

The Lecture Contains:

- ☰ Theories of attribution
- ☰ Theory of correspondent inference
- ☰ Attentional resources and trait attribution
- ☰ Kelley's theory of causal attribution
- ☰ Discounting and augmenting principles
- ☰ Attribution errors

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Theories of attribution

- In social psychology, attribution is understood as a process that we use to understand the causes of a person's behaviour and through that tend to develop insights into the dispositions or traits of the person.
- In order to understand this process better, in this lecture, we will go through the following theories of attribution :-
 - The theory of correspondent inference
 - Attentional resources and trait attribution
 - Kelley's theory of causal attribution

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Theory of correspondent inference

- Jones and Davis (1965) came up with the theory of correspondent inference where they showed how we can make a systematic attempt to understand the stable dispositions of the person through the information about or the observed behaviour of the person. They used the concept of 'non-common' effects as the central one in this process. Non-common effects are the effects on a person's behaviour evoked by some specific causes and that can not be assigned to any other apparent causes.
- For example, if we come to know that a college student went to watch a newly released movie with his friends on a weekend, we may not be able to conclude much about that student as there could be many apparent causes for that student to go to the movie (e.g. outing with friends, usual entertainment, some relief from hectic schedule on weekdays etc.). But, if we come to know that a student spends his every weekend teaching poor school children and interacting with their parents in a neighbourhood slum, then we are more certain about the characteristics of this students who is sincerely making his contributions towards weaker sections of the society. We can infer with certainty that he is a sensitive and helpful student.
- Besides the non-common effects, two other conditions that have to be met for a confident inference are :
 - Behaviour freely chosen
 - Behaviour low in social desirability

The student that we inferred above as a sensitive and helpful person must also have chosen his actions on his own without any compulsion from someone else and must not have done so out of the desire to be seen as 'good' in the eyes of friends or other people.

Attentional resources and trait attribution

- According to Gilbert, Pelham and Krull (1988), following are the three steps involved in attribution process :
 - Categorization : Making out what the individual's behaviour is all about .
 - Characterization : Using the information about the behaviour to infer the trait or disposition.
 - Correction : Correcting the inference using the subsequently provided information about the person or the situation in which the behaviour occurred.
- Gilbert and his associated (1992), however, provided experimental evidence for the assertion that sufficient cognitive (or attentional) resources, that is, clear information about the behaviour is a pre-requisite for the three steps of attribution. In their experiment, female participants went through the audio tape recordings of a "dating game" in which a woman explicated her traditional or non-traditional sex-role and a male responded to the queries of the woman. From the male's responses, one could clearly make out that he was just trying to please her (correction) rather than expressing his preference for her sex-role orientations. In the control group, the audio tape recordings could be clearly listened to but in the experimental group, a degraded version of audio tape recordings were presented to the female participants. The outcomes of the study indicated that in the experimental group, where the cognitive or attentional resources were not adequate, the participants could not go up to correction step of the attribution process as they could not conclude that the man was just trying to please the woman in the audio data.

Kelley's theory of causal attribution

- Harold H. Kelley's theory of causal attribution focuses on following features of the person's behaviour in order to attribute the causes of his/her behaviour to him/herself or the circumstances :
 - Consensus : The degree to which a person's reactions to a situation is similar to others' reactions to the same situation
 - Consistency : The degree to which a person's response to the same situation remains the same across time
 - Distinctiveness : The degree to which a person's response to different situations are the same (The lesser the similarity in behaviour across situations, the more the distinctiveness and vice-versa)
- In the following two diagrams, we will see how these three features combine to result in internal or external attribution of the person's behaviour

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Diagram 3.1: Conditions of Internal Attribution

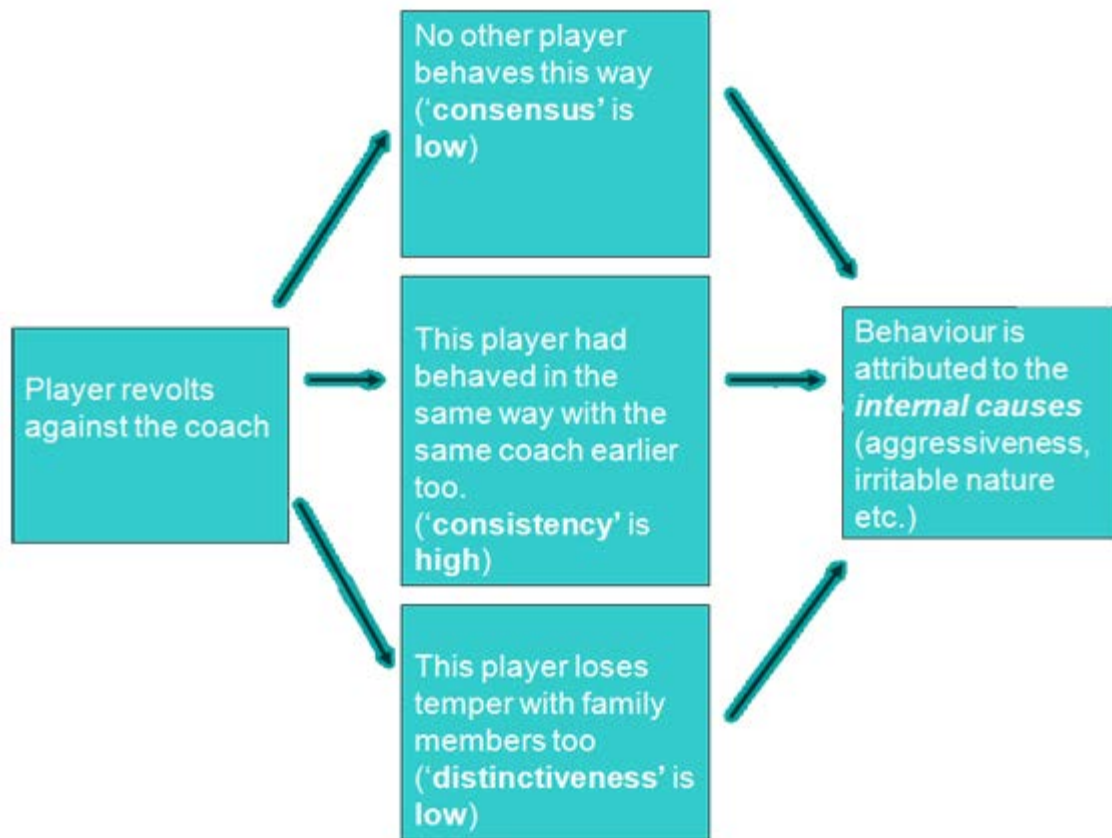
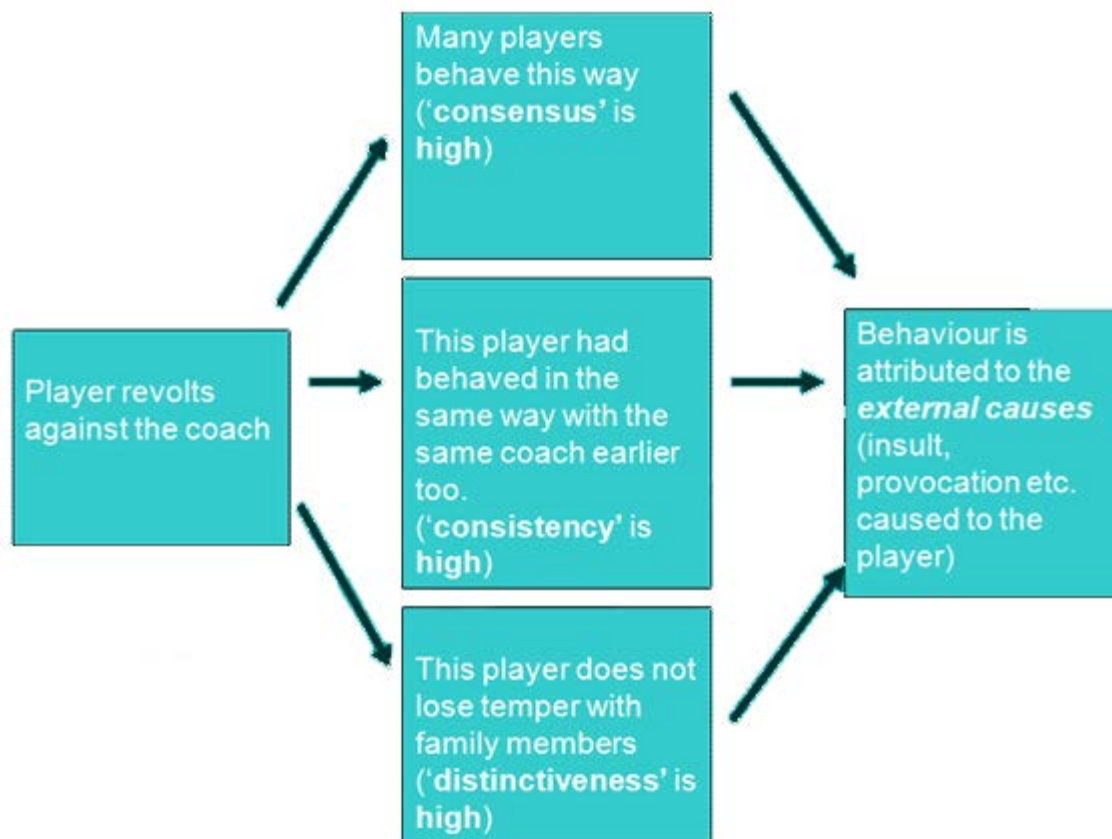


Diagram 3.2: Conditions of External Attribution



Discounting and augmenting principles

- It may be a common observation that some people are termed as 'not deserving' and some other people as 'highly deserving' for the reward or position they might have achieved. Discounting and augmenting principles explain this.
 - Discounting principle: When there are potential facilitative causes present for a particular behaviour, we give less importance to the apparent cause. For example, if a person is nominated as the chairman of a non-governmental organization (NGO) where the nominating committee apparently consists of the friends of the nominated person, then his credentials are doubted.
 - Augmenting principle: When there are potential inhibitory causes present for a particular behaviour, we give more importance to the apparent cause. For example, if a person is nominated as the chairman of a non-governmental organization (NGO) despite a strong apprehension that the nominating committee consists of the harsh critics of the nominated person, then he is taken to be a person with high credentials for the job.

Attribution errors

- Generally, attribution errors arise from overestimating the role of dispositional factors in causing a behaviour. These are the reasons cited in the literature :
 - Focus on other individual and his internal characteristics
 - Insufficient weight to the situation or the context in which his/her behaviour was observed
 - The attribution of other's behaviour to dispositional factors weakens over a passage of time.