Book Reviews

Rose Bene, Editor

An Attributional Theory of Motivation and Emotion, by Bernard
Weiner, New York, NY: Springer-Verlag, 1986, 304 pages.

Reviewed by Gilles Carrier

Attribution theory, quite prevalent in recent cognitive psychology, is
concerned with the study of perceived causation. Heider (1958), Kelley (1967)
Jones and Nisbett (1971) and Ross (1977) have been the main authors in this
field. This theory explains goal orientations by personal (dispositional) or
impersonal (situational) causes. Motivation has also been studied in the light
of personal causation by cognitivists such as Atkinson and Feather (1966),
Rotter (1966) and de Charms (1968). Adult education and distance education
may very well be interpreted from this perspective, especially in understand-
ing how students and teachers interact in their pursuit of academic achieve-
ment.

Bernard Weiner has published articles and books on cognitive motivation
since 1970 and has all along emphasized the stability factor as a stimulus
reinforcer, in personal reactions to goal expectancy. This new book presents a
general theory of attribution where perceived stability of goals and causes is
studied as a central theme. Weiner's basic argument is that the motivation to
perform or to continue to perform an activity is closely linked to the actor's
perception of the determinants of success. A stable reinforcer, as the assistance
of a physiotherapist in a training session for a disabled person, (or as any
teacher assisting pupils in a classroom) will enhance motivation for achieve-
ment and related pleasurable emotions.

In cognitive psychology, perceptions of events and stimuli confirm expec-
tancies accumulated through previous experiences and are translated into
attributions. Goal orientation is one such important attribution in situations
where achievement is pursued. From 1958 to 1982, authors explained individ-
ual evaluation of the required level of ability, or of effort, or by good and bad
luck. One main theory (Atkinson & Feather, 1966) explained achievement

needs by the probability of success or failure a subject would attribute to an expected event. Another main theory, the "social learning theory," with J. B. Rotter (1982) as a central proponent, explained differences in individual reactions by personal characteristics. The theory refers to persons more influenced by external control such as powerful others or chance situations, more inclined to aggregate in social gatherings and to rely on affiliative needs. The theory also refers to more autonomous personalities relying on their skills or abilities to achieve success.

Both of these theories agree that high achievers have common characteristics, whereby they would be more independent and regard their own contributions as more prevalent towards success than the influence of external factors. These theorists could not agree, however, in their explanation of failures. For Atkinson and others, low achievers attribute failure to the difficulty of the task, but would demonstrate a tendancy to repeat their attempts at difficult tasks. High achievers, on the other hand, would rationalize their reactions and usually choose moderately difficult tasks. For Rotter and colleagues, reactions to failure or success would be explained by the level of externality or internality of people; external people being more tolerant of failure.

The limitation of these theories when tested in a wide range of age groups and cultural environments was finally acknowledged at the end of the seventies by Weiner (1979) and other cognitivists. Results of Thematic Apperception tests (Atkinson) or of the application of Rotter scales were frequently nonsignificant with similar groups in different environments. For Weiner, in particular, this is not only due to instrumentation, but is primarily due to faulty research methods.

A large number of psychological causes may be apparent for cognitive searchers, but, for Weiner, expectancy shifts tend to be predominantly caused by the perception of stable stimuli. Factor analyses and multidimensional scaling methods are used to arrive at a parsimonious model, pointing to the prevalence of stability as a closely related factor to controlability in perceptual behavior. Weiner's conclusion is important and it is central in causality theory. It has affiliations with K Lewin's theory (1935) on levels of aspiration and with Tolman's anticipation theory (1932) of expected results in humans. It relies on new modes of investigation, such as coding of written materials from newspaper articles, business reports, letters, personal journals, or coding of verbalizations during and after task engagement, and as indirect attributional indexes, free recall of previously read material and sentence completion. These methods document spontaneous attributional activities.

Relations between emotions and motivation in situations of success or failure are also explored at great length. The author stresses the fact that individuals are more likely to take responsibility for successful outcomes and to blame negative outcomes on external factors. Emotions like pride, happiness, gratitude, anger, pity, guilt, and shame are associated with perceptions of outcomes and must be included in a comprehensive theory of attribution.

The important implication of this approach, in which causal thinking and feeling form well-established and robust laws, is that people can be reasoned out of their anger, guilt, pride or pity.

Transactional associations, where affective states are linked in retroactive loops with perceived stable expectations of success or failure, are finally included in this theoretical model. One of many applications of this general law is the observed behavior of medical students and that of teachers. Both of these groups are more willing to help students or clients in perceived uncontrollable situations. Causes perceived as controllable by the individual in need give rise to neglect, whereas causes perceived as uncontrollable by that person generate help and empathy from the professional. These reactions can also be observed in smoking cessation, parole decisions, rape or discouragement response to flight delays. On these grounds, theoretical breadth, depth and generalizability appear to be achieved and this attributional theory could even replace Freudian or Hullian psychology in clinical environments.

Weiner leaves some doors open, however. Although he promised at the beginning of the book to explain once and for all the need for affiliation and power motivation, he concludes in Chapter Seven that these two fields are still open for investigation. It may be that these personal needs are not so well explained by the cognitive (rational ?) attribution of causal stability and controllability.

This contribution to attribution theory is magisterial and very worthwhile. One can easily apply it in distance education situations, where persistence or attrition of distance learners is related to expectancy of outcomes and is achievement oriented.

In distance education and in formal adult education, as Houle (1964) and Cross (1981) have shown, decisions to enroll and to persist are closely tied with career-oriented choices. Stable outcomes are expected and motivation for achievement is high. Formative evaluation coupled with summative evaluation serve as feedback mechanisms which nourish positive self-appreciation and diminish fear of failure. If autonomous or internal students tend to look for personal success as reinforcers, external or affiliative students look for approval from influential persons in order to assess their own skills and enhance their achievement motivation. Rewards and recognition offered by stable institutions through their tutors or teachers are greatly valued by students who look for a change in their life expectations, in a stable perspective.

Moreover, a change from externality to internality, or from social dependence to personal autonomy is also possible. In Weiner's terms, the gradual process would be based on a shift from inconsistencies between expectancies and outcomes which generate attributions to unstable causes, such as luck and effort, to a more consistent motivational situation in which high expectancy of success followed by actual success results in attributions to stable factors such as aptitudes and traits.

One can see how a continuity from Lewin, Skinner and Atkinson to Weiner is developing. A positive behaviorism based on beliefs in success-oriented

performances and in stable expectations is once more ascertained. This is a departure from the Freudian deterministic approach and Weiner often repeats that it is a definitive one.

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