

ATTRIBUTION

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Primary Disciplinary Field(s): Social Psychology, Cognitive Psychology

1. Core Definition

Attribution refers to the cognitive process by which individuals infer or determine the causes underlying behavior, events, or outcomes in their social world. This inference acts as a causal explanation, transforming observed actions (e.g., a behavior) into coherent, predictable narratives (e.g., the underlying motive or skill level). The ability to make causal attributions is a fundamental requirement for navigating social life, as it allows individuals to predict future events and choose appropriate responses to others' actions. Attributions provide a necessary sense of control and stability within the environment.

Attributions are generally categorized along a key dimension: the locus of causality. An **internal attribution** (or dispositional attribution) assigns the cause of an event to factors within the person, such as personality traits, ability, mood, or effort. Conversely, an **external attribution** (or situational attribution) assigns causality to outside forces, such as environmental pressure, task difficulty, social norms, or luck. The source content illustrates a clear internal attribution scenario: "The professor made the attribution that the student caused his own failure in the course because he or she was poorly skilled, lacked aptitude to change, and did not have the self-control necessary for change." In this example, the professor attributes the failure entirely to stable, personal deficiencies rather than considering potential external factors.

2. Historical Development and Heider's Contribution

The systematic study of attribution began with the influential work of Austrian psychologist Fritz Heider. In his 1958 text, *The Psychology of Interpersonal Relations*, Heider introduced the foundational notion that people function as "intuitive psychologists," constantly analyzing behavior to determine its causes. Heider established the crucial distinction between personal (internal) and impersonal (external) causality, arguing that the need for causal understanding drives much of human social interaction.

Heider theorized that individuals generally prefer internal attributions because they offer greater predictive stability. If a person behaves aggressively because they possess an aggressive personality trait (internal cause), that behavior is highly likely to recur. If the aggression is purely a response to a temporary, high-stress situation (external cause), the prediction of future aggression is less reliable. This foundational dichotomy--situational versus dispositional--served as the starting point for all subsequent, more detailed theories of causal inference in social psychology, establishing attribution theory as a core psychological framework.

3. Kelley's Covariation Model

Building upon Heider's framework, Harold Kelley developed the sophisticated Covariation Model (1967), which describes the logical mechanisms people use to determine whether a behavior is caused by the actor (internal), the situation (external), or the target/object of the behavior (stimulus). The core premise of the model is that people look for causes that systematically covary with the effect: an effect is attributed to a cause that is present when the effect occurs and absent when the effect does not occur.

Kelley proposed that observers gather information across three critical dimensions to test covariation and arrive at a causal inference:

Consensus: How do other people react to the same stimulus? If many people exhibit the behavior (high consensus), the cause is likely external. If few people do (low consensus), the cause is internal to the actor.

Distinctiveness: Does the actor react the same way to other stimuli? If the behavior occurs only in this specific situation (high distinctiveness), the cause is external (related to the unique stimulus). If the actor behaves this way often across many contexts (low distinctiveness), the cause is internal.

Consistency: Does the actor always behave this way every time they encounter the stimulus? Consistency must be high for a reliable, stable attribution (whether internal or external) to be made. Low consistency suggests an attribution to transient chance or momentary circumstance.

For an observer to arrive at the strong internal attribution seen in the source content (that the student is poorly skilled), the perception must align with a specific pattern: **Low Consensus** (most students pass the course), **Low Distinctiveness** (the student fails many other courses or tasks), and **High Consistency** (the student fails this course repeatedly).

4. Weiner's Attributional Dimensions

Bernard Weiner extended the attributional framework by focusing specifically on achievement-related outcomes, such as success and failure. He moved beyond the simple internal/external dichotomy by proposing that causal attributions can be classified along three independent dimensions, which together dictate subsequent emotional and motivational consequences:

Locus of Causality (Internal vs. External): As previously defined, this determines whether the cause resides within the person or the environment.

Stability (Stable vs. Unstable): This dimension asks whether the cause is permanent and fixed over time (e.g., inherent talent or immutable task difficulty) or temporary and variable (e.g., transient effort, specific luck, or momentary illness). Stable attributions strongly influence future expectations.

Controllability (Controllable vs. Uncontrollable): This dimension assesses the degree to which

the actor can intentionally influence the cause. For instance, effort is highly controllable, while innate aptitude or sheer luck is generally uncontrollable.

Weiner's model is particularly significant in explaining motivation. If a student attributes their failure to an **internal, stable, uncontrollable** cause (e.g., "I am simply not smart enough"), they will likely experience feelings of shame and hopelessness, leading to reduced future effort and avoidance of similar tasks. Conversely, attributing failure to an **internal, unstable, controllable** cause (e.g., "I failed because I didn't study hard enough this time") preserves self-esteem and promotes future persistence, as the individual believes the outcome can be changed through modifiable factors.

5. The Fundamental Attribution Error

While the models proposed by Kelley and Weiner describe rational, systematic processes of attribution, extensive research in social psychology has revealed that human causal inference is highly susceptible to cognitive biases. The most prominent of these is the Fundamental Attribution Error (FAE), also known as the Correspondence Bias. The FAE is the robust tendency for observers to overemphasize internal, dispositional explanations for the behavior of others while simultaneously underestimating the powerful influence of situational factors.

The FAE causes people to automatically assume that an actor's behavior corresponds to their stable personality traits. For example, if a cashier is curt, an observer tends to conclude the cashier is inherently "rude" (dispositional), ignoring potential external causes such as a demanding supervisor, a malfunctioning register, or personal distress (situational). The primary psychological reason for the FAE is perceptual salience: the actor is the focal point of the observation, while the environmental context is often invisible or ignored, making the actor appear to be the most logical and powerful cause of the action. This bias helps explain why the professor in the source content immediately jumped to attributing the student's failure to poor skill and lack of self-control rather than to external factors like an unusually difficult curriculum or external life stressors.

6. Actor-Observer Bias and Self-Serving Bias

The attribution process is further skewed by additional biases that depend on the role of the individual making the judgment. The **Actor-Observer Bias** highlights a systematic divergence in attribution based on perspective: actors tend to attribute their own actions to situational factors, whereas observers attribute the same actions to the actor's disposition. This occurs because actors have access to a wealth of internal and situational information that observers lack; they are aware of their ever-changing motivations, moods, and specific environmental constraints. Conversely, observers primarily see only the overt behavior and the actor's visible presence.

The **Self-Serving Bias** is a motivationally driven tendency to protect and enhance self-esteem through selective attribution. When individuals experience success, they typically make internal,

dispositional attributions (e.g., "I succeeded because of my intelligence and hard work"). However, when they face failure, they resort to external, situational attributions (e.g., "I failed because the task was rigged or I had bad luck"). This bias is generally considered psychologically adaptive, helping individuals maintain a positive self-image and persevere, although extreme reliance on externalizing failure can prevent necessary personal reflection and improvement.

7. Significance and Applications in Applied Fields

Attribution theory is critical across numerous applied psychological disciplines because the way people explain causes profoundly affects emotional states, expectations, and interpersonal relations. In clinical psychology, attributional style--a person's habitual pattern of causal explanation--is fundamental to understanding vulnerability to mental health issues. A "pessimistic" attributional style, characterized by explaining negative events using internal, stable, and global causes, is strongly implicated in the development and maintenance of depression and learned helplessness. Therapeutic interventions, such as Cognitive Behavioral Therapy (CBT), often focus on retraining individuals to adopt a more optimistic, external, unstable, and controllable attributional style for negative events.

In organizational behavior and management, understanding attribution biases is essential for fair performance evaluation. Managers, prone to the Fundamental Attribution Error, might attribute an employee's low output to dispositional laziness without investigating situational barriers like inadequate training or faulty equipment. Similarly, in legal contexts, juries often rely heavily on attributions to determine culpability, weighing whether a criminal act was due to a stable, malicious personality (dispositional) or momentary, powerful environmental duress (situational). Thus, attribution is the lens through which social meaning is constructed and responsibility is assigned in both everyday interactions and structured systems.

Further Reading

[Attribution \(psychology\) - Wikipedia](#)

[Fritz Heider - Wikipedia](#)

[Harold Kelley - Wikipedia](#)

[Fundamental Attribution Error - Wikipedia](#)