

Causal Attribution

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Definition of Causal Attribution

Attributions have a major influence on students' perception about their ability to learn, how they approach learning tasks, and whether they are motivated to stay focused on tasks to completion. The following definition of causal attribution was retrieved from "ERIC ED137266: Implications of Research on Causal Attributions for Curriculum Development,"

https://archive.org/stream/ERIC_ED137266/ERIC_ED137266_djvu.txt

Causal Attribution

➤ **“Causal attributions influence the direction, magnitude; and persistence of achievement-related behavior....If informed attributions, particularly attributions to effort, can be strengthened in children at early stages of development, problems of motivation and academic achievement may be lessened later on.”**

As was noted in the discussion above, attribution theory describes three causal dimensions related to how we make attributions (internal vs. external, stability vs. instability, controllable vs. uncontrollable). It was also noted that the focus of the discussion was primarily on individual attributions, but that attribution theory is also very applicable to understanding human nature in social contexts. This is especially important in discussing biases, prejudice and social justice issues.

Causal Attribution is Fundamental to a CBA

Attributions need to be viewed from a variety of perspectives. For example, a critical perspective relates to how well school counselors, other educators and parents/guardians construct and communicate their attributions to students. We need to be aware, rather than take for granted, that our attributions are accurate and that what we are communicating through our attributional assertions is helping rather than inhibiting student learning and development. Part of this self-reflective process on our attributional styles and the causes we attribute to behaviors and events is the ability to recognize and correct our attributional biases and errors. This is especially true in terms of how we see students interpreting their successes and failures, or understanding the motivators which influence their desire to learn.

Attributional biases related to issues like race, gender, culture and nationality are another area in which school counselors need to be aware of the destructive nature of biases and prejudices against certain groups. This is especially critical in multi-cultural and multi-linguistic environments where in-group biases toward other groups have deep historical roots that are continuously fueled by perceived dangers to one's own identity, traditions and belief systems.

The current world is filled with example of how biased attributions contribute to friction among races, religions and political ideologies. One only has to look at the history of the United States to see how biased attributions have contributed to human rights violations of Native Americans, Blacks, Hispanics, Women and intolerance of other religions whether it be Jewish, Christian or Muslim. It must be asked whether attributions made against whole nationalities like Mexican's coming to America, have any valid place in a democratic society. School counselors have a responsibility to help students learn the impact of positive and negative attributions and why what we accept as causes must be continually assessed and clarified.

Another example of how negative attributions have a deep effect on education can be found in the opinion of some that school counselors are lazy and do little work for the money they are paid. It is sometimes perceived that school counselors sit in their offices all day with their feet up on their desks drinking coffee. If you want to find a good place to start examining the impact of negative attributions, begin with your own experience of how the attributions of others, whether they be parents or administrators or local politicians, have misrepresented who you are and what you do.

How does it make you feel when you see an article in the newspaper or a segment on the nightly news on TV, or watch a TV show or movie with a counselor as the main villain and it is suggested in the report or plot line that all school counselors somehow are bad? Does it ever make you wonder how many people are looking at these depictions and thinking that what they are seeing and hearing is true of all counselors or all educators? How do these types of attributions affect your motivation to do a good job or expend the extra effort to help your

students? Does it make you feel like giving up or not trying harder because it won't make a difference anyway?

Or, think about school counselor performance evaluation and the score you received. How did you explain that outcome to yourself and others? Did your response have anything to say about how easy or hard it was, or how fair or unfair the evaluator was, or an external event (e.g., death in the family, recent personnel cut-backs) that were the primary causes attributed to the score. Or how did you respond to an evaluation of your counseling program? To what were the outcomes of the evaluation attributed? Was your work or the work of your colleagues named as contributors to the success or short-coming of the program? Did you feel the report was fair and unbiased? These are the same kind of questions and issues that school counselors need to help students ask and effectively answer.

School counseling curriculum activities can be designed to emphasize the concepts related to attribution styles and causal attributions. In addition, curriculum activities can be designed to explain to students that the causes they attribute to their successes and failures are very important because their explanation of causes strongly influences their level of motivation, desire to learn and ability to successfully complete learning tasks.

Students can be taught to examine their attributions as being accurate or inaccurate, and recognize how the attributions they make have affected their performance and learning outcomes. For example, a student may attribute failure on a test or in a course to have been caused by a lack of ability when the actual cause was a lack of effort. By helping students make accurate attributions about the causes of their low performance or failures, school counselors can help improve students' motivation and ability to understand and successfully complete learning tasks.

The ability to reflect on the attributions students make that are related to learning outcomes involves metacognitive awareness, skill development and enhancement of their executive functions. Counseling curriculum activities should emphasize the need for students to be critical thinkers and critically ask questions about their own thinking and behavior patterns rather than simply accepting what other may say are the causes of their outcomes, or assigning an inaccurate attribution without investigating what the real cause may be.

Inaccurate causal attributions regarding one's successes and failures at achieving learning tasks influence students' motivation, self-awareness, self-direction and self-efficacy. Enhancing these attributes lead to more engaged students who are capable of achieving at higher levels. Teaching students about causal attribution is a critical component of school counseling programs and function of school counselor practice. By doing this, school counselors are helping to promote and sustain a learning environment focused on achievement rather than a fear of failure.

Additional Resources Related to Causal Attribution

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

A video by M. Garcia on teacher expectation and attributions and how they affect students' learning and their perceptions about success and failure/

<https://youtu.be/eXaNXW6MZJA>

Websites

Full text of an ERIC publication entitled "Implications of Research on Causal Attributions for Curriculum Development." This paper "describes research on causal attribution (ways people construe the events in their lives) and how knowledge of this psychological phenomena can be used to aid students in developing attributional processes that will enhance motivational factors and have positive effects on academic achievement."

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