

Determinants of Interpreting Difficult Classroom Situations by Young People with Mild Intellectual Disability – Case Study Analysis¹

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Abstract

Aim: Effective coping in difficult classroom situations involving peers requires gaining proper social insight. Limited abilities to process information by persons with MID (mild intellectual disability) may undermine the process of causal attribution especially in the context of stressful situations, which most often leads to defensive attribution when the cause for an event is assigned to negative dispositions of the peer. The aim of this paper is to verify the regulatory role of determinants of causal attribution in persons with mild/moderate intellectual disability, proposed as part of the Kelley's cube model.

Method: Case studies were analysed using the phenomenological, qualitative research approach.

Results: Interviews conducted with 12 students with MID aged 18 to 24 years showed that low distinctiveness of the subject's negative behaviour, with simultaneous low consensus and comparison-object consensus of this behaviour, promotes attribution of the cause to the perpetrator (negative subject). Low consistency of peer's negative behaviour on the other hand, with comparison-object consensus of this behaviour across the group, fosters situational attribution.

Conclusion: The paper ends with the summary and discussion of results, as well as indication of study limitations.

Keywords: causal attribution, mild intellectual disability, coping with difficult social situations

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Implementation of the idea to integrate young people with MID (mild intellectual disability) transitioning into adulthood, inevitably entails facing different everyday difficult situations in specific social settings (family, school, work). Studies have shown that peer relationships of students with MID are based on lower indicators of warmth/closeness and positive reciprocity than their typically developing peers (Carter & Webster, 2012; Tipton et al., 2013). Less frequently do they belong to an affinity group with whom they participate in leisure activities, which may contribute to their loneliness (Solish et al., 2010). Experiencing social isolation is associated with poorer cognitive and social competencies related to interpersonal intelligence, that are essential to build and maintain friendships, as well as effectively resolve conflicts with others during adolescence (Matheson et al., 2007). Unfortunately, previous research on proactive coping in this social group have shown the prevalence of emotion-focused over problem-focused coping strategies. Primeval actions focused on reduction of emotional tension include different forms of challenging behaviours, e.g. aggression and self-injury (Alvarez-Couto, 2024; Gogaard et al., 2019) or avoidance of difficult situations (Kurtek, 2020a). Although the tendencies to use defence mechanisms are accounted for by limited abilities to process information and manage emotional stress in this population (Coyle, 2019), attempts to identify the quality of mental representations related to proactive coping have been made rather infrequently. While, in accordance with cognitive approaches to stress and coping, the key component of an individual's behaviour in the face of stressful events is in fact subjective perception of the situation (Folkman & Lazarus, 1984; Hobfoll, 2004).

Therefore, in order to develop a deeper understanding of proactive coping employed by these individuals, their cognitive appraisal and interpretation of the events should be considered. As long as the former aspect of perception is brought down to indication of challenging social situations by the subject, the latter refers to the understanding of reasons for such behaviour which is triggered by these situations. The latter aspect is analysed in accordance with different theories of causal attribution. According to Kelley's model (1973), further developed by Hilton and Slugoski (1986), the occurring events may be explained by: situational factors, internal traits of the subject or object. Making inferences about causes of behaviour is based on the following variables: consistency, distinctiveness, consensus and comparison-object consensus. Consistency refers to the frequency with which a person behaves in a certain way, whereas distinctiveness is the extent to which a subject approaches a particular object in a peculiar way. Consensus, on the other hand, refers to the degree to which an individual and other persons behave similarly in relation to a given object, whereas comparison-object consensus allows to compare the particular behaviour with standard behaviour binding in a given environment. Situational attribution tends to be made in case of rareness (low consistency) of a given behaviour presented by the subject and high comparison-object consensus of this kind of behaviour in a given population. Assignment of the causal factor for a given item of behaviour to the subject is promoted by high repeatability of subject's behaviour across different circumstances (consistency), with low distinctiveness towards different persons, as well as low comparison-object consensus for this behaviour presented by other persons. Finally, attribution of the causal

factor to an “object” is caused by consistent actions of different partners toward the same object (high consensus) with high repeatability (consistency) and specificity (distinctiveness) of treating a given object by different persons.

Studies to date have focused primarily on the specificity of attribution in persons without a mental disability, whereas attempts to investigate this process in persons with MID have been scarce. A review of previous qualitative research points to different approaches to explaining the behaviours by these individuals (Bogaard et al., 2019). People with MID are able to discern the role of interpersonal (traumatic life events), intrapersonal (mental health, addiction to chemical substances or negative emotional state) and situational factors (atmosphere in the care centre, social isolation conditions) in explaining self-injurious behaviour presented by other people. However, they most often explain aggressive behaviour (their own or of other beneficiaries of care institutions) with interpersonal factors (Isherwood et al., 2007). They especially emphasize the significance of attitudes presented by the staff underpinned by rejection, dominance, limitation of autonomy or ignorance of the signs of frustration, at the same time generating or upholding aggressive behaviour in persons with disabilities (Brown & Beail, 2009; Clarkson et al., 2009; Duperouzel & Fish, 2010; Griffith et al., 2013; Jones & Stenfort Kroese, 2007). They also discern the importance of other pupils’ behaviour, such as agonizing, irritation and isolation, for the stimulation of aggressive behaviour of their inmates (Duperouzel & Fish, 2010; Isherwood et al., 2007; Stevens, 2006).

Therefore, one’s own aggressive behaviour is attributed mainly to external factors (not to oneself), which may constitute a manifestation of defensive attribution and justify retaliatory measures (Leffert et al., 2010). This was confirmed by some studies conducted among adolescents with MID (transitioning into adulthood), pointing to prevalence of negative attribution (“to the subject”) in case of humiliating or isolating behaviour of their peers toward the respondents (Kurtek, 2020a). However, similar stress-inducing behaviour presented by their parents (criticizing, dominance) was approached by respondents with higher forbearance (prevalence of situational attribution) (Kurtek, 2020b). Therefore, the results point to diversified ways of interpreting other people’s behaviour.

What is more, relationships between attribution of negative intentions to others (peers, teachers) and employing anti-social coping strategies (in the form of direct or indirect aggression) were found. On the other hand, positive or situational attribution of criticism or dominance presented by teachers or parents is linked to employing prosocial coping strategies in the form of assertive confrontational communication or acceptance (Kurtek, 2020b). Diversity and adjustability of attributions induces the enhancement of knowledge about mechanisms of its development, therefore the current study is intended to explore possibilities of modifying the attribution process, in consideration of its basic determinants: consistency, distinctiveness, consensus and comparison-object consensus of events.

The model of the described theoretical relationships between determinants and types of attribution and coping strategies used in difficult social situations is presented in Figure 1 (p. 166).

In line with this model, in the face of a perceived difficult situation, an individual analyses an available coping strategy, and subsequently assesses its

effectiveness. Selection of a particular strategy depends on the interpretation of peer's behaviour. The analysis of various perspectives of this item of behaviour based on its consistency, distinctiveness, consensus and comparison-object consensus allows for verification of the existing causal attribution, which may contribute to modification of the coping strategy.

The research question was formulated as follows: "What types of attribution and coping with difficult classroom situations involving peers occur in young people with MID on a case-by-case basis?" At the same time, it was decided to emphasize the role of determinants of causal attribution as a special aspect of analyses performed as part of the research objective: "What patterns of attribution determinants promote situational attribution of causes for a negative event to a peer relationship, and which to the dispositions of the subject or object?" Due to an open-ended nature of the problems, the author resigned from putting forward any research hypotheses.

Method

This study investigated difficult experiences of students with MID in peer relationships, therefore it was decided to apply idiographic, qualitative research approach using the case study method. For it was assumed that owing to a natural, face-to-face relationship, it will be easier to elicit the lived difficult situation and work it through by using the key determinants of causal attribution of events in this specific (neuroatypical) group of respondents. In order to answer the research question, specificity of social experiences of the subject needed to be explored to a greater extent; therefore, it was decided to use the phenomenological approach. For phenomenological research is focused on identifying conscious, subjective experiences of a subject related to a phenomenon by discovering meanings given to them by the respondents (Creswell, 2013). In my study, I explored the following types of personal experiences in peer relationships: types of lived difficult situations, methods of their explanation (causal attribution), applied coping strategies, satisfaction with these actions, different perspectives of social experiences (in accordance with individual determinants of causal attribution of events). Therefore, it appears that the applied research strategy met the criteria of thus conceptualised phenomenological approach. Personal meanings were elicited in a guided manner (by the order of questions in the interview – determined by the general theoretical pattern), formulated in an informal way by the respondents and interpreted without any assumptions (based on emphatic understanding of respondent's accounts).

Measures

In line with the adopted theoretical model, a semi-structured interview was developed which allows to investigate the subjective space of school experiences

in peer relationships. The point of departure in formulating the questions was the network of thematic categories describing components of the phenomenon, and their correlations. The network of the categories in question was organised according to the following template: recollection of any negative peer behaviour and respondent's reaction to it, assessment of efficiency of the strategy, original attribution of causes for this challenging behaviour, analysis of different perspectives of the behaviour according to the basic determinants of the causal attribution process (i.e. consistency, distinctiveness, consensus and comparison-object consensus), re-attribution of the same negative peer behaviour and anticipated coping strategy (the schedule of the entire interview is presented in Exhibit 1).

Due to a possible impact of the cognitive factor on respondents' understanding of questions and giving of responses, it was decided to monitor the cognitive factor using the Vocabulary sub-test of the Stanford-Binet Intelligence Scales (SB5). In addition, emotional and mental disorders were monitored using the sub-scales: Anxiety/Depression and Thought Disorders from Teacher's Report Form by Achenbach, adapted to the Polish context by Tomasz Wolańczyk (Dąbrowska, 2005). Average theoretical score for the sub-scale: Anxiety/Depression is 17 (min. – 0, max. – 34) and for the sub-scale: Thought disorders 12 (min. – 0, max. – 24).

Participants

Table 1

Respondent Characteristics

No.	Respondent	Gender	Age	Place of residence and residential setting	II (Vocabulary) RS (SS)	Anxiety/Depression	Thought disorders
1.	Anna	F	22	city/family	22 (46–58)	4	0
2.	Adam	M	20	city/family	26 (51–63)	10	2
3.	Barbara	F	18	village/dormitory	11 (45–64)	9	1
4.	Celina	F	24	city/family	14 (46–58)	4	0
5.	Bogdan	M	18	city/family	28 (56–68)	1	2
6.	Dariusz	M	22	city/family	27 (56–68)	3	0
7.	Daria	F	22	city/family	24 (51–63)	20	7
8.	Paweł	M	20	city/family	10 (46–58)	8	0
9.	Elżbieta	F	19	village/dormitory	19 (46–64)	3	0
10.	Alicja	F	23	city/family	17 (46–58)	9	1
11.	Filip	M	19	city/family	26 (51–63)	2	0
12.	Zofia	F	20	city/family	14 (46–58)	12	1

Note. RS – raw score, SS – standardized score.

The study focused on students of a trade school at Special Care and Education Centre during the period of transitioning into adulthood. Using the purposive

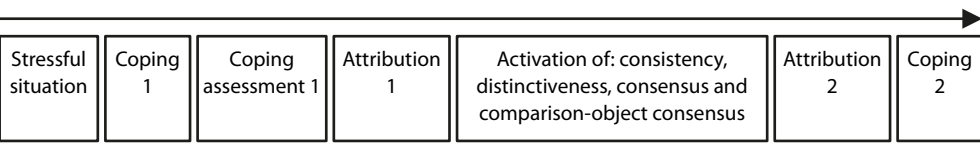
sampling method, 30 students with MID were selected, however informed consent and comprehensive data were obtained from 12 respondents only.

Participants were 7 females and 5 males with MID (verified based on school records) aged 18 to 24 years attending trade grades of an average size of 7 to 12 students, receiving instruction as: hairdresser, cook or confectioner. The diagnosis was additionally confirmed by the score obtained in the Vocabulary sub-test of the Stanford-Binet Intelligence Scales (SB5) (intelligence quotients estimated with this sub-test fall within MID range, with confidence interval of 95%). In view of absence of Polish standards for TRF test for the population of persons with MID, it is difficult to arrive at an explicit interpretation of the scores for the two sub-scales: Anxiety/Depression and Thought Disorders. However, assuming average theoretical scores for these sub-scales (17 and 12, respectively), it may be presumed that the respondents failed to display any significant thought disorders or emotional disorders. Only in Daria’s case, a slightly higher anxiety or depression indicator (20) was observed, manifested in higher tearfulness, fearfulness in new situations, the feeling of worthlessness, and irritability in interpersonal relations. As reported by teachers, the responding students have a strong track record in educational experiences.

Research Procedure and Data Analysis

Upon approval of the study by the Research Ethics Committee, the author has examined the possibility to research young people with MID at Zespół Placówek Szkolno-Wychowawczych [Complex of Care and Education Centres] in Kielce. The research procedure included the following steps: selection of students with MID, obtaining informed consent from the students and their parents to participate in the study, indicative evaluation of conceptual understanding [Vocabulary sub-test of the Stanford-Binet Intelligence Scales (SB5)] and control of emotional and mental disorders using TRF, conducting interviews during separate meetings with each student. The interviews conducted individually, face-to-face and inside a designated classroom fostered maintenance of a proper contact with each student (including controlling and supporting top-down attention, understanding of the contents of the interview and participant’s responses).

Figure 1
Coping With Difficult Social Situations as an Outcome of Development of Attribution Based on Behaviour Consistency, Distinctiveness, Consensus and Comparison-Object Consensus (Author’s Own Model)



The obtained data served as grounds for phenomenological construction of qualitative paths of developing situational and dispositional attribution of causes of the perceived difficult situation in a peer relationship. The qualitative analysis of study results was based on processual approach, the purpose of which was the reconstruction of diverse attribution and coping patterns on a case-by-case basis. Each case was analysed using a network of genetically-related phenomena, conceptualised in the author's original theoretical model (Figure 1, p. 166). As a result, unified records of each case were produced, enabling to compare individual relationship patterns.

Results

Individual Patterns of Attribution and Coping in Difficult Situations Involving Peers

Case study analyses organised with the use of the proposed model of relationships (Figure 1, p. 166) are presented in Table 2.

Table 2

Characteristics of Difficult Situations, Coping and Attribution in the Context of Various Patterns of Determinants in Micro-Scale (Individual Cases)

Difficult situation	Coping 1	Assessment	Attribution 1	Attribution determinants				Attribution 2	Coping 2
				C	D	CO	COC		
Loud laughter	Assertive confrontation to change behaviour	+/-	S	Y	N	N	N	NS/S	Assertive confrontation to change behaviour or physical isolation
Scoffing	Assertive confrontation to change behaviour or Discontinuation of action	+/-	S	N	Y	Y	Y	S	Discontinuation of action or assertive confrontation to change behaviour
Threat of falling	Assertive confrontation with indication of outcomes and seeking instrumental support	+	NS	N	N	N	N	NS	Gentle assertiveness
Crossing the boundaries of intimacy	Assertive confrontation to change behaviour and express anger	+	PS	N	N	Y/N	Y	PS	Assertive confrontation to change behaviour

Difficult situation	Coping 1	Assessment	Attribution 1	Attribution determinants				Attribution 2	Coping 2
				C	D	CO	COC		
Humiliation	Avoiding provocation/Self-control	+	S	N	N	N	N	NS	Avoiding provocation/Self-control
Humiliation	Assertive defence	+	NS	Y	N	N	N	NS	Assertive defence
Bragging	Ignorance	+/-	NS	N	N	N	Y/N	NS	Teacher's intervention
Verbal abuse	Assertive defence	+	NS	Y	N/Y	N/Y	Y	NO	Verbal aggression or assertive defence
Mockery	Explanation	+	NS	N	N	Y	Y	AD	Assertive confrontation – searching for information
Ignorance	Waiting	+	S	N	N	Y	Y	S	Waiting and alternative activities
Name-calling	Verbal reaction	+	S	N	N	Y	Y	S	Pseudo aggression
Sexual teasing	Pseudo aggression	+	PS	Y	N	Y	Y	PS	Pseudo aggression

Note. Y – yes, N – no, types of attribution: NS (negative subject), NO (negative object), PS (positive subject), S (situational), AD (attribution doubts). Types of attribution determinants: C (consistency), D (distinctiveness), CO (consensus), COC (comparison-object consensus).

The first participant (Anna) indicated her acquaintance's loud irritating laughter (sensory overload) when she and him were watching a film together. She reacted in an assertive manner ("I told him not to laugh like that and to lower his voice"). In Anna's opinion, her response could have made her friend take offence, the more so that she attributed the cause of his loud laughter to the fact of watching a funny movie. The focus on determinants of the process of attribution proved that the awkward acquaintance displays high consistency of his behaviour towards the respondent and other peers (low distinctiveness), with low consensus and low comparison-object consensus of this type of behaviour in a group of schoolmates. A repeated verification of the quality of attribution revealed that the respondent extended the scope of her explanations, indicating both situational ("I was sitting too close") and dispositional ("He could not control it") factors. It was accompanied by extension of the coping behaviours inventory with physical isolation, should an assertive response and expected change of behaviour bring no effects ("I will tell him to lower his voice or sit elsewhere, as this is irritating"). This data suggest participation of the aforementioned determinants in the attribution process and general consistency of formulated beliefs and coping behaviours presented by Anna. The described

pattern of representations may be summarized as: "This is just the way he is, so I will adjust".

The second respondent (Adam) reported on a situation when he was laughed at by his peers due to his specific food preferences ("They laugh at me that I don't like nuts").

In this situation, Adam decided on an assertive response, in order for his peer to change or give up his behaviour ("I told him to stop or else I will not talk back"). The use of an assertive strategy was emotionally demanding for Adam, as it involved increasing his level of social anxiety ("I only wanted him to stop"). The respondent provided a situational explanation of the peer's behaviour ("I guess he finds it amusing"). An informed working through determinants of attribution showed that laughing at Adam by the peer was not permanent (low consistency) and that it was not reported towards other peers (high distinctiveness). At the same time, laughing at the aversion for nuts is shared by other peers (high consensus) and is a standard across the group (high comparison-object consensus). Verification of attribution has upheld the leading role of a situational factor ("They find it strange that someone does not like nuts"), therefore while anticipating coping with the situation again, Adam reversed the order of applied strategies: from avoidance coping to assertiveness ("I will say what I always say – nothing or I will tell them to stop"). This story could be summarized with a statement: "This is what I am, but they find it strange", which expresses the feeling of one's own peculiarity and the fact of being misunderstood by peers, but also respondent's helplessness.

The third respondent (Barbara) paid attention to dangerous jokes made by her female acquaintance who would untie her shoe laces (risk of falling). The respondent reacted to this event by explaining the potential outcomes ("I told her that she could not do it because I could tumble over") and when this did not help, the respondent sought teacher's support ("I reported this to our tutor and we had a row"). However, Barbara found this strategy as something positive. She attributed her peer's behaviour to her needs ("Maybe this was just her tomfoolery"). The analysis of determinants of attribution pointed to low consistency and low distinctiveness of the peer's behaviour towards Barbara and towards other people, but also low consensus and comparison-object consensus of this type of jokes. This pattern of determinants tends to imply the use of dispositional attribution. The respondent upheld attribution "to a negative subject" ("She was teasing me") and opted for mild assertiveness including recollection of the past experience ("I would ask her not to do it, as she had done it before"). The presented narrative concerning understanding of her female acquaintance's reasons could be summarized as: "That was then but it is over now".

The next respondent (Celina) reported on crossing the physical boundaries ("He would tease me, tickle me, I was irritated because that was too much"). The respondent used an assertive defence strategy ("I asked him to let go and to stop bugging me"), which she found as something positive. She assigned responsibility for such provocative behaviour to ambivalent assessment of her male acquaintance's needs ("He wants to joke around"). The focus on determinants of the process of attribution pointed to low repeatability of this behaviour towards

the respondent (low consistency) and towards other peers (low distinctiveness). Celina noticed gender specificity of such behaviour towards herself (high consensus presented by her male peers but not by female peers) and found it to be common in a school setting. Consequently, she continued to use positive dispositional attribution ("Because he likes to make fun of me, he usually amuses me") together with assertive defence of the self ("I would tell him to calm down and cut it out"). This story may be summarized as follows: "It is quite normal that boys pick on girls, but sometimes you have to put an end to this".

The next story was told by Bogdan who, while recollecting a disagreeable situation, pointed to an offensive joke told by his male acquaintance ("He went too far while joking and said something nasty"). In this situation, the respondent decided to use avoidance coping in the form of giving up any action ("I leave this situation and fail to enter into conflict"), which he assessed as something positive. He attributed the cause of his peer's aversive behaviour to the situational context ("He unwound while having fun and it went beyond his control"). The analysis of determinants of attribution pointed to low consistency and low distinctiveness of the peer's aversive behaviour, as well as low consensus of the offensive behaviour towards Bogdan and their low comparison-object consensus in the school setting. This pattern of determinants suggests assignment of negative traits to the subject, and indeed Bogdan interpreted volitional traits of his acquaintance as the source of behaviour ("He wanted to joke in his own way"). He attempted, however, to contain expression of negative emotions in order not to escalate the conflict ("I will not bother, I will let it go and not enter into conflict"). This narrative may be interpreted as: "I am controlling myself, when somebody goes nuts".

Another story was that of Darek who was laughed at because of a T-shirt he was wearing. He responded with assertive defence ("I told him not to laugh at my clothes – face-to-face"). He found his response as something positive and provided a rational explanation ("I'd rather explain it, because shouting will not change anything"). He attributed the cause for the mockery to his friend's jealousy, that is to a dispositional factor. The focus on determinants of attribution pointed to high consistency of the acquaintance's behaviour towards the respondent, and low distinctiveness towards others. What is more, he concluded that such mockery is not common in the school setting, and that other peers rather fail to present such behaviour. This pattern of determinants induced maintenance of negative subject attribution ("He wanted to ridicule me, because he was jealous") and it reinforced expression of assertive discontent ("I would get angry and tell him that this is not funny"). This story may be interpreted as follows: "I will not allow to be ridiculed when the dude exaggerates".

Daria, on the other hand, reported on her female schoolmate bragging of something that wasn't true ("That she had a boyfriend in our grade"). In these circumstances, the respondent ignored her acquaintance's statements, about which she was in two minds. She interpreted her friend's behaviour as showing off, resulting from her bashfulness. The analysis of determinants of attribution pointed to low consistency and distinctiveness of such behaviour presented by her acquaintance, as well as low consensus of similar behaviour of other peers

towards Daria. In general however, the respondent concluded that such situations occur in the school setting (average comparison-object consensus). Therefore, situational or dispositional attribution could be expected, which was reflected in the interpretation, as the respondent by maintaining the dispositional attribution of causality for the event, presented it as less stable ("Maybe she wanted to show off"). Yet, she failed to treat deceit as something normal, therefore when anticipating that this event may happen again, she decided to ask a teacher to react. "She wanted to show off but now it's different" – this can serve as a summary of the story.

The next respondent (Paweł) reported on verbal offences ("She called me a pig and self-seeker behind my back"). He reacted with assertive defence followed by a row, which he believed was something positive. He attributed causes of his female acquaintance's behaviour to her negative personality traits ("Because she cannot understand my barriers and my limits, she pokes her nose into everything"). The analysis of determinants of attribution pointed to high consistency of the acquaintance's behaviour towards Paweł and low distinctiveness towards others ("Kasia is an exception because they are best friends"). Although other peers usually fail to treat the respondent that way (low consensus), verbal offences are quite common at school. Therefore, it could have been expected that negative subject attribution will be upheld. Meanwhile, upon reflecting on the event again, the respondent began to look for guilt in himself ("Because she holds a grudge at me against something"), but it failed to lead to a changed coping strategy ("I would use a dirty word but I can't do it at school"). This inconsistency may be summarized as follows – "Although I may be guilty, I will attack anyway".

Another respondent (Elżbieta) reported on being laughed at due to developing a romantic relationship ("They were laughing at me that I have a boyfriend"), to which she responded by justifying herself ("For your information, we have nothing in common"), with which she was pleased. When asked about causes of her peers' mockery, she chose an emotion – jealousy. However, she found it to be a short-lived behaviour (low consistency) that concerned also other peers (low distinctiveness) and quite common, which raised attributional doubts ("I don't know"). The anticipated coping strategy in case this difficult situation was repeated, was assertive defence ("What you are laughing at"). "If someone doesn't have a boyfriend/girlfriend, they are jealous" – this is the message behind this story.

The next story was told by Alicja who reported on the fact of being ignored by her female friend ("Zuzia did not text me back on something important"). Her reaction was to wait for the response and she found it a proper strategy. She attributed the cause for the delayed answer to the situational context ("She might have been busy"). She failed to discern repeated acts of ignorance on the part of her friend (low consistency) and different behaviour towards other peers (low distinctiveness). What is more, she concluded that this behaviour was presented by others as well and it was relatively common. Consequently, she kept attributing the causes of not writing back to a situation, and selected waiting and pursuing another activity as an effective coping strategy. "When someone is not

answering back to your text message, he or she may be busy and you just have to wait” – this statement may serve as the summary of this story.

Filip, on the other hand, reported on being called names by his female acquaintance, which was an irritating situation (“Julia was calling me names and she was picking on me”). In these circumstances, he reacted in an aggressive way (“I called her names”), which he found a proper response. He attributed the causes for her behaviour to his own behaviour (“She must have found me annoying”). The respondent pointed to low consistency of his friend’s behaviour towards him, and to low distinctiveness of the behaviour towards others. He found teasing a common behaviour displayed by others and widely occurring in peer relationships at school. For this reason, he maintained situational (relational) attribution of teasing (“We are teasing each other”) and pseudo aggressive squabbles with her acquaintance. “Teasing is a form of fun” – this is the reasoning behind this story.

Zofia on the other hand, reported on sexual teasing experienced from her male acquaintance (“He would smack my bottom and ask me how many lovers I had”). She responded with pseudo aggressive behaviour (“I was shouting and beating him”), which according to her was something positive. She attributed the cause of his behaviour to his positive attitude towards herself (“Because he is very fond of me”). The analysis pointed to repeatability of this behaviour towards the respondent (high consistency) and towards other girls (low distinctiveness), as well as sexual interest in the respondent also presented by other male acquaintances (high consensus), which she found normal in her school. Consequently, she kept attributing the cause of teasing to his positive approach towards her and upheld the pseudo aggressive game as the preferred form of response. “The quarrel of lovers is the renewal of love” – this is the message behind Zofia’s story.

Patterns of Determinants for Stable and Unstable Causal Attribution

The comparison of individual cases allowed to identify two types of attribution represented over time: stable and unstable. The former involves upholding the original type of attribution, whereas the latter modification of the original type of attribution. In the first category, the following types of attribution were identified: negative subject (case no.: 3, 6, 7), situational (case no.: 2, 10, 11) and positive subject (case no.: 4, 12). They are presented in Table 3 (p. 173).

For the first case of stable attribution, characteristic determinants include low distinctiveness of the negative behaviour of the subject, with low consensus and low comparison-object consensus of this behaviour (consistency had no differentiating effect). This resulted in assigning the cause to the subject. In the second case of stable attribution on the other hand, explanations for the causes of the behaviour were sought in situations, with consideration of small repeatability of the subject’s behaviour, and pointing to social consensus and comparison-object consensus of a given behaviour in the group. A similar pattern of attribution determinants was observed in case of positive subject attribution.

Recognition of positive intentions (e.g. of the “seducer”) was based on the non-specific consistency of the behaviour, low distinctiveness and high consensus and comparison-object consensus of such behaviours of boys towards girls. The analyses also found three instances of unstable attribution, presented in Table 4.

Table 3

Pattern of Stable Attribution Determinants

Stable attribution	Attribution 1	Consistency	Distinctiveness	Consensus	Comparison-object consensus	Attribution 2
NS–NS	negative subject	no/yes	no	no	no	negative subject
S–S	situational	no	no/yes	yes	yes	situational
PS–PS	positive subject	no/yes	no	yes	yes	positive subject

Note. Types of attribution: NS (negative subject), PS (positive subject), S (situational).

Table 4

Pattern of Determinants for Unstable Attribution

Unstable attribution	Attribution 1	Consistency	Distinctiveness	Consensus	Comparison-object consensus	Attribution 2
S–NS	situational	yes/no	no	no	no	negative subject
NS–NO	negative subject	yes	no/yes	no/yes	yes	negative object
NS–AD	negative subject	no	no	yes	yes	attributional doubts

Note. Types of attribution: NS (negative subject), NO (negative object), PS (positive subject), S (situational), AD (attributional doubts).

The first instance consisted in changing from situational to dispositional attribution (case no.: 1, 5). A typical characteristic was regarding other peers' behaviour as rare (low consensus) and low comparison-object consensus of such behaviour in the group. Identical patterns of determinants were observed in relation to the above-presented stable attribution, typical of assigning the negative causal factor to a subject. The second instance on the other hand, involved shifting of causality from the subject to the object (case no. 8). It was accompanied by respondent's observation of commonness of verbal offences at school and change in the narrative from the definitive “always” into a relative “sometimes”, pointing to flexibility of attribution (“Everyone can go off sometimes”). The last instance of unstable attribution involved emergence of attributional doubts

following the initial focus on the negative subject. It was difficult to uphold such interpretation however, as during the analysis the subject pointed to low consistency of his male acquaintance's behaviour of laughing at another person and low distinctiveness towards others, as well as high consensus for this behaviour presented by other peers and general commonness of laughing at others in this school.

Summary and Discussion

The results show that the respondents are able to make causal attributions regarding challenging behaviours presented by their peers. The collected material demonstrates diversified interpretations across the study population. The analyses allowed to identify individuals who:

1. Discern their own peculiarity ("This is what I am, but they find it strange") or peculiarity of their peers ("This is just the way he is, so I will adjust").
2. Are able to re-think their initial inferences ("We are teasing each other just for fun", "The quarrel of lovers is the renewal of love") or stick to their self-centred beliefs ("Although I may be guilty, I will attack anyway").
3. Are able to notice changes in others' behaviour over time ("That was then but it is over now.", "She wanted to show off, but now she's different").
4. Know when they should wait ("When someone is not answering back to your text message, he or she may be busy and you just have to wait") or act ("I will not allow to be ridiculed when the dude exaggerates").

Diversification of causal attributions encourages overcoming the vision of this social group as being solely defence-oriented. Although previous studies have pointed to assigning causes of harmful peer behaviour primarily to negative factors (Kurtek, 2020a; Leffert et al., 2010), alternative, more mature attributions are also possible (consideration of the situational factor or one's own guilt). For this reason, the fundamental aim of the analyses was to capture the process of causal attribution during struggling with difficult situations in peer relationships. The phenomenological analysis of the accounts by students with MID allowed to construct individual paths of perception and interpretation of challenging behaviours presented by respondents' acquaintances, bearing in mind the repeatability of such behaviour towards the respondent and other peers, as well as comparison-object consensus of similar situations in the school setting. It turned out that low distinctiveness of subject's negative behaviour, with simultaneous low consensus and comparison-object consensus of this behaviour, promotes assignment of the cause to the perpetrator (negative subject). Low consistency of peer's negative behaviour on the other hand, with comparison-object consensus of this behaviour in the group fosters situational attribution. The results are consistent with assumptions of the Kelley's cube model (1973) and findings of empirical studies conducted among persons without intellectual disability (Fosterling, 2005). This points to respondents' ability to consider different perspectives in interpreting their peers' behaviour.

Another important conclusion drawn from the analyses is the prevailing “negative subject” attribution among other types of attribution. This tendency in assessing others may result from the actor-observer asymmetry (Watson, after: Lewicka, 2005). Actor of the event, for which the background is made of his own self, perceives his own task-based situation as a figure. Observer, on the other hand, focuses on the person acting in a specific situational context. Actor is aware of the purpose of their activity, he or she is therefore prone to making situational inferences regarding their behaviour, whereas the observer (having no such data) explains others’ behaviour by referring primarily to dispositional factors (e.g. traits, needs). It should also be noted that respondents were not looking for the cause of behaviour in themselves as in objects that could have triggered peer revenge. Quite the contrary, they regarded themselves as victims of the attack by the acquaintance-perpetrator. This defensive attribution is quite widespread in the population of persons with MID, but it is not typical only of this group (Kurtek, 2020a, 2020b). The staff working at care and rehabilitation centres have also assigned negative behaviours to specific traits of persons with disabilities, thus neglecting other possible reasons (Davies et al., 2015; van den Bogaard et al., 2020). Therefore, a widespread defensive attribution has been observed consisting in assignment of the prevailing role to external (non-personal) factors. Admission of one’s own guilt could breach one’s self-esteem which is clearly at stake in young people with MID due to a negative balance of social comparisons (Falk & Sansour, 2024).

Despite the already mentioned tendency to use defence mechanisms, some respondents were found to present a possibility to reformulate their attributions based on working through the major determinants of this process. Matching secondary attribution with specific patterns of determinants opens new opportunities in offering support to young adults with MID with respect to a more adequate interpretation of interpersonal situations. Activation of the social insight on the other hand, may promote more reflective coping strategies applied by these individuals (Morrissey et al., 2017).

Obtained results should be approached as the preliminary exploration of the problem. They do not allow to make generalisations about persons with MID, but they offer new opportunities for recognising and developing causal attributions in challenging peer behaviours. The obtained results appear to confirm the significance of operational thinking in developing the ability of cognitive decentration by persons with MID, conditioning adoption of different perspectives while interpreting behaviours of different social partners.

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Appendix 1

Interview schedule

Part I. Existing attribution and coping strategies

1. Who is in your grade? (please list a few names – A, B, C, D)
2. What things do you do together, how do you spend your time?
3. Please recall a situation when some of these persons made your blood boil (made you angry) – please give an account of this situation.
4. And what was your response to his/her behaviour, what did you do?
5. Were you pleased with the way you reacted? YES/NO (if NO, how would you behave towards him or her right now?)
6. Why did HE/SHE behave like that? (why do you think he/she did it?)

Part II. Updating determinants of causal attribution in a difficult situation

7. And was that the way HE/SHE usually behaves towards yourself, or sometimes he/she behaves in a different manner (S)?
 - a) or maybe he/she would behave towards you in a different manner before?
 - b) or maybe he/she behaves differently towards you elsewhere?
8. What about other people in your class, does HE/SHE often behaves towards others in the same way or differently (D)?
 - a) does he/she behave in the same or different manner towards A?
 - b) does he/she behave in the same or different manner towards B?
 - c) does he/she behave in the same or different manner towards C?
 - d) does he/she behave in the same or different manner towards D?
9. What about other people, do they behave in a similar or different manner towards you than this person (CO)?

- a) does A often... (indicate behaviour from item 3), or rather not?
 - b) does B often... (indicate behaviour from item 3), or rather not?
 - c) does C often... (indicate behaviour from item 3), or rather not?
 - d) does D often... (indicate behaviour from item 3), or rather not?
10. Is this behaviour (indicated in item 3) is normal, common in your school (COC)?

Part III. Outcomes of working through attribution and coping

11. Why did HE/SHE behave like that towards you back then? (recall the event described in item 3).
12. What will you do, if HE/SHE behaves like that again, how will you behave towards him/her?