

It can be Argued that Attribution Theory does no more than Suggest that Individuals see the World Solely in the Light of Their Own Biases. To what Extent is this a Fair Interpretation of Attribution Theory?

Attribution theory analyses how we explain people's behaviour. Heider (1958), the founder of attribution theory, called his approach a 'common sense psychology'. He said that behaviour was shaped by internal and external factors. Internal factors were factors that could be controlled by the person. These were factors like ability and effort. External factors were out of the person's control. These were factors like difficulty of the task and luck.

Kelley (1967, 1973) followed Heider with the next addition to the attribution theory. Kelley questions what information is available to arrive at a causal attribution Kelley came up with the covariation principle. This stated that the behaviour was attributed to a cause when it is present, and absent when the behaviour is absent (Fincham 2001:200). Attention was now on what combinations of information lead to the three main types of causal attribution; person, entity and circumstances. McArthur (1972) experimentally investigated Kelley's covariation principle by giving participants three types of information. Generally, the results that McArthur gathered supported Kelley's combinations of information under which people make personal, external or circumstantial attributions. However, there were findings that suggested that people held attributional biases. The covariation model suggests that distinctiveness, consistency and consensus information are used equally. The subjects of McArthur's experiment placed distinctiveness as the most important, followed by consistency and then consensus. Garland (1975) showed that when people were able to view any information, only 23% of requests were for consistency, distinctiveness and consensus. While the covariation model, may accurately characterise how we use consistency, distinctiveness and consensus information, it fails to include other information that people may take into account when making attributions (Pennington et al. 1999).

Kelley's analysis of variance model sees the perceiver as a fairly rational person. It has been considered as a normative model, which indicates how perceivers should make accurate causal attributions (Fincham 2001:208). In reality however, perceivers do not rationally follow Kelley's model but make fundamental attribution errors. This is a tendency of perceivers to overestimate dispositional influences and underestimate situational influences on other people's behaviour (Myers 1993). This can lead people, even when rational thought leads us clearly to attribute the cause to situational factors, to attribute dispositional factors of a person's behaviour falsely.

Jones and Nisbett (1971) reasoned that this bias is due to our focus of attention being on the person, not the surroundings. If we have little knowledge of prior events, then it is hard to use situational factors to understand the subject's current behaviour. This leaves it difficult for the perceiver to assess and interpret the situational factors accurately. Whilst the situational factors may be insufficient, the dispositional factors are always prominent to the observer. Perceptual salience, or our visual point of view, helps explain why the fundamental attribution error is so widespread. We focus our attention more on people than on the surrounding situation because the situation is so hard to see or know (Aronson et al. 1999:130).

Aronson goes on to explain that when making attributions, people use the focus of their attention as a starting point. This starting point is the person being viewed. For example, if a football player misses a shot on goal, the viewer attributes the miss to the player's lack of ability and maybe other dispositional factors. The perceiver then realizes that this might not be the only explanation and looks to situational factors that could have affected the outcome, like a slippery surface for the footballer. However, the perceiver often does not shift towards the situational side enough and can leave a tainted attribution, which is biased towards dispositional factors. This has been described as a two-step process (Gilbert 1989, 1991, 1993). The perceiver attributes the cause dispositionally, and

then in the second step adjusts that belief when situational factors are looked at. However, if a person is distracted whilst explaining someone's behaviour, they may not continue to the next step, leaving the attribution on the subject alone (Aronson 1999:131). It is easy to create a first step opinion due to the information being ready at hand. The second step takes more analysis and conscious thinking.

This attribution error is subject to cultural variation. The Western world puts emphasis on the individual. It is a widespread belief that anyone can achieve what they want if 'they put their mind to it'. This immediately places causal attribution on what the subject has done to achieve what they have in life. More 'collective' cultures tend to become less dispositional and more situational (Fincham 2001:210). This can be seen in a piece of research carried out by Morris and Peng (1994). They compared two murder stories of a Chinese student murderer and a American postal worker murderer in both an American newspaper and a Chinese newspaper. The American paper place more dispositional attributions about the Chinese and American murders than the Chinese paper. This leads us to believe that Western cultures appear to be more like personality psychologists, viewing behaviour in dispositional terms (Aronson 1999:132). Only if they are led to think deeper about the event do they encompass situational factors. In contrast, Eastern cultures focus on situational factors when making attributions. If the type of culture we live in determines where we place attributions, people seem to see the world from the perspective of their own culture. The difference in views of the American and Chinese papers leads us to believe that there is not a single answer to where attribution lies, but a biased answer depending heavily on whether you belong to an individualistic culture or a collective culture.

The fundamental attribution error does not apply when making attributions to our own actions. Whilst we rely heavily on dispositional factors when making attributions about other people, but focus on situational factors when assessing the attributions of our own performance. When considering the attributions of a single event, the observer might attribute dispositional factors to the behaviour. On the other hand, the subject of that same event would be more likely to label situational attributions to the performance. As observers focus their attention on the subject, the subject's attention is on the situation. The subject is very rarely looking at themselves as they perform their actions. Storms' (1973) experiment involving the observing and videotaping of two conversationalists allowed the subjects to observe their own behaviour. After the conversation, each conversationalist and their observers made attributions about the conversationalists. The observers mainly attributed to dispositional factors, with the conversationalists doing the opposite. This then changed when the conversationalists watched the video of themselves in action. After looking at themselves, the conversationalists made more dispositional attributions. This change from situational to dispositional leads us to feel that attributions are made depending on whether we are the subject, or whether we are focusing on the subject.

The attribution theory is complicated further when our response to where the attributions of our performance lie depend on the success or failure of our actions. In success, we tend to place credit on ourselves by making dispositional attributions. However, failure leads us to make situational attributions, as if we were looking for a scapegoat. Kingdon (1967), interviewed a selection of American politicians and asked where the attributions of their campaign lied. The successful candidates heaped emphasis on dispositional factors like the effort they put in, their reputation and their strategy. However, when the candidate was classed as having failed, the candidate made attributions of the situational kind, like social trends and lack of funding. Fincham (2001) classes this self-serving bias into two subdivisions. In the instance of success, the subject is claiming self-enhancing bias and taking the credit for their actions. When it comes to failure, the subject applies a self-protecting bias in order to cast off responsibility for the failure. Again, with the same event we see different perspectives. The placing of attribution is not a standard practice. It depends on whether the subject wants to take credit for their actions or wants to shy away and blame situational factors.

There is also group-serving bias. Hewstone and Ward (1985) used group of people in Malaysia that was split into two smaller ethnic groups. It was split into a majority -Malay and minority-Chinese. When asked to explain the behaviour of a Malay, the majority group made dispositional factors when the behaviour was positive and situational factors when it was negative. In contrast, the majority group made situational attributions for positive Chinese behaviour and dispositional attributions for negative Chinese behaviour. The most obvious basis for intergroup attributions is to view your own group positively to boost self-esteem (Fincham 2001:217).

The person making the attributions is always in a situation that will cause bias to dispositional or situational factors when making attributions. The bias is normally subconscious and just a reaction to the information we are given. The information we receive and process allows us to form ideas and make attributions. In many cases, we do not receive the same information so are bound to come to different conclusions. On other occasions, when we do receive the same information as someone else, we may come to different conclusions to the other person because of our different cultures. Another time when alternative conclusions are reached may be when we are looking to keep our self-esteem. With so many different factors influencing our decision of where attributions lie, it seems that each individual sees the world through their own biases.