

# Attribution

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June 4, 2026

## RECOMMENDED CITATION

mohammad looti (2026). *Attribution*. PSYCHOLOGICAL SCALES. Retrieved from <https://scales.arabpsychology.com/?p=38368>

Attribution is a concept in social psychology referring to how individuals explain causes of behavior and events. Attribution theory is an umbrella term for various theories that attempt to explain these processes. Fritz Heider first proposed a theory of attribution *The Psychology of Interpersonal Relations* (1958). It was further developed by others such as Harold Kelley and Bernard Weiner.

## **Causes**

Fritz Heider argued that, as an active perceiver of the events, the average person continuously or spontaneously makes causal inferences on why the events occur. For example, they make inferences about why some people succeed on a task or they make inferences about how their own behavior influences someone else. Eventually, these inferences become beliefs or expectations that allow the person to predict and understand the events that they observe and experience.

## **Types**

### **Explanatory attribution**

People make explanatory attributions to understand the world and seek reasons for a particular event. Explanatory attribution plays an important role in understanding what is happening around us. For example, let's say Jaimie's car tire got punctured. Jaimie will make attributions by reasoning that it was the hole on the road that made the puncture. The tire puncture might be due to Jaimie's bad driving habit but by making attributions to the poor road condition, Jaimie has successfully made sense of this unfortunate event. Without the attributional explanations, Jaimie will be very embarrassed and discomforted to believe that she caused the puncture.

### **Predictive attribution**

Attributions not only serve as an explanation of an event but it can also predict future events. People want to know and understand why the event happened, but they also want to prevent it from happening again. Once people know why the event happened, their future is more predictable. For example, if Jaimie believes that the tire puncture is from the holes on the road, she can drive through the less holy road; if Jaimie thinks her driving habit contributed to the puncture, she can drive more carefully to avoid the similar incident. Similarly, people can use attributions to predict future events and to prevent the same incident from happening.

### **Interpersonal attribution**

Sometimes, when your action or motives for the action are questioned, you need to explain the

reasons for your action. Interpersonal attributions happen when the causes of the events involve two or more individuals. More specifically, you will always want to present yourself in the most positive light in interpersonal attributions. For example, let's say Jaimie and her boyfriend had a fight. When Jaimie explains her situation to her friends, she will say she tried everything to avoid a fight but she will blame her boyfriend that he nonetheless started a fight. This way, Jaimie is seen as a peacemaker to her friends whereas her boyfriend is seen as the one who started it all.

## Theories

### Common sense psychology

From the book *The Psychology of Interpersonal Relations* (1958), Fritz Heider tried to explore the nature of interpersonal relationship, and espoused the concept of what he called "common sense" or "naïve psychology". In his theory, he believed that people observe, analyze, and explain behaviors with explanations. Although people have different kinds of explanations for the events of human behaviors, Heider found it is very useful to group explanation into two categories; Internal (personal) and external (situational) attributions. When an internal attribution is made, the cause of the given behavior is assigned to the individual's characteristics such as ability, personality, mood, efforts, attitudes, or disposition. When an external attribution is made, the cause of the given behavior is assigned to the situation in which the behavior was seen such as the task, other people, or luck (that the individual producing the behavior did so because of the surrounding environment or the social situation). These two types lead to very different perceptions of the individual engaging in a behavior.

### Correspondent inference theory

Correspondent inferences state that people make inferences about a person when his or her actions are freely chosen, are unexpected, and result in a small number of desirable effects. According to Edward E. Jones and Keith Davis' Correspondent Inference Theory, people make correspondent inferences by reviewing the context of behavior. It describes how people try to find out individual's personal characteristics from the behavioral evidence. People make inferences on the basis of three factors; degree of choice, expectedness of behavior, and effects of someone's behaviors.

### Covariation model of attribution

When there is low consensus and distinctiveness, people make personal attributions for behaviors that are high in consistency (top row). On the other hand, people make stimulus attributions when there is high consensus and distinctiveness (bottom low).

Co-variation principle states that people attribute behavior to the factors that are present when a behavior occurs and absent when it does not. Thus, the theory assumes that people make causal attributions in a rational, logical fashion, and that they assign the cause of an action to the factor that co-varies most closely with that action. Harold Kelley's covariation model of Attribution looks to three main types of information from which to make an attribution decision about an individual's behavior. The first is consensus information, or information on how other people in the same situation and with the same stimulus behave. The second is distinctiveness information, or how the individual responds to different stimuli. The third is consistency information, or how frequent the individual's behavior can be observed with similar stimulus but varied situations. From these three sources of information observers make attribution decisions on the individual's behavior as either internal or external. Kelly's theory and the examples of prediction are represented in the diagram.

### **Three dimensional model of attribution**

Bernard Weiner proposed that individuals have initial affective responses to the potential consequences of the intrinsic or extrinsic motives of the actor, which in turn influence future behavior. That is, a person's own perceptions or attributions determine the amount of effort the person will engage in activities in the future. Weiner suggests that individuals exert their attribution search and cognitively evaluate casual properties on the behaviors they experience. When attributions lead to positive affect and high expectancy of future success, such attributions should result in greater willingness to approach to similar achievement tasks in the future than those attributions that produce negative affect and low expectancy of future success. Eventually, such affective and cognitive assessment influences future behavior when individuals encounter similar situations.

Weiner's achievement attribution has three categories:

- stable theory (stable and unstable)
- locus of control (internal and external)
- control (controllable or uncontrollable)

Stability influence individuals' expectancy about their future; control is related with individuals' persistence on mission; causality influences emotional responses to the outcome of task.

### **Bias and errors in attributions**

While people strive to find reasons for behaviors, they fall into many traps of biases and errors. Therefore, it's best to know those mistakes to avoid them. As Fritz Heider says, "our perceptions of causality are often distorted by our needs and certain cognitive biases". Here are some examples of attributional biases that people should look out for.

## **Fundamental attribution error**

The fundamental attribution error is a cognitive bias in which people put too much emphasis on internal, dispositional factors in explaining people's behaviors rather than explaining them in terms of situational factors. In other words, people believe an action was done because of the actor's personality rather than the situation faced by the actor. For example, when a student fails to turn in a homework assignment, a teacher is too ready to assume that the student was too lazy to finish the homework, without sufficiently taking into account the situation that the student was in.

## **Culture bias**

People in individualist cultures value individuals, personal goals, and independence.

People in collectivist cultures see individuals as members of groups such as families, work units, and nations, and tend to value conformity and interdependence.

Generally, North America and Western Europe embrace individualist culture while Asia, Latin America, and Africa embrace collectivist culture.

Research shows that culture, either individualist or collectivist, affects how people make attributions.

People from individualist cultures are more inclined to make fundamental-attribution error than people from collectivist cultures. Individualist cultures tend to attribute a person's behavior to his internal factors whereas collectivist cultures tend to attribute a person's behavior to his external factors.

Research suggests that individualist cultures engage in self-serving bias more than do collectivist cultures, ie individualist cultures tend to attribute success to internal factors and to attribute failure to external factors. In contrast, collectivist cultures engage in the opposite of self-serving bias ie self-effacing bias, which is: attributing success to external factors and blaming failure on internal factors (the individual).

## **Spotlight effect error**

The spotlight effect error is the tendency of an individual to overestimate the extent to which others are paying attention to the individual's appearance and behavior. That is, people believe that they are in the "spotlight" and that everyone is paying attention to them, as when a person drops a cup in a restaurant and gets embarrassed, believing that everyone has seen it. "The Barry Manilow t-shirt experiment" demonstrates the spotlight effect. Students got self-conscious when they were required to wear a t-shirt with an unpopular picture to classes. The students believed more than 50 percent of their classmates would notice their shirts and judge them, when in fact fewer than 20 percent even noticed the t-shirt.

## **Actor/observer difference**

People tend to attribute other people's behaviors to their dispositional factors while attributing own actions to situational factors. Basically, even in the same situation, people's attribution can differ depending on their role(actor or observer). For example, when a person gets a low grade on a test, he finds situational factors to justify the negative event such as saying that the teacher asked a question that she never went over in class. However, if other people get low grades on the test, he attributes the results to their internal factors such as laziness and inattentiveness in classes. The actor/observer bias is used less frequently with people one knows well such as friends and family since one knows how his/her close friends and family will behave in certain situation, leading him/her to think more about the external factors rather than internal factors.

### **Dispositional attributions**

Dispositional attribution is a tendency to attribute people's behaviors to their dispositions that is to their personality, character and ability. For example, when a normally nice waiter is being rude to his customer, the customer will assume he has a bad temper. The customer, just by looking at the attitude that the waiter is giving him, instantly decides that the waiter is a bad person. The customer oversimplifies the situation by not taking into account all the unfortunate events that might have happened to the waiter which made him become rude at that moment. Therefore, the customer made dispositional attribution by attributing the waiter's behavior directly to his personality rather than considering situational factors that might have caused the whole "rudeness".

### **Self-serving bias**

Self serving bias is attributing dispositional and internal factors for success and external, uncontrollable factor for failure. For example, if a person gets promoted, it is because of his/her ability and competence whereas if he/she does not get promoted, it is because his/her manager does not like him/her ( external, uncontrollable factor). Originally, researchers assumed that self-serving bias is strongly related to the fact that people want to protect their self-esteem. However, alternative information processing explanation came out. That is, when the outcomes match people's expectations, they make attributions to internal factors; when the outcome does not match their expectations, they make external attributions. People also use defensive attribution to avoid feelings of vulnerability and to differentiate himself from a victim of a tragic accident.

For example, people believe in just-world hypothesis that "good things happen to good people and bad things happen to bad people" to avoid feeling vulnerable. This also leads to blaming the victim even in a tragic situation. When people hear someone died from a car accident, they reassure that the accident will never happen to them by deciding that the driver was drunk at the time of the accident. People automatically decide that it was the driver's fault drunk-driving and thus it will

never happen to them. Another example of defensive attribution is optimism bias in which people believe positive events happen to them more than to the others and that negative events happen to them less than to the others. Too much optimism leads people to ignore some warnings and precautions given to them. For example, smokers believe they are less likely than other smokers to get a lung cancer.

## **Application of attribution**

### **Learned helplessness**

Learned helplessness was first found in animals when psychologists Martin Seligman and Steven F. Maier discovered that the classically conditioned dogs that got electrical shocks made no attempt to escape the situation. The dogs were placed in a box divided into two sections by a low barrier. Since one side of the box was electrified and the other was not, the dogs could easily avoid electrical shocks by hopping to the other side. However, the dogs just stayed in the electrified side, helpless to change the situation. This learned helplessness also applies to human beings. People feel helpless when they feel powerless to change their situation. This happens when people attribute negative results to their internal, stable and global factors leading them to think they have no control over their situation. Making no attempt to avoid or better the situation will often exacerbate the situations that people are faced and may lead them to clinical depression and related mental illnesses.

### **Perceptual salience and attribution**

When people try to make attributions about another's behavior, their information focuses on the individual. Their perception of that individual is lacking most of the external factors which might affect the individual. The gaps tend to be skipped over and the attribution is made based on the perception information most salient. The most salient perceptual information dominates a person's perception of the situation.

For individuals making behavioral attributions about themselves, the situation and external environment are entirely salient, but their own body and behavior are less so. This leads to the tendency to make an external attribution in regards to one's own behavior.

### **Criticism**

Attribution theory has been criticized as being mechanistic and reductionist for assuming that people are rational, logical and systematic thinkers. It turns out however that they are cognitive misers and motivated tacticians as demonstrated by the Fundamental attribution error. It also fails to address the social, cultural and historical factors that shape attributions of cause. This has been

addressed extensively by discourse analysis, a branch of psychology that prefers to use qualitative methods including the use of language to understand psychological phenomena. The linguistic categorization theory for example demonstrates how language influences our attribution style.

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