

## Topic 4.1

# Attribution Theory and Person Perception

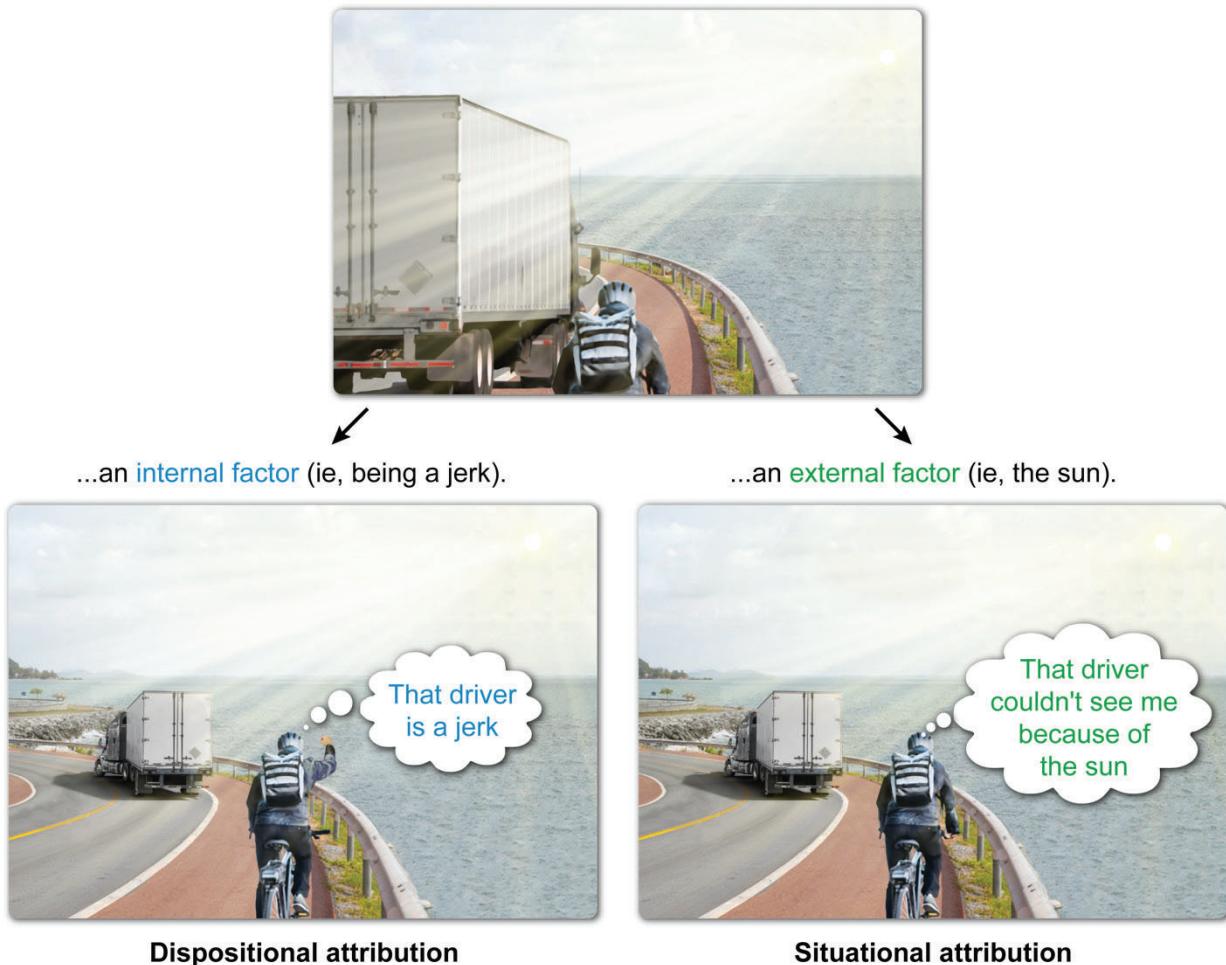
## 4.1.01 Attributions

### [ 4.1.A.1 ]

Attribution theory states that individuals assign reasons (ie, attributions) for behavior. Often, these attributions are either internal (ie, **dispositional**) or external (ie, **situational**). For example, one could blame getting cut off in traffic on internal factors (eg, "that driver is a jerk") or external factors (eg, "that driver couldn't see me because of the sun") (Figure 4.1).

Attributions can be **internal** (ie, dispositional) or **external** (ie, situational).

For example, a truck driver cuts off a cyclist (behavior) and the cyclist attributes the truck driver's behavior to...



**Figure 4.1** Situational versus dispositional attribution example.

## 4.1.02 Explanatory Styles

[ 4.1.A.2 ]

An **explanatory style** describes the pattern of how an individual tends to assign reasons (ie, attributions) for events.

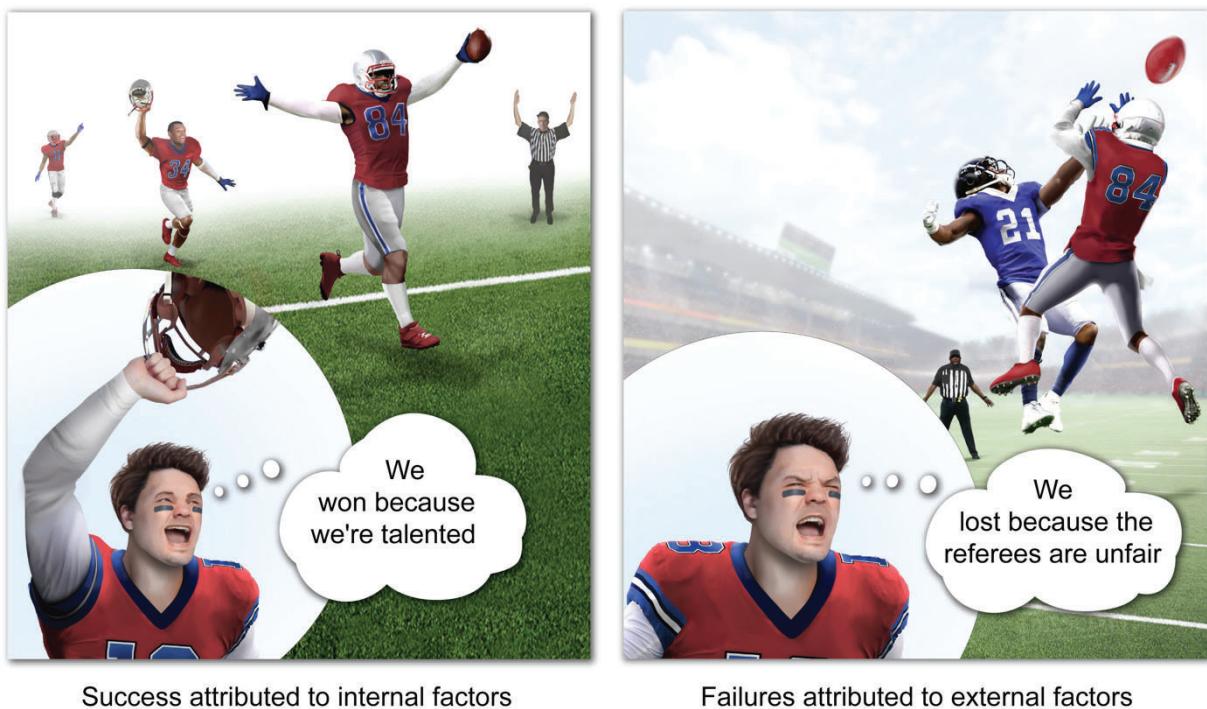
Consider the example of a student who fails a psychology test. A student with an optimistic explanatory style might view the failure as indicative of an "opportunity to improve," whereas a student with a pessimistic explanatory style might view that failure as evidence that they are "terrible at psychology."

## 4.1.03 Attributional Biases

[ 4.1.A.3 ]

Attributional biases are common cognitive biases that may occur when individuals assign attributions (see Sub-Topic 4.1.01).

For example, **self-serving bias** occurs when one's own success is attributed to internal factors (eg, winning because of talent), whereas one's own failure is attributed to external factors (eg, losing because of unfair refereeing) (Figure 4.2).



**Figure 4.2** Example of self-serving bias.

The **fundamental attribution error** occurs when an individual assumes that someone else's behavior is the result of internal (ie, dispositional) rather than external (ie, situational) factors. For example, a soccer player decides that another player's behavior (eg, committing a foul) was caused by temperament (eg, rudeness), an internal factor (Figure 4.3).

The fundamental attribution error is the assumption that someone else's behavior is the result of **internal (ie, dispositional) factors** rather than **external (ie, situational) factors**.



**Figure 4.3** Fundamental attribution error example.

Another attributional bias, **actor-observer bias** (Figure 4.4), occurs when an individual attributes another person's behavior (eg, cutting someone off in traffic) to internal factors (eg, "that person is a jerk") while attributing one's own behavior to external factors (eg, "I am running late").

For example, when an individual is cut off in traffic by another driver (ie, another person's behavior)...



...the individual assumes the other driver is a jerk (ie, internal factor).

However, when the individual cuts off another driver in traffic (ie, own behavior)...



...the individual attributes his own behavior to running late (ie, external factor).

**Figure 4.4** Example of actor-observer bias.

An attribution error called the **halo effect** occurs when an individual attributes additional positive qualities (eg, intelligence) to a person with one positive quality (eg, physical attractiveness).

For example, when research participants were shown photographs of attractive and unattractive individuals and asked to choose which person was more intelligent, they tended to judge the attractive individuals as more intelligent than the unattractive individuals.

#### 4.1.04 Locus of Control

[ 4.1.B ]

**Locus of control (LOC)** refers to an individual's beliefs about who or what controls the outcome of an event or situation.

Individuals with an **internal LOC** believe that outcomes (eg, college admission) are due to factors within their control, such as their own behaviors (eg, maintaining good grades and attendance).

In contrast, individuals with an **external LOC** believe that outcomes (eg, college admission) are due to factors beyond their control, such as luck, fate, or powerful others (eg, teachers).

Overall, individuals with an internal LOC tend to be healthier physically (eg, lower blood pressure, less obesity) and mentally (eg, less distress, less depressed) compared to those with an external LOC.

Individuals with an internal LOC also tend to be more independent and attain more in their education and careers compared to those with an external LOC.

#### 4.1.05 Mere-Exposure Effect

[ 4.1.C.1 ]

The **mere-exposure effect** states that familiarity leads to preference for, or liking of, something (eg, other people, music). In other words, being repeatedly exposed to the same stimulus results in liking that stimulus more. For example, seeing a coworker frequently increases one's liking of that person, or hearing a song on the radio frequently increases one's liking of that song (Figure 4.5).



For example, frequently hearing a song on the radio increases an individual's liking of that song.

**Figure 4.5** Example of the mere-exposure effect.

## 4.1.06 Self-Fulfilling Prophecy

[ 4.1.C.2 ]

A **self-fulfilling prophecy** occurs when one's expectation or fear about a potential event unwittingly or unintentionally causes the event to happen.

For example, an art major believes he is terrible at math, so he does not study very hard for a math test because he thinks, "What's the point in trying so hard? I'm terrible at math and will fail this test no matter what I do." Then, his lack of preparation causes him to fail the exam, thus supporting his belief that he is bad at math (Figure 4.6).



For example, an art major believes he is terrible at math...

...so he doesn't study very hard for the math test (ie, behavior) because he doesn't see the point.

When he fails the test due to his lack of preparation, his belief that he is terrible at math is supported.

**Figure 4.6** Self-fulfilling prophecy example.

The self-fulfilling prophecy phenomenon can be applied to beliefs individuals hold about other people or groups. For example, a teacher believes a student will not perform well in class and therefore pays less attention to the student, who then does poorly in class, thus supporting the teacher's belief that the student will not perform well.

## 4.1.07 Social Comparison

[ 4.1.C.3 ]

**Social comparison**, which occurs when an individual compares themselves to others, impacts the individual's own self-concept (one's ideas and feelings about who they are) and self-esteem (one's overall opinion of their self-worth).

People can compare themselves to others they judge to be better than themselves, such as someone who has more wealth or is more attractive (ie, an **upward** comparison), or they can compare themselves to someone they judge themselves to be better than, such as someone who is less wealthy or less attractive (ie, a **downward** comparison).

As a result of social comparison, an individual may experience **relative deprivation**: the belief that they are worse off than a certain standard (eg, another person), and accordingly, they feel discontent. For example, an adolescent who does not have many friends feels discontent when they compare their social situation to another student who is more popular.

## Topic 4.1 Attribution Theory and Person Perception

### Check for Understanding Quiz

1. A person who blames external factors for their failures and credits internal factors for their successes is demonstrating
  - A. the halo effect
  - B. self-serving bias
  - C. the fundamental attribution error
  - D. relative deprivation
  
2. The term self-fulfilling prophecy refers to when
  - A. repeated contact results in an increased preference
  - B. an individual assumes that someone else's behavior is due to internal, rather than external, factors
  - C. one's expectation about a potential event unintentionally causes the event to happen
  - D. an individual attributes additional positive qualities to a person with one positive quality

*Note: Answers to this quiz are in the back of the book (appendix).*