

This Week's Citation Classic

Peterson C, Semmel A, von Baeyer C, Abramson L Y, Metalsky G I & Seligman M E P.

The Attributional Style Questionnaire. *Cognitive Ther. Res.* 6:287-99, 1982. [University of Pennsylvania, Philadelphia, PA; University of Saskatchewan, Saskatoon, Canada; and State University of New York, Stony Brook, NY]

The Attributional Style Questionnaire (ASQ) measures individual differences in explanations offered for bad events and good events along the dimensions of internality, stability, and globality. The ASQ and its psychometric properties are described, along with suggestions for its use. [The SSC[®] and the SC[®] indicate that this paper has been cited in more than 265 publications, making it the most-cited paper in this journal.]

Circumstance, Timing, and the ASQ

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In 1976, I received my PhD in social/personality psychology at the University of Colorado, where I studied with a number of researchers interested in attitudes and cognitive style. Questionnaire construction and scale development were ingrained in all of the Colorado students. So too were the more mundane aspects of this sort of research; we used to joke that our doctorates should really be in collating and stapling.

After teaching social psychology for several years, I went to the University of Pennsylvania to respecialize in clinical psychology. Marty Seigman was kind enough to sponsor me and open the necessary doors. I took courses in testing, psychopathology, and therapy. I completed a practicum and internship at the Philadelphia Veterans Administration Medical Center. Of course I was grateful for these opportunities, so I offered to help out with the research activities in Marty's lab.

Marty had been conducting learned helplessness experiments since the middle 1960s, first with animals and then with people. Research subjects were exposed to uncontrollable events, and their responses gauged. Typically the subjects became list-

less, and this "helplessness" was proposed as a model of reactive depression.

In 1978, right before I came to Pennsylvania, helplessness theory was revised by Lyn Abramson, Seligman, and John Teasdale to improve its fit to depression.¹ They suggested that one's causal interpretation of uncontrollability influenced the nature of ensuing helplessness. Further, individuals had a characteristic style of offering causal explanations that influenced their interpretations in particular instances. A questionnaire dubbed the Attributional Style Questionnaire (ASQ) had been devised to measure the attributional tendencies of individuals, and it had already been used in several studies when I arrived on the scene.

As I look back on these events, my timing could not have been better. I arrived at Pennsylvania right as Marty and his research group became interested in individual differences, questionnaires, correlational analyses, and large sample studies. Researchers at Pennsylvania did not usually work this way, so there was an obvious niche for me to fill. I can remember wandering about the Psychology Department with a handful of IBM cards asking people where the campus computer center was. No one could tell me! I ended up analyzing data at nearby Drexel University.

Our 1982 article describing the ASQ simply presented the questionnaire and some of its psychometric properties. Our goal in publishing the article was to make the ASQ more available to the research community. It never occurred to us at the time that the article would someday be considered a *Citation Classic*[®]. But why not? Learned helplessness continued to be a topic of great research interest,^{2,3} particularly its application to depression.⁴ The ASQ provides the researcher with an inexpensive and straightforward way to investigate helplessness ideas, and its role in making possible diverse lines of research has been great.⁵

1. Abramson L Y, Seligman M E P & Teasdale J D. Learned helplessness in humans: critique and reformulation. *J. Abnormal Psychol.* 87:49-74, 1978. (Cited 1,525 times.)

2. Buchanan G A & Seligman M E P, eds. *Explanatory style*. Hillsdale, NJ: Erlbaum. (In press.)

3. Peterson C, Maier S F & Seligman M E P, eds. *Learned helplessness: a theory for the age of personal control*. New York: Oxford University Press. (In press.)

4. Peterson C & Seligman M E P. Causal explanations as a risk factor for depression: theory and evidence. *Psychol. Rev.* 91:347-74, 1984. (Cited 310 times.)

5. Peterson C. Meaning and measurement of explanatory style. *Psychol. Inquiry* 2:1-10, 1991.

Received February 24, 1993