

ATTRIBUTION OF RESPONSIBILITY FOR JOINT WORK OUTCOMES IN DYADS OF HIGH AND LOW ATTRACTION IN A NATURAL SETTING

EGON KAYSER

Universität, Mannheim

HELMUT LAMM

Pädagogische Hochschule, Köln

Twenty-eight students of a school class were put into dyads of high and low attraction. After working on a verbal task, all dyads attained a financial payoff. From studies about responsibility attribution in cooperative and competitive social contact, the hypothesis was deduced that there would be less self-attribution of responsibility for the (positive) joint outcome in dyads of high attraction. This was confirmed by the results. The potential significance for problems of distributive justice is discussed.

Keywords: attribution of responsibility, joint work outcomes, attraction level.

In cooperative social contact between two people, the assignment of responsibility for success and failure seems to follow a pattern in which politeness and modesty are expressed. Personal successes are attributed to external factors; personal lack of success is traced back to personal failure. The partner's successes are attributed to him, while he is exonerated in the case of failure (cf. Feather & Simon, 1971).

However, in competitive achievement situations the above attribution pattern is reversed. Personal successes are more regarded as caused internally than are personal failures (cf. Snyder et al., 1976). This attribution tendency occurs frequently when there is no concrete social relationship (i.e., a partner to compete with). The tendency to ascribe one's own success to internal factors and one's own failure to external ones (cf. Heider, 1944, 1958; Shaver, 1970; Streufert & Streufert, 1969) is also characterized as ego-biased, ego-protective, or ego-defensive (cf. Miller & Ross, 1975).

For the explanation of this attribution pattern, motivational factors (avoidance of threats to one's self-esteem – cf. Heider, 1944) have been invoked as well as cognitive factors (e.g., according to Miller & Ross, 1975, contingencies are more likely to be perceived between desired positive events and one's own behavior than between failure and one's own behavior).

While a comparison of the investigations by Feather and Simon (1971) and Snyder et al. (1976) shows the effect of situational characteristics (cooperative versus compet-

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Correspondence and reprint requests should be addressed to: Egorl Kayser, Sonderforschungsbereich 24, Universität Mannheim, L 13, 17, D-6800 Mannheim I, West Germany.

itive achievement situation) on attributions, the effect of the kind of social relationship is still to be investigated. Whether success and failure are ascribed to external or to internal causes as well as the attribution for the responsibility or an outcome, has important consequences for answering the following question: How are the corresponding material correlates of success or failure (e.g., the profits or losses) distributed in the team whose work resulted in such an outcome? Findings about such causal responsibility attributions should enable an essential clarification of the unsharply defined "relevance" concept in the equity theory formulation of Walster et al. (1973). The "causal" relevance of a contribution (e.g., effort) to the outcome obtained by the work group is significant for the extent to which individual contributions are taken into account in making a distribution decision. Moreover, it is significant whether a larger or smaller portion of a contribution is regarded as brought in intentionally (cf. Kayser & Lamm 1978; Lamm et al., 1978).

In addition, the kind of social relationship of the distributors among themselves presumably codetermines the distribution decisions. Likeability towards the partner (i.e., high attraction within the group) appears to further a tendency to distribute the attained results equally, or alternatively to be willing to sacrifice part of one's share (cf. Deutsch, 1975; Lerner, Mikula, & Schwinger, 1978). At the same time, a tendency towards "polite" attributions is manifested, as Feather and Simon (1971) have noted. However, people cannot always join work groups of their choice (which would then be characterized by high attraction). In the working world, the individual's influence on the choice of his work partner is the exception rather than the rule. The competitive aspect, and thereby the attribution pattern mentioned at the beginning of this article, would be more likely to prevail in groups whose members reject (or at least do not particularly like) each other. One could thus expect that, in groups of low attraction, members attribute the responsibility for success to a greater extent to themselves than in groups of high attraction. Above all, this should be the case when one member of the group has contributed greater effort to the joint outcome. Effort, in contrast to ability, is clearly perceived as being under the intentional control of the contributor (cf. Kayser & Lamm, 1978; Lamm et al., 1978; Weiner 1973). The self-attribution of responsibility for team success by those who worked hard will probably thus be seen more clearly in teams of low attraction than in those of high attraction.

Moreover we expect, in cases of success, clearer self-attribution of responsibility in teams which are composed of partners who mutually reject each other. We tested this question by forming corresponding teams with varying mutual attraction between its members. In addition, we investigated the correlative relationship between the self-attribution of responsibility and the extent of the participant's satisfaction with the assigned partner.

METHOD

PARTICIPANTS

Participants were 28 male members of the upper classes of a Manheim high school, aged between 16 and 18 years. Participation was voluntary, and an honorarium of DM 7.50 was paid for the 90 minutes' participation.

THE COURSE OF THE EXPERIMENT AND INDEPENDENT VARIABLES

The experiment took place within the regular school time and within the familiar surroundings (a classroom) of the students. At the first session, the participants worked on a pretest (which at the second session was claimed to be a valid ability test). Moreover, each participant was asked to rank 10 classmates according to the attraction he felt towards them: the five most likable ("my best friends") and the five most unlikable ("the classmates I like least").

At the next session (some days later), the members of the class who had mutually judged each other as likable were put together into 7 dyads while the members who had most rejected each other mutually were put together into 7 dyads, and given the task of solving a number of verbal problems of the same kind presented in the pretest. In each item, participants were to find a word that fitted to three given ones. These verbal problems were patterned after Mednick's (1962) Remote Associates Test. Each participant received the name of his team partner in writing. The arrangement of the seats was so selected that cooperation between team partners was not possible; furthermore, five experimenters and one teacher prevented contact. The participants were instructed that the greater the number of the team's correctly answered problems was, the higher the team payoff would be (maximum DM 7.50). After 20 minutes of work, the answer sheets were collected and allegedly analyzed by the experimenters. The feedback came after 10 minutes. Each participant was told privately that his team had won DM 5.20 and that the performance of both dyadic partners was approximately the same.

INDUCTION OF ABILITY/EFFORT DIFFERENCES

The test given on the first session was alleged to have been an ability test which helped to very precisely measure the capacity to solve problems like those in the team work. The sum of the ability scores of both team members had been determined in the interval between the sessions and represented the "team ability". A member of each team received the information that 60% of this ability was his and 40% the partner's. The other member received the reverse information. Furthermore, it was explained that a team member with 60% ability actually should have produced 60% of the team achievements; on the other hand, a team member with 40% should have produced about 40%. From the fact that the performance of the two was the same, it was inferred that the member with more ability had worked on the problems with less effort than the member of less ability. Thus, to summarize, seven participants in the condition of high attraction and the seven in the condition of low attraction received the information that they had more ability but had given less effort. The remaining dyadic members received the information that they had less ability but had given greater effort.

Each participant was then asked to distribute the team's payoff. (The outcome of this in over 80% of the cases was an equal distribution, which was to be expected in view both of the alleged performance equality of the team partners and of the anticipation of future interaction – cf. Shapiro, 1975.) After that, the participants were asked to estimate their own responsibility for the performance outcome of their team (an 11-point scale was used, ranging from 1 = *lowest degree of responsibility* to 11 = *highest degree of responsibility*). Furthermore, they were asked, again on an 11-point

scale, to what extent they saw the result as caused by external factors (*external conditions* or *good/bad luck*) (dependent variable *external attribution*).

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

The variance analysis of the responsibility attributions showed a significant main effect of the attraction factor. As shown in Table 1, the participants who rejected their partners attributed greater responsibility to themselves for the team outcome than the participants who found their partners likable [$F(1, 23) = 4.16, p < .05$]. An interaction effect with contribution position (partner A versus partner B) was not obtained here, although we had expected that the greater-effort members would attribute the responsibility for the payoff (the success) to a larger extent to themselves in low-attraction teams. However, an analysis of the external attributions illustrates that particularly in this cell (low attraction, high-effort member), external attribution is lesser than in the remaining cells [$F(1, 24) = 5.07, p < 0.04$ – cf. Winer, 1971. p. 170]. While the high-effort member (as compared to the low-effort one) does not directly attribute greater responsibility to himself given a rejected (unlikable) partner, he nevertheless attributes the success to a lesser extent to external conditions. Possibly the latter tendency offers a psychological solution to the dilemma of “rejection of the partner” and “politeness in social contact”. In connection with the first-mentioned finding (more self-attribution given an unlikable partner), this corresponds to the predicted attribution pattern for high and low attraction. The self-enhancing attributions evidenced often in individual situations (see introduction) are manifest in the low-attraction condition and occur indirectly (in the form of reduced external attribution) especially among participants perceiving themselves as having put in the greater effort. On the other hand, “polite” attributions are more likely to occur in the high-attraction condition, where one’s own responsibility for success is assessed as low. The high-effort participants in the high attraction dyads show a (nonsignificant) tendency to estimate their personal responsibility as less than that of their partner. In dyads of low attraction, the opposite is true.

TABLE 1
MEAN VALUES AND STANDARD DEVIATIONS OF SELF ATTRIBUTED RESPONSIBILITY

	Member A (higher effort, lower ability)		Member B (lower effort, higher ability)	
	M	SD	M	SD
Low attraction	6.57	1.13	7.29	1.38
High attraction	5.67	1.03	6.29	1.25

We also investigated the effect of experimental manipulation (attraction, i.e., team composition) on the evaluation of the relationship itself. Before the teamwork phase, each participant had to answer the question of whether he himself would have selected as team partner the one who was assigned to him (1 = *very likely*; 11 = *very unlikely*). (Participants in the condition of high attraction were of course to a significant extent more satisfied with the assignment than participants in the condition of low attraction – $p < 0.001$.) The relationship between the satisfaction with the allotment

of partner and the self-attributed responsibility for team payoff corresponds to our hypothesis: the more likely one would himself have chosen his assigned partner, the less the self-attributed responsibility for success ($r = 0.34$, $p < .05$, one-tailed).

The ascription of responsibility within a work team is dependent on (a) the jointly attained result (success versus failure) and (b) what information has been given about the individual team members' contributions towards attaining this result (e.g., how hard they have worked). The reduced external attributions by high-effort team members in low attraction dyads is evidence of (b). Nevertheless, the latter result does not go along with increased self-attribution of responsibility. This (non-finding) can possibly be traced back to the fact that the participants are members of a class with high interaction intensity. Thus, even in dyads of low attraction a tendency towards "modest" attributions counteracts the postulated process (increased self-attribution). Still, the inclination towards increased self-attribution finds an "outlet" in the reduced external attribution just mentioned. As our results show, a third determinant (c) of the attribution process within the team is an aspect of the social relationship between the team members, namely attraction. In teams of high attraction, our data correspond to the attribution patterns found in investigations involving cooperative social contact. In teams of low attraction, the data correspond to the findings from investigations involving competitive achievement situations (see introduction). However, we can claim this, for the time being, only for attributions of success (and not of failure).

Finally, the implications of the results described here for the area of distributive justice and allocation behavior still have to be dealt with. According to former investigations, responsibility attribution is probably an important intervening variable in decisions about the distribution of goods in work groups (cf. Kayser & Lamm, 1978; Lamm et al., 1978). They are probably also significant for explaining the reactions of allocation recipients. The fact that self-attribution of responsibility occurs less frequently in dyads of high attraction in contrast to those of low attraction could explain why modest, less egoistic, distributions in dyads of high attraction were found in other distribution experiments (cf. Mikula & Schwinger, 1977; here one must remember that the information about the contributions of the participants is a decisive factor in the distribution). With respect to the participants' reactions to received allocations, one could presume from the results of the present investigation that members of teams characterized by low (in comparison to high) attraction would find the allocations unfair because they considered themselves to be more responsible for attaining the payoff. As a consequence of the latter attribution tendency, an increased interpersonal conflict potential can be expected (the claims for a share of a good is presumably stronger when one feels oneself has produced the good). Thus, a thorough investigation of the role of responsibility attribution as the cause of intragroup conflict appears to be worthwhile.

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