

Fundamental Attribution Error

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In social psychology, the fundamental attribution error (also known as correspondence bias or attribution effect) describes the tendency to over-value dispositional or personality-based explanations for the observed behaviors of others while under-valuing situational explanations for those behaviors. The fundamental attribution error is most visible when people explain the behavior of others. It does not explain interpretations of one's own behavior--where situational factors are often taken into consideration. This discrepancy is called the actor-observer bias.

As a simple example, if Alice saw Bob trip over a rock and fall, Alice might consider Bob to be clumsy or careless (dispositional). If Alice later tripped over the same rock herself, she would be more likely to blame the placement of the rock (situational).

The term was coined by Lee Ross some years after a now-classic experiment by Edward E. Jones and Victor Harris (1967). Ross argued in a popular paper that the fundamental attribution error forms the conceptual bedrock for the field of social psychology.

Jones wrote that he found Ross's term "overly provocative and somewhat misleading", and also joked, "Furthermore, I'm angry that I didn't think of it first." More recently some psychologists, including Daniel Gilbert, have begun using the term "correspondence bias" for the fundamental attribution error.

Classic demonstration study: Jones and Harris (1967)

Based on an earlier theory developed by Edward E. Jones and Keith Davis, Jones and Harris hypothesized that people would attribute apparently freely-chosen behaviors to disposition, and apparently chance-directed behaviors to situation. The hypothesis was confounded by the fundamental attribution error.

Subjects read pro- and anti-Fidel Castro essays. Subjects were asked to rate the pro-Castro attitudes of the writers. When the subjects believed that the writers freely chose the positions they took (for or against Castro), they naturally rated the people who spoke in favor of Castro as having a more positive attitude towards Castro. However, contradicting Jones and Harris' initial hypothesis, when the subjects were told that the writer's positions were determined by a coin toss, they still rated writers who spoke in favor of Castro as having, on average, a more positive attitude towards Castro than those who spoke against him. In other words, the subjects were unable to see the influence of the situational constraints placed upon the writers; they could not refrain from attributing sincere belief to the writers.

Explanations

There is no universally accepted explanation for the fundamental attribution error. Here are several

hypotheses of the causes of the error:

Just-world phenomenon. The belief that people get what they deserve and deserve what they get, which was first theorized by Melvin Lerner (1977). Attributing failures to dispositional causes rather than situational causes, which are unchangeable and uncontrollable, satisfies our need to believe that the world is fair and we have control over our life. We are motivated to see a just world because this reduces our perceived threats, gives us a sense of security, helps us find meaning in difficult and unsettling circumstances, and benefits us psychologically. Unfortunately, the just-world hypothesis also results in a tendency for people to blame and disparage victims of a tragedy or an accident, such as victims of rape and domestic abuse to reassure themselves of their insusceptibility to such events. People may even go to such extremes as the victim's faults in "past life" to pursue justification for their bad outcome.

Saliency of the actor. We tend to attribute an observed effect to potential causes that capture our attention. When we observe other people, the person is the primary reference point while the situation is overlooked as if it is nothing but mere background. So, attributions for others' behavior are more likely to focus on the person we see, not the situational forces acting upon that person that we may not be aware of. (When we observe ourselves, we are more aware of the forces acting upon us. Such a differential inward vs. outward orientation accounts for the actor-observer bias.)

Lack of effortful adjustment. Sometimes, even though we are aware that the person's behavior is constrained by situational factors, we still commit the fundamental attribution error. This is because we do not take into account behavioral and situational information simultaneously to characterize the dispositions of the actor. Initially, we use the observed behavior to characterize the person by automaticity. We need to make deliberate and conscious effort to adjust our inference by considering the situational constraints. Therefore, when situational information is not sufficiently taken into account for adjustment, the uncorrected dispositional inference creates the fundamental attribution error. It also explains that people commit to fundamental attribution error more when they have no motivation or energy (i.e. under cognitive load) to process the situational information.

Reducing the error's effects

A number of "debiasing" techniques have been found effective in reducing the effect of the fundamental attribution error:

Taking heed of "consensus" information. If most people behave the same way when put in the same situation, then the situation is more likely to be the cause of the behavior.

Asking oneself how one would behave in the same situation.

Looking for unseen causes; specifically, looking for less-salient factors.

It must be noted, however, that even when participants were made aware ulterior motives existed to take a particular position, such as with the pro- and anti-Fidel Castro essays mentioned above,

they were still prone to the fundamental attribution error.

Cultural differences in the error

Previous research has shown that cultural differences exist in the susceptibility of making fundamental attribution error: people from individualistic cultures are prone to the error while people from collectivistic cultures commit less of it. It has been found that there is a differential attention to social factors between independent peoples and interdependent peoples in both social and nonsocial contexts: Masuda and his colleagues (2004) in their cartoon figure presentation experiment showed that Japanese's judgments on the target character's facial expression are more influenced by surrounding faces than those of the Americans; whereas Masuda and Nisbett (2001) concluded from their underwater scenes animated cartoon experiment that Americans are also more likely than Japanese participants to mark references to focal objects (i.e. fish) instead of contexts (i.e. rocks and plants). These discrepancies in the salience of different factors to people from different cultures suggest that Asians tend to attribute behavior to situation while Westerners attribute the same behavior to the actor. Consistently, Morris & Peng (1994) found from their fish behavior attribution experiment that more American than Chinese participants perceive the behavior (e.g. an individual fish swimming in front of a group of fish) as internally rather than externally caused. One explanation for this difference in attribution lies in the way people of different cultural orientation perceive themselves in the environment. Particularly, Markus and Kitayama (1991) mentioned how (individualistic) Westerners tend to see themselves as independent agents and therefore prone themselves to individual objects rather than contextual details.

"Fundamental attribution error" vs. Correspondence bias"

The fundamental attribution error is commonly used interchangeably with "correspondence bias" (sometimes called "correspondence inference", although this term refers to a natural judgment that does not necessarily constitute a bias, whereas bias arises when the inference drawn is incorrect, e.g., dispositional inference when the actual cause is situational). However, there has been debate about whether the two terms should be further distinguished from each other. Three main differences between these two judgmental processes have been argued:

They seem to be elicited under different circumstances, as both correspondent dispositional inferences and situational inferences can be elicited spontaneously. Attributional processing, however, seems to only occur when the event is unexpected or conflicting with prior expectations. This notion is supported by a study conducted by Semin and Marsman (1994), which found that different types of verbs invited different inferences and attributions. Correspondence inferences were invited to a greater degree by interpretative action verbs (such as "to help") than state action or state verbs, thus suggesting that the two are produced under different circumstances.

Correspondence inferences and causal attributions also differ in automaticity. Inferences can occur spontaneously if the behavior implies a situational or dispositional inference, while causal attributions occur much more slowly (e.g. Smith & Miller, 1983).

It has also been suggested that correspondence inferences and causal attributions are elicited by different mechanisms. It is generally agreed that correspondence inferences are formed by going through several stages. Firstly, the person must interpret the behavior, and then, if there is enough information to do so, add situational information and revise their inference. They may then further adjust their inferences by taking into account dispositional information as well. Causal attributions however seem to be formed either by processing visual information using perceptual mechanisms, or by activating knowledge structures (e.g. schemas) or by systematic data analysis and processing. Hence due to the difference in theoretical structures, correspondence inferences are more strongly related to behavioral interpretation than causal attributions.

Based on the above differences between causal attribution and correspondence inference, some researchers argue that the fundamental attribution error should be considered as the tendency to make dispositional rather than situational explanations for behavior, whereas the correspondence bias should be considered as the tendency to draw correspondent dispositional inferences from behavior. With such distinct definitions between the two, some cross-cultural studies also found that cultural differences of correspondence bias are not equivalent to those of fundamental attribution error. While the latter has been found to be more prevalent in individualistic cultures than collectivistic cultures, correspondence bias occurs across cultures, suggesting differences between the two terms.