Private and Public Bullets: Analyzing Credit Attributions in Military Outsourcing

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The increased outsourcing of national security endeavors to private military companies (PMC) raises questions concerning public evaluations of their performance and the extent to which government officials are held accountable or rewarded. We explore this topic by employing a survey experiment to test public credit attribution associated with a successful military operation. This operation is conducted by either regular or private military personnel, and we further manipulate the context. We closely examine performance appraisals and how they intersect with other operational features. Implications from our study add to the discussion on the private sector outsourcing of military capacities which are rapidly expanding across the Western world.

Introduction

The attribution of credit is an area of research that is almost exclusively examined tangentially to the attribution of blame – if at all. For a variety of reasons, the study of blame attribution has presented itself as a more thought-provoking topic because a lackluster scenario guarantees the presence of political consequences. But what if a government program goes well? It is entirely possible, perhaps even probable, that institutions will operate in the general direction of achieving some of their organizational goals. In keeping with this proposition, our manuscript is intended to shed light on the causal channels on what is likely a common social process: credit attribution.

According to the literature, credit attribution should follow the same processes that underly blame attribution (Marsh and Tilley 2009). When there is clarity for who is responsible for an outcome, then blame or credit should more easily be assigned (Powel and Whitten 1993). However, we are hesitant to declare that blame attribution and credit attribution are transmitted through processes that are mirror images of each other. We contend that blame can be more easily assigned to different actors across an organization that are determined to be at fault, so called bad-apples; in contrast, credit attribution channels are strongly influenced by facets of organizations that the agents are directly or indirectly associated with.

When we address a member of the public's opinion on attributing credit or blame, we assume that the value of the attribution may reflects more than just the "pure" quality of the consequence of the action. After all, the metrics of evaluating an action is not that rigid. In other words, we claim that perceived quality of an action depends in part on the identity of the

performer. The performer, as a representative or member of particular organization, often carries a particular branded identity associated with that agency.

The idea of branding originates in literature on private sector organizations (see, e.g., Farquhar 1989; Lassar et al. 1995), but it intersects with the literature on reputations in politics (see, e.g., Walter 2006). Generally speaking brands have value that can be measured as a form of "brand equity" (Teodoro and An 2018). Brand equity is something that private enterprises heavily invest in to create an image that can add value to their products and services. Similarly, public organizations engage in publicity campaigns to achieve similar aims (Kosar 2012). In both cases, given the perspective of the New Public Management (NPM) paradigm, citizens are considered clients of the services provided by both private and governmental organizations (Hood 1995). The citizens, as customers, have performance expectations based in part of the branding of the service provider and value some government organizations more than others.

We test this theory by using the U.S. military as a baseline because its strong branding is essentially a given. Using a survey experiment, we present a vignette that tests whether U.S. Marines or Private Military Contractors are viewed as higher performing agents in successful scenarios. We then examine how credit transmits across the organization. While success is found to have a positive impact on performance perceptions, it may not lead to the attribution of credit to agents or to the ultimate principal, the Secretary of Defense. However, performance perceptions are found to have a positive impact on U.S. Marine credit attributions. Furthermore, we find that organizational charts, that serve to link principal of the organization to the actors, lead to counterintuitive findings. Based on our analysis, we contend that this broken credit pathway is a product of the actors operating within the framework of a high performing organization.

In the ensuing sections of this article, we will begin with an interdisciplinary literature review on credit and blame attribution. Following our review, we will present our theory with testable hypotheses, and our research design. Finally, we will conclude with our research findings and conclusions. This paper, generally speaking, contributes to a variety of fields but most importantly provides some evidence that credit attribution does occur; however, the causal pathways function like a trail of falling dominos.

Literature Review

A variety of different literatures have examined this topic of responsibility attribution and they all emphasize the need to connect cause and effect (i.e., a causal-linkage). In the field of political science, the significance of causal-linkages has been found to be influential with a focus on policy outcomes, which coincides with the "reward-punishment" model (Marsh and Tilley 2009). Much of this research on responsibility attribution has revolved around retrospective economic voting (Lewis-Beck and Stegmaier 2013). In short, citizens are more likely to hold their leaders accountable for positive or negative economic outcomes occurs after they can attribute responsibility. One of the most important findings from this literature relates to clarity of responsibility with domestic economic outcomes (Powell and Whitten 1993). When there is clarity of responsibility for an outcome, it is easier for the public to determine accountability. Clarity of responsibility is fundamentally in sync with other social science literatures that emphasize the establishment of making an appropriate causal connection between actor and outcome.

In social psychology, it has been found that establishing a causal-linkage between actor and outcome is critical for assigning responsibility and effectively determining accountability

(Alicke 2000; Schlenker et al. 1994). Consistent with this viewpoint, economists have found

through dictator games that delegation to an intermediary agent can disrupt the causal-linkage

that ties the decision to split funds with the dictator (Bartling and Fischbacher 2012). More

specifically, the recipient is more willing to accept a reduced pay-out since a rebuff may not be

properly punishing the correct player. On the whole, the research in social psychology and

experimental economics is clear that the mere occurrence of a salient outcome is not sufficient to

establish accountability, and that a causal-linkage is a prerequisite.

At the local level in the U.S., a small experimental literature exists in public

administration that suggests public perceptions of organizational structures may impact blame

attribution. This body of research has examined government programs that have been privatized

for purposes of increasing efficiency. In two recent articles, private-sector contracting schemes

were found to be ineffective at influencing blame in response to a negative policy outcome

(Marvel and Girth 2016; and James et al. 2016); although James et al. (2016) did find that

reminding experimental participants that a politician was involved did increase blame in a

counterintuitive way. Generally speaking, these findings appear to be at odds with the pervasive

view that the private sector is more efficient than the public sector across Western nations

(Hvidman and Andersen 2016). However, these null-findings may be contextual and events at

the national level may lead to different evaluative processes. In addition, these studies address

sub-par performance that may elicit dissatisfaction and blame to any provider.

At the Federal level in the U.S., there have been some persuasive findings that are more

clear-cut. Both article that we located address how blame is tied to the U.S. presidency. In

Ruder (2014), the author explored issues associated with the U.S. presidency and causal-linkages

in Anti-Trust Policy by looking at agencies that are either controlled or uncontrolled by the

executive branch. Ruder (2014) varied the agency types in a survey experiment and found that participants were less likely to attribute blame to a U.S. President when there was no causal-linkage present with an agency. Similarly, Ruder (2015) conducted an experiment concerning the Deepwater Horizon oil spill in the Gulf of Mexico and found that survey participants were more likely to attribute blame to the U.S. President if a causal-linkage was established. This research collectively suggests that blame associated with bad policy outcomes can be diffused when there is no clear causal-linkage at the Federal level, perhaps this is due to issue saliency at the Federal level with a greater clarity in hierarchy and program control. But, what do all these findings imply for credit attribution?

Theoretical Framework

In order to understand the causal processes of credit attribution, we build off of theory in blame attribution. Hood (2010) claims that there is a strong motive for blame avoidance that is a product of "mediocrity bias" in government agencies, which arises in response to the tendency toward "negativity bias" across the media in politics (Pg. 9-10). Organizational strategies are one route to engage in blame avoidance that emphasizes organizational oversight and specially formulated organizational structures. Previous research on organizational strategies have operationalized them through opaque organizational structures and private-sector contracting arrangements (Marvel and Girth 2016; and James et al. 2016). Furthermore, a generous amount of literature has also suggested that legislatures attempt to structure organizations in such a way that diffuses blame (Fiorina 1982; Fiorina 1986; Arnold 1990; McGraw 1990; McGraw 1991; and Weimer 2006), but this begs an important question: does credit attribution travel through the same causal pathways as blame?

The same causal-linkages that assign blame can also function as pathways for the transmission of credit to different actors (Powell and Whitten 1993). Economic policy is just such an area where blame and credit are simultaneously assigned, and social scientists have consistently found that a successful economy can greatly increase the probability of re-election by an incumbent executive (Lewis-Beck and Stegmaier 2013). Clearly politicians are being given credit for economic growth and rewarded with additional votes at the ballot box. Building on these findings on economic policy, it has also been found that attribution in foreign policy are more likely than economic benefits in broader opinion by the mass public (Sirin and Villalobos 2011). Based on this preexisting theory and associated research findings, we posit that it naturally follows that a successful (unsuccessful) foreign policy outcome will lead to lead to some level of credit (blame) being passed on to different actors involved in the policy outcome. However, we anticipate that the type of affiliated organizations can interfere with assessing causal-linkages under certain contexts.

The key to understanding these indirect processes relates to branding and organizational performance levels. Like private sector brands, public organizations have been found to possess some level of brand equity (Teodoro and An 2018). This brand equity may have the ability to frame how we view actors affiliated with a government agency, much like how consumers perceive a particular company's products in the private sector (Cobb-Walgren, Ruble, and Donthu 1995; Erdem and Swait 1998; Faircloth, Capella, and Alford 2001; Foxall and Schrezenmaier 2007). The presence of a public organization with high brand equity may increase perceptions of performance through the concept of passive association with something previously associated with a high level of competence and performance (Alon-Barkat and Gilard 2017; Carpenter 2010). This brand is effectively an image that frames how the public views the

organization. By drawing causal-linkages to this brand, visually or verbally, it may lead to positive impacts on performance perceptions.

With respect to an organization, credit may become diffused across an organization in the event that agents are strongly connected to said organization and influenced by the brand. The performance of the agent may then be attributed to the organization, building the brand even further. The mass public will be faced with two questions when evaluating performance simultaneously with the strength of causal-linkages: (1) Were the agents successful based on their own initiative? Or (2), were the agents successful based on training and socialization associated with a highly reputable organization? In general, perceptions are likely to be a mixture of the two; however, we predict that multi-dimensional signals will make it difficult to assess the level of self-initiative of the actors, making it more difficult to attribute credit directly. In sum, we theorize that causal-linkages will function like signals, but multi-dimensional signals may have the ability to weaken the perceived agency of individual actors and be counter-productive for the performance perceptions of the security guards in our article.   In the case of the U.S. military, there is already a high level of brand equity and organizational ambiguity (Teodoro and An 2018; Delli, Carpini and Keeter 1997).

The U.S. Department of Defense ("DOD") that houses the American active-duty military is a colossal organization that exceeds two million full-time employees and possesses even more part-time employees. Most importantly, it has been found that the average American has little knowledge of how the many components of this organization operate (Delli, Carpini and Keeter 1997), which makes this particular government agency highly opaque. As a result, the shape of the DOD and how it proceeds with outsourcing can be described as obscure at best. This organizational complexity may lead to a great deal of fluidity with regards to the depth of

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organizational hierarchy and this may be further complicate public perceptions when there is some level of private-sector outsourcing of military functions.

Based on these supposition, we posit that credit attribution should act through the same causal pathways as those of blame attribution. However, organizational brand equity becomes a key influence in the context of understanding how credit channels function. Strong brand equity may turn causal-linkages into signals that may eventually be absorbed by a popular organization at the expense of the actors within this organization. This is not to say that the actors will not receive credit, but it will function more like a sequential domino effect:

1. Overall, successful policy outcomes should increase performance perceptions but not imply direct credit to the actors;

2. Increased performance perceptions will then increase credit attribution to the agents, but not the principal; and

3. Increased credit to the agents will trickle up to increased credit being attributed to principal(s).

With respect to our study, we arrive at the six following hypotheses:

Hypothesis 1: Because the U.S. military has a strong brand, U.S. Marines will lead to stronger performance perceptions than identical scenarios that use PMCs.

Hypothesis 2: Because the U.S. military has a strong brand, the presentation of an organizational chart will lead to stronger performance perceptions through clear association with the military.

Hypothesis 3: Due to weakening perceptions of self-agency on the part of the actors, an interaction term between organizational chart and membership in the U.S. Marines will have a negative impact on performance perceptions.

Hypothesis 4: Higher numbers of enemy casualties should increase performance perceptions, based on the higher level of success with the agent.

Hypothesis 5: Higher levels of credit should be attributed to agents in response to positive performance appraisals of how the scenario was handled.

Hypothesis 6: Higher levels of credit should be attributed to principals in response to higher credit attributed at the agent-level.

Research Design

We examine reactions by members of the U.S. public to a vignette experiment that describes a successful operation to protect the life of a U.S. diplomat in a foreign country (Ashgabat, Turkmenistan) after it was attacked by a terrorist cell. We utilize a survey experiment with a 2 x 2 x 2 between-groups design to assess how the American public attributes success to agents on the ground and to a Federal cabinet member as a consequence of the operation's success. The participants were randomly assigned to one of the eight experimental conditions. The participants (n=211) for this study were drawn from a large, convenience sample of students from Texas A&M University. We checked our primary findings for robustness with respect to gender and race (see Appendix A for results) and found that the addition of these covariates did not obfuscate the internal validity of our experiment. There are three primary treatments in our study:

1. The number of enemy casualties (high vs. low);
2. Contracting out organizational security to a private sector contractor; and
3. The presentation of an organizational chart that highlights the military chain-of-command.

Figure 1: Organizational Chart
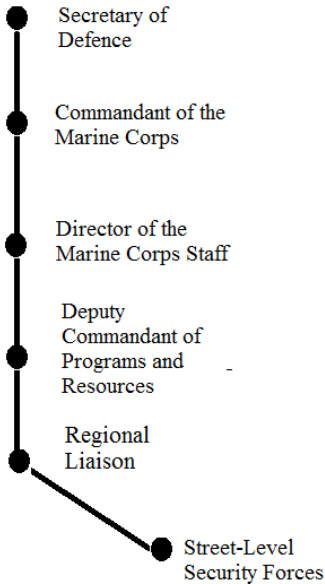
The first treatment manipulates the level of success achieved by the security forces in the vignette. There are two possible outcomes: low or high. A low level of success amounts to seven enemy casualties (2 killed and 5 captured) in the vignette. A high level of success amounts to 21 enemy casualties (9 killed and 12 captured) in the vignette. The goal was to establish a noteworthy level of enemy casualties that would grab the participants attention in the latter set of conditions.

The second treatment is binary, and it involves whether contracting occurs. There are two possible options in this treatment: (1) whether the diplomatic security detail is composed of members of the U.S. Marine Corps (frequently used at American embassies abroad); or (2) military contractors from a fictional PMC. Our name for the PMC was chosen to be geographically neutral to avoid making the guards sound non-American. The agency informational cue is as follows: "Atlas Security LLC private guards."

The third treatment manipulates the level of organizational information made available to the participants between the street-level security forces and the head cabinet level appointee that manages the U.S. military, the Secretary of Defense. In half the conditions, the participants are not provided with any organizational chart. In the other half, the participants were exposed to the organization chart depicted in Figure 1 above. We anticipated that the length of the chain-of-command would not be important, based on previous findings in the literature (Marvel and Girth 2016). Thus, this treatment was intended to be a plausible chart that would not overwhelm the participant with information.

The foundational vignette is presented below. We emphasized brevity and substance to make sure that our informational cues were properly interpreted. Most importantly, we stylized the vignettes in such a fashion that it would not cue memories of the 2012 Benghazi incident in Libya, which was widely reported on by media outlets.

In Ashgabat, Turkmenistan, [Contracting Treatment] guards protect an important diplomat, the U.S. Ambassador-in Residence, on a daily basis. The current team of [Contracting Treatment] guards are part of a new system. Last year, in response to a tightening budget, the Secretary of Defense announced a plan for a streamlined security detail for all senior members of the U.S. Foreign Service. In response to this initiative, U.S. Ambassadors received a security detail of a half-dozen [Contracting Treatment] guards. According to the Department of Defense, all [Contracting Treatment] guards are trained to the highest standards and well suited for security duties in an urban environment. However, 5 months ago, a terrorist cell, with roots in neighboring Afghanistan, attacked the Ambassador's motorcade. The U.S. Ambassador and his entire contingent of guards incurred only minor injuries in the ensuing shootout. In contrast, [Operational Success Treatment].

- *A non-partisan Congressional panel is currently investigating the circumstances surrounding the events that transpired in Ashgabat.*

After being exposed to the vignettes and associated informational cues, the participants were asked to assign the level of credit to the security guards on the ground and to the U.S.

Secretary of Defense. Additionally, they were asked to assess the performance of the security guards who took part in the successful operation on the ground. Each of the three questions function as dependent variables for the different stages of our experiment.

1. *Rate the performance of the ambassador's guards on a scale of 0-10, when 0 is "Not at all Good" and 10 is "Very Good".*

2. *Rate the level of blame and credit the guards deserve on a scale of -5 to 5, when -5 is "A great Deal of Blame", 0 is "No Credit or Blame," and 5 is "A great Deal of Credit."*

3. *Rate the level of blame and credit the Secretary of Defense deserves on a scale of -5 to 5, when -5 is "A great Deal of Blame", 0 is "No Credit or Blame," and 5 is "A great Deal of Credit."*

Empirical Findings

Our findings are presented in the Tables 1 through 3 below. As can be seen, there appears to be a clear domino effect that is not consistent with the traditional causal-linkage theory on responsibility attribution in the literature. Based on our findings, the general process of credit attribution appears to occur in the following 3 steps:

1. The presentation of organizational linkages increases performance perceptions;
2. Performance perceptions increase the amount of credit assigned to agents (i.e. security forces); and
3. The amount of credit assigned to agents in turn increases the amount of credit assigned to the principal (i.e. the Secretary of Defense).

Table 1: Regression Models for First Stage of Credit Attribution Processes			
Dep. Variables:	Performance	Credit_Agent	Credit_Principal
U.S. Marines	4.119***	-0.126	0.022
	(0.58)	(0.372)	(0.336)
Organization Chart	4.249***	0.766**	0.001
	(0.511)	(0.328)	(0.296)
U.S. Marines x Org. Chart	-2.785***	0.277	-0.466
	(0.884)	(0.568)	(0.512)
Higher Enemy Casualties	1.752***	-0.289	-0.001
	(0.427)	(0.274)	(0.247)
Observations	211	211	211
R-Squared	0.664	0.058	0.012
Adjusted R-Squared	0.657	0.04	-0.007
F-Statistic	102.041***	3.198**	0.638
Notes: *p<0.1; **p<0.05; and ***p<0.01. Std. Err's are in parentheses beneath coefficients.			

In general, we found evidence that corroborated our domino theory framework. Both of our information cues (i.e. the organizational chart and the use of U.S. Marines) strengthened performance perceptions of the guards on the ground (see Table 1 above). These findings constitute *Step 1* of the process above, providing evidence in favor of our first two hypotheses. Furthermore, the interaction term between the use of U.S. Marines and the presentation of an organizational chart was negative, suggesting that it became difficult for the participants to recognize the self-agency on the part of the security detail. In other words, the guards appeared to be so tightly woven into the U.S. Marine Corps, that any credit for a successful mission is likely being attributed to the high-performance organization instead of the guards themselves. This empirical observation provides evidence in-favor of our third hypothesis.

There was one interesting deviation from our theoretical framework. Credit for the successful operation was assigned to agents in response to the presentation of an organizational chart – a finding that was statistically significant at the 0.01 level. This finding was unexpected,

but it suggests that there are benefits if a clear association exists between the security detail and the U.S. Military. Even by itself, private sector military contractors are likely to benefit from being passively associated with the U.S. military brand, and an organizational chart will illustrate this particular relationship. However, the use of U.S. Marines and the impact of higher enemy casualties did nothing to increase credit for the security workers which suggests that practical credit is not being passed on directly, which provides evidence in favor of our fourth hypothesis that it motivates performance perceptions. In general, our domino theory holds in spite of the singular deviation mentioned earlier.

When it comes to the relationship between agent-level credit and performance perceptions, these variables behave as expected (see Table 2 below). Performance perceptions of the security guards directly increases credit assigned to the security guards themselves at the .01 level, but it does not produce a statistically significant impact on credit given to the Secretary of Defense. This second step in the domino process provides evidence in favor of our fifth hypothesis and sets the stage for the last portion of our general theory.

Table 2: Regression Models for Second Stage of Credit Attribution Processes		
Dep. Variables:	Credit_Agent	Credit_Principal
Performance Perceptions	0.124***	-0.019
	0.025	0.023
Observations	211	211
R-Squared	0.105	0.003
Adjusted R-Squared	0.1	-0.002
F-Statistic	24.560***	0.675
Notes: *$p<0.1$; **$p<0.05$; and ***$p<0.01$. Std. Err's are in parentheses beneath coefficients.		

As a critical reminder, there is absolutely no credit attributed to the Secretary of Defense in response to the informational cues presented in the paper which is entirely consistent with our theory (See Table 1 above). Nevertheless, we do find evidence in favor of the domino effect from the agent (See Table 3 below). Credit assigned from the agents to the organizational principal, *Step 3*, occurs - but it is noticeably weaker. Using two-way t-tests, we find the results are only statistically significant at the 0.1 level; however, we have single directional hypotheses which would bring our findings up to conventional levels. Moreover, we found the correlation coefficient for credit between the agents and principal was a little over 0.19. This finding provides evidence in favor of our final hypothesis and it suggests that the momentum of credit may decline as it is distributed across the hierarchy of the U.S. Military.

Table 3: Regression Models for Third Stage of Credit Attribution Processes	
Dep. Variables:	Credit_Principal
Credit_Agent	0.108*
	0.06
Observations	211
R-Squared	0.015
Adjusted R-Squared	0.01
F-Statistic	3.198*
Notes: *p<0.1; **p<0.05; and ***p<0.01. Std. Err's are in parentheses beneath coefficients.	

Conclusions

In summary, we found evidence in favor of all our hypotheses. Credit attribution channels appear to follow a step-wise process that strongly contrasts with the more precise focus of blame attribution. Furthermore, there is a process of distributing credit that diminishes as it moves farther away from the epicenter of a positive policy outcomes. These general findings are

fascinating but replicating this study with other American agencies or foreign militaries is critical for determining generalizability.

We emphasized the U.S. Department of Defense (DOD) because it enjoys a very high level of public approval and trust relative to every other major American institution (e.g. Congress or the ATF). Even former U.S. military officers are actively recruited by Ivy League MBA programs due to a high-level of private sector demand for ex-soldiers. Whether it's in the battlefields of Mesopotamia or the offices of Goldman Sachs, it becomes clear that there is a *brand* associated with the U.S. military which has value that transcends across the minds of the American public.

We hope that this study will serve as a foundation for future research on the topic of credit attribution. The U.S. military effectively serves as an extreme case to begin this new line of research, and the next logical place would involve examining an organization with very low brand equity. Thereafter, new areas of research could be explored with respect to organizations with certain unique qualities or partisan support, such as the Bureau for Alcohol, Tobacco, and Firearms. This area of research is ripe for new studies.

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