department of Psychology, Oakland University, United States
[b] Department of Psychology, Florida Atlantic University, United States
[c] Institute of Cognition and Culture, Queen's University, Belfast, United Kingdom

ARTICLE INFO

ABSTRACT

Unbidden confession—confession made by a transgressor in the absence of interrogation—presents an evolutionary puzzle because it guarantees social exposure and places the person at risk of punishment. We hypothesize that unbidden confession may be an ancestrally adaptive behavior and is difficult to inhibit under certain social conditions, particularly when one perceives imminent and inevitable social exposure. This serves as a pre-emptive strategy that, in the ancestral past, may have attenuated punishment from retributive in-group members. Using self-report data from a sample of 78 federal inmates, we report analyses supporting this hypothesis. Inmates who made unbidden confessions were more confident that they would be caught by police, and this confession was usually made to someone who had a stake in the transgressors' genetic interests, most often a family member or friend. These results suggest: (1) a possible role for natural selection in shaping cognitive mechanisms that motivate confession; (2) a potential mismatch in the efficacy of unbidden confession today compared with our ancestral past, given that the law is now administered by strangers rather than in-group members; and (3) new avenues for research on the origins of sophisticated cognitive strategies.

© 2014 Elsevier Ltd. All rights reserved.

1. Introduction

Confessions sometimes occur even when the confidant has no suspicion that the confessor has anything to hide. From an evolutionary perspective, this type of *unbidden confession* is puzzling. Because confession guarantees social exposure and thus renders the individual vulnerable to punishment (via ostracism, reputation damage, fines, or direct costs), this behavior may have threatened ancestral reproductive success (Williams, 2007; Williams & Nida, 2011). One might therefore reason that people will retain sensitive personal information under all but the most extraordinary conditions, such as harsh interrogation. Nevertheless, the "urge" to confess is well-documented (Kassin & Gudjonsson, 2004; Weiner, Graham, Peter, & Zmuidinas, 1991).

We hypothesize that, under certain social conditions, unbidden confession may be an ancestrally adaptive behavior and, therefore, difficult to inhibit. The cornerstone logic to this hypothesis is as follows: Belief in imminent and inevitable social exposure evokes unbidden confession. This serves as a pre-emptive strategy that, in the ancestral past, may have attenuated punishment from

retributive in-group members, including ostracism and social exclusion (Williams, 2007; Williams & Nida, 2011).

When people believe that their identities have been compromised in committing transgressions, such as through indisputable evidence or witnesses, they are more likely to make unbidden confessions because social exposure is probable. Consider that authorities often elicit confessions by leading the suspect to believe that they possess more information than they in fact have (Candel, Merckelbach, Loyen, & Reyskens, 2005; Kassin & Gudjonsson, 2004). Transgressors who in response confess—and who appear sincere in doing so—are given lighter sentences, judged as less likely to re-offend, and are more often forgiven by their victims than are those who deny their guilt (Gold & Weiner, 2000). Our evolutionary hypothesis of unbidden confession was used to generate the following predictions.

1.1. Prediction 1: The perceived number of knowledgeable others increases one's anticipatory anxiety about getting caught

The greater the number of people who could identify the person as a transgressor, the more the person should worry about getting caught. Strategic social information is transmitted to the rest of the in-group via gossip and, therefore, the more "carriers" of this information, the greater the threat of public exposure of one's offence (Vrij, Nunkoosing, Paterson, Ooserwegel, & Soukara, 2002).

1.2. Prediction 2: Anticipatory anxiety about getting caught correlates with the urge to confess, and unbidden confession relieves this anxiety

We do not envisage unbidden confession to be under conscious control (although this is possible); indeed, consciousness might have interfered with the quality of remorse signals and negated the ancestral reproductive payoffs of unbidden confession (Trivers, 2000, 2011; Von Hippell & Trivers, 2011). Rather, we argue that the proximate mechanism behind unbidden confession is the expectation of reduced anxiety that stems from ruminating about impending social exposure. Therefore, we predict that the urge to confess increases as one's anticipatory anxiety about getting caught increases, and transgressors who make unbidden confessions have experienced greater anticipatory anxiety than those who do not make unbidden confessions.

1.3. Prediction 3: People should first confess to those with shared genes or genetic interests

Inclusive fitness theory (Hamilton, 1964) can be used to generate the prediction that those with the greatest genetic relatedness to the transgressor (e.g., parents, siblings) are also the most likely to become a confidant and come to the transgressor's defence, because their shared genes are at stake if the transgressor is caught and punished. In addition to shared genes, individuals with shared *genetic interests* can also be predicted to provide support to transgressors. Such individuals may include a mate with whom the transgressor shares offspring, or a close friend who has shared personal (i.e., compromising) information of their own with the transgressor. In short, if one's survival or reproductive interests are threatened by the capture and punishment of a transgressor, this may serve as motivation (consciously or unconsciously) to provide support (e.g., aiding in the evasion of authorities, negotiating the transgressor's punishment). Given these potential benefits to the transgressor, we predict that if a person makes an unbidden confession, that person is most likely to confess to someone with shared genes or genetic interests. Additionally, unbidden confession can serve as a signal of commitment by the offender because, given the risks of sharing such compromising information, it reduces the likelihood of defection from future interactions (e.g., Kelly, 1999; Schelling, 1960).

We tested these predictions in a sample of federal inmates using self-report surveys of unbidden confession and criminality.

2. Methods

2.1. Participants

Participants were 78 self-selected inmates (36 men) at an Arkansas Department of Correction facility. To avoid the provision of identifying information, participants indicated their current age with one of several ranges (7.7% were aged 18–21 years, 43.6% aged 22–35 years, 42.3% aged 36–45 years, 5.1% aged 46–60 years, and 1.3% over the age of 60 years). Participants indicated the number of consecutive years served at the current imprisonment with one of several ranges (26.9% reported less than one year, 53.8% 1–5 years, 14.1% 6–12 years, 2.6% 13–20 years, and 2.6% over 20 years). Finally, participants indicated the crime(s) for which they were convicted and, as a result, for which they were currently imprisoned (33.3% reporting drug crime, 32.1% robbery/theft/property crime, 17.9% sex crime, 11.5% fraud/racketeering/forgery/counterfeiting, 10.3% murder/manslaughter, 9.0% weapon offence, 5.1% assault, and 3.8% kidnapping).

2.2. Materials and procedures

This research was approved by the Institutional Review Board of the University of Arkansas. Inmates were alerted to the survey by prison staff. Those interested in participating were administered the survey in same-sex groups in classrooms within the prison. Two research assistants, one male and one female, administered all surveys under the supervision of guards. Participation was voluntary and inmates who signed the consent form were paid $3 regardless of their completion of the survey (note that $3 can be much more valuable in prison compared to typical experimental settings with students). Each group was allotted 30 min to complete the survey; however, most finished within 20 min.

The survey included the following questions, responses to which are the focus of the current analyses: "*Before* you were arrested, did you tell anyone (for example, a friend, family member, relative, priest, or therapist) about what you had done?" ("Yes" responses were coded "1" and "No" responses were coded "0"; italics in original); "*Before* you were arrested, how confident were you that the police would somehow find out and arrest you?" (responses were recorded on a scale of 1–5, with 1 = "I was positive the police *would never find out*" and 5 = "I was positive that the police *would eventually find out*"). "How often did you *worry* about getting caught, before you decided to tell somebody (anybody)?" (responses were recorded on a scale of 1–5, with 1 = "never" and 5 = "all the time"); "*Before* you were arrested, did you ever feel a strong urge to tell somebody (anybody) about what you had done?" ("Yes" responses were coded "1" and "No" responses were coded "0"); "If you had to estimate, how many people knew that you had committed this crime, *before you actually confessed*?" (responses were recorded as 0 = "0," 1 = "1," 2–4 = "2," and 5 or more = "3"); "Who was the *very first* person you told about what you had done?" [participants selected one among: "Family member," "Friend," "Therapist or religious authority (for example, psychologist, priest, or rabbi)," and "Legal authority (for example, a lawyer or police officer)."] The following two questions followed-up on the previous question: "Was one of the main reasons you told this person that you believed that you could trust him or her with this information?" ("Yes" responses were coded "1" and "No" responses were coded "0"); "Generally speaking, has this person helped to support you (in any way) through this entire ordeal?" ("Yes" responses were coded "1" and "No" responses were coded "0").

3. Results

We first present descriptive data for responses to each of the questions that appeared in the second section of the survey and which are the focus of the current analyses. In response to the question, "*Before* you were arrested, did you tell anyone (for example, a friend, family member, relative, priest, or therapist) about what you had done?," 55.1% of participants indicated "Yes." In response to the question, "*Before* you were arrested, how confident were you that the police would somehow find out and arrest you?," participants provided a mean rating of 3.35 (SD = 1.50). In response to the question, "How often did you *worry* about getting caught, before you decided to tell somebody (anybody)?," participants provided a mean rating of 3.36 (SD = 1.42). In response to the question, "*Before* you were arrested, did you ever feel a strong urge to tell somebody (anybody) about what you had done?," 50.6% of participants indicated "Yes." In response to the question, "If you had to estimate, how many people knew that you had committed this crime, *before you actually confessed*?," participants provided a mean rating of 2.79 (SD = 1.04). In response to the question, "Who was the *very first* person you told about what you had