INTERPERSONAL ATTRIBUTIONS

Note: In the fifth edition of Human Learning, *I condensed my discussion of attribution theory, especially my discussion of interpersonal attributions. The detailed discussion of interpersonal attributions that appeared in the fourth edition of the book is presented here.*

Chapter 16 in *Human Learning* describes the nature of **attributions**—that is, people's internal explanations about *why* certain things happen to them. But just as we form attributions regarding the causes of our performance, those around us may form their own opinions regarding why we have succeeded or failed. We, in turn, have beliefs about why *they* have done well or poorly. In other words, people form **interpersonal attributions** as well as in*tra*personal ones.

I recall a conversation I once had with a well-educated man whose training was in mechanical engineering rather than psychology or education. We were discussing the fact that, on average, children in inner-city schools achieve at lower levels than children in suburban schools. Knowing that I was an educational psychologist, the man asked me why I thought there was such a difference in performance levels. I said that there were apt to be a number of reasons, probably including smaller school budgets, larger class sizes, more obligations and fewer resources at home, poor nutrition, fear for personal safety, a higher proportion of children with learning disabilities and other special needs, and so on. The man seemed quite surprised. "I always thought that the kids just weren't *motivated*," he said.

The three dimensions identified in Chapter 16—locus, stability, and controllability—are as relevant to interpersonal attributions as they are to intrapersonal ones. Probably the most important one from an interpersonal standpoint is *controllability* (Weiner, 2000). The reasons I offered for the low achievement of many inner-city students—fewer resources, poor nutrition, a dangerous environment, and so on—all involved things beyond the students' control. In contrast, my conversational partner believed that the students performed poorly only because they didn't *want* to do well; in other words, high achievement was well within their grasp if they set their minds to it. (The man also had an overly simplistic idea of what motivation is. As should be clear from Chapters 15 and 16 in *Human Learning,* motivation involves many things—self-efficacy, self-determination, expectancies, values, and so on—and most of these cannot be voluntarily flicked on and off like a light switch.)

How People Communicate Their Attributions

People communicate their attributions for a learner's performance both directly through the statements they make and indirectly through their evaluative and emotional reactions.

Statements

In some cases, people communicate their attributions verbally and explicitly. For example, consider the things a teacher might say about a student's success:

- "You did it! You're so smart!"
- "That's wonderful. Your hard work has really paid off, hasn't it?"

- "You've done very well. It's clear that you really know how to study."
- "Terrific! This is certainly your lucky day!"

Consider, also, the statements a teacher might make about a student's failure:

- "Hmmm, maybe this just isn't something you're good at. Perhaps we should try a different activity."
- "Why don't you practice a little more and then try again?"
- "Let's see whether we can come up with some study strategies that might work better for you."
- "Maybe you're just having a bad day."

All of these are well-intended comments, presumably designed to make someone feel good. But notice the different attributions they imply. In some cases success or failure is attributed to controllable (and therefore changeable) behaviors—that is, to hard work or lack of practice or to the use of effective or ineffective study strategies. But in other cases success or failure is attributed to uncontrollable ability—that is, to being smart or not "good at" something. And in still other cases an outcome is attributed to external, uncontrollable causes—that is, to a lucky break or a bad day.

Evaluative and Emotional Reactions

People also communicate their attributions—and indirectly, their beliefs about a learner's ability level—through the emotions they convey and the extent to which they praise or criticize performance (Graham, 1990, 1991, 1997; Hareli & Weiner, 2002; Reyna & Weiner, 2001; Weiner, 2000). Frequent praise is often a message that learners' successes are a result of their efforts; however, by praising a learner for *easy* tasks, people may simultaneously convey the message that success wasn't expected—in other words, that the learner has low ability. Here, then, we see a perspective very different from that of operant conditioning. Operant conditioning theorists propose that, as reinforcement, praise should increase the behavior it follows. From the standpoint of attribution theory, however, praise may be counterproductive for easy tasks. If it communicates low ability, learners may be unwilling to exert much effort on later tasks. Praise for effort is likely to be effective only when learners *have* exerted that effort.

Reactions to a learner's failures communicate attributions as well. When people criticize, express anger about, and perhaps punish a learner's poor performance, they convey the message that the learner has sufficient ability to master the task and simply isn't trying hard enough. But when people express pity or sympathy for the same performance, they communicate their belief that the learner's low ability is the reason for the failure.

Children readily draw inferences from other adults' evaluative and emotional reactions to their performance. As an illustration, Barker and Graham (1987) asked 4- to 12-year-old children to watch a videotape depicting two boys either solving single-digit math problems at the blackboard or throwing balls through a large hoop in the gymnasium; the two tasks appeared to be easy ones for the boys to accomplish. Some of the children saw a videotape in which both boys succeeded; the teacher praised one boy (e.g., "Great job!") but gave the other only neutral feedback (e.g., "Correct"). Other children saw a videotape in which the two boys failed at their task; one was criticized for this failure (e.g., "What's the matter with you? That's not the right answer!") and the other, again, given neutral feedback (e.g., "No, not quite"). The children were subsequently asked to rate the two boys for either intelligence (for the math-problem videos) or throwing ability (for the ball-throwing videos) on a 5-point scale. Younger children (4- and 5-year-olds) concluded that the boy praised for his success had higher ability than the other boy; in contrast,

older children (11- and 12-year-olds) concluded that the praised boy had *lower* ability. At the same time, younger children deduced that the boy criticized for his failure had lower ability, whereas older children came to the opposite conclusion. Children who were 8 or 9 years old assigned similar ratings to both boys in both success and failure situations. Thus, we see a developmental change as children grow older: They become increasingly likely to interpret praise for an easy success as a sign of low ability and to interpret blame for failure on an easy task as an indication of high ability.

Effects of Interpersonal Attributions

Research indicates that children's attributions for their performance are often similar to the attributions that adults assign to their performance (Dweck, Davidson, Nelson, & Enna, 1978; Eccles, Wigfield, & Schiefele, 1998; Lueptow, 1984; Parsons, Adler, & Kaczala, 1982; Schunk, 1982). Furthermore, when parents and teachers communicate their belief that children are incapable of mastering a task, children are likely to attribute their failures to low ability and may therefore conclude that there is little to be gained by trying harder (Butler, 1994; Weiner, 2000; Yee & Eccles, 1988).

When people don't know why they have succeeded or failed, they eagerly seek out information that can help them explain what has happened (Weiner, 2000). As an example, let's look at a study conducted in a second-grade classroom (Gaskill, 2001). In a three-week unit on cursive writing, the teacher introduced a new cursive letter each day and showed her students how to write it correctly. After a short demonstration and discussion of the letter, she asked the students to practice it, first by "writing" it in the air using large arm movements and then by writing it numerous times on lined paper. As the children practiced, she gave different children different kinds of feedback. (She had randomly assigned the children to two groups and placed small stickers inconspicuously on each desk to remind her which children were in which group.) When children in the control (*praise*) group wrote a letter with good form, she gave them a "happy face" token, said "Great" or "Perfect!," and either smiled at them or gave them a pat on the back. When children in the treatment (*attribution*) group wrote a letter with good form at least once, she gave them a happy face token and said something along the lines of "You sure are working hard," "You can write beautifully in cursive," or "You are a natural at this" (Gaskill, 2001, p. 8). If children in either group failed to meet her standards for good form, she gave them whatever corrective feedback they needed. Despite the seemingly minor differences in her behavior toward the two groups, the teacher observed significant differences in what the two groups said and did. During the unit, the children in the control group often seemed disappointed, sometimes even anxious, when they receive their "positive" feedback. For instance, on one occasion, after overhearing the teacher say that a classmate was a natural at cursive writing, a particularly good writer in the control group (who was consistently getting feedback such as "Great!" or "Perfect!") asked, "Am *I* a natural at this?" After the unit was over, the children in the treatment group enjoyed cursive writing more, thought it was easier, and used it more frequently in their spelling tests, journal entries, and other writing tasks. Such findings remind us once again that learners are usually eager not only for information that tells them they are doing well but also for information that affirms their sense of self-worth more generally.

Factors Influencing Attributions for Others

Just as people base their self-attributions partly on past successes and failures and partly on cultural perspectives, so, too, are their attributions for others partially a function of prior performance and culture. In addition, a general bias toward stable attributions, conceptions of intelligence, stereotypes, and goals enter into the picture. Let's briefly look at each of these.

Past History of Success and Failure

One logical source of information for forming attributions is the pattern of performance that another has exhibited. Seeing consistent performance over time—whether it be consistently high or consistently low—should lead an observer to infer that stable factors, such as intelligence or some other general ability, are the cause of the performance. Seeing *in*consistent performance from one time to the next should lead the observer to conclude that temporary factors (perhaps that switch-on-switch-off "motivation" my engineer friend had in mind) are the primary cause of performance.

Culture

Just as cultural beliefs influence people's self-attributions, so, too, do they affect people's attributions for others. For instance, compared to Chinese American and European American mothers, mothers in the People's Republic of China are much more likely to attribute their children's poor performance in math to low effort, rather than to more stable and less controllable factors such as ability (Hess, Chih-Mei, & McDevitt, 1987).

General Bias toward Stable Attributions

In forming their self-attributions, people often consider situational factors (how much help they're getting, whether irrelevant events are distracting their attention, etc.) that may be affecting their performance. In contrast, people tend to attribute *others'* behaviors to fairly stable personal characteristics, such as ability, disposition, or personality (Fiske & Taylor, 1991; Weiner, 1992). In part, this bias may be a result of the fact that an observer usually catches only an occasional snippet of a learner's performance and so does not have much opportunity to see variability across time and situations (Fiske & Taylor, 1991).

Conception of Intelligence

As noted in Chapter 16 of *Human Learning,* people have differing views of intelligence, some believing it to be an *entity* that remains fairly stable and others believing that it can change *incrementally* over time. People who have an entity view of intelligence are more likely to attribute high and low performance to a stable ability, and so they will expect learners' future performance to be quite similar to current performance levels (Dweck, 2000; Pintrich & Schunk, 2002).

Stereotypes

Gender stereotypes influence the attributions that adults form for boys and girls. For example, many parents have the impression that boys are "naturally" more mathematically talented than girls. Those who do are apt to attribute their sons' high math performance to ability and their daughters' high math performance to effort. Meanwhile, they attribute sons' low math performance to lack of effort and their daughters' low math performance to low ability. The

reverse pattern is seen for English, which is stereotypically a "female" domain (Dunton, McDevitt, & Hess, 1988; Eccles et al., 1998; Jacobs & Eccles, 1992; Yee & Eccles, 1988).

Ethnic and racial stereotypes affect attributions as well (Reyna, 2000). For example, imagine that a student from a particular ethnic group fails an exam. A teacher who believes that people of that ethnic group are "lazy" is apt to attribute the poor performance to lack of effort, get angry, and refuse to help the student improve. In contrast, a teacher who believes that people of that ethnic group are the unfortunate victims of racial discrimination (as well as of the resulting poverty and poor living conditions that it brings about) is apt to attribute the poor performance to uncontrollable factors, be sympathetic, and work hard to help the student master the subject matter (Reyna, 2000).

Goals

Regardless of what observers actually believe about the causes of a learner's success and failure, the attributions they *communicate* may depend on their goals as they interact with the learner (Hareli & Weiner, 2002). For instance, imagine that John has just failed a classroom task. A teacher who wants to protect John's sense of self-worth may suggest that his poor performance was caused by something he can control (e.g., effort or study strategies) rather than low ability. If the teacher attributes the failure to low ability, however, more effort and a new approach may not work; an alternative way of protecting John's self-worth is to suggest that the task is a very difficult one—an external, uncontrollable attribution (Hareli & Weiner, 2002).

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