

# The Attribution Process

## ***Study Tips: Difficult section***

- Pay attention to the different attribution theories. Be able to explain these theories. (I'm going to ask you about them on the test)
- Be prepared to defend whether we're accurate in the attributions we make. How do we know we're accurate or inaccurate?
- Try to think of whether you make the kinds of attribution "errors" that I discuss. Be able to define what these errors are; be able to recognize them from real-world examples:
  - the fundamental attribution error (FAE)
  - actor-observer differences in attribution
  - the self-serving bias
  - the self-centered bias

## **Background to Attribution Theories**

### **Often times:**

**We observe an action (e.g., someone yells at you).**

**We ask "why" it happened (e.g., did I do something wrong?; is she a jerk?)**

**We make a judgment about intention (e.g., she was trying to make me feel badly)**

**We make a dispositional attribution (e.g., she really is a jerk)**

### **Doing this simplifies our world by:**

**Allowing us to explain present and past behavior (now I understand why she keeps getting fired and why no one likes her)**

**If our attributions are accurate, they enable us to predict future behavior (if you've accurately diagnosed her as a jerk, you can predict that she'll treat you badly in the future)**

**If our attributions are accurate, they enable us to make appropriate responses (e.g., discontinue relationship)**

## **Some Basic Assumptions of Attribution Theories**

**Individuals attempt to assign a cause for important instances of their own behavior and that of others**

**Where necessary, they seek information that enables them to do so**

**The assignment of causes is determined in a systematic manner (even if it may be biased/inaccurate)**

### **A Definition of Attribution**

**Attributions are inferences that people draw about the causes of events, others' behavior, and their own behavior**

### **Father of Attribution Theory**

**Fritz Heider (1958)**

**distinguished internal from external causes**

**---Heider & Simmel motion example (if available)**

### **Attribution Theories**

**Even though called attribution theory, there really are many theories of attribution**

**Two theories have been most influential**

**Jones & Davis (1965): Correspondent inference**

**Kelly (1967): Covariation principle**

### **Correspondent Inference Theory**

**Theory of how we use others' behavior as a basis for inferring their stable dispositions**

**How do we know that someone's bossy behavior means she really is a bossy person (rather than being due to external constraints)?**

**For example:**

**You are watching two people work on a project. Bessie criticizes the other (Hecky) vehemently for not doing her work properly**

**You might infer that the Bessie is overly critical and perfectionistic**

This is called a correspondent inference

being critical *corresponds* to critical/perfectionistic

/.....\

personality = behavior

We don't always infer a personality characteristic from the behavior, since there are often alternative explanations for the behavior (e.g., external ones)

If you knew that Bessie's job was on the line in the project, but that Hecky was simply there to help for the afternoon, you'd be less likely to infer that Bessie is a bossy individual

However, if the behavior is really unusual (e.g., Bessie yells extremely loudly at Hecky for a full 15 min), you're more likely to make a correspondent inference.

Correspondent inference affected by three primary factors:

(1) Noncommon effects:

Elements of the pattern of action that are not shared with alternative patterns of action

Student deciding on graduate school

Has three choices:

- Xavier U..... high pay; low load; far from home
- Yale U..... high pay; low load; far from home
- Zanavoo State U..... high pay; low load; close to home

Picks ZSU

Reason: Close to home (this is the outcome/effect that is not common to remaining choices)

Correspondent inference might be: "a real home girl" (but you don't have enough info. yet)

(2) Social desirability--undesirable behavior leads to correspondent inference more than desirable behavior

Everybody tells student that ZSU is a horrible choice (undesirable), yet she

**chooses it anyway**

**(3) Freedom of choice--the greater the choice freedom, the greater the correspondent inference**

**Her parents and friends have genuinely told her many times that the choice really is totally up to her (versus pressuring her into attending ZSU)**

**All combined will lead to the strongest correspondent inference**

**Kelley's Covariation principle**

**A given effect is often the result of an interaction among a number of causes**

**John hits Bill (Why?)**

**According to the covariation principle, people look for covariation in three areas:**

- **stimulus object (Bill)**
- **persons (others who could be in a similar situation)**
- **circumstance (the entire context surrounding event)**

**Attributions are made to internal factors (John) or external factors (Bill or circumstance) depending on three variables**

**Distinctiveness--behavior can be attributed to cause if it only occurs when that cause is present and does not occur when cause is absent**

**\*Why I've never seen John hit anyone else before. He only hits Bill**

**called high distinctiveness; John's behavior is distinct/unique to Bill**

**Likely attribution? Something about Bill, the stimulus (e.g., Bill's always insulting John)**

**\*Why John hits every Tom, Dick, and Harry I know. He doesn't hit Bill only**

**called low distinctiveness; John's behavior is not distinct/unique to Bill**

**Likely attribution? Something about John, the person (e.g., John's an aggressive bugger)**

**Consistency--the person (John) behaves this way across time and situations**

**\*Why John hits Bill everytime they are anywhere (in the bar; in a restaurant; at school; at work).**

**called high consistency**

**Likely attribution? Something about John & Bill probably (they're a volatile mix)**

**\*Why John rarely ever hits Bill**

**called low consistency**

**Likely attribution? Something about the circumstance (maybe crowded bar; drunk)**

**Consensus--others behave in the same manner toward the stimulus**

**\*Why everyone who comes into contact with Bill hits him**

**called high consensus**

**Likely attribution? Something about Bill, the stimulus (he's a real jerk)**

**\*Why no one (except John) hits Bill**

**called low consensus**

**Likely attribution? Something about John, the person (he's the jerk!)**

**Do we really go to this much effort? (Lupfer, et. al., 1990)**

**Often, NO. We often jump to conclusions about causes based on past experience**

**YES, when**

**Events are unexpected**

**Events or outcomes are unpleasant**

## **Yet another attribution theory of Kelley's**

### **How do we handle multiple potential causes?**

**Discounting principle**--tendency to attach less importance to a potential cause of behavior if other potential causes are also present

**Augmenting principle**--tendency to attach greater weight to a potential cause if the behavior occurs despite the presence of other inhibitory factors

### **Consider how these operate in the context of affirmative action**

woman gets the job (her ability as the cause is discounted, because the likely explanation could be affirmative action -- an external attribution)

man gets the job (his ability as the cause is augmented, because affirmative action would actually inhibit/prevent him from getting the job -- an internal attribution)

## **Errors in attribution**

**Fundamental attribution error**: You failed; I guess you must be stupid

tendency to overestimate role of dispositional/internal/ personal factors

Heider said that "Persons are the prototypes of origins" (= causes)

Viewing people as the prototypes of origins leads to the fundamental attribution error

**Due to tendency to focus on the person's behavior, with situational forces ignored or fading into background**

Not assigning sufficient weight to situational factors

This tendency seems to fade with passage of time

**Defensive attribution** is a tendency to blame victims for their own misfortune

think of rape victims, homeless, welfare recipients

This may be seen as an extension of the fundamental attribution error.

**Actor-observer effect**--"You fell; I was pushed"

**Due to different perspectives, different information about the event and the participants**

**Actors have more information about their own past behaviors, more aware of situational factors than observers**

**When observers have more information about the person and the situation, they are less prone to this tendency**

### **Self-serving bias--enhancing the ego**

**We tend to attribute our positive outcomes to internal factors and to attribute our negative outcomes to external factors**

**Due to expecting to succeed; failure "must" be due to external factors**

**Need to protect and enhance our self-esteem**

**Can be the cause of interpersonal friction**

### **Self-serving bias--I do everything around here; you do much less**

**overestimating how much we (relative to others) contributed to a positive outcome**

**Ross & Sicoly experiments**

**We're not always as rational as we'd like to think!**

**Conscious attentional resources available to us affects accuracy of attributions (Gilbert and colleagues)**


**Attribution requires three highly conscious efforts:**


- **Categorization--what is behavior about?**
- **Characterization--what traits cause behavior?**
- **Correction--how does situation affect our initial inference?**

**Normally, we have attentional resources to do all three tasks, but if behavior is obscure or we are in a hurry, we may not have resources for corrections**

**⬅️ Back to Perceiving Persons (p. 1)**

**⬅️ Back to Affect and Cognition (p. 2)**

 **[Back to Psy 3510 Homepage](#)**

 **[Back to Psy 3510 Lecture Notes](#)**

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Send e-mail comments regarding this site to: [fatamara@cc.usu.edu](mailto:fatamara@cc.usu.edu)

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