

## **CHAPTER 3**      **ATTRIBUTION THEORY – A THEORETICAL PERSPECTIVE**

### **FOR RESEARCHING CONSUMER COMPLAINT BEHAVIOUR**

---

#### **3.1 INTRODUCTION**

According to the disconfirmation paradigm, satisfaction/dissatisfaction is a direct consequence of the disconfirmation process. However, evidence suggests that the disconfirmation of expectations does not lead directly to consumer satisfaction/dissatisfaction and, that the effects of disconfirmation are mediated by attributional processing (Oliver, 1989; Manrai & Gardner, 1991; Laufer, 2002). In view of attribution theory, people are constantly searching for reasons to explain why an event turned out the way it did. Weiner's (1986) attributional theory of achievement motivation describes basic dimensions that people use to understand their success and failure: internal or external locus, stability over time and controllability. Weiner's attributional analysis of achievement behaviour is the most comprehensive theoretical model about the influences of attributions on cognitive processes, affect and behaviour (Försterling, 2001:109). Weiner's (1986) model incorporates a cognition-emotion-action process. In a consumer behaviour context, consumers' assignment of causal inferences for product failure and their interpretation of the dimensional quality of perceived causes influence their emotions and subsequent complaint behaviour.

Attribution theory addresses how cognition and emotion together influence people's behaviour (Folkes, 1984; Weiner, 2000). An understanding of dissatisfied consumers' cognitions and emotions are necessary in order for researchers to shed light on consumers' complaint behaviour. Hence, Weiner's (1986) attribution theory is integrated with conceptions concerning consumer behaviour to develop a theoretical basis for studying consumers' complaint behaviour concerning their dissatisfaction with the functional and/or symbolic performance failure of major electrical household appliances.

This chapter focuses on attribution theory and its application in consumer behaviour, specifically consumers' reactions to attributions following product failure experiences. The first part of this chapter introduces social cognition and its application to the field of consumer behaviour. In the second part, attribution theory, as a macro-theory, is discussed in terms of its conceptual

meaning, the different micro-theories of attribution theorists, in particular those of Heider, Jones and Davis, Kelley, Bem, Schachter and Weiner, the contribution of these exponents to social psychology, in general, as well as the applicability of their theories to consumer behaviour. In part three, Weiner's (1986) attributional theory is discussed to provide a background for understanding consumers' behavioural reactions to their causal inferences (attributions) concerning product failure experiences. In part four, examples of consumers' attributions for the failure of durable products are provided. In the conclusion, the rationale for using attribution theory as a theoretical perspective for studying consumers' behaviour following product failure, is indicated. Additionally, it is indicated how some of the objectives for this study address the theory. It should be noted here that the methodologies for studying causal attributions and causal dimensions are examined in Chapter 4.

### **3.2 SOCIAL COGNITION AND CONSUMER BEHAVIOUR**

Social cognition can be described as a psychological discipline that concerns itself with the study of how individuals categorise social stimuli, make inferences about themselves and the objects and persons around them, and respond to their social environment (Sirgy, 1983:3, 7).

Researchers in social cognition therefore study the cognitive psychological processes that are the bases for the perceptions and cognitions individuals use to make judgements about people (Davis & Lennon, 1991). The scientific paradigm of social cognition has developed from a number of theories in social psychology that shared one common element – a cognitive orientation. Attribution theory, which explains the perceived causality of social behaviour in terms of cognitive rules or implications, falls under the general theory of social cognition (Sirgy, 1983:3; Lennon & Davis, 1989). As in other cognitive approaches, the central focus of attribution research lies in the investigation of thoughts or cognitions. Accordingly, researchers in the field of attribution investigate how individuals select, process, store, recall and evaluate information and how the information is then used to draw causal inferences (Försterling, 2001:10).

Since attribution theory can be applied to a wide array of social interaction phenomena, it is considered one of the fundamental paradigms in social psychology (Swanson & Kelley, 2001). It is therefore not strange that the original research on attribution was carried out within social psychology (Hewstone, 1989:11; Fiske & Taylor, 1991:22-56). Attribution theory is, however, not only of use and interest to social psychologists, but to those in other branches of psychology and related disciplines as well. Attribution theory, as such, has been used by researchers in disciplines of psychology (i.e. experimental, personality, motivation, clinical, organisational and education psychology) and in applied fields of psychology (such as clothing, marketing and

consumer behaviour) to offer theoretical guidance and explanation for their work (Lennon & Davis, 1989; Weiner, 2000; Försterling, 2001:8; Swanson & Kelley, 2001; Laufer & Gillespie, 2004; Tsiros, Mittal & Ross, 2004:476; Darmon, 2005; Johnson, 2006). Weiner (2000) notes that, with a few exceptions, the concepts of attribution theory have found limited application in the field of consumer behaviour (i.e. the theory has been rarely used for theory testing) and argues that consumer behaviour provides an important breeding ground for attributional thinking to take place.

During the last few years, the use of attribution theory in consumer behaviour has been found useful in explaining consumers' post-purchase behaviour (Laufer, 2002). Empirical evidence has demonstrated that attributions that are formed after a negative consumption experience, influence consumers' behavioural reactions to that experience (Forrester & Maute, 2001; Poon, *et al.*, 2004). Studies have concentrated on post-purchase issues such as customer satisfaction/dissatisfaction, complaint behaviour, word-of-mouth behaviour, redress seeking, and future purchase intentions (Folkes, 1984; Folkes, 1988; Somasundaram, 1993; Laufer, 2002; Bitner in Poon *et al.*, 2004; Tsiros *et al.*, 2004). Attribution theory has been used more in dissatisfaction and complaining behaviour models than in satisfaction models as such (Erevelles & Leavitt, 1992). Consumer behaviour researchers are interested in consumers' attributions toward things or objects, because products can readily be thought of as "things" or objects. (Schiffman & Kanuk, 2007:265-267). It is in the area of judging product performance that consumers are more likely to form product attributions. Specifically, they want to find out why a product meets or does not meet their expectations. Consumers could attribute the product's failure (or successful performance) to the product itself, to themselves, to other people or situations, or to some combinations of these factors (Schiffman & Kanuk, 2007:265-267).

### **3.3. ATTRIBUTION THEORY**

In the following section, attribution is discussed as part of social perception/cognition. Additionally, six different theoretical traditions that form the backbone of attribution theory are discussed in terms of their role in social psychology as well as their applicability in consumer behaviour research.

#### **3.3.1 Attribution as part of social perception/cognition**

Every day, people encounter events or situations that require explanation (Fiske & Taylor, 1991:22; Försterling, 2001:4). They often ask questions pertaining to why certain things

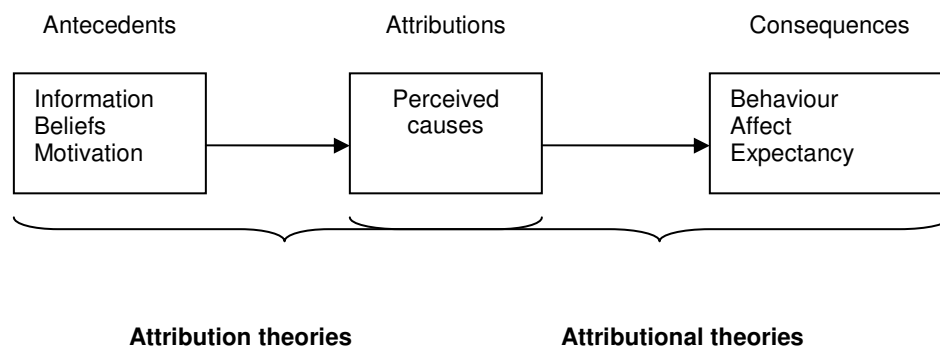
happened to them. Part of their perceptual process is aimed at interpreting the reasons for events (Williams, 1982:70-71). Under circumstances where events are considered to be insignificant, the attribution process may be almost automatic. However, there are many circumstances in which causal analyses are more intentional, deliberate and time-consuming (Weiner, 1985; Fiske & Taylor, 1991:22). After all, people typically do not ask why they did well in an examination, or why they received warm greetings from a friend, but rather why they failed and why they received rejection from a friend (Fiske & Taylor, 1991:22; Weiner, 2000). Individuals are more likely to engage in attributional reasoning when they are surprised or threatened by unexpected or negative events that undermine their beliefs and expectations (Weiner, 1986:121,127; Hewstone, 1989:45; Fiske & Taylor, 1991:22; O'Malley & Tech, 1996; Bougie, Pieters & Zeelenberg, 2003). Therefore, attributions can also be considered as cognitive schemata that are only consciously examined when unexpected (schema-inconsistent) events happen (Försterling, 2001:18). Consequently, deviation from a normal course of events acts as a condition for causal reasoning (Einhorn & Hogarth in Hewstone, 1989).

The underlying causes of the things people observe are very important if they are to understand and predict the environment accurately, make valuable decisions and possibly control behaviour and events (Mizerski, Golden & Kernan, 1979; Williams, 1982:70; Kelley in Fiske & Taylor, 1991:23; Försterling, 2001:11-12). Causal analysis, that is, the attempt to identify what factors gave rise to what outcomes, is central to explaining events and consequently, to social cognition in general (Fiske & Taylor, 1991:22). The systematic study of the perception of causality is identified by the term "attribution theory" (Kelley & Michela, 1980:458; Williams, 1982:70).

Attribution theory is a collection of diverse theoretical and empirical contributions that focus upon the universal concern with explanation – why a particular event, or state or outcome has occurred and the consequences of phenomenal causality (Fiske & Taylor, 1991:23; Weiner, 2000; Darmon, 2005). As Kelley defines it in Mizerski *et al.* (1979:123): "Attribution theory is a theory about how ordinary people make causal explanations, about how they answer questions beginning with "why?". It deals with how the social perceiver gathers information and how it is combined to arrive at causal judgment for an event on the basis of either their own behaviour or the behaviour of others (Folkes, 1988; Jones in Hewstone, 1989:37; Fiske & Taylor, 1991:23; Kelley in O'Malley & Tech, 1996; Försterling, 2001:l; Jones, 2006). Zaltman and Wallendorf in Williams (1982:70) note that these judgements do not necessarily deal with the "true" cause of things but rather with what a perceiver interprets the cause to be. Thus, attribution theorists are not concerned with the actual causes of behaviour, but focus more on the perceived causes of behaviour. They assume that there are systematic processes by which attributions (causal

cognitions) are made and that the attributions that people arrive at, influence subsequent behaviour and emotional reactions (Folkes, 1988; Davis & Lennon, 1991; Försterling, 2001:3; Vaidyanathan & Aggarwal, 2003).

Psychologists differentiate between attribution theory and attributional theories (Kelley & Michela, 1980; Fiske & Taylor, 1991:23; Försterling, 2001:8) (see Figure 3.1).



**FIGURE 3.1: THE BASIC STRUCTURE OF ATTRIBUTION CONCEPTIONS (KELLEY & MICHELA, 1980:459)**

Whereas attribution theory and research study the antecedent conditions that lead to different causal explanations (i.e. how the perceiver uses information to arrive at causal explanations for events), attributional theories investigate the psychological consequences of causal attributions (the influence that attributions exert on e.g. emotions and behaviours). Attribution theory is concerned with the generic causal principles that people employ that might be used in a wide variety of domains. Attributional theories, on the other hand, are concerned with the specific causal attribution process that people employ in a particular life domain (Fiske & Taylor, 1991:23; Försterling, 2001:8). Attribution research involves the systematic assessment or manipulation of antecedents. There is no interest in consequences beyond the attributions themselves, and they (the attributions) are generally measured directly by verbal report. With attributional studies, perceived causes (i.e. causes that are not necessarily the “true” causes of things) are assessed or manipulated and their effects on various behaviours, feelings and intentions are measured (Kelley & Michela, 1980; Folkes, 1988). Whereas each type of research has its own focus, many studies have examined both. However, both types of research have in common an interest in the causal explanations given for events by ordinary people (Kelley & Michela, 1980; Folkes, 1988).

While the behaviourist movement, which had excluded cognitive variables in their models of behaviour, maintained that cognitions cannot be observed directly and therefore cannot be

studied scientifically, the determinants and consequences of cognitive processes lie at the heart of attribution/al theories (Försterling, 2001:3).

### **3.3.2 Theories of attribution**

The following discussion elaborates on the six different theoretical traditions that form the basis of what is now termed attribution theory: Heider's theory of naïve psychology, Jones and Davis' correspondent inference theory, Kelley's work on co-variation, Bem's work on self-perception, Schachter's theory of emotional lability and Weiner's attributional theory (Sirgy, 1983:4; Fiske & Taylor, 1991:24; Swanson & Kelley, 2001). The original research on attribution theory was carried out by social psychologists, but the concepts of the theory have found application in consumer behaviour (Williams, 1982:70).

Previously, the theories of Heider, Jones and Davis and Kelley were generally considered as the "major attribution theories" (Mizerski *et al.*, 1979) or "classic versions of attribution theory" (Davis & Lennon, 1991), all of which are general models of causal inference. Later on, additional attributional formulations were developed by Schachter, Bem and Weiner. Schachter and Bem's respective theories extended attribution ideas into the sphere of self-perception. Weiner's attributional theories of achievement and helping have been useful in identifying a set of focal dimensions along which attributions may be inferred, and in integrating attributional dimensions with emotional responses (Fiske & Taylor, 1991:41). Finally, there are essentially three areas of study within the realm of attribution theory: person perception, self-perception and event or object perception (Mizerski *et al.*, 1979:123; Schiffman & Kanuk, 2007:265-267).

#### **3.3.2.1 Overview of Heider's theory of naïve psychology**

Heider viewed people as "naïve psychologists" (untrained observers) with an innate need to make sense of the action of others or to assign causality for behavioural events (Hewstone, 1989:12; Davis & Lennon, 1991). Heider argued that, in order to explain events, people need to make some kind of inference about either the person or the environment (Lennon & Davis, 1989). He therefore proposed that there are two ways to explain the causes of events. Firstly, internal attributions, where the causes are attributed to factors within the individual (personal factors, e.g. ability, effort, intention), and secondly, external attributions, where the individual attributes the cause to the environment or situation (task-related factors, luck) (Folkes, 1988; Lennon & Davis, 1989; Laufer, 2002). This distinction between personal and situational causes is fundamental to attribution theory and research on the structure of perceived causality



(Hewstone, 1989:30). Heider's work did have some influence on the attribution theorising of Jones and Davis and Kelley (Hewstone, 1989:15; Lennon & Davis, 1989) and opened the way for Weiner's extensive research on attributions for success and failure (Hewstone, 1989:14). He is therefore unquestionably considered to be the founder of contemporary attribution theory (Hewstone, 1989:5; Ployhart & Harold, 2004). Much of Heider's pioneering work concerning the basic concepts of attribution for person-perception has been applied by behaviour and marketing researchers to investigate the role of internal and external locus attributions in people's behaviour (Richins, 1983; Folkes, 1984; Oliver & DeSarbo, 1988; Swanson & Kelley, 2001:52).

### **3.3.2.2 Jones and Davis's correspondence of inference theory**

Jones and Davis's model of attributional processes examines how the social perceiver makes attributions about the causes of other people's behaviour (Fiske & Taylor, 1991:26). According to their theory of correspondent inference, the goal of the attribution process is to make correspondent inferences about another person: to reach the conclusion that the observed behaviour and the intention that produced it correspond to some underlying stable personality characteristic/quality within the person, i.e., a disposition. Differently stated, correspondent inference refers to the perceiver's judgement that the actor's behaviour is caused by, or corresponds to, a particular trait that remains fairly stable over time. A simple example of such an inference is to ascribe someone's hostile behaviour to the trait hostility. Thus, underlying dispositions are directly revealed in behaviour (Folkes, 1988; Lennon & Davis, 1989; Fiske & Taylor, 1991:26-27). Dispositional attributions, however, often take the form of ascribing a set of "broad" traits to the individual, despite the inadequate empirical evidence for their existence (Jones & Nisbett in Goodwin & Spiggle, 1989). Knowing the dispositional attributes of other people presumably enables one both to understand and to predict their behaviour (Fiske & Taylor, 1991:27). According to Jones and Davis, individuals focus their attention on certain types of actions – those most likely to be informative – when obtaining information about other people, for making attributions. Firstly, people only consider behaviours when that behaviour occurs by choice, while behaviours that were constrained and forced on the person in question tend to be ignored. Secondly, people pay attention to actions that produce non-common or distinctive effects, i.e. outcomes that would not be produced by any other outcome. Behaviour that is considered consistent with social roles or prior exceptions will be ignored. Finally, people pay more attention to actions that are low in social desirability than to actions that are high on this dimension (Fiske & Taylor, 1991:32; Baron, Byrne & Branscombe, 2000:93-94).

Correspondence Inference Theory has proved to be most useful as a rational baseline model against which actual attributions could be compared, although it has declined as a primary focus

of research (Hewstone, 1989:20). Jones and Davis's theory has stimulated relatively little research both within and outside of consumer behaviour (Kamins & Assael in Folkes, 1988).

### 3.3.2.3 Kelley's co-variance model

Kelley developed the co-variation model of how individuals form causal inference when they have access to multiple instances of similar events. In trying to understand the cause of some effect, people observe its co-variation with various potential causes and attribute the effect to the cause with which it most closely co-varies. Co-variation is the observed co-occurrence of two events (Fiske & Taylor, 1991:33, 55). Differently stated, the cause of any outcome is likely to be found in the temporal sequence with the outcome (Davis & Lennon, 1991). Thus, people attribute an effect to something that varies when the outcome varies – it is present when the outcome is present and absent when the outcome is absent (Lennon & Davis, 1989). For example, if a person gets cross every time he/she is confronted with a specific situation, a high co-variation exists. However, if a person gets cross only sometimes when he/she is confronted with a specific situation and also sometimes when he/she is not confronted with the specific situation, a low co-variation exists. According to Kelley, people assess co-variation information across three dimensions relevant to the entity whose behaviour they are trying to explain (Mizerski *et al.*, 1979; Lennon & Davis, 1989; Fiske & Taylor, 1991:55; Kelley in Baron *et al.*, 2000:95). In this context, an entity refers to another person or a thing. Firstly, consensus refers to the commonality of the event, the extent to which other persons react in the same manner to some stimulus or event as the person under consideration does. High consensus means others receive the same treatment; low consensus means the event is specific to the person. Secondly, consistency refers to the stability of the event – the extent to which the person reacts to this stimulus or event in the same way on other occasions. High consistency means the event occurs regularly when the person or situation is present; low consistency means the event occurs infrequently. Thirdly, distinctiveness refers to the uniqueness of the event – the extent to which the person reacts in the same manner to other, different stimuli or events. High distinctiveness means the event is specific to the situation; low distinctiveness means that the event occurs in many situations (Kelley in Baron *et al.*, 2000:95; Ployhart & Harold, 2004). According to this model, the combination of these three sources of information must lead to a specific attribution. Kelley's theory suggests that individuals are most likely to attribute another person's behaviour to internal causes under conditions in which consensus and distinctiveness are low but consistency is high. In contrast, people are most likely to attribute another person's behaviour to external causes under condition in which consensus, consistency and distinctiveness are all high. Finally, individuals usually attribute behaviour to a combination of these factors under



conditions in which consensus is low but consistency and distinctiveness are high (Baron *et al.*, 2000:95). When multiple instances of similar events do not exist, i.e., only a single occurrence of an event is known to a perceiver, the co-variation principle cannot be employed and other strategies of causal inference (such as the discounting principle and complex causal schemas that tie patterns of causes to patterns of effects) must be employed (Fiske & Taylor, 1991:55). The co-variation model's value is not as a descriptive model of attribution formation, but as a normative model of what people should do under ideal, controlled circumstances (Ployhart, & Harold, 2004). In this context, "normative" implies that the combination of the co-variation information must lead to a specific attribution. A significant part of the research relating attributions to consumer behaviour has been rather loosely based on the theory developed by Kelley, such as the work by Settle and associates (Krishnan & Valle, 1979; Mizerski *et al.*, 1979). Later research, partly based on the attribution theory principles of Kelley and Weiner, includes O'Malley and Tech's (1996) conceptual framework of consumer attributions of product failures to channel members (i.e., parties who are responsible for the quality of the product such as the retailer and the manufacturer).

#### **3.3.2.4 Bem's self-perception theory**

Just as people endeavour to explain the behaviour of others, they attempt to understand and attribute causes for their own actions. According to Bem's self perception theory, the process of self-perception is similar to the process of the perception of others. Since people like to be perceived by themselves and others as rational beings, they often try to explain their own attitudes and internal states, such as emotions, in part by inferring them from the observation of their own behaviour and the circumstances in which the behaviour occurs (Bem in Lennon & Davis, 1989; Bem in Fiske & Taylor, 1991:45-46). Furthermore, people infer their attitudes and other internal states in much the same way as they make attributions about other people's attitudes and internal states (Lennon & Davis, 1989; Fiske & Taylor, 1991:45). Bem's research suggests that individuals form attributional biases, whereby success is perceived as being due to one's own ability/efforts, and failures are perceived as being due to external factors (Norberg & Dholakia, 2004). Bem's work in self-perception is readily adaptable to Kelley's co-variance paradigm and increases its usefulness to consumer research (Mizerski *et al.*, 1979:126). In terms of consumer behaviour, self-perception theory suggests that attitudes develop as consumers look at and make judgements about their own behaviour (Schiffman & Kanuk, 2007:265).

### **3.3.2.5 Schachter's theory of emotional lability**

Schachter's work is notable for extending attribution ideas to self-perception, especially the self-perception of emotion. Schachter's theory of emotion suggests that people label feelings of arousal in accordance with external information. Misattribution of arousal to neutral cases can reduce emotional reactions. Schachter's theory of emotional lability examines attributions for emotional states. He argued that internal physiological cues are often ambiguous and consequently may be labelled as consistent with any of several emotions or sources of arousal. Support for the emotional lability argument, however, is mixed (Fiske & Taylor, 1991:55).

### **3.3.2.6 Weiner's attributional theory**

Weiner's work on attribution theory is notable, primarily for developing the dimensions of attributional experience, integrating attribution with emotional processes and enlightening the attributional and affective experience that underlie achievement behaviour and other concrete domains of experience (Fiske & Taylor, 1991:55-56). Weiner classified Heider's internal-external distinctions as the "locus of causality". Weiner further elaborated on Heider's seminal concepts by developing an improved multi-dimensional approach to the structure of perceived causality (i.e. causal dimensions) – he emphasised other dimensions or properties of causality (Folkes, 1988; Hewstone, 1989:32-33; Weiner, 1990:6; Försterling, 2001:111; Swanson & Kelley, 2001). Weiner's attributional theory of achievement motivation, describes basic dimensions that people use to understand their success and failure: internal or external locus, stability over time and controllability. These dimensions in turn provoke basic emotions, as well as expectations for future outcomes. Together these emotions and expectations guide behaviour (Weiner, 1986:164; Folkes, 1988; Fiske & Taylor, 1991:429). Although Weiner's work was developed initially to explain achievement behaviour and later extended into a more general theory of human motivation (Folkes, 1988), several researchers in other domains have successfully applied these dimensions in their analyses of different situations (Weiner in Folkes, 1984; Fiske & Taylor, 1991:54, 56). According to Weiner in Oliver (1989), his framework is intended to be perfectly general and not limited to specific contexts. Weiner's categorisation schema of causes has attracted the attention of consumer researchers (Bebko, 2001) and has been applied to various consumer behaviour studies to shed some light on a variety of consumer behaviour issues (Folkes, 1984; Vaidyanathan & Aggarwal, 2003). Research on product or service failure and attributions examined both product defects and service encounter problems (O'Malley & Tech, 1996). Folkes and her colleagues clearly established the utility of Weiner's attribution framework in the context of product failure and satisfaction (Folkes, 1984; Manrai & Gardner,

1991). They also demonstrated that buyer-seller conflict, due to opposing views about causes of product failure, could be interpreted in terms of the multiple consequences of attributions for product failure (Folkes, 1990:143-159). Drawing on Weiner's theory, Swanson and Kelley (2001) examined how the allocation of causality and the length of the specific actions taken in response to a service failure, affect post-recovery perceptions of service quality, customer satisfaction and behavioural intentions for word-of-mouth and repurchase. Bebko (2001) assessed consumers' level of attribution to determine which service providers are more likely to be blamed for service problems. Poon *et al.* (2004) explored cross-national variation in consumers' formation and consequences of attributions on dissatisfying service encounters. Attributional concepts have proven to be applicable to other issues of importance to consumer researchers, for example, Vaidyanathan and Aggarwal (2003) used Weiner's attributional theory to understand consumers' perception of fairness of price increases by examining the fairness perception based on two attributional dimensions – locus and controllability.

Early attribution theory was purely cognitive, that is, locus of causality or causal responsibility was the result of a logical inference process performed on information concerning the actor and his/her behaviour (Kelley in Laufer, 2002). A trend emerging since the Mizerski *et al.* (1979) review, but with roots in early attributional investigations, is research with emphasis on how causal inferences for an outcome influence the type of affective reaction to that outcome. "Neo-attribution theory takes into account certain non-cognitive biases" (Laufer, 2002:314). Weiner, for instance, linked emotional responses to outcomes and attributions. His model incorporates a cognition-emotion-action process. He also suggests that different outcomes, attributions and emotions lead to different behavioural consequences (Weiner, 1986:162; Folkes, 1988; Laufer, 2002; Jones, 2006).

There is no unified body of knowledge that neatly fits into one specific attribution theory. There are many types of attribution theorists and theories. Nevertheless, some central problems guide the thoughts of all investigators in this field (Weiner, 1992:230). The question without doubt arises as to which one of the attribution theories is the right one. The answer is that all of them have some validity, but under different circumstances and for different phenomena. Each theory has made a unique contribution, and each seems to offer insights about specific attributional problems. Despite the best efforts to compare and contrast the theories, relatively little has emerged in the way of theoretical refinement. The theories adopt different viewpoints rather than different hypotheses or stands on fundamental issues (Hewstone, 1989:29; Fiske & Taylor, 1991:40-41).

The above discussion serves to put Weiner's theory into context with the other theories of attribution.

### **3.4 WEINER'S ATTRIBUTIONAL THEORY IN SOCIAL PSYCHOLOGY AND CONSUMER BEHAVIOUR**

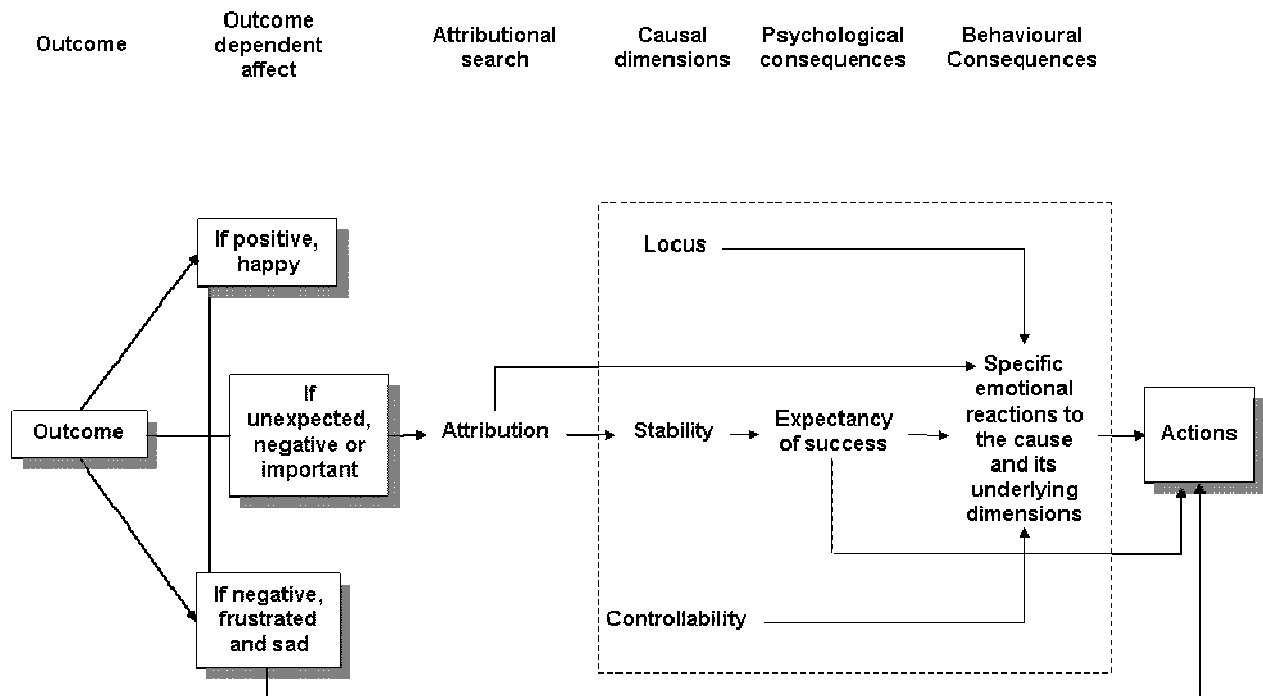
Since Weiner's attributional theory serves as the theoretical perspective guiding this research, an overview of his theory in social psychology is provided. Additionally, his theory is explained in more depth regarding its applicability to the field of consumer behaviour, specifically post-purchase behaviour.

#### **3.4.1 An overview of Weiner's theory in social psychology**

Weiner asserted that there were two key factors in eliciting attributions: unexpected (vs. expected) events and non-attainment (attainment) of a goal (loss, defeat or failure) (Weiner, 1985; Hewstone, 1989:45). Oliver and DeSarbo (1988) propose that outcomes that can be interpreted as successes or failures (e.g. good and bad) elicit causality inferences along three dimensions, namely of (1) locus, (2) stability, and (3) controllability. Locus refers to the familiar location of a cause internal or external to the person; stability refers to the temporal nature of a cause, varying from stable (permanent) to unstable (temporary), and controllability refers to the degree of volitional influence that can be exerted over a cause. Each of these dimensions is perceived as a bipolar continuum. Causes can therefore theoretically be classified within one of eight cells (2 locus levels x 2 stability levels x 2 controllability levels) (Folkes, 1984; Weiner, 1986:50; Hewstone, 1989:33; Oliver, 1989; Weiner, 2000).

Weiner's influential taxonomy for causal attributions allows one to classify phenotypically different causal attributions (e.g. lack of ability, or lack of effort, or illness) according to their genotypical similarities (i.e., that they reside within the person) (Weiner, 1986:17, 44-45; Försterling, 2001:110-111). Weiner also argues that, despite the large number of perceived causes for any one event, the specific type of cause attributed to an event is less important than its latent dimensionality, as expressed through the causal dimensions (Weiner, 1986:121; Ployhart & Harold, 2004). Russell's research (1982) helped to validate this point. He asked individuals to indicate the most likely cause for some event and then rate that cause in terms of the locus, stability and controllability dimensions. The dimensions tend to predict outcomes better than the specific causes noted.

Specific combinations of causal attributions are known to result in regular patterns of causal thinking. For example, internal, stable and controllable causes are typically ascribed to effort while external, unstable and uncontrollable ascriptions are frequently attributed to luck (Weiner, 1986:128; Oliver & DeSarbo, 1988; Oliver, 1989). Weiner has argued that how we think (ascribe causes) can influence how we feel, but also that some emotions can be elicited without intervening thought processes. At the same time, although he does not rule out the influence of emotional states on cognitive processes, Weiner sees the link from cognition to emotion as more typical (Weiner, 1986; Hewstone, 1989:67). (Refer to Figure 3.2).



**FIGURE 3.2: AN ATTRIBUTIONAL THEORY OF MOTIVATION AND EMOTION (Weiner, 1986:240)**

In addition to the cognitive aspects of his model, emotion plays an important part since emotions guide behaviour (Weiner, 1986:117-154; Fiske & Taylor, 1991:429; Weiner, 2000; Laufer, 2002). The emotion process begins with the interpretation of an event as a success or failure (i.e., the environment is evaluated as “good or bad”), referred to as the “primary appraisal” (Weiner, 1986:121, 127). The outcome of an event initially results in a generally positive or negative affective reaction (a “primitive” emotion) (Weiner, 1986:121, 127). These emotions include, “happy”, following success, and “frustrated” or “sad” following failure outcomes; they are labelled “outcome dependent”, for they are determined by the attainment or non-attainment of a desired goal, and not on causal attributions given for the outcome. This first stage sequence is followed by “secondary appraisal” involving attributions for the outcome (for instance, effort or luck) if that

outcome was negative, unexpected or important (Weiner, 1986:127). These attributions result in a different set of emotions that are attribution dependent and not outcome dependent (Weiner, 1986:121; Hewstone, 1989:67; Oliver, 1989; Laufer, 2002). For instance, failure ascribed to “low ability” should give rise to the feeling of incompetence, whereas failure ascribed to bad luck should lead to the emotion of surprise. Finally, the individual determines the dimensional quality of the attribution (e.g., internal, controllable and stable) of which specific combinations are related to a set of feelings. For example, internal, stable, and controllable causes are typically ascribed to effort while external, unstable and uncontrollable ascriptions are often attributed to luck (Oliver, 1989).

One can illustrate that specific emotions follow from specific causal attributions (Neumann, 2000). Success and failure due to internal causes are anticipated to respectively result in greater or lower self-esteem (pride) than do external attributions (Weiner, 1986:121; Försterling, 2001:117). Anger follows from a negative outcome that is perceived as controllable by others, whereas gratitude follows from a positive outcome attributed to external and controllable factors. Guilt is the emotion probably experienced by one who causes negative outcomes for others or one’s self, when those factors are controllable. Pity results from another person’s negative outcome attributed to external factors that are seen as uncontrollable (Weiner, 1986:135; Hewstone, 1989:67-68; Fiske & Taylor, 1991:429; Neumann, 2000). Uncontrollable causes are linked with shame (embarrassment, humiliation). The quality of emotions is determined by locus and controllability factors, whereas the stability factor tends to intensify them. If a cause is seen as stable, the resulting affect will be more pronounced than if the cause is unstable (Fiske & Taylor, 1991:52).

Weiner argues that the dimension of stability determines which influence a causal attribution will exert on the formation of expectancies following success and failures (expectancy change). It is postulated that stable attributions for success should increase the expectancy of being successful at a subsequent similar task to a larger extent than variable attributions. In the same manner, stable attributions for failure decrease expectancies for future success more than the attribution of failure to variable causes. It is also assumed that the mediating influences of stable versus variable attributions are independent of the locus of control dimensions (Försterling, 2001:112). Stability may also relate to future-oriented emotions such as hopelessness or anxiety. Failure attributed to stable factors implies the (fearful) anticipation that it will recur in future, whereas attribution of failure to variable causes could give rise to “hope” for the future (Försterling, 2001:117).



However, it should be noted that research has pinpointed a number of persistent attribution fallacies (biases) that people employ in the attribution process (Folkes, 1988; Fiske & Taylor, 1991:93). The question of how consumers arrive at attributions and why certain patterns occur may be important from an attribution theory point of view. An awareness of biases in terms of attributional theory may be useful in explaining the consequences of attributional thought. Important attribution errors include, inter alia, the fundamental attribution error, the actor/observer effect and self-serving attributional bias (Baron *et al.*, 2000:99-104). The fundamental attribution error claims that people over-attribute the behaviour of others to dispositional qualities rather than to situational factors. The actor/observer effect implies divergent attributions for actors' and observers' behaviour, i.e. situational attributions for actors' behaviours, and dispositional attributions for observers' behaviours. Self-serving attributional bias refers to people's preference to take credit for good outcomes and to attribute bad ones to external factors (Fiske & Taylor, 1991:67, 93; Försterling, 2001:103-105).

To summarise, Weiner's model incorporates a cognition-emotion-action process. (Due to the complexity of Weiner's model, the reader is again referred to Figure 3.2) The appraisal of an outcome as a success or failure leads to outcome-dependent emotions. Next, attributions are made that give rise to attribution-dependent emotions. The dimensional quality of the attributions in turn provokes dimension-dependent emotions and expectations for future outcomes. The differentiated affective reactions are presumed to coexist with the initial general emotional response (Weiner, 1986:127; Neumann, 2000; Weiner, 2000). Finally, these emotions and expectations are presumed to determine action (Weiner, 1986:164; Fiske & Taylor, 1991:429; Jones, 2006). Weiner suggests that different outcomes, attributions, and emotions lead to different behavioural consequences (Weiner, 1986:161-164; Folkes, 1988; Laufer, 2002; Norberg & Dholakia, 2004).

### **3.4.2 Weiner's attributional theory in consumer behaviour**

The disconfirmation of expectations paradigm has been widely used in marketing literature to explain how consumers reach dissatisfaction decisions (Oliver, 1980; Churchill & Suprenant, 1982; Oliver & DeSarbo, 1988). The concept underlying the disconfirmation of expectation paradigm is that consumers reach satisfaction decisions by comparing product or service performance with prior expectations about how the product or service would or should perform (Laufer, 2002). Disconfirmation results from discrepancies between prior expectations and actual performance (Churchill & Suprenant, 1982). When performance fails to meet expectations, dissatisfaction results (Churchill & Suprenant, 1982; Blodgett & Granbois, 1992). The traditional

expectancy disconfirmation model only recognises a direct link from disconfirmation to satisfaction, which connotes a disconfirmation-driven satisfaction response (Woodruff *et al.*, 1983:296; Oliver, 1989). Evidence suggests that disconfirmation does not lead directly to satisfaction but instead results in a search for the cause of the disconfirmation (Oliver, 1989:2).

Therefore, the disconfirmation of expectations acts as an important causal agent for generating attributional processing (Pyznski & Greenberg in Laufer, 2002). In other words, events that do not conform to expectations, are thought to trigger the search for an explanation for the event (Laufer, 2002). In a consumer behaviour context, attributions arise when a consumer evaluates the extent to which the initial product performance corresponds to his/her level of expectation concerning that product, followed by an attempt to find an explanation for the cause of the outcome (Weiner, 2000; Laufer, 2002). As mentioned earlier, an attributional search is more likely to follow failure (dissatisfaction) than success (satisfaction) (Erevelles & Leavitt, 1992; Weiner, 2000; Norberg & Dholakia, 2004). Unsatisfactory goods or non-attainment of personal goals are more likely to elicit attributions than do positive experiences (Weiner, 2000).

Considering attribution theory, consumers are viewed as rational processors of information who look for reasons to explain why a purchase outcome turned out the way it did (Folkes, 1984; Erevelles & Leavitt, 1992). Product failure is the kind of negative and unexpected event that has been shown to prompt (bring about) causal search (Folkes, 1990:144; O'Malley & Tech, 1996; Weiner, 2000; Wirtz & Mattila, 2004).

In the context of Weiner's (1986:121, 127) attributional theory, a consumer will first evaluate the product outcome/event as "good for me" or "bad for me" (i.e. a success or failure). It is proposed that this primary evaluation will result in a primary affect (e.g., the general state of happiness/sadness in response to the goodness or badness of the product event/outcome). The consumer will then search for the cause of the product's success or failure (secondary appraisal) by making an attribution, which will result in attribution-dependent emotions (Oliver, 1989).

Ultimately, the specific cause will be positioned on a causal dimension leading to dimension-dependent emotions and expectations for future product success or failure. Causal attributions and their underlying dimension of locus, stability and controllability generate differentiated affective reactions which are thought to coexist with the initial primary affect generated by the goodness or badness of the product experience. Consequently, general affective reactions linked to (product) outcome become further differentiated as more complex attributional thinking is incorporated into the process (Weiner, 2000). These emotions and expectations are thought to determine the consumer's behaviour.

Consistent with Weiner, Oliver (1989) proposes that, based on the integration of general affective reaction and differentiated emotions, a summary judgement is formed which represents the common satisfied/dissatisfied response. Differently stated, attribution processing is viewed as affecting satisfaction through distinct emotions in addition to primary evaluation, which also affects satisfaction/dissatisfaction through primary affect (Dubé & Schmitt, 1991; Manrai & Gardner, 1991). Attribution theory predicts that the perceived reason for a product's failure influences how the consumer responds (Folkes, 1984).

Consumers infer reasons for why a product performs well or badly and these reasons influence how they respond (Curren & Folkes, 1987:32; Somasundaram, 1993). It is not merely the judgement that the product has failed that determines consumer response (Folkes, 1984). Weiner's causal dimensions (locus, stability and controllability) have been linked to a variety of attributional consequences (emphasising distinctions among various behaviours, affects, expectancies and intentions) following product failure (Curren & Folkes, 1987:32-36; Folkes, 1990:150-155; Weiner, 1990:10; Ployhart & Harold, 2004).

**Locus** In a consumer behaviour setting, the locus dimension refers to whether the consumer believes that the cause for the event (success or failure with a product or the purchase outcome) can be attributed either to the consumer (internal) or to the manufacturer, retailer or some outside agent in the environment or situation or product itself (external) (Jones & Nisbett in Williams, 1982:50; Erevelles & Leavitt, 1992; Bitner in Oliver, 1993; Weiner, 2000; Laufer, 2002).

A consumer who feels dissatisfied because he/she did not follow the manufacturer's instructions when installing a dishwasher (internal attribution) will react differently than one who feels that the manufacturer is accountable for the defective dishwasher (external attribution). A person who believes he/she received a bad product because of his/her inability to deal efficiently in the marketplace is making an internal attribution. Similarly, someone who feels dissatisfied because he/she did not spend enough time shopping is attributing the cause to him-/herself. On the other hand, the person who blames a "bad" product on the nature of the manufacturing company (Krishnan & Valle, 1979) or the product per se ("This computer is not user-friendly") (Weiner, 2000), is making an external attribution. Thus, locus of causality is based on who is seen to be responsible for a given action (Vaidyanathan & Aggarwal, 2003). According to Blodgett and Granbois' (1992) integrated conceptual model of consumer complaining, this variable should actually be referred to as attribution of blame.

Locus influences beliefs about who should solve problems: problems arising from consumers' actions should be solved by consumers, whereas problems arising from companies' (retailers or manufacturers) actions should be solved by companies (Folkes, 1988, 1990). Similarly, locus influences whether consumers believe a company should provide restitution and redress (such as a refund or a replacement) and an apology for product failure. When a product failure is externally attributed, consumers feel that they deserve a refund and apology more than when it is internally attributed (Folkes, 1984, 1988, 1990; Erevelles & Leavitt, 1992; Laufer, 2002; Laufer & Gillespie, 2004). Locus is also related to consumer communications about negative outcomes. When the reason for a consumer's dissatisfaction is company-related, the consumer is more inclined to complain to the retailer and engage in negative word-of-mouth about the product than when the reason is consumer-related (Richins, 1983; Curren & Folkes, 1987:33, 39; Swanson & Kelley, 2001). Additionally, external attributions may cause consumers to experience anger toward the company and they may consequently desire to do it harm. A number of studies have found that the greater the number of internal attributions (i.e. when the consumer admits that the product or retailer is not at fault), the more likely consumers are to do nothing when dissatisfied (Laufer, 2002:315).

**Stability** The stability dimension refers to whether the cause of the event is perceived as relatively permanent or unchanging (temporarily fluctuating) over time (Folkes, 1984; Laufer, 2002; Vaidyanathan & Aggarwal, 2003). In a consumer behaviour context, the stability dimension refers to whether the outcome of the purchase-use situation can be attributed to something temporary (unstable) or something that is likely to occur each time the product is purchased or used (stable) (Williams, 1982:502; Folkes, 1990:155). For instance, when a washing machine stops because of a power failure once in a while, the cause is considered to be unstable, and when the machine stops because of an inherent defect the cause is considered to be stable.

Most of the previous studies of this dimension have been in the context of product failure (Laufer, 2002). The stability dimension signals whether the same problem can be expected in the future or whether the event was perceived as a coincidence and not likely to recur in the future (Laufer, 2002). When product failure is stable, people would expect the product to fail if they purchased it again in the future. Conversely, when product failure is caused by unstable reasons, consumers would be less certain of future product failure (Folkes, 1984). If the attribution is unstable, the consumer will view it as a once-off problem (Williams, 1982:503).

The stability dimension also influences the type of redress preferred when a product fails (Folkes, 1988; Erevelles & Leavitt, 1992). Compared with unstable reasons, stable attributions lead consumers to more strongly prefer refunds, rather than replacement of the failed product (Folkes, 1984; Vaidyanathan & Aggarwal, 2003). Preference for refunds as opposed to replacement increases when products are perceived to fail for company-related reasons as opposed to consumer-related reasons. Consumers are thought to be more likely to warn their friends against purchasing a product when they expect future product failure, than when they are uncertain about future product performance (Curren & Folkes, 1987:35; Blodgett & Granbois, 1992). Curren and Folkes (1987:40-41) demonstrated that stable causes significantly increased the desire to warn friends but had little influence on desire to complain to companies. Consumers are equally likely to complain to a company about product failure whether the cause is stable or unstable. Stability also influences intention to repurchase. Inferring a stable cause leads to less desire to repurchase a product than does inferring an unstable cause. Additionally, consumers will probably vow to never again patronise that retailer and might even warn their friends about the retailer so that they may not experience the same type of problem (Folkes *et al.*, 1987; Blodgett & Granbois, 1992; Crié, 2003).

**Controllability** Both the consumer and other parties such as the manufacturer or retailer can either have volitional control over an outcome or be under certain uncontrollable constraints (Folkes, 1984; Erevelles & Leavitt, 1992). This dimension reflects the power available to the different role-players to alter the outcome (Weiner, 2000; Laufer, 2002). The question is whether any of them has control over the factors that caused the situation to occur (Laufer, 2002).

Research has primarily examined how consumer' perceptions of retailers' control over a problem (external locus) influence their responses to product failure (Folkes, 1990:152). If consumers attribute the cause of the problem to an external, uncontrollable cause, they will probably assign less blame to other entities such as the manufacturer or retailer. However, when failures are viewed as controllable, blame is targeted to the entity perceived as having had control (Laufer, 2002:315). When retailers are thought to have control over the cause of product failure, consumers feel angry and desire revenge more than when they are believed to lack control (Folkes, 1984; Folkes *et al.*, 1987; Folkes, 1990:152). Anger intensifies as outcome importance increases and hence consumers will be more likely to complain to the company and/or public/private third parties, and to distance themselves from the company, refuse to repurchase the company's product and warn others against product purchase as opposed to uncontrollable, external product failures (Folkes *et al.*, 1987; Folkes, 1988; Blodgett & Granbois, 1992; Swanson & Kelley, 2001). Telling others about product failure enables the individual to vent his/her anger,

to gain social support for the validity of these negative feelings and may allow the consumer some means of retaliation by discouraging others from purchasing the product (Curren & Folkes, 1990:153).

It should be noted here that consequences of attributions are sometimes linked to a single causal dimension; for other consequences, more dimensions are involved (Curren & Folkes, 1987; Folkes, 1988).

### **3.5 CONSUMERS' ATTRIBUTIONS FOR THE FAILURE OF DURABLE PRODUCTS**

Day and Ash (1979) obtained data on consumers' dissatisfaction with durable products (including household appliances), their reasons for being dissatisfied and the nature and extent of any subsequent complaining behaviour. The most frequently cited reason for dissatisfaction with household appliances was that the "quality of the materials was inferior". A fair number of respondents indicated that the "quality of the workmanship was inferior". The study showed that respondents who reported dissatisfaction with durable products tended to be more concerned about product quality and product performance issues than with issues related to marketing practices. The reasons provided for dissatisfaction (from an inventory of possible reasons) were all external to respondents (i.e. related to the product as such, to its manufacturers and retailers). However, no provision was made for failure due to mistakes on the part of the end-consumer using the appliance (i.e. human error).

Rousseau (1988) requested respondents to read through five scenarios of product failure (including cars, clothing, electrical appliances, furniture and roof construction), and then to indicate the most likely cause of product failure, the most likely party responsible for the failure and the best way of avoiding similar incidents. Causes of failure included, inter alia, material weakness, mechanical/technical inefficiency and human error (i.e. incorrect operation of machine by user). Compared to Day and Ash's (1979) study, Rousseau's (1988) study included mistakes on the part of the person operating the appliance to the list of possible causes of product failure.

A limited amount of research could be found concerning the reasons for the failure of durable products. In many scientific articles, respondents were asked to think of a product failure and to describe the specific incident. However, in the discussion of the results it is merely mentioned that the respondents described a variety of failures (Richins, 1983; Folkes, 1984; Curren & Folkes, 1987). The focuses of these articles were not on the attributions as such, but rather on



the causal dimensions thereof (Curren & Folkes, 1987). Additionally, researchers examine theories and propose conceptual models and hypotheses to study the effect of specific variables on attributions for product failure (Manrai & Gardner, 1991; Weiner, 2000; Laufer, 2002; Crié, 2003), but research concerning the actual causes for the failure of specific product durables and consumer perceptions of these causes is still lacking. Research concerning the causes for product failure could be conducted by employing straightforward market surveys, but the research results will still be detached from research concerning causal reasoning. In order to gain an understanding of consumers' complaint behaviour concerning specific products, marketing and consumer behaviour specialists need to design research strategies where respondents' causal attributions for specific product failures are integrated with consumers' complaint behaviour concerning the specific products.

### **3.6 CONCLUSION AND IMPLICATIONS FOR THIS STUDY**

Psychologists consider attributions to be important because they are the foundations of further judgements, emotional reactions, and behaviour (Fiske & Taylor, 1991:54). As attribution theory is concerned with phenomena from "everyday life", this approach has also been labelled the "psychology of the man in the street" (Försterling, 2001:4). Since attribution theories address everyday common-sense phenomena, attribution research is not concerned with phenomena of questionable ecological validity that might only occur in rare laboratory situations or in selected clinical groups. On the contrary, attribution theory is concerned with the processes that make our everyday circumstance understandable, predictable, and controllable (Försterling, 2001:40). Hence, the insights of attribution research are applicable to a wide variety of domains, including the field of consumer behaviour (Weiner, 2000; Försterling, 2001:109).

Attribution theory plays a central role in explaining consumers' perceptions of the causes of events, especially unexpected, negative or important events (such as the failure of a product) and their subsequent response to product failure (Folkes, 1984; Erevelles & Leavitt, 1992; Försterling, 2001:11). Most consumers attempt to explain the causes of such events by simply asking why an outcome was unsatisfying, whether it will happen again, and who is to be held responsible (Weiner, 2000). According to Weiner (2000), attributions intervene and exert their influence after a product-related outcome and prior to the next choice. Causal attributions are posited to play a mediating role between disconfirmation perceptions resulting from product outcomes and specific emotions thought to accompany attribution judgements (Oliver, 1989). Attribution theory addresses how thinking and emotion together influence consumers' behaviour (Folkes, 1984; Weiner, 2000).

Weiner's attributional analysis of achievement behaviour is the most comprehensive theoretical model about the influences of attributions on cognitive processes, affect, and behaviour (Försterling, 2001:109). Weiner postulates that there is a sequence involving three steps in which increasingly complex cognitive interpretations give rise to increasingly complex emotional reaction following an outcome (Weiner, 1986:121; Försterling, 2001:117-118). Weiner's attributional theory articulated a dimensional structure for understanding causal inference (Fiske & Taylor, 1991:24).

Although it is impossible to cover all the publications on attribution research in consumer behaviour in this chapter, it is clear that a significant amount of empirical research has been done about the topic. Attribution concepts are no longer only examined in psychology journals but in consumer journals and related academic journals as well (Folkes, 1988; Weiner, 2000; Laufer, 2002; Poon *et al.*, 2004; Tsiros *et al.*, 2004; Schoefer & Ennew, 2005). Consumers' cognitive and affective reactions to product failure are central to understanding post-purchase behaviour (Manrai & Gardner, 1991). Attribution theory provides a map of the relationship between specific thoughts about product failure and specific complaining behaviour (Folkes, 1984). One can only agree with Folkes (1988) and Weiner (2000) that attribution theory is a rich and well-developed approach that has a great deal to say about a wide range of consumer behaviour issues. Attribution theory therefore offers a lot to consumer researchers, even though it has a long history and some might be of the opinion that its time has passed.

The theoretical overview provided in this chapter, presents a good background for studying the link between causal attribution and dissatisfied consumers' complaint behaviour concerning the performance failure of major electrical household appliances (Objective 3). Specific insight gained will assist the reader in investigating dissatisfied consumers' attributions for the performance failure of major household appliances (Sub-objective 3.1), the causal dimensional characteristics of their attributions (Sub-objective 3.2), the association between the dimensional characteristics of attributions and demographic variables (i.e., gender, age, level of education, monthly household income and culture) (Sub-objective 3.3), the association between the causal dimensions and consumers' complaint behaviour (Sub-objective 3.4), and the relationship between consumers' anger and their complaint behaviour (Sub-objective 3.5).