

## **The Attributional Style Questionnaire<sup>1</sup>**

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*Of current interest are the causal attributions offered by depressives for the good and bad events in their lives. One important attributional account of depression is the reformulated learned helplessness model, which proposes that depressive symptoms are associated with an attributional style in which uncontrollable bad events are attributed to internal (versus external), stable (versus unstable), and global (versus specific) causes. We describe the Attributional Style Questionnaire, which measures individual differences in the use of these attributional dimensions. We report means, reliabilities, intercorrelations, and test-retest stabilities for a sample of 130 undergraduates. Evidence for the questionnaire's validity is discussed. The Attributional Style Questionnaire promises to be a reliable and valid instrument.*

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Depression has recently been conceptualized as a cognitive disorder (Beck, 1967, 1976); in particular, a number of theorists have further suggested that depressive symptoms might be profitably understood by taking into account the causal attributions offered by depressives for the good and bad events in their lives (e.g., Abramson & Sackeim, 1977; Abramson, Seligman, & Teasdale, 1978; Golin, Sweeney, & Shaeffer, 1981; Gong-Guy & Hammen, 1980; Harvey, 1981; Ickes & Leyden, 1978; Janoff-Bulman, 1979; Klein, Fencil-Morse, & Seligman, 1976; Kuiper, 1978; Miller & Norman, 1981; Peterson, 1979; Peterson, Schwartz, & Seligman, 1981; Rizley, 1978; Seligman, Abramson, Semmel, & von Baeyer, 1979; Wortman & Dintzer, 1978). All of these attributional theories of depression propose that depressives and nondepressives differ in their causal judgments and that these differences are closely linked to the presence and extent of depressive symptomatology. Some theories hypothesize that a particular style of making attributions is a demonstrable risk factor for subsequent depression (e.g., Golin et al., 1981).

One of the most important attributional accounts of depression is the reformulated learned helplessness model (Abramson et al., 1978). According to this model, depression is the result of experience with uncontrollable aversive events. However, the nature of the depression following uncontrollable events is governed by the causal attributions the individual makes for them. If they are seen as caused by something about the person (*internal attributions*), as opposed to something about the situation (*external attributions*), then the resulting depression is hypothesized to involve loss of self-esteem. If the uncontrollable events are attributed to nontransient factors (*stable attributions*), in contrast to transient ones (*unstable attributions*), then the depressive symptoms are expected to be long-lasting. Finally, if the uncontrollable events are attributed to causes present in a variety of situations (*global attributions*), as opposed to more circumscribed causes (*specific attributions*), then the ensuing depression is proposed to be pervasive.

Thus, the reformulated learned helplessness model holds that attributing uncontrollable bad events to internal, stable, and global factors leads to depression. To the extent that individuals show characteristic attributional tendencies, it is appropriate to speak of an attributional style. The present paper describes a measure of attributional styles. This instrument yields scores for individual differences in the tendencies to attribute the causes of bad and good events to internal (versus external), stable (versus unstable), and global (versus specific) factors. We describe this Attributional Style Questionnaire (ASQ), its instructions, items, and scoring, and present such data as item and scale means and standard deviations, scale intercorrelations and reliabilities, and test-retest stabilities.

Some suggestions for the questionnaire's use are also made. Finally, we present validity evidence for the ASQ.

## METHOD

### *Development of the Questionnaire*

Several considerations led to the format employed. We wanted questions that would measure the degree to which subjects used the attributional dimensions of internality, stability, and globality as defined by Abramson et al. (1978). However, it seemed a poor idea to provide the subjects with possible causes, e.g., ability, effort, luck, task difficulty, and so on, that we believed to correspond to the dimensions of concern, since such an operationalization has in the past proven to be problematical. First, there is no guarantee that an attribution regarded by an attribution theorist as, for example, unstable is so regarded by all subjects; some may believe that low effort is a stable characteristic of the individual, while others may perceive it as unstable. Second, Abramson et al. (1978) argued that ability, effort, luck, and task difficulty are theoretically orthogonal to the global-specific distinction. Falbo and Beck (1979) have shown that causal attributions assumed by Weiner (1974) and other attribution theorists to operationalize internal-external and stable-unstable neither occur preponderantly in the free responses of subjects nor cluster as expected.<sup>3</sup>

On the other hand, Ross's (1977) observation that the coding of causal attributions into abstract categories depends more on the (theoretically irrelevant) grammatical form of the attribution than on its actual meaning argues against the use of completely open-ended questions. Elig and Frieze (1979) reported that open-ended attributional measures are not as reliable as fixed-format procedures. Thus, a reasonable compromise, which we employed, was to ask subjects to generate a cause themselves for each of a number of events and then to rate the cause along 7-point scales corresponding to the internality, stability, and globality dimensions. The format does not constrain or create the causal attributions made by the

<sup>3</sup>Weiner (1980) recently argued that specific attributions and their dimensional representations have distinguishable (although related) effects on subsequent affect and behavior. Because the concern here is with attributional *style*, only the dimensional ratings are of interest. However, Weiner's (1980) argument is well taken, and the possibility that the specific attributions offered by depressives clarify their symptomatology in ways above and beyond that provided by consideration of the internality, stability, and globality ratings is likely (cf. Peterson et al., 1981).

subject but at the same time allows simple and objective quantification of responses.

### *Administration*

The questionnaire is group-administered, with the following directions appearing on the first page of the test booklet:

Please try to vividly imagine yourself in the situations that follow. If such a situation happened to you, what would you feel would have caused it? While events may have many causes, we want you to pick only one—the *major* cause if this event happened to *you*. Please write this cause in the blank provided after each event. Next we want you to answer some questions about the *cause* and a final question about the *situation*. To summarize, we want you to:

1. Read each situation and vividly imagine it happening to you.
2. Decide what you feel would be the *major* cause of the situation if it happened to you.
3. Write one cause in the blank provided.
4. Answer three questions about the *cause*.
5. Answer one question about the *situation*.
6. Go on to the next situation.

Following these instructions are 12 different hypothetical events. Half are good events, while half are bad events.<sup>4</sup> Additionally, half the events are interpersonal/affiliative, while the other half are achievement-related. This latter distinction was made to build cross-situational generality into the measure of this “style,” as well as to allow for the possibility that attributional style for affiliative events is different from attributional style for achievement events.<sup>5</sup>

A preliminary version of the scale was pilot-tested in a sample of 145 introductory psychology students at the University of Pennsylvania. Item analysis revealed that 3 of the 12 events produced low variance in ratings and low item-total correlations, due to a tendency of most subjects to rate these items near the middle of each scale. These three event

<sup>4</sup>These designations were confirmed by asking a sample of undergraduates at the University of Pennsylvania to rate the events along several semantic differential scales tapping evaluation. The “good” events were clearly perceived as more desirable than the “bad” events. Although depressive symptoms as assessed with the Beck Depression Inventory (Beck, 1967) influenced these ratings, the distinction between “good” and “bad” events was consistently maintained regardless of the extent of symptomatology.

<sup>5</sup>Judges were able to distinguish the affiliative events from the achievement events, but it is acknowledged that there is not always a precise demarcation between such classes of events, or at least between those used here. Thus, the failure of our subjects to respond differentially to affiliative and achievement items (see below) is not surprising. For a discussion of domain-specific attributional measures, see Lefcourt (1979).

**Table 1.** Hypothetical Events of the Attributional Style Questionnaire

Outcome	Goal area	Events <sup>a</sup>
Good	Achievement	(3) You become very rich. (10) You apply for a position that you want very badly (e.g., important job, graduate school admission) and you get it.
Good	Affiliation	(12) You get a raise. (1) You meet a friend who compliments you on your appearance. (6) You do a project that is highly praised.
Bad	Achievement	(9) Your spouse (boyfriend/girl friend) has been treating you more lovingly. (2) You have been looking for a job unsuccessfully for some time. (5) You give an important talk in front of a group and the audience reacts negatively.
Bad	Affiliation	(8) You can't get all the work done that others expect of you. (4) A friend comes to you with a problem and you don't try to help. (7) You meet a friend who acts hostilely toward you. (11) You go out on a date and it goes badly.

<sup>a</sup>Numbers in parentheses refer to the order of the events in the actual questionnaire.

descriptions were rewritten to produce the version of the scale that is reported here.<sup>6</sup> The twelve event descriptions are shown in Table I, along with their designations as good or bad and affiliation or achievement.

Following each event are parallel questions. First, the subject is asked to "write down the *one* major cause" of the event. Then the subject is asked to rate the *cause* along the three attributional dimensions. Also, the subject is asked to rate the importance of the situation described.<sup>7</sup> The wording of

<sup>6</sup>The version of the questionnaire appearing in this paper is available on request from M. E. P. Seligman, University of Pennsylvania, 3813-15 Walnut Street, Psychology Department, Philadelphia, PA 19104.

<sup>7</sup>The importance ratings were included in light of the possibility that the proposed relationship of attributional style and depression would occur only for important events, or more strongly for important events than for unimportant events. However, analyses of the present data revealed that the importance variable did not consistently mediate the attribution-depression correlation (cf. Gong-Guy & Hammen, 1980).

the various questions reflects the specific event to be explained, but the following example illustrates the nature of these questions:

You have been looking for a job unsuccessfully for some time.

1. Write down the *one* major cause \_\_\_\_\_.
2. Is the cause of your unsuccessful job search due to something about you or to something about other people or circumstances? (circle one number)
 

Totally due to other people or circumstances	1 2 3 4 5 6 7	Totally due to me
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3. In the future when looking for a job, will this cause again be present? (circle one number)
 

Will never again be present	1 2 3 4 5 6 7	Will always be present
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4. Is the cause something that just influences looking for a job or does it also influence other areas of your life? (circle one number)
 

Influences just this particular situation	1 2 3 4 5 6 7	Influences all situations in my life
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5. How important would this situation be if it happened to you? (circle one number)
 

Not at all important	1 2 3 4 5 6 7	Extremely important
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### *Scoring*

The three attributional dimension rating scales associated with each event description are scored in the directions of increasing internality, stability, and globality. Composite scores are created simply by summing the appropriate items and dividing the sum by the number of items in the composite.<sup>8</sup>

The construction of the scale allows for the derivation of 20 different subscales based on different composites of items. At the finest level of analysis, one can derive 12 subscales based on three items each (e.g., rated stability of the attributions for the three good-outcome achievement-related events). Collapsing across the achievement-affiliation distinction, one can obtain six subscales based on six items each (e.g., rated stability of the attributions for the six good-outcome events). Finally, one can combine the internality, stability, and globality scales into two composite attributional style scores, one for good and one for bad events, based on 18 items each.

<sup>8</sup>This scoring procedure has the effect of according each item equal status, since (as will be seen) they tended to have comparable means and standard deviations. However, other researchers are cautioned against summing items when they are greatly discrepant with regard to means and/or standard deviations, since this unweighted procedure would give some items more weight than others in the composite. In the case of such discrepancies, it is recommended that the items be normalized (i.e., subtract the item mean for the sample from the item score and divide by the item standard deviation for the sample).

### Subjects

The questionnaire was completed during class by 130 undergraduates (50 males, 80 females) enrolled in an abnormal psychology course at the State University of New York at Stony Brook. Five weeks later, the questionnaire was again completed by 100 of these students.

## RESULTS

*Sex Differences.* When the analyses reported below were computed separately for males and females, no differences were found. Thus, the data were pooled across this distinction.

*Means and Standard Deviations.* Table II presents the item and scale means and standard deviations. As can be seen, these values were more comparable within the bad items and within the good items than they were between bad and good items. Good events tended to be explained more internally, stably, and globally than bad events ( $p$ 's < .0001), hardly a surprising finding (cf. Weiner, 1974), at least in a mostly nondepressed population.

**Table II.** Item and Scale Means and Standard Deviations: Undergraduate Sample ( $N = 130$ )

Event (see Table I)	Item means (standard deviations)		
	Internality	Stability	Globality
Rich	4.30(2.04)	4.62(1.89)	5.15(1.84)
Position	5.67(1.26)	5.71 (.99)	5.40(1.25)
Raise	5.93(1.06)	5.49(1.08)	5.43(1.37)
Compliment	5.39(1.33)	5.05(1.07)	4.76(1.59)
Praise	5.31(1.59)	5.78 (.93)	5.03(1.51)
Loving	4.94(1.39)	5.49(1.01)	4.89(1.68)
Dimensions for good events	5.26 (.79)	5.36 (.68)	5.11 (.80)
Composite style for good events	5.25 (.62)		
Unsuccessful	4.31(1.71)	4.27(1.41)	3.31(1.91)
Negative talk	4.57(1.64)	4.11(1.24)	3.86(1.69)
Can't finish work	4.57(1.63)	4.67(1.16)	4.49(1.47)
Friend's problem	4.41(1.88)	3.51(1.37)	3.98(1.90)
Hostility	3.80(1.63)	3.87(1.19)	3.53(1.72)
Bad date	4.06(1.13)	4.39(1.10)	4.05(1.59)
Dimensions for bad events	4.29 (.84)	4.14 (.71)	3.87(1.07)
Composite style for bad events	4.12 (.64)		

**Table III.** Dimension Reliabilities and Intercorrelations ( $N = 130$ )

Dimension	1	2	3	4	5	6
Good						
1. Internality	(.50) <sup>b</sup>					
2. Stability	.62 <sup>a</sup>	(.58)				
3. Globality	.38 <sup>a</sup>	.59 <sup>a</sup>	(.44)			
Bad						
4. Internality	.11	.01	-.03	(.46)		
5. Stability	-.17	-.07	.03	.18 <sup>a</sup>	(.59)	
6. Globality	-.15	.04	.24 <sup>a</sup>	.28 <sup>a</sup>	.45 <sup>a</sup>	(.69)

<sup>a</sup> $p < .05$ .<sup>b</sup>Figures in parentheses are reliabilities estimated by Cronbach's (1951) coefficient alpha.

*Internal Consistency.* The internal reliability of each subscale was estimated using Cronbach's (1951) coefficient alpha. Respectable alpha coefficients of .75 and .72 were obtained for the composite attributional style scales for good events and bad events, respectively. These scales were based on 18 ratings each.

The six-item subscales reflecting separate attributional dimensions achieved a mean reliability of .54 (range from .44 to .69); the exact coefficients are reported in Table III. At the finest level of analysis, three-item subscales were derived. These subscales did not attain sufficient reliability to make them useful in future research (mean alpha = .38; range .21 to .53).

*Consistency Across Goal Areas (achievement-affiliation).* Ratings of internality, stability, and globality for achievement events were significantly correlated with the respective ratings for affiliation events (separately for good and bad outcomes). These correlations had a mean of .37 and a range from .23 to .59 (all  $p$ 's < .05). The correlations match or exceed the reliabilities of the respective subscales. Thus, there is no evidence for the discriminability of achievement from affiliative goal areas. While this failure to distinguish achievement from affiliation items may be a fault of the scale, it may well reflect an actual failure of discrimination by the subjects. Particularly in an American college sample, affiliation may be viewed in economic and achievement terms, and attributions about affiliation may overlap greatly with attributions about achievement.

We counsel the researcher not to bother making a distinction between these items unless there is a specific interest in comparing correlations of achievement and affiliation subscales to external criteria that distinctly pertain to each of these goal areas. If only one type of external criterion is used, prediction from the ASQ is likely to be improved by using the composites collapsed across goal areas rather than the separate subscales.



*Consistency Across Outcomes (good-bad).* We have found that composite attributional style scores based on all of the items for bad events and on all of the items for good events are more strongly related to depression than are the individual attributional dimensions (Seligman et al., 1979). Moreover, these attributional style composites are unrelated to each other, with a correlation of .02 in the present sample. Separate correlations for each attributional dimension appear in Table III. The lack of correlation between corresponding ratings for good and bad events underscores the importance of dividing the data along these lines. High internality for good events does not necessarily imply high internality for bad events, and conceptions that confound the two (e.g., Rotter, 1966) are not maximizing the power of the concept.

*Intercorrelations of Dimensions (internal-stable-global).* In Table III, the intercorrelations of the individual attributional dimensions are presented, together with their reliabilities, means, and standard deviations. For the good events, the individual attributional dimensions were intercorrelated at a level near that of their reliabilities, suggesting that the present questionnaire did not succeed in distinguishing them. The distinctiveness of the three dimensions was more adequate for the bad events.

Why is there less discrimination among internality, stability, and globality for good events? Perhaps people make fewer distinctions among good events since they may not spend as much time ruminating over them as they do over bad events, and may attend more to the causes of bad events (cf. Langer, 1978; Peirce, 1955, pp. 9-12; Ryle, 1949).

If a researcher expects differential relationships between these dimensions and some other variable, as, for example, the helplessness reformulation does in according the internality dimension the role of determining self-esteem, or stability for bad events the role of determining time course of helplessness effects, then the dimensions should be separately employed. Otherwise, though, the researcher should use the composite

**Table IV.** Test-Retest Correlations ( $N = 100$ )

	<i>r</i>
Attributional dimension for good events	
Internality	.58 <sup>a</sup>
Stability	.65 <sup>a</sup>
Globality	.59 <sup>a</sup>
Composite	.70 <sup>a</sup>
Attributional dimension for bad events	
Internality	.64 <sup>a</sup>
Stability	.69 <sup>a</sup>
Globality	.57 <sup>a</sup>
Composite	.64 <sup>a</sup>

<sup>a</sup> $p < .001$ .

scores, particularly for good events. The use of fewer subscales possessing higher reliability will also facilitate data analysis.

*Stability.* Table IV summarizes the 5-week test-retest correlations of the attributional dimensions and the composites. These are respectably high, as we had hoped since the scores are hypothesized to represent a "style." It is worth observing that not all measures of putative cognitive "styles" prove to be so reliable, either internally or across time (cf. Goldstein & Blackman, 1978; Streufert & Streufert, 1978), so this finding should be underscored.<sup>9</sup>

## DISCUSSION

The present paper has reviewed some of the psychometric properties of the Attributional Style Questionnaire. Compared to other scales in their initial stages of development, this questionnaire seems satisfactory in terms of the internal consistency and stability of its composites. The discrimination between the individual dimensions was not particularly precise, especially for good events. We have speculated that this may reflect the rough-grained nature of actual attributions about good events.

We are now engaged in alternative means of assessing attributional style, so that the method variance associated with such assessments can be estimated. In addition to this multimethod approach, we are attempting to assess the degree to which attributional style is actually a style. Work in personality research and attitude measurement implies that some people have consistent styles, while other people are inconsistent. We are also exploring the relationship of this scale to other conceptually related scales.

In closing, we wish to discuss briefly some data bearing on the validity of the ASQ. A number of lines of evidence, described by Peterson and Seligman (Note 1), show that the ASQ yields scores that are related as expected to a variety of other variables.

1. As predicted by the learned helplessness reformulation, a style in which internal, stable, and global attributions are offered for bad events is associated with depressive symptoms in college students, adults, outpatients, and inpatients; to a lesser degree, the opposite style for attributing good events is also associated with depression (Seligman et al., 1979). In these studies, depressive symptoms have been variously measured by self-report questionnaires and by formal diagnosis. The individual dimensions

<sup>9</sup>In the present sample, attrition between the two testing sessions was 23%. However, it is unlikely that this attrition influenced the results, since in another sample of undergraduates, with attrition of 4.5% over a 6-week interval, test-retest stabilities were comparable.

(and of course the composites) are consistently correlated with the extent of depressive symptomatology. Yet to be investigated in a depressed population are the specific roles assigned the individual attributional dimensions by the helplessness reformulation.

2. In a cross-lagged panel design, Golin et al. (1981) found that ASQ scores predict which college students would develop depressive symptoms 1 month later.

3. Similarly, we have found that ASQ scores are associated with the development of depressive symptoms following poor performance by college students on a midterm examination. This finding has been replicated several times.

4. In several studies, we have shown that ASQ scores correlate positively with actual attributions made by subjects for specific events, such as rejection in a dating situation, poor performance at laboratory tasks, and the occurrence of stressful life events.

5. When "naturally" occurring attributions are extracted from therapy transcripts and rated blindly along our three attributional dimensions, high correlations with the therapist's ratings of depression are observed.

6. When subjects in a learned helplessness laboratory paradigm (e.g., Hiroto & Seligman, 1975) are divided into high and low groups based on stability scores for bad events, only those in the high group showed helplessness deficits 3 days after experience with uncontrollable events. This finding remains even when internality and globality scores are used as covariates. Thus, the specific role hypothesized for the stability dimension is supported in a helplessness paradigm.

7. Similarly, when learned helplessness laboratory subjects are divided into high and low groups based on globality scores for bad events, only those in the high group showed helplessness deficits at a task highly dissimilar to the pretreatment task. Again, this finding remains even when the other ASQ scores are held constant.

Overall, then, we conclude that the ASQ has considerable construct, criterion, and content validity. Its reliability is satisfactory. Further work is needed that addresses the reliability and validity of the individual dimensions. On the whole, the Attributional Style Questionnaire promises to be a useful means for assessing habitual tendencies in the attributions of causes.

## REFERENCE NOTE

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