**Learning Outcome: Discuss two errors in attributions**

**Command term “Discuss”-** Offer a considered and balanced review that includes a range of arguments, factors or hypotheses. Opinions or conclusions should be presented clearly and supported by appropriate evidence.

This is a level 3 command term and would require an **extended response** (22 marks).

**Attribution Errors**

Attributional decisions about one’s own and other’s behavior are not always logical or objective. They can become biased or distorted causing attribution errors.

**Why?**

* **Cognitive Misers**-we want to make quick conclusions OR don’t have time to consider all of the evidence.
* The information can be used in ways to maximize its use to us, for example to raise or maintain our self-esteem.

**Fundamental Attribution Error (Ross 1977)**

Fundamental attribution error is the general tendency for people to overestimate internal**, dispositional factors** when explaining **other people’s behavior** and underestimate external, situational factors.

**Reasons it occurs**

1. **Focus of attention** – observers more likely to notice behavior over situation, and this tends to blind us to the external or situational forces.
2. **Predictability of behavior** – personal characteristics are more stable over changeable situation and fulfill observers need to predict and control the world
3. **Linguistic ease** – English language makes it easier to describe person and action in the same way e.g. ‘aggressive’ behavior from an ‘aggressive’ person.

**Evidence**

**Ross et al (1977)**

Ross et al. (1977) argued in the introduction to their study that when people draw inferences about actors (i.e. other people) they consistently fail to make adequate allowance for the biasing effects of social roles upon performance. Some roles include more social control in interactions with other people and give them advantages. For example, an examiner knows what questions will be asked at an exam and therefore has a greater chance to display specialised knowledge compared to a student taking the exam, who does not know exactly what the topic will be. A consequence is that the examiner appears wiser than he or she really is. Ross et al. argue that this is a common phenomenon and that people forget to take this into account when explaining behaviour.

**Aim and Method**

The aim of the experiment was to test whether knowledge of allocated social roles in a quiz show would affect participants’ judgments of expertise (general knowledge). The hypothesis was that participants playing the role of questioner would be seen as more knowledgeable than contestants. The researchers recruited 18 pairs of female and 18 pairs of male students from an introductory class at Stanford University. They were told that the research was about impression formation, i.e. how people form impression of other people. The researchers simulated a game show and participants were randomly assigned to the roles of either questioner or contestant. Twelve pairs of participants of each sex were assigned to the experimental condition. In the experimental condition, the role of questioner or contestant was randomly allocated to one person in each pair. The questioners were asked to compose ten general knowledge questions that were challenging but not impossible so that they could be answered in a few words. A model of an adequate question could be: What is the capital of Mexico? The questioners were encouraged to use their own knowledge and what could be found in newspapers. In this way the experimenter assured that the questioners had an advantage and that the sample questions were truly biased and not representative of general knowledge but rather of the knowledge of the questioner. While the questioners prepared the questions the contestants were doing a writing task where they also made up easy general knowledge questions but they were explicitly told that their job in the experiment was to answer questions made by the questioners. Six pairs of each sex were assigned to the control condition. In this condition, the questioners and contestants were told that the questions were made up by another person and they spent the time before the quiz by making easy general knowledge questions. Their task was thus similar to that of the contestant in the experimental condition but not similar to that of the questioner. Both participants were fully aware of the tasks of each other’s preparation and quiz task. The independent variable in this experiment was then whether the questions were prepared by the questioner (experimental condition) or by someone else (control condition). The dependent variable was the knowledge ratings of the contestant and the questioner after the quiz had taken place. Another 24 participants were asked to watch the quiz game so their role was to be observers. The questioner was instructed to ask each question and then wait around 30 seconds for a response. It should be acknowledged if contestants answered correctly. If not, the correct answer was given. This procedure was done without any other communication between the contestant and the questioner to avoid confounding variables. After the quiz, all participants (contestants, questioners, observers) were given questionnaires where they rated questioners and contestants. One of the items on the questionnaire asked them to rate the “general knowledge” of the contestants and questioners. This was the key question. After the quiz, Ross et al. gave a brief test of general knowledge to all participants.

**Findings**

On average, contestants got only 4 out of 10 questions right in the experimental condition. The contestants consistently rated the general knowledge of the questioners in the experimental condition as superior to that of the contestants. The observers did the same. In the control condition, there was no difference in general knowledge ratings. There was no difference in general knowledge in the follow-up test that all participants took after the quiz.

**Evaluation**

This was a rather ingenious experimental set-up in that it so clearly gave the opportunity to demonstrate attributional biases. In the experimental condition, the questioners made up their own questions and this was known by all participants. The experiment used first year students at Stanford University as participants so it can be argued that they are not representative of a general population, i.e. there is sampling bias. However, attribution theory assumes that the fundamental attribution error is a general bias in attribution processes so that it should be present in most people but it is necessary to confirm the findings of this experiment with other participants as well. The issue of ecological validity could also be raised. However, it would not be possible to conduct a controlled study like this in real life and it was possible to demonstrate a cause-effect relationship between a situational bias and its consequence on judgment of people’s ability because the experimental method was chosen.

The results demonstrate that the situational advantage resulting from the fact that questioners could make their own questions led to higher general knowledge ratings from both contestants and observers. The participants attributed the questioners’ ability to answer the questions to dispositional factors. According to the researchers this clearly demonstrates the powerful influence of social roles in that contestants and observers were fully aware that the questions were prepared by the questioner. Because the participants’ roles were randomly allocated, it seems unlikely that the questioners should actually have more general knowledge than the contestants. The contestants and observers failed to take into consideration the situational factors that gave the questioners an advantage thus demonstrating the fundamental attribution error. This is in line with the assumptions of attribution theory that actors tend to attribute their own behaviour to situational factors, while observers tend to use dispositional attributions for other people’s behaviour.

An interesting point is that the questioners were aware of their role advantage in the quiz game, so they did not rate their own general knowledge as being superior to that of the contestants. This was probably because they were aware of the advantage of the role allocated to them. Therefore questioners recognised their advantaged position and could correct any attributional bias.

**References**

Ross, L., Amabile, T.M., Steinmetz, J.L. (1977). Social Roles, social control and biases in socialperception processes. Journal of Personality and Social Psychology, 35, 483-494.

**Supporting evidence**

**Jones and Harris (1967)**

These researchers asked their participants to read essays written by fellow students. The essays were about Fidel Castro’s rule in Cuba and were either supportive or critical of Castro. The participant’s task was to guess what attitude the writers of the essays really held towards Castro and his government. Half the participants were told that the essayists were free to choose whether to take a positive or negative view about Castro in their essay (choice condition). The other half were told that the essayists did not have any choice: the experimenter had assigned them in the pro-Castro or anti-Castro role (no choice condition).

As expected, the participants in the choice condition assumed that the essays reflected the genuine attitudes of their writers. However, participant’s ratings seemed to indicate that those in the no choice condition also thought that the essays reflected the genuine views of their authors. So despite the fact that it was made clear that the essayist’s behavior was severely constrained by the situation, observers still opted for an internal attribution.

**Fein et al (1990)**

US students read an essay about a character called Rob. In one of the conditions, the participants were told that Rob had been assigned to write in favour or against some view. In this condition, the expected FAE was obtained. In a second condition, participants were lead to believe that Rob’s essay expressed views which were very similar to those held by his professor and which, therefore, would be found pleasing by his professor. In this condition, no FAE was demonstrated. Commenting on this and other similar studies, Fein (2001) argues that we resist making dispositional attributions in situations where we suspect people may have ulterior motives for their behavior.

**Gilbert and Malone (1995)**

They argue that FAE involves a two-step process.

Initially when we observe some behavior, we draw an inference, based on largely automatic and often unconscious processing, that the behavior has been caused by some dispositional factor. The **second step** is based on more controlled and conscious processing. During this step we enquire into whether or not situational factors may have had an influence on the behavior. We make FAE as often as we do because the first step always forms part of the attribution process. We only occasionally proceed to the second step.

**Cultural Bias in the FAE**

In collectivist cultures (for example, China) the emphasis is on the primary social relationships of an individual (family, social role, cultural activities)

In individualistic cultures (for example, USA) the emphasis on the individual as the primary cause of action leads to dispositional attributions. The individual causes success and failure.

**Norenzayan et al (2002)**

* Korean and American participants.
* When they ONLY received information about individuals, both groups made dispositional attributions.
* When situational information was also provided, the Koreans included this information in their explanations much more than Americans did.

To conclude, there are some universal features of FAE but available information influences attributions.

**Miller (1984)**

Compared the attributions made by a sample of American and Hindu Indian children and adults for their own and other’s actions. Adult Americans clearly demonstrated the FAE but the error did not appear in American children until they got older, implying that this way of thinking is learnt through cultural processes. In support of this view, Hindu Indian participants explained other people’s behavior using situational factors and their own behavior internally, showing a reversed pattern.

This could be because different models of the self develop in individualistic and collectivist cultures. In individualistic cultures, children absorb the values of independence, competition and motivation, which lead them to see behavior as originating from the individual. In collectivist cultures, the social group is viewed as of greater importance than the individual. Hence the main explanatory framework is to look at situational factors in explaining other’s actions.

**Evaluation of FAE**

Strengths

* Promotes understanding of the common errors that people make when they attempt to explain behavior.
* Theory is supported by a lot of research.

Weaknesses

* The theory is culturally biased with too much focus on individualism. Much of the research was conducted in North America and Northern Europe.
* It ignores attributions made about one’s own behaviour.
* Many studies have been conducted in laboratories with student samples, making it difficult to generalize findings to the wider population.

**Self-Serving Bias Miller and Ross (1975)**

This relates to attributions of personal success and failure.

**Refers to people’s tendency to:**

* Attribute **success** to internal **dispositional causes**
* Attribute their **failures** to external **situational factors**

**Possible Explanations**

**Motivational Factors**

* **Greenberg et al (1982)** suggested that attribution is used to **maintain self-esteem** and for **impression management of esteem** in the eyes of others
* **Dispositional attributions** of success provides **self-enhancement**
* **Situational attributions** of failure provides **self-protection**

**Cognitive Factors**

* **Miller and Ross (1975)** People usually expect to **succeed based on their own abilities (**exaggerate the amount of control they have**).** If we expect to **succeed and do succeed** we attribute it to **dispositional factors.**
* Unexpected/unintended **failure** is perceived as due to **situational factors**
* Expected **failure** is perceived as due to **dispositional factors**
* Unexpected/unintended **success** is perceived as due to **situational factors**
* It is also suggested that the SSB occurs when people **don’t have enough information** and **limit themselves to the available information** (Miller and Ross, 1975)

**Some interesting aspects of SSB**

It can lead to **self-handicapping behavior**

Example:

Students who expect to fail an exam can openly make situational attributions

ie. by saying that they have hangovers or that they haven’t slept the whole night

**Depression**

Severely depressed people are more likely to make dispositional attributions (blaming themselves) for feeling miserable. Abramson et al (1989)

**Evidence**

**Lau and Russell (1980)**

Examined the attributions for success and failure made by professional sportspeople, both players and managers, for wins and losses. Lau and Russell selected a sample of 107 newspaper reports of games and examined the 594 explanations given within these for the outcome of the game. Each explanation was coded as internal/dispositional (e.g. ‘I played really well that day’) or external/situational (e.g. ‘some referee’s decisions just went in their favour’) by two independent coders who then compared their judgments for agreement. (Note that inter-observer reliability is particularly important in observational research). Results confirmed that a **self-serving bias was at work**: winners were significantly more likely to attribute their success to internal/dispositional factors such as hard work, than to situational factors.

**Johnson et al (1964)**

Psychology student participants were asked to teach two children how to multiply numbers by 10 and 20. The teaching was done in two phases via a one-way intercom. The first phase involved teaching children to multiply by 10; the second phase, how to multiply by 20. After each phase the children’s worksheets were made available to participants to assess the learning progress of children.

In fact, the worksheets had been marked in such a way that child A gave the right answers to all the questions on both worksheets. Depending on the condition, child B either did badly on both tasks, or did badly on the first worksheet and improved on the second. The participant, therefore, had either failed or succeeded in teaching child B the two tasks.

When child B’s performance improved, participants attributed responsibility for this to their good teaching. When child B failed to improve, they attributed this to the child’s lack of ability.

However this effect has not always been found with experienced teachers. (Ross et al 1974).

**Cultural Differences in SSB**

Is SSB linked only to individualistic cultures?

**Kashima and Triandis (1986)**

Asked American and Japanese students to remember details of slides of scenes from unfamiliar countries.

When asked to explain their performance, American students tended to attribute their *success* with dispositional factors like ability, and failure with external/situational factors. Japanese students tended to explain their *failure* with lack of ability. This is called the **modesty bias** and is a cultural variation of SSB.

**Bond, Leung and Wang (1982)**

Found that Chinese students who exhibited the **modesty bias rather than SSB** were more popular with their peers. The researchers argue that a *cultural norm* in Chinese societies is to maintain harmonious personal relationships. A person who makes self-effacing attributions would be better liked. In collectivist cultures people derive their self-esteem from group identity NOT individual achievement.

**Evaluation of SSB**

+ The theory can explain why some people (mostly from individualistic cultures) explain their failures as being caused by situational factors.

- The theory is culturally biased. It cannot explain why some cultures emphasize a self-effacing attribution (modesty bias).