Consequences of Costa Rican teachers’ attributions for students’ failure

ROBERTO RODRIGUEZ¹ & NONA TOLLEFSON²
¹ Educational Psychology, University of Costa Rica
² Educational Psychology, The University of Kansas, Lawrence, KA 66045-2338, U.S.A.

Abstract. One hundred and fifty-five elementary teachers in San Jose, Costa Rica rated their expectancy of success, willingness to help, liking for, and evaluation of two students who were failing; one because of low ability, one because of insufficient effort. Significantly higher mean ratings on all four consequences were observed for the protocol describing the student who didn’t try than for the protocol describing the student with low ability.

Introduction

Attribution theory (Weiner, 1976, 1979, 1984) is concerned with perceptions of the causes of success and failure and with the consequences of these perceptions. Four causal factors are used most often to explain achievement outcomes: ability, effort, task difficulty, and luck. Ability and effort are defined as internal in locus of causality, while task difficulty and luck are external in locus of causality. The stability dimension classifies causal factors as enduring or subject to change over time and across situations. Ability and task difficulty are stable factors, while effort and luck are unstable factors. Controllability refers to the degree of voluntary control the individual has over a cause. Ability, task difficulty, and luck are uncontrollable; effort is controllable.

The causal dimensions have differential consequences for academic endeavors (Weiner, 1974, 1976, 1979, 1980, 1984). The stability-instability dimension affects the magnitude of expectancy change following success or failure (Betancourt and Weiner, 1982; Cooper and Burger, 1980; Fontaine, 1974; Ostrove, 1978; Weiner, 1974; Weiner, Neirenberg and Goldstein, 1976; Weiner and Siriad, 1975). Attribution of an outcome to a stable factor, such as ability, increases expectancy of success after a success and decreases expectancy of success after a failure more than does an attribution to an unstable cause such as effort or luck. Therefore, if one anticipates that conditions causing success or failure will remain stable, one expects to obtain the same results, when a similar task is attempted. However, if conditions are perceived as unstable, there is more doubt that one will repeat success or failure.
The locus of causality dimension affects self-esteem (Weiner, 1979). Success attributed to high ability produces more pride than success attributed to good luck. In a similar manner, failure attributed to low ability results in greater shame than failure ascribed to bad luck.

The dimension of controllability is concerned with "how beliefs about another's responsibility for success and failure influence an actor's reactions toward that person" (Weiner, 1979, p. 15). The controllability dimension is related to behaviour, liking (sentiments), and evaluating others (Brandt, Hayden and Brophy, 1975; Brophy and Good, 1974; Cooper and Baron, 1977; Cooper and Burger, 1980; Cooper and Lowe, 1977; Ickles and Kidd, 1976; Medway, 1979; Weiner, 1979; Weiner and Kukla, 1970). According to theory, expectancy of success will be lower if failure is explained by a stable factor (ability) than if failure is explained by an unstable factor (effort). Likewise, attributions for a student's low grades to low ability are expected to produce a higher evaluation (praising) mean score, a higher liking mean score, and a higher helping mean score than are attributions to insufficient effort.

Attributions for achievement outcomes vary from individual to individual and from culture to culture. Cross-cultural studies have focused upon the locus of control orientation of students from different cultures and upon the tendency of students from different cultures to use self-serving attributions.

Barling and Finchman (1978) compared the locus of control orientation of 24 Indian and 24 Anglo elementary students in Johannesburg. These researchers found the Indian children were significantly more internal in locus of control than were Anglo children. Reimanis (1977) investigated the locus of control orientation of 96 Nigerian and 96 American college students. He found Americans scored significantly higher than Nigerian students did on internality.

Chandler, Shama, Wolf, and Planchard (1981) studied the attribution patterns of 684 university students from Japan, India, South Africa, the United States, and Yugoslavia. They found that Japanese students were more internal in causal ascriptions for failures and less internal in attributions for success than the other cultural groups were. Indian and American students believed effort was more important in explaining success than lack of effort was in explaining failure. Overall, the students attributed their achievement more to internal than to external factors and more to stable than unstable factors.

Kashima and Triandis (1986) compared the tendency of American and Japanese college students to make self-serving attributions (i.e., to take credit for success and to deny responsibility for failure). Their results provided only partial support for their initial hypothesis that Americans would use self-serving attributions more frequently than would Japanese students. Earlier studies by Fry and Ghosh (1980) and Chandler et al. (1981) had found that Americans were more likely than Indians and Japanese to use self-serving attributions. Fry and Ghosh (1980) compared the attributions of matched samples of 50 Asian Indian and 50