A LINE ON LIFE

1/17/90

Errors in Attributing Behavior *

David A. Gershaw, Ph.D.

How much do I know? Do you think I know more than you do? Your perception of the relative abilities of yourself and others may be due to **attribution error**. One type of attribution error is to see the cause of behavior as due to *personal traits* rather than the *social role* a person is playing.

To understand this better, let's use the example of **gender roles** – the ways we are expected to act as men or women in our society. Our traditional gender roles assign childcare to women and full-time work outside the home to men. Suppose I ask you to explain why Marlene stays at home to care for her children, while her husband, Alan, goes to work each day. You might say that Marlene cares for the children because she "*loves her children*, " and Alan goes to work because he is "*achievement-oriented*." If so, you are attributing their behavior to personal traits. However, this may be a type of fundamental attribution error. Basically, you may be explaining their behavior too much in terms of their presumed personal traits while ignoring the impact of their social roles.

Psychologists conducted an experiment in 1977, which demonstrated that people fail to perceive the power of social roles. Pairs of college students were asked to play a "*quiz game*." In each pair, one was randomly chosen to be the "*quiz master*" who asked the questions, while the other was the "*contestant*" who was to answer the questions. Quiz masters were asked to make up ten "*challenging but not impossible*" questions on topics familiar to themselves.

The questions turned out to be rather difficult – on average, contestants answered only four out of ten correctly. After the quiz game was over, quiz masters and contestants in each pair were asked to rate their own and their partner's level of general knowledge on a 100-point scale. On the average, contestants viewed the quiz masters as much smarter than themselves. Contestants attributed both their own behavior – "*I didn't get many answers right*." – and the quiz master's behavior – "*she sure asked some tough questions*." – to **personal traits**. In contrast, quiz masters viewed both themselves and the contestants to be about equally knowledgeable.

Which perception was more accurate? The researchers gave a general knowledge test to all subjects, and it showed *no* difference between the quiz masters and the contestants. The mistaken perception of the contestants was caused by the **social roles**. Because the quiz masters could make questions in *their* areas of expertise, they appeared more intelligent to the contestants who were not aware of the same information. Because the quiz masters were aware of how selective their questions were, they realized the hidden advantage of their privileged social role. Thus they did not attribute their difficult questions or the contestants' wrong answers to personal traits.

When making attributions, we need to be aware of our biases.

In a follow-up study, observers were asked to watch the simulated quiz game. Like the contestants, the observers judged the quiz masters to be more knowledgeable than the contestants. They show an **observer bias** – the same attribution error as the contestants – and failed to take into account the social roles in the situation. This quiz game is much like the familiar interaction between teachers and students. The teachers' role is much like that of the quiz masters. They can put the student on the spot by asking questions in their areas of expertise. On the other hand, students' roles are like those of the contestants. They have to answer whatever questions the teachers give them. In other words, the social roles are stacked against the students, who may appear less intelligent than the teacher – especially to the students themselves and to outside observers.

Even more broadly, this type of attribution error may explain how some people may wrongly develop bad stereotypes of disadvantaged groups. As observers, people often explain behavior of such groups in terms of the personal traits of its members ("*They're stupid and lazy*.") As they become more aware of the biased and restraining social roles imposed by the culture, the same observers may explain it differently ("*They have little power. Poverty, poor medical care and malnutrition limit their opportunities*.")

Unfortunately, attribution errors can be made in both directions. Sometimes people explain behavior in terms of social roles, when they actually might be due to personal traits. Let's use the example of gender roles again. Traditional gender roles tend to view men as more "*capable*" and "*task-oriented*" than women. In a 1974 study, psychologists demonstrated how this effected attributions. In the experiment, men and women heard a man (or a woman) perform extremely well on a perception test. Subjects were asked to rate whether the test taker's success was due to his or her ability, to luck or to some combination of the two. Even though the performances of the men and women were identical, *both* men and women attributed men's success mainly to *skill* and women's performance mainly to *luck*!

It is relatively easy to jump to conclusions about what causes the behavior of others and yourself. After reading this article, can you really be so sure that your attributions are accurate?

---

* Adapted from Richard A. Lippa's *Introduction to Social Psychology*, Wadsworth, 1990, pages 117-118 and from Dennis Coon's *Introduction to Psychology: Exploration and Application*, West, 1989, page 590.