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**Actors' and Observers' attributions, self-serving bias
and positivity bias***

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Abstract

An experiment was conducted to investigate the influence of evaluative factors upon preference for situational and dispositional attributions. Subjects listened to a tape recording of a group discussion on smoking, two actors presenting arguments in favour of smoking and two actors arguing against smoking. Subjects were then asked to explain in attributional terms the actors' behaviour and their own smoking behaviour, their evaluation of smoking being separately assessed. Results provided no support for a general self-other attributional difference; subjects did not explain their own behaviour in more situational terms while explaining the behaviour of others in more dispositional terms. Findings indicated that individuals generally attributed positively evaluated behaviour to dispositional factors and negatively evaluated behaviour to situational factors, regardless of attributor role (actor or observer). The results are interpreted as offering support for a positivity bias in attributional preference.

INTRODUCTION

One of the major conclusions of the extensive literature on attribution is that people tend to explain their own behaviour in more situational terms while explaining the behaviour of others in more dispositional ways (for reviews see Jones, 1976; Kelley and Michela, 1980). When Jones and Nisbett (1972) introduced this 'divergent perspectives' hypothesis they suggested that the best support for their proposition would be found in cases where the act in question is neutral affectively and morally, and the observer holds a neutral opinion towards the other. In situations where the act is negatively or positively evaluated by the observer different attributions regarding the cause of a specific behaviour may result. However, many of the studies testing the divergent perspectives hypothesis have failed to examine the influence of attributors' evaluations of the target's behaviour (e.g. Nisbett,

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Caputo, Legant and Marecek, 1973; Storms, 1973; Harvey, Harris and Barnes, 1975; Regan and Totten, 1975).

There are two lines of research in attribution suggesting that evaluative factors could play a mediating role in attributional processes. First, research on self-attribution showed that people distort their perceptions of causality to protect their self-esteem (Hastorf, Schneider, and Polefka, 1970; Heider, 1958). Thus, when individuals attribute success to internal factors and attribute failure to external factors, it is usually interpreted as implying a *self-serving bias* in attribution (Arkin, Gleason and Johnston, 1976; Beckman, 1973; Bradley, 1978; Weary, 1980; but see also Miller and Ross, 1975; Miller, 1978). Another relevant approach rests on the evidence that people are biased toward favourable evaluations (Zajonc, 1968; Warr, 1971). Skinner (1971) and Frieze and Weiner (1971) suggest that people are biased to attribute behaviour with positive consequences to internal factors and behaviour with negative consequences to external factors. Several studies have found this pattern among *observers'* judgments (Feather and Simon, 1971; Frieze and Weiner, 1971). This 'positivity-bias' again suggests that research on self-other differences in attributions should include the attributor's evaluation of the actor and/or behaviour in question.

Where evaluative factors have been studied, they indeed seem to play an important role. In his work on attributional inference Goldberg (1978) found that positively evaluated others were rated more dispositionally than the self, but this was not the case for 'neutral' others. In a later experiment Goldberg (1981) concluded that the attributors' evaluation of the target person has no consistent effect on the kind of attribution they prefer, but his findings did suggest that self-esteem could be related to the individual's *self-attribution*. Taylor and Koivumaki (1976) found no general support for self-other differences in attributional preference but found that people *generally* attribute positive behaviours to dispositional factors while negative behaviours are attributed to situational factors. Eisen's (1979) results also suggest that evaluative factors are of importance in both attributions to the self and others. More recently, Tillman and Carver (1980) obtained results supporting a general self-other difference as predicted by Jones and Nisbett (1972). However, their findings *also* showed a general bias to attribute success more to internal than to external factors, for *both* actors and observers.

To summarize, the above three approaches lead to the following hypotheses. Jones and Nisbett's divergent perspectives hypothesis simply predicts a general preference for dispositional attributions in explaining the behaviour of others as compared to one's own behaviour. The self-serving bias predicts that self-attributions to dispositional factors will be greater for positive than for negative behaviours. The positivity bias predicts that attributions will be more dispositional for positive behaviours than for negative behaviours both for self-attributions and other-attributions.

The present study was designed to test the influence of evaluative factors upon causal attributions and the predicted self-other differences in attributional preference. Subjects listened to tape recordings of people arguing in favour or opposed to smoking and were then asked to explain *why* the targets would be in favour of or opposed to smoking, in attributional terms. Furthermore, to test the influence of evaluative factors subjects' evaluation of the target behaviour (smoking) was separately assessed.

METHOD

Subjects

Subjects were 100 pupils from the fifth form of a comprehensive school in Exeter. These 100 constituted the total attendance from six classes on the days of testing (a number being on a school outing). Fifty-nine subjects were male, forty-one female: a further 3 subjects failed to complete satisfactorily enough of the questionnaire to be included in the analyses.

Stimulus material

The stimulus material used in the present experiment was collected in an investigation on adolescents' attitudes towards smoking (Eiser and Edwards, 1980). At the Forest Hill comprehensive school in S.E. London we selected groups of four subjects to participate in short (approximately 15 minutes) discussions about cigarette smoking. The restriction imposed was that each group should contain two smokers and two non-smokers. The four participants were seated in a semicircle round a microphone, with the smokers to one side and the non-smokers to the other. They were instructed to have a free discussion for about 15 minutes on the subject of cigarette smoking, specifically whether it was generally a good or bad thing, whether it was as dangerous as people say, and whether smokers became unhealthy at a young age. It was explained that the two smokers should present arguments in favour of smoking, while the non-smokers should do the reverse. Subjects were asked to treat the discussion as a 'kind of debate', and were told that the tapes would be played back to other students. We then selected two of the most lively and interesting discussions.

Procedure

Subjects listened to one of the two tapes (half of the classes listened to tape 1, the remainder to tape 2). After listening to the tapes subjects received a questionnaire in which they were asked a number of questions about the discussion they heard, its participants and the issue of smoking.

(a) First, subjects were asked to rate 10 belief statements concerning smoking on a 4-point scale ranging from 'definitely true' to 'definitely untrue', the intermediate categories being 'probably (un)true'. Five of these statements expressed a favourable attitude towards smoking (e.g. 'smoking helps you relax', 'most smokers are just as healthy as non-smokers') and five expressed an unfavourable attitude (e.g. 'you're much more likely to get lung cancer if you smoke', 'smoking makes you less fit'). On the basis of these ratings we calculated a composite index ranging from -5 to +5 by counting the number of favourable statements rated definitely (probably) true and subtracting the number of unfavourable statements so rated.

(b) Second, subjects were asked to rate how good or bad they thought smoking to be on an 11-point scale ranging from 'very bad' (-5) to 'very good' (+5).

(c) Finally, subjects were asked to indicate what they thought about the smoking behaviour of the targets and of themselves in attributional terms. Subjects were presented the following question: 'In the discussion you heard, *why* do you think

the two people who argued that smoking is *good* felt the way they did? Please indicate how important you think the following four factors are:

Because of the kind of people they are.

Because of the things that have happened to them in their life.

Because of the kind of friends they have.

Because they've really thought about the question'.

Each of the factors was rated on a 3-point scale ranging from 'very important' to 'not important'.

The first and fourth of the above factors were assumed to refer to dispositional/internal attributes, while the second and third factors were interpreted as referring to situational/external aspects. The same questions were asked about the two people who argued that smoking is bad and finally about their own smoking behaviour.

Of the above questions (a) and (b) provide 2 overall measures of subjects' evaluation of smoking, while (c) provides a measure of subjects' attributions to target persons who argued that smoking is good or bad. The two evaluative measures showed a significant correlation ($r = 0.49, p < 0.001$). Implicit in comparisons to be made below is that (c) gives an indication of subjects' perception of why people smoke or not.

RESULTS

Preliminary analysis indicated no differences on any of the variables as a function of which tape subjects listened to, so this factor was excluded from the analyses presented below. The data were cast in an analysis of variance design with the attributional measures as dependent variables and the smoking status of the subject as an independent variable. Two separate multivariate analyses of variance were conducted, one for the dispositional measures and one for the two situational measures. Subjects' evaluation of the target behaviour (smoking) was analysed in a univariate analysis of variance with own smoking status as an independent variable. Table 1 shows the results for the two groups of actors (i.e. people arguing in favour of smoking and people arguing against smoking).

The results concerning the actors who argued in favour of smoking show that smokers rated dispositional factors as less important than did non-smokers. The importance attached to situational factors did not vary over the two groups. Results on the evaluation of smoking show that *both* groups evaluated smoking negatively. The smokers rated smoking slightly negatively, while non-smokers showed a significantly more extreme negative evaluation of smoking. The difference between the two groups of subjects was significant for both evaluative measures. The index score was -0.56 for smokers and -1.49 for non-smokers ($F(1,98) = 7.83, p < 0.005$). The scores on the 11-point rating scale were -0.39 for smokers and -2.44 for non-smokers ($F(1,98) = 15.31, p < 0.005$).

In order to test the *relative importance* of the two types of attribution, a difference score (dispositional - situational) was computed. Results showed no significant difference between the two groups ($F(1,98) = 1.54, p > 0.10$). Both groups were of opinion that situational factors were more important than dispositional factors in the explanation of the behaviour of the people who argued that smoking is a good thing. The overall mean difference was $+0.49$ and significantly different from zero

Table 1. Attributions to others: Importance of situational and dispositional attributes as a function of own smoking status

Type of attribution	Targets					
	Smokers			Non-smokers		
	Judges			Judges		
	Smokers (n = 23)	Non-smokers (n = 77)	F(2, 97)	Smokers (n = 23)	Non-smokers (n = 77)	F(2, 97)
Dispositional						
Kind of people	2.52‡	2.05		2.13	1.84	
Really thought	2.30	2.04	5.60*	2.22	1.87	2.90†
Situational						
Things happened	2.26	1.96		2.22	2.03	
Kind of friends	1.78	1.73	2.00	1.96	1.78	1.90

* $p < 0.005$.

† $0.05 < p < 0.06$.

‡Possible range of attributional scores from 1 (very important) to 3 (not important).

($F(1,98) = 14.49, p < 0.0005$) indicating a clear preference for situational attributions. In other words, both groups think that this specific (negatively evaluated) behaviour is mainly caused by situational factors. A finding which is in accordance with the positivity bias formulations.

Results concerning the targets who argued against smoking are also shown in Table 1. The average importance attached to the dispositional factors showed a marginally significant difference ($F(2,97) = 2.90, 0.05 < p < 0.06$), suggesting that non-smokers rated dispositional factors as more important than did smokers. The two groups did not show any difference in the importance attached to situational factors. The two groups showed no difference in the relative importance attached to dispositional and situational attributions. The dispositional-situational difference score was +0.17 for smokers and -0.09 for non-smokers, a non-significant difference ($F(1.98) = 0.55$). Overall, subjects did not think dispositional factors to be more important than situational factors in the explanation of this positively evaluated behaviour. In absolute terms this finding does not support the predictions based on the 'positivity bias'. However, in comparison to how the targets who argued in favour of smoking were rated these findings show that negatively evaluated behaviour was seen in more situational terms than positively evaluated behaviour. The overall difference score was +0.49 for subjects' explanation of the targets arguing in favour of smoking, and -0.03 for their explanation of those arguing against smoking ($t(99) = 4.10, p < 0.0001$). Summarizing, results concerning attributions for others' behaviour provide reasonable support for the positivity bias formulation.

Both the positivity bias and the self-serving bias formulation make the same predictions concerning self-attributions, i.e. positive behaviours should be attributed to dispositional factors and negative behaviours to situational factors. Table 2 shows the results for self-attributions.

Table 2. Self-attributions: Importance of situational and dispositional attributions as a function of own smoking status

Type of attribution	Judges		
	Smokers (<i>n</i> = 23)	Non-smokers (<i>n</i> = 77)	Multivariate <i>F</i> (2, 97)
Dispositional			
Kind of person	2.35‡	1.81	
Really thought	2.43	1.95	8.74*
Situational			
Things happened	2.65	2.22	
Kind of friends	2.00	2.01	3.09†

**p* < 0.001.†*p* < 0.05.

‡Possible range of attributional scores from 1 (very important) to 3 (not important).

These results show marked differences between the two groups. Non-smokers rate both dispositional and (surprisingly) situational factors as significantly more important in the explanation of their own behaviour than did smokers¹. The (dispositional–situational) difference score was +0.13 for smokers and –0.54 for non-smokers, a significant difference ($F(1.98) = 4.37, p < 0.05$), indicating that non-smokers rate the importance of dispositional factors higher than the importance of situational factors, while the smokers show a slight tendency to emphasize the importance of situational factors in the explanation of their own behaviour. Although we did not collect *direct* measures of subjects' evaluations of their own smoking behaviour, it seems fair to conclude (on the basis of their evaluation of smoking) that non-smokers evaluated their behaviour more favourably than did smokers. The above findings are in accordance with both the positivity bias and the notion of a self-serving bias in attribution. Smokers tended to attribute their negatively evaluated behaviour to external factors, while non-smokers emphasize dispositional factors to account for their own smoking behaviour.

Finally, to look more closely at self–other differences in attributions, data were cast in an analysis of variance design with the self–other difference in perceived importance of the different attributions as a dependent variable and the smoking status of the subject as an independent variable. Table 3 shows these difference scores for the two self–other comparisons.

Results showed no significant differences between the two groups of subjects (smokers versus non-smokers). More interesting are the *overall* mean difference scores. A positive score implies that the corresponding factor was seen as *less* important in the explanation of one's own behaviour. A negative score would imply the reverse. According to the divergent perspectives hypothesis one would expect a

¹This finding confirms results obtained by Miller, Smith and Uleman (1981) who showed that dispositional and situational attributions are not mutually exclusive. A further illustration of the absence of the presumed 'hydraulic' relationship between situational and dispositional attributions is provided by the sign of the correlations between the two types of attributions. An hydraulic relationship would imply a negative correlation; our findings, however, showed positive correlations (varying between +0.11 and +0.25) between the two types of attributions for the two target-others and self.

Table 3. The importance of dispositional and situational factors: Self-other differences, as a function of own smoking status

	Judges		Overall mean
	Non-smokers (<i>n</i> = 77)	Smokers (<i>n</i> = 23)	
Self versus people arguing in favour			
Dispositional	-0.17*	-0.02	-0.14
Situational	0.31	0.30	0.31
Self versus people arguing against			
Dispositional	0.02	0.22	0.07
Situational	0.25	0.24	0.25

*Possible range of difference scores from -2 to +2. The scores are averaged over the two measures of each type.

positive difference score on the dispositional factor and a negative score on the situational factor.

A closer inspection of these mean difference scores reveals that only *one* of the obtained difference scores was in the direction predicted by the divergent perspectives hypothesis, i.e. the dispositional difference score between self and others arguing against smoking. However, this difference score was not significantly different from zero ($F(1,98) = 1.01, p > 0.10$). Both situational difference scores (0.31 and 0.25) were in the opposite direction, and significantly so ($F(1,98) = 12.54$ and 7.60 respectively, both significant at the 0.001 level). In other words, subjects were generally of opinion that situational factors were more important in the explanation of the behaviour of target others than in the explanation of their own behaviour. Finally, subjects also found dispositional factors *more* important in the explanation of their own behaviour as compared to the behaviour of the people who argued in favour of smoking. The overall mean (-0.14) was significantly different from zero ($F(1,98) = 4.74, p < 0.01$). As can be seen from Table 3, the latter effect is mainly caused by the non-smokers. The most likely explanation for this finding is the earlier mentioned self-serving bias on the part of the non-smoking subjects. Summarizing, the present evidence does not provide any support for the predicted overall self-other differences. In particular, the finding that situational factors were rated less important in self-attributions cast serious doubts on the generalizability of the divergent perspectives hypothesis.

DISCUSSION

Results of the present experiment clearly show that evaluative factors affect the type of attribution people make. Generally, attributions of a specific behaviour are more dispositional when the behaviour in question is positively evaluated. The present results show that the positively evaluated behaviour of others is regarded more as being caused by dispositional factors than negatively evaluated behaviour of others. These findings are in accordance with the so-called positivity bias. The findings concerning self-attributions are in accordance with the view that people

tend to attribute their own positively evaluated behaviour to dispositional factors and their negatively evaluated behaviour to situational factors. This finding is in accordance with both a self-serving bias in attribution and a positivity bias. Since the positivity bias can predict both the above findings and the self-serving bias phenomenon only one, the present results suggest that the positivity bias is the best single explanation of our findings.

A further finding of the present experiment is that the predicted self–other differences also seem to be related to evaluative factors. We did not find any support for the view that people prefer to explain their own behaviour in situational terms and the behaviour of others in dispositional terms. Because of the preponderance of non-smokers we found a general preference for dispositional factors in the explanation of one's own behaviour as compared to the behaviour of people arguing in favour of smoking. The latter effect is presumably related to the above-mentioned self-serving bias in attribution. Furthermore, our results concerning the importance of situational factors in self versus other attributions contradict the divergent perspectives hypothesis. Our results show that people rate situational factors more important in the explanation of the behaviour of target others. Present findings suggest that it is premature to assume a *general* self–other difference in attribution and that one should incorporate *evaluative* aspects in the explanation of attributional processes.

However, we should mention two limitations of the present material. Firstly, it could be that the target behaviour (smoking) used in the experiment was seen by most subjects (and especially the smokers) as an addiction for which one has no personal responsibility. The obtained positivity effects could have been brought forth by this particular aspect of our experimental setting. A second limitation of the present material is the lack of sufficiently heterogeneous evaluations of the target behaviour. It was first intended to split up the subjects into three sub-groups; one with a favourable evaluation of the target, one with a neutral evaluation of the target and one with an unfavourable evaluation of the target. However, the nearly complete absence of people who evaluated smoking as clearly positive made this option impossible (there were only 7 subjects who evaluated smoking favourably). A wider range of evaluations should enable the researcher to refine his/her analyses. Finally, it should be noted that although it is common in studies of attributional judgment models to use average responses as basic data for examination, this practice could bypass the possibility that different models best apply to different sub-groups of subjects. Although the present results provide strong support for the view that evaluative factors influence the attribution process, it seems especially relevant to supplement the present findings by research on issues with more diverse evaluations of the target. The latter would enable the researcher to conduct individual subject analyses, which should provide further evidence concerning the influence of evaluative factors upon attributional processes.

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RÉSUMÉ

Cette expérience a été conduite pour examiner l'influence de facteurs évaluatifs sur la préférence pour des attributions situationnelles et dispositionnelles. Les sujets entendaient l'enregistrement d'une discussion de groupe dans laquelle deux acteurs présentaient des arguments favorables au fait de fumer et deux autres des arguments opposés. Les sujets devaient alors expliquer le comportement des acteurs et le leur (c'est-à-dire fumer ou non) en termes d'attributions. Les résultats ne confirment pas une différence *générale* d'attributions entre soi et autrui; les sujets n'expliquèrent pas leur propre comportement en termes davantage situationnels et ce lui des autres en termes davantage dispositionnels. Les données indiquent que les gens attribuent en général un comportement évalué positivement à des facteurs dispositionnels et un comportement évalué négativement à des facteurs situationnels, quel que soit le rôle (acteur ou observateur) qui est adopté. Les résultats sont interprétés dans le sens d'un biais de 'positive' dans les préférences d'attribution.

ZUSAMMENFASSUNG

Die Untersuchung beschäftigt sich mit dem Einfluss von Bewertungsfaktoren auf die Bevorzugung von situations- und persönlichkeitsbedingten Attributionen. Die Vpn hörten die Aufzeichnung einer Gruppendiskussion über das Rauchen, wobei zwei Diskussionsteilnehmer für und zwei andere gegen das Rauchen argumentierten. Die Vpn wurden gehalten, ihr eigenes Rauchverhalten, das in einem getrennten Verfahren untersucht wurde, und das Rauchverhalten der Diskussionsteilnehmer unter Zuhilfenahme von Attributionsbegriffen zu erklären. Die Resultate stützen die allgemeine Hypothese, die zwischen Auto- und Heteroattributionen unterscheidet, nicht: die Vpn erklärten ihr eigenes Verhalten nicht, wie ursprünglich angenommen wurde, vorwiegend als situationsbedingt und das der andern als vorwiegend persönlichkeitsgebunden. Die Ergebnisse weisen darauf hin, dass Individuen positives Verhalten im allgemeinen persönlichkeitsbedingt, negative beurteiltes Verhalten jedoch als situationsbedingt beurteilen und dies unabhängig von der Beobachteroder Teilnehmerrolle. Die Resultate wurden interpretiert als Bestätigung der Hypothese des Positivitäts-Vorurteils bei der Attributionsbevorzugung.

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