

European Journal of Psychology of Education
2008, Vol. XXIII, n° 4, 501-504
© 2008, I.S.P.A.

Objects of study, objectivity and objectivation in attribution research

Willem Doise

Université de Genève

These short comments try to develop an argumentation in favour of broadening perspectives in attribution research in academic settings. A distinction is made between research purposes that merely aim at developing existing attribution paradigms, or that on the contrary aim at a better understanding of the function of these attributions in a broader societal context. According to the author such a broadening of perspectives also necessitates an analysis of different positioning in society.

The guest editors of this special issue on attribution processes in the academic setting draw distinctions between intraindividual, interpersonal and organizational perspectives in current attribution research and introduce a complementary approach taking into account that a social norm of internality is generally favoured irrespective of the outcomes of behaviours for which causal attributions are to be assessed.

The relevance of these distinctions for the study of various objects is illustrated in articles dealing with different issues such as the intervention of stereotypes in academic judgements and performances, the shared perceptions in classrooms of pedagogic qualities of the teachers and the cheating of their students, different styles of attribution of students at the beginning of a term and their academic performances assessed at its end. Furthermore a study in France and another in Italy evidence the special status of the norm of internality. In a review article consistent findings are reported on the progressive interiorisation of this norm during the scholastic curriculum and on its importance in self-presentations of pupils as well as in the judgements that bear on them.

This special issue is a further confirmation of the heuristic value of the theorizing on attribution processes, especially of the detailed model that Bernard Weiner has developed and of the special status that Beauvois and Dubois have afforded to the norm of internality. Therefore, these articles contribute to the further development of theoretical and empirical tools for attribution research in academic settings. Attribution processes are now important **objects of study** in educational psychology.

Does this necessarily involve that these studies bear on important aspects of the **objective reality** of educational settings? At a first sight this question is to be considered preposterous after my assessments in the previous paragraphs. Still, I think that it is a sensible question. My

reasons for asking a question about objective validity is not necessarily related to possible debates about the ecological validity of sociopsychological research. The research reported offers strong arguments in favour of the plausibility that attributions as studied by the authors intervene in educational settings. However, they are far from exhaustive in explicating the whole set of objective conditions that further or prevent their intervention in academic contexts. Probably, none amongst them would claim that attribution processes as they are presently studied account in an exhaustive way for academic success or failure, for the impact of stereotypes, for cheating behaviour, for reciprocal judgments of pupils and teachers, for self-evaluation of students.

Some of the hypotheses proposed are more than others grounded in a comprehensive view of social reality. I consider that this is the case for the theorizing by Beauvois and Dubois about the norm of internality. According to convergent statements by them (Beauvois, 1994; Dubois, 1994) this norm plays an important function in contemporary societies as France and the USA. When compared to the characteristics of attribution processes studied by authors as Weiner, the norm of internality takes precedence of other aspects of social attribution processes and in a certain sense orients their functioning. In a footnote, Beauvois (1994, 34) admits that the notion has its origins in Marxist ideas developed by Luckasz and Althusser. However, in the same note he also mentions that his own analyses moved away from these origins and he adds: "Psychologie sociale expérimentale oblige!" This is of course an elaboration on the aphorism "Noblesse oblige", implying that privilege or high standing entails responsibility. In the context of his book the aphorism probably means that the scientific rigor of social psychological approaches should prevent researchers from considering that social psychology should aim at validating or at evaluating the value of a societal vision. The work of social psychologists can be inspired or motivated by such visions, however it has its own more specific requirements and limits.

That was also the opinion of a protagonist of the so-called European social psychology. Joachim Israel, co-editor of the book on "The Context of Social Psychology: A Critical Assessment" (Israel & Tajfel, 1972) took it for granted that "stipulative statements... determine the type of empirical theories which are developed and these theories affect the research strategy used" (Israel, 1972, 125). Which are such stipulative statements: "They are: assumptions concerning (1) *the nature of Man, including the nature of knowledge which Man has*, (2) *the nature of society*, and (3) *the nature of the relationship between Man and society*" (ibidem, 124). I think that I do not distance myself to far from the theorizing by Beauvois and Dubois in considering that the *nature of knowledge* in the quotation above also should involve the nature of value judgments. And I think that further statements of Israel are also applicable to their theorizing on the norm of internality: "It is not the form of traditional essentialism that is being referred to here. ... The statements concerning the nature of the phenomena to which I refer do not have the status of final explanations but of initial conditions. They are of a stipulative kind. They can be expressed in alternative ways. ... My main thesis is that these stipulative statements have regulative functions. They determine the type of empirical theories which are developed and these theories affect the research strategy used." (ibidem, 124-125).

The research strategy of the studies on "internality" is oriented by a specific societal view, which is made explicit in statements about origins of the norm of internality, which "(1) Is before all the norm of a (privileged) social group and, (2) Is acquired in a differentiates way during development" and also it would be "a representation favoured by privileged classes, a way of relating themselves to the world characteristic of 'the good people'" (by Beauvois (1984, 105 and 109). In this sense I consider that Beauvois and Dubois have grounded their theorizing about internality in a societal view that affords a stronger ideological impact to some societal groups than to others.

The vision of a free and autonomous individual master of his/her destiny corresponds to an objective ideological reality in our society. Even if it is partly a fiction it is a necessary condition for the juridical and educational system to function. Such a vision can be considered real or objective to the extent that it has real effects which can be studied in an objective way, also in social attribution research.

In such research, a “Psychologie sociale expérimentale oblige!” effect occurs which I consider to be an **objectivation** effect, also evidenced in the papers published in this issue. While theorizing on the idea of social representation, I have described objectivation in terms such as: objectivation present abstract ideas as concrete realities, it transforms relational aspects of scientific knowledge into the image of real things.

Objectivation certainly is an important aspect of everyday thinking, however it does not necessarily promote scientific analysis. In that sense I understand and share the concern of Beauvois, re-affirmed in this issue, about the necessity of a “rupture épistémologique”. The paradox is that the operationalization of the norm of internality often lead to a simplification, if not to a real objectivation of the “norm of internality”. How often do researchers using the concept, study the objective reality of links between this norm and privileged social groups? Do they consider that this norm is now invading the entire societal space to such an extent that pupils from different social origins, being scholarized in institutions or school sections of different standing in society, are subjected to the same extent to the reality of these norms? Would it no longer be realistic to imagine different reactions to the intervention of this norm of pupils of different origins, in different educational streams? Has a researcher no longer to envisage such questions which are directly inspired by the original theorisation on the norm of internality?

Otherways said can one lump together considerations of general societal norms and organizational effects as the guest editors seem to do? Would it not be more heuristic, more in agreement with a certain sense of objectivity to distinguish what I have described a long time ago as positional effects and as general norms (Doise, 1986)? It was an epoch when Deschamps, Lorenzi-Cioldi, and Meyer (1982) did not have at their disposal the instruments, now en vogue for measuring internality. However in related areas they showed significant differences between pupils according to their social origins and I could confirm their findings in integrating convergent results from four studies with pupils of 14 to 16 years studies in the French-speaking part of Switzerland (Doise, 1985).

Paradoxically, with the advancement of the theory and the methodology of studying multi-levels effects the detection of complex interactions between social origin, prestige of the school streams, training of the teachers in different areas, should now be much easier than three decades earlier. Is it individualization of measures of internality, its objectivation at an individual level, that prevent researchers of studying their anchoring in societal differences? If this were true, attribution research by social psychologists would be another illustration of the disappearance of the social in social psychology (Greenwood, 2004).

References

- Beauvois, J.-L. (1984). *La psychologie quotidienne*. Paris: Presses Universitaires de France.
- Beauvois, J.-L. (1994). *Traité de la servitude libérale. Analyse de la soumission*. Paris: Dunod.
- Deschamps, J.-C., Lorenzi-Cioldi, F. & Meyer, G. (1982). *L'échec scolaire. Elève modèle ou modèles d'élève? Approche psychosociologique de la division sociale à l'école*. Lausanne: Editions Pierre Favre.
- Doise, W. (1985). Représentations sociales chez des élèves: Effets du statut scolaire et de l'origine sociale. *Revue Suisse de psychologie*, 44, 67-78.
- Doise, W. (1986). *Levels of explanation in social psychology*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.
- Dubois, N. (1994). *La norme d'internnalité et le libéralisme*. Grenoble: Presses Universitaires de Grenoble.
- Greenwood, J.D. (2004). *The Disappearance of the Social in American Social Psychology*. Cambridge, Cambridge University Press.
- Israel, J. (1972). Stipulations and construction in the social sciences. In J. Israel & H. Tajfel (Eds.), *The context of social psychology: A critical assessment*. London: Academic Press, 123-211.
- Israel, J., & Tajfel, H. (1972). *The context of social psychology: A critical assessment*. London: Academic Press.

Ces quelques commentaires ont pour but de présenter une argumentation en faveur d'un élargissement des perspectives dans les recherches d'attribution se déroulant dans un contexte scolaire. En effet, nous pensons qu'il faut faire une différence entre les recherches qui ont pour but principal de développer le paradigme actuel des recherches sur l'attribution et les recherches qui ont comme objet principal de comprendre la fonction de ces attributions dans un contexte sociétal. L'auteur de ces commentaires est d'avis qu'un tel élargissement de perspectives nécessite la prise en considération d'effets positionnels.

Key words: Objectivation, Objectivity, Social attribution, Societal context.

Received: July 2008

Revision received: August 2008

Willem Doise. Professor Emeritus Université de Genève Switzerland, Unimail, 1200 Genève, Switzerland. E-mail: Willem.Doise@unige.ch

Current theme of research:

Social representations of human rights. Explanations in social psychology.

Most relevant publications in the field of Psychology of Education:

Doise, W. (2007). Quand les interactions sociales font progresser. In M. Duru-Bellat & M. Fournier (Eds.), *L'intelligence de l'enfant. L'empreinte du social*. Auxerre: Editions Sciences Humaines, 121-133.

Doise, W., & Mugny, G. (1984) *The social development of the intellect*. Oxford: Oxford Pergamon Press.

Doise, W., & Palmonari, A. (1984). *Social interaction in individual development*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.