

08 - Attribution

Attribution

© SPMM Course 3. Interpersonal issues Attribution This is the process by which we make judgments about causes of behaviour. Heider (1958) was the first to propose a psychological theory of attribution - he called this "naïve" or "commonsense" psychology. In his view, people act like amateur scientists, trying to understand other people's behaviours by piecing together information until they arrive at a reasonable explanation or cause. During this process, we make a distinction between intentional vs. unintentional behaviours in others and make internal vs. external attribution of the cause of the observed behaviour. We tend to attribute behaviours to events that co-vary with those behaviours over time. e.g. if A is an event that occurs when the behaviour B is observed, then we often assume A causes B (Kelly's co-variation model). When making such covariant related observations, three elements are important to ensure validity of the inference. Consider a student X, who arrives late for a physiology lecture. Another student wants to infer the cause behind this. To make an appropriate attribution, he/she needs to consider

1. Consensus: Does everyone come late or is it only student X?
2. Distinctiveness: Does student X come late to other classes too?
3. Consistency: Does student X come late to physiology lecture every time? Consistency is most used in attribution; consensus is least used. Generally speaking if consensus is low, dispositional attribution is made (student X has a problem). If consistency is low, situational attribution is made (something must have happened to him today, perhaps, he missed his train). If distinctiveness is high, stimulus or target is considered to be at fault (the physiology class is so boring that X always comes late). Weiner developed a systematic attributional theory. Accordingly there are 3 dimensions identified in the process of attributions
4. Locus: external/internal
5. Stability: transient/permanent
6. Controllability: controllable/uncontrollable External stable and uncontrollable cause attributed to a negative event generates a sense of failure with anger.

© SPMM Course Some consistent errors (attribution bias) are noted in making attributions.

□ First impression effect: (primacy effect). Generally first impressions on people count more unless specific instruction is given to attend or repeatedly observe. A positive first impression is more likely to change than a negative first impression. Primacy is more important in strangers; recency effect plays more in evaluating friends and others who will come into repeated contacts. □ Halo effect is the tendency to perceive other persons as wholly good or bad based on few observed traits (e.g. physical attractiveness); i.e. making inferences about people using limited, superficial

information. Thus a person's positive or negative traits "spill over" from one area to influence the total perception of their personality. Investigators evaluating crime suspects are susceptible to halo effect (to be accurate - reversed halo effect or devil effect or association fallacy). For example, a policeman may conclude someone is guilty by association with attributes he has previously seen in other criminals. Mere similarity of a person to a suspect often causes the police to associate the innocent wrongly with a guilty act. Actor-observer effect: When one is involved as an agent in a specific behaviour then he/she attributes external causality to the behaviour. For the same behaviour, others who are merely observers without direct participation may invoke internal causality (intentional and dispositional). Just world hypothesis refers to the idea that 'I am a just person living in a just world; everyone here gets what they really deserve'. 'Bad things happen to bad people', leading to blaming-the-victim culture. Fundamental attribution error or correspondence bias: This refers to overestimating dispositional factors and not situational factors while attributing causes for other's behaviours. This allows a sense of predictability to be developed about the other person. It is more pronounced if the attributed behaviour is negative and undesirable. Self-serving bias (SSB): the actor observer effect is most pronounced when judging negative behaviours This may be absent or reversed for positive behaviours. Hence such self-serving bias offers selfenhancement and defense. In depression, an exception to SSB is seen - The patient takes excessive selfblame for personal failures. False consensus effect and illusion of in group homogeneity: This refers to the tendency to view other person's behaviour to be representative of a group's behaviour (culture or racial stereotypes are thus formed).

Revision #1

Created 2026-01-04 20:01:57 UTC by Omar Ayman

Updated 2026-01-04 20:01:57 UTC by Omar Ayman