

The Promise and Peril of Attributional Counseling: A Reply

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Three questions raised by Priddy and Stone (1983) in their alternative interpretation of earlier attributional research (Forsyth & Forsyth, 1983) are examined: (a) When should attributional interpretations be used? (b) How much change did these interpretations produce in research participants? and (c) Does the failure to include a control condition in the design severely limit the interpretability of the findings? The application of the studies of attributional interpretations to ongoing counseling settings is also discussed.

Priddy and Stone (1983), in their comments on two previously reported studies of the effectiveness of attributional counseling (Forsyth & Forsyth, 1982), raise several important and worthwhile points concerning possible harmful effects of attributional counseling, alternative interpretations of the initial findings, and suggestions for future research efforts. Although we find ourselves in substantial agreement on several of these issues, on others we wish to express our own views.

Attributional Counseling Is Not for Everyone

To reiterate Priddy and Stone's warning, counselors should apply attributional retraining with caution. Although our research suggests that certain individuals showed improvement after attributional counseling, other individuals did not. In fact, as we explicitly stated in our report (Forsyth & Forsyth, 1982), "externals did not respond well to . . . attributional information" (p. 145). As researchers in counseling psychology we are charged with the task of investigating what counseling method is most effective with what clients and what types of problems (Bergin & Lambert, 1978). Given our findings, an evenhanded analysis suggests that a guided exploration of the causes of behavioral and psychological problems may be helpful for only (unfortunately) some of the people some of the time.

Did Attributional Counseling Lead to Improvement?

Priddy and Stone propose that the effectiveness of several of the attributional treatments in the laboratory experiment is unclear, since

subjects in treatment conditions did not show a significant positive gain relative to those in the control groups. Unfortunately, although at a surface level this criticism is quite valid, it assumes that the subjects in the control condition were not making attributions themselves. Naturally a pure test of the hypotheses would contrast the responses of subjects in treatment group to the responses of subjects who formulated no attributions, but when individuals receive unexpected outcomes they tend to quickly formulate attributional explanations (e.g., Wong & Weiner, 1981). As we reported, the control subjects tended to attribute their outcome to internal, controllable factors, and in consequence the manipulated internal/controllable condition did not differ from this group. Furthermore, in the second study, analyses indicated that virtually all subjects—whether internal or external in their locus of control—profited from the attributional information. Although Priddy and Stone are correct in stating that this finding is not clearly established in the article, examination of the original data indicates that both internals and externals improved but that internals tended to show even more positive responses than externals.

Where Is the No-Treatment Control Group?

Priddy and Stone conclude their comments by suggesting that Experiment 2 should have included a no-treatment control. However, in designing the study we purposely omitted the control group for the following reasons: (a) the "coping" condition would provide a baseline for detecting the overall effectiveness of the attributional condition; (b) subjects themselves served as controls, since pre-post measures were used; (c) individuals assigned to a waiting-list control condition would doubtless formulate attributions about the causes of their social anxiety either with or without the assistance of an interviewer; and (d) given the limited information yielded by a

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control group, we felt its inclusion was ethically unjustified.

A Viewpoint on the Value of the Research

In sum, although we agree with several points raised by Priddy and Stone, we also feel that the experiments support—in an admittedly small way—the effectiveness of attributional interpretations in counseling. In applying the findings to actual practice, however, counselors must not seek to directly generalize the attributional interpretations used in the research but instead must integrate these findings with the results of the many other studies of attributional counseling (e.g., Antaki & Brewin, 1982; Hoffman & Teglasi, 1982; Rehm & O'Hara, 1979) as well as with their own experiences as counselors. Like most research, the two studies can be applied to counseling, but they also raise as many questions as they answer.

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