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# A Comparison of Australian and Chinese Teachers' Attributions for Student Problem Behaviors

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The present study compared Australian and Chinese teachers' causal attributions for student behavior. A total of 204 Australian teachers and 269 Chinese teachers rated the importance of four causes (ability, effort, family, teacher) of six student problem behaviors. Results showed that both groups of teachers attributed misbehaviors most to student effort and least to teacher factors. Chinese teachers emphasized family factors more while Australian teachers placed greater importance on ability. There was significant variation in attribution patterns for different types of problems, with effort attribution being equally and strongly emphasized across cultural contexts and behavior types. The results are interpreted in the light of how individualistic and collectivistic values influence teacher thinking, and implications for school-based interventions for behavior problems are discussed.

## **Significance of Teachers' Attributions**

Students' problem behaviors are an important concern in schools and they represent a major source of stress for teachers (Borg, 1990; Boyle, Borg, & Falzon, 1995; Brouwers & Tomic, 2000; Dunham, 1981; Emmer, 1994; Feitler & Tokar, 1992; Smilansky, 1984). School psychologists and teacher educators often attempt to enhance teachers' effectiveness in behavior management, and a better understanding of the motivation directing teachers' practice in this area is of great importance. Recent studies on human motivation have largely adopted cognitive frameworks of enquiry, focusing on how cognitive-mediational processes influence behavior. In line with this, many studies of educational processes examine teacher thinking as a significant antecedent to teacher practice (Hollingsworth, 1989; Jones & Vesilind, 1995; Prawat, 1992; Westerman, 1991). In this study, Australian and Chinese teachers' attributions for student problem behaviors were compared to examine how cultural context and problem types might affect the perceptions of these teachers.

Some researchers have suggested that the most important beliefs that teach-

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ers have about students are their causal attributions for student performance (Darley & Fazio, 1980; Peterson & Barger, 1985). According to Weiner's attribution theory (Weiner, 1979, 1986), people spontaneously find explanations for failure, and also to a lesser extent for success, which affect their subsequent behavior (for example, to work hard or not) (Weiner, 1985). In the context of education, it can be assumed that teachers frequently make attributions about students' success or failure in order to adjust teaching goals and strategies. Soodak and Podell (1994) noted the ease with which teachers made causal attributions about student problems, even in the absence of a rich fund of information. Furthermore, studies have shown that such attributions have significant implications for teachers' perceptions of their own responsibility for students' performance as well as their subsequent behavior towards the students (Brophy, 1996; Clark, 1997; Fang, 1996; Goyette, Dore, & Dion, 2000; Hughes, Barker, Kemenoff, & Hart, 1993; Mavropoulou & Padelidiadu, 2002; Medway, 1979; Poulou & Norwich, 2000; Soodak & Podell, 1994; Tollefson, 2000). In the past few decades, teacher attributions have been examined in relation to a wide range of student problems.

Most studies on teachers' attributions for student behavior provide evidence for a so-called self-serving bias (Brown & Rogers, 1991; Campell & Sedikides, 1999) in that teachers tend to locate the causes for problems within the student or family rather than teaching-related factors (Brophy & Rohrkemper, 1981; Christenson, Ysseldyke, Wang, & Algozzine, 1983; Galloway, Armstrong, & Tomlinson, 1994; Goyette et al., 2000; Medway, 1979; Miller, 1995, 1996; Soodak & Podell, 1994; Wilson & Silverman, 1991). However, a few studies showed that teacher and school factors were also considered important (Hughes et al., 1993; Maxwell, 1987; Mortimore, Davies, Varlaam, & West, 1983; Poulou & Norwich, 2000). Increasingly, researchers have established links between teachers' causal attributions and discipline-related practices (Bibou-Nakou, Kiosseoglou, & Stogiannidou, 2000; Bibou-Nakou, Stogiannidou, & Kiosseoglou, 1999; Brophy, 1996; Brophy & Rohrkemper, 1981; Davis & Sumara, 1997; Goyette et al., 2000; Hughes et al., 1993; Poulou & Norwich, 2000). In general, students are more subject to punitive measures if they are perceived to have control over the cause of the problem, and teachers would be more sympathetic and willing to help students viewed as victims of circumstances (Brophy, 1996; Brophy & Rohrkemper, 1981; Natriello & Dornbusch, 1984; Tollefson, 2000). Moreover, the likelihood of teachers becoming punitive is very much influenced by the extent to which students' misbehavior threatens teachers' sense of control in the classroom (Brophy, 1996; Mavropoulou & Padelidiadu, 2002).

### **Cultural Influences on Teachers' Attributions**

Recently there has been more interest in cultural factors behind teacher thinking and practice, as it has been alleged that teacher thinking cannot be

fully understood without examining the cultural context in which it occurs (Artiles, 1996; Rios, 1996). Thus an examination of the cultural factors underlying teachers' attributions becomes significant. As Hong, Chiu, Dweck, Lin and Wan (1999) suggested, people's beliefs and meaning systems would foster particular attributions in a given situation. For example, in western societies, where self-perception of competence is closely tied to students' sense of self-worth (Covington, 1984, 1992), students display a tendency to ability attribution for academic success and effort attribution for academic failure so as to avoid threats to their self-worth (Covington & Omelich, 1979; Nicholls, 1976). In contrast, in the Chinese culture, where achievement through hard work is more highly valued than achievement through ability (Yang, 1986), and where ability is considered modifiable by effort (Hau & Salili, 1991), studies have consistently shown that students of all ages attribute both academic success and failure more to effort than ability (Hau & Salili, 1996; Ho, Salili, Biggs, & Hau, 1999; Salili, 1995). Cross-cultural comparisons of teachers' attribution styles should similarly reflect differential cultural beliefs and values. This would enable a greater understanding of the meaning attached to educational practices in different cultural contexts.

In the domain of discipline and classroom management, despite the significant body of attribution research in the western context, very little has been done to examine Asian teachers' attributions for such problems. As related earlier, research has shown that western teachers tend to succumb to the self-serving bias in their attributions for student performance. Teachers in the Asian Confucian tradition, however, are supposedly very much responsible for good behavior in students (Ho, 1996; Wu, 1996; Yuan, 1984). It would be of interest to see whether this normative requirement of the teacher role would be reflected in their attribution tendencies.

The present study aimed to compare teachers' causal attributions for students' problem behaviors in two contrasting cultural contexts: Australia and Hong Kong. Teachers in these two contexts work in similar educational systems modeled after British schooling. However, the dominant culture in Australia follows very closely the western cultural heritage based on individualism (Feather, 1985, 1994), while Hong Kong is a Chinese collectivistic society, where education is very much under the influence of Confucian values despite its colonial history, as previous studies have shown (Biggs, 2001; Hong, 2001; Salili, 1995, 1996; Watkins & Biggs, 1996, 2001). Such comparisons would generate insights into the motivational processes and the associated cultural values underlying teachers' discipline strategies. Specifically, the investigation focused on:

1. Similarities and differences between Australian and Chinese teachers' general patterns of causal attribution for students' problem behaviors, and
2. The extent to which these causal attributions varied for different types of problem behaviors.

## Method

### *Participants*

A total of 204 Australian teachers (98 males and 106 females) and 269 Chinese teachers (134 males and 135 females) with more than four years of teaching experience completed a questionnaire. They taught various subject disciplines in 30 public (subsidized in the Hong Kong context), comprehensive, and co-educational high schools (15 schools in each setting). The schools were selected by stratified random sampling from various locations in Hong Kong and the Sydney metropolitan area. Efforts were made to involve teachers from schools with a range of student ability, with five schools being sampled from each of the above average, average, and below average strata in both cultural contexts. In the Australian context, selective high schools for top achievers were chosen to represent above average schools. Average and below average schools were respectively represented by those reporting a tertiary education entrance rate of 40–80% and below 40% in a recent guide to schools. In the Hong Kong context, the official banding system served as an indicator for type of school. Band 1 schools were for above average students, Band 2 schools for average students, and Band 3 schools for below average students.

### *Measures*

Six vignettes of common problem behaviors among students were used to instigate participants' causal attributions. These included daydreaming in class, not completing homework, talking in class, lesson disruption, bullying, and rudeness to the teacher (Table 1). The vignettes were based on preliminary studies in both cultural contexts, in which 103 Australian teachers and 124 Hong Kong teachers from 48 randomly selected schools (24 in each setting) responded to an open-ended question asking them to nominate common student problem behaviors in their schools. Analyses of the frequencies of nomination of specific behaviors and the category they fell into suggested that there were three major types of problems that both Australian and Hong Kong teachers were most concerned about, namely learning motivation problems, disruptiveness in class, and inappropriate interpersonal behaviors. Consequently two vignettes were developed for each type of problem. These were reviewed by two teachers from each setting for validity checking. The incidents were presented as behavior patterns that were not transient in nature.

Participants were asked to rate for each vignette the importance of four factors—student's lack of ability/skills, student's lack of effort/self-discipline, student's family background and teacher/teaching-related issue—as causes of the behavior on a six-point Likert scale (totally unimportant to most important). These factors were chosen based on results from preliminary interviews with 24 teachers, all with at least four years of teaching experience. Twelve teachers from six schools were interviewed in each cultural setting; one male and one female with different teaching subjects from each school. Of the six

Table 1. Vignettes of student problem behaviours

Type of problem	Vignette
Daydreaming in class	A student shows little interest in your lesson and is very inattentive. Now you see this student daydreaming in class again.
Not completing homework	A poorly motivated student often fails to complete assignments. Today this student has again failed to hand in homework.
Talking in class	There is a student who is quite talkative during lessons. Now you are reviewing some important material with the class and you see this student repeatedly turning to classmates on both sides to make remarks.
Lesson disruption	The class is concentrating on the lesson when a student suddenly makes some irrelevant remarks loudly. This student often disrupts lessons by calling out comments.
Bullying	You walk into the classroom and find a student teasing a classmate, making him very upset. This student is the class bully and has done things like this many times.
Rudeness to teacher	There is a student in your class who shows little respect for teachers, often being uncooperative. Now you are explaining some procedures to the class and this student interjects comments in a very rude manner.

schools in each setting, two had students with largely above average achievement, two average, and two below average. Interviewees were asked to nominate causes for student misbehaviors described in the six vignettes. Findings indicated that the four factors listed above were the most common, well-defined and differentiable causes used by both Australian and Hong Kong teachers to explain student behavior.

The questionnaire for the present study was developed in English and translated into Chinese for Hong Kong teachers. Back-translation was carried out to ensure accuracy in translation.

*Procedure*

A senior staff member in each participating school was asked to distribute 20 to 30 copies of the questionnaire to teachers who had received their education in the local setting (to control for cultural background) and had at least four years of experience. It was stated that a comparable number of males and females and teachers with varied teaching subjects were preferred. A total of about 400 questionnaires was distributed in each cultural setting and collected two to three weeks later. After discarding a small number of incomplete or ambiguous questionnaires, 204 and 269 questionnaires from the Australian and Hong Kong settings respectively were included in the analysis.

Table 2. Means and standard deviations for composite causal attribution ratings by culture and achievement level

Causal category	Student achievement	Australian ( $n = 204$ )			Chinese ( $n = 269$ )		
		M	SD	$n$	M	SD	$n$
Ability attribution	Above average	25.64	5.07	64	22.71	5.56	108
	Average	25.69	5.90	65	22.81	4.72	69
	Below average	25.19	4.91	75	24.36	5.59	92
	Combined	25.51	5.27	204	23.23	5.40	269
Effort attribution	Above average	30.30	4.65	64	29.95	3.74	108
	Average	30.28	4.16	65	28.79	3.71	69
	Below average	29.28	3.86	75	30.21	4.16	92
	Combined	29.97	4.22	204	29.62	3.90	269
Family attribution	Above average	24.38	5.10	64	25.69	4.97	108
	Average	23.54	6.51	65	25.19	4.59	69
	Below average	23.57	4.88	75	25.85	5.41	92
	Combined	23.83	5.50	204	25.56	5.02	269
Teacher attribution	Above average	22.88	4.77	64	22.54	5.09	108
	Average	23.06	5.29	65	21.22	4.50	69
	Below average	22.47	4.83	75	21.65	5.16	92
	Combined	22.82	4.94	204	21.76	4.98	269

## Results

### *General Patterns of Attributions*

To examine whether generally the importance ratings for the four causal categories differed across cultures and schools with different achievement levels, a 2 (culture)  $\times$  3 (achievement level)  $\times$  4 (causal category) analysis of variance (ANOVA) was performed. In this analysis, the composite importance rating (combining the six vignettes) was the dependent measure, while culture and achievement level were between-subject factors, and the causal category was a within-subject factor. The interaction effects involving causal attributions were first examined to explore whether the pattern of ratings across the four causal categories differed across cultures and achievement levels. The subsequent univariate  $F$ s were tested for significance at Bonferroni-adjusted  $\alpha$  levels to maintain familywise  $\alpha$  at 0.05 for each set. Table 2 shows the mean composite importance ratings for the four causes.

The ANOVA on composite importance ratings indicated a significant effect for the culture by causal category interaction [ $F(3, 1401) = 17.56, p < 0.05$ ], but not for the student achievement by causal category interaction [ $F(6, 1401) = 0.72$ , non-significant (ns)], nor the culture by student achievement by causal category interaction [ $F(6, 1401) = 0.93$ , ns]. This indicated that with the six problem behaviors considered together, patterns of causal attribution differed across Australian and Chinese teachers, but not across teachers from

schools with different achievement levels, either within the two cultural groups or across the full sample.

Follow-up tests for simple effects on the culture by attribution interaction (Figure 1) showed that Australian and Chinese teachers did not differ significantly in their importance ratings for effort or teacher attributions [ $F(1,1401) = 0.35$  and  $5.82$ , respectively, both ns]. They did, however, differ on ability and family attributions, with Australian teachers making significantly more ability attributions [ $F(1,1401) = 32.86$ ,  $p < 0.0125$ ] and Chinese teachers making significantly more family attributions [ $F(1,1401) = 20.47$ ,  $p < 0.0125$ ].

Within-group differences in attributions to the four causes were also significant for both groups of teachers [ $F(3,1401) = 110.47$  and  $173.82$  for Australian and Chinese teachers, respectively,  $p < 0.025$ ]. Tukey tests for differences in ratings within each cultural group indicated that Chinese teachers rated the causes in the following order of importance: effort, family, ability, and teacher [differences significant for all pairwise comparisons,  $Q(4,1413)$  ranging from  $5.23$  to  $29.77$ ,  $p < 0.05$ ]. Among Australian teachers, although effort was again rated the most important cause [ $Q(4,1413)$  for pairwise comparisons with the other three causes ranging from  $14.80$  to  $23.80$ ,  $p < 0.05$ ], ability was rated the second most important [ $Q(4,1413)$  for pairwise comparisons with the other three causes ranging from  $5.60$  to  $20.40$ ,  $p < .05$ ], while family and teacher factors were rated equally least important [ $Q(4,1413) = 3.40$ , ns].

#### *Variations across Individual Problem Behaviors*

The second stage of the analysis aimed to examine more closely the variability of individual causal attributions across different problem behaviors among Australian and Chinese teachers. A 2 (culture)  $\times$  6 (vignette) multivariate analysis of variance (MANOVA) was performed. In this analysis, culture was a between-subject factor, vignette a within-subject factor, and the four causal categories the dependent measures. Mean importance ratings for the four causes for individual vignettes are shown in Table 3. The MANOVA outcomes indicated a significant multivariate effect for the culture by vignette interaction [Wilks'  $\Lambda = 0.92$ ,  $F(20,7735) \approx 9.22$ ,  $p < 0.05$ ], with univariate  $F$ -tests indicating that this effect was significant for all causal categories [ $F(5,2335) = 18.96$ ,  $3.60$ ,  $13.03$ ,  $3.74$ ,  $p < 0.0125$  for ability, effort, family, and teacher attributions, respectively].

For effort attribution, follow-up tests of simple effects in the culture by vignette interaction indicated that Australian and Chinese teachers did not differ in effort attribution for all problem behaviors [ $F(1,2335) = 6.64$ ,  $2.81$ ,  $6.24$ ,  $1.07$ ,  $0.08$ , and  $5.00$ , ns for daydreaming in class, not completing homework, lesson disruption, talking in class, bullying, and rudeness to teacher, respectively]. Both groups of teachers displayed significant within-group vignette effects [ $F(5,2335) = 14.90$  and  $6.12$ ,  $p < 0.025$  for Australian



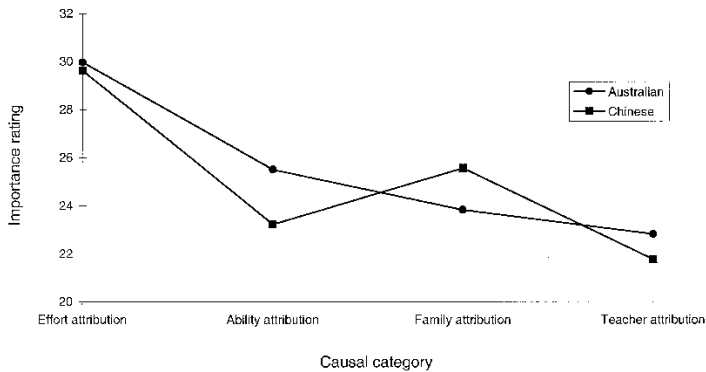


Figure 1. Composite causal attribution ratings.

and Chinese teachers respectively], and Tukey post-hoc tests within each group indicated similar patterns of ratings for Australian and Chinese teachers (Table 4). In both cases, relative to most other problem types, effort attributions were lowest for daydreaming in class and bullying.

For ability attribution, follow-up tests of simple effects for the culture by vignette interaction indicated that Australian teachers made more ability attributions than Chinese teachers for bullying [ $F(1,2335) = 42.56, p < 0.008$ ], rudeness to teacher [ $F(1,2335) = 65.79, p < 0.008$ ], and lesson disruption [ $F(1,2335) = 66.07, p < 0.008$ ], whereas Chinese teachers attributed daydreaming in class more to ability than their Australian counterparts [ $F(1,2335) = 9.41, p < 0.008$ ]. The two groups of teachers did not differ in their ability attribution for students' failure to complete homework [ $F(1,2335) = 6.46, ns$ ] or talking in class [ $F(1,2335) = 4.64, ns$ ]. Within-group differences were also significant for both Australian and Chinese teachers [ $F(5,2335) = 4.62$  and  $62.73, p < 0.025$  respectively] with Tukey tests indicating greater variation in ability attribution for different types of problem behaviors among Chinese teachers than among Australian teachers (see Table 5). Chinese teachers tended to make ability attributions mostly for schoolwork problems (daydreaming in class and not completing homework), less for talking in class, and least for lesson disruption and interpersonal problems (rudeness to teacher and bullying). Among Australian teachers, although ability attributions were slightly higher for bullying than for rudeness to teacher and schoolwork problems, in general these differences were minimal. Thus, results indicated that Australian teachers made more consistent ability attributions for different types of problem behaviors than Chinese teachers, who highlighted ability deficits as more important for schoolwork problems.

For family attribution, tests of simple effects for the culture by vignette interaction indicated that Chinese teachers made more family attributions than their Australian counterparts for daydreaming in class [ $F(1,2335) = 87.39, p < 0.008$ ], lesson disruption [ $F(1,2335) = 38.51, p < 0.008$ ] and talking in class [ $F(1,2335) = 22.24, p < 0.008$ ]. The two groups did not, however, differ

Table 3. Means and standard deviations for causal attribution ratings for individual vignettes

Causal category	Vignette	Australian ( <i>n</i> = 204)		Chinese ( <i>n</i> = 269)	
		M	SD	M	SD
Ability attribution	Rudeness to teacher	4.37	1.34	3.61	1.37
	Bullying	4.00	1.33	3.39	1.37
	Not completing homework	4.37	1.15	4.13	1.30
	Daydreaming in class	4.38	1.16	4.67	1.10
	Lesson disruption	4.22	1.30	3.46	1.37
	Talking in class	4.17	1.21	3.97	1.31
	Combined	25.51	5.27	23.23	5.40
Effort attribution	Rudeness to teacher	5.19	1.13	5.04	0.90
	Bullying	4.85	1.13	4.83	1.06
	Not completing homework	5.14	0.84	5.03	0.78
	Daydreaming in class	4.62	1.06	4.79	0.89
	Lesson disruption	5.08	0.88	4.91	0.96
	Talking in class	5.09	0.89	5.02	0.85
	Combined	29.97	4.22	29.62	3.90
Family attribution	Rudeness to teacher	4.31	1.36	4.37	1.15
	Bullying	4.51	1.25	4.62	1.08
	Not completing homework	4.29	0.96	4.29	0.98
	Daydreaming in class	3.48	1.28	4.20	1.14
	Lesson disruption	3.88	1.19	4.36	1.02
	Talking in class	3.36	1.29	3.72	1.20
	Combined	23.83	5.50	25.56	5.02
Teacher attribution	Rudeness to teacher	3.84	1.36	3.71	1.26
	Bullying	2.94	1.23	2.83	1.22
	Not completing homework	3.87	1.05	3.41	1.07
	Daydreaming in class	4.32	1.28	4.07	1.06
	Lesson disruption	3.85	1.08	3.86	1.16
	Talking in class	4.00	1.17	3.88	1.11
	Combined	22.82	4.94	21.76	4.98

on family attributions for failing to complete homework [ $F(1,2335) = 0.00$ , ns], bullying [ $F(1,2335) = 2.08$ , ns] and rudeness to teacher [ $F(1,2335) = 0.67$ , ns]. Thus, family factors were considered more relevant in the Chinese collectivistic context than in the Australian individualistic culture to students' lack of appropriate attention in classroom learning. Both Australian and Chinese teachers displayed significant within-group vignette effects for family attribution [ $F(5,2335) = 66.94$  and  $37.43$ ,  $p < 0.025$  respectively], with Tukey tests showing different patterns of variation across different problem behaviors (see Table 6). Chinese teachers considered family factors most important for bullying and least important for talking in class, with their importance being similar for all other problems. Australian teachers, on the other hand, considered family factors equally most important for bullying, rudeness to teacher and not completing homework, and least important for

Table 4. Effort attribution: Tukey tests for vignette effects

Vignette		Q-value (6,2335)					
		1	2	3	4	5	6
Chinese (M)							
4.79	1. Daydreaming in class	–					
4.83	2. Bullying	1.00	–				
4.91	3. Lesson disruption	3.00	2.00	–			
5.02	4. Talking in class	5.75*	4.75*	2.75	–		
5.03	5. Not completing homework	6.00*	5.00*	3.00	0.25	–	
5.04	6. Rudeness to teacher	6.25*	5.25*	3.25	0.50	0.25	–
Australian (M)							
4.62	1. Daydreaming in class	–					
4.85	2. Bullying	4.60*	–				
5.08	3. Lesson disruption	9.20*	4.60*	–			
5.09	4. Talking in class	9.40*	4.80*	0.20	–		
5.14	5. Not completing homework	10.40*	5.80*	1.20	1.00	–	
5.19	6. Rudeness to teacher	11.40*	6.80*	2.20	2.00	1.00	–

\* $p < 0.05$ 

daydreaming or talking in class. In other words, Chinese teachers highlighted family socialization factors especially for bullying, whereas Australian teachers broadly differentiated between social or motivation problems and inattention during class when evaluating the importance of family influence.

For teacher attribution, follow-up tests of simple effects for the culture by vignette interaction indicated that Australian teachers attributed daydreaming

Table 5. Ability attribution: Tukey tests for vignette effects

Vignette		Q-value (6,2335)					
		1	2	3	4	5	6
Chinese (M)							
3.39	1. Bullying	–					
3.46	2. Lesson disruption	1.17	–				
3.61	3. Rudeness to teacher	3.67	2.50	–			
3.97	4. Talking in class	9.67*	8.50*	6.00*	–		
4.13	5. Not completing homework	12.33*	11.17*	8.67*	2.67	–	
4.67	6. Daydreaming in class	21.33*	20.17*	17.67*	11.67*	9.00*	–
Australian (M)							
4.00	1. Bullying	–					
4.17	2. Talking in class	2.43	–				
4.22	3. Lesson disruption	3.14	0.71	–			
4.37	4. Rudeness to teacher	5.29*	2.86	2.14	–		
4.37	5. Not completing homework	5.29*	2.86	2.14	0.00	–	
4.38	6. Daydreaming in class	5.43*	3.00	2.29	0.14	0.14	–

\* $p < 0.05$

Table 6. Family attribution: Tukey tests for vignette effects

Vignette		Q-value (6,2335)					
		1	2	3	4	5	6
Chinese (M)							
3.72	1. Talking in class	–					
4.20	2. Daydreaming in class	9.60*	–				
4.29	3. Not completing homework	11.40*	1.80	–			
4.36	4. Lesson disruption	12.80*	3.20	1.40	–		
4.37	5. Rudeness to teacher	13.00*	3.40	1.60	0.20	–	
4.62	6. Bullying	18.00*	8.40*	6.60*	5.20*	5.00*	–
Australian (M)							
3.36	1. Talking in class	–					
3.48	2. Daydreaming in class	2.00	–				
3.88	3. Lesson disruption	8.67*	6.67*	–			
4.29	4. Not completing homework	15.50*	13.50*	6.83*	–		
4.31	5. Rudeness to teacher	15.83*	13.83*	7.17*	0.33	–	
4.51	6. Bullying	19.17*	17.17*	10.50*	3.67	3.33	–

\* $p < 0.05$

Table 7. Teacher attribution: Tukey tests for vignette effects

Vignette		Q-value (6,2335)					
		1	2	3	4	5	6
Chinese (M)							
2.83	1. Bullying	–					
3.41	2. Not completing homework	9.67*	–				
3.71	3. Rudeness to teacher	14.67*	5.00*	–			
3.86	4. Lesson disruption	17.17*	7.50*	2.50	–		
3.88	5. Talking in class	17.50*	7.83*	2.83	0.33	–	
4.07	6. Daydreaming in class	20.67*	11.00*	6.00*	3.50	3.17	–
Australian (M)							
2.94	1. Bullying	–					
3.84	2. Rudeness to teacher	15.00*	–				
3.85	3. Lesson disruption	15.17*	0.17	–			
3.87	4. Not completing homework	15.50*	0.50	0.33	–		
4.00	5. Talking in class	17.67*	2.67	2.50	2.17	–	
4.32	6. Daydreaming in class	23.00*	8.00*	7.83*	7.50*	5.33*	–

\* $p < 0.05$

vignette interaction indicated that Australian teachers attributed daydreaming in class and failure to complete homework more to teacher or teaching-related factors than Chinese teachers did [ $F(1,2335) = 8.62$  and  $29.50$ ,  $p < 0.008$ , respectively]. Their attribution to teacher factors did not differ for other problem behaviors [ $F(1, 335) = 0.01$ ,  $1.98$ ,  $1.76$  and  $2.30$ , ns for lesson disruption, talking in class, bullying and rudeness to teacher, respectively].

Within-group vignette effects were significant for both Australian and Chinese teachers [ $F(5,2335) = 50.16$  and  $65.41$ ,  $p < 0.0025$ , respectively], with Tukey tests indicating that both groups of teachers felt least responsible for students' bullying behavior but most responsible for student daydreaming in class (Table 7). Chinese teachers also felt significantly less responsible for students not completing homework than for classroom discipline problems (lesson disruption and talking in class) and rudeness to teacher. Thus, both between-culture and within-culture vignette effects pointed to Australian teachers feeling more responsible for schoolwork problems than their Chinese counterparts.

## Discussion

### *Cultural Effects on Attributions for Problem Behavior*

The present results showed that regardless of cultural background, teachers held students most responsible for displaying inappropriate behaviors (lack of effort or self-discipline) and themselves as least responsible. These results are largely consistent with earlier findings in western research (Christenson et al., 1983; Galloway et al., 1994; Goyette et al., 2000; Medway, 1979; Miller, 1995, 1996; Soodak & Podell, 1994; Wilson & Silverman, 1991). Nevertheless, Australian teachers' consistent attribution to internal individual causes (effort and ability) for all types of problems did reflect individualistic values, with individuals being held most responsible for their own behavior. In contrast, the relative importance that Chinese teachers placed on effort (self-discipline) and family factors is characteristic of collectivistic societies. Moreover, there was significant variation in teachers' attribution patterns for different types of problem behaviors, with effort attributions being least varied across cultural contexts and behavior types. It appears that in both individualistic and collectivistic cultural contexts, self-discipline is generally considered an important factor behind appropriate behaviors.

When teachers focus on ability deficits as the source of student problems, it is less likely that negative emotions such as anger will be aroused (Weiner, 2000). Australian teachers demonstrated quite consistent ability attributions for all types of problem behaviors, whereas Chinese teachers considered ability deficits more relevant for poor learning motivation than for disruptiveness in class or inappropriate social behaviors. This is probably related to the emphasis on impulse control in Chinese socialization. In this culture, children are subject to strict behavioral control at a very young age, through harsh methods of discipline if necessary (Ho, 1981), and little allowance is made for children's lack of ability to behave as expected. Chinese teachers might be more prepared to accept the limitations imposed by ability when students perform poorly in learning but not when they fail to show respect for teachers, get along with peers, and keep quiet in class.

The fact that Chinese teachers attributed misbehaviors generally more to family factors than Australian teachers points to a sense of collective responsi-

bility for individuals' behavior. Chinese teachers made more family attributions mainly with regard to attention problems (disruptiveness, talking and day-dreaming in class), which would be considered by Australian teachers to be more related to teachers' instructional and classroom management skills. Australian teachers perceived family background factors to be more relevant for social skills deficits (bullying and rudeness to teacher) or attitudes towards homework than for inattention problems, whereas Chinese teachers considered the family to be responsible even for students not paying attention in class. Perhaps this is related to the importance placed on parental responsibility for children's effortful engagement in academic pursuits in the Chinese culture.

While teachers generally did not see teaching-related factors to be significant in causing student problems, Australian teachers were more prepared than their Chinese counterparts to accept responsibility when students failed to hand in homework or were not attentive in class. Probably in the western context, variations in individual aptitudes and aspirations are more recognized. Thus, making adjustments in school learning to suit individual needs is an important focus of professional responsibility on the teacher's part. In contrast, in the collectivistic Chinese context, where there is general consensus about the importance of academic achievement, instructional processes and requirements are more uniform. All students are expected to strive to meet the same standards. Thus all parties concerned (parents, students, and teachers) have important roles to play and teachers do not feel particularly responsible when students fail to complete required work.

To sum up, there are both generalizable as well as culture-specific features in teachers' causal attributions for discipline problems. Australian and Chinese teachers were found to be relatively similar with regard to effort and teacher attributions for student problem behaviors, but different in their perceptions of the relative importance of ability and family factors. While the value of self-discipline is upheld in both cultural contexts, Chinese teachers' supposedly greater personal commitment to student guidance (Ho, 1996; Meyer, in Wu, 1996; Yuan, 1984) does not make them feel more responsible for students' misbehaviors. It is probable that with the emphasis on academic achievement in the Confucian tradition, a sense of collective responsibility, besides self-discipline, has over-riding significance in schools. Significant variations in causal attribution between the two groups of teachers across different types of problem behaviors also largely reflect the ways in which individualistic and collectivistic values exert effects on teachers' thinking about student problems.

### *Implications for Practice*

The present findings point to two general implications for practitioners assisting teachers in the design of behavior intervention programs. Firstly, teachers' tendency to hold students rather than teaching-related factors responsible for misbehaviors in school is likely to result in the use of punitive rather than student-centered management strategies. This blaming the student mentality is

often not conducive to effective problem-solving that generates lasting effects. To counteract this tendency, efforts should be made to engage teachers in more vigorous causal analyses of misbehaviors, directing their attention to school or teaching-related factors that are more amenable to teacher control. An over-emphasis on factors external to and uncontrollable by teachers (student effort, student ability, or family) is not only unproductive but also makes teachers more vulnerable to the development of a sense of helplessness and stress.

Another important implication is that more attention should be paid to situational variability and the cultural context when negotiating strategies for intervention with teachers. The present findings provide clear evidence that teachers' causal attributions vary significantly for different types of problems. Therefore it is important to fully assess teacher beliefs about the causes of problems so that interventions are based on an agreed understanding about the nature of the problem. If necessary, teachers' explanatory styles should be modified to meet the specific needs of the situation.

Regarding the effects of cultural context: where individualistic values are predominant (higher effort and ability attributions), strategies that focus on students being responsible for their own behavior might match the cultural expectations better; in settings where collective responsibility is emphasized (high family attribution), more involvement of the family might be appropriate and effective. In cultural settings where students' skills deficit is not much recognized (low ability attribution), as with the Chinese teachers in the present study, more effort would be necessary to help teachers adopt a developmental perspective on children's behavior so that the importance of skills development would be recognized. A further implication is that in multi-cultural classrooms, where student behaviors and their management are under varied cultural influences, teachers probably need extra help to go beyond their usual attribution frameworks that might be too culturally bound.

The present study has identified similarities and differences in teachers' causal attributions in two different cultural contexts, suggesting significant linkages between cultural values and attributions in the school context. Further research should investigate in greater detail the antecedents and consequences of teachers' differential attributions for student behavior. The discovery of systematic relationships between cultural values and attribution tendencies, and a knowledge of how attribution tendencies generate effects on teachers' discipline strategies, would provide further insights into how teachers' effectiveness in behavior management could be enhanced in different cultural settings.

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