

## Measurement Implications of Nisbett's Attribution Theory Research Notes by Andy Van de Ven

**Richard Nisbett, Craig Kaputo, Patricia Legent, Jeanne Marecek "Behavior as seen by the actor and as seen by the observer," *Journal of Personality and Social Psychology*, volume 27, 2, 1973, 154-164.**

Different individuals often have very different views of the causes of a given person's behavior. Jones and Nisbett (1971) hypothesized that actors tend to perceive their behavior as a response to situational cues, while observers tend to perceive the behavior as a manifestation of a disposition or the quality possessed by the actor. This proposition has received extensive empirical support. Nisbett et al. proposed three reasons for the divergent perspectives of behavior as seen by the actor and as seen by the observer.

First, the actor's attention at the moment of action is focused on the situational cues -- the environmental attractions, repulsions, and constraints -- with which his behavior is coordinated. It therefore appears to the actor that his behavior is a response to these cues, that is, caused by them. For the observer, however, it is not the situational cues that are salient but the behavior of the actor. In Gestalt terms action is figural against the ground of the situation. The observer is therefore more likely to perceive the actor's behavior as a manifestation of the actor and to perceive the cause of behavior to be a trait or quality inherent in the actor.

Second reason for the differential bias of actors and observers stems from a difference in the nature and the extent of the information you possess. In general the actor knows more about his past behavior and his present experiences than does the observer. This difference in information probably serves to prevent the actor from interpreting his behavior in dispositional terms while allowing the observer to make such an interpretation. For example if an actor insults another person an observer may attribute this to the actor being hostile. The actor, however, may know that he rarely insults others and may believe that his insult was a response to being provoked in a series of encounters with the person he attacked. The difference in information available to the actor and the observer is reduced when the actor and observer know one another well but is always present to a degree (Nisbett et al., p. 154).

Third Nisbett et al. (1973) add this explanation by reporting the results of a series of studies.

The first study indicates that observers tend to assume that actors have a disposition to behave in the future in ways similar to those which they have just observed, while actors do not share observers assumptions about their own future behavior.

The second study shows that actors tend to attribute the cause of their behavior--specifically choice of college major and girlfriend--to properties of the chosen entity, while they are more likely to attribute the similar choices of their close friends to dispositional qualities of their friends.

The third study shows that actors tend to believe that they have fewer personality traits than do other people.

**Richard Nisbett, Eugene Borgita, Rick Crandall, and Harvey Reed, "Popular induction: Information is not necessarily informative," chapter 8 in Carroll and Payne (1976) *Cognition and social behavior*. New York: John Wiley and Sons.**

Attribution theory poses a view of man as lay scientist, attempting to infer causes for the effects he observes. The causes he attributes determine his view of his social world, and his view may determine his behavior. An extremely broad range of phenomena, from Ash's conformity research to Shacter's the motion work can be usefully described as instances of the causal attribution process at work.

Kelley proposed three formal sources of influence on the causal attribution process. In attempting to attribute causes for events of the form "actor responds in ex fashion to situation A," he suggested that the lay attributor responds to three sources of information: distinctiveness information, consistency information, and consensus information. The attribution of cause will depend on answers to these three questions. An actor is seen as the primary cause of his response to the extent that he responds in a way in all situations of the general type and to the extent that his responses are not exhibited by others. The situation is seen as causal to the extent that the actor's response is unique to situation A and to the extent that his response is widely shared (Nisbett et al., 1976: 114).

Empirical research has found no support for Nisbett's fundamental axiom that people respond to consensus information. Theory and common sense notwithstanding, there is mounting evidence that people are largely uninfluenced by their causal attributions by knowledge of the behavior of others. Knowledge that the actor's response is widely shared seems not to prompt the inference that the situation rather than the actor is the chief causal agent. Conversely knowledge that the actor's response is unique seems not to prompt the inference that the actor rather than the situation is the chief causal agent. Hence there is little support for the view that people utilize consensus information in making attributions.

**Richard Nisbett and Timothy DeCamp Wilson, "Telling more than we can know: Verbal reports on mental processes," *Psychological Review*, volume 84, 3 (May 1977): 231- 259.**

"Why do you like him? How did you solve this problem? Why'd you take that job?" Are common question asked of individuals for why they behaved, choose, or evaluated as they did. Nisbett and Wilson summarized research findings that there may be little or no direct introspective axis to higher order cognitive processes. When people attempt to report on their cognitive processes they do not do so on the basis of any true introspection. Instead the reports are based on apriori, implicit causal theories.

We may have no direct access to higher order mental processes such as those involving evaluation, judgment, problem-solving, and initiating behavior. Researchers doubt people's ability to observe directly the workings of their own minds. "It is a result of thinking, not the process of thinking, that appears spontaneously in consciousness" (Miller, 1962, p. 56). "The constructive process (of encoding perceptual sensations) therefore themselves never appear in consciousness, their product to do (Neiser, 1967). If a person is asked, "what is your mother's maiden name?" The answer appears swiftly in consciousness. Then if the person is asked "how did you come up with that?" he is usually reduced to the inarticulate answer, "I don't know, it just came to me."

Interestingly, while people can readily provide reasons for their behavior or evaluations, they appear stumped when asked about perceptual and memorial processes

Nisbett and Wilson examine the question of whether individual's explanations of their cognitive behaviors can be correct. Three conclusions are reached.

First. People often cannot report accurately on the effects of particular stimuli on higher order, inference-based responses.

Second. When reporting on the effects of stimuli they may base their reports on implicit apriori theories about the causal connection between stimuli and responses.

Third. Subjective reports about higher order mental processes are sometimes correct, but even the instances of correct report are not due to direct introspective awareness. Instead they are due to the incidental correct employment of apriori causal theories.