

How Fundamental is "The Fundamental Attribution Error"?

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The tendency that has become widely recognized as "the fundamental attribution error" may represent neither an error nor a fundamental tendency in social perception. Contrary to the assumption underlying the fundamental attribution error, the imputation of dispositional characteristics to individuals may be both logically and empirically tenable. Further, cogent address of the accuracy of attribution necessitates much greater progress toward establishing criteria of accuracy than has occurred to date. At present, evidence regarding a pronounced tendency to make attributions to situational factors may just as likely represent a fundamental error as does a strong tendency to make attributions to dispositional characteristics. Also discussed are a distinction between error and bias and some of the indirect evidence that has been represented as supporting the fundamental attribution error.

In an influential article, Ross (1977) has conceptualized and assimilated evidence about what he refers to as "the fundamental attribution error," which he defines as "the tendency for attributors to underestimate the impact of situational factors and to overestimate the role of dispositional factors in controlling behavior" (p. 183). As Ross notes, Heider (1958) originally discussed this tendency as a cognitive error or bias. Importantly, however, he did not call it a *fundamental* error. Rather, Heider (1958) qualified his position by suggesting that "under certain conditions, there is a tendency to attribute the outcome of an action to the person, even though its source may reside in the environment" (p. 96, emphasis added).

We argue, on the other hand, that on both logical and empirical grounds, it is indefensible to ascribe the status of the fundamental attribution error to the tendency to overestimate the causal role of dispositional factors. As theoretical and empirical work has evolved since the publication of Ross' article, the fundamental attribution error has been treated as a central concept in the field by

many investigators (e.g., Carroll, 1978; Jones, Riggs, & Quattrone, 1979; Miller, Baer, & Schonberg, 1979). It now even has been accorded the stature of a topical heading in major textbooks in social psychology (Worchel & Cooper, 1979, p. 180) and person perception (Schneider, Hastorf, & Ellsworth, 1979, p. 238). The term, therefore, seems to have become more than a hyperbole, whether or not it was originally meant as such. In presenting our argument, we are reacting to this emerging literature that we believe involves the unexamined use and acceptance of the notion that there is, in fact, a fundamental attribution error.

The Pervasiveness of Dispositional Attributions

In the last decade, scholars have suggested that a more tenable case can be made for an interpretation of social behavior that focuses on situational determinants of behavior than for an interpretation based on trait determinants (e.g., Jones & Nisbett, 1972; Mischel, 1968; Monson & Snyder, 1977). Nonetheless, Ross (1977), reviewed evidence indicating that naive perceivers (as well as, he noted, psychologists) exhibit a bias toward making dispositional attributions. Individuals tend to underestimate the importance of situational determinants and to overestimate the degree to which actions and outcomes reflect actors' dispositions. Possi-

We thank Gifford Weary and Robert Levin for comments on this manuscript.

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ble bases of this bias have been a matter of some analysis. For example, a principle of least effort in causal analysis was suggested by Harvey (Note 1) and Jones and Nisbett (1972) focused on the possible inadequacy of background information possessed by the observer. Whatever the bases may be, the fact of the bias has become rather well-accepted among scholars in personality and social psychology.

The potency of situational determinants of behavior hardly precludes the fact that dispositions also exercise considerable impact on behavior (e.g., Bowers, 1973; Jaccard, 1974). The argument advanced by Ross concerning "inherent" error in dispositional attribution coincides with the contention in personality research that judges attribute to people stability that does not exist in fact. However, this argument cannot establish that there is no stability in behavior across situations apart from such bias (Epstein, 1979). The fact that behavior may vary significantly with some situations does not preclude an underlying consistency across a larger sample of situations. Even Mischel's (1968, 1973) critiques of traditional trait approaches involved attempts to articulate how more valid personality variables might be conceived and studied.

Further, a distinction can be made concerning the particular purpose for which a causal explanation is being made. Averill (1973) has argued that dispositional characteristics of the actor are often invoked by observers as explanations for the actor's behavior and that such explanations are not necessarily invalid. Averill's argument was based on a discussion of the nature of dispositional qualities in which he maintained that: (a) perceived dispositions are not logically different from other types of perceptions and that their accuracy cannot be determined on a priori grounds, and (b) that there is nothing inherent in dispositional qualities "which would preclude them from being usefully ascribed to other persons, and to oneself *under appropriate circumstances*" (p. 281). Finally, it should be pointed out that there are situations in which people do *not* exhibit the tendency to overestimate dispositional characteristics. For example, in an experiment designed to test some of the im-

plications of the fundamental attribution error, Ajzen, Dalto, and Blyth (1979) reported that in conditions in which situational constraints are made salient, there is no tendency toward making dispositional attributions to an actor. In summary, we contend that theory, logic, and data may be advanced to support the meaningfulness of dispositional constructs in understanding behavior.

Accuracy in Interpersonal Perception

The concept of a fundamental attribution error in social judgment presupposes criteria for accuracy. Notably, neither Ross' analysis nor subsequent discussions of this concept have involved consideration of the accuracy issue. A classic article by Cronbach (1955) focused on many of the issues associated with assessing accuracy in social judgments (such as trait inferences). Cronbach emphasized the need for clear, defensible criteria of accuracy, and he identified several components of accuracy scores that represented response biases (e.g., recognition of stereotypical traits) rather than differential accuracy. According to Jones (1978), the pervasiveness of this reasoning and similar arguments presented during the 1950s led to a virtual abandonment of work on accuracy of social judgments and a reorientation toward the study of the processes involved in such judgments.

Given the difficulty in determining accuracy, it follows that situational biases in people's attributional analyses may be just as inaccurate (involve just as much error) as dispositional biases. The foregoing point deserves emphasis: Situational biases and errors may be just as "fundamental" as dispositional biases and errors. To grant the pronounced tendency to make dispositional attributions the status implied by the term fundamental attribution error is to prejudice the issue. The assignment of causality entails an interpretation of events, and this most often requires that one go beyond the information given in a particular situation. It is often the case that an event clearly does not have a unique (or comprehensible, in an ultimate sense) interpretation (see Ryle, 1963). Also, it might be argued that an attempt to demonstrate nonveridical attribution is tan-

tamount to "proving" causality—an overwhelming task in any science.¹ Although matters of accuracy and veridicality have not been disregarded by attribution theorists (e.g., see both Heider, 1958, and Kelley, 1972), we must be cautious in developing means to assess accuracy and veridicality before we uncritically assume that certain attributional tendencies are very informative about them.

A Distinction Between Error and Bias

The existence of a bias in either available information or information processing may or may not imply error. Kruglanski and Ajzen (Note 2) have suggested that bias may be defined as a subjectively based tendency to prefer a given cognition over its possible alternatives, whereas error may be defined as an inconsistency between a hypothesis and one or more propositions so strongly believed in as to be considered as facts (p. 21). As an example of Kruglanski and Ajzen's distinction between error and bias, consider the situation in which parents hold the belief that their daughter is a virgin—they have strong bias in entertaining that hypothesis. However, when the parents discover that their daughter is pregnant, indeed it would be correct to consider the former hypothesis of virginity as an error. As with the unexamined issue of accuracy, neither Ross or other theorists who have written about the fundamental attribution error have distinguished error from bias.

The Nature of the Evidence

The nature of the evidence that has been advanced to support the existence of the fundamental attribution error is indirect. Generally, it relates to pronounced tendencies to underestimate the influence of situational factors in affecting certain behaviors or to overestimate the role of dispositional factors. For example, Jones and Harris (1967) found such a relative overestimation in attribution to disposition for target persons' attitude statements. Bierbrauer (Note 3) reported a significant tendency to underestimate the role of situational forces in influencing obedience. With regard to this latter finding Ross (1977) stated, "Bierbrauer's partici-

pants showed the fundamental attribution error; that is, they consistently and dramatically underestimated the degree to which subjects in general would yield to those situational forces which compelled obedience in Milgram's situation" (p. 184). We submit that consistent and dramatic underestimation does not support the idea that a fundamental error in perception has been demonstrated. Although these data reflect a strong bias, the evidence hardly speaks to the question of whether the judgments are accurate or inaccurate. Issues pertaining to a theoretical conception of error as well as to empirical validation conditions for the demonstration of error would have to be addressed in order to make a cogent case about error. Further, it does not seem unreasonable to suggest that such evidence does not represent a phenomenon that is fundamental in nature.

Summary and Conclusion

We conclude that it is logically indefensible to assert that the pronounced tendency to make dispositional attributions represents a fundamental error. Dispositional qualities may in fact represent reasonable explanations for behavior in some circumstances. The general tendency to underestimate the importance of situational factors may be offset by certain demonstrable factors. Certainly there are conditions in which it is just as plausible to argue that situational attributional tendencies represent errors as it is to argue that dispositional attributional tendencies represent errors. Further, the equating of bias with error is logically problematic, and it can be argued that Ross fails to demonstrate empirically that the fundamental attribution error represents either. Thus, we must question not only how this tendency can be considered "fundamental," but also what Ross means by "error."

In this article we have discussed some of the logical and empirical problems in assuming the existence of any fundamental attribution error. In no way do we wish to detract from the contribution of Ross' (1977) anal-

¹ We thank an anonymous reviewer for suggesting this point.

ysis of the *shortcomings* of the naive attributor. His analysis is clear and persuasive in its articulation of many of these shortcomings. However, the fundamental attribution error has been accorded stature in much contemporary work on social perception without having been adequately or critically analyzed. Ironically, it implies a characterization of the naive attributor that can be challenged as readily as can the veridicality of dispositional determinants of behavior.

According to Heider (1958), "the search for relatively enduring aspects of our world, the dispositional qualities in nature, may carry us quite far from the immediate facts, or they may end only a step from them" (p. 80). There seems to be little point in arguing about the existence or pervasiveness of one type of attributional bias or another—rather, the more important question concerns the delineation of when and under what conditions various attributional biases occur. We believe that the uncritical acceptance of Ross' contention that a fundamental attribution error exists will hinder rather than facilitate this goal.

Reference Notes

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2. Kruglanski, A. W., & Ajzen, I. *Bias and error in lay epistemology*. Unpublished manuscript, Tel Aviv University, Tel Aviv, Israel, 1979.

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