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Encyclopedia of Communication Theory

Attribution Theory

To make sense of the world, people develop explanations about what is happening and why people are acting certain ways. When people are interacting with others, communication decisions are influenced by the implicit theories, or attributions, of the participants. Ineffective communication may be partly a consequence of the parties' idiosyncratic inferences and incompatible interpretations. Attribution theory provides a framework for understanding how people explain their own and others' behavior. This entry reviews the attribution process and examines the importance of attributions for determining success or failure, for managing conflict in interpersonal relationships, and for determining people's stigmatizing attitudes and discriminatory behaviors. It ends with information about the fundamental attribution error and the self-perception theory.

An important basis of attribution theory is that people behave the way they do for a reason. In other words, people have reasons for developing their impressions of others. Fritz Heider, one of the first researchers to write about the attribution process, was interested in how one person develops an impression of another. These impressions, he argued, are developed through a three-step process: (1) observation of behavior, (2) determination of whether the behavior is deliberate, and (3) categorization of the behavior as internally or externally motivated.

Attribution Process

When a person encounters someone, how he or she interacts with that person is, in part, determined by his or her interpretation of the other person's behavior. Internal attributions, which are also called *dispositional* attributions, occur when an observer infers that another's behavior was caused by something about the person, such as personality, attitude, or upbringing. External attributions, or *situational* attributions, occur when the observer ascribes the cause of the behavior to the situation or outside circumstances. For example, Daniel's roommate Tom rushes into the house, slams the door, throws his books on the table, and runs upstairs. Tom does not say a word to Daniel, and Daniel wonders about what is happening. Daniel can develop different explanations for Tom's behavior. If he attributes Tom's behavior to an internal factor, he might think that Tom is rude and inconsiderate. If he attributes Tom's behavior to external factors, he might conclude that Tom is late for an appointment and rushing to get things done. Daniel's attributions will affect how he interacts with Tom when they next encounter each other. Based on Daniel's internal attribution, he may ignore Tom when Tom comes down the stairs. However, if Daniel selects an external attribution, then when Tom walks down the stairs, Daniel may ask whether Tom needs anything. Daniel's attribution affects his actions, and his actions can affect how the roommates manage their interaction and relationship.

Before Daniel decides whether to attribute Tom's behavior to dispositional or to situational factors, he needs to examine a few other factors. Harold Kelley, a social psychologist specializing in personal relationships, proposed that there are three general guidelines that influence people's attributions: consensus, consistency, and distinctiveness.

Consensus describes how other people, in the same circumstances, would behave. If all Daniel's roommates tend to rush into the house and run upstairs, then Tom's behavior is likely determined by the situation, leading Daniel to make an external attribution. If Tom is the only one who behaves this way, Daniel is more likely to make an internal attribution.

Consistency refers to whether the person being observed behaves the same way, in the same

situation, over time. If every time Tom entered the house he behaved this way, Daniel would likely make an internal attribution. However, if this was an unusual way for Tom to behave, Daniel would likely look for an external explanation.

Distinctiveness refers to the variations in the observed person's behavior across situations. If, for example, Tom rushed through the door at work and ran through the hallways at school, his behavior on entering his house would not be distinct from his normal behavior. In that case, Daniel would likely attribute it to internal, dispositional causes. Conversely, if in most situations, Tom was mellow and slow moving, Daniel might attribute his rushing behavior to external, situational causes.

Although each of these three factors is important for attributing cause to either internal or external factors, when an observer can combine these factors, patterns can emerge. For example, when a person behaves a certain way over time and across situations, but others do not behave the same way, people tend to make dispositional attributions (That's just the way she is). However, when someone's behavior is not typical of that person or expected in the situation, observers have a difficult time attributing cause to the person or the situation. In these cases, the observer tends to assume that something peculiar is happening (I don't know what's going on; something must be wrong).

In addition to the three factors Kelley originally identified, two more guidelines influence whether an observer makes an internal or external attribution. If a person violates a *social norm,* behavior that is typical or expected for a situation, others tend to make internal attributions. Additionally, in the absence of situational cues, observers tend to make dispositional attributions.

Attribution theory provides a framework for understanding both our own and others' behaviors. It provides guidelines for interpreting actions, so it is useful for examining motivations for achievement and conflict in interpersonal relationships. This theory has also been used to examine stigmatizing behavior and discrimination.

Attribution and Achievement

Bernard Weiner extended attribution theory to how people explain their own and others' success and failure. He contends that interpretations of achievement can be explained with three dimensions of behavior: *locus of control* (Whose fault is it?), *stability* (Is it ongoing?), and *controllability* (Can I change it?). First, a person's success or failure is attributable to either internal factors (I am a smart person) or to external factors (My computer crashed). Second, the cause of the success or failure can be either stable (It's always going to be like this) or unstable (This is a one-time event). Finally, the event may be perceived as controllable (I can change this if I want to) or uncontrollable (Nothing I do can change this situation).

These three dimensions, together, create eight scenarios that people use to explain their own achievements and disappointments:

1. Internal-stable-uncontrollable (I'm not very smart)
2. Internal-stable-controllable (I always wait until the last minute)
3. Internal-unstable-uncontrollable (I felt ill)
4. Internal-unstable-controllable (I forgot about the assignment)
5. External-stable-uncontrollable (The teacher's expectations are unrealistic)
6. External-stable-controllable (The teacher hates me)

7. External-unstable-uncontrollable (I was in a car accident)
8. External-unstable-controllable (The dog ate my homework)

Understanding how to motivate students to achieve academically requires an understanding of their attributions. People's explanations for their own success or failure will help determine how hard they work in similar situations. Students who perceive that their successes and failures are controllable are more likely to continue to work hard academically. When people perceive that they have no control over a situation, believe that the situation is permanent, and think that the outcomes are due to their own characteristics, they are likely to stop working and may exhibit signs of *learned helplessness.*

Attributions and Interpersonal Conflict

People tend to choose conflict styles based on their attributions about their partner's intent to cooperate, the locus of responsibility for the conflict, and the stability of the conflict. Their attributions about these issues influence the strategies they adopt; specifically, they tend to adopt *conflict management strategies* they believe are congruent with their partner's projected responses. The attribution process causes people to see others as more competitive, more responsible for the conflict, and more stable and traitlike than they perceive themselves to be. They underestimate the role of unstable situation factors and overestimate the extent to which behavior is caused by stable personality traits. The bias in this process often discourages *integrative* modes of conflict resolution. The choice of conflict strategies affects the likelihood of conflict resolution and the degree of satisfaction in the relationship.

Attributions and Stigmatizing Behavior

Attribution theory is an important framework for understanding why people endorse *stigmatizing* attitudes and engage in discriminatory behaviors. A person's attributions about the cause and controllability of another's illness or situation can lead to emotional reactions that affect their willingness to help and their likelihood of punishing the other. If you assume that another person's difficult situation is that person's fault and could have been prevented, you may be less likely to offer assistance and more likely to react with anger. For example, Sue is an office manager and Terry is a new employee. If Sue thinks that Terry's unorthodox and unpredictable behavior is caused by injuries he suffered when he was a child, she may be tolerant and understanding. If, however, Sue thinks Terry's unorthodox behavior is the result of years of illegal drug use, she may be more likely to get angry with him and take punitive actions. People's attributions about the causes of another's illness can lead to prejudice and discrimination.

Fundamental Attribution Error

The *fundamental attribution error* is a common attribution error in which people overemphasize personality or dispositional (internal) causes of others' negative behavior or bad outcomes and underestimate the situational (external) factors. When interpreting another's positive actions or outcomes, however, people overemphasize the situational causes and underestimate the dispositional causes. For example, Alicia is a server in a restaurant, and one of her coworkers, Julia, just got a really big tip. Alicia thinks to herself, "Wow, Julia keeps getting lucky because the hostess keeps giving her the good customers." An hour later, another coworker complains that he got a bad tip, and Alicia thinks, "Well, if you weren't such a crappy server, you would get good tips." Alicia just committed the fundamental attribution error. She assumed that

when something bad happened to one coworker, it was the coworker's fault and that when something good happened to another coworker, it was the situation that brought about the positive result.

Conversely, the *self-serving bias* (or *actor-observer bias)* is an error in which individuals attribute their own success and failure to different factors. One's own success and positive outcomes are attributed to internal, dispositional characteristics whereas one's failures or negative outcomes are ascribed to external, situational causes. To continue the restaurant example, Alicia gets a really big tip and thinks, "I worked really hard for that group and gave great service," but when another group leaves a bad tip, she thinks, "They are cheapskates."

In sum, attribution errors work in the following ways:

- When good things happen to me, I deserve it *(I worked hard* or *I am a special person).*
- When good things happen to you, you don't deserve it *(the teacher likes you* or *you just got lucky).*
- When bad things happen to me, it's not my fault *(the teacher doesn't like me* or *he started it).*
- When bad things happen to you, it's your fault *(you should work harder* or *you should be more careful).*

Self-Perception Theory

Daryl Bem's self-perception theory, like attribution theory, relies on internal and external attributions to explain behavior. However, instead of observing others, we use the same process to interpret our own behavior. Bem argues that we come to know our own thoughts and beliefs by observing our actions and interpreting what caused our behaviors. Our explanation for our behavior is determined by the presence or absence of situational cues. For example, if Debbie earns $100 campaigning for 3 hours for a politician, she can attribute her behavior to external causes ("I did it for the money"). If, however, Debbie earns only $5 for her 3 hours of campaigning, she will likely attribute her behavior to internal causes ("I did it because I like the candidate"). Self-perception theory is important in persuasion research because people who are internally motivated are more likely to maintain behaviors.

- attribution
- fundamental attribution error
- attribution theory
- attribution processes
- self-perception theory
- observer
- tipping

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http://dx.doi.org/10.4135/9781412959384.n23
See also

- Cognitive Theories
- Conflict Communication Theories
- Interpersonal Communication Theories
- Learning and Communication

- [Persuasion and Social Influence Theories](#)

Further Readings

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