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**"Attributions and Discrimination**  
A Study of Attributions to the Self,  
the Group, and External Factors Among Whites,  
Blacks, and Cubans in Miami"

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This study examined the self-protective role of social attributions by comparing attributions made to the self, one's ethnic group and to factors external to oneself, and to one's ethnic group. Respondents were lower or middle-class White, Black, or Hispanic mothers living in Miami. When presented with the hypothetical case where they personally were successful in improving their employment status, all groups attributed success to the self. In the case of failure, the lower class Whites were the only group that attributed the failure to themselves personally; the middle-class Blacks attributed failure mainly to ethnic group membership (discrimination), the lower class Blacks to both group membership and factors external to individuals or groups, and the middle-class Whites exclusively to factors external to individuals or groups.

## ATTRIBUTIONS AND DISCRIMINATION

### A Study of Attributions to the Self, the Group, and External Factors Among Whites, Blacks, and Cubans in Miami

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**Attributional processes figure** prominently in a number of theories of intergroup relations (see Taylor & Moghaddam, 1994, for a review), but the application of attribution principles to the intergroup level is new and requires an important theoretical extension. In the usual interpersonal context, the two commonly highlighted categories are *internal* and *external* (Ross & Fletcher, 1985). A further distinction is needed, however, for situations involving groups. Taylor, Doria and Tyler (1983) have described three targets of attribution in the context of groups: internal (the individual him or herself), group (an individual member's group), and external (factors external to both the individual group member or his or her group).

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Crocker and Major (1989) are among the very few who have explored attributions at the group level. Their focus is on how members of stigmatized groups make use of self-protective mechanisms in the face of discrimination, especially in cases where "attributional ambiguity" is involved. This ambiguity arises when members of stigmatized groups cannot be certain whether the outcome of their actions (e.g., succeeding or failing to be hired for a position) is due to their personal characteristics or to their group membership. For example, the individual might wonder: "Was I turned down because I am Black or because I am not qualified?"

Although Crocker and Major (1989) give particular attention to attributional ambiguity experienced by minority group members, the present climate of minority-majority relations in North America suggests that attributional ambiguity may be equally important for majority group members (Katz & Taylor, 1988). For example, the implementation of affirmative action programs may lead Whites to ask: "Did I fail to land that job because I am White and they are giving priority to hiring minorities, or because I am not qualified?" Consequently, affirmative action programs may provoke attributional ambiguity for Whites. Of particular interest are Whites who are at or near the poverty level. Because of their economically disadvantaged position, they may be particularly motivated to take advantage of this ambiguity and use attributional processes in a self-protective manner.

A series of studies has already been reported that focus on attributional processes in an intergroup context (Duncan, 1976; Hewstone, 1983; Hewstone, Jaspers, & Lalljee, 1982; Hewstone & Ward, 1985; Taylor & Doria, 1981; Taylor & Jaggi, 1974). These studies involved presenting participants with hypothetical scenarios and then asking them to account for the actions of particular actors who were members of the ingroup or the outgroup. The findings suggest that "group-serving" attributions at the collective level parallel "self-serving" attributions at the individual level, with the effect that positive stereotypes of ingroups are enhanced. For instance, Hewstone et al. (1982) found that private-school boys attributed the failure of an ingroup member more to lack of effort whereas failure on the part of a state-school boy was attributed more to ability. To explore further the self-protective characteristics of social attributions, two innovations are necessary. First, it would be important to give participants the opportunity to attribute causes to events involving themselves personally. Second, it would be desirable to avoid using students as subjects and rather focus on group members who are facing the challenges of life outside academic institutions.

In the present study, we investigated individual, group, and external attributions by focusing on samples of White Americans, Black Americans, and Cuban Americans of different social status levels living in greater Miami.

Historically, Whites have been the dominant group in this region, but their position is currently challenged by a Cuban population that has developed a thriving "ethnic economic enclave" (Wilson & Martin, 1982). The rise of Cubans as a power in economic and political spheres has created further competition in the region, particularly among lower class Whites and Blacks (Portes, 1984). This competitive intergroup situation provides a particularly good context to assess the self-protective role of social attributions.

Three overriding hypotheses are associated with self-protective attributions. First, in line with the impressive literature on self-serving biases in attributions (Ross & Fletcher, 1985), we hypothesized that events with positive outcomes would be attributed to the self by the members of all groups.

With respect to events with negative outcomes, we expected these would be attributed to factors external to the self by all groups. However, we reasoned that middle-class Whites, given their relatively privileged position on the basis of social class and ethnicity, would be less likely to attribute negative outcomes to their group situation. The route left open to them would be to attribute negative outcomes to factors external to individuals and groups. Thus, second, it was hypothesized that for middle-class Whites events with negative outcomes would be attributed not to the self but to factors outside of individuals and groups.

The other groups, consisting of the working-class Whites, Blacks and Cubans, are disadvantaged on the basis of their group memberships. Thus we reasoned that they have more readily available the psychological option to attribute negative outcomes to their group memberships. Consequently, the third hypothesis predicted that for Blacks, Cubans, and lower class Whites, events with negative outcomes would be attributed to factors related to groups (discrimination).

## METHOD

### SUBJECTS

Participants were 309 mothers representing three ethnic groups, randomly selected from schools attended by their children in the Miami area. Participants represented two distinct social classes. Mothers of children not eligible for a free lunch program were categorized as middle class. Those whose children received free lunches, many of whom lived in subsidized housing projects, were categorized as lower class. It was after extensive investigations of local conditions, and after taking into consideration the advice of local

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education and city officials, that *free lunch* was selected as the basis for defining social class (also, other indicators, such as reported income of family, are notoriously unreliable). Trained interviewers also reported on the housing conditions of respondents, and this information was used as another check on the social class membership of our samples. Also, the criterion of free lunch matched the indicator of education level for White and Black respondents: 67% of middle-class Whites and 54% of middle-class Blacks had some college education, the equivalent figures for lower class Whites and Blacks being 37% and 24%, respectively. The education level of Cuban respondents was lower, only 27% of middle-class and 25% of lower class respondents had some college education. We believe this is because Cubans are a newly arrived group and Cuban women have an education profile that does not yet follow "American" patterns. The groups selected were similar in terms of numbers and mean age ( $M$ ): White lower class ( $N = 57, M = 38.10$ ), White middle-class ( $N = 40, M = 43.89$ ), Black lower class ( $N = 52, M = 38.07$ ), Black middle-class ( $N = 55, M = 38.03$ ), Cuban lower class ( $N = 51, M = 42.13$ ), Cuban middle-class ( $N = 54, M = 41.79$ ). Furthermore, the Cuban lower and middle-class participants were similar in terms of years of residency in the United States ( $M$ s = 16.18 and 19.90 years, respectively).

#### PROCEDURE AND MATERIALS

As part of a larger study of intergroup relations in the Miami area, participants were interviewed individually in their own homes by coethnic interviewers using a structured questionnaire that was made available in English and Spanish through back-translation procedures (Brislin, 1981). The interviewer read the questions aloud and filled out the questionnaire. The participant had in front of her a booklet of rating scales, each group of scales relating to a set of questions in the questionnaire. The participant responded to each question by selecting a number from 1 to 10 on the appropriate scale, and this number was recorded by the interviewer. This procedure allowed participants to concentrate on selecting a response, rather than reading and turning pages in the questionnaire. This technique is particularly useful for participants who are not accustomed to research interviews and where literacy is an issue (see Lambert & Taylor, 1990).

Participants were asked to consider a hypothetical situation and indicate how they would attribute success and failure in obtaining a job that was one step above their present position, assuming they had all the necessary experience and qualifications for that job. Pilot testing led us to believe that this hypothetical scenario was equally realistic for both presently employed and unemployed respondents. For unemployed participants, obtaining any

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position was the definition given as "one step above their present position." In response to the question, "If you were successful in getting this job, to what extent would it be because of . . . ?", participants rated the extent to which the success would be attributed to (a) "Your personality; e.g., how you get along with others, your work attitude," (b) "Your ethnic group membership; e.g., discrimination or affirmative action," (c) "Factors outside yourself and your group membership; e.g., economic conditions, luck," on a scale of 1 (*not at all*) to 10 (*completely*). Next, participants made the same ratings for the situation where they did *not* get the job they wanted yet were qualified to hold. We chose to use these six different one-item measures because the questions were very straightforward and pilot testing made it clear that respondents understood clearly what was being asked and because these are prototypic of questions asked in attributional research. Also, given the simplicity of the questions, it was difficult to see how they could be asked differently without making the measures mundane.

## RESULTS<sup>1</sup>

*Attributions for success.* A  $2 \times 3 \times 3$  analysis of variance was computed with ethnicity and social class as the between subject variables and the three attributions (individual, group, and external) as a repeated measure. The three-way interaction was marginally significant,  $F(4, 712) = 2.31, p < .06$ ; the interactions between ethnicity and attributions,  $F(4, 712) = 4.93, p < .001$ , and social class and attributions,  $F(2, 712) = 18.25, p < .001$ , were highly significant. Post hoc tests of means (Neuman-Keuls) revealed that all groups attributed success more to personal factors than to group or external factors (see Figure 1).

This similarity aside, an interesting cross-group difference emerged: The lower class Whites were least likely to attribute success to factors external to themselves, as compared to the middle-class Whites and Blacks, and the lower class Blacks and Cubans.

*Attributions for failure.* The  $2 \times 3 \times 3$  analysis of variance for failure yielded a significant three-way interaction,  $F(4, 712) = 6.03, p < .001$ . Post hoc tests revealed that only the lower class Whites attributed failure to themselves personally, rather than to their group membership or to factors external to self or group membership (see Figure 2).

Three groups attributed failure to factors outside self: lower and middle-class Blacks, and middle-class Whites. When rationalizing failure, only the middle-class Blacks emphasized group membership or discrimination, rather

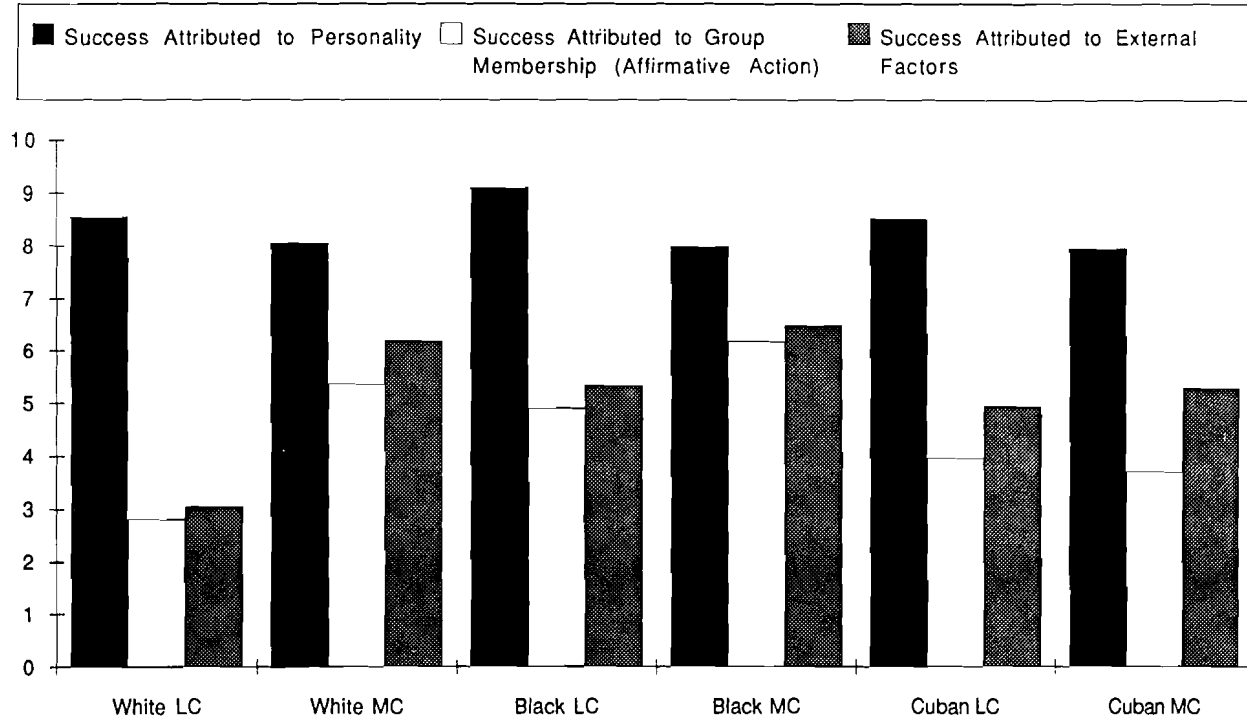


Figure 1: Attributions of Success

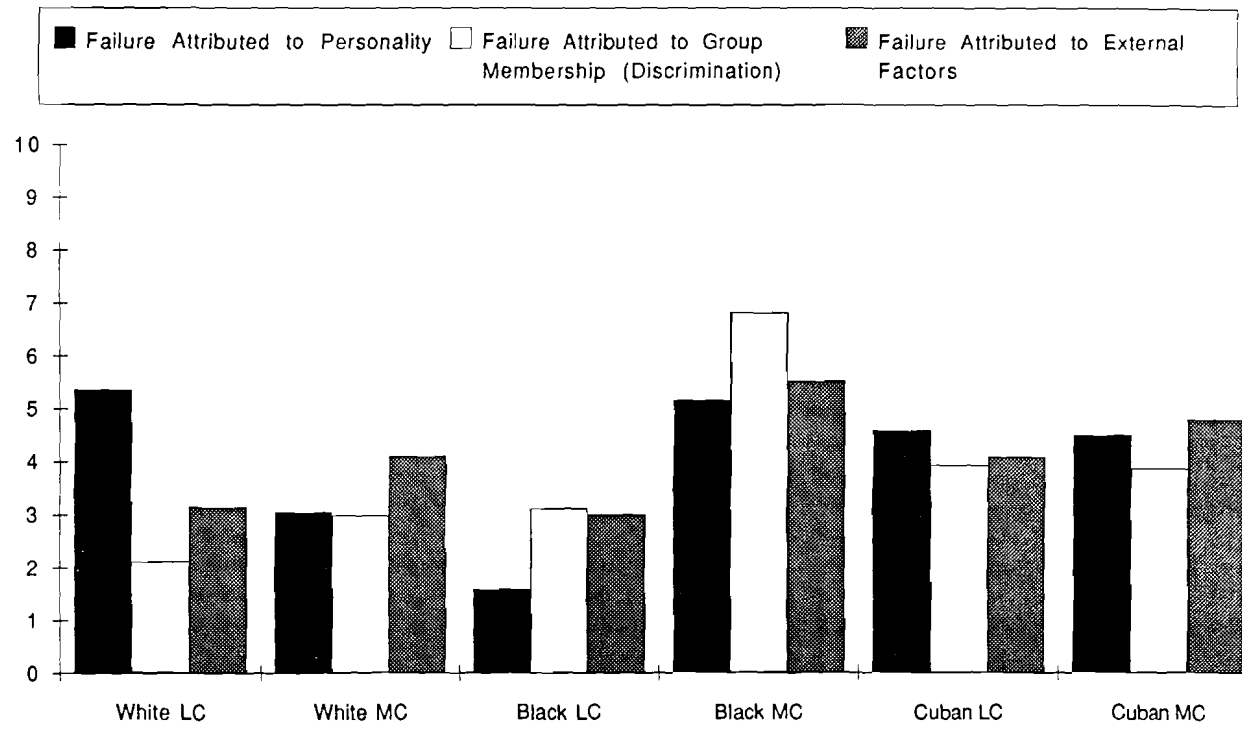


Figure 2: Attributions of Failure



than factors outside self or group membership. Lower class Blacks attributed failure less to themselves personally than to group membership or to factors outside self and group. Although only marginally significant, the middle-class Whites tended to attribute failure more to external factors than to the self or the group. The Cubans did not make any differentiations in their attributions of failure; their ratings on self, group, and factors external to the self or group were similar and all were slightly below the mid-point of the scale.

## DISCUSSION

The theoretical thrust of this study was to extend attributional research to the collective level by distinguishing between attributions made to the self, the group, and factors outside self or group. The groups studied varied both in terms of ethnicity and social class which enhanced the possibility of identifying variations in the way attributions are made for positive and negative outcomes. In particular, we focused on group discrimination as a potential causal factor.

Our *first hypothesis* was that positive events would be attributed to factors associated with the self, rather than to factors related to group membership or to factors external to self or group. The expected pattern emerged in that members of all ethnic and social-class groups were found to attribute the cause of positive outcomes to themselves personally more than to external alternatives.

The means for the positive attributions were generally higher than the means for the negative attributions for all groups. This seems to suggest that respondents were more certain in their attributional style when dealing with positive than with negative outcomes. This may be because the norms for making attributions to positive outcomes are clearer and less ambiguous than norms for making attributions to negative outcomes. After all, the self is clearly the preferred target for attributing positive outcomes, but there is more than one possible target for attributing negative outcomes (two were offered in this study). Thus the larger numbers of attributional targets seriously considered for negative outcomes may have a dilution effect so that the means for negative outcomes are lower.

Our *second hypothesis* predicted that for the middle-class Whites, events with negative outcomes would be attributed to factors external to self or group membership. The results confirmed this hypothesis; the self-protective strategy adopted by middle-class Whites played down both individual and group factors as rationales of failure, but focused instead on external factors such as economic conditions. Apparently, middle-class Whites rely on such exter-

nal factors as the most reasonable "excuse" for failure, because to attribute failure to one's self might promote a negative self-image, and to identify membership in the White group as a reason for failure is not for them convincing in light of the majority status of Whites. It is noteworthy, however, that the middle-class Whites might have attributed failure to group membership on the grounds of affirmative action or "reverse discrimination," but they did not.

*Third*, it was hypothesized that Cuban, Black, and lower class White Americans would be more likely to attribute failure to factors related to group membership (discrimination). Although some groups made attributions in the predicted direction, the pattern of attributions among other groups was unexpected. Consider first the middle-class Black group. They were most confident in rationalizing failure, as reflected by their high ratings in the failure condition. They also used group membership (discrimination) most emphatically as a self-protective strategy. That is, they were more likely to attribute failure exclusively to ethnic group membership than to factors internal to themselves or external to either self or group.

A possible explanation for this finding is related to the social status of middle-class Blacks, who are closer than lower class Blacks to gaining entrance to White mainstream society. A number of intergroup theories, such as the five-stage model and elite theory (Taylor & Moghaddam, 1994), suggest that when disadvantaged group members are in such a "close to entry" position, they are more likely to respond to failure by resorting to collective action. A first step in collective action in this context could be to make reference to discrimination against the ingroup in areas such as employment. From this intergroup perspective, then, the responses of Black middle-class respondents could be interpreted as aiming at consciousness raising. The implication is that, despite being better off than lower class Blacks in terms of material conditions and social status, middle-class Blacks do not necessarily perceive themselves to be in a better situation regarding their treatment as an ethnic group.

This interpretation is supported by results arising from another topic of the interview where middle- and lower class Black respondents were asked about the extent to which Blacks are discriminated against in the context of work. Lower class Blacks are, from all objective measures, far worse off in terms of employment than their middle-class counterparts. Thus attributions to discrimination would be a logical self-protective strategy. However, we were surprised to find that lower class Blacks did not report higher discrimination. In fact, although the difference was not significant, the middle-class Blacks reported slightly higher levels of discrimination ( $M = 4.6$ ) than did lower class Blacks ( $M = 4.2$ ).

The lower class Blacks nonetheless acted in a self-protective manner in that they attributed failure less to themselves than to factors external to the self. In fact, they attributed failure equally to group membership and to factors external to individuals and groups as possible causes for failure, making them less focused in their rationalizations of failure. A possible explanation is that lower class Black participants are motivated to be self-protective, but are not regularly in situations where potential discrimination is confronted directly.

Thus the lower class Whites were the only group that attributed failure to themselves personally. What is striking about this is the strength of the trend, particularly when the literature on self-serving attributional biases (Ross & Fletcher, 1985) leads us to expect that an external attribution would have been adopted. For example, they could have attributed failure to luck, or to the "negative impact" of affirmative action on Whites. By focusing blame on the self, the working-class Whites introduce a limitation to the universality of the self-protective role of social attributions.

A possible explanation for this finding is that they were particularly influenced by the well documented "working-class conservative ideology" (Ransford, 1972); an ideology that emphasizes self-help and individual responsibility, and focuses on the person as the cause of events. This interpretation seems to gain support from the attributions made by lower class Whites in the hypothetical case where they were successful in finding employment. In this situation, they were the least inclined to attribute success to factors external to themselves, as compared to middle-class Blacks and Whites, and lower class Blacks. Thus the lower class Whites generally adopted an attributional style most compatible with the meritocracy ideology, an ideology that is strongly endorsed by conservative political parties in Western democracies.

Limitations to the self-protective role of social attributions is also suggested by the interpretation of failure given by the Cuban sample. The Cuban lower and middle-class groups did not differentiate between explanations in terms of personal, group, or external factors. A possible explanation might be that the Cubans occupy a kind of middle-ground between the Whites and the Blacks in Miami. Because of their powerful "economic enclave" (Wilson & Martin, 1982), they are often able to evade becoming the target of discrimination and may thereby become a source of discrimination at times, particularly in relation to lower class Blacks competing for semiskilled and unskilled work. However, they still constitute a visible minority and are relatively less powerful than Whites. Thus they may see themselves in an ambiguous situation with regard to discrimination, one in which it is neither possible nor advantageous to pinpoint a cause of a personal failure on the job market.

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In summary, in all cases but one, some evidence of a self-protective mechanism, as described by Crocker and Major (1989), seems to be present in the attributional styles adopted by the different groups in this study. The exception, the lower class Whites, shows a completely different response pattern in that the self is assumed to be the basic cause of failure. This attributional pattern suggests that the lower class Whites may be influenced by a meritocracy ideology, even though such an ideology leads them to blame themselves for failure. Their case is of special theoretical significance because it represents an example of how attributions may not function in a self-protective manner. Also, this case underlines the need for cross-cultural researchers to give more attention to diversity of behavioral styles among different majority and minority groups *within* culturally diverse societies (Moghaddam, Taylor & Wright, 1993).

### NOTE

1. Only those statistical results directly relevant to the hypotheses are reported. However, readers are invited to write to the corresponding author for additional details. For example, the pattern of correlations between the six attributional measures within each of the six groups of respondents is particularly interesting, revealing a generally positive association between attributions to the group and attributions to factors external to individuals and groups.

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