

Is 'Attribution' Constructed Within and Throughout Discourse?

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Abstract

Attribution is defined simply as “the process of assigning a cause to our own behaviour and that of others” [1]. Attribution theory was a major focus in social psychology in the 1970's and as such the three main classic theories discussed are; The Naïve Scientist [2], Theory of Correspondence Inference [3] and Co-Variation Model [4]. These classic theories are interested in cognition and how people make dispositional and situational attributions. Thus, in essence, exploring whether they attribute the behaviour to a person's internal characteristics or the influence of the person's external situation. Contemporary theories have examined attribution from a different perspective. Theorists within critical social psychology have proposed discourse as an important factor, meaning that social influences and experiences have a significant influence when people are attributing cause. Marxist and feminist approaches have suggested that with the use of discourse, attribution can be manipulated for the benefit of those in power. The extent to which attribution is constructed within discourse, and implications this notion has within psychology more broadly, when applied, will be discussed.

Keywords: Attribution; Discourse; Correspondence Inference; Co-Variation

The Naïve Scientist

Fritz Heider, widely thought of as the founder of attribution research, proposed the 'Naïve Scientist' theory [2] suggesting people have a drive to look for cause and effect relationships in behaviours. He states the reasons behind this are to understand and predict the world as well as for self-justification purposes. His theory puts forward three principles behind why people make these attributions. Firstly, people believe that their own behaviour is motivated rather than random and therefore will also think that of others, meaning people look for the causal explanation in order to find the reason behind the behaviour. Secondly, people will construct these theories in order to predict their environment and gain control. Lastly, when making attributions, people will make a distinction between dispositional and situational causes (internal and external attributions). Notably, recent research has shown that individuals do appear to make distinctions between internal and external attributions when accounting for their criminal actions [5-7]. Heider found that there are a number of errors made when trying to understand the reasons behind behaviour through making these common sense theories. When looking at the behaviour of others, people tend to overemphasize the internal causes and often put the action down to a personality trait, overlooking the influence of the environment [8]. This became known as the fundamental attribution error. Opposing this, when looking at their own behaviour, people tend to overemphasize the situation rather than put cause on their own personality, resulting in the actor-observer bias. These ideas are comparable to the 'just world' hypothesis whereby there is an assumption that the world is fair, meaning good things happen to 'good' people and therefore 'bad' people are somehow responsible for the bad things happening to them [9]. This allows people to feel less vulnerable to the likelihood of negative actions towards themselves, as they do not believe they deserve it [10].

Correspondence Inference Theory and Co-Variation Model

The Theory of Correspondence Inference by Jones and Davis [3] “systematically accounts for a perceivers inferences about what an actor was trying to achieve by a particular action” [3]. This suggests that people make correspondence inferences based a preconceived impression of a person’s role, therefore if they act differently to what was expected of their role, the behaviour is attributed to something peculiar. There are a number of reasons that are likely to influence the making of a correspondence inference such as: if the behaviour was freely chosen by the person; if it was deemed socially undesirable; if it had a direct impact on the observer; if that impact was intended; or if it produced an uncommon effect.

Similar to Heider’s Naive Scientist, Kelley’s Co-Variation Model [4] suggests people act like scientists when trying to attribute cause to behaviours. This is concerned with self-perception and social perception, stating that attribution is made through three types of information:

- Consistency information (for example, whether an individual always does well in their exams, or only sometimes)
- Distinctiveness information (for example, whether an individual does well at everything, or just the exams)
- Consensus information (for example, whether everyone does well in the exams, or only the individual).

This theory is generally supported but a number of limitations have been raised. Like much early attribution research, support comes from experimental conditions. Cheng and Novick [11] found that when participants were asked to make attributions, the general logic of Kelley’s theory was followed. However, as findings were generated within an experimental setting, it raises the question of whether the data reflects real life and can therefore be generalized to the behaviour of a wider society. Recent research has displayed how in some domains within psychology, experimental research conducted with extremely low ecological validity may in fact not reflect genuine effects at all [12,13].

These classic theories suggest that attribution is made through an individualistic interpretation of the situation. In more contemporary research, Hepburn [14] has suggested criticism for the focus on individualism, method and theory. She put forward two major limitations in regards to the high influence of individualism in these theories: firstly, it produces a very narrow minded view when attempting to understand human behaviours and actions, meaning the findings will be distorted when related to society and secondly, the responsibility to change is left to the individual rather than action towards social structures meaning no change will be influenced. In regards to the methodology, as the majority of classic attribution studies are conducted in an experimental setting, they prove inadequate when applied to real human experience. Again, relating to the individualistic approach, it trivialises social issues affecting change [15]. Furthermore, the use of experiments makes for artificial data as it would provide similar data in different times and places rather than representing its time in society.

Contemporary Theory of Attribution

With an increase in critical social psychology research, alternative approaches to attribution have been suggested. Stainton Rogers [16] suggests the experimental approach to attribution has resulted in a focus on attributing cause to either the individual or the social situation, when realistically, the extent in which discourse influences attributions is drastically under estimated. For instance, it is unlikely that when looking at a particular behaviour, you will be able to attribute cause to just the individual or just the situation. It is much more likely that a range of explanations, such as context, previous experience, or aim of the interaction, will need to be taken into account. Stainton Rogers [16] explains this stating, “Critical theorists stress that attributions are never purely matters of individual social cognition, but always the product of complex cultural and social forces providing discursive resources within and through which attributions are made”. Through this contemporary view on attribution, the way it has been studied has been updated.

Discursive Action Model

One recent theory in critical social psychology is The Discursive Action Model (DAM), proposed by Edwards and Potter [17]. As stated above, this takes into account the whole range of explanations behind the particular behaviour. Rather than constructing an attribution based solely on an individual interpretation of an action, it considers the situation as a whole (this may also include factors such as past experience or future intentions). It suggests that language is used in a number of ways to attribute cause to a situation and supporting this, Potter and Wetherell [18] suggest placing emphasis in different areas in different social constructs can influence understanding (e.g. telling a story to a friend and then again to a parent). The DAM consists of three major principles of discourse: action, fact and interest and accountability:

- **Action:** Rather than a focus on cognition (as seen in the classic attribution theories) the DAM’s focus is on action. It suggests that attributions are not seen as perceptions or translations but rather discursive actions that are an important factor in social activities.
- **Fact and Interest:** This refers to how discursive devices are used to construct and display reports/descriptions as factual items in order to avoid a person’s personal investment in the account affecting the reliability or bias.
- **Accountability:** Looks at who or what caused the event originally, how accountable the current person is in the event or who is accountable for the occurrence.

One way that this model can be applied to the real world, would be in a courtroom setting. As accountability can be implied from descriptions being constructed [17,19,20] the accused and the victim will produce a description for the same event in an attempt to imply accountability to the opposing party. Drew [21] looked at courtroom dialogue from a rape trial and found that counsel used phrases such as ‘it’s where girls and fellas meet isn’t it?’ when questioning the victim to try and attribute blame to her, giving the implication that she herself could be held accountable for the rape as she placed herself into the situation by going to the bar. Something which research has found to be a common misconception [22-25].

Key Influences	Real Life Application	Description
Feminism	Discourse: A woman’s job is to: <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Stay at home and be a good wife • Look after her husband • Not talk to other men • Do as her husband says • Attribution: • A man should assert his power over a woman in order to maintain control 	Kelley (1980) states that that in order to assert male power and control over women, sexual violence is used as a way to produce fear and intimidation in their partners. The trivialisation of this oppression has resulted in acceptance of domestic violence and the promotion of rape culture.
Marxism	Discourse: People on benefits: <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Are lazy • Don’t want to get jobs • Will always be taking the tax payers money • Attribution: • Poor people don’t deserve benefits 	Marxism is interested in the theory and practice of class struggle (Gough and McFadden, 2001) Fundamental attribution error is often made when people live off benefits. It is common that the person will be victimised without taking into account any external factors that may be influencing their lifestyle (e.g. illness)
Post-Modern-ism	Discourse: Immigrants/Immigration: <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Spoiling our way of life • Steal our jobs and houses • Lazy/untrustworthy • Attribution: • Immigration needs restricting 	Edwards and Potter (1993) state that language is re-conceptualised as a social practice or action. As discourse has been defined as ‘a set of statements which construct an object’ (Parker, 1992) post modernism suggests that language can be used as a way to form negative attributions.

Table 1: Key Influences in Discursive Psychology.

Conclusion

In conclusion, more recent research into the effects of discourse in attribution have provided a deeper understanding into how we interpret the behaviours and actions of others. Classic attribution theories have provided a strong basis of experimental research which would be beneficial to build on using discursive psychology in order to apply the findings to the real world. As shown in the examples from key influences and recent research, discourse can be manipulated in attribution to benefit individuals in power. Attempts to deconstruct and counter such effects should therefore be the focus of future research and theorising in this arena.

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