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Self-Serving Bias



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Synonyms

Benefactance; Egotistical attributions; Self-serving attribution

Definition

Self-serving bias is a psychological strategy referring to the tendency of people to make internal attributions for positive outcomes and external attributions for negative outcomes.

Heider (1958) first enunciated self-serving bias in his explanation of attributions for ambiguous situations. He claimed that attributions are shaped by “a person’s own needs or wishes” (Heider 1958, p. 118). Thus, self-serving bias refers to somewhat distorted explanations and inaccurate interpretations of the given situation as compared to an objective standard. Two accounts have been defined to explain biases in the service of the self: the cognitive account and the motivational account.

The cognitive account states that self-serving bias is a result of limited cognitive capacity rather than a motivated strategy (Miller and Ross 1975). Accordingly, individuals as naïve scientists strive to use the available information to make accurate attributions, yet the bounds of cognitive functioning lead to erroneous attributions, and somehow those errors are in favor of the self. Specifically, individuals set goals with the expectation to achieve. Thus, a positive outcome fits well with the previous expectation and results in an internal attribution in favor of the self. However, feedback indicating failure is inconsistent with the prior expectation which leads to search for explanations most, if not all, of the time outside of the self. The reason behind this process is the asymmetry in memory in which positive experiences are much more salient and easier to retrieve compared to negative outcomes (Taylor 1991). As a result, individuals take action with the expectation to succeed based on the biased retrieval of past experience and make an internal attribution when the expectation is met. A similar explanation states that negative outcomes are inconsistent with the self-view or schemas about oneself (Tetlock and Levi 1982). Since individuals perceive themselves as skillful (i.e., decent, moral, and intelligent), explanations for positive outcomes result in internal attributions while negative outcomes lead to external attributions.

Another explanation derived from the cognitive account for self-serving attribution, in line with the previous one, is biased hypothesis

testing, especially for negative outcomes. Though individuals behave like scientists to find explanations for their experiences, they are inclined to collect and rely on information that verifies their previous expectations (i.e., confirmation bias). Therefore, any information supporting the previous expectation regarding the self and positive outcomes is weighted more as compared to inconsistent information (Sheppard et al. 2008).

The motivation-driven account states that individuals engage in self-serving attributions to preserve and protect their self-esteem. Thus, self-serving bias is a motivated action that aims to increase global self-worth by taking responsibility for positive outcomes and externalize responsibility for negative ones (Blaine and Crocker 1993). Various explanations have been provided for the relationship between self-esteem and self-serving bias. Wills (1981) asserted that low self-esteem drives individuals to engage in self-serving attributions while Alloy and Abramson (1979) claimed that low self-esteem is associated with the lack of motivation to enhance self-esteem. Campbell and Sedikides (1999) in their meta-analysis defined 14 moderators including self-esteem and outcome expectation. Accordingly, the common theme underlying those moderator variables, which are associated with self-serving attributions, is a threat to the self. Self-threat is defined as any kind of failure experience, and the link between self-threat and self-serving bias is stable even after controlling for errors in information processing. Furthermore, findings suggest that self-serving bias is universal rather than being exclusively Western (see Mezulis et al. 2004).

Another motivation defined in the motivation-driven account is self-presentation. According to the self-presentation explanation, individuals try to manage impressions about them formed by others. To be liked and approved by social surroundings, individuals claim responsibility for success and disclaim responsibility for failure (Forsyth and Schlenker 1977).

Overall, individuals engage in biased explanations for their success as a result of imperfect

cognitive functioning and motivations to bolster self-worth. A body of research supports both explanations, implying that they are operating in tandem.

Cross-References

► Cognitive Bias

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