
The Impact of Inhibiting or Facilitating Causal Factors on Group Members' Reactions After Success and Failure

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Group members' attributions and self-presentations following performance were examined by giving groups working under the direction of an expert or novice leader either success or failure feedback. As predicted, (a) members of failure groups led by a novice reacted as positively as the success-group members, while (b) members of failure groups led by an expert were more likely to seek external explanations for their failure, reported less satisfaction with their group, and suffered more negative affective reactions. These findings are explained in terms of augmenting and discounting attributional processes: the presence of a facilitating factor in the group exacerbated the negative consequences of failure while the identification of an inhibiting factor ameliorated these consequences.

While past research indicates that group failure can precipitate negative interpersonal dynamics (e.g., Carron and Chelladurai, 1981; French, 1941; Worchel et al., 1977; Zander, 1971), a limited amount of evidence indicates that groups are able to insulate themselves attributionally from some of the pernicious consequences of failure. For example, Forsyth and Schlenker (1977) found that relative to members of successful groups, individuals in failing groups assigned less responsibility to themselves, to the average group member, and to the group as a whole. Furthermore, Worchel and Norvell (1980) found that discovering a plausible inhibiting factor minimizes some of the negative consequences of failure. In this research two previously competing groups cooperated on a task under either ideal or poor environmental conditions. While intergroup attraction increased whenever the cooperative effort yielded success, intergroup attraction after failure increased only if subjects felt that the poor environmental conditions inhibited their performance. Apparently the environmental conditions provided group members with a nonthreatening explanation of their failure, eliminating the need to blame the other group (Norvell and Worchel, 1981).

These findings suggest that attributions in groups sometimes fulfill a self-presentational

function (Forsyth, 1980; Schlenker, 1980). Faced with an impression management dilemma brought about by failing, group members account for the poor performance by noting the impact of inhibiting causal factors. Although in intergroup contact situations these attributional accounts generally focus on the other group, any performance-inhibiting factor—such as the difficulty of the task, the environmental conditions, or the leader's actions—would help the group members discount the negative feedback (Kelley, 1971). In contrast, any performance-facilitating factor—such as the ease of the task or the leader's considerable skill—would worsen the group's impression management dilemma. Such factors should, according to the augmenting principle (Kelley, 1971), exacerbate the negative consequences of failure.

These attributional processes were examined by asking group members to perform a series of tasks under the direction of an experimenter/leader. For half of the groups, the leader was described as extremely experienced in groups, and hence should be perceived to be a facilitator of successful outcomes. For the other groups the leader was described as possessing relatively little experience in working with groups. After the tasks, the groups were led to believe that their performance was either a success or a failure, and the attributional, interpersonal, affective, and attitudinal consequences of this feedback were then assessed. In contrast to previous research, groups' attributions were examined rather than individuals' attributions by recording and analyzing the causality statements made by group members after receiving feedback.

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Major predictions focused primarily on the difference between the failure groups with an experienced leader and the remaining three conditions. Although failure should lead to more negative attitudes toward the group and its leader, an inexperienced leader provides failing groups with an excusing factor. Rather than having to accept the blame for the failure, members of this group can discount the failure and thereby avoid its negative interpersonal consequences. In contrast, the failing groups led by the experienced experimenter should react very strongly to the feedback since they failed despite the presence of a performance-facilitating force. Therefore, relative to subjects in other conditions the members of this group should be more likely to (a) deny responsibility for the outcome during the group discussion, (b) express dissatisfaction with the group, (c) form a more negative attitude toward the group, and (d) experience a more negative affective reaction.

METHOD

Subjects

Seventy-six students recruited from introductory psychology classes served as members of the 16 groups randomly assigned to one cell of the 2×2 factorial design. Groups varied in size from 4 to 7, and all groups included both males and females. Sessions lasted approximately one hour, and all participants received course credit. One male and one female experimenter each conducted 2 replications of the full design.

Procedure

After subjects seated themselves around a rectangular table, the experimenter (a) described experiential group learning, (b) stated that he or she would be leading the group in a series of experiential tasks, and (c) noted that an observer was watching the group through a one-way mirror. Subjects then signed consent forms and completed two preliminary "ice-breaker" tasks: One involved disclosing their personal feelings regarding their name, and one called for interviewing and introducing another person in the group.

After these two preliminary exercises the experimenter manipulated the level of leader experience. For groups assigned to the *experienced leader condition*, the experimenter urged the members to enjoy themselves while adding that he or she had worked with groups for several years: "I've had a lot of experience in leading groups and have studied them extensively in my graduate training. I feel good whenever I can use my experience and ability to facilitate meaningful group interactions." In

the *novice leader condition*, the experimenter also urged members to enjoy themselves, but added: "I haven't had a lot of experience in leading groups and haven't had much chance to study them. Someday I'll be experienced enough to facilitate meaningful group interactions."

Following this manipulation the group completed a communication exercise that required considerable interaction among group members as they sought to pool information to solve a murder mystery. When they completed the exercise, the experimenter left the room under the pretense of getting more questionnaire forms, and on returning introduced the false feedback from the observer. Although no one was, in fact, watching through the mirror, the experimenter stated that the observer had finished evaluating the group. For groups receiving *success feedback*, he or she stated that "Professor Schutz [the observer] rates this particular group on the positive side of the scale. Dr. Schutz feels the group is a very successful one and ranks it very highly on a number of variables." In contrast, groups receiving *failure feedback* were told that the observer rated the group on the negative side of the scale and "feels the group is a fairly unsuccessful one and ranks it fairly low on a number of variables." While delivering the feedback the experimenter also gave the group a copy of an evaluation form supposedly completed by the observer. For successful groups the form contained high marks on such dimensions as level of enthusiasm, care taken in maintaining good intragroup relations, and authenticity of communications, while failure groups received low marks on these dimensions. Lastly, the observer had also apparently written comments that were extremely positive ("Very successful group! The members demonstrate good interpersonal abilities on all the tasks and seem to be profiting from the experience") or extremely negative ("An unsuccessful group! The members don't demonstrate good interpersonal abilities on any of the tasks and seem to be profiting very little from the experience").

After receiving their feedback, group members completed a questionnaire form measuring the effectiveness of the manipulations, satisfaction with the group experience, attitude toward the group, affective responses, and perceptions of the leader. All items used 9-point response scales, with higher scores referring to more positive evaluations and reactions. Once all had completed this form, the experimenter unobtrusively turned on a video camera located behind the one-way mirror. He or she then asked the group members to discuss their reactions to the feedback received

from the observer. The experimenter did not enter into this discussion until, after five minutes, he or she requested any final comments before turning off the video camera. (Pretesting indicated that most groups would spend 3 to 4 minutes on such discussions.) Lastly, the experimenter probed for suspiciousness (all subjects accepted the validity of the manipulations) and debriefed the group concerning the actual purposes of the research.

RESULTS

Groups, rather than individuals, served as the unit of analysis for both observational and questionnaire data. For those variables assessed through observation, coders made no attempt to link statements to particular group members, but simply totaled the number of statements made during the group interaction. For questionnaire data, after preliminary analyses revealed no sex differences, group scores were generated by averaging group members' responses together. These group-level scores were then examined in 2 (Leader: expert vs. novice) \times 2 (Outcome: success vs. failure) analyses of variance. In addition, because the central hypothesis predicted differences between the failure/expert leader condition and the other three groups, a priori contrasts were also conducted when appropriate.¹

Manipulation Checks

All manipulations were effective. A main effect of leader expertise ($F(1, 12) = 17.05, p < .01$) on the item "The facilitator is experienced-inexperienced" indicated the expert leader was perceived to be more experienced than the novice leader. The means for this item were 8.5 and 7.1, respectively. Furthermore, a main effect of feedback ($F(1, 12) = 4.87, p < .05$) on the item "The group experience was successful-unsuccessful" demonstrated that the success groups indeed felt more successful than the failure groups. The respective means were 8.2 and 7.1. No other effects reached significance on these items.

Interpersonal Attributions

The five-minute group discussion was coded using an adaptation of Schönbach's (1980)

category system, which organizes 48 account statements into 4 general categories: concessions; excuses; justifications; and refusals. First, to improve the ease of coding, over one-half of Schönbach's account statements were eliminated since they did not apply in the current context (e.g., "offer of restitutions or compensations"). Second, the remaining statements were grouped into three general categories: responsibility claims ("concessions"); nonresponsibility claims ("excuses" and "justifications" were combined since coders had difficulty distinguishing between these two types of accounts); and statements questioning validity ("refusals"). The responsibility category included 7 statements, including "explicit acknowledgment of feedback," "expression of appropriate emotion regarding feedback," and "appeal to effort as a contributor to outcome." The nonresponsibility category included 8 statements such as "refusal to acknowledge responsibility," "emphasis on positive consequences," and "interprets feedback in view of tasks." The 6 statements questioning validity involved "claiming failure did not occur," "questioning criteria," and "profession of no concern or remorse." Third, each discussion was previewed so that compound causal claims—ones that used several accounting tactics—could be broken down into single statements. Fourth, two trained raters, working independently, coded each statement into one of the 21 categories. (Although these coders remained blind to one of the independent variables—leader's experience—the group's performance feedback was obvious from the content of the discussion.) Using this method, the raters achieved 96% agreement; disagreements were resolved by discussion prior to analyses. In addition, one group (success/novice leader condition) was not videotaped due to equipment failure.

Responsibility. The main effect of feedback reached significance on summed responsibility claims ($F(1, 11) = 5.91, p < .05$). As the means shown in Table 1 indicate, successful groups were much more likely to claim responsibility for their outcome than failure groups. Table 1 also shows that this overall effect was somewhat stronger in groups led by a novice rather than an expert. Post hoc contrasts revealed that the novice/success group differed significantly from the novice/failure group ($F(1, 11) = 5.76, p < .05$), but that the difference between the two expert conditions was nonsignificant ($F(1, 11) = 0.98, p < .30$). Given that the interaction was nonsignificant, however, these differences should be interpreted with caution.

Nonresponsibility. The interaction of feedback and leader expertise reached significance

¹ Preliminary analyses using individuals nested in groups as the unit of analysis revealed a significant effect of group (groups within treatment). As Anderson and Ager (1978) note, this effect suggests that the responses of subjects assigned to the same group were statistically interdependent. Therefore, groups rather than individuals were used as the unit of analysis.

on summed statements of nonresponsibility ($F(1, 11) = 4.64, p < .05$). Planned contrasts indicated that, as predicted, failure groups led by an experienced leader used significantly more accounting tactics ($F(1, 11) = 10.81, p < .01$) than groups in all the other conditions.

Questioning validity. As with claims of responsibility, only a main effect of feedback reached significance on groups' affirmations of the validity of the feedback ($F(1, 11) = 29.83, p < .001$). Table 1 indicates that failure groups were much more likely to question the validity of their feedback.

Reactions to Success and Failure

Satisfaction. Three bipolar adjectives (e.g., "enjoyable-unenjoyable," "worthless-worthwhile") were summed to yield an overall satisfaction measure (alpha of internal consistency = .86). Analyses revealed a significant main effect of feedback ($F(1, 12) = 5.80, p < .05$) and a significant planned contrast of the expert/failure condition and the other treatments ($F = 5.17, p < .05$). As the means shown in Table 1 indicate, subjects were least satisfied if their leader was an expert and the group failed.

Attitude toward the group. Analysis of the sum of four items assessing overall attitude toward the group (e.g., "I am very much attracted to the group" vs. "I am not attracted . . ."; "I would be willing to work with this group again in the future" vs. "I would not be willing to . . ."; alpha = .78) revealed a feedback main effect ($F(1, 12) = 5.94, p < .05$). Table 1 indicates that members of successful groups rated their group more positively than members of failure groups. On this particular scale, however, the expert/failure group did not differ significantly from the other groups.

Affective reactions. The affect scale, which was composed of three bipolar adjective pairs (e.g., "contented-discontented," "happy-unhappy"; alpha = .97), suggested that members of failure groups experienced a more negative affective reaction than members of

successful groups ($F(1, 12) = 8.03, p < .05$) (see Table 1). Again, however, the expert/failure group mean was significantly more negative than the means for the remaining conditions ($F(1, 12) = 8.49, p < .05$).

Perceptions of the leader. Analysis of the sum of three items assessing subjects' appraisal of their leader (e.g., "a good leader—a bad leader," "helpful—not helpful"; alpha = .87) revealed main effects of both feedback and expertise ($F(1, 12) = 10.68$ and 6.28 , respectively, $ps < .05$). As shown in Table 1, the leader received more positive evaluations from members of successful groups and when he or she was described as an expert. The planned contrast between the expert/failure condition and the other conditions was not significant.

DISCUSSION

Extending previous findings, these results indicate that some of the negative consequences of group failure can be partially ameliorated attributionally. Although past research suggests that members of failing groups tend to insulate themselves from the negative consequences of failure by blaming other group members (e.g., Schlenker, 1975), in the current study the leader provided a convenient attributional outlet. On three key measures—denials of responsibility, satisfaction with the group, and affective responses—groups that failed while working under the direction of an inexperienced leader responded as positively as the successful groups. As the augmentation principle predicts, the negative consequences of failure were most pronounced when the high expertise of the leader suggested that the group members themselves were to blame. These findings, together with previous studies of intergroup relations (e.g., Worchel and Norvell, 1980), suggest that the existence of inhibiting factors may have positive consequences. If the group's performance leads to failure, these factors provide a convenient excuse for failure, and thus members may be less likely to blame one another. In contrast, if success ensues, the

Table 1. Group Means across the Four Experimental Conditions

Item	Success Groups		Failure Groups	
	Expert Leader	Novice Leader	Expert Leader	Novice Leader
Responsibility	5.25	7.00	3.25	1.75
Nonresponsibility	4.75	4.33	9.50	4.50
Questioning Validity	.50	.00	6.75	7.00
Satisfaction	24.63	24.65	21.65	23.09
Attitude	32.71	31.70	29.53	29.54
Affect	24.44	23.69	19.47	22.05
Leader	26.00	24.46	24.10	23.29

group members are then able to congratulate themselves on a positive outcome despite negative conditions.

Furthermore, outcome alone had a strong impact on several dependent measures: questioning validity; attitude toward the group; and appraisal of the leader's skill. These findings, which are also consistent with previous work (e.g., Forsyth and Schlenker, 1977; Worchel and Norvell, 1980), suggest that failure, even when discounted, can lead to dysfunctional group dynamics. In this study, however, these variables were assessed before, rather than after, the group's discussion of the cause of the outcome. Although no evidence concerning the possible effects of group discussion on individuals' reactions can be gleaned from the data, even these detrimental effects of failure may have been alleviated if subjects had been given the opportunity to exchange interpersonal attributions before their measurement.

These findings underscore the impact of attributional processes on group dynamics by indicating that failure groups sought to deny responsibility for their performance when the leader's shortcomings did not provide a ready-made excuse. In the language of impression management (Schlenker, 1980), the group members were more likely to account for their failure when a facilitating factor worsened their dilemma. However, while failing groups appeared to use accounts to shore up a group image damaged by an unaccounted-for failure, the responsibility claims offered by successful groups were more veridical than group serving. According to Schlenker (1980), after success, individuals in some instances seek to increase their personal link to the outcome by using "acclaiming" tactics—claims of responsibility for producing the outcome. Applied to the current study, this linkage hypothesis predicts that the members of the successful groups led by an expert leader should have been most likely to use acclaiming tactics since a strictly rational causal analysis would suggest that the leader—and not the group—was responsible for the outcome. Unexpectedly, however, the members of these groups did not use significantly more acclaiming tactics than the members of the novice leader/success groups.

Unfortunately, several explanations can account for the failure to obtain evidence of attributional acclaiming. For example, pressures to account for failure may be far stronger than pressures to acclaim success, for protecting a social identity may be more critical than enhancing one. On the other hand, the public nature of the claims may have prevented acclaiming since subjects—fearing that claiming success would appear too boastful or conceited in the eyes of their comrades or the

experimenter—chose to seem modest rather than group enhancing (Forsyth et al., 1981). In any case, research is needed to further explore the role played by the audience in determining when accounting and acclaiming tactics will be utilized.

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