Running Head: Moore Article Critique

Students’ Attributions for their best and worst marks: Do they relate to achievement?

Article Critique

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In this study, researchers McClure, Meyer, Garisch, Fischer, Weir, and Walkey (2011) examined the relationship of attributions to school achievement and the possible sociocultural attribution differences. Specifically, attributions refer to the reasons students give for their success or failure. These researchers consider the students attribution to teachers, peers and family along with the more widely researched reasons for failure or success: ability, effort, task difficulty, and luck. Using a national data set adapted with permission from the New Zealand government, McClure et al. set out to examine a) the social attributions across four ethnic groups; b) to find whether attributions predict achievement as compared to motivational factors such as “doing my best,” known to predict achievement. Overall, the researchers proved that attributing effort, ability, high task difficulty, and the influence of the teacher predicted the highest marks. Conversely, the lowest marks were predicted by attributing them to luck, family, or friends. On the sociocultural level, students were divided into two types of groups: the collectivist and the individualist. The collectivist groups rate family higher than ability, while the individualist group puts ability and effort higher than family.

In this article critique, I will focus on the four aspects of the research paper: the theoretical framework, the methods, the results, and the discussion

This study is based on Weiner’s motivational theory of attributions with three dimensions of motivation: locus, controllability, and stability. This theory states that individuals cause outcomes based on their actions driven by their experiences, context, and causal reasoning. Moreover, individuals use attributions to protect the ego. Four common attributions included in this research are effort, ability, task difficulty and luck. McClure et al., also include research in education by Dweck and others who have shown that outcomes attributed to effort reflects goal orientations such as mastery learning or performance orientation. Additionally, these researchers explain how attributions are self-serving biases necessary to protect self-esteem and keep one motivated (persistent). Finally, McClure et al. present three paragraphs chock-full of assertions about how cultures and ethnic groups differ. Although, I believe they provide a strong rationale for attribution affects on achievement, I felt the literature introducing how attributions differ in diverse sociocultural contexts was too rushed and needed to be better developed with more information about individualist societies and collectivists societies.

The methodology, however, was detailed and informative. McClure et al. described in detail the participants, including the school demographic by achievement. The measurement and procedures were presented together. This made for difficult reading as the methodology is presented in narrative form more reminiscent of qualitative research than quantitative. Regardless, once the reader adjusts to this style, on the second read, the measures and procedures are easily understood.

The results, unlike the methodology, are well organized to address the study’s aims. The reader was first educated on the difference between ANOVA and MANOVA, and why this study chose mixed-design ANOVA to address the ‘nested nature of attributions,’ and to control for individual differences across ethnic groups. Next, McClure et al. present the results for attributions for best and worst marks, the relation of attribution to motivation orientations, and the relation of attributions and motivation to achievement outcomes. Finally, they add a regression table to demonstrate the predictive power of attributions on grades.

Overall I found this research study helpful and will cite it in the future when working with underrepresented populations. Specifically, I will be vigilant in the future to watch for what they call in New Zealand the ‘tall poppy syndrome. This a tendency by the collectivist group to attribute success to luck because one does not want to be seen as ‘showing off.’ For instance, westerners were more apt to use self-serving bias then Pacific islanders, Asian, or Maori (native Zealanders). McClure et al. make the comparison of Latinos and African -Americans (collectivist ethnic groups) to Caucasian (individualist), and suggests that if attributions predict achievement than our underachieving groups (Latinos and Blacks) should receive interventions that focus supports at the social level.

References

McClure, J., Meyer, L., Garisch, J., Fischer, R., Weir, K., & Walkey, F., (2011). Students’ attributions for their best and worst marks: Do they relate to achievement? *Contemporary Educational Psychology*, 36, 71.81