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PROMOTION OUTCOMES AND ATTRIBUTIONS: THEIR EFFECTS ON CAREER SATISFACTION AND CAREER-ORIENTED BEHAVIOR

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and

Bruce J. Eberhardt

Weiner and his colleagues (Weiner, 1972, 1979, 1982; Weiner, Frieze, Kukla, Reed, Rest, & Rosenbaum, 1972; Weiner, Russell, & Lerman, 1979) have developed an attributional theory of motivation to explain behavior and attitudes in achievement-related situations. Weiner (1979, 1982) has suggested that affective reactions to perceived task performance and beliefs about the likelihood of future success on similar tasks are affected by causal beliefs or attributions. Weiner (1972) has argued that the attributions people make can be classified along two dimensions: locus of causal influence and temporal stability. Causes can be either internal (i.e., effort, ability), or be associated with the external environment (i.e., task difficulty, luck). Additionally, they can reflect either stable (i.e., task difficulty, ability) or unstable (i.e., effort, luck) conditions.

During the past decade a growing number of researchers have applied Weiner's model to organizational settings. Several investigators have described the effects of a superior's attributions of subordinate performance in evaluation contexts (Green & Mitchell, 1979; Ilgen & Knowlton, 1980; Knowlton & Mitchell, 1980; Mitchell & Wood, 1980). Others have used attributions to examine corporate executives' explanations of organizational performance (Bettman & Weitz, 1983; Salancik & Meindl, 1984; Staw, McKechnie, & Puffer, 1983). In addition, employees' job satisfaction and expectations about future performance (Adler, 1980; Porac, Ferris, & Fedor, 1983; Porac, Nottenburg & Eggert, 1981) have been studied within an attributional framework.

The Present Study

The present study was conducted to expand the investigation of attributions in organizational settings by examining the nature and correlates of the attributions organizational participants make to explain their promotion outcomes. While attributions explaining specific task performances have been studied (Porac, et al., 1981; Porac, et al., 1983), the relationships among promotion outcomes and attributions and attitudes and behaviors have not been examined.

First, the relationships among the type of attributions made to explain promotion outcomes, the outcomes themselves, and satisfaction with career progress were studied. Weiner (1982) suggested that both the outcomes in achievement situations and the attributions explaining those outcomes have an impact on the effect experienced by the individual. The outcomes determine general feelings (i.e., "good" for success or "bad" for failure), while the type of attribution determines specific feelings (e.g., pride, guilt, hostility, gratitude). Porac, et al. (1981) discovered that internal attributions were

associated with higher satisfaction for work success than were external attributions and lower satisfaction in the case of work failure. Porac, et al. (1983), however, failed to discover such a relationship. They found that perceived performance was related to affect independent of causal beliefs.

Next, the relationships among type of attribution, promotion outcomes, and behavior were investigated. Weiner (1982) presented both theoretical and empirical support for the notion that causal ascriptions are related to behavioral persistence in achievement contexts. However, the empirical support cited by Weiner generally came from studies examining therapeutic treatment attempts to increase achievement strivings (e.g., Andrew & Debus, 1978; Dweck, 1975; Dweck & Repucci, 1973). All of the subjects in the present study had engaged in the potentially career-advancing behavior of completing an Executive MBA program. The authors wished to determine whether the types of attributions subjects ascribed to their promotion outcomes and the outcomes themselves were related to additional career-oriented behaviors.

Finally, it has been suggested that individuals make socially desirable internal attributions for perceived success, but they externalize perceived failure (Bradley, 1978; Zuckerman, 1979). The work of Adler (1980) indicated that this tendency might also exist in organizations. In the present study, the attributions of managers who were promoted and those of individuals who were not promoted were compared to determine whether any differences existed.

Method

Sample

For the mail survey, the population of subjects consisted of all Executive MBA alumni ($N = 240$) of a large midwestern university who graduated during the years 1977 to 1982. Sixteen alumni who worked at or close to the university participated in an open-ended pilot interview which was used as a basis for developing the questionnaire. The remaining 224 were mailed questionnaires and stamped, self-addressed envelopes. Completed questionnaires were received from 133 subjects for a 59% response rate.

An examination of the sample on several demographic variables suggested that the sample was representative of the population. The response rates from the six graduating classes ranged from 57% (1982) to 70% (1981). The age of the respondents when they entered the program ranged from 26 to 54 years with a mean age of 37 years. Executive MBAs were required to have ten years of full-time work experience and/or five years of managerial experience when they entered the program so the age of the respondents appeared to be representative. The respondents included 122 males and 10 females. One person chose not to indicate his or her gender. The population consisted of 225 males and 15 females. Seventeen of the subjects did not have college degrees, 94 had earned undergraduate degrees, 14 had Master's degrees, four had doctorate degrees, and four had professional degrees be-

fore they entered the program. Eighty percent of each entering class had undergraduate degrees.

Measures

Promotion outcomes were measured by asking the alumni to indicate if they had received several promotions, one promotion, stayed in the job, or been demoted after entering the program. A promoted or not promoted categorization was created by recoding the first two promotion outcomes with a two and the last two with a one.

The causes the subjects ascribed to their promotion outcomes were assessed through their responses to a list of eight potential attributions. The construction of the list was guided by Weiner's (1979, 1982) suggested attributions and inputs from the Executive MBA pilot interviews. The list included the economy, effort, luck, demand for your skills, ability, watching for openings, contacts with friends, and the Executive MBA degree. Subjects were asked to indicate how important each item had been in influencing their promotion outcomes. They rated each item on a six-point Likert type scale which had anchors ranging from very unimportant (1) to very important (6).

The managers' satisfaction with their career progress was measured through the use of a single six-point Likert type item. The question asked the subjects to report how satisfied they were with their career progress since entering the Executive MBA program. The anchor points ranged from very dissatisfied (1) to very satisfied (6). The number of additional days of career-oriented behaviors was assessed by asking the alumni how many days they had spent during the last year in career development activities. Examples such as seminars and classes were given. Then, they were asked what percentage of these days they paid for themselves. This percentage was multiplied by the total number of days to yield the number of days paid for by the managers. This yielded a measure which represented a behavior the managers engaged in voluntarily.

Statistical Analysis

The subjects' responses to the attribution items were factor analyzed using a principal factors with iteration procedure. An oblique rotation was utilized to clarify the resulting factor structure. Rotated factors with eigenvalues greater than one were retained for further investigation. The subjects' factor-based scores were then correlated with their promotion outcomes, satisfaction with career progress, and the number of additional days of career-oriented behavior. The promotion outcomes were also correlated with career satisfaction and career-oriented behavior. Both zero-order correlation coefficients and partial correlation coefficients were examined. Finally, t-tests were conducted on the factor-based scores for those subjects who had been promoted and those who had not received a promotion. These tests were conducted to determine if mean differences existed between the two groups in the types of attributions they made.

Results

The results of the factor analysis of the subjects' responses to the attribution items are summarized in Table 1. The table provides the factor loadings of each item on the two resulting factors, the eigenvalues for each factor, and the percentage of variance accounted for by the factors. The first factor, labelled Internal Attributions, was comprised of the following four items: effort, demand for skills, ability, and the Executive MBA degree. All of these items reflect characteristics which are, at least partially, internal to the individual. The second factor, External Attributions, included three items: the economy, watching for openings and contact with friends. These items suggest that a person's promotion success is to a large degree determined by individuals or entities outside the person's control. Factor-based scores were calculated by averaging the subjects' responses to the items which comprised each factor.

Table 1
Factor Loadings of the Eight Attribution Items

Item	Factor I	Factor II
Effort	.77	-.04
Demand for skills	.74	-.04
Ability	.83	-.18
Executive MBA degree	.56	.21
Economy	-.16	.44
Watching for openings	.16	.61
Contact with friends	.20	.84
Luck	.26	.07
Eigenvalues	2.47	1.23
Percentage of variance accounted for	67.00	33.00

Table 2 presents the means, standard deviations, and intercorrelations. The results of the zero-order correlations indicate that internal attributions were positively related to promotion outcomes, satisfaction with career progress, and additional days of career-oriented behaviors. External attributions, on the other hand, were negatively related to promotion outcomes and satisfaction with career progress and were not related to additional days of career-oriented behavior. Finally, promotion outcomes were positively related to satisfaction with career progress and negatively related to career-oriented behavior.

Of particular interest are the partial correlation coefficients displayed in the rectangle in Table 2. These coefficients were computed by systematically partialing out the effects of two of the following three variables, internal attributions, external attributions, and promotion outcome, from the relationships between the remaining third variable and satisfaction with career progress and additional days of career-oriented behavior. With the effects

Table 2
**Means, Standard Deviations, and Zero-Order
 and Partial Correlations^a**

	M	SD	1	2	3	4	5
1. Internal Attributions	4.78	1.00	—	.18*	.20*	.58**	.18*
2. External Attributions	2.84	1.27		—	-.38**	-.16*	.09
3. Promotion Outcomes	1.66	0.47			—	.35**	-.19*
4. Satisfaction with Career Progress	4.55	1.35	.59**	-.27**	.10	—	-.10
5. Additional Days of Career-Oriented Behaviors	1.72	6.32	.24**	-.06	-.26**		—

^aThe coefficients in the rectangle are partial correlation coefficients with the effects of internal and external attributions and promotion outcomes systematically partialled out.

* $p < .05$

** $p < .01$

of external attributions and promotion outcomes partialled out, internal attributions were significantly, positively correlated with both the satisfaction and behavior measures. External attributions were negatively related ($p < .01$) to satisfaction with career progress when the effects of internal attributions and promotion outcomes are controlled for. When the effects of the two types of attributions are partialled out, promotion outcomes are no longer related to satisfaction with career progress ($r = .10, p > .05$). The zero-order correlation between promotion outcomes and satisfaction was .35 ($p < .01$). A significant, negative correlation ($r = -.26, p < .01$) between promotion outcomes and career-oriented behavior remained after partialing out the effects of the two attributions.

Finally, Table 3 shows the results of t-tests which were conducted to determine if any differences existed in the types of attributions made by managers who were promoted and the attributions made by managers who were not promoted. As the table indicates the mean internal attributions were significantly greater ($t = 2.10, p < .05$) for the group of subjects who had been promoted as compared to those who had not received promotions. Additionally, the subjects who had not been promoted made significantly more ($t = 4.19, p < .01$) external attributions than did the group who had earned promotions.

Discussion

The factor analysis of the subjects' responses to the attribution items resulted in only two factors which appeared to represent an internal-external

Table 3

**Mean Attribution Comparisons Between
Promoted and Not Promoted Managers**

	N	M	SD	t
Internal Attributions				
Not Promoted	27	4.43	1.36	2.10*
Promoted	80	4.89	.84	
External Attributions				
Not Promoted	27	3.63	1.39	4.19**
Promoted	80	2.53	1.09	

* $p < .05$ ** $p < .01$

dichotomy. Although many of Weiner's (1979) original attributions were included in the present list, no evidence was found for a stability dimension (stable versus unstable) as postulated by Weiner. Therefore, only internal and external attributions were included when the relationships between types of attributions and attitudes and behaviors were investigated.

The partial correlation coefficients were revealing when the relative magnitude of the relationships between the two types of attributions and actual promotion outcomes and the two variables of interest in the present study were examined. When the effects of the attributions were partialled out, no relationship was found between promotion outcomes and satisfaction with career progress. This finding runs counter to Weiner's (1982) suggestion that the outcomes themselves determine general feelings, while the type of attribution influences specific feelings. In the present study, it appears that the attributions are the major determinants of the effect experienced in achievement-related contexts. Internal attributions were related to positive effect, while external attributions were associated with negative feelings. It appears that individuals are pleased with their career progress, regardless of outcomes, when they believe they are responsible for their promotions.

When additional days of career-oriented behaviors were considered, the results of the correlational analyses were somewhat different. Promotion outcomes were negatively related to days of career-oriented behavior. Those subjects who had received promotions were less likely to invest more time in career-related endeavors than were their counterparts who had not received promotions. Apparently, the individuals who had been promoted felt the additional career-oriented behaviors would not be worthwhile or they were not seeking additional promotions.

The subjects' internal attributions were also related to career-related behaviors. Unlike promotion outcomes, however, internal attributions were positively related to days of career-oriented behavior. This suggests that when individuals perceive that their own characteristics or behaviors are responsible for the promotion outcomes they obtain, they will continue to engage

in career-relevant behaviors. External attributions, on the other hand, were not related to these behaviors. These findings are consistent with Weiner's (1982) belief that the type of attributions made should be related to behavioral persistence. In the present context, internal attributions were related to additional days of career-related behavior after receiving the Executive MBA degree, while external attributions were not.

The results of the *t*-tests provide evidence for a self-serving bias in the types of attributions made to explain promotion success or failure. Subjects who had been promoted made stronger internal attributions and weaker external attributions than did their counterparts who had not been promoted. In other words, success (promotion) tended to lead to internal attributions, while failure (no promotion) was associated with external attributions. This finding is consistent with the results of attributional studies in other contexts (Adler, 1980; Bradley, 1978; Zuckerman, 1979).

To summarize, the results of the present study indicate that the attributions that individuals make to explain their promotion successes and non-successes are important considerations in attempting to understand their satisfaction with career progress and career-related behavior. Internal attributions, in particular, appear to be closely related to an individual's career attitudes and behaviors. Due to one limitation in the present study, one must use caution in generalizing its results. Several of the variables were assessed with single-item measures. The reliability and validity of such measures is suspect. Finally, the results of the factor analysis suggest that additional research on the various types of attributions individuals make is warranted. Only two factors were discovered. This is contrary to the numerous types of attributions suggested by Weiner (1979, 1982).

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