

THE SELF-SERVING BIAS: THEN WE SAW IT, PERHAPS NOW WE DON'T

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ABSTRACT

The Self-Serving Bias involves crediting one's successes to personal factors (ability or effort), and blaming one's failures on surrounding circumstances (bad luck or inequities). It has been pervasive in many aspects of behavior, including consumer judgments. We investigate changes in degree or existence of this bias. It may be becoming less prevalent among Millennials, making them harder to anticipate and more difficult to please. The findings are discussed in terms of both education and consumer behaviors.

BACKGROUND

Attribution Theory was in full swing in the 1970's. Ross [8] termed the ordinary person as an "intuitive psychologist" – who observes behaviors, and tries to infer related causes. Aspects of the theory emerged from psychology, social psychology, and sociology [4] [13] [15] [16] research. Simultaneously aspects of Attribution Theory were being applied in both marketing [9] [10] and management [2] contexts.

Two persuasive biases or distortions of how individuals assigned causes to observed behavior included the so-called Fundamental Attribution Error (a.k.a., the Actor-Observer Bias), and the Success-Failure Bias. Simply stating the Fundamental Attribution Error, observers, relative to actors, tend to overly attribute an actor's behavior to his/her personal characteristics or disposition. These attributions thus often concern judgments of ability or effort, and often overlook surrounding circumstances. Conversely, actors, relative to observers, overly attribute their own behaviors to elements of the surrounding situation [8].

Jones and Nisbett [3] identified two differences between actors and observers, which could account for the Fundamental Attribution Error. The first involved differing information available to either party. An actor is privy to all of his/her past behaviors, so he/she observes variations in own behavior co-varying with situational elements. An observer, with limited awareness of an actor's past behaviors, sees behavioral differences occurring between actors. Hence observers, relative to actors, more often conclude that differences are most likely attributable to differences in personal dispositions of various actors.

The second reason given by Jones and Nisbett [3] for distortions in causal judgments by actors versus observers relates to their differing perspectives. The actor looks out at the surrounding world, and is more readily aware of circumstances surrounding his/her own varying behaviors. Thus, the actor tends to infer that the situation mandated the behavior. Conversely, for the observer vs. the actor, there is a "figure-ground" reversal. The observer sees the actor "in motion" – i.e., speaking, moving, etc. For the observer, the actor is figure, and any surrounding circumstances are only background – and less noticeable. Thus, the observer is less likely to conclude that the situation has caused the behavior of the actor.

The second pervasive bias, originally called the Success-Failure Bias, was viewed as resulting from ego-defensive information mechanisms [17]. The first half of the originally-termed Success-Failure Bias has more recently been called the Self-Serving Bias [1]. Specifically, people tend to take credit for their own successes (a personal attribution), but blame their own failures on surrounding circumstances. Thus,

actors tend to attribute personal successes to their efforts, abilities and dispositions, while blaming failures on task difficulty or poor luck. The “first half” has been shown to be very strong and virtually ubiquitous.

Conversely, early researchers found that actors tended to reverse their judgements of others’ successes and failures [11]. Actors, relative to observers, generally attribute another’s failures to personal characteristics, but often view another’s successes as related to elements of the situation. This less strong aspect is indirectly ego-defensive, by comparison of self to others. The latter half of the bias has recently been largely ignored, and it is the Self-Serving Bias, attributions about self-behaviors, which has received greater attention. Thus, the Self-Serving Bias attributes judgments of own behavior to defensive, egocentric, egotistic, or self-serving motives [17].

As can be deduced, the Fundamental Attribution Error and the Success-Failure Bias are at odds in the case of an individual attributing the cause of his or her own successes. While the Fundamental Attribution Error – or Actor-Observer Bias – would predict that an actor should overly attribute own success to situational elements, more so than would an observer of the success, the Success-Failure Bias predicts oppositely. Even though the Fundamental Attribution Error is the strongest bias across all outcomes (i.e., success, failure, or neutral behaviors), apparently the salience of own success, coupled with strong ego-defensive tendencies, induces one to change his/her normal attribution concerning self-behaviors.

In addition to general acceptance of both the Actor-Observer Bias (i.e., “Fundamental Attribution Error”), and the Self-Serving Bias, some researchers have found gender differences in the biases. For example, when faced with own failures, male students attributed the failure to poor luck, while females tended to describe their failures in more self-derogatory manners [6]. Thus, females were less likely to look for a scapegoat than were males. Nichols’ study was conducted using fourth grade students, and in a time when there were well-defined gender roles in terms of education, family roles and occupations. This gender bias within the Fundamental Attribution Error was consistent with those differing gender roles.

In teaching Consumer Behavior, the author has used an exercise in which students are asked to think of a recent personal success, and describe its most likely cause. They are asked not to hedge, and to decide whether they view its cause as dominantly personal or situational. Secondly, they are asked to relate a recent failure and, again, to list its dominant cause. Finally, they are asked to repeat the task for another’s recent success, as well as for another’s recent failure. The data are recorded, and findings of biases are shared with students during a related discussion of the applicability of Attribution Theory Biases in marketing situations.

For example, the Success-Failure Bias would predict that when one buys a product which “succeeds” (i.e., meets or exceeds expectations), he/she will most likely attribute the cause to personal reasons: “smart” shopping (i.e., consumer ability or effort). Conversely, when a product fails, one is more likely to blame a store, a manufacturer, misleading advertising, a dishonest sales rep., etc. – aspects of the environment. Thus, students are asked to think of ways in which the firm can minimize the disadvantage to the firm of this second aspect of the Success-Failure Bias, when a consumer experiences a product failure.

Students are asked to look beyond retroactive solutions of warranties/guarantees, to more proactive solutions. Such retroactive “solutions” actually perpetuate the bias. A disgruntled consumer, when he/she successfully returns a product for a new item or refund, believes that the refund acknowledges the fault of the store or manufacturer. Rather, the first proactive means usually deduced is to avoid product failures through quality control measures. That, of course, is the best solution to both the firm and the customer.

However, it is not possible to avoid all product failures, particularly if the product is misused by the consumer. Thus, students are lead to consider the role of product use, assembly, and other instructions. Not only can instructions help prevent product failures, but they can help the consumer realize his/her own culpability in a failure, when and if it does occur (and the buyer failed to follow included instructions). The following study was conducted to verify the continuing existence of the two identified distortions or biases, when individuals attribute causes of their own and others' behaviors. Its original goal was to help students prove to themselves the veracity of the long-accepted biases of how people determine causality.

METHODOLOGY

Before the class period when the instructor was to discuss perceptions, a bonus project was made available to students. It asked them to think about a recent success each had experienced, as well as a recent personal failure. They were asked to describe the personal success, and decide what was the dominant cause for the success. They were also asked to describe and determine the dominant cause of the recent personal failure. The procedure was repeated for a recent success and the recent failure of someone else, with whom they were not close. During the discussion of perceptions, Attribution Theory and common biases were presented. Students were asked to reflect on their bonus projects, and determine whether they conformed to the Success-Failure Bias.

Data was originally collected in narrative, tabular form, but were subsequently coded numerically by the instructor. Data were available for spring semester of 2008, as well as fall 2016. Other data were not able to be coded, as the bonus point assignments had been handed back to students, without capturing the data.

HYPOTHESIS

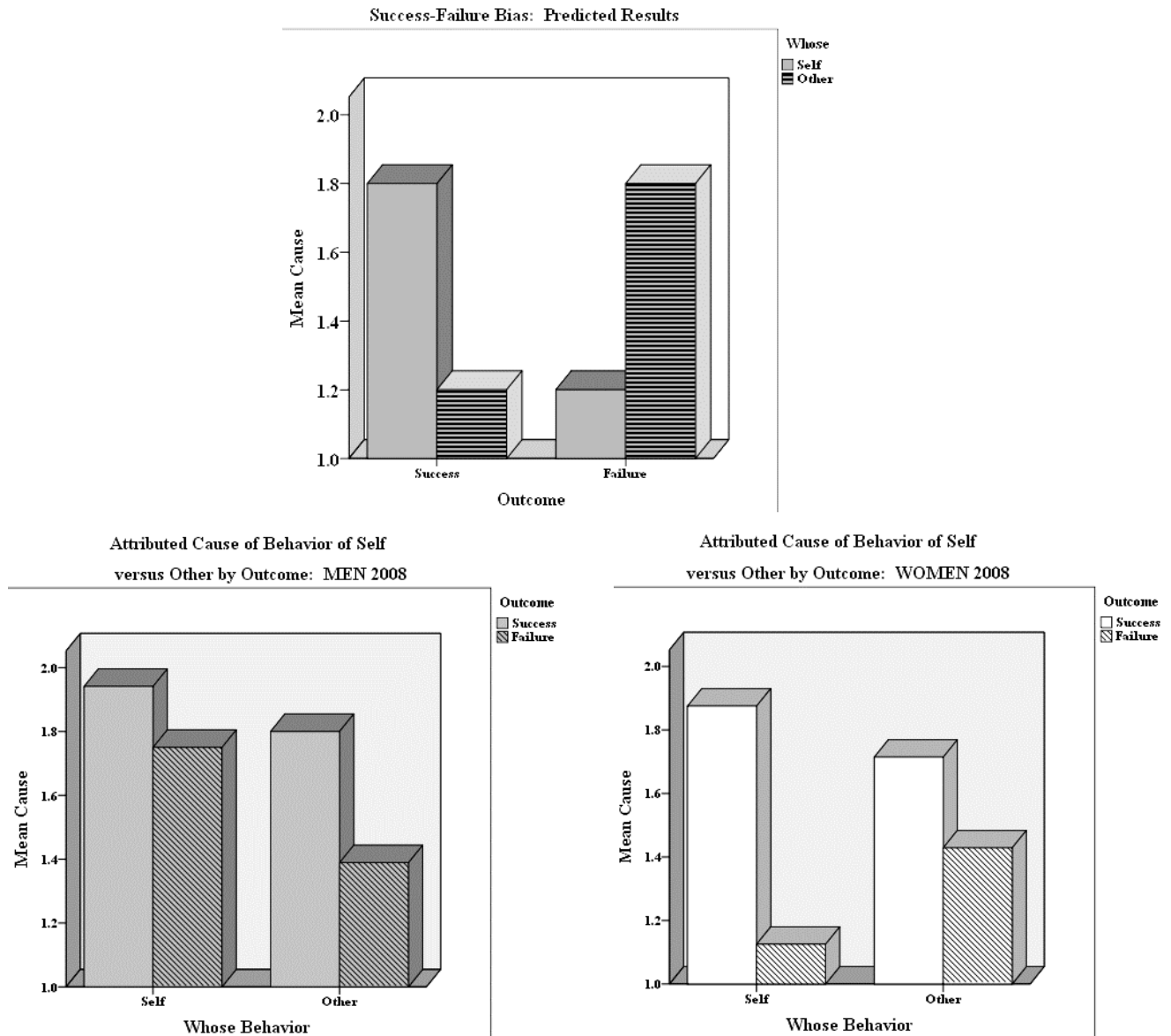
Given the behaviors which students had been asked to include – either successes or failures of self or of another – it was hypothesized to reveal the Success-Failure Bias. We hypothesized that current students would likely attribute own successes to personal characteristic, and own failures to circumstantial factors, and that the pattern would reverse for judgments of others' behaviors. Specifically, we hypothesized that successes of others would be more frequently attributed to situational considerations (e.g., luck), while their failures would be more frequently attributed to personal characteristics (e.g., lack of ability or effort). And, based Nichol's findings [6] we hypothesized that the bias would be stronger among male students than females.

RESULTS

We used ANOVA to analyze the data. We stratified the sample by both time of collection (2008 vs. 2016) and by gender. Strong evidence of the Success-Failure Bias should show significant main effects of both **Outcome** (Success vs. Failure) and **Whose** behavior was being judged (self or other) on attributed behavioral cause (**Cause**). The Outcome X Whose interaction should also be significant.

For the male students in 2008, attributed Cause (coding of Cause: 1 = situational, and 2 = personal) was significantly related to both the success or failure **Outcome** ($F_{1,62} = 8.696$; $p < .01$) and to **Whose** behavior (self or other's) was being judged ($F_{1, 62} = 6.048$; $p < .02$). The **Outcome X Whose** interaction was not significant ($F_{1, 62} = 1.160$). Thus, it would appear that the male students in 2008 at least partially demonstrated the expected Success-Failure Bias. However, plotting of the results did not look as expected. The expected nature of the interaction is found in Figure 1 (upper), whereas the actual results for both male (left) and female students (right) in 2008 are presented at the bottom of the Figure.

FIGURE 1. PREDICTED VS. OBTAINED RESULTS FOR 2008 (MALES & FEMALES)



The left half of each of the lower graphs presents the Self-Serving Bias. As predicted, 2008 males were significantly more likely to attribute their own successes to personal factors ($t_{32} = 29.164$; $p < .001$), than they did their failures. Females tested also reflected the Self-Serving Bias, and were significantly more likely to attribute own successes to personal causes ($t_{16} = 11.619$; $p < .001$), than they did their failures.

On the right side of each figure, we see predicted and observed attributions of successes and failures of others. The more recently ignored half of the original Success-Failure Bias – attributing cause of others’ successes largely to the situation, and judging their failures as more personally caused, was not observed in the 2008 study. In fact, both males ($t_{32} = 18.036$; $p < .001$) and females ($t_{13} = 11.449$; $p < .001$) from the 2008 sample were more likely to also attribute successes and failures of others similarly to their own. *In both own and others’ behaviors, the 2008 sample viewed polarized outcomes as dominantly due to*

the individual, not to the surrounding circumstances. This was not as predicted, but may give an inkling as to why the “second half” of the original Success-Failure Bias has been recently ignored.

Turning to 2016 data, an ANOVA was also conducted to determine the effects of **Outcome** (i.e., success vs. failure), **Whose** behavior (i.e., self or other) and **Gender** on attributed cause of reported behaviors. For both genders combined, as well as each individually, no main effects or interactive effects were significant. The mean for Cause was 1.67, indicating that about 2/3 of the time individuals in the 2016 group attributed the cause to personal, rather than situational factors.

DISCUSSION

The results of the current study are rather surprising. The 2008 subsample demonstrated the well-established Self-Serving bias for both genders, when judging their own behaviors. However, participants in 2008 judged the causes of others’ behaviors with polar outcomes similarly to how they judged their own. Basically they appeared to attribute causes of others’ behaviors, whether successful or failing, as largely personally caused. This is not as predicted by the Success-Failure Bias.

Comparing the results of the 2008 sample with the Fundamental Attribution Error, neither males nor females overly attributed the causes of their own behavior to situational factors, relative to the judgments of observers. In fact, the males in 2008 were more likely to attribute their own behaviors personally, than were observers. Granted, the behaviors being judged by self and by others were not the same behaviors. However, it is still contrary to the previously-established Fundamental Attribution Error.

Furthermore, in the 2016 sample, none of the hypothesized factors affected attributions of cause. Essentially, other than the greater propensity for all 2016 participants to attribute any behavior more personally than situationally, no effects reflecting either the Success-Failure Bias or the Fundamental Attribution Error were observed. It is somewhat mystifying to note the lack of even the Self-Serving Bias by the 2016 students. As the Self-Serving Bias is ego-enhancing – claiming one’s successes as his/her own, and blaming the situation for one’s failures – it appears that the current sample has not learned to protect themselves in the way of their predecessors.

What do the current results suggest? It is fair to say the recent students measured here do not appear to judge causality of behaviors similarly to others before them. Just as it is difficult to teach those whom we do not understand [5], current businesses are having trouble predicting and adjusting to the different ways in which the Millennial generation processes information, forms attitudes and acts [7] [12]. While in the past it may have been bothersome learning to deal with self-serving customers, their biases were, nonetheless, predictable. Strategies could be determined to proactively adjust to those biases. But, the customer that no one understands is difficult to predict, difficult to satisfy, and difficult to maintain in one’s customer base [14]. Clearly, future research is warranted into understanding thought processes – including biases in attributions – of the Millennial generation.

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