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Attribution of causality II: accuracy and error

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Causal inferences and accuracy

Imagine that you have just had a major row with your intimate partner (boyfriend, girlfriend, husband, wife, etc.), where you have each accused the other of being at fault. You say, 'You're always working so hard then going out in the evening so that I never get to see you.' Your partner says, 'You never want to do anything and I like to be busy and out with other people.' You then provide an attribution to your partner along the lines of being gregarious, never able to keep still, always wanting to be busy. These are dispositional (internal) attributions. Your partner provides causal explanations of his or her behaviour along the lines of being asked to go out socially and feeling

obliged, being given too much work to do which simply has to be done and never being asked out by you. These are situational (external) attributions. As you can see from this imaginary disagreement there are basic differences in attributions made by you about your partner, and by your partner about his or her behaviour. Who is right? Or put a different way, whose attributions are accurate and whose inaccurate?

This is not an easy question to answer and for the two people involved the differences may be difficult to resolve. One way of attempting to assess accuracy and error would be to have some kind of objective standard by which to compare the two sets of attributions. However, unlike the world of physics and chemistry, this does not exist in social psychology. Another way might be to have a set of norms or frame of reference which captures what most people normally do. But what is the norm does not mean it is right, or that commonly made attributions are accurate. Another way might be to construct theories and models of causal attribution and then see if attributions that people make are consistent or deviate from such models. In general, this latter approach has been the one adopted by social psychologists investigating errors and biases in attribution processes.

In this chapter we shall consider four well-researched and important errors that people demonstrate when attributing causes to either their own or other people's behaviour. These are: the fundamental attribution error; actor-observer biases; the false consensus effect and self-serving biases. We will then consider how people attribute responsibility. Finally, the chapter looks at cross-cultural differences with respect to attributional biases and errors.

The fundamental attribution error

At the start of Chapter 2 we considered the imaginary case of a woman who killed her husband and was then convicted of manslaughter. You might imagine the press giving banner headlines such as 'Evil wife slaughters husband' or 'Callous and uncaring wife kills husband in a fit of rage'. These headlines are making dispositional attributions about the personality of the woman. The headlines have ignored situational factors such as the abuse that the woman had put up with for years. Concentrating on dispositions/personality characteristics of a person to the virtual exclusion of situational factors is what social psychologists have called the **fundamental attribution error.**

Put another way, the fundamental attribution error is the tendency to overestimate the importance of dispositions and to underestimate the importance of situational factors when attributing causes to another person's behaviour (Ross and Nisbett, 1991). The error is regarded as a fundamental one since it is assumed to be pervasive and occur across a wide range of behaviours. Gilbert and Malone (1995) characterise it as a marked tendency for people to regard situational factors and influences as invisible or non-existent. It is important to realise that the error only applies when making causal attributions about somebody else's behaviour. It does not apply when making attributions about your own behaviour. This will be taken up more fully when we come to consider actor-observer differences on pages 43–6.

A classic study demonstrating this error was conducted by Ross *et al.* (1977). College students were recruited for an experiment in which some played the role of questioner and others the role of contestant in a general knowledge quiz game. Who became questioner and contestant was randomly decided by students drawing cards. Instead of the questioner asking pre-determined questions, participants were each given 15 minutes in which to make up their own general knowledge questions. This clearly advantaged the questioner and disadvantaged the contestant since the general knowledge would reflect what the questioner knew and would be idiosyncratic to him or her. After the quiz questioners and contestants were asked to rate each other's general knowledge. Ross *et al.* also had another group of college students observe the quiz; these observers were asked to rate the level of general knowledge of both questioners and contestants.

As can be seen from Figure 3.1, questioners thought that they knew more general knowledge than contestants (but the difference was not significant). By contrast, contestants rated their own general knowledge as low and that of the questioner as high. Observers, who knew that questioners made up their questions, ignored the situational constraints and rated the general knowledge of the questioner as very high and that of contestant as low. This experiment offers a compelling demonstration of the fundamental attribution error since strong dispositional attributions about levels of general knowledge were made of questioner and contestant which reflected little consideration of the strong advantage given to the questioner in this situation.

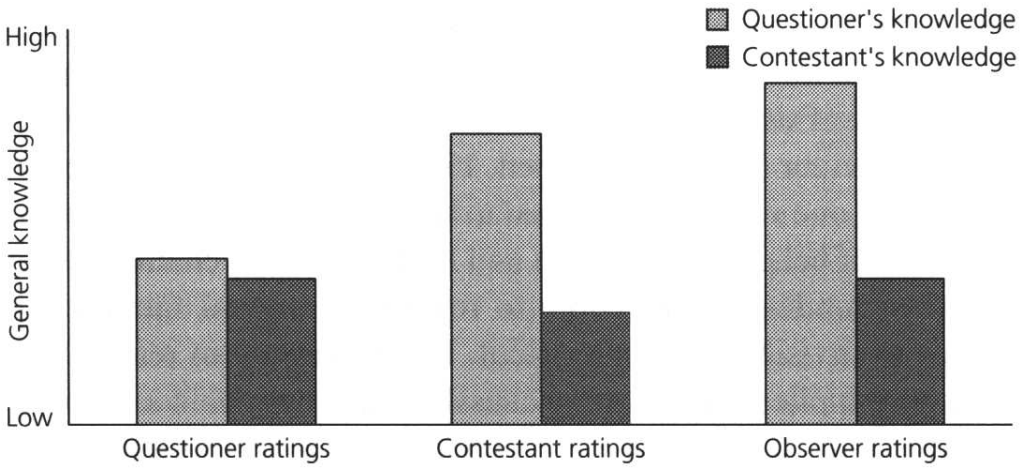

Figure 3.1 **Ratings of general knowledge of questioner and contestant after quiz game by questioners, contestants and observers**
Source: **Adapted from Ross *et al.* (1977)**

Evaluation

Numerous explanations have been put forward by social psychologists for the fundamental attribution error; we shall consider two of the more important ones here. First is the recognition, originally by Heider (1958), that another person's behaviour 'engulfs our perceptual field'. That is, as an observer of another's behaviour we focus our attention on the person him- or herself rather than pay attention to the social situation in which the behaviour takes place. Factors such as the social context, a person's role, and situational pressures are less likely to occupy our thought and attention than what the person is actually doing. As Fiske and Taylor (1991) express it 'because the person is dominant in the perceiver's thinking, aspects of the person come to be overrated as causally important' (p. 67).

Progress exercise

Consider a courtroom television programme and think about the defendant who is on trial. The prosecution case is often dominated by negative and criminal characteristics of the defendant, with the aim of trying to show he or she is a dishonest person. Videotape the programme and list examples of what you consider to be the fundamental attribution error.

This explanation has led some social psychologists to regard the error as a result of spontaneous rather than deliberative thought (see

Chapter 2). Gilbert (1989) has suggested a two-stage model in which automatic or spontaneous dispositional attributions are first made and then adjusted through a deliberative stage.

Imagine again the case of the wife killing her husband and people's explanation of this. According to Gilbert this might be as follows:

- Stage 1: Spontaneous dispositional attribution—the woman was uncaring, unable to control her temper and aggressive.
- Stage 2: Deliberative attribution—her husband had abused her physically and emotionally for years causing her to be at the end of her tether and go mad.

However, Gilbert claims that situational factors are often difficult to incorporate in the process and are more complex to understand. This results in the original, spontaneous attribution being confirmed. Gilbert *et al.* (1988) demonstrated support for this two-stage model in an experiment in which participants in one condition were distracted or 'cognitively busy', and those in another condition not distracted. All participants watched a video of a woman who demonstrated anxious behaviour (biting nails, tapping fingers, running hands through her hair). Half of the participants were told the woman had been discussing topics that made her anxious, and the other half were told that neutral topics, such as travel, had been discussed. Participants in the 'distracted' condition were asked to memorise material, whilst those in the 'undistracted' condition were not asked to memorise material. Results clearly showed that distracted participants attributed high levels of anxiety to the woman regardless of the topic of conversation. By contrast, those who had not been distracted took account of the different topics of discussion and rated the woman as less dispositionally anxious in the 'anxious' condition of the experiment. The results showed clear support for the two-stage model explaining the fundamental attribution error; the model is shown in Figure 3.2.

Progress exercise

Using Figure 3.2 think of a behaviour of a friend (for example, phoning you to ask you out, working together on a psychology assignment, finishing with his or her boyfriend/girlfriend). Think about causes for this behaviour by filling in the boxes in Figure 3.2. Hint: a distraction might be your watching television or going out with another friend.

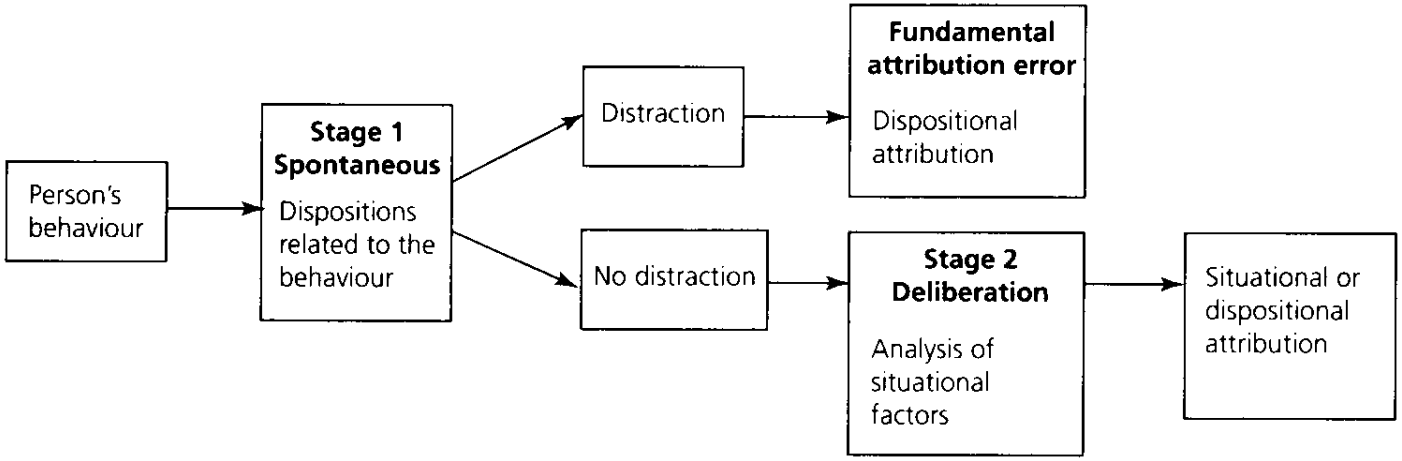

Figure 3.2 **Two-stage model of the fundamental attribution error**
Source: **After Gilbert, 1989**

It is interesting to note that the logic of this model means that strategies which encourage people to consider, or make more salient, situational factors should reduce the tendency for people to make the fundamental attribution error.

Actor-observer differences

Consider again the example given at the start of this chapter about you having a row with your partner. You make dispositional attributions and your partner makes situational attributions. From the perspective of your partner this demonstrates the classic actor-observer differences when making causal explanations. Social psychologists have produced a wealth of evidence demonstrating that when explaining your own behaviour (actor) there tends to be an emphasis on situational factors, and when explaining another person's behaviour (observer) the emphasis is on dispositional factors (Jones and Nisbett, 1972). A series of experiments conducted by Nisbett *et al.* (1973), which investigated attributions concerning, for example, choice of subject of academic study, offered support for actor-observer differences. Here participants were asked to explain why they had chosen to study psychology at university as well as why they thought their friends had chosen to study psychology. Attributions to self reflected dispositions (for example, interested in people, keen to have a career using psychology). By contrast, attributions to others reflected situational factors (for example, quality of the course, status of the university, good sports facilities).

Extensions to the original claims have been made by, for example, Baxter and Goldberg (1988) who suggest that actors see their own behaviour as less stable and predictable in comparison to how somebody else's behaviour is perceived. This may reflect that we are more aware of our own mood changes, emotions and behavioural inconsistencies because these experiences are not directly accessible to us in other people. How another person is feeling may be effectively masked by what that person does or says.

Why should this actor-observer difference exist? One explanation is that when explaining our own behaviour our attention is more focused on situation constraints and how other people influence us. By contrast, when explaining another's behaviour our attention is focused on the behaviour. This latter explanation is similar to that for the fundamental attribution error. If this is the case then making

situational factors more salient for the observer and dispositional factors more salient for the actor should reverse the actor-observer difference.

Reversing actor-observer differences

A classic study by Storms (1973) showed how actor-observer differences could be reversed by changing the orientation of the attributor. In this experiment pairs of participants engaged in conversation whilst two other participants observed—one watching one participant and one watching the other participant. Half of the participants who had engaged in conversation were shown a videotape of themselves, and the observer who had been instructed to watch this person was shown the same video tape. This was the *same orientation* condition in the experiment. In the *opposite orientation* condition the other half of the participants were shown a video of the other person in conversation.

The results are depicted in Figure 3.3, and show quite clearly that participants in the same orientation condition displayed the traditional actor-observer differences. In contrast, participants in the opposite orientation condition whilst tending towards dispositional explanations, displayed many more situational explanations.

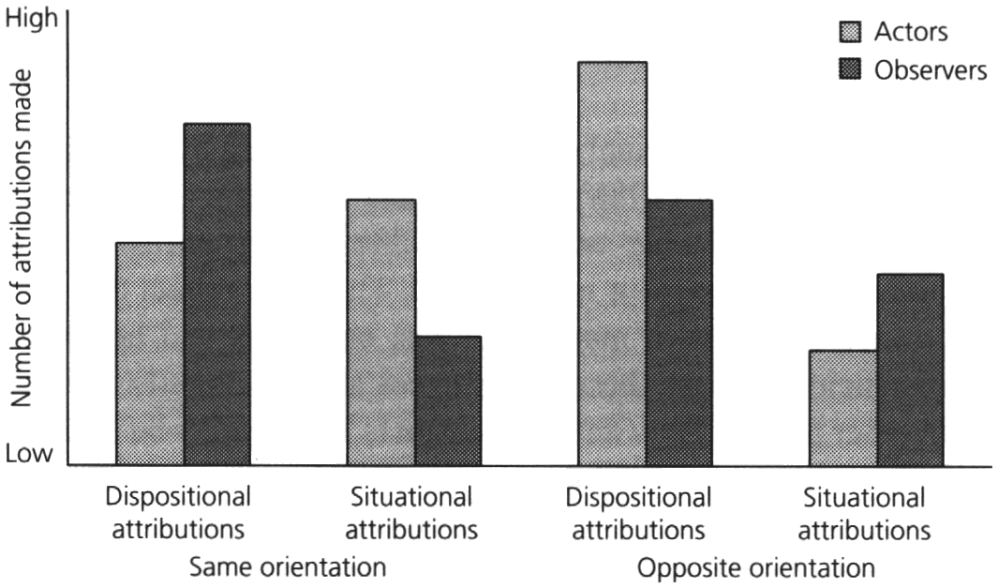

Figure 3.3 **Dispositional and situational attributions for actors and observers in the same and opposite orientations**
Source: **Adapted from Storms, 1973**

Progress exercise

Imagine you have just received a poor mark for your psychology essay. Make up a traditional 'actor' explanation in terms of situational factors. Now go to your bedroom and look at yourself in the mirror, think of the same imaginary essay. Do you find it easier to make dispositional attributions about yourself when looking at yourself in the mirror? This is similar to one of the actor 'opposite orientations' in the experiment by Storms (1973).

Other factors that have been found to reverse the traditional actor-observer difference are positive behaviours (such as being helpful to another person), when an actor knows he or she (the actor) has a certain disposition (for example, being a friendly person), and through empathy instructions (where you are asked to imagine yourself to be the other person) (Fiske and Taylor, 1991). For example, asking a person to observe another by pretending it is themselves actually behaving, results in more dispositional attributions being made (Cheu *et al.,* 1988).

Evaluation

Whilst evidence exists for actor-observer differences in causal explanation, actors do not exhibit an absolute preference for situational explanations. The results of the experiments by Storms (1973), depicted in Figure 3.3, show this since actors in the same orientation condition (viewing themselves on video tape) make many dispositional attributions as well. Furthermore, attributions about another's behaviour (observer) reveal many situational explanations. The actor-observer difference can be reduced or reversed by using strategies that make dispositions more salient for the actor, and situational factors more salient for the observer. This is summarised in Figure 3.4.

Overall, considerable evidence, from laboratory experiments and more naturalistic studies, shows the traditional actor-observer differences to be a consistent effect under many conditions. However, this should not be taken to mean that actors exclusively make situational attributions, and observers make exclusively dispositional attributions. They do not. We have also seen that the orientation, to take just one factor, of the observer can reverse the effect.

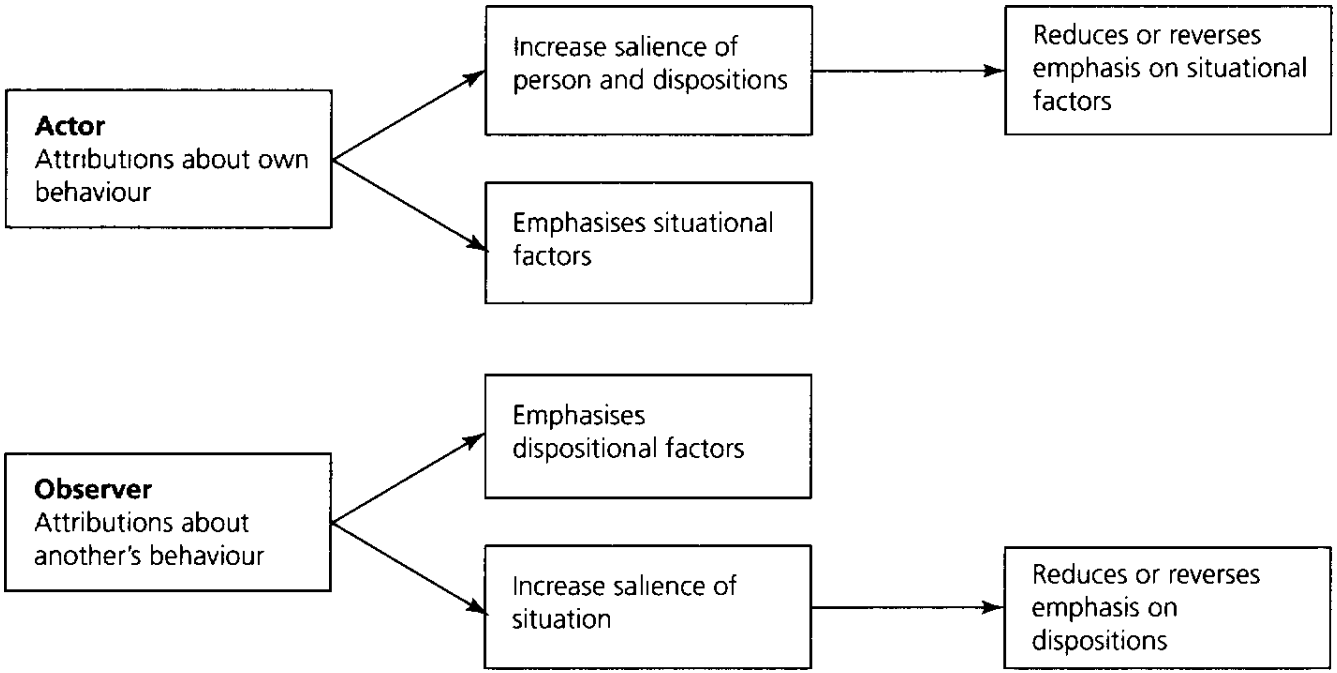

Figure 3.4 **Actor-observer differences in causal explanations and effects of increasing salience of under-emphasised factors**

The false consensus effect

Imagine that you have recently been asked to give up your Saturday to do community work for Help the Aged. This requires you to weed the beds and mow the grass of the gardens of elderly people who live at home but are unable to cope with such tasks. You agree to do these tasks. Then you wonder to yourself how many of your friends would have also agreed to give up their Saturday in such a way. You assume that most have. Later you find that only one or two have agreed to volunteer for the community work and you feel surprised by this. This example demonstrates the **false consensus effect** which is the tendency for people to overestimate how common their own behaviour, beliefs, attitudes, etc. are amongst other people.

The false consensus effect was demonstrated in a classic study by Ross *et al.* (1977). Here college students were asked to walk around their campus wearing a large sandwich board advertising 'Eat at Joe's'. Some students agreed to take part whilst others refused. Those who agreed were then asked to estimate how many of their fellow students would also agree to this request. The estimate they gave was 62 per cent. By contrast those who refused estimated that 67 per cent of their fellow students would also refuse! Ross *et al.* actually found that of the 80 college students asked 48 agreed (60 per cent) and 32 refused (40 per cent). A large number of studies show the false consensus effect to be robust and replicable across a wide range of behaviours, attitudes and opinions (Marks and Miller, 1987).

Three main explanations have been offered for the false consensus effect. First, our friends and intimate partner may be among people who are likely to be similar to us. Due to the fact that most of our social interaction takes place with our friends/partner, who by and large have similar views to us, we take these shared views to exist more commonly amongst people we do not know, than they actually are. Second, our own attitudes, opinions and beliefs will be highly salient and at the forefront of our mind. When we come across people expressing similar attitudes, we may focus on this and believe the attitude is commonly held amongst many people. This leads to an overestimation of how commonly held the attitude is with other people. Third, motivation and our own self-esteem may have a role to play in that our own self-esteem may be enhanced by believing that other people hold the same opinions as ourselves. This may provide validity and bolster confidence in our

own views with the result that we see ourselves as 'right' to hold such views. It seems then, that a mixture of cognitive and motivational explanations account for the false consensus effect.

With over 20 years of research social psychologists have identified a number of factors which may enhance or reduce the effect (Fiske and Taylor, 1991). False consensus effects are stronger when:

- the behaviour is seen to directly result from strong situational influences
- when the matter is of great importance to the person
- when we have a high degree of confidence that our view is correct or accurate

False consensus effects are weak or not in evidence when:

- a person has no idea about how others might behave in a certain situation
- when negative qualities or attributes about ourselves are involved
- when we actually do share a view held by a high majority of people

In our consideration of the false consensus effect there has been an implicit assumption that it is a bias or error. Dawes (1989) has argued to the contrary that the effect may be a rational strategy since it may make sense to assume that our behaviour and/or views are common amongst other people. In the absence of other information, evidence or alternative strategies the generalisation may be justified.

Self-serving biases

You have just attended an interview for a job that you would very much like to have, you thought the interview went well and that you gave a good account of yourself. A couple of days later you are contacted and told that you have the job. It is most likely that you will attribute your success to internal dispositions such as ability, effort and good interpersonal skills. Imagine on the other hand that you did not get the job. Because you wanted it so much attributions to external and situational factors, such as noisy room, rude interviewer or irrelevant questions asked, may be made. This pattern of attributions for success and failure is what is known as the **self-serving bias.** This

may be defined as 'the tendency to take credit for success and deny responsibility for failure' (Fiske and Taylor, 1991).

Evidence for such an attributional bias came from an early study by Johnson *et al.* (1964). In this experiment students were asked to teach secondary school pupils mathematics. The students were told that after their teaching, one pupil had performed well and one poorly. The students were then required to teach more mathematics to each pupil. Following this the student teachers were told that:

- the pupil who had done well following their first teaching session had continued to do well
- the pupil who had done poorly the first time had *either* continued to do poorly *or* improved

The student teachers were then asked to provide causal explanations for the pupil's performances. It was found that improved performance in the poor pupil was attributed to internal dispositions such as their own teaching skills and knowledge of mathematics. In contrast, for pupils who continued to do poorly the student teachers made external attributions such as pupil's lack of effort and inability to grasp mathematics.

Research over twenty years has found this self-serving bias to be a robust effect which is supported by cross-cultural research (Fletcher and Ward, 1988). Generally, empirical evidence has found stronger support for people taking credit for success (called a **self-enhancing bias**) than for people not accepting responsibility for failure (called a **self-protective bias**). The two types of bias within the general self-serving bias are shown in Figure 3.5.

Two types of explanation have been offered to explain self-serving biases—cognitive and motivational factors (Fiske and Taylor, 1991). Motivational explanations are based on the idea that the ego needs to protect itself from harm and present yourself to other people in the best light. Hence, the ego defends itself by taking credit for success and blaming others for failure. Cognitive explanations are based around expectations that people have: you expect or hope to succeed at tasks you set yourself. For example, a boxer going into the ring before a fight will do his best to convince himself that he is a better boxer and will win. This may, in part, be due to people believing their own success is under their control—but note our consideration of personality differences in Chapter 2 and the attributional style of depressives.

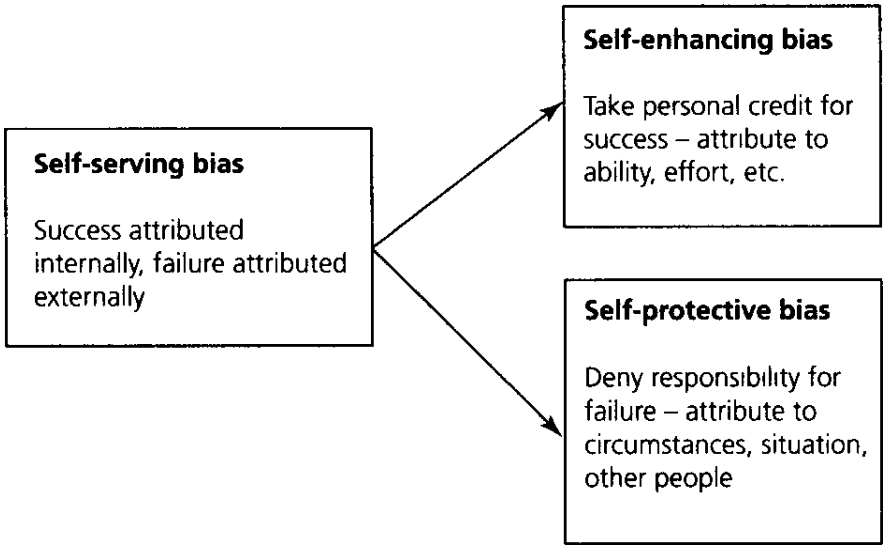

Figure 3.5 **How the self-serving bias may result in either self-enhancement or self-protective biases**

Evaluation

Some limiting factors for the generality of self-serving biases have been identified. For example, when there is public acclaim for personal success, such as that following an heroic deed, modesty and a tendency to give external explanations may be self-serving (Schlenker *et al.*, 1990). Also, if someone knows that their future performance will be critically examined there may be a tendency not to take so much credit for success (Miller and Schlenko, 1985).

Generally, research reports that people take more credit for success, whilst the evidence is less consistent for people denying personal responsibility for failure. The self-serving bias has also been found to be reduced when an act of behaviour comes under public scrutiny (such as a public enquiry or court case), and reversed sometimes when a person is trying to appear modest (Taylor and Fiske, 1991).

Group bias

Up to now we have considered self-serving biases at an individual level. However, Hewstone (1989) has identified a counterpart operating at the group level which is called the **group-serving attributional bias** or **ethnocentric bias.**

To understand this, think about a social or sports group that you are a member of. This may be a football or hockey team, or a self-help psychology group to deal with statistics! The group you identify yourself as a member of is called the ingroup, and other groups of which you are not a member are called outgroups. Hewstone (1989) found that if your own group did well on a task—for example, the group you played hockey with won their match—then dispositional attributions tend to be made. Here this might be such things as how well you all work as a team, the high level of skills of each person in the team, etc. By contrast, your attributions to the team you played against and who lost (negative behaviour) will tend to be situational (poorly trained, not used to playing away, etc.). This differential pattern of attributions serves the function of enhancing the positive aspects of the group you belong to, and making the other group look weaker or more ineffective than they actually are. In Chapter 5 we will look in much more detail into ingroup-outgroup effects. Figure 3.6 provides another example of this group-serving attributional bias.

Progress exercise

List each of the three attributional errors/biases that we have considered and identify the conditions under which each occurs. Then list the factors that have been found to reduce or reverse the error/bias.

Attributions of responsibility

Driving accidents are all too common on our roads, and after an accident happens both the police and insurance companies are interested in who is responsible and to blame for the accident. This is especially so when the accident is serious and causes severe personal injury or even death. Broadly speaking, internal or dispositional attributions result in a person being held responsible, whilst external attributions place the responsibility elsewhere. Shaver (1985) provides a theoretical framework for understanding how responsibility and blame is attributed. Four factors

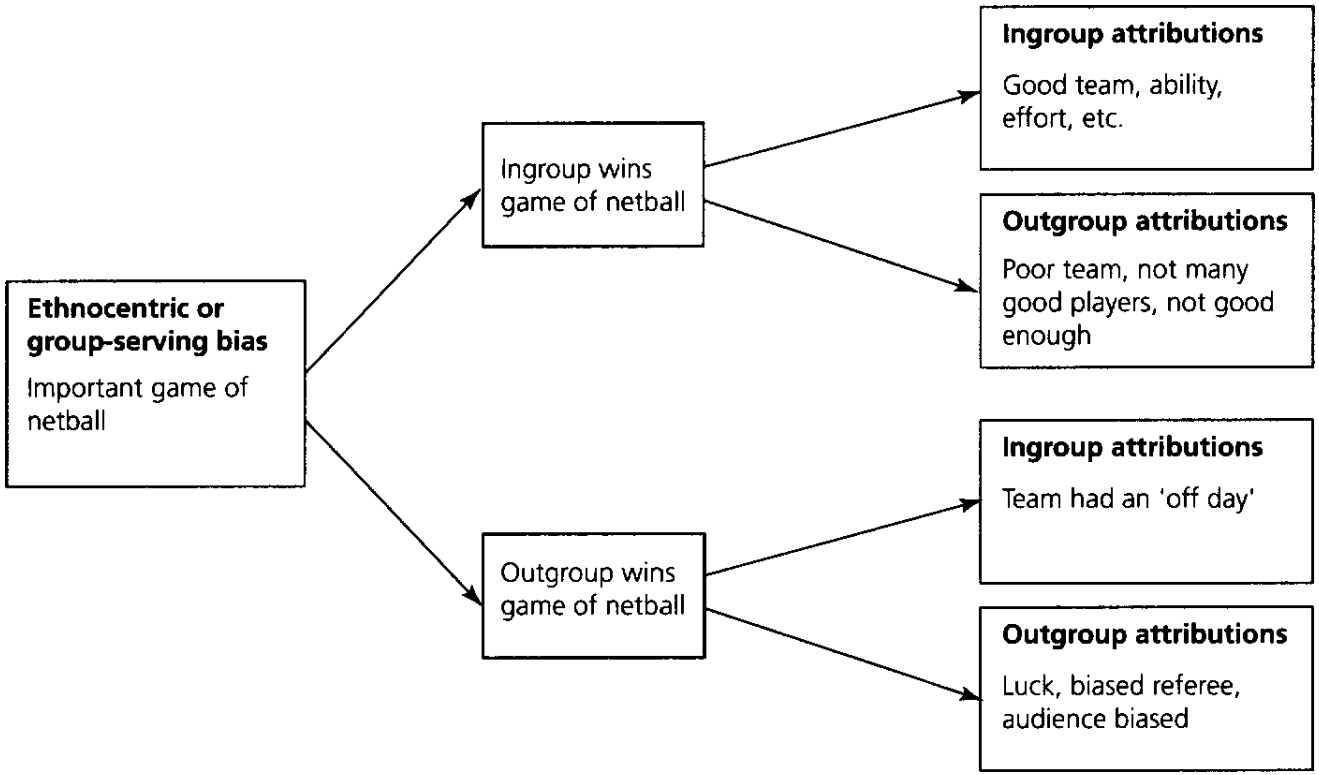

Figure 3.6 **The ethnocentric or group-serving bias shown through attributions made by the ingroup following the outcome of an important game of netball**

are involved: there to be a person identifiable as the originator of the behaviour; a belief that the person should have been able to foresee the outcome of his or her behaviour; a perception that the behaviour was not justified; and the person had free choice. Figure 3.7 summarises this and uses an example of a motor car accident to highlight these factors.

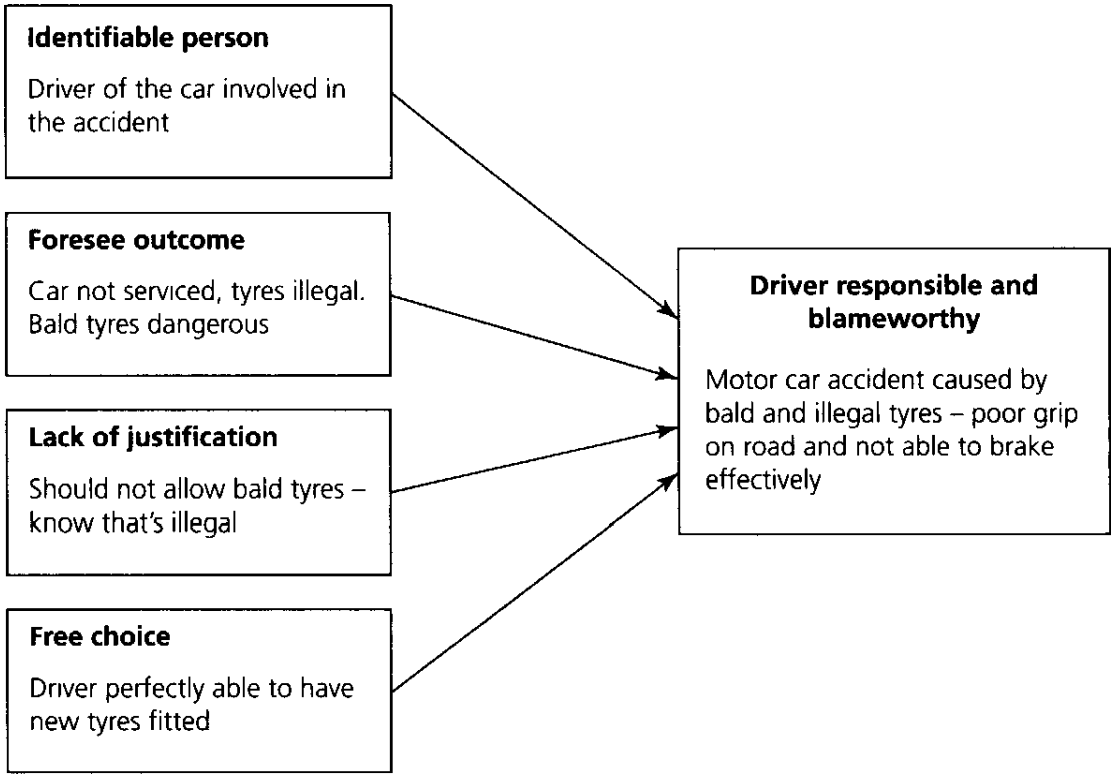

Figure 3.7 **Use of example of motor car accident to exemplify Shaver's (1985) framework for attributing blame**

Defensive attributional biases have been identified from research on attributions of responsibility. It has generally been found that behaviours resulting in severe outcomes (motor accident resulting in death, for example) attract greater levels of responsibility to the person involved than when outcomes are minor (motor accident resulting in broken headlight). As an outcome of behaviour becomes more severe the idea that the consequence was accidental (external attribution) becomes less acceptable to people and internal causes identifying responsibility are sought. Generally, the more unpleasant, undesirable and upsetting the outcome, the greater the defensive attributional bias to ascribing responsibility and blame.

People exhibit a defensive attributional bias if a high degree of personal similarity is perceived between the person responsible for the outcome and the observer. For example, suppose a doctor refuses to treat an alcoholic for a condition that is a direct consequence of excessive and regular drinking. You read about this in the newspaper and being a teetotaller yourself agree with the doctor and attribute responsibility for the condition to the alcoholic's inability to control his or her drinking. However, suppose you are an alcoholic or heavy drinker yourself. Burger (1981) showed that less personal responsibility will be attributed to the alcoholic for his or her medical condition. This is a defensive attribution since you are seeking to deny to yourself responsibility for the consequences of heavy drinking. Thornton (1984) generalised this idea to suggest that the higher the perceived personal threat, the more defensive attributions will be present.

In Chapter 2 we examined Weiner's (1979, 1986) model of attributions for success and failure. This model has good application for helping us to understand responsibility and blame in respect of such social problems as poverty, murder and rape (Lord, 1997). Clearly with crimes such as rape or murder the legal system is crucially concerned about attributing responsibility for the behaviour—this will determine both guilt and the severity of sentence passed on the person convicted of the crime.

Let us consider poverty in this context. Using Weiner's model, if we were to attribute a person's poverty to internal, stable and controllable causes the consequence would be that the person would be held responsible for the poverty he or she finds themselves in. By contrast, if a person's poverty is attributed to external, unstable and uncontrollable causes the person would not be held responsible and would receive both our help and sympathy. Zucker and Weiner (1993) produced evidence that a person's political leanings moderated this general assertion. They found that conservatives in the United States thought that poor people were more personally responsible for their plight and could do more to avoid poverty than liberals. Skitka and Tetlock (1993) suggest that conservatives are more likely to attribute internal, stable and controllable causes to people who find themselves poor, contract AIDS and other medical conditions. United States liberals look more to external, unstable causes for similar or social problems. On the face of it this should parallel conservative and labour

voters in this country and this has been supported in research by Furnham (1982).

Evaluation

Overall, good support has been found for the idea that less responsibility is attributed to another person when we see ourselves as similar to that person in terms of attitudes, beliefs, and personality. This no doubt underestimates the other person's responsibility and results from defensiveness on our part. Crudely speaking, if we perceive ourselves to be similar to another person we find it threatening to think they can do bad things. To do so would imply that we could do bad things also.

Cross-cultural perspectives on bias and error

In Chapter 2 we considered research investigating cultural differences in relation to internal and external attributions and saw that 'individualist' or 'independent' cultures showed a greater tendency towards making internal or dispositional attributions and 'collectivist' or 'interdependent' cultures showed a tendency towards external or situational attributions. This has relevance in relation to the extent that the fundamental attribution error may be prevalent across cultures. On the basis of what has just been said we would not expect it to be so. This is supported by Newman (1993) who claims that collectivist cultures are less likely to make dispositional or spontaneous internal attributions. For example, Hindus in India are more likely to refer to other people when explaining behaviour (her friends supported her) rather than dispositional explanation (she is a kind person). Research by Morris and Peng (1994), detailed in Chapter 2, supports the assertion that the fundamental attribution error is more a feature of western, individualistic cultures than collectivist cultures such as China (Krull and Erickson, 1995). Miller (1984) investigated the prevalence or frequency of dispositional attributions made by children or young adults in North American and Indian Hindu cultures. Participants were asked to give causal explanations for both pro-social and anti-social behaviours. A free-response format was used to avoid imposing a North American approach and these were then analysed for the presence of dispositional attributions.

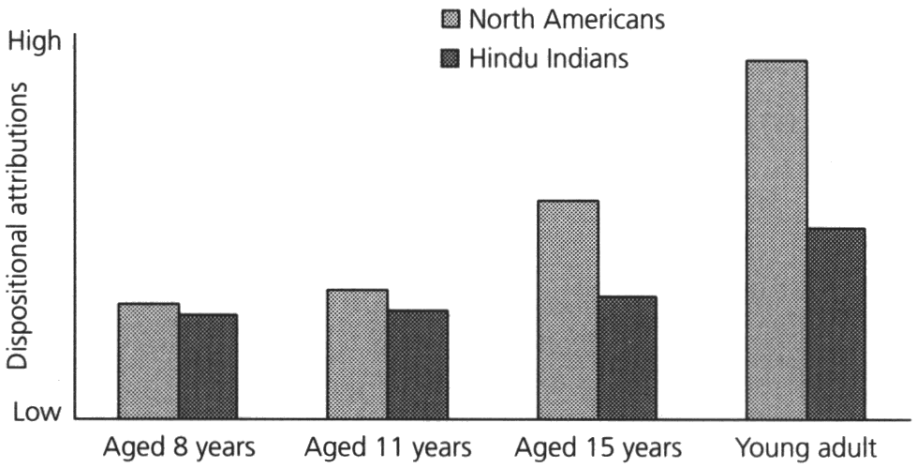

Figure 3.8 **Dispositional attributions made by North Americans and Hindu Indians from 8 years of age to young adulthood**
Source: **After Miller, 1984**

As Figure 3.8 shows, the proportion of dispositional attributions shown by 8 year-olds from both cultures was similar and, interestingly, quite low. However, with increase in age the two groups diverged with North Americans showing higher levels of dispositional attributions as they became adults. Miller (1984) also analysed external or situational attributions for the same free-responses and found the opposite. That is, Hindu Indians showed more such attributions as they became adults, whilst North Americans did not. Clearly this research supports the idea that the type of culture plays a strong role in determining the attributions (dispositional or situational) that people make. Given all this, the question now becomes how frequently other attributional biases occur across cultures. This will be looked at in terms of the self-serving bias.

Kashima and Triandis (1986) found evidence for the opposite of a self-serving bias in Japanese students, which they called a self-effacement or modesty bias. In this study American and Japanese students were asked, using a free-response format, to explain their successes and failures at academic study. The traditional self-serving bias was present in American students but not in Japanese students. Japanese students attributed failures more to personal characteristics such as ability than they did their successes. The reverse, as you might expect, was true for the American students. Earlier research by Fry and Ghosh (1980), using children between the ages of 8 and 10 years from white Canadian and Asian Indian Canadian groups, found similar attribution patterns. For example, Asian Indian Canadians attributed

success more to luck, and failure more to lack of ability, while white Canadians showed the opposite pattern.

The conclusion we may draw from these cross-cultural studies is that attributional errors and biases do not seem to be consistent across cultures. Individualistic cultures tend to foster the fundamental attribution error, in contrast collectivist cultures display the opposite to a self-serving bias in the form of a self-effacement bias. Bias and error occur across cultures but they are different in nature.

Evaluation of attributional biases and errors

At the start of this chapter the issue of how we judge accuracy and error in relation to attributions was raised. From the different biases and errors considered in this chapter, together with supporting research, it is fair to criticise social psychologists for being too keen to look for error and less concerned with accuracy. For example, when do you *really know* if someone convicted of manslaughter (as with our imaginary scenario of a wife killing her husband) did not plan the act in advance (and hence make it murder?). Very little, if any, of the literature in the attribution approach considers this. Yet it is apparent that our explanations of causes for behaviour in everyday life serve us well enough to live, adjust, and interact effectively with other people. Our justice system is built on how we validate judgements of responsibility and blame. Our legal system works quite effectively the vast majority of the time, but does succumb to dreadful miscarriages of justice at other times. In the end, because we are considering people's thoughts and thought processes we are never really going to have an entirely objective way of stating whether an attribution is accurate or in error.

The errors and biases that we have looked at in this chapter do not seem to generalise across different cultures, particularly in relation to individualistic and collectivist cultures. Furthermore, some of these biases and errors are more likely to be seen in paper and pencil type tasks (Fiske and Taylor, 1991) than in real-life situations. In view of this it is open to question just how much they may be artefacts of the social psychology experiment rather than actually occurring in everyday life. More research is needed on this matter.

The internal-external distinction is fundamental to understanding biases and errors. However, the distinction is not as clear cut as might appear on first acquaintance. Ross (1977) draws our attention to this

by asking us to think of a simple example concerning why somebody buys a house in a particular location. The person might justify their choice of house by saying it is secluded (external attribution) and this caused the person to buy it. However, you would only buy a secluded house if you valued privacy highly (an internal attribution). Hence, couching an explanation as an internal attribution does also allow external considerations!

Finally, the focus on biases and errors in the attribution process emphasises both an individual and cognitive perspective. This may result in a tendency to exaggerate the extent to which people seek to make causal attributions for behaviour. Nevertheless, the attribution approach and the study of errors and biases is both an important and influential area in social psychology. It is also one which has enjoyed numerous valuable applications as we shall see later in this book. In Chapter 6 we consider two applications of the attribution approach—sport and health. You may wish to dip into one or both of these now.

Summary

The way people actually make attributions deviates from the models considered in Chapter 2, and reveals that numerous errors and bias are present in our everyday causal attributions. The fundamental attribution error is the widespread tendency for people to overestimate the importance of dispositions and neglect situational or external causes of behaviour. The fundamental attribution error may result from both behaviour engulfing our perceptual field and from spontaneous rather than deliberate thought.

Actor-observer differences are present when explaining your own behaviour (actor) situational or external causes are emphasised, and when explaining another's behaviour internal or dispositional causes are emphasised. The false consensus effect is where people overestimate how common their own behaviour, beliefs, and opinions are amongst other people. Self-serving biases are where you make internal attributions for success and external attributions for failure: the former is self-enhancing and the latter self-protecting. Self-serving biases result from both cognitive and motivational factors, the latter being to do with ego-defensiveness. Attributions of responsibility and

blame relate to Weiner's model of success and failure. Internal attributions lead to people being held responsible for their actions.

Cross-cultural research comparing individualistic versus collectivist cultures shows that the fundamental attribution error and the self-serving bias may occur more in the former culture. In collectivist cultures there is evidence for a self-effacement bias. Social psychologists have focused too much attention on error and bias and not enough on accuracy in causal explanation. The internal-external distinction may not be a clear cut difference on which to base attributions.

Further reading

Augostinos, M. and Walker, I. (1995) *Social Cognition: an Integrated Approach,* London: Sage Publications.
Provides good coverage of the various attributional biases and errors together with a critical commentary. Later chapters attempt to integrate North American and European social psychology traditions to provide an integration. Readable and offers interesting perspectives.

Fiske, S.T. and Taylor, S.E. (1991) *Social Cognition,* 2nd edn, New York: McGraw-Hill.
Offers just the same level of detail in relation to attributional errors and biases as for models and approaches to how we attribute causes. Advanced text but readable all the same.

Weiner, B. (1995) *Judgements of Responsibility,* New York: Guildford.
Advanced text which updates and develops Weiner's earlier theoretical approach to explaining success and failure and develops it in the context of how we make causal attributions resulting in judgements of responsibility.