

CHILDREN'S, TEACHERS' AND PARENTS' ATTRIBUTIONS OF CHILDREN'S MUSICAL SUCCESS AND FAILURE

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ABSTRACT

Attribution research investigates the influence of students' beliefs about the causes of success and failure on future achievement behaviors, expectancies, and emotional reactions. The main attributions in performance-oriented contexts are ability, effort, luck, and task difficulty (Weiner, 1979). Austin and Vispoel (1998) found that young musicians also attribute achievement outcomes to parents and teachers.

The present study aimed to investigate and compare causal attributions of young instrumentalists' success and failure to themselves, their parents, and their teachers, and to examine age and gender differences in attributions. Participants were 92 Austrian children aged from 12 to 14 years. They attributed their musical successes mainly to ability, effort, and teacher's influence. Failure was primarily attributed to effort, luck and task difficulty. By comparison to boys, girls attributed successes more to luck and task difficulty and less to their father's influence. Girls also tended to attribute failures more to luck and to lack of effort rather than to their own ability. Attributions did not vary significantly with age. By comparison to the children, parents and teachers emphasized their own contribution to the children's successes and underestimated their responsibility for failures.

The children's (especially the boys') attributions corresponded to those known to promote musical development. The results suggest that teachers and parents should be more willing to share responsibility for their students' and children's failures.

1. INTRODUCTION

A major premise of attribution theory (Heider, 1958; Kelley, 1971) is that people are strongly motivated to explain their successes and failures, particularly when the outcome is important, disappointing, or unanticipated. Beliefs about the causes of success and failure influence future behaviors, expectancies, self-perceptions, and emotional responses (Austin & Vispoel, 1998). Weiner (1986, 1992) identified three dimensions of causal attributions – the extent to which the cause (i) is internal or external to the person, (ii) remains the same or changes, and (iii) is under the person's control. According to Weiner and others, most causal attributions can be assigned to four main categories – ability, effort, luck, and task difficulty. In music, Austin and Vispoel (1995, 1998) showed that children regularly attribute success and failure also to parents and teachers. Evans et al. (2000) investigated attributions of gifted students and their parents and

teachers, and found that the tendency to attribute success to one's own characteristics or influence is common to students, their parents, and their teachers.

The main purpose of this study was to investigate the causal attributions of children for their successes and failures in instrumental music, focusing on age and gender differences. Because of the important role that parents and teachers play in music education (Howe et al., 1998; Davidson et al., 1996), a further aim was to compare parents' and teachers' explanations of students' successes and failures with the explanations of the students themselves.

2. METHOD

Participants

Participants were 92 children, 58 mothers, 39 fathers, and 36 teachers. Some teachers evaluated more than one of their students; the total number of different students who were evaluated by a teacher during the study was 65. The children were recruited from 14 music schools in Austrian province of Styria. They were aged from 12 to 14 years ($M = 13.0$, $SD = 0.9$, 31 males, 61 females) and grouped according to their school year, which was 6, 7 or 8 (corresponding to years 2, 3 and 4 of the Austrian *Hauptschule* or *Mittelstufe*).

Measures

Attributional beliefs were assessed by a questionnaire comprising 35 five-point Likert scale items (from 0 = "strongly disagree" to 4 = "strongly agree") for success and 35 items for failure. In each case, 5 different items were formulated for each of 7 attributions: ability, effort, luck, task difficulty, father's influence, mother's influence, and teacher's influence. For example, the attribution *effort* was assessed by five different statements such as "I performed well because I was particularly well prepared", "I performed well because I worked especially hard" or "I performed well because I devoted extra time and effort to the more difficult passages". All attributions referred to a specific successful musical situation or a specific failure that was chosen by the participants themselves.

3. RESULTS

Multivariate analyses of variance (MANOVAs) were performed on the quantitative attribution data with age and gender as between-subject factors. This was done separately for success and failure. In addition, separate univariate analyses of variance (ANOVAs) were conducted for the seven different attributions.

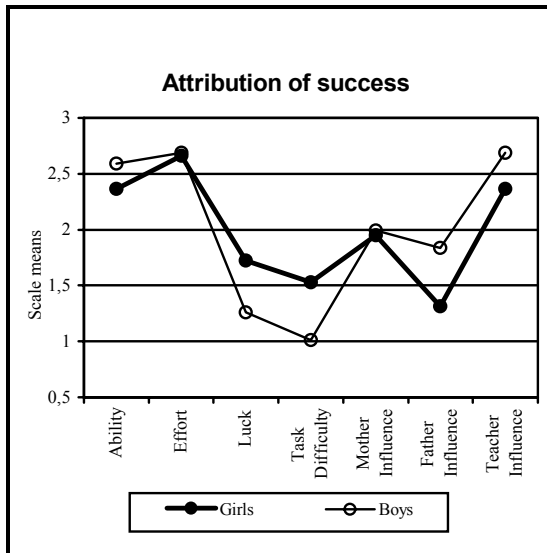


Figure 1: Comparison of boys' and girls' explanations of their musical successes. The response scale (vertical axis) ranged from 0 = "strongly disagree" to 4 = "strongly agree".

Success

The children attributed their musical successes mainly to internal factors such as ability and effort; they also emphasized the teacher's influence, which they considered to be more important than parental support (see Fig.1). The MANOVA revealed a significant main effect of gender ($F_{(7,76)} = 3.14, p = .006$). By comparison to boys, girls attributed success more to luck ($F_{(1,76)} = 5.39, p = .023$) and task difficulty ($F_{(1,76)} = 7.53, p = .007$) and less to the father's influence ($F_{(1,76)} = 4.98, p = .028$). Attributions did not vary significantly with age.

Failure

Failure was primarily attributed to effort (internal) and to luck and task difficulty (external). Children did not explain their low achievements in terms of lack of ability, nor did they hold their parents or teachers responsible for their failures (see Fig.2). The MANOVA revealed a non-significant main effect of gender ($F_{(7,76)} = 1.83, p = .093$). Girls attributed failure more to luck, i.e. to circumstances beyond their control ($F_{(1,76)} = 4.61, p = .035$) and (tendentially) to lack of effort, i.e. circumstances under their control ($F_{(1,76)} = 3.32, p = .072$) than boys.

Parents' and teachers' attributions

By comparison to the children, parents and teachers emphasized their own contribution to the children's successes and underestimated their responsibility for failures. Teachers endorsed their own influence more strongly than the ability and effort of the children. But they attributed failure least of all to a lack of positive influence from themselves.

The children were more likely than parents and teachers to explain their successes and failures in terms of bad luck and task difficulty. The adults generally considered achievement outcomes to be more controllable than did the children.

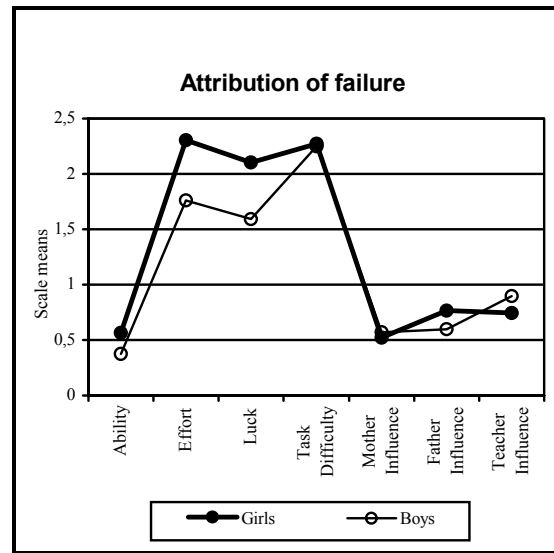


Figure 2: Comparison of boys' and girls' explanations of their musical failures.

4. DISCUSSION

The children in our study showed attribution patterns that are known to promote general self-esteem (McFarland & Ross, 1982), explaining their successes in terms of their own ability and effort. They believed they could avoid failure by hard work. They often attributed failure to lack of effort and seldom showed helpless behavior.

The attribution of success to the father's influence, which was stronger for boys than for girls, does not necessarily mean that fathers spent more time supervising the musical practice of boys than girls. Instead, it means that the boys *perceived* their fathers as more important for their musical success than did the girls.

In general, the children attributed their successes more to the influence of their teachers than to their parents. A possible explanation is that musical interactions were more intensive and active between teacher and pupil than between parent and child. Because of the altruism effect which could be found in other attribution research (Vispoel & Austin, 1995), it was not surprising that children did not hold parents and teachers responsible for their failures. More surprising was the finding that adults avoided attributing failures to their own influence. Our results suggest that teachers and parents do not discuss their children's failures openly enough with them, and do not share enough responsibility for them. We feel that both teachers and students could gain if both of these problems were addressed in a constructive, long-term manner.

A further implication of the study for adults is that they should more effectively communicate their knowledge about the controllability of achievement outcomes. The children in our study (especially the girls) showed stronger attributions to external, uncontrollable factors in comparison to parents and teachers. They need to learn that practising is the most important determinant of performance quality, and therefore the most reliable way to improve musical skills (Howe et al., 1998). Teachers

can help their students to understand this simple principle, both through the things that they say during lessons and their own example.

5. REFERENCES

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