Attribution Theory Essay, Research Paper

Attribution Theory: Is It Really Fair?

One of the easiest theories to accept and understand is Heider’s Attribution Theory. This theory is used to explain how a person comes to a quick decision about someone or their personality, based on that person’s behavior. Basically stated, we attribute a characteristic, such as labeling one as a thief, because we observed the person participating in a particular behavior, such as shoplifting. On the surface of this theory, we can say this it is correct in its assumption, since that is how we generally want to judge others. But upon analysis of this theory, we find that this theory does not apply to 100 percent of the situations that may arise. As with all theories, there are strengths, but this one also has glaring weaknesses. This theory is also known to be objective, but I can not easily attribute all five criteria of objective theories to this it.

There are obvious strengths to this theory. If you have observed the behavior of a person, especially the same behavior or action repeatedly, then it is fair to attribute that behavior to that person. For years, civil rights activists have been trying to make this society one where a person is judged by the content of their character, or who that person is on the inside, rather than by the way a person may look or who he or she is on the outside. It is popular for people to say “actions speak louder than words.” For these reasons, we are being judged each minute of each day. The Attribution Theory explains why we make these decisions and why it is so important to make a good first impression. These first actions are what people will be judging you by and most of the time, their observations will stick and leave you with no opportunity to change that impression. Another strength of this theory is it can satisfy four of the five criteria for being an objective theory. It explains the data, it is very simplistic which as helps to make it practical, an finally, the hypothesis is testable by just observing the person longer to see if he or she continues to demonstrate the behavior with which that person has been labeled.

The overpowering weakness of this theory is that it does not take prejudices a person may have or what type of experiences that the observer may have had that will force that person to look at a behavior in a way that is different from the norm. A person with a prejudice may see any behavior of yours as either positive or negative, depending on that prejudice. If a person is racially prejudice ( I am not some radical or anything, this is just the easiest example I could think of) against black people, he would be able to slant any action he has observed me participating in as a negative one. His opinion would have nothing to do with my actions, but only with his blind view of this world. What happens when the observer does not take into account the environment around the situation that he is witnessing. There also may be some pressures the subject has to deal with that is unknown to the one observing and making a decision. There are just too many factors for a person to make a judgement about someone he may or may not know.

As I stated earlier, this theory easily satisfies four of the criteria for being considered objective. I have to question its ability to correctly predict the future, though. I am skeptical of anything that claims to have the ability to predict the future. In effect, this theory says “once a cheat, always a cheat.” You can not label someone based on a single behavior you know they have demonstrated in the past. A person is allowed mistakes and is allowed the opportunity to correct those mistakes, so it is not totally fair to label someone based on one experience. But all other criteria of objective theories apply to this.

In a perfect world, this could be considered as a perfect theory. It gives a person the chance to be judge by what they have done which is what most people want. But being that we are not living in a utopia, many other factors have to be considered before we can just let this theory be the truth that we live by. We must look at the entire picture, all the evidence, before we can come to a decision that may incorrectly label someone. It is up to us to be responsible and fair enough to draw correct, or at least as close as possible to being correct, decisions.