Attribution Theory

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[WEINER'S MODEL OF ATTRIBUTIONS](#)

[HOW ATTRIBUTIONS INFLUENCE BEHAVIOR](#)

[HOW ATTRIBUTIONS ARE COMMUNICATED TO LEARNERS](#)

[INDIVIDUAL DIFFERENCES IN ATTRIBUTIONS](#)

[IMPLICATIONS OF ATTRIBUTION THEORY FOR EDUCATORS](#)

Attribution theory provides an important method for examining and understanding motivation in academic settings. It examines individuals' beliefs about why certain events occur and correlates those beliefs to subsequent motivation. The basic premise of this theory is that people want to understand their environments and, therefore, strive to understand why certain events happen. In the classroom, the understanding students have about the causes of past events influences their ability to control what happens to them in the future. For example, if students fail a test, they will probably attribute that failure to a specific cause, such as (1) lack of ability, (2) lack of effort, or (3) poor instruction. The selected attribution will affect their subsequent motivation to engage in similar learning activities.

WEINER'S MODEL OF ATTRIBUTIONS

The study of attribution was initially associated with Fritz Heider (1896–1988) (1958). Later Bernard Weiner (1935–) of the University of California at Los Angeles developed a more comprehensive and extensive model of human attributions. Weiner's model is particularly informative in research on student learning in school settings. In his model, Weiner outlined the processes through which learners form causal beliefs (Weiner 1985, 2005). A basic assumption of Weiner's model of attributions is that learners are affected by both environmental factors (e.g., characteristics of the students' home or school) and by personal factors (e.g., prior experiences and prior knowledge). These background variables affect the types of attributions that individuals are likely to make.

Weiner's original attribution model

		Locus of causality	
		Internal	External
Stability dimension	Stable	Ability	Task difficulty
	Unstable	Effort	Luck

Attribution diagram based on the work of Bernard Weiner.

When an achievement-related event occurs (e.g., a student fails an examination), especially if the outcome was unexpected, Weiner proposes that learners undertake an attributional search, trying to understand what happened. The perceived cause of the event is important regardless of any objective explanation because whatever learners perceive as being the cause of the event will affect their future motivation toward engagement with similar tasks. For example, suppose a group of students performs poorly on an examination because of poor instruction. Those individuals who attribute their failure to poor teaching will have a different level of motivation in subsequent examinations than those who attribute their failure to their own lack of innate ability.

One important feature of Weiner's theory is that the specific attribution being made (luck, effort, etc.) is less important than the characteristics of the attribution, which are classified along three causal dimensions: locus, stability, and controllability. These important dimensions affect learners' subsequent motivation toward the task or activity. The locus dimension refers to whether the cause of the event is perceived as internal to the individual or external. If a learner believes that she failed an exam because she lacks ability, she is choosing an internal cause because ability is internal to the learner. In contrast, if a learner believes that he failed an exam because the teacher is incompetent, he is choosing an external cause because teacher incompetence is external to the student. The stability dimension refers to whether the cause is stable or unstable across time and situations. If a learner believes that he failed a science exam because he lacks ability in science, then his cause is stable, particularly if he believes that his lack of ability in science is a permanent quality. In contrast, if a learner believes that he failed the exam because he was ill at the time of the exam, then the cause is unstable in cases in which the illness is a temporary factor. When a student experiences success, attributions to stable causes lead to positive expectations for success in the future. In the face of failure, however, attributions to stable causes can result in low expectations for the future. The controllability dimension refers to whether the cause of the event is perceived as being under the control of the individual. If a runner believes that he lost a race because he did not get enough practice before the event, the cause is controllable because he could have decided to spend more time practicing; in contrast, if he feels that he lost the race because he simply lacks ability as a runner, then the cause is uncontrollable. By definition, only internal attributions can be considered controllable.

In addition to the effect of individuals' motivation and expectations on future success, Weiner's model also indicates that certain emotional responses are associated with various causal dimensions (Weiner 1985, 2006). Consideration of emotional outcomes is rare in the study of academic motivation, given that most current motivation theories do not examine emotions. Weiner and others have demonstrated that the locus dimension is related to feelings of pride and self-esteem: People are more likely to experience a sense of pride in accomplishment if they believe that the cause is due to an internal characteristic or behavior. The stability dimension is related to feelings of hopefulness or hopelessness; attributions to unstable causes, by contrast to stable causes, suggest the possibility of a different outcome in the future. Finally, the controllability dimension is related to such feelings as shame, guilt, anger, gratitude, and pity. For example, students who believe their poor performance in a class is due to a controllable attribution (such as lack of effort) may experience guilt, whereas classmates who believe their failure is due to an uncontrollable cause (such as lack of ability) are more likely to experience feelings of shame (Weiner 1985). Emotional consequences of attributions ultimately affect individuals' subsequent motivation to engage in a particular behavior.

Finally, Weiner's model posits that the aforementioned psychological processes lead to behavioral consequences. For example, students' decision regarding whether to enroll in a mathematics course in the future may be partially determined by their attributions for successes or failures on previous mathematics examinations; athletes' subsequent effort in a competitive sports event may be determined by their attributions for successes or failures in previous events.

HOW ATTRIBUTIONS INFLUENCE BEHAVIOR

Many studies indicate that the types of attributions that individuals make influence their subsequent behaviors in predictable ways. Both the expectancy beliefs and the emotions that individuals experience as a result of the attributional process tend to determine future behaviors. Research generally indicates that academic achievement is improved and enhanced when learners attribute academic outcomes to factors such as effort and the use of appropriate study strategies; in contrast, academic achievement is hindered when learners attribute their failure to factors such as lack of ability or chronic health problems and attribute their success to luck. Consequently, a student who attributes failure on an examination to a lack of effort (e.g., she did not study enough the week before the exam) may be motivated to put forth additional effort when preparing for a subsequent exam. In contrast, a student who attributes failure on an examination to a lack of ability (i.e., she believes that she does not have adequate ability in the examination area) will be unlikely to exert effort for a subsequent examination.

HOW ATTRIBUTIONS ARE COMMUNICATED TO LEARNERS

Attributional information is communicated to learners in a variety of ways. Teachers communicate important information to their students through their feedback on assignments, on graded exams, and during classroom instruction. When teachers communicate to students that failures are due to the use of inappropriate strategies or due to inappropriate effort, students are likely to be motivated to try harder or to use more appropriate strategies in the future. Teachers provide this feedback to students in a variety of ways. One common way is through comments on written work. Some teachers provide general feedback, using phrases such as "Good work" or "Needs work." Research indicates that specific feedback is more useful to students because it can assist students in developing adaptive attri-butional beliefs. Therefore, it is may be effective to write a more specific comment (e.g., "I know you can do better; you need to spend more time studying the night before a test") when a teacher knows that a student has not been putting forth enough effort. It is important, however, to be sure that lack of effort truly is the problem. Researchers such as Martin Covington caution that when teachers encourage students to make attributions to effort (i.e., "You didn't try hard enough"), some students may interpret such comments as an indication of the teachers' lack of belief in the students' true abilities. In many instances, helping students to attribute their failure to not using appropriate strategies or to their lack of specific content knowledge may be more appropriate than assuming students are not trying.

Teachers also need to provide differential feedback to students. Educators must acknowledge that progress and achievement will be different for individual students. If students raise their grades from a "D" to a "C," teachers might choose to offer praise, if this change represents an important, meaningful new accomplishment for the students. In terms of attributions, scholars who study the effects of feedback and learning, such as Jere Brophy, would argue that teachers should provide feedback that will promote attributions to effort or appropriate strategy use (e.g., "You did great! I am proud of you. The fact that you used the correct formulas this time to solve the math problems shows me that you have really worked on learning when and why to use the appropriate formulas, good job!").

Parents also communicate information to children and adolescents that affect their attributions. If a participant loses a gymnastics competition, one parent might comment, "It is okay; gymnastics is very difficult," whereas another parent might state, "You didn't use the techniques that your coach showed you last week." The first statement might produce ability attributions (e.g., "This is difficult; I don't expect you to be able to do well"), whereas the latter statement might encourage the gymnast to attribute the failure to a controllable cause, to something that can be altered for a better outcome next time.

The information that parents communicate to children and adolescents may be based at least in part on parents' own attributions for their children's successes and failures. When children succeed or fail at tasks in school, parents form their own beliefs about the causes of their children's experiences. Some research suggests that there may be predictable patterns to these parental beliefs. For example, as indicated by Yee and Eccles, some research indicates that in the domain of mathematics, parents are more likely to attribute their daughter's success to effort, but to assume the same success in their son is due to mathematical ability.

INDIVIDUAL DIFFERENCES IN ATTRIBUTIONS

Attributional patterns differ among individuals. Development also plays a role in attribution. For instance, according to Nicholls, young children and older adolescents have different understandings of concepts, such as ability, that are central to attribution theory. Younger children do not easily differentiate between concepts, such as ability and effort, whereas older adolescents are better able to understand such distinctions. Consequently, attributions may take on different meanings for students at different stages of cognitive development.

Although there has not been much research on ethnic differences in attributions, Sandra Graham has summarized the findings to date of research in this area. Graham notes African-American students tend to make external attributions more often than white students. Although internal attributions are generally considered more adaptive for white students, Graham suggests that greater belief in external causes may be adaptive for African American students (1994). Graham also notes that in order to truly understand the role of attributions in the study of motivation in minority students, it is important to consider the complex relations between gender and ethnicity (1997).

Studies of gender differences in attributions have yielded somewhat mixed results. Some studies indicate that female students are more likely to attribute negative outcomes to internal and stable causes and to attribute successful outcomes to unstable, external causes (e.g., "My successes are due to good teaching and good luck; my failures are because I'm not good enough"); however, other research suggests that there are no gender differences in attributional patterns. Clearly, additional research on this topic is needed.

IMPLICATIONS OF ATTRIBUTION THEORY FOR EDUCATORS

There are many practical implications of attribution theory for educators. First, teachers need to realize that they can affect the types of attributions that students make. Teachers affect students' attributions on a daily basis, through their comments to students, feedback on assignments and examinations, and the types of praise that they offer during instruction. These comments can have important long-term effects on student learning and motivation. A student who consistently learns to attribute failures to a lack of ability in a particular subject area is unlikely to continue to be motivated to achieve in that subject area in the future. Educators need to remember the power they have in shaping students' attributions.

Second, teachers can educate parents about attributions. Since parents provide feedback and make comments to their children about performance on academic work, teachers can encourage parents to provide effective feedback. For example, teachers can send home a weekly newsletter to parents explaining what is being learned in class and offering specific suggestions to parents about providing appropriate feedback to children.

Finally, educators should be aware that students do think about the causes of their own successes and failures. Teachers can engage students in conversation to learn about their students' attributions and to

monitor potentially inaccurate and harmful beliefs. Teachers may be surprised by some of their students' attributional beliefs; one-on-one conversations may provide insight to teachers and provide opportunities for shaping students' beliefs about their performance.

See also:[Attributional Retraining](), [Student Emotions](), [Weiner, Bernard 1935-]()

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