5.2 Bias in attribution

WHAT IS ATTRIBUTION BIAS?

Social psychologists have found that attributional decisions about one's own and others' behaviour are not always made in a logical and objective manner (as some 'normative' theories of attribution suggest) but may become distorted or biased since:

1. People are 'cognitive misers' – we do not wish to spend more mental effort than necessary and so may not examine all the attributional evidence available or may simply take mental short cuts to reach quick conclusions.
2. The information available may be insufficient or be received in ways that highlight some aspects more than others, e.g. due to viewpoint, salience or importance.
3. The information may be used in ways that maximise its use to us, e.g. for predicting future behaviour or maintaining our self-esteem.

FUNDAMENTAL ATTRIBUTION ERROR

What is it?

The fundamental attribution error (Ross, 1977) is the general ***tendency*** people have ***to make internal, dispositional attributions*** for ***others' behaviour*** rather than external, situational ones, when there may be equally convincing evidence for both types of cause. The fundamental attribution error (FAE) tendency to attribute dispositionally and hold the person and their characteristics responsible for behaviour increases with the ***seriousness of the consequences*** of the behaviour and its ***personal (hedonic) relevance*** to us.

Why does it occur?

Focus of attention – observers are more likely to notice the actor and their behaviour than the situation and more diffuse circumstances influencing behaviour.

Predictability of behaviour – attributions to personal, stable characteristics rather than changeable situational ones fulfil the observer's need to be able to predict and control the world.

Linguistic ease – the English language makes it easier to describe actors and their actions in the same way (e.g. we talk of 'aggressive' behaviour resulting from an 'aggressive' *person* rather than *situation*), thus facilitating the attributional link between them (Nisbett and Ross, 1980).

Evaluation

- Ross *et al.* (1977) randomly assigned college students to be either 'questioners' (to invent and ask challenging questions based on their own expertise) or 'answerers' in a quiz. They found that the 'questioners' were rated as having better general knowledge ability (despite not actually answering any questions themselves!) than the 'answerers', by both the 'answerers' and observers of the quiz (but not themselves). This dispositional attribution ignored the 'questioners' situation of being able to create the questions and supports the FAE since later tests given by the researchers found no difference in general knowledge between the 'questioners' and 'answerers'.
- The FAE explains attributions in other studies, e.g. the tendency of observers of the Milgram experiment to attribute the potentially serious consequences of the participants' obedience to personal characteristics rather than social pressure (Bierbrauer, 1979).
- However, the FAE may not be as fundamental a tendency as first thought, Miller (1984) found cross-cultural variations in attributional tendencies with Indian-Hindus tending to prefer situational attributions to a greater degree than Americans.
- The FAE ignores attributions made by the actor about their own behaviour.

ACTOR-OBSERVER EFFECT

The actor-observer effect (Jones and Nisbett, 1972) refers to the tendency of people to attribute internal / dispositional causes when observing others' behaviour (as in the fundamental attribution error), but ***attribute external / situational causes to their own behaviour*** (when they are the actors).

Why does it occur?

Focus of attention – observers are more likely to notice the actor and their behaviour, while actors look out at, and therefore focus more on, factors in the environment.

Access to information – actors have more knowledge of intention and past behaviour (consistency information) than observers who therefore rely more on the FAE.

Evaluation

- Nisbett et al (1973) found that male college students were more likely to ***attribute*** their ***own choice*** of girlfriend and major study subject ***to external factors*** (e.g. she is a relaxing person, chemistry is a high paying field), but their ***best friend's choices*** to ***dispositional factors*** (e.g. needing someone to relax with, wanting to make a lot of money).
- Storms (1973) got actors to make more dispositional attributions by showing them videotapes of their behaviour, thus refocusing their attention as observers on to themselves.
- The actor–observer effect tends to focus on cognitive rather than motivational factors and so does not take into account whether the behaviour to be attributed was successful or not.

SELF-SERVING BIAS

The self-serving bias effect (Miller and Ross, 1975) refers to the tendency of ***actors*** to ***attribute successful behaviour to dispositional causes***, but ***unsuccessful behaviour to situational ones***, thus qualifying the actor–observer effect. The self-serving bias can lead to self-handicapping behaviour.

Why does it occur?

Motivational factors – Miller (1978) suggested that attribution is used to maintain self-esteem and for impression management of esteem in the eyes of others. Dispositional attributions of successful behaviour provide self-enhancement, situational attributions of unsuccessful behaviour provide self-protection.

Cognitive factors – since people usually expect to succeed based on their own abilities, unexpected/unintended failure is perceived as due to external factors.

Evaluation

- Kingdon (1967) interviewed successful and unsuccessful politicians and found that they tended to attribute their successes to dispositional factors, e.g. hard work and their reputation, and their defeats to external factors, e.g. national trends and lack of campaign money.
- Johnson et al (1964) found that students asked to teach other pupils attributed responsibility for increased performance to their teaching, but decreased performance to the student. However, this effect has not always been found with experienced teachers (e.g. Ross et al, 1974).
- Cross-cultural differences have been found, with more self-effacing and modest participants from China and Japan showing less self-serving bias than American participants.

Fundamental Attribution Error

Jones and Harris (1967)
The earliest demonstration of the FAE was an experiment by Jones and Harris (1967), in which American college students were presented with another student's written essay that was either for or against the Castro government in Cuba.

Half the participants were told that the essay writer had freely chosen whether to write a 'pro' or 'anti' Castro essay (choice condition), and the other half were told that the essay writer was told which position to take (no-choice condition).

After reading the essay, participants were asked what the essay writer's 'true' attitude was towards Castro's Cuba. The participants tended to view the writer's attitude as consistent with the views expressed in the essay, regardless of the choice/no-choice condition. While they didn't totally disregard that the no-choice writers had been told what position to take, they viewed this as less important than their attitudinal disposition. In other words, they underestimated the impact of the no-choice condition.

(Ross, 1977)
Stanford undergraduates were asked to be either a "questioner" or a "contestant."

They drew lots to decide which they would be; assignment was therefore known to the participants to be random. The questioners were to compose challenging but not impossible questions to ask the contestants. The contestants were to answer the questions.

The questioners did a good job of making up difficult questions; the contestants got a mean of only 4 out of 10 questions right. The participants were then asked to judge their own and their partners' general knowledge relative to the average Stanford student's on a 100-point scale. In the second experiment, there were also participants who merely observed the contest, each observing one questioner-contestant pair.

The prominent result was that the contestants rated themselves significantly lower on the 100-point general knowledge scale than they rated their partners (41.3 vs. 66.8, $p < .001$). The questioners, however, did not rate themselves significantly higher; they rated themselves 53.5 and their partners 50,6 ($p > .05$). The observers rated the questioners as much more knowledgeable than the average Stanford student (82.1), and they rated the contestants as about as knowledgeable as the average Stanford student (48.9).

This result is often said to show that participants overestimated the importance of an internal cause (general knowledge) of what they observed and underestimated the importance of an external cause (the nature of the tasks), once again displaying the FAE.