

CORRESPONDENCE BIAS

Definition

The term *correspondence bias* describes perceivers' tendency to infer stable personality characteristics from other people's behavior even when this behavior was caused by situational factors. For example, students may infer a high level of dispositional (trait) anxiety from a fellow student's nervous behavior during a class presentation, even though such nervous behavior may simply be the result of the anxiety-provoking situation. The correspondence bias is an important phenomenon in research on impression formation, as it can lead to systematic errors in first impressions of other individuals.

History

Research on the correspondence bias has its roots in the works of social psychologists Fritz Heider and Gustav Ichheiser in the 1950s and experienced a rapid increase in the 1970s. However, it wasn't until 1986 that the term *correspondence bias* was proposed by social psychologists Edward E. Jones and Daniel Gilbert. To date, the correspondence bias is considered one of the most robust findings (that means that many researchers have found it in many different experiments and contexts) in social psychological research.

Causes

One reason why the correspondence bias is such a robust phenomenon is that it has multiple causes. First, perceivers commit the correspondence bias when they do not believe that a given situational factor influences the observed behavior. In the example outlined earlier, some students in the audience may not believe that giving a class presentation is anxiety provoking. As such, they will infer that the presenter must be an anxious person, even though everyone might show the same level of behavioral anxiety in this situation. Many social psychologists assume that this cause is responsible for cultural differences in the correspondence bias, as individuals in East Asian cultures tend to attribute a greater impact to situational factors than do individuals in Western cultures.

Second, perceivers commit the correspondence bias when they do not think about the presence of situational factors. In this case, perceivers may actually

believe that a given situational factor has a strong impact on people's behavior, but they may fail to consider this situational factor when they make inferences from situationally provoked behaviors. Such inferences are particularly likely when people are either not motivated to think about situational influences on other people's behavior or when they are too involved with other activities that keep their attention. For instance, in the earlier example, students may infer that their fellow student is highly anxious either when they are not motivated to think about the presenter's situation or when they are distracted by taking notes or listening to the person sitting next to them.

Third, perceivers often commit the correspondence bias when they apply their beliefs about situational influences in a manner that promotes rather than reduces the correspondence bias. This can be the case when beliefs about situational factors influence the interpretation of the observed behavior. For instance, people may believe that giving a presentation in front of scientists at a conference is more anxiety provoking than giving a lecture in front of students in class. This assumption, in turn, can lead perceivers to "see" more anxiety in the presenter's behavior when the presentation is in front of scientists at a conference than when it is in front of students in class. Importantly, this can be the case even when the presenter's behavior is exactly the same. As higher levels of perceived anxiety in the behavior usually result in higher levels of anxiety attributed to person (i.e., as a stable personality characteristic), such biases in the interpretation of behavior can promote the correspondence bias even when perceivers believe that situational factors have a strong impact on people's behavior and even when they are motivated and able to pay attention these factors.

Fourth, perceivers commit the correspondence bias when they believe that the behavior is highly informative for the actor's personality irrespective of whether or not it was provoked by the situation. Consistent with this notion, several studies have shown that people consider immoral behavior as highly informative for inferring immoral personality characteristics. In contrast, moral behavior is considered much less informative for inferring moral personality characteristics. For example, stealing an old woman's purse may be considered highly informative for inferring an immoral personality. However, helping an old woman across the street does not necessarily imply a moral character. In a similar vein, research has shown that people consider high-level performances as highly informative for

inferring high-ability levels, whereas low-level performances are considered much less informative for inferring low-ability levels. For instance, if a chess player beats the current world champion, people are likely to think of this person as a chess talent. However, if the same person loses a game against some other player, perceivers may think that this person simply had a bad day. Applied to the correspondence bias, such differences in the perceived informative value of other people's behavior can lead perceivers to deliberately reject situational factors as viable explanations for this behavior. Thus, they will infer stable personality characteristics from this behavior even when it was provoked by situational factors (e.g., that a person who stole an old woman's purse has an immoral personality, even when this person did not have anything to eat for several days).

Bertram Gawronski

See also Attributions; Attribution Theory; Correspondent Inference Theory; Fundamental Attribution Error

Further Readings

- Gawronski, B. (2004). Theory-based bias correction in dispositional inference: The fundamental attribution error is dead, long live the correspondence bias. *European Review of Social Psychology, 15*, 183–217.
- Gilbert, D. T., & Malone, P. S. (1995). The correspondence bias. *Psychological Bulletin, 117*, 21–38.

CORRESPONDENT INFERENCE THEORY

Definition

A correspondent inference, sometimes also called a correspondent trait inference, is a judgment that a person's personality matches or corresponds to his or her behavior. For example, if we notice that Taliyah is behaving in a friendly manner and we infer that she has a friendly personality, we have made, or drawn, a correspondent inference. Or, if we notice that Carl is behaving in an aggressive manner and we conclude that he is an aggressive sort of person, we have drawn a correspondent inference. Sometimes it is reasonable to infer that people's personalities correspond to their behavior and sometimes it is not reasonable. *Correspondent inference theory* outlines when it is

appropriate to infer that a person's personality corresponds to his or her behavior.

Background

Correspondent inference theory was developed by E. E. Jones (often called Ned Jones) and his colleagues. It falls into the domain of social psychology known as *attribution theory*, which is the study of judgments that people draw from behavior. Correspondent inference theory has been revised over the years, but the original formulation of the theory was published by Jones and Keith Davis in 1965. The 1960s through most of the 1970s was a period of time in social psychology when logic and rationality were emphasized. As such, it is not surprising that correspondent inference theory has a very logical flavor. Jones and Daniel McGillis later said that the theory described a rational model for how correspondent inferences could be drawn but did not necessarily describe how people actually draw correspondent inferences.

Explanation of the Theory

According to correspondent inference theory, two factors are important to consider in determining when it is appropriate to infer that a person's personality corresponds to his or her behavior. One, if the person's behavior is what most people would be expected to do in that situation, then it is not reasonable to infer that the person's personality corresponds to his or her behavior. This is the same as Harold Kelley's discounting principle, which suggests that we should not consider a person's behavior to be informative about personality when the situation would cause most people to behave that way. For example, suppose you turn on the television and a game show is on. The contestant answers a question and wins a new BMW Mini Cooper. She smiles, jumps up and down, and looks very happy. Would you infer that because she looks really happy she must have a happy personality? Obviously not. Most people, whether they have happy personalities or not, would behave in a happy manner after winning a new car. So, when people behave just how we would expect most people to behave in that situation, correspondent inference theory suggests that we should not infer that personality corresponds to behavior.

Two, if it is not clear what trait the behavior suggests, then it is also not reasonable to draw a correspondent inference. For example, suppose the