



Review

Toward a theory of the perceived control of the attribution process

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ARTICLE INFO

Article history:

Received 21 December 2013

Revised 27 June 2014

Accepted 1 July 2014

Available online 8 July 2014

Keywords:

Attribution

Perceived control

Self-regulation

Causal reasoning

Cope

ABSTRACT

The attribution process is perhaps the most fundamental internal phenomenon with regard to producing thought and action. Given this fundamentality, a perceived control of the causal reasoning process could be a critical factor in influencing behavioral and psychological outcomes. Accordingly, a model of the perceived control of the attribution process (PCAP) is presented. PCAP consists of two subconstructs: the perceived control of attributions (PCA) which refers to an internal locus of control and perceived capability to make attributions; and the awareness of the motivational consequences of attributions (AMC) which refers to an understanding that attributions have motivational consequences. It is proposed that PCAP allows individuals to adaptively disengage from the attribution process and that this self-regulative mechanism promotes autonomy, persistence and subjective well-being. PCAP is presented in light of the inconsistencies of similar constructs that involve adaptive internal actions but do not necessarily address the perceived capability to take such actions.

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1. Introduction

People are continuously faced with events, situations, and daily stressors that challenge their ability to function adequately within their environment. To deal with these challenges people often engage in internal strategies, actions, or processes. Among these processes is the attribution process, which helps individuals to make sense of the world following stressful events that threaten a perception of control (Heider, 1958; Keinan, 1994; Kelley, 1967). The literature has consistently demonstrated the motivational impact of attributions and the benefits of attributional retraining (see Haynes, Perry, Stupnisky, & Daniels, 2009). However, the way that individuals perceive or believe that they can influence this process has received very little attention.

The attribution process is triggered by daily events that occur in all aspects of life making it a primary component of one's internal phenomena. The fundamentality of this process warrants inquiries regarding individuals' perceptions of causality. Examining a perceived control of the attribution process could be critical in understanding how to help people self-regulate following control-threatening events. Past research on coping (e.g., Lazarus & Folkman, 1984), emotion regulation (Gross, 1998) and secondary control (Heckhausen & Schulz, 1995; Rothbaum, Weisz, & Snyder, 1982) has addressed similar issues; generally, however, they do not focus on one's belief to influence the process. Introduced here is a construct that targets this under-examined concept and contributes importantly to the literature on perceptions of internal phenomena. The construct and model of the perceived control of the attribution process (PCAP) are presented.

PCAP consists of two subconstructs that, together, facilitate a perception of control over the attribution process. That perception of control promotes cognitive actions that help one to circumvent the negative motivational consequences produced by maladaptive causal reasoning. The first subconstruct of PCAP is the perceived control of attributions (PCA) which refers to an internal locus of control over determining the cause of outcomes. This internal locus of control implies a perceived capability to make those determinations, or to influence the causal reasoning process. The second subconstruct is the awareness of the motivational consequences of attributions (AMC). AMC refers to an understanding that those determinations (attributions) are linked to psychological and behavioral consequences (Fishman & Husman, 2013). From a lay perspective, these subconstructs are represented by two naïve theories which are, "I'm the one who determines why things happen and those determinations affect me", respectively. Because these subconstructs are intrinsically linked within the present theory, hereinafter PCAP refers to both PCA and AMC.

These constructs are considered metacognitive because they embody higher-order beliefs about causal thinking. AMC reflects metacognitive knowledge (about the consequences of causal attributions) and PCA reflects a metacognitive belief about causality. Importantly, the term "metacognitive" does not necessarily imply awareness (Borkowski et al., 1987; Gollwitzer & Schaal, 1998). While the perceived control of the attribution process is metacognitive in nature, the cognitive actions facilitated by the beliefs can be taken automatically. It is proposed that there are measurable differences in individuals' metacognitive beliefs of causality and those who adopt the PCAP beliefs experience favorable motivational outcomes compared to their counterparts who do not.

Bandura (1994) suggested that peoples' belief in their capability to cope with threatening or difficult situations affects their levels of stress and motivation. However, theories related to this concept, such as secondary control, seem to focus on the strategy use itself rather than the perceived capability to use the strategies. That is, they do not necessarily distinguish between "I can" and "I do". This is not surprising, as one's perceived capability to take these actions is inevitably linked to the frequency and quality of the actions. Thus, a construct that specifically reflects a belief of control over an internal process is needed to address this concept and to explore the motivational impact of such a belief. In theory, those that perceive control of their attribution process are more likely to experience autonomy, persistence and subjective well-being. The implications of the model will be detailed in a later section along with the model itself. The following sections will convey the rationale for the existence of PCAP and explore the inconsistencies within the literature on secondary control.

1.1. The Origin of PCAP

A truly novel contribution to the concept of control was made by Rothbaum et al. (1982) who introduced a construct called *secondary control* (SC). This construct generally refers to the psychological adjustment one makes to "fit in" with his or her environment. The authors labeled this construct as "secondary" because individuals perceive control not only of their environment (*primary control*) but internally bring themselves in line with environmental forces. Since its introduction, SC has been used in several studies. Work of this kind has inspired new hypotheses, measurement tools, and has been instrumental in much of the literature on coping (Morling & Evered, 2006). However, recent discussion on SC has brought to light the inconsistencies and reinterpretations of the construct that make it difficult to accurately draw conclusions about what it truly is and its influence on behavior (Morling & Evered, 2006, 2007; Skinner, 2007).

Another version of secondary control was introduced by Heckhausen and Schulz (1995) who described SC as a mechanism that "targets the self and attempts to achieve changes directly within the individual" (p. 285). This approach focused more on the active attempts to produce internal outcomes and was characterized exclusively by its target (self) regardless of the context of the event. In recent years debate has ensued about whether Rothbaum et al.'s *fit-focused* approach has more valid claim to the term "secondary control" than Heckhausen and Schulz's *control-focused* conceptualization, and if either should fall under the label of control. From the perspective of *perceived control* which is generally described as one's belief to influence and predict outcomes, with "perceived" indicating a subjective rather than objective capacity (Perry, 2003), it

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