

ATTRIBUTION THEORY

Attribution Theory is a theory about how people explain things. The theory is really quite simple despite its rather strange sounding name. A synonym for "attribution" is "explanation". The theory works like this.

When we offer explanations about *why* things happened, we can give one of two types. One, we can make an **external** attribution. Two, we can make **internal** attribution. An external attribution assigns *causality* to an outside agent or force. Or as kids would say, "The devil made me do it." An external attribution claims that some outside thing motivated the event. By contrast, an internal attribution assigns causality to factors within the person. Or as the sinner would say, "I'm guilty, grant me forgiveness." An internal attribution claims that the person was directly *responsible* for the event.

Here are some common examples. You are taking a class and you get test results back. You take a peek and see, ahhh, a 65%. You think about these disappointing results for a minute and realize what a lousy teacher you've got and how badly written the textbook is and how unfair the test was and . . . you make a lot of external attributions. What caused the 65%? Events outside of you. External things.

Now, on the next test you take a peek and see, ahhh, a 95%. Well, what can I say? When you're hot, you're hot. If you've got it, flaunt it. Some people are born great. Where's the causality? Inside of you, right? You assign causality to factors within the person and make internal attributions.

Okay, this is real simple. When the world asks us, "Why?" we provide either an internal attribution or an external attribution. Pretty obvious, but what has this got to do with *influence*?

Consider this chain of events.

1. The world asks me, "Why?"
2. I provide an attribution.
3. My future behavior depends on the type of attribution.

Now, if we can control the attributions people make, then we can influence their future behavior, right? Let's check out this reasoning with a couple of examples.

ATTRIBUTION IN ACTION

I want to share two illustrations from the classroom. Both examples are published research studies that were conducted with elementary school children in their classrooms with their teachers. Thus, these examples are not laboratory studies of influence, but rather are real-world events. This makes their outcomes useful and interesting for us. The first study concerns getting kids to clean up the classroom. The second involves improving math performance and self-esteem.

Littering. A constant battle with younger children is to get them to clean up after themselves. Especially in the classroom where there are twenty or thirty kids, neatness really makes a difference. How can you get kids to be neater?

Our first example made kids neater with Attribution Theory. They set the kids up such that the kids performed a desired behavior, then were provoked to think about why they did that behavior. And, of course, the situation was set up so that the children would make an internal attribution ("I did it because I'm that kind of kid"). Here's what happened.

First, the researchers established a baseline for littering. They visited the 5th grade class just before recess and handed out little candies wrapped in plastic. After the kids went to the playground, the researchers counted the number of candy wrappers that were on the floor or in the waste can. And there were many more wrappers on the floor than in the can, of course.

Now, the study. Its simplicity is going to surprise you. Over the next two weeks people visited this classroom. For example, the principal stopped in for a little chat and on her way out she said, "My, this is a neat classroom. You must be very neat students who care about how their room looks."

And one morning the class arrived to find a note on the blackboard from the custodian which said, "This is the neatest class in school. You must be very neat and clean students."

Finally, the teacher would make similar kinds of comments throughout the two week training period ("Neat room, neat kids"). That's all the researchers did.

Then they came back for a second visit again just before recess. And again they handed out little wrapped candies. This time when they counted whether the wrappers went on the floor or in the waste can, they found a lot more wrappers where they belonged: In the garbage. There was a very large change in the littering and cleaning up behavior of the kids.

Let's review this simple study and make sure we understand what happened. First, we use candy wrappers before and after as an objective measure of littering. Second, we have a variety of sources observing the classroom and offering explanations ("neat room, neat kids").

Also realize the things that were *not* going on. None of the sources modeled the correct behavior, so the kids were not copying a source with observational learning. None of the sources provided consequences of reinforcement, nor were rewards or punishments given for specific acts of behavior. None of the sources provided "arguments" about why kids should be clean and not litter. All the sources did was provide attributions.

(A little side note: The researchers also tried another treatment along with the attribution training. They called it the "Persuasion Treatment." With a different classroom, all the various sources essentially gave the typical adult lectures about cleanliness and neatness. They said all the things good teachers say about littering. It had no effect on the candy wrapper test. Kids, huh? Back to the main point.)

The analysis the researchers made is this. When the kids heard, "neat room, neat kids," they had to think about what had happened. In essence, they had to answer the question, "Explain why the room is neat?" And their answer was simple.

"The room is neat because we don't litter. We're the kind of people who pick up after ourselves."

In other words the children made internal attributions. And if you believe that you are the kind of person who is neat and does not litter, what happens when you have a candy wrapper? That's right, you throw it away in the waste can.

Math Achievement and Self-Esteem. Our second study goes much deeper, I think, in illustrating the impact of attribution. Littering behavior is an obvious thing. It is also a fairly simple behavior that does not depend on a lot of other factors. So, it should be easier to change. But what about something like math achievement or enhancing a child's self-esteem? These things are complex. They are related to other factors (ability, persistence, training with math and family, life experience, peer support with esteem). Can we change a child's math performance or self-esteem with attribution?

Here are the details on the second study. First, the researchers used before and after measures of math achievement and self-esteem with 2nd grade students. Second, the researchers developed simple, little scripts for each student. All the teacher had to do was read the folder provided for each student, then say or write the appropriate statement. Thus, this study was highly automated. Each teacher simply followed the instructions in a preplanned, scripted way. Third, the researchers had three different kinds of treatment. Kids either got the attribution training or they got the "persuasion" training or they got "reinforcement" training. The study lasted eight days.

Here's the attribution training. The teachers would say or write to the student:

1. "You seem to know your arithmetic assignments very well."
2. "You really work hard in math."
3. "You're trying more, keep at it!"

Here's the persuasion training. The teachers would say or write to the student:

1. "You should be good at math."
2. "You should be getting better grades in math."
3. "You should be doing well in math."

Here's the reinforcement training. The teachers would say or write to the student:

1. "I'm proud of your work."
2. "I'm pleased with your progress."
3. "Excellent progress."

Before we look at the results, again let's analyze what is happening here. In the attribution training, the children are given explanations for their behavior. They are told that their math performance is due to internal factors ("You are a good math student, you try hard in math"). Thus, we would assume that these kids will make internal attributions. Now, even if this is true and the children do explain their behavior with internal attributions, will it translate into higher math scores? It is one thing to believe that you are good at something. It is another thing to be good.

First, consider the self-esteem results. After all the training was over, all the kids had higher self-esteem (on a self report scale). But interestingly, children in the attribution groups had the greatest increases in self-esteem.

Next, what about those math scores? That is the really important and interesting part of this second study. The children took two tests after training. One occurred immediately after the eight training days. The second was given two weeks later. Each test was composed of twenty math problems.

Kids with attribution training averaged 17.5 on the first test and 17.8 on the second test. (The baseline for everyone was 15). Kids with persuasion training averaged 15.5 and 15.0. The kids with reinforcement training averaged 16 and 16. Thus, the students with attribution training scored one to two points higher than other groups and maintained that advantage during the two weeks following the training. (The standard deviation was approximately 1.0 so these mean differences are quite large.)

Time for reflection . . . the training here was really quite simple. Each teacher followed a script of written or verbal statements. All the teacher did was provide the statement to each kid. So, the teacher would mosey over during seatwork and say to a child, "You really work hard at math." Or the teacher would write on a homework assignment, "You are good at math." That's it. That's all that was done.

THE PROBLEM WITH EXTERNAL ATTRIBUTIONS

As we have seen, when people make an internal attribution for their actions, it appears that they also change their attitudes and beliefs about themselves. Hence, they become "that kind" of person and the desired behavior follows naturally. The key for change is an internal attribution. Now, what happens when people use external attributions?

Let's analyze this situation before we look at a research example. If children are made to question their behavior ("Why is this classroom so neat and clean?") and they produce an external attribution ("Because the teacher is watching"), what kind of behavior would we expect? Well, as long as the teacher is watching, then the kids will be neat, but as soon as the teacher turns her back . . . a big mess. The kids believe that their behavior is under the control of an external force and not from themselves.

This illustrates the problems that can arise when people use external things (like rewards and punishments) to

influence behaviors. In essence, the reward or punishment prevents people from making an internal attribution and thus bringing the desired behavior under their control. People may not "generalize" from the reward and acquire the internally motivated habit to produce the desired behavior. Instead, they will expect some external agent (namely you) to cause their actions.

There is another interesting problem with external attributions. They can undermine an existing habit. That is, people who perform a behavior because "that's the kind of people they are" (internal attribution), can lose the habit if they change their pattern of attribution. Here's a real interesting research study.

A group of researchers observed young kids (3 to 5 years old) at play. They noted that most of the kids loved playing with magic marker type crayons. When these crayons were available, the kids made a beeline for them and would use them with great concentration and apparent pleasure. According to Attribution Theory, we would claim that these kids used these crayons for internal reasons. There was no external force causing them to play with them. Instead, the kids freely chose the crayons and enjoyed them for intrinsic reasons.

Next, the researchers promised and then gave one randomly selected group of children "Good Player Awards" as a reward for their drawing efforts with the crayons. For one week, these children knew that they would get a "prize" at the end of the week for their drawing behavior. For the remaining children, no such promises were made.

There was a significant change in the crayon use among the kids who were promised external rewards for their drawing. These kids reduced how often they played with the crayons and reduced how much time they spent with the crayons. By contrast, the children who were not promised external rewards maintained their normal frequency and duration of use.

From an attribution perspective, it is easy to explain this outcome. We know that the kids already wanted the crayons for internal reasons and were intrinsically motivated. However, the introduction of an external attribution changed the children and their behavior. When asked, "Why do you play with those crayons?" the kids answered "Because of the award."

I want to quickly point out here that external attributions are not a uniformly bad thing. Our preceding discussion makes it seem that things like rewards and punishments and other external forces are undesirable influence tactics that never work or only work when you are around to guard your clients and deal out the carrots and the sticks.

External forces can be effective if the receivers believe that they "earned" the external factor for internal reasons. Thus, rewards work well when the receiver thinks, "I got the gold sticker because I am a good student who did a good job on this assignment." Or punishments work well when the child thinks, "I got punished because I did a bad thing." If children believe that they essentially did nothing on their own to earn the external agent, then that external agent is unlikely to cause any long term, internal change.

USING ATTRIBUTION EFFECTIVELY

In essence Attribution Theory shows us that people can create new attitudes or beliefs or behaviors depending upon the explanations they make. If they make external attributions ("I threw the candy wrapper in the trash can because the teacher was watching"), then they are unlikely to change their attitudes about littering. But, if they make an internal attribution ("I threw the candy wrapper away because I must be a neat person") then it is likely that they will come to view themselves as a different kind of person.

Adapted from <http://www.as.wvu.edu/~sbb/comm221/chapters/attrib.htm>