Reflections and Reviews

Attributional Thoughts about Consumer Behavior

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Two fundamental principles from attribution theory were examined for the role they might play in the psychology of the consumer. They are: (1) perceptions of causality along a stability dimension influence the anticipated likelihood of product satisfaction, and (2) perceptions of causality along a controllability dimension influence judgments of responsibility and retributive actions. Comments about the longevity of an attributional framework, methodological recommendations, and the heuristic value of the theory also are included.

A pet psychological theory, like a cat or a dog, has a life of about 10–12 years, which is the equivalent of around 70–84 years of human existence. Longevity in part depends on the size of the pet (the bigger the theory, the earlier the demise), its level of activity, breed, and so on. At around the age of 10, the theory begins to weaken, does not see things too well, and is unable to adapt to the new circumstances and to the many obstacles in life. It can remember and account for the distant past better than recent events, and it acts with rigidity.

Attribution theory was officially born with the publication of Fritz Heider’s (1958) book, the Psychology of Interpersonal Relations. It could be argued, however, that its real life began with Harold Kelley’s (1967) analysis of the attribution process, or even with the Edward Jones et al. (1971) compendium, Attribution: Perceiving the Causes of Behavior. The date of birth in part depends on one’s philosophical view of whether the beginning of life is defined as the moment of conception or the time when certain structures are formed. In any case, depending on the accepted date of birth, attribution theory is anywhere between 112 and 294 years old, a very long time for a pet to live. My neighbor’s cat reached the age of 22 (or 154 years in human equivalency), so this life span is not unheard of among pets. But it is rare, among both animal pets and pet theories.

Why has attribution theory endured so long and outlived its theoretical peers, including, for example, dissonance and other forms of balance, social comparison, and self-perception? We do still celebrate these old friends, and their memories do linger, but they must be regarded as no longer exhibiting elan vital. To what, then, do we attribute the vitality of attribution theory?

One reason for this longevity is that attribution theory focuses upon the universal concern with explanation—why a particular event, or state, or outcome has come about and the consequences of phenomenal causality. Hence, it is not only of use and interest to social psychologists, but to those in other branches of psychology and in related disciplines as well. This cross-field fertilization has stimulated the theory and breathed in new life when it was in the autumn of existence. For cognitive psychologists, their general interest in epistemology and in causal inference provided impetus for an examination and reformulation of attributional principles. For clinical psychologists, concern that the onset of depression might be brought about by dysfunctional causal beliefs and that recidivism is promoted by accusations from family members that the ill individual is to blame (a sinner rather than merely sick) brought new attributional thinking.

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For personality psychologists, designating individuals as differing in their desire for understanding and closure, and as optimists or pessimists based on their causal inferences, resulted in new research directions. And for the educational psychologist, concern with explanation for success and failure by pupils and their teachers provided avenues for attributional expansion. And these represent just some of the tentacles that grew from the attributional body.

All this brings me to the current audience: Why have consumer researchers not been more influenced by attributional thinking (assuming I am not underestimating its inroads; for exceptions, see, e.g., Folkes (1984; Oliver [1997]), and what might be some directions worth pursuing? After all, consumers purchase products; these acquisitions meet with positive or negative end states; the consumer then reaches an attributional conclusion regarding why the outcome was “good” or “poor” (particularly the latter); and this conclusion surely influences their subsequent consumer-related behavior. From my naive perspective, what better breeding ground could there be for attributional thinking to take hold?

I cannot supply an answer to the question of the relative absence of attribution theory in consumer psychology. Perhaps some of the readers can help. Or perhaps I overestimate what a docile pet I have, and others should not be concerned about taking it for a walk. So, instead I will propose some topics for investigation, some research directions that fit well within an attributional rubric and may be fruitful for the readers of this journal. Along the way I introduce some principles of attribution theory and clarify some aspects of the conception that I think have been misunderstood. Indeed, the research directions to be discussed were in part selected because they provide an opportunity for theoretical elucidation.

**SUBJECTIVE LIKELIHOOD OF PRODUCT SATISFACTION**

Rational choice theory, and even less rational versions of this general approach, contend that product selection is in part determined by the anticipated satisfaction with that product. Consumers wonder if the purchase will turn out "good" or "bad," if the product will "work" or not, whether he or she will be "satisfied" or "dissatisfied." It is inconceivable to argue that this inference is not a determinant of product choice in virtually all instances in which consumer decisions are made.

What, then, determines the expectancy of “success,” or the subjective likelihood of personal satisfaction for each of a number of alternative choices? Prior to any initial choice, the antecedents of expected satisfaction are numerous and primarily nonattributional. For example, I may purchase a particular product because it is first on the list in Consumer Reports, because a friend speaks highly of it, because I am convinced by an advertisement, and on and on. These are not entirely nonattributional in that I may, for example, discard my friend’s opinion because I know that he likes everything—that is, I ascribe the liking to his disposition rather than to the characteristics of the product. For the most part, though, these determinants of predecisional anticipations are beyond the range of convenience of attributional thinking.

Attributions play their role in post-initial outcome decision making; that is, attributions intervene and exert their influence after a product-related outcome and prior to the next choice. Attributions arise when one evaluates the extent to which the initial product performance corresponds to one’s level of aspiration vis-à-vis that product, and one then questions the cause of the outcome. It has been definitively documented that attributional search is more likely following failure (dissatisfaction, in this case) rather than after success (or satisfaction). After all, we typically do not ask why we did well on an exam, or why a submitted paper was accepted, but rather why we failed and why our manuscript was rejected. And we do not ask why a product “worked,” but why it did not function.

There is a very simple attributional principle addressing the issue of subjective likelihood of success (satisfaction) after attainment or nonattainment of a goal. It states that if an outcome (whether positive or negative) is ascribed to a stable cause (i.e., one that is enduring over time), then the same outcome will be anticipated in the future. On the other hand, ascription to an unstable cause (one that is temporary) implies that the future may not be the same as the past, so either subsequent outcomes remain uncertain or there is an anticipation that the future will differ from the immediate past (see Weiner 1985, 1986). This is merely restating part of the logic of Western thought about causal reasoning.

What significance, if any, might this have for consumer researchers?

Let me express a few thoughts:

1. Some products lend themselves to stable attributions. For example, if I do not enjoy the taste of a breakfast cereal (or any other mass-produced product that minimizes variability), then I will not purchase it again. After all, I expect that the next box of cereal will taste the same. Perhaps there is a chance that a hole in my tooth made the sweetness of the cereal unpleasant. This is now an unstable cause (assuming I plan on going to the dentist) so that, if I attribute my disliking to this temporary state, then I am uncertain about my future liking or disliking of the cereal and may try it again (i.e., I discount the properties of the cereal as the cause of my dissatisfaction).

2. Some products are more readily associated with unstable attributions. For example, the labels "lemon" and "bad (rotten) apple" imply a bad purchase of a good product (just as a confession often signals a bad act committed by a good person). It is of interest that both the lemon and apple metaphors are fruit-derived, a commodity subject to unknown fluctuations between seemingly identical entities. If one purchases a “lemon” (most often applied to cars, where workmanship is perceived to vary) and if granted a refund, then the consumer should be willing to repurchase the same product with little drop in expectancy of satisfaction relative to the initial choice.
3. Expectancies of satisfaction after repeated positive or negative experiences with a product are “frozen,” that is, they are difficult to alter. Thus, if one repeatedly buys delicious pies from a shop, and the next pie consumed is less than mouth watering, then the customer is still likely to return to that shop inasmuch as the poorness of the last pie is likely to be ascribed to an unstable factor (e.g., the cook was inattentive, the fruit was not fresh). Because of this unstable ascription, the future expectancy of a satisfactory purchase will be little changed. Perhaps this is the mechanism responsible for “product loyalty.” A psychological equivalent process is illustrated when a person with high self-esteem and high expectancy of success meets with a failure. This outcome is ascribed to bad luck or to some temporary external circumstance, hence maintaining personal esteem and success likelihoods. Of course, repeated failures (and a series of bad pies) will eventually result in an attributional reevaluation. One cannot logically make unstable attributions for repeated events. Conversely, the purchase of another good pie will not elicit attributional search and, if for some reason an attribution is called forth, it will be to some stable characteristics (e.g., a good cook, the bakery always has high-quality ingredients, and so on).

The opposite of this, satisfaction following a series of unsatisfying experience, is unlikely because there typically is not repeated purchase of a poorly evaluated product. However, this could occur if there was only one alternative available and it was needed (e.g., I must fly with an airline I dislike because it is the only one with connections to my destination). The reverse process then holds: a “good” flight will be ascribed to some unstable attribution such as favorable winds, the absence of airline traffic because it is the day of a holiday, etc. Conversely, another poor flight will be ascribed to the stable cause of a poorly managed company, untrained personnel, etc. This is the psychological equivalent of a person low in self-esteem with low success expectancies who ascribes success to good luck but failure to low ability. Paradoxically, the greater the divergence from expectation, the less the likelihood of expectancy shift because the attributions then are more likely to be made to atypical (unstable) causes. Anticipatory change requires a series of outcomes growing in positivity so that the attributions can gradually shift to stable factors.

The process that has been intimated regarding the subjective likelihood of product satisfaction is represented in Figure 1. There are a number of omissions in that process.

As already indicated, there are many determinants of consumer behavior in addition to anticipated product satisfaction, and these are not included. This discussion was limited to attributional influence. Further, there is a noticeable absence of emotion. In other writings (e.g., Weiner 1995), I have emphasized the role of emotion as mediating between attributions and behavior. Perhaps in the process model described above, hope and fear should be designated as possible affects that mediate between expectancy of satisfaction and choice. This is elaborated later in the essay.

In the following section of the essay I emphasize affective involvement. In addition, I turn to an interpersonal setting where the emotions are directed outward, toward individuals linked with the product.

**BLAMING OTHERS FOR PRODUCT DISSATISFACTION**

Causal stability is one of three known properties of phenomenal causality. The other two characteristics are causal locus, that is, whether the cause resides within or outside of the actor, and causal controllability, that is, the degree to which the cause is subject to volitional alteration and the outcome “could have been otherwise.” For consumers, if there is outcome dissatisfaction, the cause might be self-ascribed (“I am just no good with computers”) or be attributed to the product (“This computer is not user-friendly”). It is intuitively evident that the attribution selected between these two will guide subsequent computer choice. Causal locus also influences affective reactions to product performance. A consumer may feel pride in selection of a “good” product (ascription of success to the self). On the other hand, if a “bad” choice was made because of insufficient attention and reflection, then the buyer could experience guilt, whereas if there is a poor selection because of inability to distinguish good from bad (as when asked to purchase, e.g., a tire or, perhaps, a camera), then embarrassment or humiliation may be elicited. Guilt and embarrassment thus also are linked to the locus dimension of causality. These affective reactions are likely to influence subsequent product decisions.

More central in this context, the cause of consumer unhappiness might be attributed to external causes that are either uncontrollable (“The flight was delayed because of a blinding snowstorm”) or controllable (“The personnel are poorly trained so that boarding takes forever”) by the service

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![Figure 1](image_url)

**THE ATTRIBUTIONAL PROCESS CAPTURING EXPECTANCY OF PRODUCT SATISFACTION**

Product/Service Outcome → Attributional search → Attribution →
Attributional property (stability) → Likelihood of future satisfaction →
Future consumer behavior (choice, advising others, etc.)
or product company. Perceptions of controllability are of special interest because they link to inferences regarding personal responsibility, moral judgments, and moral emotions, including anger, sympathy, and gratitude, so that they are at the very heart of social behavior.

If one purchases a cereal and then does not like the taste, there is likely to be dissatisfaction, unhappiness (mild, in this case), and perhaps even frustration—all negative emotional states brought about by lack of goal attainment. The buyer also is not likely to purchase this product again (mediated by causal stability), at least not for personal consumption. But he or she is not angry at the company. Harm was not intended, nor has there been negligence in the production process.

But let us imagine that instead of disliking the taste of the cereal, the purchaser finds a fly in the cereal box (bringing disgust even as I write). In this case, the emotional reaction will not be mere unhappiness. Anger is likely to be experienced, along with related emotions that capture moral outrage. In this example, the negative outcome is attributed to something that the company should have controlled: they were negligent in the production process—this never "should" have happened, it "ought" not to have happened. That is, a moral code of conduct has been broken (of course, this attribution may or may not be "correct" and may or may not be in agreement with the assessments of others). Anger, in turn, leads to a wide array of antisocial (in this case, anticompany) reactions. Not only does the consumer want to be reimbursed for the purchase, there may be additional demands as well, related to retributive punishment. One form that retribution takes is to "treat others in kind," so that a murderer, for example, must give up his life. As stated in Exodus, justice demands an "eye for an eye, tooth for tooth, and hand for hand."

But it is unreasonable to assume that the consumer's only desire is to put a fly in the cereal of the manufacturing CEO or some other employee. Rather, a complaint is initiated, and some form of compensation is sought. There also could be generalization to other products, so that not only does the person not repurchase this cereal (and convince others not to do so) but he may also avoid all products made by this company. The response generalization gradient is broad.

I recall the outrage my parents expressed when, 10 years after the end of World War II, I purchased a Volkswagen.

The general process that has been described is shown in Figure 2. Note that here the role of emotion is more evident than in the discussion of causal stability, although many aspects of the attributional process are identical. If hopes and fears were inserted in the prior discussion based on the expectancy of goal attainment, then in both analyses consumer behavior would be similarly depicted, as shown in Figure 3.

These sequences start with thinking (attribution → causal stability → expectancy; or attribution → causal controllability → personal responsibility) and progress to feelings (hope and fear; anger) and then to acting (see Weiner 1995). Hence, emotions bridge the gap between the past and future. In addition to a motivational process, an affective process also is represented in the diagram, guided by the position of many appraisal theorists that thoughts are necessary and sufficient determinants of emotion. General affective reactions are linked to outcome, and these reactions become further differentiated as more complex attributional thinking is incorporated into the process.

This theoretical analysis leads to a number of speculations and unanswered (and unresearched) questions:

1. Just as some products lend themselves to stable (or unstable) causal ascriptions, others lend themselves to controllable or uncontrollable causal beliefs. Any service is subject to accusations of controllable error and personal responsibility, just as is any product (e.g., automobiles) that has a high degree of perceived human (as opposed to mechanical) input. I have frequently been angry at my auto mechanic and at the airline or waiter in a restaurant for what I regard as unnecessary delays. But I have never experienced anger for a cereal that I consider tasteless. Just disappointment.

An external attribution, particularly when stable, is likely to result in consumer avoidance ("That is a lousy cereal"), but external attributions that are controllable are much more damaging. They do not lead merely to exit and going away from, but rather they give rise to active actions, or going against. There is a great difference between increasing distance from a company or a product with no goal other than
to get away from (in Lewinian terminology, in A, going away from A), as opposed to going against, in which case new goals are set regarding retaliation (in A, going toward B).

2. The accused company, or employee, or service, must then manage impressions. A variety of strategies is possible. One rather primitive strategy is to deny the act or any wrongdoing ("No, the car was correctly repaired"; "As I said before, we have to prepare this fish after it is ordered, which takes some time"). An excuse also may be offered (ex = from, case = cause; thus, from one cause to another). Excuses offer causes that are uncontrollable by the actor. This excuse may or may not be true, and may or may not be perceived as true (e.g., "The delay is due to bad weather"); "I could not get the car part that was ordered so the auto must remain in the shop another four days"). One wonders what excuses are in fact true and which ones are perceived as true. Research indicates that humans are very poor at detecting lies and that lies are often inferred even when the statement is in fact true, and vice versa. For example, if an airline states that the delay is due to poor weather, or if the auto mechanic says that he cannot obtain the part, do consumers believe these statements to be true? And, in fact, how often are they true? In the classroom, if a student pleads that she missed the exam because her grandmother died and she had to attend the funeral, then should the teacher accept this causal statement? How are inferences regarding veracity reached?

Finally, the company or person involved can confess; that is, offer an apology along with restitution. In acts of social transgressions, if the accusing person perceives wrongdoing, then confession is quite a good strategy for maintaining relations; it decreases rather than increases conflict. As previously mentioned, confession often gives rise to the inference that a good person committed a bad act. Confession not only lowers the moral condemnation against the transgressor but also reduces beliefs that the act will be committed again (i.e., the cause was unstable rather than stable).

Thus, if there is a delay in restaurant service, and the waiter apologizes and states that the bill will be appropriately reduced, then the consumer is likely (or at least more likely) to return, for inferences of responsibility and stability are lessened. But to my knowledge there is little consumer research on such issues.

Further, when there is a negative product-related outcome and there is blame, who is perceived as responsible? For example, when there is an oil spill, is the perceived responsible party the captain of the boat or the CEO? In Japan, it appears that the CEO takes responsibility for acts clearly beyond personal control, publicly admits guilt, and often resigns. For “best” impression management, how far into the “deep pockets” should responsibility be accepted and/or communicated? Eventually, the Navy (as a company) took responsibility for the Tailhook scandal (in which Navy personnel sexually harassed a number of females at a hotel), rather than placing blame only on the personnel who did the harassing. Should this be done in cases of product dissatisfaction?

3. I have thus far focused the discussion on negative outcomes, for as already indicated, unsatisfactory goods or nonattainment of personal goals are more likely to elicit attributional search than do positive experiences. However, there are also positive emotions associated with personal responsibility for positive outcomes, and they also give rise to behaviors that “balance” the moral system. For example, if a dentist stays late to treat a patient, or some other service provider “goes the extra mile” to accommodate a customer, then the attribution (extra effort) is controllable by the other. This gives rise to the emotion of gratitude. Gratitude, in turn, greatly increases the likelihood that relations will be maintained with that individual or company. Other positive consequences also may follow, such as giving a Christmas gift, sending tickets to a sporting event, and so on. Perceptions of extra effort are another mechanism that instill “product loyalty,” although in this case the label perhaps should be “person loyalty.” But again this is not an area where consumer research is available. I believe it is not incorrect to more generally say that the topic of responsibility, which is rich in both philosophical and psychological tradition, can add to the psychology of the consumer.

The question naturally arises as to how empirically to test some of the specific hypotheses and vaguer ideas that have been expressed. I am a gourmand when it comes to meth-
odologies: they all, in the right context, offer something unique. Consider, for example, the issue of what level in an organizational hierarchy should accept responsibility so as to promote the most beneficial attitudes and behaviors toward the company and its product. To examine this question, studies might collect relevant personal reports regarding real incidents in one's life or, perhaps, events that have been reported in the media. The investigator can then determine level of responsibility acceptance, affects toward the company (product), and subsequent attitudes and behaviors. Among the weaknesses of this procedure are memory distortions and the difficulties in combining accounts between participants. Yet this approach obviously has face and ecological validity. Another useful method is for the experimenter to create scenarios or vignettes that manipulate level of responsibility (e.g., "Assume your car was badly repaired and the person accepting responsibility was the mechanic, or the dealership, or the CEO"). Some psychologists do not accept simulational or role-playing methodologies, contending that they lack ecological validity and make salient the variable of interest to the experimenter, while the data do not mirror "real-life" reactions in those situations. On the other hand, these methodologies permit examination of the variable of most concern and often allow the best theory testing by enabling the investigator to gather all the needed responses. Finally, but surely neither last nor least, there is laboratory manipulation research. For the question raised here, that could prove difficult, but surely not impossible. Such experimentation is obviously more time demanding than incident-recall or simulation research, but it has the advantage of greater immediate involvement. On the other hand, experimental manipulations in laboratory settings may in fact be less "real" than simulation research. As I intimated previously, I am a functionalist with regards to methodological choice—whatever works given the question raised is satisfactory from my perspective. Without justifying my biased beliefs in this context, I do advocate a focus on main effects rather than interactions, the search for situational rather than individual difference sources of variance, concern with conscious rather than unconscious determinants of behavior, and use of within-rather than between-subjects experimental designs.

**A CONCLUDING COMMENT**

I have taken the role here of a spokesperson for the attributional approach. I have not exposed our blemishes or our weaknesses. Since I have spent my career trying to contribute to this theoretical viewpoint, blinders are not inappropriate in this context.

I have attempted to give examples where consumer psychology can be illuminated by attribution theory. Because I am a naive psychologist, the examples I offered should not shock, nor even surprise—they are in accord with common sense, the common sense of the layperson. What attribution theory does (at least, as I practice it) is to bring order into the diversity of mundane everyday experiences that call forth explanations.

Most consumers are not rocket scientists. They simply ask why an outcome was unsatisfying, whether it will happen again, and who, if anyone, is to be blamed. Attribution theory addresses these and other common thoughts, an array of typical but important affects, and how thinking and emotion together influence behavior.

[David Glen Mick served as editor for this article.]

**REFERENCES**


