Part I: Understanding Others — Social Perception and Attribution

By: Curtis Peterson, PhD

Full Transcript

[00:00 – 00:13]

(Upbeat acoustic-electronic introductory music plays)

Host:

"Hello everyone, and welcome back to uh our podcast. And this time, we're going to continue our conversations about social psychology by focusing on social perceptions and attitudes. Really, what we want to understand is the people around us.

Throughout this section of the course and series of podcasts, we've been exploring how other people, social groups, and our social environment influence our thoughts, feelings, and behavior. Today, we're going to turn our attention to how we perceive other people and how we develop explanations for their behaviors.

I want to begin by having you think about someone you recently met. Perhaps it was someone at school, at work, or a social gathering. How long did it take you to develop an impression that of that person? Did one immediately decide whether they were friendly, trustworthy, confident, nervous, or someone you want to enjoy spending time with? What information did you use to make that determination? More importantly, how did you know your impression was accurate?

One of the fascinating aspects of human psychology is that we are constantly developing explanations about the people around us, often with remarkable little information. These explanations subsequently influence how we interact with others, the relationships we develop, and even the opportunities we provide to other people. Social psychologists refer to these processes as social perceptions and attributions.

So let's first begin with first impressions and concepts of nonverbal behavior. Human beings are remarkably efficient at forming first impressions. We observe how someone speaks, how they move, their facial expressions, their tone of voice, and how they interact with other people. Social psychologists

have studied what we call as the thin slice of behavior. This refers to our ability to develop impressions based on relatively brief observations of another person.

In classic studies conducted by Ambady and Rosenthal in the 1990s, participants observed short video clips of college instructors. Interestingly, the impressions formed from these brief observations were associated with evaluations provided by students who had spent an entire semester with those instruct—instructors. What makes this research interesting is that we appear to be capable of gathering considerable social information in a relatively short period of time.

However, there is an important distinction between forming an impression quickly and having other people agree with that impression, a—forming an accurate impression. Imagine several students observe an instructor who speaks quietly, rarely makes direct eye contact, and doesn't use many hand gestures. Those students might collectively conclude that the instructor lacks confidence.

I think about this when doing Zoom teaching, and having Zoom and the video's off, you don't see the instructor, you see these slides, and they go through them, and it can create this idea: is the instructor really uh confident and appear to have some type of expertise in that, or are they just reading the slides in a blah way?

But let's go back to the agreement between the students in this situation. Does their agreement establish that the instructor actually lacks confidence? And we probably should say, not necessarily. They may simply share similar cultural expectations regarding how a confident people are supposed to behave. Indeed, contemporary research encourages us to be considerably more cautious in interpreting nonverbal behavior than early psychological research sometimes suggests.

In a comprehensive review, for example, that was published in 2019 by Lisa Barrett and her colleagues, what examined the relationship between facial movement and emotional experiences. And what they found is considerable variability in how emotions are expressed and interpreted across people, situations, and cultures. A smile may communicate happiness, but we have found that it may also communicate things like nervousness, embarrassment, politeness, or an effort to reduce interpersonal tension. Someone who appears angry may actually be concentrating, experiencing physical

discomfort, or responding to something entirely un-related to the person's observing them.

The important point is that nonverbal behaviors provide us with information, but it does not necessarily provide us with explanation. Culture and interpretation of behavior.

This becomes particularly important when we begin interacting with people from different cultural backgrounds. Consider something as seemingly simple as eye contact. In some cultures environments, children are taught that maintaining eye contact communicates honesty, confidence, and respect. A parent might tell a child, 'Look at me when I'm speaking to you.' How in other cultural environments, particularly with certain relationships involving elders and authority figures, prolonged direct eye contact may be interpreted as confrontational and, in some contexts, disrespectful.

Imagine an instructor who interprets a student's limited eye contact as a lack of interest, when the student believes they are communicating respectfully towards the instructor. The same observable behavior can have substantially different meaning depending on the culture and the relational environment.

We also need to recognize that no cultural community is completely homogeneous, meaning similar and having the same attitudes, beliefs, and ideas and emotions. For example, we've mentioned this many times, we can't assume that every Native American student, and to an extension of that, every European American student or Asian student interprets non-behaviors in the same way. Cultural knowledge should encourage us to consider additional possibilities, rather than providing us with another set of stereotypes.

For example, a systematic study in 2025 examined 105 studies on cultural differences in facial emotional perceptions, and they identified multiple mechanisms through which culture influences how we interpret emotional information. These include learned expectations about emotional expression, attention to surrounding circumstances, and how our relationships are with social groups. What we perceive is influenced not only by another what another person does, but us a-also by what our cultural and social uh expectations have taught us about behavioral meaning."

[04:26 – 04:31]

(Brief musical transition)

Host:

"What we have been discussing brings us as to one of the most central topics in social psychology, which is attribution theories. An attribution is an express-explanation we develop regarding why an event occurred and why someone behaved in a particularly way.

Traditionally, social psychologists have distinguished between two two general categories of attributions. The first is dispositional attributions, sometimes referred to as internal attributions, which explains behaviors through characteristics of the person. These might include their personality, motivation, abilities, or or intentions, or emotional states. A situational attribution, sometimes referred to as external attribution, explains behavior through the circumstances or environment in which the behavior occurred.

Imagine that a student arrives thirty minutes late to class. If I conclude that the student is irresponsible or does not care about their education, I'm developing a dispositional attribution. However, if I consider the student may be experiencing transportation difficulties, family responsibilities, or an unexpected situation at work, I am considering their situational attribution.

However, now, either explanation could potentially be accurate. The problem occurs when we become confident in our explanation without having sufficient information. Think back to Kurt Lewin's conceptualization of behavior as a function of the person and their environment. Lewin was encouraging psychologists to stop treating the individual and the environment as entirely separate explanations for behaviors. A person's behavior emerges through the relationships between individual circumstance characteristics and the psychological environment in which the person is functioning.

Now this leads us to an important question: How can we develop better attributions? Social psychologist Harold Kelley proposed that we can improve our explanation of behavior by considering three types of information: consensus, distinctiveness, and consistency.

Consensus refers to whether other people respond similarly under comparable circumstances. Distinctiveness refers to whether the individual behaves this way specifically with one situation or across multiple situations.

Consisten-consistency, on the other hand, refers to whether the individual responds similarly to the same situation over time.

So imagine that a student performs poorly on an examination, for example. Did most students perform pur-poorly? That's one question. If so, perhaps something about the examination contributed to the outcome if all or the majority of students performed poorly. Does this particular student perform poorly across all their courses, or only in this particular course? And thirdly, is this a consistent pattern, or is this an unusual for the student to perform poorly? Each additional piece of information allows us to develop a more informed explanation. Rather than immediately assigning a personality characteristic to someone, we begin invested-investigating the condition under which the behavior has occurred."

[06:35 – 06:40]

(Brief acoustic guitar interlude)

Host:

"So I'd like to give us a minute to maybe do a reflection activity. Uh I'm calling this activity 'What do you actually know?' And in this activity, what I would like you to do is think about a time when someone did something that frustrated you. Perhaps someone failed to respond to a text message, canceled plans, arrived late, didn't acknowledge you when you entered the room.

I want you to think, what explanation did you initially develop? Now try to identify maybe three alternatives that explain their behavior. This could involve their personal circumstances, their relationships, their emotional state, or even cultural difference differences. Finally, ask yourself which of these explanations you actually have evidence to support. Take a moment to reflect on this before continuing."

[07:16 – 07:42]

(Gentle ambient reflection music plays)

Host:

"One thing you may have discovered is that they're that you were initially much more confident in your explanation than the available information

justified. And this brings us to our next topic, which is the fundamental attribution error.

Social psychologists have historically described our tendency to overemphasize personal characteristics while underestimating situational influences as the fundamental attribution error. For example, if we observe a cashier who is unusually short with customers, we may immediately conclude that the cashier is rude. We probably do not know whether the cashier has been working for ten hours, has re-recently experienced family crisis, or has been dealing with hostile customers throughout the day. The person is directly in front of us; the circumstances contributing to their behavior may be largely invisible.

However, the fundamental attribution error is not necessarily a fundamental or useful as the name might might suggest. Cross-cultural research, including the work of Joan Miller and subsequent researchers, has demonstrated that people from different cultural environments may differ in how much emphasis they place on personal characteristics versus social relationships and contextual circumstances.

In cultural environments that emphasize individual autonomy and personal achievement, people may be particularly attentive to individual motivations and personality characteristics. In cultural environments where social relationships, family obligations, and interdependence are strongly emphasized, people may be more attentive to the circumstances and the relationships surrounding the individual's behaviors.

These are general tendencies rather than fixed cultural characteristics, however. Even within the same individual, attributional processes can change depending on the circumstances, again going back to Lewin's equation. You may develop a different explanation for the behavior of a close family man-member than you would for a stranger who engages in the exact same behavior. You know more about the family member's circumstances, experiences, and responsibilities. You may therefore have access to information that allows you to develop a more contextual explanation.

Some contemporary research have also questioned whether every dispositional inference made under situational constraints necessarily represents an error. For example, Walker, Smith, and Vul, in research published in 2022, reconsidered some of the assumptions underlying this corresponding bias. The lesson here is not dispositional explanations are

inherently wrong; it is that our conclusions should be proportional to the evidence available to us."

[09:02 – 09:05]

(Soft musical chime)

Host:

"Another historical influence influential concept is the actor-observer bias. The traditional explanation poses that we explain our own behaviors, we tend to emphasize our circumstances, where when we explain another person's behavior, we tend to emphasize their personal characteristics.

So in this example, imagine two drivers who arrive late to work. When another person arrives late, you might conclude that they're irresponsible. However, when you arrive late, you might explain the traffic was particularly heavy. The traditional actor-observer hypothesis provides an intuitively appealing explanation for these differences. However, this is also an ex-excellent example of how psychological science changes as additional research becomes available.

For example, in 2006, social psychologist Bertram Malle uh conducted a meta-analysis—and remember a meta-analysis is when we take all this these research studies and statistically uh push them together to see if there's any observable effects. They took 173 studies examining the actor-observer hypothesis. Interestingly, according across these studies, the traditional distinction received very little overall empirical support.

Indeed, subsequent research has provided a very more nuanced explanation. When explaining our own behavior, we generally have greater access to our intentions, beliefs, motivations, and personal characteristics. When explaining someone else's behavior, we must infer much of that information. We therefore working with different sets of information. This does not mean our explanation of our own behaviors are always accurate. We can misunderstand our own motivations, selectively remember events, and develop explanations to protect our own self-esteem. What contemporary attribution research encourages to recognize is that explaining human behavior is considerably more complicated than simply dividing explanations into internal versus external causes."

[10:17 – 10:20]

(Gentle melodic beat transition)

Host:

"Our last attributional process is what's known as the just-world hypothesis, which was introduced by social psychologist Melvin Lerner, uh who described it as belief in a just world. People often have psychological motivation to believe that the world is predictable and reasonably fair. We want to believe that good things happen to people who make good decisions, and negative outcomes can be avoided by making appropriate choices. While this belief may provide a sense of stability, it can also result in problematic interpretation of other people's experience.

So imagine someone who is, for example, experiencing homelessness. An observer may immediately conclude that the individual made irresponsible financial decisions, failed to work hard enough, or engaged in behavior that caused their circumstances. Such explanations may ignore things like housing cost, employment opportunity, disability, family serv-circumstances, discrimination, or other environmental conditions.

By attributing another person's suffering entire entirely on their personal characteristics, we may psychologically reassure ourselves that the same outcome could never happen to us. However, this reassurance comes with a cost. It can reduce our willingness to understand or assist people experiencing difficult circum-net-stances.

Now, this does not mean that personal decisions have no influence on life outcomes. Rather, the psychological explanation must account for the interactions between the individual's decisions and the opportunity, resources, and constraints present within the person's environment.

When I reflect on the just-world hypothesis, I think about the tendency to do victim blaming. When an individual who has been severely abused by someone, we have a tendency to look at what the victim did, how did they put them in that situation, because in a just world, that shouldn't happen to good people like me. And so, a real-world example of this is when we see someone who has been severely victimized, and we instantly start thinking about what did they do to put themselves in a situation, and we try to make that psychological distance between them and us.

Another interesting aspect of this is how we also then have a tendency to glorify or justify perpetration, because we go back to what the victim does, but then we have to psychologically ded-make a difference between us and the offender. So we're trying to make those characteristic distinctions in order to make ourself feel psychologically safe.

So, as we conclude today's discussions, I want you to think about the distinction between observing behavior and explaining behavior. Observing that someone arrived late, for example, is different from concluding that they are irresponsible. Observing someone avoids contact—eye contact—is different from concluding that they are dishonest. Again, observing someone is experience difficult circumstances is different from concluding that they caused those circumstances.

Our explanations influence how we treat people, and how we treat people subsequently influences the experiences within our social environment. This is particularly important in education, healthcare, counseling, the workplace, and even within our own interpersonal relationships.

Before developing a conclusion about another person, consider asking yourself these three questions:

1. What did I observe—actually observe?
2. What explanations have I developed?
3. And what addif-additional information might change that explanation?

And one of the most valuable skills psychology can teach us is the ability to recognize the difference between what we know and what we have assumed.

And so, in the next podcast, we will turn our attention towards ourselves as we explore attitudes, how those attitudes develop, and why our behaviors do not always reflect our attitudes, and how other people's attempts to change them.

Thank you for listening, and I look forward to continuing our discussion."

[12:24 – 14:14] Outro Theme Song