

Attributional Styles

Click on a topic below to go directly to that section.

[Definition of Attributional Styles](#)

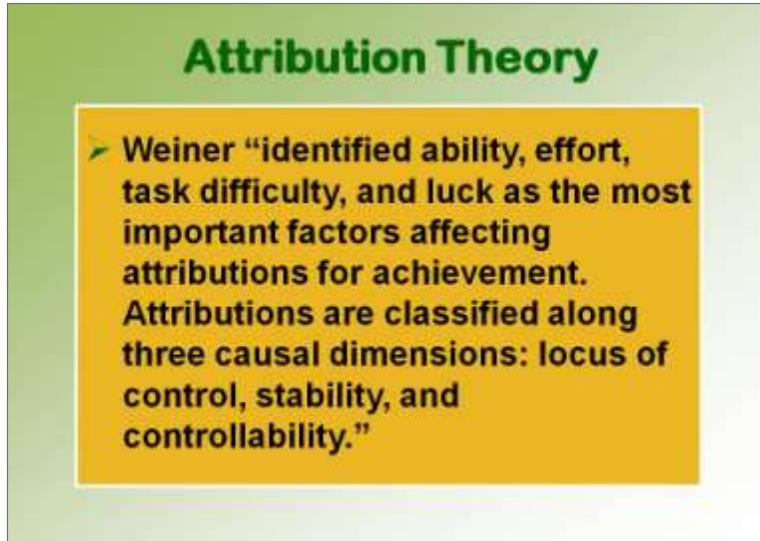
[Attributional Styles are Fundamental to a CBA](#)

[Additional Resources Related to Attributional Styles](#)

Definition of Attributional Styles

The next three sub-constructs (attribution styles, causal attribution, learned optimism) are all part of our metacognitive functioning and critical to our ability to learn and live fulfilling lives. A significant aspect of the human experience is the need to understand why something has happened. Behaviors and events need to make sense to us and we accomplish this through attributions we make regarding the cause of what occurred. The conceptual framework used to study the processes by which we attribute causes to what happened is called attribution, or explanatory, theory. We attribute the cause of the behavior or event in terms that make sense to us. The following definition of attribution theory is retrieved from:

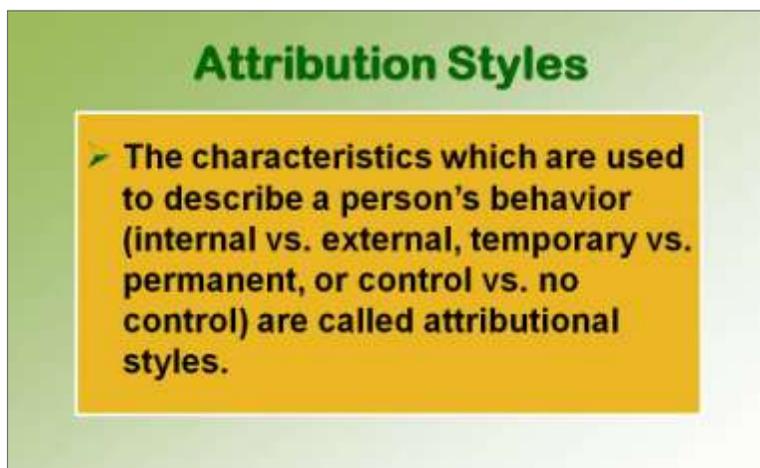
<http://www.instructionaldesign.org/theories/attribution-theory.html>



Attribution theory was first proposed by Fritz Heider and later expanded upon by Bernard Weiner, among others. These psychological theorists have provided the foundational concepts for attribution theory and have established the importance of the attributional process to education because of the strong influence attributions have on students’ feelings of success and failure and on their emotions, and future motivation and emotional state.

Attribution theory is a primary focus of social psychology. Locus of control is divided into internal vs. external, or whether the cause can be attributed to ourselves (internal) or to others or the environment (external). Stability relates to whether causes are temporary or permanent. Controllability refers to the amount of control individuals perceive they have over a behavior or event. Retrieved from <http://www.instructionaldesign.org/theories/attribution-theory.html>. The websites and videos provided below define and provide examples of attribution styles, causal attribution and learned optimism and how they relate to human behavior.

Attribution Styles

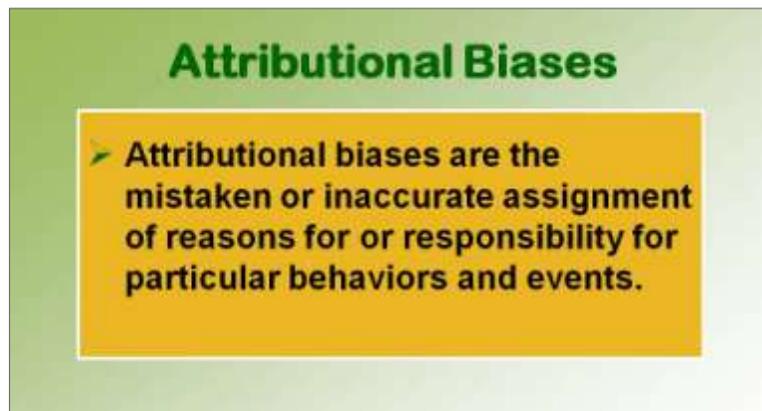


Attributions styles are affected by a combination of personal and environmental, or situational, factors. Attributions that we make in the past influence our future thinking and behavior. This is

especially important in education where students' attributions related to learning successes and failures can have a significant impact on their learning as they progress along the PreK-12 learning continuum. Students' perceptions about causes of their successes and failures can be more powerful than the actual causes because students' future attributions are influenced by their past perceptions which are not always an accurate assessment of the actual cause.

Attributional Biases

Another set of important concepts in attribution theory address attributional biases. A bias is a judgment that people make or believe to be true that is based on preconceived ideas or beliefs but in reality are not true.



Attributional biases are very important in understanding both individual and group explanations of behaviors and events. They can be used to explain in-group and out-group beliefs wherein people in the in-group (we or us) believe that certain negative characteristics of entire out-groups (they or them) are accurate perceptions.

The literature identifies many types of attributional biases. Some of the more common are the fundamental attribution error, self-serving bias, actor-observer bias, just world hypothesis and the self-centered bias. The links in the “Additional Resources” section below connect you with print and video resources that explain attributional biases. It is important to remember when reviewing these resources what all the biases have in common: they are all inaccurate attributions that we can examine, challenge, clarify and change by reflecting on the processes that explain behaviors and events.

Attributional Styles are Fundamental to a CBA

Attribution theory has broad implications for education and helping students become proficient learners. As with any of our metacognitive functions, we are capable of critically self-reflecting on the processes by which we assign attributions and can act to improve the processes in ways that help ensure accurate, and change inaccurate, explanations of behaviors and events. Helping students recognize the importance of attributions, the mistakes we commonly make, and that we have the power to improve these processes are extremely critical to students' motivation, emotional well-being, self-efficacy, and ability to set goals and achieve desired results.

The focus on individual attributions is important to every student, educator and parent/guardian. The ability to understand these processes can be learned. Therefore, school counselors have a role in ensuring that students learn what to look for when self-reflecting on their attributional strategies. They need guidance what strategies they can use to question the accuracy of their attributions and change them when they discover the actual causes of behaviors and events. Students need to better understand the consequences of making attributions related to their ability vs. causation factors that are external to them. They need to grasp the importance of personal effort in and ownership of their learning processes.

The focus on attributional styles in social contexts, discussed in the section on “Causal Attribution” below, is equally as important. This is particularly true in terms of biases and prejudices that characterize group identity and behavior. The notion of causal attribution is very useful when addressing the sub-constructs of “Critical Consciousness” and “Social Justice” discussed in the section on the “Relationships” construct.

School counselors, as all educators, are deeply concerned about student outcomes and how to improve those outcomes. One positive way counselors have to help students improve their outcomes is to help them understand the mental processes they use to explain the causes of their own behavior, the behavior of others and the influence of the situations in which they find themselves.

Attributions are an integral part of our daily lives and highly impactful in terms of how students learn, are motivated to learn and develop their ability to self-direct their learning. Because they are part of our metacognitive processes, attributions can be examined and changed, resulting in improved learning processes and learner outcomes.

Self-knowledge about the mental processes associated with attributions is an area of human experience that must be controlled and effectively managed both by students and the adults who are helping them to learn. It is therefore a responsibility of school counselors to be able to understand:

- The essential nature of attributions and how they are constructed.
- Attributional errors that can be made and how they affect individuals in the learning environment.
- How to recognize their own attributional styles and what their personal attributions are communicating to students.
- How to teach students to recognize and examine their attributions, and challenge the causes they assign to behaviors and events.
- How to teach students to determine the positive and negative influence attributions have on their self-image, potential for learning, motivation, achievement and relationships.
- How to help students develop their ability to assign accurate explanations for their successes and failures in school and life.
- How to help students develop their ability to change and more effectively control their attributional processes.

- How to help other adults engaged in helping students learn understand their own attributions and the potential impact of what they are communicating to students.

Students' ability to be aware of, examine, improve and control the mental processes related to attributions are foundational to CBA school counseling programs and counselor practice. A good place to begin is to open up a dialog with your colleagues. Share your experiences and ideas and decide what you can do to help students better understand their attributional processes and how to improve them. Develop a plan and together attack the problem and evaluate your results. Do this for yourself to understand the process because this is the process you want your students to understand, control and manage more effectively.

As part of your process, and the process you teach your students, be on look out for external, stable and non-controllable attribution styles as they yield the least likelihood of change in ourselves and our students. When you see that students have these attributional styles, work with them to think about the cause of the behavior or event as being internal, unstable and controllable, thus opening up the possibility of changing students' perceptions and initiating efforts to change.

Additional Resources Related to Attributional Styles

The Internet is a wonderful tool for accessing information on just about any topic. It has been invaluable in helping us to identify what research has demonstrated to be strongly related to students' academic achievement and well-being, and evidence-based practices that provide concrete examples of how to translate the research findings into meaningful learning opportunities that support student development.



Staying informed about what works and does not work to help students achieve and succeed is one of the defining characteristics of a professional school counselor. Internet search engines can be used to develop a deeper understanding of the topics discussed on the CBA Website. To get you started, here are some additional resources you may find helpful. These resources, however, only scratch the surface of what is available on the Internet or in published books and articles. We encourage you to use search engines to find more resources that will increase your understanding and build your capacity to apply these ideas in your work as school counselors.

Videos

This video by Dr. Brett Jones is an excellent introduction to the theory of attribution and the three dimensions of attribution (internal-external, stable-unstable and controllable-uncontrollable). The video provides meaningful examples of student attributions and asks you to consider how you would interpret the sample attributions in terms of the three dimension framework. Dr. Jones discusses how student attributions impact their motivation and how teachers can use motivating strategies to help motivate students.

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=yE4uQ0fXy3A>

Video lecture by Dr. Chris Dula on “Social Psychology: Cognitive Biases: Fundamental Attribution Error, Actor-observer Effect, Self-serving/Positivity Bias, and Self-fulfilling Prophecy.

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=hO2pBE8WI5g>

Websites

A description of attribution theory by Dr. Bernard Weiner.

<http://www.instructionaldesign.org/theories/attribution-theory.html>

An article on Weiner’s Model of Attributions by Eric Anderman and Lynley Anderman. The article focuses on how attributions influence behavior, how attributions are communicated to learners, individual differences in attributions, and implications of attribution theory for educators.

<http://www.education.com/reference/article/attribution-theory/>

This article discusses Seligman Attributional Style Questionnaire, of the most validated profiling tools in the world. It is designed to uncover attributional, or explanatory, styles regarding how people explain significant events in their lives.

<http://www.foresight.co.nz/index.asp?pageID=2145849371>

This article provides a good summary of attributional biases and their impact on how humans explain behaviors and events.

http://psychology.wikia.com/wiki/Attributional_bias