

WEINER'S ATTRIBUTION THEORY

Attribution theory is concerned with how individuals interpret events and how this relates to their thinking and behaviour. Heider (1958) was the first to propose a psychological theory of attribution, but Weiner and colleagues (e.g., Jones et al, 1972; Weiner, 1974, 1986) developed a theoretical framework that has become a major research paradigm of social psychology. Attribution theory assumes that people try to determine why people do what they do, i.e., attribute causes to behaviour. A person seeking to understand why another person did something may attribute one or more causes to that behaviour. A **three-stage process** underlies an attribution:

- (1) the person must perceive or observe the behaviour,
- (2) then the person must believe that the behaviour was intentionally performed, and
- (3) then the person must determine if they believe the other person was forced to perform the behaviour (in which case the cause is attributed to the situation) or not (in which case the cause is attributed to the other person).

Weiner focused his attribution theory on achievement (Weiner, 1974). He identified

- **ability,**
- **effort,**
- **task difficulty, and**
- **luck**

as the most important factors affecting attributions for achievement.

Attributions are classified along **three causal dimensions**:

- 1. locus of control,**
- 2. stability, and**
- 3. controllability.**

The locus of control dimension has two poles:

- **internal versus**
- **external locus of control.**

The Stability dimension captures whether causes change over time or not. For instance,

- ability can be classified as a stable, internal cause, and
- effort classified as unstable and internal.

Controllability contrasts causes one can control, such as skill/efficacy, from causes one cannot control, such as aptitude, mood, others' actions, and luck.

APPLICATION

Weiner's theory has been widely applied in education, law, clinical psychology, and the mental health domain. There is a strong relationship between self-concept and achievement. Weiner (1980) states: "Causal attributions determine affective reactions to success and failure. For example, one is not likely to experience pride in success, or feelings of competence, when receiving an 'A' from a teacher who gives only that grade, or when defeating a tennis player who always loses...On the other hand, an 'A' from a teacher who gives few high grades or a victory over a highly rated tennis player following a great deal of practice generates great positive affect." (p.362). Students with higher ratings of self-esteem and with higher school achievement tend to attribute success to internal, stable, uncontrollable factors such as ability, while they contribute failure to either internal, unstable, controllable factors such as effort, or external, uncontrollable factors such as task difficulty. For example, students who experience repeated failures in reading are likely to see themselves as being less competent in reading. This self-perception of reading ability reflects itself in children's expectations of success on reading tasks and reasoning of success or failure of reading. Similarly, students with learning disabilities seem less likely than non-disabled peers to attribute failure to effort, an unstable, controllable factor, and more likely to attribute failure to ability, a stable, uncontrollable factor.

Lewis & Daltroy (1990) discuss applications of attribution theory to health care. An interesting example of attribution theory applied to career development is provided by **Daly (1996)** who examined the attributions that employees held as to why they failed to receive promotions.

Example

Attribution theory has been used to explain the difference in motivation between high and low achievers. According to attribution theory, high achievers will approach rather than avoid tasks related to succeeding because they believe success is due to high ability and effort which they

are confident of. Failure is thought to be caused by bad luck or a poor exam, i.e. not their fault. Thus, failure doesn't affect their self-esteem but success builds pride and confidence. On the other hand, low achievers avoid success-related chores because they tend to (a) doubt their ability and/or (b) assume success is related to luck or to "who you know" or to other factors beyond their control. Thus, even when successful, it isn't as rewarding to the low achiever because he/she doesn't feel responsible, i.e., it doesn't increase his/her pride and confidence.

PRINCIPLES

Attribution is a three stage process: (1) behaviour is observed, (2) behaviour is determined to be deliberate, and (3) behaviour is attributed to internal or external causes.

Achievement can be attributed to (1) effort, (2) ability, (3) level of task difficulty, or (4) luck.

Causal dimensions of behaviour are (1) locus of control, (2) stability, and (3) controllability.