

# A | ATTRIBUTION STYLES

## INTRODUCTION

Shortly after research on attribution theory blossomed, measures were developed to assess attributional style – the presence of cross-situational consistency in the types of attributions people make. Two approaches to measuring attributional style are reviewed here. The first involves global measures that assume attributional style broadly applies across a variety of situations (see Table 1 for a list of the most widely used measures of attributional style). These measures were developed to test predictions from the reformulated theory of learned helplessness depression (Abramson, Seligman, & Teasdale, 1978). The second approach involves more specific measures of attributional style. This approach emerged, in part, from critiques of the cross-situational consistency of the global measures. These measures assess attributional style in more limited contexts such as work, school, and relationships.

## GLOBAL MEASURES OF ATTRIBUTIONAL STYLE

### Dimensional Measures

Dimensional measures of attributional style require respondents to generate causes for hypothetical events and then to rate them along

several attributional dimensions. The Attributional Style Questionnaire (ASQ; Peterson, Semmel, Von Baeyer, Abramson, Metalsky, & Seligman, 1982) is the most widely known. It contains 12 hypothetical events, half describing positive events ('you meet a friend who compliments you on your appearance') and half describing negative events ('you go out on a date and it goes badly'). Events are further divided into an equal number of interpersonal and achievement contexts. The perceived cause of each event is rated along the dimensions of locus (due to the person or the situation), stability (likely or unlikely to occur again), and globality (limited in its influence or widespread) using seven-point scales. Scores can be computed for each dimension within positive and negative events. Factor analyses of the ASQ have supported the presence of distinct attributional styles for negative and positive events (Xenikou, Furnham, & McCarrey, 1997) although results presented by Cutrona, Russell, & Jones, 1985, indicate that each event on the ASQ represents its own factor. However, findings suggest that attributions for negative events are most strongly related to depression (Sweeney, Anderson, & Bailey, 1986). Scores can be further analysed within interpersonal and achievement contexts, a distinction that appears to be more relevant to positive than negative events.

The ASQ has proven to be a valid predictor of depression. People who make internal, stable, and

Table 1. Widely used measures of attributional style

#### Global measures

- Attributional Style Questionnaire (ASQ; Peterson et al., 1982)
- Attributional Style Assessment Test (ASAT; Anderson & Riger, 1991).
- Children's Attributional Style Questionnaire (CASQ; Seligman et al., 1984)
- Content Analysis of Verbatim Explanations (CAVE; Peterson, 1992)

#### Intermediate measures

- Academic Attributional Style Questionnaire (AASQ; Peterson & Barrett, 1987)
- Organizational Attributional Style Questionnaire (OASQ; Kent & Martinko, 1995)
- Relationship Attribution Measure (RAM; Bradbury & Fincham, 1990)

global attributions for negative events tend to be more depressed. However, there are at least four problems with the ASQ. First, internal consistency for the ASQ ranges from adequate to low, especially for the locus dimension. A frequent solution is to combine the three dimensions into a single index to increase reliability, as the dimensions tend to correlate highly with one another. However, this creates a second problem one of interpretation. There are unique predictions for each attributional style dimension; using a composite score prevents valid tests of the model (Carver, 1989). Reivich (1995) advises researchers to analyse ASQ data in terms of both individual dimensions and composite scores. The third problem is also related; the ASQ does not assess the key attributional dimension of controllability. The few studies that included controllability consistently find that it is the most important attributional style dimension, whereas globality is the least important (e.g. Deuser & Anderson, 1995). The fourth problem concerns the affiliation versus achievement distinction; several of the 'achievement' items involve affiliative contexts. The *Expanded Attributional Style Questionnaire* (EASQ; Peterson & Villanova, 1988) uses an identical format to the ASQ and addresses the problem of low reliability by increasing the number of situations included in the measure. However, reliabilities remain modest and the other problems remain unresolved.

The third and fourth versions of the Attributional Style Assessment Test (ASAT-III and ASAT-IV) provide another dimensional assessment of attributional style (Anderson & Riger, 1991). These measures use a format similar to the ASQ but they incorporate a larger number of items (20 for the ASAT-III and 36 for the ASAT-IV), include the controllability dimension, and use success and failure items that mirror each other (e.g. 'succeeded' vs. 'failed' at coordinating an outing for a group of people...). The interpersonal versus noninterpersonal subsets of items are more clearly differentiated than the affiliation versus achievement items of the ASQ. Internal reliabilities at the subscale level tend to be weak to modest, in the 0.5–0.6 range; collapsing across situation types (e.g. ignoring the interpersonal vs. non-interpersonal distinction) yields somewhat larger alphas. These scales have successfully predicted

depression, loneliness, and shyness as well as depressive-like motivational deficits in laboratory settings. Furthermore, this body of work has demonstrated the importance of assessing attributional styles separately for interpersonal and noninterpersonal situations. Finally, this work has shown substantial correlations between attributional styles for successful events and depression (and loneliness and shyness).

Several other dimensional measures of attributional style use the same basic approach as the ASQ and ASAT. The *Balanced Attributional Style Questionnaire* (BASQ; Feather & Tiggemann, 1984) uses a format similar to the ASQ but, like the ASAT, the positive and negative items mirror one another. The scales have moderate reliabilities and correlate with depression, self-esteem, and protestant work ethic. The *Real Events Attributional Style Questionnaire* (REASQ; Norman & Antaki, 1988) requires that respondents generate the positive and negative events for which they then make attributions. This may yield a better prediction of depression, but the loss of item standardization creates other problems.

### Forced-Choice Measures

Forced-choice measures have respondents select a cause from a list of potential explanations. One benefit is that this method may more accurately mirror how people typically select a cause (i.e. without thinking about dimensions). Also, the types of causes in the list can be restricted to only those attributions of theoretical interest. Forced-choice measures also require less time to complete.

The ASAT-I and ASAT-II use this forced choice format. Respondents are provided with a number of hypothetical situations (20 for the ASAT-I and 36 for the ASAT-II). On the ASAT-I, the listed types of causes are strategy, ability, effort, personality traits, mood, and circumstances. ASAT-II includes only strategy, effort, and ability causes. The number of times a particular cause is selected is summed to create a measure of attributional style for that dimension. Kuder–Richardson (K-R 20) reliabilities for the subscales tend to be in the low to moderate range. Correlations with loneliness and depression have established the validity of these

scales in both U.S. and Mainland China college student populations (Anderson, 1999).<sup>1</sup>

### Measures For Children

The *Children's Attributional Style Questionnaire* (CASQ; Seligman et al., 1984) was developed to allow researchers to study attributional style in children ages 8–13. The CASQ includes 48 items divided equally between positive (“You get an ‘A’ on a test”) and negative events (“You break a glass”). The scale uses both a forced choice and a dimensional approach. Respondents select between two possible causes for the event, and each option represents the presence or absence of one attribution dimension (for example, an internal or external cause). Attributions for each dimension are computed by summing the number of internal, stable, or global responses. Scores similar to the ASQ can then be computed. Internal consistency of the CASQ is low to adequate and improves when the separate dimensions are combined into a single composite.

### Content Analysis Measure

The *Content Analysis of Verbatim Explanations* (CAVE; Peterson, 1992) technique assesses attributional style through a content analysis of an individual's writing. This allows analysis of ecologically valid events without requiring the participant to complete a questionnaire. The CAVE can also be applied to historical data, and it has established the stability of attributional style over a 52-year period (Burns & Seligman, 1989). Coders first extract causal explanations from a text, then rate them along the dimensions of locus, stability, and globality. Inter-rater reliability for the CAVE technique is satisfactory, and internal consistency has been reported as low to adequate. More standard questionnaire measures of attributional style may be better predictors of depression, but the CAVE technique has proven useful when written content is all that is available.

## INTERMEDIATE MEASURES OF ATTRIBUTIONAL STYLE

Global measures of attributional style assume a high degree of cross-situational consistency in the

types of attributions people make. However, several studies have questioned this assumption. Cutrona et al. (1985) found that the ASQ was a poor predictor of attributions for actual events, suggesting that situational factors may play a more important role in predicting attributions. Factor analyses by Cutrona et al. (1985) suggest that there is little cross-situational consistency in global measures of attributional style. Intermediate measures of attributional style address this problem by limiting the situations about which an explanatory style is being assessed. Increased specificity should increase the ability of such measures to predict actual attributions. The ASAT's emphasis on four situation types (success/failure by interpersonal/noninterpersonal) is one approach to increasing specificity. Other research on this issue has been mixed, however (Henry & Campbell, 1995), suggesting that further work is needed to establish the appropriate level of specificity in attributional style measures.

### Academic Settings

Two measures have been used to assess attributional style in academic settings. The *Academic Attributional Style Questionnaire* (AASQ; Peterson & Barrett, 1987) uses the same format as the ASQ and contains descriptions of 12 negative events that occur in academic settings. The measure has demonstrated high internal consistency, and findings suggest that students who make internal, stable, and global attributions for negative events tend to do more poorly in classes. Henry and Campbell (1995) also developed a measure of attributional style for academic events. Their measure contains 20 items, equally divided between positive and negative events. The measure displayed adequate to good reliability and also predicted academic performance.

### Work Settings

The *Organizational Attributional Style Questionnaire* (OASQ; Kent & Martinko, 1995) was developed to assess attributional style for negative events in a work setting. The format is similar to that of the ASQ, and the measure contains descriptions of 16 negative events that can occur in a work setting. After writing down an explanation for the event, respondents rate the

explanation along the dimensions of internal locus, external locus, stability, controllability, globality, and intentionality. The internal consistency for the scale is moderate to good.

## Relationships

Several different types of intermediate attributional style measures have been developed for measuring attributions in the context of relationships. The *Relationship Attribution Measure* (RAM; Bradbury & Fincham, 1990) assesses the types of attributions people make for a spouse's negative behaviour. Respondents read a hypothetical negative action by their partner and rate the causes of that event along six dimensions: locus, stability, globality, and responsibility (intent, selfishness, and blame). Researchers can use either a four- or eight- item version. A composite of all attributional dimensions displays high internal consistency and predicts marital satisfaction. Partners who attribute negative partner behaviour to internal, stable, and global causes are more likely to be dissatisfied with the relationship. Fincham has also developed a version of the RAM for use with children to assess attributions for parent-child interactions. The *Children's Relationship Attribution Measure* (CRAM; Fincham, Beach, Arias, & Brody, 1998) uses a format similar to the RAM, and contains descriptions of two negative events.

## CONCLUSIONS

### Future Research

Measures of attributional style have generated several issues which require additional research. The first issue involves level of specificity. Many studies question the presence of a global attributional style, and it is not clear if intermediate measures provide a satisfying solution to this problem. Additional research is needed to resolve these issues. Furthermore, attributional style measures typically suffer from poor reliability. New measures need to be developed to address this shortcoming. Finally, more research is needed on the controllability dimension of attributional style and on the unique contributions of the various attributional dimensions.

## Using Attributional Style Measures

There are numerous ways of measuring attributional style, each with particular strengths and weaknesses. In deciding which scale to use, the researcher needs to carefully consider the specific goals of the research project, and then pick the tool that best meets the needs of that project. The modest reliabilities of these scales suggests that considerable attention be paid to sample size and power.

## Notes

- 1 The various ASAT scales, as well as Chinese versions of that ASAT-I, the Beck Depression Inventory, and the Revised UCLA loneliness scales, can be downloaded from the following web site: [psych-server.iastate.edu/faculty/caa/Scales/Scales.html](http://psych-server.iastate.edu/faculty/caa/Scales/Scales.html)

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### *Related Entries*

PERSONALITY (GENERAL), COGNITIVE STYLES, MOTIVATION, IRRATIONAL BELIEFS.