An Attribution Primer

By J.P. Howard

What is attribution theory and why is it important? Attribution theory is the study of how people think about the causes of events. Another way to say this is that it is the study of the nature of "causal explanation". The branch of attribution theory we are most interested in is attributions about success and failure. The study of attributions about success and failure investigates three basic questions:

- What is the range of explanations people actually use to explain their success and failure outcomes, and how are those explanations structured?
- Since people vary greatly in their characteristic ways of understanding success and failure, what factors explain the particular patterns of explanations people use (what are the antecedents of attributional tendencies)?
- What are the consequences of different ways of explaining things, that is, how do future expectations, emotions and behavior change when an event is explained one way rather than another?

At the most basic level, this may be modeled:

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        Antecedents of Attributions  Attribution Tendencies  Consequences/Results
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The study of attributions is extremely important because it provides a usable understanding of why people differ so greatly in their productivity and development. Intellectual development is our particular focus. In an "information age" society where work is becoming increasingly complex and knowledge-based, and where retraining is often required of experienced workers whose jobs are evolving, any blockage to learning, any psychological factors that inhibit the motivation to work at challenging intellectual tasks, will result in severe limitations—on the individual and on society as a whole. If we can identify the modes of thinking which are most likely to produce adaptive behaviors in achievement, or learning situations, and if we can teach people to take control of the way they think, then we are in a position to have a real impact on productivity and development.

In this paper, we will refer extensively to the work of Bernard Weiner, a social psychologist who has pioneered in the study of attributions about success and failure, and the effects of these attributions on subsequent emotion and behavior. (An Attributional Theory of Achievement Motivation and Emotion. Psychological Review, 1985, vol 92, no.4, p 548)
The Antecedents of Attributions

In reviewing the literature, there would appear to be two related categories of variables that act as antecedents to causal attributions:

1. **Confidence or Internalized Expectations** (beliefs about my probability of doing well)
2. **Expectations of Others** (communicated beliefs of others or information from others about my probability of doing well)

Confidence level and the nature of expectations, in turn, arise from a variety of factors. Confidence in a given situation can arise from general beliefs about one’s worth and capabilities, or from past successes with the same or similar task. It should also be noted that confidence and the expectations of others are themselves very much under the influence of past explanations people have made about the causes of previous successes and failures. [R. Beale]

The Range of Attributions People Use, and Their Structure

**The Factors.** There are four primary attributions for success and failure identified in the attribution literature: **Ability, Effort, Task Difficulty, and Luck.** When seeking explanations for their successes or failures, in other words, people see their own ability (or lack of it), the vigor or intensity of their own effort (or the lack thereof), the difficulty (or ease) of the task, or the fickleness of luck as the prime suspects. They sometimes use these factors singly, sometimes in combination. Of the four factors, Weiner identifies ability and effort as the ones most used (this is contradicted in the ‘Learned Helplessness’ literature, which suggests that many people attribute causality to task difficulty and luck). Taken together, Weiner labels these four factors the “**dominant causal perceptions**”.

**The Dimensions.** These factors are arrayed in dimensions, two of which—the internal/external and the stable/unstable, are old friends, and a third more recent addition, controllability, is also of interest to us. The internal/external, stable/unstable dimensions can be modeled thus:
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The Internal/External dimension identifies where the individual places the responsibility for his/her successes or failures. Internal attributions identify characteristics of the self as responsible for an outcome. Ability and effort are the factors that fall in the internal category. External attributions identify forces in the situation, rather than in the performer his or herself, that determine the outcome. Task difficulty and luck are the external factors.

The Stable/Unstable dimension identifies whether the causes of one's success or failure are likely to change over time. Stable attributions involve characteristics of self or situations that tend not to change. Ability and task difficulty are considered stable factors. Unstable attributions involve factors that are variable. Effort and luck are both considered variable, and therefore fall in the unstable category.

The Controllable/Uncontrollable dimension is harder to diagram, and is a more recent addition to the literature. This dimension describes the extent to which a particular perceived cause is controllable by the actor. We may think of effort as controllable by the actor, and ability, task difficulty and luck as uncontrollable. The importance of the controllability dimension will become apparent when we discuss the impact of attributions on emotion and behavior below.

Weiner considers that the fact that the causal perceptions can be categorized in this way to be evidence that there is a structure to causal thinking—and he labels these three dimensions as the "causal structure" of attributions. So the 'causal perceptions,' or factors, are organized into a 'causal structure' of dimensions. Weiner further believes that it is the dimensions that hold the key to understanding the relationship between attributions and future effects.
The Effects of Attributions on Expectations, Emotions, and Behavior

Weiner emphasizes the centrality of our need to manage the environment, and to adapt our behavior to the demands of environmental pressures. A major reason to study attributional processes is to understand how the way we explain the causes of events affects our capacity to successfully adapt:

"Indeed one might argue that adaptation is not possible without causal analysis." (Weiner, 1985, p549)

Causal analysis, in other words, is the basis of the kind of understanding of events that enables the person to make adaptive responses to similar events in the future. There are three major categories of effects generated by causal analysis: future expectancies of success, emotional responses, and behaviors. These in turn affect the capacity to adapt to and manage the environment. So:

Causal Analysis \(\rightarrow\) Expectations \(\rightarrow\) Emotions \(\rightarrow\) Adaptation \(\rightarrow\) Management \(\rightarrow\) Behavior

Expectations. Weiner cites what he calls "a fundamental psychological law relating perceived causal stability to expectancy change":

*Expectancy principle.* Changes in expectancy of success following an outcome are influenced by the perceived stability of the cause of the event. This principle has three corollaries:

*Corollary 1.* If the outcome of an event is ascribed to a stable cause, then that outcome will be anticipated with increased certainty, or with an increased expectancy, in the future.

*Corollary 2.* If the outcome of an event is ascribed to an unstable cause, then the certainty or expectancy of that outcome may be unchanged or the future may be anticipated to be different from the past.

*Corollary 3.* Outcomes ascribed to stable causes will be anticipated to be repeated in the future with a greater degree of certainty than are outcomes ascribed to unstable causes. (p559)

To simplify, the evidence suggests that the more stable the perceived cause, the less change is expected in future outcomes. When a success is attributed to the stable causes of ability or task difficulty, the individual will expect to succeed the next time s/he faces that same task. Failures attributed to these causes will elicit expectations of failure in the future. When success or failure are attributed to the unstable causes effort or luck, there will be no expectation that future performance is bound to repeat the initial performance.
Emotions. Weiner believes that attributions underlie emotional reactions to success or failure; that they "determine or guide emotional reactions, or the subjective consequences of goal attainment." He presents a model of what he calls the "Attribution-Emotion Process" (p 560):

The idea here is that 'outcome evaluations' (judgements about whether one has succeeded or failed) generate emotions. On the upper tier, emotions are generated that are not related to attributions. They are "outcome dependent/attribute independent." Such as: "I won, so I'm happy/ I lost so I'm sad." On the lower tier, more specific emotions are generated based on the causal explanations made about the success or failure. They are "attribute dependent". It is these that are of interest.

Weiner notes that "causal dimensions play a key role in the emotion process. Each dimension is uniquely related to a set of feelings." He focuses on the relations between dimensions and emotions, rather than on how specific causal factors (ability, effort, etc.) influence them, since this is where the bulk of the research has focused. Research offers evidence of a relationship between causal dimensions and several emotions, of which five are of particular interest: pride, pity, anger, guilt and shame.

PRIDE/SELF-ESTEEM "...pride and positive self esteem are related to the internal/external dimension; they are experienced as a consequence of attributing a positive outcome to the self [making an internal attribution] and negative self-esteem is experienced when a negative outcome is ascribed to the self."

ANGER. "...the attributional antecedent for anger is an ascription of a negative, self-related outcome or event to factors controllable by others."

PITY. "In contrast to the linkage between controllability and anger, it is hypothesized that uncontrollable causes are associated with pity." The linkage between controllability and emotion is further clarified with this statement: "We feel anger toward the lazy and therefore punish lack of effort, but we feel pity toward the unable and therefore do not punish lack of ability" (since it is presumed that lack of effort was controllable by the actor, and lack of ability was not).

This is a critical point for teachers and managers. It brings to mind the advisor to college freshmen who asked, with great compassion, "But what if they can't do it?" when the Efficacy Committee proposed demanding higher standards of black freshmen. Inappropriate compassion for students and professionals
who do not achieve is probably the greatest failing of well-meaning teachers and managers. It is based on the tendency to attribute poor performance to lack of ability, a factor that the student or professional is presumed to be unable to control, rather than on effort, which s/he could control. Once this attribution is made, pity follows naturally.

GUILT. Weiner reviews the 'guilt literature' and finds that guilt is associated with a sense of personal responsibility for negative acts. "Guilt and anger therefore are elicited by controllable causes, but guilt is directed inward, whereas anger is typically (but not necessarily) directed outward."

SHAME. "...it is believed that one antecedent [to shame] is an attribution for failure that is self-related [internal] and uncontrollable, such as lack of ability." Weiner cites research that "shame related" emotions (disgrace, embarrassment, humiliation, and/or shame) "are linked to failure due [or attributed to] to low ability,"

\[\text{Attribution of failure} \rightarrow \text{Shame to Lack of Ability}\]

"whereas guilt-related affects (guilt, regret, and/or remorse) are associated with failure due to lack of effort."

\[\text{Attribution of failure} \rightarrow \text{Guilt to Lack of Effort}\]

These are very important findings, since, as we shall see in the next section, shame and guilt have very important, and very different consequences for future behavior.

Behaviors. Weiner believes that emotional reactions are an important determinant of subsequent achievement related behavior. He states: "It has been documented that shame-related emotions give rise to withdrawal and motivational inhibition."(P563). So:

\[\text{Shame} \rightarrow \text{"Motivational Inhibition"}\]

"whereas guilt-related emotions promote approach behavior, retribution, and motivational activation." So:

\[\text{Guilt} \rightarrow \text{"Motivational Activation"}\]

In a critical linkage for those interested in the attributional basis of performance and development, he states: "It therefore seems reasonable to pursue the idea that causal ascriptions influence emotions and that emotional reactions play a role in motivated behavior " (italics added). Remember that shame after failure
is based on an attribution that is "self-related and uncontrollable, such as lack of ability." So:

     Attribution of failure  ---|>  Shame  ---|> "Motivational Inhibition"
     to Lack of Ability

So the tendency to attribute failure to lack of ability is shown to generate shame, which in turn results in withdrawal and inhibition. This sort of sequence is clearly mal-adaptive, and readily apparent in the behavior of real people every day; because of the way the individual explains the causes of a failure, s/he feels shamed, and is immobilized by these feelings, with obvious effects on future performance.

On the other hand, attributing failure to lack of effort, a factor that is self-related and controllable, generates feelings of guilt, so:

     Attribution of failure  ---|>  Guilt  ---|> "Motivational Activation"
     to Lack of Effort

Herein lies the significance of the approach that we use, which can be considered a mild form of what has been labeled "attribution retraining". Just as people become immobilized by the shame associated with feeling 'stupid,' they become mobilized by the guilt that flows from feeling "I should have worked harder at this." To the extent that we are successful in teaching people to think about their failures as functions of inadequate effort, we stimulate an emotion, guilt, that results in 'activation.'

Through the mediating factor of emotions, then, attributions have a powerful impact on behavior in achievement contexts. Let's explore a little further the implications of this sequence.
Discussion: Expectations, Attributions, and "Motivation"

The attribution literature provides evidence that the inability to marshal committed effort and corrective action is the result of a process that begins with negative expectations. Negative expectations may take the form of low self-confidence, and are often based on expressions of lack of belief by others. They predispose an individual to attribute failure to lack of ability:

\[
\text{Negative} \quad \rightarrow \quad \text{Attribution of failure to Lack of Ability}
\]

Attributing failure to lack of ability is the villain of this piece. It is a way of thinking about failure that results in giving up:

\[
\text{Negative} \quad \rightarrow \quad \text{Failure Attributed to Lack of Ability} \quad \rightarrow \quad \text{Shame} \quad \rightarrow \quad \text{Motivational Inhibition}
\]

*inattention to feedback
*no corrective action

We would include as part of 'motivational inhibition' the tendency to ignore feedback, and failure to attempt corrective action. These deficiencies in effort are triggered by the attribution of failure to lack of ability and by the debilitating emotion of shame that accompanies such an attribution. If the absence of ability (a stable, uncontrollable factor) is identified as the cause of failure, increasing one's effort will be viewed as futile.

Conversely, positive expectations predispose the individual to attribute failure to lack of effort:

\[
\text{Positive} \quad \rightarrow \quad \text{Attribution of failure to Lack of Effort}
\]

Attributing failure to inadequate effort is the gateway to corrective action. Once effort deficiencies are identified as the cause of failure, the individual is stimulated by guilt to attend to feedback—the data that forms the basis for corrective action. "What went wrong here? What do I need to do differently next time?" Only by attributing causality to effort, an internal, unstable (changeable) and controllable factor, does one ensure that a process of using feedback and investigating more appropriate behaviors will begin:

\[
\text{Positive} \quad \rightarrow \quad \text{Failure Attributed to Inadequate Effort} \quad \rightarrow \quad \text{Guilt} \quad \rightarrow \quad \text{Analysis of Deficiency (Attention to Feedback)} \quad \rightarrow \quad \text{Corrective Action (Behavioral response based on Feedback)}
\]

The motivation to commit effort to a task then, is a result of a chain of events that begins with expectations. A supportive atmosphere that generates positive expectations and confidence is the basis of adaptive attributions and effective behavior. This sequence represents the adaptive mode and sets the stage for development. Helping people to put this kind of sequence to work for themselves, and for the people they teach or manage, may be thought of as a major objective of all of our work. Attribution Theory offers a way to understand how the capacity to take corrective action may be enhanced or inhibited by the
thought processes of the individual. The psychological basis of adaptive behavior can be understood, and managed.