goal of theory, the development of theory, the focus of research, and the research methods used. Finally, we talked about how theories change through the processes of extension and intention.

Case Study 2: The Development of Attribution Theory

Because the focus of this chapter was on theory development, we think it is appropriate to describe the development of a theory that is used frequently in the communication field: attribution theory. According to attribution theorists, human beings often work like detectives, continually trying to make sense of what inspired various events, mannerisms, and behavior. Just as a crime scene investigator pieces together clues in an effort to determine a suspect's motive, the theory says that you, too, go through life picking up clues and making judgments about what you believe influenced your own and others' conduct. These judgments and conclusions provide reasons for behavior that are called attributions.

The foundations of the theory can be traced to 1958, when Heider focused his attention on the process of drawing inferences—the assumptions individuals make regarding the causes of behavior as well as the judgments made about who is responsible for that behavior. Heider made "relatively global claims about what people do. Specifically, he argued that individuals act like naïve scientists" when trying to make sense of the world around them (Manusov & Spitzberg, 2008, p. 38). Specifically, Heider (1958) proposed that individuals try to determine whether a behavior in question was caused by dispositional or situational factors. *Dispositional factors* refer to internal or personal features, such as one's personality, character, or biological traits. These factors are relatively stable and unique to each individual. Conversely, *situational factors* refer to external dynamics that are relatively uncontrollable and are determined by the environment or circumstance at hand, such as the weather, noise, or even traffic.

Expanding on Heider's work, Jones and Davis (1965) focused specifically on the intentionality of dispositional (internally driven) behavior. Jones and Davis argued that we can make "correspondent inferences," or assumptions about the type of person someone is, by looking at the intentionality of their actions, whether the actions are socially desirable, and whether the actions have noncommon effects (the actions are unexpected). For instance, if one of your coworkers knows that a presentation to the board is important

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to the entire team but fails to get his or her part of the presentation to the rest of the team members by the deadline, you are likely to perceive it as intentional, socially undesirable, and unexpected. As such, you will probably make the correspondent inference that this coworker is lazy (at best) or is maliciously sabotaging the team (at worst).

Finally, Kelley's (1967, 1973) covariation model explains the causal nature of the complete attribution process. Specifically, this model has a greater scope than does Jones and Davis's correspondent inference theory because Kelley seeks to explain attributions overall, whereas Jones and Davis focused only on the intentionality of dispositional inferences. According to Kelley (1967, 1973), individuals judge the causality of another's behavior by examining four factors: consensus, consistency, distinctiveness, and controllability. When the first three of these features are combined (i.e., consensus, consistency, distinctiveness), a perceiver can judge whether the actions were internally controlled (i.e., disposition) or externally controlled (i.e., situational). That is, you assign meaning based on perceived controllability—how much command an individual had over the behavior.

First, the perceiver determines if an actor's behavior demonstrates *consensus*—that is, would other people react similarly if placed in the same situation? The more people whom you observe behaving similarly increases the perception of consensus. If Rebecca storms out of the quarterly sales meeting in a huff and snarls at everyone in her path while the other members of the sales team leave the meeting with smiles and small talk, low consensus has occurred. Here, you might conclude that something unique to Rebecca has caused her ill temper. If, however, everyone on the sales team heads out of the meeting sporting a grimace and a foul mood, then you have observed high consensus. In this case, you would probably conclude that the situation (the meeting) caused the employees' crankiness.

Second, the perceiver must determine whether the actor's behavior demonstrates consistency. *Consistency* refers to whether the person in question engages in similar behaviors over time. Comparable to consensus, the more often you observe an actor engaging in the same behavior, the more your perception of consistency will increase. If Rebecca always seems to be angry and rude to colleagues, then you would say that her ill-tempered behavior after the sales meeting is highly consistent with her previous behavior. Here, you would likely conclude that Rebecca is simply an obnoxious person. Conversely, if you typically view Rebecca as pleasant and enthusiastic, you would conclude that her sudden change of behavior

has low consistency. In this case, you would attribute her mood to the situation; perhaps a superior provided some negative feedback at the meeting, for example.

Third, a perceiver judges an actor's *distinctiveness*—that is, whether the person acts differently in one situation than in others. Unlike consensus and consistency, which increase with others' conformity and number of observances over time, distinctiveness decreases when the actor behaves similarly across many different situations. That is, a behavior is only labeled distinctive if it is "markedly different in one situation or task from others" (Texter, 1995, p. 60). Continuing with our example, if Rebecca speaks rudely and demonstrates hostility toward everyone in the company, to her friends, to her children, and to her neighbors, then Rebecca's offensive mannerisms have low distinctiveness. Moreover, you will likely make an internal attribution and assume that Rebecca is simply a rude person. On the other hand, if Rebecca's anger and disrespectful tone occurred only after this one meeting and in no other meetings or situations, then you would conclude this behavior is highly distinctive because it appears contrary to the other circumstances in her life. In this case, you would attribute Rebecca's unfriendly means of communication as situational; something happened at the meeting that really troubled her.

As mentioned earlier, by combining one's judgments of consensus, consistency, and distinctiveness, the perceiver can determine the controllability of the actor's behavior. For example, you suppose an *interior locus of control* when you believe the actor could have controlled the behavior. Alternatively, you assume an *exterior locus of control* when the behavior appears to have been unavoidable.

According to Kelley and others' research, three possible sequences result when you combine your judgments of consensus, consistency, and distinctiveness. First, an external (or situational) attribution is made when your judgment of the actor yields high consensus, high consistency, and high distinctiveness. In other words, if nearly everyone leaves the sales meeting feeling irritable (high consensus), this petulance happens each time there is a sales meeting (high consistency), and yet most days go by with pleasant employees who are not typically grouchy in other circumstances (high distinctiveness), then you would attribute the crabby mood to an uncontrollable situation. That is, something happens during these meetings that creates palpable unhappiness in people.

Similarly, the behavior is judged as an external situation if the observer perceives the event to be one of high consensus, low consistency, and high

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distinctiveness. The only difference in this case is that the behavior has not been observed over time (low consistency). Nonetheless, if employees leave the meeting feeling disgruntled, this has not happened before, and employees are typically quite satisfied at work, you would still attribute this frustration as a consequence of the environment—the meeting. The same prediction is made for low consensus, low consistency, and highly distinctive behavior because the actions are so out of character for the actor and others around that you simply conclude the situation is to blame.

Conversely, when the behavior is judged as low consensus, high consistency, and low distinctiveness, you are likely to make an internal attribution. For example, if Rebecca is the only person who storms out of the meeting (low consensus), Rebecca usually leaves the sales meeting feeling irritable (high consistency), and Rebecca exhibits crankiness in most other situations (low distinctiveness), then you would attribute her irritability to her personality. That is, Rebecca chooses to be an unpleasant person.

Attribution theory has been widely studied, with thousands of studies focused on establishing the validity of its claims. The theory was originally developed in the field of psychology, and not surprisingly, the majority of research seeking to test attribution theory is experimental in nature. Results of these studies indicate that the attribution process is not as global as originally conceived; attribution seems to only take place in certain contexts, and in certain cultures (Manusov & Spitzberg, 2008). As such, researchers continue to refine the theory.

Questions for Consideration

1. Do you believe attribution theory takes a social scientific or a humanistic approach? Provide evidence for your claim.

2. What research method(s) could be used to study attribution theory? Explain how the method(s) could be employed.

3. Describe the process of developing attribution theory. Do you see evidence of growth by extension or intension? What leads you to believe this is the case?