Brief Report

Growth motivation attenuates the self-serving attribution

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ABSTRACT

This study examined whether growth motivation would attenuate the self-serving attribution. Previous studies found that people made more internal attributions for success than for failure and that people with high self-esteem made more external attributions for failure than those with low self-esteem. In this study, participants took a listening comprehension test and rated the extent to which a success or failure score was due to them. The score was randomly assigned. It was found that people with high self-esteem and high growth motivation made more internal attributions for failure than those with high self-esteem but low growth motivation. Implications for research on self-esteem were discussed.

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1. Introduction

The self-serving attribution refers to a tendency to make internal attributions for positive outcomes but external attributions for negative outcomes. This tendency has been found to be stronger in people with high self-esteem, especially when encountering negative outcomes (Blaine & Crocker, 1993). The role of self-esteem in attributions for positive outcomes was ambiguous; some studies found that people with high self-esteem made more internal attributions for success than those with low self-esteem (e.g., Ickes & Layden, 1978), but others found no difference (e.g., Fitch, 1970; Piers, 1977). In contrast, self-esteem made a clear difference in attributions for negative outcomes; people with high self-esteem made more external attributions for negative outcomes than those with low self-esteem (Schlenker, Soraci, Jr. & McCarthy, 1976; Seligman, Abramson, Semmel, & von Baeyer, 1979).

This bias in causal attribution has been explained by two perspectives. The motivational approach (Zuckerman, 1979) argues that people make attributions in a way they can maintain their self-esteem and feel good about themselves. As a result, they distort their perception of the cause of the outcome by making internal attributions for success and external attributions for failure. In contrast, the cognitive approach (Miller & Ross, 1975) argues that people make attributions based on whether or not the outcome is consistent with their expectations of it. In fact, people were found to make external attributions for unexpected outcomes, whether it was positive or negative (Feather, 1969; Feather & Simon, 1971).

Some other researchers proposed a more general perspective by integrating both the motivational and cognitive approaches into one paradigm (Blaine & Crocker, 1993; Shepperd, Malone, & Sweeney, 2008). According to Blaine and Crocker (1993), people with either high or low self-esteem have the desire to feel good about themselves, but they differ in attributional styles because their self-concepts are different. People with high self-esteem are certain that they have positive attributes, so they are more concerned about enhancing themselves through success. Since they expect to succeed at a task, they tend to make external attributions when they receive negative outcomes. In contrast, people with low self-esteem do not have confidence that they have positive attributes, so they maintain their self-esteem by avoiding disappointment. Since they are already prepared for failure, they tend to make internal attributions when they receive negative outcomes.

As shown above, previous research argued that there are two paths to react to failure: People with high self-esteem make external attributions because of their enhanced self-image, whereas people with low self-esteem make internal attributions because of their poor self-image. However, we argue that there is a third path in which individuals make internal attributions for failure, not to verify their poor self-image, but to correct what they did wrong and improve themselves. This perspective argues that people can grow and improve themselves by learning from failure. In order to learn from failure and increase the odds of success in the future, they should take what they did wrong into consideration and try to rectify it. This motivation to learn, grow, and improve oneself is called growth motivation (Bauer et al., 2008; Maslow, 1968). In comparison with safety motivation (Bauer et al., 2008; Maslow, 1968), in which individuals make attributions for positive outcomes, this study focused on the role of growth motivation in attributions for negative outcomes.
These two motivations, we suppose, lead to different ways of self-esteem regulation. For example, Dweck and Leggett (1988) argued that self-esteem has two different sources. Some people maintain high self-esteem by seeking positive evaluation and avoiding negative evaluation of their competence without an investment to genuine change in the self. Others maintain high self-esteem by putting forth effort and increasing their abilities. Since growth motivation represents an effort into growth and improvement, growth motivation seems to play a key role in distinguishing between the two self-esteem regulations. Therefore, people with high self-esteem but low growth motivation are expected to react differently to failure than people with high self-esteem and high growth motivation.

In the present study, participants took a listening comprehension test and rated the extent to which a success or failure score was due to them. The main interest resided in causal attributions for failure rather than success, especially focusing on people with high self-esteem. We expected that growth motivation would moderate the effect of self-esteem on causal attribution for failure, and it was hypothesized that people with high self-esteem and high growth motivation would make more internal attributions for failure than those with high self-esteem but low growth motivation.

2. Method

2.1. Participants

Undergraduate students (*N* = 130, 59% women) at a small Midwestern university participated in the study in exchange for course credit. The mean age was 19.55 years (*SD* = 2.91).

2.2. Materials

2.2.1. Growth motivation

Motivation for personal growth and self-improvement was measured by the 20-item Growth Motivation Index (GMI; Bauer et al., 2008). The GMI includes items such as “I strive to change things about myself that I don’t like” and “I actively seek new perspectives on how to live my life, even if these new perspectives mean I’ve been wrong.” These items measure the degree to which people put effort into growth and self-improvement in everyday life. Items were originally extracted from narratives of growth goals and growth memories (Bauer & McAdams, 2004; Bauer, McAdams, & Sakaeda, 2005) and edited for a general use. Participants rated how often they do each item on a scale from 1 (never) to 7 (always). Cronbach’s alpha was .76.

2.2.2. Self-esteem

The 13-item Self-Description Inventory (SDI; Diggory, 1966) was used to measure self-esteem for two reasons. First, since the SDI measures how competent a person is in various situations, it represents expectation of outcomes which is one of the underlying mechanisms of the self-serving attribution. Second, a study on attributional styles (Tennen, Herzberger, & Nelson, 1987) found that the SDI was indeed the best at predicting the locus of attributions for negative outcomes among four measures of self-esteem. The SDI includes items such as “When you try to reach important goals of any kind, how often do you feel you have really succeeded?” Items were rated on a scale from 1 (never) to 7 (all the time). The alpha was .83.

2.2.3. Satisfaction and causal attribution

To assess satisfaction with a success or failure score, participants rated the extent to which they were satisfied the score on a scale from 1 (not at all) to 7 (very much). Regarding causal attributions for the score, they were asked to rate the extent to which the score was due to them, ranging from 1 (mainly due to other people or circumstances) to 7 (mainly due to me).

2.3. Procedure

Participants arrived in a classroom and were instructed to sit in a desk skipping every one column. One experimenter verbally explained the procedure of the study and the participants’ task. Participants first listened to a 3-min audio clip on earthquakes; then answered an 8-item listening comprehension quiz on the content of the audio clip. After participants completed the quiz, they were asked to predict their score. A second experimenter collected the quizzes and ostensibly scored them. While participants completed the GMI and the SDI as well as some other irrelevant ones, the second experimenter randomly assigned either a success grade (seven out of eight correct) or a failure grade (three out of eight correct) to each quiz. After all participants completed the packet, they were informed that the mean score of the quizzes was 5.2. Next, the second experimenter returned participants scored quizzes and administered the Satisfaction and Causal Attribution Questionnaire. Participants were then fully debriefed. After each session, the quizzes were graded to obtain the actual performance of participants.

3. Results

Statistics for the success and the failure conditions are presented in Table 1. There were no significant differences between the two conditions in participants’ predicted and actual scores on the listening test, age, self-esteem, and growth motivation. Participants who received the high score reported more satisfaction than those who received the low score, implying that the manipulation was well in place. Also, participants in the success condition made more internal attributions than those in the failure condition. While SDI and GMI scores were related to each other (*r* = .39, *p* < .001), neither of them was related to predicted scores or actual scores, *r* < .15, *p* > .10.

A three-way hierarchical regression (Condition: success vs. failure × Self-Esteem × Growth Motivation) with attribution scores as the dependent variable was performed to test the main hypothesis. First, SDI and GMI scores were centered; then, three two-way cross-product vectors and one three-way cross-product vector were computed. The results showed that a three-way interaction was significant, *b* = −1.41, *β* = −.57, *p* = .03. This interaction was further analyzed by Condition. In the success condition, neither SDI nor GMI scores significantly predicted attribution scores, which is compatible with previous findings. Under the failure condition, however, an interaction between SDI and GMI scores was significant in predicting attribution scores, *b* = 1.05, *β* = .28, *p* = .02. The main effects of the SDI (*β* = .07, *p* = .61) and the GMI scores were insignificant.

| Table 1 Descriptive statistics and independent t-tests for two conditions. |
|-----------------------------|-----------------------------|-----------------------------|-----------------------------|
|                             | Success (n = 64)            | Failure (n = 66)             | Independent t-test          |
|                             | M (SD)                      | M (SD)                      |                             |
| **Age**                    | 19.14 (1.15)                | 19.95 (3.89)                | −1.60                       |
| **Predicted scores**       | 4.48 (1.83)                 | 4.36 (1.33)                 | .43                         |
| **Actual scores**          | 4.98 (1.63)                 | 4.92 (1.51)                 | .22                         |
| **Self-esteem**            | 4.92 (0.73)                 | 4.78 (0.70)                 | 1.09                        |
| **Growth motivation**      | 4.96 (0.65)                 | 4.80 (0.57)                 | 1.47                        |
| **Satisfaction**           | 6.45 (0.97)                 | 2.59 (1.37)                 | 18.47**                     |
| **Causal attribution**     | 5.53 (1.50)                 | 4.73 (1.62)                 | 2.93*                       |
| *p* < .01                  | **p** < .001
Internal attribution scores for failure as a function of self-esteem and growth interaction in detail, simple slopes were tested at one standard deviation above and below the mean of the SDI (Cohen & Cohen, 1983). As can be seen in Fig. 1, there was a positive relation between GMI scores and the attribution scores for participants with high self-esteem (+1 SD), \( b = 1.18 \), \( \beta = .41 \), \( p = .04 \). In other words, participants with high self-esteem and high growth motivation made more internal attributions for failure than those with high self-esteem but low growth motivation. The relation between GMI scores and attribution scores for participants with low self-esteem (−1 SD) was not significant, \( b = -.32 \), \( \beta = -.11 \), \( p = .48 \).

4. Discussion

The results support the hypothesis that growth motivation attenuates the self-serving attribution in people with high self-esteem. Previous research argued that people with high self-esteem tend to make external attributions for failure. However, the present study demonstrates that people with high self-esteem make internal attributions for negative outcomes as long as they are oriented toward personal growth and self-improvement. Growth motivation was found to play a key role in these processes, moderating the effect of self-esteem on causal attributions for failure.

Although our hypothesis was confirmed, there is one question that needs to be examined: Why did self-esteem not play a direct role in our study? We argue that the contexts of experiments should be taken into consideration to answer this question because some experimental settings provide more availability for external excuse-making (Park, 2009). For example, in Fitch’s (1970) classic experiment, participants were asked to estimate the number of dots projected on a screen for 3 s and were randomly given positive or negative feedback. In this task, participants may not have understood what kind of ability or effort was needed for better performance. As a result, participants simply might have thought that it was a silly test and made external attributions for negative feedback.

In contrast, Lee and Tiedens (2001, Study 2) asked participants to work on a downsizing plan for a fictitious company with a confederate for 15 min which seems to be a long enough time to calculate their contribution to making the plan. In this task, the participants made internal attributions for negative feedback, scoring only 2.21 on a 9-point external attributional scale. We assume that participants could understand how good or bad they were at developing the downsizing plan in this task. As a result, the evaluations of their own performance probably superseded the desire to deny responsibility for negative feedback. Likewise, participants in the present study probably had in mind their own evaluations of how much they attended to the audio clip and how well they performed on similar quizzes when they made causal attributions. Future research should investigate whether availability for external excuse-making makes differences in degrees to which people make internal attributions for negative outcomes.

The findings from the present study shed light on research on self-esteem. For the past few decades, there have been several approaches to distinguish between secure and fragile self-esteem (for a review, see Kernis et al., 2005). Despite the enthusiasm dedicated to the distinctions, there is no agreed explanation for the divergence of two kinds of self-esteem. Why do some people have fragile high self-esteem while others have secure high self-esteem? More importantly, why do people with fragile self-esteem show defensiveness?

One way to answer these questions is to examine the basis of high self-esteem. On the one hand, some people blindly pursue high self-esteem as in the self-esteem movement in 1980s in which children were taught to seek high self-esteem regardless of actual achievement and personal characteristics. On the other hand, other people obtain high self-esteem as a byproduct of genuine growth and improvement (see Kernis, 2003). Since people with fragile high self-esteem do not have positive attributes that correspond to their high self-esteem, they behave in a way to protect their self-image when it is at stake. We posit that effort put into growth and improvement, spurred by growth motivation, may yield the secure basis that self-esteem is built on. Aristotle once said that dignity does not consist in possessing honors, but in deserving them. Now we say: So does self-esteem.

References


