

Attributional style in psychosis—The role of affect and belief type

Suzanne Jolley^{a,*}, Philippa Garety^a, Paul Bebbington^b, Graham Dunn^c,
Daniel Freeman^a, Elizabeth Kuipers^a, David Fowler^d, David Hemsley^a

^a*Department of Psychology, Institute of Psychiatry, King's College London, University of London, P.O. Box 77, Denmark Hill, London SE5 8AF, UK*

^b*Department of Mental Health Sciences, Royal Free and University College Medical School, UCL, University of London, UK*

^c*Biostatistics Group, School of Epidemiology & Health Sciences, University of Manchester, UK*

^d*School of Medicine, Health Policy and Practice, University of East Anglia, UK*

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Abstract

People holding persecutory beliefs have been hypothesised to show a self-serving attributional style, which functions to protect self-esteem Bentall, Corcoran, Howard, Blackwood, and Kinderman (2001). Experimental support for this has been mixed. Freeman et al. (1998) suggested depressed and grandiose subgroups of those with persecutory beliefs might explain events differently.

In this study, 71 participants completed measures of delusional beliefs, depression and attributional style. We hypothesised that those with persecutory beliefs would form grandiose and depressed subgroups, and that a self-serving attributional style would characterise only the grandiose subgroup.

Hypotheses were partially confirmed. Clear subgroups were evident and only those with both persecutory and grandiose beliefs showed an externalising attributional style for negative events. Depression, irrespective of co-occurring persecutory beliefs, was related to a reduced self-serving bias and an externalising attributional style for positive events. On their own, persecutory beliefs were not related to any particular attributional style.

Depressed and grandiose subgroups of those with persecutory beliefs might account for some of the inconsistencies in the attribution literature. Even within a single symptom group, care should be taken in both research and therapy to consider individual symptom patterns.

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*Corresponding author. Tel.: +44 020 7848 5028; fax: +44 020 7848 5006.
E-mail address: S.Jolley@iop.kcl.ac.uk (S. Jolley).

Introduction

Background

The defence model of persecutory beliefs (Bentall, Kinderman, & Kaney, 1994) proposed that, in contrast to the self-blaming explanatory style characteristic of people with depression (e.g. Brewin, 1985), people with persecutory beliefs would show an externalising bias in explaining negative events on the Attributional Style Questionnaire (ASQ; Peterson et al., 1982). Bentall et al. (1994) argued that external attributions for negative events, especially when combined with internal attributions for positive events (a self-serving bias, SSB), act to preserve the hypothetical construct of ‘overt self-esteem’ by reducing discrepancies between the idealised and the actual view of self; whereas the style shown by those with depression acts to reduce self-esteem further. However, according to this defence theory, attributions of blame and negative intent to others create discrepancies between one’s view of oneself and the view of oneself that one believes others to have, thus lowering ‘covert’ or underlying self-esteem.

Evidence for the defence model

A review by Garety and Freeman (1999) found mixed evidence for the model of Bentall et al. (1994): some evidence that those with persecutory beliefs made external attributions for negative events, but less that they made internal attributions for positive events, which might have quite different clinical implications.

However, few of the reviewed studies found an externalising bias which was (i) pronounced; (ii) present in comparison to a non-clinical control group and (iii) specific to those with persecutory beliefs. Kaney and Bentall (1989) reported a mean only just under the midpoint of the ASQ (i.e. equidistant from the anchor points ‘totally due to me’ and ‘totally due to other people or circumstances’). Candido and Romney (1990) reported a similar mean, and found an externalising bias only in comparison to a depressed group showing the typical internalising bias. Fear, Sharp, and Healy (1996) found an externalising bias in those with delusional disorder, but no difference in those with persecutory as opposed to non-persecutory beliefs. Kinderman and Bentall (1997), using their alternative to the ASQ, the IPSAQ, which distinguishes between external attributions blaming people and external attributions to circumstances, found a personalising bias but not an overall externalising bias. Sharp, Fear, and Heady (1997) found a strong externalising bias, but in a group with mixed persecutory and grandiose beliefs. Only Lyon, Kamey, and Bentall (1994) found a strong externalising bias in a group with persecutory beliefs. However, they used their own measure, the ASQpf, which shows low correlations with the ASQ. Two additional studies have failed to find an externalising bias in those with persecutory beliefs (Martin & Penn, 2002; Silverman & Peterson, 1993). Martin and Penn (2002) also failed to replicate the personalising bias reported by Kinderman and Bentall (1997).

Recent theoretical developments

The considerable inconsistency in the literature prompted Bentall, Corcoran, Howard, Blackwood, and Kinderman (2001) to revise their model. They suggested that variability in findings in the attribution literature could be explained by dynamism in the self-concept and in self-associated reasoning and attribution such that self-views and discrepancies between them influence current processing after they have been primed by either current or retrieved information.

Bentall et al. (2001) also suggested two alternative explanations for inconsistency in results. Firstly, they highlighted the use and reliability of different measures in self-esteem studies, which applies similarly to the attribution literature: the ASQ, IPSAQ, and ASQpf have all been used to assess attributions, while persecutory beliefs and paranoia have been assessed on a number of different criteria, including belief selection, diagnosis and BPRS cut off score. Secondly, Bentall et al. (2001) discussed the possibility of subgroups of people with persecutory beliefs based on the poor me/bad me categorisation proposed by Trower and Chadwick (1995). Freeman et al. (1998) have suggested a similar possibility: while most people with persecutory beliefs are also depressed, and show compatible levels of self-esteem, a grandiose subgroup might show the self-serving presentation described by Bentall et al. (1994).

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