

How do people explain their own and other people's behaviour?

The term behaviour describes the actions of an organism in response to a given stimuli. The way in which people explain the behaviour of themselves and others is a topic of great interest to social psychologists. In order to understand the origin of behaviour and the behaviour of others, a process called attribution is used. Indeed attribution theory has been the predominant psychological account of people's behaviour explanations (Malle, 1999). Attribution theories are concerned with the perceived reasons for behaviour – how ordinary people explain both their behaviour and the behaviour of others. When trying to explain this behaviour, various factors are taken into consideration, for example personal characteristics. Consequently, when encountering a new person, people try and assign attributions to them to try and explain their behaviour.

Attribution research has been a topic of concern to psychologists for at least the last forty years. Heider was the first to propose a psychological theory of attribution, he suggested that one can talk about a “naive psychologist” (Heider 1958) as people tend to construct theories about themselves. People believe there is a reason behind their behaviour and that it is controllable. Therefore people try to understand other people's behaviour to discover their motives and arrive at a reasonable cause. In order to establish such causes, people need to form a clear view of the world and gain control over their environment. In this sense, Heider assumed that everyone is rational, which may not necessarily be the case.

One of the core reasons for attribution is the reaction to the cause of people's behaviour. This is triggered by meeting new people. Within this there are two different systems of explanations - internal, the inference that a person is behaving due to dispositional factors, such as attitude, and external, the inference that a person is behaving due to environmental factors. Psychologists are particularly interested in what makes people switch between these two explanations.

Following this Weiner developed a theoretical framework that has become a major model within social psychology. Weiner believed that attributions that referred to success and failure were based on three different areas: locus (internal or external); stability, whether the cause is stable or changes over time, and controllability. Therefore the theory relates the structure of thinking to the way in

which people behave. A full range of cognitions and emotions are incorporated and there is an explicit concern with the self (Weiner, 1985). Similarly, the model is backed by several experiments, however critics have suggested that the controllability dimension may be less important than Weiner first thought (Hogg & Vaughan, 2008).

Indeed attribution is a key concept in many everyday situations for explaining behaviour. For example, maladaptive attribution style (internal, stable and global) is considered to be a precondition for depression. Individuals with this attributional style blame negative events on internal factors and positive events on external factors. These people are thought to be more susceptible to depression. This is known as the "learned helplessness theory" and there is some evidence to support it. For example, therapies aimed at changing attributional styles have been effective at alleviating symptoms of depression.

However the best known attribution theory is Kelley's Co-Variation Model. This theory suggests that people take consensus (people reacting in the same way to stimulus); consistency (the extent to which behaviour co-occurs with a given stimulus) and distinctive (if behaviour is a common reaction to many stimuli) information of person's behaviour into account to see how such information co-varies. This is linked to internal and external attribution as the model suggests that an internal attribution will be made when there is low consensus and distinctiveness but high consistency, otherwise an external attribution is made (Brown, 2006). Once it is determined if it is internal or external, an assessment of the behaviour can be made. In terms of behaviour, this theory suggests that people simply assign a cause to something that needs a justification. This explains why people may swing from internal and external attributions.

Since consensus is such an important factor in this theory, it has been closely examined and psychologists have discovered that errors may occur as people do not necessarily ignore consensus information but rather provide their own consensus information (Hogg & Vaughan, 2008). Research has suggested that this is most likely to occur when people have strong beliefs about something. The co-variation model also poses problems in the sense that people do not always have the facts to make judgements about consensus, consistency and distinctiveness.

As shown with the false consensus effect, research has shown that a number of errors may occur when making decisions based on behaviour and attribution and people may not always make the best choice. One of these errors is the fact that people may underestimate or overestimate behaviour. This is known as the 'fundamental error bias' and may lead to people attributing behaviour due to internal reasons even though there are clear external causes. The 'actor-observer effect' may also lead to error as people often explain their own actions externally and other people's actions internally. This may be because people recognise others' behaviour as more distinct than their own.

It is clear that attribution, as a process, is important when trying to explain behaviour. However when making these attributions several other factors, such as external or internal attributions, may determine several decisions about the causes of behaviour. Despite this, people are poor 'scientists' when making decisions on attributions as they are often biased and errors may occur. Indeed behaviour is a constantly changing process, which is something these theories may not have accounted for. People have no opportunity to compare themselves to a similar self as there is no dimension of interpersonal variation. Indeed as Heider suggested, psychology is not yet a fully developed science (Heider, 1958) and therefore further research may be necessary in order to determine how conscious attribution really is.

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