

# **An Examination of Generational Shifts in Attribution Styles among Undergraduate Business Students**

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## **Abstract**

*Much has been said, both in the popular press and in academic journals, about the differences between millennials and prior generations. They are described as the “look at me” generation, implying an overemphasis on self (Pew Research Center, 2007). According to a study by Myers and Sadaghiani (2010), stereotypes for Millennials describe them as “self-centered, unmotivated, disrespectful, and disloyal.” It is estimated that by 2025, 75% of the workforce will be comprised of millennials (Hobart and Sendek, 2014). If they are in fact as different as the stereotypes suggest, then a thorough understanding of these differences will be necessary in order to effectively compete with a primarily millennial workforce.*

*One variable that deserves attention is the attribution styles of this generation. Attributions are the causal explanations that people give for the outcomes of events that either happen to them, or that they observe happening to others. (Heider, 1958). Attributions have been shown to have great impact on individual's behaviors and mental well-being (Abramson, et al., 1978), as well as possible both positive and negative effects on workplace outcomes (Green and Mitchell, 1979; Martinko and Gardner, 1982, Harvey et. al, 2014). Therefore a shift in the styles of attributions between generations may foreshadow changes in employee performance, and the motivators that drive employee performance.*

*This paper proposes studying these changes by comparing data collected in an earlier study, on college students in the southeastern United States in 1995 (Thomson and Martinko, 2004), with data collected from students in the same region, in 2015. This longitudinal analysis will allow us to compare these generations at similar ages, allowing us to account for generational differences, without having age differences as a contaminant.*

## **Introduction**

The millennial generation has received considerable attention, particularly in how this generation differs from those who came before them (Pew Research Center, 2007). These millennials will soon be a majority of the workforce, and by 2025, will make up a full 75% of our workers (Hobart and Sendek, 2014). This paper proposes that significant differences in the attribution styles of millennial college students will be found, when comparing their styles similarly aged Generation X students 20 years ago. These differences will be tested by comparing data collected in 2015 to data from a past study conducted in 1995 (Thomson and Martinko, 2004).

## **Attribution Styles**

Attributions have been repeatedly shown to be related to important workplace behaviors, and a recent meta-analysis of these studies shows that these relationships are not only statistically significant but have predictive validity (Harvey et. Al, 2014, Myers and Sadaghiani). Harvey et

al. (2014) found that attributions affected the quality of employee/supervisor relationship, and actual work performance. Research has shown that individuals have stable biases in the attributions they make, leaning either toward more optimistic or pessimistic attributions (Seligman, 1990). Optimistic attributions are related to the better performance and relationships with supervisors found by Harvey et. al. (2014), while the pessimistic pattern of attributions has been found to be related to a condition called learned helplessness, and a psychological state termed “hopelessness depression” (Abramson, Seligman and Teasdale, 1978, Abela and Seligman, 2000).

### **Attributional dimensions**

Attributions made by an individual for their performance outcomes can be classified along several dimensions. Beginning this focus was Rotter's (1966) concept of locus of control. Locus of control refers to the degree to which a person believes that an outcome is due to his/her actions, or to environmental causes. Weiner et al. (1971), and Weiner (1985) built on this, adding the dimension of stability, and calling this model the Achievement Motivation Model of attributions. Stability refers to the degree to which the causal factor is unchanging, or consistently over time. The Achievement Motivation model has subsequently been modified in a number of ways, one of which was Abramson et al's (1978) addition of the Globality dimension. Globality refers to the generalizability of the causal factor across different situations. Weiner (1979) and Zuckerman and Feldman (1984) added the dimension of controllability to the achievement motivation model of attributions. Subsequently, Weiner (1985) suggested yet another dimension, that of intentionality, or the degree to which the specific outcome was intended by the actor.

### **Optimistic and Pessimistic Attributions**

The optimistic style of attributions is characterized by the different attributions made for success and failure. Successes are generally attributed to internal, stable and global causes (such as ability). This leads to an expectation that in the future this behavior will again lead to success. Failure, on the other hand, is generally attributed to external, unstable and specific causes (such as bad luck or environmental conditions). This leads to the person believing that the causal variable that resulted in failure is likely to be absent, or have a different effect in future situations (Abramson et al., 1989).

This attribution style is purported to have a positive effect on the probability of future success for the individual involved. They will be more likely to continue to attempt a task, even in the situation in which they have had a number of consecutive failures. This has obvious implications for some types of jobs, such as door-to-door salesmen, who may be turned down dozens of times before making a sale. The other identified style of attributions is largely the opposite of this, and has been called the pessimistic style by Seligman (1990).

The pessimistic attribution style is essentially the opposite of the previously described optimistic style. Successes are usually attributed to external, unstable and specific causes (e.g. luck). This results in little certainty that the outcome can be repeated, even when the person has succeeded repeatedly. Failures, on the other hand, are often attributed to internal, stable, and global causes (such as intelligence). This results in the person having low expectancies of future success, not only in the one specific situation, but in other, related ones as well (Seligman, 1990).

### **Narcissism and Attributions**

Grijalva and Harms(2014) cite The Diagnostic and Statistical Manual of Mental Disorders to define narcissism as a grandiose preoccupation with one's own self-importance; that is, the belief that one is special and more important than others (5th ed.; DSM-5; American Psychiatric Association [APA], 2013). They further state that "additional diagnostic criteria for narcissistic personality disorder include "fantasies of unlimited success," "hypersensitivity to criticism," "entitlement," "exploitativeness," and "a lack of empathy" (APA, 2013 p. 645.)

A study by Ladd et. al. (1997) looked at the relationship between scores on the Narcissistic Personality Inventory-40 (NPI-40) and their causal attributions. They found that higher scores on the NPI-40 correlated with more internal and stable attributions for positive events and more external and unstable attributions for negative events, in other words; the optimistic attribution style.

### **Characteristics of Millennials**

According to a study by Myers and Sadaghiani (2010), stereotypes for Millennials describe them as "self-centered, unmotivated, disrespectful, and disloyal." Furthermore a study by the Pew Research Center (2007), Millennials believe that their generation is unique and special, with more than 2/3 of all Millennials responding affirmatively to that question. They also believe themselves to be better educated, with expectations for better, higher paying jobs. This could be problematic, as a Forbes magazine article reports that their job and salary opportunities have been worse than their predecessors, due in part to the deep recession that began in 2008 (Howe, 2014). Howe (2014) goes on to describe Millennials as risk averse, focused on family, and achievement oriented. He also says that Millennials are optimistic, even in spite of their high expectations and less than stellar results. The last characteristic can be explained with attribution theory.

### **Propositions**

An examination of the above description of Millennials sounds amazingly similar to the clinical definition of narcissistic personality. Therefore, I propose that the attribution styles of millennials will be more internal, stable and global for positive events and external, unstable and specific for negative events.

P1: Millennials will have attributions for positive events that are more internal in locus of causality than their generation X counterparts.

P2: Millennials will have attributions for negative events that are more external in locus of causality than their generation X counterparts.

P3: Millennials will have attributions for positive events that are more stable than their generation X counterparts.

P4: Millennials will have attributions for negative events that are more unstable than their generation X counterparts.

P5: Millennials will have attributions for positive events that are more global than their generation X counterparts.

P6: Millennials will have attributions for negative events that are more specific than their generation X counterparts.

## **Discussion**

The implications of the above propositions, if they are supported, are significant. A more optimistic attribution style means that these individuals will be less prone to learned helplessness and less likely to give up. However, the tendency to over rely on external causes for failures may result in unrealistic expectations of success, and may lead to perceptions of unfairness, if the external causes they choose for their failures include their co-workers or supervisor. Additionally, the optimistic attribution style, if taken to an extreme, can create an unrealistic worldview, and an inflated sense of self-worth. Anecdotally, this matches the descriptions given for Millennials. How to control this bias, and benefit from the positive aspects of optimistic attribution style, while moderating the effects of narcissism are potential avenues of future research.

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