

## This Week's Citation Classic®

Peterson C & Seligman M E P. Causal explanations as a risk factor for depression: theory and evidence. *Psychol. Rev.* 91:347-74, 1984. [Virginia Polytechnic Inst. and State Univ., Blacksburg, VA; and Univ. Pennsylvania, Philadelphia, PA]

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 theSC® indicate that this paper has been cited in more than 325 publications.]

research subjects included children and adults, college students and prisoners, psychiatric patients and Harvard alumni. Taken together, results converged to support the hypothesis of interest.

During the walk, Seligman suggested to Peterson that it might be a good idea to write a paper that summarized the studies we had completed. We decided to organize the paper to highlight the multiplicity of our lines of evidence. Usually a "multimethod" strategy refers to the operationalization 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suggested changes were entirely of the form "reference this, reference that, and contact so-and-so for such-and-such an unpublished manuscript."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.<sup>2</sup> 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.<sup>3,4</sup> 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.<sup>5,6</sup>

### 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.<sup>1</sup>

Perhaps most notable about our studies is that we employed a variety of methods and strategies to test the same hypothesis. We carried out cross-sectional correlational studies, longitudinal investigations with causal modeling, laboratory analogues, experiments of nature, and even case studies. We measured explanatory style with a questionnaire and with a content analysis procedure. Our

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 1,590 times.)
  2. Sweeney P D, Anderson K & Bailey S. Attributional style in depression: a meta-analytic review. *J. Personal. Soc. Psychol.* 50:974-91, 1986. (Cited 125 times.)
  3. Peterson C, Semmel A, von Baeyer C, Abramson L Y, Meulsky G I & Seligman M E P. The Attributional Style Questionnaire. *Cognitive Ther. Res.* 6:287-99, 1982. (Cited 280 times.) [See also: Peterson C. Circumstance, timing, and the ASQ. Citation Classic. *Current Contents/Arts & Humanities* 15(12): 18,7 June 1993, and *Current Contents/Social & Behavioral Sciences* 25(22):8, 31 May 1993.]
  4. Peterson C, Schulman P, Castellon C & Seligman M E P. CAVE: content analysis of verbatim explanations. (Smith C P, ed.) *Motivation and personality: handbook of thematic content analysis*. New York: Cambridge University Press. 1992. p. 383-92.
  5. Buchanan G A & Seligman M E P. *Explanatory style*. Hillsdale, NJ: Erlbaum. (In press.)
  6. Peterson C, Maier S F & Seligman M E P. *Learned helplessness: a theory for the age of personal control*. New York: Oxford University Press. (In press.)
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