

Attribution Theory
And Its Applications
To Academic Behavior

- Attribution Theory**
- Rotter (1956)
 - Precursor to Attribution Theory
 - Locus of Control
 - Varied on two dimensions: internal or external.

- Attribution Theory**
- Fritz Heider (1958)
 - A means by which we interpret and understand behavior.
 - Behavior remains meaningless until we attribute a cause for that behavior.
 - The causes to which we attribute the behavior of ourselves or others impacts how we behave toward others and influences our future performance.

Attribution Theory

- Kelley's ANOVA Cube (1967).
- Identified the observational criteria we use to determine if a behavior is environmentally caused or personally caused.
- Do others do the same in the same circumstances? (Consensus)
- Does the same person do the same thing in the same circumstances? (Consistency)
- Does the same thing happen at other times? (Distinctiveness).

Attribution Theory

Types of Attribution	Distinctiveness	Consensus	Consistency
Person-Stable	Low	Low	High
Situation-Stable	High	High	High
Person-Unstable	Low	Low	Low
Situation-Unstable	High	High	Low

Weiner (1972, 1974)

- There are 4 general things to which one can attribute life events:
- Internal - Stable, or **Skill / Ability**
- Internal - Unstable, or **Effort**
- External - Stable, or **Task Difficulty**
- External - Unstable, or **Luck**

Weiner (1972, 1974)

- Attribution Theory applied to academic achievement.
- 1. *Locus of control*
 - Internal locus of control (within person)
 - External locus of control (in situation)
- Regarded as most fundamental distinction among causal explanations.

Weiner (1972, 1974)

2. *Stability of cause*

- Stable cause (relatively permanent and unchanging)
- Unstable cause (subject to change)
- Tasks of skill versus tasks of luck
 - When someone succeeds in tasks of skill, attribute outcome to stable attributes (ability), so expect same outcome in future.
 - When someone succeeds in game of luck, attribute outcome to unstable attributes (luck), so do not expect same outcome in future.

Weiner (1972, 1974)

- 3. *Controllability of cause*
 - Controllable (subject to volitional control)
 - Uncontrollable (not subject to volitional control)

Expectancies are Antecedents of Attributions

- Usually when students and teachers observe an academic behavior, they have some prior knowledge about this behavior.
- This prior knowledge is summarized in the form of an *expectancy* that a student will or will not do well on a particular academic task.

Jones & McGillis (1976): 2 Types of General Expectancies

- *Category-based expectancy* based on the perceiver's knowledge of the target person as a member of a reference group, e.g. slow or bright, male or female, black or white.
- Teachers have access to this category information and use it to group students for differentiated instruction (e.g. fluent vs. non-fluent readers).
- Conversely, students, especially in the early grades typically don't use category expectancies to understand their academic behavior.

Jones & McGillis (1976): 2 Types of General Expectancies

- *Target-based expectancy* based on prior information about a specific individual student.
- Compares a particular academic behavior with other academic behaviors of the same student.
- Summarize a student's past academic performance.
- Both students and teachers expect that past performance will predict future performance.

Jones & McGillis (1976): 2 Types of General Expectancies

- Both students and teachers may develop attributional patterns to ensure consistency over time.
- Students: Learned helplessness pattern—internalize failure.
- Mastery pattern—take credit for successes.
- Teacher expectation pattern—teachers give the benefit of the doubt in interpreting the performance of a high-expectancy student compared to a low-expectancy student.

Observation of Academic Behavior

- Academic behavior typically categorized on a continuum of success/failure or expected/unexpected.
- When behaviors are at the extremes, we are more motivated to try to explain them through attributions.
- Mediocre or common behavior is often ignored.

Kelley (1972) Attribution Principle of Covariation

- For any behavior, there are many potential causes.
- Perceivers of a behavior will attribute the behavior to the cause with which it covaries over time.
- When a gifted student does well, we will attribute the success to her giftedness, even though other causes are possible such as great effort or an easy task.

Kelley (1972) Attribution Principle of Covariation

- When the observed behavior is unexpected, there is a search for causal covariation.
- *Discounting principle* states that if there are other plausible causes for a behavior, the role of any one is discounted.
- *Augmentation principle* states that when a student succeeds, the role of a facilitatory cause, such as ability, carries more weight than a plausible inhibitory cause, such as the difficulty of the task.

The Consequences of Causal Attributions

- Students' attributions of past academic behavior: mediate a variety of affective reactions (e.g. how they feel, how much they like or dislike the task).
- Establishes expectancies for future academic behaviors.
- Influences future behaviors such as choices of academic tasks and the degree of persistence for tasks.

Expectancies & Attributions

- Expectancies are both the antecedents and consequences of attributions.
- Expectancies influence the observation of a behavior in terms of what aspects of the behavior are noticed or remembered.
- If a behavior turns out as expected, there will be little attribution used to determine a cause.
- If it is unexpected it will mandate attributional processing.

Expectancies & Attributions

- Both self-expectancies and other-expectancies can mediate future behavior.
- Students who expect to do well or who believe that teachers expect them to do well may try harder or persist longer.
- If teachers expect a student to do well, their behavior changes too—they may give the student the benefit of the doubt, grade leniently, listen more carefully etc.

Developmental Aspects of Attribution

- Young children can make cause-effect relationships, as long as the cause and effect occur close to each other in time.
- Young children will require more immediate feedback.
- Young children do understand many behaviors they observe, but do not understand them when they are presented verbally or in writing.

Developmental Aspects of Attribution

- Until about age 12, children use both effort and ability to explain success.
- After age 12, children see the compensatory nature of effort, e.g. if you have less ability, more effort could make up for it.
- Young children's ability to use past behavior to judge the behavior of others is better than their ability to make self-attributions.

Developmental Aspects of Attribution

- Young children have positive attitudes and higher expectation that do not decrease as a result of failure.
- As they get older, they become more realistic and pessimistic and rely on consistency and distinctiveness information to explain their academic behavior.

Developmental Aspects of Attribution

- Prior to age six, experiences of failure typically do not have a negative impact on children's affect (failure doesn't make them feel bad).
- Nor does failure reduce their expectancies.
- Young children overestimate their achievement and have high expectations for success in the future.

Children's Attributional Patterns

- 2 general patterns
- Mastery pattern—students attribute success internally, especially to ability, and attribute failure to external factors or lack of effort.
- Enables them to take credit for their successes and cope with the potentially damaging effects of failure.

Children's Attributional Patterns

- Learned helplessness pattern—Explain failures with stable attributions, especially lack of ability, and externalize successes.
- Presume that attempts to alter future outcomes will be unsuccessful, so the student remains helpless to change his performance.

Children's Attributional Patterns

- Initial expectancy affects whether a mastery or learned helplessness attributional pattern will be used.
- If a student is initially confident, he will internalize his success and externalize his failure.
- If a student lacks confidence, he will internalize his failure and externalize his success.

Category-Based Expectancies

- Young children do not understand or explain their academic behavior as a function of belonging to a particular group.
- Some controversy about gender differences in attribution.
- Some evidence suggests males are more prone to use a mastery pattern while females are more prone to use a learned helplessness pattern.
- Sex-role appropriateness of the task may influence attribution patterns of females.

Comparing Students' Target-Based Expectancies in 3 Categories of Children

- High need achievement vs. low need achievement.
- Stable, internal trait that causes a person to strive for success.
- High need achievers more likely to have a history of success.
- Low need achievers more likely to have a history of failure.
- High need achievement increases the expectancy for success.
- Low need achievement increases the expectancy of failure.

Comparing Students' Target-Based Expectancies in 3 Categories of Children

- Learning Disabled students vs. non-LD students:
- LD students more failure experiences.
- Leads them to believe that they lack ability and that their effort typically does not lead to better outcomes.
- Learned helplessness patterns.
- LD students do not take credit for their successes and take more blame for their failure compared to non-LD kids.

Comparing Students' Target-Based Expectancies in 3 Categories of Children

- High Self-Concept vs. Low Self-Concept Students:
- Self-concept = beliefs about your competence and your ability to obtain desired goals and outcomes.
- High self-concept students have a history of past success, perceived high ability and better outcomes.
- High self-concept students internalize success but not failure.

**Consequences of Attributions:
Affective Reactions**

- Success leads to happiness, satisfaction and contentedness.
- Failure leads to displeasure and upset.
- Effort attributions for success elicit feelings of pride.
- Attributions of lack of effort for failure elicits shame.
- Ability attributions for success leads to feelings of competence.
- Lack of ability attributions for failure leads to incompetence.

**Consequences of Attributions:
Affective Reactions**

- Attributions to task ease for success leads to feelings of hopefulness and safety.
- Success or failure attributed to luck leads to surprise.

**Consequences of Attributions:
Expectancies**

- Attributions of success to task difficulty or ability increase expectancies for future success.
- Attributions of failure to task difficulty or lack of ability decrease expectancies for future success.
- Attributions to unstable factors to account for success decrease expectancies for future success.
- Attributions to unstable factors to account for failure actually leads to expectancies of future success.

**Consequences of Attributions:
Expectancies**

- Students who employ a learned helplessness attributional pattern develop persistent expectancies that they cannot succeed and they lose motivation to exert effort.
- Students who employ a mastery attributional pattern raise their expectations for future success and leads them to exert more effort.

**Teacher's Attributions of their
Roles**

- Self-protective hypothesis—teachers take personal credit for their students' success and avoid personal blame for their failure.
- Couterdefensive hypothesis—proposes that teachers should take some blame for student failure and give students some credit for their success.

**Antecedents of Teachers' Attributions:
Category-Based Expectancies**

- Overall, parallel students' attributions.
- Because of educational practices, such as "tracking," more compelled to rely on category-based expectancies.

Antecedents of Teachers' Attributions:
Task Difficulty Information

- Cooper & Lowe (1977).
- For average students, when teachers have task difficulty information, they attribute less ability to successful performance.
- For smart students, task difficulty information has little effect on teachers' attributions.

Antecedents of Teachers' Attributions:
Race & SES

- Cooper, Baron & Lowe (1975).
- Teachers hold White, middle-class children more responsible for their academic behavior than minority children.
- Hold Black students less responsible for their failures.
- Teachers expect more failure from Black children and lower class White children.
- Asian-Americans rated more academically competent and academic performance evaluated more favorably.

Antecedents of Teachers' Attributions:
Student Gender

- Teachers rated successful academic performance in a gender-incongruent domain more positively than the same behavior in a gender-congruent domain.

Target-Based Expectancies: Past Performance

- Students whom teachers expect to do well based on past performance are credited with their success and excused from their failure.
- Students whom teachers expect to not do well are blamed for their failures and not given credit for their successes

Teacher Consequences of Causal Attribution: Affective & Behavioral Reactions

- Teachers feel happy following student success and disappointed following student failure.
- Feelings less intense when dealing with low-ability / low-effort students for whom the teacher had low expectations.
- Angry when bright students and students who exert effort fail.
- Surprised when low ability / low-effort students succeeded.

Teacher Consequences of Causal Attribution: Affective & Behavioral Reactions

- Gratitude when students showed an increase in effort.
- Pride when a low-ability student put forth effort.
- Guilt when a high-ability student failed or when they stopped putting forth effort.
- Teachers base more of their reactions on effort.
- Use effort to mediate their distribution of rewards and punishment.

Teacher Consequences of Causal Attribution: Expectancies for Students' Academic Behavior

- Inconsistent link found in the research between teacher expectancies and student attributions.
- Teachers behave differently for student for whom they hold different expectancies
- Teachers tend to use criticism more with low-achievers, and use it non-contingently.
- Student may come to expect criticism.

Summary Points

- Students' and teacher's *understanding* of academic behavior is more important than the academic performance itself.
- Success does not guarantee more success unless the student attributes the success to ability and effort.
- Help from the teacher and other interventions may not improve performance if the student continues to hold a learned helplessness attribution pattern.

Summary Points

- Altering students' attributions may have little effect unless they have made a link between effort and outcome.
- Making that link depends on whether the student has been taught the necessary skills and is given a task whose difficulty matches competencies.
