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The Effects of Self-Serving vs. Other-Serving Claims of Responsibility on Attraction and Attribution in Groups

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Reactions to others' claims of responsibility were investigated by assessing group members' evaluations of a fellow group member who took high, moderate, or low personal responsibility for a positive or negative outcome. As predicted, individuals whose attributions were self-serving (blaming others for failure or claiming credit for success) were liked less than (1) group members who allocated responsibility equally, and (2) members whose "other-serving" attributions indicated they took the blame for failure or credited others for success. These results suggest that attributions—when exchanged among group members—significantly influence social perceptions and group relations.

Recent studies of individuals' reactions to success and failure suggest that people tend to structure their private analyses of events so that they feel personally responsible for positive outcomes but blameless when outcomes are negative (Greenwald, 1980). In many instances, however, this private attributional reaction does not translate into a strongly positive public identity statement. While individuals may privately lay claim to a wide range of extremely complimentary personal attributions, their public self-descriptions (Jones, Gergen, and Jones, 1963), causal attributions (Ross, Bierbrauer, and Polly, 1974), and performance expectations (Brickman and Seligman, 1974) follow more modest lines when stated publicly. Apparently group members prefer to create an image of modesty—with the danger that they will be seen as lacking in self-confidence—rather than risk being viewed as boastfully conceited. Thus, members of cohesive groups make few self-serving attributional statements (Schlenker and Miller, 1977) and interpersonally-oriented group members are more modest and self-critical than those concerned with productivity (Gergen and Taylor, 1969).

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Although these findings suggest that group members apparently do try to create positive impressions by self-presentations of modesty, few studies have directly assessed the impact of such identity claims on the audience (Brickman and Seligman, 1974). To partially fill this gap, the current investigation contrasts three types of attributional patterns—self-serving, equalitarian, and group-serving—to illuminate the link between attributional "causal claims" (Forsyth, 1980) and personal attraction in groups. Participants in a group discussion, after recording their estimates of personal and group responsibility for a success or failure, were exposed to attributional claims supposedly supplied by others in the group. In actuality, these attributions had been previously prepared to seem (1) self-serving (taking high personal responsibility for success or low personal responsibility for failure), (2) equalitarian (attributing equal amounts of responsibility to self and other group members), and (3) group-serving (claiming little personal responsibility for successful outcomes while taking the blame for failure). After discovering what type of responsibility the other person had claimed, participants rated the claimant in terms of attractiveness, leadership, supportiveness, fairness, and cooperativeness.

Based on past research, we predict that the egocentric group members—that is,

those who claim the lion's share of the credit for success or shirk blame for failure—will be less favorably evaluated than either the equalitarian attributor or the group-serving attributor. Although the sociocentric members offer attributions that are inequitable and biased, we predict that they will be liked as much as equalitarian attributors since their attributions are "other-serving" rather than self-serving.

Method

Subjects. Seventeen males and 44 females (33 whites and 28 blacks) recruited from introductory psychology classes participated in the 2 (feedback: success vs. failure) × 3 (responsibility claimed by other: high, moderate, low) factorial experiment. Same sex subjects unknown to one another were randomly assigned to groups of four or five, and all sessions were conducted by the same male experimenter with one of three female assistants.

Procedure. Subjects were randomly assigned to one of two groups with the stipulation that a racial balance be maintained across the two groups. Groups then worked in separate rooms on a "survival exercise" that they believed would be objectively scored. Each group member acted as the leader for three minutes by directing group discussion of the relative importance of four items on a list supplied by the experimenter. Then the acting group leader ranked the items and a new list was given to the next leader. This procedure was employed to maintain equal participation rates by group members.

After the task was completed the experimenter pretended to tabulate the survival scores. Although subjects were told the scores were based on the combined inputs of each group member, one randomly chosen group was given failure feedback (20% survival probability) while the second group was given success feedback (90% probability). Subjects then completed a "Self-Rating Form" made up of (1) eight general personality items, (2) a measure of personal responsibility for the outcome, and (3) the question "How responsible do you feel the other group members (excluding yourself) are for the group's performance on the task?" Responsibility items were rated on 12-point Likert-type scales ranging from "not at all" to "extremely."

When members finished the Self-Rating Form one of the experimenters left the room for several minutes to supposedly photocopy the forms so that each subject could be given copies of the questionnaires completed by three fellow group members. (In the interim subjects worked on a filler questionnaire that included a check of the feedback manipulation.) Although all subjects believed they were reading copies of the others' responses (none reported any suspicions during a postexperimental debriefing), these forms had actually been previously prepared. All were identical except for (1) slight variations in responses on the personality items and (2) systematic variations in responses on the two responsibility items. The form representing the *high responsibility claimer* revealed that this person had taken high personal responsibility for the group performance and attributed little responsibility to others. The *moderate responsibility claimer* allocated moderate amounts of responsibility to self and to others. Lastly, the *low responsibility claimer* took little personal responsibility but attributed great responsibility to the rest of the group. Each subject received all three of the randomly ordered high, moderate, and low responsibility claimer forms.

Subjects were told that because group behavior is difficult to understand without information regarding members' perceptions, they would be asked to give their impressions of three group members. Furthermore, these evaluations were not to be connected directly and specifically to one of the other group members because (1) participants did not get a chance to get to know one another very well and (2) such perceptions could be influenced by irrelevant information (e.g., physical appearance). After examining each Self-Rating Form, subjects completed a "Co-Member Evaluation" questionnaire, which included a check of the responsibility claimed manipulation, three converging measures of interpersonal attraction,

and four ancillary items asking respondents to attribute dispositional characteristics (leadership, fairness, hostility, and competitiveness) to the stimulus person; all used 12-point Likert-type scales.

Results

Dependent measures taken prior to exposure to the stimulus person's claims were examined in 2 (feedback: success vs. failure) × 2 (race: black vs. white) ANOVAs. All other questionnaire responses were submitted to 2 (feedback) × 2 (race) × 3 (responsibility claimed: high, moderate, and low) ANOVAs, with responsibility claimed serving as a repeated measure. Analyses used a least-squares regression procedure that adjusted each effect for other effects of equal or lower order. Since preliminary analyses involving sex of subject as a factor yielded no effects, this variable was not considered in subsequent analyses.

Both the feedback and responsibility claimed manipulations were effective. Failure subjects believed they had performed poorly (M = 5.1), while success subjects thought their group had done well (M = 11.6; F (1,57) = 15.33, $p < .05$). The high responsibility claimer (HRC) was viewed as feeling more responsible than the moderate responsibility claimer (MRC), who was in turn viewed as feeling more responsible than the low responsibility claimer (LRC; Ms = 9.2, 5.9, and 2.7, respectively; F (2,114) = 115.39, $p <$ .05).

The multivariately significant interaction of responsibility claimed and feedback on the three attraction items (Pillai's Trace F (6,234) = 3.12, $p < .05$) proved to be univariately significant on these three items as well. As Table 1 indicates, the means for these dependent variables followed the predicted pattern. On all items, LRC was liked significantly less than either MRC or HRC when the group performed poorly on the task. Conversely, when the group had done well, two of the three items indicated that HRC was liked significantly less than MRC or LRC; the means followed a similar but less pronounced pattern for the third item. Hence, on two of the three items HRC was liked more in failure groups as opposed to success groups, while LRC was liked significantly more in success groups as opposed to failure groups. It is also worth noting that the self-abasing but "other-serving" group members (HRC in a failure group or LRC in a success group) were not liked any more than equalitarian attributors.

Analysis of the ancillary attributional data provides some insight into the social identities established by each type of responsibility claim. As Table 2 shows, HRC was seen as more of a leader than MRC, who was in turn seen as more of a leader than LRC. Further, HRC was viewed as more unfair, more competitive, and more hostile in many instances. Significant interactions of feedback and responsibility claimed (ps $< .05$) on two of these items—competitiveness and hostility—also indicate that the negative reaction to the HRC was particularly pronounced in the successful groups, where he or she was unfairly denying other group members their share of the credit. Although these findings suggest that the HRC created a more clearly self-serving social identity in the group context, it must also be noted that these reactions to

Table 1. Attractiveness of High, Moderate, and Low Responsibility Claimers Following Success or Failure

Item	Success Feedback			Failure Feedback			Feedback × Claim F-ratio*	p value
	HRC	MRC	LRC	HRC	MRC	LRC		
Easy to get along with	5.5^{b}	7.0^{a}	6.8^{a}	6.6^{a}	6.9^{a}	5.7^{b}	6.40	<.05
Liking for the person	5.3^{c}	6.6^{ab}	5.7^{bc}	7.5^{a}	7.3^{a}	5.3^{c}	7.19	<.05
Willingness to work with	7.7^{b}	8.8^{ab}	8.0^{b}	8.5^{ab}	9.1^{a}	6.7^{c}	4.65	<.05

* df = (2,114).

Note. For any single dependent variable, means without a common superscript differ at the $p < .05$ level. HRC = high responsibility claimer, MRC = moderate responsibility claimer, and LRC = low responsibility claimer. High means indicate easier to get along with, greater liking, and more willingness to work with again on another task, respectively.

Table 2. Attributions to High, Moderate, and Low Responsibility Claimers

Item	Claim of Responsibility			Claim Main Effect	
	High	Moderate	Low	*F*-ratio*	*p* value
Leader-follower	7.4[a]	4.4[b]	2.7[c]	46.69	<.05
Fair-unfair	6.4[b]	7.8[a]	7.1[ab]	6.73	<.05
Cooperative-competitive	4.3[b]	6.6[a]	7.1[a]	17.58	<.05
Supportive-hostile	5.8[b]	7.3[a]	7.0[a]	8.93	<.05

* df = (2,114).

Note. For any single dependent variable, means without a common superscript differ at the $p < .05$ level. Higher means indicate more a leader than a follower, more fair than unfair, more cooperative than competitive, and more supportive than hostile.

the HRC were primarily specific to white group members. Race interacted with responsibility claimed (ps < .05) on the fairness, competition, and hostility items, and in each case whites rejected the HRC while blacks did not differentially evaluate HRC, MRC, or LRC.[1]

Discussion

Predictions concerning the interpersonal implications of attributions were supported, suggesting that causal claims can play a major role in the determination of group cohesion and stability. Group members who seemed to be trying to place themselves in the best light possible at the expense of the rest of the group were not well liked by their fellow group members. Among successful groups, the high responsibility taker was perceived to be more of a leader, but was less well liked and judged as hostile and competitive. Although comembers who blamed the rest of the participants for the group's failure were not viewed as excessively hostile or competitive, they were rated as less attractive than either the moderate or high responsibility takers. This rejection of the responsibility "shirker" is consistent with Tetlock's (1980) finding that teachers who accept the blame for a student's failure are more positively evaluated by observers than are teachers who externalize the failure by blaming the student. Apparently, in classrooms and small cooperative groups defensive attributions (blaming others) lead to more negative appraisals than counterdefensive attributions (accepting the blame).

The other-serving group members, in contrast, were better liked than the self-serving attributors even though their attributions were objectively (although perhaps not perceptually; see footnote 1) inaccurate. However, the group members who ostensibly took all the blame for a failure or shunned responsibility for success were not liked any better than the equalitarian attributors. Hence their excessively modest claims did not produce any more liking than simply making certain that responsibility for the outcome was equitably shared. This failure to find heightened attraction for the sociocentric group member stemmed, in all likelihood, from the salience of the equalitarian atmosphere, which was stressed in the group during the task performance. The situation was constructed so that each participant contributed equally during the group's clearly cooperative and interdependent activities. Speculating, it may be that less liking for the equalitarian group member and more liking for the sociocentric group member would be observed if the group was less explicitly cooperative, if inputs were not perfectly equated, or if these attributional claims in some way influenced group members' outputs (Forsyth and Mitchell, 1979).

These findings lend general support to the experimental hypotheses, but there were racial differences: the predicted at-

[1] Exploratory statistical tests were run to examine the relationship between self-ratings and reactions to the other attributors, but few significant findings emerged. Although group members tended to take more responsiblity for success than failure (Ms = 9.6 and 8.1; F (1,57) = 3.47, $p < .07$), the correlations between own responsibility and the attractiveness ratings for the three stimulus persons were all nonsignificant.

tributional patterns were obtained only for white subjects. Although all participants attributed greater leadership potential to group members who took more responsibility than they attributed to the rest of the group, only whites felt that high responsibility claims suggested unfairness, hostility, and competitiveness. While the race effects could have stemmed from the greater uncertainty, anxiety, and self-consciousness of the black subjects in the racially heterogeneous groups (Katz, Roberts, and Robinson, 1965), the explanation of these unexpected but provocative findings requires additional research.

Several methodological limitations of the current exercise should also be clearly noted. First, the method by which responsibility claims were communicated to the subjects, combined with the repeated measures design, could have focused participants' attention on this variable and hence constrained their responses. The responsibility claims were in some cases very extreme, and subjects could have been reacting not to the self-serving nature of the attributional claims but to bizarre, inaccurate, and perhaps even ridiculous-seeming perceptions of the other group member. Future research could profitably introduce causal claims in a more credible fashion to enhance external validity.

Second, subjects' responses may have been determined in part by demand characteristics; that is, the group members may have become cognizant of the variations in responsibility claimed and could have responded simply to confirm the expectations of the experimenter. A number of considerations rule against this "demand" interpretation: (1) no method × race interaction to account for the different effects for blacks and whites occurred; (2) an elaborate cover story was provided to justify the purpose of the research; (3) responsibility claims were embedded in a number of personality questions, which disguised the manipulation; (4) the use of photocopies of original response sheets convinced all the subjects that they were reading the actual responses of group members; and (5) the meticulous final interview with respondents revealed no evidence of suspicion or hypothesis awareness. Nonetheless, some demand characteristics present in the situation may have gone undetected.

In spite of these limitations, the findings still underscore the interpersonal function of attributions in groups (Forsyth, 1980). Although attribution theory emphasizes individualistic cognitive processing, in many instances attributions result from and in turn influence group dynamics. Fellow group members are a frequently used source of causal information when behavioral cues are ambiguous or nonexistent, and the current study demonstrates how inconsistency between group members' shared attributions can limit attraction and cohesiveness. Future research could fruitfully explore other intriguing questions concerning attributions in groups, including: Do naturally occurring work-groups use interpersonal attributions to better understand and control their group's performance? How do interpersonal attributions help groups cope with failure? What effects do in-group/out-group divisions have on attributional conclusions? and What happens to the attributional deviate in groups?

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Ambiguity and Bias in the Self-Concept

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The implications of the ambiguity of an attribute for biases in self-concepts are examined. College football players evaluated themselves on seven types of athletic ability. Their coaches rated the players on these abilities and on how much self-confidence the players had. It was hypothesized that the players' self-confidence would be a better predictor of self-ratings for the ambiguous abilities than the unambiguous abilities. In addition, it was hypothesized that players would be more likely to over-rate themselves on the ambiguous abilities than on the unambiguous abilities. These hypotheses were supported. The evidence suggests that self-evaluations of ambiguous attributes are largely a function of prior self-esteem and the desire to maintain that self-esteem.

When persons evaluate themselves, they rely to some extent on their observations of their own performances and to some extent on the evaluations of those whose opinions they trust. However, there are reasons to expect biases in self-evaluations. First, persons may be more likely to evaluate themselves favorably in order to maintain their self-esteem (see Bradley, 1978 for a review). Second, the general attitude that persons have about themselves may affect how they evaluate themselves on particular characteristics. Persons who have high self-esteem or self-confidence may evaluate themselves more favorably than persons with low self-esteem or self-confidence, even when their performances are the same. This may be the result of biased attention or memory processes that lead persons to observe what they expect to observe (Gergen, 1971), or it may be the result of motivation for cognitive consistency or balance (Heider, 1958).

We expect that the more ambiguous a characteristic, the more these biases are likely to operate. It is difficult to ignore information about performances that are clear-cut. However, when performances are ambiguous, they give people the opportunity to either evaluate themselves more favorably, or to see themselves the way they usually do. In other words, people are likely to see either what they want to see or what they expect to see, based on their self-esteem.

There is one study we are aware of that examines the implication of ambiguity for inflating self-appraisals. Sherwood (1967) examined the effect of the consensus of opinion about a person's traits on that person's self-evaluation on these traits in a training group. He found that there was a lower correspondence between the evaluations of self and others, and more favorable self-evaluations, when there was high variance in the way others evaluated a trait. We are aware of no studies that ex-

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