

Emotion and attribution

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Introduction

The cognitive study of emotion is currently one of the most relevant approaches to the analysis of emotional behavior. Since Schachter-Singer's theory (1962) a long way has been covered making evident the influence, if not the preeminence, of cognition over emotion. The works of Valins (1966), Lazarus (1968), Mandler (1975), Ellis (1974), Beck (1976) and the recent revisions on this subject (Clark and Fiske, 1982; Fiske and Taylor, 1984) have made clear the unequivocal influence of cognitive processes in the apparition of emotion and in its nature.

Some problems and discussions have arisen from this subject. Zajonc's works and the conductist theories represent a part of the theoretical answer to the cognitive theories of emotions.

The Theory of Attribution belongs to the group of theories which start from a pattern of man as an active searcher of information. Attribution is an important part of the social inference and, generally speaking, of the cognitive process of world construction. The Theorie of Attribution originates in the writings of Heider (1958), Jones-Davis (1965) and Kelley (1967) and has acquired a great extension currently (Kelley-Michela, 1980; Harvery-Weary, 1984). In it, it is usually distinguished a part devoted to the study of the basic processes of causal inference and another one devoted to the consequences of the attributions on the subject's behavior.

It is this second part that we are directly interested in, as far as the study of emotions is concerned. The general presupposition is that the causal attributions are an important part of the understanding which has an important influence and determines both specific attitudes and the emotive and conductual reactions of the subject. The causal attribution would act as a causal factor of emotions.

The systematization of the causes is one of the first problems connected with this type of study. The number of causes which can be attributed to the different facts in the most varied contexts is practically endless. It is necessary to have a taxonomy giving dimensions to the different causes and organizing their possible consequences. One dimension quickly made evident was that of internal-external. This dimension distinguished two basic kinds of causes, those which are within the subject and outside it. Rotter's work (1966), although from a different point of view, have shown the importance of «locus of control» in people's behavior.

Weiner-Kukla (1970) pointed out that this dimension was insufficient to categorize properly the four most habitual attributions with regard to failure and success, already mentioned by Heider: ability, effort, difficulties of the task and luck. It was necessary a complementary dimension which should separate properly such attributions, so they proposed the dimension of stability. The dimensions of locus of causality and stability together were used to discriminate properly the four causes aforementioned.

Nevertheless, both dimensions seemed insufficient to discriminate between some types of causes, for example between bad mood and headache, which are both internal and unstable but at the same time clearly different to such an extent that the attribution of a particular fact to one or another, a failure for example, does not lack of consequences. Weiner (1979), after some hesitation about the naming of the third dimension, definitely proposed to consider it a dimension of controllability-uncontrollability.

The problems of the systematization of the causes do not end here. Some authors have proposed other dimensions such as the globality (Seligman and col. 1979) or evaluation (Weiner and Kelley,

1982). To make things worse, the relationship between dimensions is not clear either and, although theoretically the three dimensions should distinguish eight kinds of different causes, it is not obvious that it should be so. Thus, it could be asked, for example, whether an internal and stable cause can be controllable. Another complementary difficulty arises from the great interpersonal and intrapersonal variety which exists in the consideration of the causes as belonging to one or another category.

In spite of the mentioned difficulties, there seems to be a theoretical consensus which recognizes them as three basic dimensions and the different empiric works which have been carried out (Mayer, 1980; Meyer-Koelbl, 1982; Michela, Peplau, Weeks, 1978; Passer, 1977; Wimer y Kelley, 1982) have confirmed their validity for a sufficient systematization of the attributions.

Although the origin of the studies on attribution and emotion is usually placed upon Weiner's study (1978) where for the first time the subject is explicitly dealt with, we should probably place it upon the study by the same author, «Perceiving the causes of success and failure» (Weiner and col. 1971). In it, it was already said that the attribution of internality provoked stronger affective reactions. These results were obtained in a context of achievement, and in relation to the success or failure of it.

Weiner's general hypothesis was quickly and generally confirmed. One aspect of it provoked the strongest criticism: The importance given to the effort as an attribution with stronger emotional consequences. Some researchs (Covington-Beery, 1976; Nicholls, 1976) suggested that the attribution of ability had stronger emotional consequences. Other researchs (Eswara, 1972; Weiner-Peter, 1973) maintained Weiner's first conclusions. It seemed then convenient to infer that the strongest affective reaction to the attribution of one type or another of internal causality depend on the context.

In 1978, picking up the theme of previous works (Weiner, 1975, 1976), Weiner suggested that some affects, such as anxiety and frustration would depend mainly on external attributions. These emotional reactions, and some alike, have been disregarded because they did not seem to be connected directly with a motivation of achievement to which shame and pride were linked.

However, the fact these two states of affection may be the main result in a context of success-failure is a supposition which has not been discussed. Feeling such as competence-incompetence, safety-fear, gratitude-resentment could just as well be derived from a context of achievement. In this work Weiner (1978) tries to check whether, as McClelland and coworkers (1953) had maintained, pride and shame were the dominant emotions in the context of achievement.

His results show the types of attribution to the failure and success that produce a specific and determined frame of emotional reactions: ability, unstable effort, stable effort, personality, other people's efforts, motivation, personality of others, luck and intrinsic motivation. Three other possible attributions: fatigue, illness, and the difficulty of the task, did not produce clear emotional consequences. The Table n. 1 summarizes the conclusions:

TABLE N. 1

ATTRIBUTIONS AND DOMINANT DISCRIMINATING AFFECTS FOR SUCCESS AND FAILURE

Attribution	Success	Failure
Ability	Competence	Incompetence
Short effort	Activation	Guilt
Long effort	Relaxation	Shame
Personality	Self-enhancement	Resignation
Others	Gratitude	Aggression
Luck	Surprise	Surprise

Table 1 based on Weiner, Russell and Lerman, 1978.

Weiner (1978, p. 81) ends by stating that emotive reactions to failure are wider than those originally maintained by McClelland (1953) and which, obviously, depend on the type of attributions that may be made.

Both in this research and in that one of 1979 (Weiner, Russell and Lerman, 1979) it was stated that if there were emotions which depend on the attributions, there also is a group of affects dependent

on the outcome and independent of the attributions. For example, success causes the feeling of happiness, independently of the kind of attribution, and failure causes the feeling of uneasiness and dissatisfaction. This does not mean that such emotions are free of any kind of cognition, and therefore, success and failure are defined by a level of goals, that is by a pattern of success which implies evaluations between what is expected and what is obtained.

Weiner (1980, p. 5) states the emotional consequences of the attribution of the locus of causality in the Table n. 2.

TABLE N. 2
RELATIONS BETWEEN LOCUS OF CAUSALITY AND FEELINGS

Locus	Success	Failure
Internal	Pride Confidence Competence Satisfaction	Guilt
External	Grateful Thankful	Anger Surprise

Table 2 based on Weiner (1980).

Table n. 2 does not mean that the dimension of internality is the only significative attributive dimension for emotional life. Causal stability also has an influence on affective reactions. Affects such as depression, apathy and resignation appear primarily as consequences of internal and stable attributions of failure, such as the lack of ability and the deficiency of personality. This means that emotions are answers both to causal attributions and to dimensions of causality.

Later on, Weiner (1982) started to study the relationship between the dimension of controllability and some specific emotional answers in different contexts to those of achievement. In his summary work on this subject, Weiner has synthesized the most important conclusions in six propositions.

Pride and positive self-enhancement would be emotions derived from the internal attribution of a positive event. Likewise, low self-enhancement would derive from the auto-attribution of the negative event, no matter whether the event is considered controllable or uncontrollable. Pride and self-enhancement would be, in this context, expressive emotions of self-evaluation.

Anger is experienced when a negative event, which affects the self, is attributed to factors which can be controlled by others: A car accident due to other driver's fault. In the same way, anger is elicited when a negative event which affects another one is considered as controllable by the self: the failure of a pupil due to his lack of effort.

Gratitude appears when a positive event, which affects oneself, is attributed to causes which can be controlled by others. For example, a favour granted without any obligation. Certainly, the intensity of both anger and gratitude will depend on other factors apart from that of controllability, for example on the importance attributed to the event.

Guilt is experienced when an event of negative consequences is considered as personally controllable. The failure due to an insufficient effort is a clear example. A car accident caused by a personal negligence is another example outside the achievement context.

Sympathy and pity are felt when others are in a situation of necessity due to uncontrollable factors. Sympathy for somebody because of his having lost a beloved person is a clear example. Another example is a state of physical prostration due to illness.

In the emotions mentioned there has been only reference to the internality and controllability; stability also plays a part in the apparition of emotions, as it has been said.

When a negative event takes place, its attribution to stable factors generates feelings of helplessness and resignation. That is, the future will be seen as a mere reply of the negative present, giving rise to different types of hopelessness.

The mentioned affects of anger, pity and perhaps pride, are stronger when the cause is perceived as stable. Pity for a blind person is stronger than the sympathy one feels for someone who has serious

problems with his eyes. The dimension of stability operates increasing the intensity of affect without changing its direction.

However the aforesaid connections between the causal attributions and the emotions, those must not be considered as sufficient and necessary causes. If the corresponding attribution occurs it is not enough for the corresponding feeling to do necessary so. A person can get involved in a coward and abusive action without feeling guilty for it. Likewise, in certain circumstances, success can originate a situation of embarrassment or humility. This does not mean that given the consequent, the emotion, its antecedent should be necessarily the mentioned attribution. The connection established between attribution and emotions is one of congruence, credibility and probability. The theory of attribution maintains a link which is sufficient, but not necessary, between attribution and emotions.

The previous conclusions have been obtained chiefly from two basic methodologies, one consisting of supposing which are the emotions associated to particular short stories read by the subjects, the other based on the recollections of the emotions connected with a critic event lived by the subject.

As a consequence of both types of methodology, it cannot be established that emotions should follow cognitions, because the causal attributions have not been directly manipulated. It is possible, on the other hand, that the stated emotion should be the result of previous mental schemas on the relationship between cognitions and emotions, which should mean that the subject of the research would be rather the implicit theory of emotions. Although it is clear there exists a certain lack of an adequate methodology of study (Weiner, 1979, p. 1.217), the results which have been obtained seem to be convincing enough and consistent with other theoretical approaches.

Weiner and his coworker's studies have a double aim: establishing the emotions associated with the locus of causality for success and failure and analysing the conjunct influence of the locus of causality and controllability in emotions not connected with the context of achievement. According to the same authors, the dimension of stability operates increasing the intensity of emotions, although the intensity would depend on some other factors, such as the importance of the outcome, the ego involvement and the long term implication.

Our study is chiefly in the model of analysis of implicit theory of the emotions and tries to investigate two specific aspects of this theory which have not been studied previously: the capacity to discriminate typical emotions from the context of achievement with regard to the dimensions of internality and controllability.

The second part of our study analyzes the opinions about the intensity of emotions with regard to the stability or frequency of the facts. Weiner (1982) maintained that the stability of causes emphasized the intensity of emotions such as anger or pity. However, different theories have maintained the importance of instability with regard to the apparitions of emotions. Mandler's theory (1975) established that the physiological arousal, the first phase of emotion, appears when there exists interruption or unexpected events. The interruption of a sequence would be the condition for the emotion to appear. The second part of our study consisted on analysing the belief about the intensity of the emotions considered in the first part of our study.

Study 1

Method

The subjects were 137 male and female COU students, seventeen and eighteen years old. Each subject completed a questionnaire with 24 items corresponding to the eight conditions determined by the two dimensions of locus of causality and controllability and positive or negative events. Each condition was represented by three items.

Attending to previous research on the question, we chose the most prevalent emotions for the success and failure outcome.

TABLE N. 3
CORRESPONDING EMOTIONS FOR THE TWO KINDS OF OUTCOME

Outcome	Emotions
Positive story	Satisfaction, competence, pride, happiness
Negative story	Guilt, shame, incompetence, sadness

The eight emotions were selected because they are usually those obtained resulting from success and failure situations. Table n. 4 represents the theoretical classification of the eighth emotions attending to the target emotion, locus of causality and controllability.

TABLE N. 4
THEORETICAL CORRESPONDENCE BETWEEN EMOTIONS AND ELEMENTS OF CLASSIFICATION

Emotions	Target of emotions		Locus of causality		Controllability	
	Self	Others	Inter.	Extern.	Cont.	Uncontr.
Satisfaction	X		X		X	
Guilt	X		X		X	
Competence	X		X			X
Incompetence	X		X			X
Pride		X		X	X	
Shame		X		X	X	
Happiness	X			X		X
Sadness	X			X		X

Having eight different emotions, the subjects were asked to associate only the clearest one with a short story. The short stories were such as:

«Anne has worked very hard to improve in her work. Thanks to her effort she has obtained a promotion at the work.

How do you think her feelings are?

Pride, Satisfaction, Competence, Happiness

Shame, Guilt, Incompetence, Sadness».

Or:

«Marta likes practicing sports very much, but because of her poor performance she was not chosen to represent the College.

How do you think her feeling are?

Pride, Satisfaction, Competence, Happiness

Shame, Guilt, Incompetence, Sadness».

Results and discussion

The results of Table n. 5 permit to elaborate a relationship between the four conditions and the prevalent emotions for the positive outcome. So it is possible to obtain the pattern on emotions for the four conditions.

TABLE N. 5
ATTRIBUTIONS OF EMOTIONS FOR POSITIVE OUTCOMES AND CONDITIONS OF INTERNALITY AND CONTROLLABILITY

Conditions	Emotions			
	Satisfaction	Competence	Pride	Happiness
Internality and Controlability	178	77	118	32 (405)
Internality and Uncontrolability	91	119	148	41 (399)
Externality and controlability	144	104	155	3 (406)
Externality and Uncontrability	25	1	19	351 (396)

It seems from this table that the emotion of satisfaction is mainly attributed to the condition of controllability, and the happiness is clearly attributed to the positive outcome, externality and controllability.

From Table n. 6 it is also possible to elaborate the pattern of negative emotions for the four conditions and the negative outcome.

TABLE N. 6
ATTRIBUTIONS OF EMOTIONS FOR POSITIVES OUTCOMES AND THE CONDITIONS OF INTERNALITY AND CONTROLABILITY

Conditions	Emotions			
	Guilt	Incompetence	Shame	Sadness
Internality-Controlability	235	32	100	29 (396)
Internality-Uncontrolability	8	238	11	132 (381)
Externality-Controlability	51	21	282	42 (396)
Externality-Uncontrolability	1	28	1	362 (392)

The pattern of negative emotions is more clear. On each of the four conditions there is an emotion clearly prevalent. The emotion of shame is attributed to conditions of controllability and the emotion of sadness to uncontrollability conditions.

Study 2

Method

The sample was the same group of 137 male and female COU students. The task to do was to mark the attributed intensity of emotion attending to the frequency of the outcome. The stories were the same that in experiment 1, but in this occasion only a emotion corresponding to organization made in Table 4 was presented for each story. The frequency of the outcome was graduated and four categories were presented: always, frequently, rarely, never. The intensity of emotion was also graduated and five categories were presented: none, a little, medium, enough, very much. Four questionnaires were elaborated with the 24 original stories so that the 24 stories should be under the 4 conditions of frequency. The four questionnaires were distributed at random. The task to do was similar to this:

«Anna has worked very hard to improve in her work. Thanks to her effort she has obtained a promotion in her work.

As far as Anna is concerned, this is what usually happens.

How do you think is she satisfied?

None, a little, medium, enough, very much».

Results and discussion

The Table n. 9 presents the correlation between the frequency of the outcome and the intensity of emotion.

TABLE N. 7
CORRELATIONS BETWEEN FREQUENCY OF THE OUTCOME AND THE INTENSITY OF EMOTIONS

Positive emotions		Negative emotions	
Pride	= -0,272	Guilt	= -0,400
Satisfaction	= -0,484	Shame	= -0,371
Competence	= -0,602	Incompetence	= -0,298
Happiness	= -0,242	Sadness	= -0,021

All the correlations between frequency and intensity for the eight emotions were significant at the level of 0.01 except the correlation for incompetence. The results obtained seem to suggest that emotional intensity does not depend on the stability of the event: the more unstable the event is, the greater the emotional intensity is. The negative correlation obtained points out that the satisfaction for the success of personal effort is greater attending to its instability. The stability of the success of failure decreases the intensity of relative emotions. Probably the stability of the outcome implies a consolidation of the correspondent self-concept, but not an emotional experience. The emotion appears when the outcome is not frequent and its probability is very small.

General Discussion

The methodology of attributing emotions to particular events does not permit to conclude associating concrete attributions to specific emotions but it permits an approach to the implicit theory of emotions of lay man. It seems that emotions, both positive and negative, are usually considered as a pattern of affects with prevalent and dominant but not unique sentiments. Negative emotions seem to be more differentiated than the positive ones. The implicit theory of emotions also seems to associate the intensity with the frequency of the event that causes it. Probably the social inference of attributing causes produces emotions but we need more experimental methodologies to assess that.

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