Social Perception

Implicit personality theories: A network of assumptions or beliefs about the relationship among various types of people, traits, and behaviors. Although your textbook does not explicitly call it this, you may want to think of this as a stereotype.

What is the purpose of implicit personality theories?
• People are trying to infer unobservable traits through observable characteristics. These inferences are mental shortcuts (heuristics) that are prone to systematic errors—especially if you have very little time to make these inferences.

Common examples of implicit personality theories (stereotypes) apply to the following:
• Serial killers (The serial killer from Spokane doesn’t fit our stereotype of serial killers)
• Rapists, drug dealers
• The physically attractive
• Racial, religious and ethnic groups
• Scientists, engineers, accountants, computer programmers
• Blonds
• Bald men
• Politicians: Republicans, Democrats
• Terrorists
• Native Americans
• The elderly and the young (see chapter 9)
• Homosexuals and lesbians (see chapter 10)
• The mentally ill (see chapter 14)
• “bikers”
• Gender stereotypes
Implicit Personality Theories

We make unconscious decisions based on implicit theories about people. Over time, we reinforce these theories through biased thinking strategies such as the:

- **confirmation bias** (Chapter 7: Thinking, Language and Intelligence),
- fallacy of positive instances
- **belief-bias** (Chapter 7: Thinking, Language and Intelligence),
- fundamental attributional error, and the
- actor-observer bias.

In addition, our beliefs will affect how we interpret ambiguous behavior in a way that is consistent with our beliefs

- e.g. if you believe that homosexuals are effeminate, you will interpret behavior by homosexuals as more effeminate than that by heterosexuals.

If our theories and beliefs about people are valid, we will make good inferences. If our theories and beliefs are not valid, we will make bad inferences.

Poor implicit theories about people can confer advantages to some groups or individuals while discriminating against others (and thus affect their self-efficacy, and likelihood of reaching their full human potential--remember the Baraku people in Japan and stereotype threat (Chapter 7)).
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.

- Physical attractiveness stereotype (PAS)
- Fundamental attributional error (FAE)
  - Just world belief (JWB) and blaming the victim
- Actor/Observer discrepancy
- Self-serving bias and self-effacing bias

(other biases and thinking strategies learned in Chapter 7: Thinking, Language and Intelligence that can affect social perception)
- fallacy of positive instances
- belief bias
- confirmation bias
- availability heuristic
- representative heuristic
Examples of the **Physical Attractiveness Stereotype** written by students

Little Jenny and Steve were watching MTV on their parents television set when a gorgeous female vocalist appeared on the screen. Little Steve turned to his sister and said "Wow! She's so pretty. I bet she'd make a really cool, nice fun mom!"

John and Cathy were talking about the new girl at their high school. "She's very pretty," Jimmy said, "and I'll bet she's a great dancer and smart and funny too!"

I was just recently seeing this guy and it was purely physical attraction. It isn't that he was a bad person. We just don't have much in common. I continued going out with him because I thought he was HOT, witty, intelligent and a great guy. I hoped I could find more about him I liked. But I didn't.

I recently had to buy a suit for a wedding I would be attending. I narrowed my choices of stores to three and proceeded to shop for the best deal. My first salesperson was competent enough and offered me a great deal. I went to the second shop and another sales person, who was more friendly than the first and who also offered me a great suit for a great price. As I entered the third shop, I was approached by a gorgeous sales woman. I automatically presumed she would get my business; after all, a woman who looked as good as she did must be savvy enough to give me the best deal and offer me the best suit.
Physical attractiveness stereotype

The presumption that physically attractive people possess socially desirable traits: What is beautiful is good.

In general, physically attractive people are perceived and thought to be:
• more intelligent
• more likely to do better in school
• happier
• better adjusted
• socially competent
• more successful
• less socially deviant
• sexier
• more vain
• less modest
when compared to those who are less attractive

Questions we should ask about our implicit beliefs:
• Where does the belief match "reality"?
• Where does the belief not match “reality”?
• What does the evidence show?
Physical Attractiveness Stereotype

The scientific evidence shows:

Attractive people are:
  • more popular
  • given the benefit of the doubt
  • make a better first impression (later impressions are less affected by attractiveness)
  • make more money
  • have more prestigious jobs
  • less lonely
  • less anxious in social situations

However, attractiveness is not related to
  • intelligence
  • happiness
  • mental health
  • self-esteem
The tendency to for individualistic cultures to attribute the behavior of other people to **internal**, personal characteristics, while ignoring or underestimating the effects of **external**, situational factors.

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:

- 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.
- Using the fundamental attributional error, explain why a policy of “killing” terrorists is unlikely to reduce the threat of terrorism for Americans.
• When forming beliefs about politicians, we tend to overestimate the dispositional factors influencing their judgment and underestimate the situational factors. When attributing qualities to the president, we give the president too much credit for their role in steering the economy—especially when the economy goes bad (this is moderated by your political affiliation). In addition to this, we don’t give the president credit when the economy goes well.

• The development of the atomic bomb during WWII,
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.
- **Bob Kerrey’s Vietnam experience**: There is a tendency to blame the SEAL team involved as making a bad decision and not the situation they were in (Six men behind enemy lines with little support).
- **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.

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.
Examples:
- When I don’t know how to do my job, it is due to lack of training (the situation).
- When you don’t know how to do the job, it is incompetence (dispositional).
- When I come to the meeting unprepared and late, it is because something came up or traffic was bad.
- When you come unprepared and late, it is due to lack of interest in the job.
- When I hit you, it is because I was provoked.
- When you hit me, it is because you are aggressive.
- She’s a reckless, out-of-state driver.
- I was pressed for time.
- I forgot because of a brain fart.
- You forgot because you are incompetent.
- When I’m unemployed, it is because of a bad job market.
- When “you” are unemployed, it is because “you” are lazy.
• When I leave the cell phone on in class, it was an accident. I got distracted when I normally turn it off. When other students forget to turn their cell phone off in class, it is because they are irresponsible and inconsiderate.
• When I see “kids” misbehave it is because they are “bad”. When I misbehaved as a kid, it was just something you did.
• When I use the physical attractiveness stereotype, it is because he/she was just SO attractive. When you use the physical attractiveness stereotype, it is because you are shallow.

Why does this bias occur?

What have we studied before where we are inconsistent in explaining behavior or biased in interpreting and explaining “our reality”?
**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!!!
Self-serving bias and Self-effacing bias

Self-serving bias: The tendency for *individualistic* cultures to explain success with internal, personal causes, and failures with external, situational causes.

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<tr>
<th>Successes</th>
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“When I win, it is skill”   “When I lose, it is bad luck”

Self-effacing bias: The tendency to *collectivist* cultures to explain success with external, situational causes, and failures with internal, personal causes.

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“When I win, it is good luck”   “When I lose, I wasn’t trying”
Effect of the self-serving bias:
• Those who tend to commit the self-serving bias tend to be happier, but have a less accurate perception of the world around them.
Student examples of self-serving bias

Mick likes to cook and is pretty good and knows it. He says he has a talent for it etc. However, when the dish comes out bad, he says it's because the meat was not fresh or the wine was not good.

Richard is a hockey goal-tender and when his team wins, he talks about the great saves he made, etc. When his team loses the team played like crap. "Where was my defense?", Richard says "I was screened, that shot was deflected, he didn't cover his man, etc."

When Jeff got an “A” on his History mid-term he congratulated himself on being so smart. Then when he got a “D” on the History final exam he sighed and reassured herself that he had been tired and overly stressed and that is why he got the “D”.

The last time Ashley aced a test, she claimed it was because she was smart. Yet, in the same class, the test before, she failed and blamed her failure on unfair teaching practices.

I usually score about 92-96% on my calculus tests. When I received 100% on a calculus test I thought that it was because I was good at calculus. The next test I got an 88% and claimed that the professor graded unfairly.
**Just World Belief and Blaming the Victim**

The strong need for people to believe that the world is just and fair. Because the world is “just and fair”, victims must have done something to deserve his or her fate. Therefore people get what they deserve and deserve what they get. The consequence of this belief is that people tend to:

- blame the victim of rape,
- blame battered spouses by saying they provoked their beatings and they “let it happen to themselves”,
- blame the victims of dog attacks, (like in Pacific Heights)
- blame the poor are solely responsible for their condition,
- blame sick people are responsible for their illness.

A disproportional amount of weight is given to dispositional (personality) factors, and the contribution of situational factors is underestimated—the **fundamental attributional error**. The wealthy and healthy see their good fortune, and the misfortune of others as justly deserved. Linking good fortune with virtue and misfortune with moral failure enable the fortunate to feel pride in their achievements and absolve them of responsibility toward the misfortunate.
Student Examples of the Just World Belief

Because I grew up in a middle class home, I never experienced the difficulties many face to just get by from day to day. My first two years of my marriage I was steadily employed, received good wages and lived my life in pursuit of the next bigger and better toy. On the other hand, my sister, a single mother of two, struggled every day to make ends meet. I often discussed her situation with my wife, putting her down for her situation. "Gail deserves what she gets, I would say. "She is the one who decided to divorce her husband--he was a well-to-do attorney—it’s her fault for being so poor. A few years later, I found myself unemployed and struggling just to keep enough food on the table for my family. I looked back to the attitude I had displayed about Gail's unfortunate situation and shamefully realized that she had not gotten what she deserved, just as I didn't deserve to be struggling after giving my life to one company for three years. Circumstances in both our lives; circumstances that we’re not able to be controlled by either one of us, had resulted in our times of struggle.

Ellen was not a very good girl that afternoon. Later she felt down and scratched her arm. "That is what you get when you do not behave well," said her mother.
Attributional biases and social perception

- Physical attractiveness stereotype (PAS)
- Fundamental attributional error (FAE)
- Actor/Observer discrepancy
- Self-serving bias and self-effacing bias
- Just world belief (JWB) and blaming the victim

These biases in attribution can be difficult to spot because they rarely occur in tandem (very rarely will we say we aced a test because of hard work, and then say we failed a test because it was unfair. These statements often follow each other after some time making them more difficult to see). We need to have an ear for what people say.

Who should learn about these attributional biases? Why should they learn about them?

What are the consequences of not recognizing how we make attributions---especially when we are inconsistent (or why should we study how we perceive others)?