Chapter 10

Who’s to Blame? Explaining Attributions and Motivation

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1. Identify and explain the different types of attributions, including internal and external attributions, and the factors that influence the type of attribution made.
2. Analyze and evaluate the various attributional biases, such as fundamental attribution error, self-serving bias, and actor-observer bias, and their impact on understanding human behavior and motivation.
3. Understand the role of attribution in motivation and goal orientation and evaluate the benefits of attributional retraining to improve motivation.
4. Apply attribution theory to real-world scenarios, including organizational behavior, education, and sports, and analyze its implications for improving motivation and behavior.

**Introduction**

**Attribution theory** refers to the study of how people make sense of their own and others' behavior by attributing causes to events. Attribution theory assumes that people will attempt to determine why people behave in certain ways, and it can have implications for how people perceive and interact with others.

One real-world example of attribution theory can be seen in a scenario where a student receives a poor grade on a test. The student may attribute the poor grade to an external factor, such as a difficult test, a noisy classroom, or a lack of time to study. Alternatively, the student may attribute the poor grade to an internal factor, such as a lack of intelligence, effort, or motivation.

If the student attributes the poor grade to external factors, they may be less likely to feel personally responsible for the outcome and may be motivated to improve their performance in the future by making changes to their study habits or the testing environment. However, if the student attributes the poor grade to internal factors, they may feel helpless or discouraged and may be less likely to try to improve their performance. Another example of attribution theory can be seen in the workplace. If an employee fails to complete a task on time or makes a mistake, their manager may attribute the failure to a lack of effort, skill, or motivation. This attribution may lead to negative consequences for the employee, such as a poor performance review or a reprimand. However, if the manager attributes the failure to external factors, such as a lack of resources or unclear instructions, they may be more likely to offer support and assistance to help the employee succeed in the future. In conclusion, attribution theory helps to explain how people perceive and interpret events, and it has important implications for how people interact with others and respond to challenges.

Top of Form

Bottom of Form

Introduction to Attribution Theory: In this section, we will provide a brief overview of Attribution Theory and its key concepts, such as **causal attribution** and **attributional style.**

Attribution Theory and Motivation delve into how Attribution Theory can be applied to motivation, particularly in understanding why individuals engage in certain behaviors or activities. There are types of attribution. The different types of attribution, such as **internal vs. external attribution** and **stable vs. unstable attribution**, and how they relate to motivation. The attributional biases will explore common attributional biases, such as the **self-serving bias** and the **fundamental attribution error**, and how they can impact motivation. Attribution Theory in Practice will provide examples of how Attribution Theory has been applied in real-world settings, such as in education and sports, to better understand and enhance motivation.

**Applying Attribution Theory to Motivation**

Top of Form

Internal attributions refer to the explanations individuals make for the causes of behavior or events that are under the control of the individual, such as personality traits, abilities, effort, or intentions. For example, if a student does well on a test, an internal attribution would be that the student is intelligent and worked hard to prepare for the exam. External attributions, on the other hand, refer to the explanations individuals make for the causes of behavior or events that are outside of their control, such as luck, chance, or environmental factors. For example, if a student does poorly on a test, an external attribution would be that the test was too difficult or that the teacher did not teach the material well.

The type of attribution individuals make can be influenced by several factors, including:

**Consistency**: Whether the behavior or event is consistent over time and situations. If the behavior or event is consistent, internal attributions are more likely to be made, whereas if the behavior or event is inconsistent, external attributions are more likely to be made. Low consistency: John usually performs poorly on tests but he scored an A on his latest exam. It is more likely that people will make external attributions for John's success, such as the test was easy or he got lucky.

High consistency: John consistently performs poorly on tests and he scored an A on his latest exam. It is more likely that people will make internal attributions for John's success, such as he studied hard or he is intelligent.

Study 1: Jones and Harris (1967) conducted a classic study to investigate how people make attributions for the behavior of others. Participants read an essay written by a student that either supported or opposed Fidel Castro's government in Cuba. The participants were told that the writer had either chosen to write the essay or had been assigned to write it. The results showed that participants made internal attributions for the writer's attitude when they believed he had chosen to write the essay, regardless of whether the attitude was positive or negative. When participants believed the writer had been assigned to write the essay, they made external attributions for his attitude.

Study 2: Ross et al. (1977) conducted a study to investigate how people make attributions for the behavior of others in a quiz show. Participants watched a quiz show where there were three types of questions: easy, difficult, and unanswerable. The contestants either chose which questions to answer or were assigned a question by the quiz master. Participants rated the intelligence of the contestants. The results showed that participants rated the contestants who chose to answer the difficult questions as more intelligent than those who chose to answer the easy questions. However, participants rated the contestants who were assigned the difficult questions as less intelligent than those who were assigned the easy questions. This suggests that people make internal attributions for behavior that is consistent over time and situations (i.e., choosing difficult questions), but make external attributions for behavior that is inconsistent (i.e., being assigned a difficult question).

**Distinctiveness:** Whether the behavior or event is unique to a particular situation or is consistent across situations. If the behavior or event is unique to a particular situation, external attributions are more likely to be made, whereas if the behavior or event is consistent across situations, internal attributions are more likely to be made. Consider two people, Alex and Ben, who both fail an exam. If Alex believes that he failed the exam because the questions were too difficult, he is making an external attribution. On the other hand, if Ben believes that he failed because he did not study hard enough, he is making an internal attribution. In this example, Alex is attributing his failure to an external factor (the difficult questions) while Ben is attributing it to an internal factor (his lack of effort).

Study 1: Jones and Harris (1967) conducted a classic study to investigate the fundamental attribution error. They asked participants to read essays that had been written by other students. The participants were told that the writers had either freely chosen to write pro-Castro or anti-Castro essays or had been assigned to write one or the other. Despite the fact that the participants knew that the writers may have had no choice in the matter, they still attributed the pro- or anti-Castro stance to the writers' personal beliefs. This study illustrates the tendency to make internal attributions even in situations where external factors are likely to play a role.

Study 2: Ross et al. (1977) conducted a study to investigate the actor-observer bias. They asked participants to rate the importance of various factors in causing an actor's behavior in a hypothetical scenario. The participants rated internal factors (the actor's personality and abilities) as more important than external factors (the situation) in explaining the actor's behavior. However, when participants were asked to rate the importance of the same factors in causing their own behavior in the same scenario, they rated external factors as more important than internal factors. This study illustrates the tendency to make internal attributions for others' behavior while making external attributions for our own behavior.

**Consensus:** Whether others exhibit similar behavior or experience similar events. If others exhibit similar behavior or experience similar events, external attributions are more likely to be made, whereas if others do not exhibit similar behavior or experience similar events, internal attributions are more likely to be made. Imagine two employees at a company who have both recently been reprimanded by their manager for failing to meet their sales targets. If one of the employees knows that other colleagues have also received similar reprimands, they may attribute the reprimand to external factors, such as market conditions or company policies. On the other hand, if the other employee does not know of any colleagues who have received reprimands, they may attribute the reprimand to internal factors, such as their own lack of effort or ability.

Study 1: Gilbert and Jones (1986) conducted a study to investigate the impact of social comparison on attribution. Participants were asked to watch a videotape of a student giving a speech. In one condition, the participant was told that the student had performed poorly compared to other students in the class. In the other condition, the participant was told that the student had performed well compared to other students in the class. Participants who were told that the student had performed poorly made more internal attributions for the student's performance, while participants who were told that the student had performed well made more external attributions. This study illustrates how social comparison can impact attribution.

Study 2: Miller and Ross (1975) conducted a study to investigate the role of similarity in attribution. Participants were asked to watch a videotape of a woman who was experiencing an emotional outburst during a therapy session. In one condition, the participant was told that the woman had a similar background and personality to the participant. In the other condition, the participant was told that the woman had a dissimilar background and personality to the participant. Participants who were told that the woman had a similar background and personality made more external attributions for her emotional outburst, while participants who were told that the woman had a dissimilar background and personality made more internal attributions. This study illustrates how similarity can impact attribution.

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**Cultural Factors**: Cultural norms and beliefs can influence the type of attributions individuals make. In individualistic cultures, internal attributions are more common, whereas in collectivistic cultures, external attributions are more common. Consider two individuals, one from an individualistic culture and one from a collectivistic culture, who both fail an exam. The individual from the individualistic culture may attribute their failure to internal factors such as their lack of effort or ability, while the individual from the collectivistic culture may attribute their failure to external factors such as the difficulty of the exam or the lack of support from their family or community.

Study 1: Choi and Nisbett (1998) conducted a study to investigate cultural differences in attribution. They asked American and Korean participants to watch a video of two people playing a game and then to describe the behavior of the players. The game was rigged so that one of the players won every round. American participants were more likely to attribute the winner's success to internal factors such as skill and effort, while Korean participants were more likely to attribute the winner's success to external factors such as luck and the help of others. This study illustrates how culture can impact attribution.

Study 2: Gupta and Singh (1982) conducted a study to investigate cultural differences in attribution related to academic achievement. They asked Indian and American participants to rate the causes of success and failure for hypothetical students in a hypothetical academic competition. Indian participants were more likely to attribute success to external factors such as family support and good luck, while American participants were more likely to attribute success to internal factors such as hard work and intelligence. This study further supports the idea that culture can impact attribution.

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Therefore, the type of attribution individuals make can have significant implications for their behavior and emotions, and it is important to be aware of the factors that can influence attributional processes.

Top of Form

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**Attributional Biases**

**Attributional biases** refer to the systematic errors or distortions in the way individuals make attributions for the causes of behavior or events. These biases can affect how individuals interpret and react to situations, and they can lead to inaccurate judgments and decisions. There are several types of attributional biases, including:

**Fundamental attribution error:** The tendency to overemphasize internal factors (such as personality traits) and underestimate external factors (such as situational factors) when explaining the behavior of others.

Self-serving bias: The tendency to attribute success to internal factors (such as personal abilities) and failure to external factors (such as bad luck or difficult circumstances) when explaining one's own behavior.

**Actor-observer bias**: The tendency to attribute one's own behavior to external factors and the behavior of others to internal factors.

**False consensus effect:** The tendency to overestimate the degree to which others share our beliefs, attitudes, and behaviors.

**Self-fulfilling prophecy**: The tendency to create or fulfill expectations about a person or group by treating them in a certain way.

These attributional biases can have a significant impact on social interactions and relationships, as well as on our own self-perception and behavior. By being aware of these biases, individuals can make more accurate and fair attributions, leading to better communication, understanding, and decision-making.

Top of Form

Bottom of Form

**Motivation and Attribution**

**Motivation** refers to the internal and external factors that drive individuals to act or behave in a certain way. It is the reason why people initiate, sustain, or stop certain behaviors. Motivation can be influenced by various factors such as personal goals, needs, values, interests, rewards, and consequences. **Attribution**, on the other hand, refers to the process of assigning causes to behaviors or events. It is the way individuals explain why things happen and why people behave in certain ways. Attributions can be internal or external. Internal attributions refer to personal factors such as ability, effort, personality, and motivation. External attributions, on the other hand, refer to situational factors such as luck, chance, or environmental factors.

The role of attribution in motivation: Attributions can significantly influence individuals' motivation levels. When people attribute their successes and failures to internal factors such as effort, ability, and skill, they tend to be more motivated to continue working towards their goals. However, when they attribute their success or failure to external factors such as luck or other people's actions, they are less likely to be motivated to continue working towards their goals.

The role of attribution in goal orientation: Attributions can also influence individuals' goal orientation. When individuals attribute their successes and failures to internal factors, they tend to have a mastery-oriented goal orientation, which means they focus on improving their skills and abilities. On the other hand, when individuals attribute their successes and failures to external factors, they tend to have a performance-oriented goal orientation, which means they focus on obtaining rewards or avoiding punishment.

Attributional retraining to improve motivation: Attributional retraining is a technique used to improve individuals' motivation by changing their attributional style. This technique involves helping individuals identify and change their attributional patterns, so they can attribute their successes and failures to internal factors such as effort and skill.

Attributional retraining involves several steps, including Helping individuals become aware of their attributional patterns. Identifying the situations in which individuals tend to make internal or external attributions. Challenging negative or irrational attributions. Helping individuals develop a more positive and realistic attributional style. By changing their attributional style, individuals can become more motivated to achieve their goals, and they are more likely to have a mastery-oriented goal orientation, which can lead to improved performance. Being.

Top of Form

Bottom of Form

In conclusion, summary of Key Points: Attribution theory is a framework for understanding how individuals explain their own and others' behavior. According to the theory, individuals make attributions based on three dimensions: locus of control, stability, and controllability. These attributions can have important implications for motivation and behavior. Individuals who make internal, stable, and controllable attributions for success are more likely to be motivated to continue pursuing a task, while those who make external, unstable, and uncontrollable attributions for failure are more likely to give up.

Implications of Attribution Theory for Motivation and Behavior: Attribution theory highlights the importance of individuals' beliefs about the causes of success and failure. These beliefs can have a significant impact on their motivation and behavior. Understanding the attributions that individuals make for their own and others' behavior can help us design interventions that promote positive attributions and increase motivation. For example, providing feedback that emphasizes effort rather than ability can encourage individuals to make internal attributions for success and continue working towards their goals.

Future Research Directions: While attribution theory has been widely studied, there are still many questions that remain unanswered. One area for future research is exploring the cultural and individual differences in attributional patterns. Additionally, researchers could investigate the impact of interventions designed to promote positive attributions on long-term behavior change. Finally, researchers could examine the relationship between attributions and emotions, such as how different attributional patterns influence emotional reactions to success and failure.

Key Take -Aways

* Attribution theory explains how individuals explain their own and others' behavior based on three dimensions: locus of control, stability, and controllability.
* Attribution theory has important implications for motivation and behavior, as individuals who make internal, stable, and controllable attributions for success are more likely to be motivated to continue pursuing a task.
* Understanding the attributions individuals make for their behavior can help design interventions to promote positive attributions and increase motivation.
* Future research directions for attribution theory include exploring cultural and individual differences in attributional patterns, investigating the impact of interventions designed to promote positive attributions on long-term behavior change, and examining the relationship between attributions and emotions.

Discussion Activity

1. What attributions do you typically make for your own successes and failures, and how do these attributions affect your motivation to continue pursuing your goals?
2. Have you ever made attributions for someone else's behavior that turned out to be incorrect? How did this affect your perception of that person and your relationship with them?
3. Do you think that cultural or individual differences can influence the attributions people make for success and failure? How might these differences impact motivation and behavior?
4. How can attribution theory be used to design interventions that promote positive attributions and increase motivation? Provide an example of such an intervention and explain how it works.
5. How might different attributional patterns influence emotional reactions to success and failure, and how can individuals manage these emotions to maintain motivation and engagement with a task?
6. How do cultural and individual differences in attributional patterns affect motivation and behavior, and what strategies can be used to bridge these differences and promote positive outcomes? Provide an example of a cross-cultural situation where attributional patterns might impact motivation and explain how you would approach it.

Key Terms

**Attribution Theory**: A psychological framework used to understand how individuals explain or attribute the causes of events, behaviors, and outcomes.

**Causal attribution**: The process of determining the cause of an event or behavior, such as whether it is due to internal factors (e.g., personal characteristics or abilities) or external factors (e.g., situational factors or luck).

**Attributional style**: An individual's habitual way of explaining events, such as whether they tend to attribute events to stable or unstable causes, or internal or external factors.

**Motivation**: The driving force or reason behind an individual's behavior or actions.

**Internal vs. external attribution:** Internal attribution involves attributing the cause of an event or behavior to personal factors, such as an individual's abilities or personality traits, while external attribution involves attributing the cause to situational factors, such as environmental factors or luck.

**Stable vs. unstable attribution**: Stable attribution refers to the belief that the cause of an event or behavior is a lasting characteristic of the person or situation, while unstable attribution refers to the belief that the cause is temporary or changeable.

**Attributional biases**: Systematic errors or distortions in the process of making attributions, such as the tendency to attribute success to internal factors and failure to external factors.

**Self-serving bias**: The tendency to attribute one's successes to internal factors and one's failures to external factors.

**Fundamental attribution error**: The tendency to overemphasize dispositional (internal) explanations for others' behavior and to underemphasize situational (external) explanations.

**Actor-observer bias:** The tendency to attribute one's own behavior to situational factors while attributing others' behavior to dispositional factors.

**False consensus effect**: The tendency to overestimate the extent to which others share our beliefs and behaviors.

**Self-fulfilling prophecy**: A prediction or expectation that leads to behaviors that make the prediction or expectation more likely to occur.

**Consistency:** The extent to which a person's behavior is consistent over time.

**Distinctiveness:** The extent to which a person's behavior is unique to a particular situation.

**Consensus:** The extent to which others behave similarly in a particular situation.

**Cultural factors:** Social, historical, and environmental factors that shape an individual's beliefs, attitudes, and behaviors.

**Behavior:** The way in which an individual acts or conducts oneself.

**Emotions:** A complex psychological state that involves physiological arousal, subjective feelings, and cognitive interpretation.

**Judgment:** The process of forming an opinion or evaluation based on available information.

**Decisions:** The act of making a choice among alternatives based on available information and personal preferences.

Top of Form

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1. Provide an illustrative example of low vs. high AND identify a study or 2 and summarize them to add here to support this section

Low consistency: John usually performs poorly on tests but he scored an A on his latest exam. It is more likely that people will make external attributions for John's success, such as the test was easy or he got lucky.High consistency: John consistently performs poorly on tests and he scored an A on his latest exam. It is more likely that people will make internal attributions for John's success, such as he studied hard or he is intelligent. Study 1: Jones and Harris (1967) conducted a classic study to investigate how people make attributions for the behavior of others. Participants read an essay written by a student that either supported or opposed Fidel Castro's government in Cuba. The participants were told that the writer had either chosen to write the essay or had been assigned to write it. The results showed that participants made internal attributions for the writer's attitude when they believed he had chosen to write the essay, regardless of whether the attitude was positive or negative. When participants believed the writer had been assigned to write the essay, they made external attributions for his attitude.Study 2: Ross et al. (1977) conducted a study to investigate how people make attributions for the behavior of others in a quiz show. Participants watched a quiz show where there were three types of questions: easy, difficult, and unanswerable. The contestants either chose which questions to answer or were assigned a question by the quiz master. Participants rated the intelligence of the contestants. The results showed that participants rated the contestants who chose to answer the difficult questions as more intelligent than those who chose to answer the easy questions. However, participants rated the contestants who were assigned the difficult questions as less intelligent than those who were assigned the easy questions. This suggests that people make internal attributions for behavior that is consistent over time and situations (i.e., choosing difficult questions), but make external attributions for behavior that is inconsistent (i.e., being assigned a difficult question).

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Bottom of Form

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Top of Form

Bottom of Form