



Some Sage Suggestions

Bernard Weiner



The esteemed editors of this series assume that those of an advanced age (me) are also wise (who, me?). That is a questionable assumption. At an earlier time, there was an empirical literature on this topic, in part conducted by Paul Baltes, although I do not know the final conclusions. But if there is an age-wisdom relation, it is correlational and it may not be that increasing age (experience) increases wisdom, but rather that the wise are more likely to survive. The latter explanation is consistent with a biological (Darwinian) viewpoint. If that is the case, then the editors could also invite younger people if they were able to identify (measure) wisdom. Also, it is likely that the age-wisdom relation is not linear but rather curvilinear such that wisdom increases with age, peaks, and then is followed by a

lowering along with other cognitive declines due to the aging process. That perhaps describes my current state, hopefully before the decline, so it is unfortunate that the editors did not start this series many years ago and invite me at that time (making the very questionable supposal that I passed their wisdom test).

A Bit of Personal History

To perhaps confirm their wisdom regarding my invitation, the editors asked that I discuss myself, giving “a bit of your history [and] your major contributions.” Regarding history, I was an undergraduate at the University of Chicago (UC), under a Great Books program. That means the undergraduate students read only classics, had the same liberal arts major, and became smart (wise?) but knew nothing current about any field of study. Following this degree, I remained at UC (as did most undergrads since they were not qualified for graduate programs) and obtained an MBA with an interest in labor relations. After unavoidably laboring two years in the U.S. Army, I returned to academics and the University of Michigan for my Ph.D. in psychology. This choice was in great part influenced by Professor Harold Leavitt, a student of Kurt Lewin, who hired me as a research assistant while I was at UC. I became acquainted with him because I enrolled in his seminar on Organizational Psychology, my first psychology course. I came to Michigan to follow in his footsteps and study organizational psychology, but my

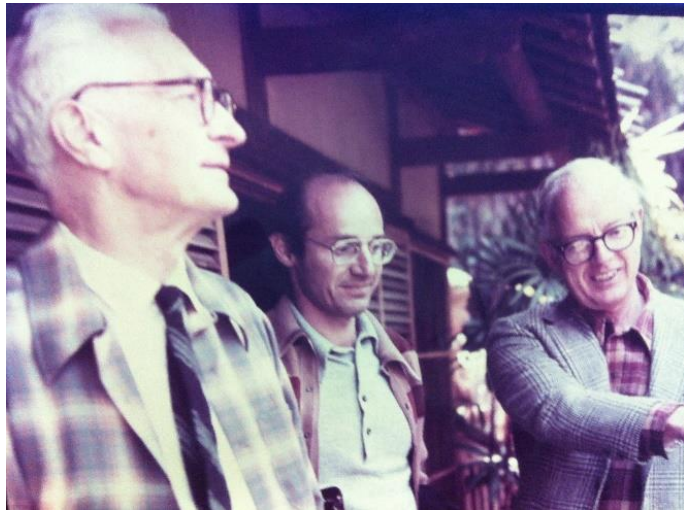
chosen advisor was on sabbatical and I was assigned to Dr. John Atkinson, a renowned motivation psychologist. Soon that became my research direction, with Atkinson as my mentor.

However, for many years I have been primarily identified as a social psychologist, for reasons I will soon give, so my academic career traveled from liberal arts to business to organizational psychology to motivation psychology to social psychology. And in truth I harbor the belief that I should have been a lawyer focusing on criminal justice. The reader can now understand why I have some hesitancy in defining myself as wise.

The vast majority of my research was conducted at the University of California, Los Angeles (UCLA), where I was a professor for 50 years (1965-2014). Since that time, I have been an Emeritus Professor and remain moderately active in psychology, writing wise chapters and essays such as this one.

Regarding Contributions

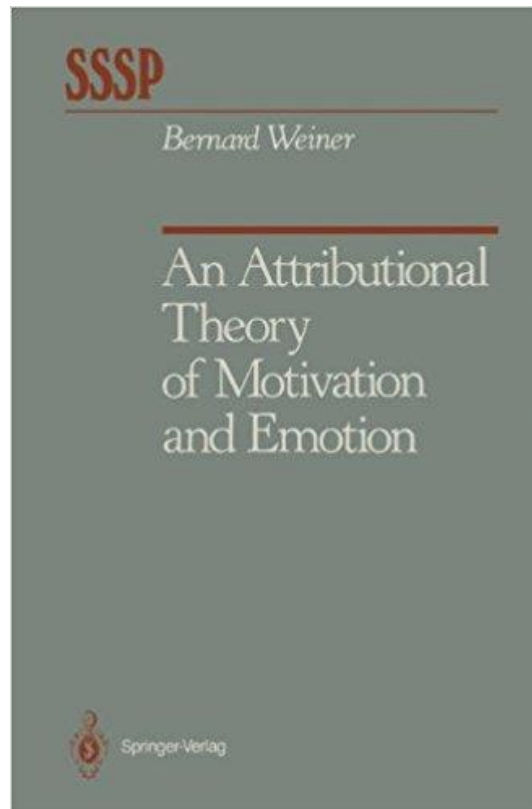
A few years ago I was an incorrect answer on the Graduate Records Exam (GRE). The question was, “Who was the originator of attribution theory?” The correct answer is Fritz Heider, an Austrian psychologist who became a close friend in the latter part of his life. Heider (above photo, far left) was transcendently wise. Another alternative, the second best answer, was Harold Kelley, (above photo,



Fritz Heider (far left), Bernard Weiner (middle), and Harold Kelley (far right) in 1975.

far right) my colleague at UCLA for 30 years prior to his premature death. The fourth alternative, after me, was a throw in—I think Sigmund Freud or William James. In any case, my contribution to psychology is certainly associated with what is known as attribution theory.

So what is this “attribution theory?” Actually, it is not really a theory but rather a field of study examining perceived causality. For example, assume you see Jim hitting Bill. You might regard Jim as aggressive, that is, he is the cause of this action. On the other hand, you might infer that Jim was provoked by Bill so that Bill is the cause of the behavior. Or perhaps both are members of gangs competing for dominance, so that others are the cause. The seminal attribution



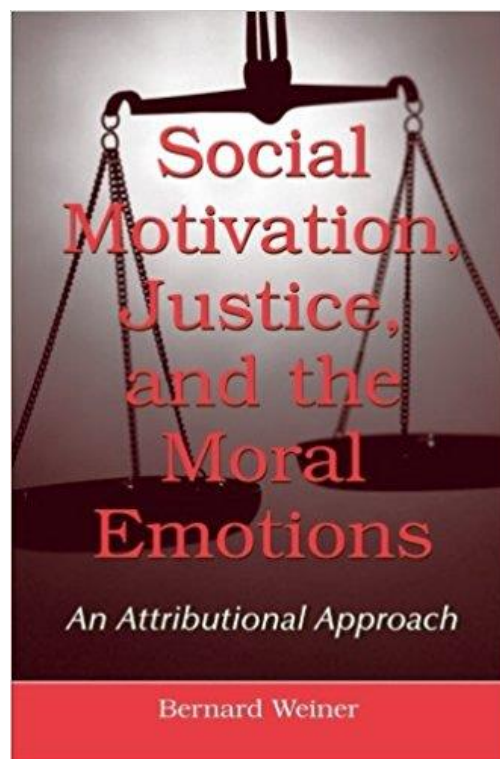
psychologists, including Heider and Kelley, examined such causal inferences, which often involve person perception. They were social psychologists concerned about interpersonal relationships. Included among the issues raised were: Is there a tendency to see others rather than the situation as causal? Do actors and observers make different causal judgments? What information is used to reach causal judgments and are there systematic biases in reasoning? Even though I was only marginally associated with these particular issues, because my research concerned causal beliefs, I became labeled a social psychologist.

Since my background was in the study of achievement motivation, the questions I examined from an attribution perspective, along with their answers, included:

- In what situations do individuals search for causes? Answer: particularly when the outcome of an event is negative and unexpected, such as failure at an exam when a good grade was anticipated, or in non-achievement settings, when your car does not start!
- What are the perceived causes of success and failure? Answer: the primary perceived causes of success and failure are ability and effort, followed by task difficulty and luck. Given other outcomes and states, there are different sets of causes, again with a few prominent. For example, the main perceived causes of poverty are laziness and lack of thrift, along with little education and lack of available jobs.
- What properties or characteristics do causes share? The answer is among my most important contributions. Answer: causes share three properties so that they differ not only qualitatively but also quantitatively. The properties are

locus (internal versus external to the person); stability (enduring versus transient); and controllability (under volitional control versus not controllable). For example, aptitude as a cause of academic success is regarded as internal to the person, stable, and not volitionally controllable. On the other hand, luck or chance as the perceived cause of a positive outcome is considered external to the actor, transient, but also not controllable. Aptitude and chance therefore differ on two causal properties (locus and stability) while sharing one characteristic (neither are perceived as subject to volitional change).

- Are there emotional and behavioral consequences given particular attributions and the properties of those causes? This question leads me to an attribution-based theory of motivation, which is my main



contribution to psychology. Extended wise answer: Each causal dimension has unique consequences. *Locus* is related to self-esteem and pride in accomplishment; self-esteem increments and pride are experienced if and only if success is ascribed to the self, or to extensions of the self such as, for example, relatives, groups, and country. *Stability* influences expectancy of success; ascriptions to stable causes result in an increased perceived likelihood that the past outcome will be repeated, whereas this is not the case given unstable causality. For example, success ascribed to high ability creates the belief that success will occur again, whereas this is not anticipated given a positive outcome attributed to luck. Finally, *control* relates to evaluation and moral emotions including guilt and shame, as well as anger and sympathy. For example, if someone fails because of lack of effort, anger often is experienced followed by punishment, whereas failure by

someone due to low aptitude or a different uncontrollable cause gives rise to sympathy and pro-social behavior.

Given this (as well as other unstated information), what might be a motivation sequence in the achievement domain? Assume a student fails an exam and perceives the cause to be lack of math aptitude. Because the cause is internal, there is a lowering of self worth and self esteem; because the cause is stable, there is an expectancy of future failure; and since the cause is internal and uncontrollable, there are feelings of humiliation, shame and embarrassment. These lower motivation and as a result perhaps the student drops out of school. If the teacher has this same attribution (he or she may not), then there is again expectation of future difficulty but now accompanied by sympathy, which leads to helping behavior. Thus, there are two parallel motivation episodes, respectively associated with the actor and the observer, one related to achievement striving and the other to help-giving, but explained with the same theoretical system. The reader may play out motivation sequences given other

causes – just insert the causal dimensions, the emotions and expectations, and then the behavior. I believe that this theory increased our understanding of the influence of both the head and the heart on motivated behavior as compared to prior theories of motivation. For further reading, extensive reviews can be found in some prior sources (Weiner, 1985, 1986, 1995, 2006, 2018).



Bernard Weiner with dog, Freckles, in 2012.

Influences

The editors also asked “what personal and situational factors [influenced your] work.” I already alluded to some:

- Wise mentors, including Harold Leavitt, who guided me into academics; Norman Garnezy, who helped at the beginning of my career by overseeing my academic progress; and Harold Kelley, who supported my work.
- The stimulating academic centers of the University of Chicago, where I learned how to think; the University of Michigan, where I learned about psychology and to value research; and UCLA, where I was given time, space, and the opportunity to engage in research of my choosing.
- Fabulous undergraduate, graduate, and post-doctoral students who provided ideas, pushes and shoves, stimulation, friendships, and the great reward of influencing their lives and becoming a father over and over again.
- In addition to these, there were many other causes for my career path. I was lucky in coming to attribution theory just as it was making a wave in psychology. I certainly rode that wave. But I also have to take some credit in having the wisdom to make that choice as

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Advice

Thankfully, it is time to turn away from myself (I talked about me enough; why don't you now talk about me!). “What lessons have been learned that can be implemented by

colleagues” is my writing assignment. What follows are some scattered thoughts:

Selecting a mentor. When Odysseus went on his long journey, he needed someone to watch over his son, Telemachus, someone who would teach moral values and to accept responsibilities in the city-state. He searched for a teacher, sponsor, and exemplar. For this position, Odysseus chose his friend, Mentor.

The importance of having someone play the role of mentor in academics cannot be overemphasized. Students with mentors are happier, more productive, promoted more quickly during their academic careers, and are overrepresented as award winners. If one wants to pursue a research career, a mentor is needed to teach how to submit publications, how to revise, and when to *bold um* and when to *fold um*. Often insufficient thought is given to the very important mentor decision. I was lucky in being assigned to Atkinson but also had some important mentors later in my career. So my simple advice is to make an informed and wise decision. Is the potential mentor publishing? Are his or her students getting good job offers? Do you personally like that person? Is the individual available? Is there an active research group? These are the kinds of questions to ask if you are pursuing a research career.

Avoiding the research crisis.

Currently there is a lot of noise about a research crisis, that is, a lack of replicability of experimental findings. Although the attention given to this issue appears to be relatively new, it existed even when I started my career. Then lack of reliability was typically ascribed to poor experimental methods or changes in procedure rather than to some fundamental shortcoming in the hypothesis itself.

In my very first meaningful experiments regarding causal beliefs, along with a student (Andy Kukla), we described school children as succeeding or failing and factorially varied whether they had or did not have ability and exerted or did not exert effort. The research participants were instructed to evaluate (reward and punish) those students. Such simulation or “pretend” experiments are easy to conduct, the variables easy to manipulate, and hence easy to attempt to replicate. Indeed, the findings were systematic and reliable – the low ability, high effort and successful student is considered a moral hero, whereas the high ability, low effort and failing student is a moral villain.

I submitted a manuscript of about 20 pages, containing three experiments, to a highly respected journal. The editor at that time was extremely critical, insightful, and wordy. He wrote a 10-page editorial response with an invitation to resubmit. By the time I read, processed and understood his comments, I had conducted a fourth experiment and included this in the

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resubmission. He responded with a nearly seven-page letter, again asking for a resubmission. Finally, after going through a third review, a six-experiment study of about 25 five pages was accepted for publication. It became one of my most highly cited works.

My advice regarding possible lack of reliability of research findings is to publish a series of studies that includes replication and extension. Be confident about your empirical findings—be willing to bet on full replication. Be open to performing the study in your classroom without fearing embarrassment. Of course, not all research questions are open to this path. But, if possible, develop procedures that permit easy data gathering and repeated studies.

Gaining status. All fields of science search for indices of scientific contribution. The most obvious indicator is number of publications, although this by itself does not reveal merit if the publications are “minor.” Perhaps the number of publications could be weighted by the reputation of the journal to make this a more valid contribution index. More recently, it appears that the most-used measure of scientific worth is the number of publication citations or some other citation variant.

For psychologists, their most cited works are written between the ages of 50-60 (for mathematicians, the golden age of productivity is around ages 20-25). The most cited work also is cited most about five years following publication. One therefore comes to clearly learn of his or her scientific merit, visibility,

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But what work is heavily cited? The most cited publications are books, reviews, essays, and other non-empirical writings. Of course, these are usually based on years of prior empirical findings. So, to increase the likelihood of visibility a number of replicable empirical publications followed by a theoretical synthesis may be the optimal career path. Of course, other routes are possible. The originator of attribution theory, Fritz Heider, did little research and wrote one major book (that changed the field of social psychology), published in his 60's. So anything is possible, although I suggest an early empirical focus followed by an extensive conceptual piece, with the most cherished piece written when one is near 50!



Bernard Weiner with wife, Jaana, and daughter, Miina, in 2014.

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About Acquired Wisdom

This collection began with an invitation to one of the editors, Sigmund Tobias, from Norman Shapiro a former colleague at the City College of New York (CCNY). Shapiro invited retired CCNY faculty members to prepare manuscripts describing what they learned during their College careers that could be of value to new appointees and former colleagues. It seemed to us that a project describing the experiences of internationally known and distinguished researchers in Educational Psychology and Educational Research would be of benefit to many colleagues, especially younger ones entering those disciplines. We decided to include senior scholars in the fields of adult learning and training because, although often neglected by educational researchers, their work is quite relevant to our fields and graduate students could find productive and gainful positions in that area.

Junior faculty and grad students in Educational Psychology, Educational Research, and related disciplines, could learn much from the experiences of senior researchers. Doctoral students are exposed to courses or seminars about history of the discipline as well as the field's overarching purposes and its important contributors. .

A second audience for this project include the practitioners and researchers in disciplines represented by the chapter authors. This audience could learn from the experiences of eminent researchers—how their experiences shaped their work, and what they see as their major contributions—and readers might relate their own work to that of the scholars. Authors were advised that they were free to organize their chapters as they saw fit, provided that their manuscripts contained these elements: 1) their perceived major contributions to the discipline, 2) major lessons learned during their careers, 3) their opinions about the personal and 4) situational factors (institutions and other affiliations, colleagues, advisors, and advisees) that stimulated their significant work.

We hope that the contributions of distinguished researchers receive the wide readership they deserve and serves as a resource to the future practitioners and researchers in these fields.



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