

CAUSAL ATTRIBUTION OF PERFORMANCE (FAILURE VS. SUCCESS) OF A STUDENT AT AN EXAM DEEMED DIFFICULT ACCORDING TO HIS SOCIOECONOMIC ORIGIN

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ABSTRACT

Background: *This study aims to highlight the combined effect of performance and socioeconomic level of causal attribution made by the observer. This causal attribution is about the conduct of a student at an exam deemed difficult.*

Method: *The study concerned 72 students who voluntarily agreed to participate.*

Results: *The statistical results (ANOVA) have shown that the observer makes an internal or external attribution according to the student from a low socio-economic or high socio-economic level, that is to say, the effort, the ability etc. meanwhile those of socio-economic level makes an external attribution, that is to say, to corruption, parents' support etc.*

Conclusion: *It emerges from this that the actor and the observer do not infer the same causes for an event. It is therefore understandable that the information the subjects treat to formulate these judgments not only come from the situation or the environment in which the action takes place, but also the behavioral history of the actor.*

Keywords: Causal attribution, performance, socioeconomic level, observer, actor

INTRODUCTION

In daily life, the question related to the cause of the events that happen, the reasons of our own behaviors or those of others is often asked. It fuels our daily conversations, guides our interactions with others, is part of our perception of the physical and social reality. Natural and spontaneous phenomenon, it is the object of the so-called attribution theories (Pétard, 2007).

According to Heider (1958), we face a complex and changing world and we need to simplify it to understand, predict, control and master it. The attributions serve to achieve this goal by identifying stable behavior characteristics and events that help account for it.

The attributions therefore to give an explanation and interpretation of reactions or behaviors that we observe in others and in oneself. It seeks to describe how the naive subject who observes a behavior proceeds to find a cause of his act. The need to explain the phenomena, to know the conditions of their expression is peculiar to human beings. The explanation is at the heart of human beings' everyday interactions with others. According to Kelley (1972), people, before they understand, explain above all. Their main motivation is the search for truth.

In the context of causal attribution, our work focuses more on the actor-observer phenomenon. This phenomenon is about the systematic differences revealed between the

causal responses of the subjects who are for the ones, actor, that is to say, the one who acts and for the others, observers, that is to say, those who see the action being acted. This is specifically to show how the performance and the socioeconomic level can influence the explanation that the observer expresses as regards the actor's behavior.

For its implementation, this study is articulated around three main axes. The first part deals with theoretical foundations in light of which the assumptions make. The second part examines the methodological approach used for data collection. Finally, in the third part, the analysis and interpretation of the results are discussed.

PROBLEM

School failure is a social problem for a society that wants all its children to reach the exercise of citizenship; it is also a political problem for the one that purports to be democratic (Meirien, 2008).

The rapid development that the school failure phenomenon witnesses makes itself unbearable for many of us. According to Revol , and FumeauxHunziker (2013), each year, approximately 150,000 students leave school without a diploma , namely nearly one out of five young people while with their speeches, the will of successive ministers of education is to take at least 80% of young people to the baccalaureate.

This situation therefore raises questions which can be summarized into one and essential: why such a development of failure? Such a question is to find an explanation to this phenomenon and to understand its causes. However, in our social context, despite attempts of solutions of governmental and non -governmental organizations to deal with this phenomenon, we are far from the expected results, the situation goes from bad to worse, that is to say, moves ominously. Strategies to overcome this problem are considered. For Revol, Hunziker and Fumeaux (op. Cit.), fight concretely against school failure requires at least a thorough reflection on our educational policies with all of its stakeholders namely teachers and parents included.

Note that in general, the search for possible causes of an act or event is based on attribution theories. The attribution consists in giving an explanation to events for which we have no immediate and obvious account. The explanation may be connected with oneself (self-attribution) or others (hetero - attribution); it then becomes the perceived cause of the event in question, that is to say a belief as to the cause of an act, an inference aimed at explaining the why of an event (Vallerand, 1994).

According to Heider (1958), the attribution is the process by which man apprehends reality and is able to predict and control it, is a search for the causes of the perceived events. In these circumstances, it is appropriate to focus on how do people explain the events that happen to them or happen to others.

Note that in different contexts, situations and roles, there are standards of explanation, socially valued answers, consciously or unconsciously used by everyone in interaction situations (Weiner, 1985). In other words, in the study of causal attribution mechanisms, many bias or standards raised by different authors are involved in explanations, in particular either an actor or spectator one may be (observer) of the event. We can higgledy-piggledy quote the competence standard (Covington, 1984); the internality standard (Dubois, 1987); the accountability standard (Shaver and Down, 1986). Finally, we have the effort standard. Here, the subject when explaining a failure, prefers to avoid the attribution to the lack of effort and present his failure as the consequence of a lack of ability or difficulty of the task

and the one who succeeds most often attributes his performance to effort. It is in this case that we also speak of bias / standard of complacency where people explain success by internal factors and failure to external factors. In the literature on the field of causal attribution, actor is the person who, in a given situation, produces an action and the observer or spectator, the person who can see this action occurring (Ngbala, 1984). Jones and Nisbett (1972), in the conclusion of their analysis of the results of causal attribution experience, observe that the actor and the observer do not infer the same causes for an event.

The expression of the actor-observer phenomenon is used in the literature to characterize this type of systematic difference we noted in the explanations that the actor and the observer give for the same action.

The information that the subjects treat to formulate these judgments come from two sources that are on the one hand the situation or the environment in which the action takes place, and on the other, the behavioral history of the actor. Jones and Nisbett (op. cit) think that the actor and the observer do not have the same environmental approach; they do not therefore treat the same information.

The information regarding the actor behavioral history mainly concern the latter's reactions vis-à-vis other stimuli and his reactions whenever he was himself in the presence of that particular stimulus. They correspond to the information on the differentiation and consistency described by Kelley (1972).

These information, declares Kelley, mostly fail in the outside observer's judgments making on the behavior of the actor he observes. It is therefore unlikely that the actor and the observer make the same judgments for the same action.

Let's indicate, moreover, that if the proponents of the attribution approach have sought to highlight the effects of causal explanations in various areas and situations (Jones and McGillis, 1976. Weiner *et al.*(1988), it is within the education system framework that many studies have been conducted. C-B Olivier and Benoit G. (2003), compare sociology students to business students at different times of the curriculum in terms of their attribution as regards unemployment and poverty point of view.

Research works, investigated precisely the explanation of student performance (success / failure). In this regard, Covington and Omelich (1979) were able to show that the success attribution to the ability allows the individual to present himself as someone who usually succeeds and whose success can be predicted; when Dompnier, B. and Pansu, P. (2007) report the intervention of internal causal explanations in terms of effort in the self-presentation strategies and social judgment.

According to some authors, success is explained by internal factors , while failure is explained by external factors to the individual namely the difficulty of the task , luck or chance (Weiner, 1972) but also by the lack of effort that allows the individual to prevent a self-presentation , that is to say , the value of oneself (Covington , 1984). Other authors have rather made the observation that subjects with collectivistic orientations, who have failed, commit bias modesty, that is to say, explain their (repeated) failures in their integration into the workplace attempt by internal causes (Otémé, 2009). In addition to the ability and motivation including the effort and intention, there is also the action environment called impersonal causes that color our explanations such as social or moral obligations and social norms (Heider, op .cit.).

What about the socio-economic background? Rabbie and Horwitz (1969) show that there is an appearance of evaluative discrimination when individuals anticipate an interpretation

between groups. Several studies have then endeavoured to demonstrate the importance of social status in the attributions.

The experiment conducted by Thibaut and Ricken (1955) is one example. The results of this study show that the subject (partner) of higher social status is judged differently from that of lower social status. These results clearly indicate that there is an influence of the socioeconomic level on the attributions.

Borus and Carpenter (1984) dealing with the parents' socio-economic influence, have come to the conclusion that families living below the poverty line have great difficulties to offer their support for homework's and lessons and even a tutor to help their child at home. This inability thus increases the risk of failure and class repetition of children living in disadvantaged areas.

Favre et al (2004) point out that apart from the level of education, the economic status of parents also influences the school-oriented interactions between the parent and the child. Indeed, these authors show that the material and social difficulties and the hazards of life make some parents in popular areas unable to give considerable attention to their children school activities.

Furthermore, Epstein et al (1993); Potvin et al (1996); Deslandes and Cloutier (2005) emphasize the role of parental involvement in the follow-up to their children schooling as a fundamental element in their success. Parents whose standard of living is high, they continue to have a variety of means to support their children's learning

It comes out from this work review that the studies that have been conducted on the issue which this research is interested in including the explanation of the failure or success have, in their great majority, involved both dimensions of causal attributions, we mean internal / external made by the actor. This orientation does not include the fact that the possibility of action could be limited by social situations (Heider; op. cit.). This could be an influential element in this process of causal attribution that deserves to be considered.

Our approach in this study is necessarily centered on the explanation made by the observer for the behavior of the actor according to the latter performance and socioeconomic level. It thus brings about the following working hypotheses:

Hypothesis 1: the success of the student from a higher socioeconomic level surrounding is attributed to the support of his parents, unlike his counterpart low level who would not benefit.

Hypothesis 2: students from a low socio-economic surrounding are considered more credible in their performance than their higher level counterparts.

Hypothesis 3: Students from low socioeconomic level surrounding make more effort to their success compared to their counterparts of high socioeconomic level surrounding.

METHODOLOGICAL APPROACH

Description of Variables

The first independent variable, performance has two modalities (Success / Failure to an exam). As for the second independent variable, that is to say, the socioeconomic level, it includes three modes (levels: low, high and unspecified of the parents).

Two independent variables: performance and the socioeconomic level.

The dependent variable of this study is the causal attribution made by the observer, which has two modes (Internal / External).

Participants

To carry out this study we surveyed 72 students all from the Félix Houphouët Boigny University of Cocody (Abidjan), both girls and boys.

Participants are approached while they are either in groups or alone on the university site. Their participation is voluntary and remains anonymous. They know it and it takes about 10 to 15 minutes.

The material used for this study is made up of two pages of a story describing a situation in which the main character (a student) is from a poor socioeconomic background or from a wealthy background or a living environment where the living standard is not specified, passes or fails an exam (Baccalaureate), a result that will enable him to realize his ambitions or not.

Material

A pre-test was conducted on twenty subjects to know the level of intelligibility of the instruction and of questions thanks to scales of the Likert type in 7 points (1 = not likely and 7 = very likely) then (1 = not at all and 7 = absolutely).

The subjects answered questions like: (in your opinion, why has the topic got such a result?) and (now give your impressions of the subject's personality).

Procedure

At first the participant is asked to read the story to understand the situation. He then completes the questionnaire by choosing a number on the scale that comes with it, according to his degree of agreement with the proposed answer; indicated as a possible reason for the cause of the event.

Data Analysis Method

Data from this study were processed through the analysis of variance (ANOVA) according to the factorial design: 2 (Performance: Success vs. Failure) × 2 (Socio-economic level: high vs. low) in which performance and socio-economic level are independent inter-subject variables. Below, we present the results for each of the dependent variables.

RESULTS

Combined effect of performance and socio economic level on causal attribution of the observer

1- Judgment on the Possibility to Benefit from Parents' Support

In table 1 these answers assess the possibility for the student to be followed by a private teacher. When the student has succeeded (M=3.75; SD = 2.06) the participants consider that he has a private teacher who helps him work, compared to the failure condition (M = 2.25; SD = 1, 31), the difference is significant (1, 66) = 28, 85 p .0001. The variable socioeconomic level has also an effect on this answer. For the participants, the student from unspecified socioeconomic level (M = 3.50; SD = 1.64) and that of high level (M = 3.37; SD = 2.2) have more opportunity to benefit from a private teacher, unlike the one from a low socioeconomic level (M = 2.13, SD = 1, 54); the difference is significant, F (2.66) 9,88p <.0001.

Table 1. Average Scores to Benefit from Private Teacher Depending on the Performance and the Socioeconomic Level

<i>Dependent Variable Performance</i>	<i>social origin</i>	<i>Average</i>	<i>Standard deviation</i>	<i>N</i>	
Benefit from Private teacher	Failure	Unspecified	2.25	1.288	12
		Low level	2.92	1.621	12
		High level	1.58	0.515	12
		<i>Total</i>	2.25	1.317	36
	Success	Unspecified	4.75	0.754	12
		Low level	1.33	0.651	12
		High level	5.17	1.697	12
		<i>Total</i>	3.75	2.062	36
	<i>Total</i>	Unspecified	3.50	1.642	24
		Low level	2.13	1.454	24
		High level	3.37	2.2	24
		<i>Total</i>	3.00	1.876	72

There is a significant interaction between the performance and the socioeconomic level, $F(2, 66) = 31.72, p < .0001$. This is explained by the fact that for the participants, when the student of high socioeconomic level has succeeded ($M = 5.17; SD = 1.69$), it is because he has a private teacher unlike the one of low socioeconomic level ($M = 1.33; SD = 0.65$), and if unsuccessful, it is because the student of high level ($M = 1.58, SD = 0.51$) do not benefit from a private teacher compared to the one of low level ($M = 2.92; SD = 1.62$) as well as the one of unspecified level ($M = 2.25; SD = 1.88$).

These results confirm our hypothesis according to which the success of the student from high socioeconomic status is attributed to the fact that he has the support of his parents.

2- "Impression on the Laziness Level of the Student"

As per table 2, participants considered the laziest student in failure condition ($M = 2.78; SD = 1.69$) compared to the success condition ($M = 1.69; SD = 0.99$), the difference is significant, $F(1, 66) = 11.97; p < .0001$.

The variable socioeconomic level has no effect on this answer. For the participants, it is likely that the student of unspecified socioeconomic level ($M = 2.17; SD = 1.49$), the one of low level ($M = 2.29; SD = 1.68$) as well as the one of high level ($M = 2.17; SD = 1.34$) are all lazy; there is no difference concerning the lazy nature (lack of effort) depending on the socioeconomic level.

The interaction between the performance and the socioeconomic level is not that insignificant. This can be explained by the fact that the socioeconomic status had no influence on the judgment of the participants in both conditions for each student either in success condition or in failure condition. These results are not going in the same way as our hypothesis according to which students from low socioeconomic level living area make more

effort for their success compared to their counterparts of high socioeconomic level living area.

Table 2. Lazy Average Scores Based on the Performance and the Socioeconomic Level

<i>Dependent Variable</i>	<i>Performance</i>	<i>social origin</i>	<i>Average</i>	<i>Standard deviation</i>	<i>N</i>
<i>Lezy</i>	<i>Failure</i>	Unspecified	2.58	1.78	12
		Lowlevel	3.25	1.87	12
		High level	2.50	1.45	12
		Total	2.78	1.69	36
	<i>Success</i>	Unspecified	1.75	1.06	12
		Lowlevel	1.33	0.65	12
		High level	1.83	1.19	12
		Total	1.64	0.99	36
	<i>Total</i>	Unspecified	2.17	1.49	24
		Lowlevel	2.29	1.68	24
		High level	2.17	1.34	24
		Total	3.32	1.50	72

3- «Impression on the Honesty Level»

Table 3:

<i>Dependent Variable</i>	<i>Performance</i>	<i>social origin</i>	<i>Average</i>	<i>Standard deviation</i>	<i>N</i>
<i>Honesty</i>	<i>Failure</i>	Unspecified	5.08	1.443	12
		Low level	6.08	1.165	12
		High level	4.58	1.881	12
		Total	5.25	1.610	36
	<i>Success</i>	Unspecified	4.50	1.382	12
		Low level	5.00	1.206	12
		High level	4.17	1.193	12
		Total	4.56	1.275	36
	<i>Total</i>	Unspecified	4.79	1.414	24
		Low level	5.54	1.285	24
		High level	4.38	1.555	24
		Total	4.90	1.484	72

The student is considered more honest in failure condition ($M = 5, 25$; SD (Standard Deviation) = 1.61), compared to the success condition ($M = 4, 56$; $SD = 1.27$), the difference is significant, $F(1.66) 4.42$; $p < .0001$

The socioeconomic level has a significant effect on this answer. Indeed, the student of lower socioeconomic level ($M = 5.54$; $SD = 1.28$) is considered more honest compared to the one of high level ($M = 4.38$; $SD = 1.95$) and of unspecified level ($M = 4.79$; $SD = 1.41$), the difference is significant. These results confirm our hypothesis that we grant more credibility to students of low socioeconomic level. However, the interaction between the two variables, performance and socioeconomic level is not significant.

DISCUSSION

The aim of our study was to verify, on the basis of assumptions expressed, the combined effect of the performance and of the socioeconomic level on the attribution made by the observer.

We anticipated that the observer make an attribution of the performance of higher socioeconomic level students to their parents' help while the one of their low level counterparts is attributed to their effort, so an internal attribution. The above statistical analyzes show this:

to the observer, students from higher socioeconomic level have more opportunity to benefit from the help of their parents and that, among them, there are more corruption for their success than their low-level counterparts who make more effort for their success.

From the preceding, we retain that, taken as a whole, the results are in line with what we expected; our assumptions are confirmed in all. Authors in their work showed that parents whose standard of living is high have a wide variety of social and cultural resources to support their children in their learning (Calixte, 2007).

The father's occupation appears to play an important role in the academic performance of the children. The children of the labour class are less successful than those of the upper classes (Jodouin, 2003).

In the same logic, Epstein & al. (op. Cit.), Potvin & al. (op. Cit.) stressed the role of parental involvement in the school work of the children as a fundamental element in their academic success. These works reveal not only in the eyes of all, the socioeconomic level is an influential element in the attribution of the performance, but that the observer also uses external attribution in his explanations of the behavior of others. For Harvey, Arkin, Gleason and Johnston (1974), it is when an observer has some expectations of the actor that are not verified that he will have the tendency to attribute the responsibility to the actor. This comes to say that when these expectations are verified, he will attribute the responsibility of the actor's behavior to the situation (external attribution). This could also explain our results regarding the students' external attribution performance to the high socioeconomic level. At another level, the observer makes an internal attribution of the student that is of a low socioeconomic level performance: He attributes it to effort. Weiner (op. Cit.) emphasizes the idea that there is in the society a work ethic that values and rewards the effort systematically. In addition, observers value the actors who they think are making efforts. Some authors have stressed that the relationship between the actor and the observer is crucial. For Jones and Nisbett (op.cit.), when the observer feels close or involved in the behavior or the performance of the actor, he will tend to use more complacency in his explanations of the behavior. Regan and Totten (1975) also point out that when there is empathy between the actor and the

observer, it plays an important role in the judgment of the latter. In these conditions, it is necessary to take into account the emotional and motivational state of the observer in future studies.

CONCLUSION

The results of this study have shown that the socioeconomic background of the subjects induces a significant effect on the performance attribution made by the observer.

Note that the interest of this study can be located at two levels. First, it confirmed that the two dimensions of causal attributions can appear both at the actor's and the observer's. In other words, the observer as well as the actor resorts, in his attributions of the events, to internal / external explanations of the causes. Then, we came to the fact that the observer's attribution operation depends on some contextual factors. The study makes obvious that for subjects of advantageous living conditions, that is to say socially affluent, the observer make external attributions of the performance. As for the subjects of poor living conditions, they rather make internal attributions of the performance. These results are in line with those of Jones and Nisbett (op. Cit.) showing that the actor and the observer do not infer the same causes for an event. It is therefore understandable that the information the subjects take up to formulate these judgments come from two sources that are on the one hand the situation or the environment in which the action takes place, and on the other hand the actor's behavioral history. Jones and Nisbett (Op.cit.) think that the actor and the observer do not have the same environmental approach; they do not take up the same information. These results challenge us on the interest there is to elaborate the students' approach of the performance (Failure / Success) that integrates the social cognitive understanding of the individual.

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