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FOCUS QUESTIONS

1. Helen is angry with her husband Lewis who avoids approaching his boss for a pay rise. Lewis argues that the timing is not right. Helen says he simply fails to face up to people. How are these attributions different in kind? Watch Helen and Lewis debate this issue in the video Social perception (go to Student resources > Chapter 3 of MyPsychLab at www.pearson.com.au/vaughan7).

2. You read a newspaper report about a rape case in which the defence lawyer pointed out that the young woman who was the victim was dressed provocatively. What attributional error is involved here?

3. The job market was tight and Rajna began to worry that she might be made redundant. Then she heard a rumour that the worst had come—several staff were about to be fired. She was itching to pass this on to the next colleague whom she saw. Why would Rajna want to spread the rumour further?
Seeking the causes of behaviour

People are preoccupied with seeking, constructing and testing explanations of their experiences. We try to understand our world to make it orderly and meaningful enough for adaptive action, and we tend to feel uncomfortable if we do not have such an understanding. In particular, we need to understand people. Through life most of us gradually construct adequate explanations (i.e. theories) of why people behave in certain ways; in this respect, we are all ‘naive’ or lay psychologists. This is extraordinarily useful, because it allows us (with varying accuracy) to predict how someone will behave, and possibly to influence whether someone will behave in that way or not. Thus, we gain some control over our destiny.

People construct explanations for both physical phenomena (e.g. earthquakes, the seasons) and human behaviour (e.g. anger, a particular attitude), and in general such explanations are causal explanations, in which specific conditions are attributed a causal role. Causal explanations are particularly powerful bases for prediction and control (Forsterling & Rudolph, 1988).

In this chapter, we discuss how people make inferences about the causes of their own and other people’s behaviour, and the antecedents and consequences of such inferences. Social psychological theories of causal inference are called attribution theories (Harvey & Weary, 1981; Hewstone, 1989; Kelley & Michela, 1980; Ross & Fletcher, 1985). There are seven main theoretical emphases that make up the general body of attribution theory:

1. Heider’s (1958) theory of naive psychology
2. Jones and Davis’ (1965) theory of correspondent inference
3. Kelley’s (1967) covariation model
4. Schachter’s (1964) theory of emotional lability
6. Weiner’s (1979, 1985) attributional theory

We discuss the first six of these below and then deal with intergroup attribution by itself in greater detail later in the chapter.

How do we attribute causality, and why is it important?

People as naive psychologists

Fritz Heider (1958) believed it was crucially important for social psychologists to study people’s naive, or commonsense, psychological theories, because such theories influenced ordinary people’s everyday perceptions and behaviour. For example, people who believe in astrology are likely to have different expectations and are likely to act in different ways from those who do not. Heider believed that people are intuitive psychologists who construct causal theories of human behaviour, and because such theories have the same form as systematic scientific social psychological theories, people are actually intuitive or naive psychologists.

Heider based his ideas on three principles:

1. Because we feel that our own behaviour is motivated rather than random, we tend to look for the causes and reasons for other people’s behaviour in order to discover their motives. The search for causes does seem to pervade human thought, and indeed it can be difficult to explain or comment on something without using causal language. Heider and Simmel (1944) demonstrated this in an ingenious experiment in which people
who were asked to describe the movement of abstract geometric figures described them as if they were humans with intentions to act in certain ways. Nowadays, we can witness the same phenomenon in people’s often highly emotional ascription of human motives to inanimate figures in video and computer games. The pervasive need that people have for causal explanation reveals itself most powerfully in the way that almost all societies construct an origin myth, an elaborate causal explanation for the origin and meaning of life that is often a centrepiece of a religion.

Because we construct causal theories in order to be able to predict and control the environment, we tend to look for stable and enduring properties of the world around us. We try to discover personality traits and enduring abilities in people, or stable properties of situations, that cause behaviour.

In attributing causality for behaviour, we distinguish between personal factors (e.g. personality, ability) and environmental factors (e.g. situations, social pressure). The former are examples of an internal (or dispositional) attribution and the latter of an external (or situational) attribution. So, for example, it might be useful to know whether someone you meet at a party who seems aloof and distant is an aloof and distant person or is acting in that way because she is not enjoying that particular party. Heider believed that, because internal causes, or intentions, are hidden from us, we can only infer their presence if there are no clear external causes. However, as we see below, people tend to be biased in preferring internal to external attributions even in the face of evidence for external causality. It seems that we readily attribute behaviour to stable properties of people. Klaus Scherer (1978), for example, found that people made assumptions about the stable personality traits of complete strangers simply on the basis of hearing their voices on the telephone.

Heider identified the major themes and provided the insight that forms the blueprint for all subsequent, more formalised, theories of attribution.

From acts to dispositions

Ned Jones and Keith Davis’ (1965; Jones & McGillis, 1976) theory of correspondent inference explains how people infer that a person’s behaviour corresponds to an underlying disposition or personality trait—how we infer, for example, that a friendly action is due to an underlying disposition to be friendly. People like to make correspondent inferences (attribute behaviour to underlying disposition) because a dispositional cause is a stable cause that renders people’s behaviour predictable and thus increases our own sense of control over our world.

To make a correspondent inference, we draw on five sources of information, or cues (see Figure 3.1):

1 Freely chosen behaviour is more indicative of a disposition than is behaviour that is clearly under the control of external threats, inducements or constraints.

2 Behaviour with effects that are relatively exclusive to that behaviour rather than common to a range of other behaviours (i.e. behaviour with non-common effects) tells us more about dispositions. People assume that others are aware of non-common effects and that the specific behaviour was performed intentionally to produce the non-common effect—this tendency has been called outcome bias (Allison, Mackie & Messick, 1996). So, for

Religions are one expression of our most basic need to understand the world we live in. Millions of Catholics hope that their new Pope will satisfy this need.

Internal (or dispositional) attribution

Process of assigning the cause of our own or others’ behaviour to internal or dispositional factors.

External (or situational) attribution

Assigning the cause of our own or others’ behaviour to external or environmental factors.

Correspondent inference

Causal attribution of behaviour to underlying dispositions.

Non-common effects

Effects of behaviour that are relatively exclusive to that behaviour rather than other behaviours.

Outcome bias

Belief that the outcomes of a behaviour were intended by the person who chose the behaviour.
example, if a person has to choose between behaviour A and behaviour B, and both produce roughly the same effects (i.e. no non-common effects) or a very large number of different effects (i.e. many non-common effects), the choice tells us little about the person’s disposition. However, if the behaviours produce a small number of different effects (i.e. few non-common effects—e.g. behaviour A produces only terror and behaviour B produces only joy), then the choice does tell us something about that person’s disposition.

3 **Socially desirable** behaviour tells us little about a person’s disposition, because it is likely to be controlled by societal norms. However, socially undesirable behaviour is generally counter-normative and is thus a better basis for making a correspondent inference.

4 We make more confident correspondent inferences about others’ behaviour that has important consequences for ourselves: that is, behaviour that has **hedonic relevance**.

5 We make more confident correspondent inferences about others’ behaviour that seems to be directly intended to benefit or harm us: that is, behaviour that is high in **personalism**.

Experiments testing correspondent inference theory provide some support. Jones and Harris (1967) found that American students making attributions for speeches made by other students tended to make more correspondent inferences for freely chosen socially unpopular positions, such as freely choosing to make a speech in support of Cuba’s president at the time, Fidel Castro.

In another experiment, Jones, Davis and Gergen (1961) found that participants made more correspondent inferences for out-of-role behaviour, such as friendly, outer-directed behaviour by someone who was applying for an astronaut job, in which the required attributes favour a quiet, reserved, inner-directed person.

Correspondent inference theory has some limitations and has declined in importance as an attribution theory (Hewstone, 1989; Howard, 1985). For instance, the theory holds that correspondent inferences depend to a great extent on the attribution of intentionality, yet unintentional behaviour (e.g. careless behaviour) can be a strong basis for a correspondent inference (e.g. that the person is a careless person).

There is also a problem with the notion of non-common effects. While correspondent inference theory maintains that people assess the commonality of effects by comparing chosen

**Figure 3.1** How we make a correspondent inference

To make an inference that a person’s behaviour corresponds to an underlying disposition, we draw on five sources of information.
and non-chosen actions, other research indicates that people simply do not attend to non-occurring behaviours and so would not be able to compute the commonality of effects accurately (Nisbett & Ross, 1980; Ross, 1977). More generally, although we may correct dispositional attributions in the light of situational factors, this is a rather deliberate process, whereas correspondent inferences themselves are relatively automatic (Gilbert, 1995).

**People as everyday scientists**

The best known attribution theory is Harold Kelley’s (1967, 1973) **covariation model**. Kelley believed that in trying to discover the causes of behaviour people act much like scientists. They identify what factor covaries most closely with the behaviour and then assign that factor a causal role. The procedure is similar to that embodied by the statistical technique of analysis of variance (ANOVA), and for this reason Kelley’s model is often referred to as an ANOVA model. People use this covariation principle to decide whether to attribute a behaviour to internal dispositions (e.g. personality) or external environmental factors (e.g. social pressure).

In order to make this decision, people assess three classes of information associated with the co-occurrence of a certain action (e.g. laughter) by a specific person (e.g. Tom) with a potential cause (e.g. a comedian):

1. **Consistency information**—does Tom always laugh at this comedian (high consistency) or only sometimes laughs at this comedian (low consistency)?
2. **Distinctiveness information**—does Tom laugh at everything (low distinctiveness) or only at the comedian (high distinctiveness)?
3. **Consensus information**—does everyone laugh at the comedian (high consensus) or is it only Tom who laughs (low consensus)?

Where consistency is low, people **discount** the potential cause and search for an alternative (see Figure 3.2). If Tom sometimes laughs and sometimes does not laugh at the comedian, then presumably the cause of the laughter is neither the comedian nor Tom but some other covarying factor: for example, whether or not Tom smoked marijuana before listening to the comedian or whether or not the comedian told a funny joke or not (see McClure, 1998, for a review of the conditions under which discounting is most likely to occur). Where consistency is high, and distinctiveness and consensus are also high, one can make an external attribution to the comedian (the cause of Tom’s laughter was the comedian), but where distinctiveness and consensus are low, one can make an internal attribution to Tom’s personality (Tom laughed at the comedian because Tom is simply the sort of person who tends to laugh a lot).

McArthur (1972) tested Kelley’s theory by having participants make internal or external attributions for a range of behaviours, each accompanied by one of the eight possible configurations of high or low consistency, distinctiveness and consensus information. Although the theory was generally supported (see review by Kassin, 1979), there was a tendency for people to under-use consensus information. There are also some general issues worth considering:

- Just because people can use pre-packaged consistency, distinctiveness and consensus information to attribute causality (the case in experimental tests of Kelley’s model), this does not mean that in the normal course of events they do.

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**Covariation model**

Kelley’s theory of causal attribution—people assign the cause of behaviour to the factor that covaries most closely with the behaviour.

**Consistency information**

Information about the extent to which a behaviour Y always co-occurs with a stimulus X.

**Distinctiveness information**

Information about whether a person’s reaction occurs only with one stimulus, or is a common reaction to many stimuli.

**Consensus information**

Information about the extent to which other people react in the same way to a stimulus X.

**Discount**

If there is no consistent relationship between a specific cause and a specific behaviour, that cause is discounted in favour of some other cause.
There is evidence that people are actually poor at assessing the covariation of different events—they are poor statisticians (Alloy & Tabachnik, 1984).

There is no guarantee that people are using the covariation principle—they may attribute causality to the most salient feature or to whatever causal agent appears to be similar to the effect (Nisbett & Ross, 1980).

If people do attribute causality on the basis of covariance or correlation, then they certainly are na"ive scientists (Hilton, 1988)—covariation is not causation.

Another drawback of the covariation model is that consistency, distinctiveness and consensus information require multiple observations. Sometimes we have this information: we may know that Tom does indeed laugh often at almost anything (low distinctiveness), and that others do not find the comedian particularly amusing (low consensus). At other times, we may have, at best, incomplete information or even no information from multiple observations. How do we attribute causality under these circumstances? To deal with this, Kelley (1972a) introduced the notion of causal schemata—beliefs or preconceptions, built up from experience, about how certain kinds of cause interact to produce a specific effect. One such schema is that a particular effect requires at least two causes (called the ‘multiple necessary cause’ schema): for example, someone with a drink-driving record must have consumed a certain amount of alcohol and have been in control of a vehicle. Although the notion of causal schemata does have some empirical support (Kun & Weiner, 1973) and does help to resolve attributional problems raised by the case of a single observation, it is by no means uncritically accepted (Fiedler, 1982).

### Extensions of attribution theory

#### Explaining our emotions

Making attributions also plays a role in defining emotions. Our emotions have two distinct components: a state of physiological arousal, and cognitions that we use to label the arousal as an emotion, such as fear or excitement. Although the arousal and label usually go hand-in-hand and our thoughts can generate the associated arousal, in some cases unexplained arousal can be experienced as different emotions depending on what kind of attributions we make for what we are experiencing. A major contributor to theory and research in this area is Stanley Schachter (1964, 1971; for a review of his work see Reisenzein, 1983). One of his...
Research classic 3.1

The context affects how we label an emotion

In the late 19th century the famous psychologist William James turned the usual account of how we experience an emotion on its head. As ordinary folk, we might believe that our mental images cause the body to react, and define our feelings as an emotion. However, James argued that first the body responds automatically to a stimulus, and then we interpret our bodily responses on the basis of what is going on around us: if we see a bear, we run, and a little later our pounding heart tells us that we are afraid.

One of Stanley Schachter’s experiments dealing with ‘emotional lability’ brought this idea into the laboratory and gave it an attributional flavour (Schachter & Singer, 1962). The key condition was one in which adrenalin was administered to male volunteers causing them to feel aroused (an increase in heart rate), but were not informed what the drug was or what would happen. The aim was to show that the drug-induced arousal would be interpreted differently according to the context, of which there were two. In the first context, a confederate in the same room engaged in silly antics and made paper aeroplanes, which led the volunteers to report feeling euphoric. In the second context, the confederate ripped up papers and stomped around the room, which led the students to report feeling angry.

Given that the arousal brought on by the drug was unexpected, the confederate’s actions provided sufficient cues to attach a label to what the volunteers thought was actually an ‘emotion’.

![Diagram](image)

Figure 3.3 Attributing a likely cause to an experimentally induced emotion

experiments dealt with ‘emotional lability’. See Box 3.1 and Figure 3.3 for the components in the process of attributing an emotion in this experiment.

For a time, the most significant implication of Schachter’s work was the possibility that it might be applied in therapy (Valins & Nisbett, 1972). If emotions depend on what cognitive label is assigned, through causal attribution to undifferentiated arousal, then it might, for example, be possible to transform depression into cheerfulness simply by reattributing arousal. A paradigm has been devised to test this idea—called the misattribution paradigm (Valins, 1966). People who feel anxious and bad about themselves because they attribute arousal internally are encouraged to attribute arousal to external factors. For example, someone who is shy can be encouraged to attribute the arousal associated with meeting new people to ordinary environmental causes rather than to personality deficiencies and thus no longer feel shy. A number of experiments have employed this type of intervention with some success (e.g. Olson, 1988; Storms & Nisbett, 1970; for critical reviews of clinical applications of attribution theory, see Buchanan & Seligman, 1995; Forsterling, 1988).

However, initial enthusiasm for emotional lability and the clinical application of misattribution waned in the light of subsequent criticisms (Reisenzein, 1983).
• Emotions may be significantly less labile than was originally thought (Maslach, 1979). Environmental cues are not readily accepted as bases for inferring emotions from unexplained arousal, and because unexplained arousal is intrinsically unpleasant, people have a propensity to assign it a negative label.

• The misattribution effect seems to be limited (Parkinson, 1985). It is largely restricted to laboratory investigations and is unreliable and short-lived. It is not clear that the effect is mediated by an attribution process, and in any case it is restricted to a limited range of emotion-inducing stimuli.

The more general idea that cognition, in particular cognitive appraisals of the surrounding situation, plays an important role in generation and experience of emotion has, however, fed into the contemporary revival of research on affect and emotion (e.g. Blascovich, 2008; Forgas, 2006; Keltner & Lerner, 2010; see Chapter 2). Indeed, attribution theory was the conceptual springboard for the later exploration of the concept of appraisal (e.g. Lazarus, 1991).

Attributions for our own behaviour

One far-reaching implication of treating emotion as cognitively labelled arousal is that people may make more general attributions for their own behaviour. This idea has been elaborated by Daryl Bem (1967, 1972) in his self-perception theory. Because this is an account of how people construct their self-concept, we describe it in Chapter 4 which explores the nature of self and identity.

Acts that are stable and controlled

Attributional dimensions of task achievement are the focus of another extension of attribution theory, by Bernard Weiner (1979, 1985, 1986). Weiner was interested in the causes and consequences of the sorts of attribution made for people’s success or failure on a task—for example, success or failure in a social psychology examination. He believed that, in making an achievement attribution, we consider three performance dimensions:

1 Locus—is the performance caused by the actor (internal) or the situation (external)?
2 Stability—is the internal or external cause a stable or an unstable one?
3 Controllability—to what extent is future task performance under the actor’s control?

These produce eight different types of explanation for task performance (see Figure 3.4). For example, failure in a social psychology examination might be attributed to ‘unusual hindrance from others’ (the top right-hand box in Figure 3.4) if the student was intelligent (therefore, failure is external) and was disturbed by a nearby student sneezing from hay fever (unstable and controllable, because in future examinations the sneezing student might not be present or have taken an antihistamine, and/or one could choose to sit in a place away from the sneezing student).

Weiner’s model is a dynamic one, in that people first assess whether someone has succeeded or failed and accordingly experience positive or negative emotion. They then make a causal attribution for the performance, which produces more specific emotions (e.g. pride for doing well due to ability) and expectations that influence future performance.
The model is relatively well supported by experiments that provide participants with performance outcomes and locus, stability and controllability information, often under role-playing conditions (e.g. de Jong, Koomen & Mellenbergh, 1988; Frieze & Weiner, 1971). However, critics have suggested that the controllability dimension may be less important than was first thought. They have also wondered to what extent people outside constrained laboratory conditions really analyse achievement in this way. Subsequently, Weiner (1995) extended his model to place an emphasis on judgements of responsibility. On the basis of causal attributions people make judgements of responsibility, and it is these latter judgements, not the causal attributions themselves, that influence affective experience and behavioural reactions.

Applying attribution theory

Application of the idea that people need to discover the cause of their own and others’ behaviour in order to plan their own actions has had a significant impact on social psychology. We have already seen two examples—achievement attributions and the reattribution of arousal as a therapeutic technique. In this section, we explore two further applications: attributional styles, and interpersonal relationships.

Individual differences and attributional styles

Research suggests there are enduring individual differences in the sorts of attributions that people make: their attributional style. According to the clinical psychologist Julian Rotter (1966), those of us who are internals believe we have some control over the reinforcements and punishments we receive, and therefore over our destiny—things happen because we make them happen. However, those of us who are externals are more fatalistic: we believe we have little control over what happens to us—things simply occur by chance, luck or the actions of powerful external agents. To measure people’s locus of control Rotter devised a 29-item scale. This scale has been used to relate locus of control to a range of behaviours, including political beliefs, achievement behaviour and reactions to illness. One problem with the scale is that it may not measure a unitary construct (i.e. a single personality dimension) but, rather, a number of relatively independent beliefs to do with control (Collins, 1974).

A number of other questionnaires have been devised to measure attributional styles—a tendency for individuals to make particular kinds of causal inference, rather than others, over
time and across different situations (Metalsky & Abramson, 1981). Of these, the attributional style questionnaire or ASQ (Peterson et al., 1982; Seligman, Abramson, Semmel & von Baeyer, 1979) is perhaps the most widely known. It measures the sorts of explanation that people give for aversive (i.e. unpleasant) events on three dimensions: internal/external, stable/unstable, global/specific. The global/specific dimension refers to how wide or narrow a range of effects a cause has—‘the economy’ is a global explanation for someone being made redundant, whereas the closing of a specific company is a specific explanation. People who view aversive events as being caused by internal, stable, global factors have a ‘depressive attributional style’ (i.e. the glass is half empty), which may promote helplessness and depression and may have adverse health consequences (Abramson, Seligman & Teasdale, 1978; Crocker, Alloy & Kayne, 1988).

Another slightly different scale, called the attributional complexity scale (ACS), has been devised by Fletcher, Danilovics, Fernandez, Peterson and Reeder (1986) to measure individual differences in the complexity of attributions that people make for events.

The notion of attributional style as a personality trait is not without problems: for instance, the ASQ and the ACS provide only limited evidence of cross-situational individual consistency in causal attribution (e.g. Cutrona, Russell & Pomerantz, 1985). Also not without problems is the important link between attributional style, learned helplessness and clinical depression. Although more than 100 studies involving about 15 000 participants confirm an average correlation of 0.30 between attributional style and depression (Sweeney, Anderson & Bailey, 1986), this does not prove causation—it is a correlation in which one factor explains 9 per cent of variance in the other.

More useful are diachronic studies, which show that attributional style measured at one time predicts depressive symptoms at a later date (Nolen-Hoekstra, Girgus & Seligman, 1992), but again causality is not established. Causality is difficult to establish because it is, of course, unethical to induce clinical depression in experimental settings. We are largely left with experimental evidence from studies of transitory mood, which is a rather pale analogue of depression. Is it justified to generalise from feelings about doing well or poorly on a trivial laboratory task to full-blown clinical depression?

Interpersonal relationships

Attributions play an important role in interpersonal relationships (see Chapter 14), particularly close interpersonal relationships (e.g. friendship and marriage) where attributions are communicated to fulfil a variety of functions: for instance, to explain, justify or excuse behaviour, as well as to attribute blame and instil guilt (Hilton, 1990).

John Harvey (1987) suggests that interpersonal relationships go through three basic phases: formation, maintenance and dissolution (see also Moreland & Levine’s (1982, 1984) model of group socialisation in Chapter 8). Fincham (1985) explains that during the formation stage, attributions reduce ambiguity and facilitate communication and an understanding of the relationship. In the maintenance phase, the need to make attributions wanes because stable personalities and relationships have been established. The dissolution phase is characterised by an increase in attributions in order to regain an understanding of the relationship.

A notable feature of many interpersonal relationships is attributional conflict (Horai, 1977), in which partners proffer divergent causal interpretations of behaviour and disagree over what attributions to adopt. Often partners cannot even agree on a cause–effect sequence, one exclaiming, ‘I withdraw because you nag’, the other, ‘I nag because you withdraw’. From research mainly on heterosexual couples, attributional conflict has been shown to be correlated strongly with relationship dissatisfaction (Kelley, 1979; Orvis, Kelley & Butler, 1976; Sillars, 1981).
However, the main thrust of research has focused on the role of attributions in heterosexual marital satisfaction (e.g. Fincham & Bradbury, 1993; Fletcher & Thomas, 2000; Noller & Ruzzene, 1991). An important aim has been to distinguish between distressed and non-distressed spouses in order to provide therapy for dysfunctional marital relationships. Correlational studies (e.g. Fincham & O’Leary, 1983; Holtzworth-Munroe & Jacobson, 1985) reveal that happily married (or non-distressed) spouses tend to credit their partners for positive behaviour by citing internal, stable, global and controllable factors to explain them. Negative behaviour is explained away by ascribing it to causes viewed as external, unstable, specific and uncontrollable. Distressed couples behave in exactly the opposite way.

While women tend fairly regularly to think in causal terms about the relationship, men do so only when the relationship becomes dysfunctional. In this respect, and contrary to popular opinion, men may be the more diagnostic barometers of marital dysfunction—when men start analysing the relationship alarm bells should ring!

Do attributional dynamics produce dysfunctional marital relationships, or do dysfunctional relationships distort the attributional dynamic? This important causal question has been addressed by Frank Fincham and Thomas Bradbury (1987; see overview by Hewstone, 1989), who obtained responsibility attributions, causal attributions and marital satisfaction measures from 39 married couples on two occasions 10–12 months apart. Attributions made on the first occasion were found reliably to predict marital satisfaction 10–12 months later, but only for wives.

Another longitudinal study (although over only a two-month period) confirmed that attributions do have a causal impact on subsequent relationship satisfaction (Fletcher, Fincham, Cramer & Heron, 1987). Subsequent, more extensive and better controlled longitudinal studies have replicated these findings for both husbands and wives (Fincham & Bradbury, 1993; Senchak & Leonard, 1993).

**Biases in attribution**

The attribution process, then, is clearly subject to bias: for example, it can be biased by personality, biased by interpersonal dynamics or biased to meet communication needs. We do not approach the task of attributing causes for behaviour in an entirely dispassionate, disinterested and objective manner, and the cognitive mechanisms that are responsible for attribution may themselves be subject to imperfections that render them suboptimal.

Accumulating evidence for attributional biases and ‘errors’ occasioned a shift of perspective. Instead of viewing people as naive scientists or even statisticians (in which case biases were largely considered a theoretical nuisance), we now think of people as cognitive **misers** or motivated **tacticians** (Moskowitz, 2005; Fiske & Taylor, 2008; see also Chapter 2). People use cognitive shortcuts (called heuristics) to make attributions that, although not objectively correct all the time, are quite satisfactory and adaptive. Sometimes the choice of shortcut and choice of attribution can also be influenced by personal motives.

Biases are entirely adaptive characteristics of ordinary, everyday social perception (Fiske & Taylor, 2008; Nisbett & Ross, 1980; Ross, 1977). In this section, we discuss some of the most important attributional biases.
Correspondence bias and the fundamental attribution error

One of the best known attribution biases is correspondence bias—a general tendency for people to overly attribute behaviour to stable underlying personality dispositions (Gilbert & Malone, 1995). This bias was originally called the fundamental attribution error, and although the correspondence bias and fundamental attribution errors are not identical (Gawronski, 2004), the terms are often used interchangeably—the change in the preferred label mainly reflects accumulating evidence that this bias or error may not be quite as ‘fundamental’ as originally thought (see below).

The fundamental attribution error, originally identified by Lee Ross (1977), refers to a tendency for people to make dispositional attributions for others’ behaviour, even when there are clear external/environmental causes. For example, in the Jones and Harris (1967) study mentioned earlier, American participants read speeches about Cuba’s President Fidel Castro ostensibly written by fellow students. The speeches were either pro-Castro or anti-Castro, and the writers had ostensibly either freely chosen to write the speech or been instructed to do so. Where there was a choice, participants not surprisingly reasoned that those who had written a pro-Castro speech were in favour of Castro, and those who had written an anti-Castro speech were against Castro—an internal, dispositional attribution was made (see Figure 3.5).

However, a dispositional attribution was also made even when the speech writers had been instructed to write the speech. Although there was overwhelming evidence for an exclusively external cause, participants seemed largely to overlook this and to still prefer a dispositional explanation—the fundamental attribution error. (Bearing these points in mind, how would you account for the different views held by Helen and Lewis? See the first focus question.)

Other studies furnish additional empirical evidence for the fundamental attribution error (Jones, 1979; Nisbett & Ross, 1980). Indeed, the fundamental attribution error, or correspondence bias, has been demonstrated repeatedly both inside and outside the social psychology laboratory (Gawronski, 2004; Gilbert, 1998; Jones, 1990). Correspondence bias may also be responsible for a number of more general explanatory tendencies: for example, the tendency to attribute road accidents unduly to the driver rather than to the vehicle or the road conditions (Barjonet, 1980); and the tendency among some people to attribute poverty and unemployment to the person rather than to social conditions.

Figure 3.5 The fundamental attribution error: attributing speech writers’ attitudes on the basis of their freedom of choice in writing the speech

- Students who freely chose to write a pro- or an anti-Castro speech were attributed with a pro- or anti-Castro attitude respectively
- Although less strong, this same tendency to attribute the speech to an underlying dispositional (the fundamental attribution error) prevailed when the writers had no choice and were simply instructed to write the speech

Source: based on data from Jones and Harris (1967)
Tom Pettigrew (1979) has suggested that the fundamental attribution error may emerge in a slightly different form in intergroup contexts where groups are making attributions about ingroup and outgroup behaviour—he calls this the ultimate attribution error (see below). Correspondence bias and the fundamental attribution error are closely related to two other biases: the outcome bias (e.g. Allison, Mackie & Messick, 1996), in which people assume that a person behaving in some particular way intended all the outcomes of that behaviour; and essentialism (Haslam, Rothschild & Ernst, 1998; Medin & Ortony, 1989), in which behaviour is considered to reflect underlying and immutable, often innate, properties of people or the groups they belong to.

Nick Haslam and his colleagues have noted that essentialism can be troublesome, particularly when it causes people to attribute stereotypically negative attributes of outgroups to essential and immutable personality attributes of members of that group (e.g. Bain, Kashima & Haslam, 2006; Haslam, Bastian, Bain & Kashima, 2006; Haslam, Bastian & Bissett, 2004). For example, the stereotype of an outgroup as being laid-back, liberal and poorly educated becomes more pernicious if these attributes are considered immutable, perhaps genetically induced, properties of the group’s members—the people themselves are considered to have personalities that are immutably lazy, immoral and stupid.

Different explanations of the fundamental attribution error have been proposed (as follow).

**Focus of attention**
The actor’s behaviour attracts more attention than the background: it is disproportionately salient in cognition, stands out as the figure against the situational background, and is therefore overrepresented causally (Taylor & Fiske, 1978). This the actor and the actor’s behaviour form what Heider (1958) called a ‘causal unit’. This explanation makes quite a lot of sense. Procedures designed to focus attention away from the actor and on to the situation have been shown to increase the tendency to make a situational rather than dispositional attribution (e.g. Rholes & Pryor, 1982). When people really want to find out about a situation from a person’s behaviour, they focus on the situation and are less likely to leap to a dispositional attribution—the fundamental attribution error is muted or reversed (e.g. Krull, 1993).

**Differential forgetting**
Attribution requires the representation of causal information in memory. There is some evidence that people tend to forget situational causes more readily than dispositional causes, thus producing a dispositional shift over time (e.g. Moore, Sherrod, Liu & Underwood, 1979; Peterson, 1980). Other studies show the opposite effect (e.g. Miller & Porter, 1980), and Funder (1982) has argued that the direction of shift depends on the focus of information processing and occurs immediately after the behaviour being attributed.

**Cultural and developmental factors**
The correspondence bias was originally called the fundamental attribution error because it was considered to be an automatic and universal outcome of perceptual experience and cognitive activity (e.g. McArthur & Baron, 1983). However, there is evidence that both developmental factors and culture may affect the correspondence bias. For example, in Western cultures, young children explain action in concrete situational terms and learn to make dispositional attributions only in late childhood (Kassin & Pryor, 1985; White, 1988). Furthermore, this developmental sequence itself may not be universal. Norman Miller (1984; see Figure 3.8) reports data showing that Hindu Indian children do not drift towards dispositional explanations at all, but rather towards increasingly situational explanations.

**Essentialism**
Pervasive tendency to consider behaviour to reflect underlying and immutable, often innate, properties of people or the groups they belong to.
These differences quite probably reflect different cultural norms for social explanation, or more basic differences between Western and non-Western conceptions of self—the autonomous and independent Western self and the interdependent non-Western self (Chiu & Hong, 2007; see Chapters 4 and 16). The fundamental attribution error is a relatively ubiquitous and socially valued feature of Western cultures (Beauvois & Dubois, 1988; Jellison & Green, 1981), but, although present, it is less dominant in non-Western cultures (Fletcher & Ward, 1988; Morris & Peng, 1994).

The fundamental attribution error may not be as fundamental as was first thought. It may, to some extent, be a normative way of thinking (see discussion of norms in Chapters 7 and 8). This is one reason why Daniel Gilbert and his colleagues (e.g. Gilbert & Malone, 1995) recommend that the term ‘correspondence bias’ be used in preference to the term ‘fundamental attribution error’. Indeed, according to Bertram Gawronski (2004), the two constructs are subtly different: technically, he argues, the fundamental attribution error is the tendency to underestimate the impact of situational factors; and the correspondence bias is the tendency to draw correspondent dispositional inferences from behaviour that is constrained by the situation.

**Linguistic factors**

One final, rather interesting, observation by Nisbett and Ross (1980) is that the English language is so constructed that it is usually relatively easy to describe an action and the actor in the same terms, and much more difficult to describe the situation in the same way. For example, we can talk about a kind or honest person, and a kind or honest action, but not a kind or honest situation. The English language may facilitate dispositional explanations (Brown & Fish, 1983; Semin & Fiedler, 1991).

**The actor–observer effect**

Imagine the last time a shop assistant was rude to you. You probably thought, ‘What a rude person!’ though perhaps not as politely—in other words, you made an internal attribution to the shop assistant’s enduring personality. In contrast, how did you explain the last time you snapped at someone? Probably not in terms of your personality, more likely in terms of external factors such as time pressure or stress. The actor–observer effect (or the self–other effect) is an extension of the correspondence bias. It refers to the tendency for people to attribute others’ behaviour internally to dispositional factors and their own behaviour externally to environmental factors (Jones & Nisbett, 1972). Twenty years of research has provided substantial evidence for this effect (Watson, 1982), and some extensions and qualifications. For example, not only do we tend to attribute others’ behaviour more dispositionally than our own, but we also tend to consider their behaviour to be more stable and predictable than our own (Baxter & Goldberg, 1988).

A number of factors can influence the actor–observer effect. People tend to make more dispositional attributions for socially desirable than socially undesirable behaviour, irrespective of who the actor is (e.g. Taylor & Koivumaki, 1976), and there is a tendency for actors to be more dispositional in attributing positive behaviour and more situational in attributing negative behaviour than are observers (e.g. Chen, Yates & McGinnies, 1988).

The actor–observer effect can be inverted if the actor knows that his or her behaviour is dispositionally caused. For example, you may ‘adopt’ an injured hedgehog in the full knowledge that you are a sucker for injured animals and you have often done this sort of thing in the past (Monson & Hesley, 1982). Finally, the actor–observer effect can be abolished or reversed if the actor is encouraged to take the role of the observer regarding the behaviour to be attributed, and the observer the role of the actor. Under these circumstances, the actor becomes more dispositional and the observer more situational (e.g. Frank & Gilovich, 1989).
There are two main explanations for the actor–observer effect:

1. **Perceptual focus.** This explanation is almost identical to the ‘focus of attention’ explanation for the correspondence bias (see above). For the observer, the actor and the actor’s behaviour are figural against the background of the situation. However, an actor cannot ‘see’ him/herself behaving, so the background situation assumes the role of figure against the background of self. The actor and the observer quite literally have different perspectives on the behaviour and thus explain it in different ways (Storms, 1973). Perceptual salience does indeed seem to have an important role in causal explanation. For example, McArthur and Post (1977) found that observers tended to make more dispositional attributions for an actor’s behaviour when the actor was strongly illuminated than when dimly illuminated.

2. **Informational differences.** Another reason that actors tend to make external attributions and observers internal ones is that actors have a wealth of information to draw on about how they have behaved in other circumstances. They may actually know that they behave differently in different contexts and thus quite accurately consider their behaviour to be under situational control. Observers are not privy to this autobiographical information. They tend simply to see the actor behaving in a certain way in one context, or a limited range of contexts, and have no information about how the actor behaves in other contexts. It is therefore not an unreasonable assumption to make a dispositional attribution. This explanation, first suggested by Jones and Nisbett (1972), does have some empirical support (Eisen, 1979; White & Younger, 1988).

### The false consensus effect

Kelley (1972b) identified consensus information as being one of the three types of information that people used to make attributions about others’ behaviour. One of the first cracks in the naive scientist model of attribution was McArthur’s (1972) discovery that attributors in fact under-used or even ignored consensus information (Kassin, 1979).

Subsequently, it became apparent that people do not ignore consensus information—they provide their own. People see their own behaviour as typical and assume that under similar circumstances others would behave in the same way. Ross, Greene and House (1977) first demonstrated this *false consensus effect*. They asked students if they would agree to walk around campus for 30 minutes wearing a sandwich board carrying the slogan ‘Eat at Joe’s’. Those who agreed estimated that 62 per cent of their peers would also have agreed, while those who refused estimated that 67 per cent of their peers would also have refused.

There are well over 100 studies that bear testimony to the robust nature of the false consensus effect (see Marks & Miller, 1987; Mullen et al., 1985; Wetzel & Walton, 1985). The effect can arise in several ways:

- We usually seek out similar others and so should not be surprised to find that other people are similar to us.
- Our own opinions are so salient to us, at the forefront of our consciousness, that they eclipse the possibility of alternative opinions.
- We are motivated to ground our opinions and actions in perceived consensus in order to validate them and build a stable world for ourselves.

Other research indicates that the false consensus effect is stronger for important beliefs, ones that we care a great deal about (e.g. Granberg, 1987), and
for beliefs about which we are very certain (e.g. Marks & Miller, 1985). External threat, positive qualities, the perceived similarity of others and minority group status all also inflate perceptions of consensus (e.g. Sanders & Mullen, 1983; Sherman, Presson & Chassin, 1984; van der Pligt, 1984).

Self-serving biases

In keeping with the motivated tactician model of social cognition (Fiske & Taylor, 1991) discussed earlier in this chapter (also see Chapter 2), attribution is influenced by our desire for a favourable image of ourselves (see Chapter 4). We are very good at producing self-serving biases. Overall, we take credit for our positive behaviours and successes as reflecting who we are and our intention and effort to do positive things (the self-enhancing bias). At the same time, we explain away our negative behaviours and failures as being due to coercion, normative constraints and other external situational factors that do not reflect who we ‘really’ are (the self-protecting bias). This is a robust effect that holds across many cultures (Fletcher & Ward, 1988).

Self-serving biases are clearly ego-serving (Snyder, Stephan & Rosenfield, 1978). However, Miller and Ross (1975) suggest that there may also be a cognitive component, particularly for the self-enhancing aspect. People generally expect to succeed and therefore accept responsibility for success. If they try hard to succeed, they associate success with their own effort, and they generally exaggerate the amount of control they have over successful performances. Together, these cognitive factors might encourage internal attribution of success. In general, however, it seems likely that both cognitive and motivational factors have a role (Anderson & Slusher, 1986; Tetlock & Levi, 1982) and that they are difficult to disentangle from one another (Tetlock & Manstead, 1985; Zuckerman, 1979).

Self-enhancing biases are more common than self-protecting biases (Miller & Ross, 1975)—partly because people with low self-esteem tend not to protect themselves by attributing their failures externally; rather, they attribute them internally (Campbell & Fairey, 1985). However, self-enhancement and self-protection can sometimes be muted by a desire not to be seen as boasting over our successes and lying about our failures (e.g. Schlenker, Weingold & Hallam, 1990)—but not totally extinguished (Riess, Rosenfield, Melburg & Tedeschi, 1981). A fascinating self-serving bias, which most of us have used from time to time, acts in anticipation—self-handicapping, a term described by Jones and Berglas:

The self-handicapper, we are suggesting, reaches out for impediments, exaggerates handicaps, embraces any factor reducing personal responsibility for mediocrity and enhancing personal responsibility for success. (Jones & Berglas, 1978, p. 202)

People use this bias when they anticipate failure, whether in their job performance, in sport, or even in therapeutic settings when being ‘sick’ allows one to drop out of life. What a person often will do is to intentionally and publicly make external attributions for a poor showing even before it happens. Check the experiment about choosing between drugs in Box 3.2 and Figure 3.6.

Another self-serving instance is the attribution of responsibility (Weiner, 1995), which is influenced by an outcome bias (Allison, Mackie & Messick, 1996). People tend to attribute greater responsibility to someone who is involved in an accident with large rather than small consequences (Burger, 1981; Walster, 1966). For example, we would attribute greater responsibility to the captain of a tanker that spills millions of litres of oil than to the captain of a small fishing boat that spills only a few litres, although the degree of responsibility may actually be the same.

We can link this effect to the tendency for people to cling to an illusion of control (Langer, 1975) by believing in a just world (Furnham, 2003; Lerner, 1977). People like to believe that
& Ward, 1988; Jahoda, 1982) and partly a reflection of a more holistic world view that promotes context-dependent, occasion-bound thinking (Shweder & Bourne, 1982).

To investigate further the role of culture in dispositional attributions, Joan Miller (1984) compared middle-class North Americans and Indian Hindus from each of four age groups (adults, and 15-, 11- and 8-year-olds). Participants narrated prosocial and antisocial behaviour and gave their own spontaneous explanations of the causes of this behaviour. Miller coded responses to identify the proportion of dispositional and contextual attributions that participants made. Among the youngest children there was little cross-cultural difference (see Figure 3.8). As age increased, however, the two groups diverged, mainly because the Americans increasingly adopted dispositional attributions. For context attributions the results were reversed.

The important lesson this study teaches us is that cultural factors have a significant impact on attribution and social explanation. We return to the role of culture in social behaviour in Chapter 16.

### Figure 3.8
Dispositional attributions as a function of age and cultural background

North Americans and Indian Hindus initially do not differ in the proportion of dispositional attributions made for behaviour. However, by the age of 15 there is a clear difference that strengthens in adulthood, with Americans being significantly more dispositional than Indians in their attributions.

Source: Based on data from Miller (1984)

### Summary
- People are naive psychologists seeking to understand the causes of their own and other people's behaviour.
- Much like scientists, people take account of consensus, consistency and distinctiveness information in deciding whether to attribute behaviour internally to personality traits and dispositions, or externally to situational factors.
- The attributions that we make can have a profound impact on our emotions, self-concept and relationships with others. There may be individual differences in propensities to make internal or external attributions.
- People are actually poor scientists when it comes to making attributions. They are biased in many different ways, the most significant of which are a tendency to attribute others' behaviour dispositionally and their own behaviour externally, and a tendency to protect the self-concept by externally attributing their own failures and internally attributing their successes.
- Attributions for the behaviour of people as ingroup or outgroup members are ethnocentric and based on stereotypes. However, this bias is affected by the real or perceived nature of intergroup relations.
- Stereotypes may originate in a need for groups to attribute the cause of large-scale distressing events to outgroups that have (stereotypical) properties that are causally linked to the events.
- People resort to causal attributions only when there is no readily available social knowledge (e.g. scripts, causal schemata, social representations, cultural beliefs) to explain things automatically.
- Social representations are simplified causal theories of complex phenomena that are socially constructed through communication contextualised by intergroup relations. Rumour may play a key role in social representations.
- Conspiracy theories are one particularly bizarre but sadly prevalent type of causal theory that often persists in the face of overwhelming evidence that the theory is wrong.
**Key terms**

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**Literature, film and TV**

**JFK**

A 1991 film by Oliver Stone. It stars Kevin Costner as a New Orleans district attorney who reopen the case to find out who really assassinated JFK on 22 November 1963, in Dallas, and what the process/plot behind it was. This is a wonderful encounter with conspiracy theories and people's need to construct a causal explanation, however bizarre, of a disturbing event. The film also stars Tommy Lee Jones and Sissy Spacek.

**The Devils**

Based on Aldous Huxley's 1952 book, *The Devils of Loudun*, this is a very harrowing Ken Russell cult classic from 1971, starring Vanessa Redgrave and Oliver Reed, about the inquisition and political intrigue in the church/state. The scenes are grotesque, evocative of the paintings of Hieronymus Bosch. It shows the awful lengths to which a group can go to protect its ultimate causal explanation—any divergence is seen as heresy or blasphemy, and is severely and cruelly punished in order to make sure that everyone believes in its explanation of the nature of things.

**Macbeth**

Shakespeare's 1606/07 tragedy in which three witches prophesise a string of evil deeds committed by Macbeth during his bloody rise to power, including the murder of the Scottish king, Duncan. The causal question is whether the prophecy caused the events—or was there some other complex of causes.

**Legally Blonde**

This 2001 award-winning comedy directed by Robert Luketic stars Reese Witherspoon as Elle Woods, a stereotypically breathless, self-confident, blonde Southern California sorority girl—sounds pretty much like one of a million such films, but this one is actually funny, relatively clever and has more going on. It is a nice vehicle for exploring the way that people construct someone's personality from the way they appear and behave, and how it can be difficult for the target to break free of the pigeon hole. Elle, like most people, is a more complex and less superficial character than her appearance and some of her behaviour leads one to think. But as she tries to be taken seriously as a law student and a person, she finds that those around her continually construct her personality on the basis of superficial cues.

**Suck My Toes**

A collection of short stories by Australian writer Fiona McGregor. The varied characters—a young girl running for her life, a 30-year-old woman escaping her dull existence, a new girl in town seeking to realise her fantasies, a brother and sister on a journey, an acquaintance who brings with him die-hard bad habits—all share one characteristic: none has solid ground beneath their feet. All struggle towards futures where nothing is certain, learning to live without expectation but not without hope.
GUIDED QUESTIONS

1. What is meant by locus of control? Compare the contributions that are made by people’s efforts to their chances of success in life with those made by fate or by circumstances. See what other students think about these issues in the video Where is your locus of control? (go to Student resources > Chapter 3 of MyPsychLab at www.pearson.com.au/vaughan7).

2. Do attributional dynamics lead to problems in close relationships, or vice versa?

3. Sometimes our mental shortcuts lead us into error. One of these is correspondence bias. Describe and illustrate this concept.

4. What is meant by self-handicapping? Provide a real-world setting in which it can be applied.

5. The term conspiracy theory has entered everyday language. Can social psychology help us understand what purpose conspiracy theories serve?

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