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ABSTRACT

Recent work in attribution theory has shown the importance of not only the distinction between beliefs in internal and external causes, but also between relatively fixed, stable causes and those more unstable and subject to change. The relationships of causal attributions for success and failure in achievement and social affiliation with perceptions of temporal continuity of past, present, and future and with optimistic expectations for future events were explored with a sample of 215 high school students. All subjects completed the Long-Term Personal Direction subscale of the Temporal Experience Questionnaire to measure temporal continuity, the Achievability of Future Goals subscale of the Future Time Perspective Inventory to measure optimism, the Hopelessness Scale to operationally define optimistic/pessimistic future expectations, and the Multidimensional-Multiattributional Causality Scale to measure causal attributions of ability, effort, task difficulty, and luck for both success and failure in achievement and social affiliation. Findings supported the hypothesis that more temporally oriented and optimistic adolescents were more likely to take personal responsibility for both achievement and affiliation successes and failures. The importance of the distinction between the internal attributions of effort and ability was also supported for achievement, as less optimistic and temporally oriented students were more likely to attribute failure to lack of ability, rather than to lack of effort. This finding suggests a consistency with the attributional pattern associated with learned helplessness. (Author/NRB)

# The Personal Experience of Time, Causation and Optimism

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## The Personal Experience of Time, Causation, and Optimism

It has long been a tenet of human growth and development that healthy dependence leads to healthy independence. From a developmental perspective, infants and children first begin to develop a sense of trust or distrust of their environment and significant people in their lives, followed by a sense of autonomy or shame and doubt concerning their own personal control of themselves and their environment (Erikson, 1963). Infants begin trusting their environment when events happen in a consistent fashion. Once this consistency is perceived and trust develops, a willingness to try to do things occurs, based on an expectancy that if certain actions are performed, certain outcomes will follow because this consistently occured in similar situations in the past. This sense of consistency necessary for trust to develop may be viewed within a temporal perspective as anticipation of the future, with an expected continuity of past, present, and future.

Thus it could be anticipated that a sense of temporal continuity and optimistic expectations would be systematically related to beliefs in personal control and responsibility. Several studies do indeed support this view (Platt & Eisenman, 1968; Thayer, Gorman, Wessman et al, 1975). Recent work in attribution theory has shown the importance of not only the distinction between beliefs in internal and external causes(locus), but also between relatively fixed and stable causes and those more unstable and subject to change (Weiner, 1979, 1980). For instance, it can be just as debilitating to persons' self-concept to attribute failure to lack of ability (internal and relatively stable and uncontrollable, given the genetic parameters of intelligence), as it is to external causes that are also not personally controllable. In both instances, these

people may have learned to be helpless (Dweck, 1975; Dweck & Repucci, 1973). That is, they may exhibit cognitive deficits, e.g. learning the non-contingency between behavior and outcomes, emotional deficits, e.g. anxiety or depression resulting from perceived lack of behavior-outcome covariation, and motivational deficits, e.g. not trying as hard. Thus several achievement change programs (Andrews & Debus, 1978; Dweck, 1975; Dweck & Repucci, 1973) have focused on the distinction between ability (internal and stable/unchangeable) and effort (internal and unstable/changeable), a distinction not apparent in the locus of control literature. These programs emphasize changing attributional patterns away from perceptions of lack of personal ability as the cause of failure and toward beliefs that lack of effort is the cause of failure. While care must be taken not to engender unrealistic expectations, if tasks of appropriate difficulty are matched to the characteristics of the learner, a sense of hope or optimism for future success may more readily develop by believing that trying harder will influence the outcome of behavior.

Given this perspective, it is likely that individuals' possessing (a) a greater sense of temporal continuity and (b) more optimistic expectations would more likely take personal responsibility for both their successes and failures (i.e. internal locus). Because it has been consistently shown that people assume significantly more responsibility for their successes than for their failures (Chandler, Shama & Wolf, 1981a, 1981b; Crandall et al, 1965; Weiner & Kukla, 1970), it is also likely that attributions to effort (internal and changeable/controllable) for personal failures would likely be positively related to temporal continuity and optimism, while there could well be a negative relation for attributions to ability (internal and unchangeable/uncontrollable). The purpose of the present study is to explore these relations between individuals' personal experience of causation, time, and optimism. Because several studies (Chandler, Shama & Wolf, 1981a, 1981b; Lefcourt, VonBreyer, Ware & Cox, 1979)

have shown differences in causal attributions as a function of the context, these relations will be explored for both achievement and social affiliation successes and failures.

## Method

A sample of 215 high school students (114 females and 101 males) were selected for this study. These subjects represented the entire tenth grade class of a suburban, typically middle class school, and had a modal age of 16 years. This sample was selected to provide a socioeconomically homogeneous group of subjects at the age when adult concepts of time typically emerge (Wallace & Rabin, 1969).

The Long-Term Personal Direction subscale of the Temporal Experience Questionnaire (Wessman, 1973), the Achievability of Future Goals Subscale of the Future Time Perspective Inventory (Heimberg, 1961), the Hopelessness Scale (Beck et al, 1974), and the Multidimensional-Multiattributional Causality Scale (Lefcourt et al, 1979) were completed by the subjects under standard conditions as part of a larger research program.

The Long-Term Personal Direction (LTPD) subscale of the Temporal Experience Questionnaire (Wessman, 1973) was used as a measure of temporal continutiy. Subjects were asked to rate 20 items on a 7-point likert scale from "not at all" to "completely" descriptive of themselves. This scale was constructed by selecting the 10 items with the highest positive and negative loadings, respectively, from a Thurstone centroid factor analysis. The positive items reflect a sense of continuity of past, present, and future, as well as motivation for and commitment to long-term goals. The negative items reflect an unstructured, fragmented, and discouraging conception of time with an absense of aims, commitment, and future goals.

The Achievability of Future Goals (AFG) subscale of the Future Time Perspective Inventory (Heimberg, 1961) was used as a measure of optimism. This scale con-

tains 8 items to be rated on a 7-point likert scale and has a reported coefficient alpha of .76.

The Hopelessness Scale (HS) (Beck et al, 1974) also was used to operationally define optimistic/pessimistic future expectations. A principal components analysis yielded three subscore factors: a) an affective factor related to hope, enthusiasm, happiness, faith, and good times, labeled Feelings About the Future, b) a motivational factor, labeled Loss of Motivation, concerned with giving up, not wanting anything, and not trying to get something that is wanted, and c) a cognitive factor, labeled Future Expectations, reflecting "anticipations regarding what life will be like: a dark future; getting good things; things not working out; and the future being vague and uncertain" (Beck et al, 1974). The authors reported a total score correlation of .74 with clinical ratings of hopelessness, and coefficient alpha ($KR_{20}$) internal consistency of .93. Because the scale is scored for pessimism, all signs of correlations with the HS were reversed for ease of interpretation. Thus all positive correlations indicate a positive relation with optimism.

The Multidimensional-Multiattributional Causality Scale (MMCS) was developed by Lefcourt et al (1979) to measure causal attributions of ability (internal/stable), effort (internal/unstable), task difficulty (external/stable), and luck (external/unstable) for both success and failure in achievement and social affiliation. The 48 questions are balanced for success and failure, the four attributions, and achievement and affiliation, and result in 16 independent subscales containing 3 items each. Subjects were asked to rate each item on a 5-point likert scale from agree to disagree. In addition, total scores for each attribution collapsing success and failure were derived, as well as composite internality and stability scores. Internality composites were computed by summing the scores for ability and effort and subtracting scores for context (task difficulty) and luck. Stability composites were computed by summing the

scores for ability and task difficulty and subtracting scores for effort and luck. Negative composite scores indicate either external or unstable attributional patterns.

## Results

Means and standard deviations for the time, achievement and affiliation attributions are presented in Tables 1-3. Pearson correlations for measures of temporal experience with achievement and affiliation attributions are summarized in Tables 4 and 5, respectively.

Achievement Attributions. Temporal continuity and optimism both were (a) significantly ($p < .05$) and positively related to attributions to effort and the internality composite for achievement successes and failures ($r = .15$ to $.35$); (b) not related to the stability composite; (c) significantly ($p < .05$) and negatively related to attributions to task difficulty (context) and luck ($r = -.15$ to $-.28$); (d) positively related to ability attributions for success ($r = .14$ to $.19$; $p < .05$), but negatively related to ability attributions for failure ($r = -.15$ to $-.20$; $p < .05$).

Social Affiliation Attributions. Temporal continuity and optimism were both (a) significantly ($p < .05$) and positively related to attributions to effort for achievement successes ($r = .17$), but not for failures ($r = .10$; NS); (b) positively related to the internality composite ($r = .25$ to $.26$; $p < .01$); (c) not significantly related to ability attributions or the stability composite; (d) negatively related to luck attributions ($r = -.26$ to $-.31$; $p < .01$); (e) not related to context attributions for affiliation successes, but negatively related for failures ($r = -.21$; $p < .01$).

## Discussion

For achievement, the findings of this study support the hypothesis that individuals who exhibit more of an internal locus of responsibility tend to have more optimistic expectations, as well as a greater sense of temporal continuity of past, present, and future, than do individuals with a more external locus of causality. In addition, the hypotheses regarding the distinctions between the two internal attributions of effort (unstable) and ability (stable) were supported. Individuals who were more optimistic and temporally oriented were more likely to attribute their achievement successes to both their ability and effort. However, they were less likely to attribute their failures to their lack of ability and more likely to attribute them to their lack of effort than were less optimistic and temporally oriented individuals. This is the facilitative attributional pattern thought to minimize the likelihood of learned helplessness (Andrews & Debus, 1978; Dweck, 1975; Dweck & Repucci, 1973).

The findings were less clear for the perceived causes of social affiliation. Persons whose attributions were more internal in relation to more external were more likely to be more optimistic and temporally oriented. However, more effort for affiliation successes was the only internal attribution to be significantly related to more optimism and temporal continuity. More optimistic and temporally oriented persons were less likely to attribute their social failures to luck or the situational context.

While the present study provides evidence of significant associations between time, optimism, and causal attributions, the nature of these relationships remains unclear. Further investigations of whether any of the measures of time, optimism, or attributions temporally or causally precede any of the others, or whether their relationships are more reciprocal and symmetrical remain to be explored.

Note

1. For purposes of the present study, ability connotes the more stable aspects of aptitude and intelligence, and not the more unstable and learnable aspects, such as skill.

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Table 1

Means and Standard Deviations of Time Measures

| Measure | Mean | SD |
|---|---|---|
| Long-Term Personal Direction (Continuity) | 74.23 | 12.14 |
| Time Utilization | 67.59 | 11.85 |
| Achievability of Future Goals (Optimism) | 35.31 | 6.78 |
| Hopelessness (Pessimism) | 2.67 | 3.15 |

Table 2

Means and Standard Deviations of Causal Attributions for Achievement Success and Failure

| Attribution | Success Mean | Success SD | Failure Mean | Failure SD | Paired t-Test |
|---|---|---|---|---|---|
| Ability | 8.93 | 1.99 | 5.63 | 2.62 | 14.06** |
| Effort | 9.44 | 2.06 | 9.49 | 2.30 | -.33 |
| Context | 6.24 | 2.34 | 7.23 | 2.35 | -5.41** |
| Luck | 6.61 | 2.47 | 5.03 | 2.61 | 8.39** |
| Repeated measure ANOVA F | 119.36** | | 157.16** | | |
| Internality composite | 5.59 | 5.63 | 2.84 | 4.85 | 6.44** |
| Stability composite | -.82 | 3.19 | -1.69 | 3.63 | 2.52* |

* $p < .05$
** $p < .01$

Table 3

Means and Standard Deviations of Causal Attributions for Affiliation Success and Failure

| Attribution | Success Mean | SD | Failure Mean | SD | Paired t-Test |
|---|---|---|---|---|---|
| Ability | 7.60 | 2.27 | 6.25 | 2.17 | 8.28* |
| Effort | 8.68 | 2.31 | 7.01 | 2.52 | 8.80* |
| Context | 9.32 | 2.08 | 7.01 | 2.68 | 11.36* |
| Luck | 4.14 | 2.63 | 5.51 | 2.21 | -7.91* |
| Repeated measure ANOVA F | 224.21* | | 22.97* | | |
| Internality composite | 2.78 | 4.54 | 0.72 | 5.11 | 5.07* |
| Stability composite | 4.07 | 3.88 | 0.83 | 3.59 | 9.21* |

* $p < .001$

Table 4

Pearson Correlations Between Measures of Temporal Experience and Causal Attributions for Achievement Success and Failure

| Attribution | Continuity | Time Utilization | Optimism | Hopelessness |
|---|---|---|---|---|
| Success | | | | |
| Ability | .19** | .22** | .17* | -.14* |
| Effort | .27** | .24** | .31** | -.17* |
| Context | -.21** | -.15* | -.25** | .26** |
| Luck | -.18** | -.22** | -.20** | .15* |
| Internality Composite | .34** | .33** | .37** | -.29** |
| Stability Composite | -.08 | .04 | -.11 | .09 |
| Failure | | | | |
| Ability | -.15* | -.21** | -.15* | .18* |
| Effort | .15* | .06 | .25** | -.12 |
| Context | -.18** | -.21** | -.10 | .11 |
| Luck | -.28** | -.26** | -.30** | .19** |
| Internality Composite | .23** | .16* | .25** | -.11 |
| Stability Composite | -.12 | -.14* | -.11 | .13 |

* $p < .05$
** $p < .01$

Table 5

Pearson Correlations Between Measures of Temporal Experience and Causal Attributions for Affiliation Success and Failure

| Attribution | Continuity | Time Utilization | Optimism | Hopeless-ness |
|---|---|---|---|---|
| Success | | | | |
| Ability | .03 | .08 | .08 | .02 |
| Effort | .17* | .20** | .20** | -.11 |
| Context | .03 | .03 | -.00 | -.03 |
| Luck | -.31** | -.17* | -.45** | .36** |
| Internality Composite | .26** | .22** | .41** | -.24** |
| Stability Composite | .13 | .05 | .23** | -.19** |
| Failure | | | | |
| Ability | -.06 | -.04 | -.10 | .11 |
| Effort | .10 | .04 | .01 | -.05 |
| Context | -.21** | -.19** | -.12 | .17* |
| Luck | -.26** | -.11 | -.26** | .28** |
| Internality Composite | .25** | .16* | .14* | -.19** |
| Stability Composite | -.09 | -.12 | -.01 | .05 |

* $p < .05$
** $p < .01$