SOCI 323
Social Psychology

Session 7 – Theories of Attribution

Lecturer: Dr. Peace Mamle Tetteh, Department of Sociology
Contact Information: ptetteh@ug.edu.gh

UNIVERSITY OF GHANA

College of Education
School of Continuing and Distance Education
2014/2015 – 2016/2017

Session Overview

- Human behavior does not occur in a vacuum. There would always be some explanation for why behavior occurs or does not occur. This session provides two Social Psychological theories that explain how we attribute cause(s) to behavior. We shall analyse critically the adequacy of these theories in explaining human behavior.

- At the end of the session, the student will be able to:
- Define social attribution
- Outline and explain the tenets of the correspondence inference theory of attribution
- explain the covariation model of attribution
- examine the extent to which a context affects the attributions we make.
- Explain the circumstances that would engender the use or non-use of these theories in the explanation of human behaviour

Session Outline

The key topics to be covered in the session are as follows:

- Definition of Attribution

- Correspondence Inference Theory

- Covariation Model of Attribution

- Context Effects on Attribution

- Circumstances that engender the use of Attribution theories in explaining Human Behaviour

- Sample Question

- Session Summary

- References

Reading List

- Read chapter three (3) of the required text and the article on session seven (7) posted on Sakai.

Topic One

DEFINING ATTRIBUTION

What is Attribution?

- Causal attribution is the construal process people use to explain both their own and others behavior (Gilovich et al, 2016)

- It is the process through which we seek to identify the causes of others behavior and so gain knowledge about their stable traits and dispositions. It is persons' perception of the reasons for others behavior.

- Our responses to other people depend on the attributions or inferences we make about their intentions and actions. If our attributions are correct, our responses will be appropriate.

Social Psychology

UNIVERSITY OF GHANA

Topic Two

CORRESPONDENCE INFERENCE THEORY

UNIVERSITY OF GHANA

Correspondence Inference Theory

- This theory describes how you can use others' behavior as a basis for inferring their stable dispositions (traits and characteristics).

- This is not simple to determine because sometimes peoples' overt behavior is not consistent with their nature (e.g. when people act under duress). Thus, the inferred trait might be biased.

- For instance, if you are forced to torture a prisoner lest you face the same plight, you might do it to escape being punished. If I judge you based on this and say you are wicked, I might be wrong because you acted under duress.

- To control such bias, correspondence inference theory indicates that you must consider some peculiar factors before making inference about another's behavior. These factors include non-common effects, social desirability and perceived choice.

Non-Common Effects

- This refers to outcomes that will not be produced by any other act or apparent cause.

- Thus, the question is whether there is some effect or outcome unique to the chosen behavior.

- Research indicates that behaviors with unique non common effects result in stronger inferences about an actor's dispositions than behaviors with common effects.

Perceived Social Desirability

- If there is a perceived social desirability to a behavior observed, it is more difficult to infer behavior because socially desirable behavior is thought to suggest more about the cultural norms of a group than the personality of individuals within the group

- On the other hand, the social undesirability or actions that are low in social desirability reveal more about a person's traits and characteristics.

- That is when people are willing to break from these norms to act in a certain way; such unexpected behavior demands an explanation.

UNIVERSITY OF GHANA

Freedom of Choice

- Behaviors that are a product of free choice tend to yield correspondent inferences whilst behaviors that are the result of constrained or limited choice do not.

- Thus we can make inferences about people only with the behaviors that are freely chosen and not those exhibited under coercion.

- Thus, peoples actions reflect underlying dispositional traits or make correspondent inferences when the actions are perceived to be (a) low in social desirability (b) be freely chosen and occurs by choice and (c) result in unique acts and yields distinctive non common effects

THE COVARIATION MODEL

The Covariation Model

- This is a principle or attribution theory which states that for something to be the cause of a particular behavior, it must be present when the behavior occurs and absent when it does not occur.

- The assumption underlying this principle is that cause and effect go together and a change in one affects the other. Simply, cause and effect **co-vary**.

- Attributions with this principle are made either to internal factors (the person), external factors (the object or the situation) or, a combination of both.

- Internal/external attributions are made based on an assessment of consensus, consistency and distinctiveness of the behavior of the individual

UNIVERSITY OF GHANA

Covariation Model: Consensus

- The extent to which others react <u>in the same way and manner</u> to some stimulus or event as the person you are observing.

- Thus, the extent to which the actions by one person are also shown by others.

Covariation Model:Consistency

- This refers to the extent to which a person reacts to the same stimulus or event in the same way on other occasions.

- Thus, the extent to which an individual responds to a given stimulus and situation in the same way on different occasions (that is, across time).

UNIVERSITY OF GHANA

Covariation Model: Distinctiveness

- This refers to the extent to which individuals react in the same manner to different stimulus or events at different times.

- Or the extent to which an individual responds in a similar manner to different stimuli or different situations.

Covariation Model: Conclusion

- The theory predicts that you are most likely to:

➤ attribute another person's behavior to internal causes when consensus and distinctiveness are low but consistency is high.

➤ make circumstance attribution and attributions to external causes when consensus, consistency and distinctiveness are all high.

- A mixed combination of these variables can lead to attributions to both internal and external factors

Topic Four

CONTEXT EFFECTS ON ATTRIBUTION

UNIVERSITY OF GHANA

Context Effects on Attribution

- Causal attributions do not occur in a vacuum. When attempting to identify the causes of others' behavior, we take into account, the context in which they occur.

- This suggests that in different contexts, the same behavior will be attributed to different causes. For example, you may have heard about the killing of some person. Will you give the same interpretation to this action if you got to know that (a) the killer just got released from a mental hospital; (b) The killer is a paid assassin (c) the killer was a jealous lover who acted out of rage and (d) the killer acted in self defense?

- The attributions you are likely to make would be based on these peculiar circumstances. Thus, sometimes context and background factors may be more important than consensus and consistency and distinctiveness.

The Discounting Principle

- Suppose you saw someone slap another, or you saw a husband beat his wife; at a glance you might conclude that s/he has a bad temper. But should you learn of something bad that the victim did, you might change your mind.

- The process and tendency to attach less importance to one potential cause of some behavior when other potential causes are also present is termed the **Discounting Principle** (subtraction rule).

- Thus, the principle suggests that the importance of any potential cause of a person's behavior is reduced (discounted) to the extent that other potential causes exist.

The Augmenting Principle

- This refers to the instance where behavior occurs in the presence of someone who is expected to inhibit such actions.

- Thus, when a factor that might facilitate a given behavior and the factor that might inhibit it both are present and the behavior occurs, we assign weight to the facilitating factor.

- This is so because even in the face of inhibitions that factor still caused the behavior.

- Thus, **AUGMENTING** is the tendency to attach greater importance to a potential cause of behavior if the behavior occurs despite the presence of other inhibitory causes. An example is assaulting your spouse in the presence of your in-laws, boss, or priest.

UNIVERSITY OF GHANA

When to make Causal Attributions

- Causal attribution is not a simple task. Hence when possible, people avoid such cognitive work and often quickly jump to conclusions about situations and peoples behavior.

- Thus, they rely on past experience (heuristics, stereotypes) to identify behavior that generally stems from internal and external forces. For example you generally assume and perceive that success is from internal causes (personal ability and effort;) whilst laughter is from external sources.

- Thus, people only bother with causal attribution when confronted with unexpected and unpleasant events. In other words individuals reserve their effort and cognitive ability only for unexpected behavior. Doing this makes one a **Cognitive Miser**.

UNIVERSITY OF GHANA

- Explain with illustrations, how the context influences the attribution process.

Session Summary

- In this session we sought to understand why people act they do or have done. The first theory by Jones and Davis, the correspondent inference theory explains that behavior can be explained if we observe certain aspects of a persons behavior. Behaviours that are freely chosen, low in social desirability and produce non-common effects are more reflective of who a person is. The reverse is true.

- Kelly's Covariation model explains that we can attribute cause ot others behavior by determining whether the behavior is from internal or external sources. To answer this question, we look at the factors of consensus, consistency and distinctiveness.

- The session also discussed how the context can influence the attributions we make-augmenting or discounting the explanations we give for others' behavior.

References

- Robert, B. and Branscombe, N. (2012). Social Psychology. 13th Edition. Pearson Education, Inc.

- Aronson, E., Wilson, T. & Akert, R. (2007) Social Psychology. 6th Edition. Pearson Education Inc.

- Aronson, E., Wilson, T. & Akert, R. (2010) Social Psychology. 7th Edition. Pearson Education Inc.

Social Psychology