

Testing the Validity of Reformulated Learned Helplessness Theory : Do the Theoretical Classifications of Causes for Failure Match Subjects' Perceptions?

| | |
|-------|---|
| メタデータ | 言語: eng 出版者: 公開日: 2017-10-02 キーワード (Ja): キーワード (En): 作成者: メールアドレス: 所属: |
| URL | http://hdl.handle.net/2297/944 |

Testing the Validity of Reformulated Learned Helplessness Theory : Do the Theoretical Classifications of Causes for Failure Match Subjects' Perceptions?

Yukiko ARAKI

Abstract : In order to test the validity of the reformulated Learned Helplessness (LH) theory's attributional dimensions, this study examined whether two causes of failure such as bad luck and lack of effort generally match the subjects' perception. 65 Japanese undergraduates (18 males and 47 females with a mean age of 19.46) were asked to answer the Expanded Attributional Style Questionnaire three times in different "pretend" conditions: nopretend, unluckypretend, and effortpretend. As a result, the unluckypretend condition was significantly rated as more external and uncontrollable than the effortpretend condition. On the other hand, the effortpretend condition was significantly rated as more internal and controllable than the unluckypretend condition. However, the results were not consistent with the predictions in the global-specific and stable-unstable dimensions. Also, regarding the relation between internal-external and control-no control dimensions, there were two strongly different tendencies in the subjects' perception of lack of effort.

Key words : reformulated learned helplessness theory, attributional style, lack of effort, validity, attributional dimensions

When experiences with uncontrollable events lead to the expectation that future events will also elude control, disruptions in motivation, emotion, and learning may occur (Peterson, Maier, & Seligman, 1993). This phenomenon, called learned helplessness (LH), has attracted considerable attention as a model of depression.

Abramson, Seligman, & Teasdale (1978) adapted the concept of causal attribution to the original LH framework. This reformulated LH theory asserts that humans attribute their uncontrollable failure to internal-external, stable-unstable, and global-specific dimensions. The theory predicts that the attribution to internal, stable, and global causes is critical for the occurrence of LH and depression. An increasing number of investigators have tested the implications of the refor-

mulated LH theory and demonstrated the influence of attributional style on depressive behavior (Tennen & Eller, 1977 ; Alloy, Peterson, Abramson, & Seligman, 1984 ; Mikulincer & Nizan, 1988 ; Mikulincer, 1986 ; see Peterson, & Seligman, 1984, for a review). However, many studies have also revealed several problems with the attributional dimension concepts.

Most discussions have been directed to the internal-external dimension. Peterson, Bettes, & Seligman (1985) reviewed the studies examining the validity of the attribution dimensions and found that the internal-external dimension did not predict depression. Abramson, Peterson, Schwartz, & Seligman (1981) mentioned the need to distinguish two types of self-blame for bad outcomes : one is directed at one's own personality trait and is considered uncontrollable while the other is directed at one's behavior and is considered controllable. They asserted that the former was expected to lead more easily to LH. Alloy, Metalsky & Alloy (1989) proposed the hopelessness theory of depression as a revision of the reformulated LH theory, removing the internal-external dimension from factors of depression.

The concept of the internal-external dimension is confusing because Abramson and others (1978) borrowed it from Weiner's theory of achievement motivation (Weiner, 1979) when they reformulated the LH theory. The way attribution affects behavior is different in the two theories. Weiner's theory assumes that attribution affects behavior only indirectly because it is mediated by expectation and emotion, whereas the reformulated LH theory assumes that attribution affects behavior by recognizing the noncontingencies between behavior and outcome. Although Hayamizu (1984) examined the placement of Weiner's causal dimensions, few have tested the attributional dimension concept of the reformulated LH theory. These discrepancies still must be resolved.

The conceptual confusion about the internal-external dimension creates a problem when the reformulated LH theory is applied to clinical psychology and psychotherapy. Dweck (1975) demonstrated that helpless children improved their performance in problem-solving by attribution retraining treatment, in which the children were taught to attribute failure to lack of effort. Whereas lack of effort is the most effective cause according to Weiner's theory of achievement motivation, it is not effective according to the reformulated LH theory. According to the reformulated LH theory, attribution retraining treatment should be concerned with teaching helpless children to attribute the cause of their failure to external, unstable, and specific factors such as "fate" or "bad luck", the opposite of factors causing depression (Foersterling, 1985). However, is it true that attribution to bad luck is external, unstable, and specific, while attribution to lack of effort is internal, unstable, and specific? Since bad luck is also uncontrollable, how does this affect attribution retraining treatment? Attributional change studies guided by the reformulated LH theory have not yet been published. Before the reformulated LH theory can be applied, it is

necessary to confirm whether the theoretical classifications for the causes of failure, such as lack of effort and bad luck, generally match the perception of causes by subjects.

The purpose of this study was to test the validity of attributional dimensions from the viewpoint of the applications of the reformulated LH theory. It examined the placement of causes on a continuum within each dimension in terms of the subjects' perceived meaning of each cause. On the basis of the reformulated LH theory, the predictions of this study were as follows : subjects would attribute lack of effort to internal, unstable, specific, and controllable factors, and attribute bad luck to external, unstable, specific, and uncontrollable factors.

Method

Subjects

Eighty-nine undergraduates of Kanazawa University served as subjects. In the class the experimenter briefly explained the purpose of the study and asked the attendants for their cooperation. She distributed to each attendant a booklet with question items, explained how to answer them, and asked them to complete the questionnaire at home and to return the completed booklet to her at the next week's class.

Sixty-five students handed in the booklets : 18 males and 47 females with a mean age of 19.46 (18 to 22 years old).

Material

The Japanese version (Narita, Imada, & Niihama, 1990) of the Expanded Attributional Style Questionnaire (EASQ; Peterson & Villanova, 1988) was used to assess attribution styles. The questionnaire consisted of 22 hypothetical negative affiliative or achievement life events.

Procedure

The standard procedure of EASQ involves 5 steps (A-E). First (A), subjects are asked to read about the given event, imagine it happening to them, decide the one most probable cause, and write it down in the blank after the description. Next (B), for the internal-external dimension, subjects are asked to decide whether the cause is due to something about themselves or something about other people or circumstances, and to rate the cause on a 1 - 7 scale (1 = totally due to others, 7 = totally due to self). Next (C), for the stable-unstable dimension, subjects are asked to rate whether the cause would be present again in the future (1 = never again present, 7 = always be present). Next (D), for the global-specific dimension, subjects are asked to rate whether the cause is something that just affects this type of situation, or if it also influences other areas of their life (1 = influences just this situation, 7 = influences all situations). Finally (E), for the

control-no control dimension, subjects are asked to rate how much control they have over the occurrence of the event (1 = no control, 7 = total control). Subjects are asked to do this for each of the 22 events.

In addition, subjects were asked to answer the EASQ three times in different "pretend" conditions : nopretend, unluckypretend, and effortpretend.

At first, the subjects answered in the nopretend condition. Next, the order of unluckypretend and effortpretend conditions was counter-balanced among the subjects. With the "nopretend" condition, subjects were asked to answer the EASQ as they actually felt. This is the standard procedure of the EASQ, as described in the preceding paragraph.

With the "unluckypretend" condition, subjects were asked to answer the same questions as the first "no pretend" condition again, but this time the major cause (A) was attributed to "being unlucky". They were asked to imagine themselves in each event, assume each event was due to being unlucky, and answer the questions (B), (C), (D), and (E) outlined above.

With the "effortpretend" condition, they were asked to answer the same questions again, but this time the major cause (A) was attributed to "lack of effort". They were asked to imagine themselves in each event, assume each event was due to being lack of effort, and answer the following questions (B), (C), (D), and (E) accordingly.

Results

Reliability of the EASQ

First, to test the reliability of the EASQ, internal consistencies were assessed using Cronbach's coefficient α . In the nopretend condition, the internal consistency coefficients were .56 for internal-external, .83 for stable-unstable, .86 for global-specific, and .81 for control-no control dimension. In the unluckypretend and effortpretend conditions, the coefficients were consistently high (above .90). The results suggest the EASQ exhibit an acceptable level of internal consistency.

ANOVA using rating scores in each item

Table 1 presents the predictions of the reformulated LH theory and the means of rating scores for each item and the standard deviations. To assess the statistical significance of the difference between conditions, a three-factor analysis of variance was conducted, with conditions (nopretend, unluckypretend, and effortpretend), dimensions (internal-external, stable-unstable, global-specific, and control-no control), and items (events 1 to 22) as variables. The main effects of conditions ($F(2, 168) = 13.28, p < .01$), dimensions ($F(3, 228) = 11.42, p < .01$),

Table 1

Predictions of the reformulated LH theory and means of EASQ scores for each item

| Attributional Dimensions | Predictions | | Pretend Conditions | | |
|--------------------------|-------------|--------|--------------------|------------|------------|
| | Unlucky | Effort | Unlucky | No | Effort |
| Internal-External | 1 | 7 | 2.54(1.48) | 4.72(2.10) | 4.50(1.93) |
| Stable-Unstable | 1 | 1 | 4.32(1.80) | 5.25(1.78) | 4.99(1.61) |
| Global-Specific | 1 | 1 | 3.74(1.90) | 4.12(2.16) | 4.66(1.82) |
| Control-No control | 7 | 1 | 5.45(1.47) | 4.07(2.02) | 2.82(1.44) |

Note ; Numbers in parentheses are standard deviations.

EASQ = Expanded Attributional Style Questionnaire

and items ($F(21, 1344) = 9.9, p < .01$) were significant. The following interactions were significant: conditions and dimension ($F(6, 496) = 55.93, p < .01$); conditions and items ($F(42, 2688) = 3.67, p < .01$); dimensions and items ($F(63, 4032) = 10.27, p < .01$); and conditions, dimensions and items ($F(126, 8064) = 5.52, p < .01$).

The analysis of the simple main effect for the interaction of conditions and dimensions revealed that the main effects of conditions were significant in each dimension ($ps < .01$). Results of multiple comparisons by Tukey tests in each dimension showed the following.

There were significant differences between the scores of the effortpretend and unluckypretend conditions in all dimensions ($ps < .01$). The scores of unluckypretend condition were significantly rated as more external, unstable, specific, and uncontrollable than effortpretend condition. In other words, the scores of effortpretend condition were significantly rated as more internal, stable, global, and controllable than unluckypretend condition.

Also, there were significant differences between the scores of the unluckypretend and nopretend conditions in internal-external, stable-unstable, and control-no control dimensions ($ps < .01$). The scores of unluckypretend condition were significantly rated as more external, unstable, and uncontrollable than nopretend condition. On the other hand, there were significant differences between the scores of the effortpretend and nopretend conditions in global-specific and control-no control dimensions ($ps < .01$). The scores of effortpretend condition were significantly rated as more global and controllable than nopretend condition.

The analysis of the simple main effect for the interaction of conditions and items in each dimension revealed that the main effects of conditions ($ps < .01$) were significant in all items of internal-external and control-no control dimension. Results of multiple comparisons in each dimension showed that there were significant differences between the scores of the effortpretend and unluckypretend conditions in all items of both dimensions ($ps < .01$). However, the main effects of conditions were not significant in five items of the stable-unstable dimension and in

eight items of the global-specific dimension.

Correlation analysis using total scores in each dimension

Using total scores for each, correlations between dimensions were calculated in each condition to assess the statistical significance of the relations between dimensions. As a result, significantly high correlations were found between stable-unstable and global-specific dimensions in all conditions ($p < .001$). Regarding correlations between internal-external and control-no control dimensions, the effortpretend condition was low ($r = -.028$), whereas the nopretend condition ($r = -.356$, $p < .01$) and the unluckypretend condition ($r = -.803$, $p < .001$) were significantly high.

The results of investigating the relations between the internal-external and control-no control dimensions in effortpretend condition are shown on scatter plots of subjects' total scores (Figure 1). Regarding lack of effort, many subjects gave a rating toward the controllable pole for the control-no control dimension, whereas many subjects gave a rating toward both poles for internal-external dimension. In addition, correlations were calculated after subjects were divided into ex-

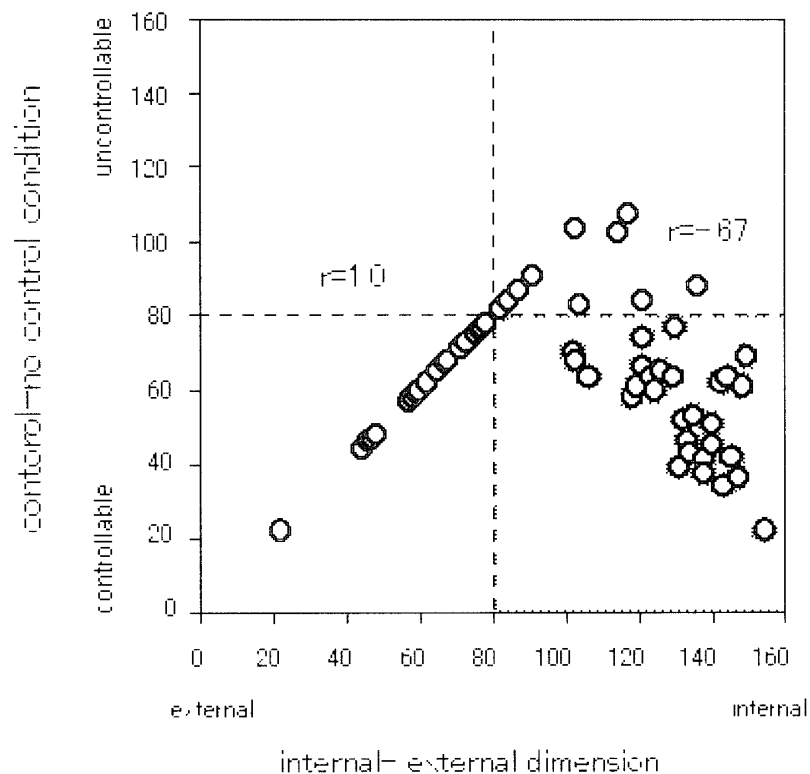


Figure 1 . Scatter plots of subjects' total scores between internal-external and control-no control dimensions in the effortpretend condition. The gray part indicates the theory's prediction (internal and controllable).

ternal attribution (with the scores 0 to 80, $N=26$) and internal attribution (with the scores 80 to 160, $N=39$) groups. Because internal attribution shows significantly high correlation with the controllable pole ($r = -.67$, $p < .01$), this result supports the prediction. On the other hand, external attribution shows significantly complete correlation with the controllable pole ($r = 1.0$, $p < .001$) which is the opposite of what was predicted.

Discussion

This investigation tested the validity of attributional dimensions by using questionnaires about the "pretend" conditions, and manipulating the subjects' attribution by varying the instructions. By using "pretend" conditions we can examine the identical person's perceptions about both bad luck and lack of effort. However, because subjects must answer the same questionnaire three times for different "pretend" conditions, there may be concern about the reliability of their responses. Thus, before testing the validity of dimensions, it is necessary to ascertain the effectiveness of the "pretend" conditions. There were significant differences between scores of unlucky- and effortpretend conditions in all dimensions. This result suggests that subjects discriminated between two causes and perceived each cause as a different attributional factor. On the other hand, there were no significant differences between scores of the nopretend and unlucky or effort pretend conditions in some dimensions. This result suggests that a subject's actual attributional style may overlap with either bad luck or lack of effort. The purpose of this study is not examining whether subject's actual attributional style is either bad luck or lack of effort but examining how a subject perceives these causes in terms of attributional dimensions. Considering this purpose, it seems that the "pretend" conditions were effective in contrasting both causes.

This investigation examined whether the theoretical classifications for the causes match the subjects' perception. The results were consistent with the predictions in the internal-external and control-no control dimensions: the unluckypretend condition was significantly rated as more external and uncontrollable than the effortpretend condition; the effortpretend condition was significantly rated as more internal and controllable than the unluckypretend condition. On the other hand, the results were not consistent with the predictions in the global-specific and stable-unstable dimensions. According to the predictions, the unlucky and effort pretend conditions are rated as unstable and specific. However, there were significant differences between the unlucky- and effortpretend conditions. Moreover, the effortpretend condition was significantly rated as more global than the nopretend conditions.

There are two reasons for differences between the practice and the theory of the concepts

about the global-specific and stable-unstable dimensions. At first, there were significantly high correlations between both dimensions in all conditions. Second, there were not significant differences between three conditions in five items of the stable-unstable dimension and in eight items of the global-specific dimension. These results suggest that the validity of the dimensions is low, and that it is doubtful whether both dimensions explain the same constructive concept. The hopelessness theory (Abramson, Metalsky, & Alloy, 1989), that was recently proposed as a revision of the reformulated LH theory, excluded the internal-external dimension from causal attributions and focused on the stable-unstable and global-specific dimensions. However, the present findings indicate that these dimensions may involve conceptual problems referring to attributional factors. Because the present study has limitations about the method, future research should investigate these dimensions by methods other than the "pretend" conditions.

The present findings also shed light on the concept of controllability. For the control-no control dimension, there were significant differences not only between the effort-and unluckypretend conditions but also between the effort or unlucky pretend conditions and nopretend condition as predicted. As Brown & Siegel (1988) have noted, although perceptions of control occupied a central role in both the original and reformulated LH theory, the construct of uncontrollability gradually has been replaced by the construct of event valence such as negative and positive when relating attributions to depression. That subjects perceived both lack of effort as controllable and bad luck as uncontrollable supports those who have claimed that controllability is an important element in the link between attributions and depression (Weiner & Litman-Adizes, 1980 ; Wortman & Dintzer, 1978 ; Brown & Siegel, 1988).

Additionally, regarding the relation between internal-external and control-no control dimensions, Figure 1 shows anomalies and individual differences. There were two strongly different tendencies in the subjects' perception of lack of effort as the cause of failure. Some subjects perceived lack of effort as internal and controllable as the theory predicted, while others perceived it as external and controllable, which is opposite of the prediction. That is, some subjects considered that lack of effort is due to other people or circumstances, but that they nevertheless have control over it. This leads to the question of what constitutes an external and controllable effort.

This study does not explore individual differences about what is meant by effort, but it does suggest two possible interpretations about external and controllable effort. First, it seems that the concept of an internal-external dimension is confusing, as noted in the introduction, because subjects distinguish internal and external attributions relating to controllability. Similarly, Hayamizu (1984) reported that Weiner's locus of causality and controllability dimensions overlapped moderately with each other because the difference between the internal and external causes could be

represented by the degree of controllability. However, the concept of Weiner's controllability is different from LH theory. In Weiner's theory, since controllability is perceived as under the volitional control of oneself or others, it is reasonable that external and controllable factors overlapped. On the other hand, in the reformulated LH theory, the controllability is defined as perception of control not by others but by oneself. Although these theories are different, people confuse their ideas about internal and controllable factors. In order to understand internal-external dimension, it is necessary to classify internal and external attributions as separate factors, and to allow for a distinction between "internally-controlled" and "externally-controlled" controllability.

Second, it seems that the concept of effort cannot be lumped into a single category. There were differences among subjects' perceptions of effort, with some subjects considering effort as external and controllable. This suggests these subjects make an effort only when they are placed in a good situation by others. This finding may reflect the current attitude of many Japanese students, since students from junior high school to university tend to be passive in their classes, and are physically and emotionally "spoon-fed" by their parents and teachers, without having demands made of them. In addition, the Japanese educational system tends to overemphasize the importance of effort (Holloway, Kashiwagi, Hess, & Azuma, 1986), to the extent that the concept of effort has taken on a superficial meaning. When applying the reformulated LH theory as attribution retraining treatment, attention should be paid to the current social and cultural factors attributed to the concept of lack of effort. Even if students are asked to attribute the cause of failure to lack of effort as in Dweck (1975), this therapy may not necessarily work in Japan because students' experiences may not lead them to a different understanding of what is meant by lack of effort. In order to make the reformulated LH theory useful, the concept of effort must be better understood, taking social and cultural factors into consideration. Future research investigating the relation between internal attribution and controllability may result in modifications of the reformulated LH theory.

References

- Abramson, L.Y., Metalsky, G.I., & Alloy, L.B. 1989 Hopelessness depression: A theory-based subtype of depression. *Psychological review*, **96**, 358-372.
- Abramson, L.Y., Seligman, M.E.P., & Teasdale, J.D. 1978 Learned helplessness in human: Critique and reformulation. *Journal of Abnormal Psychology*, **87**, 49-74.
- Alloy, L.B., Peterson, C., Abramson, L.Y., & Seligman, M.E.P. 1984 Attributional style and the generality of learned helplessness. *Journal of Personality and Social Psychology*, **46**, 681-687.
- Brown, J.D., & Siegel, J.M. 1988 Attributions for negative life events and depression: The role of perceived control.

- Journal of Personality and Social Psychology*, **54**, 316-322.
- Dweck, C.S. 1975 The role of expectations and attributions in the alleviation of learned helplessness. *Journal of Personality and Social Psychology*, **31**, 674-685
- Foersterling, F. 1985 Attributional retraining: A review. *Psychological Bulletin*, **98**, 495-512.
- Hayamizu, T. 1984 Changes in causal attributions on a term examination: Causal dimensions. *Japanese Psychological Research*, **26**, 1-11.
- Holloway, S.D., Kashiwagi, K., Hess, R.D. & Azuma, H. 1986 Causal attributions by Japanese and American mothers and children about performance in mathematics. *International Journal of Psychology*, **21**, 269-286.
- Abramson, L.Y., Metalsky, G.I., & Alloy, L.B. 1989 Hopelessness depression: A theory-based subtype of depression. *Psychological Review*, **96**, 358-372
- Metalsky, G.I., Abramson, L.Y., Seligman, M.E.P., Semmel, A., & Peterson, C. 1982 Attributional styles and life events in the classroom: Vulnerability and invulnerability to depressive mood reaction. *Journal of Personality and Social Psychology*, **43**, 612-617.
- Narita, K., Imada, H., & Nihama, K. 1990 Assessment of attributional style by EASQ (Expanded Attributional Style Questionnaire). Paper presented at the annual meetings of the Japanese Psychological Association, Tokyo (In Japanese)
- Peterson, C., Bettes, B.A., & Seligman, M.E.P. 1985 Depressive symptoms and unprompted causal attributions: content analysis. *Behavior Research and Therapy*, **23**, 379-382
- Peterson, C., Maier, S.F. & Seligman, M.E.P. 1993 *Learned helplessness: A theory for the age of personal control*. New York: Oxford University Press
- Peterson, C. & Seligman, M.E.P. 1984 Causal explanations as a risk factor for depression: Theory and evidence. *Psychological Review*, **91**, 247-374
- Peterson, C. & Villanova, P. 1988 An expanded attributional style questionnaire. *Journal of Abnormal Psychology*, **97**, 87-89
- Tennen, H. & Eller, S.J. 1977 Attributional components of learned helplessness and facilitation. *Journal of Personality and Social Psychology*, **35**, 265-271
- Weiner, B. 1979 A theory of motivation for some classroom experiences. *Journal of Educational Psychology*, **71**, 3-25
- Weiner, B., & Litman-Adizes, T. 1980 An attributional, expectancy-value analysis of learned helplessness and depression. In J. Garber & M.S.P. Seligman (Eds.), *Human helplessness: Theory and applications* (pp. 35-58). New York: Academic Press
- Wortman, C.B., & Dintzer, L. 1978 Is an attributional analysis of the learned helplessness phenomenon viable? A critique of the Abramson-Seligman-Teasdale reformulation. *Journal of Abnormal Psychology*, **87**, 75-90

Acknowledgements

A portion of this article was presented at the 62th Japanese Psychological Association meeting, Tokyo, Japan, October 1998. I express appreciation to Junji Komaki, Reginald Dyck, and Donna Erickson for their invaluable comments on an earlier version of this article. I also thank those who kindly volunteered to participate in this study.