Social Cognition and Person Perception

We are unconsciously and automatically forming quick judgments and drawing conclusions about the characteristics of other people (person perception). We are evaluating a person’s attractiveness, likeability competence, trustworthiness and aggressiveness (page 445).

These initial impressions are often wrong and don’t realize it because (1) don’t get feedback on our performance (2) and can distort reality to make our first impressions match our perception.

Our perceptions of others our guided by our
- implicit personality theories,
- social categories and
- attributions we make of their behavior.

Again, these processes are unconscious and automatic so we are often unaware how our perception and thinking is being influenced.
Social Cognition and Person Perception

Social categorization is the mental process of classifying people into groups on the basis of common characteristics (page 446).

These processes can be explicit or implicit. These categories can be as simple as an “us” versus “them” (or ingroup and outgroup). Dividing people into groups is unconscious and automatic, but can exaggerate differences between groups (e.g. men and women, Generation X and Generation Y, etc.)
Social Cognition and Person Perception

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.
Social Cognition and Person 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.

One common implicit personality theory is the physical attractiveness stereotype.
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.
A friend of mine went to a party once. She briefly met what she named as “a very attractive man”. She only talked to him a moment before he had been called away. As she left the party, her host mentioned that the “attractive man” had asked about her. My friend felt pleased that she had made an impression in such a short time. Her host asked if he could give her phone number to him. She consented. He had obviously made an impression on her too. He did call her a few days later. She was very excited. They went out to dining and dancing. My friend came home with a very disappointing look on her face. She was shocked to find out that he did not dance as good as he looked. He was also a little boring.

When our car broke down on the highway, I had my wife stand next to the car to flag down a car to help (I had tried, no success). The first car to come by, she was able to get it to stop.

Elaine, who is extremely beautiful and knows it, often brags how she gets away with stealing things. She said even if she gets caught a stupid excuse always gets her out of trouble.
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
- more socially skilled,
- healthier
- 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
- happier
- higher intelligence
- higher self-esteem
However, attractiveness is not related to
- mental health
- grades
- number of personal relationships
- financial resources
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, drug users
- 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

We are often inferring the causes of people’s behavior (including our own). We want to have an explanation or “story” that makes sense. However, when we explain the cause of behavior, there are some biases that can systematically lead to errors in perception.

- Fundamental attributional error (FAE)
  - Just world belief (JWB) and blaming the victim
- Hindsight bias
- Self-serving bias and self-effacing bias
- Actor/Observer discrepancy (not in Hockenbury and Nolan)

(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
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 to 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><strong>Bryan Cranston is an excellent actor</strong></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

![Breaking Bad poster](image-url)
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.
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:**
Hindsight Bias

The hindsight bias is the tendency, after an event has occurred to overestimate one's ability to have foreseen or predicted the outcome (page 449).

Only after we know what happens, it is easy to construct a plausible story to see how the conclusion was “inevitable”. The hindsight bias can make it easier to blame a victim if, you the observer, were overconfident in seeing the how the outcome occurred after knowing the outcome.
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,
- 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.

My cousin died of AIDS a few years ago and my brother said, "Well if he didn't put his ______ up men’s ______, then it wouldn't have happened.

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.
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.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>Successes</th>
<th>Failures</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Internal, personal causes</td>
<td>External, situational causes</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Successes</td>
<td><img src="Image" alt="Successes Image" /></td>
<td><img src="Image" alt="Failures Image" /></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>“When I win, it is skill”</td>
<td><img src="Image" alt="Successes Card" /></td>
<td><img src="Image" alt="Failures Card" /></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>“When I lose, it is bad luck”</td>
<td><img src="Image" alt="Successes Card" /></td>
<td><img src="Image" alt="Failures Card" /></td>
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</tbody>
</table>
Self-serving bias and Self-effacing bias

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

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Successes</th>
<th>Failures</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>External, situational causes</td>
<td>Internal, personal causes</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>“When I win, it is good luck”</td>
<td>“When I lose, I wasn’t trying”</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
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. (they are distorting reality)
**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.
A friend of mine is taking an Anatomy class this summer. At the first of the term she really liked the teacher and the subject. She was excited to learn and understand more about her body. She felt confident because the teacher was so good. Now, after failing two tests she has changed her mind. She is no longer interested or excited in the subject and she now says that the teacher goes too fast and doesn't care for the students and their learning processes. She knows she isn't doing well and she has reasoned this by the teachers lack of concern and the bad subject instead of acknowledging that she could try harder, review with the classmates, attend review sessions and so on. The impact is that she is worried and scared, and she has lost hope. She blames her loss of interest on the teacher and not on her grade results. She may or may not improve. It has yet to be seen with one week left.

Tonya Harding was skating in the Olympic finals and her skate lace broke. She had to stop during her performance to get another one. After the performance was all over, I heard her say that she would have done better if she did not have the problem with her lace. I seriously doubt that she would not attribute her success to her skates.
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>
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</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>Situational explanations</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.
Other 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).
### Actor-observer discrepancy

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

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>The explanation when you are the ACTOR</th>
<th>≠</th>
<th>The explanation when you are the OBSERVER</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td><strong>Situational explanations</strong></td>
<td></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></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></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>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>------------------------------</td>
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<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
| When I’m unemployed, it is because of a bad job market. | When “you” are unemployed, it is because “you” are lazy.

"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
• I forgot because of a brain fart.
• You forgot because you are incompetent.
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.
Actor /Observer bias

When I do this, I wasn’t paying attention, when you do it…

1. READ DIRECTIONS ON BOX
2. THROW BOX AWAY
3. PULL BOX OUT OF TRASH
   15 SECONDS LATER
4. REPEAT

Seriously, what’s wrong with me?!
**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!!!
Attributional biases and social perception

- Fundamental attributional error (FAE)
  - Just world belief (JWB) and blaming the victim
- Hindsight bias
- Self-serving bias and self-effacing bias
- Actor/Observer discrepancy (not in Hockenbury and Nolan)

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)?