Why Confess? The Role of Instrumental and Symbolic Motivations on Confessions in an Interpersonal Context

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Thesis Summary

The aim of the present research is to better understand the motivations driving the decision to confess in an interpersonal context. Confession is an act of acknowledging responsibility for a wrongdoing or violation of social norm. In a theoretical taxonomy I propose that individuals confess wrongdoing for either symbolic or instrumental reasons, and for individual or social purposes. These two orthogonal continua create a four-factor integrated model of motivations. That is, motivations driving the decision to confess can be individual instrumental (benefits to the self), individual symbolic (self-integrity), social instrumental (welfare of another) or social symbolic (group values and identity).

For any one or more of these motives, offenders may decide to confess or not confess depending on which they believe better serves their salient motives. Which motives are salient should depend on dispositional and situational factors, including the offender's moral identity, self-construal, as well as the trustworthiness of the confidant. Similarly, the belief that confession (rather than non-confession) can satisfy the motives should also depend on dispositional and situational factors, specifically an offender's dispositional propensity to trust and/or the trustworthiness of the confidant. In the first case, individuals with higher faith in humanity may believe that in general, people are kind, forgiving and willing to aid in resolving concerns once one has confessed. Alternatively, trustworthy confidants can be expected to be more benevolent, lenient and/or forgiving in response to one's confession and thus alleviate offender concerns.

Studies 2.1 and 2.2 established the four-factor model of confession motives through two retrospective surveys where participants recalled occasions where they transgressed against another person. Participants rated a list of 20

motivations on their relevance in driving confession or non-confession. Results showed support for the four-factor structure, while the evidence for the predicted dispositional correlates was mixed.

Study 3.1 replicated the four-factor model in the context of a hypothetical scenario and also investigated the role of trust. Participants were more likely to confess to trustworthy confidants, mediated through relevant confession motives. Studies 3.2, 3.3 and 3.4 used experimental paradigms, staging wrongdoing in the lab and online, respectively. Studies 3.2 and 3.3 confirmed that trustworthiness of the confidant affects confession, and Study 3.4 found the same for offender's propensity to trust and general faith in humanity. However, this was neither mediated nor moderated by confession motives. Study 4.4 used a 3-week diary study in which participants recorded their transgressions and relevant confession behaviours. Again, trust in the confidant was related to confession, mediated through relevant concerns yet did not moderate the relationship between concerns and confession.

Overall, these results indicate that motivations driving the decision to confess can be categorised into four major types of concerns. Offenders are more likely to confess to people they trust and if they have a higher propensity to trust. Yet, there is little evidence that trust affects how offenders resolve the motivations. Rather, trust appears to increase symbolic concerns that tend to motivate confession and reduce individual instrumental concerns that tend to motivate non-confession.

Declaration

I certify that this thesis does not incorporate without acknowledgement any material previously submitted for a degree or diploma in any university; and that to the best of my knowledge and belief it does not contain any material previously published or written by another person except where due reference is made in the text.

Carmen Yap

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