

ATTRIBUTION THEORY: APPLICATIONS FOR TEACHING

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ATTRIBUTION THEORY

The study of how people try to explain the causes of events and behaviors. Attribution theory assumes people are **naïve psychologists** who try to understand **why** people behave as they do. Attribution theory deals with perceived causes of events rather than actual causes.

RELEVANCE TO TEACHING

A basic knowledge of attribution theory can help us as teachers avoid the pitfalls of biases, and to learn how to motivate our students towards success. The theory predicts that students who attribute their successes and failures to certain causes will be more successful at those tasks in the future.

FRITZ HEIDER'S EARLY MODEL

Behavior attributed to factors which are

INTERNAL (DISPOSITIONAL)—Any cause which is “inside” the person

Ex: John didn't practice because he is lazy.

EXTERNAL (SITUATIONAL)—Any cause which is “outside” of the person

Ex: John didn't practice because his other obligations didn't leave him time.

KELLEY'S COVARIATION MODEL

Events can be attributed to

PERSON—stable characteristics of the person (Ex: Ability)

Ex: John performed well because he is a good performer.

ENTITY—properties of the object we interact with (Ex: Task difficulty)

Ex: John performed well because he played an easy piece.

CIRCUMSTANCE—transient, unstable causes (Ex: Luck)

Ex: John performed well because he was lucky.

WEINER'S 3-DIMENSIONAL MODEL

Outcomes attributed to causes which can be categorized in different dimensions

INTERNAL vs. EXTERNAL (e.g. Ability vs. Task difficulty)

STABLE vs. UNSTABLE (e.g. Ability vs. Short-term effort)

CONTROLLABLE vs. UNCONTROLLABLE (e.g. Effort vs. Luck)

MOST IMPORTANT ATTRIBUTIONS (WEINER)

Ability	Internal Stable Uncontrollable
Effort	Internal Stable (Long-term) Unstable (Short-term) Controllable
Task Difficulty	External Stable Uncontrollable
Luck	External Unstable Uncontrollable

ABILITY VS. EFFORT

Studies have shown that teachers tend to reward perceived effort and actually penalize ability. We reward students on specific tasks for effort rather than high ability.

LEARNED HELPLESSNESS

The worst possible situation for a student. The student perceives that effort makes no difference for the outcome of events (success or failure). This stems from successive perceived failures in spite of increased effort.

FUNDAMENTAL ATTRIBUTION ERROR

The tendency to attribute other people's behavior to internal factors and your own behavior to external factors.

SELF-SERVING BIAS

The tendency to attribute our successes to internal causes and failures to external causes.

IDEAL OUTCOME ATTRIBUTIONS FOR STUDENTS

SUCCESS:

In general, we want our students (and ourselves) to attribute successful outcomes to factors that are **internal** and **stable**, and thus can be relied on in the future such as ability or long-term effort.

FAILURE:

We want our students (and ourselves) to attribute failures to factors that are **controllable** and that can be changed in the future such as effort.

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