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Original article

## Attributional retraining and achievement goals: An exploratory study on theoretical and empirical relationship



### *Reconversion attributionnelle et buts d'accomplissement : une contribution exploratoire de leurs liens théoriques et empiriques*

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## ARTICLE INFO

## Article history:

Received 23 June 2015

Received in revised form 14 June 2016

Accepted 24 August 2017

## Keywords:

Attributional retraining

Causal attribution

Academic failure

College students

Achievement goals

## ABSTRACT

**Introduction.** – Achievement goals and attribution theory are theoretically and empirically linked, but existing literature lacks to explore the link between achievement goals and attributional retraining (AR), a motivational intervention based on the causal attribution theory.

**Objective(s).** – The aims of this field study were to determine the effectiveness of an AR treatment aimed to restructure college students' dysfunctional causal explanations of poor performance and to explore whether achievement goals are predictive of the use of adaptive causal attributions.

**Methods.** – Students' achievement goals orientation and causal attributions were assessed and AR treatment was provided to a sample of second-year college students with maladaptive attributional schemas. **Results.** – Findings confirmed the effectiveness of AR treatment in restructuring self-defeating stable attributional explanations and suggested that achievement goals are implicated in the adoption of adaptive causal dimensions.

**Conclusion.** – The importance of integrating the two discussed theoretical models in order to provide efficacious AR interventions with students at risk is discussed.

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## R É S U M É

**Introduction.** – La théorie des buts d'accomplissement et la théorie de l'attribution sont théoriquement et empiriquement liées, mais la littérature existante manque d'explorer le lien entre les buts d'accomplissement et la reconversion attributionnelle (RA), une intervention motivationnelle fondée sur la théorie d'attribution causale.

**Objectif(s).** – Les buts de cette étude étaient de déterminer l'efficacité d'un traitement RA visant à restructurer les explications causales des étudiants concernant leur mauvaises performances et d'explorer si les buts d'accomplissement sont prédictifs d'attribution causales adaptatives.

**Méthode.** – Les buts d'accomplissement et les attribution causales d'un échantillon d'étudiants universitaire de deuxième année ont été examiné et un traitement RA a été administré à un sous-échantillon d'étudiants utilisant des attributions causales dysfonctionnelles.

**Résultats.** – Les résultats ont confirmé l'efficacité du traitement RA en terme de diminution de causes stables et suggèrent que les buts d'accomplissement doivent être prise en considération pour comprendre l'adoption d'un style attributif adaptatif.

**Conclusion.** – L'importance d'intégrer les deux approches théoriques afin de proposer un traitement RA efficace pour étudiants en conditions d'échec est discutée et mise en perspective.

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## Mots clés :

Reconversion attributionnelle

Attribution causale

Échec scolaire

Étudiants universitaires

Buts d'accomplissement

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## 1. Introduction

In academic settings, students look for causes for their success or failure and the cause they ascribe to their performance may shape the way students view their academic competence and, as a consequence, may influence their motivation and the subsequent achievement behaviours. For example, a student who attributes poor performance or academic failure to an immutable lack of ability (e.g., “I failed the test because I am not smart”), which is a stable and uncontrollable cause, may, therefore, believe s/he does not have a needed characteristic to succeed in the studies. Consequently, the student will be less motivated to continue and to put a lot of effort into studying and on subsequent tasks, and this situation probably will produce a feelings of hopelessness, decreased motivation, lack of achievement striving, and, as a result, future negative performance. Students who feel they can control academic outcomes – that is who attributes their performance to controllable, internal and unstable causes (e.g., “I failed the test because I didn’t study as hard as I could”) – are less likely to fall into the above-mentioned downward spiral of low motivation, lack of achievement striving, and ultimately low levels of academic performance. As a result, students who adopt adaptive attributional patterns are likely to be more motivated and successful than students with self-defeating attributional patterns (e.g., [Perry, Hall, & Ruthig, 2005](#)).

Causal attribution processes are therefore crucial for students’ motivation and research conducted over the last nearly 30 years have confirmed this assumption. Following these research findings, a motivational intervention based on Weiner’s attribution theory ([Weiner, 1985, 1995, 2005](#)) has been designed to foster students’ adaptive attributions: the Attributional Retraining (AR) technique.

The AR technique has had a widespread application and a vast literature has supported its positive influence on academic motivation and performance in college students. However, underlying process variables of the effectiveness of AR treatments still need to be clarified in order to understand how do they mediate the well-established impact of AR. A recent contribution has therefore advanced the idea that the internal, unstable, and controllable attributions encouraged by AR are embedded in mastery goals, which have been found to mediate the treatment effect of AR on academic achievement (GPA) ([Haynes, Perry, Stupnisky, & Daniels, 2010](#)).

Indeed, attributional theory and achievement goals theory are both motivational models developed to explain and predict students’ behaviours and reactions to failure and success events (for a review: [Wolters, Fan, & Daugherty, 2013](#)). Achievement goals orientations refer to broader approaches students take to their learning and with respect to developing competence ([Wigfield & Cambria, 2010](#)) that serve as “a guide for future behavior” ([Elliot & Murayama, 2008](#), p. 614). Likewise the attributional theory, achievement goals theory was developed to understand students’ adaptive and maladaptive reactions to achievement tasks (e.g., [Nicholls, 1984](#)). The two theories are bonded from their origin, as “people with different goals will perceive and attribute their (as well as others’) performance in accordance with their own goals” ([Nicholls, Cheung, Lauer, & Patashnick, 1989](#), p. 69).

Despite theoretical and empirical ties ([Wolters et al., 2013](#)), the connection between achievement goals principles and attributional retraining (AR) has never been investigated in depth and the existing research lacks of contributions focussing on achievement goals and adaptive attributional patterns.

The overall purpose of the present field study is to verify the effectiveness of an AR treatment on college students with self-defeating attributional patterns and to explore the extent to which students’ achievement goals orientations may be implicated in the use of adaptive attributional explanations, by comparing an experimental AR treatment group with a control group.

Below, an overview of both the principal theories involved in this study, as well as the main research concerning AR treatment will be presented.

## 2. Attributional theory and attributional retraining

According to Weiner’s attribution theory of motivation and emotions, people look for causes to explain outcomes and events in their lives, especially if unexpected, important, or negative. Many investigations conducted by Weiner (e.g., [Weiner, 1985, 1995, 2005](#)) revealed a three-dimensional structure of causal thinking whose components are the locus, the stability, and the controllability of causes. Along these three causal dimensions, causal attributions made by people can be classified as internal vs external (locus), stable vs unstable over time (stability), and controllable vs uncontrollable by the subject (controllability).

A vast amount of research has proven that causal properties are related to affective states (emotions), which in turn influence achievement motivation, as well as directly motivated behavior (attributional dimensions → emotion → action) (e.g., [Caprara, Pastorelli, & Weiner, 1997](#)). In academic settings, students who adopt adaptive attributional patterns based on unstable and under their control causes, are likely to be more motivated and successful than students with self-defeating attributional patterns (e.g., [Perry et al., 2005](#)) who are more likely to fall into a downward spiral of low motivation, lack of achievement striving, low levels of academic performance. In order to prevent such negative situation and to foster adaptive attributions, AR technique has been designed. AR has been defined as a cognitive motivation treatment ([Boese, Steward, Perry, & Hamm, 2013; Haynes, Daniels, Stupnisky, Perry, & Hladkyj, 2008](#)), a psychotherapeutic motivational intervention ([Hall, Perry, Chipperfield, Clifton, & Haynes, 2006](#)), a therapeutic method ([Perry & Penner, 1990](#)), a remedial intervention ([Hall et al., 2007; Menec et al., 1994](#)) or, simply, a motivation treatment ([Hamm, Perry, Clifton, Chipperfield, & Boese, 2014](#)). AR treatment is aimed at modifying students’ dysfunctional explanatory thinking by encouraging adaptive attributions of poor performance (internal, controllable and unstable explanations, such as lack effort and wrong strategy), in place of maladaptive attributional schemas based on stable and uncontrollable causes (such as lack of academic ability or intelligence). As expected consequence, this improved attributional schema will provide greater motivation to succeed, increased effort and, in turn, improved performance (e.g., [Boese et al., 2013; Haynes et al., 2010](#)).

## 3. The AR treatment procedure

AR intervention typically consists of two main phases: AR induction and AR consolidation. Usually AR induction is an informational session (e.g., via a videotape or an oral/handout presentation) aiming at presenting and summarizing the benefits of functional attributions (e.g., low effort), the opportunity and the advantages of changing dysfunctional, self-defeating causal attributions (e.g., low ability) to more adaptive ones, and offering suggestions concerning students’ causal thinking about failure. AR induction is usually reinforced by a consolidation phase, aiming at working in depth on the attributional information. Consolidation activities have included several activities such as group discussion (e.g., [Perry & Struthers, 1994](#)) or writing assignments including primarily cognitive or affect-oriented content (e.g., [Hall et al., 2006, Hall et al., 2007; Van Overwalle & Metsenaere, 1990](#)).

AR intervention programs have been realized across various educational settings (i.e. primary, secondary and tertiary levels of study) and positive effects were found in several academic areas (i.e. mathematics, physics, first year psychology undergraduate

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