Fundamental attribution error

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In social psychology, the **fundamental attribution error** (also known as **correspondence bias** or **attribution effect**) is the tendency to overestimate the effect of disposition or personality and underestimate the effect of the situation in explaining social behavior. The fundamental attribution error is most visible when people explain the behavior of others. It does not explain interpretations of one's own behavior — where situational factors are more easily recognized and can thus be taken into consideration. This discrepancy between attributions for one's own behavior and for that of others is known as the actor–observer bias.

As a simple example, consider a situation where Alice, a driver, is about to pass through an intersection. Her light turns green, and she begins to accelerate when another car drives through the red light and crosses in front of her. The fundamental attribution error may lead her to think that the driver of the other car was an unskilled or reckless driver. This will be an error if the other driver had a good reason for running the light, such as rushing a patient to the hospital. If Alice had been driving the other car, she would have understood that the situation called for speed at the cost of safety, but when seeing it from the outside she was inclined to believe that the behavior of the other driver reflected their fundamental nature (having poor driving skills or a reckless attitude).

The phrase was coined by Lee Ross[1] some years after a now classic experiment by Edward E. Jones and Victor Harris (1967).[2] Ross argued in a popular paper that the fundamental attribution error forms the conceptual bedrock for the field of social psychology.

Jones wrote that he found Ross' phrase "overly provocative and somewhat misleading", and also joked: "Furthermore, I'm angry that I didn't think of it first."[3] Some psychologists, including Daniel Gilbert, have used the phrase "correspondence bias" for the fundamental attribution error.[3] Other psychologists have argued that the fundamental attribution error and correspondence bias are related but independent phenomena, with the former being a common explanation for the latter.[4]

Contents

Classic demonstration study: Jones and Harris (1967)

Edward E. Jones and Victor Harris hypothesized, based on the correspondent inference theory, that people would attribute apparently freely-chosen behaviors to disposition, and apparently chance-directed behaviors to situation. The hypothesis was confounded by the fundamental attribution error.[2]

Subjects read essays for and against Fidel Castro. Subjects were asked to rate the pro-Castro attitudes of the writers. When the subjects believed that the writers freely chose the positions they took (for or against Castro), they naturally rated the people who spoke in favor of Castro as having a more positive attitude towards Castro. However, contradicting Jones and Harris' initial hypothesis, when the subjects were told that the writer's positions were determined by a coin toss, they still rated writers who spoke in favor of Castro as having, on average, a more positive attitude towards Castro than those who spoke against him. In other words, the subjects were unable to see the influence of the situational constraints placed upon the writers; they could not refrain from attributing sincere belief to the writers.

Explanations

There is no universally accepted explanation for the fundamental attribution error. Here are several hypotheses of the causes of the error:

1. **Just-world phenomenon.** The belief that people get what they deserve and deserve what they get, which was first theorized by Melvin Lerner (1977).[5] Attributing failures to dispositional causes rather than situational causes, which are unchangeable and uncontrollable, satisfies our need to believe that the world is fair and we have control over our lives. We are motivated to see a just world because this reduces our perceived threats,[6][7] gives us a sense of security, helps us find meaning in difficult and unsettling circumstances, and benefits us psychologically.[8] Unfortunately, the just-world hypothesis also results in a tendency for people to blame and disparage victims of a tragedy or an accident, such as victims of rape[9][10] and domestic abuse[11] to reassure themselves of their insusceptibility to such events. People may even go to such extremes as the victim's faults in "past life" to pursue justification for their bad outcome.[12]
2. **Salience of the actor.** We tend to attribute an observed effect to potential causes that capture our attention. When we observe other people, the person is the primary reference point while the situation is overlooked as if it is nothing but mere background. So, attributions for others' behavior are more likely to focus on the person we see, not the situational forces acting upon that person that we may not be aware of.[13][14][15] (When we observe ourselves, we are more aware of the forces acting upon us. Such a differential inward versus outward orientation[16] accounts for the actor-observer bias.)
3. **Lack of effortful adjustment.** Sometimes, even though we are aware that the person's behavior is constrained by situational factors, we still commit the fundamental attribution error.[2] This is because we do not take into account behavioral and situational information simultaneously to characterize the dispositions of the actor.[17] Initially, we use the observed behavior to characterize the person by automaticity.[18][19][20][21][22] We need to make deliberate and conscious effort to adjust our inference by considering the situational constraints. Therefore, when situational information is not sufficiently taken into account for adjustment, the uncorrected dispositional inference creates the fundamental attribution error. It also explains that people commit to fundamental attribution error more when they have no motivation or energy (i.e. under cognitive load) to process the situational information.[23]

Reducing the error's effects

A number of "debiasing" techniques have been found effective in reducing the effect of the fundamental attribution error:

- Taking heed of "consensus" information. If most people behave the same way when put in the same situation, then the situation is more likely to be the cause of the behavior.
- Asking oneself how one would behave in the same situation.
- Looking for unseen causes; specifically, looking for less salient factors.

However, even when participants were made aware ulterior motives existed to take a particular position, such as with the essays for and against Fidel Castro mentioned previously, they were still prone to the fundamental attribution error.

Cultural differences in the error

Generally, the fundamental attribution error has been researched central to a social cognitive framework. Barring this however, there are many cultural differences which arise when attempting to explain this error.[24] Previous research has shown that cultural differences exist in the susceptibility of making fundamental attribution error: people from individualistic cultures are prone to the error while people from collectivistic cultures commit less of it.[25] It has been found that there is a differential attention to social factors between independent

peoples and interdependent peoples in both social and nonsocial contexts: Masuda and his colleagues (2004) in their cartoon figure presentation experiment showed that Japanese's judgments on the target character's facial expression are more influenced by surrounding faces than those of the Americans;[26] whereas Masuda and Nisbett (2001) concluded from their underwater scenes animated cartoon experiment that Americans are also more likely than Japanese participants to mark references to focal objects (i.e. fish) instead of contexts (i.e. rocks and plants).[27] These discrepancies in the salience of different factors to people from different cultures suggest that Asians tend to attribute behavior to situation while Westerners attribute the same behavior to the actor. Consistently, Morris & Peng (1994) found from their fish behavior attribution experiment that more American than Chinese participants perceive the behavior (e.g. an individual fish swimming in front of a group of fish) as internally rather than externally caused.[28] One explanation for this difference in attribution lies in the way people of different cultural orientation perceive themselves in the environment. Particularly, Markus and Kitayama (1991) mentioned how (individualistic) Westerners tend to see themselves as independent agents and therefore prone themselves to individual objects rather than contextual details.[29]

"Fundamental attribution error" versus "correspondence bias"

The fundamental attribution error is commonly used interchangeably with "correspondence bias" (sometimes called "correspondence inference", although this phrase refers to a natural judgment that does not necessarily constitute a bias, whereas bias arises when the inference drawn is incorrect, e.g., dispositional inference when the actual cause is situational). However, there has been debate about whether the two terms should be further distinguished from each other. Three main differences between these two judgmental processes have been argued:

1. They seem to be elicited under different circumstances, as both correspondent dispositional inferences and situational inferences can be elicited spontaneously.[30] Attributional processing, however, seems to only occur when the event is unexpected or conflicting with prior expectations. This notion is supported by a study conducted by Semin and Marsman (1994),[31] which found that different types of verbs invited different inferences and attributions. Correspondence inferences were invited to a greater degree by interpretative action verbs (such as "to help") than state action or state verbs, thus suggesting that the two are produced under different circumstances.
2. Correspondence inferences and causal attributions also differ in automaticity. Inferences can occur spontaneously if the behavior implies a situational or dispositional inference, while causal attributions occur much more slowly (e.g. Smith & Miller, 1983).[32]
3. It has also been suggested that correspondence inferences and causal attributions are elicited by different mechanisms. It is generally agreed that correspondence inferences are formed by going through several stages. Firstly, the person must interpret the behavior, and then, if there is enough information to do so, add situational information and revise their inference. They may then further adjust their inferences by taking into account dispositional information as well.[23][33] Causal attributions however seem to be formed either by processing visual information using perceptual mechanisms, or by activating knowledge structures (e.g. schemas) or by systematic data analysis and processing.[34] Hence due to the difference in theoretical structures, correspondence inferences are more strongly related to behavioral interpretation than causal attributions.

Based on the preceding differences between causal attribution and correspondence inference, some researchers argue that the fundamental attribution error should be considered as the tendency to make dispositional rather than situational explanations for behavior, whereas the correspondence bias should be considered as the tendency to draw correspondent dispositional inferences from behavior.[35][36] With such distinct definitions between the two, some cross-cultural studies also found that cultural differences of correspondence bias are not equivalent to those of fundamental attribution error. While the latter has been found to be more prevalent in individualistic cultures than collectivistic cultures, correspondence bias occurs across cultures,[37][38][39] suggesting differences between the two phrases.

See also

- Attribution (psychology)
- Self-serving bias

Therapeutic implications

- The related concept of explanatory style is a major component of the theories of learned helplessness and learned optimism pioneered by Martin Seligman.

Cognitive biases

- Cognitive bias
- Actor–observer asymmetry
- Attributional bias
- Defensive attribution hypothesis
- False consensus effect
- Group attribution error
- Just-world phenomenon
- List of cognitive biases
- Locus of control
- Ultimate attribution error

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