



Attribution in Social Psychology

Dr. Suresh Kumar Murugesan PhD



HOW WE JUDGE OTHERS

Anna is unreliable.
She can't even attend
a meeting on time



Ben is incompetent.
He can't finish his
projects on time

We attribute a person's behaviour to their character without taking into account the limitations and constraints within which the person might be operating

Attribution

'Attribution' is a concept in social psychology addressing the processes by which individuals explain the causes of behavior and events.



Example for Attribution

When you get a poor grade on a quiz, you might blame the teacher for not adequately explaining the material, completely dismissing the fact that you didn't study.

When a classmate gets a better grade on the same quiz, you might attribute his good performance to luck, neglecting the fact that he has excellent study habits.

Key terms

- Attribution = Explanation
- Attribution Theory
 - Explains others behaviour by crediting the situation person's disposition
- Dispositional - factors within the person (Personality)
- Situational - factors outside the person (Luck)

Types of Attribution

The main types of attributions we may use in daily life include:

1. Interpersonal Attribution
2. Predictive Attribution
3. Explanatory Attribution



Interpersonal Attribution

When telling a story to a group of friends or acquaintances, you are likely to tell the story in a way that places you in the best possible light.



Predictive Attribution

We also tend to attribute things in ways that allow us to make future predictions.

When your bike was damaged, you might attribute the crime to the fact that you parked in a particular private parking.

As a result, you will avoid that private parking in the future in order to avoid further damaged.



Explanatory Attribution

- We use explanatory attributions to help us make sense of the world around us.
- Some people have an optimistic explanatory style, while others tend to be more pessimistic.
- People with an optimistic style attribute positive events to stable, internal, and global causes and negative events to unstable, external, and specific causes.
- Those with a pessimistic style attribute negative events to internal, stable, and global causes and positive events to external, stable, and specific causes.



Types of attributions

1. External Attribution
2. Internal Attribution

ATTRIBUTION

What causes certain behaviour?

It is something within
the person we observe,
i.e. their personality

= internal attribution

We make a
DISPOSITIONAL ATTRIBUTION

Is it caused by
something outside
the person we observe,
i.e. their situation

= external attribution

We make a
SITUATIONAL ATTRIBUTION



External attributions

- External attribution, also called situational attribution
- It refers to interpreting someone's behavior as being caused by the individual's environment.
- For example, if one's car tire is punctured, it may be attributed to a hole in the road; by making attributions to the poor condition of the highway, one can make sense of the event without any discomfort that it may in reality have been the result of their own bad driving.
- Individuals are more likely to associate unfortunate events with external factors than with internal factors.
- Ex. A child attributes their feelings to the weather outside their house; The child feels sad because it is raining outside.

Internal Attribution

- Internal attribution, or dispositional attribution, refers to the process of assigning the cause of behavior to some internal characteristic, likeability and motivation, rather than to outside forces.
- This concept has overlap with the Locus of control, in which individuals feel they are personally responsible for everything that happens to them.
- Example: A child attributes the weather to their feelings; it is raining outside because the child is feeling sad.





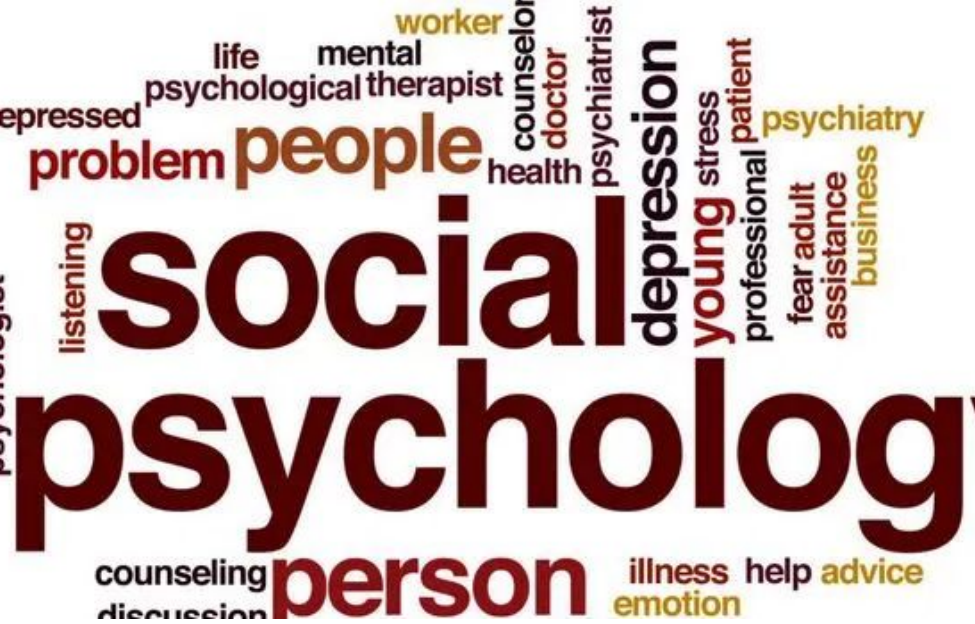
Types of Attribution

- Stable attribution
- Unstable attribution



Stable Attribution

- Stable Attribution, people infer that an event or behavior is due to stable, unchanging factors.
- *Example: Suresh gets a grade 'D' on his social Psychology semester paper. If he attributes the grade to the fact that he always has bad luck, he is making a stable attribution.*



Unstable Attribution

- Unstable Attribution, people infer that an event or behavior is due to unstable, temporary factors.
- *Example: Suresh gets a grade 'D' on his social Psychology semester paper. If he attributes the grade to the fact that he didn't have much time to study that week, he is making an unstable attribution.*

Relationship between attribution and Personality

	Stable	Unstable
Dispositional	Intelligence, personality, judgement, willpower "He's just not a good singer"	Moods, exertion of effort in a specific task, momentary whims "She wasn't trying hard enough"
Situational	Institutional factors, economics, social structures such as race, gender, class "The judges always go easier on girls"	Coincidence, weather, dumb luck "You're lucky I had a sore throat today"

Locus of causality

Internal

External

Stable

Ability

Coaching

Unstable

Effort
Practice
Psychological
factors

Luck
Task difficulty
Teamwork
Officials

Locus of stability



Theories of Attribution

The roots of attribution theory

Attribution theory is rooted in the work of

1. Kurt Lewin,
2. Julian Rotter,
3. John Atkinson,
4. Fritz Heider,
5. Harold Kelley, and
6. Bernard Weiner.

Different Theories of Attribution

1. Fritz Heider's "Common Sense" Theory (1958)
2. Correspondent Inference Theory by Edward Jones and Keith Davis (1965)
3. Kelley's Covariation Model (1967)
4. Bernard Weiner's Attribution Theory (1979) etc

Theories of Attribution

1. <https://www.integratedsociopsychology.net/theory/meta-states-and-the-cognitive-triad/attribution-theory/>
2. <https://www.indjsp.org/article.asp?issn=0971-9962;year=2020;volume=36;issue=4;spage=277;epage=283;aulast=Banerjee>
3. https://nptel.ac.in/content/storage2/courses/109101015/downloads/Lecture%20Notes/Lec9-Social_Attribution.pdf

Biases in Attribution

Fundamental Attribution Error

We judge others on their personality or fundamental character, but we judge ourselves on the situation.



Sally is late to class; she's lazy. You're late to class; it was a bad morning.

Self-Serving Bias

Our failures are situational, but our successes are our responsibility.



You won that award due to hard work rather than help or luck. Meanwhile, you failed a test because you hadn't gotten enough sleep.

In-Group Favoritism

We favor people who are in our in-group as opposed to an out-group.



Francis is in your church, so you like Francis more than Sally.

Bandwagon Effect

Ideas, fads, and beliefs grow as more people adopt them.



Sally believes fidget spinners help her children. Francis does, too.

Groupthink

Due to a desire for conformity and harmony in the group, we make irrational decisions, often to minimize conflict.



Sally wants to go get ice cream. Francis wants to shop for T-shirts. You suggest getting T-shirts with pictures of ice cream on them.

Halo Effect

If you see a person as having a positive trait, that positive impression will spill over into their other traits. (This also works for negative traits.)



"Taylor could never be mean; she's so cute!"

Moral Luck

Better moral standing happens due to a positive outcome; worse moral standing happens due to a negative outcome.



"X culture won X war because they were more moral than the losers."

False Consensus

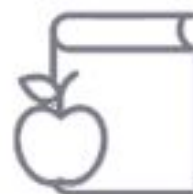
We believe more people agree with us than is actually the case.



"Everybody thinks that!"

Curse of Knowledge

Once we know something, we assume everyone else knows it, too.



Alice is a teacher and struggles to understand the perspective of her new students.

Spotlight Effect

We overestimate how much people are paying attention to our behavior and appearance.



Sally is worried everyone's going to notice how lame her ice cream T-shirt is.

Availability Heuristic

We rely on immediate examples that come to mind while making judgments.



When trying to decide on which store to visit, you choose the one you most recently saw an ad for.

Defensive Attribution

As a witness who secretly fears being vulnerable to a serious mishap, we will blame the victim less and attacker more if we relate to the victim.



Sally sat too long at a green light because she was playing with her phone. She got rear-ended. Greg, who is known to text and drive, got out and yelled at the person who smacked into her.

Just-World Hypothesis

We tend to believe the world is just; therefore, we assume acts of injustice are deserved.



"Sally's purse was stolen because she was mean to Francis about their T-shirt and had bad karma."

Naïve Realism

We believe that we observe objective reality and that other people are irrational, uninformed, or biased.



"I see the world as it really is — other people are dumb."

Naïve Cynicism

We believe that we observe objective reality and that other people have a higher egocentric bias than they actually do in their intentions/actions.



"The only reason this person is doing something nice is to get something out of me."

Forer Effect (aka Barnum Effect)

We easily attribute our personalities to vague statements, even if they can apply to a wide range of people.



"This horoscope is so accurate!"

Dunning-Kruger Effect

The less you know, the more confident you are. The more you know, the less confident you are.



Francis confidently assures the group that there's no kelp in ice cream. They do not work in the dairy industry.

Anchoring

We rely heavily on the first piece of information introduced when making decisions.



"That's 50% off? It must be a great deal."

Automation Bias

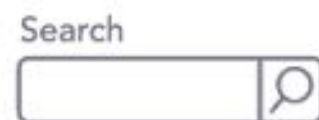
We rely on automated systems, sometimes trusting too much in the automated correction of actually correct decisions.



Your phone auto-corrects "its" to "it's," so you assume it's right.

Google Effect (aka Digital Amnesia)

We tend to forget information that's easily looked up in search engines.



"What was the name of that actor in that funny movie? I've looked it up like eight times..."

Reactance

We do the opposite of what we're told, especially when we perceive threats to personal freedoms.



One of Alice's students refuses to do his homework, even though both she and his parents tell him to.

Confirmation Bias

We tend to find and remember information that confirms our perceptions.



You can confirm a conspiracy theory based on scant evidence while ignoring contrary evidence.

Backfire Effect

Disproving evidence sometimes has the unwarranted effect of confirming our beliefs.



The evidence that disproves your conspiracy theory was probably faked by the government.

Third-Person Effect

We believe that others are more affected by mass media consumption than we ourselves are.



"You've clearly been brainwashed by the media!"

Belief Bias

We judge an argument's strength not by how strongly it supports the conclusion but how plausible the conclusion is in our own minds.



Sally mentions her supporting theory about your conspiracy theory, which you adopt wholeheartedly despite the fact that she has very little evidence for it.

Availability Cascade

Tied to our need for social acceptance, collective beliefs gain more plausibility through public repetition.



A story about razor blades appearing in candy eventually led to many people no longer offering homemade treats on Halloween in America.

Declinism

We tend to romanticize the past and view the future negatively, believing that societies/institutions are by and large in decline.



"In my day, kids had more respect!"

Status Quo Bias

We tend to prefer things to stay the same; changes from the baseline are considered to be a loss.



Even though an app's terms of service invade Sally's privacy, she'd rather not switch to another app.

Sunk Cost Fallacy (aka Escalation of Commitment)

We invest more in things that have cost us something rather than altering our investments, even if we face negative outcomes.



"In for a penny, in for a pound!"

Gambler's Fallacy

We think future possibilities are affected by past events.



Alice has lost nine coin tosses in a row, so she's sure to win the next one!

Zero-Risk Bias

We prefer to reduce small risks to zero, even if we can reduce more risk overall with another option.



"You should probably buy the warranty."

Framing Effect

We often draw different conclusions from the same information depending on how it's presented.



Alice hears that her favorite candidate is "killing it" with a 45% approval rating. Sally hears that the candidate is "disappointing the country" with a 45% rating. They have wildly different interpretations of the same statistic.

Stereotyping

We adopt generalized beliefs that members of a group will have certain characteristics, despite not having information about the individual.



"That guy with the fancy mustache is a hipster. He probably has a vinyl collection."

Outgroup Homogeneity Bias

We perceive out-group members as homogeneous and our own in-groups as more diverse.



Alice is not a gamer, but she believes "all gamers are the same."

Authority Bias

We trust and are more often influenced by the opinions of authority figures.



"My teacher told me this was fine."

Placebo Effect*

If we believe a treatment will work, it often will have a small physiological effect.



Alice was given a placebo for her pain, and her pain decreased.

Survivorship Bias

We tend to focus on those things that survived a process and overlook ones that failed.



Greg tells Alice her purse business is going to be great because a successful fashion company had the same strategy. (But 10 other failed companies also had the same strategy.)

Tachypsychia

Our perceptions of time shift depending on trauma, drug use, and physical exertion.



"When the car almost hit me, time slowed down ..."

Law of Triviality (aka "Bike-Shedding")

We give disproportionate weight to trivial issues, often while avoiding more complex issues.



Rather than figuring out how to help the homeless, a local city government spends a lot of time discussing putting in a bike path and bike sheds.

Zeigarnik Effect

We remember incomplete tasks more than completed ones.



Greg feels guilty for never getting anything done, until he sees all of the tasks he's checked off on his task list.

IKEA Effect

We place higher value on things we partially created ourselves.



"Don't you love this pot I spent \$20 on? I painted it myself!"

Ben Franklin Effect

We like doing favors; we are more likely to do another favor for someone if we've already done a favor for them than if we had received a favor from that person.



Greg loaned Francis a pen. When Francis asked to borrow \$5, Greg did it readily.

Bystander Effect*

The more other people are around, the less likely we are to help a victim.



In a crowd of students, no one called 911 when someone got hurt in a fight.

Suggestibility

We, especially children, sometimes mistake ideas suggested by a questioner for memories.



"So did you fall off the couch before or after your mom hit you?"

False Memory

We mistake imagination for real memories.



Greg is certain Sally said a really funny joke about pineapples, when that joke actually came from a TV show.

Cryptomnesia

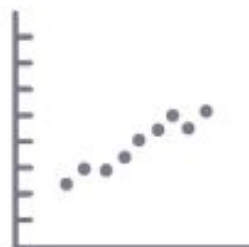
We mistake real memories for imagination.



Greg thinks he visited a graveyard, but he's pretty sure he just had a spooky dream.

Clustering Illusion

We find patterns and "clusters" in random data.



"That cloud looks like your cat, Alice!"

Pessimism Bias

We sometimes overestimate the likelihood of bad outcomes.



"Nothing will ever get better."

Optimism Bias

We sometimes are over-optimistic about good outcomes.



"It's going to turn out great!"

Blind Spot Bias

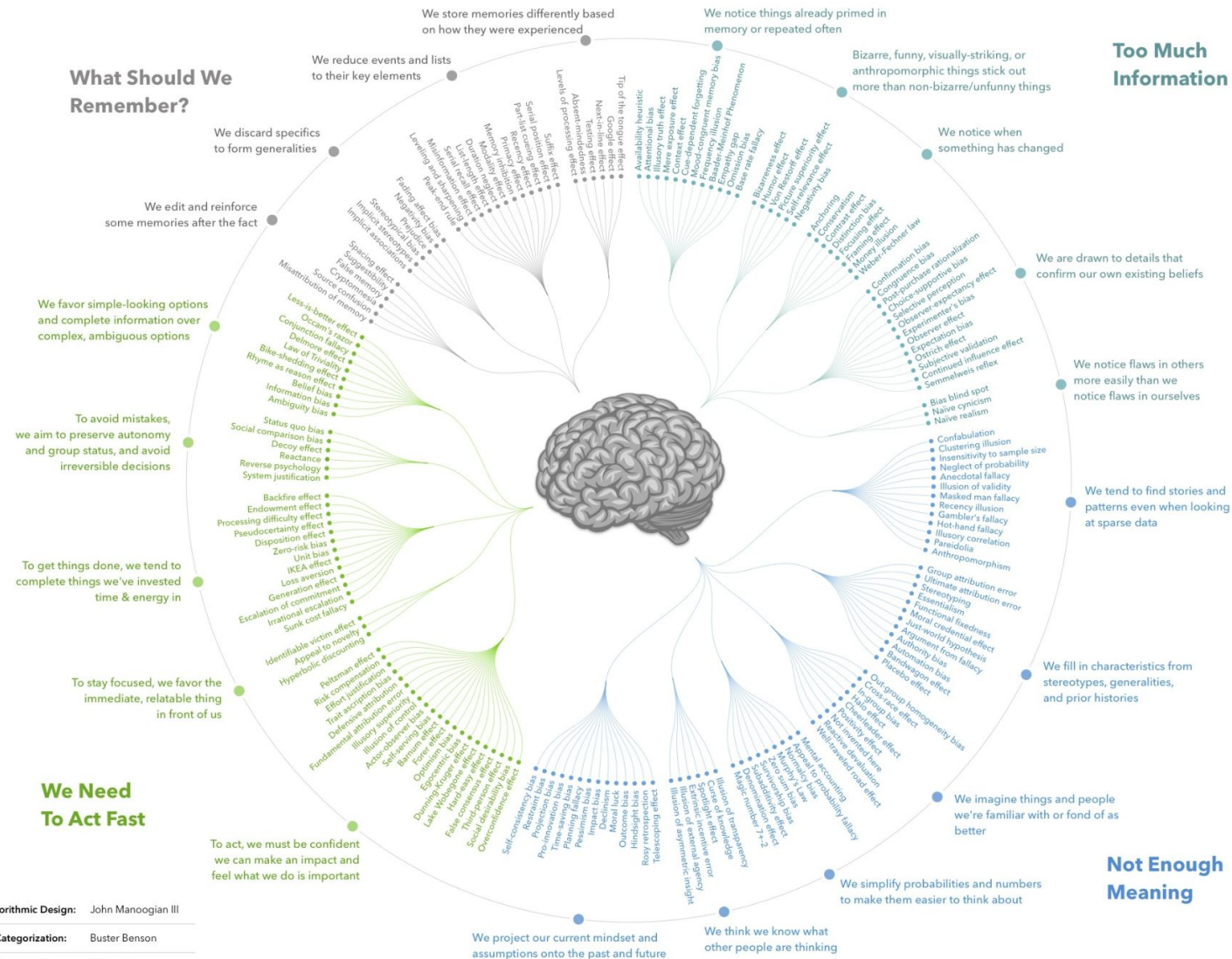
We don't think we have bias, and we see it in others more than ourselves.



"I am not biased!"

*Technically not a cognitive bias but another important form of bias

COGNITIVE BIAS CODEX



<https://www.visualcapitalist.com/wp-content/uploads/2017/09/cognitive-bias-infographic.html>

Not Enough Meaning

designhacks.co

Visual & Algorithmic Design: John Manoogian III

Concept & Categorization: Buster Benson

List of 188 Cognitive Biases: [Wikipedia](#)

Practical applications of attribution theories in various areas of clinical practice

Area/field	Applications
Understanding psychopathology/symptoms ^[24,27]	Cognitive biases of depression/anxiety disorders/substance use disorders Genesis of delusions/hallucinations Culture-bound syndromes Somatoform disorders Sexual dysfunction and disorders Personality disorders (especially borderline, antisocial) Paraphilias Gender identity disorders
Formulating management plan ^[28,29]	Autism spectrum disorders, separation anxiety Behavioral modification/CBT Social skills training Modeling and social learning Interpersonal therapy Psychoeducation

Stigma-reduction
measures^[30,31,32]

Understanding controllability attribution with public attitudes

Community measures (using drama, art, and education) to reduce misattributions for mitigating public stigma

Use of media for IEC activities

Understanding psychology of misinformation/disinformation

Use of disease targeted and culture-specific infographics

Addressing self-stigma, burnout, and stress in health-care professionals

Positive psychology^[33,34]

Enhance self-esteem and modify coping strategies

Foster collectivism through motivational attributions

Re-attributional modeling to reduce xenophobic attitudes

Leadership psychology and training

Industrial psychology^[23,35,36]

Utility in consumerism science and sales management

Advertisement, brand management, and marketing

Performance analysis

Administrative policy-making for social change based on prevalent “causal” attributions

Education strategies, learning, and curriculum building

Applications in political psychology, estimating public perceptions, election campaign behaviors, and policy reactions

Social rehabilitation ^[30,37]	Motivational enhancement
	Action orientation
	Morality and cultural salience
	Culture and context-specific understanding of disability and appropriate social engagement
Terror management and Criminology ^[38,39]	Understanding personality attributions and genesis of psychopathy
	Motive estimation
	“Dual-component cultural anxiety buffer” to understand terrorism based on worldview and self-esteem (which are based on “reason” attributions)
	Exploring and understanding fanaticism, radicalism and related beliefs
Understanding and addressing stigma in special populations	HIV
	LGBTQ population
	Racism
	Age, gender, caste and ethnicity-based discrimination

CBT=Cognitive and behavioral therapy, IEC=Information education communication, HIV=Human immunodeficiency virus, LGBTQ=Lesbian gay bisexual transgender queer

References

1. Kendra Cherry_(May 15, 2020). Attribution and Social Psychology.
<https://www.verywellmind.com/attribution-social-psychology-2795898>
2. McLeod, S. A. (2012). *Attribution theory*. Simply Psychology. <https://www.simplypsychology.org/attribution-theory.html>
3. [https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Attribution_\(psychology\)](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Attribution_(psychology))
4. <https://www.sparknotes.com/psychology/psych101/socialpsychology/section3/page/2/>
5. Debanjan Banerjee, Chehak Gidwani and TS Sathyanarayana Rao (2020). The role of “Attributions” in social psychology and their relevance in psychosocial health: A narrative review.
<https://www.indjsp.org/article.asp?issn=0971-9962;year=2020;volume=36;issue=4;spage=277;epage=283;aualast=Banerjee>
6. https://www.indjsp.org/viewimage.asp?img=IndianJSocPsychiatry_2020_36_4_277_305945_t1.jpg
7. https://nptel.ac.in/content/storage2/courses/109101015/downloads/Lecture%20Notes/Lec9-Social_Attribution.pdf
8. <https://courses.lumenlearning.com/boundless-psychology/chapter/social-cognition-2/>
9. <https://www.cliffsnotes.com/study-guides/psychology/psychology/social-psychology/attributions>
10. <https://opentextbc.ca/socialpsychology/chapter/biases-in-attribution/>
11. <https://courses.lumenlearning.com/edpsy/chapter/attribution-theory/>
12. <http://psychology.iresearchnet.com/social-psychology/social-psychology-theories/attribution-theory/>
13. <https://www.integratedsociopsychology.net/theory/meta-states-and-the-cognitive-triad/attribution-theory/>
14. https://storage.googleapis.com/titledmax-media/099372db-50-cognitive-biases-2_80per.png