

# This Week's Citation Classic

CC/NUMBER 28  
JULY 11, 1983

Deaux K & Emswiller T. Explanations of successful performance on sex-linked tasks: what is skill for the male is luck for the female.  
*J. Personal. Soc. Psychol.* 29:80-5, 1974.  
[Purdue University, Lafayette, IN]

Explanations for an equivalent successful performance by a male and a female were found to differ, with males being credited with relatively more ability than luck and females seen as luckier than males. These differences were found only when the task was masculine in content. [The *Social Sciences Citation Index*® (SSCI)® indicates that this paper has been cited in over 170 publications since 1974.]

Kay Deaux  
Department of Psychological Sciences  
Purdue University  
West Lafayette, IN 47907

May 4, 1983

"After fairly traditional work on attitudes as a graduate student and as an assistant professor at Wright State University, I arrived at Purdue University looking for an area of research that was less charted and potentially more involving. Prompted by the rising feminist movement, I began to consider how social psychology might be applied to gender-related issues. My initial inquiries were rather simple (and not heavily cited)—a modest revelation that results obtained with male subjects and male stimulus persons do not necessarily hold true if women are included,<sup>1</sup> and a demonstration, similar to Goldberg's,<sup>2</sup> that male and female performances are not rated equally.<sup>3</sup> Although such demonstrations were important, I felt it was necessary to adopt a more theoretical approach to the issues of sex discrimination.

"Attribution theory appeared to offer a suitable framework. Drawing from the fertile ideas of Fritz Heider,<sup>4</sup> investigators such as Bernard Weiner<sup>5</sup> and Norman Feather<sup>6</sup> had begun to explore the explanations that people offer for their success and failure. Applying this framework to the case of sex

discrimination, I predicted that different expectations for male and female performance would result in different explanations for their respective success.

"Joined by Tim Emswiller, a creative and energetic undergraduate (whose peripatetic post-Purdue career has included a stint as a theater costumer at Yale University, graduate work in social psychology at the City University of New York, and, at last report, marketing research for American Express), I designed the study cited here. The results were as expected when the task had masculine associations; however, the feminine task, perceived without cause as easier, did not elicit differential attributions.

"I believed the study to be an important step forward in understanding sex discrimination. The *Journal of Personality and Social Psychology* reviewer, while voicing a few concerns, seemed to agree, recommending acceptance for a study that was the 'first of its type' with 'interesting' results. The editor was less impressed. Although acknowledging it to be 'a good idea and a nice study,' he found the interpretation 'a bit cloudy' and elected to reject the article. Unwilling to accept this verdict, I wrote what I hoped was a persuasive (and, in retrospect, was a somewhat testy) letter to the editor asking for reconsideration. He did indeed reverse his decision, accepting the manuscript with no revision.

"The high citation rate of this article seems attributable to its location at the junction of two major trends during the 1970s. First, research on attribution processes dominated that decade, subsumed only recently in the more general concern with social cognition. Secondly, the 1970s saw a tremendous growth in research on gender-related issues, a surge that continues in the 1980s. In 1976, I reviewed a number of studies in this area and attempted to provide a more detailed, theoretical framework.<sup>7</sup> More recent research, while improving the methodology and qualifying some of the conditions under which this particular phenomenon occurs, has verified its existence and persistence."

1. Deaux K. To err is humanizing: but sex makes a difference. *Represent. Res. Soc. Psychol.* 3:20-8, 1972.

2. Goldberg P. Are women prejudiced against women? *Transaction* 5:28-30, 1968.

3. Deaux K & Taynor J. Evaluation of male and female ability: bias works two ways. *Psychol. Rep.* 32:261-2, 1973.

[The SSCI indicates that this paper has been cited in over 55 publications since 1973.]

4. Heider F. *The psychology of interpersonal relations*. New York: Wiley, 1958. 322 p.

5. Weiner B, Frieze I, Kukla A, Reed L, Rest S & Rosenbaum R. *Perceiving the causes of success and failure*. Morristown, NJ: General Learning Press, 1971. 26 p.

6. Feather N T. Attribution of responsibility and valence of success and failure in relation to initial confidence and task performance. *J. Personal. Soc. Psychol.* 13:129-44, 1969.

[Citation Classic. *Current Contents/Social & Behavioral Sciences* 14(11):24, 15 March 1982.]

7. Deaux K. Sex: a perspective on the attribution process. (Harvey J, Jekes W J & Kidd R F, eds.) *New directions in attribution research*. Hillsdale, NJ: Lawrence Erlbaum Associates, 1976. Vol. 1. p. 335-52.