

Copyright is owned by the Author of the thesis. Permission is given for a copy to be downloaded by an individual for the purpose of research and private study only. The thesis may not be reproduced elsewhere without the permission of the Author.

CAUSAL ATTRIBUTIONS FOR OUTCOME IN SCHOOL CERTIFICATE ENGLISH

A thesis presented in partial fulfilment of  
the requirements for the degree of  
Master of Arts in Psychology  
at Massey University

Meryl Margaret Lawes

1983

This thesis is dedicated to my father

James McKay 1896-1968

## Abstract

Attributions offered for success and failure in School Certificate English were investigated with 400 Fifth Form pupils. The effect of confirmation or disconfirmation of expectations for examination outcome were examined and the results were analysed for sex differences (male/female), and ethnic differences (Maori/Pakeha). As predicted, pupils whose expectations were confirmed (pass-pass or fail-fail) attributed their results more to stable/internal causes. Unexpectedly, they also attributed their results to unstable/internal causes more than pupils whose expectations were disconfirmed (pass-fail or fail-pass). The direction of outcome (pass or fail) for pupils whose expectations were disconfirmed, did not significantly affect their causal perceptions. As predicted, males who failed made significantly more unstable/external attributions than females. In addition, males also made stronger attributions to stable/internal causes for failure than females. Males who succeeded, in contrast to what was predicted, did not make stronger attributions to stable/internal factors than females. No significant sex differences in attributions made for success were evident. There was no significant difference in causal attributions offered by Maoris for their successes and failures, and those offered by Pakehas. Analysis of both the structured and the open-ended sections of the questionnaires showed that pupils attributed their results (success or failure) more to effort (stable and unstable) than to any other causes. The findings were discussed in terms of their application to educational settings, and their relationship to other studies.

### Acknowledgements

I am deeply grateful to my supervisors Dr. James Chapman and Dr. Beryl Hesketh for their supportive assistance, and continuing encouragement which helped make this study an enjoyable research experience.

Thanks are also due to other staff, of both the Education and the Psychology Department, in particular Keith Tuffin and Dr. Alison St George for their helpful assistance.

I would also like to thank the headmasters who allowed me access to their schools.

The final thanks goes to my husband Stephen for succour, and my children Carlene and Cameron for their support.

## Table of Contents

Chapter	Page
I INTRODUCTION .....	1
II REVIEW OF LITERATURE AND RESEARCH .....	5
Achievement Attributions .....	5
Causal Dimensions .....	5
Causal Attributions for Success and Failure .....	8
Expectations and Outcomes .....	13
Sex Differences.....	19
Ethnic Differences.....	25
Measurement of Causal Attributions .....	32
Summary and Hypotheses.....	33
III METHOD.....	38
Sample Selection.....	38
Checks for Bias in Final Sample.....	39
Description of Final Sample and Comparison with National Data .....	43
Instruments.....	43
Pilot Study.....	48
Procedure.....	48
Summary of Procedure.....	49
Design.....	50
IV RESULTS.....	51
Structured Questionnaire.....	51
Confirmation/Disconfirmation of Expected Outcome.....	51
Sex Differences .....	56
Ethnic Differences .....	60

Open-ended Questionnaire.....	63
V DISCUSSION.....	64
Confirmation and Disconfirmation of Expected Outcome.....	64
Sex Differences.....	67
Ethnic Differences.....	69
Attributions for Success and Failure.....	70
Conclusions.....	72
Suggestions for Future Research.....	74
REFERENCES.....	76
APPENDIX A.....	86
APPENDIX B.....	101
APPENDIX C.....	102

## List of Tables

Table		Page
1	Schematic Representation of Sample Selection	40
2	Number and Percentage of Respondents to School Certificate English Questionnaire as a Function of School	41
3	School Certificate English Outcome as a Function of School, Sex, and Race	44
4	Comparison National 1981 and Sample School Certificate English Passes	45
5	MANOVA and ANOVA Summary Data for Confirmed-Disconfirmed Attributions by Outcome in School Certificate English	53
6	Means and Standard Deviations for Confirmed-Disconfirmed Attributions Regarding Outcome in School Certificate English	54
7	MANOVA and ANOVA Summary Data for Male-Female Attributions by Outcome in School Certificate English	57
8	Means and Standard Deviations for Male-Female Attributions Regarding Outcome in School Certificate English	58
9	MANOVA and ANOVA Summary Data for Maori-Pakeha Attributions by Outcome in School Certificate English	61
10	Means and Standard Deviations for Maori-Pakeha Attributions Regarding Outcome in School Certificate English	62
A	Causal Attributions Listed First in Order of Importance by Pupils Whose Expected Outcome was Confirmed or Disconfirmed.	102
B	Causal Attributions Listed Second in Order of Importance by Pupils Whose Expected Outcome was Confirmed or Disconfirmed	103
C	Causal Attributions Listed Third in Order of Importance by Pupils Whose Expected Outcome was Confirmed or Disconfirmed	104



D	Causal Attributions Listed First in Order of Importance for Outcome by Males and Females	105
E	Causal Attributions Listed Second in Order of Importance for Outcome by Males and Females	106
F	Causal Attributions Listed Third in Order of Importance for Outcome by Males and Females	107
G	Causal Attributions Listed First in Order of Importance for Outcome by Maoris and Pakehas	108
H	Causal Attributions Listed Second in Order of Importance for Outcome by Maoris and Pakehas	109
I	Causal Attributions Listed Third in Order of Importance for Outcome by Maoris and Pakehas	110