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The Effects of Self-Esteem on Attribution Making in Close versus Casual Relationships

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Abstract

This study explored the effect of self-esteem on attributions made in close and acquaintance relationships. It was predicted that people are more likely to attribute negative events to others and are also more likely to attribute positive events to themselves. This trend was expected more in casual relationships than in close relationships and also more for people with high self-esteem than people with low self-esteem. Students answered questions about hypothetical scenarios involving either a best friend or casual acquaintance. The measurements used in the survey were the Relationship Attribution Measure and the Rosenberg Self-Esteem Scale. The second and third hypotheses received limited support. The importance of looking at friendships is exemplified by the importance of relationships to human nature.

The Effects of Self-Esteem on Attribution Making in Close versus Casual Relationships: People need People.

The need for relationships is a vital part of life. When relationships are going well, people tend to report feelings of happiness and optimism. They are likely to have a positive outlook toward the relationship and whatever problems that may arise. When relationships are doing poorly, people tend to report feelings of sadness and loneliness. They are likely to have a negative outlook toward the relationship and whatever problems that may arise.

There has been a significant amount of research conducted on relationships, emotions, and how emotions affect attributions for positive and negative outcomes. What has not been sufficiently explored is whether or not self-esteem as well as the degree of closeness of a relationship also influences attributions made by the members of that relationship. The current study addresses the effects of self-esteem, degree of closeness of a relationship, and how these two variables influence the attribution making process.

Attributions are perceptions or inferences of a cause (Kelly & Michela, 1980). The main focus of attribution theory is on the process by which the average person forms an understanding of events (Harvey, Orbuch, & Weber, 1992). The attributions that individuals make about an event often influence how they act or behave.

There are two different types of attributions: causal attributions and responsibility attributions. People make causal attributions to explain why people act, think, and feel the way that they do (Jones et al., 1972; Shaver, 1985). In other words, people use causal attributions to assess the factor(s) that have produced a particular behavior, feeling, or thought (Fincham, Beach, & Nelson, 1987

Causal attributions can be made on three different dimensions: locus, globality, and stability. The perceived locus of a cause refers to whether people think the cause of an event is dispositional or situational. When individuals explain an outcome as dispositional, they explain this outcome in terms of the attributes, abilities, and values that a person possesses. For example, people who make dispositional attributions would explain their success or failure as the result of their intelligence and natural ability. When individuals explain an outcome as situational, they explain an outcome in terms of the environment, societal norms, or individual roles. For example, people who make situational attributions would explain their success or failure as the result of task

difficulty, a powerful other, or uncontrollable outside forces.

The perceived globality of a cause refers to whether or not people think the cause of an event is going to be cross-situational or situationally-specific. When individuals explain an action or behavior as cross-situational, they perceive the cause of this behavior as likely to affect other behaviors and actions at different times. When individuals explain an action or behavior as situationally specific, they perceive the cause of the behavior as only affecting certain behaviors and actions at certain times. For example, most distressed couples would explain the cause of their spouses' inability to make them happy as a lack of an ability that will be constant across most situations (Bradbury & Fincham, 1990; Fincham, 1985; Holtzworth-Monroe & Jacobson, 1985). On the other hand, most non-distressed couples explain the cause of their spouses' inability to make them happy as a lack of effort that will change across most situations (Bradbury & Fincham, 1990; Fincham, 1985; Holtzworth-Monroe & Jacobson, 1985).

The perceived stability of a cause refers to whether or not people think the cause of an event is going to be unchanging or transient. When individuals explain an action or behavior as unchanging, they perceive the cause of a behavior as likely to stay constant over time. When individuals explain an action or behavior as transient, they perceive the cause of a behavior as likely to change over time. For example, distressed persons will explain a partner's uncaring attitude as something that will not change over time and a partner's caring attitude as something that will change over time (Bradbury & Fincham, 1990; Jacobson, McDonald, Follette, & Berley, 1985). Non-distressed couples explain a partner's uncaring attitude as something that will change over time and a partner's caring attitude as something that will not change over time (Bradbury & Fincham, 1990; Jacobson et al., 1985).

People make responsibility attributions to pass moral judgment on the actions of other individuals. Individuals who make responsibility attributions are concerned not with the reason behind a particular outcome (behavior, feeling, or thought) but with how much someone can be held accountable for a particular outcome according to a set of standards (Fincham et al., 1987; Shaver, 1985). For example, a man has been assigned the task of watching over anther's car. If the man allowed the car to be stolen, then he would be blamed for the theft because he did not meet the expected standards of watching over a car.

Responsibility attributions can be made on three different dimensions as well: intent, blame, and motivation. The perceived intent of an action refers to whether or not the persons' actions were purposeful or accidental. When individuals explain an action as something that was done purposely, they perceive the person committing the action as intentionally producing the outcome (Shaver, 1985). When individuals explain an action as something that was done accidentally, they perceived the people committing the action as unintentionally producing the outcome (Shaver, 1985). Bradbury and Fincham (1990) found that in distressed couples, spouses explain their partner's negative behavior (such as forgetting an anniversary) as something done with the intent of hurting them. In non-distressed couples, spouses explain their partner's negative behavior (such as forgetting an anniversary) as something done accidentally without the intent of hurting them.

The perceived blame-worthiness of an action refers to whether or not the persons behind the action should be held personally accountable or unaccountable. When individuals hold others as being accountable for an action, these individuals perceive the people involved as performing the action voluntarily and in full knowledge of the consequences (Leary, Springer, Negel, Ansell, & Evans, 1998; Shaver, 1985).

When the consequences of the action are favorable and the people involved are seen as accountable, then those people are seen as praise-worthy. If the consequences of the action are unfavorable and the individuals involved are seen as accountable, then they are seen as blame-worthy. When individuals explain people as being unaccountable for their actions, they perceive the people involved as performing the action involuntarily and without full knowledge of the consequences (Leary et al., 1998; Shaver, 1985). If people are seen as unaccountable, then they are not seen as praise-worthy. Leary et al. (1998) found that persons betrayed in distressed relationships attributed their hurt feelings to their partners by labeling them blame-worthy.

The perceived motivation behind an action refers to whether or not the individuals responsible for the action were seen as acting selfishly or unselfishly (Kelley & Michela, 1980). When individuals explain people's actions as selfish, they perceive those people as acting for their own benefit. When individuals explain people's actions as unselfish, they perceive those people as acting for the benefit of people instead of for their own benefit. For example, distressed spouses perceive their partner's act of giving a gift as something done for selfish reasons such as trying to get out of trouble. In non-distressed couples, spouses perceive their partner's act of giving them a gift as something done for unselfish reasons such as trying to show affection and love (Bradbury & Fincham, 1990; Jacobson et al., 1985; Thompson & Snyder, 1986).

Kelley and Michela (1980) found that there are many different reasons for the different attributions that people make. They found that people often make attributions in order to protect their own self-esteem. In Kelley and Michela's (1980) review of research conducted on attributions, it was found that positive behavior enhances self-esteem only if the persons who engaged in the behavior could claim credit for their actions. An internal attribution will therefore

be made for positive behavior (Kelley & Michela, 1980). On the other hand, the attribution making process for negative behavior followed a different trend. Negative behavior often lowers self-regard and therefore people tend to make external attributions for negative behavior to protect themselves (Bradbury & Fincham, 1990; Holtzworth-Monroe & Jacobson, 1985).

To gain a true understanding of the attribution theory, the applications of attributions should be explored as well (Kelley & Michela, 1980). There are a surprising number of applications for the attribution theory. One of the most interesting of these applications is how to use of the attribution theory to better understand intimate relationships and the conflicts within them (Thompson & Snyder, 1986). Humans are very social creatures who thrive on interpersonal relationships living every moment of their lives as a part of some type of relationship (Hartup & Stevens, 1999). Humans rely on relationships for everything such as food, shelter, aid, and comfort.

There are two main types of relationships: close relationships and casual relationships. There has been a great deal of disagreement over a definition of "close relationships" (Berscheid & Peplau 1983). A formal definition has yet to be agreed upon. Persons interviewed on the subject have offered many different definitions which included words such as "love," "caring," "intimacy," and "commitment" (Berscheid & Peplau, 1983; Berscheid, Snyder, & Omoto, 1989; Walker, 1995). Theorists and researchers defined a close relationship as a relationship that is of "strong, frequent, and diverse interdependence that lasts over a considerable period of time" (Kelley, H.H., Berscheid, E., Christensen, A., Harvey, J.H., Hudson, T.L., Levinger, G., McClintock, E., Peplau, L.A., Peterson, D.R., 1983, p.38). In partial support of this view, Hays (1989) discovered that people in close relationships reported a greater number of interactions for

a longer period of time with their partners than did people in casual relationships. He also found that people reported that their interactions with someone in a close relationship provided much more emotional and informational support than did interactions with someone in a casual relationship. People involved in close relationships were also found to be much less selfish than were individuals in casual relationships.

Close relationships are perhaps the most important and beneficial of the two types of relationships (Hays, 1987). People involved in close friendships generally feel better about themselves and others than do people who are not in close friendships (Berscheid, Snyder, & Omoto, 1989; Hartup & Stevenson, 1999; Hays, 1989; Paul & Kelleher, 1995). Individuals in close friendships reported a higher occurrence of self-disclosure within their friendships than did individuals in casual relationships or acquaintance relationships (Hays, 1989). People involved in close relationships resolve conflicts more effectively, have more emotional support, and also report having a higher self-esteem than do people involved in casual relationships (Berscheid et al., 1989; Hartup & Stevenson, 1999; Hays, 1989). There are benefits inherent to close relationships that do not occur in casual relationships.

When compared, these two relationships appear to be opposites. Using Kelly's aforementioned definition of a close relationship as a guide, a casual relationship may be defined as a relationship that is weak, infrequent, lacks interdependence, and will most likely last for only a short time (Kelley et al., 1983). The interactions for close relationships differ greatly from those of casual relationships (Berscheid et al., 1989; Hartup & Stevenson, 1999; Hays, 1989). People involved in casual relationships spend less time together, share less on an intimate level, perceive themselves as receiving less benefits from the relationship, and be less likely to trust

the other member of the relationship than people in close relationships. Individuals involved in casual relationships tend to think more about themselves than about the other person involved in the relationship. The differences found between close and casual relationships are even more pronounced when conflict occurs. According to Hays (1989), casual friendships lack the foundation that is present in close friendships and, therefore, are more likely to break up when faced with conflict than are people in close friendships.

Although an accepted definition of conflict has not been adopted, Kelley et al. (1983) defined conflict as "an interpersonal process that occurs whenever the actions of one person interfere with the actions of another" (p. 365). Conflicts are present in every kind of relationship (Kelly et al., 1983; Leary et al., 1998; Shackelford & Buss, 1996). People in a close relationship are more interdependent, they can be hurt easier, and they also spend much more time together compared to people in a casual relationship (Hays, 1989; Kelly et al., 1993; Leary et al., 1998). Although there are more opportunities for conflict within close relationships than casual relationships, close relationships are better able to withstand conflict than are casual relationships (Kelley et al., 1983; Leary et al., 1998; Shackelford & Buss, 1996).

Leary et al. (1998) found that even though people in close relationships usually fare better during conflict than those in casual relationships, conflicts have the potential to destroy any kind of relationship if not handled properly. Conflicts can also cause hurt feelings within close relationships (Leary et al., 1998; Shackelford & Buss, 1996). Conflicts, especially when one person in the close relationship is perceived as harming the other emotionally, directly affect the attributions made by the other person involved in the relationship (Leary et al., 1998; Shackelford & Buss, 1996).

Conflicts cause hurt feelings that lower self-esteem which results in feelings of distress (Leary et al., 1998; Shackelford & Buss, 1996). These feelings of distress then cause people in dissatisfied relationships to make distress-maintaining attributions (Bradbury & Fincham, 1990; Fincham, 1985; Jacobson et al., 1985; Thompson & Snyder, 1986). But what exactly is the role of feelings in the attribution making process?

Research seems to point to self-esteem as an antecedent of the attribution making process (Blaine & Crocker, 1993; Chandler, Lee, & Pengilly, 1997; Shultz, 1998). Self-esteem refers to people's evaluations of themselves (Baumeister, 1999; Blaine & Crocker, 1993). For example, people might see themselves as mediocre athletes, intelligent students, and loyal spouses. High self-esteem is characterized by a positive self-image (Baumeister, 1999; Blaine & Crocker, 1993; Tice & Baumeister, 1990). This self-image may include a healthy self-confidence and recognition of achievements and abilities (Blaine & Crocker, 1993). People with a high self-esteem may also hold inflated self-perceptions. They also might exercise behavior that is conceited, egotistical, arrogant, and narcissistic (Blaine & Crocker, 1993). As Baumeister (1999) said, "The common thread is thinking well of oneself – regardless of whether it is justified or not" (p. 350).

Theorists believed until recently that low self-esteem was the *opposite* of high self-esteem (Baumeister, 1999). People with low self-esteem have a negative and uncomplimentary self-image. Baumeister (1999) discovered that low self-esteem is an absence of a positive self-image rather than the presence of a negative self-image. People who have low self-esteem do not believe that they are bad or unworthy people. Instead, they lack the self-conviction that they are good people (Baumeister, 1999).

Baumeister (1999) found that individuals possessing high self-esteem work toward self-enhancement. People with high self-esteem do not expect to fail in their endeavors. People with high self-esteem tend to feel less worried and anxious than those with low self-esteem (Baumeister, 1999). People with low self-esteem focus more on self-protection. Instead of trying to gain self-esteem these individuals focus on not losing what self-esteem they have.

Studying self-esteem is very important (Baumeister, 1999). Self-esteem affects many different actions and reactions that occur a variety of situations. Conflicts in close relationships provide opportunities for which the effects of self-esteem on individuals' actions and reactions in different circumstances can be witnessed.

When confronted with a conflict, high and low self-esteem people tend to cope differently with the problem (Baumeister, 1997; Rusbult, Morrow, & Johnson, 1987; Shultz, 1998). Shultz (1998) found that people with high self-esteem responded to conflict with positive, optimistic emotions whereas those with low self-esteem responded to conflict with negative, destructive emotions. Compared to people with low self-esteem, people with high self-esteem approached the problem with more confidence and worried less about the problem. Individuals with low self-esteem felt more threatened, stressed, guilty, and hurt than did people who had high self-esteem (Shultz, 1998). During the course of a conflict, people with low self-esteem tended to place the blame more readily on their partners than did those with high self-esteem.

There also is a distinct difference in the reactions of high and low self-esteem people when faced with an unsolvable conflict. Rusbult et al. (1987) found that when problems became too much to bear and relationships became too destructive, those with high self-esteem would engage in "exiting behavior" (i.e., leaving the relationship and looking for another). Under these circumstances people with low self-esteem displayed passive and "neglecting behavior" (i.e., staying in a bad

situation and doing nothing).

It seems that the drive to protect or sustain self-image can even shape the attributions that individuals make. People usually act in a way that will help them increase or maintain their own self-worth (Baumeister, 1999). The self-serving bias is one way in which people accomplish this increase or maintenance of self-worth. Blaine and Crocker (1993) defined the self-serving bias as "the tendency of people to interpret and explain outcomes in ways that have favorable implications for the self" (p.55). They also found that there was a powerful relationship between self-esteem and the use of self-serving biases.

A part of self-serving biases are self-serving attributions (Chandler et al., 1997). Self-serving attributions refer to the tendency for individuals to make internal attributions for positive outcomes and external attributions for the negative outcomes (Blaine & Crocker, 1993). When people make internal attributions, they credit an outcome of a situation in the terms of traits, abilities, or personal efforts. For example, if people win a race, they will credit this victory to their constant training and athletic prowess. On the other hand, when people make external attribution, they credit an outcome of a situation in terms of other people, the environment, luck, etc. For example, if people lose a race, then they will most likely credit their failure to the rocky terrain or the weather. Clearly, self-serving biases in attribution making may be characterized as self-enhancing or self-protecting biases.

Most people would explain that their abilities were responsible for their successes and that extenuating circumstances were to blame for their failures. This relationship, however, does not always hold true. Self-serving attributions are stronger in people who possessed high instead of low self-esteem (Blaine & Crocker, 1993).

People who have high self-esteem are confident that they posses important positive qualities and not important negative ones (Baumeister, 1999; Blaine & Crocker, 1993; Tice & Baumeister, 1990). They attack every situation with a feeling of confidence and do not concern themselves with the possibility of failure. They potentially see every new situation as an opportunity to do well and to enhance the self (Blaine & Crocker, 1993). Upon succeeding, individuals with high self-esteem assume that their abilities were the reason for that success (Baumeister, 1997; Blaine & Crocker, 1993; Tice & Baumeister, 1990). They then continue to work mainly on the abilities and talents at which they excel in order to ensure continued success and enhancement of self (Blaine & Crocker, 1993; Tice & Baumeister, 1990).

Upon failing, people with high self-esteem are surprised because their self-image does not include failure (Blaine & Crocker, 1993). When failure does occur, individuals with high self-esteem tend to distort reality by using attributions to restore their lost self-image and positive affect (Blaine & Crocker, 1993; Chandler et al., 1997). For example, they will attribute negative outcomes to external causes by devaluing the importance of the task, deciding that the evaluator is not credible, or focusing on negative information about other people to make themselves feel better (Blaine & Crocker, 1993; Tice & Baumeister, 1990).

In comparison to individuals with high self-esteem, individuals with low self-esteem are plagued with uncertainty (Blaine & Crocker, 1993; Tice & Baumeister, 1990). People with low self-esteem are not confident that they possess positive attributes and are convinced that they possess only negative attributes. Even so, they still care about having positive qualities and not having negative one's (Baumeister, 1999; Blaine & Crocker, 1993). People with low self-esteem fear they have more negative qualities than positive ones. In order to reduce that fear, they tend to distort positive feedback in a negative direction (Blaine & Crocker, 1993). Upon receiving

positive feedback, for example, people with low self-esteem might devalue the situation as being something unimportant and thereby maintain their belief that they might have more negative qualities than positive ones. They also prepare themselves for failure before the task or situation occurs. Tice and Baumeister (1990), in their study on self-esteem and self-handicapping, found that people with low self-esteem were more likely than people with high self-esteem to self-handicap when it would provide an excuse for failure.

Even though they might try and devalue their success in order to maintain their self-image, people with low self-esteem are actually pleased when they succeed in a given task (Blaine & Crocker, 1993). However, individuals who possess low self-esteem may be cautious about making an internal attribution the reason for their success (Baumeister, 1997; Blaine & Crocker, 1993; Schutz, 1998). For them, failure feedback is more likely to be attributed to internal factors than is success feedback (Blaine & Crocker, 1993).

Upon receiving negative feedback, low self-esteem persons are not surprised. Blaine & Crocker (1993) found that people with low self-esteem actually suspected and prepared for this outcome all along. Even though failure is not a desired outcome, it is consistent with the self-image of low self-esteem people. People with low self-esteem attribute success and failure equally among external and internal causes because they are unsure if they possess positive qualities (Blaine & Crocker, 1993).

In light of the aforementioned theory and research, the following hypotheses were made. It was hypothesized that people are more likely to attribute negative events to others while attributing positive events to themselves. It was also hypothesized that there would be a significant interaction between degree of closeness in a relationship and attribution making. Those involved in casual or acquaintance relationships would be more likely to

attribute positive events to themselves while attributing negative events to the other person in the relationship than would people involved in close relationships. Last, it was hypothesized that in both casual and close relationships, people with high self-esteem would be more likely than those who have low self-esteem to attribute positive events to themselves and negative events to others in order to maintain self-esteem.

Method

Participants

One hundred and seventy-four undergraduate psychology students (83% between the ages of 18-23) from the University of North Florida were asked to complete a questionnaire to receive extra credit toward their class grade. The participants were mostly single (90%), Caucasian (73%), and had known their best friend or casual acquaintance 5 years or longer (best friend – 39%; casual acquaintance - 33%). There were 73 males and 99 females. Prior to completion of this questionnaire, the participants signed an informed consent. All participants were treated in accordance with the "Ethical principles of psychologists and code of conduct" (American Psychological Association, 1992).

Overview of Design

The design of this experiment was a 2 (self-esteem: low vs. high) x 2 (scenarios: positive vs. negative events) x 2 (relationship: best friend vs. casual acquaintance) factorial design. The relationship variable (best friend vs. casual acquaintance) and the self-esteem variable (low vs. high) were between subject variables. The scenario variable (positive vs. negative) was a within subjects variable. The 174 participants were randomly assigned to answer questions about hypothetical scenarios (positive and negative

events) involving either a best friend or a casual acquaintance.

Procedure

The participants were recruited from several undergraduate psychology classes. Participants were placed into groups of 8 or less. The experimenter began by explaining the importance of the study. He continued by telling the participants that the study was being conducted to better understand how people perceive and explain their relationships. The experimenter informed the participants that they would be completing a survey that consisted of questions gauging their perceptions about themselves and a best friend or casual acquaintance.

Following this introduction, an informed consent sheet was handed to each participant. The experimenter reviewed the contents of the form with the participants emphasizing the importance of responding honestly. The experimenter also explained that their answers were confidential. Participants were reminded that they were volunteering in this study that they could withdraw at any time. They were also informed that they might ask questions at any time during the course of the study. The participants were told that they would receive extra credit toward their class grade for their participation in this study. Upon completing a review of the informed consent the participants were asked to sign, date, and then to pass the informed consent to the experimenter.

After collecting the informed consents the experimenter randomly assigned the participants one of two surveys. These surveys were identical with exception that the subject of the questionnaire was either the respondent's best friend or casual acquaintance. For the best friend survey, the participants would be instructed to think about one friend in their life that they considered their very best friend. The participants were informed that this friend

could be either a current or past best friend. They were told that they must choose one and respond to all scenarios with that person in mind. For the casual acquaintance survey, these steps were repeated with the exception that the participants were to thing about one person of whom they considered a casual acquaintance. The participants were told that a casual acquaintance could be a co-worker, neighbor, or classmate. The participants were further informed that the person they considered to be their casual acquaintance was to be someone that they liked rather than someone that they disliked.

Measures

Two measurements were used within the questionnaires handed to the participants. These measurements were the Relationship Attribution Measure (Fincham & Bradbury, 1992), and the Rosenberg Self-Esteem Scale (1965). The questionnaire was completed with demographic items (e.g., sex, age, and length of best friend/casual acquaintance).

Attributions

The attribution questionnaire used in this study was a variation of the Relationship Attribution Measure (Fincham & Bradbury, 1992). The questions and scenarios of the Relationship Attribution Measure were changed to fit the present study dealing with best friends and casual acquaintances. In every location where the word "spouse" was used in the Fincham and Bradbury Relationship Attribution Measure (1992), "best friend" or "casual acquaintance" was substituted (e.g., "Your spouse criticized something you said." was changed to "Your best friend/casual acquaintance criticized something you said".). Six positive behaviors were added to the questionnaire used in this study to provide balance between negative and positive events (i.e., to be positive that the outcome is due to dissatisfaction in the

relationship). Two of the six positive behaviors were suggested filler items found in the Relationship Attribution Measure. The remaining four positive scenarios were created for this study (e.g., "Your best friend is being warm and personable"). A complete list of all scenarios can be found in Appendix A.

In this study, the participants were presented with a total of 12 hypothetical events (6 positive and 6 negative) that were likely to occur involving either a close friend or casual acquaintance. The participants were randomly assigned to either of these conditions by the experimenter. The participants were then asked to imagine that the target individual (either a close friend or a casual acquaintance) performed each of the twelve behaviors one at a time. For each possible event (e.g., "Your best friend compliments you," or "Your best friend treats you more considerably," "Your best friend criticizes something you say," or "Your best friend begins to spend less time with you."), participants were asked to respond on a 5-point Likert scale according to their level of agreement or disagreement.

The six attribution statements consisted of three causal attributions and three responsibility attributions. The causal attributions were used to measure the locus of attributions (e.g., "My best friend's behavior was due to something about him."), the globality of attributions (e.g., "The reason my best friend criticized me is something that affects other areas of our friendship."), and the stability of attributions (e.g., "The reason my best friend criticized me is not likely to change). The scores for each positive scenario ranged from 3 to 15 with higher scores reflecting more relationship-enhancing attributions (i.e., attributions that are more internal, stable, and global). The scores for each negative scenario also ranged from 3 to 15. The total score for the responses on the causal attribution items for each positive scenario was calculated by adding the scores for each

response. The responses for these items were reversed scored so higher scores would also reflect more relationship-enhancing attributions.

The responsibility attributions measured the intent (e.g., "My best friend criticized me on purpose rather than unintentionally."), motivation (e.g., "My best friend's behavior was motivated be selfish rather than unselfish concerns."), and blame (e.g., "My best friend deserves to be blamed for criticizing me.") that the respondent placed on their best friend for each event. The scores on this dimension also ranged from 3 to 15 for each positive scenario with higher scores reflecting more relationship-enhancing attributions (i.e., attributions that are more intentional, unselfishly motivated, and praiseworthy).

The scores for each negative scenario on the responsibility dimension also ranged from 3 to 15. The total score for the response to the responsibility attribution items for each scenario (both positive and negative) was also calculated by adding the three responses. The responses for these times were reversed scored so higher scores would also reflect more relationship-enhancing attributions. Immediately following the questionnaire concerning attributions, the experimenter deployed the Rosenberg (1965) Scale to measure the self-esteem of the participant.

Self-Esteem Scale

The Rosenberg (1965) Scale consisted of 10 items (e.g., "I feel that I have a number of good qualities." and "I feel I do not have much to be proud of.). These were designed to increase the ease of administration, decrease the time needed for completion, and increase face validity (Blascovich & Tomaka, 1991). The questions required the participants to report feelings about themselves. This self-esteem measure used a four-point response scale (strongly agree, agree, disagree, strongly disagree). It had a scale range of 10-40 with

higher scores representing higher self-esteem. In a review of self-esteem measures by Blascovich and Tomaka (1991), the Rosenberg Self-Esteem Scale was found to have internal consistency (a Cronbach alpha of .88), and a good test-retest validity (a correlation of .82 for 259 male and female subjects with a 1-week interval). The participants in the present study will be divided into high and low self-esteem groups with the use of a median split.

Results

Causal attributions were analyzed using a three-way ANOVA. The predictor variables were self-esteem, nature of the relationship, and nature of the outcome. Repeated measures were taken on the last factor.

For causal attributions, there was a main effect of nature of the relationship, $F (1,167) = 10.95, p< .01$. Participants were more likely to make relationship-enhancing attributions in close relationships ($M = 58.00, SD = 4.99$) than were participants who were in casual relationships ($M = 55.59, SD = 4.05$). There was also a main effect of type of outcome on causal attributions, $F (1,167) = 189.28, p< .01$. Participants were more likely to make relationship-enhancing attributions for positive outcomes ($M = 63.47, SD = 8.20$) than for negative outcomes ($M = 50.17, SD = 7.52$). There was a three-way interaction between self-esteem, nature of the relationship, and nature of the outcome, $F (1,167) = 4.50, p < .05$. To isolate the source the three-way interaction, simple interaction effects were computed. The three-way interaction was broken down into two two-way interactions. One ANOVA was run for the positive events and one ANOVA was run for the negative events.

For positive events, there was a 2 (self-esteem: high vs. low) x 2 (nature of the relationship: close vs. casual) interaction, $F (1,167) = 4.01, p < .05$. Participants with low self-esteem were more likely to attribute the cause of positive events to their

partners in close relationships (M = 66.08, $SD = 7.45$) than to their partners in casual relationships ($M = 61.06, SD = 6.47$). Participants with high self-esteem did not differentiate between close ($M = 63.33, SD = 10.93$) and casual ($M = 63.32, SD = 7.38$) relationships when making attributions for positive events.

For negative events, there was no 2 (self-esteem: high vs. low) x 2 (nature of the relationship: close vs. casual) interaction, $F (1,167) = 2.00, p< .16$. Participants with low self-esteem did not differentiate between close ($M = 50.98, SD = 6.18$) and casual ($M = 50.45, SD = 7.38$) relationships when making causal attributions. Similarly, participants with high self-esteem did not differentiate between close ($M = 51.19, SD = 9.84$) and casual ($M = 47.38, SD = 6.34$) relationships when making casual attributions.

Responsibility attributions were analyzed using a three-way ANOVA as well. The predictor variables were self-esteem, nature of the relationship, and nature of outcome. Repeated measures were taken on the last factor.

For responsibility attributions, there was also a main effect of nature of relationship, $F (1,167) = 4.07, p< .05$. Participants in close relationships were more likely to make relationship-enhancing attributions ($M = 57.29, SD = 4.60$) than were participants who were in casual relationships ($M = 55.97, SD = 5.60$). This main effect was qualified by two two-way interactions.

There was an interaction between self-esteem and nature of the relationship, $F (1, 167) = 4.12, p < .05$. People with high self-esteem were more likely to make relationship enhancing attributions in close relationships ($M = 57.85, SD = 4.18$) than in casual relationships ($M = 54.66, SD = 6.40$). People with low self-esteem were equally likely to make relationship-enhancing attributions in close relationships ($M = 56.88, SD = 4.88$) as they were in casual relationships ($M = 56.89, SD = 4.82$).

There was also an interaction between nature of outcome and nature of the relationship, $F(1, 167) = 12.19, p < .01$. For close relationships people were equally likely to make relationship-enhancing attributions for positive outcomes ($M = 56.25, SD = 6.28$) and negative outcomes ($M = 58.09, SD = 8.85$). For casual relationships people were more likely to make relationship-enhancing attributions for positive outcomes ($M = 57.78, SD = 6.40$) than for negative outcomes ($M = 54.15, SD = 9.28$).

These two-way interactions were qualified by a three-way interaction between self-esteem, nature of the relationship, and nature of outcome, $F(1,167) = 10.60, p < .05$. To isolate the source of the three-way interaction, simple interaction effects were computed. The three-way interaction was broken down into two two-way interactions. One ANOVA was run for the positive events and one ANOVA was run for the negative events.

For positive events, there was no 2 (self-esteem: high vs. low) x 2 (nature of the relationship: close vs. casual) interaction, $F(1,167) = 1.78, p <. 18$. Participants with low self-esteem did not differentiate between close ($M = 57.06, SD = 6.13$) and casual ($M = 57.28, SD = 5.57$) relationships when making attributions for positive events. Similarly, participants with high self-esteem did not differentiate between close ($M = 55.67, SD = 6.49$) and casual ($M = 58.51, SD = 7.45$) relationships when making responsibility attributions.

For negative events, there was a 2 (self-esteem: high vs. low) x 2 (nature of the relationship: close vs. casual) interaction, $F(1,167) = 10.87, p< .01$. Participants with low self-esteem did not differentiate between close ($M = 56.7, SD = 8.54$) and casual ($M = 56.5, SD = 7.98$) relationships when making responsibility attributions. Participants with high self-esteem were more likely to make relationship enhancing attributions for negative events to their partners in close relationships ($M = 60.02$,

$SD = 9.02$) than to their partners in casual relationships ($M = 50.8, SD = 10.08$).

Discussion

Recall the three hypotheses made earlier. First, it was hypothesized that people would attribute negative events to others and attributes positive events to themselves. Second, it was hypothesized people involved in casual or acquaintance relationships would be more likely than people involved in close relationships to attribute positive events to themselves while attributing negative events to the other person in the relationship. Last, it was hypothesized that in both casual and close relationships, people with high self-esteem would be more likely than those who have low self-esteem to attribute positive events to themselves and negative events to others in order to maintain self-esteem.

The first hypothesis was not supported. For causal attributions, participants were more likely to attribute positive outcomes to their partners and negative outcomes to themselves. Perhaps people give credit to their partners for positive outcomes and take responsibility for negative outcomes to maintain relationships (e.g., Berscheid, Graziano, Monson, & Dermer, 1976). By doing so, people share both success and failure thereby splitting responsibility, maintaining equality, and promoting happiness within the relationship. For responsibility attributions, participants did not differentiate between positive or negative outcomes. They were as likely to take responsibility for a negative outcome as they were to take responsibility for a positive outcome. Similarly, participants were as likely to give responsibility to their partner for a negative outcome, as they were to give responsibility to their partner for a positive outcome.

The second hypothesis was partially supported but only with respect to (a) responsibility attributions, (b) negative

outcomes, and (c) casual relationships. In casual relationships, participants were more likely to make distress-maintaining attributions for negative outcomes than for positive outcomes. This particular trend supported previous studies (Hays, 1989; Kelley, & Michela, 1980; Thompson & Snyder, 1986). For close relationships, people were equally likely to make relationship-enhancing attributions for positive and negative outcomes. Perhaps people in close relationships overlook negative outcomes because there is more invested in the relationship and therefore these members of close relationships have more to lose if the relationship should break apart (Hays, 1989).

The third hypothesis was also partially supported. For causal attributions, there was an interaction between self-esteem, nature of the relationship, and nature of the outcome as predicted. However, the means were not in the direction predicted. Participants with high self-esteem did not differentiate between close and casual relationships when making attributions for either positive or negative outcomes. Participants with low self-esteem only differentiated between close and casual relationships when making attributions but for positive outcomes. For responsibility attributions, there was also an interaction between self-esteem, nature of the relationship, and nature of the outcome as predicted. However, not all of the means were in the direction predicted. Participants with high self-esteem only differentiated between close and casual relationships when making attributions for negative outcomes. Participants with high self-esteem were more likely to attribute responsibility for these negative outcomes to casual acquaintances than to their best friends.

There are many potential reasons why the results did not generally support the hypotheses. Among these potential reasons, three specific areas were focused on. These areas included the nature of the sample, the nature of the attribution scale that was used, and

the nature of the survey used to collect the data.

When the sample of an experiment consists of college-age students, there is a chance that the sample in not representative of the general population (Sears, 1986). There are major differences between a college-age sample and the general population including differences in age, intelligence, socio-economic status, sense of self, and level of cognitive ability (Sears, 1986). These differences between a college-age sample and the general population could threaten the internal validity of the results.

However, recall that this experiment dealt with the subject of friendships. Friendships occur across every stage of development (Hartup & Stevens, 1999). Therefore, there is little if any evidence that college-age students have fewer or different types of friendships than the general population. The nature of the sample is, therefore, not a plausible alternative explanation as to why the results did not totally support the hypotheses.

Another possible reason for the inconsistencies between the hypotheses and the data collected is the nature of the attribution scale. The attribution scale used in this experiment was originally designed to measure attribution making in married couples (Fincham & Bradbury, 1992). Instead of imagining a spouse as specified in the original scale created by Fincham and Bradbury (1992), participants in the present study were asked to imagine their best friend or casual acquaintance. There are a number of differences between friendships and marriages (Snyder & Simpson, 1984). The main differences include level of commitment, legal status, level of self-disclosure, level of intimacy, and emotional attachment (Snyder & Simpson, 1984). For example, people in marriages have a higher level of commitment than do people in friendships. People in marriages would show more relationship maintaining behavior than would people in friendships.

There were ways that the nature of the survey used to collect the data might

provide another plausible alternative explanation for the results collected. Participants might answer questions to present themselves in a socially desirable manner. In other words, they want to appear fair and reasonable. People might report giving more credit for success and less responsibility for failure to their partner for this hypothetical situation than they normally would. However, the participants were assured that their answers were totally confidential. This assurance should have alleviated any doubts held by the participants that their answers would be connected with them. In turn, the participants should not be concerned with coming across as unfair or unreasonable to the experimenter.

Alternatively, the self-report survey used contained only hypothetical situations. It is possible that this experiment lacked experimental realism. The answers given by the participants might have been different if faced with real-life consequences. A hypothetical situation would not carry the same threat to self-esteem as a real-life situation would. For example, participants might not have been so quick to take responsibility for negative events and pass on responsibility for positive events if faced with consequences are possible threats to actual self-esteem. Therefore controlled real-life situations, such as an engineered disagreement between two real friends, should be used instead of the self-report method.

In sum, in addition to how well the relationship is functioning, self-esteem and degree of closeness of a relationship ought to influence attributions made by the members of a relationship. Overall, the more involved people are in a relationship, the more likely they should be to try and maintain that relationship. Even though self-esteem does play an intricate role in the attribution-making process, the individual effects of self-esteem may decrease as the degree of closeness in a relationship increases. Relationships have been shown to directly influence people's happiness. The

need for relationships in everyday life is so vital to human existence that people will change their behavior to keep relationships intact. People are not loners by nature. In all, people need people.

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