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# ATTRIBUTION AND PERSONAL-SOCIAL ADJUSTMENTS OF THE CHILD DURING CHILDHOOD EDUCATION

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## Abstract

*Attribution is the formal body of information pertaining to the use of inferences and implied causality under conditions of minimal information. The child uses attributions so as to understand and control the world he lives in. People specially need to know if something was done because of force or because of choice. To protect our self-esteem and feel happy we are more likely to blame something external to ourselves hence self-servicing attribution bias. Attributions have certain salient theories discussed such as Heider's attribution theory, Jones and Davis correspondent attribution theory, Kelley's Co-variation model theory. It has to be learnt here that from attribution, people are trying to figure out the personality of the child as a result of his behaviour. His behaviour could be referenced/attributed to his parents and to the type of people that are always around him. The behaviour of the child, makes others to draw inferences and make judgments. We are constantly told that we should not judge others but attribution theory says we cannot help it. Some recommendations have been made for effective attribution.*

## Introduction

Most of our impressions of others are based on what they actually do. That is, their overt behaviour and the setting in which it occurs. Sometimes, we only know

about someone's behaviour from someone else. Therefore, our impressions may be based on second-hand information and in many situations people are merely informed (verbally or in writing)

about the behaviour of some persons. In all these cases, we usually try to explain why the person behaved the way he did by identifying the cause of the behaviour. In particular, has it to do with the people, for instance, their motives, intentions or personality (an internal cause) or has it something to do with the situation, including some other person's or some physical features of the environment (an external cause)? Unless we can make this sort of judgment, we cannot really use the person's behaviour as the basis for forming an impression of him, although we might mistakenly attribute the cause to the person instead of the situation:

An Austrian born social psychologist- Heider (1958) introduced the term attribution to refer to the explanations people give for their own or other person's actions or beliefs. He further said that the process by which we make this judgment is called the attribution process. He demonstrated the strength of human tendencies to explain people's behaviour in terms of their intentions to maintain balance. In a famous study carried out by Heider and Simmel (2004) they showed animated cartoons of three geometrical figures (a large triangle,

a small triangle and a disc) moving around, in and out of a large square. People tended to see them as having human characteristics and in particular, as having intentions towards each other. They attributed the two triangles as two men in rivalry for a girl (the disc) with the large triangle as being aggressive and bully. The smaller triangle being seen as defiant and heroic and the disc as timid. Sometimes we see a person's action and we immediately reach conclusions that go beyond sensory information.

### **Types of Attribution**

There are three major types of attribution. They are: Dispositional attribution, Situational Attribution and Causal Attribution.

- 1. Dispositional Attribution:** According to Norman, Richmen, and Sharon, (1994), when the attribution is based on an internal factor, it is called a dispositional attribution. It is said to be genetical or hereditary. The person is born with the trait. According to attribution theories, when people attempt to explain another person's actions, they tend to overestimate dispositional (hereditary) factors. Here people are more

likely to interpret another person's actions on the basis of the person's inherent traits. For example, during a pupil-teacher discussion, the teacher might patiently listen to the pupil's list of situational (external) reasons for failing the Mathematics quiz but may privately view them as alibi for the pupil's inherent laziness. According to Norman et al (1994), children who really believe that their academic failures are due to dispositional factors such as laziness, truancy, absenteeism, lack of concentration, and so on, are apt to lose motivation and stop making further effort.

Children who rarely experience success in the classroom; for example, often attribute their failures to trait (dispositional) factors and eventually could be heard making statements like "I am too dull to learn", "my brain is too low to learn", "I cannot sit down in a place to learn", "I am not capable of possessing any skill, and so on.

Caregivers/teachers who have such children in their classes should develop or adopt motivational strategies to encourage them to learn instead of regarding them as

"never-do-well", or seeing their failure as transferred from their parents.

2. **Situational Attribution:** Here is when the explanations people give for their own or another person's actions or behaviour is based on external factors. For example, if the teacher views the poor performance of a pupil on Mathematics test as resulting from the child's falling ill or as a result of his being chased home for school fees or somebody fighting him when he was coming to school, that would be a situational attribution. Many psychologist relate this to adjustment mechanism.

It has been observed that when the child is explaining his own behaviour, especially when it is ugly; he is more likely to use situational attribution. Wilson and Linville (2006) opine that if children become convinced that failures are due to situational factors, academic motivation may increase. Also, when a child performs brilliantly well in a test, the teacher is more likely to attribute this excellent performance to situational factors such as his use of very good instructional materials

and good method of teaching. The child may attribute it to his regular attendance to school, paying attention to the teachers' teaching and using the appropriate textbooks. The teacher has to encourage positive situational attribution and discourage negative situational attribution.

**3. Causal Attribution:** This is the tendency to favour one cause over another. Gross (1992) observed that this type of attribution deviated from predictions derived from rational attribution principles. This still refers to tendency to attribute causality to salient reasons that is those reasons that are conspicuous or stand out. Gross (1992) still said that causal attributions are often made with less thought and conscious information processing.... Causal attribution could be regarded as adjustment or defence mechanism where the real cause of an action may not be said but any lie that makes the person accepted and adjusted to the society. Such causal attribution could still be regarded as the "noble lie". This could make the teacher or any other person take

deliberate wrong judgment on the child even when he knows that the judgment on the child is wrong. The teacher and other people should try to avoid bias effects when taking judgment or making inferences on the child or on somebody else. The real cause for the action must be said no matter who may be indicted.

### **Attribution Errors and Bias**

Attribution errors and bias are the tendency to favour one cause of the child's behaviour over another when explaining some effects. There are various attribution errors.

(a) **The Fundamental Attribution Error:** As observed earlier, the fundamental attribution error is when children tend to over-estimate dispositional factors and under-estimate situational factors. It has to be noted that this occurs mainly when someone is explaining another person's behaviour. For instance, if a child is always arrogant in the class or he is a bully to other children, the teacher may attribute his poor performance in the examination to his arrogance or aggressiveness.

The fundamental attribution error is more likely

to occur when the behaviour in question is perceived as negative such as aggressiveness, pride, greed, disruptiveness, academic failure, etc. Gross (1992), states that the reason for the fundamental error is that people prefer simple to complex explanations. The preference for internal (dispositional) causes could be understood in terms of making the behaviour of another more predictable which, in turn, enhances our sense of control over the environment, as well as making people more competent observers (situational).

However, in some conditions, children over-emphasize situational factors. For example, a child's truancy to school could be attributed to the type of school he is attending. His high performance in an examination could be likened to the cheapness of the questions. It may reflect an efficient, automatic process of inferring dispositions from behaviour which, on average, produces accurate perceptions by perceivers who are too cognitively busy to make conscious corrections based on situational causes.

(b) **The Actor-observer Attribution Errors and Bias:** This is the tendency for actors and observers to make different inferences (attributions) about the same event/person. Actors usually see their own behaviour as primarily a response to the situation (the cause is external) while the observer typically attribute the same behaviour as dispositional (hereditary/internal).

(c) **Self-Servicing Attribution Error and Bias:** Naturally, no one wants to admit being clumsy, so we are more self-esteemed but we are quite happy to take the credit for our successes. This enhances our self-esteem. This is referred to as self-serving attribution bias. Gross (1992) observed that positively valued outcomes (e.g altruism) are more often attributed to people and negatively valued outcomes (e.g being late) are attributed to situational (external) factors, regardless of who committed the action. When someone commits an action, credit goes to him for positive action (self-enhancing bias) and denial of responsibility for negative event (self-protection bias).

Abramson, Seligman & Teasdale (1978) observed an interesting exception, they found that people tend to explain their failures in terms of their own inadequacies and their success more in terms of external factors, such as luck and somebody's assistance.

distinctiveness is underestimated and consistence is over-estimated, resulting in an increase in the tendency to attribute internal causes to behaviour. There, the believe is that behaviour is hereditary and could be traced back to parents i.e. the child's root.

(d) **The Illusory Causation Attribution Error and Bias:**

This refers to the tendency to attribute causality to physically salient children i.e those who are conspicuous or stand out in some ways; For example, children who are extroverted in class, dress well and neatly, speak more intelligently, perform significant roles, bullies other children, always punctual, very brilliant, etc. the above examples suggest that causal attributions are often made with less thought and conscious information processing.

**The Consequences of Attribution Error**

The more serious the consequences of the child's behaviour, the more likely the fundamental attribution error is to be made; the more serious the outcome, the more likely we are to judge the child as responsible, regardless of the perceived intentions of the child. For example, Walster (1966) gave children an account of a car accident in which a young man's car had been left at the top of a hill and the car rolled down. One group was told that very little damage was done to the car and no other vehicle was involved, a second group was told that it collided with another car, causing some damage while the third group was told that the car crashed into a shop, injuring the shopkeeper and a small child. When they had to assess how responsible the car owner was, the third group found him more 'guilty' or morally culpable than the second group and the second group found him more guilty than the first.

(e) **The Fallacy of Representative Behaviour Attribution Error and Bias:**

Nisbeth and Ross (1980) have pointed out that one of the most common traps the child falls into is assuming that behaviour is much more representative. Here

However, Darley and Huff (1990) found that the children's judgment depended on whether they believed it was done intentionally through negligence or accidentally. Although the damage was described, the children who felt that the act was done intentionally and much harm was done, inflated their estimation of the amount of damage done compared with the children who believed the damage was caused unintentionally. Chaikin and Darley (1973) in Gross (1992) found that if someone spills ink over a large and expensive book, people are more likely to blame the actor than if it is spilt over a newspaper.

Another facet of the consequences of behaviour is how these consequences affect the child's personality. The more they affect the child, the more likely people are to hold the actor responsible. For example, if somebody tears a very big and expensive book, the more likely people are to blame the person than if the book is small less expensive and not much relevant.

## **Attribution Theories**

### **1. Fritz Heider's Attribution Theory (1958)**

Heider an Austrian born psychologist is regarded as the father of attribution theory. He said that attribution

is the process of drawing inferences. We see a person act and immediately reach conclusions that go beyond mere sensory information. Heider's attribution theory accepts that man should judge by behaviour. To Heider, prediction is survival skill. He believes that we make personality judgments in order to explain otherwise confusing behaviour. From Heider's attribution theory, the way the child speaks, mode of dressing, relationship with other people, sincerity, attitude to other school activities, etc could make the teacher and other people that come in contact with him to draw inferences about his family background and other factors about him.

### **2. Jones and Davis' Correspondent Attribution Theory (1965)**

Jones and Davis (1965) were very much influenced by Heider, investigated how people decide that someone's behaviour is intentional when the information they have at their disposal is so often ambiguous. They believe that the goal of the attribution is to be able to make correspondent inference,



that is, to infer that the behaviour and the intention that produced it correspond to some underlying, stable, features of the person (i.e. a disposition). For example, knowing that John has an argumentative disposition, people are in better position to predict that he will intentionally start an argument. Agreeing with Heider, Jones and Davis maintain (1965) that, before somebody can begin to attribute intentions, he has to be confident first, that the actor is capable of having deliberately and regularly performed the act and second, that they know the effects that his/her behaviour would produce.

### 3. **Kelley's Co-variation Attribution Model (1967)**

Kelley has investigated attribution, concentrating on how we make judgment about internal and external causes. His co-variation model is intended to explain cases where a child has knowledge of how the person being studied usually behaves in a variety of situations and how others usually behave in those situations. The theory of co-variation states that an effect

is attributed to one of its possible causes with which, over time, it co-varies. That is, if two events repeatedly occur together, we are more likely to infer that they are causally related than if they very rarely occur together.

Kelley identified three causes of the effects of behaviours as Consensus, Distinctiveness and Consistency. Consensus refers to the extent to which other children behave in the same way. Distinctiveness refers to the extent to which the child behaves regularly in a different way towards other similar stimuli or entities and consistence refers to how stable a child's behaviour is over time.

### **Application of Attribution Theories to Children's Education**

In line with Jones and Davis (1965) correspondent theory, the goal of attribution is to be able to make correspondent inferences, that is, to infer that the behaviour and the intention that produces it corresponds to the features or dispositions of the child. This shows that at the childhood education, different types of personality are observed even in the classroom. The caregiver/teacher will at the childhood education observe the

extrovert who is sociable, talkative, pushful and gets on to other children's nerves very often. According to Denga (1988) the extrovert child does not brood over wrong for a long time and he heals strained relationship fast.

The caregiver/teacher will also at the childhood education level observe the introverted child. The introverted child observed by the caregiver/teacher is quiet, withdrawn, careful not to offend other children because he hardly forgives those who offend him. He stays away from people for fear of offending them or being offended by them

This theory (attribution theory) highlights the two extreme groups of children as the extroverted is suspected to also attempt to answer and ask questions in the class. The caregiver/teacher knows he always wants to be seen. The teacher knows his name will always be in the list of noise makers. However, the extroverted child has the skill of interacting and socializing with many of his peers even in the classroom. Here the teachers may give him some leadership responsibilities so as to keep him busy. He will also be advised abinitio to learn to take turns before he talks and engages in other school programmes. His

extroversion could be referenced to his parents, hence attribution.

Conversely, the theory exposes introverted children as those who the teacher/caregiver has marked as not willing to answer and ask questions in the class. The teacher has eye-marked them as solitary and with perfectionist attitude i.e. they want to be perfectly sure of anything before they embark on it. Hence, they are afraid of embarking on what they are not sure. At this level of the theory, the teacher should involve the introverted child in group activities. They could also be given leadership responsibilities and advised to accept mistakes and failures and take corrections. They should be encouraged to make attempts of asking and answering questions in the class and during other school programmes.

There is no gain-saying that if the teacher identifies this with the child, he will start inferring the child as such and other children will begin to attribute certain actions to his type of person. Jones and Davis correspondent theory, in fact, matches the child's personality type with his behaviour.

Teaching and learning may not be very effective at the childhood education level if attribution theory is not properly applied and consciously used. The children will be identified as they are

and given responsibilities and attention as their traits are.

Kelley's co-variations model theory is relevant to childhood education because if a child's behaviour occurs repeatedly for two or more times, that behaviour will be attributed to the child. That is why Kelley (1967) states that if two events or behaviour repeatedly occur, we are more likely to infer that they are causally related. With this, the parents and the teachers should identify things attributed to the child and develop ways of handling them. It will make teaching and learning easier because individual differences will be identified and handled accordingly.

The teacher is expected to have vast knowledge of the theory and principles of attribution. It is very important that the teacher/caregiver should know how to apply attribution theories to any child. If it is properly applied, the effects will be positive but if otherwise, the effects will be negative.

Both dispositional and situational attributions should not be over-emphasized at this level. If any of it is over-emphasized, the child may begin to be maladjusted which may linger up to his adulthood. Certain adjustment/defence mechanisms may become the child's way of life. Wrong use of attribution at the childhood education will be

very dangerous because the child may not accept responsibility when he misbehaves but will rather transfer it to external factors.

The teachers/caregiver should positively reinforce the pupils as and when due. The children at the nursery/primary level could develop negative self-concept of themselves if they discover they are academically very poor as a result of personal traits they possess. The teacher should assist the children to maintain some homeostasis (equilibrium/balance) so as not to drop out of school very early in life. The attribution theories equip the teachers for effective teaching.

### **Summary and Conclusion**

In this paper, the writers x-rayed the concept of attribution which refers to explanation people give for their own or another person's action. Herein, types of attribution which include dispositional attribution, situational attribution and causal attribution were properly discussed. Dispositional attribution is when inference (attribution) is based on internal factor or "self" of the child while situational attribution is basing the child's action on external factor. When one factor is intended to favour one cause over another, it is called causal attribution.

In this paper, attribution error, which includes fundamental

attribution error, the actor-observer attribution error, self-serving attribution bias, and the fallacy of representative behaviour attribution error have been carefully discussed.

This paper did not overlook the attribution theories and three of them; Heider's attribution theory, - Jones and Davis correspondent attribution theory, Kelley's co-variation attribution model theory have been discussed. The application of attribution theories to childhood education are highlighted in the paper. Attribution is a concept that affects all stages of human development hence the discussion on attribution and childhood education. In this paper, some recommendations on the application of attribution have been discussed.

It is therefore hoped that this exposition on attribution will impact on the personal-social adjustment of the child.

### Recommendations

Based on this study carried out on attribution and personal-social adjustment of the child, during childhood education, the following recommendations are hereby offered:

1. Children should be encouraged by both parents and teachers to exhibit positive self-concept of themselves so that they could

also be properly placed in the society they find themselves.

2. The teachers and parents should endeavour to avoid attribution errors that might make them take wrong judgment of the child.

3. The child is still at the formative stage of his life, therefore, the teacher and parents should not yet take judgment on the child but should endeavour to help the child to form positive attitude to life. This will help to prevent wrong attribution on the child.

4. The teachers and parents should encourage the children to develop some homeostasis (equilibrium/balance) so that proper inferences could be drawn.

5. Longitudinal study of the child should be taken by the teachers and the parents before attribution could be taken.

6. Every Nursery and primary school teacher should have good knowledge of childhood psychology so as to be in a better position to identify the children and place them adequately without attribution errors.

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