

The positivity bias—the tendency to make internal attributions for others' successes and external attributions for others' failures—was examined in newspaper sports articles from the United States and Hong Kong. The positivity bias was observed in both cultures; however, the cultures manifested this bias differently. There was a greater emphasis on enhancing winners (making internal attributions for successes) in the United States and on protecting losers (making external attributions for failures) in Hong Kong. The concept of preserving others' face as a universal social motivation may provide an explanation for the cross-cultural consistency of the positivity bias. East-West differences in attributional tendencies and in the values of independence versus interdependence may explain cross-cultural differences in the expression of this bias.

**IT'S NOT JUST WHETHER YOU WIN OR LOSE,
IT'S ALSO WHERE YOU PLAY THE GAME**
**A Naturalistic, Cross-Cultural
Examination of the Positivity Bias**

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People generally see others in a favorable light (Sears, 1983). This tendency can be seen in the explanations we make for other people's behavior—we tend to attribute their positive behaviors to internal causes and their negative behaviors to external causes (S. Taylor & Koivumaki, 1976). This pattern of attributions, known as the *positivity bias*, benefits the images of the people whose behaviors are being explained; internal attributions for positive behav-

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ior confer personal credit for successful outcomes and external attributions for negative behavior deflect personal blame for negative outcomes. The positivity bias has been investigated by a number of researchers (Smith & Whitehead, 1984; Smith, Whitehead, & Sussman, 1990; S. Taylor & Koivumaki, 1976), but few explanations have been offered to explain why it occurs. The fact that we make internal attributions for our own successes and external attributions for our own failures can be explained by a motivation to enhance self-esteem (Bradley, 1978; Zuckerman, 1979). However, it is less clear why we make similar attributions for others.

In this article, we propose that the concept of “face” (Goffman, 1967) may explain the positivity bias. Face refers to the way in which people are perceived by those around them, “the public self-image that every member [of society] wants to claim for himself” (P. Brown & Levinson, 1987, p. 61). Face is hypothesized to be a universal human need—people across all cultures are concerned with how they are perceived by others, and people mutually cooperate in social interactions to protect those around them from face threats. Politeness theory (P. Brown & Levinson, 1987) claims that people’s everyday social discourse reflects their concern for others’ face or public image. For example, in everyday communication, we frequently deliver face-threatening messages such as interruptions, requests for favors, criticism, and bad news. Yet, these types of messages typically are not delivered bluntly. Instead, they are carefully framed to soften the blow to the hearer (R. Brown, 1990; Lee, 1993; Lee & Robinson, 1996; Tesser & Rosen, 1975). A growing body of empirical research shows that elaborate verbal and nonverbal social behaviors are enacted to protect others from face threats and to fulfill others’ needs to be perceived positively (e.g., Ambady, Koo, Lee, & Rosenthal, 1996; Holtgraves & Yang, 1990, 1992; Lee, 1993).

This motive to protect and enhance others’ face may also explain the positivity bias in attribution. Making attributions about others is an inherently face-sensitive activity. A positive event provides an opportunity to enhance others’ face by attributing the outcome to internal attributes. Conversely, a negative event provides an opportunity to protect others’ face by attributing the outcomes to external factors. In other words, the positivity bias in our attributional behaviors may reflect our underlying motivation to protect and enhance others’ face.

CROSS-CULTURAL CONSISTENCY AND DIFFERENCES IN THE POSITIVITY BIAS

The motivation to protect others’ face is thought to be universal. For example, the use of verbal strategies to redress face threats has been observed

in a number of languages, including English, Tamil, and Tzeltal (P. Brown & Levinson, 1987), Korean (Holtgraves & Yang, 1990, 1992; Koo, 1995), and Javanese (Smith-Hefner, 1988). Similarly, the positivity bias has been observed cross-culturally in Eastern cultures such as India, Japan, and China and in Western cultures such as the United States and Western Europe (Smith & Whitehead, 1984; Smith et al., 1990). The cross-cultural consistency of the positivity bias is consistent with the idea that it is based on a universal motivation to protect and enhance other people's face.

Although the positivity bias has been found in both Western and Eastern cultures, the bias may not necessarily manifest itself in the same way across cultures. The positivity bias has two distinct components: a face-enhancing bias, where internal attributions are made for others' successes, and a face protecting bias, where external attributions are made for others' failures. We suggest that these processes may be differently emphasized across Eastern and Western cultures for two reasons. First, there are clear differences in the attributional styles between Eastern and Western cultures. People from Western cultures generally favor internal attributions, whereas people from Eastern cultures generally favor external attributions (e.g., Crittendon, 1991; Fletcher & Ward, 1988; Lee, Hallahan, & Herzog, 1996; Miller, 1984, 1986; Morris & Peng, 1994; Schuster, Fosterling, & Weiner, 1989; Shweder & Bourne, 1984; Smith & Whitehead, 1984). Second, Markus and Kitayama (1991) distinguish between independent cultures (typically Western) where individualism and uniqueness are highly valued and interdependent cultures (typically Eastern) where belongingness and fulfilling one's social role are highly valued and standing out from the group is undesirable. This cultural antithesis is reflected in American and Japanese folk wisdom about the consequences of standing out: "In America, 'the squeaky wheel gets the grease.' In Japan, 'the nail that stands out gets pounded down'" (Markus & Kitayama, 1991, p. 224).

In this study, we predict that face protection will be more evident in Eastern cultures and that face enhancement will be more evident in the Western cultures. In Eastern cultures, external attributions are generally more prevalent, so people may express their concern for others' face primarily through making external attributions for others' negative outcomes. Further, making external attributions for negative outcomes is consistent with cultural values of interdependence. External attributions for someone's behavior keeps them from being set apart from their peers—it implies that a similar outcome would have occurred regardless of the actor (Kelley, 1967). For the same reasons, in Western cultures, where internal attributions are more prevalent and independence is highly valued, the positivity bias would be expressed more in terms of face enhancement.

NATURALLY OCCURRING ATTRIBUTIONS

A number of researchers have examined attributions from naturally occurring sources such as newspaper articles (Lau & Russell, 1980; Lee et al., 1996; Morris & Peng, 1994; Peterson, 1980; Zaccaro, Peterson, & Walker, 1987), corporate annual reports (Bettman & Weitz, 1983; Salancik & Meindl, 1984; Staw, McKeachie, & Puffer, 1983), or political speeches (Zullov, Oettingen, Peterson, & Seligman, 1988). The major advantage to this approach is that researchers can observe unsolicited attributions for actual behaviors that are meaningful to the person making the attribution. Although there are also many clear advantages to the experimental approach (Weiner, 1985), the study of naturally occurring attributions nicely complements and extends experimental attribution research by providing an opportunity to observe attributions as they are actually made in daily life.

PRESENT STUDY

We suggest that one explanation of the positivity bias is the social motivation to maintain others' face. Because people are thought to be universally motivated to maintain each other's face, we predict that the positivity bias should exist in both cultures. However, cultural differences in underlying attributional style and in the importance of independence and interdependence may lead to cultural difference in how the positivity bias is manifested.

The present study is a naturalistic, cross-cultural examination of the positivity bias. We examined attributions for winning and losing performances from U.S. and Hong Kong newspaper sports articles. Previous studies of sporting events have focused on the self-serving bias. These studies compared the attributions made by winning and losing players regarding their own performances (Grove, Hanrahan, McInman, 1991; Lau & Russell, 1980; Mark, Mutrie, Brooks, & Harris, 1984; Scanlan & Passer, 1982). The current study focuses on the positivity bias, using attributions made by third-party observers or, in this case, by nonpartisan journalists. Newspaper accounts of sporting events provide an excellent opportunity for a naturalistic investigation of the positivity bias. Success and failure are clearly defined in sporting events; each game typically has a winner and a loser. Further, in writing about a sporting event, sportswriters frequently make causal attributions for a match's outcome.

The following predictions are tested in this study:

Hypothesis 1: Attributions will reflect a positivity bias, that is, more internal attributions for wins and more external attributions for losses.

Hypothesis 2: The positivity bias will be evident in both the United States and Hong Kong, and the size of this bias will not differ substantially between the two countries.

Hypothesis 3: Hong Kong will emphasize face protection (i.e., external attributions for losses), and the United States will emphasize face enhancement (i.e., internal attributions for wins).

METHOD

Naturally occurring attributions were collected from U.S. and Hong Kong newspaper articles of soccer matches. Coders identified causal attributions for match outcomes (i.e., why a team won or lost) and then rated the attributions.

SELECTION OF ARTICLES

The articles analyzed in the present study are a subset of a larger body of articles examined in previous research (Lee et al., 1996). Newspaper sports articles were collected over a 5-month period (September 1991 to February 1992) from the *Boston Globe*, a U.S. newspaper, and the *South China Morning Post*, an English-language newspaper from Hong Kong. Only articles written by local journalists were included. Articles from international news agencies (such as Reuters, UPI, or Associated Press) that are written for an international audience by authors with unknown cultural backgrounds were excluded. Only articles covering soccer matches were selected because soccer is one of few sports that is covered regularly by local journalists in both Hong Kong and the United States.¹ Finally, only articles covering matches between local teams (local Hong Kong soccer clubs and local U.S. college teams) were included, making it less likely that journalists would be affected by a hometown bias. In total, 11 articles from the United States and 28 articles from Hong Kong were selected.

CODING ATTRIBUTIONS

Three undergraduates who were blind to the hypotheses coded the articles. The coding methodology was similar to Lee et al.'s (1996) analysis of attributions. Coders read each article fully and identified causal attributions for the outcome of each match. Attributions were included in the analysis if at least two of the three coders agreed that a specific attribution was being made for a particular event. Twenty-one distinct attributions for specific events were identified, 14 from the United States and 7 from Hong Kong.

Each attribution was coded, using a 9-point scale, for the extent to which it was (a) internal to the winning team, (b) external to the winning team, (c) internal to the losing team, and (d) external to the losing team.² The effective reliability of the coders' ratings was reasonably strong (for internal ratings $r = 0.45$, $R = 0.71$; for external ratings $r = 0.50$, $R = 0.75$).³

RESULTS

A $2 \times 2 \times 2$ ANOVA was conducted with culture (Hong Kong or United States), target (winning team or losing team), and type of attribution (external or internal) as independent variables. Individual attributions were the basic unit of analysis with target and type as repeated measures variables.

As Table 1 illustrates, attributions from Hong Kong articles were more external (external $M = 6.38$, internal $M = 4.17$), and attributions from U.S. articles were more internal (external $M = 3.22$, internal $M = 5.03$). The interaction of culture and type of attribution was significant, $F(1, 19) = 12.60$, $p = .002$, $r = .63$. This finding is consistent with existing cross-cultural attribution research showing that Eastern cultures favor external attributions and Western cultures favor internal attributions.

Consistent with Hypothesis 1, the present data show a strong positivity bias. In both cultures, more internal attributions were made about winning teams and more external attributions were made about losing teams (see Table 1). The interaction of target and type of attribution was significant, $F(1, 17) = 25.44$, $p = .0001$, $r = .77$. Furthermore, the relative size of positivity bias was almost identical in the two cultures ($r = .77$ in Hong Kong, $r = .79$ in the United States). The effect size for the three-way interaction of culture, target, and attribution type was nearly zero, $F(1, 17) = 0.01$, $p = .97$, $r = .01$, suggesting that the strength of the positivity bias did not differ between the two cultures. This finding supports Hypothesis 2, which predicted that the magnitude of the positivity bias would be similar in both Hong Kong and the United States.⁴

Attributions for winning and losing teams were analyzed separately to examine cultural differences in the expression of the positivity bias. As Table 1 shows, the tendency to explain winning teams' success in terms of internal causes was greater in the United States. The interaction of culture and type was significant for the winning teams, $F(1, 19) = 5.15$, $p = .035$, $r = .46$. Furthermore, the tendency to explain losing teams' failure in terms of external causes was greater in Hong Kong. The interaction of culture and type was significant for the losing teams, $F(1, 17) = 14.59$, $p = .001$, $r = .68$. This pattern of results supports Hypothesis 3, which predicted that face enhancement

TABLE 1
Internal and External Attributions by
Culture and Target (winners vs. losers)

<i>Culture</i>	<i>Mean Attribution Rating</i>			
	<i>Winning Team</i>		<i>Losing Team</i>	
	<i>Internal</i>	<i>External</i>	<i>Internal</i>	<i>External</i>
United States	6.86	3.07	2.89	3.40
Hong Kong	5.47	5.40	2.86	7.36
Overall mean	6.40	3.85	2.88	4.86

(making internal attributions for positive outcomes) would be more prevalent in the United States and face protection (making external attributions for negative outcomes) would be more prevalent in Hong Kong.

DISCUSSION

The present study provides naturalistic evidence for the positivity bias in attributions from two very different cultures. Observing this pattern in natural, unsolicited attributions for actual events extends the validity of existing research on the positivity bias (Smith & Whitehead, 1984; Smith et al., 1990; S. Taylor & Koivumaki, 1976). The observed size of the positivity bias was similar in U.S. and Hong Kong newspapers, which is consistent with the idea that the positivity bias stems from a universal motivation to maintain others' face. However, U.S. sportswriters placed more emphasis on face enhancement by attributing wins to internal causes, whereas Hong Kong sportswriters placed more emphasis on face protection by attributing losses to external causes. This difference may reflect cultural differences in attributional style, as well as underlying cultural differences in the importance of independence versus interdependence.

Because this is a naturalistic comparison rather than a randomized experiment, it is not appropriate to make causal inferences based on the present findings. There are competing explanations that must be considered when interpreting these data. For example, the fact that Hong Kong articles were reporting on professional soccer teams and U.S. articles were reporting on college teams may present a potential confound with the cultural effects. However, because there is no known research that compares the attributions made for professionals versus amateurs, we cannot speculate on how this might have affected our results. Nevertheless, this difference between the Hong Kong and U.S. samples may have confounded the cross-cultural

comparison. Also, although newspapers provide a rich source of naturally occurring attributions, they suffer from potential confounds (Weiner, 1985) such as response bias (i.e., journalists may present attributions selectively in statements that are for public consumption), unrepresentative sampling (i.e., editors' selection of material to be published might favor some types of attributions over others), and self-selection bias (i.e., sportswriters might not be representative of the general population). The extent to which these factors may have influenced the present study cannot be determined fully. We speculate that the problems of response bias and unrepresentative sampling cannot be separated entirely from journalists' and editors' concern for the athletes' face. Indeed, some self-censorship of attributions may occur precisely because journalists and editors are concerned with protecting the face of the people about whom they are writing.

Further, the present study only examined a small sample of attributions from two countries (one each from the West and the East). It would be useful for future research to examine this question in larger samples, to include other countries, and to consider naturalistic sources other than newspaper accounts of soccer matches. Finally, it should be noted that the positivity bias does not exist for every situation in which attributions are made for others' behaviors. For example, people are often motivated to explain the behaviors of rivals, enemies, or outgroup members in the worst possible light (Brewer, 1979; D. Taylor & Jaggi, 1974).

Although the positivity bias has been observed consistently across a number of different cultures, a clear theoretical explanation for this phenomenon has yet to emerge. Perhaps the inability to explain the positivity bias adequately stems from attribution theorists' emphasis on self- or ego-oriented motives (Bradley, 1978; Ross & Sicoly, 1979; Zuckerman, 1979). Social motives like face have received much less consideration in attribution theory. Discussions about social motivations have focused on individuals' attempts to enhance their own self-perceptions and self-images in social settings (Jones & Pittman, 1982), rather than individuals' motivation to enhance others as its own end (P. Brown & Levinson, 1987; R. Brown, 1990). We argue that the positivity bias may be motivated by a universal motivation to maintain others' face and that social motivations such as face may play an important role in explaining our attributional behaviors.

NOTES

1. It was important to compare articles covering the same sport because different sports vary in many ways that could affect the types of attributions made about those sports.

2. However, for 2 of the 21 attributions, coders provided ratings of the attributions for the winning team but not for the losing team.

3. Effective reliability refers to the overall reliability of a measuring instrument (Rosenthal & Rosnow, 1991). The Spearman-Brown formula (Guilford, 1954; Rosenthal & Rosnow, 1991; Walker & Lev, 1953) was used to compute the coders' effective reliability. The Spearman-Brown formula is interpreted like other measures of effective reliability, such as Cronbach's alpha and Kuder and Richardson's KR-20.

4. Because of the relatively small number of attributions in this sample, the hypothesis tests presented in this article have low statistical power. Low power is inconsequential for the interpretation of Hypothesis 1 and Hypothesis 3—they were significant despite the low power of the statistical tests. However, power does affect the interpretation of Hypothesis 2 (i.e., that the size of the positivity bias would not differ between the United States and Hong Kong). With such a small sample, it would be unlikely to observe a statistically significant cultural difference in the magnitude of the positivity bias, even if the actual cultural difference were quite large. However, the fact that the size of the positivity bias's effect is nearly identical within these cultures ($r = .77$ in Hong Kong and $r = .79$ in the United States) and the fact that a cross-cultural comparison of the bias's magnitude has a near zero effect size ($r = .01$) suggests that the magnitude of the positivity bias does not differ much between the United States and Hong Kong.

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