

Intrapersonal and Interpersonal Theories of Motivation from an Attributional Perspective

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Two related attribution theories of motivation are examined. One, an intrapersonal theory, includes self-directed thoughts (particularly expectancy of success) and self-directed emotions (pride, guilt, and shame). The second is an interpersonal theory and includes beliefs about the responsibility of others and other-directed affects of anger and sympathy. These two theories are respectively guided by the disparate metaphors of the person as a scientist and the person as a judge. Some experimental evidence supporting the conceptions and the range of phenomena that they incorporate are examined.

KEY WORDS: attribution; emotion; causal inference; responsibility.

INTRODUCTION

Attribution theory is now ending its third decade as a dominant conception in motivation, social psychology, and educational psychology. To survive this length of time indicates that it not only has had strong empirical support, but also that it has been responsive to empirical challenges and has changed in order to meet objections and problems.

In this context, I present the current state of my attributional approach to motivation and classroom issues. The picture I paint includes two interrelated theories. Imagine, for example, a student has just received a poor grade on an exam and we, as psychologists, desire to predict if he or she will continue in school or drop out. Among the likely predictors are subjective expectancy of future success and self-directed emotions related to self-

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esteem, guilt, shame, and others. These self-directed thoughts and feelings comprise what I label an *intrapersonal* theory of motivation.

Now consider that, following the poor exam performance, significant others including peers, teachers, and parents evaluate or judge this person. They consider her good or bad, responsible or not responsible, moral or immoral, the target of anger or sympathy, and so on. These thoughts and emotions, in turn, result in help or neglect, positive or negative feedback, and the like. These other-directed thoughts and feelings comprise what I label an *interpersonal* theory of motivation. Of course, the boundaries between the intrapersonal and interpersonal motivational systems are fuzzy, but nevertheless this distinction is worthwhile.

Here I will give an overview of each theory, followed by some exemplar research to illustrate the predictive power and empirical focus of the conceptions. In the course of this discussion I also will introduce some meta-theoretical concerns as well.

INTRAPERSONAL MOTIVATION FROM AN ATTRIBUTIONAL PERSPECTIVE

My approach to intrapersonal motivation is guided by the metaphor that people are scientists, trying to understand themselves and their environment and then acting on the basis of this knowledge (for a fuller discussion of metaphors in motivation, see Weiner, 1992). This approach begins with an event that has been completed, such as success or failure at an exam (see Fig. 1). At the end of this process there is a behavioral reaction. What comes between is the motivational process, guided by attributional inferences that fill the gap between the stimulus (the exam outcome) and the response (some behavioral reaction such as dropping out of school).

Figure 1 shows this process. In the far left on the figure we see that there is an exam outcome. Following this, there is an affective reaction to the outcome—one feels happy following goal attainment and unhappy when there is nonattainment of a goal. These are general affective reactions that are not mediated by a great deal of cognitive work. Then individuals ask, “Why did this happen? What caused this outcome? Because of cognitive limits, search is not undertaken following all events, and is particularly likely when an outcome is negative, unexpected, and/or important. Thus, if one expects to succeed and does, *why* questions are not likely to follow. But unexpected failure at an important exam surely will evoke attributional processes (see review in Weiner, 1986).

The answer to this *why* question will be influenced by many sources of evidence, including past history of success and failure, social norms or the

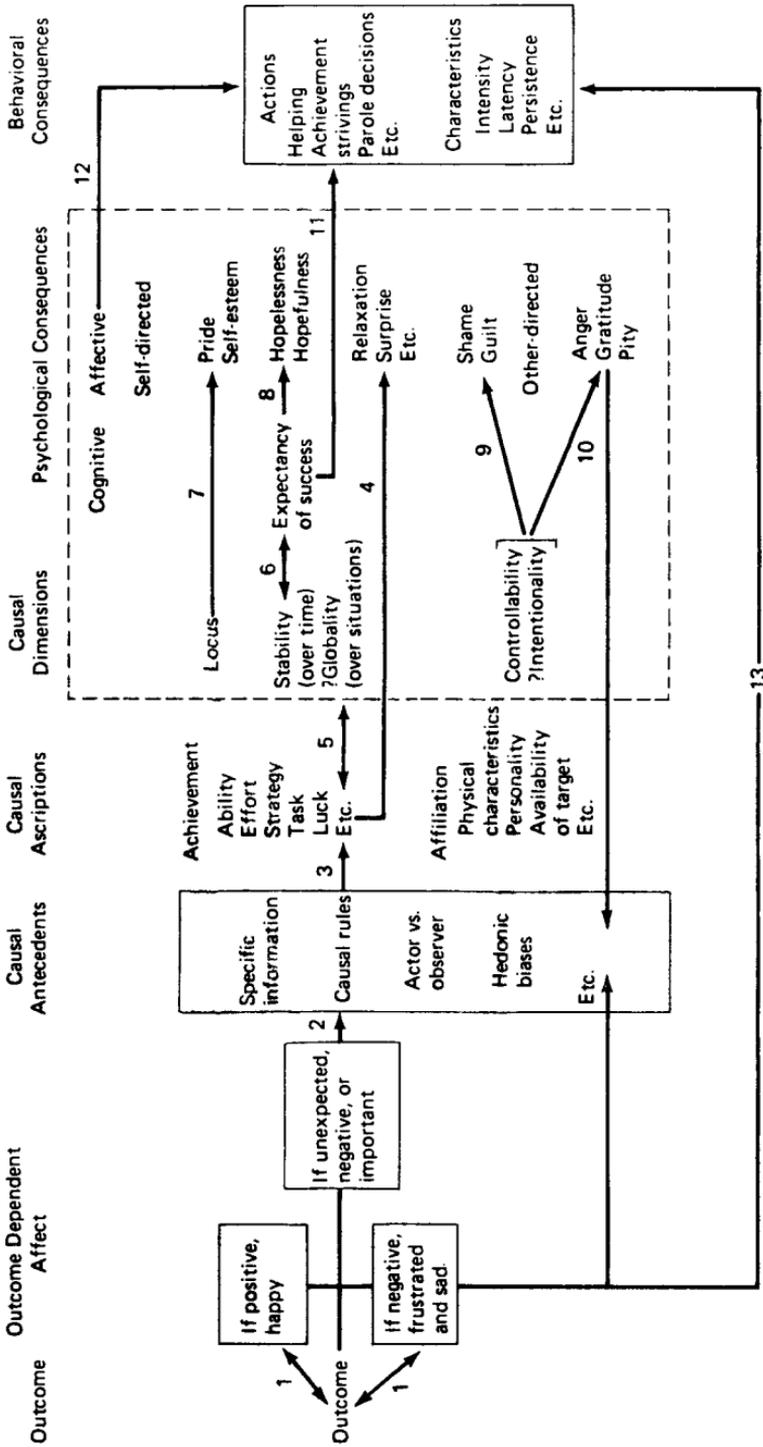


Fig. 1. An attributional theory of intrapersonal motivation.

performance of others, rules about the relations between causes, hedonic biasing, and on and on. More specifically, for example, if the person has always failed in the past, then the current failure is likely to be attributed to the self; if others succeed while you fail, then again failure is more likely to be attributed to the self (rather than to the task); if one thinks that failure requires multiple causality, then even given knowledge of lack of effort one is likely nevertheless to derogate personal ability, whereas if there is a belief in sufficient causality, then knowledge that one has not worked hard is likely to result in maintenance of a self-related ability belief. Among other attributional antecedents, one is more likely to take credit for success than attribute failure to the self (the hedonic bias).

Note in Fig. 1 there is an arrow from affect to causal antecedents, because personal feeling states influence which cause is selected. In addition, affective communications from others also influence causal beliefs (e.g., if another expresses anger, then the target of this is more likely to consider that he or she caused a negative event). Hence, it is evident that causal inferences are complex, determined by many factors. This epistemological question is not examined further in this context, but it has generated the greatest amount of research among psychologists with an attributional perspective.

A cause is then selected, such as lack of ability, lack of effort, or bad luck given failure. Similarly, if one is rejected for a date, again an array of causes is possible, such as poor personality, the person already has a date, and so forth. Let us assume for purposes of clarity that indeed there is only one phenomenological cause, although we all recognize that life is not that simple. This now sets the stage for the next issue, which concerns the underlying characteristics or properties of causes. This is the very heart and soul of an attributional approach to motivation. To understand the motivational consequences of causal beliefs, it is necessary that the qualitative difference between causes such as effort and ability be altered to be quantitative differences, and for this to occur the causes must be comparable on some psychological dimensions. A great deal of research has documented that there are three, and indeed only three, underlying causal properties (see review in Weiner, 1986). These are locus, stability, and controllability. Locus refers to the location of a cause, which is either within or outside of the actor. For example, ability and effort would be considered internal causes of success, whereas the ease of the task or help from others are external causes. Causal stability refers to the duration of a cause. Some causes, such as math aptitude, are perceived as constant, whereas others, such as chance, are considered unstable or temporary. Finally, causes such as effort are subject to volitional alteration, whereas others cannot be willfully changed. Luck and aptitude have this property. Note, then, that

all causes can be located within a three-dimensional causal space. Although there can be disagreements regarding where a cause is located because this depends on “how it seems to me,” there also is a great deal of agreement that, for example, aptitude is internal, stable, and uncontrollable, whereas luck, although also uncontrollable, is external to the actor and unstable.

The significance of these causal properties is that they map into what are considered the two main determinants of motivation—namely, expectancy and value. Expectancy refers to the subjective likelihood of future success and value often is considered the emotional consequences of goal attainment or nonattainment (see Atkinson, 1964). Turning first to expectancy, it has been documented that if a cause is stable, then the same outcome will be anticipated again following a success or failure. Hence, if failure is perceived as due to lack of aptitude, or to an unfair teacher, then taking another exam from this teacher will be anticipated to result in another failure. On the contrary, failure due to unstable factors, such as bad luck or lack of preparation because of the flu, will not be an indicator that there will be further failure (see review in Weiner, 1986).

Locus and controllability particularly relate to feeling states, or the value of achievement outcomes. Note that I do not use the concept of locus *of* control, but rather speak of locus *and* control. These are two independent dimensions. A cause may be internal to the person but quite uncontrollable, such as lack of height as the cause for not being selected for the basketball team.

Locus influences feelings of pride in accomplishment and self-esteem. Pride and increments in self-esteem require internal causality for success. One might be happy following a high grade on an exam, but pride will not be experienced if it is believed that the teacher only gives high grades. It has been said that all at the table can enjoy a great meal, but that only the cook can experience pride. Controllability, in conjunction with locus, influences whether guilt or shame is experienced following nonattainment of a goal. Attribution of failure to insufficient effort, which is internal and controllable, often elicits guilt, whereas an ascription to lack of aptitude, which is internal but uncontrollable, often evokes feelings of shame, embarrassment, and humiliation. Other affects also are influenced by the controllability dimension of causality, particularly anger and sympathy, but I will hold this discussion until I examine the interpersonal theory of motivation.

Finally, expectancy of success, along with emotions such as pride, guilt, and shame, together determine subsequent behavior. That is, behavior depends on thoughts as well as feelings. Let me show the logic of this analysis by leaving the achievement domain and examining an affiliative context. Assume that Bill is rejected by Mary when asking her for a date. We now want to predict and understand whether he will seek further dates,

richness, leading one to examine expectancy, self-esteem, and other emotions in a systematic and conceptually coherent manner. Reyna also highlights this richness in her article on stereotypes. In contrast to other theories of motivation, an attributional framework offers a network of conceptually related constructs, tied to one another as well as to the empirical world.

INTERPERSONAL MOTIVATION FROM AN ATTRIBUTIONAL PERSPECTIVE

Success and failure in achievement settings do not occur in a vacuum. Quite the contrary, there is a rich social context that effects and is effected by achievement performance. This social environment includes peers, teachers, and parents who experience happiness and sadness given the performance of others, who express anger and sympathy, and who reward, punish, help, or neglect. These reactions to the performance of others I include within an interpersonal theory of motivation.

An interpersonal conception of motivation from an attributional perspective is shown in Fig. 2. For the moment, concentrate on the top row of that figure. It can be seen that the motivational sequence again is initiated by an achievement outcome, in this case exam failure. Again there is causal search, in this case not by the actor, but by an involved observer, such as a teacher or parent. And again, based on a variety of factors that are not included in the figure, a causal understanding is reached. Of course, this may or may not be the same inference that is reached by the failing student. This cause is then again placed in a dimensional space, with the dimension of causal controllability of prime importance. As shown in the top row, failure is ascribed to lack of effort, which is subject to volitional control and hence regarded as a controllable cause. If the cause of a negative event is controllable by others, that is, if it "could have been otherwise," then that person is perceived as responsible for the outcome (for greater detail regarding the link between controllability and responsibility, see Weiner, 1995). Hence, the motivational process proceeds from a causal decision to an inference about the person. Responsibility for a negative outcome, in turn, gives rise to anger. Thus, one is mad when one's child fails an exam because of not studying, just as one is angry at a roommate for not cleaning the kitchen following a meal. Anger, in turn, gives rises to anti-social responses such as punishment and reprimand.

Now consider the sequence when achievement failure is caused by lack of ability, which is depicted a few lines below. Ability, conceived here as aptitude, is an uncontrollable cause. Because the cause cannot be volitionally altered, the failing student is not held accountable, or personally

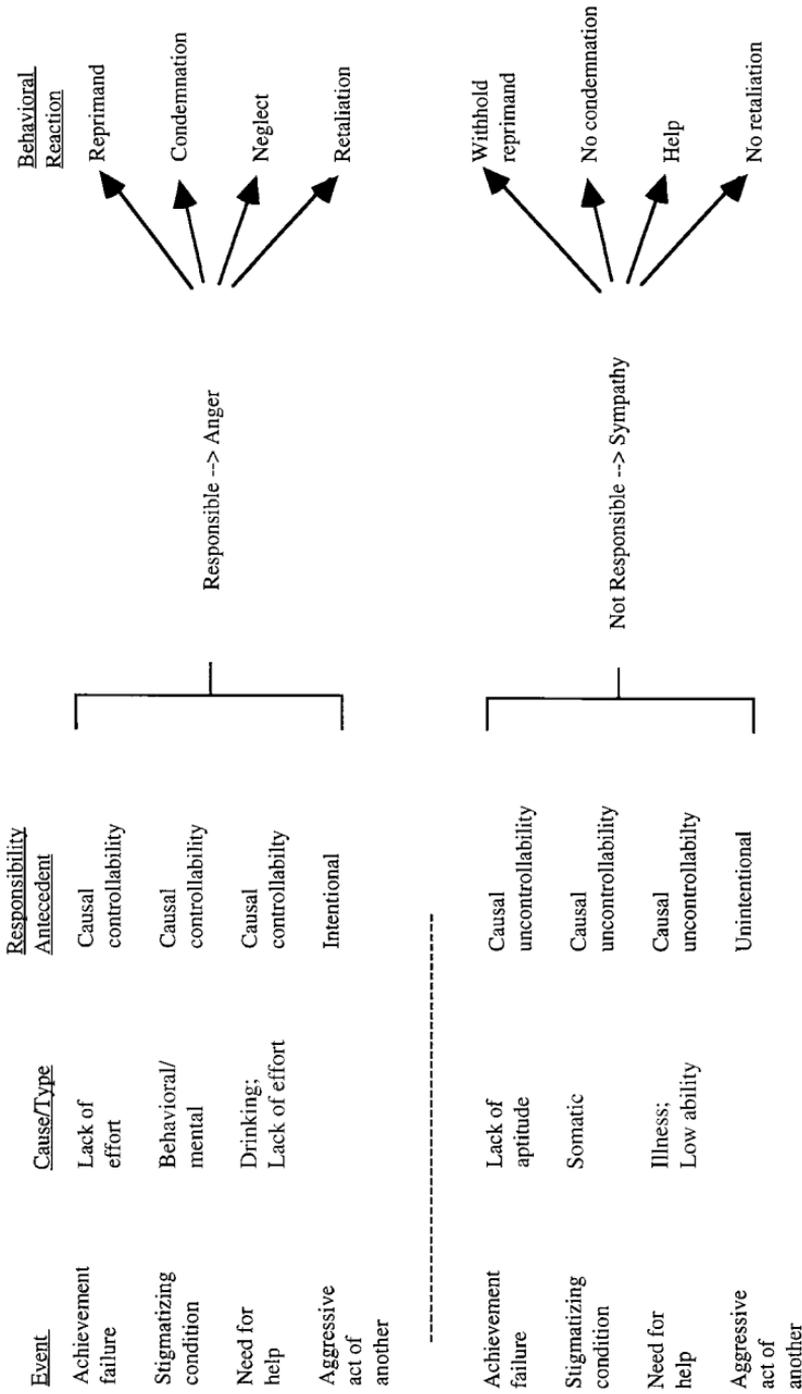


Fig. 2. An attributional theory of interpersonal motivation.

responsible. This is because there is a lack of free will; the cause cannot be intentionally altered. Lack of responsibility for a negative achievement outcome tends to elicit sympathy. Thus, we feel sorry for the mentally handicapped who cannot perform cognitive tasks, or for the physically handicapped who cannot perform motor tasks. Sympathy, in turn, elicits prosocial reactions. Note that again, as in the intrapersonal theory of motivation, a thinking–feeling–acting motivational sequence is posited, although in this case inferences of responsibility take on a major role, whereas the effects of causal locus and causal stability are deemphasized.

This interpersonal approach to classroom experience is not confined to an explanation of achievement-related behaviors. A number of other observations also can be examined within the same conceptual framework. Figure 2 shows that reactions to the stigmatized, help giving, and aggression are also subject to a responsibility-guided analysis. In all cases, if a person is responsible for a negative state or an act such as being unkempt, needing help because of prior laziness, or aggressing against someone intentionally, then anger is experienced and the reaction is negative. On the other hand, persons stigmatized because of noncontrollable reasons—such as being blind, needing help because of missing school when ill, or aggressing against someone by accident—elicit sympathy and pro-social behaviors.

In all these situations, an appropriate metaphor to capture the reactions of the involved observer is that he or she is a judge presiding in a courtroom. The judge has the right to determine if others are innocent or guilty and then passes a sentence based on these beliefs and the experienced emotions. Indeed, classroom life may be considered a courtroom where dramas related to transgressions are played out. The observer is a scientist in making causal decision, but then also acts in a godlike manner by reaching moral conclusions regarding right and wrong, good and bad.

One of the very first studies I conducted from an attributional perspective is germane to this approach (Weiner and Kukla, 1970). In this experiment, pupils were described as high or low in ability, high or low in effort, and performing on an exam in a positive (excellent, fair) or negative (moderate failure, clear failure) manner. The subjects were then asked to evaluate the students on rating scales from +5 (most reward) to –5 (most punishment). As shown in Fig. 3, the student receiving the most praise and least punishment was low in ability but high in effort. That is, persons overcoming a handicap through hard work, or those not responsible for their poor performance, receive the highest evaluations. These are our cultural heroes—overcoming obstacles through hard work. The Protestant Ethic described by Max Weber remains at the core of our value systems. On the other hand, pupils with high ability who do not put forth effort and fail are particularly punished. Not fulfilling one's potential is reacted to with

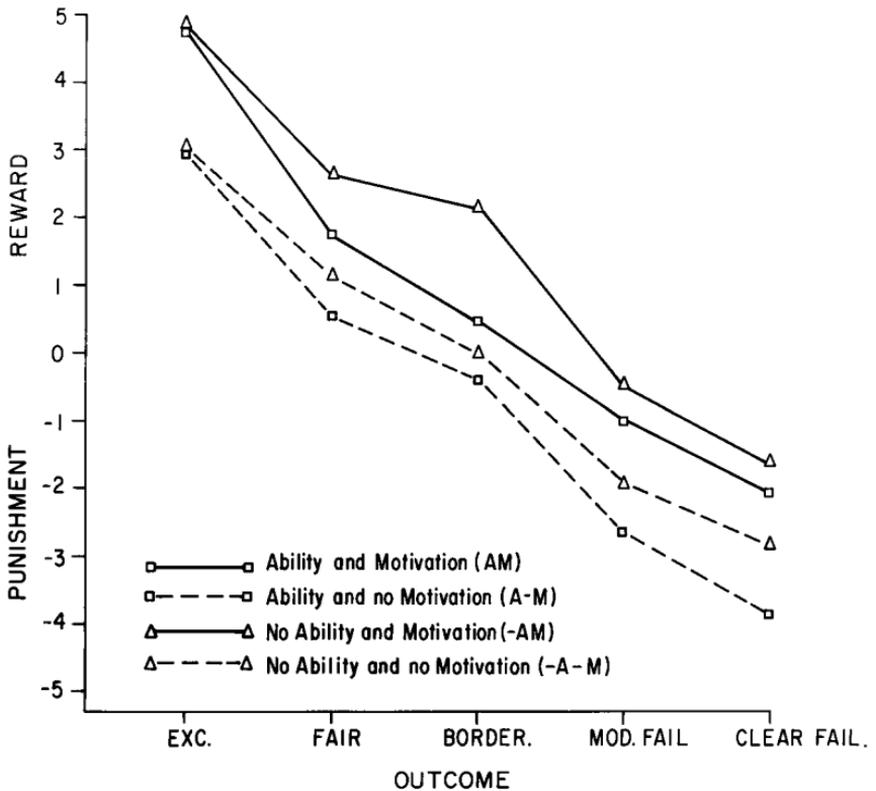


Fig. 3. Evaluation as a function of exam outcome, ability, and effort. (from Weiner and Kukla, 1970, p. 3).

extreme negativity. As Juvonen shows in this issue, however, these reactions are effected by the social context and whether the judges are peers or teachers.

At the time, more than 25 years ago, I did not fully realize that beliefs about fairness, justice, and deservedness were key to understanding the different evaluative responses. In a recent study, we (Farwell and Weiner, 1996) more directly explored the moral foundation of achievement evaluation. Pupils were described as failing an exam either because of lack of ability or lack of effort. This causal information was paired with a teacher's evaluation that ranged from -1 to -5 . The evaluations were varied in a factorial manner so that, for example, at times the pupil failing because of lack of effort received a -5 , whereas the lack of ability pupil received an evaluation of -1 . In other conditions they both received -5 or -1 , and in yet another condition the pupil failing due to lack of ability was evaluated -5 , whereas the student performing poorly due to lack of effort had feed-

back of -1 . We then asked our subjects to judge the fairness of the teacher evaluations. Positive ratings, with $+3$, maximum, indicated that the teacher was judged as fair, whereas negative ratings, going to -3 , revealed that the teacher was perceived as unfair. As shown in Fig. 4, the fairest evaluation was when there was about a 3-point disparity between failing due to lack of effort and lack of ability. That is, the most fair patterns were evaluating the lack of effort student -5 and the lack of ability student -2 , or the lack of effort student -4 and the lack of ability student -1 . The most unfair evaluations occurred when lack of ability was evaluated more negatively than was lack of effort. In sum, evaluation is a moral judgment in which perceptions of responsibility mediate between outcomes and reactions to the individual.

The metaphor of the classroom as a courtroom takes one to other domains that remain relatively unexplored. For example, in one series of investigations, my colleagues and I (Weiner *et al.*, 1997) explored the function of punishment in the classroom. Philosophers have pointed out that punishment is guided by two goals—utilitarian, which focuses on future change, and retribution, which focuses on balancing the scales of justice given a past wrongdoing. One intuitively might think that classroom punishment from teachers is entirely utilitarian in origin. However, this is not the case. In one study, we gave teachers scenarios in which a student failed an exam. Four cases were provided, obtained by factorially varying the stability and controllability of the cause. The stable yet controllable cause of failure

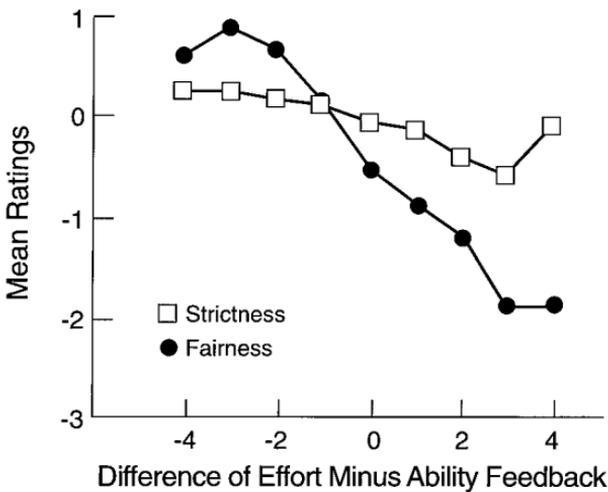


Fig. 4. Strictness and fairness of negative allocations as a function of feedback to low ability versus low effort students. (from Fairwell and Weiner, 1996, p. 871).

was laziness, whereas the unstable controllable cause was “did not try on this occasion.” Concerning the uncontrollable causes, the stable uncontrollable cause of failure was described as lack of aptitude, whereas the unstable and uncontrollable cause was lack of pertinent knowledge. We then asked teachers to indicate what degree of reprimand would be meted out to these failing students. Further, we defined utilitarian and retributive punishment goals and asked the teachers to what extent their behaviors were in service of these two goals. The results are shown in the left-hand graph of Fig. 5. It is indeed the case that teachers primarily punish for utilitarian reasons. However, when the cause is stable and controllable (i.e., the student is always lazy), then punishment is more directed towards justice, or giving “what is deserved.”

We created similar scenarios for the causes of burglary and murder. In these burglary vignettes we said the person committed the act because of “a brain injury that interfered with rational judgment” (in the uncontrollable condition) or because he intentionally chose to steal, or murder (in the controllable condition). Stability was conveyed by the permanence of the cause (e.g., temporary vs. lasting brain damage). As seen in the two right-hand panels, the patterns of data are similar to that given achievement

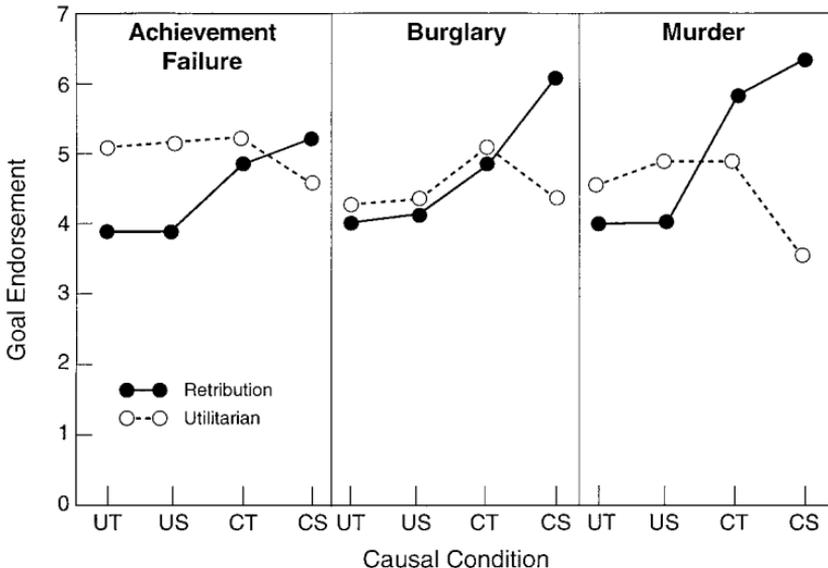


Fig. 5. Endorsement of retributive vs. utilitarian punishment as a function of the controllability and stability of the causes of achievement failure, burglary, and murder (UT = uncontrollable, temporary; US = uncontrollable, stable; CT = controllable, temporary; CS = controllable, stable). (from Weiner *et al.*, 1997, p. 441.)

failure: Controllable causality, particularly given the severe outcome of murder, tends to elicit retributive goals. Whether criminal justice and reactions to classroom failure are guided by similar principles is a hypothesis that remains to be explored, providing new directions for research. Our data suggest that this is a reasonable hypothesis.

INTERRELATIONS OF THE THEORIES

Although the two motivational systems have been discussed as though they are quite separate, in fact they are closely intertwined and interactive. Consider, for example, a student who performs poorly because of inferred lack of aptitude. Inasmuch as this is perceived as an uncontrollable cause, involved observers will communicate sympathy and pity to this person following failure. These communications then add further information to the person that he or she “cannot,” which then contributes to personal feelings of shame and humiliation. That is, if pity and sympathy are “accepted,” then this contributes to or is an antecedent of a low-ability ascription, which gives rise to shame and humiliation. On the other hand, if the student fails because of lack of effort, then the teacher will communicate anger. Anger is a cue that the other is responsible for the failure and that the failure is controllable. Hence, if this affect is “accepted,” then the student will ascribe his or her personal failure to lack of effort, which increases guilt. In sum, the two motivational theories overlap and influence the thoughts, feelings, and actions of both an actor and an observer.

SOME CONCLUDING THOUGHTS

An attributional approach to classroom behavior can address expectancy of success and affects including pride, guilt, shame, and self-esteem. It also allows for predictions about reactions to success and failure. In addition, attributional analyses provide a window for the understanding of evaluation, reactions to the stigmatized, help, and aggression. And this is not the total picture. Because of its theoretical and empirical richness, I do not think that 30 years will end the life span of attribution-guided research and thought. Quite the contrary, I envision still further growth and elaboration, as is evidenced in the other work presented in this special issue.

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