

Perceived High School Students' Attribution of Academic Success and Failure in East Gojjam Zone

By: Temesgen Adam Lemeneh

MA in Counseling Psychology Addis Ababa University 2020, Ethiopia

Lecturer, Debre Markos University, Ethiopia

Abstract

The aim of this study was to examine causal attribution of academic achievement among the nine selected high school students in East Gojjam Zone. A descriptive survey design was employed to describe the attribution of students for their academic success and failure. Total sample sizes of 452 were selected from the study population. The samples were selected using simple random sampling and proportional stratified sampling techniques. Multidimensional Multiattributional Causality Scale was adapted and used as an instrument. The results showed High school students of the study population were attributing their academic achievement to internal factors than external factors. Students with high achievers were attributing the causes of academic achievement to effort and ability while students with low achievers attributing to luck. Males and females differ in their attribution of academic achievement by ability. However, there is no significant difference between the two genders in their attribution of academic achievement with regard to effort, context and luck. Therefore, this suggests that there High school students should accept the fact that much of what happens to them is a result of what they do so that they focus on effort as the main driver of success in their academic endeavors rather than luck. And it is also recommended that high school directors and principals should always emphasis on effort as the basis of students' success in their academic activities, while improving the learning environment so as to minimize environmental constraints.

Key Words: Attribution, Internal factor, External factor, Success, Failure

Introduction

1.1 Background of the Study

Attributing causes to events that usually happen in the environment has been considered as a human tendency. People not only think about facts that occur in their lives, but also try to search for their causes in explaining them. In other words, people are usually in search of causal explanation. As suggested by Weiner (1985), the attribution theory links the process of thinking, feeling and action. Students generally consider ability, effort, task difficulty and luck as possible causes for their success and failure experiences in academic settings.

Weiner (1986) first proposed a model which further classified causes into three dimensions: locus, stability and controllability. Alderman (199) described these dimensions within a continuum. The locus dimension is described according to an internal-external continuum that includes factors within a person (ability, effort) or factors outside the person (luck, task difficulty). The stability dimension is described by Alderman (1999) within a stable-unstable continuum. A cause is considered stable if it is consistent over time and unstable if it is inconsistent in nature. Ability and task difficulty are stable cause whereas effort and luck are unstable cause in this regard. The third dimension, controllability, is also described within a continuum ranging from controllable to uncontrollable, and is the extent a person believes he/she has control over a performance outcome (Alderman, 1999). For example, effort is controllable while ability and task difficulty are uncontrollable factors.

The attribution theory assumes that people will attribute their success or failure to factors that will enable them to feel as good as possible about themselves. To avoid negative emotional reactions, people have a tendency to attribute success to their own efforts or abilities, but they tend to attribute failure to some external factors that they do not have control of (Augoustinos, 2005). Moreover, Hunter & Barker (1987) suggested that people mostly attribute success to their own effort or ability and failure is linked to luck or some other environmental factors.

Accordingly, learners tend to attribute their success at examinations to their efforts or abilities, but they will attribute failure to some environmental factors, such as bad teaching, bad luck or lack of teaching and learning facilities. This implies that people's perceptions for success or failure will determine the amount of effort the person is willing to expend on a particular activity. Impliedly, therefore, people who attribute a cause to external factors are less likely to put more effort on a task than those who attribute internally. Effort is the most important factor in which learners can exercise a great deal of control. Task difficulty is an external and a stable factor, which is clearly beyond the learner's control. Though ability is relatively an internal factor, the learner does not have much control over it because it is a stable factor that cannot easily be changed. Luck is an external and unstable factor and, as such, the learner does have a very little control over it (Weiner, 1986).

According to the attribution theory, students who achieve high in academic tasks tend to associate their success to internal factors such as ability, effort and having worked hard, while those who do not perform well tend to attribute their failure to external factors, such as bad luck, bad teaching and poor learning environment. Regarding this, Boruchovitch (2004) found that students who performed poorly attributed their failure to external factors, such as examination difficulty and bad luck, while those who performed well attributed their success to internal factors such as being calm and working hard.

Concerning the sex difference in attribution a study conducted by Eugene L. (1991) depicted that male and female students did not significantly differ in the ratings of the attributions for academic success and failure. They both believed that effort was the most important factor for academic success, followed by ability, type of task and luck. Eugene also confirmed that both male and female students attributed success to their great effort equally as they attributed their failure to lack of effort. They attributed success to good luck equally as they attributed their failure to bad luck. And similarly both sexes attributed success to their high ability more than they attributed their failure to their lack of ability.

Overall, in line with the aforementioned literature and experience of the researchers, current study aims to examine the causal attribution of students towards their academic success and failure in High School Students of East Gojjam Zone.

1.2 Statement of the Problem

The attribution inquiry is still strong enough to attract attention of the researchers as students still react when they see about their grades in a classroom test (Weiner, 2008).

Currently, our teaching experience tells us that attributing low achievements to external factors and high achievements to internal factors among university students (including our own university) is becoming a habitual way of expressing their academic scores. Suffice it to mention students' parlance that, as Tamir (1995) indicated well, students often say "I did well" when they achieve good grades and say "the teacher gave me or flunk me" when they did badly or fail.

In addition, most of the previous researches on students' attributions are done outside Ethiopia and those researches done in Ethiopia are conducted either on university students or outside this research's area. Given that our way of thinking and seeing things is culturally embedded and hence students' causal attribution is conditioned by the cultural setting, pursuing this research is important and necessary. Most of the researches indicate that sex does not affect causal attribution. This study will attempt to see if this holds true.

Therefore, the study was conducted to answer the following basic research questions:

1. What do students attribute to their academic achievement?
2. Is there a statistically significant variation in attribution of academic achievement between high and low performing students?
3. How does students' attribution of academic achievement vary across sex?

2. Research Methods

2.1. Research Design

The study was designed to examine causal attribution of academic success and failure among the nine selected high school students in East Gojjam Zone. In order to carry out this research, descriptive survey design was employed to describe the attribution of students for their academic success and failure.

2.2 Variable Specification

The purpose of the study was to analyze ability, effort, context and luck as they influence success and failure situations. The independent variables for this study were ability, effort, context and luck. The dependent variables were academic success and failure.

2.3. Population, Samples and Sampling Procedures

The target population of this study was high school students of East Gojjam Administrative Zone with a total of more than 10,000. There are eighteen Woredas in this particular zone. Out of these woredas, nine woredas were selected and one high school from each woreda was taken as a sample of the study via lottery method. From each high school, the researchers were selected proportional number of 9th and 10th grade students and male and female students using proportional stratified sampling method. Since the total populations were more than 10,000, the researchers were employed the formula which is developed by Naing, Winn and Rusli (2006) and found that 452 participants were selected in the study.

2.4. Instruments

When conducting this study Multidimensional Multiattributonal Causality Scale developed by Herbert M. Lefcourt (1981) was adapted and used. The scale consists of items concerning experiences of academic failure and experiences of academic success.

2.5 Method of Data Analysis

While analyzing the raw data, preliminary activities was carried out. First the data was assured and entered into the computer and this raw data was computed in the way that is used for the analysis purpose. After preparing the raw scores, different data analysis techniques were employed. Such as Mean was used to determine the level of causal attribution based on internally or externally oriented situations. Independent t-test was employed in order to compare the statically significant attribution difference between high and low achievers of high school students with their academic success and failure. And independent sample t-test was also used in order to analyze the statically significant differences between the two sexes in the way they attribute for academic success and failure.

3. Research Findings

The aim of this chapter is to present the key findings in the context of the original objectives of this research. Therefore, all the data gathered through questionnaires were presented and analyzed in accordance with the basic research questions.

Table 1 Biographical information of the participants

Variables		Frequency	Percent
Sex	Male	207	46.3
	Female	240	53.7
	Total	447	100
Grade	9	231	51.7
	10	216	48.3
	Total	447	100
Academic achievement	Low	241	53.9
	High	206	46.1
	Total	447	100

Table 1 demonstrates the biographical information of the respondents with regard to distribution of sex, grade and levels of academic achievement. A total of 447 students were identified and participated in this study. From these, 207(46.3%) were males and 240(53.7%) were females. With regard to grade level of the participants, 231(51.7) were grade 9 students and 216(48.3) were grade 10 students. And with respect to levels of academic achievement, 241(53.9%) of the respondents were low achievers and 206(46.1%) were high achievers.

Table 2

Mean academic achievement scores of students with attributional dimensions

Attributional Dimensions	Academic Achievement		
	N	M	SD
Internal	104	42.3173	7.08104
External	102	32.6863	7.96152

As Table 2 depicts, the difference between means is statistically significant in the attribution dimension. Thus, the majority of the respondents 42.32(±7.08SD) tend to attribute the cause of academic achievement to internal factors (ability & effort) while the remaining 32.69(±7.96SD) to external factors (context & luck).

Table 3

Mean academic achievement scores of students across the four attributional dimensions

Attribution dimension	Mean	Std. Deviation
Ability	21.7069	4.12979
Effort	24.3199	4.20848
Context	15.9642	5.22228
Luck	16.7785	5.07280

Table 3 shows there is statistically significant attribution mean difference among the four attributional dimensions. Thus, the majority of the respondents attributed the cause of academic achievement to effort(M=24.3199), ability (M=21.7069), luck (M=16.7785) and context (M=15.9642) respectively.

Table 4

Attributions for Academic Achievement by Gender

Variable	sex	N	Mean	SD	t	P
Ability	Male	59	21.5294	2.97319	2.546	0.012*
	Female	45	19.7111	4.24062		
Effort	Male	58	22.3621	4.20817	1.483	0.141
	Female	45	21.0444	4.79088		
Context	Male	54	16.6667	3.30237	-1.510	0.134
	Female	44	17.6363	2.9817		
Luck	Male	55	16.3091	4.913	-0.952	0.357
	Female	44	17.2955	5.692		

* P < 0.05

Table 3 reveals that the mean of males 21.53(+2.97SD) and females 19.71(+4.24SD) were attributed for by ability respectively. Therefore, there is a significant mean difference between males and females with regard to their attribution of academic achievement to ability ($t=0.012$, $P<0.05$). However, there is no statistically significant difference between the two genders in their attribution of academic achievement by effort ($t=1.48$, $P>0.05$), context ($t=-1.51$, $P>0.05$) and luck ($t=-0.95$, $P>0.05$).

4. Discussion

In this section major findings of the present study were discussed in line with the basic questions raised earlier.

4.1 Attributions for Academic Achievement as internal and external oriented situations

The results of the present study showed that the majority of students tend to attribute the causes of academic achievement toward internally oriented situation. Whatever the academic achievement is, success and failure students attribute this phenomenon to ability and effort. This result is confirmed with Eugene L. (1991) found out that effort and ability were the most important factor for academic achievement, followed by task and luck.

4.2 Attributions for Academic Achievement as success and failure at school

The present study indicated that on average, students with high achievers tend to attribute the causes of academic achievement to effort and ability while students with low achievers assign the causes of academic success and failure to luck. This finding is inconsistent with Morris (2013) depicted that the attributions students gave for academic events did not predict performance.

4.3 Attributions for Academic Achievement by Gender

According to the present study, males and females differ significantly on dimension of ability as the t-value 0.012 was found to be significant. The observation of mean scores revealed that males and females had different attribution to ability (21.53, 19.71 respectively). Male students beliefs in their ability more than females did. This result is contrary to a study by Eugene (1991) found out that on average both male students and female students tend to attribute academic success to their high ability more than they attributed failure to their lack of ability.

However, comparison of t-value of males and females (Table 3) on effort, context and luck were found to be non-significant. The males and females were having almost similar attribution toward academic achievement. This finding is consistent with Eugene (1991) found out that both male students and female students tend to assign the causes of academic achievement to effort, context and luck in similar way. When they are successful in their academic achievement, they attributed to their great effort and good luck while when they are failing to be successful, they assigned to lack of effort and bad luck.

5. Conclusion and Recommendations

5.1 Conclusion

Based on the summary of the findings, the researchers draw the following conclusions

- High school students of the study population are attributing their academic achievement to internal factors than external factors.
- Students with high achievers are attributing the causes of academic achievement to effort and ability while students with low achievers attributing to luck. That is when high achieving students do better in their academic achievement, they attributed to great effort and ability and when they perform poorly in their academic achievement, they attributed to lack of effort and their inability. However, students with low achievement attributed their academic success to good luck and their failure to bad luck.
- Males and females differ in their attribution of academic achievement by ability. However, there is no significant difference between the two genders in their attribution of academic achievement with regard to effort, context and luck.

5.2 Recommendations

Based on the conclusions made above, the researcher forwards the following possible suggestions.

- High school students should accept the fact that much of what happens to them is a result of what they do so that they focus on effort as the main driver of success in their academic endeavors rather than luck.

- High school teachers should adjust the way they interact with and respond to students' academic success and failure by appreciating the fact that every student can learn to achieve and therefore every student can be successful.
- It is also recommended that high school directors and principals should always emphasize on effort as the basis of students' success in their academic activities, while improving the learning environment so as to minimize environmental constraints

Reference

1. Asonibare, J.B. (1982). Traditional beliefs and the attribution of success and failure among the Nigerian High School Students. Unpublished Doctoral Dissertation. University of Pittsburgh.
2. Boruchovitch, E. (2004). A study of causal attributions for success and failure in mathematics among Brazilian students. *International Journal of Psychology*, 38(1), 53-60.
3. Forsyth, D, R., Story, P, A., Kelley, K, N., &McMillan, J, H. (2009). What causes failures and success? Students' perceptions of their academic outcomes. *Social Psychology Education*, 12: 157-174. doi: 10.1007/s11218-008-9078-7.
4. Hunter, M., & Barker, G. (1987). "If at first...":Attribution theory in the classroom. *Educational Leadership*, 45(2), 50-53.
5. Weiner, B. (1985). An attributional theory of achievement motivation and emotion. *Psychological Review*, 92(4), 548-573. <http://dx.doi.org/10.1037/0033-295X.92.4.548>
6. Weiner, B. (2008). Reflections on the history of attribution theory and research- people, personalities, publications, problems. *Social Psychology*, 39 (3), 151-156. doi: 10.1027/1864-9335.39.3.151.

IJSER