

# Child Abuse: An Attribution Perspective

**Frank D. Fincham**

*State University of New York at Buffalo*

**C**hild abuse poses significant challenges for scientists and practitioners. For one thing, the willful harming of an innocent child is a painful image that understandably evokes intense emotions. The resulting diversity of strongly held views about the nature of the problem and what to do about it can, and too often does, lead to polarization among professionals who share the common goal of responding optimally to the problem. In this context, the articles in this special section do yeoman service to the field, recognizing, as they do, that there is no substitute for developing a strong empirical foundation to address this important social problem. The focus on children's attributions for abuse is particularly laudable as there is some evidence that children's responses to stressful events (e.g., interparental conflict) is mediated by their appraisals of the events (e.g., Grych, Fincham, Jouriles, & McDonald, 2000). However, the challenge of researching attributions in this field is emphasized by the fact that investigation of abuse allegations and receipt of services may alter the very phenomenon investigated. The sensitivity shown to this problem in the articles is exemplary; Kolko, Brown, and Berliner (2002, this issue) collected their data within 2 to 3 weeks of intake at Child Protective Services (CPS) and Feiring, Taska, and Chen (2002, this issue) did so within 8 weeks of abuse discovery.

As attribution research is extended into yet another substantive area of inquiry, a further challenge arises. What does one make of the enormous body of literature on attribution that continues to grow at the rate of about 350 articles per annum (1990-2000; mean = 364.2, range = 291-536)? Does the study of children's attributions for abuse take the course followed by researchers on close relationships, who did not build on existing research when they began to study attributions? Or can this voluminous

literature inform the study of children's attributions for abuse? The remainder of this commentary offers some observations pertinent to the last question before pointing out features of these articles that augur well for the future development of this field of inquiry.

### CHALLENGES ARISING FROM PAST ATTRIBUTION RESEARCH

The investigation of children's attributions for abuse is one of many applications of an attributional framework to applied problems. These applications have sustained the vitality of attribution research but have at the same time resulted in increased Balkanization of the attribution literature (Fincham, 2001). One avenue toward greater integration is to ensure that each new application culls what is appropriate from past research. After all, as Santayana (1905) so aptly reminds us, "Those who cannot remember the past are doomed to repeat it."

### *Delineating the Domain of Attributions*

Attributions are not attributions are not attributions. Delineation of the domain to which the term *attribution* applies still remains the "single most significant barrier to progress" (Fincham, 1985, p. 205). It is quite clear that at least two distinct referents, attribution of a cause versus attribution of a property (e.g., a feeling; Kolko et al., 2002, this issue), are considered in these articles. This is quite understandable when seen in historical perspective. Heider (1958), the founding father of attribution research, had a broad concern with how a perceiver links observables to

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Author's Note: The preparation of this manuscript was supported by a grant from the Templeton Foundation. Correspondence concerning this chapter should be addressed to Frank Fincham, Department of Psychology, Park Hall, University at Buffalo, Buffalo, NY 14260-4110 (e-mail: fincham@buffalo.edu)

underlying stable or dispositional properties (invariances) of the world to give meaning to phenomenal experience. He was also particularly interested in the narrower task of linking a person's behavior to underlying properties of the person (e.g., motives, traits) to explain their behavior.

Although understandable, multiple and different referents for the attribution construct have the potential to generate the enemy of progress: confusion. Imputation of meaning is important, in child abuse as elsewhere, but not all meaning stems from causal analysis. Using the same term to refer to causal analysis and to other forms of meaning imputation is not inherently problematic, but it surely becomes so when different referents are overlooked or treated as equivalent by virtue of sharing a common label (see Celano, Hazzard, Campbell, & Lang, 2002, this issue; Kolko et al., 2002). If the potential of these articles is to be fully realized, greater precision will be needed to ensure that boundary conditions for generalizations about attributions are clear (see Valle & Silovsky, 2002, this issue). Delineating and respecting the domain of attributions within and across different analyses remains critical to building a cumulative literature in this new domain of inquiry.

### *Types of Attributions*

A closely related challenge concerns clarity about types of attributions. In prior attribution research, distinctions have been drawn among causal, responsibility, and blame attributions. In fact, a presupposition or entailment model in which a blame attribution presupposes a judgment of responsibility (who is accountable for the event once a cause is known), which, in turn, rests on the determination of causality (who or what produced an event), has been hypothesized (Fincham & Jaspars, 1980; Shaver, 1985) and has received some support at both individual and dyadic levels of analysis (Davey, Fincham, Beach, & Brody, in press; Lussier, Sabourin, & Wright, 1993). However, in close relationships, respondents do not routinely distinguish responsibility attributions from blame attributions, leaving only the distinction between causal attributions and responsibility/blame attributions (Fincham & Bradbury, 1992). It is clear that even children as young as 6 years of age make this distinction (Fincham & Jaspars, 1979).

However, even this distinction still appears to be problematic. Responsibility attributions have at least two different referents across this set of articles. One is the usage outlined above (moral responsibility) whereas the second equates responsibility with causal locus (causal responsibility). Although words are merely symbols with admittedly arbitrary referents,

usage conventions develop that allow them to be used meaningfully in communication. Linguistic and commonsense usage of the term *responsibility* was carefully analyzed by attribution researchers (see Fincham & Jaspars, 1980; Schlenker, Britt, Pennington, Murphy, & Doherty, 1994; Shaver, 1985) following Fischhoff's (1976) observation that "the incredible confusion in the attribution of responsibility literature . . . might serve as an illustrative example of how psychologists' vagueness about their basic concepts can strip their work of its value" (p. 440). These analyses may well be wrong, but it behooves scholars to point out the ways in which they are wrong and to illustrate the advantages of their new (often rarely acknowledged) usage of the concept. Failure to do so raises the real possibility that that field will collapse under the weight of its own confusion.

Again, these articles deserve commendation for showing some awareness of these issues. For example Celano et al. (2002) in their closing paragraph call for research on the "impact of wording (e.g., *blame* versus *responsibility*)" in assessing attributions. One simple recommendation to arise from the preceding analysis is never to use the term *responsibility* alone but rather to always qualify it with a descriptor that makes the referent clear (e.g., casual, moral, legal). A similar recommendation could be made for the term *attribution* (e.g., causal attribution, blame attribution).

### *Uncovering Assumptions*

In the interests of clarity, it is important to discuss a feature of the attributional framework that makes it both appealing and a source of confusion. The fact that attribution theory is one element of Heider's (1958) attempt to systematize common sense (naïve psychology), means that as intuitive or lay psychologists, everyone has access to the ideas informing attribution theory. As a result, one can "set up studies without being very explicit about the attribution process" (Kelley in Harvey, Ickes, & Kidd, 1978, p. 375). This manifests itself most obviously in the need to uncover unarticulated assumptions.

*From bipolar to unipolar dimensions.* One assumption found in some of the articles is that perceived internal causes and external causes define two end points on a bipolar dimension (e.g., I think I was abused because of something [I did/someone else did]; Kolko et al., 2002). In this regard, the emerging literature on attributions for abuse is no different, for example, than the literature on attitudes, where "social scientists typically assess people's attitudes by placing them on a bipolar evaluative continuum" (Eagly & Chaiken, 1993, p. 90). However, this implies a high negative correla-

tion between internal and external causes, which contradicts empirical findings in the broader empirical literature. For example, I long ago showed that in the interpersonal domain, perceiving oneself and perceiving one's spouse as the cause of the spouse's behavior were minimally correlated (Fincham, 1985), a finding that has been widely replicated when respondents are allowed to rate internal and external causes separately. In this context, Feiring et al.'s (2002) demonstration that internal and external causal/blame attributions define separate factors in regard to children's attributions for their abuse is particularly important. Although the factors were negatively correlated, they shared little of their variance in common ( $<.07$ ). It cannot, therefore, be assumed that teaching children to make external blame attributions for their abuse *ipso facto* removes possible self-blame.

Using two unidimensional scales in lieu of a single bipolar scale has important implications. First, it is unclear how to interpret responses that fall at the midpoint of a bipolar scale (a problem that Kolko et al., 2002, readily admit). Do such responses reflect the irrelevance of both poles or do they reflect some agreement with each pole? To avoid this problem, Kaplan (1972) divided the semantic differential into positive and negative components. His and subsequent work (see Thompson, Zanna, & Griffin, 1995) has shown that respondents have no difficulty in responding to the two components and that the responses do not provide redundant information. Similarly, in the study of affect, a two-dimensional assessment is used, although the axes are often rotated to yield positive and negative dimensions. Summarizing such work, Watson, Clark, and Tellegen (1988) conclude that even though positive and negative affect are often assumed to be strongly negatively correlated, "they have in fact emerged as highly distinctive dimensions that can be meaningfully represented as orthogonal dimensions in factor analytic studies of affect" (p. 1063). This approach has also been fruitfully employed in the study of relationships (Fincham, Beach, & Kemp-Fincham, 1997), and its implications for studying children's attributions for abuse is likely to prove fruitful.

*Insider and outsider perspectives.* Most of what we know about attributions and their underlying dimensions reflects a single perspective, that of the questionnaire respondent (insider). However, the perspective of the scientist (outsider) provides a useful complement to the insider perspective in the study of attributions, and in a recent analysis of the field, I called for greater attention to this perspective (Fincham, 2001). In this regard, two of the articles are particularly note-

worthy as they appear to include both perspectives (Feiring et al., 2002; Kolko et al., 2002). However, close examination shows that although both Kolko et al. (2002) and Feiring et al. (2002) begin by using an outsider (expert) perspective to map attribution content onto underlying causal dimensions, each article ends up offering results from a different attribution perspective. Kolko et al. provides results that reflect a scientific (outsider) analysis of attributional structure, whereas Feiring et al.'s findings reflect a phenomenological (insider) perspective. Because each article offers a different attribution perspective, we should not be surprised if they yield different findings. Both perspectives are legitimate, important perspectives and have dominated the attributional literature at different times. For example, most of the literature inspired by Kelley's (1967) classic ANOVA analysis of attributions, as well as much of Weiner's early work, reflected a logical (expert) analysis of attributional structure, a perspective that gave way to an insider (lay) perspective by the end of the 1970s.

*Public versus private attributions.* Feiring et al. (2002) also provides an attributional analysis from an outsider perspective in coding children's responses to an open-ended attribution question. However, it is important to recognize that public attributions may be different from those held privately, which presumably inform responses to questionnaire ratings of attributions. For one thing, public attributions are communicative acts and therefore cannot be considered independently of the communicative context. Accordingly, ordinary language philosophy has been applied to the study of communicated attributions (particularly Grice's conversational maxims of quality, informativeness, relevance, and clarity; see Hilton, 1990). Here, the function the attribution serves is also important, especially when studied in the context of naturally occurring conversation.

The development and adoption of a system for coding children's attributions for abuse has the potential to open up new research vistas. It could, for example, allow study of archival data on abuse, naturally occurring changes in attributions over time (e.g., from initial disclosure to posttreatment), and attributions in different contexts (e.g., therapy, family conversations); it would allow for comparison of attributions that are made spontaneously (e.g., as might occur in initial disclosures) with those that occur more deliberately (e.g., in response to questioning).

However, the complexities of coding attributions need to be acknowledged. One obvious example concerns the locus of a causal attribution, an old but unresolved problem raised by Ross (1977, p. 176; see

Malle, 1999, for a suggested resolution). Ross contrasted two explanations; "Jill bought the house because she wanted privacy," typically classified as a person attribution, and "Jack bought the house because it was secluded," usually classified as a situational/external attribution. The problem is that classification of the attributions is based on subtle linguistic differences not on fundamental differences in the underlying causal structure. One could, for example, as easily view Jack's action as reflecting the fact that he is a person who values seclusion (a person attribution). The analogue in the present context is obvious (e.g., This happened to me because of the way I look/ [perpetrator] likes kids with blonde hair and blue eyes). Add in the developmental dimension, and it is clear that developing a database of coded attributions for abuse poses numerous challenges (see Bradbury & Fincham, 1988, for further discussion and Munton, Silvester, Stratton, & Hanks, 1999, for an example of a coding system).

Thus far, I have focused on some challenges that the broader attribution literature poses for the study of children's attributions for abuse. The issues highlighted are by no means exhaustive, and many relevant topics, such as developmental research on attributions, are conspicuous by their absence. Furthermore, I have tried to highlight broad issues and processes rather than focus on specific content in the belief that this is likely to be more helpful to the future development of this new field. Lest it appear otherwise, I hasten to add that there are definite limits to what can be learned from the broader attribution literature and, in any event, I believe that these articles provide some lessons for the broader attribution literature. I therefore conclude by highlighting what all attribution researchers can learn from these articles.

#### PROGNOSTICATIONS FOR A HEALTHY FUTURE

Three features of these articles are particularly instructive and augur well for the field's future. First, all three empirical articles pay particular attention to the measurement of attributions, a step that has too often been ignored in broader attribution research. Kolko et al.'s (2002) goal of developing an attribution measure to assess children's attributions of abuse is laudable, and it is hoped that some of the comments made earlier will facilitate this important task. Similarly, Feiring et al. (2002) provide important data regarding the assessment of attributions for abuse. The fruits of their labor are apparent in the finding that abuse-specific attributions predict later indices of child adjustment even after controlling initial levels of

adjustment, age, gender, and abuse severity. Without careful attention to attribution assessment, it is doubtful whether the importance of attributions for longer term adjustment could have been demonstrated. Finally, Bugental and Shennum's (2002, this issue) impressive findings across childhood and adulthood also reflect exemplary attention to assessment. Bugental's careful development of the Parent Attribution Test and, more recently, the Picture Attribution Test, is testimony to the importance of sound assessment as shown in the informative body of research to which these instruments continue to give rise.

The importance of the above attention to assessment is emphasized by Feiring et al.'s (2002) recognition of the possibility that attributions are meaningful only "within domains of situations" (Arntz, Gerlsma, & Albersnagel, 1985, p. 84) or at a "moderate level of specificity" (Anderson, Jennings, & Arnoult, 1988, p. 981). Accordingly, a broader attribution index should be less useful than a domain-specific index in studying abuse, a finding that is clearly documented in Feiring et al.'s study. Indeed, it is noteworthy that the correlation between a general attribution index and abuse-specific attributions was very low. The significance of Feiring et al.'s (2002) examination of domain-specific and general attributions is underscored by the fact that attribution researchers often assume that attribution style, or the tendency to make particular attributions across different situations and across time, account for responses to specific events without verifying that the attributions for the event mirror the attribution style. Attribution researchers would do well to follow Feiring et al.'s (2002) example.

A final observation concerns Bugental and Shennum's (2002) creative reconceptualization of attributions within a power framework. Some 15 years ago, I was able to show that the extent to which a spouse located the cause of a negative partner behavior in him- or herself versus the partner (using unipolar scales) was associated with marital distress (Fincham, 1985) and went on to argue that attribution biases involving self versus partner attributions were important in relationships (Fincham, Beach, & Baucom, 1987). The resulting line of research on this issue was not nearly as productive as the program of work resulting from Bugental's conceptualization of self versus other as causes of events. Why? The difference lies in the theoretical framework. Whereas my work remained rooted in an attribution framework, Bugental linked her work to analyses of power and thereby enriched its attribution roots. In the presence of such creativity, one can only be sanguine about the future of research on attributions for abuse.

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*Frank Fincham (Ph.D. University of Oxford) is professor and director of clinical training in the Psychology Department at the State University of New York at Buffalo. His research focuses on marital dysfunction, the impact of interparental conflict on child adjustment, and forgiveness. He has received numerous awards for his research, including the President's Award for Distinguished Contributions to Psychological Knowledge from the British Psychological Society and the Berscheid-Hatfield Award for "distinguished contributions to the field of personal relationships" from the International Network on Personal Relationships. His work has placed him among the top 25 psychologists in the world in terms of impact (number of citations per published article, APS Observer, January 1996).*