

Correspondent Inference Theory

Authored by
mohammad looti

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Correspondent inference theory is a psychological theory proposed by Edward E. Jones and Keith Davis that "systematically accounts for a perceiver's inferences about what an actor was trying to achieve by a particular action."

Attributing intention

The problem of accurately defining intentions is a difficult one. For every observed act, there are a multitude of possible motivations. If a person buys someone a drink in the pub, he may be trying to curry favour, his friend may have bought him a drink earlier, or he may be doing a favour for a friend with no cash.

The work done by Jones and Davis only deals with how people make attributions to the person; they do not deal with how people make attributions about situational or external causes.

Jones and Davis make the reasonable assumption that, in order to infer that any effects of an action were intended, the perceiver must believe that (1) the actor knew the consequences of the actions (e.g., the technician who pushed that button at Chernobyl did not know the consequences of that action), (2) the actor had the ability to perform the action (could Lee Harvey Oswald really have shot John Kennedy?), and (3) the actor had the intention to perform the action.

Non-Common effects

The consequences of a chosen action must be compared with the consequences of possible alternative actions. The fewer effects the possible choices have in common, the more confident one can be in inferring a correspondent disposition. Or, put another way, the more distinctive the consequences of a choice, the more confidently you can infer intention and disposition.

Suppose you are planning to go on a postgraduate course, and you short-list two colleges - University College London and the London School of Economics. You choose UCL rather than the LSE. What can the social perceiver learn from this? First there are a lot of common effects - urban environment, same distance from home, same exam system, similar academic reputation, etc. These common effects do not provide the perceiver with any clues about your motivation. But if the perceiver believes that UCL has better sports facilities, or easier access to the University Library then these non-common or unique effects which can provide a clue to your motivation. But, suppose you had short-listed UCL and University of Essex and you choose UCL. Now the perceiver is faced with a number of non-common effects; size of city; distance from home; academic reputation; exam system. The perceiver would then be much less confident about inferring a particular intention or disposition when there are a lot of non-common effects. The fewer the non-common effects, the more certain the attribution of intent.

Low-Social desirability

People usually intend socially desirable outcomes, hence socially desirable outcomes are not informative about a person's intention or disposition. The most that you can infer is that the person is normal - which is not saying anything very much. But socially undesirable actions are more informative about intentions & dispositions. Suppose you asked a friend for a loan of £1 and it was given (a socially desirable action) - the perceiver couldn't say a great deal about your friend's kindness or helpfulness because most people would have done the same thing. If, on the other hand, the friend refused to lend you the money (a socially undesirable action), the perceiver might well feel that your friend is rather stingy, or even miserly.

In fact, social desirability - although an important influence on behaviour - is really only a special case of the more general principle that behaviour which deviates from the normal, usual, or expected is more informative about a person's disposition than behaviour that conforms to the normal, usual, or expected. So, for example, when people do not conform to group pressure we can be more certain that they truly believe the views they express than people who conform to the group. Similarly, when people in a particular social role (e.g. doctor, teacher, salesperson, etc.) behave in ways that are not in keeping with the role demands, we can be more certain about what they are really like than when people behave in role.

Expectancies

Only behaviours that disconfirm expectancies are truly informative about an actor. There are two types of expectancy. Category-based expectancies are those derived from our knowledge about particular types or groups of people. For example, if you were surprised to hear a wealthy businessman extolling the virtues of socialism, your surprise would rest on the expectation that businessmen (a category of people) are not usually socialist.

Target-based expectancies derive from knowledge about a particular person. To know that a person is a supporter of Margaret Thatcher sets up certain expectations and associations about their beliefs and character.

Choice

Another factor in inferring a disposition from an action is whether the behaviour of the actor is constrained by situational forces or whether it occurs from the actor's choice. If you were assigned to argue a position in a classroom debate (e.g. for or against the free-market economy), it would be unwise of your audience to infer that your statements in the debate reflect your true beliefs - because you did not choose to argue that particular side of the issue. If, however, you had chosen to argue one side of the issue, then it would be appropriate for the audience to conclude that your

statements reflect your true beliefs.

Although choice ought to have an important effect on whether or not people make correspondent inferences, research shows that people do not take choice sufficiently into account when judging another person's attributes or attitudes. There is a tendency for perceivers to assume that when an actor engages in an activity, such as stating a point of view or attitude, the statements made are indicative of the actor's true beliefs, even when there may be clear situational forces affecting the behaviour. In fact, earlier, psychologists had foreseen that something like this would occur; they thought that the actor-act relation was so strong - like a perceptual Gestalt - that people would tend to over-attribute actions to the actor even when there are powerful external forces on the actor that could account for the behaviour.

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