According to the attributional reformulation of helplessness theory, an explanatory style in which bad events are attributed to internal, stable, and global causes is a risk factor for depression. Studies are described in support of this hypothesis. [The SSC® and the SSCI® indicate that this paper has been cited in more than 325 publications.]

Methods, Fonts, and Explanatory Style

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The idea for this paper surfaced at Valley Forge, during some free time at a conference when the two of us took a walk through the national park there. Peterson had recently completed postdoctoral studies at the University of Pennsylvania under Seligman’s sponsorship. Between 1979 and 1981, we conducted a number of studies designed to test a basic hypothesis of the helplessness reformulation: namely, that an explanatory style in which bad events are attributed to internal, stable, and global causes is a risk factor for depression, particularly when bad events are encountered.

Perhaps most notable about our studies is that we employed a variety of methods and strategies to test the same hypothesis in different ways. We organized the notion to refer to the testing of the same construct in different ways, but we expanded the notion to refer to the testing of the same hypothesis in different ways. We organized about a dozen studies under a multimethod rubric, and the paper virtually wrote itself.

We submitted the paper to Psychological Review, and in several months heard the good news that both anonymous reviewers recommended publication. The editor wanted us to make the changes suggested by the reviewers and to shorten the paper by 15 pages or so. Unfortunately, the suggested changes were entirely of the form “reference this, reference that, and contact so-and-so for such-and-such an unpublished manuscript.” The suggested additions of course added to the length of the paper. How were we to reduce its length at the same time? Borrowing a lesson from our students, we simply changed the font size of the printer.

By increasing our methods and decreasing our fonts, we produced a paper that the larger field has found of great interest. Our Psychological Review paper stands as one of the strongest statements about the influence of cognitive factors on psychopathology. It also provided researchers with concrete methods and designs for investigating such influences. Since 1984, explanatory style has joined the family of individual differences pertinent to adaptation, and it has been examined with regard to an ever-increasing variety of outcomes.


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