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# CAUSAL ATTRIBUTIONS OF COMPLIANCE OR REBELLION ACCORDING TO THE RAVEN'S BASES OF POWER

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## ABSTRACT

*In the present study, participants had to explain the behavior of some agents and targets of influence when the interactions involved the power bases mentioned by Raven (1998) in the power/interaction model of interpersonal influence. The behavior of the target of influence was either a complaint or rebellious behavior. Participants had to explain such behavior referring to different internal attributions (willingness, belief, personality or interest) and external attributions (others' will, fate, luck or circumstances). As expected, results show frequent internal attributions when explaining the agent's behavior and rebellion. Results underline the necessity to consider not only the internal/external dimensions but also the nature of behavior.*

**KEYWORDS:** *power, attribution, rebellion, compliance*

Accounting for power can refer to passions (Mulder, 1977); personality (Adorno, Frenkel-Brunswik, Levinson, & Sanford, 1950; Altemeyer, 1998); collective rationality (Anderson & Berdahl, 2002; Jost & Hunyady, 2002; Keltner, Gruenfeld, & Anderson, 2003); culture (Hofstede, 2001; Torelli & Shavitt, 2010) or to interactions within groups (Turner, 2005; Brauer & Bourhis, 2006). The power/interaction model of interpersonal influence (Raven, 1990, 1992, 2001; Koslowsky & Schwarzwald, 2001) offers a unique perspective, as it is based on common and spontaneous causal attributions, *i.e.*, power bases. French and Raven (1958a&b, 1959) initially presented a typology of six power bases, *i.e.*, resources which can be implemented to change a target's belief, attitude or behavior. The first two bases are reward (promise of reward or positive evaluation) and coercion

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(threat of punishment or negative evaluation). Legitimacy (power associated with status or a social norm) may also be a power base. The latter is usually associated to authority (French & Raven, 1958a). The legitimacy of a request may depend on the status of the influencing agent or the existence of standards that promote the reciprocity, the responsibility or the equity. The influencing agent can also use the information base (the quality of persuasive arguments), the expertise base (the influencing agent's skill or credibility) or the reference base (identification with an attractive person or a referent group). Finally, the IPIM model considers two other bases (Raven, Schwarzwald, & Koslowsky, 1998). The ecological base (changing behavior following a change in the situation) refers to the influence exerted by the environment. The influencing agent can also invoke or reduce the power of a third party, such as a superior or an organizational rule (invoking base).

From the target of influence's perspective, perception of a base is a causal attribution of power (Erchul, Raven, & Whichard, 2001; Erchul, Raven, & Wilson, 2004). From this point of view, the perception of the power base is not independent of the causal attribution process. Causal attributions, *i.e.* the explanation of social events or behaviors, are the subject of many theoretical models (Heider, 1958; Jones & Davis, 1965; Kelley, 1973; Kassir, 1979). To provide explanations, one can appeal to the context, previous inferences or behavior. At the heart of these different models, one of the most important dimensions is the distinction between the elements relating to the person (internal attribution), for example motivation, personality and elements having to do with the environment (external attribution), for example chance, fate, the others. For example, internal attributions (Sabini & Silver, 1983) tend to account for obedience in Milgram's study (1974), but in this case obedience leads to behavior resulting in wrongdoing. This result can reflect two phenomenons. First, regarding causal attribution, social psychologists agree that people tend to make dispositional attributions. It is believed to reflect the actor's own disposition or preferences. This phenomenon is usually called "the fundamental attribution error" (Jones & Harris, 1967; Jones & Nisbett, 1971; Ross, Amabile, & Steinmetz, 1977). At the same time, power attribution means attributing responsibility (Kaplowitz, 1978), and attributing a compliance behavior leading to a wrongdoing or a rebellion is not exactly the same process as attributing a behavior leading to a legitimate compliance. For example, some studies reveal that the power of rewards is perceived as more internal when explaining a transgression, and rather external when explaining a compliant behaviour (Alanazi & Rodrigues, 2003). When behavior appears inconsistent with what is socially expected, explanations tend to become more internal and betraying the intentions of the person displaying such behavior (Jones, Davis, & Gergen, 1961). Explanations therefore generally focus on factors related to people, especially since the behaviors needing explanation violate a standard or oppose a prescription from a social agent of power.

This induces our first hypothesis H1: Causal attributions are more internal when it comes to account for behavior opposing an agent of power or a standard rather than a compliant behavior.

Attributions also depend on who is evaluated. Overbeck, Tiedens and Brion (2006) note that causal attributions are more internal and dispositional when it concerns a power holder's behavior, and external and situational when it concerns a target's behavior. This relationship is explained by the fact that people who hold power are perceived as having the resources to express their will and impact events, while those who are deprived of power are deemed as merely putting up with events and as compelled to fulfill their duty towards agents of power. Overbeck et al. (2006, p. 479) summarize this with the following formula: "The powerful want to, the powerless have to".

This induces our second hypothesis H2: Causal attributions are more internal when it comes to explaining the behavior of a power-holding agent than the behavior of an agent submitted to a power relationship.

Concerning the attributions associated with different power bases, some studies establish recurrences (Rodrigues, 2003). Raven (1992) indicates that the reward and coercion bases rather induce external attribution for the target's compliance. Meanwhile, the informational base induces internal attributions, while expertise, reference and legitimacy do not clearly lead to internal or external attributions. In this case, attributions tend to be more internal when the power base is referent, i.e. is based on attractiveness and more external when the power base is coercive, i.e. is based on the use of sanctions. One must also consider power base independently. Brown and Raven (1994) observed that the informational base, the expertise base and the reference base are perceived as more internal than are coercion, reward and legitimate bases respectively. Rodrigues and Lloyd (1998) observed that the compliant behavior caused by reward, information and reference was perceived as more internal than the behavior caused by legitimacy, expertise, and coercion. Results may be different if one takes into account the nature of submissive behavior. Alanazi and Rodrigues (2003) observed that compliant behaviours caused by reward or coercion are perceived as more internal when they lead to a bad outcome than to a good one.

This induces our third hypothesis H3: We expect more external attributions to explain compliance when referring to legitimacy, reward, coercion and more internal attributions to account for compliance when referring to reference, information and expertise.

Some questions remain unanswered concerning the attribution of power in Raven's typology (Raven, 2001). Most studies concern the causal attribution of targets' behaviors but do not consider the behavior of agents of influence. However power bases are both explanations of agents of influence's behavior and reasons for targets' compliance. Similarly, studies do not appeal to all the bases of power described by Raven, such as ecological power or invoking power. Normative bases

of legitimacy have also been neglected. Meanwhile, attributions are not always very univocal because we do not know what aspect of the person or the environment they use. Some power bases involve the targets' self-interests (reward, coercion) and others refer to their beliefs (expertise) but it is unclear what types of explanations are truly relevant. Finally, attributions relate mainly to compliance behaviors but not to rebellion. However, rebellion is less likely than compliance but also possible. Indeed, social disapproval decreases the likelihood of this type of behavior but doesn't make it impossible.

In this study, we present nine scenarios featuring different power bases. Subjects must account for the target's rebellion or compliance behaviours and for the ways the agent of influence behaves. In general, the target's compliance that relies on legitimate, reward or coercion bases are mostly perceived as external, while compliance relying on informational, expertise or reference bases is rather perceived as internal. When the target's compliance is a transgression or leads to a bad outcome, the causal attribution tends to be internal. When the explanations concern the power holder's behavior, the causal attribution tends to be internal while the explanations of the target's behaviors tend to be external. These proposals will serve as our assumptions. Other bases (legitimacy of reciprocity, invoking power and ecological power) have been studied in an exploratory way.

## **METHOD**

### **Participants**

A total of fifty-six students (28 women and 28 men) of participated voluntarily in this experiment. The mean age of participants was 19 years and 8 months ( $SD= 8$  months).

### **Variables**

#### **Bases of power**

The participants individually read nine scenarios describing an interaction between an influencing agent (A) and a target (T), in professional settings. Nine scenarios describes behaviours, with various power bases (see appendix 1). The bases were coercion (T complied because he was threatened physically in the workshop); reward (T complied because he was promised a financial reward); legitimacy (T complied with A's request because A is his line manager); the invocation of reciprocity (T complied to A's request because A has already done much for him professionally); expertise (T complied with recommendations because they came from A, the audit/certification company's expert) identification (T complied with A's request because he wants to look like A, which is the person T admires for

getting on so brilliantly in the company); the informational base (T complied with A's advice because it is generally convincing); the ecological base (T changed his way of working because A has changed the hours and place of work); and the invoking power base (T complied with A because otherwise the Boss would be warned of his behavior).

### **Behaviour of the target**

Each scenario describes compliance or rebellion behaviours. In the compliance condition, it was indicated that the target obeyed or complied to the request. In the rebellion condition, each base is the same but it was indicated that the target had disobeyed the request.

### **Causal attribution**

Participants were asked to explain the agent of influence's and the target's behaviours, choosing causal attributions. They were asked to choose only one cause out of four internal ones (beliefs, personality, interest or willingness) or out of four external ones (fate, luck, others' will or circumstances).

### **Procedure**

The participants, all students, were randomly assigned to either a compliance or rebellion condition. They read nine scenarios describing nine different power bases and had to account for the respective behaviours of the influencing agent and of the target for each base. For each scenario, they answered by choosing one attribution to explain target' behaviour and another one attribution to explain agent' behaviour. They were informed of the purpose of the study only after completion of their task. The objectives of the study were presented and the methodology of the experiment explained to the subjects.

## RESULTS

The data were analyzed with the Chi square test – or the Fisher exact test when the data were insufficient.

Table 1.

*Internal and External attributions of the behaviour of the agent of influence and the target as a function of compliance or rebellion of the target*

		Compliance of the target		
		Agent of influence	Target of influence	Total
Internal	Personality	32	29	61
	Belief	10	11	21
	Self-interest	13	22	35
	Willingness	21	17	38
	<b>Total</b>	<b>76</b>	<b>79</b>	<b>155</b>
External	Fate	3	2	5
	Luck	0	0	0
	Will of others	14	17	31
	Circumstance	33	28	61
	<b>Total</b>	<b>50</b>	<b>47</b>	<b>97</b>
		Rebellion of the target		
		Agent of influence	Target of influence	Total
Internal	Personality	34	55	89
	Belief	8	19	27
	Self-interest	19	10	29
	Willingness	26	16	42
	<b>Total</b>	<b>87</b>	<b>100</b>	<b>187</b>
External	Fate	4	6	10
	Luck	3	1	4
	Will of others	9	3	12
	Circumstance	23	16	39
<b>Total</b>	<b>39</b>	<b>26</b>	<b>65</b>	

We observed more internal attributions to explain rebellion ( $\Sigma = 187$ ) than to account for compliance ( $\Sigma = 155$ ;  $\chi^2 = 9.32$ ,  $df = 1$ ,  $p < .05$ ). The first hypothesis is verified. There is no difference concerning the four categories of internal attributions. Compliance is more frequently accounted for the will of others (12/31;  $\chi^2 = 4.41$ ,  $df = 1$ ,  $p < .05$ ).

The internal attributions are equivalent ( $\chi^2 = 2.33$ ,  $df = 1$ ,  $ns$ ) to explain the behaviour of the agent of influence ( $\Sigma = 163$ ) and the target's ( $\Sigma = 179$ ). There is no

difference concerning the internal attributions on the behaviour of the agent of influence or the target's. The attributions are equivalent when concerning personality ( $\chi^2 = .144$ ,  $df = 1$ ,  $p = .24$ ), belief ( $\chi^2 = 2.31$ ,  $df = 1$ ,  $p = .13$ ) or interest ( $\chi^2 = .17$ ,  $df = 1$ ,  $p = .68$ ) both for the agent and the target of influence. On the other hand, there are more attributions making reference to willingness ( $\chi^2 = 5.15$ ,  $df = 1$ ,  $p < .02$ ) when giving reasons for the behaviour of the agent of influence ( $\Sigma = 47$ ) than for the target's behaviour ( $\Sigma = 33$ ). The second hypothesis is infirmed, if we consider all attributions together, but confirmed concerning the attributions making reference to willingness.

We expected more external attributions to explain compliance when referring to the three bases (legitimacy, reward, coercion), and more internal attributions as reasons for compliance when referring to the three bases (reference, information and expertise). When participants have to explain compliance, they more frequently choose some external attributions ( $\Sigma = 22$ ) than internal ( $\Sigma = 6$ ) for the power of legitimacy/status (*Fisher's exact probability* = .02). On the other hand, when referring to legitimacy/reciprocity, internal attributions ( $\Sigma = 23$ ) are more frequently observed than external ( $\Sigma = 5$ ; *Fisher's exact probability* = .01). We have more frequently observed some internal attributions ( $\Sigma = 24$ ) than external attributions ( $\Sigma = 4$ ) to account for the power of reward (*Fisher's exact probability* = .004). There is no difference between internal ( $\Sigma = 19$ ) and external attributions ( $\Sigma = 9$ ) concerning the power of coercion (*Fisher's exact probability* = .14). Participants more frequently use internal attributions ( $\Sigma = 24$ ) than external attribution ( $\Sigma = 4$ ) when referring to the power of reference (*Fisher's exact probability* = .004). They also use more frequently internal ( $\Sigma = 21$ ) than external attribution ( $\Sigma = 7$ ) to account for the power of information (*Fisher's exact probability* = .04). There is no difference between the internal ( $\Sigma = 14$ ) and external ( $\Sigma = 14$ ) attributions concerning the power of expertise (*Fisher's exact probability* = 1). The third hypothesis is infirmed.

When explaining compliance behaviour, there is no difference between the internal ( $\Sigma = 11$ ) and external ( $\Sigma = 17$ ) attributions concerning the ecological power (*Fisher's exact probability* = .29) and no difference between the internal ( $\Sigma = 13$ ) and external ( $\Sigma = 15$ ) attributions concerning the invoking power (*Fisher's exact probability* = .5).

## DISCUSSION

In this study, participants had to explained the compliant or rebellious behaviours of a target of influence and the behaviours of an agent exercising a power based on different resources.

Results revealed participants have more frequently chosen some internal attributions to explain rebellion, but the nature of these reasons is not unambiguous.

Indeed, all the internal causes (willingness, self-interest, belief, personality) can explain rebellion in participants' eyes. We can suppose that the rebellious behaviour causes incredulity, as conformity appears as a more likely behaviour and even a more desirable one (Gangloff & Duchon, 2008; Gangloff & Mayoral, 2008; Gilles, Scheidegger, & Toma, 2011). The attribution of rebellion may have resulted from trying to make sense of things, just as much as trying to attribute responsibility (Greitemeyer & Weiner, 2003). In this case, if we take into account both previous studies and our results, it seems that wrongdoing, transgressions and compliance leading to bad outcome or rebellion pertain to the same register of explanation, *i.e.*, internal attribution. At the same time, compliance behaviors are explained with greater likelihood by the will of others. Overall, it seems that, in the eyes of an observer, people obey or comply with the will of others while they rebel because of what they are as a person. So, it is undesirable to consider the attribution of causality on power independently of the nature of the behaviour that is induced.

Future research should also take into account the distance the observer maintains with the object. Indeed, the judgment that can be passed on a behavior depends on the distance maintained vis-à-vis the latter (Eyal, Liberman, & Trope, 2008) and, particularly the fact that one is able or not to choose the behavior under evaluation.

In line with Overbeck, Tiedens, and Brion's (2006), results revealed that participants explain the behaviour of the agent of influence by appealing to willingness. On the other hand, we do not observe external reasons for the behaviour of the target of influence. We can consider that the powerful are perceived as people who "want others to" but we cannot consider that the powerless actually "have to". We can assume that our measure of attribution is more restrictive than Overbeck, Tiedens, and Brion's (2006). Some participants in our study were asked to choose one single cause for explaining the target's behaviour, while subjects in Overbeck and *al.*'s study only had to indicate, using a continuous measurement scale, whether the behaviour could be accounted for by the situation. The high frequency of internal attributions we have observed suggests that participants made a fundamental attribution error. This certainly is a limitation associated with our research that is not strictly comparable to other studies on this subject.

We found some external attributions when concerning the legitimacy/status base, as well as some internal attributions when concerning the reference, the reward or informational bases respectively. Our results confirm those obtained by Rodrigues (2006) and Litman-Adizes and Raven (1978) on internal bases and the perception of legitimacy as an external base. Results do not confirm previous studies when concerning all the coercion and expertise bases. Alani and Rodrigues (2003) have already underlined the failure to replicate findings consistently. Our study brings new evidence of this difficulty.

Our results allow concluding that the legitimacy base, *i.e.*, status or reciprocity, do not bring about consensual explanations. When legitimacy is presented in reference to the status of the agent of influence, attribution is external, whereas reference to a legitimacy associated with a reciprocity standard rather leads to an internal attribution. This result suggests that it is not desirable to place both forms of legitimacy on the same plane, since they turn out to be distinct in the way they are perceived. Future researches should take more specific interest in these various bases and explore other bases like equity-legitimacy or responsibility-legitimacy.

Finally, the ecological power or the invoking power did not lead to unambiguous attributions. Both bases suggest indirect acquisition strategies and the use of power. They therefore hinge as much upon the intentions of the agent of power as on the resources available to him to support his power. This could explain why it is difficult to account for the behavior of an agent of influence in an univocal way.

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## APPENDIX 1

scenario 1: Marc does what Paul requests of him because the latter threatened him physically in the workshop (*versus* Marc does not comply with Paul's demand, although the latter has physically threatened him in the workshop).

scenario 2: Gildaz, a technician, does not comply to the letter with the recommendations that are given to him even though they were made by Roger, the expert working for the auditing body that verifies compliance with manufacturing standards (*versus* Gildaz, a technician, observes to the letter the recommendations given to him because they come from Roger, the expert sent by the auditing body which verifies compliance with manufacturing standards).

scenario 3: Peter does what Hervé demands because the latter has promised him a financial reward (*versus* Peter does not comply with Herve's wishes although the latter has promised him a financial reward).

scenario 4: Michel does not agree in all cases on his colleague Eric's decisions, although he would like to emulate that person, whom he admires so much for succeeding so brilliantly in the company (*versus* Michel agrees in all cases on his colleague Eric's decisions because he wants to become like that person, whose brilliant career in their company he admires).

scenario 5: Jean accepts Benoît's dictating his behaviors at work because the former is his line-manager (*versus* Jean will not have Benoît dictating to him how he must behave at work, though the latter is his supervisor).

scenario 6: Vincent does not follow Peter's advice although it is convincing most of the times (*versus* Vincent takes Peters advice because it is convincing most of the times).

scenario 7: Charles does what Hector asks him to because the latter has already done so much for him professionally (*versus* Charles does not obey Hector's requests although the latter has done a lot for him professionally).

scenario 8: Luke does not change his way of working even if Claude has accepted to change his work schedule and workplace (*versus* Luke changes his way of working because Claude has agreed to change his work-schedule and workplace).

scenario 9: Noël does not carry out Bertrand's orders, although the latter has warned him that, should he fail to comply, the HRD would be informed of his behavior (*versus* Noël carries out Bertrand's orders because he has been forewarned that, otherwise, the HRD would be informed of his conduct).