

# Socioeconomic Status and Attributional Biases in Explaining Success and Failure

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## BACKGROUND

- Attributions refer to our explanations for the causes of events, and shape the way that we think, feel, and respond to situations.
- Attributions often depend on situational context, such as the outcome of the situation, and the person we are making attributions about.
- Attribution biases are also known to shift perceptions dependent on whether outcomes are experienced personally or observed in others.
- Perceptions of an individual's socioeconomic status often appear to shape real life attributions made toward that individual, but there is limited empirical evidence to support this.
- The present study seeks to understand how situational outcome, perception of socioeconomic class, and self/other targets shape the types of situational and dispositional attributions individuals make.

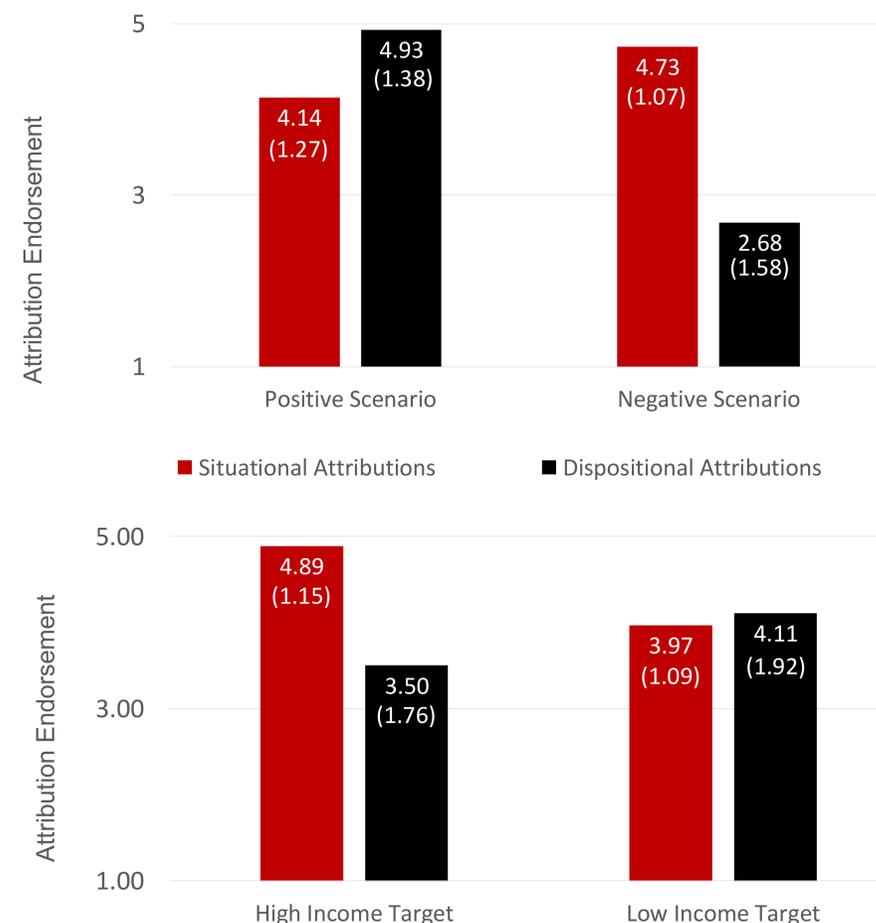
## METHOD

- 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.
- Participants read passages where they imagined themselves and others experiencing success or failures in high- or low-income situations and rated situational and dispositional causes.
  - The self and other passages were counterbalanced to avoid order effects.
- They then responded to items assessing internal and external attributions associated with situations.
  - To what extent is Alex personally responsible for their job situation?
  - To what extent was your employment situation influenced by systemic factors (e.g., job market)?

## METHOD

- All participants were recruited via Prolific (N = 250;  $M_{age} = 45.4$ ,  $SD = 13.3$ ).
- 57.2% were women; 79.6% were White.
- 13.6% reported completing a graduate degree, 36% reported completing a Bachelor's degree, 23.2% reported attending some college with no degree, 15.6% reported a high school education or lower.
- Adjusted family income was calculated using the Pew Research Center's method of household income / square root of household size.
  - Median adjusted family income was \$39,130.

## RESULTS



## RESULTS

- Data were submitted to a 3-way mixed ANOVA.
- There was no significant 3-way interaction, but all 2-way interactions were significant.
  - These interactions were driven by the scenario subject condition. There were no significant differences by outcome or income when the subject was the self, but there were differences for others.
- Independent samples t-tests indicated:
  - Participants made significantly more situational attributions about others in scenarios with negative outcomes than positive outcomes,  $t(248) = -11.98$ ,  $p < .001$ ,  $d = .50$ .
  - Participants made significantly more dispositional attributions about others in scenarios with positive outcomes than negative outcomes,  $t(248) = 3.96$ ,  $p < .001$ ,  $d = -1.52$ .
  - Participants made significantly more situational attributions high-income others than low-income others,  $t(248) = -6.47$ ,  $p < .001$ ,  $d = -.82$ .
  - Participants made significantly more dispositional attributions about low-income others than high-income others,  $t(248) = 2.60$ ,  $p = .010$ ,  $d = .329$ .

## DISCUSSION

- These results indicate that scenario outcomes and perceptions of actors' SES can influence attributions.
- These results remained significant when controlling for general attributional style in a general linear model, indicating that these situation-level variables are independently important.
- This study suggests that a person's income level can directly contribute to how people explain events in their lives.
- This study is limited by its online sample with limited diversity, and should be replicated in other contexts.

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