

CULTURE MODERATES THE SELF-SERVING BIAS: ETIC AND EMIC FEATURES OF CAUSAL ATTRIBUTIONS IN INDIA AND IN CANADA

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This study tested the hypothesis that individuals from a collectivist culture explain life events using more contextual causes than do those from an individualistic culture. Undergraduates' causal attributions about positive and negative life events were assessed in India ($n = 195$) and Canada ($n = 162$) using a revised Attributional Style Questionnaire. Analyses revealed the India participants generated more contextual causes for events, but also had a stronger self-serving bias than did the Canada participants. Further, each cultural group viewed achievement events as more controllable than interpersonal events, but the Canada sample differentiated between achievement and interpersonal events more strongly than did the India sample. The findings demonstrate that causal explanations for life events in the two cultures possess both etic (i.e., universal) and emic (i.e., culture-specific) features.

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Culture is an important determinant of how one views oneself and one's social world (Markus & Kitayama, 1991; Miller, 1984; Moghaddam, Taylor & Wright, 1993; Triandis, 1994). A salient finding of past research has been that the cultural context of most of the Eastern societies, such as India and Japan, promote a collectivist or an "interdependent" self, whereas most of the Western societies, such as the U.S. and Canada, promote an individualistic or an "independent" self (Markus & Kitayama, 1991). These conceptions of self, in turn, relate to the way individuals may make sense of the happenings in their world. Within these two broad and divergent cultural frames—Eastern and Western—people's attributions as to what may cause various events in one's life have been examined by cross-cultural researchers. Miller (1984) and Moghaddam et al. (1993), for example, have noted that individuals in Eastern cultures tend to "contextualize" their explanations of various life events; i.e., they emphasize the role of context or external factors in causal explanations of events. In contrast, individuals in Western cultures tend to view the self (i.e., internal factors) as playing a determining role in causing various life events.

Different tendencies toward attributions of causality in different cultures may stem from the fact that a culture encompasses a global ideology that is integrated with one's perceptions of self and the world. For instance, traditional Hindu culture in India has been deeply rooted in the ideology of Karma,¹ which dictates that events in one's life, at least to some extent, are pre-determined either by individuals' own past actions in this life or by their own actions in their previous life. As such, what happens to an individual at a given moment may not be entirely under his or her direct control. In addition, due to its inherent interdependent conception, the "self" in Eastern cultures is rarely viewed in isolation; i.e., as being apart from the social context (Markus & Kitayama, 1991). The boundary between self and the social world being somewhat blurred, the "external" is invoked with relative ease while searching for causal explanations for events in one's life. In contrast, the independent self in Western culture is quick to look inward, since its separation from the external world is more clearly marked, and because issues of personal responsibility for events are a salient feature of the culture. The less marked distinction between self and others in a collectivist culture also implies that, in providing causal explanations, individuals from a collectivist culture may not differentiate sharply between the domains of personal achievement and interpersonal relationships. In contrast, due to a clear separation of self from others, individuals from an individualistic culture are likely to draw a relatively sharp distinction between the achievement domain and the interpersonal domain.

Betancourt and Weiner (1982) proposed that a number of shared underlying properties of the causes allow for quantitative comparisons. These properties, or

¹ Karma is a Sanskrit word meaning "actions" or "deeds".

causal dimensions, include the *locus of causality* (degree to which the cause is internal or external to the individual), *controllability* (degree to which the individual can volitionally alter the cause), and *stability* (degree of endurance of the cause over time). A number of studies have demonstrated the use of these causal dimensions in individualist and collectivist cultures (e.g., Betancourt & Weiner, 1982; Hau & Salili, 1991; Schuster, Försterling, & Weiner, 1989; Si, Rethorst, & Willimczik, 1995). Further, because it is the dimensions of causes, not the causes themselves, that influence affect and action, it is possible to examine cross-culturally the psychological and behavioral consequences of the dimensional perceptions once they are assessed (e.g., Betancourt & Weiner, 1982; Fletcher & Ward, 1988).

One major issue pertaining to causal attributions across cultures is the universality of the self-serving bias, which refers to the tendency to explain successes (positive events/outcomes) using more internal causes (e.g., effort), and to explain failures (negative events/outcomes) using more external or context causes (e.g., task difficulty) (Nisbett & Ross, 1980). The self-serving bias appears to arise from both cognitive and motivational mechanisms (Miller & Ross, 1975; Tetlock & Levi, 1982; Zukerman, 1979) and has been well-documented in numerous studies with North American participants (e.g., Davis & Davis, 1972; Frieze & Weiner, 1971; see Nisbett & Ross, 1980 for a review). However, there is some dispute about findings from cross-cultural studies, with some arguing that people in collectivist cultures fail to show the bias or show a reversal of the bias (Lee & Seligman, 1997; Miller, 1984). In contrast, others have argued that the self-serving bias is universal, in that the bias appears to be present in many different cultures, whether collectivist or individualist (e.g., Chandler, Shama, Wolf, & Planchard, 1981; Kashima & Triandis, 1986; Wan & Bond, 1982).

The cross-cultural studies addressing the self-serving bias are quite varied in the measures used to assess the bias, and thus in the operational definitions of the bias. Hence, inconsistent evidence of the self-serving bias cross-culturally may be due to a lack of clarity in specifying which specific attributions are being examined, and for what events. In reviewing the literature, a number of possible “moderator” variables that potentially influence the self-serving bias were identified, not all of which are accounted for in cross-cultural studies. For example, did the study focus on: (1) self-attributions or causal attributions? (2) self-perceptions or other-perceptions? (3) positive outcomes/events, or negative outcomes/events, or both? (4) the achievement domain or the interpersonal domain, or both? It is proposed that these, and other potential moderating variables, need to be examined to provide a comprehensive understanding of the nature of self-serving bias in causal attributions across cultures.

Another problem in cross-cultural studies of the self-serving bias has been the issue of the “rival hypothesis.” For example, Lee and Seligman (1997) asserted

that the contextual causes invoked more often in collectivist than individual cultures are an indication of the antithesis or the non-universality of the self-serving bias. However, such a view ignores the fact that “any theoretical construct of some generality in social psychology is likely to have both etic [i.e., universal] and emic [i.e., culture-specific] aspects” (Triandis, 1994, p. 72). That is, the idea that members of a collectivist culture may explain life events with contextual causes more often than do members of an individualist culture is not a true “rival hypothesis” to the universality of the self-serving bias; rather, it is an “emic” (i.e., culture-specific) aspect of causal explanations of life events, and one that does not rule out “etic” (i.e., universal) aspects.

The purpose of the present study was to examine the etic and emic features of causal explanations for life events. To this end, the present study examined causal attributions among people in Canada, representing an individualist culture, and people in India, representing a collectivist culture (Hofstede, 1983; also, see Smith & Bond, 1999). In terms of the etic (universal) features of causal attributions, it was predicted that the self-serving bias would be evident in both cultures; i.e., in both cultures, collectivist and individualist, individuals would generate more contextual causes to explain negative events and more internal, controllable causes to explain positive events. Also, it was predicted that, in both cultures, more internal, controllable causes would be invoked for events occurring in the achievement domain than in the interpersonal domain. Second, in terms of the emic (culture-specific) features of causal attributions, it was expected that individuals in India would invoke more contextual (i.e., external and uncontrollable) causes to explain positive and negative life events than would individuals in Canada. Also, it was predicted that the causal attributions of individuals from an individualistic culture would mark a stronger distinction between the interpersonal and achievement domains compared to those of individuals from a collectivist culture. As noted earlier, attribution research has yet to examine systematically how the two central causal dimensions (i.e., locus, controllability) operate cross-culturally for different domains of outcomes (such as the interpersonal or the achievement domain), as well as in relation to the valence (i.e., positive or negative) of life events/outcomes. Thus, in the two cultures, the perceived locus (i.e., the extent to which the cause was perceived to be due to oneself or factors external to self) and perceived controllability (i.e., the extent to which the cause was perceived to be under one’s volitional influence) of individuals’ causal attributions were examined for positive and negative life events occurring in both the achievement domain and the interpersonal domain.

In order to avoid the methodological conundrum of eliciting responses to causes selected by the researchers rather than by the participants, and to avoid potentially engaging in the “fundamental attribution researcher error” (i.e., making the assumption that the researcher perceives causes in the same way as does the

respondent)” (McAuley, Duncan, & Russell, 1992, p. 566; cf. Russell, 1982), the present study examined the unconstrained causal attributions of individuals using an attributional style approach. The attributional style approach resembles a “projective test” in that participants provide attributions in an open-ended format, which provides a clearer picture of individuals’ phenomenal causal thinking (Schulman, Castellon, & Seligman, 1989). Besides identifying culturally appropriate life events, the open-ended questionnaire format of the present study was an emic approach in that it allowed the India and Canada participants to generate the causes they deemed relevant and likely to the occurrence of an event in their own respective cultures (cf. Kashima & Triandis, 1986). The attributional style format also allowed participants to rate each cause on theoretically relevant causal dimensions; locus (i.e., internal versus external) and controllability (i.e., personally controllable versus personally uncontrollable).

METHOD

PARTICIPANTS AND PROCEDURE

Data were obtained from undergraduate students in India ($n = 195$; mean age = 19.56 years; $SD = 1.9$), and Canada ($n = 162$, mean age = 23.6 years; $SD = 6.6$). The India participants² were from Bombay University ($n = 87$), a primarily English language institution, and from M.S. University of Baroda ($n = 108$), a Gujarati language institution. The Canada participants were students at Camosun College in Victoria, British Columbia, an English language institution. There were more female than male participants both in the Canada (98 females; 63 males) and India (171 females; 24 males) samples. All the students were at approximately the same undergraduate level taking psychology courses. As there were no significant differences between the Bombay and M.S. University students on the dependent measures, the results for the India samples are reported as combined.

Participants were instructed to visualize and respond to each of twelve life events—six in the interpersonal domain and six in the achievement domain. Within each domain, half (3) were positive and half (3) were negative. For each hypothetical event, participants were asked first to visualize the occurrence of the event, write down the most likely cause for the event, and then rate the cause on the dimensions of locus of causality (internal-external to self), and controllability (controllable-uncontrollable by self).³ The causal ratings were done on 7-point scales.

² The term “India participant” is used rather than “Indian participant” to avoid confusion with First Nations/Aboriginal peoples of Canada.

³ The authors measured also perceived stability (i.e., the extent to which the cause was viewed as temporary or permanent) and perceived external control (i.e., the extent to which the cause was viewed as under the control of someone other than the rater). Those ratings were completed on 7-point scales. Information about findings based on the stability and external control causal dimensions may be obtained from the authors.

The locus scale was anchored with 1 (Totally due to other people or circumstances) and 7 (Totally due to me). The controllability scale was anchored with 1 (Not at all controlled by me) and 7 (Completely controlled by me).

The English language version of the attribution questionnaire was developed first, using the format of the Attributional Style Questionnaire, or ASQ (Peterson, Semmel, von Baeyer, Abramson, Metalsky, & Seligman, 1982). Two of the original twelve ASQ items were retained. The other ASQ items were changed as minimally as possible in order to preserve continuity with previous research. Also, the changes resulted in items (events) that would be plausible in a Canada or India context. For example, an original ASQ item, "You go out on a date and it goes badly", was changed to "Your engagement breaks off", to better reflect mores and practice in India and to allow for comparison with Canada participants facing the same negative interpersonal event. The questionnaire items are provided in the Appendix. Once the English language version of the attribution questionnaire had been completed, the entire questionnaire was translated into Gujarati by two experts in the Gujarati and English languages. The questionnaire was then "back-translated" (Brislin, Lonner, & Thorndike, 1973; Triandis & Berry, 1980). The Bombay and Canada students were assessed using the English version of the attribution questionnaire. The M.S. University students were assessed using the Gujarati version of the attribution questionnaire. Instructions to all participant groups were identical.⁴

The design for data analyses was a 2 (cultural group: India, Canada) x 2 (event domain: achievement, interpersonal) x 2 (event valence: positive, negative) x 2 (causal dimension: locus, controllability) factorial, with repeated measures on the last three factors. Based on previous research (e.g., Higgins & Morrison, 1998; McAuley et al., 1992; Weiner, 1985), it was anticipated that the dependent variables (locus, controllability) would be strongly correlated, and thus a mean perceived locus/controllability score was calculated for each participant as the average of their locus and controllability scale scores. Lastly, as there were no systematic differences due to the gender of the participant, gender was ignored in the analyses reported below.

RESULTS

As predicted, locus and controllability scores showed strong positive correlations in the samples both for negative events (India $r = .41, p < .01$; Canada $r = .77$,

⁴ While the "Instructions" tutorial for the Canada participants took approximately ten minutes per session, the tutorial for the India participants took longer (20 minutes per session for the Bombay University students, and 45 minutes per session for the M.S. University students) due to the unfamiliarity with rating scales. The Gujarati-speaking students were instructed in Gujarati.

$p < .01$), and for positive events (India $r = .58$, $p < .01$; Canada $r = .70$, $p < .01$). Further, the multivariate analysis of variance revealed no main effect due to causal dimension measure, and only one interaction between event valence and causal dimension measure. The interaction effect indicated that the average difference between valence conditions (positive, negative) was greater for perceived controllability ($M = 1.27$, $SD = 1.28$) than for perceived locus ($M = 1.01$, $SD = 1.25$), $F(1, 355) = 20.39$, $p < .001$, $\eta^2 = .054$. As there were no other effects due to the causal dimension measures, and given the strong correlation between locus and controllability scores, the authors collapsed the dimensions and entered the average of the locus and controllability scale scores (i.e., the mean perceived locus/controllability score) into a $2 \times 2 \times 2$ (cultural group, event valence, event domain) multivariate analysis of variance with repeated measures on the last two factors. In determining effect size (Cohen, 1992; Kirk, 1996) for an F -statistic, small, medium, and large effects have partial eta-squared (η^2) values of .01, .059, and .138, respectively.

As shown in Table 1, the India participants ($M = 4.47$, $SD = .59$) rated the causes of life events to be less internal and controllable than did the Canada participants ($M = 4.87$, $SD = .55$), $F(1, 355) = 41.72$, $p < .001$, $\eta^2 = .10$. Thus, differences due to culture in the perceived locus/controllability of life events were small and consistent with the prediction that members of a collectivist culture explain life events using more contextual causes than do members of an individualist culture. However, the culture main effect was qualified by an interaction between cultural group and event valence, $F(1, 355) = 37.61$, $p < .001$, $\eta^2 = .09$. As predicted, participants in both cultural groups showed a self-serving tendency to explain negative events more with external-uncontrollable causes and to explain positive events more with internal-controllable causes (see Figure 1). Further, as shown in Figure 1, the bias was stronger for the India participants than for the Canada participants. The average difference in perceived locus/controllability between the positive and negative events for the India sample was $M_{\text{diff}} = 1.46$ ($t(194) = 18.36$, $p < .001$), and for the Canada sample the difference was $M_{\text{diff}} = 0.74$ ($t(161) = 8.59$, $p < .001$). The Canada and India participants were more similar in their perceptions of the positive events ($M_{\text{diff}} = 0.04$, $t < 1.0$) than of the negative events ($M_{\text{diff}} = 0.76$, $t(355) = 8.37$, $p < .001$).

In contrast to the moderate-sized main effect for cultural group noted above (i.e., $\eta^2 = .10$), the main effect for event valence (positive versus negative) was quite large. Overall (i.e., cultures combined), positive life events ($M = 5.22$, $SD = .74$) were perceived to be more internal and controllable than negative life events ($M = 4.08$, $SD = .93$), $F(1, 355) = 351.52$, $p < .0001$, $\eta^2 = .49$. Thus, the universality for the self-serving bias also was supported by the different sized main effects for cultural group and for event valence.

TABLE 1
MEAN PERCEIVED LOCUS/CONTROLLABILITY OF NEGATIVE AND POSITIVE ACHIEVEMENT AND INTERPERSONAL EVENTS, IN INDIA (N = 195) AND CANADA (N = 162)

Life Events	India Mean (SD)	Canada Mean (SD)	Mean Difference
Positive			
good marriage(I)	4.98 (1.57)	4.76 (1.54)	0.22
family harmony (I)	4.10 (1.30)	3.97 (1.38)	0.12
able to help a friend(I)	5.65 (1.34)	5.32 (1.55)	0.32*
nice house (A)	5.19 (1.49)	5.58 (1.62)	-0.38*
good job (A)	5.50 (1.52)	5.79 (1.46)	-0.28
prestige in society (A)	5.81 (1.29)	6.03 (1.24)	-0.22
Negative			
no help from friend (I)	3.14 (1.61)	3.07 (2.01)	0.06
conflict with relatives (I)	3.15 (1.47)	3.75 (1.50)	-0.59**
engagement breaks off (I)	3.28 (1.65)	4.10 (1.62)	-0.82**
large debt (A)	4.41 (1.76)	5.61 (1.38)	-1.20**
unemployed (A)	3.98 (1.90)	4.75 (2.00)	-0.76**
fail final exam (A)	4.46 (1.88)	5.74 (1.55)	-1.28**

¹ Interpersonal events are indicated by (I), and achievement events by (A). * $p < .05$ ** $p < .01$

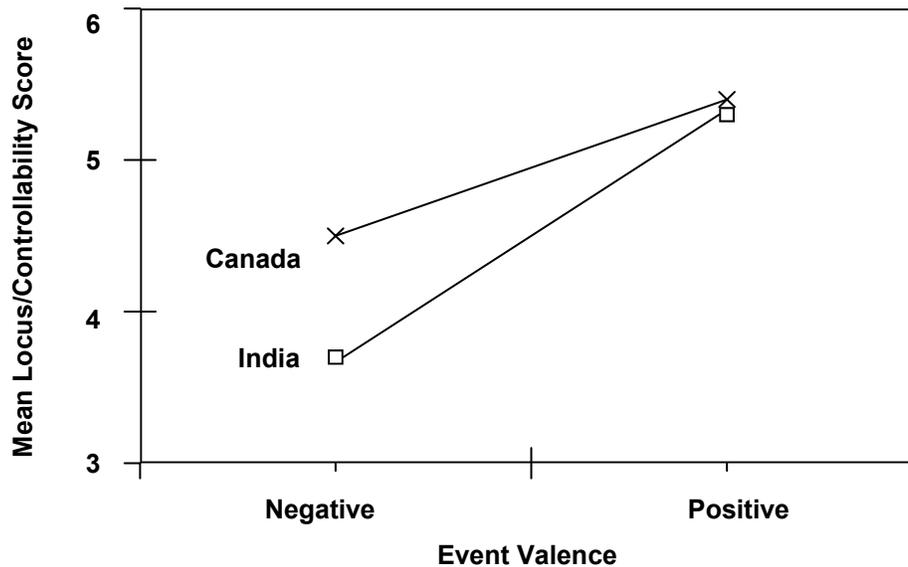


Figure 1. Mean perceived locus/controllability of the causes of negative and positive life events, in India ($N = 195$) and Canada ($N = 162$). The rating scale ranged from 1 (totally due to other people/circumstances and not at all controlled by me) to 7 (totally due to me and completely controlled by me) and is abbreviated for clarity of presentation.

Further, there was a significant interaction between cultural group and event domain, $F(1, 355) = 32.21, p < .001, \eta^2 = .08$. As shown in Figure 2, the average

difference in perceived locus/controllability between achievement vents and interpersonal events for the Canada participants was $M_{diff} = 1.42$ ($t(161) = 18.68, p < .001$), and the mean difference for the India participants was $M_{diff} = 0.84$ ($t(194) = 12.55, p < .001$). The Canada and India participants were more similar in their perceptions of the interpersonal events ($M_{diff} = 0.11, t(355) = 1.52, ns$) than of the achievement events ($M_{diff} = 0.68, t(355) = 8.04, p < .001$). Thus the Canada participants differentiated more strongly between the perceived locus/controllability of the achievement and interpersonal events than did the India participants. In addition, in comparison to the moderate-sized effect of cultural group, the main effect for event domain (achievement versus interpersonal) was quite large. Over- all (cultures combined), achievement events ($M = 5.20, SD = .87$) were perceived to be more internal and controllable than were interpersonal events ($M = 4.10, SD = .68$), $F(1, 355) = 503.11, p < .0001, \eta^2 = .58$. Thus a general tendency to perceive achievement events to be more internal and controllable than interpersonal events was supported by the different sized main effects for cultural group and for event domain.

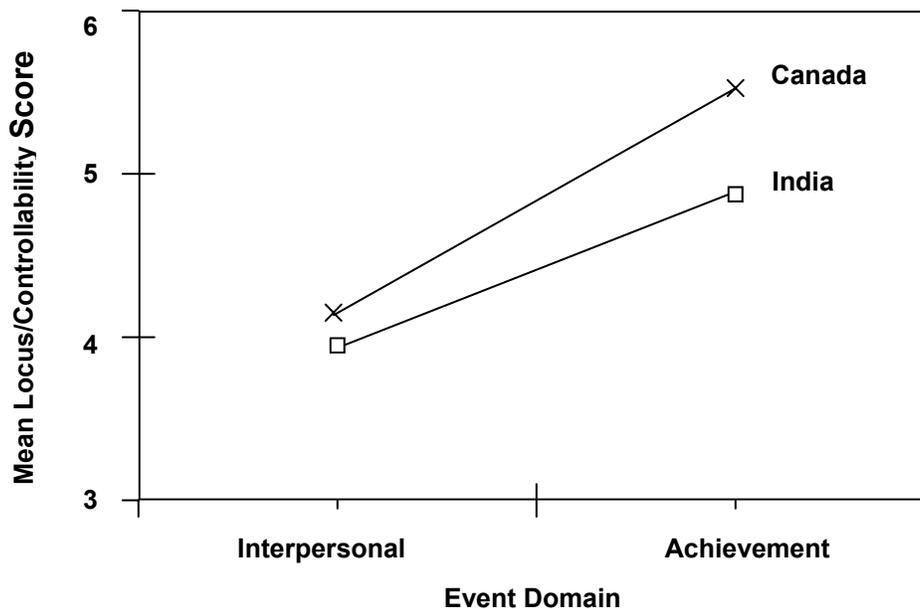


Figure 2. Mean perceived locus/controllability of the causes of interpersonal and achievement life events, in India ($N = 195$) and Canada ($N = 162$). The rating scale ranged from 1 (totally due to other people/circumstances and not at all controlled by me) to 7 (totally due to me and completely controlled by me) and is abbreviated for clarity of presentation.

Lastly, there was an interaction between event valence and event domain, $F(1, 355) = 35.88, p < .001, \eta^2 = .09$. The average difference between positive and

negative achievement events was small but significant ($M_{\text{diff}} = 0.83$), $t(356) = 13.63$, $p < .001$. In contrast, the average difference between positive and negative interpersonal events was larger ($M_{\text{diff}} = 1.41$), $t(356) = 17.83$, $p < .001$. Thus, irrespective of the cultural group, there was a smaller self-serving bias for the achievement events than for the interpersonal events.

DISCUSSION

The present findings demonstrate that causal attributions about life events possess both emic and etic features, as anticipated by Triandis (1994, 1972). Consistent with past cross-cultural evidence (e.g., Chandler et al., 1981; Kashima & Triandis, 1986; Wan & Bond, 1982), each cultural group showed a self-serving tendency to explain negative life events with more contextual causes and to explain positive life events with more internal and controllable causes. However, overall, the India participants generated more contextual causes (i.e., less internal and controllable) for life events than did participants from Canada. This finding supports past evidence of a culture-specific difference in causal thinking by members of individualist and collectivist cultures (e.g., Miller, 1984). The finding of cultural specificity also validates the implication from past research that individualistic cultures place high value on individual responsibility, which may be linked to the motivation to be liked by others (e.g., Weiner, Graham, Peter, & Zmuidinas, 1991). Further, while members of the two cultures viewed the causal controllability of positive life events similarly, the India sample rated the causes of negative events as substantially less internal and controllable than did the Canada sample. Thus, the universal bias of taking credit for positive events was evident in both cultural groups, but in explaining negative events the India participants provided substantially less internal and controllable causes compared to the Canada participants. This finding highlights the role of culture. Based on the premise of *Karma*, the cultural ideology of India may have provided the India participants an additional source of external (contextual) explanation.⁵ The interaction between culture and event valence thus revealed an emic feature of causal attributions about life events in India and Canada.

The etic and emic features also were evident in the causal explanations of achievement and interpersonal domains. Both cultural groups showed a tendency to view interpersonal events as less internal and controllable than the achievement events. That is, when events involved more contextual factors (i.e., other people), individuals in *both* cultures generated more contextual causes. However, while members of the two cultures viewed the causal controllability of interpersonal events

⁵ The authors are not suggesting that their “emic” (culture specific) findings pertain to causal attributions in all collectivist, or in all individualist, cultures.

similarly, the Canada participants rated the causes of achievement events as substantially more internal and controllable than did the India participants. The difference in the domain attributions observed in the present study requires a closer examination of the role of culture in determining the view of “self” and “others”. Conceptually, the two domains, achievement and interpersonal, imply the salience of “self” and “others” respectively. The role of an individual self is salient in the domain of achievement, whereas the role of others (social reciprocity) is salient in the interpersonal domain. The interaction between culture and domain observed in the present study may then be interpreted in terms of these cultural frames. In an individualistic culture where the self is viewed as separate from others, a sharp distinction between the achievement domain and interpersonal domain is facilitated. In contrast, in a collectivist culture where the boundary between self and others is somewhat blurred, individuals are less likely to distinguish between the two domains. The observation of a stronger domain differentiation among the Canada participants than among the India participants may be indicative of an emic feature of causal attributions.

To summarize, individuals in both cultures showed a self-serving bias. Hence, it appears there may be a universal tendency to buffer oneself against negative self-evaluation by invoking causal explanations that distance the self from bad events/outcomes and credit the self with good events/outcomes. The present findings also suggest that culture moderates the degree of self-serving bias. Depending on the prevalent cultural ideology, the strength of the self-serving bias may vary in terms of the causal attributions about positive and negative events/outcomes. Also, the present findings suggest that there is some universality in the causal attributions pertaining to two domains, achievement and interpersonal. People viewed events in the achievement domain as more internal and controllable than those in the interpersonal domain. However, culture moderated the level of differentiation in the causal attributions pertaining to these domains. The present study thus provided evidence for both etic and emic features in causal attributions.

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APPENDIX

ATTRIBUTIONAL STYLE QUESTIONNAIRE: CROSS-CULTURAL LIFE EVENTS

1. You get the right marriage partner.
 2. You incur big debt.
 3. You own a nice house.
 4. You ask a friend to help you with a need and your friend does not help you.
 5. You have been searching for a job unsuccessfully for a year.
 6. You have a good job.
 7. You have conflicts with relatives.
 8. After several tries you are unable to pass the final exam for your degree.
 9. There is harmony in your family.
 10. You have a good name and prestige in the society.
 11. Your engagement breaks off.
 12. You help your friend get on the right track of life.
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Achievement Domain

Positive: 3, 6, 10
 Negative: 2, 5, 8

Interpersonal Domain

Positive: 1, 9, 12
 Negative: 4, 7, 11