*IB Psychology*

Attribution errors

Definitions

What is attribution? Attribution theory argues that we do not observe traits, we observe behaviours and infer personal attributes which may have caused the behaviour. We talk about the dichotomy of situational and dispositional factors (Heider, 1958).

Jones & Davis (1965) proposed the **correspondence inference theory**. This is the tendency to take someone’s statement of opinion as a sign of what they believe. People tend to attribute to movie actors, especially to type cast ones, beliefs, attitudes, and even character traits. We see someone help a student that drops his lunch, and we assume that he is a kind person.

We are likely to make dispositional rather than situational attribution about an actor when the behaviour is intentional (deliberate or voluntary), uncommon, and low in social desirability. **The** **discounting principle** of attribution argues that individuals strategically minimize the possible multiple attribution situations into a single and alternative explanation for the event. We do this because we are cognitively conservative, and we like to “keep things simple.” In a sense, attribution theory is a **heuristic** - a short-cut for coming to a decision. Psychologists demonstrated that internal motives are discounted when external motives explain an event or the other way around. Therefore, a person is more likely to attribute an internal motive to an actor when no plausible external, alternative explanation for an action is salient. As such, it emphasizes individuals’ subjective experience of distributional validity of the causal inference and their tendency to discount one motive or the alternative other. **Actor-Observer divergence**: The "actor" tends to attribute cause to situational factors, whereas observers attribute the same actions to disposition.

Research on attribution

Seligman on has researched the attribution style for depressed patients using the Attributional Style Questionnaire (ASQ). He has found that the typical pattern is an internal, stable, and global attributional style for negative life events, and an external, unstable, and local attributional style for positive life events.

Suedfeld (2003) studied attribution styles in Holocaust survivors. Members of Holocaust survivor groups were asked to fill out a questionnaire which asked their views on the factors that had led to survival during the Holocaust. The results were compared with the responses of age-matched Jewish respondents who had spent the period of the Holocaust safe from Nazi persecution (mostly in North America) - that is, they were asked how they felt people survived the Holocaust. 91% of survivors but only 51% of controls cited external factors (e.g., luck, help from others), with the reverse pattern (71% vs. 34%) for internal factors such as psychological strength and determination.

In a study by Bibou-Nakou et al (1999) the role of attributions was examined. 200 primary school teachers were presented with four hypothetical class management situations and they were questioned as to their attributions in each case. There was a significant association between internal attributions and symptoms of burnout, suggesting that teachers who blame themselves for difficulties are more vulnerable to stress. An interesting study from the world of sport psychology was carried out b y Quaquebeke & Giessner (2010) in which they looked at fouls called by referees over the period of 7 years of UEFA cup, German Bundeliga seasons, and the last three FIFA cups. In each case, they found that foul perpetrators were on average taller than foul victims. They wanted to see if this was a case of attribution error affecting referees’ judgement. To do this, they carried out an experiment.

The online experiment was set up as a independent samples design. Participants saw a picture portraying two football players moving towards a ball in the middle of the picture. The ball was said to be lying still on the ground. The height of the two depicted players was randomly manipulated so that one player would always be bigger than the other. They told participants that the player on the left (in some pictures being the bigger and in others being the smaller player) would fall to the ground after the portrayed scene. We then asked the participants to indicate the reasons why. Possible reasons for falling to the ground were: (1) Foul, (2) Dive (3) Chance. Paralleling decisions in the field and in light of our theoretical rationale, we collapsed dive and chance decisions for our analyses into a “no foul” decision. The results were that participants called fouls more often when the player said to be lying on the ground after the portrayed scene was the respectively smaller one.

Attribution Errors

**1. Fundamental Attribution Error:** A tendency to overestimate the extent to which a person's behaviour is due to internal, dispositional factors and to underestimate the role of situational factors. One plausible reason for this error relates to the perceptual and cognitive salience of the actor as opposed to the situation: that is, observers focus their attention on actors, while the situational causes of the actor's behaviour are less salient and may be unknown. Ross et al (1977) asked observers to rate the general knowledge of questioners and answerers in a game show. The former were rated as superior.

**2.Self-Serving Bias:** Self-serving attributions are explanations for one's own successes that credit internal, dispositional factors and explanations for one's failures that blame external, situational factors. People tend to make attributions in line with "bad things happen to bad people" and "good things happen to good people" in order to protect their self esteem and prevent feeling vulnerable. We tend to take credit for our successes, identify an internal cause, and dissociate from our failures, blaming external factors. Johnson et al (1964) asked participants to teach arithmetic to two pupils. The "teacher" attributed improved performance to themselves but blamed pupils if they continued to do poorly. Lau & Russel (1980) found that American football coaches and players tend to credit their wins to internal factors and their failures to external factors.

**3.Defensive Attribution:** Defensive attributions are one type of self-serving attribution; they involve explanations for actions or outcomes that are made to avoid feelings of vulnerability and mortality. Unrealistic optimism is a form of defensive attribution in which people think that positive events are more likely to happen to them than to their peers, and that negative events are less likely to happen to them than to their peers. The greater the consequence of an action, the more that attribution will be dispositional rather than situational. Walster (1966) described a car accident and asked participants to rate the car owner's responsibility. The more serious the consequences of the accident, the more responsibility the owner was assigned. This is often referred to the **Just World Hypothesis** (Lerner, 1977) .

Cross-cultural research

Cross cultural research has shown that collectivist cultures tend to engage more in **modesty bias** - that is, they attribute failure to dispositional factors and successes to situational factors. However, some research is now indicating that this may be changing. Fahr, Dobbins & Cheng (1991) examining self-reports of 982 Chinese workers in Taiwan found that Chinese employees rated their job performance less favorably than did their supervisors. This modesty bias occurred relatively uniformly across gender, various educational levels, and age groups. These results are contrary to the typically reported U.S. finding that self-ratings of performance are more lenient than are supervisory ratings. The findings suggest that culture plays a critical role in shaping workers' perceptions of their own work performance.

Barron & Sackett (2008) found that Western managers typically rate their performance higher than their bosses, peers, or subordinates do. In examining data from six Asian countries, Japanese managers were found to rate themselves lower than others in their organization do. This modesty bias, however, varies considerably among Asian countries; in other countries, including India and China, self-inflation was more comparable to typical Western findings. Bond, Leung & Wan (1982) looked for a possible explanation as to why modesty bias exists in collectivist cultures. It is argued that a person in Chinese societies who makes self-effacing attributions for his performance should be better liked because his self-effacing attributions support cultural norms whose function is to maintain harmonious interpersonal relationships. To test this hypothesis, Chinese participants in the experiment watched two confederates working on an intellectual task. These confederates were either competent or incompetent and subsequently made either self-effacing or self-enhancing attributions for their performance. Participants then rated them on likability, competence, and anxiety. Results indicated that a self-effacing confederate was better liked but rated as less competent than a self-enhancing confederate. Though in the United States competent persons are better liked, such a finding was not replicated in the present study. Incompetent performers who made self-enhancing attributions were perceived as more anxious than performers in the other conditions.