for their successes but situational attributions for their failures. To illustrate, students rarely cite low intelligence (a dispositional factor) as the cause of a poor exam performance. Instead, they blame a variety of situational factors (e.g., the questions were picky, the professor is disorganized, the book is unclear). Not everyone does this, but most people do (for reviews, see J. D. Brown, 1998; Mezulis, Abramson, Hyde, & Hankin, 2004; Zuckerman, 1979).

M. L. Snyder, Stephan, and Rosenfield (1976) conducted one of the first studies in this area. These investigators had participants succeed or fail at a task and then make attributions for these outcomes to ability (a dispositional factor) or to luck (a situational factor). Figure 4.4 presents some of the results from this investigation. The data show a strong self-serving bias. Success was attributed to dispositional causes more than situational ones, whereas failure was attributed to situational causes more than dispositional ones. The effect is particularly pronounced given failure, indicating that people are especially reluctant to make dispositional attributions for failure.

The self-serving bias is much less apparent when we explain other people’s outcomes (Stephan et al., 1976). Consequently, the actor–observer effect occurs only when we make attributions for negative outcomes. To illustrate, when someone cuts us off in traffic, we are rather quick to assume that the person is rude or an incompetent driver. But when we exhibit the very same behavior, we attribute our actions to situational factors, such as poor driving conditions or a blind spot in our rearview mirror. The reverse is true for positive outcomes: People are more apt to make dispositional attributions for their own positive outcomes than they are for the behavior of others (Schlenker, Hallam, & McCown, 1983). As a result of these tendencies, the self-serving bias qualifies the actor–observer effect (and the correspondence bias). The tendency to make dispositional attributions for behavior occurs when we explain our own successes and other people’s failures.

4. A Critical Look at the Correspondence Bias

The tendency to overlook the importance of situational factors when explaining behavior has been one of the most active areas of research in social psychology over the last 30 years. In large part, this is because the effect lies at the heart of the social