

Is There a Universal Positivity Bias in Attributions? A Meta-Analytic Review of Individual, Developmental, and Cultural Differences in the Self-Serving Attributional Bias

Amy H. Mezulis, Lyn Y. Abramson, Janet S. Hyde, and Benjamin L. Hankin
University of Wisconsin—Madison

Researchers have suggested the presence of a self-serving attributional bias, with people making more internal, stable, and global attributions for positive events than for negative events. This study examined the magnitude, ubiquity, and adaptiveness of this bias. The authors conducted a meta-analysis of 266 studies, yielding 503 independent effect sizes. The average d was 0.96, indicating a large bias. The bias was present in nearly all samples. There were significant age differences, with children and older adults displaying the largest biases. Asian samples displayed significantly smaller biases ($d = 0.30$) than U.S. ($d = 1.05$) or Western ($d = 0.70$) samples. Psychopathology was associated with a significantly attenuated bias ($d = 0.48$) compared with samples without psychopathology ($d = 1.28$) and community samples ($d = 1.08$). The bias was smallest for samples with depression (0.21), anxiety (0.46), and attention-deficit/hyperactivity disorder (0.55). Findings confirm that the self-serving attributional bias is pervasive in the general population but demonstrates significant variability across age, culture, and psychopathology.

People have a need to view themselves positively. This is easily the most common and consensually endorsed assumption in research on the self. (Heine, Lehman, Markus, & Kitayama, 1999, p. 766)

For decades, researchers from diverse perspectives have argued that there is a positivity bias in human cognition. According to this view, people seek a positive image of themselves and their environments with such vigor that reality is at times selectively interpreted and at other times patently ignored. Heider (1958) noted that cognition is influenced not only by the objective evidence but also by the subjective needs, desires, and preferences of the individual such that the individual's positive outlook is maintained. Such positivity seeking may serve an adaptive function. Allport (1937) labeled this positivity seeking "nature's eldest law" (p. 48)—a way for the individual to protect the fragile ego from the blows of reality. Tiger (1979) suggested that such optimism has become pervasive in human cognition through natural selection processes. Taylor and Brown (1988) similarly argued that the tendency to engage in "positive illusions" about the self is a widespread feature of human cognition that allows for the maintenance of mental health. Clinically oriented researchers have long proposed that the breakdown or absence of positive cognitive biases would be associated with a breakdown in normal functioning and may be associated with psychopathology (e.g., Abramson & Alloy, 1981; Alloy, Albright, Abramson, & Dykman, 1990).

The self-serving attributional bias is one positivity bias in cognition. Heider (1976) observed that "one is inclined to attribute to

oneself good things, but one suffers when one has to attribute to oneself something that is not so good" (p. 16). The result is the self-serving attributional bias: People are more likely to attribute positive events to themselves but dismiss negative events as attributable to other causes. Several comprehensive reviews have concluded that the self-serving attributional bias is a robust and amply demonstrated phenomenon in human cognition (Anderson, Krull, & Weiner, 1996; Bradley, 1978; W. K. Campbell & Sedikides, 1999; Greenberg, Pyszczynski, & Solomon, 1982; Heider, 1958; D. T. Miller, 1976; D. T. Miller & Ross, 1975; Sedikides & Strube, 1995; Zuckerman, 1979). Moreover, a growing body of evidence has suggested that the self-serving attributional bias is an adaptive feature of human cognition that is consistently associated with mental and physical health. The self-serving attributional bias has been associated with greater self-reported trait happiness (Kuiper, 1978; Rizley, 1978), less depression (Abramson & Alloy, 1981), more positive mood states (McFarland & Ross, 1982), better problem solving (Isen & Means, 1983), better immune functioning (Taylor et al., 2000), and lower mortality and morbidity longitudinally (C. Peterson & Seligman, 1987). By contrast, an attenuated or absent self-serving attributional bias has been associated with depression (Sweeney, Anderson, & Bailey, 1986); worse physical health (Lee & Seligman, 1997; C. Peterson, Seligman, & Vaillant, 1988); and worse academic, work, and athletic performance (C. Peterson & Barrett, 1987; Seligman, Nolen-Hoeksema, Thornton, & Thornton, 1990).

In recent years, however, a heated debate has arisen around the universality of the self-serving attributional bias. Is the self-serving attributional bias truly widespread in human cognition? Is the absence of such a bias always associated with poor adaptation? Heine et al. (1999) suggested that the use of cognitive strategies such as the self-serving attributional bias to fuel a positive self-concept is an assumption by Western researchers that is rarely challenged empirically. They noted that "researchers have a solid

Amy H. Mezulis, Lyn Y. Abramson, Janet S. Hyde, and Benjamin L. Hankin, Department of Psychology, University of Wisconsin—Madison.
We thank Meghan Fearn for her help in preparing this article.

Correspondence concerning this article should be addressed to Amy H. Mezulis, Department of Psychology, University of Wisconsin, 1202 West Johnson Street, Madison, WI 53706. E-mail: ahmezulis@wisc.edu

