

FIFTH EDITION

Social Psychology

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אוניברסיטת בן-גוריון בנגב
הספרייה

Social Attribution: Explaining Behavior

UNTIL OCTOBER 2017, BILL GATES WAS THE RICHEST PERSON IN THE WORLD (HE'S NOW THE SECOND RICHEST). Having dropped out of Harvard at the ripe old age of 19, he started a company called Microsoft (you might have heard the name). Why was he able to invent tremendously creative and powerful software at such a young age and build such a hugely successful company? Most people would say he must be one of the smartest people who ever lived. But Bill Gates himself would not say that.

Instead, Gates would tell you that in 1968, when he was in eighth grade, his parents were well-off enough to enroll him in a private school called Lakeside (Gladwell, 2008). Lakeside happened to have a time-sharing computer terminal that linked the school's computer club (at a time when few colleges, let alone high schools, had computer clubs) to a mainframe computer in downtown Seattle. Back then, most computers still required a clumsy punch-card system for data entry; but Lakeside's terminal, like those today, used a more efficient keyboard system. Gates became one of a handful of teenagers in the world who were able to do real-time programming in 1968.

Gates's luck continued. Though Lakeside soon ran out of money to pay for expensive computer time, by coincidence, one of the founders of a company called Computer Center Corporation (CCC) had a son at Lakeside and offered the Lakeside Computer Club free programming time in exchange for testing the company's software. CCC went bankrupt shortly thereafter, but by then Gates and his friends had managed to persuade a local firm, Information Sciences, Inc. (ISI), to give them free computer time as payment for helping the firm develop a payroll

OUTLINE

Inferring the Causes of Behavior

The Processes of Causal Attribution

Errors and Biases in Attribution

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Beyond the Internal/External Dimension

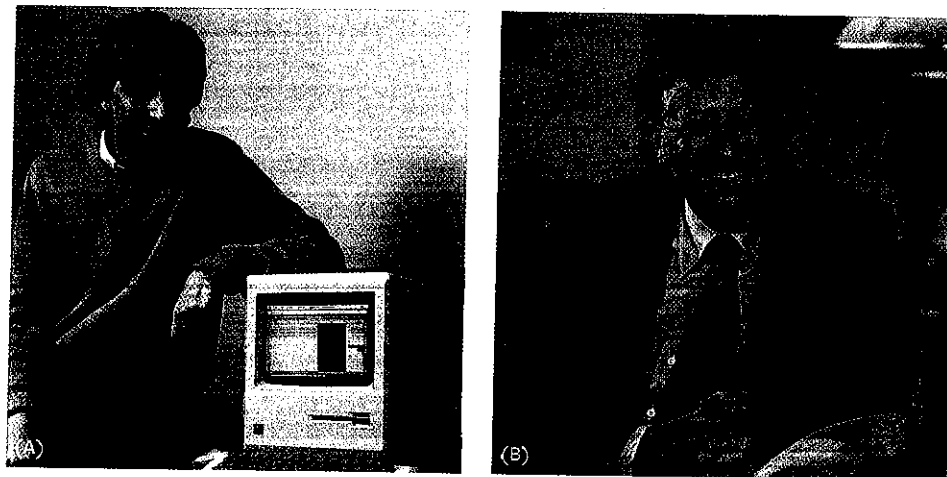
Why do we follow Bill Gates?
Do his parents do this for their children?
Is he just a lucky kid?

Why do we follow Bill Gates?
Do his parents do this for their children?
Is he just a lucky kid?

Why would an Olympic athlete be more satisfied with winning third place than second?

BILL GATES

(A) A fledgling entrepreneur. (B) The man today, primarily a philanthropist.



program. Gates by this time was spending 20–30 hours a week programming. Gates also established a connection with the University of Washington, which happened to have one computer that was free for the little-used period from 3 a.m. to 6 a.m. Living close to the university, he could sneak out of bed at night and walk to the computer center.

The next fortuitous event was that ISI needed programmers who were familiar with their particular type of software. Gates and his pals fit the bill, and they went to work under the supervision of a brilliant master of programming. By the time he got to Harvard, Gates had spent many thousands of hours programming—likely more than any freshman anywhere. Bill Gates was a brilliant guy, but he couldn't have started Microsoft at 19 if he hadn't had such unusually fortunate experience with programming beginning when he was 13.

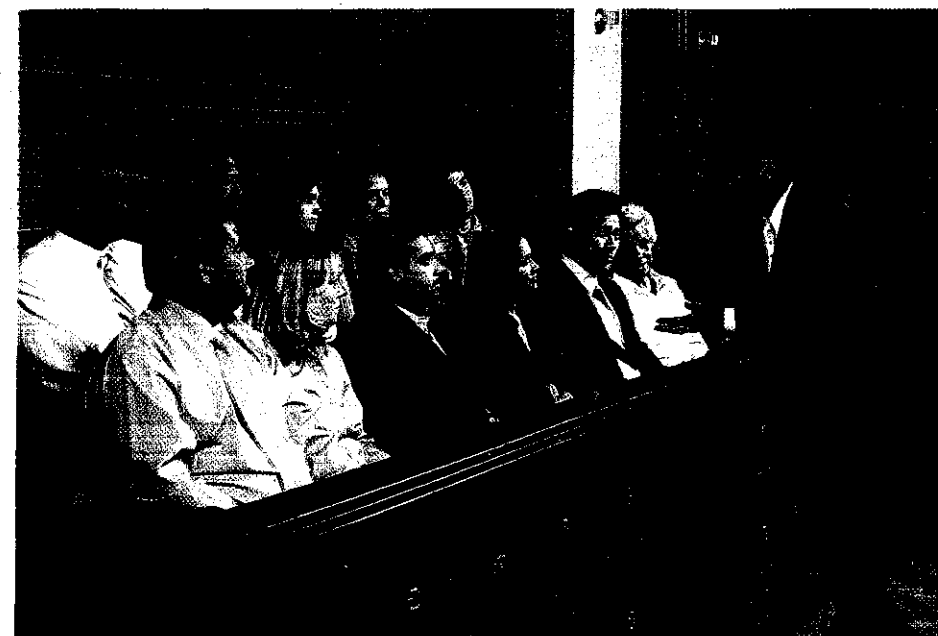
This difference between the explanations—or “causal attributions”—of the observer (that's you) and the actor (Bill Gates) is commonplace. The observer is inclined to attribute actions, especially highly distinctive ones, to properties of the actor, such as personality traits and abilities. The actor is more inclined to attribute the same action to situational factors. People make causal attributions because they need to draw inferences about others (and themselves) in order to make predictions about future behavior.

This chapter examines how people explain the behavior of those around them and the effect of these explanations on the judgments they make about other people. We'll also explore how people understand the causes of their own behavior, as well as the way their understanding influences both their immediate emotional experience and their subsequent behavior. These are the concerns of **attribution theory**, the study of how people understand the causes of events. ■

Inferring the Causes of Behavior

In class one day, you listen as a student gives a long-winded answer to a question from your professor. When the student is finally finished, your professor says, “Good point” and moves on. You can't help wondering, “Did the professor really think it was a good point, or was she just trying to encourage student

attribution theory A set of concepts explaining how people assign causes to the events around them and the effects of these kinds of causal assessments.



CAUSAL ATTRIBUTION

Causal attribution is central to much of social life, ranging from off-the-cuff speculation to formal decision-making situations, such as a trial. Often, the core question the jury must answer is what caused a given event or series of events.

causal attribution Linking an event to a cause, such as inferring that a personality trait is responsible for a behavior.

participation? Or was she trying to boost her standing on ratemyprofessors.com?” The way you answer these questions—the way you construe the meaning of the professor's behavior—explains her particular action. It also helps make sense of many of her other actions in the course, such as whether she consistently praises students' opinions in general. And your attributions may also affect your own behavior toward your professor in the future.

Causal attribution is the construal process people use to explain both their own and others' behavior. Understanding causal attributions is crucial to understanding everyday social behavior because we all make causal attributions many times a day, and the attributions we make can greatly affect our thoughts, feelings, and future behavior.

The Pervasiveness and Importance of Causal Attribution

When you ask someone out for a date but are rebuffed (“Sorry, but I already have plans”), you don't simply take the response at face value. You wonder whether the person actually has something else going on or is just giving you the brush-off. Similarly, when you get an exam back, you're not simply delighted or dejected about the grade you received. You make an attribution. If the grade is a good one, you might decide that this is another example of how smart and hardworking you are, or you might attribute the grade to luck or easy grading. If the grade is a bad one, you might decide you're not so good at this subject, or you might decide that the test was unfair.

Concluding that someone won't go out with you because she's busy leads to an entirely different set of emotional reactions than concluding that she finds you unappealing. And attributing a bad grade on an exam to a lack of ability leads to unhappiness and withdrawal, whereas attributing failure to a lack of effort often leads to more vigorous attempts to study harder and more effectively in

the future. Indeed, systematic research on causal attribution has shown that people's explanations have tremendous consequences in a number of areas, including health and education.

Explanatory Style and Attribution

Social and personality psychologists have examined the impact of attributions on academic and professional success by relating a person's explanatory style to long-term performance. **Explanatory style** refers to a person's habitual way of explaining events, and it's assessed along three dimensions: internal/external, stable/unstable, and global/specific. To assess explanatory style, researchers ask participants to imagine six different good events that might happen to them ("You do a project that is highly praised") and six bad events ("You meet a friend who acts hostilely toward you") and to provide a likely cause for each (Peterson & Barrett, 1987). The participants then say whether each cause (1) is due to something about them or something about other people or circumstances (internal/external), (2) will be present again in the future or not (stable/unstable), and (3) is something that influences other areas of their lives or just this one (global/specific). An explanation that mentions an *internal* cause implicates the self ("There I go again"), but an *external* cause does not ("That was the pickiest set of questions I've ever seen"). A *stable* cause implies that things will never change ("I'm just not good at this"), whereas an *unstable* cause implies that things may improve ("The cold medicine I was taking made me groggy"). Finally, a *global* cause is something that affects many areas of life ("I'm stupid"), while a *specific* cause applies to only a few ("I'm not good with names").

Researchers typically combine the three dimensions of internal/external, stable/unstable, and global/specific to form an overall explanatory style index, which is then correlated with an outcome of interest, such as students' GPAs. A tendency to explain negative events in terms of internal, stable, and global causes is considered a pessimistic explanatory style, and it's related to a variety of undesirable life outcomes. For example, students with a pessimistic explanatory style tend to get lower grades than those with a more optimistic style (Peterson & Barrett, 1987).

Explanatory style has also been shown to relate to people's physical health. A person's explanatory style as a young adult has been found to predict physical health later in life (Peterson, Seligman, & Vaillant, 1988; see also Peterson, 2000). The study in question took advantage of the fact that members of Harvard's graduating



EXPLANATORY STYLE AND ACADEMIC SUCCESS

How people explain their academic successes and failures ("I'm not good at this," vs. "The questions were picky") has implications for students' long-term success in school.

"A pessimist sees the difficulty in every opportunity; an optimist sees the opportunity in every difficulty."

—SIR WINSTON CHURCHILL

The Sunny Side of the Street

Buoyed by the finding that optimism predicts better health decades later, other investigators have asked whether prompting people to practice optimism can lead to increased happiness (Layous, Chancellor, & Lyubomirsky, 2014; Lyubomirsky & Layous, 2013). In this intervention-oriented work, researchers translate abstract concepts such as optimism into everyday practices. In one study, for example, participants in an optimism-enhancing condition wrote about what their best possible future life would look like if everything were going well in their personal and professional lives (Boehm, Lyubomirsky, & Sheldon, 2011). This act of practicing optimism led Western European college students to report greater happiness one month later (although this practice, it should be noted, had no effect on East Asian students). In related work, participants were asked to identify signature strengths they possess (for example, having courage, a strong sense of justice) and apply that strength to their daily lives during the ensuing week. In another condition, participants were asked each day to think about three good things in their lives. Thinking about a signature strength and reminding oneself of the good things in life each day are close cousins of developing an optimistic view of the future. These practices, compared to a control condition in which participants journaled each day for a week about their past, led to increased happiness and reduced depression over a period of six months (Seligman, Steen, Park, & Peterson, 2005).



Three Good Things in My Life

1. _____
2. _____
3. _____

*Put these three things down.
You'll be glad you did!*

classes from 1942 to 1944 took part in a longitudinal study that required them to complete a questionnaire every year and submit medical records of periodic physical examinations. Using the medical records, judges scored each person's physical health on a 5-point scale, where 1 means the person was in good health and 5 means the person was deceased. This was done for all participants when they reached the ages of 25, 30, 35, and so on. The physical health of the men at each of these ages was then correlated with their explanatory style as young men, which was assessed by having judges score the descriptions they gave in 1946 of their most difficult experiences during World War II. Optimistic explanatory style during younger adulthood was a significant predictor of good physical health in later life.

The optimistic tendency to make external, unstable, and specific attributions for failure presumably makes us less prone to despair and encourages more of a can-do outlook that promotes such behaviors as exercising regularly and visiting the doctor—behaviors that can lead to a longer, healthier life (**Box 5.1**).

ATTRIBUTIONS ABOUT CONTROLLABILITY Other researchers, led by Bernard Weiner and Craig Anderson, have also shown that people's attributional style has a powerful effect on long-term outcomes. These investigators emphasize whether an attribution implies that a given outcome is controllable. For example, attributions for failure that imply controllability—a lack of effort or a poor strategy—make it easier to persevere because we can always try harder or try a new strategy



PRODUCTIVE ATTRIBUTIONAL STYLE

Franklin Delano Roosevelt was elected U.S. president for four terms. FDR's optimistic attributional style undoubtedly contributed to his being one of the most successful political figures in U.S. history, despite having a severe physical handicap.

(Anderson, 1991; Anderson & Deuser, 1993; Anderson, Krull, & Weiner, 1996). If we view outcomes as beyond our control, on the other hand, it's tempting to simply give up—indeed, it may often seem rational to do so.

Research inspired by this framework has shown that people can be trained to adopt more productive attributional tendencies for academic outcomes—in particular, an inclination to attribute failure to a lack of effort—and that doing so has beneficial effects on subsequent academic performance (Dweck, 1975; Forsterling, 1985). The effects are both substantial and touching. Blackwell, Trzesniewski, and Dweck (2007) report that tough junior high school boys crying when made to realize that their grades were due mainly to a lack of effort rather than a lack of brains. Making people believe they can exert control over events that they formerly believed to be beyond their control restores hope and unleashes the kind of productive energy that makes future success more likely (Crandall, Katkovsky, & Crandall, 1965; Dweck & Reppucci, 1973; Peterson, Maier, & Seligman, 1993; Seligman, Maier, & Geer, 1968; Weiner, 2010).

GENDER AND ATTRIBUTIONAL STYLE Such training programs might be put to good use in undoing some inadvertent attributional training that occurs in elementary school classrooms and that may give rise to a troubling gender difference in attributional style. Research shows that boys are more likely than girls to attribute their failures to lack of effort, and girls are more likely than boys to attribute their failures to lack of ability (Dweck, 1986; Dweck, Davidson, Nelson, & Enna, 1978; Lewis & Sullivan, 2005; Ryckman & Peckham, 1987; Whitley & Frieze, 1985).

Carol Dweck and her colleagues have found that this difference results in part from teachers' feedback patterns in fourth-grade and fifth-grade classrooms (Dweck et al., 1978). The researchers found that although girls, on average, outperform boys in school, negative evaluation of girls' performance was almost exclusively directed at intellectual inadequacies ("This is not right, Lisa"). In contrast, almost half of the criticism of boys' work referred to nonintellectual factors ("This is messy, Bill"). Positive evaluation of girls' performance was related to the intellectual quality of their performance less than 80 percent of the time; for boys, it was 94 percent of the time. From these data, Dweck and her colleagues argue that girls learn that criticism means they may lack intellectual ability, whereas boys learn that criticism may just mean they haven't worked hard enough or paid enough attention to detail. Similarly, girls are likely to come to suspect that praise may be unrelated to the intellectual quality of their performance, whereas boys learn that praise means their intellectual performance was excellent (Good, Rattan, & Dweck, 2012).

When Dweck and her colleagues performed an experiment in which they gave both boys and girls feedback—either the kind girls typically receive or the kind boys typically receive—they found that *both* genders tended to view subsequent failures accordingly, either as a reflection of their lack of ability or as a reflection of their lack of effort and attention to detail (Dweck et al., 1978). Therefore, whatever other reasons there may be for boys routinely taking credit for their successes and dismissing their failures and for girls' more modest attributions, these patterns are reinforced by the treatment they receive in the classroom (Espinoza, Areas da Luz Fontes, & Arms-Chavez, 2014).

← LOOKING BACK

People differ in their explanatory styles; that is, they differ in whether they tend to make attributions that are external or internal, stable or unstable, global or specific. Attributional style predicts academic success as well as health and longevity. Belief in the controllability of outcomes is important, and beliefs about the controllability of academic outcomes can be altered by training. Boys and girls often learn to draw different conclusions about academic outcomes. Boys receive feedback indicating that success is due to ability and failure is due to insufficient effort or to incidental factors, whereas girls receive feedback indicating the reverse.

The Processes of Causal Attribution

Does she really like me, or is she just pretending she does because she's after my best friend? Does that salesman really believe the turbo boost is essential to performance, or is he just saying that to get a bigger commission? Is that guy really that selfish, or is he just under a lot of pressure? These types of questions run through our heads every day. How we answer them—how we assess the causes of observed or reported behavior—is not capricious; rather, our assessments follow predictable patterns that serve several purposes. They help us understand the past, illuminate the present, and predict the future. Only by knowing the cause of a given event can we grasp the true meaning of what has happened and anticipate what's likely to happen next.

For example, our perception of how much control another person has over his or her actions is one important factor in how we judge that person. When a person offers an excuse for problematic behavior, it typically yields more sympathy and forgiveness if the excuse involves something beyond the person's control ("I had a flat tire") than if it involves something controllable ("I needed to take a break") (Weiner, 1986). Gay and lesbian people are viewed more favorably by those who believe they are "born that way" rather than choosing their sexual orientation (Haider-Markel & Joslyn, 2008; Whitely, 1990).

When we're trying to figure out the cause of something, a particularly important question is whether an outcome is the product of something within the person (that is, an internal, or dispositional, cause) or a reflection of something about the context or circumstances (an external, or situational, cause). Ever since Kurt Lewin pointed out that behavior is always a function of both the person and the situation (see Chapter 1), theories of attribution have focused on how people assess the relative contributions of these two types of causes (Heider, 1958; Hilton & Slugoski, 1986; Hilton, Smith, & Kim, 1995; Jones & Davis, 1965; Kelley, 1967; Medcoff, 1990).

Frequently, the distinction between internal and external causes is straightforward. You might win the pot in your weekly poker game because you're a better player than everyone else (internal cause), or maybe you simply were lucky and got the best cards (external cause). In other contexts, the distinction isn't as clear. We might say that someone became a rock-and-roll guitarist because of a deep love of the instrument



"If we're being honest, it was your decision to follow my recommendation that cost you money."

(internal cause) or because of the desire for fame and fortune (external cause). But aren't love of the instrument and desire for fame both inner states? Why is the desire for fame and fortune considered an external cause? The answer is that loving to play the guitar is not something shared by most people, so it tells us something characteristic and informative about the person and is therefore personal, or internal. Many people, however, seem to find the prospect of fame attractive. (Why else would there be so many reality TV shows?) And even more find the prospect of wealth attractive. Doing something to achieve fame and fortune, then, tells us little about the person in hot pursuit of either. So in this case, it makes sense to refer to the cause as something impersonal, or external. Determining whether certain actions are the product of internal versus external causes thus requires assessments of what most people are like and what most people are likely to do.

Attribution and Covariation

When scientists attempt to nail down the cause of some phenomenon, they try to isolate the one cause that seems to make a difference in producing the effect. In other words, they try to identify the cause that seems always to be present when the effect or phenomenon occurs and always seems to be absent when the phenomenon does not occur. For example, to determine whether ulcers are caused by a bacterium, a medical researcher might determine whether people who are given the bacterium develop ulcers and whether people with ulcers improve after taking an antibiotic to fight the bacterium.

To a considerable degree, this is also how people assess causality in their everyday lives (Cheng & Novick, 1990; Fiedler, Walther, & Nickel, 1999; Forsterling, 1989; Hewstone & Jaspers, 1987; Kelley, 1973; Nisbett & Ross, 1980; White, 2002). When your friend states that she likes her statistics class, you automatically try to figure out why: Is she a math person? Is the class taught by a great professor? What does your friend say about other math classes or about her classes in general? What do other students in her statistics class say about it?

In assessing causality, people use what attribution theorists have dubbed the **covariation principle** (Kelley, 1973). We try to determine what causes—internal or external, symptomatic of the person in question or applicable to nearly everyone—“covary” with the observation or effect we’re trying to explain. Psychologists believe that three types of covariation information are particularly significant: consensus, distinctiveness, and consistency.

1. **Consensus** refers to what most people would do in a given situation. Does everyone behave the same way in that situation, or do few other people behave that way? Is your friend one of a precious few who likes her statistics class, or do most students like the class? All else being equal, the more an individual's reaction is shared by others (when consensus is high), the less it says about that individual and the more it says about the situation.
2. **Distinctiveness** refers to what an individual does in different situations. Is a particular behavior unique to a specific situation, or does the person react the same way in many situations? Does your friend seem to like all math classes or even all classes in general, or does she just like her statistics class? The more someone's reaction is confined to a particular

situation (when distinctiveness is high), the less it says about that individual and the more it says about the specific situation.

3. **Consistency** refers to what an individual does in a given situation on different occasions. Is the behavior the same now as in the past, or does it vary? Does your friend have favorable things to say about today's statistics class only, or has she raved about the course all semester? The more an individual's reaction varies across occasions (when consistency is low), the harder it is to make a definite attribution either to the person or to the situation. The effect is likely due to some less predictable combination of circumstances. When consistency is high and an individual's reaction does not vary much across occasions, it's easier to make a definite attribution either to the person or to the situation.

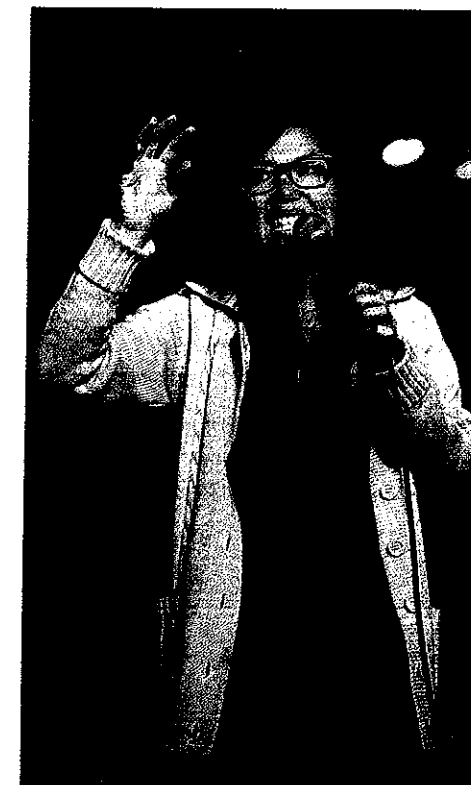
A *situational attribution* is called for when consistency, consensus, and distinctiveness are all high. When everyone else taking your friend's statistics class likes it too, when your friend claims to like few other math classes, and when she has praised the class all semester, there must be something special about that class. In contrast, a *dispositional attribution* is called for when consistency is high but consensus and distinctiveness are low. When few other students like the statistics class, when your friend claims to like all math courses, and when she has raved about the statistics class all semester, her fondness for the course must reflect something about her.

When psychologists have given research participants these three types of covariation information and asked them to attribute a reported effect to a particular cause, they do indeed use the logic of covariation (Forsterling, 1989; Hewstone & Jaspers, 1983; Hilton et al., 1995; McArthur, 1972; White, 2002). They make situational attributions when consensus, distinctiveness, and consistency are high and make dispositional attributions when consistency is high but consensus and distinctiveness are low. The only surprising finding is that people are sometimes only modestly influenced by consensus information. They respond to whether or not everyone laughed at the comedian, but rather mildly. This reflects a common tendency to focus more on information about the person (distinctiveness and consistency) at the expense of information that speaks to the influence of the surrounding context (consensus).

Discounting, Augmentation, and Counterfactual Thinking

The judgments people make aren't always based on what's actually happened; sometimes they are based on what people *imagine* would happen under different situations or if a different individual were involved. For example, in considering the high rates of obedience in Milgram's experiment (see Chapters 1 and 9), you might try to imagine what you would do if you were a participant. You might find it difficult to imagine administering so much electric shock to the victim (the “learner”). In other words, you might believe that a change in the participant—in particular, if *you* were the participant—would lead to a change in the outcome. Hence, you would conclude that it must have been the person

consistency A type of covariation information: whether an individual behaves the same way or differently in a given situation on different occasions.



COVARIATION AND ATTRIBUTION

If your roommate laughs at Ali Wong but doesn't laugh at many other comedians on TV (high distinctiveness), and if most people you know laugh at Ali Wong (high consensus), and if both your roommate and most other people you know almost always laugh at an Ali Wong performance (high consistency), you're going to think your roommate laughs at Ali Wong because of the situation, namely, because it's an Ali Wong performance. If your roommate laughs at pretty much every comic on the tube (low distinctiveness) every time he sees one (high consistency), and, of course, you know that's not true of everyone you know (low consensus), you're going to think that your roommate laughs at any comedian because he's a pushover for comedians; in other words, he has a disposition to like comedians.

“The logic of science is also that of business and life.”

—JOHN STUART MILL

“The whole of science is nothing more than refinement of everyday thinking.”

—ALBERT EINSTEIN

covariation principle The idea that behavior should be attributed to potential causes that occur along with the observed behavior.

consensus A type of covariation information: whether most people would behave the same way or differently in a given situation.

distinctiveness A type of covariation information: whether a behavior is unique to a particular situation or occurs in many or all situations.

(or rather the people who delivered so much shock), not the situation, that was responsible for the behavior.

THE DISCOUNTING AND AUGMENTATION PRINCIPLES Sometimes the information available to us suggests that there could be multiple causes responsible for a given behavior. A young man interviews for a job and seems quite personable. Did he seem personable because that's the way he really is or because he was just putting on a good face for the interview?

In circumstances like these, the **discounting principle** says that our confidence that a particular cause is responsible for a given outcome will be reduced (discounted) if there are other plausible causes that might have produced that same outcome (Kelley, 1973). Either a sunny disposition or the desire to land a job is sufficient to make someone act personably in an interview. By pure logic, then, we can't make a confident attribution. But we supplement the pure logic with our knowledge of what people are like. That knowledge tells us that nearly everyone would act in a personable manner to get the job offer, so we can't be confident that the applicant's disposition is all that sunny. We thus discount the possibility that what we've seen (a personable demeanor) tells us something about the person involved (he's personable) because we imagine that nearly everyone would act similarly in that context.

Extending that logic just a bit leads to a complementary **augmentation principle**, by which we can have greater (augmented) confidence that a particular cause is responsible for a given outcome if other causes are present that we imagine would produce a *different* outcome. Typically, we can be more certain that a person's actions reflect what that person is really like if the circumstances would seem to discourage such actions. If someone advocates a position despite being threatened with torture for doing so, we can safely conclude that the person truly believes in that position.

THE INFLUENCE OF WHAT ALMOST HAPPENED In making causal assessments, we sometimes consider whether a given outcome is likely to have happened if the circumstances were slightly different. Our attributions are thus influenced not only by our knowledge of what has actually happened in the past, but also by **counterfactual thinking** (thoughts *counter* to the facts)—considerations of what might have, could have, or should have happened “if only” a few minor things were done differently (Johnson, 1986; Kahneman & Tversky, 1982; Roese, 1997; Roese & Olson, 1995). “If only I had studied harder” implies that a lack of effort was the cause of a poor test result. “If only the Democrats had nominated a different candidate” implies that the candidate, not the party's principles, was responsible for defeat.

Because our attributions influence our emotional reactions to events, our counterfactual thoughts should do so as well. An emotional reaction tends to be more intense if the event almost didn't happen—a phenomenon known as **emotional amplification**. Would you feel worse, for example, if someone you loved died in a plane crash after switching her assigned flight at the last minute or after sticking with her assigned flight? Most people say that a last-minute switch would make the loss harder to bear because of the thought that it “almost” didn't happen. In general, the pain or joy we derive from any event tends to be proportional to how easy it is to imagine the event not happening.

So what determines whether a counterfactual event seems like it “almost” happened? Some of the most common determinants are time and distance. Imagine,

discounting principle The idea that people will assign reduced weight to a particular cause of behavior if other plausible causes might have produced it.

augmentation principle The idea that people will assign greater weight to a particular cause of behavior if other causes are present that normally would produce a different outcome.

counterfactual thinking Thoughts of what might have, could have, or should have happened “if only” something had occurred differently.

“Of all sad words of tongue or pen, the saddest are these, ‘It might have been.’”

—JOHN GREENLEAF WHITTIER,
NINETEENTH-CENTURY QUAKER
POET AND ABOLITIONIST

emotional amplification An increase in an emotional reaction to an event that is proportional to how easy it is to imagine the event not happening.

for example, that someone survives a plane crash in a remote area and then tries to hike to safety. Suppose he hikes to within 75 miles (120 kilometers) of safety before dying of exposure. How much should the airline pay his relatives in compensation? Would your estimate of the proper compensation change if he'd made it to within a quarter of a mile (402 meters) to safety? It would for most people.

In one study, those who were led to believe he died a quarter mile from safety recommended an average of \$162,000 more in compensation than those who thought he died 75 miles away (Miller & McFarland, 1986). Because he almost made it (within a quarter mile), his death seems more tragic and thus more worthy of compensation.

This psychology of coming close leads to a kind of paradox in the emotional reactions of Olympic athletes to winning a silver or bronze medal instead of the gold. An analysis of the smiles and grimaces that athletes exhibited on the medal stand at the 1992 Summer Olympics in Barcelona, Spain, revealed that second-place silver medalists seemed to be less happy than the third-place bronze medalists they had outperformed (Medvec, Madey, & Gilovich, 1995). This finding was replicated at the 2004 Olympics in Athens, Greece (Matsumoto & Willingham, 2006). Since when is bronze better than silver? The reversal of reasonable expectations about medals stems from silver medalists being consumed by what they did not receive (the coveted gold medal), whereas bronze medalists focus on what they did receive (a medal). Indeed, analyses of the athletes' comments during post-event interviews confirmed the suspected difference in their counterfactual thoughts. Silver medalists were more focused on how they could have done better “if only” a few things had gone differently, whereas bronze medalists were more inclined to state that “at least” they received a medal. Second place



COUNTERFACTUAL EMOTIONS ON THE OLYMPIC PODIUM (BARCELONA, 1992)

The happy athlete on the right won the bronze medal. The unhappy one on the left won the silver medal. The happy bronze medal winner is undoubtedly comparing the result with a failure to win a medal at all. The gloomy silver medalist is probably contemplating how close she came to the gold.



THE ANGUISH OF WHAT MIGHT HAVE BEEN

It's especially upsetting when someone dies who was not supposed to be in a particular situation. (A) The matador José Cubero, known as Yiyo, died in the bullring after substituting at the last minute for another bullfighter. (B) In the Israeli army, soldiers are forbidden to trade missions, no matter how compelling the circumstances. The reasoning is that if a soldier dies on a mission that he was not supposed to go on, the family will feel even greater anguish at his “needless death,” and the soldier who should have gone may feel guilt over still being alive.

can thus be a mixed blessing. The triumph over many can get lost in the defeat by one.

THE INFLUENCE OF EXCEPTIONS VS. ROUTINES Another determinant of how easy it is to imagine an event not happening is whether it resulted from a routine action or a departure from the norm. In one study that examined this idea, participants read about a man who was severely injured when a store he happened to be in was robbed (Miller & McFarland, 1986). In one version of the story, the robbery took place in the store where the man typically shopped. In another version, the robbery took place in a store he decided to visit for “a change of pace.” When participants considered how much the victim should be compensated for his injuries, those who thought the injuries were sustained in an unusual setting recommended over \$100,000 more than those who thought the injuries occurred in the victim’s usual store. The injuries were presumably more tragic because it was so easy to imagine the counterfactual event that would have left the man unharmed.

← LOOKING BACK

A primary aspect of causal attribution involves assessing how much the person or the situation is responsible for a given event. People make such assessments by employing the logic of covariation. We consider the distinctiveness and consistency of a person’s behavior, as well as whether others would have behaved similarly (consensus). We also rely on our psychological insight to make attributions. When someone stands to gain from a particular behavior, we attribute the behavior to what the person stands to gain and not to the person’s underlying disposition. But when someone behaves in a way that conflicts with self-interest, we are inclined to attribute the behavior to the person’s disposition. Counterfactual thoughts about events that almost occurred influence our causal attributions and emotional reactions to events that did occur.

Errors and Biases in Attribution

The attributions people make are sometimes less than fully rational. Our hopes and fears sometimes color our judgment; we sometimes reason from faulty premises; and we’re occasionally misled by information of questionable validity. In other words, our causal attributions are occasionally subject to predictable errors and biases. Indeed, since the initial development of attribution theory in the late 1960s and early 1970s, social psychologists have made considerable progress in illuminating some of the pitfalls of everyday causal analysis.

The Self-Serving Attributional Bias

One of the most consistent biases in causal assessments is one you have no doubt noticed time and time again: people are inclined to attribute their failures and other bad events to external circumstances, but to attribute their

successes and other good events to themselves—that is, they’re subject to a **self-serving attributional bias** (Carver, DeGregorio, & Gillis, 1980; Greenberg, Pyszczynski, & Solomon, 1982; Mullen & Riordan, 1988). Students, for example, tend to make external attributions for their failures (“The test questions were ambiguous”; “The professor is a sadist”) and to make internal attributions for success (“My hard work paid off”; “I’m smart”). Research shows that professors do the same thing when their manuscripts are evaluated for possible publication (Wiley, Crittenden, & Birg, 1979). “Of course they accepted this brilliant paper.” “They obviously sent this to reviewers who are morons.” (But note, as we’re sure we don’t have to tell you, that papers by the authors of this textbook really are rejected only because of theoretical bias, unfair evaluation procedures, or the simple narrow-mindedness of reviewers.)

Consider your favorite athletes and their coaches. How do they explain their wins and losses, their triumphs and setbacks? Richard Lau and Dan Russell (1980) examined newspaper accounts of the postgame attributions of professional athletes and coaches and found that attributions to one’s own team were much more common for victories than for defeats. In contrast, attributions to external elements (bad calls, bad luck, and so on) were much more common for defeats than for victories. Overall, 80 percent of all attributions for victories were to aspects of one’s own team, but only 53 percent of all attributions for defeats were to one’s own team. Only 20 percent of attributions for victories were to external elements, whereas 47 percent of attributions for defeats were to external elements (see also Roesch & Amirkhan, 1997).

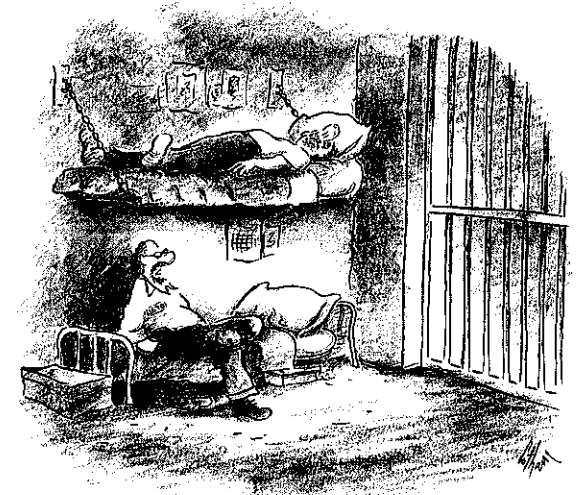
You’ve no doubt observed this tendency to attribute success internally and failure externally (Box 5.2, see p. 152), and it’s easy to explain why it happens: people are prone to a self-serving bias in their attributions because doing so makes them feel good about themselves (or at least prevents them from feeling bad about themselves). The self-serving attributional bias, then, is a motivational bias—motivated by the desire to maintain self-esteem. What could be simpler?

Actually, things are not so simple. Even a completely rational person, unaffected by motivations to feel good, might make the same pattern of attributions and be justified in doing so (Wetzel, 1982). After all, when we try to succeed at something, any success is usually at least partly due to our efforts and thus warrants our taking some of the credit. Failure, on the other hand, usually occurs *despite* our efforts and therefore requires looking elsewhere, perhaps externally, for its cause. A fully rational individual, then, might exhibit an apparently self-serving pattern of attribution because success is generally so much more tightly connected than failure to our intentions and effort.

To see this pattern more clearly, consider experimental paradigm that reliably elicits the self-serving attributional bias (Beckman, 1970). Participants tutor a student who is having difficulty mastering some material. (In some of these studies the participants are real teachers, and in others they’re college students.) After an initial round of tutoring, the student is assessed and

self-serving attributional bias The tendency to attribute failure and other bad events to external circumstances and to attribute success and other good events to oneself.

“Success has a thousand fathers; failure is an orphan.”
—OLD SAYING



“There might have been some carelessness on my part, but it was mostly just good police work.”



“First, I’d like to blame the Lord for causing us to lose today.”

Self-Serving Attribution

It's easy to find self-serving attribution in various public documents. When corporations send reports to their shareholders, how do you think they describe their corporation's triumphs and tribulations? In fact, CEOs claimed credit for 83 percent of all corporate gains and accepted blame for only 19 percent of all corporate losses (Stanick & Meindl, 1984). Or consider the auto accident reports filed with their insurance companies after a car accident. The externalizing here is clear. "The telephone pole was approaching me from the side when it struck my car," explained one driver. "A

pedestrian hit me and went under my car," stated another (MacCoun, 1993).

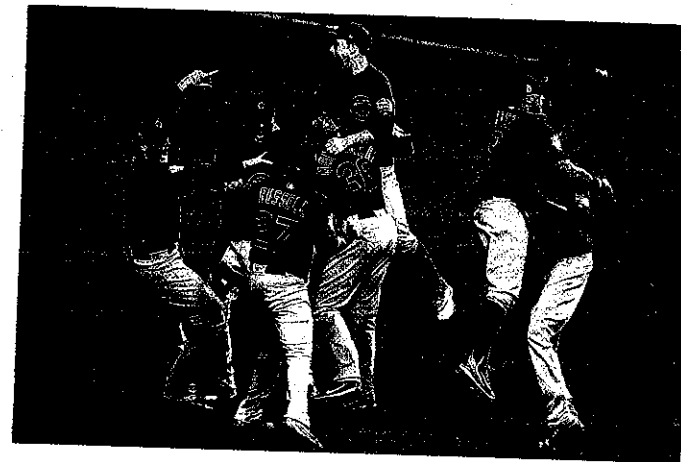
These data, of course, require a disclaimer. Unlike the more controlled laboratory studies of the self-serving attributional bias, the corporate reports and insurance forms are for public consumption. Perhaps the authors of these reports don't really believe what they're saying; they're just hoping others will swallow it. These examples should thus be taken as illustrations of the self-serving attributional bias, not as solid evidence for it. The real evidence comes from the more carefully controlled studies described in the text.

found to have done poorly. A second round of tutoring follows and then an additional assessment. For half the participants, the student's performance on the second assessment remains poor; for the other half, the student shows marked improvement. Such studies typically reveal that the teachers tend to take credit if the student improves from session to session, but they tend to blame the student if the student continues to perform poorly. In other words, people make an internal attribution for success (improvement) but an external attribution for failure (continued poor performance).

It may seem as if the teachers are trying to feel good about themselves and are making less than rational attributions to do so. But that's not necessarily the case. Suppose researchers programmed a computer, devoid of any feelings and hence having no need to feel good about itself, with software that employed the covariation principle. What kind of attributions would it make if the programmers gave the computer these inputs? (1) The student did poorly initially, (2) the teacher redoubled efforts or changed teaching strategy (as most people do after an initial failure), and (3) the student did well or poorly in the second session. The computer would then look for a pattern of covariation between the outcome and the potential causes that would tell it what sort of attribution to make. When the student failed both times, there would be no correlation between the teacher's efforts and the student's performance (some effort at time 1 and poor performance by the student; increased effort at time 2 and continued poor performance). Because an attribution to the teacher couldn't easily be justified, the attribution would be made to the student. When the student succeeded the second time, however, there would be an association between the teacher's efforts and the student's performance (some effort at time 1 and poor performance; increased effort at time 2 and improved performance). An attribution to the teacher would therefore be fully justified.

As this example indicates, we shouldn't be too quick to accuse others of making self-serving attributions just to make themselves feel good. It can be difficult to tell from the pattern of attributions alone whether someone has made an attribution to protect self-esteem; such a pattern could be the result of a purely rational analysis.

"We permit all things to ourselves, and that which we call sin in others, is experience for us."
—RALPH WALDO EMERSON,
EXPERIENCE



The Fundamental Attribution Error

Try to recall your initial thoughts about the individuals who delivered the maximum level of electric shock in Milgram's studies of obedience (again, see Chapters 1 and 9). The participants had to deliver more than 400 volts of electricity to another person, over the victim's protests, as part of a learning experiment (Milgram, 1963, 1974). Nearly two-thirds of all participants followed the instructions. In this case, a straightforward application of the covariation principle would lead to a situational attribution, not an inference about the participants' character or personality. Because virtually all participants delivered a high level of shock in the face of protests by the "learner," and nearly two-thirds were willing to deliver everything the machine could produce (that is, consensus was high), their behavior doesn't say much about the individual people involved, but rather speaks to something about the situation that made their behavior (surprisingly) common.

If you're like most people, however, you formed a rather harsh opinion of the participants, thinking of them as unusually cruel and callous, perhaps, or as unusually weak. If so, your judgments reflect a second way that everyday causal attributions often depart from the general principles of attributional analysis. There seems to be a pervasive tendency to see people's behavior as a reflection of the kind of people they are, rather than as a result of the situation they find themselves in.

As discussed in Chapter 1, the tendency to attribute people's behavior to elements of their character or personality, even when powerful situational forces are acting to produce that behavior, is known as the **fundamental attribution error** (Ross, 1977). It's called "fundamental" because the problem being solved (figuring out what someone is like from a sample of behavior) is so basic and essential and because the tendency to think dispositionally (to attribute behavior to the person while ignoring important situational factors) is so common and pervasive.

EXPERIMENTAL DEMONSTRATIONS OF THE FUNDAMENTAL ATTRIBUTION ERROR Social psychologists have devised a number of experimental paradigms to examine the fundamental attribution error (Gawronski, 2003; Gilbert & Malone, 1995; Lord, Scott, Pugh, & Desforges, 1997; Miller, Ashton, & Mishal, 1990; Miller, Jones, & Hinkle, 1981; Vonk, 1999).

Remarkably, people will sometimes attribute to personal dispositions another person's behavior even if they themselves have elicited that person's behavior. To illuminate this point, let's consider some studies in which experimenters have

SELF-SERVING ATTRIBUTIONAL BIAS

Athletes tend to attribute their success to internal causes like their talents and hard work, but attribute their failures to external causes like bad officiating and bad luck.

fundamental attribution error The failure to recognize the importance of situational influences on behavior, along with the corresponding tendency to overemphasize the importance of dispositions on behavior.

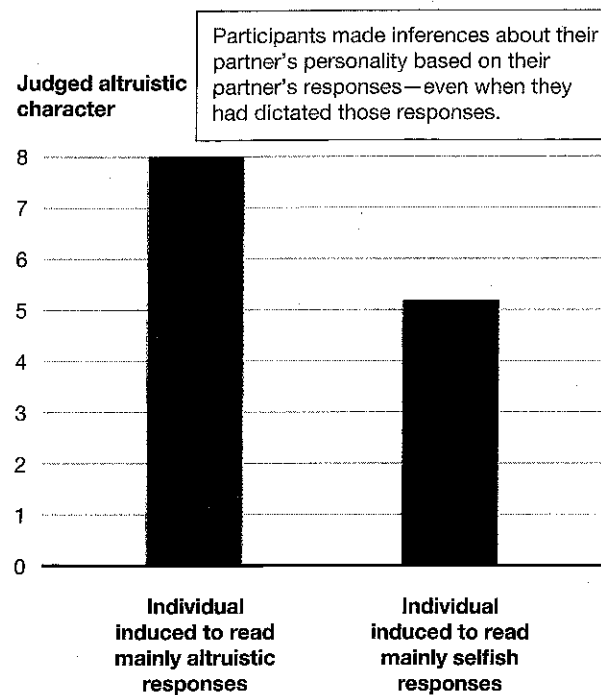


FIGURE 5.1
PERCEIVERS “LEARN” FROM BEHAVIOR THEY ELICITED FROM ANOTHER PERSON

This graph shows participants' average trait ratings of individuals that they themselves had directed to respond in an altruistic or selfish manner. Higher numbers indicate greater assumed altruism.

Source: Adapted from Van Boven et al., 1999.



ATTRIBUTIONS TO ABILITY

We tend to attribute people's success in life to their inner qualities, like talent and hard work, even when other causes, like family connections and early opportunities, have played a strong role.

randomly assigned participants to one of two roles: questioner or responder (Gilbert & Jones, 1986; Van Boven, Kamada, & Gilovich, 1999). The questioner's job is to read a series of questions to the responder, who then answers with one of two entirely scripted responses. Thus, the responders' answers are not their own and shouldn't be considered informative about their true personalities. The added twist in these studies is that the questioners themselves, following instructions from the experimenter, indicate to the responders which of the two responses to read. Thus, the questioners are determining the responders' behavior. For example, in response to the question, “Do you consider yourself to be sensitive to other people's feelings?” the questioner signals to the responder which of these two answers to give: “I try to be sensitive to others' feelings all the time. I know it is important to have people one can turn to for sympathy and understanding. I try to be that person whenever possible” (altruistic response) or “I think there are too many sensitive, ‘touchy-feely’ people in the world already. I see no point in trying to be understanding of another if there is nothing in it for me” (selfish response).

After reading a list of these questions to the responders and eliciting a particular response, the questioners in one such study rated the responders on a set of personality traits: trustworthiness, greediness, and kindheartedness (Van Boven, Kamada, & Gilovich, 1999). The investigators found that the questioners drew inferences about the responders—even though they themselves had directed the responders to answer as they did! Responders led to recite mainly altruistic responses were rated more favorably than those led to recite mainly selfish responses (Figure 5.1). Note that this occurred even though the responders could have (and may have) tried through tone of voice to distance themselves from the responses they had to give.

THE FUNDAMENTAL ATTRIBUTION ERROR AND PERCEPTIONS OF THE ADVANTAGED AND DISADVANTAGED An inferential problem we face in our daily lives is deciding how much credit to give to those who are succeeding in life and how much blame to direct at those who are not. How much praise and respect should we give to successful entrepreneurs, film stars, and artists? And to what degree should we hold the impoverished accountable for their condition? The discussion thus far about the fundamental attribution error suggests that people tend to assign too much responsibility to the individual for great accomplishments and terrible mistakes and not enough responsibility to the particular situation, broader societal forces, or pure dumb luck.

An ingenious study by Ross, Amabile, & Steinmetz (1977) shows that we can sometimes fail to see clearly the advantages some people enjoy in life and the disadvantages others must overcome. Participants took part in a quiz-game competition, much like the television show *Jeopardy*. Half of them were assigned the role of questioner and the other half the role of contestant. The questioner's job was to think of challenging, but not impossible, general-knowledge questions (“Who were the two coinventors of calculus?” “Who played the role of Victor Laszlo in the film *Casablanca*?”), and the contestant would try to answer the questions (see answers on p. 156).

From a self-presentation standpoint, the questioners had a tremendous advantage. It was relatively easy for them to come off well because they could focus on whatever personal knowledge they happened to have and ignore their various pockets of ignorance. The contestants, however, suffered from the disadvantage of having to field questions about the questioners' store of knowledge, which typically didn't match their own.

If participants were thinking logically, they should correct for the relative advantages and disadvantages enjoyed by the questioners and contestants, respectively: any difference in the questioners and contestants' apparent knowledge and intelligence could easily be explained by their roles. But that was not what happened. Predictably, the hapless contestants failed to answer many of the questions correctly. The contestants came away quite impressed by the questioners' abilities, rating the questioners' knowledge and intelligence more highly than their own. And when the quiz game was later reenacted for a group of observers, they, too, rated the questioners' general knowledge more highly than that of the contestants (Figure 5.2). Notice that the only people not fooled by the questioners' performance were the questioners themselves, who rated their own general knowledge and intelligence as roughly equal to the average of the student body. The questioners knew they had skipped over yawning gaps in their knowledge base in order to come up with whatever challenging questions they could offer.

The quiz-game study has profound relevance to everyday life (Ross et al., 1977). Organizational psychologist Ronald Humphrey set up a laboratory microcosm of a business office (Humphrey, 1985). He told participants he was interested in “how people work together in an office setting.” All participants witnessed a random procedure whereby some of the participants were selected to be “managers” and to assume supervisory responsibilities, while others were selected to be mere “clerks” who followed orders. Humphrey gave the managers time to study manuals describing their tasks. While they were studying them,

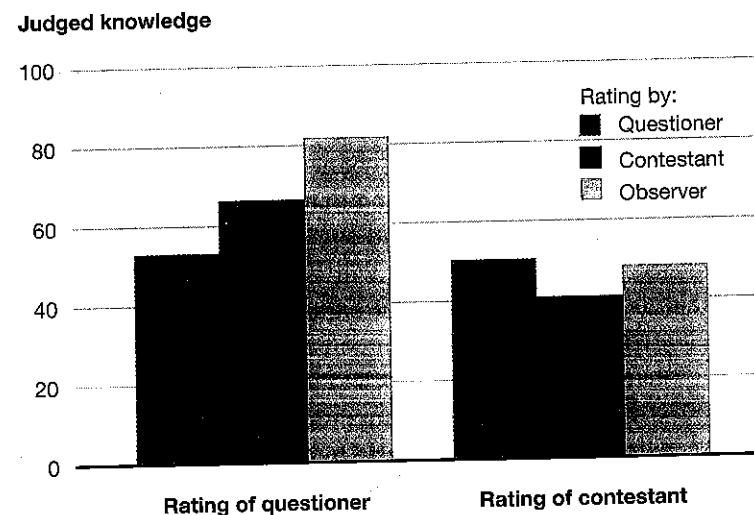


FIGURE 5.2
ROLE-CONFERRED ADVANTAGE AND DISADVANTAGE

The bars show ratings of the general knowledge of the questioner and contestant in the quiz-show experiment. Participants thought the questioners were more knowledgeable than the contestants, even though they knew they had been randomly assigned to their roles and that the questioners had a much easier task.

Source: Adapted from Ross et al., 1977.

the experimenter showed the clerks the mailboxes, filing system, and so on. The newly constructed office team then went about their business for 2 hours. The clerks were assigned to work on a variety of low-skilled, repetitive jobs and had little autonomy. The managers, as in a real office, performed reasonably high-skill-level tasks and directed the clerks' activities.

At the end of the work period, managers and clerks rated themselves and each other on a variety of role-related traits, such as leadership, intelligence, capacity for hard work, assertiveness, and supportiveness. For all these traits, managers rated their fellow managers more highly than they rated their clerks. For all but the capacity for hard work, clerks rated their managers more highly than they rated their fellow clerks. And bear in mind that these attributions were made by people who knew their jobs were assigned by the proverbial flip of a coin. Studies like these serve as a caution about rushing to judgment when it comes to the successes and failures we see in everyday life. If we're ever tempted to heap scorn on those who haven't succeeded, we should remember the fundamental attribution error—and the unfortunate office clerks—and ask ourselves whether there are subtle, but powerful situational forces responsible for what we've observed.

Causes of the Fundamental Attribution Error

Why are people so quick to see someone's actions as a reflection of the person's inner traits and enduring character? A tendency so strong and so pervasive is probably the result of several causes acting jointly. Indeed, social psychologists have identified several psychological processes that appear to be responsible for the fundamental attribution error.

MOTIVATIONAL INFLUENCE AND THE BELIEF IN A JUST WORLD One reason we're likely to attribute behavior to people's traits and dispositions is that dispositional inferences can be comforting. The twists and turns of life can be unsettling. A superbly qualified job candidate may be passed over in favor of a mediocre applicant with the right connections. A selfless Good Samaritan may be stricken with cancer and experience an agonizing death. Such events cause anxiety, and we're tempted to think such things couldn't happen to us. But we can minimize such threats by attributing them to something about those who suffer from them, rather than to fate or chance (Burger, 1981; Walster, 1966).

More broadly, by thinking that people "get what they deserve" or that "what goes around comes around," we can reassure ourselves that nothing bad will happen to us if we are the right kind of person living the right kind of life. Thus, we tend to attribute behavior and outcomes to dispositions in part because there is a *motive* to do so.

Social psychologists maintain that this motive lies behind what's called the **just world hypothesis**—the belief that people get what they deserve in life (Lambert, Burroughs, & Nguyen, 1999; Lerner, 1980; Lipkus, Dalbert, & Siegler, 1996; Nudelman & Shiloh, 2011). Victims of rape, for example, are often viewed as responsible for their fate (Abrams, Viki, Masser, & Bohner, 2003; Bell, Kuriloff, & Lottes, 1994), as are victims of domestic abuse (Summers & Feldman, 1984). This insidious tendency reaches its zenith in the claim that if no defect in a

just world hypothesis The belief that people get what they deserve in life and deserve what they get.



"The employees have to assume a share of the blame for allowing the pension fund to become so big and tempting."



BOX 5.3

Not So Fast: Critical Thinking about the Fundamental Attribution Error

Recent hurricanes Harvey, Irma, and Maria caused tremendous damage. But the most deadly hurricane occurred in 2005 when Hurricane Katrina devastated the city of New Orleans. People across the United States and around the world were surprised that thousands of residents stayed in the city rather than evacuate—costing the lives of nearly 1,500 of them and leading to a harrowing several days for many more. Why would so many people have stayed and risked their lives rather than evacuate, as they were told to do by numerous authorities and media sources? Viewers were puzzled because they thought of staying as *choosing* to stay. As Secretary of Homeland Security Michael Chertoff put it, "Officials called for a mandatory evacuation. Some people chose not to obey that order. That was a mistake on their part." Michael D. Brown, head of the Federal Emergency Management Agency (FEMA) at the time (who ended up losing his job as a result of his handling of the federal response to the hurricane), echoed the same sentiment when he stated that "... a lot of people... chose not to leave."

But how many really "chose" to stay? It's not hard to detect the influence of the fundamental attribution error here when we consider that those who stayed behind were poorer, probably didn't own a car, had minimal access to news, and had weaker social networks and therefore less opportunity to discuss the situation and how to deal with it. If you don't have a car

to get you out of the city, don't have the money to pay for lodging wherever you flee, and are less likely to hear about the gravity of the threat from friends, family, or the media, you might very well end up, as they did, staying put and sticking it out.

The influence of the fundamental attribution error is even more obvious in the results of a survey that asked relief workers from around the country (doctors, counselors, firefighters, police officers) to provide three words to describe those who evacuated in advance of the hurricane and those who stayed behind. Those who left were most often described as "intelligent," "responsible," and "self-reliant," whereas those who stayed behind were described as "foolish," "stubborn," and "lazy" (Stephens, Hamedani, Markus, Bergsieker, & Eloul, 2009). Being taken in

by the fundamental attribution error is easy to do here because the raw facts are that some people left and some stayed, and the fortunes of those who left tended to be much better than those of the people who stayed behind. The dispositional explanations come easily when it's just those facts that command our attention. It takes some effort to look further and see the background influences that made it so much easier for some people to evacuate than others.

There's a general lesson from the Katrina tragedy and our mistaken causal attributions for the deaths of so many: we shouldn't be so fast to make dispositional attributions for others' behavior; we should hold off until we've made a serious attempt to assess the situation confronting them.



THE FUNDAMENTAL ATTRIBUTION ERROR AND HURRICANE KATRINA Some people had ready means of escape from Katrina and some did not. Commenters typically ignored such differences when explaining the "choice" to evacuate in advance of the hurricane's arrival.

victim's manifest character or past actions can be found, the tragic affliction must be due to some flaw or transgression in a "past life" (Woolger, 1988). Research also shows that people tend to "derogate the victim"—that is, they disparage the character of those who suffer unfortunate experiences that are completely beyond their personal control (Jones & Aronson, 1973; Lerner & Miller, 1978; Lerner & Simmons, 1966). Moreover, they choose to believe that "since I'm a good person, I don't have to worry that I will suffer the terrible fate of that bad person."

PERCEPTUAL SALIENCE AND CAUSAL ATTRIBUTIONS In assessing someone's behavior, what influences whether a potential cause springs to mind? One important determinant is how much the cause stands out perceptually, or how *salient* it is (Lassiter, Geers, Munhall, Ploutz-Snyder, & Breitenbecher, 2002; Robinson & McArthur, 1982; Smith & Miller, 1979). Features of the environment that more readily capture our attention are more likely to be seen as potential causes of an observed effect. And because people are so noticeable and interesting, they tend to capture our attention much more readily than other aspects of the environment. Situations, if attended to at all, may be seen as mere background to the person and his or her actions. This is particularly true of various social determinants of a person's behavior (customs, social norms) that are largely invisible. Attributions to the person, then, have an edge over situational attributions in everyday causal analysis because people are usually more salient than situations.

The importance of perceptual salience in our causal attributions has been demonstrated in many ways. In one study, participants watched a videotape of a conversation between two people (Taylor & Fiske, 1975). Some participants saw a version that showed only one of the individuals; others saw a version that showed both people equally well. When the participants assigned responsibility for setting the tone of the conversation, those who could see only one person assigned more responsibility to that individual than those who could see both people in the conversation equally well.

ATTRIBUTION AND COGNITION Perceptual salience explains some instances of the fundamental attribution error better than others. It explains the results of the quiz-show study, for example, because the decisive situational influence—that the questioner could avoid areas of ignorance but the contestant could not—was invisible and therefore had little impact on people's judgments. But what about the studies in which participants directed another person to give a particular answer and then went ahead and assumed that the person's true nature had been revealed by that answer? Here the situational constraints were far from invisible. Why didn't the participants discount appropriately, decide that the person's answer was perfectly well accounted for by the situational constraint of being assigned to give that answer, and thus refrain from making any inference about the person at all? The answer is that the cognitive machinery people draw on when using the discounting principle doesn't work that way.

Research by Dan Gilbert (1989, 2002) makes it clear that we make attributions for people's behavior in a way that stacks the deck in favor of the fundamental attribution error. Gilbert argues that when we observe someone's behavior, we automatically characterize the person as having a disposition corresponding to the behavior observed. Someone doing something kind is instinctively thought of as kind; someone doing something cruel is reflexively thought of as cruel. The representativeness heuristic discussed in the previous chapter does this work for us. Only on reflection do we consider the context of the behavior, and it's often too little and too late: our assumption that the behavior is dispositional rather than situational has been made, and revising it is effortful and therefore typically insufficient. Indeed, sometimes an adjustment to consider the context is neglected altogether. In short, the situation is secondary and often slighted in the process as we attempt to establish a causal explanation.

Ample evidence supports Gilbert's contention that we rapidly and automatically characterize other people based on their behavior (Carlston & Skowronski,

1994; Moran, Jolly, & Mitchell, 2014; Moskowitz, 1994; Newman, 1993; Todorov & Uleman, 2003; Uleman, 1987; Winter & Uleman, 1984). Then, only later do we consciously ponder what we know about the prevailing situational constraints and adjust our initial dispositional inference if it seems warranted. This analysis suggests that when we are tired, unmotivated, or distracted, we should be more likely to commit the fundamental attribution error (or to make a larger error) because the adjustment process that considers the situational context is shortened or skipped.

In one study that supports this analysis, participants watched a videotape, without the sound, of a young woman engaged in a conversation with another person. The woman appeared anxious throughout: "She bit her nails, twirled her hair, tapped her fingers, and shifted in her chair from cheek to cheek" (Gilbert, 1989, p. 194). Gilbert told half the participants that the woman was responding to a number of anxiety-inducing questions (about her sexual fantasies or personal failings, for example). He told the other participants that she was responding to questions about innocuous topics (world travel or great books, for example). Gilbert predicted that all participants, regardless of what they were told about the content of the discussion, would immediately and automatically assume that she was an anxious person. Those told she was discussing anxiety-producing topics, however, would take that into account and adjust their initial characterization, concluding that maybe she was not such an anxious person after all. Those told she was discussing a series of bland topics would not make such an adjustment and would conclude that she was an anxious person.

So far, this is just a standard attribution experiment. But Gilbert added a twist. He gave another two groups of participants the same information he gave the first two, but he had these groups memorize a list of words while watching the videotape. Gilbert reasoned that this extra demand on their attention would make them less able to carry out the deliberative stage of the attribution process in which they would (ordinarily) adjust their initial characterization of the person to account for situational constraints. If so, then those who thought the woman was discussing anxiety-provoking topics should nevertheless rate her as being just as anxious as those who were told she was discussing innocuous topics. As **Figure 5.3** indicates, that's just what happened. When participants were busy memorizing a list of words, they didn't have the cognitive resources needed to adjust their initial impression, so they rated the woman as being just as anxious when they thought she was discussing anxiety-provoking topics as when discussing innocuous topics. This demonstration is important because many things in life may rob us of the cognitive resources needed to carry out the correction phase of attributional analysis in which we take into account situational constraints (Geeraert, Yzerbyt, Corneille, & Wigboldus, 2004).

CONSEQUENCES OF THE FUNDAMENTAL ATTRIBUTION ERROR Does it matter that we're susceptible to the fundamental attribution error? Indeed it does. We make the error many times a day, and the results can be unfortunate.



THE INFLUENCE OF PERCEPTUAL SALIENCE ON CAUSAL ATTRIBUTIONS

People who are more salient—bigger, more brightly lit, more distinctively dressed—are typically seen as more influential in outcomes.

Observers who were kept busy by having to memorize a list of words did not correct their initial, automatic impression that the person was dispositionally anxious and did not take into account the nature of the material being discussed.

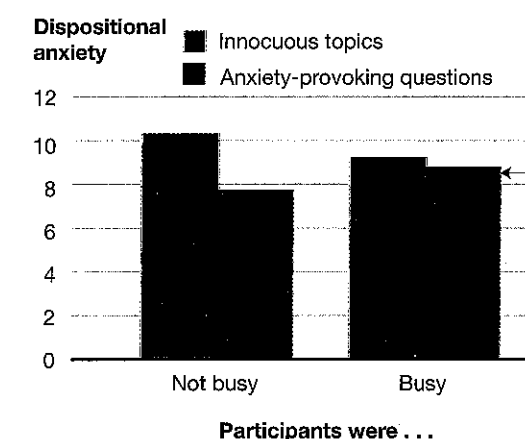


FIGURE 5.3 ADJUSTING AUTOMATIC CHARACTERIZATIONS

Observers had to judge how generally anxious a person was who appeared anxious while discussing either innocuous or anxiety-provoking topics. Source: Adapted from Gilbert, 1989.

Here's just one example: People, including employers and college admissions officers, often assume they can learn a lot about a person's traits and abilities from a 30-minute unstructured interview. But interviews reveal only the person's *apparent* traits and abilities in a *single situation*. In fact, the validity of the unstructured interview is close to nil: the correlation between judgments based on interviews and the subsequent judgments based on performance on the job or in school is only .10 (Hunter & Hunter, 1984).

A more accurate prediction of future performance would require information based on a wide array of situations: letters summarizing experience with the candidate in a range of situations, reports of previous job performance, high school GPA (which in turn is based on performance in everything from labs to homework to writing assignments and exams). Such information is far from infallible, but it often predicts future behavior with reasonable accuracy. Correlations between these types of "input" information and later outcomes are typically much higher than for interviews, on the order of .30–.50. Relying on one or two interviews is a setup for disappointment; employees are hired and students admitted who aren't as terrific as initially thought, and more deserving people are passed up.

If the fundamental attribution error is so pervasive and consequential, why are we so susceptible to it and so unaware of it? For one thing, we're not very good at assessing the validity of our own judgments. We can explain after the fact almost any failure of prediction, and we do it so effectively that we're prevented from seeing our errors. Suppose, for example, you were the interviewer who hired Jane, who didn't work out very well. "True, but she had some personal problems that came up shortly after she was hired." Or "Jane's boss was the real problem; it would be hard for anyone working for her to be successful." Choosing Jane automatically prevented you from finding out that other candidates for that job might have been more satisfactory.

A second reason for the pervasiveness of the fundamental attribution error is that we often see a given individual only in particular kinds of situations. You see Rachel only at parties, when she seems nice and fun to be around, but you don't know about the trials she inflicts on her roommates. You see Professor Jones only in his statistics classroom, where he seems stiff and boring and none too pleasant, but you don't see him being kind, funny, and helpful with his student advisees, let alone with his kids. Such errors sometimes cause no harm, but sometimes they do; and it's difficult to trace the error back to the fact that dispositional inferences were formed on the basis of limited or biased information.

The Actor-Observer Difference in Causal Attributions

It may have occurred to you that the degree to which you're oriented toward the person versus the situation depends on whether you're engaged in the action yourself or just observing someone else. In the role of "actor," you're usually more

interested in determining what kind of situation you're dealing with than assessing what kind of person you are. In the role of "observer," in contrast, you're often primarily interested in determining what kind of person you're dealing with. By this logic, actors should be more likely than observers to make situational attributions for a particular behavior—to see their own behavior as caused by the situation, when observers of the very same behavior are more likely to focus on the actor's dispositions. Indeed, there's considerable evidence for just such a difference (Gioia & Sims, 1985; Jones & Nisbett, 1972; Pronin, Lin, & Ross, 2002; Saulnier & Perlman, 1981; Schoeneman & Rubanowitz, 1985; Watson, 1982; see Malle, 2006, for a dissenting voice).

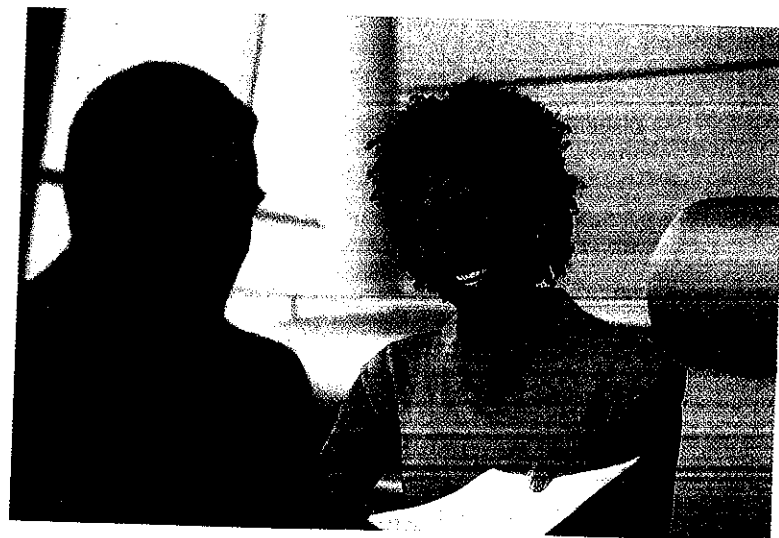
In one of the most straightforward demonstrations of this **actor-observer difference** in attribution, participants had to explain why they chose the college major that they did or why their best friends chose the major that they did. When the investigators scored the participants' explanations, they found that participants more often referred to characteristics of the person when explaining someone else's choice than they did when explaining their own choice. They typically focused on the specifics of the major when explaining their own choice. You might attribute your own decision to major in psychology, for instance, to the facts that the material is fascinating, the textbooks beautifully written, and the professors dynamic and accessible. In contrast, you might attribute your friend's decision to major in psychology to "issues" he needs to work out (Nisbett, Caputo, Legant, & Maracek, 1973).

This phenomenon has significant implications for human conflict, both between individuals and between nations. Married couples, for example, often squabble over attributional differences. John may blame a late meeting or unusually heavy traffic to explain why an errand didn't get done, whereas his husband may be more inclined to argue that he's lazy, inattentive, or "just doesn't care." Similarly, at the national level, the United States is likely to explain the stationing of its troops in so many locations across the globe as a necessary defense against immediate and future threats. Other countries may be more inclined to see it as a manifestation of U.S. "imperialism."

Like the fundamental attribution error, the actor-observer difference has no single cause. Several factors give rise to it. First, assumptions about what needs explaining can vary for actors and observers. When asked, "Why did you choose the particular college that you did?" you (here the actor who chose a particular college) might reasonably interpret the question to mean "Considering you are who you are, why did you choose the particular college that you did?" The person (you) is taken as a given and therefore need not be included as part of the explanation. This is much like Willie Sutton's explanation of why he robbed banks: "Because that's where the money is." He takes it as given that he's a crook and thus interprets the question as one about why he robs *banks* rather than gas stations. Notice, in contrast, that when you're asked about someone else and are hence the observer ("Why did your roommate choose his particular college?"), the nature of the person can't be taken as a given, so it's reasonable to invoke the roommate's dispositions in offering an explanation (Kahneman & Miller, 1986; McGill, 1989).

Second, the perceptual salience of the actor and the surrounding situation is different for the actor and the observer (Storms, 1973). Because, as we noted earlier, people tend to make attributions to potential causes that stand out—are perceptually salient—it makes sense that actors tend to attribute their behavior to the situation, while observers tend to attribute that same behavior to the actor.

actor-observer difference A difference in attribution based on who is making the causal assessment: the actor (who is relatively inclined to make situational attributions) or the observer (who is relatively inclined to make dispositional attributions).



THE FALLIBILITY OF INTERVIEWS

We tend to assume far more accuracy and utility for interviews than is really the case. The 30-minute interview—for college, medical school, executive positions, the Peace Corps, and so on—has almost no predictive validity.

Third, actors and observers differ in the amount and kind of information they have about the actor and the actor's behavior (Andersen & Ross, 1984; Jones & Nisbett, 1972; Prentice, 1990; Pronin, Gilovich, & Ross, 2004). Actors know what intentions influenced them to behave in a certain way; observers can only guess at those intentions. Actors are also much more likely to know whether a particular action is typical of them or not. (In the attribution language used earlier, the actor is in a much better position to know if the behavior is *distinctive* and thus merits a situational rather than a dispositional attribution.)

← LOOKING BACK

Our attributions are subject to predictable errors and biases. We often exhibit a self-serving attributional bias, attributing success to the self and failure to the situation. We exhibit the fundamental attribution error when we attribute behavior to a person's dispositions rather than to the situation, even when there are powerful situational factors that we ought to consider. Actors are more likely than observers to attribute behavior to the situation, whereas observers are more likely than actors to attribute behavior to the actor's dispositions.

Culture and Causal Attribution

Much of what psychologists know about how people understand the behavior of others is undoubtedly universal. People everywhere are likely to engage in counterfactual thinking, imagining outcomes that might have occurred as an aid in understanding what did happen. People everywhere probably prefer to maintain the view that they live in a just world. All people undoubtedly perceive the causes of their own behavior somewhat differently than they perceive the causes of other people's behavior. But there are also some basic differences in how people from different cultures understand the causes of behavior. Some of these differences can be anticipated on the basis of what has been discussed already about cultural differences in perception and in characteristic social relations.

Cultural Differences in Attending to Context

Most of the world's people tend to pay more attention to social situations and the people who are involved in them than Westerners do. The kinds of social factors that are merely background for North Americans appear to be more salient to people from other cultures (Hedden et al., 2000; Ji, Schwarz, & Nisbett, 2000). Recall from Chapters 1 and 3 that Westerners generally define themselves in terms of their relationships with others less often than other people throughout the world do. Westerners think about themselves more in the context of personal goals, attributes, and preferences, whereas non-Westerners think about themselves more in terms of the social roles they occupy and their obligations to other people and institutions. Non-Westerners therefore have to pay more attention to others and to the details of the situations they find themselves in because

effective action typically requires coordinating their actions with those of other people.

Asians and Westerners do indeed differ in how much attention they give to context, even when perceiving inanimate objects. Kitayama, Duffy, Kawamura, and Larsen (2002) demonstrated this difference in a study with Japanese and American participants (**Figure 5.4**). After examining a square with a line drawn at the bottom, the participants went to another part of the room and saw a square of a different size; they had to draw either a line of the same length as the original or a line having the same length *in relation to* the original square. The Americans were better at the absolute judgment, which required ignoring the context, whereas the Japanese were better at the relative judgment, which required paying attention to the context.

Hedden and his colleagues used functional magnetic resonance imaging (fMRI) to examine activation of the frontoparietal area of the brain, which is associated with difficult perceptual judgments (Hedden, Ketay, Aron, Markus, & Gabrieli, 2008). There was more activity in that region when participants had to do the task that did not come as naturally to them: for East Asians when they made judgments about absolute line length and thus had to *ignore* the context, and for Westerners when they made proportional judgments and thus had to *attend to* the context.

Causal Attribution for Independent and Interdependent Peoples

Given the pronounced difference between Asians' and Westerners' attention to context, it should come as no surprise to learn that Asians are more inclined than Westerners to attribute an actor's behavior to the situation rather than to the person's dispositions. For example, attributions for the outcomes of sports events are not the same in independent cultures as they are in interdependent cultures. Coaches and players on sports teams in the United States tend to see positive outcomes as the result of the abilities of individual players and the actions of coaches

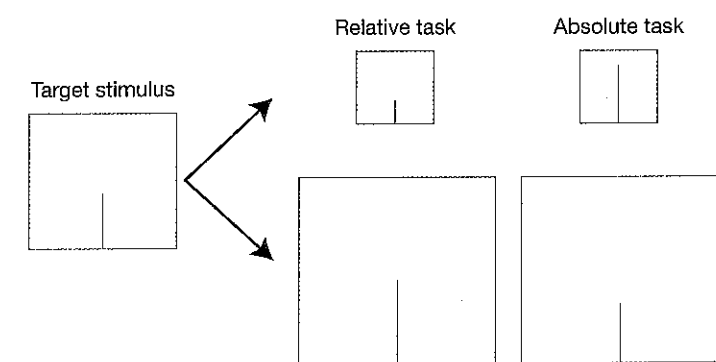
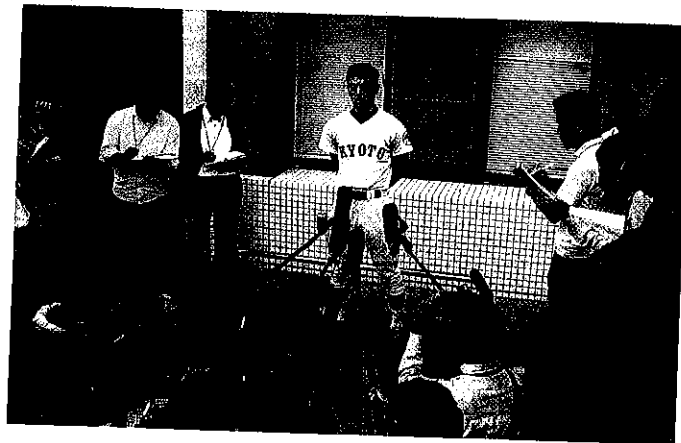


FIGURE 5.4
SENSITIVITY TO CONTEXT AND THE FRAMED LINE TASK

After seeing the target stimulus, participants were asked to draw a vertical line at the bottom of an empty square. In the relative task, the line must be drawn in the same *proportion* to the square as it was originally. In the absolute task, the new line must be exactly the same length as the original line. Japanese participants performed better at the relative task and Americans performed better at the absolute task. Source: Adapted from Kitayama et al., 2002.



CULTURAL DIFFERENCES IN ATTRIBUTION

Attributions of Western reporters for outcomes of sporting events tend to emphasize the traits and abilities of individual players. Attributions of East Asian reporters tend to emphasize the setting, the recent history of the two teams' experience, and other contextual factors.

("We've got a very good keeper in Bo Oshoniyi, who was defensive MVP of the finals last year") (Lau & Russell, 1980). In contrast, the attributions of Hong Kong coaches and players are more likely to refer to the other team and the context ("I guess South China was a bit tired after having played in a quadrangular tournament") (Lee, Hallahan, & Herzog, 1996).

Culture and the Fundamental Attribution Error

Is it reasonable to assume that the fundamental attribution error occurs in all cultures? After all, nearly everyone wishes to live in a just world; other people and their dispositions are everywhere more salient than the situation and therefore capture attention more readily than the situation; and all people have the same basic cognitive machinery. The error does indeed seem widespread. For example, the finding that people assume that a speech or an essay by another person represents that person's own opinion on the topic, even when the position advocated in the speech or essay was assigned, has been demonstrated in many societies, including China (Krull et al., 1996), Korea (Choi & Nisbett, 1998), and Japan (Kitayama & Masuda, 1997).

There is evidence, however, that the fundamental attribution error is more widespread and pronounced for Westerners than for Easterners. Westerners pay little attention to situational factors in circumstances in which Asians pay considerable attention to them and grant their influence. Consider the results of studies in which students inferred that a person who was required to express certain beliefs actually held those beliefs (Jones & Harris, 1967). Koreans make the same error as Americans when they read essays written by other people. But in a variation of this paradigm, participants themselves had to write an essay favoring a position specified by the experimenter before seeing someone else write a similar essay (Choi & Nisbett, 1998). With this direct experience of being required to advocate a particular position, Koreans recognized how powerful the situation was and therefore made no assumption about the attitudes of a target individual they subsequently observed. American participants, in contrast, learned nothing from the experience of being pressured to write what they did. They were just as likely as control participants to assume that the coerced targets believed what they said.

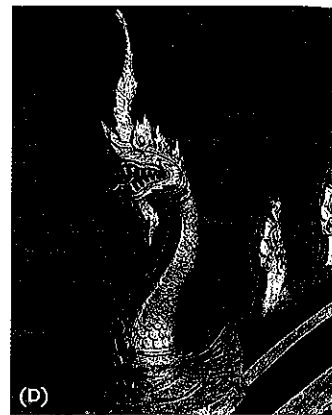
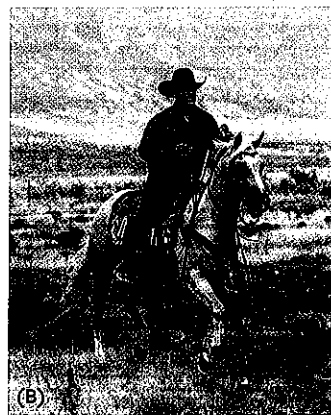
Koreans are also more likely to appreciate the implications of consensus information. They recognize that if many people behave in a particular way in a given situation, then the situation is probably the main determinant of behavior (Cha & Nam, 1985). Americans' attributions tend to be less influenced by consensus information. Finally, there is evidence that Asians are less likely to make an initial dispositional inference in circumstances where such inferences are made by the great majority of Westerners. Na and Kitayama (2011) presented participants with information about a person that could be expected to lead them to make an inference about the person's personality. For example, the statement "She checked twice to see if the gas was on in the stove before she left" might lead a participant to infer that the person was *careful*. When participants were later shown a picture of the person along with the word *reckless*, the American participants exhibited a pattern of brain activity associated with surprise, but the Korean participants did not. Thus, Asians are not just more likely to notice situational cues that might correct a dispositional inference; they might also be less likely to make a dispositional inference in the first place.

There are also differences in attributional tendencies among American subcultures. Puerto Rican children use fewer traits when describing themselves than Anglo-American children (Hart, Lucca-Irizarry, & Damon, 1986), and they are less likely to use traits to describe other people's behavior (Newman, 1991). Zarate, Uleman, and Voils (2001) found that Mexican-Americans and Mexicans were also less likely than Anglo-Americans to make trait inferences.

Priming Culture

In today's world of highly mobile populations, many people have spent significant parts of their lives in both independent and interdependent societies. Their experiences provide psychologists with an opportunity to better understand cultural influences on attribution. For example, Hong Kong has been the location for several fruitful cultural studies because the British governed Hong Kong for 100 years. The culture there is substantially Westernized, and children learn English when they are quite young, sometimes at the same time that they learn Cantonese.

People in Hong Kong, it turns out, can be encouraged to think in either an interdependent way or an independent way by being presented with images that suggest one culture or the other. Hong, Chiu, and Kung (1997) showed some participants the U.S. Capitol building, a cowboy on horseback, and Mickey Mouse. They showed other participants a Chinese dragon, a temple, and men writing Chinese characters using a brush. They also showed a control group of participants neutral pictures of landscapes. The investigators then showed all participants animated cartoons of an individual fish swimming in front of a group of other fish, behind the group, joining the group, departing from the group, and so on. They had the participants explain why the individual fish was behaving in these various ways. Participants who previously saw the American pictures gave more reasons relating to motivations of the individual fish and fewer explanations relating to the other fish or to the context than participants who saw the Chinese pictures. Participants who saw the neutral pictures gave explanations that were in between those of the other two groups.



PRIMING CULTURE

To prime Western associations and individualistic attributions, investigators might show participants a photo of (A) the U.S. Capitol building or (B) an American cowboy riding a horse. To prime Asian associations and collectivist attributions, the investigators might show participants a photo of (C) a Chinese temple or (D) a Laotian dragon.

Other natural experiments are made possible by the fact that many people living in North America are of Asian descent and think of themselves as partly Asian and partly Western. In one study, researchers asked Asian-American participants to recall either an experience that made their identity as an American apparent to them or an experience that made their Asian identity salient (Peng & Knowles, 2003; see also Benet-Martinez, Leu, Lee, & Morris, 2002). They then showed the participants a group of highly abstract cartoon vignettes suggesting physical movement, such as an object falling to the bottom of a container of liquid, and had them rate how much they thought the object's movement was due to dispositional factors (shape, weight) versus contextual factors (gravity, friction). Participants who had their American identity primed rated causes internal to the objects as being more important, compared with participants who had their Asian identity primed.

It's also possible to prime religious concepts and affect the degree to which attributions are dispositional. Research shows that Protestants are more concerned than Catholics with the state of their souls, and they are more likely to make internal, dispositional attributions for behavior (Li et al., 2011). When Protestants are primed to think about the soul, this increases their internal attributions still further. The same manipulation has no effect on the attributions of Catholics (Li et al., 2011).

Social Class and Attribution

So far in this section, we've looked at how people from different countries and from diverse ethnic and religious backgrounds vary in their tendencies to attribute behavior to situational versus dispositional causes. Recent studies find that another form of culture—social class—influences attribution in important ways.

Social class refers to the amount of wealth, education, and occupational prestige individuals and their families enjoy. Families with higher socioeconomic status enjoy greater wealth, education, and occupational prestige than those from less privileged backgrounds. And it turns out that within a particular culture or ethnicity, people from different levels on the socioeconomic ladder arrive at very different causal explanations for events.

Michael Kraus and his colleagues have found that lower-class or working-class individuals resemble individuals from interdependent cultures in their attributional tendencies (Kraus, Piff, & Keltner, 2009). The investigators had

participants make attributions for positive life events (getting into a desired graduate program) and negative life experiences (suffering a health problem). Lower- and working-class participants were more likely to invoke situational causes, whereas those higher up the socioeconomic ladder tended to invoke dispositional causes. When the investigators showed participants a person with a particular facial expression (smiling, sad, or angry) surrounded by people with the same or different expressions, those lower on the socioeconomic ladder were more likely to be swayed by the emotions of the faces in the surrounding context (also see Figure 3.3). The lower-class participants were less likely to rate a smiling target as happy when the other faces were frowning, for example. Investigators believe that these class differences are found because, similar to Asians, lower-class people live in a world where attention to other people is more essential for effective functioning than it is for higher-class people.

Why are some people richer than others? Class-related differences in attribution extend to how people from different class backgrounds explain why some people are rich and some are poor. Kraus and Keltner (2013) asked participants to offer explanations for why some people rise in society and others remain in the lower rungs of the class hierarchy. Wealthy participants were likely to endorse the belief that a person's standing in society is determined by genetic factors and a person's temperamental inclination to succeed or fail. Working class individuals are more likely to cite situational factors. Another study in this investigation found that upper-class individuals' tendency to attribute a person's lot in life to genetically based, biological factors led them to advocate for harsher punishments for students who have been found cheating and for citizens who have violated the law.

Dispositions: Fixed or Flexible?

Do Asians, Catholics, and people of lower social class think like "social psychologists," putting greater emphasis on situational determinants of behavior, whereas Westerners, Protestants, and people of higher social class think like "personality psychologists," putting more emphasis on dispositional determinants? Not quite. It may be more accurate to say that everyone is inclined to think in both of these ways. We know that Asians and Westerners both understand their fellow human beings in terms of the so-called Big Five personality dimensions of extraversion, neuroticism, agreeableness, conscientiousness, and openness to experience. These dimensions play almost as big a role in judging people's personalities, including their own personality, for Asians as they do for Westerners (Cheung et al., 2001; McCrae, Costa, & Yik, 1996; Piedmont & Chase, 1997; Yang & Bond, 1990).

Norenzayan, Choi, and Nisbett (1999), however, asked Korean and American college students a number of questions intended to tap their theories about the causes of behavior and found that although Koreans and Americans rated the importance of personality the same, the Koreans reported situations to be more important than did the Americans. The Norenzayan team also asked their participants several questions about their beliefs regarding how fixed or flexible personality is, including whether it is something about a person that can't be altered much or whether it can be changed. The Koreans considered personalities to be more changeable than the Americans did. The belief in the flexibility of personality is, of course, consistent with the view that behavior is substantially influenced by external factors.

social class The amount of wealth, education, and occupational prestige individuals and their families have.

The idea that personality is changeable is also consistent with the view—much more characteristic of interdependent people than independent people—that abilities can be changed by environmental factors and through sustained effort (Dweck, 1999; Dweck, Chiu, & Hong, 1995; Dweck, Hong, & Chiu, 1993). American students spend much less time studying than Asian students do (Stevenson & Stigler, 1992). The belief in the value of effort to overcome inadequacy is deeply rooted in the cultures of China, Korea, and Japan. Not surprisingly, Asian-Americans are more academically successful than European-Americans. Moreover, their occupational success far exceeds what would be expected on the basis of SAT/ACE scores.

← LOOKING BACK

People in interdependent cultures pay more attention to social context than Westerners do. Asians as well as Westerners are susceptible to the fundamental attribution error, but Westerners are more susceptible to it. For individuals reared in both interdependent and independent cultures, it is possible to prime the different ways of perceiving and attributing behavior. Social class also influences attributional tendencies: lower- and working-class people are more likely to attend to the surrounding circumstances, whereas middle- and upper-class people tend to make dispositional attributions. Protestants, whose concerns focus on the soul, are more likely to make dispositional attributions than Catholics.

Beyond the Internal/External Dimension

Everyday causal analysis often requires people to determine whether a given action is mainly due to something about the person involved or to the surrounding situational context. But this person/situation question is not the only one we ask, and it's not the whole story about everyday causal analysis. We often ask ourselves additional questions about someone's behavior to arrive at a more nuanced understanding of its meaning and to enable us to make more refined predictions about future behavior. In particular, we're often interested in understanding a person's intentions (Heider, 1958; Jones & Davis, 1965; Malle, 1999, 2004).

Think of it this way: people engage in causal analysis to make the world more predictable—to find the “glue” that holds all sorts of varying instances of behavior together. Sometimes that glue is a trait in the person—for example, her kindness explains her long hours at the soup kitchen, her unflinching politeness to everyone in the residence hall, and her willingness to share her notes with others in her class. At other times the glue is provided by knowing someone's intentions—for example, the long hours in the library, the ingratiating behavior toward the professor, and the theft of another student's notes all come together and make sense if we know that the individual has a particularly strong desire to get good grades (Malle, Moses, & Baldwin, 2001; Searle, 1983). One study found that across a wide range of circumstances, people explain intentional actions by referring to the actor's reasons (Malle, 2001). Reasons for action, of course, are many and varied, but the overwhelming majority of the reasons offered to

explain behavior fall into two classes: desires and beliefs. Why did the senator endorse an amendment banning the burning of the American flag? Because she *wants* to be reelected, and she *believes* she needs to appease her constituents. Why does the neighbor put up with his wife's abusive insults? Because he doesn't *want* to be alone, and he *believes* no one else would be interested in him.

← LOOKING BACK

When we want to understand a person's intentions, the attributional question we are most inclined to ask concerns the *reason* for the person's behavior. Understanding a person's reasons for a particular action, in turn, often requires understanding the person's beliefs and desires.



UNDERSTANDING OTHERS' INTENTIONS

We often try to understand other people's behavior by discerning their beliefs and desires. We might understand Texas Senator Ted Cruz's appearance at this rally, for example, by assuming that he wants to get elected, and he believes that winning over Jewish voters will help him do so.

Chapter Review

SUMMARY

From Acts to Dispositions: Inferring the Causes of Behavior

- People constantly search for the causes of events, and their attributions affect their behavior.
- People have different *explanatory styles*, which tend to be stable over time. A pessimistic style, attributing good outcomes to external, unstable, and local causes and bad outcomes to internal, stable, and global causes, is associated with poor health, poor performance, and depression.

The Processes of Causal Attribution

- The *covariation principle* is involved in making attributions. When a person engages in a given behavior across many situations and other people tend not to engage in that behavior, it's reasonable to attribute the behavior to the person. When the person engages in the behavior only in a particular situation and most others in the same situation also exhibit the behavior, it's reasonable to attribute the behavior to the situation.
- The ability to imagine what others would likely do in a given situation allows people to make use of the *discounting principle* and the *augmentation principle*. If situational constraints could plausibly have caused an observed behavior, people discount the role of the person's dispositions. If strong forces were present that would typically inhibit the behavior, but the behavior occurs anyway, they assume that the actor's dispositions were particularly powerful.
- *Counterfactual thoughts* can powerfully affect attribution. People often imagine what the outcome would

have been like "if only" something had occurred differently. Joy or pain in response to an event is amplified when counterfactual thinking encourages the thought that things might have turned out differently.

Errors and Biases in Attribution

- People's attributions are not always rational. People sometimes attribute events to causes that flatter themselves beyond what the evidence calls for, thus exhibiting the *self-serving attributional bias*.
- The *fundamental attribution error* is the tendency to attribute behavior to real or imagined dispositions of the person and to neglect influential aspects of the situation confronting the person. Even when it ought to be obvious that the situation is a powerful influence on behavior, people often attribute behavior to presumed traits, abilities, and motivations.
- One cause of the fundamental attribution error is the *just world hypothesis*: thinking that people get what they deserve and that bad outcomes are brought about by bad or incompetent people.
- Another cause of the fundamental attribution error is the tendency for people and their behavior to be more salient than situations.
- A final cause of the fundamental attribution error is the tendency for attributions to be made in a two-step process. People typically characterize others immediately and automatically in terms consistent with their behavior, and only later, or perhaps not at all, do they adjust this initial characterization to account for the impact of prevailing situational forces.
- There are *actor-observer differences* in attributions. In general, actors tend to attribute their behavior much more to situations than observers do, partly because actors can usually see the situations they confront better than observers can.

Culture and Causal Attribution

- There are marked cultural differences in susceptibility to the fundamental attribution error. Interdependent people are less likely to make the error than independent people, in part because their tendency to pay attention to context encourages them to look to the situation confronting the actor.
- When bicultural people are primed to think about one culture or the other, they make causal attributions consistent with the culture that is primed.
- Lower-class individuals, like people from interdependent cultures, tend to make more situational attributions compared with middle-class and upper-class individuals.

Beyond the Internal/External Dimension

- Much of the time, people are concerned with more than just whether to attribute behavior to the situation

versus the person. They're interested in discerning the intentions and reasons that underlie a person's behavior.

THINK ABOUT IT

1. Carla is the last person to be picked for dodgeball teams in her gym class. She thinks to herself, "Jeez, no one wants me for their team. I'm terrible at dodgeball. In fact, I'm terrible at all sports. No matter how much I work out or how hard I try, I'm never going to get any better." What are the three attribution dimensions that make up a person's explanatory style? Describe where Carla falls on these three dimensions. Overall, what is Carla's explanatory style? How do you know?
2. Can you think of a time when you committed the fundamental attribution error? What happened? Why do you think you made this mistake?
3. Curtis, a busy guy with good taste in music, has a friend who raves about a new band. Curtis wants to know whether it's worth his time to listen: Is the band actually awesome (an external attribution) or is his friend not all that discerning about music (an internal attribution)? Curtis recalls that his friend raves about the band every time he listens to them, although none of their other friends rave about the band, and his friend raves about every band. Describe the three components of the covariation principle, and explain how each one applies in this scenario. Based on this information, what should Curtis conclude? Is the band awesome or does his friend simply love all music?
4. Imagine you are single and decide to go to a speed-dating event, in which you will have a series of 5-minute dates with many people. You really care about getting to know what your dates are like. Given this situation, which types of behaviors would strongly signal the type of person your date is? What types of behaviors might you discount, that is, chalk up to the demands of the speed-dating situation? Apply the augmentation and discounting principles in your analysis.
5. Can you think of other aspects of our identity (besides culture, religion, or social class) that might influence the types of attributions we make? How so?
6. Mary, Travis, and Hussein stand to receive their awards at the National Spelling Bee. Mary, who won first place, receives her trophy with a smile on her face. The second-place winner, Travis, covers his face with his hands and sobs. Eventually, he politely receives his award despite the tears. When Hussein's name is called for the third-place prize, he grins and excitedly claims his award. Using what you learned in this chapter, explain Mary, Travis, and Hussein's (perhaps surprising) reactions to their respective prizes.

The answer guidelines for the think about it questions can be found at the back of the book . . . 

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