

SELF-SERVING ATTRIBUTIONS IN TEACHERS' EXPLANATIONS OF STUDENTS' PERFORMANCE IN A NATIONAL ORAL ESSAY COMPETITION

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The purpose of the study was to determine the influence of self-serving and ingroup-outgroup biases on teachers' attributions and evaluation of students' performances. The participants were 51 senior secondary school students whose performances in an oral essay competition were evaluated by a panel of 5 judges. After the competition, the teachers were asked to make attributions of their students' performances in the competition. The findings revealed that the teachers of the successful students attributed the success to internal factors while the teachers of the unsuccessful students attributed the students' failures to external factors. It was concluded that self-serving and ingroup-outgroup biases influenced the teachers' attributions and judgment of their students' performances.

Motivational biases are sources of error that stem from a need for people to present themselves well, either to impress others or to maintain their own self-esteem (Schlenker & Weigold, 1992). The existence of motivational biases in attribution was first demonstrated in an experimental study in which experienced teachers taught a lesson to pupils, whose performance – both in terms of its level and its progression – was manipulated by the experimenters (Beckman, 1970). When pupils' performance improved, the instructors were found to attribute the improvement to their abilities as teachers. On the other hand, when the pupils' performance declined, the instructors were reported to have attributed the failure

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to the students. It was further reported that a group of uninvolved observers, who had no responsibility for the students' performance, attributed good performance to the students and bad performance to the teachers.

Attributional bias is not limited to a feeling of self-esteem. It may occur when people feel they may be responsible for others' behaviors. The self-serving bias is a general tendency to attribute success to internal factors – such as skill, ability, or effort – while attributing failure to external factors – such as skill, ability, or effort – while attributing failure to external factors, such as chance or a particular situation (Schlenker, Weigold, & Hallam, 1990).

Most research work in motivational biases (Best, Dansky, & Kilpatrick, 1992; Dye & Roth, 1990) involving teachers' attributions of students' performance did not involve the teachers in the evaluation process of the students' performance. The present study attempted to combat such limitation by involving the teachers as evaluators in the panel of judges. In this case, it was hoped that a new strategy for improving school performance might be adopted and that teachers could be retrained to correct their attribution errors in order to bring about improvement in the teaching and learning process.

METHOD

PARTICIPANTS

The participants were 51 (32 boys and 19 girls) senior secondary school students and 51 class teachers who made attributions of the students' performances. The students were the top members of their classes who had obtained first position in the immediate past promotion examination. The mean chronological age of the students was 16.9.

PROCEDURE

An advertising firm, Cowbell Nigeria Ltd. in June 2000 organized a National Oral Essay Competition at Abuja for secondary school students in Nigeria. Entries in the competition were restricted to the first 51 applications received by the advertising company, which promised to pay a grand prize of US\$1,500 to the student whose presentation was judged to be best in the competition. Consolation prizes ranging from US\$50 to US\$100 were paid to the other 50 successful contestants. The company paid the teacher of the grand winner US\$150 while the other teachers each received US\$50 in addition to reimbursement for all expenses incurred by the students and the teachers to participate in the competition.

The competition was held at Abuja, Nigeria. All participants were kept in a waiting hall that was different from the hall in which the competition took place. The procedure was intended to guard against participants having knowledge of

the topic beforehand. Five judges (4 independent and each student's class teacher) rated each student's performances on a scale of 1-100 points. After all the participants had presented their oral essays and the judges had made their judgment, the winners were announced and all the teachers were asked to make attributions of their candidates' performances.

The scores assigned to each student by each of the 5 judges were averaged and ranked. Canonical discriminant analysis involved testing the significant difference between the attributions of the teachers whose students performed below average and those teachers whose students performed above average using the *U*-statistic (Hoeffding, 1948) at an alpha level of .05.

RESULTS

The results of the present study did not confirm the null hypothesis of no significant difference in attributions between the teachers whose students performed below average and those teachers whose students performed above average and subsequently won some prizes. The findings revealed that 41 of the 51 student contestants had performed below average. All the classroom teachers of the students attributed the students' poor performance to external factors. On the other hand, all the teachers whose students had performed above average and subsequently won some consolation prizes attributed the students' performance to themselves as teachers.

Table 1 outlines the values of the *U* and the univariate *F*-ratio statistics with 1 and 49 degrees of freedom respectively with mean and standard deviations scores of the rating of the students by the 5 judges. Teachers' attributions by students' performances *U*-statistic analysis were statistically significant, $U(1, N = 51) = .489, p < .05$. In order, means for judges 1 through 5 were 62.22, 63.61, 64.39, 64.76, and 84.51 (*SDs* = 1.85, 1.71, 1.61, 1.50, and 0.80, respectively). It could be observed from the means and standard deviation distributions that the teachers rated the students much more highly than did the 4 independent judges.

TABLE 1
MEAN AND STANDARD DEVIATION SCORES OF JUDGES' RATINGS OF STUDENTS' PERFORMANCE

Judges	<i>M</i>	<i>S.E.M</i>	<i>SD</i>	<i>N</i>
Judge 1	62.22	1.85	13.20	51
Judge 2	63.61	1.71	12.22	51
Judge 3	64.39	1.61	11.53	51
Judge 4	64.76	1.50	10.68	51
Judge 5	84.51	.80	5.70	51
<i>Variable</i>	<i>U</i>	<i>F</i>	Sig.	<i>N</i>
Rank	.489	51.07	.000	51

DISCUSSION

The findings of the present study are in full support of the self-serving biases in social cognition in which people who feel they may be responsible for others' behavior tend to attribute failure to external factors and success to internal factors (Schlenker & Weigold, 1992). Therefore, it was not surprising to observe that all the 41 teachers whose students performed poorly in the contest attributed the students' performances to external factors, while the teachers of the successful contestants attributed the successful performances to internal factors.

Moreover, the role of ingroup-outgroup motivational biases seems obvious in the present findings in which the teachers were found to rate the students much more highly than did the other 4 independent judges. The findings are supportive of earlier works by Wilder (1986, 1990) and Perdue, Dovidio, Furtman and Tyler (1990) in which it was found that there is a tendency to hold less favorable opinions about groups to which we do not belong, while holding more favorable opinions about groups to which we do belong.

The null hypothesis of no significant difference in the teachers' attributions of the students' performances and the difference between the teachers' and the independent judges' ratings of the students' performances was rejected; $p < .05$. It was therefore concluded that self-serving and ingroup-outgroup biases strongly influenced the teachers' attributions and ratings of the students' performances.

The implication of the findings suggests subjectivity in teachers' classroom performances in educational testing. It is recommended that educational institutions should attempt to utilize independent assessment of students' classroom performances as a means of validating teachers' scores assigned to different students.

Further research is needed in determining whether or not the gender of the teacher and his/her feelings about some students have any significant relationship with the teacher's classroom assessment of students' performances.

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