

How Group Members Explain Their Success and Failure: Causal Attribution to Favoritism versus Discrimination and Its Impact on Self-Esteem

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ABSTRACT

When members of disadvantaged groups receive negative treatment, they often show the reluctance to attribute it to discrimination. The present study aimed to test the hypothesis that the need to protect positive self-regards mediates the unwillingness for discrimination attribution. Female undergraduates read a scenario in which a female protagonist either passed or failed in a job interview. The protagonist was either herself or a fictitious student. The results showed that the participant's own failure in the scenario was attributed to discrimination only when the interviewers were unanimously sexist. The in-group other's failure was attributed to discrimination as far as a moderate level of discrimination was expected. This means that the criterion for attributing a negative event to discrimination was lower for the in-group other than for the self. As for the positive outcome scenario, the participants were more willing to acknowledge the influence of favoritism on one's own success than on other's success. These results suggest that the unwillingness for attribution discrimination serves the protection of self-esteem among the members of an underprivileged group. Implications for the study of coping strategies by the victim of discrimination are discussed.