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A Self-Presentation Approach to the Fundamental Attribution Error: The Norm of Internality

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Several studies were designed to assess the validity of the assumption of a general norm placing greater value on internal explanations for behavior than on external explanations for behavior. One study demonstrated that individuals who expressed internal causal attributions received more social approval than those who expressed external causal attributions. A second study, in which subjects rated themselves as giving more internal explanations for events than average others do, also demonstrated the greater positive value associated with internal attributions. In a third study, subjects given the injunction to create a positive impression described themselves as having a stronger bias toward internal attributions than did subjects given the injunction to create a negative impression. The implications of the norm for internality are discussed in relation to the fundamental attribution error (observers' preference for internal attributions when explaining the behavior of others) and in relation to a general self-presentation approach to publicly stated attributions. The implications of this approach are outlined for the actor–observer effect and for social psychological theories.

Much of the burgeoning literature on attribution processes can be traced to the work of Heider (1944, 1958). Basic to Heider's conception of commonsense explanations of human behavior is the distinction between internal and external causes. The differentiation between internal or dispositional and external or environmental causative factors has been maintained in more recent theoretical formulations (Jones & Davis, 1965; Kelley, 1967). A substantial body of research has accumulated that was designed to determine the conditions under which internal or external causative imputations will be made.

From this body of empirical investigations has come evidence for a second conceptual legacy of Heider, namely, the generalization that individuals prefer to attribute causality to internal or dispositional properties (see Jones, 1979, for review). Several studies document the pervasiveness and tenacity of this tendency of the average person, when perceiving the behavior of others, to emphasize internal causes even in light of salient environmental factors (Jones & Harris, 1967; Jones, Worchel, Goethals, & Grumet, 1971; Miller, 1976; Snyder & Jones, 1974). This tendency of lay persons has been called the "fundamental attribution error" and has been defined as the "general tendency to overestimate the importance of personal or dispositional factors relative to environmental influences" (Ross, 1977, p. 184).

Not surprisingly, explanations for the fundamental attribution error can take either of two general forms, one internal and the other external. Internal explanations have been framed in terms of individuals' perceptual and cognitive information-processing biases (Arkin & Duval, 1975; Jones, 1979; Jones & Nisbett, 1972). An external explanation, which emphasizes that social pressures from the environment are applied to the individual, is founded on the self-presentation perspective. In general, the self-presentation perspective assumes that the social environment is the cause of an individual's behavior (Jellison, Note 1). More particularly, it assumes that an individual's actions are guided by attempts to create impressions that will gain social approval and avoid social disapproval.

The self-presentational explanation for

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the fundamental attribution error rests on the assumption that internal ascriptions of causality are rewarded and external ascriptions of causality are not. If there is a norm favoring internal attributions, then it follows that individuals can make a self-presentation that gains the approval and avoids the disapproval of others by giving internal attributions for behavior. In sum, it is generally to an individual's advantage to publicly make internal attributions for his or her own behavior and the behavior of others.

One qualification to this assumed general benefit of making internal attributions should be noted, however. Greater social disapproval and punishment are administered for negative actions assumed to result from internal causes than for negative actions assumed to result from external causes. Therefore, when explaining one's own negative actions, the individual faces a dilemma between the normative advantage of making an internal attribution and the potential punishment for acknowledging responsibility.

In this regard, it is extremely interesting that after reviewing the literature on the tendency of individuals to attribute their own negative behavioral outcomes to environmental factors (the self-serving bias), Bradley (1978) proposed a self-presentation explanation for the data. This explanation is that publicly stated causal attributions are part of self-presentation strategies that are designed to gain the approval or avoid the disapproval of others (Tedeschi, Schlenker, & Bonoma, 1971). Bradley suggested that one's public statements of the causes of one's own behavior "may be mediated by a desire to maintain or gain a positive public image (i.e., a public-esteem motive) rather than a concern for one's private self-image" (p. 63).

Bradley's analysis is consistent with the present postulation of the existence of a norm for internal attributions. Support for a self-presentation explanation of the fundamental attribution error would seem to require two types of data. First, it would be necessary to demonstrate that internal attributions are more socially approved and valued than external attributions. Second, it would be necessary to demonstrate that people can utilize knowledge of such normative prescriptions in negotiating their social environment. The present research was designed to furnish these two types of information.

Experiment 1

The first study was carried out to garner evidence that internal attributions produce greater approval than external attributions. In this study, subjects rated the applicability of socially desirable attributes to and indicated their liking for stimulus persons who expressed varying degrees of the belief that events associated with human behavior are largely determined by internal causative factors. It was hypothesized that increasing degrees of expressed internality would be related to increasing amounts of social approval or liking. A somewhat similar study was carried out for other purposes by Stern and Manifold (1977); however, that study had extremely strong demand characteristics, and the dependent variable measure did not directly assess liking or social approval.

Method

Subjects. The subjects were 117 students in introductory psychology, with the number of males and females being approximately equal. They participated in the experiment as part of a course requirement. Subjects were divided into two groups composed of 57 and 60 participants of both sexes. Within each group, subjects were assigned to each experimental condition according to a randomizing procedure, with as near an equal number as possible in each condition.

Procedure. After the subjects for a particular session had assembled, the experimenter explained that the study was concerned with the process of forming first impressions and, more specifically, the kinds of impressions nonprofessionals develop as a result of reading someone's responses to a personality test. The subjects were told that they would read a personality test that had been completed by a student the previous year, form an impression of the student, and then indicate their impression by rating the individual's personal characteristics. The experimenter explained that the student had consented to the use of his test in later research on the condition that his identity be protected. For that reason, the experimenter pointed out, the individual's name had been cut off the test that the subjects would receive, but all other information was intact. The subjects were also told that the individual was a 20-year-old male, who was a junior at the university. The booklets, which contained a completed copy of Rotter's I-E scale and the impression rating form, were then distributed.

This study employed Rotter's (1966) Internal–External Locus of Control Scale, with the exception that the six filler items on the scale were omitted. The 23-item scale was completed to create four levels of internality. In the low internality condition, the scale was completed

with one item (Item 21) reflecting an internal response. In the moderate internality condition, the scale was completed with the following 13 items of Rotter's scale reflecting internal responses: Items 3, 6, 10, 11, 13, 15, 16, 18, 22, 23, 25, 26, and 29. In the high internality condition, the scale was completed with the following 20 items of Rotter's scale reflecting internal responses: Items 2, 3, 5, 6, 7, 10, 11, 12, 13, 15, 16, 18, 20, 21, 22, 23, 25, 26, 28, and 29. In the very high internality condition, the scale was completed with all 23 items reflecting internal responses.

After reading a stimulus scale, subjects completed an impression rating form on which they indicated how well various characteristics applied to the stimulus person by circling a number along a scale from 1 (not at all) to 9 (very much) for each characteristic. The impression rating form contained the characteristics admirable, friendly, good, likable, nice, popular, similar, enjoy the person's company, and have for a friend.

After completing the form, the subjects were asked to write a few sentences describing their reactions to and any ideas they may have had about the study. The comments of one subject indicated doubt about the authenticity of the stimulus person's personality test, and one subject failed to complete the impression rating form. These data were not included in the analysis of the results of the study.

Results

Experiment 1 provided support for the prediction that the greater the level of internality another expresses, the higher the other would be rated on socially approved characteristics. The means for the measure of social approval are presented in Table 1, and it can be seen that generally the stimulus person received more social approval as the level of internality increased. An analysis of variance using unweighted means indicated that the effect of level of internality was highly significant, $F(3, 111) = 12.05$, $p < .0001$. Further, individuals expressing low internality were liked significantly less than those expressing moderate, high, and very high levels of internality ($p < .05$). An examination of the means indicated a strong linear trend. A test of trend was performed based on contrast coefficients that were adjusted for unequal intervals on the internality dimension (Keppel, 1973). This test revealed a highly significant linear component of trend, $F(1, 111) = 33.06$, $p < .001$, which accounted for most of the variance among the means, residual $F(2, 111) = 1.55$, $p < .10$. This analysis suggested that social approval is a linear function of expressions of internality; that is, social approval increased linearly with expressed internality.

Table 1
Mean Social Approval Summary Scores

Low (29)	Moderate (29)	High (28)	Very high (29)
4.06_a	5.60_b	5.70_b	6.00_b

Note. The larger the number, the greater the rated degree of liking. Means without at least one common subscript differ beyond the .05 level of significance using Scheffé's multiple-comparisons test. Numbers in parentheses indicate number of subjects.

Experiment 2

Experiment 2 relied on the idea that people depict themselves more positively than typical or average others (Festinger, 1954). If this assumption is coupled with the assumption that internal causal explanations of behavior are valued more than external causal explanations of behavior, then one conclusion is obvious: If given the opportunity, people would describe themselves as having a stronger tendency than a typical other to use internal explanations for behavior. If this result is obtained, it would offer evidence for the assumption that people do value internal explanations more than external explanations. Based on this reasoning and employing an experimental paradigm used by others (Jellison & Arkin, 1977; Wallach & Wing, 1968), Experiment 2 was designed to show that in comparison to an average other, individuals would depict themselves as having a greater tendency to locate causality internally.

Method

Subjects. The subjects were 18 students in introductory psychology, who participated in the experiment as part of a course requirement. Subjects were tested in one group, with the number of males and females being approximately equal.

Procedure. The procedure was similar to that successfully employed in the study of the risky shift (Wallach & Wing, 1968) and other topics. The experimenter first asked the subjects to complete a 23-item I-E scale in terms of "their own personal responses to the items."

After the subjects had given their own personal responses to the I-E scale, they were given a second, blank copy. They were instructed to complete this copy in a way that they would expect "the average undergraduate" to respond. The subjects were told that their re-

sponses would remain anonymous and were asked not to put their names on either of the forms.

After completing the second I-E scale, the subjects were asked to write a few sentences describing their reactions to the study and any ideas they might have had about it. None of the subjects indicated any insight into the hypothesis of the study.

Results

Experiment 2 tested the prediction that subjects would rate themselves as more internal than the average other. The subject's own responses and the subject's rated expectations of the average undergraduate's responses to Rotter's I-E scale were scored. The measure was the sum of the internal responses made on all 23 scale items. The larger the number, the greater the number of internal responses. The mean in the self condition was 13.06, and the mean in the other condition was 8.22. A t test for correlated means indicated this difference was highly significant, $t(17) = 3.78, p < .01$. The subjects depicted themselves as having a greater internal locus of causality than the average other person.

Experiment 3

In addition to demonstrating that internality is more socially valued than externality, it would be useful to show also that people can utilize knowledge of this norm when they engage in overt behavior. Such data would corroborate the existence of a norm for internality and also document that subjects can guide their behavior according to the norm's prescriptions. If the individual's typical goal of gaining approval were changed to the opposite goal of engendering disapproval, then his or her tendency to give internal attributions should be affected. Specifically, if subjects were given the incentive to create a negative impression and gain disapproval, then they should describe themselves as more external than subjects operating with the normal incentive to create a positive impression and gain approval.

Method

Subjects. The subjects were 49 students in introductory psychology, with approximately equal numbers of males and females. They participated in the experiment as part of a course requirement. Subjects were studied in one group session. They were assigned to each experimental condition according to a randomizing procedure, with as near an equal number as possible in each condition.

Procedure. When the subjects had assembled, the experimenter explained that the study concerned first impressions and, more specifically, how people generate or create impressions through their responses to personality tests. The experimenter said that the type of impression a person might try to generate could vary greatly from one situation to another; for example, a person seeking a job might attempt to create a positive impression for a potential employer and would, therefore, complete the personality test in a manner designed to create a good impression. On the other hand, a person wishing to remain jobless in order to continue to draw unemployment insurance might attempt to create a negative impression for a potential employer and would, therefore, complete a personality test in a manner designed to create a bad impression. The experimenter explained that the subjects were to fill out a personality test in order to create either a positive or a negative impression. The subjects were asked to read the instructions attached to the test, which would indicate the particular kind of impression they were to create. The blank 23-item I-E scales were then distributed.

In the positive incentive condition, the instructions read: "Please fill out the attached personality test in the manner that you would if you were attempting to get the person who was going to read it to *like* and *approve* of you." In the negative incentive condition, the instructions read: "Please fill out the attached personality test in the manner that you would if you were attempting to get the person who was going to read it to *dislike* and *disapprove* of you." The subjects were told that their responses were to remain anonymous and were asked not to put their names on any of the forms.

After completing the personality tests, the subjects were asked to write a few sentences describing their reactions to the study and any ideas they may have had about it. None of the subjects expressed doubt about the authenticity or purpose of the study. One subject failed to complete all 23 items on the scale; these data were not included in the analysis of the results.

Results

Given the rule that internality is approved and externality is disapproved, it was expected that when subjects were given the incentive to gain approval, their scores on the 23-item I-E scale would reflect more internal responses than when they were given instructions to gain disapproval. The measure was the sum of the internal responses made on each of the 23 forced-choice items. The larger the number, the greater the number of internal responses. The mean score in the positive-incentive condition was 12 ($n = 24$), and the mean score in the negative-incentive condition was 6.62 ($n = 24$). The difference

between the two conditions was significantly beyond the .01 level, $t(46) = 3.39$. Subjects who were given the incentive to create approval gave significantly more internal responses than subjects who were given the incentive to create disapproval.

Discussion

The present research was designed to test the viability of a normative interpretation of the fundamental attribution error. This interpretation proposes the existence of a general norm positively sanctioning explanations for behavior that emphasize internal causal forces and devaluing explanations that emphasize external causal factors. The data from Experiment 1 demonstrated this sanctioning because individuals who expressed internal causal attributions received more approval than those who expressed external causal attributions. Experiment 2 was based on the notion that people describe themselves as "better than average" others (Myers & Ridl, 1979). Given this idea, the second finding that subjects rated themselves as more internal than average others also indicates the greater positive value attached to internal attributions. Experiment 3 corroborated the existence of the norm for internality and suggested that subjects can utilize knowledge of the norm. Subjects given the injunction to create a positive impression described themselves as having a stronger bias toward internal attributions than did subjects given the injunction to create a negative impression.

The norm for internality was conceived as a comprehensive value for internality that would include individual cases, such as a particular causal attribution for a single act committed by oneself or another, and would also include generic causal explanation systems, such as philosophies or ideologies. Given the comprehensive nature of the norm, the multidimensionality of Rotter's I-E scale made it an ideal means for operationalizing the variable. This multidimensionality has been the object of debate (Gurin, Gurin, Lao, & Beattie, 1969; Gurin, Gurin, & Morrison, 1978; Mirles, 1970) among researchers in the area of personality for whom it is crucial to specify exactly what traits a scale measures. Although not central to the present experimental hypotheses, where practicable, additional analyses were conducted in accordance with the three most distinguishable factors of the I-E scale isolated by Gurin et al. (1978): personal control (Items 9, 13, 15, 25, and 28), control ideology (Items 2, 6, 18 and 21), and political control (Items 12, 17, 22, and 29). The analyses of the data from Experiment 2 revealed, as would be expected, that the means of the internal responses in the self condition were significantly larger than the means in the other condition for all three factors ($p < .01$). In Experiment 3, the means of the internal responses in the positive-incentive condition were significantly larger than in the negative-incentive condition for both the factors of personal control and political control ($p < .001$). These secondary analyses suggest that the value of internal attributions is pervasive and support the original conception of the norm.

In Experiments 2 and 3, subjects instructed to describe themselves and to create a positive impression selected only an average of 13 and 12 internal items, respectively, out of the available 23. When responses to particular items were examined, it was clear that the external alternative was occasionally more attractive than the internal alternative. For example, on some items the internal alternative was not very realistic or sensible (e.g., "There really is no such thing as luck," "The idea that teachers are unfair is nonsense"), and on other items the external response was more optimistic and positive (e.g., "In the long run the bad things that happen to us are balanced by the good ones"). This suggests that the tendency of subjects to favor external responses on some items resulted from the unreasonableness of some of the internal alternatives and from the greater optimism of the external alternative. According to this reasoning, a measure of internality that did not contain such confounds should produce more extreme self-descriptions of internality. This confound in the original I-E scale can also explain why the linear trend between expressed internality and social approval in Experiment 1 was not more pronounced at the higher levels of internality.

The normative explanation for the fundamental attribution error has implications for the research on the actor–observer effect, that is, the tendency for actors to attribute the cause of their own behavior less to internal causes than do observers of the same behavior (for reviews see Jones, 1976, and Jones & Nisbett, 1972). The results of Experiment 2 can be viewed as a reversal of this phenomenon. As such, it can be added to the list of existing studies that report finding that actors give more internal explanations than observers (see Monson & Snyder, 1977, for a review). Attributing the behavior of others to internal factors is advantageous to actors because it allows them to block others' attempts to escape from responsibility and allows them to justify punishments and retribution. When explaining one's own behavior, the most prudent strategy is typically to defend against punishment by claiming external causes unless the action is clearly socially desirable.

Lay persons are not the only ones who are subject to the fundamental attribution error; it has been asserted that professional psychologists, too, are biased toward explanations that rely on internal causal forces (Ross, 1977). Within social psychology, the prevalence of hypothetical internal constructs posited to explain behavior is evidence for this assertion. Examples of these explanations include such cognitive concepts as attitudes, values, and beliefs, and such cognitive motives as dissonance reduction (Festinger, 1957), need for approval (Crowne & Marlowe, 1964), consensual validation (Byrne, 1971), and reactance (Brehm, 1966). The self-presentation perspective in general (Tedeschi & Lindskold, 1976), especially when linked to a behavioristic approach (Jellison, Note 1), reverses the traditional causal emphasis by placing the cause in the environment. It is interesting to ponder the extent to which the traditional emphasis on internal explanatory concepts and the resistance to external explanations results from the norm for internality.

Reference Note

1. Jellison, J. M. *Self-presentation: A behavioristic approach.* Paper presented at the 86th annual meeting of the American Psychological Association, Toronto, Canada, August 1978.

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Manuscripts Accepted for Publication in the Section Attitudes and Social Cognition

Cognitive Moderators of the Relationship Between Behavioral Intentions and Behavior. Eleanor Salzer (705 West La Veta, #104, Orange, California 92688).

Affective–Cognitive Consistency and Attitude Inference From Salient Behavioral Information. Shelly Chaiken (Department of Psychology, Erindale College, University of Toronto, Mississauga, Ontario L5L 1C6 Canada) and Mark Baldwin.

Cognitive Sets, Attribution, and Social Interaction. Kerry Yarkin (Department of Psychology, Vanderbilt University, Nashville, Tennessee 37240), John H. Harvey, and Bruce M. Bloxom.

Self-Blame and Depressive Symptoms. Christopher Peterson (Department of Psychology, University of Pennsylvania, 3813 Walnut Street, Philadelphia, Pennsylvania 19104), Stanley M. Schwartz, and Martin E. P. Seligman.

Unemployment and Depression: A Motivational and Attributional Analysis. Norman Feather (Department of Psychology, Flinders University of South Australia, Bedford Park, South Australia, 5042) and P. R. Davenport.

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Selective Monitoring of Physical Sensations. James Pennebaker (Department of Psychology, University of Virginia, Charlottesville, Viriginia 22901) and J. A. Skelton.

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