

Discuss at least two attributional biases, refer to evidence in your answer (10)

Attribution is judging the causes of behaviour, the decision is made that behaviour is caused by internal factors OR external factors. A dispositional attribution is made when we can decide that someone's behaviour is due to their personality or an internal cause. This means that the behaviour is seen as an outward manifestation of an inward quality. A situational attribution is made when we decide that someone's behaviour is the result of the situation or the circumstances which they find themselves in. This means that the cause is external or beyond the control of the person. In social psychology, the actor is the person producing the behaviour and the observer is the watcher of the behaviour.

The Fundamental Attribution Error is the general tendency observers have to decide that an actor's behaviour has an internal cause. We have the general belief that a person's behaviour and actions are due to their own personality traits. It is likely that this is because of an expectation that our behaviour and personality match or fit each other. A real life example is "He dropped the jug because he is clumsy"

Nisbett et al (1973) wanted to see if people tend to attribute the cause of a person's behaviour as due to an internal cause rather than external cause. Participants were asked to explain choices made by themselves and their friends (e.g. "why have you/has your friend chosen the uni course?") he found that the answers made about the friends behaviour were dispositional (due to the friends personality) the answers for their own behaviours were situational rather than dispositional. This suggests that we make fundamental attribution error and assume the behaviour of others – even people we know are due to their disposition or personality rather than circumstance.

The study is quite high in ecological validity as it is performed in real life situations (asking why themselves or a friend has done a specific university course is a common question in everyday life). There are cultural and developmental variations. Young children in western cultures explain actions in concrete, situational terms and only make attributions later on in childhood.

The self-serving bias is a bias which occurs when explaining the cause of success or failure. An actor attributes his own success dispositionally and others situationally. A real life example is "I passed the exam because I worked hard but he passed the exam because it was easy" or "I failed the exam because my teacher was useless, he failed because he is stupid"

Research was done by Johnson in 1964, he wanted to see if the causes of behaviour are explained in ways which protect our self-esteem or not. Teachers were asked to explain the academic performance of their pupils. It was found that when pupils performed badly, teachers said they weren't very bright or were lazy. When pupils did well, they said that their own good skills were the cause of their success. The judgements made by the teachers in both cases are self-serving and protect the self-esteem of the teachers. This means that we tend to deny responsibility for poor outcomes but accept it for good performances.

The study involved real teachers explaining performances of their own pupils and therefore the results are valid and support the fact what bias can be found. However, the sample of participants was biased. It is not known if such findings can be generalised to other teachers and people. Some research is found by using experienced rather than student teachers failed to produce consistent findings.

Another application of this bias is to explain why depressed people think in the way that they do. Abrahamson suggested that the thinking of depressed people is the opposite of a self-serving bias where good things that happen have situational causes (it was beyond my control) but bad things = dispositional (it's my fault) Therapy involves challenging this thinking and has been found to be extremely effective.