

Adolescents' and Parents' Explanatory Styles and Parents' Causal Explanations About Their Adolescents¹

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This pilot study compares the explanatory styles of adolescents, the explanatory styles of their parents, and the parents' causal explanations about their adolescents. Twenty-one adolescents with academic problems and their mothers (n = 19) and fathers (n = 15) completed the Attributional Style Questionnaire (Peterson et al., 1982). The parents also completed a parallel questionnaire, My Adolescent's Life (MAL). Both mothers' and fathers' explanations of events in their own lives and of events in their adolescents' lives were significantly associated. Fathers' explanations of events in their adolescents' lives were positively correlated with the adolescents' explanations of their own events. In this study, neither mothers' explanations of their own events nor of their adolescents' events nor fathers' explanations of their own events correlated with the adolescents' explanations of their own events. Significant findings with a small sample suggest that this line of inquiry and the MAL are promising for future research.

KEY WORDS: adolescents; attributional style; causal explanations; parents.

Explanatory styles are the habitual ways that individuals explain good and bad events in their lives. An individual with a pessimistic explanatory style

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tends to attribute bad events to internal causes ("it's my fault"), to stable causes ("it will last forever"), and to global causes ("it affects all parts of my life") (Peterson & Seligman, 1984; Peterson et al., 1982). For example, a person who fails a test might say, "I failed because I am stupid" (an internal, stable and global cause) instead of, "I failed because the test was difficult" (an external, unstable, and specific cause). A person's explanatory style, be it pessimistic or optimistic, has been found to be consistent over time as measured by the Attributional Style Questionnaire (Nolen-Hoeksema, Girgus, & Seligman, 1986; Seligman et al., 1984).

The habitual tendency to attribute negative events to internal, stable and global causes has been linked to a number of problems of adaptation. The explanatory style has been most notably associated with depression in adults (for reviews see, Peterson & Seligman, 1984; Peterson et al., 1982) as well as in children (Nolen-Hoeksema et al., 1986; Seligman et al., 1984). A pessimistic explanatory style has also been identified as a correlate to unpopularity (Aydin, 1988), as well as a risk factor for poor academic performance (Peterson & Barrett, 1987), and illness (Peterson, 1988). Furthermore, causal attributions have been found to distinguish between distressed and nondistressed parent-child relationships (Larrance & Twentyman, 1983).

Dix, Ruble, Grusec, and Nixon (1986) suggested that how parents assess the causality of their children's behavior influences the parents' affective reaction, and thus the parents' subsequent behavior toward their children. They found that the more parents reported that their children's misdeeds were due to dispositional factors (an internal, stable, and global cause), the more upset the parents were and the more important they felt it was to respond to the children's behavior. In other words, it is "not just *whether* values have been violated but also inferences about *why* they have been violated" that affect parents' emotional reactions (Dix et al., 1986, p. 892).

It seems reasonable that parents' explanatory styles also influence the development of their children's explanatory styles (Bry & Krinsley, 1990). One possibility is that children develop their explanatory styles from their parents' self-statements (Fincham & Cain, 1986). Providing some support to this hypothesis, Seligman et al. (1984) found that children's explanations of bad events converged with their mothers' explanations of their own bad events. Another possibility is that children may develop their explanatory styles from the attributions that their parents make about their children. Fincham and Cain (1985, in Fincham & Cain, 1986) compared these two hypotheses using effort and ability attributions and found that their sample of third-grade children behaved more closely to how their parents explained bad events about the children than to how their parents explained their

own bad events. Similarly, Parsons, Adler, and Kaczala (1982) found that adolescents' expectancies concerning math was more directly related to their parents' beliefs about their offspring's math aptitude than the offspring's past performances in math, and that parents did not influence their offspring's achievement beliefs as role models.

Furthermore, mothers' and fathers' explanatory styles may differentially affect the development of their children's explanatory styles. Seligman et al. (1984) found that children's styles for bad events converged with those of their mothers, but not with those of their fathers. More generally, mothers' causal beliefs have been found to be more similar to their children's causal beliefs on memory and math tasks than fathers' causal beliefs (Bird & Berman, 1985; Parsons et al., 1982).

Contrastingly, Cashmore (1982, in Bird & Berman, 1985) found that fathers' and daughters' attributions for the daughters' school performances were more congruent than mothers' and daughters' attributions. Similarly, in the Fincham and Cain study (1985, in Fincham & Cain, 1986), the only significant relationship found was that both sons and daughters behaved similarly to how their fathers explained the children's failures. Mothers' explanations were not significantly related.

The disagreements among the above findings are difficult to reconcile. Perhaps the relationship between parents' and children's attributions vary with other socially significant variables. For example, Hess, Holloway, and King (1981, in Bird & Berman, 1985) found that synchrony between mothers' and children's attributions varied with the children's general academic performance. Greater synchrony correlated positively with higher academic performance.

Whereas most of the above findings are about children, the current study compares the explanatory styles of the mothers and fathers of adolescents with their explanations about the events in their adolescents' lives and with the adolescents' own explanations. Because these relationships may be affected by other, as yet unknown, variables, the adolescents studied were a relatively homogeneous convenient sample of working-class, low-achieving, middle-school students who, along with their parents, were part of another investigation.

METHOD

Subjects

Twenty-one male and female adolescents (eight girls and thirteen boys) in a metropolitan working class town were in the study. The subjects, who were between 12 and 16 years old, were nominated by their teachers

and guidance counselors at the request of researchers for another study (Bry & Greene, 1990). The researchers asked teachers and the guidance counselor of a small middle school for names of all of the students in their classes whose school performances they judged to be poorer than expected because of lack of motivation to achieve in school. When contacted by the researchers and guaranteed confidentiality, 77% of the nominated students' parents consented for their adolescent to participate in the study. The mean age of the adolescents was 14.1 years.

Up to two adults with primary care responsibilities were considered parents. Ninety-five percent of the adolescents' mothers ($n = 19$) and 79% of the adolescents' fathers ($n = 15$) completed the questionnaires. Eighty-six percent of the parents identified themselves as married. The average male and female "heads of the household" were 42.3 and 41.4 years old, respectively, and 80% of the fathers and 67% of the mothers had completed high school.

Instruments

Attributional Style Questionnaire (ASQ). The ASQ is a self-report questionnaire that requires the subject to generate his/her own cause for a series of good or bad hypothetical events (Peterson et al., 1982). Twelve events are described vaguely, half of them good (e.g., "You meet a friend who compliments you on your appearance"), and half of them bad (e.g., "You go out with friends and it goes badly"). The subject then rates the cause along three 7-point scales corresponding to three causal dimensions: internal-external, stable-unstable, global-specific.

Although it is possible to obtain separate scores for internality, stability, and globality, Peterson et al. (1982) suggest using composite scores to obtain higher internal consistencies. Therefore, two composite scores were derived from the ASQ: the composite score for the six negative events, summing across internal, stable, and global dimensions and dividing by the number of events; and the composite score for the six positive events. Previous studies have found the test-retest reliability for the ASQ to be .70 for good events and .64 for bad events (Peterson et al., 1982).

My Adolescent's Life (MAL). The MAL was created for this study so that parents' explanations for their children could be directly compared to their explanations for themselves on the ASQ. The MAL is a revised copy of the ASQ that changes only the object of inquiry in the hypothetical events from "you" to "your adolescent." This questionnaire poses exactly the same hypothetical events but asks the parents to imagine their adolescents in the situations. Similarly, the parents write down the causes of their

adolescent's hypothetical good events (e.g., "Your adolescent meets a friend who compliments him/her on his/her appearance") and bad events (e.g., "Your adolescent goes out with friends and it goes badly"). The parents then rate these explanations on the three causal dimensions, for example, internality to the adolescent. Two composite scores were derived from the MAL using the same format that was used for the ASQ.

PROCEDURE

After parents' consent was obtained by telephone, written consent forms, a demographic questionnaire, MALs, and ASQs for the parents were sent by mail with a return envelope. Parents who did not return the forms were visited by a graduate student to collect them. To ensure confidentiality, a different graduate student called each adolescent out of class during school to fill out his/her ASQs along with a series of other questionnaires.

RESULTS

Correlation Between Parents' Explanations About Their Own Life Events (ASQ) and Parents' Explanations About Their Adolescents' Life Events (MAL)

Each parent's composite scores on the ASQ were compared to his/her composite scores on the MAL using the Spearman correlational coefficient. Table I shows a significant relationship between the two types of parents' explanations.

Correlation Between Mother and Father Explanations (ASQ and MAL) and Adolescent Explanations (ASQ)

The adolescents' two composite ASQ scores were compared to each of his/her parents' two composite scores on the ASQ and then on the MAL, in separate analyses for mothers and fathers, using the Spearman correlation coefficient. Table I shows that the only significant relationship occurred between the fathers' explanations about their adolescents' events (MAL) and the adolescents' explanations about their own events (ASQ).

DISCUSSION

The results indicate that the parents of adolescents with achievement problems explain events for themselves and their adolescents similarly in

Table 1. Parents' Explanations About Events in Their Own Lives (ASQ), Parents' Explanations About Events in Their Adolescents' Lives (MAL), and Adolescents' Explanations About Events in Their Own Lives (ASQ)^a

	Mother about own events (ASQ)	Father about own events (ASQ)	Mother about adolescent's events (MAL)	Father about adolescent's events (MAL)
Mother about adolescent's events (MAL)	.61 ^b			
Father about adolescent's events (MAL)		.63 ^b		
Adolescent about own events (ASQ)	.18	.47	.41	.58 ^c
Explanations about negative events				
Mother about adolescent's events (MAL)	.76 ^d			
Father about adolescent's events (MAL)		.55 ^c		
Adolescent about own events (ASQ)	.18	.13	-.02	.61 ^c
Explanations about positive events				

^a ASQ = Attributional Style Questionnaire; MAL = My Adolescent's Life.

^b $p < .01$.

^c $p < .05$.

^d $p < .001$.

terms of internal, stable, and global dimensions. Although clinically such parents may appear to explain events in their own lives differently from events in their adolescents' lives, in this study of adolescents, the parents tended to use the same styles of explanations about themselves and their offspring.

Since both types of parental explanations were so strongly correlated, it is possible that parents' explanations about themselves influence their explanations about their adolescents. Another possibility is that a parent's explanations about his/her adolescent influences the parent's explanations about him/herself. For example, if a parent believes his/her child is "bad" (internal, stable, and global), the parent may view him/herself as a "bad" parent and/or a "bad" person (internal, stable, and global) as a result. To investigate how and why both types of parental explanations are so strongly correlated, it will eventually be necessary to study parents' explanatory styles prospectively.

The results of the present study also indicate that the fathers' explanations about their adolescents were significantly associated with the adolescents' own explanations. Perhaps adolescents develop their explanatory styles by learning how their fathers explain the adolescents' events. Alternatively, the correlations may be due to a third variable, such as imaginal style similarities between fathers and adolescents and/or other differences due to parent gender, characteristics, or role, such as amount of conflict, depression, or time spent with their adolescents.

The fact that mothers' explanations of their adolescents' events did not correlate with the adolescents' explanations of their own events may reflect the same lack of agreement found by Cashmore (1982, in Bird & Berman, 1985), Finchman & Cain (1985, in Fincham & Cain, 1986), and Hess, Holloway, and King (1986, in Bird and Berman, 1985). On the other hand, the nonsignificant result may simply be due to the relatively small *n*. Further studies should not only test the robustness of the current results on larger samples but also should test their generalization by including samples of higher-achieving and higher-socioeconomic-class adolescents. In a larger sample, the effects of adolescent gender on the relationship could also be studied. There were not enough girls in the current sample for such a comparison. Although the results of this study were strong significant findings, it is important to note that they are based upon self-report. Their validity could be tested in future research by going beyond questionnaires and including studies of spontaneous explanations in natural speech (Peterson, Bettes, & Seligman, 1985).

This study has contributed to the explanatory style literature in the area of measurement. It was shown that adolescents are capable of completing the same (ASQ) questionnaires as their parents. Furthermore, since

the MAL may be useful in future research, this study suggests that the MAL's psychometric properties warrant investigation. It is directly equivalent to the ASQ, using the same hypothetical situations in the same format and seems to measure a variable that was not accounted for previously. Interestingly, in accounting for adolescents' explanations using their parents' explanations, the parents' explanations about their adolescents' events seemed to be more informative than the parents' explanations about themselves. Much research has investigated exactly how parents act towards their adolescents. Perhaps not enough attention has been paid to what parents believe and tell their adolescents about how the parents interpret their adolescents' lives. The popular culture warns parents that when their child does something wrong not to tell their child that she/he is "bad" because she/he will start believing that she/he is bad. This study lends preliminary empirical support to this folk wisdom.

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