

**EFFECTS OF SEX, ATTENTIONAL FOCUS ON
ATTRIBUTION FOR SUCCESS AND FAILURE OF HIGH
AND LOW ACHIEVERS**

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INTRODUCTION

The question what caused a particular event to occur, how that took a particular form, and to identify rules which govern perception of causality, has attracted the attention of behavioural scientists. The most systematic account which has developed in due course regarding such rules is known as attribution-theory.

Attribution theory is concerned with the cognitive process involved in how perceivers generate causal explanation for behaviour and events which they encounter in everyday life. This process of inference represents a phenomenological analysis of the perceiving person as he/she deals with his/her

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world, focusing primarily on perception of causal forces in observed personal actions, interpersonal behaviour and even physical events. Therefore these attributions are referred as key events in the perceiver's subjective understanding of other people's as well as his own behaviour. Moreover, this understanding enables him to cope better with changing contingencies in the environment and thereby facilitating adjustment.

Attribution theories assume that people strive to explain, understand, and predict events. This effort entails a constant processing of information about the behaviour of oneself and other's and the attribution of it to the environment or both. If a person concludes that the actor was instrumental in causing a particular behaviour, he or she is making an attribution to an internal cause such as motivation or intention. If environmental factors are considered important to influence the outcome he or she is making external attributions. Attribution theories, then focus on cognitive attribution of causation, including motivation. Moreover, according to these theories, the causal attributions one makes guide one's decisions for example, a student who believes that academic-success is a result mainly of luck will probably not study very hard. Therefore, attribution theories emphasize cognition not only as central to the attribution process but also as influential in behaviour.

The typical characteristic of attributional theories is that they are composed of concepts and principles that people commonly use in explaining behaviour, not one's that exist only in the psychologist's lexicon. They can be viewed as the

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layman's theories of perceived motivation. They view understanding the process of attributing causes to behavior as ultimately the most meaningful task.

There is no one, comprehensive attribution theory. Rather, there is a network of prospective and models that offer guidelines to understand the "why" of behaviour. As such, attribution theories are enormously useful in post dictively analysing the causes of behaviour but less so in prediction.

Heider's (1944,1958) analysis of the attributional process is the first attribution theory, and it remains the most significant statement on causal attributions. He proved a philosophical analysis of the problems of attribution in his paper on phenomenal causality (1944) and presented a formal theory of attribution processes in social behaviour in his book, "The Psychology of Interpersonal Relations" (1958). Heider's theory, however, is unique in that it appealed to what he called "commonsense psychology" as a source of insight and knowledge about interpersonal behaviour. He reasoned that a thorough understanding of motivation required an understanding of the "theories" that people use in their everyday relations with others. consequently, Heider referred to his approach as "naive" and relied exclusively on simple, meaningful terms such as can, try, and pleasure to explain attribution processes, rather than complex, ambiguous terms such as instinctual drive, self-actualization, and quasi-needs.

Heider's attribution theory had two fundamental assumptions. First, people use similar principles in the perception of other persons and in the perception of physical objects. Second, people strive for prediction and understanding of their

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world. Using these two assumptions, Heider observed that a person imposes stability and predictability on both the interpersonal and the physical environments by attributing transient events to invariant underlying condition. These Underlying conditions are called dispositional properties.

Moreover, people also explain the outcome of a behaviour by making attributions to the person, the environment or both. We attribute an outcome, success as or failure, to a joint function of factors within the person and factors within the environment. Heider says outcomes are attributed to effective personal force and effective environmental force.

According to Heider (1958) effective personal force has two components: power and motivation. Power is determined mainly by ability, because ability is necessary for motivated behaviour to produce a successful outcome. A person who has a poor background in mathematics cannot solve a complex differential equation, no matter how motivated he or she might be. Thus, it depends on person's of effective personal ability whether he or she can do the task. The motivational component of effective personal force is called 'trying'. This trying component involves both what a person is trying to do and how hard a person is trying. In sum, both can (stable) and try (unstable) are necessary to reach a desired goal.

Although some of the concepts and processes proposed in Heider's theory have received empirical support e.g Thibaut and Riecken (1955), the major

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shortcoming of the theory is its neglect of specific operationally defined hypotheses that can be investigated in the experimental laboratory. Jones and Davis (1965) have developed an "act-to-disposition" model of the attribution process to refine Heider's theory by specifying more exactly how an observer infers the causes of behaviour. Like Heider, they assume that behaviour has intended effects and that an observer strives to explain behaviour by attributing invariant dispositions either to the actor or to the environment but they preferred to analyse only attributions to personal causation, impersonal causation becomes important only by implication when personal attributions are weak or nonexistent. In general their model is pertinent where person is motivated and capable to do something i.e., where a Person is 'trying' and 'can'.

According to Jones and Davis, the attribution process has an act-intention-disposition sequence. The model contains two problems for a perceiver-one has to infer intentions of the actor from the effect of acts and second is to infer dispositions from intimations. For example, an observer is seeing that a student has stood up in the class and approaching the teacher. The observer inferred the intentions that he is going to insult the teacher and personal disposition of the actor that he is dishonest. The attributions can vary from strong to weak. Such disposition might include personality traits. The attribution process thus proceeds from act to intention to disposition.

In sum, the theory of correspondent inferences is a significant extension of Heider's attribution theory. Jones and Davis amplify the cognitive component of

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the attribution process by enlarging the sources of information used for inference to actual observed behaviours, they add potential behaviour choices. Moreover, their systematic formulation of the attribution process as an act-intention-disposition sequence allior the model (e.g. Garske, 1974, Jones Devis and Gergen 1961; Jones and Harris, 1967).

Kelley (1967, 1971, 1973) continued the refinement of attribution theory begun by Jones and Davis (1965) and made most significant contributions to attribution theory. In constructing his theory, Kelley (1971) relies heavily on Heider model, but he provides elaboration and analysis that generate new hypotheses and lay bare the critical issues in inferring the causes of behaviour. He regarded causal attribution as a complex process that takes in account the joint influence of multiple causes to produce a given effect. Thus attribution process involves the selection from several causes of the one that provides best explanation of a behaviour. Kelley propounded two sets of principles to explain the process of causal attribution in two kinds of situations.

Kelley stated that all the possible causes can be covered by three main dimensions of causes viz., external stimuli, the person and the situation or context. The first two dimensions are similar to Heider's categories "environmental" and "personal" causation. Situation is an added category of sources. Kelley depicts these three source dimensions by means of a three-dimensional solid that he terms an "attributional data table".

Weiner (1972,1974) conceptualized an attributional model of achievement related behaviour suggesting that individuals causal perception of success and failure outcomes may be of major importance in understanding such behaviour. As in several other cognitive attainment would make young children's attributions less predictable from attainment.

Factors influencing attribution of achievement related situations

1. Sex:

Broveman et al. (1968) proved that men and women develop different expectancies or self ,stereotypes on the basis of their traits. Dweck and Reppuci (1973) and Dweck-Licht (1980) reported different attributions from male and female children, they have argued that girls exhibit a more helpless pattern of attribution than boys in academic intellectual situations. That is, female are more likely to blame their failure on lack of ability whereas, boys are more likely to blame uncontrollable variable or factors such as luck (Deaux, 1976). However, it indicates that characterological attributions for bad events (such as blaming lack of ability) were more evident among female subjects. Male subjects, however, were more likely to report behaviour attributions for these negative events (such as lack of effort). Thus it can be suggested that male may attribute their success more to internal, stable and global factors and failure more to external unstable and specific in comparison to female Subjects.

2. Outcome (Success/failure)

Outcome is the most important and frequently explored factor with consistent results that influence the attribution. Weiner (1979) pointed out that attributions are more internal for success (effort), and more external for failure (lack of effort or bad luck). Feather, (1983) concluded that good outcomes were more attributed to the self (internal) than were bad outcomes, and causes of good outcomes were also attributed as stable and global than bad outcomes.

3. Attentional focuses

How individuals focus their attention while doing a task. Duval and Wicklund (1972) distinguished between conditions of task-focus and self-focus. Task focus occurs when individuals direct their attention to the task at hand. Self-focus occurs when the person is made self aware, as in evaluative situations or when performance is observed. Duval and Wicklund reasoned that self-focus usually results in negative self-evaluations because individuals-see negative discrepancies between their performance and their aspirations for their performance. Lukes, Wicklund and Ferris (1973) provided empirical support for this position. Carver and Schier (1981,1986) proposed that although self-focus heightens individuals self-awareness. It can produce either positive or negative self-evaluations depending on Weiner (1974) showed that subjects in a self-focus condition attributed both positive and negative outcome more to personal factors than did subjects in a control group. Harvey et. al (1976) using a more involving task showed that such effects are particularly likely for positive outcomes but not for negative outcomes. There are developmental differences in

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how attentional focus influences children' s attributions because older children appear to be more self reflective than younger.

OBJECTIVES

1. To study the attribution styles of achievement of boys and girls.
2. To find out the interactive effect of sex, academic achievement, attentional focus, outcome (success and failure) on students attribution styles.
3. To make the study useful for the practical application.

RESEARCH METHODOLOGY

Sample

The present study was conducted on 160 (80 male and 80 female) students of Vth Standard. All the subjects were selected from five Government schools of Karnal City in Haryana. The age of the subjects ranged between 10 to 11 years, with a mean of 10.6 years. Since the main objective of the study was to examine the influence of academic achievement, sex, attentional focus, and outcome on achievement attributions, it was necessary to assign the subjects in different conditions independent variables. Subjects scoring 60 percent or above and 40 percent or below were kept in high achievement and low achievement groups, respectively.

Design

Keeping in view the main objectives of the study, a 2x2x2x2 factorial design was followed. Four independent variables viz., academic achievement, sex,

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attentional focus, and outcome were included in the study. Each of the independent variables was varied at two levels. Male and female subjects formed two groups of source sex. High achievers and low achievers were the two levels of second independent variable, academic achievement. The third independent variable, attentional focus was varied in terms of self-focus and task-focus. Subjects assigned to self-focus condition received the instruction that performance on recall test depends on how well one tries to remember the story. Whereas, the subjects assigned to task focus condition received the instruction that to perform better on such a test depends on how well one concentrates on the task during its presentation. The two levels of the fourth independent variable (outcome) were success and failure feedback after the test or recall.

Dependent measures were attributions for success or failure in terms of five possible reasons i.e. ability, effort, interest, task difficulty, and luck. These reasons were evaluated on five point rating scale. Thus each subject obtained scores on five dependent measures

Scoring and Analysis

Each of the attributions was scored on a five point scale. viz. 1 to 5. Thus the total score of an individual on each of the attributions ranged between 1 and 5. In this way five scores corresponding to each attribution were obtained for each of the Subjects. To examine the main and interactive effects of each of the sources four way analysis of variance (2x2x2x2) was applied for all the five dependent scores separately.

RESULTS

The results obtained by applying analysis of variance and descriptive statistics i.e. cell means, main means, and interactive cell means are simply reported here, their interpretation and implications are discussed in the next chapter.

The results of analysis of variance for all the five causes are summarized in Table-I. Results reported in Table-I revealed that the source sex has influenced the attribution on effort significantly ($F=3.96$, $df\ 1/114$, $p.< .05$). The means of boys and girls Table-2 indicate that male subjects endorsed the reason effort more strongly for their performance than female subjects. It means boys considered their own effort as important determinant of their success or failure and girls do not differ in their attribution on ability, interest, difficulty, and luck causes. The F-ratios for these reasons are .09, .75, 037, and 013 respectively (d.f.1/144).

Table-1
Summary of F-test results for all the source on all the five dependent measures (df=1/144)

Source	F Ability	F Effort	F Interest	F Difficult	F Luck
A	.09	3.96*	.75	.34	.13
B	.20	1.57	.18	.78	.02
C	.09	1.96	7.46**	1.06	.02
D	5.21*	51.13**	.14	7.85**	3.40
AxB	3.91*	2.86	6.89**	.20	.33
AxC	.09	.65	.24	.78	.13
AxD	.20	.43	.01	.78	.13

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BXC	.21	1.21	.24	1.39	6.18*
BXD	.37	1.21	6.80**	.00	.46
CXD	.57	.65	3.02	.53	3.81*
AXBXC	3.90*	1.23	0.06	.19	.23
AXBXD	.37	.45	1.25	13.27**	.23
AXCXD	.21	.06	.05	3.13	.34
BXCXD	.00	.66	.24	.09	.14
AXBXCXD	.37	2.33	.095	40.04**	.31

N.B.

A= Sex, B = Academic Achievement, C= Attentional Focus D=outcome
&p≤.05, **p≤.01

Table-2

Main means of different sources for all the five variables

Source	Boys					Girls				
	Levels					Levels				
	a	b	C	d	e	a	B	c	d	e
Sex	2.95	3.35	3.16	2.96	3.37	3.00	3.01	2.76	3.05	3.2
Achievement	3.01	3.28	2.91	3.02	3.3	2.93	3.05	3.01	2.98	3.27
Attentional focus	2.95	3.06	2.9	2.98	3.01	3.00	3.3	3.02	3.02	3.56
Outcome	3.16	3.78	3.35	3.22	3.32	2.78	2.57	2.57	2.78	3.25

a = ability b= effort
c= difficulty d= Luck e= Interest

Academic achievement did not exert significant influence on any of the reasons. It indicates that high achiever and low achiever subjects do not differ significantly in the importance assigned to ability, effort, interest, task difficulty, and Luck. The

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scoring in class examinations has no bearing on how they attribute their performance in a specific situation.

Significant main effects of attentional focus i.e. self- focus and task-focus, were obtained on the rating of interest reason. The F ratio (7.46) is significant beyond .01 level of probability at 1/144 degrees of freedom. Means of self-focus and task-focus groups can be seen from Table-2. Means of these two conditions indicate that subjects attributed their performance more to their interest in the task-focus condition than the self-focus condition. Respective means of the task-focus condition and the self-focus condition on interest reason are 3.56 and 3.01 respectively. These results suggest that subjects who received task-focus instructions listened stories by taking more interest than those who received self-focus instructions that's why they attributed their performance to the reason interest.

The fourth independent variable outcome exerted significant influence on several of the attributions. The F-ratio for this source on ability reason was 5.21, which is significant beyond .05 level of probability at 1/144 d f.: Main means recorded in Table-2 and reveal that ability was judged as important cause of the success than failure. Mean score of successful and failure conditions on ability reason was 3.16 and 2.78, respectively. Outcome main effects were obtained on effort reason also. The F-ratio accounted by this source on effort attribution was 51.13, significant beyond .01. The mean score on effort for the success condition was 3.78 and 2.78 for the failure condition (table-2). It clearly indicates that the

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subjects who received success feedback attributed their own effort more than the subjects who received failure feedback.

The source outcome has also influenced the attribution on task-difficulty reason significantly ($F=7.85$, d.f.1/144, $P<.01$). Means of successful and failure conditions (table-2) have shown that successful subjects judged task-difficulty (less difficult) as important reason for their performance than failure. These results indicate that success is attributed to more internal factors than failure.

The interaction of sex and academic achievement was significant on ability reason. The obtained F ratio (3.91, d.f. 1/144) is significant at .05 level of probability.

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