

THE EFFECTS OF ATTRIBUTIONS FOR CRIME ON ATTITUDES TOWARD PRISON REFORM

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Early attribution research suggests that those who view criminal acts as highly internal, controllable, and stable tend to support more severe and retributive punishment. This study aims to further examine how laypeople’s attributions for crime relate to their perceptions of responsibility, emotions, punishment goals, and prison reform attitudes. Participants completed surveys with one of five criminal conviction scenarios. Correlational analyses and a path model provided support for links between internal and controllable attributions, high levels of anger and blame, retributive punishment purposes, and judgments against reform funding. Those with higher prison system knowledge and the politically liberal agreed more that prison system change is necessary. The potential use of these data for prison reform activists is considered.

Keywords: attribution theory, attitude formation, prison reform, incarceration

The United States has one of the highest incarceration rates across the globe. According to a recent report by the Bureau of Justice Statistics, one in every two hundred Americans is incarcerated (Guerino, Harrison, & Sabol, 2011). Because the United States government functions as a democracy, public attitudes toward crime and incarcerated individuals are pertinent to the delivery of effective criminal justice. It is therefore important to understand people’s beliefs, particularly their attributions for crime. Abundant research has shown that causal attributions are linked with emotions, attitudes, and behavioral intentions. Therefore, studying these attributions may provide insight into attitudes toward prison reform.

Attribution Theory

Attribution theory was originated by Fritz Heider (1958) to address individual perceptions of why given phenomena occur. It has since been suggested that different dimensions can be used to distinguish causes and that each one gives rise to a unique set of reactions. The three most commonly noted dimensions of causality include locus, stability, and controllability (Carroll & Payne, 1977; Weiner, 1995). Specifically, the term locus is

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used to denote whether the cause of an event is internal to the individual, such as character, or external to the individual, such as socioeconomic status (Graham, Weiner, & Zucker, 1997). Stability addresses whether the cause is stable and constant with time (e.g. a personality trait) or unstable and varying with time (e.g. an emotional response). Controllability pertains to whether a cause is controllable by the individual (e.g. a selfish motive) or uncontrollable by him or her and not subject to change (e.g. a mental illness).

Although the attributional dimensions have been applied to a broad range of phenomena including criminality, Bernard Weiner first studied their effects in educational achievement scenarios (see Weiner, 1995 for a review). He found that when a teacher viewed a failure, such as poor exam performance, as being due to a lack of effort (which is internal and controllable), the teacher deemed the student responsible for this failure. The teacher then blamed him for not trying, experienced anger at the student, and punished him in the form of a failing grade. However, if the teacher perceived the poor exam performance as the result of limited ability (which is internal and uncontrollable), he or she did not find the student responsible for the failure. In this case, the teacher felt sympathy for the student, pitied his lack of talent, and offered help by delivering a less harsh grade or providing extra tutoring. Weiner (1995), therefore, devised the following pathways to explain the effects of attributional dimensions:

- Event failure → Causal search → Lack of effort → Internal and controllable cause → Responsibility → Blame → Anger → Punishment
- Event failure → Causal search → Lack of ability → Internal and uncontrollable cause → No responsibility → Sympathy → Help

From these educational studies, Weiner concluded that locus and controllability are particularly important in the assignment of responsibility and punishment. Additionally, Weiner, Nierenberg, and Goldstein (1976) found that the dimension of stability relates to failure and success reactions through expectancy of reoccurrence rather than emotional reactions. Specifically, the more stable a teacher's attribution for the cause of a student's exam failure, the higher his or her expectancy that the student will continue to fail in the future, and the less likely he or she is to believe that the student's lack of success can be changed. Thus, expectancy of failure is higher with an attribution of low ability (stable) than an attribution of illness on the day of the test (unstable).

Since Weiner's early exploration of attributions for educational performance, researchers have further extended these dimensional pathways to the perceived causes of criminality. Throughout the literature on this topic, internal loci continue to be particularly relevant to the assignment of criminal responsibility. In one early study on parole decision scenarios, Carroll and Payne (1977) found that a highly internal locus for a criminal event is the most important attributional dimension for punishment decisions. In general, the more internal the cause of a criminal behavior is perceived to be, the more likely an individual is to support relatively long periods of incarceration. Furthermore, Quinsey and Cyr (1986) found that when the cause of crime is presented as being highly internal (such as a murder caused by an individual's bad temper), participants viewed the perpetrator as very

dangerous and increasingly supported harsh or severe punishments (i.e., relatively long periods of punitive incarcerations). Although it is recognized that several external factors such as poverty, limited education, and abuse are related to incidents of crime, it appears that some degree of internality is necessary for criminal punishment to be administered because individual freewill is a necessary crux of the United States criminal justice system (Campbell & Muncer, 1990; Weiner, Graham, & Reyna, 1997). Further, there is a well-documented tendency, termed the Fundamental Attribution Error, which holds that people over-attribute events to an individual's disposition (as opposed to external factors) (Ross, 1977). Thus, both systemic and psychological factors may predispose Americans to view crime as caused by something internal to the criminal.

In addition to locus, the dimensions of controllability and stability have also been found to relate to the severity of assigned criminal punishments. For example, study scenarios that present a murderer as driven by the desire to steal (an internal and controllable cause) lead to higher desire to punish severely than do scenarios that present a murderer who acted on a schizophrenic delusion (an internal and uncontrollable cause) (Weiner et al., 1997). When negative events are attributed to controllable causes, perpetrators are typically viewed as responsible for the event because it could have been avoided (Weiner, 1993). On the contrary, individuals assign less severe punishments when the cause of a negative event is, in some way, beyond the criminal's control.

When the cause of a negative event is portrayed as being stable, participants tend to anticipate the offender's involvement in future criminal acts, and again believe that severe punishment is merited (Carroll & Payne, 1977; Graham et al., 1997). For example, when criminal acts are presented as the result of unstable emotional impulses, participants report less fear of repeat offenses than when these acts are presented as the result of a stable causes, such as psychopathy (Carroll, Perkwitz, Lurigio, & Weaver, 1987). Whereas individuals assign more severe criminal punishments in reaction to controllable causes due to an increased sense of blame, they appear to assign severe punishments in reaction to stable causes in order to prevent anticipated future offenses, thus suggesting that the goals of punishment might be related to the dimensions of causality.

Goals of Punishment

Many years after his original attribution studies, Weiner, Graham, and Reyna (1997) discovered that crime attribution pathways differed from educational ones in that participants' judgments (e.g. to help or to punish) were also strongly affected by the individual's perspective on the goals of punishment. In the United States, the purposes of punishment are primarily driven by two different judicial philosophies: utilitarian and retributive. Utilitarian punishment goals include isolating and instilling a sense of fear in the offender as well as generally deterring the public from committing crimes (Phelps, 2002). Although rehabilitation is often regarded as a unique entity in the field of criminology, psychological literature typically regards rehabilitation as another goal of utilitarian punishment (Weiner et al., 1997). Under the utilitarian philosophy, punishment is a mean for achieving greater good; specifically, a safe and civil society. Retributive goals, however,

are concerned with just deserts, or balancing the scales of justice and making offenders suffer for their wrongdoings.

In the series of studies conducted by Weiner and his colleagues (1997), the researchers focused on the specific utilitarian goal of rehabilitation, and participants responded to crime scenarios with manipulated attributional dimensions. Results suggested that when the cause of an adverse outcome is uncontrollable, individuals are more supportive of rehabilitative punishment goals, perhaps because the crime was not entirely due to the offender's purposeful actions, whereas when the cause is controllable, participants are more supportive of retributive goals, likely because the act was perceived as avoidable, i.e., the criminal could have done otherwise. According to Weiner and colleagues (1997), support for either punishment philosophy is influenced by a combination of crime attributions and expectancies in regard to the future behavior of the offender (i.e., recidivism risks or the potential to improve behaviors).

Additional studies reported that the dimensions of locus and stability influence opinions on the purposes of punishment as well. For example, Quinsey and Cyr (1986) presented participants with murder scenarios manipulating locus and found that the more external the cause, the more the offender is viewed as individually treatable, and the more supportive the participant generally is of rehabilitative initiatives. Graham, Weiner, and Zucker (1997) further suggest that stable crime scenarios may cause participants to fear repeat offending and ultimately lead them to endorse longer, more retributive punishments. Weiner and colleagues (1997) neatly summarized these concepts using the following pathways to explain the effects of attributions on punishment goals:

- Transgression → Cause is presented as internal and controllable → Person is responsible → Blame → Anger, no sympathy → More focus on retributive punishment goals (e.g., punitive sentences), less focus on utilitarian punishment goals (e.g., rehabilitation)
- Transgression → Cause is presented as stable → High expectancy of future crime → More focus on retributive punishment goals
- Transgression → Cause is presented external and/or uncontrollable → Person is not entirely responsible → Less blame → Less anger, more sympathy → More focus on utilitarian punishment goals
- Transgression → Cause is presented as unstable → Low expectancy of future crime → Less focus on retributive punishment goals, more focus on utilitarian punishment goals

However, the situation is a bit more complicated in that individuals often endorse some aspects of both utilitarian and retributive forms of justice, depending on situational specifics (Stalans, 2009). One study found that for less serious crimes (such as minor assaults or car thefts), participants believed that the primary purpose of punishment should be rehabilitation, whereas for more serious crimes (such as rape or murder), the primary

purpose should be retributive-focused, just deserts (McFatter, 1982). Interestingly, a study of judges suggests that attributions guide their judgments as well, such that they support utilitarian goals in cases where they perceive the crime to be caused by a socioeconomic factor (i.e., an external attribution), but retributive goals when they perceive the cause to be addictions such as alcoholism (i.e., an internal attribution) (Carroll et al., 1987). Carroll and colleagues propose that this shift in philosophies may be because retributive punishments aim to make an offender pay for his or her wrongdoing when he or she is to blame for a negative event; however, if that event was partially caused by something other than that individual, the desire to punish him or her for the purposes of balancing the scales of justice decreases. As indicated by Stalans (2009), individuals may view both retributive and utilitarian goals as important in punishment decisions and yet hold the goals of one philosophy as slightly more important in particular situations.

Individual Differences in Perceptions of Crime and Prison Systems

Factors specific to individual participants may also influence their attitudes and attributions for crime. For example, participant gender appears to be associated with attributions for crime. In one study regarding rape attitudes, Yarmey (1985) found that when comparing men and women of varying ages, young men were more likely to endorse long, retributive punishments for sex offenders than were any other type of participant. Yarmey suggests that the tendency for this population to endorse retributive punishment goals can be understood through the notion that these male participants may have used their own experiences as a comparison, and likewise perceive the criminal's act as more controllable, since they themselves were able to avoid such behaviors.

Furthermore, political ideology is associated with views of crime and punishment. Specifically, more conservative individuals generally endorse retributive punishment goals according to Carroll et al. (1987). These authors suggest that conservatives tend to view crime as caused by "people who lack self-control and moral conscience" (p. 108). Conversely, liberals tend to endorse utilitarian punishment goals and hold that criminals may have been "victimized by social and economic misfortune" (p. 108).

Attributions for crime may additionally be related to individual differences in knowledge about the topic. In a study on attributions for racial inequality, Gomez and Wilson (2006) suggest that individuals with more sophisticated knowledge of a social problem are more likely to make external attributions for the cause of that problem. Therefore, it is expected that individuals with sophisticated knowledge of prison systems might tend to make more external attributions for crime, and thus support utilitarian-rehabilitative punishment efforts to a higher degree than their less sophisticated counterparts. Purvis, Ward, and Devilly (2002) suggested that individuals especially knowledgeable about the justice system make more informed criminal punishment decisions than do laypeople, which often leads them to support more rehabilitative efforts. This may be because they better comprehend the treatability of certain criminal behaviors as well as the multitude of external factors that may have influenced them. Similarly, individuals with a high need for cognition (i.e. those who want to learn about and discuss issues of crime) are less supportive of retributive punishment goals, due in part to increased tendency to attribute crime

to external and uncontrollable causes (Sargent, 2004). Beyond knowledge of a particular issue, attitudes may also be influenced by direct experience with that issue. A field study conducted by Regan and Fazio (1977) documented that college students who experienced a campus housing crisis formed stronger opinions about housing policies than those who did not. It was thus concluded that attitudes formed from more direct experience and interaction with the issue tend to be more strongly, stably and explicitly expressed. This suggests that individual factors related to experience with crime and source of crime information may uniquely relate to participants' perspectives on crime and the overall criminal justice system. Thus, factors such as gender, age, political ideology, prison system knowledge, crime exposure, and source of crime information could all possibly be associated with attributions for crime and opinions on the purposes of punishment.

Literature Limitations and the Current Study

Since the country's last major prison reforms of the 1980s, emerging research on attitudes toward prison system efficacy and purposes of punishment has largely stalled. Additionally, while previous literature has drawn meaningful connections between crime attributions and opinions on the goals of punishment, research has stopped short of connecting these attributions to attitudes toward prison reform. To many politicians and professionals within the justice system, the current necessity for increased research, funding, and prison system revision is obvious, yet bills proposing related initiatives fail to be instated (Stalans, 2009). Such a paradox introduces the question of why average citizens tend not to support prison reform.

To begin the process of answering this question, the current study aims to extend previous attribution research on the causes of crime and purposes of punishment to attitudes toward modern prison reform. By understanding how attributions for the causes of crime relate to beliefs about prison reform, activists and educators may be better able to target their campaigns to change the perceptions about causes of crime that are associated with limited support for reform.

This study presents scenarios in a novel manner by providing information on one of five types of criminal conviction, but leaving out background information suggestive of any attributional dimensions. The hope is to simulate the situation the general public faces when voting on issues regarding prison reform. That is, they are not given specific information about crimes but rather must operate based on their own assumptions about the causes of crime. Participants are then presented with a series of questions about their attributions for the crime; judgments of responsibility, blame, and anger; perceptions of the purposes and goals of punishment; and opinions on prison reform. In regard to attributional pathways for this study, it is hypothesized that:

- **Hypothesis I:** Crime → Cause is perceived as internal and controllable → Person is responsible → Blame → Anger → Focus on retributive punishment goals → Opinion that prisons should be more punitive → Minimal support for prison reform

- **Hypothesis II:** Crime → Cause is perceived as external and/or uncontrollable → Person is not entirely responsible → Minimal blame → Minimal anger → Focus on utilitarian / rehabilitation punishment goals → Opinion that prisons should be more rehabilitative → Greater support for prison reform
- **Hypothesis III:** Crime → Cause is perceived as stable → High likelihood of re-offense → Focus on retributive punishment goals → Opinion that prisons should be more punitive → Minimal support for prison reform
- **Hypothesis IV:** Crime → Cause is perceived as unstable → Low likelihood of re-offense → Focus on utilitarian / rehabilitation punishment goals → Opinion that prisons should be more rehabilitative → Greater support for prison reform

Exploratory Analyses: It is additionally expected based on past research that when compared to their counterparts, participants who are young, male, conservative, Republican, or know little about the prison systems will be more supportive of retributive punishment goals, and less supportive of overall prison reform. Exploratory analyses further aim to examine how type of crime, personal experience, source of crime information, beliefs about a typical prisoner, and perceived quality of life in prison relate to attributions for crime, punishment philosophies, and support for prison reform.

METHODS

Participants

Participants were recruited in dining rooms on a small liberal arts college in Massachusetts. Of the 150 individuals who participated in this study, 31.3% ($n = 47$) were male, and 68.7% ($n = 103$) were female. Participant ages ranged from 18 to 23 years old ($M = 20$, $SD = 1.35$). Regarding race and ethnicity, 4.7% ($n = 7$) identified as Asian, 3.3% ($n = 5$) as Black or African American, 7.3% ($n = 11$) as Hispanic or Latino, 84.0% ($n = 126$) as White, and 0.7% ($n = 1$) as Other. Additionally, 58.7% ($n = 88$) of participants identified themselves as Democrats, 8.0% ($n = 12$) as Republicans, 18.0% ($n = 27$) as Independents, and 15.3% ($n = 23$) as having no political affiliation. Additionally, the mean score of personal experience with the type of crime depicted in the provided scenario was 2.60 ($SD = 2.15$) on a 7-point scale.

Materials

Criminal synopsis and related questions. To determine whether type of offense influences attributions for crime, this independent-groups quasi-experiment first presented participants with one of five short, hypothetical criminal synopses (i.e. murder, sexual offense, robbery, drug-related offense, violent assault). In each scenario, a hypothetical man named John was found guilty of committing that particular crime, and was being sent to prison. Although some of the questions that followed asked participants to consider the specific crime mentioned in his or her survey, all of the questions were uniform in all versions of the survey.

Several crime-specific questions were presented during the survey to determine whether additional factors were related to participants' attributions for the described criminal action. Using 7-point Likert scales, participants were asked to rate how serious they viewed John's criminal act from *1=Not at all serious* to *7=Extremely serious*, how severely they believed that John should be punished from *1=Not at all severely* to *7=Extremely severely*, how likely they believed John was to commit another criminal act if released from *1=Very unlikely* to *7=Very likely*, and finally, whether they had any personal experience with the type of crime mentioned in the synopsis from *1=No personal experience* to *7=A great deal of personal experience*.

Attribution questions. Three questions were adapted from Graham et al.'s (1997) study to address participants' attributions for John's criminal action. To address internality, one question asked participants to rate on a 7-point Likert scale the degree to which John's criminal action was more of represented by *1=Result of some external event* to a *7=Reflection of his internal character* on the scale. To assess controllability, one 7-point Likert scale question asked participants to rate the cause of John's criminal action from *1=Very uncontrollable* to *7=Very controllable*. In the last attribution-specific question, participants were asked to rate the stability of the cause of John's criminal act on a 7-point Likert scale from *1=Change with time* to *7=Stay the same over time*.

Because certain attributions tend to give rise to specific responses and pathways, participants were asked to answer a series of 7-point Likert scale questions about their affective reactions to the crime synopsis (Graham et al., 1997). Specifically, one question inquired about John's responsibility for his action from *1=Not at all responsible* to *7=Extremely responsibly*. Another question inquired how much participants blamed John for committing the crime from *1=Not at all* to *7=Very much*, and one more asked how angry they were with him from *1=Not at all angry* to *7=Extremely angry*.

Implied cause of John's criminal action questions. One open-ended question prompted participants to write what they suspected was the "single most likely cause of John's criminal act, recognizing that they lacked many details of the actual offense." Guided by Campbell and Muncer's (1990) most commonly cited causes of crime, a 7-point Likert scale question asked participants how likely it was that several specific factors were a cause of John's criminal behavior: "poverty/unemployment, mental illness, limited education, substance abuse, family problems, immoral character, peer/neighborhood pressure, and feelings of anger and revenge." All were rated from *1=Definitely not the cause* to *7=Definitely the cause*.

Punishment philosophies questions. To determine how attributions for crime relate to philosophies for punishment, this survey employed five questions adapted from Weiner et al.'s (1997) punishment goals study. Participants were first prompted to write what they viewed as the primary purpose of punishing John in an open-ended question. Next, four 7-point Likert scales were employed to measure utilitarian and retributive values. Retributive punishment values were measured by asking participants how much they agreed that "the purpose of punishing John should be to make him suffer as he made others

suffer,” measured from *1=Strongly disagree* to *7=Strongly agree*. Utilitarian punishment values were also measured on a 7-point Likert scale by asking participants how much they agreed that, “the purpose of punishing John should be to send the general message that criminal actions will be severely punished” (utilitarian: general deterrence); “the purpose of punishing John should be to rehabilitate him so that he can return to society as a productive member” (utilitarian: rehabilitation); and that “the purpose of punishing John should be to protect society by preventing him from committing further crimes” (utilitarian: protect society via offender isolation). This was again measured from *1=Strongly disagree* to *7=Strongly agree*.

General crime perception questions. Using a 7-point Likert scale, participants were asked to rate their perception of how severe a problem crime poses in their hometowns and in the United States as a whole from *1=Not at all a problem* to *7=A very severe problem*. Next, participants were asked to identify where they got most of their information on criminality using a multiple-choice style question with options including *Proximity, experience, or personal exposure; Media attention; Academic or professional knowledge;* or *Other*. In another multiple-choice style question, participants were asked which type of criminal (from the options *Murder, Sexual offender, Robber, Illegal drug user/dealer, Violent assaulter,* or *Other*) they envisioned when picturing a prisoner.

Knowledge of prison systems questions. Two questions were designed to assess the amount of general knowledge participants had of prison systems. Specifically, participants were asked which type of criminal they believed makes up the majority of United States prison populations with the multiple-choice options *Murderer, Sexual offender, Robber, Illegal drug user/dealer, Violent assaulter,* or *Other*. According to the Bureau of Justice, individuals convicted of drug-related offenses make up the largest percent (48%) of United States prison populations (Carson & Sabol, 2012). Another multiple-choice question asked participants about what percent of released prisoners they believed are re-convicted within the following three years (with options *<10%, 20%, 30%, 40%, 50%, 60%, 70%, 80%, >90%*). According to a 2011 yearly report done by the PEW Center on the States, on average 43.3% of prisoners in the United States re-offend within three years of release. Finally, participants were asked to rate their perceived knowledge of the United States criminal justice system on a 7-point Likert scale ranging from *1=Much less knowledgeable than average* to *7=Much more knowledgeable than average*.

Prison reform questions. In another series of questions, participants were asked to report their opinions on the issue of prison reform in the United States. Using 7-point Likert scales, participants were asked to report their likelihood of supporting a bill proposing increased funding on prison reform (measured from *1=Very unlikely* to *7=Very likely*); their opinion on the quality of life led by criminals while imprisoned (measured from *1=Very poor* to *7=Very good*); how fair they perceived the criminal justice system to be (measured from *1=Very unfair* to *7=Very fair*); and their views on the necessity of change in the prison systems (measured from *1=No need for reform* to *7=Strong need for reform*). If participants reported a need for change in the prison systems, they were next prompted with two 7-point Likert scale questions (both measured from *1=Strongly disagree* to

7=*Strongly agree*) to report how much they agreed conditions should be made stricter and more punitive (e.g. retributive punishment goals), and how much they agreed that conditions should be made more rehabilitative (e.g. utilitarian punishment goals).

Participant demographic questions. Through a series of multiple-choice style questions, a final series of questions prompted participants to provide demographic information such as gender (*Male* or *Female*); age; race (*Asian, Black or African American, Hispanic or Latino, Native American, Pacific Islander, White, or Other*, with directions to circle as many as apply); political party (*Democrat, Republican, Independent, None, or Other*); and political ideology (*Very liberal, Liberal, Slightly liberal, Middle of the road, Slightly conservative, Conservative, Very conservative*).

Procedure

A researcher approached students in dining halls at a small liberal arts college in Massachusetts. Participants read and signed a consent form briefly describing the content of the questionnaire, reassuring them that participation was voluntary, and asking them to respond as frankly and honestly as possible. The 34 question survey began with one of the five brief crime synopses, which were randomly and equally distributed amongst participants. The first 17 questions prompted participants to report their attributions for and attitudes toward the specific criminal offense described in the specific survey. The next 12 questions inquired about participants general attitudes toward the criminal justice system and prison reform. The final five questions asked participants to report individual demographic information. Upon completion of the survey, participants read a debriefing form that explained the purpose of the study, thanked them for their time, and provided contact information should they have any inquiries in the future.

RESULTS

Hypothesis I

A series of correlational analyses was performed to examine the relations among perceived seriousness of the crime; attributional dimensions; perceptions of responsibility and blame, and anger; intentions to punish; goals of punishment; and views of prison reform. (see Table 1). Hypothesis I (Crime → Cause is perceived as internal and controllable → Person is responsible → Blame → Anger → Focus on retributive punishment goals → Opinion that prisons should be more punitive → Minimal support for prison reform) was fully supported by these correlational tests. As participants rated the cause of John's crime as more internal and controllable, they also tended to find John more responsible for his criminal acts ($r(150) = .31, p < .01$ and $r(150) = .25, p < .01$, respectively). Next, as participants viewed John as increasingly responsible, they also tended to blame him more for his actions ($r(150) = .71, p < .01$), and as they blamed John more, participants reported significantly more anger toward him ($r(150) = .41, p < .01$). As expected, anger then significantly related to a focus on retributive punishment goals: specifically, as participants' anger increased, so typically did their level of agreement that a purpose of punishing John was to make him suffer ($r(150) = .36, p < .01$). In general, the more participants agreed that the purpose of punishing John was to make him suffer, the more they reported that reforms

should make prisons more punitive ($r(150) = .31, p < .01$). Lastly, the more they supported punitive reforms, the less willing they were to support increased general reform funding ($r(150) = -.26, p < .01$).

Table 1

Correlations Between Attributions, Punishment Philosophies, and Reform Opinions

	1	2	3	4	5	6	7	8	9	10	11	12	13	14
1. Seriousness	—													
2. Punishment Severity	.85	—												
3. Internality	.06	.06	—											
4. Controllability	.07	.15	-.13	—										
5. Stability	-.04	-.02	.30	.05	—									
6. Responsibility	.25	.26	.31	.25	.08	—								
7. Blame	.39	.44	.27	.21	.03	.71	—							
8. Anger	.44	.43	.11	.09	.13	.18	.41	—						
9. Likelihood to Reoffend	-.04	-.03	.04	.01	.20	-.01	.11	.18	—					
10. Punish to Make Him Suffer	.15	.19	.14	-.04	.08	.08	.20	.36	.01	—				
11. Punish to Rehabilitate Him	-.14	-.21	.09	.02	-.06	-.04	-.15	-.03	-.06	-.06	—			
12. Support Punitive Reform	.17	.23	.14	-.01	.01	.07	.28	.32	.02	.31	-.16	—		
13. Support Rehabilitative Reform	-.12	-.07	-.04	.08	-.03	.03	-.11	-.01	.05	-.23	.05	-.34	—	
14. Support Reform Funding	.01	.01	.02	-.03	-.08	-.03	-.05	.02	-.10	-.12	.16	-.26	.39	—

Note. The above table shows correlations between internality, controllability, stability, responsibility, anger, blame, re-offense expectancy, punishment philosophies, and reform variables, where significant correlations ($p < .05$) are noted with bolded font.

To more directly test the predicted links among the variables proposed in Hypothesis I, a path analysis was conducted using the EQS structural equation software (see Figure 1). Blame and responsibility were summed into a combined variable, based on past literature documenting a strong relationship between these variables and their high correlation in the present study ($r(150) = .71, p < .01$). According to attribution theory the dimensions of locus (internality) and controllability, which were found to have a slight negative covariance, precede and positively relate to responsibility; responsibility is then linked to anger. Anger is in turn positively linked with endorsement of punishing John to make him suffer, which is positively related to the desire to make prison more punitive. The punitiveness goal was negatively associated with support for increasing funding for prison reform. Though causal links cannot be established in correlational studies such as this, the data strongly support this model ($X^2 = 16.37, p = .29, Comparative Fit Index = .97$).

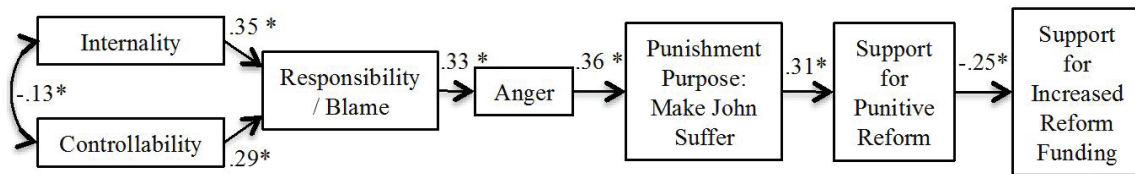


Figure 1. Above is a path model of the relations between the attributional dimensions of internality and controllability; responsibility and blame; anger; belief that that a purpose of punishing John is to make him suffer; belief that prison reform should be punitive in nature; and level of support for increased reform funding. Statistically significant paths ($p < .05$) are indicated with asterisks.

Hypothesis II

Statistical analyses just discussed in regard to Hypothesis I demonstrate support for the expected positive correlations between locus / controllability and responsibility, responsibility and blame, and blame and anger. However, Hypothesis II differs from Hypothesis I in that it predicts negative correlations between anger and support for utilitarian rehabilitation punishment, opinions that prisons should be more rehabilitative and greater support for prison reform. Contrary to Hypothesis II, anger did not significantly relate to the rehabilitative utilitarian punishment purpose ($p = .68$), nor did the rehabilitative utilitarian punishment purpose significantly correlate with the belief that prison reform should be rehabilitative ($p = .68$). In support of Hypothesis II, however, the more strongly participants agreed that reform should be rehabilitative, the more they supported increased funding for general reform ($r(150) = .39, p < .01$).

Hypothesis III

Hypothesis III (Crime \rightarrow Cause is perceived as stable \rightarrow High likelihood of re-offense \rightarrow Focus on retributive punishment goals \rightarrow Opinion that prisons should be more punitive \rightarrow Minimal support for prison reform) was largely supported by correlational tests as well. In general, the more stable participants viewed the cause of John's crime to be, the more they suspected he was at risk of re-offense upon release from prison ($r(150) = .20, p < .05$). A significant relationship was not found between likelihood of re-offense and focus on retributive punishment goals ($p = .31$). As was noted above in the findings relevant to Hypothesis I, significant correlations between increased focus on retributive punishment goals, stronger opinions that prison reforms should be punitive, and less support for reform funding added further support for Hypothesis III as well.

Hypothesis IV

Hypothesis IV (Crime \rightarrow Cause is perceived as unstable \rightarrow Low likelihood of re-offense \rightarrow Focus on utilitarian rehabilitation punishment goals \rightarrow Opinion that prisons should be more rehabilitative \rightarrow Greater support for prison reform) somewhat differs from Hypothesis III through its focus on utilitarian punishment goals and support for rehabilitative reform. As noted above, correlational tests indicate a significant relationship between the cause of John's crime being perceived as unstable and a low expected likelihood of his

re-offending upon release from prison. Likelihood of re-offense, however, did not significantly correlate with the utilitarian punishment goal of rehabilitating John ($p = .48$), nor did this purpose significantly correlate with the opinion that prisons should be more rehabilitative (as noted in the results for Hypothesis II). In support of Hypothesis IV, however, the more strongly participants agreed that reform should be rehabilitative, the more they supported increased funding for general reform (again, noted in Hypothesis II).

Exploratory Analyses

Type of Crime. Although the purpose of including five different scenarios in this study was primarily to determine if Hypotheses I through IV were generalizable across different types of crime, analysis of variance (ANOVA) tests suggest that the type of crime John was presented as having committed also related to several variables of interest. Specifically, participant ratings of seriousness ($F(4, 145) = 33.29, p < .01$); punishment severity ($F(4, 145) = 34.41, p < .01$); stability ($F(4, 145) = 4.01, p < .01$); blame ($F(4, 145) = 6.48, p < .01$); and anger ($F(4, 145) = 17.69, p < .01$) all significantly varied by crime (see Table 2).

Table 2

Means and Standard Deviations for Attributions and Punishment Philosophies by Crime

Crime Type	Murder		Sexual Offense		Robbery		Drug Offense		Violent Assault		Overall	
	<i>M</i>	<i>SD</i>	<i>M</i>	<i>SD</i>	<i>M</i>	<i>SD</i>	<i>M</i>	<i>SD</i>	<i>M</i>	<i>SD</i>	<i>M</i>	<i>SD</i>
Seriousness	6.40	0.89	5.70	1.12	3.93	1.08	4.03	1.03	5.40	0.97	5.09	1.4
Punishment Severity	6.00	0.87	5.40	1	3.5	1.01	3.97	1.03	5.30	0.99	4.83	1.35
Internality	4.07	1.44	4.20	1.58	3.5	1.28	3.77	1.01	4.00	1.41	3.91	1.36
Controllability	4.33	1.47	4.33	1.74	4.13	1.43	3.97	1.69	4.30	1.56	4.21	1.57
Stability	3.60	1.38	4.80	1.45	3.83	1.39	4.53	1.14	4.37	1.43	4.23	1.41
Responsibility	6.07	0.87	6.20	0.92	5.53	1.46	5.60	1.00	5.83	1.02	5.85	1.09
Blame	6.00	0.95	6.13	0.94	5.03	1.38	4.93	1.48	5.47	1.01	5.51	1.26
Anger	4.17	1.72	5.60	1.25	2.63	1.43	3.00	1.43	4.07	1.68	3.89	1.82
Likelihood to Reoffend	4.33	1.18	4.87	1.3	4.83	0.95	5.07	0.87	4.63	1.13	4.75	1.11
Punish to Make Him Suffer	2.93	1.64	2.87	1.66	2.07	1.11	2.27	1.46	3.07	1.86	2.64	1.59
Punish to Rehabilitate Him	5.2	1.62	5.83	1.12	5.77	1.04	6.10	1.09	5.87	1.41	5.75	1.29
Punish to Prevent Reoffense	5.53	1.33	5.90	1.12	4.9	1.58	4.97	1.45	5.63	1.43	5.39	1.43
Punish to Send a Message	5.57	1.25	5.60	1.16	5.07	1.28	4.63	1.27	5.67	1.27	5.31	1.3

Note. The above table displays 7-point Likert scale response means and standard deviations of seriousness of the crime; punishment severity; attributional dimensions; cognitive and emotional responses; likelihood of re-offense; and goals of punishment as a function of John's specific type of criminal offense. Tukey HSD significant differences are noted in results section.

Tukey HSD tests revealed that participants' ratings of seriousness, suggested punishment severity, and blame were all significantly higher when John was presented as guilty of murder, sexual assault, or violent assault compared to robbery or drug offense ($p < .05$) (see Table 2 for specific means and standard deviations). Although the attributional dimensions of internality and controllability did not vary significantly with crime ($p = .30$ and $p = .87$, respectively), participant ratings of stability did vary significantly with type

of crime. Tukey HSD tests revealed that participants rated the cause of John's crime as significantly less stable for incidents of murder than for the four other types of crime ($p < .05$). Interestingly, Tukey HSD tests also revealed that participants indicated experiencing significantly more anger toward John for committing a sexual offense than for all of the other crimes ($p < .05$); they also reported significantly more anger for murder and violent assault than for robbery and drug offense ($p < .05$).

Political Ideology. The mean score for political ideology was 2.72 ($SD = 1.28$), which suggests that as a whole, the participant group leaned toward a slightly liberal political ideology. As participant self-reported conservatism increased, so generally did suggested punishment severity ($r(150) = .22, p < .01$) and belief that reform should make prisons more punitive ($r(150) = .19, p < .05$). As participants' conservatism decreased, they tended to agree more that prison system change was necessary ($r(150) = -.18, p < .05$) and that reforms should increase rehabilitative efforts ($r(150) = -.18, p < .05$).

Prison System Knowledge. A new variable was calculated to score participant prison system knowledge as a whole. This variable considered participants' responses to the survey questions about the type of criminal they believed to make up the majority of prison populations (if participants answered "Drug related offenders," they received 7 points in the new variable, all other answers received 0); percent of released prisoners to reconvict (if participants answered 30%, 40%, or 50%, they received 7 points in the new variable, all other answers received 0); and self-reported relative knowledge of the justice system (the number participants indicated on the 7-point scale for this question was also added to the new variable, with 1=*Much less knowledgeable than average* and 7=*Much more knowledgeable than average*). Prison system knowledge was thus the sum of these recalculated variables, with larger numbers symbolizing increased justice system knowledge. The mean prison system knowledge score was 11.41 ($SD = 4.78$). Correlations indicated that as participants' prison system knowledge increased, their belief that John was likely to re-offend decreased ($r(150) = -.16, p < .05$), and their perception of the necessity of prison system change increased ($r(150) = .24, p < .01$). All other variables were unrelated to this measure.

Source of Crime Information. An ANOVA revealed that perceived necessity for change differed as a function of source of crime information ($F(2, 145) = 3.51, p < .05$). Tukey HSD tests revealed that those who gained awareness through media attention endorsed a significantly lower necessity of change ($M = 5.15, SD = 1.07$) than those who gained awareness primarily through proximity or personal experiences ($M = 5.74, SD = 1.21$) or academic or professional knowledge ($M = 5.55, SD = 1.06$) ($p < .05$).

Other Exploratory Variables. Results from this study indicate that participant gender, age, political party, experience with crime, perceptions of the causes of crime (from Muncer and Campbell's 1990 study), perception of hometown crime severity, and vision of a typical prisoner did not systematically relate to any of the four hypotheses, general punishment philosophies, or support for prison reform. Variables not considered in this study included the utilitarian punishment purposes of sending a general message and preventing

re-offense, justice system fairness, prison quality of life, and the two open-ended questions regarding the primary cause of John's crime and the primary purpose of punishing him. Results from the open-ended responses may be explored further in a future study.

Impact of Race and Age. Compared to white (majority) participants, non-white (minority) participants expressed a significantly stronger belief that reforms should make prisons more punitive ($M = 3.64$, $SD = 1.44$ for white participants; $M = 3.88$, $SD = 1.08$ for non-white participants). Additionally, white participants stated that they would support increasing funding for prison reforms significantly more than non-white participants ($M = 5.36$, $SD = 1.35$ for white participants; $M = 4.54$, $SD = 2.08$ for non-white participants). All other outcome variable responses did not significantly vary with participant race. As participant age increased, average ratings of John's criminal responsibility decreased ($r(148) = -.19$, $p < .05$), beliefs that the purpose of punishing John was to make him suffer increased ($r(148) = .17$, $p < .05$), and beliefs that reforms should make prisons more punitive increased ($r(148) = .17$, $p < .05$). All other outcome variable responses did not significantly vary with participant age.

DISCUSSION

Although all four hypotheses were at least partially supported, the results of this study most strongly supported Hypothesis I. Correlational analyses and a path model fully supported Hypothesis I, thus suggesting that the attributional dimensions of locus and controllability, perception of responsibility and blame, and feelings of anger significantly relate to retributive punishment philosophies and minimal support for increased prison reform funding. While the effects of internality and controllability on punishment philosophies have been explored in past literature, this recent finding adds two major advancements to the field of study. Firstly, it confirms that Weiner et al.'s (1997) model for crime attributions additionally applies in more naturalistic situations such as this one, where the attributions for crime are not manipulated in the survey scenarios. Secondly, this study extended Weiner's model a step further by successfully linking the retributive purpose of punishment to attitudes toward prison reform and support for funding it. This finding suggests that individuals who are unsupportive of prison reform may have formed these attitudes due to retributive and punitive perspectives on punishment based upon a tendency to make internal and controllable attributions for crime.

Contrary to the findings of previous literature, however, statistical analyses relevant to Hypothesis II did not support the prediction that the affective reactions correlated with external and uncontrollable attributions for crime were related to increased support for utilitarian rehabilitative punishment purposes (Graham et al., 1997; Weiner et al., 1997). Surprisingly, agreement that a purpose of punishing John was rehabilitating him did not significantly correlate with the belief that prison reform should be rehabilitative. This may have been due in part to the phrasing through which the survey proposed its question about the role of rehabilitation in prisons. It may be possible that participants perceived rehabilitation as an important part of incarceration, but did not necessarily agree that it was a major "purpose of punishment," as it was worded in the survey. However, as expected, results

supported the connection between thinking that reform should be rehabilitative and high levels of support for increased reform funding.

In support of Hypotheses III and IV, results from this study suggest that participants generally agreed that John was more likely to repeat-offend when they perceived the cause of his crime to be more stable. This study, then, extends Graham et al.'s (1997) findings a step further by documenting that a connection between stability and crime expectancy rates also occurs in more naturalistic settings, such as this survey in which stability was not manipulated in the scenario provided. Contrary to what was expected from Graham et al.'s (1997) previous findings, however, results from this study did not support a significant relationship between re-offense expectancy rates and any of the punishment goals. This finding is consistent with Weiner's (1997) suggestion that the dimensions of internality and controllability are of the most importance to issues of criminality. Perhaps in regard to issues of prison reform, stability and expectancy rates are less important than the affective reactions caused by internal and controllable attributions.

Interestingly, exploratory analyses indicated that several attributional factors varied by type of crime. While participants reported high levels of anger for all of the more serious crimes (sexual offense, murder, and violent assault), it was somewhat unexpected that sexual offenses were associated with significantly more anger than any other crime. Perhaps this is a reflection of the participant pool and their relative proximity to incidents of sexual assault rather than murder or generalized violent assaults. Furthermore, participants generally viewed murder as the least stable crime, perhaps because non-serial murders may be accredited by participants to acts of anger or vengeance, which may be considered intense but fleeting emotions connected to isolated events that may not necessarily be repeated (and therefore be unstable) in the future, especially if met by the typical long period of incarceration. In response to sexual offense, a crime perceived as being highly stable in this study, participants also rated a particularly high expectancy for re-offense. Furthermore, while participants reported high levels of anger for all of the more serious crimes (sexual offense, murder, and violent assault), it was somewhat unexpected that sexual offenses were associated with significantly more anger than any other crime. However, none of these differences in stability scores significantly correlated with opinions toward prison reform. This may perhaps be due to the fact that the dimensions of locus and controllability, which did not vary significantly by type of crime, were found in this study to be more important in decisions about prison reform than stability.

Extending Carroll et al.'s (1987) finding that liberalism correlated with high support for utilitarian forms of criminal punishment and conservatism correlated with high support for retributive forms, this study found that participants high in conservatism were generally more supportive of making prisons more retributive, whereas participants high in liberalism recognized a higher necessity for prison system change in general, and advocated more strongly for such change to be rehabilitation-focused. These results align with Jost, Kruglanski, Glaser, and Sulloway's (2003) meta-analysis suggesting that in terms of social attitudes, conservatives are generally more prone to resisting change and justifying inequalities. The present study's finding that liberals reported significantly stronger agree-

ment that reform is necessary suggests a desire for changing the current system; whereas, conservatives were less likely to support any change. In addition, liberal support for rehabilitative and conservative support for retribitional reform demonstrates a different ideological perspective on incarceration. It may be that liberals wish to correct the inequalities likely faced by incarcerated populations who are perceived to have suffered from unfortunate circumstances or limited opportunity before prison and will likely face discrimination upon reentry. Conservatives, on the other hand, being less concerned with inequality and external factors that cause crime may feel that punishment is what criminals deserve.

In accordance with Purvis, Ward, and Devilly's (2002) finding that individuals more knowledgeable about prison systems tend to support increased rehabilitative efforts, the current study found that increased knowledge correlated with high levels of agreement that prison system change was necessary. Surprisingly, however, there was not a significant correlation between prison system knowledge and support for rehabilitative reform. It is possible that individuals with much knowledge of prison systems support a more dynamic type of reform than one that is strictly rehabilitative, particularly if they are aware of prisons with increased gang presence, disobedience, or violence, and thus feel that reform is necessary in a more holistic sense that involves punitive measures as well.

In agreement with Regan and Fazio's (1977) conclusion that strong attitudes often stem from direct experience, this study's exploratory results confirmed that participants who were most exposed to issues of crime through proximity generally agreed more strongly that prison system reform was necessary. Other variables were less significantly impacted by source of crime information; however this may be due, in part, to the participant pool of primarily New England college students, who likely have limited exposure to crime in general. Additionally, this college-aged sample may have limited life experiences upon which to draw strong ideologies on crime and criminal punishment.

Although not a major focus of this study, several notable differences in outcome variables were found on the basis of participants' age and race. Given the fact that minorities are disproportionately represented in prison populations (U.S. Department of Justice, 2011), it is somewhat surprising that results suggest non-white participants, on average, supported punitive prison reform significantly more so than white participants. Perhaps minority college students hold a unique set of related beliefs and are less sympathetic toward others who were less successful in avoiding criminal involvement. However, though non-white participants endorsed the idea that reform should be punitive, this group also showed limited support for increasing prison reform funding; this finding may stem from a view of criminals as undeserving. Of additional interest, the outcome measures that varied with age seemed similarly contradictory. Although older participants viewed criminals as less responsible for their behaviors, they simultaneously expressed stronger beliefs that a purpose of punishment was to make criminals suffer, and reform should occur in a punitive direction. Given that punitive responses are typically intended to hold offenders responsible for their wrongdoings and deter them from future criminal involvement, this finding presents a paradox that suggests logical thought processes may play a limited role in making decisions about this emotional, anger-inducing topic (Weiner et al., 1997). These find-

ings relevant to race and age, however, should be interpreted with caution given the small age range observed (18-23) and the small percent of surveyed minorities (16%).

Despite the multiple contributions of this study, several limitations should be acknowledged. Firstly, the participant pool was rather limited in terms of participants' varying backgrounds and levels of experience with crime (be it witnessing or being directly involved). Additionally, the observed sample consisted of predominantly white, college students, all of whom attended a small, suburban private college. Had the participants represented different or more notably diverse backgrounds, perhaps their experiences with crime, criminal justice, and criminal punishment would have varied from those observed. In addition, it is likely that most of the participants were from the northeast of the U.S., and there are likely to be differences between college students in this region as compared to students and non-students in other parts of the country. As noted previously, the sample leaned toward the liberal end of the spectrum and thus may not reflect the views of the larger population of U.S. citizens. In addition, as college-aged individuals, their ideological views are likely to be less crystallized and more susceptible to change than those of an adult non-student population (Visser & Krosnick, 1998).

Although the survey gave participants an option to convey whether the majority of their knowledge about crime came from academic or professional knowledge, as undergraduate college students, none of the participants have yet studied crime in an advanced degree program or held a relevant, full-time professional position. This may have resulted in the finding of less significant differences between source of crime information and other variables in this study than is truly reflected in society.

Additionally, there are possible flaws in the survey that may have affected responses. Specifically, individuals who received a survey stating that John was found guilty of committing a "drug offense" may have interpreted this to mean distributing, smuggling, possessing, or using illegal drugs, all of which may have led to different attributions and related pathways. A more specific charge would be useful to utilize in future studies. Another potential limitation based on survey wording exists in the phrasing of the punishment purposes questions. As mentioned before, it is possible that participants may have viewed rehabilitation as, for example, an important element of the prison experience but not necessarily a purpose of punishment in general. For more topic-relevant responses, the survey might be reworded in such a way that it asks for "goals of incarcerating John" rather than "purposes of punishing him." Future studies should aim to re-administer this survey, with these minor changes, to a more diverse participant pool. Additionally, it is possible that the prison system knowledge variable could be better measured in the future, perhaps by including additional questions that examine how much participants know about the extent of rehabilitative and punitive services currently practiced in many prisons.

Results from this study have several practical applications, particularly in terms of highlighting areas of focus for successful campaigns to increase prison reform funding. Strong support for Hypothesis I suggests that highly internal and controllable attributions are a possible point of inception for prison-reform attitudes. Individuals who are strongly

against rehabilitative prison reform may ultimately hold this attitude due to internal and controllable attributions for crime, such as believing that crime is often caused by “bad people” who could do otherwise. Likewise, it seems plausible that individuals expressing such attitudes may be falling victim to Ross’s (1977) fundamental attribution error, by which they over-attribute events to internal and controllable causes. Campaigns, then, might benefit from trying to correct this problem by publicizing more external and uncontrollable causes of crime in hopes of inspiring laypeople to focus less on punitive prison reform and more on the necessity of rehabilitative reform. To increase support for reform funding, campaigns might benefit from targeting conservative populations, as they appear to have the most room for improvement in level of reform support. Furthermore, results from this study also suggest that increasing general knowledge of prison systems, perhaps through media or otherwise easily accessible forms of exposure, might also inspire more people to support funding for rehabilitative reform. In conclusion, this study suggests that the spontaneous attributions laypeople make for the causes of crime impact their level of support for prison reform funding. In attempting to gain public support for prison reform, activists should thus continue to explore how they can target attributions for crime to lead society in a more reform-supportive direction.

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