

Describe and
evaluate studies
relating to attribution
of causality



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In this essay I will be looking at four theories relating to attribution of causality. Jones (1977) defined attribution as 'the process by which people use available information to make influences about the causes of particular behaviour'. Internal or 'dispositional attribution' (within the person e. g. personality) and external or 'situational attribution' (the environment) factors are often used when explaining a person's behaviour. (Cardwell, 1996).

When discussing the theories I will state the strengths and weaknesses of each and how each is related to attribution. Heider (1958) was the first to propose a theory on attribution known as the naive psychologist (Culatta, 2013). Here he proposed that people try to make sense of our own and others' behaviour by using their common sense (Cardwell, 1996). Heider initially discussed the distinction between situational and dispositional attribution (12Manage, 2014). Jones and Davis (1965) produced the correspondent inference theory.

Their research was on dispositional attributions only and did not consider situational attributions (Ray, 2011). They argued that a basis of inferring intention was made on the consequences exhibited in people's behaviour. The theory describes the circumstances in which distributional attributes are made to behaviour, which we perceive as deliberate. It states that in order for us to make correspondence inference, we need to examine five sources of information. (Mcleod, 2010). Ray, 2011 states that this theory is helpful when looking at motivations (Ray, 2011).

The theory has been criticised by Eiser (1983) as he believes that this model cannot be used for acts that are unintentional (psychology4a, 2006) and Schneier believes that the theory cannot be related to cases of terrorism as it's implied that the main motivation of the terrorist is death, however it could be a desperate measure for a different end (Ray, 2011). The main criticism made by Kelley (1972) is that situational factors have not been considered and may potentially account for the person's behaviour (psychology4a, 2006). Kelley (1972) went on to expand and develop the theories discussed.

He developed the co-variation model and then subsequently the causal schemata model (1973). The co-variation model was established to distinguish if a particular action could be attributed to internal or external factors (Mcleod, 2010). According to Kelley, we need to take into account three types of causal information when reaching an explanation (Sheppard, 2014). The first is consensus, which refers to other people's behaviour in the same situation, the second is consistency which refers to the behaviour of the person in the same situation and the third is distinctiveness, which is the way a person behaves to other stimuli (Cardwell, 1996).

This model does have some advantages over the correspondent inference theory as it is looking into three possible attributions (psychology4a, 2006). Garland et al (1975) criticises this theory by saying that in some cases when people are reaching an attribution they do so using personality and/or the situation in which the behaviour is occurring (Cardwell, 1996). Nisbett and Ross (1980) also criticised the theory by saying that although it may appear

that the covariation principle was used, the way in which the information was processed may be completely different (Sheppard, 2014).

Due to the criticisms of the covariation model, Kelley introduced the causal schemata model. Kelley defines causal schemata as ' general conceptions a person has about how certain kinds of causes interact to produce a specific kind of effect'. The theory was then further divided into multiple sufficient causes which mean that there can be many causes for the behaviour and any one will provide a sufficient explanation. The other is multiple necessary causes which mean two or more factors are necessary for behaviour attributes to be made (Cardwell, 1996).

Fielder (1982) criticised this theory by saying that the research in this area is very limiting and that the idea of schemata is too abstract (Sheppard, 2014). When people are processing information to make attributions they are not always using all of the information in a productive manner, which can lead to biases in the information processes. This is as a criticism of the causal schemata theory as Ross (1977) states that when explaining a person's behaviour we tend to make internal attributions even when external attributions are just as likely to help us reach an explanation (Cardwell, 1996).

To conclude, there have been many studies researching into how and why we make attributions. It seems that a single theory on its own is not enough to lead us to a conclusion of a person's behaviour. It can be very difficult to distinguish between external and internal factors as found by Nisbet et al (1973). He found that by rephrasing a sentence of an internal factor, it could

then become an external factor. There are many biases when making an attribution, which will distort the perception about a behaviour exhibited (Cardwell, 1996).