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## *Attribution Theory*

### Finding Good Cause in the Search for Theory

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**H**umans are an inquisitive species: We wonder why and how things occur, and we develop religions, philosophies, and sciences as ways of answering our questions. Such curiosity influences our cultural, societal, interpersonal, and personal lives in intricate ways. We can easily see many everyday examples of this in our own minds and in our conversations with friends: We ask ourselves why another person looks so lonely, we think about why we did not get a job, and we talk to others to try to figure out why the person we went out with on Saturday has not called us since then. After all, it's Tuesday!

So fundamental is the process of asking and answering “why” questions—trying to figure out what caused something else—that it has been characterized as a basic human activity (Heider, 1958), and a family of theories has developed to illumine how and why things happen as they do. This set of theories, collectively called Attribution Theory, attempts to describe and explain the mental and communicative processes involved in everyday explanations, most typically explanations of individual and social events. In this chapter, we describe select parts of these theories and their related scholarship, and we offer critiques of its usefulness for understanding interpersonal communication processes.

#### **Purpose and Meta-theoretical Assumptions**

Even though attributions are talked about in everyday life and studied by people in many academic disciplines, most attribution theories arose in—and

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are most commonly researched as part of—the field of psychology. Not surprisingly, then, the various attribution theories lean heavily toward a logical-empirical view of the world. Although there are important cultural and personal differences in attribution making (see, for example, Lawrence, Murray, Banerjee, Turner, Sangha, Byng, et al., 2006; Maddux & Yuki, 2006), attribution researchers believe that the underlying process of attempting to understand the world around us is universal, pervasive, and predictable.

There are a number of definitions for attributions, but a common way to define “attributions” is as the internal (thinking) and external (talking) process of interpreting and understanding what is behind our own and others’ behaviors. Thus, although there are different types of Attribution Theory, they all are concerned with the “how” and the “what” by which people process information in attempting to understand events, judge those events, and act on those events. We can, for example, see attributional processes at work in the following conversation, where three friends are trying to explain one of their professor’s facial expressions. In this discussion, each is describing the cause he or she attributes to the same action:

*Sheryl:* Hey, did you see how Professor Smythe looked at me when I asked him that question?

*Theo:* Yeah, he looked like he was really confused!

*Sheryl:* Really? I thought he looked like he thought I was the dumbest student ever.

*Theo:* No way. I’m sure he was just trying to figure out the answer.

*Kyle:* I thought he was coming down with the flu.

This example illustrates that any communication event or behavior can be viewed as an effect that has some cause, and the cause we attribute (e.g., confusion, opinion, flu) is likely to influence the meaning of the action and how we might respond to it.

The person most often attributed as the originator of attribution models is Fritz Heider. In his early work, Heider reflected the logical-empirical backbone of attribution theories by making relatively global claims about what people do. Specifically, he argued that people act like naïve scientists as they attempt to make sense—in a relatively systematic way—of their larger social worlds. For Heider (1958), people are active interpreters of the events that occur in their lives, and they use consistent and logical modes of sense-making in their interpretations. They do so, in large part, to both understand and control the world around them.

Heider was concerned particularly with an action’s “causal locus,” focusing his work largely on when a person is more likely to judge a behavior’s cause as internal (e.g., a disposition or a characteristic of a person) or external (i.e., an

environmental factor) to another person. Causal locus continues to be a mainstay of attribution studies and is readily understandable. For example, if a good friend is late for a lunch date, it is likely that you would try to figure out why she was late. Heider argued that we do our best to determine the most likely causes.

## **Main Features of the Theory**

Heider's (1958) initial ideas have been expanded in a number of ways to account for the complex process of attribution. For example, researchers have argued that attributions vary from one another not only based on causal locus but also on other dimensions. These include "stability," or whether or not we see the cause of something as stable ("He's late because he doesn't care about other people") or unstable ("He's late because he wasn't feeling well and it took him a while to get ready"); and "control," or whether or not we think a person was able to alter the cause ("He's late because he forgot to set his alarm again") or unable to alter the cause ("He's late because there was a traffic accident that delayed traffic").

In addition to a broadening of what form attributions take, four theoretical currents have emerged since Heider introduced the concept of attributions. Most research relies on just one of these currents, but, collectively, they make up the primary features of attributional scholarship.

### **A FOCUS ON CORRESPONDENCE**

One of the ways that any action can be explained is as a product of some set of characteristics (i.e., "a kind person would act that way"). When attributions are informative of a person's nature or personality, they are considered "correspondent." Jones and his colleagues (Jones & Davis, 1965; Jones & Harris, 1967) developed this line of theorizing, and it has since been studied in a wide variety of disciplines and contexts. For example, Stamp and Sabourin (1995) found that relationally abusive or aggressive men tend to attribute their violence to things that were external to them, such as a wife's behavior or jealousy. Most of these external factors are considered correspondent, because abusive men tend to attribute such causes to intentional and negative factors in their partners. Importantly, such attributions reflected the men's thinking, rather than what may actually have prompted the behavior.

### **A FOCUS ON COVARIATION**

Attributions are not tied only to dispositions. In order to understand the underlying structure of attributing causes to effects, Kelley (1967, 1971)

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proposed a normative model that came to be known as the ANOVA (an acronym for “analysis of variance”) cube. In general, events are attributed to causes with which they covary or co-occur. Causes are attributed to factors that are present when an event or effect is observed, and not present when the event or effect is absent. If you find that your relationships tend to get more complicated and are more likely to dissolve only after one of you says “I love you,” you might attribute the utterance or state of love as the cause of relationship problems. For you, these events covary.

#### A FOCUS ON RESPONSIBILITY

Not all attributions are about the cause of an action, however. When we are making sense of things, we often focus instead on who or what was responsible for that behavior or outcome (Weiner, 1986). Importantly, research following this reasoning has looked at the potential consequences of responsibility attributions, and these consequences can be extensive. For example, according to research by Badahdah and Alkhder (2006), people are, for example, more likely to feel sympathetic to a person with AIDS if that person is viewed as not responsible for his or her own plight (e.g., if AIDS was contracted through blood transfusion) as opposed to intentional risky conduct (e.g., unprotected sex). Thus attributions of responsibility can have significant repercussions.

#### A FOCUS ON BIAS

Whereas people can make relatively logical assessments of cause and responsibility, as Heider (1958) predicted, researchers have found there are often systematic biases in how we make attributions (see Ross, 1977). Perhaps the most well known bias is the “fundamental attribution bias,” which is our tendency to make more internal attributions than external attributions for others’ behaviors. But there are other biases as well. For example, Canary and Spitzberg (1990) predicted a self-serving bias in conflict situations, and found that actors in conflicts tend to view their behavior as significantly more appropriate than the behavior of their partners. They further predicted and found that more salient conflict behaviors such as anger and criticism would be more correlated between self and partner perceptions than less salient behaviors such as topic shifting and integrative discussion. To the extent that we generally view ourselves as competent and not responsible for negative events, and that we view our partners as stable and personally responsible for negative events, conflicts are springloaded to escalate in unpleasant ways (see Sillars, 1980).

#### SUMMARY

Every comment a person makes and every action in which a person engages can be subject to attributional analysis, by self and by others. The outcome of

this analysis has potentially significant implications for the nature of how one responds to another's actions. Whether it is an achievement failure, a stigmatizing condition, a need for help, or an aggressive act, if these are attributed to controllable and intentional causes, responses of anger and reprimand or neglect are more likely, whereas uncontrollable and unintentional attributions are more likely to lead to sympathy and offers of assistance (Weiner, 2004).

## **Conceptualization of Communication in the Theory**

Whereas attribution processes were perceived initially as the domain of psychologists, the past 20 years have also seen particular attention to attributions by communication scholars. Two key chapters written in 1982 (Seibold & Spitzberg, 1982; Sillars, 1982) helped to encourage communication researchers to address the nature of attributions, and the term "attribution" now shows up as a key word in an array of studies. Most scholarship on attributions in our field, however, has been done in the context of interpersonal encounters. For these scholars, attributions are employed typically in one of three ways.

### **ATTRIBUTIONS AS EXPLANATIONS UNDERLYING SOCIAL ACTIONS, INCLUDING COMMUNICATION BEHAVIORS**

Initial work conceptualized attributions as a psychological process used to determine the cause of or responsibility for a behavior. The event that needed explaining was often an individual one such as why a person achieved or failed a goal. But attributions are also made for communication behavior, such as a facial expression directed to one person from another. That is, much like other behaviors, communication behaviors can be seen as occurring for different reasons. Work by Amy Bippus (2003) typifies the conceptualization of attributions as "explanations for communicative behavior." In her study, she asked people why a person used humor in an actual conflict situation. She also asked how they interpreted the cause and repercussions. For example, Bippus found that more internal attributions for humor use were associated with more negative outcomes (e.g., conflict escalation, progress, and face loss). Humor thought to be bad and humor that was attributed to the speaker's personality was particularly damaging to the relationship.

### **ATTRIBUTIONS AS CATEGORIES OF MEANINGS GIVEN TO COMMUNICATION BEHAVIOR**

Attributions not only help us explain communication behavior—they may also help us understand the diversity of meanings that people give to any

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communicative act. That is, if we look at the content of attributions made for communication we will see the many dimensions of attributions we discussed earlier (e.g., causal locus, responsibility, stability, and control). For more discussion of these dimensions, and to see other dimensions, read Weiner (1986). Different combinations of these dimensions lead to different conclusions about what something means. In the discussion between Sheryl, Theo, and Kyle, for example, each attribution discussed can be compared to the others based on an array of attributional dimensions. Furthermore, how these dimensions combine with one another has consequences. For example, Erina MacGeorge (2001) investigated the ways in which people offer social support to one another in times of crisis and found that when the crisis was attributed as more stable, more the affected person's responsibility, and more a result of the person's effort, it induced greater anger and reduced sympathy for the affected person's plight.

#### ATTRIBUTIONS AS THE ACTUAL MEANINGS GIVEN TO A BEHAVIOR, OFTEN IN TALK

The third conceptualization of attribution also points us toward the content of attributions, but in a somewhat different way. Rather than helping locate the source of difference in interpretations for communication behavior, some interpersonal communication researchers have looked at dialogue—like the dialogue between Sheryl, Theo, and Kyle—to investigate how spoken attributions reflect the meaning that people give to a communication act. That is, we can also look at attributions to see what a behavior means—what message value it has—for someone. As Brant Burleson (1986) noted,

people frequently *talk* [emphasis in original] to one another about why someone acted in some way; indeed exploring why someone behaved as he or she did is probably one of the most ubiquitous conversational topics<sup>9</sup> (p. 64). . . . [Moreover] the *outcome* [emphasis in original] of a collaborative, publicly conducted attribution process . . . is a product that was socially constructed, tested, and verified. (p. 79)

That is, attributions do not just occur for communication behaviors; they also comprise some of what we communicate about (e.g., see Rempel, Ross, & Holmes, 2001) and are about what we have conflict (Orvis, Kelley, & Butler, 1976).

### Uses of the Theory

These three conceptualizations reflect a strong interconnectedness between attributions and communication. They arise from a large body of context-based scholarship conducted by researchers interested in the interpersonal nature of attributions. Two of these are contexts are (a) marriage, and (b) the ways in

which attributions are involved in some of the darker sides of communication. To follow, we discuss these somewhat overlapping areas of research.

## ATTRIBUTIONS IN MARRIAGE

The majority of empirical work using Attribution Theory in relationships concerns the processes and effects of attributions in married couples. Only some of this work centers on communication processes, but all of it is relevant to understanding the role of attributions in interpersonal interaction. Most notably, researchers have looked at the ways in which one spouse's feelings about the relationship—his or her degree of marital satisfaction—influences or is influenced by the kind of attributions the spouse makes for his or her own and his or her partner's behaviors.

Overall, researchers find that

distressed spouses . . . make attributions for negative events that accentuate their impact (e.g., they locate the cause in their partner, see it as stable or unchanging, and see it as global or influencing many of the areas of their relationship), whereas nondistressed spouses . . . make attributions that minimize the impact of negative events (e.g., they do not locate the cause in the partner and see it as unstable and specific). (Fincham & Bradbury, 1992, p. 457)

The tendency for nondistressed or satisfied couples to make low-impact attributions for negative behaviors (and, conversely, to allow positive events more influence) has been termed relationship-enhancing; the type of attributions more common for distressed or dissatisfied couples is called distress-maintaining (Holtzworth-Munroe & Jacobson, 1988).

The occurrence and impact of distress-maintaining attributions appears augmented when couples are categorized as aggressive. A study by a team of communication and psychology scholars (Sillars, Leonard, Roberts, and Dun 2002) concluded that aggressive couples tend to have negative styles of communication, and that their communication tends to get even more negative when the husbands drink alcohol. Couples in aggressive relationships tend to reveal quite divergent attributions in their beliefs about why they acted as they did and what accounts for their partners' behavior. Thus, one spouse may state that he engaged in certain conflict behavior because, "I'm trying to get her to talk about it," yet assert that his spouse engaged in the same behavior for a very different reason: "She's always got to have her way" (see Sillars et al., 2002, p. 97). In particular, the authors found that aggressive spouses tended to attribute less constructive engagement and more avoidance to their partner than they attributed to themselves ("He always runs away from conflict, but I try to argue it out") and concluded, ominously, that, in aggressive relationships, attribution-making "presents a combustible situation" (Sillars et al., 2002, p. 101).

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Although researchers investigated the relationship between attributions and couples' behaviors less than would be expected, some researchers focus on it. In one study, Manusov (2002) reported evidence that attributions made by one spouse for his or her spouse's nonverbal cues may also influence the behaviors the attributor expresses toward the other (e.g., when one spouse attributed greater control to his or her partner's emotional expressions, the attributor was more likely to be facially pleasant, gaze more, and use a more upright posture when talking to his or her spouse). Other researchers have found links between the ways in which people assign responsibility and their own anger displays (Fincham & Bradbury, 1992), their overall use of negative behaviors in reaction to an attribution (Bradbury & Fincham, 1992), and their reciprocity of partners' negative behavior (Bradbury & Fincham). The links between attributions and other affective and behavioral outcomes show the extent to which attribution-making may permeate intimate relationships in both positive and negative ways.

## THE DARKER SIDE OF ATTRIBUTIONS

As the section above on marriage reflects, the role of attribution processes has been the subject of increasing attention in the explanation of, among other things, intimate aggression and violence. Consistent with the responsibility principle discussed earlier, Byrne and Arias (1997) found that there was a substantial negative correlation between marital satisfaction and marital aggression among wives who attributed their husbands as responsible for negative behavior in the relationship (although the same was not true of husbands' attributions of responsibility to their wives). To explain this, Olson and Lloyd (2005) engaged in detailed interviews with a small sample of women who had experienced aggressive behaviors in their relationships. They found that a "glaring pattern was how often the women explained that aggression was the only way to get their partners' attention or to get the men to listen or acknowledge the women" (p. 615).

In contrast, however, and more consistent with the self-serving bias, Cantos, Neidig, and O'Leary (1993) found that spouses were more likely to blame their partners rather than themselves for domestic violence. Biased attributions occur in other ways in these relationships. For example, Tonizzo, Howells, Day, Reidpath, and Froyland (2000) found that physically violent men tend to blame their wives' negative behaviors on the wives' so-called selfish motivations. It appears that abusive men not only demonstrate these attribution biases in their own relationships but in their perception of others, as well. When asked to interpret the thoughts of videotaped interactions, Schweinle and Ickes (2002) learned that abusive men reveal an overattribution bias in which husbands assume that their wives' thoughts are more critical and rejecting than wives interpret their husbands' thoughts.

## **Strengths and Limitations of the Theory**

The examples just discussed reflect the salience and consequences of attributions in interpersonal contexts. Despite the expansive and diverse domains and questions to which Attribution Theory has been applied, the theory is not without its problems, and Attribution Theory has received its share of critical review (e.g., Newcombe & Rutter, 1982; Semin, 1980). There are many criteria by which theories can be evaluated. We focus here on (a) explanatory power, (b) scope and generality, (c) conditionship specification, and (d) verifiability or falsifiability to show some of the strengths and limitations of Attribution Theory qua theory (Spitzberg, 2001).

“Explanatory power” refers to the most essential requirement of any theory: how well does it explain, or make sense of, phenomena? It is a near paradox that a theory explaining how people explain is itself required to be a good explanation. Attribution theories have the advantage of making good intuitive sense, developed as they were to account for laypersons as naïve scientists (Heider, 1958). Most of the dimensions and principles of attribution theories are recognizable immediately in everyday interactions. In Sheryl, Theo, and Kyle’s conversation, for example, we can see evidence of the process of negotiating attributions and the normalcy of working together in conversation to determine why something occurred and what it meant.

“Scope and generality” refer to the breadth of phenomena and contexts in which a theory applies. A theory that only applies to a particular time, place, or behavior is narrow in scope and not very generalizable. Attribution Theory was developed originally as a universal theory of human sense-making, but research has limited its scope. Most research investigates contexts in which conscious attributional efforts are most likely: contexts involving actual or potential negative consequences and violations of expectations. For example, researchers have centered on shyness, loneliness, conflict, relationship satisfaction, accounts, abuse, anger, shame, achievement motivation, moral responsibility, and relationship breakups. Attributions may or may not work the same way in other contexts where the importance of making attributions is less necessary. Furthermore, there is increasing evidence that attributional thought processes may be culturally moderated to some extent. For example, Eastern and Asian cultures may be more situational in their attribution biases, compared to the West’s dispositional attribution bias (Choi, Nisbett, & Norenzayan, 1999). Both of these, context and culture, limit how broadly general claims about attributions can legitimately be made.

“Conditionship specification” refers to the extent to which a theory articulates clearly the nature of the relationship among its concepts. Even some of the original theorists claim some strict parameters for the theory. For example, Heider’s (1958) original propositions were quite formulaic, along the lines of

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the following: Personal causation is attributed as a multiplicative function of power (can) and trying (effort) plus environmental facilitation (or minus environmental obstruction). Weiner (2004) claimed boldly that “there are three, and indeed only three, underlying causal properties that have cross-situational generality. . . . locus, stability, and controllability” (p. 17). Bradbury and Fincham (1990) summarized their extensive review as indicating that “the dimensions of locus, stability, control, and globality are necessary and sufficient for assessing causal attributions in marriage” (p. 17). Yet, their own coding of research results indicates that many studies find no or only partial support for these dimensions.

The fact is that, almost 50 years after its inception, it is still not entirely clear how much the results of Attribution Theory support these condition specifications. This raises a significant question of the verifiability and falsifiability of this theory. “Verifiability” is the extent to which evidence in support of a theory can be generated through observation and investigation. “Falsifiability” is the extent to which evidence that contradicts a theory can be generated through observation and investigation. Consider the following proposition: all conflicts are blamed on the partner more than on self. A verification strategy would take any evidence that conflicts tend to be blamed on the partner more than on the self as evidence in support of the proposition. In contrast, a falsification strategy would take any evidence that it sometimes does not happen as evidence that the proposition is incorrect and must be modified or replaced. To date, it is easy to find researchers claiming to have supported or verified Attribution Theory. Even though lack of support and partial support are often reported, however, it is rare to find any scholar of merit claiming that Attribution Theory is fundamentally flawed and that some of its premises need to be replaced. We believe that the validity of Attribution Theory should be examined closely on these criteria.

### **Directions of Future Research and Applications**

Despite our concerns with Attribution Theory as a theory, we contend that attribution processes have great potential for additional study and application by scholars interested in interpersonal communication and relationships. In particular, the research focusing on some of the very real consequences of the attributions we make suggest places for important exploration. For example, a recent study (Stewart, Keel, & Schiavo, 2006) examined attributions people gave for others who had been diagnosed with an eating disorder. Compared to the attributions made about people without the eating disorder, attributions about people with anorexia nervosa are to blame the affected person for his or her condition. That is, people implicated those with anorexia in their own disorder;

such attributions could affect others' treatment of and communication with that person and may, therefore, worsen the person's condition.

Attributions may have strong legal implications, as well. For example, Nancy White (2005) looked at the legal effects of responsibility attributions for juvenile delinquents and their parents. According to White,

Recently, two families in Western Australia have felt the full force of being found guilty of failing to act responsibly in relation to their respective 14- and 15-year-old sons' delinquent actions. . . . Fines totalling A\$60,000 were exacted, with one family ordered to pay A\$45,000 and the other family A\$15,000 remuneration to the victims of their sons' damage. . . . What, one asks, did these parents do or fail to do that allowed the Court to order such high compensation to be paid to the victims of their sons' acts? (p. 402)

What they did or failed to have done may well rest in how they communicated with their children.

In closing, we believe that attributional processes are a vital—and consequential—set of practices for interpersonal communication scholars to investigate. Their ubiquity in our everyday sense-making means that attributions are ripe for study by people in their everyday lives. Our hope is that this chapter energizes that curiosity in readers.

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