

Attributions for Negative Life Events and Depression

Hermez Djamila

University of Djelfa (Algeria), hermezdjamila@gmail.com

Received: 09/02/2023

Accepted: 01/06/2023

Published: 18/06/2023

Abstract:

This study found evidence that judgments of control interact with other attributions in predicting depression. Specifically, in a perspective research of stress and well-being in adolescence, internal, stable, and global attributions for negative events attributed to uncontrollable causes were found to be positively related to increases in depression, as predicted by the reformulated helplessness theory, but internal and global attributions for negative events attributed to controllable causes were found to be inversely related to increases in depression. The discussion considers the implications of the findings for understanding the nature of the relation between attributions for naturally occurring life events and depression.

Keywords: Negative Life .Events . Depression.

Corresponding author: Hermez Djamila, **E-mail:** hermezdjamila@gmail.com

1. INTRODUCTION

The helplessness theory was used first by Seligman in 1967, he argued that depression could result when individuals perceived that important life events were beyond their control. More specifically, experience with prior uncontrollable outcomes and the consequent expectation that future events would be uncontrollable were linked to a series of cognitive and motivational deficits and depressed affect (Seligman,1975).

Abramson, Seligman, and Teasdale (1978) retained an emphasis on perceived control in their attributional reformulation of Seligman's theory (1975). Introducing their model as an attempt to resolve "several theoretical controversies about the effects of uncontrollability in humans" (Abramson & al, 1978), the authors argued that it is not uncontrollability per se, but the attributions individuals make for a perceived noncontingency between actions and outcomes, that are the proximal determinants of depression. Specifically Abramson and al proposed that a maladaptive attributional style involving the tendency to attribute noncontingent negative events to internal, stable, and global causes predisposes an individual to depression. An individual who ascribes financial setbacks to enduring lack of business acumen, for example, is thought to be more likely to develop affective distress than an individual who attributes fiscal hardship to a temporary downturn in the local economy. Attributions to internal -as opposed to external- causes are presumed to underlie the deficits in self-esteem that commonly accompany depression, whereas attributions to stable -as opposed to temporary- and global -as opposed to domain specific- factors are linked, respectively, to the duration and generalizability of depressive symptoms. A good deal of research supports the claim that a negative attributional style is linked to depression (Sweeney & al,1986).

The mediating role assigned to attributions in the revised model, the first step in the event-attribution-depression sequence

Attributions for Negative Life Events and Depression

remained the perception that an important event was beyond one's control. As the theory has continued to evolve, however, a change in emphasis has occurred. The construct of uncontrollability, which formerly occupied a central role in both the original and reformulated theory, gradually has been replaced by the construct of event valence (Weiner, 1986). That is, the attributions individuals offer for bad or good events in their lives now are linked to depression, rather than the attributions individuals make for events that are perceived to be beyond their control (Peterson & Seligman, 1984).

Unfortunately, a number of serious consequences may ensue from failing to consider perceptions of controllability when relating attributions to depression. First, since the theory originally was concerned with attributions for noncontingent outcomes, the ability of causal judgments to predict depression may be diluted or obscured if the causes of negative events are perceived as controllable and perceptions of control are not taken into account. A lack of attentions to this issue may, therefore, explain why attributions for life events typically account for only a small proportion of the variance in depression (Hamman & Cochran (1981).

The aforementioned link between controllability attributions and emotion suggests that judgments of control may be critical to understanding the nature of relation between causal perception and depression. (Weiner & Litman, 1980).

To summarize, the controllability attributions moderate the relation between depression and the negative attributional style identified by Abramson in 1978 . The present study test these interactions, subjects in this study made all four types of attributions - controllable-uncontrollable, internal-external, stable-unstable, global-specific concerning the causes of a recent negative life event. It was anticipated that the negative attributional style, would be positively related to depressed affect only when negative outcomes were attributed to uncontrollable causes, when negative events were attributed to controllable causes, this pattern of attributions was

expected to be inversely related to depressed affect (Brown,1984;Nolen & al,1986).

The aim of this research was to assess the causal role of attributions in depression, attributions are hypothesized to be an important factor in the development of depression. This relation between attributions and depression was tested with adolescents, because adolescence often is regarded as a stressful period in life, and the manner in which individuals interpret and cope with stress during adolescence (Newcomb & al,1986).

Method:

Subjects:

The subjects were 98 females, aged between 14 and 19 years, attending a secondary school in Cheraga. Data were occurred in classes during a period between October 2018 and December 2018.

Measure and Procedure:

Subjects first completed a measure of life stress. The 33 items àn this scale were drawn from previous measures of life stress developed by Sarason, Johnson, and Siegel (1978), Lewis, Siegel, and Levis (1984), and Newcomb and al (1981). The measure assessed the occurrence of major life events .

After completing the life stress inventory, subjects were instructed to select the one event that had been the most upsetting. After indicating how upsetting the event was (1=not at all upsetting, 4=extremely upsetting), subjects responded to the following items taken from an attribution questionnaire developed by Gong-Guy and Hammen (1985): control (How much control over the occurrence of this event did you have? 1=no control at all, 4=a great deal of control), locus (Did this event happen mostly because it was mostly due to situation?) 1=entirely due to situation, 4= entirely due to you), stability (Did this event occur because qf something is relatively permanent? 1=entirely due to things that change, 4= entirely due to things that don't change),and globality (Is the cause of this event influences other areas of your life? 1=only affect this one area,

Attributions for Negative Life Events and Depression

4=completely affects all areas).

Depression was measured by with the the center for Epidemiology Studies Depression Scale (CES-D, Radloff, 1977). The CES-D is a self-report inventory developed to assess the presence of depressive symptomatology in general population. The measure places particular emphasis on the affective component of depression. For each of 20 items, subjects indicate the extent to which they have experienced symptoms of depression during the preceding week. Responses are made on 4-point scales (0=none of the time, 3=most or all of the time) and a symptom score (0-60) is found by summing responses to the 20 items (for four of the items, scoring is reversed). Psychometric information regarding the scale's reliability and construct validity are presented in Radloff (1977), for normative data with adolescents (Schoenbach & al,1982). The internal consistency Cronbach's alpha for the present sample was 0.82.

Results:

Subjects with higher depression scores on the CES-D, $t=2.61$, $p<0.01$.

Events attributed to uncontrollable causes were rated as more upsetting than events ascribed to controllable factors, $t=2.33$, $p<0.025$. External and stable attributions also were higher for events attributed to uncontrollable than controllable factors, $t=7.87$, $p<0.001$, and $t=1.97$, $p<0.5$, respectively.

The hypothesis of this study was that controllability attributions interact with other causal judgments in predicting future depression. More specifically, it was predicted that the tendency to make internal, stable, and global attributions for upsetting life events would be positively related to depression when events were attributed to uncontrollable causes, but inversely related to depression when events were attributed to controllable causes.

Discussion:

The investigation examined the relation among attributions for naturally occurring life events and the development of

depression. We predicted that whether the negative attributional style identified by Abramson and al (1978) predisposes depression depends on the perceived controllability of the event to be explained (Brewin,1985). The data supported the hypothesis. Specifically, only when events were attributed to uncontrollable causes did internal, stable, and global attributions predict greater depression in the manner specified by the reformulated learned helplessness theory. When important life events were attributed to controllable causes, internal and global attributions were associated with lower levels of depression.

These findings underscore the importance of considering judgments of control when relating attributions for naturally occurring life events to depression. Although perceived control occupied a central role in both the original and reformulated learned helplessness models, a focus on controllability increasingly has given way to a concern with event valence. That is helplessness researchers have begun relating the attributions individuals make for negative life events to depression, without regard to whether these negative events are attributed to controllable or uncontrollable factors (Windle and al,1986).However, not all negative outcomes are attributed to uncontrollable causes. In fact, a slight majority of subjects (56%) reported having at least some control over a stressful life event. Thus, a simple correspondence between uncontrollability and negativity cannot be assumed.

Moreover, the current findings show that the association between other attributions and depression depends on whether events are attributed to controllable or uncontrollable factors. These findings support the contention that affective reactions to events are determined, in part, by judgments of control (Weiner, 1985). The present results also support those who have claimed that the controllability dimension is an important element in the link between attributions and depression (Wortman & Dinzer,1989).

Attributions for Negative Life Events and Depression

References:

- Abramson.L.Y, Selegman.M.E.P, & Teasdale.J.D (1978); *Learned helplessness in humans: Critique and reformulation. Journal of Abnormal Psychology; Los Angeles; 87; 49-74.*
- Brewin.C.R (1985); *Depression and causal attributions: What is their relation? Psychological Bulletin; New York; 98; 297-309.*
- Brown.J.D (1984); *Effects of induced mood on causal attributions success and failure; Motivation and Emotion; Texas; 8; 343-353.*
- Gong-Guy.E & Hammen.C (1980); *Causal perceptions of stressful events in depressed and non-depressed outpatients; Journal of Abnormal Psychology; Los Angeles; 89; 662-69.*
- Hammen.C & Cochran S.D (1981); *Cognitive correlates of life stress and depression in college students; Journal of Abnormal Psychology; Los Angeles; 90; 23-27.*
- Lewis.C.E, Siegel.J.M, & Lewis.M.A (1984); *Feeling bad: Exploring sources of distress among pre-adolescent children; American Journal of Public Health; Washington; 74; 117-122.*
- Newcomb.M.D, Huba.G.J, & Bentler.P.M (1986); *Life change events among adolescents: An empirical consideration of some methodological issues; Journal Nervous and Mental Disease; San Francisco; 174; 280-289.*
- Nolen-Hoeksema.S, Girgus.G.S, & Seligman.M.E.P (1986); *Learned helplessness in children: A longitudinal study of depression, achievement, and explanatory style; Journal of Personality and Social Psychology; New York; 51; 435-442.*
- Peterson.C & Seligman.M.E.P (1984); *Causal explanations as a risk factor for depression.Theory and evidence; Psychological Review; New York; 91; 347-374.*
- Radloff.L.S (1977). *The CES-D scale: A self-report depression scale for research in the general population. Applied Psychological Measurement; Washington; 1; 385-401.*
- Sarason.I.G; Johnson.J.H; & Siegel.J.M (1978). *Assessing the*

impact of life changes: Development of the life experiences survey; New York; Journal of Consulting and Clinical Psychology; 46; 932-946.

-Schoenbach.V.J, Kaplan.B.H; Grimson.R.C; & Wagner.E.H (1982); Use of a symptom scale to study the prevalence of a depressive syndrome in young adolescents; American Journal of epidemiology; San Francisco; 116; 791-800.

-Seligman.M.E.P (1975); Helplessness: On depression, development, and death; San Francisco: Freeman.

-Seligman.M.E.P, Peterson.C; Kaslow.N.J, Tannebaum.R.L; Alloy.L.B, & Abramson.L.Y (1982); Attributional style and depressive symptoms among children. Journal of Abnormal Psychology; Los Angeles; 93; 235-238.

-Sweeney.P.D, Anderson.K; & Bailey.S (1986); Attributional style in depression; A meta-analytic review. Journal of Personality and Social Psychology; New York; 50; 974-991.

-Weiner.B (1985); An attributional theory of achievement motivation and emotion. Psychological Review; New York; 92; 548-573.

-Weiner.B (1986); An attributional theory of motivation and emotion; New York: Spinger-Verlag.

-Weiner.B & Litman-Adizes (1980); An attributional, expectancy-value analysis of learned helplessness and depression; Human helplessness; New York: Academic Press.

-Windle.M; Hooker.K; Lerner.K; East.P.L; Lerner.J.V; & Lerner.R.M (1986); Temperament, perceived competence, and depression in early and late adolescence; Developmental Psychology; New York; 22; 384-392.

-Wortman.C.B; & Dintzer.L (1989); Is an attributional analysis of the learned phenomenon variable? A critique of the Abramson-Seligman-Teasdale reformulation. Journal of Abnormal Psychology; 87; 75-90.