Available online at www.sciencedirect.com

SCIENCE DIRECT®

Applied Developmental Psychology 26 (2005) 314–328

Applied Developmental Psychology

Children's attributions for their own versus others' behavior: Influence of actor versus observer differences

Charlotte Johnston[a,*], Catherine M. Lee[b]

[a]*Department of Psychology, University of British Columbia, 2136 West Mall, Vancouver, Canada BC V7T 1Z4*
[b]*School of Psychology, University of Ottawa, Canada*

Abstract

In attempts to make assessments less threatening, children are sometimes asked to respond to questions about another child rather than about themselves. Little is known about how this manipulation of response format (self versus other) might influence children's responses. This study compared responses of 58 younger (5–7 years) and 68 older (8–11 years) boys who made attributions about child behavior. Boys reported either as they themselves would respond to a situation described in the measure (self condition) or as they thought a hypothetical other child (other condition) would respond. Some situations were positive and some were negative. Consistent with hypotheses, older boys provided more internal attributions than did younger boys; boys in both age groups attributed negative events more to internal causes if they responded as a hypothetical other child, as compared to responding as themselves. Suggesting specificity of the self-serving bias to attributions, boys who were responding as a hypothetical "other" child described engagement and involvement with their mothers more positively than did those who were responding as themselves. In addition, few differences were found in responses of boys diagnosed with ADHD compared to those without known problems. The implications for having children respond to rating scales as another child in both clinical and research settings are discussed.

Keywords: Child attributions; Self–other bias; Actor–observer; Self-reports; Mother–child relationship

* Corresponding author. Tel.: +1 604 822 6771; fax: +1 602 822 6923.
E-mail address: cjohnston@psych.ubc.ca (C. Johnston).

0193-3973/$ - see front matter © 2005 Elsevier Inc. All rights reserved.
doi:10.1016/j.appdev.2005.02.005

1. Introduction

In both research and applied contexts, psychologists frequently assess children's abilities, emotions, or behavior. In attempts to make these assessments less threatening, children are sometimes asked to respond to questions about another child rather than themselves. However, there has been no empirical investigation of whether and/or how this manipulation of response format (self versus other) may influence children's responses. This question is the focus of the present study.

In addition to the usual demands of conducting reliable and valid assessments in any population, psychologists face special challenges in child assessments due to the inherent ways in which children differ from adults, and differ from one another according to their stage of development. The period from early childhood through to adolescence is one of rapid and uneven change in children's cognitive functioning, expressive skills, and self-awareness (Harter & Whitesell, 1989; La Greca, 1994). Consequently, the psychological assessment of children is a complex endeavor that must be sensitive not only to standard psychometric concerns, but also to developmental changes that may affect responses and that may interact with variations in assessment methods.

In contrast to early approaches to child assessment that relied primarily on adult accounts of child behavior or on interpretations of children's play, current child assessment strategies often include the child as an important source of information about his/her thoughts and feelings. Although there continues to be debate about the value of different methods and the accuracy of different informants in providing reports of various types of child behavior (Phares, 1997), it is now generally acknowledged that children can provide unique information about aspects of their experience that are not fully tapped by measures completed by adult informants such as parents, teachers, or caregivers (Grills & Ollendick, 2002; Treutler & Epkins, 2003). Indeed, the relative ease and practicality of children's self-report measures, coupled with a growing emphasis on cognitive factors in children's psychological adjustment, has led to the development and use of such measures. As the number of measures has burgeoned, there has been a growing body of research focused on the empirical basis for child assessment techniques (Hunsley, Lee, & Wood, 2003; Salmon, 2001).

A number of issues arise in using self-report measures with children, including questions of the child's comprehension of both the content of items and the requirements of responding, and how the format of the measure may influence children's responses. One aspect of test content and format that is varied in both clinical and research settings is whether the child responds thinking of himself or herself or thinking of a hypothetical child. To date, the effects of the common clinical practice of having the child respond as a hypothetical child have not been examined empirically and, consequently, the impact of this variation in assessment method is unknown. Asking children to respond by inquiring about how another child would act or feel is an example of the psychodynamic concept of displacement, which is presumed to permit children to talk about feelings and ideas that they would otherwise defend against through silence, denial and responses such as "I don't know" (Kalter & Schreier, 1994). According to psychodynamic theorists, expression of feelings as if they belonged to someone else alleviates children's fears of the consequences of their thoughts and feelings (Garbarino, Stott, & Faculty of the Erikson Institute, 1992). Although there is ample anecdotal evidence and clinical lore that children provide more elaborate responses to questions about another child than to questions about themselves, there has been no empirical investigation of whether there are differences in the content of children's responses according to this variation in response format (self or other).