

Miller D T & Ross M. Self-serving biases in the attribution of causality: fact or fiction? *Psychol. Bull.* 82:213-25, 1975.
[University of Waterloo, Ontario, Canada]

Research demonstrates that people accept more responsibility for their successes than for their failures. The traditional explanation for this asymmetry focuses on people's need to think well of themselves. It can also be explained, however, by implicating various cognitive processes, such as expectancies and covariation detection. [The *Social Sciences Citation Index*® (SSCI)® indicates that this paper has been cited in over 240 publications since 1975.]

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July 27, 1984

"Attribution theory was a very 'hot' research area in social psychology during the 1970s, so in my last year in graduate school at the University of Waterloo, I occasionally attended a seminar on this subject taught by Michael Ross. The topic on one of the days I visited the seminar was people's causal attributions for positive and negative outcomes. Near the end of the seminar, the idea emerged that the tendency of people to take credit for success and to deny responsibility for failure may have its roots in cognitive processes rather than motivational ones, as had generally been assumed. I was intrigued by this idea and, since I was quick to seize any opportunity to divert myself from the writing of my dissertation, I spent some time in the library closely examining the relevant studies.

"My review of the literature and a subsequent discussion with Ross convinced me that there were alternative

cognitive explanations for what we were later to term the 'self-serving attributional bias.' Ross and I both were busy with other projects at the time, however, and we did not discuss the idea further. Indeed, the paper would not have been written (by us, at least) if it were not for the fact that a couple of months later our respective travel plans for the Christmas vacation fell through, leaving us both with an unexpected block of uncommitted time. We agreed that our misfortune provided us with an ideal opportunity to delve into the question of self-serving attributions. By the end of the holidays, we had completed a rough draft of the paper.

"There are probably a number of reasons this paper is so highly cited. One reason is simply that this article reviewed a body of literature that had not been reviewed previously and that continues to grow. The most important reason, however, is that the argument that attributional biases reflect features of information processing rather than the perceiver's needs or wishes was consistent with a dominant theme in the rapidly expanding area of social cognition. A major tenet of the cognitive 'revolution' that has swept social psychology is that most inferential errors and biases have cognitive rather than motivational origins.

"Since the publication of our paper, research on this topic has continued at a brisk pace. Much of this research has sought stronger evidence for the role of motivation in causal attribution.^{1,2} We now know much more about the factors that influence the attributions people make for positive and negative outcomes. However, an understanding of the precise interplay of cognitive and motivational factors in this process still eludes us."³

1. Miller D T. Ego involvement and attributions for success and failure. *J. Personal. Soc. Psychol.* 34:901-6, 1976. (Cited 80 times.)
2. Skolov F & Ross M. Facilitation of ego-biased attributions by means of self-serving observer feedback. *J. Personal. Soc. Psychol.* 35:734-41, 1977.
3. Tedlock P & Levi A. Attribution bias: on the inconclusiveness of the cognition-motivation debates. *J. Exp. Soc. Psychol.* 18:68-88, 1982.