

Attribution theory analysis



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Attribution theory assumes that people try to determine why people do what they do. The theory deals with the information one uses in making casual inferences, and the way one deals with this information to answer a casual question. But how can this account to the usefulness of the theory? By knowing the reasons for various behaviours people can better predict future behaviours, and thus protect themselves from any unpleasant surprises (Brown, 1986). This search for reason behind behaviour allows people to attribute causes to behaviour. It focuses on situations that usually involve at least two people: one who is making a judgement about someone else's behaviour, and this someone else whose behaviour is being judged. When people try to attempt and find explanations for other people's behaviour they are said to be engaging in the processes of attribution (Gleitman, 1999).

Attribution helps individuals to understand and react to their social surroundings (Eiser & Pligt, 1988). It is important to study because attributions have implications for behaviour hereby emphasizing upon the usefulness of the theory itself. Three types of attribution theories will be discussed: theories that focus on antecedents of people's perception of the cause of events in their social environment; theories that are based on the assumption that people have preconceptions about causality leading to bias in their attribution; and finally, theories that concentrate on the consequences of attributions. Heider (1958), Jones and Davis (1965), and Kelley (1967) have provided the major theoretical contributions to attribution theory.

“ Attribution theory is usually traced to Fritz Heider and his attempts to describe and explain ‘ naive’ psychology” (Eiser & Pligt, 1988; p. 46).

Heider's major role in relation to attribution theory would be the division of potential sources of action into personal and environmental types (Hewstone M. et al., 2000). Heider believed that people act on basis of their beliefs. Upon inspection, people form beliefs or theories about what is occurring in order to understand, predict and control events that concern them. Heider assumes that individuals are motivated to see their social environment as predictable and hence, controllable, and that they apply the same kind of logic to the prediction of social events as to the prediction of physical events; they look for the necessary and sufficient conditions for such events to occur. (Eiser & Pligt, 1988).

In Heider's words, " Attributions in terms of impersonal and personal causes, and with the latter, in terms of intent, are everyday occurrences that determine much of our understanding of and to our surroundings" (Heider, 1985; p. 16). Heider stresses on the importance of the concept of internality, arguing that behaviour should only be attributed to personal causes if its outcome is seen to have been intended by the actor. " It seems that behaviour in particular has such salient properties it tends to engulf the total field rather than be confined to its proper position as a local stimulus whose interpretation requires the additional data of a surrounding field" (Heider, 1985; p. 54). This choice becomes clear if we try to imagine a social world where people do not attribute behaviour.

One of Heider's themes is that people engage in attributional analyses to discern the personal and relatively stable properties that underlie the variable behaviour of others (Eiser & Pligt, 1988). Heider's insights provided the blueprint for succeeding theories, making naïve psychology a

legitimate field of study in social psychology. These and other insights were systematized and expanded upon by Jones and Davis, and Kelley. Their contribution helped develop attribution into an explicit, hypothesis generating set of principles.

Jones and Davis developed Heider's (1958) ideas about the attribution of personal dispositions describing two major stages in the process. They assumed that when judging the causes of another person's deliberate behaviour, people first try to attribute it to an underlying intention, and then to the personal disposition that produced that intention. This process is known as 'correspondent inference' because dispositions and intentions are inferred in the actor that matches to the nature of the observed action. (Hewstone M. et al., 2000).

The next addition to attribution theory was Kelley's model. Kelley's analysis of the attribution process deals with the question of how individuals establish the validity of their own or of another person's impression of a stimulus. The postulation is that the observation of co variation of conditions and effects leads to attributions. The three aspects that determine the observation of co variation are distinctiveness, consensus and consistency (Eiser & Pligt, 1988). Kelly's model is based on a statistical technique, the analysis of variance (ANOVA), which tests changes in a dependant variable (the effect) by varying independent variables (the conditions). (Hew stone M. et al., 2000)

The three theories outlined above – those of Heider, Jones and Davis, and Kelley – are generally regarded as the building blocks of future studies.

Dealing with topics such as mediation between stimulus and response; active and constructive casual interpretation; and the perspective of the naive scientist. Most importantly, all share a concern with commonsense explanations and responses to the question why. These studies on attribution theories, however the significance, no longer dominate basic research as they used to. It is no overstatement that few applied problems have escaped analysis from perspective of attribution theory.

“ A key element in understanding the importance accorded attribution theory therefore lies in the extent to which it lends itself to the analysis of applied problems” (Hew stone M. et al., 2000; p. 186). Weiner (1995) claims that attribution theory has been so open to practical use because many pioneers in this area were dedicated to both theory development and theory utilization and they practiced basic research on issues that have lend themselves to application. It is important to be aware that the relation between the attribution models described earlier and applied research is not often straightforward. Three reasons for this circumstance can be seen. “ First, attribution principles, such as the covariance principle, are so pervasive that they no longer associated with a particular model and they often remain implicit in analyses of applied problems. Secondly, finding obtained in basic attribution research cannot simply be extrapolated to applied setting without further examination. Finally, applied work has generated ideas that are not found in the writing on attribution theory and has also led to slightly different perspectives on some existing attribution ideas” (Hew stone M. et al., 2000; p. 186).

The application of the attribution theory in two main points, motivation and clinical psychology, will be discussed. Weiner offers a classification of the different kinds of causes invoked by observers when explaining other people's success and failure. According to his model, there are three basic dimensions along which causes are perceived to vary. Following Heider's footsteps, he initially focused on the locus of causality but soon found that achievement evaluation was influenced more by effort than by ability despite the fact that both are internal causes. Weiner hereby assumed that effort and ability differ in casual stability thus showing that expectations relating to future performance are influenced by casual stability rather than casual locus. Due to certain problems Weiner suggested a third casual dimension, which he labelled controllability. " Thus, effort and ability differ not only in stability but also in controllability and either dimension may be responsible for their differential evaluation. As it turns out controllability is the mediator of reward and punishment. Weiner's three-dimensional scheme (locus x stability x controllability) became the foundation for general theory of motivation and emotion." (Hew stone M. et al., 2000; p. 188). According to him it makes a difference which category of cause a given effect is attributed to.

One could apply this theory to Simpson's case. People who consider O. J. Simpson as guilty tend to search for a reason into why he might have committed such a crime. The cause is perceived as controllable hence he would be held liable for his actions. In contrast if the actions were judged as uncontrollable O. J. Simpson would be held less responsible seeing the outcome of the matter. Considering the second dimension causes may be

perceived as temporary or relatively stable. The stability dimension is directly related to expectations for future performances.

This analysis can be used to understand reactions towards Simpson. Attributing his crime to a stable cause should result in the expectation of similar crimes in the future. Such expectations then suggest severe punishment in hope of avoiding the punishing behaviour. Conversely, attributing O. J.'s crime to unstable causes gives rise to the belief that the action is improbable to occur again, thereby reducing the need for severe punishment. (S. Graham et al., 1997)

Another case study to take notice of is that of Provencher (2000) where attributions of causality, responsibility and blame for negative symptom behaviours in caregivers of a person with schizophrenia is observed. Within this study three types of attributions for positive and negative symptom behaviours were assessed; examining what predicts these attributions and how they are related to each other. “ Social psychological studies show that people attribute cause, responsibility and blame differently. Casual attribution corresponds to the factors that produce an event, responsibility attribution implies a judgement regarding an individual's accountability for the event and blame attribution refers to an evaluative judgement concerning the implicated individual's liability for censure” (Provencher & Fincham, 2000; p. 899). This study is particularly interesting because it is the first to examine the three types of attributions for symptom behaviours in caregivers of persons with schizophrenia Specific patterns of responsibility dimensions emerged for positive and negative symptom behaviours. The findings provide some support for the proposal that caregivers tend to

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engage in differential attributional processes for positive and negative symptom behaviours. (Provencher & Fincham, 2000)

Attributional approaches represent a diverse and pioneering area of research, and the study of attributions has helped us to understand the different kinds of feelings and behaviours in a wide variety of context. Inclinations for certain attributions do play a vital role in many decisions ranging from individual decisions to social policy issues. Attribution theory starts from a concern with casual explanations and postulates ways in which information must be weighted and compared in order to make such explanations possible hereby reflecting upon the usefulness of the theory itself.