# Predicting the Interpersonal Targets of Self-Serving Attributions

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## Abstract:

People will, under certain conditions, attribute failure to an external target to avoid an unfavorable self-evaluation. But to what external target do people attribute failure? Based on Fritz Heider's analysis of similarity and attribution, we predicted that failure—a negative event—would be attributed to a similarly negative external target. Participants worked on a task ostensibly created by three other people and received failure feedback. Self-awareness was either high or low, and people believed that their likelihood of improving in the future was either high or low. The valence of the fictional group members was manipulated such that one member was positive, another was mildly negative, and the third was highly negative. As in past research, highly self-aware persons who could not improve their failure attributed failure externally, relative to the other conditions. Consistent with Heider's analysis, these participants perceived the negative group members as being responsible for their failure relative to self and the positive group member. Implications for the self-serving bias are discussed.

## Article:

People typically have many goals and motives simultaneously (Freud, 1923; Heider, 1958; Lewin, 1935), so the operation of important motives maybe obscured by parallel or contrary motives. For example, people are motivated to maintain a positive self-evaluation by achieving consistency between the self and important standards and values (Duval & Wicklund, 1972; Silvia &Duval, in press). One consequence of this motive is the "self-serving bias": people will attribute negative events to external causes to avoid a lowered self-evaluation (Federoff &Harvey, 1976). Yet people should not always make self-serving attributions because this is not the only important motive. In fact, the influence of additional motives is reflected in the contradictory self- serving bias literature. Some studies do find external attributions for failure (e.g., Snyder, Stephan, &Rosenfield, 1976). Other studies, however, find internal attributions for failure (e.g., Ames, 1975; Ross, Bierbrauer, &Polly, 1974; Weary et al., 1982) or no effect at all. Indeed, a recent meta-analysis (Campbell & Sedikides, 1999) and past reviews (Zuckerman, 1979) show that self-serving and other- serving attributions are both common findings.

What other motives might be moderating the self-serving bias? Duval and Silvia (in press) suggest that attributional motives are a significant factor. People want to be consistent with their standards, but they also want to accurately attribute events to their most plausible cause (see Duval & Duval, 1983, for a detailed discussion). Such attributions enable a reasonably accurate understanding of the environment's causal structure (Heider, 1944, 1958), which is useful when striving for complex goals. These two motives can be harmonious. When self is the most plausible cause for success, for example, an internal attribution will simultaneously further self-evaluative and attributional motives. But the two goals can also conflict, such as when self is the most plausible cause for failure. An internal failure attribution would satisfy the attributional motive but disrupt self– standard congruity. Conversely, an external failure attribution would preserve self–standard congruity but thwart the attributional motive.

How do people reconcile these conflicting motives? One possible moderator proposed by Duval and Duval (1983, 1987) is peoples' perceived ability to improve their failure in the future. If people feel that they can rapidly improve, then a discrepancy would only be temporary and failure should be attributed internally. But if people feel that they cannot improve, an internal attribution would create an irreducible self-discrepancy and its

resulting negative affect. In this situation an external attribution seems a more optimal reconciliation of the two motives.

The effects of perceived ability to improve should be exaggerated by high levels of self-awareness. People are keenly aware of the relation between self and standards when their attention is focused on the self (Duval & Wicklund, 1972; Silvia &Duval, in press; Silvia & Gendolla, in press). This makes the experience of failure much more severe (Ickes, Wicklund, &Ferris, 1973). Conversely, the self-evaluative motive is minimal when people are not concerned with whether they are consistent with their standards (Scheier &Carver, 1983); there is thus no motive conflict to be reconciled when self-awareness is low.

A series of experiments (Duval &Duval, 1983, 1987; Duval & Silvia, in press) have supported these predictions. The general procedure involved giving participants false failure feedback and then manipulating the perceived probability of improving in the future. Self-awareness was manipulated by exposing half of the participants to their image on a video monitor. When self-awareness was high, people attributed failure internally (as measured by an internal– external change score and by the fourfold typology) when they felt they could improve; their state self-esteem declined as a result. In contrast, highly self-aware people who perceived improvement as unlikely attributed failure externally; their state self-esteem thus remained unchanged.

## THE TARGETS OF SELF-SERVING ATTRIBUTIONS

People will attribute failure externally when self-awareness is high and the likelihood of improving failure is low (Duval &Duval, 1983, 1987; Duval & Silvia, in press). But to what external object are people attributing failure? What variables determine the targets of self-serving attributions? Such processes have received very little attention in the self-serving bias literature. This is surprising, given the presumed links between attributions and subsequent action (Heider, 1958). For example, a student who attributes a poor test grade to the neighbor's late-night party will take different actions than a student who attributes failure to the professor's malevolent incompetence. Likewise, consider a job candidate who, not being very qualified, does not get hired. An attribution to the employer's "lack of good judgment" will have different consequences than an attribution to "affirmative action" or "a bad astrological pairing." Indeed, many influential models of prejudice (e.g., Allport, 1954; Crocker &Major, 1989) discuss the pivotal social consequences of external attributions for personal failings.

One likely determinant of external attributions is the similarity in valence between the failure event and the target. In Heider's (1944, 1958) model, attribution involves connecting cognitions in cause–effect unit relations. As with all unit relations, there are pressures toward uniformity between the connected elements; a negative event linked to a positive cause would create "imbalance." People avoid these uncomfortable disruptions of the perceptual field by connecting elements that are affectively harmonious. "Good people" are thus seen as responsible for "good things" and vice versa. Heider's perspective thus suggests the intuitive prediction that failure—a negative event—will be attributed to an external target that is similarly negative.

Although couched in different theoretical terms, several studies are consistent with Heider's approach. Regan, Straus, and Fazio (1974) manipulated participants' liking for a target person who then failed or succeeded on a task. Attributions for the target's performance reflected balance processes. The liked person's failure was attributed externally, whereas the disliked person's failure was attributed internally; this pattern was reversed when the target succeeded. In a second study, participants believed that a liked or disliked acquaintance had done a favor for another person. The favor (a positive event) was attributed to the liked person's disposition and the disliked person's situation. Another study (Sedikides, Campbell, Reeder, &Elliot, 1998, Study 2) found that working closely on task led to greater liking for the dyad partner—in balance terms, the unit relation induced a positive sentiment relation. Liking then mediated whether a dyad's failure was attributed to the other or to the self: the other received less blame for failure when viewed positively. This nicely fits a balance theory analysis, as the positive valence of the other person was inconsistent with the negative valence of the poor performance.

## THE PRESENT STUDY

We sought to test the influence of event–target similarity in guiding external attributions for failure. We "manipulated" internal and external attributions by manipulating self-awareness and perceived ability to improve. Many experiments have shown that highly self-aware people who feel they can improve will attribute failure internally, whereas highly self-aware people who do not expect improvement will attribute failure externally (Duval &Duval, 1983, 1987; Duval & Silvia, in press). This enabled us to create a condition in which people will attribute failure externally. We also manipulated the affective valence of three possible targets, creating one positive target, one mildly negative target, and one highly negative target.

Following past research, we expected highly self-aware people who could not improve to attribute failure externally relative to the other three conditions. Within this condition, we expected greater attribution to either (or both) of the negative targets relative to self and the positive target. In contrast, we expected highly self-aware people who could improve to attribute failure internally. Because they perceived the self as responsible, they should make minimal attribution to the three external targets. Finally, given that self-evaluation concerns are minimal when self-focus is low (Scheier &Carver, 1983; Silvia &Duval, in press), no systematic effects were expected in the low self-awareness conditions.

## METHOD

### *Overview*

Participants worked on a creative problem solving task presumably created by three other (fictional) participants, known as A, B, and C. Participant A was mildly negative, Participant B was positive, and Participant C was negative. To create a discrepancy, all participants received false failure feedback. Level of self-awareness and perceived probability of discrepancy reduction (PDR) were manipulated. Attributions for failure to self, A, B, and C were measured.

### *Participants and Design*

Forty-four participants (16 men and 28 women) enrolled in undergraduate psychology courses participated in exchange for extra course credit. Men and women were distributed equally across the conditions. Participants were randomly assigned to condition in a 2 (high/low self-awareness) X 2 (high/low PDR) factorial design.

### *Procedure*

All persons participated individually. Upon entering the lab, the participants were greeted by the experimenter and led to a private room. The experimenter explained that the study concerned the dynamics of creative problem solving in a group situation, specifically creative processes in the absence of nonverbal cues from other group members. Participants were told that they would work on a creative problem solving task with three other participants—all nonverbal cues were eliminated by having each group member participate at a different point in the semester.

The participants were then introduced to the creative problem solving task, which was a variation of the Remote Associations Task (Mednick, 1962). In this task, three words sharing a common associated word (known as a "trigram") are presented. For example, the associated word to the trigram "basket, room, base" is "ball," as in "basketball, ballroom, baseball." Participants were asked to generate the word associated with all three trigram words. To make the task ambiguous and challenging, participants were asked to also generate words associated with any one word or combination of words in the trigram.

After being introduced to the task, the participants were told that the three other participants had been randomly assigned to be the "problem creators" and that each problem creator had generated 10 trigrams. Participant were informed that they were thus the "problem solver"—their role was to correctly solve the 30 trigrams generated by the three problem creators.

The experimenter stated that because the study was a group experiment, he would like to give the participant some information on the other three group members. The participants received contrived personality descriptions of the three fictional participants, referred to as A, B, and C. Each personality description contained

two trait terms taken from Anderson's (1968) list of valenced traits. The participants were told that the personality profiles were intended to familiarize them with the format of the profiles and that more detailed personality descriptions would be given later in the session. The participants were then led through three practice trigrams to ensure their familiarity with the task.

*Self-awareness manipulation.* Before beginning the task, the experimenter explained that some sessions were randomly chosen to be videotaped so the experimenters could see if the procedure was standard for each participant. In the *high self-awareness* condition, the experimenter further explained that the present session was selected to be videotaped. A video camera facing the participant, a video recorder, and a monitor were turned on; the participant was only able to see his or her face in the monitor. This is a common (Duval, Duval, & Mulilis, 1992; Duval & Lalwani, 1999) and well-validated (Davis &Brock, 1975; Geller & Shaver, 1976; Rogers, Miller, Mayer, &Duval, 1982) self- awareness manipulation. In the *low self-awareness* condition, the experimenter stated that the present session had not been randomly chosen to be videotaped, and the video equipment was not manipulated.

The participant was given 10 min to work on the 30 trigrams. The experimenter then reentered the room, took the answer sheet, and ostensibly went to computer analyze the responses. After 4 min, the experimenter returned and gave the participant a printout detailing the results of the supposed computer analysis. All participants first received failure feedback. The experimenter directed attention to bold type at the bottom of the sheet stating "Total degree of discrepancy from standard: 20.02%." (Pretesting indicated that people perceived 20% as a large discrepancy.)

*Probability of discrepancy reduction (PDR) manipulation.* The experimenter went on to tell the participants that the analysis also provided an accurate estimate of their

TABLE 1
Attributions to Self and the Mildly Negative, Positive, and Highly Negative Partners

| | No camera | | Camera | |
|---|---|---|---|---|
| | High PDR | Low PDR | High PDR | Low PDR |
| Self | 3.73 (1.27) | 3.82 (1.60) | 5.73 (1.10) | 2.09 (1.38) |
| Mildly negative | 3.27 (1.56) | 2.55 (1.13) | 2.18 (0.98) | 4.45 (1.44) |
| Positive | 3.55 (1.29) | 2.82 (0.75) | 2.27 (1.01) | 2.45 (0.93) |
| Highly negative | 3.18 (1.66) | 2.82 (1.40) | 2.09 (1.04) | 4.18 (1.25) |

*Note.* PDR = probability of discrepancy reduction. Scale values range from 1 to 7; higher values represent more attribution for failure. $N = 11$ per cell.

ability to improve their performance in the future. Another boldface sentence stated "Estimated probability of improved performance." The probability of improvement was 98.51% in the high PDR condition and 1.51% in the low PDR condition. The experimenter reiterated the failure and PDR feedback and asked if the participant had any questions.

*Target valence manipulation.* In order to assess "impressions of the creative task's dynamics," the experimenter gave the participant the detailed descriptions of the other three participants. Each description was composed of 10 trait terms with a similar affective valence (Anderson, 1968). Pretesting revealed that Participant A was mildly negative (e.g., shy, conforming, and hesitant), Participant B was positive (e.g., modest, confident, and idealistic), and Participant C was highly negative (e.g., superstitious, insecure, and eccentric; *M*s = 3.8, 5.55, and 2.25 on a 7-point scale, with each mean differing significantly from the others). Each "personality profile" was followed by the 10 trigrams that the fictional participant had presumably contributed to the 30 total trigrams. The trigrams were randomly ascribed to the fictional participants from the list of 30.

The participant was asked to review the personality profiles and trigram lists and then complete a brief questionnaire. The questionnaire contained attribution measures, checks on the target valence and PDR manipulations, and several filler measures intended to maintain the cover story's credibility. Causal attributions for failure were measured by asking participants four questions: "To what extent was your performance caused by factors associated with yourself/Person A/Person B/Person C?"; each item was answered on a 7-point scale. Participants were debriefed upon completion of the questionnaire.

## RESULTS

The gender variable was not involved in any significant main effects or interactions, so it is not discussed further.

### *Manipulation Checks*

The PDR manipulation's effectiveness was measured with the item "To what extent can you improve your performance on the creativity task in the future?" An analysis of variance (ANOVA) yielded a sole main effect of PDR, $F(1, 40) = 43.4, p < .001$; as expected, the high PDR conditions expected a greater chance of improvement than the low PDR conditions.

Participants were asked "To what extent do you think you would like Participant A/B/C?" as a check on the manipulation of targets' valence. The positive target ($M = 4.89$) was perceived more positively than both the mildly negative target ($M = 3.22$), $t(43) = 6.4, p < .001$, and the highly negative target ($M = 2.73$), $t(43) = 6.5, p < .001$. The mildly and highly negative targets were also perceived as distinct, $t(43) = 2.3, p < .024$. This pattern replicates our pretesting and suggests that the manipulation was successful.

### *Causal Attributions*

To see if attributions were influenced by our manipulations, we conducted a 2 (self-focus) X 2 (PDR) X 4 (attribution targets) ANOVA with repeated measures on the third factor. This analysis found a main effect for the attribution targets and an interaction between PDR and targets (both *p*s < .001). These were, however, qualified by the predicted three-way interaction, $F(3, 120) = 19.1, p < .001$. We thus conducted additional between- and within-condition analyses to clarify the meaning of this interaction, using Girden's (1992, pp. 59–65) recommendations. Attributions to self and the three external targets are shown in Table 1.

*Attributions to self.* Our between-condition analyses first tested our predictions regarding self-attributions for failure. Given past research, we expected the high selfawareness/high PDR condition to attribute failure to self, and the high self-awareness/low PDR condition to attribute failure externally. A 2 X 2 ANOVA yielded a significant PDR main effect, $F(1, 40) = 18.9, p < .002$, and a significant interaction, $F(1, 40) = 20.9, p < .001$. The pattern supported our predictions (see Fig. 1). When improvement was likely, high self-awareness led to greater self-attribution of failure, $t(20) = 3.9, p < .001$. When improvement was unlikely, however, high self-awareness led to less self-attribution, $t(20) = 2.71, p < .013$. The improvement conditions differed when self-awareness was high, $t(20) = 6.8, p < .001$, but not when self-awareness was low, $t < 1$. This nicely replicates past research and indicates that our "manipulation" of internal and external failure attributions was successful.

*External attributions to other participants.* The second step tested our predictions regarding the predictability of external attributions. We conducted analyses within the high self-awarenessllow PDR condition —the only condi-

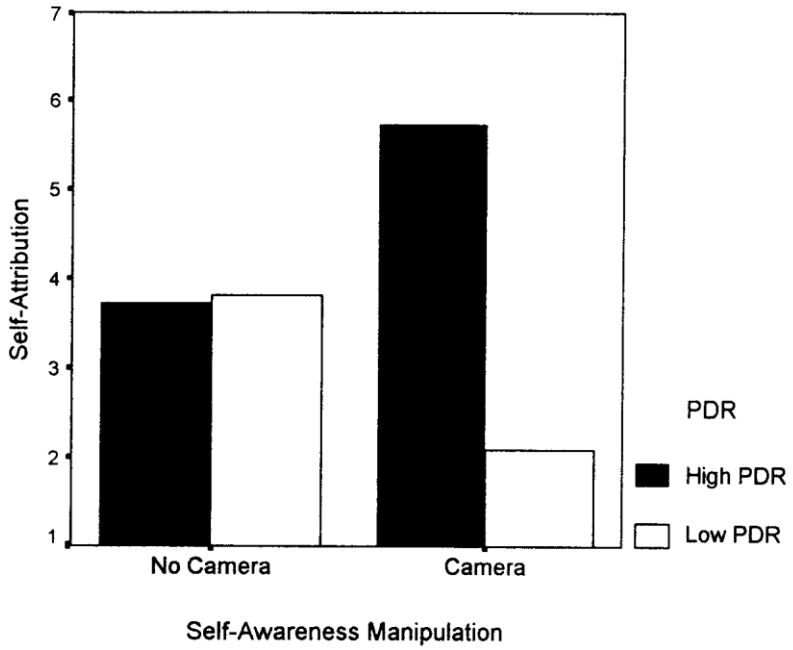


**FIG. 1.** Attributions to self as a function of self-awareness and perceived ability to improve.

tion to attribute failure externally—to see if people defensively attributed failure to positive or negative others. Given Heider's (1944, 1958) analysis of similarity and attribution, we expected greater attribution to the negative targets relative to self and the positive target. We conducted paired *t* tests within this condition to see if attributions were affected by event–target similarity. The attribution patterns for the two high self-awareness conditions are shown in Fig. 2.

Participants attributed more causality for failure to the mildly negative partner, $t(10) = 4.4, p < .001$, and the highly negative partner, $t(10) = 4.2, p < .002$, than to self. Self-attribution did not differ from attribution to the positive partner, $t = 1.01$, *ns*. This shows that people indeed saw external causes as more responsible for their own failure.

External attribution was also specific to the negative targets. Participants attributed more causality to the mildly negative partner than to the positive partner, $t(10) = 3.8$, $p < .003$. The highly negative partner was also seen as more responsible for failure than the positive partner, $t(10) = 3.6, p < .004$. The two negative partners did not differ, $t < 1$. This shows that the negative targets were both seen as more responsible for failure than self or the positive possible target.

## DISCUSSION

People frequently attribute failure externally, but what external target of all possible targets is perceived as responsible for failure? Heider's (1944, 1958) model of attribution suggests that similarity between the failure event and the possible target is relevant. In this model, people form cause–effect unit relations to create and maintain a simple and consistent view of the environment. One aspect of consistency is the extent to which connected elements have similar valences. A unit relation composed of dissimilar elements, such as perceiving a nice person as the cause of a bad event, creates an uncomfortable sense of imbalance. The formation of attributions is thus guided in part by the goal of establishing affectively harmonious unit relationships.

The present study extended Heider's (1958) reasoning to defensive failure attributions. Failure, a negative event, should be attributed to a similarly negative external target; this attribution would establish a harmonious unit relationship. An experiment demonstrated the importance of event– target similarity in this process. People

who attributed failure externally (the high self-awarenessl low PDR group) were able to attribute failure to a positive person, a mildly negative person, or a highly negative person. As expected, significantly more causality for failure was attributed to the two negative targets relative to the positive target.

The present study also replicated previous findings on the effects of self-awareness and perceived ability to improve on performance attributions. Highly self-aware people who felt they could improve attributed failure to self, whereas highly self-aware people who did not expect to improve attributed failure externally. Ability to improve had no effect when self-awareness was low; self–standard consistency concerns were minimized, so there was no conflict

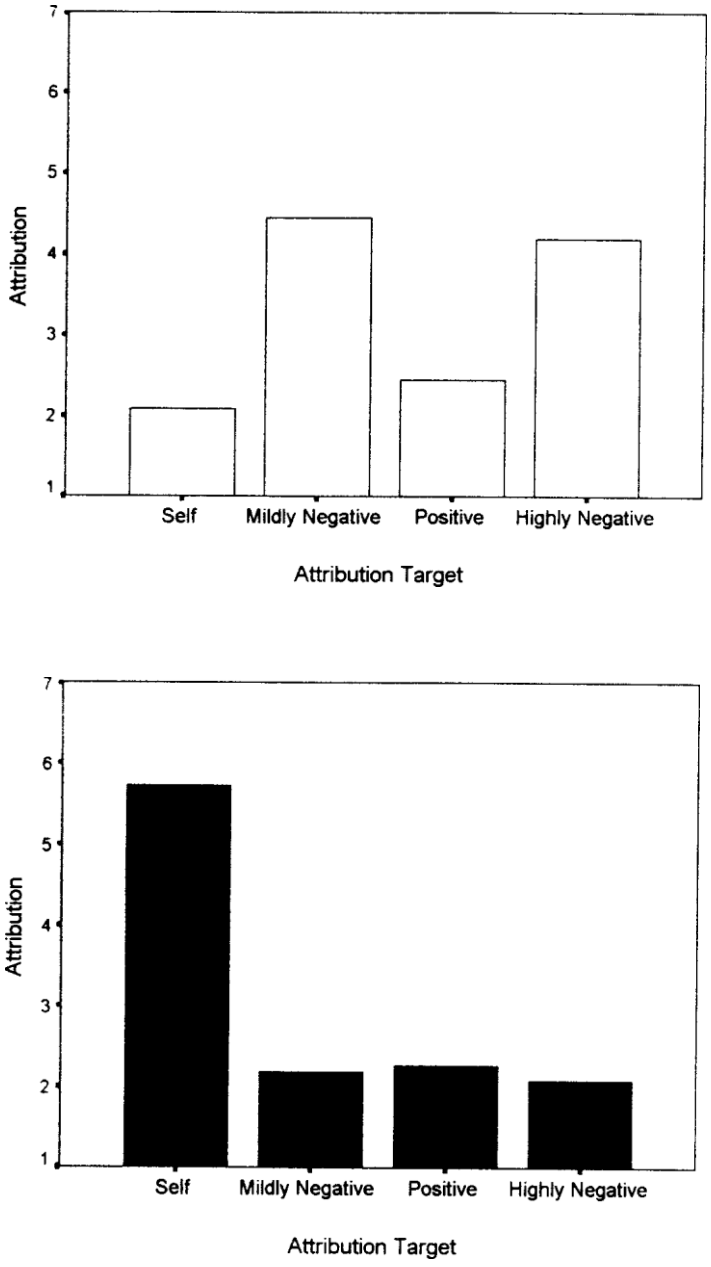


**FIG. 2.** Attribution to self and the mildly negative, positive, and highly negative targets within the camera/low PDR (TOP) and camera/high PDR (BOTTOM) conditions.

between self-esteem and attributional motives. Evidence for internal failure attributions clearly contradicts the strong view of the self-serving bias, which assumes that the self- esteem motive is paramount. It is fully consistent, however, with past studies (Ames, 1975; Duval &Duval, 1983, 1987; Ross et al., 1974; Weary et al.,

1982) and the general position that action is determined by the interplay of multiple simultaneous motives rather than a single imperialistic drive (Heider, 1958; Lewin, 1935).

Future research should isolate other predictors of external attributions. The usual attribution suspects, such as contiguity and covariation, seem promising. Another possibility is "substantiality," which is the subjective sense of magnitude (Duval &Duval, 1983; see also Bruner & Postman, 1948). People typically perceive substantial events (e.g., a huge political scandal) as being due to substantial causes (e.g., a vast conspiracy). Persons with Christian beliefs, for example, often perceive God as the cause of substantial positive events, such as an averted catastrophe, but rarely as the cause of trivial positive events, such as finding misplaced car keys (Lupfer, Brock, & DePaola, 1992). Testing additional facets of a balance approach is another goal for later work. The present study was only concerned with predicting the targets of failure attributions. A comprehensive extension of balance theory to self-serving attribution should consider success attributions as well as attributions for events that are linked with but not caused by the self, such as the failure of a favorite sports team.

*Reconsidering Attributional Typologies*

One reason why so little attention has been paid to the targets of external attributions is the popularity of the "attribution typology." Many studies have used attributions to ability, effort, task difficulty, and luck as the measure of attributional egotism. Ability and effort represent internal dimensions that are stable and unstable, whereas task difficulty and luck represent external dimensions that are stable and unstable. This typology is traced to Heider (1958), although Heider's primary concern was clearly the interpersonal function of attribution and not the narrow domain of performance attribution. Attributions, in his model, primarily serve to gain information about the dispositions and motives of other people, thus enabling a predictable and manageable social environment.

The attribution typology has some serious problems. It's unclear what an attribution to "luck" means psychologically. Are people agnostically saying they do not know an event's cause, or do they really believe a mysterious force has influenced the outcome? Furthermore, "ability" and "task difficulty" are two sides of the same coin; a task is only difficult relative to a person's ability level. And ultimately the fourfold typology, like all typologies, is "convenient and seductive" (Allport, 1961, p. 17)—it does not illuminate the process of attribution. No one attributes being spurned by a lover to "task difficulty" or "effort"; no one attributes an altruistic act to "luck" or a hate crime to "ability." These actions are instead attributed to the dispositions, intentions, and motives of other people (Heider, 1958). The attribution typology thus obscures the basic interpersonal character and implications of causal attribution; future research should pursue more viable measures.

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