Weary Bradley G. Self-serving biases in the attribution process: a reexamination of
the fact or fiction question. *J. Personal. Soc. Psychol.* 36:56-71, 1978. [Department
of Psychology. Vanderbilt University, Nashville. TN]

Evidence relevant to the proposition that self-esteem motivations bias attributions of causality was examined, and in contrast to an earlier review,' strong support was found for the proposition. Additionally, a broadened self-serving bias formulation was presented to account for evidence often cited as inconsistent with the notion of motivational distortions in the causal inference process. [The *SSCI*® and the *SCI*® indicate that this paper has been cited in more than 425 publications.]

Self-Serving Causal
Attributions Revisited

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My paper was stimulated by D.T. Miller and M. Ross's influential 1975 review of the self-serving attributional bias literature.[1] In their paper, Miller and Ross boldly asserted that motivational accounts of the tendency for individuals to make self-attributions for their good outcomes and external attributions for their negative outcomes were fiction; they presented three alternative, information processing mechanisms to explain such causal asymmetries.

This article piqued my interest for several reasons. First, I was, at the time, a third-year graduate student immersed in both the clinical and social psychology training programs at Vanderbilt University. As such, I had broad and recent exposure to the writings of such early, influential theorists of motivated cognition as Bartlett, Heider, Festinger, Freud, and Adier, and had found these writings compelling. Second, the thesis that individuals sometimes explain their outcomes in ways that protect or enhance their self-esteem was so consistent with my own commonsense, phenomenological experience of everyday life that I had difficulty believing that sufficient and compelling evidence to the contrary could be found. Finally, and perhaps most importantly, I was intrigued by the fact or fiction question embedded in Miller and Ross's title; it seemed to me (and still does) that there are few questions about human behavior that can be answered in so clear, so unqualified a manner.

I asked my mentor, John H. Harvey, if he thought another review of the I iterature could represent a contribution; it had only been a year since the Miller and Ross paper had appeared. He replied that perhaps it could, if it included at least 10 new studies, and if it somehow presented a new perspective on the contradictory findings. I have no idea how likely he thought it was that I would be able to carry out either or both of these charges. However, that is precisely what I set out to do, and did, with some degree of success.

Several factors should be considered when attempting to explain why my paper has been as influential as it has been. Undoubtedly a big factor was fortuitous timing. I happened to write a paper championing the interdependence of motivation and cognition just at a point where the cognitive Zeitgeist that had so gripped the discipline for a decade or more was beginning to let go...just a little. Scientific psychology was beginning to question how far a "cold" information processing metaphor could take us in understanding human social behavior. Second, one of the contributions of my article was the argument that causal explanations could serve a communicative, self-presentational function. While novel at the time, this viewpoint is now widely accepted.[2] Finally, attribution was one of the most widely researched topics in social psychology during the 1970s and 1980s, and attributional analyses were applied during these decades to many and diverse phenomena. Such research activity helps to ensure heavy citation.

The volume of work on motivated social cognition has increased dramatically during the 15 years since my review article appeared. Fortunately, arguments pitting motivational against cognitive influences on human social judgments are no longer necessary. We have moved to a more sophisticated examination of the manner in which various motivations affect cognitive processes.[3]

1. **Miller D T & Ross M.** Self-serving biases in Ihe attribution of causality: fact or fiction? *Psychol. Bull.* 82:213-25. 1975. (Cited 440 times.1 [See also: Miller D T. Citation Classic®. (Smelser N J. comp.) *Contemporary classics in the social and behavioral sciences.* Philadelphia: 1SI Press. 1987. p. 225.]
2. **Leary M R & Kowalski R M**. Impression management: a literature review and two-component model. *Psychol. Bull.* 107:34-47. 1990.
3. **Weary G, Gleicher F & Marsh K L,** eds. *Control-motivated social cognition.* New York: Springer-Verlag. 1993. 344 p.
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