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Commentary:

A FUNDAMENTAL DISAGREEMENT ABOUT THE FUNDAMENTAL ATTRIBUTION ERROR, OR: THE SITUATION MADE HIM WRITE IT

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Abstract

Berry (2015) argues in his article "*Explanations and Implications of the Fundamental Attribution Error: A Review and Proposal*" (see this present issue of JISS) that (1) the occurrence of the FAE has potentially harmful implications, (2) explanations of its occurrence may be unified under the idea that it is caused by hypersensitive agency detectors in the mind (HADD), and (3) its effects may be mitigated by education and proper training. It is argued here that each of these points are brought into question by whether or not the FAE actually works in the way people believe it does, whether it in fact works at all, and whether or not thinking about behavior in terms of a person-situation dichotomy is even fruitful.

Keywords: Attribution, attribution error, correspondence bias, social psychology, situationism, personality psychology, person-situation dichotomy

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COMMENTARY

I've never been a great fan of the Fundamental Attribution Error (FAE). This is at least partly because I'm a personality psychologist; social psychologists seem to put a great deal of stock in it, as it supports the general proposition that situations are more important sources of behavioral variance than are traits. However, empirical evidence in support of the FAE is scarcer than we're generally led to believe (see Funder, 1982; Kreuger & Funder, 2004; Funder & Fast, 2010) and there is even reason to believe that the phenomenon may operate in the opposite direction, entirely.

For example, Ross' (1977) "false consensus bias" suggests that people *over* - rather than under - attribute behavior to environmental factors. Quattrone (1982) asked his participants to rate *situational* impact on the essay topics of authors (who had, in reality, been free to choose), standing traditional FAE methodology on its head. By drawing attention to the salience of situations (rather than to attitudes), he found that participants tended to explain behavior in terms of external forces rather than internal - thus reversing the usual outcome.

I'm not sure the FAE is even "fundamental," and I'm not alone in this (see, e.g., Sabini, Seipmann, & Stein, 2001). My most direct objection to the "fundamental" nature of the FAE is described best by Funder & Fast (2010): how successful, they ask, are our attempts to change a friends' political standpoint, a spouse's dishwashing habits, or a child's clinginess? And how successful are governmental programs aimed at rehabilitating undesirable behaviors such as drug abuse, violent tendencies, or drunk driving? In all cases, the answer is: not as successful as we imagine when we *make* the attempt (or fund the program). It can easily be argued that we *over*estimate the power of external factors to alter behavior - dispositions actually being quite powerful (and frequently inflexible).

To be clear, then, I'm not disagreeing with Berry's (2015; see this issue of JISS) summary of the FAE so much as I have always been dubious about the construct itself (indeed, I cannot blame the author for anything stated in his article; I can only assume that the situation made him write it!). Whether or not understanding the FAE and its implications is actually "important" in any real sense is up for debate. As it happens, I have personally seen friendships end over the FAE; in graduate school, one doctoral student made a complaint about a colleague's behavior, and another doctoral student accused them of committing the FAE. The first turned on their heel and left, wounded, and the two haven't spoken since.

This example is clearly of the $N = 1$ anecdotal sort, and in a tongue-in-cheek way, serves to support Berry's assertion that "the FAE affects relationships" (p. 52). But it is also possibly the best example of a real-life negative outcome of the FAE given in this volume - though the umbrage arose not as an outcome of the FAE itself but rather from a hypersensitive understanding of the implied insult in its application. This experience also suggests that neither properly educating people on the topic (Berry's suggestion, p. 52) nor

increasing attributional complexity (p. 53) may have the ameliorative effects the author hopes for (assuming we're willing to agree that doctoral students in Social Psychology are likely to be a) relatively educated on the topic and b) relatively complex, attributionally).

Berry's paper is in main a brisk summary of the properties and consequences of the FAE, but I would be remiss in not mentioning the novel portion of it, which is the proposal that the phenomenon be understood in terms of a higher level cognitive function, the HADD. Because my criticism is with the FAE itself, I have no particular quarrel with thinking about it in those terms, although I am always uncertain, in general, as to whether or not ascribing the mechanism of function for an already intangible theoretical construct to *another* intangible theoretical construct goes a long way in illuminating things. To his credit, Berry does suggest that the HADD be examined empirically before being given too much weight as an explanatory tool, and I will be interested to follow along and see what the results of those studies reveal. But as long as we're making educated guesses, I'd like to take a stab at it as well: the FAE, to the degree that it exists, may simply be a function of the availability heuristic. That is, we have more instances available of *people* doing things than of nebulous situational properties doing things. How many times have we seen or heard about a car wrapped around a telephone pole because the driver was texting, or drunk, or fell asleep at the wheel? Compare this to the number of times we've seen or heard an explanation in which the situation was such that any person would have no choice but to do the same and wrap *their* car around the pole as well! My explanation is certainly no more empirically supported than Berry's, but it does have the benefit of cleaving a bit closer to Occam's Razor.

Probably the largest problem, in my opinion, in spending effort understanding the FAE is that it represents a dangerous sort of oversimplification. Firstly, it is an oversimplification in that people probably do some more sophisticated thinking than the FAE acknowledges when it comes to making attributional inferences (Gawronski, 2004). McClure (1998), for example, proposes that people generally recognize that their behavior can be (and frequently is) multiply determined, and Reeder (2009) suggests that people take higher level states such as intention and motive into consideration when making dispositional attributions.

But more importantly, it is less profitable, frankly, to treat dispositions and situations as though they are competing forces in understanding human behavior than it is to recognize that the two imply one another and interact almost inseparably on most occasions. Take, for example, traditionally competing explanations for why a driver has just cut you off on the freeway: the dispositional attribution ("because (s)he is an aggressive driver") is not inseparable from situational aspects about the conditions of the road or other drivers on it that would provoke behaviors perceived by some as aggressive. Likewise, the situational attribution ("because (s)he was late for work") also intrinsically implies something dispositional, because not everyone will respond to lateness the same way; my

wife never breaks speed laws, regardless of hurry, whereas I get very anxious about being late and am much more likely to worry and therefore, rush.

The point, then, is that Kurt Lewin had it right in his (1936) proposal that understanding behavior requires knowledge of both the person *and* the situation. In fact, if we look at persons, situations, and behaviors as part of a triad of sorts (Funder, 2001; 2006), it becomes equally true that if we want to understand people we need to know something about both behaviors and situations, and that if we want to understand situations, we need to know something about both persons and behaviors. In other words, persons and situations interact in such a way that viewing them separately paints an incomplete picture and is ultimately unfruitful.

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