A FIRST LOOK AT
COMMUNICATION THEORY

The following document is an **archived chapter**
from a previous edition of
A First Look at Communication Theory
by Em Griffin, the leading college text in the
field of communication theory
(all editions published by McGraw-Hill).

The theory is no longer covered in a full chapter of the current edition.

This document is posted on the resource website for the text
www.afirstlook.com

Attribution Theory

of Fritz Heider

My wife, Jean, served on a jury in a federal case involving conspiracy, racketeering, drug dealing, armed robbery, and extortion. The seven defendants were accused of being the lieutenants in the "Little Mafia" gang which terrorized a Chicago neighborhood. The gang leader had escaped from police custody and was on the FBI's most-wanted list.

The key government witness was an ex-gang member named Larry. Larry was called "the Canary" by the defendants because he turned informer. For two months Jean listened to the testimony and tried to figure out whether Larry's story was credible. Was his behavior on the witness stand that of a pathological liar, a rejected pal seeking revenge, a petty crook who would say anything to save his own skin, or an honest witness dedicated to the truth? Fritz Heider, the Austrian-born father of attribution theory, said that we all face the same task Jean confronted—trying to figure out personality from behavior.

Heider, who became a psychologist and taught at the University of Kansas, said that attribution is the process of drawing inferences. We see a person act and immediately reach conclusions that go beyond mere sensory information. Suppose Larry yawns while on the stand. Is he bored, afraid, tired, or indifferent? Jean will search for an explanation that makes sense to her. Heider would have seen her as a naive psychologist bringing common sense to bear on an interpersonal judgment. If he were crafting the theory today, he might well describe Jean and all of us as Judge Wapner stand-ins, rendering decisions in a people's court of everyday life.

We're constantly told we shouldn't judge others. Attribution theory says we can't help it. Like my wife, who had to listen to Larry's testimony for a week, we're inundated with sensory data, some of it contradictory. Faced with this information overload, we make personality judgments in order to explain otherwise confusing behavior. For example, although Jean had earlier thought Larry was a credible witness, she wondered why Larry yawned when describing how a gang member struck a victim on the head with a baseball bat. She made a snap judgment that he was callously indifferent to human suffering.

In addition to our need for clarity, there's another reason for making causal inferences from behavior. We want to know what to expect in the future. Prediction is a survival skill. During the third week of the trial, Jean came face-to-face with one of the defendants outside a train station. Mildly anxious, she quickly turned aside. Accurate attributions can help us know which people might do us harm.

ATTRIBUTION: A THREE-STEP PROCESS

Attribution is a three-step process through which we perceive others as causal agents. Suppose you are stopped at a red light, and the driver in the car ahead flips an empty soda can into the gutter. Before the light turns green, you mutter the three thoughts that cross your mind:

I saw that! (Perception of the action)

You meant to do that! (Judgment of intention)

You're a slob! (Attribution of disposition)

The process of attribution is diagramed in Figure 11.1. I visited the courtroom the day ex-gang member Larry described the baseball bat attack, so I'll use my reactions to illustrate Heider's chain of causal inference. Jean experienced her own attributional sequence as she heard the testimony that day. Since her private world differs from mine, however, I can write with certainty only about one person's experience—my own.
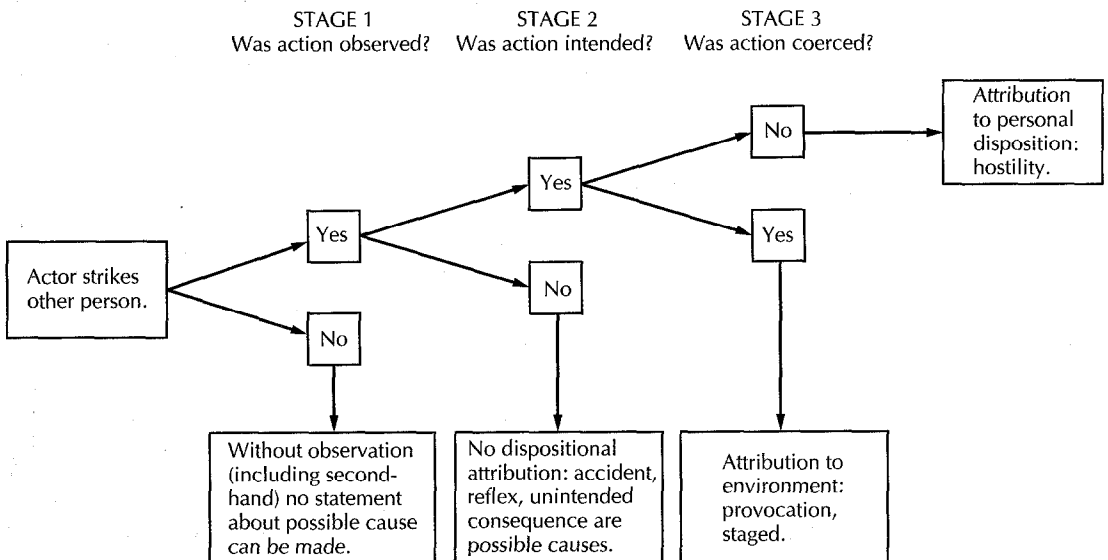

FIGURE 11.1
The Process of Attribution (From Shaver, *An Introduction to Attribution Processes.*)

Step 1: Perception of the Action

The courtroom was on the twenty-first floor of the Federal Building. A well-dressed, handsome man carrying a bag of donuts dashed toward the elevator just as the doors were closing. I slapped my hand against the breaker bar to hold the car, receiving enthusiastic words of thanks and the offer of a donut. We traded a few friendly comments until we got off at the same floor. It turned out we were both headed for the south courtroom. A few minutes later I learned that his name was Brian, and I also heard testimony of how he used a Louisville Slugger to beat up a cocaine addict who hadn't paid for his drug.

Was Brian observed? Yes, Larry was an eyewitness and gave an account of the act. My perception was secondhand through Larry's description, but Jean had told me the night before that she thought Larry was a credible witness. My vicarious observation of the scene triggered the start of the attribution chain. If I hadn't heard the story, the process would never have started.

I'm sure that my perception of the action was subject to all the biases listed in the introduction to this section. It was initially difficult to picture such a brutal act performed by Brian because that contradicted my initial image of a generous, joking Brian. This first impression, which was formed on the elevator, was one of warmth, a trait that casts a halo over all other qualities.

I like to think of myself as a good judge of character, so my continuing desire to see Brian in a favorable light could well have compromised the integrity of my courtroom listening. That's why jurors are excused "for cause" when personal motivation prevents their being impartial. Despite these biases, the new information crashed into my world and I moved to the second stage of causal attribution.

Step 2: Judgment of Intention

Since Larry's words convinced me that Brian was present when the man was struck with a bat, the next question was, To what extent had Brian wanted it done? That may sound like a strange way to ask the question, but Heider didn't consider intention as an either-or matter. He identified five sliding scale positions of personal causation. We can see these gradations reflected in the American legal code. Suppose for a moment that the victim had died. Our judgment of intention could place the killing blow into five different categories before the law.[1]

1. Association. Despite the testimony, maybe Brian didn't direct the attack, swing the bat, or even know the man who did. He was merely in the vicinity at the time. Chance proximity is no reason to assign causality. We hope we are past the stage of killing the messenger who brings bad news. To impute guilt by association would be irrational. Not guilty.

2. Causality.   Perhaps the event took place at a sandlot baseball game. Brian took a mighty swing at a pitch that fooled him, and the bat slipped out of his hands, striking the unlucky fellow standing forty feet away in foul territory. It's true that Brian's hand was the ultimate cause of death, but he had no motive or desire to do harm, and that is what a coroner's jury would rule. Accidental death.

3. Justifiability.   Suppose the event took place in Brian's apartment. Returning from work, Brian surprised an intruder who came at him with a knife. Brian grabbed the bat, which was propped in the corner, and swung it to protect himself. Some might wonder about excessive force, but most people would see it as self-defense. Justifiable homicide.

4. Foreseeability.   Picture Brian trying to hit fly balls to a group of friends in a crowded park. It's a dangerous game from the start. Angry at his inability to get the ball in the air, he impulsively flings the bat aside, blindsiding a man playing with his children nearby. That would be reckless homicide. Brian might honestly claim that he never meant to hurt anybody, but the law would regard him as responsible for the outcome of his careless act. Manslaughter.

5. Intentionality.   None of the scenarios above captures the purposeful nature of the attack Larry described. I saw Brian as the sole cause of the attack and was convinced he meant to destroy. The police would label it "premeditated homicide." We'd call it murder.

Common Biases in Judging Intention

Because I'm illustrating attribution theory in a courtroom setting, I've cast judgment of intention in legal terms. But Heider emphasized that the issue transcends accountability before the law. We're really dealing with moral culpability—perceived responsibility in the court of public opinion. When we judge another's motives, we move past Sergeant Joe Friday's dispassionate "Just the facts, ma'am," and enter the realm of values, "shoulds," and "oughts." It's easy for bias to shade our judgment. Three volumes of attribution research edited by Harvey, Ickes, and Kidd verify the human tendencies described in Heider's original work.[2]

1. We tend to hold others more responsible for negative results than for positive outcomes. If the first-year student who sits next to us in class flunks a test, he's stupid. If he aces it, we're more likely to think he's lucky.

2. We tend to hold others more responsible for not trying than for incompetence. It's worse to be lazy than to lack ability.

3. We tend to hold others more responsible when they aim to improve their position rather than avoid loss. For example, we judge more

The book contains a cartoon at this place.
Permission to reproduce the cartoon
was granted for the original publication only and
does not include reproduction on the World Wide Web.

harshly a hungry person who steals food than we do a well-fed person who won't willingly share it.

4. We tend to hold others more responsible for their outcomes when we fear the same thing may happen to us. A veteran skydiver haughtily claimed that anyone who "bounced" got what he or she deserved. The skydiver used defensive attribution as reassurance that death by sudden impact always happens to someone else.

5. We tend to hold others more responsible than we hold ourselves. Apparently, we use a double standard as we decide who should be held accountable for mistakes and errors. When things turn out badly for others, we assume it's their fault; but for our own failures, we tend to blame circumstances or other people. We see others as causal agents, but we give ourselves an excuse.

All our biased judgments involve a decision between personal and environmental control. This tension is a crucial ingredient in the third step of attribution. Having taken notice of Brian's aggressive action and believing that it was an unprovoked and wanton attack with malicious intent, I'm now in a position to make a dispositional attribution.

Step 3: Attribution of Disposition

Heider defined attribution as an effort to "predict and control the world by assigning transient behavior to relatively unchanging dispositions."[3] You can

see that process in my train of thought as I heard the testimony about the assault:

> That was a brutal attack. Brian's a brute! I can't imagine bashing someone over the head when they haven't done anything to hurt me. I wonder if he's insane. No, there was nothing crazy about how he acted on the elevator. And there wasn't any pressure from the gang leader to do the job. Brian offered to work the guy over for $500, yet he didn't even need the money. No doubt about it; he's a brute and he'll probably be violent again.

Note how quickly I jumped from behavior to disposition. I assumed that people who *do* things like that *are* like that. Heider said that's typical. As naive psychologists, we constantly assess how much an action is due to personality as opposed to environmental pressure. When judging others, our tendency is to discount external factors and put our thumb on the character side of the scale.

ATTRIBUTIONS DEPEND ON PERCEIVED FREEDOM OF CHOICE

The key issue is choice. If we see others as compelled to act as a result of circumstances beyond their control, we won't assign their behavior to enduring traits of character. I tried to consider the possibility that Brian was driven by madness, coerced by his boss, or forced to the act by financial need. These mitigating circumstances would short-circuit the attributional chain. But I couldn't find any outside explanation which would account for the severity of the action.

Heider stated that we judge an actor's freedom as proportional to the difficulty of performing the act. It's not easy to crack someone's skull. It takes tremendous desire and exertion to lay waste the human head. Being face-to-face with the victim makes it even harder. (Dante condemned the designer of the catapult to an inner circle of Hell. By giving a warrior a means to achieve death without having a visual link to the victim, the inventor made killing easier.[4]) Since Brian performed this difficult task with apparent ease, I considered him as having true choice, his act free of constraint. I therefore attributed to Brian a cluster of personality traits and attitudes consistent with volitional violence. My conclusion: Brian is a hardened criminal.

Don't be surprised that I ended up explaining Brian's behavior by the type of person he is rather than by the circumstances surrounding the attack. None of us is immune from the bias that Stanford psychologist Lee Ross calls the "fundamental attribution error."[5] It is the tendency for observers to underestimate situational influences and overestimate dispositional influences upon behavior. Whether it's a police officer's callous reaction that the rape victim was "asking for it," the football coach's analysis that a player missed a tackle because he didn't try hard enough, or parents' assumption that the crumpled fender on the family car is due to their son's carelessness, we assume that people are responsible for the things that happen to them.

This extended account of judgment may give you the impression that attribution is a prolonged, conscious deliberation which takes place only in formal settings of guilt or innocence. Not so. Causal inferences are usually subconscious snap judgments made whenever we see others in action. Our judgments deal with praise as well as blame. Heider's theory has generated thousands of studies that blanket the map of interpersonal relations. One of the fascinating extensions of the theory is the work of Cornell University psychologist Daryl Bem, who is interested in the way we look at our own actions.

SELF-PERCEPTION: A SPECIAL CASE OF ATTRIBUTION

Bem is concerned with the dispositional labels we assign to ourselves. He claims we don't have favored status when it comes to figuring out our own prevailing moods. Our weak internal signals may give clues to our attitudes or emotions, but behavior is the acid test that confirms or rejects our intuition. So we watch ourselves act and then draw conclusions about our inner disposition just like outside observers do.

Conventional wisdom suggests that behavior follows attitude: "I play tennis because I like it." Bem's radical behaviorism says it works the other way around: "I like tennis because I play it." Later in the book we'll see that cognitive dissonance theory also predicts that actions precede attitude, but Bem explains the sequence on the basis of self-perception. We see ourselves put a dollar in a beggar's cup and decide that we are compassionate.

Emotions work the same way. You might think it's safe to assume that a fellow knows when he is sexually aroused. Not necessarily, according to Bem. He cites a study by Stuart Valins, a research psychologist at the State University of New York (SUNY) at Stony Brook. College men were wired with fake electrodes that supposedly picked up their heartbeat and amplified it through a speaker for them to hear. The experimenter occasionally varied the bogus biofeedback as the males looked at pictures of nude women. The men reported being most "turned on" by the photos that were associated with a change in heartbeat.

Some cynic has suggested that love is a feeling you feel you're feeling when you feel you're feeling a feeling. The statement is consistent with Bem's description of self-attribution. We aren't sure what we feel, so we look to behavioral clues to fill in the gaps. "It must be love cuz my heart skipped a beat."

CRITIQUE: RENDERING A VERDICT

Heider suggested that people systematically evaluate causes of behavior in a commonsense search to understand why things happen. If Heider was right, however, some of the jurors Jean was with failed to get the message. After ten days of bickering, nine were convinced of the defendants' guilt; three saw

them as innocent. One jury member chose to ignore all the evidence, relying instead on a gut feeling that the men were innocent. In reaction to this member's stubborn refusal to discuss wiretap recordings, another juror lay on the floor for days and wouldn't discuss anything.

The jury's bizarre behavior illustrates a serious weakness in Heider's case. Like Mead's symbolic interactionism (see Chapter 9), attribution theory stresses human rationality and ignores the role of emotion. Heider described the process as one of making "causal inferences," but are we the detached observers of the human scene that the phrase suggests? It may be more accurate to describe the attribution process as "jumping to conclusions." And Heider's naive psychologists might be more correctly labeled "self-serving perverters of the truth."

Just as Jean and the other jurors had to decide whether to believe the testimony of Larry the Canary, so you and I must render a verdict on the validity and usefulness of attribution theory. A vote to reject means we still need to find a way to explain our quick judgments of personality based on behavior. But if we find Heider's attribution principles to be true beyond a reasonable doubt, sheer human decency requires us to resist some of the built-in biases that tilt our perceptions.

The chief culprit is our consistent tendency to assume that other people are the sole cause of their actions, that they are free to move in any direction they want. In the absence of overwhelming evidence to the contrary, we'd be much closer to the truth if we viewed others as enclosed in a maze of environmental constraints. Most people on welfare aren't poor because they're too lazy to work. Pilot error is only part of the story in airplane accidents. There are times when others really can't help being late. In short, other people's lives are just as complicated as ours.

In spite of its questionable ability to deal with the passionate side of relationships, attribution theory provides a helpful analysis of the way we parcel out praise or blame. It has stimulated thousands of research studies that investigate the way people interpret the behavior they see. The last two articles suggested in A Second Look attempt to explain the apparent irrational behavior of jurors. Heider's ideas may not be perfect, but as the theory itself suggests, few objects of our judgment are as good or as bad as we want to give them credit for being.

QUESTIONS TO SHARPEN YOUR FOCUS

1. What happens when we *observe* an action but decide that the other person had no *intention* to do it?

2. Tracy's coffee ends up all over Lacy's new shirt. Before you jump to the conclusion that Lacy is a slob, can you construct a scenario for the five categories of causation—*association, causality, justifiability, foreseeability, intentionality*?

3. What steps could you take to make certain that you don't commit the *fundamental attribution error?*

4. According to attribution theory, what is it that we *attribute* to other people?

A SECOND LOOK

Recommended resource: Kelly G. Shaver, *An Introduction to Attribution Processes*, Lawrence Erlbaum Associates, Hillsdale, N.J., 1983.

Original conception: Fritz Heider, "Social Perception and Phenomenal Causality," *Psychological Review*, Vol. 51, 1944, pp. 358–374.

Fuller development: Fritz Heider, *The Psychology of Interpersonal Relations*, John Wiley & Sons, New York, 1958.

Fundamental attribution error: L. D. Ross, "The Intuitive Psychologist and His Shortcomings: Distortions in the Attribution Process," in *Advances in Experimental Social Psychology*, Vol. 10, Leonard Berkowitz (ed.), Academic Press, New York, 1977, pp. 173–220.

Relational attributions: John H. Harvey, Terri L. Orbuch, and Ann L. Weber (eds.), *Attributions, Accounts, and Close Relationships*, Springer-Verlag, New York, 1992.

Alternative approach to person perception: Mary K. Babcock, "The Dramaturgic Perspective: Implication for the Study of Person Perception," *European Journal of Social Psychology*, Vol. 19, 1989, pp. 297–309.

Self-perception principle: Daryl Bem, "Self-Perception Theory," in *Advances in Experimental Social Psychology*, Vol. 6, Leonard Berkowitz (ed.), Academic Press, New York, 1972, pp. 2–62.

Heartbeat study: S. Valins, "Cognitive Effects of False Heart-Rate Feedback," *Journal of Personality and Social Psychology*, Vol. 4, 1966, pp. 400–408.

Research updates: J. H. Harvey, W. Ickes, and R. F. Kidd (eds.), *New Directions in Attribution Research*, Vols. 1–3, Lawrence Erlbaum Associates, Hillsdale, N.J., 1976, 1978, 1981.

Further extensions: J. H. Harvey and Gifford Weary (eds.), *Attribution: Basic Issues and Applications*, Academic Press, San Diego, 1985.

Jury psychology: Gerald Miller, "Social Cognition, the Unwanted Juror?" in *Social Cognition and Communication*, Michael Roloff and Charles Berger (eds.), Sage, Beverly Hills, Calif., 1982, pp. 227–254.

Jury simulation research: Wayne Weiten and Shari S. Diamond, "A Critical Review of the Jury Simulation Paradigm: The Case of Defendant Characteristics," *Law and Human Behavior*, Vol. 3, 1979, pp. 71–93.

1 M. E. Shaw and J. L. Sulzer, "An Empirical Test of Heider's Levels in Attribution of Responsibility," *Journal of Abnormal and Social Psychology*, Vol. 69, 1964, pp. 39–46.
2 J. H. Harvey, W. Ickes, and R. F. Kidd (eds.), *New Directions in Attribution Research*, Vols. 1–3, Lawrence Erlbaum Associates, Hillsdale, N.J., 1976, 1978, 1981.
3 Fritz Heider, *The Psychology of Interpersonal Relations*, John Wiley & Sons, New York, 1958, p. 79.
4 Dionysius the Elder, 330–367 B.C. He perfected the catapult in sieges of Italian cities (Ralph Payne-Gallwey, *The Projectile-Throwing Engines of the Ancients*, Rowman and Littlefield, Totowa, N.J., 1973, p. 5). Dante places the "tyrant of Syracuse" in the seventh circle of Hell, submerged in a stream of boiling blood (Dante Alighieri, *The Divine Comedy: Inferno*, Canto XII:107).
5 Lee Ross, "The Intuitive Psychologist and His Shortcomings: Distortions in the Attribution Process," in *Advances in Experimental Social Psychology*, Vol. 10, Leonard Berkowitz (ed.), Academic Press, New York, 1977, p. 184.