

Attribution Theory

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In many cases, when we encounter a certain behavior from someone, we attribute this negative or positive behavior either to their personality traits or to the situation in hand. Attribution theory in sociology deals with this observation. Attribution theory can be defined as how we perceive behaviors and other information from individuals we interact with and how we link such behaviors to certain causes. These causes can be the events or context, i.e., situational, or can be based on our judgment on the person's personality, culture and beliefs, i.e., personal.



Introduction to Attribution Theory

Many psychologists have asked the question of **why people tend to look for causative explanations for others' behavior**. Heider argued that most people are simply naïve psychologists who prefer to find explanations for every behavior. Thus, people can link some behavior to the events that lead to the behavior or to the personality of the individual who expressed that behavior.

Additionally, it was noted that attributing behavior to persons or situations is **different among different cultures but is a universal phenomenon**. While western societies are more likely to judge someone's behavior by their personality traits, Asian cultures usually blame the situation or events for the negative behaviors.

Internal versus External Attribution

The observation by psychologists that most people attribute behaviors either to persons or to situations meant that a **clear distinction between the two attributions** needed to be made.

Internal attribution was defined as the process by which individuals explain others'

behaviors by causatively linking them to their personality traits, beliefs and culture.

External attribution, on the other hand, is where someone links others' behaviors to the situation, the events that lead to the behavior and the environment. Asian cultures are generally non-judgmental and very sensitive to others and prefer to use external attribution.

Intentional versus Accidental Behaviors and Attribution

Psychologists also noticed that people usually try to explain intentional behaviors by attribution compared to accidental behaviors. Therefore, a **link between motives and behavior** needs to be made before someone links certain behaviors to personality traits. This theory was put out by Jones and Davis in 1965 and helped explain why people sometimes choose internal attribution rather than external attribution.

Intentional behaviors usually have motives. Once a motive is linked to a certain behavior, people usually become more judgmental about the person who expresses that behavior, hence connects the behavior with the person and not with the situation.

Based on this, one can understand that behaviors that are freely chosen by an individual and are intentional, behaviors that are not accepted socially, behaviors that are believed to directly benefit or harm others, and behaviors that can have any impact on us are usually motivational and attributed to somebody's personality. On the other hand, accidental behaviors, behaviors that are socially acceptable and behaviors that do not affect us directly usually make us attribute them to the situation rather than to the person who expressed them.

Freely Chosen Behaviors	Accidental Behaviors
intentional not accepted socially benefit or harm others attributed to a specific person	socially accepted do not affect others directly attributed to situation

How Do We Define Behaviors as Motivational?

Psychologists then moved on to study how humans define certain behaviors as intentional, socially unacceptable or to have an impact on us personally. By identifying factors that lead us to use internal attribution, we can understand and later modify our behaviors to be more acceptable in society.

The first factor that was identified is **the consensus**. When someone's behavior agrees with another's behavior in each situation, their behavior is usually attributed to the situation rather than to them personally.

Example 1

For example, when someone checks the time on his or her phone while at dinner with friends, his behavior can be judged as negative versus normal based on whether other people also checked their phones or used their phones during the dinner. If he is the only person who used the phone, people might attribute this behavior to him personally rather than to the situation, i.e., it is getting late and tomorrow is a workday for example.

Example 2

Additionally, smoking can be judged as normal or negative behavior based on consistency. If the person smokes every time regardless of the situation and time, the behavior is considered normal and is usually not attributed to that person's personality. On the other hand, we tend to go for internal attribution when someone smokes only when he is very worried or stressed out.

Per this theory, we can notice that **we as humans prefer to correlate behavior with certain factors to define whether it was personal or situational**. This theory explains when and why we prefer to use internal versus external attribution of behaviors.

Necessary versus Sufficient Causes

In addition to correlating behavior with certain factors to understand, whether such behavior had a motivation was personal or not, we also tend to look for **causes for behaviors**. Such causes might be judged as necessary because we believe that without them an individual would not be able to express a certain behavior or sufficient because we believe that an individual expressed a certain behavior because of an 'excuse'.

A sufficient cause is often not a necessary cause; there may be other factors that may lead to the disorder. Necessary causes are therefore usually attributed for positive behaviors and sufficient causes are usually chosen for negative behaviors.

Example 1

Let us take the world of clinical research as an example to understand necessary and sufficient causes. A researcher who publishes many good papers and original articles in journals with high impact factor when he publishes a new paper, we usually attribute this success to his ability to be organized, to his scientific knowledge, and for being a highly-motivated person; internal attribution.

Example 2

If that same individual has a paper retracted from a journal, we already have a predetermined picture about that person and would explain that perhaps one of his students was responsible for the scientific or copyright mistake that leads to paper retraction. We might also say that the subject he is working on is very controversial and say that many papers are being retracted in the field. Therefore, we tend to use external attribution more in that situation.

The first example leads us to look for necessary causes. Causes we believe that without them someone will not be able to be scientifically successful in research. On the other hand, the second example shows sufficient causes. These causes are sufficient to explain the negative behavior and the negative consequence of that behavior – the paper being retracted.

References

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