ATTRIBUTION THEORY

http://webspace.ship.edu/ambart/Psy_220/attributionol.htm

Attribution - to explain by indicating a cause

ATTRIBUTION THEORY - motivational theory looking at how the average person constructs the meaning of an event based on his /her motives to find a cause and his/her knowledge of the environment.

Att. Theory basically looks at how people make sense of their world; what cause and effect inferences they make about the behaviors of others and of themselves. **Heider** states that there is a strong need in individuals to understand transient events by attributing them to the actor's disposition or to stable characteristics of the environment.

The purpose behind making attributions is to achieve **COGNITIVE CONTROL** over one's environment by explaining and understanding the causes behind behaviors and environmental occurrences.

Making attributions gives **order and predictability** to our lives; helps us to cope. Imagine what it would be like if you felt that you had no control over the world. (talk about later)

When you make attributions you analyze the situation by **making inferences** (going beyond the information given) about the dispositions of others and yourself as well as inferences about the environment and how it may be causing a person to behave.

Two basic kinds of attributions made: **INTERNAL and EXTERNAL**

INTERNAL - dispositional

EXTERNAL - situational

Consequences of making inferences:

1) gives order and predictability;

2) inferences lead to behavior - you will or will not behave in certain ways toward the actor based on your inferences and you will form expectations as to how the actor will behave.

The meaning of a behavior depends on the cause to which it is attributed (e.g. bystander studies - if we don't perceive the situation is caused by an emergency then we don't act like it is an emergency).

INACCURACIES in attribution: 1) misplaced blame (trials, eyewitness studies, whites vs. blacks); 2) blinds people to other causes

ATTRIBUTION THEORIES:

1) CORRESPONDENT INFERENCE THEORY (HEIDER AND JONES)

Given that an individual has **POWER** (is capable of being responsible for his own behavior) the factors affecting the attributions that the observer will make are:

1) the observer's (o's) knowledge of environmental factors impinging on the actor (a)

2) the observer's motives

3) the observer's perspective as a bystander or an actor

1) o's knowledge of the envir.

a) **free choice?** was the A pushed into his action by environmental forces (Bill hit Mary) or did he freely choose his action

CORRESPONDENT INFERENCE - describing a person's disposition in terms of his/her behavior

DISCOUNTING PRINCIPLE - the greater the awareness of the env. the less likely one is to make a C.I. The role of a given cause in producing a given effect is discounted if other plausible causes are present

NONCOMMON EFFECTS - the tendency to infer dispositional causes is influenced by what we initially expect an A to do. **Unexpected events elicit a search for explanation**.The more deviant the behavior from the expected, the greater the likelihood of making a CI

b) rewards and punishments

social approval (social desirability) - if A acts in a socially approved manner, can we be sure that the behavior was truly intended?

If a person acts in a socially disapproved manner what do we think?

Jones and Davis - interview study: Ss(subjects) listened to an interview . They were told what the ideal candidatewould be like. The candidate acted either consistently or inconsistently with the description. Ss judged the true dispositions of the As. What do you think happened? What kinds of attributions were made of the As?

c) status relationships

if a person has a high status, envir. factors are perceived as playing less of a role in his/her good behaviors and more in h/h bad behaviors.

Thiebaut and Riecken (1955) each S participated in a project with 2 other students (confederates)

Confed 1 - new Ph.D. (high status)and Confed 2 - freshman veteran (low status)

The S had to ask the confeds for help and both helped . Ss rated both students in terms of how much their behavior was internally/or externally motivated

Findings: C1 - high internal ; C2 - external

2) **the observer's motives** an observer's interest and needs become entangled in h/h attributions in many ways:

1.) they determine whether an attribution will be made;

2.) whether h/h seeks understanding in an open-minded way;

3.) whether h/h is preoccupied with a particular causal question;

4.) whether h/s will arrive at certain explanations rather than others

a) Hedonic Relevance and Personalism to the extent that the A's actions are rewarding or costly to the O, the behavior has hedonic relevance

Bershied Study - videotapes of blind dates in interaction with others were viewed. Ss made more attributions of the blind date than others on the tape, why?

To the extent that the O believes that theA's actions are meant to affect h/h, the **action is personal**. Think about the inferences you draw about others who you are interested in, especially if you perceive that h/h action was intended to gratify or spite you.

Pepitone Study - tickets to BB playoffs versus tickets for a high school game Ss interviewed by :

Mr. Friendly or Mr. Negative or Mr. Neutral

Ss had to rate their interviewer on friendliness and power

Findings?

b) self presentation motives "how do I look to others and to myself" The A's motives to present him/herself in as positive a way as possible.

self-enhancement and self-image protection (attributions for success and failure). Success has potential for enhancement of ourself-esteem if we perceive ourselves as responsible for that success. Failure has potential for destroying our self-esteem, if we perceive ourselves to be responsible for the failure.

Success - we make internal attributions for our successes

Failure - we make external attributions for our failures

Other's successes - we make more external attributions

Other's failures - we make more internal attributions

Studies on **ego-enhancing or self-serving biases**:

classroom teachers were asked to teach to student A or student B. student A performed well, B failed teacher's attributions of students, A is a good student, B a poor student continue the lesson test again, A does well, B does poorly or for some teachers, B does well . What were teacher's attributions? A smart (internal), B who did poorly (poor student - internal), B who did well - I'm a good teacher (external)

Coaches (Carver): assistant coaches and head coaches - team lost, why?

Self-handicapping - active attempts to arrange circumstances of behavior in order to protect self-perceptions as competent, intelligent people Do things to **avoid diagnostic informationabout their own characteristics and capabilities. Select settings that render performance feedback ambiguous.** By finding impediments that make a good performance less likely, the self-handicapperprotects his/her sense of competence. Regardless of the outcome, the handicapper can't lose. Underachievement is a self-hand. strategy.

c) motive for belief in effective control - the belief that a person can satisfy his/her owngoals through h/h own efforts. The need to believe that the world is orderly and not arbitrary. The need to believe that you have control over the world. "If I had just been in the right place at the right time", a need to believe that you can **control**your own destiny.

Lottery study: people were either given lottery tickets with the numbers already selected or were given the tickets but were allowed to select theirown numbers. Then the Ss were asked to sell their tickets back to the E. Who was more willing to makethe sell? Why?

Derogation of victims: the more negative the event that falls on someone the more internal attributions are made

Walster - presented stories about Carl. Ss were asked to assign responsibility for the consequences of the actions

Findings: as the consequences became more severe, , greater respon. was assigned to Carl. **Patty Hearst Syndrome** - victim assumes responsibility for what has happened

3) perspective of the observer as bystander or actor - (Actor/Observer effect) leads to the fundamental attribution error

Two roles: Actor and Observer

Fundamental attribution error: the actor tends to attribute his/her behaviors to the situation while the observer tends to attribute the actor's behavior to his/her disposition.

Contributing factors: cognitive - information processing and perception differences motivational - differences in self-presentation concerns and other motives

Perception and information processing: (Cognitive reasons)meaning is heavily related to the context in which it occurs and contextual information may be interpreted differently by A and O. There are two types of contextual information : **cause and effect.**

cause:

- **environmental** (task difficulty, incentives, etc.
- **intent** (what the A meant to do)
- knowledge of the envir. can be = for A and O
- knowledge of intent of A can only be inferred by O

effect:

- a) i**nformation about the nature of the act and its outcome**
- b) **information about the A's experiences or feelings**
- a can be = for A and O
- b only known to A, inferred by O

historical info about the A - not equal for A and O

A's focus in on the task and the situation; O's focus is on the actor

Storms_ what kinds of attributions do we make when the shoe is on the other foot

2. COVARIATION MODEL - Harold Kelley - focuses on conditions that lead a perceiver to attribute a cause to an environmental entity with which the actor interacts

Four rules of logic in making attributions:

- **Covariation** - if a behavior or object is always present when another behavior or object is present, they covary (like correlation).
- **Extremity** - the more extreme the effect of a behavior, the more likely we are to make internal attributions.
- **Discounting** - the more you know about environmental conditions surrounding a behavior, the less likely you are to make internal attributions.
- **Augmentation** - the strength of a facilitative force will be perceived as greater if an event occur in the presence of an inhibitory force

Look at the covariation of three factors when making attributions:

- **Distinctiveness of the entity -** the behavior only occurswhen the entity is present **(HIGH DISTINCTIVENESS)**. Fred is laughing at the movie, does he laugh at all movies **(LOW DISTINCTIVENESS)** or only Mike Myer's movies? The more specific the behavior is to this one entity the less it tells us about Fred.
- **Consensus** - do most others respond similarly? If most others respond the same way to this entity (laugh), then there is HIGH CONSENSUS, if most others do not respond this way to this entity there is LOW CONSENSUS
- **Consistency** - does the A act this way in the presence of this entity most of the time (HIGH CONSISTENCY) or only some of the time (LOW CONSISTENCY)

High Distinctiveness, High Consensus, and High Consistency leads to an External attribution; Low distinctiveness, Low Consensus, Low Consistency leads to an internal attribution

3. WEINER'S MODEL OF ACHIEVEMENT ATTRIBUTIONS; an
individual's causal attributions of achievement behaviors affect subsequent achievement behaviors and motivation; future achievement expectancies; persistence at similar tasks; pride or shame felt following success or failure.

Three dimensions:

- **stability (stable and unstable),**
- **locus of causality (internal and external)**
- **control (controllable or uncontrollable)**

- Stability attributions affect our predictions about the future ; controllability affects our persistence on task; causality attributions affect our affective(emptional) reactions to success and failure (the more the individual feels that his/her behavior is under h/h conscious control, the greater the affective response)

FOUR ATTRIBUTIONAL FACTORS: Effort, Task Difficulty, Luck, Ability - depending where you place the attribution in the matrix will determine expectations of future performance, shame, pride, etc.

		STABILITY	
		STABLE	**UNSTABLE**
CONTROL	**INTERNAL**		
	EXTERNAL		

Dweck - induce kids with a repeat failure history to make effort rather than ability attributions

Lepper and Green (1973) child's performance can be enhanced by inducing him to make internal attributions for success (look at high self-esteem people - usually see themselves as responsible for their successes and blame failures on external factors)

ATTRIBUTIONAL STYLE:

Optimistic - **negative events** are explained in terms of **external, unstable and specific causes** ; and **positive events to internal, stable, global causes.**

Pessimistic - negative events explained in terms of **internal, stable, and global terms** (I'm a bad person); positive events in terms of **external, unstable, and specific causes**

Individual differences in attributional style may lead to depression; health factors (immune system and stress - 99 veterans of W.W.II responses on a questionnaire about their wartime experiences (1946); explanatory style predicted health after age 45; more health problems with those who had a more pessimistic explanatory style. Baseball players with a pessimistic style died earlier than optimistic players.

Seligman - learned helplessness and attribution