Do culture and its social environment determine humans' perception of their achievement related behaviour?

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The chosen research topic is valuable for educational practice. Scientists who have researched it (Weiner, Bar-Tal, Brophy, et al.) encourage university teachers to help students create appropriate attributions for their achievement-related behaviour, preventing failure in academic activities. In the practical research, students' causal attributions of their academic success and failure were studied using open-ended questions. A similar research was done half a year ago in LUA, Latvia and Tallinn University, Estonia in order to compare how the cultural environment and language influence the students' way of thinking and acting, including the process of communication.

The most prevailing cause of failure in students' answers was 'other people', like in the previous research (44% now, 53% before), but as regards success internal causes prevailed (55% now, 55% before).

The category of interaction still remained a rather important factor in both the case of success and the case of failure (success 11.7% and to failure 17% now, success 18% and failure 21% before).

The sign of self-serving bias was affirmed again.

The second part of practical research consisted of the analysis of material obtained by deep interviews with six university teachers involved in teaching the students-respondents. On the one hand, teachers consider Latvians to be an ego-centred nation, but on the other hand, they are more open than Estonians to interpersonal dialogue.

Key words: *causal attributions, self-serving bias, academic achievements, students, teachers*

Introduction

Weiner (1980) in his attribution model of achievement-related behaviour argues that individuals use a variety of causes to explain their success or failure on achievement tasks. These explanations – causal attributions – can be classified in three dimensions: locus of control (internality/externality), stability over time, and controllability. According to Bar-Tal's (1982, 178–179) review there is a substantial amount of evidence that causal perceptions of success and failure influence the individual's persistence, intensity and choice behaviour of achievement tasks. Individuals who tend to attribute their failure to unstable-controllable causes, such as effort, tend to persist for a long time even in failure situations. Conversely, attribution of failure to stable-uncontrollable causes does not leave a possibility of changing the outcome in the future and, therefore, there is no reason to persist. The belief in unstable-controllable makes such as effort causes the person to assume that the outcome depends on will. Therefore, these

individuals perform with great intensity on achievement tasks. On the other hand, the belief in stable and uncontrollable causes, such as ability or mood, does not motivate a person to perform with intensity, since there is no belief in having control over causes of success or failure. Nurmi, Aunola, Salmela-Aro & Lindroos (2003) have clearly demonstrated that the ways in which individuals approach and respond to academic situations form cumulative, either positive or negative, cycles.

Thus, it is obvious that our knowledge about students' causal attribution of their academic achievement is very valuable for educational practice. It also gives a basis for several intervention programs whose purpose is to help students create more appropriate attributions of their achievement-related behaviour and therefore to prevent failure. In attribution retraining, students are taught to attribute their failures to insufficient effort, the lack of information, or the use of ineffective strategies rather than to the lack of ability (Brophy, 1998). Analysing 20 different studies on attribution training, Robertson (2000) claims that the majority of these projects have demonstrated success.

Analysis of literature

A considerable body of evidence exists that individuals often take credit for successes and deny responsibility for their failures. This tendency to make internal attributions for success and external attributions for failure has been referred to as a self-serving bias (hedonic bias, self-serving effect) Some researchers of attribution have hypothesized that it helps to protect or enhance individuals' self-esteem. March (1986) found that self-serving effect was substantially larger for students with a higher level of achievement. At the same time it was smaller for older students. Nurmi, Aunola, Salmela-Aro & Lindroos (2003) have shown, in accordance with some previous findings, that individuals who use the most effective strategy – an optimistic strategy – in achievement tasks seem to use self-serving causal attributions when interpreting the causes of their success and failure. Thus students' self-serving bias seems to enhance their self-esteem and be a part of effective task-solving strategies. It is important in the educational context that the self-serving bias has been clearly demonstrated from both the student's and the teacher's perspective. In case of teachers the self-serving bias means that teachers, feel the need to distance themselves from the students' failure or to take credit for success (McAllister, 1996). Gage & Berliner (1992: 341) have stressed that the self-serving bias is a tendency which must be regarded as unprofessional in case of teachers.

During 40 years of research, numerous articles have been published about causal attributions of achievement-related success and failure. A thorough review of the methods used in exploring achievement attribution is given by Hau and Salili (1993). Researchers used investigation in natural settings, laboratory tasks and scenarios both open-ended and closed-ended questions. Later it became clear that students can make more attributions: attributional categories of "mood" and "other person", "interest in subject matter", "condition in

the home" and "home preparation", "physical and emotional ability", "previous experience", "habits", "attitudes", "self-perception", "maturity" and others were added. Still the majority of studies continually preferred to concentrate on ability, effort, task difficulty and luck as the pre-determined causes of success and failure (Hau & Salili, 1993: 403). B. Weiner, pointing to methodological errors in atributional research, criticized the use of four causes regardless of context of the study. He wrote (1983: 533): "Each motivational concern is associated with a set of causal beliefs, some of them are likely to be unique to that particular domain. It is also evident, that even within the achievement area, specific causes are associated with particular kinds of achievement". In an interview (Siegel & Shaughessnessy, 1996: 171) B. Weiner confesses that he does not have a strong belief in attributional styles because attributions are very situation-specific and often do not generalize.

In recent years, more attention has been paid to differences in learner's causal attribution determined by cultural factors. For example, Parameswaran & Hom (2000) have shown that Indian students' structure of causal attributions is not the same as described in Western countries. Indian children (aged 6–12) attributed a successful performance to effort rather than to ability, and referred to external (teacher bias and coping) rather than internal attributions (ability) when asked to explain why two children might obtain the same score with different amounts of effort. In their next study, Parameswaran & Hom (2001) have found that Indian children of all ages attributed a low ability to a child who was blamed and a high ability to a child who was not blamed by the teacher. This finding does not confirm the expectations based on studies conducted in the West. It was also found that the Indian sample did not clearly distinguish between ability and effort. Menon, Morris, Chiu & Hong have pointed to the differences in Chinese and North American participants' attributions. They also stress that causal attributions reflect culture-based knowledge structures. On the other hand, there is an evidence that by means of attributional training it is possible to change ineffective learning strategies to more suitable ones (Robertson, 2000). So, differences in causal attributions in different cultures or subcultures can possibly also serve as a hint to different educational belief systems.

Migration and the assimilation of nations are strongly pronounced all over the world, therefore, new methods of communication across borders have become highly necessary. Under the process of globalization, the moral and spiritual categories common to all mankind have acquired a special significance. Their contiguity can be found in the mythologies of different nations, their lore, religions, art. A human being forever carries with him or her not only his or her personal history, but also the history of the whole humankind.

Culture, in its turn, cannot be communicated without language. Culture and language seem to have appeared simultaneously, that is why many prominent philosophers, cultural anthropologists and linguists (e.g., Plato, W. Humboldt, E. Cassirer, G. Gachev, etc.) think that language,

like culture, exists as a system of symbols. The task of people is to decode these symbols.

The knowledge of foreign languages is a guarantee of a high level of tolerance at an international level, both in the sphere of culture and economy. Latvia's incorporation into Western Europe's community determines the necessity of an intensive mastering of EFL in the country.

The author is sure that the cross-cultural approach of acquiring EFL guarantees the necessary result.

Some scholars have postulated that language expresses the speaker's way of thinking. Western nations are considered to be left-brain thinkers.

V. Arshavsky has stated that Latvians belong to right-brain thinkers. Statistics show that 60% of Latvians are right-brain thinkers, 35% left-brain thinkers, and 5% are the so-called ideal mixed type (Arshavsky, 1993:67). This explains why Latvians are sometimes called the nation of singers, dancers and poets.

D. Shiryayev (Širjajevs, 2003: 32–35) points out a special importance of persons' emotional status when choosing the language structures. Emotions are reflected by different levels of language arrangement: phonetics, lexics, syntax, etc. The whole set of language features exploited is connected with human's right and left brain activities. A fundamental research done by Japanese professor T. Cunoda proves that practically people of all cultures on this planet are lead by the left brain in their language activities, while emotional activities are the right brain's competence; however it is not so in Japanese culture where both

mentioned phenomena, language and emotional activities, are determined by the left hemisphere. The scholar has verified that the case is not connected with somatics (e.g., a Latvian child, being raised in Japanese culture, will also use the left brain for both language and emotional activities). The study proves that national languages are closely connected with humans' emotional mechanisms playing a special role in the development of mental activities and a unique culture of any ethnical group, which in its turn influences the cross-cultural and interpersonal communication.

At the same time, the author of this research argues that the human language (any word) manifests as a flow of energy that belongs to one or another semantic field and its constellations expressed and perceived on a definite level of one's consciousness.

Method

Participants of the research were 74 first- and second-year university students and six university teachers. The future speciality of the students was External Relations of Organizations, and the teachers-respondents had been teaching them languages, philosophy, sociology, etc. for several years or at least several months. The study was conducted in September–October 2007. The students were asked to describe one of their successful achievement-related experiences in their own words and to explain for what reasons they succeeded or failed that particular time. Open-ended answers were categorized, and then a quantitative analysis was done to identify the frequency of categories. To make it possible to decide on the self-serving bias, the causal attribu-

tions of success and failure were divided into internal, external and internal/external cases.

The research carried out the previous academic year in the LUA and in Tallinn University highlighted differences in students' (from different cultures) perception of their success and failure.

The study revealed that even between neighbouring in countries with quite similar historical backgrounds and cultures, there existed differences in students' attributional patterns. It means that causal attributions could not be treated as universal and seen apart from cultural conditions.

The substantially more pronounced self-serving bias in Latvian students' causal explanations as well as the interaction phenomenon, mainly pointed out by respondent from Latvia, became an issue of interest for further exploration, namely for this research. To explore the reasons for the mentioned phenomena, six university teachers from the LUA who had been teaching students-respondents different subjects were interviewed. Each respondent was asked seven questions, and using the method of qualitative research the answers were analysed and grouped.

Results

Students mainly wrote about examinations, projects, academic tests using them as samples of their successful and/or unsuccessful learning experience (see Table 1).

Explanations of success

According to the results of this research (see Table 1), the most prevalent category in stu-

dents' explanations of their academic success was 'effort', considering 'strategies' as a subcategory of effort. For example:

> *I passed my maths' examination with credit because I used to do all my homework in time* (*72*);

> *I passed my examination in informatics well because I fulfilled all the practical tasks and studied regularly* (*3*);

> *I passed examination in English very successfully because I studied hard, attended English courses and communicated with foreigners regularly* (*20*).

Motivation factors were also mentioned quite often (see Table 1). For example:

> *I wrote a good scientific work in biology because I was highly motivated by the topic* (*5*);

> *I got a good mark in philosophy because the teacher managed to motivate students to work hard and with interest. The material was so interesting and the teacher's explanations so perfect that I became motivated to study with interest* (*18*).

In the last example, it turned out that the respondent became motivated to work hard by his teacher. Students conceded quite often that other people had helped or supported them in their study activities (see Table 1). For example:

> *I had no possibility to attend all the classes in theory of gnoseology, but the teacher helped me much, explaining the complicated cases in her tutorials (64);*

> *I finished the last academic year very well because teachers helped us much, explaining uneasy cases several times and working with students at their tutorials (26).*

One student mentioned that her emotional state was the reason for her success:

Table 1. **Categories of causal attributions for academic success and failure**

Categories of causal attribution	*Locus of control*	*Attributions of success*	*Attributions of failure*
Effort	Internal	26 35.1%	15 20.3%
Strategies-sub. cat. to effort	Internal	20 27%	5 6.8%
Motivation	Internal	19 25.7%	10 13.5%
Other people (peers, family members, friends)	External	29 39.2%	33 44.6%
Interaction	Internal/external	14 18.9%	11 14.9%
Emotional, physical state	Internal	1 1,4%	9 12.2%
Environment	External	3 4.1%	7 9.5%
Task characteristics	External	1 1.4%	3 4.1%
Ability, possibility	Internal/external	–	6 8.1%
Luck	External	7 9.5%	1 1.4%
Internal causes		66 55%	39 39%
External causes		40 33.3%	44 44%
Internal/external causes		14 11.7%	17 17%
All causes		120 100%	100 100%

I liked rhetoric very much and I succeeded perfectly well because I felt self-confident and was not afraid to communicate with a large audience. Our teacher gave us the possibility to express ourselves creatively (46).

Interaction was one of the categories which occurred in Latvian students' answers in the previous research and was definitely mentioned this time also (before 12%, now 18.9%). For example:

A good interaction with my teacher helped me pass examination well (64).

I presented my report with a mark "exceptionally" because my group members and teacher helped me much, and the encouraging environment in the group all the time stimulated me to study hard (53).

Explanations of failure

The categories of causal attributions of academic failure, revealed from students' open-ended answers, can also be seen in Table 1.

The system of the main categories for the explanation of failure was the same as

the system of categories for the explanations of success, but there were some differences in subcategories. For example, when students explained their success, they used only causes related to their emotional state, but when they explained failures, the causes related to their physical state were added and the category *other people* where the most frequently used (see Table 1). For example:

Some subjects were taught so unprofessionally that we – students – had obtained no knowledge in them. Some teachers were not well-prepared for lectures (64);

I could not stand the course 'Mass media & advertising' because the teacher was telling all the time about his own achievements in this realm (19).

Sometimes students are too noisy at the lectures. I cannot concentrate (32);

I could not cope up with other students in practical activities, therefore, I had to work much at home, but parents usually made me help them on farm or take care of my younger brother (1);

I could not study well because at a student's hostel where I lived room-mates were used to behave rather loudly (53).

The category the other people was followed by effort and strategy. For example:

I got only satisfactory in geography because I was lazy and did not study it quite enough (5);

I failed in politics because I did not like the subject and did not study it (47);

I did not succeed in Russian because I never did my homework in time (72).

The same was observed in the previous research (other people: now 44.6%; before – 39%; ill effort: now 20.3%; before

8%). Unsatisfactory environment, complicated tasks, low motivation were mentioned too.

A specific category was a poor interaction with others as a cause of failure. For example:

A year ago I entered the RTU, but it was not possible to interact with teachers and students there. The greatest part of our professors did not speak Latvian, they spoke only Russian, students were not friendly. Now I am here in the LUA and feel myself satisfied and happy (7).

I failed in maths and the teacher cursed me. I have never greeted this teacher any more. I cannot communicate with such people (6).

To sum it up, students used more internal causal attributions than external or external/internal samples to reveal the cases of failure (see Table 1).

To explore the self-serving bias and the students' need to interact with other people in the study activities, six university teachers were interviewed, asking all of them the same seven questions:

1. Are Latvian students prepared for the integration process in the cultural life of global net society which is based on a new-level interpersonal communication?

2. How can you explain students' tendency to use more internal causal attributions for their success but external for their failure in academic studies?

3. Could the self-serving bias be connected with Latvian nation's historical experience (self-saving mechanism in subconsciousness)?

4. How can the present socio-economic situation influence the respondents' choices?

5. Do you treat the self-serving bias as a positive or a negative tendency?

6. Why Latvian youth tend to stress the process of interaction and communication in the study process?

7. Why do Latvian and Estonian youth differently perceive the same phenomena?

Analysis of the university teachers' answers to the questions asked it turned out that revealed the following:

1. Latvian youth is only partly prepared for the integration process into culture of global net society. Many young people still have a language and communication barrier. On the one hand, Latvians' mentality is connected with national values. On the other hand, the mass media are stereotyping youth, oppressing youth's free choices. In general, study programs as well as exchange possibilities (Erasmus & Socratus programs) help Latvian youth integrate in the new global culture, developing their ability to communicate freely across boarders.

2. Latvians are an ego-centred nation. Young people are unable to take over the responsibility for global processes. It is easy to criticize others, but introspection is a much more complicated phenomenon. Much depends on education at home and at school.

3. The historical experience of the nation plays a definite role in our youth's perception abilities (slavery, deportations, etc.) Young people are also greatly influenced by the present economic situation, mass media and politicians' activities in Latvia. Self-centered bias could be a peculiarity of contemporary youth in general. Latvians are an especially ego-centered nation.

4. Stratification in the state influences youth greatly.

5. Self-serving bias could be treated positively up to the limit when it starts to restrict the creative development of one's personality. In a liberal state, self-serving bias is always supported. In Latvia, this phenomenon starts influencing contemporary youth negatively.

6. In real life, people cannot do without communication and interaction. Latvian youth feel that group work helps young people integrate into society. The flow of information is so mighty that only in a team it is possible to cope with selection and analysis.

7. Estonians in comparison with Latvians are a more closed nation. They are great individualists, it is determined by their mentality and historical processes in the state. However, the present socio-economic situation and the educational systems also are different in the neighbouring countries. This definitely influences youth's perception of world and their attitude to interaction, communication and introspection phenomena.

Conclusion

To conclude, the following tendencies regarding the phenomena under research could be highlighted:

- to affirm the validity of the results of research on causal attributions carried out in the 2006/2007 academic year in the LUA, Latvia, 74 students from the LUA were involved in the same research process in the 2007/2008 academic year. In the process of research, the needed data were confirmed again: the sign of self-serving bias repeatedly occurred in Latvian students' descriptions of their academic success and failure; the category of interaction, which had been expressed by Latvian samples in the previous research, was also stressed again;

- teachers from the LUA considered the main differences in the Latvian and Estonian students' perception of study situations to be rooted in the dissimilar cultures, mentalities, historical development of the two nations, their present economic situation and educational peculiarities;

- the phenomenon of self-serving bias was mainly treated positively, however, up to a definite limit. On the one hand, the teachers considered Latvians to be an ego-centred nation, but on the other hand, Latvian youth turned out to be able to understand that the integration into global society could be realized only through interaction and communication process; therefore, a specific category of perfect or poor interaction occurred in students' samples;

The author of the article considers this research to be open for further studies in three Baltic States – Estonia, Lithuania and Latvia.

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AR KULTŪRA IR JOS SOCIALINĖ APLINKA NULEMIA ŽMOGAUS ELGSENOS SUVOKIMĄ SIEKIANT TIKSLO?

Margarita Putniņa

S a n t r a u k a

Pasirinktas tyrimo aspektas yra svarbus edukacinei veiklai. Mokslininkai, jį tyrinėję anksčiau (*Weiner, Bar-Tal, Brophy ir kiti*), skatina universitetų dėstytojus padėti studentams susikurti tinkamą aplinką, galinčią turėti įtakos jų pasiekimams ir poveikį jų elgsenai. Tai padėtų išvengti akademinių nesėkmių. Praktinis tyrimas atskleidė, koks yra studentų kasdienis indėlis siekiant akademinių laimėjimų ar patiriant nesėkmę. Klausimas buvo tiriamas pateikus neviešinamus individualius klausimus. Panašūs tyrimai buvo atlikti ir LUA, Latvijos universitetuose ir Talino universitete. Estijoje buvo siekiama palyginti, kiek kultūrinė aplinka ir kalba gali paveikti, lemti studentų mąstymą ir veiksmus, taip pat komunikacijos procesus. Antroji tyrimo dalis pristato giluminius interviu, kuriuos taikant buvo apklausti 6 universitetų dėstytojai. Viena vertus, dėstytojai sutaria, kad latviai yra egocentriška tauta, bet, kita vertus, jie yra atviresni tarpasmeniniam dialogui nei estai.