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Self-serving bias

Description of the bias:

The self-serving bias is part of the social biases. It occurs when people attribute their successes to internal or personal factors but attribute their failures to situational or external factors beyond their control. The self-serving bias can be seen in the common human tendency to take credit for success (self-enhancing bias) but to deny responsibility for failure (self-protective bias).

Examples:

A student who gets a good grade on an exam might say, "I got an A because I am intelligent and I studied hard!" whereas a student who does poorly on an exam might say, "The teacher gave me an F because he does not like me!" If people pass their driving test on the first try, they might say that this was due to the fact that they studied hard and are a good driver. If they fail the test, they might blame the examiner, the car, or the weather, rather than admitting that they did not demonstrate safe and effective driving skills.

The "Calvin and Hobbes" example

Calvin attributes his failure not to his poor throwing ability, but to external factors beyond his control: miserable luck, a cross breeze.



Another aspect:

Another aspect of the self serving bias is the tendency for people to interpret unclear information in a way which is favorable to their interests. For example, if an instructor for a course they are taking says that "only two people got As on the final," they may assume that they are one of these persons.

Explanations for the occurrence of the bias:

Three reasons have been proposed to explain the occurrence of self-serving bias. The first explanation is motivational: people are motivated to protect their self-esteem, so create explanations that make them feel better. The second of explanation focuses on making impressions on others. The third explanation focuses on the mechanisms of memory: internal reasons for success might be more memorable than external reasons for failure.

Dangers:

By focusing on success only, people shortchange themselves of learning experiences from their failures.

Sources:

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