

Causal attributions

- Why did I fail my driving test?
- Why do I find it so difficult to learn a foreign language?
- Why did I get such a poor grade in the course?
- Why did I not get the job?

When we ask ourselves questions like these, what do we want to know?

What else do you notice about the questions?

When we make a *causal attribution*, we want to know *why* something happened. We want to know the causes of something – an event, an outcome, a behaviour.

We tend to do this after certain types of outcomes or events. What types? (Look at the example questions again.)

We tend to make causal attributions after outcomes or events that are:

- negative
- important to us
- surprising

Think back to the questions you discussed earlier:

1 In which presentation(s) this semester did you not do as well as you wanted?

2 Why did you not do as well as you wanted?

For question 2, you were making attributions (trying to explain why the presentation did not go so well).

The most common types of attribution are:

- ability (I'm just not good at languages)
- effort (I guess I didn't really study that much)

Did you think of reasons like these when you answered question (2) earlier?

We think of causes (attributions in different ways):

- Is the cause inside me (internal) or outside me (external)? This is the *locus* of an attribution.
- Will the cause stay the same in the future or can it change over time? This is the *stability* of an attribution.
- Do I have control over the cause or not? This is the *controllability* of an attribution.

So, attributions differ in the way we perceive where they lie (locus), whether they can change in the future (stability), and whether we have control over them.

Why do you think this is important?

The attributions we make (especially we make the same type over a long period of time) can have consequences on:

- the way we *think* about outcomes (lack of ability or lack of effort?)
- the way we *feel* about outcomes (ashamed, guilty?)
- our expectations about what outcomes will occur in the future (will I do better next time or fail again?)
- our motivation (is there any point in working for a better outcome?)
- our behaviour (should I continue or give up?)

So, different attributions have different consequences.

Attributions that tend to have negative consequences are *maladaptive*.

Attributions that tend to have positive consequences are *adaptive*.

Take a look again at the handout again. Can you see why it is better to make adaptive attributions than maladaptive attributions?

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Think of possible ability and effort attributions for these questions.

How would you describe the attributions in terms of locus, stability, and controllability?