

ATTRIBUTION THEORY

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Explaining human behavior.

History and Orientation

Heider (1958) was the first to propose a psychological theory of attribution, but Weiner and colleagues (e.g., Jones et al, 1972; Weiner, 1974, 1986) developed a theoretical framework that has become a major research paradigm of social psychology. Heider discussed what he called "naïve" or "commonsense" psychology. In his view, people were like amateur scientists, trying to understand other people's behavior by piecing together information until they arrived at a reasonable explanation or cause.

Core Assumptions and Statements

Attribution theory is concerned with how individuals interpret events and how this relates to their thinking and behavior. Attribution theory assumes that people try to determine why people do what they do. A person seeking to understand why another person did something may attribute one or more causes to that behavior. According to Heider a person can make two attributions 1) internal attribution, the inference that a person is behaving in a certain way because of something about the person, such as attitude, character or personality. 2) external attribution, the inference that a person is behaving a certain way because of something about the situation he or she is in.

Our attributions are also significantly driven by our emotional and motivational drives. Blaming other people and avoiding personal recrimination are very real self-serving attributions. We will also make attributions to defend what we perceive as attacks. We will point to injustice in an unfair world. We will even tend to blame victims (of us and of others) for their fate as we seek to distance ourselves from thoughts of suffering the same plight. We will also tend to ascribe less variability to other people than ourselves, seeing ourselves as more multifaceted and less predictable than others. This may well be because we can see more of what is inside ourselves (and spend more time doing this).

Conceptual Model

Not applicable.

Favorite Methods

Various methods have been employed in the measurement and categorization of attributions. Open-ended methods involve the researcher categorizing the oral replies of participants to open-ended questions. Derived score methods require the participant to rate his/her reasons for, for example, a success or failure on 5-point scales for different elements (e.g. ability or effort) related to the attribution dimensions. The direct rating method (e.g. [Benson, 1989]), requires the participant to state his/her reasons for the event and then map those reasons onto items referring to attribution dimensions.

Scope and Application

Attribution theory has been used to explain the difference in motivation between high and low achievers. According to attribution theory, high achievers will approach rather than avoid tasks related to succeeding, because they believe success is due to high ability and effort which they are confident of. Failure is thought to be caused by bad luck or a poor exam and is not their fault. Thus, failure doesn't affect their self-esteem but success builds pride and confidence. On the other hand, low achievers avoid success-related chores because they tend to (a) doubt their ability and/or (b) assume success is related to luck or to "who you know" or to other

factors beyond their control. Thus, even when successful, it isn't as rewarding to the low achiever because he/she doesn't feel responsible, it doesn't increase his/her pride and confidence.

Example

If, for example, a runner had already been expending high effort, but had failed to reach a race final, then encouraging him to attribute the failure to lack of effort might simply demoralise him (see, e.g. [Robinson, 1990]). If the qualifying standard were simply too difficult to meet, then encouraging attributions to lack of effort might serve little purpose, because increasing effort would probably do little to improve outcomes. If the wrong race strategy were used, then increasing effort would not logically lead to improved outcomes, if the same strategy were used in future.

References

Key publications

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