Chapter 9
Social Attribution

Attributions are inferences that people make about the causes of events and behavior. People make attributions in order to understand their experiences. Attributions strongly influence the way people interact with others. Most of the people most of the times, do not accept that they live in a world which is random, and for them most of the times, things happen for a reason. To make their lives orderly and predictable, people attribute causes and explanations to events and try to understand why people behave the way they do. In social psychology, attribution refers to how we infer the causes of behaviors and events. During a typical day, you probably make a number of different attributions regarding your own actions as well as the behavior of others.

The reasons why people attribute and how they attribute, and the conditions under which they do and don’t attribute, all these can be included in what is called as the Attribution theory. Attribution theory is concerned with how and why ordinary people explain events as they do. It explores how individuals "attribute," or explain, the causes of actions either to the personal qualities of actors involved or to situations.

Theories of Attribution

A number of small theories have been put forth to explain the attributional processes, rather than a single unifying theory explaining it. However, these small theories are not competing; rather the contributions of these theories are complementary to one another.

Heider’s naïve psychology:

Heider (1958) believed that people are naive psychologists trying to make sense of the social world. People tend to see cause and effect relationships even where there is none. Heider didn’t so much develop a theory himself as emphasize certain themes that others took up. There were two main ideas that he put forward that became influential.

1. When we explain the behavior of others we look for enduring internal attributions, such as personality traits. For example we attribute the behavior of a person to their naivety or reliability or jealousy.
2. When we try to explain our own behavior we tend to make external attributions, such as situational or environment.

Jones and Davis’s Correspondent Inference Theory:

Jones and Davis (1965) thought that people pay particular attention to intentional behavior (as opposed to accidental or unthinking behavior). Jones and Davis’s theory helps us understand the process of making an internal attribution. They say that we tend to do this when we see a correspondence between motive and behavior. For example, when we see a correspondence between someone behaving in a friendly way and being a friendly person. Dispositional (i.e. internal) attributions provide us with information from which we can make predictions about a person’s future behavior.

The correspondent inference theory describes the conditions under which we make dispositional attributes to behavior we perceive as intentional. Davis used the term correspondent inference to refer to an occasion when an observer infers that a person’s behavior matches or corresponds with their personality. It is an alternative term to dispositional attribution.

Furthermore, Jones and Davis proposed that we draw on 5 sources of information to make a correspondent inference:

1. **Choice:** If a behavior is freely chosen it is believed to be due to internal (dispositional) factors.
2. Accidental vs. Intentional behavior: behavior that is intentional is likely to a attributed to the person’s personality and behavior which is accidental is likely to be attributed to situation / external causes.
3. **Social Desirability:** behaviors low in sociably desirability (not conforming) lead us to make (internal) dispositional inferences more than socially undesirable behaviors. For example, if you observe a person getting on a bus and sitting on the floor instead of one of the seats. This behavior has low social desirability (non conforming) and is likely to correspond with the personality of the individual.
4. **Non-common effects:** If the other person’s behavior has important consequences for ourselves. For example if the person asks us out on a date we assume it was the fact that they like you that was important (not that you were simply available!).
5. **Hedonistic Relevance:** If the other person’s behavior appears to be directly intended to benefit or harm us, we assume that it is “personal”, and not just a by-product of the situation we are
Kelley’s Covariation model:
Kelley’s (1967) covariation model is the best known theory of attribution. He developed a logical model for judging whether a particular action should be attributed to some characteristic (internal) of the person or the environment (external). The term covariation simply means that a person has information from multiple observations, at different times and situations, and can perceive the covariation of an observed effect and its causes.
Kelley argued that in trying to discover the causes of behavior people act like scientists. More specifically they take into account three kinds of evidence. He believed that there were three types of causal information which influenced our judgments.

- **Consensus**: the extent to which other people behave in the same way in a similar situation. E.g. Alison smokes a cigarette when she goes out for a meal with her friend. If her friend smokes, her behavior is high in consensus. If only Alison smokes it is low.

- **Distinctiveness**: the extent to which the person behaves in the same way in similar situations. If Alison only smokes when she is out with friends, her behavior is high in distinctiveness. If she smokes at any time or place, distinctiveness is low.

- **Consistency**: the extent to which the person behaves like this every time the situation occurs. If Alison only smokes when she is out with friends, consistency is high. If she only smokes on one special occasion, consistency is low.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Principle</th>
<th>External attribution</th>
<th>Internal attribution</th>
<th>Example</th>
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</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Consensus</td>
<td><strong>High</strong>. If someone behaves in a way that most other people would, we make a situational (external) attribution</td>
<td>Low. Behaviour that is different to everyone else leads to dispositional (personality) attributions</td>
<td>Someone laughing at an animal cruelly video. Not many others (if any) would also laugh, so we’d think they have a mean/evil personality</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Consistency</td>
<td><strong>Low</strong>. if someone behaves differently to how they normally do, we expect something external has caused the behaviour</td>
<td><strong>High</strong>. If someone always behaves this way, it’s likely because of his or her personality</td>
<td>A happy person acts sad one day; we’d wonder what has happened to cause the sadness. If someone is always sad, we’d assume they’re just a miserable person by nature</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Distinctiveness</td>
<td><strong>High</strong>. If their behaviour is a &quot;one off&quot;, or they act differently in other situations, we attribute to external causes</td>
<td>Low. If someone behaves like this in every situation, we conclude it’s due to personality</td>
<td>If someone is rude to just one person, we conclude that the person is a bad influence. If they’re rude to everyone they meet, we deem them as an impolite person</td>
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For example, consider a subject called Tom. His behavior is laughter. Tom is laughing at a comedian.

1. **Consensus**: Everybody in the audience is laughing. Consensus is high. If only Tom is laughing consensus is low.
2. **Distinctiveness**: Tom only laughs at this comedian. Distinctiveness is high. If Tom laughs at everything distinctiveness is low.
3. **Consistency**: Tom always laughs at this comedian. Consistency is high. Tom rarely laughs at this comedian consistency is low.

Now, if everybody laughs at this comedian, if they don’t laugh at the comedian who follows and if this comedian always raises a laugh then we would make an external attribution, i.e. we assume that Tom is laughing because the comedian is very funny. On the other hand, if Tom is the only person who laughs at this comedian, if Tom laughs at all comedians and if Tom always laughs at the comedian then we would make an internal attribution, i.e. we assume that Tom is laughing because he is the kind of...
person who laughs a lot. So here it can be seen that people attribute causality on the basis of correlation. That is to say, we see that two things go together and we therefore assume that one causes the other. One problem however is that we may not have enough information to make that kind of judgment. For example, if we don’t know Tom that well we wouldn’t necessarily have the information to know if his behavior is consistent over time. Furthermore, according to Kelley we fall back on past experience and look for either:

- Multiple necessary causes. For example, we see an athlete win a marathon and we reason that she must be very fit, highly motivated, have trained hard etc. and that she must have all of these to win.

- Multiple sufficient causes. For example, we see an athlete fail a drug test and we reason that she may be trying to cheat, or have taken a banned substance by accident or been tricked into taking it by her coach. Any one reason would be sufficient.

Types of Attribution

- **Interpersonal Attribution:** When telling a story to a group of friends or acquaintances, you are likely to tell the story in a way that places you in the best possible light. Interpersonal attributions happen when the causes of the events involve two or more individuals.

  More specifically, it is likely that one will always want to present oneself in the most positive light in interpersonal attributions. For example, if a sibling were to accidentally break their mother’s favorite tea pot, the sibling will be more likely to blame the other sibling in order to shift blame away from him/her.

- **Predictive Attribution:** We also tend to attribute things in ways that allow us to make future predictions. If your car was vandalized, you might attribute the crime to the fact that you parked in a particular parking garage. As a result, you will avoid that parking garage in the future in order to avoid further vandalism.

- **Explanatory Attribution:** We us explanatory attributions to help us make sense of the world around us. Some people have an optimistic explanatory style, while others tend to be more pessimistic. People with an optimistic style attribute positive events to stable, internal and global causes and negative events to unstable, external and specific causes. Those with a pessimistic style attribute negative events to internal, stable and global causes and positive events to external, stable and specific causes.

  People make explanatory attributions to understand the world around them and to seek reasons for a particular event. With explanatory attributions, people can make judgments as to what was the cause of a certain event, even if it turns out the proposed cause is unrelated to the event. For example, if Jacob’s car tire is punctured he may attribute that to a hole in the road; by making attributions to the poor condition of the highway, he can make sense of the event without any discomfiture that it may in reality have been the result of his bad driving.

Attributional Biases

As one seeks to explain the reasons and causes for behaviors, they are prone to falling victim to a number of cognitive biases and errors. Our perceptions of events are often distorted by our past experiences, our expectations and our own needs. When people make an attribution, they are guessing about the causes of events or behaviors. These guesses are often wrong. People have systematic biases, which lead them to make incorrect attributions. These are called Attributional Biases or Errors. A few of the most common types of errors in attribution include the fundamental attribution error, the actor-observer effect, and the self serving bias.

**The Fundamental Attribution Error:**

The fundamental attribution error is the tendency to attribute other people’s behavior to internal factors such as personality traits, abilities, and feelings. The fundamental attribution error is also called the correspondence bias, because it is assumed that other people’s behavior corresponds to their personal attributes. When explaining their own behavior, on the other hand, people tend to attribute it to situational factors.

An example of the fundamental attribution error is when you ask a stranger for directions but they give you a seemingly snarky response or they’re simply rude to you. Naturally you would peg this person as rude and having a bad personality, but looking past their initial first impression they may have had a bad day putting them in a foul mood or they’ve just received some devastatingly bad news and you were the first person they have come into contact with since receiving this news. They acted the way they did not because of their natural personality (most people are generally polite to strangers) but their circumstances made them act the way they did, in this case it was just having a bad day which was the cause.
Over the years, several explanations of the Fundamental attribution error have been suggested. These explanations are either related to the cognitive or psychological processes, or the social, cultural, or ideological processes. The cognitive explanation focuses on how the situational factors that give rise to behavior such as the social context, roles, or situational pressure, are unlikely to be noticed when compared with the dynamic behavior of the person. Another explanation emphasizes the degree to which person attributions give us a sense of predictive control of other people’s behavior. The dispositional attributes enhance our sense of prediction and control in everyday life and that is why they are preferred. Some researchers have also suggested that the dispositionalist bias is not universal to cognitive functioning, but reflects the dominant ideology of individualism within the European and American cultures.

The Actor-Observer Effect:

The actor-observer bias refers to a tendency to attribute one’s own actions to external causes, while attributing other people’s behaviors to internal causes. Essentially, people tend to make different attributions depending upon whether they are the actor or the observer in a situation. The actor-observer bias tends to be more pronounced in situations where the outcomes are negative. For example, in a situation where a person experiences something negative, the individual will often blame the situation or circumstances. When something negative happens to another person, people will often blame the individual for their personal choices, behaviors and actions. Researchers have found that people tend to succumb to this bias less frequently with people they know well, such as close friends and family members. Because we have more information about the needs, motivations and thoughts of these individuals, we are more likely to account for the external forces that impact behavior.

The actor-observer bias is basically a tendency wherein the actors attribute their actions to situational factors, while the observers attribute the same actions to the stable personal dispositions. Suppose, for instance, that we are walking in the street past a house into which we can see a home ‘handy-man’ in the front room standing on a ladder painting his ceiling. As he reaches into a bucket of paint he knocks it over with the brush, splattering the floor with the contents. We may conclude that he is clumsy, careless, or just generally inept: but what if we were the one doing the painting and we likewise knocked over the receptacle containing the paint? Might we then offer some alternate explanation, such as that our ladder doesn’t provides a very steady platform and needs replacing and/or is too short for the job at hand, that we should get a new paintbrush of appropriate type for the job, or switch to different footwear with a superior non-slip sole, or complain to a housemate not to distract us by asking questions when we’re up a ladder, etc.: meaning that if we are at the centre of the action we are likely to place increased emphasis upon external causes, whereas looking at someone else it is more probable we would ascribe the turn of events to the other party’s own internal traits.

A number of explanations have tried to throw light on how the Actor-Observer bias works. One of the explanations is perceptual and argues that actors and observers literally have different points of view. The actors cannot see themselves acting, and that is why the situational influences on their behavior are more readily available to them. On the other hand, from the observer’s point of view, the actor’s behavior is more perceptually salient than the situation or context. These differences in the perception of actors and observers thus lead to different attribution tendencies. Another explanation suggests that the actors and observers may possess different information about events and it is this that leads to different attributions.

Self-serving Bias:

It is a common human tendency to attribute one’s successes to personal characteristics, and one’s failures to factors beyond one’s control. The reason people tend to personalize success is because it helps their self-esteem levels. Most people demonstrate this behavior on a regular basis. It is human nature to take credit for things like an A on a test or a job well done at work. It is also human nature to
avoid responsibility entirely for mistakes or problems.

The self-serving bias is people's tendency to attribute positive events to their own character but attribute negative events to external factors. For example, if a positive event occurs, such as, you get an A for an essay and you attribute it to your own hard work and intelligence (internal attribution). But, if a negative event occurs, such as you get a C on an essay and you attribute it to your professor not having explained what they wanted well enough (external attribution).

Both motivational processes (i.e. self-enhancement, self-preservation) and cognitive processes (i.e. locus of control, self-esteem) influence the self-serving bias. There are both cross-cultural (i.e. individualistic and collectivistic culture differences) and special clinical population (i.e. depression) considerations within the bias. The motivational explanation advocated that people accept credit for success and deflect responsibility for failure because doing so makes them feel good and look good and thus serves as a self-enhancement motive. Also, strong evidence also has suggested that the people who are chronically high in self esteem make more self serving attributions than the people who are chronically low in self esteem.

On similar lines, it can be said that it is normal, functional and biologically adaptive to make such biased attributions because they help to create and maintain a positive self image. Sometimes when people are depressed or have low self-esteem, their attribution style is flipped. They attribute positive events to chance or external help, and attribute negative events to their own character. If someone is feeling irritable, they might attribute negative events to a combination of internal and external factors "I suck and everybody sucks." For example, "I got a C because I'm useless and professors are unfair anyway." Or, "I'm having problems in my relationship because I'm a defective person and because other people are generally untrustworthy." Overall, research on the self-serving bias and depression suggests that the bias isn't completely flipped in people with depression, but the magnitude of the bias is less than in the general population; it's smaller.

Cultural Influences on Attribution

Research suggests that cultural values and norms affect the way people make attributions. In particular, differences in attribution style exist between individualist and collectivist cultures. People in individualist cultures place a high value on uniqueness and independence, believe in the importance of individual goals, and define themselves in terms of personal attributes. People in collectivist cultures, on the other hand, place a high value on conformity and interdependence, believe in the importance of group goals, and define themselves in terms of their membership in groups. North American and Western European cultures tend to be individualistic, while Asian, Latin American, and African cultures tend to be collectivist.

People in collectivist cultures tend to be less susceptible to the fundamental attribution error than people in individualist cultures. People from collectivist cultures are more likely to believe that a person's behavior is due to situational demands rather than to personal attributes. People from collectivist cultures are also less susceptible to the self-serving bias.