Analysis of attribution theory

Attribution theory was developed overtime from the theories of Fritz Heider, Edward Jones, Keith Davis, and Harold Kelley. All were social psychologists. Edward ' Ned' Jones was born August 11, 1926 in Buffalo, NY. He received his doctorate degree from Harvard University in 1953. He taught at Duke University in the psychology department and was chair of the department from 1970-73. He was on both the National Science Foundation and National Institute of Mental Health's advisory boards. He has written several books including Foundations of Social Psychology.

3. Institution(s) with which identified:

Harold Kelley was at the University of California and most of his research involving attribution theory was funded by the National Science Foundation. Edward Jones spent his entire career at the Duke University.

4. Purpose of the theory:

Attribution theory is about how people make causal explanations; about how they answer questions beginning with " why?" The theory deals with the information they use in making causal inferences, and with what they do with this information to answer causal questions. The theory developed within social psychology as a means of dealing with questions of social perception. For instance, if a person is aggressively competitive in his/her behavior, is s/he this kind of person, or is s/he reacting to situational pressures. If a person fails a test, does s/he have low ability, or is the test difficult? In both examples, the questions concern the causes of observed behavior and the answers of interest are those given by the man on the street. This is why Heider refers to attribution theory as " naÃ¯ve"

psychology. Attribution theory describes the processes of explaining events and the behavioral and emotional consequences of those explanations.

5. Approximate year of origin:

Heider first wrote about attribution theory in his book The Psychology of Interpersonal Relationships (1958) which played a central role in the origination and definition of attribution theory. Jones and Davis' systematic hypotheses about the perception of intention was published in 1965 in the essay " From Acts to Dispositions." Kelley published " Attribution in Social Psychology" in 1967.

6. Circumstances that led to model development: In the 1970s the field of social psychology was dominated by attribution theorists and researchers. " Attribution theory came to rival cognitive dissonance as one of the most imperialistic theories in social psychology. Attribution theory was seen as relevant to the study of person perception, event perception, attitude change, the acquisition of self-knowledge, therapeutic interventions, and much more" (Ross and Fletcher, 1986). Attribution theory emerged from Heider's (1958) " naÃ¯ve" or " lay" psychology and subsequent reformulations by Jones and Davis (1965) and Kelley (1967). Heider postulated a set of rules of inference by which the ordinary person might attribute responsibility to another person (an " actor") for an action. Heider distinguished between internal and external attributions, arguing that both personal forces and environmental factors operate on the " actor," and the balance of these determines the attribution of responsibility (Lewis and Daltroy, 1990). Kelley (1967) advanced Heider's theory by adding

hypotheses about the factors that affect the formation of attributions: consistency, distinctiveness, and consensus.

7. Key terms:

1. Attributions – the causes individuals generate to make sense of their world.

2. Consistency – the degree to which the actor performs that same behavior toward an object on different occasions.

3. Distinctiveness – the degree to which the actor performs different behaviors with different objects.

4. Consensus – the degree to which other actors perform the same behavior with the same object.

8. Description of Attribution Theory:

Heider's " Naive" Psychology: Heider believe that people act on the basis of their beliefs. Therefore, beliefs must be taken into account if psychologists were to account for human behavior. This would be true whether the beliefs were valid or not. Heider also suggested that you could learn a great deal from commonsense psychology. He stressed the importance of taking the ordinary person's explanations and understanding of events and behaviors seriously.

Correspondent Inference Theory: Jones & Davis described how an " alert perceiver" might infer another's intentions and personal dispositions (personality traits, attitudes, etc.) from his or her behavior. Perceivers make correspondent inferences when they infer another's personal dispositions

directly from behavior; for example, perceivers may infer a disposition of kindness from a kindly act. Inferences are correspondent when the behavior and the disposition can be assigned similar labels (e. g. kind).

Kelley's Model of Attribution Theory: Kelley's theory is not limited to interpersonal perception. His theory concerns the subjective experience of attributional validity. He asks the question: " How do individuals establish the validity of their own or of another person's impression of an object?"

Kelley suggested that perceivers examine three different kinds of information in their efforts to establish validity (Ross and Fletcher, 1985):

Consensus information – do all or only a few people respond to the stimulus in the same way as the target person?

Distinctiveness information – does the target person respond in the same way to other stimuli as well?

Consistency information – does the target person always respond in the same way to this stimulus?

Three combinations of this information:

High consensus, high distinctiveness, high consistency: The target person's judgment of the restaurant (it is a good restaurant) should be perceived as valid if the perceiver knows that 1) other people like the restaurant, 2) the target person seldom likes restaurants, and 3) the target person enjoys the restaurant every time he or she goes there. The restaurant is good.

Low consensus, low distinctiveness, high consistency: If a perceiver knows that 1) most people do not like the target person's restaurant, 2) the target person likes most restaurants and 3) the target person enjoys the restaurant each time s/he goes there. Target person's enjoyment at restaurant attributable to something about him/her (likes to eat out) not something unique about the restaurant.

Low consensus, high distinctiveness, low consistency: If a perceiver knows 1) few other people like the restaurant, 2) the target person seldom likes the restaurant, and 3) the target person disliked this restaurant in the past. More than likely the target person's liking this restaurant is attributable to the person liking the company or wine rather than the food.

9. Attributions and Health Education

Attribution theory can be applied to health education in 6 ways (Lewis and Daltroy, 1990):

development of therapeutic relationships between health care professionals and clients,

development of correct attributions,

alteration of incorrect attributions,

altering the focus of attributions,

attributing characteristics to the individual, and

maintenance of perceived personal effectiveness.

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