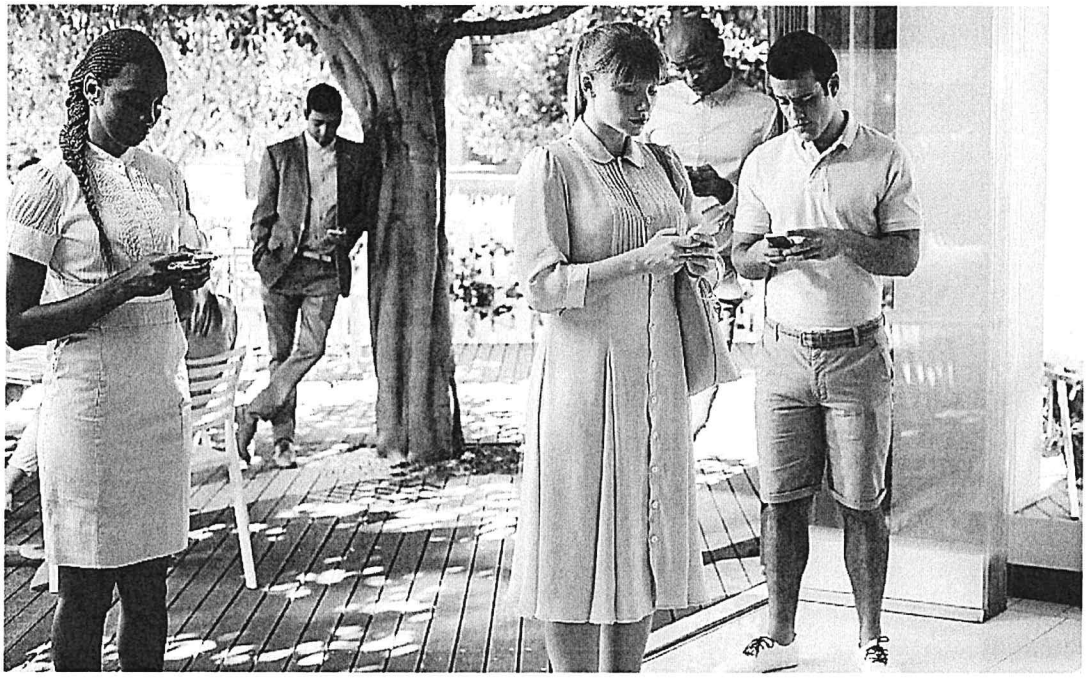
Chapter 4

Social Perception

How We Come to Understand Other People



Chapter Outline and Learning Objectives

Nonverbal Communication

LO 4.1 Explain how people use nonverbal cues to understand others.

Facial Expressions of Emotion

Culture and the Channels of Nonverbal Communication

First Impressions: Quick But Long-Lasting

LO 4.2 Analyze how first impressions form quickly and persist.

The Lingering Influence of Initial Impressions

Causal Attribution: Answering the "Why" Question

LO 4.3 Explain how we determine why other people do what they do.

The Nature of the Attribution Process

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The Fundamental Attribution Error: People as Personality Psychologists

Self-Serving Attributions

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Culture and Social Perception

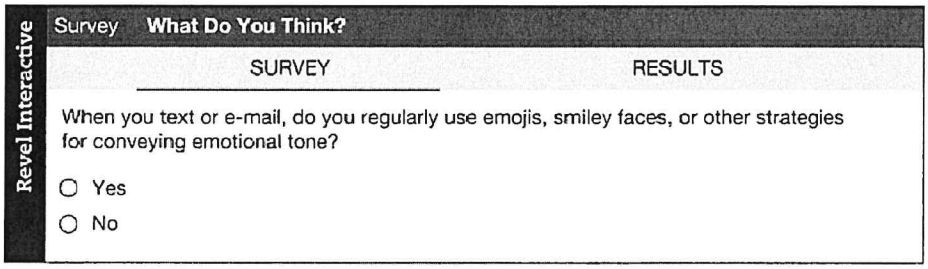
LO 4.4 Describe how culture influences our processes of social perception and attribution.

Holistic Versus Analytic Thinking

Cultural Differences in the Fundamental Attribution Error

Culture and Other Attributional Biases

WHAT DO YOU THINK?



Other people are not easy to figure out. Is this someone I can trust? Should I get to know him better? Why is she the way she is? Why are they doing what they're doing? The frequency and urgency with which we pose questions like these are clear across many daily situations in which we seek to evaluate others and figure out the reasons for their behavior.

Social Perception
The study of how we form impressions of and make inferences about other people

In this chapter we focus on these efforts to make sense of the social world around us. Specifically, we will discuss **social perception**—the study of how we form impressions of other people and how we draw inferences about them. How important is impression formation? Consider a recent episode of the science fiction series *Black Mirror*—a show that some have called a latter day *Twilight Zone*—in which every social interaction ends with the individuals involved rating each other using the 5-point scale of a hugely popular mobile app. Seemingly every outcome in life—what job you qualify for, which neighborhood you can live in, whether or not you can get another flight when yours is canceled—depends on how high your average rating is. Meeting someone for the first time or crossing paths with an old friend? Either way, in the universe of the show, special digital contact lenses mean that you'll see their score at the same time as you see their face.

The episode follows the exploits of Lacie Pound (pictured on the previous page, in the center, in pink dress with eyes glued to pink phone), as she navigates this world and seeks, at all costs, to reach the prized rating level of 4.5. We won't spoil the plot for you, though the episode title ("Nosedive") and common sense might suggest that a life led in single-minded pursuit of popularity does not always lead to happiness. The show's satire exaggerates our contemporary emphasis on social media "likes" and other forms of superficiality. Still, aspects of the episode ring familiar. We may not walk around with popularity ratings hanging over us, but even without visible numbers, do we not use external characteristics to quickly evaluate people we meet? The clothes they wear, the car they drive, the food they buy—is it processed? Gluten-free? Organic? By making snap judgments like these, aren't we all essentially dialing rating numbers up or down, every day, all the time, much like Lacie Pound?

Social perception is also about *explaining* why others behave as they do. This desire to understand people is so fundamental that it, too, carries over into our recreational lives. We go to movies, read novels, eavesdrop on conversations, and watch people flirt at bars because thinking about the behavior even of strangers and fictional characters fascinates us (Weiner, 1985). This basic aspect of human cognition has been exploited brilliantly by reality television producers, who cast television shows with real people, not actors, and film them as they go about their lives. You can watch *Teen Mom* or *Real Housewives, Keeping Up with the Kardashians* or *The Bachelor*. Why are these shows so popular? Because we enjoy trying to figure people out.

You don't have to be a fan of any of these shows to appreciate the intrigue posed by the complex and contradictory characters around us: we have a fundamental fascination with explaining other people's behavior. From "people watching" out in public

to first impressions about a new professor on the first day of class to late-night conversations with friends about why so-and-so just acted the way he did, much of our daily mental energy is devoted to analyzing other people. Why? Because thinking about other individuals and their behavior helps us understand and predict our social universe (Heider, 1958; Kelley, 1967).

The challenge, of course, is that the reasons why people behave as they do are usually hidden from us. Unfortunately, we can't read minds. All we have to go on is observable behavior: how people act, what they say, their facial expressions, gestures, and tone of voice. We rely on subtle cues and quick impressions, putting together these puzzle pieces as best we can, hoping they will lead to reasonably accurate and useful conclusions. We'll start our review of social perception with one particularly important source of information used in thinking about others: nonverbal communication, such as people's facial expressions, body movements, and tone of voice.

Nonverbal Communication

LO 4.1 Explain how people use nonverbal cues to understand others.

In the course of daily interaction, so much of what we have to say to other people doesn't require us to actually *say* anything at all. Our nonverbal expressions provide others with a wealth of information about us; we use these same nonverbal cues to learn about them (Burgoon, Guerrero, & Floyd, 2016; Hall, Gunnery, & Andrzejewski, 2011; Hall, Murphy, & Schmid Mast, 2007). **Nonverbal communication** refers to how people communicate, intentionally or unintentionally, without words. Facial expressions, tone of voice, gestures, body positions and movement, the use of touch, and eye gaze are the most frequently used and most revealing channels of nonverbal communication (Knapp, Hall, & Horgan, 2014).

Nonverbal Communication
The way in which people communicate, intentionally or unintentionally, without words, including via facial expressions, tone of voice, gestures, body position, movement, touch, and gaze

Nonverbal cues serve a variety of functions in communication. They help us to express our emotions, our attitudes, and our personality (and to perceive those same characteristics in others). For example, you express "I'm angry" by narrowing your eyes, lowering your eyebrows, and setting your mouth in a thin, straight line. You communicate your personality traits, such as being an extravert, with broad gestures and frequent changes in voice pitch and inflection (Knapp et al., 2014). Just think about how difficult it can sometimes be to convey the true meaning and tone of your message when communicating on e-mail or via text. There's a reason why emojis are so popular; they help fill in gaps created by the lack of nonverbal cues in such communications. You can explore how you use one aspect of nonverbal communication—your voice—in the Try It! on the following page.

Social psychologists are not the only ones to recognize the importance of nonverbal communication. Today it seems like every political debate or press conference is inevitably followed by a panel of pundits who analyze what was said but also *how* it was said. Indeed, on today's cable news channels, the title "body language expert" appears to be just as common as "political correspondent." Some of these analyses are more informed than others. The best ones draw on an extensive scientific literature concerning nonverbal communication. Interestingly, though, nonverbal forms of communication have typically been studied individually, in their separate "channels." In other words, some studies examine eye gaze, others investigate gestures, and still others explore the role of body posture in social perception. But in everyday life, nonverbal cues of many kinds occur all at the same time in a quite dazzling orchestration of simultaneous information (Archer & Akert, 1984; Knapp et al., 2014). Let's focus on the research concerning a few of these channels now before turning to how we interpret the full symphony of nonverbal information as it occurs naturally.

Try It!

Using Your Voice as a Nonverbal Cue

Even though the words you say are full of information, the way you say them gives your listener even more of an idea of what you mean. You can take a perfectly straightforward sentence like "I don't know her" and give it many different meanings, depending on how you say it. Try saying that sentence out loud so that it communicates each of the emotions listed below. Experiment with the pitch of your voice (high or low), the speed with which you speak, the loudness or softness of your voice, and which words you stress.

"I don't know her."

- You're angry.
- You're being sarcastic.
- You're scared.
- You're surprised.
- You're disgusted.
- You're very happy.

Now try this exercise with a friend. Turn your back to your friend as you repeat the sentence; you want your friend to have to rely on your voice as the only cue, without help from any facial expressions. How well does he or she guess the emotions you are expressing? Have your friend try the exercise too. Can you understand his or her nonverbal vocal cues? If you don't always correctly identify the emotions in each other's voices, discuss what was missing or confusing in the voice. In this way, you'll be able to figure out, for example, what a "disgusted" voice sounds like as compared to an "angry" or "scared" voice.

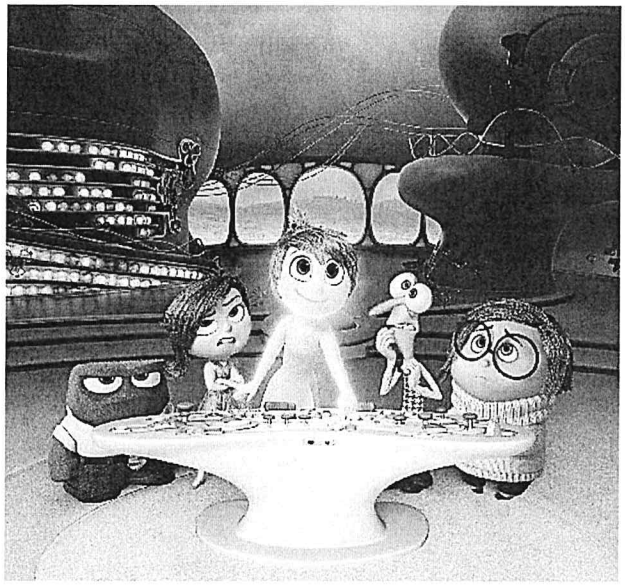
Facial Expressions of Emotion

The crown jewel of nonverbal communication is the facial-expressions channel. This aspect of communication has a long history of research, beginning with Charles Darwin's book *The Expression of the Emotions in Man and Animals* (1872). Its primacy is due to the exquisite communicativeness of the human face (Becker et al., 2007; Fernández-Dols & Crivelli, 2013; Kappas, 1997; Wehrle et al., 2000). Look at the set of facial expressions here. We bet you can figure out which emotions these expressions convey with very little effort.

These photographs depict facial expressions of the six major emotions. Can you guess the emotion expressed on each face?

Top row answers (L to R): anger, fear, disgust. Bottom row (L to R): happiness, surprise, sadness.

EVOLUTION AND FACIAL EXPRESSIONS Darwin's research on facial expressions has had a major impact on the field in many areas. We will focus on his belief that the primary emotions conveyed by the face are universal: the argument that all humans **encode**, or express, these emotions in the same way and that all humans can **decode**, or interpret them, with comparable accuracy. Darwin's interest in evolution led him to believe that nonverbal forms of communication were species specific and not culture specific. He proposed that facial expressions were vestiges of once-useful physiological reactions. For example, if early hominids ate something that tasted terrible, they would have wrinkled their noses in displeasure and expelled the food from their mouths. Research by Joshua Susskind and his colleagues (2008) offers support for Darwin's view. They studied the facial expressions of disgust and fear and found, first, that the muscle movements of each emotion were completely the opposite of the other. Second, they found that the "fear face" enhances perception, while the "disgust face" decreases it. For fear, the facial and eye muscle movements increase sensory input, such as widening the visual field, increasing the volume of air in the nose, and speeding up eye movements—all useful responses to something that is frightening. In contrast, for disgust, the muscle movements decrease input from these senses: Eyes narrow and less air is breathed in, which are useful reactions to something that smells or tastes disgusting (Susskind et al., 2008).



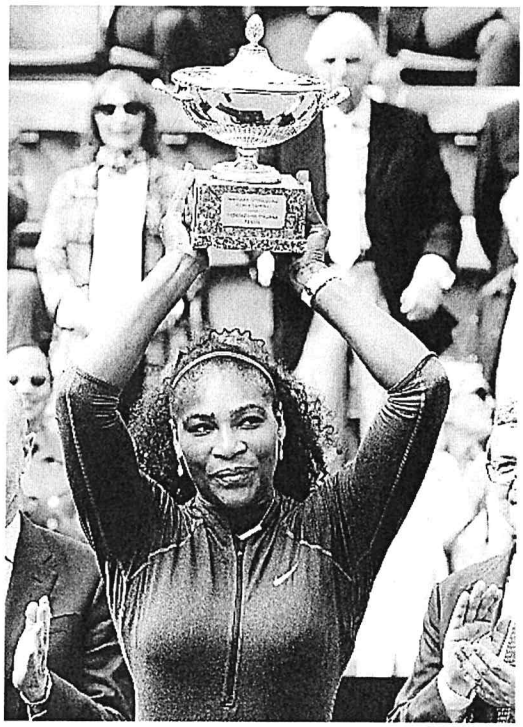
In the Pixar movie *Inside Out*, we meet the five major emotions living inside the brain of an 11-year-old girl named Riley: Anger, Disgust, Joy, Fear, and Sadness. As you'll read, researchers have long argued that these are, indeed, five of the major emotions expressed across cultures. But psychologists usually propose a sixth major emotion as well, one not included in the movie or the image above … can you guess what it is?

Was Darwin right that facial expressions of emotion are universal? The answer seems to be yes, for the most part, for six major emotional expressions: anger, happiness, surprise, fear, disgust, and sadness. For example, in a particularly well-designed study, Paul Ekman and Walter Friesen (1971) traveled to New Guinea, where they studied the decoding ability of the South Fore, a preliterate tribe that, until that time, had had no contact with Western civilization. They told the Fore people brief stories with emotional content and then showed them photographs of American men and women expressing the six emotions; the Fores' job was to match the facial expressions of emotion to the stories. The Fores were as accurate as Western subjects. The researchers then asked the Fore people to demonstrate, while being photographed, facial expressions that would match the stories they were told. These photographs, when later shown to American research participants, were also decoded accurately. This research yielded considerable evidence that the ability to interpret the six major emotions is cross-cultural—part of being human and not a product of people's particular cultural experiences (Ekman, 1993; Matsumoto & Wilingham, 2006; Sznycer et al., 2017).

Encode
To express or emit nonverbal behavior, such as smiling or patting someone on the back

Decode
To interpret the meaning of the nonverbal behavior other people express, such as deciding that a pat on the back was an expression of condescension and not kindness

Why do we say that evidence has supported universal emotional expression, but only "for the most part"? Well, for decades, textbooks such as this one have offered an unqualified "yes" to the question of universality. But recent research paints a more complicated picture. Studies have found that individuals from Western cultures maintain more rigid boundaries between the six major emotions when applying them to faces, whereas Asian respondents show overlap in their use of these categories (Jack et al., 2012). Other research has supported universality when asking participants from across cultures to match emotional labels to faces but found evidence of cross-cultural differences when allowing people to freely sort faces into their own grouping system (Gendron et al., 2014). And still other research has demonstrated that individuals are better at decoding facial expressions from other members of their own ethnic group than they are for people of other groups (Yan, Andrews, & Young, 2016). Clearly,



The nonverbal expression of pride, involving facial expression, posture, and gesture, is encoded and decoded cross-culturally.

cultural variation in encoding and decoding remains an open research question among contemporary social psychologists.

Beyond these six emotions, are there other emotional states that are communicated with distinctive and readily identifiable facial expressions? Researchers are exploring just this question for emotions such as contempt, anxiety, shame, determination, envy, and embarrassment (Ekman, O'Sullivan, & Matsumoto, 1991; Harmon-Jones et al., 2011; Keltner & Shiota, 2003; van de Ven, Zeelenberg, & Pieters, 2011). For example, research has indicated that the emotion of *pride* exists cross-culturally (Sznycer et al., 2017). Pride is a particularly interesting emotional display because it involves a facial expression as well as body posture and gesture cues. Specifically, the prototypical pride expression includes a small smile, the head tilted back slightly, an expanded chest, and arms raised above the head or hands on hips (Tracy & Robins, 2004). Photographs of pride expressions were accurately decoded by research participants in the United States and Italy, as well as individuals from a preliterate, isolated tribe in Burkina Faso, West Africa (Tracy & Robins, 2008). Jessica Tracy and David Matsumoto (2008) explored pride and its opposite, *shame*, by coding the spontaneous expressions of judo athletes at the 2004 Olympic and Paralympic Games. Sighted and blind athletes from 37 countries were coded on their nonverbal behavior just after they had won or lost a match. The pride expression was associated with winning for both sighted and blind athletes around the world. Shame, expressed by slumped shoulders and a sunken chest, was significantly associated with losing for all the athletes except one group—sighted athletes from highly individualistic cultures, such as those of the United States and Western Europe. In individualistic cultures, shame is a negative, stigmatized emotion that one tends to hide rather than display (Robins & Schriber, 2009).

WHY IS DECODING SOMETIMES DIFFICULT? Decoding facial expressions accurately is more complicated than we have indicated, however, for multiple reasons. First, people frequently display **affect blends** (Du, Tao, & Martinez, 2014; Ekman & Friesen, 1975): One part of their face registers one emotion while another part registers a different emotion. Take a look at the photographs on the following page and see if you can tell which two emotions are being expressed in each face. An affect blend is the sort of expression you might display if a person told you something that was both horrible and inappropriate—you'd be disgusted with the content and angry that the person told you. A second complication is that aspects of the same facial expression can have different implications based on context and other cues (Hassin, Aviezer, & Bentin, 2013; Parkinson, 2013; Wenzler et al., 2016). For example, studies indicate that decoding of facial displays varies depending on eye gaze (Adams et al., 2010; Ulloa et al., 2014). For an approach-oriented emotion like anger, decoding is quickest when a face stares right at you, presumably alerting you that you are the target of the anger and might need to prepare for confrontation. But for avoidance-oriented emotions like fear, decoding is easiest when a face displays an averted gaze—the eyes looking over to the side reveal to you the exact location of the scary object, signaling to you that you should also be fearful of whatever is off in that direction (Adams & Kleck, 2003). And yet a third reason why decoding facial expressions can be challenging has to do with culture, as alluded to previously.

Affect Blends

Facial expressions in which one part of the face registers one emotion while another part of the face registers a different emotion

President Barack Obama and 2012 U.S. Olympic gymnast McKayla Maroney show off their matching "McKayla is not impressed" faces during a White House visit. Recent research suggests that beyond the six major emotion expressions, other expressions may also be universally recognized.

Culture and the Channels of Nonverbal Communication

For decades, Paul Ekman and his colleagues have studied the influence of culture on the facial display of emotions (Ekman & Davidson, 1994; Ekman & Friesen, 1971; Matsumoto & Hwang, 2010). They have concluded that **display rules** are particular to each culture and dictate what kinds of emotional expressions people are supposed to show. For instance, Japanese norms often lead people to cover up negative facial expressions with smiles and laughter and, in general, to display fewer facial expressions than are displayed in the West (Aune & Aune, 1996; Gudykunst, Ting-Toomey, & Nishida, 1996; Huwaë & Schaafsma, 2016). Here is another example: American cultural norms typically discourage emotional displays in men, such as grief or crying, but allow the facial display of such emotions in women.

Display Rules
Culturally determined rules about which nonverbal behaviors are appropriate to display

There are, of course, other channels of nonverbal communication besides facial expressions. These nonverbal cues are strongly shaped by culture. Eye contact and gaze are particularly powerful nonverbal cues, as alluded to before. In American culture, people often become suspicious when a person doesn't "look them in the eye" while speaking (or, for that matter, someone who always wears dark sunglasses that obscure the eyes). However, as you can see in Figure 4.1, in other parts of the world, direct eye gaze is considered invasive or disrespectful.

Another form of nonverbal communication is how people use personal space. Imagine that you are talking to a person who stands too close to you or too far away; these deviations from "normal" spacing will affect your impressions of that person. Cultures vary greatly in what is considered normative use of personal space (Hall, 1969; Hogh-Olesen, 2008). For example, most Americans like to have a bubble of open space, a few feet in radius, surrounding them. In comparison, in some other cultures it is normal for strangers to stand right next to each other, to the point of touching; someone who stands apart may be considered odd or suspicious.

Gestures of the hands and arms are also a fascinating means of communication. Americans are adept at understanding certain gestures, such as the OK sign, in which one forms a circle with the thumb and forefinger and curves the rest of the fingers above the circle, or "flipping the bird," in which one bends all the fingers down at the first knuckle except the longest, middle finger. Gestures such as these, which have clear, well-understood definitions, are called **emblems** (Archer, 1997; Ekman & Friesen, 1975). The important thing to keep in mind about emblems is that they are not universal; each culture has devised its own emblems, and these are not necessarily understandable to people from other cultures (see Figure 4.1). Thus, "flipping the bird" will be a clear communicative sign in American society, whereas in some parts of Europe you'd need to make a quick gesture with a cupped hand under your chin to convey the same message. On one occasion when President George H. W. Bush used the "V for victory" sign (forming a V shape with his fingers), he did it backward—with the palm of his hand facing him instead of the audience. Unfortunately, he flashed this gesture to a large crowd in Australia, and in Australia this emblem is the equivalent of "flipping the bird" (Archer, 1997)!

Emblems
Nonverbal gestures that have well-understood definitions within a given culture, usually having direct verbal translations, such as the OK sign

To summarize, people's nonverbal communication can tell us a lot about their attitudes, emotions, and intentions. In some instances, as with the expression of major emotions, the conclusions people draw from these bits of social data are fairly consistent across cultures. In other instances, as with eye contact, personal distance, and gestures, the same nonverbal information is interpreted differently by people in different parts of the world. But regardless of where you're from, it's clear that much of what you pick up on in the course of social interaction is conveyed nonverbally. In short, much of what is said in daily conversations takes place before anyone actually *says* anything at all.

Figure 4.1 Nonverbal communication

Cultural Differences in Nonverbal Communication

Many forms of nonverbal behavior are specific to a given culture. Not only do some of the nonverbal behaviors of one culture mean nothing in another, but the same nonverbal behavior can exist in two cultures but have very different meanings in each. Such nonverbal differences can lead to misunderstanding when people from different societies interact. Some of these cultural differences are noted here.

Eye contact and gaze

In American culture, direct eye contact is valued; a person who won't "look you in the eye" is perceived as being evasive or even lying. However, in many parts of the world, direct eye contact is considered disrespectful, especially with superiors. For example, in Nigeria, Puerto Rico, and Thailand, children are taught not to make direct eye contact with their teachers and other adults. Cherokee, Navajo, and Hopi Native Americans use minimal eye contact as well. Japanese use far less direct eye contact than Americans do. In contrast, Arabs use a great deal of eye contact, with a gaze that would be considered piercing by people from some other cultures.

Personal space and touching

Societies vary in whether they are high-contact cultures, where people stand close to each other and touch frequently, or low-contact cultures, where people maintain more interpersonal space and touch less often. High-contact cultures include Middle Eastern, South American, and southern European countries. Low-contact cultures include North American, northern European, Asian, Pakistani, and Native American peoples. Cultures also differ in how appropriate they consider same-sex touching among friends. For example, in Korea and Egypt, men and women hold hands, link arms, or walk hip to hip with their same-sex friends, and these nonverbal behaviors carry no sexual connotation. In the United States, such behavior is much less common, particularly between male friends.

Hand and head gestures

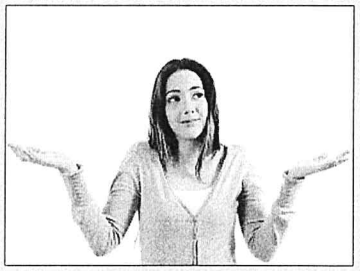
The "OK" sign: The OK sign is formed by making a circle with your thumb and index finger, with your three other fingers extended upward. In the United States, this means "okay." However, in Japan, this hand gesture means "money." In France, it means "zero"; in Mexico, it means "sex." In Ethiopia, it means "homosexuality." Finally, in some South American countries, such as Brazil, it is an obscene gesture, carrying the same meaning as the American "flipping the bird" sign, where the middle finger is the only one extended.

The thumbs-up gesture: In the United States, raising one thumb upward with the rest of the fingers in the fist means "OK." Several European countries have a similar meaning for this gesture; for example, in France it means "excellent!" However, in Japan, the same gesture means "boyfriend," while in Iran and Sardinia, it is obscene.

The "hand-purse" gesture: This gesture is formed by straightening the fingers and thumb of one hand and bringing them together so the tips touch, pointing upward. This gesture has no clear meaning in American culture. However, in Italy, it means "What are you trying to say?"; in Spain, it means "good"; in Tunisia, it means "slow down"; and in Malta, it means "you may seem good, but you are really bad."

Other body movements

In the United States, nodding one's head up and down means "yes" and shaking it from side to side means "no." However, in some parts of Africa and India, the opposite is true. To complicate matters more, in Korea, shaking one's head from side to side means "I don't know," which in the United States is communicated by a shrug of the shoulders and a lifting of the hands, as pictured above.



Review Questions

1. Paul Ekman and Walter Friesen traveled to New Guinea to study the meaning of various facial expressions in the primitive South Fore tribe. What major conclusion did they reach?
   a. Facial expressions are not universal because they have different meanings in different cultures.
   b. The six major emotional expressions appear to be universal.
   c. There are nine major emotional expressions.
   d. The members of the South Fore used different facial expressions than westerners to express the same emotion.
2. Which of the following is *not* one of the six major emotional expressions examined by Ekman and his colleagues in their influential cross-cultural research on perception of emotions?
   a. Disgust
   b. Anger
   c. Embarrassment
   d. Sadness
3. Darwin's evolutionary perspective on nonverbal communication of emotion led him to predict that facial expressions were
   a. specific to particular cultures.
   b. related to physiological reactions that proved to be a useful way to respond to a particular type of stimulus.
   c. a way to increase but not decrease input through senses such as vision and smell.
   d. universal across all animal species.
4. Tracy and Matsumoso's (2008) research on Olympic athletes indicated that the nonverbal expression of shame was
   a. associated with losing for many athletes but not those from highly individualistic cultures such as the United States.
   b. different for blind athletes than it was for sighted athletes.
   c. difficult to distinguish from the nonverbals associated with pride among athletes from more collectivistic cultures such as Japan.
   d. more often displayed rather than hidden by athletes from highly individualistic cultures such as the United States.
5. Research on eye gaze and perception of facial expression indicates that which of the following tends to be most quickly decoded?
   a. An angry face looking right at us
   b. An angry face looking away from us
   c. A fearful face looking right at us
   d. A fearful face with eyes closed

First Impressions: Quick But Long-Lasting

LO 4.2 Analyze how first impressions form quickly and persist.

What do we know about people when we first meet them? We know what we can see and hear. And even though we also know we should not "judge a book by its cover," we do form impressions of others based on the slightest of cues. For example, Sam Gosling has conducted research on "what your stuff says about you," as presented in his book *Snoop* (2008). Is your room messy or orderly? What posters are on your wall? What objects are on your desk and shelves? All of these possessions can be used by observers (potential snoopers) as clues to what you are really like. For example, consider what we might learn from an individual whose office or car doesn't have much decoration in the form of personal objects or photos. One possibility, Gosling suggests, is that this is the mark of a person who wants to establish a clear separation between his or her private self and his or her work/public self. Another is that this is someone low on the personality trait of extraversion: extraverts tend to decorate public spaces more, making them inviting to other people and sparking conversations with passersby.

Of course, as you now know, another factor that plays a major role in first impressions is nonverbal communication. What we have not reviewed yet is just how quickly such communication takes place. Research indicates that we form

#trending

First Impressions Formed Online

Physical spaces are not the only contexts where we leave behind tell-tale signs of identity and personality. Snooping, of the type described above, can also be done online. Instagram posts, Twitter and Facebook feeds, and Snapchat stories can also tell us something about other people.

Now, you might be thinking, can we really trust people's online self-portraits? After all, it's no secret that people often try to put themselves in the very best (and coolest) of lights, whether by photoshopping pictures of themselves or making sure that everyone knows they're having the most epic time ever on a random Tuesday night. Surely, this propensity to exaggerate the good and downplay the bad (and boring) on social media can skew social perception.

However, research suggests that online honesty depends on a person's motivation for being on social media to begin with. Those who seek to maintain existing relationships tend to be more accurate in their social media self-depictions than those who are looking to meet new people (Hollenbaugh & Ferris, 2015). And, for that matter, just discovering that someone's profile is a bit exaggerated or dishonest might, in and of itself, teach you something notable about them.

The specific type of social media also makes a difference. For a website like Facebook, the majority of users become online friends *after* becoming friends in person. This makes it difficult to present misleading or enhanced information—your friends will know you're lying about your job title; they'll recognize that your profile picture comes from 10 years and 30 pounds ago. On an app like Tinder, however, or other media that facilitate new relationships, inaccurate profile information is more likely (Wilson, Gosling, & Graham, 2012).

Psychologists would propose that there is, indeed, valuable social perception evidence to be gathered online. For example, Facebook use can help us predict an individual's personality, such as how extraverted, or outgoing, that person is (yes, we know that Facebook is hardly the trendiest of social media sites, but it's been around the longest and most research on these issues has thus far focused on it). As you might have guessed, the more friends a Facebook user has, the more extraverted he or she tends to be. But extraverts also view and comment on other people's pages more often, add more photos of groups of people (both including and not including themselves), and spend more time on the website across the board (Gosling et al., 2011).

What other characteristics can we learn about from Facebook use? People who change their profile picture often also tend to be more open to new experiences more generally. And those individuals who score on high measures of conscientiousness—who meet deadlines regularly and avoid procrastination—also tend to spend fewer hours per week on the site (Gosling et al., 2011).

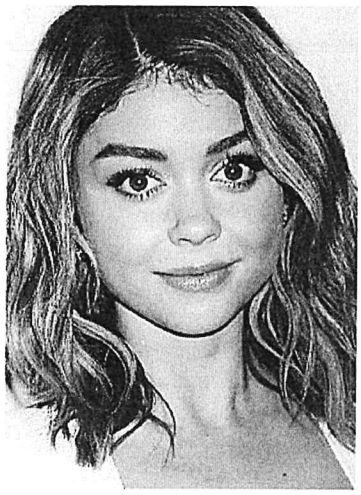
All of which is to say that trying to form impressions of people online is a lot like trying to do so in person. You often have only a small amount of data on which to base a conclusion. You have to distinguish between what someone is really like and what they *want* you to think they're like. And you have to keep in mind the broader context in which you're seeing people: are they presenting themselves to existing friends or trying to initiate new social connections?

initial impressions of others based solely on their facial appearance in less than 100 milliseconds (Bar, Neta, & Linz, 2006; Willis & Todorov, 2006). That's less than 1/10 of one second! And recent research indicates that we show signs of this tendency to consistently infer character from faces when we're as young as 3 years old (Cogsdill et al., 2014).

One example of these quick snap judgments is that people who have "baby faces"—features that are reminiscent of those of small children, with big eyes, a small chin and nose, and a high forehead—tend to be perceived as having childlike traits as well, such as being naive, warm, and submissive (Livingston & Pearce, 2009; Zebrowitz & Montepare, 2008). Obviously, these impressions are not always correct, but there is some evidence that we can make accurate judgments about others simply based on facial appearance. As another example, after brief glances at photographs of men's and women's faces, research participants are able to judge sexual orientation at above-chance levels of accuracy, suggesting that there may indeed be a scientific basis to the notion of "gaydar" (Rule et al., 2008; Rule, Ambady, & Hallett, 2009). Or in another set of studies, American participants rated the faces of Canadian political candidates (with whom they were totally unfamiliar) on the dimensions of powerfulness and warmth. Their first-impression ratings correlated with actual election results: The more powerful the candidates looked, the more likely they were to have

won their election; the warmer they looked, the less likely they were to have won (Rule & Ambady, 2010; Todorov et al., 2008). Just think about this for a moment—all the time, money, and effort candidates expend to try to win elections, and in the end, the simple question of how powerful their face looks emerges as a significant predictor of success. Perhaps we were too dismissive previously of the importance of "body language experts"!

Indeed, it is amazing just how limited an exposure to other people is enough for us to form meaningful first impressions about their abilities or personalities. Nalini Ambady and her colleagues have referred to such social perception based on extremely brief snippets of behavior as **thin-slicing** (Ambady & Rosenthal, 1992; Rule et al., 2013; Slepian, Bogart, & Ambady, 2014). In one study, they examined an instance of social perception familiar to most readers of this book (not to mention its authors): how college students form impressions of their professors (Ambady & Rosenthal, 1993). For the study, the researchers videotaped more than a dozen instructors while teaching and then selected three random 10-second clips from each one. After removing the audio track, they showed the silent video clips to students who had never before taken a class with these instructors. Students were asked to rate the teachers on a series of variables including how competent, confident, and active they appeared to be.

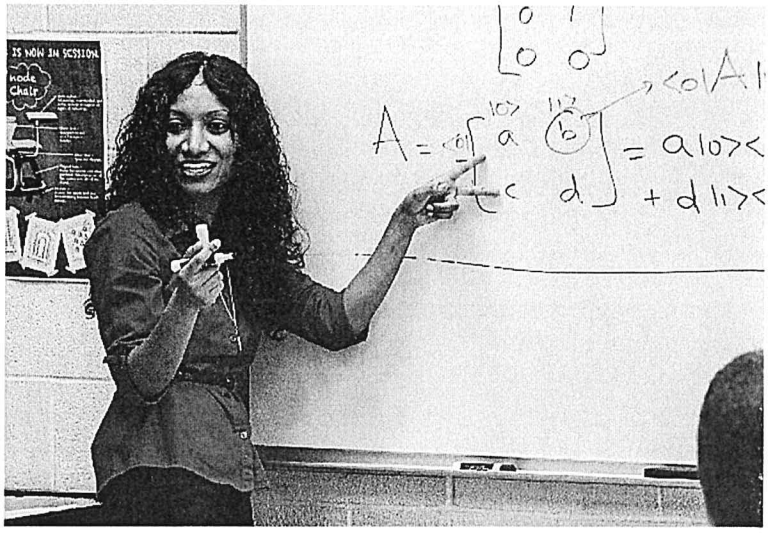


This is Sarah Hyland, whom you might know from her TV role as older daughter Haley Dunphy on *Modern Family*. Research suggests that her baby-faced appearance—big eyes, small chin, high forehead—might also lead you to jump to the conclusion that she is friendly, honest, and gullible.

Thin-Slicing
Drawing meaningful conclusions about another person's personality or skills based on an extremely brief sample of behavior

Not surprisingly, participants had little trouble coming up with ratings—as we've discussed, first impressions come to us quickly. But recall that Ambady's prediction was that thin-sliced impressions would be *meaningful*, not just fast. To test this, she compared the ratings made by her participants—whose only exposure to the instructors came in the form of brief, silent video clips—with the end-of-semester teaching evaluations these instructors received from their actual students. The result was a significant correlation: the thin-sliced impressions were quite similar to the perceptions of students who spent an entire semester with the instructors. In fact, even when shorter, 6-second silent clips were used, participants were still able to accurately predict who the highest-rated teachers were (Ambady & Rosenthal, 1992). Similar findings have been observed outside the classroom: patients draw informative first impressions based on thin-slice exposures to doctors; clinicians do the same with their patients (Ambady et al., 2002; Slepian et al., 2014). Our ability to extract meaningful information from very limited encounters has also captured the attention of best-selling authors, with the research of Ambady and colleagues playing a central role in Malcolm Gladwell's *Blink* (2005).

How much do you think you would enjoy having the professor pictured here as your instructor? Quick, just answer—don't think! Although it might seem ridiculous to suggest that you can learn anything of substance about the job performance of a college professor or anyone else from a simple photograph, research indicates that thin-slice judgments can yield meaningful information. (They can also perpetuate stereotypes, as we will discuss in more detail in Chapter 13.) This particular professor is Dr. Preethika Kumar, a faculty member in electrical engineering at Wichita State University. In 2015, the Institute of Electrical and Electronic Engineers named her their nationwide outstanding teacher of the year. Were your thin-slice judgments of this photo consistent with Professor Kumar's award-winning reputation?



It is clear, then, just how quickly first impressions happen. But do they last? If first impressions faded from view as quickly as they came into focus, then they might not matter much when it comes to social perception. But it turns out they do matter. Let's look at just how important and long-lasting first impressions really are.

The Lingering Influence of Initial Impressions

As we saw in Chapter 3, when people are unsure about the nature of the social world, they use their schemas to fill in the gaps. A schema is a mental shortcut: When

all we have is a small amount of information, our schemas provide additional information to fill in the gaps (Fiske & Taylor, 2013; Markus & Zajonc, 1985). Thus, when we are trying to understand other people, we can use just a few observations of a person as a starting point and then, using our schemas, create a much fuller understanding. This idea suggests that our initial impressions have staying power—that they color the way we interpret the information we learn next.

As an example, consider a hypothetical individual you've never met before. Let's call him Keith. We want you to mull over your impressions of Keith as we tell you the following about him: Keith is an interesting guy. People who know him say he's intelligent. Another word often used to describe him is industrious. Keith can also be impulsive as well as critical. Still others have described him as stubborn and envious. Based on this information, what's your impression of Keith at this point?

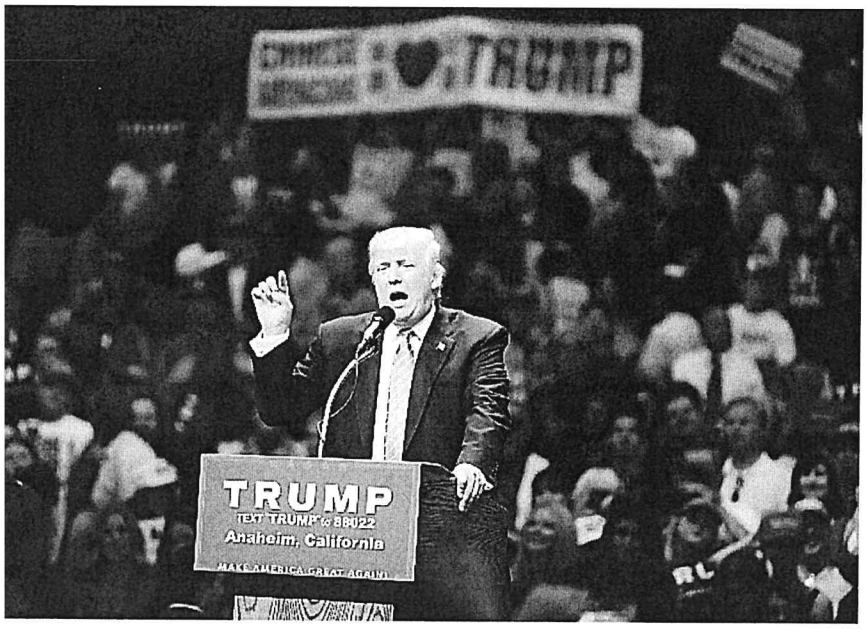
Now consider another hypothetical stranger. We'll call him Kevin. Kevin is an interesting guy as well. People who know him have called him envious. Also stubborn. And you know what, it just so happens that other descriptors that people use when talking about Kevin are critical, impulsive, industrious, and intelligent.

Primacy Effect

When it comes to forming impressions, the first traits we perceive in others influence how we view information that we learn about them later

By now, you've likely sensed the pattern. Keith and Kevin are being described the same way. Or, at least, the content of what you've been told about them is the same; the order of the descriptors has been switched around. What conclusions do you think people would draw about Keith versus Kevin? When Solomon Asch (1946) ran this very study, describing hypothetical individuals with the same descriptors you read above, he found that order made a big difference. Participants formed a more positive impression of someone described as intelligent-industrious-impulsive-critical-stubborn-envious (Keith, in our example), compared to someone described as envious-stubborn-critical-impulsive-industrious-intelligent (Kevin, in our case). Why? Because first impressions are powerful. In this instance, Keith's positive traits of being intelligent and industrious create a filter—a schema—through which subsequent traits are viewed. After learning that he is smart and hardworking, perhaps you also perceived "impulsive" and "critical" in a positive light—as in, sure, Keith may make quick decisions and critique the work of others, but that can be productive for someone who's intelligent. Kevin, on the other hand? You already know he's envious and stubborn. This makes it easy to see those same traits of critical and impulsive as negatives, bringing them in line with the initial expectations you have for him.

In the months leading up to the 2016 U.S. presidential election, large numbers of voters continued to believe in political misinformation that had long since been discredited. For example, polls indicated that a majority of voters with a positive impression of Donald Trump continued to believe that then-President Barack Obama was Muslim and had not been born in the United States (Gangitano, 2016), a disturbing example of belief perseverance in action.



Asch's study demonstrates that there's a **primacy effect** in social perception: What we learn first about another person colors how we see the information we learn next. In addition to primacy effects, we also have schemas regarding which traits tend to appear together in clusters. That is, we use a few known characteristics to determine what other characteristics a person likely has (Sedikides & Anderson, 1994; Werth & Foerster, 2002; Willis & Todorov, 2006). For example, a capable, can-do person is also seen as powerful and dominant, whereas an incompetent person is seen as the opposite (Fiske, Cuddy, & Glick, 2006;

Todorov et al., 2008; Wojciszke, 2005). Or consider physical attractiveness. We often presume that "what is beautiful is good"—that people with physical beauty will also have a whole host of other wonderful qualities (Dion, Berscheid, & Walster, 1972; Eagly et al., 1991; Hughes & Miller, 2016).

But primacy effects and schemas about which characteristics go together aren't the only reasons why first impressions have lasting effects. When it comes to social perception, we also have a tendency for **belief perseverance**, or standing by initial conclusions even when subsequently learned information suggests we shouldn't. In dozens of studies over several decades, research participants have opted to stick by their original impressions even once the basis for their that judgment is contradicted or revealed as erroneous (Anderson, 1995; Ross, Lepper, & Hubbard, 1975). Indeed, belief perseverance has been cited to explain why jurors have a hard time disregarding evidence ruled inadmissible, why scientists are slow to discount published research conclusions that turn out to be based on fabricated data, and why voters remain influenced by political misinformation even after it has been discredited (Greitemeyer, 2014; Lilienfeld & Byron, 2013; Thorson, 2016). As Chapter 6 will detail, we find inconsistent thoughts unpleasant and uncomfortable. Once we make up our minds, we're inclined to keep them made up. And so first impressions, once formed, can prove pretty hard to shake.

Belief Perseverance
The tendency to stick with an initial judgment even in the face of new information that should prompt us to reconsider

There are clear implications of the research on first impressions: When trying to win people over, there's no overemphasizing how important it is to start off on the right foot. Getting ready for public speaking? Make sure the opening moments of your presentation are your most polished, as that thin-slice will set an influential tone. Going on a job interview? How you dress, whether you maintain eye contact, your body posture—these are immediately apparent factors that may shape how others evaluate the rest of your visit. Even the simplest of introductory actions, like the way you shake hands, can have a dramatic effect, as detailed in the following photo gallery.

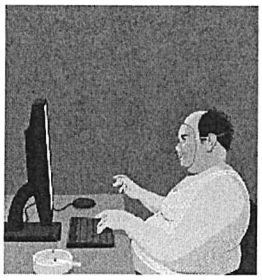
USING FIRST IMPRESSIONS TO YOUR ADVANTAGE

Revel Interactive

Given all that you now know about the importance of first impressions, you might be even more motivated than ever to make a good one. Social psychologists refer to this tendency as *impression management*, both conscious and unconscious efforts control how people see you (Leary & Kowalski, 1990).

For example, research indicates that perceptions of handshake quality are significantly related to assessments of personality and even final hiring recommendations in an interview setting (Chaplin et al., 2000; Stewart et al., 2008). So when meeting new people, by all means, give thought to how you will dress, pay attention to eye contact, but don't overlook the importance of a firm (but not too firm) handshake.

Recent research offers the provocative conclusion that in addition to influencing how others see you, your body language can also change how you think, feel, and act. In one study, participants required to adopt a high-power pose, such as the one depicted above, reported feeling more powerful and were rated as giving a better speech in a subsequent job interview task (Cuddy et al., 2015; but also see Garrison, Tang, & Schmeichel, 2016).



Efforts to capitalize on the power of first impressions take place online as well. On social networks as well as dating websites and apps, people often strive to put their best (digital) foot forward, sometimes at the expense of accuracy (Rosenberg & Egbert, 2011). As in real life, though, too much impression management can seem disingenuous and rub people the wrong way.

Review Questions

1. Research indicates that which of the following candidates would be most likely to win a political election?
   a. Denise, whose face other people often perceive as indicating a warm personality
   b. Theo, who many people believe is gay based only on his facial appearance
   c. Vanessa, who has large eyes, a high forehead, and a small, child-like nose
   d. Rudy, whose face is usually seen by others as indicating a cold, calculating, and powerful personality
2. Ambady and colleagues were able to conclude that the thin-sliced impressions formed by their participants were based on meaningful information because
   a. their ratings based on 30-second clips were little different than their ratings based on 6-second clips.
   b. their ratings of the silent video clips corresponded strongly with the ratings that the instructors received from their actual students at the end of the semester.
   c. ratings were similar for silent video clips and for the same video clips when shown with audio.
   d. while the thin-sliced video clips were brief, it took participants a relatively long amount of time to come up with ratings of the instructors they viewed.
3. Asch's (1946) research on person perception provided evidence for which of the following conclusions?
   a. There is a primacy effect in social perception.
   b. First impressions serve as a filter through which subsequently learned information is interpreted.
   c. Even when the content of information conveyed about two individuals remains the same, the order in which we learn it can have a powerful effect on our impression.
   d. All of the above.
4. Belief perseverance can help explain which of the following?
   a. Why people who watch news programs that refer to climate change as a hoax remain convinced of that conclusion even in the face of scientific evidence to the contrary.
   b. Why during jury deliberations it is easier to convince fellow jurors to change their votes from guilty to not guilty than it is to change their minds in the opposite direction.
   c. Why weather forecasters are better at predicting rainfall totals than snowfall totals.
   d. All of the above.
5. Which of the following statements about impression management is true?
   a. It can be a conscious or unconscious process.
   b. It occurs in person but not during online interactions.
   c. It involves an effort to depict the self as accurately as possible.
   d. It tends to be counterproductive and "rub people the wrong way."

Causal Attribution: Answering the "Why" Question

LO 4.3 Explain how we determine why other people do what they do.

We have seen that when we observe other people, we have a rich source of information—their nonverbal behavior—on which to base our impressions. However, nonverbal behavior and other components of first impression formation are not foolproof indicators of what a person is really thinking or feeling. If you meet an acquaintance and she says, "It's great to see you!" does she really mean it? Perhaps she is acting more excited than she really feels, out of politeness. Perhaps she is outright lying and really can't stand you. The point is that even though nonverbal communication is sometimes easy to decode and first impressions are quick to form, there is still substantial ambiguity as to what a person's behavior really means (Ames & Johar, 2009; DePaulo, 1992; Hall, Mast, & West, 2016).

Attribution Theory
A description of the way in which people explain the causes of their own and other people's behavior

Why did that acquaintance behave as she did? To answer this "why" question, we will use our immediate observations to form more elegant and complex inferences about what people are really like and what motivates them to act as they do. How we go about answering these questions is the focus of **attribution theory**, the study of how we infer the causes of other people's behavior.

The Nature of the Attribution Process

Fritz Heider (1958) is frequently referred to as the father of attribution theory. His influential book defined the field of social perception, and his legacy is still very much evident in current research (Crandall et al., 2007; Kwan & Chiu, 2014). Heider discussed what he called "naive," or "commonsense," psychology. In his view, people were like amateur scientists, trying to understand other people's behavior by piecing together information until they arrived at a reasonable explanation or cause (Surian, Caldi, & Sperber, 2007; Weiner, 2008).

One of Heider's most valuable contributions is a simple dichotomy: When trying to decide why people behave as they do—for example, why a father has just yelled at his young daughter—we can make one of two attributions. One option is to make an **internal attribution**, deciding that the cause of the father's behavior was something about him—his disposition, personality, attitudes, or character—an explanation that assigns the causes of his behavior internally. For example, we might decide that the father has poor parenting skills or is an impatient person. Alternatively, we might make an **external attribution**, deciding that something in the situation, not in the father's personality or attitudes, caused his behavior. If we conclude that he yelled because his daughter had just stepped into the street without looking, we would be making an external attribution for his behavior.

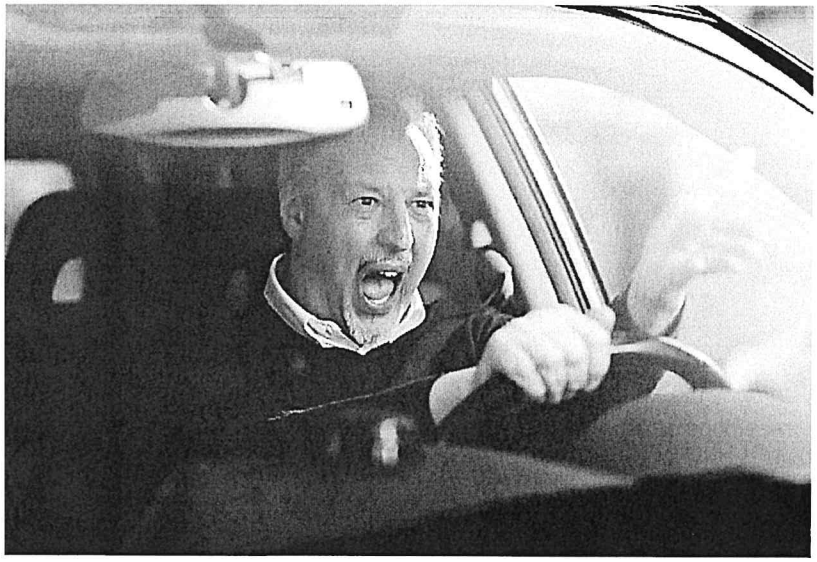
Internal Attribution
The inference that a person is behaving in a certain way because of something about the person, such as attitude, character, or personality

External Attribution
The inference that a person is behaving a certain way because of something about the situation he or she is in, with the assumption that most people would respond the same way in that situation

Notice that our impression of the father will be very different depending on the type of attribution we make. For this particular example, if we make an internal attribution, we'll form a negative impression. If we make an external attribution, we won't learn much about the father—after all, most parents would have done the same thing if their child had just disobeyed them by stepping into the street. Quite a difference!

This internal/external attribution dichotomy plays an extraordinarily important role in even the most intimate parts of our lives. Indeed, spouses in happy, satisfied marriages make very different attributions about their partners than spouses in troubled, distressed marriages. Satisfied spouses tend to make internal attributions for their partners' positive behaviors (e.g., "She helped me because she's such a generous person") and external attributions for their partners' negative behaviors (e.g., "He said something mean because he's so stressed at work right now"). In contrast, spouses in distressed marriages tend to display the opposite pattern: Their partners' positive behaviors are chalked up to external causes (e.g., "She helped me because she wanted to impress our friends"), while negative behaviors are attributed to internal causes (e.g., "He said something mean because he's a self-centered jerk"). When an intimate relationship becomes troubled, this second pattern of attributions about one's partner only makes the situation worse and can have dire consequences for the future of the relationship (Fincham et al., 1997; Furman, Luo, & Pond, 2017; McNulty, O'Mara, & Karney, 2008).

Attributional tendencies have important consequences for relationships, including marriage. Consider Dre, the father on the TV show *Blackish*. On a weekly basis, his wife, Bow, has to decide whether to attribute his comically eccentric behavior to internal or external causes. For example, should she interpret his desire to terrify his children with Halloween pranks an indication of hopeless immaturity? Or a natural response of a loving father to the realization that his kids are getting older and spending less time with him? Whether we make charitable (or less so) attributions for the behavior of a partner is a strong predictor of relationship satisfaction in the long run



According to Fritz Heider, we tend to see the causes of a person's behavior as internal. For example, when we see a driver exhibiting signs of "road rage," we are likely to assume that he is at fault for losing his temper. If we knew the person's situation—perhaps he is rushing to the hospital to check on a family member and another driver has just cut him off—we might come up with a different, external attribution.

The Covariation Model: Internal Versus External Attributions

The first, essential step in the process of social perception is determining whether to make an internal or an external attribution. Harold Kelley's major contribution to attribution theory was the idea that we notice and think about more than one piece of information when making this decision (Kelley, 1967, 1973). For example, let's say you ask your friend to lend you her car, and she says no. Naturally, you wonder why. What explains her behavior? Kelley's theory, called the **covariation model**, says that you will examine multiple behaviors from different times and situations to answer this question. Has your friend refused to lend you her car in the past? Does she lend it to other people? Does she normally lend you things when you ask her?

Kelley, like Heider before him, assumed that when we are in the process of forming an attribution, we gather information, or data. The data we use, according to Kelley, are about how a person's behavior "covaries," or changes, across time and place and depending on the target of the behavior. By discovering covariation in people's behavior (e.g., your friend refuses to lend you her car, but she agrees to lend it to others), you can reach a conclusion about what causes their behavior.

When we are forming an attribution, what kinds of covariation information do we examine? Kelley (1967) identified three key types: *consensus*, *distinctiveness*, and *consistency*. Suppose that you are working at your part-time job at the mall and you observe your boss yelling at another employee, Hannah. Automatically, you ask that attributional question about your boss: "Why is he yelling at Hannah and being so critical? Is it something about him as a person, something about what is going on around him (perhaps something about Hannah), or something else entirely?"

Covariation Model
A theory that states that to form an attribution about what caused a person's behavior, we note the pattern between when the behavior occurs and the presence or absence of possible causal factors

Consensus Information
The extent to which other people behave the same way toward the same stimulus as the actor does

Distinctiveness Information
The extent to which a particular actor behaves in the same way toward different stimuli

Consistency Information
The extent to which the behavior between one actor and one stimulus is the same across time and circumstances

How would Kelley's (1967, 1973) model of covariation assessment answer this question? It would focus on three different types of information regarding the actor (your boss, the target of your attributional efforts) and the stimulus (Hannah, the person on the receiving end of the action in question) in this scenario. **Consensus information** refers to how other people behave toward the same stimulus—in this case, Hannah. Do other people at work also yell at or criticize Hannah? In other words, is there consensus to how various people respond to Hannah? If so, perhaps something about Hannah's job performance is responsible for the interaction you witnessed. But if not, you would become more confident that your boss's behavior is more unique and he is, therefore, to blame.

Distinctiveness information refers to how a person responds to other stimuli—in this case, everything other than Hannah. Is Hannah the only employee whom your boss criticizes publicly? That is, does your boss only react this way to Hannah and no one else? If so, we wonder what it is about her that seems to set him off, and we begin to think she's to blame. If, however, your boss reacts this way with multiple people, we might think that he's probably the one responsible for the confrontation.

Consistency information refers to the frequency with which the observed behavior between the same person and the same stimulus occurs across time and circumstances. Does your boss criticize Hannah regularly and frequently, whether the store is filled with customers or empty, whether it's Monday morning or Saturday evening? In other words, is yelling consistently the outcome when the boss and Hannah are together?

According to Kelley's theory, it is difficult to make either a straightforward internal or external attribution when consistency is low—when the actor and stimulus in question do not always produce the same outcome. In such instances, we usually have little choice but to chalk up the event to being a fluke. In essence, we resort to a special kind of external or situational attribution, one that assumes that something peculiar must have happened in this particular circumstance—for example, the boss just received very upsetting news that day and uncharacteristically lost his temper with the first person he saw.

But when consistency is high, specific patterns of consensus and distinctiveness information can permit a clear internal attribution, according to Kelley. People are most likely to make an internal attribution (deciding that the behavior was due to something about the boss) when the consensus and distinctiveness of the act are low (in addition to high consistency; see Figure 4.2). We would be pretty confident that the boss yelled at Hannah because he is an impatient or vindictive person if we knew that no one else yells at Hannah, that the boss yells at other employees, and that the boss yells at Hannah every chance he gets. On the other hand, people are likely to make an external attribution (in this case, perhaps about Hannah) if consensus, distinctiveness, and consistency are all high. If everyone always yells at Hannah too, and the boss never yells at anyone otherwise, we can be pretty confident that something about Hannah is triggering this response in the boss (and everyone else).

Figure 4.2 The Covariation Model

Why did the boss yell at his employee Hannah? To decide whether a behavior was caused by internal (dispositional) factors or by external (situational) factors, people use consensus, distinctiveness, and consistency information.

Your boss keeps yelling at Hannah. Is it something about who your boss is as a person (internal attribution), or something external to your boss (e.g., Hannah's work ethic or attitude, pressure your boss faces at work, a tragic event in his personal life). The covariation model can help you make this determination using three variables of consensus, distinctiveness, and consistency.

Low Consensus (No one except your boss yells at Hannah)	+	***Low*** Distinctiveness (Your boss yells at everyone)	+	***High*** Consistency (Your boss always yells at Hannah)	=	***Internal*** Attribution	This is something about your boss's personality or values.
High Consensus (Everyone yells at Hannah)	+	***High*** Distinctiveness (Your boss only yells at Hannah)	+	***High*** Consistency (Your boss always yells at Hannah)	=	***External*** Attribution	This is not about your boss, but more likely about Hannah's work ethic or attitude.
Low/High Consensus	+	***Low/High*** Distinctiveness	+	***Low*** Consistency	=	***No*** Attribution	When consensus and distinctiveness are varied, and there's no consistency to a behavior, attributions are difficult to make.

The covariation model assumes that people make causal attributions in a rational, logical way, observing the clues about consensus, distinctiveness, and consistency and then drawing a logical inference about why the person did what he or she did. Research has confirmed that people often do make attributions in this way (Hilton, Smith, & Kim, 1995; Rottman & Hastie, 2014; White, 2002)—with two exceptions. Studies have shown that people don't use consensus information as much as Kelley's theory predicted; they rely more on consistency and distinctiveness when forming attributions (McArthur, 1972; Wright, Lüüs, & Christie, 1990). Also, people don't always have the relevant information they need on all three of Kelley's dimensions. For example, what if this is Hannah's first day at work? Or your first day, and you've never seen your boss or Hannah before? In these situations, research has shown that people proceed with the attribution process using the information they do have and, if necessary, making guesses about the missing data (Fiedler, Walther, & Nickel, 1999; Kelley, 1973).

To summarize, the covariation model portrays people as master detectives, deducing the causes of behavior as systematically and logically as Sherlock Holmes would. However, people aren't always logical or rational when forming judgments about others. Sometimes they distort information to satisfy their need for high self-esteem. At other times they use mental shortcuts that, although often helpful, can lead to inaccurate judgments. Unfortunately, the attributions we make are sometimes just plain wrong. In the next section, we will discuss some specific errors or biases that plague the attribution process—we don't always follow the straightforward logic of the covariation model in a balanced and levelheaded way. One such shortcut is common: the idea that people do what they do because of the kind of people they are, not because of the situation they are in.

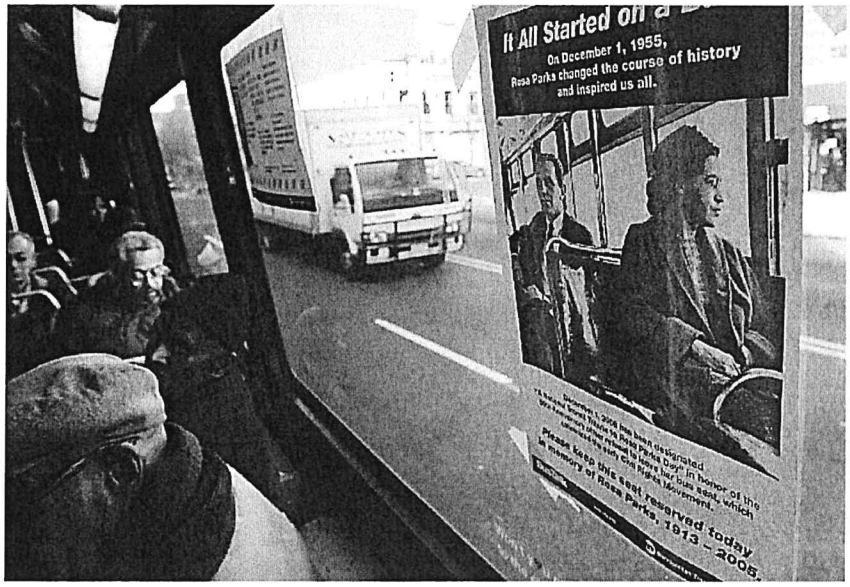
The Fundamental Attribution Error: People as Personality Psychologists

One day in December 1955, a Black seamstress in Montgomery, Alabama, refused to give up her seat on the city bus to a White man. At the time, segregationist "Jim Crow" laws in the South relegated African Americans to second-class status in all aspects of everyday life. They could sit in the middle section if it was empty, but they had to give up their seats to White people when the bus got full; the front 10 rows were always reserved for White people (Feeney, 2005). That day in 1955, Rosa Parks broke the law and refused to give up her seat. Later, she said, "People always say I didn't give up my seat because I was tired, but that wasn't true. I was not tired physically.... No, the only tired I was, was tired of giving in" (Feeney, 2005, pp. A1, B8). Ms. Parks was convicted of violating the segregation laws and fined. In response, African Americans boycotted the Montgomery buses for over a year and mounted a legal challenge that led to a successful Supreme Court decision in 1956 outlawing segregation on buses. Rosa Parks's brave act was the precipitating event of the American civil rights movement (Shipp, 2005).

On October 24, 2005, Rosa Parks died at the age of 92. To commemorate her, the American Public Transportation Association called for December 1 to be "Tribute to Rosa Parks Day." Buses in major cities across the country designated that one seat, behind the driver, be kept empty for the day in her honor. To alert riders, signs were posted on the windows adjacent to the seat, with Rosa Parks's photograph and the small caption "It all started on a bus" (Ramirez, 2005).

A New York City journalist rode the buses that day to see if people would honor the request—after all, an empty seat on a crowded city bus is a coveted item. He found that the vast majority of riders did so, even during rush hour, when just finding a place to stand is difficult. However, some people did sit in the special seat (Ramirez, 2005). Now this was an interesting development, both to the journalist

and to his fellow travelers. Why did they do it? It seemed to be a flagrant act of disrespect. How could one not honor Rosa Parks? Were these "sitters" prejudiced? Were they selfish or arrogant, believing that their personal needs were more important than anything else? In short, negative dispositional attributions were possible about these sitters.



Buses across the United States posted a sign like this one, asking riders to keep one seat empty to honor Rosa Parks.

Being a good reporter, the journalist began asking the sitters why they chose to sit in this special seat. Wouldn't you know it, a situational explanation emerged. They hadn't seen the sign. In fact, the small signs were badly placed and easy to miss in the midst of scheduling announcements (Ramirez, 2005). After the sign was pointed out to sitters, they reacted swiftly. One man "read it quickly, shuddered, then uttered a loud profanity in dismay. He scooted out of the seat. 'I didn't realize it was there.... It's history.... It means freedom'" (Ramirez, 2005, p. B1). Another rider, a Black man, began to sit down but stopped halfway when he saw the sign. He said to another rider, a Black woman, "'But people were sitting here.' The woman said gently, 'They couldn't see the sign.' 'Well,' the man said, peeling away the sign and moving it to the edge of the seat, 'they will now'" (Ramirez, 2005, p. B1). Thus, many on the bus were making the wrong attribution about the sitters. The other riders believed that their behavior was due to the kind of people they were (bad ones) instead of due to the situation—in this case, a too small, poorly located sign.

The fundamental theory or schema most of us have about human behavior is that people do what they do because of the kind of people they are, not because of the situation they are in. When thinking this way, we are more like personality psychologists, who see behavior as stemming from internal dispositions and traits, than like social psychologists, who focus on the impact of social situations on behavior. As we saw in Chapter 1, this tendency to overestimate the extent to which other people's behavior results from internal, dispositional factors, and to underestimate the role of situational factors is called the **fundamental attribution error** (Heider, 1958; Ross, 1977; Ross & Nisbett, 1991). The fundamental attribution error has also been called the *correspondence bias* (Gilbert & Jones, 1986; Gilbert & Malone, 1995; Jones, 1979).

Fundamental Attribution Error
The tendency to overestimate the extent to which other people's behavior results from internal, dispositional factors and to underestimate the role of situational factors

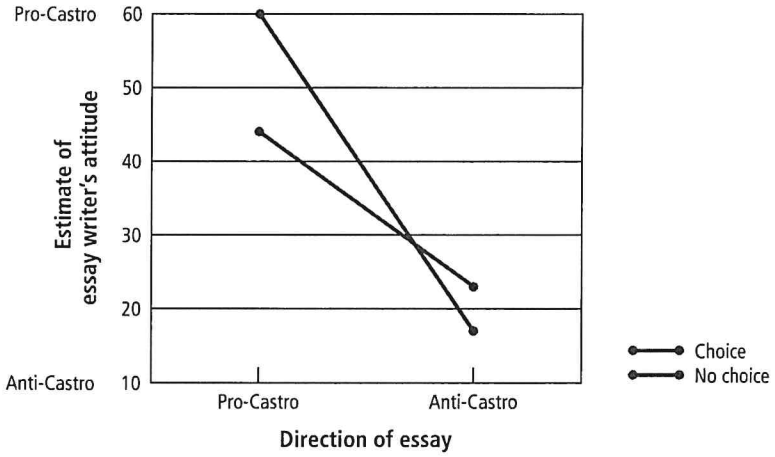
There have been many empirical demonstrations of the tendency to see people's behavior as a reflection of their dispositions and beliefs rather than as influenced by the situation (Arsena, Silvera, & Pandelaere, 2014; Gawronski, 2003; Miller, Ashton, & Mishal, 1990). For example, in a classic study, Edward Jones and Victor Harris (1967) asked college students to read an essay written by a fellow student on a controversial political topic. Specifically, students were asked to read an essay about what was, in that era, a hot-button issue: whether to support or oppose the regime of Fidel Castro in Cuba. (If the same study were run today, students might be asked to read an essay adopting a position that is either pro-choice or anti-abortion, or in favor versus opposed to affirmative action in college admissions.) After reading an essay that either supported or opposed Castro, the participants had to guess how the author of the essay *really* felt about Castro (see Figure 4.3).

In one condition, the researchers told the students that the author had chosen freely which position to take in the essay, thereby making it easy to guess how he really felt. If he chose to write in favor of Castro, clearly he must be sympathetic to Castro. Much like if a

Figure 4.3 The Fundamental Attribution Error

Even when people knew that the author's choice of an essay topic was externally caused (i.e., in the no-choice condition), they assumed that what he wrote reflected, at least to some degree, how he really felt about Castro. That is, they made an internal attribution for his behavior.

(Based on Jones & Harris, 1967)



student today chose to write an essay in favor of affirmative action, we would likely assume that the student was, indeed, a supporter of the policy. In another condition of the Jones and Harris (1967) study, however, the participants learned that the author had been *assigned* the position in the essay as part of a debate. In that instance, one should not assume that the student held the same opinion as the essay's position; the student was, after all, told which position to take. Yet the participants in this study (and in dozens of others like it) assumed that the students really believed what they wrote, even knowing that they had no choice as to which position to take. As you can see in Figure 4.3, people ratcheted down their guesses a little bit, but they still assumed that the content of the essay reflected the author's true feelings to some extent. This would be like assuming that someone assigned to argue an anti-abortion position in a class debate truly was, deep down, against abortion. This is the fundamental attribution error in action, overlooking the role of the situation (the assignment of a position), and jumping to conclusions about internal explanations (the person's true attitudes).

Why is the fundamental attribution error so fundamental? It is not always wrong to make an internal attribution; clearly, people sometimes do what they do because of the kind of people they are. Some yelling bosses really are jerks. However, considerable evidence indicates that social situations can strongly affect behavior. Indeed, the major lesson of social psychology is that these influences can be extremely powerful. The point of the fundamental attribution error is that people often tend to underestimate external influences when explaining other people's behavior. Even when the influence of the situation on behavior is obvious, as in the Jones and Harris (1967) experiment, people persist in making internal attributions (Li et al., 2012; Newman, 1996; Ross, Amabile, & Steinmetz, 1977).

Watch QUIZ SHOW ATTRIBUTIONS

THE ROLE OF PERCEPTUAL SALIENCE IN THE FUNDAMENTAL ATTRIBUTION ERROR

Why do people fall prey to the fundamental attribution error? One reason is that when we try to explain someone's behavior, our focus of

attention is usually on the person, not on the surrounding situation (Baron & Misovich, 1993; Heider, 1944, 1958; Jones & Nisbett, 1972). In fact, the situational causes of another person's behavior are practically invisible to us (Gilbert, 1999 Gilbert & Malone, 1995). If we don't know what happened to someone earlier in the day (e.g., she received an F on her midterm), we can't use that situational information to help us understand her current behavior. And even when we know her situation, we still don't know how she interprets it (e.g., the F may not upset her because she's planning to drop the course anyway). If we don't know the meaning of the situation for her, we can't accurately judge its effects on her behavior.

If information about the situational causes of behavior is unavailable or difficult to interpret, what does that leave us with? Although the whole of any given situation may be largely unknown or even out of sight for us, the individual is "perceptually prominent"—our eyes and ears notice people. And what we notice seems like the reasonable and logical cause of the observed behavior (Heider, 1958). We can't see the situation, so we overlook its importance. People, not the situation, have **perceptual salience** for us; we pay attention to them, think about them, and tend to assume that they alone cause their behavior (Lassiter et al., 2002; Moran, Jolly, & Mitchell, 2014).

Perceptual Salience
The seeming importance of information that is the focus of people's attention

Several studies have confirmed the importance of perceptual salience—especially an elegant one by Shelley Taylor and Susan Fiske (1975). In this study, two male students engaged in a "get acquainted" conversation. (They were actually both accomplices of the experimenters and followed a script during their conversation.) At each session, six actual research participants also took part. They sat in assigned seats, surrounding the two conversationalists (see Figure 4.4). Two sat on each side of the actors; they had a clear, profile view of both individuals. Two observers sat behind each actor; they could see the back of one actor's head but the face of the other. Thus, the conversationalist who was visually salient—that is, the individual the participants could see better—was cleverly manipulated.

After the conversation, participants were asked questions about the two men—for example, Who had taken the lead in the conversation? Who had chosen the topics

Figure 4.4 Manipulating Perceptual Salience

This is the seating arrangement for two actors and the six research participants in the Taylor and Fiske study. Participants rated each actor's impact on the conversation. Researchers found that people rated the actor they could see more clearly as having the larger role in the conversation.

(Based on Taylor & Fiske, 1975)

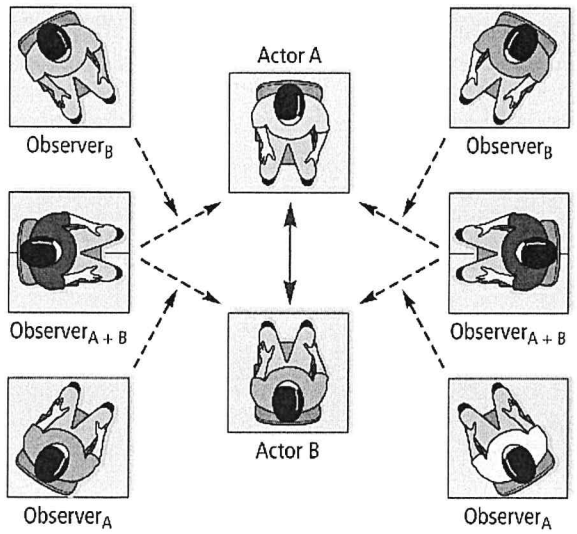
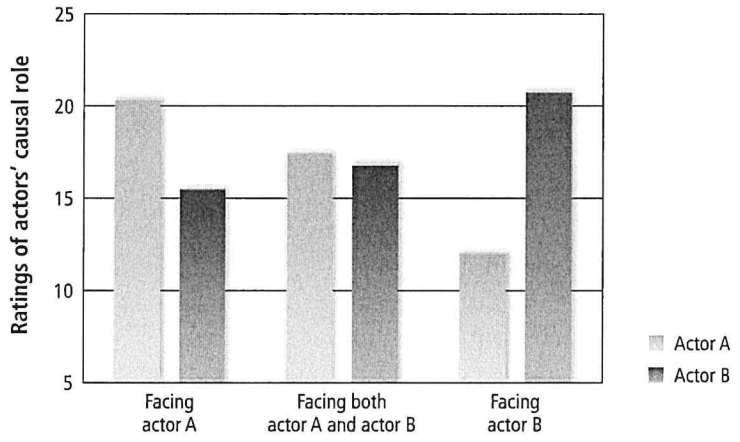


Figure 4.5 The Effects of Perceptual Salience

These are the ratings of each actor's causal role in the conversation. People thought that the actor they could see better had more impact on the conversation.

(Based on Taylor & Fiske, 1975)



to be discussed? What happened? The person they could see better was the person they thought had more impact on the conversation (see Figure 4.5). Even though all the observers heard the same conversation, those who faced student A thought he had taken the lead and chosen the topics, whereas those who faced student B thought he had taken the lead and chosen the topics. In comparison, those who could see both students equally well thought both were equally influential.

Perceptual salience plays a role in how we view higher-stakes conversations as well. Consider a police interrogation in which investigators question a potential suspect for an unsolved crime. G. Daniel Lassiter and his colleagues (2007; Lassiter, 2010) presented 21 courtroom judges and 24 police officers with a videotape of an individual confessing to a crime. These judge and police participants were shown one of three different versions of the videotape: (a) the camera's focus was on the suspect only, (b) the camera's focus was on the detective only, or (c) there was equal camera focus on the suspect and the detective. Participants were asked to rate how voluntary the confession seemed, as opposed to it seeming coerced. For both the judge and the police respondents, the videotape that focused only on the suspect produced significantly higher ratings of voluntariness than the other two videotape versions (Lassiter et al., 2007). In other words, the perceptual salience of the suspect, when shown alone, triggered the fundamental attribution error, making him appear guiltier than when he was less perceptually salient. These results are worrisome because videotaping the suspect only is standard operating procedure in many real criminal investigations. In fact, one country, New Zealand, has adopted a rule of "equal focus" camera perspective (suspect + detective) for videotaped interrogations, in direct response to concerns about attributional bias (Lassiter et al., 2006).

Our visual point of view, or perceptual salience, helps explain why the fundamental attribution error is so widespread. We focus our attention more on the person than on the surrounding situation because the situation is so hard to see or know. So we hear a debater argue strongly against abortion, and our first inclination is to explain this in dispositional terms: "This person must be anti-abortion rights." But we are capable of realizing that this explanation might not be the whole story. We certainly have the mental sophistication to think, "On the other hand, I know she was assigned this position as part of a debate," adjusting our attributions more toward a situational explanation. However, the problem is that people often don't adjust their judgments enough. In the Jones and Harris

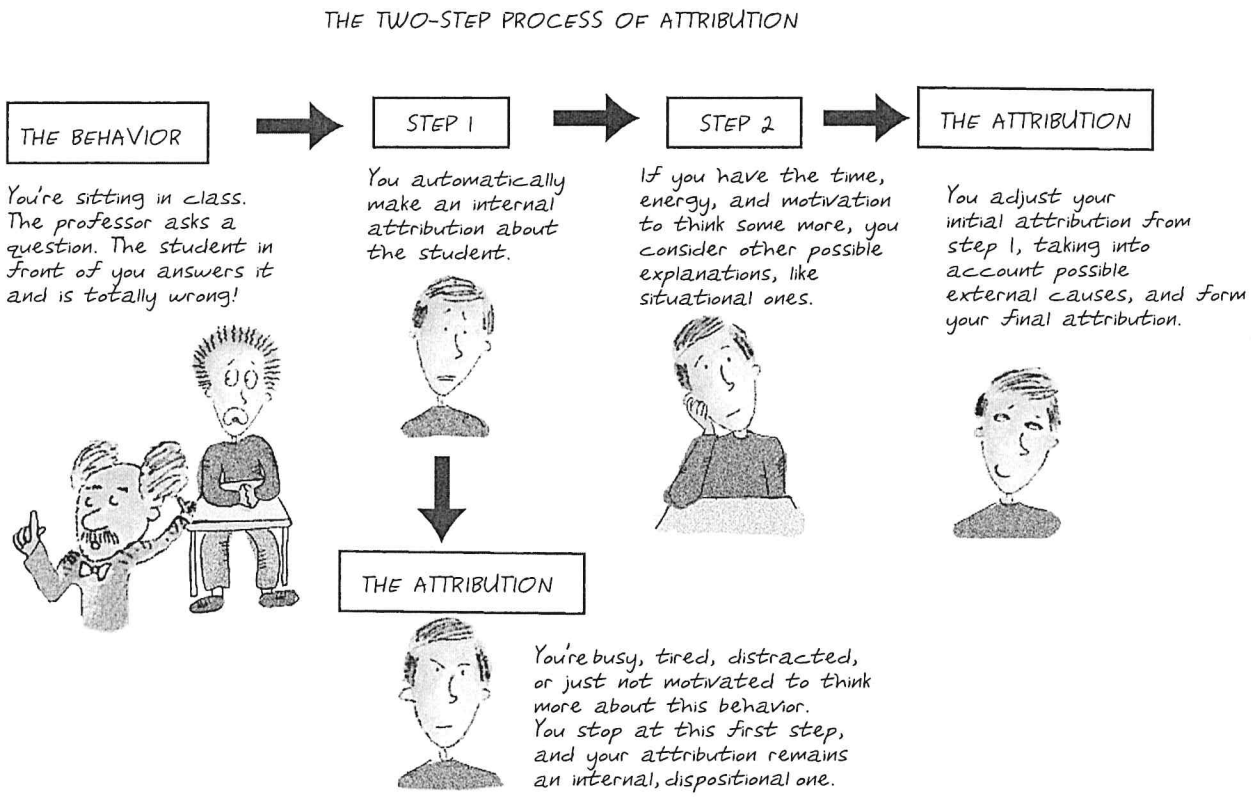
(1967) experiment, participants who knew that the essay writer did not have a choice of topics nevertheless thought that what he had written told them *something* about his true attitudes. They adjusted insufficiently from the most salient information—the position taken in the essay (Quattrone, 1982).

Watch SURVIVAL TIPS! AVOID JUMPING TO CONCLUSIONS

THE TWO-STEP ATTRIBUTION PROCESS In sum, we go through a **two-step attribution process** when we make attributions (Gilbert, 1989, 1991, 1993; Krull, 1993). We make an internal attribution, assuming that a person's behavior was due to something about that person. We then sometimes attempt to adjust this attribution by considering the situation the person was in. It's just that we often don't make enough of an adjustment in this second step. Indeed, when we are distracted or preoccupied, we often skip the second step altogether, making an internal attribution in the extreme (Gilbert & Hixon, 1991; Gilbert & Osborne, 1989; Gilbert, Pelham, & Krull, 1988). Why? Because the first step (making the internal attribution) occurs quickly and spontaneously, whereas the second step (adjusting for the situation) requires more effort and conscious attention (see Figure 4.6). Indeed, recent brain-imaging studies provide evidence at a neural level that our tendency to spontaneously consider the internal, mental states of actors often leaves us less likely to think later about potential situational explanations for their actions (Brosch et al., 2013; Moran et al., 2014).

Two-Step Attribution Process
Analyzing another person's behavior first by making an automatic internal attribution and only then thinking about possible situational reasons for the behavior

Figure 4.6 Two-Step Process of Attribution



When do we engage in this second step of attributional processing? If and when we consciously slow down and think carefully before reaching a judgment; if we are cognitively alert and motivated to make as accurate a judgment as possible; or if we are suspicious about the behavior of the target person—for example, believing that he or she has ulterior motives (Hilton, Fein, & Miller, 1993; Risen & Gilovich, 2007; Webster, 1993). Of course, this two-step model of attribution may be less applicable to individuals in cultures in which internal attributions are not a default response (Mason & Morris, 2010), as discussed in the final section of this chapter.

Self-Serving Attributions

Imagine that Imani goes to her chemistry class one day feeling anxious because she's getting her midterm grade back. The professor returns her exam. Imani turns it over and sees that she has received an A. What will Imani think explains her grade? As you might guess, people tend to take personal credit for their successes: Imani is likely to think that her success was due to the fact that she's good at chemistry and just plain smart. But what if she got a bad grade? Here, she is more likely to blame external events beyond her control, such as the professor for giving an unfair test. When our self-esteem is threatened, we often make **self-serving attributions**. Simply put, these attributions refer to people's tendency to take credit for their successes by making internal attributions but to blame the situation (or others) for their failures by making external attributions (Kestemont et al., 2014; Miller & Ross, 1975; Pronin, Lin, & Ross, 2002).

Self-Serving Attributions
Explanations for one's successes that credit internal, dispositional factors and explanations for one's failures that blame external, situational factors

A particularly interesting arena for studying self-serving attributions is sports (Wertheim & Sommers, 2016). When explaining their victories, athletes and coaches both point overwhelmingly to aspects of their own teams. In fact, an analysis of professional athletes' and coaches' explanations for their team's wins and losses found that 80% of the attributions for wins were to such internal factors. Losses were more likely to be attributed to external causes, outside of the team's control, such as bad luck or the superior play of the other team (Lau & Russell, 1980). Roesch and Amirkhan (1997) further wondered if an athlete's skill, experience, and type of sport predicted attributional tendencies. They found that less experienced athletes were more likely to make self-serving attributions than experienced ones; experienced athletes realize that losses are sometimes their fault and that they can't always take full credit for wins. They also found that athletes in solo sports made more self-serving attributions than those in team sports. Solo athletes, such as tennis players, know that winning and losing rests on their shoulders.

Why do we make self-serving attributions? Most people try to maintain their self-esteem whenever possible, even if that means distorting reality by changing a thought or belief. (We will discuss this concept at length in Chapter 6.) Here we see a specific attributional strategy that can be used to maintain or raise self-esteem: just locate "causality"—the reason something happened—where it does you the most good (Greenberg, Pyszczynski, & Solomon, 1982; Shepperd, Malone, & Sweeny, 2008; Snyder & Higgins, 1988). We are particularly likely to engage in self-serving attributions when we fail at something and we feel we can't improve at it. The external attribution protects our self-esteem, as there is little hope we can do better in the future. But if we believe we can improve, we're more likely to attribute our current failure to internal causes and then work on improving (Duval & Silvia, 2002). Another related reason has to do not with how we see ourselves but rather with how we present ourselves to others (Goffman, 1959). We want people to think well of us, as we discussed previously. Telling others that our poor performance was due to some external cause can be a way to put a "good face" on failure and manage impressions.

Yet one more reason individuals make self-serving attributions has to do with our prior discussion about the kind of information that is available to people. Let's imagine the attributional process of another student in Imani's chemistry class, Ron, who did poorly on the midterm. Ron knows that he studied very hard for the midterm, that he typically does well on chemistry tests, and that in general he is a good student. The D on the chemistry midterm comes as a surprise. The most logical attribution Ron can make is that the test was unfair—the D grade wasn't due to a lack of ability or effort. The professor, however, knows that some students did well on the test and some did poorly; given the information available to her, it is logical for the professor to conclude that Ron, not the difficulty of the test, was responsible for his poor grade (Miller & Ross, 1975; Nisbett & Ross, 1980).

People also alter their attributions to deal with other kinds of threats to their self-esteem. One of the hardest things to understand in life is the occurrence of tragic events such as random attacks, terminal diseases, and fatal accidents. Even when they happen to strangers we have never met, they can be upsetting. They remind us that if such tragedies can happen to someone else, they could happen to us. So we take steps to deny this fact. One example is the belief that bad things happen only to bad people—or, at least, only to people who make mistakes or poor choices. This allows us to rest assured that bad things won't happen to us because we won't be that careless. Melvin Lerner (1980, 1998) has called this the **belief in a just world**—the assumption that people get what they deserve and deserve what they get (Adolfsson & Strömwall, 2017; Aguiar et al, 2008; Hafer & Begue, 2005).

Belief in a Just World
A defensive attribution wherein people assume that bad things happen to bad people and that good things happen to good people

The just-world belief has some sad and even tragic consequences. For example, consider the terrible hypothetical of a female student on your campus being raped. How do you think you and your friends would react? Would you wonder if she'd done something to trigger the attack? Ask if she had been acting suggestively earlier in the evening or whether she had invited the perpetrator into her room? Problematic questions like these are examples of a defensive attribution process by which people might try to make themselves feel better about a disturbing attack by placing some of the blame onto the victim (Burger, 1981; Lerner & Miller, 1978; Stormo, Lang, & Stritzke, 1997). Indeed, research has found that the victims of crimes or accidents are often seen by others as contributing to their own fate. For example, people tend to believe that victims of rape and domestic abuse are somehow to blame for the crimes committed against them (Abrams et al., 2003; Bell, Kuriloff, & Lottes, 1994). By using this attributional bias, the perceiver does not have to acknowledge that there is a certain randomness to becoming a victim, that accidents or crimes can happen to good and careful people as well (see the photo gallery on the next page). The belief in a just world keeps anxiety-provoking thoughts about one's own safety at bay.

The "Bias Blind Spot"

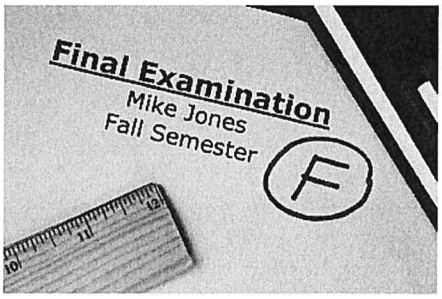
By now, we've discussed a number of attributional biases. Chances are you've thought of an occasion or two when you've fallen prey to one of these biases. But chances are you also think that these are isolated incidents and this is really a bigger problem for other people. If you are thinking this way, you're not alone! Emily Pronin and colleagues have studied this tendency and found evidence for what they call a **bias blind spot**: the tendency to think that others are more susceptible to attributional biases than we are (Hansen et al., 2014; Pronin et al., 2002, 2004).

Bias Blind Spot
The tendency to think that other people are more susceptible to attributional biases in their thinking than we are

To study the bias blind spot, researchers presented participants with descriptions of a number of biases. We will focus on two here: self-serving attributions and victim blaming. The descriptions the participants read never used the word *bias* (which makes it sound like a bad thing); instead, they were described as *tendencies*

EXAMPLES OF SELF-SERVING BIAS

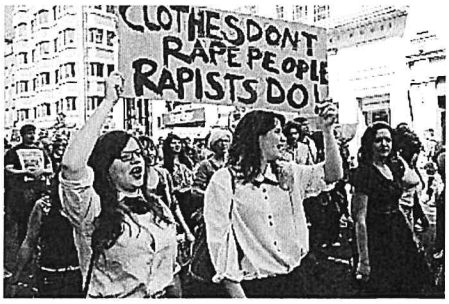
Revel Interactive



The attribution process is all about making sense of the world around us, but it can also play a self-serving function. Consider, for example, the attributions that a student might make upon receiving a poor grade on an exam. Blaming external factors (e.g., the test was unfair, the room was too crowded and distracting, it was just a busy time of the semester) can help protect the ego from the negative feedback.

Another form of self-serving attribution is the tendency to blame victims for their own misfortune. The conclusion that "bad things only happen to bad people" is one way to reassure ourselves that we will remain immune from such tragedy. One egregious example of this occurs when anyone suggests that a natural disaster was God's way of punishing segments of our society for supposedly immoral behavior.

Have you ever heard about a mugging or other crime in your area and convinced yourself that this would never happen to you because you'd take better precautions? Perhaps the victim was distracted on a cell phone at the time of the crime or walking alone in a poorly-lit area? While there certainly are steps we can take to reduce the likelihood of being robbed, such thoughts also serve to make us feel safer in an often unpredictable world.



One particularly problematic example of victim blaming occurs in cases of rape. By attributing such crimes, at least in part, to choices or actions made by the victim, perceivers are able to avoid acknowledging that anyone could become the victim of sexual violence. Here you see protesters speaking out against this tendency to blame sexual assault on the way a victim was dressed.

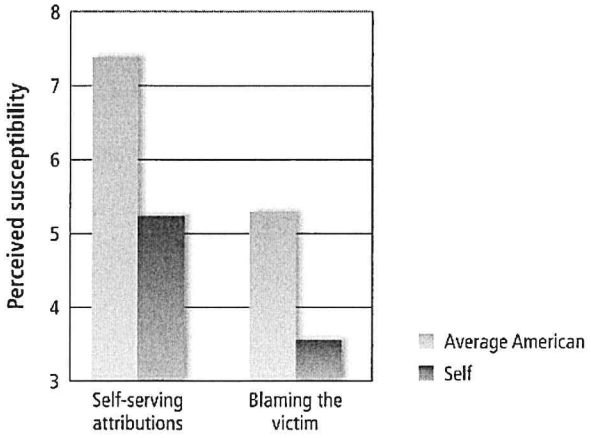
In short, the tendency to hold on to the belief that we live in a just world in which people only experience the outcomes they deserve is often a self-serving one. This underlying sentiment can be seen in sayings such as "what goes around comes around" and "he or she had it coming." Such a mindset may be reassuring in some ways, but it also prevents us from a fuller, more reasoned consideration of events in our social world.

to think a certain way. Participants were asked to rate how susceptible they thought they were to each of these thought tendencies, using a scale ranging from "not at all" to "strongly." Next, participants made the same ratings for how susceptible they thought the average American was to these tendencies. The results indicated a striking difference: Participants felt they were only "somewhat" susceptible to self-serving attributions, while the average American was rated as much more susceptible, an ironically self-serving belief in its own right. Similarly, participants felt they rarely committed the "blaming the victim" attribution, but again, they judged the average American as much more likely to do so (see Figure 4.7).

Figure 4.7 Perceived Susceptibility to Attributional Biases for Self and the Average American

Research participants rated their own susceptibility to two attributional biases and that of the "average American." They believed that others were significantly more likely to engage in biased thinking than they themselves were.

(Based on Pronin, Lin, & Ross, 2002)



Thus, it appears that we realize that attributionally biased thinking can occur in other people, but we're not so good at spotting it in ourselves. Our own thoughts seem rational and sensible, but other people, hey, they're susceptible to biases! These findings suggest that we often need to reflect more carefully on our judgment processes, check our conclusions, and remind ourselves that a bias blind spot may be lurking.

Review Questions

1. All of the following are examples of an internal attribution *except* for which one?
   - **a.** After winning close to $100 playing poker, Fred explains that he's always been a skilled gambler.
   - **b.** Velma blames her poor grade on her biology exam on the idea that she's never been good at taking multiple-choice exams.
   - **c.** Daphne thinks that the reason her brother is never able to hold a steady job is that he's lazy and quick to get angry with others.
   - **d.** Shaggy says that the only reason for his recent van accident is that the road he was traveling on that day was wet from a recent rainfall.
2. Although he claims to hate reality television, Simon never misses an episode of *Hoarders*. Simon's behavior (i.e., watching *Hoarders*) is
   - **a.** high in distinctiveness.
   - **b.** low in distinctiveness.
   - **c.** low in consensus.
   - **d.** low in consistency.
3. The two-step process of attribution suggests that
   - **a.** people first make an internal attribution and then correct for situational influences.
   - **b.** people first make an external attribution and then correct for dispositional influences.
   - **c.** Americans are less likely than Chinese to commit the fundamental attribution error.
   - **d.** if the attribution process is disrupted at either step, no attribution will be made.
4. Which of the following is the most accurate conclusion based on the Jones and Harris (1967) Castro essay study?
   - **a.** When a target's behavior is forced, perceivers do not attribute it to any sort of internal cause.
   - **b.** We are less generous with ourselves when making attributions for negative events than we are when others are the actors.
   - **c.** We are more likely to make an internal attribution for a chosen action versus a forced action.
   - **d.** We are more likely to make an internal attribution when the actor in question is perceptually salient.
5. Who of the following individuals is most likely to make a self-serving attribution?
   - **a.** Rory, a golfer in the early stages of his career
   - **b.** Mariano, a baseball player who has won multiple championships in the past
   - **c.** LeBron, a basketball player who has been playing since he was young
   - **d.** Roger, a professional tennis player with over a decade of experience

Culture and Social Perception

LO 4.4 Describe how culture influences our processes of social perception and attribution.

Social psychologists are focusing more and more on the role of culture in social perception. Beyond our discussion of nonverbal communication and emblems from before, does the culture in which we grow up influence how we perceive other people and try to make sense of their behavior? Let's look at the evidence.

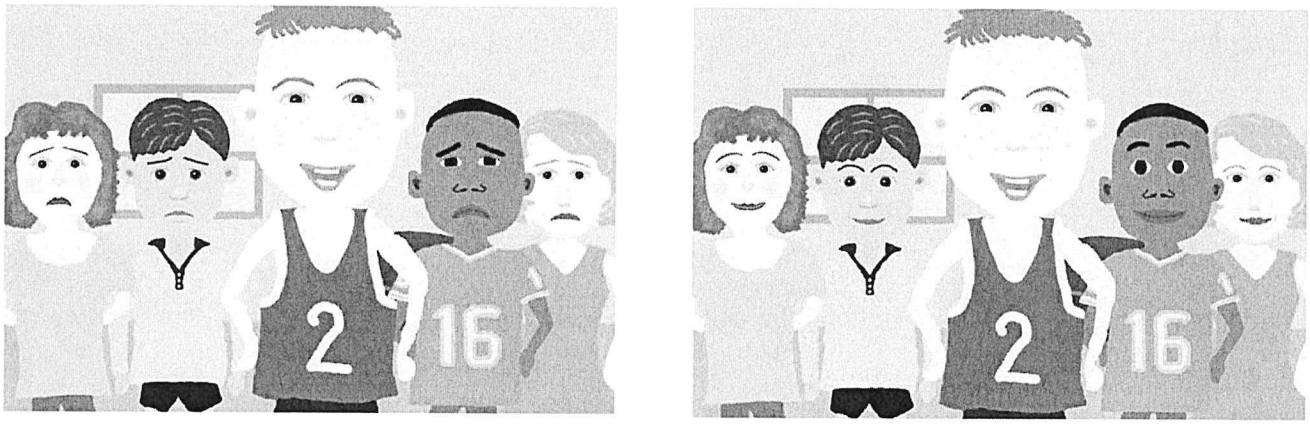
North American and some other Western cultures stress individual autonomy. A person is perceived as independent and self-contained; his or her behavior reflects internal traits, motives, and values (Lu, Fung, & Doosje, 2017; Markus & Kitayama, 1991). The intellectual history of this cultural value can be traced from the Judeo-Christian belief in the individual soul and the English legal tradition of individual rights (Kitayama et al., 2006; Menon et al., 1999). In contrast, East Asian cultures such as those in China, Japan, and Korea tend to stress group autonomy. The individual is more likely to derive his or her sense of self from the social group. The intellectual history of this belief derives from the Confucian tradition—for example, the "community man" (*qunti de fenzi*) or "social being" (*shehui de renge*)—as well as from Taoism and Buddhism (Menon et al., 1999, p.703; Zhu & Han, 2008).

Holistic Versus Analytic Thinking

Research has indicated that these differing cultural values predict the kind of information that people notice and pay attention to. As we discussed in Chapter 3, the values inherent in individualistic Western cultures cause people, as they grow up, to develop more of an *analytic thinking style.* This style involves focusing on the properties of objects (or people) while paying much less attention, if any, to the context or situation that surrounds that object. In contrast, the values of collectivistic cultures, such as those of East Asia (e.g., China, Korea, and Japan), cause people to develop more of a *holistic thinking style.* Here, people focus on the "whole picture"—that is, the object (or person) and the context that surrounds that object as well as the relationships that exist between them (Nisbett, 2003; Nisbett & Masuda, 2003). We don't mean to suggest that these are either–or differences, that all people in one culture think one way and all people in another culture think another way; obviously, a great deal of variability exists within cultures as well. But these generalized differences in thinking styles do predict how we perceive other people.

For example, imagine that you are talking to a group of friends. The expression on one friend's face catches your attention. She's frowning, and her mouth is set in a tight line. What is she feeling? The analytic thinking style suggests that you would focus on her face alone and reach a decision. The holistic thinking style suggests that you would scan the faces of the others in the group, compare them to hers, and then reach a decision.

Takahiko Masuda and colleagues (2008) conducted a study much like this. They presented research participants in the United States and Japan with cartoon people in groups. One person in each cartoon was the central figure, and had a facial expression that was happy, sad, angry, or neutral. The other people in the group had facial expressions that either matched the central figure or were different. The participants' task was to judge the central person's emotion on a 10-point scale. The researchers found that the facial expressions of the other group members' faces had little effect on Americans' ratings of the central figure. If the central figure was smiling broadly, he received a high rating for "happy." It didn't matter what the rest of the group was expressing. In comparison, the facial expressions of the other group members had a significant effect on Japanese participants' ratings of the central figure. A broad smile was interpreted as very happy if the group members were also smiling; the same broad smile was interpreted as less happy if the other group members looked sad or angry. In short, the

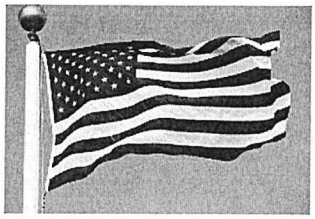


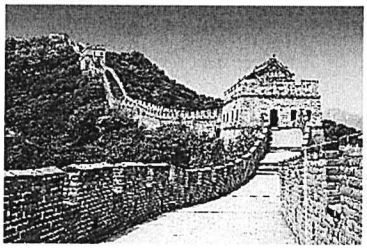
What emotion do you think the central person (the one in the middle) is experiencing in each of these cartoons? Your answer might depend on whether you live in a Western or East Asian culture (see the text as to why).

meaning of the cartoon character's facial expression depended on his "context"—what the other cartoon characters standing next to him seemed to be feeling (Masuda et al., 2008). The researchers also measured the eye-tracking movements of the participants as they looked at the cartoons. The Japanese spent more time looking at the cartoon characters in the background than did the Americans. Both groups began by looking at the central character, but after 1 second, the Japanese started to scan the other characters significantly more than did the Americans (Masuda et al., 2008).

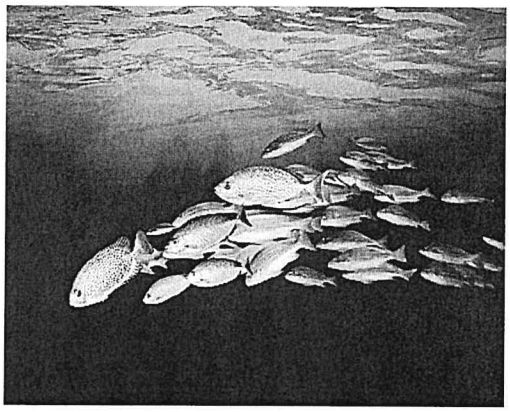
SOCIAL NEUROSCIENCE EVIDENCE The eye-tracking results in the study by Masuda and colleagues (2008) suggest that something very interesting is going on at a physiological level in people as they engage in analytic versus holistic thinking. Beyond eye movements, other researchers have explored how differences in cultural thinking styles predict how the brain responds to social stimuli (Knowles et al., 2001; Mason & Morris, 2010). Trey Hedden and colleagues (2008) used functional magnetic resonance imaging (fMRI) to examine where in the brain cultural experience predicts perceptual processing. Their participants, East Asians and Americans, underwent fMRI brain scans while making judgments about the length of lines inside boxes. Some participants were told to ignore the box around each line ("ignore context"), and some were told to pay attention to the box around each line ("attend to context"). Although participants from the two cultures were equally accurate at judging the lengths of the lines, they showed significantly more brain activity when they had to follow the instructions that were the opposite of their usual cultural thinking style. That is, American participants showed greater activation in higher-order cortical regions (frontal and parietal areas) when told to pay attention to the context, while East Asian participants showed greater activity in the same brain regions when told to ignore context. Greater cortical activation means that the participant had to exert more attention (in a sense, had to work harder cognitively) when asked to perceive objects in a way that was not typical (Hedden et al., 2008).

Other researchers have used event-related potentials (ERPs) to measure brain activity among individuals from different cultures (Goto et al., 2010, 2013). Although fMRI indicates which brain regions are active, ERPs provide a more fine-grained analysis of the onset and offset of neural firing by measuring electrical activity through sensors placed on the scalp. In one study, researchers presented participants with a series of simple perceptual tasks that involved visual information about "targets" and context (Lewis, Goto, & Kong, 2008). In an interesting twist, their participants were all Americans who had grown up in American culture but were of two different ethnic backgrounds: European American or East Asian American. The pattern of ERPs indicated that the European American participants paid more attention to the targets, while the East Asian American participants paid more attention to the context surrounding the targets.



Bicultural research participants were first "primed" with images from one of their cultural heritages: either images evoking American culture or images evoking Chinese culture, like these.



Next, these research participants were asked to make an attribution about the behavior of the fish in the front of the pack. Would they make dispositional or situational attributions about the fish's behavior, given the cultural priming they had experienced earlier?

Cultural Differences in the Fundamental Attribution Error

Previously we saw that people often commit the fundamental attribution error, overestimating the extent to which people's behavior is due to internal, dispositional factors and underestimating the role of situational factors. Is the fundamental attribution error stronger in Western than Eastern cultures?

As it turns out, people in individualist cultures do prefer dispositional attributions about others, relative to people in collectivist cultures, who prefer situational attributions (Newman & Bakina, 2009; Tang, Newman, & Huang, 2014). For example, Joan Miller (1984) asked people of two cultures—Indians living in India and Americans living in the United States—to think of various examples of their friends' behaviors and to explain why those behaviors occurred. The American participants used more dispositional explanations for the behaviors. In contrast, Indian participants gravitated toward situational explanations for their friends' behaviors. But, you might be thinking, perhaps the Americans and Indians generated different kinds of examples. Perhaps the Indians thought of behaviors that were really situationally caused, whereas the Americans thought of behaviors that were really dispositionally caused. To test this alternative hypothesis, Miller (1984) took some of the behaviors generated by the Indian participants and gave them to Americans to explain. The attributional difference remained: Americans still found internal, dispositional causes for the behaviors that the Indians had thought were caused by the situation.

Remember our discussion of the role of evolution in the display of facial expression? Well, Miller's (1984) cross-cultural findings serve as an important reminder that environmental forces—in this case cultural experiences—play a major role in social perception processes as well. In fact, some of the most interesting findings from Miller's (1984) research come from the American and Indian children she examined. In addition to comparing the attributional tendencies of adults from the two cultures, Miller also analyzed the attributions of 8-, 11-, and 15-year-olds. Unlike the significant differences she observed among the adults, children from the United States and India were more or less indistinguishable in terms of how they explained their friends' behaviors. In short, cross-cultural differences in social perception do not appear to be inborn; rather, we arrive in this world with a flexibility of thinking style that is molded over time by cultural (and other) influences.

A fascinating look at this flexibility is provided by Ying-Yi Hong and colleagues (2003), who investigated the fundamental attribution error among Hong Kong Chinese college students. These students were bicultural—deriving their identity not only from their Hong Kong Chinese culture but also from Western culture, to which they had had a great deal of exposure. The participants were first shown a series of images and asked brief questions about them. The purpose of the photographs was to activate, or prime, one aspect of their bicultural identity. Half the participants saw images representing American culture, such as the American flag and the U.S. Capitol building. The other half saw Chinese images, such as a Chinese dragon and the Great Wall. Participants in the control condition saw geometric figures, which did not prime either culture. Next, in a supposedly unrelated task, participants were shown a photograph of a fish swimming in front of a school of other fish. They were asked to make an

attribution: Why was this fish swimming in front of the others? Their responses were coded for dispositional reasons (e.g., "The fish is leading the other fish") and situational reasons (e.g., "The fish is being chased by the other fish"). The researchers found that about 30% of the control group made situational attributions about the central fish. However, participants primed with thoughts of one culture or the other showed markedly different patterns. Those primed with Chinese cultural images were more likely to make situational attributions about the fish (nearly 50% of the participants), while those primed with American cultural images were less likely to make situational attributions (about 15% of the participants), instead making dispositional attributions (Hong, Chiu, & Kung, 1997; Hong et al., 2000).

Thus, it appears that Western cultures prompt people to think more like personality psychologists, viewing behavior in dispositional terms. In contrast, Eastern cultures seem to prompt people to think more like social psychologists, considering the situational causes of behavior. However, it would be a mistake to think that members of collectivist cultures don't *ever* make dispositional attributions. Of course they do—it's just a matter of degree. A tendency to think dispositionally about others is prevalent in many cultures. However, members of collectivistic cultures are more aware of how the situation affects behavior and more likely to take situational effects into account (Choi et al., 2003; Krull et al., 1999; Miyamoto & Kitayama, 2002). Thus, the difference is that people in collectivist cultures are more likely to go beyond dispositional explanations and consider information about the situation as well.

Culture and Other Attributional Biases

Continuing to explore the link between culture and attributional biases, social psychologists have examined the self-serving bias and found a strong cultural component to it as well. In a meta-analysis of 266 studies conducted all over the world, Amy Mezulis and her colleagues (2004) found that the self-serving bias is strongest in the United States and some other Western countries—Canada, Australia, and New Zealand. It is also prevalent in Africa, Eastern Europe, and Russia. Within the United States, samples of participants who were of White, Asian, African, Hispanic, and Native American descent did not differ significantly from each other in the degree of self-serving bias. On the other hand, some Asian cultures displayed a lower level of self-serving bias: Japan, the Pacific Islands, and India (Mezulis et al., 2004). That said, more recent studies—such as one including more than 1,300 Chinese secondary school students—have found evidence that the self-serving bias can be just as strong in Asian samples (Hu, Zhang, & Ran, 2016).

Why, though, might there be reason to suspect that self-serving biases could vary across cultures? In many traditional Asian cultures, the values of modesty and harmony with others are highly valued. For example, Chinese students are expected to attribute their success to other people, such as their teachers or parents, or to other aspects of the situation, such as the high quality of their school (Bond, 1996; Leung, 1996). Their cultural tradition does not encourage them to attribute their success to themselves (such as to their talent or intelligence), as it does in the United States and other Western countries. Indeed, in some studies Chinese research participants take less credit for their successes than U.S. participants do (Anderson, 1999; Lee & Seligman, 1997). Instead, Chinese students attribute their success to aspects of their situation, reflecting the values of their culture.

Do individualistic and collectivistic cultures differ in how they explain Olympic gold-medal success? Prior research has indicated that "cultural products" such as advertising, song lyrics, television shows, and art reflect their culture's values: more individualistic content is found in Western cultures and more collectivistic content in countries such as Japan, Korea, China, and Mexico (Morling & Lamoreaux, 2008). Hazel Markus and her colleagues (2006) found that this applies to sports commentary

Sports competitors often make very different attributions for their outcomes based on whether they win or lose as well as cross-cultural variability in attributional tendencies.

as well. They coded Japanese and American media accounts of their countries' gold medal–winning athletes. They found that U.S. media described the performance of American gold medalists in terms of their unique abilities and talents. In comparison, Japanese media described the performance of Japanese gold medalists in much broader terms, including the individual's ability but also encompassing his or her past experiences and the role of other people such as coaches, teammates, and family in his or her success. Finally, American coverage focused more on positive aspects than negative ones (e.g., "[his] strength keeps him in the running"), consistent with a self-serving attributional style, while Japanese coverage focused more equally on positive and negative aspects (e.g., "Her second Olympics is a regrettable one. She was almost at the top, but she didn't have a perfect performance"; Markus et al., 2006). The following two quotes from gold medalists summarize the different ways in which culture influences how one explains one's own behavior:

> *I think I just stayed focused. It was time to show the world what I could do.... I knew I could beat [her], deep down in my heart I believed it ... the doubts kept creeping in ... but I just said, "No, this is my night."* (Misty Hyman, American gold medalist, 200m butterfly).

> *Here is the best coach in the world, the best manager in the world, and all of the people who support me—all these things were getting together and became a gold medal. So I think I didn't get it alone, not only by myself* (Naoko Takahashi, Japanese gold medalist, marathon).

What about failure? Remember that in individualistic cultures such as the United States, people tend toward the self-serving bias, looking outside of themselves—to the situation—to explain failure. In collectivist cultures such as Chinese, the reverse is true: People often attribute failure to internal causes, not to external ones (Anderson, 1999; Oishi, Wyer, & Colcombe, 2000). In fact, in some Asian cultures such as Japan and Korea, self-critical attributions are a common and important "glue" that holds groups together. In response to self-criticism, others offer sympathy and compassion, which strengthens the interdependence of the group members (Kitayama & Uchida, 2003).

Finally, recall that the belief in a just world is a defensive attribution that helps people maintain their vision of life as safe, orderly, and predictable. Is there a cultural component to it as well? Adrian Furnham (1993, 2003) argues that in a society where most people tend to believe the world is a just place, economic and social inequities are considered "fair." In such societies, people believe that the poor and disadvantaged have less because they deserve less. Thus, the just-world attribution can be used to explain and justify injustice. Research suggests that, indeed, in cultures with extremes of wealth and poverty, just-world attributions are more common than in cultures where wealth is more evenly distributed (Dalbert & Yamauchi, 1994; Furnham & Procter, 1989). And more recently, Cindel White and colleagues (2017) have argued that one more way to explore cross-cultural variability in just-world beliefs is to consider endorsement of the religious concept of *karma*, the notion that good moral behavior is rewarded and bad actions will be punished, whether in this lifetime or others. More than 1.5 billion people practice religions centered on karmic principles, including Buddhism, Hinduism, and Jainism. The relationship between traditions like these and social perception tendencies remains understudied, but it has the potential to help further our understanding of how people—all people, in all cultures—seek to assess and explain the behavior of those around them.

Review Questions

1. In Masuda and colleagues' (2008) study of cross-cultural perceptions of emotion,
   a. eye-tracking technology is used to demonstrate that American participants spend less time looking at the peripheral individuals surrounding the central figure than do Japanese participants.
   b. American participants' perceptions of the central figure's emotional state are significantly influenced by the emotions of the peripheral individuals.
   c. context has little influence on the social perception processes of the participants.
   d. American participants begin by looking at the peripheral individuals before shifting their attention to the central individuals.
2. Research using fMRI brain scanning technology indicates which of the following?
   a. East Asian participants use a greater percentage of their frontal and parietal regions when making judgments than do American participants.
   b. Neither East Asian nor American participants are able to overcome their typical, learned ways of attending to (or overlooking) context.
   c. Participants from both cultures demonstrate greater activation in higher-order cortical regions when asked to perceive objects in a way that is unusual for them.
   d. Social neuroscience data provide no support for the hypothesis that holistic versus analytic thinking styles tend to vary by cultural background.
3. In Miller's (1984) cross-cultural investigation of attribution style in the United States and India,
   a. among young children, Americans were more likely to make external attributions, and Indians were more likely to make internal attributions, but few cultural differences emerged with adult participants.
   b. among young children, Americans were more likely to make internal attributions, and Indians were more likely to make external attributions, but few cultural differences emerged with adult participants.
   c. few cultural differences emerged with children, but among adults, Americans were more likely to make external attributions, and Indians were more likely to make internal attributions.
   d. few cultural differences emerged with young children, but among adults, Americans were more likely to make internal attributions, and Indians were more likely to make external attributions.
4. Who among the following individuals would you predict would be most likely to make an external attribution for any given behavior observed?
   a. A U.S.-born American adult
   b. An 8-year-old born and raised in India
   c. A Hong Kong Chinese college student who had just been shown images related to Chinese culture
   d. A Hong Kong Chinese college student who had just been shown images related to American culture
5. Whereas individuals in Western cultures tend to think more like _____, individuals in Eastern cultures tend to think more like _____.
   a. children; adults
   b. psychologists; sociologists
   c. personality psychologists; social psychologists
   d. introverts; extraverts

Summary

LO 4.1 **Explain how people use nonverbal cues to understand others.**

- **Nonverbal Communication** Nonverbal communication is used to express emotion, convey attitudes, and communicate personality traits. People can accurately decode subtle nonverbal cues.
  - **Facial Expressions of Emotion** The six major emotions are universal, encoded and decoded similarly by people around the world; they have evolutionary significance. *Affect blends* occur when one part of the face registers one emotion and another part registers a different emotion. Mirror neurons are involved in emotional encoding and decoding and help us experience empathy.
  - **Culture and the Channels of Nonverbal Communication** Other channels of nonverbal communication include eye gaze, touch, personal space, gesture, and tone of voice. *Display rules* are particular to each culture and dictate what kinds of emotional expressions people are supposed to show. *Emblems* are gestures with well-defined meanings and are culturally determined.

LO 4.2 **Analyze how first impressions form quickly and persist.**

- **First Impressions: Quick But Long-Lasting** We form impressions of other people based on their facial structure, possessions, attire, and a variety of other cues, and

this process begins within milliseconds. Research on *thin-slicing* indicates that these snap judgments are not just quick; they also pick up on meaningful information and converge with the impressions formed by perceivers with even longer exposure to the target in question.

- **The Lingering Influence of Initial Impressions** Once formed, impressions remain influential because the *primacy effect* demonstrates that the first traits we perceive in another person influence our interpretation of subsequently learned information. We also tend toward *belief perseverance*, or clinging to conclusions even in the face of evidence that seems to indicate we should change our minds. Knowing what influences social perception can allow us to manage the impressions others form of us.

LO 4.3 **Explain how we determine why other people do what they do.**

- **Causal Attribution: Answering the "Why" Question** According to *attribution theory*, we try to determine why people do what they do in order to uncover the feelings and traits that are behind their actions. This helps us understand and predict our social world.
  - **The Nature of the Attribution Process** When trying to decide what causes people's behavior, we can make one of two attributions: an *internal*, or dispositional, attribution or an *external*, or situational, attribution.
  - **The Covariation Model: Internal Versus External Attributions** The *covariation model* focuses on observations of behavior across time, place, actors, and targets of the behavior. It examines how the perceiver chooses either an internal or an external attribution. We make such choices by using *consensus, distinctiveness*, and *consistency* information.
  - **The Fundamental Attribution Error: People as Personality Psychologists** In making attributions, people also use various mental shortcuts, including schemas and theories. One common shortcut is the *fundamental attribution error*, the tendency to believe that people's behavior corresponds to (matches) their dispositions. A reason for this bias is that a person's behavior has greater *perceptual salience* than does the surrounding situation. The *two-step attribution process* states that the initial and automatic attribution tends to be dispositional, but it can be altered by situational information at the second step.
  - **Self-Serving Attributions** People's attributions are also influenced by their personal needs. *Self-serving attributions* occur when people make internal attributions for their successes and external attributions for their failures. The *belief in a just world*, where we believe that bad things happen to bad people and good things happen to good people, allows us to avoid thoughts about our own mortality.
  - **The "Bias Blind Spot"** The *bias blind spot* indicates that we think other people are more susceptible to attributional biases in their thinking than we are.

LO 4.4 **Describe how culture influences our processes of social perception and attribution.**

- **Culture and Social Perception** Social psychologists have increasingly begun to consider cross-cultural differences in how people interpret the world around them.
  - **Holistic Versus Analytic Thinking** In individualistic cultures like the United States, people tend to pay more attention to the properties of objects. In collectivistic cultures like those of East Asia, people focus more on the whole picture, including context and the relationships between objects, as demonstrated by *social neuroscience evidence* from fMRI and ERP studies.
  - **Cultural Differences in the Fundamental Attribution Error** Although people from both individualistic and collectivistic cultures demonstrate the fundamental attribution error, members of collectivist cultures are more sensitive to situational causes of behavior as long as situational variables are salient.
  - **Culture and Other Attributional Biases** There is also evidence for cross-cultural differences in self-serving attributions and belief in a just world. Typically, these differences, too, occur between Western, individualistic cultures and Eastern, collectivistic cultures.