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Egotism in Group Members: Public and Private Attributions of Responsibility for Group Performance

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The attributional egotism of individuals may be particularly important when they serve as members of cooperative groups. Within a group one’s fellow members may be granted or denied credit for a group performance in order to manipulate one’s own perceived responsibility for the outcome. In this study, group members privately or publicly reported their assessments of their own and others’ responsibility for group successes and failures. Subjects privately claimed more responsibility for success than for failure but did not do so (in public) when the other members were expected to see their reports. Moreover, under public conditions, subjects claimed less responsibility for a group success than they gave to the other members, an effect which disappeared in private. Subjects were clearly sensitive to the interpersonal implications of their attributions, displaying less egotism under public conditions.

The attributional tendency of subjects to take credit for their successes but to (try to) avoid responsibility for their failures is well known (e.g., Weary Bradley, 1978). In individual testing situations, subjects assign themselves more personal responsibility for good outcomes than for bad; success is usually attributed to personal ability and effort, while failure is explained by bad luck and situational constraints (Miller, 1976; Sicoly and Ross, 1977).

Indeed, this egotism bias seems widespread (Myers, 1983). Nevertheless, it is not always reflected in subjects’ public statements of blame or praise. Both Weary (1980) and Tetlock (1981) have argued that one’s attributions of responsibility can play an important role in self-presentation, and that whatever one publicly admits concerning the reasons for one’s behavior may occasionally be different from what one privately believes. In fact, Tetlock showed that subjects’ public attributions for their actions seemed tailor-made to create favorable impressions in others. Moreover, other studies suggest that subjects’ public evaluations of an intelligence test imply that they are more humble than their private evaluations suggest (Frey, 1978), and that subjects may “publicly aggrandize, but privately denigrate” the ability of a future opponent (Gould et al., 1977). There seems to be little question that subjects’ attributions are considerably influenced by the conditions under which they

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are reported and the interpersonal images the subjects wish to create (Riess et al., 1981).

These processes are particularly interesting in the context of cooperative group interaction. There, one’s fellow group members serve as environmental variables whose influence on the group outcomes may be perceptually maximized or minimized to mediate one’s own responsibility. Thus, in a group, subjects may not only perceive themselves to be more responsible for success than for failure, they may also see themselves as more praiseworthy (or less blame-worthy) than other members of the group. Both of these effects occur. Members claim more personal credit for group successes than for failures (Schlenker and Miller, 1977a), and may see themselves as more responsible for success than the other members (Schlenker, 1975) or less responsible for failure (Schlenker and Miller, 1977b). Whether the group succeeds or fails, each member may consider him- or herself the best member of the group.

Evidently there are processes at work within groups that could severely disrupt group harmony—if each member’s egotistical perceptions were made known to his or her fellows. Indeed, Forsyth et al. (1981) have shown that group members derogate and dislike any of their fellows who are known to allocate responsibility inequitably. It seems that group members who must publicly allocate credit and blame would have good reason to be less self-serving. Previous studies, however, have only obtained group members’ private self-attributions.

Thus, we sought to investigate whether scrutiny from other group members would mitigate the egotism of participants in cooperative groups. Subjects were members of groups which either succeeded or failed, and were asked to report their subsequent perceptions either publicly or privately. We expected that subjects would be sensitive to the interpersonal implications of their attributions and would display less egotism under public conditions.

METHOD

Forty-eight males and 46 females recruited from introductory psychology classes participated in four- or five-person same-sex groups. Teams of two experimenters—students from a research methods class—handled each group. Each team ran two same-sex groups and was randomly assigned to, and equally associated with, both of the manipulated variables. The experimenters were blind to the major hypotheses of the study and remained blind to the manipulated variables until after their major interaction with the group.

Subjects were asked to work together on a “survival” exercise which would determine their chances of surviving a January plane crash in Minnesota’s North Woods. The task directed them to rank the usefulness and importance of several items salvaged from the crash, and they were told that the thoughtfulness reflected in their rankings would objectively indicate their chances of actually surviving such a disaster. In order to involve all the group members, each subject acted as “leader” for a specified period, leading the discussion of four items and bearing the ultimate responsibility for ranking them. The leaders were instructed to seek group consensus, but were assured that the final rankings were always up to them. Thus, the procedure made the group performance a collaborative effort in which each member had played a visible part (cf. Forsyth et al., 1981).

When the rankings were complete, they were ostensively combined into a group “Probability of Survival” score which was then relayed by written feedback to the subjects. Within each group, half the subjects received success information indicating that they had a 91% probability of surviving; the other half, failure subjects, learned that they had a mere 11% chance. The experimenters distributed the feedback at random and remained blind to the performance condition of any particular subject.

Subjects were then asked to fill out questionnaires which would help the researchers interpret the group performance. In fact, the questionnaire assessed subjects’ attributions of responsibility for the group outcome and obtained ratings of test difficulty, luck, and personal performance, all on 19-point scales. However, the instructions attached to the questionnaire randomly assigned each group to either public or private disclosure conditions. Public subjects were told that they would discuss the group experience with the other members and that their questionnaires would be shown to the others in order to facilitate the discussion. In addition, they were instructed to put their names at the top of the page. By contrast, private disclosure subjects were told that

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1 The subjects were Texas collegians, and the winter survival task was particularly apropos. They generally approached the task with enthusiasm, but most of them had rarely seen snow, so that, when delivered with appropriate gravity, either success or failure feedback seemed entirely veridical. Most subjects were genuinely surprised when they learned during the debriefing that the score was bogus.
their reports were entirely confidential and that no one presently in the room would see them; they were asked to place the completed questionnaire in a sealed envelope and were told that the study would be over when they were through. Moreover, they were not to include their names.

Subjects were fully debriefed thereafter. Thus, the study constituted a $2 \times 2 \times 2$ factorial design that included group performance, disclosure condition, and subject sex.

RESULTS

Analyses of variance indicated that the apparent quality of the group performance had a substantial impact on subjects' perceptions of the group interaction. As Table 1 shows, not only did they correctly report that the group had done less well in the failure condition than in the success condition, they also believed that they had personally done less well after a group failure; nonetheless, they still rated their own performances as no less than "average" (according to the verbal label on the scale). Subjects also believed that there had been less agreement among the members, that the survival score was much less accurate, and that the task had been slightly more difficult if they had failed than if they had succeeded. These perceptions are particularly intriguing since, in each group, some subjects received success feedback while the others received failure information; depending on their current beliefs, subjects had quite different recollections of the same group interaction (cf. Greenwald, 1980).

Personal Responsibility

Subjects' responses to the item, "How responsible do you feel you personally are for the group's performance?" revealed the usual main effect of group performance, with subjects claiming more responsibility after a group success than after a failure. However, as Table 2 shows, an interaction of performance and disclosure condition qualified this result ($F (1, 85) = 3.87, p < .05$). Tests of simple effects indicated that subjects privately claimed more personal credit for a group success than they publicly admitted ($F (1, 89) = 6.57, p < .01$), so that an egotism bias was only reflected in subjects' private reports; only when other group members would not learn of their feelings did subjects report themselves to be more responsible for success than for failure ($F (1, 89) = 8.39, p < .01$).

Relative Responsibility

When subjects were asked how responsible "all the other group members" were, they accorded their colleagues a larger role in a group success ($M = 12.6$) than in a failure ($M = 10.5$) ($F (1, 85) = 11.72, p < .01$). No effects of disclosure condition emerged on this item. However, these two measures of responsibility, for self and others, were alongside each other on the questionnaire, and a comparison of the two indicated whether subjects were taking more or less responsibility than they granted others. Indeed, a derived measure of a subject's own responsibility relative to that of the rest of the group was obtained by subtracting the ratings of the others' responsibility from one's personal ratings. A resulting positive score revealed that subjects were claiming more responsibility than they were allowing the others, while a negative score indicated that they were taking less responsibility than they were giving the others (cf. Schlenker and Miller, 1977b).

Analysis of these difference scores yielded a main effect of disclosure condition; subjects were publicly presenting themselves as less responsible than the other members ($M = -1.6$) while privately perceiving themselves to be equally responsible ($M = .02$). However, this

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<th>Table 1. Perceptions of the Group Experience Following Success or Failure</th>
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<td><strong>Dependent Variable</strong></td>
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<tr>
<td>Group Performance</td>
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<td>Personal Performance</td>
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<tr>
<td>Agreement Within Group</td>
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<td>Accuracy of Feedback</td>
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<td>Task Difficulty</td>
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effect was qualified by another interpretation of performance and disclosure condition \( (F (1, 85) = 4.40, p < .05) \) shown in Table 3. Under public conditions, when they believed the other members would examine the questionnaire, a reverse egotism effect emerged; subjects claimed considerably less responsibility relative to the others for a group success than they did for a failure \( (F (1, 89) = 8.69, p < .01) \). Their private perceptions were different. Under confidential conditions, there was no difference in their relative attributions for success and failure \( (F = 1.0, \text{n.s.}) \). Moreover, subjects privately claimed much more credit for a group success than they publicly admitted \( (F (1, 89) = 15.87, p < .01) \). When presenting themselves to the others, group members represented themselves as less important than their colleagues in causing the group to succeed; privately, however, they believed themselves to be just as important.

Sex Differences

Males and females differed little in their responses, and the dissipimilarities that did emerge seemed to be tied to the instrumental nature of the task. Males felt that they had personally done better \( (\bar{M} = 13.6) \) on the task than did females \( (\bar{M} = 11.8) \), and an interaction of sex and group performance was obtained on subjects’ ratings of the influence of luck on the group score \( (F (1, 85) = 7.99, p < .01) \). Thus, males felt that luck had played a larger role in influencing a group failure than a group success, while females felt they had been luckier after success than after failure \( (p’s < .05) \). Females also tended to take somewhat less personal responsibility \( (\bar{M} = 10.2) \) for the group outcome than did males \( (\bar{M} 11.4) (p < .07) \), but the overall pattern of their responsibility attributions did not differ.

**DISCUSSION**

The data extend the study of the self-presentation aspects of attribution to a situation in which they have a great deal of relevance—group interaction. Within a group, one’s interpersonal relations may not be best served by the sort of self-serving, self-aggrandizing public attribution that individuals are prone to proffer (cf. Tetlock, 1981). Instead, the more humble “face” of the gracious team player may be much more acceptable (Forsyth et al., 1981). Indeed, the results of this study indicate that group members are cognizant of the audiences which will encounter their attributions, and that they regulate their reports accordingly. Thus, when describing their personal responsibility for a group outcome, members were egotistical in private but not in public. Moreover, when their claims of personal responsibility were compared to their allocations to the rest of the group, members were self-effacing in public but not in private. When surrounded with co-workers, subjects were careful not to brag, and publicly reported perceptions which they did not privately believe. One is reminded of a kick returner in a football game who privately credits a touchdown to his personal ability but who tells the papers, “I got some great blocks.”

There seems little doubt that we should consider attributions of causality to be tools of impression management (Schlenker, 1980) and that we should be attentive to the conditions under which they are obtained.

Finally, the data also illustrated that, as others have suggested (e.g., Snyder and Uranowitz, 1978), we are likely to remember details of an event that fit and conform our current impressions of it. Though they were party to the same group experience, subjects’ ratings of the group varied greatly according to whether they thought the group had succeeded or failed. Not only will people selectively describe an account of what happened depending on who’s listening, what they remember happening may not have actually occurred that way.

**REFERENCES**

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Table 3. Ratings of Responsibility Relative to the Other Group Members

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<tr>
<th>Group Performance</th>
<th>Disclosure Condition</th>
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<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Public</td>
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<tr>
<td>Success</td>
<td>-2.56&lt;sub&gt;ab&lt;/sub&gt;</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Failure</td>
<td>-.55&lt;sub&gt;a&lt;/sub&gt;</td>
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* Negative numbers denote less personal responsibility than that accorded others. Means with a common single-letter subscript differ by \( p < .01 \).


Social Structure, Belief, Attitude, Intention, and Behavior: A Partial Test of Liska’s Revisions

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In a recent critique Allen Liska (1984) pointed out a potential weakness in the Fishbein/Ajzen model (1975): by assuming a fully recursive model, Liska believes that Fishbein and Ajzen miss some of the subtleties of the relationship between beliefs, attitudes, intentions, and behavior. In this paper the Wisconsin model is used to test Liska’s notion that social status does not exert its total influence on behavior through attitudes, subjective norms and, finally, behavioral intentions, as Fishbein and Ajzen contend. While the results do not fully accord with Liska’s contention, neither do they fully support the Fishbein/Ajzen model: the centrality of intentions is not lost, but neither are the effects of social status totally mediated by behavioral intentions.

In a recent critique Allen Liska (1984) pointed out a potential weakness in the Fishbein/Ajzen model (1975). In that model it is assumed that background variables such as social status exert their influence on behavior through mediating structures (attitudes, subjective norms, and behavioral intentions). In their own words:

The attitude is viewed as one major determinant of the person’s intention to perform the behavior in question. Other beliefs relevant for a behavioral intention are beliefs of a normative nature, i.e., beliefs that certain referents think the person should or should