

We demonstrate the opposite of self-serving attributions: People would rather “own” a negative outcome than have someone else be held responsible for it. This finding is driven by the isolation effect (Tversky, 1972). Finally, we show that a preference for agency over negative outcomes [vs. self-serving attributions] occurs when outcomes have only one [vs. many] possible causes.

Open Science

Preregistration, data, analyses code, and experimental materials for all 8 studies are available on ResearchBox: https://researchbox.org/532&PEER_REVIEW_passcode=EZYJTY

Contributions

- Self-serving attributions are less prevalent than the literature suggests (e.g., Heider, 1958; Larson, 1977).
- The isolation effect is a powerful tool able to reverse people's preferences.

Studies Framework

In all our studies, participants are always the **only recipients** of the **negative outcome** (the negative outcome affects only them, not the “other”).

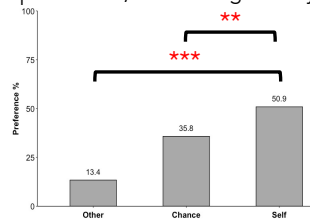
Preference for Agency over Negative Outcomes

In study 1 (N=449), we measure agency preferences (self vs. other) for a negative outcome in three high stakes, real life scenarios (between-subjects).



Beyond Self/Other & Ruling out Overplacement

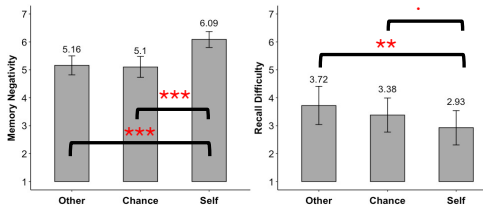
In study 2 (N=232), participants chose agency-scenarios. They preferred receiving a negative outcome caused by themselves than caused by someone else, and even by chance—highlighting that the DBMOH preference is not just about self/other preference, but more generally about internal/ external attribution.



Contrary to Overplacement (i.e., belief to be “better” than others; Moore & Healy, 2008), we found the preference for agency regardless of whether participants exhibited over-, underplacement, or neither.

Ruling out Impact Bias

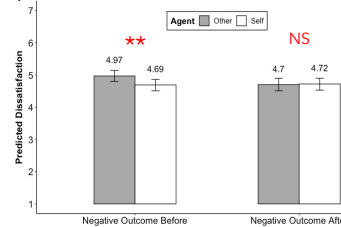
For impact bias to qualify as driving our effect, past negative outcomes (memories) caused by others and chance should be easier to recall and induce stronger negative affect (Morewedge et al., 2005). If so, people may prefer to attribute negative outcomes to themselves to minimize negative affect. In study 3 (N=69) we find the



opposite: outcomes caused by oneself were easier to recall and induced more negative affect than those caused by others and chance.

Evidence for the Isolation Effect: Outcome order

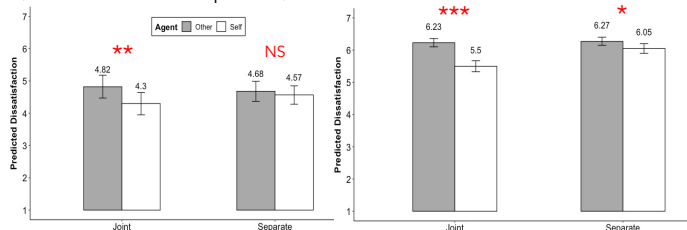
The isolation effect predicts that when evaluating choice alternatives, individuals pay less attention to shared features (the outcome, in our case) and focus on the features that distinguish the alternatives (the agent). Focusing on the agent, participants would prefer agency. Consistent with the isolation effect, study 4 (N=905)



finds that when participants focus only on the agent (Negative Outcome Before), they prefer agency. While when they also focus on the negative outcome (Negative Outcome After), the effect vanishes (Int: p=.027)

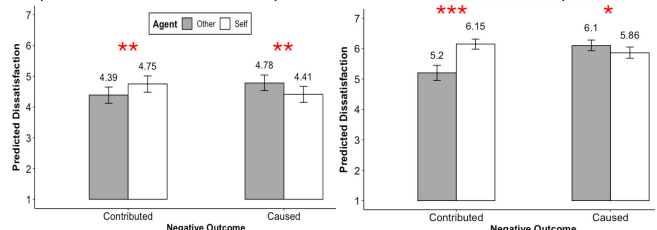
Evidence for the Isolation Effect: Evaluation mode

Further supporting the role of the isolation effect, in studies 5A (N=444) and 5B (N=1049), the preference for agency over negative outcomes is replicated in joint (within-participant) evaluation mode and is attenuated in separate (between-participant) evaluation mode (Hsee, 1996; Int 5B: p<.001)



Reversing Self-Serving Attributions

Studies 6A (N=400) and 6B (N=398) show that a preference for agency over negative outcomes occurs when outcomes are exclusively caused by one agent, whereas self-serving attributions occur when outcomes are caused by multiple agents. In both experiments we observe a preference reversal. (Both int: p<.001)



CONTACT

Giulia Maimone

Giulia.Maimone@rady.ucsd.edu

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