Attributional Biases in Social Perception

Attributional biases are thinking processes people use about groups, individuals or yourself that can systematically lead to errors in perception.

- Fundamental attributional error (FAE) or called the correspondence bias
  - Just world belief (JWB) and blaming the victim
- Actor/Observer discrepancy

(other biases and thinking strategies learned in Chapter 8: Thinking and Intelligence can affect social perception)

- fallacy of positive instances
- belief bias
- confirmation bias
- availability heuristic
- representative heuristic
Fundamental Attributional Error (FAE)

Attributions are explanations we use for why events or actions occur. Humans seem to have a desire to understand and explain why things happen. However, not all attributions are accurate and unbiased.

The fundamental attributional error is the tendency for individualistic cultures to explain other people’s behavior with the tendency to overemphasize internal, personal traits, while ignoring or underestimating the effects of external, situational factors.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Internal and Personal characteristics</th>
<th>External and Situational Factors</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Alex Trebeck is smart</td>
<td>Alex Trebeck has the answers provided to him</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
Fundamental Attributional Error (FAE)

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Internal and Personal characteristics</th>
<th>External and Situational Factors</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Crazy driver</td>
<td>Maybe the driver is ill or had to avoid something in the road.</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

In this case, members of individualistic cultures like the United States tend to focus on the person and make a dispositional attribution (Crazy driver!). While those from a more collectivist culture like Japan tend to focus on the situation and make more situational attributions (Maybe that driver is ill).
Fundamental Attributional Error (FAE)

The show is successful because of

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Internal and Personal characteristics</th>
<th>External and Situational Factors</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Bryan Cranston is an excellent actor</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
Football
People say that anyone can do anything with their lives—they ignore racism and wealth. One of the Kardashians and Paris Hilton claims to be “self-made”.
This attributional error is common when bad things happen and observers tend to blame the victim of crime, disaster such as floods, or illness.

For example:

- Football Quarterbacks are deemed to be critical at winning or losing the game.
- Paris Hilton and one of the Kardashians (I forget which one) claims that their wealth is self-made.
- When people take note of ethnic neighborhoods, dominated by crime and poverty,
  - the personal qualities of the residents are blamed for these problems,
  - while other situational explanations, such as job discrimination, poor police service, etc. are downplayed.
- When one fails to get a job,
  - people can underestimate (social) situational factors such as opportunity, unemployment rates and connections and
  - overemphasize dispositional factors and label people as incompetent or lazy.
- Americans used IQ tests to demonstrate that Caucasians were more intelligent that many immigrants at the turn of the century,
• When explaining why Americans interned the Japanese during WWII, we fail to consider situational factors
• The exposure of an unborn fetus to radiation without the mothers’ knowledge. While we agree that these are unacceptable, there is a tendency to discount situational factors and public sentiment at the time.
• When talking about terrorist, we tend to make personality attributions (they are “evil”) and discount American foreign policy.
Why is recognizing the Fundamental Attributional Error important?

There are many factors influencing behavior. Not recognizing the fundamental attributional error (overestimating personality factors and underestimating situational factors) makes it difficult to address problems such as the following because we focus too much on the person.

- **Student’s cheating on exams:** We tend to make personality attributions and focus on the person, and not take into account social pressures to do well.
- **School Shootings:** There is a tendency to focus on the personality of the individual and not look at the social environment, such as bullying, which took Americans a long time.
- **Enron/Worldcom’s accounting practices:** There is a tendency to focus on “bad individuals”. However, there are institutional processes that reinforce an individual to manipulate the books.
- **Telemarketers:** People tend to focus on the individuals as being bad people, calling them and being annoying, and not as a person who needed to work and that was what was available.
• **Driving:** People tend to blame people for being bad drivers when they aren’t allowed to merge in and ignore situational factors (such as another car not allowing that driver to merge).

• **Drug abuse:** The root causes of drug use are partially situational. Telling someone “just say no!” is (and was) an ineffective strategy to fight drugs abuse.

• **Suicide:** We tend to focus on the personality of the person, and underestimate situation factors such as (accessibility to the means of committing suicide, the situational factors affecting the mood and cognitions).

• **Problems in Iraq:**
**Actor-observer discrepancy**

As an exception to the fundamental attributional error, there tends to be a bias in the opposite direction.

- When we are the **actor** (explaining our own behavior), we tend to attribute our own behavior to external causes.
- When we are the **observer** of someone else’s behavior, we tend to attribute their behavior to internal causes.

For example

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>A behavior</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td><img src="image" alt="Car and jeep" /></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>The explanation when you are the <strong>ACTOR</strong></th>
<th></th>
<th>The explanation when you are the <strong>OBSERVER</strong></th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Situational explanations</td>
<td>≠</td>
<td>Personality explanations</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
Actor-observer discrepancy

For example, a report comes in late.

There is a discrepancy or bias when explaining the same behavior. Quite often these discrepancies occur over a period of time and are more difficult to detect. In addition, if we believe we are “fair” and “unbiased”, we might be motivated NOT to detect these discrepancies.
### Actor-observer discrepancy

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>A behavior</th>
<th></th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td><img src="image_url" alt="Car" /></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>The explanation when you are the ACTOR</th>
<th>The explanation when you are the OBSERVER</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td><strong>Situational explanations</strong></td>
<td><strong>Personality explanations</strong></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>• When I come to the meeting unprepared and late, it is because something came up or traffic was bad.</td>
<td>• When you come unprepared and late, it is due to lack of interest in the job.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>• When I hit you, it is because I was provoked.</td>
<td>• When you hit me, it is because you are aggressive.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>• I was pressed for time.</td>
<td>• She’s a reckless, out-of-state driver.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>--------------------------------------</td>
<td>----------------------------------------</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>• When I’m unemployed, it is because</td>
<td>• When “you” are unemployed, it is</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>of a bad job market.</td>
<td>because “you” are lazy.</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

"Why is it that if you take advantage of a corporate tax break you're a smart businessman, but if you take advantage of something so you don't go hungry, you're a moocher?"

Jon Stewart
**Student examples of the actor-observer discrepancy**

I was driving in my car and there was a REALLY slow driver head of me who would almost turn at the intersection and then change his mind and keep going straight and who was making me crazy. What a bad driver!!!

A couple days later, I was driving in Portland and I was trying to find my friend's new house. I had the map but I couldn't find the right streets and I was driving slowly and I almost turned down the wrong street a few times and someone honked at me! It really made me angry because I'm not a bad driver, I'm just a little lost!!!
Stereotypes

Stereotypes are beliefs and/or cognitive schemas that help us organize information about groups (page 528).

Stereotypes are mental shortcuts that allow us for easy, fast processing of social information. This process is often automatic and unconscious which makes their recognition difficult to recognize and inhibit.

As social scientists use the concept of stereotypes, they are neither good or bad. They reflect efficient cognitive processing (page 528). In fact, many stereotypes are accurate.

However, stereotypes can produce harmful results of prejudice and discrimination because they can be

1. inaccurate
2. overused
3. self-perpetuating, and
4. automatic
Associative Networks and the Implicit Attitude Test

STEREOTYPES ARE AWESOME!
But only one of them is a convicted felon
Stereotypes are overused

Figure 13.19 illustrates how categories warp perceptions (page 537 4th edition).

Those who see the lines on the right (group A and group B)
• tend to overestimate the similarity of lines 1 and 3 and
• underestimate the similarity of lines between lines 3 and 4.

The difference between Group A and Group B (or line 3 and 4) is seen as larger than it actually is. Even with “content-less lines” that have no meaning, we exaggerate differences between groups.
When we categorize people by gender, religion, political affiliation, intelligence, generations (Baby Boomers, Gen X, Millennial), socioeconomic status, extraverts versus introverts, etc., we tend to downplay the similarities across groups (men and women are more alike) and the variations within a group (democrats are quite different from one another democrats and republicans are quite different from other republicans)

This can lead to the outgroup homogeneity effect—the tendency for you to perceive the outgroup or “them” as more homogenous (similar) and the ingroup or “us” as quite diverse.
Stereotypes are overused

Boundaries can create the perception of differences when they don’t exist. The following is a visual illusion from the Discovering Psychology #7: Sensation and Perception at about 20:00 into the video

Most people see two different shades in the left and right side. Now cover up the center line.
Stereotypes can be self-perpetuating

Stereotypes can be self-perpetuation (have a life of their own outside of reality) due to the following processes:

- Perceptual confirmation
  - We tend to seek and remember information consistent with our beliefs
  - We tend to forget and/or not notice information inconsistent with our beliefs
- Self-fulfilling prophecies
  - Empire Strikes Back
  - Elementary school “Bloomers”
  - Telephone conversation with who they believed was an attractive or unattractive woman
- Subtyping
Stereotypes can be self-perpetuating

Your beliefs about people affect what you perceive (stereotypes can cause perceptual confirmation)—you perceive what is consistent with your beliefs which can be independent of the reality.

For example:

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Dog’s Name is Loki</th>
<th>Dog’s Name is Prince Charming</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>![Picture of Loki Dog]</td>
<td>![Picture of Prince Charming Dog]</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>You are more likely to perceive the bad things the dog does.</td>
<td>You are more likely to perceive the good things he dog does.</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
Stereotypes can be self-perpetuating

Subtyping is the tendency for people who are faced with disconfirming evidence to modify their stereotypes (by creating a new category), rather than abandon them (page 539)

"Here's all you have to know about men and women: women are crazy, men are stupid. And the main reason women are crazy is that men are stupid." - George Carlin
Subtyping stereotypic beliefs

If you believe that women are crazy and you come across a “normal” woman, you say she really isn’t a woman.
If you believe that men are stupid and you come across an “intelligent” man, you say he really isn’t a man.

Subtyping stereotypic beliefs allows you to maintain your belief in the presence of disconfirming evidence.
Stereotypes can be Automatic

To demonstrate how pervasive negative stereotypes are in our culture, take the Implicit Attitude Test (IAT). This can be found on a weblink on the website.
Why do Stereotypes Matter?

• We are more likely to harm members of groups with negative stereotypes
  o Reminding people of negative stereotypes regarding intelligence increase the odds of poorer performance (see stereotype threat)
  o We are more likely to justify harm done to members of groups with negative stereotypes (e.g. sexual assault victims)
  o We are more likely to believe that harm done to members of groups with negative stereotypes

• We are more likely to support cuts in programs for those in need
  o You are more likely to support welfare programs that help the needy due to circumstances beyond their control (e.g. hurricanes)
  o You are more likely to cut welfare programs for the “welfare queen” (which is a very small minority of people who receive welfare).
# Prejudice versus Discrimination

**Prejudice:** Negative feelings, opinions, and beliefs associated with a stereotype (page 530).

**Discrimination:** The inappropriate and unjustified treatment of people as a result of prejudice (page 530).

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Prejudice (attitude)</th>
<th>yes</th>
<th>no</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Discrimination (behavior)</td>
<td>A restaurant owner who is bigoted against gays treats them fairly because he needs their business.</td>
<td>An executive with favorable attitudes toward blacks <em>doesn’t hire</em> them because he would get in trouble with his boss.</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
The Implicit Attitude Test

Many prejudicial attitudes and associations are unconscious. The implicit attitude association measures the reaction time in how long it takes you to make a judgment between the color of a person’s skin and positive or negative words.

Image source: Lillenfeld
Associative Networks and the Implicit Attitude Test
Associative Networks and the Implicit Attitude Test
Associative Networks and the Implicit Attitude Test
Associative Networks and the Implicit Attitude Test
The Implicit Attitude Test

**HYPOTHESIS:** Stereotypes can influence basic perceptual processes.

**RESEARCH METHOD:**

1. White participants were shown a picture of a white face or a picture of a black face.

2. Immediately after viewing a picture of a face, participants were shown a picture of an object and asked to classify it as a gun or a tool as quickly as possible.

**RESULTS:** Participants primed by seeing black faces identified guns more quickly and mistook tools for guns.

**CONCLUSION:** Stereotypes affect perception.

Role of Construals: Schemas and Stereotypes

When the criminal was holding a gun, shoot the criminal. When the civilian was holding a neutral object, you do nothing.
Role of Construals: Schemas and Stereotypes

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>White Skin</th>
<th>Black Skin</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td><strong>Holding a gun</strong></td>
<td><img src="#" alt="White Skin" /></td>
<td><img src="#" alt="Black Skin" /></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Holding a Camera</strong></td>
<td><img src="#" alt="White Skin" /></td>
<td><img src="#" alt="Black Skin" /></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

People were more likely to identify ambiguous items as weapons if the person was black.
Dealing with Prejudice and Stereotypes

The problem is that the activation of stereotypes, discrimination, and prejudice is unconscious, automatic and we are not aware of our own thinking processes and our behavior.

For example,
- fundamental attributional error (FAE),
- actor-observer bias,
- self-serving bias,
- the ingroup-bias,
- reduction of cognitive dissonance,
- belief bias, and
- confirmation bias

are all thinking processes that occur without our awareness and distort our perception of reality.

If your self-concept (see chapter 13) consists of being fair and unprejudiced, this information can be perceived as being threatening your self-concept and you will … (insert answer). Have dissonance, get angry, deny JWB, adjust behavior.
So what? Does treating groups of people differently affect behavior?

- The Baraku people in Japan achieve lower scores on intelligence tests than other Japanese. When they come to America and are treated like Japanese, they difference disappears (Chapter 8).
- It increases the perception of helplessness and decreases self-efficacy
- Can it make some individuals or groups experience more stress?
Strategies for Dealing with Prejudice

- Inhibiting prejudicial attitudes
- Mutual Cooperation
- Jigsaw method
- Mere contact (the contact hypothesis)
Dealing with Prejudice at the Individual Level

People who are not consciously prejudiced against others may react in prejudicial ways. Stereotypes are automatically activated, and can affect our behavior without our awareness.

Patricia Devine argue that prejudice reduction at the individual level is a three-step process (I have slightly modified it).

- The individual must decide that prejudiced responses are wrong and consciously reject prejudiced and stereotyped thinking.
- They must internalize their non-prejudiced attitudes so that those beliefs become part of your personal self-concept.
  - The person must recognize that they act in a discriminatory manner, have stereotypes of groups, and have some prejudicial attitudes.
- Individuals must learn to inhibit automatic prejudicial reactions and deliberately replace them with non-prejudiced responses that are based on their personal standards.
  - Individuals need to recognize the thinking process that lead to and reinforce prejudicial attitudes (eg. the confirmation bias, the belief bias, ingroup-bias, illusory correlations, actor-observer bias, just-world belief, FAE, self-serving bias).
If you are unaware of how prejudicial attitudes and discrimination occur, it makes it difficult to address the problem.
Mutual Cooperation:
The Jigsaw Method

Groups are established by a common theme or topic (e.g. perspective of personality) where each group member studies their topic or theme.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Psychoanalytic</th>
<th>Humanist</th>
<th>Social-cognitive</th>
<th>Trait</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td><img src="psychoanalytic_diagram.png" alt="" /></td>
<td><img src="humanist_diagram.png" alt="" /></td>
<td><img src="social_cognitive_diagram.png" alt="" /></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Ann</th>
<th>Ashley</th>
<th>Alfred</th>
<th>Aaron</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Carole</td>
<td>Christy</td>
<td>Caleb</td>
<td>Cecil</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Eric</td>
<td>Edward</td>
<td>Elaine</td>
<td>Erin</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Fred</td>
<td>Frank</td>
<td>Felicia</td>
<td>Fiona</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
The Jigsaw Method

After each group has learned their theme or topic, they form new groups where each member of the original group (perspective of psychology) will teach each other member their perspective.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Group W</th>
<th>Group X</th>
<th>Group Y</th>
<th>Group Z</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Ann</td>
<td>Ashley</td>
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Reducing Prejudicial Attitudes: The Contact Hypothesis

Another strategy that has been hypothesized to reduce prejudice is that the mere contact with out groups/minorities will decrease group conflict. This is called the contact hypothesis or contact theory.

**Does the contact hypothesis/theory work? Why?**
- It was argued that John Rocker (Atlanta Braves pitcher who publicly expressed prejudicial attitudes), will become less prejudiced against minorities over time because he has to work with them.
- At UC Berkley, there is a lot of group diversity. Is there less inter-group conflict at UC Berkley?
- Many people may believe that African-Americans are not intelligent and are lazy. People who work with Colin Powell will find that he does not match this stereotype (I am not accusing or suggesting anyone in the Bush Administration of having these beliefs—Colin Powell is an easy example to illustrate the thinking process). How do they resolve this apparent conflict while maintaining their belief?
Who should learn about these the psychology of stereotypes, discrimination and prejudice? Why should they learn about them?