

Review Article

Open Access

A Social Psychologist, Guided by Attribution Theory, Explores the Components and Structure of Some Myths

Bernard Weiner

Dept. of Psychology, University of California, Los Angeles CA 90095, USA

ABSTRACT

Two prevalent motivation domains, help giving and achievement striving, portrayed respectively in *The Cinderella Myth* and *The Little Engine Who Could*, have been central to the experimental testing of attribution theory. In this article, I explore the relation between these myths and attribution theory and suggest that they provide speculative evidence for the universality of that conception. Specifically, *The Cinderella Myth* depicts the hypothesized relation between uncontrollable causality (an orphan with an evil family) and help giving, while *The Little Engine Who Could* captures the relation between controllable causality (effort) and achievement striving. In addition, the emotions of sympathy and anger are proposed as mediators between attribution and action.

***Corresponding author**

Bernard Weiner, Dept. of Psychology, University of California, Los Angeles CA 90095, USA.

Received: July 03, 2026; Accepted: July 06, 2026; Published: July 16, 2026

Keywords: Achievement Motivation, Attribution Theory, Effort, Helping, Motivation

The study of mythology (here broadly defined to include some of what are known as children's stories, fables, fairy tales, folk tales and legends) has a limited representation in the psychological sciences as well as a rather murky, esoteric past. This literature is most associated with the psychoanalyst Carl Jung and his concept of archetypes, the unconscious and universal characteristics or tendencies that purportedly are represented in myths [1]. Perhaps next in visibility in terms of a psychological explanation of myths is the related work of the literary scholar Joseph Campbell and his notion of the hero's journey (as illustrated in the epic *Star Wars* series) [2]. To a lesser extent, there also have been Freudian interpretations of children's stories and myths (e.g., the wolf did something other than kill *Little Red Riding Hood*, who had strayed into the forest and brought a basket of fruit (forbidden fruit) into bed. Then, with his big teeth, he ate her (or engaged in some other evil act). These accounts of myths have elicited a degree of skepticism in that none of the approaches or conclusions is accompanied by scientific data or other documentation, which indeed would be a very difficult undertaking given this topic, particularly given the humanistic leanings of the interpreters mentioned above.

In this article, the meaning of myths is explored with the aid of an experimentally-tested psychological conception labeled attribution theory. And perhaps of equal importance, what light myths shed on the validity of that theory is also considered. It is known that some myths have endured over centuries and are present in many cultures. These tales are likely to have been diffused by travelers and migrants, although the possibility of independent origins has not been totally dismissed. One of the goals of science and scientists is the development of theories that transcend time and cultures. Thus, one might cautiously (very cautiously) reflect whether the validity of attribution theory as a general or universal theory of behavior is enhanced by the existence of certain myths. The focus of most myths involves creation, life and death, the

origin of animal and human characteristics, and other ethereal subject matter beyond the range of attribution theory. But there are (at least) two prevalent mythological story lines that have endured over a long period of time, have cross-cultural representation and relate to the core empirical and conceptual work emanating from attribution theory. These are known as *The Cinderella Myth* and *The Little Engine Who Could* story.

The Cinderella Myth

In this myth, an evil other, often a stepmother, abuses Cinderella; alternatively, some replacement figure (e.g., *Snow White*, *Rapunzel* or a beautiful princess) is secretly given some poison or placed in a prison-type location (although in some of the many Cinderellas stories a different depiction is given). Help is needed to rescue the victim and deliver her to safety and/or to her goal. The help that arrives typically is unsolicited and is in the form of a Fairy Godmother or prince who respectively creates a vehicle or renders a magical kiss that saves the endangered other, ultimately resulting in marriage and a happily-ever-after ending. This thematic statement is depicted in a variety of stories that involve an innocent young woman, in a terrible predicament, brought about by an evil other, but ultimately saved by a kind benefactor [3,4]. Other stories that might be included under this rubric involve only animals, such as depicted in *Charlotte's Web*, where a concerned spider saves a condemned pig.

It has been contended that myths capture the values of society and illustrate (instruct) how individuals should, and should not, behave [4]. That is, as in the American version of *The Cinderella Myth*, to remain unbroken and resolute. In addition, the myth conveys under what circumstances and to whom help should be extended, a concern in the study of social psychology and for attribution theory as well.

The Little Engine Who Could

Examples of this type of tale have changed greatly over time, at first having religious significance while later becoming more

secular. It captures the weak overcoming a difficult task for the good of society, with victory of the underdog due to hard work, persistence, confidence, and/or successful strategy. Thus, for example, small David defeats mighty Goliath with the use of a sling-shot and saves the country from slavery. While the David and Goliath story is set within the context of a battle and war, alternative manifestations of this theme often appear in achievement-related settings where a difficult task is undertaken by a limited other, as in The Little Engine Who Could. Here, a small engine attempts to pull a large train over a steep hill. It tries again and again and ultimately succeeds, in some versions bringing toys to grateful children. In a similar manner, one pig in The Three Little Pigs rebuffs the big, bad wolf by working hard to build the strongest house.

The moral lessons in this grouping of tales embrace the value of hard work, not giving up in the face of failure, maintaining high expectations of success, and overcoming adversity with confidence and steadfastness. Some of these virtues in real-life are captured by the Protestant Ethic and in depictions of persons high in achievement motivation [5]. As in the case of help-giving, achievement strivings are a central focus in the study of social psychology and in the work of attribution theorists.

Attribution Theory

It has been documented that helping and achievement strivings are behaviors central to attribution theory. This has recently been proven in a cluster analysis of citations in attribution-related articles [6]. In that bibliometric research, four clusters of attribution publications are identified, with two of the four attribution publication categories represented in Cinderella (interpersonal behavior including help giving) and The Little Engine Who Could (achievement striving).

An Attribution Analysis of the Cinderella Myth

The Cinderella Myth relates to need and help giving. Help is an over-determined action and many of the factors that affect help giving have been identified in psychological research. These include the genetic and social relationship between the person in need and the benefactor, the number of others available to help, prior observation of help-givers, the availability of resources, and on and on. For attribution theorists, the perceived cause of the need for help is an essential determinant of the motivation to provide help. If that cause is believed to be under volitional control of the needy other, that is, if it is that individuals “fault,” then help tends to be withheld. For example, if Cinderella repeatedly refused to assist equally in cleaning the house and therefore was not permitted to attend the ball, then according to attribution theory help would likely have been withheld. On the other hand, inasmuch as the cause of Cinderella’s plight is the evil stepmother and stepsisters and therefore not controllable by her, then help is hypothesized to be offered (as it was). Often in myths, the needy individual is an abandoned orphan, clearly a cause not controllable by that person and thus prone to elicit aid.

This control-help relation has been definitively documented in the attribution literature (see Rudolph, et al, 2004). It has been applied to a variety of areas of study, including stigmas. For example, stigmas of dementia, blindness and physical illness are more likely to elicit aid than are stigmas of obesity and addictions because of the perceived personal responsibility (personal controllability) of the causes of the latter, but not the former, conditions. In a similar vein, lung cancer due to smoking (controllable) is less likely to elicit aid than lung cancer because of unknowingly living in a polluted area (uncontrollable by the victim). The uncontrollable factors that elicit aid may be external (a polluted environment) or internal (a genetic shortcoming) to the needy other [6].

In addition, attribution theorists have added another process to this analysis -- the emotional response of the potential helper. It has been contended that the emotion experienced to the plight of the needy mediates between the perceived cause of his or her difficulty and the elicited behavioral response from others [7]. Specifically, for example, knowing that another (e.g., Cinderella) is being unfairly abused by her stepsisters and stepmother would be hypothesized to give rise to sympathy, which then promotes prosocial behavior. Thus, a motivation episode for helping behavior has been proposed within attribution theory that sequentially progresses from thinking to feeling to acting:

Negative state/outcome – Perceived cause (Evil caretakers) – Genotypic property of cause – (Uncontrollable by Cinderella) – Emotion (Sympathy from others) – Behavior (Going toward, help)

On the other hand, when the needy individual exhibits a controllable plight, the motivation sequence has been hypothesized to be:

Negative state/outcome – Perceived cause (Laziness) – Genotypic property of cause (Controllable by Cinderella) – Emotion (Anger from others) – Behavior (Going away from, neglect)

In the Cinderella story, there is no verbal or facial evidence regarding the feelings of the Fairy Godmother. But I think there will be little doubt in the minds of the readers that sympathy and concern are at the top of the list of elicited emotions, which would be consistent with the research findings. Research also has shown that emotions can be inferred from overt behavior and that help promotes beliefs regarding the presence of sympathy and concern [6,7].

This analysis falls within what is called the structural approach to the understanding of myths [8]. In this form of analysis, the basic elements within myths are sought and their logical relations are identified. Attribution theory has proposed that these components are causes, the genotypic properties of these causes (here, only personal uncontrollability or controllable), their linked emotions (sympathy or anger), and the actions elicited by these emotions (approach and help versus avoidance and neglect). This structural analysis, based on a psychological theory, has little in common with the structures that have been identified in literary analyses, which typically are characteristics of the action (e.g., hero leaves home; hero meets villain; etc.). However, the proposed psychological structure is consistent with the thoughts of Levi-Strauss, who stated: “In the structural approach [there is] the quest for the invariants, or for the invariant elements among superficial differences” (p. 8) [9].

An Attributional Analysis of The Little Engine Who Could

The underlying logic of the structural approach that has been illustrated in helping themes (cause, causal property, emotion, and action) is now examined in achievement contexts. In the Little Engine story, a small engine is asked to pull a large train over a hill and initially fails because of size, or aptitude. Aptitude has the causal properties of being uncontrollable. A second dominant cause of achievement performance is effort, which is controllable. In being described as “little,” the engine is portrayed as low in pulling aptitude and hence requires great effort to succeed; that is, effort is necessary to compensate for lack of ability (just as David must compensate for his small physical stature and put forth special effort or find some unusual strategy to win a battle over the larger and stronger Goliath). When the engine fails on the initial attempts, it ascribes the failure to insufficient effort. Because effort is controllable, future success is regarded as possible (“I think I can”) and the emotion of hope is maintained. Eventually, the

exertion is sufficient to reach the goal, producing happiness and pride in the engine (with the use of some anthropomorphizing!).

Building upon the structural analysis of help already presented, this motivation episode can be depicted as follows:

Negative event (Failure) – Perceived cause (Lack of sufficient effort) – Causal property (controllable) -- Emotion (Regret and hope) – Behavior (Persist)

This can be contrasted with an ultimate failure scenario, which is rarely depicted in children's achievement stories. This would result, for example, if the little engine ascribed the initial failure to small size, an attribution akin to low aptitude. This is predicted to be followed by the statement "I am sure I can't" and, in turn, giving up. This sequence of structural components is depicted as follows: Negative event (Failure) – Perceived cause (Lack of aptitude) – Causal Property (uncontrollable) Emotion (Hopeless; low expectancy of success) – Behavior (Give up)

A recent meta-analysis has provided support for these proposed paths [9].

This structural analysis requires some modification for the David and Goliath story because in that myth there is no initial failure that gives rise to a causal analysis. However, the basic elements involving the potential causes of ability and effort and their inferred characteristic regarding control determine subsequent emotions and behavior.

Implications for Attribution Theory

In sum, two prevalent categories of myths can be decomposed into comparable elements suggested by an experimentally tested, attribution-based theory of action. Of course, these elements have been determined to describe only two types of myths. Other story contents (e.g. "Why are crows black?" "Why is there winter?" "Who created the world?") typically are outside the explanatory range of attribution theory. What value, then, might a relation to a small subset of myths have for attribution theory? It can be contended that the validity of attribution theory as a general theory of behavior is enhanced by the existence of these myths. The links proposed in the theory between uncontrollability and help, and between a low ability/high effort configuration and reward or appreciation from others, are captured in these myths. Inasmuch as myths have been proposed to illustrate the values of society, it can be inferred, or hypothesized, that they depict (as well as guide) the behavior of the readers or listeners. And these audiences can be found over long periods of time and across many cultures. Of course, this cannot be regarded as definitive proof of the universality of the theory. Nevertheless, I am pleased that myths are not entitled: "Lazy Cinderella Gets Help;" this would not align with our experience nor with attribution theory.

This approach also raises the general issue concerning the possible contribution of art to science. Fritz Heider, the originator of attribution theory, also developed balance theory, another powerful conception for the field of social psychology [8]. The impetus for this came from his reading of *Romeo and Juliet*. Heider considered how the consequences of that fatal love story would have changed if Juliet's parents liked Romeo, or if Juliet did not love Romeo. These two possibilities produce balanced states and no motivation to action, as opposed to what Shakespeare penned. And that led to Heider's more general thoughts about balance and motivation. Perhaps, then, there is greater value in the arts for social science than has been realized [10-13].

References

1. Jung C (1936) The concept of the collective unconscious. In *Collective work* Princeton University Press 9.
2. Campbell J (2008) The hero with a thousand face. New World Library <https://newworldlibrary.com/product/the-hero-with-a-thousand-faces>.
3. Dundes A (1958) *Cinderella: A casebook*. Madison Wi: University of Wisconsin Press 1- 316.
4. Mark JJ (2018) *Mythology*. World History Encyclopedia. <https://www.worldhistory.org/mythology/>.
5. McClelland DC (1961) *The achieving society*. Princeton, NJ: Van Nostrand 7: 14.
6. Weiner B (2006) *Social motivation, justice, and the moral emotions*. Mahow, NJ: Erlbaum Press file:///C:/Users/admin/Desktop/10.4324_9781410615749_previewpdf%20(1).pdf.
7. Weiner B (1995) *Judgments of responsibility: A foundation for a theory of social conduct*. New York: Guilford Press 1-301.
8. Heider F (1958) *The psychology of interpersonal relations*. New York: Wiley 1: 1.
9. Levi-Strauss C (1979) *Myth and meaning*. New York: Schocken Books https://ark.moocahuset.no/wpcontent/uploads/sites/20/2024/10/OceanofPDF.com_Myth_and_Meaning_Cracking_the_Code_of_Culture_-_Claude_Levi-Strauss.pdf.
10. Brun L, Pansu P, Dompnier B (2021) The role of causal attributions in determining behavioral consequences: A meta-analysis from an intrapersonal attributional perspective in achievement contexts. *Psychological Bulletin* 147: 701-718.
11. Muschetto T, Siegel (2021) Bibliometric review of attribution theory: Document citation analysis. *Motivation Science* 7: 439-450.
12. Vladimir Propp (2015) *Morphology of the folktale*. Mansfield Centre, CT: Martino Publishing https://monoskop.org/images/f/f3/Propp_Vladimir_Morphology_of_the_Folktale_2nd_ed.pdf.
13. Weiner B (1980) A cognitive (attribution) – emotion – action model of motivated behavior: An analysis of judgments of help-giving. *Journal of Personality and Social Psychology* 39: 186-200.
14. Weiner B (1985) An attributional theory of achievement-related emotion and motivation. *Psychological Review* 29: 548-573.

Copyright: ©2026 Bernard Weiner. This is an open-access article distributed under the terms of the Creative Commons Attribution License, which permits unrestricted use, distribution, and reproduction in any medium, provided the original author and source are credited.