

Introduction

Attribution theory - how we explain people's behaviour. Key early theorist was **Heider**, who noted behaviour of others is attributed either as being a disposition of the person (internal) or the situation a person is in (external).

How we attribute behaviour has consequences for our attitudes, beliefs and behaviour.

e.g. bad driving - disposition - they are selfish - therefore you are likely to act negatively towards the driver. However: bad driving - situation - they are unfamiliar with the particular road - more likely to give them extra room and consideration.

More crucially - attribution of behaviour when on a jury (self defence or malicious intent?); argument with partner (nasty person or under stress?); being unemployed (feckless person or national situation?)

Ross - 1977 - FAE - refers to our inbuilt bias to attribute the cause of other people's behaviour more to disposition than situation.

Extensive (experimental) research on FAE has been carried out over the last 50 years, showing ever more subtle differences in the way that FAE operates (atomist).

However, FAE is yet to be explained - e.g. no-one has offered a satisfactory explanation of why events are attributed more to the person than situation, children take until late adolescence to show this bias, why it is seen predominantly in Western cultures or why it appears to be affected by individual differences.

Origins of FAE

Heider - first noted person attributions more likely than situation attributions. Argued that people are understood as the 'prototype of origins' - the source of a change that brings about an effect (behaviour).

CRiSP Chapter 4 - Attribution - FAE

This view probably influenced by legal philosophy - i.e. that the person is 'first cause' and culpable for their own actions. Leads to the underestimation of situational factors.

Hewstone - highlights four of **Heider's** key ideas:

1. Process of attributing causality for events is similar to perception. Regardless of objective attributes of an object, perception is all important. We attribute more to people as we have a psychological need for stability, prediction and control in our lives.

2. This leads to the distinction between dispositional and situational attributions.

3. Person (dispositional) attributions are more often made for intentional than unintentional events

4. Three things affect how we attribute:
(a) factors within the perceiver
(b) properties of the object
(c) mediating conditions

Gestalt / phenomenological influences argued by some - e.g. **Shaver** (though **Heider** disagreed with the idea his work was phenomenological!)

His work is superseded by later theorists - especially **Jones and Davis** (1965) and **Kelley** (1967)

Attribution theory becomes even more micro in focus, and even more on the individual than the social. Research paradigm becomes firmly cognitive. Desire for testable and formal theories. Much useful research and many ingenious experiments has been the result.

Ross (1977) - Paper summaries work in attribution theory and FAE in particular.

1. Defines attribution theory as about understanding the causes and implications of events people witness.

2. Regards it as an advance in understanding from behaviourism's S-R paradigm. People are now 'intuitive psychologists', able to explain behaviour and draw inferences about actors and their environments.

3. The 'intuitive psychologist' is guided by a set of assumptions - e.g. pain should be avoided, pleasure is good and that conformity to expectations of peers is less demanding than non-conformity. Data is personal experience, but more often the reports of others in the media and so on. The environment is mastered (or not) by the accuracy of the hypotheses used. Error and bias may have serious consequences.

4. Argues attribution theory has much to owe to Gestalt psychology - i.e. it is about the subject's assignment of meaning to events in the lab or in everyday life.

Heider, Jones and Davis, Kelley (50s/60s): Two closely related tasks identified:

1. Causal judgement - the observer seeks to identify the cause(s) of a specific effect, outcome or action.

2. Social inference - the observer infers the attributes of what is relevant - i.e. the dispositions of the actors and the properties of the situation to which they have responded.

Later (1970s), a third task also became of interest:

3. Prediction of outcomes and behaviour.

e.g. does a politician really mean what they promise (it is their true belief) or are they just promising because the situation demands it.

All three tasks are interrelated - judgements + inferences lead to predictions.

But, problems are apparent, according to **Ross**.

1. Causal judgement

Research has focused on how internal dispositions or external factors are credited as being the explanation for particular events.

But there are methodological problems with this:

‘Jack bought the house because it was so secluded’ may be coded as an external attribution, but:

‘Jill bought the house because she wanted privacy’ may be coded as an internal attribution!

This problem occurs when it is the content of the statement that is attended to rather than its form.

2. Social Inference

Jones and Davis (1965) - Correspondence

If someone learns Joan has given money to charity, they may attribute it to a generous personal disposition. However, they may also attribute it to an external social pressure or incentive to give.

Measurement of the participant’s willingness to attribute something about Joan’s traits etc. is therefore possible - e.g. by using a Likert scale to rate Joan’s generosity and another to determine their degree of confidence in their inference.

But there are methodological problems with this too:

(a) Different participants will use a different point on these scales to indicate the same judgement of generosity/confidence

(b) The meaning created is affected by the instructions given to participants and the context of the research

(c) There is no way for a participant to say ‘it depends’

3. Predictions of behaviour

Allows simple and unambiguous questions to be used and objective scoring of responses.

e.g. a researcher can give participants a number of similar episodes to test what they think of an actor’s degree of generosity.

Or: they can ask what percentage of people / students / women etc. would be as generous as Joan?

It is therefore possible to generate estimates of how ‘people in general’ will respond to a particular situation.

It is therefore possible to evaluate the accuracy of such predictions, by comparing them to what happens in real life and also to see which direction any dispositional or situational bias occurs.

Sources of bias

What are the sources of bias which lead people to misinterpret events?

Heider, Jones and Davis, Kelley - suggest biases are ‘ego-defensive’ (motivational origin) - so people attribute success to their own efforts and failure to the situation.

Achievement tasks and teaching performances from many researchers provide evidence of this asymmetry.

However, this research has been challenged:

1. Participants’ private perceptions may not be the same as their overt judgements

2. Asymmetry shown in biases may not be due to motivational factors - it may be that the actor has been successful before at such a task and so they expect to be successful again and so failure is therefore attributed to situational causes.

Empirical research has also challenged the idea that biases are motivational in nature - e.g. **Ross, Bierbrauer and Polly** - instructors rate their own performance as more important at determining failure than success of their learners and learner’s efforts as less critical for failure than success.

There is little analysis or evidence however of non-motivational bias. **Heider (1958)** - identified FAE as:

‘the tendency for attributers to underestimate the impact of situational factors and to overestimate dispositional factors in controlling behaviour.’

Jones and Nisbett - actor/observer effect - actors and observers diverge in susceptibility to FAE.

e.g. Where actors attribute their behaviour to the situation, observers are more likely to attribute the actor’s behaviour to dispositional factors.

Kelley - actors are held more responsible for acts that lead to reward than those which prevent loss or punishment.

Bierbrauer - replication of **Milgram** obedience experiment shows observers consistently underestimate how far ‘participants’ will go along the shock scale before stopping. - i.e. their obedience would be dispositional, rather than situational - in other words, observers make the FAE too.

Critique:

1. **Ross** acknowledges focus on minutiae, micro work.
2. The focus is on the individual and lab experiments.
3. Faith in gradual accumulation of facts misguided - **Kelly**.
4. Even **Ross** questions the simple internal-external distinction - e.g. Jack and Jill example.
5. No solutions offered to the problems of establishing causal judgement/social inferences.

Langdridge and Butt (2004) - Phenomenological perspective.

1. Age, culture, individual differences, mood and method affect the FAE.
2. Objective thought is the wrong focus for social psychology - 'lived experience' is more important.
3. **Merleau-Ponty's** arguments can be used to create an overarching framework to help understand the existing knowledge about the FAE.

The starting point for much research into F AE is that it is the automatic outcome of perceptual processes - **McArthur and Baron**.

But:

1. FAE is learned - young children make situational rather than dispositional attributions
2. It is not universal across cultures. It occurs in the West, but often not in other places (but arguable)
3. FAE is affected by experimental manipulation
4. FAE is mood dependent - happy moods induce more dispositional attributions and sad ones fewer.
5. FAE is not demonstrated face to face, but with pen and paper.

Trope (widely supported) explanation of FAE:

Attribution has two stages - spontaneous identification followed by a deliberate inferential process.

Situational expectancies subtracted from disposition implied by observed behaviour and then combined with prior information about the actor to make the judgement.

Quattrone - FAE has three stages - categorisation,

characterisation and correction.

Experimental support for these cognitive models from may researchers - e.g. **Pelham and Krull**.

Vonk - dispositional attributions are made as we have a need to predict and control future behaviour.

Sabini et al - internal vs external notions of causality are misguided - e.g. in the way **Ross** argues (Jack and Jill). Behaviour is a product of person + environment.

e.g. the addict - can be understood as having internal cravings but is also under the external control of the drug they crave.

People therefore don't have a tendency to attribute dichotomously, but they underestimate the importance of specific factors.

For **Sabini** therefore, such a conclusion means that the FAE is not worth investigating. **Fein**, although agreeing the internal-external distinction is not correct, does not believe it is also the end of FAE, and neither does **Ross** - too many limitations in **Sabini's** idea of an ego-syntonic/ego-dystomic explanation.

Lipe - has tried to bring attribution and FAE theories together under a counterfactual information framework. Parsimonious model, but lacks face validity and empirical support.

Bottom line - although there is a huge body of work on FAE, there is no unifying theory which can account for it in cognitive social terms.

Instead of cognitive explanations, **Langdridge and Butt** propose an understanding of FAE built on **Merleau-Ponty's** existential phenomenology.

1. Anti-dualist - perception is our direct contact with the world, everything is embodied and intersubjective. We can never achieve a value-free perspective.

2. Consciousness is 'I can', not 'I think'; objective thought is not an appropriate focus for psychology.
3. Empiricism and intellectualism are the two contrasting strategies psychologists have used to explain how we have internal representations of the external world - making perception problematic. For **Merleau-Ponty**, there is no separation between subject and object.

Empiricism over privileges the objective realm (e.g. behaviourism); Intellectualism over privileges the mental realm (e.g. cognitive social psychology).

Perception is more Gestaltist - i.e. between the person and the world. Lived world is always therefore ambiguous, more than one interpretation is always possible - e.g. Necker cube. Not surprising we have contradictory attitudes! There is no 'inner man' - 'man is in the world and only in the world does he know himself'

Attitudes are therefore always contextual - not fixed.

Ryle - Intellectualism = Cartesian category error - there are not two categories of events - mental and material - instead, they are two alternative constructions of the same thing 'two different discursive registers' - **Crossley**.

Phenomenology proposes embodied subjects naturally read each others intentions directly. There is no need to explain how one mind communicates with another, as there is no mind-body dualism.

Therefore, our embodiment allows us to read other people's intentions directly - it is an intersubjective understanding. It is not due to a cognitive process of inference - there is no time to do this!

Can be used to understand why children are less prone to FAE - development implies a move from a shared lived world to one differentiated into subjects and objects.

Therefore, FAE rests on an assumption of dualism - Ryle's 'ghost in the machine'.

Orthodox views of FAE take us into the internal world - and away from how things are patterned intersubjectively. (e.g. Gestalt figure and ground ideas - a circular relationship between subject and object)

Instead of FAE, a phenomenological social psychology would study the way people construct meanings in their social world as part of their project. It should be about understanding experience, not cause and effect relationships.

We are always in relation to the world - therefore perception (hence attribution) involves a relationship between the person and the world which cannot be unpicked.

The model of the person is one of an embodied individual who is always in relation with the social world - not an information processor in a social context.

Methods of investigation are therefore first-person accounts of experience, rather than experiments.

Knowledge of FAE is therefore not universal nor ahistorical. Instead it is embedded in the history and culture in which that knowledge was produced.

Criticism:

Social psychoanalytic perspective - what about the role of unconscious processes in attributing causality?

Discursive perspective - language represents the lived world - so the focus should be on conversational contexts of the FAE phenomenon.