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The self-serving bias is a cognitive bias where individuals attribute their successes to internal factors like talent or effort, while blaming external factors like luck or other people for their failures. This bias serves to maintain self-esteem and protect ones ego. The self-serving bias suggests that no one wants to admit to being incompetent and is likely to blame failures on something external to ourselves. This protects our self-esteem. However, we are happy to take credit for our success. We rely on this bias to protect and boost our self-esteem. Our minds dont want to take responsibility for negative or failed outcomes for fear of hurting our confidence. Although this bias is incredibly common in many areas of our lives, from the classroom to sports to the workplace, we can work to overcome it by recognizing its existence and practicing self-compassion. Picture yourself sitting in a classroom, anxiously awaiting the results of your most recent math exam. When the teacher finally hands you your graded test, you turn it over only to see a giant C minus written in thick red ink. While still in disbelief, your mind immediately begins to think of all possible explanations for this outcome. The exam questions were too hard, the teacher didnt teach the topics well enough, the answers were graded unfairly, and the list goes on. Imagine that when you turned over, a giant A plus was written instead. This time, with a huge grin, you praise yourself for how hard you studied, for your strong understanding of the material, for your smartness, and the list goes on. This is an example of what is called the self-serving bias in psychology. The self-serving bias refers to the tendency to attribute internal, personal factors to positive outcomes but external, situational factors to negative outcomes. As you may know, our minds are biased to act, judge, and see the world in such a way. These cognitive biases are the product of human nature, the people we interact with, and an attempt to simplify the millions of bits of information the brain receives each second. These factors also often cause specific errors in thinking that influence our decisions and judgments. This type of bias is called cognitive bias and occurs without us even realizing it (Kahneman & Tversky, 1972). These biases arise out of problems with memory, attention, and other mental mistakes, and while they can often be dangerous, cognitive biases help you make sense of the world, reach decisions, and make judgments with relatively quick speed. A common phenomenon in psychology is the fundamental attribution error, also referred to as the correspondence bias. The fundamental attribution error is the tendency of people to overemphasize personal characteristics and ignore situational factors when judging others behavior (Ross, 1977). For example, if an individual cuts in front of you on the street, you might think they did this because they are a bad person and not consider external alternatives such as being late to work and in a rush. But what happens if you are the actor? In other words, what if you were the one who cut in front of the pedestrian? Would you then make the same argument that you are a bad person? According to the actor-observer bias, we tend to explain other peoples behavior in terms of internal factors while explaining our own behavior on the basis of external factors (Jones & Nisbett, 1971). Because we know ourselves better than anyone else, we can judge when our actions are the result of something external to who we are, but our minds default to assuming another persons actions are a result of who they are. But that still isnt the complete picture. While it is true that we often attribute personal or dispositional characteristics to explain other peoples behavior while attributing situational factors when making sense of our own behavior, this isnt always the case. Whether or not the specific outcome of our behavior is good or bad will actually determine whether we make an internal or external attribution. This is the self-serving bias (Heider, 1982). As illustrated in the example above, a failed or negative outcome (such as performing poorly on a test) causes us to make external attributions, whereas a successful or positive outcome (such as acing a test) will result in us making internal attributions. Over the past few decades, several empirical studies have illuminated the sectors, populations, cultures, and levels of organization in which self-serving bias is more or less common. Self-serving bias is particularly prevalent in sports. If youve ever played or watched a sport, youve probably blamed the referees bad call or the other team cheating when you lost a game but praised your sheer talent and mental toughness when you won. In sports, an individuals performance (both your own and your opponents) is so clearly linked to a specific outcome that it is easy for the self-serving bias to seep in. And because the outcome and players are so apparent, self-serving bias is especially common in individual sports, where the sole winner is even more defined. Dating back to 1987, a study conducted by Stephen Zaccaro and colleagues collected 549 statements from athletes who played both individual (e.g., tennis and golf) and team sports (e.g., baseball, football, and basketball) and found that individual sports athletes were significantly more likely to make self-serving attributions about their performance (Zaccaro et al., 1987). In conjunction with the self-esteem theory for this form of bias, the researchers concluded that individual sports athletes performance had a more significant impact on their self-esteem, so they relied more on the self-serving bias to increase their confidence. Another empirical analysis that investigated the self-serving bias in Division I wrestlers further supports the prevalence of this bias among athletes (De Michele et al., 1998). The wrestlers were asked to self-report on their performance during preseason matches and supplied the results of these matches. The researchers found that wrestlers who won were more likely to attribute their success to internal factors than those who lost. And in 2020, a comprehensive meta-analysis that looked at 69 studies and 10,515 total athletes demonstrated that those who play sports have a tendency to attribute success to dispositional factors and failure to external factors (Allen et al., 2020). From the hiring phase to the firing phase to everything in between, self-serving bias is just as common in the workplace as it is in the sports sector. People who are hired for a position often attribute this decision to personal factors, such as an exceptional resume or other strong qualifications, but are quick to point to external factors, such as a short-sighted hiring manager, when they are not given the position. And in the office setting itself, self-serving bias can run rampant in the event of any workplace incident: the victim is likely to blame external factors, while the coworkers and management are more likely to see the accident as a result of the victims actions. In situations like these, the self-serving bias proves to be an obstacle to productivity by blocking the ability to evaluate a situation fairly and take responsibility for any shortcomings. This can also hurt professional relationships as a result. And when these relationships are tarnished, self-serving bias increases. Specifically, a 2007 study conducted by Joseph Walther and Natalya Bazarova found that the more distant the relationship between employees and their colleagues was, the more easily co-workers blamed each other for workplace failures. But this form of bias can also occur when workplace successes arise, whether it be a promotion or a presentation that went well. The employee is likely to take full responsibility for these outcomes and neglect the people and circumstances that helped them earn their success. Self-serving bias is even visible when an employee is terminated: people are quick to attribute external factors to the decision to lay them off (Furnham, 1982). Regardless of the job application stage, type of work, or an individuals title, self-serving bias is incredibly pervasive in the workplace. Sports and the workplace are just two areas where we can identify this form of bias. Consumer decisions, interpersonal relationships, and other areas of life are also affected by self-serving bias, and certain populations are affected more than others. For example, research has shown that individuals with depression experience self-serving bias to a much lesser degree. A 2004 meta-analysis analyzed 266 studies that surveyed people from different age groups, diverse regions, and various forms of psychopathology (Mezulis et al., 2004). The researchers found that the presence of the bias was smallest among those who were clinically diagnosed with depression. They posited that this effect might be due to the fact that these individuals already have lower-than-average levels of self-esteem, so they are more likely to attribute negative events to something they did. Relating back to the hypothesis that the self-serving bias is tied to how closely an outcome aligns with our expectations, a person with depression might also expect more negative outcomes, and so when those do occur, they take responsibility for them. The same study also revealed that Asian samples displayed significantly smaller biases than U.S. or Western samples. This finding highlights the cross-cultural differences of the self-serving bias: it is much more prominent in individualistic than collectivist cultures. This may be because, in individualistic societies, there is a larger focus on individual goals and identity, which increases the need for people to protect themselves and increase their personal self-esteem levels. Finally, research has also indicated that self-serving bias occurs on a national scale. That is, instead of an individual attributing personal factors to their own successes and external factors to their failures, groups often attribute factors unique to their country when successes arise and factors related to other countries when they run into failures. A common example of this nationalistic self-serving bias is climate change. A 2011 study conducted out of Carnegie Mellon University and the University of Zurich investigated citizens perceptions on which country should lower its greenhouse gas emissions (Kriess et al., 2011). The team administered surveys to college students in both the U.S. and China and found that they all held nationalistic self-serving biases regarding the economic burdens that result from reducing these emissions, demonstrating the challenges of making international agreements. The researchers note that with proper intervention, these biases can be mitigated to stimulate environmental policy legislation worldwide. During the 1960s, when psychologists began to investigate the fundamental attribution error. An Austrian psychologist named Fritz Heider found that in certain ambiguous situations (situations in which the reason for the outcome is unknown), people tend to make attributions based on their need to maintain a higher self-esteem level (Heider, 1982). To many psychologists, a need for increased self-esteem is the driving force for the presence of this bias. We default to taking responsibility for positive outcomes to preserve our self-esteem and are quick to divert the blame for negative outcomes to protect ourselves. Having these high levels of self-esteem allows us to feel confident and secure and have positive relationships with others as a result. Additionally, when you have high self-esteem, youre more open to learning and feedback. Thus, we subconsciously rely on this self-serving bias as a way of maintaining our self-esteem. Although the linkage between self-esteem and self-serving bias is a leading theory, psychologists have identified several other reasons for why this bias is so prevalent among individuals. As this phenomenon was gaining traction in the 60s and 70s, two prominent psychologists, Dale Miller and Michael Ross, pushed back on the self-esteem explanation and argued that self-serving bias is instead tied to how closely reality aligns with an individuals expectations. In other words, if the outcome of an event is consistent with a persons expectation, then they will attribute internal factors to the outcome (Miller & Ross, 1975). But if the outcome is unexpected, then they will make external attributions and blame their surroundings. Another possible explanation is that self-serving bias is a result of natural optimism (Self-serving bias biases & heuristics, 2021). This theory holds that because humans are inherently optimistic, negative outcomes come as a surprise, and so when these outcomes do occur, we are more likely to attribute these results to external factors as opposed to internal ones. This helps further explain Miller and Ross theory because humans are naturally optimistic, we expect positive and successful outcomes, so when they dont occur, we assume it is a result of situational factors alone. These leading theories help illustrate why we might regularly fall victim to self-serving bias. And although the root cause is still debated, there is no doubt that this form of bias is incredibly prevalent. Just as the researchers in Zurich and at Carnegie Mellon alluded to, overcoming self-serving bias is not futile. And the first step is something you are doing right now: awareness! Like most cognitive biases, bringing something from the unconscious mind to the conscious mind is the first step to mitigating the bias. And recognizing that biases grow out of our minds tendency to think quickly and make snap judgments and decisions, it is important to try to slow down your thinking taking all relevant factors into consideration and trying to avoid making rash decisions or statements. The self-serving bias is unique in that it is closely related to our self-esteem. When we rely on this bias to help elevate our sense of self-worth, it makes self-improvement difficult because we are less likely to learn from our mistakes and accept any negative feedback. But because knowing how to admit when you are in the wrong or are responsible for a negative outcome is paramount to growth, its important to challenge the self-serving bias and learn how to be better at taking criticism. An important way to do this is by practicing self-compassion allowing yourself to be imperfect and still treating yourself with unconditional kindness when you fall short of your own expectations (Neff, 2003). You can practice self-compassion through mindfulness, therapy, and even on your own. These are just a few ways to help combat self-serving bias. The bottom line is that although this bias is inherent in who we are as humans, we can still work towards overcoming this thinking pattern and, at the end of the day, recognize that it is okay to make mistakes. Which of the following is an example of a self-serving bias? John believes he got lost on his way home because of unclear road signs rather than admitting he is bad at directions. Mary credits her failure in the competition to her lack of practice, not external factors. Jack believes his success in the stock market is purely due to his market understanding but attributes any losses to market volatility. Sally accepts that her delay is due to her poor time management, not the traffic on the road. David attributes his promotion to his networking skills, but he blames office politics when he doesnt get a raise. Emily believes her win in chess was due to her lack of studying, not the difficulty level of the exam. (Answer: Not self-serving bias) Lisa thinks her successful painting was due to her talent, but she blames the art market when her next painting doesnt sell. Mike admits that not getting the job was due to his lack of experience, not the interviewers bias. Sarah believes she won the lottery because of her lucky numbers, but when she doesnt win, she thinks the lottery is fixed. Answers: Self-serving bias is seen in examples 1, 3, 5, 6, 8, and 10, where individuals credit their successes to their own abilities or qualities but attribute their failures to external factors. In contrast, examples 2, 4, 7, and 9 are not instances of self-serving bias, as individuals attribute their failures to their own shortcomings rather than blaming external circumstances. Allen, M. S., Robson, D. A., Martin, L. J., & Laborde, S. (2020). 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If youve ever played or watched a sport, youve probably blamed the referees bad call or the other team cheating when you lost a game but praised your sheer talent and mental toughness when you won. In sports, an individuals performance (both your own and your opponents) is so clearly linked to a specific outcome that it is easy for the self-serving bias to seep in. And because the outcome and players are so apparent, self-serving bias is especially common in individual sports, where the sole winner is even more defined. Dating back to 1987, a study conducted by Stephen Zaccaro and colleagues collected 549 statements from athletes who played both individual (e.g., tennis and golf) and team sports (e.g., baseball, football, and basketball) and found that individual sports athletes were significantly more likely to make self-serving attributions about their performance (Zaccaro et al., 1987). 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Relating back to the hypothesis that the self-serving bias is tied to how closely an outcome aligns with our expectations, a person with depression might also expect more negative outcomes, and so when those do occur, they take responsibility for them. The same study also revealed that Asian samples displayed significantly smaller biases than U.S. or Western samples. This finding highlights the cross-cultural differences of the self-serving bias: it is much more prominent in individualistic than collectivist cultures. This may be because, in individualistic societies, there is a larger focus on individual goals and identity, which increases the need for people to protect themselves and increase their personal self-esteem levels. Finally, research has also indicated that self-serving bias occurs on a national scale. That is, instead of an individual attributing personal factors to their own successes and external factors to their failures, groups often attribute factors unique to their country when successes arise and factors related to other countries when they run into failures. A common example of this nationalistic self-serving bias is climate change. A 2011 study conducted out of Carnegie Mellon University and the University of Zurich investigated citizens perceptions on which country should lower its greenhouse gas emissions (Kriess et al., 2011). The team administered surveys to college students in both the U.S. and China and found that they all held nationalistic self-serving biases regarding the economic burdens that result from reducing these emissions, demonstrating the challenges of making international agreements. The researchers note that with proper intervention, these biases can be mitigated to stimulate environmental policy legislation worldwide. 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Although the linkage between self-esteem and self-serving bias is a leading theory, psychologists have identified several other reasons for why this bias is so prevalent among individuals. As this phenomenon was gaining traction in the 60s and 70s, two prominent psychologists, Dale Miller and Michael Ross, pushed back on the self-esteem explanation and argued that self-serving bias is instead tied to how closely reality aligns with an individuals expectations. In other words, if the outcome of an event is consistent with a persons expectation, then they will attribute internal factors to the outcome (Miller & Ross, 1975). But if the outcome is unexpected, then they will make external attributions and blame their surroundings. Another possible explanation is that self-serving bias is a result of natural optimism (Self-serving bias biases & heuristics, 2021). This theory holds that because humans are inherently optimistic, negative outcomes come as a surprise, and so when these outcomes do occur, we are more likely to attribute these results to external factors as opposed to internal ones. This helps further explain Miller and Ross theory because humans are naturally optimistic, we expect positive and successful outcomes, so when they dont occur, we assume it is a result of situational factors alone. These leading theories help illustrate why we might regularly fall victim to self-serving bias. And although the root cause is still debated, there is no doubt that this form of bias is incredibly prevalent. Just as the researchers in Zurich and at Carnegie Mellon alluded to, overcoming self-serving bias is not futile. And the first step is something you are doing right now: awareness! Like most cognitive biases, bringing something from the unconscious mind to the conscious mind is the first step to mitigating the bias. And recognizing that biases grow out of our minds tendency to think quickly and make snap judgments and decisions, it is important to try to slow down your thinking taking all relevant factors into consideration and trying to avoid making rash decisions or statements. The self-serving bias is unique in that it is closely related to our self-esteem. When we rely on this bias to help elevate our sense of self-worth, it makes self-improvement difficult because we are less likely to learn from our mistakes and accept any negative feedback. But because knowing how to admit when you are in the wrong or are responsible for a negative outcome is paramount to growth, its important to challenge the self-serving bias and learn how to be better at taking criticism. An important way to do this is by practicing self-compassion allowing yourself to be imperfect and still treating yourself with unconditional kindness when you fall short of your own expectations (Neff, 2003). You can practice self-compassion through mindfulness, therapy, and even on your own. These are just a few ways to help combat self-serving bias. The bottom line is that although this bias is inherent in who we are as humans, we can still work towards overcoming this thinking pattern and, at the end of the day, recognize that it is okay to make mistakes. Which of the following is an example of a self-serving bias? John believes he got lost on his way home because of unclear road signs rather than admitting he is bad at directions. Mary credits her failure in the competition to her lack of practice, not external factors. Jack believes his success in the stock market is purely due to his market understanding but attributes any losses to market volatility. Sally accepts that her delay is due to her poor time management, not the traffic on the road. David attributes his promotion to his networking skills, but he blames office politics when he doesnt get a raise. Emily believes her win in chess was due to her lack of studying, not the difficulty level of the exam. (Answer: Not self-serving bias) Lisa thinks her successful painting was due to her talent, but she blames the art market when her next painting doesnt sell. Mike admits that not getting the job was due to his lack of experience, not the interviewers bias. Sarah believes she won the lottery because of her lucky numbers, but when she doesnt win, she thinks the lottery is fixed. Answers: Self-serving bias is seen in examples 1, 3, 5, 6, 8, and 10, where individuals credit their successes to their own abilities or qualities but attribute their failures to external factors. In contrast, examples 2, 4, 7, and 9 are not instances of self-serving bias, as individuals attribute their failures to their own shortcomings rather than blaming external circumstances. Allen, M. S., Robson, D. A., Martin, L. J., & Laborde, S. (2020). 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Misattribution in virtual groups: The effects of member distribution on self-serving bias and partner blame. *Human Communication Research*, 33(1), 1-26. Zaccaro, S. J., Peterson, C., & Walker, S. (1987). Self-serving attributions for individual and group performance. *Social Psychology Quarterly*, 257-263. The self-attribution bias is a cognitive bias that occurs when individuals attribute their successes to their own abilities, skills, or efforts, while attributing their failures or negative outcomes to external factors or bad luck. Essentially, people tend to take credit for their successes but avoid taking responsibility for their failures. Explanations: The self-attribution bias is related to self-preservation and the desire to maintain a positive self-image. People often want to see themselves as competent and successful, leading them to attribute positive outcomes to their own qualities and negative outcomes to external circumstances. Examples: Success in Sports: A person might attribute their victory in a sports competition to their hard work and skill, but blame a loss on the weather or an unfair referee. Business Achievement: An entrepreneur may credit their business success to their innovation and decision-making but blame economic downturns for financial setbacks. Academic Performance: A student might believe their good grades are the result of their intelligence and diligence, while attributing poor grades to a difficult teacher. Solenous: Honest Self-Reflection: Encourage honest self-reflection to assess the role of both internal and external factors in successes and failures. Accountability: Accept responsibility for actions and decisions, whether they lead to success or failure, and use setbacks as opportunities for growth. Attribution Reversal: Practice attribution reversal by considering how others might perceive your successes and failures from an external perspective. Feedback and Perspectiveness: Seek feedback and input from others to gain a more objective view of the factors contributing to outcomes. Addressing the self-attribution bias involves recognizing the natural tendency to attribute success to internal factors and failure to external factors. By embracing accountability and honest self-reflection, individuals can achieve a more balanced and accurate assessment of their achievements and setbacks.

Self attribution bias example. What is self serving attribution bias. What is the attribution bias. Self attribution. What is the fundamental attribution error and self serving bias. Self attribution theory. What is a simplified definition of the self attribution bias. Self serving bias attribution theory.