

## Features of Students' Attributional Style

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**Abstract.** Attributional style or explanatory style is a cognitive personal feature reflecting a standard specific way of explaining the reasons of events in which people are involved. This concept is key in M. Seligman's theory of learned helplessness and depression. M. Seligman and his followers experimentally proved that the person becomes helpless in case he is convinced that nothing depends on his active actions, that evil events happen accidentally, and it is impossible to change them. The paper describes features of attributional style of junior students and provides recommendations on overcoming its negative consequences.

The social focus of the state policy forms and defines the psychological atmosphere in the society, where social optimism and a feeling of national dignity or pessimism, despondency and national inferiority may prevail. The validity of this statement is confirmed by the situation in modern Russia: change of socio-political structure of the society and transformation of economy accompanied with stagnation, and frequent social cataclysms generated public disbelief in the efficiency of national institutes, in the potential to improve life in the future [1]. As a result of developed assurance in impossibility to be an active subject of life the active part of the population demonstrates the pessimistic attributional style in life events where the life goals are mainly focused on material problems of survival. In Russia, according to sociologists, 73.5% of the population [2] belong to the group of people "facing some needs or having low income" and 90% of them believe that they cannot influence the decisions taken by authorities [3]. Another considerably smaller part of citizens (power elites and oligarchs possessing production facilities) is focused on fast financial benefits. Sharp income differences and a fair amount of citizens living below poverty line indicate unstable social and economic development of the country.

According to M. Seligman's theory of learned helplessness and depression [4], the conditions of public consciousness currently existing in Russia may be characterized as learned helplessness – conditions under which a person does not attempt to change the situation

to the best. M. Seligman and his followers [5; 6; 7] experimentally proved that the helplessness is not caused by unpleasant events but by subjective experience confirming the failure to control negative events. The person becomes helpless in case he is convinced that nothing depends on his actions, that evil events happen accidentally, and it is impossible to change them.

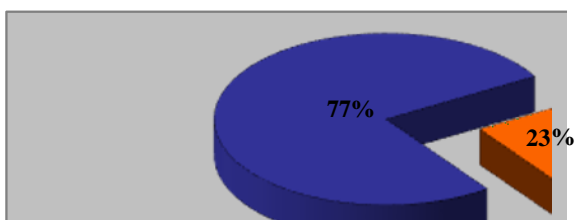
The core of the theory of learned helplessness is formed by attributional style or explanatory style – a cognitive personal feature reflecting a standard specific way of explaining the reasons of events in which people are involved [8, p. 22]. The attribution phenomenon as the field of psychological study includes a variety of problems connected with the fact how the person explains his behavior and behavior of others. M. Seligman identifies two types of attributional style – pessimistic and optimistic. The first type is understood as the style when adverse events are explained by internal, constant and general characteristics, and positive events – by external, temporary, relating to specific reasons. It is typical for a person to think that he is not able to control negative events. This style is not considered constructive since it does not lead to any solution and is aimed to find the guilty person. Success is considered as random, temporary and uncontrollable event. The pessimistic explanatory style is a predictor of depression, and during the adolescence period serves the risk factor for health in the future. The learned helplessness and pessimistic explanatory style are bound to bad health. The second type – optimistic – is the style

explaining failures caused by external changeable and certain reasons, and success – by internal constants, general reasons. This style acts as constructive when the progress is treated as stable, global and controllable, and failures are considered temporary, casual and uncontrollable, referring to a small part of life. The majority of difficult situations are both positive and negative. For example, an exam failure results in a bad mark on a subject, but can also motivate a person to develop academic abilities and foster successful achievements and demonstration of persistence in follow-up activity. The optimistic attributional style helps an individual to adapt to reality, its difficulties and to continue constructive work due to optimistic, flexible and realistic perception of events. This style serves the predictor of subjective feeling of happiness, mental and physical health [9]. The attributional style is described by three parameters: stability (continuity of reasons in time and their temporality); localization (external situational and internal personal reasons) and globality (universal, related to various situations, and specific without generalization on other reasons of the situation) [10, p. 73].

**The purpose** of this study was to analyze the features of attributional style of junior students in conjunction with reflection types and to develop recommendations on overcoming the negative consequences of this style. The following techniques were chosen: test of attributional styles (L.M. Rudin); determination of reflexivity level (A.V. Karpov).

The empirical base of the study was formed by Siberian Federal University and the Reshetnev Siberian State University of Science and Technology: 1<sup>st</sup> and 2<sup>nd</sup> year students of various training programs (280 people).

The test of attributional styles (TAS) by L.M. Rudina helped to define that the pessimistic features of attributional style prevail among the majority of students – 76.6%. The remaining 23.3% demonstrated optimistic features. The result is shown in Figure 1.



**Fig. 1.** Correlation of attributional styles among students, %.

Low mood is typical for students with pessimistic attributional style: everything is bad, nothing good is expected, disbelief in the right. They do not try to resolve conflictogenic academic situations since this requires prompt actions and decisions, as well as change of activity.

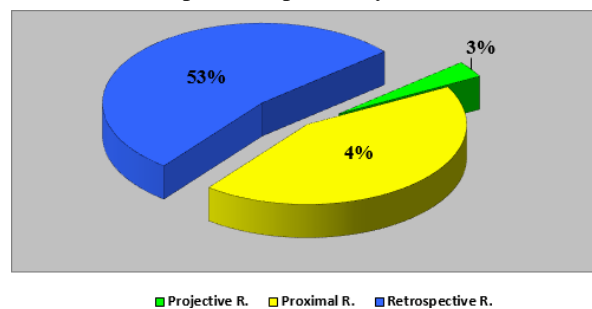
Analyzing the revealed behavioral features, the authors faced the need to analyze them in the context of three main reflection types identified through the so-called ‘temporary’ principle: situational (relevant, proximal), retrospective and perspective reflection.

The situational reflection ensures direct behavioral self-control in a relevant situation, understanding of its elements, analysis of events, ability of a subject to correlate actions with a situation and to coordinate them according to changing surrounding and personal conditions. Behavioral features and characteristics of this reflection type include time of reflecting on the current activity; how often a person applies the analysis of events; degree of extension of decision-making processes; tendency to self-analysis in particular situations.

The retrospective reflection is demonstrated by the tendency to analyze the activity already performed in the past. In this case, prerequisites, motives and reasons of the event; content of past behavior and its resulting parameters, especially made mistakes, act as objects of reflection. This type of reflection is expressed in how often and how long does the subject analyze and estimate the events, whether in general he is ready to analyze the past and himself.

The perspective reflection corresponds to: the function of analysis of upcoming activities, behavior; planning as such; prediction of potential outcomes, etc. Its main behavioral features include careful planning of behavior, frequency of appealing to future events, focus on the future.

The determination of reflexivity level by A.V. Karpov made it possible to conclude that 53.3% of students have retrospective reflection, i.e. focus on the past, while 43.3% have proximal and 3.3% have perspective reflection (Figure 2). It should be noted that due to perspective reflection students are able to design, plan and program their activities (including professional), they begin to think not what they have done but what they will do and that will happen in the future. Hence, only 3.3% of respondents are capable to use the reflexive potential positively.



**Fig. 2.** Correlation of students' reflection types, %.

The group of students demonstrating retrospective features of reflection (53.3%) are characterized by ‘narrowing of a life field’ until the past, i.e. a student understands his personal image and reasons of intrapersonal conflicts in the past. Most often, a student is ‘stuck’ on this process and cannot define the potential for personal development.

Following the purpose of the study, the authors correlated the data obtained through the techniques of L.M. Rudina and A.V. Karpov and revealed six pairs of collocated variables: 40% of respondents demonstrated the pessimistic and attributional style and retrospective

reflection; 36.7% – pessimistic attributional style and proximal reflection; 13.3% – optimistic attributional style in the ratio of retrospective reflection; 6.67% – correlation of optimistic attributional style and proximal reflection; and 3.3% – optimistic attributional style and projective reflection. The correlation of pessimistic attributional style and projective reflection was not revealed. The obtained results are given in Figure 3.

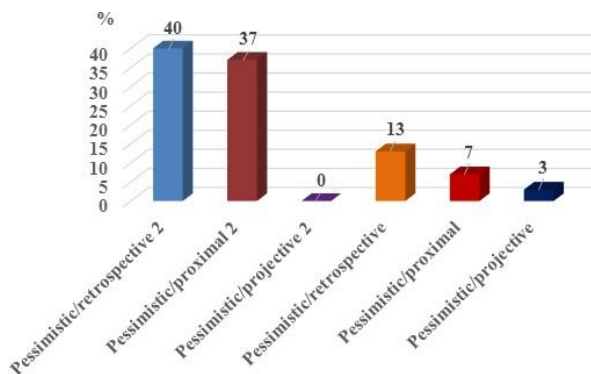


Fig. 3. Diagram of students' attributional style and reflection.

As a result, students were given practical recommendations on overcoming the negative features of attributional styles. It should be noted that the program to correct the attributional style of students shall focus on a cognitive component of this style – reflection – and shall be shifted towards students. Taking the above into account the address to students was made.

### DEAR STUDENTS!

You are active, freedom-loving, and adventurous. You want to know yourself and to use your knowledge for self-development. Do you recognize yourself? Of course, you do, otherwise you would never choose such a complex field of social activity as welfare work.

Studying at higher educational institution, you have excellent chances to become homo innovaticus – the innovation person in your self-development and overcoming negative aspects of attributional style.

**Remember! Optimism is a great trust in life and people.**

Imagine that you bought a tour to Turkey, but at the last moment, you felt hurt by a tour operator and failed to get your flight in due time: let them suffer without me. Have you imagined? Does this awkward situation makes you smiling? Does this situation remind you of something? You paid your tuition fee to study at the university and never used the educational services provided, you decided to do something else – let teachers and parents suffer because you failed to meet their expectations and did not gain the necessary knowledge. Or you had a spat with a friend and the whole world became dark, you lost the desire to pursue good works, etc.: let friends suffer seeing how bad I feel! The demonstration of pessimistic features of attributional style are diverse and most often represent emotional reactions to some action or event.

**The surefire way to make your life a hell is to become pessimist.**

Perhaps, our advice will help you to overcome difficulties of pessimism.

1. Consider the best ways of overcoming negative features of attributional style and clear the obstacles on the way towards optimism. **REMEMBER!** You may try hard to pursue happiness but stumble over some unforeseen point, which can destroy all previous achievements.

To feel happy, to be in harmony with the world is very important for the success of self-fulfillment. To make progress in career, study, love and at the same time remain unhappy? How it that possible? What is the use of pseudo-progress?

Meanwhile, it often happens exactly like this in life: it seems that everything is fine and there are no obvious troubles / misfortunes, but some 'worm' of dissatisfaction does not calm down and its continuous 'fuss' leads to the fact that the good luck, progress and achievements bring absolutely no joy, and the pessimism prevails ...

**BUT! Although you are not able to guarantee yourself an absolute happiness, you may only try to minimize misfortune.** What does this mean?

Psychologists proved that there are **five obstacles** preventing a person from feeling happy. This is **anger, disappointment, fear, grief and boredom.**

Terry Horn and Simon Wootton proposed several ways to fight against these obstacles. They can help you to get rid of 'inner barriers, to free yourself and not be afraid to be happy anymore. We suggest you think through some general provisions of the **Special Behavioral Program.**

2. Switch over to other things: once you found yourself complaining about life, thinking ill of yourself, creating sad forecasts for life or reflecting on failures and misfortunes, put a note mentally or in your diary and tell yourself: I have just thought of my failure, and now I want to think about ... (for example, my relatives, my dream, upcoming festal event, etc.).

3. Invent an autosuggestion formula: short life-affirming sentence, for example: "I am free in my life"; "I am a strong person"; "I am self-confident". Repeat the formula naturally but not as being forced at least 5-6 times a day right after or shortly before going to bed. Generally, the result is achieved in two weeks. **REMEMBER!** "Everything passes. This, too, shall pass" (parable). Even today, the words of wisdom are able to make a person stronger in a despair moment and give spiritual strength.

4. Don't be a maximalist: don't set unachievable goals for yourself. Learn to be tolerant and indulgent to yourself and others.

5. Don't look back especially towards what has happened or could happen.

6. Attend trainings aimed to develop the skills of self-control in difficult situations.

7. Sign up for classes with psychologist to learn constructive behavior.

8. Analyze your emotional state more often and avoid emotionally negative expressions: "Damn!"; "What a

nightmare!"; "That's awful"; "What a pity", etc. Instead, simply think, what has happened?

9. Don't use rough expressions: "Think faster!"; "Keep your nose out of ..."; "Back off", etc. If you became irritated, raised your voice or even shouted – apologize and express your regret.

10. Deal only with positive people who are able to give hope and inspire people – **the best way to develop optimism.**

### DEAR TEACHERS!

1. Don't disregard anxiety, suspiciousness, pessimism of students, and their insecurity, and control reasons (verbal and nonverbal) for academic failures.

2. Help students to set realistic goals to increase chances of their success and personal self-assessment of abilities.

3. Provide psychological support to the desire of students to change their pessimistic mood.

4. Inform and consult students on problems of attributional style.

5. Make students believe in personal potential to overcome critical situations.

6. Encourage students to plan the near future and design an individual educational trajectory.

7. Avoid unreasonable pressure upon pessimistic students, don't 'cross the line' in your desire to insist and push students.

8. Use your sense of humor, cheerful and smooth temper when supporting students demonstrating negative features of attributional style.

9. Be more democratic with pessimistic students, don't abuse irony. Your sarcasm may offend them and strengthen negative features of attributional style.

10. Be cheerful and inspire students with positive emotions. Avoid learned helplessness because of personal failures and disappointment in educational situations.

### Optimistic quotes

- A pessimist sees the difficulty in every opportunity; an optimist sees the opportunity in every difficulty (*Winston Churchill*).

- If you wish to become an optimist and understand life, stop believing what people say and write. Observe and discover for yourself (*Anton Chekhov*).

- Pessimism is a mood, optimism is will (*Émile-Auguste Chartier*).

- The best way to cheer yourself up is to try to cheer somebody else up (*Mark Twain*).

### Useful reading

Seligman M., How to be optimistic. M.: Veche, 1997, pp. 10-113.

Martin Seligman (born 12 August 1942 in Albany, New York) – American psychologist and writer.

The scientist gives advice on how to become optimistic. He will help you to sort out your feelings and to understand who you are: an optimist or a pessimist.

**Wish you optimism!**

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