

Attribution Theory

Are assumptions getting you in trouble?

by Mark Gorkin, L.I.C.S.W.

On a recent airline flight home, I was sitting in the same row with a seemingly unresponsive parent with three children. After awhile the kids, not surprisingly, were getting restless. Where was mom? She was sleeping in her seat, in my mind, oblivious to her children. I couldn't help but wonder about another too young mother who was being unresponsive if not irresponsible.

At some point though, I noticed her black t-shirt with the following inscription in yellow letters: "Iraqi Veteran: Fighting the War on Global Terrorism." Curiosity began to replace judgment. When the young mother finally awoke, I commented on her shirt — suddenly her eyes began to water. She explained that her husband, stepfather to her kids, had been killed in Iraq the week before. I immediately verbalized, "No wonder you need to sleep!"

The Basis of Judgment, Otherwise and Objective

The above demonstrates my capacity for too quick and negative assumptions about the sleeping mother's motives and seeming parental inattention, and how all of us are susceptible to quick and faulty judgments about motives and intentions. Actually, I had made a common perceptual mistake and misjudgment based on a social psychology framework called Attribution Theory. Attribution theory examines how a perceiver or judge assesses another person's motives and behaviors. And a highlight of the model is the capacity for perceptual error based on whether an observer attributes a person's motives or actions to situational forces or personality factors.

For example, a colleague at work (whom you don't know well) has come in late two times in the last two weeks. It wouldn't be surprising if you began to start wondering about their motives and competencies, e.g., are they lazy, disenchanted with work, or just plain old passive-aggressive? However, if you were to come in late and asked to speculate about reasons for your hypothetical lateness, research indicates you would likely quickly note; the traffic conditions, needing to get a child to daycare, illness in the family etc.

Can you see the bias? When explaining our behavior we first focus on situational or outside conditions affecting intentions and actions, thus providing a rationale or protective cover for any outcomes or consequences. In contrast, while observing others, our initial predilection is to assess based on personality or motivational traits not on environmental constraints. An assessment focused on the individual alone, not seen in context, often makes it harder to be empathic or forgiving, or even just truly curious. This tendency to broadly, quickly or indiscriminately place personal disposition over situation when observing and evaluating others is called "Attributional Error."

Clearly, my assumption-like questions about the sleeping mother and the degree of parental responsiveness demonstrate attributional bias. If you had been sitting in my seat, what would your initial thought and judgment process have been? If you too were not perceptually objective, how might we reduce our one dimensional too quick to negative judgment tendencies? Consider these "Three Steps for Achieving More Fair and Balanced Observations and Judgments":

① **Challenge the Quick Judgment Tendency:** We all are creatures of habit; it is easy to fall into a prejudgment, especially if you have had a previous experience seemingly similar to the event or action being observed and evaluated, e.g., witnessed inattentive parenting. The key is to put on your mental-judgmental brake before going any further with the attributional process.

② **Shift From Assumptions and Judgments to Genuine Questions:** Giving thought even to a simple question as "What factors might be contributing to this woman's need to sleep?" surely would have raised some possibilities that would have tempered my negative assessment.

③ **Avoid All-or None Thinking and Attribution:** Even if it's appropriate to raise some questions or concerns about a person's motivational state or attitude, don't stop there. Think hard or ask questions about the context in which the person is operating. Are there background barriers or bridges potentially impeding or facilitating normal or typical behavior and expected options or outcomes? In general, what are the environmental constraints and supports, social or cultural conditions or obligations, and mental status variables affecting the person's mood, mindset or possible pathways?

Hopefully, this essay has dramatically demonstrated that when observing others' actions or inactions rushing to judgment often leads to rash assessments. Don't just get caught up in the figure. Take the time and effort to raise questions about and carefully examine the situational background. Words to help us not just be more observant but also more tolerant. ▼

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