ATTRIBUTIONS

Attributions are a special type of perception—perceptions about people.

Why do people do what they do? ***Because that's what makes sense when dealing with the people involved in this situation.*** Whatever the situation, we want to know what to expect—and what's expected of us-- so we'll know how to act. We want to be able to plan our actions. In order to do so, we need to be able to predict how others will behave. Many expectations are derived from the situational script, but the script doesn't tell us anything about the people playing the various roles. How these people will perform their roles is the biggest uncertainty in any situation. As a result, we are constantly trying to figure these people out. This endeavor is called the attribution process—we are trying to figure out how to attribute-- or assign responsibility for—people's behavior. There are basically two types of attributions: internal and external, or personal and situational. Either the ***person*** is in control of his/her behavior, or the ***situation*** is exerting influence upon him/her, to shape his/her behavior.

To illustrate the attribution process, I've asked our dot people to help me out. I want you to try to figure out the dot people's behavior. Part of my intent for doing this is to illustrate that rather than being some foreign concept, the attribution process is something we already do. The theory just articulates an unconscious process. On the screen there are several different dot-people. There are also two different situations—one in each of the upper corners. Watch the behavior of the dot people in these situations and see what you can deduce from their behavior. I want you to answer the question: what can we conclude about the "bouncyness" of the different dot people?

Okay, Blue you can go first.

Debrief #1: What can we conclude about Blue's bouncyness? He was bouncy in both the circle and square. And bouncy when he went back to the circle. Blue ***seems*** pretty bouncy. Chances are you chose either A-- that Blue is an inherently bouncy person--, or B-- that you need more information. It sure looks like Blue is a bouncy person, but we really don't know much about the two situations, since we have nothing to compare Blue's behavior to. So, let's withhold judgement until we find out a bit more. Okay, Red, your turn.

Debrief #2: What can we conclude now? Red bounced slowly in the circle, then quickly in the square, then slowly again in the circle. The variability in Red's behavior raises questions. Why did Red behave so differently in the two situations? Is Red a naturally slow or fast bouncer? By itself, Red's behavior would seem to be unpredictable. But if we compare Red's behavior with Blue's, we can search for patterns. We find both similarities and differences in their behavior. Red and Blue both bounced fast in the square. Since they both exhibited the same behavior, maybe there's something about the square that makes people bouncy. If that's true, then we couldn't necessarily infer that someone was bouncy just because they bounced there. By contrast, in the circle, since each dot exhibited **different** behavior, we can't conclude that the situation was controlling their bouncyness. Therefore the behavior observed in the circle is probably more reflective of each dot's **natural** inclination. The fact that Red bounced slowly both times he was in the circle, while Blue bounced fast both times, only reinforces that these are their preferred level of bouncyness. We would most likely conclude that Blue is basically a bouncy person. Red can be bouncy, but is more naturally a slow-bouncer. Okay, Green, you're up.

Debrief #3: What did we learn from that? Given our previous conclusion that there is something about the square that makes people bounce fast, to observe someone slow bouncing really stands out. Such contrasting behavior must come from a strong internal drive. This conclusion is further supported by Green's behavior in the circle. We already suspect that the circle allows people the freedom to manifest their natural behavioral tendencies, therefore, the fact that Green exhibits slow horizontal and random bounces confirms her natural, slow-bouncing tendencies.

We would therefore most likely conclude that Blue is basically a bouncy person. Red is probably naturally a slow bouncer, but can bounce fast with the best of them when required. And Green seems to be a non-conformist, enacting her slow bouncing wherever she goes.

Let's revisit these conclusions in light of attribution theory. According to the theory there are 3 key types of information people seem to use in making attributions. The three types of information were demonstrated in the illustration and include: distinctiveness, consistency and consensus.

Distinctiveness looks at the same person's behavior across different situations. If, like Blue, her behavior is uniform, there is little or no distinctiveness. If, however, the person's behavior varies from situation to situation, like Red's, then there is high distinctiveness. Similar behavior across different

situations indicates a constancy of character, or an internal attribution. Variation by the same individual across situations would indicate sensitivity to situational influences.

- Distinctiveness: same person + diff situations:

    - same behavior (low distinctiveness) = personal attribution;

    - diff behavior (high distinctiveness) = situational attribution.

Consensus looks at different people's behavior in the same situation. If different people exhibit the same behavior in a particular situation, like Red and Blue in the square, chances are there's something about the situation that is influencing their behavior. [similar behavior = similar situation]. If people exhibit different behavior in the same situation, like the circle, then the situation is obviously not very powerful in shaping their behavior, and their behavior most likely reflects their natural disposition.

- Consensus: diff people + same situation:

    - same behavior (high consensus) = situational attrib;

    - different behavior (low consensus) = personal attribution.

Consistency looks at the same person's behavior in the same situation over time. If a person's behavior changes over time, like Green's did in the circle, since the situation has stayed constant, any change is most likely attributable to some internal cause. If, however, a person's behavior remains constant over time, like Blue's and Red's, then it is hard to know if it's the situation or the person causing it—since nothing has changed. But when combined with other types of information, can still help us figure out people's behavior.

- Consistency: same person, same situation over time:

    - same behavior (high consistency) = ambiguous?

    - diff behavior (low consistency) = personal attribution.

We collect this type of information in order to make causal inferences about the source of people's behavior. By itself, some of this information can be hard to interpret, that's why we continually scan the situation and collect pieces of evidence to add to the puzzle. For example, we would probably

be much more confident of our attributions if we could watch the dots' behavior over a period of many visits to the circle and square situations. As we compare the behavior of people in different situations, and different people in similar situations, we start to narrow down the causal options. The more accurately we are able to predict people's behavior, the better we'll be able to plan our own!

Biases

When it comes to making attributions about people's behavior, researchers have found that most people-- at least most Americans-- will readily acknowledge the powerful situational forces influencing their **own behavior**. However, these same people tend to attribute **other people's** behavior to internal, personal causes and to downplay the importance of external, situational factors. This propensity is so strong that it has been labeled the "fundamental attribution error." This tendency implies that we tend to blame people for what they do, while shifting responsibility for our own behavior to external or situational causes. We use their behavior to make assumptions about their character, personality or intentions. Basically, Americans tend to assume that what a person does is a reflection of who they are. This presumption is striking in light of our tendency to explain away our own behavior due to the strong constraints/pressures we feel from the surrounding situation. It seems a bit odd that we attribute to others a strength of character of which we seem incapable?!?   This tendency to distort our attributions is refined further by a powerful self-serving bias. We tend to attribute our successes to internal causes (i.e., take credit for it) and our attribute our failures to external forces (shift blame). Of course for other people, we do the opposite: attach personal blame for their failures (they are inept, misguided or incompetent), and attribute their success to external forces (e.g., luck, cheating or unfair bias in their favor).

Self-attributions: As hinted at above, just like we make attributions about other people's behavior, we also interpret our own. Have you ever asked yourself the question: why did I just do that? Sometimes we act without thinking, and try to make sense out of our own behavior **after** the fact. We often employ identical reasoning process to explaining our own behavior as we do in accounting for other people's actions. Other theorists argue that, given the unique access to our own internal thought processes, our ability to make self-attributions and perceptions should be quite different from those we make about

people based solely upon external observations. Either way, people are as actively gathering information

about their own behaviors as they are about the behavior of other people.