



# Perceptions of Socioeconomic Status Shape Attributional Biases

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## BACKGROUND

- Attribution biases (e.g., fundamental attribution error) are universal and shape how people react to daily occurrences.
- Low socioeconomic status (SES) individuals frequently face harsher dispositional judgments even when systemic barriers exist.
- The present study aimed to understand how both internal and external factors, particularly those related to SES, shape attributions.

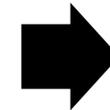
## DESIGN & METHOD

Participants were 250 adults living in the US and recruited through Prolific.

- $M_{age} = 45.38, SD = 13.31$
- 57.2% women, 76.8% White
- Adjusted family income was calculated using the Pew Research Center's method of household income /  $\sqrt{\text{household size}}$ ; Median = \$39,130.

## DESIGN & METHOD

Individual Difference Factors



Type of Attribution



Scenario Factors

The present study included a correlational and experimental element.

### Correlational Component

- Participants completed a measure developed by the study team assessing their broader attributional tendencies. Sample item: "If I achieved a long-term goal, it would reflect my perseverance."
- Participants also completed measures of defensiveness, income and household size (used to compute adjusted family income), learned helplessness, religiosity, political leaning, social support, and demographic items.

### Experimental Component

- This study uses a 2 (scenario subject: self, other; within) x 2 (scenario outcome: positive, negative; between) x 2 (portrayed income level: low, high; between) mixed factorial design.
- All participants were shown two scenarios: one in which they were asked to imagine a scenario in which a job-related event happened to themselves and one in which a job-related event happened to a subject, "Alex." These scenarios were counterbalanced to avoid order effects.
- In each scenario, participants were randomized to read about a positive or negative outcome and were provided with cues that the target had a low- or high-income.

## RESULTS

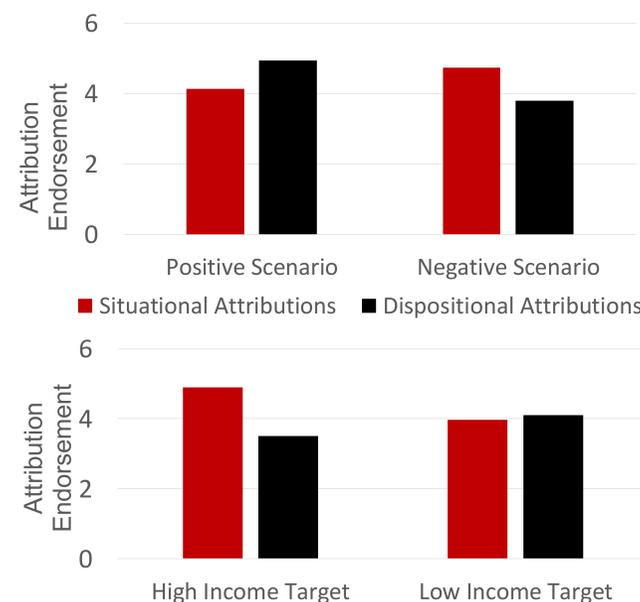
### Correlational Component

- A multivariate multiple regression was conducted to evaluate the influence of social and individual difference factors on situational and dispositional attributional style while correcting for multiple tests.
- Both the situational model,  $F(8,246) = 4.18, p < .001, R^2 = .12$ , and the dispositional model,  $F(8,246) = 2.02, p = .045, R^2 = .06$ , were significant.
- High defensiveness was associated with increased situational attributions, while high religiosity and politically conservativeness were associated with decreased situational attributions.
- Higher-income was associated with more dispositional attributions.

Dependent Variable	Predictor	B	SE	t	p
Situational attributions	<b>Defensiveness</b>	<b>.20</b>	<b>.08</b>	<b>2.41</b>	<b>.017</b>
	Adj. Income	-.06	.15	-.39	.699
	<b>Religiosity</b>	<b>-.21</b>	<b>.07</b>	<b>-2.97</b>	<b>.003</b>
	<b>Political leaning</b>	<b>-.01</b>	<b>.00</b>	<b>-4.76</b>	<b>&lt;.001</b>
Dispositional attributions	Defensiveness	.22	.13	1.68	.095
	<b>Adj. Income</b>	<b>.56</b>	<b>.23</b>	<b>2.38</b>	<b>.018</b>
	Religiosity	-.04	.11	-.33	.742
	Political leaning	.01	.00	1.65	.099

### Experimental Component

- Data were submitted to a 3-way mixed ANOVA.
- There was no significant 3-way interaction, but all 2-way interactions were significant.
- A MANOVA proving the two-way interactions indicated:
  - Participants made significantly more situational attributions about others in scenarios with negative outcomes ( $M = 4.73, SD = 1.07$ ) than positive outcomes ( $M = 4.14, SD = 1.27$ ),  $F(1) = 15.64, p < .001, \eta_p^2 = .059$ .
  - Participants made significantly more dispositional attributions about others in scenarios with positive outcomes ( $M = 4.93, SD = 1.38$ ) than negative outcomes ( $M = 3.80, SD = 1.86$ ),  $F(1) = 143.58, p < .001, \eta_p^2 = .367$ .
  - There were no differences in the situational or dispositional attributions made about self targets based on the positive and negative outcomes of the scenarios.



## DISCUSSION

- The present study examined how social and individual difference factors influence attributional style, finding that only individual difference factors related to defensiveness, adjusted income, religiosity, and political leaning influenced attributional style.
- Experimentally, in scenarios where another person was the subject, participants were more likely to contextualize high-income others, and to make dispositional attributions in positive scenarios and situational attributions in negative scenarios.
- Thus, these results provide insight that both person-level factors and situational-level factors influence the types of attributions that individuals make.
- This research highlights that the perception of an attribution target as low or high income may shift the types of attributions individuals make about them. Participants were more likely to make situational (as opposed to dispositional) attributions about high income targets.
- This study is limited by its online sample and by the unvalidated measure used to capture attributional style. Future studies should replicate these findings in additional samples and with validated measures.

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