The Self-Serving Bias in Children

In this study of self-serving bias, 20 male and 16 female second graders completed an academic task with a same-sex partner. Half of the groups consisted of friends and the other half were nonfriends. The children had 3 min to complete a math worksheet and were told their group’s performance would be graded as a whole. Each group received success or failure feedback. Results showed a significant interaction between the type of relationship between the partners and the type of feedback they received. Nonfriends in the failure group were more likely to exhibit the self-serving bias.

Research has shown that people tend to view themselves in a self-serving way. Some people claim to be more intelligent, trustworthy, and physically attractive than others (Sedikides, Campbell, Reeder, & Elliot, 1998). When people attribute their successes to internal causes and their failures to external causes, they are exhibiting the self-serving bias (Friedrich, 1996). For instance, a student may blame the teacher for a bad test grade but will gladly take the credit for a good grade (McAllister, 1996). Evidence shows that people have a need to achieve and maintain a positive view of themselves (Taylor, Neter, & Wayment, 1995). In general, people see themselves as well above average (Story & Dunning, 1998).

The two main explanations for the self-serving bias are cognitive and motivational. “The cognitive explanation emphasizes differential access to information as the leading cause of the self-serving bias” (Sedikides et al., 1998, p. 378). In other words, people manifest the self-serving bias because they limit themselves to the available information, not because they are trying to protect or boost the self (Sedikides et al., 1998, p. 378). Other researchers claim that the main cause of the self-serving bias is motivational because people want to perceive themselves in a favorable manner (Story & Dunning, 1998; Taylor et al., 1995). Story and Dunning also reported that when it comes to task performance, people are more sensitive to the information available to them about their successes.

One focus of research on the self-serving bias is whether people exhibit the self-serving bias when they are with a close friend. Two theories explain the influence of friendship on the self-serving bias: the relationship-as-enabler hypothesis and the relationship-as-bound hypothesis (Sedikides et al., 1998). The relationship-as-enabler hypothesis predicts that friendship gives each individual the freedom to be self-serving. This hypothesis claims that within a close relationship, the fear of consequences that come with being self-serving disappears (Campbell, Sedikides, Reeder, & Elliot, 2000). Characteristics like the “durability and stability of friendship might actually facilitate the expression of the self-serving bias” (Campbell et al., 2000, p. 232). In contrast, the relationship-as-bound hypothesis claims that individuals in a close relationship will refrain from the self-serving bias.
because people include their close friends in their own self-concept (Campbell et al., 2000). Close friends are expected to share the responsibility for success as well as failure (Sedikides et al., 1998). In this case, neither person will show evidence of the self-serving bias.

Campbell et al. (2000) found evidence supporting the relationship-as-bound hypothesis. Half of the participants signed up to report for the experiment with a same-sex friend, and the other half signed up with a list of strangers. The participants completed four single-item 9-point scales to make sure those who reported with a friend were closer than those who reported with a stranger. The researchers presented the participants with the task of brainstorming in dyads. They gave each pair a combined score and randomly assigned them to a success or failure feedback group. Campbell et al. (2000) found a significant interaction, which indicates a relationship-type influence on the self-serving bias. Compared to strangers, friends did not show evidence of the self-serving bias. Despite the fact that Sedikides et al. (1998) relied on induced close relationships and Campbell et al. (2000) used participants who had a close relationship before the experiment, both concluded that friendship plays a crucial role in taming the self-serving bias.

One major limitation of the study of the self-serving bias is that the overwhelming majority of research has involved college students (McAllister, 1996). I wanted to know whether the self-serving bias pertained to children and whether children would show evidence of the relationship-as-enabler or the relationship-as-bound hypothesis. Whitley and Frieze (1985) found in a meta-analysis that children in grades 1-7 did exhibit the self-serving bias (effect size = .56 for success attributions; effect size = .45 for failure attributions). Few studies, however, have used academic tasks as a means of studying the self-serving bias; the majority of studies have focused on experimental rather than naturally occurring academic situations (Whitley & Frieze, 1985). I sought to determine whether an academic task made a difference in whether children exhibited the self-serving bias. Because of similar findings with adults, I predicted that children would show evidence of the relationship-as-bound hypothesis.

Method

Participants

The study included 36 second graders, 20 boys and 16 girls, from four elementary schools in the North Little Rock, AR, school district. Eight students were from each of two schools and 10 students came from each of the other two schools. I used four schools to obtain a variety of second graders. All the participants were volunteers.

Materials

I gave each participant a worksheet of 150 math problems to complete. After consulting an elementary school teacher, I constructed the problems to consist of second-grade-level addition and subtraction. Each participant was asked two questions orally to measure the self-serving bias. Participants responded on a 1–5 scale.

Design and Procedure

The design was a 2 (relationship type: friends or strangers) X 2 (feedback type: success or failure) X 2 (gender: boy or girl) factorial design (Campbell et al., 2000). I used a factorial analysis of variance (ANOVA) for my statistical analysis.

The experiment had three independent variables. The first independent variable was the type of relationship between the two participants in each individual group. I manipulated the type of pairs by putting half of the participants with a randomly selected partner and half with a friend classified as such on the basis of the teacher's report. The second independent variable was the performance feedback. I randomly placed each group into either a success or failure category with an equal number of friends and nonfriends in each group. The third independent variable was gender. I used only same-sex pairs and divided them equally between the success and failure categories. The dependent variable was the self-serving bias.

To prevent any of the participants from learning about the experiment before it was complete, all the students from each school stayed together until the debriefing. I also instructed the children not to say anything about our conversation or the questions to the other children. My assistant monitored the children while I was out of the room.

I used 10 pairs of boys and 8 pairs of girls. I sent out permission slips to be signed by a parent 2 weeks before the experiment. All the children who participated brought back a signed permission slip. The teachers helped pair the students. Half of the groups consisted of friends who voluntarily played together on a consistent basis and half were nonfriends who did not associate with each other unless forced by the teacher.

Partners sat across from each other at a table. I gave each participant a worksheet and explained that they had 3 min to correctly complete as many problems as they could. I gave each pair a group number and told them to write only their group number at the top of the worksheet. I explained that although the partners solved the problems separately, the group evaluation was based on the total number of problems solved between the two. I explained that each group would be evaluated as a whole and that no one person's grade weighed more than the other. After 3 min,
students were instructed to hand their test to my assistant. I took the tests from my assistant and left the room so the students would believe I was grading their work. My assistant entertained the children while I was out of the room.

Before the testing began, I had randomly assigned the groups into two equal groups of failure or success (Sedikides et al., 1998). Assigning these groups created an opportunity for self-serving children to blame others for failure and take the credit for success. If they were in the success group, I told them their group performed better on the worksheet than all the other groups. I told the failure groups that their scores were worse than all the other groups.

I measured the self-serving bias by separating each student from his or her partner and asking two questions: “Who caused your group to perform this way?” and “Who did the better job on the test?” The children used a scale of 1 (my partner) to 5 (me) to respond to the questions (Campbell et al., 2000). I reversed the scores for Question 1, the responsibility question, for the failure groups, because a low number on this question represented the self-serving bias. After the scores for that question were reversed for the failure group, high scores represented a self-serving response. When all the students completed the questions, I debriefed the children by revealing the deception for their performance feedback.

**Results**

I collapsed across gender because there was no significant difference between boys and girls for either question. For Question 1, “Who caused your group to perform this way?” results from the factorial ANOVA showed no effect for the feedback, $F(1, 36) = .38, p = .54$. The type of relationship was significant, $F(1, 36) = 4.97, p = .03$. This main effect, however, was qualified by a significant feedback by relationship interaction, $F(1, 36) = 5.87, p = .02$. The interaction appears in Figure 1. Nonfriends in the failure groups were most likely to give a self-serving response.

For Question 2, “Who did the better job on the test?” results from the factorial ANOVA showed no effect for the feedback, $F(1, 36) = .01, p = .92$. The type of relationship was significant, $F(1, 36) = 4.79, p = .04$. This main effect was qualified by a marginally significant feedback by relationship interaction, $F(1, 36) = 3.33, p = .08$. The interaction appears in Figure 2. Nonfriends in the failure group were more likely to give a self-serving response. Friends in the failure group were more likely to give a non-self-serving response.

**Discussion**

In this study I sought to determine whether second graders exhibited the self-serving bias during an academic task. Previous research has shown that children do exhibit the self-serving bias; the present data produced similar results (Whitley & Frieze, 1985). Children paired with a nonfriend and placed in the failure group were more likely to exhibit the self-serving bias than children who were also in the failure group but worked with a friend. When asked who did the better job, nonfriends in the failure group were more likely...
to give a self-serving response by taking credit. In contrast, children paired with a friend were more likely to give their friend credit for doing the better job.

My data are also consistent with previous research supporting the relationship-as-bound hypothesis (Campbell et al., 2000). Friends did not exhibit the self-serving bias. In fact, when it came to crediting someone for the better job, friends gave the praise to their friend. These data coincide with the hypothesis that friends become a part of our self-concept (Campbell et al., 2000). Our friends and how others view them is a reflection of our self.

These results have potential for application in classroom settings. Teachers should be aware of the self-serving bias and watch for it when a group experiences failure. They may need to appease tension after a group fails by providing ways for its members to mend relationships.

My research and previous research have shown that children in grades 1–7 do exhibit the self-serving bias. The question of the development of the bias is left unanswered. Although Whitley and Frieze (1985) found no significant difference between grade levels, their study did not extend to prekindergarten and kindergarten children. An extension of this research would be to test children younger than the first grade to determine whether they exhibit the self-serving bias. Further research would help determine when children are first able to make causal attributions.

**References**


