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**Research Paper**

# Regret attribution in old age: an exploration of causes of life regrets

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**ABSTRACT**

The study aims to understand the attribution of life regrets by older adults. Specifically, the study explores how people in old age attribute their major life regrets, and is there any gender difference in their regret attribution. The research follows Weiner's causal attribution dimensions– external/internal, stable/unstable, and controllable/uncontrollable, to identify the attribution of regret. The study followed a narrative-based inquiry, where participants were asked to give accounts of their significant life regrets and what were the reasons for those regrets. A total of 60 retired older adults participated in the study; 30 males and 30 females, age between 60 and 80 years. A total of 157 regret incidents were narrated by the participants. Both quantitative and qualitative content analysis was used to examine the causes of regrets. The results show that participants attributed internal and external causes equally, their attribution on controllable reasons were slightly more than uncontrollable reasons, however, the stable causes were attributed significantly more than unstable reasons. The results also show gender differences in regret attribution, where females participants were found attributing more to external, stable, and uncontrollable aspects than males. The results and implications are discussed.

Growing older and when life is ready to play its last part probably everyone does mental calculations of what they have done and why. Failure and regrets can play an important role to identify how experienced a person is and how he/she has performed in life. The present study aimed to understand life regret attribution with the perspective of failure attribution. One notable trait in the cognitive organization of human life is the change regarding their understanding of life, age, time, and**, past experiences that takes on more great part when it comes to giving meaning to life** (Wong & Watt, 1991). According to Erikson (1982) and Butler (1963), intense life evaluation naturally happens as life brings to a conclusion (ending). Presumably, perceptions of life can be in two parts; outside and inside. The outer or external life situations are related to culture, education, group, and physical circumstances. However, the internal or the condition associated with self is mostly psychological and biological temperaments, and also on the personal expectation from life or time left to live. So, in the present study, the author is trying to

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reveal the complex structure of attribution behind life regrets by focusing on its specific causes.

Regret refers to the affective reaction to the unfavorable outcome. It is a self-attentive negative feeling based on an upward comparison (Gilovich & Medvec, 1995; Zeelenberg, 1999). *Regret appears after the realization of mistakes.* Various research on regret has identified the reasons including the feelings of blame (Connolly & Zeelenberg, 2002). **Studies on regrets have frequently been indicated as an association with decision making by experiments on decision making** (Wrosch & Heckhausen, 2002) within research on emotions. Various studies on internally attributed regret indicate that our inaction (failure to do) creates deep regret than our action (wrong act) (Savitsky, Medvec, & Gilovich, 1997). **Causes of external regret are being investigated in several studies on traumatic life events** (Coleman, 1999). Old age with a limited time perspective, it becomes difficult to rectify mistakes and life regrets (Baum, 1999). The present study examines the various attributions of regret from the perspective of older adult's regret experiences. The authors have taken different attributional aspects from Weiner's attributional theory.

### *Weiner's Theory of Attribution*
The attribution is not only about internal or external blaming, this cannot address the whole aspect of attribution. The attention should be also drawn to the questions- are the causal factors that influence the behavior likely to be stable over time or likely to change (the stable/unstable dimension)? Whether the causes are controllable or not- can individuals change or influence them if they wish to do so (Weiner, 1993, 1995)? The attribution theory of Weiner provides reasons for why people do what they do, the interpretation of various causes to an event or behavior (Weiner, 1985). Attribution of success and failure have mainly three classifications: locus of control (cause lies inside or outside the agent, i.e. internal vs. external), the stability of cause (cause changes over time or not, i.e. stable vs. unstable), and controllability (causes can be controlled by the agent or not, i.e. controllable vs. uncontrollable).

*Internal and External Attributions of Regret.* Internal aspects of attributional regret are about the experience which comes after the realization of mistakes, is a significant factor in the continuous development and improvement of one's life plan (Whitbourne, 1985). In general, the regret of feeling comes from the sense of responsibility, which makes people attribute more to internal reasons than the external circumstances. However, in old age people cannot work on various important life decisions, especially those decisions which passed with time for example- studies, marriage, and career planning (external), are already occurred in specific life stages. Therefore, in old age many domains of life are unchangeable, people cannot do anything because the opportunity for change has passed. So, they might therefore rely on other approaches of administering regret, like they may externalize the responsibilities of their mistakes. One of the major ways to defend oneself by attributing externally to the negative event works is the fear of death (Tomer & Eliason, 2000). Therefore, older adults may use both external and internal attribution for their regrets.

*Stable and Unstable Attribution of Regret.* Causes can also be categorized with stabile and unstable dimensions (stability). Stable causes refer to those causes which tend to influence the outcome as well as the behavior consistently over time and across situations. For example, causes such as intelligence and environmental or governmental laws are usually considered moderately stable because they are challenging in regards to changes, but not impossible, to change. Whereas unstable causal factors, such as the amount of effort exerted

toward a task, are comparatively easy to change. Unlike the locus of causality dimension, which fundamentally affects emotional reactions to events and behaviors, the stability dimension assumes individuals' future expectations (Kovenklioglu & Greenhaus, 1978). When an outcome such as lower performance is attributed to a stable cause, such as low intelligence, it is reasonable to assume that the people's performance is not going to change in the future. If the same poor performance is attributed to a less stable factor, such as insufficient effort, we can expect that the employee could improve his or her performance by working harder in the future.

***Controllable and Uncontrollable Attribution of Regret.*** The classification of this category as the causal dimension is called controllability (Weiner, 1979), informed and solved some problems while creating other difficulties. Among the illustrated topics was the contrast by Rotter (1966) within internal versus external perceptions of control of reinforcement. Within the three-dimensional taxonomy, two of the aimed causal properties are labeled as locus and control. A cause, therefore, might be internal yet uncontrollable, such as math aptitude. If failure is ascribed to poor aptitude, then the performance is perceived as determined by skill and ability. According to Rotter, this indicates that the outcome is perceived as subject to internal control. Yet a genetically determined aptitude will not be perceived as controllable by a failing math pupil. Thus, confusion is evident in the Rotter one—dimensional taxonomy. Locus and control, not the locus of control, describe causal perceptions. To avoid confusion, the locus dimension should be labeled locus of causality.

### *Regret Attribution and Gender*
Although, there are not many studies that suggest gender differences in regret attribution, still there are a few studies which suggest gender difference in attribution. **Studies on gender (Huyck, 1994) suggest that an urge among men toward action (or the inclination towards acting); a**nd among women, the inclination is on inaction **(or relating to their social context). Women, in particular in old age** in our study, might also have had fewer possibilities for self-improvement. For both reasons, men may feel more responsible for their own life. We assumed that men are more likely to feel sorry for past events that mean men are taking their responsibility for their mistakes and regrets, whereas women are more likely to blame others for their regrets.

### *Present Study*
There are studies regarding regret to show the gender differences but lacking in attributional style behind regret with gender differences. The present study attempted to understand the causal dimensions of regret with the major life regrets of older adults. There are three causal dimensions that have been identified (Weiner, 1985). One style of cause is the locus or location means within or outside of the person. The second property on which causes can identify is controllability. Aptitude is internal to the person, is not subject to willingly control and change means external administration, whereas effort is considered subject to personal control. Endurance of stability is the third known property of causes. Some causes are viewed as stable over time. On the other hand, the chance/opportunity is not enduring. The effort also is typically considered unstable, although recall attribution theory (Heider, 1958) deals with phenomenal causality so that labeling another lazy or industrious, implies stability in effort expenditure. This study also examines the associations between different causal properties of regret with age and gender aspects. The study explores Weiner's causal attribution theory with the present investigation of regret and its attribution. The purpose

behind this to see whether the failure attribution among people is the same or different when compared with regret attribution.

## METHODOLOGY

The present study follows the narrative method to understand the causes of regret in old age. To know the narrative of regret and its causes, the interview method of data collection is used.

### *Participants*

The present investigation comprised 60 older adults (30 males and 30 females) as participants. Participants were randomly selected from the government pensioner associations list of districts of Bihar. The participants' age was 60 to 80 years with a mean age of 67.5 years. Most of the participants were living with their family, and only a few were widow/widower but were living with their children.

### *Interview questions*

Though the in-depth interview method was used in data collection, and the questions which were asked were mostly unstructured but still there were two questions around which the whole inquiry remained a focus. For example- What are the major causes of regret? Do you have any regret in life? If yes, what were the reasons behind those regrets.?

### *Procedure*

As the participants were selected from the retired government servant's pensioner list, the researcher has called them on phone and taken the permission and prior appointment for the interviews by explaining the purpose of the study. The interview took place at a convenient place and time for the participants. Since the participants belonged to the Hindi speaking area, therefore, the language of the interview was Hindi. The researcher developed a rapport and informed them about the purpose of the study before starting the interview. Before starting the interview, their informed consent was taken. With their permission, the researcher recorded the interview in a voice recorder. The ethical clearance was taken from the University's Ethical Review Board.

The recorded interviews were then transcribed and translated into English. The analysis of the interviews was done using the qualitative as well as qualitative content analysis, where the focus of the analysis was on looking at regret attribution on three dimensions: external-internal, stable-unstable, controllable-uncontrollable.

## RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

To understand any problem or event, people need to know about the causes. Causes can provide a better vision of the problem whether the problem is associated with any disease, failure, or mistakes. To understand regret as well it is beneficial to know the causes behind the wrong decisions of a regretful event. People often regret not having pursued alternative actions (Roese & Summerville, 2005). One thing can surely be said that people from every age, gender, and place have some or other regrets in their life (Zeelenberg, 1999; Roese & Summerville, 2005). However, regret becomes problematic in old age since many studies have shown that regret can affect the quality of life and health in a negative way for older adults (Wrosch, et. al., 2005, 2007). The present study examines the major causes of regret and how older adults attribute their regrets. And how the attribution of regret is associated with attribution of failure explained by Weiner. Weiner's Attributional model is also called the three-dimensional model. The first dimension is 'locus'. The locus dimension refers to

the perception of the cause of any event as internal or external. The result shows in table no. 1 is referring to these two styles of attribution which come under Weiner's locus' dimension.

*Table 1 The table shows the frequency analysis of various regret causes*

| Attribution of regret | Overall | Male | Female |
|---|---|---|---|
| Internal Causes | 76 | 41 | 35 |
| External Causes | 81 | 38 | 43 |
| Stable Causes | 127 | 58 | 69 |
| Unstable Causes | 30 | 22 | 8 |
| Controllable Causes | 96 | 55 | 41 |
| Uncontrollable Causes | 61 | 24 | 37 |

*Note.* Total regret incidents= 157. Male regret incidents = 79, female regret incidents = 78.

**Internal attribution.** In this category, the total regret was 76 out of 157, and out of that 41 internal causes were mentioned by male participants. Males have attributed more to the internal aspect of causes as compared to females. Females have attributed 35 regrets which were indicating the internal aspect of attribution. According to Weiner if someone failed due to his/her inability means the person is attributing to the self for his/her failure. Weiner is mentioned that inability comes from within that's why it is internal. Another concept is that **internally attributed regrets with having experience from past mistakes are a vital factor in the regular development and rebuilding of one's life thought (Whitbourne, 1985).** Attributing self is a causation process in which individuals refer to themselves as the antecedents of their regrets. It states the location of reasons, whether it is from within or outside of the self. For example- "I decided to quit my studies and join a job. My focus was to earn money but today my juniors who were decided to complete their studies, promoted very high than my position" (Male#22, age 66). Here, in this example, the person attributed his ambition to earn money as the reason he could not finish his studies and therefore could not become a big officer and have regret. These desires, ambitions are internal aspects of attribution. In another, example one of the participants says "I have a regret of being so strict man (father and husband) of my family. Due to my very strict nature my son never came close to me and my wife went into severe depression" (Male#27, age 72). The personality of being very strict is the main reason for regret here, and personality is an internal factor.

**External attribution.** In this category, the total externally attributed regrets were 81 out of 157. Male participants mentioned 38 regrets which were blamed on others whereas females have attributed 43 regrets externally. In many domains of life like education, career, etc., The **possibilities regarding life changes have already passed for older people. In old age, people may blame external things more for their life regrets. Attributing negative experiences to external drives might be a way to defend oneself in old age** (Tomer & Eliason, 2000). In this particular study, the female participants have attributed their regrets more to the external locus of causality. According to Weiner, the external attribution is blaming others for failure. External attributions are explanations that stress environmental or situational factors, such as task difficulty, social influences, and the physical characteristics of a particular environment (Ross, 1977). For example, "I could not finish my master's degree due to the unsupportive nature of my husband and his family." (Female#13, age 67). In this example, the person is attributing others to her regret. So, above in both causal dimensions, we have seen that the attribution of failure and attribution of regret is more or less the same.

**Controllable causes.** As per the participants, there were 96 attributions of regrets which were controllable. According to Weiner Controllability dimension refers to whether or not the cause of any event is under the control of the person or not. If the cause is under the control of the person may make realized to the person that he/she could have done better in that situation. The control over the situation as well as our act of responses to the situation in life which may create changes, but could not due to internal aspect only. It may or may not internal but counterfactually the imagination of possible changes are controllable causes. For example- ''Me and my husband wanted to shift abroad and when time and opportunity came then all of a sudden, my husband decided to not shift there. I desperately wanted to go. I spoke many things wrong to him in anger and I still have regret on it that I should not have said like this" (Female#12, age 65). Here in the example, the anger is the reason for regret, which was very much in control of the agent.

**Uncontrollable causes.** There were 61 uncontrollable causes, and most of the uncontrollable causes of regrets were mentioned by female participants. As per Weiner's view if the ability to make changes, in any event, is doubtful then the cause can be uncontrollable. The present category of causes refers to those attributions which lie outside of their powers of influence. Some situations in life suddenly appear and never gives much opportunity to control or make some changes. It refers to the lack of power over the causes of regret. For example, "I wanted to achieve a lot in my career, I got the opportunity to do post-doc but my husband didn't allow me to go out for my studies, I tried a lot to convince him but he never got agree. I still have the regret of not pursuing postdoc but I was helpless" (Female#19, age 69). The example shows that a lady is regretting something which was beyond her control.

**Stable causes.** The result shows there were 127 cases of regrets which were attributed to stable features. Females have reported 69 stable causes and males were mentioned 58 regrets, stable. Weiner's stable dimension refers to the permanent and not changeable causes behind the occurrence of the event. The stable causes refer to the unchangeable aspect of a person's life. This category of attribution explains the stability or not the changeable part which contributes to the antecedent of regrets. For example- "I am a very short-tempered kind of person. I have the regret of speaking very harshly and being rude to my father." (Male#28, age 71). As the person in this example attributing his behavior to his short-tempered nature, which is a stable trait.

**Unstable causes.** There were only 30 causal attributions, which are considered unstable attribution. Weiner's unstable dimension refers to those causes which can be changeable over time. The unstable causes refer to the changeable aspect regarding the causes of a person's life events. This category of attribution explains the instability or changeable part, which contributes to the antecedent of regrets. For example- "when I was young, I was careless, I used to avoid even a proper diet. Skipping breakfast was common in those days but today I am regretting my unwellness and various diseases that made my condition severe." (Female#11, age 62). Here a person has attributed to a factor that was changed over time therefore unstable in nature.

*Interaction of various dimensions*
Weiner's theory does not leave these dimensions in isolation, rather it belive that any attribution would be an outcome of a mixture of these three dimensions. Since every dimension has two factors, therefore the attribution style could be 2X2X2, i.e. 8. These are— external-unstable-controllable, external-unstable-uncontrollable, external-stable-

controllable, external-unstable-controllable, internal-unstable-controllable, internal-unstable-uncontrollable, internal-stable-uncontrollable, internal-stable-controllable. In the analysis of regret attribution, it is also found that the reasons for regret are the byproducts of these dimensions, be it attribution to personality or anger or parents, etc. the results of interaction of attribution dimensions are given in Table 2.

*Table 2 Regret attribution across various attribution types*

| Attributions | Property | Examples |
|---|---|---|
| External Unstable Controllable | Attribution is done on the external sources, which is unstable however can be controlled. | Given too much freedom to others; Trusted on the wrong person |
| External Unstable Uncontrollable | Attribution on the external unstable source, which was controllable. | Specific circumstances; Unsupportive seniors. |
| External Stable Controllable | The cause of regret is external but stable and in the control of the agent | Trusted again and again; Strained relationship with spouse or children |
| External Stable Uncontrollable | The cause is external and stable however agent has no control over that. | Unfavorable circumstances; Uncooperative workplace. Lack of cooperation within the family. Family background. |
| Internal Unstable Controllable | Agent attribution was an internal and controllable aspect, however, the causes were unstable. | Being emotional, insensible; Deployed faulty method; The decision was made by ignoring crucial information. |
| Internal Unstable Uncontrollable | Attribution is internal, unstable, and uncontrollable. | Decisions took of rage; Speaking something in haste. |
| Internal Stable Uncontrollable | The cause of regret attribution is internal but stable and uncontrollable | Personality; Easily trusting others; Abilities. |
| Internal Stable Controllable | The cause of regret is internal however sable and controllable | Carelessness; Time management; |

The study describes the various causes of life regrets. The goal of this study was to illustrate the importance of attributional perceptions in predicting older people's life regrets. The study shows that most of the causes of regrets are controllable and internally attributed. However, females couldn't much agree with the self-blame perspective in their life regrets. The study attempted to see the attributional style of regrets with the help of Weiner's attributional style of failure and showed that causes of regret and causes of failure can be addressed by the same dimensions.

## CONCLUSION

The study attempted to understand the causal attribution with the perspective of older adults regarding their life regrets. The research followed Weiner's causal attribution style to understand the significant attributions behind regret. Weiner mentioned three kinds of causal attribution that are external, internal, and stability dimension, and, in the present study author used and compared these attributional styles and it was found that the aspect of regret attribution is more or less the same as the attribution of failure by Weiner. The analysis shows that most of the life regrets are stable especially in old age. Out of 157 attributions, 127 were stable causes only. The study also suggests that women attribute their regrets to external aspects but male participants blamed themselves for attributing their regret. Apart from these attributional dimensions the study also suggested a major subtheme behind the regrets and their attribution. The mistakes and less experience of life, unfavorable or unfortunate situations, and the unsupportive nature of society and family also contribute to life regrets.

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