Explaining Teacher Explanations of Pupil Performance:  
A Self-Presentation Interpretation

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Professional teachers often make counterdefensive attributions for pupil performance—they tend to assume responsibility for student failure and to give the student credit for success. This study examines the possibility that teachers' counterdefensive attributions are self-presentations designed to establish favorable social identities. The study simulates an experiment by Ross et al. (1974) in which teachers were led to believe that they had been successful or unsuccessful in teaching a lesson to a pupil. Simulation observers were assigned to one of ten conditions in a 2 × 5 experiment. Observers learned that a particular teacher either failed or succeeded and offered either no explanation or one of four explanations that varied from highly or moderately defensive to moderately or highly counterdefensive. The moderately counterdefensive attributions corresponded to the mean attributions given by teachers in the Ross et al. study. Consistent with the prediction of the self-presentation analysis, observers rated the moderately counterdefensive teacher significantly more positively than the moderately or highly defensive teacher on traits relevant to professional competence as well as concern for others and overall likability.

Social psychologists have long maintained that ego-defensive or self-protective motives bias people's interpretations of events (cf. Allport, 1937; Sherif and Cantril, 1947). People, it is claimed, tend to explain events in ways designed to protect and even enhance their images of themselves.

This claim has stimulated an enormous amount of empirical research (see the reviews of Bradley, 1978; Miller and Ross, 1975; Zuckerman, 1979). Investigators have carried out numerous experiments in which subjects are led to believe that they have either succeeded or failed on various skill-demanding laboratory tasks and tests. Subjects are then asked to give reasons for their performance. The results of many such experiments appear to support the ego-defensiveness hypothesis: subjects usually accept responsibility for good performance and deny responsibility for poor performance (e.g., Arkin et al., 1976; Federoff and Harvey, 1976; Miller, 1976; Sicoly and Ross, 1977; Snyder et al., 1976).

The research evidence is not, however, entirely consistent. The results of several studies seem to contradict the ego-defensiveness hypothesis (e.g., Ames, 1975; Beckman, 1973; Feather and Simon, 1971; Ross et al., 1974). In these studies, subjects give largely counterdefensive attributions in which they accept responsibility for poor performance and deny credit for good performance. At first glance, such studies are difficult to reconcile with the position that self-protective motives are the primary determinants of attributions for performance on skill-demanding tasks.

Bradley (1978) recently proposed a promising explanation for counterdefensive attributions. According to this interpretation, counterdefensive attributions are "strategic self-presentations" designed to help people avoid public embarrassment and gain public approval. Bradley attempted to account for inconsistencies in the experimental evidence by arguing that counterdefensiveness rather than defensiveness will occur when: (1) subjects expect their performance attributions to be public; (2) subjects believe that counterdefensive attributions will be most effective in convincing others to evaluate them positively.

* I am very grateful for the encouragement and assistance of Terry Murray and Phoebe Ellsworth. Lee Ross generously helped me to develop the stimulus materials for the study reported here by providing detailed information on the Ross et al. (1974) experiment. Address all communications to: Philip E. Tetlock, Department of Psychology, Tolman Hall, University of California, Berkeley, CA 94720.
The present study attempts to test Bradley’s interpretation in the context of teachers’ attributions for pupil performance. Professional teachers who have been called upon to explain pupil performance are especially likely to be counterdefensive. For instance, Ross et al. (1974) compared the causal attributions of teachers following a student’s apparently very successful or unsuccessful performance on a spelling test. They reasoned that if the desire to protect one’s self-image biases attributions, teachers (especially professional teachers) will be more likely to deny responsibility for failure than for success. Contrary to their prediction, teachers (especially professional teachers) attributed responsibility for failure to themselves and responsibility for success to the student. Other studies have obtained similar results. Beckman (1973) found that teachers assumed responsibility for the deteriorating performance of their pupil in a laboratory teaching task. Ames (1975) found that teachers consistently took responsibility for failure and gave the student credit for success, regardless of what they thought to be the initial feasibility of success (low vs. high success expectancy).

One important determinant of teacher counterdefensiveness may derive from the normative requirements of the teacher role. Society has a strong interest in ensuring that teachers feel accountable for pupil failure and that teachers praise and reward pupil success (cf. Sarason, 1971). People may perceive teachers who make self-protective attributions as failing to fulfill the obligations of the teacher role. It follows that people are likely to censure such behavior by evaluating self-protective teachers negatively (e.g., defensive, irresponsible, arrogant, immature). In contrast, people may perceive teachers who make counterdefensive attributions as sincerely trying to identify their own mistakes and shortcomings and to encourage pupil achievement. People are likely to approve of such behavior by ascribing positive characteristics to counterdefensive teachers (e.g., responsible, modest, mature, flexible). Teachers themselves are almost certainly aware of these social expectations (in behaviorist terms, social reinforcement contingencies). Consciously or unconsciously, they learn to explain pupil performance in ways that avoid the censure and gain the approval and respect of others.

If teachers are in fact concerned with creating a favorable social identity through their attributions for pupil performance, one would expect that the counterdefensive attributions offered by teachers make a more positive impression on observers than do alternative attributions that are more literally favorable to the teacher. To test the effect of various attributions on observers’ impressions of teachers, this study adopts the methodology of Alexander’s situated identity theory (Alexander and Knight, 1971; Alexander and Lauerdale, 1977; Alexander and Sagatun, 1973; Touhey, 1974). The study (a 2 × 5 between-subjects factorial) examines people’s reactions to a hypothetical teacher in the Ross et al. (1974) experiment who (1) supposedly fails or succeeds on the teaching task used in that study, and then (2) either does not explain or offers one of four different explanations for his pupil’s performance. These attributions range from the highly and moderately defensive (in which the teacher claims credit for success or denies responsibility for failure) to the moderately and highly counterdefensive (in which the teacher gives the student credit for success or takes responsibility for failure). The moderately counterdefensive attribution corresponds to the mean attributions actually given by teachers in the Ross et al. study. If the self-presentation hypothesis is correct, people should evaluate the hypothetical teacher most positively when the teacher gives moderately counterdefensive attributions for failure or success. People should evaluate the teacher most negatively when the teacher gives defensive attributions for failure or success. It is unclear how people will react to the teacher who offers highly counterdefensive attributions. Although highly counterdefensive attributions may suggest a willingness to give the pupil the
benefit of the doubt, such attributions may also suggest that the teacher is insincere or lacks self-confidence.

METHOD

Subjects

Subjects participated in the study for one of two reasons: (1) to fulfill an Introductory Psychology course requirement, or (2) to earn $1.50 for participating for one-half hour in a study of social perception. Subjects included 57 males and 43 females.

Overview of Procedure

On arriving at the experiment, subjects were told the purpose of the research in general terms: namely, to investigate people’s perceptions of behavior in experimental or laboratory settings.

Subjects were randomly assigned to one of ten conditions in a $2 \times 5$ between-subjects factorial design. All subjects received the same detailed written descriptions of the procedures of the Ross et al. study (information on how the study was described to teachers, the experimental setting, the teaching task). Subjects in each condition received differing information on: (1) whether the teacher failed or succeeded on the laboratory teaching task; and (2) how the teacher explained his failure or success on the teaching task (the teacher offered either no attribution, a highly defensive attribution, a moderately defensive attribution, a moderately counterdefensive attribution, or a highly counterdefensive attribution).

Subjects were run in small groups of two to six individuals. Subjects within a given group were always randomly assigned to different experimental conditions (thus ensuring that subjects in the same experimental condition were randomly distributed among the experimental groups). Subjects were seated so that they could not see each other’s questionnaires and were asked not to communicate with each other during the study. Questions concerning the study were answered outside the experimental room.

The Stimulus Materials Used in the Study

The simulation stimulus materials were introduced to subjects as a description of the experiences that a particular school teacher (Mr. D. W.) had as a subject in a psychological research project. Subjects were asked to read the simulation script carefully and to imagine that they were actually viewing the events described. Special care was taken to ensure that the script accurately described the events that occurred to the typical teacher subject in the original Ross et al. study. The following is a condensed version of the information presented to the simulation raters.

Mr. D. W. is a school teacher who recently participated as a subject in a psychological research project. On arriving at the laboratory, Mr. D. W. was told that the study was concerned with how well professional teachers can adapt their teaching styles to a novel situation that might become very important in the future: televised or filmed instruction in which the teacher must educate without personal contact or feedback about students’ attention or comprehension. The experimenter emphasized to Mr. D. W. the relevance of the task and the challenge it placed upon the instructor’s skill and ingenuity.

At this point an 11-year-old boy—the pupil—arrived. The boy was introduced to Mr. D. W. and told that they would be working together to learn some spelling. The boy was then taken to an adjoining laboratory which was separated by a 1-way mirror from the room where Mr. D. W. remained.

The experimenter then handed Mr. D. W. a list of 25 commonly misspelled words and told him that he was free to use any techniques he wished in teaching the words to the student. The experimenter stated that Mr. D. W. had 20 minutes for his teaching session and that Mr. D. W.’s teaching performance would be videotaped. The experimenter told Mr. D. W. that a spelling test would be administered to the student after the session and that 18 correct out of 25 was an average performance. Finally, the experimenter gave Mr. D. W., a card, completed by the student’s homeroom teacher, which rated the student as average or near average in several areas of classroom behavior and provided information on the student’s hobbies and interests.

At the end of the teaching session, the
The experimenter returned to Mr. D. W.'s room, thanked him and gave him a questionnaire that asked him to rate his own performance and his expectations of how well the student performed on the spelling test.

After about fifteen minutes, the student brought his completed spelling test to Mr. D. W. for grading.

The Failure-Success Manipulation

At this point in the script, the failure-success manipulation was introduced. The teacher learned that the student had either performed well below average (12 correct out of 25) or well above average (24 correct out of 25). The experimenter reminded the teacher that 18 out of 25 was the average performance. The description of the Ross et al. experiment ended here for raters who received no information on how the teacher explained his pupil's performance.

The Teacher Attribution Manipulation

After the teacher had learned how well his pupil had done, the experimenter asked him to rate the importance of eight possible causes of the pupil's performance on the spelling test. Simulation raters learned that the teacher responded in one of four different ways: highly or moderately defensively (i.e., the teacher denied responsibility for failure or claimed credit for success) and highly or moderately counterdefensively (i.e., the teacher accepted responsibility for failure or denied credit for success). The moderately counterdefensive attributions—in both failure and success conditions—corresponded to the mean pattern of attributions actually given by professional teachers in the Ross et al. study (see Table 1). The other patterns of attributions were defined with respect to the moderately counterdefensive pattern. The more defensive (or less counterdefensive) an attribution pattern, the greater the responsibility assigned to the teacher (relative to the student) for success and to the student (relative to the teacher) for failure.

Table 1. Mean Attributions Offered by Professional Teachers in the Ross et al. Study

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Teacher Responses in:</th>
<th>Student's overall scholastic ability</th>
<th>Student's aptitude for spelling</th>
<th>Student's adjustment to the novel situation</th>
<th>Student's attention and motivation level</th>
<th>Your overall teaching ability</th>
<th>Your performance in the teaching session</th>
<th>Your ability to adjust to the novel situation</th>
<th>The techniques and strategies of teaching you used</th>
</tr>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Success</td>
<td>9</td>
<td>10</td>
<td>8</td>
<td>9</td>
<td>6</td>
<td>6</td>
<td>7</td>
<td>6</td>
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<tr>
<td>Failure</td>
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<td>Condition</td>
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Note: all ratings were made on a 1-12 scale where 1 represented "not at all important" and 12 represented "very important." Values in the table are rounded to the nearest whole number.

The scales sampled from research on "implicit personality theory" (cf. S. Rosenberg and Sedlak, 1972). All ratings were on 7-point scales. Subjects rated the teacher on the following scales: sincere-insincere, responsible-irresponsible, imaginative-unimaginative, open to criticism-closed to criticism, honest-dishonest, enthusiastic-unenthusiastic, inspiring-uninspiring, professional-unprofessional, modest-immodest, active-passive, well organized-poorly organized, original-unoriginal, creative-uncreative, self-confident-self-doubting, likable-unlikable, intelligent-unintelligent, flexible-rigid, entertaining-boring, humble-arrogant, ethical-unethical, skilled-unskilled, and competent-incompetent. Two orders of trait presentation were employed.

In making their trait ratings, subjects were told that they should feel free to refer back to information contained in the simulation script. Many subjects did so.

After subjects had completed the trait rating task, the experimenter asked for informal subject reactions to the study. Subjects were then thoroughly debriefed and thanked for their participation.

RESULTS

The data analysis was a multi-stage procedure. In the first stage, the 22 trait
scales on which subjects had evaluated the teacher were submitted to a maximum likelihood factor analysis incorporating an oblique method of factor rotation (oblimin). A three-factor solution emerged. A highest loading traits on the first factor—which accounted for 40% of the variance—included creative, original, skilled, active, imaginative, well-organized, competent, and inspiring. This factor will be labeled Competence. Highest loading traits on the second factor—which accounted for 14% of the variance—included responsible, open to criticism, ethical, likable, flexible, modest, and humble. This factor will be labeled Social Evaluation. Finally, highest loading traits on the third factor—which accounted for 6% of the variance—were self-confident and arrogant. This factor will be labeled Self-Confidence.

In the second stage, a 2 × 5 fixed effects multivariate analysis of variance was performed using estimates of subject scores on the three major factors as dependent variables. Table 2 presents experimental condition means of subject scores on the three factors. The analysis revealed powerful effects for failure–success (multivariate F (3,88) = 31.97, p < .001), type of attribution offered by the teacher (multivariate F (12,233) = 18.44, p < .001), and the interaction between the two independent variables (multivariate F (12,233) = 3.34, p < .01).

Univariate analyses of variance were employed to clarify these multivariate effects. Analysis of scores on the Competence factor indicated an extremely strong tendency for subjects to perceive the teacher as more competent when he succeeded than when he failed (F(1,90) = 88.5, p < .0001). Type of attribution offered by the teacher also significantly affected subjects’ perceptions of teacher competence (F(4,90) = 9.43, p < .05). According to the Tukey (a) multiple comparison test, the moderately or highly counterdefensive teachers were evaluated as significantly more competent than were the moderately or highly defensive teachers (all p’s < .05). There was no significant difference in the perceived competence of the moderately and highly counterdefensive teachers. The interaction between failure–success and type of attribution was not significant (F (4,90) = 1.22, n.s.).

Analysis of variance of scores on the Social Evaluation factor indicated that subjects evaluated the successful teacher more positively than the unsuccessful teacher (F (1,90) = 11.08, p < .01). There was an even more pronounced effect for type of attribution given by the teacher (F (4,90) = 56.91, p < .0001). As predicted by the self-presentation hypothesis, subjects evaluated the moderately counterdefen-
sive teacher significantly more favorably than the moderately or highly defensive teachers (both $p$'s < .05 according to the Tukey test) as well as the highly counterdefensive teacher ($q$ (5,90) = 3.78, $p$ < .01). Moderately counterdefensive attributions also created a significantly better impression than did offering no attribution ($q$ (5,90) = 7.73, $p$ < .01), whereas highly and moderately defensive attributions created a significantly worse impression than did offering no attribution (both $p$'s < .01 by the Tukey test).

There was an almost significant interaction between failure–success and type of attribution ($F$ (4,90) = 2.13, $p$ < .09). The type of attribution given by the teacher had similar but somewhat weaker effects in the success than in the failure condition.

Analysis of variance of scores on the Self-Confidence factor indicated that subjects viewed the successful teacher as more self-confident than the unsuccessful teacher ($F$ (1,90) = 20.08, $p$ < .001). Type of attribution given by the teacher also influenced subjects' perceptions of teacher self-confidence ($F$ (4,90) = 12.76, $p$ < .001). The Tukey test indicated that subjects regarded the highly counterdefensive teacher as significantly less self-confident than the moderately counter-defensive or moderately or highly defensive teachers (all $p$'s < .05). Finally, there was a significant interaction between failure–success and type of attribution ($F$ (4,90) = 5.87, $p$ < .01). As Table 2 reveals, this interaction largely derives from subjects' tendency to: (1) rate the successful moderately or highly defensive teachers as much more self-confident than the unsuccessful moderately or highly defensive teachers; and (2) rate the successful highly counterdefensive teacher as less self-confident than the unsuccessful highly counterdefensive teacher.

**DISCUSSION**

Overall, the findings are highly consistent with the self-presentation analysis of teacher counterdefensiveness. Subjects perceived the moderately counterdefensive teacher significantly more positively than the highly or moderately defensive teacher on both the Competence and the Social Evaluation factors, the effect being especially powerful on the latter factor. These results support the hypothesis that the moderately counterdefensive attributions given by teachers in the original Ross et al. study were self-presentation designed to establish favorable social identities.

The highly positive reactions to the moderately counterdefensive teacher suggest that people perceive counterdefensiveness as more than merely perfunctory compliance with implicit social norms. As some informal comments indicated, counterdefensiveness was often taken as evidence that the teacher had the strength of character to resist the natural human tendency to make defensive attributions. People appear to have used the “augmentation principle” (Kelley, 1971) and reasoned: “The counterdefensive teacher must be particularly virtuous in order to have overcome the temptation to be defensive.” In contrast, defensive attributions were often taken as evidence of the teacher’s lack of concern for the student. Many subjects seemed to use the trait ratings to express their disapproval of the “egotistical” teacher who appeared more preoccupied with protecting his own image than with giving his pupil the benefit of the doubt.

Highly counterdefensive attributions were as effective as moderately counterdefensive attributions in creating a positive impression on the Competence factor, but significantly less effective than moderately counterdefensive attributions in creating a positive impression on the Social Evaluation factor. Highly counterdefensive attributions also led people to perceive the teacher as less self-confident than did moderately counterdefensive attributions. This pattern of findings suggests that people may have perceived the highly counterdefensive teacher as: (1) not completely sincere and honest in denying all credit for success and accepting all responsibility for failure; (2) overly concerned with his effectiveness as a teacher. It can be argued that by offering moderately counterdefensive attributions, teachers in the Ross et al. experiment selected—consciously or uncon-
sciously—attributions that created the most favorable possible social identity, given the available response options (cf. Alexander and Knight, 1971; Alexander and Lauderdale, 1977).

Although these results converge impressively with the self-presentation position, they do not prove that teachers offered moderately counterdefensive attributions in order to gain positive evaluations from others. The results demonstrate only that other people evaluated teachers in the Ross et al. study most positively when teachers gave moderately counterdefensive attributions. Alternative interpretations of the data are possible. For instance, it could be argued that factors other than the desire to create a good impression caused teachers to be counterdefensive in the Ross et al. study. Perhaps teachers were counterdefensive because they did not expect to succeed on the novel teaching task that had been given to them in the study (cf. Miller and Ross, 1975, for evidence that people make more situational attributions for unexpected than for expected performance outcomes). Since such possibilities cannot be definitely ruled out using simulation data (see Bem, 1972; Kruglanski, 1975), it is most appropriate to view the present findings as simply demonstrating the plausibility and parsimony of the self-presentation hypothesis.

In conclusion, it is worth considering the general methodological implications of the present study. The results underscore once again the need to consider subjects’ concerns for their social identities in the design, execution, and interpretation of social psychological experiments (cf. Alexander and Knight, 1971; Orne, 1969; M. J. Rosenberg, 1965). The simulation approach used here may aid researchers in determining the influence of social identity maintenance goals on subjects’ behavior in a wide range of attribution and other social psychological research.

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