

Social Thinking

by Sophia



WHAT'S COVERED

Social psychology is the study of how people affect one another's thoughts, feelings, and behaviors. In this section, you'll learn about how our attitudes about others and our perception of ourselves can be deceiving. You'll examine situational forces that have a strong influence on human behavior including social roles, social norms, and scripts. You'll learn about how humans use the social environment as a source of information, or cues, on how to behave. Situational influences on our behavior have important consequences, such as whether we will help a stranger in an emergency or how we would behave in an unfamiliar environment. Here are the topics:

1. Social Psychology

Social psychology examines how people affect one another, and it looks at the power of the situation. Social psychologists assert that an individual's thoughts, feelings, and behaviors are very much influenced by social situations. Essentially, people will change their behavior to align with the social situation at hand. If we are in a new situation or are unsure how to behave, we will take our cues from other individuals.

The field of social psychology studies topics at both the intra- and interpersonal levels.

- **Intrapersonal** topics (those that pertain to the individual) include emotions and attitudes, the self, and social cognition (the ways in which we think about ourselves and others).
- **Interpersonal** topics (those that pertain to dyads and groups) include helping behavior, aggression, prejudice and discrimination, attraction and close relationships, and group processes and intergroup relationships.

Social psychology deals with all kinds of interactions between people, spanning a wide range of how we connect: from moments of confrontation to moments of working together and helping others.

Social psychologists focus on how people construe or interpret situations and how these interpretations influence their thoughts, feelings, and behaviors. Thus, social psychology studies individuals in a social context and how situational variables interact to influence behavior. In this module, we discuss the intrapersonal processes of self-presentation, cognitive dissonance, and attitude change, and the interpersonal processes of conformity and obedience, aggression and altruism, and, finally, love and attraction.



TERMS TO KNOW

Social Psychology

The study of how people affect one another's thoughts, feelings, and behaviors.

Intrapersonal

Pertaining to an individual.

Interpersonal

Pertaining to two or more people together.

2. Situational and Dispositional Influences on Behavior

Behavior is a product of both the situation (e.g., cultural influences, social roles, and the presence of bystanders) and of the person (e.g., personality characteristics). Subfields of psychology tend to focus on one influence or behavior over others. **Situationism** is the view that our behavior and actions are determined by our immediate environment and surroundings. In contrast, **dispositionism** holds that our behavior is determined by internal factors. An **internal factor** is an attribute of a person and includes personality traits and temperament.

Social psychologists have tended to take the situationist perspective, whereas personality psychologists have promoted the dispositionist perspective. Modern approaches to social psychology, however, take both the situation and the individual into account when studying human behavior. In fact, the field of social-personality psychology has emerged to study the complex interaction of internal and situational factors that affect human behavior.



TERMS TO KNOW

Situationism

The view that our behavior is determined by our environment.

Dispositionism

The view that our behavior is determined by internal factors.

Internal Factor

An attribute of a person, including personality traits.

3. Fundamental Attribution Error

In the United States, the predominant culture tends to favor a dispositional approach in explaining human behavior. Why do you think this is? We tend to think that people are in control of their own behaviors, and, therefore, any behavior change must be due to something internal, such as their personality, habits, or temperament. According to some social psychologists, people tend to overemphasize internal factors as explanations—or attributions—for the behavior of other people. They tend to assume that the behavior of another person is a trait of that person, and to underestimate the power of the situation on the behavior of others. They tend to fail to recognize when the behavior of another is due to situational variables, and thus to the person's state. This erroneous assumption is called the **fundamental attribution error**.

IN CONTEXT

To better understand, imagine this scenario:

Greg returns home from work, and upon opening the front door his wife happily greets him and inquires about his day. Instead of greeting his wife, Greg yells at her, “Leave me alone!” Why did Greg yell at his wife? How would someone committing the fundamental attribution error explain Greg’s behavior? The most common response is that Greg is a mean, angry, or unfriendly person (his traits). This is an internal or dispositional explanation.

However, imagine that Greg was just laid off from his job due to company downsizing. Would your explanation for Greg’s behavior change? Your revised explanation might be that Greg was frustrated and disappointed for losing his job; therefore, he was in a bad mood (his state). This is now an external or situational explanation for Greg’s behavior.

The fundamental attribution error is so powerful that people often overlook obvious situational influences on behavior. A classic example was demonstrated in a series of experiments known as the quizmaster study. Student participants were randomly assigned to play the role of a questioner (the quizmaster) or a contestant in a quiz game. Questioners developed difficult questions to which they knew the answers, and they presented these questions to the contestants. The contestants answered the questions correctly only 4 out of 10 times. After the task, the questioners and contestants were asked to rate their own general knowledge compared to the average student. Questioners did not rate their general knowledge higher than the contestants, but the contestants rated the questioners’ intelligence higher than their own. In a second study, observers of the interaction also rated the questioner as having more general knowledge than the contestant. The obvious influence on performance is the situation. The questioners wrote the questions, so of course they had an advantage. Both the contestants and observers made an internal attribution for the performance. They concluded that the questioners must be more intelligent than the contestants.

As demonstrated in the example above, the fundamental attribution error is considered a powerful influence in how we explain the behaviors of others. However, it should be noted that some researchers have suggested that the fundamental attribution error may not be as powerful as it is often portrayed. In fact, a recent review of more than 173 published studies suggests that several factors (for example, high levels of idiosyncrasy of the character and how well hypothetical events are explained) play a role in determining just how influential the fundamental attribution error is.

You may be able to think of examples of the fundamental attribution error in your life. Do people in all cultures commit the fundamental attribution error? Research suggests that they do not. People from an **individualistic culture**, that is, a culture that focuses on individual achievement and autonomy, have the greatest tendency to commit the fundamental attribution error. Individualistic cultures, which tend to be found in western countries such as the United States, Canada, and the United Kingdom, promote a focus on the individual. Therefore, a person’s disposition is thought to be the primary explanation for her behavior. In contrast, people from a **collectivistic culture**, that is, a culture that focuses on communal relationships with others, such as family, friends, and community, are less likely to commit the fundamental attribution error.

Why do you think this is the case? Collectivistic cultures, which tend to be found in east Asian countries and in Latin American and African countries, focus on the group more than on the individual. This focus on others provides a broader perspective that takes into account both situational and cultural influences on behavior; thus, a more nuanced explanation of the causes of others’ behavior becomes more likely. The table below summarizes individualistic and collectivist cultures.

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Individualistic Culture	Collectivistic Culture
Achievement oriented	Relationship oriented
Focus on personal autonomy	Focus on group autonomy
Dispositional perspective	Situational perspective
Independent	Interdependent
Analytic thinking style	Holistic thinking style



TERMS TO KNOW

Fundamental Attribution Error

The tendency to overestimate the effect of internal factors on other people's behavior.

Individualistic Culture

A culture that focuses on individual achievement and autonomy.

Collectivist Culture

A culture that focuses on communal relationships with others, such as family, friends, and community.

4. Actor-Observer Bias

Returning to our earlier example, Greg knew that he lost his job, but an observer would not know. So a naïve observer would tend to attribute Greg's hostile behavior to Greg's disposition rather than to the true, situational cause. Why do you think we underestimate the influence of the situation on the behaviors of others? One reason is that we often don't have all the information we need to make a situational explanation for another person's behavior. The only information we might have is what is observable. Due to this lack of information we have a tendency to assume the behavior is due to a dispositional, or internal, factor.

When it comes to explaining our own behaviors, however, we have much more information available to us. If you came home from school or work angry and yelled at your dog or a loved one, what would your explanation be? You might say you were very tired or feeling unwell and needed quiet time—a situational explanation. The **actor-observer bias** is the phenomenon of attributing other people's behavior to internal factors (fundamental attribution error) while attributing our own behavior to situational forces. As actors of behavior, we have more information available to explain our own behavior. However as observers, we have less information available; therefore, we tend to default to a dispositionist perspective.

One study on the actor-observer bias investigated reasons male participants gave for why they liked their girlfriend. When asked why participants liked their own girlfriend, participants focused on internal, dispositional qualities of their girlfriends (for example, her pleasant personality). The participants' explanations rarely included causes internal to themselves, such as dispositional traits (for example, "I need companionship."). In contrast, when speculating why a male friend likes his girlfriend, participants were equally likely to give dispositional and external explanations. This supports the idea that actors tend to provide few internal explanations but many situational explanations for their own behavior. In contrast, observers tend to provide more dispositional explanations for a friend's behavior.

Actor-observer bias is evident when subjects explain their own reasons for liking a girlfriend versus their impressions of others' reasons for liking a girlfriend.

**Actor-Observer Bias**

The phenomenon of attributing other people's behavior to internal factors (fundamental attribution error) while attributing one's own behavior to situational forces.

5. Self-Serving Bias

Following an outcome, self-serving bias produces those attributions that enable us to see ourselves in favorable light (for example, making internal attributions for success and external attributions for failures). When you do well at a task, for example acing an exam, it is in your best interest to make a dispositional attribution for your behavior ("I'm smart,") instead of a situational one ("The exam was easy,"). The tendency of an individual to take credit by making dispositional or internal attributions for positive outcomes but situational or external attributions for negative outcomes is known as the **self-serving bias** (or self-serving attribution). This bias serves to protect self-esteem. You can imagine that if people always made situational attributions for their behavior, they would never be able to take credit and feel good about their accomplishments.

We can understand self-serving bias by digging more deeply into **attribution**, a belief about the cause of a result. One model of attribution proposes three main dimensions: locus of control (internal versus external), stability (stable versus unstable), and controllability (controllable versus uncontrollable). In this context, stability refers the extent to which the circumstances that result in a given outcome are changeable. The circumstances are considered stable if they are unlikely to change. Controllability refers to the extent to which the circumstances that are associated with a given outcome can be controlled. Obviously, those things that we have the power to control would be labeled controllable.

Consider the example of how we explain our favorite sports team's wins. Research shows that we make internal, stable, and controllable attributions for our team's victory. For example, we might tell ourselves that our team is talented (internal), consistently works hard (stable), and uses effective strategies (controllable). In contrast, we are more likely to make external, unstable, and uncontrollable attributions when our favorite team loses. For example, we might tell ourselves that the other team has more experienced players or that the referees were unfair (external), the other team played at home (unstable), and the cold weather affected our team's performance (uncontrollable).



TERMS TO KNOW

Self-Serving Bias

The tendency of an individual to take credit for positive outcomes but blame situational or external attributions for negative outcomes.

Attribution

A belief about the cause of a result.

6. Just-World Hypothesis

One consequence of westerners' tendency to provide dispositional explanations for behavior is victim blame. When people experience bad fortune, others tend to assume that they somehow are responsible for their own fate. A common ideology, or worldview, in the United States is the **just-world hypothesis**. The just-world hypothesis is the belief that people get the outcomes they deserve. In order to maintain the belief that the

world is a fair place, people tend to think that good people experience positive outcomes, and bad people experience negative outcomes. The ability to think of the world as a fair place, where people get what they deserve, allows us to feel that the world is predictable and that we have some control over our life outcomes. For example, if you want to experience positive outcomes, you just need to work hard to get ahead in life.

People who hold just-world beliefs tend to blame the people in poverty for their circumstances, ignoring situational and cultural causes of poverty.

Can you think of a negative consequence of the just-world hypothesis? One negative consequence is people's tendency to blame poor individuals for their plight. What common explanations are given for why people live in poverty? Have you heard statements such as, "The poor are lazy and just don't want to work" or "Poor people just want to live off the government"? What types of explanations are these, dispositional or situational?

These dispositional explanations are clear examples of the fundamental attribution error. Blaming poor people for their poverty ignores situational factors that impact them, such as high unemployment rates, recession, poor educational opportunities, and the familial cycle of poverty. Other research shows that people who hold just-world beliefs have negative attitudes toward people who are unemployed and people living with AIDS. In the United States and other countries, victims of sexual assault may find themselves blamed for their abuse. Victim advocacy groups, such as Domestic Violence Ended (DOVE), attend court in support of victims to ensure that blame is directed at the perpetrators of sexual violence, not the victims.



TERM TO KNOW

Just-World Hypothesis

The belief that people get the outcomes they deserve.



SUMMARY

In this lesson, you learned about social psychology, or how the behavior and psychology of individuals is influenced by the social situations they experience.

In psychology, there is an understanding that people's **behavior is influenced** by internal factors within a person, as well as external factors from the situations you experience. **Social psychology** focused more on the situationa or situationist side of that balance.

Some social psychologist find that people generally over-emphasize the personal or internal psychological factors when explaining behaviors, leading to an **error** in where we attribute the causes of that behavior. When we look at our own behavior as the **actor**, we often attribute our actions to external factors; at the same time when we **observe** someone else, we are more likely to explain their behavior with factors inside the other person and not the external situation.

In a similar way, for our own behaviors, we will often describe positive outcomes as coming from some internal strength we have, while explaining negative outcomes or failures, as coming from external factors beyond our control. This presents as a **self-serving bias**. Finally, the **just-world hypothesis** drives our sense that people get what they deserve - an outcome of our willingness to attribute behaviors and outcomes to internal factors for others, while maintaining more flexibility in our understanding of our own behaviors.

Good luck in your learning!

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TERMS TO KNOW

Actor-Observer Bias

The phenomenon of attributing other people's behavior to internal factors (fundamental attribution error) while attributing one's own behavior to situational forces.

Attribution

A belief about the cause of a result.

Collectivist Culture

A culture that focuses on communal relationships with others, such as family, friends, and community.

Dispositionism

The view that our behavior is determined by internal factors.

Fundamental Attribution Error

The tendency to overestimate the effect of internal factors on other people's behavior.

Individualistic Culture

A culture that focuses on individual achievement and autonomy.

Internal Factor

An attribute of a person, including personality traits.

Interpersonal

Pertaining to two or more people together.

Intrapersonal

Pertaining to an individual.

Just-World Hypothesis

The belief that people get the outcomes they deserve.

Self-Serving Bias

The tendency of an individual to take credit for positive outcomes but blame situational or external attributions for negative outcomes.

Situationism

The view that our behavior is determined by our environment.

Social Psychology

The study of how people affect one another's thoughts, feelings, and behaviors.