

# Attribution Theory

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Attribution theory is concerned with how ordinary people explain the causes of behavior and events. For example, is someone angry because they are bad-tempered or because something bad happened?

A formal definition is provided by Fiske and Taylor (1991, p. 23):

“Attribution theory deals with how the social perceiver uses information to arrive at causal explanations for events. It examines what information is gathered and how it is combined to form a causal judgment”.

Heider (1958) believed that people are naive psychologists trying to make sense of the social world. People tend to see cause and effect relationships, even where there is none!

Heider didn't so much develop a theory himself as emphasize certain themes that others took up. There were two main ideas that he put forward that became influential: dispositional (internal cause) vs situational (external cause) attributions.

## Dispositional vs Situational Attribution

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### 1. Dispositional Attribution

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Dispositional attribution assigns the cause of behavior to some internal characteristic of a person, rather than to outside forces.

When we explain the behavior of others we look for enduring internal attributions, such as personality traits. This is known as the fundamental attribution error.

For example, we attribute the behavior of a person to their personality, motives or beliefs.

### 2. Situational Attribution

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The process of assigning the cause of behavior to some situation or event outside a person's control rather than to some internal characteristic.

When we try to explain our own behavior we tend to make external attributions, such as situational or environment features.

## Jones & Davis Correspondent Inference Theory

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Jones and Davis (1965) thought that people pay particular attention to intentional behavior (as opposed to accidental or unthinking behavior).

Jones and Davis' theory helps us understand the process of making an internal attribution. They say that we tend to do this when we see a correspondence between motive and behavior. For example, when we see a correspondence between someone behaving in a friendly way and being a friendly person.

Dispositional (i.e., internal) attributions provide us with information from which we can make predictions about a person's future behavior. The correspondent inference theory describes the conditions under which we make dispositional attributes to the behavior we perceive as intentional.

Davis used the term correspondent inference to refer to an occasion when an observer infers that a person's behavior matches or corresponds with their personality. It is an alternative term to dispositional attribution.

So what leads us to make a correspondent inference? Jones and Davis say we draw on five sources of information:

1. **Choice:** If a behavior is freely chosen it is believed to be due to internal (dispositional) factors.
2. **Accidental vs. Intentional Behavior:** Behavior that is intentional is likely to be attributed to the person's personality, and behavior which is accidental is likely to be attributed to situation / external causes.
3. **Social Desirability:** Behaviors low in sociable desirability (non conforming) lead us to make (internal) dispositional inferences more than socially undesirable behaviors. For example, if you observe a person getting on a bus and sitting on the floor instead of one of the seats. This behavior has low social desirability (non conforming) and is likely to correspond with the personality of the individual.
4. **Hedonistic Relevance:** If the other person's behavior appears to be directly intended to benefit or harm us.
5. **Personalism:** If the other person's behavior appears to be intended to have an impact on us, we assume that it is "personal", and not just a by-product of the situation we are both in.

## Kelley's Covariation Model

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Kelley's (1967) covariation model is the best-known attribution theory. He developed a logical model for judging whether a particular action should be attributed to some characteristic (dispositional) of the person or the environment (situational).

The term covariation simply means that a person has information from multiple observations, at different times and situations, and can perceive the covariation of an observed effect and its causes.

He argues that in trying to discover the causes of behavior people act like scientists. More specifically they take into account three kinds of evidence.

- **Consensus:** the extent to which other people behave in the same way in a similar situation. E.g., Alison smokes a cigarette when she goes out for a meal with her friend. If her friend smokes, her behavior is high in consensus. If only Alison smokes, it is low.
- **Distinctiveness:** the extent to which the person behaves in the same way in similar situations. If Alison only smokes when she is out with friends, her behavior is high in distinctiveness. If she smokes at any time or place, distinctiveness is low.
- **Consistency:** the extent to which the person behaves like this every time the situation occurs. If Alison only smokes when she is out with friends, consistency is high. If she only smokes on one special occasion, consistency is low.

Let's look at an example to help understand his particular attribution theory. Our subject is called Tom. His behavior is laughter. Tom is laughing at a comedian.

## 1. Consensus

If everybody in the audience is laughing, the consensus is high. If only Tom is laughing consensus is low.

## 2. Distinctiveness

If Tom only laughs at this comedian, the distinctiveness is high. If Tom laughs at everything, then distinctiveness is low.

## 3. Consistency

If Tom always laughs at this comedian the consistency is high. If Tom rarely laughs at this comedian, then consistency is low.

Now, if everybody laughs at this comedian, if they don't laugh at the comedian who follows and if this comedian always raises a laugh, then we would make an external attribution, i.e., we assume that Tom is laughing because the comedian is very funny.

On the other hand, if Tom is the only person who laughs at this comedian, if Tom laughs at all comedians and if Tom always laughs at the comedian then we would make an internal attribution, i.e., we assume that Tom is laughing because he is the kind of person who laughs a lot.

So what we've got here is people attributing causality on the basis of correlation. That is to say, we see that two things go together and we, therefore, assume that one causes the other.

One problem, however, is that we may not have enough information to make that kind of judgment. For example, if we don't know Tom that well, we wouldn't necessarily have the information to know if his behavior is consistent over time. So what do we do then?

According to Kelley we fall back on past experience and look for either

**1) Multiple necessary causes.** For example, we see an athlete win a marathon, and we reason that she must be very fit, highly motivated, have trained hard etc., and that she must have all of these to win

**2) Multiple sufficient causes.** For example, we see an athlete fail a drug test, and we reason that she may be trying to cheat, or have taken a banned substance by accident or been tricked into taking it by her coach. Any one reason would be sufficient.

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