

ATTRIBUTION THEORY¹

Attribution and its theory are connected to a situation where two individuals (the actor and observer) may have a difference of opinion or perception regarding the cause or consequence of events or behaviour. The actor and observer each have a perception of their own behavior and its causal origins. Studies indicate that the actor is remarkably inclined to measure his/her own behaviour in terms of task difficulty or as situational in nature, while the observer attributes the actor's behaviour in terms of ability or disposition.² There are powerful cognitive forces that compel both the actor and observer to make these respective situational and dispositional attributions.

ATTRIBUTION - AN OVERVIEW

The common definition of attribution is the way people understand and explain conduct or events. Kelley's 1973 classic definition of attribution theory is as follows:

“Attribution theory is a theory about how people make causal explanations, about how they answer questions beginning with ‘why?’... In all such instances, the questions concern the causes of observed behaviour and the answers of interest are those given by the man in the street.”³

Fritz Heider is considered to be the first attribution theorist. His investigation has been the foundation for subsequent hypotheses and investigations.⁴ It focused on why we attribute people's behaviour to their disposition in certain situations, and in other situations why we attribute their behaviour to external circumstances.

In everyday social interactions we frequently feel that our behaviour has been misunderstood or misinterpreted, and that others have perceived certain aspects of our character and motivation inaccurately.⁵ We believe that we know ourselves better than anyone else and that no one else really has accurate insight into our character, our behaviour or our motivation. Research indicates that in social interactions the observer is consistently more likely to make *dispositional* rather than *situational* attributions for the actor's behaviour and event outcomes. When accounting for their own behaviour however, observers tend to attribute a situational rationale for themselves.

¹ Knickle, K, excerpt from unpublished paper, “The Actor-Observer Loop: The Effects of Inflammatory Language on Existing Dispositional Attributions in Escalated Conflict” Osgoode Hall, York University, 2006

² Edward E. Jones, “The Actor and the Observer: Divergent Perceptions of the Causes of Behaviour,” Attribution: Perceiving the Causes of Behaviour, ed. Edward E. Jones (Morristown, NJ: General Learning Press, 1972) 80.

³ Shi-xu, “Attributional Explanation: Unraveling Structural and Qualitative Complexities,” Journal of Language and Social Psychology 1999: 362.

⁴ Allred, Keith G. “Anger and Retaliation in Conflict,” The Handbook of Conflict Resolution: Theory and Practice, ed. Morton Deutsch and Peter T. Coleman (San Francisco, CA: Jossey-Bass, 2000) 238.

⁵ Emily Pronin, “You Don't Know Me, But I Know You: The Illusion of Asymmetric Insight,” Journal of Personality and Social Psychology 2001: 639.

“There is a pervasive tendency for actors to attribute their actions to situational requirements, whereas observers tend to attribute the same actions to stable personal dispositions.”⁶

The difference between actor versus observer judgment of an action is based on incompatible contextual data that prompts differing attributions of the other.⁷ Cause and effect data directly influence the attribution process. Cause data is comprised of environmental data, (e.g. incentive or task difficulty) and intention data is action the actor intended and how hard he was working to achieve it. Effect data is broken into three broad type categories: action taken, action outcome (success or failure, reaction of the recipient) and the actor’s experience (embarrassment, anger etc.)

Harold E. Kelley formulated the concept of three factors observers assess before assigning situational or dispositional attributions to the actor’s behaviour in given circumstances: consensus information (is this person’s conduct unique in this particular situation or would everyone respond in the same way?), distinctiveness information (is it only in certain circumstances that this person behaves this way?) and consistency information (is this facet of behaviour predictable in most situations?)⁸

A general summary of social psychologists’ exploration of this tendency indicates that in overlooking relevant situational influences, observers may rely unconsciously on implicit personality theories and overly general stereotypes to make hasty, inaccurate and overconfident assessments and inferences of traits and behaviour patterns. Furthermore, the evidence suggests that people are confident that their dispositional assessments and attributions of others are more accurate than their peer’s assessment of them. This tendency has been identified as *naïve realism*.⁹

Generally speaking, both self assessment and assessment of others can be biased. Extensive research has shown that self- assessment tends to be indulgent and that people are more aware of this inclination in others than themselves. This overestimation, coupled with a lack of awareness of personal bias cultivates a sense that one’s self knowledge and insight exceeds that of one’s peers (particularly in the area of their shortcomings).

The following two hypotheses were tested and provided preliminary yet encouraging evidence to support these beliefs in relation to interpersonal and intrapersonal knowledge:

- 1) People think that they know others better than others know them (*interpersonal* knowledge hypothesis).
- 2) People think that they know themselves better than others know themselves (*intrapersonal* knowledge hypothesis).¹⁰

⁶ Edward E. Jones, “The Actor and the Observer: Divergent Perceptions of the Causes of Behaviour,” Attribution: Perceiving the Causes of Behaviour, ed. Edward E. Jones (Morristown, NJ: General Learning Press, 1972) 80.

⁷ Jones 85.

⁸ Keith G. Allred, “Anger and Retaliation in Conflict,” The Handbook of Conflict Resolution: Theory and Practice, Ed. Morton Deutsch and Peter T. Coleman (San Francisco, CA: Jossey-Bass, 2000) 240.

⁹ Emily Pronin, “You Don’t Know Me, But I Know You: The Illusion of Asymmetric Insight,” Journal of Personality and Social Psychology 2001: 640.

¹⁰ Pronin 641.