

Attribution theorists and biased judgements



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Social psychologists have studied attribution theories for several decades, and their research has produced many interesting insights. The process of assigning a cause to ones own behaviour, or that of other's can be defined as attribution (Hogg, 2005). Considering that attribution is complex, many theories have been constructed to demonstrate its performance. This essay will examine the evidence that biased layperson's judgements of others are inevitable by, first of all, focusing on explaining three classic theories of attribution, then paying particular attention to biases in attribution in order to fully answer the question under investigation.

Attribution theory is concerned with how individuals make sense of their environment and how this affects their cognition and behavior (x). There exist three classic views on attribution that continue to be especially influential. The first of these classic theories is Fritz Heider's (1958) theory of naive psychology where the layperson is viewed as a naive scientist who links observable behaviour to unobservable causes. Also Heider made a significant distinction between internal (dispositional) and external (situational) attributions. It was also underlined that individuals look for causes of others' behaviours in order to find out their motives and give some sense of control in their lives (Hewstone, 1990). Related to Heider's theory is Jones and Davis' (1965) theory of correspondent inference which is concerned with how people use information about other's behaviour and its effects in order to find out their underlying dispositions and personality traits. Of particular interest is behaviour that is freely chosen, produces non-common effects (effects produced by a particular cause that could not be produced by any other apparent cause), and is low in social desirability. The

last and the best known theory of attribution is Kelley's (1967) covariation model where Kelley believes that people act like scientists when they try to discover the causes of behaviour. People are interested whether others' behaviour stems from internal (motives, traits) or external (social, physical world) causes, or both of them at the same time. In order to answer this question, individuals focus on three types of information that can be defined as consistence, distinctiveness and consensus (Baron, Branscombe, Byrne, 2006).

Heider (1958), Davis and Jones (1965) together with Kelley (1967) have acknowledged that attribution is subject to many potential sources of bias. It has been noted that a bias occurs if the social perceiver systematically distorts (overestimates or underestimates) a procedure that is known to be correct (Fiske and Taylor, 1984). People constantly use cognitive shortcuts that are called heuristics in order to make attributions. Apart from being not always objectively correct, biases in attribution are entirely satisfactory and adaptive characteristics of everyday social perception (Ross, 1977).

In terms of studying how people interpret their social worlds, social psychologists have identified 3 general biases that often affect people's attributions and explanations. One of the most important of these biases is the fundamental attribution error, that is the tendency to explain others' actions as stemming from dispositional causes even when situational causes are at present. Social psychologists have conducted numerous studies to find out the reasons that determine the occurrence of these biases (Robins et al, 1996), though the issue is still to some extent uncertain. One possibility is that when people observe another persons' behaviour, they tend to focus on

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his or her actions and the situational behaviour tends to fade away in the background. Another explanation is that people notice such situational causes but give them insufficient weight in their attributions.

An experiment conducted by Amabile, Ross and Steinmetz (2000) illustrates fundamental attribution error. In this experiment they set up a 'quiz show' design in which they randomly assigned participants to one of two roles. First was a questioner whose task it was to prepare difficult questions for a contestant, and second was a contestant whose task it was to answer the questions prepared by the questioner. An observer watched the 'quiz show' and then estimated the questioner's and the contestant's general knowledge. They found that observers thought that the questioners were far more knowledgeable than the contestants. However, everyone was assigned to conditions randomly, so it was highly unlikely that one group was more clever than the other. The most interesting thing is that observers did know that participants were randomly assigned to their roles, yet they failed to consider the impact of that knowledge in making their judgement.

Fundamental attribution error is not limited only to quiz shows, its implications are far more encompassing. For example, people's common reaction to convicted criminals are that they are terrible human beings and that is why they committed a crime. However, there can be many factors other than personal characteristics that explain why a person commits a crime. These include lack of job opportunities, the lack of positive role models in the family and neighborhood, growing up in a dysfunctional family and many others (Aronson, 2003). In addition to this, Nisbett and Ross (1980) argued that the English language allows easy description of action

and actor in the same terms but it gets more complicated when using the same terms in order to describe the situation. For example, it is possible to talk about honest and generous person or honest and generous action but not a honest and generous situation. This demonstrates that linguistic factors have an important role in making attributions. People are certainly unaware of this phenomena because this is the way they have been taught from childhood and is something that happens without conscious thought.

An equally common bias in social judgement is the actor-observer effect, in other words, the self-other effect that is really an extension of the fundamental attribution error. The actor-observer effect refers to the tendency for people to attribute others' behaviour to dispositional factors and their own behaviour to situational factors (Jones & Nisbett, 1972). For example, in general, students tend to explain their poor performance in exams in terms of the difficulty of the test items whereas they tend to explain others' poor performance in terms of their ability and personality. There exist several explanations for actor-observer effect. Firstly, according to Jones et al (1972), the informational factors are very important as the actors have access to a much wider range of information about the factors leading to their own actions. For example, behaviour that can be expressed in a party. Secondly, actors and observers have different perspectives. The actor's attention is usually focused on the environment. On the other hand, the observer's attention is usually focused on the actor and his or her behaviour rather than the background, which is why the observer may be unaware of why the actor behaved like this. Evidence for this explanation comes from Storm's (1972) experiment where he had two subjects engaged

in a conversation while two observers watched it, and were instructed to monitor the behaviours of one or the other actors. Results showed that the actors were more likely to explain their behaviour in terms of the situation and the observers in terms of personality dispositions. However, this was not the only thing they found. Storm (1972) also demonstrated that when the participants were shown a video tape of their conversation from the same angle as they saw it, actor-observer bias had occurred. On the contrary, when the video tape was shown from the reverse angle, the actors saw themselves from the observer's point of view and tended to attribute their behaviour in terms of dispositional factors. This is a clear example of how biases are inevitable in everyday life. In order to avoid biases, one has to see other's point of view but that is not an easy task to accomplish.

One more bias can be identified in relation to attributions for success and failure. The self-serving bias refers to a tendency for people to attribute internally and take credit for their successes, the self-enhancing bias, or attribute externally and deny the responsibility for their failures, the self-protecting bias. For instance, gamblers perceive their successes as based on their skill and their failures as unlucky chances (Gilovich, 1983). Kingdom (1967) provided an example of self-serving bias from the political world. He interviewed American politicians five months after the general election and asked them to describe the factors that led to their victories or defeats. Results indicated that the politicians tended to attribute successes to internal factors such as hard work, personality and reputation. On the other hand, they tended to attribute their failures to external factors, for example, lack of money, the familiar name of their opponent and state trends. It is

important to understand the reasons why people engage in biases. Miller and Ross (1979) suggested that the self-enhancing bias could be explained in relation to the cognition model. People in general expect to succeed rather than fail and, therefore, are more likely to make self-attributions for expected than unexpected outcomes. For example, couples estimate their contribution to housework differently. Individuals are more likely to keep track of every job they do at home such as dusting or washing the dishes but when it comes to estimating the partner's contribution, not all of their work is successfully remembered. This effect could be due to differential attention and memory (Aronson, 2003). However, the cognitive perspective alone cannot explain all the examples of self-serving biases. Another explanation for self-serving biases is that people are motivated to engage themselves in attributions in order to protect their self-esteem (Greenberg, 1982). It is evident from the experiments of Weary (1999) that self-serving bias increases when the person is highly involved in that particular behaviour and when other people are watching. Self-serving bias occurs when an individual's self is threatened or when that individual has an opportunity to achieve and maintain a positive image of the self.

To conclude, people do make judgements very quickly based on minimal information. As it has been demonstrated above, the reasons humans make biases seem varied and complex and different research reflects this (Storm, 1972; Ross et al, 1979; Kingdom, 1967; Amabile et al, 2000; Jones et al, 1972). Every day people try to justify themselves and their behaviour with the help of biases such as fundamental attribution error, actor-observer effect and self-serving bias. By using heuristics, individuals interpret and

distort the meaning of their actions and the world around them, and make attributions that are very adaptive but not always correct. The situations people find themselves in, the cues they face and frustrations they may experience, also all appear to have the ability to inflame an aggressive response. Attribution is an important part of human existence and, although much has been achieved to aid the understanding of this behaviour, it is for now still reasonable to conclude that attribution is indeed an inevitable and inescapable part of our lives.