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## The Functions of Attributions\*

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*Four functions that attributions fulfill for the attributor are catalogued and described. Explanatory attributions promote an understanding of the social world through implicit attribution theories; predictive attributions facilitate the development of expectations concerning the likelihood of future events; egocentric attributions meet self needs and reduce anxiety; and interpersonal attributions provide for the communication of social identity information to others. The importance of considering the functions of attributions is considered, and the implications of the functions approach for attributional asymmetries, the cause/reason distinction, and arguments regarding the accessibility of higher-order cognitive processes are noted.*

Early investigations of the nature of attitudes and the dynamics of attitude change initially assumed that attitudes could be understood without taking into account the functions they fulfilled for the individual. In time, however, researchers recognized that different attitudes do different things: some seemed concerned primarily with optimal adaptation to and utilization of objects in the environment, others facilitated the expression of personal values and appraisals, while others served an ego-defensive function. Theories were developed which described these various purposes of attitudes (cf. Katz, 1960; Smith, Bruner, & White, 1956), and research demonstrated that attitude change could be more accurately predicted when the motivational underpinnings of the attitude were taken into consideration (Kiesler, Collins, & Miller, 1969).

Like attitudes, attributions fulfill different functions. Although Heider (1958) emphasized the role attributions play in the organization of social cognitions, he also described the self and interpersonal implications of attributions. Other theorists have also examined the functions of attributions in some detail (e.g., Bradley, 1978; Jones & Davis, 1965; Kelley, 1971), and have concluded that the causes

and consequences of attributions vary in relation to the function the attribution serves for the attributor. The purpose of the present paper is to draw together and describe previously noted functions of attributions by emphasizing their *explanatory, predictive, egocentric, and interpersonal* uses.

### *Explanation and Prediction: The Control Functions*

The idea that individuals are motivated to achieve a degree of control over their physical and social world has been a recurrent theme in psychological theorizing. A host of concepts (e.g., Kelly, 1955; deCharms, 1968; White, 1959; Wortman, 1976) emphasize the importance of personal control, and research attests to the impact of control and loss of control on behavior (e.g., Abramson, Seligman, & Teasdale, 1978; Glass & Singer, 1972). Within the context of attribution theory an understanding of the causes of behaviors and events, even if erroneous, reinforces the individual's sense of personal control by fulfilling two interrelated functions for the attributor: providing explanations of behavior and environmental outcomes, and facilitating the prediction of these types of outcomes.

*Explanation.* Heider (1958) argues that the perceiver's explanatory attributions work in ways similar to the scientist's theories. Just as the astronomer who understands why the planet Neptune deviates slightly from the path predicted by classical me-

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chanics achieves intellectual control over the phenomenon, so the attributor who explains another's behavior by reference to internal or external causal agents achieves cognitive control. Such explanations, even if never applied to formulate predictions or physically control outcomes, support the foundational assumption the attributor shares with the scientist: the principle of determinism. Events which occur in the social world are assumed to be non-random, the result of systematic regularities which are understandable and explainable. Without attributional explanations, any environment event, any social behavior would baffle the perceiver.

*Prediction.* Not all science and not all attributions involve the detached pursuit of theoretically meaningful explanations. As Kelley (1971:22) notes, "The attributor is not simply an attributor, a seeker after knowledge; his latent goal in gaining knowledge is that of effective management of himself and his environment." Like the applied scientist, the attributor's intuitive predictions about causality serve a two-fold function; not only do they allow the individual to anticipate future occurrences and hence buttress a sense of effective control, but they also provide the means by which commonsense explanations of behaviors and events can be tested.

The explanatory and predictive functions are neither synonymous nor entirely independent concepts. Part of the overlap is due to the dual nature of control. First, control can refer to intellectual or cognitive control, with attributors accepting a priori implicit theories of causality for the same reasons that researchers accept scientific theories. Second, control can also include maintenance and alteration of the physical environment. However, while closely related, neither function is a necessary or sufficient condition for the other. The ability to explain, when certain information concerning the magnitude of key variables and parameters is lacking, need not imply that prediction is possible. Conversely, the ability to predict does not necessarily imply an understanding of the behavior or event in question. But both explanation and prediction, whether taken

singularly or in combination, do enhance feelings of control.

### *The Egocentric Function*

At the core of attribution theory is the Hobbesian conception of the person-as-rational-information-processor who attempts to understand and control his or her existence by achieving a veridical perception of reality. Attributions may not, however, always serve to predict or explain. In some situations, rational information processing may be biased, not only by the information collection and processing distortions so well documented by Ross (1977a), but by individuals' self-serving motivations. When attributions are formulated to protect, maintain, or further extend beliefs about the self or the environment which would be rejected if attributions followed from observations in a strictly rational manner, these attributions fulfill an egocentric function. Although the pervasiveness of egocentrism in attributions is debatable (cf. Bradley, 1978; Miller & Ross, 1975), several relatively unambiguous instances of "self-centered" attributions which serve the needs and desires of the individual have been documented (e.g., Miller, 1976; Schlenker & Miller, 1977; Stevens & Jones, 1976).<sup>1</sup>

### *The Interpersonal Function*

In many diverse but important situations people find themselves in the position of having to describe the reasons for their actions. When motives for behavior are questioned, when actions go astray leading to undesirable outcomes, or when a behavior is "misunderstood" by others,

<sup>1</sup> The term "egocentrism" is used in this context since it merely implies that attributions are made relative to the self or ego, and thus can be used when attributions are self-esteem enhancing as well as effacing. The term "ego-defensive" is rejected for its psychoanalytic implications, "defensive" attribution is rejected due to the label's already well-established application to instances of attribution for negative consequences (e.g., Shaver, 1975; Walster, 1966), and "egotism" is rejected for its strongly negative connotations and applicability to only esteem-enhancing attributional biases.

people try to clarify the causes of their actions. When descriptions of the causes of events are exchanged among two or more individuals, these "causal claims" serve a communicative, informational function and present a way to control others' attributional conclusions.

Although attributions are not typically conceptualized as interpersonal communications, this interpretation is consistent with a symbolic interactionist conception of social identity negotiation (e.g., Cooley, 1922; Mead, 1934) in its emphasis on exchanged interpersonal information. Goffman's (1959, 1971) dramaturgical notions suggest that individuals trade identity-establishing and maintaining information through their self-presentations. In attributional terms, actors in a social encounter can potentially control the perceptions of others by selectively manipulating their symbolic descriptions of causality, including "correct action" as well as the "provision of corrective information" (Goffman, 1971:106).

The interpersonal function of attributions is best demonstrated in those situations in which an individual's actions yield affectively-laden consequences. For example, after behaving in an untoward manner, the actor may try to *account* for the behavior and consequences with excuses and justifications (Austin, 1962; Scott & Lyman, 1968). Through excuses—causal claims which, if accepted, diminish responsibility—the actor can argue that the action should be attributed to external, "extenuating circumstances," rather than dispositional factors. Through justifications, the actor can claim that the act was, in this particular instance, allowable or even praiseworthy. In a public testing situation, for example, actors may excuse themselves by blaming bad luck, excessive test difficulty, noise, item ambiguity, or even the influence of some debilitating substance such as alcohol (Jones & Berglas, 1978). Alternatively, they may justify their performance by arguing that the consequences should be perceived as non-negative since the test is invalid or incorrectly scored. In terms of the action-attribute paradigm of Jones and Davis (1965), observers are

warned that there is no correspondence between behavior and disposition.

While the threat to social identity is not as great when a performance has yielded positive consequences, the actor may still need to insure that the performance is perceived favorably by employing *acclaiming* descriptions (Schlenker, in press). From the actor's point of view, observers should be guided in the direction of internal attributions that will yield increases in social esteem. Through entitling, which is the obverse of an excuse, actors can make salient the link between themselves and the obtained outcome. Enhancements, which work to increase the positivity of the consequences, parallel justifications. They ensure that the outcome will be perceived to be a good one. Thus, after a successful performance the individual may note that personal factors produced the outcome while at the same time pointing out that the consequences are positive; the high score on a test might be followed by the statement "It was a good, comprehensive exam. I'm glad I studied so hard for it."<sup>2</sup>

Thus, individuals are viewed as active participants in social interaction who often control the perceptions of others by using attributions interpersonally. Observers, however, have also been actors themselves and—either implicitly or explicitly—realize that the actor's causal claims may not be completely unbiased. If, for example, the claims made by the actor differ greatly from the tentative attribution conclusions reached by the observer, "attributional conflict" (Horai, 1977) may result unless a mutually acceptable definition of the situation can be negotiated through social bargaining (McCall & Simmons, 1966; Weinstein & Deutschberger, 1964). While observers may prefer to base their conclusions on their own observations rather than the

<sup>2</sup> The accounting/acclaiming framework should be considered a heuristic taxonomy rather than a complete cataloging of all types of causal claims. Also, while it is hypothesized that an excuse usually cites the impact of coercive environmental factors, individuals may at times reduce their responsibility by citing internal factors such as headaches, irresistible impulses, or mental illness.

claims of the actor, causal forces may be so complex that they are not easily identified. Although theories of attribution (e.g., Heider, 1958; Jones & Davis, 1965; Kelley, 1971) tend to discuss only the attributional effects of environmental and behavioral information, the verbal claims of the actor can also be a critical source of information when observers are uncertain about causes.

### *Implications and Conclusions*

It has been argued that attributions meet a number of needs for the attributor—including the need to explain, to predict, and to protect self and social identity—and that function influences both the antecedents and consequences of attributions. While it is clear that additional research is required before the functions listed here can be adequately evaluated, those proposed seem both reasonable and fairly well supported by previous theory and research.

Although they were introduced and described separately, the four functions probably do not represent four mutually exclusive categories. While in simple instances any given attribution may fulfill a single function, in most situations attributions are multi-purposed. For example, while an individual may formulate an attribution simply to achieve a parsimonious understanding of some event, this explanatory attribution may be later used to make predictions about outcomes. Similarly, while the egocentric attribution of a poor performance to external factors may help the individual minimize the esteem-damaging implications of failure, this same egocentric attribution need only be communicated to others to become an interpersonal attribution (Miller, 1978; Weary, 1979). Because the approach suggests that the functions are not independent of one another, further research is needed to specify the implications of conflict among attributions which yield incompatible conclusions while serving different functions and those variables which determine the dominance of one function over others.

The quadruplex nature of attributions has implications for research examining

the self-serving versus non-motivational nature of attributions following negative and positive outcomes. Although the asymmetries in attributions about the causes of valenced outcomes have been variously explained in terms of *expectations* derived from causal assumptions (Feather, 1969), *information-processing* (Miller & Ross, 1975), *self-serving biases* (Forsyth & Schlenker, 1977), and *self-presentational motives* (Bradley, 1978), the functional approach diplomatically suggests that each of the four explanations is "correct" since each is suited to one particular function of attributions. When the attributor is not concerned with understanding why a particular outcome occurred but only wishes to predict future outcomes, the expectations function is predominating. If, however, the actor attempts to integrate and reconcile the current situation with his or her implicit causal theory (e.g., "I am usually the cause of positive events and rarely the cause of negative events.") then attributions will fulfill an explanatory function and confirm information-processing predictions. Alternatively, if the task is one with which the individual is personally involved, making failure self-esteem damaging and success self-esteem enhancing, then attributions fulfill an egocentric function and a self-serving motivational explanation is supported. Or, if the actors wish to maintain a public image of poise and competence, then they may use interpersonal attributions to make certain that observers do not blame them for their failure, but do credit them with their successes. Lastly, when attributions yield partial support for one or more of the proposed explanations of attributional asymmetries, then subjects' attributions must be serving several purposes at the same time. Rather than continuing to ask the question "Which of these theories is correct?", the functional approach, like Ross (1977b), advocates specification of when attributions are mostly self-serving, mostly logical, or both self-serving and logical.

The functional approach is also relevant to Buss's (1978) distinction between cause and reason. Buss suggests that reasons are typically teleological in that they make

reference to intentions or desired goals to account for actions. Causes, however, are used to explain occurrences and explicate "that which brings about a change" (1978:1311). Buss indicted social psychologists for not using the terms correctly and also advanced the hypothesis that while actors typically use reasons, observers may use either reasons or causes.

The present categorization of attributions agrees with Buss's contention that different attributions do different things for the attributor. However, the functional approach extends the cause/reason dichotomy by suggesting sub-categories within the two types. What Buss calls "causes" are attributions which fulfill either explanatory or predictive functions. Further, when attributional statements are "reasons," they will typically be interpersonal or egocentric. In sharp disagreement with Buss, however, the functional approach argues that—because attributions can fulfill multiple functions—the categories are not mutually exclusive. In addition, when attributions are examined in the context of the four-fold typology, it becomes clear that, as Kruglanski (1979) pointed out and Buss later admitted (1979), actor's attributions can be either reasons or causes—indeed, they can be predictions, explanations, self claims or social identity claims.

Finally, Nisbett (Nisbett & Wilson, 1977) has recently raised the important issue of the role of introspection in attributional processes. Although Nisbett suggests that attributions are exclusively determined by the attributor's implicit causal theories, a functional approach argues that his hypothesis holds true only when attributions are explanatory. If attributions are predictive, then attributors should be far more likely to make certain their inferences are accurate reflections of the explicitly causal information available (Ajzen, 1977). In addition, the issue of introspective accuracy per se is relatively unimportant when attributions are egocentric or interpersonal.

In sum, the importance of attribution in a social world is emphasized in the functional approach. When all four functions are considered, the framework can be

applied to the full range of social cognition, from implicit causal theories, to information processing, to self-identity processes, and to social identity definition. In particular, the approach, through emphasizing the interpersonal uses of attributional information, makes explicit the link between attributions—a typically psychological social psychology topic, and social identity—a typically sociological social psychology topic. It is hoped this link may help bridge, in an admittedly small way, the gap between the two perspectives in social psychology (cf. Archibald, 1976; House, 1977) and strengthen the status of attribution theory as a dominant view within social psychology by "returning" attribution to the social dynamics framework from which it originated.

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