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Attributional Perceptions of Dating Outcomes

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Abstract

Attributional responses made by undergraduate college students to interpersonal relationship outcomes were investigated to determine if the actor-observer effect exists in a similar manner for successful and unsuccessful dating situations, or if the effect is mediated by an ego-serving bias tendency. Participants rated the influence of the Weinerian Factors of ability, effort, luck and task difficulty on successful and unsuccessful dating outcomes in terms of Self, an Other Male, or an Other Female. Participants attributed a significantly greater amount of internal responsibility to the others as compared to self for unsuccessful dating outcomes but not for successful outcomes. Additionally, participants, when responding to Self outcomes, were shown to take more responsibility for successful situations as compared to unsuccessful situations. This general pattern was extended to Other Female, but not to Other Male.

Fritz Heider, the founder of attribution theory, proposed that in an attempt to explain the reasons for the behavioral outcomes of self and others, individuals will attribute outcomes to either internal or external causes (1958). Bernard Weiner (1972) extended Heider’s classification scheme by postulating that internal attributions include ability and effort, while external attributions include task difficulty and luck.

Within the realm of attribution research there are two basic patterns of attributional responses that have been described: the actor-observer effect (Jones & Nisbett, 1972) and the ego-serving or self-serving bias (Miller & Ross, 1975). According to the actor-observer effect, Jones and Nisbett suggest that individuals causal explanations for behavioral outcomes of other individuals will emphasize internal attributional factors to a greater extent than the causal explanations about self. An everyday example of the actor-observer effect can be seen by comparing an individual’s attributional explanation of another person’s slip and fall to his or her attributional explanation of his or her own slip and fall. In this comparison an individual who observes another person fall might determine that the other person fell because he or she is clumsy, whereas an individual would ascribe their own falling to a slick floor or other external reasons. Aside from anecdotal examples, the actor-observer effect has been demonstrated by a number of research studies including Kelly’s (1973) investigations of the actor-observer effect using multi-observational scenarios, Snyder’s (1976) research of self-monitoring and the actor-observer effect, and Watson’s (1982) research supporting the Jones and Nisbett actor-observer effect. Additionally, Robins, Spranca, and Mendelsohn (1996) found that individuals, in dyadic social interactions, rated internal personality factors as having influence on their partner’s behavior than on their own behavior. The general pattern of
findings across these studies strongly supports the tendency of individuals to ascribe greater internal causation to the behavioral outcomes of others as compared to self.

With respect to ego-serving bias theory, Miller and Ross (1975) proposed that individuals take a disproportionate amount of credit for their own successes but assume little responsibility for their failures. This tendency can be seen when considering an individual's response to academic success and failure. In this situation, according to the ego-serving bias theory, an individual would take credit for his or her academic success, but not his or her academic failure. The general ego-serving bias prediction was confirmed by the research of Weiner (1986), which addressed academic success and failure. Weiner found that students' successes were attributed more internally, while their failures were more externally attributed. Similarly, Green, Bailey, Zinser, and Williams (1994) found that students ascribed greater cause to internal factors of ability and effort for successful academic outcomes as compared to unsuccessful outcomes, whereas in response to unsuccessful academic outcomes students ascribed greater cause to the external factors of luck and task difficulty as compared to successful outcomes. This general ego-serving pattern has also been found across other situations. For example, Lau and Russell (1980) investigated causal attributions in sports and found that team wins were typically attributed more to internal factors, while team losses were attributed more to external factors. Similarly, Morgan, Griffin, and Heyward (1996) found that track athletes perceived individual success (as compared to failure) as more internal, controllable, and stable. Additionally, Watt and Martin (1994) found a self-serving bias pattern in the explanations college students provided for their performance outcomes on a computerized response latency task. These consistent patterns have been interpreted as reflecting individuals' tendency to protect or enhance their self-perception (e.g., Green, et al., 1994; Weiner, 1986; Lau & Russell, 1980).

Clearly, predictions drawn separately from the actor-observer-effect and ego-serving bias theory have been supported by empirical research and can be seen in everyday anecdotal experiences. However, an interesting possible qualification of the actor-observer effect can be expected when considering the potential mediating impact of the ego-serving bias tendency. This potential mediation can be seen when considering the possible differential actor-observer response patterns for successful versus unsuccessful behavioral outcome situations. If the actor-observer effect is mediated by an ego-serving bias tendency, one would expect the actor-observer effect (i.e., greater internal attributional response for other as compared to self) to be present for unsuccessful situations; however, an opposite pattern would be expected for successful situations. These potential patterns can be imagined for any number of real-world situations ranging from academic and workplace performance outcomes to athletic competition and interpersonal relationship outcomes. For example, one can imagine an individual who blames his or her unsuccessful mid-term exam performance on the difficulty of the test, while giving credit to a classmate for an unsuccessful exam performance by pointing to the classmate's lack of effort. Conversely, one can imagine an individual who takes credit for his or her successful mid-term exam performance by pointing to his or her own hard work, while not giving credit to a classmate for a successful exam performance by pointing to the classmate's luck.

Given the possible interaction between these two tendencies and the potential application of this interaction to real-world behavioral outcomes, the purpose of our study was...
to determine if the actor-observer effect exists in a similar manner for both successful and unsuccessful dating outcome situations, or if the actor-observer effect is mediated by an ego-serving bias tendency. Our study addressed these issues by asking participants to make attributional responses to successful and unsuccessful scenarios concerning dating relationship outcomes about themselves (Self), another male (Other Male), or another female (Other Female). We hypothesized that the attributional response pattern associated with the actor-observer effect would be mediated by an ego-serving bias tendency. Therefore, we specifically predicted that participants would respond with greater internal attribution for their own dating success as compared to the dating success of others, while responding with less internal attribution for their own unsuccessful dating as compared to the unsuccessful dating of others. Additionally, we predicted that participants would respond with greater internal attribution for their own dating success as compared to their own dating failure.

**METHOD**

**Participants**

One hundred thirty-nine undergraduate college students (56 men and 83 women with a mean age of 20.7 years) voluntarily participated in the study. They were enrolled in various summer school courses at a private comprehensive college.

**Measures**

**Attribution perception packet:** A research packet was developed which included an informed consent, two hypothetical dating scenarios, an attribution measure, and demographic questions.

**Hypothetical dating scenarios:** Following the informed consent, one of three possible dating scenarios was presented. One involved Self, the second involved a Male Other, and the third involved a Female Other. Each scenario included both a successful and an unsuccessful dating situation. For example, each successful scenario involved the participants imagining themselves or another in a successful relationship, whereas the unsuccessful scenario involved imagining unsuccessful dating relationships.

**Attributional rating scales:** Below the hypothetical dating scenarios, the attributional scale was presented. The scale listed Weiner’s (1972) four causal attributional factors of ability, effort, luck, and task difficulty. Participants rated their perception of how much each factor influenced the success or failure of the individual on a 7-point Likert scale. Following these responses, participants responded to demographic questions concerning age, gender, and academic class level.

**Procedure**

In a variety of classes, during a given class period, the course professor introduced the experimenter. The experimenter proceeded to explain that the purpose of the study was to determine people’s perceptions of reasons involved in dating relationship outcomes. Students were informed that their participation was voluntary. Then students were given one of three different packets (i.e., Self, Other Male, or Other Female) based on prior block random assignment. Each participant responded to the informed consent, provided attributional responses to the two dating scenarios (i.e., Successful, Unsuccessful), and then responded to the demographic questions described above.

**Experimental Design and Statistical Analyses:** The resulting experimental design was a 3 X 2 X 2 mixed factorial design. The first factor was the between-subjects factor, actor status (i.e., Self, Other Male, and Other Female). The second factor was the within-subjects factor, dating outcome (i.e., Successful, Unsuccessful). The third factor was gender of the research participant. The dependent variables were internality (computed as the total of the response scores made for the ability and effort factors) and externality (computed as the total of the response scores made for the luck and task difficulty factors). A 3 (Actor Status) X 2 (Situation Outcome) X 2 (Gender) mixed model factorial analysis of variance was used to analyze both the attribution internality and externality scores.

**RESULTS**

**Internal Attribution Findings**

Results failed to show a significant main effect for actor status (F(2, 127) = 2.58, p>.05). However, a significant
interaction between actor status and situation outcome was found (F(2, 127) = 4.24, p<.05). The interaction, which can be seen in Table 1, shows that participants attributed a significantly greater amount of internal responsibility to the other male and female as compared to self for the unsuccessful dating outcome. The simple effect of actor status for unsuccessful situations was significant (F(2, 127) = 4.63, p<.05). However, as suggested by the pattern of means, the simple effect of actor status was not statistically significant for the successful situation (F(2, 127) = .26, p>.05).

Additionally, results revealed a significant main effect for situation outcome (F(1, 127) = 19.47, p<.01). As shown in Table 1, there was an overall tendency to ascribe more internality for successful as compared to unsuccessful outcomes. However, as reflected by the interaction between actor status and situation outcome, the pattern of ascribing greater internality for success as compared to failure was most apparent for Self attributions and attributions for Other Female, but not for Other Male. The simple effect for situation outcome was significant for both the Self (F(1, 46) = 13.83, p<.01) and Other Female (F(1, 127) = 7.66, p<.01), but not for Other Male (F(1, 127) = .13, p>.05).

There was no statistically significant three way interaction between Actor Status, Actor Outcome, and Gender (F<1).

External Attribution Findings
As shown in Table 2, non-significant patterns of means associated with externality scores were found. There was no main effect for Actor Status (F<1). There was no Actor Status X Situation Outcome interaction (F<1), and there was no Actor Status X Situation Outcome X Gender interaction (F<1).

DISCUSSION
The results demonstrated clear support for ego-serving bias theory (Miller & Ross, 1975) and prior research (Morgan et al., 1996; Watt, & Martin, 1994; Green et al., 1994; Weiner, 1986; Lau, & Russell, 1980) which demonstrated that, for individuals' responses to self outcomes, there was a clear pattern of taking greater internal credit for successful dating outcomes as compared to unsuccessful outcomes. This pattern strongly supports the notion that individuals will take a disproportionate amount of credit for their successes as compared to failures, and extends the applicability of the ego-serving bias from academic and athletic situations to interpersonal dating outcomes.

Interestingly, it should be noted that this ego-serving pattern was present for female outcome situations, but not male outcome situations. Apparently, there is a tendency for individuals, regardless of their gender, to extend this ego-serving bias pattern to other females but not to males. Individuals in general were more willing to ascribe females greater credit for success as compared to failure, while not providing males with credit for success. This pattern may suggest a view, held by both males and females, that other males do not deserve credit for success whereas self and other females do.

The powerful impact of the self-serving tendency (Miller, & Ross, 1975) can also be seen when interpreting the findings associated with the actor-observer effect. These findings failed to support an overall actor-observer effect in that there were no significant overall differences of internality of attributions between Self, Other Male, and Other Female. However, a significant pattern of greater internal causation for others as compared to self was found for unsuccessful dating situations but not for successful situations. This pattern may be seen as a result of an ego-protective (self-serving) pattern associated with individuals taking less credit in failure situations as compared to others. Although a self-serving pattern may be seen in the failure situation, results failed to show a self-serving (ego-enhancing) pattern in success situations. As a result, individuals did not take more credit in the success situation as compared to others. A possible interpretation may be that, although powerful, the ego-serving tendency was not strong enough to entirely override the tendency for the actor-observer effect, but it was sufficient to undermine the actor-observer effect tendency in successful situations.

Future research in this area might address the potential impact of various personality factors, such as self-esteem. Based on cognitive consistency theory (Festinger, 1957; Heider, 1958), one may reasonably expect individuals of higher self-esteem to present a
more exaggerated pattern of ego-serving attributions in performance outcome situations, in an effect to maintain cognitive balance. Additionally, future research might compare attributional response patterns for hypothetical versus real experiences. Although little research has addressed this issue, one could logically predict a stronger pattern of attributional responses for real situations due to the greater personal relevance of such experiences.

REFERENCES


APPENDIX

**Table 1**

<table>
<thead>
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<th>Actor Status</th>
<th>Robert</th>
<th>Sally</th>
<th>Marginal Means</th>
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**Table 2**

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