

## Controllability Attributions and Learned Helplessness: Some Methodological and Conceptual Problems

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The attribution literature related to the reformulated model of learned helplessness theory was examined, with particular attention paid to the methodological/procedural aspects of such research. The extent to which controllability attributions were examined within the literature and whether appropriate statistical and procedural methods was employed to control for confounded variance among attributional dimensions were of central interest. Literature published between January 1978 and June 1990 was examined. Of 134 studies examined, only 12% measured controllability attributions. In contrast, the majority of studies (over 50%) focused exclusively on attributional dimensions important to the reformulated model. Methodological/procedural and data-reporting concerns that were identified included inattention to statistical controls to prevent confounding of variance among dimensions and incomplete reporting of correlational matrices necessary for meta-analyses. Studies that examined controllability are reviewed, and implications of the findings are discussed.

The attribution construct has generated a large body of basic and applied research over the past 25 years. The relation between attributions and a number of criterion variables such as depression, general affect, mood, and task performance has been examined within the research literature. Much of the research examining attributions has been undertaken as a test of the reformulated model of learned helplessness theory (Abramson, Seligman, & Teasdale, 1978). As a result, attributional dimensions important to the

reformulated model have received considerable attention, whereas little attention has been paid to competing dimensions or models.

Specifically, the reformulated model specifies that the dimensions of primary importance are stability, internality (or locus), and globality. Within the reformulated model's framework described by Abramson et al. (1978), helplessness depression results when an individual believes that desired outcomes are improbable or that aversive outcomes are probable, and when the individual expects that no response that he or she makes will change their likelihood. The model further specifies that the generality of depressive deficits depends upon the globality of the attribution for helplessness, the chronicity of such deficits depends on the stability of attributions for helplessness, and lowered self-esteem depends on the internality of the attributions for helplessness. A dimension conspicuously missing from the reformulated model is *controllability*. Controllability as an attributional dimension has been defined as the extent to which an individual expects to be able to control a particular cause in the future (Anderson & Arnoult, 1985). The exclusion of controllability (and other concerns) was noted in another article that appeared in the same journal issue as the original article outlining the reformulated model (Wortman & Dintzer, 1978).

One domain in which controllability (along with locus and stability) attributions have been seen as important is that of achievement motivation (Weiner, 1979; Weiner et al., 1972). A model proposed by Weiner and associates maintained that general emotions (as reactions to success and failure in achievement situations) induce a search for the cause of an outcome along the three dimensions of controllability, locus, and stability. In this model, controllability is seen as especially important in making decisions to evaluate another person or in reacting to another person. For a more in-depth review, see Weiner (1985, 1986).

Another conceptual model in which controllability attributions are of primary importance is *attributional functionalism* (Anderson & Deuser, 1993). A primary assumption of this approach is that the particular processes and contents of attributions exist because of the functions they play. Such a functional approach to attributions has been adopted by other attribution scholars, sometimes explicitly, sometimes implicitly (Heider, 1958; Jones & Davis, 1965; Kelley, 1967). The common thread in this approach is the belief that people engage in attributional activity for the same general functional reason—to increase their control of the environment. Without knowing what has caused one's past outcomes, one cannot reasonably hope to control the future. The attributional functionalism approach suggests that the single most important dimension of concern is controllability, for it most directly guides our future actions. Locus is also viewed as an important dimension, both because of its link to action in the target behavior domain and its link to the anticipated actions of others.

Other attributional dimensions (e.g., stability, globality, intentionality) may occasionally play some functional role, but these dimensions are seen as secondary in most situations.

The *controllability attributional model* (CAM) has been proposed as a theoretical extension of attributional functionalism (Anderson & Riger, 1991). CAM specifies that motivational, cognitive, and affective responses to events are influenced by the causal interpretations people give to them. The key feature of CAM is that controllability (by the person) is recognized as the most important attributional style dimension. The rationale is that knowing the controllability of a cause provides more information than other attribution dimensions. It tells people whether they can change the outcomes in the future, and thus provides much of the information that stability provides. At the same time it provides information about locus. Because CAM is conceptualized as a style measure (i.e., at least somewhat consistent across situations), it also subsumes the globality dimension. Other dimensions are not entirely ruled out by CAM, but they are seen as secondary. Simply stated, CAM allows for the testing of specific underlying assumptions related to the attributional functionalism approach.

Inattention to the controllability dimension by the reformulated model is important for three reasons. First, writings from the learned helplessness literature state and imply that future perceptions of controllability are crucial in determining whether learned helplessness or depression will result after an experience of a perceived noncontingency. Measurement of future-oriented controllability is therefore important to determine whether a person considers a currently uncontrollable cause to be controllable in the future. Second, perceptions of controllability may enhance the explanatory power of the attribution construct by accounting for variability not already captured by the dimensions of locus and stability (cf. Peterson, 1991). Additionally, empirical evidence suggests that controllability may be of primary importance as an attributional dimension. This evidence will be reviewed in another section of this article. Third, because alternate conceptual approaches and theoretical models that posit controllability as an important attribution dimension exist, attributional style research needs to employ methodologies that test differing perspectives within the attribution research domain. Failure to test hypotheses related to different models may inadvertently lead the scientific process astray, thus creating delays in further understanding of exactly which attribution dimensions are crucial and which dimensions are less important.

Although the omission of controllability as an attributional dimension may be considered a serious drawback, it is not the only such drawback of much of the research literature. Perhaps just as serious is the measurement and treatment of the various attributional dimensions within various research contexts. A number of authors have pointed out that attributional dimensions are not empirically orthogonal (e.g., Anderson, 1983; Anderson

& Arnoult, 1985; Anderson & Deuser, 1991; Carver & Scheier, 1991; Evans, 1991; Weiner, 1986). Consequently, when one is testing a theory that a particular dimension produces some specific effect, one must control the confounding effects of other correlated dimensions statistically (e.g., by partialing them out first) or methodologically (e.g., by manipulating attributions so that different experimental conditions differ only along one dimension). Evans (1991, p. 7) summarized the correlational issue succinctly by stating that such a test should involve only the variance "over and above the variance explained by the main effects of the independent and moderator variables." Simple zero-order correlations do not provide informative tests of relations between various attributional dimensions and criterion variables. The issue of confounded variance among attributional dimensions once again brings up the importance of measuring the dimension of controllability. If controllability is not assessed, its unique and confounded variance cannot be partialled out. In studies where controllability is not measured, another dimension (e.g., globality) may be predictive of problems such as depression simply because it is highly correlated with controllability.

Finally, the confounded variance issue also arises in studies that have employed a composite attributional score—that is, when the individual dimensions are combined in some way (usually additively). Caution is warranted in interpreting such studies with respect to testing a specific theory because the reformulated model implies that individual dimensions should combine multiplicatively as interactions. The problem with composites becomes even more complicated when one considers the possibility that two people could have the same composite score with vastly different patterns. Therefore, as several authors have pointed out, a composite score does not accurately reflect the model being tested (Anderson & Arnoult, 1985; Anderson & Deuser, 1991; Carver, 1989; Carver & Scheier, 1991; Cohen, 1978; Cohen & Cohen, 1975; Evans, 1991).

The purpose of the present review is to examine the published empirical literature relating attributions to the reformulated model, with special attention to the methodological and procedural aspects of such research. Specifically, it focuses on the extent to which controllability is empirically examined within the literature and/or statistically correct procedures and methods are employed in the various studies. This review is different from others (e.g., Sweeney, Anderson, & Bailey, 1986) in that effect size and outcome are not the focus and the type of criterion variables examined is not a factor for inclusion or exclusion. Indeed, the methodological concerns of interest in this review need to be addressed before additional outcome reviews are generated, primarily because such methodological and statistical concerns have serious implications for the reliability and validity of the research on this construct. It should be noted that the original intent of this

review was to gather data available from the published literature in order to conduct a meta-analysis. Unfortunately, a meta-analysis could not be conducted due to incomplete reporting of intercorrelations between attributional dimensions and criterion variables. Because the reformulated model first appeared in 1978, the literature beginning with that year was the focus for this review. Because this particular research area continually generates a large volume of research, a cutoff date of June 1990 was chosen so that the already large number of studies could be reasonably managed.

## METHOD

The literature search was conducted using the Psyc-LIT CD-ROM computerized search system. The following four indexed search terms were used: *attributional style*, *explanatory style*, *learned helplessness*, and *attribution*. Possible combinations of these were searched as well to prevent accidental exclusion of articles. The indexed fields that were searched included the title, keyword descriptors, and the entire abstracts of all indexed studies. This was done to make the search overly broad at its beginning. The search strategy was limited to studies using human subjects and to English language publications (for practical purposes). Searching the years 1978 to 1982 resulted in 63 "hits," and the years 1983 through June 1990 resulted in 213 "hits," for a total of 273 articles.

For an article to be included in the review, a specific criterion had to be met. Attributions had to have been either manipulated or measured along with some criterion variable or variables. *Attribution manipulations* here often referred to pre-exposure of participants to uncontrollable outcomes. However, some studies attempted to manipulate specific attributions experimentally, and these studies were also included. Note that, using this criterion, a study need not have been focused exclusively on learned helplessness. Because the reformulated model of learned helplessness was an attribution model, and because many attribution studies discuss and interpret their findings relative to the reformulated model, we included all studies that might speak to the issue at hand, deeming it a more conservative approach to the review. Thus, only empirical articles relating attributions to some reformulated model framework were targeted for review. If this criterion was met, the article was examined, and the following questions/information categories were addressed:

1. Were attributions manipulated (via pre-exposure to uncontrollable outcomes or some other experimental manipulation)?
2. If so, how were attributions manipulated?
3. Were attributions measured?

4. If so, which attribution dimensions were measured?
5. What were the criterion variables?
6. Were statistical or methodological controls used to avoid confounding of variance among dimensions?
7. Was a complete correlation matrix available from the article?
8. How many subjects were included in the study?

Answers to these questions were obtained by examination of each article. Obviously, not all of these categories were relevant for all of the articles reviewed. A total of 123 citations met the criteria just described (a complete listing of the reviewed articles is in the Appendix). These 123 citations actually included 134 studies that were reviewed because some articles reported multiple studies relevant to this review.

## RESULTS

### Breakdown of Studies and Attributions Tested

Fifty-one (38%) of the 134 studies manipulated attributions of the study participants in some way. The remaining 81 studies were correlational designs that measured attributions along with (or prior to) the criterion variable of interest. Of the 51 experimental design studies, only 9 (18%) measured controllability attributions or perceptions of control. Out of the 81 correlational studies, only 7 (9%) examined controllability attributions or perceived control (see Table 1). This means that, overall, only 11.4% (16 out of 132) of all the studies listed in the Appendix included a measure that examined controllability attributions or perceptions in some way. Several studies contributing to this 12% figure measured perceived control only, and some attempted to do so by using only one item.

In contrast to the scarcity of measurement of controllability attributions, the stability, internality, and globality dimensions that are of primary importance to the reformulated model were measured exclusively in 68 (over 50%) of the 134 studies. The remaining studies measured stability,

TABLE 1  
Synopsis of Reviewed Studies

Type of Study	% Examined Controllability
Correlational <sup>a</sup>	10
"Lab" experiments <sup>b</sup>	14
Total <sup>c</sup>	11.4

<sup>a</sup>n = 81. <sup>b</sup>n = 51. <sup>c</sup>n = 132.

internality, and globality in combination with other dimensions. Thus, studies that spoke exclusively to the reformulated model outnumbered those studies that measured controllability attributions by approximately 5:1. It is worth making the point here that, although many studies were inattentive to the dimension of controllability, such studies were often quite valuable in other ways, such as demonstrating the important role that attributions may play with respect to a number of important psychological and health-related phenomena.

A large number of studies (24%) measured types of attributions, such as effort, ability, and strategy. These studies typically did not measure individual attributional dimensions and therefore provided no information regarding the unique contributions of variance from the individual dimensions in predicting or explaining outcome on the criterion variables of interest. Although many of these studies have also made important contributions to the attribution literature, they do not address specific dimensional concerns resulting from differing theoretical models.

### Methodological/Statistical Controls

Relatively few studies employed methodological or statistical controls to prevent the confounding of variance among the various attribution dimensions or composites of interest. Twelve studies did employ some sort of methodological or statistical control to avoid confounding of variance among dimensions. One example of an experimental study that employed methodological controls (including manipulation checks) was Mikulincer's (1986). Examples of correlational studies that employed statistical controls included studies by Anderson and Arnoult (1985) and Brown and Siegel (1988). Such studies used regression analyses to examine unique predictive variance of competing attributions (including controllability). These and other studies will be reviewed in more detail in the following section.

It should be noted that most studies employed no controls like these. However, the focus of many of these studies was not to test a specific theoretical model but instead to demonstrate that various attributions may be of importance with respect to some criterion variable. Such studies of a general nature are important in establishing that attributions play important roles across a wide range of psychological phenomena and do not necessarily need to employ the same type of controls that studies testing particular theoretical models need to employ.

### Results From Studies That Have Examined Controllability Attributions

All of the studies reviewed in this section have examined controllability in some way—some by assessing controllability attributions, others by mea-

asuring perceived control or control expectancies. It is not our intention to imply that perceptions of control or control expectancies are the same as controllability attributions. However, the constructs are closely related to one another. For example, perceiving that one is controlling a situation is likely to lead to an attribution to a controllable cause. Similarly, attributing an event to a controllable cause is likely to lead to an expectation of control. Of course, there is not a one-to-one correspondence among these constructs. For instance, it is quite possible that one might not feel able to control a particular cause in the present but might nevertheless expect control over the cause in a similar situation in the future (quite likely due to having learned from the experience). The point is that all of these constructs, although distinct, are not orthogonal and are related to the controllability attribution dimension. Because so few studies actually assessed controllability attributional style, we decided that a broader look at controllability would be worthwhile.

The studies highlighted here were chosen because they represent solid research efforts to examine the importance of controllability relative to other attribution dimensions. Other studies listed in Tables 2 and 3 are important in their own right but were less effective for a variety of reasons in addressing the question of the relative importance of controllability. In many cases, attribution composites, rather than specific attribution dimensions, were measured. In other cases, appropriate statistical or methodological controls were lacking. Once again, it is important to remember that these drawbacks do not invalidate or detract from the study if the primary purpose of the study was to demonstrate that various attributions might be of importance with respect to some criterion variable. It simply means that, from a theory-testing perspective, they are unable to address the importance of controllability relative to other competing attribution dimensions.

*Forsyth and McMillan (1981).* In a study of attributions in the classroom, student reactions ( $N = 233$ ) to test results were examined. After receiving their grades on a test, students completed measures of affect and future success expectancies. Students also rated attributions for their performance on three dimensions: controllability, locus, and stability. Not surprisingly, performance (success or failure) on the exam strongly influenced affect and future expectations. This study found that both controllability and locus were important in both affect and future expectations. Students who believed that a potentially controllable factor caused their outcome exhibited more positive affective responses than students who believed uncontrollable causes were operating. With respect to locus, students felt more fulfilled and composed when they attributed their outcome to internal factors. In terms of expectations, students who failed expressed more negative expectations when failure was attributed to

TABLE 2  
Experimental (Lab) Studies That Examined Controllability or Perceptions of Control

Citation	Manipulation	Attributions Measured	Criterion Variables	Controls Used?
Alloy & Abramson (1979) <sup>a</sup>	button-pressing task	judgment of control	depression and affect	No
Barber & Winefield (1987) <sup>b</sup>	feedback on anagram task manipulated	situation, locus, stability, and controllability	affect following task	No
Friedlander & Chartier (1981) <sup>c</sup>	helplessness induced by noise escape task	perceptions of ability, control, frustration, and "motivation"	shuttlebox escape avoidance performance	No
Perry & Dickens (1984) <sup>d</sup>	task feedback	perceived control over performance, ability, effort, luck, etc.	attributions of subjects	No
Tennen & Gillen (1979) <sup>e</sup>	controllable/uncontrollable noise burst task	task difficulty, skill, luck, expectancy of control	performance on a test anagram	No
Tennen, Gillen, & Drum (1982) <sup>be</sup> (2 studies reported)	noise escape task	luck, skill, task difficulty, experimenter control/stability, intentionality, globality, perceived control	performance on anagram	No.
Tennen, Drum, Gillen, & Stanton (1982) <sup>fs</sup> (2 studies reported)	noise burst task	perceived control, task difficulty, luck, skill, other control/stability, intentionality, globality, perceived control	performance on test anagram/depression	No

<sup>a</sup> $n = 90$ . <sup>b</sup> $n = 40$ . <sup>c</sup> $n = 60$ . <sup>d</sup> $n = 296$ . <sup>e</sup> $n = 55$ . <sup>f</sup> $n = 48/100$ . <sup>g</sup>Two studies reported.

TABLE 3  
 Correlational Studies That Examined Controllability Attributions or Perceptions of Control

Citation	Attributions Measured	Criterion Variables	Controls Used?
Anderson & Arnoult (1985) <sup>a</sup>	controllability, locus, stability, globality, intentionality	depression, loneliness, shyness	Yes
Brown & Siegel (1988) <sup>b</sup>	stability, intentionality, globality, control	depression	Yes
Forsyth & McMillan (1981) <sup>c</sup>	controllability, stability, locus	affect and future expectations regarding grades	Yes
Furnham, Hillard, & Brewin (1985) <sup>d</sup>	controllability only	Type A behavior and responsibility attributions	No
Hammen & DeMayo (1982) <sup>e</sup>	stability, intentionality, changeability, expectancy of control	teacher stress, CES-D scores	No
Harvey (1981) <sup>f</sup>	situation, effort, chance, ability, control over cause	depression	No
Whiffen (1988) <sup>g</sup>	stability, intentionality, globality, controllability (1 item each)	postpartum depression	No

<sup>a</sup>n = 207. <sup>b</sup>n = 176. <sup>c</sup>n = 233. <sup>d</sup>n = 168. <sup>e</sup>n = 75. <sup>f</sup>n = 91. <sup>g</sup>n = 124.

external and uncontrollable factors. Students who succeeded expressed more positive expectations when they attributed success to internal and controllable factors. Stability contributed relatively little to either type of attributional dependent variable.

*Hammen and DeMayo (1982).* This was a study on teacher stress and depression among urban high school teachers ( $N = 75$ ) in which attributions were assessed along a stability and a locus dimension. In addition, subjects rated their perceived control over stressful job factors. This rating was not controllability of a particular cause but was probably closely related. Interestingly, results of this study demonstrated that perceived control correlated significantly with depression ( $p < .01$ ), but that neither locus nor stability did.

*Anderson and Arnoult (1985).* In this study, subjects ( $N = 207$ ) completed standard measures of depression, loneliness, and shyness. In addition, they completed a version of the Attributional Style Assessment Test. This version measured attributional style for five dimensions (controllability, locus, stability, globality, and intentionality) for each of four types of situations (interpersonal success, noninterpersonal success, interpersonal failure, and noninterpersonal failure). Initial analyses tested each dimension, by itself, as a predictor of the three problems in living. Canonical correlation analyses were conducted, with the four measures of a given attributional style dimension as predictors (e.g., interpersonal success controllability, noninterpersonal success controllability) and with the three problems (depression, loneliness, shyness) as criteria. These analyses revealed that intentionality attributions were not significantly related to the problems, whereas each of the other three attribution dimensions was ( $ps < .01$ ). Thus, intentionality was dropped at this preliminary stage. Regression analyses were then conducted to test the unique predictive power of each of the remaining four attributional dimensions after partialing out all variance shared with the other dimensions. This was done separately for each of the three problems for each of the four types of situations, resulting in 12 tests of unique contributions for each attributional dimension. Results were clear: Controllability was the most consistently important dimension; it yielded significant predictive increments in seven of twelve possible cases. Locus was significant in three cases, stability in one, globality in none. In other words, controllability was the primary dimension in predicting attributional effects.

*Mikulincer (1986).* In this article on attributional processes in the learned helplessness paradigm, three experiments were reported in which globality was manipulated and future control expectancies were assessed.

Regression analyses conducted by Mikulincer indicated that (a) subjects' expectancies for control predicted their performance in a dissimilar test situation and (b) control expectancies accounted for performance effects of the manipulation of globality attribution. Thus, in all three studies, control expectancies mediated performance on the generalization task, whereas ratings of globality did not. Mikulincer concluded that the results were in line with Anderson and Arnoult's (1985) views regarding the importance of controllability attributions.

*Brown and Siegel (1988).* This study examined attributions, negative life events, and depression with 176 female adolescents, utilizing a prospective design to examine the causal relation among attributions and depression. Subjects completed a life stress survey and were instructed to pick the most upsetting event and rate that event on dimensions of perceived controllability (at the time), locus, stability, and globality. A depression measure was administered twice: once with other scales at Time 1 and again one semester later. Subjects were classified as either reporting no control over the event ( $n = 78$ ) or reporting at least some control ( $n = 98$ ). Subjects in the controllable group exhibited lower mean depression scores at both times than subjects in the uncontrollable group. A series of hierarchical regression analyses indicated that controllability  $\times$  locus and controllability  $\times$  globality interaction terms improved the prediction of depression beyond that of initial depression status. For the uncontrollable events, internal, stable, and global attributions were associated with increases in depression. In contrast, for controllable events, internal and global attributions were associated with decreases in depression. These findings further demonstrated the importance in considering judgments of control when relating life events to depression.

## DISCUSSION

One function of theory is to direct attention toward particularly promising constructs and relationships. Without good theories to guide us, our attempts to develop a scientific understanding of the world would quickly become entangled in confusing and tangential issues. On the other hand, because theories tell us where to look, they also tell us where to avoid looking. Frequently, this results in unnecessary delays in further advances in understanding (cf., Greenwald, Pratkanis, Leippe, & Baumgardner, 1986). The reformulated model of learned helplessness has been extremely popular and valuable. Our theory overlaps with the reformulated model (and the more recent hopelessness theory) to an amazing degree. We've all heard about the overlap in genetic structure between chimpanzees and

humans (this overlap is on the order of roughly 98%). Obviously, the 2% difference can be quite important. We feel that the relative lack of attention given to controllability has slowed the evolution of theory in this domain. As a result, the importance of controllability has been slow to emerge, even though studies have provided strong support for the importance of the controllability dimension.

Because attributional dimensions are, typically, highly correlated, studies that do not partial out confounded variance among dimensions may be misleading from a theoretical perspective. Once again, because controllability is correlated with other attributional dimensions, inattention to controllability attributions leads to the inability to determine unique contributions of individual attributional dimensions through the appropriate partial correlations or regression analyses. In order to assess unique contributions of individual dimensions, all of the relevant attributional dimensions need to be measured. Composite dimensions, by their nature, do not allow testing of unique contributions of individual dimensions and therefore should not be employed when specific theory testing is the goal of the research. Unfortunately, as this review indicates, the vast majority of studies have neglected the dimension of controllability. We strongly recommend and encourage the measurement of controllability attributions so that future research can continue to test the theoretical importance of that dimension.

Additionally, given the methodological and conceptual problems inherent in reporting of simple zero-order correlations, it is highly advisable to control for confounding among attributional dimensions through procedural means (e.g., by manipulating attributions so that different experimental conditions differ only along one dimension) or statistical means (e.g., by partialing out confounded variance) to prevent the misattribution of variance of one dimension to another. In studies that manipulate attributions, methodological controls are important. Careful pilot testing and manipulation checks can provide assurance that the attributional dimension one is trying to manipulate is in fact the one that is being manipulated.

One final point worth making concerns the description and reporting of results from the studies reviewed here. In a large number of cases, the methods and/or results sections were too brief. Although journal pages are at a premium, failure to completely describe methods and data analyses employed in the study makes it difficult to examine the data in more detail. For example, reporting only some of the correlations among dimensions and criterion variables instead of a complete correlation matrix makes it impossible to conduct meta-analyses that employ regression techniques to partial out confounded variance among dimensions. We admit to inadvertently contributing to this problem in our own research. Reporting a complete matrix is not likely to take a great deal more of space in the report,

and the added information contained in a complete matrix is worth the additional space.

Several methodological problems exist within the attributional literature. Overall, the research conducted has been valuable in demonstrating the importance of attributional dimensions with respect to a number of criterion variables, including various psychological problems. The methodological problems described here are solvable and can be easily corrected by taking the several steps mentioned. We hope that both researchers and journal editors will take steps to improve the methodological, and thus the theoretical, quality of work in this area.

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## APPENDIX

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