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Abstract

The Blame Attribution Scale (BAS; Anderson, Koerner, Shore, Linares, & Barchard, 2010) was created to measure the extent of blame attribution by participants who took the Levels of Emotional Awareness Scale (LEAS; Lane, Quinlan, Schwartz, Walker, & Zeitlin, 1990). The BAS focuses on four LEAS scenarios believed to be the most likely to elicit attributions of blame from participants. The BAS expands on the research of Linares, Shore, Rojas, & Barchard (2009) by scoring Self-Blame and Other-Blame separately, and by providing different scores for different degrees of blame. This study correlated the BAS with 10 scales on the Revised Conflict Tactics Scale (CTS2; Straus, Hamby, Boney-McCoy, & Sugarman, 1996) to determine the relationship between Self-Blame and Other-Blame and how participants dealt with conflict in a romantic relationship. Fifty undergraduate students (36 women, 14 men) completed theCTS2 and LEAS. Only one of the 20 correlations was statistically significant, and thus could be interpreted as a Type I error. The lack of relationships between blame and how people deal with conflict could be caused by three factors. First, it might be that BAS scoring is not clear. The Intraclass Correlation Coefficient for Absolute Agreement, ICC(A,1), was used to compare scores given by two raters. The ICC for Other-Blame was high (.87), but the ICC for Self-Blame was low (.55). In addition, the Standard Change for Absolute agreement (Barchard, 2010) was quite high for both scales, indicating that scores tended to change quite a bit from one scorer to the other. Second, the sample size was somewhat small. We only scored 50 people using BAS. With this sample size, the relationship would have to be quite strong for us to have power of more than .80. Finally, there was little variability in conflict styles and in blame attributions in the undergraduate students. The relationships would likely be stronger in a group that is having difficulty dealing with conflict, such as couples in relationship therapy. To explore how blame is related to how people deal with conflict, future research should refine the BAS scoring system, and use it with a large sample of people who are having difficulty dealing with conflict in their romantic relationships.

Introduction

Conflict is an inevitable part of any relationship. However, there are different ways to deal with conflict. Sometimes, people talk about their problems to try to find a solution. Other times, they call each other names, threaten each other, or physically hurt one another. What causes some couples to use pro-social conflict tactics and other people to use psychological aggression and physical violence? One factor might be the attributions they make. Some people blame others or themselves when things go wrong. The purpose of this study is to examine the relationship between self and other blame attribution and how people deal with conflict in a romantic relationship.

No previous research has examined the relationship between self and other blame and conflict in romantic relationships. However, several studies have examined blame itself. For example, Kuppens and Mechelen (2007) found that people are more likely to blame others if they are unable to control their own feelings of anger. Bulman and Wortman (1977) found that people are more likely to blame other people if the other person was physically present when an unfortunate event occurred. Brewin, MacCarthy, Duda, and Vaughn (1991) found that hostile people are more likely to make causal attributions. Tennen and Affleck (1990) found that people are more likely to make blame attributions when an authority figure is involved. Finally, Linares, Shore, Rojas, and Barchard (2009) showed that attributions of blame are negatively associated with the ability to regulate emotions.

These studies provide helpful insights into the nature of blame and how it can be measured. For example, it is important to distinguish blaming oneself from blaming others, and blame can be recognized by the use of causal attributions (he caused the accident), and counter factual statements (if he had not been driving so fast, the accident would not have happened), in addition to explicit statements of blame (he is to blame for the accident). However, most of these studies focused on a particular type of negative event. For example, Bulman and Wortman (1977) investigated attributions of blame for severe accidents, and Brewin et al. (1991) examined attributions of blame for schizophrenia. These events and conditions have such important consequences that they require explanation; people will necessarily try to explain how they came about. But conflict in romantic relationships is likely to focus around much smaller issues: who will wash the dishes, what movie should we watch, or where we should go for a holiday. To examine the relationship between blame attributions and conflict in romantic relationships, we wanted to measure blame in everyday situations.

Only a single study (Linares et al., 2009) has examined blame attributions in everyday situations. Linares et al. were scoring an open-ended test called the Levels of Emotional Awareness Scale (LEAS; Lane, 1991; Lane, Quinlan, Schwartz, Walker, & Zeitlin, 1990). The LEAS consists of 20 open-ended questions. For each, participants state how they and another person would feel in an emotionally evocative situation. Linares et al. noticed that some participants tended to blame other people for their misfortunes. They wondered if the tendency to make blame attributions would be related to various branches of Emotional Intelligence. To measure blame, they focused on four of the twenty LEAS items, which seemed to elicit blame attributions from some participants. These are items 2, 9, 14, and 17. They scored these items using a simple four point scale:

0   blames no one for bad things that happen

1   blames self entirely for bad things that happen

2   partially blames other people for bad things that happen (or holds them responsible), but also says that the self is partially to blame. Might blame other people or an institution or a situation. Code all of those as blaming others.

3   blames other people entirely for bad things that happen (or holds them responsible)

To examine the relationship of blame attributions to conflict in romantic relationships, we developed a new measure of blame, the Blame Attribution Scale (BAS; Anderson, Koerner, Shore, Linares, & Barchard, 2010). See Appendix A. Like Linares et al. (2009), we scored four of the LEAS items for blame attributions (item 2, 9, 14, 17). However, we used a more explicit and more nuanced scoring method. First, we measured both self and other blame. Second, we distinguished between lower and higher levels of blame. Each LEAS item was scored 0, 1, or 2, depending upon how much the participant blamed the self or other person. Third, we provided more explicit scoring rules. Linares et al. found that inter-rater reliability was relatively high (r(32) = .89, p < .001), but the correlation between blame and emotion regulation was only statistically significant for one of the two raters, suggesting that the two scorers were using different criteria when doing the scoring. Our scoring key explicitly states which words lead to which scores, and does not allow the scorer to make inferences about blame based upon statements that might indicate blame but which do not state this explicitly. For example, in the statement "I am angry and upset," the person might have been blaming themselves, another person, or the environment, but this is not stated explicitly.

Method

Participants

A total of 50 undergraduate students (14 men, 36 women) participated in this study. Participants ranged in age from 18 to 42 (mean 19.54, SD 3.65). They identified themselves as being of the following ethnicities: 66.0 % White, 14.0% Hispanic, 10.0% Asian, 2.0% Black, 2.0% Native American, and 6.0% Other.

Measures

The Levels of Emotional Awareness Scale (LEAS; Lane et al., 1990) is a 20-item, open-ended test. Each item includes an emotionally evocative scenario, which includes the self and another person, and which was designed to Elicit one of the four following emotions: anger, fear, sadness, or happiness. For each item, participants describe how they would feel and how the other person in the scenario would feel.

The LEAS was designed to measure Emotional Awareness. To score the LEAS for Emotional Awareness, the research would identify the emotion words that participants used, and calculate the Emotional Awareness scare based upon the rules in the LEAS scoring manual (Lane, 1991). In this study, we did not score the LEAS for Emotional Awareness. Instead, we scored four of the LEAS items for blame attributions.

The Blame Attribution Scale (BAS; Anderson, Koerner, Shore, Linares, & Barchard, 2010) was created to measure Self-Blame and Other-Blame in written open-ended responses. First, Self-Blame and Other-Blame are scores for each item, and then these item scores are summed to obtain the total Self-Blame and total Other-Blame scores. For each item, Self- and Other-Blame are assigned a score from 0 - 2. A score of 2 is given if the participant provided an explicit extreme statement of blame, by using at least one of the following words: fault, blame, or responsible. A score of 1 is given if there were words in the statement that indicate blame (e.g., angry, betrayed, apologize), but the participant did not use the words "fault," "blame," or "responsibility". Finally, a score of 0 is given if no blame words were used. See the Appendix for the complete BAS scoring manual.

The Revised Conflict Tactics Scale (CTS2; Straus et al., 1996) measures how people deal with conflict in romantic relationships. The items are statements about behaviors that the participant may have experienced in the past year. The 78 items are organized in 10 scales. Self Negotiation and Partner Negotiation each consist of 6 items. Self Negotiation measures how often the Self tried to negotiate and Partner Negotiation measures how often the other person tried to negotiate. Self and Partner Psychological Aggression have 8 items each. Self and Partner Physical Assault have 12 items each. Self and Partner Sexual Coercion have 7 items each. Finally, Self and Partner Injury have 6 items each. The questions are distributed in a seemingly random order throughout the survey, and questions from the each scale are separated, so they do not directly follow each other.

Procedures

The LEAS and the CTS2 were completed by participants in a supervised group setting, which took place over two sessions as part of a larger study.

Analysis

To examine the relationship between blame and conflict tactics, we correlated the blame scores assigned by the first author with the 10 CTS2 scales, using Kendall Tau-b. The Kendall Tau-b is used to calculate the correlation between interval level variables without assuming a normal distribution.

Because many people believe in "just world," we hypothesized a tendency to blame the victim of psychological and physical abuse. Specifically, we hypothesized a positive correlation between Self-Blame and Partner Physical Abuse and Partner Psychological Aggression (if my partner is beating me up, I must deserve it), and a positive correlation between Other-Blame and Self Physical Abuse and Self Psychological Aggression (I only beat up my partner because he or she deserves it). We also hypothesized a negative correlation between Other-Blame and Self Negotiation (if it's not his fault, then I should work with him to solve the problem).

A secondary purpose of this study was to examine the inter-rater reliability of the BAS scales. First, we used the Intraclass Correlation Coefficient for Absolute agreement (ICC(A,1)). The ICC has different models, types, and measures. The model we used was the two-way random model. This means all raters scored all items, and the raters were considered to be a random sample of possible raters. The type we used was Absolute agreement. This measures if different raters assigned the exact same scores. ICC(A,1) calculates how closes the pairs of scores are to a 45 degree line, not simply if they form a line like the Pearson's correlation measures. Finally, the measure we used is single measure reliability. This means that individual ratings are the unit of analysis. In the future, only a single person will do the ratings; so it is appropriate to examine the reliability of a single rater. The maximum value of ICC(A,1) is 1, which would mean that the scores agreed perfectly.

In addition, we assessed inter-rater reliability using the Standard Change for Absolute agreement (Barchard, 2010). The SC(A,1) specifies how much the score changes from one rater to the other, on average. SC(A,1) is given in the same units as the original scores. The minimum value of SC(A,1) is 0, which would mean that the scores agreed perfectly. Because BAS uses explicit scoring criteria, we hypothesized that ICC(A,1) would be high (.80 or greater) and SC(A,1) would be low (less than .5 of the standard deviation) for both Self-Blame and Other-Blame.

Results

To examine the relationship between the two blame scales and the 10 relationship conflict tactics, we calculated 20 values of Kendall's tau-b (see Table 1). The relationship between blaming yourself (Self-Blame) and injuring your partner (Self Injury) was significant (r(49) = .32, p = .022).

To determine inter-rater reliability we used an Intraclass Correlation Coefficient for Absolute Agreement, ICC(A,1), and Standard Change for Absolute Agreement, SC(A,1). Inter-rater reliability was somewhat low. The ICC for Self-Blame was low (.55), although the ICC for Other-Blame was high (.87). For Self-Blame SC(A,1) was .37. For Other-Blame, SC(A,1) was .47. Even though Self-Blame and Other-Blame were each scored from 0 to 2 on the four items so that total scores ranged from 0 to 8, this represents fairly substantial disagreement between the two raters, given that the standard deviations for these two scales were .39 and .92 (averaged across the two raters).

Table 1
Correlations of Blame with Conflict Tactics

CTS2 Scale	BAS	
	Self-Blame	Other-Blame
Reports that the Self does this		
Negotiation	.02	.02
Psychological Aggression	-.02	-.06
Physical Assault	-.01	-.06
Sexual Coercion	-.02	.01
Injury	.32*	.07
Reports that the Partner does this		
Negotiation	.02	-.06
Psychological Aggression	-.01	.08
Sexual Coercion	-.02	.03
Injury	.01	-.13
Physical Assault	-.05	-.07

* p < .05.

Discussion

The first purpose of this study was to calculate the relationships between the BAS Self-Blame and Other-Blame scales and the 10 CTS2 measures of conflict in romantic relationships. We found one significant relationship out of the 20 relationships that we examined. Our findings show that blaming yourself and injuring your partner are related. This could mean that people who blame themselves are frustrated with themselves and take their frustration out on their partner by injuring them. It could also mean they recognize that they are blame-worthy people because they injure their partner. On the other hand, because only one of the 20 correlations was statistically significant (and because this was not one of the correlations we hypothesized originally), this could be a Type I error and requires replication.

Very few participants scored above a zero on the BAS and the CTS2. This could be because of the population that we used. Our sample was made up of college students, who may be less likely to use violence and anti-social methods of dealing with conflict than group of people who are having difficulty dealing with conflict. For example, the relationships would likely be stronger if the research used a group of people who had been accused of physical or sexual abuse.

The second purpose of this study was to determine inter-rater reliability of the BAS scales. Inter-rater reliability was disappointing. Although the ICC(A,1) for Other-Blame was high (.87), the ICC for Self-Blame was low (.55). Moreover, the Standard Change for Absolute Agreement was quite high for both scales: both were quite large compared to their respective standard deviations. Inter-rater reliability might be low for three reasons. First, the low variability on Self-Blame and Other-Blame would reduce the possible size of the ICC. However, this would have no effect on the Standard Change, and thus is not the only factor. Second, although the current scoring rules are more explicit than the scoring manual used by Linares et al. (2009), some of the scoring rules may not be as clear as they could be. Finally, the two scorers had limited scoring experience. If people with more research experience or more experience with BAS scoring were used, higher agreement would likely be obtained. Future research should examine disagreements between these two raters to determine if the scoring key requires clarification.