

SELF-ESTEEM AND INTELLECTUAL ATTRIBUTION OF RESPONSIBILITY IN FILIPINO CHILDREN

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This study examined the degree of internality of the attributions of responsibility for success and failure in performance situations by 275 high, medium, and low self-esteem Filipino secondary school children. Rather than supporting self-enhancement or self-consistency theory the results suggested that the low self-esteem subjects may have failed to internalise success to the same extent as their high self-esteem peers. This result was interpreted as being consistent with earlier Filipino literature on attribution, child rearing practices, and personality. The need for further investigations of the influence of socialisation practices upon the relationship between self-esteem and attribution was emphasised.

Self-concept theorists have long claimed that two prime motives guiding human behaviour are those of self-enhancement and self-consistency (James, 1890; Snygg and Combs, 1949). However, as Rosenberg (1979) amongst others has pointed out, two separate motives are involved here and they are not always compatible. The term "self-enhancement" refers to the way people are motivated to perceive events in a manner which enhances chronic self-esteem while "self-consistency" refers to the way people are motivated to perceive events in a manner which is consistent with chronic self-esteem. Some recent investigators have tried to test empirically which of these motives is the more powerful. Thus Jones (1973), after reviewing 16 investigations relating self and interpersonal evaluations, claimed to find support for self-enhancement rather than self-consistency theories. However, Korman (1967, 1969) claims to have found support for self-consistency theory in the area of vocational choice and job satisfaction. Support

for self-consistency theory was also reported by Colman and Olver (1978) who studied reactions to flattery.

The focus of this research is the relationship between a person's self-esteem and the responsibility he or she perceives for success or failure at a performance task. Self-theory literature provides two partially contradictory hypotheses in this area. From the perspective of self-enhancement theory it would be predicted that both high and low self-esteem individuals would attempt to enhance their self-esteem by accepting personal responsibility for success but not failure. That is by attributing success to internal sources (such as ability or effort) and failure to external sources (such as task difficulty or bad luck). Self-consistency theory would also predict that high self-esteem subjects would attribute success and failure in this way. However, the prediction from self-consistency theory is different for the low self-esteem person. To maintain a low level of

self-esteem would require responsibility for failure being internalised more than responsibility for success. This is because it is thought that low self-esteem persons would be made uncomfortable by success because of its inconsistency with their negative self-appraisals and thus would tend to reject responsibility for success but not failure.

Many researchers (e.g. Luginbuhl *et al.* 1975; Larson, 1977; Arkin and Maruyama, 1979) have indeed found evidence for a "self-serving bias" in causal attributions. By this is meant that people tend to attribute successes to internal factors and failures to external factors. Recent evidence (Miller, 1976; Larson, 1977) suggests that this attributional bias stems from motivational processes, such as self-enhancement, rather than nonmotivational factors, such as information processing, as Miller and Ross (1975) have suggested.

Yet there have been a number of studies which have suggested that attributions may differ according to level of self-esteem. Thus Ames (1978) found that high self-concept children rated their abilities more highly after success than did low self-concept children. Shrauger and Terbovic (1976) reported that high self-esteem subjects rated their performances more favorably than did low self-esteem subjects even though their actual results were identical. Additional support comes from several laboratory studies which have demonstrated that internal attributions are generally higher for both expected success and unexpected failure (Feather and Simon, 1971; Gilmor and Minton, 1974).

Fitch (1970) reported partial support for both self-enhancement and self-consistency theories. His subjects were asked to attribute causality for performance in a dot-estimation task to internal and external sources. Success outcomes were more often attributed to internal sources than failure outcomes as self-enhancement theory predicts. However, support was also found for the predictions of

self-consistency theory as, in the failure condition, low self-esteem subjects attributed significantly more causality to internal sources than did high self-esteem subjects. Fitch tentatively concluded that while high self-esteem subjects may tend to internalize success but not failure outcomes, low self-esteem subjects may tend to internalize both success and failure.

Taken as a whole these studies indicate that while individuals are more likely to internalize success and externalize failures, those of high self-esteem tend to do so more often.

Most of the studies discussed above suffer from the disadvantage that they are from data based on highly artificial laboratory tasks. Can these results be generalized to specific real life situations and even to characteristic tendencies of high and low self-esteem subjects?

The results of Ickes and Layden (1980), based on attribution responses to a wide range of hypothetical situations, suggest that this indeed may be the case. Yet other studies (e.g. Nicholls, 1975; Miller, 1976) have suggested that ego-involving outcomes tend to evoke self-enhancing needs. Indeed Adler (1976) found a significant positive relationship between internality of attribution and academic performance for both high and low self-esteem school students. In a related study working business students were asked to attribute causality for satisfying and dissatisfying incidents on their jobs (Adler, 1980). While his high self-esteem subjects were significantly more internal than those of low self-esteem in their attributions for satisfaction these two groups did not differ significantly in their attributions for dissatisfaction. Adler (1980) concluded that researchers should no longer try to determine whether self-enhancement or self-consistency is the more powerful motive but rather address themselves to finding out the conditions under which one or other of these two motives is more prepotent — he suggests ego-involvement as one such situational contingency.

The Philippine Setting

It is surprising that there has been little attempt to study the relationship between self-esteem and attribution of responsibility in cross-cultural settings. This is despite the fact that it has been suggested that the so-called "self-serving bias" may be acquired through socialisation processes rather than through a psychodynamic defence mechanism with the aim of maintaining or enhancing one's self-esteem (Ickes and Layden, 1980). The aim of this paper is to discuss this relationship in the context of Filipino society and to present the results of an empirical study with Filipino children.

Third world psychologists are now questioning the appropriateness of Western psychological concepts in cross-cultural settings (Enriquez, 1977). Thus this section of this article will consider the relevance of the concepts of "attribution" and "self-esteem" in the Filipino context.

Bonifacio (1977) considers "intrusion" and "the concept of success and failure" to be dominant features of Filipino social behaviour. The term "intrusion" refers to the way Filipino friends try to discover the reasons for each other's actions, which may range from everyday activities such as walking down the street to major life decisions. By intruding into another's personal affairs they demonstrate the deep concern they have for each other. This desire to understand the reasons underlying behaviour is thought to be an essential aspect of causal attribution (Frieze, 1979).

The emphasis placed on "the concept of success and failure" in Filipino society is also clearly relevant to this discussion. Bonifacio explains that if a Filipino is successful at some endeavour he or she is likely to claim to have been *suwerte* (lucky) while failure is usually ascribed to *malas* (back luck). Anyone who has spent any length of time in the Philippines will find examples of "luck" attributions in all

aspects of Filipino life, but they are especially plentiful when students are explaining their examination performance.

Both Bonifacio (1977) and Angeles (1977) consider that *suwerte* and *malas* play such a dominant role in Filipino behaviour because the belief that life is determined by forces outside man's control is a dominant value-orientation of the Philippines. Angeles, however, sees a positive aspect in this apparent attitude of fatalistic resignation, which itself is often based on strong Christian conviction. She argues that rather than being resigned to his fate the Filipino espouses an "optimistic fatalism." This latter attitude allows the Filipino to accept his own lot without grumbling, because he believes that by hard work and endeavour he and his family will come to a better future. Guthrie (1977) lent empirical support to this proposition by finding that most of his respondents emphasised the need for education, hard work, and saving rather than relying on forces outside their control to improve their lot in life. The Filipino's belief in the value of education is borne out in that nation's impressive statistics on national literacy, universal schooling, and proportion of Filipinos entering into tertiary study (cf. National Economic and Development Authority, 1976).

Several studies of causal attribution for examination success with Filipino students have also indicated the validity of these concepts in the Philippine setting. Thus Watkins and Astilla (1980a), in a study with students from a major private university, found that internal success attribution correlated significantly with satisfaction with success in three out of four cases and that effort attribution correlated significantly with the students' ratings of how hard they had tried. These young Filipinos generally possessed adaptive patterns of attribution ascribing possible examination success somewhat more to internal than external sources but possible failure almost equally to

these factors – consistent with the self-serving bias hypothesis. Luck was rated as being of relatively minor importance by these students but was still attributed more significance than usually reported with Western subjects. Very similar results were found for a sample of rural Filipino children (Watkins, 1980).

There have been a number of recent studies which have supported the usefulness of Western self-esteem measuring instruments and theories in the Philippines. Thus, Youngblood (1976) and Watkins and Astilla (1980b), using samples of Filipino children, reported moderate internal consistency reliability coefficients and some validity data for the Self-Esteem Scale (Rosenberg, 1965) and Self-Esteem Inventory (Coopersmith, 1967), respectively. As would be expected in a society where great store is placed on the quality of family relationships, social standing, and academic achievement these factors have been found to be significantly related to Filipino self-esteem (Watkins and Astilla, 1979; Youngblood, 1976). These factors resemble the antecedents of self-esteem reported by Coopersmith (1967) in the United States.

Two concepts related to self-esteem are given prominence in accounts of Filipino personality, *amor propio* and *hiya*. The term *amor propio* refers to self-pride and is reflected in sensitivity to criticism (Youngblood, 1978). Visitors to the Philippines have sometimes been surprised to find that the usually courteous and hospitable Filipino people can react angrily to remarks which to Western eyes would seem only mild rebukes. Vigorous actions to defend one's *amor propio* have long been a tradition in Filipino society. Injury to self-esteem remains the cause of many of the violent altercations in Filipino society to this day.

Self-esteem in the Philippines is also closely related to the indigenous notion of shame (*hiya*). Bulatao (1964, p. 428) defines *hiya* as a "painful emotion arising from a relationship with an authority figure or with society,

inhibiting self-assertion in a situation which is perceived as dangerous to one's ego. It is a kind of anxiety, a fear of being left exposed, unprotected, and unaccepted." The concept of *hiya* touches the very core of the ego (Youngblood, 1976) and acts as a potent social control of a Filipino's actions (Angeles, 1977). The term *walanghiya* (without *hiya*) is a terrible insult which most Filipinos would fight against, even with their lives.

Because of the basic insecurity engendered by *hiya* Filipinos tend to be shy, retiring, and lacking in self-confidence. They also tend to brush off compliments for fear of being thought immodest. This also leads to an inability to tolerate negative evaluations from others in everyday situations (Guthrie and Jacobs, 1966). Such experiences are deeply painful to Filipinos and they will go to great lengths to avoid them. Thus school children may run away from school if criticised by their teacher; a teacher may be unwilling to fail a pupil because of fear of reaction to *hiya*; employees resign because they have been reprimanded, etc. Considerable attention is paid to developing socially approved mechanisms for avoiding the dangers arising from slights to self-esteem. Filipinos have built up a system of nonverbal communication, enhanced by euphemistic and indirect expressions and the use of go-betweens, to ensure smooth interpersonal relations (Lynch, 1964).

It would appear then that the Filipino concept of self-esteem involves the internalisation of shame to a degree not present in Western societies: "By the process of learning the Filipino child develops the capacity to experience intense feelings of inferiority, humiliation, and loss of self-esteem" (Guthrie and Jacobs, 1966, p. 160). *Hiya* apparently develops from early childhood mainly through the extensive use of teasing by parents, siblings, and other relatives to which Filipino children are subjected – "one is teased about something about which one is known to be vulnerable, about which

one is believed to be touchy" (Guthrie and Jacobs, 1966, p. 159). Another difference in child-rearing practice between American and Filipino mothers that may be of significance in this regard is that the latter seldom praise or reward their children although bribes are extensively used, as are physical punishment or scolding (Guthrie and Jacobs, 1966). Thus it would appear that Filipino socialisation practices may well lead to internalisation of failure but perhaps not of success.

Given an understanding of the socialisation processes and ensuing typical personality characteristics of Filipinos it would seem reasonable to suggest that the relationship between self-esteem and attribution in the Philippines may well be different from the results of Western studies. Watkins and Astilla (1980c) reported that their high self-esteem subjects were (a) significantly more likely than those of low self-esteem to perceive their possible examination success, but not failure, as due to internal causes and (b) were significantly more likely to attribute possible success more to internal causes than they did possible failure. However, their low self-esteem subjects did not differ significantly in their attributions for success and failure. These authors concluded that rather than supporting self-enhancement or self-consistency theories the data indicate that the low self-esteem group may have failed to internalize success to the same degree as the high self-esteem group. A cross-cultural explanation, of the type discussed above, was tentatively suggested.

This paper presents a conceptual replication of this latter study. The influence of social desirability upon the instruments selected to measure self-esteem and attribution of responsibility was also examined, in order to investigate the possible confounding effect of this response tendency. This possibly contaminating factor has been largely neglected in other studies in this area and would seem to be particularly necessary to investigate in cross-cultural studies.

THE PRESENT STUDY

Subjects

The subjects were 149 male and 126 female fourth (and final) year students attending a major boys' and girls' secondary school in the central Philippines. Average age of the subjects was 15 years.

Instruments

The 26-item general self subscale of the Coopersmith Self-Esteem Inventory (SEI) was chosen to measure self-esteem. Previous research had supported the reliability and validity of the full Coopersmith questionnaire at the same secondary school (Watkins and Astilla, 1980b). On this occasion, coefficient *alpha* was found to be 0.66.

The Crandall, Kotkovsky, and Crandall (1965) Intellectual Achievement Responsibility (IAR) Scale was used as the attribution measure. The IAR scale attempts to assess the readiness to attribute successful or unsuccessful outcomes in a number of everyday childhood performance situations to internal factors (one's ability or effort) rather than to external sources. The 34 forced choice item of the IAR are divided into 17 items where attribution to successful outcomes are sought and 17 items where internal or external explanations of failure in the same situations are examined. Thus the IAR scale can provide a total internality score, an internality score for successful outcomes (I+) and a parallel internality score for failure (I-). Coefficient *alpha* was found to be 0.69 for these subjects.

Social desirability was measured by the Young Children's Social Desirability Scale (Ford and Rubin, 1970) which two Filipino educationalists considered relevant for use with Filipino children.

The questionnaires were administered under supervision by trainee student counsellors during normal class periods. The SEI was used

to assign subjects to high, medium, or low self-esteem groups. One of the problems with many of the earlier studies in this area is that they have simply called the top (bottom) half of scores on some measure of self-esteem as being of high (low) self-esteem. This may have arbitrarily forced many quite self-confident students into the low esteem group whereas the hypotheses being tested were based on an assumption of negative self-evaluations. To try to overcome this problem only students one standard deviation above (below) the group mean were chosen for the high (low) self-esteem groups. Those within one standard deviation of the mean were also included in the design as a medium self-esteem group.

RESULTS

Little evidence was found for the confounding influence of social desirability on

the SEI or IAR scales (correlations of .08 and .06, respectively, being obtained).

The means and standard deviations of the IAR I+ and I- subscales are presented in Table 1 for the high, medium, and low self-esteem children. This data was then subjected to a 2 x 3 (Outcome x Self-Esteem) Analysis of Variance with repeated measures on one factor (Outcome). Because of unequal sample sizes due to the method of selecting the self-esteem groups, the least squares method was adopted (Winer, 1971) and the *alpha* value required for significance was set at a fairly conservative .01. As can be seen in Table 2, a significant main effect for Outcome and a significant interaction were obtained. Internal attributions were more often given for successful than unsuccessful outcomes by all self-esteem groups in accord with self-enhancement theory. However, failures were

Table 1: Means and standard deviations of IAR I+ and I- subscales for high, medium, and low self-esteem groups

Self-esteem	IAR Subscale			
	I+		I-	
	\bar{X}	SD	\bar{X}	SD
High (n = 55)	14.64	1.87	11.83	2.68
Medium (n = 169)	13.66	2.24	12.06	2.30
Low (n = 51)	13.19	2.44	11.39	2.79

Table 2: Analysis of variance for internal attribution of responsibility scores by outcome and self-esteem groups

Source	d.f.	MS	F	p
<i>Between Subjects</i>				
A (self-esteem)	2	23.94	3.12	n.s.
subj. w. groups	272	7.68		
<i>Within Subjects</i>				
B (outcome)	1	483.16	55.17	< 0.01
A x B	2	15.40	4.64	< 0.01
B x subj. w. groups	272	3.32		

still attributed more to internal than external factors by all subject groups. The significant interaction effect was apparently due to differences in internal attributions according to level of self-esteem (consistent with self-consistency theory) for success but not failure situations.

DISCUSSION

Rather than supporting self-enhancement or self-consistency theories these results lend further weight to the data of Watkins and Astilla (1980c) which indicated that low self-esteem Filipinos may have failed to internalise success to the same degree as their high self-esteem peers. However, both groups tended to internalise failure almost to the same extent. These results are consistent with the discussion of Filipino personality and socialisation processes discussed earlier which would certainly indicate the likelihood of results different to those studies conducted in Western societies. Future research is required to examine more fully the possible influence of socialisation processes on the relationship between self-esteem and attribution for success and failure. Perhaps, as Adler (1980) amongst others, has argued it is time that psychologists stopped arguing about which self theory is correct or which motive is the more powerful and started to systematically discover the situational determinants of the relationship between self-esteem and attribution.

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