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Attribution Characteristics of Chinese Teachers and Students: From some Interaction Experiences on Campus

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Teacher-student conflict is attracting people's attention in China. This study utilized attribution theories to investigate the attribution features of Mainland Chinese teacher and student groups for negative events in their interactions. It found out that due to the factor of social identity, the two groups revealed a significant self-serving bias in attribution of events related to teaching and learning. As for events related to other campus activities, major tendencies of the two groups were consistent for situational factors due to the influence of social values and campus cultures. However, in regards to other factors for these events, rather than social factors, the two groups showed cognitive gaps as well.

Key words: teacher-student interaction, negative events, attribution, China

Introduction

Since the 1990s, China has enjoyed relative social stability accompanied by constant rapid economic growth. Education, especially higher education, was drastically enlarged to meet social needs (Hayhoe, 1996). However, with the impact of economic changes and market principles being applied to education, it seems that what most Chinese had believed that campus is a piece of "pure land" and the teacher is "the engineer of the soul" has been shaken, and that the teacher-student relationship, including the authority of the teacher, is facing a crisis. There also has appeared an increase in teacher-student conflicts. Some serious conflicts have been exposed to the public by influential newspapers in China (Feng, 2004; Li, 2005; Shang, 2002). G. R. Yuan (2002), Vice-minister of Ministry of Education of China, even advocates stabilizing the situations of universities and improving teacher-student relationships. Teacher-student conflicts aroused arguments on how to view and solve them, among which Y. Han (2004) argues that the focus of the conflicts lies in how both sides evaluate the idea and behavior of the other side.

The field of attribution studies how people attribute their own or other people's behaviors. It deals with how people explain events and the psychological consequences of such explanations (Kelley, 1992, p.3). It is an appropriate lens through which to view how teachers and students perceive each other. For each cause, there are four dimensional properties. They are dimensions of the internal or external, the controllable or uncontrollable, the stable or unstable, and globality (Lieber, Yang & Lin, 2000, p.163). This study utilized the first two pairs since they may reflect the psychology of an attributor. The internal or external dimension determines if the cause is due to the actor or due to other persons or circumstances. For example, effort is internal, condition is external. The controllable or uncontrollable dimension determines if the cause can be controlled by the actor. For example, effort is controllable, but ability is uncontrollable (in a short time). Attributing bad outcomes to external or uncontrollable causes shows a self-serving or responsibility-shirking tendency, doing otherwise shows a responsibility-taking tendency.

The interactions of people involve the functions of both personal identities and social identities. Tajfel (1978) argues

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that no pure interpersonal behavior exists since both interpersonal and intergroup factors operate in every situation. When group memberships are considered in attribution processes, the processes are called social attributions (Gudykunst and Kim, 2002), which deal with how members of one social group explain the behavior of their own members and members of other social groups. Hewstone (1988) addresses the way that group members' attribution can lead to intergroup conflict. When an outgroup member's behavior confirms ingroup members' negative expectations, ingroup members attribute it to internal causes, thus maintaining the dynamics of conflict.

Empirical studies of attribution can be mainly classified into two streams. The first concerns cognitive gaps in attributing achievement and failure, including that in academic contexts. Among this stream, a few studies (Chiu, 1988; Lieber, et al, 2000; Mizokawa & Ryckman, 1990) are aimed at Chinese. They choose Chinese students either in the U.S. or in Taiwan, making comparisons between their attributions and that of American students. The results of these studies are similar in that they show that Chinese students report significantly less academic responsibility for success and more academic responsibility for failure than the American students, revealing a more self-protective bias on the part of the American students. The study of Zhang and Liu (2003) is based on Mainland Chinese university students and teachers. By using a failure in exams as a stimulus, they find that the students are more inclined to think the failure results from reasons which are controllable.

The second stream aims at interpersonal or intergroup relationships and emphasizes cognitive variables that provide the basis for conflict, such as the way that causal inferences influence consumer reactions in the marketplace, family conflicts and spousal relationships (Graham and Folkes, 1990). Chandler (1981) is a major study that views Hong Kong Chinese in interpersonal relationship, in which Chinese stress a tendency to ascribe affiliation events to internal causes. They are more optimistic regarding interaction than their Japanese counterparts, but less optimistic than their Americans counterparts. Jing and Han (2003) demonstrate the attributions of intercourse of elementary pupils and high school students in Mainland China. The pupils and students attribute successful interactions to internal causes, failed ones to external causes.

Attribution application to various fields has stressed cultural variations in explaining events. Unfortunately, cross-cultural and domestic research on interpersonal and intergroup interactions is not sufficient (Crittenden, 1996), with very few (Lee & Seligman, 1997; Zhang & Liu, 2003) on Mainland Chinese. Moreover, for those on interactions, events among students are dominant. No study on teacher-student interactions has been found up to now.

Intergroup attributions assume a bias that people explain negative behavior of an ingroup more in terms of external causes than through the negative behavior of an outgroup. This study (1) testifies to validity of the bias assumption that if Chinese teachers and students reveal a protective tendency in explaining the ingroup's undesirable behavior; (2) and uncovers what factors are associated with their attribution tendencies.

Methods

Instrument

The final data collection instrument is a questionnaire with ten episodes, which was designed and pre-tested for the purpose of this study. The ten episodes consist of two groups, one relates to events of teaching and learning, the other relates to events of other campus life, rather than teaching and learning. Among the same ten episodes, five are of attribution of student's behavior, five are of teacher's. Immediately after each episode, there is a question asking participants the most likely reason they think explains the actor's behavior.

Critical incidents are brief descriptions of vivid events that people remember as their meaningful experiences (Brookfield, 1995). The rationale for using critical incidents in this study is the need to reveal the participants' perceived causes for the events. For questionnaire construction, the author interviewed 9 former teachers and 11 former students, asking each of them to describe two to four negative incidents regarding teacher-student interaction which either happened to them or to their peers. Then every interviewee is asked to provide the most likely cause he/she thought for each event, and two more possible causes he/she could think of. After interview and pre-testing, the author found that due to their familiarity with campus life, the episodes and causes provided, together with what the author had experienced during her three-year teaching in a university, were not numerous, but concentrated upon certain similar incidents and causes. Due to this concentration, and because without being constrained by predetermined categories of analysis, qualitative methods typically produce a wealth of detailed information about a smaller number of people and cases (Partton, 2002, p.14)，the author believes that a questionnaire

with episodes and open-ended questions is more compatible with the need for perceived causes. After consulting with the questionnaire structure of the European Economic Commission on "Images of Poverty", in which respondents were asked to explain why people live in need (Lalljee, 1987, p.45), the questionnaire for this study was constructed.

The ten episodes are as follows:

(1) Monitor A did not record, as teacher C had required, the names of those who had been absent from the school's Morning Exercises.

(2) Student A sometimes sleeps in teacher C's class even though teacher C has criticized him/her for this several times.

(3) In an exam, teacher C was surprised to find that his/her top student A was secretly looking at the textbook.

(4) Student A told teacher C on a day that a report should be submitted that he/she hadn't known the deadline.

(5) Student A asked teacher C a question after class. After teacher C explained twice, he/she pretended to be clear about it though he/she wasn't.

(6) Student A was dissatisfied after receiving a grade of B from teacher C since teacher C gave a grade of A to another student whose academic scores from other teachers had been always lower than his/hers.

(7) Student A was found stealing from classmates and was sent to teacher C. However, teacher C did nothing in public about it later.

(8) Student A asked for a permission of absence in a performance rehearsal for an unfinished report that would be due soon. Teacher C did not give permission.

(9) Before an exam, student A asked teacher C about the importance of Chapter Five. Teacher C replied that it was important. However, student A later found that no single question was from Chapter Five.

(10) The school has a student exchange program with a school abroad. Student A has been the most excellent student in every subject. However, contrary to his/her expectation, teacher C recommended student B whose academic achievement has been always lower than his/hers.

Participants

Participants were students and teachers in eight faculties of a university in the northern part of China. 150 questionnaires were sent respectively to the teacher and student groups. 121 valid responses from the students (mean age = 21.4 years) and 115 valid responses from the teachers (mean age = 38.2 years, mean teaching year = 13.9 years) were received.

Data analysis

Data was inputted into an SPSS statistical program. In order to test the association between the row and column variables in tabular data, Pearson's Chi-square Test was utilized. Cross tabs in descriptive statistics helped to obtain frequencies for each variable and associations between variables. Residual in Chi-Square, the difference between the observed frequency and the expected frequency, is a more reliable indicator. Standardized residuals should be those that correspond to an alpha of 0.05 or 0.01. In this study, if the residual value is satisfied, it suggests that the test of the relationship between social identity and a certain attribution item of an episode has statistical significance.

Results

Results of the study revealed three apparent attribution tendencies of the two social groups.

The overall attribution tendencies

The results proved that, generally speaking, for student actor's behavior, the student participants attributed it more often to external causes such as, reports due were too many, or the teaching was dull (episode two and four). However, teacher participants attributed it more often to internal dispositions, for example, the student has difficulty understanding the lesson, or the student did not make sufficient effort, or the student is indifferent to study. This result is typically shown by table 1 on episode four. On the contrary, for teacher actor's behavior, a reversed tendency was revealed.

Another set of general controversial tendencies resided in the controllability dimension of the perceived causes. For student behaviors, such as episode two, four and six, in which the attributions obtained significant statistical differences, the teacher group had an orientation for controllable causes, but the student group had an orientation for uncontrollable causes. For example, in regards to teacher group's preference, student A is indifferent to study, is a factor under the control of student A. In contrast, the preferred explanation of the student group, student A did not get the information about the deadline, is a factor out of the control of student A.

Table 1. *Chi-square test results on episode four*

Cause	Student	Teacher	Total
Internal controllable			
Count	35	82	117
Expected count	60.0	57.0	117.0
Std. residual	-3.2	3.3	
Internal uncontrollable			
Count	7	5	12
Expected count	6.2	5.8	12.0
Std. residual	.3	-.4	
External controllable			
Count	50	19	69
Expected count	35.4	33.6	69.0
Std. residual	2.5	-2.5	
External uncontrollable			
Count	29	9	38
Expected count	19.5	18.5	38.0
Std. residual	2.2	-2.2	

Note. DF=3, p<.001

Table 2. *Chi-square test results on episode two*

Cause	Student	Teacher	Total
Internal controllable			
Count	36	58	94
Expected count	48.2	45.8	94.0
Std. residual	-1.8	1.8	
Internal uncontrollable			
Count	5	18	23
Expected count	11.8	11.2	23.0
Std. residual	-2.0	2.0	
External controllable			
Count	17	11	28
Expected count	14.4	13.6	28.0
Std. residual	.7	-.7	
External uncontrollable			
Count	63	28	91
Expected count	46.7	44.3	91.0
Std. residual	2.4	-2.5	

Note. DF=3, p<.001

Significant attribution differences of events regarding teaching and learning

The second important feature lay in episodes concerned with teaching and learning, for example, episode two. The cognitive diversity of the two groups fell heavily on the internal controllable and external uncontrollable causes, revealing a quite strong self-group-protective tendency determined by their respective social identity. It indicates that most students protected the student actor; most teachers protected the teacher actor. Table 2 is Chi-square results on episode two that best show this contrast.

Attribution differences and similarities of events on other campus activities

The third apparent feature is that most teachers and students shared an attribution tendency for other campus activities. Unlike the cognitive gap shown in events on teaching and learning, episode one, eight and ten revealed an attribution consistency of most participants from both groups whose favored causes for these events were external, such as, personal reasons not being appropriate for asking for absence, and excellent academic record not being the only requirement for candidates. It suggested that both groups somehow protected the actor no matter if the actor was a student or a teacher.

However, when the overall tendencies of this group of episodes were consistent in terms of external causes, there existed cognitive gaps of a small number of teachers and students in terms of internal causes. For instance, when most participants were focused on external causes, some teachers believed an internal reason to be significant, (for example, the monitor wasn't earnest, for episode one); and some students believed an internal reason was significant, (for example, teacher C was slightly irritated, for episode five). These differences were statistically significant (p<.05) as well, due to the factor of social identity. These small branches are like undercurrents underlying the main stream of consistency in this group of episodes. Table 3 on episode one shows the branch and the main stream.

Table 3. *Chi-square test results on episode one*

Cause	Student	Teacher	Total
Internal controllable			
Count	9	24	33
Expected count	16.9	16.1	33.0
Std. residual	-1.9	2.0	
Internal uncontrollable			
Count	7	4	11
Expected count	5.6	5.4	11.0
Std. residual	.6	-.6	
External controllable			
Count	93	82	175
Expected count	89.7	85.3	175.0
Std. residual	.3	-.4	
External uncontrollable			
Count	12	5	17
Expected count	8.7	8.3	17.0
Std. residual	1.1	-1.1	

Note. DF=3, p< .05

Discussion

On the general tendency

The general tendency did satisfy the bias assumption of group favoritism in intergroup attribution. Brewer (1979) proves that people tend to view their ingroups in a favorable light when they are compared to outgroups. This study tested the notion that when behavior of a student actor was not self-relevant or socially desirable, most students perceived that its causes were external or uncontrollable, showing an ingroup-member-protective bias. This bias was performed by the teacher group as well.

In addition, Weiner (1995) emphasizes the importance of the controllability of a perceived cause. An attributor's judgment on whether or not a cause is under the control of an actor affects the emotion of the attributor. The general tendency of this study suggested that students tended to blame the teacher actor or situational factors and be unwilling to blame the student actor. Meanwhile, causes from the teachers showed a tendency to blame student actor. For instance, most teachers thought the student actor in episode four was indifferent to study. Many students regarded good relationships as the reason for the student actor getting a high score in episode six. The connotations of these controllable causes seemed to be, "Student A could have found out the deadline by him/herself if he/she was earnest" and "the teacher should evaluate papers fairly in spite of his/her good relationship with that student."

Moreover, Chi-square test results proved that the factor of social identity, rather than gender or specialization or age, functioned in the process of attribution. This ingroup bias was a consequence of drawing a distinction between ingroups and outgroups. People maintain positive social identities by evaluating their ingroups more positively than outgroups (Tajfel and Turner, 1979). However, sometimes they do not use direct strategies, such as rating ingroups higher, to exhibit the bias, but use indirect strategies, such as preferring situational factors.

Furthmore, the attribution and emotional tendency of each side toward the other side may form potential factors for group misunderstanding or conflict. Pettigrew (1979) suggests that the bias observed at the interpersonal level also occurs at the intergroup level, because interpersonal and intergroup factors always operate together, and people tend to regard negative behavior of an outgroup as representative of the whole group he/she belongs to, but positive behavior of an outgroup as exception (Lalljee, 1981). For this study, undesirable behavior of a teacher or a student may lead to negative evaluations for the whole group. Individual level misunderstanding or conflict between a certain teacher and a student might be upgraded to the group level.

On the different cognitions for events surrounding teaching and learning

The cognitive diversity of the two groups fell heavily upon events concerned with teaching and learning, showing an active influence of the social identity factors. Most participants avoided accepting an ingroup's behavior that was suspected to have violated a standard for appropriate behavior as a member of that social group. According to Graham and Folkes (1990), a person attends to and extracts information from event before he/she responds to it to judge whether or not the actor's behavior is considered to be self-relevant. In this study, results from episodes of teaching and learning showed that when an ingroup's inappropriate behavior appeared, ingroups responded to it by externalizing causes to keep the image of their social identity positively intact.

Here the standard for appropriate behavior refers to social norms for a person as a teacher or a student. For thousands of years, Confucianism has dominated a large part of Chinese society, especially education. A representative Confucian educator, Han Yu in the Tang Dynasty (618-907), defined the image and task of a teacher as transmitting moral values, transferring knowledge and answering questions. This definition has been deeply rooted in the value of education. In the early 1980s, for rebuilding the badly damaged education system caused by the Cultural Revolution (1966-1976), preferential policies including financing, salaries, and propaganda poured light upon education. On the other hand, students have been educated that their duty is simply to study hard. All of these had strengthened the image of teacher and student in people's minds. Thus, in this study, whenever a behavior that may threaten the group image has appeared, most participants reacted actively to protect the given image.

On the results from other campus activities

It is quite plausible that social values and campus cultures are accountable for the attribution similarities found in episodes on other campus activities.

Resent studies (Bond, 1993; Williams, Liu & Shi, 1997) argue that economic growth and western influence may change Chinese values from mainly collectivism into a coexistence of collectivistic and individualistic features. In this study, for episode eight, a large number of participants claimed that a personal excuse was an inappropriate excuse for being absent from a class activity. It suggests that at present on campus, from the attribution perspective, when there is conflict between what Bond and William and associates illustrate as being the coexisting dimensions of value, most teachers and students incline to give the collectivistic aspect a priority as a criterion for proper behavior.

A number of studies refer to face maintenance strategy (Ting-Toomey, 1988; Bond, 1993; Gao, 1991) and the role of the social network of Chinese (Hwang, 1987; Chang & Holt, 1991). Face maintenance is the projection and claiming of public image (Ting-Toomey, 1988), which is essential to maintaining the existing role relationships and interpersonal harmony. Social network refers to networks of family membership, group membership involving education, occupation, etc (Chang and Holt, 1991). This study found evidence of the face issue and the role of social networks in attribution as well. For example, nearly all participants shared a perception in episode five that the student actor had used pretence to save his/her self-face since he/she felt ashamed for having not understood the question even after the teacher actor had explained twice, and it was also a means of saving face for the teacher actor who was unable to help him/her understand. It is a mutual face saving strategy.

It is worth noting that teachers and students were consistent in episode ten in terms of external causes. 22.6% of the teachers did not protect their ingroup. They perceived that someone else had asked the teacher to recommend the other student, revealing a reversed tendency of the assumed attribution bias. Together with 29.8% of the students, they believed that the social network of that teacher had operated in this case.

Face saving and social networks are two dominate elements in Chinese values. How to save face or have face saved and how to negotiate one's way through the network avoiding offending anyone preoccupy all personal interactions in China. With this social knowledge foremost in their minds, the two opposite participant groups in terms of attributing events on teaching and learning, here turned out to be consistent in terms of attributing events on other campus activities. Their attribution focus moved from internal causes to external causes. The functional factor of social value took the place of social identity.

Conclusion

This study attempted to reveal the attribution characteristics of Chinese teachers and students in their interaction experiences. Major findings include, first of all, a confirmation of a general self-serving attribution bias of each group in explaining negative events. It was statistically examined that the social identity of the participants determined this overall tendency. Second, significant differences were particularly found in events related to learning and teaching, revealing participants' great concern about their duties, images and responsibilities. These great differences indicated the potential misunderstandings and conflicts between the two social groups. Third, the two groups exhibited relatively consistent attribution tendencies in terms of events related to other campus activities with the strong influence of social factors.

The above findings may maximize the awareness and sensitivity of people in the education field regarding potential cognitive differences between teacher and student groups. One can hardly evaluate whose attribution is accurate because a perceived cause, a view from one's own perspective, is not

necessarily the true cause of an event. However, the maximized awareness and the knowledge of these cognitive differences enable educators, teachers, and students to consider more objectively when they encounter the negative behaviors of the other. Therefore, it becomes possible to enhance greater understanding of the two groups and facilitate the various interactions which occur between them, in which teaching and learning weigh the most.

Limitations and Future Tasks

There are certain limitations inherent in this study. First, it was unable to utilize interview techniques in the extensive investigation. The author was concerned that the presence of the author and the face-to-face conversation might make interviewees alert since the topic is about perceived causes of negative behaviors of their teachers or students. In future studies, interviews of former teachers or students should be done to capture individual cases and personal analysis. Second, future studies should examine the other two dimensions of causes, stability and globality, so as to reveal Chinese teachers' and students' attribution characteristics regarding these two aspects.

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