

Perceiving Others, Day 1

2019-09-12

Course(s) Used:

- Interpersonal Communication

Goals and Objectives:

- Students understand how attributions vary.
- Students can identify common biases in our attributions.

Rationale: Attribution theory is one of the most well-supported theories in psychology and has a significant impact on the processes we use when interpreting the messages other people send.

Materials Needed

Materials:

- Handout¹

¹ HO

Technology:

- Classroom computer and projector

Outline of the Lesson

1. Review of previous session's content
2. Attribution Theory^{2,3,4}
 1. **Locus of Control** Internal vs. External to the actor.
 2. **Stability** Whether the behavior is caused by a temporary or permanent condition.
 3. **Specificity** Unique to the individual, or global
 4. **Controllability** Whether the cause can be changed by the actor.
3. The Fundamental Attribution Error⁵
 1. A tendency to rely on personality explanations when situational explanations are appropriate.
4. The Self-serving Bias^[^sedikides-et-al-1998-JPSP]
 1. Applies to the self and relationally close others.
 2. A tendency to attribute positive experiences to internal causes and negative experiences to external causes.

² These dimensions are based on those from Weiner, but modified by Wood.

³ Weiner, B. (1985). An attributional theory of achievement motivation and emotion. *Psychological Review*, 92, 548–573.

⁴ Wood, J. T. (2008). *Communication mosaics*, 5th ed, Belmont, CA: Thompson-Wadsworth.

⁵ Tetlock, P. E. (1985). Accountability: A social check on the fundamental attribution error. *Social Psychology Quarterly*, 48, 227–236.

5. The process of Attribution is typically:
 1. Automatic
 2. Effortless
 3. Conducted without identifying specific reasons/explanations.
6. Hands on group work: “Exploring Attribution Theory and Bias”^{6,7}
 1. Partner students in groups of 4-6.
 2. **Situation #1**⁸: Learn about your new partner, Jane⁹
 3. **Situation #2**
 4. **Situation #3**
 5. Identify the types of attributions you made.
 6. Compare to the attributions made by other groups.
7. Debrief the activity
 1. Why did some groups attribute differently?
 2. How might you have attributed differently?
 3. Identify other causes that would be categorized differently.
8. Lesson closing

⁶ Robinson, J. A. (2017). Exploring attribution theory and bias. *Communication Teacher*, 31, 210–213. <https://doi.org/10.1080/17404622.2017.1358387>

⁷ HO

⁸ VA

⁹ HO

Limitations

Students often have difficulty identifying alternate explanations that are truly different on some dimensions.

Variations and Accommodations

Follow guidance from local accommodation authorities.