

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

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### SUMMARY

Members of socially disadvantaged groups such as women and the handicapped often receive derogations and discriminations. However, they show reluctance to attribute the negative treatment they receive to discrimination. Drawing on the argument by Ruggiero and Taylor (1995; 1997), we maintained that attribution to discrimination involves psychological costs because such attribution forces the perceivers to acknowledge that their low status is unchangeable, thereby lowering their self-esteem.

To test the hypothesis that protection of positive self-regards mediates the unwillingness for discrimination attribution, we manipulated potential antecedents for threat to self-esteem. First, as a boundary condition for threat, we introduced a situation in which the perceiver was favored and compared it to the discrimination situation. Second, either the self or someone else in the same group was presented as the target of the discrimination/favoritism. We furthermore varied the likelihood of the unjust treatments. We predicted that the perceiver would attribute their failure in achievement to discrimination only when the target was the self (rather than an in-group other) and when discrimination was unambiguously present.

The participants were 207 female undergraduate students. They read a scenario in which a female protagonist either passed or failed in a job interview. Participants were asked to imagine that the protagonist was either herself or a fictitious female student. The 5 male interviewers in the discrimination scenario were described to be either unanimously sexist, 3 sexist and 2 unbiased individuals, or unanimously unbiased. Likewise, in the favoritism scenario, the number of interviewers who favored women ranged from 0 to 3 to 5. After reading the vignette, participants rated the extent to which they thought the outcome was due to discrimination (or favoritism). They also responded to a State Self-Esteem Scale. In the other-person condition, they were asked to estimate how the protagonist would respond to the scale.

Consistent with our prediction, the failure was attributed to discrimination only when the interviewers were unanimously sexist. In contrast, the negative treatment

that the in-group other received was attributed to discrimination as far as a moderate level of discrimination was expected. In other words, the criterion for attributing a negative event to discrimination was lower for the in-group other than for the self. Also consistent with our prediction, the discrimination attribution was negatively correlated with the self-report of social state self-esteem, but not with the estimated self-esteem for the in-group other target. As for the positive outcome scenario, participants attributed their own success to favoritism in the moderate favoritism condition as well as in the unambiguous favoritism condition. The other person's success, however, was attributed to favoritism in proportion to the objective likelihood of favoritism. Thus, a lower criterion was found for acknowledging the influence of favoritism on one's own success than on other's success. Taken together, these results were consistent with our contention that the unwillingness for attribution discrimination serves the protection of self-esteem among the members of an underprivileged group. Implications for the study of discrimination and psychological well-being of low status group members are discussed.