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ABSTRACT

This study examines certain differences in attribution of causation regarding a child's performance between parents and teachers. The study attempts to examine the process through which teachers' and parents' biases regarding a child are developed and the group differences between the biases. Nine upper-elementary grade teachers assigned equal numbers of children from their own classrooms to three performance categories: Low Performance, Moderate Performance, and High Performance. A child's teacher and his or her parent (usually mother) then completed structured and open-ended questions regarding the reasons why the child performed as he or she did. Results showed that while teachers clearly distinguished differences in causative factors in the different performance conditions, parents of children in different conditions did not significantly differ in their ratings on each factor. Teaching was rated as more important by parents in all three conditions than by teachers. (Author/WSK)

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Teacher's and Parent's Attribution of Causality for Children's Performance

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This study examines certain differences in attribution of causation regarding a child's performance between parents and teachers. Parent-teacher relationships and attitudes remain in area about which little scientific investigation is centered. Yet, parent's attitudes toward educational establishment may affect children's motivational level and, thus, the child's performance. The literature also suggests that teacher's attitudes toward and expectations about a child may affect his academic performance and his long-range intellectual potential (Rosenthal and Jacobson, 1966). Other studies have shown that teachers accept credit for a child's successful performance, but may avoid blame for a child's failures (Beckman, 1970, Johnson, Feigenbaum and Weiby, 1964). However, under certain conditions teacher's may be likely to show anti-defensive attributions, i.e., to attribute both the child's failure and success to themselves (Beckman, In press).

While many studies have examined the process by which teachers attribute causality for a child's performance, studies of parent's attributions regarding their own children are conspicuously absent. If it is indeed true that teachers' and parents' perception and biases regarding a child can affect a child's future performance, then it is necessary to examine the process through which such biases are developed and the differences between teachers' and parents' biases.

The social-psychological position upon which this study is based (Heider, 1958) assumes that when man perceives the occurrence of an event within his lifespace, he searches for the causal locus of that event. He may attribute the event internally to self or externally to the environment (e.g., the teacher may attribute the child's performance internally to his/her own teaching or externally to the child or situational demands). In either case, casual attribution is greatly influenced by a force toward consistency among a person's many cognitions and beliefs. Although veridical interpretation of causal relationships usually helps adaptation and survival in the environment, the force toward consistency among a persons many beliefs and attitudes can create situations in which misattribution of the cause of a new event is adaptive for the individual. Biased attribution is sometimes consonant with a person's perception of himself and his world.

It was hypothesized that biases, errors and illusions is attributional processes may sometimes occur and that causal attribution is influenced by the magnitude and direction of the affective consequences of an event. Just as forces toward self-protective and self-enhancing attribution exist in the classrooms, so too do such forces exist in the home. Just as teachers may have certain characteristic ego-protective modes of attribution, so too may parents have certain attributional biases.

In general, one would expect parents and teachers to have dissimilar biases in attribution. If a child is performing poorly and situational factors are minimal, it will be difficult to displace blame onto situational or background factors. Here, the teacher might tend to blame Johnny or his family for failure. On the other hand, the parent will not consciously want to admit

that the child has failed. Therefore, if situational factors, (e.g., he was ill) cannot be blamed for the child's failure, the parent may see the teacher and her poor instruction as responsible. The characteristic ego-protective modes of attribution of both teachers and parents may provide an explanation of sources of conflict between parent and teachers.

Methodology

Subjects: Fourty-nine parents and nine teachers of 4th, 5th, and 6th grade upper elementary students participated in the study. Parents were divided into three groups: parents with children above average in academic performance (N = 22), parents with children average in academic performance (N = 16), and parents with children below average in academic performance (N = 11). The teacher group was composed of all nine upper-elementary teachers from one elementary school in a moderately sized city school district in southern California. The school itself was composed mainly of children of lower middle class and some working class homes. Approximately 40 percent of the students were from minority group families (i.e. Mexican American or Black). The school district's grading systems required teacher's to rate children separately on progress (i.e., improvement in achievement), performance in relation to grade level and effort. Bi-yearly parent-teacher conferences were stressed; they were held at the end of the first and third quarters while report cards were issued at the close of the second and fourth quarters.

Procedures: Children within each class were divided into average, above average and below average achievers by their respective teachers. Specifically teachers were asked to list the children in their classes who fell into the

following extreme groups in performance (achievement) level: top 10 percent of students, middle 10 percent of students, lowest 10 percent of students. They were asked to include name of students, even if they believed that the parents would be unwilling to participate in the study. Each teacher could list up to four children in each performance category.

An attempt then was made to pair each teacher with three parents of children from each of the achievement groups. A note from the school principal was sent to all parents falling into each performance category (9 in each classroom, 3 in each achievement category) requesting their participation in the study. Parents were told that the project's aim was to give educators a better understanding of parent-teacher relationships in the hope that methods could be developed which would create better interpersonal relationships and rapport between parents and teachers. Parents were asked to sign a consent form indicating their willingness (or unwillingness) to participate in the study. All of the 81 parents contacted returned the forms. However, 21 of the parents completing the forms refused to participate in the study. Thus, the total refusal rate of parents equalled approximately 25 percent. However, parents of children in the low achievement category were more likely to refuse to participate than were parents with children in the two higher performance categories. Thus not only was the final number of parents in each of the three categories unequal, but also more parents of low performers were eliminated from the final data analysis than parents of high performers.

All parents agreeing to participate in the study were mailed the research questionnaire along with a letter asking them to return it in a preaddressed

stamped envelope before their next conference with the teacher. Teacher questionnaires were placed in teachers' mail boxes at the school and their return to the school administrative office was requested. Teachers were asked to complete questionnaires on all children whose parents had agreed to participate in the study. All teachers completed the 5-9 questionnaires given to them: 49of the 60 parents agreeing to parrticipate completed their questionnaires and returned them. In addition to the questionnaires, data were collected from observation and coding of the parent-teacher conferences and examination of the students' cumulative records. However, only the questionnaire data are reported in the present paper.

Questionnaires: Parent and teacher questionnaires contained parallel questions regarding perceptions of causality. Subjects were encouraged to answer all questions even if unsure of his or her answer. Both parent and teacher questionnaires asked structured questions regarding the importance of a number of factors in determining the child's overall school performance and performance in specific subjects (reading and mathematics) the last report card period and open-ended questions regarding why the child performed the way that he or she did and received the grades that he or she did. The list of factors on the questions included child's ability, child's motivation, teacher's teaching, mother's influence, father's influence, peer influence and other reasons (such as child's illness or problems in the family). Each of these factors was rated on a five-point scale ranging from "Of No Importance" to "Very Important".

Results

Of the 60 parents agreeing to participate in the study, 49 actually returned the questionnaires. Parents of low-performing children were

less likely to agree to participate or to return the questionnaires as is evidenced by only half as many usuable questionnaires from parents of low (performance) children as from parents of high (performance)children, ($X^2 = 4.47$, $p < .05$). This difference may suggest that parents of low achievers either are not as interested in their child's school activities or are more threatened by the situation than are parents of high-achievers. Although parents were asked to indicate which one completed the questionnaire, the form did not specify which parent should complete it. However, in no case did the father complete the questionnaire alone. In approximately 20 percent of the cases parents indicated that they each participated in completion of the questionnaire.

Fifty-seven of the 60 teacher questionnaires returned contained usable data. Thus, for some children data was available from teachers only and for some children data was available only from parents. Also, teachers rated from 4-9 students each, while each parent rated only his or her own child. Unfortunately in the analysis it was impossible to control for the variance due to the various teacher styles in answering the questionnaires because in a few cases there was no parent data for a particular performance category in a particular classroom (i.e., teacher). However, since teachers did complete approximately equal numbers of questionnaires in each performance category, differences among teachers should not systematically bias the data obtained.

Because of the small and unequal N's involved, data were analyzed two ways. When parents and teachers were compared on specific categories only cases for which both parent and teacher questionnaires were available were included. However, when only teacher's (or only parents') responses in different categories were compared, means were computed in two ways: 1) only cases where parent (or teacher) data were available and 2) all cases. Since

differences between these means were minimal, all teacher cases (or all parent cases) were used in computation of differences.

Answers to open-ended questions regarding why the child performed as he or she did and received the grades he or she did were coded into the following main categories: a) child's ability, b) child's motivation, c) child's attention, d) child's attitude, e) child's participation, f) teacher characteristics, g) parent characteristics, and h) difficulty of the situation. Chi squares revealed that the only significant differences between parents and teachers were that in all three performance conditions, particularly the moderate and high conditions, parents were more likely than teachers to mention teaching as a factor which influenced the child's performance ($X^2 = 6.38$, $p < .02$). Differences between performance conditions for parents (and for teachers) were not significant.

Analysis of data from the structured questions revealed that while teachers distinguished between factors affecting performance in the different achievement conditions parents in the three performance conditions in no case significantly differentiated between casual factors. Ability was rated as a more important causal factor by teachers for the high achievement children ($t = 2.42$, $p < .05$) than for the low achievement children. Own teaching was considered more important in determining the high achieving children's performance than in determining the low achieving children's performance ($t = 5.67$, $p < .01$). Mother's influence was rated by teachers as a less significant factor affecting performance for low achievement children than for high achievement children ($t = 3.14$, $p < .01$) or moderate achievement children ($t = 2.07$, $p < .05$). Father's influence was rated less important by teachers of low performance children than for the moderate performance

($t = 2.13$, $p < .05$) or high performance children ($t = 2.93$, $p < .01$).

The same trend applied for other children's (peers) influence (Low vs. High Performance $t = 4.23$, $p < .01$; Low vs. Moderate Performance, $t = 2.36$, $p < .05$). Other reasons (a category which included poor health of the child or parent or other severe family problems) was considered by teachers to be much more likely to affect the low achieving children's performance than the high achievement children's performance ($t = 3.05$, $p < .01$) or the moderately achieving children's performance ($t = 3.21$, $p < .01$). Thus, the pattern which emerges for teachers is for most causal factors to be rated as more important in determining high achieving and average achieving children's performance than in determining the low achieving children's performance.

When parent and teacher scores are compared for only those cases where data on both is available, the only significant difference is a tendency for parents with children in two of the three performance conditions to rate teaching as a more important causative factor in determining performance than do teachers themselves (Low achievement $t = 4.59$, $p < .01$; Moderate achievement $t = 4.04$, $p < .01$; High achievement, $t = 1.43$, $p < .10$). It should be noted that the differences in mean scores between parents and teachers are greatest for the low performance children (3.2 for parents and 1.8 for teachers vs. 3.3 for parents and 2.9 for teachers for high performers) which may be an indication of an ego-defensive bias on the part of teachers.

Discussion

Parents with children in different performance categories appear not to differ in attribution of causality, while teachers differentially attribute importance to various causal factors for the different performance level

children. Generally, causal factors (e.g., child's ability, teaching) were rated by teachers as more important in determining high or moderate performance than in determining low performance. The striking exception to this trend is "Other Reasons" (e.g., health). Here low achieving children's performance is more greatly influenced by such factors than the performance of the moderate or high achieving children. These results may indicate, as in the previous Beckman study, (1970), that teachers tend to displace blame for the low performance of a child onto situational factors or the external environment rather than placing responsibility upon a person, be it the teacher herself, the child or the parent. Teachers' tendency to rate teaching as less important than do parents of low achievement children may be another indication of this ego-protective trend.

It must be remembered that teachers rated children in all performance conditions while parents rated only one child in one performance category. The clear-cut differences among teacher ratings for the different achievement levels may be a function of the large number of children that they rate across achievement levels, i.e., if each teacher rated only one child in one achievement level, teacher ratings in different achievement levels might not differ significantly. Only further research that more adequately compares parents' and teachers' attributions will tell if these conclusions are generally upheld.

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TABLE 1

Mean Ratings of Importance of Factors Influencing Child's Performance (Structured Questions)

	Parents' Ratings			Teachers' Ratings		
	Performance Level			Performance Level		
	Low	Mod.	High	Low	Mod.	High
Child's Ability	2.73	3.31	3.27	2.94	3.05	3.60
Child's Motivation	3.09	3.31	3.55	3.06	3.05	3.50
Teaching	3.27	3.44	3.36	1.73	2.37	2.86
Mother's Influence	2.55	2.69	2.62	1.86	2.59	3.00
Father's Influence	2.40	2.81	2.55	1.57	2.47	2.81
Peer Influence	2.30	1.75	1.90	1.00	2.00	2.45
Other Reasons	1.00	1.00	1.35	2.45	0.20	0.38

TABLE 2

Proportion of Parents and Teachers Giving Reasons for Child's Performance (Open-ended Questions)

	Parents			Teachers		
	Performance Level			Performance Level		
	Low	Mod.	High	Low	Mod.	High
Child's Ability	.100	.133	.318	.500	.421	.145
Child's Motivation	.500	.733	.545	.375	.526	.714
All Child Reasons	.900	.933	.909	1.000	1.000	1.000
Teacher	.100	.333	.318	.000	.000	.000
Parents	.100	.133	.273	.125	.000	.238
Skill Difficulties	.400	.000	.045	.313	.000	.000
Situational Factors	.000	.000	.045	.188	.158	.095