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The Really, Really Fundamental Attribution Error

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One of the most important contributions that can be boasted by the vast literature on the putative fundamental attribution error (FAE) is that it inspired the present analysis by Sabini, Siepmann, and Stein (this issue). This article is a major intellectual achievement and a milestone in our progress toward understanding the manner in which people interpret the behavior of themselves and others. In this commentary, I make three small additional points, all derived from ones made in the target article. First, the FAE in all of its forms—including the recast version attempted by Sabini et al.—is untenable, and in some of its forms it is incoherent. Second, any meaningful comparison between the power of personal variables and the power of situational variables in the determination of behavior—much less any imputation of error—must await the development of a language and technology for describing and assessing the psychologically important aspects of situations. Third, the really, really FAE—by psychologists, not by laypersons—may be that of underestimating the complexity both of situations and the conflicting goals that people try to pursue simultaneously within them.

The Demise of the FAE

Few readers could come away from Sabini et al.'s demolition of the standard forms of the FAE and maintain a belief that the FAE, as traditionally described, is an appropriate way to characterize any basic aspect of social perception. This famous error revolves around laypersons' alleged confusion about the relative importance of situational and dispositional causes of behavior. The nature of these causes has been conceptualized in at least three ways, but the first conceptualization is incoherent, the second leads to conclusions opposite to those argued by proponents of the FAE, and the third tends to disconfirm the FAE, so far as data are available.

The first conceptualization views dispositional causes as emanating from within the skin and situational causes from emanating from without the skin (Gilbert & Malone, 1995). Sabini et al. convincingly establish that this distinction is incoherent. The original proponent of the FAE[1] (Ross, 1977) himself pointed out that, in these terms, every situational explanation for behavior implies a dispositional one, and vice versa. For example, consider the Milgram (1974) situation. A situational pressure to obey that comes from outside the skin only produces obedient behavior in a person who has a disposition to obey, inside the skin. This disposition might be surprisingly stronger than the disposition to be kind to an innocent victim, but the error people make when they predict that kindness will overcome obedience is not one of overestimating the power of dispositions in general but of underestimating the strength of one disposition relative to another.

The second, "statistical" version of the dispositional–situational dichotomy—one proposed by Ross (1977) and endorsed by Gilbert (1998)—ironically reverses the interpretation of many putative demonstrations of the FAE. If, following the statistical criterion, one considers a behavior to be

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[1] E. E. Jones earlier propounded an equivalent tendency called the *correspondence bias,* but the term *fundamental attribution error,* being catchier, accordingly caught on more widely (see Gilbert & Malone, 1995, for a history).

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dispositionally caused when there is large interpersonal variation and situationally caused when there is small interpersonal variation, then the outcome that shows the most dispositional causation arises when 50% of your research participants do one thing and 50% do the opposite. Therefore, when, for example, laypersons and psychiatrists estimated that fewer than 1% of subjects would obey Milgram's (1974) experimenter, they were predicting that the situation would have an extremely strong effect, that of producing disobedience. They were wrong: The real proportions varied by condition, but were much closer to even. And so their error was in overestimating the power of the situation and underestimating the degree of interpersonal variation. The same basic principle applies to many other putative demonstrations of the FAE.

A third conceptualization of the person–situation dichotomy was not discussed by Sabini et al., but is no more favorable for the existence of an FAE. This conceptualization concerns the relative utility of personality and situational variables for the prediction of behavior. Proponents of the FAE often assert that research shows personality variables to be weakly related to behavior, whereas situational variables are strongly related to behavior (and people therefore err by believing in personality anyway). This argument is typically made by subtraction. If a personality variable correlates .40 with a behavioral outcome, then it is asserted that the remaining 84% of the variance can be assigned, by default, to the situation.

This argument reveals only how little we know about situations. If there were a set of situational variables that could be correlated with behavior, then any variance left over could just as well be assigned to persons! But we don't have a well-developed set of situational variables or, really, any comprehensive set, at all. So despite the rhetoric touting the "power of the situation," we know very little about the basis of that power—or its real amount.

Some years ago, Ozer and I (Funder & Ozer, 1983) recalculated the effect sizes of a few situational variables that could be identified and that were widely acknowledged as important. For example, the size of the effect of distance of the experimenter and victim in the Milgram (1974) situation and of number of bystanders in the Darley studies (Darley & Batson, 1973; Darley & Latoné, 1968; all specifically mentioned by Sabini et al.) are each equivalent to a correlation between .30 and .40. If we resist the temptation to ascribe the remaining variance to persons by subtraction, it can still be noted that many effects of personality on behavior are in this range, and measures of cross-situational consistency are often much higher (e.g., Funder, 1999; Funder & Colvin, 1991). The basic and necessary claim of proponents of the FAE, that situational variables are generally more powerful than personality variables as predictors of behavior, therefore seems extremely doubtful on empirical grounds.

In response, it might be argued that the proximity of the experimenter, the distance of the victim, or the number of bystanders is not the real basis of the power of these situations. But that only raises the question, what is? Until psychology develops a vocabulary for describing the psychologically important aspects of situations, and a technology for manipulating or measuring them, we will never understand what aspects of situations determine their influence on behavior or how strong they really are. And as long as we lack that understanding, we are in no position to describe anybody else's estimates of the power of the situation as erroneous, whether fundamentally or otherwise.

The Really, Really FAE

Following Sabini et al.'s close analysis (and demolition) of the standard FAE, they attempt to reconstruct a variant of it by recasting the dispositional–situational dichotomy in terms of ego-syntonicity. People overestimate their capacity to choose to do things that are consistent with their images of their best selves, Sabini et al. suggest, and underestimate the degree to which they instead behave to the contrary. This is a brilliant suggestion, and certainly an improvement on the FAE, but in the end, I do not think it is successful.

The problem is that the concept of ego-syntonicity is vague (at least as vague, for example, as the concept of face value that Sabini et al. so compellingly critique). Apparently, *ego-syntonicity* refers to acting in accord with those of one's own dispositions that one is proud of, or at least not ashamed of. But the typical situation includes many forces that elicit many dispositions, few of which may be very laudable or shameful, but many of which may nonetheless be in conflict.

For example, the Milgram (1974) situation evokes various dispositions that could be construed in various ways, including the dispositions to be kind, cooperative, likable (to the victim), likable (to the experimenter), competent (as a "teacher" or research participant), intelligent, strong, scientific, decisive...the list is very long. Which of these dispositions are ego-syntonic, and which are ego-dystonic? Sabini et al. argue that the (ego-dystonic) motivation to avoid embarrassment overrules the (ego-syntonic) motivation to be kind, but one could just as well argue that the (ego-syntonic) motivation to be cooperative overrules the (equally ego-syntonic) motivation to be kind, or even the (ego-dystonic) motivation to fold under pressure. What is *really* going on? The answer is by no means obvious, but what *is* obvious is that in this situation—as in many others in life—multiple motivations are activated, and fully satisfying all of them at once is impossible.

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Perhaps, then, this is the really, really FAE (by psychologists, not our participants): to believe that the causes of behavior are simple and easily dichotomized. (Our participants are not prone to this error, as evidenced by their typical, frustrated reaction to attribution questionnaires.) As Freud taught us long ago, and the modern theorists of parallel distributed processing models of cognition teach us now, many different things are going on at the same time within the typical human head (and heart). We try to serve many masters, seek many goals at the same time, and life is a continuous struggle to balance them all and find some kind of workable compromise.

Notes

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The Fundamental Attribution Error Where It Really Counts

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Sabini, Siepmann, and Stein (this issue) have written a provocative article that reminds social psychologists of two important lessons: that human behavior is not easily parsed into situational and dispositional causes, and that concerns about propriety and face are powerful and pervasive determinants of how people choose to act. It might seem odd that social psychologists, of all people, would need the latter reminder. But the fact is that although we can all throw around a few quotes from Goffman and might even give an isolated lecture on the dramaturgical approach to social psychology, issues of self-presentation are more often treated as annoying methodological artifacts than as compelling phenomena worthy of attention in their own right. Mainstream social psychology only infrequently touches the subject and even less frequently touches it for long.

Sabini et al. show us the error of our ways. It may be tempting to think of most human behavior as guided by rather broad, direct, and even noble concerns, but the reality is often less flattering. One might think, for example, that questions raised at the end of a colloquium are typically motivated by a genuine quest for knowledge, but as often as not, they are performances staged as much to dis-

play knowledge as elicit it. One might think that the decision of whether to seek a doctor's advice would be controlled solely by the prevailing medical issues, but quite often such decisions are hijacked by concerns about hurting another doctor's feelings or about being seen as a hypochondriac. And one might think that the decision of whether or not to switch one's first-grader from one classroom to another would be based primarily on the educational merits of the move, but often the merits take a back seat to fears about seeming pushy, demanding, or elitist.

Sabini et al. highlight the importance of these issues of face in everyday social interaction and in such classic experiments as Milgram's obedience studies, Darley and Latané's bystander intervention studies, and Asch's studies of conformity. They rightly point out that the fear of making one kind of scene or another is a tremendously powerful "channel factor" that lies at the heart of how people act in these studies—and why their actions seem so surprising.

But is fear of embarrassment the *only* channel factor whose influence is surprisingly powerful? Are all experimental surprises in the "situationist" tradition (indulge us for now) the result of underestimating people's concerns

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