Attribution Theory

Attribution theory (Weiner, 1980, 1992) is probably the most influential contemporary theory with implications for academic motivation. It incorporates behavior modification in the sense that it emphasizes the idea that learners are strongly motivated by the pleasant outcome of being able to feel good about themselves. It incorporates cognitive theory and self-efficacy theory in the sense that it emphasizes that learners' current self-perceptions will strongly influence the ways in which they will interpret the success or failure of their current efforts and hence their future tendency to perform these same behaviors.

According to attribution theory, the explanations that people tend to make to explain success or failure can be analyzed in terms of three sets of characteristics:

- First, the cause of the success or failure may be **internal or external**. That is, we may succeed or fail because of factors that we believe have their origin within us or because of factors that originate in our environment.

- Second, the cause of the success or failure may be either **stable or unstable**. If the we believe cause is stable, then the outcome is likely to be the same if we perform the same behavior on another occasion. If it is unstable, the outcome is likely to be different on another occasion.

- Third, the cause of the success or failure may be either **controllable or uncontrollable**. A controllable factor is one which we believe we ourselves can alter if we wish to do so. An uncontrollable factor is one that we do not believe we can easily alter.

  Note that this factor is distinct from the previous two categories. An internal factor can be controllable (we can control our effort by trying harder) or uncontrollable (most people cannot easily change their basic intellectual ability or change from being an introvert to being an extrovert). Likewise, an external factor can be controllable (a person failing a difficult course could succeed by taking an easier course) or uncontrollable (if calculus is difficult because it is abstract, it will still be abstract no matter what we do).

An important assumption of attribution theory is that people will interpret their environment in such a way as to maintain a positive self-image. That is, they will attribute their successes or failures to factors that will enable them to feel as good as possible about themselves. In general, this means that when learners succeed at an academic task, they are likely to want to attribute this success to their own efforts or abilities; but when they fail, they will want to attribute their failure to factors over which they have no control, such as bad teaching or bad luck.

The basic principle of attribution theory as it applies to motivation is that a person's own perceptions or attributions for success or failure determine the amount of effort the person will expend on that activity in the future.

There are four factors related to attribution theory that influence motivation in education: ability, task difficulty, effort, and luck. In terms of the characteristics discussed previously, these four factors can be analyzed in the following way:

Ability is a relatively internal and stable factor over which the learner does not exercise much direct control.

Task difficulty is an external and stable factor that is largely beyond the learner's control.

Effort is an internal and unstable factor over which the learner can exercise a great deal of control.

Luck is an external and unstable factor over which the learner exercises very little control.

Note that it is the learner's perception that determines how attributions will influence future effort. A learner may believe that he is a "lucky person" - and for him luck would be an internal and stable characteristic over which he exercises little control. In other words, for this person "luck" is really what the preceding list calls an "ability" or personality characteristic. Likewise, a person may believe that she expended a great deal of effort, when in fact she did not, or that an objectively easy task was difficult. The basic principle of attribution theory as it applies to motivation is that a person's own perceptions or attributions for success or failure determine the amount of effort the person will expend on that activity in the future.

Students will be most persistent at academic tasks under the following circumstances:

- if they attribute their academic successes to either:

- internal, unstable, factors over which they have control (e.g., effort) or

- internal, stable, factors over which they have little control but which may sometimes be disrupted by other factors (e.g., ability disrupted by occasional bad luck);
- and

- if they attribute their failures to internal, unstable factors over which they have control (e.g., effort).

The following guidelines can be derived from the preceding statement:

If we want students to persist at academic tasks, we should help them establish a sincere belief that they are competent and that occasional imperfections or failures are the result of some other factor (such as bad luck or a lack of sufficient effort) that need not be present on future occasions. (That is, ability attributions for success are likely to be beneficial, with the exception cited in the next guideline.)

It is not beneficial for students to attribute their successes entirely to ability. If they think they already have all the ability they need, they may feel that additional effort is superfluous. The ideal attribution for success is, "I succeeded because I am a competent person and worked hard."

When students fail, they are most likely to persist and eventually succeed if they attribute their failure to a lack of appropriate effort. Therefore, it is extremely important that when students perceive themselves as unsuccessful teachers help them develop the conviction that they can still succeed if they give it their best shot. (Note that it is important to define effort appropriately, as in guideline 5.)

It is extremely hazardous to motivational health for students to fail repeatedly after making a serious effort at academic tasks. When this happens, they will either (a) stop believing they are competent, or (b) stop attributing their failure to lack of effort. Both of these outcomes are likely to reduce persistence at the academic tasks. It is important, therefore, to arrange tasks so that students who work hard are able to perceive themselves as successful.

It is important to define effort correctly and for the learners to internalize an accurate concept of effort. In practical terms effort is most usefully defined as devoting effective academic learning time to the task. Just trying harder or spending more time doing ineffective activities does not constitute effort. It is extremely important to make this distinction. If we use another definition of effort, when we tell children that their failures are a result of a lack of effort, we run the risk of leading them to believe that they have an internal, stable characteristic called laziness, over which they have no control. This will reduce motivation.

Another way to say this is that it is possible and desirable for students to believe that even though they have "worked hard," they have not yet put forth their best effort. If we can show students ways to improve their efforts - and there are almost always ways to channel their energies more effectively - then we can enable them to have an accurate perception that increased effort is likely to pay off.

Excessively competitive grading and evaluation systems are likely to impair the learning of many students. Competition will encourage students to persist only to the extent that they believe additional effort will enable them to succeed within the competitive atmosphere. In many instances, success in competition is completely beyond the learner's control - no matter how hard a learner works, another more competent and equally energetic competitor is likely to win.

It is useful to evaluate students at least partly (but not exclusively) on the basis of their effort. This does not mean that the weakest students in a class should receive the highest grades simply because they may spend more time trying to master the subject matter. Ideally, course assignments should be arranged so that diligent work actually leads to academic success, and the teacher's evaluation should help students see this connection.

In general, it is best for students to believe that it is their own behavior rather than external circumstances that leads to success or failure. Researchers refer to this as having an internal locus of control. While it is good for students to have a realistic understanding of what's happening around them, research shows that the most successful students have a tendency to overestimate the degree to which their own behavior leads to success or failure (Lefcourt, 1976).

When students have a conviction that they lack ability, it is necessary to take steps to circumvent or overcome this conviction. Such students are likely to repudiate successes. For example, when they do well, they are likely to have a sincere conviction that they were "just lucky." It is difficult to alter this conviction. Changing this conviction is tantamount to altering the learner's self-concept, and this cannot be accomplished in a short time. There are many approaches available to teachers, including the following:

Find areas in which the learner perceives himself or herself as successful, and show connections between that area and the topic currently under consideration.
Use guidelines discussed in chapter 8 to enhance the learner's self-concept.

Focus heavily on effort as the factor critical to success.

While the teacher's long-range goal may be to enhance the child's self-concept, the immediate goal is to promote motivation with regard to the subject matter at hand.

When students reject the value of effort, it is important to change their perception. This can be done by clarifying the meaning of effort and by seeing to it that effort does actually pay off. In addition, if students attribute their success to luck, it may be best to refrain from arguing with their attributions, while simply praising or otherwise reinforcing them for their effective use of academic learning time.

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The preceding guidelines should enable teachers to use attribution theory to motivate students more effectively. In addition, it is possible simply to reinforce effort attributions (Schunk, 1982, 1983) and to conduct training programs designed to promote attributions that are likely to lead to higher levels of motivation and productivity (McCombs, 1984; Forsterling, 1985; Licht & Kistner, 1986; Zimmerman, 1989).

Attribution theory is an evolving field, and it is likely that further research will lead to additional practical insights regarding motivation. It is important to note that this discussion of attribution theory has barely scratched the surface. The following are some additional concepts related to attribution theory:

Learning goals are set by individuals who seek to increase their competence. People who emphasize learning goals are likely to seek challenges, if they believe the challenges will lead to greater competence; and they tend to respond to failure by increasing their effort (Elliott & Dweck, 1988; Dweck & Leggett, 1988; Dweck, 1989). It is good to encourage students to set and pursue learning goals rather than performance goals.

Performance goals, on the other hand, are set by individuals who seek to gain favorable judgments or to avoid unfavorable judgments in the eyes of others. People who emphasize performance goals are likely to avoid challenges unless they are certain they can succeed, and they tend to respond to failure with feelings of learned helplessness and self-handicapping (Elliott & Dweck, 1988; Dweck & Leggett, 1988; Dweck, 1989), which are discussed next. It is often undesirable to emphasize performance goals; but schools, parents, and society often overemphasize them to the detriment of learners.

Learned helplessness refers to the expectation, based on previous experience, that one's actions cannot possibly lead to success (Dweck, 1975, 1978). Performance goals are much more likely than learning goals to lead to ability rather than effort attributions and to result in feelings of learned helplessness. Heyman & Dweck (1992) recommend encouraging students to focus primarily on learning goals, while keeping performance goals in perspective by enjoying recognition without letting it become an overriding concern. Teachers can accomplish this by focusing on learning rather than normative comparisons when reinforcing students, by modeling the use of learning goals, and by using the scaffolding strategies described in chapter 12 to teach effect goal setting and self-monitoring.

Self-handicapping occurs when learners create impediments that make good performance less likely. Examples of impediments include drug and alcohol use, refusing to practice, reporting

excessive symptoms, and reducing effort. These impediments may sound just plain foolish, but they are very real and actually serve to protect the person's sense of self-competence. If the self-handicapping person does poorly, his explanation for this failure lies in the impediment. If the person does well, his success is exalted, because he overcame the impediment. Since the impediments interfere with learning, they have the overall effect of reducing motivation and performance. Self-handicapping is likely to become prominent during adolescence. Since it occurs most often among persons with an overriding concern with their competence image, this problem can best be minimized by focusing on effort attributions and by helping learners develop secure feelings of self-efficacy (Riggs, 1992).

Self-handicapping may be imposed or at least supported by a learner's culture or subculture or by the atmosphere of the school. For example, adolescents may handicap themselves by reducing their effort because they feel that studying hard will be viewed as an undesirable form of competition with their peers (Slavin, 1983). Likewise, African-American students may reduce their effort because they resist conforming to the norms of the oppositional culture (Fordham & Ogbu, 1986).

Self-Handicapping Attributions

Paradoxically, students use the principles of attribution theory itself as a means of self-handicapping. For example, students who think they will fail a difficult test may be inclined to refrain from studying for that test. Their thinking goes like this:

If I study hard but fail, I will look and feel incompetent. That is, if I give my best effort and fail, everyone will know that I don't have the ability to do well on this test.

If I study hard and pass, the hard work will reduce the glory of my success. People will think I had to work hard in order to succeed. If I were really smart, I wouldn't have to work so hard.

If I don't study but fail, I can explain this failure by noting that I haven't even tried. If I haven't tried, then I can have the internal assurance that I could have succeeded if I had really tried. I may fail the test, but at least no one will have evidence that I'm stupid.

If I don't study but still manage to succeed, then people will know that I'm a genius. The only explanation for my success would have to be that I have really high ability.

This kind of reasoning is counterproductive, of course, because the objective reality is that a person who expends less effort is actually less likely to be productive.

Expectancy-valence models state that a person's motivation to achieve a goal depends on a combination of the value of that goal (its valence) and the person's estimation of the likelihood of success (Feather, 1982). The combination of expectancy and valence interacts with attribution theory in complex ways. For example, under certain circumstances, a high probability of success can actually reduce motivation. In most cases, a person will expend more effort when there is a moderate (rather than high or low) probability of success (Atkinson, 1964).

Self-worth theory Covington (1984) combines ideas related to self-efficacy, attribution theory, and learned helplessness. It focuses on the notion that people are largely motivated to do what it takes to

enhance their reputation in various areas. Learners engage in objectively counterproductive activities such as setting goals that are far too high or too low, reducing effort, and procrastinating, in the often illusory hope that they will feel better about themselves if they refrain from putting forth their best effort and risking failure.

Many factors contribute to students' goal setting and feelings of helplessness, but research shows that highly competitive grading systems that foster comparisons with others and give the impression that only a few students will meet the high standards are likely to promote performance goals and learned helplessness and thereby reduce motivation for many students (Ames et al, 1977; Rosenholtz & Wilson, 1980; Cohen, 1986). These and other issues related to the impact of attributions on motivation are discussed in Ames & Archer (1988).

Repeated Important Caution: It is important to define effort clearly and correctly when helping students make effort attributions for their failures. If you tell a student who does not understand a concept that his problem is a lack of effort, he is likely to think you are accusing him of being lazy. When I once told a student she had failed because of a lack of effort, she replied, "Baloney! I crammed for eight straight hours for this test." The point that I hastened to clarify with her was that her problem was not being lazy, but that she had not used her time as effectively as possible. Once I convinced her that she should spread out her study time and apply several of the other principles described in chapter 1, she did much better on subsequent quizzes. Her improved motivation to be more productive after we discussed that first failure arose because she had begun to attribute her initial failure to effort - that is, to the internal, temporary, and controllable perception that she had not yet given the subject matter her best shot.

Actually, what we want to promote is not purely effort attributions, but rather strategic effort attributions - that is, learners need to believe that working hard in a particular way is what leads to success (Pressley, Borkowski, & Schneider, 1987). By consistently helping students make strategic effort attributions, we can encourage them to view failures as problem solving situations in which the search for an improved strategy becomes the main focus of attention (Clifford, 1984).

What parents can do about motivation:
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