A LINE ON LIFE
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Attribution Theory — Explaining Behavior *
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Everyone — including psychologists — tries to explain the behavior of themselves and others. We try to attribute causal factors to behavior. Sometimes we infer correctly, but other times we are wrong. Regardless of the correctness of our attribution, we change our opinions and behavior accordingly. What factors influence our attributions?

Consider two people buying a cone of "tooty-fruity, double-nutty" ice cream. If one person bought the cone when the store was out of all flavors except that one, you would tend to attribute the purchase to a **situational cause**. If she wanted ice cream, there was no other choice. If the other person purchased his cone when there were many flavors available, you would attribute his behavior to a **personal cause**. He really likes "tooty-fruity, double-nutty" ice cream.

Whether you attribute a personal or situational cause depends on several factors. Two of these factors are consistency and distinctiveness. **Consistency** means that the behavior is the same over various instances, situations or people. In contrast, **distinctiveness** means the behavior is only seen with certain people, in certain situations or specific instances. Consistency leads to attribution of personal causes, while distinctiveness suggests situational causes.

Whether you are right or wrong, your attributions will influence your behavior.

Suppose Joe — a co-worker or classmate — avoids you. Does this mean he dislikes you? (Maybe you haven't been using a good deodorant.) Could it be just a coincidence? If it happened distinctively over time — he just avoided you for a day or two — you might assume that something has been upsetting him. If it was distinctive over people — Joe avoids you but doesn't avoid others — he may dislike you. If he avoided you at work or school but was sociable outside of those situations— you might assume that work/school pressures were affecting him. However, if Joe avoids almost all types of people most of the time and in most situations, you would be likely to attribute a personal cause — Joe is shy. Regardless of whether you are right or wrong, your attributions will influence your behavior toward Joe.

Another factor affecting attribution is **consensus** (agreement). If there is consensus, we tend to attribute a situational cause. For example, if millions of people flock to see a

movie, we assume that the *movie* was good. In contrast, if someone sees a movie six times, when others are staying away in droves, we attribute a personal cause — she likes that type of movie.

Situational demands also influence our attributions. When observed behavior goes along with the situational demands, we assume a situational cause. It tells us very little about the person. If the behavior is contrary to the situational demands, we assume a personal cause. For example, if a woman wears a bathing suit to the beach, we assume it is situationally caused. However, if she wears it to the office, a personal attribution is more likely to be made.

In making attributions, it makes a great deal of difference whether we are the **actor** or **observer** in relation to the behavior. As the actor, we know the *history* behind our behavior. As an observer, we are often ignorant of the history. For examples, suppose you have seen Tanya at the last five parties you attended. You may assume that Tanya likes parties and is sociable and outgoing. However, if you say this to her, you might get a response like this:

> *"Actually, I hate these parties, but I get invited to play my tuba at them. My music teacher says I need to practice in front of an audience, so I keep attending these dumb events. Want to hear a Sousa march?"*

Knowing the history (background) for this behavior changes your attribution. This actor-observer difference often leads to a **fundamental attribution error**. As we observe the behavior of others — not knowing their history — we tend to attribute their acts to their desires, motives or personality traits. As actors, we tend to attribute situational causes to our own actions.

Suppose someone knocks over a cup of coffee. If we observe this, we tend to assume personal causes — that person is clumsy or careless. If *we* knock over the cup, it is because of situational factors — the cup was too close to the edge of the table, the quarters were too cramped or someone accidentally bumped into us.

There is also a **sex-bias** in attribution. Competency is viewed as a masculine trait in our culture. If two people successfully perform a task, *both* men and women tend to attribute the man's success to *skill* and the woman's success to *luck!*

So — before you make a judgment about someone's behavior — try to get more information about their background (history) to reduce your chances of attribution error. In other words, before you jump to a conclusion — ask some questions.