

## THE PROMOTION OF EXTERNAL EXPLANATIONS: THE CASE OF SANCTIONS DISTRIBUTED IN THE FAMILY FIELD

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### Abstract

Whether to explain the reinforcements that one receives or the behaviors that one adopts, many researches show the existence of internal attributions. However other researches, carried out in order to explain the distributive behavior of sanctions, *i.e.* exclusively focused on the distributor of a sanction, show that the attributions are more hetero-attributive than self-attributive, more external than internal. The latter researches having been carried out in the field of training or in a professional environment, the purpose of the present research is to extend them to the family sphere by studying the explanation of the sanctions administered by a parent to his children and between spouses. 55 participants were confronted with scenes in which a parent sanctioned (positively or negatively) his children and a husband his spouse (vs a spouse her husband). Each sanction, whether positive or negative, was followed by internal and external explanations. The participants had to indicate the degree of acceptability of these explanations. It is observed that the distributor of the sanction is never considered as the primary cause of the sanction: the receiver or the context, *i.e.* external targets, come first. These results are discussed in relation to the available knowledge on attribution.

**Keywords:** *Internality, sanctions, equity, family.*

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### 1. Introduction

It has long been known that what happens to us in everyday life, whether positive (success) or negative (failure) events, can, from a causal point of view, be explained in two ways: by internal factors (successes or failures that we obtain because of our personality or our behavior) or by external factors (the chance, the arbitrary decision others, etc.). This dichotomization refers to what Lefcourt (1966) and Rotter (1966) called the *Locus of Control*. And a great deal of research have highlighted a prevalence of internal explanations, even in cases where the obvious should lead us to appeal to external causes (*e.g.* the reviews by Langer, 1975; by Lerner, 1965; by Lerner & Simmons, 1966).

This accentuation of the actor's weight has had several interpretations. It was initially considered by Lefcourt (1966) and Rotter (1966) as relating to personality (people would be mostly internal and would thus consider what happens to them as the consequence of their personological characteristics). Afterwards, it was interpreted as an error, a cognitive bias called "attribution error" (Nietzsche, 1968, p. 163) or "fundamental attribution error" (Ross, 1977, p. 184). But a few years later, another interpretation emerged, no longer in terms of bias but of social normalization: if we provide, even against all objective evidence, more internal answers than external ones, it would be because internal answers would be socially valued (*cf.* Jellison & Green, 1981).

Otherwise, if we move from the domain of the explanation of events to that of the explanation of behavior, we also have known for a long time (especially since Heider's reseraches, 1944, on attribution) that when we have to determine the reason for our behavior (or the reason for the behavior of others), we also can refer either to internal explanations or to external factors. The data from some researches then showed that internal explanations could again be given priority (*e.g.* the reviews by Jones, 1979; by Ross, 1977), which led some authors to consider that this accentuation would come from the fact that it would also be socially valued (*cf.* Beauvois & Le Poutier, 1986). But several other researches, which were carried out after theoretical support, have shown that it is, on the contrary, external explanations that are the most frequent and the most valued. This is the case of Gangloff's the pinceps research (2004), conducted as part of the training. The theoretical basis, the initial idea, was quite simple: if at school, a child is rewarded or punished by his teacher, this sanction will be the subject, according to the results of studies on the LOC, of

an internal explanation: the receiver of the sanction, that is to say the pupil, will say himself (and will be said) responsible for this sanction, this reinforcement. As a corollary, this means that the distributor of the sanction, that is to say the teacher, can only say that he is (and be said) not responsible for his distributive behavior of sanction. This is what Gangloff (2004) called the LOD or *Locus of Distribution*, in no longer getting into the role of the receiver having to explain, in terms of LOC, his reception, but getting into the role of the distributor of the sanction having to explain a particular behavior, in this case a distributive behavior of sanction, and by showing, in his research, that to explain the sanctions they administer to their students, teachers did appeal massively to external causes, and that these external causes were socially valued. This research was replicated in Argentina, with similar results (Mayoral, Gangloff, & Romero, 2009). And several other researches, carried out in the workplace to explain the sanctions distributed by hierarchical managers to their subordinates, have also highlighted the prevalence and valorization of external explanations (cf. Gangloff & Duchon, 2013; Gangloff, Soudan and Rezrazi, 2016; Mayoral, Gangloff, & Romero, 2011).

The present study aims to extend these researches to the family sphere by examining the desirability of the explanations provided in justification of the sanctions distributed by a parent to his children and by a husband to his partner. The hypothesis is that the explanation of these sanctions will again focus more on the receiver of the sanction (external cause) than on the distributor (internal cause).

## 2. Method

### 2.1. Participants

55 men and women, parents of children aged seven to fifteen, were contacted using the snowball technique and, on a voluntary basis, responded individually, at their workplace and in a face-to-face situation, to a questionnaire, being divided into two groups, each being confronted to a specific questionnaire.

### 2.2. Instrument and procedure

Each participant was confronted with a questionnaire in which a man (questionnaire 1) vs a woman (questionnaire 2) positively or negatively sanctioned his children or his spouse (vs her husband). Each questionnaire included 4 situations followed by six explanatory proposals that participants had to rank in order of acceptability, from 1 (explanation they considered most acceptable) to 6 (the less acceptable). Two explanations were internal (referring either to the personality or the mood of the distributor of the sanction), two others referred to characteristics of the recipient of the sanction, and the last two ones to characteristics external to both the distributor and the recipient: cf. table 1.

Table 1. questionnaire for a man (for a woman, it was similar but suitable for her gender).

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| <p><b>Potitive sanction with regard to the children:</b><br/> <i>When I am tolerant with my children, it is because...</i><br/>                     1) I'm having a good day, 2) I'm a caring person, 3) they behaved well, 4) they are good children, 5) I was advised to sometimes be less strict with them , 6) it is an educational technique</p>                      |
| <p><b>Negative sanction with regard to the children:</b><br/> <i>When I am severe with my children, it is because ...</i><br/>                     1) I had a tough day at work, 2) I am someone who doesn't let anything go, 3) they misbehaved, 4) they are difficult children, 5) I was advised to sometimes be severe with them, 6) it is an educational technique</p> |
| <p><b>Potitive sanction with regard to the spouse:</b><br/> <i>When I get mad at my spouse, it is because...</i><br/>                     1) I had a tough day at work, 2) I get angry easily, 3) she deserved it, 4) she has a difficult character, 5) sometimes it happens in a couple, 6) it's often like that, the couple's life</p>                                   |
| <p><b>Negative sanction with regard to the spouse:</b><br/> <i>When I give a present to my wife, it is because...</i><br/>                     1) I'm having a good day, 2) I'm a generous person, 3) she deserved it, 4) she has a lovely character, 5) in a couple, it is sometimes necessary to give presents, 6) it is normal, in a couple</p>                         |

For a man, the instruction was as follows (for a woman, the instruction was similar but adapted to her gender): “Here are some behaviors that Paul has in his family (towards his children and towards his wife). Paul can use 6 reasons to explain why he behaves like this. You are asked to rank each explanation from 1 to 6, marking 1 for the most acceptable explanation, which satisfies you the most; up to 6 for the one you consider the least acceptable, which satisfies you the least. There are no right or wrong answers: it is your opinion that interests us, and your answers will remain anonymous”.

### 3. Results

The average of the scores assigned to each of the six explanatory proposals (and reflecting their ranking) was calculated for each of the behaviors, then we calculated Anovas.

#### 3.1. Parental situation

Inter-target comparisons indicate (tables 2 and 3), with the positive sanction distributed by a man, that the receiver (4.14) precedes the distributor (8.38) and the context (8.90), which are located at the same level. The hierarchy is the same when the actor is a woman, with first the receiver (5.23) then (equally) the distributor (6.96) and the context (7.15). The data are almost similar for the negative sanction: when the actor is a man, comes first the receiver (5.14) then the distributor (6.97) then the context (8.48), and with a female actor, the receiver (5.27) comes also first, then (equally) the distributor (7.92) and the context (8.08)

Table 2. Means (and standard deviations) of the answers to questions 1 (positive sanctions) and 2 (negative sanctions) in the parental situation.

|                                | Target’s attribution | Sanction’s source |             |
|--------------------------------|----------------------|-------------------|-------------|
|                                |                      | Man               | Woman       |
| Question 1 (positive sanction) | Distributor          | 8,38 (2,11)       | 6,96 (2,16) |
|                                | Recipient            | 4,14 (1,66)       | 5,23 (2,25) |
|                                | Context              | 8,90 (1,95)       | 7,15 (2,09) |
| Question 2 (negative sanction) | Distributor          | 6,97 (2,55)       | 7,92 (2,05) |
|                                | Recipient            | 5,14 (2,31)       | 5,27 (2,01) |
|                                | Context              | 8,48 (1,84)       | 8,08 (1,99) |

Nota: responses range from 1 to 6, with 1 being the most acceptable explanation and 6 the least acceptable.

Table 3. comparisons of the answers to questions 1 (positive sanction) and 2 (negative sanction) in the parental situation.

|                                      | Actor | Comparisons            | F      | P   | $\eta^2$ |
|--------------------------------------|-------|------------------------|--------|-----|----------|
| Question 1<br>(positive<br>sanction) | Man   | Distributor/Recipient  | 77.16  | .00 | .73      |
|                                      |       | Distributor/Context    | .70    | .40 |          |
|                                      |       | Recipient /Context     | 121.34 | .00 | .81      |
|                                      | Woman | Distributeur/Recipient | 7.07   | .01 | .22      |
|                                      |       | Distributor/Context    | .09    | .76 |          |
|                                      |       | Recipient /Context     | 8.97   | .00 | .26      |
| Question 2<br>(negative<br>sanction) | Man   | Distributor/Recipient  | 6.33   | 0.1 | .18      |
|                                      |       | Distributor/Context    | 6.59   | .01 | .19      |
|                                      |       | Recipient/Context      | 32.38  | .00 | .53      |
|                                      | Woman | Distributor/Recipient  | 16.35  | .00 | .39      |
|                                      |       | Distributor/Context    | .08    | .77 |          |
|                                      |       | Recipient /Context     | 16.96  | .00 | .40      |

#### 3.2. Marital situation

Inter-target comparisons indicate (tables 4 and 5), with the positive sanction distributed by a man, that the receiver (6.21) precedes the distributor (7.86), and when the distribution is carried out by a woman, it is first the context (4.73) that takes precedence, then (equally) the receiver (6.19) and the distributor (6.38). Now, with the negative sanction and a male actor, comes first the context (5.93) then (equally) the distributor (7.55) and the receiver (8.48), and when the actor is a woman, the context (5.96) is ahead of the distributor (7.69).

Table 4. Means (and standard deviations) of the answers to questions 1 (positive sanctions) and 2 (negative sanctions) in the marital situation.

|                                | Target's attribution | Sanction's source |             |
|--------------------------------|----------------------|-------------------|-------------|
|                                |                      | Man               | Woman       |
| Question 1 (positive sanction) | Distributor          | 7,86 (2,73)       | 6,38 (2,77) |
|                                | Recipient            | 6,21 (2,67)       | 6,19 (3,04) |
|                                | Context              | 6,38 (2,82)       | 4,73 (2,67) |
| Question 2 (negative sanction) | Distributor          | 7,55 (2,74)       | 7,69 (2,42) |
|                                | Recipient            | 8,48 (2,48)       | 7,19 (2,62) |
|                                | Context              | 5,93 (2,57)       | 5,96 (2,23) |

Nota: responses range from 1 to 6, with 1 being the most acceptable explanation and 6 the least acceptable.

Table 5. Comparisons of the answers to questions 1 (positive sanction) and 2 (negative sanction) in the marital Situation.

|                                      | Actor | Comparisons            | F     | P   | $\eta^2$ |
|--------------------------------------|-------|------------------------|-------|-----|----------|
| Question 1<br>(positive<br>sanction) | Man   | Distributor/Recipient  | 4.95  | .03 | .15      |
|                                      |       | Distributor/Context    | 3.01  | .09 |          |
|                                      |       | Recipient /Context     | 0.3   | .85 |          |
|                                      | Woman | Distributeur/Recipient | .06   | .79 |          |
|                                      |       | Distributor/Context    | 6.44  | .01 | .20      |
|                                      |       | Recipient /Context     | 4.30  | .04 | .14      |
| Question 2<br>(negative<br>sanction) | Man   | Distributor/Recipient  | 1.37  | .25 |          |
|                                      |       | Distributor/Context    | 4.95  | .03 | .15      |
|                                      |       | Recipient/Context      | 13.58 | .00 | .32      |
|                                      | Woman | Distributor/Recipient  | .34   | .56 |          |
|                                      |       | Distributor/Context    | 7.18  | .01 | .22      |
|                                      |       | Récepteur/contexte     | 2.94  | .09 |          |

#### 4. Discussion – conclusion

As we recalled in the introduction, researches on the locus of control report a quantitative prevalence of internal attributions, a prevalence interpreted as resulting from their social valuation: the receiver of a reinforcement is valued when he says he is responsible. This valuation was extended by Beauvois and Le Poulter (1986) to the attribution of behaviors: according to these authors, it would manifest itself both in terms of explaining reinforcements and explaining behaviors. However, researches on the Locus of Distribution, relating to the explanation of distributive behaviors of sanctions, invalidate this hypothesis: carried out in an educational or professional environment, they show an accentuation of the weight of the receiver of a reinforcement, which results in a disempowerment of the reinforcement distributor. Here, we have extended these latest studies to the family domain with the hypothesis that we could found similar results. The results effectively show that in the parental situation, whatever the gender of the actor or the direction of the sanction, the receiver is always evoked as the preferred cause: he is systematically ahead, in a significant way, both the distributor and the context. Similarly, in the marital situation, the results also show that the distributor is never indicated as the first cause.

However, this study has some limitations. Thus, only "fair" sanctions, or at least sanctions on which no information allows to question their fairness, have been staged. Additional researches are therefore necessary before being able to say that the results presented are generalizable to situations in which the sanctions would be unfair. It also would be interesting to examine the possible impact of cultural variations: would the results be identical in more patriarchal societies, in societies with more unequal couple relationships? This being so, apart from the fact that the results obtained already enrich the knowledge on the locus of distribution (and more generally on attributive theories), they are not without possible applications: participating in the deciphering of attributive ideologies can allow, by a more objective localization of responsibilities, to avoid some frustrations and disputes.

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