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# UNIT 2 SOCIAL COGNITION: ATTRIBUTION THEORY

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## 2.0 INTRODUCTION

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The way in which people come to an understanding of both others and themselves has been a major focus of study for social psychologists. The topic is critical for an understanding of social behaviour because how people process information and make judgments of others and how they explain the causes of behaviour have an important influence on their own behaviour. Moreover, as you will see in this unit, social psychologists have found that learning how people understand their own and others' behaviour provides a clear basis for solving a variety of everyday

problems ranging from insomnia to poor school performance. This unit is focused on the process of understanding and evaluating others. We will first discuss person perception and social cognition: how people make sense of information they have about an individual to form an overall impression and how that information is stored and organised in memory. Next, we will discuss attribution theory which encompasses how people explain the causes of both their own and others' behaviour.

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## **2.1 OBJECTIVES**

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After completing this unit, you will be able to:

- 1 Define person perception;
- 1 Explain the various factors contributing to person perception;
- 1 Define social cognition;
- 1 Describe the characteristic features of social cognition;
- 1 Explain impression formation;
- 1 Describe the factors contributing to impression formation;
- 1 Explain attribution theory; and
- 1 Analyse the various types of errors in attribution.

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## **2.2 PERSON PERCEPTION AND SOCIAL COGNITION**

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In an early study on person perception Harold Kelly (1950) gave a group to students one of two descriptions of a lecturer whom they had never met, and then had the lecturer lead a discussion. In one case, students were told that the lecturer was a rather warm person, industrious, critical, practical and determined. But in a second condition, a group of students was told that the same lecturer was “a rather cold person, industrious, critical, practical and determined.” The crucial difference was the substitution of the word cold for warm in the second description. You may be surprised to learn that the substitution made a drastic change in the way the lecturer was viewed in the two conditions. Students who were told that the lecturer was cold rated him far less positively after the discussion than those who were told that he was warm, although the behaviour of the lecturer was invariant across the two conditions.

The Kelley experiment, now considered a classic, illustrates an early view of person perception, which concentrated on the way in which individuals focus on particular traits when forming overall impressions of others. According to this perspective, certain traits play an unusually large role in determining a general impression. These traits are known as central traits. *Central traits* serve to organise the impression and provide a framework for interpreting information that is received subsequently. Solomon Asch (1946) suggested that the meaning of additional descriptive traits is altered by the presence of a central trait. Thus the word “determined” when describing an individual means something very different, depending upon whether it is preceded by the word “warm” or “cold”

## 2.3 COGNITIVE ALGEBRA: ADDITIVE AND AVERAGING MODELS

More precise models were suggested for impression formation. Two of these are: Additive and averaging models.

- i) **The additive model** (Anderson 1965) suggests that we simply add together the bits of information we have about a person to form a judgment. For example, if we learn that a new acquaintance is adventurous, bold and caring, we simply assign each one a value on some hypothetical scale and add them together. If, for instance, one rates adventurousness as 4; boldness as 5, and caring as 9 (on an 11 point scale) the overall impression will be expressed in mathematical terms as  $4+5+9=18$ . A consequence of such a model is that the inclusion of more positive traits on a list will lead to a more positive impression.
- ii) **The averaging model** (Anderson, 1974) on the other hand suggests that although we start in the same way there is an additional step in which we divide by the number of traits to form an average. (Hence, we get  $4+5+9=18/3=6$ ). What is particularly important about this model is that the inclusion of additional information does not necessarily make the impression more positive, rather, it depends on the nature of the new traits. Hence, if we learn that the person is also neat and we scale neat as a 2, the overall impression drops:  $(4+5+9+2)=20/4=5$ . In contrast, a model employing addition would suggest that additional information would result in a more positive impression.

Of these two models averaging model has shown accurate predictions. But applicability of such research in actual social situations has been questioned. First people are restricted to a small finite set of trait when evaluating other persons; secondly the richness of social information is neglected. Despite such limitations, research on impression formation has provided important insights into how information about people is processed and combined.

### Self Assessment Questions

- 1) Discuss person perception and social cognition.

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- 2) What is cognitive algebra?

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- 3) Explain the additive and average model in person perception.

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## 2.4 IMPRESSION FORMATION

In a classic study Luchins (1957) gave subjects a two paragraph description of a boy named Jim. One paragraph Jim walking to school with others and participating in a member of other activities. In short he was portrayed as an extrovert. In the second paragraph, the activities described were similar but Jim did them all alone, thus appearing introvert. Subjects were presented with the two paragraphs, but the order was reversed according to condition. When asked to form an overall impression of Jim subjects' responses demonstrated a strong ***primacy effect***. Primacy effect refers to the condition in which early information has a stronger impact than later information. If subject had read the extrovert paragraph first, they found them considerably more extraverted than if they had read the introvert paragraph first, and vice versa. More recent work confirms that indeed early information is weighted more heavily than later information. This holds true even when the later information is very salient and clearly contradicts earlier information.

On the other hand **recency effects**, in which later information is given more credence than early information, have been reliably produced under three sorts of conditions. First, when people are asked specifically to make a second evaluation following the presentation of new information, late information takes on more importance than earlier information. Second, if there is a relatively large time span between the presentation of new information and the initial exposure, recency effects are likely to occur. Finally, later information is given heavier weight if the task is one which people assume that practice might improve performance.

### 2.4.1 Schemas: Holding our Impressions Together

Given the diversity of people and settings that one encounters passing through everyday life, we might suspect that people could easily become overwhelmed with the sheer quantity of information relating to what others are like. To avoid becoming overwhelmed, people need to organise their impressions of others. The way that they are able to do this is through the production of schemas. Schemas are organised bodies of information stored in memory. The information in a schema provides a representation of the way in which social world operates as well as allowing us to categorise and interpret new information related to the schema.

We all hold schemas relating to everyday objects in our environment. We might, for instance, hold a schema for automobiles –we have an idea of what they look like, how they are used, what they can do for us and how to differentiate them from other vehicles such as buses and horse and buggy. More importantly, from a social psychological point of view we hold a schema for particular people (one's mother, girlfriend, boyfriend, brother, or sister) and of classes of people playing a given role (mail carriers, teachers, or librarians). Each of these schemas provides a way of organising behaviour into meaningful wholes.

## 2.4.2 Prototypes

The personality types that we derive in the case of person perception are organised into schemas known as **prototypes**. Prototypes are schemas that organise a group of personality traits into a meaningful personality type. For example, Nancy cantor and walter Mischel (1979) suggest a frequently held prototype concerns a person labeled on a general level as committed.

At the most specific level called the subordinate level— the prototype consists of different types of committed individuals for example monks, nuns and activists. At the middle level of specificity, there are basic classes of individuals: the religious devotee or social activist. The subordinate and middle levels of specificity are subsumed under the broader super ordinate level which encompasses the prototype as a whole.

The importance of prototypes lies in three directions:

- i) Prototypes allow people to recall more readily, recognise and categorise information about others. In a sense then information processing capabilities are enhanced through the use of prototypes.
- ii) Prototypes help us to organise the social world around us. By observing relatively few traits or behaviours, we are able to categorise people into certain prototypes and this in turn allows us to form expectations about others' behaviours.
- iii) Prototypes allow people to plan behaviour in social interactions more readily.

### Self Assessment Questions

1) Define Impression formation.

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2) What are the factors that contribute to impression formation?

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3) What are schemas? How do they hold our impressions together?

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- 4) Define prototype and indicate their role in impression formation.

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## 2.5 ATTRIBUTION: EXPLAINING THE CAUSES OF BEHAVIOUR

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We turn now to an examination of how people observe behaviour and draw inferences about what motivates behaviour. The process of attribution— an individual's understanding of the reasons behind peoples' behaviour. Attribution theory is concerned with how individuals interpret events and how this relates to their thinking and behaviour. Heider (1958) was the first to propose a psychological theory of attribution, but Weiner and colleagues (e.g., Jones et al, 1972; Weiner, 1974, 1986) developed a theoretical framework that has become a major research paradigm of social psychology.

### 2.5.1 Situational vs. Dispositional Causes

Behaviour will be attributed to an external cause when external reasons are more likely or plausible. Conversely behaviour will be attributed to dispositional factor when external causes are unlikely. In an experimental demonstration of this phenomenon, Jones, Gergen and Davis (1961) asked subjects to rate the personality of a job applicant who presented himself as either having or not having the characteristics that were a prerequisite for the job. Subjects were confident about assessing the candidate's true personality only when the candidate had displayed traits that were contrary to ones related to the job requirements.

### 2.5.2 Covariation Principle

To describe the general process people use to explain behaviour, Harold Kelley (1967) has introduced the principle of covariation. Kelley suggests that there are many possible cause and effect relationships inherent in a situation that provides a possible explanation for a behaviour. We try to analyse these relationships in order to pinpoint a particular cause for a behavior. The covariation principle states that the cause that will be chosen to explain an effect is a cause that is present when the effect is present, and absent when the effect is also absent.

According to the covariation principle, an observer can use one of three specific types of causes to explain an effect:

**The actor** — the individual who is demonstrating the behaviour.

**The entity**— the target person or thing at which the behaviour is directed.

**The circumstances**- the setting under which the behavior accurse.

But how do we know which explanation would be correct? According to Kelley we consider three different kinds of information to figure out the answer.

**Consensus:** is the degree to which other people react similarly in the same situation.

**Consistency:** is the degree to which the actor behaves the same way in other situations.

**Distinctiveness:** refers to the extent to which the same behaviour occurs in relation to other people or stimuli.

**Table: Summary information patterns for the three attributions**

Attribution	Information Pattern		
	Consensus	Distinctiveness	Consistency
Object	High	High	High
Entity	Low	Low	High
Circumstances	Low	High	Low

Kelley suggests that we make attribution either to *dispositional factors* (something about the person) or the *situational factors* (something about the target person or the particular circumstances). Research concerning these predictions has largely been supportive of Kelley's theory. Moreover, even when some of the sources of information are absent, people still make causal inferences similar to the ones predicted by Kelley. On the other hand some evidence suggests that an important restriction must be placed on Kelley theory. Sillars (1982) argues that although the theory of causal attributions holds up when people are presented with concrete explicit information about consensus, distinctiveness and consistency, it does not work quite so well when people must infer the information on their own.

### 2.5.3 From Acts to Dispositions

Edward Goner and Keith Davies (1965) have produced an attribution theory that tells how a person's behaviour can be used to make inferences about his personality and motive behind his behaviour. The theory examines *correspondent inferences*, observers' ideas of how closely and overt behaviour or action represents a specific underlying intention trait or dispositions. The more behaviour appears to reflect the underlying disposition, the greater the correspondence between these two factors is.

According to Jones and Davis we learn the most from behaviours of others that lead to *non common effects*. It is assumed that any behaviour leads to some set of consequences but that the behaviour which are most helpful in forming correspondent inferences are those resulting in consequences or effects that alternative behaviorus would not have produced.

Another factor that colors the kind of attributions we make, and the confidence with which we hold them is the *social desirability* of an action. Generally, the greater the social desirability of an action or behaviour the more difficult it will be to draw a correspondent inference between act and disposition.

The Jones and Davis theory considers a somewhat different aspect of the attribution process than Kelley model of causal attribution. Kelley's model focuses on the general direction from which to draw an explanation — dispositional versus situational causes; Jones and Davis theory of correspondent inference provides



identification of the particular characteristics and traits that underlie behaviour when dispositional attribution is made. Kelly's theory has an important advantage that it considers behaviour over an extended period of time (consistency information) whereas Jones and Davis do not take such information into account. Thus neither theory alone is able to provide a complete account of the attribution process.

Both theories do agree that people are logical, rational processors of information a view disputed by some other theorists. These theorists state that very often people are in state of mindlessness in which they simply do not think about what they are doing. People often rely on well learned patterns of behaviour that allow them to move through their daily activities. These patterns are called scripts. These scripts are used more for mundane and commonplace activities.

### **Self Assessment Questions**

1) Define Attribution.

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2) How will you use attribution to explain the causes of behaviour?

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3) What are situational and dispositional causes?

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4) Elucidate the Covariation principle

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5) How will use behaviour to understand what others are like?

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## 2.6 ERRORS IN ATTRIBUTION

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The basic attribution processes that we have discussed have been supported in many studies. The theories underlying these studies are similar in that they all paint a picture of human beings as thoughtful and systematic processors of information. On the other hand, people are distinctiveness psychologist that Fritz Heider described is susceptible to error. We turn now to some of the most frequent pitfalls.

### 2.6.1 The Fundamental Attribution Error

When we see someone acting friendly toward another person, our inclination is to assume that he or she is in fact friendly and outgoing yet that person may think of himself or herself as introverted and shy and attribute his or her friendliness to something about the situation such as earlier gregarious behaviour on the part of the person the whom he or she is acting friendly.

The situation exemplifies fundamental attribution bias. It is called fundamental because of its pervasiveness; whereby people, when acting as raters of others, tend to attribute the behaviour they view as indicative of stable trait dispositions but when acting as self raters tend to perceive their own behaviour as more affected by specific situational influences.

Why we are apt to characterise others' behaviour as due to dispositional causes yet see our own as a reflection of the situation? Part of the explanation relates to the nature of information that is available to us. When we view that behaviour of others, the information that is most perceptually salient is that which comes from the individual; typically, the environment is static and unchanging, while the person moves about—making the person the focus of attention. In contrast to people observing their own behaviour, any change in the environment is going to be most salient, and thus they are more likely to employ environmental, situational explanations.

An alternative explanation for the fundamental attribution error stems from people's desire to interact effectively with others. According to this view, observers increase their understanding and ability to make predictions about the world by differentially attending to the situation or person, depending on whether they are rating another person or themselves. For the observer, knowing the internal dispositions of others increases predictability of another's behaviour, causing observers of others to focus on those dispositions. In contrast understanding and predictability regarding appropriate behavior for people considering their own behaviour are apt to be enhanced through attention, not to themselves, but to the environment; therefore, situational factors will be attended to more carefully.

The fundamental attribution error has important applications but sometimes it may ever affect interpersonal relations negatively.

### 2.6.2 Halo Effects: Assuming Consistency within a Person

The halo effect is the phenomenon in which the initial familiarity that a person has positive traits is used to infer other uniformly positive characteristics. (The converse is also true; observation of a single negative trait can be used to infer the existence of uniformly negative traits.) For example, finding that a person is friendly and

clearheaded may lead us to believe that he is also helpful and sociable. Although this may be true, it is not necessarily the case. Our assumption that good traits are found together reflects out implicit personality theory, which is people's notion of what traits are found together in an individual. The halo effect is sometimes seen in media portrayals of various prominent figures.

### **Self Assessment Questions**

1) Explain errors in attribution.

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2) What are the fundamental attribution errors?

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3) Discuss Halo effects.

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4) What is meant by assuming consistency within a person?

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## **2.7 THE PERSON – POSITIVITY BIAS: LOOKING FOR THE GOOD IN OTHERS**

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This bias, which has been shown to apply to a wide range of situations, reflects the tendency to rate others in a predominantly positive way. Persons in experiments tend to elicit positive ratings and people tend to over attribute good outcomes to internal causes and bad outcomes to external causes. Public figures are usually evaluated positively. People have a tendency to view others positively. Why should this be the case? One Simple explanation is that a Pollyanna principle operates to color out perceptions (Marlin & sting, 1978). According to this view we enjoy being surrounded by a pleasant world and thus we hope a propensity to view people through rose colored glasses. This argument would be compelling

except that there are limitations to the person possibility bias. Not every person or social entity is rated favorably.

David sears (1982) suggests that the reason for the positivist bias is that observers develop an extra degree of positive regard for individuals who are being evaluated which they do not develop when rating groups of people, even if the groups are made up of people who as individuals are evaluated positively. For example, examination of student ratings of instructor shows that college professors receive more favourable ratings as individuals than when they are rated in groups and college professors are rated more highly than the courses they teach.

It seems that we tend to relax our evaluation standards a bit when making ratings of individual human beings, but become stricter as soon as the ratings shift away from the individual. Why should this be so? Sears suggests that this tendency is related to perceived similarity. When evaluating another person we tend to assume that he or she is similar to ourselves and we are motivated to rate him or her more positively.

### **2.7.1 Assumptions of Similarity**

As we have indicated, people not only rate in a generally positive way but they tend to assume that others are similar to themselves. This predisposition is known as the assumed similarity bias. It is particularly pronounced when obvious features such as sex and race are similar, but can even occur when there are overt differences between rater and ratee.

This phenomenon can lead to misperception of other people's personalities if they are in fact dissimilar to that of the rater. On the other hand, the assumed similarity bias can actually lead raters to appear to make very accurate judgments if the others actually are similar not because the raters are unusually astute but simply because they are categorising the others as similar to themselves. In some cases, attribution biases can make judgments more, rather than less, accurate.

#### **Self Assessment Questions**

1) What do you understand by stating "looking for the good in others"?

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2) Discuss the person-positivity bias.

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3) How is assumption of similarity a bias?

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### 2.7.2 Attribution Theory and its Applicability in Education

Attribution theory (Weiner, 1980, 1992) is probably the most influential theory with implications for academic motivation. It emphasises the idea that learners are strongly motivated by the pleasant outcome of being able to feel good about themselves. It incorporates cognitive theory and self-efficacy theory in the sense that it emphasises that learners' current self-perceptions will strongly influence the ways in which they will interpret the success or failure of their current efforts and hence their future tendency to perform these same behaviours.

According to attribution theory, the *explanations* that people tend to make to explain success or failure can be analysed in terms of three sets of characteristics:

- 1) First, the cause of the success or failure may be *internal* or *external*. That is, we may succeed or fail because of factors that we believe have their origin within us or because of factors that originate in our environment.
- 2) Second, the cause of the success or failure may be either *stable* or *unstable*. If the we believe cause is stable, then the outcome is likely to be the same if we perform the same behaviour on another occasion. If it is unstable, the outcome is likely to be different on another occasion.
- 3) Third, the cause of the success or failure may be either *controllable* or *uncontrollable*. A controllable factor is one which we believe we ourselves can alter if we wish to do so. An uncontrollable factor is one that we do not believe we can easily alter. An *internal* factor can be controllable (we can control our effort by trying harder) or uncontrollable (most people cannot easily change their basic intellectual ability or change from being an introvert to being an extrovert). Likewise, an *external* factor can be controllable (a person failing a difficult course could succeed by taking an easier course) or uncontrollable (if calculus is difficult because it is abstract, it will still be abstract no matter what we do).

An important assumption of attribution theory is that people will interpret their environment in such a way as to maintain a positive self-image. That is, they will *attribute* their successes or failures to factors that will enable them to feel as good as possible about themselves. In general, this means that when learners succeed at an academic task, they are likely to want to attribute this success to their own efforts or abilities; but when they fail, they will want to attribute their failure to factors over which they have no control, such as bad teaching or bad luck.

The basic principle of attribution theory as it applies to motivation is that a person's own perceptions or attributions for success or failure determine the amount of effort the person will expend on that activity in the future.

There are four factors related to attribution theory that influence motivation in education: ability, task difficulty, effort, and luck. In terms of the characteristics discussed previously, these four factors can be analysed in the following way:

**Ability** is a relatively *internal* and *stable* factor over which the learner *does not exercise much direct control*.

**Task difficulty** is an *external* and *stable* factor that is *largely beyond the learner's control*.

**Effort** is an *internal* and *unstable* factor over which the learner *can exercise a great deal of control*.

**Luck** is an *external* and *unstable* factor over which the learner exercises *very little control*.

It is the learner's *perception* that determines how attributions will influence future effort. A learner may believe that he is a "lucky person" and for him luck would be an internal and stable characteristic over which he exercises little control. In other words, for this person "luck" is really what the preceding list calls an "ability" or personality characteristic.

Likewise, a person may believe that she expended a great deal of effort, when in fact she did not, or that an objectively easy task was difficult.

The basic principle of attribution theory as it applies to motivation is that *a person's own perceptions or attributions for success or failure determine the amount of effort the person will expend on that activity in the future*.

Students will be most persistent at academic tasks under the following circumstances:

- 1) If they attribute their academic *successes* to either (a) internal, unstable, factors over which they have control (e.g., effort) or (b) internal, stable, factors over which they have little control but which may sometimes be disrupted by other factors (e.g., ability disrupted by occasional bad luck);
- 2) If they attribute their *failures* to internal, unstable factors over which they have control (e.g., effort).

If we want students to persist at academic tasks, we should help them establish a sincere belief that they are competent and that occasional imperfections or failures are the result of some other factor (such as bad luck or a lack of sufficient effort) that need not be present on future occasions. (That is, *ability attributions for success* are likely to be beneficial, with the exception cited in the next guideline.)

- 3) It is *not* beneficial for students to attribute their successes *entirely* to ability. If they think they already have all the ability they need, they may feel that additional effort is superfluous. The ideal attribution for success is, "I succeeded because I am a competent person and worked hard."
- 4) When students fail, they are most likely to persist and eventually succeed if they attribute their failure to *a lack of appropriate effort*. Therefore, it is extremely important that when students perceive themselves as unsuccessful

teachers help them develop the conviction that they can still succeed if they give it their best shot. (Note that it is important to define effort appropriately, as in guideline 5.)

- 5) It is extremely hazardous to motivational health for students to fail repeatedly after making a serious effort at academic tasks. When this happens, they will either (a) stop believing they are competent, or (b) stop attributing their failure to lack of effort. Both of these outcomes are likely to reduce persistence at the academic tasks. It is important, therefore, to arrange tasks so that students who work hard are able to perceive themselves as successful.
- 6) It is important to *define effort correctly* and for the learners to *internalise* an accurate concept of effort. In practical terms effort is most usefully defined as *devoting effective academic learning time to the task*. Just trying harder or spending more time doing ineffective activities does not constitute effort. It is extremely important to make this distinction. If we use another definition of effort, when we tell children that their failures are a result of a lack of effort, we run the risk of leading them to believe that they have an internal, stable characteristic called laziness, over which they have no control. This will *reduce* motivation.
- 7) Another way to say this is that it is possible and desirable for students to believe that even though they have “worked hard,” they have not yet put forth their best effort. If we can show students ways to improve their efforts— and there are almost always ways to channel their energies more effectively - then we can enable them to have an accurate perception that increased effort is likely to pay off.
- 8) Excessively competitive grading and evaluation systems are likely to impair the learning of many students. Competition will encourage students to persist only to the extent that they believe additional effort will enable them to succeed within the competitive atmosphere. In many instances, success in competition is completely beyond the learner’s control— no matter how hard a learner works, another more competent and equally energetic competitor is likely to win.
- 9) It is useful to evaluate students at least partly (but not exclusively) on the basis of their effort. This does not mean that the weakest students in a class should receive the highest grades simply because they may spend more time trying to master the subject matter. Ideally, course assignments should be arranged so that diligent work actually leads to academic success, and the teacher’s evaluation should help students see this connection.
- 10) In general, it is best for students to believe that it is their own behaviour rather than external circumstances that leads to success or failure. Researchers refer to this as having an *internal locus of control*. While it is good for students to have a realistic understanding of what’s happening around them, research shows that the most successful students have a tendency to *overestimate* the degree to which their own behaviour leads to success or failure.

When students have a conviction that they lack ability, it is necessary to take steps to circumvent or overcome this conviction. Such students are likely to repudiate successes. For example, when they do well, they are likely to have a sincere conviction that they were “just lucky.” It is difficult to alter this conviction. Changing



this conviction is tantamount to altering the learner's self-concept, and this cannot be accomplished in a short time.

The preceding guidelines should enable teachers to use attribution theory to motivate students more effectively. In addition, it is possible simply to reinforce effort attributions and to conduct training programs designed to promote attributions that are likely to lead to higher levels of motivation and productivity.

### **2.7.3 Additional Concepts Related to Attribution Theory**

Attribution theory is an evolving field, and it is likely that further research will lead to additional practical insights regarding motivation. It is important to note that this discussion of attribution theory has barely scratched the surface. The following are some additional concepts related to attribution theory:

**Learning goals** are set by individuals who seek to increase their competence. People who emphasise learning goals are likely to seek challenges, if they believe the challenges will lead to greater competence; and they tend to respond to failure by increasing their effort. It is good to encourage students to set and pursue learning goals rather than performance goals.

**Performance goals**, on the other hand, are set by individuals who seek to gain favourable judgments or to avoid unfavourable judgments in the eyes of others. People who emphasise performance goals are likely to avoid challenges unless they are certain they can succeed, and they tend to respond to failure with feelings of learned helplessness and self-handicapping. It is often undesirable to emphasise performance goals; but schools, parents, and society often overemphasise them to the detriment of learners.

**Learned helplessness** refers to the expectation, based on previous experience, that one's actions cannot possibly lead to success. Performance goals are much more likely than learning goals to lead to ability rather than effort attributions and to result in feelings of learned helplessness. Encouraging students to focus primarily on learning goals is recommend, while keeping performance goals in perspective by enjoying recognition without letting it become an overriding concern. Teachers can accomplish this by focusing on learning rather than normative comparisons when reinforcing students, by modeling the use of learning goals, and by using the scaffolding strategies described in chapter 12 to teach effect goal setting and self-monitoring.

**Self-handicapping** occurs when learners create impediments that make good performance less likely. Examples of impediments include drug and alcohol use, refusing to practice, reporting excessive symptoms, and reducing effort. These impediments may sound just plain foolish, but they are very real and actually serve to protect the person's sense of self-competence. If the self-handicapping person does poorly, his explanation for this failure lies in the impediment. If the person does well, his success is exalted, because he overcame the impediment. Since the impediments interfere with learning, they have the overall effect of reducing motivation and performance. Self-handicapping is likely to become prominent during adolescence. Since it occurs most often among persons with an overriding concern with their competence image, this problem can best be minimised by focusing on effort attributions and by helping learners develop secure feelings of self-efficacy.



Self-handicapping may be imposed or at least supported by a learner's culture or subculture or by the atmosphere of the school. For example, adolescents may handicap themselves by reducing their effort because they feel that studying hard will be viewed as an undesirable form of competition with their peers. Likewise, African-American students may reduce their effort because they resist conforming to the norms of the oppositional culture.

*Expectancy-valence models* state that a person's motivation to achieve a goal depends on a combination of the value of that goal (its valence) and the person's estimation of the likelihood of success. The combination of expectancy and valence interacts with attribution theory in complex ways. For example, under certain circumstances, a high probability of success can actually reduce motivation. In most cases, a person will expend more effort when there is a moderate (rather than high or low) probability of success (Atkinson, 1964).

### Self Assessment Questions

- 1) What are the three sets of characteristics that can help in explanation?

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- 2) What are the four factors related attribution theory that influence motivation in education?

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- 3) What are the circumstances in which students will be most persistent in academic tasks?

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- 4) What are the additional concepts related to attribution theory?

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5) Discuss self handicapping in terms of attribution theory.

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6) What is expectancy valence models? Give examples.

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## **2.8 UNDERSTANDING ONE'S OWN BEHAVIOUR**

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Most of us would admit that we invest the most time and cognitive energy thinking about ourselves. In this section we will discuss some processor involved in thinking and understanding whether social object.

### **2.8.1 Social Comparison: Using others to Understand Oneself**

According to early theorizing by Leon Festinger (1954), there is a basic drive to evaluate one's opinions and abilities- a need for social comparison. In many cases there is objective physical evidence which can provide us with answers. For instance if I think my route from home to the center of town is shorter than the route my wife takes I can objectively determine whether my opinion is correct by using my car odometer and measuring the two routes. But suppose I want to find out how good a piano player I am, here objective means are lacking.

According to Festinger, I will probably turn to social reality to satisfy my needs for evaluating my ability. Social reality refers to understanding that is derived from how other people generally think, feel and view the world. Hence, if I turn to social reality to discern my level of performance, I, illumine how others play the piano. But who is included in an individual's social reality? It wouldn't help very much to compare myself to a very dissimilar other. I already know I don't play as well as Vladimir Horowitz. For me, the most relevant information would come from similar other people who have taken lessons for about the same amount of time, who are adults, and so forth. Thus Festinger suggests that the people with whom we compare ourselves will be similar to us.

### **2.8.2 Knowing Our Emotions**

One important outgrowth of the notion that we evaluate our abilities and opinions by comparing them with those of others is the idea that the way we identify our emotional states might also be influenced by comparison with others. In fact, a classic experiment by Stanley Schachter and Jerome Singer (1962) found evidence for this hypothesis, showing that how we label our emotional experiences may new due in large part to the circumstances in which we find ourselves.

### 2.8.3 Bem's Self-Perception Theory

“Individuals come to know their own attitudes, emotions and internal states by inferring them from observations of their own behaviour and circumstances in which they occur. When internal cues are weak, ambiguous, or uninterpretable, the individual is in the same position as the outside observer”. (Bem, 1972)

Self-perception theory represents one of the most influential theories of how self-knowledge unfolds. Developed by social psychologist Daryl Bem self-perception theory consists of two basic claims.

- a) First the theory claims that people come to know their own attitudes, beliefs, and other internal states by inferring them from their own behaviour and the circumstances under which they occur. So a student who observes that he or she constantly reads psychology books may infer an interest in psychology.
- b) Second the theory claims that when internal cues are weak, the individual is in the same position as an outside observer who must rely upon the external cues of their behaviour to infer their own inner characteristics. In this case people's conclusion that they genuinely like psychology will be reinforced if there are no external incentives to explain their behaviour (e.g., grades), and they have no clear prior opinions regarding psychology. Thus people simply use their behaviour and the circumstances in which it occurs to infer their own beliefs and attitudes.

One reason why self-perception theory has been so influential stems from its simplicity as an explanation for how self-knowledge develops. That is people come to know themselves merely by observing their own behaviour. Beyond its simplicity, however, self-perception theory has been so influential because it provides an important contrast to the most famous psychological theory of how behaviour shapes self-knowledge: cognitive dissonance theory.

Cognitive dissonance theory assumes that people are motivated to maintain consistency between self beliefs and experience an unpleasant state of dissonance when they hold two inconsistent beliefs about the self. Thus the inconsistency between the thoughts “I do not like psychology” and “I constantly read about psychology” arouses dissonance, and people are motivated to reduce dissonance by changing one of those thoughts. The most direct way to resolve dissonance is to change the prior belief (“I do not like psychology”) to align with the behaviour (“I spend a great deal of time learning about psychology”). That is the person can resolve dissonance by making their initial attitude more favourable (I really do like psychology) and, hence, consistent with their behaviour.

There are two differences between cognitive dissonance theory and self-perception theory. First unlike cognitive dissonance theory, self-perception theory does not assume that any motivational state (e.g., dissonance reduction) is necessary for change in self-knowledge. In fact self-perception theory only requires people's willingness to infer their own attitudes and beliefs by considering the environmental and dispositional causes for their own actions for changes in self-knowledge to occur. Second self-perception theory claims that people can use their own behaviour to infer self-knowledge when the internal cues of prior beliefs are ambiguous or weak, whereas cognitive dissonance theory assumes that people adjust self-knowledge only when the internal cues of prior beliefs are clear and conflict with their freely chosen behaviour. Taken together these two differences have led psychologists to suggest that both self-perception theory and cognitive dissonance

theory can explain the adjustment of self-knowledge under different conditions. Self-perception theory explains *the creation of new self-knowledge* following behaviour *that does not conflict with clear initial self-views* whereas cognitive dissonance explains *change in existing self-knowledge* following freely chosen behaviour *that does conflict with clear initial self-views*.

The resolution of the self-perception theory versus cognitive dissonance theory debate represents one of the greatest contributions of self-perception theory. Indeed psychology only becomes better when old theories are challenged and complemented by new theories. However the contribution of self-perception theory extends beyond cognitive dissonance theory through its ability to account for a wider variety of self-attribution phenomenon. Most notably self-perception theory can explain how people develop self-knowledge from behaviour even when there is no inconsistency between prior beliefs and behaviour.

### **Self Assessment Questions**

1) How do you use others to understand self?

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2) Why is it important to know our own emotions?

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3) Explain Bem's Self Perception theory.

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4) Discuss Cognitive Dissonance theory in this context.

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5) Compare the self perception theory and cognitive dissonance theory.

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## 2.9 LET US SUM UP

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We have discussed the processes by which individuals come to understand both themselves and others. We focused on overall impressions are formed and attributions are made, and how such attributions ultimately influence the behaviour of the observer. Person perception refers to the way in which individuals focus on specific traits to form an overall impression of others. Central traits serve to organise a person's impression and provide a framework for interpreting information that is subsequently learned. Additive and averaging models suggested how information is combined. Impressions are also influenced by the order of information.

Schemas are organised bodies of information which allow us to organise and interpret information. Schemas related to personality traits are called prototypes. Prototypes are general personality types developed on the basis of prior experience.

Attribution theories explain how people come to understand the reasons behind their own and other's behaviour. One of the basic issues of attribution theory is concerned with whether behaviour is due to the situation or to the disposition of the person being observed. Kelly suggested that we consider three types of information to make this determination: consensus, consistency and distinctiveness. Jones and Davis's theory of correspondence inference examines how behaviour is attributed a specific underlying intention, trait or disposition. The theory states that we learn most from uncommon effects.

Attributional theory posits that people are fairly rational and logical processors of information. But, people are prone to some systematic biases like fundamental attribution error, halo effect, person-positivity bias and assumed similarity.

Research on person perception shows that we often view ourselves as social objects in a way that is analogous to what we do when perceiving others. Weiner's theory of achievement-related attributions suggests that people explain success and failure by means of two independent dimensions: internal or external and stable or unstable causes. The factors are assumed to affect both affective reactions and expectations for future success.

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### 2.10 UNIT END QUESTIONS

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- 1) What do you mean by additive and averaging models?
- 2) What do you mean by person perception? What is the role of schemas in person perception?
- 3) Write a note on covariation principle proposed by Harold Kelly.
- 4) "Individuals come to know their own attitudes, emotions and internal states by inferring them from observations of their own behavior and circumstances in which they occur." Explain with reference to Bem's self perception theory.
- 5) What are the errors in attribution that people generally make in understanding other's behaviour?
- 6) What are the educational implications of Weiner's attribution theory? Explain.

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## 2.11 GLOSSARY

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<b>Central traits</b>	: traits that play an unusually large role in determining a general impression. Central traits serve to organise the impression and provide a framework for interpreting information that is received subsequently.
<b>The additive model</b>	: we simply add together the bits of information we have about a person to form a judgment.
<b>The averaging model</b>	: we divide the acquired information by the number of traits and average.
<b>Primacy effect</b>	: the condition in which early information has a stronger impact than later information.
<b>Recency effect</b>	: the condition when later information is given more credence than early information.
<b>Schemas</b>	: organised bodies of information stored in memory. The information in a schema provides a representation of the way in which social world operates as well as allowing us to categorise and interpret new information related to the schema.
<b>Prototypes</b>	: the personality types that we derive in the case of person perception are organised into schemas known as <i>prototypes</i> .
<b>Attribution</b>	: an individual's understanding of the reasons behind peoples' behaviour.
<b>Attribution theory</b>	: concerned with how individuals interpret events and how this relates to their thinking and behaviour.
<b>Covariation principle</b>	: the cause that will be chosen to explain an effect is a cause that is present when the effect is present, and absent when the effect is also absent.
<b>Consensus</b>	: the degree to which other people react similarly in the same situation.
<b>Consistency</b>	: the degree to which the actor behaves the same way in other situations.
<b>Distinctiveness</b>	: refers to the extent to which the same behaviour occurs in relation to other people or stimuli.
<b>Correspondent inferences</b>	: observers' ideas of how closely and overt behaviour or action represents a specific underlying intention trait or dispositions. The more behaviour appears to reflect the underlying disposition, the greater the correspondence between these two factors is.

- Non-common effects** : the behaviours which are most helpful in forming correspondent inferences are those resulting in consequences or effects that alternative behaviours would not have produced.
- Fundamental attribution error** : people tend to attribute the behaviour of others to stable trait dispositions, but tend to view their own behaviour as more affected by specific situational influences.
- Halo effect** : the phenomenon in which the initial familiarity that a person has positive traits is used to infer other uniformly positive characteristics. The converse is also true; observation of a single negative trait can be used to infer the existence of uniformly negative traits.
- Social reality** : refers to understanding that is derived from how other people generally think, feel and view the world.

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## 2.12 SUGGESTED READINGS

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Baron, R. A. and Byrne, D. (1997). *Social Psychology*, 8th edition. Boston, MA: Allyn and Bacon

Feldman, R. S. (1985) *Social Psychology: Theories, Research and Applications*. McGrawHill Book Company : New York

Berkowitz, L. (1986) *A Survey of Social Psychology*. CBS Publishing: New York