Attribution theory

Jenny Thorp looks at why sports performers attribute the results of their performances to a variety of different factors

After a match or competition, athletes and managers are often asked why they think they won or lost. Reasons given for losing often involve blaming the referee and reasons given for winning often involve team effort.

Attribution theory examines the reasons for an athlete's success or failure, helping us to understand their actions and motivation. The correct use of attribution is vital: a coach must evaluate an athlete's performance and provide feedback effectively if they wish to maintain the athlete's level of performance, task persistence, satisfaction of performance and future expectations.

Weiner's model

Weiner's 1974 attribution theory proposed four types of attribution for achievement:
- ability
- effort
- task difficulty
- luck

Weiner placed these four attributions into two dimensions:

1 The first dimension is the **locus of causality**, i.e. the reason is internal (within our control) or external (out of our control)

2 The second dimension is the **locus of stability**, i.e. the reason is permanent (stable) or forever changing (unstable)

Weiner later added a third dimension called the **locus of control**. This dimension refers to *internal control* (things within an athlete's control, e.g. commitment to training) and *external control* (things out of the athlete's control, e.g. coaches' tactics or weather conditions).

Stoke City's Peter Crouch strikes for the ball as Tottenham Hotspur's Emmanuel Adebayor and Scott Parker look on during the game that put Harry Rednapp in a rage at the referee

In football

In a post-match interview following Liverpool's 3-0 victory over Everton in March 2012, manager Kenny Dalglish said: 'It was a fantastic performance from everyone that was involved. It was a great effort from the players.' He attributed the team's success to internal, unstable factors (effort): **www.youtube.com/watch?v=c0EH67fCHG8**

Tottenham Hotspur manager Harry Redknapp raged at the referee in his post-match interview after Tottenham's 2-1 loss against Stoke City in December 2011. He blamed referee Chris Foy for missing a handball on the Stoke goal line that denied Younes Kaboul a goal for Tottenham, as well as a possible handball by Peter Crouch in the lead-up to Stoke's opening goal. Redknapp clearly attributed his team's loss to external, unstable factors (luck): **www.youtube.com/watch?v=cm_F9_IVCgA**

In tennis

Roger Federer lost to Novak Djokovic in the semi-finals of the 2011 Australian Open. In his post-match interview he said: 'Novak was the better player tonight and you have to accept that.'

Federer attributed his failure in this match to external, stable factors (task difficulty): **www.tinyurl.com/c5hwq64**

Using attribution theory

As a coach you want your athlete to maintain high levels of motivation and confidence and to learn from their mistakes, so it is essential that a coach uses attributions effectively. In order to achieve this, a good coach will attribute success to internal, stable or controllable factors (ability), ensuring that the athlete is satisfied with his or her performance and maintains task persistence and motivation levels.

A coach should always attribute failure to external, unstable or uncontrollable factors (task difficulty, luck or effort) as this allows the athlete to believe that changes can be made to improve his or her performance. This helps to maintain motivation and is known as **self-serving bias**. In simple terms an athlete can say:

'When I win it's all down to me and my efforts.' (Good for confidence)

'When I lose it wasn't my fault.' (A way to maintain self-esteem)

In boxing

Amir Khan lost his WBA and IBF light welterweight titles to Lamont Peterson in December 2011 on a controversial split decision. Khan was hugely frustrated by the inexperienced referee, Joe Cooper from Virginia, who deducted two points for pushing. These deductions came in round seven (when Khan was ahead) and round 12 (when he needed a big finish after a great resurgence by Peterson). The deductions cost Khan the fight and he attributed his loss to external factors (referee's decision/luck), so telling himself that such a loss was out of his control and that it wasn't his fault (self-serving bias): **www.tinyurl.com/c7yxbrc**

Relationship to achievement motivation

Achievement motivation comes from the individual's personality and is their motivation to strive for success. It is this drive that makes athletes carry on trying even when they fail. Atkinson (1964) placed athletes into two categories:
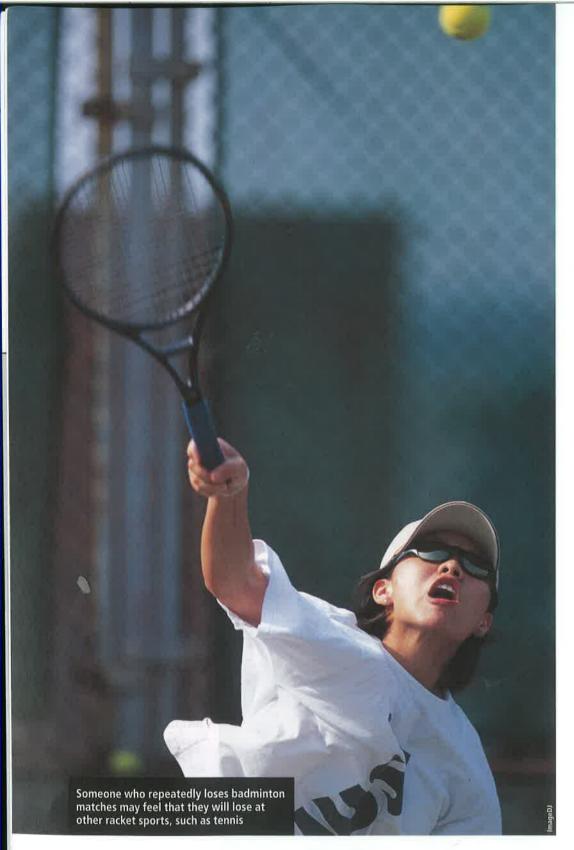- Need to achieve (Nach)
- Need to avoid failure (Naf)

We all have aspects of both Nach and Naf, but it is the difference between the two that makes up somebody's achievement motivation. Those with a Nach personality tend to enjoy challenges, such as competing against opponents who are equal or slightly superior to them. They need feedback and respond well to constructive criticism. They do not fear failure, which means they persist at sports, unlike those with a Naf personality.

High achievers such as Serena Williams tend to attribute success to internal factors (good fitness levels or being the better player on the day) and attribute failure to external factors (high temperature during the match or bad line calls from the umpires). Low achievers tend to attribute success to external factors (e.g. 'I was lucky, the sun was behind me and blinding my opponent') and attribute failure to internal factors such as lack of fitness or ability.

Learned helplessness

When an athlete has an injury, repeatedly loses a match to the same opponent or attributes failure to internal, stable factors (ability) they may start to believe that no matter how hard they try, failure is inevitable, and as a result they begin to lose confidence and motivation. Even when they are successful, some athletes believe

Serena Williams can be classed as a Nach personality

that this was due to luck and that their success will not be repeated.

Coaches should pay particular attention to athletes who are self-blaming and tend to inaccurately attribute their failures to internal and stable factors, such as lack of ability or physical capacity. In such cases a coach needs to correct these attributions and make the athletes aware that problems can be solved and improvements are possible, otherwise a negative emotional state known as **learned helplessness** can ensue.

Someone who repeatedly loses badminton matches may feel that they are not very good at racket sports in general and will be unsuccessful regardless of how hard they try (general/global learned helplessness). Others may think they are good at tennis but lose confidence in their ability in badminton because they never win a match in that sport (specific learned helplessness).

Attribution retraining

By using attributions effectively, coaches can help athletes overcome feelings of learned helplessness and make them realise that they can be successful. This process is known as **attribution retraining**. Coaches who wish to use attribution retraining effectively should ensure that when an athlete achieves success they:

- attribute success to stable and internal factors (ability)
- attribute failure to unstable and external factors (luck, task difficulty, effort)
- improve self-esteem, confidence and motivation

A coach should not let athletes get away with faulty attributions. For example, if a tennis coach overhears a player attributing a winning, technically correct volley to luck, the coach needs to correct

this perception straightaway by drawing attention to the effort and practice that has led to this outcome. Correcting such an attribution can help the tennis player learn to reattribute success by acknowledging that improvements are down to effort not luck, thereby enhancing the player's motivation.

Boosting confidence

There are several strategies a good coach can employ to try to prevent learned helplessness and boost confidence. For instance, a tennis coach may set performance goals rather than outcome goals before the start of a game, such as telling the player to try to reduce the

number of unforced errors rather than worrying about the score.

When setting these goals the coach must take into consideration how realistic the goals are and remind the player of previous successes. The coach should also refrain from making social comparisons between their tennis player and other players on the circuit.

Another effective strategy is to use mental rehearsal. A lot of tennis players mentally rehearse their serve before a match.

Heptathlete Jessica Ennis' career was thrown into turmoil in June 2008 after she suffered three stress fractures to her right ankle, forcing her to pull out of a

Jessica Ennis at the 2011 World Athletics Championships

competition in Goetzis, Austria. With only 10 weeks until the 2008 Beijing Olympics, it was a massive blow:

> I burst out crying. I found it very difficult…I thought it was my year to shine and do well. In the blink of an eye it was over. It was heartbreaking.

Ennis started light training in November 2008, working on recovering from a fractured ankle and trying to regain her confidence. Ennis's coach, Toni Minichiello, decided she should change her take-off leg on the long jump to alleviate some of the pressure from her right foot. In making such a decision, Minichiello showed Ennis that changes could be made to her technique to overcome this massive blow. Her confidence restored, Ennis secured Britain's first ever heptathlon gold at the 2009 World Athletic Championships, saying afterwards:

> It was a very difficult time and I felt quite sulky. I'd had a major injury in an Olympic year and couldn't do a thing. I had to stay at home and rest my foot. But that's what made the 2009 Worlds so much sweeter.

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Someone who repeatedly loses badminton matches may feel that they will lose at other racket sports, such as tennis

Expand your knowledge

- Watch the player and manager interviews on *Match of the Day*. What reasons do they give for results?
- Read the newspapers and look for examples of quotes from different sports stars that fit into Weiner's model.
- Using a camera or phone, perform interviews with members of your school/college sports teams after a match. Discuss their reasons for performance in relation to Weiner's model.

Test your understanding

The following questions will help increase your understanding of the concepts of attribution theory and its application to sporting situations.

PEReviewOnline
See PEReviewOnline for the answers.

1 Explain what is meant by attribution. Describe the different types of attribution that may be used by athletes. (4 marks)
2 In terms of attribution theory, explain what is meant by self-serving bias. (3 marks)
3 People who fail in sport may at some time experience learned helplessness. Explain what this means. (3 marks)
4 In relation to attribution, outline the strategies used by a coach to overcome a state of learned helplessness in a performer. (4 marks)
5 Performers may attribute success or failure to various factors. What do you understand by the term attribution retraining, and when would it become necessary? (4 marks)